

榮昌洗衣館 Wing Chong Laundry

| No. of Articles | DESCRIPTION | Lined Count | Check Count | Price | | Total Amount | |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------|---|--------------|---|
| | | | | \$ | C | \$ | C |
| ..... | Sheets | | | | | | |
| ..... | Pillows | | | | | | |
| ..... | Bedspreads | | | | | | |
| ..... | Hand Towels | | | | | | |
| ..... | Roller Towels | | | | | | |
| ..... | Kitchen Towels | | | | | | |
| ..... | Glass Towels | | | | | | |
| ..... | Bath Towels | | | | | | |
| ..... | Table Cloths | | | | | | |
| ..... | Table Tops | | | | | | |
| ..... | Table Napkins | | | | | | |
| ..... | Side Board Covers | | | | | | |
| ..... | Dresses | | | | | | |
| ..... | Dusters | | | | | | |
| ..... | Blankets, Wool, Double, pr. | | | | | | |
| ..... | Blankets, Flannelette, pr. | | | | | | |
| ..... | Blankets, Cotton, double | | | | | | |
| ..... | Aprons | | | | | | |
| ..... | Window Curtains | | | | | | |
| ..... | Shirts | | | | | | |
| ..... | Collars | | | | | | |
| ..... | Curtains | | | | | | |
| ..... | Combination Underwear | | | | | | |

Figure 1: Wing Chong Laundry service slip
Heritage Park archives, Alberta

Chinese-operated businesses were situated in proximity to each other, and some were established along 4th Avenue East, like the 榮昌洗衣館 Wing Chong Laundry that was owned by Mr Tse. Others were on the west side, across the train tracks, such as Quon’s Grocery and Palm Café and its later rendition, New Look Café. The small Toisan diaspora community relied on one another for support in many ways.

Though Paul Wong did not read Chinese, his business partner 司徒錫 Seto Gan was fluent in the written Chinese language. After the Chinese-language newspaper sourced from Vancouver was first read by Seto Gan, Paul would bring it to Mr. Tse at the laundry, apparently to discuss news articles though Paul could not read the language. Chinese newspapers were circulated and shared in the close-knit community.

While the men talked, Paul’s daughter Margaret Rose would visit Mrs. Tse, who treated her to special mandarin oranges imported from Japan when they were available during the winter season. This was a special treat for Margaret, who as the only mixed-raced person in the community, received the gift as a form of familial affection.

This show of affection was particularly tender as the Tse couple spoke only Toisan and Margaret Rose only English.

Like many others, instead of a flower garden, Mrs. Tse planted big leafy vegetables for practical use. It included Chinese vegetables as they would have been unobtainable in a rural community. For winter months, they would have relied on sun-dried bok choy or spinach reconstituted in soups; leafy greens traditionally used in both fresh and dried forms. At harvest time, they would have collected all the seeds from the various vegetables and dried them to be reborn next planting season.

While Margaret did not have the knowledge to name the vegetables as a child, she speculates in our interview what they might have grown: “they had watermelon, bitter melon, chives, garlic, bok choy, gai lan, snow peas, napa and green cabbages, spinach; all the Alberta-hardy Chinese veggies that reflect a cultural heritage in a new land.”

History of 謝 Tse Family and Wing Chong Laundry, experience of owning/operating a laundry

Though the couple married before Mr. Tse left for Canada, she remained in China to farm to help support the husband's family. The exorbitant head tax aside, extreme hardships under hostile conditions made it prohibitive to bring his wife. Many starved to death or committed suicide during these difficult times, so what meagre resources, if any, would be left to help the remaining, dwindling numbers to survive. Then the *Chinese Exclusion Act* was passed into law in 1923. Mrs. Tse would have only been able to rejoin her husband when the law was finally repealed decades later. During the 46 years of separation, she raised four children on her own.

According to an archived interview with Mrs. Tse in the mid 1970s, she noted business was bad, and always been bad. At the time of the interview when Mr. Tse was the age of 84, they had already ceased operations for five years. Advance age aside, their hand-laundry operations using mainly equipment from the 1900s, could not compete with the mechanisation of the industry and modern washing machines that were readily available. When asked whether they noticed any changes in High River over the decades, they replied "none". It appears they have been insulated from the changes around them, living in a distorted, earlier time.

According to immigration records, Tse arrived at the age of 29 under the named "Jay Joo" in Victoria in March, 1910. His ancestral homeland is shown as 開平縣 Hoy Ping/Kaiping, which is the same as other Chinese contemporaries of High River.

The naming of the Tse has an intriguing history that speaks to the difficulty of tracing Chinese history in Canada. The name "Tse," which he used in High River comes from "June Jay", the three words use both Cantonese and Toisan romanizations, and repeat the surname, which is not a Chinese traditional way of naming. For example, Tse is his surname, 謝, romanized in Cantonese. June is his given, 忠/中/宗, name romanized in Toisan. Jay is his surname, 謝 romanized in Toisan. There are many words with the "June" sound and tone when pronounced in Toisan and this Anglo spelling ever only appears in records during the 1900's. However, without seeing his name written, we will never know. 忠/中/宗 are the three most likely words which would have been used in his name. All three are offered as possibilities but we cannot be certain what his real name is without his headstone, which would likely have the inscriptions. Even more curious is his legal name that appears on the land title of the laundry's property. It is written as "Jar Dar", which is simply a bastardized spelling of his romanized name by a white legal clerk.

At the time, the Chinese population in High River peaked at around forty, then declined to the tens by the 1970s. In urban centres such as Calgary, tongs would have been the meeting place of the burgeoning affluent Chinese, similar to belonging to a private club in today's terms. For many labourers or businesses just getting by, they could not afford the time or money to donate and participate in the clan associations or church groups. In rural Alberta however, the Chinese community was so small that these types of associations would not be necessary. As many of the Chinese settlers in High River were from the same county 開平縣 Hoy Ping/ Kaiping, the close-knit community served each other's specific rural needs and bonds formed simply by being in proximity, both in their ancestral homeland as well as High River.

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Yet at the same time, because of how small the community was in High River, there was no public observance of Chinese festivals as they toiled throughout the year. This did not mean however, that they had abandoned traditions. Instead, ceremonies dedicated to filial piety took on more private and intimate rituals of reverence. Mrs. Tse would simply put incense on the altar and “slaughter a chicken”, the expression for having something special to eat for a festive occasion. Before the cooked chicken or any food offering can be eaten, it would be first presented on the family’s ancestral altar along with the incense, then consumed later in the day.

The two-storey building housed the laundry operations, kitchen and living quarters were on the main floor. During the Depression years, Tse offered room and board to unemployed men in exchange for labour in the laundry. In the late 1940s and 1950s, after the repeal of the *Chinese Exclusion Act* and post War era, Tse rented the upstairs space to boarders from New Look Café.

Tse bought the property from the white owner John Lemuel Sexsmith, “one piece at a time”, as in part of a room then eventually the entire floor, then the second storey, and finally the whole building. Tse said it was always called “Wing Chong Laundry”, though did not know the origins of the name. However, in a different interview, Seto Gan reveals that the original owner is the uncle of Wong Fook Lan. When Tse took over the premises it was already fully set up with laundry equipment and he operated the shop as it was while sharing the premises with a shoemaker.

Based on the certificate of the land title, in February 1926 Tse June Jay (recorded as Jar Dar) and Wong Fook Lan (recorded as Wing Foo) purchased Lots 40-41 Blk.11 Plan High River 2245E. The previous owner was listed as John Lemuel Sexsmith, June 25, 1910. Between 1910-1926, the property was rented to Andy S. Irvine, then the Wing Chong Laundry as it was named and operated by Tse’s predecessor, the uncle of Wong Fook Lan. Tse and his partner Wong, as well as a shoemaker were the last tenants.

In the early 1940s, as recalled by Don Blake in “The Best of Times” article archived in the Museum of the Highwood, there were numerous businesses on 4th Avenue. He noted a “Chinese shoe repair shop” but did not mention a laundry where Wing Chong would have been located. Based on historical photographs and interviews with Margaret Rose Wong, the shop didn’t show any signage, which may explain why Blake did not notice the laundry if a shoemaker occupied the front space.

Wing Chong Laundry wrote Chinese characters on the brown packages to identify their owners, such as New Look Café, 醫院 Hospital, etc. because it was the language of work at the laundry. Though marker pens were invented in the 1950s, they would not have been widely in use until much later, and the ink would have seeped through the brown paper wrapping, damaging the clothes. Hence the labelling was very likely done in pencil.

Mr. Tse co-owned the laundry with 黃馥蘭 Wong Fook Lan. When Mr. Wong died in July 1943, a relative took over his share and operated it jointly with Tse for a short time until Tse bought them out and became the sole proprietor.

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Kwong Lung administered Wong's estate in October 1943. In December 1944, the certificate of title showed three names: Tse (recorded as Jar Dar), Chui Pai Wong and Wong Lem. Reduced to Tse and Chui Pai Wong by August 1949. Tse was the sole proprietor in May 1957.

Mr. Wong died of pneumonia in 1943 at the age of 51, as calculated from immigration records confirming his arrival in Victoria in 1911 at age 19. Harsh working conditions and safety concerns, coupled with exposure to lye, which is very caustic, would have been an occupational risk in laundries. Lye in the form of both sodium hydroxide and potassium hydroxide is used in making soap for their cleaning properties. Lye is a corrosive and even more hazardous when used in high temperatures as in a laundry where clothes are routinely boiled. It would have been commonplace to work with bare hands with hot caustic solutions while breathing in the fumes.

Aside from the laundry business, Wing Chong Laundry also offered cheque cashing services just like the New Look Café. In a 1984 speech by Alderman Sue Higgins, she described the service as such: "one would normally expect the laundry to just do laundry, but the venerable [school teacher, mother of Sue Higgins] Mrs. Leitch used the Wing Chong Laundry as her Sunday banker—the only place in town besides the New Look Café she could cash a cheque on Sunday". The Chinese established their own borrowing services as traditional banking were not widely available to them. Given that Tse and his partner eventually bought the property, he was experienced in borrowing from other sources when banks were shut to them. Tse later offered banking services at Wing Chong Laundry to all townsfolk. To serve English speakers such as Mrs. Leitch, Tse must have learnt enough English to provide banking services at the laundry, seven days a week.

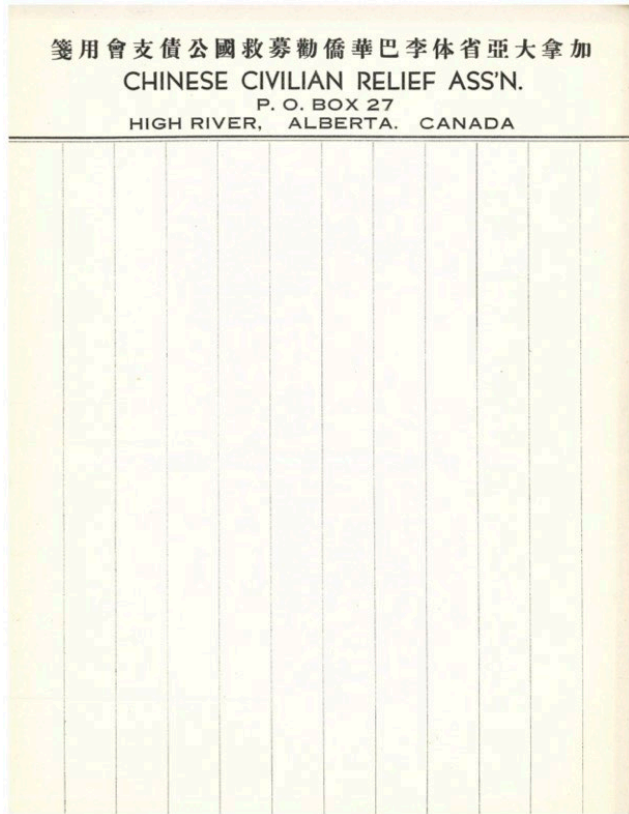


Figure 2: "Save China" issue war-bonds record slip
Heritage Park archives, Alberta.

In addition to banking services, Tse also sold "Save China" war bonds at the laundry. When Wing Chong Laundry was relocated to Heritage Park in 1978, the archive included laundry service slips as well as slips to record the issuance of "Save China" war bonds. The Chinese Civilian Relief Association was raising funds to finance Chinese military operations and fight the Second Sino-Japanese War that occurred between 1937-1945. The war-bond record slips at the laundry, with vertical lines for the documentation of Chinese names and contributed amounts, indicated that this campaign reached the small community of High River. Tse would have been a "broker" in the global campaign to drive contributions from overseas Chinese and raise funds to support the war effort. Collecting and remitting the funds also correspond with Tse's cheque cashing business model. These efforts played a significant role for the diasporic Chinese community during a time of

war, who wanted to aid their homeland but were significantly distant. This would have been meaningful for Paul Wong, who was rejected like many other Chinese when trying to enlist in the Canadian army during the Second World War. His sister Dorothy worked in an ammunition factory, brother George volunteered to drive supplies to a training facility in northern BC. That these blank slips remained a keepsake in the laundry decades after the war shows how much this campaign meant to the community.



Figure 3: 司徒錫 Seto Gan buried in Queen's Park Cemetery, Calgary. Courtesy of Margaret Rose Wong

Tse and Wong established their first laundry business in High River in the 1920s when Wong Fook Lan would have been about age 30. Despite having no immediate family here, Mr. Wong's gravestone was eloquently engraved in Chinese. It would have been no small feat to have such a monument designed and produced in rural Alberta because the engraving needed a skilled stone mason who was literate in Chinese, which requires memorizing thousands of characters. In an interview with Margaret Rose, it is suggested that perhaps Seto helped with the inscription, since he was "the only person I can think of who would have had the knowledge of writing Chinese to have the gravestone made and it is apparently well done."

Traditionally, gravestone inscriptions are very detailed and include the ancestral homeland of the deceased, right down to the specific district in 廣東開平 Hoiping/Kaiping county in Guangdong province. However, Wong's gravestone only shows his date of death: July 3, 1943, without a birth date. These omissions are likely because he died without family here and the birth date is unknown. Both Seto Gan and Wong Fook Lan hailed from the same home county of 廣東開平 Hoiping/Kaiping as confirmed by Seto's gravestone inscription four decades later.



Figure 4: 黃馥蘭 Wong Fook Lan buried in Highwood Cemetery, High River
Courtesy of Chinook Country Historical Society

By contrast, even founding Chinese families such as 關 Quon have only English inscriptions on their monuments in the same cemetery. Wong Fook Lan was laid to rest in the Highwood Cemetery in High River. It is another example of how the Toisan community looked after one another; in death as in life.



Fung Ling Feimo
In collaboration with
Annie Wong

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