Chinese Food Network in British Columbia, 1880-1940

A Socio-economic History of Migrant Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

A Chinese food network specializing in vegetable crops has existed since the onset of labor migration from southeast China to British Columbia in the 19th century. By 1940, the network achieved market prominence in the local production and distribution of vegetables. This thesis examines the socio-economic history of the network's emergence and development during the historical period between 1880 and 1940 – the height of white supremacy and discriminatory policies. It seeks to explain how the economic success came about under structural disadvantages. Two theoretical concerns guide the methodologies and historical analysis: How do social relations bear on economic actions? How do migrants interact with the environment in which they find themselves? To deconstruct the narrative that Chinese market gardeners, peddlers, and greengrocers were victims simply pushed into the agri-food sector, this thesis reads for economic difference from data scattered across secondary literature, archival materials, and oral histories. Economic subjectivities and actions are re-aligned to present an alternative picture: small-business entrepreneurship in agriculture as a vehicle to a good life. Adopting mixed embeddedness approach, it traces the interplay between the actors within the network and the structural context of colonialism and capitalism. It identifies the ways in which they utilized resources and devised strategies to adapt to and transform societies. Furthermore, the multifaceted ways in which social relations, especially migrant networks, influenced the emergence and development of the Chinese food network are elaborated.

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1. Introduction

Walking through the fresh produce sections of major supermarkets in Metropolitan Vancouver, Chinese vegetables such as gai lan and winter melon are noticeably prevalent.[1] Independent greengrocers selling Asian produce are ubiquitous, many of them owned and operated by Chinese Canadians (N.R. Gibb 2011, 55). Reports and anecdotal evidence suggest that Chinese Canadians play a significant role in the local production of Chinese vegetables and greenhouse produce in British Columbia (BC) (N.R. Gibb 2011, 52-3; Phan 2011, 12). Produce Row in Vancouver's Strathcona, which evolved from the older food network in Chinatown, functions as the distribution hub in western Canada, where Chinese wholesalers move both local and imported produce as far east as Toronto (Ho and Chen 2017, 13; N.R. Gibb 2011, 54, 75).

If we look at scattered historical data, however, it appears that this network is by no means a recent phenomenon. In 1926, Chinese owned and operated 74 of the 85 greengroceries that distributed fresh produce in Vancouver – a staggering 87% market share (Anderson 1991, 112). On the production side, Chinese farmers historically played a significant role in BC agriculture. As early as a century ago, in 1921, they produced and distributed 55% of the potatoes and 90% of the vegetables traded in the province (Anderson 1991, 111). Ten years later, 23% of the Chinese in BC worked in agriculture; by 1941, this figure had risen to 32% (Con and Wickberg 1982, 310).

Meanwhile, it was also an era when anti-Chinese sentiment pervaded BC society at both the institutional and community levels. The Chinese were one of only two groups barred from citizenship (the other being Indigenous peoples), and the only group subjected to an expensive head tax through legislation. For the same work, the going rate for Chinese laborers was generally about 1/3 to 1/2 that of white laborers, which became a source of racial antagonism

[1] By Chinese vegetables, I refer to those that are commonly used in Chinese cuisines. I use the descriptor "Chinese" in alignment with the common usage found in official statistics, community-generated reports, as well as in numerous academic literature. The availability of a particular vegetable crop depends on many factors: the demographic composition of the neighborhood, the relationship with suppliers shop owners have cultivated, profit margin of a particular crop, among others. Some vegetables, e.g. gai lan, are more associated with regional diet. Oftentimes, dietary habits are not distinctive along nation-state border. There are overlaps in border regions; historical migrations have also brought local dietary habits to faraway places. Therefore, the denominator "Chinese" is really a contested one, whose signification and relevance depend on specific time, place and political agenda.

when jobs were scarce. White mobs intimidated businesses that employed or transacted with Chinese. Local politicians publicly participated in anti-Chinese leagues (Anderson 1991).

How do we begin to make sense of Chinese involvement in BC's agri-food sector, particularly with vegetable crops? This thesis takes a historical and economic perspective, focusing on the following research question: Against the backdrop of structural discrimination and social antagonism, how did the Chinese food network develop and achieve such extensive market prominence in BC? To answer this question, two theoretical concerns guide the research: 1) How do social relations bear on economic actions? 2) How do migrants interact with and adapt to the environment they find themselves in? These will be addressed throughout the thesis.

The Chinese food network has evolved alongside continuous Chinese migrations to Canada since the 1850s, and its modes of operation have changed considerably. The time frame investigated here is the historical period between 1880 and 1940. This choice merits a brief explanation. In the early 1880s, the Canadian transcontinental railway was extended to BC on the backs of Chinese laborers. The completion of the railway marked the beginning of substantial demographic changes in BC and its economic integration with the Atlantic world. the BC economy, gradually centred around Vancouver, experienced rapid growth in subsequent decades. Meanwhile, political structures were put in placr to ensure that non-European settlers and Indigenous population would not get their fair share of the boom. The Second World War in the early 1940s brought dramatic changes to Chinese communities in Canada. The Veterans' Land Act of 1942 allowed Chinese to buy Crown land for the first time since a discriminatory 1884 legislation prohibited them from doing so. In 1947, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923 was repealed. Ensuing public knowledge of Nazi horrors, racial ideologies and white attitudes toward non-white racial "others" changed significantly in Canada. Yet, even before these drastic social changes, early Chinese migrants had already built such a sophisticated and resilient food network that white businesses had to pressure the provincial government to commission a report investigating "Oriental penetration" (British Columbia Legislative Association 1927, 3). It is this historical period that this thesis is concerned with.

The following part is structured into four chapters. Chapter two reviews literature in five research fields as they relate to the socio-economic history of the Chinese food network and

discusses their contribution to the current study: ethnic studies, food studies, migration studies, migrant entrepreneurship, and economic sociology/geography on small businesses. Chapter three elaborates on the methodological choices: reading for economic difference and mixed embeddedness analysis. Chapter four delves into the socio-economic history in three parts. Part one introduces the historical migration context that forms the backdrop of the Chinese food network during the period under study. Part two and three look at the development of the network in the late 1800s and early 1900s, respectively. The analysis focuses on the interaction between structural forces and migrant resources. Chapter five concludes by reviewing the previous chapters and tying the threads together. It then briefly discusses the strengths and limitations of this study and suggests four areas for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter serves two purposes. First, it presents social science research that relates to the topic of Chinese food network in Canada and the United States. Research that directly examines the food network clusters in two fields: Chinese Canadian/Chinese American history and food studies. In addition, the thesis draws theoretical insights from research in migration studies, migrant entrepreneurship, and economic sociology/geography on small businesses. To the best of my knowledge, none has explicitly considered the Chinese food network as a case of migrant entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, this body of literature sheds crucial light on the economic functions of migrant networks and links migration to the economy through a sociological lens. The second aim of this chapter is to bring different theoretical frameworks into conversation, to outline the theoretical insights that emerge and how they inform the present study.

I'm particularly interested in the socio-economic history of Chinese food network, because food and the means to support livelihood constitute an essential material foundation of our organic existence. Food sustains body *and* mind. In my various conversations with overseas Chinese of different backgrounds (e.g., class, home region, education, or generation), food has never failed to occupy a place in our exchange. For example, Tony, the owner of a shoe repair shop in Vancouver, told me that his wife preferred to work at T&T supermarket (a major

Chinese supermarket chain in BC) rather than help out in his shop because she found comfort working with food. How food affects Chinese migrants' decision-making is a complex issue. Although this thesis focuses on the material aspects of Chinese food network, it is of the contention that the material cannot be seen in isolation from the non-material.[2] Therefore, it brings in discussions from diverse economies (economic geography) and embeddedness (economic sociology), both investigating how social relations bear on economic actions and how social actors economically navigate the social structures they are in.

2.1. Ethnic Studies

Several book-length studies of Chinese Canadian history contain scattered information about the emerging food network. They don't speak of a network as such, but discuss (often briefly and separately) Chinese farmers, produce peddlers, and greengrocers, while addressing Chinese communities and the social environment in which they were embedded (Yee 1988; Con and Wickberg 1982; Anderson 1991; Li 2000). Taken together, they provide an incomprehensive but valuable snippets of network development, the broader economic and sociopolitical context, and community-level self-organization.

Two papers specifically examine the history of the Chinese food network in BC. Kyle (2019) looks at the rise and decline of Chinese and Japanese market gardening in the Okanagan Valley from the 1860s to the 1940s. Her focus on political economy places the issue in a broader market and institutional context, albeit with very sparse discussion on social relations. Moreover, it was unclear what facilitated the rise of Chinese and Japanese market gardening. J. Yu (2014) explains the emergence of Chinese market gardening in southern BC between 1885 and 1930 largely as a response to racial exclusion in other sectors of the labor market. Nonetheless, he identifies several important factors in its emergence, such as the agricultural background of early

[2] A case in point would be the studies of emotion in cognitive psychology and cultural studies. For example, in addition to physical arousal (physiological processes), R. Lazarus' cognitive appraisal theory of emotion emphasizes the cognitive appraisal of a situation (thinking) in emotional reactions. *See* Lazarus (1982), "Thoughts on the Relations between Cognition and Emotion." In cultural studies, Sarah Ahmed takes a phenomenological approach to emotion and examines the interaction between bodies and ideas. *See* Ahmed 2014, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions.*

Chinese migrants, land practice, and distributors in the supply chain. Taken together, they narrate the history of the network primarily in terms of the structural disadvantages and hostile social environment that Chinese communities faced. The roles of agentic capacities, social capital, and social networks in explaining the network's successful formation and subsequent development are not systematically analyzed.

The histories of Chinese communities in the U.S. and Canada have much in common. Trans-Pacific migrations up and down the west coast between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries largely originated from the same eight counties in southern China. Anti-Chinese legislation and racialization developed along comparable trajectories. Chinese migrants established similar and interconnected networks both along migratory routes and in places of settlement. The points of divergence, however, arise from national variations in institutional structures and how local Chinese communities navigated these different structures over time (H. Yu 2016b, 2016a).

From a comparative perspective, Chan's (1986) sociological study of Chinese farmers in California agriculture between 1860 and 1910 offers constructive insights. Adopting an economic lens, Chan reconstructs an economic history of California agriculture in which early Chinese miners played an integral role in local agricultural development amidst settler colonialism, migration, and capitalism. Chinese farming emerged from the confluence of past experiences in southern China and social networks on the one hand, and the particular California environment – geography, industrial change, and developments in the institutional framework, especially land policy – on the other.

2.2. Alternative Food Network

In food studies, ethnic or migrant food networks are often discussed as alternative food networks (AFN) – alternatives to the corporatized global agri-food system.[3] In the following, I

[3] For works that examine ethnic/migrant food networks as AFNs, *see*, for example, Gibb and Wittman (2013), "Parallel Alternatives: Chinese-Canadian Farmers and The Metro Vancouver Local Food Movement;" Imbruce (2015), *From Farm to Canal Street. Chinatown's Alternative Food Network in the Global Marketplace*. For an introduction to the state of corporatized global agri-food system, *see* Carolan (2022), *The Sociology of Food and Agriculture*; Sage (2011), *Environment and Food*.

discuss briefly the development of AFN studies and how Chinese food networks in Canada and the U.S. are positioned in this research stream.

As a subject of both academic inquiry and food activism, AFN is enmeshed with capitalism critique on the financialized global food supply chain. Its empirical case selection and theoretical inquiry focus largely on contemporary Western societies and on issues of environmental sustainability, interpersonal trust, and food "quality". However, oppositional binarism often underpins this body of work, and normative value hierarchies are uncritically ascribed to binary categories: e.g. global vs. local, industrial vs. artisanal, alternative vs. conventional, economic vs. cultural/relational (Goodman and Goodman 2009; Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012b; Kalfagianni and Skordili 2019; C.C. Hinrichs 2003; Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012a).

From a social justice perspective, a growing number of scholars are beginning to critique AFN studies for their narrow focus on the normative, ideology-driven practices of white, middle-class social actors in the Global North (Guthman 2008a, 2008b) and the dichotomous narratives inherent in the dominant AFN discourse (Ostenso, Dring, and Wittman 2020; C. Hinrichs and Kremer 2002). Consequently, scholars are increasingly critical of the practice of normative value attribution, focusing instead on the social processes by which people navigate the available opportunity structures to live well (Sonnino and Marsden 2005; Agyeman and Giacalone 2020; Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020).

In the Canadian context, N. Gibb and Wittman (2013) interrogate the unreflective localism in Metro Vancouver's local food movement. They identify a parallel structure in the local food system: the local Chinese Canadian food network and the institutionally lauded and supported local food movement, such as farmers' markets. The contemporary presence of this parallel structure, they argue, testifies to the continuation of historical racialization. In a similar vein, Lim (2015) connects the silent history of Chinese Canadian farmers to the continued exploitation of racialized agricultural labor in Canada, questioning the idealized notion of local food. While an important contribution to the AFN literature, their historical analyses focus predominantly on structural discrimination and racialization, giving little import to the opportunity structure, agency, and social embeddedness that explicate market entry and growth

despite such a hostile environment. Moreover, the undesirability of farm work goes unquestioned.

Complementing racialization with the subjectivities of Chinese Canadian farmers, N.R. Gibb (2011) identifies what contemporary Chinese Canadian farmers find advantageous about their self-employment in market gardening and store-merchandising. For one, they find it easier to coordinate work and family life, as they can more flexibly manage childcare and business in the same space. For family members, these small businesses provide employment. For returning customers, they are a consistent and reliable source of quality local produce, which in turn generates pride for the farmers. Furthermore, Gibb links relational benefits to cultural proximity. Greengroceries and on-farm stores are social spaces where shared languages, similar dietary preferences, and non-verbal cues facilitate a sense of ease, comfort, and community.

Similarly, Imbruce (2015) draws on extensive field observations and interviews to study the Chinese food network on the east coast of North America. She centers the social actors of the network as "producers of processes that are spatially distended but also locally embedded and relational." (3) The empirical richness of this study illustrates the complex nature of economic action in real life. Transnationally dispersed from Toronto in the north to Honduras in the south, the network is nevertheless connected through locally embedded personal relationships between small-scale farmers and distributors. Personal relationships and shared languages can lead to potential business partnerships, but decisions are made based on a range of considerations. The role of language in business relationships – whether it's using a shared Sinophone language to facilitate communication or citing a lack of English proficiency to protect information – is flexible, depending on the particular goals the social actor wants to achieve. Farmers and wholesalers actively consider structural forces (e.g., land development policies) when deciding where and what crops to grow. Contingent on market and regulatory conditions, cost-benefit calculations exist alongside the desire to maintain long-term, reciprocal relationships. At times, one compromises the other; at other times, they reinforce each other, a testament to the complexity of economic decision-making.

2.3. Migration Studies

In recent years, critical and comparative migration scholars have identified some problematic tendencies within migration studies: ethnonational underpinnings, colonial amnesia, and an inability to synthesize structure and agency (de Haas 2021; Wyss and Dahinden 2022). A productive way to understand current migration processes is to connect colonial history with the migration present (Boatcă and Santos 2023). In this light, scholarship on historical Chinese migrations offers productive insights for thinking about the question of migration and social change. McKeown (2008) and Kuhn (2008), who both examine historical Chinese migrations on a global scale, demonstrate that migration has always been a continuous historical process of social transformation. Its modern manifestations, however, are inextricably intertwined with nation-state projects and colonialism.

Looking at diasporic Chinese business networks, McKeown (2000) illustrates the ways in which these networks evolved into particular forms as a result of social interaction among different groups. As European colonialism expanded around the Pacific, the dominant model in Southeast Asia – mestizo traders working with indigenous rulers – gave way to merchant-organized labor migrations to European colonies. Beginning in the late 19th century, business networks became increasingly parochial, because growing nationalism and racial ideologies made it more difficult to operate outside these boundaries. At the same time, the development of world economy provided economic opportunities for diasporic Chinese to enter, and in some cases to create, middlemen occupations such as peddlers, shopkeepers, and truck farmers from Borneo to Peru. As migration was increasingly controlled by border regimes and transnational movement was severely hampered by Pacific warfare, previously dispersed family members moved to one locality. The business model shifted from partnerships with fellow villagers and distant relatives to family enterprises that incorporated the labor of women and children. Thus, it is not what *is Chinese* that explains Chinese migrant businesses, but how changing context shapes contact and how social actors interact with the environment.

Taking a network perspective, H. Yu (2018) and Hsu (2000) argue that Cantonese migration across the Pacific in the century between the 1850s and the 1950s was facilitated as much by British colonialism as it was by migrant networks. These networks, linked to earlier ones established in Southeast Asia, not only organized the practical flow of people, goods, and

information, but also mobilized migratory aspirations. These historical perspectives on Chinese migration provide two important insights for the current study. First, they situate Chinese migrations to Canada within the broader context of historical migrations under European colonialism that operated across nation-state borders. Second, they highlight the significance of migrant networks as social capital and how earlier practices were transferred and adapted to the local context.

2.4. Migrant Entrepreneurship

If we view the Chinese food network as the clustering and integration of economic activities, it is fruitful to examine the field of migrant entrepreneurship. This strand of literature studies how and why certain ethnic/migrant groups become concentrated in a particular employment sector, industry, or geographic location. In the case of Chinese migrant entrepreneurship, M. Zhou (2009) adopts the concept of ethnic enclave economy developed by Alejandro Portes (1995) to examine the tangible and intangible factors that attract Chinese immigrants to work in New York City's Chinatown economy. For those disadvantaged in the mainstream labor market due to language barrier, immigration regime, discrimination, and lack of recognition of qualifications, the Chinatown economy provides accessible employment and social resources. High levels of transnational trade and migration between Asia and the U.S. create and sustain market demand and cheap labor supply. Although wages are low and hours are long, tax-free cash payments and long hours also result in higher net income. This is especially attractive for entrepreneurial endeavors that require initial capital. Within the Chinatown economy, success stories abound. A typical narrative depicts fellow immigrants on an upward trajectory: those who have gone from hard-working and frugal wage earners to successful business owners. For individuals, the Chinatown economy provides resources for entrepreneurship, such as training and financial support, making it a fertile ground for entrepreneurial aspirations.

Ethnic resources are flexibly mobilized in response to changing contextual environment (K.B. Chan and Ong 1995). Prior to the liberalization of immigration policies, Chinese entrepreneurship in Canada was largely concentrated in small-scale businesses such as

restaurants, laundries, and grocery stores. Since the 1980s, Chinese presence has grown in capital-intensive industries such as garment manufacturing in Toronto and real estate in Vancouver. The industries into which they have moved have also become increasingly diversified. These developments reflect changing federal and provincial immigration policies aimed at attracting business immigrants and economic investors from Asia, which have resulted in a changing class composition of the Chinese population in Canada. Embedded in a global landscape of a prosperous Asian economy, transnational trade and finance, Chinese entrepreneurs with access to capital employ different strategies to grow their businesses than their predecessors (K.B. Chan 1992; James 1999). These, in turn, reflect the broader neoliberal turn of world economy since the 1980s.

2.5. Small Business

The neoliberal trend associated with horizontal and vertical integration into large, spatially disentangled corporations, however, finds contradictory evidence in empirical reality. In New York City's Chinatown, small garment businesses proliferated (Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward 1990). Small, independent farmers, greengrocers, and restaurants are still ubiquitous in Metro Vancouver (Phan 2011; N.R. Gibb 2011); on the east coast, similar small units of farmers, greengrocers, restaurants, and wholesalers weave a dense network of vegetable supply chains (Imbruce 2015).

Contrary to the research attention paid to large corporations, small businesses are actually the numerical majority (Granovetter 1984). To better understand small firms from a sociological perspective, Granovetter advances a meso-level analytical framework that considers how the economy is embedded in proximate social relations. This includes how social actors' evaluations of these relations, including their implications for trust, reputation, social status, power, or sociability, dynamically affect their economic actions (Granovetter 1985). From the perspective of diverse economies, North (2020) traces the etymology of the word *entrepreneur*, and reconceives it as traders and producers who, in fact, constitute 99% of small and independent businesses. Under this framing, entrepreneurs are "people who see small, independent, community-based businesses *as vehicles for living as they want to*" (98, *emphasis added*).

Migrant small businesses, such as those that made up the historical Chinese Canadian food network, are thus a productive site to examine the relationship between migration and economy from a social justice perspective. Economy as part of the social fabric is not merely quantifiable numbers or profit through exploitation (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020). It is also the multifaceted and complex ways in which people negotiate their place in society in relation to others.

The above review of the literature offers three main theoretical insights. First, patterns of group economic behavior are contingent on context, which is specific in time and space. Rather than delineating what constitutes an ethnic group, it is more generative to examine the processes by which groups adopt and adapt strategies according to the environment, the resources at their disposal, and the aspirational motives circulating in their networks. Second, with migration, ethnicity can become a useful group resource. Third, social relations implicate economic patterns, and their modes of influence are both material and non-material. Taking a critical distance from binary and essentialist thinking about the economy, ethnic relations, and migration, this thesis approaches the structural and the relational, the material and the non-material, not as opposing forces, but as complementary analytical lenses to understand migration as processes of social negotiation of difference. In bridging these often isolated strands of literature and fostering a dialectical dialogue between them, it also contributes to interdisciplinary research that broadens the analytical scope of migration studies and offers insights into the complex interplay of social, economic, political, and cultural factors. This interdisciplinary approach enriches our understanding by moving beyond reductive frameworks, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of how migration shapes and is shaped by diverse, interconnected forces. In what follows, I outline the methodologies by which this thesis integrates these theoretical insights into a coherent analysis.

3. Methodologies

K.B. Chan and Ong (1995, 527) note that studies of migrant entrepreneurship tend to oscillate between celebration of success and focus on exploitation. The former is arguably tinged by capitalist logic, while the latter is derived from Marxist tradition of capitalism critique. This

thesis takes a different route by conceptualizing the *economy* from the perspective of diverse economies. This chapter introduces the theoretical framework of diverse economies, and one of its methods that I adopt for the current study: *reading for economic difference*. This understanding of the economy enables a shift in perspective on both the historical phenomenon of the Chinese food network as a product of socio-economic processes and the subjectivities involved. These subjectivities are important to consider because they prompted the actions that ultimately formed the material reality of the network. Reading for economic difference is complemented by mixed embeddedness analysis at the operational level. In the remainder of the chapter, I elaborate on the methodologies and data.

Diverse economies regards the economy in real life as more heterogeneous and mutable than the hegemonic narratives of capitalism suggest. Turning an informed gaze to empirical practices and how they already constitute the economy can enrich the repositories of economic understanding and imagination. For example, how do practices such as housework, barter, collective ownership, or rotating credit associations distribute surplus differently? How is labor remunerated beyond monetary compensation? How is access to property and its benefits regulated differently (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020)? From this perspective, economic practices are not determined solely by the rational calculations of homo economicus. When we consider the success of an enterprise, the focus should not be limited to the capitalist growth logic that fixates on business size, profit margin, and net worth. It also involves the consideration of subjective well-being, multiple value orientations, and ideas about how to foster the kinds of relationships and life arrangements that can accommodate them. If we see entrepreneurship as *vehicles for living as want do* (as North puts it), it opens doors to contemplating how sociality, aspirations, and non-human actors affect economic decisions.

The data for this study come from three groups of sources: secondary literature, digitized local archives, and oral histories published in three projects: *Finding Memories, Tracing Roots. Chinese Canadian Family Stories* by the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia; *Chinese Canadians in Burnaby Subseries* by Burnaby Village Museum; *Chinese Canadian Stories—Uncommon Histories from a Common Past* by The Initiative for Student

Teaching and Research in Chinese Canadian Studies (INSTRCC) at the University of British Columbia.

By and large, these valuable historical sources don't regard the network from an economic perspective. Therefore, the history of the network is to be brought under a socio-economic spotlight by employing the method *reading for economic difference*. Derived from the poststructuralist tradition, the method entails deconstruction, queering, and an informed gaze that aims to create new economic alignments among known practices. To this end, deconstruction alludes to the deconstruction of economic thought that gives meaning to action only in reference to the master narratives of Capitalism. These master narratives tend to conceptualize social relations through the lens of domination, exploitation, and commodity fetishism. Queering concerns de-alignment: de-aligning economic subjectivities and practices to create space for an informed gaze to enter and seek new alignments (Gibson-Graham 2020).

To operationalize, I use the *mixed embeddedness* (ME) approach first developed by Kloosterman and Rath. It has since been used extensively to study (mostly) contemporary migrant entrepreneurship in Europe (Solano, Schutjens, and Rath 2022; R.C. Kloosterman and Rath 2018; R. Kloosterman, Van Der Leun, and Rath 1999; R. Kloosterman and Rath 2001; Barberis and Solano 2018). In the following, I briefly elucidate this approach and how it is used in this thesis.

ME examines interactive processes between three analytical levels: the meso-level opportunity structure (market opportunities), the micro-level individuals with their resources, and the macro-level political-institutional framework (R.C. Kloosterman 2010). It's similar to the interactionist model of Waldinger, Aldrich and Ward (1990), which views migrant entrepreneurship as an effect of the interplay between group resources and opportunity structure, mediated by migrants' coping strategies. While maintaining the focus on interaction, ME differs from Waldinger and colleagues' approach in two aspects. First, it gives more weight to the institutional context, especially state regulation. Second, it focuses on the immigrant entrepreneurial sectors, which are characterized, at least in part, by limited capital and education/skills resources (Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela 2017).

The concept e*mbeddedness* in ME is understood in a broad sense: Entrepreneurs are embedded not only in social networks, but also in specific market and political-institutional milieu. This view differs from that of Mark Granovetter (1985), which chiefly examines how economic actions, especially those of small firms in market settings, are embedded in proximate social relations. Granovetter distinguishes relational and structural embeddedness as variegated analytical scales: the former denotes more direct, small-scale personal relationships, while the latter refers to the webs of social relations that contain the former – the “higher order structures” of network relations, as he describes them (Granovetter 2019, 98). His analysis is ostensibly intended to focus on the more immediate meso-level relations, and to bridge the gap between micro-level theories and macro-level historical and structural analysis.

Building on Granovetter, ME uses the two concepts somewhat differently. Here, *Relational embeddedness* practically replaces Granovetter’s conceptualization of social embeddedness and encompasses the embeddedness of individuals in social networks at various scales. This goes beyond co-ethnic networks to include proximate relations with customers, competitors, or law enforcement, among others. *Structural embeddedness* refers to three levels of interconnection: Entrepreneurs are embedded in both the market and the institutional framework, and the market itself is embedded in the national socio-cultural, institutional and regulatory framework (R.C. Kloosterman and Rath 2018). This national underpinning has since been complemented by a transnational focus (Solano, Schutjens, and Rath 2022).

This thesis uses the term relational and structural embeddedness à la ME approach. Meanwhile, in conjunction with the diverse economies perspective, I treat ME as an analytical tool with slight variance: 1) Instead of focusing on the national, regulations at different levels are examined as part of the institutional context, depending on case relevance. 2) Relational embeddedness is expanded to also encompass relations with other-than-humans, such as land practices. 3) The three central analytical units – opportunity structure, institutional context, and social networks – interact in protean social processes. Therefore, I discuss their interactions separately in different historical periods. 4) Although I discuss the structural constraints faced by early Chinese migrants, I do not assume that self-employment in the agri-food sector was so

undesirable that these small business entrepreneurs were simply pushed into it – a logic that underlies much of the ME literature.

The methodologies are constructive for this study for three reasons. First, the case fits ME's analytical frame. Chinese migrants to BC between 1880 and 1940 were mostly peasants and laborers without large sum of capital or formal education. Furthermore, state regulations during this period had a major impact on local Chinese communities. Second, there is no evidence suggesting that self-employment in market gardening, peddling, and greengrocery was perceived by the Chinese migrants themselves as such undesirable occupations that they felt forced into. In fact, being a landowner was historically a much coveted social status in China, and vegetables have always occupied a significant place in the Cantonese diet (S. Chan 1986, 82, 90). Examining the network from the diverse economies perspective, especially with insights from oral histories, thus allows us to better understand the economic success of the network from the perspective of Chinese migrants. Third, the analytical focus on the interaction between institutional context, opportunity structure, and social networks serves to reconstruct the decision-making landscape, offering a pathway to consider how subjectivities and structures interact in migration processes.

4. A Socio-economic History of the Network

4.1. Cantonese Migrations across the Pacific: In Search of Opportunities for Good Life

In order to understand how the Chinese food network emerged and developed, we have to first look at the people who built it. Who were they and how did they enter the agri-food sector? Before the 1950s, Chinese migrations to North America stemmed primarily from eight counties in Guangdong (Canton) province in southeastern China: Saamyap (三邑 Three Counties), Siyap (四邑 Four Counties), and Zungsaan (中山). Before 1949, 80% of those who migrated to Canada came from the Siyap region, and 45.5% came from Toisaan county alone

(H. Yu 2016b, 350-4).[4] The majority of Siyap migrants were peasants and unskilled laborers, whereas Saamyap and Zuungsaan migrants were largely merchants due to their vicinity to the trading ports of Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macao (Yee 1988, 10).

They did not come to farm or trade local farm produce in particular. Following the discovery of gold in the Fraser Canyon in 1858, BC became another "Gold Mountain" destination, where the prospect of gold mining and other income opportunities fueled aspirations for a good life, the realization of which was often narrated through letters, gossip, and returning villagers (H. Yu 2012). In fact, trans-Pacific migration routes to former British colonies in Australasia and the Americas were part of the Cantonese migration networks that enabled the movement of people, goods, money, and information. These built on earlier migration networks between southern China and Southeast Asia that were organized along kinship, village, and shared dialect lines (H. Yu 2016b, 354-7). The ways in which colonialism was intertwined with Chinese migrations are manifold; suffice it to say that with the development of British colonialism in the 19th century, the particular migration networks connected to these eight counties were extended to BC.

In their extension, colonial entanglements manifested themselves in labor, movement, wealth distribution, resource extraction, and the development of the nascent nation-state of Canada. Hong Kong, among the various ports connecting the British Empire, became an important nodal point through which Cantonese laborers and merchants moved to other British colonies (Sinn 2012). Following technological changes in commercial steamships, it was more affordable for passengers to make long ocean voyages, and much more profitable for colonial steamship companies to transport large numbers of people and goods (S. Chan 1986, 26-8). Like California in its early days, BC was a frontier economy built on resource extraction. Fur, mineral resources, fish, and lumber constituted the early economic base (Barman 2007; Watkins and

[4] English spellings vary according to different dialects and their transliteration. In some literature, the Three Counties are spelled Sam Yup, the Four Counties Sze Yup/Si Yup/Say-Yup, respectively; Zungsaan is often spelled as Chungsan, Toisaan as Hoisan/Toisan (*台山*), originally Sunning (*新宁*). For the purpose of cohesion, I use the present-day Cantonese jyutping spelling as indicated on the website CantoDic, as all these counties are located in the Cantonese-speaking region: http://www.cantonese.sheik.co.uk/. Zungsaan was previously named Hoengsaan (in jyutping; alternatively, Heungsan *香山*). The county was renamed after Sun Yat-Sen, the founding president of the Republic of China. *See* Yu 2012, "Chinese Migrations," p. 353-4.

Grant 1999). These were labor-intensive industries, and the British Empire historically depended on the use of enslaved labor transported by sea to extract resources and accumulate wealth.[5] For the beneficiaries of colonialism, the gradual abolition of slave trade (and later slavery) in the British Empire meant that cheap labor had to be found elsewhere. Prior to the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), which connected BC to the eastern provinces, it was costly and complicated to move large numbers of people across the land barrier to the west (H. Yu 2022, 974-5). Therefore, trans-Pacific steamships, with their colonial infrastructures anchored in Hong Kong, San Francisco, Victoria, and Vancouver, enabled more cost-efficient labor migrations to BC.

Historical evidence attests to the instrumental role the Chinese played in the colonial economy and the incorporation of BC into what is now Canada. When BC's fish canneries were established in the 1870s, Chinese dominated cannery work due to labor shortages. By the 1920s, Chinese constituted 70-75% of the workforce in shingle mills and canneries (Yee 1988, 17, 59, 63). They were considered so essential to the completion of the CPR that the Dominion government in Ottawa rejected BC's request to restrict Chinese immigration a year before its construction, because Ottawa was of the opinion that the railway could not be built on time without Chinese workers (Con and Wickberg 1982, 49). Interestingly, the extension of the CPR into BC and its timely completion was also an essential condition for BC's incorporation into the newly formed Dominion of Canada. Thus, Cantonese migrants were instrumental in the expansion of the modern Canadian nation-state to the Pacific coast.

As much as the new colony needed their labor, and colonial infrastructures facilitated and benefited from their mobilities, these migrants moved with their own aspirations. The ability to move, if desired, depended on the infrastructure established by migrant networks, as they organized the necessary transportation, financing, work, accommodation, and local contact points. Working in the newly established colony of BC provided them with an opportunity for upward mobility that they might not otherwise have at home, given the socioeconomic

[5] *See* Scanlan (2020), *Slave Empire*; Williams (1994), *Capitalism and Slavery*; Beckert (2014), *Empire of Cotton: A Global History.*

conditions in Guangdong at the time. H. Yu (2018, 185-6) illustrates these aspirations to an idealized life cycle.

> For young men journeying out into the Cantonese Pacific in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, aspirations were organized into an idealized life cycle that involved leaving the village as a young man, usually supported by the financial sponsorship of older generations who had already gone overseas. Hard work as a laborer in construction, farming, logging, mining, or the canneries paid off the loans needed for passage, and once the initial loans were paid, a trip back to the home village for marriage led to a return overseas to begin *sending remittances home for property investments and the schooling of children*. Laboring work that allowed for the *opportunity to observe and learn a small business trade* (laundry washer, cook or waiter in a restaurant, grocery store stocker, produce deliverer) and the display of diligence and potential might lead an older relative to loan some money for a stake in the business. Acquiring a larger stake in one or more businesses, with the ultimate goal of eventually becoming an elder *with enough wealth* to begin loaning money and *investing in the young men of the next generation*, allowed a migrant to *retire in comfort* on dividends from the business and loan repayments from the ambitious young men of the next generation. (*emphasis added*)

These narratives circulating within Cantonese migrant networks bore an outlook of comfortable retirement built on local and transnational networks of relationships. This temporal orientation, which prioritized future gratification for themselves and their family members, constituted an affective explanatory factor for endured hardship and self-exploitation while overseas, as H. Yu (2018, 191-2) vividly illustrates through the story of Mrs. Yee.

It is important to note that the conceptions of a good life vary across time, place, and social context (de Haas 2021, 15). What it means to live well is constantly negotiated in real-life practices.[6] In these aspirational narratives that circulated in the networks, it was not incessant capital accumulation or atomized personal profit maximization that determined the course of economic action. Rather, the prospect of self-sufficient retirement and sustained inter-generational care also played an important role in guiding economic action. Money was an important theme threading the aspirations, but it was a means to an end. Moreover, the narratives of aspiration discussed here were spatially extended and temporally specific. In these narratives, Cantonese migrant networks, as proximate social relations, constituted one of the primary

[6] The central question diverse economies seek to address regarding labor concerns different possibilities for livelihood well-being, and how social actors negotiate it: "How can different forms of work and remuneration be combined so that humans and Earth Others survive well?" For various case studies, *see* Gibson-Graham and Dombroski (2020), *The Handbook of Diverse Economies*, the chapter on Labor. For a generative rethinking of the economy, *see* also Ralph (ed.) (2014), "Crisis, Value and Hope: Rethinking the Economy."

spaces in which the value orientation of individual migrants (e.g., migratory aspirations) was socialized. Small business, achieved through apprenticeship with clan members and modest capital accumulated through years of hard work and frugal living, was a common vehicle to the aspired good life. This nuanced view of contingent life aspirations has important implications for understanding early migrants' decisions to engage in self-employment.

4.2. The Emergence of a Food Network

An occupational snapshot of 1884 shows that at least 10% (901) of all working Chinese in BC were employed in the agri-food sector. Of these, 80% (720) worked as agricultural laborers for non-Chinese enterprise, while the remainder were self-employed as vegetable gardeners (13%, 114) and food peddlers (7%, 67).[7] It is likely that the gardeners and peddlers captured by this census data were concentrated in Victoria at the time, where the earliest Chinese communities in Canada developed. Evidence suggests that there were 114 market gardeners and 46 peddlers in and around Victoria in 1885 (J. Yu 2014, 8-9). The 1885 Royal Commission indicates that a year later the number of Chinese working in the agri-food sector doubled (to 1,734), accounting for 18.7% of the Chinese workforce in the province. A larger proportion now worked as farm laborers – 93% of them, with the remaining 7% working as farmers and gardeners. Peddling was not listed as an occupation here, although it continued throughout the 19th century.[8] The increase in Chinese agricultural laborers was related to the decrease in railroad construction jobs, as I will discuss later. Self-employed Chinese farmers mostly grew vegetables in small-scale market gardens, which were then distributed by Chinese peddlers.

Geographically, Chinese market gardens were concentrated on southeastern Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland, near the urban centers of Victoria, Vancouver, and New Westminster. Many also emerged in the Fraser Valley and the Okanagan Valley by the early 1900s. In 1901, 6.5% of the working Chinese in Victoria (198) were self-employed farmers and gardeners (Li 2000, 52). In the late 1880s and 1890s, Chinese established small-scale market

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[7] Data enumerated from Con and Wickberg (1982), *From China to Canada*, table 13, p. 309. 17%, or 1,585, were grouped under "miners and farmers in the interior." Therefore, the total number of those working in the agri-food sector is most likely to be higher.

[8] Data enumerated from Li (2000), *The Chinese in Canada*, table 4.2, p. 52.

gardens on stretches of land between Vancouver and New Westminster, two urban centers with thriving Chinatowns that functioned as both markets and distribution centers. In the Lower Fraser Valley, a cluster of Chinese tenant farms called the China Ranch in Chilliwack began operation in the 1890s (Reimer 2011, 12). During this period, Chinese market gardens were also observed in the Spallumcheen area of the northern Okanagan Valley (Kyle 2019, 3).

Vegetables from Chinese market gardens did not supply only Chinese communities. They went to work sites in mines, mills and canneries, Chinatown grocers and restaurants, hotels, boarding houses, coastal steamships, and private residences of various origins. Two key elements completed the supply chain: peddlers and servants/cooks. All three occupations were predominantly Chinese occupations, i.e., Chinese occupational niches. Peddling was an economic practice of flexible self-employment brought by Chinese migrants from southern China and Southeast Asia. As for servants and cooks, Chinese "houseboys" became common for two reasons: local white society, predominantly of British origin, perceived Chinese men as nonthreating and versatile substitutes for white women – the demographic group with which domestic service was associated. In the early decades of the province, white women were few in number and often unwilling to work in domestic service (J. Yu 2014, 9-10). To fill the labor shortage, white employers paid Chinese labor contractors to find servants and cooks, which gradually became an occupational niche for Chinese men (Yee 1988, 25; Con and Wickberg 1982, 61). Although small in number, Cantonese vegetable gardeners, peddlers, servants, and cooks formed a self-sustaining vegetable supply chain that included production, distribution, and consumption. Because of the wide range of customers they served, these were primarily crops common in European diets at the time – e.g., lettuce, rhubarb, potatoes – although farmers also grew small amounts of Chinese vegetables for personal or community consumption.

The emergence of such an extensive food network is all the more curious when we consider the extent to which white supremacy affected their livelihoods prior to 1940. This political-institutional context in which the network was embedded shaped the options that Chinese migrants saw as available to them and translated into specific factors that they had to evaluate when making livelihood decisions: e.g., income levels, accessibility, subjective well-being, and security. The following section illustrates the employment landscape faced by early

Chinese migrants under white supremacy. Three aspects are discussed: federal, provincial, and municipal regulations on Chinese employment and immigration; the conditions of wage labor for Chinese male workers; and the racial antagonism that gradually characterized the Chinese experience of wage labor.

4.2.1. Employment Landscape under White Supremacy

Employment and immigration restrictions

Within BC's early democratic polity, Chinese residents faced a constrained employment landscape. Successive legislations were passed to exclude the Chinese from certain employment opportunities, including public works, underground mining, and professions such as pharmacy, law, and accountancy. As early as 1875, the Victoria city council agreed to a proposal by Noah Shakespeare – a staunch anti-Chinese organizer who later became Victoria's mayor and a member of the BC parliament – that no Chinese be hired on city works. The BC legislature followed suit in 1878, banning Chinese employment on public works. Similar legislations were passed by the city councils of New Westminster and Maple Ridge in 1884. Vancouver's legislation came two years later: the city prohibited the employment of Chinese on municipal contracts and city-sponsored projects (Con and Wickberg 1982, 46; Chen 2019, 311; Anderson 1991, 66). Underground mining, which paid higher wages than surface mining, was also foreclosed to Chinese by provincial legislation in 1898 (J. Yu 2014, 6).

Chinese disenfranchisement was another issue that preoccupied early BC politicians, and one that had significant implications for Chinese employment. For one thing, eligibility for certain professions, such as pharmacy, law, and accountancy, depended on the franchise. As soon as the province joined the Confederation in 1871, the BC legislature attempted to disenfranchise Chinese and Indigenous peoples through an amendment. The provincial parliament succeeded in enacting disenfranchisement in 1875. The municipal government of Vancouver followed suit in 1886 (Anderson 1991, 65; Con and Wickberg 1982, 45-6). Another long-term implication for Chinese employment was their ability to participate in local political processes. Unable to use voting and other franchise-based rights to secure their interests, the Chinese had limited means to influence the contour and direction of policies that not only

expropriated and re-allocated key resources such as land, but also regulated trade and labor conditions in terms of prices, wages, and working hours.

Two other professions were precluded from Chinese in practice, if not through legislation: nurse and teacher (Con and Wickberg 1982, 83, 185). After BC was incorporated, the number of schools grew exponentially in the first seven decades (Barman 2007, 109, 150). Teaching in BC was an alluring prospect that attracted whites from the eastern provinces to migrate west because of the comparatively higher teacher salaries. This was exemplified by the migration of young Nova Scotia schoolteacher Annie McQueen in 1887, whose sister and cousin followed through chain migration to work as teachers as well: "Lured west by the much higher salaries – in the case of the McQueens in 1887, $60 a month compared with $60 for six months in a similar Nova Scotia school – many Maritimers came out to teach in British Columbia's fledgling schools" (Barman 2007, 137). Although most early Chinese migrants were laborers without teaching credentials, this de facto exclusion had implications for the educational decisions that young Chinese Canadians had to make. Faced with the bleak prospect of becoming a teacher in BC's public schools, many would choose not to enter the training program at all and instead prepare themselves for occupations that were perceived to offer more potential. Take Tong Louie as an example. Although he was born in BC, Tong Louie was lumped into the category of "Chinese" and therefore could not enjoy citizenship rights, including the right to teach in public schools. When it came time for him to decide what to study, these professional restrictions, in conjunction with his existing family business in food wholesale, led him to study agriculture at university.

> Tong knew that few Chinese students ventured onto the developing campus of the University of British Columbia. In 1931 there were 27 Chinese students in the entire university, 10 of whom were women. After all, what was the purpose of a university degree when you were barred from the professions for which you trained? At the time Chinese were barred from entering law, the pharmaceutical industry, medicine, teaching in public schools, and working for the government. Arthur Laing's proposal that Tong should follow him into agriculture had the advantage that he was less likely to encounter a colour bar in that field, and in any case it tied in with the business in which they were both already engaged (Perrault 2002, 65).

Here, the decision-making landscape regarding professional training and occupation was more complex than a narrative of passive victimization would suggest. Chinese did proactively

take up opportunities that were attainable, such as attending university, even though these opportunities offered different prospects for Chinese than for whites. They made informed decisions, taking into account the likely correlation between training and long-term work prospects. Moreover, these opportunities were used flexibly in combination with the social resources available to them. Tong studied agriculture because his family's business and its accumulated social capital offered him greater and more secure access to future employment in a field less marked by the "color bar" – an advantage achieved through the ethnic economy. The prospect that Tong's agricultural education would later benefit the existing business added another layer to the decision-making process.

Immigration restrictions had both direct and indirect effects on the Chinese employment landscape. They limited the growth of Chinese communities, thereby limiting the human and social capital available to Chinese entrepreneurs. For those who had already arrived, they now came with greater financial burdens. The completion of the CPR marked the beginning of official federal restrictions on Chinese immigration. The Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 imposed a head tax of $50 per person and restricted entry by limiting the number of Chinese passengers allowed on inbound ships (Yee 1988, 19). The $50 head tax approximated two years of wage labor at the time (H. Yu 2012, 113). In the ensuing decades, the head tax was raised to $100 in 1900 and then to $500 in 1903, with the revenue shared between the federal and the provincial governments. Only people under six classes could enter (Con and Wickberg 1982, 82). To circumvent these restrictions, Cantonese migrants found ways to enter through loans and forged papers made possible by Cantonese migrant networks (H. Yu 2012, 113). Nevertheless, these legislations, which added to the already costly passage to arrive, created a heavy financial burden and bondage for newer arrivals. In addition, loans, favors, and advances were given and received among fellow villagers and relatives connected within close-knit social networks. As a consequence, the sense of responsibility to fulfill these financial obligations was strong, as desertion carried a high risk of ostracism from the migrant network(s) to which one belonged and brought shame to family members back in the village.[9]

[9] For two case studies that illustrate the trust mechanism of informal loans and credit within migrant networks, *see* Portes & Sensenbrenner (1993), "Embeddedness and Immigration," p. 1333-5.

Wage labor conditions

Early Chinese migrants were overwhelmingly single males, and most were employed as wage laborers for non-Chinese enterprises – the result of a segmented labor market. By 1884, 72% of all documented Chinese in BC worked as wage laborers for non-Chinese enterprises (Con and Wickberg 1982, 309). Wage labor sectors employed Chinese through labor contractors, and wage rates for Chinese were consistently lower than those for whites. Typically, the former were about 1/3 to ½ of the latter, and white men tended to have easier access to supervisory functions in such a segregated labor market. A wage table shows that wages around 1900 in the two main industries in which Chinese were employed – manufacturing and resource extraction – did not vary substantially for Chinese laborers. Cannery work paid relatively more, at $40 to $50 per month. This may explain the high percentage of Chinese working as canners in Victoria in 1901: almost 30% worked as food canners, the highest percentage of any documented occupational category (Li 2000, 48, 52). When minimum wage legislation was introduced in the lumber, canning, and mining industries in 1926, it didn't entirely end the segregated labor market. Nor did it raise wage levels for those Chinese laborers who were already employed. Rather, with the onset of the Great Depression, many Chinese simply lost their jobs in these industries or were defaulted on their wages. A few years later, in 1934, the BC Board of Industrial Relations allowed the sawmill industry to continue the practice of segregated employment. Under this minimum wage order, 25% of the sawmill workforce could be hired at only 71% of the minimum wage rate. In reality, this 25% was often the "Oriental" workforce (Anderson 1991, 150; Con and Wickberg 1982, 184-5; MacInnis and MacInnis 1943, 8).

Developing manufacturing and resource industries absorbed some of the seasonal labour as railroad construction jobs gradually declined. As early as 1883, the railway contractor for the BC section, Andrew Onderdonk, ran into financial difficulties and began to lay off workers in large numbers. Between 1883 and 1885, Chinese workers on various sections of the CPR were successively discharged. Unemployment was a dire issue for the Chinese. Many faced starvation and drifted from place to place in search of a livelihood (Chen 2019, 307-9). After the CPR was completed in 1885, more Chinese workers joined the seasonal labor reserve and worked in

various wage labor sectors. While 31% were still employed on the railroad, 52% now found themselves in other wage labor sectors. The largest employers included farms (17%), mines (16%), canneries (8%), and lumber and sawmills (8%) (Li 2000, 52). As the seasonal labor pool of a split labor market grew, white industrialists saw opportunities to control labor costs and accumulate profits.

Racial antagonism

White contractors and industrialists liked to hire Chinese laborers for three reasons. First, in a split labor market, it was cheaper to hire Chinese for the same amount of work because their wages were significantly lower. In one land-clearing project, the Brighouse Estate in what is now downtown Vancouver, contractor John McDougall won the bidding by offering a price 35% below the going rate. He was able to make a profit by subcontracting some of the land to a Chinese contractor in Victoria at an even lower price: he paid the subcontractor only 46% of the rate he received from the CPR company. So instead of paying $500 an acre, the CPR company saved $61,250 to clear the 350 acres. Contractor McDougall made a net profit of $175 per acre on the subcontracted tract. In addition, he saved $2 per day in wages per worker. In contrast, Chinese laborers working on the project would receive only ¢50 to ¢75 per day (Con and Wickberg 1982, 62). By using the labor contract system and employing Chinese workers, both the CPR company and Onderdonk made easy profits without doing any actual work on the land.

The second reason for hiring Chinese laborers had to do with responsibility and day-to-day management. Chinese labor contractors usually took on the responsibility of assembling the labor force, paying wages, arranging transportation, accommodation, food, and tools for the Chinese workers. They also hired cooks and Chinese supervisors to manage daily operations and resolve internal conflicts. This made the management easier. Third, many white employers perceived the Chinese to be more hardworking and reliable than white workers. BC's monopoly CPR contractor Onderdonk attributed this to the social obligations that Chinese workers carried with them, noting that white workers tended to desert work sites soon after payment (Con and Wickberg 1982, 49). These social obligations that drove Chinese laborers to be "good" workers derived from their financial obligations to send home remittances, repay relatives for loans, or

pay labor contractors for advances. They also stemmed from moral obligations to repay the favors of those who introduced them to work and not to abandon the fellow workers with whom they labored and lived. Additionally, they were motivated by future-oriented aspirations that required capital outlay. This was commonly achieved through wage earnings in the early years (or decades) and continuous savings through frugal living arrangements.

The employment of Chinese, especially during periods of economic downturn, fueled racial antagonism among white workers who saw the Chinese as a source of competition. Racial tensions, particularly among male workers in the construction and resource industries, intensified in the 1880s and 1890s. Robert Dunsmuir, the major colliery and railroad developer on Vancouver Island, was known to use Chinese laborers to break strikes and keep wages down. In response, self-organized white unions agitated to exclude the Chinese from mining employment altogether (Con and Wickberg 1982, 50, 54). Across the strait in Vancouver, local Knights of Labor assemblies intimidated businesses that had any commercial or employment dealings with Chinese, and organized boycotts against the general Chinese presence in the city. After McDougall hired Chinese laborers for the Brighouse Estate project, an anti-Chinese riot broke out in 1887. White rioters not only physically attacked the newly arrived Chinese contract workers, burning down their homes and property, but also extended the violence and destruction to the residents of Chinatown, who were by now longtime residents of Vancouver (Anderson 1991, 65-7). The social antagonism in these industries against the Chinese presence is an important factor in the employment decision landscape of early Chinese migrants.

4.2.2. *Labor Contract System*

In order to place self-employment in the agri-food sector within the broader decision-making landscape, it is necessary to examine the relationships between Chinese labor contractors and laborers, as they affected considerations of where and how to work. Recall from the earlier discussion that the majority of Chinese in BC worked for non-Chinese enterprises in the last decades of the 20th century. Mostly brokered through Chinese labor contractors, labor relations in these industries involved multiple dimensions.

More complex and ambivalent than a single narrative of ethnic solidarity or capitalist exploitation would suggest, they simultaneously involved coercion, trust, mutual aid, care, and exploitation. Chen (2019) notes that during the construction of the CPR, Chinese labor contractors had close relationships with white employers. They also managed the Chinese workforce by hiring Chinese superintendents, cooks, and bookkeepers to oversee day-to-day operations. When white foremen mistreated Chinese workers, these Chinese superintendents/contractors sometimes assumed care and relief functions, establishing hospitals, initiating community organizing through benevolent associations, and consigning steamships to send unemployed and stranded railroad workers back to China (297-312). Finding work through a labor contractor was not always benevolent. Contractors often defaulted risk to laborers and made large profit by selling supplies to workers from their own stores, since many were also merchants who operated import-export trade, general stores, or boarding houses. Chinese laborers had to buy supplies exclusively from them, and they charged a premium over the going rate. Contractors also sold liquor, tobacco, and opium at Chinese work sites and charged gambling fees (Yee 1988, 28). Other coercive and exploitative practices were also noted: some cut wages without deliberation or supplied faulty tools in their stores (Chen 2019, 304-5). Since these same merchants accumulated wealth from import-export trade, labor contracting, real estate, and opium processing (Yee 1988, 36), these arrangements of the labor contract system contributed to the accumulation of profits by the contractors. This is supported by Chan's (1986) California study: Chinese farm laborers didn't fully trust the Chinese head contractors, who, according to the white landowners who contracted them, made their profits not from contracting but chiefly from provisioning Chinese laborers (177-83).

Although wage labor brokered through Chinese contractors was a common starting point, its underlying conditions underscore the complexity of relational embeddedness in migrant networks. Thinking back to diverse economies and aspirational motives illustrated earlier, capital accumulation was rarely the end goal for these migrants when it came to decisions about work. If we acknowledge that labor conditions affect subjective well-being and conceptualize work as a vehicle to live well, then a hostile and coercive work environment must be taken into

serious consideration when inquiring into employment decisions.[10] Meanwhile, employment and business opportunities were emerging in the vegetable produce sector. The next three sections examine the market opportunity, relational embeddedness, and institutional context that gave rise to a robust Chinese food network. The final section uses the biographical story of H.Y. Louie to illustrate how this mixed embeddedness led some to venture into suburban market gardening in the 1890s and what the business looked like on a day-to-day basis.

4.2.3. Market

Since the Gold Rush, there has always been a market for fresh vegetables. Wherever Cantonese migrants went in the Pacific Rim, they often kept small vegetable gardens on the side to feed themselves and earn an income (Kyle 2019, 5; S. Chan 1986, 81-6; Boileau 2014, 141-9). Miners needed food, irrespective of where they came from. In the early days of settler colonies, local food production provided a fresher and cheaper source than long-distance imports. Vegetables, always important in the traditional Chinese, especially Cantonese, diet, could be grown quickly and easily on small plots of land. Potatoes, the staple food of the European miners who came to the New World, were also an easy crop with a short growing season.

In BC, although Cantonese migrants began farming as early as the 1860s, it was not until the construction of the CPR in the 1880s that a robust food network began to take shape. In need of labor, the railway construction spawned a major wave of Chinese migration to BC, one stream from Guangdong and one from California, where the Gold Rush had begun a decade earlier. An estimated 20,000 workers arrived between 1880 and 1885 (Chen 2019, 298). To put this number in perspective, records show only 1,319 Chinese in 1871, less than 1/10 of the Cantonese migrants who arrived a decade later (Cail 1974, 21). Railway work was temporary, and when Coal Harbour (later renamed Vancouver) became the new western terminal of the CPR, many

[10] Some studies of Chinese history in New Zealand and Australia highlight the preference for self-employment among Cantonese migrants who came from the same eight villages in Guangdong. For them, self-employment was associated with stability, status and self-reliance. *See* Sedgwick (1982), *The Politics of survival: A social History of the Chinese in New Zealand*, PhD dissertation at the University of Canterbury, p. 319; Rannard (2005), *The Forgotten Gardens: The Story of the Last Market Gardens in Willoughby and Northbridge*, p. 78.

discharged workers came to the growing urban center in search of work opportunities (Anderson 1991, 64). As S. Chan (1986) illustrates in her California study, farmers supplied the local population, and their numbers rose and fell with the local population (79-105). After 1885, the completion of the transcontinental railway initiated further westward settlement from eastern Canada and Europe. From its completion to the eve of World War I, BC's non-Indigenous population increased tenfold, while the Indigenous population declined by one-third (Barman 2007, 136). The population explosion, consisting mainly of migrants from Europe and Asia, provided a growing market for fresh produce such as vegetables. How was the fresh produce distributed, and how did Chinese men come to produce these vegetables? These are the topics of the next two sections.

4.2.4. Migrant Network and Market Access

Distribution usually went through Chinatown, where Chinese farmers sold their produce to Chinese wholesalers and peddlers in the open market. Peddling as an economic practice was brought to BC by Cantonese migrants from southern China and Southeast Asia. The lack of refrigeration at the time meant that vegetables would easily perish soon after harvest. What followed was a niche market for peddling, as peddlers went door-to-door with fresh vegetables, and customers could buy in smaller quantities as they pleased, rather than making a trip to the general store or city market, which could be far and time-consuming to reach.

Another key element in the distribution chain were Chinese servants and cooks. The labor contract system, prevalent in the early decades, connected Cantonese migrants, most of whom didn't speak English, with employers in various industries. Through labor contractors who spoke their dialects, many Cantonese migrants worked as servants and cooks for various establishments and performed produce purchasing. In 1884, 3% (279) of all working Chinese in BC were employed as servants and cooks. By 1901, those working as servants, cooks, and waiters accounted for a substantial 17.4% (529) in Victoria alone.[11]

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[11] Data for 1884 was enumerated from Con and Wickberg (1982), *From China to Canada*, table 13, p. 309. Data for 1901 was from Li 2000, *The Chinese in Canada*, table 4.2, p. 52.

These servants and cooks purchased their produce from peddlers within their networks. In the 1902 *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, white market gardeners suggested anecdotally that Chinese cooks bought exclusively from Chinese peddlers although white peddlers and gardeners tried to compete. The anecdote also mentioned the practice of paying small commissions (Canada. Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration 1902, 67). Based on the widespread use of the term "Chinese" and "Oriental" by white institutions and publications during this period, they were apparently unaware that Chinese migrants in Canada at the time were predominantly Cantonese in origin from only eight counties in southern China, and that migrant activities were generally organized along village, dialect, and clan lines rather than an all-encompassing Chinese identity.

Give the modest incomes of peddlers, it was unlikely that the small amount of commission a Cantonese peddler could afford was the decisive cause of this bounded solidarity. Otherwise, competing white peddlers could easily replace their competitors with a higher commission. However small, the commission signaled an act of goodwill. By accepting it and buying exclusively from the Cantonese peddler, who likely spoke the same dialect, the servant or cook was extending a favor to the peddler and engaging in reciprocity transactions. In their discussion of social capital, Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993, 1324-9) note the economic importance of dynamic group membership in the context of transactions in social intangibles such as trust, information, and favors. This is particularly true in situations characterized by external adversity directed toward a perceived "us." In the case of early Cantonese migrants, institutional and social antagonism strongly shaped their experience as "Chinese" in BC. Bounded solidarity, as a group-oriented behavior that emerge in response to external hostility, fosters group members' adherence to norms of mutual support (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993, 1325). In this case, a small commission opened the door to tap into resources that fellow clansmen could offer out of solidarity. This provided Cantonese peddlers and market gardeners with stable market access, making vegetable production and distribution a promising field to enter for sustained livelihoods.

In a historical account documented by Yee (1988, 58), "Chang Yun Ho became a pedlar when he bought a route from a friend." Two implications follow. First, information about

business opportunities was shared within social networks, and peddling businesses also changed hands within the networks. In consequence, peddling became an occupational niche for local Cantonese, securing an important link in the distribution chain. Second, if a peddling route was to be transacted, peddlers likely travelled along fixed routes that either didn't overlap much, or were shared among a handful of peddlers in a way that was economically viable. Otherwise, it would not make sense for route transactions to exist. If they interacted and transacted with the same customers on a regular basis, some level of relationship and enforceable trust may have been fostered within neighborhood communities. The popularity and normalcy of Cantonese peddlers in those days can be seen in the words and actions of their customers. City archivist J .S. Matthews recalled regular purchases of fresh fish and vegetables from "the Chinaman" at his back door (Yee 1988, 58). A petition by Cantonese peddlers in 1920 received more than 5,000 signatures from white women, who constituted their typical neighborhood customers (Anderson 1991, 119). This historical evidence suggests that reciprocal relationships were nurtured not only among Cantonese who worked as peddlers, servants, and cooks, but also between at least some peddlers and their white customers, despite the prevalence of racial antagonism. These nuanced facets of relational embeddedness provided porous access to the market.

In the early stages of the network's development, there were relatively few regulations in place to hamper Chinese in market gardening and peddling. This opening may have been particularly attractive given the overall employment landscape at the time. However, the existence of an expanding market and distribution channels only explains part of the story. The attractiveness and prospective feasibility of market gardening also depended on other enabling factors. The next section looks at the production side: how the policies and realities of land development in BC created the institutional context for Cantonese to enter agriculture, and the diverse ways in which Chinese market gardens came into being

4.2.5. *Land Development*

Although legislation was enacted to prevent Chinese from owning Crown land or diverting water channels, the overall land policies inadvertently provided opportunities for them

to start farming businesses with little capital outlay. In the early decades of nation-building, the dominion and provincial government actively promoted white settlement from Europe and Eastern Canada. One of the incentives was to give out land expropriated from Indigenous peoples to white settlers at very low prices. However, settlement did not easily follow land ownership. Human settlement in BC has long been premised on the (sometimes reluctant) accommodation to its natural geography, characterized by multiple mountain ranges, the Fraser River, old-growth forests, and the Pacific coast. While land was readily and inexpensively distributed to white settlers, clearing land for homesteading and cultivation proved to be an arduous and costly endeavor. In addition, the lack of irrigation systems and dykes increased the cost and risk of settlement in sparsely populated areas. Land clearance was such strenuous and expensive work that many white landowners leased land to Chinese for free or at a low cost in exchange for clearance and cultivation (Yee 1988, 24). From the 1880s well into the 1940s, Chinese tenant farming became increasingly common in the province.

For large landholders, leasing land to Chinese was a cost-effective strategy to avoid the exorbitant expenses associated with land clearance. Depending on the density and species of vegetation, these expenses varied between \$50 and \$150 an acre. In coastal areas where climate was humid and rain forest dense, clearing costed as much as \$300 an acre (Demeritt 1996, 222). Large landowners were often men of financial means, had personal connections to political office, or were influential politicians themselves. They were at an advantage to acquire desirable land in large acreage, and many did so for speculative purposes. Land transactions grew exponentially in the course of the 1880s, in part because the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway reignited the expectation that more white settlers would come to BC, and demand for land would follow swiftly. A large part of the transactions was to be traced to earlier white (mostly English) settlers who had established their influence in local affairs by this point. They bought up large acreage of land in anticipation of price increase and purchase restrictions—valuable information on land policy they were privy to. Some attempted to use their personal relationships with local politicians to secure land entitlement (Cail 1974, 37-8, 46; Barman 2007, 133). The way in which information networks worked here had a strong class character: local white (English) elites had the social capital to access and, to varying extent, influence and direct

policy development; meanwhile, they also had the financial capital to make large land purchases based on that information.

To curb land speculation, the Land Act of 1891 stipulated that landowners now had to occupy and make permanent improvements to their land continuously for two years, before they could make another purchase (Cail 1974, 47). Because cultivation counted as a permanent improvement, leasing land out for market gardening became a way for landowners to expedite the process before more land could be acquired. Pre-emption, a way to acquire Crown land practically for free, was again authorized for 40- or 80-acre lots in 1892, and further restricted to 20-acre lots two years later. Three conditions had to be met if pre-emptors were to receive a Crown land grant after 5 years: regular rental payment, the price of which determined by the chief commissioner; personal residence on the land; and at last, cultivation (Cail 1974, 47-8).

These land policies reflected the intention of the provincial government to attract (white) settlers for permanent settlement and agricultural development following railway construction. This had practical implications for the Chinese food network, as Chinese farm laborers were employed in places of incipient agricultural development. In 1914, the townsite of Lansdowne was relocated to Armstrong to take advantage of the newly constructed railway lines. Shortly thereafter, government brought 500 Chinese workers from Vancouver to grow potatoes for Canadian troops in France. As some gained experience and knowledge about local farming, they stayed and set up their own farms after the war (H. Lee 2019). As a result, Chinese farm clusters gradually developed in the area.

For both large and small landholders, cultivation was of essential importance if they wanted to keep the land under possession or generate income from it. Many landowners subdivided large tracts of uncleared land into smaller acreages, either selling or leasing them out for cultivation. For small landholders, sub-leasing was a survival strategy. They usually lived on the premise with a family to support, relying on subsistence farming as well as seasonal wage labor outside the farm to sustain their livelihoods. They couldn't afford hired hands for clearance work but do it themselves. Many didn't have prior knowledge about land clearance or soil cultivation.

One example is the small landholding of Daniel William in South Vancouver, a delta area along the Fraser River where many Chinese farmers leased land for market gardening at the turn of the century. Williams held 68-acre farm land, of which 40 acres were leased to Chinese for market gardening. He observed that his tenants "can get more off the lands" than he did. Land clearance costed him $150 an acre, and an additional $700 was spent on irrigation and diking. Williams cleared the first 20 acres and cultivated hay and vegetables to sell in Vancouver. Nonetheless, the overall work was so expensive and strenuous for him that he decided to lease the cultivated 20 acres, along with another 20-acre uncleared land, to Chinese for market gardening. For these 40 acres, the Chinese tenants paid him $415 a year in cash. Later, when he attempted to clear the remaining 28 acres with his wife, he had to sell half his ranch just to keep up with the cost (Canada. Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration 1902, 55).

This arrangement was a rational decision. In most cases, it was not viable for these small landholders with limited means to develop the land on their own under the geophysical and policy environment. Leasing uncleared land to Chinese for market gardening allowed them to charge rent as a regular income stream after a few years, while obtaining a productive tract of land with little work of clearance or cultivation on their own.

Nevertheless, The 1902 *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration,* commissioned with the explicit purpose to impede migration from China and Japan, reached different conclusions. The commissioners acknowledged that expenses for land development in BC were very high, making survival difficult for small landholders with uncleared timber land. They also recognized that some landholders favored the leasing arrangement with Chinese market gardeners, because an alternative would be seeking seasonal employment in the wage sector, where income often fell short to sustainably supplement homesteading costs. For landholders able to hire for clearance, they struggled to find white laborers for the work. However, instead of addressing issues of land speculation, rushed promotion of homesteading, and the high costs burdened upon individual families, the commissioners focused on the so-called Chinese competition. With few concerns for ecological consequences or financial feasibility, the report conclusively recommended that small landholders should use machinery and explosives operated by white male labor. It also

dismissed the collaborative arrangement which had already proven to function rather well for many. Not surprisingly, it found that many landholders who tried to work on their own abandoned the land altogether and moved elsewhere (Canada. Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration 1902, 44-64).

This is illustrated through the story of Daisy and Jack Phillips. Motivated by government policies encouraging homesteading, and lured by false promotions from land and railway companies, the Phillips, like many middle-class city folks from England and Eastern Canada, migrated to BC under the false hope that they would achieve the agrarian dream in no time. Their story testifies to the difficulties these new rural settlers encountered during those years.

> Daisy and her husband Jack Phillips arrived in the Windermere valley from Windsor, England, in 1912, drawn, along with many other middle and upper class English people, by the clever, distorted promotions of the Columbia Valley Irrigation Company. Jack purchased twenty-eight acres of forested land at 3200 feet and set about establishing an orchard; Daisy tried to create a middle class English home. Neither was at all prepared for what they were trying to do. Jack had been an army officer, and Daisy, who previously had lived with servants, had never done a washing, sewn, or cooked. They worked and they learned, setting out an apple orchard (where apple trees could not survive), and furnishing a house with belongings from England. Without servants or appliances, and driven by middle class English standards, Daisy was caught in an endless round of housework. The two dressed for dinner, set the table with bone china and silver, and then scrubbed the pots. The Windermere Valley absorbed their limited capital, and their few sales - a few dozen eggs, a few heads of lettuce, a little alfalfa - were inconsequential. They were creating a subsistence farm (Demeritt 1996, 227-8).

Between 1891 and 1941, many white settlers aspiring to build farm life came and left, abandoning their homesteads in the span of a few years. These settlers, new to BC without prior connections to the locality, often took up land unsuitable for farming. BC's physiographic diversity required specialized crops, targeted irrigation, diking, drainage, soil cultivation, and farming techniques in specific areas. Under land speculation in the early decades, neither the government, land companies, nor city folks from far away had enough know-hows about agricultural development in BC, especially in the interior. Those who managed to grow something often had trouble accessing and competing in the market. Many realized they didn't have a large enough local market to serve. Others found themselves inconveniently located in the transportation system, unable to move their produce quickly to urban markets (Demeritt 1996, 220-33). In comparison, Chinese farmers worked in partnerships, sharing tasks, information, costs, and income flexibly. Most had prior experience in farming, either in

Guangdong or BC. I will expand on these individual and group resources in the third part of the chapter.

Chinese market gardens flourished across the Lower Mainland and southeastern Vancouver Island. In addition to South Vancouver, another notable example was a plot of bush land located between Vancouver and New Westminster, possibly in or near today's Big Bend in Burnaby. Chinese cleared the land with a ten-year rent-free lease beginning in 1886, and quickly turned it into fertile vegetable gardens (Con and Wickberg 1982, 61; Wolf 1995). Chinese market gardens also proliferated across various valleys in the interior, such as in Armstrong, Vernon, and Ashcroft. Some land was indeed owned by Chinese, as purchase from private landowners was possible. Most were leased from railway companies or private landowners (Kyle 2019, 8-9). In Chilliwack, within the Lower Fraser Valley, white landholders subdivided their lots into smaller acreages, typically less than 10 acres each, and leased them to Chinese for market gardening. Similar to other regions, Chinese tenants cleared and cultivated the land rent-free in the initial years. White landowners, providing the necessary machineries for hauling, ploughing, and reaping, received rent or a portion of the sales income from Chinese tenant farmers (Reimer 2011, 12-8). The prevalence of formal and informal tenancy agreements during this period strongly suggests the mutual benefits derived by both Chinese farmers and white landowners or landowning companies.

Chinese farming was not limited to tenancy arrangements with white landholders and landholding companies. Deed to land became "official" only after the land was surveyed and registered by the colonial government, which was a slow and messy process continuing well into the 20th century. Some Chinese started farming on land before it was surveyed or transacted. As early as the 1880s, and possibly earlier, Chinese cultivated vegetables and raised pigs around China Creek, a large stream flowing into False Creek and surrounded by dense rainforest. Four Chinese market gardens and two pig ranches were already in operation for years, before an English family purchased a small plot of land for ranching. They named it China Creek after the Chinese farmers (Matthews 1956, 112; Vancouver Heritage Foundation). Records in Chilliwack indicate the existence of at least one independent Chinese farmer as early as the 1870s, who

went by the name Mon Ah. Mon Ah successfully pre-empted a plot of land two years before legislation deprived Chinese of the right to own Crown land (Reimer 2011, 5-6).

Chinese market gardens also proliferated on Musqueam land at the mouth of the Fraser River. Through handshake agreements, Chinese leased land—unbeknownst until 1906 to the Department of Indian affairs—from Musqueam people, one of the Indigenous peoples on whose land UBC now sits. Chinese farmers cultivated vegetables and cohabited with Musqueam neighbors under reciprocal social relations. The Department took over the leasing process after 1906 but "tolerated" the presence of Chinese farmers, assuming that these Chinese farms would "assimilate" Musqueam people into farming lifestyles (Ling 2018, 41-4). In the interior, records indicate that multiple Chinese market gardens were cultivated on leased land from Indigenous communities, including the Duck Lake Indian Reserve and First Nations reserves in Vernon (Kyle 2019, 8). In the next section, the example of H. Y. Louie demonstrates how the factors discussed above influenced the actions taken by Cantonese migrants.

4.2.6. Market Gardening in the 1890s

Market gardening, peddling, and greengrocery were occupations that did not necessitate the involvement of labor contractors. From this perspective, engaging in self-employment within the agri-food sector granted entrepreneurs greater autonomy and flexibility, albeit with additional responsibilities. The biography of Tong Louie, a Chinese Canadian entrepreneur in wholesale and retail business, provides insights into the early endeavors of his father, H. Y. Louie, in suburban market gardening during the 1890s. While his individual business trajectory and personal attributes may not be taken as a representation of the whole community, the biographical account offers a glimpse into the market dynamics, institutional frameworks, and relational contexts that shaped the experiences of entrepreneurs within the Chinese food network. His concerns and practices, as narrated by family members and the biographer, shed light on the decision-making landscape and common trajectories other members of the Chinese communities might share during that period.

H. Y. Louie's decision to venture into market gardening during the 1890s was influenced by a careful consideration of various factors. He assessed the comparative income offered by

other labor options available to Chinese men, evaluated his own skillsets, and took inventory of the resources at his disposal. Common options such as laundry work, cooking, mining, or logging did not provide him with satisfactory income. Jobs with slightly higher pay, such as gang boss or labor contractor, required a command of English, a skill he had not yet acquired. Starting a business required significant capital investment. In this regard, market gardening stood out as a more feasible option due to the low rent of land at the time.

He initiated his market gardening business as part of a trio partnership in what is now south Burnaby, situated on the north bank of the Fraser River. The rent for land was minimal compared to other expenditures. The primary cash outlay consisted of expenses for seeds, fertilizer, a horse, a wagon, and basic shelter. The work hours were extensive, as the three partners were responsible for the entire process, ranging from planting to transporting the produce. Transportation involved a horse-drawn wagon, and it took 4 hours from their suburban farm to arrive at the destination in Vancouver Chinatown. In his case, distribution took place through Chinatown wholesalers and small retail stores, instead of direct door-to-door sales. For the amount of time they already spent on farming, harvesting, packing, and transportation, there would have been little time left to engage in direct sales.

> His main responsibility was to deliver the vegetable crop to the markets in Vancouver. This meant rising at three in the morning to reach the city by seven. With the horse harnessed and the wagon loaded with produce, he started up the steep, rutted track of Kerr Road. Except for the buildings at the Stewart fruit farm, the only signs of human life he was likely to see along the way were other produce wagons…Once in Chinatown, he distributed his produce among the wholesalers and a few small retail stores, fed his horse a bag of oats, and began the long trip back to his leasehold farm. There, he would unharness the horse, wash it and the wagon, and then go into the fields to help his partners with the cultivating and harvesting of vegetables. Into the night, the three men would trim and wash produce before loading it into the wagon for the next day's trip. Hok Yat was lucky to get five hours sleep a night (Perrault 2002, 32).

Task sharing and division was a matter of practicality. In contrast to many white middle-class farm families, where tasks were done in adherence to prescribed gender roles in Victorian social norms, people in these early all-male Chinese farms took on tasks where a hand was needed. Later on, H. Y. Louie gave up market gardening and started a wholesale and retail store that supplied Chinese farmers. Following the typical trajectory of Cantonese male migrants, he

worked as a wage laborer at a sawmill before accumulating enough savings to open his own store.

At this point, he accumulated other forms of capital as well. He developed local farming knowledge and understood what the farmers needed. He taught himself English and could transact directly with English-speaking people. Furthermore, he established trustful relationships with friends in the Cantonese migrant networks. This accumulation of immaterial capital, including information, relationships, and linguistic abilities, played a crucial role in the sustainable long-term operation of a business. The trust he cultivated within Chinese communities became particularly important as white antagonism and discrimination fostered general mistrust toward white institutions among Chinese residents. Many Chinese businesses in farm, laundry, restaurant, and grocery store began to purchase services from him (Perrault 2002, 34-9). Louie's example illustrates the decision-making landscape pertaining to Chinese market gardening in the late 19th century. His later success in wholesale and retail underscores the significance of non-material capital in the development of the Chinese food network.

For the majority of Chinese men in BC at the time, migration had much to do with income opportunities and social aspirations. In terms of relational embeddedness, the prevalent labor contract system was tinged by coercive and dependent relations between Chinese contractors and laborers. Notwithstanding, it firmly established these men in occupations such as servants and cooks, providing secure market access for entrepreneurial Chinese farmers and peddlers. The internal organization of the Cantonese migrant networks under white supremacy generated bounded solidarity among its group members, strengthening each link within the distribution network. In terms of structural embeddedness, the network was first and foremost embedded in a booming local market that demanded its produce. This burgeoning market and the infrastructure of the network are embedded in the context of European colonialism of the 19th and 20th centuries: under the strong influence of the British Empire, trans-Pacific Chinese migrations and trans-Atlantic European migrations left their mark on the place of contact: British Columbia. A split labor market and anti-Chinese sentiment took hold, shaping the local wage labor experience. Although limited in their financial capital and constrained by policy from owning land, Cantonese male migrants saw in market gardening – under the specific

conditions of land development at the time – a vehicle to live differently through small business entrepreneurship. In the next part, the thesis moves on to the further development of the network in the early 1900s.

4.3. The Network Further Developed

Despite successive restrictions, the food network thrived in the first half of the 20th century. Food peddling was an occupation almost exclusively practiced by Chinese. They engaged in door-to-door sales with fresh harvest distributed through Chinatown's open markets or wholesalers. Greengrocery, another significant distribution channel, was predominantly a Chinese enterprise from its inception. In 1901, 15 Chinese greengrocers established themselves in Vancouver Chinatown alone (Anderson 1991, 74). By 1920, this number had grown to 31 in the city of Vancouver. Within six years, it more than doubled, reaching 74 in 1926. Notably, 71 out of the 74 were located outside the geographical bounds of Chinatown at this point. This indicates a growing dispersal of Chinese residents outside Chinatown, but also the extensive customer base these greengrocers served.

Comparative ownership provides further insights into Chinese participation in Vancouver's greengrocery sector. In 1920, there were a total of 40 licensed greengrocery businesses, with 31 of them owned and operated by Chinese, constituting 77.5%. By 1926, the number of greengrocers had more than doubled to 85. Almost all of the new stores established within these six years were Chinese-owned—43 out of 45 (Anderson 1991, 112). This expansion continued into the 1930s. In 1935, there were 158 greengrocers in total, of which 125 were Chinese (Yee 1988, 77). By 1939, Chinese ownership had risen to 133, while the total number of greengrocery business had fallen slightly to 156 (Anderson 1991, 147).

On the production side, the development followed a similar trend. In the 1900s, there were 130 Chinese farmers supplying fresh vegetables to the growing urban population in Vancouver (Yee 1988, 31). Two decades later in 1927, a report prepared for the provincial legislative assembly, *Report on Oriental activities within the province*, documented 5,665 acres of farmland owned by Chinese, and an additional 11,087 acres on lease. On majority of the land, Chinese farmers engaged in truck farming, and to a less extent, mixed farming. A very small

fraction was used for orcharding and small-fruit growing: only 0.7% on owned land and 0.9% on leased land (British Columbia Legislative Association 1927, 23). Through wholesalers, peddlers, and greengrocers, they supplied 55% of potatoes and 90% of vegetables transacted in BC, serving a wide range of consumers (Anderson 1991, 111). In what institutional environment was the network embedded, and what facilitated the network's further development?

4.3.1. Restrictive Policies and Strategic Responses

In face of thriving Chinese businesses, white farmers and distributors formed various trade associations to lobby for policies that would impede Chinese businesses, initially in peddling and later in farming, wholesale, and greengrocery. From the late 1890s through the early 1900s, successive legislations were proposed to handicap the market participation of Chinese peddlers, of which the majority were also passed. These measures included limiting the sale of fresh produce to "permanent" places of business, imposing an exorbitant tax on peddlers, and introducing new limits on work hours. Chinese peddlers responded resourcefully by transitioning into the greengrocery business, resulting in the exponential growth of greengroceries in the 1920s and 30s. The new tax levied on peddling was $50. In comparison, a store only had to pay $10 for a license (Yee 1988, 58-9). Building on earlier peddling networks, Chinese greengrocers had the advantage of steady supplies, established distribution channels, and a ready customer base inherited from previous peddling routes. This explains why the majority of greengroceries established in the 1920s and 30s were located outside Chinatown.

White trade associations, including the Retail Merchants Association and Vancouver Chamber of Commerce, persistently agitated for governmental policies and boards that would restrict Chinese operations in farming, wholesale, and store merchandising. Associations like the BC Board of Trade, Farmers' Institute, and United Farmers of British Columbia lobbied the provincial government to commission a study explicitly aimed at "mak[ing] it impossible for Orientals and undesired aliens to own, lease and otherwise control land in Canada," as published in the February 7th issue of the newspaper *Colonist* in 1920 (as cited in Anderson 1991, 111). In 1928, responding to petitions from white businessmen, the legislature passed a Trades Licences Board Act in the name of "public interest" to limit the number of shops non-whites

could own. One of the petitions came from W. H. Malkin, a fierce competitor of the Chinese wholesaler H. Y. Louie discussed earlier (Yee 1988, 79). Two marketing boards, the BC Coast Vegetable Marketing Board and BC Interior Vegetable Marketing Board, were established in the 1930s to dictate the volume and price of tree fruits and vegetables entering the provincial market.[12] In effect, they aimed to handicap the operations of Chinese and Japanese businesses in the agri-food sector.

Restrictions imposed through public policy served to legitimize physical disruptions of the supply chain. Law enforcement and self-organized white farmers barricaded produce transport from Chinese farmers, seized perishable vegetables in warehouses, and dumped them onto streets. Faced with these new developments, Chinese farmers and distributors employed various strategies to negotiate the changing institutional landscape. One frequently used method was mobilizing tools available within the Canadian political system: strike, petition, litigation, and diplomatic actions via Chinese ambassadors and consuls. However, given the pervasive anti-Chinese racial discourse and the deep entanglement between local political office and white businesses, this method achieved only limited effectiveness. Confronted with a blatantly unjust political system, another approach the Chinese harnessed was civil disobedience. Many ignored discriminatory regulations on store hours and "hygiene," refused to pay unreasonable levies and fines, and physically crashed road barricades (Yee 1988, 59, 79-83; Anderson 1991, 118-9). These resourceful and adaptive acts of resistance, whether through civil disobedience, political mobilization, or litigation, would not have been possible without the support of the Chinese communities. In the following, I discuss five aspects conducive to the network: Chinese trade associations, market linked through the network, farming knowledge, human capital, and sociality. The focus here is set on relational embeddedness, i.e. how did relations with co-ethnics in the migrant network, Indigenous communities, and other-than-humans influence the economic activities?

4.3.2. *Chinese Trade Associations*

[12] Japanese were concentrated in the tree fruit business by the early 1900s.

Self-organized trade associations played an important role in the network's success. Pooling resources together, they supported individual farmers, peddlers, wholesalers, and greengrocers, helping them navigate the institutional context and providing organizational support in challenging situations. For instance, the Chinese Peddlers' Association in Vancouver wrote a letter on behalf of a vegetable peddler, Ko Young, to one of his customers to retrieve a late payment (Chinese Peddlers' Association of Vancouver 1930). The Vegetable Sellers Association, boasting 300 to 400 members around 1920, hired lawyers, organized meetings, strikes, and petitions to counteract discriminatory policies promoted by white trade associations (Anderson 1991, 118-9). Ensuing the establishment of the BC Coast Vegetable Marketing Board, the Chinese United Growers' Association fought the new regulations on three fronts. It translated and disseminated information about the new regulations to Chinese farmers and distributors, drafted English-language letters to voice its official opposition to the government, and engaged in public relation campaigns to augment public pressure (Chinese United Growers Association 1935; Chinese United Growers' Association 1936; Chinese United Growers Association 1937). Undertaking such endeavors would have been significantly more challenging on an individual basis.

According to two tables compiled by Con and Wickberg (1982, 318, 320-1), in 1923, only one Chinese trade association in Vancouver was involved in the agri-food business: the Vegetable Retailers Association. However, this scenario changed rapidly in the 1920s and 30s. Five out of seven Chinese trade associations in Vancouver were now related to the agri-food sector: Overseas Chinese Farmers' Association, Overseas Chinese Produce Merchants Association, Chinese Produce wholesalers Association, Federation of Overseas Chinese Agricultural Producers and Merchants, Vancouver Mainland Growers' Cooperative Association.[13] Many more such associations came into existence and dissolved in the span of a few years.

The sprouting of specialized trade associations reflected the swift development of the Chinese food network, but also the increasing need to battle discriminatory policies that were

[13] For some reason, the Chinese Peddlers' Association and the Chinese United Growers' Association were not listed in the tables.

now targeting Chinese participation in the agri-food sector. The tactics employed by these Chinese associations demonstrated their remarkable capability to adapt and command practices suitable for the local environment. In a draft letter opposing the Marketing Board regulations on sales volume, the Chinese United Growers' Association invoked the concept *right to free trade*: "Such a decision of the Board has infringed the private rights of citizens in free trade" (Chinese United Growers' Association 1936, 2). Ironically, the British Empire had declared wars on the Qing Empire in the 19th century precisely because the Qing imperial court wouldn't grant the British unlimited rights to free trade. A concept that only gradually became an organizing principle in the Britain Empire, the right to free trade was not at all that familiar to the rural residents of Guangdong at the time. The Cantonese migrants, who came to BC partly as a result of the Opium Wars and subsequent treaties, were resourcefully pragmatic enough to mobilize this British concept when appealing to a government that bore a deep British colonial imprint.

4.3.3. Market, Information and Network

Chinese-owned and -operated restaurants and western-style cafés, serving Chinese and other population alike, emerged as an additional market within the distribution network. Similar to greengrocery, this industry experienced rapid growth in the initial decades of the 20th century as Vancouver developed into an urban center. In 1911, 25 restaurant licences were issued to Chinese establishments in Vancouver. In 1923, that number tripled, with 57 operating outside Chinatown (Yee 1988, 168). In the period between 1920 and 1926, Chinese held about 1/6 to 1/5 of all restaurant licences (Anderson 1991, 121).[14] In 1931, 16% of Chinese in BC were employed in the restaurant business; that figure rose to 20% in 1941 (Con and Wickberg 1982, 310). These restaurants and cafés constituted a crucial link in the distribution chain alongside booming Chinese greengroceries, whose steady market share of 80% to 90% meant that most of the vegetables sold in Vancouver went through the Chinese network during this time.

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[14] Although both literature take their sources from License Registers in the City of Vancouver Archives, there's potentially a data discrepancy here. It is curious that among the 61 and 69 licences issued to Chinese in 1922 and 1924 respectively, 25 and 24 located outside Chinatown, while in 1923, that number suddenly doubled to 57. What's important and congruent is the fact that Chinese-owned restaurants grew in number during this period, and a significant number were located outside Chinatown, servicing a diverse urban population.

The distribution network maintained between Chinese farmers, wholesalers, and grocers also transmitted up-to-date business information. Connected through Chinese distributors, farmers learned what was in demand across various markets and made informed crop planning. Likewise, distributors learned who was growing what, and which new crops could ease the distribution process. The robust market and extensive reach of the network are evident from the fact that Vancouver's demand was met by produce grown on Chinese farms in as far as Armstrong, more than 400km away in the interior. Howe Lee's grandfather operated a Chinese farm in Armstrong after WWI. His story illustrates the dynamic ways information, seeds, and produce moved along the intricate distribution network. First growing potatoes, he soon learned about the market demand for Chinese vegetables in Vancouver, such as lo bak (white reddish) and siuh choi (Chinese cabbage), and adjusted his crops accordingly to meet this demand. He was able to do that, because his contacts in Vancouver, who operated corner stores or worked for the large wholesaler MacDonalds Consolidated, passed this market information to him. One of his distant relatives, who operated an import-export business in Victoria, got him the seeds from China. This communication was a two-way street. Through personal contacts, distributors heard about his experimentation with siuh choi and the crop's particularly long shelf life. The growing demand finally led Lee's family farm to specialize in siuh choi, supplying the Vancouver and even the Winnipeg market 1,800km to the east (H. Lee 2019).

The information network was also useful when it came to locating suitable areas for farming, peddling routes, or establishing stores. As discussed in land development, the availability of land conducive to agriculture was constrained by the province's natural geography and limited transport infrastructure. Farm location bore strategic importance to its successful operation. It needed the right crops, soil type, aridity, climate, irrigation, and market access. As Cantonese laborers moved across the province in the late 1800s and early 1900s, working in mining, railway construction, irrigation infrastructure, and farming, they accumulated knowledge on the specifics of land. When work opportunities in mining or railway construction dwindled, some stayed and started a farm or store. China Ranch in Chilliwack was one such example, where one individual knowledgeable about local farming pooled resources together and built up a Chinese farming cluster. A person by the name "Chinese Sam" came

initially for gold mining, and worked for the Evans family from 1871 onwards. After two decades, he and the family became trusted friends and started to cultivate land together. To supplement the necessary labor, Sam hired Chinese or sub-leased land to them. From the 1890s to the 1910s, China Ranch became home to numerous Chinese and some white farmers alike (Reimer 2011, 12-4).

4.3.4. Farming Knowledge

Vegetables are perishable goods. Without modern-day cooling facilities, the production sites of vegetables had to be located in the vicinity of their markets and connected through transportation system. By 1917, railway system was relatively developed in BC, with three transcontinental lines and several local lines moving into mining areas. Water transport was another important medium connecting Vancouver Island, Lower Mainland, and the interior. Road system only developed much later. Vancouver was not connected to the interior by road until 1927 (Demeritt 1996, 223). Cantonese migrants exhibited an adeptness at finding optimal farm locations. The majority of Chinese market gardens were situated either in suburban areas surrounding urban centers like Victoria, New Westminster, and later Vancouver, or along waterways and railways.

Why did many Cantonese migrants choose vegetable cultivation in market gardens? The flat, low-lying delta land, humid and mild climate, extended daylight hours, and abundant sunshine during summer, coupled with the forested soils of the Lower Mainland, created ideal conditions for various vegetables. Vegetables take only a few months to mature. It's cultivation is labor-intensive and doesn't require large acreage. These make vegetable farming a relatively swift avenue to recover cost and generate income.

These aspects were not unfamiliar to early Cantonese migrants in BC, as a great many of them had farming experiences in the Pearl River Delta, where the climate was humid and water transport was extensively in use. These prior experiences introduced hands-on knowledge when it came to intensive vegetable farming on small acreage and resourceful ways to exist alongside water—flood mitigation, small-scale irrigation, composting, and distribution via waterways. Furthermore, Cantonese migrants brought practices and knowledge of what would

be considered today organic and ecological agriculture, including the use of natural fertilizer, integrated pest management, crop rotation, and intercropping. For example, "night soil," i.e. human and animal excrement, and discarded fish heads collected from canneries, were resourcefully processed into manure (N.R. Gibb 2011, 48; J. Lee 2020).

Boileau (2014, 54-64) highlights the connection between Cantonese horticultural traditions and the success of Chinese market gardens in Australia and New Zealand. With vegetables and rice as traditional staples in the Cantonese diet, cultivation and irrigation technologies occupied a central place in local agricultural development over centuries. The population density of Guangdong, coupled with limited arable land, directed collective efforts toward enhancing field productivity rather than labor efficiency. Crop rotation, intercropping, inlaid cropping, the system of ridges and furrows, systematic methods of composting and manuring, individual care of plant, and sophisticated irrigation systems through hydraulic engineering were some of the common methods Cantonese farmers utilized to achieve year-round yields. These were labor intensive endeavors more suitable on small acreage, such as the Chinese market gardens found throughout British settler colonies around the Pacific.

In the Pearl River Delta, People had a long tradition of using the resource-efficient dyke-pond system for self-sufficient food production. Farmers constructed dykes to mitigate floods, on which they built a house and planted various trees and vegetables. The earth used to build the dyke was excavated from the adjacent field, which was then conveniently transformed into a fish pond. The small-scale dyke-pond system was highly self-sufficient, as it recycled waste from one element as fertilizer for another, creating a self-sustaining ecosystem. Excrements and plants were mixed to produce natural fertilizer for fish, and fish scraps were used as fertilizer for vegetables and trees. Commonly, water-storage system was constructed to connect the pond with outside waterflows. Taking advantage of the ebb and flow of delta tidal water, it simultaneously moderated flood, balanced irrigation, adjusted the temperature, and dissolved oxygen saturation of pond water (Q. Zhou 2013).

This circular use of limited resources and working with—rather than against—one's environment, suggested a knowledge framework oriented toward resource-conscious adaptation. While not directly replicating the dyke-pond system, Cantonese farmers in BC exhibited a

similar resource-consciousness in their local farming practices, such as composting and manuring. In addition, they were also adaptive and experimented with new crops like potato and celery.

This knowledge framework, together with transferable technologies and an understanding of water as a resource, elucidates the historical prevalence of Chinese market gardens around the Pacific. Throughout former British settler colonies in the Pacific Rim—Southeast Asia, California, BC, Australia, and New Zealand—Cantonese migrants established successful market gardens scattering across vast geographies. Not all were located on humid delta land. Chinese market gardens also prospered in arid and semi-arid areas such as Central Otago in New Zealand, central Australia, southern California, and under temperate continental climate such as central BC. Site-specific studies indicate that Cantonese farmers adapted these farming and irrigation expertise innovatively to local conditions wherever they went. They chose which crops to grow according to local aridity, climate, topography, soil, and most importantly, market. New practices were learnt as well as invented (Boileau 2014; Kyle 2019; S. Chan 1986). Over time, early Cantonese migrants developed site-specific knowledge about land and water in BC. Moreover, they devised their own collaborative practices given the resources at hand.

4.3.5. Human Capital

Many Chinese migrants initially worked as farm laborers in BC before transitioning to market gardening. As most were seasonal laborers, they were highly mobile and moved where there was work. For instance, the Douglas Lake Cattle Company, one of the largest cattle ranches in the interior, raised cattle on hundreds of thousands of acres. It employed Chinese almost exclusively as cooks and irrigation workers (Demeritt 1996, 238). Large groups of Chinese agricultural laborers were a common sight in the Okanagan Valley, where agriculture developed around the 1900s (Kyle 2019, 3-5). Aside from wage labor on farms, many Chinese miners also grew vegetables for personal consumption and to supply other miners as additional income. In an occupational census of 1884, 15% of Chinese were grouped under "miners and

farmers in the interior," indicating that mining and farming was a common occupational combination for Chinese working in the interior at this time (Con and Wickberg 1982, 309).

These early farming experiences served as quasi on-site training. While working in agriculture across the province, Chinese laborers gained insights into local land characteristics and farming practices suitable for specific regions. For example, which areas were suitable for which crops, how should irrigation work in particular topographies, how to access markets, and how much work was required for specific farms and acreages. They could also learn what didn't work from their employers' failures. These on-farm trainings prepared them to later take on market gardening as owner-operators, tenant farmers, or to help friends and relatives on their farms as hired hands. In Chilliwack's agricultural economy, for example, while Chinese farm laborers had been consistently high in number since the 1880s, the number of independent Chinese farmers grew from a scant 2 in 1901 to 49 in 1911, making up 21% of the Chinese workforce. Many of these farmers hired additional Chinese farm workers (Reimer 2011, 18). This suggests that work as farm laborers prepared Cantonese migrants to become market gardeners later on. In comparison, white farm laborers were much fewer in number, and their wage rates were in most cases higher. Not every farm owner, even those with prejudicial racial sentiments, could and would afford white farm labor under these conditions.

Immigration policies resulted in a predominantly male demographic within Chinese communities until the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1947. In small businesses such as market gardening, this led to the predominant entrepreneurial unit being male partnerships. Research on Chilliwack Chinese farmers identifies common patterns of partnerships involving two men or groups of three to five men operating a single farm. Often, these farms were clustered in the same area to pool resources together (Reimer 2011, 17-8). Evidence indicates that some partners had prior working relationships. Ken Yip's grandfather and his long-time associate Dennis Quong first met while mining gold in the late 1800s. They later became business partners in market gardening and general merchandizing in Cranbrook, east Kootenays, for decades (Yip 2007, 131). Similarly, the history of independent Chilliwack Chinese farmer Mon Ah shows that he had two Chinese lodgers on his homestead, very likely friends from their

gold mining days (Reimer 2011, 6). Laboring in camaraderie under adverse conditions likely engendered a good level of trust and bounded solidarity among these men.

In contrast to the dominant form of patriarchal nuclear families, where social norms assigned tasks based on gender, Cantonese male partnerships created flexibility in how tasks were divided and shared, and which forms farm life could take on.[15] J. Lee (2020) recounted life on her grandfather's farm in Burnaby in the early 1900s, where Chinese workers slept, ate, and worked together on the farm. Before 1949, many single Chinese men became adopted family members and fostered enduring friendships with her family. For self-employed Chinese farmers, this pool of experienced men, willing to take up seasonal farm work and live on-farm, provided the necessary and skillful farm hands for their labor-intensive operations. Chinese farm workers in these establishments obtained not only work, room, and board but also the possibility to be trained in the business, live in a community where they could enjoy familiar food, speak their home languages, find nurturing relationships, and perhaps even discover potential business partners.

In the 1920s and 30s, there was a growing number of younger generations in Chinese communities who spoke English and assisted the day-to-day operations of family businesses. Between 1922 and 1926, approximately 1,300 to 1,400 Chinese children attended public schools in BC each year (British Columbia Legislative Association 1927). Oral histories and biographies frequently recount experiences where younger ones helped in stores or on farms, performing tasks ranging from farm work, customer service, to book-keeping for their families or family friends (Chow 2020; J. Lee 2020; Perrault 2002). This is corroborated by an account from an anxious white observer in a 1937 newspaper editorial, attributing the Chinese "takeover" of the fresh produce industry to a sophisticated food network and the help of second-generation Chinese Canadians (Yee 1988, 83). The support of younger generations reduced overhead costs, complemented older generations with skills such as English or book-keeping, and provided an unified space for entrepreneurs to coordinate family, community, and work life. While the

[15] For the constricted roles white women were expected to take on in western Canada during the early period, *see* Carter (2009), " 'Daughters of British Blood' or 'Hordes of Men of Alien Race': The Homesteads-for-Women Campaign in Western Canada."

benefits for working adults are evident, the impacts of these responsibilities on the younger persons remain less clear.

4.3.6. Sociality

Relations not only facilitated market entry and business establishment, they also contributed to job and life satisfaction while operating a small farm or greengrocery. Leafy greens have held a special culinary importance in Cantonese diet. Early Cantonese miners often maintained small vegetable gardens on the side for self-consumption and to supply fellow miners. Oral histories suggest that cultivating and selling vegetables satisfied the self and social needs of these entrepreneurs, serving social reproduction in the Marxian sense and building communities within the broader anti-Chinese social milieu. The family farm of Julie Lee in 1920s Burnaby served as a community space where Cantonese workers, friends, and family could gather in a safe space, speaking the same language and enjoying familiar food together (J. Lee 2020). Her first-person account reflects a sense of well-being anchored not just in the farm as a workplace but also as a space for social gathering, care, trust, and leisure activities.

In contrast, Chinese farms and stores neighboring Indigenous communities functioned as social spaces for both communities. Sarah Ling and Faith Sparrow-Crawford conducted community interviews to retrace the histories of Chinese market gardens on Musqueam land. In the reflective piece that became Ling's master thesis, she documents the ways in which Chinese tenant farmers and their Musqueam hosts cohabited as respectful and hospitable neighbors. Edmond Leong recalled playing with Musqueam children when he grew up on his family farm. Wayne Point's family exchanged food with the Jing family, where they gifted fish and received fresh vegetables in return. When Chinese farmers found Musqueam cultural artifacts, they brought them to the late Chief Sparrow. As a small boy, Wayne Point and his family searched for cultural artifacts on their neighbor Jing's farm. As long as they didn't disturb the garden, they could go through the fields as they liked (Ling 2018, 42-4).

In these stories, what stands out is a quite different historical relation to land and Indigenous communities. Farm was not a fenced-up private property closing off those who were deemed as strangers. Neither was it an enterprise that brought in hundreds of seasonal laborers

under foremen's supervision, whose primary function was profit-making. Rather, these small Chinese market gardens on Musqueam land were shared working and living spaces with permeable boundaries, dynamically negotiated with their Musqueam neighbors through reciprocal and respectful relations.

In Alert Bay, Vancouver Island, Frank Wong's father operated a general store in the small village where, according to Frank, inter-ethnic relations were much more amicable than in Vancouver. First Nations used the store as a makeshift bank: when fishing season was over, they deposited money unofficially in the store, and his father was entrusted to keep count. Growing up, Frank would go to potluck with First Nations and they would catch his favorite kinds of fish for him (Wong 2013). These acts of trust and reciprocity stand in stark contrast to historical white-Indigenous relations marked by expropriation and violence. Though policies have evolved, the legacies persisted, shaping contemporary Chinese-Indigenous relations in Canada.[16]

To excavate these different shapes of social relations under migration and contact is not to argue that certain groups did it better than others. Rather, these historical evidences enrich our understanding of migration. Inter-group social relations did and do exist in diverse forms apart from subjugation and the erasure of difference, even under settler colonialism. Migrants or settlers—two concepts that have become at times difficult to distinguish in contemporary debates—have had divergent ways of relating to Indigenous peoples and to the land they cohabited, though convergent practices can also be observed. With different policies and brutality, white supremacy and the settler colonial government targeted Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, and Indigenous peoples to exert control after different groups came into contact. In the process of navigating this social environment, early Chinese migrants found ways to live on and with this land, live alongside diverse neighbors, and form communities. In fostering

[16] As a starting point to understand the histories and implications of white settler colonialism on Indigenous population in Canada, *see* the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Reports: https://nctr.ca/records/reports/. Writer and researcher Amy Fung (2019) reflects in her personal essay collection *Before I Was a Critic I Was a Human Being* the complex ways in which settler colonialism is entangled in her life while growing up Chinese Canadian.

social space where care, trust, respect, and reciprocity could be practiced in proximity, sociality also nurtured market gardening as a vehicle to live well with others.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I began with the question, namely how to explain the historical phenomenon of a robust Chinese food network in BC that has achieved extensive market prominence, especially given the extent to which institutions worked to exclude and supress the Chinese presence between 1880 and 1940. An examination of existing literature revealed some important theoretical insights that subsequently framed my approach to this question. These theoretical insights revolved around two overarching concerns. Guided by them, the thesis set out to write an alternative narrative of this history based on archives, oral histories, and secondary literature.

The first concern was how social relations bear on economic actions. In asking this question, I follow in the footsteps of feminist economic geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists who have been charting out maps to conceive the *economy* in expansive and generative ways, ones that look beyond the confines of the classic economic model homo economicus. Methodologically, I took inspiration from diverse economies framework, particularly North's framing of "small, independent, community-based businesses as vehicles for living as they want to." How to search for these subjectivities and connect them to the material history of the Chinese food network? Oral histories and biography provided one point of access, but connections had to be made through reading for economic difference: What economic subjectivities and practices can be de-aligned and re-aligned? These methodological questions guided my engagement with the historical material.

To begin with, I called into question the victim narrative that regards the Chinese working in market gardening, peddling, greengrocery, and wholesale under white supremacy as people who had few considerations of their own but reluctantly entered the agri-food sector. In order to queer and shift this conceptual framing, I positioned these social actors as migrant entrepreneurs of small businesses. This shift in perspective is not just about empowerment, although it can be empowering for those who voluntarily work with the food they cherish and

find comfort in. More importantly, analyzing the network as a case of migrant entrepreneurship opens doors to contemplate a more complex question: What constituted their decision-making landscape? What mattered to them as they made these decisions? What constituted their everyday economic life? For this, I'm indebted to the critical engagement of feminist scholars with social reproduction, especially their inquiries into the value hierarchy of differentially paid and unpaid labor: housework, care and emotion work, the work of other-than-humans, to name a few.[17]

An analysis of Cantonese migrant networks and the aspirational motifs circulating within gave a first clue. Whether it was a market garden, a greengrocery, a restaurant, or a wholesale store, running such a small business with community resources was seen as a common vehicle to an aspired good life. In these aspirational motifs, wage labor was a common starting point to accumulate savings, build trust, skills, and social connections for later ventures. Lower wage in a split labor market, antagonism from white labor groups, and the coercive and dependent relations experienced in the labor contract system all explain why wage labor was seen only as a means to an end during this period. On the other hand, the physical place of a farm or store often became a social space where communities were built and reciprocal, respectful, and nurturing relations were fostered, whether with fellow villagers, neighborhood customers, or Indigenous neighbors.

Relational embeddedness provided an analytical tool to zoom in on the various ways in which social relations bore on the socio-economic history of the network. An important component was embeddedness in migrant networks. The Cantonese migrant networks served

[17] For discussions on house- and care work, s*ee* Federici (1975), "Wages against Housework;" Herrera (2012), "States, Work, and Social Reproduction through the Lens of Migrant Experience: Ecuadorian Domestic Workers in Madrid;" Hopkins (2017), "Mostly Work, Little Play: Social Reproduction, Migration, and Paid Domestic Work in Montreal;" Molinari and Pratt (2021), "Seniors Long Term Care in Canada: A Continuum of Soft to Brutal Privatisation;" Fraser (2016), "Contradictions of Capital and Care." For emotion work and labor, *see* Hochschild (2012), *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. For work of other-than-humans, *see* Collard, Dempsey and Sundberg (2015), "A Manifesto for Abundant Futures." For broader discussions on social reproduction, *see* Ferguson and McNally (2015), "Precarious Migrants: Gender, Race and the Social Reproduction of a Global Working Class;" Meehan and Strauss (eds.) (2015), *Precarious Worlds: Contested Geographies of Social Reproduction;* Bhattacharya (ed.) (2017), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression;* Mitchell, Marston and Katz (eds) (2004), *Life's Work: Geographies of Social Reproduction;* Emiko and Kaoru (eds.) (2014), *Asian Women and Intimate Work.*

multiple functions. First and foremost, they connected people along lines of language/dialect and village origin. Anchored in these connections, Cantonese men occupied multiple employment niches that secured the links within the distribution chain: farmers, peddlers, servants, and cooks; later these expanded to include greengrocers, restauranteurs, and wholesalers. In the face of white supremacy, bounded solidarity developed among them that ensured access to a booming market. Not only did goods and people move through these networks: business information traveled along them; training and work opportunities abounded; in addition, they provided a large pool of potential collaborators and partners for small business ventures.

The second theoretical concern focused on the interplay between agency and structure, more specifically, how these early migrants adapted to and devised strategies to live in the new environment. To account for the structural factors of colonialism, border regime and white supremacy, I analyzed this interplay with structural embeddedness. Land practice was a prime example. Although they were unable to acquire land, early Cantonese men entered into numerous formal and informal tenancy agreement with white landholders and Indigenous communities, because they were able to pool group resources to do the work that most individual landowners could not do on their own: land clearance and irrigation. At the conjuncture of settler-colonial expansion, chaotic agricultural development in virgin forest, and varying levels of experience with land cultivation, Cantonese men found the niche in small-scale market gardening: intensive vegetable cultivation on small acreage. In migration, they brought over not only their labor and aspirations, but also ideas and practices that were then adapted to the local environment. This included an understanding of water resources, transferable technologies such as manuring and irrigation, and a knowledge framework oriented toward resource-conscious, adaptive agriculture. Immigration restrictions and costly passage resulted in a majority male demographic in BC's Chinese communities. This led them to devise new farming unit of working-men partnerships that allowed for more flexible division of labor and resource sharing. What followed were communities and new forms of social organization on these farms: These single men became adopted families, and the farms came to perform important social functions for those who labored, lived, and visited.

A recurring theme in the analysis of this interplay was the resourceful strategies that Chinese farmers, peddlers, and green grocers developed to deal with constraints. Some of these constraints were structural, such as successive public policies designed to hinder Chinese participation in the market. Others pertained to their own resources, such as limited financial capital and English proficiency. Again, group resources were mobilized to adapt to the situation. They formed trade associations for mutual aid, took advantage of tools available in the Canadian political system, and strategically used British concepts in communicating with the white Anglophone public and political office. To work around limited financial resources, partners shared in capital, costs, income, and risk, and extended credit to each other on the basis of enforceable trust. These practices bear striking similarities to communing – a concept and practice of social organization that has gained traction in discussions of capitalism and precarity. At its core, commoning is about pooling and sharing resources. But just as in food studies, few connect it to migrant practices, especially those of groups commonly seen as exploited, racialized, or subjugated. In the process of coping and adapting to the situation at hand, new practices were invented that transformed local societies. The greengrocery, a business model born out of the need to circumvent a new legislation on peddling tax, became an entirely new sector of the Canadian urban landscape that continues to this day.

In writing this socio-economic history of the Chinese food network, the thesis brought five fields of research into interdisciplinary dialogue: ethnic studies, food studies, migration studies, migrant entrepreneurship, and economic sociology/geography. Furthermore, it weaved diverse economies and ME as methodologies into the fabric of analysis. The strength of such an interdisciplinary dialogue lies in its capacity to think through social processes outside the confines of binary thinking: In this work, it addresses the conceptual tension between economic and social, agency and structure. Relatedly, its second contribution consists in its methodological inter-temporality: Most studies in diverse economies and ME concern themselves only with contemporary phenomena. Both took shape in the early 2000s in response to their respective academic debates at the time: diverse economies was concerned with hegemonic narratives of capitalism within Marxist traditions, while ME sought to bring institutional and national contexts back into the discussion on migrant entrepreneurship. Their

application in this historical analysis revealed surprising connections, both between these two research agendas, which have rarely overlapped, and between economic practices and subjectivities of different time periods. The similarities drawn between commoning and resource-sharing practices among Chinese migrants was one such example.

Nonetheless, due to restricted access to local archives and a lack of direct narratives from the historical actors in question, this study is limited in its capacity to engage in dialogue with Chinese market gardeners, peddlers, and greengrocers. Moreover, the story it tells is really a story of Chinese/Cantonese men, as the Chinese communities in BC at the time were largely a bachelor society of laborers. Future historical research can build on more extensive archival work and generate oral histories or life writing in the process. I'm particularly interested in the untold stories of Chinese women in places of inter-group contact: What happened to the women who worked as prostitutes or came over as wives, and the daughters who grew up in both worlds? Were there Chinese women who received higher education in these places during this period? If so, what were their stories and what became of them?

Relatedly, I'm interested in conducting a sociological study of contemporary Chinese migrants built on community-based fieldwork. Because of my own academic trajectories in North American Studies and in Germany, I'm particularly interested in Chinese women in the U.S., Canada, or Germany who have received or are receiving higher education in these places. More specifically, I want to explore their subjectivities and practices with regard to work. What ideas and aspirations guide their actions, and what resources do they mobilize in order to live well in their new life settings? What role does the institutional context play?

Another area for future research is the history of human-environment relations, in particular, the relations to water in migration. Discussions on land development and farming knowledge emphasized the important role of water in both Guangdong and BC. Both provinces had extensive waterways connected to the Pacific. Water has long been a significant resource, a means of transportation, and a source of danger. Guangdong has a long tradition of irrigation design and construction; upon arrival in BC, many Cantonese men worked on irrigation and dyking projects throughout the province. What were their specific practices with water? How

did these change with migration? How were these related to Indigenous relations to water and to the water policies of the settler-colonial government?

The fourth area of inquiry I'd like to pursue is the social history of ideas in migratory contact. Ideas have traveled with human mobilities. Under 19th century colonialism, maritime transportation was the primary means of long-distance travel. Therefore, I'm particularly interested in the ways in which certain ideas – about border, about human mobilities, about a particular social group – traveled, developed, and localized with moving bodies and objects (e.g. letters, postcards) in and through colonial ports: Hong Kong, Singapore, Victoria, San Francisco, or Qingdao. How did the development and articulation of these ideas relate to the state of science and philosophy in Europe at the time? How were they connected to the travels and long-distance communications of certain influential intellectual figures? What encounters did they have in migratory contact that influenced their writings on these ideas, and how did these writings influence imperial and colonial regimes? These are some of the avenues I'm interested in pursuing after this thesis.

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