An Act to Restrict and Regulate Chinese Immigration Into Canada (Assented to (agreed upon) 20th July, 1855.)

Section 4:
...every person of Chinese origin shall pay...the sum of fifty dollars, except the following persons who shall be exempt from such payment ... the members of the Diplomatic Corps, or other Government representatives and their suite and their servants, consuls and consular agents; and second: tourists, merchants, men of science and students, who are bearers of certificates of identity, specifying their occupation and their object in coming into Canada ....

Section 6:
Every master (captain) of any vessel bringing Chinese immigrants to any port in Canada, shall be personally liable to Her Majesty for the payment of the fee imposed by section four of this Act in respect of any immigrant carried by such vessel, and shall deliver, together with the total amount of such fee, to the controller, immediately on his arrival in port and before any of his passengers or crew shall have disembarked, a complete and accurate list of his crew and passengers, showing their names in full, the country and place of their birth, and the occupation and last place of domicile (residence) of each passenger.

The "Chinese question"
Legislature of British Columbia
February 1884

The number of Chinese in this Province is variously estimated from 15,000 to 18,000, the large majority of whom were imported here by contractors as labourers, and arrived here in a condition of comparative destitution [poverty]; and now, owing to the limited amount of employment that can be obtained during the winter months ... a large number of these men are scattered throughout the Province without any visible means of support .... They systematically evade (avoid paying) taxation ... and there are no means available of compelling (forcing) them to contribute their fair share to the Provincial Revenue .... By their (the Chinese immigrants') presence here they most materially affect the immigration of a white population, through whom alone we can hope to build up our country and render it fit for the Anglo-Saxon race .... We earnestly request that an Act may be introduced by the Dominion Government restricting and regulating the immigration of Chinese.

©Public Domain, Passages from an appeal by the Legislature of British Columbia to the Lt. Governor of British Columbia on the Chinese question, February 1884. Library and Archives Canada / Department of Agriculture fonds http://data2.archives.ca/e/e333/e008315665-v6.jpg
The “Heathen Chinee” in British Columbia

Cartoon published in the April 26, 1879 Canadian Illustrated News showing Amor de Cosmos, a journalist and politician (served as the second Premier of British Columbia) and a Chinese immigrant.

“Heathen Chinee: Why you send me offee?

Amor De Cosmos: Because you can’t or won’t ‘assimilate’ [become absorbed into the larger society] with us.

Heathen Chinee: What is datee?

Amor De Cosmos: You won’t drink whiskey, and talk politics and vote like us.”

Charles Hou and Cynthia Hou, Great Canadian political cartoons, 1820 to 1914 (Toronto, ON: Moody’s Lookout Press, 1997), p. 35.
“John Chinaman”
Song published in the Nanaimo Free Press in January 1886 about “John Chinamen,” a stock caricature of a Chinese labourer commonly shown in political cartoons during the 19th century.

Nanaimo Free Press
January 1886

“John Chinaman”

John Chinaman, my Joe, John
Here we were first acquaint [met]
This was a land of plenty, John
And we were well content.

The poor man worked for wages,
The rich were well supplied,
Our wives no comfort wanted,
For bread no children cried.

But times have sadly changed, John
Since first we saw your face,
No good you’ve wrought [brought] but ill,
John,
In this once happy place.

You’ve came like hordes of locusts, John
And spread o-er the land,
You fill our streets and houses, John
And leave no room to stand.

You work for little wages, John
And live like pigs in stys [pig enclosure],
In filth and stench you revel [take pleasure],
John
Your crimes for vengeance cry.

And vengeance sure is coming, John,
If here you longer stay,
Be warned and pack your baskets, John
And quickly get away.

The land is far too small John,
For us to live together,
So up and get you gone, John,
But here you shall not stay.

Our girls are coming West, John,
To cook, and wash, and sew,
They will not live with pig tails [reference to the Chinese hairstyle of the time], John
So pig-tails you must go.

We know you prize your tails, John,
For we have heard it said,
That minus that appendage, John,
You dare not show your head.

Take warning then on time, John,
To leave us be not slow,
For by our father’s god we’ve sworn,
Tails or not tails you go.

For a selective immigration policy

Editorial cartoon published in 1907 in the Saturday Sunset, a Vancouver newspaper.

THE SAME ACT WHICH EXCLUDES ORIENTALS SHOULD OPEN WIDE THE PORTALS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA TO WHITE IMMIGRATION.

The Oriental problem

Excerpts from an article published in the Victoria Daily Colonist in 1907.

Victoria Daily Colonist
1907

But they are coming. I stumbled over no less than half a hundred of them as I picked my through the dust of the back-yard of the great Canadian Pacific station ..., and brought up before a door labelled “Immigration Offices” in nine incomprehensible languages, each worse than the last.

They are coming by the thousand ....

The Oriental Problem

Commissioner Milne, in Victoria, British Columbia, has the problem of the Chinese, Japanese and Hindus to deal with.

There is the inevitable Chinatown of the Coast city, dirty, queer-smelling, evil, with dozens of little butcher-shops hung with unspeakable dried claws and joints and horrible dead things; with staring coolies [negative term used to describe labourers of Asian descent] and rattling voices and silent, dark, myriad-windowed, carefully-curtained little courts that hide heaven only knows what warrens [an overcrowded dwelling or apartment].

There is the Japanese quarter up the hill, where there are open shops and pretty baskets and dainty, kitten-soft Japanese women peeping through the screens.

There is the Hindu district out toward Westminster, where the red and blue turbans add a note of colour to the sober blacks and grays and browns of the Anglo-Saxon.

Sir Matthew Begbie’s comments on Chinese immigration

Excerpt from a quote from Sir Matthew Begbie, the Chief Justice of British Columbia from 1858 to 1894, published in the Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration in 1885.

Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, 1885

The Chinamen is in every respect the reverse of an European .... His religion, his notions of honor and rank, his mode of thought, his dress, his amusements, his sense of beauty, his vices (bad or immoral practices) are not to our taste at all, or such as we can take to or even understand; and his language ... appears to us at once incomprehensible (unable to understand) and ridiculous ... what is most annoying, they come here and beat us on our own ground in supplying our wants. They are inferior, too, in weight and size of muscle, and yet they work more steadily and with better success on the average than the white men.

(Signed)

Sir Matthew Begbie
Chief of Justice
British Columbia

Excerpt from an interview with Joseph Metcalf Jr. published in the Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration in 1885. Metcalf was a Victoria native whose name appears on several anti-Chinese petitions in the late 19th century.

Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, 1885
Interview with Joseph Metcalf Jr.

Q. Has the presence of Chinese contributed to the development of the province?

A. No; it has prevented white men with families from coming here, and also single families; in other words, if British Columbia had not here 12,000 Chinese, she would have had some 24,000 more white population, and this would have made the province a flourishing [developing rapidly] place, with a happy, contented [satisfied] people, that would have helped the government and developed the resources of the province.

Q. Can white people now find remunerative [well-paying] employment here and steady work, and is such remuneration [wages] adequate to support and clothe and education their families and make reasonable [adequate] provision for old age?

A. No; there are many out of work in the different industries on account of the Chinese being employed at low wages.

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The root cause of anti-Chinese feeling

Excerpt from a pamphlet published in 1943 by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), a Canadian socialist political party formed in Saskatchewan.

Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), 1943

The root cause of anti-Oriental feeling has always been economic. Back in 1858, when a gold strike in the Fraser River brought the first Chinese miners to British Columbia, they were welcomed. When the boom collapsed a few years later and they went into road-building, store-keeping, trading and packing, farming, gardening and domestic service (working as servants), prejudice mounted against them. The reason was that their lower living standards enabled them to undercut white workers.

But up through the years this root cause was always skilfully obscured by those who exploited (used for personal gain) labor. By diverting economic discontent into racial channels, employers and politicians managed to keep all labor standards down. The workers did not see the real enemy (owners and managers were the real problem, not competition from immigrant labour).

No journalist needed to convince Macdonald [Prime Minister John A. Macdonald] himself of the desirability of immigration regulations. As early as 1882 … Macdonald referred to the Chinese as “an inferior race,” “semi-barbarians,” or “machines with whom Canadians could not compete” but whose labour was necessary for railway construction. Moreover, Macdonald believed the Mongolian and Aryan races could never combine. In short, John A. Macdonald was a racist, but he was also a practical politician and nation-builder. Thus, he sympathized with British Columbia’s demands for Chinese restriction, and as soon as the railway was virtually complete, his government introduced a Chinese immigration Act. In 1885, Macdonald was a hero to many British Columbians: he had fulfilled the railway promise and his new immigration law seemed likely to permit white British Columbians to enjoy the benefits of Confederation without the fear of being overwhelmed by low-paid Chinese immigrants.
Whites also believed that the Chinese threatened the economic status of the west coast workingman—his wages, his job, and his stable economic environment. Indeed, in the minds of many this conviction [belief] was far more firmly fixed than those stressing Chinese depravity [immorality]. That the threat was grave there was little doubt. In the first place, it was widely assumed that the Chinese hoarded [saved] their wages and sent them back to China, that they spent as little as possible and invested nothing in the community, and that therefore their earnings were forever lost to British Columbia. But much more important was the apparent willingness of the Chinese labourer to accept lower pay than his white counterparts. In doing so he imperilled [endangered] the livelihood of every white wage earner in the province …. They [the Chinese] could survive, and even prosper, on living standards far below those of the western worker …. [I]t was commonly agreed that, unlike other immigrants, the Chinese brought no families to support and thus refused to shoulder [accept] any community responsibilities. This, in turn, increased their capacity to work for low wages …. For all these reasons, therefore, the Chinese appeared to undermine the place of whites in the British Columbian labour market.

The Chinese in Canada: Anti-Orientalism


The sense of racial superiority among European settlers can be easily understood as a part of the ideological [characterizes the thinking of a group or nation] construction of colonialism that took for granted the natural superiority of Europeans over the peoples of Asia and Africa, who were seen as weak and backward. The belief that Occidental [European] culture and people were superior to the Chinese and the culture they represented made it easy to accept the Chinese as having a utilitarian [practical/material] value to Europeans in British Columbia as long as they were kept within the bounds of subservience [serving to promote an end/goal]. But as soon as the Chinese were seen as competitors threatening or undermining the interests of white workers, the belief in Europeans’ racial superiority provided a distorted rationale [reason] for excluding Chinese and blaming various economic and social problems on them. Anti-Orientalism was not restricted to the white working class. Despite the willingness of the white middle class to hire Chinese as domestic servants, the view that the Chinese race was unassimilable [unable to be absorbed into the larger community] and their character immutable [unchangeable] was universally held by British Columbians of all classes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. … Consequently, when the supply of Chinese in British Columbia exceeded the demand for their labour, the white middle class had little problem supporting or condoning [accepting] anti-Orientalism, since it had no economic cost and it upheld Europeans’ sense of superiority. Before the enactment of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885, B.C. politicians had already made many attempts to press the Dominion [Federal/Canadian] government to act on what they defined as a public menace.

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Generally, critics have understood the head tax as a racist instrument of restrictive immigration policy one that sought to limit Chinese immigration once Canada no longer needed cheap Chinese labour … a policy of state-sanctioned discrimination motivated by repugnance [strong dislike] for Chinese immigrants in Canada.

[...]

My investigations reveal that the contributions of Chinese immigrants were recognized from the beginning, suggesting that the head tax might have been more ambivalent [hesitant/of two minds] in its intention than one of simple and outright exclusion. From the first report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration in 1885 and throughout the head tax debates, the desirability [importance] of Chinese labour in Canada surfaced frequently. The evidence submitted for the 1885 report … turned again and again to the importance of Chinese labour to an emerging nation …. To suggest—as many writers have—that the head tax functioned as an example of Canada’s hatred of Chinese is to ascribe [assign] a uniformity [sameness] to the Canadian body politic [people] that simply did not exist. The 1885 report and the House of Commons debates on the head tax reveal deep divisions along the lines of class and geography within the white Canadian community on the question of Chinese immigration. Chapleau … marked out this division … “In general, the wealthy class, the best-educated class, is favorable to the Chinese.” For the authors of the 1885 report, and throughout the House of Commons debates, anti-Chinese sentiment was consistently attributed to working- and lower-class Canadians in British Columbia.

[...]

Although most discussions of the head tax refer to it as a policy designed to restrict Chinese immigration, these discussions do not question the contradiction between the stated purpose of the legislation (to keep Chinese out) and its effect (an increase in Chinese immigration during the head tax years) … [T]he Chinese were not expendable [unessential] in 1885, nor was the railway a completed project. The last spike was driven in on 7 November 1885, but it was more a photo opportunity than a sign of the actual completion of the railway.

[...]

One of the clearest indications that the head tax functioned as a tool for pacifying [put an end to] fear and anxiety in Western Canada lies in understanding an often overlooked fact of accounting. Many writers have assumed that the revenue [profits] from the head tax went straight into Ottawa’s coffers [treasury]. This was not the case. During the 1903 parliamentary debates, just before the bill to raise the head tax to five hundred dollars was read for the third time, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier stated that “Under the old law the proportion of the poll tax to be paid to the province [of British Columbia] was one-quarter, and now it will be one-half.” Clearly, British Columbia was meant to benefit from the head tax more so than other provinces. What is more, it had always received more benefit from the head tax. The basic facts of accounting point directly to the way in which the head tax functioned as a means of appeasing [making happy] an increasingly angry BC population.