

Historical Perspective Video Transcript

This series introduces six concepts to help you think about history. In this session we focus on historical perspective as we examine Chinese Canadians' attitudes toward Canadian society during the early part of the 20th Century.

Taking on Historical Perspective involves trying to view the past through the social, intellectual and emotional lenses of the time in order to understand what it would have been like for the people living then. The problem with many Hollywood movies about the past, is that they recreate things in light of our current feelings and understandings and not how the past was actually experienced by those living in the time.

In the case of Chinese Canadians restrictive policies such as an expensive head tax discouraged new Chinese immigrants from coming to Canada. But how did immigrants, who were already here, feel about Canada in the 1920s and 30s? Did they have a sense of belonging or alienation?

Answering these questions requires taking on the historical perspective of Chinese Canadians. When looking back in time, the most important question to ask is: Are we using our knowledge of the values and beliefs existing at the time to interpret the people, events, and practices of the past?

For example, look at this picture of the Chinese students' football club in the year they won the prestigious British Columbia Mainland Cup. How did these soccer ball players feel about winning the tournament? If we try to answer this question by imagining how we would feel after winning a big tournament, we are using present day beliefs and values to interpret the past.

This tendency to look at the past through modern eyes is called *presentism*. Historical perspective taking requires that we consider the meaning of the event from the players' point of view. As the only Chinese team in the tournament, competing at a time when racism was common place, the championship may have meant more about gaining acceptance and respect in Canadian society than about winning a sports trophy.

When examining a historical perspective, a second key question is: Are the interpretations representative of the beliefs, values, and practices of the time? Or have important differences been overlooked?

When exploring historical beliefs and values we are less interested in determining what one person might have thought or felt, and more interested in the common or shared beliefs and values of the time period. If we look at only one person or one situation, we might draw conclusions that aren't representative of the practices and beliefs at the time. The tendency to generalize about the entire group or time period, based on a narrow range of examples is called stereotyping.

When deciding on the extent to which Chinese Canadians adopted the manners and customs of mainstream society, we should look beyond one example to consider several activities. Looking at these photographs, we are left with the impression that Chinese Canadians were largely welcoming of mainstream practices. But other wedding photographs indicate a diversity within the Chinese Canadian community about the extent to which traditional customs should be retained and new practices adopted.

So, what have we learned? When exploring the perspective of a time in history, ask these questions: Are we using our knowledge of the values and beliefs, existing at the time, to interpret the people, events, and practices of the past? Are the interpretations representatives of the beliefs, values, and practices of the time, or have important differences been overlooked?

Historical Perspective...that's it.