Pioneers, Sunday Schoolers, and Laundrymen: Chinese Immigrants in Iowa in the Chinese Exclusion Era, 1870–1890

ANTHONY J. MILLER

The "Sunday Schoolers" of Des Moines, May 1881

On the evening of May 25, 1881, five Sunday schoolers in Des Moines left the Presbyterian Church where they had been learning catechisms and hymns, and on their way home, local youths shouting chants of "rat-eaters" and "pig-tails" accosted them. The quintet—known to Iowans as Wing Fun, Ah Chee, Ah Ying, Sing Long, and "Sam" Wah—wore long-flowing robes and each fashioned his hair into a queue; they were laundrymen and among the first residents of Iowa to hail from China. Following Sunday School, these five Chinese men were headed home to their shops when they ran into the group of boys on Second Street near the Burlington and Quincy Railroad Depot. Accustomed to such treatment in the Midwest, the Sunday School students chased the young white boys off while hurling their own insults. In retreat, however, the youth ran into George Nash, an African-American man who chided the boys for being too cowardly and encouraged them to use the "baseball club" carried by one of the youths. Taking the baseball bat, Nash led them back to the

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laundrymen where he then proceeded to "crack" Ah Ying over the head with it.[1]

Outraged, Ah Ying's countrymen seized Nash and went to turn him over to the Des Moines Police Department. But as they proceeded toward the police headquarters, a mob of a few hundred people surrounded the four uninjured Chinese laundrymen who were holding Nash and carrying the injured Ah Ying. Suddenly, these Des Moines residents were united in their animosity toward the Chinese, as over forty men and the youthful instigators began what a local newspaper called "a most outrageous assault upon the Celestials." Only the timely arrival of the Des Moines police saved the lives of the Presbyterian Church's Sunday School students. The mob quickly dispersed, leaving the Chinese bruised, beaten, and bleeding in the streets.[2]

Despite being the victims of the attack, Des Moines' Chinese laundrymen were hauled to jail along with Nash, and one white assailant, D.H. Ruland. Three of the five Chinese men were charged with disturbing the peace and levied fines. Certainly, the racial dynamics of this explosive attack on Iowa's early Chinese settlers are notable and quite suspicious. Out of the "mob" of hundreds, the police prosecuted Nash, an African-American, and identified him by name as the instigator of actual violence in local

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1. It is customary in East Asia for a person's family name to be listed first followed by their given name. This convention often confused other Iowans who might be unsure as to whether "Ah" or "Ying" was a person's family name. Adding to the confusion, the language barrier between Chinese and other Iowans led to myriad spellings for a name, such as "Wah" or "Wa" in newspapers, city records, and census materials. Thus, at times the same person might be listed as "Ah Ying," then "Ying Ah," on a third record as "Yung Ah," and on a fourth as "Ah Yun." Like their compatriots on the East and West Coasts, many Chinese pioneers later chose to adopt "Americanized" names such as "Sam" or "Charlie" to promote their businesses, ease social interactions with the wider community, and gesture to their desire to assimilate and become citizens. To limit confusion in the essay, when referring to Chinese Iowans I will follow the East Asian custom and use the name most commonly found for that person in the historical records. When referring to two Chinese pioneers who shared the same family name, I will continue to use their full name to make clear to which individual I am referring, as I do here when discussing Ah Ying and Ah Chee. "Des Moines Kearneyites: A Lot of Hoodlums Make an Attack on a Party of Chinese Returning from Sunday School," *Quad-City Times*, 5/25/1881.

2. "Des Moines Kearneyites."

media. Meanwhile, the white youths who had first accosted the Chinese Sunday schoolers, brandished a weapon, and participated in the attack escaped identification in the public eye and any criminal charges. Law and order in Des Moines on that day in 1881 was meted out by deeming one white Iowan, one Black Iowan, and all of the Chinese present as the "guilty parties," an assignment of blame that held the working class and racial minorities disproportionately responsible for disrupting the peace.

The racial climate in Iowa in this episode indicated that Chinese people in Des Moines had no right to self-defense from bodily harm or perhaps even death. Taken before the court and, according to one observer, "still frightened out of their wits" and without an interpreter, the men received advice from an attorney and then they pled guilty and paid their fines. Anonymous members from the Presbyterian Church defended the honor and reputation of the laundrymen in the newspapers, calling the violence "uncalled for" and disgraceful. Quoting a "lady teacher" from their Sunday School class, one paper described the men as "quiet, industrious peaceful men," who labored all week long only to spend their free Sundays trying to learn Christianity and the English language. The Presbyterian Church called the clubbing with a bat suffered by Ah Ying especially shameful. The immigrant laundry worker, according to his teacher, was an invalid and had spent the last few weeks gravely ill. Ah Ying was only able to come to church with his countrymen because they carried him there. Adding insult to injury, the victim had been robbed of $87 and a ring during the melee.[3] Ultimately, the Iowa court and legal system determined that by simply being present, the Chinese, by virtue of their racial identity, were culpable for the violence inflicted upon them by the surrounding community.

The attack on the Chinese laundrymen of Des Moines was not random; it occurred in a moment of rising national hostility toward immigrants from China. By the early 1880s, the anti-Chinese movement that had originated in California had spread across the nation and was building toward the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the nation's first immigration law barring access to

3. "Des Moines Kearneyites."

the United States on the basis of race and class. And yet, in spite all of that, from the 1880s onward Iowa was home to a small number of successful Chinese entrepreneurs who owned and operated laundries, restaurants, and dry goods stores into the twentieth century. Far removed from the nation's more densely populated Chinatowns, what compelled these Chinese men to be the first pioneers from the Middle Kingdom to reach Iowa's small cities and rural towns? Without the resources and protection provided by those larger ethnic enclaves in cities such as San Francisco and Chicago, how did these Chinese Iowans survive and carve out a living at a time of rising violence against the Chinese in America? This essay marks the onset of an inquiry into those questions as part of a more general historical investigation into the ties between Iowa and China that have been integral to the state's development and identity since the late nineteenth century.[4]

A trickle of Chinese pioneers headed to the Midwest and eventually arrived in Iowa. Among them were Ah Wing of Waterloo, Sam Kee of Boone, and Perry's "Billie" Ar Shong, men whose businesses acquired a considerable clientele and who developed reputations as savvy businessmen. Moreover, with tenures lasting decades in Iowa, Ah, Kee, Ar Shong, and others of their generation broke new ground in the Midwest, creating networks of family-based migration that brought Chinese immigrants to Iowa for the next century.

By paying attention to the lives of Iowa's first generation of immigrants from China this research contributes to existing scholarship on a variety of topics. Firstly, in the revitalized field of midwestern history, writing Chinese Iowans back into the historical record contributes to the work of scholars such as Kristin Hoganson, Jon Lauck, Doug Kiel, and Sara Egge. Focusing on Chinese immigrants as integral to Iowa's economic, political, and

4. Conversely, much of this work has been delayed and disrupted since the spring of 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to materials related to the lives of Chinese people in Iowa in the 1880s and 1890s in many towns across the state has been limited or wholly inaccessible. As a result, much of this current research relies on digitized primary sources and research conducted prior to the pandemic, specifically newspaper accounts, city directories, census, records, and marriage certificates concerning Iowa's first Chinese residents.

cultural development challenges notions about the region's homogeneity and insularity.[5]

A second contribution is to add another layer to scholarly understandings of Sino-American relations and the Chinese-American experience by shifting the focus from the American coasts and "Chinatowns" to the nation's center and rural areas.[6] Historians such as Erika Lee and Beth Lew-Williams have emphasized the critical role that the Chinese Exclusion Acts played in shaping American views of the Chinese as a racial "other" and to the development of the stereotype of Chinese people as deceitful, immoral, violent, and incapable of becoming democratic citizens.[7]

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5. Kristin Hoganson, *The Heartland: An American History* (New York, 2019); Jon Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City, 2013); Doug Kiel, "Untaming the Mild Frontier: In Search of Midwestern Histories," *Middle West Review* 1 (2014), 9–38; Sara Egge, *Woman Suffrage and Citizenship in the Midwest, 1870–1920* (Iowa City, 2018).

6. Far less studied by scholars are the lives of Chinese-Americans living in the Midwest in the era of the Chinese Exclusion Acts and beyond. Among the exceptions is the incredibly valuable study of Chicago's Chinese-American and immigrant laundry workers by Paul Siu and the biography of Wichita's Wayne Hung Wong edited by Benson Tong. Paul C. P. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*, eds. John Kuo and Wei Tchen (New York, 1998). Wayne Hung Wong, *American Paper Son: A Chinese Immigrant in the Midwest*, ed. Benson Tong (Urbana, IL, 2006). For examples of histories of the Chinese-American experience, see Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America* (New York, 2015); Benson Tong, *The Chinese Americans* (Westport, CT, 2000); and Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, 2017).

7. Erika Lee's *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* focuses on Chinese immigrants' struggle against obstacles to immigration in US courts and with customs and immigration officials. She argues defiance of immigration laws led many Americans to see all persons of Chinese descent living in the United States as "illegal immigrants," and thus strengthened the nation's resolve to restrict membership in the United States on the basis of race and nationality. Lee, *At America's Gates* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003). More recently, Beth Lew-Williams in *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* explores the interplay between the government's passage of laws excluding Chinese people and local acts of racial violence or community shunning, enforced segregation, and isolation of these migrants in the United States. Under these constraints, Lew-Williams demonstrates how racism, the continued threat of expulsion, and separation from family members denied laboring Chinese-Americans the chance to pursue the "American Dream" of life, liberty, and the pursuit happiness. Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go* (Cambridge, MA, 2018). See also Mae M. Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *Journal of American History* 86 (1999), 67–92; Andrew Gyory, *Closing the*

Yet far less attention has been paid to the lives of smaller communities of Chinese-Americans and immigrants in midwestern states such as Iowa.[8] Long before international students, artists, and political elites such as Xi Jinping visited Iowa in the late twentieth century, generations of Chinese people from southern China, mostly from the province of Guangdong, were "pushed" to the Midwest by war, famine, population pressures, imperialism, and the need to provide for their families and villages in the nineteenth century. By framing the first Chinese to settle in Iowa as "pioneers," I show that Chinese laundry owners, merchants, and common laborers not only resisted discrimination but were also the first emissaries of their nation to bring cuisine, customs, dress, language, and artwork from their ancestral homeland to states such as Iowa.

Chinese Migration to Iowa After the Civil War

The first wave of Chinese immigrants to the United States began in the mid-1800s on the West Coast with laborers in agriculture, mining, and railroad construction. At the time, the Qing Empire

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Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003); John Robert Soennichsen, *The Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2011); William H. Siener, "Through the Back Door: Evading the Chinese Exclusion Act Along the Niagara Frontier, 1900–1924," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27, no. 4 (2008), 34–70; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York, 2000).

8. In part this is because there are a far fewer primary sources left behind by Chinese-Americans and immigrants living in the Midwest during the Chinese Exclusion Era. Instead, historians are forced to peer at their lives through the imperfect, biased lenses of accounts left by the wider community found in the press, local histories, city directories, census records, and immigration materials. Making matters even more complicated is that the spelling of Chinese-American names often took a variety of forms, for example, sometimes listed as "Ling Wung" and then recorded in another item as "Wung Ling." Other times the community mistook the name on the sign of the laundry to be the name of the shop-owner, which was not always the case. Additionally, Chinese people often adopted new names such "Joe," "Happy," or "Charlie" as a gesture towards assimilation, or changed names to capitalize on the popularity of well-known laundrymen, stores, and families such as the "Fongs." All of this makes it enormously difficult to recover and accurately historicize the lives of Chinese-Americans in this era. Among the exceptions to the dearth of primary sources is Wong, *American Paper Son.*

of China faced several severe problems, such as the Opium Wars, internal rebellion, and rapid population growth, which began a century of decline and turmoil. These forces ultimately pushed hundreds of thousands of Chinese people abroad as a survival strategy. Many migrants set their sights upon the United States, known after the 1850s as the "Gold Mountain" as the Gold Rush drew waves of Chinese miners to California. American efforts to discourage Chinese immigration in the 1850s and 1860s included special taxes on foreign miners. Conversely, in 1868 the United States and the Qing Empire signed the Burlingame Treaty, which established open immigration policies with guarantees of fair treatment and protection before the law for Chinese students, laborers, and merchants coming to America.[9]

By the 1870s and 1880s, however, sporadic economic depressions combined with the power of labor in politics laid the groundwork for the creation of a powerful anti-Chinese movement. Playing on the white public's economic insecurities and racial fears, groups such as the Workingmen's Party led by Denis Kearney, campaigned obsessively against Chinese laborers as a threat to the dignity and wages of white workers. Politicians from both the Democratic and Republican Parties on the West Coast soon echoed Kearney in labeling the Chinese as an "uncivilized" menace incapable of exercising democratic freedoms.[10] Outside of politics, the use of violence, terror, and intimidation by the anti-Chinese movement increasingly restricted the lives of an isolated, relatively small minority group. For protection, Chinese-Americans congregated in large cities in segregated

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9. Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold Mountain, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882–1943* (Stanford, CA, 2000).

10. Historians such as Mae M. Ngai have argued the Chinese Exclusion Acts marked a watershed moment in the nation's history wherein politicians in Washington and labor unions across the country allied to shape immigration policy toward the goal of preserving white supremacy. Mae M. Ngai, "Legacies of Exclusion: Illegal Chinese Immigration During the Cold War Years," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18, no. 1 (1998), 3–35. For the development of Chinatowns in the United States, see also Hsiang-shui Chen, "Patterns of Chinese Settlement in the United States," in *Chinatown No More: Taiwan Immigrants in Contemporary New York* (Ithaca, NY, 1992), 3–26.

districts known as "Chinatowns," which allowed them to pool resources and make their livelihoods. As these "Chinatowns" on the West Coast swelled, competition, overcrowding, and scarcity of opportunity incentivized the continued Chinese migration across the country. Violence followed in migrants' wake as anti-Chinese riots and forced expulsions occurred in Tacoma, Washington, and Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885 and then later in Milwaukee in 1888.[11]

Others traveled farther eastward finding new avenues for employment in the logging industry, manufacturing cigars, or as migrant farm workers and vegetable peddlers far off in the South. Railroads recruited thousands of Chinese workers, with over 10,000 working on the Transcontinental Railroad. Later in the mid-1880s, thousands more laborers ventured to Canada to work on the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. In both cases, once the railroads were completed, thousands of Chinese people found themselves unemployed thousands of miles from the coast in the middle of North America. While many Chinese laborers returned to the Pacific Northwest and Southwest to work on smaller railroads, others traveled toward the growing Chinatowns in St. Louis and Chicago where laundry work was the dominant profession in the nineteenth century.

Iowa historian Jeff Bremer has noted that "people came to Iowa seeking economic independence, fleeing unemployment, hunger, or political or religious repression." That was certainly true for Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century who came to the United States fleeing economic poverty, natural disasters causing floods and famine, and political turmoil causing rebellion and civil war in the Qing Dynasty. And like African-Americans, Chinese-Americans and immigrants often were pushed to Iowa by discrimination and hostility in other regions of the country. And yet, in Iowa, they could not entirely escape racial violence, hardship, and marginalization. There, unlike Scandinavians, Chinese immigrants rarely managed to become farmers. Nor did they manage to find work in the coal fields of central Iowa like Italians.

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11. Victor Jew, "'Chinese Demons': The Violent Articulation of Chinese Otherness and Interracial Sexuality in the U.S. Midwest, 1885–1889," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 2 (2003), 389–410.

Entry to Iowa was predicated upon performing servile jobs for Euro-American men and women. Also, while Bremer writes that "migrants made Iowa, providing cultural diversity, ideals, and religious and educational institutions," Chinese immigrants were rarely afforded such a chance to transplant so much of their native culture into Iowa's fertile soil.[12] Euro-Americans traveled to Iowa in large waves with families in tow, while the Chinese by virtue of the nation's rising anti-Chinese immigration policies formed small clusters of bachelors living in rented apartments or in the back of storefronts.

Iowa's first Chinese residents have received little attention from historians, yet their arrival after the Civil War was widely known, and at the time, Iowans followed news of Chinese pioneers in the press. Historian H. Roger Grant has noted that Chinese migration to new areas of the United States from the West Coast almost immediately caught the attention of the media in Iowa. In January 1870, for instance, Iowans gawked eagerly as a group of 200 laborers decamped from railcars in Council Bluffs on their way to Texas and the Deep South to work on plantations, canals, and new railroad projects. Grant's account stresses that newspapers such as the *Council Bluffs Bugle* expressed "relief" that Chinese people had no plans to settle in Iowa. And yet, Grant also acknowledged that already a small number of immigrants from China had "drifted" to Iowa to take up residence.[13]

Indeed, a story in the *Quad City Times* from 1870 tells of a fight between a newspaper editor in western Iowan and a "washee," a derogatory term often used for Chinese people.[14] The laundry trade drew most Chinese migrants to Iowa as ordinary laborers, but a small number such as Ar Shong were merchants who opened cigar shops and storefronts dealing in a range of dry goods, teas, and other imported items from China. Others worked in a variety of service jobs such as part-time barber Joe "Happy" Sing of Cedar Rapids and Davenport. Much later in the

12. Jeff Bremer, "Immigration to Iowa: A Brief History & Historiography," *Annals of Iowa* 80 (2021), 387–93.

13. H. Roger Grant, "The Chinese Come to Iowa," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* (Winter 2008), 190–91.

14. "Daily Democrat," *Quad City Times Evening Edition*, 1/10/1870.

early twentieth century a number of immigrants opened restaurants to bring the cosmopolitan craze of chop suey from the East and West Coasts to the Midwest's growing industrial and commercial hubs. Still most settlers, such as "Happy" Sing, made much of their income working in a laundry. Among the earliest were Sam Lee's laundry in Davenport, and Ah Wing & Co. in Sioux City, both advertising their services in newspapers by 1875.[15]

By 1880, Iowa was home to just over thirty Chinese people with most operating hand laundries along the railroads nearest to cities such as Des Moines, Keokuk, Waterloo, Burlington, and Dubuque. In the following decade, scores of Chinese laborers began fanning out from these pockets to found laundries in smaller towns such as Estherville, Algona, Story City, Carroll, and Fayette.[16] By 1900, Iowa's Chinese population had slowly risen to 104 people, almost all of them employed as laundry workers while the wealthiest were rapidly making the transition to restaurants. Like the vast majority of Chinese immigrants to enter the United States from the 1850s to the 1950s, Iowa's Chinese were overwhelmingly single men hailing primarily from Guangdong.[17] In contrast to most Euro-American immigrants such as

15. "Advertisement, Sam Lee, Chinese Laundry," *Morning Democrat*, 6/26/1875; "Advertisement-Ah Wing & Co.," *Sioux City Journal*, 8/17/1875.

16. *United States Census of 1880, Des Moines, Polk, Iowa,* roll 360, p. 250B, enumeration district 161 (1880 census records cited as follows: roll, page, enumeration district); *Vernon Springs, Howard, Iowa,* 344, 524B, 250; *Council Bluffs, Pottawattamie, Iowa,* 361, 219D, 191; *Marshalltown, Marshall, Iowa,* 355, 185C, 293; *Sioux City, Woodbury, Iowa,* 371, 364C, 241; *Perry, Dallas, Iowa,* 335, 149A, 046; *Cedar Rapids, Linn, Iowa,* 351, 59A, 255; *Ottumwa, Wapello, Iowa,* 367, 98B, 063; *Boone, Boone, Iowa,* 328, 96C, 006; *Dubuque, Dubuque, Iowa,* 338, 145A, 172; *Creston, Union, Iowa,* 366, 208B, 222.

17. *United States Census of 1900; Hampton, Franklin, Iowa,* FHL microfilm 1240432, p. 2, enumeration district 0141 (1900 census records cited as follows: FHL film number, page, enumeration district); *Richland, Sac, Iowa,* 1240457, 7, 0124; *Center, Winnebago, Iowa,* 1240464, 11, 0192; *Etna, Hardin, Iowa,* 1240435, 4, 0147; *Burlington, Des Moines, Iowa,* 1240429, 10, 0009; *Freedom, Palo Alto, Iowa,* 1240452, 12, 0153; *Boyer Valley, Sac, Iowa,* 1240457, 6, 0115; *Sioux Rapids, Buena Vista, Iowa,* 1240419, 3, 0011; *Troy, Iowa, Iowa,* 1240438, 13, 0050; *Mason City, Cerro Gordo, Iowa,* 1240423, 2, 0029; *Van Buren, Van Buren, Iowa,* 1240462, 14, 0101; *Oskaloosa, Mahaska, Iowa,* 1240446, 4, 0066; *Iowa City, Johnson, Iowa,* 1240440, 3, 0083; *Marshalltown, Marshall, Iowa,* 1240448, 1, 0122; *Brighton, Washington, Iowa,* 1240464, 6, 0107; *Northwood, Worth, Iowa,* 1240468, 1, 0152; *Des Moines, Polk, Iowa,* 1240453, 7, 0075.

those of Dutch or German descent, Chinese immigrants in Iowa congregated in much smaller pockets and like their compatriots on the coasts were "bachelors," unaccompanied by spouses or families and living primarily with other men. Secondly, by operating laundries in smaller, more rural settings, the presence of these Chinese pioneers shatters the perception of Iowa's small, rural towns as homogeneous and remote places unconnected to global currents.[18]

Historians have started to unpack how the Chinese came to dominate the laundry trade, which had once largely been performed by American women. This process, at least partially, explains how even in a national climate of racism and violence Chinese laundries managed to survive in Iowa. According to historian Joan S. Wang, the origins of Chinese immigrants in the laundry trade reflect the twin forces of racism and sexism at play. Although indispensable to the economy of the American West, the racial hostility of American labor toward Chinese people soon led to their exclusion from a variety of jobs such as mining and farming. This exclusion compelled most Chinese laborers to take up jobs as cooks, laundrymen, and domestic servants—trades traditionally performed by women in the 1880s and 1890s. With a scarcity of Black and white female labor on the West Coast, American society accepted the performance of "women's work" by Chinese men, denigrating them as "feminine" and less masculine than American men. Washing clothes was typically reserved for women in China too, but the modest profits and restricted employment choices often made laundries the only choice for many newly arrived Chinese men.[19]

This combination of ideas rooted in race, class, and masculinity also kept many white Iowans from entering the laundry trade, despite it being quite profitable. This aversion created an

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18. Here, I borrow the phrase from Jeff Bremer to encapsulate how the neglect of immigration, particularly by non-whites, has led to a misconception of the state and its history shrouded in mythology and exceptionalism. Bremer, "Immigration to Iowa," 387–93.

19. Joan S. Wang, "Race, Gender, and Laundry Work: The Roles of Chinese Laundrymen and American Women in the United States, 1850–1950," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24, no. 1 (2004), 58–99.

opening for Chinese people arriving in the 1870s and 1880s. By then the anti-Chinese movement in the West produced stereotypes about Chinese people being willing to work for far lower wages and tolerate more deplorable living conditions than the majority of Americans, making them a perceived dire threat to domestic labor. These anti-Chinese campaigns also labeled Chinese immigrants as carriers of vice and disease, associating their spread across the country with the transmission of prostitution, opium addiction, smallpox, and other pathogens. Especially as the trade of laundrymen became associated with Chinese people, an ideology of whiteness and manhood stigmatized the profession of laundrymen. An editorial from the *Elmira Gazette* titled "Don't Learn a Trade," reprinted in the *Burlington Hawkeye* in 1878, exemplified the notion that work in a laundry was not fit for white American men. The author purported that American men entering into the laundry trade were abandoning "real" trades and professions because they "don't want to work and sweat." Mocking them as too "genteel," the editorial warned they might be disappointed to find that when working in the laundry, "you might soil your hands, wilt your shirt collar, and spoil your complexion sweating." Beyond challenging the masculinity of laundrymen, the author chided that working men in the laundry trade were insufficiently "white" or "American," writing, "Go hang your chiu over a counter; learn to talk twaddle to the ladies; part your hair in the middle; and make an ass of yourself generally, and work for wages that wouldn't support a Chinese laundryman on rice-fed rats."[20] Thus, gender and racial stereotypes disparaging the Chinese were often used to shame white Americans into seeing the laundry as a lowly, unsuitable profession.

In reality, a laundry was also extremely unattractive because the work was physically demanding, tedious, and many times a precarious way to make a living. Typically, laundrymen worked six to seven days a week for an average of sixteen to eighteen hours a day, starting in the morning and laboring well into the

20. Editorial from the *Elmira Gazette,* "Don't Learn a Trade," reprinted in the *Burlington Hawkeye,* 10/24/1878.

late night. Before the use of modern machinery, various tasks such as the constant scrubbing of clothes to remove stains was grueling. Or, when sorting clothes and ironing, they may be mind-numbingly repetitive. Even the work of delivering bundles of clean linens or soliciting work from families in the community took a toll that was both physical and psychological.[21] Out in public, the appearance, dress, and language of Chinese immigrants made them racially "exotic" to many other Americans, who subjected them to taunts and threatened violence even while patronizing their businesses. On the other hand, laundries did not require costly equipment or facilities, which was an advantage, and appealed to the entrepreneurial spirit of many Chinese immigrants and their desire not to be "under the thumb" of a white employer. Running a laundry required very little use of English or education, which was helpful since most Chinese people in Iowa spoke very little English and had limited schooling before coming to the United States.[22]

It was key to a laundry's survival to find a location where it could attract a sizeable clientele amongst the white residents. In this respect, the dispersion of Iowa's small Chinese community was an advantage. In Iowa, most immigrants founded a laundry in areas near the railroad depots, central business districts, or along principal streets and roadways. These locations kept them in close contact with the community and customers most likely to patronize their businesses. Because most of the Chinese settlers in Iowa were related to each other, many chose to avoid competition in a city that already had a laundry by instead spreading out across the state to pioneer hand laundries in new communities. By 1895, the largest pockets of Chinese people living together in the same city were in Mason City, Sioux City, Des Moines, and Davenport, but none of these cities had more than twenty people at any given time. And yet by 1900, the slow, steady sprawl of Chinese hand laundries dotted the social landscape in 50 of Iowa's 99 counties with many of their proprietors being the solitary Chinese person in the county.

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21. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman.*

22. Siu, *The Chinese Laundryman,* 44–55.

The scattered populations of Iowa's Chinese pioneers starkly contrasted life for Chinese-Americans on the coasts. The diffusion of Iowa's Chinese and their hand laundries in many ways made their situation, at least in an economic sense, more advantageous than living in the nation's overcrowded Chinatowns. Chinese Iowans were often the first to bring the conveniences of the steam laundry to many towns and counties across the state, for a short time reaping profits that gave them the chance to fulfill the dreams that brought them from China to the United States. Conversely, isolation also made Chinese people in Iowa a very visible, extremely vulnerable racial minority at a historical moment in which the nation was inflamed in debate about their presence and future in the United States.

The search for opportunity and security in Iowa and the larger Midwest spurred Chinese pioneers to live transient, mobile lifestyles. Recent work by scholars such as Patrick J. Jung has argued that the geographic contours of Iowa's rivers shaped early patterns of migration and settlement by Euro-Americans and Native peoples. He writes, "what we today see as borders, were, before statehood, highways and hubs that drew people together and allowed for the movement of peoples and their cultures over vast distances."[23] This idea of Iowa as a nexus of "highways and hubs" was largely true for the state's first arrivals from China too. Chinese people crisscrossed the state, however, on the new highways formed by railroads, apprenticing in rural Iowa laundries to pay for their trek to larger Chinese communities in Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and even New York. Or, they moved back and forth over their careers from spots inside Iowa's borders like Davenport, Mason City, Sioux City, and Council Bluffs to places just beyond state lines, working and living in nearby Moline, Illinois, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Albert Lea, Minnesota, and Omaha, Nebraska.

These immigrants also made infrequent trans-Pacific trips back to China to see family. Even after the later Chinese Exclusion Acts were designed to prevent re-entry, these Chinese

23. Patrick J. Jung, "Iowa Without Borders: Iowa History from European Contact to Statehood," *Annals of Iowa* 80 (2021), 365–71.

pioneers found their way back to Iowa and the Midwest by traveling south from Canada or trekking north from Mexico. Even if they had tenures in the state lasting decades, immigrants often returned home to China to reunite with families upon retirement. Or, they relocated to larger Chinatowns in the Midwest and along the coasts as the vagaries of age made them more dependent on a larger community. Ultimately, the Chinese Exclusion Acts erected barriers to permanent residence, citizenship, and forming families that undermined the chance for most Chinese pioneers to set down roots in Iowa. A small number, though, still managed to do so. In sum, from the vantage point of most early Chinese migrants, the state was rarely a final destination. Iowa was more of a hub, transit depot, or an oasis where for a spell they found the chance to carve out lives and run their businesses amidst the rising anti-Chinese movement spreading across the nation. Thus, the history of Iowa's Chinese settlers is a transnational story—intrinsically bound via their mobility to the larger history of Chinese-Americans spread across the rest of the Midwest, along the coasts, and back home in China.

Unlike their counterparts in the Chinatowns of Chicago and St. Louis most laundrymen in Iowa worked alone or with just a few partners, which made the burden of managing the business much more challenging. Laundrymen who fell ill risked losing valuable business if forced to close their shops while they recovered. Without Chinatowns, Chinese people residing as individuals or in small groups were more vulnerable to theft, assault, and vandalism. The same risks were incurred when making visits to friends and relatives in nearby towns in Iowa. Infrequent returns home to China to visit parents or to find a wife meant securing a trusted replacement to operate one's shop for years at a time, making their businesses and lives dependent on the help of relatives spread across the Midwest. Luckily, a small stream of Chinese journeyman laborers and apprentices came to Iowa's hand laundries in 1870s and 1880s. As was the custom on the coasts, most of Iowa's Chinese residents followed relatives; they were brothers, sons, kin, and clansmen who depended on the pioneer's aid and advice to navigate their way to Iowa. In other

cases, the new arrivals were bound by native place associations to the pioneers setting up shop in Iowa.[24]

Studying Chinese immigration to Iowa in the nineteenth century creates a more complete portrait of the state's past. Most often, historians of immigration leave Asians out of the story until the twentieth century, an act of erasure that eliminates Chinese-Americans from the record and mitigates the complexity of the state's cultural and social landscape. This erasure makes possible the popular imagination of Iowa as a "white place," insulated from other regions and peoples. To counter that impression historians must use the history of Chinese immigrants as a point of comparison to Euro-Americans and other non-whites coming to Iowa. Unlike Dutch and German immigrants, Chinese migrants never founded whole towns, colonies, or even a community large enough to warrant the designation of a "Chinese quarter" let alone a "Chinatown." Instead, the laundry and their few other businesses such as later chop suey restaurants were microscopic communities, and the only spaces available for them to speak their native language, practice imported religion, and preserve a semblance of community and family amongst their kin.

"Must the Chinese Go?": The Chinese Question Comes to Iowa

Although few in number, Iowa's first Chinese settlers were the subject of intense public fascination as their arrival left Iowans and the larger Midwest divided over the "Chinese Question," a national debate about the right of Chinese people to enter the country and become citizens. In confronting the question of Chinese labor in Iowa, state officials and labor unions consumed the vitriolic reports of anti-Chinese groups from the West Coast. Often, these reports issued a direct warning to Iowa and the Midwest to take measures to ban Chinese people. In one such report, San Diego Chief of Police J.W. Brenning stated that "if the people of Iowa had as many Chinese as California they would rise in

24. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold Mountain,* 125–26.

open revolt against them."[25] As a result, labor, politicians, and judges along with media in Iowa often regurgitated ideas that were produced by anti-Chinese movements on the West Coast and characterized the Chinese as a deplorable race.

Because of this animosity, many of the first Chinese people to establish a hand laundry in new towns across Iowa found themselves expelled by the local community. Sam Lee, for example, tried opening a shop in Cedar Falls in 1878, but he quickly abandoned the town for a new enterprise in Dubuque. An account of Lee's expulsion from the *Courier* notes, "Cedar Falls can't appreciate the celestials, and so the Chinese must go."[26] Adopting the rallying cry of the anti-Chinese movement out West, many Iowans tried to drive Chinese people from the state by refusing to patronize their businesses and inflicting upon them severe social isolation. Others were more direct, using harassment and the threat of violence. Hang Lee's attempt to open a laundry in Ames in 1882 illustrates the license afforded to youth to act on the community's hostility toward the Chinese. Harvey Taylor was a teenager when Lee opened his laundry on Duff Street. According to an account by Taylor years later, Lee's residence in Ames angered many of the town's elders who "stewed" over the introduction of "foreign elements." Meanwhile, Taylor and his friends decided "to figure out a way to run him out of town," eventually hatching a plot to send in a young woman to Lee's shop who would then scream for "help." Under the pretext that Lee had assaulted and tried to rape her, men from around town raced into the laundry. Faced with an angry mob threatening his arrest or murder, Lee immediately fled town never to return. In doing so, he left behind all his worldly possessions and the life savings it had cost him to start his business in Ames.[27]

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25. Iowa Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the State of Iowa* (Des Moines, 1885).

26. "Local News," *The Courier*, 12/4/1878.

27. It is extremely telling that this story, told by Taylor years later in postwar America, was framed as a light-hearted tale of Iowa's frontier past, with the criminal behavior of the local youth who robbed Hang of his shop and threatened his life intended to entertain Iowans in the twentieth century. In sum, violence toward Chinese-Americans remained "humorous" to mainstream Americans

Nativist Iowans weaponized stereotypes about Chinese men as criminals and sexual predators to force their removal. Vandalism targeting Chinese laborers became a source of entertainment for bored youth or drunken adults. Linens left out to dry were smeared with mud or dust by young boys, a twisted game where youth delighted in forcing the Chinese to redo their work or reimburse customers for damaged items. In the toxic racial climate surrounding Chinese people in the United States in the 1880s, even customers felt entitled to belittle, harass, and strike Chinese laundrymen. Although typically done by males, women also inflicted harm on laundrymen. One woman in Dubuque, for instance, "rose up and swatted" a laundryman in the face because she believed he had overcharged her.[28]

On the other hand, a number of the Chinese who pioneered the laundry trade in the Midwest garnered a warm reception from Iowans. For example, Chinese launderers in Davenport in the early 1880s were praised for their contributions to the opening of the city's art museum. Featuring exhibits of Japanese and Chinese silkworks, plaques, embroidered screens, and pearl jewelry on loan from collectors in New York City, the gallery opening included lanterns provided by Wah Sing and Sing's own musical instruments, pipes, and porcelain for the public's viewing.[29] Davenport's elite circles, on this occasion, hailed Chinese laundrymen as emissaries of a great civilization and treated them in the public sphere as men who enriched the city's cosmopolitan culture. In another case, the opening of a Chinese laundry in Iowa City in 1880 prompted *The Morning Democrat* to proclaim, "So metropolitan is Iowa City in its character, and proportions, that the Celestials seek it to carry on their vocation."[30] Thus, some Iowans treated the establishment of a Chinese hand laundry as a key marker in the community's development, symbolic of the transition from frontier town to cosmopolitan city. In this respect,

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long after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts. Gladys Hultz Meads, "1882 Was a Bad Year for Storms," *Ames Daily Tribune*, 2/3/1954.

28. "News of the State," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, 6/21/1889.

29. "A Superb Night," *Quad-City Times*, 6/8/1882; "Items in Brief," *Quad-City Times*, 6/11/1882.

30. "A Heathen Chinee and a 'Melican Girl,'" *The Morning Democrat*, 3/6/1880.

some voices took the presence of the Chinese in the Midwest to signify a vibrant local economy and the worldliness and sophistication of Iowans.

The key for most Chinese pioneers was to find a community that would tolerate their presence and patronize their businesses, a search that made their already transient lives even more mobile. For example, from the late 1870s to the late 1890s, Sam Sing moved around Iowa repeatedly searching for a town to support his laundries. Born in 1860, Sing was just seventeen years old when he came to Clinton, Iowa, in 1877. By 1880, he had moved to Des Moines where he ran a laundry on Walnut Street, before later opening new shops in Cedar Rapids and Iowa City.[31] Sing's mobility and his willingness to uproot in search of a better opportunity was his greatest advantage, one that allowed him to survive for over thirty years as a laundryman in Iowa.

Despite that mobility, Sing and many other pioneers tried to set down roots in Iowa and make it a permanent home. Like a few other Iowa Chinese in the 1880s and 1890s, Sing married a local woman. Interracial marriages were a spectacle to the surrounding community and fodder for stereotypes and sneering prejudice in print; however, these marriages also challenged anti-Chinese claims that these immigrants had no desire to form families and settle permanently in the United States.[32] At this time, marrying Chinese men proved costly to American women due to the Naturalization Act of 1855. Under this law, a wife's nationality and that of her children was dependent on her husband, an act specifically designed by Congress to discourage women from marrying Chinese men by threatening to strip them of their claims

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31. "News from the State," *Quad-City Times*, 8/14/1877; *United States Census of 1880*, "Sam Sing," *Cedar Rapids, Linn, Iowa*, 351, 84D, 256. "Sam Sing Laundry," from *1882 Des Moines City Directory*, in *U.S., City Directories, 1822–1995* [online database] (Provo, UT, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011). Later laundries known as the "Sam Sing Laundry," potentially his too, operated in Marshalltown from 1894 to 1902. "Sam Sing Laundry" from *Marshalltown City Directory, 1894–1902*, in *U.S., City Directories, 1822–1995.*

32. "Marriage Certificate for Sam Sing and Mary Manning, March 6, 1880," in *Iowa, U.S., Select Marriages Index, 1758–1996* [online database] (Provo, UT, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014).

to citizenship and rights in the United States.[33] Such legislation created yet another barrier to establishing a family for Iowa's Chinese pioneers.

Another consequence of the longevity and success of men like Sing was that many Iowans came to see the laundry as highly lucrative for Chinese-Americans, which produced a tinge of envy and admiration. An 1881 *Quad City Times* interview with a group of Chinese men traveling from the East Coast to San Francisco seemed to confirm suspicions about wealthy Chinese laundrymen. The article, entitled "Going Home to Live At Ease: A Score of Celestials Bound for China," interviewed several male Chinese immigrants in their twenties and thirties while their train stopped momentarily in Davenport.[34] It reported that all of the sojourners had traveled across the United States as common laborers, laundrymen, servants, and cooks, but they were now headed home with incredible wealth that most American workingmen would envy. The "poorest" among the Chinese was Ling Wum, who had saved only $3,000 to take with him to China.[35]

It is not all that surprising then that recently arrived Chinese migrants such as Lee Lung and Wah Sing in Davenport were not in the state long before they were victims of robbery.[36] Simultaneously, many laundrymen resisted anti-Chinese violence and hostility. Ah Wah and Wong Fun of Waterloo exemplify the capacity of many Chinese pioneers in the Midwest to defend themselves ably. In the late 1880s, Ah owned a laundry on Waterloo's Fourth Street and faced frequent harassment by locals, although his business enjoyed admirers as well. In the spring of 1888, Ah was walking along Fourth Street with his employee Wong when a man named "Bub" Hurley "saluted" the two by hurling rats at them, a reference to the stereotype of Chinese people being "rat-eaters." Wong approached Hurley, who began to strike and attack the laundryman. Having lived in the United States for over

33. Nancy F. Cott, "Marriage and Women's Citizenship in the United States, 1830–1934," *The American Historical Review* 3, no. 5 (1998), 1440–74.

34. "Going Home to Live At Ease: A Score of Celestials Bound for China," *Quad-City Times*, 2/22/1881.

35. "Going Home to Live At Ease."

36. "Items in Brief," *Quad-City Times*, 2/11/1881.

a decade by then, Ah was well-prepared for random attacks. He opened his coat to pull out a hatchet, and he and Wong chased Hurley around downtown.[37]

The trio soon found themselves in the custody of police and presented before the town's mayor. Apparently, Hurley was a frequent instigator of brawls and sentenced to jail for thirty days. Wong and Ah were released with bonds to present themselves for a hearing. In defending their conduct, Wong proclaimed that they had not chased Hurley in the hopes of harming him but rather it was a "custom" in China for the aggrieved to capture criminals and present them personally to the local authorities. Despite wielding a deadly weapon, the mayor approved of Wong and Ah's defense of their lives and reputations. *The Courier* went so far as to declare them exemplary members of the community and representatives of their race, printing, "If, instead of deriding these Chinese boys as they passed them on the street, young men will take their conduct for an example, they will make much better citizens. Wong and Ah are quiet, inoffensive fellows and our officers will see that they are protected from further insult."[38] At least in a few cases Chinese immigrants in Iowa could carry weapons for self-defense and yet maintain their identities as "quiet, inoffensive fellows" and persons of high character.

Later that summer, however, Ah and Wong had another "lively time with a pair of hoodlums," later recounted in papers across the state. The pair were working late into the night when the shop was visited by two local men, who menacingly stood in the doorway as Wong ironed shirts. The two men departed, but Ah soon heard noise at the back of his shop and found the men waiting outside for him. When Ah stepped out into the back alley the two men assaulted him, unaware or unafraid of his reputation. Ah quickly brandished his revolver, striking one man with the gun and forcing both to flee as he fired upon them. Newspapers in Iowa celebrated Ah's triumph over the "hoodlums."[39] Ah Wah and his shop persisted into the 1890s, and locals hailed him

37. "Police Items in Brief," *The Courier*, 4/4/1888.

38. "Police Items in Brief."

39. "Lively Time With Pair of Hoodlums," *The Courier*, 7/30/1890.

as an innovator in his trade after he opened a new laundry on the east side of Waterloo in 1891, which brought "the latest and best laundry machinery, steam engine, etc." to the state. He also was a key figure in the fledgling Chinese community in Iowa known for gathering with his employees and the laundrymen of Webster City to mark holidays like the Lunar New Year.[40]

While Ah and Wong dealt with these attacks deftly, both cases illustrate the climate of terror that surrounded laundrymen in this era. Hurley's assault happened out of nowhere without provocation in broad daylight, while the second attack took place at a time when laundrymen were most vulnerable, toiling late at night. That the laundry trade required such long hours, often from the early morning until late at night, meant laundry shops attracted the attention of drunkards and vandals as one of the few places open at such an hour in most towns. It is more telling that attackers presented themselves as customers because, in fact, they often were a laundry's customers. Thus, attacks against laundryman could come at all times of the day and from complete strangers or familiar, frequent customers.

In states where Chinese-Americans and immigrants congregated in Chinatowns, sporadic violent outbursts could spread like wildfire and last for days and weeks. Beth Lew-Williams has brilliantly documented how hundreds of instances of anti-Chinese terror and intimidation spread from West Coast cities such as Tacoma, Washington, to the rest of the country.[41] Incidents of anti-Chinese violence included "planting bombs beneath businesses, shooting blindly through cloth tends, and setting homes ablaze," as well as arbitrary arrest, looting of businesses, boycotts, and arson, all driven by the singular aim to expel Chinese people. Similarly, a "minor quarrel" between Chinese and white Americans in a Denver saloon in October 1880 led to three days of rioting by thousands of people that left all the residences and businesses of the city's Chinese quarter destroyed. In the weeks before the riot, false rumors circulated by the Colorado press and

40. "New Steam Laundry," *The Courier*, 9/15/1891; "The Chinese New Year," *The Courier*, 1/28/1892.

41. Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go.*

Democratic Party claimed that Republican candidate for president James Garfield favored "free importation of cheap Chinese labor," which created a political powder keg that once set off by a barroom brawl became a racial bloodletting.[42] In another instance in Milwaukee in 1889, the intermingling of sexual and racial politics set the stage for a wave of anti-Chinese violence. The local press had spuriously accused Chinese laundry owners of enslaving white women for the purposes of sexual trafficking and assault.[43] Four days of vandalism against Chinese businesses followed the accusation as thousands in Milwaukee marched in the streets, calling for the lynching of the accused.[44]

Local incidents and national events and issues often combined to create a climate that was exceedingly hostile to Chinese-Americans and immigrants. The circumstances generating hostility toward Chinese people and the kinds of violence employed by other Iowans against them were largely the same as elsewhere in country, differing primarily in scale or size. These smaller episodes reflected two facts: first, the anti-Chinese element in Iowa was less organized, playing a smaller role in the political parties and labor unions. Secondly, the population of persons of Chinese descent remained small and scattered widely across the state. This belies any kind of conclusion that Iowa was any more hospitable or tolerant than other states or regions. Scholars such as Madeline Hsu have shown that Chinese people migrated through highly sophisticated networks of kinship, fraternal organizations, and transport and financial companies that spanned from southern China to Southeast Asia and across the Pacific to the United States.[45] Within these networks and amongst Chinese migrants, information about potential destinations, opportunities, and the political and social climate of cities and regions in the United States spread rapidly.[46] Should Iowa in the late nineteenth

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42. Liping Zhu, *The Road to Chinese Exclusion: The Denver Riot, 1880 Election, and Rise of the West* (Lawrence, KS, 2013).

43. Jew, "'Chinese Demons,'" 389–410.

44. Jew, "'Chinese Demons.'"

45. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold Mountain.*

46. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants.*

century have proven to be a "haven" or "refuge" from the anti-Chinese movement, larger waves of Chinese immigrants likely would have settled in the state.

While many immigrants might have been drawn by "dreams of gold" and making a fortune, the Chinese who came to Iowa were not "greenhorns," who were naïve enough to think the state's inhabitants would automatically welcome them. Rather Iowa's Chinese were "pioneers"; their migration to the nation's center required them to be intrepid and self-reliant, willing to face discrimination and societal violence alone or in very small numbers with fewer resources than Chinese people living on the coasts. Moreover, by being the first Chinese people in states like Iowa, they stretched the frontiers of Chinese civilization to America's Heartland, enlarging transnational circuits of migration and managing to claim new territory for future generations of Chinese-Americans. Lastly, their presence, even if fleeting or temporary, transported questions about race, Chinese immigration, and even trans-Pacific diplomacy directly into the heart of Iowa's communities, forcing them into larger national and global dialogues.

In these respects, Iowa's Chinese showed considerable skill at cultivating allies and winning support from the press. Chinese Iowans profited from the goodwill generated by the speaking tour of Chan Pak Kwai, a Chinese Christian activist from San Francisco, who traveled across the Midwest in 1879. Chan's speaking engagements had a remarkable impact on how many Iowans looked at pioneers from the Middle Kingdom. In March 1879, Chan arrived in Iowa to give several public lectures on the "Chinese Question," and drew large crowds and coverage from newspapers. In these talks, he urged Iowans to see the anti-Chinese movement as "instigated and manipulated by professional politicians." In contrast to the many stereotypes about "heathen Chinese," Chan defended his fellow countrymen residing in the United States as "sober" and "industrious" compared with the "lazy hoodlums" who rallied behind the exclusionist movement. His talks at the Academy of Music in Des Moines had an especially powerful influence on his audience, featuring most of the city's clergy, college

students, and middle-class professionals who, newspapers noted, frequently "burst into applause" after his key points.[47]

Iowa audiences were particularly impressed with Chan's fluency as an English speaker, defying expectations based on racial stereotypes. His impressive oratory skills awed audiences, often described as "graceful" yet "powerful" in his use of organization, logic, wit, and sarcasm to disparage advocates of exclusion. *The Des Moines Register* was so amazed with Chan's performance that it proclaimed that if not for his clothing and queue, the speaker "might readily pass for an American whose complexion was bronzed by exposure." The reviews of Chan's lectures showed that he did more than just defend the Chinese; he ably played upon midwestern sensibilities to convince many Iowans that Kearney and other anti-Chinese politicians were no more than "sandlot Caesars," and "mob orators." Newspapers such as the *Des Moines Register* and *Quad City Times* lauded Chan's credibility and encouraged Iowans to attend his lectures in order to understand the "Chinese Question" in a "different light." Iowans also praised Chan's esteemed family, describing him as a "relative" of Chan Lan Pin, ambassador to Washington from the Qing Empire, and Chan Shu Tang, the Consul General in New York.[48]

Playing the politics of respectability, Chan convinced crowds in Des Moines, Iowa City, and Davenport that the anti-Chinese movement was "beneath" the midwestern upper and middle classes, most especially churchgoing Iowans. It was a political movement for the working class and the uneducated, and in Iowa newspapers, Chan's supporters, clergy, and middle-class writers echoed him in labeling anti-Chinese politics as un-Christian. Further, by labeling the anti-Chinese movement as driven by mobs and the conspiring of powerful political parties, Chan encouraged Iowans who opposed Chinese Exclusion to see themselves and the

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47. "Chan Pak Kwai," *Iowa State Register*, 3/5/1879; "The Chinese Question," *Iowa State Register*, 3/7/1879; "Advertisement-CHAN PAK KWAI: The Chinese Lecturer! The Real Chinese Question!" *Iowa State Register*, 3/2/1879.

48. "Chan Pak Kwai," *Sioux City Journal*, 3/18/1879; "Iowa Items," *Iowa State Register*, 3/21/1879; "Iowa City-Chan Pak Kwai," *Muscatine Weekly Journal*, 3/14/1879; "A Chinese Lecture," *Quad-City Times*, 3/13/1879; "Personal," *Quad-City Times*, 3/14/1879; "Items in Brief," *Quad City Times*, 3/17/1879; "The Chinaman," *Quad-City Times*, 3/19/1879.

state as politically superior to—and freer and more democratic than—the West Coast. With many in his audience, Chan succeeded in convincing them that the Midwest's openness to Chinese immigrants was proof of their state's "free thinking" and Christian values.

In the wake of Chan's tour, many Chinese people in Iowa skillfully employed a variety of tactics to capitalize on these ideas and win allies in their fight to forge a foothold in the Midwest. One of the key weapons in the arsenal of the laundrymen around Iowa was the art of gift giving. In Des Moines, the Chinese were known to offer young men free cigars on the street as a gesture of friendship and a way to find new customers.[49] In the 1880s, Pang Sam and Sam Ling, proprietors of a laundry on Fourth Street in Waterloo, were well-known in the community as "very liberal" gift-givers during the Christmas season. Patrons, Sunday School teachers, and other locals who had befriended the men were recipients of turkeys, silks, and handkerchiefs, a generosity that prompted the *Waterloo Courier* to remark, "A Chinaman never forgets his true friends. You lose nothing by treating him decently."[50] In one sense, the gifts given by the two men satisfied Chinese customary practices of gift giving as the art of friendship and social ritual. In another sense, the gifts can be read as a bribe—payment for protection from law enforcement, soliciting business from customers, and making an appeal to win support for Chinese residence in the Midwest.

Sioux City's Hing Lung, for example, was perhaps the most innovative and controversial gift giver among Iowa laundrymen. Rather than imported teas, silks, or flower bulbs, Hing "treated" his customers to samples of his "gin, short ribs of pig, and sundry whiffs of opium pipe." In his case, the alarm provoked in Sioux City by the popularity of his laundry with young men and the working class produced a backlash from the city's elites and reinforced ideas about the Chinese as deviants and their businesses as dens of vice and sin.[51]

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49. "A Free Smoke with the Chinamen," *Iowa State Register*, 10/8/1871.

50. "Items in Brief," *The Courier*, 12/26/1883.

51. "Hing Lung No Good," *Sioux City Journal*, 4/18/1893.

Ostentatious acts of generosity also provided these pioneers with the opportunity to act as emissaries of China and their cultural heritage. Such was the case in Des Moines when in the mid-1890s a group of laundrymen rewarded their Sunday School teachers with a lavish banquet. The banquet featured a five-course dinner of authentic Chinese dishes prepared by laundrymen Sing Kee and Charlie Pang, who also created invitations decorated with Chinese calligraphy. The dinner was attended by a number of families from the city's elite and held at the home of Dr. McCash, pastor of the University Christian Church that served the faculty and students of nearby Drake University.[52] Banquets, gifts of silk, and demonstrations of holiday practices afforded laundrymen the opportunity to expose Iowans firsthand to an authentic cultural heritage that countered the ignorance and prejudice against Chinese culture found in print. While such encounters were often brief, many laundrymen in Iowa clearly relished the chance to act as spokesmen for Chinese people and show the sophistication of Chinese handicrafts, artwork, and cuisine.

Last but certainly not least, Chinese pioneers recognized Christianity was a gateway to wider acceptance in Iowa just as it was in the rest of the Midwest and nation. In the 1870s, the aforementioned Sing of Clinton was among the most notable church goers. Just six months after arriving in Iowa, Sing was already a regular attendee of the Methodist Church where his memorization of scriptures and singing astounded church-going Iowans, shocked by the "heathen's" quick learning.[53] In return, Iowa churches stridently defended Chinese immigrants. For example, Davenport's *Morning Democrat* celebrated the "progress" and "character" shown by the laundrymen and laborers attending Dubuque's First Presbyterian Church in 1880. In fact, after visiting the Sunday services, the newspaper boasted that the First Presbyterian Church had shown that the Chinese were the "easiest of all nationalities to lead out of heathenism." The Chinese immigrants in attendance were described as learning their lessons with "unbroken quietness and sobriety" and "earnest devotion." The

52. "Items in Brief," *Iowa State Register,* 12/13/1896.

53. "Church News," *Quad-City Times,* 8/14/1877.

journalist concluded, "The Mongolian character with a little leading and encouragement, easily gives itself to serious studies." *The Morning Democrat* lectured "any native born American who looks down on rascally Chinese," need only visit the First Presbyterian Church in Dubuque "to look at rows of happy-faced celestials, drinking in Christian morality and right living."[54] Thus, Iowa churches promoted ideas about the need for religious and racial tutelage of Chinese immigrants, who under midwestern white paternalism, might readily convert to American values and lifestyles.

The transnational dimensions of America's growing participation in the worldwide Christian missionary movement shaped some Iowans' reception of this first generation of Chinese arrivals. Following the First and Second Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60), the Qing Empire was forced to open to Christian missions, leading thousands of Protestants from western countries such as the United States to embark on a mission to "evangelize China," hoping to save millions of Chinese souls. In return, the missionary movement fed American imperialist notions about racial and cultural superiority. It also reinforced the idea that by "befriending" the Chinese through religious uplift and a wide array of social services such as medicine, western-style education, and reforms to eradicate foot-binding and opium addiction, the United States could use China to launch itself to national glory and international prestige. How the treatment of Chinese people in the United States influenced the evangelization of China concerned a bevy of clergy, churches, diplomats, and middle-class reformers across the nation in the late nineteenth century.[55] In Iowa, where evangelical religion was foundational to many communities in these decades and the Chinese population was so small, paternalistic impulses generated an outlook on the question of Chinese immigration that favored a trade-off: individuals

54. Even then the newspaper could not refrain from racist humor targeting Dubuque's Chinese population, mocking their accents and "pidgeon English" by calling their singing of gospel hymns "anything but soothing." "The Chinese Sunday School," *The Morning Democrat*, 12/18/1887.

55. Ian Tyrell, *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire* (Princeton, 2010); Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: America Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton, 2003); Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 6.

and small pockets of Chinese people could be tolerated, absorbed, and reformed through churches to ensure the long-term success of the missionary movement in China.[56]

Conversely, the previously mentioned 1881 riot in Des Moines against Sunday schoolers suggests that such measures were no guarantee against a sudden outburst of xenophobic violence or widespread racism. Without the pooled resources and community provided by Chinatowns, revolvers, hatchets, a sterling reputation, and the support of key allies in the form of customers, the press, civic leaders, and churches were all necessary for survival in Iowa. More isolated and vulnerable then their kin, the life of Chinese pioneers in the Midwest was exceedingly dangerous and required enduring considerable risk and torment. For many, it was a living best summed up by a popular idiom known to Chinese people in the twentieth century as *chi ku* (吃苦), which translates literally into English as "eating bitterness."[57] The expression refers to bearing hardship, which for Chinese pioneers meant a lifestyle of hard work, social isolation, and confronting discrimination as the "price of admission" to life in Iowa.

Conclusion: Boone's Sam Kee and Perry's "Billie" Ar Shong

The fate of two men exemplify the opportunity and risk Chinese Iowans faced in this era: Boone's Sam Kee and Perry's "Billie" Ar Shong. Kee was among the most financially successful of Iowa's early Chinese pioneers. By 1885, he was reported to have amassed a savings account in excess of $3,000 and had announced plans to return home to China and marry. Kee's success in Boone was embraced enthusiastically by residents, in part because the laundryman was known around town as a man who loved a good

56. Recently, historians such as Andrew Klumpp have implored those examining Iowa's past to investigate how religion has shaped political action and social movements, and colored the reception of immigrants, especially from Asia. Iowa's first arrivals from Asia and the "Chinese Question" would be an excellent entry point to putting the themes of race, immigration, and religion front and center in our understanding of the state's past. Klumpp, "Everywhere Yet Nowhere: Histories of Religion in Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 80 (2021), 394–400.

57. Felix Wemheur and Kimberley Ens Manning, *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine* (Vancouver, BC, 2011).

time with a "fondness" for American food and especially spirits. Residents of Boone and readers across Iowa delighted in the thought that Kee's laundry had made him a "millionaire" back in China where he could soon find a "small-footed" wife to start his family. But Kee did not stay in China for long; a decade later, he was forty years old and still laboring for sixteen hours a day at the laundry in Boone.

Despite the Chinese Exclusion Acts, Kee still moved infrequently back and forth between countries, from his business in Boone to his wife and family back in his home village in Guangdong. His initial return to China lasted just long enough, perhaps a year or two, for Kee and his parents to arrange a marriage and for he and his wife to have a child. According to historian Madeline Y. Hsu, back in China, Kee's time in the United States as a laundryman purchased him membership in a new upwardly mobile class in society, commonly referred to as the *jinshanke* (金山客), the "Gold Mountain guests." Holding out a promise to return to the laundry trade in Iowa made him a prime candidate for marriage as his wife would be entitled to large remittances and the social prestige and envy of the local community as his *jinshanpo* (金山婆), "Gold Mountain Wife." Forced to endure separation, Kee and his wife could build a family privy to a high standard of material comfort, climbing the social ladder, and bringing glory to their family, clan, and village through his wealth. Over the coming years on return visits spaced years apart, Kee's wages in Iowa bought the couple a new home, more land, and promised their sons and daughters an education and eventually lavish weddings.[58]

Back in Boone in the 1890s and 1900s, Kee and other Chinese Iowans in Boone fared comparably well. His success there as the city's lone laundryman in the 1880s had attracted a small "colony" of relatives. By 1903, now around fifty years old, Kee set off on another trip home and was given another grand farewell party by many of his countrymen in Boone before departing for San Francisco. It was his last trip between the Midwest and China. He died in transit. The news shocked and saddened many in Boone. The story, printed under the headline "Sam Kee Dies on the High

58. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold Mountain,* 40–53; Siu, *The Laundryman,* 176–93.

Seas: Death Cheats Iowa Chinaman of Fruit of Lifetime's Work: He Took Passage for Home," evoked pity from the local community. *The Davenport Morning Star* called his death on the journey home "pathetic" since it robbed him of the chance "to do honor to the graves of his ancestors and bring opulence to living relatives with his wealth for which he has labored a life time in the United States." The public reaction to Kee's death showed that many Iowans at the very least pitied if not admired Kee's success and commitment to his cultural heritage.[59]

Equally remarkable and tragic was the fate of a man first known as Ar Shong and then later as "Billie" or "Wm. Arshong." Unlike most of his brethren, he did not work in a laundry, but since the early 1870s, he had worked as a merchant and even a landlord in Iowa. Before spending nearly two decades in Perry, from roughly 1876 to 1894, Ar Shong operated stores in Des Moines and West Branch, where he imported tea, ginger, coffee, and spices, and sold tobacco products to the public. In the early 1870s, the growing community around Des Moines received Ar Shong and his Chinese employees warmly, in particular, noting the Chinese love of flying kites and for being "quiet and always well-behaved."[60] After moving his main store to Perry, Ar Shong achieved tremendous commercial success, with newspapers such as *The Sioux City Journal* marveling at his storefront chock full of "dry goods, groceries, clothing, boots and shoes, notions, etc. amounting to fully $4,000." By the 1890s, he managed to parlay his store's success into owning several newly built homes in Perry, which he rented out as a landlord.[61]

The rapport Ar Shong acquired with the community in Perry was even more impressive. He was well known as an "honest man." Perry residents became faithful patrons of his business, learning that unlike most of the Chinese in the United States he had first set foot on the East Coast. Leaving China as a young

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59. "Sam Kee Dies on the High Seas: Death Cheats Iowa Chinaman of Fruit of Lifetime's Work: He Took Passage for Home," *Davenport Morning Star*, 8/9/1903.

60. Eugene Hastie, "The Early History of Perry, Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 40 (Summer 1970), 381–87; "Celestials in Difficulty," *Des Moines Register*, 7/12/1873; "Advertisement for Ar Shong & Co." *The Perry Daily Chief*, 6/26/1875.

61. "Northwestern Items," *Sioux City Journal*, 11/28/1888.

boy, he spent his early teens and twenties as a sailor traveling the world and living in New York's Chinatown.[62] Other accounts of his life told in the *Algona Courier* reported that he had been "born on a pirate ship in the Chinese sea," and visited England and Africa before settling in the United States.[63] Residents of Perry were even more shocked to find out that Ar Shong was a Civil War veteran, employing his services in the US Navy. Ar Shong proclaimed that due to his service he was one of the nation's few naturalized Chinese-American citizens; he demonstrated his citizenship to Iowans by proudly voting in local and national elections. A popular figure in Perry, locals took to calling him "William" or "Billie," names he adopted to project a willingness to assimilate. His regular attendance at Presbyterian churches while living in both Des Moines and Perry indicated a similar eagerness to become "American."[64]

New forms of Chinese exclusion, however, caused a sudden turn in his fate and relationship to Iowans in the spring of 1894. Provisions of the 1892 Geary Act aimed to crack down on "illegal entry" to the United States by requiring immigration officials to register all Chinese-Americans and immigrants and requiring these immigrants to carry a certificate of residence at all times under threat of fines and imprisonment. Ar Shong gained statewide attention in 1894 when he rebuffed immigration agents in Iowa who demanded that he register with authorities and submit a photograph for a residence certificate. As a citizen and veteran, he refused. In defying the Geary Act in the 1890s, Ar Shong was not alone as other notable figures such as Joe "Happy" Sing of Cedar Rapids and the entirety of Sioux City's Chinese population loudly objected to the Geary Act and threatened not to comply. Sing, in fact, taunted in the face of immigration officials that he would prefer deportation on the "dime" of Uncle Sam as a free trip home to see family and relatives rather than accept such

62. "THE CHINAMEN IS DEAD: A Peculiar Funeral—Not a Relative or Mourner Present," *The Perry Daily Chief*, 12/6/1894.

63. "A Famous Iowa Criminal," *Algona Courier*, 12/21/1894.

64. "THE CHINAMEN IS DEAD."

humiliation.[65] Ar Shong, Sing, and this generation of Chinese pioneers in the Midwest were rarely docile when faced with prejudice and discrimination.

The majority of Chinese pioneers were almost never entirely "sinners" nor "saints." Ar Shong was no exception. His defiance of the Geary Act was unique from that of other Chinese Iowans in two respects. First, he claimed citizenship as a protection against the Geary Act, and secondly, his defiance coincided with his arrest on charges of larceny. Ar Shong's relationship to the residents of Perry soured as law enforcement began investigating his business as a "fence" for stolen goods in December 1893. Clothing goods produced by the Rock Island Depot and shipped to Manning, Iowa, were reported stolen in February 1893. Missing for several months, Des Moines and Rock Island police collaborated on a "raid" of Ar Shong's storefront, finding much of the clothing and many other items allegedly stolen from across the state. Charged with larceny and subject to a flood of allegations from the surrounding area, Ar Shong posted his own bail at a sum of $1,000, an enormous sum of money at the time, a move that regained his freedom but likely did nothing to dissuade the public of his guilt.

The story spread quickly in part because of Ar Shong's notoriety in Iowa and neighboring states such as Nebraska. Des Moines Police accused Ar Shong's store of dealing almost entirely in stolen goods, functioning as the headquarters for a "den of thieves" operating in Des Moines and Central Iowa. Despite his good reputation and standing for nearly two decades, Iowa law enforcement and journalists now trumpeted, without "any doubt" as one newspaper put it, that he had not only "knowingly received" stolen items but labeled him a criminal mastermind behind robberies across the state. His allies in Perry defended him from such charges with *The Perry Bulletin* dismissing such accusations by calling him too trusting, gullible, and "bad" at business to have knowingly bought stolen goods.[66] Statements of support from the community continued as the investigation

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65. "Shipping Chinese: Cedar Rapids Loses A Citizen Through Geary Law," *Daily Leader*, 6/20/1894.

66. "Looks Dark for 'Billie,'" *The Perry Bulletin*, 12/23/1893.

lingered with *The Perry Daily Chief* writing, "We think he was innocent of any intent to commit a crime, at least let us throw the mantle of charity over the questionable portions of his life."[67]

Under investigation and refusing to comply with the Geary Act, Iowa newspapers began applying labels such as the "Obstinate Celestial" to Ar Shong, emphasizing again his racial "otherness" rather than lovingly hailing him as the familiar "Billie." Worse, in December 1894, Ar Shong died from complications related to typhoid fever while still under investigation and refusing to comply with immigration agents. Circumstances changed the perception of him from a respected member of the community to a "notorious Chinese receiver of stolen goods" and "Famous Iowa Criminal," according to the *Algona Courier*.[68] Convicted without a trial in the court of public opinion and without an official will, the District Court of Dallas County took possession of his assets—the storefront, its stock, his cash, and the homes and properties he owned around Perry.

Beyond his outspoken repudiation of US immigration, Ar Shong had challenged other provisions of the racial discrimination underlying the Chinese Exclusion Act by virtue of his property holdings. Beginning with the Naturalization Act of 1870 a number of state legislatures enacted "alien land laws" designed to prohibit Chinese and Japanese people from owning land and other private property for their businesses. In Iowa, by owning several homes and real estate, Ar Shong achieved feats denied to most Chinese-Americans elsewhere in the country.

Yet Ar Shong's holdings were not bequeathed to his descendants or relatives. Rather, when he died his "considerable property" was liquidated and deposited into the state's educational funds for school construction. In the winter of 1895, the District Court of Dallas County auctioned off Ar Shong's properties and belongings to the highest bidder, including individual lots larger than two acres. Back in China, a single two-acre plot of land would have cemented Ar Shong's place in the upper crust of his village, bringing renown to his family and clan, and the aspiration of

67. "THE CHINAMEN IS DEAD."

68. "A Famous Iowa Criminal."

becoming landed gentry that almost all Chinese men of his generation entertained but few ever realized. It also might have been a small beacon from the rural confines of Perry that drew his kin and fellow Chinese-Americans to the Midwest to take up his business and parlay his wealth and standing toward their own dreams. Instead, all that Ar Shong's nineteen years in Iowa symbolized—an immigrant from the Middle Kingdom who became a Union veteran, naturalized citizen, successful merchant, member of the local church, proud voter, and wealthy landowner—was forfeited at auction.

Together, Ar Shong and Kee and others from their generation cemented Iowa's ties to the Middle Kingdom in the Chinese Exclusion era. The state's last Chinese American-owned hand laundries in Waterloo and Cedar Rapids, which were run by Dick Kole, Lee "Bennie" Wong, and Edward Fong, remained active until finally closing shop in the 1970s. Celebrated by the Iowa press as "laundry kings" and historical landmarks, Wong, Fong, and Kole traced their roots in Iowa back to relatives who entered the state in the 1880s and 1890s and a generation of Chinese pioneers in the Midwest who like Ar Shong and Kee defied exclusion.

With the experiences of these Chinese pioneers in mind, one should resist, as urged by historian Ashley Howard, the temptation to frame these stories as part of a "triumphalist or exceptionalist narrative," that prompts one to conceive of Iowa as some kind of "utopia" for non-whites. Rather, recounting the experiences of Chinese Iowans makes pivotal contributions to the state's history and helps to deconstruct the dominant Black-white binary that undergirds the study of race.[69] The Chinese arrived in Iowa at a pivotal historical moment following decades of dispossession that forced Native Americans from the scene and on the heels of a Civil War, which left African-Americans free from enslavement but locked into another life and death struggle across the country against segregation and inequality. In breaking apart that Black-white dichotomy and paying closer attention to Chinese immigration, historians can sharpen and complicate our understanding of the past.

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69. Ashley Howard, "Race and Iowa History," *Annals of Iowa* 80 (2021), 377–83.