

Chinese Legacy in BC

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The 19th century gold rushes played a key role in shaping BC. Gold seekers from many parts of Europe, the Americas and Asia followed the gold trail around the world. The gold rush brought the first major settlement of Chinese people to Canada, and what would later become known as British Columbia.

The first documented Chinese arrival is recorded in a ship rental document held by the Royal BC Museum. This important archival document will be on display from May 13 – October 31, 2015 in the feature exhibition [*Gold Rush: El Dorado in BC.*](#)

According to this document, Hop Kee & Co. of San Francisco played an important role in bringing the first wave of Chinese people to Victoria. On June 24, 1858, it commissioned Allan Lowe & Co. to ship 300 Chinese men and 50 tons of merchandise to Victoria at the cost of \$3500. Most men left for the gold fields soon after arriving. Throughout the summer of 1858 and 1859, Chinese people continued to arrive from the United States; by 1859

clipper ships were bringing hundreds of Chinese immigrants directly from Hong Kong.



This arch in Victoria's Chinatown on Cormorant Street was erected in honour of Governor general the Earl of Dufferin's visit in August 1876. This image shows the store fronts of two of the three earliest Chinese companies by merchants who arrived in 1858 – Kwong lee & Co. and Tai Soong & Co.

RBCM & BCA E-01926.

Since 1858, Victoria had served as a major port between Canada and Asia and had the second largest Chinese population in North America. In 1885, Vancouver became the last stop on the newly completed Canadian Pacific Railway, and economic activities gradually shifted to Canada's West Coast.

During the gold rush era, a few Chinese immigrants benefited from booming trade. Victoria's Chinatown also prospered, along with a network of agencies in all of BC's gold rush towns. Early Chinese migrants provided useful services, such as operating



and working in restaurants and laundries, and growing and selling fresh vegetables.

Chinese workers contributed much to the building of British Columbia. In the 1860s and 1870s, besides mining, Chinese worked on many public projects such as erecting telegraph poles, constructing the 607 km-long Cariboo Wagon Road, building trails, digging canals and reclaiming wastelands.

In the late 1800s, one of the main complaints about the Chinese presence was the perception that they contributed little to the local economy before moving on to another gold field or back to China. But the gold rush migration pattern of the Chinese typically paralleled that of Europeans. Among them, some left for home or other opportunities and some stayed and created settler communities. Many of these early migrants made great contributions to the building of British Columbia.

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The Royal BC Museum and Archives collection contains samples from a stack of bilingual tickets issued to Chinese men and boys for passage on the *Barque Maria* from Hong Kong to Victoria in 1865. The Chinese names of the passengers are written in Chinese calligraphy on the upper left corner. This rare archival evidence reveals that conditions on these voyages were harsh, with only one meal a day and a sleeping space of only 14 inches (35.5 cm) for each of the 316 Chinese passengers.

Barque Maria passenger tickets, 1865, RBCM & BCA K/EA/C43