Unwelcome Settlers from the West:

PEOPLE FROM THE "FAR EAST" IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

ABSTRACT

British Columbia was long unique in Canada in having a significant portion of its settlers come from the west, that is, the so-called "Far East" of China and Japan. Although these people contributed to the development of the provincial economy, for a variety of intertwined reasons white British Columbians long opposed their immigration and attempted to restrict their activities.

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In 1884, a federal government pamphlet reported that British Columbia was keen to have settlers; there was a caveat, they were to be white "to take the place of Chinese workmen, who are not regarded with favour...[because]... they form an inferior class apart, and are not adapted for mingling with or forming part of the civilization of the Caucasian or white race."[1] The Chinese continued to come. Within the decade, Japanese immigrants also began to arrive. They were equally unwelcome though not always for the same reasons. The basic arguments against the Asian presence were set in the first half century of British Columbia's existence from 1858 to 1914 when, alone among Canadian provinces, it experienced significant immigration from the west, that is, from Asia. By the time of the First World War, both the Chinese and the Japanese were well established and together formed seven to ten percent of the province's population.[2]

The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) allowed some Chinese to move east of the Rockies but about 70% remained in British Columbia where almost every city and town had a Chinatown. Some consisted of only a few individuals who operated restaurants and laundries or worked in nearby market gardens as in Vernon and Nelson; others such as Barkerville were relics of the gold rush era or, in the case of Kamloops, the construction of the CPR; some, Nanaimo and Cumberland, grew up around coal mines where Chinese had found employment after the gold rush faded. Several were quite large. In 1911, both Victoria and Vancouver had about 3,500 Chinese residents.[3] A few communities such as Penticton and some Kootenay mining towns had driven out potential Chinese settlers and had no Chinatowns.

In contrast to the overwhelmingly male and widely dispersed Chinese population, the Japanese, who came later, brought in wives, formed families, and were concentrated at the coast. In 1911, of the province's total Japanese population of about 8,600, approximately a quarter lived in Vancouver, mainly around Powell Street and the sawmills on False Creek. Their other major settlement was the fishing village of Steveston at the mouth of the Fraser River. Smaller groups resided at Cumberland and at fishing communities and lumber camps scattered along the coast.

As settlement patterns imply, the Chinese and Japanese earned their livings in several ways. By 1900, the Japanese held 45% of the gill net licenses on the salmon-rich Fraser Rive. Their quick success aroused the enmity of white and native fishers especially when they did not fully join strikes for higher fish prices.[4] The Chinese did not face such opposition in the fishing industry since few white people wanted the unpleasant work they did in the canneries. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese and Japanese mined for coal only at Cumberland with its several

Chinatowns and "Jap" towns.[5] Claiming that that Asians accepted lower wages and poorer working conditions, worked during strikes, and endangered safety by not knowing English, white miners, through legislation and moral suasion, had forced them from the other mines and kept them out of the metalliferous mines. The lumber industry also employed Asians. White workers accused the Asians of being "cheap labour" and "unfair competitors"; employers claimed they were less efficient than white men but relied on them. In 1901, the Japanese and Chinese were 25 and 12 per cent respectively of the labour force in the province's lumber and shingle mills usually doing unskilled tasks.[6] Their wages were low. In 1904, for example, unskilled white labour in lumber mills earned $1.75 to $2.00 per day; Japanese, $1.00 to $1.60; and Chinese, 90 cents to $1.30.[7] A few Japanese were loggers mainly cutting shingle bolts. The provincial practice of denying employment to Asians on crown lands, however, limited their opportunities since most timberlands were leased from the government.

Asians were accepted in a few occupations. Since the time of the gold rush, Chinese had engaged in market gardening and through their own distribution system supplied the white community with fresh vegetables at reasonable prices. A handful of Japanese worked on Okanagan farms and ranches but the major move of Japanese into agriculture came after 1914. In the meantime, white settlers were happy to hire Chinese and Japanese to clear their land. In the cities and towns, whites patronized Chinese laundries and restaurants although white competitors alleged, without much evidence, that the Chinese conducted their businesses in filthy, unsanitary conditions. Yet, many white middle class households employed Chinese as cooks and general servants and a few had Japanese houseboys.

What drew Asians to British Columbia? Although some individuals sought adventure or desired to leave uncomfortable family circumstances, the majority simply wanted a better economic life. China was crowded and its government unstable. Japan had a stable government but limited land. Even "cheap labour" in British Columbia was highly paid by Asian standards. The Chinese first came in search of gold. Little was said about them in the colonial era. With provincial status and the promise of a railway link with the rest of Canada, the Chinese question came to the fore since the only large supply of accessible labour for the west coast was in China. Given a choice of not having the railway or accepting new Chinese immigrants, British Columbians reluctantly accepted the "necessary evil" of letting agents for CPR contractors advance wages and travel costs to an estimated 15-16,000 Chinese labourers.[8] To discourage the Chinese from staying or more from coming, the legislature, having disfranchised them in the 1870s, passed several more anti-Chinese measures such as special taxes which the courts declared *ultra vires*; Ottawa disallowed an immigration law. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, who shared British Columbians' notions of an "alien race" of "semi-barbarian" Chinese[9] that could not assimilate, appointed a Royal Commission to investigate Chinese Immigration. Following its report, Ottawa passed a Chinese Immigration Act imposing a $50 head tax on all Chinese entering Canada effective 1 January 1886, six weeks after the driving of the last spike on the CPR. The tax was raised to $500 in 1904 but was cancelled in 1923 when Parliament passed an exclusionary Chinese immigration law. It is to the surviving head tax payers and their spouses that the Canadian government recently offered $20,000 as compensation.

When Japanese immigrants began to arrive in the 1890s, partly in response to a temporary decline in Chinese immigration because of the head tax, British Columbians treated them like Chinese. After disfranchising them in 1895, the provincial government regularly added "and no Japanese" to the standard clause in its contracts that "No Chinese should be employed." The legislature also sought to halt further immigration from Asia. On seven occasions between 1900 and 1908 it passed such laws, usually a "Natal Act" by which that African colony used a language test to keep out Asian immigrants. Because Japan had signed commercial treaties with Great Britain and concluded a formal Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902, "for imperial reasons" Canada could not let such measures stand and disallowed all but the one reserved in 1907 by Lieutenant-Governor James Dunsmuir whose Vancouver Island coal mines employed Asians.

Why was there such opposition to these immigrants from the west? The notion that they could not form part of a Caucasian "civilization" persisted but it was only one of many intertwined reasons for antipathy. The *Victoria Daily Times* in 1913, for example, asserted that it was "prompted by the instinct of self-preservation." and was "based principally on economic grounds, although unquestionably national and social considerations enter

into the situation."[10] Disentangling the causes of hostility or ranking them in any order is impossible but they can be considered under several headings:

As already indicated, many British Columbians regarded Asians as "cheap labour" who undercut white wages and took jobs; sometimes that was linked to conflict between capital and labour. Another economic argument was the belief that they were sojourners who sent their money home to their families or saved it before returning to Asia to live in relative comfort. In the meantime, it was alleged that by living frugally in crowded, unsanitary conditions, and eating little but imported rice, they did not build up the province. That complaint was particularly directed to the Chinese who, because of the head tax, could rarely afford to bring families to Canada. In fact, many Chinese remained because they did not earn enough to return to China. Many Japanese were also sojourners but, without the burden of the head tax, they could send for wives. After the Gentlemen's Agreement, a high proportion of the new immigrants were brides in their peak childbearing years so the Japanese population grew mainly through natural increase. By 1914 or so when more Japanese children began appearing in the schools, white British Columbians predicted that a high birth rate would let the Japanese "swamp" the province.

Before 1914, the common concept of "swamping" was that "the hundreds of millions of people in Asia,"[11] could overwhelm white British Columbia. A telling cartoon pictured a crowd of Asians gathered around an elderly white man displayed as a museum specimen under the caption: "At one time very numerous in this province."[12] Whenever the number of Asian arrivals rose as it did, for example, in the spring and summer of 1907, partly because of a demand for labour and a revival of emigration from Japan after the Russo-Japanese war (1902-05), British Columbians reacted strongly as shown by the activities of the Asiatic Exclusion League and its ill-fated parade and rally that culminated in Vancouver's Anti-Asian riot in September 1907. Embarrassment over the riot led Canada to negotiate the Gentlemen's Agreement whereby Japan limited the number of passports issued to emigrants to Canada. Despite this diplomatic settlement and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance that gave Japan responsibilities for defending them, even then British Columbians feared a Japanese military invasion.

Behind much antipathy was racial prejudice. In the words of Premier Richard McBride, we have a "sacred and imperative duty" to preserve "this country for the white race."[13] As the federal immigration pamphlet suggested, many Anglo-Saxons believed in a clearly defined racial hierarchy with "whites" at the top. Yet, sentiment grew that the people across the Pacific could "no longer be regarded as inferior."[14] "The Yellow Peril," warned the *Victoria Daily Colonist* in 1913, "is no longer one of brute force; it is one of brains."[15] That, of course, made Asians a more formidable "menace."

As the 1884 pamphlet implied, many white British Columbians believed that Asians did "not assimilate, nor [was] it desirable that they should do so."[16] Assimilation could simply mean living apart in "Little Tokyos" and especially in Chinatowns where, a local magazine alleged, lived "drab-faced, pig-tailed, almond-eyed, rat-eating, opium smoking, leprosy tainted, filthy, hypocritical, polygamous, lecherous, thieving, heathenist, alien Mongol slaves who, like swarms of locusts…spreading over the land, greedily devoured… [British Columbia's] substance."[17] Medical health officers reported that sanitary conditions in Chinatowns were generally no worse than elsewhere in the community but the press viewed the effects of an epidemic in Chinatown as "horrible to contemplate."[18] The most common forms of Chinese "immorality" were gambling and smoking opium, among the few recreations available to most Chinese. Until 1908 the manufacture and sale of opium was legal as Mackenzie King was shocked to realize when he had to authorize the Canadian government to compensate owners of opium factories whose premises were damaged during the 1907 riot.[19] The use of opium continued. Social reformers alleged that the Chinese created "white slaves" by introducing young white women to the narcotic. In its extreme form, assimilation meant miscegenation but neither Chinese, nor Japanese, nor whites favoured that. The "mixing of color degrades both types," declared the *Nanaimo Free Press*.[20]

Despite discrimination, the settlers from the west helped make British Columbia by providing necessary labour. Their descendants, especially after the removal of racial barriers let them enter a variety of trades and professions, continue to contribute to the development of the province and the nation. Alas, it had taken another half century for white British Columbians to recognize that Asians were not an "inferior class" and could "mingle" with their "civilization" to the benefit of both.

Suggestions for further reading

On the Chinese and Japanese respectively the best overviews are still Edgar Wickberg, ed., *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese*

Communities in Canada (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982) and Ken Adachi, *The Enemy that Never War* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976). On the attitudes of white British Columbians to Asian immigrants see 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, 3rd ed.) and Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989).

Endnotes

1 Canada, *Province of British Columbia: Information for Intending Settlers* (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1884), 24.

2 The First Nations population remained relatively stable at about 25,000 between 1881 and 1911.

3 Because of their constant movement, it is difficult to determine the exact size of the Chinese population. (David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988), 199-200; Edgar Wickberg, ed. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 300, 303.

4 Roy, A *White Man's Province*, 143

5 For details see Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989), passim.

6 Canada, Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration, *Report*, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1902), 7, 119, and 132.

7 *New Westminster British Columbian*, 30 December 1904.

8 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 12 May 1882, 1477.

9 *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 23 June 1882.

10 *Victoria Daily Times*, 10 June 1913.

11 *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 14 January 1908.

12 *Vancouver Daily Province*, 6 March 1908.

13 *Vernon News*, 21 March 1912.

14 *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 29 July 1909.

15 *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 31 January 1913.

16 H.H. Stevens, *The Oriental Problem*, [Vancouver, n.p. c.1912], 5.

17 *Resources of British Columbia*, 3 (May 1885), 2.

18 *Kamloops Sentinel*, 21 April 1908.

19 R. MacGregor Dawson, *William Lyon Mackenzie King: A Political Biography, 1874-1923* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958) 147.

20 *Nanaimo Free Press*, 21 April 1913.