

Response to Chinese head tax



Background Briefs

Historic injustices and redress in Canada



Head tax survivors and their spouses show their certificates during the struggle to obtain redress.
Source: John Bonnar, "New book details experiences of Chinese Head Tax families," *Rabble*, September 27, 2012.

The movement for redress and early government responses

The movement to redress (to make up for past injustices) the wrongs committed against the Chinese can be traced back to 1984. Vancouver Member of Parliament (MP) Margaret Mitchell raised the issue in the House of Commons of repaying the Chinese head tax to two people who lived in her riding. This encouraged 4,000 other head tax payers and their family members to seek representation by the Chinese Canadian National Council (CCNC), an organization that advocates for Chinese Canadians in their struggle to obtain redress from the Canadian government.

In 1993 Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney offered individual medallions, a museum wing, and other measures to many other communities seeking redress for past wrongs. Chinese Canadian national groups felt this was inadequate and rejected the prime minister's offering outright. The same year, Jean Chrétien replaced Mulroney as prime minister, but his new

Liberal government did not provide an apology or redress. However, the CCNC and its supporters did not end their struggle. They even raised the issue at the United Nations Human Rights Commission and eventually took the issue to court. They argued that the federal government should not profit from racism and that under the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and international human rights law it had a responsibility to redress this historical injustice.

In 1988, the apology and compensation for the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II set the stage for redressing other racially motivated policies. By the time Paul Martin was appointed prime minister in 2003, it had become clear that there were perhaps only a few dozen surviving Chinese head tax payers still alive and likely only a few hundred spouses or widows. As a result, several national events were organized to strengthen the redress campaign. For example, in 2005, Gim Wong, the 82-year-old son of two head tax payers and a World War II veteran, conducted a cross-country "Ride for Redress" on his Harley Davidson motorcycle.

Government apology and redress agreement

It wasn't until 121 years after the first head tax was placed on Chinese entering Canada that Canada officially recognized this historical wrongdoing. With intense pressure and perseverance from Chinese Canadian community organizations and individuals (the first Chinese Canadian filed a claim in 1983 to have the amount of the head tax returned to him), a settlement was finally reached in 2006.



Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivers an apology for the head tax in the House of Commons.

Source: Office of the Prime Minister, Government of Canada.

On June 22, 2006 Stephen Harper, prime minister of Canada, offered an apology and compensation for the head tax paid by Chinese immigrants. Survivors or their spouses were paid approximately \$20,000 in compensation. As of 2013, \$16-million in compensation payments had been made. In 2008, the government of Canada devoted five million dollars to Chinese Canadian projects aimed at educating Canadians about discriminatory immigration restrictions applied in Canada.

Reactions to the apology and redress agreement

There have been mixed reactions to the redress agreement among Chinese Canadian. Some say the fight for redress is over while others say the compensation is not enough, given the suffering caused by the head tax. Some members of the community say the payments are not true compensation.

Colleen Hua, national president of the CCNC, said in a news release:

This is a restorative [healing] moment for the Chinese Canadian community as we begin a genuine process of reconciliation [bring back friendly relations] with the Canadian government.¹

An 88-year-old head tax payer, James Pon,

expressed his satisfaction:

I am grateful that I lived to see this day after so many years of trying to get the Canadian government to say “sorry.”

Others in the community said the apology and settlement were not enough. This is revealed in the following excerpts from the *Globe and Mail*, published on Wednesday, June 30, 2010.

Canada’s apology to the Chinese community for the head tax from 1885 to 1923 was not enough, say descendants of those who paid the tax.

Ottawa said sorry to the Chinese community four years ago and gave \$20,000 to those who had paid the head tax or to their surviving spouse.

But members of the Head Tax Families Society of Canada say the federal government excluded thousands of Chinese families who were affected by the historic injustices and Ottawa should rethink its approach to redress.

. . . The federal government acknowledged less than 1% of families who had paid the head tax, he said. Payments were made to about 800 people although more than 82,000 Chinese immigrants paid the tax from 1885 to 1923.²

Victor Wong, executive director of the Chinese Canadian National Council said:

For an apology to be meaningful, it needs to include the children of head tax payers.

In 2013 Jason Kenney, Minister for Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, celebrated the end of the five-year educational project. It was later revealed that \$500,000 of the \$5 million destined for Chinese Canadian projects had not been spent. However, the Canadian government took back the unspent money despite claims from Chinese Canadians that this was unfair.³



Transcript of the official government apology

Address by Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada on the Chinese Head Tax Redress

Ottawa, 22 June 2006

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to formally turn the page on an unfortunate period in Canada's past.

One during which a group of people—who only sought to build a better life—was repeatedly and deliberately singled out for unjust treatment.

I speak, of course, of the head tax that was imposed on Chinese immigrants to this country, as well as the other restrictive measures that followed.

The Canada we know today would not exist were it not for the efforts of the Chinese labourers who began to arrive in the mid-nineteenth century.

Almost exclusively young men, these immigrants made the difficult decision to leave their families behind in order to pursue opportunities in a country halfway around the world they called “gold mountain.”

Beginning in 1881, over 15,000 of these Chinese pioneers became involved in the most important nation-building enterprise in Canadian history—the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

From the shores of the St. Lawrence, across the seemingly endless expanses of shield and prairie, climbing the majestic Rockies, and cutting through the rugged terrain of British Columbia, this transcontinental link was the ribbon of steel that bound our fledgling country together.

It was an engineering feat—one for which the back-breaking toil of Chinese labourers was largely responsible—that was instrumental to the settlement of the West and the subsequent development of the Canadian economy.

The conditions under which these men worked were at best harsh, and at times impossible: tragically, some one thousand Chinese labourers died building the CPR.

But in spite of it all, these Chinese immigrants persevered, and in doing so, helped to ensure the future of Canada.

But from the moment that the railway was completed, Canada turned its back on these men. Beginning with the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885, a head tax of \$50 was imposed on Chinese newcomers in an attempt to deter immigration.

Not content with the tax's effect, the government subsequently raised the amount to \$100 in 1900, and then to \$500—the equivalent of two years' wages—in 1903. This tax remained in place until 1923, when the government amended the Chinese Immigration Act and effectively banned most Chinese immigrants until 1947.

Similar legislation existed in the Dominion of Newfoundland, which also imposed a head tax between 1906 and 1949, when Newfoundland joined Confederation.

The Government of Canada recognizes the stigma and exclusion experienced by the Chinese as a result. We



acknowledge the high cost of the head tax meant many family members were left behind in China, never to be reunited, or that families lived apart and, in some cases, in poverty, for many years. We also recognize that our failure to truly acknowledge these historical injustices has led many in the community from seeing themselves as fully Canadian.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, on behalf of all Canadians and the Government of Canada, we offer a full apology to Chinese Canadians for the head tax and express our deepest sorrow for the subsequent exclusion of Chinese immigrants.

Gar nar dai doe heem.

This apology is not about liability today: it is about reconciliation with those who endured such hardship, and the broader Chinese-Canadian community—one that continues to make such an invaluable contribution to our great country.

And while Canadian courts have ruled that the head tax, and immigration prohibition, were legally authorized, we fully accept the moral responsibility to acknowledge these shameful policies of our past.

For over six decades, these race-based financial measures, aimed solely at the Chinese, were implemented with deliberation by the Canadian state.

This was a grave injustice, and one we are morally obligated to acknowledge.

To give substantial meaning to today's apology, the Government of Canada will offer symbolic payments to living head tax payers and living spouses of deceased payers.

In addition, we will establish funds to help finance community projects aimed at acknowledging the impact of past wartime measures and immigration restrictions on ethno-cultural communities.

No country is perfect. Like all countries, Canada has made mistakes in its past, and we realize that. Canadians, however, are a good and just people, acting when we've committed wrong.

And even though the head tax—a product of a profoundly different time—lies far in our past, we feel compelled to right this historic wrong for the simple reason that it is the decent thing to do, a characteristic to be found at the core of the Canadian soul.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, let me assure the House that this government will continually strive to ensure that similar unjust practices are never allowed to happen again.

We have the collective responsibility to build a country based firmly on the notion of equality of opportunity, regardless of one's race or ethnic origin.

Our deep sorrow over the racist actions of our past will nourish our unwavering commitment to build a better future for all Canadians.

Thank you.

¹ Ottawa issues head tax redress payments to Chinese Canadians, CBC News (posted October 20, 2006).

² Robert Matas, "Head tax redress was not enough" *The Globe and Mail* (published online Wednesday, June 30 2010).

³ Robert Matas, "Head tax redress was not enough" *The Globe and Mail* (published online Wednesday, June 30 2010).

