

# Chinese Head Tax

## a Vancouver Public Library **Guide**

### Introduction

Many Canadians of Chinese origin are interested in finding records of the head tax paid by their immigrant ancestors. This guide is designed to help in the search for this information. Throughout the guide, references are made to **Chinese-Canadian Genealogy** ([www.vpl.ca/ccg/](http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/)), a comprehensive website created by the Vancouver Public Library for Canadians of Chinese origin wishing to research their family history. The website includes information about Chinese immigration records and other types of documents that may be useful when looking for head tax information.

### Historical Background

The head tax on Chinese Immigrants was introduced by the Dominion (federal) government in the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885. Initially, an amount of \$10 was proposed, but due to anti-Chinese agitation, this was amended to \$50 before the bill's final passage. The Chinese Immigration Act of 1900 (which went into effect on January 1, 1902) increased the tax to \$100, and finally, in the Chinese Immigration Act of 1903, it was raised to \$500. Some Chinese were exempt. For example, under the 1903 legislation, there were six classes of persons who did not have to pay: merchants and their families, diplomats, clergymen, tourists, students, and men of science.

Efforts to control Chinese immigration, including the administration of head tax, were overseen by a federal Chief Controller of Chinese Immigration. The Chief Controller's Department documented Chinese immigration in detail, generating a large amount of corresponding paperwork, including certificates, registers and other records. These are held by Library and Archives Canada. Copies of selected records are also available on microfilm at a number of libraries and archives across Canada, including the Vancouver Public Library.

### Head Tax Certificate

Head tax certificates were officially called C.I. 5 certificates. ("C.I." stands for "Chinese Immigration"). C.I. 5 certificates were one of several types of certificates issued to Chinese



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immigrants by federal Chinese immigration authorities.

C.I.5 certificates were issued to individuals. The government did not keep copies. (This can be compared to modern passports and social security cards. The government has records of passport and social security numbers, but does not keep actual duplicates of every passport and social security card issued).

A very small number of C.I. 5 certificates have been donated to various archives across Canada, but in most cases, unless your family kept the original C.I.5 certificate, you will not be able to find a copy. However, it may be possible to locate your ancestor in one of the many registers used by the Chief Controller's Department to document Chinese immigration and payment of head tax.

## Before You Start

Before searching for your ancestor's head tax record, gather as much information about your immigrant ancestor as you can, including any documents in your family's possession. These could include birth, marriage and death certificates, papers issued by federal immigration authorities, and other types of documents. Talking to older family members may help. Your goal is to determine the date that your ancestor arrived in Canada. It is especially helpful if you know the port and name of the ship on which your ancestor arrived. Bring the information with you to the library.

## What's At the Library?

### General Register of Chinese Immigration

This set of records, available on microfilm at the Vancouver Public Library, is the single most important surviving source of Chinese head tax information. It is a master register, based on registers maintained at individual ports of entry across Canada. The individual port registers were periodically submitted to Ottawa, and used to compile the General Register.

Entries in the General Register of Chinese Immigration include the amount of head tax paid and other details, such as age, district and village of origin in China, etc. Note that entries are only in **rough** chronological order and that some have been filmed out of sequence. For detailed film notes on the General Register of Chinese Immigration, see [www.vpl.ca/ccg/General\\_Register.html](http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/General_Register.html).

### Other Chinese Immigration Records

In addition to C.I.5 certificates, federal Chinese immigration authorities issued other types of certificates to Chinese individuals and maintained related registers. Some of these certificates and registers include C.I.5 certificate numbers. In some cases, microfilm copies of the records are available at the Vancouver Public Library. Others can be obtained from Library and Archives Canada through inter-library loan. For more information, see [www.vpl.ca/ccg/Other\\_Records.html](http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/Other_Records.html)

## Additional Sources

The library has many other documents and records that may provide useful clues that will help you estimate your ancestor's date of arrival and locate him in head tax records. Further information is provided in the next section of this guide.

## How Do I Find My Ancestor?

### 1. If You Have an Original C.I. 5 Certificate Issued to an Immigrant Ancestor . . .

The certificate shows the amount of head tax paid, as well as the port and date of arrival. It is relatively easy to find an ancestor in the General Register of Chinese Immigration if you have the original C.I. 5 certificate. The entry in the General Register provides little additional information, but confirms what appears on the head tax certificate.

### 2. If You Do Not Have an Original C.I.5 Certificate But Have a Certificate Number . . .

Entries in the General Register of Chinese Immigration are not arranged according to the C.I.5 number but are in order according to the serial number assigned by Ottawa. If a port submitted entries with earlier dates than those of another port register that had already been entered into the General Register, the earlier entries follow those with later dates. The records are therefore in *rough* chronological order only.

### 3. If You Do Not Have an Original C.I.5 Certificate But Know Exactly When Your Ancestor Arrived . . .

As described above, records in the General Register of Chinese Immigration are in *rough* chronological order and you can browse by date. Note that the date on which your ancestor arrived in Canada may *not* be the same date that he registered as a Chinese immigrant and paid the head tax. In the General Register, the original date of arrival is usually shown in column 18.

### 4. If You Do Not Have an Original C.I.5 Certificate But Know Approximately When Your Ancestor Arrived . . .

Although you can start by immediately browsing through the General Register, it may be easier to locate your ancestor in passenger lists first. These are more legible and some are typed. Please note that for the West Coast (Vancouver, Victoria and other Pacific ports), there are no passenger lists available prior to 1905. West Coast passenger lists from 1905-1922 are available on microfilm at the Vancouver Public Library. Passenger lists for all ports and for later dates are available on interlibrary loan from Library and Archives Canada and some are also available online. If you find your ancestor in a passenger list, the next step is to search the General Register of Chinese Immigration for records dated on or shortly after his arrival date.

If you know the port of arrival in Canada, keep in mind that your immigrant ancestor may have registered at a different port. For example, an immigrant may have initially arrived in Victoria and his name may appear in passenger lists for that port. But he may have continued, disembarked, registered and paid the head tax in Vancouver.

For more information about passenger records, see [www.vpl.ca/ccg/Passenger\\_Lists.html](http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/Passenger_Lists.html)

## 5. If You Still Cannot Find Your Ancestor Or Have Little Or No Idea When He Arrived . . .

Look for clues in other documents and records. Your goal is to find or estimate the date of arrival in Canada.

- If your ancestor died in B.C., try to find his **B.C. death certificate**. B.C. death certificates record the number of years that foreign-born deceased people resided in Canada. This information can be used to estimate the year of arrival. For more information on locating B.C. death certificates, see [www.vpl.ca/ccg/Civil\\_Registration.html](http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/Civil_Registration.html)
- If your ancestor was in Canada in 1901 or 1911, you may be able to find clues in **historical Canadian census records**. Census records for both years include the “Year of Immigration to Canada”. For more information, see [www.vpl.ca/ccg/1911\\_Census.html](http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/1911_Census.html)
- Many other types of records may provide clues that may help narrow down your ancestor’s date of arrival. For more information, see [www.vpl.ca/ccg/Documents.html](http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/Documents.html)

## Beyond VPL

Citizenship and Immigration Canada may be able to provide information about your immigrant ancestor’s arrival in Canada. For more information, see their **Citizenship or Naturalization Records Fact Sheet** at [www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/atip/factsheet.html](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/atip/factsheet.html).

## A Note About Chinese Names

Your search for Chinese head tax information may be complicated by factors relating to Chinese names. Your ancestor may have had several names throughout life, or it may have been misspelled in some records. For more information, see [www.vpl.ca/ccg/Names\\_Introduction.html](http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/Names_Introduction.html)



*Head tax certificate issued to Lee Don, age 22, arrived Victoria, B.C. on July 23, 1918  
VPL 30625*