



## Yee Clun Lost Story Backgrounder

### **Section 1: First Arrivals and the Canada Pacific Railway**

The first Chinese people to arrive in what is today called Canada were some 120 Chinese men hired by fur trader John Meares to work on Vancouver Island in the late 1780s. These early Chinese arrivals were contract labourers – carpenters and craftsmen. They disappeared from available records following a raid by the Spanish on the island as part of a conflict over control of the area with the British. The eventual fate of these men remains a mystery.

The first wave of true Chinese immigration to Canada began in the late 1850s following the discovery of gold in the Fraser River and the gold rush that followed. While the first of these immigrants arrived from San Francisco, they were soon followed by large numbers from China proper. By 1870, the combined total number of Chinese immigrants in British Columbia was about 1,900, growing to 4,350 by 1880. After the end of the gold rush, most of these men settled and found work in Victoria. A small portion found employment in mining and other industries.

This first wave of immigration was followed by a second that arose in response to the demand for labour to construct the Canada Pacific Railway (CPR) from 1881-1885. Over the four-year period of 1881-1884, nearly 16,000 Chinese immigrants arrived in Victoria. These men were treated little better than slaves, and many died because of cold, malnutrition, disease, and accidents, only to be replaced by newcomers from China. Estimates of the death toll range from 600 to several thousand.

The majority of the Chinese immigrants who came to work on the CPR were men from the Guangdong province of Southern China. Their native tongue was Taishan, a dialect of Cantonese. Of the British Columbia Chinese population of 10,500 in 1884, only 200 were women. This was a result of the cost of travelling to Canada, which was usually covered in part by the employer. In the decades that followed, these costs, along with the eventual head taxes (discussed below), kept the female Chinese population to a minimum.

Following the completion of the CPR in 1884, the majority of Chinese immigrants settled in enclaves built in urban centres, primarily Vancouver, Victoria, New Westminster, and Nanaimo. These enclaves (often called Chinatowns) were initially extremely poor, consisting of little more than closely clustered wooden shacks. While British Columbia remained home to most of the Chinese in the decades that followed, Chinese populations would spread east onto the Prairies and as far as Montreal in the hopes of finding work and escaping the more overt legislative and public racism in British Columbia.

---

## Section 2: Racism, riots, and anti-Chinese legislation

The initial attitude of European settlers toward Chinese labourers, while often based in stereotypes, was not overtly hostile. However, anti-Chinese sentiments increased during periods of economic hardship, the first arising in the late 1860s as the gold mines started to decline. The Chinese were often framed as competition for white labourers, willing to work for far less, and live under far worse conditions. Chinese labour, both due to its availability and cheapness, was core to the Canadian project of “opening the west” to exploitation, especially while there was a shortage of white settlers. However, as larger numbers of white settlers arrived, and racist stereotypes spread, Chinese communities were increasingly the target of anti-Chinese legislation and harassment.

The first attempt to limit the number of Chinese immigrants coming to Canada, the *Chinese Immigration Act (1885)*, was passed in response to rising anti-Chinese sentiments in British Columbia during the economic downturn of 1881-1884. However, the government only passed this law once there was no longer a need for cheap labour for the construction of the CPR. This law put a \$50 immigration tax per head on “any person of Chinese origin entering Canada and not entitled to the privilege of exemption” in an attempt to curtail Chinese immigration into Canada. The initial tax’s failure to stem Chinese immigration spurred updates to the law in 1900 and 1903 raising the head tax first to \$100 and then \$500.

In the aftermath of the First World War, Canada experienced an economic collapse that left large numbers of workers and veterans unemployed, some of whom blamed Chinese competition. In addition, increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants, numbering over 4,000 in Canada in 1919, proved that the head tax was insufficient to bar Chinese entry. In response to these factors and continuing general anti-Chinese racism, in 1923 the government of Canada passed *An Act Respecting Chinese Immigration*, limiting entry to only Chinese diplomats, children born in Canada, and merchants.

Direct restrictions on Chinese immigration to Canada ended with the passage of the *Canadian Citizenship Act* in 1947. However, government policy continued to work for the purpose of maintaining a “White Canada forever” until 1967 when a point system was introduced that ranked immigrants based on factors like level of education and ability to speak French or English.

It is important to note that, as mentioned above, the majority of the Chinese immigrants prior to the 1923 immigration ban were Cantonese-speakers. This set them apart from Chinese immigrants after 1967, most of whom spoke variations of Mandarin. Unrelated by dialect or close geographic origin, these later immigrants had little to no connection with the earlier waves. As a result, many of the early Chinatowns languished and declined even as new Chinese immigrants arrived in Canada, as they had never called Chinatown home.

Chinese Canadians were subjected to countless other local, regional, or national discriminatory laws, which often included being refused the right to vote, limitations on what fields of employment they could enter, and as will be discussed in the next section, laws against who could be employed in a Chinese-owned business.

In addition to being the target of racially discriminatory legislation, the Chinese in Canada were faced with harassment and attacks from the white settler majority. The most famous of these

were the Vancouver riots of 1887 and 1907. The first of these riots was spurred by rising anti-Chinese sentiment following the economic decline of the early 1880s, and the flood of Chinese workers during the completion of the CPR. Leading up to the 1887 event, numerous anti-Chinese rallies were held at Vancouver City Hall with the support of the municipal government. The riot spreads into the Chinese quarter with the goal of intimidating Chinese people into abandoning the city.

The 1907 Vancouver riot began as a parade by the “Asiatic Exclusion League,” bearing signs about the threat of Chinese labour, protecting the British Empire, and defending the British race. It passed through Japantown and Chinatown, destroying and looting homes and businesses as it went. In the aftermath of the riot, a government commission recommended \$26,990 in reparations to the Asian population. However, the message was loud and clear, and the riot served to embolden anti-Chinese attitudes.

Another example of discriminatory action at this time comes from Saskatchewan. In 1907, Regina was the location of what became known as the Poison Porridge Case. After several patrons of a Regina restaurant became sick at breakfast, the Chinese owner of another restaurant was accused of poisoning his competitor’s oatmeal. In the search for him, police rounded up every male Chinese person in the city and took them to City Hall, apparently believing they had conspired to hide the accused. The operation didn’t result in the apprehension of the suspect; moreover, fourteen of those rounded up later successfully sued the police officers and the Mayor of Regina for false arrest and unlawful confinement.

One of the ways the Chinese population (despite being of working-class origin and lacking capital) worked to mitigate the effects of racism, discrimination, and segregation was through their own organizations and communities. These allowed the Chinese population to manage their own affairs and fight back against Canadian oppression. As well, in the “bachelor society” created by the lack of women, these organizations provided opportunities for socialization, relaxation, and mutual support. In this regard, there were clan associations (based upon shared ancestry), traditional secret societies (imported from China), and benevolent associations. These organizations provided a replacement for the family networks immigrants were forced to leave behind in China.

---

### **Section 3: Chinese Cafes and Laundries, and the White Women’s Labour Law**

In the early years of immigration Chinese immigrants were often employed in both skilled and unskilled manufacturing, farm work, and other blue-collar work. As time went on, and more white settlers arrived, the Chinese immigrants were forced via legislation and the treatment by mainstream society into less skilled, lower paying, and more marginal work. As a result, Chinese immigrants were increasingly forced into sectors where they were less likely to compete directly with white workers, such as service industries. This marginalization also led to the creation of Chinese-owned businesses. Often established by pooling resources through associations, Chinese businesses tended to be cafes and restaurants, groceries, and hand laundries. With these businesses, the Chinese community was able to maintain some modicum of status and work towards financial success in spite of oppression from mainstream society.

Many of these small businesses depended upon the labour of working-class white female employees. The reasons for this were three-fold. First, white women were a pool of cheap labour, earning half of what white men were paid. Additionally, many white Canadians found the idea of eating food prepared and served by Chinese people revolting and preferred restaurants that had “white help only”. Finally, waiting tables was viewed as a feminine type of work by white Canadians. For lack of any Chinese women to take the jobs to play to these ideas of feminine and masculine work, white women had to be hired in their stead.

The first White Women’s Labour Law, officially titled *An Act to Prevent the Employment of Female Labour in Certain Capacities*, was passed by the Saskatchewan legislature in 1912. This law forbade “any restaurant, laundry or other place of business or amusement owned, kept or managed by any Japanese, Chinaman or other Oriental person” from hiring a white woman, under threat of a \$100 fine or jail time. There were several reasons for introducing such a law. White businessmen lobbied for restrictions and discriminatory laws targeting Chinese businesses with the goal of making them unprofitable and forcing them out of business. Members of the white working class often faced Chinese immigrants used as strikebreakers, and viewed them as competitors for work, and thus supported anti-Chinese legislation. Finally, some moral and religious movements promoted a narrative that the Chinese population was inherently corrupting, degenerate, and diseased, and that allowing them to operate put “pure white” society at risk, particularly the “vulnerable” women they worked with.

The first change to the law came in 1913, when it was amended to remove Japanese and “other oriental persons” under pressure from the Japanese government and Japanese Canadians. However, the law was passed at a time when centralized government in China was at its weakest. As a result, it was left to the Chinese population in Canada to push back. One way they did this was via challenges to the laws in courts, most famously in the case of Quong Wing and Quong Sing, who received funds from numerous organizations in their trial after being charged under the law. Under pressure from both the Saskatchewan Chinese community and eventually the Chinese government as the situation there improved, the initial law was amended in 1919 to remove explicit reference to Chinese people. However, the effects remained the same, as the “municipality in which such restaurant or laundry is situated” was granted the right to refuse Chinese businesses a licence to hire white women.

---

## **Section 4: Yee Clun**

Yee Clun arrived in Canada in 1902 at 21 years of age, moving from British Columbia to Saskatchewan four years later. After a short stint as a servant in Tyvan and as a laundryman in Rouleau, he operated the BC Restaurant in that community for several years. By 1916, he had moved to Regina and quickly became part owner of several enterprises, including the Exchange Café and attached apartments, established in partnership with a man named Jow Tai. In 1919 his parents arranged a marriage for him in China with a woman named Eng Shee Ying. She was able to come to Canada because she was exempted, as a merchant’s wife, from the \$500 head tax. In addition to his personal life, Yee Clun was a key figure in the Regina Chinese community, presiding over several nationalist and Chinese organizations including the Regina Chinese Nationalist Party.

Yee Clun made his application to Regina's Municipal Council to be allowed white female waitresses at the Exchange Cafe in the summer of 1924, the year after the total ban on Chinese immigration. He argued that, with Chinese immigration barred, and as he was now disallowed from hiring white women, there were no remaining labour pools from which he could hire.

As a well-respected businessman and member of the community, Yee Clun had met with several of his municipal contacts prior to making his request, to obtain support for his application. Despite support from several police and City officials, however, many other Councillors opposed him. In addition, women's groups like the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Regina Local Council of Women petitioned against the issuing of a licence, using racialized notions of Chinese men presenting a danger to white women's virtue as the reason for their objection. While they felt they were protecting working women, they were in fact doing the opposite. In the first place, they were barring working-class women from much-needed employment. Second, they were focussing attention on a single, racialized group of employers (Chinese men) to raise concerns about working women's vulnerability, while doing nothing to address women's vulnerability to exploitation from employers in every other part of society.

The Regina Local Council of Women brought in a lawyer to support its cause, and the Chinese community did the same, raising funds to hire Andrew MacKinnon. Following the arguments presented by both sides of the controversy, the Regina City Council ultimately decided to refuse Yee Clun's application. In response, MacKinnon and Yee Clun took the issue to the Saskatchewan Court of Kings Bench. Here, the judge ruled that the White Women's' Labor Law was meant to be racially neutral. As a result, he decided that Yee Clun could not be denied the ability to hire white women as employees.

In 1932, Yee Clun and his family left Canada and returned to China to escape the economic downturn of the great depression. However, as the Second World War loomed, and Japan made forays into China, Yee Clun returned to Regina in 1936, and his family in 1941. In 1947 they moved to Vancouver, where in 1954 his first wife, Eng Shee, died of lung cancer. Yee Clun later remarried, and passed away himself in 1967.