

Victoria's Chinatown: An Evolution

“Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery.”
— J.K. Rowling



Victoria is a travel destination for people all over the world, and among many must-see tourist attractions in the city is Chinatown. The oldest in North America, Victoria's Chinatown is now considered a fascinating place to shop and explore, but it wasn't always this way. When it began to form in the

19th century it was thought to be an unsavoury, crime-ridden area that should be avoided. In the past the Chinese community in Victoria was mistreated and marginalized by both the citizens and government of Canada. The journey of how Chinese-Canadians and Chinatown became an integral part of the community shows a lot about the changes that can happen through acceptance and education.

Victoria's Chinatown began to form in 1858 when the first Chinese gold miners started immigrating to British Columbia, mainly from San Francisco, California. Because Victoria was the largest supply and commercial base for many gold miners, and gold had been found in Vancouver's Fraser River, many decided to settle in the two areas. Later, between the years of 1881 and 1884, the second rush of Chinese immigrants arrived in Canada. This group consisted of 1700 men hired by Canadian companies to build the Canadian Pacific Railway, with the promise of a steady income and a place to live. These men would spend their days coworking jobs with high mortality rates to earn an extremely low wage of \$1.35/day, while their white counterparts were being paid \$2.00/day for the same job. Most of the Chinese immigrants had family living in poverty back home, and their hope was to one day afford to bring their families to Canada and provide them with a better life. However, despite their hard work and dedication to their families, this would not happen for more than half a century.

Life in Canada was challenging enough for the Chinese people, but even the act of immigration itself was made difficult by the government (of Canada). In 1885, when the number of Chinese immigrants entering the country had begun to rise dramatically, the government issued the “Chinese Immigration Act.” Its purpose was to discourage the arrival of the Chinese. As a part of this act, the government installed the “Head Tax” - a \$10 fee applied to every Chinese immigrant entering Canada. This cost eventually rose to \$500 in 1903, equivalent to approximately \$11,000 in 2016, and was financially out of reach for most people. Unfortunately, even for those who could afford to immigrate, there were many more obstacles ahead.

Having to adjust to the European way of life wasn't easy. From language and culture to religion and food, the Chinese had to alter their traditional ways of life. They had to adapt to the European cuisine or in order to make their own ethnic dishes, they had to replace traditional ingredients with foreign substitutes. Contrary to the government's hurdles, in 1874 some churches surrounding Chinatown began offering English lessons and religious classes in order to lessen the cultural gap, a sign that some acceptance of the Chinese community was offered.



As more immigrants continued to arrive in Victoria, they began adding on to the already existing Chinese communities. Over time, these communities, which had started out as just a collection of crude huts, evolved into a dense neighbourhood of businesses, theatres, schools, churches, temples and a hospital. Despite the government's implementation of the Head Tax, Chinese immigrants were still entering the country. This led the government to search for a more permanent solution and saw the creation of The Chinese Immigration Act of 1923. Also known as the

Chinese Exclusion Act, this law banned the entry of almost all Chinese people. There were now only four classes of Chinese people allowed into the country: diplomats, government officials, foreign students and those granted permission by the minister of immigration.

This legislation had a significant impact on the decline of the Chinese communities in Canada, especially on Victoria's Chinatown. It was estimated that during the Exclusion Act no more than 15 Chinese immigrants were accepted into Canada. At its population peak in 1911, Chinatown had housed over 3000 people; now, however, the population began to rapidly fall. As the wives and children of Chinese men living in Canada were restricted from entering the country, the natural growth of the Chinese community was limited. Moreover, any older and unemployed Chinese immigrants began returning back to China. It took a while, but In 1947 the Chinese Exclusion Act was successfully repealed and Chinese immigrants could now come to Canada, as well as vote and receive federal citizenship rights. Furthermore, by 1957 Chinese residents living in Canada could apply to have their families join them. The Chinese immigrants were no longer outsiders trying to survive in a foreign land, but citizens welcomed into a new life.

The government has since issued a long awaited formal apology to all Chinese-Canadians for the injustices done to them. On June 22, 2006, prime minister Stephen Harper apologized to the Chinese Immigrants for both the Chinese Immigrant Act of 1885 and the Exclusions Act of 1923, saying "*The House deeply regrets that these Canadians were discriminated against simply because they were of Chinese descent. All members of this House acknowledge that we all aspire to be a fair and just society where people of all nations and cultures are welcomed, accepted and respected.*" (<http://www.cbc.ca>) Many Chinese people from all over Canada traveled to the House of Commons to hear the words from the Prime Minister themselves. As another apologetic gesture the government made a payment of \$20 000 to 400 living head tax payers and widows of those who had passed away. In Victoria, in order to continue the welcoming of the Chinese community, the government rehabilitated Chinatown. This included the construction of The Gates of Harmonious Interest in 1981 to symbolize the cooperation between the two cultures. Two years later, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip visited Victoria's Chinatown to witness the progress that had been made. This gesture, along with many other efforts, showed the progress between the Chinese and the rest of the country; Chinatown had once been viewed as a place of crime and now, almost eighty years after the Exclusion Act was repealed, the queen herself was walking its roads.

So far all apologetic gestures were political, but was that enough to make the outsiders feel at home? According to the Ethnic Diversity Survey collected in 2002, the Chinese are now

the largest non-white ethnic group in Canada. Over one in four has a University degree, and their unemployment rate is no different than the rest of the country's. The survey showed that 76% of Chinese-Canadians said they felt a strong sense of belonging to Canada. So yes, it seems as if the government's acceptance also encouraged the citizens of Canada to welcome the Chinese immigrants as equals.



But the question remains: why the Chinese? Why were these people, in a country of immigrants, persecuted and marginalized? The simple answer is because they were different. Throughout history and even to this day people all over the world are discriminated against simply because they are different.

For the Chinese, however, they weren't just excluded by individuals but by the government of Canada itself. It is uncertain exactly why the government felt so threatened by the Chinese, but their objective was clear; they wanted to restrict the numbers of Chinese in Canada, and they were successful. As for their rationale, it's hard to say, but it is obvious that the government didn't want the Chinese to become more than a minority.

It seems to be one of our most unfortunate traits: the human tendency to dislike those who are different. This has been the cause of much pain and suffering throughout history, and while Canada was once guilty of this, the country has come a long way in terms of acceptance. A country's strength lies in its diversity, and only by realizing this did Canada begin to improve as a nation. Adopting the traditions and cultures of people around the world and breaking down the walls that separated them has enabled Canada to come together as a stronger and more stable country.

Even though discrimination still exists today, Canada is trying to combat the tendency to reject differences and instead strives to embrace them. As Canada is coming to terms with its troubled past we recognize how these events have helped to shape our country and greatly influence our lives today. However, we still must understand before we can move on and look towards the future. The gradual acceptance of Chinatown and ultimately Chinese-Canadians has helped to shape Victoria and Canada into the diverse country it is today. The realization that

all cultures can be welcomed and celebrated can open our minds, enabling us to create positive change in the global community.