

The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Victoria: Its Origins and Functions¹

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The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Victoria, established in 1884, was the main representative body for the Chinese in Canada before the Chinese Consulate was set up in Ottawa in 1908.² Many of its old records, circulars, notices and correspondence have been lost in the course of its long history, but some are still available in the Association. A study of these old materials will undoubtedly lead to the discovery of many events occurring in the Chinese communities in Canada which have not been recorded in government documents, newspapers or other English-language literature. This paper provides a preliminary report on the origin and functions of the Association based on research in its archives.

The Beginning of Chinese Immigration

When the news of the discovery of gold on the Fraser River reached California, Ah Hong, who was sent to reconnoitre the Fraser region, returned in May 1858 to San Francisco, and confirmed the news to his Chinese fellow countrymen.³ A great number of Chinese therefore went by boat from San Francisco to Victoria, where they prepared their packs and headed for the Fraser.⁴ Some also walked overland from Portland, Seattle or Whatcom to New Westminster, whence they canoed up the Fraser to the mining districts. In 1859, Chinese began to emigrate into Victoria directly from Hong Kong.⁵ By 1861, it was estimated that "the entire number of Chinamen in the sister Colony (British Columbia mainland) is 2,875. At one time last summer (1860), there were nearly 4,000 but as many, dreading the winter, took passage for California early in the fall, and others returned to their native land, the number has, therefore,

¹ Acknowledgement is given to the Social Science Research Centre, University of Victoria, for supporting this research project.

² For brevity, hereafter the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Victoria will be referred to as the Association.

³ *Daily Globe*, San Francisco Newspaper, May 16, 1858.

⁴ *The Daily Victoria Gazette*, June 30, 1858, p. 3.

⁵ *The Daily Victoria Gazette*, March 12, 1859, p. 2.

TABLE 1
CHINESE POPULATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA AND CANADA
1881-1961

Census Year	B.C.		CANADA		
	No.	% In Provincial Population	No.	% In National Population	B.C. Chinese As % of Canadian Chinese
1881	4,350	8.8	4,383	0.1	99.3
1891	8,910	9.1	9,129	0.2	97.6
1901	14,885	8.3	17,312	0.3	86.0
1911	19,568	5.0	27,831	0.4	70.3
1921	23,533	4.5	39,587	0.5	59.5
1931	27,139	3.9	46,519	0.5	58.3
1941	18,619	2.3	34,627	0.3	53.8
1951	15,933	1.4	32,528	0.2	49.0
1961	24,227	1.5	58,197	0.3	41.6

Source: Decennial Censuses of Canada.

decreased to 2,875.⁶ Between 1858 and 1866, strings of Chinese communities were established along the Fraser and its tributaries. Chinese settlements were also found in the Similkameen, the Okanagan, the Boundary country, the Kootenay and the Big Bend of the upper Columbia.

The construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway led to another influx of Chinese from Hong Kong into British Columbia. In 1880, Andrew Onderdonk, a contractor for the B.C. region, employed many Chinese labourers who formerly worked on the Northern Pacific Railway in Oregon and the Southern Pacific Railway in California. He also chartered ships to bring thousands of workers from Hong Kong. Their arrival led to an increase of Chinese from 5% of the province's population in 1871 to 8.8% in 1881 (Table 1). Of the 4,383 Chinese living in Canada in 1881, 4,350 were in British Columbia.⁷ It was reported that between 1881 and 1884, a total of nearly 16,000 Chinese came to Victoria from China, San Francisco and other places.⁸

⁶ *British Colonist*, March 28, 1861, p. 2.

⁷ *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration, Sessional Paper No. 54*, Ottawa, 1902, p. 7.

⁸ *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, Report and Guidance*, Ottawa, 1885, p. 398.

The Establishment of the Association, 1884

Chinese communities, large and small, were found in nearly thirty towns of British Columbia by 1884. Victoria, with a Chinese population of 1,767, had the largest Chinese community in the province, followed by New Westminster with 1,680, and Wellington with 685.⁹ Other major Chinese communities were found in Nanaimo, Yale, Hope, Dog Creek, and the Cariboo and Lillooet Districts, where there were many once booming gold-mining towns. In spite of the many Chinese communities in the province, there was not a single body coordinating their activities. Their communication with the provincial and Dominion government had to go through the Chinese Consul-General in San Francisco. In view of this inconvenience, the Chinese in Victoria felt the necessity of the establishment of a Chinese association and a Chinese Consulate in Canada. The most dynamic force in the formation of a Chinese association in Victoria was the growing demand for a representative body who would unite the Chinese in British Columbia in their protest against the discriminatory laws passed by the provincial government. The increase of crime, prostitution, gambling and disputes among the Chinese had also made it necessary to set up a kind of law-enforcing body which every Chinese in Canada would obey.

Accordingly, the merchants in Victoria sent a letter in March, 1884, to Huang Tsim Hsim, the Chinese Consul-General in San Francisco, making a request for the establishment of a Chinese Association.¹⁰ The letter stated that the B.C. legislature had passed a law compelling every Chinese in B.C. over 14 years of age to pay \$10 annually for a licence to live in the province (Fig. 1). It also described how gangs of vicious Chinese were bullying their fellow-countrymen; the old, the poor and the unemployed suffered from coldness, sickness and starvation, and some had died in the streets; prostitution, gambling, brawling, fighting, intimidation and extortion pervaded the Chinese communities. To eliminate oppression by Westerners, the letter said, it was necessary to fight for the abolition of the discriminatory laws; to solve the troubles in Chinese communities, the first measure was to prohibit prostitution. The most effective solution was the establishment of a Chinese association and a Chinese consulate in Victoria.

⁹ *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, Report and Evidence*, Ottawa, 1885, pp. 363-365.

¹⁰ The dates of the records and correspondence of the Association which followed the Chinese lunar calendar, have been converted to their corresponding dates in the solar calendar.

In the following month, a notice was put up to appeal for contributions for, first, the establishment of a Chinese Association and, second, the campaign against discriminatory laws and taxes (Fig. 2). The notice stated that a contribution of \$2 per Chinese must reach Victoria before October 3, 1884, and that if any miser failed to make this contribution, he would have to pay \$10 to the Association before being permitted to return to China. If anyone contributed more than \$3, his name and native place would be recorded on a notice board to be displayed in the Association. Contributions to the Association were therefore compulsory rather than voluntary. A fund of nearly \$30,000 was finally raised for the construction of the Association building and a hospital. The excavation of the site began on May 27, 1885,¹¹ and the building was completed in July.¹² It was a three-storey brick building erected on the former site of an old joss house at 558 Fisgard Street.¹³ The ground floor of the building was let, the first floor was used as the Association's office, and the second floor as a temple and a school. The Association, officially known as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, was registered with the provincial government on August 9, 1884.¹⁴ In 1909, the Association's office was moved to its present location at 636 Fisgard Street.¹⁵

The Rules and Bylaws of 1884

An English copy of "The Rules and By-laws of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association" was submitted on August 18, 1884, to the Registrar of Companies, Victoria, but the Chinese copy was drafted in greater detail and outlined more clearly the organization, authority and functions of the Association. The content is divided into two sections. The first section consists of four rules which define the objectives and functions of the Association. Rule 3, for example, states the main objectives of the Association, which are to promote inter-relationships among the Chinese in Canada, to carry out relief aids and social welfare, to solve disputes, to assist financially the sick and the poor, to eliminate internal troubles, and to fight against foreign oppression. The second section includes 37 articles,

¹¹ *Daily Colonist*, March 28, 1885, p. 3.

¹² *Daily Colonist*, July 4, 1885, p. 3.

¹³ *Daily Colonist*, July 15, 1885, p. 3.

¹⁴ *The Registration File for the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, Victoria*, The Registrar of Companies, Victoria.

¹⁵ The removal of the Association's office was probably not reported to the Registrar of Companies until July 1932. (Refer to *The Registration File for the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, Victoria, File No. 95906, July 21, 1932*, The Registrar of Companies, Victoria.)

of which 19 are concerned with the election and appointment of officers, and accounts and audits; 12 articles deal with the conditions under which the Association will arbitrate in disputes among the Chinese and assist them in their disputes with the Westerners; and nine articles concern social welfare.

The by-laws numbered from Article 10 to Article 19 are very important, not only because they demonstrate one of the most important functions of the Association, but also because they indicate that the Association, in those days, was a *de facto* Chinese government in Canada making legislation, exercising jurisdiction and enforcing regulations and orders. According to these by-laws, the Association would hold a consultation about a case or a complaint each time before it took any action. Articles 10 to 19 are translated as follows:

- ARTICLE 10 If a Westerner assaults, robs or refuses to pay his debt to a Chinese, and if he makes a complaint to the Association, the Association will assist him to appeal to the law.
- ARTICLE 11 If a Chinese is killed by a Westerner who is still at large, the Association will give a subsidy of \$25 to the victim's family in order to institute a suit against the killer, and the Association will also offer a reward of \$200 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the killer.
- ARTICLE 12 The Association will arbitrate in monetary disputes between Chinese if the parties involved come to ask for the Association's mediation.
- ARTICLE 13 If a Chinese is killed or murdered by another Chinese who is still at large, the Association will give the victim's family a sum of \$25, and will offer a reward of \$200 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the murderer.
- ARTICLE 14 If a Chinese is wrongly accused by a Westerner and jailed, the Association will go bail for him and employ a lawyer to appeal against the sentence.
- ARTICLE 15 If a Chinese is wrongly sued by a Chinese and is imprisoned, the Association will attempt to settle the case by arbitration. If the arbitration is refused, the Association will go bail for the wrongly accused and will assist him to appeal to the law.
- ARTICLE 16 If a Chinese who is villainous and detested by the community is arrested and jailed, and if the Association decides not to free him on bail, anyone who goes bail for him will be expelled from the Association.
- ARTICLE 17 If a Chinese is imprisoned because of swindling, robbery, or ganging up in intimidation, and if the Association decides not to free him on bail, anyone who goes bail for him will be expelled from the Association.

- ARTICLE 18 If a Chinese teams up with the Westerners in extortion, robbery and bullying his fellow-countrymen, the Association will report him to the local authority, and the Association's directors will witness against him in the court.
- ARTICLE 19 If a Chinese gangster has a grudge against the Association's directors and avenges himself on them, the Association will report him to the Chinese Consul-General, the British authorities, and the local authority in China, so that he will be arrested for trial.

The above by-laws are indicative of the violence of society in those days and the frequent conflicts between Chinese and white people. It is also probable that young girls were often kidnapped and sold in Victoria. According to Article 27, a girl who is kidnapped and sold in Victoria must be returned to the Association, who will pay her passage back to Hong Kong and place her in the custody of Tung Wah Hospital. If she does not have any relatives, the hospital authority will arrange her marriage.

Functioning as a protector and arbitrator, the Association also acted as a benefactor. The Articles numbered from 22 to 25 state that the Association will raise money to pay the homeward fare for those Chinese over sixty years old and who are poor and unable to work. The Association will build a hospital to accommodate poor, homeless patients and raise money to pay for their funeral if they die in the hospital.

The Rules and By-laws of 1884 also state that the Association's protection, arbitration and beneficence will be denied to any Chinese who does not contribute \$2.00 to the foundation fund of the Association before October 3, 1884.

Functions and Activities

A study of the Association's archives reveals its past functions and activities, which can be broadly classified into four types. The first type of functions included the Association's organization of protests against discriminatory laws and taxes, and fund-raising campaigns in fighting for their abolition in Court. In many instances, resolutions which were passed by the B.C. parliament were later declared *ultra vires* when the Chinese made their protests in Court. The Association, for example, has records about their protests against the prohibiting of the employment of white women workers by Chinese. The statute of Saskatchewan of 1912, for instance, prohibited the employment of white women in any restaurant, laundry or other place of business or amusement which was kept, owned

or managed by a Chinese, Japanese or other Oriental person. It was amended in 1913 by deleting the words "Japanese or other Oriental person," leaving it applicable to Chinese alone. By November 1914, the Association had raised a total of \$1,175 and remitted it to the Chinese in Regina to petition the Attorney-General for the abolition of the law. Finally, the law was amended in 1919, requiring a special licence for the employment of any white woman or girl, without singling out Chinese by name.

Another case was that the City of Victoria demanded a minimum residential density of 380 square feet per person in a Chinese residence. As Chinatown was crowded and many people were usually accommodated in one room, the Chinese were frequently fined for overcrowding. Accordingly, the Association held a meeting on November 3, 1893, and made a passive protest against this regulation by passing the following decision: any persons who were arrested during a police raid on a residence and were sentenced to a fine for overcrowding, should not pay the fine and should go to jail. When released, each person would be rewarded with \$10 by the Association. If anyone paid a fine to the police, the Association would also impose a fine of \$10 on him (Fig. 3).

The second type of functions was arbitration and maintenance of peace and order in Chinatown. The Association always tried to deal with minor offences by arbitration before or even after they were reported to the police. According to a record, for example, Ho Ng was robbed by Lee Hung in a gambling house and reported the robbery to the police. Upon the advice of the Association's directors, Ho Ng accepted \$50 from Lee Hung and went to the police to withdraw his complaint.

The Association also served as a witness in the transaction of business, including the selling and redeeming of young girls. For example, the directors of the Association signed as witnesses on a note which stated that Yip Cheung Lun had sold a girl, called Ah So, to Chan Chun as a maid-servant for \$600, and on another note which related that Sum Wai paid \$330 to Yip Cheung Lun for the redemption of a girl called Sum Ah Kwai.

In the Association archives there are many records of Chinese complaints over assault, injury or murder by Westerners. Since many of these cases received little or no attention by the local authority, the Chinese victims or their families had to rely on the Association to bring the case to the local authority. However, the Association did not step in to help every Chinese when he was attacked. For instance, in a notice dated June 27, 1905, a group of people living in different *fang k'ous* (co-operative

boarding houses) stated that in Ladysmith a Chinese sailor was punched by a foreign sailor and became unconscious (Fig. 4). The notice went on to denounce the Association for protecting only the merchants and not individual Chinese. This might shed light on the feeling of some Chinese in those days about the Association. Their accusation is worth noting, since the office-bearers of the Association were mainly merchants and the protection of their interest might be a first priority. It is observed from a minute of the Association of November 27, 1894, that upon the request of a shop which was visited by burglars, the Association decided to give a reward to anyone who could provide information leading to the arrest of the burglar or burglars. The informer would then be given \$300 if the burglar was sentenced to three years or less in prison, and \$600 if the burglar was imprisoned for four years or over. If he witnessed against the burglar and was threatened, the Association would see him safely on board ship to Hong Kong. This big reward was definitely a means to stop burglary in Chinatown, but it may reflect the Association's attitude towards the interest of the Chinese business. After all, it was mainly the merchants who ran the Association and sustained it.

The third type of functions of the Association was to raise funds to send relief, not only to cities in Canada, but also in China and Chinese communities in other parts of the world. For instance, the Association raised much money to assist the Chinese in Cuba during the Cuban people's struggle for independence from Spain during 1870-1898. After the unsuccessful revolution in 1895, the Spanish military commander, Valeriana Seyler Y Nicolau, instituted the *reconcentrado* system in the following year. He confined Cuba's rural population, which included many Chinese, to centrally located garrison towns, where thousands died from disease, starvation and exposure. Lai Wing Yiu, the Chinese Consul-General in Cuba, appealed to the Association for relief aid in 1897, offering five honourable official titles for sale by auction in Victoria. On 20 December, 1897, two official titles of the sixth grade were put up for auction and were bought by Chiang King Ho for \$159.50 and Li Kam Tao for \$125 (Fig. 5). Three official titles of the fifth grade were put up for auction on April 8, 1897 and were bought by Lam Bon Skeh for \$161, Wong Fok Ong for \$120, and Li Kam Tao for \$115. Meanwhile, American disagreements over Spanish policies regarding Cuba and a series of incidents early in 1898 finally led to the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in April. The American fleet established a blockade of the harbour of Santiago de Cuba in May, destroyed the Spanish fleet and took Santiago in July. According to the letter of the Chinese

Consul-General in Cuba, the price of rice was raised from 20 cents to 40 cents per pound during the blockade, and at the beginning of July rice was out of stock.

The last type of functions of the Association was the administration of a hospital, a cemetery and a school. The Chinese hospital, built in 1885 on Herald Street, was formerly called *Tai Ping Fang* (Peaceful Room). In 1895, it was rebuilt on the same site and named the Chinese Hospital. The Association also maintained a Chinese cemetery at Harling Point, a promontory between Gonzales Bay and McNeill Bay, and the Imperial Chinese School (now known as the Chinese Public School), which was opened on August 7, 1909.

Viability of the Association

The Association today has declined rapidly in its importance in the Chinese community in Victoria, mainly because many of its former functions are no longer necessary. The discriminatory laws against Chinese have been abolished, and Chinese are not ostracized from Canadian society. The recent immigrants, together with the younger generations of Canadian Chinese, are more frequently intermingled with Western communities. They do not regard "Chinatown" as their sanctuary nor do they need the Association as a mouthpiece to express their opinions. Today there are twenty-three Chinese Associations and clubs in Victoria, which include six clan associations, eight locality associations, four fraternal associations, two gambling clubs, one music club, one youth club and a friendship association. About eleven of these associations are still active, and only fifteen have joined the Chinese Association. Today, the most important functions of the Association are to administer the Chinese hospital and cemetery and to maintain the school which provides Chinese education for about 100 pupils ranging from Grade 1 to Grade 6.

Conclusions

The results of this study of the Association's archives are revealing. They indicate that during the Gold Rush era, Chinese lived in a violent and disorderly society. At one time, prostitution was the main cause of disturbance in Chinatown. The Association was finally formed in order to unite the Chinese to curb violence and crimes as well as to oppose discriminatory laws and racial prejudice. It was not merely a benevolent association, but a well-organized umbrella association governing the dif-

ferent societies, clubs and associations in Chinese communities in Canada. It functioned as a spokesman for Chinese interests in Canada and also acted as a liaison office to communicate the ideas of local Chinese to the Chinese government as well as to the Canadian government. With the abolition of the discriminatory laws and the greater assimilation of Chinese into Western communities, the Association has gradually declined in its role as a leader of the Chinese in Canada.

敬啟者

其京廣各埠商民林業等處多由華商經營戶口甚眾者為
 萬憂慮且此餘額 委情設法保護等切莫虧損林業等處
 多利若年自息商民未辦分日開商三日多現商貿易仍係
 戶約自為子嗣其器器控令重皇老爾等工約計多六
 上入護國守人向皆奉侍養人惟憶連美國商年業
 商則之習亦遍時形多倉主據先種五年曾主坊的講業
 罪人丁穩能回始允並保商民等重亦余公而後 終領事設
 法辦理後事口使英耶文臣行又英國政府駁辦又任商
 民等控於社察司署重得廉潔液例事其各字不科誅
 清况又於今年清主并的警署再人高性既在境境者各
 抽丁稅稅格元等有禁限貿易云云居居種：前屋例諸
 次第施行此外惠日週三六端也商人在該地有向留安太學
 區年人言眾多習學自德英使題其報商請先權行律：年
 邊者人魚因鄉里其老弱共者者飢寒貧病轉轉無望
 周郎等人加以相購日多乞此致學日深福惠此內度日週三
 端也憂慮心迫若必府督理填充五商不向德主名十
 人謀生之門商民等竭誠苦能風及慘性固知所措度未
 東再三意請商請往 德恩老致商者例清因事必先事德其
 揭報求惠恩德及必放至年兼命命以聯給未性又必謹設
 事既前以理支涉凡此端似皆自若：急務商不端者
 時其推商民責乃未於今孔獨厚臣思德善四人德性
 越赴 會階願懇 訓示若志可行善不能行善其急行
 是存信信行又或端端之外別有急須舉行事：德亦飭得
 是存善進君面示一切存善善善待道：和善解以備諮詢再
 亦 德亦舉行之 大恩保存商等回安大宋次第奉行切
 命商民等事速腐英體不復在在 任守今在國權權操
 不至信民之義即擇臨門外支復行轉伏念 大官長之
 城多分任任全此等事播於今皇城其事務或亦商而和辦成威
 聲威而清預查此二端惟事者之受德道直自今日取取功矣
 大德令這個 意商成等因報之 信 息 誠 不 在 使 中 事 也
 惜命之 盛 隆 重
 德 啟 事 者 大 人 為 商 辦 理 知 宗
 計報得文例云
 敬啟中兼金箱名程：和
 光緒十年二月

FIGURE 1. A letter sent in March 1884 by the merchants in Victoria to Huang Tsim Hsim, Consul-General in San Francisco, making a request for the establishment of a Chinese Association and a Chinese Consulate in Canada.

多利華英議院... 光緒十年三月十五日... 公舉總理... 光緒十年三月十五日... 城多利華英議院...

公舉總理 廣東李存序
副總理 謝昌店李天序 李昌店馬心德
 李祥店李全禮 廣利店李善元
 春源店李榮德 兆昌店馮錦漢
值事 新 孟 德 榮 榮 司 德 森
 李廣源 馮錦漢 馮 彰
 李德元 德 進 曹 慶 堂
 黃德隆 李 華 李 利 昌

光緒十年三月十五日 城多利華英議院

Figure 2. A notice drafted on April 10, 1884, appealing for contributions to, firstly, the establishment of the Chinese Association, and secondly, the campaigns against discriminating laws and taxes.

世人為不平則鳴天下以無訟為貴。可知鳴也者。不平之故。所
 也者。亦因勢之所迫。然李利市寬博。有種姓。週流于斯。灣泊河旁。
 不料依唯禮拜二日。唐人水手。被著人水手。一棹打傷。當時氣絕于
 地。聖靈唯保。神仙亦難保。見者流淚。聞者傷心。轉瞬間。幸而復活。
 聞其不之家。居新安人氏。生平品賢端正。非其自取也。雖未入三七邑之
 內。亦在十司五邑之中。均叫鄉親。今遇此橫禍。當求鼎力。團振。庶為出
 入相友之誼。況今設有中華會館。例應保護鄉民。致公堂。保護昆仲。保
 皇會。保童同志。各梓里。事先恐後。入保皇。拜大斗。以為保全一路福星。
 誰知保皇會。乃係保正副兩董。不保同志之流。致公堂。乃公于任事。
 脚式。而不公于散脚進士。中華會館。都係會于商家箱頭。不會
 于遊民散仔者。寧可察有梓里榮旋。竟抽收銀子。廣向抽收何
 所置用。取之何所作焉。徒然列排難解紛。秉公處理。自創立
 會所以來。未見過一個响屁。豈不是猶神以求食。藉例以
 肥己者哉。則知各梓里。汝諾平乎不平乎。

光緒三十一年

五月廿五日

光雅房 尊英房 義合房 三品對雙
 俊英房 蘭亭房 孔德堂 慶台房 僑
 德英房 浩然房 三多堂 聯勝房 喬
 律法然 聯以對 人可

FIGURE 4

A notice dated June 27, 1905 and signed by a group of people in different fang-k'ou making a complaint against the Chinese Association.

