BAS 125 Chinese Empire reform Association Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

The Chinese Empire Reform Association (CERA) began in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1899, created by exile Kang Youwei. CERAs supported the short-lived reforms instituted by the Guangxu Emperor, who reigned 1875-1908, to modernize (and to some extent, Westernize) China. His plans were thwarted by the Dowager Empress Cixi, who placed Guangxu under house arrest and he served most of his reign after 1898 as an ineffective figurehead.

More than 150 CERAs were established worldwide, including at least nine in Montana. The Butte chapter was organized in August 1901, with merchant Quong Loy the president. Quong Loy became known as the Mayor of Chinatown, and in 1920 he led a campaign to stamp out the narcotics trade in Butte.

The group met in various locations, including the Chinese Freemason hall (20 West Galena), 103 China Alley, and 212½ S. Colorado, which stood in today’s vacant lot across from the Mai Wah, the site of the 2007 archaeological dig that uncovered a CERA medallion. The dig was paid for by the Urban Revitalization Agency and conducted by archaeologist Mitzi Rossillon.

By 1905, the organization was actively supporting a developing army in the U.S., intended (at least on the surface) to help restore the Guangxu Emperor to power, but it’s not clear that they actually expected to return to China in force. In Butte, “the young men of Chinatown,” numbering about 30, spent many summer evenings in 1905 drilling and practicing army maneuvers “upon a roof back from the street on Mercury just west of Main street,” according to the Anaconda Standard, January 8, 1906.

But by the following year, with financial and other troubles, the military schools were disbanded by order of leader Kang Youwei. The organization effectively ended with the start of the Republic of China, in 1912, although its successor, the Chinese Democratic Constitutionalist Party (1911-1945) and other incarnations continued to have political influence for many more years.

The medallion discovered in the 2007 archaeological dig in Butte shows an image of the Guangxu Emperor, and crossed flags of the CERA and the dragon flag of the Qing Dynasty (which lasted from 1644-1912). The Guangxu Emperor was second-to-last emperor of China.

Mark Johnson, a Montana native who taught at the Concordia International School in Shanghai and is now associated with the University of Notre Dame, wrote on CERAs in the Winter 2014 issue of Montana Historical Society’s journal Montana: The Magazine of Western History.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.