



Ancient China Learning Series

The Children of Chinatown

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The Children of Chinatown: A Long Time Coming

Vancouver's Chinatown is a vibrant community with a long history beginning with the hard work and perseverance of its early settlers. Most settlers came from southern China and were farmers and laborers. Few women immigrated in the early days because of Canada's restrictive laws and because women were expected to stay in China to take care of their families. Early Chinatown was a community of bachelors.



Why Did Chinese Immigrants Come?

Between 1787 and 1850, China's population increased from 16 to 28 million. Food production could not keep up and famine became widespread. Breakdown of law and order and political instability led to the death of millions. Farmland was scarce and farmers saw their land shrink further with the growing population. During this time Guangdong Province faced many natural disasters, successively leading to bad harvests. Most farmers could not feed their families.

Canada was prosperous by comparison and the attractiveness of new opportunities led many to immigrate.



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For more information, or to obtain the other issues in the series, please contact:

Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden

604-662-3207 ext 205, education@vancouverchinesegarden.com

www.vancouverchinesegarden.com



DR. SUN YAT-SEN
CLASSICAL
CHINESE
GARDEN

HERITAGE
Legacy Fund
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Who Were the Early Chinese Immigrants?

The first Chinese immigrants to North America came in 1848 for the California Gold Rush and then spread northward towards British Columbia. Most of these first arrivals were called “sojourners” (temporary workers) rather than settlers. Their historical arrival marked the establishment of a continuous Chinese community in Canada.

In 1858, the first Chinese settlers, a few wealthy merchants from Hong Kong, came to British Columbia and established businesses in Victoria. The majority of later settlers were laborers who were hired by Chinese companies to work on the Canada Pacific Railway and other labour-intensive jobs.

In 1885, anti-Chinese sentiment led to the government-introduced “head tax” on Chinese immigrants. Each immigrant was forced to pay a \$50 fee to come to Canada. This was later increased to \$500 in 1903 which was the equivalent to two years wages of a Chinese labourer at the time.

Because of this prohibitive head tax, it was only merchants and professionals who could afford to bring their wives and children from China. In all, the federal government collected \$23 million from the Chinese through the head tax. No other ethnic group had ever been targeted in this way.



BC HISTORY: The first explorers and fur traders to arrive on the west coast of what is now British Columbia came from Spain, England, Russia, America, France and Scotland.

In 1827, trader James McMillan brought Canada’s first immigrants, the Sandwich Islanders (Hawaiian Islanders), to British Columbia’s Fraser Valley. The “Kanakas”, as they were called, worked clearing land and hewing timbers for Fort Langley.

Soon settlers from other parts of Canada were attracted to the developing western frontier. By 1857, French and French-Canadian missionaries formed the largest ethnic group settled in the inland areas of the province.

When gold was discovered on the Fraser River over 20,000 newcomers, including Chinese people, from around the world poured in. At the peak of the Gold Rush, there were 5,000 Chinese in Barkerville alone. When the Rush was over, they moved to other B.C. centres, such as Victoria, where Chinese communities were already established.

Who Was in Chinatown?

In 1884, two years before Vancouver was incorporated, a head count around Burrard Inlet counted 114 Chinese including 60 sawmill hands, 30 washermen and cooks, 10 store clerks, 5 merchants, 5 children, 3 married women and 1 prostitute.

As the head tax was raised to \$500.00 in 1903, it became prohibitive for the majority of Chinese men to bring their wives and children to Canada. Instead, they sent money back to China to support their families and occasionally went home for visits.

By 1947, the Exclusion Act, which had forced many Chinese families to remain apart for years, was repealed. Some families were able to re-unite quickly; others never did. From 1947 onward, an increasing number of Chinese children living in Chinatown were Canadian-born.

A Child's Life

Usually, child rearing in Chinese families in Canada was done by the mothers. During the early years, sons were sent to elementary school, but daughters were kept at home. Fathers wanted their sons to have a Canadian education and learn English so they could help with business and hopefully become more assimilated into Canadian life.

The children of Chinese immigrants, clustered around Chinatown, straddled two cultures. They attended Strathcona Elementary school, one of the oldest standing schools in Vancouver (located at the east end of Chinatown) after it opened in 1891. They received a traditional English education along with children from other European immigrant groups that had settled in the Strathcona area. English as a Second Language (ESL) classes were unknown, so older children and teens, who didn't speak English, had to endure attending grades one and two classes with six and seven year old children to acquire English language skills. To improve their Chinese reading and writing skills, they attended special classes in the evenings and on weekends with private tutors. The Chinese Public School opened in 1917 for instruction in Chinese.

FAMILIES: Yip Sang (his real name was Yip Chun Tien) played a pioneering role in British Columbia's early history. He founded the Wing Sang Company, one of Vancouver's most important import-export businesses, whose legacy still stands as the oldest building in Chinatown.

In 1886, Yip Sang returned to China, married and had two children, but his wife (Lee Shee) died. Over the years, he married three more times (Dong Shee, Wong Shee, and Chin Shee) and had another 21 children. In 1901 he brought his three wives and all twenty-three children to Vancouver.



(above) Chinese school soccer team in front of Strathcona school



(left) Strathcona Elementary school today

Games Children Played

Just like today, games were an important social activity for the families of Chinatown. Parents enjoyed games of mahjong while children played various chasing games or occupied themselves with toys.

CHINESE YO-YO: This toy includes two sticks tied together with a string and a spool balanced on the string. The point of the game is to keep the spool spinning on the string and prevent it from hitting the ground. When spinning, the spool creates a mysterious whirling sound. Traditionally played by youngsters as a form of entertainment, this sport has a long history. Presently, this toy is generally performed for major Chinese festivals, such as Chinese New Year.

CHINESE SHUTTLECOCK: The shuttlecock is a flying object traditionally made out of chicken feathers tied to an old coin and used in kicking games of skill. Later, children made their own shuttlecocks by cutting many strips of tissue paper and attaching these to a small hard square object which was then kicked in the air.

HAWK AND CHICKS (sometimes called Eagle and Chicks): In this game of tag one child is the hawk attacking the chicks, another child is the mother hen trying to protect the chicks and everyone else are chicks that may run anywhere. When the hawk catches one, it then becomes the hawk.

KITE FLYING: Colourful kites have been popular in China for hundreds of years. Traditional shapes include butterflies, fish and dragons. Both store-bought and hand-made kites, intricate and simple, were used.

TIU-U (Fishing) or CHINESE DOMINOES: The name 'fishing' comes from the idea that players 'fish' for matching dominoes. The game was originally played with bone or wood dominoes and continues to be popular today.

THINK ABOUT IT: Some of the games the children played in Chinatown are very similar to the games played by children today in North America. Can you think of a game that resembles Chinese Shuttlecock or Hawks and Chicks?



Chinese Yo-Yo



Kite Flying

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