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## **Grad reconstructs Chinese history in Barkerville**

Jun 03, 2002

Ying Ying Chen's reconstruction of early Chinese life in the Cariboo is considered by fellow academics to be the definitive history of Chinese immigrant societies in the region. Chen, who graduates with a PhD in archaeology, wants the general public to better understand how these immigrants, some 5,000 Chinese, came to settle and live in northern BC during the gold rush and after, from the 1860s to the 1940s. Her findings will soon be published as a book. "My goal is to show how these immigrants who helped build this province lived, how they came to BC, and from where," says Chen, whose thesis examining committee describes her work as a milestone on the subject. Chen says their story has to date been largely untold because the Chinese rarely left communicable records and their European neighbours didn't understand them.

Chen, who is also a single mother (and resides in Burnaby) worked on several projects over nearly a decade, including an investigation of the Chih Kung T'ang house at Barkerville's Chinatown site. A large-scale excavation underneath the house and examination of wallpaper inside revealed six distinct strata, along with 7,321 artifacts and 1,200 eco-facts. These works enabled Chen to establish a chronological sequence of the site and house construction and occupation by the Chinese immigrant society during that time.

Chen carried out an extensive field survey of Chinese settlements in the North Cariboo, locating 34 different sites, which led to her further reconstruction of a Chinese settlement hierarchy in the district. Chen identified more than 2,000 names of Chinese immigrants in the North Cariboo from rare documents collected from two major Chinatown sites in the region. In addition, she studied the history of emigration of the Chinese in south China, where most early Chinese immigrants in BC originated, from 200 BC to the later 19th century.

Chen, who earlier majored in archaeology and taught art history in China, says the research provided a unique opportunity to reconstruct an untold modern history.