

Race, Labour, and The Architecture of White Jobs:
Chinese Labour in British Columbia's Salmon Canning Industry, 1871-
1941

by

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B.A. Honours, The University of British Columbia, 2014

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(History)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

May 2017

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Abstract

Chinese migrant workers in North America have typically been regarded in two ways by historians: either as competitive threats to white workers, or as workers isolated within ethnic niches. Few scholars have examined cases where Chinese workers complemented or supported the labour of others. This thesis looks at Chinese labour in British Columbia's salmon canning industry between 1871 and 1941, arguing that Chinese workers were foundational to white fishing jobs in the province. Drawing on company records, Government reports, newspapers, and oral interviews, I examine Chinese manual labour, labour politics, and wages as three areas where Chinese workers upheld the labour of fishers in a nominally "white" industry. As such, this thesis offers a different outlook on the structural entanglement of race and labour in British Columbia in the seventy years after the province joined the Canadian Confederation.

Lay Summary

The claim that “they” are stealing “our jobs” is pervasive in the contemporary politics of labour migration. It has also been historically ubiquitous. In British Columbia, proponents of Chinese exclusion after the 1870s charged that migrant Chinese workers would “grind down all labour to the lowest living point,” and pressed for restrictions on their immigration and participation in civil society. But do low-paid migrant workers invariably threaten the jobs of others? This thesis suggests that in some cases low-paid migrants complement or uphold other jobs. With a focus on manual labour, labour politics, and wages, this thesis examines how Chinese salmon cannery workers supported fishing jobs in British Columbia’s nominally “white” fishing industry in the seventy years after the province joined the Canadian Confederation.

Preface

This thesis is entirely the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Devin Ainsworth Eeg.

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Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to this thesis in ways big and small. First thanks go to my family and friends, especially to Katja Gallagher for her love and patience. My friends in the History Department have been constant sources of good cheer across this degree and the last. My classmates in HIST 549 commented on an earlier version of this paper, and I owe special thanks to David Adie, Dexter Fergie, John Miller, Daniel Ribí, and Conor Wilkinson for reviewing additional drafts.

I'd like to thank my professors, Scott Anderson, Tim Cheek, Laura Ishiguro, Bradley Miller, Carla Nappi, and Coll Thrush for their mentorship. I'm especially grateful to my supervisor Laura Ishiguro for the apprenticeship I've had in scholarship and professionalism over the past two years. I thank my readers Robert McDonald and Paige Raibmon for their valuable feedback. I owe the staff in the History Department, and especially Jason Wu, for looking after the important details.

The staff at the B.C., Richmond, UBC, UVIC, and Vancouver Archives, as well as those at UBC Rare Books & Special Collections were all extremely helpful. The staff and volunteers of Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site in Steveston gave me an intro into this topic, and I especially thank Heidi Rampfl, who pointed out several key resources at an early stage of this project. Finally, my paper was generously supported by scholarships from the UBC History Department, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Foundation to Commemorate the Chinese Railroad Workers in Canada, whose investments in young researchers deserve recognition.

I. Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, Indigenous, European, and Japanese fishers in British Columbia together vied for fish, licenses, and fair pay, and at times allied in those common pursuits.¹ By the 1890s, however, many settlers in the province had begun to think of fishing as a “white” industry. Successive fisheries commissions after 1892 foregrounded white fishers in their investigations. In 1908, Liberal Party candidate Robert Jardine campaigned in the riding of New Westminster on a slogan of “White Fishermen Only!”² By 1912, dominion and provincial fisheries authorities began decreasing license issues to Japanese fishers in favour of “a suitable class of white fishermen,” and by 1927, white fishers had become the single largest demographic on the Fraser River, the historical heart of the province’s salmon fishery.³ But while such views percolated the industry’s procurement sector, they were absent in its processing sector, where thousands of Chinese and Indigenous salmon cannery workers transformed the product for world markets. If fishing was a white industry—at least in aspiration—then it masked an underlying reliance on non-white labour. This was especially striking in the case of the Chinese: while Chinese exclusion movements roared in the provincial legislature (and occasionally in the streets), Chinese workers were at the centre of paradigmatically white jobs. What, then, can the fishing industry tell us about the structural entanglement of race and labour in British Columbia in the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?⁴

¹ Because some of these workers were Indigenous women, I have opted for the more gender-neutral term “fishers” rather than “fishermen.”

² Mitsuo Yesaki, *Sutebusuton: A Japanese Village on the British Columbia Coast* (Vancouver: Peninsula Publishing Company, 2003), 39.

³ Cited in Douglas Harris, *Landing Native Fisheries: Indian Reserves & Fishing Rights in British Columbia, 1849-1925* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 140; Mitsuo Yesaki, Harold Steves & Kathy Steves, *Steveston Cannery Row: An Illustrated History*. 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Peninsula Publishing Company, 2005), 139.

⁴ In this paper I use the term “Chinese” to refer both to sojourners and settlers. Some, like Timothy Stanley, date the identity “Chinese Canadian” to the beginning of the twentieth century. Others see it as a product of Canada’s official Multiculturalism Policy of 1971. Because most migrant workers in salmon canning were sojourners, I have opted for terminology that reflects their attachment to the sending region. See Timothy J. Stanley, “By the Side of Other

The history of anti-Chinese racism in British Columbia is well documented. By the 1870s, white working class settlers increasingly regarded Chinese migrants—then roughly 20 percent of the province’s non-Indigenous population—as threats to their wages, working conditions, and influence, and responded with campaigns for Chinese exclusion. The statements of the Knights of Labour before the 1885 *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration* were typical:

Their standard of living is reduced to the lowest possible point, and...they are enabled to not only live but to grow on wages far below the lowest minimum at which we can possibly exist. They are thus fitted to become all too dangerous competitors in the labour market, while their docile servility, the natural outcome of centuries of grinding poverty and humble submission to a most oppressive system of government, renders them doubly dangerous as the willing tools whereby grasping and tyrannical employers grind down all labour to the lowest living point.⁵

Industrialists’ threatened or actual use of Chinese workers to break strikes were dramatic illustrations of the menace posed by this ostensible alliance of labour and capital.⁶ In turn, exclusion movements and their political allies began a decades-long enclosure of the provincial labour market, barring Chinese workers from jobs in mining, logging, public works, and the licensed professions, while pushing for border restrictions via increasingly onerous head taxes. These actions culminated in the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, which banned the further immigration of Chinese workers. The result was a society that excluded Chinese migrants at the border, offered them little upward mobility, and constrained their economic activities within

Canadians’: The Locally Born and the Invention of Chinese Canadians,” *BC Studies* 156/7 (2007): 109-139; Wing Chung Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80: The Pursuit of Identity and Power* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 103.

⁵ *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1885), 156.

⁶ See for example, Robert Dunsmuir’s use of Chinese workers to break a mining strike in 1883, and mayoral candidate R.H. Alexander’s alleged threat in 1886 to replace striking sawmill workers with Chinese strike breakers. W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978), 38; Robert A.J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status, and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 52.

ethnic niches. To borrow Timothy Stanley's evocative term, British Columbia became a Chinese Archipelago, where "Chinatown was an island," amidst "a hostile social geography."⁷

On a more general level, the vilification of Chinese workers in British Columbia was a local manifestation of the familiar refrain that immigrant workers were undermining "our jobs." This has been a flexible, and at times contradictory trope. In British Columbia, settler colonists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries inveighed against Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, Italian, Hebridean, and even Indigenous workers, who they derided as "cheap labour" threatening white settler jobs.⁸ Though the content of such claims has changed over time, similar contentions are as present in the contemporary world as they have been in the past as migrants—whether permanent or temporary, regular or irregular—often bear the brunt of social censure for the economic difficulties of the majority.⁹ In British Columbia, the clear political importance of the subject, both for understanding the political and economic history of the region as well as for present concerns, has made the study of race, class, and migration staples of historical scholarship. Much of this scholarship has focused on Chinese workers, the province's largest non-white immigrant group.¹⁰

⁷ Timothy Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy: School Segregation, Anti-Racism, and the Making of Chinese Canadians* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 121.

⁸ On antagonism against European and Indigenous workers see McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 208; Timothy S. Forest, "Defenders of Empire or Agents of Ruin?: Hebridean Scot Colonies in British Columbia in the 1920s," *The Canadian Historical Review* 96.2 (2015): 194-222; John S. Lutz, *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 163.

⁹ For a helpful survey, see Cindy Hahamovitch, "Creating Perfect Immigrants: Guestworkers of the World in Historical Perspective," *Labor History* 44.1 (2003): 69-94.

¹⁰ For an overview of much of this literature see Patricia Roy, "White Canada Forever: Two Generations of Studies," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 11.2 (1979): 97-109; and *ibid.* "'Active voices': A Third Generation of Studies of the Chinese and Japanese in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 117 (1998): 51-61. Book-length studies of anti-Asian racism in British Columbia include James W. Morton, *In the Sea of Sterile Mountains: The Chinese in British Columbia* (Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, 1974); Ward, *White Canada Forever*; Harry Con, Edgar Wickberg et al. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982); Anthony B. Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983); Patricia Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990); Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Patricia Roy, *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province, 1914-1941* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003); *ibid.* *The Triumph of*

Historians have largely taken two positions on the historical relation between Chinese and white workers. One view sees the relation as competitive. Although Chinese workers have generally been marginal to most of their accounts, this has often been the position of Canadian labour historians. Desmond Morton and Terry Copp's *Working People*, for example, depicts Chinese migrants as workers whose "bare subsistence needs and docility... offered competition that no white worker could match and few white employers could resist."¹¹ Bryan Palmer's *Working-Class Experience*, a survey of 180 years of Canadian labour history, mentions Chinese workers only three times, in the context of white labour organization, strike breaking, and the detrimental effects of race on class consciousness.¹² While most such studies have examined how white workers sought to overcome this competition through Chinese exclusion, others have looked at the rare cases when Chinese and white workers organized together, overcoming their competition through mutual solidarity.¹³ At root, both perspectives share the view that Chinese

Citizenship: The Japanese and Chinese in Canada, 1941-67 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007). On the "race versus class debate" over whether race or class was the more fundamental social division in the province, see W. Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939," *BC Studies* 45 (1980): 17-36; Rennie Warburton, "Race and Class in British Columbia: A Comment," *BC Studies* 49 (1981): 79-85; W. Peter Ward, "Race and Class in British Columbia: A Reply," *BC Studies* 50 (1981): 52; Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 125-127; McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, xiv. Recent works have also put anti-Chinese racism in B.C. in transnational perspective. See Marilyn Lake & Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Kornel S. Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); David C. Atkinson, *The Burden of White Supremacy: Containing Asian Migration in the British Empire and the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2017).

¹¹ Desmond Morton & Terry Copp, *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement* (Ottawa: Deneau Publishers, 1980), 54.

¹² Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto & Vancouver, Butterworth & Co., 1983), 104, 123-124, 227. Likewise, the flagship Canadian labour history journal *Labour/Le travail* has only printed three articles on Chinese workers in Canada over its forty-year history, all of which have dealt with white anti-Chinese racism.

¹³ Much of this literature has been influenced by Edna Bonacich's writings on "split labour market theory." See Edna Bonacich, "A Theory of Ethnic Antagonism: The Split Labour Market," *American Sociological Review* 37.5 (1972): 547-559; Lucie Cheng & Edna Bonacich eds., *Labor Immigration under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Terry E. Boswell, "A Split Labor Market Analysis of Discrimination Against Chinese Immigrations, 1850-1882," *American Sociological Review* 51.3 (1986): 352-371. In Canadian labour history, see Paul A. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Broadway Printers, 1967); Ross A. McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and*

labour was a *problem* for white workers, one that demanded—as Gillian Creese has put it—either “exclusion or solidarity” in response.

Another view holds that although Chinese and white workers were competitors in some areas of the economy, in most areas their relation was non-competitive. Some scholars have highlighted the fact that most Chinese workers channeled into menial jobs or jobs in Chinese-owned firms over time. W. Peter Ward has argued that Asian workers in British Columbia “seem to have functioned within a separate labour market of their own, one confined to a limited range of occupations, most of them arduous and ill-paid.”¹⁴ The concepts of an “immigrant economy” or “ethnic sector” have proven useful to some studies, while studies of Chinatowns in Canada have traditionally regarded local workers as partly isolated from the wider society.¹⁵ This more frictionless conception of the relation between working groups highlights the non-economic aspects of racial antagonism, in Ward’s case contributing to his argument that anti-Asian racism in British Columbia was fundamentally a product of the “social psychology of race relations” rather than economic competition.¹⁶

These two positions—economic competition and isolation—frame much of the historiography on Chinese labour in Canada. Some contemporary researchers of migrant labour, however, have offered a third view, remarking that in some cases low-paid immigrant workers

Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 10; Carlos A. Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885-1917* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1979), 157-159; David Goutor, *Guarding the Gates: The Canadian Labour Movement and Immigration, 1872-1934* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007). On solidarity between white and Chinese workers see especially Gillian Creese, “Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the ‘Oriental Problem,’” *BC Studies* 80 (1988): 24-51.

¹⁴ Ward, “Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia,” 33-34.

¹⁵ Paul C.P. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 1; Peter S. Li, “The Economic Cost of Racism to Chinese-Canadians,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 19.3 (1987): 104; In addition to Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy*, see David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988); Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown*.

¹⁶ Ward, *White Canada Forever*, ix. See also McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, 206.

neither undermine nor evade other workers, but instead *complement* or *uphold* them.¹⁷ This position has been under-represented in historiography, but deserves consideration.¹⁸ On a systemic level, the notion that British Columbia's Chinese and white workforces "had limited contact outside economically competitive situations" seems implausible.¹⁹ Chinese workers were also consumers, intermediaries, and sometimes investors, whose economic contributions cannot be delimited by the geographical circumscriptions of Chinatown. As workers, Chinese migrants belonged to chains of production that extended well beyond discrete workplaces. Furthermore, as recent works have shown, social boundaries under Chinese exclusion were often more fluid than imagined.²⁰ Beneath the overwhelming social phenomena of Chinese exclusion and marginalization, there is room to think differently about Chinese workers and their relations to others in British Columbia.

Salmon canning is a helpful forum for thinking about the historical links between ethnically divided workforces. Procurement and processing were integrated components of canning firms, fusing a chain of production around a single locale: the cannery. With around 80 percent of the provincial salmon fishery passing through canneries into the 1940s, fishers

¹⁷ Tyler Woods, "Seven Myth-Busting Facts on Undocumented Immigration," *Urban Institute*, March 24, 2016.

¹⁸ One notable exception is Peter S. Li, *The Chinese in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988). On recent developments in the historiography of Chinese migration see Chris Friday, "Asian American Labor and Historical Interpretation," *Labor History* 35.4 (1994): 524-546; *ibid.*, "Asian American Labor History: 'What do you do?,'" *Amerasia Journal* 26.1 (2000): 181-205; Mae Ngai, "Asian American History: Reflections on the De-centering of the Field," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25.4 (2006): 97-108; Moon-Ho Jung, "Beyond These Mythical Shores: Asian American History and the Study of Race," *History Compass* 6.2 (2008): 627-638. In British Columbia, see Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver*; Henry Yu, "Refracting Pacific Canada: Seeing Our Uncommon Past," *BC Studies* 156/7 (2007): 5-10; Lisa Rose Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era, 1885-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy*; Chang, *Pacific Connections*; Alison Marshall, *Cultivating Connections: The Making of Chinese Prairie Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Roy, *The Oriental Question*, 27.

²⁰ In B.C. scholarship see Renisa Mawani, *Colonial Proximities: Crossracial Encounters and Juridical Truths in British Columbia, 1871-1921* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009); Patrick Alexander Dunae et al. "Making the Inscrutable Scrutable: Race and Space in Victoria's Chinatown, 1891," *BC Studies* 169 (2011): 51-80; Jean Barman, "Beyond Chinatown: Chinese Men and Indigenous Women in Early British Columbia," *BC Studies* 177 (2013): 39-64.

depended on canneries purchasing and processing their catch, just as canneries depended on fishers for their raw materials.²¹ Through this mutual dependency, both workforces interacted directly with the firm, but also indirectly with each other. A labour shortage or strike in one sector meant a work stoppage in the other. Within a largely price-taking industry, shifting input costs had to be balanced by the moveable parts; a rise in wages on one side thus put those of the other side into question.²² In this respect, labour politics played out not only between workers and capitalists, but within the workforce itself in a dialectical relationship mediated by capital. The history of Chinese labour in salmon canneries, therefore, cannot be isolated from the history of fishers—both were mutually constitutive.

This paper looks at Chinese labour in British Columbian salmon canneries in the context of Chinese exclusion and the rise of a “white” fishery before the Second World War. I argue that Chinese labour was foundational to white fishing jobs in B.C. This was true in three senses. First, exclusion in civil society crowded Chinese workers into economic niches, one of which was salmon canning. This crowding effect upheld fishing labour through heightening the availability of processing workers at a time when canners faced chronic labour shortages, and led workers to develop skills in key manual employments over time. Second, crowding and the mediation of labour contractors reduced Chinese workers’ propensity to strike, which contrasted with the turbulent history of labour activism by other workers in the industry. This gave salmon canning an artificial stability in its processing operations that underpinned the labour struggles of other groups. Lastly, low and stagnant Chinese labour costs over time enabled firms to harmonize the

²¹ “9. Fish Caught and Marketed, by Provinces,” *Fisheries Statistics of Canada*, Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Fisheries Division, 1917-1941 (Ottawa), 1918-1942.

²² David J. Reid, “Company Mergers in the Fraser River Salmon Canning Industry, 1885-1902,” *Canadian Historical Review* 56.3 (1975): 282-302; Dianne Newell, *The Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry: A Grown Man’s Game* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989).

growing earnings of fishers with their own competitiveness on world markets. In this sense, Chinese labour served as a financial buffer between the conflicting interests of canners and fishers. For these reasons, as much as the canned salmon that was shipped worldwide, fishing jobs in B.C.'s paradigmatically "white" fishing industry prior to the Second World War should be understood as in part the product of Chinese labour under the province's exclusion regime.

My argument engages two methodological approaches. Sections on manual labour and labour activism are largely grounded in first-hand accounts. As is often the case in labour history, workers wrote little to nothing about their own experiences; nevertheless, journalists' reports, Royal Commissions, and interviews with former workers all shed light onto aspects of this history. My discussion of labour costs, by contrast, retreats from the voices of individuals in favour of a more "bird's eye" perspective drawing on annual records. The major canning company that I draw from is the Anglo-British Columbia Packing Company (ABC Packers), whose public archives date to the firm's founding in 1890. Producing over a quarter of the province's canned salmon in its first year of operations, the company was responsible for roughly 12 percent of provincial production up to the Second World War.²³ Beginning in 1918, the Canadian Dominion Bureau of Statistics also began collecting annual statistics on Canada's fisheries, providing a point of comparison with ABC Packers' internal records while extending its field of vision in new directions. Borrowing from both perspectives will, I hope, speak to the twin premises of much labour history since E.P. Thompson: that individuals enter labour markets as members of social formations; but those social formations only ever manifest "in real people and in a real context."²⁴

²³ Annual Records 1 & 2, Box 590-G-1&2, The Anglo British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA); compared with Cicely Lyons, *Salmon: Our Heritage* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press Limited, 1969), 705-715.

²⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Pelican Books, 1980), 8.

Lastly, a word on scope. Indigenous and Japanese workers were also critical actors in the provincial fishing industry, and although much of my analysis applies to these groups as well, it would be unfair to discuss them without accounting for their distinct experiences as shaped by settler colonialism and anti-Japanese racism. The participation of white women in salmon canneries and the small number of Chinese who fished are also not discussed in detail.²⁵ My discussion is not to suggest that Chinese workers alone made the industry function, nor that their labour uniquely benefitted white fishers, but rather to highlight their role in supporting fishing jobs in the labour process, an aspect of Chinese migrant labour history that bears emphasis in light of persistent tendencies to see immigrant workers as either a threat to other workers or as a community apart. This history shows instead that even at the height of Chinese exclusion, the economic development of British Columbia cannot be fully understood without examining Chinese labour and the ways it complemented the labour of others.

²⁵ The 1881 census found 76 Chinese fishers in New Westminster. See Rudy Chiang, "Participation of Chinese Pioneers in British Columbia Salmon Canneries, 1880s to 1920s," *5th World Confederation of Institutes and Libraries in Chinese Overseas Studies*, University of British Columbia, May 16-19, 2012.

II. The Growth of Salmon Canning

Canning is a product of what historian Joel Mokyr has called the “Industrial Enlightenment.”²⁶ Originating in France at the turn of the nineteenth century, by mid-century “canners” had experimented with canning meats, vegetables, fruits, and fish, in efforts to expand the market reach of perishable foodstuffs without replicating the aesthetic downsides of salting or drying. Anadromous Atlantic salmon had long been fished from the major rivers of western Europe, but was disappearing, beckoning a Pacific orientation in the production of canned salmon. Following small-scale efforts to export salted and dried salmon, North America’s west coast salmon canning industry was founded on the Sacramento River in 1864, and expanded northward over the 1870s and 1880s, reaching the Columbia River in 1866, Puget Sound in 1877, and Alaska in 1878.²⁷ Production in British Columbia began in 1870 on the Fraser River, and reached the more northern Skeena river in 1876.²⁸ By the 1910s, with Russian and Japanese producers canning salmon on the Siberian Kamchatka Peninsula and Okhotsk Sea, the industry had encircled the northern Pacific Rim. The scale of this multinational slaughter was immense. Between 1910 and 1916, American, Canadian, Russian, and Japanese canneries produced 47,399,106 cases of canned salmon, the equivalent of over 600 million fish.²⁹ Two decades later, output reached 74,542,070 cases—the product of more than a billion fish (Fig. 2.1, 2.2).³⁰

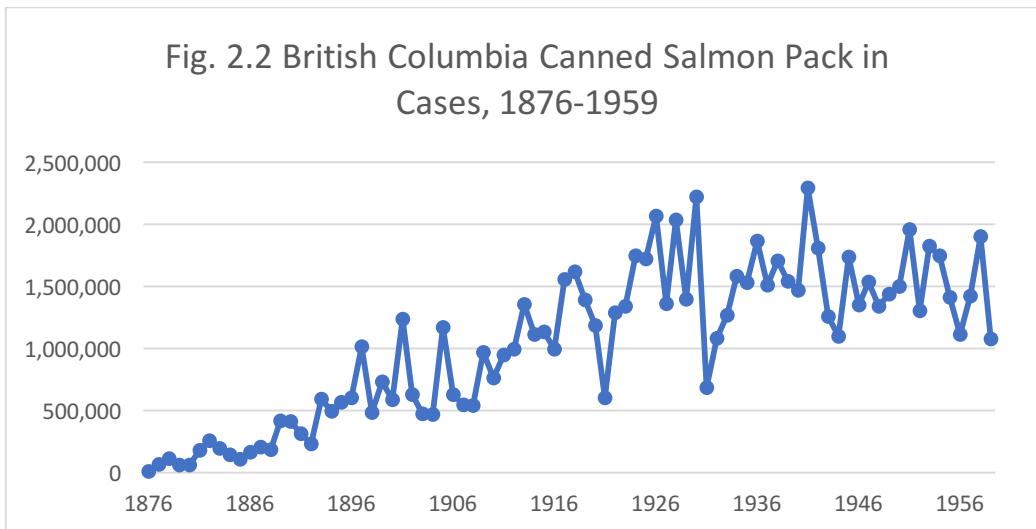
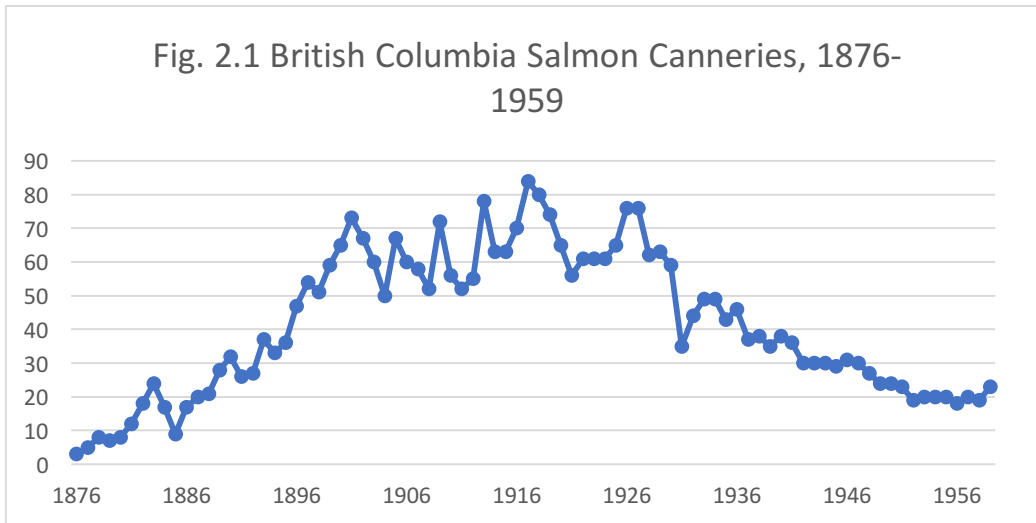
²⁶ Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain, 1700-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 137.

²⁷ Lyons, *Salmon*, 141.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 142, 149. Another entrepreneur—James Syme—also exported a dozen cans of salmon to Australia in 1867 on an experimental basis. Duncan A. Stacey, *Sockeye & Tinplate: Technological Change in the Fraser River Canning Industry 1871-1912* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1982), 2.

²⁹ Raw fish total based on Henry Doyle’s 1924 estimate that 14 sockeyes were required per case. This figure varies for each species and by cannery—a case of pinks required roughly 17 fish, while a case of chums required only 8. There was some variation between canneries, some using as few as 11 sockeyes per case while others used up to 18. See also Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Files 1 & 2, The Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA). These figures are compared with the tables in Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 230, 238.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

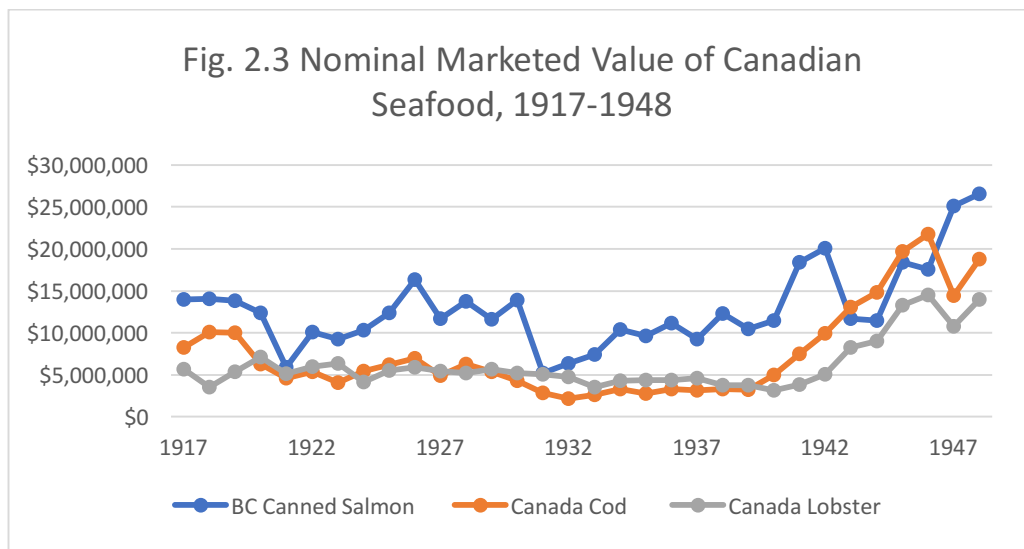


Source: Both charts drawn from Lyons, *Salmon*, 705-715. Info on canneries and salmon pack between 1876-1879 from *British Columbia Fisheries Commission 1905-1907* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1908), 20.

Given the perishability of the product, limited refrigeration technologies, and a low domestic demand, realizing the value of salmon required canning it within hours of its catch, and shipping the product to overseas markets. The major early market was Britain, which purchased 70 to 80 percent of the provincial canned salmon pack in the nineteenth century, and roughly half of the pack in the 1920s and 1930s.³¹ Whereas American canners could rely on a sizeable domestic market for nearly three-quarters of their output, British Columbian canners consistently

³¹ Lyons, *Salmon*, 208; Annual Records 1, Box 590-G-1, File 3, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA); Annual Report, 1940, Box 1, File 10, British Columbia Packers Limited Fonds (CRA).

maintained an export-driven orientation premised on expanding into new markets.³² By the outbreak of the Second World War, provincial canners shipped to regions as distant as South Africa, Fiji, India, the West Indies, Colombia, and Portuguese East Africa.³³ In virtue of these global connections, British Columbia canned salmon became the single most valuable component of Canada’s fisheries from 1905 until mid-century, frequently exceeding the marketed value of the country’s Atlantic cod and lobster fisheries—the next most valuable fisheries—combined (Fig. 2.3).³⁴



Source: *Fisheries Statistics of Canada, 1917-1948*, Table 3. Quantity and Value of all Fish caught and marketed, Canada; Table 20. Quantities and Values by Provinces of all Fish and Fish Products Marketed.

Canning districts developed at the mouths of large rivers, where transportation distances were shortest, and returning salmon were healthiest prior to spawning.³⁵ Steveston, on the south arm of the Fraser River, became the early centre of the British Columbian industry, with fifteen

³² The 1917 British Columbia Fishery Commission noted that the domestic/export consumption ratios were nearly inverse between the United States and British Columbia. While the U.S. consumed 72.5 percent of its product domestically and exported 27.5 percent, British Columbia consumed 27.2 percent domestically and exported 72.8 percent. *Report of the Special Fishery Commission, Province of British Columbia, 1917* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1918), 15.

³³ Annual Report, 1940, Box 1, File 10, British Columbia Packers Limited Fonds (CRA).

³⁴ Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 4.

³⁵ Percy Gladstone, “Industrial Disputes in the Commercial Fisheries of British Columbia,” M.A. Thesis, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1959), 8.

operating canneries by 1901. The canning season itself lasted roughly five months—May to September—with variations by district, pre-seasonal work and the types of salmon caught.³⁶ Of the five species of Pacific Salmon—sockeye, coho, pink, spring, and chum—sockeye commanded the highest price for its taste, deep red colour, and high oil content. This focus concentrated seasonal production between late June to early August, when thousands of fishers and cannery workers migrated to the canning district of their hire, some so remote as to be roughly a week from outside goods and services and accessible only by the “cannery routes” plied by coastal steamships.³⁷

Recruiting labourers for canning’s seasonal, unpredictable, and often unpleasant work was a persistent challenge for firms. Work patterns alternated between idle boredom and conditions that replicated the worst excesses of the early Industrial Revolution. When sockeye runs were at their peak, working days in northern areas with long summer daylight lasted upwards of 18 hours, while other working days could last as little as three or four hours.³⁸ The canning process itself involved many tasks: unloading salmon from boats; butchering and rinsing the fish; removing scales; cutting the fish into steaks; filling, weighing and sealing the cans; washing, cooking, and cooling the cans; testing the cans for blemishes; lacquering and labelling them; and preparing the product for shipment.³⁹ The noise and heat inside canneries could be

³⁶ Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon Canning Industry*, 7.

³⁷ Geoff Meggs, *Salmon: The Decline of the British Columbia Fishery* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991), 51; Dianne Newell, “Surveying Historic Industrial Tidewater Sites: The Case of the B.C. Salmon Canning Industry,” *IA. The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archaeology* 13.1 (1987): 1-16. On steamships, see for example Official Sailing Guide [1927], Box 10-F-g, Folder 1, Union Steamship Company of B.C. Fonds (VCA). By the 1920s, the Union Steamship Company offered coastal cruises for tourists advertising “many interesting calls at logging camps and canneries.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 296; Neill Chan, interview by Lilian Chau, July 17, 1999, transcript, Chinese Cannery Workers Oral History Project (GOG); Jimmy Hing & Jim Kishi, interview by Marilyn Clayton & Marie Bannister, August 15, 1991, transcript, Britannia Oral History Project (RCA).

³⁹ For descriptions of the canning process see “The Salmon Fisheries of the Fraser River,” *Mainland Guardian*, April 14, 1877; “A Visit to the Fraser Canneries,” *Daily British Colonist*, July 30th, 1881; Stacey, *Sockeye & Tinsplate*, 4-7; Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 109-111; Chris Friday, *Organizing Asian American*

overwhelming.⁴⁰ While relatively rare, industrial injuries could be serious, particularly as medical help was sometimes hours or days away.⁴¹ Waste and effluence from canneries was frequently noxious—physicians testifying before the 1892 Fisheries Commission, for instance, noted the prevalence of typhoid in surrounding areas and advised residents to follow Chinese workers in boiling water “like tea.”⁴² While foul conditions prevailed in many other industrial jobs, work in salmon canneries met particular disdain. Rudyard Kipling, visiting salmon canneries in the Pacific Northwest, could only be struck by their “slippery, blood-stained, scale-spangled, oily floors” and their “most civilized and murderous of machinery.”⁴³ As historian Patricia Roy has noted more forthrightly, “few whites wanted such miserable work.”⁴⁴

Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry, 1870-1942 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 28-30.

⁴⁰ “A Visit to the Fraser Canneries,” *Daily British Colonist*.

⁴¹ The *Daily British Colonist* recorded at least one—and another probable—Chinese fatality from falling pulleys in 1881, “Fatal Accidents at the Canneries,” *Daily Colonist*, July 30, 1881. A journal from the Beaver Cannery on Rivers Inlet from the 1930s recorded a serious eye injury and a fatality in 1931. Journal—1931, Box 1, File 3, Beaver Cannery, Rivers Inlet Records (UBC RBSC).

⁴² *British Columbia Fishery Commission Report* (Ottawa), 1892, 221. As former cannery worker Isaac Nelson recalled in 1964, “they didn’t have no... gut boxes in them days... [rotten fish] were just dumped under the cannery... there was just a layer of rotten fish all along the shore. And the stink and stuff, terrible!” Isaac Nelson, interview by Imbert Orchard, 1964, Track 2, Imbert Orchard Fonds (BC Archives). On residential protests, see for example “Cannery for Roberts Bay,” *The Daily Colonist*, June 13, 1916.

⁴³ Rudyard Kipling, *American Notes* (Boston: Brown and Company, 1899), 60.

⁴⁴ Roy, *The Oriental Question*, 103.

III. The Chinese Cannery Worker

In July 1881, the Victoria-based *Daily British Colonist* sent a correspondent to review cannery production on the Fraser River. He reported that the “canneries are now working to their fullest extent, but complain greatly of the lack of labor.”⁴⁵ Twenty years later, cannery workers continued to voice similar complaints. As Henry Bell-Irving of ABC Packers recalled before the 1902 *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, “[w]e had not enough labor to take care of all the fish in 1897,” and cannery workers confronted a similar situation in 1901, when, in W.A. Carrothers’ words, fishers’ nets “were sunk and lost on account of the weight of the fish caught.”⁴⁶ Four years later, cannery workers were again “forced voluntarily to limit the number of fish they could accept daily...and to reduce the number of contract boats fishing for the cannery.”⁴⁷ These years coincided with peak runs in the quadrennial cycle of the Fraser River sockeye, when demand for labour was greatest. Subsequent shortages in 1906 and 1907 however, confirmed the ongoing nature of the problem.⁴⁸ This was a chronic issue in the first thirty years of the industry, with consequences for both cannery workers and fishers. Canneries restricted fish purchases when they lacked processing workers, and so fishers too had an interest in having a sizeable force of cannery workers on hand. Bell-Irving was undoubtedly speaking to the dispositions of the Royal Commission, yet his comments are revealing of the inner logic to fishery employment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “if there had been more Chinese we should have given employment to more white men outside in fishing.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ “Fatal Accidents at the Canneries,” *Daily British Colonist*, July 30, 1881.

⁴⁶ W. A. Carrothers, *The British Columbia Fisheries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1941), 17.

⁴⁷ Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 131.

⁴⁸ William Barker of BC Packers, for instance, estimated that the company was 30-40 percent short of Chinese labour in 1919. See Barker Letter Books, Vol. I, Series 2, File 1, pg. 826-829, British Columbia Packers Limited Fonds (CRA).

⁴⁹ *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 143-148.

In the first thirty years of salmon canning in British Columbia, the number of canneries and fishers in the province grew in direct proportion to the number of Chinese workers the industry could obtain. Conversely, when the supply of Chinese workers was low, the entire industry suffered. Cannery owners complained that they “could not carry on business” without Chinese workers, and this dependency was reflected in modest wage increases and some Chinese labour activism.⁵⁰ Dependency, however, was never unidirectional. Chinese labour contractors channeled workers into the industry when few other avenues were open. By 1899, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) in Victoria warned prospective migrants in China that the “only means of earning a living” in British Columbia was “to work in the fish-canning industry.”⁵¹ Salmon cannery labour, in short, was a product of both agency and compulsion. Over time, these twin pressures developed a certain momentum. Chinese workers gained important industrial skills and entered a “middle rung in the province’s labour hierarchy.”⁵² By the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese labour had become the backbone of provincial salmon canning, supporting the labour process as the most numerous class of operatives and day labourers at a time when labour was in short supply. The origins of a large-scale salmon canning industry, and the salmon fishery it supported, thus begins with the Chinese cannery worker.

In a provincial labour market split along ethnic lines, cannery owners had a few options in selecting a processing labour force. Despite a demographic collapse wrought by introduced diseases over the preceding century, Indigenous workers filled most of the labour requirements of the industry’s first canneries in the 1870s, and became a key source of labour thereafter.⁵³

⁵⁰ British Columbia Fishery Commission, 275.

⁵¹ David Chuen-Yan Lai, “Chinese Attempts to Discourage Emigration to Canada: Some Findings from the Chinese Archives in Victoria,” *BC Studies* 18 (1973): 35-37.

⁵² Ward, *White Canada Forever*, 16.

⁵³ Historians have debated the extent and causes of this demographic decline. See John Douglas Belshaw, *Becoming British Columbia: A Population History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 72-90.

Seasonally-migrating families or villages included a variety of important skilled workers, including fishers, net-makers, child-carers and fish butchers, who cannerys generally hired as a single unit through a contractor.⁵⁴ While Indigenous women sometimes fished alongside men in the nineteenth century, most Indigenous labour was divided by gender and age, with men working as fishers and women and children working in cannerys. A similar pattern prevailed amongst Japanese migrants after the turn of the century as the number of Japanese women grew and as Japanese men captured an increasing number of fishing licenses. But although this conjugal division of labour complemented the industry's procurement and processing stages, it also left important gaps. Pre-seasonal work—including making cans and boxes, clearing grounds, and moving supplies—required an independent force of shore workers. Furthermore, salmon canning was only one component of Indigenous workers' year-long earning strategies and thus commanded only their partial loyalties—as one canner complained in 1918: “Indians will only fish sockeyes, and quit after the sockeye run is over; thus leaving...cannerys relatively short manned for fall fishing.”⁵⁵ As for white workers, cannerys considered it “impossible to get white labour for the short time we require them,” with one canner equating white labour with a kind of industrial suicide: “if the cannerys in British Columbia had to depend on white labor,” Thomas Ladner told the 1885 *Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, “every one, without an exception, would be closed up and the industry be entirely killed.”⁵⁶ With growing economic activity elsewhere in the province and a relatively small domestic population, cannerys had

⁵⁴ Dianne Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 53-54; John S. Lutz, *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 92. See Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 135-136 on the labour of indigenous women and children.

⁵⁵ Minute Book, March 23, 1914-October 9, 1920, Oct. 29, 1918, Box 52, International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Collection (UBCA). See also Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter From the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁵⁶ *British Columbia Fisheries Commission Report*, 1892, 275; *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration*, 98.

difficulty recruiting settlers for work in canneries, even as many chose to become fishers.⁵⁷ In British Columbia, as in the United States, such factors led canners to seek an alternative migrant workforce in the form of Chinese workers.

Most Chinese migrants to North America came from a small cluster of counties in Guangdong's Pearl River Delta.⁵⁸ Proximity to Hong Kong, ceded to Britain after the First Opium War, provided access to steamships as well as financial and business networks that facilitated finding work, transferring money, and communicating with home. These migrants relied on brokers, relatives, or acquaintances for work, travel assistance, and other services.⁵⁹ Although relatively small in comparison with travel to Southeast Asia, some 1.5 million Chinese migrants travelled to the Americas in the century after 1840, with some migrants travelling between several regions over the course of a sojourn.⁶⁰ The address book of one Chinese cannery contractor in Vancouver in the 1930s, for instance, displays the expansive migrant networks to which salmon canneries and Chinese brokers were linked, with its entries for contacts in South China, eastern and central Canada, both American coasts, and Cuba, alongside 24 British Columbian salmon canneries within three major canning companies.⁶¹

The key for sojourning workers was to capitalize on the difference between wages in North America and the cost of living in South China. As Alicja Muszynski has argued, the

⁵⁷ *British Columbia Fisheries Commission 1905-1907: Report and Recommendations with Addenda and Appendices* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1908), 17. On provincial population figures see Belshaw, *Becoming British Columbia*, 201.

⁵⁸ Four counties were particularly well represented: in Cantonese—Toisan, Sunwui, Yungping & Hoiping counties. June Mei, "Socioeconomic Origins of Emigration: Guangdong to California, 1850-1882," *Modern China* 5.4 (1979): 463-501; Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 14-15.

⁵⁹ Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 126.

⁶⁰ Adam McKeown, "Chinese Emigration in Global Context, 1850-1940," *Journal of Global History* 5.1 (2010): 98-99. For discussion on some of the differences between migrant destinations, see *ibid.*, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁶¹ Address Book, Box 2, Chock On Fonds (UBC RBSC). The three canning companies were the Canadian Fishing Company, Nelson Brothers' Fisheries, and BC Packers.

dramatic gap between the two enabled Chinese workers to underbid other groups of workers, whose costs of living were borne locally.⁶² Domestic exclusion movements against “cheap wage labour,” which gathered momentum over the 1870s, helped ensure that provincial demand for Chinese labour would be low, ironically perpetuating the low Chinese wages that the movements hoped to avoid competing with. This, combined with the influx of Chinese workers building the westernmost stretches of the Canadian Pacific Railway between 1881 and 1884, offered salmon canning a sizeable, and relatively inexpensive “reserve force” of processors available for flexible work terms and hours. Chinese workers were first employed in the Pacific salmon canning industry on the Columbia River in 1870.⁶³ Soon thereafter, entrepreneur Alexander Ewen hired the first Chinese cannery workers in British Columbia, and they quickly grew in number.⁶⁴ By 1879, there were approximately 1,100 Chinese workers in the provincial industry, representing three quarters of its workforce.⁶⁵ By 1902, the *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration* estimated that there were between 5,000 and 6,000 Chinese working in British Columbian salmon canneries. This represented roughly 50 to 60 percent of the province’s cannery labour force and 35 to 40 percent of the its Chinese population, making the industry the province’s top employer of Chinese workers.⁶⁶ The predominance of Chinese workers in canneries became reflected in the very vocabulary of the industry. Labour contracts were job

⁶² Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996).

⁶³ Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*, 8-24.

⁶⁴ *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1902), 135.

⁶⁵ Young and Reid, cited in Percy Gladstone, “Industrial Disputes,” 293. The *Daily British Colonist* claimed that there were 1,500 Chinese workers in salmon canning in 1878. “Third Parliamentary Session,” Aug. 8, 1878.

⁶⁶ *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 134, 164-167. The commission put the total number of workers in provincial fisheries at 20,262 for 1900. The *1905-1907 British Columbia Fishery Commission* gives 3,120 Chinese workers for 1901, but this estimate was based only on members of the Fraser River Cannery Association, not the entire industry. See *British Columbia Fisheries Commission 1905-1907*, 22. A survey of Chinese workers in Victoria for 1901 found that 29.1 percent worked as “Food Cannery.” See Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 47.

printed as “Chinese Contracts.” Bookkeepers recorded canning work as “Chinese Labour.”⁶⁷

When inventor E.A. Smith patented an automatic fish-butchering machine in 1903, the machine was quickly dubbed the “Iron Chink,” a testament to the confidence of its proponents that the machine would “easily perform the work of many Chinamen.”⁶⁸

Chinese labour contractors turned the demand for Chinese cannery workers into a business. Cannery owners directly hired only overseers, engineers, cooks, and labour contractors, outsourcing the canning process through labour contracts that specified seasonal advances, a price per case of production, and other conditions.⁶⁹ Contractors took three basic forms. The most prevalent were merchants, for whom contracting was only one component of larger business structures. These ranged from some of the largest Chinese firms in the province to smaller wholesalers.⁷⁰ Some held up to 12 canning contracts at a time, and in rare cases briefly owned or leased their own salmon canneries.⁷¹ A second type were more formal labour recruitment agencies.⁷² A third type were surname or native place associations. One example of these—Chock On House—illustrates the scope of these institutions’ activities. Based on a small property in East Vancouver, Chock On House descended from a string of boarding houses founded in the 1880s to assist unemployed Chinese migrants after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Intended to provide migrants with “mutual help and protection, and support in illness,”

⁶⁷ See for example Chinese Cannery and Packing Contracts, Box 101, File 1, Chung Collection: Textual Materials (UBC RBSC); Annual Records 1, Box 590-G-1, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA); Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 256.

⁶⁸ *British Columbia Fisheries Commission 1905-1907*, 14.

⁶⁹ The 1903 Fraser River Salmon Cannery Association defined the following as “employees”: “Book-keepers, Foremen, Engineers, Bath-room-men, Net-men, Watchmen, Tally-men, Cooks, Chinese Boss Contractors. Also one Fisherman for each boat and gear actually owned and fished by the Canneries.” *Minute Book*, Mar. 2, 1900-Mar. 11, 1904, June 9, 1903, Box 52, International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Commission (UBCA).

⁷⁰ Larger contractors included Wing Sang & Co. and Sam Kee Company, while smaller contractors included the Steveston-based Hong Wo & Co. Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 114.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 114; *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 155.

⁷² See the correspondence of Lincoln Mar’s “Fish Cannery Employment Service” with J.H. Todd & Sons in Empire Cannery-Tai On Company Payroll Sheets, Oct. 1946-Jan. 1947, Box 10, File 16, J.H. Todd & Sons Business Records Inventory (UBC RBSC).

the house recruited and provisioned workers for salmon canneries, and temporarily lodged new migrants. Their work during the 1930s left a record of correspondence that highlights some of the everyday activities of cannery labour contractors, from shipping provisions, to handling requests for employment.⁷³

While the term “Chinese Labour” conveyed a certain homogeneity, this institutional structure supported a workforce differentiated by skill and experience. Along the mostly manual chain of production in the nineteenth century, fishers and canners depended on the speed and skill of two Chinese jobs in particular: can production, and butchering. Prior to the arrival of fishers in a season, canners hired an initial cohort of Chinese workers for pre-seasonal can making and other work, a group historian Chris Friday has called “essentially skilled tinsmiths.”⁷⁴ Chinese can makers cut sheets of tin, rolled the sheets into cylinders, and soldered the bottom and sides, forming an empty can. Once the pre-fabricated cans were filled during the season, workers would then solder the tops before they were cooked. Prior to the introduction of sealing machines, the expanding air inside heated cans had to be vented by poking a hole in the tops of cans and filling in the puncture with a drop of solder. A lack of finesse could easily spoil the finished product. “Swells” were a continual source of anxiety for canners, who had to employ workers to not only make the cans, but to resolder defective ones as well. As Patrick O’Bannon has found, canners often preferred to retain manual Chinese can makers in the nineteenth century even after can making and soldering machines became commercially viable. Although early soldering machines could seal twice as many cans per minute as a team of about twenty

⁷³ A Special Publication of Wo Chock On House (胡卓安房特刊), Box 1, File 1, Chock On Fonds (UBC RBSC). See Lilian Chau’s translations of a set of letters sent between Chock On House and canneries regarding provisioning in Lilian Chau, *Joe Yu Sup, ‘Working in the Cannery’: A Social History of Chinese Cannery Workers 1930-1999* (Steveston, B.C.: Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site, 1999).

⁷⁴ Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor*, 30.

solderers, and machine-made cans emerged after 1883, the need to retain workers throughout the season and to assure the quality of the product led many to forego their advantages.⁷⁵ Even as late as 1923, six canneries in a survey of 44 still hired manual can makers, who “earned among the highest wages of all cannery employees.”⁷⁶

Most critical at the height of a run were skilled butchers, a position that took “two or three years to become proficient in.”⁷⁷ Each canning line required about thirty butchers when functioning at full capacity, and canners placed a premium on speed.⁷⁸ The *Colonist*, surveying summer operations, placed special notice on one Chinese butcher “who opens, beheads, betails and bepins two thousand salmon in a day of ten hours...at the rate of two hundred fish an hour or three and a third a minute.”⁷⁹ Jimmy Hing, hired as a ticket puncher by the Phoenix Cannery in Steveston in 1934 to record the output of can fillers, recalled that an

experienced butcher will do about four or five fish a minute....They’re really going fast. They have two knives: they use one knife for two or three hours and when it gets dull, they change knives and keep on going until noon time. As soon as they eat, they touch the knives up again.⁸⁰

Such speed was not normally required, but it was critical to have such capacity at the height of a run. After the mechanization of butchering, for example, the 1917 Special Fishery Commission of British Columbia remarked upon the “overequipment of the industry,” canners having built up enough capacity to have processed the entire 1917 Fraser River pack in only two and a half eight-hour days.⁸¹ This same capacity was required in human muscle prior to mechanization—as

⁷⁵ Patrick O’Bannon, “Waves of Change: Mechanization in the Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry, 1864-1914,” *Technology and Culture* 28.3 (1987): 566.

⁷⁶ Ibid.; Alicja Muszynski, “Major Processors to 1940 and Early Labour Force: Historical Notes,” in Patricia Marchak, Neil Guppy et al., eds., *Uncommon Property: The Fishing and Fish Processing Industries of British Columbia* (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), 56; Stacey, *Sockeye & Tinsplate*, 21.

⁷⁷ “A Trip to the Canneries,” *Daily British Colonist*, August 4, 1891.

⁷⁸ Stacey, *Sockeye & Tinsplate*, 21.

⁷⁹ “Interesting News from the Canneries,” *Daily British Colonist*, July 26, 1881.

⁸⁰ Paul Yee, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006), 65.

⁸¹ *Special Fishery Commission, 1917*, 14.

Henry Bell-Irving put it, “[o]ur season is so short that if we miss a day or two out of the run it is a great loss to us, and we have to keep a large number of men on hand so as to cope with an emergency.”⁸² As the workers responsible for feeding the rest of the production line, during regular production periods as well as during “emergencies,” Chinese butchers became the pivots around which efficient production on the line and the regular purchase of fish both turned.

Demand for this and other Chinese labour led to modest short-term growth in worker incomes. In 1901, contractor Mar Chan noted that the “competition among the cannery contractors to get the experts” tended to raise Chinese wages annually; stated Chinese earnings over the first thirty years of the industry appear to confirm this view.⁸³ Sources from 1879 and 1884 report that canneries paid Chinese workers \$25-\$35 per month, wages that were on par with the earnings of Chinese workers in railway construction.⁸⁴ Over the 1880s and early 1890s, Chinese workers on the Fraser River earned \$30-\$32 per month.⁸⁵ By 1902, Chinese workers commonly earned \$35-\$45 per month.⁸⁶ Seasonal variations meant that earnings fluctuated. Chinese workers at Ewen & Co. canneries on the Fraser River between 1897 and 1900, for instance, earned as little as \$8.67 on average in especially slow months. Nevertheless, the firm’s pay scale for Chinese workers also increased slightly, from an average of \$38.54 per month in 1897 to \$40.15 in 1900.⁸⁷ This wage compared favourably with other predominantly Chinese

⁸² *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 144.

⁸³ Stated earnings must always be taken with a grain of salt for the fact that they often do not specify whether room and board was included in the wage. Since most of these reports are in the same ballpark, they will be treated as commensurate. The definition of a “month” is 26 working days, not a calendar month.

⁸⁴ *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1885), xxv-xvii; Young and Reid, cited in Gladstone, “Industrial Disputes,” 293; Chan, *Gold Mountain*, 61; Alicja Muszynski, “Race and Gender: Structural determinants in the Formation of British Columbia’s Salmon Cannery Labour Forces,” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 13.1/2 (1988): 111.

⁸⁵ Lyons, *Salmon*, 183; Muszynski, “Race and Gender,” 116. One of the earliest extant Chinese labour contracts—signed in 1895 with S.A. Spencer’s Alert Bay Cannery—contracted Chinese workers for \$40 per month. See Alert Bay Cannery Labour Agreements, 1888, 1895, Box 1, File 2, Frank & Cecilia Sylvester Fonds (UVIC Archives).

⁸⁶ *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 134.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

jobs. Chinese tailors in Victoria, earned \$30 to \$40 per month in 1902, while hired laundry workers earned only \$18 per month.⁸⁸ Although Chinese cannery workers earned much less than white workers, who earned upwards of \$80 per month in canneries by 1901, Chinese salmon cannery workers were among the best remunerated Chinese labourers in the province during their period of employment.⁸⁹

In 1902, the Royal Commission concluded that the canning process in British Columbia was “almost entirely in the hands of the Chinese.”⁹⁰ Canners were unanimous, the commission noted, “that the industry at the present time and under existing conditions could not be carried on successfully without the aid of Chinese,” who were “experts and...fully adapted for this work.”⁹¹ In the years between 1879 and 1901, the number of salmon canneries in British Columbia had grown ten-fold—from seven canneries to 73—largely on the backs of a Chinese workforce that had itself grown five-fold over the same span. One of the more striking facets of this is that although white fears of Chinese dominance in agriculture and other industries were prominent in the decades before and after, the same was never true in salmon canning. In this respect and others, Chinese cannery labour challenged the expectations of groups like the Knights of Labour. Regarded as unskilled, Chinese can makers and butchers joined the ranks of skilled factory operatives, defined by David Montgomery as workers who developed significant industrial skills in “specialized and repetitive” tasks, but who lacked the control over the labour process exercised by skilled artisans and craft workers.⁹² Although remaining below the wages of white workers, Chinese wages grew modestly with the rise of the industry. The idea of Chinese

⁸⁸ Chan, *Gold Mountain*, 94-95.

⁸⁹ *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 164-167.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, The State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 130.

workers as a dependent workforce also requires qualification, as canners repeatedly insisted that the industry depended upon Chinese workers. But Chinese workers also depended upon the industry. Visiting the region in 1903, the Chinese reformer Liang Qichao noted that although the “majority” of Chinese workers in British Columbia found work in salmon canneries, most were “unable to find jobs” at season’s end.⁹³ The only alternatives open to Chinese workers, Liang pointed out, were to work as cooks or in laundries. Within a restrictive provincial labour market, the high industry-specific demand in salmon canning became a critical outlet for Chinese workers in British Columbia, which in turn allowed salmon canning to expand to new heights. This circular relationship between the mass of Chinese workers confined to economic niches and the emergent salmon canning industry hungry for labour defined salmon canning’s early growth.

⁹³ L. Eve Armentrout Ma, “A Chinese Statesman in Canada, 1903: Translated from the Travel Journal of Liang ch’i-ch’ao,” *BC Studies* 59 (1983): 34-35.

IV. Strikes and Stability

Fishers capitalized on the growth of salmon canning. The 1881 census counted 1,850 fishers in the province.⁹⁴ A decade later, the number of fishers had doubled to 3,798, making them the third largest cohort of workers in the province after agricultural workers and miners.⁹⁵ The removal of license restrictions on the Fraser River the following year led to further growth.⁹⁶ Indigenous fishers dominated the early fishing population, but Japanese fishers also grew exponentially. From only 50 licenses in 1891, Japanese fishers captured 1,805 gillnet licenses on the Fraser River by 1901, double the number of licenses issued to white gillnetters, who had become the second largest group.⁹⁷ With an average of 60 to 100 boats employed per cannery, fishing employment evolved with the growing number of provincial canneries over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, growing in tandem with Chinese labour.⁹⁸

But the relation between fishers and Chinese cannery workers was never straightforward. This is perhaps most clearly seen through the industry' labour politics. The brevity of the season made work stoppages a potent weapon in the hands of workers, as a widely-observed and well-timed strike could doom smaller canneries. The seasonal earnings of workers, however, were also precarious, vulnerable not only to the actions of firms but also to the actions of other workers. A strike in procurement or processing alone could shut down all production. For fishers as for canners, then, the best cannery labour force was not only numerous, skilled, and relatively

⁹⁴ *Census of Canada*, Vol. II (Ottawa: Queen's Printer 1884), 320, Table 14.

⁹⁵ *Census of Canada*, Vol. II (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1893), 140, Table 12. This excludes the category of "Labourers (not specified)."

⁹⁶ Harris, *Landing Native Fisheries*, 133.

⁹⁷ Yesaki & Steves, *Steveston Cannery Row*, 139.

⁹⁸ See Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA).

inexpensive, but also *stable*. This too was a key advantage that Chinese workers offered the industry, a product of the distinctive labour politics attending Chinese migration in the province.

The consensus among canners held that Chinese workers were a particularly docile workforce. Henry Bell-Irving of ABC Packers argued that Chinese workers “won’t strike while you have a big pile of fish on your dock,” and “are less trouble and less expense than whites.”⁹⁹ Everell Deming of the Pacific American Fishing Co. in Washington put it simply: “Chinese don’t strike; you can always count on them.”¹⁰⁰ But while some canners attributed this to Chinese culture, Chinese labour activism in British Columbia and around the Americas was industry- and period-specific. In some sectors, Chinese labour activism was relatively high. In the twenty years between 1917 and 1937, Chinese shingle workers in Vancouver struck thirteen times.¹⁰¹ Other Chinese workers organized unions to bargain with employers and to prevent community members from under-cutting each other’s wages.¹⁰² Similarly, Chinese labour activity in canneries was dynamic. Describing Chinese cannery workers as “saucy and mutinous upon the slightest provocation,” the *Daily British Colonist* reported in 1881 that Chinese workers had walked off work in response to the introduction of a soldering machine:

in the scarcity of labor John Chinaman feels his importance. He knows he cannot be replaced...when the [salmon] rush came John declared that he would not continue at work if the soldering machine was used, and so it stands, or stood at the time of our visit, idle.¹⁰³

Two other short strikes by Chinese workers were recorded in 1889 and 1901.¹⁰⁴ In 1904, hundreds of Chinese cannery workers briefly unionized under the banner of the “Chinese Cannery

⁹⁹ *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 145.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 161-163.

¹⁰¹ Gillian Creese, “Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the ‘Oriental problem,’” *BC Studies* 80 (1988): 50-51.

¹⁰² Con, Wickberg et al. *From China to Canada*, 32, 166. Much of these activities were recorded by the Vancouver-based Chinese language newspaper *Chinese Times* after 1915.

¹⁰³ “Interesting News from the Canneries,” *Daily British Colonist*, July 26, 1881; “A Visit to the Fraser Canneries,” *Daily British Colonist*, July 30, 1881.

¹⁰⁴ Rolf Knight & Maya Koizumi, *A Man of Our Times: The Life-History of a Japanese-Canadian Fisherman* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1976), 105; Roy, *A White Man’s Province*, 67; Creese, “Exclusion or Solidarity?,” 50.

Employees' Union," demanding seasonal advances of \$200 for skilled workers and \$65 for unskilled workers, and denouncing labour contractors who failed to deliver on promises of pay.¹⁰⁵ It is unclear how long the effort lasted. Symbolically, however, the union was important as the first independent organization of Asian salmon cannery workers in North America, thirty years before the largely Filipino-led Cannery Workers and Farm Labourers Union Local 18257 was chartered by the American Federation of Labor in 1933.¹⁰⁶ Some Chinese workers also joined the white-led Fishermen's and Cannery Workers' Industrial Union, founded in Barkley Sound in 1932.¹⁰⁷ Details on Chinese participation in this union are also sparse, but they testify to the willingness of some Chinese workers to organize across ethnic lines for better conditions.

There was some truth, however, to the notion that Chinese workers provided a unique source of stability in the labour process. This can be seen through a comparison with other workers. Despite being internally divided along various lines—including the nature of their employment with canneries, differences in gear types, and ethnic differences—fishers developed a relatively high degree of class consciousness before the turn of the century.¹⁰⁸ The first wide-scale fishers strike in the industry was a strike of the 1,600-member Fraser River Fishermens' Protective Association in 1893 over daily wages.¹⁰⁹ Though such organizations rarely lasted longer than a single strike, they had a tendency to emerge with some frequency. In the twenty years between 1893 and 1913, white fishers struck at least 11 times, Indigenous fishers and cannery workers struck at least 12 times, and Japanese workers, with less secure standing in the

¹⁰⁵ "Chinese Demand Higher Advance," *Vancouver Daily Province*, April 25, 1904.

¹⁰⁶ Jack Masson & Donald Guimary, "Pilipinos and Unionization of the Alaskan Canned Salmon Industry," *Amerasia Journal* 8.2 (1981): 1-30.

¹⁰⁷ "Deep Bay Cannery to be Rebuilt," *The Fisherman* 1.9 (June 18, 1937).

¹⁰⁸ James Conley, "Relations of Production and Collective Action in the Salmon Fishery, 1900-1925," in Rennie Warburton & David Coburn eds., *Workers, Capital, and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 86-116; Dianne Newell, *Tangled Webs of History*, 72-73.

¹⁰⁹ Gladstone, "Industrial Disputes," 131-132.

provincial economy, struck at least six times. All in all, there were at least 33 fishing strikes of varying intensity and duration between 1893 and 1938, many of which were supported by Indigenous and Japanese cannery workers.¹¹⁰ This made job action an abiding threat in the industry, even as the fisher population rose to a peak of 13,076 in 1927 across the province's fisheries.¹¹¹ The contrast with Chinese workers was telling: after 1901, there are no recorded Chinese salmon cannery strikes in British Columbia.

Why did Chinese workers exhibit this pattern? Liang Qichao's observation that cannery labour provided most, if not all, of a Chinese worker's annual income hints to one reason. In a restrictive labour market, Chinese workers could ill afford to lose access to salmon canning jobs. Another key reason, however, is the structure of their employment through labour contractors. Like other businesses, Chinese labour contractors were incentivized to extract a maximum of labour from their workers at the lowest cost. Their functions as ethnic brokers, however, appended non-economic considerations to their roles. Scholars and observers have disagreed over the outcomes of this combination of factors. Lisa Rose Mar and others have shown that contractors' language skills and connections were critical to Chinese workers' fortunes in the wider society and to the success of sojourning.¹¹² For the 1902 Royal Commission, on the other hand, contracting was simply an efficient way "to get more work out of the men."¹¹³ Others went further, characterizing workers under this system as "industrial serfs" or "slaves."¹¹⁴ An analysis of contractors, as Adam McKeown reminds us, cannot substitute for a critique of the "working

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 304-308. Many of these strikes are also recorded in Lyons, *Salmon*; and Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia, 1848-1930* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1996), 179-206.

¹¹¹ *Fisheries Statistics, 1927*.

¹¹² Mar, *Brokering Belonging*.

¹¹³ *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 135.

¹¹⁴ Persia Crawford Campbell, *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries Within the British Empire* (London: P.S. King & Son Ltd., 1923), 45; *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 161.

conditions, laws and public attitudes” that surround migrant labour.¹¹⁵ But in salmon canning it is important to stress that it was generally the contractor and not the firm that absorbed Chinese labour conflicts. The Chinese contract structure, in the context of Chinese exclusion, made for a distinctive labour politics based more heavily on worker-contractor frictions than on more disruptive actions like strikes against the firm.

Contractor-worker conflicts often arose out of contractors’ attempts to profit on workers’ provisions, by some accounts the source of most of a contractor’s earnings during a canning season.¹¹⁶ One common practice was for contractors to provide workers with only two meals on days when canneries were inoperative, in contrast to white workers who always received three.¹¹⁷ Some went further: in 1898 one contractor, worried that workers would be unable to pay back seasonal advances during a slow season, drew the attention of the Dominion Fishery Guardian when he restricted workers to one meal per day.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, conditions in cannery bunkhouses were often unsanitary, and remained a key target of worker criticism into the 1940s.¹¹⁹ In response, workers used their mobility as a bargaining tool. Workers demanded—and received—seasonal advances in exchange for traveling to distant canning locations.¹²⁰ Less scrupulous workers made off with these advances prior to the end of the season or fled to the border with debts owed to contractors.¹²¹ Other times, they abandoned contractors when

¹¹⁵ Adam McKeown, “How the Box Became Black: Brokers and the Creation of the Free Migrant,” *Pacific Affairs* 85.1 (2012): 24.

¹¹⁶ See the testimony of Mar Chan in *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 141-143;

¹¹⁷ Duncan Stacey, “The China Contract,” *The Fisherman*, Dec. 11, 1981; 1947 Alfred Quan Report, Box 9, File 14, Chinese Canadian Research Collection (UBC RBSC).

¹¹⁸ *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 160-161.

¹¹⁹ Willie Chong, interview by Lilian Chau, July 29, 1999, transcript, Chinese Cannery Workers Oral History Project (GOG). See also 1947 Alfred Quan Report, Chinese Canadian Research Collection (UBC RBSC).

¹²⁰ As contractor Mar Chan put it, “If they do not get it they won’t go.” *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 141-143.

¹²¹ Lissa Wadewitz has argued that this should be regarded as “spatial forms of regional class struggle.” See her “Pirates of the Salish Sea: Labor, Mobility, and Environment in the Transnational West,” *Pacific Historical Review* 75.4 (2006): 593; Willie Chong, interview by Lilian Chau.

competitors offered higher pay.¹²² Chinese mobility was also a critical factor in extracting additional privileges, such as employment policies that employed blocks of Chinese workers when daily labour requirements demanded only a few, and preferential hiring of preferred cooks and overseers.¹²³ Some former workers were ambivalent about the role of contractors in the industry; as one worker put it in a 1999 interview:

the contractors would probably...take a little bit of the food money for himself and squeeze what's left to the workers... They had full control...I think they took advantage of their own country people and they're the ones who made the money on the backs of the immigrants...¹²⁴

Such comments highlight that contracting, much like the relation between firms and fishers, was a class relation. The notion that workers were “their own country people” also highlights the fact that contracting was infused with a particular cultural dynamic. Both were involved in the worker-contractor relation.

The patterns of Chinese labour activism had important implications in the wider industry. Unlike Indigenous and Japanese workers, whose conjugal and familial relations meant that fishers and cannery workers often struck in tandem, Chinese cannery workers continually suffered the collateral damage of fishing strikes they had little stake in. When they struck, fishers brought production to a halt without any promise of improved conditions for Chinese workers. Under other circumstances, this might have led workers to opt for collective organization. The costs of remaining unorganized, however, were borne entirely by the Chinese and not by fishers.

¹²² “Enquiry Committee Concludes Season,” *The Daily Colonist*, April 18, 1907.

¹²³ Willie Chong, interview with Lilian Chau. On employing more workers than were necessary, see J.H. Todd & Sons’ Inverness Cannery 1948 Questionnaire: “The unloaders were not required until the afternoon when the fish arrived... They argued that when one group was called for work then all must start at that time.” Questionnaires, 1948, Box 2, File 11, J.H. Todd & Sons Ltd. Business Records Inventory (UBC RBSC). See also Chinese Negotiations June 9/47, Box 190, File 4, United Fishermen and Allied Workers’ Fonds (UBC RBSC), where the sides discussed the “question of whole crew turning out when only a few men are required.” In one 1918 case, workers warned one another against travelling to work under a particularly unscrupulous overseer in the Chinese press—see Rudy Chiang, “Participation of Chinese Pioneers,” 13.

¹²⁴ Herb & Elizabeth Lim, interview with Lilian Chau, July 21, 1999, transcript, Chinese Cannery Workers Oral History Project (GOG); Willie Chong, interview with Lilian Chau.

Had the reverse been true—if a similar pattern of independent strikes by Chinese cannery workers had continually undermined whatever gains fishers made in their negotiations with canners—then fishers would have faced a dilemma: whether to opt for “exclusion or solidarity” with Chinese workers. The fact that there were no Chinese cannery strikes after 1901, however, gave the industry a constancy on one side of its operations that artificially upheld the industry as a whole, and helped avoid this issue. Because Chinese workers tended not to strike, fishers could struggle with canners on the assumption that canneries would process their catch when the labour process resumed.

V. Making a White Fishery

The availability of an inexpensive and stable Chinese workforce in British Columbian salmon canneries was a constant before the Second World War but other aspects of the industry were dynamic. After thirty years of rapid growth in the nineteenth century, salmon canning's trajectory in British Columbia ran up against its own contradictions. Low capital requirements and low barriers to entry had led to an influx of firms. The simultaneous growth of salmon canning in Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and California, alongside new entrants in Russia and Japan, had dwindled British Columbia to roughly 20 percent of Pacific output, giving the province a largely price-taking position on world markets.¹²⁵ Unable to exercise much sway over selling prices, canners in British Columbia saw the world price of canned salmon drop by 25 percent between 1888 and 1899.¹²⁶ More concerning, the price of raw fish had skyrocketed over the same period, growing by 240 percent even as the supply of fishers expanded. A lack of control over markets and labour seemingly foreshadowed a "survival of the fittest" between canners in the coming years.¹²⁷ Although the decline in world prices reversed after the turn of the century, growing by 130 percent between 1897 and 1933 as canners extended into new markets and consolidated into larger and more coordinated firms, the rising price of fish continued to outpace selling prices.¹²⁸ This minor price revolution in fishing was one of the central factors shaping the salmon canning industry after the turn of the century. Here too, Chinese labour was key. Relatively low and stagnant Chinese wages over the long term not only sharply contrasted with the earnings of fishers, but were one of its enabling conditions, providing firms with the

¹²⁵ Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 4.

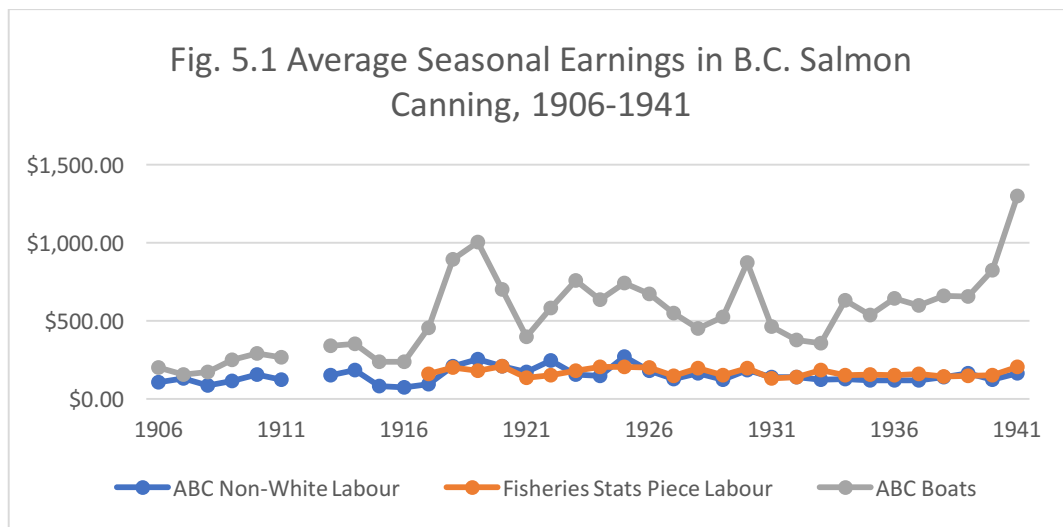
¹²⁶ Reid, "Company Mergers," 291.

¹²⁷ *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 143-148.

¹²⁸ *Report of the Special Fishery Commission, Province of British Columbia 1917*, 17; Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 246-247.

leeway for meeting fishers’ demands. The rise in fishing incomes, in turn, had implications for the industry’s ethnic composition. With substantial support from Fisheries bureaucrats, who had harboured designs on the ethnic distribution of fishing licenses, white fishers captured much of the industry in the post-war period as many returned from wartime mobilization. Though Indigenous fishers continued to participate in large numbers, the notion of a “white” fishery in British Columbia took on a material reality as Japanese fishers were displaced en masse. The underlying relation of this shift to Chinese labour is the subject of this section.

The chart below (Fig. 5.1) illustrates the contrast between fishing incomes and the



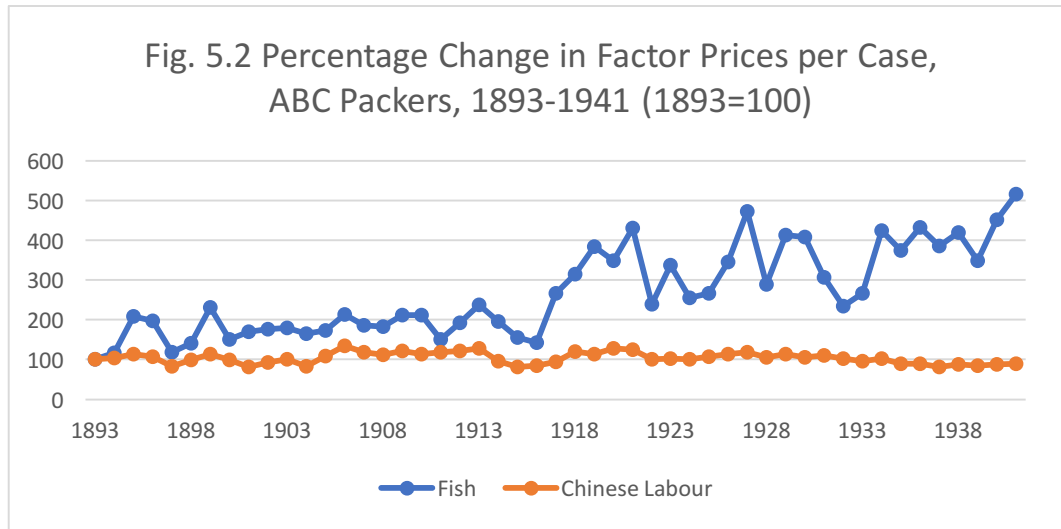
Source: Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Files 1-2, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA). Data for 1912 missing; 43. Employees and Salaries and Wages in Fish-Processing Establishments, by Provinces, *Fisheries Statistics of Canada*, Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Fisheries Division, 1917-1941 (Ottawa), 1918-1942.

earnings of Chinese cannery workers after the turn of the century. The trend-lines on the bottom reflect two data sets: the average earnings of “non-white” workers within ABC Packers, and the average earnings of piece-workers surveyed in Fisheries statistics after 1917. Both categories include Indigenous and Japanese cannery workers, and thus are not exclusively Chinese, but reflect the gross earnings of those working under a Chinese contract structure. As the data shows, the century began with a relatively egalitarian distribution between fishers and cannery workers. In some seasons the gap between the two was relatively close—in 1907, for example, the

average boat for ABC Packers earned \$160, while cannery workers earned \$130. But over time they were marked by extremely uneven growth rates: in the thirty-five years between the 1906 and 1941, the wages of ABC cannery workers grew by only 14 percent while those of boats grew by 542 percent. By 1941, cannery workers only earned \$160 from a summer of work at the company while boats earned roughly \$1,300. In most seasons after 1917, a Chinese worker could expect to earn between \$150 and \$200 in a season, while the earnings of boats only dipped as low as \$350 in 1933, at the height of the Great Depression. Salmon canning, in other words, was characterized by a basic, fixed bargain for cannery workers, while the average boat witnessed a qualitative leap in earnings after 1916.

The category “boats” was used by ABC Packers in its annual records, but it does not transparently reflect fishers’ earnings as boats could hold more than one worker. This consideration becomes more important over time as fishers tended to opt for larger boats. Larger purse seiners, for example, began competing with gillnetters as the production of pink and chum salmon increased; licenses for purse seiners grew from 92 to 445 between 1912 and 1926.¹²⁹ Another angle onto fishers’ earnings, however, is available through the price of fish. Documents from ABC Packers show that the cost of fish per case grew at a similarly rapid rate. In the half-century between the firm’s founding in 1891 and 1941, the cost of fish per case grew by a dramatic 490 percent, vastly outpacing all other expenses (Fig. 5.2). ABC Packers’ membership in successive provincial canners’ associations, responsible for negotiating standard prices for fish and labour, allows this data to be generalized across much of the industry, with local variations.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 101.



Source: Annual Records 1 & 2, Box 590-G-1, File 3, Box 590-G-2, The Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Fonds (VCA).

As both charts demonstrate, the major period of change in fishing incomes occurred after 1916. Two exogenous causes were particularly important in causing this increase. First, wartime mobilization of fishers put upward pressure on wages.¹³⁰ Another factor was ecological—1917 marked the first peak sockeye run after rockslides on the Fraser River during construction of the Canadian National Railway in 1913-1914 destroyed much of those years’ sockeye runs, diminishing the supply of sockeye salmon for decades. 1917 was the last year that sockeye production on the Fraser River exceeded sockeye production in other districts until 1942, putting further pressure on canners to induce fishers to travel northward.¹³¹ On an individual level, these factors caused fishers to become some of the better-paid workers in the province’s resource industries. Fishers residing in Vancouver and Victoria both earned more in 1921 than did miners and lumbermen, earning an average of \$830 and \$980 per year in the respective cities.¹³² Within

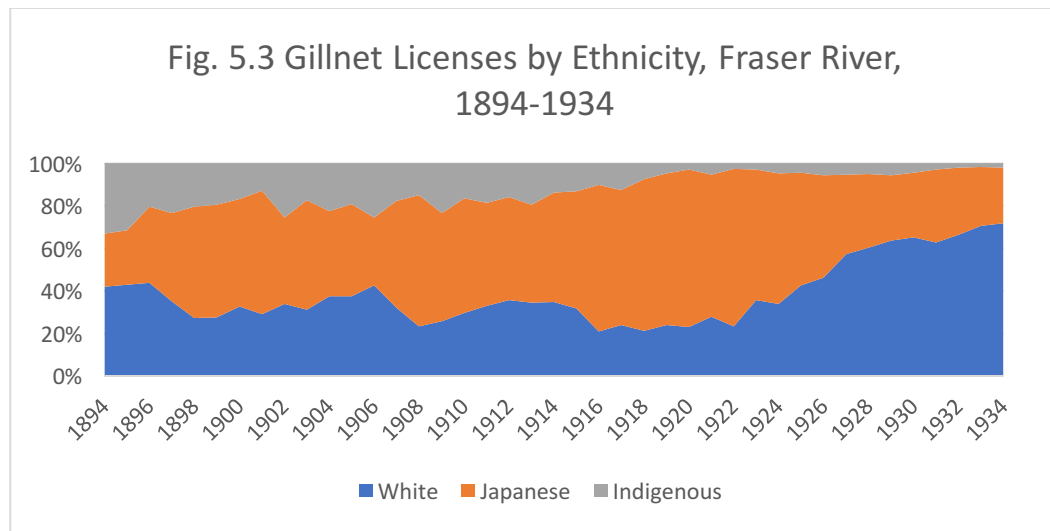
¹³⁰ The average number of fishers per cannery within ABC Packers, for instance, dropped from 98 at the beginning of the war to 58 by 1918. Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Files 1-2, The Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Fonds (VCA).

¹³¹ Lyons, *Salmon*, 719-720. See also Dianne Newell, “Dispersal and Concentration: The Slowly Changing Spatial Pattern of the British Columbia Salmon Canning Industry,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 14.1 (1988): 31.

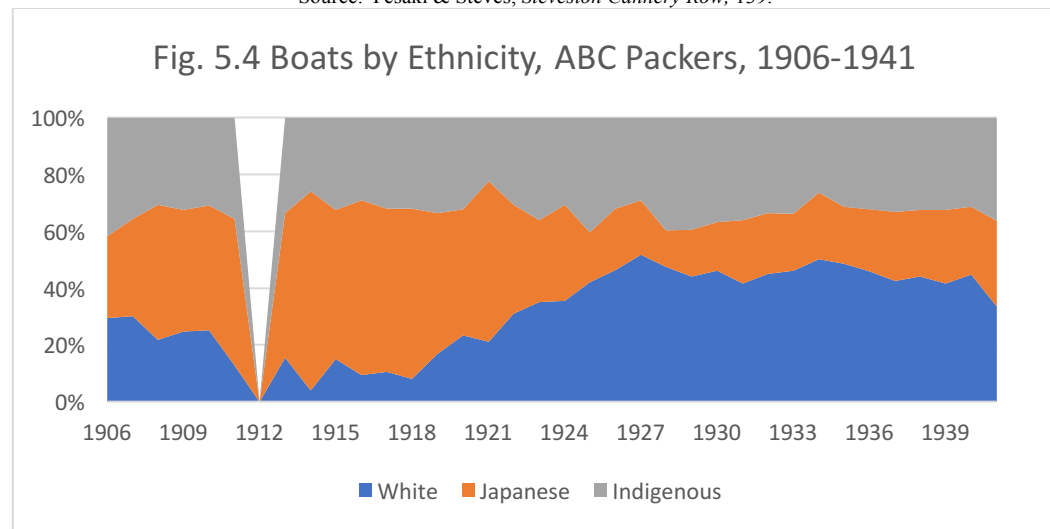
¹³² *Census of Canada*, Vol. III (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1927), 370, 392, Table 40.

ABC Packers, the average earnings per boat nearly tripled over the course of the war, from \$350 in 1914 to \$1,005 in 1919.¹³³

At war's end, growth in fishing incomes and the interventions of the Department of Fisheries to reserve those gains for white fishers redefined the state of fishing in British Columbia. The postwar years saw a gradual influx of white fishers, who overtook other groups in size over the 1920s (Fig. 5.3, 5.4). By the end of the decade, white fishers were a majority on the



Source: Yesaki & Steves, *Steveston Cannery Row*, 139.



Source: Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Files 1-2, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA). Data for 1912 missing.

¹³³ Average earnings found by distributing annual fish expenses among the number of boats recorded in Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Files 1-2, The Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Fonds (VCA).

Fraser River for the first time since the nineteenth century, and flooded into other districts. Within ABC Packers, which only operated in one year on the Fraser River between 1918 and 1933, white fishers crowded out the firm's Japanese fishers, becoming a majority after 1923. The efforts of fisheries officials to hasten this shift were explicit: the 1922 Duff Commission contemplated how to "bring about the displacement of Orientals by white fishermen in the shortest possible time without disrupting the industry," and by 1927 Japanese license issues on the Fraser River were capped at 400 while issues to white and Indigenous fishers remained unrestricted.¹³⁴ Fisheries regulations restricting seine-net license issues to Indigenous and Japanese fishers in the first decades of the twentieth century ensured that whites would dominate this growing part of the industry as well.¹³⁵

The changing demographics of fishing caused some consternation amongst firms, who regarded Japanese fishers as more efficient than white fishers. Publicly assuring the Department of Marine and Fisheries that the company was "trying to encourage a desirable class of white fisherman," managers at BC Packers noted in private that a white fishery was "detrimental to [their] interests."¹³⁶ Japanese fishers had regularly out-produced white fishers, and firms could thus expect a relative slackening in procurement. The bigger issue, however, was controlling costs. The Fraser River Cannery Association met to discuss this in 1921, issuing a memo advocating "drastic measures...in order to bring conditions back to normal."¹³⁷ Given the history of fishing strikes in the region, challenging fishers with "drastic measures" was likely to be difficult, and in the immediate post-war period firms were indeed unable to revert costs back to

¹³⁴ Newell, *Tangled Webs of History*, 100. See also Conley, "Relations of Production and Collective Action," 103-104.

¹³⁵ Harris, *Landing Native Fisheries*, 147.

¹³⁶ Barker Letter Books, Vol. 1, 529-531; Vol. 2, 284-286.

¹³⁷ Memo for Cannery Meeting dated today January 18th. 1921, Minute Book, October 15, 1920-, Box 52, International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Collection (UBCA).

pre-war levels. BC Packers registered its first losses in 1923, with individual canneries losing upwards of \$2.37 for every case produced.¹³⁸ ABC Packers apologized to shareholders after posting similar losses in 1921 and 1922, calling the situation “unprecedented” in the industry’s history.¹³⁹ Even as ABC Packers returned to profitability in 1923, management retained a certain disquiet, noting that “it is still extremely difficult to cut down the rates paid to fishermen.”¹⁴⁰ To the extent it was actualized, a “white” fishery in British Columbia overlapped with a period of crisis.

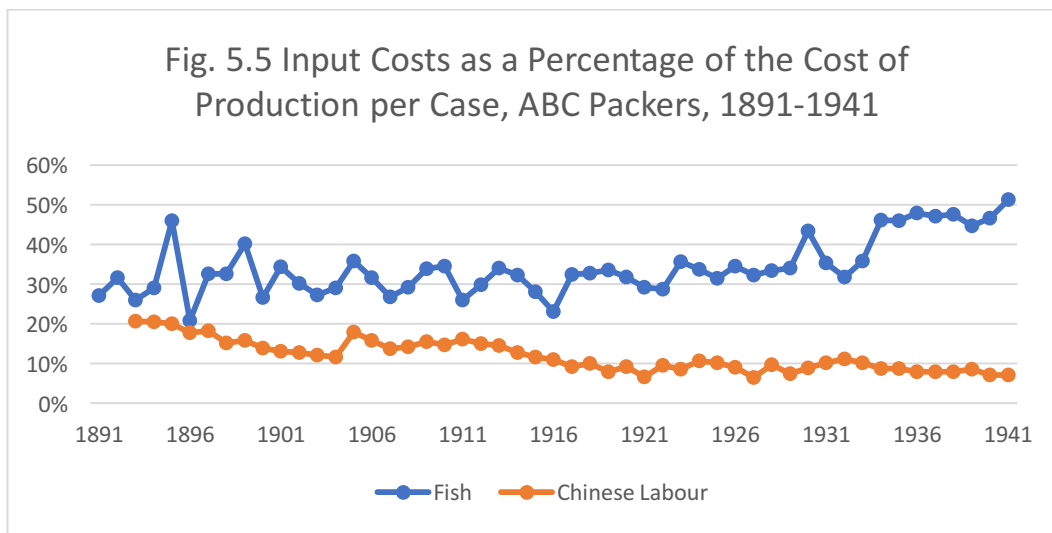
In longer-term perspective, firms had three options for weathering the rising cost of fish: increasing selling prices, limiting profits, or managing other input costs to compensate for the increase. The first was largely ruled out because of British Columbia’s relatively small share within Pacific production. The second was a non-starter for firms over the long-term. The third option was more promising, as the Fraser River Cannery Association recognized. While acknowledging in its 1921 memo that “the heavy item of cost is...fish,” most of the association’s resolutions touched on other input costs. The Association singled out Chinese contracts, washing and filling labour, Japanese and Indigenous day labour, and “general cannery help,” all items typically classified as “Chinese Labour” in cannery bookkeeping. The search for savings on Chinese labour was not unique to salmon canning. Peter Li has argued that firms employing Chinese workers in Canada had a distinct advantage over competitors, in that the demands of their white workers could be paid for on the backs of their Chinese workers, who tended to resist less violently to such impositions. In this respect, he writes, “it was precisely because the

¹³⁸ Comparison of Annual Profits per Case made by Various Operating Companies, Box 6, File 18, Henry Doyle Papers (UBC RBSC).

¹³⁹ Annual Records 2, Box 590-G-2, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA).

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Chinese were paid less than white workers were paid more.”¹⁴¹ In few industries would this have been truer than in salmon canning, where Chinese workers were both a significant fraction of the industry’s workers, and a group whose class struggles were effectively outsourced to contractors. Unsurprisingly, then, Chinese cannery labour was a long-term source of savings. Except for a brief jump after 1904, when the Chinese Head Tax was raised to \$500, Chinese labour continually decreased as a share of ABC Packers’ total cost of production. Other items also decreased over time: the share of “White Labour”—mainly mechanics, overseers, and specialized workers—fell by about four percent between 1893 and 1941 as firms exploited growing efficiencies of scale; “Nets” fell by three percent as they were largely outsourced to fishers; and “Boxes” fell by two percent.¹⁴² It is clear, however, that in the long-run the rising cost of fish was largely financed by a corresponding reduction in the relative position of Chinese Labour, which dropped from 20 percent in 1893 to seven percent in 1941 (Fig. 5.5).



Source: Annual Records 1 & 2, Box 590-G-1, File 3, Box 590-G-2, The Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Fonds (VCA).

¹⁴¹ Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 45.

¹⁴² Other items, interestingly, changed very little over time. “Cans” fell from 20 percent of the cost of production in 1893 to 19.7 percent in 1941, even as the can making process was mechanized. See Annual Records 1 & 2, Box 590-G-1, Box 590-G-2, The Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Fonds (VCA).

What caused this relative decline in Chinese labour? Most accounts of salmon canning labour in British Columbia have assumed that Chinese workers were almost totally displaced by the combined forces of technological change and border restrictions after 1905, a view that has some support in the sources.¹⁴³ After inventor E.A. Smith patented his butchering machine in 1903, the Puget Sound based *Pacific Fisherman* ran a series of articles that heralded the impending decline of Chinese labour. One 1910 article memorialized the “passing of Chinese Labor” as follows:

Chinese are at present such an important factor in the salmon packing industry—in fact, have been for many years—that when you speak of a cannery you think of yellow faces and “pig tails,” or when you enter a plant you look for “Chinks.” But the introduction of new machinery is gradually changing all this. The introduction of the ‘Iron Chink’ resulted in the displacement of hundreds of chinamen [sic], each machine doing the work of fifty-two Orientals... Now comes the new sanitary process of canning, and with its rapid adoption, the chinese [sic] become even less necessary than now, and a large part of the picturesqueness of the industry will have passed just as the Chinese workers are themselves slowly passing.¹⁴⁴

That the publication could still describe Chinese labour as “an important factor” in canning seven years after Smith’s invention suggests that change was not instantaneous, and as Dianne Newell has observed, technological changes in salmon canning were generally less dramatic than sources like the *Pacific Fisherman* conveyed.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, technology ushered in important changes to cannery labour which it will be helpful to survey.

One of the major effects of inventions like Smith’s butchering machine and the “sanitary,” or solderless, can line that was introduced in 1913, was to allow canners to centralize operations in larger canneries. After growing to a peak of 84 in 1917, centralizations caused the number of provincial canneries to plummet to 36 in 1941. The average number of workers per

¹⁴³ Patrick O’Bannon, “Technological Change in the Pacific Coast Canned Salmon Industry, 1900-1925: A Case Study,” *Agricultural History* 56.1 (1982): 151-166; Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour*, 73, 244. This claim is repeated in Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007): 199-200.

¹⁴⁴ “The Passing of Chinese Labor,” *Pacific Fisherman* 8.11 (Nov. 1910).

¹⁴⁵ Dianne Newell, “The Rationality of Mechanization in the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry Before the Second World War,” *The Business History Review* 62.4 (1988): 626-655.

cannery remained stable at 100 workers between 1898 and 1931 before growing to 160 by 1941, as canneries operated with more canning lines.¹⁴⁶ The results in aggregate are visible in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Employment in British Columbia Salmon Canneries, 1906-1940

Year	Total ^a	Male Piece-Workers ^a	Female Piece-Workers ^a	ABC Packers ^b	Chinese (ABC) ^b	Indigenous (ABC) ^b	White (ABC) ^b	Japanese (ABC) ^b
1906-1908 (avg.)				489	281	140	66	2
1909-1912 (avg.)	7,100*			697	358	271	112	23
1913-1916 (avg.)	6,700*			839	291	276	93	178
1917-1920 (avg.)	7,226	2,776	1,786	627	224	228	120	55
1921-1924 (avg.)	4,929	1,789	1,614	515	177	211	81	47
1925-1928 (avg.)	6,171	2,239	1,932	554	196	225	99	35
1929-1932 (avg.)	4,659	1,708	1,837	598	200	249	107	35
1933-1936 (avg.)	5,015	1,795	2,070	786	261	271	140	114
1937-1940 (avg.)	5,242	1,639	2,180	839	250	312	151	126

Sources: The asterisk indicates rough estimates based on Stats Canada Fisheries Data (Series N65-68), "Number of persons employed in fish processing plants, by area and by sex, 1895-1975." I have taken 90 percent of the total number of West Coast workers, rounded to the nearest hundred, as a conservative estimate, as the number of cannery workers between 1917-1920 represented 91.2 percent of all West Coast fish processing workers. a. 43. Employees and Salaries and Wages in Fish-Processing Establishments, by Provinces, *Fisheries Statistics of Canada*, Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Fisheries Division, 1917-1941 (Ottawa), 1918-1942; b. ABC Packers data from Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Files 1-2, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA). Data for 1912 missing.

¹⁴⁶ The exception to this trend was World War I, when ABC Packers leapt to 244 workers per cannery in 1914, before reverting to the historical average. See Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Files 1-2, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA).

The title “male piece-workers” may be taken as a rough proxy for Chinese workers, who comprised between 70 and 85 percent of the male piece workers recorded in ABC Packers surveys.¹⁴⁷ The employment of Indigenous, white, and Japanese workers in ABC Packers’ canneries was mostly female, though it also includes a small number of Indigenous and white men as well.

Aggregate employment was roughly halved between 1901 and 1940, indicating a significant drop in the overall demand for labour. Within ABC Packers, however, employment nearly doubled as the firm expanded production. The ethnic composition of cannery labour also changed. Although their absolute numbers had changed little, by the 1920s Chinese workers represented about 30 percent of the ABC Packers workforce—down from 75 percent in the late nineteenth century—while Indigenous workers grew to 40 percent, a reflection of the difficulty of mechanizing jobs in washing and filling. The figures suggest that although technological changes fell hardest on Chinese workers, their impacts on Chinese employment, and employment generally, were less dramatic than the *Pacific Fisherman* had implied.¹⁴⁸ As Dianne Newell has argued, canners did not always adopt new technologies immediately, employing instead “a mixture of assembly-line production, automatic machinery, and hand techniques” that were region-specific.¹⁴⁹ The Smith butchering machine is one example of the uneven diffusion of new technologies. Former workers recalled that the machine struggled to process certain sizes of fish into the 1940s, one noting that the machine was only useful for “poorer grades of fish” because of its relatively rough handling, which “destroy[ed] part of the fish.”¹⁵⁰ As they had done with can

¹⁴⁷ See the annual returns of the North Pacific Cannery between 1919-1921 and 1923, Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Files 1-2, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA).

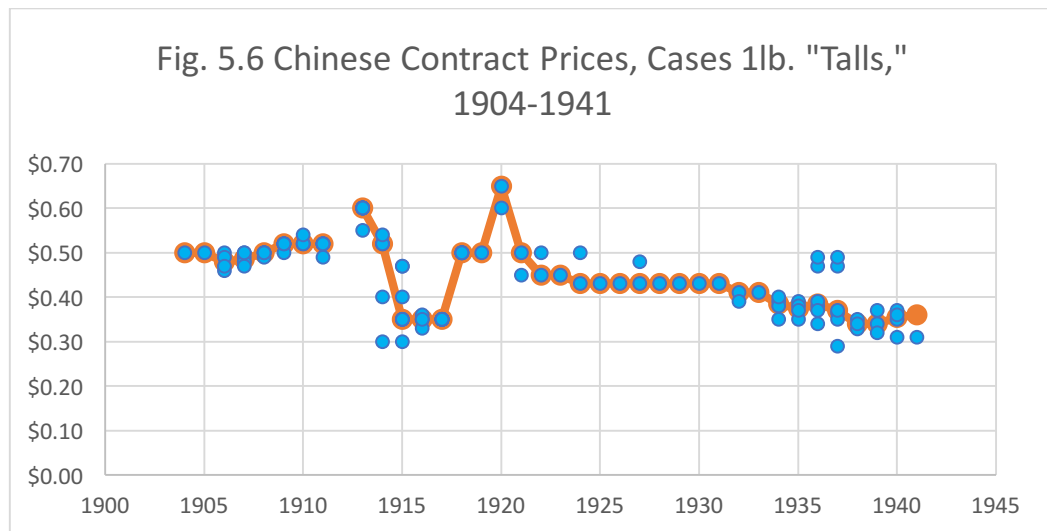
¹⁴⁸ “The Perfect Fish Cleaning Machine,” *Pacific Fisherman* 5. Yearbook (Feb. 1907).

¹⁴⁹ Newell, “The Rationality of Mechanization,” 652, 654.

¹⁵⁰ George P. Mah, interview by Lilian Chau. See also the comments of Nicholas Stevens in conversation with Imbert Orchard in 1963: “...they do the big spring salmon and big cohoes and things that won’t fit the Iron Chink

makers, some canneries kept a force of manual butchers in reserve or opted to forego the machine altogether. A 1923 survey of 44 canneries found that nearly half produced without a butchering machine.¹⁵¹ Anecdotal evidence from canner J.H. Todd & Sons indicates a similar conclusion: in 1936, the company still butchered part or all its fish by hand at three of its five operational canneries.¹⁵² Technological change in salmon canning, in other words, unfolded as a historical process rather than as a *fait accompli*. Its pace reserved significant space for Chinese workers in the British Columbian industry into the 1940s.

For Chinese workers remaining in the industry, however, lower aggregate demand for labour in the context of an already restricted labour market led to stagnant wages. The chart below (Fig. 5.6) surveys 174 Chinese labour contracts and statements of contract prices from



Sources: The trend line in orange indicates median prices. The two main sources on Chinese Contracts used here are Annual Returns, Box 565-C-4, Files 1-2, Anglo-British Columbia Packing Co. Ltd. Fonds (VCA); and Price of Chinese Contracts, Box 6, File 24, Henry Doyle Papers (UBC RBSC). Other sources include Newell, *Development of the Pacific Salmon-Canning Industry*, 114, 142; Chinese Cannery and Packing Contracts, Box 101, File 1, Chung Collection: Textual Materials (UBC RBSC); Hong Wo (Contractor for Canneries, File 2, Hong Wo Records (CRA); Agreement with B.C. Packers Assn., 1906, Box 612-E-4, File 1, Yip Sang & Yip Sang Ltd. Fonds (VCA); 1936 Business & 1937 Business, Box 4, Files 5-6, J.H. Todd & Sons Ltd. Business Records Inventory (UBC RBSC).

they do by hand... a 20lb spring salmon won't go through there so they cut those up by hand." Nicholas Stevens, interview by Imbert Orchard, Tape 1, Track 2, Imbert Orchard Fonds, 1963, (BCA).

¹⁵¹ Muszynski, "Major Processors to 1940 and Early Labour Force: Historical Notes," 56.

¹⁵² Memorandum of Gross Earnings of Quon On. Co. per J.H. Todd & Sons, Ltd. For the year 1936, Box 4, File 5, J.H. Todd & Sons Ltd. Business Records Inventory (UBC RBSC); Dominion of Canada Income Tax Returns 1937 Income Re. Mr. Lee's Letter March 15th, 1938, Box 4, File 6, *ibid*.

1904 to 1941. These reflect the prices that contractors were paid per case of 48 one-pound cans (“Talls”), regardless of the species of salmon canned. Unlike the bookkeeping item “Chinese labour,” they exclude auxiliary workers that firms and contractors hired for odd jobs in the production process. The chart shows that Chinese contract prices declined over time, from \$0.50 per case in 1904 to a median price of \$0.36 per case in 1941, offsetting growing productivity. As Henry Doyle’s records indicate, a major turning point was the introduction of sanitary cans in 1915, which dropped contract prices from \$0.54 per case to \$0.35 per case within the span of a year, although high Chinese unemployment in the early war years—reaching an estimated 60-70 percent in 1916—no doubt contributed as well.¹⁵³ These rates rebounded between 1918 and 1920, but reverted to a new equilibrium before declining over the 1930s.¹⁵⁴ Because the chart excludes the deductions that contracts increasingly included for the use of machinery or for production above a specified amount, the extent of this decline is underestimated above. A contract signed in 1938 between ABC Packers and Hong Wo & Co., for example, deducted \$0.05 from each case beyond 20,000 cases of production, and \$0.03 per case for using cans with enamelled ends, an eight-cent per case divergence from the nominal price.¹⁵⁵ Such deductions, along with the overall downward trend, indicate that the Chinese contract was a flexible instrument in capping labour expenditures.

Decades of stagnation were reflected in workers’ attitudes toward the industry. By the 1940s Chinese workers commonly described cannery labour as a “dead-end job.” As George Mah recalled when interviewed in the late 1990s, salmon canning in the 1940s

¹⁵³ Price of Chinese Contracts, Box 6, File 24, Henry Doyle Papers (UBC RBSC); Con, Wickberg et al., *From China to Canada*, 118.

¹⁵⁴ This rebound was influenced by the purchase by the British Ministry of Food of nearly the entire provincial pack of these years. See Aug. 21 & Sep. 23, 1918 entries, Minute Book, March 23, 1914-October 9, 1920, Box 52, International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Collection (UBC RBSC).

¹⁵⁵ A.B.C. Packing Co., Ltd. Chinese Contract [Phoenix Cannery, 1938], File 2, Hong Wo Records (CRA), 1991 26.

was only good for the summer. There was no future in it... You go up for three months, eating slop, sleeping on boards. It was a dead end job... I know the families with girls, they would tell them don't go with him, he works in the cannery. It's like you're a drug peddler.¹⁵⁶

For others, however, cannery labour paid good money for such short-term work. Jimmy Hing, speaking of his experiences in canning in the 1930s, noted that if Chinese workers could “earn anything from \$100 to \$150 a year, at that time, it was good money. Some of the good boys would save every nickel of it and a couple, three years, they'd take a trip back to China.”¹⁵⁷ The constancy of this bargain in salmon canning supported a generation of Chinese sojourners and settlers in British Columbia, although the possibility of rising incomes receded for these workers over time. For fishers, an increasing number of whom were white settlers, prospects were more promising, with incomes and fish prices growing to new peaks over World War II. Though their trajectories were divergent, both trends were related. Stagnant Chinese earnings served as the context within which rising fishing incomes could be managed in a price-taking industry.

¹⁵⁶ George P. Mah, interview by Lilian Chau.

¹⁵⁷ Jimmy Hing and Jim Kishi, interview by Marilyn Clayton and Marie Bannister.

VI. Conclusion

In late 2015, the Canadian Fishing Company (Canfisco) announced that it was ceasing canning operations at Oceanside Cannery in Prince Rupert, cutting roughly 500 jobs and reducing the hours of remaining workers.¹⁵⁸ As British Columbia's last commercial salmon cannery, Oceanside's closing marked the end of an era. Until 2015, British Columbia had been canning salmon for world markets uninterrupted since becoming a province of Canada. And although its fishing industry had changed greatly over time—with sport fishing now the greatest employer—the closure of the province's last salmon cannery demonstrated the extent to which canning continued to matter 145 years after its inauguration.¹⁵⁹ As union leader Arnie Nagy put it,

I think you're going to see a community fight back like you haven't seen in a long time because this community and outlying communities understand the importance of the commercial fishing industry to the entirety of the North Coast.¹⁶⁰

Nearly two years later, the success of this fight looks doubtful. Despite 30,000 online signatures, the support of Skeena-Bulkley Valley MP Nathan Cullen, and federal committee hearings, retaliatory efforts to “take a run at” Canfisco's fishing licenses appear to have stalled.¹⁶¹

Resentment against the company, and its billionaire owner Jim Pattison, however, will be ongoing. Described by *The Province* as “famous for his humility and generosity” after Pattison donated a record \$75 million toward the construction of a new hospital in Vancouver, others saw instead the Janus face of a business empire that had abandoned them.¹⁶² As one commenter stated, “Canfisco in Prince Rupert is freezing and then shipping spring salmon to processing plants in

¹⁵⁸ Kevin Campbell, “Sad day for Rupert as cannery closes,” *Northern View*, Nov. 18, 2015.

¹⁵⁹ “British Columbia's Fisheries and Aquaculture Sector, 2012 Edition,” *BC Stats*, 2013.

¹⁶⁰ Campbell, “Sad day.”

¹⁶¹ “Revoke Jim Pattison's fishing licenses,” <https://actions.sumofus.org/a/jim-pattison-fishing-licenses> (accessed April 3, 2017); Wendy Stueck, “Debate over closing of B.C. salmon cannery goes to federal committee,” *The Globe and Mail*, Jun. 22, 2016.

¹⁶² Pamela Fayerman, “Vancouver billionaire Jim Pattison donates \$75M towards new St. Paul's Hospital,” *The Province*, Mar. 27, 2017.

China and back again to Canada. Two shifts of good hard working people in Rupert gone into Jimmy's pocket."¹⁶³

Such comments register an important fact: Chinese labour has participated in both the rise and the fall of salmon canning in British Columbia. As Cullen and others decry “Made-in-Ottawa policies that allow North Coast fish to be processed in China and Alaska,” it is worth noting that the very means by which Chinese labour has competed in global markets since “opening” to the world in the Deng Xiaoping era— factory skills, outward labour discipline, and low pay—are the same factors that upheld provincial fishing labour a century earlier, and which, in transnational perspective, continue to underlie the labour of fishers in British Columbia today.¹⁶⁴ By looking at provincial salmon canning in the seventy years between the 1870s and early 1940s, my paper suggests that the outcomes of what some have called “cheap wage labour” are historically variable. The labour that today draws industry away from British Columbia once fueled its domestic expansion. If processing jobs in salmon canning have left British Columbia today, the reason lies less in the nature of Chinese processing labour as it does in the ways that the mobility of capital has been enhanced over the mobility of people.¹⁶⁵ Today it is easier for a firm to process British Columbian fish overseas than it is for a class of sojourning workers to process fish in British Columbia. And so, capital chases labour rather than the reverse.

This sense of historical variation should inform the way we regard domestic relations between workers. My paper suggests that although Chinese workers have often been regarded as competitive threats to British Columbia's white settlers, or simply as a community apart, Chinese

¹⁶³ “Hooray Jim Pattison! Donated \$75 million to St. Paul's!!!,” *Van4um*, <https://memebee.com/vancouver> (accessed April 3, 2017).

¹⁶⁴ Nathan Cullen, “Fish talks in Ottawa tomorrow aimed at protecting North Coast jobs,” <http://nathancullen.ndp.ca/> (accessed Apr. 4, 2017).

¹⁶⁵ For an overview of technological changes in fishing transportation on the mobility of capital see Frank W. Millerd, “Windjammers to Eighteen Wheelers: The Impact of Changes in Transportation Technology on the Development of British Columbia's Fishing Industry,” *BC Studies* 78 (1988): 28-52.

workers in British Columbia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also supported the jobs of others. Through massing in the industry during its early stages and becoming its skilled factory operatives, stabilizing processing operations, and buttressing the earnings of fishers through stagnant long-term pay, Chinese labour upheld fishing jobs in BC's nominally "white" fishery over a period of several decades in provincial salmon canneries. Far from undermining white labour, as the Knights of Labour worried, Chinese labour in British Columbia's salmon canneries played a key role in promoting some of the very jobs that the Knights and others valorized. Salmon canning is likely not unique in this respect—across chains of production, Chinese labour has likely exercised a much greater influence on provincial jobs than has been recognized. Seeing this, like understanding the systemic impacts of "cheap labour" on what workers consider "our jobs," requires thinking not only in terms of competition and isolation, but also of the deeper relations of complement, support, and mutual constitution that sometimes characterize these ostensibly opposing poles.

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