Participation of Chinese Pioneers in British Columbia Salmon Canneries, 1880s to 1920s

Abstract: It is generally accepted that the salmon canning industry in British Columbia could not have functioned without Chinese labourers. This study examines the economic contribution of Chinese workers, measured by their labour input for each carton of canned salmon produced. The period of study, from 1880s to 1920s, covers a time when canning was labour intensive. Salmon catch had to be discarded at peak season due to labour shortage. Short seasons and unsteady employment made experienced hands hard to retain. This gave rise to the Chinese contract system. To add a human dimension to the Chinese cannery pioneers, the name and the deeds of some Chinese contractors and their workers are presented.

Key Words: Salmon Cannery, Chinese Fishermen, Chinese labourer, contractor, Lee Coy (李衢, 字祐樞), Yip Sang (葉永生, 字春田), Sit Sang (薛勝, 字會可), Chong Dot (蔣炳達, 字安鰲), Chong Tee Poy (蔣池沛, 字會可), Chung Sat (蔣述, 字國多), Lue Mong (劉望, 字崇厚), Moy Kwok Village (梅閣鄉), Sa Duoy Village (沙堆鄉), Sun Woy County (新會縣), Sun Kum Wo (新錦和), Kwong On Wo Company (廣安和), New Westminster Chinese Benevolent Association (二埠中華慈善會), Kong Chow Benevolent Association (雲高華埠岡州總會館), New Westminster (二埠, 鳥埠), The Chinese Times (大漢公報), Mount Saint Joseph Hospital (聖約瑟院醫), Cumshewa Cannery (冚暑嘩魚濕).

By Rudy M.T. Chiang 蔣汶德, Vancouver, B.C.

Preface
This study attempts to capture the contribution of the Chinese work force from the infancy of the B.C. salmon canning industry in 1870s. Though Chinese and First Nations workers made up of 95% of the cannery workforce, they were paid less than 10% of the salmon pack value. Their skilled labour input was far more valuable than what they were paid. The 1904 pack of 465,894 cases brought $2.5 million (in 1904 dollars) to the B.C. economy. Without these hard working men and women, the wealth created would not have been possible.

Infancy Period of 1870s to 1880s
- Two salmon canneries were built in 1870. Alexander Loggie & Co. was built on the Fraser River at Annieville, or Gunerson Slough as we know it today. It was moved to New Westminster in 1873, and later sold to Alexander Ewen in 1876. The second was Stamp & Co., situated on the bank of Sapperton, New Westminster. It was sold two year later. Nine addition canneries were built by the end of 1879.
- The production of these canneries was believed to be small but labour intensive. First Nations and Chinese workers provided the labour input.
Canadian Census of 1881
The Census of 1881, made available on-line by Library and Archives Canada, listed 76 Chinese fishermen living in New Westminster North, Sub District 187B. In the North, 101 Chinese labourers resided at 3 cannery camps on the Skeena River and Nass Harbour of Sub District 187D, Coast of Mainland.

Record of Chinese Fishermen in the 1881 Census
The Census of 1881 provided interesting information about the 76 fishermen of Chinese origin in Sub District 187 B, North. They lived in four different households. Although 50% of them were married, only Kai Gum had his family with him. Their age ranged from 15 to 46, though the average was 30.5, the biggest age group was 35, Appendix 1. The data on Sub District 187 B, North provide us the following insight:

- Fisherman Chun Joy, age 30, lived in House No. 244, the household of restaurant keeper Wah Nuy. Wah, age 40, was living with his wife Mary Wah and their two daughters, Jow Sun and Ah Wu. Mary and her girls were all born in B.C., though Mary, age 30, did not identify her ethnicity. Right next to them lived Won Lin Sing and his family of eight in House 243. Won Cymou was a 20 year old young man at the time.
- In House No. 253, Family 256, fisherman Kai Gum, age 40, lived with wife Ah Chong, age 38, and 20-year-old Tai Gum and 3-year-old Ah Yong. Tai Gum and Ah Yong were presumably their daughters. Their religion was Buddhist.
- In House No. 264, Ah Kee, age 32 operated a boarding house where 32 Chinese fishermen lived. Thirteen of them were married (40%), but none had family with them.
- House no. 265 was home to 42 fishermen. Most gave their last name first, followed by the first name, an indication that they understood English. Sixty percent of them were married, but they too lived a bachelor’s life. First on the list was Wou Don, followed by You Keet and Jew Long. Foreman Lee Coy, age 26 was last on the list.
- Living in the same house with Lee Coy and the 42 fishermen was a 40-year-old cook Chin Tiu, married, and Gardner Ah Fu, age 31. Ah Fu lived with his wife Fu Chui (age 25) and their children Fu Nu (female, age 7), Fu Pang (female, age 6), Fu Mong (male, age 4), and Fu Loom (male, age 2). The family of Ah Fu probably arrived recently, since two-year-old Fu Loom was born in China. Ling Lu, age 24, unemployed also stayed at the house.
- House no. 266 was B.C. Penitentiary, where Warren McBride, his family of four, a Deputy Warren and five guards lived. They guarded 39 inmates, 9 of them, or 25%, were Chinese.

The community where the 76 Chinese fishermen lived was not identified in the Census. It is believed to be a part of New Westminster located near the B.C. Penitentiary. The name “North” might suggest Sub District 187 B was the North portion of the Royal City.

Sub District 187 B had a population of 3,003, among which were 263 Chinese. They made up 9% of the local population, whereas English, Scot, and Irish accounted for 60%. The 76 Chinese fishermen, on the other hand, lead the majority at 65% of the 116 fishermen in Royal City North. It was the Chinese fishermen who hauled in the bulk of the 1881 catch to New West canneries.
Sub District 187 A, South, listed only 2 fishermen, a Scot and an English. It has a Chinese population of 219 (or 14%) among the 1,540 residents. By occupation, 190 of the 246 labourers were Chinese. It appeared that the Southside of Royal City was where the 77% strong Chinese labour force lived. A good number of them were probably skilled cannery hands working at the canneries along Front Street.

The combined population of New Westminster North and South (SD 187, A & B) was 4,543, of which the 482 Chinese made up 11%. Chinese inmates at the B.C. Penitentiary numbered 25%.

**1881 Census: Record of Chinese Cannery Workers in B.C. North**

In Sub District 187D, Division 3, Coast of Mainland reported 101 Chinese (Appendix 2). They were engaged at the Nass, Aberdeen, and Inverness canneries. The Census was taken during summer months in this part of the B.C. North Coast. The names of the 101 Chinese pioneers

- In 1881, a new fish cannery headed by an American carpenter, J.L. Campbell, was being established at Nass Harbour. The company engaged 38 workers, of which were 11 Caucasians and 27 Chinese. Caucasian workers consisted of 1 clerk, 2 carpenters, 1 cooper, 1 tinsmith, 1 slother [slitter?], 1 net mulher (net boss?), 2 labourers, and 2 fishermen. In House No.12 lived the 27 Chinese labourers. The enumerator could not ascertain their age or marital status. The Chinese totalled 71% of the crew at the Nass.
- Built in 1878, the Aberdeen Fishery on Skeena was managed by W.H. Dempster. The 19 Caucasian workers he hired consisted of 1 storekeeper, 1 canner, 1 blacksmith, 1 watchman, 3 labourers, and 11 fishermen. In House No. 18, the Chinese crew of 32 made up the balance of the 52 men shop. The Chinese was 62% of the Aberdeen crew.
- Established in 1876, the Inverness Fishery on Skeena was managed by J. E. White. His Caucasian crew of 8 consisted of 1 bookkeeper, 2 canners, 1 blacksmith, 1 charcoal burner, 1 boat builder, 1 fisherman, and 1 miner. In House No. 21 lived 42 Chinese, among them were Ting Fook, Wa Chung, Lung Hon, Sam Lung, Sung Hoon, Hip Foo, & You Koon. The Chinese crew accounted for 82% of the Inverness Shop.
- A Caucasian manager and a handful of skilled tradesmen headed each cannery. A Chinese crew and a local crew did the labour intensive processing. The size of the Chinese crew depended on the anticipated pack (output) for the season. Table 1 compares the ratio of Caucasian to Chinese worker for each shop. The 1:5 ratio at Inverness Cannery might suggest that it was a bigger plant and processed a larger pack with the help of more Chinese.

Table 1: Ratio of Caucasian to Chinese Workers in North Coast Canneries, Census 1881

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cannery</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Caucasian:Chinese</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Chinese %</th>
<th>Fishermen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nass</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1:3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeen</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1:4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inverness</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1:5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>1:4</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- According to Cicely Lyons, the 1881 salmon pack for Skeena and Nass River was 21,560 and 7,700 cases, respectively. Base on a 1:1 ratio for a Chinese crew and a local crew, the output per worker, measured in “Cases per Worker-Season”, is given in Table 2.
Table 2: Worker Output Base on the 1881 Salmon Pack for Skeena River and Nass River.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catch Area</th>
<th>Salmon Pack (48 lb Case)</th>
<th>Caucasian Worker</th>
<th>Chinese Worker</th>
<th>Local Worker (Estimate)</th>
<th>Worker Total</th>
<th>Cases per Worker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skeena River</td>
<td>21,560</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>126.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nass River</td>
<td>7,700</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>116.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Season Total</td>
<td>29,260</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>124.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- The estimate of **236 workers required to pack 29,260 cases** (48 pounds each) gave an averaged output of 124 cases per worker per season. Assuming the 1881 season had 50 full canning days, the daily output per worker would be 2.5 cases per worker-day. For ½ lb cans, the production rate came to 120 can per person per day, from tin plate to fully cooked bright cans. In reality, the Chinese crew would stay longer to do the preparation and the wrap up work.

- Only 21 fishermen were listed in Division 3 of Sub District 187 D, which covered Nass Harbour, Port Essington, and Skeena River. First Nations fishermen were grouped in a “Coast Indians” sub division and enumerated separately in 187 D. First Nations fishermen numbered 183 out of a total of 220 in SD187 D. The bulk of their catch was kept as food supply. Perhaps only 60 of the fishers would sell their catch to canners.

- The 1881 pack commanded an export price of $5.029 per case\(^{17}\). The Northern pack would fetch $146,885 (estimate). Workers were paid $30 to $32 per month in the late 1880s to 1890s, according to Lyons\(^{18}\). For a 2-month season, a worker would get at most $65. The combined wages of 236 workers would thus be $15,340, a mere 10% of the pack value. Had they worked the full 3 month season, their share would increase to 15% of the pack, or less than $100 each.

- According to Statistics Canada, base on year ending 1880, the 1881 value for Preserved Fish was $2,685,861. The material cost was 42%. The cost of labour was a staggering 26% at $707,462. The 8,453 workers earned an average wages of $83.70 each\(^{19}\). It should be noted that salted cod in Atlantic Provinces was labour intensive as well.

- The Value to Capital ratio was 2.2. Compared to the Meat sector of 2.8 and the Flouring Mill sector of 3.0, Fish was more capital-intensive\(^{19}\). These are ballpark comparisons only; no conclusion should be drawn without checking the data source.

- Labour was paid only 10% to 15% of the Skeena and Nass pack, though it contributed 80% of the capita input. Wages commanded 26% of the total value of the Canadian Fish (Preserved) sector in 1881. The Chinese and First Nations workers received far less. Were they less diligent or were they paid less because they did not fit the social “norm”?  

Division 3 of Sub District 187 D covered Nass Harbour, Port Essington, Skeena River, Bella Bella, Bella Coola, and Alert Bay. It recruited a population of 295, of which 142 belonged to the First Nations, and 101 were Chinese (who worked at the 3 canneries). The balance of 52 was mostly Scots, Irish, English, Welch, and a few Norwegians. First Nations accounted for 48% of the population, and the Chinese 34%, in Division 3, Sub District D, Coast of Mainland.

**Economic contribution as a percentage of the total work force**

pack. Doyle estimated that a typical single canning line operation, with mechanized cutter, filler & weighter, 2 steam boxes, and 3 retorts, the crew requirement (Table 3) was:

- Labour required to process 600 cases of ½ lb. cans per day: a crew of 111, consisting of 6 whites, 50 Chinese, and 55 First Nations.
- Labour required to process 800 cases of ½ lb. cans per day: a crew of 153, consisting of 6 whites, 62 Chinese, and 85 First Nations.

Table 3. Michael Doyle’s projection on work crew required for a single line operation in 1904.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>½ lb Pack</th>
<th>Caucasian Worker</th>
<th>Chinese Worker</th>
<th>First Nations Worker</th>
<th>Total Workers</th>
<th>Cases / Worker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>600</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- In 1904 Doyle’s calculated output was 5.4 cases per worker-day, base on half-pound cans (flats). This output doubled that of the 1881 estimate of 2.5 cases per worker-day in Skeena and Nass. Mechanization of the canning line has doubled the productivity.
- Fifty canneries operated in 1904, they produced a B.C. pack of 465,894 cases. It would take 93,179 worker-days to do the job, at an average rate of 5.0 cases/worker-day. Divided by 50 canneries, each cannery would process 1,863 worker-days. Thus a crew of 100 might only work 18.6 full days in a 60-day season. 1904 was not a good year.
- In reality, canneries hired a smaller local crew during slow season.
- Base on Table 3, the 50 operating canneries in 1904 would engage 2,800 Caucasian and Chinese workers (56 men x 50 canneries), plus an equal size local crew of 2,800. Additional workers would be added to handle peak runs.
- The labour input of Chinese workers made up for at least half of the 1904 salmon pack. Long after the season ended the Chinese continued to work in can checking (for duds), labelling and making empty cans. Their labour input was thus higher and their contribution estimated at 60%. The B.C. canning industry could not have taken off without the hardworking Chinese pioneers and the First Nations women.
- Thanks to the 1881 Census, the names of the 76 Chinese fishermen in New Westminster North, and the 101 Chinese cannery workers in Nass Harbour, Aberdeen, and Inverness camps are preserved in the history of Canada.

**Contract Price Paid**


- Take the case of the Clayoquot Cannery, located north of Tofino on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. The contractor was asked to prepare for a pack of 8,000 cases, but the company would only guarantee a minimum pack of 6,000 cases at $0.49 per case. To earn the $2,940, a contractor must hire a crew for 8,000 cases, or suffer a penalty. The
contract effectively transferred the cost of standby labour to the contractor, without paying any risk premium for 2,000 addition cases.

- Doyle’s contract price paid an average of $0.50 per case to Chinese contractors. At a production of 600 cases per day, with a crew of 105 men and women. This worked out to $0.25 per hours for an 11-hour day before contractor overhead and profit. The worker would average less than 20 cents an hour.

**Wealth Creation Measured by Labour Input**

- In 1904 Canadian salmon export fetched an average of $5.40 per case. The Chinese and First Nations workers would only get a share of the $0.50 per case paid to contractors. Less than 10% of the wealth created by each case of salmon went to the Chinese and Native crew, which made up 95% of the cannery workforce. Measured in terms of value added input per case, the labour crew contributed at least 70%, while fishermen 20%, and management 10%. The labour crew was hardly rewarded for their value added input.

- 1904 was not a big year for salmon return in B.C. At $5.40 per case, the pack of 465,894 cases contributed $2,519,554 to B.C.’s economy. Skilled labour was a scarce commodity during peak season. The 70% labour input of the Chinese and First Nations crew made a $1.7 million value added contribution to the British Columbia economy. The pack value of $2.5 million (in 1904 dollars) was indeed a lucrative injection of wealth to the Canadian economy.

**Technological Innovations, Lower Wages in 1910’s**

The introduction of the “Iron Butcher” to B.C. in 1906, followed by the manufacturing of ready to ship pre-made empty cans (sanitary cans), prompted a fierce drive to further cut labour cost.

- Doyle noted on 13th July, 1914 that he would cut cost by hiring two Chinese crews to make cans thus replacing contract workers. He would pay the first crew of 14 men $60 per month for 5 months, then pay a second crew of 10 men $55 a month for 2 months.

- Doyle went on to note that he would pay Chinese workers $2.50 per day to manufacture sanitary cans. A standard workday was 11 hours.

**Chinese Contractors**

The unpredictable nature of salmon runs undermines the best production plan even to this day. When salmon runs returned in 1881, fishermen would pull their small 2 men boat to the dock with the catch still in the water. Had they loaded the catch onboard, their boat would sink. If left unprocessed, the salmon would soon rot. The cannery must unload the fish fast, and work full shifts day and night to quickly gut, wash, patch, can, cook, and vacuum seal the cans. A team of skilled worker, working in synchronization with each other, is critical for handling peak demand. A guaranteed pool of skill workers is vital for any cannery. Hard and messy work, combined with seasonal nature of salmon canning, compounded the difficulty of retaining a skilled crew.

The Chinese Contract system answered the call. Canners downloaded the risk of having to bridge labour supply with unpredictable production demand. The contract terms were harsh and exacting. Chinese contractors, with their team of skilled fish processing experts, met the
challenge. The story of some pioneer contractors and cannery operators are told in the following paragraphs.

**Human Faces of Chinese Cannery Workers and Contractors**

**Kwong On Wo Company (廣安和)**

Kwong On Wo was a supplier of goods and services to the Chinese community in New Westminster. It acted as agent for Onderdonk and his Chinese workers in the 1880s. Kwong On Wo was a member of the local Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA: 二埠中華慈善會). The CBA named Kwong On Wo the contactor to help with identifying the location of buried remains of pioneers at the Chinese Cemetery on 8th Street.

- 二埠撿先友遺骸
啟者，本埠定期七月一號開工執拾先友遺骸，大約十天告竣，前因義塋碑往年已被公家一律掃平，此時全無形跡可考。想各先友之親屬曾經到塋場辦理塟事者尚可模糊識認，懇即先期報知，或先到塋場堅以証據，俾臨時易於着手，且無混亂。即與先友有親友世戚之關係者，此責亦難旁貸。特此預告。

民國八年 六月廿六號
中華會館謹啟 二埠廣安和代理

**Yip Sang (葉永生 字春田), 1845-1927**

The history of Yip Sang is well published. His was credit for securing Chinese labour for the canneries. Cicely Lyons gave the following account:

“...he was engaged by the Kwona [sic] On Wo Company to take general charge of some 75% of the Chinese working for Andrew Onderdonk. ... It was not long before Yip Sang secured many contracts for his crews…”

--- Cicely Lyons, Salmon: Our Heritage, page 183.

**Lam Tung (aka Lam Tong 林棠?)**

Lam Tung first arrived in Victoria via steamship in May 1885. The 39-year-old native of Singapore was 5ft 4\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches tall, has a pockmarked face and showed an upper front gold-filled tooth as he smiled.

Merchant Lam Tung, age 43, returned from San Francisco on July 25, 1889. He paid an entry fee of $1.50. The Register of Chinese Immigration showed that a Certificate of Leave, No. 55 (54) was cancelled upon his return.
According to David Reid, Lam Tung started the Westminster Cannery, code #54, in 1896. It was absorbed by B.C. Packers in 1902 29.

**Lee Yine and Lee Poon Kai of Kwong Man Tai Company**

In 1901, Kwong Man Tai Company purchased the 1897 built Colonial Cannery from Columbia Packing. It was absorbed by B.C. Packers in 1902 30. According to Cicely Lyons, the owners were Lee Yine and Lee Poon Kai 31.

**Lee Coy (李長衢, 字祐樞, 1855 – 1927)**

After leaving his home village of Sar Tuey (沙堆鄉), Lee Coy landed on the shore of Victoria B.C. in 1876. The 5 ft.7 inches Sun Woy County native stood tall among his friends. Lee, age 22 was very stout and his face pitted with small pox, noted the Port Officer 32.

By 1881 Lee Coy, age 26 and married, was foreman to a crew of 42 Chinese fishermen in New Westminster, North 33. Immigration record kept at the Port of New Westminster recorded Lee Coy was returning from a trip to USA on April 14, 1891. He paid an entry fee of 1.50 34.

The 1891 Census showed that merchant Lee Coy, age 36, was lodging in a 2 story Bungalow with 9 rooms in New Westminster City, South. He and his 20 year old wife were staying in the household (No. 152) of Kwan Ah Loy and five other residents 35.

Lee Coy was a career cannery man and a contractor. He was credited by Doyle for “breaking the unions” in 1904 and earned a $2,400 bonus. Lee Coy held contracts with 12 Canneries in 1904 36.

Troubles brew as the 1905 season came to end. The notes by Doyle on Sept. 28 and Nov. 1, made references to a problem of swell cans (cans that were not sterile) at the Gulf of Georgia plant. At least 800 cases of salmon had to be thrown away 37. Lee Coy was the contractor.

In 1906 the Gulf of Georgia Cannery, built by Malcolm and Cannon in 1894, was sold to Lee Coy by it owner the United Canning Company. Lee ceased at the Gulf of Georgia around 1909 38.

To service the many contracts, Lee Coy had to retain a core group of skilled workers. At times he would extend credit for room and board base on the worker’s promise to repay Lee with the cash advance at the beginning of the canning season. In 1921, a fellow Lee defaulted. Lee Coy promptly placed a notice in the Chinese Times asking the public and fellow contractors to have Mr. Lee Wan apprehended. The appeal ran as follows 39:
Notice To Apprehend

To Whom It may Concern: Please take Notice that Lee Wan of Sunwoy County, Sar Duey Village, age 30 plus, requested last winter to stay at my store [in Ladner] on credit for room and board. He promised to repay his debt with the cash advance for working at the Cloverleaf Cannery this season. Considering that he is a fellow Lee, I consented to his request. Lee Wan has negated on his promise and left for Vancouver, leaving an unpaid debt of $46.35 for food. Should any contractor hire him, please hold back the money he owes and have it returned to me at the Wo Yeun Store. Lee Wan shall be apprehended until the debt is paid.

This dated May, 1921

Lee Coy

The Ladner Gee Gong Tong (蘭拿致公堂) listed Lee Coy a member of the board. In February of 1926, Lee celebrated his 70th birthday. Lee Coy died on October 22, 1927 at age 72. His obituary on the Chinese Times gave his full name and date of birth as February 4, 1855: 李長衢 字祐樞, 生于咸豐五年(1857) 十二月十八日戌時. 子:奕俊,奕銳. 廣樂房

The family’s appreciation note and the news of Lee’s memorial service appeared in the Chinese Times on Nov. 2, 1927.

Mrs Lee Coy, nee Chew Yuet Chee 趙氏月之 of Toon Duey, Senwoy County, was born on August 31, 1871. She came to New Westminster before the age of 20. Mrs. Lee did make a trip home to Toon Duey and returned via the Empress of China in May 1899. She paid an entry fee of 50 cents. She was described as having “two upper front teeth missing. Several pits on forehead.” She passed away at age 60, on September 2, 1931, and was laid to rest next to her husband at the Mountain View Cemetery, Lots OLD-3-04-016-0011 & 0012 in Vancouver.

Chung Nye (蔣奈, 字經可), ca. 1867-1928

The 16-year-old Chung Nye left his home village of Moy Kwok in Sun Woy County with his friend and boarded a ship for the Gold Mountains. They landed in Victoria in April 1882. The time of arrival coincided with the 2,000 men Onderdonk recruited on contract with the Canadian Pacific Railroad Company (CPR) to lay tracks through the Fraser Canyons for Canada.

It is believed that Chung Nye settled in New Westminster around 1886. By 1888-89 he was recruiting cannery workers. Four new canneries started along the shores of Fraser River in 1906. One of them was Nye Canning Company. It operated for only one season. Was Chung Nye the owner operator of this cannery? Further research is needed to ascertain this speculation.
The story of merchant Chung Nye and his contribution to the salmon canning industry is detailed in “Chung Nye of New Westminster, B.C.” at the 2012 WCILCOS Conference.

**Sit Sang / Sit Sing (薛勝/薛盛?), 1869-1914**

Sit Sang was remembered as one of the pioneer cannery boss in New Westminster. A grave maker bearing the name “Sit Sing” at Vancouver’s Mountain View Cemetery is believed to be that of Sit Sang, the cannery boss. It gave the year of birth at 1869 and the date of death was 1914-06-11. He lived to age 45.

Search in the Register of Chinese Immigration returned no Sit Sang or Sit Sing. The name of Sit Shing appeared in 1887 and in 1907. The name Seid Shung, age 31, showed up in 1900. He paid a 50 cent fee, meaning that it was a return trip to Victoria. Seid Shung was described as “5 ft. 5, scar above right temple. Pit in front of both ears. Pit on forehead.”

**Charlie Chang Suey (曾瑞, 字毓和, 號雲峯) 1873-1946**

Chang Suey belonged to the second generation of Chinese contractors following Yip Sang, Lee Coy, and Chung Nye. He was known as Charlie Suey among his peers. By the 1920’s he was a major recruiter of skilled workers for canneries in the North.

Charlie Suey can best be remembered for his challenge to fellow contractors of Sun Woy County to donate $5 for every 10,000 cases of their can pack towards the Kong Chow Benevolent Association (雲高華埠岡州總會館) building fund. Charlie Suey reported a total pack of 405,000 cases for the 1924 season. He promptly donated $202.50. Located next to the Lum Sai Ho Tong (林西河總堂) on the 500 block Carrall Street in Vancouver, the building opened its door in January 1925. Charlie served as director of the Kong Chow Benevolent Association.

In March 1943 Suey celebrated his 71st birthday. He passed away on December 12, 1946.

**Cannery Contractors Help Funded the New Premise of Kong Chow Benevolent Association**

The fund raising drive in 1924 to build a new premise for the Kong Chow Benevolent Association (雲高華埠岡州總會館) was keenly support by cannery contractors and workers of Moy Kwok and Sar Tuey Village. The pledge of Charlie Chang Suey (曾瑞, 字雲峯) to donate $5 for every 10,000 cases of salmon was matched by fellow contractors. In November, 1924 donations mounted as contractors reported their salmon pack for their cannery:

- Charlie Chang Suey (曾瑞) 340,000 cases, donation $170,
- Chong Mae (蔣美) 48,000 cases, donation $24,
- Chung Sat (蔣述, 字國多) 20,000 cases, donation $10,
- Chong Yaw (蔣有/蔣寛有, 字容可) 18,000 cases, donation $9,
- Lew Lung (廖龍) & Lee Chong Hang (李祥亨) 20,000 cases, donation $10,

By December 1924, more pledges came in:

- Woo Sai Ding (胡世定) 130,000 cases, donation $65,
- Woo Won Kam (胡允襟) 10,000 cases, donation $5,
- Charlie Chang Suey (曾瑞) an additional 65,000 cases, donation $32.50

The contractors were all from the two neighbouring villages of Moy Kwok and Sar Tuey. Their pack represented 651,000 cases, or 37.3% of the 1924 pack of 1,745,313 cases.
Chung Nye and his family members who were living in New Westminster did not respond to the pledge. Had their pack for the Brunswick, Imperial and other shops been included, the Moy Kwok and Sar Tuey contractors would easily account for 60% of the 1924 salmon pack.

**Chong Dot (蔣炳達, 字安鰲), 1892-1965**

Chong Dot’s father Suey Ho (蔣占和, 字瑞可) was a second cousin of Chung Nye. They descended from Ding Yik (蔣定億). According to Immigration records, Chong Bing Bat (蔣炳達), age 19, and Chung Nye’s son Ching Ding Yow (蔣丁酉), age 14, arrived in Vancouver on the Empress of China on May 15, 1910. They were exempted from the $500 Head Tax because both were “merchant’s son”.

Following the family tradition, Chong Dot carried on the Imperial plant contract with B.C. Packers after the retirement of his elder brother Chong Yat (蔣逸琴, 字安烈). His long association with Imperial Plant in Steveston was well known. Though not actively engaged with Chinatown associations, Chong Dot supported the Chinese Public School (雲埠華僑公立學校) in Vancouver with a $20 donation in 1933.

On September 14, 1951 Dot lead a team of four on a fund raising drive to honour the returning Chinese Canadian Volunteer Troop. The Chong team arrived at the Imperial plant in Steveston by nightfall. The workers welcomed them. They raised $106. The Chinese Times reported this story on September 17, 1951.

The Mount Saint Joseph Hospital (聖約瑟院醫) on Prince Edward Street in Vancouver added a new 50-bed wing in 1956. The Chinese community responded overwhelmingly in support of the “Chinese Hospital”, as it was commonly called. Chong Dot and his wife, Lin Tai Lim (林蓮娣) made a $10,000 donation for beds and furnishings. A room bearing the name of Mr. & Mrs. Dot Chong (蔣安鰲夫婦) was dedicated in their honour. The black and white nameplate of the Chongs and those of many Chinatown Associations still adorned the rooms of Mt. Saint Joseph in the 1990’s.

Chong Dot passed away on December 23, 1965 at age 73, survived by his wife and sons. Mrs. Chong passed away three year later on December 16, 1968. Both were laid to rest at Forrest Lawn Cemetery in Burnaby.

**More Contractors & Workers**

There were far too many contractors to name in the 140-year history of salmon canning in B.C. The story of contractors and workers, preserved in the National Archive, the Chinese Times, and kept by their descendants will be enhance by future research.

**Chong Tee Poy, Woy Hor, 蔣池沛, 字會可, 1889-1968**

Chong Tee Poy was a long time resident of New Westminster. He headed north to Port Edward during the canning season and return home in the Fall. He made generous loads to friends on the promise of repayment from cannery advances.
Tee Poy and Chung Nye were related by brothers Ding Hip (蔣定協) and Ding Yik (蔣定億), their respective great grand father. Born on June 23, 1889, Chong Tee Poy passed away on December 20, 1968. His grandson Melvin Chong (蔣盤炎) and great grand children were with him in Vancouver. His son and additional family members were in Hong Kong at the time.

Melvin Chong worked with grandfather Tee Poy in Prince Rupert during the 1950s. He became charge hand for the Tulloch Western Fisheries on Commissioner Street in Vancouver, and later the Seafood Products Cannery in Port Hardy.

**Chung Sat (aka Deung Soot, 蔣述 字國多), 1882-1961**
Deung Soot arrived in Vancouver, off the Empress of China on April 29, 1896. At age 14, he paid the $50 Head Tax. His contract career spanned the Fraser, Burrard Inlet, and North Coast canneries. He donated $10 to the Kong Chow building fund with a pack of 20,000 cases in 1924. Chong Sat was well respected for his generosity & kindness. He was a member of the Vancouver Branch of Chinese Reform Party. When work was hard to come by in 1916, Chinatown Associations handed out daily congee to the needy. Chung Sat and many of his fellow contractors, Chung Nye, Tee Poy, and On Shun all supported the drive with donations. Chung Sat passed away at the Prince Rupert Hospital on July 2, 1961.

His son Harold Chong (蔣俊豪) headed the Chinese crew at the Cassiar Cannery until his retirement in late 1970’s. The 3rd son, Willie Chong (蔣俊偉) volunteered for the Canadian Army and served in Burma during World War II. Willie was a successful salmon and shrimp fisherman.

**Danny Chung (蔣章霖)**
Danny Chung was the son of Chung On Shun (蔣北強, 字安順) and a grandnephew of Chung Nye. Both On Shun and Danny were career contractors. Danny Chung enjoyed a long association with the Nelson brothers. His contract in 1959 with the Port Edward Cannery was the last signed in B.C. Danny became salary staff and continued to lead the Chinese crew at Port Edward until his retirement.

Danny Chung’s younger brother Wayne Horne Chong (蔣榮漢) retired from the Home Plant of Canadian Fishing Company at the foot of Gore Ave in Vancouver.

**Caught between the Company and the Worker**
To service the many shops located on the Fraser River, the North Coast, and the West Coast of Vancouver Island, salmon canners depended on Chinese contractors to secure thousands of skill seasonal workers each year. Not only the contractors had to shoulder the risk of too many or too few fish, they have to pay a cash advance to the crew. The amount reached $100 per worker at 1929. Every now and then some workers will skip the boat after receiving the cash advance.

The Chinese Times reported on May 8, 1919, the sentencing of Lu Yeun to a 6-month prison term for defrauding hundreds of dollars of cannery advance pay to him.
Lum Tak Gee was defrauded by Wong Goon Yin and Wong Ban. They took the advance but disappeared after boarding the ship. The Chinese Times reported on page 7, April 17, 1924 68:

林德珠 魚濕: 黃冠英,黃扳收上期,落船無踪.

In the case of contractor Mah Wing Tun (馬榮騰), he was out of pocket for $300 because his trusted recruiter, Yen Dick Gong (甄廸光) took off with the advance refunded by the 3 workers who had a change of mind. Mah’s public notice of August 3, 1929 read 69:

- 緊要告白
甄廸光者,無業遊民也.向居雲埠,近兩年來為弟魚濕僱請工伴,頗著勤勞.有時銀兩亦信任過他携往代交工伴,適此次弟所交過雷溢公司之銀三百大元,備請工伴三人.隨該工伴等因事不 能趕程前往,願將原銀交回,由弟指名交其人前往代收,豈料他立心不軌,竟將該欵全數挾帶私逃.弟任他逍遙不加追究,殊無以儆將來.故特向就地警衙報告備案,經將他之相片一併繳交以檢查.今再由報章佈告,如各親朋有知其匿居何處者,仰祈報知本埠警衙,拘拿到案,即謝花紅銀五十元,決不食言. [此一花紅銀貯在打慎法律事務處]
一九二九年八月三日 馬榮騰謹佈

Discrimination at the Cumshewa Cannery
An advertisement appeared on page 3 of the Chinese Times on November 12, 1918. It warned cannery workers not to work for the Cumshewa Cannery located at South Queen Charlotte Island. The crew complained that they were subjected to discriminatory practices by a Caucasian name Sergie at the cannery. When the 1918 season ended, they left on the same boat with Sergie on board. Over the course of several days, Sergie denied the Cumshewa Chinese crew of any meals. They were starved the entire journey, while other passengers, Chinese and Caucasian were fed. The crew of Cumshewa were totally disgusted by Sergie’s cruel treatment against them. They will not return to the cannery again, and warned fellow workers to stay away from the Cumshewa Cannery.” The names of the 25 member crew were listed 70.

- 痛陳其害
水不平則流,人不平則鳴.今日魚業工伴論及冚暑嘩(Cumshewa)之白人『寫字』(Sergie)對待我等華工,人面獸心,種種蔑視.至今出埠搭加蘭厰船,此『寫字』之人亦同出水路.數天中西 日同此船福食相就,獨我冚各工伴無一餐之膳,亦係此『寫字』人之過,想其人之狼子野心,無人類之可言.今再見此事不平,我工伴此特字布告.我僑界切不可往此魚濕操工.鄙人等之所望也.

Lue Mong (aka Lue Shon How 劉望,字崇厚), 1880-1954
Lue Mong’s story was a painful but touching reflection of the life of the pioneers. The Chinese Times reported in 1954, the funeral service for Lue Mong and offered the following tribute 71:

“…Lue Shon How of Moy Kowk Village, was a hard working and frugal cannery man. He had wanted to return home but was held at bay by the chaos at home. He felt ill recently and was admitted to the hospital, but sadly passed away on August 18, at the age of 75. Service was held at 3 pm August 23 at the Armstrong Funeral Home. It was well
attended by his friends and relatives. He was laid to rests at the Ocean View Cemetery. Mr. Lue was most kind to his relatives and friends. He has bequeathed the balance of his estate, after funeral expenses, to the Kong Chow Benevolent Association, the Lung Kong Association, and the hospital for charity purposes. Mr. Lue was exemplary in life and after death…”

One December 10, 1954 the Kong Chow Benevolent Association gave a follow up account on the disbursement of the Lue Mong estate.72

“Our beloved member Lue Mong, whose married name was Shun How, was a native of Moy Kowk Village in Sun Woy County. He was most supportive of the charity goal of the Kong Chow Benevolent Association. Members of his entire family were all perished when the Japanese invaded his home village. Lue Mong had requested his confidant, Mr. Ng Chuck Kong, to disburse the balance of his estate to different charities. The Kong Chow Benevolent Association acknowledges the receipt of $350 from his estate. This money credited to the charity fund, will be spent in accordance with Mr. Lue’s wish.”

『啟者.本總會館所屬先友劉望,字崇厚,是新會梅閣鄉人.其生前備極推崇本會館慈善宗旨. 惟因日賊陷縣境時,其家人喪亡殆盡.然劉望本人亦於月前病逝.遣囑託其密有友吳澤光君將所餘之款遣交各團體.本會館得其遺交叁百五拾元.故本會館藉以充裕慈善經費.用表劉先友生前死後不忘慈善之志願也.特此佈告.』

**CPR Ferry Services to Coastal Fish Camps**

### 1916 Fall

To pick up canny workers for their return trip home, the August schedule was 73:

- MV Princess Pedder (Serving West Coast of Vancouver Island)

  On Saturdays, leaving Nootka Inlet for Vancouver
- MV Princess McQueena (Serving North Coast)

  On Sundays, leaving Skeena River and Nass Bar for Vancouver

Special service offered: Hot and cold water is always available

- 詩丕亞新坑輪船
扁瀉士必打士 (Princess Pedder)
  每逢禮拜六由臘巴咽列 (Nootka Inlet) 各漁濕開行來雲埠
扁瀉士麥困拿 (Princess McQeena)
  每逢禮拜日士見拿 (Skeena) 與 拿士臘巴 (Nass Bar) 各漁濕啟行來雲埠
冷熱水常便特別招待 仰漁濕諸君光顧是幸

### 1917 Spring

To transport canny workers to fish canneries, the April schedule was 74:

- MV Princess McQueena

  At 11:30 pm Wednesdays, leaving Vancouver for Bella Bella , Swanson Bay, Butedale Slough?, Prince Rupert, Nass Bar, (Barnard Cove?), Claxton, and Skeena Bar
- MV Princess Pedder

  At 11:30 pm Thursdays, leaving Vancouver for (Alert Bay?), Shushartie, Nootka Inlet, Namu, (Cassiar?), Burke Channel and other Shops
Conclusion
The 1881 Census identified 76 Chinese fishermen in New Westminster North. They were the single largest ethnic group who landed the bulk of salmon catches to the nine canneries on the Fraser River. The popular assumption that the Chinese were no fishermen is unfounded.

Though only 11% of the population, Chinese pioneers made up 64% of the local fishermen and 65% of the labour force in New Westminster. In 1881, Chinese pioneers were the major economic driver of the salmon canning industry in the Royal City.

Chinese participation from the infancy of the salmon canning industry in British Columbia is well recognized. Specifics on their economic contribution has yet been qualitatively or quantitatively presented. This article attempts to explore the avenue of quantitative assessment by measuring the per capita value of labourer input of cannery workers.

Salmon canning is labour intensive, particularly so in the 1870s and the early 1900s. In coastal villages of the “remote” North and the “distant” Fraser estuaries, skilled labour was a scarce
commodity. Labour resources became more precious when a big run of salmon arrived at the
dock. The cost of spoilage and the opportunity cost of missing addition catches, due to
production backup at the canning line, made the Chinese and local crew highly valuable.

In 1881, labour was paid only 10% to 15% of the Skeena and Nass pack though the crew was the
backbone of the 3 canneries. In the Fish (Preserved) sector, the national average share of labour
pay was 26% of the total value. The 236 Chinese and First Nations workers received only half of
the national average. The rule of supply and demand did not apply. Without their labour input,
the Northern pack of 29,260 cases could not be realized.

The 1904 pack of 465,894 cases would likewise be compromised without the experience crew of
Chinese and First Nations workers. Automation of the canning lines might have reduced the per
capita input of labour to 70% by 1904, but labour was still the backbone of the $2.5 million
salmon pack at $5.40 per case. Though their paid accounted for less than 10% of the pack value,
the per capita contribution of their input was worth 1.7 million.

Risk exposure to gyrations in salmon runs was passed on to the Chinese contractor. The
Clayoquot contract of 1904 set a production ceiling of 8,000 cases, but the company would only
guarantee 6,000 cases at a fixed price. The company was insured for a 33% production overage
of 2,000 cases without paying any risk premium. The contractor must carry the cost of standby
labour. Production risk was downloaded to the contractor at no cost to the company.

The Head Tax record and the Census of 1881 and 1891 provided a wealth of information on the
Chinese pioneers. Coupled with the Chinese Times, a link between the data in English and
Chinese can be bridged. A portrait of the workers and individual contractors emerged.

No longer was Lam Tung, Lee Coy, Charlie Suey, or Chong Dot a name mentioned in passing,
their deeds and contributions to the canning industry and the community came alive. Their
history can now be incorporated to the blank pages of Canadian history in British Columbia.
They were at the forefront of the B.C. salmon canning industry right from the beginning.

The story of the Cumshewa crew and those of Chung Nye, Chong Tee Poy, Chong Sat, Mah
Wing Tun and many others can be further enriched from data retrieved in archive records, the
Chinese Times, and family scrap books.

The sad story of cannery worker Lue Mong, whose entire family was perished when the Japanese
invaded his ancestral village, recapitulated the hardship encountered by Chinese pioneers.
Though he died a lonely man, Lue embraced his community and bequeathed the balance of his
estate to the hospital and two local family associations for charity purposes. Mr. Lue was an
exemplary Canadian.

Acknowledgement
This article would not be possible without the availability of on-line data of the Chinese Head
Tax, the Census of 1881 and 1891, and the Chinese Times. Library and Archives Canada,
Multicultural Canada, B.C. Archives, and Statistics Canada are to be congratulated for posting
these data on their website with search capabilities.

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Appendix 2. Name of 101 Chinese Cannery Workers in Sub District 187D, Division 3, Coast of Mainland, Pages 1 to 7.

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27 at Nass Cannery  32 at Aberdeen Cannery  42 at Inverness Cannery
References


http://data2.collectionscanada.gc.ca/e/e329/e008211107.pdf

[5] Census 1881, 187B, North, p. 57. Note: The name was entered as “Rai Gum”.


[7] Census 1881, 187B, North, pp. 60-61. Wou Don was entered as “Won Don” on page 60. On page 61, Chin Tiu was entered as “Chin Liu”, and Ah Fu was entered as “Ah Fee”.


[9] Census 1881, 187B, North, The search listed 261 Chinese, but Jow Sun and Ah Wu were erroneously reported as “Not Given”.

[10] Census 1881, 187A, South, A search listed 219 Chinese out of a population of 1540. By occupation, 2 fishermen, and 246 labourers (of which 190 were Chinese) were found.


[17] David Reid, Ibid., p.76.


[21] David Reid, Ibid., p.76.


[29] David Reid, Ibid., p. 43.


[34] Library and Archives Canada, General Register of Chinese Immigration, http://data2.collectionscanada.gc.ca/e/e146/e003638113.pdf
[38] David Reid, Ibid., p. 47.
[47] David Reid, Ibid., p. 47.
[48] Mountain View Cemetery, Record: 1914-09-139733
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