The daily life of late 19th century to early 20th century Alaska salmon cannery workers entailed seasonal, strenuous labor combined with harsh living conditions. For the workmen of Chinese descent in particular, this life was characterized by significant physical stress, the relationships of kinship affiliations forged within the Chinatown districts of the western United States (Lyman, 1974). This research analyzes skeletal remains of cannery workers from the Chinese cemetery at Karluk, Kodiak Island, AK. This cemetery was excavated in 1931 from the cannery workmen, especially Chinese immigrants, filling this employment niche.

Chinese Immigration to the Western United States

Late 19th century China was characterized by political unrest, largely stimulated by growing opposition to Manchu control against the Qing dynasty. This, combined with the allure of the rising gold rush industry and railroad expansion in the United States, may have been a motivation for many Chinese natives to emigrate to the western United States (Schmidt et al., 2011). Coinciding with the gold rush economic success was the blossoming salmon cannery industry, which tripled its profits over the span of several decades (Freeman, 1976). This led to many workmen, especially Chinese immigrants, filling this employment niche.

The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibiting incoming Chinese labor led to an increased reliance on the existing population by labor contractors, while simultaneously influencing the preservation of cultural tradition and strengthening the development of Chinese-formed groups known as “tongs” (Mason & Guimary, 1981). Often determined by common surname or region, tong affiliations formed a network of mutual aid and solidarity. Despite these bonds, rivalry among factions often resulted in conflicts known as tong wars (Lyman, 1974). These rivalries may explain some indications of interpersonal violence reflected from the cannery workmen skeletal remains.

Late 19th century China was characterized by political unrest, largely stimulated by growing opposition to Manchu control against the Qing dynasty. This, combined with the allure of the rising gold rush industry and railroad expansion in the United States, may have been a motivation for many Chinese natives to emigrate to the western United States (Schmidt et al., 2011). Coinciding with the gold rush economic success was the blossoming salmon cannery industry, which tripled its profits over the span of several decades (Freeman, 1976). This led to many workmen, especially Chinese immigrants, filling this employment niche.

The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibiting incoming Chinese labor led to an increased reliance on the existing population by labor contractors, while simultaneously influencing the preservation of cultural tradition and strengthening the development of Chinese-formed groups known as “tongs” (Mason & Guimary, 1981). Often determined by common surname or region, tong affiliations formed a network of mutual aid and solidarity. Despite these bonds, rivalry among factions often resulted in conflicts known as tong wars (Lyman, 1974). These rivalries may explain some indications of interpersonal violence reflected from the cannery workmen skeletal remains.

Skeletal Pathologies and Anomalies

Surprisingly, few pathological conditions were found on the skeletal remains. The most common findings were neural arch defects, including 33% of the individuals exhibiting spinous bifida (Fig. 14). Several individuals exhibited signs of disease, including tuberculosis (Fig. 12,13), and a lytic process, possibly syphilis (Fig. 11). Other conditions noted included perforated dental wear, isolated cortical defects, and periostitis. Most of the individuals exhibited no skeletal pathology that could indicate cause of death.

Interpretations/Conclusions

Literature describing the Chinese custom of “secondary burial” (Chung & Wegner, 2003) in which eventual exhumation of the skeletal remains that are not returned to China is at odds with the individuals that were left behind at the Karluk cannery. It is unclear why these individuals’ remains were never recovered. There are notes in Hrdlicka’s diary that there were burial bricks in several of the graves suggesting that an eventual return to China was expected.

The overall lack of pathological conditions manifested on the skeletal remains limits the ability to determine the cause of death for the majority of the individuals. The differential mortuary treatment of certain individuals’ burials indicates a selectivity among significant Chinese practices and taphonomic bias, but the explanation for the connection cannot be positively identified. Future research conducted beyond this preliminary investigation about the cannery workmen can address these questions further.

Acknowledgments/References

I would like to thank David Hunt and Rhonda Coolidge for their mentorship during this project. I would also like to thank the faculty at the Miami University Interdisciplinary and Research and Creativity in Education and Human Development at the National Institute for Geospatial-Intelligence for their support. Many thanks to Marla Salzman for providing the poster background. I would like to thank Joe Mullins and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) for their collaboration in this project.