

Chinese Exclusion Act - Background Document

In 1923, the Canadian federal government passed the Chinese Immigration Act, banning virtually all Chinese immigration to Canada, including ethnic Chinese with British nationality.

This Act is commonly known as the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The aim of the Act was to eliminate all Chinese immigration to Canada after the Chinese Head Tax failed to stop Chinese immigration. In spite of the huge amount of head tax collected (nearly \$23 million, equivalent to over \$400 million in 2023), Canada was determined to exclude the Chinese in an attempt to keep it a “white man’s country”.

The Act requires all Chinese people living in Canada, including those born in Canada, to register with the federal government for an identity card within 12 months and carry it around. The penalty for noncompliance was imprisonment or a fine of up to \$500 (equivalent to about \$8,800 in 2023). Besides, all Chinese Canadians must observe a two-year limit on absence from Canada. Those who overstayed outside Canada were prohibited from returning to Canada.

The Act passed into law on July 1, 1923. The Chinese community referred to this day as “Humiliation Day” and refused to participate in the celebration of Canada Day for many years.

The Chinese Canadians are the only ethnic group that was barred from entry based solely on their country of origin in Canadian history. They were the only immigration group for which a complete structure of special legislation and regulations was established to limit their entry, their family unification, and their access to citizenship.

The Act was repealed in 1947 after the many contributions and sacrifices that the Chinese Canadian community had made in the Second World War. From 1923 to 1947, it is estimated that only 15 Chinese immigrants gained entry into Canada. That same year, the first Canadian citizenship ceremony for Chinese immigrants was held in Vancouver.

The Act resulted in 24 years of family separation in the Chinese community. Many Chinese Canadians led a lonely “married bachelors’ life”, some of whom died alone and never saw their families again. Unsent letters written by early Chinese immigrants were found in the Kelowna museum’s basement in which they “begged their families for forgiveness for their failure as husbands and fathers because they were not able to bring their families to Canada.” The Chinese population in Canada decreased by 25 per cent, from 39,587 in 1921 to 32,528 by 1951.

The Act legally sanctioned racial discrimination and perpetuated systemic racism against Chinese Canadians. During this period, Chinese in Canada saw many of their civil, economic and political rights either severely restricted or stripped completely, such as the right to vote, the right to work in certain key industries (most notably mining), and the right to enter various professions, including law.

The Act sent the clearest signal from the Canadian government that Chinese Canadians did not belong. It turned Canadian-borns into perpetual foreigners and second-class residents and has undermined their confidence in their cultural identity for generations to come.

Today, its residue is still manifested in all walks of life. Chinese Canadians have to work extra hard to prove their quality and competency.

The historical construction of Chinese communities as the “yellow peril” and plague remains to be the underlying reason for blaming Chinese Canadians or Chinese culture in times of pandemic such as the outbreak of SARS in 2003 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

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