

Chinese Imprints in British Columbia¹

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Various ethnic groups have brought their cultural traits with them to Canada and left on the Canadian landscape imprints ranging from visible features such as farm patterns, house forms, restaurants and folk festivals to invisible impressions such as aroma, music and languages. Not the least of these groups, the Chinese people created a unique urban enclave which is commonly known as "Chinatown." Traces of Chinese imprints are most apparent and numerous in British Columbia, where nearly all the Chinese in Canada came and settled during the three decades between the late 1850s to the 1880s. British Columbia had and still has the largest number of Chinese people in Canada (fig. 1). In 1971, their population in the province numbered 44,315, which represented about 37 percent of the total Chinese population in the country.² The purpose of this paper is to study various forms of Chinese imprints in British Columbia.

Chinese imprints in the province can be classified into four main groups. The first and most apparent group includes many tangible and relatively permanent features such as buildings constructed and decorated in Chinese styles, Chinese social and educational institutions, vegetables that originated in China, and the like. The architectural features of "Chinatown" are characterized by recessed balconies, upturned eaves and roof corners, extended eaves covering the main balcony, and structural components such as tiled roofs and circular, moon-shaped windows and doors (fig. 2). Dominant motifs are dragons, phoenixes, lions and tigers, which are carved or painted on columns, walls and shop signs. Imperial gold, mandarin red, emerald green, golden yellow and other brilliant colours are used to highlight the decorative details. Signboards, street signs, advertisements and notice boards are written both in Chinese characters and English letters. Pagodas, lanterns, bowls and chopsticks and other typical Oriental objects are the ornamented components commonly used

¹ Acknowledgement is given to the University of Victoria for its financial support in this research project.

² *Census of Canada, 1971 Bulletin 1-32, Table 2, p. 2-1.*

by Chinese restaurants in their decoration. Chinese institutional buildings such as temples, churches, schools, hospitals, theatres and voluntary associations constitute an important component of the urban fabric of a Chinatown, whereas Chinese corner stores, greenhouses and cemeteries are distinctive landmarks outside their enclave.

It is to the Chinese credit that they have brought their cuisine with them to North America and modified the basic pattern of taste of the host society. *Lo bok* (a variety of Chinese turnip), *bok-choy*, *choy-sum* and *sui-choy* (different types of Chinese vegetables) are ethno-plants which were formerly the exclusive merchandise of Chinatown, but they are now available for sale in department food stores such as Safeway, and purchased by many non-Chinese people.

The second group encompasses visible, momentary imprints which are represented by festival celebrations, funeral processions, marriage ceremonies, demonstrations, etc. In celebrating the Chinese New Year, the Chinese communities in Victoria and Vancouver, for example, will organize lion dances and *kung-fu* (Chinese martial art) performances in Chinatowns. During the Ching-ming Festival, members of various associations in Victoria will prepare roasted pigs and offer them to the deceased in the Chinese Cemetery at Harling Point. These occasions usually draw a large crowd of not only the Chinese themselves but also many non-Chinese people. Nowadays, many western people study *kung-fu*, Chinese cooking, painting, languages and other kinds of Chinese culture, and participate in Chinese festival celebration, notably the Lantern Festival which is organized annually by the Victoria Chinatown Lions Club.

The third group comprises invisible imprints which may be audible or olfactory. They are manifest in Chinatowns where Chinese pedestrians chat in various Chinese dialects, the air is redolent with the smells of Chinese food from Chinese restaurants and barbecue shops and the aroma from vegetable stalls and herb stores, and occasionally Chinese music and the sound of drums and gongs from schools or recreation clubs can be heard in the street.

The last group is relic imprints which include archives, historic sites of settlement, place names and so on. The early inflows of Chinese into British Columbia were associated with the Gold Rush in the 1850s and 1860s.³ According to old-timers, the Chinese miners not only panned for gold but also searched for jade pebbles among river gravels. White miners did not know what the "green stuff" was; it was much later that they

³ Chuen-yan Lai, "Chinese Immigrants to British Columbia and their Distribution, 1858-1970," *Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 14, no. 1, May 1973, pp. 102-08.

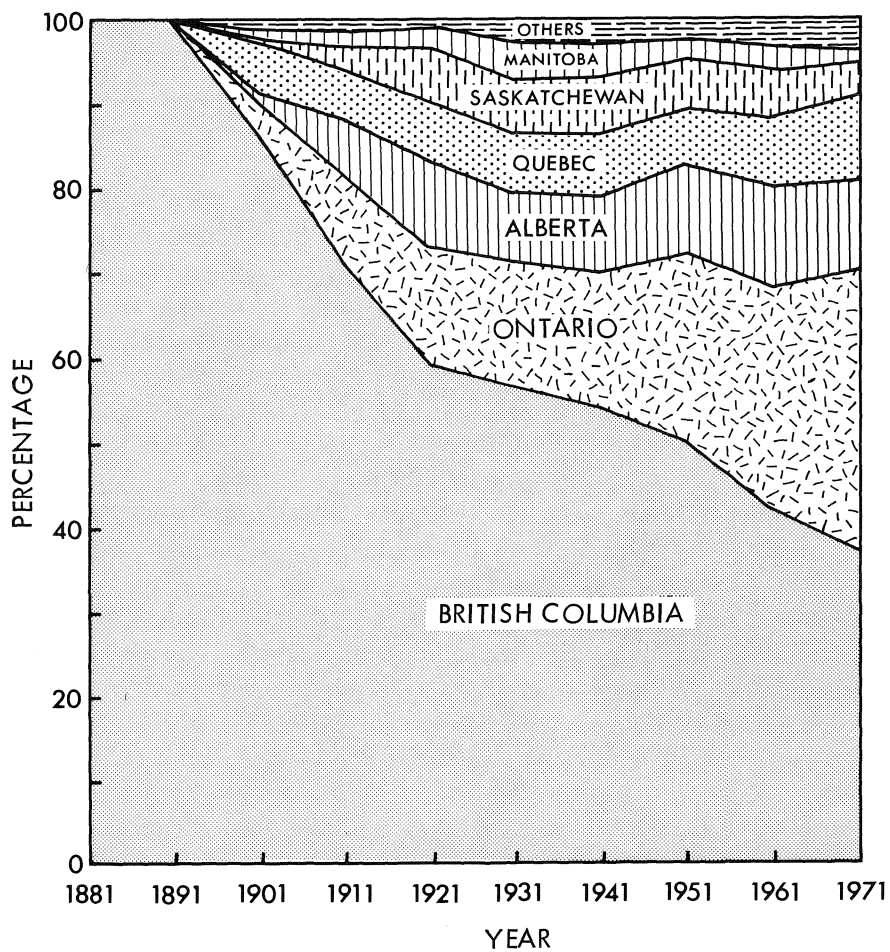


FIGURE 1

Distribution of Chinese Population in Canada, 1881-1971.

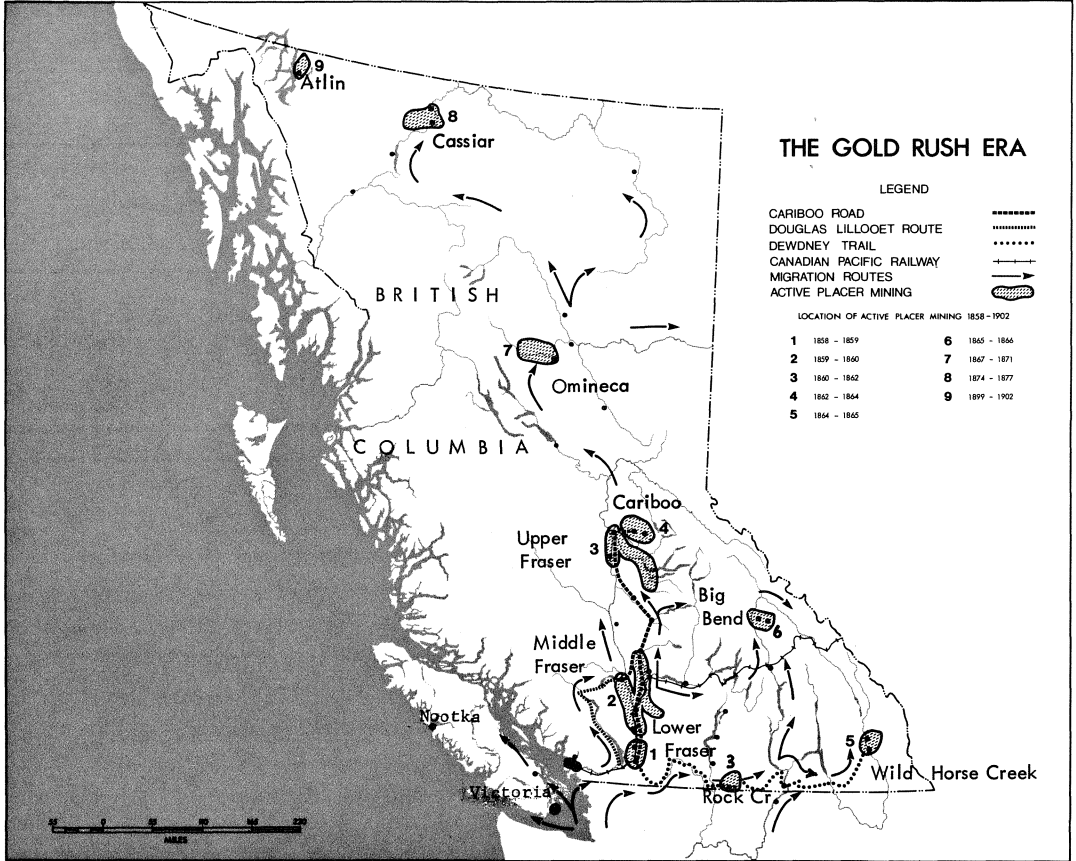


FIGURE 3

The Diffusion of the Chinese People in British Columbia during the Gold Rush Era.



FIGURE 4

*Fong Ching and his family in Victoria, c. 1890.
(Courtesy of Provincial Archives, B.C.)*



FIGURE 5

*A Chinese Funeral Procession along Government Street, c. 1900, Victoria.
(Courtesy of Provincial Archives, B.C.)*

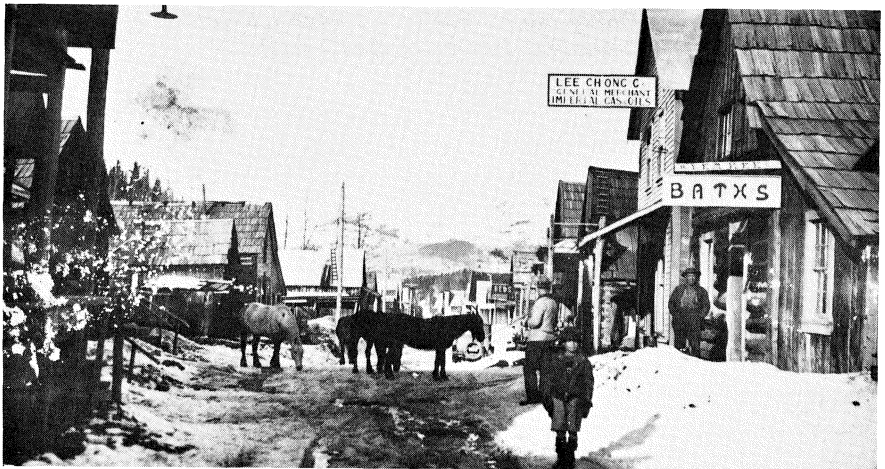


FIGURE 6

Barkerville's Chinatown, c. 1900. (Courtesy of Provincial Archives, B.C.)

learned from the Chinese that the green pebbles were precious stones. The Chinese recognition of the value of jade is one of the factors, if not the factor, that led to the development of the jade industry in British Columbia. During the Gold Rush, the Chinese immigrants were engaged in road construction as well. Many were hired to build the Douglas-Lillooet wagon road from Yale to Barkerville.

As a result, the Chinese were widely scattered in the province during the Gold Rush days (fig. 3). Traces of their former settlements can still be detected from the toponymy of the province. Some rivers, lakes, ridges and mountains are so named because the Chinese had concentrated there for gold-panning. For example, at least six streams are known as China Creek. They are located near Princeton, Lillooet, Robson, Osoyoos, Quesnel and Alberni.⁴ There are China Gulch and China Head Mountain in Lillooet District; Chinaman Creek, Chinese Creek and China Bluff in Cariboo District; China Butte and China Ridge in Similkameen District; the Chinese Wall in Kootenay District; China Nose Mountain in Coast District; Chinaman Lake in Peace River District; China Flat, north of Lytton; China Bar, south of Boston Bar; China Bar Bluff, north of Yale; and China Beach on the western coast of Vancouver Island.⁵ At least three lakes are called China Lake and two islands known as China Island or Islet. In addition, some place names are derived from personal names of the Chinese. For example, Ah Clem Creek, Ah Clem Lake, Ahluk Creek and Ahluk Lake in Cassiar District and Ahbau Station, Ahbau Creek, Ahbau Lake, Ahbau Landing and Ahbau (locality) northeast of Quesnel are named after the Chinese who had lived there as miners and trappers for many years.⁶ These Chinese place names with their euphony are significant relic imprints of the Chinese in the province.

In the Gold Rush days journalists tended to use a derisive style of writing to describe the Chinese and their activities in the province. The following excerpts and the choice of words are examples of such a style: "A procession of moon-eyed Orientals might have been seen yesterday afternoon on their way to the wharf of the steamer for Langley . . .";⁷ "A procession of 15 Celestials armed and equipped similarly to those which

⁴ *Gazetteer of British Columbia*, Vancouver, 1909, p. 22.

⁵ For details, see G. P. V. and H. B. Akrigg, "1001 B.C. Place Names" (Vancouver, 1970) and Harvey File in the Provincial Archives of B.C.

⁶ *Gazetteer of Canada, British Columbia*, Canada Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (Ottawa, 1966), vol. 2, p. 5.

⁷ "Chinese Exodus," *Victoria Gazette*, 15 March 1859, p. 3.

left for Langley . . .";⁸ "Twenty-six Chinamen . . . were in one detachment and bound to China Bar, a favourite locality of the Johns . . .";⁹ "One of the above-mentioned happy-go-lucky Johns, informed us that with \$500 in cash, he could live in China for five or six years. . . . Two of the Johns intend [to bring] . . . their families of female Johns and demi-Johns [to Canada] . . .";¹⁰ "A Celestial lady from the Flowery Kingdom changed hands during the week in Barkerville at the handsome figure of \$700. . . ." ¹¹

In the early days the Chinese were referred to as "Johns," "John Chinamen," "Orientals," "Celestials" or "Mongolians." Why they were called Johns is still a mystery. There are two possible explanations. The first is that the word "John" may be a corruption of the French word "Jaune" (meaning yellow) and that the Frenchmen might have called the Chinese people *Jaune Chinoise* (yellow Chinese). The second explanation is that the Chinese had difficulties in pronouncing English names. Since the name "John" is easily pronounced, and is so commonly used by the English-speaking people, the Chinese would greet a person of European extract in the street in broken English with "how do you do, John?" To them every white man was "John." On the other hand, the white people were also puzzled by Chinese names and found difficulties in identifying one Chinese from another. Instead of struggling to pronounce or spell out a Chinese name, let alone establish a man's identity, the white people might as well have called the Chinese "John." A reporter once humorously remarked that "we are all Johns to them and they to us."¹² It was also a common practice of the westerners in those days to simply prefix the syllable "Ah" to every Chinese name. An example of this can be found in Mallandaine's *Victoria Directory* of 1869, in which the page listing Chinese residents in the city included Ah Caha, Ah Chin, Ah Ching, Ah Coo and so on. This display of ignorance is rarely found today as members of the host society have now acquired a deeper understanding of the Chinese civilization. Moreover, many Chinese words such as *chow-mein* and *chop-suey*, which would sound very strange to ears of the western people in those days, are now loan words in their own language.

Most of the Chinatowns which at one time abounded in British Colum-

⁸ "More Chinamen for the Diggings," *Victoria Gazette*, 17 March 1859, p. 2.

⁹ "For the Mining Region," *Victoria Gazette*, 14 June 1859, p. 2.

¹⁰ "For China," *Victoria Gazette*, 22 October 1859, p. 2.

¹¹ "Sale of Celestial Treasure," *Cariboo Sentinel*, 10 August 1872, p. 3.

¹² "Letter from Fort Yale," *Daily Victoria Gazette*, 30 July 1858, p. 2.

bia have now been destroyed by fire or obliterated in the course of slum clearance or urban renewal programs. Nevertheless, their locations and characteristic features can be traced and studied from old photographs, newspaper reports, mining records, fire atlases and other historical documents. Relic imprints of the Chinese and their settlements are preserved, for example, in old photographs which depict portraits of wealthy merchants in their elegant Manchu attire, labourers dressed in tattered clothes, Chinese joss-houses, gambling dens, funeral processions and street scenes of vanished Chinatowns (figs. 4 and 5). From these photographs and other archival materials, it is possible to restore the relic sites of old Chinese settlements. The researchers of the Provincial Parks Branch, for example, have used these materials to recreate Barkerville's Chinatown, which in the heyday of the Cariboo Rush had a Chinese population of more than 5,000 (fig. 6).

In summary, the four groups of imprints constitute a Chinese cultural component of British Columbia landscape. Visual, audible and olfactory manifestations of Chinese cultural imprints are most apparent in the Chinatowns of Vancouver and Victoria, which are the oldest and the only major surviving inhabited Chinatowns in the province. They should be treated as part of the province's heritage and be preserved as live museums of an important ethnic landscape in the multi-racial society of Canada.