

# Opium Trade and Head Taxes

by John Atkin, Civic Historian

“LI HUNG CHANG AT VANCOUVER” was the headline in the 14 September 1896 edition of the *Daily Columbian*. The story continued, “Li Hung Chang, Chinese Viceroy, and party arrived at Vancouver by special CPR train yesterday at 2 o’clock. He was met and welcomed by representative Chinamen, after which he was driven around the city and Stanley Park. During the afternoon, *HMS Comus*, in harbour, fired a salute of nine guns in honour of the distinguished visitor.”

The “Yellow Jacket” (bestowed upon Li by the Chinese Emperor) was concluding a North America tour and had visited Vancouver to discuss the head tax that the Canadian government had initiated against Chinese and the problems caused by the widespread use of opium.

The first Chinese labourers in British Columbia were brought in by the colonial government to build many of the early roads and trails in the colony. They soon found their welcome short-lived. Four years after British Columbia joined the Canadian confederation the legislature removed their voting rights (and that of the Natives too), and in 1885 the federal government, at the urging of British Columbia, put in place a head tax on new Chinese immigrants of 50 dollars. The tax would rise to an astounding 500 dollars in 1903—approximately 15,000 dollars in 2010.

The 7 December 1886 edition of the *Vancouver News* spoke of the “evil [that] is only beginning to shape at the foot of Carrall Street on the edge of False Creek.” In the city Chinese were banned from working on municipal contracts. Despite this and other measures the population grew. If the City couldn’t stop the growth of a Chinese population, they were determined to regulate it. Chinatown became a separate category of inspection for the Health Department and became the target of constant police gambling raids, because according to the 5 February 1906 *Vancouver Province*, gambling was “ingrained in the Celestial nature.”

Labour unions were a loud voice in the call for a “British” or “white” province and continued to urge all levels of government to do something about the “Oriental problem.” They were a major thrust behind the formation of groups such as the Asiatic Exclusion



Henry Collins, Vancouver’s 5<sup>th</sup> Mayor, started out in Vancouver as a dry goods merchant before venturing into municipal politics. He served two terms as mayor during which time he hosted from Chinese statesman Li Hung Chang, Lord and Lady Aberdeen. Lord Aberdeen was the Governor General of Canada from 1893 until 1898.



A golden dragon adorns a street lamp in Vancouver’s Chinatown.



ARCH OF HONOUR. Members of Vancouver’s Chinese community stream through an arch in honour of Li Hung Chang on 14 September 1896. Chang is seated in the back of the coach beside Mayor Henry Collins (black Derby) while in the front seat is H. B. Abbott, general superintendent of the CPR (white Derby) and another Chinese diplomat. The two houses on the bluff overlooking Burrard Inlet stand on “Blue Blood Alley” (Georgia Street), named for the posh homes of the richest railroad families. An early Vancouver photographer stands in the middle of the crowd with his large-format camera and cumbersome tripod.

League, though in Vancouver the membership crossed all of society’s boundaries. In 1907 a meeting of the League at City Hall got out of hand, and the assembled crowd marched on Chinatown, smashing storefronts and windows before turning their attention to Japantown.

The Minister of Labour, Mackenzie King, was dispatched from Ottawa to look into the matter and to assess compensation

claims from business owners. While in Vancouver he expressed his alarm and surprise at the fact that there were opium factories in the city—the two Vancouver factories in had submitted claims for damage—though the manufacture of opium was legal and widely known. Even the wife of the Governor General, Lady Aberdeen, had visited a Victoria factory in 1895 to see the production herself.

King's subsequent 1908 report, *The Need for the Suppression of the Opium Traffic in Canada*, observed that "In the coast cities of Victoria, Vancouver and New Westminster there are at least seven factories carrying on an extensive business in opium manufacture. It is estimated that the annual gross receipts of these combined concerns amounted for the year 1907, to

between \$600,000 and \$650,000." Concern was raised about women and children smoking opium (echoing a familiar theme about how Caucasian women were always at peril whenever near the Chinese), and while the government acted on King's report and outlawed the production and sale of opium by the Chinese, they did not ban the inclusion of opium in popular patent medicines.

King's report added to the calls to limit immigration and convinced Vancouver officials to step up their harassment of Chinatown. Ultimately this led to the Exclusion Act of 1923, when King was Prime Minister, which cut off further Chinese immigration to Canada. The Act wasn't repealed until 1947.

Haley Twaites, great-great-granddaughter of Yip Sang, poses in traditional Chinese silk in Chinatown's Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Park adjacent to the Dr. Sun Yat-sen Classical Chinese Garden, the first full-size Chinese garden built outside of China.



## Father of Modern China

by John Atkin

DR. SUN YAT-SEN was a revolutionary leader, founder of the Nationalist government of China, and considered by many to be the father of modern China.

At an early age Sun had gone to live with his brother in Honolulu, where he attended school until his return to China in 1883 (his brother was concerned Sun would convert to Christianity if he stayed much longer there—he did later convert while in Hong Kong). Further study in Hong Kong and Guangzhou earned him his medical licence, though he gave up his medical practice to concentrate on reforming what he saw as a backward country with a corrupt and conservative government that refused to engage the modern world. In 1894 he founded the Revive China Society in Hawaii with the support of the local expatriate population as a platform for his revolutionary activities.

In 1895 Dr. Sun Yat-Sen led an unsuccessful coup against the ruling Qing Dynasty that saw many of his supporters executed, and Sun was exiled from China for the next sixteen years. He spent the time travelling around the world, spending time in Japan, the United States, Canada and Europe, to raise awareness of his cause.

It was during a visit to London in 1896 that he was kidnapped from the streets of the city and detained by the Chinese Legation for twelve days. It was big news, and local papers reported that an effort was made to send him as captive by steamer from London, but he was released by the British authorities. He afterwards came to Canada and endeavoured to enlist the Chinese in Victoria as sympathizers in the rebel movement. Victoria's Chinatown was one of the oldest and largest on the Pacific Coast, but Sun found on this visit that they were "relatively uninterested in revolutionary discussion."

On his second visit in 1910 he arrived in Vancouver by train from San Francisco at the new Great Northern station on Pender between Columbia and Carrall Streets. After a short stay in town he travelled east across the country, returning to the city in 1911. This time the crowds were large and thronged to greet him. He was welcomed by the executives of the Chee Kung Tong, a mutual aid society organized in Vancouver in 1892 (better known as the Chinese Freemasons, a name they adopted in 1920).



The Sun Yat-Sen statue outside the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden in Chinatown.