THE CHINESE CONSOLIDATED BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION AND CHINA:
1884-1922
– A Selective Guide of Primary Sources

Ying Liu
Subject Liaison & Reference Librarian
McPherson Library
P.O. Box 1800 STN CSC
Victoria, British Columbia, V8W 3H5
Canada
Email: [redacted]
Tel: [redacted]

Tina Bebbington
Subject Liaison & Reference Librarian
McPherson Library
P.O. Box 1800 STN CSC
Victoria, British Columbia, V8W 3H5
Canada
Email: [redacted]
Tel: [redacted]

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Abstract

This paper identifies, assesses and places in historical context many of the primary source documents found in the University of Victoria’s Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association Fonds (1884-1979). These documents illuminate the lives and struggles of the Chinese Communities in Victoria and throughout British Columbia, and document that communities struggle to protect their interest in an often hostile Canadian society.

Introduction

The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Society (CCBA) was founded in Victoria, British Columbia in 1884. It was the sole representative for the interests of Chinese in Canada until the Chinese Consulate was established in Ottawa in 1908, and continues this work to present day.

With assistance from Dr David Lai, Professor Emeritus, 7 linear metres of documents from the CCBA’s earliest years were deposited on indefinite loan to the University of Victoria Archives in 1973. The material was to remain sealed, except with permission from the CCBA executive, who have continued this loan agreement over time. In 2008, they agreed to allow UVic Archives to digitize some of the most interesting documents as part of the multi-institutional Multicultural Canada Project.

The collection contains documentation of the CCBA’s activities between 1884 and 1979, which included such diverse things as protesting racial discrimination, supporting organizations in China, mediating business deals and disputes, providing financial assistance to Chinese in China, Canada and Cuba, and establishing public services such as a hospitals and a school.

In addition to the executive records of the organization, the fonds contains a variety of related material, such as lists of Chinese deceased, donation and fundraising records, population data, and records of the Chinese Hospital (these records remain closed until 2040).

The purpose of this paper is to bring to light this important collection, and highlight some significant English and Chinese primary sources to scholars who may be interested in the history of early Chinese immigrants in Canada. We’ll introduce, review and assess some relevant documents, focusing on how the CCBA, a local community and charitable organization on the west coast of Canada, maintained relations with the Chinese Government between its founding in 1884 and 1922. These case studies will demonstrate the overseas Chinese community’s attitudes to China as they experienced discrimination and a lack of understanding from their host government and British Columbia Society.

The guide is organized into four main sections:

1. Historical Context
2. Establishment of the CCBA
3. Activities and Contributions of the CCBA
4. Future acquisitions and digitization plans

**Research Question & Methods**

The selection of documents and related analysis are based on the question of how CCBA, a Victoria local community charity organization, were related to Chinese government in a specific historical context from 1884 to 1922.

To serve the purpose of introducing the CCBA fond to scholars, the method adopted is mainly the review and assessment of documents. Cases with limited document analysis are provided to demonstrate the oversea Chinese community’s attitudes to China, especially when they experienced discriminations and ignorance from the host government and society.

**Historical Context**

The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) was formed in an extremely challenging Canadian historical context for earlier Chinese immigrants, on the other hand, in an unprecedented Chinese context in which the Chinese government changed its attitudes and policy on overseas Chinese issues.

Victoria, British Columbia, as one of the first entry ports through which Chinese landed on the North America, attracted the majority of the Chinese community, who opted to settle there. The Chinese population in Victoria from 1884 to 1923 is a topic that cannot be missed in studying early Chinese experience in Canada.

In this section, the CCBA documents and other primary sources were selected to address background questions such as: Who constituted the Chinese population in B.C.? How they were accepted in the local society? How they were connected to the Chinese government? Why was the CCBA needed?

**Chinese population in B.C. 1880s & who they were**


The list shows some interesting facts about the Chinese population in B.C. in 1884. This document was created two years before the completion of the Pacific Railway caused the influx
of unemployed Chinese railway workers to Victoria. By 1886, the population in Victoria Chinatown had increased by over ten times to 17,000.1

Two issues are worth noting here. One is the gender imbalance. There were only 119 females among the whole population of 1680. The other is that over 90% of the population was laborers such as farm laborers, fishery hands, and ditch diggers. They were probably illiterate and poor, having no way to communicate with the outsiders of the Chinese community. The 45 merchants listed here dominated the power and wealth in the community. This structure, plus discriminatory laws later passed by municipal, provincial and federal governments, caused Victoria’s Chinatown to be a closed community for decades, without frequent communication with the outside society. It was a lonely community mainly consisting of aging single males rather than families and children.


The source shows the results of a survey done in 1922 by the Overseas Chinese Bureau, the Republican China. The total population in Victoria Chinatown was reduced to 3,681, among which only 456 were females. The gender imbalance persisted.

Context in British Columbia


This article indicates certain welcoming attitudes and objective observations in 1873 towards Chinese immigrants. The situation was gradually changed in late 1870s, especially after 1885 when thousands lost their jobs due to the completion of Trans-Canada Railroad.

The Workingmen’s Protective Association was established in Victoria, B.C. in 1878. Its constitution clearly states its purpose: ²

The objects of this society shall be the mutual protection of the working classes of British Columbia against the great influx of Chinese; to use all legitimate means for the suppression of their immigration; to assist each other in the obtaining of employment; and to devise means for the amelioration of the condition of the working classes of the Province in general. (Constitution, Article 1)

Since Chinese labor usually accepted less pay and worse working condition, they were more likely used by the employers to maintain the profit level in the deteriorating economy. The hostility from white workers increased as the result.

The main local newspaper the British Colonist from time to time reported on the Workingmen’s Protective Association meetings and activities. Here is a paragraph about Mr. Noah Shakespeare acting as Chinese Tax collector. ³

Rewarded- Councilor Noah Shakespeare has received his reward for political services of a rather questionable character rendered the dominant party. He is collector of the Chinese Tax for the District of Victoria. A more high-toned position might have been found; but it will answer as a basis from which to climb. Mr. S., who is active and stirring, will be paid by commission, and it will therefore be to his interest to see that no Chinaman shall escape.

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³ “Rewarded,” British Colonist, p.3, Sept. 8th, 1878. The British Colonist 1858-1910 was digitized and available online at http://www.britishcolonist.ca/.
On the same page, another brief paragraph described the Chinese community’s response. 4 “The Chinese Tax. – The tax collector has met with a flat refusal to pay the head tax in every case from Chinamen, and we learn that next week he intends to levy on the goods of the merchants in satisfaction of the tax.”

Again on the same page, there was a report on an explosion happened at Humber’s brick-kiln, Saanich Road, Victoria on the previous Friday. 5 The owner believed that this was not accidental but resulted from the “enmity” due to his employment of Chinese labor.

On one newspaper page three different stories were reported related to the Chinese community. It was clear that the Chinatown and Chinese labor issues caught enough attention in the local society. Some politicians like Noah Shakespeare used the issues as a way to gain public support. More reports and cases can be found in the British Colonist to understand the social context that the Chinese immigrants lived in.


In this 746 page report, rich information can be found including interviews of the public, global context of the Chinese labor issue, cultural observations, moral discussions, and specific data in British Columbia.

The chapter Chinaman in China represented the early Canadian society’s views on Chinese government, culture, education, social situation and traditions like worshipping ancestors and filial piety.

When examining these documents, the signs of cultural barriers appear repeatedly. Rather than simply criticizing all the discriminations and unfair treatments, what is worth researching more may be how the misunderstanding, the lack of communication, the language and cultural barriers, and the intentional distortion of a particular culture influenced on the ethnic relations in a society.

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A series of Chinese tax acts were passed in British Columbia well before the federal government imposed the $50 head tax on Chinese entering Canada under the *Chinese Immigration Act* in 1885.

**Context in China**


This document showed the evidence that the Manchu Government strictly forbade Chinese from emigrating overseas before 1860.

The *Sino-British Treaty* (Beijing Tiao Yue) signed in 1860 forced the Qing government to allow Chinese to legally go abroad to work. Afterwards, large number of cheap laborers and coolies were recruited and exported. In the following Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895), the Qing government attempted to modernize its army. Several senior officials like Xue, Fucheng, Zhang, zhidong and Li, Hongzhang, proposed to seek funding and donations from overseas Chinese communities.  

In 1870s, the Qing government established consulates in New York and San-Francisco. Different from the previous ignorance, the consulates started to carry on the function of protecting overseas Chinese. For example, in 1879, a private law of imposing $40 on every Chinese living in B.C. was abolished due to the local efforts and the diplomatic protest from the Chinese Ambassador Guo, Songtao to England.


The central and local governments sent officials to visit overseas Chinese communities, persuading the merchants to invest in China and offering them honorary official titles and rankings, and favorable policy to support their enterprises in China. 9

**The Process of Establishing CCBA**

CCBA was established in 1884. In the bulletin inviting donation to form the organization, it stated why such an organization was necessary. Using the case in 1879, the merchants tried to convince the community that they need to get united, fighting against the discrimination laws with the support from the Chinese government. The Chinese consulate in San-Francisco Huang, Zunxian played an important role in the establishment of CCBA. 8

Now the Honorable Huang Zun Xian permitted to forward our case to the Chinese Ambassador to England to send again an official protest to the British Government. He also instructed that we raise funds, firstly, to hire lawyers for the case, and secondly, to be prepared for the establishment of The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. This Chinese representative body could, therefore, address all the issues concerning the Westerners, and do benevolence by taking care of the sick and the poor Chinese.

In August 1884, CCBA was registered as a charitable organization. The objective of the association was:

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8. Ibid.

1. The translation into the Chinese language and advertisements of the Laws of the Country which most mainly concern them and of which they are ignorant.
2. Affording assistance to the officers of this Government in detecting crime.
3. Assisting members of the Association who may be in distressed circumstances through sickness, old age, or otherwise.
4. And for the purpose of the last clause the paying the passage of any sick infirm or poor Chinese to return to China.
5. The settling disputes between members of the said Association by arbitration where both or all of the parties shall so agree.


However, in the CCBA Constitution in the Chinese language, it stated, “The objectives of the association are: to promote inter-relationships among the Chinese communities, to carry out relief aids and social welfare, to solve disputes, to assist the sick and poor, to eliminate internal troubles, and to fight against foreign oppression”. Obviously there was a lack of trust between the Chinese community and the local government. Moreover, by examining the rules and by-laws of the CCBA, researchers will note that CCB functioned as more than a charitable organization. It actually served as an internal administrative institution in the community.

Activities & Contributions of CCBA

Protest against discrimination


From late 1870s to 1922, among the heap of discrimination laws and acts against Chinese immigrants, CCBA worked actively in seeking external support. The CCBA fond includes letters
from CCBA to the Chinese Ambassador to England, and the Chinese Foreign Minister, as well as CCBA’s correspondences with the Chinese Consul in San-Francisco.

Representing the voice of Chinese community, CCBA also fought relentlessly against discrimination by sending petitions to local administrations. 10 When the petitions did not achieve the desired aims, CCBA pursued legal action. 11 In 1909 CCBA constructed the Chinese Public School in response to the City of Victoria’s policy of segregating Chinese children in public schools.

**Support from the Chinese government and the public**

The Chinese consulate in San-Francisco maintained constant communication with the Victoria CCBA, forwarding letters between CCBA and the Chinese government. The CCBA fond included a number of diplomatic notes and protest letters from the Chinese ambassador to the British Foreign Minister. 12


The discrimination experienced by Chinese immigrants in North America caused concerns in Chinese public as well. This Chinese source disclosed a public movement in 1905 to protest against the Chinese Exclusion Act and the later anti-Chinese violence in the United States.


In Canton province, the hometown of most Chinese immigrants in North America, charity organizations, commercial associations and the general public started the anti-American movement. In the movement, Chinese public and companies refused to buy American goods, labourers refused to load goods on American ships in ports and workers stopped working for American enterprises.

The Republican China government continued to carry on the protective role, maintaining the relationship with CCBA. An example is the letter from Mr. Zhou Qi Lian to CCBA in 1922.


It is not difficult to imagine that the sympathetic support from the Chinese government and general public, no matter functional or not, more or less, enhanced the Chinese Canadians’ emotional ties to China, especially when they were experiencing discrimination and hostile atmosphere in the local society.

**CCBA’s donations to the Chinese government and Chinese charity organizations**

The experience of racial discrimination and segregation from the host society made the Chinese immigrants realize that their fates were more connected with the fate of China rather than with Canada. Spontaneously they perceived the need to help strengthen China. Many original donation name lists and records were preserved in the CCBA fond.


The document recorded CCBA donations to Donghua hospital in Hongkong, Aiyu Tang, Jiushang Tang and other charity organizations in China.


The letter shows the attitude of encouragement from the local Chinese government to solicit donations from overseas Chinese. It also indicates the practice of buying official titles from the
Manchu Government by making large contributions. Lai commented that “The honour system was also the Manchu government’s way of acquiring loyalty and overseeing its overseas subjects in countries where there were no Chinese consulates.”

On the other hand, what is worth further research here is why these honorary official titles and ranks from a faraway government still important to the overseas Chinese merchants. Was it just a psychological comforter? Or did it really enhance the individual’s power in the local community? In the host society, was it possible for the Chinese merchants to achieve any social status?

**Community building**

Another important role of CCBA is to provide leadership in helping the poor and the needed to solve both internal conflicts and issues with other communities. There are several cases worth studying in the CCBA fond.


In this case, Ma, Lian, a Chinese chef was shot dead by his white employer on May 25, 1900. CCBA was asked to provide legal and investigational support by the Rossland Chinese community.

**New Acquisitions & Future Plans**

The digitization of this rich collection of CCBA documents, unique in Canada in terms of content and scope, has interested researchers of Chinese Diaspora from all over the world. UVic Archives is happy to report that with additional grants, they are planning to digitize and provide English translations to more of the collection. Currently, a $26 000 Victoria Foundation Grant is securing the digitization and translation of additional CCBA correspondence, leave permits for Chinese residing in BC cities, towns and villages, and donation records.

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The Victoria Chinatown Research Project has enabled the donation and digitization of the Hung Lee fonds, containing correspondence to family in Hong Kong and China between 1920 and 1930. These letters detail the activities of an import-export store in Victoria’s Chinatown which also served as a remittance centre for sending money back to families in China.

The text collection has also been enhanced with new acquisitions. Transferred from Oak Bay Archives were the death and burial records of Chinese in Victoria, who were buried at Harling Point Cemetery in Oak Bay, British Columbia. Other new acquisitions are currently being negotiated.

Conclusion

Documents speak. By selecting and aggregating these primary sources in this paper, scholars may find that the documents connect and interweave with each other in depicting the lives of early Chinese immigrants from late 1870s to 1923 in Victoria. The documents provide evidence and cases to reveal the overseas Chinese’s perception and attitudes to China, their interactions with the Chinese government, and their efforts to strengthen China.

Related Resources


According to Dr. Tzui Zhong’s description from the BC Archive, David C. Lew was a lawyer in Victoria who also served as secretary of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. The fond consists of Lew's letterbook, containing correspondence of his firm and of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association.


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