

# COMING TO CANADA

By Debbie Jiang

Powerful forces pushed many people to leave China in the mid-1800s. In Canada, they found danger and mistreatment along with new opportunities.



China, one of the world's most powerful civilizations, goes back 4,000 years. The Chinese invented paper, gunpowder, the compass and printing press. The rulers of the Qing (pronounced Ching) Dynasty were Manchu people who had conquered the Han people in 1644.

To show they were loyal to the Manchu emperor, men wore their hair in a long braid called a queue. Cutting it off was punished by death. When the 1911 revolution, led by Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, dethroned the last emperor, Chinese men chopped off their queues. In Canada, getting rid of this badge of difference helped them fit in a bit more.



In the mid-1800s, Great Britain and China fought two wars. China lost, so Europeans saw it as weak. Millions of people died from these wars or starved when crops failed because of a severe lack of rain. Many young men had to leave China just to survive.

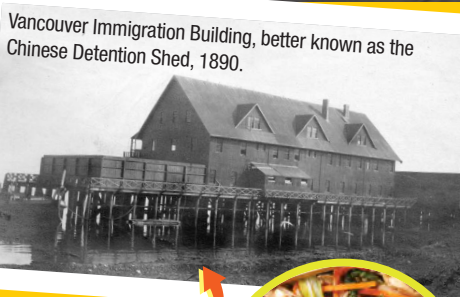
Many early immigrants from China came to Vancouver, Victoria and New Westminster in Canada, and to San Francisco in the U.S.

The news of gold discovered in California in 1848 and British Columbia in 1858 created excitement among the Chinese. Lured by stories of 金山 (pronounced “gum san”) or Gold Mountain, shiploads of men set sail from Toi San (or Taishan) in southern China. Gold mining was hard and white miners often bullied the Chinese off their mining spots, known as claims. Many Chinese stayed on in B.C., becoming coal miners, loggers, workers in fish canneries and farmers.

A big reason why B.C. joined Canada in 1871 was the promise of a railway to connect it to the other provinces. The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) only hired white workers at first. Later, it turned to Chinese labour for the hardest, most dangerous jobs that others didn't want. Chinese workers were paid only \$1 per day. Many saw little money until the cost of their voyage from China was paid off. White workers received \$1.50 to \$2.50 a day plus gear, meals and a place to stay. The working conditions were brutal and unsafe. Accidents, cold weather, illness and malnutrition killed many Chinese workers.



Chinese gold prospectors at Leech River on Vancouver Island in 1909.



Vancouver Immigration Building, better known as the Chinese Detention Shed, 1890.

Chinese men, women and children were held here like criminals for days or weeks while officials went through their paperwork.



The one-pot recipe known as chop suey 雜碎 was invented during the railway-building days. Food was scarce so everything was thrown together. [Chop suey means “assorted scraps”.]

McCord Stewart Museum, Royal Alberta Museum, Catherine Lee / iStockphoto



Chinese work gang just west of Rogers Pass, B.C., 1889.

This head tax certificate belonged to Mun Shee, whose married name was Mrs. Choy Lam. Chinese women were rare in Canada — by 1923, there were 28 men for every woman. It was too difficult and expensive to bring a wife from China.





## "THE CHINESE MUST GO"

### MONSTER PETITION FROM BRITISH COLUMBIA ON THE WAY HERE

Ten Thousand Names will be on it—The Signers Say Mongolian Cheap Labor is Ruining the Whiteman—They Ask the Government to Exclude Them or put on a \$500 Tax

Vancouver, B. C., July 30.—A monster petition to the Federal government praying for the further restrictions of Chinese Immigration to Canada is being circulated. The petition will contain over ten thousand names when it is sent to Ottawa.

The petition recites that Chinese labor is driving out white working men, that the United States realizing this has excluded the Mongolian, and Canada should adopt measures to keep them out. It urges that a tax of \$500 be levied upon each Chinaman entering the Dominion.

The summer before the CPR was completed in 1885, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald imposed a head tax to keep Chinese people out of Canada. Any immigrant of Chinese ancestry had to pay \$50 (two months' wages), then \$100 in 1900. In 1903, it rose to \$500 (many years' wages). In Newfoundland, it cost \$300 by 1906. Only a few types of immigrants like merchants and students did not have to pay.

July 30, 1896 – *Ottawa Journal*

Canadians ask the government to increase the head tax on Chinese newcomers to \$500. Their petition says the reason is to protect white workers' jobs.

After building the railway, workers were promised a boat ticket home. But the hiring agents lied, leaving many people stranded. Not only did the Chinese workers owe money, but they were also forced to stay in a land where many people treated them as a threat. They were only allowed to live in the worst available parts of town. These communities, often on the fringes of white settlements, were the first Chinatowns. Other Chinese men married First Nations women or moved to the Prairies and eastern provinces. Laundries and cafés began to dot Canada's map wherever Chinese settled.



Lee Hong's laundry, Toronto, 1912.





Chinese Freemasons in Kelowna, B.C., 1910.

University of British Columbia, Robert Louie

Separated from their families, Chinese immigrants relied on each other. Chinese merchants helped send money, known as remittances, to families in China. In B.C., the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and clan associations provided health care, arranged funerals and helped people if they had to appear in court. Churches offered English classes, interpreters and medical services. The Chinese Freemasons helped the poor and raised money for the revolution in China.

Even worse than the head tax was the newest version of the *Chinese Immigration Act*, which began on July 1, 1923. That sounds like it was supposed to help people come to Canada. The truth was the opposite, which is why it's better known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. It prevented Chinese people from immigrating to Canada at all. In 1945, Canada joined the brand-new United Nations, which emphasized human rights. Two years later, the Exclusion Act was finally repealed. Only in 1967 did the Canadian government finally change the immigration system.

Canada no longer chooses immigrants based on the country they come from. Now, our system gives people points based on their education, skills and experience running a business. Since the late '60s, Chinese have immigrated from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. People of Chinese heritage have also immigrated from Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, South America, Mauritius, India, Singapore, Africa, the Caribbean and Australia. Most recently, migrants have come to Canada from all parts of China.

