UBC prof compiling digital index of notorious head tax register

Detailed info makes it easier for Chinese to research family history

By Lisa Smedman
Staff writer

Thanks to the racist immigration policies of decades gone by, Chinese-Canadians have an advantage when researching their roots. Soon, the efforts of a history professor at the University of B.C., will make it that much easier for amateur genealogists to do their research.

Between 1885 and 1923, Chinese immigrants to Canada had to pay a "head tax". As each immigrant arrived and paid the tax, government officials recorded not only the payment, but also detailed information about the immigrant and his or her origins.

The end result was the General Register of the Chinese Head Tax, which contains the names of more than 80,000 Chinese immigrants. It's currently available on microfilm at the Vancouver Public Library. Scrolling through its entries, however, can take time, since the register is organized by date of arrival in Canada, rather than by surname.

UBC history professor Henry Yu hopes to speed up that process. Together with colleague Peter Ward, he's working on a digital index of the register that will allow researchers to search by a variety of criteria, including surname, village of origin, date of arrival or ship name.

"Lots of people tried to use the microfilm and never found who they were looking for, because they weren't absolutely sure when someone came," said Yu. "It makes it extremely difficult, if you don't know even to the month."

In the "boom years" of Chinese immigration just before the First World War, for example, a single year can contain 3,000 to 5,000 entries. For those who don't know the day or even the month their ancestors arrived in Canada, that can mean a lot of scrolling through microfilm.

Yu anticipates it will take another year and a half for his four student assistants to complete the data entry involved in creating a digital index. But a partial database, containing about 40,000 names, should be ready for uploading to the Internet by the end of this year.

"The head tax register is an incredibly valuable resource," said Yu. "Once [the database] is complete it means we have a tracking record for almost everybody who came in between 1885 and 1923."

Yu, a founding member of the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of B.C., discovered more about his own family history as a result of the database project. His grandfather, Young Sing, came to Canada in 1923 at the age of 13, paying the $500 head tax—equivalent then to about a year's wages.

Young returned to China to marry, but was unable to bring his wife to Canada due to the Chinese Exclusion Act, which ended immigration from that country. He didn't meet his daughter (Yu's mother) until 1965, when she came to Canada at the age of 27, together with her mother.

In order to enter Canada, Young presented a "paper identity." For decades, the name he used on official documents was Low Jang Yu. The only document bearing his real name—as an alias—was his death certificate. His real name also appears on his gravestone. He died in 1978.

The General Register of the Chinese Head Tax contains a wealth of information, including the immigrant's village of origin, the name of the ship he or she sailed on, its port of entry to Canada, the immigrant's stated destination within Canada, his or her occupation—even details like the immigrant's age, height and distinguishing marks.

"The irony," said Yu, "is that a racist doctrine gave Chinese-Canadians a unique record of their ancestors. The United States, Australia and New Zealand all had similar exclusionary laws that targeted Chinese, but didn't keep the detailed records the Canadian government did."

"For those who were welcomed into Canada, no such historical documentation exists," said Yu. "If your ancestor stepped off a boat in Halifax from Scotland during that same time period, he or she walked off the docks with nary a trace left in government records."

Chinese-Canadian genealogists can begin their search at the Vancouver Public Library's Chinese-Canadian history website, at www.vpl.ca/ccg.