
*Brokering Empire*THE MAKING OF A CHINESE
TRANSNATIONAL MANAGERIAL ELITE

IN 1862, CHIN GEE HEE began a journey that would take him from his rural village in Guangdong province, China, to the various frontiers of the North American West. Inspired by the dream of “Gold Mountain”—the ubiquitous myth that spurred the mass movement of Chinese to the Anglophone settler world in the mid- and late nineteenth century—Chin Gee Hee joined the California gold rush with the hopes of striking it rich. Upon his arrival he headed straight to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada where visions of gold-paved streets quickly yielded to the harsh reality of labor and toil. After six years, Chin Gee Hee gave up on mining and criss-crossed the North American West, bouncing from one seasonal job to the next. He eventually left the world of migrant labor for good to become one of the leading merchant contractors in the Pacific Northwest. Commodifying the transpacific spaces that he had once traveled and traversed, Chin Gee Hee helped develop an international market in labor that connected rural villagers in southern China to the railways, mines, fisheries, and mills in Washington, Oregon, Montana, and Alaska.

At first glance, Chin Gee Hee’s personal journey would seem to recycle the conventional beginnings of early Asian American history, of gold rushes and railroads. But these dominant narratives of Chinese migration to North America, which are almost always framed in terms of its significance to national history—as part of the “winning of the West” or the unification of an internal marketplace—fail to capture the far-flung connections and broader histories that made Chin Gee Hee’s life possible.¹ His mobility and movement and those of his contract laborers followed the multiple pathways spawned by empire. By the mid-nineteenth century, China was the site of intense imperial rivalry, the center of competing Euro-American colonial

projects in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The “opening of China” signaled a crucial moment in the history of Western expansion, as the dream of tapping the fabled China markets, centuries in the making, finally appeared to be in reach.² But markets were not the only enticement; Western imperial powers were also lured by China’s seemingly inexhaustible supply of laborers. In 1852, U.S. Secretary of State William H. Seward insisted that the “North American continent and Australia are capable of sustaining, and need for their development, five hundred millions,” but their populations were “confined to fifty millions,” meanwhile, lying in Asia were “two hundred millions of excess.”³ The abolition of chattel slavery made the question of who would furnish the labor in the mines, plantations, fisheries, and woods of colonial America, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific more than a mere abstraction.

As Euro-American powers reached deeper into China, searching for new sources of labor as well as new markets for their goods, the country and its people became increasingly integrated into an imperial circuitry of trade, migration, and communication. The imperial enterprise hinged on its ability to move people and goods across vast expanses of space and time, to fill gaps and needs in distant parts of empire. The functioning of the empire, as one scholar points out, “was dependent on these inter-colonial exchanges.”⁴ In the Pacific Northwest, imported Chinese labor was critical to the region’s development, having built the infrastructure—railway lines, streets, and ditches—that powered an extractive economy there. The commodities that their labor helped produce were, in turn, sold internationally with China serving as a vital foreign market, one that was forcibly opened under the terms of an Anglo-American “Open Door” policy.

The connections that gave rise to the migration of Chinese laborers to the Pacific Northwest were, then, the product of networks created by empire that connected frontier expansion in the North American West to Western imperialism in Asia and the South Pacific. Chinese migration did not, of course, begin with the “treaty ports”—the Chinese had a long tradition of mobility and moving abroad as strategies for social mobility, and family and kin survival—but western encroachments intensified and accelerated the process, producing widening channels through which Chinese migrants would flow to the hinterlands of North and South America, Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific.⁵

These imperial networks were not, however, solely the handiwork of Euro-American colonizers. Their organization and maintenance required the assistance of native middlemen, the incorporation of a transnational Chinese managerial elite into empire building. In the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere, a Chinese mercantile elite played a crucial role in establishing imperial nodes and facilitating traffic across them as they distributed migrant workers to sites of labor scarcity and opened Asian markets for Western goods. In circulating overseas Chinese labor, and as protagonists in the opening of East Asian markets, Chinese merchant contractors like Chin Gee Hee performed concrete work on behalf of the empire, mediating the flows and exchanges that energized colonial development in the North American West and across the Pacific.

But if they served as agents of empire, by extending the reach of U.S. and British imperialism into China, and Asia more broadly, they simultaneously undermined the colonial project by organizing subversive forms of mobility that challenged national-state sovereignty and by appropriating “barbarian” methods to enhance their individual positions and their nation’s position within this imperial formation. As Michael Geyer and Charles Bright forcefully argue, “imperialism was also able to exist because Indians, Egyptians, Argentines, Chinese, Persians, and Africans helped make it happen, and not simply as lackeys and dupes but pursuing strategies of renewal that synchronized in the web of European-dominated global regimes.”⁶ These cross-cultural collaborations and alliances were therefore highly contradictory and fraught with tensions, falling into the netherworld between collaboration and resistance.

This chapter explores two exemplars of this Chinese transnational managerial class whose lives and fortunes were intimately bound up with Anglo-American imperial expansion in the Pacific Northwest and across the Pacific. Chinese middlemen Chin Gee Hee of Seattle and Yip Sang of Vancouver played profoundly important roles in greasing the proverbial wheels of imperial commerce, managing the international linkages and labor and capital flows that integrated the British and U.S. empires in the Pacific. By tracing the ways leading Chinese middlemen made the empire and how the empire, in turn, made Chinese middlemen, this chapter resituates immigration history within the multiple and overlapping histories of frontier expansion, the globalization of capital and empire, and the territorializing process of state formation in Canada and the United States.

IMPERIAL PROJECTIONS
AND FRONTIER DEVELOPMENT

Starting with the maritime fur trade in the eighteenth century, Euro-American entrepreneurs and traders had searched for ways to extract, commodify, and profit from the vast natural resources of the Pacific Northwest. Early travel writings chronicled the immense potential of the region, opening this remote corner of the northern Pacific to Euro-American exploitation and expansion. In one such account, written in 1857, James Swan observed that “its numerous and inexhaustible mines of bituminous coal, its quarries of marble and sandstone, its rich gold and lead deposits, and its unrivaled water privileges offer great inducements to the capitalist, whether as manufacturer, trader, or ship-owner.” All that these pristine lands and this untapped natural wealth needed, he argued, were “men and means.”⁷ The railroad magnate James J. Hill later remarked similarly that the region “has within itself an abundance of wealth, in the water, in the fields, in the mines, and her forests,” contending that the “permanent and great prosperity will come through the development of these resources.”⁸

This vision of exploiting and settling the Pacific Northwest started to become a reality with breakthroughs in transportation and communication during the late nineteenth century. The technological revolution that accompanied the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (C.P.R.), extending from Montreal to Vancouver in 1885, and the Great Northern Railway, connecting St. Paul to Seattle in 1893, paved the way for large-scale extraction and production of natural resources in the Pacific Northwest. The C.P.R. opened a north-south feeder line from Vancouver to Seattle shortly thereafter, integrating these frontiers into a binational borderland economy. The railroad companies also began to provide regular steamship service to transpacific ports in China, Japan, Hong Kong, and the Hawaiian Islands. The interlocking network of railroads and steamships linked the region to the rest of the continent and to more distant markets around the world. “Modern invention found the ocean a barrier and made it a highway,” is how one early Washington settler put it.⁹ This conquest of distance enabled resource exploitation and production to accelerate rapidly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result, the region’s identity became associated with that of a colonial hinterland, a place known to extract and furnish raw materials for more advanced economies on the East Coast and across the Pacific, an empire of extraction.

By the turn of the century, Washington State was one of the nation's leading producers of several key natural resource-based commodities. The logging and milling industries benefited overwhelmingly from the arrival of the railroads. Prior to the completion of the northern transcontinental railroad in 1893, Washington was average among states in the union in timber production, manufacturing about 160 million board feet of timber per year. By 1910, however, the emerald state produced over four billion board feet of timber per year, an output that led the nation. Logging and milling companies emerged as the state's leading employers, with their payrolls accounting for more than 50 percent of all salaries and wages in Washington State prior to the First World War.¹⁰ Salmon canning also developed into an important extractive industry during the late nineteenth century. In 1877, canneries on the Puget Sound packed about 5,000 cases of salmon. Two decades later, there were sixteen canneries on the Puget Sound packing almost a million cases of salmon to sell on markets at home and abroad.¹¹ The state's rapid commercial expansion was accompanied by a demographic surge led by immigrants. Between 1900 and 1910, fueled mainly by the infusion of people from outside the state, the population of Washington State doubled—a growth rate six times that of the national average.¹²

Global capitalism encroached upon and transformed British Columbia as well, placing its equally rich natural resources in reach of the world economy. As it was the case with Washington State, railroads fueled the growth and the development of the region's far-flung hinterlands. Between 1900 and 1913, revenues from commercial timber rose from \$136,000 to more than \$2 million per annum. Commercial fishing also emerged as an important industry in British Columbia. There were close to eighty salmon canneries in the 1890s, mostly located on or around the Fraser River. Although the salmon runs proved to be highly unpredictable, British Columbia canneries still managed to pack more than a million cases of salmon valued at close to \$5 million in 1897. Forestry and salmon canning, along with mining, constituted British Columbia's economic base.¹³ The total value of the region's output from manufacturing, forestry, mining, fishing, and agriculture went from a little over \$8 million in 1881 to over \$22 million in 1891 and almost quadrupled to \$84 million in 1901.¹⁴ Here, too, a settler society began to take root as a diverse array of immigrants began to pour into the province. At the turn of the twentieth century, four out of five residents in British Columbia were new arrivals.

In 1907, Daniel Lincoln Pratt, writing for *The Westerner*, paid homage to the region's rapid growth, extolling the "big undertakings" and the "large scale" of industrial development in the Pacific Northwest. Since the railroad was considered the harbinger of modernity and industrial progress, Pratt focused on the fact that "there are more miles of new railroads planned for the State of Washington than any other in the union" and that "Oregon, Idaho, British Columbia, and Montana are also being crisscrossed and belted by steel rails" to predict that the region stood on the brink of a mighty economic expansion.¹⁵ Yet, the scene in Seattle and its surrounding hinterlands in 1873—the year of Chin Gee Hee's arrival—was of a sleepy backwater mired in muddy flats, impassable roads, and thick forest cover that hardly portended a thriving extractive economy that would reach across the Pacific. Indeed, what was to become the premier city in the Pacific Northwest was little more than a tributary at this time, outfitting the logging and mining camps in its surrounding hinterlands with supplies it received from San Francisco. This is to say that the settlement and exploitation of the region was neither preordained nor natural, the rhetoric of boosters notwithstanding: There were railroad tracks to be laid down, rivers and lakes to be connected, and hills to be shaved, before the region's vast natural wealth could be tapped and consumed by global capitalism. Indeed, the exploitation of nature would require a commensurate exploitation in people: "The handling of picks, the digging of ditches, [and] the swinging from nine to ten hours a day of a heavy shovel" involved "rough, strenuous labor on the part of many thousands of men," as one industrialist put it.¹⁶

Fortunately for developers, just as they were beginning to pour capital into the region, Euro-American imperial incursions into Asia spun new global circuits of labor and capital through which overseas Chinese were channeled across the Pacific. Following the First Opium War in the 1840s, the Ch'ing dynasty, under duress from Western imperial powers, signed a series of unequal treaties opening southern China coast ports to foreign capital.¹⁷ In carving up China into spheres of influence, Western imperial powers were not only interested in opening overseas markets but also in locating new sources of labor for their newly acquired colonies. As Philip Kuhn explains, "the settlement forced by Britain on the Qing government established a framework of special privilege for Westerners in China-coast ports, where labor recruitment was then able to flourish largely unhampered by Chinese laws."¹⁸ China made an additional round of concessions on this score at the end of the Second Opium War. In 1866, Britain and France

signed the Chinese Labor Immigration Agreement, which permitted foreign emigration agencies to recruit laborers in coastal Chinese ports. Not to be left out, the United States negotiated the Burlingame Treaty two years later, which regularized Chinese immigration to America.¹⁹

In this reconfigured China, politically and spatially realigned by Western imperialism, the “treaty ports” and the colonial hubs of Hong Kong and Macao emerged as important new nodes through which Chinese migrants would flow to new destinations both inside and outside of the British imperial system. The labor trade that emerged at these sites was organized by Chinese merchant companies, the *Jinshanzhuang*, or Gold Mountain firms, which collectively gave rise to a transnational network of creditors, merchants, and laborers that were bound together by ties of kinship and native place. Native participation in this commerce would result in the systemization of Chinese migration, the creation of a permanent infrastructure that would ensure the perpetual migration of Chinese across the Pacific. Within this system, Hong Kong emerged as the central node for Chinese migrating to the Western Hemisphere.²⁰

The primary, though by no means exclusive, method by which earlier Chinese migrants came to the American West was through the credit-ticket system. This labor migration system was embedded in international trading and credit networks and native-place associations stretching across the Pacific. Creditors and transportation brokers in Hong Kong provided Chinese migrants with the cost of passage to the United States and then transferred or sold the debt (including interest) to affiliated companies and associations in San Francisco. Upon their arrival, Chinese merchants furnished the newcomers with lodging, food, supplies, and jobs. In between were passage brokers who facilitated the transaction from one side of the Pacific to the other. The functioning of this complex system of mobility and exchange rested on its ability to ensure that laborers repay their creditors. As historian Madeline Hsu and others have shown, it ultimately worked because their debt was guaranteed “not by contracts but by relationships based on kinship or native-place ties,” and thus the indebted Chinese migrant was accountable not only to his creditor but to a much wider (and more intimate) web of relationships.²¹ Some migrants found ways to circumvent the credit-ticket system by raising funds on their own, typically from family or kin members, who viewed the advancing of this money as an investment.²² All told, close to 40,000 Chinese laborers came to California during the gold rush of the 1850s through one of these methods.²³

The initial wave of Chinese laborers to the Pacific Northwest came by way of California, drawn by the discovery of gold deposits on the Columbia and Fraser Rivers in the 1850s and 1860s.²⁴ Reproducing scenes from the early gold rush in California, thousands of Chinese miners migrated northward to work on claims left behind by white miners in British Columbia and Washington Territory. In 1879, the *Washington Standard* wrote: "From the old abandoned gold fields of California to the icy streams of the Cariboo, they are literally taking the country." "The Chinese," the paper reported, "never let up when they once fairly settle down to business in the gold diggings. Years ago, white men rushed to the Fraser mines, and as they thought, exhausted them. Chinamen followed hard after them, as usual, and found good paying diggings where white miners could not or would not live; as characteristic of the race, they are still in the business"²⁵ This short account captured the basic contours of the Chinese immigrant experience in the North American West: Excluded from the mainstream of frontier life, they performed tasks undesired and left behind by white Euro-Americans.²⁶

Yet, among these migrant workers emerged a select number of Chinese who would go on to become powerful merchant contractors in the leading cities of the Pacific Northwest. Exploiting the transpacific connections generated by imperialism and by rapid frontier expansion, these laborers-turned-merchants established new niches within an international system of movement to produce and sustain a steady stream of Chinese migrants to Pacific Northwest long after the Gold Rush was over. Bilingual and bicultural, this Chinese middling elite straddled two social worlds, mediating (and profiting from) the geographical and cultural gulf separating them.²⁷ The ability to expertly move human bodies and goods across borders made them indispensable. On these imperial peripheries, far removed from the centers of power, where services and transactions of this sort were conducted through more formalized structures and institutions, the marginal man went on to become a powerful middleman.²⁸

CONSTRUCTING IMPERIAL CORRIDORS

In Place du Canada in Montreal stands a statute of John A. Macdonald facing west. Unveiled in 1895, it was to serve as a tribute to the first prime minister of the Dominion of Canada, for his visionary leadership in expanding Canada and unifying its disparate provinces. This iconography of national

origins illustrated how a bold visionary willed a nation into being. But what is forgotten in this nationalist telling was that Macdonald's vision for a united confederation was part of a larger imperial vision that saw "the great task of welding the scattered provinces of Canada" as "only forging the initial link in that mightier chain to unite the Motherland with Canada, the Orient and Australia on the all-red line of Empire."²⁹ In this rendering, the nation was merely a stepping stone to an empire. The lynchpin to this grand imperial scheme was the Canadian Pacific Railway (C.P.R.), what would become the Dominion's first transcontinental railroad. "Establish an unbroken line of road and railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific through British territory," wrote Macdonald's close friend and ally, Edward Watkins. "For Japan, for China, for the whole Asiatic Archipelago, and for Australia, such a route must become the great highway to and from Europe." Pushing Macdonald's vision of a "Greater Britain on the Pacific," Watkin declared that "whatever nation possesses that highway must wield of necessity the commercial spectre of the world."³⁰

The physical task of fashioning these important sinews of empire was performed by imported Chinese labor and there was perhaps no single individual more responsible for assembling this vital overseas labor force than Vancouver's Yip Sang. The fantasy that envisioned the transcontinental railroad as an integral part of an imperial network that would extend the Dominion's reach into exotic, far-flung markets in Asia was initially frustrated by acute labor shortages. In 1881, British Columbia had fewer than 50,000 residents, many of whom were unaccustomed or unwilling to perform industrial wage labor.³¹ A project of this scale would therefore require a massive infusion of outside workers. The C.P.R., like every other railroad company in the North American West, would come to rely almost exclusively on overseas Chinese migrants.³² As superintendent of the C.P.R.'s labor supply company, Yip Sang would recruit thousands of Chinese laborers to help build the most powerful transportation system on the planet. Yet, in doing so, he and his overseas Chinese laborers became unwitting participants in opening their homeland to further Western penetration, constructing the very imperial technologies by which it was made possible.

Yip Sang had migrated to San Francisco in 1864, lured, like so many of his contemporaries, by dreams of gold. He was nineteen years old at the time and had lived his entire life until then in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong. Born to a poor family, and having lost both his mother and father at a young age, Yip Sang seized on the opportunity to migrate, seeing it as one of the few chances to improve his life fortunes. In San Francisco, Yip Sang first worked as a dishwasher, cook, and cigar roller, before panning

for gold. In 1881, he hitched on the wagon trail to the Yukon gold fields. He would ultimately make his fortunes not from gold however, but by commodifying the labor and mobility of his overseas compatriots. In Vancouver, Yip Sang landed employment with the Canadian Pacific Railway's labor supply firm, where he started as bookkeeper. He quickly graduated to timekeeper, and then to paymaster, before being promoted to company superintendent.³³ At the time of his promotion, the C.P.R. was just starting construction on the western sections of its transcontinental railroad.

Company executives initially tried to meet their labor needs by attracting white European immigrants. Company agents and officials, with assistance from Western boosters, emphasized the Eden-like qualities of the Pacific Northwest and held out the promise of upward social mobility. Yet, despite these efforts, the number of Euro-American and Canadian newcomers failed to keep pace with the company's seemingly endless labor needs. White labor recruits also proved to be less than dependable as workers. Henry Cambie, a surveyor and engineer for the C.P.R., described the first group of white men that the company imported from California in 1880, as the "most useless lot of broken down gamblers, barkeeps, and etc., ever collected in one place."³⁴ As a result, the railroad giant turned to an alternative source of unskilled labor, namely overseas Chinese, to solve the perennial problem of labor scarcity. As one leading industrialist acknowledged: "It is altogether clear and evident to the manufacturers, contractors, and railroad builders who must have certain sorts of labor accomplished that the Orientals are the only ones who will attempt it."³⁵

At the outset, the white labor suppliers for the C.P.R. focused on local and regional markets in their recruiting efforts, sending company emissaries across the border into Washington, Oregon, and California, where they siphoned hundreds of Chinese laborers from U.S. railroad companies. As one C.P.R. manager recalled, their American labor supplier, "[Andrew] Onderdonk picked up a few China gangs in 1880, from the Northern Pacific Railway in Oregon, and some in 1881 from the Southern Pacific Railway in Southern California, the latter whom had among them some trained gangs of rockmen, as good as I ever saw."³⁶ In a classic case of how colonial labor was used to energize the development of multiple, and sometimes competing, imperial spaces, capitalists and their labor suppliers disregarded national boundaries, drawing upon a labor pool that cut across the U.S.-Canadian frontiers. This method of recruiting, however, proved to be ineffectual for the time being; it would have to wait until Chinese middlemen took over the role exclusively and built a transborder labor network for it to generate a

more consistent flow of Chinese laborers across the border. As C.P.R. officials noted, “by the end of 1881 these, all told, amounted to only about 1,500 men, or less,” which fell well short of meeting the company’s growing labor needs.

When Yip Sang came into the role of superintendent a year later, he dramatically expanded the geography of the company’s labor recruiting system by going directly to the source. Being familiar with cultural practices and customs, having access to immigrant networks, and understanding the working of government bureaucracies on both sides of the Pacific, he was able to organize Chinese labor migrations from abroad. Yip Sang chartered C.P.R. ships to contract and import thousands of men from China’s countryside, focusing his efforts on his home region on the Pearl River Delta. The transpacific passage from China was treacherous, exacting a terrible cost on its human cargo. Ten percent of the laborers the C.P.R. brought over from China in the winters of 1881 and 1882 died soon after their arrival. As one C.P.R. official recalled, “They came in the winter, had long and rough passages and the men were kept below most of the time, with closed hatches and bad ventilation. They arrived in B.C. in April, apparently well and in good condition, but in a short time a large number developed scurvy.”³⁷ More men died during the harsh winter months when the Chinese were forced to make due in makeshift tents in subfreezing temperatures because the company failed to build enough cabins. According to some estimates, two Chinese laborers died for every mile of track built.³⁸ Despite the enormous human losses, the C.P.R. still found the use of Chinese labor the most cost-effective way of addressing the company’s labor needs.³⁹ Yip Sang went on to employ and supervise some 7,000 Chinese workers between 1881, and until the last spike was driven into the ground.⁴⁰

At the completion of the C.P.R., Yip Sang departed for China, making his triumphant return home as a Gold Mountain success story. His departure may have also been hastened by the passage of the Chinese Immigration Act, which was signed into law shortly after the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1885. The law imposed a \$50 head tax on Chinese migrants, which was designed to discourage their immigration to Canada. The timing of the head tax was not coincidental. Canadian Prime Minister John Macdonald wanted to ensure the completion of his pet project before appeasing white supremacists on the west coast with anti-Chinese legislation.⁴¹ Macdonald’s instrumental attitude toward Chinese immigrants was the prevailing one among the region’s ruling elite, whose tolerance of Chinese immigrants did not go much beyond the utility of

their labor, thus making them disposable at a moment's notice. "The truth that Oriental labor has become a necessary thread in the Northwestern industrial fabric is too manifest to be avoided." But, if this was a truth, as booster Daniel Pratt posited, it was also a truth that only "a limited immigration of Oriental labor is very desirable."⁴²

Back in his home village in south China, Yip Sang cemented his new elite status by marrying additional wives, siring more children, and engaging in a number of philanthropic projects. Perhaps growing restless with the routine of village life, Yip Sang returned to Canada with his family after three years. In 1888, he opened the Wing Sang Company, which imported and exported Chinese goods and contracted migrant labor. His earlier relationship with the C.P.R. helped him launch his labor-contracting business. Using his former contacts, Yip Sang secured the coveted position of Chinese passenger agent for the C.P.R.'s steamship lines. In 1891, the C.P.R. agreed to provide regular mail service between Hong Kong and Britain via Vancouver. The company's new fleet of transpacific ocean liners—the *Empress of China*, the *Empress of Japan*, and the *Empress of India*—provided regular passenger service soon thereafter. As the firm's new Chinese passenger agent, Yip Sang almost at once gained control over the entire Chinese migrant traffic between Vancouver and East Asia. His rise to prominence would, therefore, be built on the pathways and connections traced by his imperial patron, the C.P.R., which integrated the borderland economy of the Pacific Northwest into transpacific commerce and markets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Yip Sang's imported Chinese laborers would help facilitate the region's transition from gold rush society to industrial economy. With the basic infrastructure of the emerging economy in place, which earlier Chinese laborers had a big hand in constructing, their manpower would now be needed to commodify the region's vast natural resources—to extract, package, and bring to market, that is. Recognizing the pivotal role Chinese labor played in the region's development, one booster wrote in 1907: "the West, in a way, owes a degree of gratitude to Chinese labor, which has in a number of instances met a crucial need at a time when lack of laborers would have been disastrous."⁴³ Similarly, Everett Deming, manager of the Pacific American Fishing Company in Washington, acknowledged in 1902, that, "If there had been no Chinese the salmon canning business would not have been conducted on so big a scale."⁴⁴

As this suggests, the task of transforming the hinterland spaces of the Pacific Northwest into a productive empire of extraction required a specific



FIGURE 1.1 Portrait of Yip Sang, 1890. University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

type of workforce, one that operated on logic different from either the plantation societies of the American South or the industrial centers on the Atlantic seaboard. In the Pacific Northwest, employers sought laborers whom they could quickly mobilize during peak seasons and dispose of just as quickly at season's end. Conducting business in geographically remote areas, the region's capitalists found that they could not meet their labor demands by recruiting from the local populace alone, and high competition among the various seasonal industries only exacerbated the problem. The harvest season for salmon and hops, for example, coincided with the months the railroad companies required additional section hands.

This is where Chinese labor contractors like Yip Sang came in. Indeed, the value in using someone like Yip Sang, according to historian Gunther Peck, lay precisely in his ability to “organize labor markets at sites of labor demands, creating truly disposable workforces that could be mobilized from

remote corners of the earth to equally remote industrial islands at the drop of the hat.⁴⁵ In the case of Yip Sang's contract laborers, theirs was a global mobility organized across the Pacific only to be fixed to isolated hinterland corners upon their arrival in the North American West. What Yip Sang and other Chinese labor contractors were providing, ultimately, then, was not only their ability to fuel and foster mobility across great distances but also their capacity to discipline that mobility, to lock migrant workers firmly in a place. The power of the contractor therefore rested on his ability to calibrate mobility and immobility simultaneously.

Chinese labor contractors were also attractive to western firms because all the responsibility, inconvenience, and liability involved in employing and maintaining a sufficient supply of unskilled workers fell on the contractors themselves. The contractor, for example, assumed all financial risks stemming from hiring too few or too many laborers. Additionally, the passage of contract labor laws in the United States and Canada made it illegal to import overseas laborers under contract and thus corporations were eager to transfer any potential legal liability to these middlemen. Furthermore, Chinese contractors were able to furnish laborers who were willing to work for less—anywhere between one-quarter to one-third less wages in most cases—compared to white laborers for the same job.

Applying the skills he had acquired earlier as C.P.R.'s main labor supplier, Yip Sang quickly rose to the top of the labor-contracting world. As the Chinese passenger agent for the C.P.R., Yip Sang had subagents stationed in cities across the Dominion, including in Victoria and Montreal, as well as ports of call in South China: Hong Kong and Shanghai, among others. In addition to advertising the C.P.R.'s steamship services in these cities across the Pacific, Yip Sang and his agents recruited Chinese migrants for contract labor. In this way, this one-time migrant laborer was able to establish Vancouver as a groove within a global system of movement: a "local specialization," as historian Adam McKeown calls it, that made transnationalism possible.⁴⁶ Operating out of Vancouver's Chinatown, on 51 East Pender Street, Yip Sang routed migrants from across Canada and across the Pacific to productive sites in the region's hinterlands and beyond. His corporate clients included salmon canneries, lumber mills, and railroad companies.⁴⁷

Like other labor contractors, Yip Sang profited from this arrangement by imposing an elaborate system of fee for employment, transportation, and housing, which were deducted directly from workers' paychecks. The Wing Sang Co. generated additional revenue streams by provisioning workers with



FIGURE 1.2 Chinese workers at the Marble Bay Mine, Texada Island, British Columbia, April 1912. University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW 5761.

supplies and goods and by charging them for services bound up with native place, including mailing and translating letters and transferring remittances on behalf of its workers. The firm therefore profited from its contract laborers both as consumers and as producers. Yip Sang used his gatekeeping powers as the exclusive Chinese passenger agent for the C.P.R. to ensure that all laborers paid their debt in full before being permitted to depart for China. If the Sam Kee Company, Yip Sang's main competitor, serves as any kind of guide, Chinese laborers, on average, handed over roughly a quarter of their earnings to their contractors to pay for food, supplies, and other commissary services.⁴⁸ In 1907, the Wing Sang Co. was one of only four Chinatown businesses to post revenues of \$150,000 or more.⁴⁹

Yip Sang eventually leveraged labor contracting to build other facets of his firm's business, which included real estate, shipping, and trading. For example, in 1904, he led a Chinese merchant group to buy and develop the Canton Alley complex, a row of storefronts and buildings running south of Pender Street that would become the center of commercial life in Chinatown.⁵⁰ The Wing Sang Co. owned and managed a number of tenements in the complex, which the firm used to house and provision immigrant workers.

The company also imported general merchandise from China and Japan, and owned and operated multiple fisheries off the coast of Vancouver Island to start an international trade in dry-salt herring.⁵¹ Turning himself into an international businessman, Yip Sang created overseas markets for the latter by working closely with business partners in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Kobe, and Osaka. To get a rough sense of the size of the business the firm was doing, the Wing Sang Co. shipped 1,000 ton of dry herring in 1919, with a market price of \$35,000.⁵² By the 1920s and 1930s, the firm was trading dried herring and canned fish from British Columbia on an even larger scale.⁵³

The Wing Sang Co.'s diverse portfolio of labor contracting, international trading, and real estate and business investments required careful coordination and management. Each spring, the firm brought over laborers, silk, rice, tea, and other goods from China and Japan. Chinese migrants went to meet the high labor demands of the peak summer season, a portion of them being diverted to the firm's fish-packing plants in Nanaimo and on Nanoose Bay off Vancouver Island, while imported goods were sold to Chinese and white residents as well as tourists who shopped in Vancouver. At the end of the season, the firm shipped canned salmon and dry-salt herring as well as returning Chinese migrants to Asia.⁵⁴ The seasonality of the extractive economy meant that if Chinese migrant laborers wanted to visit China, they did so in the winter months when jobs were scarce. This cycle of comings and goings repeated itself each spring.

Yip Sang's integrated business model was the imperial logic writ small, in which the exploitation of foreign labor and the opening of overseas markets went hand in hand with Asian migrant bodies coming in one direction and the commodities that their labor helped produce going in the other, across the Pacific. Incorporating far-flung regions and new products into his business portfolio made Yip Sang one of the most powerful merchants in Vancouver. Indeed, when he died in 1927, his vast merchant-contracting empire was linked to trading, credit, and labor markets across the Pacific world. But if these accumulated connections enriched Yip Sang (as well as other Chinese middlemen), they also diversified the region's international links that made empire possible as more and more commodities from British Columbia and other parts of the Dominion found their way to Asian markets. "Vancouver is now the recognized gateway between East and the West," the Governor General of Canada Earl Grey declared, "the gateway through which the double streams of commerce between the Occident and the Orient, and between Britain and the self-governing nations of New Zealand and Australia will

flow in ever increasing volume, until Vancouver shall become, perhaps, the first and most important port in the world." The life of Yip Sang was, then, a story about how a Chinese managerial elite made the empire and how the empire made a Chinese managerial elite.

THE RACE TO THE CHINA MARKETS

The belief that economic salvation would come through access to the China markets was gospel to white settler societies across the Pacific world, sparking a global competition to be the first to Asia.⁵⁵ "The trade of China, which is for the most part in British hands, is now estimated at \$130,000,000 annually, and it can securely be said that it is yet in its infancy. The development of this vast empire has but begun, and, though the China trade has been the stake for which nations have waged wars through a dozen centuries, it is as nothing compared with what it will be in the near future."⁵⁶ In the Pacific Northwest, the emergence of Seattle directly challenged Vancouver's imperial aspiration to be the "gateway to the Orient." Staking Seattle's claim to the title was Washington pioneer Frederic James Grant who insisted in 1890 that, "The teeming millions of the Orient are, for all purpose of trade, Seattle's near neighbors." He boldly predicted that the "China of a quarter of a century hence will be a land rendered accessible by railroads, and the Chinese will be larger consumers of American wares and fabrics." Seattle and the Puget Sound more broadly, he contended, would be the "chief beneficiaries of Oriental trade," which "has rendered rich and great every city through which it has flown, from Venice and the Hanse towns to London and Amsterdam."⁵⁷

No one wanted to beat Vancouver, and the Dominion, more broadly, to the China markets more than James J. Hill. The Canadian-born Hill was the visionary and architect behind the twin railroads of the U.S.-Canadian borderlands: the C.P.R. and the Great Northern Railway. He was a firm believer in the transforming power of the railroad, considering it the means by which the promise of modernity would be realized in the North American West. Like his sprawling railroads, Hill's investments, alliances, and rivalries spanned nations and industries crisscrossing the North American frontiers. In this regard, Hill was a quintessential capitalist, chasing profits and building empires on both sides of the international line. Fittingly, historian Beth LaDow calls Hill a "hybrid" because he "crossed the

border to great effect,” and thus it was impossible to tell with him “where the Canadian stopped and the American began.”⁵⁸

Yet, as the only original member of the C.P.R. syndicate unceremoniously dumped from the company’s board, Hill was set on beating his former business associates to Asia. As a scion of the Canadian railroad giant, he was infatuated with the myth of boundless China markets. “If you go back into the commercial history of the world you will find that the people who controlled the trade of the Orient have been the people who held the purse strings of nations.”⁵⁹ He remained committed to this vision long after leaving the C.P.R. in 1883, carrying it with him across the border to Seattle, where Hill found a community of like-minded men who shared his vision in which trade with the Orient was thought to be the rightful, even natural, preserve of the “commercial people” of the Pacific Northwest. As his lawyer Thomas Burke remarked, “The Pacific Ocean, which alone separates us is our common frontier. Nothing could be more natural than that a commerce should spring between the countries served by that great highway.”⁶⁰ In what might be considered an earlier version of what Bruce Cumings has called “rimspeak,” this discourse constructed the Asia-Pacific as a virgin economic frontier ripe for Euro-American capitalist penetration.⁶¹

Understanding very well that the fortunes of the city were bound up with gaining access to the China markets, Seattle’s elite rallied around the cause of bringing Hill’s transcontinental railroad to the emerald city, reaching agreement with the railroad magnate in 1890.⁶² In one of his famous stump speeches, Hill promised city leaders that he would “reverse the immemorial course of trade eastward over the seas, and turn it from the Suez to Seattle.”⁶³ His Great Northern Railways and steamships eventually connected locally produced commodities—wheat, lumber, minerals, and fish—to external markets, which in turn stimulated investment and settlement. Hill generated streams of profit by bundling transportation, land, and trade together. “When we built the Great Northern Railway to the Pacific coast,” he recalled in 1897, “we knew that it was necessary to look to Asia for a part of our traffic.”⁶⁴ Thus, even as he was rapidly extending his commercial empire across the Great Plains, Hill had his eyes squarely on Asia, imagining it as the next frontier of capitalist development. Unlike another famous imperialist, Hill didn’t view the end of continental expansion as signaling the “closing of the frontier,” framing a narrative of American exceptionalism, but rather he saw it as merely another stage in the unfolding of world history that would reach its apogee when the

promise of the China markets would be fulfilled through Western expansion in which Western civilization would finally come full circle.⁶⁵

But the kind of integration that would give Hill's business the global breadth and reach that he craved and one that could transform Seattle into a major hub for transpacific commerce required tight coordination and synchronization of a range of transnational processes. As it was the case with their competitors to the north, the C.P.R. and Vancouver, respectively, Hill's Great Northern and Seattle's ruling elite would come to rely on versatile Chinese intermediaries to meld disparate points in the Pacific Northwest and across the Pacific into global circuits of mobility and exchange. In 1890, Thomas Burke brought one Chin Gee Hee to the attention of his ambitious patron. Chin Gee Hee had arrived in San Francisco in 1862, as part of the California gold rush. He spent the next several years bouncing back and forth from mining towns in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. However, like Yip Sang, who arrived two years later, Chin Gee Hee's plans took a detour when he migrated northward from California to the logging town of Port Gamble, Washington, in the late 1860s. And like Yip Sang, he would amass wealth and power by energizing the mobility and movement of Chinese migrants across the Pacific and across the North American West.⁶⁶

Chin Gee Hee relocated to Seattle in 1873, joining the Wah Chong & Co. as a junior partner. The move was made at the urging of his friend and future mayor of Seattle, Henry Yesler, who convinced him of the city's commercial potential. The Wah Chong & Co. was the first wholly Chinese-owned company in Seattle. Chin was placed in charge of the firm's labor-contracting business, and in this role he worked tirelessly to drum up demand for Chinese laborers with mine owners, railway foremen, and farmers in Seattle's immediate hinterlands.⁶⁷ Chin Gee Hee sought to capitalize on the dramatic growth in labor demand generated by the region's transition to an industrial-extractive economy. His efforts turned the company into one of the leading labor suppliers in the Pacific Northwest. The firm's contract workers could be seen working in almost every corner of the territory, building roads and streetcar lines in Seattle, logging and milling on the Puget Sound, and picking fruit and hops in the Yakima Valley.

But, by far and away, Chin Gee Hee's largest and most important clients were the railroads.⁶⁸ In 1882, the Northern Pacific Railway employed 15,000 Chinese workers in Washington Territory (and another 6,000 in Montana and Idaho) to construct its line through the Pacific Northwest, and although exact numbers are hard to come by, it's probably safe to assume that the Wah



FIGURE 1.3 Studio Portrait of Chin Gee Hee, Seattle, 1905. The Wing Luke Museum.

Chong & Co. supplied a fair share of the total as the leading labor supplier in the Puget Sound district. In fact, the Northern Pacific made Chin Gee Hee the general passenger agent for its railroad (and later steamship) lines ending in the Puget Sound, which gave him access and control to a steady source of Chinese migrants. The grading, drilling, and demolition performed by his laborers, at the rate of around a dollar per day per worker, helped the Northern Pacific complete the western sections of its railroad, reaching the Puget Sound in 1887. His services were highly valued because, in addition to furnishing laborers, Chin Gee Hee provisioned workers with supplies from his merchant business, handled payroll for them and dealt with all issues related to wages and payments, and provided a loyal cadre of Chinese foremen to enforce workplace discipline—labor contracting from soup to nuts, if you will.⁶⁹ His firm, of course, exacted a fee for each of these services, subtracting them from workers' wages.



FIGURE 1.4 Chinese workers clearing snow from railroad tracks, 1886. Heavy snowfall sometimes buried tracks so deep that rotary snowplows could not operate. Then it was necessary to employ shovel gangs to clear tracks. University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW552.

The labor needs of the railroad giant continued to take priority even after its completion. In a letter written to the general manager of the Northern Pacific in 1895, Chin Gee Hee requested “that you inform me at your earliest convenience for the reason that the season of the year is now approaching when there is considerable demand for our men on farms and in fishing industries and while of course this will not entail any inconvenience to you, it means some little expense to me should they become scattered before you need them.” However, he was quick to note, “that this is a matter for my own look-out as of course I will furnish the men promptly whenever called for.”⁷⁰ When Chin Gee Hee left the Wah Chong & Co. to start the Quong Tuck Company in 1889, he performed the same dual roles for the Great Northern, serving simultaneously as labor broker and passenger agent for its transpacific railroad and steamship lines in Seattle. Needless to say, the patronage of these behemoth transportation companies was crucial to Chin Gee Hee’s rise as a successful middleman.

Chin Gee Hee furnished large quantities of imported Chinese workers from southern China and from neighboring states and territories. The first direct ship route from Seattle to China was established in 1874, allowing Chin Gee Hee to directly tap the Chinese countryside for migrant labor.

In 1870, the census reported 33 Chinese people residing in King County and 234 Chinese people in total in Washington Territory. Six years later, officials recorded 250 Chinese in Seattle and perhaps another 300 or 400 transient Chinese in the territory. Other estimates put the number much higher, as much as five times higher in some unofficial tallies.⁷¹ The transpacific links constructed by transportation giants Northern Pacific and Great Northern only served to thicken the migrant movement between Seattle and China. Chin Gee Hee combined the growing number of overseas Chinese with migrant workers he recruited from California, Oregon, and Montana. The completion of the Central and Union Pacific Railroads in California was a big boon in this regard. It left thousands of Chinese railway laborers with skills in grading, boring, and demolition searching for employment. The ever-vigilant businessman, Chin Gee Hee was quick to identify an opportunity and so he sent labor agents to California to recruit the unemployed railway hands to the Pacific Northwest.⁷²

The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, however, made the task of contracting Chinese laborers a far more difficult and complex affair for Chin Gee Hee and other Chinese labor contractors in the United States. The law, which prohibited overseas Chinese laborers from migrating to the United States, severely hemorrhaged their labor supply with the number of Chinese laborers entering the country plummeting following its enactment. Between 1883 and 1888, less than a 100 Chinese laborers entered the United States annually, whereas almost 16,000 Chinese laborers had entered the country in the previous ten years, and total Chinese immigration to the United States during the 1880s dropped by 50 percent from the previous decade.⁷³ The labor supply problem was further exacerbated by the anti-Chinese riots of 1885, having led to the expulsion of Chinese residents in Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia, and Portland.

In response, Chinese merchant contractors like Chin Gee Hee became experts at negotiating and contesting political and legal boundaries in North America. They provided fraudulent documents and certificates, coached prospective immigrants for entrance interviews, and created new identities and statuses for overseas Chinese laborers seeking entry into the United States.⁷⁴ In doing so, Chinese labor contractors resisted and profited from the new legal regime of Chinese exclusion, simultaneously. In the Pacific Northwest, authorities singled out Chin Gee Hee's Quong Tuck Company for being one of the worst violators of the new law. "In immigration matters, this firm, it is understood, are a lot of grafters, doing their blood-sucking from their own

people, who come into and depart from this country. The principal trade-business of this firm is furnishing papers to Chinese.”⁷⁵

The U.S.-Canadian border became a major venue for these clandestine activities. Indeed, cross-border migrant smuggling became the primary way to fill the gap created by Chinese exclusion. “The business of running Chinese,” as one Washington newspaper reported, “from Victoria, British Columbia, into the United States is a well organized business, as much so as any legitimate branch of trade.” “Chinese merchants in Portland, Oregon, in Seattle, and other Sound ports in Washington Territory and Victoria, British Columbia, furnish the cast, and white men transact the business.”⁷⁶ U.S. Customs officers stationed in the Puget Sound district corroborated these journalistic accounts. “From Victoria, B.C. to these canneries [on the Puget Sound] the Chinese are brought over night, during the fish season. They are put to work by the contractor, where they remain until the season is over, when they make their way to Seattle, or other American ports.”⁷⁷ The Quong Tuck Company was believed to be the worst of the lot. “There is no doubt that the immigration officials will experience a great deal of trouble from this Chinese firm and perhaps at no place will they have to keep a closer watch than on them.”⁷⁸

While Chin Gee Hee left no paper trail of his clandestine activities, for obvious reasons, we can reconstruct the basic mechanics and patterns of his cross-border migrant trafficking by drawing on newspaper accounts, government reports, and oral testimonies about Chinese merchant smuggling, more generally, in the Pacific Northwest. For Chinese merchants in the region, western Canada was viewed as the last bastion of Chinese migrant labor. This was the case because the Dominion, despite strident protesting from its west coast residents, had yet to enact law to restrict Chinese immigration to Canada. That would have to wait until 1885, and even then, it wasn’t outright exclusion but instead new legislation simply required Chinese immigrants to pay a head tax, initially, of \$50. Chinese merchants in Seattle, Portland, and other Northwest cities were quick to exploit the opening in Canada to circumvent Chinese exclusion in the United States. The first step under this scheme was to have overseas migrants, whose ultimate destination was the United States, routed to Victoria, first. Beginning in 1882, tramp steamers carrying Chinese passengers started to come in greater numbers to British Columbia: the *Euphrates* with 600 Chinese on board arriving from Hong Kong, the *Escambia* with 902, the *Suez* with 890, and the *Strathairly* with 1,056.⁷⁹ As a result, the port city on Vancouver Island experienced a record influx of Chinese immigrants in 1882 and the first half of 1883.⁸⁰

From there, border guides, or runners—a motley collection of whites, Chinese, and indigenous people—conveyed Chinese migrants across the border, both by land and by sea. “The numerous islands in Puget Sound at the head of the Strait of [Juan de] Fuca, lying on both sides of the suppositious line separating the two countries, offer special facilities for the operations of smugglers who . . . have little difficulty in crossing the line with cargoes of opium and its smokers, land both in the hidden recesses of some American Chinatown.”⁸¹ During an 1890 Congressional hearing on smuggling on the Puget Sound, one Chinese merchant confirmed the practice, testifying that, “I have never smuggled, but have heard it stated that for \$20 a head Chinamen can be gotten from British Columbia.” He added that, “It is common report that Chinamen are smuggled across the line.”⁸² All throughout this period, white and Chinese smugglers were being prosecuted and convicted for attempting to import Chinese migrants from British Columbia. In 1904, for example, white smugglers, Thomas and Anderson, were convicted and sentenced to one year in the penitentiary and ordered to pay a \$1,000 fine for trying to smuggle in fourteen Chinese from across the border.⁸³

Once a Chinese migrant safely made it across the border, he typically spent a couple of days at the merchant’s store, before being sent to a work site in the hinterlands. “Chinamen would be in the store Monday who would not be there Wednesday,” William Daly recalls. “It was common knowledge when I was a boy that they engaged in activities they didn’t advertise. I think they found work for those that were brought in illegally.” “They had their own underground,” the long-time Port Townsend resident explained.⁸⁴ We know that the three-story brick building from which Chin Gee Hee operated his storefront during the day also furnished residential housing. We also know that some of his laborers used the store’s address as their mailing addresses, making it very likely that Chin Gee Hee housed migrant laborers temporarily in the building—among them, laborers who had just arrived from Canada. If he ran into any legal problems on any of this, Chin Gee Hee had some of the best white lawyers in Seattle standing by to protect his firm’s interest and legal standing.⁸⁵ It may explain why, despite widespread suspicion that his firm was engaged in illicit activities—on a large-scale, it seems—Chin Gee Hee and his company were never formally charged.

Yet as much as Chin Gee Hee and other Chinese merchants tried to devise new methods and develop ever more intricate schemes to elude state regulations, their labor-contracting businesses eventually succumbed

under the impact of the Exclusion Act. By the turn of the twentieth century, fewer than 4,000 Chinese were in Washington State, making their population less than half the size of the Japanese population, who, as the newest Asian immigrants, were beginning to supplant the Chinese in a number of different industries.⁸⁶ By 1907, as one observer put it, “the story of the Orientals in the lumber industry [was] almost wholly a story of the Japanese.”⁸⁷ As this suggests, the legal regime of Chinese exclusion, paradoxically, helped to both make and unmake Chinese labor contracting in the late nineteenth century.

Facing a diminishing supply of Chinese laborers, Chin Gee Hee turned away from labor contracting and focused on international trade and commerce instead. The leading men of Seattle had always envisioned a dual role for the Chinese entrepreneur: a middleman who could broker trade and commerce between Seattle and Asia, as well as secure overseas laborers who would transform the city into a strategic nodal point in the transpacific economy. Under this arrangement, a Chinese managerial regime was incorporated into America’s “informal” empire in which middling men like Chin Gee Hee functioned as crucial go-betweens, facilitating the global flows and exchanges energizing an “Open Door” empire.⁸⁸ The Quong Tuck Company eventually expanded into Asia, opening branch offices in Hong Kong, China, and Japan with Chin Gee Hee himself relocating to the southern Guangdong province in 1904. White supremacy may have circumscribed the lives of most Chinese migrants but it didn’t stop Chin Gee Hee from translating his bicultural and bilingual skills into financial and cultural capital, albeit as something as a perpetual outsider.

Chin Gee Hee’s main collaborator on promoting trade with Asia was his long-time patron James J. Hill, who was constantly searching for ways to fill his train cars to capacity, especially traveling westbound. As his biographer notes: “To Mr. Hill an empty car was a thief.”⁸⁹ A way to remedy this problem, he thought, was to connect the commodities produced in the American heartland to overseas markets in Asia, which would enable frontier commerce and international trade to develop in tandem. But it would mean integrating two distinct commercial systems: one on the continent, and one overseas. To link the two, thereby capturing Asian trade traffic for his Great Northern Railway and Midwestern farmers and producers, Hill partnered with the Nippon Yusen Kaisha (NYK) shipping line in 1896, on a joint venture to provide regular steamship service between Seattle and Japan, China, Hong Kong, and the Philippines.

For his first overseas trade venture, Hill had the quixotic idea of transforming the hundreds of millions of Chinese rice eaters into bread eaters.⁹⁰ In one of his famous county fair speeches to Midwestern farmers, he proclaimed, “Our white bread is like the lotus; no nation that once eats it will change to a poorer diet. I will make wheat flour as cheap as rice for the millions of the Orient, and our farmers will profit by a new demand.”⁹¹ In lieu of the agreement with NYK, his Washington State representative, Thomas Burke, lobbied Seattle officials for proper facilities—grain elevators and warehouses—to store and ship wheat while his other partner in this endeavor, Chin Gee Hee, pitched the product to Chinese merchants in Seattle and Portland, showing them how bread can be made from wheat flour, and even left behind Chinese language instruction manuals for them. With Hill’s assistance, Chin Gee Hee made his first shipment of flour in 1897. By 1902, the Puget Sound was the largest flour-exporting port on the Pacific coast, exporting close to 1.3 million barrels.⁹² Hill would soon add cotton, lumber, and salmon among the staples being exported to Asia.

As Chin Gee Hee spun wider webs of relationships of commerce across the Pacific, accumulating great wealth in the process, his ambitions grew further still. Sparked by grand dreams of transforming the site of his home village into a hub of maritime traffic thick with commercial activities, he sought to invigorate Taishan County with foreign trade and investment. In 1904, he relocated to Guangdong province, hoping to do for his home province what Hill, Burke, and others had done for Seattle. Having observed the development of the emerald city firsthand, Chin understood if his homeland was to benefit from international trade he would have to create transportation links to connect its untapped interior markets with the wider world economy. Benefiting from the high tide of Chinese nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century, Chin Gee Hee collected almost \$3 million (Chinese) in subscriptions from overseas Chinese investors in the North America West, Hong Kong, and Singapore to build an integrated railroad network in the southern Guangdong province.⁹³

Chin’s former patrons in Seattle were eager to lend their financial and technical expertise to his ambitious endeavor. “Judge Thomas Burke and J. J. Hill of the Great Northern Railroad arranged for me to be given a trip over some of the principal railway lines of the country,” Chin Gee Hee recalled; “That was my opportunity to add to my knowledge of railroad construction.” Paying homage to the transpacific bonds that made his career

as an international businessman possible, he wrote, “Could I ever be what I am if it wasn’t for Seattle men?”⁹⁴ James J. Hill even assisted Chin Gee Hee in locating financial backers for his project in Canada and the United States. His support for a railroad project a half a world away was undoubtedly self-interested, driven by an obsessive pursuit of the China trade. Despite the enormous hype surrounding it, the promise of the China markets had eluded Hill up until that point. The factors that had hindered trade between China and the United States since the early nineteenth century—political instability, lack of infrastructure, antforeign hostilities, and an impoverished countryside—continued to frustrate American investors and traders almost a century later.⁹⁵ The movement to boycott American goods in 1905, which drew a broad coalition of Chinese in protest over the treatment of Chinese immigrants in the United States, was symptomatic of some of these problems.⁹⁶ The China market thus proved more myth than reality, accounting for only 2 percent of America’s total foreign trade in 1900.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, Hill had high hopes for Chin’s new railway project, seeing it as a sign of progress, another step in opening China’s countryside to American goods and services.

Chin’s plans for a railway-led development that would transform his Taishan home into a maritime hub in the image of Seattle collapsed slowly over the course of the first two decades of the twentieth century. During its construction, Chin was forced to make costly concessions to local landowners, warlords, and bureaucrats, which exhausted precious resources and time. Moreover, in a region that produced little in the way of exportable goods, he had trouble generating freight traffic for his railway. Beset with these problems, Chin’s ambitious railroad project languished in Guangdong province. Authorities eventually ousted Chin Gee Hee and seized control of his railway in 1926.⁹⁸ Chin was forced to retire to his home village, where he died shortly thereafter. Lest it be assumed that Chin’s railroad debacle was an isolated case of an incompetent businessman, the American China Development Company, founded by a group of Pacific Northwest businessmen and backed by the likes of Edward H. Harriman, J. P. Morgan, and Jacob H. Schiff, also failed miserably in its bid to bring the railroad to China during this period.⁹⁹ Chin’s failure, along with those of other entrepreneurs, demonstrated the limits of the China market at this time. The obstacles posed by political instability and underdevelopment in the Chinese countryside proved far more formidable than the most ardent China market enthusiasts wanted or cared to admit.

THE POLITICS OF (IM)MOBILITY

The combined efforts of merchants, smugglers, and migrants to subvert law and sovereignty in the Pacific Northwest generated a fierce public backlash, which brought with it a new consciousness of state territoriality. Indeed, it was starting with the mid-1880s, amid rumors of a highly organized Chinese smuggling ring operating along the U.S.-Canadian boundary, that the border began to become more than an abstraction. The *West Shore*, for example, reported alarmingly that the “Canadian border is the one now offering the easiest opening for the guileless Mongolian.” Citing the fact that the “Canadian Pacific railroad runs parallel the border from the Pacific to Lake Superior,” it noted that there “are many places along the route where a crossing can be made by a person willing to spend the time and money necessary to effect it.” But “it is on the Puget Sound where this illegitimate business has become a science.”¹⁰⁰ Frederick Grant, the editor of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, explained similarly that, “After Congress had passed a restriction act, little was done to make its provisions effective. The meager appropriations to secure the enforcement of the law made it a dead letter and a mere farce, so far at least as Washington Territory was concerned.” The trafficking of Chinese migrants, therefore, went “practically unhindered” and a “systematic business was conducted in smuggling them in, which the insufficient force of custom house officials was unable to suppress.”¹⁰¹

As this suggests, the law to restrict Chinese labor migration to the United States had created unintended problems and consequences for the modern state. The U.S. architects of the Chinese Exclusion Act never anticipated that excluded Chinese laborers would exploit the nation’s landed borders to gain unlawful entry into the country. The federal government initially assigned the task of enforcing the exclusion laws to the U.S. Customs Service, which up to that point had no prior experience in immigration matters. Within this department, the government created an official position known as the “Chinese inspector,” who was responsible for screening Chinese immigrants entering the United States. In the Pacific Northwest, this small cadre of inspectors determined the eligibility of Chinese immigrants seeking admission, primarily in Seattle and other seaports, while leaving the border unguarded. Although first made aware of the problem of illegal Chinese border crossers in the 1880s, U.S. Customs inspectors cited limited resources as the primary reason for the lack of proper border enforcement.¹⁰²

The situation was not much different on the Canadian side. Apart from the occasional sighting by the North-West Mounted Police, movement across the U.S.-Canadian boundary went virtually unregulated. At this time the Mounties were more concerned with the movement of indigenous groups and radical labor activists than with Chinese migrants.¹⁰³ There was good reason for this: In Canada, after all, Chinese immigrants found it less trouble to pay the head tax than to attempt more clandestine means of illegal entry. This policy difference—with Canada instituting a poll tax as opposed to outright exclusion—decisively shaped the directional flow of illegal Chinese immigration in the Pacific Northwest, where it ran from north to south or from British Columbia to Washington, for the most part.

But how was it that Canada, a white settler society that was equally bent on excluding Chinese immigrants, came to pass less draconian measures than the United States? This discrepancy can be explained by the different degrees of sovereignty accorded to the two polities at this time. Canada was a self-governing white settler colony and as such could make and pass laws provided that they were not in direct conflict with the crown's laws and interests. In the case crown officials deemed a law *ultra vires*—that is, repugnant to English laws and interests—the law was nullified. Unfortunately for white nativists in British Columbia, the more draconian anti-Chinese measures—for example, an outright ban on Chinese immigration—fell into this category. Having a keen interest in deepening commercial ties with Asia, the crown wanted to maintain cordial relations with China. British officials believed that an overt act of discrimination on the part of one of its dominions would interfere with this important crown objective.¹⁰⁴ This pattern, in which white settlers passed restrictive immigration legislation only to see it nullified by the metropole, was, therefore, repeated throughout the Anglophone settler world, in New Zealand, South Africa, and the Australasian colonies, where white settlers and crown officials sparred over the power to control Asian immigration.¹⁰⁵ In this regard, the United States' exclusion law was exceptional among white settler societies in the 1880s but only for a limited time. Through the persistent efforts of white settlers, the various dominions of the British Empire would pass more restrictive laws by the early twentieth century, establishing border control as a rightful prerogative of a self-governing polity, as the different white settler societies competed to see which one could pass the most stringent anti-Asian measure.

Among the constituencies that were especially scandalized by news of illegal Chinese immigration were the white workingmen of the Pacific

Northwest. Having successfully lobbied for the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and the Foran Act in 1885, the latter prohibiting the importation of foreign contract labor, the white working class were led to believe that the problem of “coolie” labor was a thing of the past.¹⁰⁶ It was hence not long before white labor activists, mainly associated with the Knights of Labor, linked the plight of the workingman to the problem of illegal Chinese immigration. “During the construction of the Canadian Pacific railroad,” one local observer recalled, “large numbers of Chinamen had been at work in British Columbia”; however, “on the completion of that work they were discharged and crossed into Washington territory, congregating principally at Seattle, Tacoma, and Olympia,” and “their presence swelled the number of Chinese laborers at these points and furnished to anti-Chinese orators additional arguments to excite the laboring element of the population.”¹⁰⁷

Allegations that the Chinese defied the nation’s immigration laws only to become “willing tools” of “tyrannical employers” fueled overlapping feelings of racial resentment and class oppression among the white workingmen in the region. In this narrative, Chinese contractors were especially vilified as degraders of labor. “[The] long established practice on the part of the companies to hire Chinese workers through a system known as the contractor system, in which a worker must depend on the contractor for his means of livelihood during those months of the year when the canneries are not operating has resulted in grinding the worker to an extreme degree of servility to his master contractor.”¹⁰⁸ In the age of emancipation, relations between worker and capitalist were now supposed to be based on voluntary exchange, guaranteed by the contract.¹⁰⁹ The Chinese labor-contracting system, white labor activists charged, fostered subservience and thus violated the core principle of free labor: economic independence.¹¹⁰ The labor newspaper, the Seattle *Union Record*, was of the opinion that there is “strong support” for the “assertion made that Asiatic immigration is not really free immigration, but that the men are brought here by the crowd of contractors who farm their labor out.”¹¹¹ Such accounts gave credence to the ubiquitous charge that the Chinese were “coolies,” as opposed to “free” immigrants, brought into the country under a system of coercion.¹¹²

These charges galvanized disparate white workers into a social movement and facilitated the emergence of a highly racialized working-class consciousness in the Puget Sound district. Modeling themselves after labor demagogues in San Francisco, the Knights of Labor, led by Daniel Cronin, mobilized the working-class in Tacoma, Seattle, and Portland by calling for

Chinese expulsion. As historian Carlos Schwantes writes: “As organizer for the Knights of Labor in Washington Territory, Cronin exploited the discontent caused by hard times and seemingly overnight transformed a faltering, intimidated band of workers into a militant and idealistic brotherhood widely believed to number several thousand.”¹¹³ Anti-Chinese racism, in other words, furnished the basis for the first instance of labor organizing in the Pacific Northwest.

The anti-Chinese agitation in the Puget Sound was part of a wider movement to “drive out” Chinese from towns and cities all across the Western United States that included expulsion campaigns in California, Oregon, and Washington during the mid-1880s.¹¹⁴ These pogroms, called “abatement” by contemporaries, were inspired by the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act. By enshrining into law that the Chinese did not belong, the act encouraged exclusion by any means necessary. In Seattle, Cronin convened an anti-Chinese Congress in September 1885, where he announced that all Chinese residents of Washington had until the first of November to leave the city. If the Chinese failed to comply, the Congress threatened to have them forcefully removed. Prior to this edict, the *Seattle Daily Call*, voice of the Knights of Labor, made the case for vigilante justice, arguing that the Chinese, in choosing to reside in the country unlawfully, had “forfeited the protection of our laws.”¹¹⁵

By November 1885, the Congress authorized local coordinating committees in Tacoma and Seattle to assemble workmen for the purpose of gathering the remaining Chinese, and escorting them to the nearest railroad station or harbor for transport outside the region. In Tacoma, a vigilante mob led the two hundred remaining Chinese residents to the Northern Pacific station, several miles outside of the city limits. These working-class insurrections led to confrontations with law and order groups, backed by the commercial elite who feared that the social disorder and chaos would sully the reputation of their cities, and threaten future investment and development in the region. Thomas Burke, Henry Yesler, and Chin Gee Hee were central figures in the opposition to the mob and led efforts to diffuse the crisis. In his call for help to the Chinese consul in San Francisco in 1885, Chin Gee Hee described a dire situation: “Chinese residents of Tacoma forcibly driven out yesterday from two to three hundred Chinese now in Seattle imminent danger local authorities willing but not strong enough to protect us we ask you to secure protection for us.”¹¹⁶ The class conflict resulted in bloodshed as workers clashed with home guards deputized by the territorial

governor. The federal government eventually stepped in, dispatching troops to the area, which brought an end to the violence.

But just as the intervention of federal troops was quelling the racial upheavals on the Puget Sound, anti-Chinese hysteria across the border in British Columbia was beginning to gather momentum. In November 1886, on the one-year anniversary marking the anti-Chinese riots in Seattle and Tacoma, the Vancouver and Victoria assemblies of the Knights of Labor issued a joint resolution pledging that they would resist the “increase of Mongolian competition to citizen labor,” and would do so by an “active and persistent action against all persons who continue to encourage or employ Chinese.” True to their word, later that month, the Knights of Labor instituted a formal boycott against merchants and storekeepers hiring or conducting business with the Chinese. The group enforced this strategy by employing a rather simple scheme: “When a business man created one of these offences he found a big black ‘x’ painted on the sidewalk in front of this store or office when he went to his place of business in the morning, and the initiated understood that store or office, as the case may be, had to be boycotted for supplying Chinese.”¹¹⁷ Several hundred local businesses and residents signed pledge cards vowing that they would neither employ nor sell to members of the Chinese community. Nevertheless, these anti-Chinese boycotts failed to achieve the goal of eliminating “coolie” labor from the province, as larger corporations and government institutions continued to recruit and employ Chinese laborers for their private businesses and public works projects. Consequently, the Knights of Labor, including labor activists “hailing from Seattle, Tacoma, and other Sound cities,” resorted to the “Tacoma method”—the extralegal measure adopted earlier by their working-class brethren across the border.

Their final ultimatum unheeded, several hundred workingmen converged upon the Brighthouse estate near Granville Street to force the Chinese laborers working for the C.P.R. to board a waiting steamship liner back across the Pacific. To discourage the Chinese from entertaining any thoughts of returning, the mob demolished the work camp, leveled their living quarters to the ground, and set their goods and supplies ablaze. “It was a weird scene to those standing on the bluff and looking down at the shed, inside of which were burning the bundles of clothing and bedding which were thrown down the hill from time to time whenever the fire grew dim,” one participant later recalled. “At intervals no sound was heard but the crackling of burning wood, the flames from which were quite brilliant and the smoke from the

surround fires dense, the whole making a spectacle not to be forgotten in the annals of the province.”¹¹⁸ The agitators then proceeded to False Creek the next day, where they expelled the eighty-six Chinese fishermen there in exactly the same manner. The provincial constables eventually brought the anti-Chinese mob under control, but restored order only after several days of heavy rioting and violence.

The ruling elite in British Columbia insisted that the acts of lawlessness were the work of a “small mob chiefly of American anti-Chinese agitators, among whom it was reported were a number of San Francisco sand lotters, at which city and other U.S. coast cities serious anti-Chinese riots had recently taken place.”¹¹⁹ Such analysis of the riots was not surprising, given the British-Canadian propensity for scapegoating “lawless” Americans for acts of social disorder in their western provinces.¹²⁰ Yet, in this case, the agitation in Vancouver and Victoria did appear to have a strong resemblance to the anti-Chinese disturbances across the border in Seattle, Tacoma, and Portland a year earlier. Indeed, the similarities were stark; they shared the same organizational roots, methods, and goals, providing some credence to the contention that the “ruffians and hoodlums” across the border were behind the riots in British Columbia.

However, attributing the labor unrest solely to “American” agitators ignores the complex histories of transience and movement that defined transnational working-class politics and culture in the Pacific Northwest. In this fluid borderland region, white labor activists were constantly on the move, organizing and agitating on both sides of the border. “The fact that the dividing line between Canada and U.S. is a frontier rather than a border is indicative of the ease citizens of either country could cross and recross,” one labor leader explained. “Consequently, organizers, both for unions and for radical groups, were free to come and go.”¹²¹ In doing so, anti-Chinese activists were merely following the well-worn paths of the workers they were seeking to organize. As Canadian unionist Harry Cowan recalled, “Subsequently to the anti-Chinese movement in Vancouver large numbers of workingmen kept coming and going. Work in this city was good, but it was better across the line in the neighboring state of Washington, where higher wages were the rule.”¹²² The constant movement and the common cause against Chinese labor served to obscure national distinctions in a frontier with porous boundaries.

The massive disturbances resulting from the unanticipated flow of Chinese migrants prompted the United States to seek the collaborative assistance of

their northern neighbors in rooting out what they believed to be a social problem common to both nations. As reported by a Dominion official in the foreign ministry, “The United States Minister called at this Office today and spoke to me respecting the exclusion of Chinese subjects from the United States. The Chinese, he said, were in the habit of using Canada as a stepping stone to enter the territory of the United States and his government would be glad if the Canadian government could give their assistance in preventing this practice.”¹²³ With this exchange, a long, productive, and yet at times, contentious partnership over the issues of unauthorized Asian immigration and border management was born.

The U.S. Immigration Service, in what was known as the “Canadian Agreement,” extended its bureaucratic powers and laws beyond its own borders. While the arrangement went through several revisions during the 1890s and 1900s, the core of the agreement was to have all U.S.-bound Chinese immigrants traveling through Canada directed to designated ports along the Canadian border, where they would be subject to U.S. immigration protocol and standards, before being allowed to proceed to the United States. Upon passing inspection, Chinese immigrants received certificates of admission, which they then presented to border authorities on the U.S. side. The intent behind these measures was to “establish the same level of control over Chinese immigration through Canada as it had over Chinese sailing directly into the United States,” with the goal of preempting illegal cross-border migrations.¹²⁴ Historian Erika Lee argues this was part of a larger strategy that “centered on border diplomacy based on a historically amicable diplomatic relationship and a shared antipathy for Chinese immigration.”¹²⁵

However, efforts to solve the problem solely through diplomatic channels ran up against the subversive mobility of Chinese immigrants who were intent on circumventing the international agreements designed to keep them out. Devising new cross-border migratory strategies and networks, the Chinese contested the policies of “border diplomacy,” forcing the state to come up with different tactics and approaches for enforcing the northern boundary. The Canadian Agreement—the diplomatic solution to the problem of Chinese migration—had major flaws, which the Chinese were quick to exploit. It failed to account for the Chinese already residing in the region, and, more importantly, for newly arriving immigrants who were increasingly claiming British Columbia as their final destination, paying the poll tax, and then surreptitiously crossing the largely unguarded border into the United States. This issue would later become a source of tension between the

neighboring nations. An often-heard complaint within official U.S. circles was that “British Columbia gets the money and we get the Orientals.”¹²⁶ Thus, despite their diplomatic accords, the problem of illegal Chinese migration across the U.S.-Canadian border persisted. The United States, therefore, while continuing to cooperate with Canada over the issue of unauthorized Chinese border migrations, developed a parallel system of policing and surveillance to detect and apprehend illegal Chinese border crossers in the Pacific Northwest. As this suggests, border enforcement strategies were fluid as the state reacted and revised their policies according to shifts in Chinese migration patterns in a cat-and-mouse-like game.

As we have already seen, Chinese merchant contractors played a major role in creating and sustaining the cross-border traffic of unauthorized Chinese immigrants. Working through previously established channels used for the cross-border smuggling of opium and fish, these merchants now utilized these routes for the new trade in human contraband.¹²⁷ Consider the following cross-border smuggling scheme arranged by Seattle-based Chinese merchants in 1900:

Acting on information already gained, C. K. and Colonel Hill left Blaine, Washington, for the farm of Hop Lee, located some 9 miles from Blaine, and in B.C., and near the small town of “Cloverdale.” [Hop Lee] was in the smuggling of Opium, and Chinese, that he made his farm, a depot for the Chinese to rest in, until their contractors could secure their landing, by guiding them over the border. That he had then, some 40 Chinamen, waiting to be landed, in this way. That these Chinamen belonged to Toy Wing, Wong Good, Yong Goon, and Goon Me Kan, smugglers who reside in Seattle, when at home.¹²⁸

In another scheme, authorities reported smugglers exploiting the waterways of the Puget Sound to bring in illegal immigrants. “One Mar Get, residing at Port Townsend, and conducting the firm of Wing Sing Co. has been steering contraband Chinese through Coupeville, and sending them to this city by the steamer *Fairhaven*.”¹²⁹

The *Seattle Union Record* complained bitterly about illegal Chinese immigration across the U.S.-Canadian border. “The Chinese cheerfully pay the Canadian poll tax of \$50, but 90 percent of them do not stay more than a week, but go immediately to the other side of the line, where by law their entrance is barred.”¹³⁰ “Orientals go back and forth practically unmolested,” and consequently “more Orientals get into this country through Puget Sound ports than all of the rest of our coast combined.” The labor newspaper

opined that “if the authorities at Washington lived up to the spirit, as well as the letter of the law they would have hundreds instead of a half dozen customs officers in the Puget Sound district.”¹³¹ On the other side of the border, *The Province* reported similarly that there “appears to be, to say the least, an impression prevailing among the Chinese scattered along the border line from the Rockies to the coast that papers issued to them in either Canada or the United States entitle them to pass out of one country into the other and return when they feel like it.” The Vancouver paper exhorted Dominion officials to “put a stop to [this] promiscuous maneuvering.”¹³² In 1902, the U.S. Immigration Service announced that the “Canadian border has become the most prolific field for the introduction into the United States of the Chinese coolie.”¹³³

Lacking the manpower and resources to address the problem at the point of entry, U.S. Customs inspectors responded by scrutinizing the status of Chinese laborers in the interior of the state. They conducted unannounced inspections and raids of canneries, laundries, merchant stores, and other major business operations suspected of employing illegal Chinese. The passage of the Geary Act in 1892, which required that all Chinese laborers possess a certificate of residency or be subject to deportation, made such a border strategy possible.¹³⁴ A sign of a weak regulatory state, however, one that lacked a formal apparatus for border management, this ad hoc strategy yielded mixed results, at best. For instance, on a typical tour in 1898, U.S. immigrant inspectors paid visits to salmon canneries in Anacortes and Fidalgo Island, reviewing several hundred Chinese certificates in the process, but were unable to make a single arrest.¹³⁵ The reason for this may be explained by Inspector Fisher’s findings in a subsequent visit in the fall of 1899. When making a similar tour of canneries in Fairhaven and Whatcom, he discovered that the Chinese knew of his inspection a week prior to his arrival. Chinese cannery workers had developed a communication network for sharing information and tipping off fellow workers to potential inspections and raids. Inspector Fisher was informed that “they were on the watch for him, and the first call that he made, word was sent to all other Canneries, and the Chinese hid themselves by opening up the floor and sliding down the piling, to the water below where they remained until after the Inspector’s departure.”¹³⁶ The irony, of course, was the more proficient the Chinese (and later the Japanese and South Asians) became at eluding the law and the boundary, the more the state intruded into their lives, as more powerful

exclusions and more sophisticated techniques of border control would be introduced in their stead.

. . .

Taken together, the various exclusion laws, head taxes, and border controls led to the declension of Chinese migrant labor, paving the way for a new class of ethnic middlemen and labor brokers in the Pacific Northwest borderlands. While Chinese merchants continued to furnish workers, especially in British Columbia where less draconian measures were passed, their diminishing labor supplies simply could not keep pace with the industrial expansion taking place across the Pacific Northwest. The Japanese would ultimately fill the labor vacuum left in the wake of Chinese exclusion, becoming the region's main source of foreign labor by the turn of the twentieth century. Their arrival, however, was not a simple story of immigrant succession, for it coincided with the inauguration of America's territorial overseas empire and the emergence of modern Japan upon the world's stage. The increased movement of Japanese migrant labor to the region was part of larger flows of people, goods, and ideas introduced by imperialism and geopolitics through which hitherto disparate nations, communities, and individuals were integrated into the circuitry of the Pacific world.