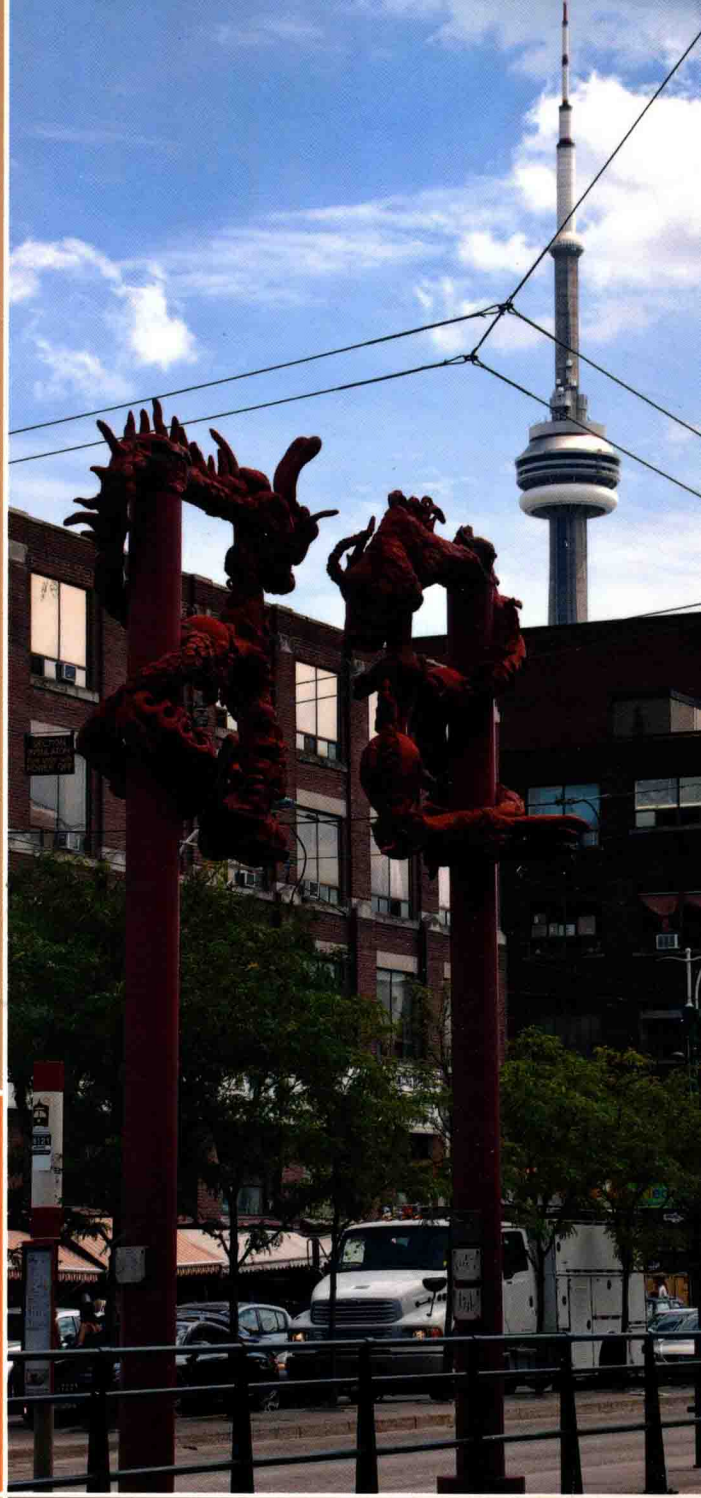
the CHINESE *in* TORONTO *from* 1878

From Outside to Inside the Circle



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DUNDURN
NATURAL HERITAGE
TORONTO

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Front Cover: Chinatown's gateway, a symbol of the acceptance of the Chinese in Toronto. *Photo by Jens Ronneberger.*
BC (Back Cover) 1: The Nanking Restaurant. *Harry Tang Collection.*
BC 2: Patrick Chan, fourth consecutive national champion, 2011 Canadian Figure Skating Championships. *Photo by Gerard Chataigneau.*

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CONTENTS

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To my parents, Doyle and Jean Lumb, who, in their own lifetimes, witnessed and participated in the movement of the Chinese in Toronto from outside to inside the circle of Canadian life.

CONTENTS

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The scope of my research was limited almost exclusively to English language sources despite the increasing availability of information in Chinese, particularly on the Internet. I thank my husband, Leo, for his translations, and both Leo and my sister, Janet, for being my sounding board and wise counsels.

And, finally, I would like to acknowledge the thousands of Chinese men and women, whose labours and tribulations have contributed so much to the colourful and celebrated cultural mosaic of Toronto.

INTRODUCTION

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
— CONFUCIUS

The story of the Chinese in Toronto has roots in an ancient civilization and branches that extend to one of the youngest countries. Canada was in its infancy, not yet having celebrated a birthday, when the first wave of Chinese arrived on its shores in 1858. Toronto was younger still, with its first Chinese recorded in 1878 as laundryman Sam Ching.

The arrival of these early immigrants from China marked the first step in "a journey of a thousand miles" that would take years in an arduous climb up the untravelled cliffs of what came to be known as "Gold Mountain." The contributions of these pioneer immigrants forged the foundation of Canada's multicultural mosaic. Their legacy, pre-dating Confederation and spanning 150 years in the country, comprises only a fraction of their homeland's civilization — marked in history by millennia. And yet their impact can be felt in the flourishing communities of present-day Toronto, which has a thriving population of Chinese Canadians. Chinatown is no longer an ethnic enclave that sheltered the early Chinese from a hostile host society. There are now many Chinese communities that have broken out of the Chinatown mould and have successfully established themselves in many areas of the city.

There are many stories to tell. Some are told in the words of individuals from the past and present, others as excerpts from novels, poems, and biographies that reflect Chinatown both real and imagined. No one story alone can fully describe the societal disadvantages that shrouded the Chinese in Canadian society. The hardships of early immigrant life and injustices of the government and society are brought to light not so much to inspire shame as to show lessons learned.

A country that has gained a worldwide reputation for compassion and human rights was historically less than compassionate, and this is worth exploring. Individual decisions of public officials alone, such as parliamentarians, police officers, judges, and even prime ministers, did not create the hostile environment. Rather, institutional and systemic racism was entrenched in the official policies and legislation of the day. Why the Chinese made the decision to leave their families and homeland in mass numbers becomes clear when the factors that pushed them out of China and pulled them to Canada are explained.

More than 17,000 Chinese labourers, mostly from one province in Southern China, came to Canada to make their fortunes. Their dreams were not unlike those of other newcomers, who wanted to own their own land and businesses and to make a life with their families. They fled conditions that were filled with war, poverty, and starvation. These immigrants were a small portion of the single biggest migration out of China in its long history. Many departed for Southeast Asia. Many went to the United States. Some came to Canada in hopes of striking gold or working as labourers for the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The Chinese struggled under extreme hardship as they tried to find employment in a harsh environment filled with state-sanctioned hostility, hatred, and discrimination. They moved eastward across Canada in search of more welcoming towns and cities. Subsequent waves of immigration were shaped by immigration laws that restricted and excluded Chinese almost exclusively. Canadian government and businesses exploited Chinese labour but resisted the acceptance of Chinese into Canadian life. The established white society viewed the Chinese as foreigners who could be imported or expelled as needed. The great irony of the Chinese Canadian experience has been that success was as dangerous as failure. Whenever the Chinese excelled as labourers or businessmen, efforts arose to depict their contributions not as a boon to Canada, but as a threat. The federal government succumbed to public demand, first with a series of head taxes, and, finally, with the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act, which slammed shut the doors to Canada for 24 years.

After the Second World War and the repeal of the Exclusion Act, several waves of Chinese immigrants entered Canada at different times and for different reasons. The People's Republic of China was established in 1949. The Nationalist Party fled and set up headquarters in Taiwan. Civil unrest in Southeast Asia brought boatloads of refugees into Canada. Hong Kong and Macau were handed back as special administrative regions of the People's Republic of China. All of these historic events shaped the immigration patterns to Canada.

The telling of the story of the Chinese in Toronto has been a personal journey for me. The phrase "outside the circle" is a reference made by my mother, Jean Lumb, a Torontonian, as she reflected on her childhood years at a segregated school. "Why are we being treated this way? Why can't I do what other people do? The most important thing at that time was being accepted into the circle. I didn't want to be outside looking in. I wanted them to accept me in this circle."

The Chinese in Toronto were kept outside the circle for decades by decision-makers at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels, by the media, and by Canadian society. The modest

beginnings of Chinese in Toronto and the development of Chinatown are due to the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, after which time Chinese labourers fled eastward from a hostile British Columbia in search of employment and a more welcoming place. In 1894 the Chinese population in Toronto numbered 50. Today, no less than seven Chinatowns serve the city's largest visible minority, with a population just short of half a million. After English, Chinese is the most spoken language in the Toronto area.

Chinatown was, for a time, in a constant state of flux, reacting to a history notched with varying restrictions, exclusions, and periods of immigration that destroyed or re-located its physical centre. Despite these tumultuous setbacks, the story of the Chinese in Toronto has a happy ending. Today, the Chinese communities are flourishing — a testament to resilience and endurance of those early settlers seeking a better future for their families. While the promised land of Gold Mountain never materialized, they paved the way for their descendants to reach undreamed of heights.

As a third-generation Chinese Canadian, I was born, raised, and educated in Toronto. I spent my childhood in what is now called Old Chinatown, at Elizabeth and Dundas streets. My parents were the co-owners of the Kwong Chow Restaurant, at the time considered one of the "big four" Chinese restaurants in the city. Beforehand, they had operated a grocery store in the Junction at the west end. Our family moved to a house at the intersection of Dundas and Beverley streets, where I attended public school and Chinese school.

The arrival of my maternal grandfather in 1899 was followed a few years later by that of my grandmother; they were both from Taishan. My father paid the $500 head tax for entry in 1921. Nanaimo, British Columbia, was the birthplace of my mother, who also experienced, first-hand, the injustices of discriminatory legislation. As a child, she attended a segregated school. When the Exclusion Act was enacted, she and 10 of her brothers and sisters were required to register for identification cards despite being born Canadian citizens. When she moved to Toronto at age 16, there were only 13 Chinese families in Chinatown. The year was 1935, smack in the middle of the bachelor society phase. Marriage to my father, who was not born, like herself, in Canada, stripped her of her Canadian citizenship. Ironically, she later became a citizenship judge who granted citizenship to over 2,000 Canadians.

My own journey of a thousand miles spans several decades and it is my close connection to Chinatown that has afforded me a deeper understanding of what I am reliving through my research. While my trek is far from completed, I have linked memories of past places and faces that I can now, as an adult, chart in the story of the Chinese community. For the diminishing number of Torontonians who lived during the early years of Chinatown, the tales will conjure a trip down memory lane. For the greater number, who did not live those many years ago, these tidbits paint a bleak landscape of a time past.

Spelling

Pinyin, the official system of romanization in the People's Republic of China, is used for names and terms. More commonly recognized words that reflect the early prevalence of Cantonese and its