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### **Chinese-Canadians in Search of Immigrant Ancestors: Current and Potential Resources**

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#### **Abstract**

*Although interest in genealogy has increased significantly in recent years, Chinese-Canadians make little use of library-based genealogical resources and services, and remain outside the Canadian genealogy mainstream. This situation is possibly due in part to a strongly British/European focus in the prevailing Canadian genealogy culture. There are indications that Chinese-Canadians are very interested in exploring their family roots. But while the community has recently begun to reclaim its place in Canadian history, Chinese-Canadian genealogists face a considerable challenge, due not only to a lack of relevant resources and services, but also to unique aspects of Chinese-Canadian history and culture. The paper examines the nature of this challenge, using specific examples of genealogical resources, including civil registration, census, and other records. It then describes several initiatives, some library-based, which indicate that a more promising context for Chinese-Canadian genealogical research is emerging. With the example of Chinese-Canadians in mind, public libraries are urged to expand their genealogy services to include a broader range of immigrant groups, and some practical suggestions are offered.*

The impulse to explore identity by researching one's personal connection to the past has gained tremendous momentum in recent years, fuelled in part by the growth of the Internet. Research commissioned by Library and Archives Canada in 2003 determined that almost a third (32%) of Canadians planned to trace their genealogy within the year, within the next few years, or when they retire. Another 8% said that they had already done this type of research, bringing the total of those with an interest in genealogy to fully 40% (Ipsos-Reid).

The same report found that those expressing this interest were mainly of Aboriginal, British Isles, Italian or German background. Since only 2% of respondents to the survey self-identified as being

of Chinese/Hong Kong/Taiwanese ancestry, it is not surprising that this background did not figure prominently among respondents expressing an interest in genealogy. By comparison, however, while only 3% of those surveyed described their ethnic background as Italian, this background did figure strongly among the group expecting to pursue genealogical research (Ipsos-Reid).

The perception that this might indicate a lack of genealogical interest among Chinese-Canadians is supported by the direct experience of having worked for several years as the genealogy librarian in the largest public library in British Columbia. B.C. is the historical magnet of Chinese immigration to Canada, but although genealogical services and resources at the Vancouver Public Library have expanded considerably in recent years, Chinese-Canadians are conspicuously absent from the legions of genealogists who regularly visit to make use of genealogical services and resources. Chinese-Canadians are also rarely seen at local genealogy events organized by the LDS Family History Centres and British Columbia Genealogical Society, and were unrepresented at a genealogical symposium held in Ottawa in 2002 to help guide the development of the Canadian Genealogy Centre, an online initiative launched in early 2003.

Lack of participation by Chinese-Canadians in the mainstream genealogy culture is possibly explained in part by the fact that the prevailing genealogical research culture in Canada is strongly oriented towards those of British Isles and, to a lesser extent, Continental European immigrant ancestry. This is reflected in public libraries, whose collections of genealogical materials typically comprise substantial holdings relating to research in the British Isles, Continental Europe, and United States, but few materials relating to other parts of the world. Handbooks and other resources focusing on Canadian sources are also slanted towards those of British and European immigrant ancestry. The lack of balance in collections reflects a general lack of available materials – there is little for libraries to buy. A bias is also seen in the membership and activities of genealogical societies. An interesting example is the case of a family history society in British Columbia, which has undertaken the indexing of Canadian passenger lists from 1900 to about 1921. Although it might be expected that a society located on Canada's west coast would direct its efforts locally, towards passenger lists for ships arriving at Vancouver, Victoria and other Pacific ports, the project is currently indexing arrivals at the Atlantic ports of Halifax and Quebec, which received large numbers of immigrants from the British Isles.

The British focus seen in Canadian genealogy perhaps arises inevitably from the fact that the bulk of Canada's early immigrant population was concentrated in eastern Canada, and originated from the British Isles and European continent. In 1871, the population of British Columbia – the destination of the vast majority of early Chinese immigrants to Canada – was approximately 36,000, a mere 1% of the total population of Canada. Of these, 23.7% were of British/European origin, while 4.3% were Asian (Francis 542). In the same year, 84% of the foreign-born in all of Canada were born in the United Kingdom (Kalbach 1869). It is therefore not surprising that a large proportion of those researching their Canadian roots would be descended from British ancestors.

But although it may follow that Canadian genealogy culture would strongly reflect British immigrant research interests, there are good indications that Chinese-Canadians are also, in fact, very interested in exploring their roots. Although no specific research has been conducted to measure attitudes among Chinese-Canadians towards genealogical research, the founding meeting of the Chinese-Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia in November 2004 was extremely successful. Many who attended were keen to discuss and share their personal family histories. Moreover, when the Vancouver Public Library first offered workshops specifically on the subject of Chinese-Canadian genealogical research, in 2002, the programs were over-subscribed, with long waiting lists, despite the absence of Chinese-Canadians from the general genealogy workshops more usually offered. This is especially noteworthy in view of the fact that the number of Chinese with deep historical roots in Canada is small, relative to the total size of the Chinese-Canadian population. However, in addition to being poorly served by existing resources and services, Chinese-Canadians face unique and specific obstacles in the search for their roots. A closer look at the nature of these obstacles illustrates the considerable task facing librarians and information specialists seeking to develop quality resources and services that will address the needs of all genealogists, including those from minority immigrant groups.

The unique challenges facing Chinese-Canadian genealogists are partly explained by the historical path of the Chinese in Canada. Although some Chinese arrived at Nootka Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island on British fur-trading vessels in the 1780s, the first wave of Chinese immigrants leading to the establishment of a permanent residential community did not arrive until the 1850s. These early Chinese migrants came to B.C. by way of California, drawn by the Fraser River gold rush. Large-scale immigration, directly from China, did not begin until the early 1880s, when Chinese labourers were recruited for construction of the western section of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). Although many of these contract workers eventually left, the size of the resident Chinese population substantially increased, more than doubling between 1881 and 1891, and increasing by almost as much again in the next ten years, to 17,312 in 1901 (Li 361). In addition to their work on the railway, the Chinese were employed as miners, merchants, domestic servants, farm labourers, food canners, forest workers, and store owners.

The Chinese were not, however, welcome immigrants and faced social hostility as well as overt discrimination, in the form of legislative controls that were never applied to any other group of immigrants to Canada. One of the most infamous was the “head tax”, introduced in 1885, after the completion of the CPR. The legislation required almost every Chinese person entering Canada to pay a tax of \$50, increased to \$100 in 1900 and \$500 in 1902, an exorbitant amount for the time. Almost forty years later, another notorious piece of federal legislation, the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, excluded Chinese from entering the country and imposed new regulations on those already residing there. Entry to Canada by anyone of Chinese origin, regardless of citizenship, was restricted to diplomats, merchants, students, and children born in Canada. The legislation virtually ended Chinese immigration.

These measures had a profound impact on family history, and created both obstacles and opportunities for future genealogical researchers. But while it is important to consider historical background in relation to immigrant ancestor research, other factors, such as language and culture, may also play a significant role. In the case of Chinese-Canadians, complexities relating to personal names demonstrate this very clearly.

Traditional Chinese naming customs pose one challenge. While people of British ancestry typically have a given name, a middle name, a surname, and in some cases a nickname, a Chinese man traditionally had several different given names throughout life, including a milk (baby) name, school name, marriage name, and perhaps others. Women acquired fewer names, and essentially lost their given names at marriage, after which their names were commonly written as their maiden surname, followed by Shih, Shee, or See, for example, Chow Shee, meaning, “a married woman who came from the Chow clan.”

Although surnames remained the same throughout life, dialectical and romanization differences affected the way in which the same name was pronounced, so that, for example, a surname pronounced Chun in the Punti dialect might be Ching in the Hakka dialect, Chen in the Wade-Giles romanization system, and Zhen in the Pinyin system, preferred today. All of these names, however, had the same written form, and were, in fact, the same name, although even the written form of the name might vary, as there was no standardized national written form of Chinese until 1919, when Vernacular Chinese was adopted.

Name order also followed a different custom from that practised in the British Isles and Europe. In Chinese, surnames always appeared first, followed by given names. In dealings with Westerners, however, Chinese migrants might reverse the traditional order, following the custom of the adopted country. It was also common for Chinese in Canada to take a “Western” name.

Another basic characteristic of Chinese names with significant implications for Chinese genealogical research was their relatively small number. About 2000 are in use today (Lewellen cii), most of which occur rarely, with the result that Chinese people share a very small number of surnames. As experienced genealogists know, the more unusual a name, the easier it is to trace through documentary sources. Conversely, it can be very difficult to identify an individual in the historical

record if he or she has a common name. The small Chinese surname pool thus puts those of Chinese ancestry at a genealogical disadvantage.

The degree of difficulty associated with researching individual names is further increased by the fact that Chinese names would have been unfamiliar to the English-speaking and writing clerks, registrars, enumerators or other persons who initially created the records that are now of interest to genealogists. It is extremely unlikely that such individuals would have understood the complexities of Chinese names and language, and although there may sometimes have been translators, the rendering of Chinese names into English may often have been quite uncertain. The prevalence of the name Ah in many nominal references to Chinese people in original sources is a good example of the way in which English speakers and writers mis-interpreted Chinese names. Ah is not, in fact, a Chinese name. Roughly translated, it means “that man is” or “that guy is”. However, it appears often to have been mistakenly recorded as a proper name.

Finally, the use of “paper names” sometimes obscures the documentary trail. Many Chinese moved back and forth between China and Canada, and in some cases, identity documents papers were exchanged or sold and used by others. This was a means of circumventing discriminatory legislation. Identity changes, however, inevitably create challenges for subsequent generations of genealogists.

A closer look at specific examples of key genealogical resources illustrates more clearly the potential impact of historical, cultural and language-related factors on the genealogical research prospects for Chinese-Canadians.

Civil registration records are acknowledged as one of the most useful sources for genealogists. In British Columbia, registration of births, marriages and deaths began in 1872, under the Births, Marriages and Deaths Act. The early Chinese population, however, was specifically excluded from civil registration under the Act, which was not amended to include Chinese people until 1897. Due to the delay in including all Chinese in the civil registration system, very few birth records are available. Until 2003, public access to B.C. birth records was sealed for 100 years. Although 1903 birth records were released, new legislation in 2004 blocked access for an additional 20 years. As a result, Chinese birth records are currently available for only six years, beginning in 1897, when Chinese were first included in the system, until the end of 1903. No additional records will be available until 2025, when 1904 birth records are due to be released. A larger number of marriage records (to 1929) and death records (to 1984) are available, although again, the Chinese records date back only as far as 1897.

Despite the initial exclusion of the Chinese, it is possible to find some older Chinese birth, marriage and death records. A search of the online indexes to B.C. civil records, using the names (and their variations) of the ten large clans that made up over half of the total Chinese population in Canada in the 1880s (C. Lai 7-8), has identified over 100 birth, marriage and death registrations of Chinese individuals prior to 1897. The total number of pre-1897 Chinese registrations was certainly higher, as it would also have included records for individuals from other clans, as well as a number of people named Lee, omitted from the search, because in addition to being the name of one of the ten large clans, it is also a name of English origin. The reasons that some Chinese were registered prior to 1897 are unclear, but it may simply be that not all registrars were aware of the provisions of the legislation. The possibility of locating a pre-1897 record for a Chinese person is admittedly remote, but cannot be discounted from a genealogist’s perspective.

The records themselves demonstrate some of the problematic aspects of Chinese names described above. This is seen in the case of Won Alexander Cumyow, the first baby of Chinese origin born in Canada. His birth in 1861 preceded the start of civil registration in 1872, and was not registered. However, there is a civil record of his marriage to Ye Chan in 1889 (Figure 1), notwithstanding the fact that it took place prior to the official inclusion of Chinese in the civil registers, beginning in 1897.



to historical, social and cultural factors. This is well-illustrated by several examples, including the 1881 census extract, from Nanaimo on Vancouver Island seen in Figure 2, which records a household in which virtually every individual reportedly had the surname Ah, not an actual Chinese name. The Chinese surnames are actually the ones appearing after Ah, and the given names are completely omitted. This is likely due to language barriers, but in any case, even when the enumerator recorded a full name, there is a distinct possibility that he did so phonetically and inaccurately. It is also possible that he might mistakenly transposed surnames and given names.

NAME	SEX	AGE	CHIEF OF HOUSEHOLD	RELIGION	EDUCATION	PROFESSION, OCCUPATION OR TRADE	INDUSTRY
Ah Bull	M	30					
Ah Hone	M	28					
Ah Hone	M	25					
Ah Hone	M	24					
Ah Hone	M	25					
Ah Hone	M	26					
Ah Hone	M	26					
Ah Hone	M	20					
Hong Lee	M	35					
Ah Lee	M	25					
Ah Hone	M	22					
Ah Yee	M	20					
Chun Lee	M	24					
Ah Hone	M	25					

**Figure 2:** Canadian census record for a household of Chinese labourers in Nanaimo, British Columbia, 1881 from Census Returns for the 1881 Canadian Census, Microfilm Number C-13285, District 191, Sub-district A, Page 89, Household 574.

Returning to the example of Won Alexander Cumyow, it is impossible to tell how closely the enumerator's record of the Won family in the 1881 census (Figure 3) approximates the actual names of members of the family, as no other records of the Chinese names of Won Cumyow's siblings are available, although it is known that some adopted western names.

NAME	SEX	AGE	CHIEF OF HOUSEHOLD	RELIGION	EDUCATION	PROFESSION, OCCUPATION OR TRADE	INDUSTRY
Wong King	M	35					
Wong King	M	34					
Wong King	F	38					
Won Cumyow	M	20					
Won Cumyow	M	18					
Won Cumyow	M	16					
Won Cumyow	F	11					

**Figure 3:** Canadian census record showing Won [Alexander] Cumyow living with his parents and siblings in New Westminster North, British Columbia in 1881 from Census Returns for the 1881 Canadian Census, Microfilm Number C-13284, District 187, Sub-district B, Page 55, Household 245.

The Won family entry does, however, offer a distinct advantage to the genealogical researcher in that it describes a nuclear family. When researching historical Canadian census records, it is

immediately noticeable that the overwhelming majority of Chinese households were comprised of individual males, often living together in hostels or work camps. This reflects the transient nature of the Chinese immigrant community – many originally came to Canada temporarily, in order to earn money to take back to China – and also perhaps the financial constraints placed on Chinese immigrants by discriminatorily low wages and the head tax, which discouraged them from bringing wives and children to Canada. The absence of spouses and children from most census records makes it very difficult to verify individual ancestors and reconstruct family groups. The task is impossible in the case of the 1891 census of Victoria, which had the largest Chinatown in B.C. All individuals of Chinese origin were simply assigned the pejorative name “Chinaman” (Figure 4).

NAME	Sex	Age	Birth Place	Place of Birth of Mother	Place of Birth of Father	Place of Birth of Grandfather	Place of Birth of Great-grandfather	Place of Birth of Great-great-grandfather	Place of Birth of Great-great-great-grandfather	Place of Birth of Great-great-great-great-grandfather
Chinaman M 30 M - China	M	30	China	China	China	China	China	China	China	China
Chinaman M 37 M - China	M	37	China	China	China	China	China	China	China	China
Chinaman M 30 M - China	M	30	China	China	China	China	China	China	China	China
Chinaman M 37 M - China	M	37	China	China	China	China	China	China	China	China
Chinaman M 25 M - China	M	25	China	China	China	China	China	China	China	China
Chinaman M 26 M - China	M	26	China	China	China	China	China	China	China	China
Chinaman M 24 M - China	M	24	China	China	China	China	China	China	China	China
Chinaman M 23 M - China	M	23	China	China	China	China	China	China	China	China
Chinaman M 22 M - China	M	22	China	China	China	China	China	China	China	China

**Figure 4:** Canadian census records for Chinese people living in Victoria, British Columbia in 1891 from Census Returns for the 1891 Canadian Census, Microfilm Number T-6292, District 4, Sub-district B-2, Page 1, Household 1.

Many print and online databases of Canadian census records are available, and as always, the researcher must be alert to the vagaries relating to names that may affect the transcription and indexing of entries for Chinese people. While all census records are subject to error, again, the margin is unusual in the case of Chinese individuals. The previously cited 1881 entry for Won Alexander Cumyow and his family, enumerated in the New Westminster District, clearly presents a challenge to any transcriber. The record in the widely-used 1881 Canadian census database on the LDS FamilySearch website (Figure 5) transcribes Alexander's father name as Won Liu Ling, although the original record could also be read as Won Lin Ling, closer to the name on Won Alexander Cumyow's marriage certificate (Won Ling Ling). Won Alexander's mother's name, Wong Shee, is clearly mis-transcribed as Won Shu.

Regardless of the accuracy of the transcription, another troubling aspect of the Won family records is the manner in which they are indexed in the FamilySearch database.



**Household Record**

1881 Canadian Census

Search results | Download

Previous Household | Next Household

**Household:**

Image	First Name	Gender	Age	Birthplace	Occupation	Religion
1	Won, Liu, Ling	M	57	China	Restaurant Keeper	Buddhist
2	Won, Shu	M	38	China		Buddhist
3	Won, Cumyau	Male	25	British Columbia	Bookkeeper	Church of England
4	Won, Cumyau	Male	18	British Columbia	Butcher	Church of England
5	Won, Amy	Female	16	British Columbia	Teamster	Church of England
6	Won, Shu	Male	11	British Columbia		Church of England
7	Won, Zai	Male	9	British Columbia		Church of England
8	Won, Loo	Male	7	British Columbia		Church of England

**Source Information:**

Census Place: North, New Westminster, British Columbia  
Family History Library Film: 1321520  
Id. Film Number: C-13294  
District: 187  
Sub-district: 8  
Page Number: 85  
Household Number: 245

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**Figure 5:** 1881 Canadian census record for the Won family from [FamilySearch](#).

In the case of all eight family members, the only indexed nominal term is the surname Won, which is indexed in the First Name field. None of the other names – Cumyau – etc. are retrieved by an index search in either the First Name or Last Name fields. The indexing of only one name, in the First Name field, even when several names are available, is seen in numerous records relating to Chinese individuals in the database, although in other cases, both First Name and Last Name are indexed.

A similar example of inconsistent standards applied to the treatment of records containing Chinese names is seen in a database of 1881 Vancouver Island census entries created by Malaspina University-College on Vancouver Island and available on the [viHistory.ca](#) website. Nominal census indexing usually reflects original census records, in which the surname appears at the beginning of each entry. Duncan Robertson of Victoria, B.C. for example, originally recorded in the 1881 census as Robertson, Duncan, is indexed as Robertson in the Family Name field and Duncan in the Given Name field. The [viHistory.ca](#) index does not, however, follow the same pattern in transcribing an original entry for Yick Soong. The names are reversed, with Soong assigned to the Family Name field, and Yick to the Given Name field.

There are also unique aspects to the way in which Chinese people are treated in directories, another useful source for genealogists. Early provincial directories listed members of professions, trades and other prominent citizens, thereby excluding many people, Chinese and otherwise. As city directories evolved and became more comprehensive, Chinese listings were sometimes segregated in separate sections at the back, reflecting concern for status and racial differentiation, according to George Young and John Lutz, who have researched the directories extensively (Lutz vii). This may make them easier to use from a Chinese research perspective, although the number of Chinese individuals listed was a tiny proportion of the total Chinese population at the time. A significant barrier is found, however, in other provincial and city directories, in which Chinese households were not listed separately. Many addresses are identified simply as “Chinese,” “Chinese store,” “Chinese dwelling,” or “Orientals”, as seen in Figure 6.





Harling Point is one of several Chinese cemeteries in B.C., none of which are among the 264 B.C. cemeteries whose records and monuments have been transcribed and compiled into the British Columbia Cemetery Finding Aid, a searchable database comprising hundreds of thousands of cemetery records and inscriptions collected by genealogical societies and other groups. The Finding Aid does, however, include Chinese burials found in some of the other cemeteries.

Canadian military records, another perennial favourite of genealogists, are distinguished for Chinese researchers primarily by the lack thereof, a fact attributable both to the small numbers of Chinese people relative to the overall population and to discrimination. Despite the fact that they were denied the vote and were the victims of discrimination in their adopted country, Chinese-Canadians – both Canadian-born and naturalized citizens – volunteered to serve in the First and Second World Wars. The potential number of recruits in the First World War, however, although inevitably small, was further decreased by the fact that those who attempted to register in British Columbia were turned away, although both Alberta and Ontario accepted Chinese recruits willingly. While the federal government's Military Service Act of 1917 introduced conscription, this did not extend to Chinese-Canadians. The total number of Chinese-Canadians who enlisted has been estimated as 300 by some historians, a tiny proportion of the Canadian force (Wong 3).

Although many Chinese-Canadians participated in World War II, and are honored at the Chinese Canadian Military Museum in Vancouver, the most important Canadian military records from a genealogical perspective are those relating to World War I, since records from World War II and the Korean War are not open to the public. An especially useful resource is the "Soldiers of the First World War (1914-1918)" database, compiled by Library and Archives Canada, which comprises searchable digitized attestation (enlistment) papers relating to approximately 650,000 soldiers who served from 1914-1918. The ability to locate records for the few Chinese-Canadians in the database is constrained by the fact that the original records do not indicate ethnicity or place of birth, and in any case, are searchable only by name and regimental number. A good example of the complicating potential of name-related factors is seen again in the case of two brothers, Wee Hong Louie and Wee Tan Louie, from Shuswap, B.C. Despite the fact that Chinese recruits were not generally accepted in B.C., Wee Hong Louie managed to enlist in Kamloops, while his brother, Wee Tan Louie, traveled to Calgary to enlist.

**Figure 7:** Canadian Expeditionary Force attestation (enlistment) paper of Wee Hong Louie, 1917 from "Soldiers of the First World War (1914-1918)," Regimental Number 2323392.

Wee Tan Louie had adopted an English moniker, from a name he had seen on a post box he passed on the way, and is entered into "Soldiers of the First World War" as William Thomas Louie, with no indication of his Chinese name. The index entry for his brother, however, is Wee Hong

Louie, Walter Henry (AKA). The English alias does not appear on Wee Hong Louie's attestation paper (Figure 7), but was evidently located elsewhere in the file by the indexer.

Historical voters' lists are yet another example of genealogical source material whose value differs significantly for Chinese researchers. Earlier generations of Chinese-Canadians do not appear in the lists, due to disenfranchisement of the Chinese at all levels of government beginning in the 1870s and continuing until 1947, when the Chinese finally received the right to vote in federal elections.

Perhaps the most important records for Chinese genealogists are immigration records and documents. Although immigration records present access problems for Chinese and non-Chinese researchers alike, Chinese-Canadian researchers – unusually – enjoy an advantage in some circumstances.

A major source of immigration information is ship passenger lists, held by Library and Archives Canada. There are very few pre-1865 passenger lists, and most date back to the early 1880s, although in the case of Vancouver, Victoria, and other Pacific ports, they only begin in 1905. Many of these west coast records include large numbers of immigrants from East Asian ports, particularly China, India, and Japan (Figure 8).

No.	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Place of Birth	Date of Birth	Date of Arrival	Date of Departure	Remarks	Signature	No.
40071	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40072	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40073	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40074	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40075	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40076	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40077	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40078	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40079	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40080	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40081	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40082	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40083	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40084	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40085	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40086	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40087	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40088	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40089	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40090	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40091	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40092	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40093	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40094	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40095	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40096	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40097	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40098	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40099	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								
40100	Do, Jung Bak Fun		Male								

**Figure 8:** Extract from passenger list, S.S. Africa Maru, arrived Victoria, British Columbia, December 30, 1918 from Victoria and Other Pacific Ports Ships' Manifests, Microfilm Number T-4874, June 1918 – February 1919.

However, access to all passenger lists is constrained by a lack of indexing. To find anyone in the passenger lists, it is essential to know almost the exact date on which the person arrived, and it is best to know the name of the ship as well, details that are often unknown. One set of Canadian passenger records has been made available as a searchable online database by the Pier 21 Society in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in cooperation with Library and Archives Canada. However, the database is derived from records covering 1925-1935, a period which entirely falls into the exclusion period, during which Chinese were barred from entering Canada under the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923. Thus only a few Chinese individuals are recorded in the database, most likely returning former residents of Canada, or those who had exempt status.

But if discriminatory legislation had significant implications for Chinese-Canadian families and contributed to the degree of difficulty in researching Chinese-Canadian family history, one of the best sources for Chinese-Canadian research emerged from these very measures. The legislation resulted in the detailed documentation of virtually every Chinese person entering or leaving Canada during the period from 1885 to 1949. Chinese immigration records held by Library and Archives Canada (LAC), include ledgers of exempt admissions, outward registration records, lists of persons

readmitted, and many others. Although access to case files from 1900-1993 and some other records is restricted by law, the earlier records are open to the public, and contain a considerable amount of genealogically useful information. None, however, has yet been included in LAC digitization projects.

Perhaps the most important collection of Chinese immigration records is the General Registers of Chinese Immigration (Figure 9) created at the headquarters of the Chinese Immigration Service in Ottawa. In theory, the registers list all Chinese immigrants who arrived in Canada from 1885 to 1949, a total of about 97,000 records.

**Figure 9:** 1919 Chinese immigrants records from General Registers of Chinese Immigration, Microfilm Number T-3486, Ottawa Serial No. 89251-89274.

The information recorded for each individual includes name, port or place where registered, sex, age, city or village and district of birth in China, occupation, last place of domicile, port of arrival in Canada, vessel, railway or other conveyance on which the person arrived, physical marks or peculiarities, and in some cases, the person's eventual destination in Canada. Despite the unique quality of the General Registers of Chinese Immigration as a resource for Chinese-Canadian genealogists, access is very difficult, again due to lack of indexing, a characteristic shared by other records found in the Chinese immigration series at the LAC. The records comprising the General Registers of Chinese Immigration are arranged numerically, by serial number and declaration number, and are in very rough chronological order, according to the date that the notice of the immigrant's arrival was submitted to Ottawa. Unless the date on which the immigrant arrived is known, it is very difficult to locate an individual entry.

Researchers may be assisted by the fact that the detailed documentation of Chinese arrivals and departures was accompanied by the issuing of various types of certificates, the most famous of which was the C.I.5 or head tax certificate (Figure 10), issued when the tax was paid. The certificate can be a vital link to the General Registers and passenger lists, since it lists both the date of arrival, and the name of the ship. Families in possession of head tax and other certificates may be able to locate their ancestors' immigration records relatively easily, but without one, it is much more difficult to locate an ancestor in either passenger lists or the General Registers.





**Figure 10:** C.I.5 (head tax) certificate, 1919 from “Government Records,” [Living Memory](#).

All of the types of materials considered so far have been English-language, but inevitably, as Chinese-Canadians trace their roots, they may wish to locate and examine Chinese-language materials. In Vancouver, the Chinese community published a Chinese-language newspaper, the Chinese Times, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until 1992, and clan associations have also produced Chinese-language publications which sometimes include material of genealogical interest. There is also a very strong genealogical tradition within China itself, and some Chinese-Canadian families have produced their own Chinese-language genealogies. Access to the above materials is problematic, however, due to lack of indexing and the fact that some are not formally published. Moreover, Chinese-Canadians with deep historical roots in Canada are often unable to read Chinese.

It is evident, then, that both the nature of the documentary sources themselves – in some cases determined by historical and cultural factors – as well as a bias in the mainstream genealogical culture compromise the ability of Chinese-Canadians to successfully research their roots. However, there are signs that a more supportive context for Chinese-Canadian genealogical research is emerging.

The previously-mentioned creation of the Chinese-Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia is one example. Registered in May 2004, the new society’s main objective is “to bring out the untold history of ethnic Chinese within the history of British Columbia. We will do this through sustained efforts at document preservation, research, family and oral history promotion, public education programs, an active web site, and many other initiatives.” The Society’s inaugural event, “Routes to Our Roots: Finding Chinese in Canada” was held in November 2004. Sponsored by the Vancouver Public Library, the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, and the Association of Chinese Canadian Professionals, the workshop had a largely genealogical focus. It was followed in January 2005 by “A Free Taste of Chinese-Canadian History: The Inaugural Chinese-Canadian History Fair” in January 2005, which received extensive pre-event media coverage, including an hour-long open line radio program on a popular local radio show. Numerous callers from around the province phoned to share their own stories and personal histories. A number of future projects have been suggested, including, notably, the creation of an inventory of existing Chinese-Canadian genealogies. Meanwhile, the Society facilitates the exchange of information between members by providing space on its website for members to informally post their research interests.

One of the founding members of the Chinese-Canadian Historical Society of B.C., Dr. Henry Yu, has recently received funding for a project which holds great promise for Chinese-Canadian genealogists. The research proposed by Yu and his colleague, Peter Ward, will draw its primary data from the General Registers of Chinese Immigration. Data will be transcribed from microfilm

copies of the original registers, and used both to analyze trends in the physical heights of Chinese immigrants who entered Canada between 1887 and 1949, and to map the circular migration flows between southern China and Canada. While these goals are not genealogical in nature, the intent is to produce and make available to the public a fully searchable electronic database, which will enable people to find head tax certificate registration numbers and corresponding immigration files.

Another project, the first stage of which was completed in 2004, similarly attests to the growing climate of support for Chinese-Canadian historical and genealogical research. Historical Chinese Language Materials in British Columbia: An Electronic Inventory (Figure 11) is a joint project of the Asian Library and the Centre for Chinese Research, both at the University of British Columbia, and the David See-Chai Lam Centre for International Communication at Simon Fraser University. The database created by the project comprises over 11,000 records of Chinese-language items such as manuscripts, newspapers, correspondence, genealogical and family records, business transaction records, association records, certificates, receipts, textbooks, photographs, and other items. These were documented throughout the province, and represent contributions from seventeen resource centres, and seven pioneer families, as well as a number of individuals. The resulting database is searchable by Chinese, English, and Pinyin, and an English-Chinese dictionary is incorporated into the index file, which automatically converts searches from vernacular Chinese to Pinyin and vice versa, in order to improve the hit rate on searches. The database also incorporates more than 500 images of archival materials. The next stage of the project will focus on digitizing major collections. A downloadable template is also available, allowing remote users to contribute records and images for items in their possession.



**Figure 11:** Home page of Historical Chinese Language Materials in British Columbia: An Electronic Inventory.

Another exciting initiative is The Multicultural Canada Project, a collaborative effort involving Simon Fraser University Library, in Burnaby, B.C. and the University of Calgary in Alberta, in partnership with several other organizations, including the Sien Lok Society, a Chinese-Canadian heritage organization in Calgary. The vision of the Project, which is currently seeking funding, is to work with community-based organizations to gather Canadian multicultural print, oral and visual heritage materials and preserve them online, thus correcting the imbalance that exists in relation to similar English and French-language materials. The scope of the project encompasses Chinese, Doukhobour, Ukrainian, Indic, Japanese and Persian materials. One of the initial Chinese-language projects, for which a prototype has already been developed, will be the digitization of the Chinese Times, with corresponding indexing both in Chinese and English. The Multicultural Canada Project, although not primarily aimed at genealogists, could ultimately encompass a wide-range of resources, including genealogically-useful materials.

Elsewhere, the Chinese Canadian Military Museum in Vancouver is engaged in an oral history project funded by Canadian Heritage, which will record the stories of Chinese-Canadian war veterans, while the Kamloops Chinese Cultural Association is developing a Heroes of Confederation Project. The latter is a major heritage initiative, focusing on the sacrifices and contributions of Chinese railway workers during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s. The goal of the project is to build a Kamloops Chinese Heritage Railway Museum, one function of which will be to store the records of Chinese railway workers so that family members can trace their roots.

Perhaps the most intentionally Chinese-Canadian genealogical initiative is a Vancouver Public Library project aimed at creating a specialized website. Funding has been approved for the project, which is now at the preliminary stage. The initial goal is to develop a site incorporating features such as a basic genealogy “how-to kit”, tips on interviewing family members, an overview of Chinese-Canadian history and its implications for genealogy, information on name-related customs and pitfalls, annotated links to existing online resources, and an inventory of repositories currently holding material of interest to Chinese-Canadian genealogists. Perhaps the most important aspect of the website will be a detailed overview of the characteristics of key documentary sources, introducing them from a Chinese-Canadian perspective. The new website will begin to fill a conspicuous gap in terms of the availability of online genealogy resources for those of Chinese descent.

With these promising indications that the prospects for Chinese-Canadians interested in genealogical research is improving, through both library-based and other initiatives, it is perhaps appropriate to consider the role of public libraries in relation to genealogy in general, and the genealogical research needs of minority immigrant communities in particular.

The place of genealogical services and resources in a public library setting is undoubtedly a matter for debate, and many factors may affect the manner in which individual libraries choose to respond to genealogists’ needs. In light of the burgeoning interest in genealogy, however, public libraries may find that they have a compelling interest, particularly as they struggle to define their place in an information culture radically transformed by Google. In an article appearing in the June/July 2001 issue of *American Libraries*, Bernard Vavrek of the Department of Library Science at Clarion University in Pennsylvania, identified the enhancement of local history and genealogy collections as one of a number of core strategies for libraries to consider in the face of this changing environment.

Some public libraries, such as the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and in the Vancouver area, the Cloverdale Branch of the Surrey Public Library, have already developed very extensive collections and services for genealogists. But as noted previously, genealogical collections and services tend to reflect a strongly British Isles/European focus, offering little to those from other historic immigrant groups. The question inevitably arises as to whether public libraries have a special responsibility in relation to these other groups. Certainly the specific needs and wishes of genealogists are almost limitless. But while libraries must attempt to meet the needs of the widest possible range of genealogical patrons, the focus of their efforts should perhaps also partly be informed by fact that those of British and to a lesser extent, European, origin are already very well supported by existing print and online sources, as well as the activities of genealogical societies. It is worth noting “Guidelines for Developing Beginning Genealogical Collections and Services”, prepared by the Genealogy Committee of the History Section of the Reference and User Services Association, part of the American Library Association. The guidelines specifically state that:

A genealogical collection should be developed and maintained to support the basic research needs of the community served by the library. An assessment should be made concerning the ethnic background and countries of origin of the members of the community served by the library in order to determine the scope of the genealogical collection. The scope of the collection should represent, at least, the majority of the community, but not be limited to it. The collection should include basic materials on genealogical research procedures. These materials should include the



widest possible range of nationalities and ethnic groups represented in the community.

In a multicultural country such as Canada, in which the overwhelming majority of the population traces its roots to immigrants in a mosaic encompassing many ethnic groups, these guidelines present a considerable challenge. As seen in the case of Chinese Canadians, responding to the needs of just one group may require a high level of expertise, including an understanding of the particular history and characteristics of the group, and a specialized knowledge of the manner in which it is reflected in documentary sources. Moreover, this knowledge must be acquired without the help of secondary materials such as the genealogical guides and high-value websites that are available for British and European research. The lack of resources relating to ethnic immigrant origins also points to the need for public libraries to be engaged proactively in projects such as the creation of specialized guides, indexes, databases and other projects. In view of limited budgets and the very broad nature of their mandates, the question arises as to what might be a realistic approach for public libraries to take in developing equitable, high-quality services in the area of multicultural genealogy.

Initially, it might be useful to focus efforts on just one or two nationalities or ethnic groups. The selection of target groups might be based on a community assessment, as suggested by the ALA Guidelines, but should also take the historical context into account. Thus, in British Columbia, the historical magnet of Chinese immigration to Canada, it is logical that library-based genealogical initiatives would focus on the Chinese-Canadian community. In Nova Scotia, on the other hand, similar initiatives might focus on the historic African-Canadian population, descended from ancestors who left the United States at the time of the Revolution. Ideally, groups to be targeted would be selected in the context of a broadly-based cooperative strategy, perhaps developed by a formally established genealogy and local history interest group within the national library association (there is currently no such group within the Canadian Library Association).

Input from community groups would be the next essential aspect of any effort to develop high-quality resources and services. In the case of Chinese-Canadians, groups such as the newly-formed Chinese Historical Society of British Columbia and the Chinese Canadian Military Museum can play an essential role in planning services and promoting them to their own constituencies. Just as importantly, community groups can make a significant contribution in terms of their knowledge of community history, and related documentary and other resources. Such groups may also be interested in developing their own genealogical projects. Public libraries are well-placed to assist them in identifying, planning and implementing such projects, and can also contribute professional expertise in matters such as standards for indexing, databases and websites.

Having consulted with community organizations, it would be a useful exercise to craft a vision of genealogy services for the target group or groups, identifying specific resources and features that might be included. An ideal feature of services for Chinese-Canadians, for example, might be fully transcribed, indexed and digitized versions of all genealogically-useful and publicly-available records of the Chinese Immigration Service. Although implementing such a detailed – even idealized – plan might not immediately be a realistic possibility, it would act as a useful reference point for the purpose of formulating funding requests and exploring collaborative opportunities.

While expensive and ambitious digitization and indexing projects may be beyond the reach of public libraries, due to budgetary constraints, other types of projects could prove a useful first step towards developing more equitable services. The initial phase of the Vancouver Public Library's Chinese-Canadian genealogy website, described above, is an example of such a project. It will not involve transcribing, translating, digitizing, or indexing. Rather, it will provide basic tools, information, examples, and links to existing resources. In some cases, however, projects involving digitization, transcription, or indexing could be quite local and small-scale in nature. In the case of Chinese-Canadians, an example might be the digitization of a single Vancouver Chinese telephone directory.

Finally, partnerships with other agencies, such as museums, archives, academic libraries, and individual researchers would be very important. Some such partners may not be primarily

interested in genealogy, but may be interested in other projects which will produce genealogically-useful by-products. Dr. Henry Yu's project is one example. Another is the large [viHistory.ca](http://viHistory.ca) collection of databases. Although intended to be to "a research & teaching tool and a vehicle for exploring the larger field of Canadian history during the late 19th and early part of the 20th century," the collection is also of great use and interest to genealogists, and coincidentally, comprises a significant number of entries relating to Chinese-Canadians.

As the example of Chinese-Canadians has demonstrated, the goal of providing high-quality, equitable genealogical resources and services in a society with a long tradition of multicultural immigration may remain elusive. However, commitment, collaboration, and imagination could eventually result -- if only by incremental steps -- in meaningful progress towards fuller participation and greater success for genealogists researching immigrant ancestors from beyond the British Isles and Europe.

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