

## Background Information for Educators

Early Chinese immigrants to Canada conjure up images of gold miners, railway workers, laundrymen and cooks. However, there is much more to the story – a story that is not widely known. The September 2023 issue of *Kayak: Canada's History Magazine for Kids* commemorates the 100th anniversary of the *Chinese Immigration Act of 1923*, more commonly known as the Chinese Exclusion Act.

What was this law and why was it imposed on one specific group of immigrants? Desired immigrants to Canada were offered free land in the Prairies while undesired ones had the door closed in their face. "Beyond Gold Mountain: Canadians of Chinese Ancestry" is divided into four sections: existence, struggle, survival and celebration.

### Existence

There has been a Chinese presence in Canada since the late 1700s, when Chinese artisans and workers helped build a trading post off Vancouver Island. The discovery of gold in British Columbia in 1858 led to a wave of immigration from southern China, where warlords, drought, and famine drove people out of their homelands in search of a better life overseas. Following the gold rush, many Chinese stayed in B.C. becoming coal miners, loggers, farmers and working in fish canneries.

Approximately 17,000 Chinese were brought to British Columbia in 1881 to work on the railroad. Being paid less than white workers, they were a cheaper source of labour and were assigned to build the most dangerous and challenging segments of the railway.

By 1911, the population of Chinese in Canada was 27,774, the majority of whom resided in B.C. From the start, their presence was not welcome and plans to drive them out were already hatching.

### Struggle

As the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway neared completion and thousands of Chinese immigrants were looking for new work in Canada, the federal government was facing pressure to restrict immigration from China.

In the summer of 1884, the federal government appointed the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration to obtain proof that limiting Chinese immigration was in the best interest of Canada. The commissioners found little evidence to support claims that immigration should be restricted because Chinese people were vile, dirty, diseased, dangerous to white women and incapable of assimilation. The final report recommended only a \$10 entry duty. However, in 1885, the Canadian government passed the *Chinese Immigration Act* implementing a \$50 head tax.

Within 18 years, the head tax had increased to \$500; however, this did not prevent Chinese from continuing to come to Canada. Poverty and political instability in Southern China posed a precarious future and many sought new opportunities overseas. In Canada, Chinese migrants were willing to work at half the wage of white workers, further fueling anti-Chinese sentiment and hostilities.

Racism was rampant throughout Canadian society. No province was exempt from the mistreatment of unwanted immigrants. British Columbia and Saskatchewan took the lead in introducing the most discriminatory laws against the Chinese. Municipal governments imposed high laundry business taxes and even vegetable peddling license fees. Where it was not written in law, Chinese people still felt racial prejudice when they could not get a haircut by a barber or sit in the better seats of a movie theatre simply because they were of Chinese ancestry. Houseboys and cooks often took the blame for unsolved murder cases of white people, while court trials were more often than not unfair.

## **Survival**

Deemed incapable of assimilating, Chinese were denied the right to vote. Without being on the voters list, one could not aspire to the higher professions like law, accounting or medicine. Chinese immigrants demanded only "fair play" afforded to immigrants of other races.

The comic "Students on Strike!" in "Beyond Gold Mountain" portrays the Victoria School Board's attempt in 1922 to segregate students. The story is an example of how the Chinese community rallied together to push back and advocate for themselves.

On July 1, 1923, the federal government enacted another version of the Chinese Immigration Act, more commonly referred to as the Chinese Exclusion Act. This piece of legislation practically banned all Chinese immigration and required all Chinese settlers living in Canada or people born in Canada of Chinese descent to register with the government and carry identification certificates.

Over the next 24 years, Chinese immigrants in Canada adjusted to the new normal. Those fortunate enough to raise their family in Canada (some marrying Indigenous or white women) put roots down and prospered. Letter writing to maintain long-distance relationships were enhanced by the periodic visit to China. The immigrant could not exceed a two-year time limit for travel outside of Canada. Canadian-born children had to be registered as aliens with no legal status. Living within these restrictive boundaries exacted a heavy cost. Fathers did not know their children and vice-versa. Wives who remained in China were dubbed "Gold Mountain widows," having to turn down local marriage proposals while their husbands resided in Canada. Spouses grew estranged from one another.

Canadian-born Chinese young adults challenged the status quo when the Second World War broke out. They were eager to seize the opportunity to prove their loyalty to Canada. Initially rejected by the Canadian military, a group was able to serve in the Pacific theatre of war under British command. Upon their return, they and other community leaders, demanded full and equal rights. At the same time, both China and Canada became signatories of the Charter of the United Nations in 1945; it would have proved to be an embarrassment to let the archaic Exclusion Act continue.

### **Celebration**

In 1946, the *Canadian Citizenship Act* was passed. Canadians of Chinese ancestry were finally given legal status as Canadian citizens. The following year, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed. For the next 20 years, efforts to reunite with family members was no simple task. An age cap was put in place to allow only children under the age of 21 to reunite with their families. X-Ray technology was implemented to scan bone density to prove falsified ages (but was proven ineffective). Some families still could not reunite under unfair scrutiny.

Since 1967, when the points system of immigration was implemented, people of Chinese ethnicity have been able to freely immigrate to Canada. In the past 150 years, Canada has seen many milestones in its immigration policies. Although discriminatory legislation has disappeared from our law books, racism still persists today. It is only through education and the teaching of our children that society can attempt to remedy this age-old problem.

# Suggested Reading and Watching List

This is a selection of books, articles, and videos to learn more about the history of Canadians of Chinese ancestry.

## Books

*Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada* by David C. Lai.

*Being Chinese in Canada: The Struggle for Identity, Redress and Belonging* by William Ging Wee Dere

*Chinatown: An illustrated history of the Chinese Communities of Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and Halifax* by Paul Yee Paul Yee

*Chop Suey Nation* by Ann Hui

*Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era, 1885-1945* by Lisa Rose Mar

*Escape to Gold Mountain - A Graphic History of the Chinese in North America* by David H.T. Wong

*Yip Sang: And the First Chinese Canadians* by Frances Hern

*The Longest Shot: How Larry Kwong Changed the Face of Hockey* by Chad Soon and George Chiang

*Harry Livingstone's Forgotten Men: Canadians and the Chinese Labour Corps in the First World War* by Dan Black

## Articles

"[How Chinese immigrants brought restaurants to Newfoundland](#)" by William Ping, CBC News.

"[Chinese Head Tax: George Yee's Story](#)" by Julia Petrov and Matthew Ostapchuk, Royal Alberta Museum Blog.

"[The lessons of the Anti-Asiatic Riots](#)" by Michael Barnholden, *The Beaver*.

"[February 19, 1947: First Chinese become Canadian citizens](#)" by Larry Wong, *The Beaver*.

"[Lost Spike](#)" by Paul Yee, *Kayak: Canada's History Magazine for Kids*.

## **Films and Videos**

["Flying and Spying"](#) by Canada's History Society.

["Victoria's Forbidden City"](#) by Canadiana

["Unwanted Soldiers"](#) by Jari Osborne, National Film Board of Canada.

["In the shadow of Gold Mountain"](#) by Karen Cho, National Film Board of Canada.

["Gold Mountain: The True Story of the BC Gold Rush"](#) by Storyhive

["Under the Willow Tree: Pioneer Chinese Women in Canada"](#) by Dora Nipp, National Film Board of Canada