

# Background to Chinese head tax



## Background Briefs

Historic injustices and redress in Canada



Cartoon published in the April 26, 1879 *Canadian Illustrated News* showing Amor de Cosmos, a journalist and politician (who served as the second premier of British Columbia) and a Chinese immigrant.  
Source: Charles Hou and Cynthia Hou, *Great Canadian Political Cartoons, 1820 to 1914*, (Toronto, ON: Moody's Lookout Press, 1997), p. 35.

### Historical context

The first large influx of Chinese immigrants to Canada originated in San Francisco. These immigrants came north to the Fraser River valley in British Columbia in 1858, following the gold rush. In the 1860s, many moved on to prospect for gold in the Cariboo Mountains in the interior of BC. The next large migration took place when the Canadian government allowed Chinese workers to immigrate to Canada in order to work building the Canadian Pacific Railway. Many were brought directly to Canada from China. These workers were expected to work longer hours for lower wages than their non-Chinese counterparts. From 1880 to 1885 about 17,000 Chinese labourers helped build the most difficult and dangerous British Columbia section of the railway, resulting in many deaths. In spite of their contributions, there was a great deal of prejudice against the

Chinese. Some Canadian workers began to believe that the Chinese immigrant workers were a threat to their jobs and began to pressure the Canadian government to restrict further Chinese immigration.

### Details about the head tax

When the railway was finished and cheap labour in large numbers was no longer needed, there was a backlash (negative reaction) from unionized workers and some politicians against the Chinese. In response, the Canadian federal government passed the *Chinese Immigration Act* in 1885. It imposed a tax of \$50 on each Chinese person wishing to immigrate in the hopes of discouraging them from entering Canada. In 1900, the head tax was increased to \$100. In 1903, the head tax rose to \$500, which was equal to two years' pay.

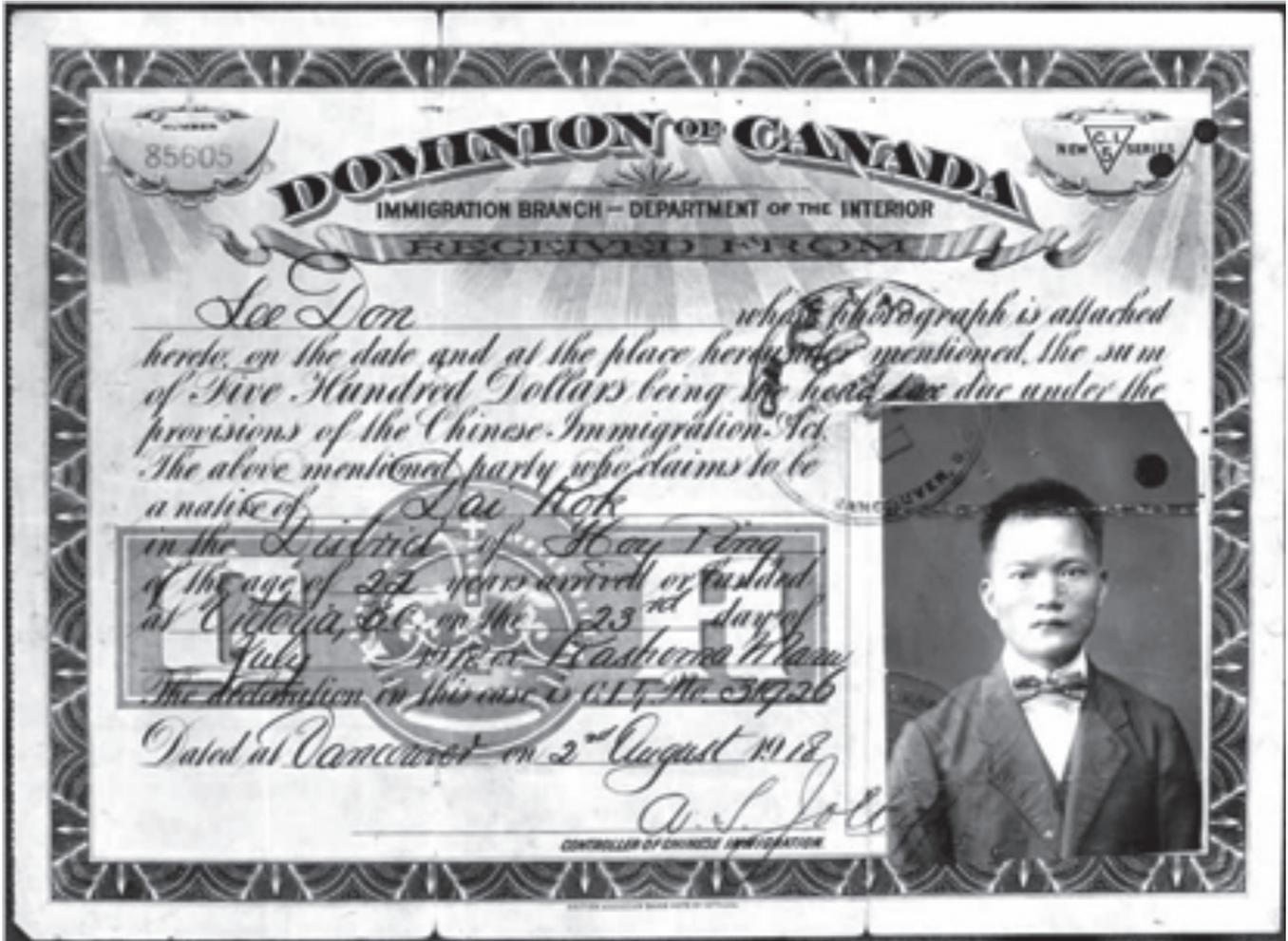
During World War I, more Chinese workers were needed in Canada, resulting in an increase in Chinese immigration. After the war ended there was a backlash towards the Chinese from soldiers returning from the war looking for jobs. Also, many Canadians disliked the fact that the Chinese had begun to own land and farms.

### Significance of the head tax

According to a United Nations report, between 1885 and 1923, the Canadian government collected approximately \$23 million through the head tax, which amounts to an estimated \$1.2 billion in 21st century dollars. This represented a large source of revenue for the British Columbia and federal governments over a four-decade period. The tax was applied only to the Chinese, causing financial difficulties for many new immigrants.

The tax on Chinese Canadians exposed deep-seated anti-Asian feelings in Canada in general, and in British Columbia in particular. The head tax reinforced the outsider status of the Chinese and created great financial obstacles that led to many hardships for new immigrant families. The head

tax reflects a deliberate policy of the Canadian government to keep out a group of immigrants based on their race and country of origin. As such, it is an example of a legally sanctioned injustice that unfairly targeted a group of Canadians.



Head tax certificate for Lee Don, 1918.  
Source: Vancouver Public Library VPL 30625.

