

## REFLECTION

### *Following the Paper Trail of the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act*

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**T**HERE ARE ONLY THREE surviving records of the life that the man known as Mar Shing (or Ma Shing, or Mah Shing, or Mah Sing) led in Canada. These include: a CI 28 certificate, the identity card he used to prove he had paid the head tax; a CI 44 certificate, created by the Canadian government in 1924 to enforce the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, passed the year before; and a police report on his death.<sup>1</sup> Mar Shing first set foot on Canadian shores on 24 May 1903 when he was about twenty-seven years old, and lived in Canada until he died in 1937. Three records attest to thirty-four years.

CI, in this case, stands for Chinese Immigration. The immense web of documents known as the CI certificates was created between 1885, when Parliament enacted the head tax – the first piece of exclusionary legislation the Canadian federal government applied to the Chinese – for the first time, and 1947, when the federal government repealed the *Exclusion Act*. There were at least fifty known types of CI certificate, each with a specific function.<sup>2</sup> Some, like the CI 28 that Mar Shing possessed (Figure 1), functioned as the forerunners to modern photo ID; their possessors, Chinese individuals in Canada, had to carry them to prove that they were not in violation of any of the various laws intended to exclude the Chinese from the country. Others, like the CI 44, were

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<sup>1</sup> CI 28 certificate of Mar Shing (Mar Sam Chan) (Ma Shing), 14 December 1922, Department of the Interior, Immigration Branch, RBSC-ARC-1838-DO-0521, Paper Trail Collection, 1893–1955, UBC Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver, <https://rbscarchives.library.ubc.ca/c-i-28-certificate-of-mar-shing-mar-sam-chan-ma-shing>; CI 44 form for Mar Shing (Mar Sam Chan) (Ma Shing), 17 June 1924, Department of Immigration and Colonization, Chinese Immigration Service, reel T-16170, R1206-294-1-E, RG76-D-16, 4350360; CI 44 Forms and Indexes, 1923–1946, Library and Archives Canada, [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\\_reel\\_t16170/832](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_t16170/832); Police Report Re: Mah Sing – deceased, 4 September 1937, British Columbia Provincial Police, RBSC-ARC-1838-DO-0522, Paper Trail Collection, 1893–1955, UBC Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver, <https://rbscarchives.library.ubc.ca/police-report-re-mah-sing-deceased>.

<sup>2</sup> See “Chinese Immigration Certificates and Forms,” Vancouver Public Library, <https://www.vpl.ca/guide/chinese-canadian-genealogy/chinese-immigration-certificates-and-forms>.



Figure 1. Mar Shing's CI 28 certificate.

created and maintained by the federal government as a vast archive through which it could track and monitor the Chinese population in Canada. But all certificate types were united by one overarching purpose, which was to enforce Chinese Exclusion in Canada.

“Chinese Immigration,” however, is misleading, for the documents applied to thousands of people who could not be considered immigrants at all. Take, for example, this beige card (Figure 2), a CI 45 certificate, which belonged to a Canadian-born girl named on the certificate as Abe Koo, or Wai Lan Koo. The CI 45 was for anyone who was Canadian-born but of Chinese descent.<sup>3</sup>

I first encountered the certificates through my work as a curatorial assistant on the Paper Trail team. Both Mar Shing's CI 28 and Abe Koo's CI 45 are viewable in the online Paper Trail Collection at UBC Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.<sup>4</sup> They are also on display in the “The Paper Trail to the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act,” the inaugural

<sup>3</sup> See section 18 of Bill 45, *An Act respecting Chinese Immigration*, 2nd Sess., 14th Parliament, 13-14 George V, 1923, which made it mandatory for “every person of Chinese origin or descent in Canada, irrespective of allegiance or citizenship” to possess a CI certificate with photo identification.

<sup>4</sup> Paper Trail Collection, 1893-1955, RBSC-ARC-1838, UBC Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver, <https://rbscarchives.library.ubc.ca/paper-trail-collection>.

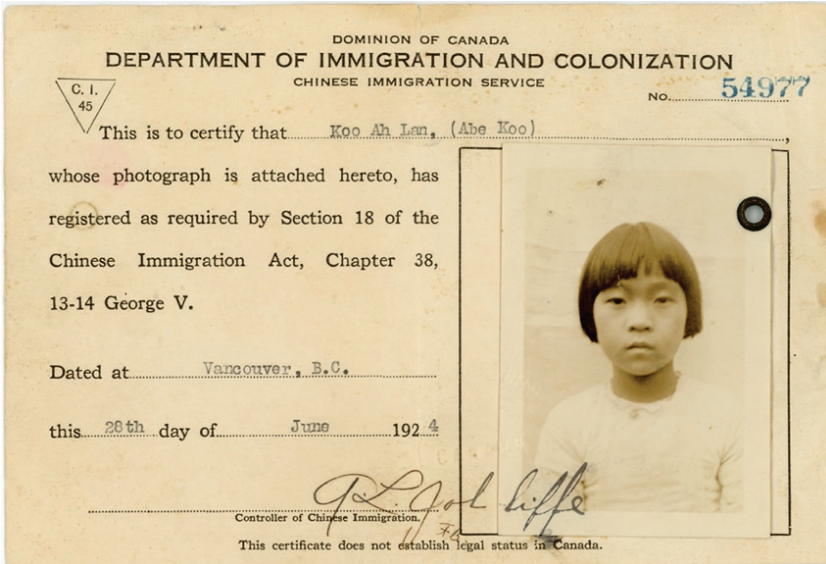


Figure 2. Abe Koo's CI 45 certificate.

feature exhibition of the Chinese Canadian Museum, which opened in its permanent home on 1 July 2023, the centenary of the *Chinese Exclusion Act's* passage. Since 2019, curator Catherine Clement has been crowdsourcing scans of CI certificates from Chinese Canadian families for preservation in the online archive and for display in the exhibition. Almost wholly reliant on Chinese Canadians who have held on to their relatives' CI documents and stories for decades, the exhibition and archive preserve and retell the stories of those who lived through the Chinese Exclusion Era in Canada.<sup>5</sup>

Canada's formal archival institutions, such as Library and Archives Canada, have for the most part put few resources towards preserving CI certificates and making them publicly available. The Paper Trail Collection is the first broad attempt to collect and exhibit the CI certificates that were issued to individual Chinese Canadians as identity cards. These documents tell us much about the individuals who possessed them as well as about the experience of Exclusion more broadly. Examining the

<sup>5</sup> The 1923 legislation was formally titled the *Chinese Immigration Act, 1923*. In this article, I title it the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, referencing it according to its main purpose so as to differentiate it from the other legislation passed by Parliament to restrict Chinese immigration (which was also titled the *Chinese Immigration Act*).

CI certificates – the paper trail, so to speak – and how they came into our collection further highlights the central role that Chinese Canadian families have played in the preservation of their ancestors' documents and memories. To underscore this point, I follow the paper trails left by both Mar Shing and Abe Koo. They lived very different lives, and the pathways their documents took to reach our archive were similarly disparate. But telling their stories together highlights one essential point: in the absence of formal archival collection efforts, it has been up to the Chinese Canadian community, and families in particular, to keep the stories of those who lived through Exclusion alive.

#### MAR SHING'S PAPER TRAIL

Mar Shing's paper trail traces a bare outline of his life in Canada. According to his CI 44, Mar was born circa 1876 in Toisan, the Southern Chinese county from which the majority of Chinese migrants to Canada in the pre-Exclusion Era hailed, and landed in Canada in 1903.<sup>6</sup> A customs official issued him a CI 5 certificate indicating that he had paid the one-hundred-dollar head tax; however, at some point, he lost his CI 5 and had to apply for a CI 28 certificate, which was what was used to replace lost CI 5s. His CI 28, #10007, is dated 14 December 1922 and indicates that he was living in Bella Bella, British Columbia.<sup>7</sup> There's a sadness to his eyes and his downturned expression in the photo on his CI 28 that makes his certificate stand out when one is searching through the Paper Trail Collection.

The CI 44 the government kept on Mar and the stamps on the back of his CI 28 hint at his life during the Exclusion Era. By the time he registered for his CI 44 in June 1924, he had moved to Vancouver's Chinatown and was working as a laundryman. He was forty-eight years old, and he had no wife or children in Canada. The two stamps on his CI 28 are dated 21 July 1931 and 30 August 1936, respectively. They are re-entry stamps. Per the regulation established in 1910, every time a person of Chinese origin temporarily left and then returned to Canada, she or he had to present her or his CI certificate to customs officials to re-enter. From these documents alone, it is unclear where or why Mar left and returned to Canada. Perhaps he returned to visit his aging parents and siblings, whom he had not seen since he left China in 1903. Perhaps his family had arranged for him to marry a Chinese

<sup>6</sup> CI 44 for Mar Shing, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>7</sup> CI 28 certificate of Mar Shing, Paper Trail Collection.

woman and have children with her so that he could send the money he earned in Canada to support her. These were both common reasons for Chinese men working in Canada to travel back to China.<sup>8</sup>

Mar Shing died not long after his last voyage. The last documentation of his life is the report the BC Provincial Police made upon his death. In 1937, Mar was around sixty-one years old, labouring for a canning company in Quathiaski Cove on Quadra Island, near Campbell River. The report contains only the barest of details of his death: “one Mah Sing, an oriental ... died at Quathiaski Cove on August 15th, 1937 an indigent. It appears that he had no money coming to him and his effects were junk. The only paper of any value is an Immigration Certificate #10007.”<sup>9</sup>

Mar Shing died intestate, with no will and no heirs in Canada, so the BC Police took his CI 28 into custody. Eventually, their collection of records on individuals who died intestate was donated to the BC Archives, and Mar Shing’s documents wound up in the basement of the Royal BC Museum and Archives. The BC Archives donated the scan of his CI 28 and the police report to the Paper Trail Collection, which is how I came across his CI 28. In the digital archive, the few details of Mar’s life that can be gleaned from his documents will be preserved for a new generation of researchers and scholars to study. But any other details of his life are lost to history. With no descendants in Canada who might have held on to other documents and artefacts that could have attested to his life – family photos, a favourite plate perhaps, or other heirlooms – or who could have retold fond memories of him, all that remains of his life in Canada are the documents the Canadian government used to monitor him.

Mar Shing is not alone in this respect. Searching through Library and Archives Canada’s digitized reels of CI 44s or the General Registers brings up documents for thousands of other Chinese men who lived lives similar to Mar’s. The vast majority of Chinese migrants to Canada were young men who came to work as low-wage labourers – for example, as laundrymen, canners, market gardeners, and loggers – and would send the money they earned back as remittances to support their families.<sup>10</sup> Most of these men either had no family or had a family in China whom

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Williams, *Returning Home with Glory: Chinese Villagers around the Pacific, 1849 to 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 35–65; and Lisa Rose Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada’s Exclusion Era, 1885–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Police Report Re: Mah Sing, Paper Trail Collection.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Returning Home*, 35–65.



they could not see, unless, over the long, lonely years of Exclusion, they were lucky enough to raise enough money to purchase a ticket for a handful of visits. For men like Mar, their low wages meant they could not raise enough money to pay the head tax to bring their wives and children to join them, although many of them clung to the slim hope that one day they would be able to do so. After the implementation of the *Exclusion Act*, even that slim hope was gone. In Canada, Chinese immigrants lived as bachelors in cramped rooming houses with other bachelors. Many of these men died in Canada – alone, like Mar. They appear in the historical record only in the vast web of CI certificates that are held by the Canadian government and whose purpose was to enforce their Exclusion.

#### WAI LAN KOO'S PAPER TRAIL

As one of the few Chinese women who lived through the Chinese Exclusion Era, Abe Koo led a life very different from Mar Shing's. Her paper trail is much more extensive. The web of extant documents that chronicle her life begins with Koo's CI 45 and CI 44 certificates, both of which were created in June 1924 when she registered herself with the Department of Immigration and Colonization under the mandatory registration required by the *Exclusion Act*. Abe Koo (or Ah Lan) was born on 26 December 1914 in New Westminster to two Chinese immigrants.<sup>11</sup> Canadian government documents named her as Abe or Ah Lan, but her name in the Zhongshan dialect her parents spoke was closer to Wai Lan than it was either to Abe or to Ah Lan. She received her CI 45 when she was ten years old, growing up in her father's tailoring shop as the second of nine children.<sup>12</sup> The Great Depression hit the Koo tailoring shop hard, and Wai Lan's father decided to move the entire family to Calgary, where he started a market garden. Times were still tough, and, after completing Grade 8, Koo had to drop out of school to help take care of her younger siblings.

The gender imbalance among the Chinese Canadian community that had so shaped Mar Shing's life likewise shaped Koo's. The 1923–1924 registration showed that, of the 55,982 people of Chinese descent who registered, only 1,350 were adult women.<sup>13</sup> The gender imbalance persisted throughout the Exclusion Era, kept more or less in place by the

<sup>11</sup> CI 44 form for Koo Ah Lan, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>12</sup> CI 45 certificate of Koo Ah Lan, Paper Trail Collection.

<sup>13</sup> Memo by Chief Controller of Chinese Immigration, 6 October 1943, Department of Mines and Resources, RG76, C-7372, 1290–1291, Library and Archives Canada.

*Exclusion Act*. As a Canadian-born Chinese woman, once she approached adulthood, Koo was one of the few realistic marriage options for the many single Chinese bachelors.<sup>14</sup> In that same year, a cousin introduced the sixteen-year-old Koo to Gum Ho, a twenty-five-year-old recent immigrant from China, and the two started courting. They married the next year. Since she was of Chinese descent, for her honeymoon Koo had to apply for a CI 9 certificate to enable her temporarily to travel outside of Canada.<sup>15</sup> The Department of Immigration and Colonization granted Koo her CI 9 on 17 November 1932, and Koo and Gum Ho travelled back to his native province of Zhongshan so that he could introduce his new bride to his extended family.<sup>16</sup>

The newlywed couple lived in Vancouver before settling in Calgary. There, Gum Ho ran a herbal shop in Calgary's Chinatown. Koo raised her growing family while running a grocery shop – Glenmore Grocery – of her own. Koo developed a love of travelling in her retirement years, and she died on 10 April 1997 in Guadeloupe, doing what she loved: taking a cruise with her family.

As is evident from the information in the above paragraphs, what I know about Wai Lan Koo extends beyond just the paper trail of documents kept on her by the Canadian government. I know more about Koo and can share it in these pages because, unlike Mar Shing, Koo had a family. She had eleven children with Gum Ho and thirty-eight grandchildren. Her descendants preserved both the paper trail and her biography. Koo's daughter, Elizabeth, found Koo's CI 45 certificate while cleaning out her mother's belongings after she died, and she held on to it for years. Elizabeth eventually submitted the CI 45 to the Paper Trail Collection along with a biography of her mother.<sup>17</sup>

The final key to why Wai Lan Koo's life story is much better preserved than Mar Shing's is me. Wai Lan Koo is my great-grandmother (Figure 3), and her family is my family. The story I have told you is only a tiny snapshot of the memories my grandparents, aunts, and uncles have shared

<sup>14</sup> Though Chinese men could theoretically marry non-Chinese women, in practice, the stigma against interracial marriage meant that few non-Chinese women would consider marrying a Chinese man.

<sup>15</sup> Lily Cho, *Mass Capture: Chinese Head Tax and the Making of Non-Citizens* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 2–4.

<sup>16</sup> CI 9 certificate of Koo Ah Lan, 17 November 1932, Department of Immigration and Colonization, Chinese Immigration Branch, reel T-6052, R1206-170-5-E, RG76-D-2-d-I, 161413, CI 9 certificates from Vancouver and Victoria, 1910–1953, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=immfrochi&id=106676&lang=eng>.

<sup>17</sup> The biography submitted by Koo's family to the Paper Trail Collection can be seen at "Koo, Abe," Paper Trail Collection, 1893–1955, RBSC-ARC-1838, UBC Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, <https://rbscarchives.library.ubc.ca/koo-abe>.

with me over dim sum and dining-room tables. As it turns out, one of the best ways to ensure your memory will be preserved for posterity is to have a great-granddaughter who becomes a historian and writes it.



Figure 3. Wai Lan Louie (née Koo) with her great-granddaughter, Naomi Louie, in 1997.