

The Integration of the Chinese Market Gardens of Southern British  
Columbia, 1885-1930

By Jeffrey Yu

31 March 2014

Report prepared at the request of the Royal British Columbia Museum in partial fulfillment of UBC Geography 429: Research in Historical Geography, for Dr. David Brownstein

ABSTRACT: This article examines the history of Chinese integration into the small-scale hand-cultivation of a variety of fruits and vegetables grown for local consumption, otherwise known as market gardening, in Southern British Columbia. Racism and discriminatory regulations restricted employment opportunities and relegated the Chinese to occupations deemed 'menial' – market gardening, domestic service, and peddling. As the Chinese presence grew within these 'menial' occupations, the interrelated relationships between such occupations reinforced one another to allow for the Chinese to achieve market dominance in market gardening by the 1920s. Despite opposition from Euro-Canadians expressed through restrictive regulations on the agricultural trade, the supporting occupations of domestic service, peddling, and green grocer and the formation of associations had coalesced by the late 1920s to entrench the Chinese into a solidified position in the market gardening industry.

By the time of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration in 1902, it was well known that the Chinese had achieved integration and market dominance within the market gardening industry in Victoria.<sup>1</sup> A combination of the denial of political rights to enforce their status as permanent 'foreigners' – hence the prevalent usage of the term 'sojourner' to identify Asian migrants<sup>2</sup> – and racism expressed through discriminatory practices in the labour market, political system, and in daily life confined and concentrated the Chinese into the least desirable unskilled occupations in the primary and service sectors of the economy.<sup>3</sup> Market gardening was one of such undesirable occupations and was commonly referred to as a 'menial' occupation alongside other 'traditional' Chinese occupations – domestic service and laundry work.<sup>4</sup> However, by the 1920s, Chinese domination within the market gardening industry had begun to raise alarms in the Legislative Assembly over the amount of land held by Asians.<sup>5</sup> Such alarms prompted investigations into the extent of Chinese engagement within the agricultural sector and implementations of

---

<sup>1</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*. (Ottawa: S. E. Dawson, 1902), 65-71.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony B. Chan, "'Orientalism' and Image Making: The Sojourner in Canadian History," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Gillian Creese, "Class, Ethnicity, and Conflict: The Case of Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1880-1923" in *Workers, Capital, and the State in British Columbia*, ed. Rennie Warburton and David Coburn (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989), 122; Charles P. Sedgwick, *The Context of Economic Change and Continuity in an Urban Overseas Chinese Community* (Victoria, B.C: University of Victoria, 1973), 40-42, 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> Both the Sikhs and Japanese were engaged in market gardening by the 1920s. In fact, Euro-Canadians were more concerned over Japanese involvement as they tended to buy their land, unlike the Chinese who tended to lease their land. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine these two ethnic groups.

exclusionary measures such as a gentlemen's agreement to not sell or lease land to the Chinese and restrictive regulations related to the agricultural trade to terminate and curtail further Chinese expansion.<sup>6</sup> Despite such measures, the Chinese were well entrenched within the industry and continued to dominate the local fruits and vegetables trade through their lower cost of labour, higher economic productivity and rates of rent, their domination in the supporting occupations of peddling, domestic service, and green grocery, and associations established to defend their interests.

In Canada, the image of the Chinese 'sojourner' was engendered through the apparent imbalance in sexes – women formed less than one percent of the Chinese population in Victoria in 1902.<sup>7</sup> To Euro-Canadians, the absence of Chinese women was indicative of the motives of Chinese immigrants – that of an unwillingness to settle in BC and contribute towards the Canadian economy. The earliest official association of the Chinese migrant with the identity of a 'sojourner' was made in 1882 by the first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, when Macdonald emphasized that the Chinese labourers contracted to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway were unlikely to remain as permanent settlers.<sup>8</sup> However, the 'sojourner' identity was a one-sided projection. The Chinese never referred to their migrants as luju de ren or doliu de ren (Chinese sojourner), but used the term hua qiao (overseas Chinese).<sup>9</sup> The Chinese Consul General Huang Cunxian, in 1885, told an Inquiry into Chinese immigration to North America that many Chinese indeed desired to settle in America: "I know a great many Chinese will be glad to remain here permanently with their families, if they are allowed to be naturalized and can enjoy privileges and rights."<sup>10</sup> As such, Chinese immigration must be

---

<sup>6</sup> British Columbia, *Report on Oriental Activities Within the Province* (Victoria, B.C: Legislative Assembly, 1927); W. G. Donley, *The Oriental Agriculturist in British Columbia*, Graduating Essay (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1928); Patricia Roy, *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province, 1914-41* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 118-119; Rare Books and Special Collections (henceforth RBSC), Chung Collection, Box 100, File 8, *Chinese Produce Peddlers' Association*, 1930s.

<sup>7</sup> Chan, op.cit, 515.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

<sup>10</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration. Report and Evidence*, Parliament, 1884-1885. Sessional Paper No. 54a (Ottawa: 1885), 41.

understood in its broader historical context to understand the reasons behind emigration and the lack of women migrants.

The vast majority of Chinese migrants in the mid-nineteenth century came from eight rural counties in the Pearl River delta in the coastal province of Guangdong.<sup>11</sup> The population primarily depended upon agriculture for its livelihood. However, arable land was limited and Guangdong province was faced with overcrowding issues as the population steadily increased. In Taishan county, for example, only 1,659,100 *mu* or 34.9 percent of the total land of 4,748,000 *mu* was cultivable. While 4.0 *mu* was needed for bare subsistence, Frederic Wakeman estimated in 1812 that only 1.67 *mu* was available for each person in Guangdong. Compounded with such meagre allowances in land, between 1838 and 1920, the population of Taishan quadrupled from 196,972 to approximately 800,000.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, it was no longer sustainable for the population of Guangdong to pursue agriculture for its livelihood.

China was also embroiled in political instability in the nineteenth century. The First Opium War of 1839-42, the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864, and armed internecine Punti-Hakka conflicts over land and water rights in 1854-1868 caused a breakdown in law and order at both national and local levels. The massive loss of lives in the conflicts, unabated piracy and banditry, and conscription of able-bodied men severely impeded farmers' abilities to maintain their fields properly in the face of recurring flood and drought.<sup>13</sup> Political instability, combined with an economic crisis stemming from overcrowding provided strong push factors for the Chinese to look abroad for their livelihoods.

The first Chinese immigrants to arrive in BC came from California in 1848.<sup>14</sup> From the 1850s and to the 1870s, 4,000 Chinese immigrants entered BC. Most of these migrants were searching for gold, as they

---

<sup>11</sup> Paul Yee, *Chinese Business in Vancouver, 1886-1914*, Thesis (Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia, 1983), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882-1943*, Asian America (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21-22.

<sup>13</sup> Yee, op.cit, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Tianfang Cheng, *Oriental Immigration in Canada* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1931), 35.

were in California while under the spell of the fabled 'Gold Mountain'.<sup>15</sup> By the 1860s, when it became evident that accessible gold through panning had been all but mined, the Chinese began to expand into other industrial labour markets such as mining, salmon canning, agriculture, and logging.<sup>16</sup> Between the late 1870s and 1884, the Chinese population in BC expanded dramatically with an additional 17,000 when a large demand for cheap manual labour was generated through the construction of the BC segment of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).<sup>17</sup> As outlined, there was no demand for Chinese women or children in the BC labour market. Considering the average earnings for a farmer in China was five cents a day during harvest season,<sup>18</sup> the expenses incurred to pay for passage to America – about twenty dollars for passage and fifty dollars for food<sup>19</sup> - served to deter any decision to have women or families accompany the men to BC. As such, the Chinese migrant population in BC was predominantly male, as economic considerations made securing the passage for women and families financially unviable.

In fact, Chinese immigrants desired to bring their families to BC and would have done so once sufficient wealth had been accumulated. However, racist agitators, such as the likes of John Robson, editor of the New Westminster *British Columbian*, Amor De Cosoms, who became BC's second premier in 1872, Victoria councillor Noah Shakespeare, and F.L Tuckfield of the anti-Chinese organization Knights of Labour, all called for higher taxes, fewer job opportunities, or straight forward exclusion because of their fear for Chinese economic competition.<sup>20</sup> This unfriendly environment dissuaded men like Sing Chung Yung – a Nanaimo market gardener – from bringing their families to BC, as “this country talk so much against Chinese that I do not care to bring them here”.<sup>21</sup> Won Alexander Cumyow, the first Chinese born in Canada, echoed

---

<sup>15</sup> Hsu, op.cit, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Aaron Jerome West James, *Class, Race and Ethnicity Chinese Canadian Entrepreneurs in Vancouver*, Thesis (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1999), 25.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Con et al. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*, Generations, a History of Canada's Peoples (Toronto, 1982), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Chan, op.cit, 519.

<sup>19</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, op.cit, xxviii, 1xxvi, 46, 161.

<sup>20</sup> Chan, op.cit, 516.

<sup>21</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, op.cit, 65.

Yung's feelings: "A large portion of them would bring their families here, were it not for the unfriendly reception they got here during recent years which creates an unsettled feeling".<sup>22</sup>

The unfriendly reception manifested from a racially segregated labour market caused by political disenfranchisement and exclusion from trade unions.<sup>23</sup> In 1872, the BC Provincial Legislature passed the *Qualifications and Registration of Voters Act* to disenfranchise the Chinese under the belief that 'non-settlers', or 'sojourners', should not be in the decision making process for the development of BC's economy.<sup>24</sup> During the period of disenfranchisement, The British Columbia legislature enacted over one hundred pieces of discriminatory legislation.<sup>25</sup> One such bill was in the mining industry where five Euro-Canadian labour representatives elected to the provincial legislature enacted legislation in 1898 to ban Asians from underground employment in the coal mines, thereby dramatically reducing the amount of jobs available to the Chinese.<sup>26</sup> Disenfranchisement prevented the Chinese from lobbying for equal job opportunities and better working conditions and wages. Up until the late 1920s, trade unions consistently refused to admit Asians and applied pressure for all-white hiring policies.<sup>27</sup> Exclusion from trade unions eliminated any sense of security from collective bargaining as the threat of being fired was a constant reality. Through disenfranchisement and exclusion from trade unions, the Chinese labour group thus possessed inferior resources to struggle for better working conditions and wages as opposed to the Euro-Canadian labour group. The labour market became racially segregated and had the effect of relegating the Chinese into the lowest levels of the provincial working class.

An occupation in which the Chinese found minimal resistance was market gardening. Only small farmers of potatoes, fruits, and vegetables were in direct competition with the Chinese. Even so, such

---

<sup>22</sup> Robert Edward Wynne as quoted in Chan, op.cit, 532.

<sup>23</sup> Edna Bonacich, "A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labor Market," *American Sociological Review* 37, no. 5 (October 1, 1972): 547–59.

<sup>24</sup> The act also disenfranchised the First Nations.

<sup>25</sup> James, op.cit, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Creese, op.cit, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Creese, op.cit, 72; James, op.cit, 36-37.

competition was minimal. Before the construction of the CPR, Europeans who migrated to BC were unwilling to earn their livelihoods in a settled life of toil after having invested heavily financially in the arduous journey overland. Instead, they were a restless, adventuresome lot, who were more interested in the possibilities of a rapid rise to fortune through gold digging.<sup>28</sup> The large rancher and land holder, of which were numerous and significant, benefitted from the Chinese through the profits earned by their labour and rent. By the late nineteenth century, the Chinese had achieved a strong foothold within the market gardening industry. The attractiveness of legal entitlement to land ownership, displacement from other areas of the labour market, and the fact that most Chinese immigrants were once agricultural workers made market gardening a viable path for a livelihood.

In the employment sphere of market gardening, the Chinese out competed to Euro-Canadians in terms of overhead costs – wages and boarding – and economic productivity. The Chinese were willing to accept much lower wage rates at \$12 to \$25 per month while the Euro-Canadian demanded \$60 per month.<sup>29</sup> The Chinese also provided for their own boarding by living in shacks that housed from five to fifteen men at a time, while the Euro-Canadian demanded some form of boarding beyond a shack. Being industrious workers, the Chinese toiled from daylight to dark, seven days a week during the busy seasons.<sup>30</sup> Though this was by no means a generalization that could be applied to all Chinese immigrants, those who chose to remain in the industry were indeed industrious workers.<sup>31</sup> As British Columbia was a capitalist society, the employer would be more inclined to hire the Chinese labourer over the Euro-Canadian labourer when their costs of labour and economic productivity were compared against one another.

---

<sup>28</sup> Donley, op.cit, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, op.cit, 65-68.

<sup>30</sup> Donley, op.cit, 25-26.; "Larry Grant: Intertwining Cultures," Youtube video, posted by "chinesecanadianubc," Mar 11, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Bh3QidIVFU>

<sup>31</sup> Hok Yat, the father of Tong Louie who would eventually become the CEO of London Drugs, tried his hand at market gardening and found the work to be simply too arduous and risky with the constantly flooding Fraser River. He abandoned market gardening and directed his attention towards becoming a successful merchant. (E. G. Perrault, *Tong: The Story of Tong Louie, Vancouver's Quiet Titan* [Madeira Park, B.C: Harbour Pub, 2002], 30-31.)

The Chinese also held an advantage in the area of obtaining land ownership. The Chinese paid such high rates – an average of \$8 per acre at the turn of the century – that it had the effect of keeping the price of land suitable for market gardening out of reach for Euro-Canadians.<sup>32</sup> Such high rates were possible through their intensive farming methods – referred to as ‘mining the soil’. It was common practice for the Chinese to raise an early crop of potatoes and then a crop of turnips. As reported by Donley in 1928, it was becoming usual for two crops of potatoes to be grown in a single year by a liberal use of ‘forcing’ fertilizer.<sup>33</sup> ‘Mining the soil’ meant a double return, thereby allowing for high rates of rent. Additionally, the Chinese commonly leased uncleared land, as it was cheaper, thereby alleviating the burden of land-clearing from the proprietor’s shoulders.<sup>34</sup> Though some Euro-Canadian proprietors entered into a gentlemen’s agreement to not sell or lease land to Asians,<sup>35</sup> they seldom held to such agreements as the inducement to lease or sell land was that the proprietor received more from the Asians than other Euro-Canadians could offer, or that he would otherwise receive from cultivating the land himself: “If I do not rent, someone else will and I stand to lose through competition in either case”.<sup>36</sup> Such land ownership practices placed the Chinese in an excellent position to lease land from proprietors who were almost always in desperate need of money between February and March.

Market gardens serviced urban areas from the fringes of cities. By 1885, there were 114 market gardeners in the vicinity of Victoria.<sup>37</sup> Sedgwick suggested that market gardeners were essentially the first Chinese people to reside and work away from the Chinatown area.<sup>38</sup> By 1886, when it became known in 1885 that Vancouver would become the western terminus of the CPR, the Chinese, in anticipation of rapid urban growth, made a significant expansion into the Lower Mainland by clearing 160 acres of bush land to grow vegetables beside the road to New Westminster. By as early as 1913, almost 3,000 acres were under

---

<sup>32</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, op.cit, 70.

<sup>33</sup> Donley, op.cit, 27-28.

<sup>34</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, op.cit, 65.

<sup>35</sup> Roy, op.cit, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Donley, op.cit, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, op.cit, 363.

<sup>38</sup> Sedgwick, op.cit, 72-73.



cultivation by the Chinese near Vancouver.<sup>39</sup> The Vancouver Sun reported: “Every imaginable kind of vegetable is growing on the land...they supply residences, hotels, boarding houses, who depend almost entirely upon the Chinamen for their vegetable products.”<sup>40</sup> These vegetables were European staples: potatoes, carrots, onions, corn, pickling cucumbers, cabbage, asparagus, and tomatoes.<sup>41</sup> In fact, it wasn’t until the 1970s when vegetables associated with Chinese cuisine were grown by Chinese farmers.<sup>42</sup> This indicated that market gardeners grew produce to cater to the largest urban market – Euro-Canadians.

Peddling, a corollary of market gardening, was one of the primary avenues of revenue for market gardeners. Peddlers rose early in the morning for the freshest pick of the produce, carried the vegetables in large wicker baskets slung on either ends of a shoulder pole, and delivered directly to households throughout the city.<sup>43</sup> By 1885, there were 46 peddlers in Victoria.<sup>44</sup> The convenience of door-to-door service prevented the establishment of a marketplace in Victoria, causing a tension between Euro-Canadian market gardeners and the Chinese: “their peddling those vegetables about from door to door was another great difficulty. There were no stores here which you could supply and get cash for”.<sup>45</sup> While some Euro-Canadian market gardeners strove to compete with the Chinese by engaging in peddling themselves, they quickly found their efforts to be in vain – a point that will be further explored below. By 1925, 72 percent of all peddler licences in Vancouver were held by the Chinese.<sup>46</sup> One of the main customers of the peddler was the domestic cook, another occupation that was dominated by the Chinese.

The Chinese filled the occupation of domestic service and cooks due to their availability and competence within the field. Employers, in fact, had desired the occupation to be filled by white girls.

---

<sup>39</sup> David Demeritt, “Farming and Rural Life,” in R. Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1997). 243.

<sup>40</sup> Con et al., op.cit, 61.

<sup>41</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, op.cit 68-69; Natalie Ruth Gibb, *Parallel Alternatives: Chinese-Canadian Farmers and the Metro Vancouver Local Food Movement*, Thesis (SFU: Arts & Social Sciences: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 2011), 48.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Harris, op.cit, 244.

<sup>44</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, op.cit, 363.

<sup>45</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, op.cit, 67.

<sup>46</sup> British Columbia, op.cit, 24.

However, in the 1860s, during the birth of this industry, an imbalance in sexes existed in Victoria.<sup>47</sup> While some employers obtained white servants at great expense from the eastern provinces or from Europe, the girls tended to marry within a short period, leaving the employer yet again without a servant.<sup>48</sup> Chinese servants were readily available, trustworthy, competent, and proved to be more versatile workers as they would undertake jobs that women would often refrain from performing.<sup>49</sup> By 1880, there was an estimated 400 Chinese servants and cooks in Victoria. 85 percent of Chinese domestic servants in Canada were concentrated in Victoria.<sup>50</sup> Though the imbalance in Euro-Canadian sexes was less pronounced by 1880, Euro-Canadian girls had little desire to engage in domestic service and preferred other occupations even if wages were half of what was offered in domestic service.<sup>51</sup> Thus the domestic service and cooks industry was held securely by the Chinese.

The relationship between domestic cooks and market gardeners was that peddlers sold their produce directly to the cooks. While cooks could only be afforded by wealthy households, it still provided a consistent market for the peddler, and hence, the market gardener. Though some Euro-Canadian market gardeners engaged in peddling to compete with their Chinese counterparts, as aforementioned, Chinese cooks refused to buy produce from Euro-Canadian peddlers, and instead, bought exclusively from their fellow countrymen: "When a white gardener goes to a house with vegetables he finds a Chinese cook there, and the Chinese cook does not want vegetables raised by a white man".<sup>52</sup> Such a reciprocal relationship was strengthened by the small commission paid between the Chinese cook and the Chinese peddler. As Euro-Canadians market gardeners were denied these lucrative avenues for revenue, they found it difficult to compete with the Chinese. Some, like Joseph Shaw, a market gardener from England who migrated to Victoria specifically to market garden, did not engage in the business after having been given advice that he

---

<sup>47</sup> Con et al., op.cit, 20.

<sup>48</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, op.cit , 85, 142; Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, op.cit, 174.

<sup>49</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, op.cit, 167-174.

<sup>50</sup> Con et al., op.cit, 20, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, op.cit, 169.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 67.

would not be able to compete with the Chinese at all.<sup>53</sup> As such, the domestic service and peddling industry, both of which were dominated by the Chinese, created a stable and ever-expanding market for Chinese market gardeners.

Grocery stores were an additional avenue of revenue for market gardeners. The appearance of grocery stores outside of Chinatown corresponded with a general growth in population. Sedgwick traced the beginnings of green grocers in Victoria to 1921 where records showed ten green grocers with registered licences. 1921 also marked the year of decline in merchants located near Chinatown and dealing almost exclusively in Chinese goods.<sup>54</sup> This suggested that the Chinese expanded their market beyond the Chinatown core and into outlying residential areas by dealing in a commodity that the masses desired – fruits and vegetables. In the Lower Mainland, however, green grocers established themselves as early as 1903 – Hok Yat set up shop at 922 Westminster Avenue to enter the wholesale and retail grocery and farm supply business.<sup>55</sup> Many peddlers in Vancouver transitioned to the greengrocer business in 1915 when the municipal government introduced a \$50 licensing fee on their business.<sup>56</sup> By 1925, green grocery was in the hands of Asians; Asians accounted for 91 percent of all greengrocer licences.<sup>57</sup>

By the 1920s, the Chinese had achieved full integration and market dominance in market gardening throughout Southern British Columbia. Chinese gardeners had 1,142 acres under lease near Vernon in 1919, grew 80 percent of garden-truck products grown in the Okanagan Valley and controlled the potato industry throughout the Fraser Valley except in Chilliwack in 1923, and dominated the tomato industry in Ashcroft to the point that there were no Euro-Canadian growers in the area in 1926.<sup>58</sup> From 1921-1925, the acreage of

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Sedgwick, op.cit, 133.

<sup>55</sup> Perrault, op.cit, 34.

<sup>56</sup> Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*, McGill-Queen's Studies in Ethnic History 10 (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 118.

<sup>57</sup> British Columbia, op.cit, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Donley, op.cit, 12; RBSC, Chinese Canadian Research Collection (henceforth CCRC), Box 11, File 24, Vernon, 1961 Dec 13); Roy, op.cit, 113, ft #60 279.

land leased by Chinese market gardeners increased by 1500 acres.<sup>59</sup> In 1922, E.D. Barrow, the Minister of Agriculture, stated that the Chinese owned 2,500 acres of land in the Ashcroft and Lillooet District and leased another 1,905 acres, more than 55 percent of the potatoes grown in the province were grown by the Chinese, and that 90 percent of all local produce consumed was grown by the Chinese.<sup>60</sup> W. J. Bonavia, secretary of the Department of Agriculture, wrote in 1925 that the Chinese were distributed principally throughout the Delta and Fraser Valley, have taken up truck farming in the interior, and over \$1,250,000 worth of agricultural land in BC were owned or leased by the Chinese in 1925.<sup>61</sup> By 1927, the *Report on Oriental Activities* placed the figure at \$7,526,071. 30.6 percent of the total acreage in the Lower Fraser Valley devoted to small-fruits growing was held by the Chinese. While Chinese farmers constituted just one-seventh of total growers engaged in small-fruits growing, they held more acres per grower – averaged at 4 acres to each Chinese grower and just 1.5 acres to each Euro-Canadian grower.<sup>62</sup>

Such dominance of market gardening by the Chinese was not without opposition.<sup>63</sup> In 1925, a number of agriculturalists in Victoria proposed to reduce the issuance of licences to peddlers,<sup>64</sup> the BC Agricultural Committee proposed to restrict the Chinese and the Japanese from buying and leasing land,<sup>65</sup> and Chinese farmers were forbidden to work on Sundays.<sup>66</sup> In 1923, legislation was enacted to ban merchants from operating in the evening and on Sundays under the behest of Euro-Canadian merchants who believed it created unfair competition. In response, the Chinese established the Chinese Businessmen Association in 20 March 1923 with a mandate to defend Chinese rights to trade and promote business in China. A lawyer was hired to protest against the harsh law of “during night time, all Chinese stores had to be

---

<sup>59</sup> British Columbia, op.cit.

<sup>60</sup> James Morton, *In the Sea of Sterile Mountains: The Chinese in British Columbia* (Vancouver: J. J. Douglas, 1974), 235; Roy, op.cit, 116.

<sup>61</sup> J. Ross Tolmie, *The Orientals in British Columbia*, Graduating Essay (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1929), 82.

<sup>62</sup> British Columbia, op.cit, 10.

<sup>63</sup> Con et al., op.cit, 120; Anderson, op.cit, 111-2, 127.

<sup>64</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 15, *Chinese Times*, May 1 1925.

<sup>65</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 15, *Chinese Times*, Dec 12 1925.

<sup>66</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 15, *Chinese Times*, May 18 1925.

locked and no entry or exit was allowed".<sup>67</sup> The Chun Wah Commerce Association issued a warning to Chinese merchants on 30 April 1923 to not work after hours because several shops were sued for not abiding by the new law. Additionally, two men belonging to the association were chosen to work on the law, hoping for improvement.<sup>68</sup> However, it was reported in 1928 that five Chinese stores were fined for doing business on Sunday.<sup>69</sup> Though this suggests that the efforts of the associations could not abolish this repressive law, it also showed that the Chinese mobilized resources against oppression by forming inclusive associations that advocated and sought to protect their interests.

Direct regulation against Chinese market gardeners took the form of the BC Coast Vegetable Marketing Board (henceforth referred to as 'Board') which imposed restrictive regulations in 1927 on agricultural products as a response to declining prices. Opposition from the Chinese was immediate as they argued that having to sell their produce to the Board at prices and quotas fixed by the latter meant protection and profits for established wholesalers, but higher prices for the consumer and no profits for the grower.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, the regulation was enforced and in 1928, nine Chinese farmers were charged for selling potatoes without a licence.<sup>71</sup> The farmers, instead of paying the \$200 fine, risked imprisonment and took the matter to court as a means of protest.<sup>72</sup> The charges were dropped upon appeal but the restrictive regulations were not abolished.<sup>73</sup> As it was apparent that the Board's authority was backed by police enforcement, the Chinese Farmers Association and Chinese Agricultural Association called forth a fund drive to protest the restrictive regulation.<sup>74</sup> A Chinese farmer went to court in August 1928 to appeal the regulations by claiming that placing a fixed price on agricultural products was a violation of the

---

<sup>67</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 2, File 1, Chinese Businessmen Association, 1922 March 20 1923.

<sup>68</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 2, File 1, Chun Wah Commerce Association, April 30 1923.

<sup>69</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 18, *Chinese Times*, December 13 1928.

<sup>70</sup> Con. et al., op.cit, 179.

<sup>71</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 18, *Chinese Times*, July 16 1928.

<sup>72</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 18, *Chinese Times*, July 19 1928.

<sup>73</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 18, *Chinese Times*, August 1 1928.

<sup>74</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 18, *Chinese Times*, June 12 1928; RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 18, *Chinese Times*, July 26 1928.

constitution.<sup>75</sup> Though the appeal was nullified by the judge, these actions by the Chinese showed their ability in mobilizing solidarity within the community through various associations. Despite the efforts of the Board, the Chinese could not be displaced from the industry; in 1930, market gardening remained firmly in the hands of the Chinese.<sup>76</sup>

The unfriendly atmosphere of BC, expressed through disenfranchisement and exclusion from trade unions, imposed the identity of 'sojourner' upon Chinese migrants and caused the labour market to be split along ethnic lines. As Euro-Canadians possessed superior resources to demand better working conditions, jobs, and wages, the Chinese were relegated to the lowest levels of the provincial working class. Market gardening, along with peddling and domestic service, were occupations which the Chinese were able to enter with minimal resistance as these occupations were labelled by Euro-Canadians to be 'menial'. The interrelated relationships between market gardening, peddling, and domestic service reinforced one another as the Chinese presence grew within each respective occupation. By the 1920s, the Chinese had achieved integration and market dominance in the market gardening industry of Southern British Columbia. Euro-Canadians became increasingly concerned over the level of Chinese land ownership and initiated investigations into the extent of Chinese engagement into agriculture and implemented restrictive regulations related to the agricultural trade to prevent and curtail further Chinese expansion. In response, the Chinese organized their resources and established associations as a conduit to advocate for their interests. While evidence shows concerted efforts on behalf of the associations and increased community solidarity, further research is required to reveal the full implication of their actions. By 1930, despite the restrictive regulations, market gardening remained in the hands of the Chinese. Full integration and market dominance had been achieved through Chinese monopolies in the supporting industries of peddling, domestic service, and greengrocery, and community solidarity through associations.

---

<sup>75</sup> RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 18, *Chinese Times*, Aug 17 1928; RBSC, CCRC, Box 4, File 18, *Chinese Times*, Aug 28 1928.

<sup>76</sup> Sedgwick, op.cit, 170.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

British Columbia, *Report on Oriental Activities Within the Province*. Victoria, B.C: Legislative Assembly, 1927.

Canada. *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration. Report and Evidence*. Parliament, 1884-1885. Sessional Paper No. 54a. Ottawa, 1885.

----- *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*. Ottawa: S. E. Dawson, 1902.

“Larry Grant: Intertwining Cultures,” Youtube video, posted by “chinesecanadianubc,” Mar 11, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Bh3QidIVFU>

Perrault, E. G. *Tong: The Story of Tong Louie, Vancouver’s Quiet Titan*. Madeira Park, B.C: Harbour Pub, 2002.

Rare Books and Special Collections (UBC), Chinese Canadian Research Collection

----- Chung Collection.

### Secondary Sources

Anderson, Kay. *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*. McGill-Queen’s Studies in Ethnic History 10. Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991.

Bonacich, Edna. “A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labor Market.” *American Sociological Review* 37, no. 5 (October 1, 1972): 547–59.

Chan, Anthony B. “‘Orientalism’ and Image Making: The Sojourner in Canadian History.” *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1981).

Cheng, Tianfang. *Oriental Immigration in Canada*. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1931.

Con, Harry, Ronald J. Con, Graham Johnson, Edgar Wickberg, William E. Willmott. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*. Generations, a History of Canada’s Peoples. Toronto, 1982.

Demeritt, David. “Farming and Rural Life,” In Cole R. Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1997.

Donley, W. G. *The Oriental Agriculturist in British Columbia*. Graduating Essay. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1928.

James, Aaron Jerome West. *Class, Race and Ethnicity Chinese Canadian Entrepreneurs in Vancouver*. Thesis. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1999.

Gibb, Natalie Ruth. “Parallel Alternatives: Chinese-Canadian Farmers and the Metro Vancouver Local Food Movement.” Thesis, SFU: Arts & Social Sciences: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 2011.

Hsu, Madeline Yuan-yin. *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882-1943*. Asian America. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000.

Morton, James. *In the Sea of Sterile Mountains: The Chinese in British Columbia*. Vancouver: J. J. Douglas, 1974.

Roy, Patricia. *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989.

Roy, Patricia. *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province, 1914-41*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003.

Sedgwick, Charles P. *The Context of Economic Change and Continuity in an Urban Overseas Chinese Community*. Victoria, B.C: University of Victoria, 1973.

Tolmie, J. Ross. *The Orientals in British Columbia*. Graduating Essay. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1929.

Yee, Paul. *Chinese Business in Vancouver, 1886-1914*. Thesis. Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia, 1983.