

MAKING AND DEFENDING INTIMATE SPACES:
WHITE WAITRESSES POLICED IN VANCOUVER'S CHINATOWN CAFES

by

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Abstract

In mid-1930s Vancouver, city authorities launched a campaign to ban white waitresses from Chinatown cafes. Canadian historians have overlooked this campaign because of the tendency to treat the Chinese in Canada as a separate history from working women and to focus on discourse analysis rather than experience. This obscures the importance of sexuality and cross-racial interaction to the lives of both Chinese “bachelors” and white working women in Canada. This paper shows how white waitresses, Chinese restaurant owners, and Chinese patrons created and defended a social space of cross-racial intimacies in Vancouver’s Chinatown cafes.

By examining a variety of sources, including mainstream and labour newspapers, mayor’s and police records, oral histories, and Chinese-language newspapers, this paper considers the perspectives of the four groups involved in the campaign. City authorities constructed the cafes as immoral spaces, where white waitresses were enticed into prostitution by Chinese men. In the name of protecting white womanhood, they drew a gendered and racial line around Chinatown. Despite policies of racial and gender equality, labour organizations also viewed the campaign through this lens of morality.

For the white waitresses and Chinese customers, on the other hand, these cafes opened up a social space to explore cross-racial intimacies. In the cafes, they flirted, formed friendships, and began sexual relationships. The Chinese “treated” the waitresses to dinner, gifts, or money in exchange for sexual intimacy. Some of these intimacies were purely functional, while others developed into relationships that fulfilled mutual interests, needs, and desires. Through these intimate practices, they created choices and opportunities not available outside of Chinatown.

The ban forced the Chinese, and especially the white waitresses, to become self-reflective about their experience in the cafes. The Chinese condemned the ban as racial discrimination. Fifteen white waitresses marched on city hall, where they defended their rights as workers, their respectability, and their Chinese employers. The waitresses articulated why the Chinatown cafes held value in their lives and in Vancouver. They had lost their jobs and their reputations, but they took a political stand.

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Introduction

“White Girls Banned: Police Order Chinese Restaurant Owners to Employ Only Orientals,” *Vancouver Province*, 22 January 1932.

“[There is] no reason why they should make [these] spasmodic attempts to clean up Chinatown ... The excuse of closing the places because they hire white girls is too weak to fool anyone,” Charlie Ting, *Vancouver Sun*, 18 September 1937.

“[They're] a bunch of fussy old bridge-playing gossips who are self-appointed directors of morals for the girls in Chinatown. They are bound to get us out of here, but what will they do for us then. We must live and heaven knows if a girl is inclined to go wrong, she can do it just as readily on Granville Street as she can down here,” Anonymous white waitress in Chinatown, *Vancouver Sun*, 17 September 1937.

Just after eleven p.m. on Sunday, December 20, 1931, Dick Lee shot dead twenty-year-old waitress Mary Shaw at the Pender Cafe in Vancouver's Chinatown. A regular at the cafe, Lee was a thirty-four year old cook in the affluent neighbourhood of Shaughnessy Heights, nicknamed “Ox-tongue-no-gravy” by the waitresses for his customary order. When he entered the restaurant that night, Mary Shaw was powdering her nose in front of a mirror. Without warning, he shot Shaw eight times with a .38 calibre revolver and a .32 automatic taped to his wrists. Then he ended his own life. Lee had sent letters declaring his love for Shaw, but she refused his advances. Two letters were found on Lee's body that warned “action” would be taken. One pictured a man pointing a revolver at a girl with the caption, “You don't love me, I shoot.” The coroner's inquest ruled Lee temporarily insane.¹ A recommendation was added to the report: “If there be a by-law or a law prohibiting the employment of white female help by Orientals ... [it should] be strictly enforced.”²

¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 21 December 1931, 1; 23 December 1931, 1; 22 January 1932, 1; *Vancouver Province*, 21 December 1931, 1; 23 December 1931, 4; 22 January 1932, 24.

² British Columbia, Attorney-General, Coroners' Inquests, No. 324, 1931, British Columbia Archives (BCA).

Following this episode, Vancouver City Police launched a campaign to ban white women from working in Chinatown cafes. The campaign came to a head in the late 1930s in Vancouver, spearheaded by Police Chief William Wasbrough (WW) Foster and supported by Mayor George C. Miller. In Foster's opinion, Chinese patrons were enticing white waitresses into prostitution: "The association between the white girls and Chinese is such that a large number of the girls, who are usually quite young and without experience, become intimate with the Chinese, and in many cases live with individual Chinamen."³ In January 1937, city council threatened to revoke the licenses of three Chinatown cafes, Charlie Ting's Hong Kong Cafe, Toy Wing's B.C. Royal Cafe, and Harry Lee's Gee Kong Cafe, unless they fired their white waitresses. Through the Chinese Benevolent Association, the restaurant owners hired a lawyer and met with city council. When their negotiations failed, fifteen waitresses marched on city hall where they demanded - and were denied - a meeting with the mayor. Over the next two years, city council held firm on the ban against white waitresses.⁴

Foster's campaign gives insight into the complex dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality in Depression-era Vancouver. City authorities constructed the Chinatown cafes as spaces of immorality and danger for white working women. In contrast to their ideal image of Vancouver as a white, respectable British city, the Chinatown cafes flouted the conventions of domesticity and were tainted by cross-racial sex. The solution was to ban white working women altogether, drawing a gendered and racial line around Chinatown. No one beyond Chinatown seems to have

³ Foster to Mayor Miller, 3 September 1937, "White Girls in Chinese Restaurants," Series 483, General correspondence files, 1899-1994, Mayor's Office fonds, 33-D-6, File 4, City of Vancouver Archives (CVA).

⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 February 1937, 1; 5 February 1937, 3; 16 September 1937, 1; 17 September 1937, 1; 18 September 1937, 1 and 4; 20 September 1937, 10; 23 September 1937, 3; 25 September 1937, 1; 27 September 1937, 3; 28 September 1937, 18; 30 September 1937, 8; 2 October 1937, 4; 7 October 1937, 6; 8 October 1937, 5; 12 October 1937, 1; 15 October 1937, 7; 16 August 1938, 9; 17 August 1938, 6; 25 August 1938, 1; 13 September 1938, 12; 17 March 1939, 8; 21 March 1939, 11; *Vancouver Province*, 1 February 1937, 1; 10 February 1937, 1; 16 September 1937, 1; 18 September 1937, 1; 20 September 1937, 1; 22 September 1937, 1; 24 September 1937, 2; 25 September 1937, 1; 27 September 1937, 6; 28 September 1937, 1; 1 October 1937, 8; 12 October 1937, 1; 15 August 1938, 1; 17 August 1938, 2; 13 September 1938, 24; 8 March 1939, 9.

supported the rights of the Chinese restaurant owners and white waitresses. Although this was a period of sometimes violent clashes between city authorities and labour organizations, the left did not offer substantial help to the fired waitresses. Like Foster, they viewed the ban as an issue concerning morality, not workers' rights.

For the white waitresses, Chinese restaurant owners, and patrons, on the other hand, the Chinatown cafes opened up a social space to explore cross-racial intimacies. In the cafes, they flirted, formed friendships, and began sexual relationships. These intimacies developed out of the relationship of commercial exchange in the cafes. Waitresses joked and flirted with customers; the Chinese "treated" the waitresses to dinner, gifts, or money in exchange for sexual intimacy. Some of these relationships were purely functional with the superficial exchange of sex for money. Others developed into relationships where more complex emotional needs and affective ties became entangled with financial considerations. These relationships fulfilled mutual interests, needs, and desires. Through these intimate practices, the waitresses and the Chinese created choices and opportunities not available outside of Chinatown. For them, the social world in the cafes gave meaning to their lives beyond the daily grind of work and pursuit of survival.

Confronted with Foster's campaign, the white waitresses and Chinese restaurant owners defended the social space in the Chinatown cafes. Their protests were motivated by a sense of outrage at the injustice of the ban. The fight forced the Chinese, and especially the waitresses, to become self-reflective about their experience in the cafes. The Chinese condemned the ban as racial discrimination. The waitresses, on the other hand, gained the ability to articulate why the social world in the Chinatown cafes held value. They rejected the moral discourse used by city authorities to brand the Chinese as sexual villains and the waitresses as prostitutes. Instead of

protecting their morality, city authorities were putting them out of a job. The Chinatown cafes gave them work, the means for respectability, and employers who treated them well. Although they had lost their jobs and their reputations, they took a political stand. They stood up and challenged Police Chief Foster and Mayor Miller.

The Chinatown cafes held very different meanings for the groups involved in the campaign - the city authorities, labour organizations, white waitresses, and Chinese restaurant owners and patrons. To uncover these perspectives, this paper uses a variety of sources. Mainstream newspapers, mayor's papers, and police reports show how city authorities constructed the Chinatown cafes as immoral spaces. Comparing the labour press with oral histories from women involved in Vancouver's waitress union movement in the 1930s reveals the difference between what was officially reported by the left and opinions expressed by unionists behind the scenes. To gain insight into the Chinese community in Vancouver, it is crucial to examine Chinese-language sources. This paper uses translated advertisements and articles from the *Chinese Times*, published in Vancouver by the Chinese Freemasons Society, to consider the sexuality of Chinese "bachelors" and examine how they resisted the ban.⁵ Because the white waitresses in Chinatown did not leave personal diaries or accounts, we need to read sources against the grain. As they were interrogated by the police and interviewed by mainstream newspapers, the waitresses tried to use these official channels to justify their behaviour and voice their protest, providing glimpses into their experience in the cafes. These sources show what was at stake for these four groups as they clashed over the campaign to ban white waitresses from Chinatown.

⁵ I worked closely with Eunice Wong, my research assistant and translator. But using translated sources presents challenges, especially making it difficult to grasp the nuances of language.

“White Girls Banned From Chinese Cafes”: Chinatown Cafes as Social Spaces of Cross-Racial Intimacies

By the late nineteenth-century, the Chinese community had identified the employment of white women as a key area of discrimination. In 1894, Liu Guang Zu wrote to Guan Song Nian for advice about the case of a white maid in British Columbia. Guan, once the owner of a western food restaurant in Quebec, had been forced by police to fire his four white waitresses. Overall, twenty waitresses were let go in Quebec. The female workers were unhappy because they needed their jobs “to pay the bills.” Both the Chinese owners and the waitresses took action. Guan rehired “a few smart” waitresses who he instructed to spread the word: white waitresses employed by Chinese should tell police they would quit only if they were given a similar job. He advised Liu of this “hint.” White Canadians’ fear about Chinese employment of white women was a problem to which, Guan remarked, “There seems no solution yet.”⁶

No solution was found during the early twentieth-century, a period of aggressive anti-Chinese sentiment. The classic histories about the Chinese in Canada examine this anti-Chinese racism and agitation in Canada from the dominant white perspective.⁷ They show how a racial discourse marked the Chinese as an inferior race. They were viewed as unclean, diseased, and addicted to opium and gambling. The threat of the “Yellow Peril” led to fears that the Chinese would overrun the nation, while Chinatown was portrayed as a den of sin and vice that threatened to contaminate respectable Vancouver. Fears about the employment of white women

⁶ “Personal report from a Chinese outside of Victoria area,” Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Victoria, 1 January 1894, accessed 30 October 2009, http://multiculturalcanada.ca/cdm_item/cba/13/100.

⁷ Kay J. Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), Patricia Roy, *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man’s Province, 1914-1941* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003), W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990).

by Chinese were justified by the common trope of white slavery, which portrayed Chinese men as forces of sexual corruption. “Devious” Chinese men were supposedly using drugs and trickery to seduce innocent white girls into prostitution, selling them in Chinatown and onto an international slave trade. The racial discourse justified measures such as the Exclusion Act of 1923, which banned Chinese labourers from migrating to Canada and excluded wives and children from the country.

These measures were part of an attempt to create and maintain a “White Canada Forever.” Scholars in whiteness studies argue that whiteness should not be viewed as the normal, default position, but must also be scrutinized.⁸ To be “white” was to be just as racially marked as to be “Chinese.” In the nineteenth century, a diverse group of Europeans banded together as workers who claimed entitlement in Canada based on their shared whiteness, relegating the Chinese to the position of foreign usurper. Henry Yu reminds us that the Chinese were not “late arrivers,” but were displaced by European migrants who, ironically, came west on the railways built largely through the backbreaking work of the Chinese.⁹

These attitudes shaped the development of labour unions. In the early twentieth century, the “worker” was defined as white and male. The Chinese were treated as foreign workers and scabs who threatened to take jobs that rightfully belonged to white working men.¹⁰ Excluded from labour unions, the Chinese formed separate organizations such as the Chinese Benevolent

⁸ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Mathew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 2007).

⁹ Henry Yu, “Refracting Pacific Canada: Seeing Our Uncommon Past,” *BC Studies* 156/157 (Winter/Spring 2007/08): 5-10. Also see Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

¹⁰ Gillian Creese, “Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the ‘Oriental Problem,’” *BC Studies* 80 (Winter 1988/89): 24-51. Also see Roy and Ward.

Association (CBA) to cope with work discrimination and protect their interests in Canada.¹¹

White women also did not have the unquestioned right to work. Because of the ideal of the male breadwinner, women were accused of taking jobs from men who needed to support their families. When women were allowed into labour unions, they had less bargaining power since they were restricted to unskilled jobs, were burdened with duties at home, and faced a male-centric environment in union halls.¹² Both women and the Chinese had a troubled history with the labour movement in Canada.

While white working men claimed privilege as workers, an aspiring middle class was creating its own image of respectability. To distinguish themselves from the rough culture of the single male labourer, the middle class claimed respectability based on shared whiteness and bourgeois Victorian values of domesticity. These values were based on the ideology of separate spheres: the husband entered the public world of work, while the wife created a warm and welcoming home where she supported her husband and raised their children.¹³

White womanhood became an important symbol for the middle class. Adele Perry's study of colonial British Columbia in *On the Edge of Empire* shows how white women were viewed as an "imperial panacea" to the racially diverse and "rough" culture of single working men. Colonial authorities believed white women would civilize and Christianize the new community, eliminating mixed-race relationships by creating respectable white families. White

¹¹ Edgar Wickberg, et al. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 157-169, David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinese Community Leadership: Case Study of Victoria in Canada* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010).

¹² Ruth A. Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 98-118. Also see Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

¹³ Robert A.J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status, and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1996), 23-25 and 186-199.

women symbolized racial and moral purity in colonial British Columbia.¹⁴ They became what postcolonial historian Ann Laura Stoler terms the “custodians” of the colonizers’ moral and cultural community: “Any attempted or perceived infringement of white female honor came to be seen as an assault on white supremacy and European rule.”¹⁵ The image of white womanhood under attack aroused hysteria and panic, justifying the repression of native populations.¹⁶

The legacy of this colonial ideology was the persistent belief that the protection of white womanhood was paramount. In the early-twentieth century, the trope of white slavery employed white womanhood as a symbol that justified anti-Chinese measures. A threat against a white woman became a threat against the respectable middle class. Added to this was an emerging language of eugenics. Racial mixing between a white woman and Chinese man was considered perverse and unnatural. The degradation of future mothers and the threat of miscegenation spelled race suicide.¹⁷ White slavery threatened not only the respectable middle class, but also the survival of the entire Anglo-Saxon race.

White slavery portrayed white women as helpless, victimized, and sexually innocent. But working women challenged this image as industrialization changed the way they worked. Dire economic circumstances led to an increasing number of women working in Vancouver. Between 1901 and 1931, the percentage of women in Vancouver’s workforce more than doubled

¹⁴ Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 139-193.

¹⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, “Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31.1 (January 1989): 149.

¹⁶ There is a good overview of this historiography in Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada’s Prairie West* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 10-18.

¹⁷ Mariana Valverde, *Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada: 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), 104-128.

from six to fourteen percent.¹⁸ Gender historians have studied the developing culture of white working women, who consumed commercial amusements such as dime novels and films, emulated the fashion and makeup of Mary Pickford, and danced the jitterbug with “reckless abandon” at dance halls.¹⁹ As young working women began to take charge of their sexuality and create their own identities and habits, they challenged traditional expectations of propriety. Historians of sexuality show how this led to attempts to regulate women’s sexuality by restricting their leisure activities, pushing women towards “respectable” domestic service, and linking their supposed sexual immorality to delinquency.²⁰ To the respectable middle class in Vancouver, working women also posed a threat.

In this context, provincial legislation was enacted to “protect” white womanhood in early-twentieth century Canada. In 1912, Saskatchewan was the first province to pass legislation that prohibited Chinese from employing “any white woman or girl.”²¹ As studied by legal historians Constance Backhouse and James W. St. G. Walker, the Supreme Court of Canada’s landmark decision in 1914 upheld the right of provinces to enact racially discriminatory legislation as long as it did not contravene the *British North America Act*.²² Saskatchewan’s

¹⁸ Gillian Creese, “The Politics of Dependence: Women, Work and Unemployment in the Vancouver Labour Movement before World War II,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 13.1/2 (Winter/Spring, 1988): 123-124, Star Rosenthal, “Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver 1900-1915,” *BC Studies* 41 (Spring 1979): 41.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love For Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), Carolyn Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

²⁰ Ruth Alexander, *Girl Problem: Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), Tamara Myers, *Caught: Montreal's Modern Girls and the Law, 1869-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), Joan Sangster, *Girl Trouble: Female Delinquency in English Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002).

²¹ James W. St. G. Walker, “Race,” *Rights and the Law in the Supreme Court of Canada: Historical Case Studies* (Waterloo: Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History and Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1997), 51-121.

²² Walker, 53.

legislation was also the first in Canada to mark “whiteness” as a race, using the symbol of white womanhood to justify the creation and maintenance of white privilege.²³

It was a potent symbol. In the following years, the legislation spread to Manitoba, Ontario, and British Columbia.²⁴ British Columbia was the last to enact this legislation in 1919, amended in 1923 to omit the specific reference to the Chinese and to include “Indian” women or girls.²⁵ But the Chinese remained the main targets. The following year, the murder of Vancouver nursemaid Janet Smith, thought to have been committed by Chinese houseboy Wong Foon Sing, led to a widely debated, although ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to extend the legislation to ban white women and Chinese from working as domestic servants in the same household.²⁶

The Chinese community spent considerable time and money fighting the spread of these “White Women’s Labour Laws.” According to the *Chinese Times*, Consul Yang Shu-Wen conducted personal visits to the provincial governments of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario to protest against the legislation.²⁷ He succeeded in eliminating the term “Chinese” from the wording of the Manitoba legislation, which he hailed as the successful annulment of the law. In April 1919, Consul Yang travelled to Victoria, where he met with Chinese business owners and discussed the case with a lawyer hired by the CBA.²⁸ But his negotiations with the provincial

²³ Constance Backhouse, “The White Women’s Labor Laws: Anti-Chinese Racism in Early Twentieth-Century Canada,” *Law and History Review* 14.2 (Fall 1996): 360.

²⁴ Walker, 55-56. Manitoba passed a similar act in 1913 and Ontario amended its *Factory, Shop and Office Building Act* in 1914 to prohibit Chinese from employing “any female white person in any factory, restaurant or laundry.”

²⁵ “Municipal Act Amendment Ac,” S.B.C. 1919, c. 63, s. 13; “An Act for the Protection of Women and Girls in certain Cases,” S.B.C. 1923, c.76.

²⁶ Scott Kerwin, “The Janet Smith Bill of 1924,” *BC Studies* 121 (Spring 1999): 83-114.

²⁷ *Chinese Times*, [*Da Han Gong Bao*] (Vancouver) (trans. Eunice Wong), 6 November 1916, 3; 28 November 1916, 3; 30 March 1917, 3; 7 April 1917, 3; 9 April 1917, 3; 10 April 1917, 3; 9 February 1918, 3; 22 February 1918, 3; 11 March 1918, 3; 22 March 1918, 3. Also see Files 5-7 (1916-1918, trans. Jenny Yue), Box 4 - *Chinese Times* Chronological Index, Chinese Canadian Research Collection, University of British Columbia Archives (UBC Archives).

²⁸ *Chinese Times*, 10 April 1919, 3; 11 April 1919, 3; 15 April 1919, 3; 17 April 1919, 2; 24 April 1919, 3; 28 April 1919, 3; 30 April 1919, 3.

legislature failed. It was only in 1923 that the word “Chinese” was deleted from the legislation after the CBA raised a protest fund, hired a lawyer, started a letter campaign, and sent representatives with Consul General Lim to negotiate with the provincial government in Victoria.²⁹ It is unclear to what extent the law was applied in British Columbia. We do know that immediately after the law passed in April 1919, the *Chinese Times* reported a man named Cheng Yau was fined twenty dollars plus court fees for employing a white waitress in his New Westminster restaurant. Although far from the maximum \$100 fine, this was still a substantial amount of money.³⁰ The Chinese response shows they viewed the legislation as a serious threat to their economic interests and well-being in Canada.

By the 1930s, discourses about the Chinese and working women were shifting. The use of overt racist discourse had become less acceptable. Although anti-Chinese measures were still common, a new image of Chinatown as an exotic tourist attraction was emerging at the same time as Japanese occupation made the Chinese sympathetic in the eyes of the West.³¹ A more positive image of single working women also emerged. Single women were increasingly portrayed as “dutiful daughters” as they became the primary breadwinners for families during the Depression, finding jobs in “women’s work” that men refused to do.³² Married working women

²⁹ *Chinese Times*, 27-29 November 1923, 3; 30 November 1923, 3 and 11; 1 December 1923, 3; 3 December 1923, 3; 5 December 1923, 3; 7 December 1923, 3; 10-11 December 1923, 3; 17 December 1923, 3; 21 December 1923, 3, File 13 (1923, trans. Bessie Yue), Box 4 - *Chinese Times* Chronological Index, Chinese Canadian Research Collection, UBC Archives.

³⁰ *Chinese Times*, 26 April 1919, 3; 28 April 1919, 3.

³¹ For the transition to a racial discourse about an “exotic” Chinatown see Anderson, 144-177. During the Depression, Chinese and progressive organizations claimed the meagre meals at the Anglican soup kitchen led to the deaths of 184 Chinese from beriberi, see Roy, 151. During the “Potato War” in the late 1930s, white farmers blockaded bridges to stop Chinese from bringing fruits and vegetables to market in Vancouver, see Edgar Wickberg, “Chinese and Canadian Influences on Chinese Politics in Vancouver, 1900-1947,” *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980): 50.

³² Katrina Srigley, *Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-Era City, 1929-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

were now the subject of major debate, accused of taking jobs that were desperately needed by men so they could earn “pin money.”³³

Despite these shifting attitudes, Foster’s campaign to ban white waitresses from Chinatown came to a head in mid-1930s Vancouver. Canadian scholars have paid little attention to this campaign. Patricia Roy gives a brief chronology in *The Oriental Question*, but argues the employment of white women by Chinese “caused little excitement generally” since the Japanese had become the primary targets of racism.³⁴ In *Vancouver’s Chinatown*, Kay Anderson argues the campaign reveals the persistence of older racist discourses during a transitional period moving towards more positive views of Chinatown.³⁵ Both view the campaign as an incident of anti-Chinese racism. Their overarching narrative of exclusion to inclusion tends to gloss over this episode by looking forward to the post-war period of liberalized immigration policies. On the other hand, Michaela Freund’s “The Politics of Naming: Constructing Prostitutes and Regulating Women in Vancouver, 1934-1945” focuses on discourses about gender and sexuality. She argues that Vancouver’s middle class “named” waitresses as prostitutes simply for working in Chinatown cafes, using this moral discourse to justify the regulation of women’s bodies.³⁶

These studies reflect two broader trends in the literature about the Chinese in Canada and working women. The first is a focus on discourse analysis, without considering experience. Working with limited source material, historians of gender and sexuality have tried to uncover the agency of working women as they developed their own culture and resisted regulation by

³³ See the debate about married women workers in the letters to the editor section of the *Province*, “Married Women Workers, 1 February 1937, 4; “Still a Problem,” 3 February 1937, 4; “Women in Own Place,” 5 February 1937, 4; *Vancouver Sun*, “Married Women’s Jobs,” 6 March 1939, 4; “Defends Married Women,” 10 March 1939, 8; “Married ‘Career’ Women,” 15 March 1939, 6; “Down With Married Women With Spouses Working, Too,” 18 March 1939, 16.

³⁴ Roy, 207.

³⁵ Anderson, 158-164.

³⁶ Michaela Freund, “The Politics of Naming: Constructing Prostitutes and Regulating Women in Vancouver, 1934-1945” (M.A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, July 1995).

middle class reformers. The classic literature about the Chinese in Canada, on the other hand, focuses almost entirely on the racial discourse of white Canadians.³⁷ This work has an important anti-racist motivation, but it overlooks and distorts the Chinese experience. By focusing on racist stereotypes and anti-Asian measures, this literature victimizes the Chinese and portrays the community as a monolithic whole. A serious consideration of experience makes it impossible to dismiss Foster's campaign as unimportant. For both working women and the Chinese community, the campaign did cause excitement, as well as pain, anger, and suffering.

The second trend treats the history of working women and the Chinese in Canada as separate literatures. Historians of gender and sexuality have considered how cross-racial mixing led to the moral regulation of working women, but have not focused on their experience interacting with men and women of different ethnicities and races. Canadian scholarship is only now starting to consider how the Chinese interacted with aboriginal and white communities.³⁸ This has led to the portrayal of the Chinese community as a separate "bachelor" society in Canada. While restrictive immigration laws led to an overwhelmingly male Chinese population, most were not bachelors. This term obscures the importance of sexuality to their lives.

Asian American historians have started studying the sexuality of the Chinese American community. Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu has examined transnational familial links between America and China, Mary Ting Yi Lui has considered interracial couples and families, and Nayan Shah has suggested that Chinatown may have offered a "queer" alternative to the rigid domestic ideology of the middle class.³⁹ Most of these studies stress the respectability of Chinese

³⁷ The exception is Edgar Wickberg's *From China to Canada*, which uses translations of the *Chinese Times*.

³⁸ The exception is Renisa Mawani, *Colonial Proximities: Crossracial Encounters and Juridical Truths in British Columbia, 1871-1921* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), although she focuses on colonial discourses.

³⁹ Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New*

Americans by focusing on heterosexual and long-term relationships. This emphasis comes from an activist movement to claim belonging and citizenship in the United States by portraying Asian Americans in a positive light. Jennifer P. Ting and Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu call for historians to take the sexuality of the bachelor community seriously, without moral judgment.⁴⁰ In Hsu's opinion: "[We need to understand] the bachelor era of Chinese American history on its own terms, as a homosocial community and space, rather than as a discomfiting deviation from heterosexual, family norms."⁴¹ But women occupied these spaces also.

Vancouver's Chinatown cafes should be understood "on their own terms," as social spaces of cross-racial interaction. These were unique spaces in the racially segregated city. Outside of Chinatown, interracial spaces were carefully regulated. Robert A. Campbell, for example, has shown how beer parlour operators would refuse to serve mixed-race clientele, especially Asian men with white women.⁴² Chinatown was still an ethnic enclave, with tourism only just getting off the ground after the 1936 Golden Jubilee. For most white Vancouverites, the situation in Chinatown cafes was out of sight and out of mind, until forced into the public eye by the murder of Mary Shaw. Inside the racially segregated district of Chinatown, white waitresses and Chinese could, to a certain extent, escape the regulation of moral reformers. Together, they developed a social world based on sexual intimacies and exchange.

Historians have studied these intimate practices as "treating." In the early twentieth-century, treating was a common practice among working women in major cities such as New

York City (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴⁰ Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, "Unwrapping Orientalist Constraints: Restoring Homosocial Normativity to Chinese American History" *Amerasia* 29.2 (2003): 230-253, Jennifer P. Ting, "Bachelor Society: Deviant Heterosexuality and Asian American Historiography," in *Privileging Positions: The Site of Asian American Studies*, eds. Gary Y. Okihiro, et al. (Washington: Washington State University Press, 1995), 271-280.

⁴¹ Hsu, "Unwrapping Orientalist Constraints," 230.

⁴² Robert A. Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer: Regulating Vancouver's Beer Parlours, 1925-1954* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 82-85.

York and Chicago.⁴³ Treating developed through the growing popularity of commercial amusements. Unable to afford a dance hall ticket or vaudeville show on their meagre wages, working women exchanged sexual favours for a night out on the town. Treating blurred the definition of prostitution, allowing working women to maintain their respectability among their peers. It also gave working women a degree of agency. As Kathy Peiss has shown, treating was a way for women to take some control over their lives while having fun: “Working women sought a way to negotiate dependency and claim some choice, autonomy, and pleasure in otherwise dreary lives.”⁴⁴ On a pragmatic level, working women also used treating just to get by, as a way to supplement insufficient wages.⁴⁵

This literature focuses on the motivations of women who engaged in treating, but does not consider why men treated. This lack of critical analysis implicitly suggests men were in it only for sex. We should not make the ahistorical assumption that men have a natural sexual drive that needs to be catered to by women.⁴⁶ Treating also fulfilled a social function for men. This was especially true in Vancouver’s racially charged environment. For both the waitresses and the Chinese, treating was a way to negotiate the vulnerable positions they occupied in the city.

Inside the Chinatown cafes, they created a social world with its own set of values and unspoken rules. Studying these cafes requires delving into complicated dynamics of power shaped by gender, race, and sexuality. Chinese customers, who paid for meals, left tips, and treated waitresses, clearly had the economic upper hand. At the same time, they lived in a racial

⁴³ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, Meyerowitz, Clement.

⁴⁴ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 55.

⁴⁵ Meyerowitz, 92-116.

⁴⁶ See Adele Perry, “‘Oh I’m Just Sick of the Faces of Men’: Gender Imbalance, Race, Sexuality, and Sociability in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia,” *BC Studies* 105/106 (1995): 27-43. Perry critiques the “volcano theory” of male sexuality, which assumes “a fixed quantity of male sexual energy,” as ahistorical and heteronormative.

system that relegated most to low-paying, menial jobs and called for their exclusion from Canada. In Chinatown, the waitresses gained status based on their whiteness, gender, and sexuality. This privilege has been overlooked by most historians, who treat working women as uncomplicated heroines.⁴⁷ In this context, the waitresses and Chinese created terms of exchange that fulfilled mutual interests, needs, and desires. They created a world worth fighting to preserve. For Police Chief Foster, however, these intimacies represented a moral threat to respectable white Vancouverites.

**“These Restaurants Are Not Fit and Proper Places for the Employment of White Girls”:
The Campaign Against White Waitresses in Vancouver’s Chinatown during the mid-1930s**

The ban on white waitresses in Chinatown was part of a city-wide campaign against vice, crime, and corruption in mid-1930s Vancouver. For Police Chief Foster, the Chinatown cafes were immoral spaces that threatened to corrupt respectable Vancouver society. This was a period with an active labour movement, as Communist and socialist organizations, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), and labour unions defended the rights of workers and the unemployed. In 1937, the same year as the ban on white waitresses in Chinatown, waitresses from Local 28 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees’ Union (HREU) launched a campaign to organize Vancouver cafes. Yet, the union offered no substantive support to the Chinatown waitresses. Inside the boundaries of Chinatown, the combination of race, gender, and

⁴⁷ Dana Frank, “White Working-Class Women and the Race Question,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 54 (Fall 1998): 80-102. Frank argues that many white working women were implicated in creating and recreating the racial order, but some may also have had special opportunities for cross-racial understanding and anti-racism.

sexuality became an explosive moral issue that overpowered existing discourses of workers' rights.

In January 1935, Foster accepted the position of chief constable after Mayor McGeer warned him of a Communist conspiracy to lead a general strike in Vancouver.⁴⁸ Since Winnipeg's general strike in May 1919, McGeer had viewed "Bolshevism" as a serious menace: "There is an element associated with the cause of labor in this City [Vancouver], who are decidedly inclined to Bolsheviki tendencies ... they are sufficiently powerful to do a great deal of harm and to cause a great deal of trouble."⁴⁹ Foster had experience quelling labour strikes. As general manager of a shipping firm in the 1920s, he headed the special police force that broke the longshoremen strike of 1923.⁵⁰ As police chief, he had a degree of sympathy for the unemployed, but none for the labour movement.⁵¹ In April 1935, he stood at McGeer's side when the mayor read the Riot Act to a group of strikers protesting conditions in relief or "slave" camps. A few weeks later, when striking longshoremen tried to march on Ballantyne Pier, he ordered police to attack with tear gas and clubs, resulting in the injury of sixty people.⁵² While labour activists and unemployed strikers defended their "right" to a job, fair pay, and good work conditions, Foster viewed such "Bolshevism" as a serious moral threat.

City authorities launched a general campaign against vice in the mid-1930s. Police Chief Foster cracked down on gambling and disorderly houses, regulated cabarets and beer halls, and pushed for the inspection and incarceration of "prostitutes" for venereal disease.⁵³ This formed

⁴⁸ Lani Russwurm, "Constituting Authority: Policing Workers and the Consolidation of Police Power in Vancouver, 1918-1939" (M.A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2007), 78.

⁴⁹ Patricia Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co, 1980), 94.

⁵⁰ Russwurm, 33.

⁵¹ Russwurm, 105-110.

⁵² David Ricardo Williams, *Mayor Gerry: The Remarkable Gerald Grattan McGeer* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986), 191-192. Russwurm, 109-110.

⁵³ Vancouver Police Department, *Annual Reports*, 1938, 24-27; 1939, 22; "Police - Gambling," Series 483, 33-F-1, File 1, VCA; "Police - Vice (1939)," Series 483, 33-F-1, File 2, VCA; "Cabaret Hours, Sunday mornings," Series

part of a broader moral and social reform movement in early-twentieth century Canada. As Mariana Valverde argues in *Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, the social reform movement was “a loose network of organizations and individuals” who “helped to constitute a powerful if informal coalition for the moral regeneration of the state, civil society, the family, and the individual.”⁵⁴ Concerns about racial and sexual purity shaped the ban against white waitresses in Chinatown.

In October 1935, Alderman Halford D. Wilson, a strong proponent of anti-Asian policies, expressed concern about Chinese employing white women.⁵⁵ Soon after, Foster launched his campaign. In early 1936, he unsuccessfully invoked the 1923 Women and Girls’ Protection Act that gave police the power to take legal action to protect the “morals” of “Indian” and “white” female employees.⁵⁶ Since the law stated that women had to be named as individuals, restaurant owners simply replaced the waitress before the case came to trial. Later that year, city council passed by-laws to outlaw closed-curtain booths, narrow passageways, and screens that allowed “immoral” behaviour to flourish in restaurants.⁵⁷ Finally, in 1937, Foster turned to the city license department for help. In City Prosecutor Oscar Orr’s opinion: “[If] the License Inspector [discovers] ... ‘loose conduct’, such as, a white waitress sitting down with a Chinese, no outward crime is being committed but the chances are that procuring may be well under way ... the power to cancel licenses should be used by the License Inspector.”⁵⁸ In January 1937, the city refused to issue new licenses to Charlie Ting’s Hong Kong Cafe, Toy Wing’s B.C. Royal Cafe, and Harry Lee’s Gee Kong Cafe unless they agreed to lay off their white waitresses. After the CBA protested on behalf of the restaurant owners, they reached a compromise: Chinatown cafes would

483, 27-D-3, File 17, VCA; “Beer Parlour Tax,” Series 483, 27-C-6, File 8, VCA; “Bylaws re. Restaurants and Cabarets,” Series 483, 27-C-4, File 23, VCA.

⁵⁴ Valverde, 17.

⁵⁵ Anderson, 159.

⁵⁶ “An Act for the Protection of Women and Girls in certain Cases,” S.B.C. 1924, c. 275.

⁵⁷ Foster to Mayor Miller, 3 September 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA.

⁵⁸ Oscar Orr to Foster, 7 September 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA.

gradually phase out white female help. A misunderstanding arose when the owners thought they could maintain the same number of white waitresses. In Foster's opinion, they "apparently treated the whole matter as a joke."⁵⁹ After further negotiations failed, the Chinese restaurant owners finally conceded loss. They agreed to fire their white waitresses by October 1st, 1937. Despite the protests of the waitresses, Foster's ban held.

The campaign to ban white waitresses from Chinatown was supported by the *Vancouver Sun*. In 1937, the newspaper refused to "infer" that an "unwholesome relation exists between these girls and their employers," instead calling for a federal law to rule whether the employment of white waitresses by Chinese was "objectionable": "It is either in the best interests of society that Chinese should employ white girls or it is not."⁶⁰ Although overt racist discourse was no longer in fashion, the *Sun's* reports had a clear bias. Their stories questioned the respectability of the waitresses who were "apparently of decent families" and represented Chinatown as a "hostile" threat.⁶¹ In 1938, the *Sun* demanded that Chinese restaurant owners respect the ban, since neither law nor public opinion were on their side: "In [the] matter of white girls in Chinese cafes, [the Chinese community] is putting itself in the wrong ... If it be wise, [the Chinese] will submit to this overwhelming public opinion and conform to the wishes and rulings of the city in which it lives."⁶² The campaign provoked a small debate in the letters to the editor section. "Sympathizer" defended the jobs of the waitresses and criticized people for "poking their noses into other people's business."⁶³ In response, "Canadian Retired" argued there needed to be "no

⁵⁹ Foster to Mayor Miller, 6 March 1937, "White Girls in Chinese Restaurants," Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA.

⁶⁰ "Oriental Employers," *Vancouver Sun*, 18 September 1937, 4.

⁶¹ "City Cancels Cafe Licenses of 3 Chinese," *Vancouver Sun*, 16 September 1937, 2; "Chinese Sue City Council," *Vancouver Sun*, 18 September 1937, 3.

⁶² "Chinese Misstep," *Vancouver Sun*, 17 August 1938, 6.

⁶³ "Waitresses," *Vancouver Sun*, 2 October 1937, 4.

shedding of crocodile tears” for the dismissed white girls, declaring that “Orientals” would soon take over the businesses of restaurants, market gardens and fruit stands in British Columbia.⁶⁴

Like “Canadian Retired,” Foster felt an urgent need to eliminate the “disgraceful” conditions in Chinatown cafes.⁶⁵ From 1937 to 1939, he sent frequent reports and updates to the mayor. These records are fraught with tension. Under interrogation, the waitresses felt they had to justify their behaviour. As we will see in the following section, we can use these records to gain insight into the reasons why waitresses valued the cafes. But these records were also shaped by the police who wrote the reports. It can be hard to untangle these layers of interpretation. In his letters to the mayor, for example, Foster included two personal statements from former Chinatown waitresses. Both tell a classic story of white slavery. Did the women choose to narrate their story through this trope? Or did the police interpret their accounts through the lens of white slavery? It is impossible to know. Certainly, both statements are suspiciously similar in content and were used by Foster to drum up support for his campaign. When examined in the context of his letters to the mayor, these statements provide insight into Foster’s perception of the Chinatown cafes.

In his letters to the mayor, Foster portrayed the white waitresses as young, inexperienced girls who were duped and enticed into prostitution by their Chinese customers:

The first day I was at this cafe, Chinamen made suggestions for me to go to their rooms, offering sums of money as high as \$10 or \$15. I only went on one occasion and this Chinaman brought a bottle of White Horse Whisky to the Cafe. He persuaded me to drink and I got drunk. I don’t remember what took place but I woke up in this Chinaman’s room in bed with him. I knew from my condition that he had had sexual intercourse with me. He gave me \$25 and a few days afterwards he gave me \$35.00 and told me to buy myself clothes.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ “Chinese Philosophy,” *Vancouver Sun*, 7 October 1937, 6.

⁶⁵ Foster to Mayor Miller, 3 September 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA.

⁶⁶ Foster to Mayor Telford, 28 April 1939, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-F-3, File 11, VCA.

Foster accused the Chinese restaurant owners of forcing white waitresses to be intimate with customers, “mak[ing] themselves as agreeable as possible, even to the extent of sitting in the booths with the customers.”⁶⁷ The Chinese customers propositioned the waitresses in the cafes, using trickery, liquor or drugs to “[pester] the life out of a girl,” until she agreed to accompany him to his room to “prostitute” herself.⁶⁸

In Foster’s opinion, the white waitresses were also to blame for their own corruption. As Michaela Freund has argued, they were “named” as prostitutes simply for working in Chinatown cafes. Foster called Jessie Pleasance, a waitress at the B.C. Royal Cafe, a “well known prostitute” who was either working or “hanging around” Chinatown cafes.⁶⁹ The moment a white woman stepped into Chinatown, her tragic downfall into prostitution was determined. The personal statements of two “prostitutes” concluded with almost identical statements: “I know if I had not worked in these Chinese cafes I never would have prostituted myself.”⁷⁰

In the Chinatown cafes, Foster claimed the waitresses influenced each other to become “loose.” They sacrificed their morality for frivolous gifts of clothes or makeup: “About a month or so after I had started to work at the Gee Kong Cafe I started to go to Chinamen’s rooms; the reason was that I knew the other girls were making money that way and buying nice clothes and I wished to get money and have clothes like them.”⁷¹ Their vanity threatened to corrupt respectable Vancouverites. Foster noted that B.C. Royal Cafe waitress Ruth Allen was being

⁶⁷ Foster to Deputy Minister King, 18 July 1938, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-F-3, File 11, VCA.

⁶⁸ Foster to Mayor Telford, 28 April 1939, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-F-3, File 11, VCA.

⁶⁹ Foster to Mayor Miller, 6 March 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, VCA.

⁷⁰ Foster to City Clerk Howlett, 25 November 1937, “Police Department,” Series 20, Subject files - including Council supporting documents, 1886-1976, City Council and Office of the City Clerk fonds, 16-F-6, File 4, VCA; Foster to Mayor Telford, 28 April 1939, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-F-3, File 11, VCA. The 1939 statement says: “I know for certain if I had not gone to work in a Chinatown cafe I would not be a prostitute now.”

⁷¹ Foster to City Clerk Howlett, 25 November 1937, “Police Department,” Series 20, 16-F-6, File 4, VCA.

treated for venereal disease.⁷² City authorities blamed prostitutes for being the “source[s] of infection” in the spread of sexually transmitted disease.⁷³ In the language of eugenics, venereal disease undermined the strength of the nation, contributed to the growth of the feebleminded population, and threatened race suicide.⁷⁴ As prostitutes, the waitresses were a menace to respectable society.

The ban drew a gendered and racial line around Chinatown.⁷⁵ The Chinese community categorized cafes such as the B.C. Royal as “Chinese-run western style restaurants” common in most neighbourhoods of Vancouver.⁷⁶ Foster, on the other hand, treated “Chinatown cafes” as a special category. In his view, Chinatown was a foreign and vice-ridden neighbourhood. During Foster’s campaign against gambling, he again concentrated on Chinatown as the origin of this social vice.⁷⁷ In such a neighbourhood, close proximity between white women and Chinese men could only be interpreted as an illicit cross-racial threat. In Detective-Sergeant Andrew S. Rae’s opinion, the Chinatown cafe was a “breeding place for crime and vice” and a “trap for the defilement of young girls.”⁷⁸ By banning white waitresses from Chinatown, Foster clarified the boundary between the races and policed the sexuality of working women. He felt this protected respectable Vancouverites from the spread of immorality and disease.

If Foster saw the ban in moral terms, it was just as possible to view the campaign in terms of workers’ rights, as a threat to the jobs and livelihood of the white waitresses. In the 1930s,

⁷² Foster to Mayor Miller, 6 March 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA. Mary Shaw was examined post-mortem for evidence of venereal disease, British Columbia, Attorney-General, Coroners’ Inquests, No. 324, 1931, BCA.

⁷³ Andrew S. Rae to Foster, 9 May 1939, “Police - Vice,” Series 483, 33-F-1, File 2, VCA.

⁷⁴ Renisa Mawani, “Regulating the ‘Respectable’ Classes: Venereal Disease, Gender, and Public Health Initiatives in Canada, 1914-35,” in *Regulating Lives: Historical Essays on the State, Society, the Individual and the Law*, eds. John McLaren, Robert Menzies and Dorothy E. Chunn, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002): 170-195.

⁷⁵ Mary Ting Yi Lui describes a similar case in New York City.

⁷⁶ This was the term used regularly in the *Chinese Times*.

⁷⁷ “Police - Gambling (1939),” Series 483, 33-F-1, File 1, VCA.

⁷⁸ McKay to City License Inspector, 5 March 1940, “Police Commission,” Series 483, 34-A-7, File 1, VCA.

Vancouver restaurant workers had an active union in Local 28 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union (HREU). By the 1930s, the HREU had a policy of gender and racial equality.⁷⁹ Business agent William (Bill) Stewart commented to Vancouver's Communist newspaper the *People's Advocate*: "Our constitution makes this plain. Our job is to organize all the help, whatever their color or creed, to get decent conditions and union wages."⁸⁰ The HREU's slogan was "Every Restaurant a Union Restaurant!"⁸¹

Local 28 of the HREU accepted membership from all restaurant workers, but mainly attracted women working as waitresses in the "front end" of restaurants, as well as the odd bus boy.⁸² The majority of the male cooks did not join the union. In part, as waitress Emily Nuttall remarked, this was because cooks had higher status and greater job security: "The cook always felt he was just a little bit, you know he had a prestigious position, in comparison to waitresses. It wasn't so easy to change a cook, as it was to throw a waitress out of a job and get another one."⁸³ But many of the cooks were also Chinese men who were wary of the motivations of the HREU. In the spring of 1938, Local 28 tried to recruit Chinese cooks. They hired organizer Wong Toy to place advertisements in the Chinese-language newspapers, distribute leaflets, and call two meetings for Chinese cooks. They failed to bring in Chinese members. This lack of enthusiasm was understandable. Only twelve years before, the HREU had supported the replacement of Chinese dish washers with white workers in the Hotel Vancouver.⁸⁴ Labour

⁷⁹ At this time, the Vancouver, New Westminster and Districts Trades and Labor Council officially opposed anti-Oriental prejudice. See "Labor Scores Anti-Oriental Race Prejudice," *Vancouver Sun*, 16 March 1938, 4.

⁸⁰ "Cafe Girls Rap Action of Council," *People's Advocate*, 24 September 1937, 1.

⁸¹ "Every Restaurant a Union Restaurant," *Labor Statesman*, April 1937, 1.

⁸² Jim Morrison interview transcript, p. 5 and 9, F-67-1-0-26, Sara Diamond Women's Labour History Interview Collection, 1979, Simon Fraser University Archives (SFU Archives) (hereafter Jim Morrison interview).

⁸³ Emily Nuttall interview transcript, p. 26, F-67-1-0-27, Sara Diamond Women's Labour History Interview Collection, 1979, SFU Archives (hereafter Emily Nuttall interview).

⁸⁴ Minute Book of the Local Joint Executive Board (April 9, 1924 - May 10, 1926), Box 5 - Local 28, Hotel, Restaurant and Culinary Employees' and Bartenders' Union (HREU), Local 40 fonds, 1910-1981, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections (UBC RBSC).

unions had long used minimum wage as a tactic to replace Chinese with white workers, as the HREU was well aware: “The reasons for [the failure to organize Chinese cooks] are the lack of understanding on the part of the Chinese and the threat of the employer to dismiss them and take on white help.”⁸⁵ Although the union commented that the “situation is not hopeless,” they did not take further steps to recruit Chinese cooks.⁸⁶

As a “women’s local,” the waitresses had the opportunity to play a major role in the union.⁸⁷ In the mid-1930s, while under the leadership of Bill Stewart, the waitresses launched a campaign to organize cafes. The summer 1936 strike at the Trocadero Cafe kick-started a militant movement.⁸⁸ When the waitresses went on strike for better pay and working conditions, there were only a few other union restaurants in Vancouver.⁸⁹ Marion Sarich remembered the public support for the waitresses. During one week of the strike, she counted only thirty-five people who broke the picket line.⁹⁰ Since the waitresses were segregated into “women’s work” that did not compete with the jobs of men, they were supported and encouraged by many of their male working class customers, who respected the strikes and the “we do not patronize” list of blacklisted restaurants.⁹¹ This experience with labour activism inspired and motivated the

⁸⁵ Minute Book of the Local Joint Executive Board (May 11, 1937 - December 4, 1957), Box 6 - Local 28, HREU, Local 40 fonds, 1910-1981, UBC RBSC.

⁸⁶ Minute Book of the Local Joint Executive Board (May 11, 1937 - December 4, 1957), Box 6 - Local 28, HREU, Local 40 fonds, 1910-1981, UBC RBSC.

⁸⁷ Jim Morrison, an organizer in the HREU during the 1940s and 1950s, referred to Local 28 as the “women’s local.” Jim Morrison interview, p. 3.

⁸⁸ Anita Andersen, F-67-1-0-1; Barbara Stewart, F-67-1-0-35; Marion Sarich, F-67-1-0-32, Sara Diamond Women’s Labour History Interview Collection, 1979, SFU Archives.

⁸⁹ Anita Andersen interview transcript, p. 14, F-67-1-0-1, Sara Diamond Women’s Labour History Interview Collection, 1979, SFU Archives (hereafter Anita Andersen interview). Andersen estimated the strike lasted around a month, Anita Andersen interview, p. 12. In another account, which spells her name “Anderson,” the strike is estimated to have lasted two weeks, see Betty Griffin and Susan Lockhart, *Their Own History: Women’s Contribution to the Labour Movement of British Columbia* (New Westminster, BC: United Fishermen & Allied Workers Union/CAW Seniors Club, 2002), 76.

⁹⁰ Marion Sarich interview transcript, p. 10, F-67-1-0-32, Sara Diamond Women’s Labour History Interview Collection, 1979, SFU Archives.

⁹¹ Anne Marshall remembers learning about labour unionism from customers who were longshoremen during the 1924 strike: “The longshoremen gave me my first insight, that’s when I first got interested, when I was about 19,” Anne Marshall interview transcript, p. 2, F-67-1-0-21, Sara Diamond Women’s Labour History Interview

waitresses: “Women were encouraged by the return they received ... They improved the conditions, and it was something different for the first time in their lives.”⁹² Through the HREU, the waitresses expressed pride in their work and asserted the rights of women not only to a job, but also union work conditions. The Trocadero strike was followed by the unionization of a series of cafes, including the Only Fish, Melrose, and Love’s.⁹³ A strike at Scott’s Cafe blocked attempts by restaurant owners to force workers to join a competing company union.⁹⁴ By October 1937, there were twenty-eight union restaurants.⁹⁵

In December 1937, the HREU expressed “feeling[s] of pride to a year of progress,” celebrating their major successes unionizing cafes and hotels.⁹⁶ They did not mention the ban on white waitresses in Chinatown. During Foster’s campaign, the HREU refused to take an active role. They issued two public statements. In the *People’s Advocate*, Bill Stewart stated the union had no objection to white women working for Chinese employers.⁹⁷ After the waitresses were fired in early October, the HREU sent a resolution to Mayor Miller calling for the fired “girls” to “be provided with jobs or maintained at usual scale of pay.”⁹⁸ Beyond this resolution, the HREU did not discuss the matter at union meetings, call for the waitresses’ reinstatement to their jobs in Chinatown, or help the waitresses organize in protest.⁹⁹

Collection, 1979, SFU Archives. Barbara Stewart remembers the “unfair list” was an effective tactic since all union members blacklisted the restaurant. See Barbara Stewart interview transcript, p. 52, F-67-1-0-35, Sara Diamond Women’s Labour History Interview Collection, 1979, SFU Archives (hereafter Barbara Stewart interview).

⁹² Anita Andersen interview, p. 20.

⁹³ Daisy Brown interview transcript, p. 6, F-67-1-0-6, Sara Diamond Women’s Labour History Interview Collection, 1979, SFU Archives.

⁹⁴ “Local 28 Signs Up Scott’s Cafe,” *Labor Statesman*, September 1937, n.p.

⁹⁵ “Local 28 Gains Nearly Fifty Members,” *Labor Statesman*, October 1937, 1.

⁹⁶ “Local 28 Makes Continued Progress,” *Labor Statesman*, December 1937, n.p.

⁹⁷ “Cafe Girls Rap Action of Council,” *People’s Advocate*, 24 September 1937, 1.

⁹⁸ “Ask City Aid For Cafe Girls,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 October 1937, 5; “Cafe Workers Union Backs Ousted Girls,” *People’s Advocate*, 8 October 1937, 2; Regular Meetings of Local 28 Minute Book (Nov. 1, 1935 - Aug. 4, 1943), Box 5 - Local 28, HREU, Local 40 fonds, UBC RBSC.

⁹⁹ This is according to newspaper reports and the minute books of the HREU, Local 40 fonds, UBC RBSC.

The HREU leadership viewed the ban in moral terms, not as an issue of workers' rights. An oral history conducted in 1979 with Bill Stewart's future wife, Barbara Gale, shows how the union adopted the same moral discourse as Police Chief Foster. Gale was an active member of the waitress union in Vancouver during the 1930s and eventually replaced Bill Stewart as business agent of the HREU.¹⁰⁰ She briefly waitressed in a Chinatown cafe when she was fired from her previous job for picketing. For Gale, the cafe, owned by an "oriental" man and his white wife, was an alien environment: "The place was like a pig sty. I couldn't believe it, it was filthy. I was embarrassed working down there, I felt like I was in a foreign country."¹⁰¹ Soon after, Gale claimed she discovered the back room of the restaurant was being used for prostitution: "When I walked in this particular morning, I took a wrong turn and found that it was a house of prostitution ... I wondered where on the earth [the waitresses] went to ... in the back part of the shop ... Even the cook was under the influence of narcotics and he was sitting there in a chair with a great big long pipe."¹⁰² Although Gale claimed she "loved" Chinatown, clearly it was "so fascinating" not only as an exotic neighbourhood, but as a dirty, foreign, and vice-ridden neighbourhood.¹⁰³ In Chinatown, the Chinese engaged in immoral acts hidden behind curtains and in the back rooms of restaurants. Addicted to opium, they used trickery and deception, what Gale termed "skullduggery," to force the waitresses into prostitution.¹⁰⁴

Despite Bill Stewart's comment in the *People's Advocate*, Gale claimed the union supported the ban because women were "being used" in Chinatown cafes.¹⁰⁵ After a dispute with the owners of the Chinatown restaurant, she called Bill Stewart for help: "Boy, did he ball

¹⁰⁰ Fonds Description, p. 16, Sara Diamond Women's Labour History Interview Collection, 1979, SFU Archives.

¹⁰¹ Barbara Stewart interview, p. 25-26.

¹⁰² Barbara Stewart interview, p. 28.

¹⁰³ Barbara Stewart interview, p. 25.

¹⁰⁴ Barbara Stewart interview, p. 28.

¹⁰⁵ Barbara Stewart interview, p. 29.

me out for working in Chinatown ... union members [weren't] supposed to be down there.”¹⁰⁶ The HREU's slogan may have been “Every Restaurant a Union Restaurant,” but they had no interest organizing Chinatown cafes. In February 1937, on the other hand, the HREU took an active role in a waitress strike at the Chinese-run Crescent Cafe at 251 West Hastings Street, a mere block and a half away from Chinatown.¹⁰⁷ Bill Stewart suggested that an official be placed in the cafe to ensure union wages were paid.¹⁰⁸ In this case, the HREU stood up for the rights of workers. Inside the boundaries of Chinatown, however, the combination of race, gender, and sexuality became an inflammatory moral issue that overwhelmed the discourse about workers' rights.

Other organizations and politicians offered a degree of support to the fired waitresses, but they also employed this moral discourse. In October 1937, the Vancouver Mothers' Council, lawyer Garfield King, and a representative from the Women's Labor League met with city council on behalf of the waitresses. The Vancouver Mothers' Council, which grouped together women from various organizations including the CCF, the Local Council of Women, and the Women's Labour League, argued that the Chinatown waitresses needed jobs to support their families. Their main critique of the ban was that it was inconsistently applied since “white girls” worked with Chinese throughout Vancouver: “You should be consistent and not have whites and orientals working together anywhere.”¹⁰⁹ Lawyer Garfield King, on the other hand, argued the ban was inconsistent because it did not also target Japanese and Greek restaurant owners.¹¹⁰ As they spoke on behalf of the waitresses, they called for the expansion of the ban, not its

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Stewart interview, p. 26.

¹⁰⁷ Only the *Vancouver Sun* mentioned the owners were Chinese, “Waitresses on Strike, 13 February 1937, 1.

¹⁰⁸ “Union Would Handle Cafe to Pay Wages,” *Federationist*, 11 March 1937, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Vancouver Mothers' Council to Mayor Miller, 29 September 1937, “Vancouver - Miscellaneous (1937),” Series 20, 17-A-2, File 8, VCA.

¹¹⁰ “City Refuses Plea for Girls,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 October 1937, 2.

elimination. In response, CCF alderman Alfred Hurry expressed a degree of sympathy for the out-of-work waitresses. He was the only alderman to vote against Mayor Miller's motion for no action.¹¹¹ Instead of blaming city authorities, however, he had previously accused the Chinese of "bartering" the livelihoods of the women in exchange for their licenses. This was despite the fact that he voted to reinstate the licenses of the Chinese restaurants.¹¹² CCF Alderman Pettipiece was entirely unsympathetic. He stated the waitresses should be denied relief, since "no provision [was] made for bartenders when prohibition came into effect."¹¹³

Only the Communist *People's Advocate* condemned the ban against white waitresses. The newspaper viewed the ban as an "absurd Jim Crow law" that discriminated against Chinese business owners. It also unfairly deprived waitresses of their jobs: "Working girls should have the right to work for any employer, white, black or yellow, they can find to employ them."¹¹⁴ This was the sole voice of support for the Chinatown waitresses and restaurant owners. For white Vancouverites of both the middle and working classes, Chinatown cafes were immoral spaces that needed to be eliminated by city authorities.

Powder Boxes, Love-Sex Potions, and Treating: Cross-Racial Intimacies and Exchange in Chinatown Cafes

In contrast to the moral rhetoric of city authorities like Foster, the Chinatown cafes held very different meanings for the white waitresses, Chinese restaurant owners, and patrons. The

¹¹¹ "Chinese Cafe Protest Fails," *Province*, 12 October 1937, 1; "City Council Rejects Plea Of Cafe Girls," *People's Advocate*, 15 October 1937, 2.

¹¹² "Chinese Restaurant Licenses Restored," *Vancouver Sun*, 28 September 1937, 18; "Plight of Girl Waitresses In Chinese Cafe Case Aired," *Federationist*, 30 September 1937, 1. Except for this article, the CCF *Federationist* did not report on the ban on white waitresses in Chinatown.

¹¹³ "City Refuses Plea for Girls," *Vancouver Sun*, 12 October 1937, 1.

¹¹⁴ "Race Discrimination," *People's Advocate*, 17 September 1937, 6.

Chinatown cafes opened up a social space to explore cross-racial intimacies. Inside the cafes, they flirted, talked, formed friendships, and began sexual relationships. These intimacies developed out of the relationship of commercial exchange in the cafes. The Chinese customers treated the waitresses to dinner, gifts, or money in exchange for sexual intimacy, often in their rooms in Chinatown. These relationships fulfilled financial and emotional needs, desires for sex and gratification, and dreams of a life beyond the daily grind of work.

The Pender Cafe, where Dick Lee shot Mary Shaw, catered to Vancouver's large population of Chinese male labourers. Like the B.C. Royal, Gee Kong, and Hong Kong cafes, the Pender was what the Chinese termed "a western-style Chinese-run restaurant."¹¹⁵ Customers dropped by twenty-four hours a day for a quick coffee and apple turnover, a greasy breakfast, or a cheap "sausage-and-mashed" dinner.¹¹⁶ Most of the patrons were Chinese "bachelors" like Dick Lee who socialized in the cafes during off hours from work.¹¹⁷ Almost every night between nine o'clock and midnight, Lee visited the Pender Cafe after he finished working as a cook in an affluent household in Shaughnessy Heights.¹¹⁸ In Vancouver, most Chinese worked menial jobs in the service industries. As cooks and busboys in hotels and restaurants, houseboys in middle-class households, and laundry workers, they were relegated to low status "women's work." At the Chinatown cafes, they could finally relax, catch up on news and gossip, and - for a change - be served by waitresses.

¹¹⁵ According to Quene Yip, there were twenty restaurants in Vancouver's Chinatown in 1936, including nine cafes, nine ground-floor chop suey restaurants, and two "genuine" chop suey houses, *Vancouver Chinatown, Specially prepared for the Vancouver Golden Jubilee, 1886-1936* (Vancouver: Vancouver Golden Jubilee Chinese Carnival Board, 1936), 25.

¹¹⁶ "Restaurant Meals," *Vancouver Sun*, 27 January 1936, 4. "Epicure" wrote to the *Sun* saying he had paid up to 15 cents in a "Chinese joint" for a sausage-and-mashed with tea, bread and butter, soup and pie (or pudding), which was "not quite like what mother used to make." He suggested readers should go "to a white man's eatery" and pay 20 to 25 cents instead.

¹¹⁷ There would also have been the occasional Chinese family, white labourer, or tourist exploring the "exotic" side of the city.

¹¹⁸ British Columbia, Attorney-General, Coroners' Inquests, No. 324, 1931, BCA.

In the cafes, Chinese men had the rare opportunity to socialize with women. Even as late as 1947, Mary Chan described an uncomfortable level of attention in Chinatown: “When I walked down the street, everybody stared at me. So I didn’t walk down in Chinatown again. See, there were waitresses but not many other women in Chinatown.”¹¹⁹ The extreme gender disparity in the Chinese population led to a short supply of Chinese waitresses. Restaurant owners could have filled this gap with Chinese men, already hard at work as cooks and busboys in their kitchens. But they realized waitresses were key to attracting restaurant patrons. They turned to white working women.

By 1937, approximately thirty white waitresses worked in Chinatown cafes. They were young, with an average age of twenty-two years. During the Depression, with fathers, brothers, and husbands unable to find work, many of the waitresses supported their families. One third of the waitresses were married with a total of twenty-five dependents.¹²⁰ When she was murdered, Mary Shaw’s father, two brothers, married sister, and brother-in-law were all out of work.¹²¹ In Chinatown, the waitresses were able to find jobs that were scarce during the Depression.

By waitressing in Chinatown, they also gained a measure of autonomy and a sense of community. During the Depression, social reformers pushed unemployed women towards domestic service. Working women dreaded the long hours and low pay, constant supervision of their employers, and continual reminders of their low social status.¹²² After their shifts as waitresses, their time was their own, although often filled with family responsibilities. This did not mean their jobs were ideal. There was a high turnover in the Chinatown cafes. When Shaw

¹¹⁹ Daphne Marlatt and Carole Itter, *Opening Doors: Vancouver’s East End* (Victoria: Aural History Program, Province of British Columbia, 1979), 86.

¹²⁰ “City Refuses Plea for Girls,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 October 1937, 2.

¹²¹ “Ban on White Waitresses in Cafes Urged,” *Vancouver Sun*, 23 December 1931, 11.

¹²² Rebecca Coulter, “Young Women and Unemployment in the 1930s: The Home Service Solution,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 7.4 (1989): 145-166; Magda Fahrni, “‘Ruffled’ Mistresses and ‘Discontented’ Maids: Respectability and the Case of Domestic Service, 1880-1914,” *Labour/Le Travail* 39 (1997): 69-97.

was murdered, she had been working at the Pender for ten weeks, while Grace Leslie had been hired only two weeks before. Yet they had met six and a half months before the murder, when they both worked in different Chinatown cafes.¹²³ Although the waitresses moved between jobs, they stayed in Chinatown. They developed a sense of community based on their race, gender, and the social world they created in the cafes with their Chinese patrons.

The waitress-customer relationship was based on commercial exchange, but this became entangled with the intimacies of a service job. As the waitresses took orders and served food, they joked, talked, or flirted with patrons to make better tips. At the Pender Cafe, Dick Lee addressed the white waitresses as “sweetheart” and the Chinese waitress as “sister,” asking them to mimic the emotional bonds of a sibling or girlfriend.¹²⁴ With money at stake, some waitresses might have grudgingly played these roles; others developed feelings of affection and friendship for their customers. Waitress Grace Leslie expressed disbelief that Dick Lee, “a quiet chap ... [and] so decent,” had murdered Shaw.¹²⁵ Despite her feelings, none of the waitresses at the Pender Cafe returned Dick Lee’s terms of endearment. Instead, he was nicknamed “Ox-tongue-no-gravy” for his regular order. As waitresses became intimate with their customers, money remained ever-present.

Sexual intimacies developed out of the relationship of commercial exchange in the cafes. The Chinatown waitresses and their customers modified the practice of treating to avoid the policing of cross-racial intimacies. Instead of a night out on the town, Chinese men gave gifts or treated waitresses to dinner in Chinatown. In exchange, the waitresses offered sexual intimacy by paying a visit to their rooms. In Paul Yee’s *Saltwater City*, restaurant worker Lun Yee described a typical evening of treating in Vancouver’s Chinatown: “There were the white girls

¹²³ British Columbia, Attorney-General, Coroners’ Inquests, No. 324, 1931, BCA.

¹²⁴ “Chinese Slayer of Waitress in Cafe Insane?” *Vancouver Sun*, 21 December 1931, 18.

¹²⁵ “Chinese Slayer of Waitress in Cafe Insane?” *Vancouver Sun*, 21 December 1931, 18.

working as waitresses in the cafes of Chinatown [in the 1930s]. They were very friendly, and if you asked them, they might go out with you, for a snack or dinner. And then after a steak dinner, you could ask them to your room. You'd pay two or three dollars or as high as five."¹²⁶ Much to the frustration of Police Chief Foster, this "system [of] visiting the man's room" made it difficult to make an arrest based on the charge of prostitution. The Chinese and white waitresses blurred the definition of prostitution as they explored a broad range of relationships.

In some cases, waitresses practiced treating for purely functional reasons. Working low-paid, menial jobs during the hard times of the Depression, they needed money to supplement their income. In Vancouver, they were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, but their gender and race gave them increased status in Chinatown. Some used this to their advantage. Both the Chinese community and the Vancouver Police expressed concern about white "prostitutes" manipulating Chinese men. In 1936, the *Chinese Times* warned its readers about "groups of prostitutes trying to insult and disgrace overseas Chinese."¹²⁷ This warning was prompted by the story of a Chinese man named Seto who was duped by a white woman in Ottawa. The woman agreed to accompany Seto to a hotel room in exchange for twenty dollars to travel to Montreal. The newspaper commented, "She was especially tender with him and pretended to be in love. Seto was like putty in her hands." At her request, Seto left to buy food. When he returned, both she and his money were gone. He called the police. When they tracked down the woman, she claimed Seto tried to seduce her into prostitution. He was arrested and faced either a fine of \$107 or one month in jail. The article does not state what happened to the woman, but her use of the trope of white slavery might have worked in her favour or landed her in a reformatory. Most Chinese would not have called the police since they were well aware cross-racial sex was an

¹²⁶ Paul Yee, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988), 95.

¹²⁷ *Chinese Times*, 5 March 1931, 3.

inflammatory issue for white Canadians. Yet, even the Vancouver Police recognized manipulations were a frequent problem. For Detective-Sergeant Andrew S. Rae, the system of visiting rooms in Chinatown was the most “vicious” form of prostitution because “this class of prostitution usually leads to cases of robbery and theft, as the girls get to know individuals who carry or have a considerable sum of money and in turn tip off the pimp or a friend who commits the robbery.”¹²⁸ Some white waitresses skipped out on agreements with Chinese men, extracting money from easy targets.

For others, treating was a way to acquire luxury gifts of clothes and makeup they could not otherwise afford. Fashion and style were serious business for working women. It not only improved tips, it meant they could dress respectably and take part in the emerging beauty culture. Emily Nuttall, a waitress union activist during the Depression, remembers the care she took to preserve her pantyhose: “Silk hose, nylons were just unheard of, if you had one pair you washed them and you were very, very careful.”¹²⁹ Clothes and makeup allowed waitresses to dream beyond the restaurant walls. Like Joan Crawford, they could imagine being whisked away by Clark Gable, hair done in perfect curls and lips painted red. When Mary Shaw powdered her nose in front of the mirror in full view of restaurant patrons, she took control of her public space and claimed the spotlight like a Hollywood starlet. Like the women in Kathy Peiss’ study of beauty culture in *Hope in a Jar*, she not only took a break from work, she also indulged in dreams of beauty and romance.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Andrew S. Rae to Foster, 9 May 1939, “Police - Vice,” Series 483, 33-F-1, File 2, VCA. Rae stated that a young girl and her two “boy friends” were on trial for murdering a “Chinaman” called Woo Dack under similar circumstances.

¹²⁹ Emily Nuttall interview, p. 28.

¹³⁰ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 186.

In some cases, the practice of treating became part of this dream. In 1940, Wanda Woods, a “rather pretty blonde” girl of fifteen years, told police how she was approached by Chinese customers on her first day as a waitress at the Geck Lock Cafe: “One of the Chinamen wanted me to go to his room with him. Another one wanted me to go out with him to a Beer Parlour ... [I was] introduced ... to a young and well dressed Chinese name [*sic*] Wing or Wayne Hope. He speaks good English. He took me out for a walk. We went to Chinatown and went to the Flying Dragon cafe.”¹³¹ Inside the Geck Lock, Woods became a coveted object of desire. She considered her options. When she chose a “young and well dressed” Chinese man who spoke English, she did not just value money. She valued attractiveness and the ability to communicate, opening up the possibility not only for a night out on the town, but a more substantive relationship.

Other women chose to live with Chinese men. Police Chief Foster was frustrated by the number of waitresses “living with Chinamen.”¹³² In a letter to the mayor, he listed six examples, including Hong Kong Cafe waitress Kay Martin, who would later play an important role in the march on city hall. In June 1936, police found Kay Martin living with a Chinese man named Roy Fong. Waitress Jerry Wilson was also discovered in bed with one of her employers at the B.C. Royal Cafe: “[Restaurant owner Toy Hong] stated he had been living with this girl for about six weeks. [Jerry Wilson] said the man was good to her, giving her nice presents, and that she was able to take a day off when she pleased.”¹³³ Toy Hong was likely an older man who had worked his way up the social ladder in Vancouver. In exchange for sexual intimacy, Wilson received what she intimated was support and security.

¹³¹ McKay to City License Inspector, 5 March 1940, “Police Commission,” Series 483, 34-A-7, File 1, VCA.

¹³² Foster to Mayor Miller, 6 March 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA.

¹³³ Foster to Mayor Miller, 6 March 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA.

For the Chinese, treating filled an important social function in lives shaped by the system of racial oppression in Canada. In part, sex offered momentary escape from the hard work and loneliness of Chinese “bachelor” life in Vancouver. This can be seen in *The Chinese Laundryman*, Paul C. P. Siu’s sociological study of Chinese laundrymen in Chicago during the 1930s. Like the Chinese in Vancouver, the Chicago laundrymen came from a region in China’s Pearl River Delta called Taishan, which meant there were often family connections and movement between the two cities.¹³⁴ In one of Siu’s interviews, a newcomer to the laundry business used sex as a distraction from grueling physical labour: “The work in the laundry is too hard ... I spent my money right and left - on everything that made me happy. I had two places to keep mistresses.”¹³⁵ Some Chinese men treated white waitresses to inject sexual pleasure and gratification into lives that could otherwise be a monotonous daily grind.

The Chinese also used treating to assert their masculinity in a social and political context that often did not treat them as men. It is important to recognize the sexual worlds created by Chinese “bachelors” in Vancouver.¹³⁶ Some asserted a virile masculinity through sexual behaviour that objectified women. In the *Chinese Times*, apothecary shops advertised products to improve sexual potency and cure sexually transmitted diseases. In January 1937, the Man Ling Apothecary advertised an ointment for venereal disease by promising unlimited sex with prostitutes: “To gamble without losing money would be the ultimate industry/To use prostitutes without getting sores would be the ultimate achievement of a ladies’ man.”¹³⁷ On the same day, the Hen Sang Tong apothecary advertised a “Yang fortifying pill” that would “take effect in two

¹³⁴ Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 49-53, 74-86.

¹³⁵ Paul C. P. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*, ed. John Kuo Wei Tchen (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 115.

¹³⁶ See the growing literature on Chinese American sexuality, including Hsu, Lui, Shah, Ting.

¹³⁷ *Chinese Times*, 6 January 1937, 2.

hours so you can have sex with several women without tiring.”¹³⁸ Women were treated as bodies to be used and tallied. An advertisement for a “Sex, Love Potion” presented sex as a “battle” where men proved their prowess by conquering women: “A man’s joy in life is sex/When the two genders battle, it would be a pity for your weapons to be unsharpened before the war.”¹³⁹ In Vancouver, the Chinese visited brothels, asked hotel-keepers to send women to their rooms, or picked up waitresses in the Chinatown cafes.¹⁴⁰ These women were considered “cheeh-gai [cejie],” a term that specifically referred to prostitutes in America.¹⁴¹

Chinese men displayed their masculinity by gossiping about their sexual exploits. A conversation recorded by Paul Siu suggests the graphic way they talked about sex:

‘That fellow!’ Hsin-ming was relating a story about Mr. Chang with a prostitute, ‘He used some of that ‘love water’ on his thing. It took him about half an hour from making the girl. Oh, that head of his thing was nearly skinned. The girl knew that he used a drug; she was mad.’ ...
‘Oh! You shut up!’ retorted Mr. Chang. ‘How about you? It was you who began to use that sort of thing ... She didn’t please me at all. Give her two dollars and had to get out of the place quickly. Among us in this country, who does not go to see girls at all? ... The only worry is getting venereal disease.’¹⁴²

They bragged about their sexual relationships, teased each other, and tried to one-up their friends. As they asserted their strength and virility, they objectified women. For men such as Chang, the “prostitute” was a diseased body useful only for quick sexual gratification.

As the Chinese asserted this virile masculinity, some women were placed in dangerous situations. Although Foster’s files must be read with caution, the personal statement of the woman who got drunk and woke up in a “Chinaman’s” bed could be interpreted as a case of rape. Valued as sexual objects, women’s thoughts and feelings did not matter. In one of Paul

¹³⁸ *Chinese Times*, 6 January 1937, 2. Yang was the male organ or sexual energy.

¹³⁹ *Chinese Times*, 5 January 1937, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Yee, 98.

¹⁴¹ Siu, 251.

¹⁴² Siu, 252.

Siu's interviews, a Chinese man took pleasure in a woman's distress: "I got a bottle of those "little sweethearts" ... I made her four or five time. She cried while I was working on her. So pleasant."¹⁴³ Mary Shaw's murder was an exceptional case, but it also indicates the violence some women faced. As the Chinese asserted their virility, women confronted issues of consent, coercion, and violence.

But treating relationships also gave Chinese men the opportunity to assert a paternalistic masculinity. As Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu showed in *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home*, the Chinese were expected to care for their families back in China, sending regular cheques to their wives and children. They developed sophisticated networks of trade and communication through the *jinshanzhuang* or Gold Mountain firms, which allowed them to send remittances back home. An overwhelming number did. One-eighth of the money China received from abroad came from remittances sent to Taishan from the United States.¹⁴⁴ The overseas Chinese were also responsible for acts of philanthropy and social welfare in their home villages, building schools or railways.¹⁴⁵ Overseas, Chinese men could become the "butt of ridicule" if they neglected these duties.¹⁴⁶ By fulfilling these obligations, they were owed status and respect by their families and village. In some cases, they expressed this paternalistic masculinity in relationships with white women in Canada. Siu interviewed a Chinese man who spent an estimated ten to fifteen thousand dollars on a "mistress" he lived with for almost two years.¹⁴⁷

These intimacies were not just about money. As long-term relationships developed, likely so too did emotional bonds. In her family memoir *The Concubine's Children*, Denise Chong described how her grandmother May-ying, a waitress who moved between Vancouver,

¹⁴³ Siu, 269.

¹⁴⁴ Hsu, 40.

¹⁴⁵ Hsu, 40-53.

¹⁴⁶ Siu, 265.

¹⁴⁷ Siu, 115.

Victoria, and Nanaimo's Chinatowns, had liaisons with men that lasted for several years. In these cases, financial considerations and sexual gratification could become entangled with emotional attachment: "[My grandmother's] motive in these casual liaisons was mainly to help ease her financial problems ... The men would generously pay a gambling debt here or there or give her money to 'buy herself something.' Some may have been satisfied with physical gratification, some may have hoped for more, for a romantic love."¹⁴⁸ May-ying eventually left her husband for one of these men. Dick Lee's love letters to Mary Shaw show a similar desire for a relationship based on more than exchange. Police Chief Foster recorded the marriage of B.C. Royal Cafe waitress Jessie Pleasance and a Chinese man named Harry Chin.¹⁴⁹ To take this step when white Vancouverites not only frowned upon, but actively policed such relationships points to the fulfillment of mutual interests, but also the presence of strong feelings. As we will see with Hong Kong cafe waitress Kay Martin, the waitresses' experience in these relationships motivated their fight to keep the social world in the Chinatown cafes alive.

“They Treat Us Swell!”: The Protests of the Chinatown Waitresses and Chinese Restaurant Owners

Faced with the campaign to ban white waitresses from Chinatown, the Chinese restaurant owners and white waitresses took action in September and October 1937. Through the CBA, the restaurant owners tried to negotiate an agreement with city council. When they failed, fifteen Chinatown waitresses marched on city hall. Although they did not form a political alliance, both

¹⁴⁸ Denise Chong, *The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided* (Toronto: Penguin, 1994), 93.

¹⁴⁹ Foster to Mayor Miller, 6 March 1937, "White Girls in Chinese Restaurants," Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA. Waitress representative Margaret West told the *Vancouver Sun* one waitress was married to a Chinese customer, "Chinese Cafe Owners Dismiss 15 White Girls," 25 September 1937, 8.

groups challenged the moral discourse of city authorities such as Police Chief Foster. The Chinese dismissed the charges of immorality, placing the ban within the long history of racial discrimination in Canada. The fifteen waitresses proclaimed their rights as workers, asserted their respectability as women, and defended their Chinese employers.

For the Chinese restaurant owners, the ban was clear racial discrimination. Charlie Ting (Lum Fun Ting), owner of the Hong Kong Cafe and president of the CBA, acted as spokesman for the Chinese restaurant owners. Ting had migrated to Canada when he was seventeen, starting off as a contractor in the lumber industry before working his way up to his status as a merchant in the restaurant and food import business. Because of his privileged position, Ting was able to bring his Chinese wife to Canada and form a family with two daughters and three sons. He was also a member of the United Church.¹⁵⁰ As an established member of the Chinese community in Vancouver, Ting was insulted by the ban: “The excuse of closing the places because they hire white girls is too weak to fool anyone ... If the girls are allowed to work in Oriental cafes uptown, why should they not be allowed to do likewise in Chinatown. It must be a geographical reason.”¹⁵¹ In Ting’s opinion, city authorities used morality as an “excuse” to discriminate against the Chinese. CBA lawyer Denis Murphy expressed this same opinion in a letter to the mayor: “Our clients ... expect ... they will not be singled out for any special treatment over and above what treatment is handed out to other reputable restaurant proprietors no matter what creed or colour they may chance to have.”¹⁵²

The *Chinese Times* took this critique further. In a two-part editorial entitled “Anti-Chinese Incidents Strike Again in Vancouver,” the newspaper argued the ban was part of a long history of aggressive measures aimed at eradicating the Chinese from Canada. The editorial

¹⁵⁰ “Impressive Ceremony At Chinese Funeral,” *Vancouver Sun*, 20 March 1939, 3.

¹⁵¹ “Chinese Sue City Council,” *Vancouver Sun*, 18 September 1937, 3.

¹⁵² Murphy to Mayor Miller, 6 May 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA.

called the ban a “laughable political game” that was actually about “distinguishing between yellow and white.” Anti-Chinese measures such as the Exclusion Act were especially unjust since the Chinese had made major contributions to the development of Canada: “[The Chinese] constructed the railway and developed the land so that cities are now standing ... Yet the Westerners treat my Chinese overseas brothers without appreciation, only contempt.” The ban on white waitresses was part of an attempt to “extinguish Chinese footsteps in Canada,” erasing their long history in order to perpetuate the fiction of a white Canada built in the image of Great Britain.¹⁵³ In this context, the ban was an urgent threat that required immediate action.

The Chinese restaurant owners turned to the CBA for aid, an organization with a long history of defending the interests of the Chinese community in Canada.¹⁵⁴ The CBA took legal and diplomatic action. The organization hired lawyer Denis Murphy, visited city council, and held a banquet with city aldermen to discuss the ban.¹⁵⁵ But initial negotiations failed. Murphy was denied an injunction to halt city interference with the restaurants. The next step was to take the case to Supreme Court, where Murphy would argue the city bylaws were *ultra vires* because they were in restraint of trade.¹⁵⁶ The CBA chose to avoid this lengthy legal battle. Instead, the restaurant owners in Chinatown agreed to fire their waitresses by October 1st as a “goodwill gesture.”¹⁵⁷ City prosecutor Oscar Orr regarded the CBA as an ally during the campaign, recommending they be “commended” for efforts to “remove any cause of complaint” in the

¹⁵³ *Chinese Times*, 13 October 1937, 1; 14 October 1937, 1.

¹⁵⁴ Walker, 89-90, Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 37-40, Lai.

¹⁵⁵ *Chinese Times*, 8 February 1937, 3.

¹⁵⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, “City Cancels Cafe Licenses of 3 Chinese,” 16 September 1937, 1; “Chinese Cafe Men Defy City,” 17 September 1937, 1; “Chinese Sue City Council,” 18 September 1937, 1; “Cafes Seek To Enjoin City,” 20 September 1937, 10; “Police Picket Chinese Cafes,” 23 September 1937, 3.

¹⁵⁷ Murphy to Oscar Orr, 29 September 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA.

cafes.¹⁵⁸ The CBA's decision kept revenue flowing for the restaurant owners and fostered cross-racial alliances among the elite. To protect the interests of the Chinese merchants, they sacrificed the jobs of the waitresses.

Yet, some of the restaurant owners felt a sense of obligation towards their former employees. Charlie Ting defended the waitresses, declaring to the *Vancouver Sun*: “[They] have to make a living.”¹⁵⁹ He realized the waitresses faced hardship if they lost their jobs. Over a month after the waitresses were fired, they were still in touch with their former employers. In November 1937, Charlie Ting and Gee Kong Cafe owner Harry Lee almost lost their licenses when police discovered they were feeding former waitresses in return for a few hours of unpaid work. City council backed down after CBA Secretary Foon Sien Wong delivered an impassioned speech, arguing the restaurant owners were merely following Confucian beliefs by helping the “hungry” waitresses.¹⁶⁰ There were affective ties between the Chinese restaurant owners and white waitresses, but the Chinese did not offer political support to their fired employees. It was up to the waitresses to take a stand.

On September 25, 1937, fifteen Chinatown waitresses marched on city hall. Among them was Kay Martin, still working at the Hong Kong Cafe over a year after the police had discovered she was living with Roy Fong. This was not the first time the waitresses descended on city hall. When their jobs were first threatened in February, twenty-five waitresses - almost all of the estimated thirty in Chinatown - met with Mayor Miller.¹⁶¹ This time, the fifteen

¹⁵⁸ Oscar Orr to Mayor Miller, 30 September 1937, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-D-6, File 4, CVA.

¹⁵⁹ “Chinese Sue City Council,” *Vancouver Sun*, 18 September 1937, 3.

¹⁶⁰ “City Restores Licenses to Two Chinese Cafes,” *Vancouver Sun*, 24 November 1937, 4; “Vancouver, Canada - Chinese Benevolent Association Book of Reports, 1938,” Box 12, Foon Sien Wong fonds, UBC RBSC. After they were fired, the waitresses also declared their intention to “[canvass] Chinese merchants for funds” so they could fight the ban at city council, “Ousted Girls Fight Ruling,” *People's Advocate*, 8 October 1937, 3.

¹⁶¹ “White Girls Protest Ban on Oriental Work,” *Province*, 1 February 1937, 1.

Chinatown waitresses were denied a meeting. Their “desperate plea” became front page news in the *Vancouver Sun*, complete with photographs of their “parade” on city hall.¹⁶²

The Chinatown waitresses rejected the notion the ban “protected” the morals of white women. In the opinion of one waitress who spoke to the *Vancouver Sun*, city authorities were meddling in their private lives: “[They are] a bunch of fussy old bridge-playing gossips who are self-appointed directors of morals for the girls in Chinatown ... We must live and heaven knows if a girl is inclined to go wrong, she can do it just as readily on Granville Street as she can down here.”¹⁶³ Instead of “protecting” the waitresses, the “old bridge-playing gossips” were turning them out on the street.

Their Chinese employers gave them jobs they needed to support themselves and their families: “We are fired just at a time when Old Man Winter comes along ... Many of us support families and are right up against it.”¹⁶⁴ In a letter to the mayor, an anonymous Chinatown waitress pointed to the absurdity of taking away jobs when people were desperate for work: “Why are individuals denied the right to work and forced to live on starving relief.”¹⁶⁵ City authorities had reduced the waitresses to the position of unemployed men. Two waitresses told the *People’s Advocate* they would “go on the streets with tin cans with single unemployed boys” if they were denied relief.¹⁶⁶ Like unemployed men, they claimed access to government aid: “The city has taken away our jobs, therefore it is up to them to find other jobs or give us funds to live on.”¹⁶⁷ The waitresses defended their rights as workers.

¹⁶² “Chinese Cafe Owners Dismiss 15 White Girls,” *Vancouver Sun*, 25 September 1937, 1.

¹⁶³ “City Cancels Cafe Licenses of 3 Chinese,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 September 1937, 2.

¹⁶⁴ “Chinese Cafe Owners Dismiss 15 White Girls,” *Vancouver Sun*, 25 September 1937, 8.

¹⁶⁵ Anonymous to Mayor Telford, 8 March 1939, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-F-3, File 11, CVA.

¹⁶⁶ “City Council Rejects Plea of Cafe Girls,” *People’s Advocate*, 15 October 1937, 2.

¹⁶⁷ “Cafe Girls Rap Action of Council,” *People’s Advocate*, 24 September 1937, 1.

In the cafes, they gained not only much-needed work, but also the means to respectability. Waitress representative Margaret West critiqued city authorities for firing the waitresses when “most of the girls have bought winter clothes and are still paying for them.”¹⁶⁸ They needed winter clothes to dress warmly, but also to signal respectability. The waitresses resented having their reputations called into question. As they marched on city hall, they self-consciously put themselves on display (Figure 1). The waitresses visibly contradicted the notion they were shady, victimized, and diseased prostitutes by performing respectability. The *Vancouver Sun*'s photographs show the waitresses walking two-by-two in an orderly line. They wore the latest fashion and style. Their hair was curled, at least three sported the fashionable “pert” hat tilted at a “jaunty” angle, while others had on necklaces and carried clutch purses.¹⁶⁹ They waved at the photographers and posed for pictures, seemingly thrilled at being the centre of attention. Waitress Kay Martin smiled widely for the cameras, while Fay Martin played coy (Figure 2). By taking to the streets, the waitresses expressed pride in their identity and their work. They were respectable citizens of Vancouver who had the right to sit down to a meeting with the mayor.

¹⁶⁸ “Chinese Cafe Owners Dismiss 15 White Girls,” *Vancouver Sun*, 25 September 1937, 8.

¹⁶⁹ Pauline Weston Thomas, “1930s Hat Fashions - Costume History Pictures,” accessed 26 June 2010, http://www.fashion-era.com/hats-hair/hats_hair_8_fashion_history_1930_1940.htm. Also see John Peacock, *Fashion Sketchbook, 1920-1960* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 53-63.



Figure 1 - Fifteen Chinatown waitresses march on city hall.
Source: "Dismissed Girls Parade to City Hall," *Vancouver Sun*, 25 September 1937, 1.



Figure 2 - Chinatown waitresses pose for *Vancouver Sun*.

(From left, upper) Peggy Parker and Fay Walker.

(From left, lower) Kay Martin, waitress at Hong Kong Cafe, Margaret West, waitress at Modernized Cafe and representative for the group, and Dorothy Crutchley, Hong Kong Cafe.

Source: "Dismissed Girls Parade to City Hall," *Vancouver Sun*, 25 September 1937, 1.

The waitresses argued the Chinese restaurant owners were also respectable. They defended their employers by holding up Chinese paternalistic masculinity as an ideal. One of the most vocal was Kay Martin: “They treat us swell. We work eight hours each day, seven days a week and are paid good wages. There is never any trouble with the [Chinese] boss.”¹⁷⁰ Not only did the Chinese restaurant owners provide good work conditions, Chinese employers at the Royal Cafe gave mothers special “consideration” with flexible shift arrangements so they could look after their babies.¹⁷¹ In the cafes, Kay Martin insisted they were never forced to go out with customers.¹⁷² The real threat came from the rough, white male labourer, who tried to throw around his weight in the cafes: “[There are no problems with customers, except] the odd rowdy white young fellow who imagined he was in a tough joint.”¹⁷³ In the waitresses’ opinion, they were treated better in the Chinatown cafes than in a lot of “high-class places.”¹⁷⁴

As the waitresses tried to express why they valued their Chinese employers, they drew comparisons. Kay Martin declared: “I would much prefer working for a Chinese employer than for some other nationalities.”¹⁷⁵ In a letter to the mayor, an anonymous waitress defended her Chinese employer by scapegoating Jewish bosses: “I have worked with many girls in my life ... they will all tell you that they have never been molested more in their life than working for Jews ... There is more vice goes on with this class than with any other nationality. We are slaves when we work for Jews. But not for Chinamen.”¹⁷⁶ The waitresses understood the Chinese were angry about the “principle” of racial discrimination: “[Our employer] could easily have fired us and taken on Chinese waiters, but that isn't the point. They feel that the present city by-law on

¹⁷⁰ “City Cancels Cafe Licenses of 3 Chinese,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 September 1937, 2.

¹⁷¹ “Cafe Girls Rap Action of Council,” *People’s Advocate*, 24 September 1937, 1.

¹⁷² “City Cancels Cafe Licenses of 3 Chinese,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 September 1937, 2.

¹⁷³ “Cafe Girls Rap Action of Council,” *People’s Advocate*, 24 September 1937, 1.

¹⁷⁴ “City Cancels Cafe Licenses of 3 Chinese,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 September 1937, 2.

¹⁷⁵ “City Cancels Cafe Licenses of 3 Chinese,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 September 1937, 2.

¹⁷⁶ Anonymous to Mayor Telford, 8 March 1939, “White Girls in Chinese Restaurants,” Series 483, 33-F-3, File 11, CVA.

this question is not only illegal but an insult to their pride.”¹⁷⁷ But this did not mean the white waitresses questioned the entire racial hierarchy.

Both the Chinese restaurant owners and the waitresses wanted the same thing: white waitresses in Chinatown cafes. As they fought to keep their jobs and employees, neither group successfully overrode contemporary racial and gender biases. But their experience in the Chinatown cafes gave the fifteen waitresses who marched on city hall the conviction to take a political stand.

Conclusions: Taking a Political Stand

Over the late 1930s, white waitresses remained banned from Vancouver’s Chinatown cafes. When Charlie Ting challenged the ban in August 1938, his license was immediately cancelled.¹⁷⁸ The following year, a group of former Chinatown waitresses, who claimed they still had no jobs, petitioned the city to lift the ban. The civic finance committee turned the decision over to Police Chief Foster. His opinion had not changed: “In view of the conditions under which these girls are expected to work ... it is almost impossible for them to be so employed without falling victims to some form of immoral life.”¹⁷⁹ After Foster left the Vancouver Police Department to volunteer for military service, the police continued to keep

¹⁷⁷ “Cafe Girls Rap Action of Council,” *People’s Advocate*, 24 September 1937, 1.

¹⁷⁸ “Chinese to Defy Cafe License Cancellation,” *Vancouver Sun*, 16 August 1938, 9; “Council Waits For Mayor on Cafe License,” *Vancouver Sun*, 13 September 1938, 12; “Chinese Restaurant License Cancelled,” *Province*, 15 August 1938, 1; “Chinese Restaurant Defies City’s Order,” *Province*, 17 August 1938, 2.

¹⁷⁹ “Ban to Stay on White Waitresses,” *Vancouver Sun*, 21 March 1939, 11. Also see “Employment of White Girls In Chinatown Up to Foster,” *Province*, 8 March 1939, 9.

watch over the Chinatown cafes.¹⁸⁰ The employment of white waitresses in Chinatown did not again explode into major controversy, but it remained an issue into the 1940s.¹⁸¹

The ban closed down a unique space in Vancouver. Inside the Chinatown cafes, the white waitresses and Chinese customers reached an understanding as they fulfilled mutual needs and desires - from the commercial to the sexual and romantic. They created intimate practices that gave them choices and opportunities not available outside of Chinatown. As they fought for their jobs, they also tried to keep these intimate spaces alive. But they failed. These spaces did not reemerge in the post-war era of immigration liberalization. As Chinese wives and children were admitted into the country, “bachelor” society gradually disappeared. The Chinatown cafes were transformed.

The fifteen waitresses who marched on city hall lost the rich social world in the Chinatown cafes. Through this loss, however, they gained self-awareness. During their protest, they rejected the biases and unfair regulation of white waitresses, Chinese restaurant owners, and patrons. The ban threatened their livelihoods, but more importantly, it was *wrong*. The waitresses scoffed at the notion they were degraded prostitutes and the Chinese opium-smoking fiends. Their experience in the Chinatown cafes had taught them better. They marched on city hall to issue a challenge to those at the top of the political system. Through their fight, they expressed an understanding of and resistance to their construction in the gendered and racial order. They took a political stand as they articulated why the Chinatown cafes held value in their lives and in Vancouver.

¹⁸⁰ McKay to City License Inspector, 5 March 1940, “Police Commission,” Series 483, 34-A-7, File 1, VCA.

¹⁸¹ The League of Women Voters wrote to the city clerk in 1943 because “white girl’s [*sic*] are acting as waitresses in a Chinese restaurant,” Jessie Hollis to City Clerk Fred Howlett, 17 February 1943, “Chinese Restaurants and Employment of White Girls (1943),” Series 480, City Law Department fonds, 115-C-3, File 18, VCA. This was reported in the *Chinese Times*, 24 February 1943, 3.

The significance of this act is lost to historians who focus on dominant discourses and treat studies of working women and the Chinese as separate histories. The Chinatown waitresses knew they had something important to say, if only the “fussy old bridge-playing gossips” would listen. Their voices show how ordinary people could have the opportunity to challenge dominant discourses of race and gender. Historians remember the 1930s as a period when attitudes towards the Chinese and working women were gradually shifting towards increased racial and gender tolerance. These fifteen white waitresses were at the forefront of this change.

Charlie Ting died a month before the ban was challenged for the last time in March 1939. As president of the CBA, Charlie Ting received the first public funeral for a Chinese official in Canada. A “monster procession” of two hundred motor cars and an estimated one thousand people paraded through Chinatown before leaving for the Chinese section of Mountain View cemetery.¹⁸² In attendance were Dr. C. H. Pao, the Chinese Consul for Western Canada, as well as representatives from the major Chinese organizations in Canada. Lawyer Denis Murphy was an honorary pallbearer and, ironically, the *Chinese Times* reported the presence of Alderman Halford D. Wilson, who had first prompted Police Chief Foster to launch the campaign to ban white waitresses from Chinatown.¹⁸³ A day after his funeral, the *Vancouver Sun* reported the ban on white waitresses would stay.¹⁸⁴ Charlie Ting failed to lift the ban, but his advocacy and leadership for the Chinese community were not forgotten. He received a hero’s burial.

After they marched on city hall, the Chinatown waitresses disappeared from the newspapers. The former waitresses who challenged the ban in 1939 remained nameless, making it impossible to determine whether they were the same group who protested two years before. How did the Chinatown waitresses support themselves and their families after they lost their

¹⁸² “Impressive Ceremony At Chinese Funeral,” *Vancouver Sun*, 20 March 1939, 3.

¹⁸³ *Chinese Times*, 18 March 1939, 3; 20 March 1939, 3.

¹⁸⁴ “Ban to Stay on White Waitresses,” *Vancouver Sun*, 21 March 1939, 11.

jobs? Did they stay in touch with their former Chinese employers and customers? What stories did they tell their families and children about the protest? Nobody cared to ask.

Yet these waitresses played a critical role in mid-1930s Vancouver. They challenged city authorities by asserting their right to free labour choices and intimate relationships with whomever they chose. They understood how the entanglements of race, gender, and sexuality could so easily turn into an explosive moral issue. They had lost their jobs and their reputations. But they took on the mayor and the police chief. They demanded that they and their Chinese employers be treated as respectable citizens of Vancouver. Their protest failed, but the significance of their act lives on.

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