A Journey to Serve: A Chinese American Woman’s Service in the Canadian Armed Forces during World War II

Sharyne Shiu Thornton, PhD
Deputy Director, InterIm Community Development Association
Clinical Assistant Professor, Department Health Services,
University of Washington, SPHCM
Seattle, Washington

Paper presented at
5th International Conference of Institutes and Libraries for Chinese Overseas Studies (WCILCOS)
May 16-19, 2012
Vancouver, B.C. Canada
INTRODUCTION

Stories engage us. They can involve us in lives different from our own; absorb us deeply in the experiences of the ‘other’, yet present us with hopes and fears we may also find intimately familiar. Stories are also compositions of lives both individually and collectively lived and in their structure, bring voice to those often silenced in history. In this way, stories can function as compositions on social justice; equity and transformation.

“Stories are true to our common experience; they are statements which concern the human condition. To the extent that the human condition involves moral considerations, stories have moral implications. Beyond that, stories are true in that they are established squarely upon belief. In the oral tradition stories are told not merely to entertain or to instruct; they are told to be believed. Stories are not subject to the imposition of such questions as true or false, fact or fiction. Stories are realities lived and believed. They are true.”

N. Scott Momaday. The Man Made of Words. p.3

In July 1943, my 19 year old mother, May Toy Yee (aka May Toy Shiu, Min Toy Shiu, Moy Mee Liu), attempted to enter Canada through Windsor, Ontario to report for duty in the Canadian Womens Army Corps (CWAC). Although a U.S. citizen and with her birth certificate in hand, she was unaware that under the U.S. Chinese exclusion policies in place at that time, she needed to present the required certificate of proof of her right to be in the United States (author emphasis). This exclusionary and discriminatory legislation, designed specifically to restrict Chinese immigration to the United States, also imposed restrictive transnational movement of U.S. citizens of Chinese ancestry. Should a U.S. citizen of Chinese ancestry leave the United States without this certificate of identity for travel abroad to visit relatives in China or to travel for business, they would be denied re-entry into the U.S. as well as face
other penalties such as imprisonment or deportation. Thus, while she presented both her U.S. birth certificate and her orders from the Canadian army to report for duty, she was denied entry into Canada. On July 21, 1943, she testified before Immigration Inspector S. B. Sigurdson in Chicago, Illinois and on July 23, 1943, a letter was issued by the District Director, Immigration and Naturalization Service in Chicago, attesting that Mother was born in Chicago, Illinois on December 28, 1923 to Chinese immigrant parents and she was, indeed, who she said she was.

Initially, she sought to join the U.S. Armed Forces but was denied because at that time, women needed to be at least 21 years old to serve. However, a Canadian recruiter informed her that women could serve in the Canadian Armed Forces at 18 years of age and so, she and a woman friend signed up to serve in the Canadian Army.

Thus, began a journey that would cross geographic borders, intersect with the anti-Chinese immigration policies of both the U.S. and Canada, and where she would participate in the little told story of service in WW II by women of Chinese ancestry on behalf of Canada. This paper presents her story of military service. Embedded in this narrative is her triumph over gender bias, reflected in her personal story of birth as an ill-fated Chinese daughter and the tenacious strength of a young Chinese American woman who sought first to serve her country of birth, the United States, and subsequently, Canada during WW II.

There is limited literature on the military service of Chinese Canadians during WW II; the literature on Chinese Canadian women is even more scant. These voices deserve more than silence and the contributions of their service need to join all those who served for proper acknowledgement. Additionally, my mother, as a Chinese American woman who served in the Canadian armed forces, appears to be the only Chinese American female veteran of the Canadian armed forces during WW II. Embedding her story of service within the larger historical context of military service during WW II contributes to a deeper social discourse of military service of Chinese North Americans on behalf of both Canada and the United States.
Through the narrative construction of her story, this paper examines the broader themes of Chinese women in the Americas: gender identity and power as reflected in Chinese women’s military service; changing patterns of kinship influenced by immigration and the policies that shaped acculturation to different social norms, and the socially and politically constructed sense of a gendered, ethnic minority self that was challenged to balance multiple social worlds.

**Methodology:** The methodological approach utilized in this paper is qualitative. One function of qualitative inquiry is to make sense of personal stories; how they are embedded in larger social, cultural and historical contexts and how emerging larger themes intersect with the collective stories of shared lived experiences. Data for this proposed paper has been collected from digitally recorded, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, notes from family stories collected during family visits, family reunions and cross-sharing of family stories with my cousin, Pamela Jadeen Chin (JC). Jadeen has also documented through archival research the Shiu (Moy) family immigration history to Chicago, Illinois across three generations. Additionally, we have worked collaboratively on identifying the documentation of my mother’s (her maternal Aunt) service during WW II in the Canadian Armed Forces. Additional data, specific to my mother’s service, was collected through digitally recorded interviews, structured around photographs from my mother’s photo album taken during the time of her service in Nanaimo, British Columbia where she was stationed. Additionally, a literature review of Chinese participation in the war effort on behalf of Canada during WW II was conducted.

**Background Context:** Following her graduation from Lake View High School in Chicago, Illinois in 1942, Mother attended a trade school for about a year. It was during this year that she met my father, 17 years old and from Texas, who was in Chicago for radio communications training for the U.S. Navy prior to his deployment to North Africa and Italy. They dated until his training was completed and, in December 1942, he received orders to report to New York City from where his fleet would sail to fight in the Mediterranean theatre. Throughout this time, they corresponded: he, while fighting in every major
battle “from North Africa up the boot of Italy” as he describes and Mother, while serving in Canada, first in Ottawa and then, in Nanaimo, B.C. They married in February 1945, following my Father’s discharge and while Mother was on leave just prior to her remaining few months of service.

**SERVICE NARRATIVES**

**Recruitment:** On separate occasions, both JC and I queried Mother on why she decided to join the army; what had motivated her to sign up to serve, especially given that it was quite uncommon for Chinese American women at that time. Her response was consistently the same:

> “Truthfully, I had no place else to go…”

The key experiences that led her to ultimately serve in the Canadian armed forces are rooted in her childhood of being a Chinese daughter rejected at birth by her mother because she was a daughter instead of a son; her subsequent years growing up as a marginalized member of her natal family where she was fostered among other Chinese families identified by her father and finally, at 13 years old, adopted by a woman named Yee with whom her father had an unclear relationship. These years were unstable, and marked by little kindness or nurturing.

When she succeeded in graduating from high school, her foster mother, named Yee, moved away from Chicago, ultimately remarried, and left my Mother without a ‘home’ base. As a woman (and, an Asian woman especially) at this time, her options were quite limited. However, the country was at war; all were being called to service and the military seemed the most respectable and viable choice. She truly had nowhere else to go.

She saw a military service sign in a window and rather than “wander around Chicago”, she sought to enlist. However, the U.S. military did not accept women who were younger than 21 years old. The year was 1942. Mother was living at a YWCA in Chicago and attending a technical trade school when she befriended a woman who was from Detroit. It was also during this year that she met and dated my Father until he shipped out in December 1942. She describes ‘trudging the streets looking for a job
(she) was qualified for (sic) but because she was Chinese, Americans would tell her that there were no openings”. At her friend’s suggestion, they went to Detroit where both of them signed up with a Canadian military recruiter because in Canada, women were allowed to serve once they were 18 years old.

**Crossing the Border:** Mother received her orders to report for duty at Kitchener, Ontario. She proceeded to cross the U.S. Canadian border at Windsor, Ontario together with her friend and another woman from Alabama. While all three carried U.S. birth certificates along with their military orders to report for duty, her friend (who was Caucasian) and the other woman (who was African American) were permitted to enter but Mother was not. Because both Canada and the United States had Chinese Exclusion laws, intended to restrict the flow of Chinese across the borders of both countries, all Chinese were required to have a certificate attesting to the veracity of their identity and legal status. Mother needed this certificate to ensure that once her service in the CWAC was completed, she would be able to legally return to the United States. To obtain this certificate of identity, all Chinese who were born in the U.S. had to complete a Form 430 application, which then had to be approved by immigration. Mother was born in Chicago, possessed a birth certificate but had no idea that she was required to also have a certificate of identity in order to leave and then, ultimately, re-enter the U.S.

Forced to return to Chicago, she found the services of a “kind attorney who felt sorry for her” who took her case pro bono. The veracity of my Mother’s legal identity was complicated by her multiple names and also, multiple birth certificates due to her status within her family. The need to sort through these documents with an outsider was a reminder of her marginal status within her birth family.

*I wanted to get into the army and I couldn’t get into the army because I had no identity. I had to go through all the details of where the hell I was and why I needed identification. Well, yeah, how else can I get legal status unless I tell him my background and (sic) it wasn’t that great.*
What follows provides the context for my Mother’s marginalized status within her natal family that resulted in the legal need to untangle her multiple names and birth certificates so that she could obtain her certificate of identity and report for duty in Canada.

Common to Chinese immigrant families of this period, my Grandfather’s immigration preceded my Grandmother’s by more than a decade. Their first two children, a daughter and a son, were born in the family village in Toisan, Kwangtung Province, China. Following her immigration to join my Grandfather in Chicago, Illinois, Grandmother arrived with her 10 year old son, leaving her first born daughter behind in the family village in China. Once in Chicago, she gave birth in quick succession to three more daughters. The third daughter (b. 1923) was my Mother and the birth of yet another girl enraged my Grandmother. She rejected my mother at birth, leaving my Grandfather to find alternative care for this ill-fated infant daughter. The original, handwritten Cook County birth certificate from December 1923 shows Mother’s name as Mintoy Shiu (with Mintoy as one word and no middle name).

Between her birth and 1936, Mother was fostered in different Chinese families identified and monetarily compensated by her father, including a brief period with a Chin family who lived in Nebraska. She would return to her natal family household for visits, but did not reside there. At some point, my Grandfather identified a woman named Yee, who fostered my Mother. The exact year when her father arranged this care is unclear, but appears to have covered about one to two years. Thus, in August 1936, Mother was residing with Mrs. Yee when her father applied for Form 430 certificates of identity for each family member, including my Mother, so that the Shiu family could travel from Chicago to China where Mother’s eldest brother was to be married. During this period of the Chinese Exclusion Act, all Chinese residing in the United States, regardless of citizenship status, were required to have a certificate of identity when travelling abroad so that they could legally re-enter the United States. The August 1936 Form 430 application for Mother, submitted by her father, carries the name ‘Mintoy Shiu’ because it had to be a perfect match to the birth certificate presented on August 3, 1936 to the Immigration examining inspector.
However, on September 22, 1936 there appears an adoption decree “for the name of the child, Min Toy Shiu or May Toy Shiu to be changed to May Toy Yee, daughter of Toy Yee”. The birth certificate submitted for the adoption was a certified copy that identified Mother as Min Toy or May Toy Shiu. Family lore suggests that this adoption was the primary reason why Mother ultimately did not make the trip to China with the rest of the Shiu family for her eldest brother’s wedding. Consequently, because Mother did not accompany the family on the 1936 trip to China, she never received her Form 430 certificate of identity. Furthermore, when the rest of the family sailed to China, Mother was no longer a legal member of the family, having been adopted by Mrs. Yee.

When Mother signed up to serve in March 1943, the birth certificate she presented was a copy of the one used at the time of her adoption by Mrs. Yee, issued by the State of Illinois, Department of Public Health that documented her as May Toy Yee, daughter of Toy Yee. However, there was no amendment to this text to indicate that an adoption was involved. Thus, in mid-July 1943, it was this birth certificate that she had in hand when she attempted to enter Canada through Windsor Ontario to report for duty. Furthermore, she was unaware that as a Chinese person living in the U.S. she was required to have a certificate of identity before leaving the U.S. in order to legally return to the U.S.; therefore, she was denied entry into Canada. On July 20, 1943, the birth certificate issued for her certificate of identity application was a certified copy of the one used at the time of her adoption. Clearly, the name ‘May Toy Shiu’ that appears on this birth certificate is an inaccurate copy of the original 1923 birth record. It was a forced match to the name that Mother was actively using in July 1943 and is congruent with the September 22, 1936 adoption decree where the names Min Toy Shiu and May Toy Shiu are both cited.

On July 21, 1943, documented sworn testimony is recorded at the Chicago office of the Immigration Service, Department of Labor, per NARA Chinese Exclusion Act case file Chicago 2005/2782 for Mintoy Shiu (aka Moy Mee Liu). Testimony is signed by May Toy Yee.

Below is her sworn testimony:

_Q: How long did you live in Chicago after your birth?_
A: All my life until 1942 when I graduated from Lake View High School at Ashland and Irving, Chicago.

Q: When did you begin attending school?

A: I was around six years old. I started at the Nettlehorst School, at Albany and Broadway, Chicago; and I attended school in Chicago continuously until I graduated in 1942.

Q: Have you ever been out of the United States?

A: No.

Q: If you establish to the satisfaction of this Service that you are a native and citizen of the United States and Form 430 should be issued in your case, through what port do you intend to leave the United States?

A: Through Detroit, Michigan

Q: Have you ever attempted to leave the United States and enter to some other country?

A: I was told to report to Windsor, Canada, by the Canadian Army offices in Windsor; and when I went to Windsor, Ontario, the immigration officer sent me back, stating I needed proof to show I was a United States citizen, so that I could return to the United States after the war. I had my Birth Certificate but they wanted something from your office.

Q: What branch of the service are you going to enter?


Q: Has that matter already been settled, so that you are practically inducted, as it were?

A: All that remains for me to do is to report in person. I was supposed to report the 13th or 14th of July and therefore, I would like to get this paper as soon as possible but I did not know that it was necessary for me to obtain this certificate.
On July 24, 1943, the Form 430 certificate of identity was approved by the District Director, Immigration and Naturalization Services, in Detroit, Michigan. On July 29, 1943, the Canadian Women’s Army Corps (CWAC) attestation form identifies Mother as ‘May Toy Yee. It also shows her as “having a qualification of a technical radio and machinist course, post high school graduation”.

Mother was finally able to report for duty where she took her basic training at Kitchener, Ontario, followed by her first assignment at Ottawa, Headquarters and then, her final assignment at Fort Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, British Columbia (B.C.). Her enlistment record, per discharge papers, shows her as part of the CWAC, Army ID #W.1947; rank at discharge: Sergeant. A photo of Mother, in formal military dress, shows her bearing an insignia that notes her as part of the Signal Corps with another insignia, U.S.A. under the Canada insignia.

Finally, in sifting through the documents to sort out Mother’s multiple names, another name appears: Moy Mee Liu. This is in ‘informal’ name, but one that was given to her and known within the family. Moy is the actual family surname. Shiu is the legal surname assigned by immigration when her father and his father immigrated from China to Chicago. The Chinese character for the family surname is romanized commonly as ‘Moy’; however, and for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, upon entry, grandfather and his father were assigned the surname, Shiu, as spelled. Mother and her two older sisters were all given names reflecting the ‘real’ Chinese family surname and each assigned a given name with two characters, the first of which marks their generation (Mee) and the second one that reflects their gender (in Mother’s case, Liu). None of these names were entered as legal names but evidence the persistence of the cultural practice of naming in a new cultural setting where the surname confirms the patriline and given names reflect both generation and gender.

That Mother and her attorney were pressed in very short time to sort through such complex cultural and legal layers where one’s “name” played such a crucial and pivotal role in whether she could acquire her certificate of identity is quite remarkable and emotionally affecting. Her ultimate success in finally entering Canada to serve is poignantly reflected in a personal handwritten letter to her from Hubert
Lee Steed, the sympathetic Chicago attorney who took her case and sorted out all the name changes so that she could receive her certificate of identity:

“Keep your chin up, let me know how it goes – and do as I have done – forget you have any relatives but remember your friends.”

(July 27, 1943)

**Basic Training:** According to Mother, all new recruits travelled by train to Kitchener, Ontario, the CWAC No. 3 Basic Training Center. The Center was opened in October 1942, located in Knollwood Park, near present day Kitchener Memorial Auditorium complex. Prior to its opening, the Camp was previously used for military training for men. In reviewing photos from her album, she is the only Asian among her group of women. The photos triggered small stories, moments captured in her memory, here and there, of positive experiences. When pressed for deeper details, she would return to the lighter moments, leaving us with the sense that what her memory retains are the positive aspects of her training. One picture shows her with her unit shortly after they all had received haircuts. They were smiling and toasting each other, reflecting a sense of camaraderie. During basic training, all recruits underwent a screening to assess education, skills, and aptitude as well as individual interviews to determine placement and duties for assignment. Mother was proud of the fact that she scored ‘high’ and was assigned to communications. This placement also required that she successfully pass security checks, a condition for selection for wireless training. Ultimately, she was assigned to a position as a wireless operator. Mother stated that she was the only member of her squad assigned to communications. She further notes “...it was at a time when Canada had lost so many men in Dunkirk and women were needed (to serve) so that the ‘man-power’ could go where they were needed – overseas”. Women filled the support positions on the domestic front.

When queried, Mother denied experiencing any racial discrimination within her unit during basic training. Rather, she consistently related with an evident sense of pride, her achievement and assignment as a wireless operator: “…no complaints. I’m glad I could do something.”
**Service Assignments:** As Mother recalls, basic training lasted about nine weeks. Her first assignment following basic training was in Ottawa, at GHQ Security (General Headquarters Security) where she was part of the Signal Corps. She remembers the weather at that time as very cold. In her photo album she proudly points to pictures of herself at the ‘wireless’. According to her, wireless operators were needed to decipher and decode incoming wireless messages in anticipation that Hitler could potentially invade the East coast of Canada: “No mistakes were tolerated!” Other photos depict her three NCO mentors, all Canadian men. Her training was one on one; she was not trained in a group and she had no interactions with other trainees. To her recollection, she was the only female trainee. When asked if she knew whether there were other women, specifically Asian women in training, she responded that she was the only Chinese woman, Canadian or otherwise, that she saw.

Her training consisted of listening for Morse code through a headset as well as sending messages. The work involved coding and decoding messages that then were sent through teletype and the work required absolute accuracy. During her Ottawa period, she participated in a number of maneuvers, including one communications maneuver in the snow on skis to test the range of new ‘walkie-talkie’ type communications devices.

Following her Ottawa assignment she was sent to Vancouver Island, British Columbia and stationed at Fort Nanaimo. From another photo in her album, she identified a total of ten women in her unit, including herself. Her duties carried her between headquarters in Victoria, BC and three different communication outpost stations in remote areas along the length of the Vancouver Island (hereafter, Island): one station was located outside of Victoria, another was located near the center of the Island and the third station was located in a very remote area at the northern part of the Island (Tofino). These outposts were considered critical for monitoring submarine, shipping and air activities. Initially, staffed by service men, service women assumed these duties when the war effort required additional troop support overseas.

Three women were usually assigned to each outpost where they would rotate eight hour shifts. The only male was the driver who transported them between outposts and brought supplies. A typical
duty shift consisted of one woman monitoring all communications activities during her shift with the primary responsibility to intercept all messages, looking for any that implied covert activities by the Japanese. They were trained to follow military rules and to handle small arms. During this period, Mother also was taught to shoot a gun. When not on duty, activities consisted of sleeping, eating, reading and talking on the ham radio:

“You had yourself for company. You listened to music; you slept and read; you drew pictures. You didn’t have company. (You) also talked by (ham) radio (but) had to be careful how you transmitted...because the Japanese were really making their plans to invade.”

And Another Name: During this period, Mother changed her name. She entered the service as ‘May Toy” but one day, one of her army buddies looked at her and said

Friend: Uuchh! That (May Toy) doesn’t sound like you.
Mother: Okay, what do I sound like?
Friend: You sound like a Jimmy.
Mother: Nah, I’m not a boy.
Friend: No, not a male Jimmy, not J-I-M-M-Y.

Mother’s story about her name change implies deeper meanings of identity as a Chinese person during a period when the Chinese Exclusion laws were still in effect in Canada.

Oh, I don’t know – we got together; I guess we had a beer bust (laughs). No, my army buddies named me; and, another one spelled it (Jimi). And, I had my name legally changed. Well, it has really opened doors for me because they don’t expect to see an Asian when I show up.”

Discrimination: An interesting area of exploration was Mother’s perception of being ‘Chinese’ and female while serving. Given the challenge she faced when entering Canada to serve because of the immigration restrictions on Chinese in both Canada and the U.S., I anticipated that she would share examples of discrimination because she was Chinese. However, when asked directly, she denied feeling any discrimination within the military because she was Chinese. She was very bonded to the women in
her unit during all phases of service, from basic training to her different assignments. While she was the only Chinese woman and moreover, the only Asian woman in her units, she claims that she never experienced discrimination in the military for being Chinese: “…up in Canada, I had no trouble anywhere I went”.

Instead, the discrimination she experienced was towards women in the military by civilians residing and working around the military bases:

(We) had more trouble going into town with the civilians. They gave you more heartache than anything. The women; the older traditional women - they didn’t like (us). It’s not nice.....they accused the women in the service of communicating – keeping the lines open between the enemies and here. The townswomen considered the women in uniform as walking sleep mates for their husbands or brothers or what have you…..Yeah, they said that we were government prostitutes. I remember that statement. They’re very insulting.

I slugged a woman for (calling us) government prostitutes...(I) was at a restaurant. See, you don’t go out without your uniform. You go out for your time off...you go out as a group. I’m not the only one. Civilian women were rude....especially the west coast more than the east coast.

She cites further incidents of gender discrimination. For example, among men who remained on duty on the domestic front, many were overt in their resentment towards women in the service. She gives an example during her first duty assignment in Ottawa:

Well, they wouldn’t be derogatory....You see, this is up in French Canada and the French are very macho. And, they just didn’t like you invading their territory....one of my top sergeants was a French Canadian...and, he didn’t like the (service) women around.

She further reports that she saw only one other Chinese and no other Asians during her entire time in the service. She met a Chinese Canadian man at one of the canteens where they all would meet and have fun when not on duty. He was from the Canadian east coast and was serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force. They kept in touch for quite a few years before finally losing contact. Finally, she points out
while looking at the pictures in her photo album, “I’m not white; that’s right. You notice I’m the only non-white girl.”

**Courtship and Marriage:** Following a brief courtship in Chicago where they met, my Father left in December 1942 for combat duty in the Mediterranean. Throughout his tour in the Navy, he and Mother corresponded; Mother often describes metaphorically, how she ‘went through every battle’ with Dad because of what they shared in their correspondence. In January 1945, he was shipped back to the United States, arriving in Norfolk, VA. At the time and unbeknownst to Dad, Mother was on leave, having returned to Chicago for a short visit. Dad sent Mother a telegram informing her that he had 30 days leave and to meet him in Virginia. Her commanding officer received the telegram, forwarded it to Mother, and then granted her an extended 10 days of leave. Mother joined Dad in Virginia where they planned to travel by train to Texas, where Dad was from and where his family lived, and get married while both were on leave. Virginia had a three day waiting period before a couple could get married, so they asked a taxicab driver who told them that Mississippi did not have a waiting period. The taxicab driver drove them to Mississippi where they applied for a license and went before a judge. However, unbeknownst to them, Mississippi had anti-miscegenation laws as well as a minimum age requirement of 21 years regarding marriage. Standing before the judge, a mixed race couple and underage (Dad was 20 years old) he reviewed their application and according to Dad, asked Dad if he had served in the military. Dad described his service record, including all the battles in which he fought while in the Mediterranean and that his fiancé was currently on leave from the CWAC. The judge told them to take a walk around the block and return to see him. The judge then asked again about his service record and told them that anyone who had just served his country in battle could get married in his court and there, on February 4, 1945, he married them.

Once again, Mother acquired a name change. She returned to Nainamo as May Toy Thornton (aka ‘Jimi’ to the women in her unit) and a married woman. Following their respective duty leave periods, each returned to their posts to complete their service duties. Dad was discharged from the U.S.
Navy in December 1945 and headed for Nanaimo, B.C. where Mother was still on active duty. They tell
stories of spending Christmas 1945 together and after about one month, Dad returned home to Texas to
find work until Mother could join him. Mother was discharged on February 14, 1946 and according to
her discharge papers:

Name: May Toy Thornton
Branch: Canadian Women’s Army Corp
Rank: Sergeant
Discharge reason: To return to civilian life (on demobilization)

**Final name change:** On April 18, 1946 there appears a document, issued by the State of Illinois,
Department of Public Health that is an “Affidavit and Certificate of Correction”, which completes
Mother’s last and final name change: Jimi Thornton, in place of, May Toy Thornton. The witness
signature on this document bears Mother’s father’s name – Maurice L. Shiu. Mother’s name, identity,
role and status are finally, legally and socially affirmed.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF SERVICE NARRATIVES**

Mother’s story of service stands as an individual, lived experience story of a woman who is
second generation Chinese American, who was born during the Chinese Exclusion periods of both the
U.S. and Canada, and who served in the Canadian armed forces during WW II. Her story is also held
within a larger narrative of what it meant to be Chinese, female, and U.S. born while living under a policy
of exclusion because of one’s ethnicity and exceptional for the military service commitment made at a
time when women in general, were a minority in the military. In short, minority women constituted a
minority within a minority, a status that for far too long has silenced their voices. The following cross-
cutting themes that emerge from Mother’s story are examined for their broader significance.

**Chinese immigration and the Exclusion Period:** Both Canada and the United States historically share
policies and practices that were discriminatory and exclusionary to Chinese with the express intent to
control Chinese immigration and inhibit Chinese population growth within both countries. These exclusionary policies, enacted at different times and with varied expression in details, shared the same intended consequences of political, social and economic oppression against people of Chinese ancestry regardless of whether they were residents through naturalization or by birth. While not within the scope of this paper to present in detail these policies and practices in both countries, certain key features are salient to the story presented.

In Canada, the first anti-Chinese immigration law was introduced in 1885 in the form of a head tax on every person of Chinese ancestry who entered Canada (Maxwell 2005:11). In 1923, this capitation tax was suspended and replaced with the Chinese Immigration Act, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, which remained in effect through the Second World War and “…defined the Chinese both as Canadian citizens and as aliens…they had no legal status in the country.” (Wong 1994:76) Again, the express intent was to limit the immigration of Chinese into Canada. Exceptions to this ban were Chinese immigrants in the following categories: merchant, diplomat, foreign student or an ill-defined category, “special circumstances”. Furthermore, Chinese, whether Canadian-born or naturalized Chinese Canadians, were excluded from military service, including conscription, for fear that if they served they would subsequently press for full rights as citizens.

The Sino-Japanese conflict, especially marked by the invasion of China by Japan in 1937 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in December 1941 shifted governmental attitude and policies regarding Chinese Canadians that manifested in a united, nationally shared anti-Japanese sentiment. By 1944, exacerbated by the huge loss of soldiers on the European front and with a need for recruits who could serve in the Pacific campaign against the Japanese, government policy shifted towards recruitment of Chinese Canadians to serve in clandestine operations in Japanese held territories. The government perceived Chinese Canadians to be especially suited because they could phenotypically ‘blend’ in enemy territory, considered a ‘strategic’ advantage. Thus, by 1944, “…every person of Chinese origin or descent in Canada, irrespective of allegiance or citizenship, shall register (sic) and obtain a certificate.” (Wong 1994:77) Chinese Canadians throughout Canada were registered as “Allied Aliens, becoming
simultaneously – both a citizen and an alien. Furthermore, Wong notes that in a Canadian Army circular letter on aliens, all aliens were subject to investigation and report or vetting, except for American citizens. “…the rules were always softened for American citizens serving in Canada.” (Wong 1994:77) Finally, this Chinese Exclusion Act was in effect throughout the War and was not abolished until May 1947.

Of interesting note in Mother’s story is that once she was allowed entry into Canada to serve in the CWAC, it seems that her U.S. citizenship assumed dominance over her Chinese ancestry. It is curious as to whether this had an impact on why she was never assigned to units with other Canadian soldiers of Chinese descent and that the only other service personnel of Chinese ancestry she met was a Chinese Canadian man in the Canadian Royal Air Force. It appears that within the Canadian military, she was first ‘seen’ as an American citizen and not as ‘Chinese’, a distinction that set her apart from Chinese Canadians who were seen as ‘allied aliens’. However, simultaneously, as noted in her numerous quotes, she was always conscious that she was ‘not white’.

As noted earlier, my Mother was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1923 during the period when the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (hereafter, Exclusion Act) was still in effect. As in Canada, the intent was to control and suppress Chinese immigration to the United States. During this period, wives of Chinese laborers already in the U.S. were denied entry. Exceptions to this law included those who could be identified as diplomatic personnel, merchants, students, teachers, and tourists and the definition was left to the discretion of immigration officials (Soennichsen 2011), reflecting a consistent similarity to Canadian policies. The Exclusion Act effectively thinned the Chinese population in the Western U.S. where original migration clustered. Afterwards, the trend for the few Chinese who entered was to migrate eastwards, predominately to Boston, Chicago and New York where they opened small businesses, e.g. laundries, produce stands, small groceries, and restaurants. It was during this period that Mother’s father and paternal grandfather entered the U.S. and migrated to Chicago where they established a thriving laundry supplies business.

The immigration story of Mother’s family follows a common pattern during the Exclusion Act period, including their class category of merchant to their establishment of a small business in Chicago. It
further follows the common migration story of many Chinese who immigrated during this period in the nature of family patterns shaped by immigration policies that divided families. Mother’s father did not arrive with his father; rather, joined him in Chicago only when he was able to immigrate as a young man. Likewise, my Mother’s mother together with her eldest son migrated to join Mother’s father a full decade following his immigration to Chicago. Essentially, family members, geographically separated as a result of discriminatory immigration policies, joined their families as spouses, parents, or children and as ‘strangers’. There are many cultural reasons for the lack of affection between my grandparents but one can assume that the pattern of prolonged geographic separation, further exacerbated by the challenges of language and cultural adjustments to a new and unfamiliar social setting did not facilitate a positive family ‘bonding’ experience. Family lore paints my grandmother as a tyrant who resented being sent to the United States to join a husband she barely knew who left her in China with two small children. Upon joining my grandfather, she gave birth in quick succession to three girls, the last of who was my Mother. One can posit that her first identity was not that she was Chinese but that she was a Chinese daughter who pulled an ill-fated place in the sibling birth order.

**Ethnic and Gender Identity:** Ethnic and gender identity as a cultural, social, and political construct is the corner stone of Mother’s story and is embedded in the collective narrative of Chinese migration to both Canada and the United States. In her story, we witness how immigration policies influenced adaptations of Chinese kinship patterns to a new cultural setting; how a socially constructed ethnic and gendered identity responded to discriminatory and oppressive federal policies of both the United States and Canada and ultimately, how her story stands as a transformative example of triumph over such exclusionary and discriminatory policies.

By birth, Mother is both Chinese and female. Her identity is shaped by Chinese cultural and social patterns, adaptively expressed within the political context of her country of birth, the United States, and is historically contingent. There is a robust literature on the impact of Exclusion policies on Chinese immigrants; however, there is little attention to the impact on those born in the U.S. to immigrant parents.
Capturing the stories of Chinese born in the U.S. (2nd generation Chinese) during the Exclusion Act period is critical to understanding how this status affected the formation of their sense of a cultural and social self.

In Mother’s case, the cultural persistence of Chinese gender preference for males is evident in her rejection at birth by her mother. However, the new cultural setting necessitated alternative arrangements for her care that were handled by her father, reflecting a shift in cultural practice. In China the fate at birth of an unwanted daughter would be decided by a woman’s mother-in-law. Men had no role in either the decisions or the management of pregnancy and birth. (Shiu-Thornton 2001:72-92) Without his mother present in the U.S., my Grandfather assumed the responsibility for my Mother’s care and arrangements, and at considerable expense. The multiple families who fostered Mother were paid by my Grandfather in exchange for her care; he reserved the right to bring her ‘home’ for visits at his choice and, ultimately, ‘paid’ another woman to adopt my Mother when she was 13 years old.

Symbolically, this cultural adaptation is further expressed in the multiple names that Mother had while growing up. The Romanized spelling of Chinese names has always bedeviled Westerners, and particularly, immigration officials. Chinese names traditionally are ordered by surnames first, followed by given names and typically, comprise three Chinese characters. Written Chinese is based on ideographs (characters) and when transcribed has followed different Romanization systems over time. Thus, variation in the English spelling of Chinese names was common as was any resulting confusion over a person’s ‘correct’ name due to multi-varied spellings. Additionally, the requirement that Chinese in the U. S. submit birth certificates as documentation to authorities for any number of reasons, including application for certificates of identity to legally allow for travel outside of the U.S. often resulted in copy errors on documents. Recall that at this time, there were no copy machines and duplicate documents were hand copied, thus, increasing the risk of errors. In 1936, when Grandfather submitted the birth certificates of family members as part of the form 430 application to receive certificates of identities so that the family could travel to China for Mother’s oldest brother’s marriage and then, re-enter the U.S., the birth
certificates submitted were the originals. These original birth certificates were never returned to Grandfather. Thus, when subsequent circumstances required a birth certificate, it had to be obtained from County records and was hand copied or re-typed. It is in subsequent copies of Mother’s birth certificates that her given name is changed, e.g. Mintosh to Min Toy. Additionally, Min, Mee and May are common (mis)spellings for what represents the same Chinese character. To further complicate, Shiu is an inaccurate surname that replaced the family’s true surname, Moy, by officials when Mother’s father and grandfather immigrated from China to the U.S. Finally, another birth certificate is copied and issued for Mother when she was adopted by Mrs. Yee; however, this birth certificate did not carry an adoption amendment. This was the birth certificate she carried when she reported for duty at the time of enlistment. Thus, the vetting and additional documentation required of ALL Chinese during the Exclusion Act period, complicated by a Western failure to understand Chinese naming practices and the inconsistent spelling of Chinese names, contributed to ‘re-shaping’ Chinese identity to be congruent with Western standards.

Even more profoundly, the evolution of her name changes to her ‘final’ name occurred during her service period, implying an identity deeply settled through her military service and marriage where she found her own sense of power to shape the context of her lived experience; where she was with others who ‘accepted’ her; where she felt her own personal sense of belonging and self-worth.

This is further reflected in her perspectives on discrimination. Repeatedly and consistently, she denied experiencing any ethnic/racial discrimination within the military. Once the political and systems’ discriminatory policies were surmounted and she was finally admitted into Canada, her identity of prominence became that of a U.S. citizen, which seemed to have trumped her identity as Chinese in Canada. In a picture of her, in full Canadian military dress, her service uniform carries both the label of Canada and below, U.S.A. This alone, distinguishes her from Chinese Canadians, men and women, who served as ‘allied aliens’ a label never imposed upon her. Furthermore, within the military and as part of a unit, she found her first sense of acceptance, of belonging, in contrast with her personal identity.
throughout her life as a marginalized person within her own natal family and within the larger Chicago Chinese community where she was born solely because of her gender.

Mother’s personal story stands as a representative narrative of how identity is socially, culturally and politically constructed and how this construction is further shaped through the fluid interplay between individual circumstance and the greater social and political context. Finally, in Mother’s personal story is the narrative of emergence: a newly constructed and transformed gendered and ethnic identity where military service was a rite of passage, marked by an empowered sense of self competency, a new name, and multiple new roles as a Chinese American woman, as a married woman, and as an honored veteran.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bateson, Mary Catherine.


INTERNET SOURCES

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

http://www.archives.gov/research/chinese-americans/guide.html

(accessed 2-24-12).