

Chinese Chicago from 1893 to 1943: Cultural Assimilation, Social Acceptance, and Chinese-American Identity through the Lens of Interracial Relations and Class

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With a myriad of transportation and architectural advances, Chicago grew faster than any other city in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century, jumping to become the nation's second largest city in 1890. Chicago emerged not only as an industrial powerhouse, but also as a multicultural hub for transplants from rural Midwestern towns, immigrants from Northern and Eastern Europe, and African Americans resettling in northern cities during the Great Migration. Those who came were, in the words of novelist Theodore Dreiser, "life-hungry for the vast energy Chicago could offer to their appetites."¹ It was also in the midst of this exciting backdrop that the first Chinese migrants came to Chicago in the 1870s. But unlike Chinese migrants in San Francisco who experienced explicit anti-Chinese hostility, the Chinese in Chicago lived largely under the radar of the public eye, as "the average Chicagoan was no more tolerant toward Chinese than anybody else in the nation."²

Some historians attribute this invisibility to the geographical isolation or to the small size of the Chinese population relative to other minorities, citing Chicago's "racial diversity" in helping "the Chinese 'disappear' in its multiethnic 'jungle'."³ Between the 1890s and 1930s, however, the Chinese population in Chicago increased more than ten-fold to roughly 6,000, according to population estimates at the time. Given this rapid change in population, how much did attitudes and perceptions toward the Chinese change? Moreover, how did these new migrants, many of

¹ Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn: A History of Myself* (1931), 159.

² Adam McKeown, Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 193.

³ Ling, *Chinese Chicago*, 56.

whom came from cities on the West Coast, adapt to life in Chicago?⁴

Although most Chinese migrants came to Chicago via a complex system of cross-country kinship networks, their identities along class, gender, age, and education lines strongly shaped their assimilation into the fabric of city life. In this paper, I examine a few moments of contact between Chinese and non-Chinese Chicagoans to understand how different racial attitudes were formed between 1893 and 1943. Regarding racial attitude formation, I begin with 1893 because the Columbian Exposition generated a significant influx of Chinese immigrants who hoped to take advantage of the increase in business, and end with 1943, the year the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed. This fifty-year period is valuable to study because it provides insight into the way that the first generation of migrants established their livelihoods, assimilated into the social fabric of Chicago, formed communities, and participated in processes of cultural negotiation and translation.

Scholarship on the unique demographic, social, and cultural characteristics of this first generation of migrants exists, but the historical analysis tends to focus solely on experiences within the Chinese community. For instance, Adam McKeown examines the ebb and flow of Chinese migration in *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii*, offering a comparative history of Chinese diaspora but glossing over the interaction of Chinese migrants with other migrant and minority groups within Chicago itself. Similarly, Huping Ling's book *Chinese Chicago: Race, Transnational Migration, and Community since 1870* offers an in-depth look at the various push and pull factors that brought migrants to Chicago and what life was like within certain Chinese enclaves. Ling, among others, comprehensively examines factors of migration and assimilation through kinship networks, marital relations, family dynamics, and commercial enterprises but does not offer a substantial discussion of how interracial relations existed within those settings. Although the influence of Chinese migrants was relatively insignificant electorally, opinions about them certainly formed as more touch points between groups quickly opened up within working, romantic, and religious spheres of activity. Ling's claim that

⁴ Ifu Chen, "Chinese in Chicago," Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, [Box #129] [Folder #8] Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

The population statistic was situated within a Section IV "Chinese Population Distribution of Chicago and Chinatown", a report written by a Chinese graduate student. However, no methodology is cited for how the information was collected. It seems that his figures are estimations based on his own experiences, as the numbers for the total population of Chinese in Chinatown versus Chicago are nice round numbers, 2,000 and 4,000 respectively. Comparing his statistics to census estimates at the time, they report considerably lower population counts for Chinese in Chicago (2,757 in census versus 6,000 in Chen). Although the absolute numbers are different, the proportion of men to women that Chen cites is similar to those in the census (15:1).

Chinese immigrants and African Americans were socially separated because they were spatially segregated in distant residential areas paints too broad a brush over the myriad number of day-to-day interactions at laundries or restaurants in which the two groups came into contact.⁵

The First Migrants

Moy Dong Chow, a Chinese laborer from Canton, arrived in Chicago from San Francisco to find the Chicagoans' friendliness a welcome change from the anti-Chinese sentiment he had experienced on the West Coast. In a 1926 interview with Chicago sociology graduate student Tin-Chiu Fan, Moy recalled that the Chicagoans "never asked me whether or not I ate rats or snakes. They seemed to believe that we had souls to save, and these souls were worth saving. The Chicagoans found us to be a peculiar people to be sure, but they liked to mix with us."⁶ Within a few years, Moy had sent for close to forty members of his extended family to settle in Chicago and by 1890, nearly 500 Chinese lived in the area between Clark and Van Buren Street in the Loop, known as Chicago's first Chinatown.

In various ways, Moy was representative of many of the first Chinese migrants that came to Chicago. For one, the first migrants were overwhelmingly male: in 1932, the gender ratio was so skewed male that for every female there were about fifteen males, most of whom were in their late forties or older.⁷ This gender distribution lasted until the 1940s, a period which represented a shift in the demographic makeup due to different conditions of migration. The War Bride Act of 1945 and the G.I. Fiancées Act of 1946 admitted approximately 6,000 Chinese war brides, while the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 and Refugee Relief Act of 1953 admitted several thousand more Chinese women.⁸ Between 1944 and 1953, almost 82 percent of Chinese migrants were women.⁹ The result was a much more demographically diverse post-World War II landscape of Chinese migrants compared to earlier years.

While the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition pandered to middle class taste for exoticized culture, it also formalized class divisions in the participation and representation of the Chinese at the fair. Inside the fair exhibits, visitors were impressed by the so-called "entrepreneurial exotics" who supposedly left their homelands to perform at ethnic village

⁵ Ling, *Chinese Chicago*, 98.

⁶ Huping Ling, *Chinese Chicago: Race, Transnational Migration, and Community Since 1870*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 32.

⁷ Ifu Chen, "Chinese in Chicago," 1932, Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, [Box #129] [Folder #8] Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

⁸ Ling, *Chinese Chicago*, 206.

⁹ Ibid.

exhibits.¹⁰ The Chinese exhibit emphasized traditional culture and was built with exaggerated faux Chinese architecture that played into the larger commercial goal of the fair to offer a lavish excursion around the world without leaving Chicago. William Walton wrote in 1893 that the Chinese village included a theater, restaurant, and bazaar where “some of the tea offered for sale is priced at a hundred dollars per pound, only a few leaves being required to make a pot of the beverage.”¹¹ In response to the exhibit, one visitor praised the refinement of the Chinese, writing that, “it was quite a relief to see the difference between the person and manners of the refined class of Chinese and the ‘coolies’ that infest our Western shores. These people are neat, intelligent, polite, and agreeable.”¹²

Ironically, the Chinese were only seen as refined within the fair walls. Outside of them, the Chinese were seen as a class of deplorables that infested the city. A rumor that “scores of Chinese would be smuggled to the fair and would then disappear into the crowds of their fellow countrymen in the city” reached the Office of the Inspector of the fair, who promptly issued a campaign to photograph all of Chicago’s Chinese in order to identify the smuggled Chinese as if they looked different from the resident Chinese.¹³ A *Chicago Tribune* article that aimed to “ascertain the feelings of those residents as to the photographing and measurements now being taken of Chinese” reveals how angry Moy Dong Chow, a respected elder in the community, was at this point.¹⁴ The article also quoted the response of Chow Tai, who gave an intelligent and articulate defense of his civil liberties:

Chow Tai said in clear English: “If the law means that all my countrymen, residents in America, are to be measured as criminals and labeled as so many packages of tea, it will never be enforced. The ridiculousness of its provisions will kill it. Are we not residents here? Do we not pay taxes as all-other property holders? It would be more nearly justice for them to drive us out. So long as we are accepted as residents we are entitled to some rights. We are not law

¹⁰ Bancroft, cited in Curtis M. Hinsley, “The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the Worlds Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 362-63.

¹¹ Cited in Chinese American Museum of Chicago Research, *William Walton, Art & Architecture*, (Philadelphia: G. Barrie, 1893).

¹² Cited in Mae Ngai, in *Shepp’s Worlds Fair Photographed* (Chicago: Globe Bible Co., 1893); “A Chinese Residence,” Views of the Worlds Columbian Exposition, part 10 (Chicago: Laird and Lee, 1893) [unpaginated].

¹³ Ling, *Chinese Chicago*, 44.

¹⁴ “Just Like Criminals: Hi Lung Indigent at the Plan for Detecting Chinamen,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 10, 1982 in ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 3.

breakers.”¹⁵

Chow Tai’s precise English likely surprised the reporter because it ran contrary to how most Chinese were perceived as “racially debased, politically naïve, and culturally ignorant.”¹⁶ The reporter pointed out that bystanders were smoking opium and being rowdy, playing into two of the main negative stereotypes associated with Chinese laborers. He continued with negative rhetoric to describe the crowd as a “perspiring, jabbering crowd of his countrymen” enveloped in smoke.¹⁷

Given the discrepancy in the perception of the Chinese that the fair galvanized, it is even more interesting to note that the three main investors who funded the Chinese exhibit were prominent Chinese American businessmen themselves that collectively financed \$90,000 (\$1.7 million in 2003 dollars).¹⁸ One of the investors, Wong Kee, was reportedly the wealthiest Chinese man in Chicago at the time.¹⁹ These businessmen spoke clear English, adopted the American style of dress, and were well assimilated. Thus, the degree to which one was perceived as assimilated by white Americans seemed to be directly correlated with one’s socioeconomic class.

These three investors were part of an emerging Chinese-American bourgeois class. They were transnational merchants who came to Chicago with significant amounts of capital and strong clan networks, which allowed them to establish successful business empires. The story of Chin Foin, an elite restaurateur in Chicago is particularly interesting. Chin was the owner of four upscale Chinese restaurants in the Loop area: King Yen Lo, Mandarin Inn, King Joy Lo, and Mandarin Garden.²⁰ His businesses flourished at the turn of the century when the number of Chinese restaurants increased exponentially. According to the Lakeside Annual Directory, there was one Chinese restaurant in 1900, but only fifteen years later, that number had grown to 118.²¹ Chin Foin, however, was the first to recognize a demand for upscale Chinese dining catered to a wealthy white clientele with the opening of his King Yen Lo restaurant

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ling, *Chinese Chicago*, 44.

¹⁷ “Just Like Criminals,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

¹⁸ Ngai, Mae M. “Transnationalism and the Transformation of the ‘Other’: Response to the Presidential Address.” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 62.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ling, *Chinese Chicago*, 92.

²¹ Cited in Chinese American Museum of Chicago Research, Reuben H, Donnelley, compiler, *The Lakeside Annual Directory of Chicago, 1890, 1891, 1892, 18793, 1894, 1895, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1905, 1911, 1915*. (The Chicago Directory Company: Chicago).

on Randolph Street. A full-page advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune* for the grand opening of Chin Foin's third restaurant, Mandarin Inn, highlighted both its lavish Western and Chinese amenities such as a "perfect system of ventilation," the "choicest vintages of European, American, and Chinese wines, liquors and cordials," and "Chinese dragon fixtures and Chinese furniture of the most luxurious type."²² The advertisement also called attention to the authenticity of Mandarin Inn, praising it as "the only correct Mandarin cooking in Chicago."²³ Thus, Chin Foin recognized the same demand amongst Chicago's wealthy for an exotic yet cosmopolitan experience that the World's Fair investors saw. His restaurants played into an ironic brand of westernization wherein the more authentically "Chinese" they were, the more sophisticated and assimilated their owners were deemed to be.

Not only were Chin's restaurants well attuned to the tastes of Chicago's white elite, but Chin and his family also led a fairly westernized life relative to his contemporaries. As such, Chin's assimilation as a Chinese man into the fabric of proper American life received public praise and attention. A 1917 *Chicago Tribune* article that features a picture of the wedding ceremony of Chin Foin's daughter reads, "*The Groom Wore the Conventional Black*: once more the Great Chicago Melting Pot is epitomized by these Chinese-Americans, who marry with all the approved form and ceremony of the west."²⁴

Despite Chin's good rapport among Chicago's wealthy patrons, the backlash he received in moving his family to Calumet, a wealthy white suburb on the South Side of Chicago, indicated that anti-Chinese sentiment persisted even for someone of Chin's social stature. Another *Chicago Tribune* article reported Chin's move as an "invasion" and featured the complaints of a neighbor in quotations: "Dear me! How cosmopolitan are we becoming? We have Negroes out here now and a few Goths and Visigoths. I suppose a Chinese or two won't do any harm."²⁵ In order to mollify his neighbors, Chin Foin needed to outwardly prove his qualifications to live in an upper-class neighborhood. It is rumored that Chin colluded with the reporter to mention in the article that he was a "graduate of Yale, and he has a cousin in the cabinet of the Chinese Republic. Also, Chin Foin is wealthy."²⁶ As a result of such efforts, neighbor J.W. Scofield informed the *Chicago Tribune* that he'd "rather have a Chinese any day than some other

²² "Mandarin Inn: Grand Opening Tonight," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 16, 1911 in ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 1.1.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "The Groom Wore the Conventional Black" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 15, 1917 in ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 3.

²⁵ "Chinese Family Takes a Fine Home," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 28, 1912, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 1.

²⁶ Ibid.

nationalities.”²⁷

For migrants who were not as fortunate as Chin Foin in their business endeavors or who did not have ties to a strong family name, many of their experiences centered around the locus of either the Chinese laundry or the chop suey restaurant. In 1921, second brother Teh-Him wrote to his oldest brother Teh-Seng about his journey from San Francisco to Chicago and all his stops in between. The letters indicated that one of the most important factors for men like Teh-Him in relocating was if there were relatives who already lived there and if they had the means to lend him money.²⁸ On July 28, 1921 Teh-Seng advised Teh-Him to stay in Chicago and work for his Uncle Kai’s laundry because of the superior economic opportunities:

Uncle Kai’s business is pretty good all the times. Now you work for him and when he goes back to China, you can buy over the place from him....Secondly, some of our brethren in Chicago are financially well-to-do and also there is *wai* [loan fund of the clan] can be obtained. In case of need, in raising money to pay debt or buy business, you can get it with less difficulty. It will be much harder to raise money in a small town like this [Duluth, MN].²⁹

This excerpt revealed both the importance of kinship networks and salient characteristics of how migrants moved across the country from California, typically, to Chicago. It was common for people to stop at multiple different cities, depending on if they had family ties there. On the other hand, it was rare for migrants to seek work in cities to which they did not have a familial connection – if they did, they usually did not stay long. This mentality was also demonstrated in an interview sociology graduate student Paul Siu had in 1933 with a Chinatown elder, Charles Kai.³⁰ Kai reflected that he left Bakersfield, where he was working for his brother’s laundry, to go to Los Angeles, but did not find any work there because “how can one expect to have something to do if he has no cousins there to receive him?”³¹

If conditions allowed, however, sometimes migrants started their own businesses rather than working for a relative’s. Paul Siu wrote in his study “The Laundryman and the Chop Suey Man” that many Chinese immigrants usually started out with either a laundry or chop suey store

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, [Box #129] [Folder #4] Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Paul Siu, “Life Story of Charles Kai”, Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, [Box #138] [Folder #4] Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

³¹ Ibid.

“and then turn[ed] to the other, fail[ed], turn[ed] back to the former.”³² In most of the correspondence between family members, transferring money, either from the writer back to family in China or to the writer from family in America, was always mentioned briefly. It reflected the transactional nature inherent in these kinship networks where the networks assumed a dual role as self-sufficient economic networks. Chinese Americans thereby created monopolies in a select number of industries – notably the laundry, chop suey store, and grocery – where the businesses were passed down from generation to generation.³³ Siu also found in his study that the chop suey stores and groceries tended to open up as complements of each other: “chop suey tends to follow laundry” and both “tend to appear in the same area [since] both of the business enterprises may be owned by members of the same clan.”³⁴

Opening laundries were also viable sources of income for migrants due to the low upfront capital required to open a store – little to no machinery was needed since the chief service, washing, was done by hand on washing boards.³⁵ In Siu’s book, *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Isolation*, a few records of expenses from laundries around Chicago listed operating costs such as gas, heating, and labor as the only major expenses.³⁶ Opening chop suey stores also became more popular once the notion of take-out was established. A take-out meant that a store did not need to operate a dine-in space, substantially cutting costs. Lastly, because these niche businesses were all in the service industry, their successes depended on finding loyal customers. As a result, Ifu Chen’s study noted that the majority of laundries and chop suey stores were located outside of Chinatown and dispersed throughout the city in order to reach a more diverse customer base.³⁷

Similar to how the restaurant was a point of interaction between Chin Foin and wealthy white Chicagoans, the store, albeit in a much different context, was also a major touchpoint for cross-racial relations of lower class citizens. This was because the commercial enterprises of the Chinese American laborer class provided opportunities for employment and consumption across a broad geographic and racial base, even if Chinese residential communities did not intersect with other ethnicities or minorities. For instance, shared work experiences in a common

³² Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, [Box #138] [Folder #2] Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Paul C. P. Siu (Paul Chan Pang), and John Kuo Wei Tchen. *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*. New York: New York University Press, 1987.

³⁷ Ifu Chen, “Chinese in Chicago,” Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, [Box #129] [Folder #8] Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

environment could facilitate romances between partners of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Typically, interracial relations arose between a Chinese male and a working class female of either Eastern European or African American descent. One such case of interracial interaction occurred in the Chinese laundry. Paul Siu observed that Chinese laundrymen started to hire African American laundresses during the Depression when the volume of demand weakened and many laundries had to lay off more than half of their employees.³⁸ Given that Chinese male laborers did not like to take part-time labor, “Negresses were first employed” and were “hired to work three days a week, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, the ironing days.”³⁹ Siu noted that their employment was less than desirable and generally took “the form of irregular, unsteady, and purely commercial fashion.”⁴⁰ Although there did not seem to be anti-black prejudice in the realm of work, outside of work, “the Chinese [was] very prejudicial against the Negro, especially on the sex matter” and therefore Chinese-black interracial relations were looked down upon.⁴¹

Siu’s report, however, noted that many of the women who were sexual partners of the laundrymen lived together, but were not legally married. Considering how isolating the job was and how few Chinese women there were in Chicago, Siu argued that “the sexual matter between the laundrymen and the negress helper is merely a social consequence.”⁴² But because of racial prejudice and anti-miscegenation laws, there were relatively few Chinese and black marriages.

Therefore, among the working class, cross-racial romantic and sexual relationships arose partly from demographic necessity but also labor association. Records of such relationships, however, are limited to first-hand accounts, and even broader sociological studies like Paul Siu’s are hard to come by. Looking at death certificates reveals that there were a number of white and black women with Chinese surnames like Lee, Sing, and Toy, although that information is limited and could be misleading since surnames like Lee are not necessarily Chinese.⁴³ There does seem to be a pattern of the poor marrying the poor, though – in other words, relationships crossed class boundaries far less than they did racial ones.

With regard to racial relations, the historical record of interactions between Chinese migrants and black Chicagoans is larger than the

³⁸ Paul Siu, “The Employment of Negress in Chinese Laundry”, Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, [Box #138] [Folder #2] Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Peggy Spitzer Christoff, *Tracking the “Yellow Peril,”* (Rockport, ME: The Picton Press), 77-143.

records of interactions between Chinese migrants and any other racial groups. The nature of these Chinese-black interactions often depended on where and how they were mediated, leading to a very multi-faceted history of antagonism, cooperation, and everything in between. A 1929 article reporting a bombing at Golden Lily Café, a South Side chop suey place located near 55th and Garfield, revealed how economic conditions oftentimes shaped the form of interaction. The article explained that although the exact motive for the explosion was unconfirmed, “folks in the neighborhood believe[d] the dismal attempt to wreck the place was caused by management opening the café to all races.”⁴⁴ Golden Lily Café was previously whites-only but had been experiencing bad business as the neighborhood demographics began to change and whites moved out. Therefore, “when business fell off to such an extent that it was the case of change their solid white policy or close up, the owners hired Tiny Parham’s orchestra and announced a policy of ‘come one, come all’” indicating that perhaps the Chinese owners did not have pre-existing racial biases against black Chicagoans and were more motivated by making a profit.⁴⁵

The article mentioned above was written in *The Chicago Defender*, a nationally circulated newspaper with a prominently black audience. Periodically, op-eds or letters written by laypeople would be published. One particular letter to the editor written by a white man from Greenville, Mississippi, although not specific to Chicago, highlighted the complexities of the racial dynamic between the Chinese and black communities in the South. Using explicitly nativist and racist rhetoric, he urged black southerners to boycott Chinese businesses to drive them out of town and thereby “protect white womanhood” from the “yellow menace.”⁴⁶ It also called for the preservation of the status quo through racial separation by forbidding the Chinese from visiting stores marked as either whites-only or blacks-only.⁴⁷ The letter mentioned that black Americans must “realize that the white man is your best friend” because at least they had a shared American heritage, which the Chinese inevitably threatened.⁴⁸ The peculiarity of the letter, as the *Defender* editor noted, was that it was the “case of a white man...appealing to us to turn our backs on Chinese and help the white race crush Chinese as well as ourselves.”⁴⁹

However, the letter does reveal how some black Americans felt about the increasing Chinese presence in their daily lives. Although the Chinese were not seen as an explicit threat, there was a reluctant

⁴⁴ “Bomb Hits S.S. Chop Suey Café,” *The Chicago Defender*, October 26, 1929, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “White Mississippian Asks Our Aid Against Chinese,” *The Chicago Defender*, Jun 7, 1930, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

acknowledgement of the success of their groceries and laundries, as the editor admitted that, “the strange part of it is that the man’s arguments are logical.”⁵⁰ Even though the letter referenced specific events in Mississippi, one could conjecture that the same sentiments were at times stronger in Chicago, where there was a larger Chinese presence. However, several newspapers denied the letter publication before the *Defender* decided to publish it, meaning it was already fairly controversial.

Among the upper class, however, there were instances in which black intellectuals and leaders seemed to be involved in Chinese-American affairs. Just a year before, in 1928, Robert S. Abbot, the editor-in-chief of *The Chicago Defender*, had been invited to a celebratory dinner marking the anniversary of the People’s Republic at Wom Kom Restaurant.⁵¹ In this case, respectable leaders in the black community were not treated differently on a racial basis.

What all these examples have in common is the idea that the commercial enterprise was a major point of both interracial interaction and racial formation. The context in which Chinese migrants encountered other racial groups, whether that was conditioned by class, explicit racial segregation, or circumstance within the enterprise, informed how migrants were perceived and in turn, how other racial groups perceived the Chinese.

Interracial interactions also occurred outside the realm of commercial enterprise, although they were much less common and typically involved mostly middle or upper-class Chinese Americans. A black sociology graduate student named Horace Cayton wrote a profile of Harry Mar, “a young Chinese American boy [who] was a friend of our family for a number of years.”⁵² Harry was a second-generation Chinese American who, growing up, had lived in the same middle-class neighborhoods as Cayton did. According to Cayton, Harry’s father was a prominent businessman and important figure in local Chinese politics, despite being “far from Americanized” because he “maintained many of the old Chinese customs as to holidays and family organization.”⁵³ Cayton’s story about Harry is significant because it gives insight into how interracial relationships were perceived within Harry’s social class compared to their perception amongst working-class Chinese Americans who lived in Chinatown. Harry’s romantic interest was a Filipino-French girl whom he had met at a taxi dance hall. It was out of the ordinary because typically, dance hall workers were never treated as serious romantic partners. Cayton wrote that rumors about the affair began to spread throughout the Chinese community and eventually reached Harry’s parents, who reacted angrily because they had expected

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “Chicago Chinese Remember Homeland”, *The Chicago Defender*, Oct 20, 1928, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 4.

⁵² Horace Cayton, Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, [Box #129] [Folder #4] Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.

⁵³ Ibid.

him to marry Daisy Quong, a local Christian Chinese girl.⁵⁴ In fact, “the father even suggested that he have sex relations with the girl, but that he should stop taking her out and ‘treating her as if she were a decent woman,’” indicating that relations with non-Chinese minorities, especially Filipinos, were strongly looked-down upon.⁵⁵ They eventually married and the repercussions Harry faced, according to Cayton, were severe: he was “afraid to go out for food” as people “wouldn’t feed [him], or would make remarks,” and he could not hold a steady job. He held a job at a jeweler’s for a week until “a Chinese fellow called on the manager of the store and told him that Harry had married outside of his race, and was going to be punished by his family, and so, if [the manager] wanted peace in his store it would be best to get rid of him.”⁵⁶ Despite the consequences of being socially ostracized from the Chinese community, however, Harry still tightly held onto a sense of family respectability and traditional values. Harry would not accept charity or outside help when he was unemployed, nor would he let his wife seek employment, resorting to stealing instead. As a second-generation Chinese American who was fairly culturally assimilated, the salience of his Chinese ethnic identity remained a strong, if not contradictory, influence in his life.

Around the same time Cayton produced his report, there were also a number of Chinese graduate students in the sociology department writing field studies. In fact, the fruits of their field research are widely cited in secondary scholarship on Chinese Americans in Chicago. However, it is also fruitful to study their own migration and assimilation stories to reveal a completely different site of cross-racial relations: the academic institution.

Like the transnational networks that brought countless Chinese laborers to Chicago, the migration of these Chinese scholars was also part of a larger global migrant system. The U.S. received annual indemnity funds from China as part of an international agreement after the failed Boxer Rebellion in 1901 and used them to fund scholarships for Chinese students to study in America. As a result, from 1909 onward, the number of Chinese students in the U.S increased rapidly from 239 to 650 in 1911.⁵⁷ Interestingly, Yu notes in his book, *Thinking OrientalsI*, that “most of the students who were chosen for these scholarships, and were actually willing to use them, were connected in some way to American Protestant missions in China...some, but not all, were converted Christians.”⁵⁸ From 1924 to 1969, twenty students came to work under sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess at the University of Chicago, contributing to studies on the so-called “Oriental Problem” which attempted to assign racial theory

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ling, *Chinese Chicago*, 194.

⁵⁸ Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 115.

to the phenomenon of Asian immigration.⁵⁹ A perceived problem of the study was the so-called “Great Wall” surrounding the Chinese community that made it impenetrable to the Chicago sociologists. Because Chinatown was an exotic place “behind closed doors,” an understanding of the aloof and non-cooperative Chinese was considered quite lucrative.⁶⁰ As a result, “the mere possession of an Oriental identity was enough to provide an unquestioned credibility,” and thus the Chinese scholars were considered valuable informants for the advancement of sociological studies.⁶¹

The notion of a hermetically sealed Chinatown was not only false, but also formed a misleading distinction between scholars who could accurately investigate the Chinese and those who could not.⁶² This dichotomy was misleading because the Chinese students came from vastly different backgrounds, both amongst themselves and in relation to the Chinese immigrants that resided in Chicago at the time. For instance, many of the students came from Mandarin-speaking northern Chinese provinces where they were well-educated and had exposure to Christian missionaries, whereas the Chinese in Chinatown spoke Cantonese and more often than not came from villages in Guangdong province in southeastern China. Thus, the assumption that the Chinese students could provide an insider perspective on life inside Chinatown cannot be substantiated. Moreover, the presumed objectivity of their sociological reports should not be taken at face value either. For instance, graduate student Ting-chiu Fan plotted the locations of Chinese businesses in Chicago on a map and interpreted their dispersed distribution as evidence that the Chinese were well assimilated and “did not isolate themselves from the influence of the American customs and institutions.”⁶³ Another student, Paul Siu, however, saw the same map and realized that only laundries and restaurants were evenly distributed throughout Chicago and the other businesses were mostly concentrated within Chinatown. Siu concluded that it was an indicator of the social and geographic isolation of the Chinese laundrymen that led them to be culturally unassimilable.⁶⁴ Realistically, their dispersion was likely due to a variety of factors including restrictive covenants that explicitly discouraged landlords from renting to specific races in certain areas. The vast differences between the Chinese students explains the different interpretations: Siu was the son of a laundryman and grew up in the ghetto of Chinatown, whereas Fan was a student born in China who had previously had little exposure to the social experiences of the Chinese

⁵⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 174.

⁶¹ Ibid., 165.

⁶² Ibid., 175.

⁶³ Cited in Ting-chiu Fan Yu, “Chinese Residents in Chicago” (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago 1926), 29.

⁶⁴ Paul Siu and John Kuo Wei Tchen. *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*. (New York: NY University Press, 1987).

immigrants.

Outside of the university, the feelings and opinions of these Chinese scholars were not well documented. Many of the scholars returned to China after their graduate studies, indicating that they likely felt disconnected and distanced from Chicago's Chinese community. For Paul Siu, his feelings in many ways were reflected in his own work. Yu writes that "Siu had too much sympathy for his subjects [laundrymen]; they were his friends, his relatives, and ultimately, himself."⁶⁵ In 1985, Siu reflected that, "I often reminisce about the native village where I grew up, my relatives in the old country, and my parents. All these memories now seem distant and irretrievable. They cause me to feel deeply the grief and loneliness of life."⁶⁶

In a city that historian William Cronon wrote was "destiny, progress, and all that was carrying the nineteenth century toward its appointed future," Siu's experience and his longing for his homeland seem small in the context of Chicago's great forward push toward modernity.

⁶⁷ Stitched together, Siu is just one of the many immigrant narratives that created Chicago in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout this essay, I have argued against the notion that the first generations of Chinese migrants were a monolithic group: instead, they were wealthy Chinese businessmen, restaurateurs, civic leaders, laundry owners, and employees in countless other occupations. Although they were also Chicagoans wholly integrated in the fabric of the city, their cross-racial interactions were very much dictated by their socioeconomic class. I began with examining the China exhibit at the 1893 Columbian Exposition where the very walls of the Exposition bifurcated perceptions of a refined class inside the exposition and a class of deplorables outside. Next, I discussed the experience of an emerging Chinese-American bourgeois class, focusing on Chin Foin's restaurant empire to show how he successfully played into an ironic brand of exoticization to pander to the tastes of white Chicagoans. Then I discussed the lower class of migrants, situating the Chinese laundry and chop suey restaurant as a site of cross-racial interactions amongst Chicago's wage laborers. Cross-racial romantic relationships were also common – the story of Harry Mar shows how the salience of his Chinese identity gave him a strong and troubling sense of respectability. Finally, I discussed the experiences of Chinese graduate students who worked with sociologists at the University of Chicago to show that even the scholarship they produced was influenced by their socioeconomic backgrounds as migrants. Therefore, Chinese Chicago from the period was not a hermetically sealed community but rather a diverse group of immigrants who were attempting to carve out their own lives and negotiate a uniquely Chinese-American identity.

⁶⁵ Yu, *Thinking Orientals*, 138.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 21.

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