



# Relatively Speaking

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*This plaque marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act in Canada, for which a remembrance ceremony was held in Ottawa in June, 2023. Inside, Ging Wei Wong chronicles the impact of the prohibitive policies that accompanied the Exclusion Act, and his father's and fellow Chinese immigrants' fortitude in overcoming the challenges associated with this dark period in Canada's history, starting on page 7.*



**Ging Wei Wong** 黄景煒 was born into a market gardening family and educated at Edmonton Public Schools and the University of Alberta. He helped on the family farm for 20 years and retired from a 35-year career in air traffic services. Wei continues to research the lesser known history of the immigration of Chinese to Canada and is eager to share his knowledge using personal family experiences. He has written several historical accounts of his family that have been published by the Alberta Genealogical Society and was the winner of the Peter Staveley Memorial award in 2018.

His family's stories have been of interest to local writers and historians. Family artifacts are featured at the Chinese Canadian Museum's exhibition – *The Paper Trail to the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act in Vancouver*, and the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library's exhibition – *Mercantile Mobility: Chinese Merchants in Western Canada* at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

## The Chinese Exclusion Act and Wong Bark Ging's C.I. 44

by Ging Wei Wong

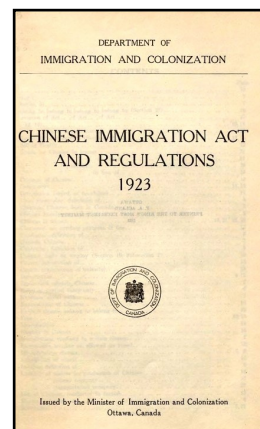
On June 23, 2023 a national remembrance ceremony was held in the Senate of Canada to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Chinese Immigration Act, commonly known as the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Governor General Mary Simon, Senators Yuen Pau Woo and Victor Oh delivered remarks at the ceremony.

Why is it important for Canadians to be aware of this dark period in Canada's history? The negative impact of the Chinese Exclusion Act continues to affect several generations of Chinese in Canada.

Prior to enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act, head taxes were levied on Chinese who wanted to immigrate to Canada. When the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed coast to coast, the Chinese head tax levied was \$50 in 1885, doubling to \$100 in 1900 and then escalated to \$500 in 1903 (equivalent to \$13,000 today).

The intent of the prohibitive head taxes was to discourage Chinese from immigrating, and to deter the mostly Chinese bachelor population in Canada from bringing family members over from China. The Canadian government collected \$23 million in head taxes from 82,000 Chinese immigrants during the 38 years that it was in effect (1885-1923).



Cover page of the *Chinese Immigration Act and Regulations 1923*

With the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, head taxes were replaced by more restrictive measures. It was the government's solution to keeping the Chinese out of Canada, and only certain categories were allowed entry into Canada such as diplomats, merchants and students. It was enacted on Dominion Day, July 1, 1923. While the rest of Canada celebrated, the Chinese felt disgraced and called it Humiliation Day.

My father and his compatriots never talked about their experiences entering this country. I believe they wanted to forget the injustices they endured. They were too ashamed to talk about the racism and discrimination thrust upon them. They didn't understand why the Chinese were singled out for mistreatment.

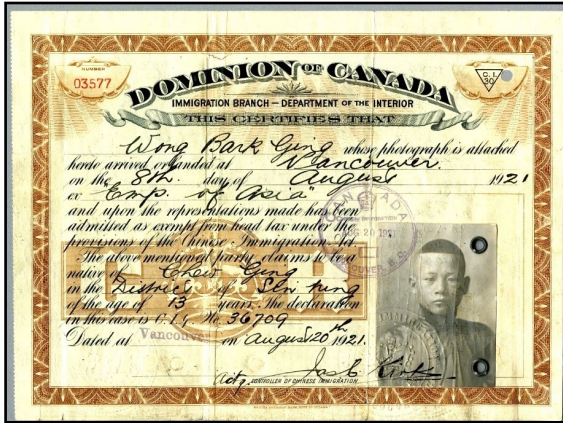
Chinese to register within twelve months from date of the Act.

**18.** Within twelve months after the coming into force of this Act and subject to such regulations as may be made by the Governor General in Council for the purpose, every person of Chinese origin or descent in Canada, irrespective of allegiance or citizenship, shall register with such officer or officers and at such place or places as are designated by the Governor General in Council for that purpose, and obtain a certificate in the form prescribed: Provided that those persons who may, during the time fixed for registration, be absent from Canada with authority to return, may register upon their return.

Proviso.

Section 18 of the *Chinese Immigration Act and Regulations 1923*

Section 18 of the Chinese Immigration Act made it mandatory for every Chinese in Canada, including those born in Canada, to register with a government office or RCMP detachment within a year or risk



1921 Immigration Certificate of Wong Bark Ging

finer, imprisonment or deportation. Like many others, my father Wong Bark Ging 黃栢振 was affected by this Act.

I first learned from Catherine Clement, curator of The Paper Trail to the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act at the newly opened Chinese Canadian Museum in Vancouver, that the registration process involved bringing in three copies of his photo and his Chinese Immigration (C.I.) 30 Immigration Certificate that was issued to him when he first landed in 1921.

At the age of 16 he would have felt the dread of being scrutinized and with trepidation made the visit to an immigration agent on June 21, 1924, just days before the deadline. His education comprised five years of school in China. His English capacity would have been what he managed to learn in the two years since stepping onto Canadian soil.

He was one of over 56,000 Chinese living in Canada who were registered before June 30, 1924.

These C.I. 44 forms were kept in government vaults since that time, and it was only at the urging of Catherine Clement and her team that Library and Archives Canada made them public in 2023, on the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

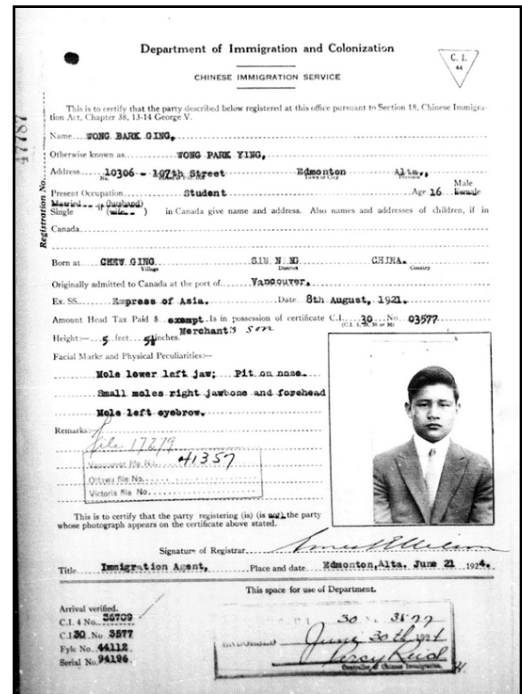
Almost a hundred years after it was issued to my father, I was privileged to be the first one in my family to see his C.I. 44. I would have never been able to see a photograph of him at age 16 if these records were not released.

A scan of Wong Bark Ging’s C.I. 30 (number 03577) Immigration Certificate is on display at the exhibit *The Paper Trail to the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act* in the new Chinese Canadian Museum in Vancouver until June 30, 2024 [chinesecanadianmuseum.ca/exhibitions/1923-chinese-exclusion-act](http://chinesecanadianmuseum.ca/exhibitions/1923-chinese-exclusion-act). The museum is housed inside the two-storey structure originally built by merchant Yip Sang in 1889. It is the oldest building in Vancouver’s Chinatown.

It is also displayed at the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library at the University of Alberta, at an exhibition titled *Mercantile Mobility: Chinese Merchants in Western Canada* that runs until March 29, 2024 [bpsclibrarynews.blogspot/2023/mercantile-mobility-chinese-merchants](https://bpsclibrarynews.blogspot/2023/mercantile-mobility-chinese-merchants).

The C.I. 44 states that my father was otherwise known as Wong Park Ying, a name I never heard him use. My research into his address of 10306 – 107 Street, Edmonton, Alberta in 1924 came up empty. There is no listing in the 1924 Henderson’s Directory for that address.

My father came to Canada as a student. He was born in the village of Chew Ging, county of Sin Ning in China. He was originally admitted to Canada on August 8, 1921 at the port of Vancouver after sailing the Pacific Ocean via the Empress of Asia. He was exempt from the \$500 head tax because he was a merchant’s son. The Immigration Agent recorded his height of 5 feet 5 ½ inches as well as facial marks and physical peculiarities: mole lower left jaw, pit on nose, small moles right jawbone and forehead, mole left eyebrow.



1924 C.I. 44 Certificate of Wong Bark Ging issued by Department of Immigration and Colonization

Historians have said that the Chinese in Canada have been the most surveilled and excessively documented. My father's C.I. 44 (number 47787) contains a lot of information that was only uncovered when I formally applied to obtain the Case Files of Wong Bark Ging held by Library and Archives Canada, under the Access to Information Act.

1. File number 17279 CH is typed on his original C.I.4 Statement and Declaration for Registration, which was issued on August 20, 1921 in Vancouver, BC. That was twelve days after he first set foot on Canadian soil, detained in the Vancouver Detention Shed, interrogated and cross examined by a government inspector aided by an interpreter. The cross-examination document is tagged with the same file number, 17279 CH.
2. Vancouver File number 41357 was a later entry handwritten in the stamped box. The number was entered on Wong Bark Ging's wife's Landed Immigrant document issued by the Canadian Immigration Service on July 4, 1949 and her medical document completed at Douglas, BC on July 5, 1949.
3. C.I. 4 number 36709 appears on the Statement and Declaration for Registration. The completion of this form by the Acting Controller of Chinese Immigration in Vancouver granted Wong Bark Ging a C.I. 30 certificate declaring he was exempt from paying the head tax.
4. File number 44112 was found on memos of the Department of Immigration and Colonization related to Wong Bark Ging and other family members on arrival in Canada in 1921.
5. Serial number 94196 appears as an Ottawa registration number at the top of his Statement and Declaration for Registration.

REGISTERED AT OTTAWA 191  
 UNDER NO. 94196  
**STATEMENT AND DECLARATION FOR REGISTRATION**  
 Under the provisions of the Chinese Immigration Act.  
 No. 36709  
 Part of Vancouver, BC. August 20th, 1921  
 (786-462-3544)  
 WONG BARK GING  
 This Statement made in duplicate by  
 whose proper signature is hereto appended, testifies—that he is at the date hereof  
 13 years of age, was born at Chen Ging  
 in the district of SIN HING  
 that his title, official rank, profession or occupation is that of a  
 merchant's son, that his last place of domicile  
 was Chen Ging, that he arrived in Canada at  
 Vancouver, by Express of the ASIA  
 in August 8th, 1921, and now expresses a desire to remain in  
 Canada, and expects to reside in VANCOUVER, in the  
 Province of British Columbia  
 I declare that I fully comprehend the above statement and that it is true in every  
 particular. 我表白所言以上各事予皆通曉俱是真實  
 File # 17279 CH  
 Made and declared before me, and Certificate of Registration No. 05677  
 Form granted on the day, month and year hereto affixed.  
 Amount paid, 500, or Exempt.  
 (Full description must be entered on the back of this Form.)  
 (SEE OTHER SIDE.)

1921 C.I. 44 Statement and Declaration for Registration

It seems official documents were referenced and cross referenced depending on where they were completed – point of entry, Vancouver or where they were officially granted in Ottawa. Uncovering and trying to understand these documents and numbers is perplexing, and leads to more questions than answers that require further study.

### Human Toll of the Act

The Chinese Exclusion Act remained in force for almost a quarter century. It was not repealed until May 14, 1947. According to Statistics Canada, during the time that the Chinese Exclusion Act was in force, 1923 to 1947, less than fifty Chinese migrants were accepted into Canada.

The gender imbalance in Canada made it impossible for the majority of Chinese bachelors to have any hope of starting a family, and disrupted Chinese families from having normal relationships. Many fragmented families in China and Canada could not be united.

It raised obstacles to travel to and from China by allowing only a maximum two-year absence from Canada, otherwise the person would have to apply again for admission as an immigrant. Wong Bark Ging left Canada to get married (October 30, 1930 to May 25, 1931).

Many Chinese in Canada made trips back to China, but could not bring their wives or children back to Canada until the Act was repealed. In Wong Bark Ging's case, he married Young See on December 30, 1930 in China and was reunited in Edmonton, Alberta 18 ½ years later in July 1949.

Many wives survived poverty, famine, civil war and the Japanese invasion back in China in the absence of their husbands – many died. Husbands endured racism, discrimination and unemployment in Canada and worried incessantly about their spouses and family in China.

After the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed and Canadian citizenship was granted to Chinese in Canada, successful applications to bring wives over resulted in the start of a Chinese baby boom. Delays however, meant riskier pregnancies because many wives were near the end of their childbearing years.

Many bachelors were stranded in Canada without family, alone. A few documented cases were overwhelmed by hopelessness and died by suicide.

On June 23, 2023 an official plaque in English, French and Chinese commemorating the Centenary of the Chinese Exclusion Act was unveiled in the Senate of Canada.

*The Exclusion of Chinese Immigrants, 1923-1947*

*On 1 July 1923, Canada prohibited Chinese immigration. The Chinese Immigration Act, 1923 (Chinese Exclusion Act) was the culmination of anti-Chinese racism and policies, including the head taxes which it replaced. All Chinese persons living in Canada, even those born here, had to register with the government or risk fines, detainment, or deportation. The Act impeded family reunification, community development, social integration, and economic equality. Chinese Canadian men and women successfully challenged this law, leading to its repeal in 1947. Still, their fight to dismantle racist immigration restrictions continued.*



*Official plaque commemorating the Centenary of the Chinese Exclusion Act, June 23, 2023 (Source: CBC News: The National)*

The Public record of the *Ceremony Marking 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act* is available at <https://www.cpac.ca/episode?id=126e0d5f-8759-4409-9c9c-904a4db010c1>.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.chinesecanadianmuseum.ca/exhibitions/paper-trail-1923-chinese-exclusion-act>  
<sup>2</sup><http://bpsclibrarynews.blogspot.com/2023/02/mercantile-mobility-chinese-merchants.html>

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