

The Forgotten History of the Chinese in Canada

by *Ging Wei Wong* 黃景煒

Depending on what version of history you want to believe, the first Chinese may have set foot on Canadian soil as early as 1421. Another version says 1788. But the most accepted wisdom is that China was in turmoil in the mid-1800s, especially in the agrarian societies of southern China with drought, poverty, crime, and political unrest. All of that, with some slick marketing putting the dreams of a better life in many a desperate family's heads, led to a mass exodus to so-called lands of opportunity – referred to as “Gold Mountain.”

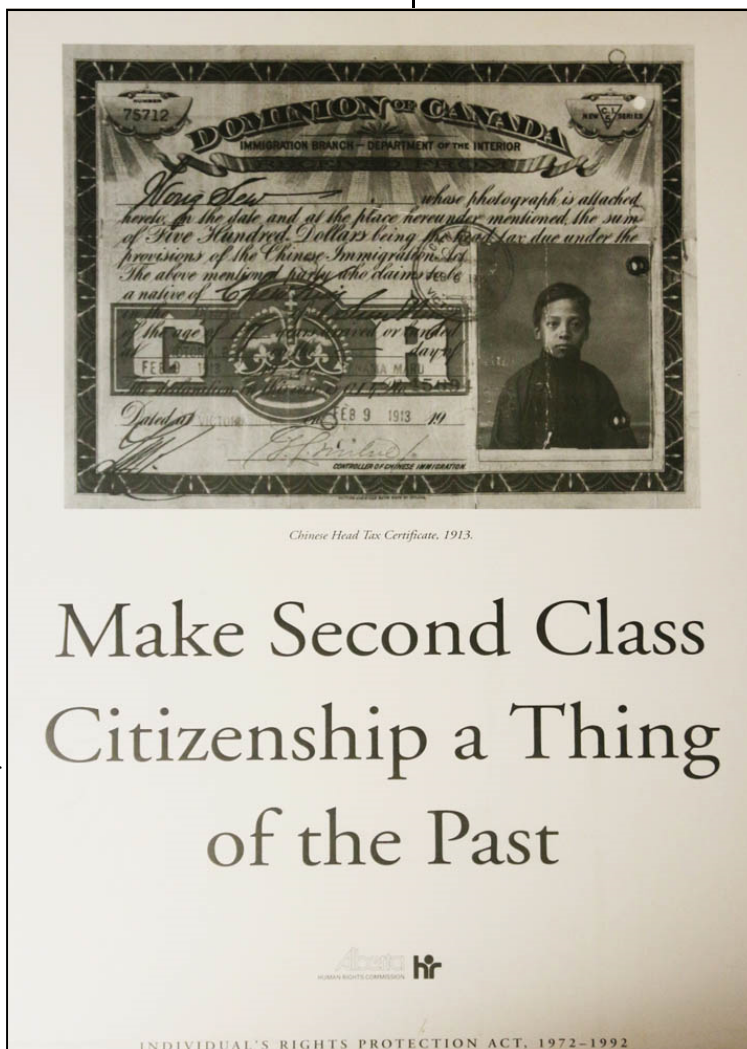
Large-scale immigration of Chinese to Canada started with the gold rush in 1858. Later, a large influx of 17,000 Chinese labourers came between 1881 and 1885 to complete the construction of the BC portion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Once Chinese labourers were no longer needed, the BC and federal governments passed discriminatory legislation aimed to keep the Chinese out of Canada.

Between 1885 and 1923, more than 82,000 Chinese paid an exclusive, Chinese-only head tax, starting with \$50 in 1885, increased to \$100 in 1900, then to \$500 in 1903. In their effort to keep the Chinese out of Canada, the federal government collected more than \$23 million. Only a few categories of Chinese immigrants were exempt from the head tax – merchants and their families, diplomats, tourists, students, clergy and men of science.

Conditions remained dire in China. The Chinese, the vast majority male, kept trying to come to Canada no matter what the cost. Chinese women and children were rarely considered, resulting in the segregated Chinatowns in Canada becoming “bachelor” societies. What little education they received was up to the Chinese community because they were not allowed in public Canadian schools.

Anti-Chinese sentiment on the west coast forced many of the Chinese eastward into Alberta. The first Chinese man to settle in Edmonton was Chung Gee who was fleeing anti-Chinese riots in Calgary. He opened a laundry in July of 1892.

My father-in-law, Sew Wong, was born in 1896. He paid a head tax of \$500 upon arriving in Victoria in 1913. His head tax certificate was used on an Alberta Human



Chinese Head Tax Certificate, 1913.

Make Second Class
Citizenship a Thing
of the Past

1992
HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

INDIVIDUAL'S RIGHTS PROTECTION ACT, 1972-1992

*1992 Human Rights
Commission poster with image
of 1913 Chinese Head Tax
Certificate of Sew Wong
(Source: Wong Family
Collection)*

Rights Commission poster in 1992 – almost 100 years after he was born.

Traditionally the oldest boy in Chinese families was destined to take care of his parents in their old age. My father, Bark Ging Wong, was the third-born child in the family. Because he was the oldest son, he was chosen to be sent to Canada in 1921, at the age of just 13. He was exempt from paying the head tax because he was sponsored by a merchant family.

He landed in Vancouver and most likely worked immediately as a labourer. He had little, if any, formal education in Chinese, and none in English. This was two years before the federal government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923, literally barring any Chinese from entering Canada.

Can you imagine the task he was burdened with, of finding work to support himself and to send remittances home to help his family, not knowing when or if he would ever see them again?

By 1924 he had made his way to Alberta as a cook, quite possibly working in mining camps.

He was a labourer, a cook, and then a market gardener by the time he made his first trip back to China in October 1930, likely after the autumn harvest. He returned to his ancestral village of Chew Ging, Toishan County, China. It would be the first time he had set eyes upon his youngest sister who was born three years after he first sailed for Canada.

Bark Ging married Young See on December 30, 1930 in what was an arranged



1921 Canadian Immigration Certificate of Bark Ging Wong
(Source—Wong Family Collection)

marriage. She was 18. He returned alone to Edmonton in May 1931. It turned out to be the last time he ever saw his parents.

Back in Canada, the Great Depression had just started with up to a third of the labour force out of work. Bark Ging was different. Toiling as a market gardener, he was self-employed and was not dependent on anyone, nor did he live in Chinatown like many of his compatriots. He lived on location where he gardened along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River.

Dr. Max Dolgoy, who graduated in 1936 from the University of Alberta Medical School, received Bark Ging as one of his earliest patients and remained the family physician for three generations of Wongs before he retired. He recalled that Bark Ging worked on a market garden south of the General Hospital, just west of the High Level Bridge. When the Depression ended and World War II started in 1939, Bark Ging had an address in Riverdale, 9013 – 101 Avenue. This was also the address of Hop Woo (listed in the Henderson Directories 1935-1940), the market gardening partnership he had with Lung Kie Chew.

By 1945, after 15 years of marriage, Bark Ging and Young See were still 10,000 km apart, separated by the Rocky Mountains and Pacific Ocean. By correspondence, they agreed to adopt one of Bark Ging's nephews to be their son. Young See took him in as her own after the death of Bark Ging's parents.

In 1947, Bark Ging gardened and lived in a house on the hillside near Government House and befriended Ernest Stowe who was the Chief Provincial Gardener. This friendship endured until Stowe retired and moved to the west coast in 1952.

The discriminatory Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed on May 14, 1947. Subsequently, Chinese families started to be reunited in Canada and the Chinese Canadian baby boom started.

In anticipation of bringing his wife and adopted son to Canada, Bark Ging received his Certificate of Canadian Citizenship on January 17, 1949. Meanwhile, Young See was in Hong Kong completing paperwork and fulfilling the requirements necessary to come to Canada. Their adopted son would have to wait until Young See was settled in Canada before joining them.

Young See Wong finally arrived in Vancouver on June 27, 1949, by airplane. Eighteen years had lapsed since she last saw her husband. It was around this time that the dwelling located at the rear of Government House was moved to the northwest corner of the Calder market garden and became 12782 – 113 Street. This was where Bark Ging and Young See started their family.

When 37-year old Young See Wong joined her husband in Edmonton, Bark Ging had market gardening interests in Riverdale and Calder with his business partner Lung Kie Chew. Amidst the hustle of a new growing season in May 1950, Young See gave birth to a daughter, a true Canadian. Due to medical complications, however, the baby only survived a month and was laid to rest in Beechmount Cemetery.

Their adopted son arrived in early July 1951 and was welcomed into his new home in Calder. He was promptly introduced to the chores of the market gardens located in Calder and Riverdale.

The business partnership with Lung Kie Chew dissolved around 1952. Bark Ging continued with the Calder operation north of the CN railway tracks between 109 Street and 113 A Street, north of 127 Avenue to 129 Avenue, and Lung Kie Chew continued on the Riverdale site where he had his home.

On October 25, 1952 Young See gave birth to her first Canadian-born son. In



Ging Wei Wong 黄景煒 was born into a market gardening family in Edmonton. A product of Edmonton Public Schools and the University of Alberta, he retired after a 35-year career in air traffic services. The year he served in Tuktoyaktuk on the Arctic Coast, the locals thought he was Inuit. Wei is the co-editor of *Millennium Messages: An Anthology of New Asian Canadian Expressions* (1997), co-founder of Edmonton's inaugural Asian Heritage Month (1999), Statistical and Historical Advisor of *Talk to the World: Edmonton's Chinese (Mandarin) Bilingual Program – The First 25 Years* (2007) and Associate Producer of the award-winning documentary film *Lost Years: A People's Struggle for Justice* (2011). He was a presenter at the 2015 Alberta Genealogical Society Conference. He has been working on his family tree since 1990 after the passing of his parents who left Toishan, Guangdong Province, China for a better life in "Gold Mountain" (Canada).

December 1953, another nephew arrived from Hong Kong to live with and help Bark Ging and Young See. Days later, in the new year of 1954, Bark Ging and Young See welcomed another boy into their busy household.

Dreaming of better prospects, and with a growing family, Bark Ging rented an additional 20 acres in 1956 to grow vegetables, while continuing to tend the Calder market garden. Described as a portion of the SE of 7-53-25W4, Clover Bar, we had to commute through Beverly, cross the Clover Bar Bridge, and take an immediate right turn after the guardrail down to the river flats. It was across the river from present-day Rundle Park (which was a city landfill at the time), and is at the bottom of what is now the Sunridge Ski Area. We referred to this as our Beverly farm.

In 1958, we moved to a house in Dovercourt, 12261 – 134 Street. We commuted to our Beverly farm for another year or so. The 1958 gross income of \$13,375.66 was the best year in our market gardening operations.

In October 1959, the Calder market garden was vacated. The land was sold and has never been developed as it was on the approach path to runway 16 at the Industrial Airport (also known as the Municipal Airport, Blatchford Field or the City Centre Airport); the last chance for any aircraft to land if it ran into difficulty before hitting the CN rail yards or the Yellowhead Trail. It is now used as the Lauderdale off leash park site and is also known locally as Onion Park (named for the onions that have regenerated from our market garden).

*Bark Ging Wong
Market Garden,
Edmonton Site Map*

The house that I first lived in was relocated again, this time to 10 acres of uncultivated land in the Municipal District of Sturgeon-Waldemere, (Plan 6215V, Lot 5 & 14, Blk 2) north on what was then the 2-lane Highway 28 (now 97 Street). The house was used only for storage. The land was later annexed by the City of Edmonton in 1971 and given the address of 9407 – 157 Avenue (in the present-day Eaux Claire neighborhood). We referred to this as our Namao farm.

After the brush and weeds were burned off, it was cultivated for crops for the first time. We grew beets, radishes, carrots, squash, dill, parsley, green onions, spinach, turnips, cucumber, cauliflower and cabbage, which were marketed to wholesalers like MacDonald's Consolidated, Scott National, Brown Fruit Co., Westfair Foods and Woodward's Westmount. Chinese vegetables grown were bok choy, suey choy, gai lan, gai choy and snow peas. These crops were sold to the same wholesalers as well as to Chinese merchants such as Kwong Hing Company in Chinatown (10126 – 97 Street).



July 2, 2003 Wei Wong

There were a couple of lean years, for example, 1965, with a net income of \$587.74 and 1971, with a net income of \$935.58. But Bark Ging never sought alternate employment in the off-season no matter what the circumstances as far back as I can remember. Ironically in 1975, the last year of the Namao operation, gross income peaked at \$9,159.42. Bark Ging and Young See sold the Namao farm on November 1, 1975.

Retired from market gardening, Bark Ging and Young See took a long-awaited trip to tour China in August 1976. Young See had not been back since she left in 1949. Bark Ging had not been back since 1930. They lived out their retirement years in north Edmonton.

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Bark Ging Wong, ca 1953, at 12782 113 Street, Calder (Source—Wong Family Collection)

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