

Timeline of significant events in early Chinese settlement in Calgary and the role of Community Organizations

1871 – 1885: The Early Years of Chinese Settlement

Construction on the Canadian Pacific Railway

The story of Chinese settlers in Alberta begins in another province. When British Columbia agreed to join Confederation in 1871, it did so under the condition that the Canadian Pacific Railway, linking B.C to Eastern Canada, would be built within 10 years. As a result, more than 17,000 Chinese workers were recruited from Guangdong Province in China, Taiwan, and from Chinese communities in California and Victoria B.C who arrived during the Fraser River Gold Rush. Their labour was characterized by high levels of volatility, death, and an unfair wage that was less than 50% of what white workers received. As well as being paid less, Chinese workers were given the most dangerous tasks, such as handling the explosive nitroglycerin used to break up solid rock. Due to the harsh and exploitative conditions, hundreds died from accidents, the winter cold, illness and malnutrition.

The Anti-Chinese Movement and The Head Tax

Despite the emergence of labour unions at the time, Euro-Canadian workers did not seek solidarity with the Chinese, but rather organized to further disenfranchise them of labour rights. The Working Men's Protective Association is one example of an organized agitation group in the anti-Chinese movement that would influence local and federal policies. Founded in 1878, their mandate is described as:

“the mutual protection of the working classes of British Columbia against the great influx of Chinese; to use all legitimate means for the suppression of their immigration; to assist each other in the obtaining of employment; and to devise means for the amelioration of the condition of the working classes of the Province in general.”¹

This form of organized racism existed beyond the labour sector and was integrated into the fabric of Euro-centric Canadian society. Anti-Asian lectures, pamphlets, and other forms of propaganda circulated widely in the public sphere. In 1885, the federal government enacted a \$50 Head Tax on Chinese immigration, a significant hardship for the Chinese whose average annual wage was \$300 at the time. The tax, which doubled in 1902 and increased tenfold to \$500 by 1903, followed other onerous restrictions that would last four decades. Regardless of the racist environment, the arrival of the Chinese worker would forever change the ethno-cultural landscape of Canadian society.

1884 – 1910: Chinese Organizations and Calgary's First Chinatowns

Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association

¹ Warburton, Rennie. “The Workingmen's Protective Association, Victoria, B.C., 1878: Racism, Intersectionality and Status Politics .” *Journal of Canadian Labour Studies*, Volume 43, 1999, p. 105–120.

With the completion of the CPR, Chinese settlers moved eastwards towards rural and urban centers. In August 1884, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), a registered charitable organization, effectively served as an "internal administrative institution" for the Chinese-Canadian community. The CCBA opened their first branch in Victoria in 1885 and a second in Vancouver in 1895. The Association offered various crucial social services and assisted the community with several needs. Services ranged from offering legal representation to sending the remains of deceased family members to their ancestral homelands in China.

Calgary's First Chinatown

The first "Chinatowns" in Canada formed as racially ghettoized neighbourhoods that also served as cultural enclaves for the Chinese to build community and find sanctuary. By the late 19th century, Calgary's first Chinatown began to take shape along the Bow River and the town centre in the 1880's. Destroyed by a fire in 1886, a second Chinatown was established that comprised of restaurants, a grocer, a tailor, and several laundries. By 1900, the neighbourhood was thriving and included a rooming house and the Kwong Man Yuen restaurant with a community room in the back where many came to drink tea or Chinese whisky.

The 1892 Smallpox Riot

In the summer of 1892, a Chinese resident fell ill with smallpox. While the situation was contained, nine white Calgaryans contracted the disease and three would die. Following their deaths, four Chinese patients released from quarantine returned to Chinatown. In response, a mob of 300 men descended on Chinese laundries, from which the workers had fortunately already fled. The mob vandalized the laundries, then moved on to a store where they injured two individuals. While this horrific scene was documented by the media, many undocumented acts of racially motivated violence occurred in the neighbourhood with little aid from the authorities. The Chinese community would have to fend for themselves and provide their own safety.

Tongs, Clan Associations, Mutual Aid and Secret Societies

The Chinatown pioneers established social institutions to maintain traditional customs and offer social services that were integral to community life. Four types of social organizations were established: 房 fong/堂 tong, clan associations, 會館 hui kuan, and secret societies. The fongs organized newcomers who were from the same region in China and helped find affordable accommodation and other necessities of everyday life. Calgary's first known organization was Louie Kheong's community room that operated as a fong during 1890s.

Clan associations were for members with the same family name and reflected the importance of kinship systems in Chinese culture. These groups undertook broader support including legal, recreational, and social responsibilities. Class associations often cared for their most vulnerable members.

The hui kuan were mutual aid societies that offered credit and loans, employment services, and disputed arbitration. Their members were typically from the same county or district in China or spoke the same dialect.

Secret societies that were established in China, particularly in the Guangdong and Fujian provinces, organized to counter the imperial ruling dynasty in China. The first activity for secret societies would begin in the years preceding the 1911 revolution in China.

Other organizations would form in future phases of Chinatown. These institutions ensured that as Chinatown evolved, Chinese traditions, cultural heritage, and the community would be maintained. Their kinship orientation strongly influence future settlement in the area since members would be supported in their efforts to act as sponsors and agents to bring extended family over.

1910 – 1923: The Next Generation of Chinatown

When the Canadian Northern Railway announced a planned route and hotel through the location of Calgary's second Chinatown, property values in the area escalated. Capitalizing on the burgeoning real estate, white landlords sold their properties and evicted the Chinese tenants. In response to the displacement of the Chinese community, a small group of successful Chinese businessmen purchased a piece of land for \$18,000 at the corner of Centre Street South and 2 Avenue. This block would become known as the Canton Block and the genesis of Calgary's current Chinatown. This significant purchase of land did not come without backlash from neighbouring white settlers. In October 1910, a group of opposing white citizens lead by prominent lawyer and educator James Short, demanded that the Chinatown be located elsewhere and segregated from whites. This was known as the Chinatown Relocation Issue of 1910. Given the protest, a temporary order to withhold building permits to the Chinese was issued. At that time, City Council set up a committee to assess if the Chinese should be segregated or permitted the same property rights as whites.

Louie Kheong, president of the Chinese Empire Reform Association of Calgary, Ho Lem, representing the laundry businesses, and Thomas Underwood, a former city mayor, were part of the committee. Other areas in the city were proposed as an alternative site for the new Chinatown but were rejected by the committee. Without an agreement, the purchase of the Canton Block proceeded as originally planned.

1923 – 1946: The *Chinese Exclusion Act*

The *Chinese Immigration Act of 1923* was passed by the government of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King in response to continued demands for more prohibitive regulations to limit Chinese immigration. Commonly referred to as the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, the legislation restricted all Chinese immigration to Canada by narrowly defining the acceptable categories of Chinese immigrants. Coinciding with Dominion Day, commemorating the anniversary of Canadian Confederation, the Chinese community referred to this day as "Humiliation Day" and refused to participate in celebrations for many years to come.

The virtual cessation of Chinese immigration significantly impacted the community across Canada. Families were fractured and the lack of Chinese women limited the opportunity for the community's natural growth. The result was the formation of "bachelor societies" where the population was predominately men. During the Great Depression, unemployed Chinese were encouraged to return to China, and many did. As the population declined, it was predicted that the Chinese communities in Canada would eventually disappear.

During the Exclusion Act years, Calgary's Chinese population dropped from 1,054 in 1931 to approximately 800 in 1941. Existing buildings deteriorated in Chinatown and very few others were built. In these critical times, several Chinese-led institutions and mutual aid societies formed or expanded branches in Calgary. The Chinese Public School, established in 1920, taught Chinese language and traditions to Canadian-born Chinese children. The Chinese Mission formed a YMCA, which organized the first all-Chinese hockey team for boys and a girls basketball team in 1929. The Mission also sponsored a Chinese Young People's Society and various children's clubs. Two popular annual fundraising events originated during these years: the women's Chow Mein Tea in 1936, and the Young People's Society's Chinese Fashion Show in 1937. Originally non-denominational, the Chinese Mission became affiliated with the United Church of Canada in 1949.

Several more family associations formed in these decades: the Mah Kam Gee Tong in 1919, the Sue Yuen Benevolent Association, who were primarily the descendants of the Louie, Fong, and Kwong families in 1926, and the Wong Wun Sun Society in 1927. The Lung Kong Association, the Shon Yee Benevolent Association, and the Yee Fung Toy Society established branches in Calgary. The inner lodge of Chinese Freemasonry also became home to the Dart Coon Club in 1922.

The Depression Era and Political Involvement

During the Depression era, the hardship experienced by the Chinese was compounded by the systemic racism of the times. Single unemployed Chinese men received \$1.12 a week in federal government relief while whites received \$2.50. In 1936, a group of Chinese men were denied the stipend for refusing to work in federal relief camps. These camps were created to board and house unemployed single men in exchange for demanding physical labour. In 1937, the Communist Party of Canada and groups of unemployed Chinese men engaged in a series of protests demanding equal government relief. They picketed government offices, held a rally at City Hall, and demonstrated by blocking city streetcar tracks. These protests exposed a schism between the working class "bachelors" who were willing to form an alliance with the Communist Party, and the merchant class who were embarrassed by the protests and preferred to address the community's social problems through existing Chinatown organizations and the church. Eventually, the relief payment was raised to \$2.12 per week. However, in retaliation, several buildings that housed the unemployed were shut down, including the Chinese Mission.

At the time, the Chinese Mission had been a refuge to the community. They housed 50 jobless men, many who slept on the floor; initiated the Mothers' Club to help provide meals, led English classes, and ran the popular "Unemployed Men's Choir", which performed hymns in churches throughout the region. Chinese business leaders also provided charity and offered cheap or free

meals at restaurants in exchange for dishwashing, and warm places to sleep beside the dryers in laundries. Although not well documented by white historians, the existing Chinatown associations also played a critical role in providing diverse and crucial aid during the Depression Era.

1947 – 1960: Post Exclusion and the Changing Chinese Community

Post Chinese Exclusion Act

After the Second World War, Chinese citizens who had fought alongside white Canadians in the war continued to advocate for equal immigration rights and were successful in repealing “the Act” in 1947. Although the repeal was an important step, considerable obstacles remained. Only Chinese Canadian citizens could bring spouses and non-adult children to Calgary, but there were very few naturalized citizens at that time since Canadian citizenship status required the renunciation of Chinese citizenship. In addition, the *Canadian Citizenship Act* of 1947, made it necessary to have citizenship to vote. Thus, the repeal had little impact on the community in the beginning.

It was not until the late 1950s and 1960s, when there was a gradual relaxation of regulations controlling immigration from China did change occur. With the federal government now endeavouring to meet the critical demand for labour, the emphasis on country of origin was removed and in 1967 the quota system was replaced by a new points system. In stark contrast, prior to this policy reform, immigrants from majority-white countries such as the United Kingdom, western Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand were favoured and experienced no such barriers the way the Chinese did. The *Chinese Exclusion Act* was the first of its kind that legally discriminated based on race.

By 1961, Calgary’s Chinese population had more than doubled since 1941 as women had become 61 per cent of Canada’s Chinese population. The end of the era of selective entry did not mean all was well, however. Members of the Chinese community continued to face challenges. Obtaining professional status, receiving the right to vote, getting a driver’s license, and other barriers continue to exist as they still do to the contemporary racialized newcomer.

Same site different Chinatown

At the same time, Alberta was experiencing an economic boom triggered by a series of major oil discoveries. As car ownership increased in Calgary many moved away from the inner-city neighbourhoods, including Chinatown, to the newly built post-war suburbs. Societally, the assimilation of Chinese Canadians was becoming mainstream as the multicultural movement among other racialized groups in Canada was gaining momentum. With the majority of Chinese Calgaryans living in other areas, the 1960s would mark the beginning of the changing role of Chinatown to meet new cultural needs, the social needs of its residents, and increased commercial demand from white customers.

The roles of the traditional social organizations also began to shift as government-sponsored social services reached the Chinese community. When the People’s Republic of China was

established in 1949, affiliations with the homeland became complicated. Some groups changed their focus to local activities instead of China while others withdrew. Nonetheless, social and cultural activities remained as important as ever and new Chinatown-based organizations emerged. The Chung Shan Association formed in Calgary in 1954. The Gee How Oak Tin Benevolent Association, representing the Chan, Woo, and Yuen families, was established in 1962. The Wong Wun Sun Society combined with the Wong Kong Har Tong in 1967 to become the Wong's Affinity Association. Despite the move of many residents and businesses to the suburbs, all the kinship associations retained their Chinatown location and continued to serve the aging and changing Chinese community.

This period of change in Calgary's Chinatown also included new challenges brought on yet again by government pressure. During the 1960s a series of transportation and urban renewal programs threatened to destroy Chinatown. Vigorous lobbying by the Sien Lok Society, founded in 1968 by a group of Chinese businessmen and community leaders, advocated that business and residential redevelopment should be initiated by Calgary's Chinese population and should reflect the area's heritage. These ideas were formalized by the city's 1976 Design Brief for the area. The streets were given Chinese names, benches, and Chinese motifs were adopted on buildings. The climax of this advocacy was the creation of a Chinese Calgary Cultural Centre. Designed after the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, the centre opened in September 1992 and continues to be actively used by the city's Chinese community.



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