Chinese Life, 1900–1914

The Chinese settled in Chinatowns for safety from discrimination. Racial prejudice had the impact of forcing the Chinese to stay together, thereby strengthening Chinatowns. By the early 1900s, Chinese communities in BC were thriving. Vancouver, now with the largest Chinese population and Chinatown in Canada, surpassed Victoria in size. Across the country, over 90 per cent of Chinese people lived in or near their Chinatowns, in cities like Calgary, Moose Jaw, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Hamilton. Most Chinese in the province of Quebec settled in Montreal and the community there soon rivalled the one in Toronto. Like Edmonton and Saskatoon, Quebec City was not on the railway route so its Chinese population grew more slowly. The Atlantic provinces, on the other hand, had sparse Chinese settlement.

Work Without Fear
Hop Wah Laundry in St. John’s was one of twenty Chinese laundries in Newfoundland and Labrador in the early 1930s. Cleaning clothes was considered women’s work but the Chinese established themselves in this business. With little start-up money, they could work, eat, and live in their laundries without fear of discrimination from white employers.

Bachelor Societies
Typically, Chinese communities were made up of single men in what came to be known as bachelor societies. It was unusual among the Chinese to have a family in Canada because the head tax made it financially prohibitive to bring wives, children, and parents. Eighty per cent of the men had left wives behind in China. Bachelor-society men saved money in as many ways as possible, like living in rundown, crowded rooming houses. Their frugal lifestyles allowed them to send regular remittances to their families in China. The more successful men made occasional trips to China — unmarried men to get married, married ones to visit their wives and father children.

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Republic of China
In large part due to the fundraising efforts of Dr. Sun Yat-sen in Canada and around the world, the Manchu government was overthrown in 1911 and the Republic of China established the following year. A political cartoon shows a Chinese soldier cutting off a man’s queue, which had been forced upon Chinese men by the Manchus. Up until this time, many had been reluctant to cut them off. In the event that they had returned to live in China, they would have been required by law to have this hairstyle.
Canada in the First World War

The Great War, or the First World War, was set in motion when the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire was assassinated by a Serbian in 1914. On one side of the battlefield was Austria-Hungary, on the opposite side, Serbia, Russia, France, and Britain. Of course, Canada was at war too as a member of the British Commonwealth. Although many Chinese tried to enlist in the Canadian Army, they were refused by recruiters in BC on the grounds that this was a “white man’s war.” Despite the racial discrimination of the head tax and other anti-Chinese legislation, an estimated 300 Chinese men, Canadian-born and naturalized, volunteered to serve in the army. Many left BC to enlist in other provinces, like Ontario, where there were no restrictions.

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Cheated of the Franchise
The Chinese war veterans who served in the army proved their loyalty to Canada. Although they were granted the right to vote due to their war service, they never got to take advantage of the franchise. The Dominion Elections Act, enacted in 1920, did not allow any Chinese person to vote, regardless of the promise that had been made to the veterans.

Tell No One
The Chinese Labour Corps, as the workers became known, were outfitted with straw hats and dark blue tunics and pants. They are seen disembarking from a ship for quarantine at William Head, BC. As late as 1919, the Chinese labourers helped bury the dead and clean up the battlefields. Afterwards, they were shipped back to China. The Canadian government enforced a media blackout about these workers and their contribution remained top secret for many years.

En Route to the Front
The Empress of Russia transported the first of many shiploads of labourers from China. After landing in BC, they travelled cross-country to Halifax in sealed railway cars, then back on ships to cross the Atlantic Ocean to the western front in France. There, they loaded and unloaded supplies from ships and trains, filled sandbags, built roads and railways, and dug trenches.

Labourers Needed
A labour shortage prompted Britain to ask its ally, China, to provide 200,000 labourers for war construction projects in France. Canada agreed to transport 80,000 of them. Guards, who followed the instruction manual shown above, kept watch on the train. The fear was that the Chinese would escape onto Canadian soil without paying the head tax.

No Rest
When there was a stopover in Ontario, the Chinese labourers were put to work at Camp Petawawa, a Canadian Forces base and internment camp for German, Austrian, and Italian prisoners of war. The Chinese Labour Corps was the largest ethnic minority group to participate in the Great War.
The Exclusion Act

The successive head taxes of $50, $100, and $500 failed to curb Chinese immigration. On July 1, 1923, the federal government enacted the Chinese Immigration Act, known in the Chinese communities as the "Chinese Exclusion Act." This was the most comprehensive law to exclude the Chinese from entering Canada. With the exception of merchants, students, and diplomats, all Chinese people were denied entry for the sole reason of their race. Trips to China were limited to a maximum of two years' absence; otherwise, entry back into Canada would be denied.

The Exclusion Act

Humiliation Day
As the Chinese Immigration Act was being drafted, many individuals, missionaries, and organizations, including a committee of eight representatives from the Chinese community that travelled to Ottawa, voiced their objections. Their efforts were unsuccessful and the Chinese Immigration Act became law on July 1. While Canadians celebrated Dominion Day, the Chinese in Canada boycotted any public holiday festivities on the day referred to by the Chinese as Humiliation Day. Their businesses were closed and Canadian flags were not displayed.

Identification Papers
The Chinese Immigration Act also stipulated that every Chinese person, whether or not they were born in Canada, was required to register for an identification card. This one for Toy Jun Wong (Jean Lumb) was issued when she was four years old. Jean would later help to change Canada's immigration laws and become the first Chinese-Canadian woman to receive the Order of Canada, the country's highest civilian honour.

Hard Labour
These women, working on road construction in Kowloon, China, show the hardship faced by the wives who were left behind during the Chinese exclusionary period. While some men could afford a trip or two to China to visit their families and father children, many women endured a lifetime of spousal separation.

Sons Preferred
The birth of three sons would have been celebrated in any Chinese family due to the preference for male children. Germaine Wong was told of her father's disappointment when she was born instead of a son. Her arrival was also considered extremely unlucky because she was a girl child born in the Year of the Tiger.

Sid Chow Tan:
"[My grandfather] told his father not to sell his sister, that he would go to work. He was seven, she was ten. As it turned out, his father did not sell the sister. My grandfather sent money back to his sister [in China] all his life."

Young Married Couple
Albert Lee's father, Chuck Lee, returned to China at age eighteen to get married in 1926. By tradition, the marriage was arranged by a matchmaker so he did not meet his teenaged bride, Sui Fa Kung, until the wedding day. He returned to Canada; she stayed behind in China.

Albert Lee:
"Head tax is money paid and that is one thing for people who paid and worked it off. The Exclusion Act was a whole different matter, which was for fifteen years they were separated."

Remittances
The Chinese sent money to China to feed their families and buy land. Homes, like this one in Kaiping, could be sturdy built for protection from flooding and bandits. Money from overseas Chinese was also used to build roads, schools, and hospitals in their villages.

Walter Tom:
"The overseas Chinese followed very closely with what was happening at home. The money that they sent back was the lifeline to their families in China."