

# HARD IS THE JOURNEY

崎岖的旅途

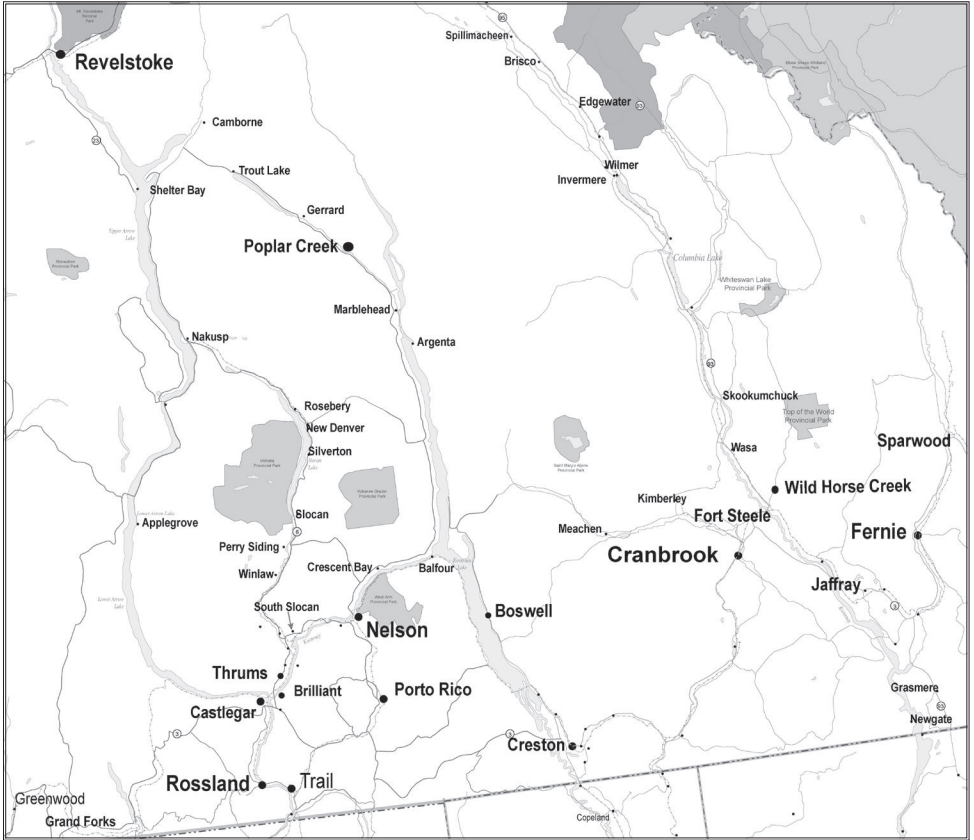
Stories of Chinese Settlement  
in British Columbia's Kootenay

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*To my children, Steve, Stephanie and Warren*

# Map



## Introduction

In August 2001, I drove to the Kootenay with the intention of collecting information about Chinese immigration and settlements in the various towns and cities in the region. Nelson was the first city I visited. After finding and checking in to a motel, I drove downtown and parked my car in front of a Chinese restaurant. By then it was evening, so I went into the restaurant to have dinner. The restaurant was packed with diners, but a kind waiter found me a small table tucked in a corner of the dining room and waited on me. The service was good and the food delicious. After I finished my meal, I paid my bill and met the cashier at the till. The gentleman who received payment was Cameron Mah, an owner of the restaurant. He asked me if I was visiting friends or just touring the city. I told him I was doing neither and said that I was on my way to find out about the history of Chinese immigration in the Kootenay, that I had arrived in Nelson in the afternoon and planned to visit the museum and archives and the Chinese community in town. He smiled and gave me a thumbs-up. I could sense his interest and enthusiasm and ventured to ask him if he was a Chinese immigrant or a citizen of Canada. He said, "Both." Then he told me that he had immigrated to Canada in 1959 and became a citizen in the early 1960s.

I asked him for the location of the museum and archives in town. Immediately, he offered to take me there the next day. I thanked him, and we made plans to go to the museum shortly after it opened at 10:00 a.m. After thanking him again for his assistance, I left the restaurant and returned to the motel for a good night's sleep.



Cameron Mah immigrated to Canada in 1959. He lived in Nelson, BC.

The following day, Mah took me to Touchstones Nelson: Museum of Art and History and introduced me to Shawn Lamb, the curator and archivist at the museum. Lamb was delighted when she learned that I had come to Nelson to research the history of the Chinese in the Kootenay. Mah left us to return to the restaurant, and Lamb accompanied me to the archives. She allowed me to go through all the files that documented the lives of the many Chinese immigrants who had arrived in town, beginning with the earliest days of Nelson's history. I spent two days in the archives, recording the information and photocopying documents related to the Chinese immigrants who had lived in the area.

While I was in the archives, Lamb introduced me to Art Joyce, a journalist and historian who had written a series of articles about the Chinese immigrants to Nelson and the surrounding area. Joyce's stories had been published in the *Nelson Daily News*. Both Lamb and Joyce were very generous and knowledgeable. They shared with me many stories about the lives of Chinese immigrants in the area, and they showed me the location of the early Chinatown in Nelson on a map. Joyce generously gave me copies of his articles and permission to quote them in my writing. Lamb provided me with a record of the deceased Chinese individuals buried in the Nelson Memorial Park cemetery and also introduced me to Henry and Audrey Stevenson. This couple had volunteered to survey the cemetery for the British Columbia Genealogical Society, which needed the information for a book and CD it was compiling. The Stevensons took me to visit the section of the cemetery where the Chinese immigrants were buried.

When I returned to the museum and archives, Lamb suggested that I interview Cameron Mah, Lawrence Mar, and the chair of the Chee Kung Tong—also known as the Chinese Freemasons Society after this English name was adopted in 1921—in town. Mah was a pillar of the Chinese community; Mar had been president of the local chapter of the Guomindang (中国国民党), also known as the Chinese Nationalist League, and had been the chair of the Chinese Youth Association in 1955. After I had gathered the necessary information on the history of Chinese immigrants in the archives, I interviewed Mah and Mar, as well as the chair of the Nelson chapter of the Chinese Freemasons Society, who asked me not to state his name but allowed me to include the history of the organization in my writing. I thanked him and have honoured his request.

Before I left Nelson, Mah told me that he had a brother, Ronald Mah, who lived in Rossland, and suggested that I contact him, because he knew the history of the Chinese market gardeners who had lived there years ago. Mah said he would phone his brother and inform him that I would be visiting Rossland in the immediate future. This trip to Nelson was truly rewarding.

On my way to Rossland, I stopped in Trail, where I stayed in a youth hostel.

I assumed there was no Chinatown in this industrial town, because there were only a couple of Chinese restaurants, one Chinese laundry shop, and a grocery store operated by Chinese people. It never occurred to me to find out whether there was a museum in the city. But I knew there was a museum and archives in Rossland, so I travelled between Trail and Rossland daily.

In Rossland, I met and interviewed Ronald Mah, who informed me that “in the early days Rossland had about three hundred to five hundred Chinese people residing or in transit to this area. Most of the early Chinese were engaged in vegetable gardening, the laundry business and the grocery businesses. Some VIPs in Rossland employed Chinese [individuals] as cooks and servants or houseboys in their homes.”<sup>1</sup> He took me to the site where the Chinese gardens had been located and told me a sad story about two Chinese gardeners. Their story—told in the chapter on Rossland—is significant, since it illustrates the trials and challenges the two Chinese gardeners faced. I also had an opportunity to meet and interview Lindsay Wong, a councillor in Rossland.

I then visited the Rossland Museum & Discovery Centre and met Joyce Austin, the curator and manager, who shared with me the *West Kootenay Chinese Heritage Society, Summary Report, 1995* and the *Historical Guide Map and Story of the City of Rossland, British Columbia*; the latter publication was compiled by the Rossland Historical Museum & Archives Association. After I returned home to Prince George, Joyce Austin sent me a few images of the gardens in Rossland. Unfortunately, the images were dark and unclear, so they could not be used to illustrate the Rossland chapter.

When I had completed my research in the museum and archives in Rossland, I ventured to Cranbrook where I stayed in the College of the Rockies residence. (In the summer, classes were not held, so visitors could rent a room and stay in the student dormitories.) While I was in town, I visited the Tamarack Centre shopping mall where I met the Rotarian Jim Chiu and his wife, Helen, who owned and operated a drug store in the mall. They were very friendly and invited me to dinner in their home. Unfortunately, Jim Chiu suffered from pancreatic cancer and he passed away in 2018. His friends and fellow Rotarians in Montana, Idaho and Washington State miss him, as do his other friends and associates in the Kootenay. I remain grateful to Jim’s wife, Helen, for writing to me every now and then.

In Cranbrook, I visited and interviewed a few owners of Chinese restaurants, including a couple of Chinese immigrants who were scientists. These two scientists—Cai Yi Hai and Ma Zhong Lam—left Guangdong during the Cultural Revolution (a movement in China from 1966 to 1976). From them, I learned about Chu Ban Quan, a Chinese immigrant who arrived in BC in 1882

and migrated to the Kootenay a few years later. He established the Ban Quan Mining Company in the Wild Horse Creek district, and after accumulating wealth from mining, built the Tamarack Centre shopping mall in Cranbrook and established his business in the mall. I didn't realize that Chu had passed away, and my ignorance led me to knock at the door of a house marked "The Ban Quan Home." No one answered the door. Later, I learned from the vital statistics records in the Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives that Chu had passed away in 1947.

I continued my search for historical information and arrived at the Fort Steele Heritage Town, where I met Derryll White, the curator of the museum and archives. White showed me a printed image of a photograph of a Chinese altar in Fisherville, an early mining town near Fort Steele that no longer exists. While I was there, employees of the historic park were heading out to install signposts at the site on Wild Horse Creek that had once been a Chinatown. I left my car at the parking lot of the heritage town, hopped on the truck with the workers and visited the site of long-gone Fisherville on the bench above Wild Horse Creek. The trip gave me the opportunity to take a few photographs at the Chinatown site.

In the Wild Horse Creek district, I had the good fortune of meeting Ingrid Lum and Peter Ah Lum, a well-known miner and entrepreneur in the area. After visiting the Wild Horse area, I returned to the College of the Rockies residence in Cranbrook to rest for a day, eating, sleeping and doing nothing, to replenish my energy. I turned on the tape recorder and listened to music!

The following day I drove to Revelstoke, where I met Cathy English, manager and curator of the Revelstoke Museum & Archives. English allowed me to go through all the files in the archives that contained the history of the Chinese immigrants to the city. As well, she accompanied me to the cemetery where the deceased Chinese were buried. On the tombstones I noted the names of the Chinese villages in Guangdong Province from which the immigrants had come. While I was in the archives, Margaret McMahan, a historian, came in and gave me her book, *Pioneers of Revelstoke, British Columbia*, which included the history of the well-known Wong Kwong family. I am very thankful for her generosity.

English and I became good friends, remaining in contact for years. She helped me to connect with two descendants of the Wong Kwong family. In addition, she shared with me volumes of the *Revelstoke Review* that contained information about Chinese-Canadian history in the Kootenay.

Having completed my research in Revelstoke, I returned home to Prince George. I was exhausted and stressed physically and mentally. While I was carrying out research and interviews, I kept my findings on a couple of floppy

disks, hoping that one fine day I would spend time organizing my findings and listening to and transcribing the interviews. At that time, I had no zeal or desire to begin writing. I just wrote notes and numbered some of the images related to the Chinese Canadians and immigrants who had lived and spent their lives in the Kootenay region. Procrastination set in, and I totally forgot about the findings in my files!

At the annual general meeting of the British Columbia Historical Federation held in June 2019, I received the very sad news that Cameron Mah had passed away. This alarming news motivated me to review my research on the Kootenay; it had become necessary to share my findings, especially the immigration history of Mah, with my children and readers. His deeds and contributions, strength and determination, and achievements and successes reflected the endeavours and convictions of the Chinese immigrants who called this land home.

To my dismay, I could not download the WordPerfect files from the floppy disks to my desktop computer. I cried out for help. Thank goodness my son Steven and good friend Susanna Ng were able to retrieve the information from the floppy disks and convert the files from WordPerfect to Word. Meanwhile, Susanna sent me a link to a database of old BC newspapers that enabled me to continue my research online. At the same time, Greg Nesteroff, another kind friend in Nelson, sent me information, including maps and images, to illustrate my writing. I am truly indebted to these two good friends and associates. Their assistance gave me the courage to contact Vici Johnstone, publisher of Caitlin Press, and to sign a contract for publishing this book.

While I was searching or looking at various online resources, I found two works about Chinese-Canadian history in Rossland: “The Chinese and Chinatown of Rossland: Fragments from Their Early History,” a paper by Professor Ronald A. Shearer of the University of British Columbia; and “Placed on the Margins: The Idea of Chinatown in Rossland, British Columbia, 1890–1902,” an article by Professor Michael Ripmeester of Brock University in Ontario. I asked Professor Shearer for permission to quote his writing, and he graciously gave me his consent. I particularly love Professor Ripmeester’s article because it denounces racism.

Indeed, prejudice and discrimination against Chinese immigrants—as well as other immigrant groups and Indigenous peoples—is a part of Canadian history. In the case of the Chinese, several pieces of legislation demonstrate the resentment that the mainstream society felt for the Chinese newcomers. In 1885, once the Canadian Pacific Railway was complete and the Chinese labourers were no longer considered essential, the Chinese Immigration Act was



passed, which imposed a Head Tax on new Chinese immigrants to Canada. The Head Tax was fifty dollars at first but was later raised to one hundred dollars and then again to five hundred dollars. In 1923, a second piece of discriminatory legislation was passed, which was known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. This act prohibited Chinese immigration, with just a few exceptions. It was not repealed until 1947. The province of British Columbia also enacted several pieces of discriminatory legislation, including an 1890s law prohibiting Chinese miners from working underground in the province's mines; in 1923, a law was passed forbidding Chinese employers, such as restaurant owners, from hiring white women—apparently due to a fear that white women and Chinese men might marry! Also demonstrating the discrimination and racism that Chinese immigrants faced was the derogatory language used when referring to them—terms such as “Celestials” and “chinks” appear often in the historical newspapers that provide information about these early immigrants to the Kootenay.

Each chapter in this book begins with an acknowledgement of the Indigenous peoples in the area of the Kootenay that the chapter describes. Then I briefly describe the locations of the major towns and cities in the region, followed by the size of the historical general population and the numbers of Chinese Canadians and immigrants that lived in the Chinese settlements commonly known as Chinatowns. I made an effort to find out the occupations of the early Chinese immigrants, how they lived in Canada, and how they supported their families who remained behind in Guangdong Province, China. In my search, I learned that Chinese immigrants were employed as houseboys, servants and cooks in almost every town and city in the Kootenay. I also researched the lives of Chinese families in Canada who were reunited after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1947.

In Rossland, there was a mysterious murder case. In 1900, Ernest Chenoweth, an eight-year-old boy, shot Mah Lin, a Chinese servant and cook, with a rifle. The Chinese Benevolent Association hired a detective to investigate the murder case. Chenoweth was arrested and tried. The details of the trial and the verdict in this case are included in the Rossland chapter.

The Chee Kung Tong (Chinese Freemasons Society) was found in cities throughout the Kootenay. This organization provided accommodations and found work for its members and other Chinese immigrants who arrived in town and needed employment. The chair and board members of this society tried to preserve Chinese culture and heritage. They held celebrations for their members and other Chinese immigrants during Spring Festival and honoured Chinese festival days according to the traditional Chinese lunar calendar. These included Qing Ming Jie, or Tomb-Sweeping Day, which occurs around Easter; Duan

Wu Jie, the Dragon Boat Festival, which takes place on the fifth day of the fifth moon; Yu Lan Jie, which takes place on the fifteenth day of the seventh moon; Zhongqiu Jie, or the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, which takes place on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon; and Zhong Yang Jie, which takes place on the ninth day of the ninth moon in the Chinese calendar, and is another day on which the deceased Chinese are honoured in cemeteries.

The Guomindang, or as it was called in English, the Chinese Nationalist League, was a political organization affiliated with the Republic of China (currently located in Taiwan) that had a presence in Cranbrook, Nelson and Revelstoke. The late Wong Kwong of Revelstoke was the president of the Guomindang party there. Interestingly, the Chinese Empire Reform Association was found in Nelson and Rossland. This organization was established in mainland China when Emperor Guangxu was on the throne, but this movement lasted only one hundred days. The powerful Empress Dowager Cixi sent Guangxu to Yingtai, an island within the premises of the imperial palace in Beijing, where he was kept under house arrest. Both Guangxu and Cixi passed away in November 1909.

In 1911, under the leadership of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the Chinese revolution succeeded in overthrowing the Qing regime and established the Republic of China. The governing party was the Guomindang. Many Chinese immigrants to BC and other Canadian provinces established Guomindang branches to support the Republic of China. But in 1927, the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, came into conflict with each other and a Chinese civil war broke out. When the Japanese invaded China in 1937, the two parties reconciled and united to resist the Japanese invasion. After World War II, Chiang Kai-shek, called “the Generalissimo,” initiated attacks against the communists. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party defeated the Guomindang, and the latter relocated and formed a government in Taiwan. Following this, the Chinese Communist Party established the People’s Republic of China on the mainland.

In 1947, when the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in Canada, the country’s Chinese immigrants could finally send for family members still in China to join them in Canada. After the arrival of their families, the Chinese men moved out of the boarding houses they had occupied, and lived with their families in apartments or houses. Gradually, many of the Chinese organizations dissolved—with the exception of the Chee Kung Tong—because they were no longer needed to house and take care of the original immigrants. As time went by, nearly all of the Chee Kung Tong’s buildings in the Kootenay either burned down or were sold. In Nelson, the board members decided to sell their building

because most of the members moved to the Lower Mainland after their families arrived, and the aging caretaker was no longer capable of taking care of the building. The organization sold the building, and used the funds realized from the sale to observe Qing Ming and celebrate Chinese New Year each year.

My research process in various towns and cities gave me the opportunity to meet curators and archivists who were very knowledgeable about their local history. They helped me find records and documentation related to Chinese immigration and settlements in their localities. Almost all of them allowed me to copy and print out information, and the fees were minimal. The research process took place over many years and some of the original source documents have been lost and, in some cases, individuals have passed away; still, every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the book. Although the process of research and writing required time and energy, nothing could be more rewarding than meeting historians and scholars and learning from them about the history of the Chinese in the Kootenay.