

The Chinese Population

Victoria was the biggest city in BC until about 1898. Many Chinese men came to Victoria looking for work during the Gold Rush. Victoria's Chinatown was the first in Canada, and was the largest in Canada until 1902. Chinatowns were also established in Barkerville, Nanaimo, Yale, and Vancouver as well as in other BC communities.

In the mid-1880s, almost half of Victoria's population was Chinese. A small group of wealthy Chinese people lived in Victoria, but most were poor or working-class men.

Tongs

Many Chinese men joined a *tong* (literally meaning a *meeting hall*). As part of a tong, many Chinese men found a place to stay, and help if they were sick or needed to find work.

Most tongs had a temple or *joss house*. Traditional Chinese religion was important and most men practised a kind of folk religion. Some were Buddhists or Taoists.

Leisure

There was lots of entertainment in Victoria's Chinatown. At one time there were five theatres offering Chinese operas, plays, **pantomimes**, and music. Some of the plays went on for days, and the audience would come and go. Many people probably knew the songs and stories by heart, because the performers were mainly from rural China.

Men would sit for long hours drinking tea, playing dominoes or cards, and talking in the small cafés and restaurants that stayed open late.

Gambling was a popular pastime. Gambling dens were located in Fan Tan Alley (fan tan is a popular Chinese game). Domino parlours and lotteries were also common throughout Chinatown.

Vocabulary

pantomimes:
entertainment
where performers
express meaning
through gestures
and music

The Chinese Working-Class

Many of the Chinese men who came to Victoria were poor. They performed unskilled labour, often for low wages. If they were married, they generally left their wives and children at home in China. The men were expected to send money home. Because they weren't planning to settle in Canada, the Chinese men were considered *sojourners* (meaning people who were staying temporarily).

Occupations

Some Chinese workers came to Victoria in 1858 to pan for gold, but many worked in service industries related to the gold rush. These jobs included cooking, laundry, and market gardening. They also found work in the coal mines on central Vancouver Island and in the BC interior.

Between 1881 and 1884, about 15,000 Chinese people arrived to help build the Canadian Pacific Railway. Chinese workers were valued. They worked hard for less money, and did not complain about the poor living conditions.

Chinese people in Victoria also worked in sawmills, shingle mills, cigar factories, and in the numerous Chinese laundries and restaurants. Others were domestic workers such as cooks, gardeners, and servants.

Housing

Most Chinese factory workers and domestics lived in Chinatown. They walked, bicycled, or took the streetcar to work.

Housing in Chinatown ranged from small wooden shacks to brick apartment buildings. Rooms and washing facilities were shared. There were minimal cooking facilities, so most working-class men ate in cafés and restaurants in Chinatown.

Meals often consisted of a bowl of rice and some dried, salted fish or vegetables.

Some domestic workers were provided with a room in the wealthy household in which they worked. Some of those who worked in laundries and restaurants slept on the floor or under the tables after the workday was over.

The Chinese Middle/Upper-Class

A group of wealthy Chinese merchants formed a middle/upper-class in Victoria's Chinatown. These men were often educated and came to Victoria to open stores and other businesses. They had respect in Chinatown.

Occupations

Many wealthy Chinese people were owners or managers of large stores and supply houses. Kwong Lee & Co. was the largest Chinese import and export company. In the 1860s, Kwong Lee & Co. was a major landowner and property tax payer in Victoria.

Beginning in the 1890s, a new middle-class arose in Chinatown. These people worked as interpreters, investors, restaurant owners, moneylenders, and real estate agents. One of the prominent men was Lee Mong Kow, an interpreter and businessman who helped found the Chinese Public School. He became its first principal.

Family

Some well-off men brought their wives and children to Victoria. Poorer, working-class countrymen usually left their families back in China. Because of this, there were very few children in Chinatown. Some of the merchants married Chinese women who were the children of other merchants. For example, Lee Mong Kow met and married Victoria-born Seto Ang, the daughter of a local tailor. Eventually, they had seventeen children, twelve of whom survived to adulthood.

Even though families were established in Chinatown during the 1800s, most men planned to return to China. While in Victoria, their wives lived a secluded but comfortable life. They didn't take part in their husband's businesses or in the community affairs of Chinatown.

Education

Chinese schools were run for the small number of children in Chinatown. Some Chinese children born in China were not allowed to go to public schools. This did not apply to Lee Mong Kow's and Seto Ang's children, since they were born in Canada.

The Chinese Public School was opened to provide a Chinese and English education to Chinese children. Soon after, Chinese children were allowed to attend Victoria's public schools, but they were placed in separate classes for many years. The Chinese Public School remains an important part of Chinatown's cultural heritage.

Housing

Middle-class and wealthy Chinese people could afford to live in more spacious and luxurious homes than the working-class. Typical homes included an apartment above their store, or a house at the rear of their building.

Lee Mong Kow and Seto Ang started their married life in an apartment on the second floor of a new brick building overlooking Chinatown's main street. As their family and wealth grew, they moved into a house on the edge of Chinatown. They eventually bought the house of a wealthy white family a few blocks away from Chinatown.