

Sam Kee: A Chinese Business in Early Vancouver*

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Canada's reception of the early Chinese migrants was characterized by vicious hostility and antagonism at legislative and popular levels of society. Politicians, journalists, housewives and workers alike sought to exclude and restrict the Chinese. Yet the Chinese remained and settled, attracted by the economic opportunities open to them as wage-labourers and self-employed businessmen. This paper explores the pre-1916 activities of the Sam Kee Company 三記號, one of the wealthiest merchant firms of early Vancouver's Chinatown, in order to look at the Chinese-Canadian past from a perspective different from those traditionally used in viewing Chinese-Canadian history. It looks at how one Chinese firm conducted its affairs and how the institution of business contributed to the process of immigrant adjustment.

In the writing of Chinese-Canadian history, one group of scholars has looked extensively at the roots and agitators of the racism that surrounded the Chinese during their early settlement in Canada.¹ These studies have explained the politics, the economics and the psychologies of what remains essentially a white phenomenon the victims and targets of which are the Chinese. Other scholars have examined the voluntary associations established by the Chinese to meet various community and social needs.² These studies have commented on how the social bases of organization

* I wish to acknowledge the comments of W. Peter Ward on earlier drafts of this article and the assistance of Mrs. Yat Leong Chang and Dr. Theodore Chang in providing personal information on Chang Toy.

¹ See, for examples, James Morton, *In the Sea of Sterile Mountains* (Vancouver: J. J. Douglas, 1974) and W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Towards Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill and Queen's University Press, 1978).

² A large volume of literature has emerged on the topic of voluntary associations. For examples, see: Chuen-yan Lai, "The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Victoria: Its Origins and Functions," *BC Studies* 15 (Autumn 1972): 53-67; Edgar Wickberg, editor, *From China to Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982); William E. Willmott, "Chinese Clan Associations in Vancouver," *Man* 64 (1964): 33-37.

came from China as part of the immigrants' cultural baggage to provide familiar points of reference and support for new immigrants.

But white racism and community organizations are only two aspects of the immigration experience of the Chinese in Canada. This article explores a third realm of that past: business activity. The records of Vancouver's Sam Kee Company, while incomplete and unclear, allow a rare look inside the immigrant world. To date, studies of the Chinese-Canadian past have hardly used primary documentation from within the Chinese community. Studies of anti-Asian agitation, for example, have rarely explored racism's psychological impact upon the Chinese people, nor have organizational studies investigated the internal workings of a clan or county-based association. Business records, on the other hand, document Chinese firms and individuals as active participants in the immigrant past, as people responding to a New World context.

Furthermore, business history explores an area of primary concern to the Chinese migrants themselves. After all, the Chinese, like other immigrants to North America, came to make money, not to stir up racism nor to establish clubs and meeting halls. By looking through the frame of business history, it is possible to begin to think more seriously about how the Chinese adjusted to the New World with regard to their own economic motivations and expectations.

Vancouver's Chinese community grew from the lumber industries of the region and from the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway to nearby Port Moody. After the city's incorporation in 1886, the Chinese worked there as land-clearers, ditch-diggers and farmers, and as cooks and servants in homes, hotels and logging camps. As Vancouver developed, the Chinese established laundries, merchant tailor operations, and other businesses to meet consumer demands from the white population. Merchants inside Chinatown provided the growing Chinese community with a full range of essential services. With the trans-Pacific steamships docking at Vancouver's harbour, Chinatown firms channelled the burgeoning import trade from China into the British Columbian interior, where the majority of the province's Chinese lived. Vancouver's Chinatown soon overtook Victoria's as the leading commercial and social centre of the Chinese in Canada.³

The Sam Kee Company was one of the four firms in Vancouver's Chinatown that grossed over \$150,000 in 1907, a figure six times greater

³ Information of Chinese activities in early Vancouver is taken from Paul R. Yee, "Chinese Business in Vancouver, 1886-1914" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1983), pp. 28-41.

than the average income of two-thirds of Chinatown's businesses.⁴ The wealthier merchants of Chinatown filled many roles and functions within the immigrant community while enriching themselves. They provided the essentials of food, housing and employment (directly and indirectly through labour contracts) to their fellow countrymen. They helped the community attain a high degree of self-sufficiency in a hostile environment. Because wealth was one important determinant to leadership inside and outside of Chinatown, these merchants often acted as the community's spokesmen. They organized two early chambers of commerce in 1898 and 1899 and also formed the backbone of the Chinese Benevolent Association, nominally the highest ranking body within Chinatown.⁵ Merchants were the most outspoken segment of the community and defended their interests in court and at city hall to demonstrate a confident understanding of western legal and political institutions.⁶

In many respects the merchants helped to recreate in the overseas settlement a semblance of a Chinese social order. Migrants accustomed to the flourishing market towns and county centres of rural South China encountered a familiar free market economy in Canada, complete with limited prospects of upward mobility as they toiled at whatever jobs they found. Peace and order were needed for the smooth functioning of the economy, and this impelled Chinatown's merchants to deal with the vagaries of the New World by shouldering the traditional welfare and mediary duties of the gentry and lineage elders of China. Since wealth and financial acumen were highly respected, business activity helped transform the social and economic values brought from China into a familiar, functional hierarchical system where migrants could labour patiently at realizing their own dreams.

Chang Toy (陳才, Chen Cai, also known as Chen Dao-zhi 陳道之 and 陳長僅 Chen Chang-jin) was the founder and guiding force of the

⁴ Public Archives of Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie King, Memoranda and Notes 1887-1921, vol. C41, Royal Commission to Investigate into Losses Sustained by the Chinese Population of Vancouver, B.C., 1908, Resultant Claims (1) and (2), pp. C32537-C32719. (Hereafter King Papers)

⁵ David T. H. Lee, [A History of Chinese in Canada] (Taipei, 1967), pp. 208-09; King Papers, p. C31560; Doe Chuen Lee, *Inside the Chinese Benevolent Association* (Taipei, 1969), pp. 12-13.

⁶ Chinese laundrymen, for example, carried on a prolonged battle with civic officials in Vancouver over licensing and bylaw regulations, while land-owning merchants complained about the condition of streets and sidewalks and about police raids into Chinatown. Other merchants sued the city for damages incurred during razing and lobbied for licence reductions. See Paul Yee, "Chinese Business in Vancouver, 1886-1914" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1983), pp. 33-35, 47, 49-50 and 51.

Sam Kee Company. According to family sources, he was born in 1857 to poor peasant Hakkas (客家) in Poon Yue (番禺) county of Guangdong (廣東) province. His father died when Chang Toy was three years old, but the boy managed to acquire three years of education after the age of ten. In 1874 Chang Toy came to Victoria, B.C. His passage had been paid by a fish canner, for whom Chang was to work one season in repayment. However, due to contrary winds, the boat arrived late, and only one month's work remained.

Chang then went to New Westminster to work in a sawmill. After two years he came to the Vancouver area and began a laundry business. In subsequent years he gradually moved into imports and exports, retail sales, charcoal and fuel sales, labour contracting in the timber, fishing and sugar industries, steamship ticket sales and real estate development. The Sam Kee store emerged as a gathering place for migrants of Hakka and Poon Yue origins who came to purchase goods and look for work. The firm's name, Sam Kee, was used by the company and customers alike as a person's name, although no such person ever existed.

The company's earliest surviving records document the sale of Chinese goods to local Chinese. Import-export firms shipping goods to and from China have been identified as the earliest businesses of the Chinese immigrants to North America. These firms did not require large amounts of initial capital because they relied extensively on credit and good business contacts in Canton and Hong Kong. Many of these firms were private partnerships between one or more owners, while others were attached to locally formed home-county associations, where officers acted as owner-managers and carried on the business. The primary imports were rice, tea and dry goods such as clothing and food items, while exports to China included gold, wheat, barley, mercury, salt and dried seafoods.⁷

The Sam Kee Company's retail endeavours started with goods shipped from Victoria's Wing Chong Company (永祥號), owned by Chang Toy's good friend Chu Lai (徐禮). Chang Toy was involved from the outset, employing two helpers in 1888. Shum Moon (沈滿) later emerged as his comptroller. For 1888, sales totalled \$4,356.45, and the net profit was \$374.81.⁸ The company stocked a wide range of goods: a 1901 inventory listed over 350 different kinds of items including all types of Chinese

⁷ L. Armentrout Ma, "Big and Medium Businesses of Chinese Immigrants to the United States, 1850-1890: An Outline," *Bulletin of the Chinese Historical Society of America* 13 (September 1978): 1-2.

⁸ City of Vancouver Archives, Add. MSS 571, Sam Kee Company Papers (hereafter cited as Sam Kee) vol. 15 file 6 "光緒十四年吉日計來貨" [Record of Goods on Hand], 1888.

foods (rice, preserved fruits, dried seafoods, salted goods, beans, pastes, spices, and oil), Chinese medicines and wines, and a variety of dry goods such as thread, writing brushes, envelopes, matches, fish-knives and handkerchiefs.⁹ The firm's retail sales climbed in the 1890s from \$7,740.25 in 1893 to \$8,660.44 in nine months of 1898.¹⁰ A tally of daily cash-book entries shows that \$13,831 was received and \$14,891 expended in 1891,¹¹ while \$19,540 was received and \$18,471 expended in 1896.¹² Clearly Sam Kee had sources of income other than retail sales of imported Chinese goods.

Sam Kee relied on connections to China and abroad for supplies and for credit. It purchased goods from firms in Hong Kong and Yokohama, chief of which was the Sun Tong Chong Company (新同昌) of Hong Kong. Sun Tong Chong acted as the company's agent in China, purchasing goods both outright and on credit for shipment to Canada. In payment, Sam Kee sent funds and Canadian goods to Sun Tong Chong which were then sold to Chinese buyers. Between 1902 and 1907, Sam Kee's purchases from Sun Tong Chong climbed from 9,810 taels (\$6,180.30) to 22,735 taels (\$17,960.65).¹³ Sun Tong Chong levied interest charges of between 6 and 8 percent on annual outstanding balances.¹⁴ As table 1 shows, Sam Kee relied heavily on credit purchases, owing amounts that ranged from 2,453 taels (\$1,545) to 9,314 taels (\$7,358) during the 1902-07 period.

In the 1890s the Sam Kee Company was shipping goods to Chinese stores in Kamloops, Lillooet and Ashcroft, and in the 1900s it supplied smaller towns such as Extension on Vancouver Island and Enderby in the interior.¹⁵ Until 1902 the store was located on the south side of the unit block East Pender Street, and the back of the store overlooked the waters of False Creek, which facilitated the shipping of goods. In Vancouver credit from Sam Kee was readily available to Chinatown individuals and firms, and even Japanese and a few whites had accounts

⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 15 file 1 " 雜貨成本簿 " [Cost of Goods On Hand], 1901.

¹⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 15 file 9, " 光緒十九年春月立記現沽數簿 " [Record of Sales, 1893]; vol. 15 file 12 " " [Record of Sales, 1898].

¹¹ Sam Kee, vol. 14 file 1 " 光緒十七年抄進支總簿 " [Journal, 1891].

¹² Sam Kee, vol. 14 file 2 " 光緒二十二年立記進支總簿 " [Journal, 1896].

¹³ Sam Kee, vol. 3 file 6 [List of Goods Shipped to Vancouver], 1905-06; and vol. 3 file 11 [List of Goods Shipped to Vancouver], 1908.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See letters in Sam Kee, vol. 3 files 2, 3, 8 for correspondence with camps and towns throughout British Columbia.

TABLE 1

Sam Kee Company Payments and Purchases from Sun Tong Chong Company

<i>Year</i>		<i>Total sent to Sun Tong Chong</i>	<i>Interest allowed by Sun Tong Chong</i>	<i>Total held by Sun Tong Chong</i>	<i>Total purchases from Sun Tong Chong</i>	<i>Interest charged by Sun Tong Chong</i>	<i>Total owing</i>	<i>Balance</i>
1902	T	10,241.3.6	570.9	10,712.1	9,810.0.8		9,810.0.8	902.0.9
	\$	6,451.83	359.10	6,748.56	6,180.30		6,180.30	586.26
1903	T	9,361.0.9	737.2.5	10,098.3.4	11,757.9.8	793.4	12,551.3.8	2,453.0.3
	\$	5,991.04	471.68	6,462.72	7,524.48	507.52	8,032.64	1,569.92
1905	T	18,462.2.0	1,204.8.8	19,667.0.8	20,896.4.3	1,623.8.6	22,520.2.9	2,853.2.1
	\$	13,477.26	878.92	14,356.91	15,254.08	1,184.79	16,439.60	2,082.69
1906	T	9,932.4.1	643.1.7	10,575.5.9	14,656.4.4	916.2.5	15,572.6.9	4,997.1
	\$	7,945.60	522.40	8,460.00	11,724.80	732.80	12,457.60	3,995.20
1907	T	13,650.1.6	1,093.5.1	14,743.6.9	22,725.0	1,332.8.6	24,057.8.7	9,314.1.8
	\$	10,783.50	863.47	11,646.97	17,952.75	1,052.28	19,005.03	7,358.06

SOURCE: City of Vancouver Archives, Add. MSS 571, Sam Kee Papers, vol. 3 file 6 [List of Goods Shipped to Vancouver 1905-1906], vol. 3 file 11 [List of Goods Shipped to Vancouver, 1908].

CURRENCY CONVERSION: Average value of Haikwan tael for 1902 — 63¢; 1903 — 64¢; 1904 — 66¢; 1905 — 73¢; 1906 — 80¢; 1907 — 79¢. Source: Canada. House of Commons. Report of the Department of Trade and Commerce, *Sessional Papers* No. 10 (1903), p. 137; Canada. House of Commons. Report of the Department of Trade and Commerce, *Sessional Papers* No. 10a (1908), p. 189.

with the company.¹⁶ Chinese imports such as rice, soya sauce and fire-crackers were sold to white wholesale firms in Vancouver and in Revelstoke,¹⁷ and prior to 1908 the firm handled occasional shipments of opium, forwarding goods from a Victoria firm to white customers in Vancouver.¹⁸

As well, a network of communication existed between Sam Kee and individual Chinese immigrants scattered throughout British Columbia in small towns and isolated camps. Most Chinese immigrants had come to Canada expecting to earn enough money for an eventual retirement back in China. In the meantime, for purposes of ongoing household maintenance, they regularly sent funds home to their relatives. Sam Kee Company acted as a clearing-house for cash remittances. After receiving the money from migrants, Sam Kee forwarded the funds by personal carriers or by mail to Sun Tong Chong in Hong Kong and to other business associates in Canton. These firms then arranged to distribute the funds to the appropriate recipients. In the 1890s Sam Kee arranged for monthly dispatches of remittances containing individual amounts ranging from \$10 to \$200.¹⁹

In Sam Kee's import-export trading, rice was one major import which the company promoted extensively. In 1900 it brought in at least ten tons of rice from China.²⁰ These supplies may have been insufficient to meet local demands, since a year later Sam Kee purchased additional quantities of rice from local wholesale grocers such as F. C. Davidge and W. A. Anderson.²¹ By 1908, however, Sam Kee had gained better control of its Chinese rice supplies and was selling rice directly to the major wholesale firms of Victoria and Vancouver including Kelly, Douglas and Company and the W. H. Malkin Company,²² as well as indirectly to other customers through local food broker J. E. Chipman.²³

¹⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 12 file 1 "三記光緒二十七年貴客簿" [Ledger of Customers Accounts, 1901]; vol. 12 file 2 "光緒二十八年客帳簿" [Ledger of Customers Accounts, 1902]; vol. 12 file 3 "光緒二十九年客帳簿" [Ledger of Customers Accounts, 1903].

¹⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 54, Sam Kee to McLennan and McFeely, 30 July 1908; vol. 6 file 7, Woolsey, LeFeaux and Co. to Sam Kee, 15 May 1906.

¹⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 4, Shon Yuen and Co. to Sam Kee, 19 December 1904, 18 December 1904.

¹⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 18 file 6 "代寄銀信簿" [Record of Cash and Letter Remittances], 1891; file 7 "匯銀信簿" [Record of Cash and Letter Remittances], 1896.

²⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 6, Customs declarations, 9 March 1900, 21 May 1900.

²¹ Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 9, F. C. Davidge to Sam Kee, 22 March 1901, 26 March 1901; W. A. Anderson and Co. to Chang Foy [sic], 28 March 1901.

²² Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 120, Sam Kee to Kelly Douglas and Co., 31 May 1908; vol. 1 Book 1, p. 33, Sam Kee to W. H. Malkin, 18 January 1908.

In 1908 Sam Kee Company set up its own rice mill in Vancouver to process uncleaned rice, but this venture appears to have failed since a year later the firm was attempting to sell the milling equipment.²⁴ The company proved to be an aggressive seller of its rice, sending samples and prices to white wholesale firms across western Canada in Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Regina and Winnipeg.²⁵ It was a canny bargainer too, admitting in one instance that the firm could meet any lower price of competitors because it had purchased its rice too early in the season and was therefore anxious to sell.²⁶ The company also sold rice to local Japanese wholesalers including the Japan Rice Mill.²⁷

Fish was the Sam Kee Company's major export. British Columbia's massive overseas shipments of canned salmon had helped to consolidate the province's staples-based economy in the 1870s. In 1899 Sam Kee sent thirty-five cases of canned crab to Hong Kong and thirty tons of salted dogfish to Yokohama.²⁸ In 1901 over five tons of pickled salmon, canned salmon and dried salt salmon were shipped to Chinese firms in Hawaii.²⁹ Then the development of a salt herring industry in British Columbia, matched with a powerful consumer demand from across the Pacific for salted fish, led Sam Kee to export large quantities of this fish to Asia beginning in 1903. Most of the early shipments of salt herring went to the Sun Tong Chong Company in Hong Kong, but by 1907 considerable amounts of the fish were being consigned to Shanghai.³⁰ Table 2 shows that the volume of salt herring exports almost tripled from at least 521 tons in 1905 to at least 1,544 tons in 1915.³¹

²³ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 12, J. E. Chipman to Sam Kee, 2 January 1907, 10 January 1908.

²⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 8 file 1, Sam Kee to V. E. Roberts, 18 February 1909.

²⁵ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 12, Sam Kee to Campbell Bros and Wilson, Calgary, George-son and Co., Calgary, Hudson's Bay Company, Winnipeg, et al., 22 January 1908; vol. 1 Book 1, pp. 67-70, Sam Kee to various firms, 19 March 1908.

²⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 52, Sam Kee to Rat Portage Lumber Co., Harrison River, 6 March 1908.

²⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 89, Sam Kee to Japan Rice Mill, 31 March 1908.

²⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 4, Bills of Lading, Sam Kee to Wing Lee Chun, 25 February 1899, 28 December 1899; Sam Kee to J. Hori, 27 February 1899.

²⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 9, Bills of Lading, Sam Kee to Chin On, 1 November 1901; 11 December 1901.

³⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 9 file 2, Bills of Lading, 1906-08.

³¹ The export figures are modified by "at least" because the compilation may be affected by missing records.

TABLE 2
Sam Kee Company Salt Herring Exports to China, 1904-1915

<i>Year</i>	<i>Exports</i>
1904 - 1905	573.29 tons
1905 - 1906	321.55 tons
1906 - 1907	587.59 tons
1908 - 1909	638 tons
1910 - 1911	1,005.8 tons
1912 - 1913	1,649.2 tons
1914	1,544.25 tons

SOURCE: City of Vancouver Archives, Add. MSS 571, Sam Kee Company, vol. 9 file 1, Bills of lading and insurance certificates, 1904-05; vol. 9 file 2, Bills of lading and insurance certificates, 1906-08; vol. 9 file 3, Bills of lading and insurance certificates, 1911; vol. 9 file 5, Insurance policies, 1912-13; vol. 9 file 6, Bills of lading and insurance certificates, 1914-15.

The rapid growth of this export trade led to Sam Kee's direct participation in the processing side of the industry. Its plants were centred at Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island, where the herring was caught in nearby waters and immediately salt-packed for export. Local Japanese firms had exported the fish to Japan prior to 1903, when both the Sam Kee and Wing Sang companies of Vancouver began shipping the fish to Hong Kong.³² At the outset, Sam Kee merely purchased the fish from white and Japanese packers, but soon it began to advance funds to packers to ensure sufficient supplies for itself.

Sam Kee's role as supplier of capital and buyer of the finished products relieved the cash shortages and marketing problems of early fish packers. During the 1903-04 season the company advanced funds to Nanaimo packer H. M. McCrae, charging him 7 percent interest per annum.³³ When McCrae delivered his shipment of fish to Sam Kee, the company paid cash for one-half the shipment and was allowed to defer the balance for sixty days.³⁴ Sam Kee then received a 10 percent commission from McCrae for helping to sell the fish.³⁵ In the early days of the trade, when

³² Leung, p. 6.

³³ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 4, H. M. McCrae to Sam Kee via E. W. MacLean, 19 February 1904.

³⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 4, Agreement between H. M. McCrae and Sam Kee, 14 December 1903.

³⁵ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 4, H. M. McCrae to Sam Kee via E. W. MacLean, 19 February 1904.

there was little regulation or quality control over salting and packing procedures, Sam Kee also withheld part of its payment as indemnity against any weight loss or damage resulting from improper salting.³⁶

By 1908 Sam Kee was dealing with several Japanese packers, principally Charlie Okuri and U. Makino. For the 1908-09 season both Okuri and Makino agreed to supply Sam Kee with one thousand tons of salt herring.³⁷ But still these two packers supplied only a portion of Sam Kee's total export volume, and the company purchased 800 tons of fish from another Japanese firm in the same season.³⁸ The firm's relationship with different Japanese packers varied over the years, with Okuri and Makino operating independent salteries on waterfront land owned by Sam Kee. Okuri and Makino received fish from Japanese fishermen, and their workers drained the herring and salted and packed it for shipment. Other Japanese packers later rented buildings and equipment owned by the Chinese firm, but earlier operators had rented only the waterfront land and put up their own buildings.³⁹

Sam Kee's dealing with the Japanese packers also involved the lending of money. In March of 1908 Charlie Okuri borrowed \$300 from Sam Kee for a six-month term, promising to pay interest at \$2 a month and offering his saltery buildings and fishing outfit as security.⁴⁰ In turn, Sam Kee guaranteed to the William Hoggan General Store in Nanaimo that it would buy Okuri's fish upon packing and would pay Okuri's account at the store in the meantime.⁴¹ Sam Kee was a demanding money-lender and did not hesitate to order its lawyers to threaten foreclosure over the Japanese fish-boats and fishing gear on which it held a chattel mortgage.⁴² Sam Kee was a ruthless manager too. When it became displeased with Okuri's slow packing and his fishermen's sale of herring to other firms, it threatened to default on Okuri's account at the general store.⁴³ Similarly,

³⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 4, M. Komatsu and Co. to Sam Kee, 7 April 1904.

³⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 7 file 6, C. Okuri to Sam Kee, 22 September 1908; U. Makino to Sam Kee, 31 October 1908.

³⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 7 file 6, Awaya, Ikeda and Co. to Sam Kee, 21 September 1908.

³⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, Sam Kee to Red Fir Lumber Co., Ladysmith, B.C., 15 November 1909.

⁴⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 54, C. Okuri to Sam Kee, 13 March 1908.

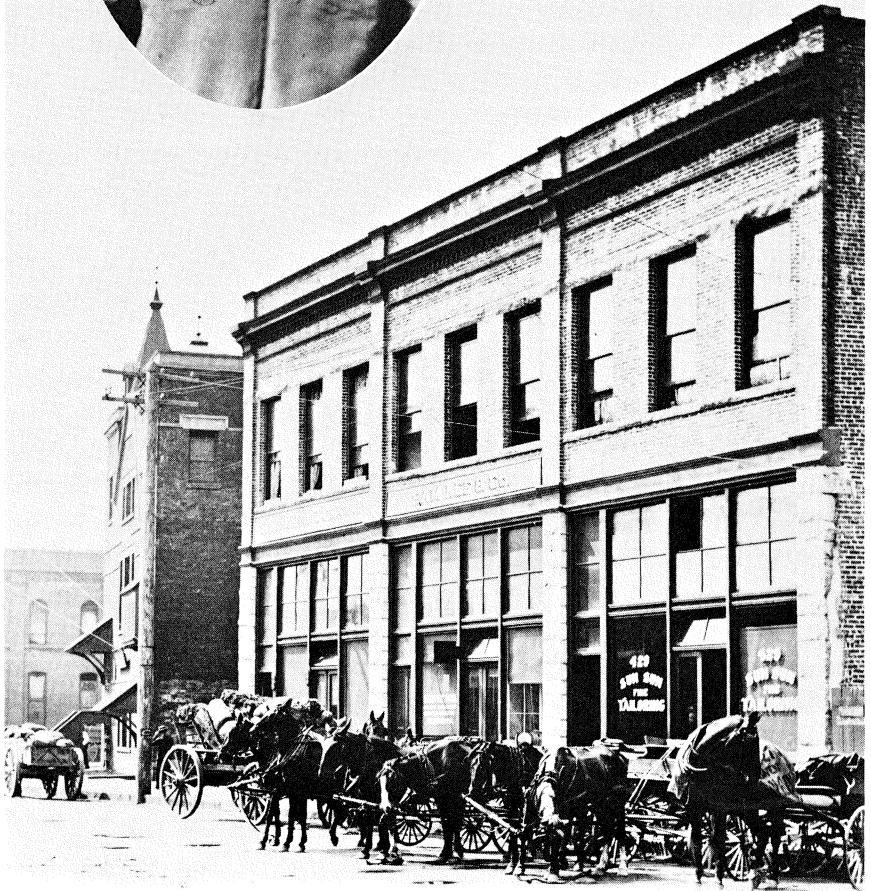
⁴¹ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 56, Sam Kee to C. Okuri, 13 March 1908.

⁴² Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 2, p. 24, Sam Kee to MacNeill, Bird, Macdonald and Banfield, 2 October 1912.

⁴³ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, pp. 312, 315, Sam Kee to C. Okuri, 10 December 1908, 12 December 1908.



*Chang Toy,
founder of
Sam Kee Company*



Sam Kee Company, 433 Carrall Street, ca. 1905

Sam Kee began to charge Makino ground rent of a dollar per ton of salt fish when it discovered that he was also selling fish to other buyers.⁴⁴

In overseeing the Japanese packers, Sam Kee arranged for the purchase and delivery of all supplies. Salt was purchased from several Vancouver wholesale dealers including Colin F. Jackson and Company and Evans, Coleman and Evans to be shipped to Vancouver Island. It also bought salt for export to China.⁴⁵ Sam Kee bargained determinedly and demanded prices that it wanted.⁴⁶ For instance, in October 1908 it bluntly told A. R. Johnston that its price was too high,⁴⁷ and in May it rejected Evans, Coleman and Evans' offer of a December delivery on 100 tons of salt and insisted upon a November delivery.⁴⁸

As backer and purchasing agent to the Japanese packers, Sam Kee made the most of its intermediary position in dealing with suppliers. The Hoggan general store in Nanaimo gave the firm a 5 percent discount for settling Okuri's account on a monthly basis.⁴⁹ Sam Kee then took a similar discount, without asking, on its own account at a local lumber firm, reasoning that it deserved to earn something for bringing its Japanese business there.⁵⁰ With another supplier, Sam Kee demanded that wholesale prices apply to its purchases.⁵¹

Sam Kee was a careful buyer of supplies. When it came time to purchase 10,000 wooden boxes for shipping, the company invited quotations from nine lumber mills on the mainland and on Vancouver Island.⁵² Hardware wholesalers were also asked to submit quotations for nails and other supplies.⁵³ When rumours hinted that purse-seining for herring

⁴⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 388, Sam Kee to U. Makino, 15 February 1908.

⁴⁵ Sam Kee, vol. 7 file 1, Evans, Coleman and Evans to Sam Kee, 16 May 1908.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 11, Colin F. Jackson and Co. to Sam Kee, 7 June 1907. C. F. Jackson and Company subsequently reduced their price by ten cents a ton. Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 232, 27 October 1908.

⁴⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 232, Sam Kee to A. R. Johnston, 27 October 1908; vol. 1 Book 1, p. 245, Sam Kee to A. R. Johnston, 3 November 1908.

⁴⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 113, Sam Kee to Evans, Coleman and Evans, 18 May 1908.

⁴⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 7 file 2, W. Hoggan to Sam Kee, 19 October 1908.

⁵⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 758, Sam Kee to Red Fir Lumber Company, 15 April 1910.

⁵¹ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 2, p. 40, Sam Kee to M. Furuya and Co., 25 November 1911.

⁵² Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, pp. 160, 186, 187, Sam Kee to various mills, 18 August 1908; pp. 198-200, Sam Kee to various mills, 12 October 1908.

⁵³ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 163, Sam Kee to Wood, Vallance and Leggatt Ltd., 19 August 1908; vol. 1 Book 1, p. 164, Sam Kee to McLennan and McFeely Ltd., 19 August 1908.

might be prohibited by government regulation, Sam Kee quickly cancelled its salt orders and urged its supplier Evans, Coleman and Evans to verify the rumour,⁵⁴ and when the company declined a salt purchase from C. Gardiner Johnston in August 1908, it alleged that the cancellation had arisen due to the inability of Japanese fishermen to secure fishing licences.⁵⁵

Pressures to restrict the number of licences issued to Japanese fishermen were an ongoing concern to Sam Kee. The company usually paid a white agent in Nanaimo to obtain the necessary licences for its Japanese packers.⁵⁶ In July 1909 Sam Kee was sufficiently concerned to instruct agent H. J. Simpson to interview the Fisheries Commissioner with regard to hostile protests about the Japanese fishermen.⁵⁷ Next year Sam Kee discovered that white saltery owners were attempting to manipulate the number of licences issued, and it requested that Simpson handle the matter.⁵⁸ Things worsened in 1911 when only fifteen licences were granted, and the firm had to send discreet funds to its Nanaimo agent to sway the situation in its favour.⁵⁹ In 1910 Sam Kee had approached Furuya and Company, a major Seattle-based herring exporter, about jointly setting up an arrangement to control the salt herring industry, noting that the white packers had tried to do so already but without success.⁶⁰ No further details on this matter were found in the company's records, but it would appear that Sam Kee wanted either to set up a buyers' syndicate to obtain fishing licences en bloc or to stop competing buyers from bidding up the price of herring and cornering the supplies of fish.

During 1909 Sam Kee contemplated exploiting new sources of herring located at Swanson Bay and in the Queen Charlotte Islands farther up the coast. In March the company informed local agents for the major trans-Pacific steamship lines that it would be receiving salt herring from northern British Columbia for shipment to China, and it wanted to ship

⁵⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 129, Sam Kee to A. E. Planta, 18 June 1908; vol. 1 Book 1, p. 130, Sam Kee to Evans, Coleman and Evans, 18 June 1908.

⁵⁵ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 170, Sam Kee to C. Gardiner Johnston, 27 August 1908.

⁵⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, pp. 646, 747, Sam Kee to J. H. Simpson, 18 June 1909, 11 March 1910.

⁵⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 659, Sam Kee to J. H. Simpson, 3 July 1909.

⁵⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, pp. 750, 753, Sam Kee to J. H. Simpson, 18 March 1910, 20 March 1910.

⁵⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 7 file 7, George Hannay to Sam Kee, 6 September 1911.

⁶⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 748, Sam Kee to M. Furuya, 14 March 1910; vol. 1 Book 1, p. 755, Sam Kee to M. Furuya, 28 March 1910.

directly out of Victoria rather than out of Vancouver or Seattle.⁶¹ The NYK, Waterhouse and Blue Funnel lines responded positively and offered to discount the cost of transfers between Victoria and Seattle if Seattle shipments were necessary.⁶² At this stage Sam Kee was shipping such large volumes of fish that coastal steamship companies and agents such as the Coast Shipping Company and Evans, Coleman and Evans would send Sam Kee their sailing schedules well in advance of the herring season.⁶³

The northern shipments did not materialize, however, and Sam Kee continued to rely on Nanaimo for most of its herring and added new Japanese packers to its list of suppliers. The export volume expanded through the 1910 decade, and competition from other Chinese exporters arose.⁶⁴ The firm considered buying more waterfront property in Nanaimo to expand its operations, but no frontage with a deep enough moorage could be found.⁶⁵ For the 1909-10 season, Makino supplied Sam Kee with 292 tons of salt herring, Nakaji and Modokoro 374 tons, and Takeda 528 tons.⁶⁶ Sam Kee instructed its agent to watch that these three suppliers did not sell any herring to its competitors, noting that if Makino misbehaved, the company would move to have the Inspector of Fisheries cancel his licence immediately.⁶⁷ To meet the export demand, Sam Kee continued to buy salt herring elsewhere, from the Nanaimo Fish and Bait Company and through A. R. Johnston.⁶⁸

By 1911 Sam Kee's investments in the Nanaimo salt herring industry included waterfront land and a wharf, two gasoline launches worth \$3,500, fish tanks, a mess hall, a bunkhouse and other saltery buildings.⁶⁹ All were rented to Japanese packers under agreements closely resembling labour contracts. Takeda, for example, applied to Sam Kee in 1912 for some operating capital and for use of the company's facilities. Rent was

⁶¹ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, pp. 497-499, Sam Kee to Dodwell and Co., K. J. Burns, and Greer, Courtney and Skene, 5 March 1909.

⁶² Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 535, Sam Kee to Coast Steamship Co., 10 March 1909.

⁶³ Sam Kee, vol. 7 file 2, Evans, Coleman and Evans to Sam Kee, 22 August 1908; vol. 7 file 6, Coast Shipping Company to Sam Kee, 15 September 1908.

⁶⁴ Leung, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, pp. 561, 584, Sam Kee to A. E. Planta, 18 March 1909.

⁶⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 767, Sam Kee to E. G. Taylor, no date.

⁶⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, pp. 736, 812, Sam Kee to George Hannay, 30 January 1910, 23 November 1910.

⁶⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 726, Sam Kee to Nanaimo Fish and Bait Company, 8 January 1910; vol. 1 Book 1, p. 700, Sam Kee to A. R. Johnston and Co., 25 November 1909.

⁶⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 9 file 4, Insurance Policies, 1911.

charged for the use of the wharf and the boat, and Takeda had to agree to sell his catch solely to Sam Kee at specified prices and to purchase all nets, food, fishing gear and packing supplies exclusively from the firm.⁷⁰

The Sam Kee Company's salt herring exports led it to extensive dealings with white business institutions and their representatives. This included the general stores, lumber mills and hardware and commission firms that supplied the salteries, marine insurance and steamship agents who arranged for local and export shipments, and the company's own agents in Nanaimo. In all these dealings, Sam Kee's actions and positions were guided by market demands and profit-seeking. At no point did it behave differently from any other astute business operation of the period. Sam Kee was not placed at a disadvantage because of its Chinese background. It behaved aggressively, secure in the knowledge that its volume of production and trade gave it advantages and power. Its middleman role was made possible by the shortage of operating capital among local packers, by the demand in China for salt fish, and by the existence of a viable transportation system over the Pacific.

The success of the herring trade did not hinge upon the Chinese immigrants' disadvantaged position in the general economy. By contrast, Sam Kee's work as a labour contractor did help to lock the Chinese into low-paying, semi-skilled work in other areas. The early economy of British Columbia was one reliant on using ready sources of cheap labour to exploit the various natural resources of the land, and middlemen contractors such as Sam Kee were an essential link to the pools of immigrant workers. Labour contracting pre-dated the company's entry into the herring trade and may have exposed it to a wider range of business practices that it used later to its own advantage. Certainly the business acumen that characterized Sam Kee's herring trade strategies surfaced in its labour marketing activities.

Contract labour and the Chinese have been studied with reference to the salmon canning industry,⁷¹ but its key features also apply to the areas in which Sam Kee plied its trade. In the salmon industry, a cannery operator and a Chinese labour contractor drew up an agreement whereby the contractor agreed to supply men at a specified price to can a certain quota of fish. The canner provided a cash advance, which the contractor

⁷⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 8 file 6, Agreement between Sam Kee and O. Takeda, 18 November 1912.

⁷¹ Paul Yee, "The Chinese in British Columbia's Salmon Canning Industry," in Garrick Chu, et al., editors, *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese and Japanese-Canadian Anthology* (Vancouver: Private Printing, 1980), pp. 9-11.

TABLE 3
Sam Kee Company Sawmill Contract Labour Accounts, 1906

<i>Year 1906</i>	<i>Number of men</i>	<i>Wages</i>	<i>Expenses: food and supplies</i>	<i>Expenses as percentage of wages</i>	<i>Net wages received</i>	<i>Net wages as percentage of total wage</i>	<i>Average wage</i>
Crew A							
June	16	\$ 371.95	\$ 57.05	15%	\$ 314.90	85%	\$19.68
July	14	288.05	81.85	28	206.20	72	14.72
Aug.	9	241.43	43.60	18	197.83	82	21.98
Sept.	10	207.50	48.60	23	158.90	77	15.98
Nov.	11	401.70	86.10	21	315.60	79	28.69
Crew B							
July	69	1,493.45	390.95	26	1,102.24	74	15.97
Aug.	96	2,154.19	563.76	26	1,590.43	74	16.56
Sept.	74	1,935.90	602.90	31	1,333.00	69	18.01
Oct.	58	2,025.95	648.00	32	1,377.95	68	23.75
Nov.	61	1,978.75	542.50	27	1,436.25	73	23.54
Dec.	64	1,975.40	590.40	30	1,385.00	70	21.64
Jan. 1907	57	1,312.37	498.00	38	814.37	62	14.28

SOURCE: City of Vancouver Archives, Add. MSS 571, Sam Kee Papers, vol. 11 file 3 [Payroll], 1906-07.

used to entice men to take the job. Crews were then sent to the canneries where they worked and were boarded by the contractor. At season's end the contractor received the final payment and paid his crew their wages less amounts deducted for the advance, room and board.⁷²

However, if the salmon run for that season was low, or if any other reason prevented the workers from filling the quota of fish stated in the contract, the canner could refuse to pay the balance of the contract. The contractor too could pass his loss onto his workers by inflating the costs of provisions and food he had supplied. Thus workers could emerge from a cannery having been fed and housed but denied their expected wages. In short, the contract system shifted the risks of an unstable industry onto the contracted workers and their contractor.

Sam Kee's many cannery customers included William Hickey, John Wallace, William Hill and J. H. Todd, as well as such firms as the Burrard Inlet Packing Company, Malcolm and Windsor, Wurzburg and Company and the Imperial Cannery.⁷³ Sam Kee's dealings revealed one other way in which the middleman was vulnerable to the losses suffered by the canner. In August 1905 the Canadian Canning Company sued Sam Kee Company, charging that the firm's foreman had lost control over his men and that the crew had failed to produce the required 1,200 cases a day.⁷⁴

Yet, since they controlled the vital supply of labour that cannery owners needed, the contractors were not entirely powerless. Cannery owners were constantly demanding full and skilled crews of workers from Sam Kee.⁷⁵ In two instances cannery owners guaranteed in writing to Sam Kee that workers' wages would be paid.⁷⁶ In 1901 Sam Kee's lawyers successfully issued a garnishee against one canner for non-payment of its account,⁷⁷ but it appears that the competition between the many Chinese contractors of

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ For a sample of his clients, see Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 96, Sam Kee to John Wallace, Naas River, 15 April 1908; vol. 6 file 5, W. Hickey Canning Co. to Sam Kee, 5 September 1905; vol. 5 file 1, Burrard Inlet Packing Company to Sam Kee, 1897; vol. 5 file 4, Sam Kee to Wurzburg and Co., 9 November 1899; vol. 5 file 9, Imperial Cannery to Sam Kee, 12 April 1901.

⁷⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 5, Russell and Russell to Sam Kee, 11 August 1905.

⁷⁵ For example, see Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 645, Sam Kee to John Wallace, 15 June 1909.

⁷⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 5, W. Mowat to Sam Kee, 9 September 1905; vol. 6 file 7, J. O. W. Brown to A. Desbrisay, 22 March 1906.

⁷⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 9, Cowan, Kappele and McEvoy to Sam Kee, 18 May 1901, 30 June 1901.

Chinatown precluded any possibility of their united action to improve bargaining and working conditions.⁷⁸

The contract system functioned in similar fashion in the sawmill industry. Sam Kee supplied men for packing, jointing, knot-sawing and other jobs in sawmills, shingle mills and planing mills. The mills were quick to complain about inexperienced labour crews, about their late arrival, and about their insufficient numbers.⁷⁹ The contractor's vulnerability was exposed again when the Spicer Shingle Mill informed Sam Kee that if sufficient men were not on hand when needed, then the mill would hire additional men and charge their wages to Sam Kee's account.⁸⁰

Two sets of tallies kept by Sam Kee for its sawmill workers in 1906 yield additional information on the nature of contract labour. Table 3 shows that the number of men employed fluctuated from month to month; in some months over twenty men were taken on or discharged. The amounts deducted for food and supplies ranged from 15 to 38 percent of the total wages calculated, so that workers eventually received on average 75 percent of the original wage. The average monthly wage also fluctuated, from a low of \$14.28 to a high of \$28.69, reflecting the different grades of wages paid for different tasks.

In 1902 Sam Kee began supplying workers to the newly established Knight Sugar Company of Raymond, Alberta.⁸¹ Sam Kee furnished crews of "good, healthy and practical" workers under the supervision of an English-speaking boss to cultivate and harvest 800 acres of sugar beets for sale to the sugar company.⁸² Contract terms, like those in other labour agreements, specified that if Sam Kee defaulted on the work it would have to pay Knight Sugar the cost of labour that the sugar company would subsequently engage.⁸³

With the sugar beet contracts, Sam Kee protected its own position wherever it could. In 1904 it successfully changed the contract to have Knight Sugar accept the beets in good condition regardless of saccharine content or purity.⁸⁴ Earlier contracts had specified a 12 percent sugar

⁷⁸ Duncan Stacey, "The Iron Chink," *Material History Bulletin* 12 (Spring 1981): 105.

⁷⁹ For examples, see Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 9, E. H. Heaps and Co. to Sam Kee, 13 July 1901; Spicer Shingle Mill to Sam Kee, 13 May 1901.

⁸⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 1, Spicer Shingle Mill to Sam Kee, 22 March 1898.

⁸¹ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 2, Knight Sugar Co. to Sam Kee, 27 June 1902.

⁸² Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 2, Agreement between Knight Sugar Co. and Sam Kee, 2 December 1903.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 4, E. P. Ellison to Sam Kee 17 November 1904.

content and an 80 percent purity in the beets.⁸⁵ Sam Kee also arranged with the Canadian Pacific Railway Company for a guaranteed return fare for the workers,⁸⁶ even though transportation costs were refunded by Knight Sugar.⁸⁷ Sam Kee purchased land near Raymond in 1904⁸⁸ to cultivate beets to sell to another sugar company⁸⁹ but had left the sugar trade by 1907 without explanation.⁹⁰

Sam Kee's ready access to Chinese labourers also led it to work in logging and timber sales. Lumber mills, brickyards, woodyards and other small manufacturers needing wood for fuel or for production contracted with Sam Kee to purchase cut timber, paying according to the amount of wood purchased.⁹¹ In some cases the buyers held timber leases or owned land which they wanted logged, but in other cases Sam Kee had to find its own source of wood. Most sites were situated around Vancouver, but some were located as far away as Ruskin, Stave Lake and Chilliwack.⁹² The wood products included shingle bolts, cordwood, long bolts and logs suitable for use as pilings and telegraph or telephone poles.⁹³

The contract terms varied according to the owner of the uncut wood. One mill paid for towing costs while Sam Kee paid for stumpage; another customer paid for a road to be built to remove the timber.⁹⁴ Yet another buyer of timber supplied a horse for loading the wood and even promised to pay for wood not delivered by year's end.⁹⁵ When Heaps and Company neglected to have the shingle bolts cut at Stave Lake promptly mea-

⁸⁵ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 2, Agreement between Knight Sugar Co. and Sam Kee, 2 December 1903.

⁸⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 4, E. P. Ellison to Sam Kee, 17 November 1904.

⁸⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 2, Agreement between Knight Sugar Co. and Sam Kee, 15 October 1903.

⁸⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 4, E. P. Ellison to Sam Kee, 23 April 1904.

⁸⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 5, Agreement between Union Stock Company and Shum Moon, 13 May 1905.

⁹⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 10, E. P. Ellison to Sam Kee, 20 February 1907; vol. 6 file 11, E. P. Ellison to Sam Kee, 13 April 1907.

⁹¹ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 29, Sam Kee to Douglas and Thomas, 3 September 1907; vol. 6 file 4, Harold Burnet to Sam Kee, 12 January 1904; vol. 7 file 1, John Coughlan and Co. to Sam Kee, 25 June 1908; vol. 7 file 2, Joseph Chew Lumber and Shingle Manufacturing Co. to Sam Kee, 3 September 1908; vol. 6 file 10, E. H. Heaps and Co. to Sam Kee, 28 February 1907 and 6 March 1907.

⁹² Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 9, Dean Brothers to E. H. Heaps and Co., 1 August 1907; vol. 1 Book 1, Sam Kee to Henry Fitzgerald, 17 November 1910.

⁹³ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 2, Brown and Vanostrand to H. H. Chow for Sam Kee, 9 April 1903.

⁹⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 9, E. H. Heaps to Sam Kee, 8 March 1901.

⁹⁵ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 11, Cascade Wood Co. to Sam Kee, 26 September 1907.

sured, Sam Kee was quick to remind them of their contract obligations.⁹⁶ When no satisfactory action resulted, the fallers hired a lawyer, and Sam Kee hastened to set up a meeting to avoid a lawsuit.⁹⁷

Sam Kee subcontracted some of the logging work and once again acted as capital supplier. In November 1907 it entered a "partnership" with W. H. Chow to cut timber on 340 acres of CPR land. Chow undertook to fell and dispose of the timber with all sale proceeds to be submitted to Sam Kee's bookkeeper.⁹⁸ Sam Kee's cash advance to Chow was to be repaid from the profits, with interest set at 10 percent per annum. In another situation Sam Kee sold its contract for supplying timber and its camp outfit outright to a Chinese sub-contractor.⁹⁹

Sam Kee proved once again to be an aggressive dealer in buying and selling its wood products. When the CPR invited tenders for cutting shingle bolts and timber on its land, Sam Kee argued that it should win the contract because it had already worked the site under another lessee and had spent some one thousand dollars putting in roads. Sam Kee bid \$1.10 per cord, with instructions that an additional ten cents could be added if any firm should outbid it.¹⁰⁰ In August the firm purchased the timber standing in several sites in the Hastings Townsite¹⁰¹ and later approached Arthur McEvoy, a prominent Vancouver solicitor, to tender the wood for quick sale to city hall, the City Hospital, schools, churches and "any other big buildings" to clear its stock before the summer.¹⁰² When necessary, Sam Kee knew how to use the appropriate middleman.

In its business dealings Sam Kee encountered problems that any firm might have faced. Lumber mills accumulated unpaid debts to Sam Kee for contracts completed.¹⁰³ Other customers complained about the quality

⁹⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 529, Sam Kee to E. H. Heaps and Co., 8 March 1909.

⁹⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 648, Sam Kee to E. H. Heaps and Co., 19 June 1909.

⁹⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 11, Agreement between Sam Kee and W. H. Chow, 13 November 1907.

⁹⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 11, Agreement between Chow Mew and Sam Kee, 20 February 1908.

¹⁰⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 11, Sam Kee to CPR Land Department, 25 April 1907.

¹⁰¹ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 11, Edward Donlan to Sam Kee, 25 August 1907 re: timber on NW¼ of Section 47; Townsend Brothers to Sam Kee, 17 August 1907 re: NE and NW¼ of Block 44; H. Farlow to Sam Kee, 28 August 1907 re: NW¼ of Block 46.

¹⁰² Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 13, Sam Kee to A. McEvoy, 5 February 1908.

¹⁰³ See, for examples, Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 7, C. W. Brown to Sam Kee, 8 May 1906 re: \$950 debt; Fred A. Shore of Foss Lumber to Sam Kee, 8 August 1906.

of Sam Kee's shingle bolts and refused full payment.¹⁰⁴ The company pursued sales with other customers by guaranteeing good timber in its shipments.¹⁰⁵ Transportation posed a problem too, and Sam Kee complained to the B.C. Electric Railway Company about the lack of cars available for carrying wood into town. Sam Kee pointed out that it had built a spur line for one area and therefore deserved better service.¹⁰⁶

The company's work in the lumber and logging industries may have grown from its charcoal manufacturing and woodyard operations which were running by 1898¹⁰⁷ and possibly as early as 1889.¹⁰⁸ Newspaper reports had noted that a "syndicate" of Chinese was making charcoal from the refuse of the Moodyville sawmill in an oven built by themselves.¹⁰⁹ By 1900 Sam Kee was running the Quick Delivery Coal and Woodyard at 48 Dupont Street, selling coal, coke, charcoal and wood to businesses such as chandleries, small foundries, restaurants, hotels, homes and other fuel dealers.¹¹⁰ Charcoal was sold as far away as Calgary.¹¹¹

Conveniently, the major charcoal customers were the salmon canneries, many of which Sam Kee also supplied with labourers. These buyers were located nearby along the Fraser River and at Steveston and further away at sites on the Skeena and Nass Rivers, Quathiaski Cove and Smith's Inlet.¹¹² Charcoal shipments averaged between 200 and 250 bushels and were shipped on the many steamships servicing the British Columbia coast. By 1907 Sam Kee may have had difficulties in supplying charcoal as it investigated purchasing the product from another manufacturer in town.¹¹³

In another retail venture that involved steamship tickets, Sam Kee combined its intermediary role between Chinese and whites with its mer-

¹⁰⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 7 file 2, Joseph Chew Lumber and Shingle Manufacturing Co. to Sam Kee, 3 September 1908.

¹⁰⁵ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 129, Sam Kee to John Coughlan, 16 June 1908.

¹⁰⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 274, Sam Kee to General Superintendent, B.C.E.R., 14 November 1908.

¹⁰⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 2, Sam Kee to T. Dunn and Co., 1898 no date; Sam Kee to W. H. Morton Mining and Milling Supplies, 25 November 1898.

¹⁰⁸ City of Vancouver Archives, James Skitt Matthews Newsclipping Collection file M1765 "Charcoal," *World* clipping dated 22 April 1889.

¹⁰⁹ City of Vancouver Archives, James Skitt Matthews Newsclipping Collection file M1765 "Charcoal," clipping dated 6 January 1898.

¹¹⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 5, Delivery lists, 14 February 1900.

¹¹¹ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 114, Sam Kee to C. D. Taprell, Calgary, 20 May 1908.

¹¹² For examples, see Sam Kee, vol. 5 file 9.

¹¹³ Sam Kee, vol. 6 file 11, Electric Turpentine Company of Canada to Sam Kee, 12 October 1907.

chant role of supplying goods and services demanded by the immigrants. By 1905 Sam Kee was acting as the Chinatown agent for the Blue Funnel Line and the Japan Mail Steamship Company through Dodwell and Company, a local broker. Sam Kee sold the tickets to Chinese travellers and boarded them locally as they came to town to await their ship's departure.¹¹⁴ The competition among the various trans-Pacific steamship lines was fierce, with each having Chinese agents based in Chinatowns all across Canada. In 1909 Sam Kee appointed twenty-seven Chinese sub-agents for the Blue Funnel Line in thirteen cities including Montreal, Ottawa, Hamilton, Winnipeg, Swift Current and Moose Jaw.¹¹⁵

The pre-eminent firm in the industry was the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company with its fleet of Empress liners. In compiling information on this competitor, Sam Kee reported to Dodwell that just over 2,000 Chinese had departed from Vancouver aboard CPR ships in 1907.¹¹⁶ The CPR's advantage, of course, lay in its ability to sell its steamship tickets at the same time that eastern travellers purchased train passage to reach the west coast. To counter this, Sam Kee and the Blue Funnel Line offered trans-Pacific passage at the same price charged by the CPR and offered its eastern agents a \$2 commission if they sold these Blue Funnel passages together with the CPR railway fare without informing CPR officials.¹¹⁷

As the Chinese agent, Sam Kee publicized the advantages of the Blue Funnel Line carefully. It pointed out to its Chinese customers that there were no first or second class accommodations on board the eight steamers of the line, thus allowing all passengers to walk freely about and avoid being racially segregated.¹¹⁸ The 1908 fare of \$43.50 included passage, cartage and board.¹¹⁹ The Blue Funnel Line, in line with its competitors, offered a discounted ticket to indigent Chinese, and Sam Kee was held responsible for verifying the applicants' neediness.¹²⁰

Sam Kee was also quick to report passengers' complaints to Dodwell, noting that bad publicity not only injured the Blue Funnel Lines traffic but also gave the CPR a better chance to regain its share of the busi-

¹¹⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 18 file 17 “代理藍湖通輪船商位記” [Record of Writing Seats on Behalf of Blue Funnel Line], 1905.

¹¹⁵ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, pp. 611-13, Sam Kee to Dodwell and Co., 7 May 1909.

¹¹⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 148, Sam Kee to Dodwell and Co., 30 May 1908.

¹¹⁷ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 203, Sam Kee to Dodwell and Co., October 1908.

¹¹⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 443, Translation of Advertisement, no date.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 239, Sam Kee to Dodwell and Co., 2 November 1908.

ness.¹²¹ In 1908 the indigent rate was raised by all the steamship lines to \$30 from \$25.¹²² In 1910, when Dodwell considered raising the passage to match the CPR's higher fares, Sam Kee advised against doing so because the Chinese would prefer to travel aboard the *Empresses* if steamship prices were identical.¹²³

In the land-owning arena, Sam Kee became one of the first Chinese to buy land in Chinatown, then centred around the unit block of East Pender (then Dupont Street) at Carrall and extending east towards the 100 block East Pender.¹²⁴ Originally the lots had formed part of the land grant used to entice the Canadian Pacific Railway Company to locate its terminus in Vancouver instead of in Port Moody. These lots had passed quickly into the hands of a succession of white speculators who rented the property to the Chinese for use as stores and dwellings. In some cases the Chinese tenants were authorized to erect their own buildings.¹²⁵ Not until the early 1900s did the Chinese purchase most of the remaining Chinatown lands. For its part, Sam Kee held some ten lots in the Chinatown area,¹²⁶ but its acquisitions elsewhere in the city were far more extensive.

Outside Chinatown, the company purchased two corner sites in Gastown and another at the downtown intersection of Pender and Richards Streets.¹²⁷ Residential hotels and apartment buildings containing commercial space existed or were erected on these lots, which were then leased to non-Chinese hotel operators or turned over to white real estate agents for

¹²¹ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 799, Sam Kee to Dodwell and Co., 25 October 1910.

¹²² Sam Kee, vol. 7 file 8, Dodwell and Co. to Sam Kee, 7 December 1908.

¹²³ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 810, Sam Kee to Dodwell and Co., 19 November 1910.

¹²⁴ British Columbia. Ministry of the Attorney General. Land Titles Office. Absolute Fees Book, Volume 21, Folio 280, Henry Town to Chang Toy, 25 September 1889.

¹²⁵ For two examples see Land Titles Office (hereafter LTO), Charge Book Volume 12, folio 424, lease dated 15 February 1893 between John M. Spinks and Hing Kee. This was a fifteen-year lease, with the lessee agreeing to pay rent of \$20 per month, to remit one-half of the amount of assessed taxes, and to erect a building. A twenty-year lease is contained in LTO Applications Series, #4772E. The lessors were W. J. Bowser and George I. Wilson, the lessees were Yip Yen and Yip Sang. The lease is dated 4 August 1902, and the lessees agreed to erect a two-storey brick building within five years of the signing of the lease.

¹²⁶ Sam Kee, vol. 10 file 7, List of taxes due, 1905, and vol. 10 file 9, List of taxes due, 1911.

¹²⁷ The Gastown sites were Lots 9-11, Block 2, DL 196, and the south 55 feet of Lot 15, Block 2, DL 541. Sam Kee vol. 10 file 7, City of Vancouver to Sam Kee, 23 September 1910; vol. 10 file 5, Mortgage between Shum Moon and Francis Walter Hall, 1 August 1906. The downtown site included Lots 19-20, Block 25, DL 541. Sam Kee, vol. 10 file 6, City of Vancouver to Sam Kee, 30 August 1904.

rent collection. Sam Kee owned five hotel sites and buildings in central Vancouver and leased from German entrepreneur Edward Stolterfoht two sites on which it then constructed hotels for sub-leasing.¹²⁸

In managing its hotels, the firm dealt firmly with civic officials through its lawyers R. R. Parkes and W. A. Macdonald, K.C. In March 1911 the city health inspector condemned Sam Kee's Oriental Hotel and ordered it demolished. The company, however, argued that its solicitor and architect had consulted earlier with two civic aldermen and the building inspector, and they had all agreed to let the building stand for another five years. Sam Kee ordered its lawyer to appeal the decision, but in vain.¹²⁹ In another instance, when the city expropriated one of Sam Kee's Pender Street lots, the firm instructed its lawyers to start negotiations at \$70,000 to reach the desired price of \$62,000.¹³⁰

Elsewhere in Vancouver, Sam Kee bought land fronting on Burrard and on Hastings Streets, both of which became major thoroughfares in the city.¹³¹ Sam Kee also held water frontage on the industrial south shore of False Creek,¹³² as well as land in what later became the south-east sector of Vancouver.¹³³ More land was acquired in the neighbouring districts of Burnaby, North Vancouver, Steveston, Caulfield (later West Vancouver) and the Hastings Townsite.¹³⁴ Land, of course, represented

¹²⁸ Sam Kee, vol. 1 Book 1, p. 133, Sam Kee to Ed. Stolterfoht, 22 June 1908; Sam Kee to R. R. Forshaw, 10 October 1910.

¹²⁹ Sam Kee, vol. 2 Book 1, p. 16, Sam Kee to R. R. Parkes, 31 March 1911.

¹³⁰ Sam Kee, vol. 2 Book 1, p. 15, Sam Kee to W. A. Macdonald, K.C., 30 March 1911.

¹³¹ These were Lots 9 and north ½ of Lot 10, Block 40, DL 541 and Lots 4, 5, Block 100, DL 541. Sam Kee vol. 10 file 9, typescript list of property taxes due to City of Vancouver, 1911. Also Lots 9 and 10 Block 8 DL 183D in Sam Kee vol. 10 file 9, typescript list of property taxes due to City of Vancouver, 1911.

¹³² These were Lot 23, Block 2, DL 200A in Sam Kee vol. 10 file 7, City of Vancouver to Sam Kee, 23 September 1910; and Lot 12, Block 9 DL 200A, Sam Kee, vol. file 9, typescript list of property taxes due to City of Vancouver 1911.

¹³³ These were the following: DL 394, Block 15, Subdivision 5-9 in Sam Kee, vol. 10 file 7, Municipality of South Vancouver to Sam Kee, 26 June 1907; DL 714, East ½, Southwest ¼ in Sam Kee, vol. 10 file 7, Municipality of South Vancouver to Sam Kee, 26 June 1907; DL 648, East ½, Subdivision 5, Lots 6-9 in Sam Kee, vol. 10 file 7, Municipality of South Vancouver to Sam Kee, 1908 Tax Statement; DL 335, L½, East ¼ in Sam Kee, vol. 10 file 7, Municipality of South Vancouver to Sam Kee, Tax Statement, 1 November 1911; DL 335, South ½, Southeast ½, Sam Kee, vol. 10 file 7, Municipality of South Vancouver to Sam Kee, Tax Statement, 18 October 1910; DL 14, Lots 1-4, 7-22, Sam Kee, vol. 10 file 11, Municipality of South Vancouver to Sam Kee.

¹³⁴ Sam Kee, vol. 10 file 7, Richmond Municipality to Sam Kee, 12 December 1908 for Steveston Block 2, Lot 3; vol. 10 file 7, District of North Vancouver to Sam Kee, 15 November 1911 re DL 887, Block 4; vol. 10 file 7, W. L. Fagan to Sam Kee, 24 June 1907 re: Hastings Townsite Section 45, East Pt. SW½.

the most permanent of assets, prized in China for its ability to generate food, rental income and loans.

As one of Chinatown's merchant princes, Chang Toy showed interest in the development of Chinese education in the community. In 1905, Toy added a third floor to his Carrall Street building to serve as a Chinese language school and as a hostel for visiting scholars. The school (愛國學堂) was closely associated with the Chinese Empire Reform Association. The hostel contained a living room, kitchen, warm air and hot water heaters and washing facilities. Also consistent with the custom of wealthy Chinese men, Chang Toy took several wives. At least two of his five wives provided him with many Canadian-born children. Chang Toy died in 1920.

* * *

The slice of company life presented in this paper attests again to the importance of business in facilitating immigrant settlement in the New World. Other studies have noted how the institution of business carried Italian migrants over the ocean, helped them find work and shelter and, in the case of boarding houses, re-established familiar Old World social patterns.¹³⁵ Elsewhere, the prominence of commerce and trading in South China peasant life has been noted, as well as the cross-over of credit devices from China to Canada.¹³⁶ The Sam Kee Company, while not operating at a level of trade shared by average entrepreneurs, did play its own distinct role in immigrant adjustment.

The success of the Sam Kee Company reflected upon both immigrant initiative and host society tolerance. The firm stood out as an enterprisingly surviving in the local economy with regional and international linkages. It bought and sold herring, salting supplies, charcoal and transportation services like any merchant and invested in real estate, making money in areas quite separate from the servicing of immigrant needs. In these matters, race did not interfere with doing business as the industrial interests of Vancouver and Sam Kee seemed to share mutual needs met by the trading of goods and services. The scale and diversity of Sam Kee's operations, of course, placed it into an elite class of Chinese merchants, and the small number of these firms allowed whites to see them as non-threatening operations worthy of trade.

¹³⁵ Robert F. Harney, "Boarding and Belonging: Thoughts on Sojourner Institutions," *Urban History Review* 2 (1978): 8-37.

¹³⁶ Paul Yee, "Business Devices from Two Worlds: The Chinese in Early Vancouver," *BC Studies* 62 (1984): 44-67.

Sam Kee, of course, did not conduct business to test white racism. Its aim was to pursue profits by seizing all available opportunities to market goods and services. The firm's growth followed a logical chain of interconnected activities. Labour contracting and retail sales attracted Chinese customers to the store, where steamship tickets were later sold. The firm's shipping connections to China facilitated its remittance function and herring exports. Products from contract logging were channelled into its charcoal manufactory and woodyard sales. Charcoal sales then reinforced contacts with salmon canneries where labour was supplied.

While the company's activities demonstrated fundamental business acumen and aggressiveness, they also reflected upon Sam Kee's unique role as middleman between two cultures. Certainly the company profited as remittance agent, steamship ticket seller and importer, but under its labour contractor hat it had to acknowledge the limited power of the Chinese labourers in the workplace. The extra obligations that the firm (and workers) shouldered over quotas of cans, sugar and lumber were terms dictated by white employers who knew that job opportunities for the Chinese were limited.

Studies of immigrant middlemen have commented upon their exploitative nature, but the limited evidence presented here does not reveal how much profit Sam Kee was deriving from its contract workers. Doubtless a profit was made, but this was accepted by the immigrant community because a cultural and linguistic gap precluded direct communication between employer and employee. The middleman broker was a familiar model to the Chinese as well, having functioned in the treaty ports of Hong Kong and Canton.

The company's many middleman activities facilitated the adjustment of early migrants and reduced the trauma of settlement in a foreign land. Amid the adverse racial setting, the company helped newcomers realize their migration ambitions by providing jobs, food and contact with the mother country. The company's efforts did not alter the racial climate or directly promote greater acceptance of the Chinese minority. Instead, it merely helped the newcomers co-exist peacefully beside their inhospitable hosts. In some functions, the company brought Chinese into greater contact with other Canadians, while in others it helped the Chinese retain their self-sufficiency.

Importantly, Sam Kee's activities reveal how the institution of business encouraged newcomers to act and behave as economic men without concern about colour. These non-racist encounters were limited to a small circle of businessmen and did not generally affect race relations, but the

viability and impressive wealth of the Sam Kee Company demonstrated clearly to the immigrant community that there was indeed room in the host society economy for them to work and prosper.

It was in the business arena that host society acceptance of the Chinese was the greatest. Thus, the success of firms such as Sam Kee stimulated the hopes of smaller operators that they too might enjoy comparable success and similarly bring their families over. Indeed, it can be observed that the continuing settlement of the Chinese community in Canada was founded largely upon family and business stakes. Finally, despite the common language of the Chinese as victims of racism and industrial capitalism, their business ambitions and endeavours prove them far from powerless.