DISCRIMINATION

From 1878 to the early 1880s, the government of Sir John A. Macdonald had been deluged with requests to restrict Chinese immigration, but the Prime Minister, well aware that the Canadian Pacific Railway could not be completed without the help of thousands of Chinese workers, evaded the issue. After the railway was completed—due in good part to the backbreaking the labour of the Chinese—their assistance was no longer needed. As a result, governments began enacting anti-Chinese legislation.

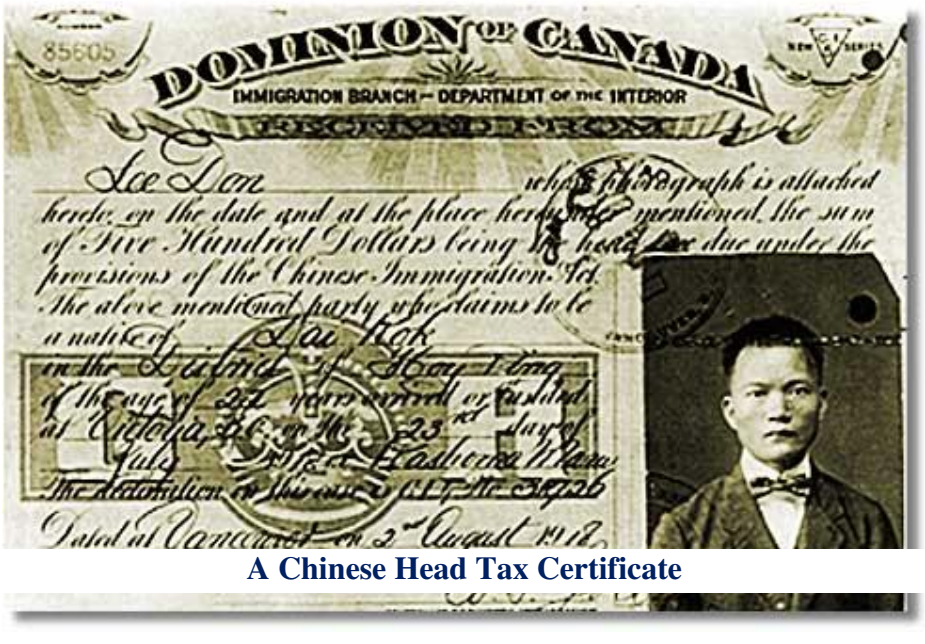
The government of British Columbia denied the Chinese the provincial franchise in 1872; in 1885 the Prime Minister followed suit, submitting an amendment to the Franchise Act that removed federal voting rights to "any person of Chinese or Mongolian race":

Photo Credit: W.J. Moore / Library and Archives Canada / C-021595

The Chinese are foreigners. If they come to this country, after three years' residence, they may, if they choose, be naturalized. But still we know that when the Chinaman comes here he intends to return to his own country; he does not bring his family with him; he is a stranger, a sojourner in a strange land, for his own purposes for a while; he has no common interest with us, and while he gives us his labour and is paid for it, and is valuable, the same as a threshing machine or any other agricultural implement which we may borrow from the United States on hire and return it to the owner on the other side of the line…. But he has no British instincts or British feelings or aspirations, and therefore ought not to have a vote.

The Chinese Head Tax (1885)

In 1884, a Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration recommended imposing a head tax on every Chinese person entering the country. 1885's *Act to Restrict and Regulate Chinese Immigration into Canada* required every new Chinese arrival to pay $50. The goal was to make immigration economically unfeasible for Chinese people. The head tax—raised to $100 in 1900—was raised to $500 in 1903.



A Chinese Head Tax Certificate

Five hundred dollars was an exorbitant sum at the time. A luxury three-story home in Vancouver could be purchased for $500—about two years' wages for the average Chinese worker. Many took out huge loans in order to pay the fees, and spent their lives working to pay off their debts. Others relied on funds from family members: money would be pooled to send one or two people to Canada, who would send part of their wages back to their families in China.

82,380 Chinese people paid the head tax from 1886-1924—a total of $22.5 million. The Canadian government collected another $23 million from them in other taxes, such as an exit tax on those visiting China. Only Chinese people were required to pay a head tax. Even income tax was not even collected until after 1914, for the Canadian government wanted to provide incentives for European immigration.

The head tax marked the beginning of a flood of anti-Chinese activity across the country, ranging from discriminatory legislation to individual acts of violence and intimidation.

Anti-Chinese Rally (1885)

On May 21, 1885 over 2,000 residents of Victoria participated in an anti-Chinese rally, some displaying banners bearing racist slogans. Shortly after, the Anti-Chinese Union was formed, with city councillor W.A. Robertson as its first President.

Forced Evictions (1886-1906)

In 1886, Chinese workers in Vancouver and New Westminster were forcibly evicted from town by racist mobs. Between 1898 and 1906, similar evictions took place in B.C.'s Slocan Valley, Atlin, the Kootenays, and Penticton.

The Calgary Smallpox Riot (1892)

In 1892, a Chinese laundry worker in Calgary came down with smallpox after visiting Vancouver. All the occupants of the laundry were quarantined and the building was burned down. Nine Chinese people contracted smallpox and three of them died. The Chinese community was accused of spreading disease because of substandard living conditions. More than 300 men formed a mob and marched through the city's Chinese district, looting and vandalizing Chinese property and smashing the windows out of Chinese laundries. The traumatized community was forced to take shelter at the North West Mounted Police barracks, and for the following three weeks police patrolled the streets to prevent more attacks.

Newfoundland Head Tax (1906)

A lesser known piece of anti-Chinese legislation—specific to Atlantic Canada—was Newfoundland's *Act Respecting the Immigration of Chinese Persons*. The Act (first introduced in 1904), which imposed a $300 tax on all Chinese entering the province, was passed two years later.

The rationale behind the law was highly dubious. Although there were few Chinese in Newfoundland in the early 1900s, local newspapers reported on their presence in increasingly histrionic tones. When St. John's fifth Chinese laundry opened in 1904, the *Evening Telegram* declared, "It is time some steps were taken to check this invasion of undesirables."

In 1905, a popular St. John's laundry (non-Chinese owned) burned down. The arrival shortly afterwards of 7 Chinese people spurred claims of "a Chinese plot" designed to take advantage of the accident. Several months later, the arrival of 6 more Chinese and 4 Lebanese immigrants prompted the following statement from a local newspaper:

> *Six more Chinamen and four Assyrians arrived here by the* S.S. Laurentian *this morning. The 'Heathen Chinee' have now quite a colony established here, and if they continue to come in such large bunches we will boast of a local Chinatown of larger population than in much more pretentious cities. The yellow peril is not greatly appreciated by our workmen, who fear that in a short time they will be branching out in other than the 'washee-washee' business.*

In the spring of 1906, the Longshoremen's Protective Union entered a petition to stop Chinese immigration to Newfoundland. When 50 immigrants arrived at Port aux Basques just three days later, newspaper reports whipped up hysteria about a Chinese "invasion."

When the Head Tax passed the House of Assembly and was submitted to the Legislative Council, not all members were in favour of the bill. One commented, "As far as the Chinamen on the streets is concerned, [their] cleanliness and tidiness of appearance contrasts most favorably with our own people." Nonetheless, the Head Tax—made legal in August, 1906—was not repealed until 1949.

The Vancouver Riots (1907)

One of the most dramatic acts of anti-Chinese agitation took place in Vancouver in 1907. Racial tensions had heightened in 1899 and 1990 after an influx of Asian immigrants arrived in B.C., many of them Japanese workers expelled from California after the enforcement of anti-Asian immigration legislation.

During July of 1907, more than 2,300 Japanese immigrants arrived in the province, many of whom had been contracted for jobs by Canadian companies. The local press responded to the "invasion" with alarm, and soon after, a chapter of the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) was formed.

On Sept 7, the AEL, along with 8,000-9,000 supporters, marched to Vancouver City Hall, where an anti-Asian meeting had been convened. Inside the packed hall, racist speeches were made against the Chinese and Japanese, further inflaming the crowd. An agitated mob descended on the city's Chinatown and Japantown, and soon a riot broke out.

Asian-owned businesses were vandalized and destroyed, which stoked anger and fear within Chinese and Japanese communities. In protest, the Asian workers of Vancouver went on strike. The government attempted to compensate the Asian community for some of its devastating losses: $23,000 was paid to the Chinese community and $9,000 to the Japanese.

Chinese Exclusion Act (1923)

The *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1923 was by far the most devastating piece of legislation against Asian immigrants. The Act, which became known as the "Chinese Exclusion Act" among the targeted community, largely prohibited Chinese immigration to Canada. British citizens of Chinese ethnic origin were also barred from entering the country. A few exceptions were made for diplomats, university students, and those granted special permission by the Minister of Immigration. The family of former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson came to Canada by permission of the Minister.

Passed on July 1st—then Dominion Day to most—the Act was long remembered by Chinese Canadians as "Humiliation Day." Besides closing the door on prospective immigrants, the Act separated many men who had already been living in Canada from their wives and children in China.

"It may be very right indeed to separate a man by law from his wife and family if he belongs to a race whose increase in the country would be disastrous to those already in occupation of it; especially if such intruding race be very prolific and very difficult to assimilate; and by reason of a more meagre standard of living capable of undoing the masses of those to whom such a country belongs."

—Tom MacInnes, *Oriental Occupation of British Columbia* (1927)

Men affected this way were called "Married Bachelors." The wives left in China often struggled to raise children by themselves and suffered the economic hardships of forced single-parenthood. Some families were never reunited.

The *Chinese Immigration Act* was repealed in 1947, due mainly to the lobbying and activism of Chinese-Canadian veterans of World War II and their supporters. In the 24 years from its enactment to its repeal, only 12 Chinese people entered Canada. By 1947, Chinese settlers had been part of Canada's history for almost 90 years, but because the Act's restrictions and separation of families disrupted the continuity of immigration, Chinese-Canadian communities of today are largely unconnected to the early settlers and tend to display traits of first-generation immigrants.

Other Legislation

From 1872 to 1923, a host of discriminatory legislation was imposed on the Chinese at the provincial and federal levels. Some of these include but are not limited to:

- **Coal Mining Regulation Amendment Act (1890):** Chinese in B.C. were prohibited from working underground.

- **B.C. Liquor Licensure Act (1899):** Chinese restaurant owners were prohibited from holding liquor licenses.

- **Act prohibiting the Chinese from entering professions and buying property in parts of Vancouver:** Enacted in British Columbia in 1907.

- **Act to Prevent the Employment of Female Labour in Certain Capacities (1912):** Chinese business owners in Saskatchewan were prohibited from hiring white women. Similar laws were later passed in Ontario, Manitoba and BC.

- **By-laws prohibiting the establishment of new Chinese laundries:** Such laws were passed in Hamilton (1910), Halifax (1919), and other communities across Canada.

- **School segregation (1921):** The Victoria School Board attempted to segregate Chinese students by creating a separate school for them (as was attempted in the early 1900s). Angry protests from their parents eventually forced the Board to allow Chinese children to attend public schools.

Impact on the Chinese-Canadian Community

Discriminatory laws that prevented Chinese people across the nation from voting, and that restricted and eventually ended their immigration, imposed economic burdens that made survival in Canada very difficult.

Chinese workers had been reluctantly brought to Canada when the government needed their labour on the Canadian Pacific Railway, but they were discarded and systematically discriminated against when they were no longer useful. The imposition of a Head Tax on Chinese immigrants both exploited the Chinese community and brought in millions of dollars for the province of British Columbia and the federal government.

Despite the challenges, the Chinese community persisted. In 1884, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and others were formed to provide support and political leadership.

Most Chinese immigrants survived in whatever ways they could, often by opening their own businesses or by working for those that were Chinese-owned: entrepreneurship was one of few avenues available for the Chinese at the time. The ubiquity of Chinese laundries, restaurants, and shops in so many Canadian communities attests to fierce determination—determination that must be admired.

In 1885, financier Donald Smith ceremonially drove in the last spike of the Canadian Pacific Railway. A photo taken that day is often reproduced in newspapers and text books:

Notably absent in the photo are any of the Chinese workers so instrumental in the CPR's completion. "All the Spikes But the Last," by Canadian poet F.R. Scott (1899-1985), brings perspective to both the plight of the Chinese community and the cruelty of governments towards them:

Where are the coolies in your poem, Ned?
Where are the thousands from China who swung
their picks with bare hands at forty below?

Between the first and the million other spikes
they drove, and the dressed-up act of
Donald Smith, who has sung their story?

Did they fare so well in the land they helped to
unite? Did they get one of the 25,000,000 CPR acres?

Is all Canada has to say to them written in the Chinese
Immigration Act?

Although the ban on Chinese immigration would be lifted in 1947, major Chinese immigration to Canada would not occur again until the 1960s, when discrimination according to racial background was officially removed from rules for immigration to Canada.

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