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SITUATION BRIEF #33

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There are two historical faces to Chinatown

In his report for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, historian Ted Mills summarized the historical significance of Victoria's Chinatown.

"This historic area, more than a century old, is a role model for the growth, decline, and revival of Old Chinatowns in North America. Although it has a small Chinese population today, and has lost much of its former lustre and mystery, the remaining fragment still possesses its nineteenth century townscape. It is one of the very few Chinatowns in North America to retain cohesive groupings of old buildings with high heritage values. The labyrinthine features behind them still remain, defining the special heritage character of the once Forbidden Town....

Mills cites geographer Dr. David Lai (The Forbidden City Within Victoria. 1991):

"This tiny Chinese enclave is outstanding in the history of Canadian Chinatowns because it is the first and oldest surviving Chinatown in Canada. It was the largest Chinatown in Canada for fifty years (1858-1910), and the second largest for forty years (1911-1950). Furthermore, it is the only Canadian Chinatown that has

a complete history, dating from the first Chinese arrival in Canada to the present--a history of 134 years. For nearly three decades before the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed, Victoria was the first port of entry of most Chinese immigrants. Many of their descendants must come to its Chinatown to trace their roots".

Victoria's Chinatown, dating from 1858, is the oldest in Canada and forms an important link in China's trans-Pacific diaspora that developed during the nineteenth century. Its historic footprint occupies eight city blocks that contains the largest number of pre-1906 Chinatown structures in North America. Until 1902 it had the largest Chinese population in Canada, and from 1902 to 1950 the second largest. Until the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, Victoria was the only major port of entry and departure for ships, goods and

passengers in what is now British Columbia.

Victoria developed as a merchant city and served as the supply and employment centre for a series of gold rushes beginning in 1858, followed by railway construction after 1880. Chinatown was an integral part of this flourishing city. Beginning in 1910 Chinese families started to live in neighbourhoods adjoining Chinatown and gradually moved to more distant suburbs. But Chinatown remained the focus of their commercial, leisure, educational and institutional activities well into the twentieth century and continues to serve as the historic point of origin for many in what is now Canada.

A permanent paifang, the Gate of Harmonious Interests (erected 1979), marks the entrance to lower Fisgard Street. Sympathetic 'streetscaping' with character lamp standards and sidewalks with stylized versions of Shou (longevity) and Zhong (China) embedded in brick, set off Old Town's most dense cluster of heritage buildings fronting an elaborate system of back-alleys and internal courtyards.

Anchor character buildings with distinctive upturned eves and inset second-floor balconies distinguish the Tong (or society) buildings from the more mundane minimally decorated facades of the tenement structures. The most imposing the pagoda-like structure housing a Chinese temple and school is the 1909 Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Societies Building.

These exotic attraction values must however be balanced with a more sinister reality. Between the early 1860s and 1921 British Columbia's Chinese immigrant population grew from about 1000 to over 23,000. Mainly laborers they worked as miners, railway builders, irrigation workers, market gardeners and domestic servants throughout the Province. For the first 50 years Victoria was their main port of entry, its Chinatown their organization reference point. But over the subsequent 80 years it witnessed the most egregious program of

institutional prejudice, social exclusion and minority discrimination aimed at Victoria's Chinese community.

Populist anti-Chinese sentiment emerged in the early 1870s spearheaded by working men's groups who maintained their jobs were being stolen. Groups such as the Anti-Chinese Society and the Workingmen's Protective Association provided political opportunity exploited by community leaders such as Colonist editor (and later B.C. Premier) John Robson, M.P. Arthur Bunster and City Councilor, later Mayor and M.P., Noah Shakespeare. City Council enacted a bylaw forbidding the employment of any Chinese on public works. Petitions to Ottawa calling for a limit on Chinese immigration followed.

The Province, in the 1872 Qualification and Registration of Voters Amendment Act disenfranchised both Chinese and First Nations. By 1882 even Amor De Cosmos had joined the anti-Chinese lobby. Despite this, in 1882 the Dominion Government allowed Andrew Onderdonk, the CPR contractor, permission to recruit 10,000 laborers from China. With public opinion inflamed by both the Colonist and Standard newspapers, the BC Legislature responded in 1884 by passing three discriminatory acts. The first prevented Chinese from landing in the Province; the second prevented Chinese from purchasing Crown lands; the third requiring an annual $10 residential license fee.

Although these were disallowed, in an 1885 by Act of Parliament the infamous head tax was imposed. Originally set at fifty dollars, the amount was doubled in 1902, and only a year later, was raised to five hundred dollars. The tax remained in effect until 1923, collecting an estimated twenty-three million dollars. This financial burden limited the ability of workers (mostly men) to bring their wives and families from China and resulted in a community of bachelors.

The Asiatic Exclusion League was formed in Vancouver in 1907, followed shortly thereafter by the anti-Asian street riots in that city which resulted in

extensive property damage to Chinatown and Japantown. In Victoria, the early 20th Century saw repeated attempts by the local school board to deny, limit, or segregate, Chinese children and prevent them from attending classes with whites. The Victoria School Board maintained Chinese-only schools until after World War II. One result was the construction of the Chinese School, a key historical monument in Chinatown.

On July 1, 1923, Ottawa passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, thereby barring entry of Chinese immigrants completely until 1947.

The 'others' of Chinatown

Chinatown also provided a safe haven for others suffering similar racial exclusion. Japanese seasonal workers congregated during the off season in rooming houses along lower Discovery and Store streets until the entire population was removed to internment camps as enemy aliens under the War

Measures Act in 1942. This was followed by the sale of their land-holdings are personal effects. The erasure of the Japanese population was permanent. Post-war the interns faced forced dispersal to Eastern Canada or deportation back to Japan.

Sikh migrants also congregated in this area establishing their first Gurdwaras or Temple on upper Herald Street in 1912. The Sikh's own painful history of systemic discrimination and exclusion culminated in the infamous Komagata Maru incident in 1914 whereby a ship with 340 East Indian refugees was held in Vancouver for 63 days in conditions of near starvation. Ultimately, on a Supreme Court ruling, these passengers were denied entry and sent back to Calcutta. There 20 Sikhs were killed, and many others injured, while protesting their "arrest" upon arrival by the British authorities.

In the face of 80 years of racial intolerance, Chinatown essentially functioned as what the Europeans would call a ghetto. Its major institutions, the homeland and family Tongs, coordinated by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, functioned variously as social clubs, banks, welfare providers and even political and legal brokers between the White and Chinese worlds.

On June 22, 2006, the Government of Canda issued a full apologies to Chinese Canadians for the head tax and Exclusion Act, a major and important step towards reconciliation followed by offering symbolic payment of $20,000 to survivors.

Observations

- Chinatown, as a place of contested memory, could be registered with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. This global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives connects past struggles to today's

movements for human rights. As such, Chinatown's presence in Victoria's Old Town, and its interpretation, could promote reconciliation after deeply divided events by "turning the page". Erasing the past can prevent new generations from learning critical lessons. It can also compromise opportunities to build a peaceful future.

- The significance of Chinatown could itself be more inclusive, that is its value to other marginalized immigrant groups such as Japanese and East Indian Canadians. Such a narrative could form part of the story-line in the planned Chinatown Museum as well as public street interpretation.

- The unique architecture of Chinatown could be further restored to better reflect its authentic origins. This particularly includes the multi-storey galleries that were a notable feature of the commercial and tenement building street frontages. One of the most elaborate was the original Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Society building at 554-562 Figard Street.
- The eight city blocks of Chinatown are still just as much Chinatown as are the remaining blocks of Old Town, even though original populations have been replaced by different ones. The original demographic has changed but the historic connections with buildings, businesses, activities, etc. remain. Apart from Centennial Square, Chinatown is remarkably intact compared to Chinatowns in San Francisco, Sacramento, Portland, Chicago and New York that have seen massive demolitions
- Three buildings in particular draw attention to the significant contributions of early Chinese immigrants, all involving the Lim Dat (a.k.a Lim Dor Chor or Lim Dat) family. In 1898, Lim Dat and Wong Soon Lim, a business partner, bought a site on the corner of Fisgard and Store Streets and hired Thomas Hooper (Hooper and Watkins) to design the distinctive building which still stands at 1617-1623 Store Street. In 1909, Lim Dat again hired Hooper to design the building taking up a whole block of Government Street (1802-1826), considered an architectural marvel at the time. Both Lim Dat buildings have been registered as National Heritage Sites. The third edifice was built by son Lim Bang in 1911, at the southwest corner of Pandora and Douglas Streets, directly across the street from Victoria's City Hall.
- A link could be made to Judge Matthew Bailey Begbie (1889-1894 - See theNHSBC Plaque in Bastion Square) who over the course of his 36 years on the Bench struck down both municipal and provincial attempts at anti-Chinese discriminatory legislation.

- Numerous Chinese Canadian examples of intangible heritage should be noted: Chinese New Year's Day celebrations, the Lion Dance, the Moon/Lantern Festival, the Lotus Dance troupe, even the popular Dragon Boat Races on the Gorge Waterway.

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