Professional Immigrants from Mainland China and Barriers to Integration in the Canadian Society

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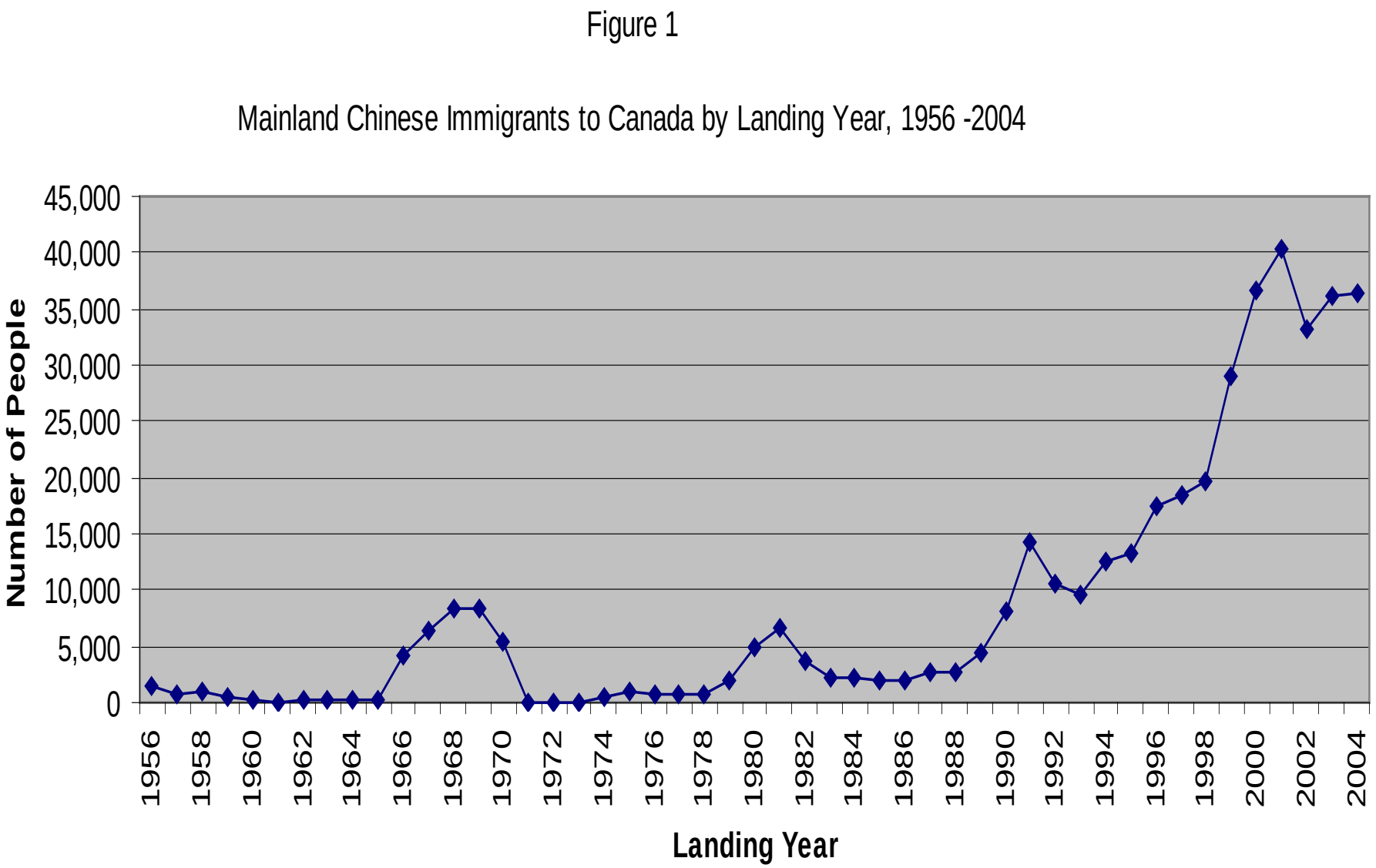
This paper reviews the trends of recent mainland Chinese immigration to Canada and examines obstacles that these immigrants face in integrating into Canadian society. Theoretical debates on the issue of occupational attainment for professional immigrants and covert racism will be addressed.

- Since 2000, over 30,000 to 40,000 immigrants from mainland China entered Canada each year.
- Mainland China has become the largest immigration source country for Canada.
- Mainland Chinese immigrants to Canada tend to locate themselves in large urban centres for settlement. About 70% of mainland Chinese immigrants chose Toronto and Vancouver as their intended destinations.
- Most recent mainland Chinese immigrants are well-trained and experienced professionals.

Immigration Trends from Mainland China (1956-2004)



Obstacles for Occupational Attainment in Canada

- Between 1994 and 2004, for a ten year period, 293,680 mainland Chinese immigrants came to Canada.
- Most of mainland Chinese immigrants are well-trained and experienced professionals. For example, between 1990 and 2002, over 77,000 principal applicants who were well trained and experienced professionals immigrated to Canada from mainland China to seek better opportunities in Canada.
- Canada welcomes these immigrants mainly because of their potential to contribute to the country's population and economic growth. However, many mainland Chinese immigrants, particularly skilled/professional immigrants, are disappointed and frustrated because they have not been able to achieve a satisfactory social and economic status in Canadian society.

- A survey of 1,180 recent mainland Chinese professional immigrants was conducted in the cities of Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton, and Saskatoon between 1997 and 1999.
- The respondents had the following characteristics: 56% were male and 44% were female. In terms of age, 18% were between 20 and 30 years old, 58% were between 31 to 40 years old, and 24% were over 40 years old. About 95% of respondents had at least a bachelor's degree, and 40% had a Master's or Ph. D. degree. The professions among the respondents were primarily medical doctors, engineers, and school/university teachers. 50% had 5 to 10 years of professional work experience and 21% had more then 10 years of professional work experience.

- About 79 percent of respondents reported having worked as professionals in China before immigrating to Canada. However, only 31 percent reported that they worked as professionals in Canada.
- About 41 percent of the respondents had lower social status in non-professional jobs, and 22 percent had never worked in Canada.
- About 75 percent of respondents reported that their occupations in their home country matched their professional qualifications well, while only 23 percent reported that their current (or last) occupation in Canada matched their professional qualifications.
- About 41 percent of respondents reported that they were overqualified for their current occupations in Canada.

Theoretical Approaches to Occupational Attainment and Mobility of Immigrants

- **Individual approach** focuses primarily on individual barriers experienced by immigrants, including the inability to meet occupational entry requirements, a lack of Canadian work experience, and an inadequate command of English.

- **Structural approach** focuses on social barriers, including devaluation or nonrecognition of foreign credentials, unequal opportunities, and racism.

Individual Barriers

- About 49% of respondents reported that they experienced difficulties with their command of English. Among those who answered “difficult” or “very difficult” with regard to command of English, 70% experienced downward occupational mobility.

- About 34% also experienced difficulties in adapting to Western culture. Among those who answered “difficult” or “very difficult in adaptation to Western culture, 65% experienced downward occupational mobility

Perceived Structural Barriers

Many mainland Chinese immigrants perceived structural barriers that affect their occupational attainments in Canada.

- 73% of respondents believed that they could not enter into professional occupations in which they were trained because there is unequal opportunity for visible minority immigrants.
- About 77% reported that it was difficult for them to find professional jobs because of a shortage of opening positions in the Canadian labour market.
- The major systemic barrier identified by respondents is devaluation or nonrecognition of their foreign credentials and work experience.
- About 78% of respondents reported the difficulty in having their foreign qualifications or credentials recognized.

“Length of time” is an important variable

Individual barriers such as linguistic ability and cultural adaptation can be gradually improved over time through their personal efforts, community support, and programs and services provided by the Canadian government. However, immigrants themselves cannot resolve institutional barriers, such as the devaluation of foreign credentials and work experience, unequal opportunity, and racism.

Racism – from Overt to Covert

- Racism are generated and reproduced within complex historical and social contexts.
- Racism can be expressed by individuals or it can be deeply embedded within institutional or organizational frameworks.
- Racism can be overt or covert. **Overt racism** is the conscious, deliberate form of racism in which racial or ethnic minority groups are perceived as culturally or biologically inferior, and unequally treated. **Covert racism** is disguised racist attitude and practice through behaviour that outwardly is non-prejudicial or discriminatory in appearance.

Overt Racism

Examples:

<u>Institutional level</u>

- The Chinese Head Tax,1885, 1900,1903
- Chinese Immigration Act (Chinese exclusion act), 1923

<u>Individual level</u>

- Anti - orientalism in B.C. in the nineteenth century

Social Change and Democratic Value

After World War II, especially since 1960s, many changes contributed to the weakening of notions of racial superiority or inferiority based on biological and genetic factors. These changes include the struggle against colonial rule, civil right movement, women movement, and black movement.

Since World War II, Canada has witnessed the abolition of overt exclusionary policies and laws such as the repeal of the Chinese Immigration Act in 1947, the adoption of the multiculturalism policy in 1971, and constitutional guarantees of individual rights and freedoms in 1982. These changes help to promote a democratic and tolerant society, and the value of equality in Canadian society is widely propagated.

Co-existence of Democratic Values and Racial Stereotypes

- The contradiction between democratic principles and racial inequalities at the structural level is reflected in the conflict between the egalitarian values of justice and racist attitudes.

- While Canadians generally support the values of equality and democracy, many have exhibited a remarkable degree of intolerance toward the increased presence of visible minorities. In the past two decades, the dramatic influx of refugees and immigrants from the Third World and a large volume of business and professional immigrants from Asian countries have produced renewed racial attitudes and a resurgence of racism.

Racism remains a serious problem in Canada

- About one in six Canadian adults – roughly four million people – have been victims of racism. 15% of respondents said they thought skin colour made a difference at work. One in 10 respondents said they wouldn't want people from another race as next-door neighbours. 13% of respondents said they would never marry or have a relationship with someone from another race. (The Ipsos-Reid survey conducted by the Dominion Institute, 2005)

- 74% of respondents expressed the view that there is still considerable racism in Canada. 36% of visible minorities feel they have experienced discrimination and unfair treatment because of ethno-cultural characteristics. (The Ipsos - Reid survey conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada and the *Globe and Mail*, 2003)

- One in five people in Saskatchewan report discrimination. (A recent survey conducted by the Saskatchewan Anti-Racism Network, 2007)

- 20 percent of visible minorities in Canada feel they have sometimes or often experienced discrimination and unfair treatment in the previous five years because of ethno-cultural characteristics. (The Ethnic Diversity Survey conducted by Statistics Canada, 2002)

Covert Racism

- The racism experienced by Chinese immigrants in their everyday life is often expressed in a hidden form.
- The covert racism is a contemporary expression of hostility toward racial minorities that goes undetected by conventional measures.
- Although people generally accept the value of racial equality, many are not prepared to accept non-white immigrants such as the Chinese.

A survey I conducted in Vancouver (1995) confirms the coexistence of two sets of contradictory values, and the findings demonstrate the basis of a new ideology shared by many respondents in their attitudes towards Chinese immigrants. Although people generally accept the value of racial equality, many were not prepared to accept non-white immigrants such as Chinese.

- About 79% of the respondents agreed that "immigrants should have exactly the same job opportunities as Canadians."
- About 82% of the respondents agreed that "minority groups in Canada should have equal opportunity for occupation, education, and promotion in society."
- However, European immigrants and Chinese immigrants were not equally supported by the public. About 73% of respondents supported admitting more European immigrants, while only about 47% supported admitting more Chinese immigrants. The negative attitude towards Chinese immigrants was not so much based on colour or biological differences but on perceived cultural differences.

Conclusion

- In the past 15 years, the number of mainland Chinese immigrants to Canada increased dramatically, and they have brought significant financial and human capital resources to Canada. However, this study shows that new Chinese immigrants have experienced great difficulties in accessing education-related professions in Canada. Recent mainland Chinese immigrants face both individual and structural barriers to entry into their respective professions. Individual barriers can gradually improve over time through their personal efforts. However, immigrants themselves cannot resolve structural barriers.

- This paper indicates that there are contradictory social values within a multicultural society that become an important ideological basis of covert racism. On the one hand, Canadian people generally accept “racial equality” and “democracy” as central values in a social democratic society; on the other hand, traditional racial and cultural stereotypes still exist as reflected in negative attitudes towards Chinese immigrants.

- In order for Canada to fully benefit from international human capital transfer, a policy is needed to ensure that the credentials of foreign-trained professional immigrants are properly and fairly evaluated. Canadian governments at different levels should consider providing more assistance to new immigrants, including delivery of effective settlement services, development of Anti-racism education program and public awareness of covert racism.