

# KWONG LEE & COMPANY AND EARLY TRANS-PACIFIC TRADE:

*From Canton, Hong Kong,  
to Victoria and Barkerville*

---

TZU-I CHUNG\*

The gold seekers were harbingers of modernity, and one had to be rather modern in 1850 to be untroubled by the world they seem to foreshadow, to be sure that a society dominated by self-interested, wealth-seeking men would be worth living in.<sup>1</sup>

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY GOLD rushes played a key role not only in shaping British Columbia but also in starting “the Pacific century” and transforming the Pacific from a peripheral zone into “a nexus of world trade.”<sup>2</sup> Gold seekers from many parts of Europe, the Americas, and Asia followed the gold trail around the Pacific Rim. Even if few gold seekers became wealthy, the increased supply of gold stimulated global trade and investment and brought profits to some merchants engaged in the trans-Pacific trade.<sup>3</sup> The gold rush initiated the first major Chinese settlement in what is now British Columbia. After the news of gold in the Fraser Canyon broke in 1858 and Billy Barker struck gold in the Cariboo in 1862, Victoria, New Westminster,

---

\* Special thanks to Judy Campbell, Ying-ying Chen, Bill Quackenbush, Mandy Kilsby, everyone at the Barkerville Symposium in June 2012, including special issue editor Jacqueline Holler, Lily Chow, Robert Griffin, David Chuenyan Lai, Elizabeth Sinn, Lorne Hammond, Chuimei Ho, Ben Bronson, and Henry Yu, the anonymous reviewers, and the staff at Barkerville Historic Town, the Royal BC Museum, and the British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA). Much deep appreciation to Richard Mackie, Patricia Roy, and Graeme Wynn.

<sup>1</sup> David Goodman, *Gold Seeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 221.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Sinn, *Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Keir Reeves, “Tracking the Dragon Down Under: Chinese Cultural Connections in Gold Rush Australia, Aotearoa, and New Zealand,” *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 3, 1 (2005): 49–66, 51.

Barkerville, and a number of smaller gold rush towns sprang up and were connected by trans-Pacific trade and Chinese migration.

Building on previous research on the Chinese presence in British Columbia,<sup>4</sup> this article contextualizes the early history of trans-Pacific trade, its development during the gold rush era, and its legacy. Focusing on Kwong Lee & Co. and Barkerville's Chinese legacy,<sup>5</sup> I explore the trans-Pacific significance of this BC story by situating it within the framework of recent theories that shed light upon migration and settlement patterns.

This article has four parts. The first briefly surveys early trans-Pacific trade and lays out a theoretical framework. The second recounts the origins of Kwong Lee & Co., an early participant in the "gold mountain trade" that was located in Victoria, the site of the first major Chinese settlement in today's Canada. The third uses archival evidence and material culture sources to examine Chinese settlements in and near Barkerville. Although Kwong Lee & Co. extended the trade corridors to other parts of British Columbia, I focus on its involvement along the gold rush trail in the Fraser Canyon and the Cariboo to Barkerville. The fourth part explores the legacy of Kwong Lee & Co., highlighting the historic, regional, and trans-Pacific significance of Barkerville, a one-time gold-mining centre in central British Columbia that has been restored as a tourist attraction.

## THE CANTON SYSTEM OF CO-HONGS AND MIGRATION IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY GOLD RUSHES

Trade between China and what is now British Columbia preceded the gold rush. Early in the nineteenth century, all foreign trade in China operated through Co-hongs (公行).<sup>6</sup> The word "Co" means "public"

<sup>4</sup> Namely, scholarships by Jean Barman, Lily Chow, Harry Con, Ronald J. Con, Graham Johnson, Edgar Wickberg, and William E. Willmott, David Chuenyan Lai, David Tung-Hai (T.H.) Lee, Patricia E. Roy, and other scholars cited in this article.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Douglas Herbert rightfully asserts, "Much more research needs to be done on the Kwong Lee Company and its place in the early history of British Columbia." See his "Unequal Participants: Race and Space in the Interracial Interactions of the Cariboo Gold Fields, 1860-1871" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2005), 32. This article does not purport to be a thorough study of Kwong Lee & Co. but, rather, a discussion of its significant trans-Pacific connections, related material culture items, and potential directions for future research endeavours that would highlight the significance of Barkerville and BC stories beyond regional and national contexts.

<sup>6</sup> Jiabin Liang (梁嘉彬), *Survey of the Thirteen Factories* (廣東十三行考). (Nanking: National Publishing, 1937, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. [Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing (广东人民出版社), 1999, reprint].)

(公), or “official,” and “Hong” (行) means “company.” Co-hongs were representatives of both the government and the merchants responsible for foreign trade. They were first established in the Ming dynasty (1550s). In 1757, the Qing emperor Chien-Lung banned maritime activities in general and confined foreign trade to Canton, today’s Guangzhou City, capital of Guangdong Province and located at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta. This ruling started the Canton System of Co-hongs, which monopolized the global China trade for over eighty years (leading merchant Bing-Hing Wu of Ewo Hong was one of the world’s ten wealthiest people). Over the years the system, commonly known as the Thirteen Co-hongs, encompassed a varying number of merchants.<sup>7</sup> In the early nineteenth century, it included Chinese-named factories (trading stations) as well as those named after foreign countries. Before the Opium Wars (1839-42), Canton was almost the only place in which foreigners – British, American, French, Flemish, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Spanish, Portuguese, Muslim, and others – could trade and live in China.<sup>8</sup> For the British, “Canton” referred to both Guangdong (the province from which most early Chinese migrants came) and Guangzhou (the capital city of Guangdong). Most gold rush migrants from China to other parts of the trans-Pacific world came from this area and spoke various dialects of Cantonese.

In 1792, one of the leading Co-hong merchants, Loo Guan-Hen, started Kwong Lee Hong, which, by 1796, had become the third largest Co-hong.<sup>9</sup> After Loo Guan-Hen died in 1813, Kwong Lee Hong gradually gave way to his sons, but he was still in business near the end of the Co-hong system.<sup>10</sup> Kwong Lee Hong is of particular interest in British Columbia because, during the gold rush, the leading Chinese company was also named Kwong Lee, and the brothers – Loo Chuck Fan and Loo Chew Fan – who established Kwong Lee & Co. in Victoria,

<sup>7</sup> *Guangdong Customs History*, Scroll 25 Co-hongs, 1. “设关之初，番舶入市者，仅二十余舵，至则劳以牛酒，令牙行主之，沿明之习，命曰十三行。” (It states that Chinese in the Qing Dynasty followed the practice of the Ming dynasty and continued calling the merchants dealing with foreign trade as the “Thirteen Co-hongs.”) See also Pengze Yi (彭澤益), “The Origin of Qing Guangdong Co-hong System” (清代廣東洋行制度的起源) *Historical Research* (歷史研究) 1 (1957): 1-24, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Paul A. Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao: Politics and Strategies in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), xiii. At this time, all foreign trade went through the Canton system, and the routes between the Northwest Coast and Canton were well trodden by the early fur traders. See Richard Somerset Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), for some examples of the centrality of Canton to the early fur trade of the Northwest Coast.

<sup>9</sup> Liang, *Survey of the Thirteen Factories*, 295-96.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Barkerville, and other gold rush towns shared a family name with Loo Guan-Hen.<sup>11</sup> Preliminary genealogical research has yet to establish a direct connection between the owners or the Kwong Lee companies, but the shared name presents, at the very least, an intriguing coincidence.

The demise of the Co-hongs and the subsequent trans-Pacific development are important matters in the history of the British Empire. Based on Tony Ballantyne, the structure of the British Empire can be compared to a web woven by “vertical” connections between Britain and its colonies and “horizontal” connections among different colonies.<sup>12</sup> To offset the trade deficit created by their imports of silk, tea, and porcelain from China, the British Empire exported opium from British India to China. The Opium Wars were precipitated by Chinese resistance to these British exports. After its defeat, China was forced to open five ports and to cede Hong Kong Island in accordance with the Treaty of Nanking, 1842. As a result of the Opium Wars, Chinese use of opium became widespread, and opium became an integral (and increasingly strong) thread in the “web of empire.” Chinese participation in the nineteenth-century gold rushes led to opium’s becoming a major trade commodity in the Pacific. Throughout the Pacific, opium and its associated smoking equipment also comprised an important part of material culture. Canton lost its role as the exclusive port for foreign trade, and the Co-hong system declined and disappeared after the original site of Thirteen Co-hongs was burned early in the Second Opium War (1856–60).

Yet the tradition of foreign trade through the Canton system paved the way for spreading the news of gold, pushing emigration, and developing gold mountain trade. The Pearl River Delta (including Canton and its surrounding counties) became the major source of Chinese migrants predating the 1950s. Civil wars (including the Taiping Rebellion) and natural catastrophes (such as famine and flood) caused extreme hardship and exacerbated the poverty in this densely populated area. Even though the opening of new ports enabled Hong Kong Island to quickly move

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Leng Dong, director of the Research Centre for Guangzhou Thirteen Co-hongs; and Wang Li-Ying, Chair of Department of History at Guangzhou University; and local government officials in Jiangmen, Guangdong, for guidance and arrangements for conducting preliminary genealogical research in the Loo Guan-hen’s hometown in June 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 16. For examples on the increasing scholarship of networked empire, see also Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001); Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Alan Lester and David Lambert, eds., *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careerism in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

from being a small fishing village to being a major oceanic trading port,<sup>13</sup> Canton continued to thrive as a central entrepot during a series of gold rushes around the Pacific: California (1848), Australia (1851), British Columbia (1858), and New Zealand (1861).

Difficulties in southern China served as a major “push” factor for Chinese migration, but the “gold mountain dream” ignited by the gold rushes was a powerful “pull” factor. Originally, in Chinese the term “gold mountain” (金山, pronounced *gum saan* in Cantonese) meant “gold mines” or “goldfields.” In the nineteenth century, it came to denote a land of promise full of opportunities for wealth. After gold was found in California, San Francisco became Gold Mountain City (金山大埠); in Australia, Melbourne became New Gold Mountain City (新金山); in 1858, the Fraser River became the next gold mountain, with Victoria as a main point of entry; and, in 1862, Barkerville emerged as yet another gold mountain. In China, gold mountain became a popular image, and the gold seekers, the sojourners/guests (金山客, *gum saan haak*), were highly sought-after as husbands, sons-in-law, and/or business partners.<sup>14</sup> In Guangdong and Hong Kong, the gold mountain dream continued into the twentieth century and inspired many creative works relating to nineteenth-century overseas Chinese experiences.<sup>15</sup>

Older studies of migration focus on the destination countries, whereas recent studies focus on the mechanisms connecting sending countries with receiving countries. As historian Philip A. Kuhn puts it: “the essence of the matter is not the separation, but the connection.”<sup>16</sup> He analyzes such connections within “a flexible labor-distribution model in which the norm [is] a corridor-linked international style of life and work.”<sup>17</sup> Central to this model is Kuhn’s idea that, when Chinese migrants went overseas, instead of leaving home they created and extended countless “corridors” – “channel[s] of connections that ke[pt] the migrant in a meaningful relationship to the old country (or old village, lineage, or province).”<sup>18</sup>

The “corridors” established by Chinese migrants to British Columbia built on and intersected with the complex “web” of the British Empire at several Pacific ports, including Hong Kong, Canton, San Francisco,

<sup>13</sup> See Sinn, *Pacific Crossing*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>15</sup> For example, a 2009 film co-produced by Canada and China on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway is entitled *Iron Road* in English and *Gold Mountain* in Chinese.

<sup>16</sup> Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

Victoria, Melbourne, and (later) Vancouver. These ports were what Hong Kong historian Elizabeth Sinn aptly calls “in-between places.”<sup>19</sup> These places facilitated the flow of people, goods, funds, commercial intelligence, correspondence, and even human remains.<sup>20</sup> Chinese migrants’ corridors or channels of exchange not only linked different localities in China and British Columbia but also included gold rush sites and ports such as San Francisco and Melbourne. This notion of a trans-Pacific network of corridors joined at in-between places enables the retelling of stories of Chinese migrants who contributed to various aspects of social, economic, and cultural exchange across the Pacific.

The daily needs of Chinese gold seekers, from food and clothing to education and entertainment as well as all aspects of daily life, shaped the composition of the gold mountain trade through these corridors.<sup>21</sup> The consumption of Chinese goods, including opium, during the gold rush and long after contributed to the prosperity of trans-Pacific trade and of Chinese merchants.<sup>22</sup> Yet imports of Chinese goods also contributed to the long-standing perception that the Chinese were sojourners who contributed little to the local economy of their host countries before moving on either to another goldfield or back to China.<sup>23</sup> Australian historians Keir Reeves and Benjamin Mountford challenge this stereotype, pointing out that, in Australia, only a fraction of the gold seekers, of whatever nationality, stayed on to create settler communities. And their conclusions are broadly applicable to gold rushes around the Pacific.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Sinn, *Pacific Crossing*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 136. See also Hon Ming Yip, *The Tung Wah Coffin Home and Global Charity Network: Evidence and Findings from Archival Materials* (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian [HK] Co. Ltd., 2009). Yip studied the large-scope charitable service of shipping dead bodies and bones from overseas to the hometowns of the deceased, a folk practice important for Chinese of the time, through Hong Kong. Yip explained that, from the United States, the shipping went through various Pacific ports, whereas in Canada, Victoria was the only trans-Pacific port used for this practice.

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix 1 in Sinn, *Pacific Crossing*, 309–11. In 1849, Hong Kong exports to San Francisco, in twenty-three vessels, amounted to 4,950 tons. The exported goods ranged from eggs and soda water to paint and bricks.

<sup>22</sup> David T. H. Lee (李東海), *A History of Chinese in Canada* (加拿大華僑史) (Vancouver: Canada Liberty Publishers, 1967), 66.

<sup>23</sup> This perception from early times persists today in North America. As Asian American scholar Robert G. Lee explicates, the common questions many Asian Americans (and Asian Canadians) get – such as “Where do you come from? ... No, where do you really come from?” – are based on the assumption that Asians are sojourners. But such assumptions may have extreme consequences. See Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), ix–x.

<sup>24</sup> Reeves, “Tracking the Dragon,” 56, 62. See also Benjamin Mountford and Keir Reeves, “Reworking the Tailings: New Gold Histories and the Cultural Landscape,” in *Creating White Australia*, ed. Jane Carey and Claire McLisky (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009), 25–43, 35–36, and 40–41.

Still, it cannot be denied that these early Chinese migrants, who spoke various dialects of Cantonese, left a lasting legacy in the trans-Pacific world, which Henry Yu fittingly refers to as the “Cantonese Pacific.”<sup>25</sup>

#### KWONG LEE & CO., VICTORIA, AND BRITISH COLUMBIA'S GOLD RUSH

The first wave of Chinese gold seekers to today's British Columbia came from San Francisco as they extended the trans-Pacific corridors they had developed during the California gold rush. Hop Kee & Co. of San Francisco played an instrumental role in this process.<sup>26</sup> On 24 June 1858, the company commissioned Allan Lowe & Co. of San Francisco to ship three hundred Chinese men and forty-nine tonnes of merchandise to Victoria at the cost of \$3,500.<sup>27</sup> Most men departed for the goldfields soon after arriving.

Throughout the summer of 1858 and 1859, Chinese continued to arrive from the United States and quickly established a corridor between San Francisco and Victoria. By 1859, clipper ships brought hundreds of Chinese immigrants directly from Hong Kong and created another corridor. The trans-Pacific voyage was difficult. A stack of bilingual tickets issued in 1865 to Chinese men and boys for passage on the *Maria* from Hong Kong to Victoria reveals that each of the 316 passengers received only one meal per day and a sleeping space of only thirty five centimetres (in contravention of the Chinese Passengers Act, 1855). (See Figure 1.)

The origin of Kwong Lee & Co. coincided with the first major Chinese settlement in today's Canada. Loo Chuck Fan and Loo Chew Fan, brothers and owners of Kwong Lee & Co., were among the earliest Chinese merchants (the other two were Wong Tien Lui and Chang Tsou) to arrive in British Columbia and to establish businesses. They purchased land at the northern edge of Fort Victoria across a ravine, where today's Johnson Street is located.<sup>28</sup> In Barkerville, they repeated

<sup>25</sup> Henry Yu, “The Intermittent Rhythms of the Cantonese Pacific,” in *Connecting Seas and Connected Oceans: Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and China Seas Migration from the 1830s to the 1930s*, ed. Donna R. Garbaccia and Dirk Hoerder, 392–414 (Leiden: Brill, 2011). “Cantonese Pacific” is also the topic of the second book of Yu's current trilogy on global and migration history.

<sup>26</sup> BCA, MS 1053.

<sup>27</sup> David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988), 15–16.

<sup>28</sup> See Patrick A. Dunae, John Sutton Lutz, Donald J. Lafreniere, and Jason A. Gilliland, “Making the Inscrutable, Scrutable: Race and Space in Victoria's Chinatown, 1891,” *BC Studies* 169 (2011): 62–63, for the location of this Chinatown in the late nineteenth century.



No. 89.

SCHEDULE D.  
FORM OF CONTRACT PASSENGER TICKET.

I Herby Engage, that the Chinese named Wong Tin of shall be provided with a Passage to, and shall be landed at the Port of Victoria in the Ship or Vessel called the Prima with not less than 72 Cubic Feet and 12 Superficial Feet for Berth, Accommodation, and shall be victualled according to Schedule A to the "Chinese Passengers Act, 1855," annexed, during the Voyage and the term of detention at any place before its determination, for the Sum of Dollars and I hereby acknowledge to have received the Sum of Dollars in full payment.

NAME OF PASSENGER	MALE	FEMALE	OCCUPATION	NATIVE PLACE
Age	Age			
王端 Wong tin	25		Labourer	China

Victoria, Hongkong, the Day of 1865

I Herby Certify, that I have explained to the Signer of the above Contract Passenger Ticket.

Victoria, Hongkong, the Day of 1865

32  
11

412

立收船位證人李嘉坡收  
船位一個係廣東人年廿五歲  
工生意係在華人街做地  
船位到香港地方上岸在船以  
方停七十二英尺橫直以十二尺地  
力安置其食用照一千八百五十五年  
律民搭客律例內所載施行或將別  
處地方為式共該船位銀二十員  
照收清立此收單為據

( )  
年二月廿四日  
白荷船經已李嘉坡收單

Figure 1. Maria bilingual passenger tickets, ca. 1865. Source: RBCM/BCA K/EA/C43.

this pattern of forming a Chinatown, in this instance at the south end of the town, separate from the main community.<sup>29</sup> In Victoria, they set up stores (Kwong Lee & Co., Tai Soong & Co., and Yan Woo Sang & Co.) and wooden huts as tenement houses for the labourers they recruited in San Francisco and (later) China. When Victoria was incorporated as a city in 1862, three hundred people, about 6 percent of the city's total population, were Chinese.<sup>30</sup> This percentage changed seasonally as some miners wintered in Victoria while newcomers either passed through or stayed and took jobs (mainly in the service sector).

Unlike Californians, early colonial British Columbians were comparatively tolerant of the Chinese.<sup>31</sup> In the early years of the gold rush, some regarded Chinese as valuable members of their communities – people who shared the goal of making money and whose presence might lead to the growth of a profitable trans-Pacific trade.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Chinese

<sup>29</sup> On the location of Chinatown, see Richard Thomas Wright, *Barkerville and the Cariboo Goldfields* (Victoria: Heritage House, 2013), 101–2, 134, 138.

<sup>30</sup> See Lai, *Chinatowns*.

<sup>31</sup> Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858–1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989), 5, 7. For a degree of tolerance and acceptance at Barkerville, see also Wright, *Barkerville and the Cariboo Goldfields*, 101, 170, 173.

<sup>32</sup> Roy, *A White Man's Province* (1989), 6–7, also see this book for the later development of racism against Chinese in British Columbia; Patricia E. Roy, *The Oriental Question: Consolidating*



labourers provided the non-Chinese population with useful services as laundrymen, servants, barbers, tailors, cobblers, or other tradesmen as well as cooks, domestic servants, market gardeners, and washmen.<sup>33</sup>

The manager of Kwong Lee & Co., Lee Chang (alternatively spelled as “Lee Chong”), an early model of an intercultural personality, illustrates how the Chinese participated in public life, interacted with all walks of society, and engaged with the legal system for their own protection (Figure 2). He rose quickly as a leader of his community and was well known by the non-Chinese public as “Kwong Lee,” even though he was not the owner of the firm. An English traveller described him as “a gentleman of most polite manners and very intelligent. Speaks English fluently in ordinary conversation. Free from Yankee twang and slang.”<sup>34</sup> In August 1858, a newspaper reported that Lee Chang, “a well-known and respectable commission merchant,” had acted as a court interpreter when a Chinese man was charged with selling liquor to an Aboriginal person.<sup>35</sup>

Lee Chang brought his wife and two children to Victoria from San Francisco on 29 February 1860, and she (sometimes known as Mrs. Kwong Lee) became the first Chinese woman to settle in Victoria.<sup>36</sup> As in the Antipodes, the arrival of families showed that not all Chinese were sojourners.<sup>37</sup> Lee’s plan to settle permanently was also demonstrated by his engagement with the government. On 7 March 1860, along with two other Chinese merchants, he went to see Governor James Douglas after hearing that a poll tax might be imposed on Chinese immigrants.<sup>38</sup> In their open address to the governor, they stated that, unlike in California,<sup>39</sup>

---

a *White Man’s Province, 1914–41* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003); W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy towards Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002). See also W. Peter Ward, “Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia,” *BC Studies* 45 (1980): 17–35; Rennie Warburton, “Race and Class in British Columbia: A Comment,” *BC Studies* 49 (1981): 79–85; and W. Peter Ward, “Race and Class: A Reply,” *BC Studies* 50 (1981): 52.

<sup>33</sup> Lai, *Chinatowns*, 44–51. David Chuenyan Lai comments that these services benefited many households and made the non-Chinese household women’s lives much easier. For an analysis of occupations later in the history of Victoria’s Chinatown, see Dunae et al., “Making the Inscrutable.”

<sup>34</sup> Walter B. Cheadle, *Cheadle’s Journal of a Trip Across Canada, 1862–63* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1971), 268.

<sup>35</sup> *Daily Victoria Gazette*, 10 August 1858.

<sup>36</sup> *British Colonist* (Victoria), 1 March 1860. Barman notes that only a handful of Chinese immigrants to early British Columbia (mostly merchants) had Chinese wives. See Jean Barman, “Beyond Chinatown: Chinese Men and Indigenous Women in Early British Columbia,” *BC Studies* 177 (2013): 39–64.

<sup>37</sup> Reeves, “Tracking the Dragon,” 56.

<sup>38</sup> *British Colonist* (Victoria), 8 March 1860.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 April 1864.

**KWONG LEE & CO.,**  
**LEE CHANG, Manager.**  
**Commission Merchants,**  
**IMPORTERS AND DEALERS**  
 IN ALL KINDS OF  
**CHINESE GOODS,**  
**Cormorant street, Victoria, V.I.**

Branches....At FORT YALE, British Columbia  
 LILLOOET " "  
 MOUTH of QUESNELLE " "  
 FORKS of QUESNELLE " "

San Francisco House.....HOF KEE & Co.  
 Also in China—Canton City....YU TEAN & Co.  
 Hong Kong.....KWONG MAN FUNG & Co.  
 ap6 2m

Figure 2. Kwong Lee & Co. ad from *British Colonist*, 6 April 1864.

they believed that in the colony of British Columbia the Chinese had access to legal protection.

Nevertheless, despite official government policy, the Chinese did suffer mistreatment.<sup>40</sup> Thus, when Governor Arthur Kennedy, James Douglas's successor, arrived in Victoria in April 1864, Lee Chang, Tong Kee, and Chang Tsoo called on him to express their hope for the fair treatment of the Chinese population and their concerns about the colonial government's plan to modify the colony's free trade policy.<sup>41</sup> According to Chinese accounts, Governor Kennedy was friendly and maintained a positive relationship with, and enjoyed a good reputation among, Chinese communities during his term in the British colonies both here (1864-66) and in Hong Kong, where he was governor between 1872 and 1877.<sup>42</sup>

In their talks with Governor Kennedy, Lee Chang et al. were quick to emphasize the active trade in silk, tea, sugar, and rice imports from China as well as the prospects of increasing lumber, coal, mineral, and fish exports

<sup>40</sup> Lee, *A History*, 85-86.

<sup>41</sup> *British Colonist* (Victoria), 5 April 1864.

<sup>42</sup> Lee, *A History*, 85-88. Based on his account, Kennedy's service as governor was very well received by Chinese in Hong Kong. The resonant good reputation of Kennedy in the colonies of Hong Kong and British Columbia shows the intersection of what Tony Ballantyne theorizes as the "horizontal" (between colonies) and the "vertical" (between colony and the British government) connections of the nineteenth-century British Empire. See Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire*, 16.

to China (see Figure 3).<sup>43</sup> By 1862, eleven Chinese companies paid taxes under the Trade Licence Ordinance. Kwong Lee & Co. was assessed at £6500, second only to the Hudson's Bay Company, while Tai Soong & Co. and Yan Woo Sang & Co. were assessed at over £2000 each.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 3. Kwong Lee and Co. & Tai Soong & Co. stores<sup>45</sup> on Cormorant Street in Victoria, next to the Chinese arch erected in honour of Governor General the Earl of Dufferin's visit in August 1876. Source: RBCM/BCA E01926.

These figures reflect the role of Victoria as a hub on the trans-Pacific corridors of trade between Canton, Hong Kong, and the gold rush towns. According to an 1868 Kwong Lee & Co. ad, its "Principal Houses" (i.e., principal agents and offices) were Kwong U Shing in Canton and Kwong Man Fung in Hong Kong, and it was also connected with Hop Kee & Co. in San Francisco. It had branches in several BC gold rush towns.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the owners of Tai Soong & Co., located at 40-42 Cormorant Street (today's 550-556 Pandora Ave., Victoria), also operated Tai Chuen Co. in Hong Kong and Kwong San Tai Co. in San Francisco.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *British Colonist* (Victoria), 5 April 1864.

<sup>44</sup> Harry Con, Ronald J. Con, Graham Johnson, Edgar Wickberg, and William E. Willmott, *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 16. Further research and statistical analysis of all 1860s trade licence records would establish a better understanding of the scope of Chinese businesses of the time.

<sup>45</sup> Thanks to researcher Chris Hanna who pointed it out.

<sup>46</sup> *First Victoria Directory and British Columbia Guide* (Victoria: Edward Mallandaine, 1868), 77.

<sup>47</sup> *A Commemorative Issue of the Grand Opening of the Yue Shan Society Building in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Yue Shan Society, 1949), sec. 2, p. 2, cited in David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinese*

Two or three times a year, Wong Tien Lui chartered a clipper to ship tons of dry goods and Chinese merchandise from Hong Kong to Victoria for distribution to Chinese stores in the gold-mining towns.<sup>48</sup>

#### KWONG LEE & CO., MATERIAL CULTURE, AND BARKERVILLE

By 1861, the miners' trek to the Cariboo gold rush was well under way,<sup>49</sup> and Victoria's Chinese merchants were quick to take advantage. They operated transportation businesses, first with mules and later with wagons, up the Fraser Valley, into the Cariboo,<sup>50</sup> and on to Barkerville. Chinese people operated grocery stores, brothels, opium dens, and restaurants;<sup>51</sup> ran ranches; cultivated fresh produce; served as packers; and operated pack trains and mule teams.

Kwong Lee & Co. developed a network of subsidiaries and agencies in the goldfields. By 1868, it had opened stores in Yale, Lillooet, Quesnelleforks, Quesnellemouth, Stanley, and Barkerville. It also had warehouses in Barkerville and Quesnellemouth.<sup>52</sup> In Barkerville, the company acquired a retail trade licence in June 1866 and a wholesale licence little more than a year later. Receipts held in the Barkerville Archives for freight charges on the lower Fraser River reveal the frequency of shipping and the wide range of goods shipped from the company's New Westminster warehouse to Yale and to the gold rush towns. The general merchandise included rice, tea, opium, cigars, clothing, boots and shoes, hardware, mining tools, blankets, and matches (Figure 4).<sup>53</sup> All of these items had been imported from China.

---

*Community Leadership: Case Study of Victoria in Canada* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2010), 52.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 52–53.

<sup>49</sup> Fred W. Ludditt, *Barkerville Days* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1969), 14–15. For an overview of the timing, gold strikes, and communities of the Cariboo goldfields, see Wright, *Barkerville and the Cariboo Goldfields*, 17–34.

<sup>50</sup> Con et al., *From China to Canada*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> Lee, *A History*, 63.

<sup>52</sup> *First Victoria Directory*, 77. For Kwong Lee's stores in Barkerville and elsewhere in British Columbia in the 1860s, see Wright, *Barkerville and the Cariboo Goldfields*, 171–72. In Kwong Lee's 6 April 1864 *British Colonist* ad (Figure 2), the place names were referred to as Fort Yale, Mouth of Quesnelle, and Forks of Quesnelle. In its 1868 ad in *Fort Victoria Directory*, these towns were listed as Yale, Mouth Quesnelle, and Forks Quesnelle. As Wright indicates in his note, the names later became Quesnellemouth and Quesnelleforks, and Quesnellemouth became Quesnelle in the 1870s and adopted today's name Quesnel in 1928 (10). In this essay, for consistency, the place names are referred to Yale, Quesnellemouth and Quesnelleforks.

<sup>53</sup> *First Victoria Directory*, 77; and Barkerville Archives files 996.9.12.8–31.

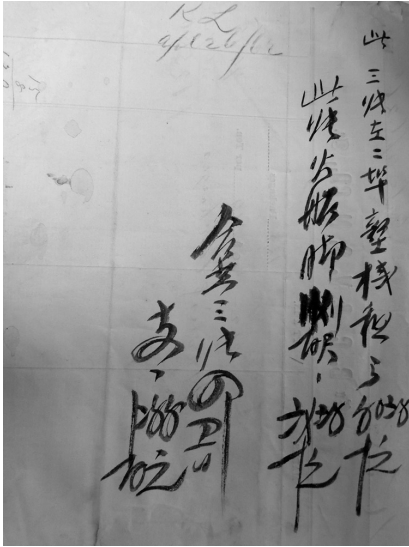


Figure 4. A note in Chinese calligraphy from a Kwong Lee & Co. receipt folder indicating the payment for warehouse storage in New Westminster and for transportation of goods by steamer. On the back in Chinese calligraphy is the date on the lunar calendar (which differs from the Western calendar). Barkerville Historic Town Archives.

The Kwong Lee firm also owned mining claims, employed Chinese miners, and owned shares in non-Chinese mining companies.<sup>54</sup> An 1862 receipt for Ballou's Express and regular reports of the gold commissioner indicate that it also shipped large quantities of gold dust from the Interior to Victoria.<sup>55</sup> Kwong Lee & Co. also acquired a ranch almost a kilometre from the town of Quesnellemouth on the east bank of the Quesnelle River in 1864 (Figure 5).<sup>56</sup> Between 1864 and 1885, this ranch harvested 29,484 kilograms of barley and oats from 16.2 hectares and 31,651 kilograms of potatoes from one hectare, it also kept ten horses and mules, six cattle, and thirty pigs.<sup>57</sup>

The Kwong Lee operation at Quesnelle was one of several supplying much needed fresh produce to the goldfields at "very reasonable prices."<sup>58</sup> According to the *Cariboo Sentinel*, by 1866 Chinese were growing large quantities of potatoes,<sup>59</sup> and they controlled prices in the fresh produce market.<sup>60</sup> Other crops at Quesnelle included turnips, carrots, and

<sup>54</sup> Susan M. Lambeth, *The Chinatown Component in Barkerville* (Barkerville: Heritage Conservation Branch, 1981), 27.

<sup>55</sup> Barkerville Archives 996.9.12.19. A few similar items can also be found in Colonial Correspondence, RBCM/BCA, GR-1372, file 104.

<sup>56</sup> Lambeth, *Chinatown Component*; Barkerville Archives, 305.8951 Lam 1981/0991.0123.0606, 1981, 24.

<sup>57</sup> BCA, GR 216, vol. 160, file 6, 1885. Also cited in Lambeth, *Chinatown Component*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> *Cariboo Sentinel*, 20 September 1866. It cites the prices of potatoes (8 cents), turnips (6 cents), carrots (16 cents), and cabbage (16 cents) sold by Chinese in Quesnellemouth area (presumably per pound).

<sup>59</sup> *Cariboo Sentinel*, 10 September 1866.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 May 1866.







Figure 6. Nan Sing and children in the Cariboo, ca. 1860. *Source:* BCA G-03059.

arrived directly from China. Earnings declined and the need for social support grew. Most Chinese miners worked in groups, but white miners often drove them away from claims with better yields and forced them to work abandoned claims.<sup>64</sup>

Before they came to Canada, some Chinese belonged to Hongmen, a secret society in China that was later known as the Chinese Freemasons in the Americas, and many of them joined it after arriving in British Columbia in order to protect themselves against discrimination in the goldfields.<sup>65</sup> In 1863, the Chinese Freemasons established a lodge. Although Victoria already had several rudimentary associations, this was the first major Chinese organization in British Columbia (Figures 7 and 8).<sup>66</sup> Its institutional and cultural practices, which originated in the

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 63–64.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 63–64, 73–76.

<sup>66</sup> See David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinese Community Leadership Case Study of Victoria in Canada* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010). Before the establishment of the Chinese Consolidated

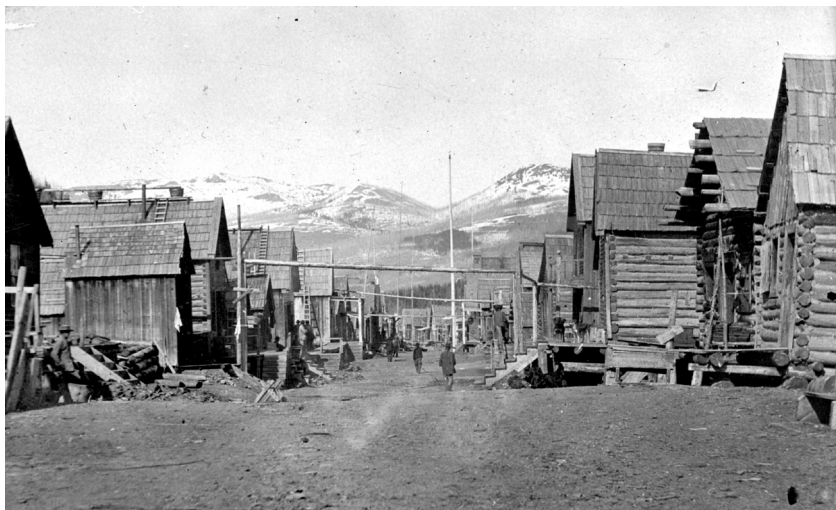


Figure 7. Barkerville Chinatown, ca. 1890. *Source:* RBCM/BCA C-09748.



Figure 8. Chinese residents clearing snow in Barkerville, ca. 1920s. *Source:* RBCM/BCA C-09556.



Figure 9. Barkerville Chinese Masonic Hall. *Source:* RBCM/BCA F-07470.

Old World, were applied faithfully in Barkerville and later in Quesnelle, Quesnelleforks, and other gold rush towns.<sup>67</sup> Such practices helped new migrants ground themselves in the new land and find their sense of belonging. Hongmen refashioned itself in North America and adopted the Freemasons' iconography while retaining the Old World hierarchy and rules (Figure 9).

The Chinese Freemasons left a precious material legacy that illustrates the wide range of trans-Pacific connections that passed through what

Benevolent Association in 1885, Victoria had only "rudimentary organizations" such as clan associations, which "did not have an office nor hold meetings regularly or keep records" (22-23). See Chen, "Colonies of Tang," for the list of Chee Kung Tong or Chinese Freemasons' ledgers in Barkerville Archives.

<sup>67</sup> See Lily Chow, *Sojourners in the North* (Prince George, BC: Caitlin Press, 1996).

Kuhn refers to as “cultural, social, and economic corridor[s].”<sup>68</sup> Material culture helps people “to know, understand, and situate [them]selves within the world, both externally and internally.”<sup>69</sup> In Barkerville, several Chinese Freemason artefacts have been preserved, notably hall plaques and a small woodblock-printed book – the Hongmen’s manual, with its history and rules. These artefacts are emblematic of a once active and thriving community and of the persistence of Old World cultural practices. As an artefact, the Chinese Freemasons manual also exemplifies the advanced colour printing technology of nineteenth-century China and the prominence of the Chinese Freemasons in the New World (Figure 10).

Other artefacts of Chinese origin indicate the practical needs of the goldfields. A fire in September 1868 destroyed much of Barkerville, including a Chinese washhouse and Kwong Lee & Co.’s original store.<sup>70</sup> The Quesnel and District Museum and Archives has a long, extendable Chinese brass fire pump with its original engraving, which shows that it was made by the fire pump specialist Zhang Fa Co. (长long 发prosperous 号Co.) located on the east side of Canton (Figure 11). Although it is not known whether this pump was obtained before or after the big fire, its existence testifies to the wide range of needs served by Chinese imported goods in Barkerville’s early years.

Barkerville’s Chinese merchants also imported brass scales with which to weigh gold and goods. A surviving example in Barkerville Historic Town is one weight, part of a set, engraved with Chinese characters. Similar bits and pieces of scales and weights have been found at other gold-mining sites. A more complete and well-preserved set of this kind (from a later time) is shown in Figure 12. Chinese merchants also shipped basic cooking items around the Pacific. Liquor and sauce bottles made in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hong Kong, and found in early Barkerville kitchens and stores, have been found all around the Pacific (Figure 13).

Opium dens were among the earliest businesses established in Barkerville. Late Qing intellectuals commented that the three most harmful (albeit popular) practices were opium, gambling, and prostitution. All three crossed the Pacific. It is estimated that 40 to 50 percent of the

<sup>68</sup> Kuhn, *Chinese among Others*, 46.

<sup>69</sup> See Abby Clouse, “A Narrative of Value and the ‘Antiques Roadshow’: A Game of Recognitions,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 41, 1 (2008): 3.

<sup>70</sup> Kwong Lee & Co. suffered the third largest loss of any individual or company in Barkerville, estimated at \$40,000. See Lambeth, *Chinatown Component*, 25. According to Wright, Barkerville’s Chinatown, isolated at the south end of town, survived the fire. Wright, *Barkerville and the Cariboo Goldfields*, 101–2, 138.





Figure 10. Chinese Freemasons manual in Barkerville. Courtesy Barkerville Historic Town Archives.



Figure 11. Engraving on Chinese brass fire pump. Courtesy Quesnel and District Museum and Archives.



Figure 12. Chinese scale and weights. Courtesy Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, SC854.1-50.



Figure 13. Chinese liquor bottle from Hong Kong, Barkerville 2008.20.1. Courtesy Barkerville Historic Town Archives.



Chinese in Victoria and the gold rush towns smoked opium, but the opium dens also served non-Chinese customers.<sup>71</sup> Opium refineries in Victoria's Chinatown, which operated legally until 1908, not only sold their product locally but also exported it to the Americas.<sup>72</sup> In the 1870s, when it came to exports from British Columbia, only coal and fur exceeded opium in value.<sup>73</sup> Pieces of old opium cans were still being found along the Fraser River in the mid-twentieth century, but few people recognized them and most were lost.

Across diverse nationalities and cultures, gambling was a common entertainment in the goldfields as well as in Victoria's Fan Tan Alley (where



Figure 14. White pigeon ticket. Courtesy RBCM.

wealthy merchants operated gambling dens), which the Chinese referred to as “Bank Street.” In Barkerville, archaeologists have discovered pieces from games popular in Qing China and have determined that the Chinese mainly played fan-tan, dominos, and card games, including the famous and widely popular Cantonese game of White Pigeon Ticket. Barkerville His-

torical Town preserves these tickets and uses reproductions for educational programs and festivals (Figure 14).

#### LEGACY: CONTINUITIES AND IMPACT

After 1868, as the gold supplies dwindled and many claims were abandoned, some Chinese persisted in looking for gold along the Fraser River.<sup>74</sup> Like most of Barkerville, Kwong Lee & Co. rebuilt itself

<sup>71</sup> Lee, *A History*, 103.

<sup>72</sup> Lai, *Chinese Community Leadership*, 52. See also Dunae et al., “Making the Inscrutable,” 77.

<sup>73</sup> Lai, *Chinese Community Leadership*, 38.

<sup>74</sup> Lee, *A History*, 65. After 1860 on the Fraser, notes Michael Kennedy, gold mining “continued to be practiced by small groups of Chinese and Native miners who used pans, rockers,

after the 1868 fire and continued in business under new ownership.<sup>75</sup> Early in the 1880s, its business began to decline. Family disputes and financial problems resulted in court cases and eventual receivership in 1885.<sup>76</sup> By 1888, Loo Gee Wing had become the “assignee or purchaser” of the Kwong Lee Estate at Yale, Barkerville, and Quesnelleforks.<sup>77</sup> The business was renamed Kwong Lee Wing Kee in Barkerville, and it operated under this name between 1890 and 1915, when Tsang Quon was in control.<sup>78</sup> The rest of Tsang’s family moved to Barkerville around 1902, and their residence has been restored.<sup>79</sup>

Other family histories connected different, and created new, corridors in the trans-Pacific region. Among them is that of W.M. Hong (widely known in the Cariboo as Bill Hong), author of the self-published book entitled ... *And So ... That’s How It Happened: Recollections of Stanley-Barkerville, 1900–1975*. Wong Gar Won, Bill Hong’s father, was among the highly mobile trans-Pacific gold seekers of the mid-nineteenth century. Born in China in 1852, he went to Silver City, New Mexico, at the age of ten and arrived in New Westminster in 1880 after spending eighteen years in the United States. After marrying in China, he settled in Stanley, near Barkerville, and bought and ran the Kwong Lung Kee store in 1885. The business closed in 1926.<sup>80</sup> In 1927, he returned to China, where he died in 1945.

Bill Hong became an important figure in Barkerville and the Cariboo.<sup>81</sup> He was born in 1901 in Stanley. In 1910, he went with his family to China but returned to Victoria the following year. In 1926, he

---

and sluices.” Michael Kennedy, “Fraser River Placer Mining Landscapes,” *BC Studies* 160 (2008/2009), 44.

<sup>75</sup> Lambeth, *Chinatown Component*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> Lai, *Chinese Community Leadership*, 54.

<sup>77</sup> BCA, GR 216, vol. 143, file 6, [Hong Kong], 15 May 1888. Also cited in Lambeth, *Chinatown Component*, 28.

<sup>78</sup> Barkerville Archives, Building 10 description. See also Wright, *Barkerville and the Cariboo Goldfields*, 171–2 and Anne Laing, *The Traveller’s Site Guide to Barkerville Historic Town* (Burnaby: Vanpress, 2009), 50.

<sup>79</sup> One of his descendants is an activist in Vancouver, and her daughter, Karin Lee, a Vancouver-based award-winning artist and filmmaker, has made films using Barkerville as background. For instance, her short film *Small Pleasures* is set in 1860s Barkerville and features a Chinese woman with bound feet explaining the custom to a white woman and a First Nations woman in Chinook Wawa. Another short film, *Little Heaven and Earth*, a title translated from the Chinook *Ats Sahali pee Illabaie*, interprets Barkerville’s great fire of 1868 from the perspective of the Chinese community; it is based on the oral history passed down by Karin Lee’s late uncle Dick Mah.

<sup>80</sup> Chen, “Colonies of Tang,” 514.

<sup>81</sup> See W.M. Hong (widely known in the Cariboo as Bill Hong), author of the self-published ... *And So ... That’s How It Happened: Recollections of Stanley-Barkerville, 1900–1975* (Coquitlam, BC: W.M. Hong, 1978). And see David Hong, “Roots,” unpublished list of Hong family genealogy and chronology.



Figure 15. Pat (standing) and Ray Hong, Bill Hong's sons, grew up in Barkerville, 1927. *Source:* RBCM/BCA C-09457.



Figure 16. Bill Hong, in uniform as chief of Fire Brigade of Barkerville, September 1962. *Source:* RBCM/BCA I-60783.

and his wife Faye moved to Barkerville, where his children were born and raised (Figures 15 and 16).

Like his father, Bill Hong took his young family to China where he built a home in the ancestral village of Nam Lung in 1936. After the Japanese invaded China, the family returned to Barkerville in 1937. Bill Hong mined claims, ran the Lee Chong Store and many other businesses, worked on water conservancy projects, and served as chief of the Barkerville fire brigade from 1948 to 1962 (Figure 16). He also played a crucial role in recounting Barkerville's regional history through his book and his ongoing engagement with the community.<sup>82</sup> Wong Gar Won and Bill Hong's life trajectories, and those of their descendants, indicate that there were no set courses for Chinese migrants, either as sojourners or as settlers. Through criss-crossing corridors, migrants travelled both multi-directionally and widely.

After the gold rush waned, ongoing migrant flows followed established trans-Pacific corridors. Established local Chinese merchants benefited from the influx of more than fifteen thousand Chinese who came between 1881 and 1885 to work on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. After the railway was built, many Chinese were forced to go back to China or to find work elsewhere. Some of them survived in British Columbia by mining small quantities of gold in the Fraser Canyon, and, in the late nineteenth century, the Chinese became the majority population in some gold rush towns (such as Quesnelleforks). They sent remittances to China,<sup>83</sup> and they expanded the gold mountain trade. Tai Soong & Co., which had operated in Victoria since the gold rush era, was one of the main agencies to handle these transactions. The continuity of gold mountain trade extended the trans-Pacific corridors from the gold rush era and transformed both the sending and receiving regions of these migrants for decades to come.

The stories of the Loo Brothers, of Tsang Quon, of Bill Hong, and of others illustrate not only how the Chinese developed trans-Pacific corridors of culture and trade but also that material culture (whether archival or current) reveals the impact of gold mountain trade on the "Cantonese Pacific." The goods of the Pearl River Delta transformed material lives and cultural landscapes around the Pacific Rim. As a result of the gold rushes, Chinese migrants informed the cultures of the trans-Pacific world.

<sup>82</sup> See Bill Quackenbush, "Notes from the Curator," available at <http://www.barkerville.com/vol1/curator.htm>.

<sup>83</sup> BCA K/EA/C43.