

Chinese Head Tax and Immigration Act

Chinese immigrants have had a long history in Canada. In the early 1800s many Chinese wanted to come to Canada to escape the harsh conditions in China. In China there was little farmland or food due to flooding and overpopulation. Also, China was dangerous. There were wars, people were forced to join armies and there were gangs who raided villages. The Chinese government could not maintain law and order. The Chinese wanted to come to Canada to make a better life for themselves and their families.

Early Chinese Immigrants

Among the first Chinese who came to Canada were gold prospectors. In 1858, gold was found in British Columbia and the Gold Rush began. Many people who were prospecting in California, including Chinese prospectors, rushed to British Columbia in the hopes of finding gold. Soon word spread to China and Chinese citizens began arriving by ship to search for gold. At the time many people felt that the Chinese were only in British Columbia to make money before moving on. Those who do this were called sourjourners. It was believed that sourjourners contributed nothing to the community and only took valuable resources before moving to the next opportunity. While some Chinese did move on others stayed.

The second wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in Canada in the 1880s. The Canadian government had promised to build a railroad from the east of Canada to British Columbia. Many workers were needed to finish the railway so Chinese workers were hired. Chinese workers were hired because they would work for half of the pay of other workers. The Chinese workers got the most dangerous and difficult jobs. They carried the explosives, dug tunnels and carried huge rocks. Conditions working on the railway were so dangerous that it is estimated that 4 Chinese men died for every mile of the railroad that was built.

Head Tax

When the railroad was completed in 1885, there was a sudden turn in the economy. Railroad workers were no longer needed. The number of unemployed people was high. Some prejudiced white British Columbians became scared that the Chinese would take jobs away from the white workers since the Chinese would agree to work for much less than other workers. The federal government decided to put laws in place that would limit the number of Chinese immigrants. So, in 1885 the Canadian government forced a \$50 Head Tax on every Chinese person who entered Canada. This meant that every person who entered Canada had to pay fifty dollars, which was a lot of money in 1885. However, the Chinese continued to come to Canada since conditions in China were so bad. The government raised the tax to \$100 and then \$500 in 1903. \$500 was about two years of wages for Chinese labourers. As a result, men could not bring their families to Canada.

The Chinese Exclusion Act

The Head Tax was not the end of the anti-Chinese laws. Slowly the number of Chinese immigrants grew despite the Head Tax. Prejudiced Canadians noticed this and wanted to keep the Chinese out. On July 1, 1923, the government passed the Chinese Immigration Act, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. The law made it near impossible for Chinese people to immigrate to Canada. Chinese men in Canada could not bring their wives and children. However, European men were able to immigrate and to bring their families. This was very unfair.

The discriminatory immigration laws continued until 1967. The immigration act was finally changed and at last was based on a person's merit. Those favoured under the new immigration laws knew one official language, had education and job skills. People were no longer excluded due to where they were born.

On June 22, 2006, Stephen Harper apologized in the House of Commons for the Chinese Head Tax and the Chinese Immigration Act. People who paid the tax received 20 000 to make amends.

Question 1: What was the Head Tax?

Question 2: What does the word discriminatory mean?

Question 3: Why did the Canadian Government create the Head Tax?

Question 4: How do you think the Head Tax made Chinese people in Canada feel? Why?

Question 5: What are some other discriminatory events that are happening in the world/community/school right now? Briefly describe why each event is discriminatory?
