

The Chinese Laundries of Wichita, Kansas:

A Portrait of an Immigrant Community on the Western Frontier, 1880-1905



Figure 1 Chinese Laundry in Prescott, AZ taken around the turn of the century. This is a good example of what the laundries in Wichita might have looked like. There are no known pictures of Wichita's Chinese laundries. SOURCE: www.chineselaundry.wordpress.com

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Introduction

When one imagines the early cattle towns of the Kansas plains between 1880 and 1905, few would include Chinese laundries or Chinese immigrants in their reflections. The Chinese are not normally part of our romanticized view of the American West; however Chinese populations could be readily found, especially in bustling cattle towns like Wichita, Kansas. The map below indicates the Kansas counties where Chinese populations existed in 1890; small populations of Chinese existed along the pathways of Kansas' flourishing cattle trade. Wichita was located on the Chisolm Trail which ended at Abilene; the cattle were then taken by rail on the Kansas Pacific Railroad east to Wyandotte County, Kansas, where a large slaughter industry was located.

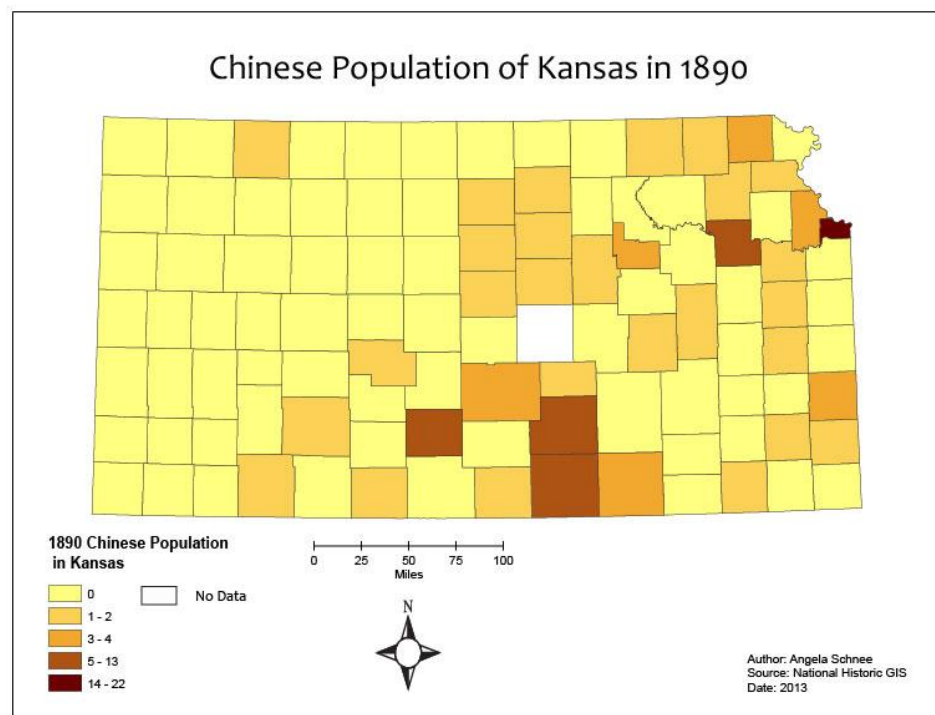


Figure 2: Map showing 1890 Chinese population in Kansas. Counties with the darker coloring had the highest populations. It should be noted that these were very small populations, in some cases only one person of Chinese nativity is reported for a county. SOURCE: Map created by author. Data: National Historic GIS; U.S. Census 1890.

The appearance of the Chinese on the frontier landscape should not suggest that they were accepted members of the places where they lived. The white European settlers saw the Chinese as uncivilized “heathens” and their presence was viewed as a blight on the community. The illustration below is an example of how many Americans perceived the Chinese.

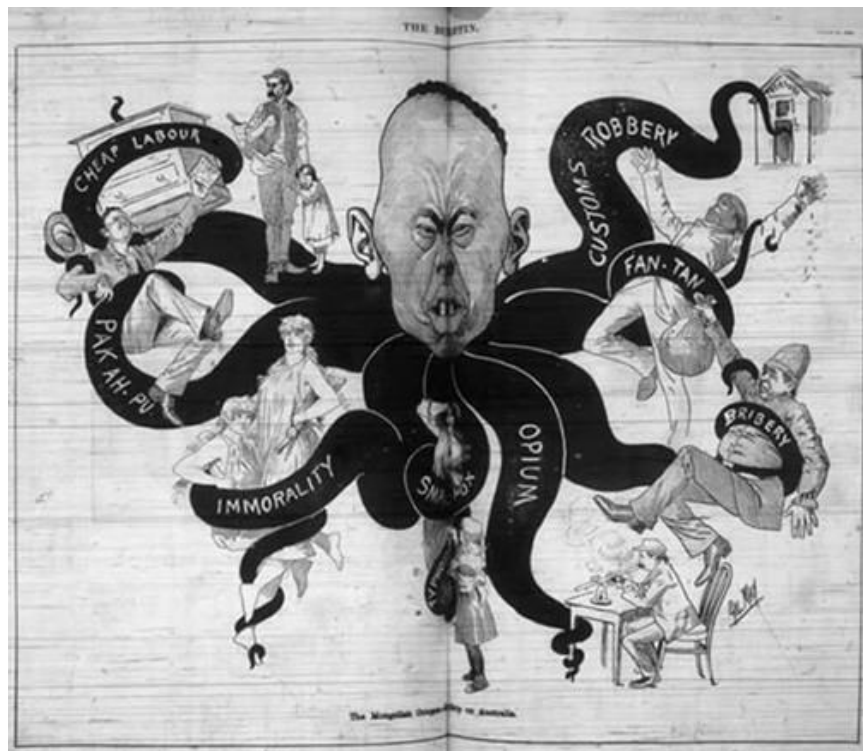


Figure 3: This Australian cartoon is titled “The Heathen” and it portrays the common fears held by many Americans. The Chinese were often the scapegoat for all the ills of society. SOURCE: <http://asiaeducationfoundation.wikispaces.com>

People feared that the presence of a Chinese population, within the borders of their town, would somehow change their way of life and erode the moral fabric of the community. These types of prejudices forced the Chinese to live in isolation and made it extremely difficult

for them to assimilate into American culture. Ironically one of the common complaints of community members was that the Chinese didn't try to adjust to the "American" way of life.¹ Euro Americans feared the Chinese due to a difference in cultures. Chinese food, writing, religion, and customs seemed strange and were often made fun of in white culture. Some of the stereotypes created at this time are still found to exist in our culture today.

So why did these Chinese men end up so far from home, half way around the world, in southern Kansas? In order for people to make such a drastic move there must be significant push and pull factors at work. Push factors are what causes a person to either need or want to leave his homeland; pull factors are the conditions that draw immigrants to a new location.² Several events occurred in China between 1848 and 1868 that created the necessary factors that spurred the immigration of the Chinese to the United States. The Opium Wars with Britain, alternating years of drought and flood, civil unrest, and robbing bandits created dire circumstances in many areas of China. This forced Chinese men to find a means of support for their families. During that same period "The Gold Rush" had started in California. The call of the California gold fields, named "Gold Mountain" in China, became irresistible to many Chinese. In 1868, the Burlingame Treaty was signed between the U.S. and China, relaxing previous immigration laws and providing the Chinese with a greater opportunity to relocate to the United States.³ Unfortunately many of the Chinese immigrants arrived to find that their dreams would not be realized. Upon arrival in a new land the Chinese soon found that the white miners would not allow them to participate in mining work. The majority of the Chinese were relegated

¹ Arthur F. McEvoy, "In places men reject—Chinese fishermen at San Diego, 1870–1893." *J. San Diego History* 23 (1977): 12-24.

² The Levin Institute- The State University of New York, "Globalization 101, Migration-Push and Pull Factors." Last modified 2013. Accessed March 7, 2013. <http://www.globalization101.org/push-factors/>.

³ Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, "MILESTONES: 1866-1898 The Burlingame-Seward Treaty, 1868." Last modified 2013. Accessed March 7, 2013. <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/Burlingame-SewardTreaty>.

to work as cooks, servants, or laundrymen.⁴ With families at home in need of support, these men were desperate for any type of work, and they were willing to do whatever it took to send money home to China, so they stayed.

Wichita's Chinese Laundries

The first mention of a Chinese laundry in Wichita, Kansas, is in the 1881 Gazetteer Business Directory. Charles Sing (Charley or Charlie) was operating a Chinese laundry located on the southwest corner of Fourth Street and Douglas Avenue.⁵ By 1885, there are six Chinese men recorded in the city directory as laundrymen in the town. One of them, Mr. Sing Lee⁶, is listed as being employed as a laundryman at the Occidental Hotel, but he was living at the laundry of Charley Sing.⁷ This indicates that Sing Lee and Charley Sing were likely related. Often family members would immigrate to the United States and serve as apprentices with an established family member until they were able to open their own laundry, thus creating an intricate pattern of chain migration.⁸ The Chinese had a system set up that governed where and when a new laundry could be established. The best way to explain this system is by comparing it to a modern counterpart, the Italian Mafia. The first Chinese immigrant who arrived and settled in an area became "The Boss"; all subsequent arrivals had to gain permission from him to establish a new Chinese business. He also regulated pricing and decided who worked in

⁴ John Jung, *Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain*, (Yin and Yang Press, 2007), chap. 1.

Wong Chin Foo. "Chinese Laundrymen." *Wichita Eagle*, September 2, 1888. [http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85032490/1888-09-02/ed-1/seq-10/;words=laundry Chinese?date1=1888&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1888&proxtext=chinese laundries&y=15&x=12&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=1](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85032490/1888-09-02/ed-1/seq-10/;words=laundry%20Chinese?date1=1888&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1888&proxtext=chinese%20laundries&y=15&x=12&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=1) (accessed January 23, 2012).

⁵ Midwest Historical and Geneological Society, Wichita, KS, "1881 DIRECTORY OF WICHITA GAZETTEER." Accessed January 20, 2012. [http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/mhgs/1881 Gazetteer.htm](http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/mhgs/1881%20Gazetteer.htm).

⁶ Due to little understanding of Chinese culture many of the Chinese names are likely reversed. In Chinese write the surname is first, for example Sing Lee in English would be Lee Sing.

⁷ Midwest Historical and Geneological Society, Wichita, KS, "1885 City Directory." Accessed January 20, 2012. <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/mhgs/1885dir.htm>

⁸ John Jung, *Chinese Laundries: Tickets to survival on Gold Mountain*, (Yin & Yang Press, 2007), chap. 5.

which laundries. In Wichita that “Boss” was Charley Sing. It must be noted that this was not a crime family like the mafia, but the claim to a specific territory and the regulation of an unwritten code of self-governance was similar. Below is an article published in the *Wichita Daily Eagle* on, July 18, 1885. This article gives an example of Mr. Sing asserting his authority over another laundryman.

CHINESE CONTEST.

Yesterday Charlie Sing and his wrestler got on a rampage against the house of Lung On Tei, who runs an opposition laundry on Douglas avenue. Sing claims that he owns Wichita exclusive of all other Chimanen by virtue of discovery and as he established his laundry here first, claims his right to regulate prices and other details of the washee business. So he sallied forth with his wrestler and attacked the house of Lung On Tei and proceeded to close it up. In the absence of Lung, Goon Lei had charge and Sing started to put Goon out of the house and when Lung came on the scene there was sheol to pay and a large crowd were witnesses of the transaction. Lung claims to be a Melican man, and talked English all the way through, but the others talked Chinese, and talked all at once and such a conglomeration of language was never heard in this locality since the Cheyennes left this part of their hunting grounds. This thing went on until the owner of the property asserted authority and put out the Ling invaders and quelled the disturbance.

Figure 4: This article gives insight into the social system that was found in Chinese communities. It is amusing that Charlie had a wrestler; one can assume that this was his muscle. It should also be noted that the term Melican man was the term used by the Chinese for Americans. SOURCE: *Chronicling America*, Library of Congress. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>

In 1887, the number of Chinese laundries in Wichita peaked. That year there were seventeen laundries listed in the city directory.⁹ The map below shows where the 1887 laundries were located within the city.

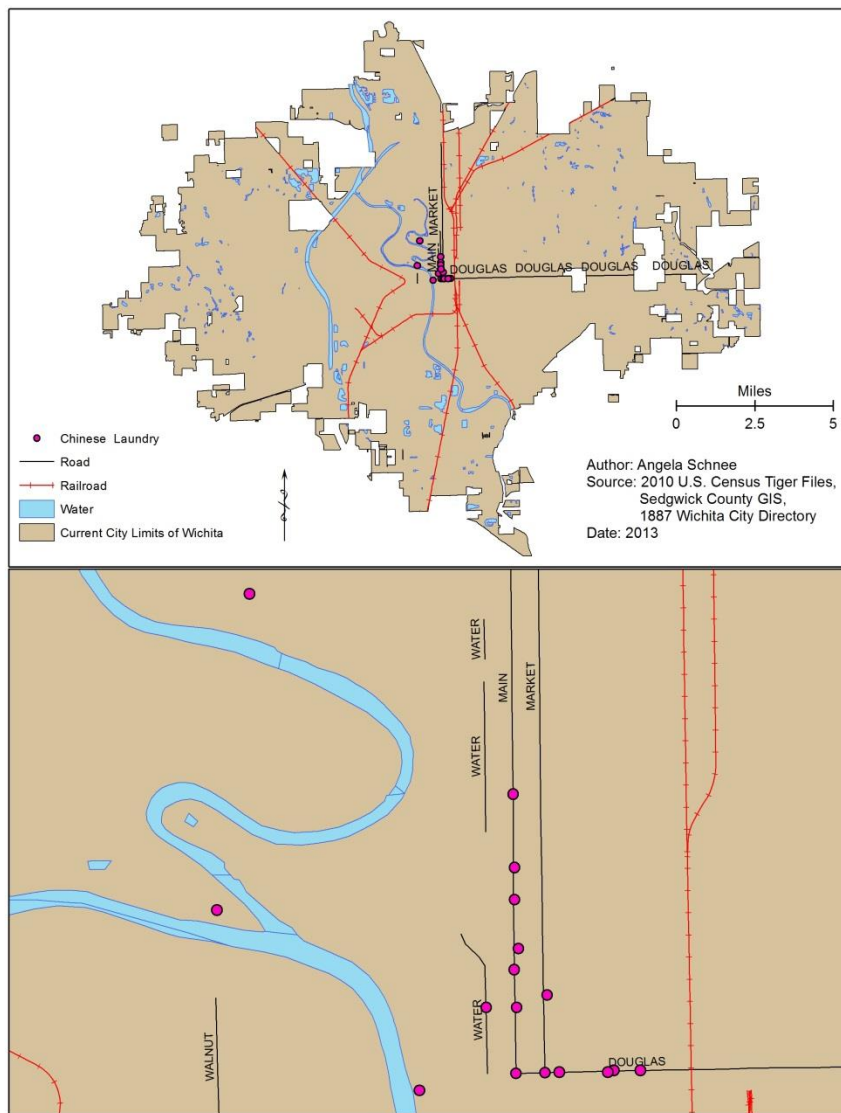


Figure 5: Using the Wichita City Directory for 1887 the author located the seventeen laundries listed. Notice that the laundries were toward the end of the central business district that would have grown up along the railroad. There are also three laundries located outside of the business district on the river. The Chinese likely did the wash with water from the river or even in the river, and these properties would have been less desirable due to flooding. SOURCE: Created by author.

⁹ Midwest Historical & Geneological Society, Wichita, KS, "1887 Wichita City Directory." Accessed January 20, 2012. <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/mhgs/1887dir.htm>.

In the years following this peak there was a rapid decline in the number of Chinese laundries found within the city, and by 1890, only two remained. They were the laundries of Charley Sing and Kee Wong.¹⁰ By 1902 Charley Sing's was sole surviving Chinese laundry in the town and the following year, he also closed shop and opened a restaurant at a different location.¹¹ Charlie Sing ended up being the first and the last Chinese laundryman of Wichita, spending nearly 25 years providing laundry service to the city of Wichita.

American Perception and The Chinese Exclusion Acts

What caused the Chinese laundries to so quickly disappear? There are several factors that facilitated the decline of Chinese populations in the U.S. Americans rarely offered Chinese immigrants a warm welcome. Numerous labor unions petitioned law makers to remove all Chinese immigrants from the country, due to their belief that the Chinese were driving down wages. Playing on the fears of the public, the labor unions, especially those associated with laundry workers, propagated falsehoods about the Chinese. They were depicted as vectors for disease, dealers of opium, and immoral barbarians. A series of circulars was printed in the *Wichita Eagle* by the Women's Industrial League, calling for a boycott of all Chinese laundries. One such circular is included on the following page. A common argument for the removal of the Chinese was that they were stealing work from white Americans. The circular below goes even farther and accuses the laundries of taking money from widows and orphans. It is obvious today that media such as this and the illustrations below were solely designed to scare the

¹⁰ Midwest Historical & Geneological Society, Wichita, KS, "Classified Business Directory, Wicita, KS 1890." Accessed January 20, 2012. [http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/mhgs/1890Classified Business Directory and Official Directory.pdf](http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/mhgs/1890Classified%20Business%20Directory%20and%20Official%20Directory.pdf).

¹¹ Midwest Historical & Geneological Society, Wichita, KS, "1902 Wichita City Directory." Accessed January 20, 2012. [http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/mhgs/1902 Wichita City Directory Classified Business.PDF](http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/mhgs/1902%20Wichita%20City%20Directory%20Classified%20Business.PDF).

Midwest Historical & Geneological Society, Wichita, KS, "1904-1905 Wichita City Directory." Accessed January 20, 2012. [http://skyways.lib.ks.us/kansas/genweb/mhgs/1904 1905 Wichita Business Directory.pdf](http://skyways.lib.ks.us/kansas/genweb/mhgs/1904%201905%20Wichita%20Business%20Directory.pdf)

public into supporting the removal of the Chinese from the country. Unfortunately this tactic worked.

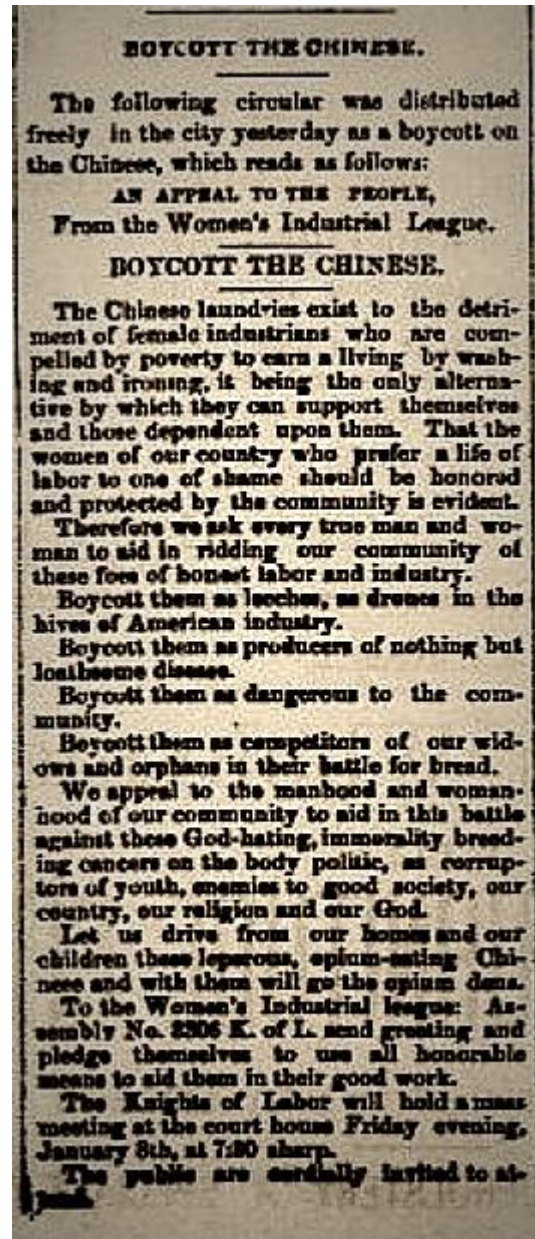


Figure 6: Pleas such as this were commonly found in newspapers across the nation. It is obvious that the use of such strong language was meant to scare, intimidate, and incite the general public. Some of these same arguments and tactics are being employed today, as our nation discusses Mexican immigration. Taken from the *Wichita Daily Eagle*. January 18, 1886. SOURCE: <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>

States nearly impossible.¹² The citizens of Wichita were not unlike other Americans in their disdain for these immigrants invading their community. These men often endured terrible discrimination at the hands of their neighbors.

Articles and political cartoons such as the ones above are commonly found in newspapers from Kansas and across the country. Today these images are appalling, but there are several reasons why the Chinese were viewed in such a derogatory way. First, Chinese customs and religion seemed alien to white Americans, and there was almost a complete lack of understanding on the part of Americans of European descent.¹³ Second, while men like Charley Sing emigrated and settled in Wichita, spending a good portion of their lives in the town, this was not typical of many Chinese immigrants. Most of the Chinese who ran laundries in Wichita only stayed a year or two. With such a transient population it was difficult for the people of the community to get to know them as individuals. Third, there is evidence that a few of the men running laundries were also selling opium on the side. In Wichita there is only one newspaper account of opium being found.¹⁴ However, in larger cities like Kansas City, Chicago, New York, and San Francisco it was a much larger problem.¹⁵ Particularly salacious headlines about opium dens and prostitution rings found in larger cities were regularly reported

¹² Waverly B. Lowell. The National Archives, "Chinese Immigration and the Chinese in the United States." Last modified 1999. Accessed March 8, 2013. <http://www.archives.gov/research/chinese->

¹³ Arthur F. McEvoy, "In places men reject—Chinese fishermen at San Diego, 1870–1893." *J. San Diego History* 23 (1977): 12-24.

¹⁴ "Coon Lee's Place Raided." *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, January 31, 1892. [http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1892-01-31/ed-1/seq-6;/words=laundry Chinese?date1=1892&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1892&proxtext=chinese laundries&y=14&x=14&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=2](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1892-01-31/ed-1/seq-6;/words=laundry%20Chinese?date1=1892&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1892&proxtext=chinese%20laundries&y=14&x=14&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=2) (accessed January 23, 2012).

¹⁵ "Looking for Smuggled Opium." *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, August 6, 1890. [http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1890-08-06/ed-1/seq-2;/words=laundries Chinese?date1=1890&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1890&proxtext=chinese laundries&y=10&x=19&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=2](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1890-08-06/ed-1/seq-2;/words=laundries%20Chinese?date1=1890&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1890&proxtext=chinese%20laundries&y=10&x=19&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=2) (accessed January 23, 2012).

"Home Pipe Dreams: Chicagoans Do Not Patronize Opium Dens Now." *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, November 10, 1901. [http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1901-11-10/ed-1/seq-13;/words=laundry laundries Chinese?date1=1901&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1901&proxtext=chinese laundries&y=9&x=18&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=1](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1901-11-10/ed-1/seq-13;/words=laundry%20laundries%20Chinese?date1=1901&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1901&proxtext=chinese%20laundries&y=9&x=18&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=1) (accessed January 23, 2012).

in small town newspapers, thereby giving the Chinese a tawdry reputation. The Chinese laundries did seem to attract a corrupt element; according to newspaper articles from the *Wichita Daily Eagle*, criminals of all sorts were frequently found lurking around the laundries, thus creating an unsavory image of the Chinese businesses. In a notorious Wichita murder case, evidence was shown that the defendant had smoked opium at one of the laundries on E. Douglas (not Charlie Sing's) before committing the murder.¹⁶ In an 1886 *Wichita Eagle* article, it was reported that the Tin Horn Gambling Fraternity was caught by police while eating in the back of one of the town laundries. Newspaper reports such as this reinforced the belief that the Chinese were not interested in becoming a part of the community, but rather were a conduit for crime. This perception held by Wichita citizens was not accurate, and additional evidence from newspaper crime reports indicate that the Chinese were much more frequently the victims of crime rather than the perpetrators of it. Chinese businesses were recurrently robbed and the owners were consistently assaulted.¹⁷ It can be assumed that many of the crimes committed against them went unreported as is commonly the case with immigrant populations. During the time period researched for this study there are eight accounts of crime against a Chinese laundryman and only one report of a laundryman actually committing a crime. This shows that many of the perceptions held by the American public were grossly exaggerated.

¹⁶ "End is in Sight: Ingram Murder Case will Reach Jury Today." *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, May 14, 1897.

[http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1897-05-14/ed-1/seq-5/;words=laundry Chinese?date1=1897&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1897&proxtext=chinese laundries&y=14&x=16&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=1](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1897-05-14/ed-1/seq-5/;words=laundry%20Chinese?date1=1897&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1897&proxtext=chinese%20laundries&y=14&x=16&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=1) (accessed January 23, 2012).

¹⁷ "Little Thieves." *The Wichita Eagle*, July 21, 1888. [http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85032490/1888-07-21/ed-1/seq-5/;words=laundry Chinese?date1=1888&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1888&proxtext=chinese laundries&y=17&x=10&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=0](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85032490/1888-07-21/ed-1/seq-5/;words=laundry%20Chinese?date1=1888&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1888&proxtext=chinese%20laundries&y=17&x=10&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=0) (accessed January 23, 2012).

"Announcements." *The Wichita Eagle*, February 7, 1888. [http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85032490/1888-02-07/ed-1/seq-5/;words=laundry Chinese?date1=1888&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1888&proxtext=chinese laundries&y=17&x=10&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=2](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85032490/1888-02-07/ed-1/seq-5/;words=laundry%20Chinese?date1=1888&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1888&proxtext=chinese%20laundries&y=17&x=10&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=2) (accessed January 23, 2012).

"Tried To Rob Chinaman." *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, July 27, 1902. [http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1902-07-27/ed-1/seq-4/;words=laundry Chinese?date1=1902&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1902&proxtext=chinese laundries&y=13&x=21&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=0](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014635/1902-07-27/ed-1/seq-4/;words=laundry%20Chinese?date1=1902&rows=20&searchType=basic&state=Kansas&date2=1902&proxtext=chinese%20laundries&y=13&x=21&dateFilterType=yearRange&index=0) (accessed January 23, 2012).

There are a few accounts that offer a glimpse of Charlie Sing the person. The first is from a Mr. Lillie who operated a tailor shop next to Charlie's laundry. He says, "The Chinaman is the best fellow in the world... He is liberal, good natured and kind hearted." Mr. Lillie goes on to tell about the care given to him by Mr. Sing, who looked after him while he faced a serious illness, bringing him meals and checking on him every few hours to make sure that he was all right. Mr. Lillie goes on to say that he and Charlie visited with each other daily and ended most days by enjoying a cigar together in the alley behind their shops.¹⁸



Figure 12: There are no pictures that are known to exist of any of the Chinese laundries in Wichita. The author constructed a 3D model using Tremble Sketch-up to re-create what Charlie's laundry may have looked like. This depiction was based on historic photographs of Wichita and Chinese laundries in other locations. Source: Portfolio of author.

Mr. Lillie is possibly the only townspeople who ever really got to know Charlie as a person and accepted him as a friend. Those who did forge relationships with their Chinese neighbors found that they were extremely hard working, kind, and giving. The life of Mr. Sing offers proof that

¹⁸ "Charlie is a Good Fellow." *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, June 30, 1901. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov> (accessed March 8, 2013).

the stereotype of the Chinese immigrant was unjustified, and that there were Chinese who were able to adapt and become a part of American society.

Final Thoughts

The research for this writing began as a fluke, but as I delved into this little known pocket of Kansas history, it quickly became evident that the story of Charlie Sing and the Chinese who made Kansas their home deserved attention. It is probable that few Kansans know our state had an emerging Chinese population as early as the 1880s. I know I didn't. My initial thoughts when I learned of Mr. Sing and his laundry were, "Why was there a Chinese laundry in Wichita, Kansas in the 1880s; what were Chinese immigrants doing here. That doesn't fit what I know." This study challenged my perceived notions of Kansas' history. As historians it is easy to report the triumphant moments in our nation's history and easier yet to gloss over or ignore the more disgraceful junctures of our past; however it is important to recognize that it is our duty to tell the story of all the people we learn about, no matter how scant the records or mention in standard histories!

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