



## Asian Immigration

Chinese and Japanese immigrants to Canada had a troubled relationship with the federal government throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, thanks to institutionalized racism and a predominating notion that these immigrants were a burden on white society. While Chinese immigration was somewhat accepted in the country during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) from 1880 to 1885, when the federal government needed a source of cheap labour to tackle the most dangerous jobs in railway building, there was much racial unrest afterward.

This unrest - caused by racism and social pressures, such as the fear that Orientals would take away job opportunities from Whites - prompted the federal government to take steps to ban Chinese immigrants through taxes and, later, immigration embargos. These actions remain a source of controversy with many Chinese-Canadians today.

Similarly, during the early 20th century, the federal government curtailed its relations with Japan, and limited the number of people who come emigrate from that country to Canada. During World War II, when Canada and Japan were at war with each other, the federal government forcibly interned more than 20,000 Japanese-Canadian citizens, regardless of their personal stance on the war.

*Note: While Canada has seen immigration from the southern Korean peninsula and Southeast Asia, this section is mostly concerned with the plight of Chinese and Japanese peoples. Settlers from these countries were particularly targeted in federal government policy throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.*

### **Early Chinese and Japanese Immigrants**

Immigration to Canada from China stretches back as far as 1788, when a group of 50 Chinese artisans accompanied Capt. John Meares to build a trading post on Vancouver Island. However, Chinese immigration truly began in earnest around 1858, when Asian gold prospectors came to British Columbia.

The first wave of settlement from Japan to Canada happened between 1877 and 1928, when mostly young, literate men came to work as fishermen or lumbermen along the Pacific coast of British Columbia. They also settled in B.C.'s Fraser Valley and parts of Alberta.

### **Chinese Railway Labourers, 1880s**

Between 1880 and 1885, about 15,000 Chinese labourers were brought into Canada from China and California to work on the British Columbia section of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Many of these immigrants were hoping this job would help them escape from crushing levels of poverty in China.

The Chinese often had the most dangerous jobs on the railway carrying heavy rocks or planting unstable explosives. They were also paid about 30 to 50 per cent less than other workers. They lived in unsafe canvas tents that offered poor protection from the elements, including sudden rockslides in the Rockies.

Many of these workers died from diseases like smallpox and cholera, or were killed in work-related accidents.

### **Did you know ... ?**

Of the 5,000 or so Chinese workers who came to Canada in 1880, about 3,500 would be killed by the following year during construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

In 1885, work on the railway was nearing completion. Chinese men generally didn't make enough on the railway to pay for a return fare back, so many wanted to stay in Canada.

Trade union workers and some politicians on the west coast wanted to get rid of these Chinese workers, however, since Asians were willing to work hard at any job no matter how low the wages were or how appalling the conditions.

Many white people in blue-collar positions feared that the Chinese would take away their means of employment and standard of living. They also believed that Chinese people were:

- less clean and more susceptible to diseases.
- dishonest and immoral.
- simply weren't suited to living in the harsh climate of Canada.

In the face of mounting public dissatisfaction, a Royal Commission was held by the federal government in 1885 to look into the effects of Chinese immigration.

#### ***1885 Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration***

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/14563>)

#### ***Rapport sur l'immigration chinoise, 1885***

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/93650>)

### **The Chinese Immigration Act and Head Tax, 1885**

In 1885, the federal government decided to pass the *Chinese Immigration Act*, which put a special \$50 head tax on Chinese immigrants in the hopes that this would deter the Chinese from entering Canada. No other ethnic group had to pay this kind of tax at the time. The head tax would increase a number of times in the early 20th century, and would prevent wives and families from joining their husbands or fathers in Canada.

### **Did You Know ... ?**

Chinese people were prevented from voting in British Columbia as early as 1875. They gained the right to vote provincially and federally in 1947.

***Chinese Immigration Act, 1885***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9\\_02345/0019](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9_02345/0019))

***An act to amend the Chinese Immigration Act, 1887***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9\\_02345/0024](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9_02345/0024))

***An act to further amend the Chinese Immigration Act, 1892***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9\\_02345/0025](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9_02345/0025))

By 1903, the Chinese head tax was increased to \$500 per person to eliminate Chinese immigration. This fee was roughly equivalent to two years worth of wages for a Chinese labourer living in Canada at the time.

However, some employers like the railways needed cheap labour, and were willing to pay this fee for adult men. That meant that Chinese immigration wasn't eliminated altogether, but that Chinese women and children didn't get the opportunity to join their husbands and fathers. This created a Chinese bachelor society in Canada.

***Chinese Immigration Act, 1901***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9\\_03479](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9_03479))

**Japanese Exclusionism**

Starting in 1907, Canada entered into an unofficial "gentleman's agreement" with the United States to start limiting the number of Japanese people emigrating from America to Canada. A similar agreement was also struck with Japan around the same time, as Japan was interested in controlling its emigration levels.

A quota was placed on the immigration of the Japanese, and no more than 450 people of Japanese origin could enter Canada each year. In practice, however, the number of Japanese immigrants allowed into Canada would be much less than this agreed-to quota number.

***An Act Respecting Chinese and Japanese Labour in Mines, 1901*** (URL:

[http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9\\_02264/0003](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9_02264/0003))

**Anti-Asian Vancouver Riot, 1907**

In September 1907, there was a serious riot against Asian businesses in downtown Vancouver that was started by members of the racist Asiatic Exclusion League. Because Canada was in a slight recession that year and a fair amount of white people were out of work on the west coast, there was a great deal of anger and hostility directed towards Oriental people. Generally, unemployed Whites in blue-collar labour jobs felt that Asians were taking job opportunities away from them.

A mob of about 9,000 white people riled up by the Asiatic Exclusion League descended upon Oriental businesses in downtown Vancouver, smashing windows and destroying signs.

Later that year, a federal government inquiry was held to look at providing compensation to the Oriental community. Future Prime Minister Sir William Lyon Mackenzie King was the Deputy Minister of Labour in Canada at the time, and presided over the inquiry. In his final report on the matter, he agreed to award about \$26,000 to Chinese businesses and \$9,000 to the Japanese community in damages.

***Report by W.L. Mackenzie King to investigate into the losses sustained by the Chinese population of Vancouver, B.C.***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9\\_08045](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9_08045))

***Rapport de W.L. Mackenzie King, commissaire nommé pour s'enquérir des pertes subies par la population chinoise de Vancouver***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9\\_08046](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9_08046))

***Report by W.L. Mackenzie King to investigate into the losses sustained by the Japanese population of Vancouver, B.C.***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9\\_08047](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9_08047))

***Rapport de W.L. Mackenzie King, commissaire nommé pour s'enquérir des pertes subies par la population japonaise de Vancouver***

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/65190>)

***Chinese Exclusion Act, 1923 - 1947***

Even though the federal government had profited and collected about \$23 million from the Chinese in through the head tax dating back to 1885, there were still concerns that too many Oriental men were coming to Canada and taking jobs from white people. (There was another recession in Canada from 1918 to the mid-1920s.)

In 1923, the federal government passed a law called the *Chinese Exclusion Act*. This law prevented the immigration of anyone from China. Only 15 Chinese immigrants were allowed into Canada between 1923 and 1947, when this law was finally revoked.

When the ban was lifted in 1947, many immigrants to Canada from China exhibited the same characteristics as those who came during the first waves of China-to-Canada immigration. For one, they tended to speak neither of Canada's official languages. They also retained a great deal of their Chinese heritage and culture, rather than being absorbed a bit more by the cultural values of the so-called white, "mainstream" Canadian society. This has, of course, changed considerably since the late 1940s, but the after-effects of the ban can be still seen in Canada, particularly among elderly members of this ethnic group.

The other effect this law had was that it ensured that the Chinese men who'd come to Canada before 1923 wouldn't be able to marry women, since so few Chinese females were in the country and inter-racial relationships were quite taboo at the time. This ensured the continuation of a Chinese bachelor society within Canada. It's possible that

one of the intended effects of this ban was to ensure that Chinese people in Canada "died out" over a few generations.

***Chinese Exclusion Act, 1923***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9\\_08043](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9_08043))

***Loi de l'immigration chinoise, 1923***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9\\_08044](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9_08044))

**World War II, 1939 - 1945**

Enemy aliens, including about 22,000 people of Japanese descent, were jailed through the *War Measures Act, 1914*. The act forcibly removed all Japanese persons within 100 miles of the Pacific Coast for reasons of "national security."

Japan had attacked American forces at Pearl Harbor in the Pacific Ocean in late 1941, which in turn caused America to declare war on the Japanese. American president Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order that permitted the internment of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans from 1942 to 1945 on the grounds of being enemies of the state. Therefore, Canada was merely following U.S. policy to appease its new ally in the war effort in doing likewise to Japanese Canadians.

However, many Japanese Canadians didn't openly support their homeland's involvement in the war. In fact, no Japanese Canadian was ever charged with disloyalty to Canada during the war, and many Canadian military officers at the time actually questioned the federal government's decision to treat the Japanese as enemy aliens.

Japanese people were placed in forced labour internment camps in places like:

- the interior of British Columbia.
- sugar beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba.

Between 1943 and 1946, the federal government sold off all property and businesses belonging to Japanese-Canadians -- down to simple possessions like their fishing boats.

At the end of the war in 1945, the federal government gave these people two choices:

- return to Japan.
- move inward to areas east of the Rocky Mountains.

Most chose the latter option, though the government tried to remove all Japanese people from the country later on in the 1940s. Canadian public opinion, however, prevented the federal government from acting on its threat. In April 1949, all Japanese people living in Canada became enfranchised citizens again.

New Japanese immigrants were barred from entering Canada until 1967, however, when the Points System was introduced. The Point System, which is still in place, judges

potential immigrants primarily on their labour market skills and adaptability to Canadian culture, rather than their racial or ethnic backgrounds.

### **Did You Know ... ?**

In 1988, Canada offered an official apology and financial compensation to the Japanese community for the internments and abuses of World War II. Some members of the Chinese community are upset that Canada has not offered a similar apology or financial support to those whose lives were impacted by the *Chinese Exclusion Act* or *Chinese Immigration Act*. However, it is worth pointing out that the affected Japanese had officially been considered Canadian citizens, and the Chinese had not.

#### ***War Measures Act, 1914***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9\\_08039](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9_08039))

#### ***La loi des mesures de guerre, 1914***

(URL: [http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9\\_08040](http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/9_08040))

### **Political Refugees, 1970s**

During the late 1970s, Canada admitted nearly 70,000 refugees from oppressively communist rule in Vietnam. These people were often dubbed "Vietnamese boat people" because of their willingness to flee the country and taking to the ocean in tiny, leaky, unsafe boats.

Many Canadians agreed to sponsor such refugees under new changes to the *Immigration Act, 1976*, which created a "refugee" class.

### **Hong Kong Immigration, 1980s and 1990s**

In the 1980s, a new type of immigrant was added to the *Immigration Act*: those who belonged to a "business" class. That is, anyone who wanting to bring significant entrepreneurial or business funds to Canada could immigrate here.

Many of this new class of immigrants were of Chinese origin and came from the tiny island colony of Hong Kong. During the 1980s and '90s, capitalist business people living in Hong Kong were anxious over the Chinese government's impending treaty take-over of the island from Britain, which occurred in 1998. They looked to Canada as a place to resettle and do business, since China had been a particularly oppressive communist country since the late 1940s.

Between 1983 and 1996, about 700,000 Chinese business people (mostly from Hong Kong) came to settle in Vancouver and, to a lesser extent, Toronto. They brought billions of dollars worth of investment funds with them.

### **Did You Know ... ?**

Between 1981 and 1983 alone, Chinese immigrants invested \$1.1 billion dollars in Canada's economy.