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A HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN CHARLESTON

JIAN LI*

THE EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE OF MANY DIFFERENT ANCESTRIES, including Africans, American Indians, Germans, French, Irish, Jews, Italians, and others, have all been recognized, in varying degrees, in the histories of Charleston, South Carolina.¹ Although the Chinese influence in Charleston can be traced to the eighteenth century, that contribution has never been recorded in any scholarly works. This study documents the history of the Chinese in Charleston from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. More specifically, it describes the earliest recorded contact between the peoples of Charleston and China through trade and missionaries; examines the social conditions that gave rise to the development of a small Chinese community between the 1870s and the 1940s in regard to their occupations and economic and social status; and explores the factors responsible for the gradual disappearance of the public's awareness of the early Chinese presence in Charleston after the 1930s. By placing it in a larger social context, this history of the Chinese is intended to provide a more complete picture of the history of Charleston in general, and its ethnic mosaic in particular.

*The author would like to thank many people who helped her during the process of this research, including the descendants of the Chinese families in Charleston, especially Margarita Fielding, Ruth Eagle, Robert Miller, Jr., Lee Stevenson, and Mai Lin Lee Riley. Several Charleston residents talked or wrote about their memories of the Charleston Chinese, including Trudy Clark and Dorothy Davey. Generous archival assistance was provided by Chris Loeblein and Mary Giles of the Charleston Museum, Jane M. Yates of The Citadel Archives-Museum, and Tommy Townsend of the Charleston County School District Archives. John Rashford, Paul Rodell, Dee Dee Joyce, Tee Wagner, Rosemary Brana-Shute, and Stephen Hoffius read earlier drafts of the paper and made valuable comments. Last but not least, she extends her gratitude to her research assistants, Ron Glover and Miriam Farhonmand, without whose dedication to and confidence in this project the work would not have been possible.

Though the Chinese custom is to identify people by the family name first and given name last, listing in Charleston sources are inconsistent.

¹See David D. Wallace, *The History of South Carolina* (New York: The Historical Society, 1934), for Indians, pp. 11-25; Irish, pp. 44, 141, 341, 356; French Huguenots, pp. 95, 124-125, 149; Irish, p. 44, 141, 341, 356; Jews, pp. 150, 304, 355; Germans, pp. 134, 282-283, 445. Walter J. Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 3-33, 227, 291-292. For the history of African Americans in Charleston, see Bernard Powers, *Black Charlestonians* (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 1994).

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Charleston's Early Connections to China

Charleston's earliest exposure to the Chinese and their culture came from the "China trade." The Charleston Museum has presented an exhibit entitled "The China Trade" which has demonstrated the enthusiasm displayed by wealthy Charlestonians in acquiring china, ivory fans, tortoise-shell combs, lacquered wares, and furniture from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century. Among more than fifty delicate Chinese artifacts in the museum are many heirlooms made in China and ordered for Charleston's aristocratic families. These include an Imari-style charger (circa 1725) from the Motte family, a plate bearing the coat of arms of the Manigault family ordered from China (circa 1770), a blue-on-white porcelain plate and saucer (circa 1780), and a lacquered work box made in Canton in 1818 for Margaret Izard Manigault. Two well-known French Huguenots from Charleston, Charles Manigault and Louis Manigault, were directly involved in the China Trade from the 1820s to the 1860s.² The popularity of Chinese decoration also found expression in furniture design and architectural details. For instance, the first chinoiserie building in America, the James Reid House, was built in Charleston in 1757.³

Another source of initial contact with China was through southern missionaries. Three pioneering missionaries to China from South Carolina were The Rev. William J. Boone, Lewis Shuck, and Shuck's wife, Henrietta Hall Shuck. In 1842 Boone, founder of the American Episcopal Mission and its first bishop, returned from a missionary effort in China with his two children and two Chinese, Sin Say, a language teacher, and Wong Kong Chai, a young man who cared for the children. Although Chai was considered "strange" because of his long braid of hair, note was taken of his educational background. Chai became Boone's first convert and was baptized on Easter Sunday, April 12, 1847. In 1845 J.L. Shuck again returned to the United States, this time to arrange for the education of his children when their mother, Henrietta Hall Shuck, died in childbirth in China. Shuck brought along Young Seen-Sang, his teacher for six years. Young Seen-Sang usually was presented as "a scholar and a cultivated gentleman," due to his educational background in Chinese philosophy and religion. Shuck described Young as an educated man, with a thoughtful and philosophical mind, who had studied the Christian system attentively and would be

²Jane Gaston Mahler, "Charleston and the Orient Trade. With Notes on Two Charlestonians Who Went to China: Charles Izard Manigault and His Son Louis Manigault. For the Century Club of Charleston" (1970), Charleston County Library, pp. 1-14. See also Jane Gaston Mahler, "Huguenots Adventuring in the Orient: Two Manigaults in China," *Transactions of the Huguenot Society of South Carolina* 76 (1971), pp. 1-42; Annie Jenkins Batson, *Louis Manigault: Gentleman from South Carolina* (Roswell, Ga.: Wolfe Publishing), 1995, pp. 17-38.

³Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 83.

extremely useful in proselytizing Christianity among his countryman. The 1870 U.S. census for Charleston recorded a clergyman, L.M. Shuck, son of J.L. Shuck and H.H. Shuck, who had been born in China; he was probably the first Charleston resident to have been born in China.⁴

Chinese at Work in Charleston, 1870s to the 1940s

Traditionally, the Chinese in the United States have been overwhelmingly concentrated on the West Coast, particularly in the state of California. According to the census, by 1870 63,000 Chinese lived in the United States. Most of them, 77 percent, resided in California, but they also lived elsewhere in the West as well as in the Southwest, New England, and the Southeast. After the Civil War, with anti-Chinese sentiment growing in the West and the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, some Chinese immigrants started to disperse to the more industrialized northeastern coast.⁵ Even before the Civil War, some Southerners considered the possibility of seeking Chinese workers, particularly as an alternative source of agricultural labor. Discussion of the suitability of Chinese labor during the late 1850s was overshadowed by arguments in favor of re-opening the slave trade. After the war, the severe labor shortage and perceived docility and adaptability of the Chinese laborers prompted some white Southerners to look to the Chinese to replace black laborers. In 1869 the Chinese Immigration Convention was held in Memphis with a goal of devising the "best and cheapest means of procuring Chinese laborers." As a result, a few thousand Chinese laborers were brought to the South and employed in railroad construction, sugar refining, and the growing and

⁴Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), pp. 2-5, 12-15. Not only was J.L. Shuck listed as having been born in China, the birthplaces of both his parents were also listed as China. *U.S. Manuscript Census of Population, 1870*, Charleston, S.C. Other references to Chinese in Charleston are incomplete. On August 11, 1831, a white male named ___ Selze, who had been born in China, died in Charleston and was buried at Bethel Methodist Church. No other information on him is available. Death Records of Charleston, Charleston County Library. William Black Yates recorded the April 17, 1838, baptism of "Wood Samshini, a Chinaman converted in the Mariner's Church from his Idols to the worship of the true God." Yates, *Journal* (43-398), South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston.

⁵Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 80; Pao-min Chang, *Continuity and Change: A Profile of Chinese Americans* (New York: Vantage Press, 1983), pp. 3-4; Cheng-Tsu Wu, ed., *Chink!* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 70-75.

processing of cotton.⁶ Though the convention attracted delegates from South Carolina, no evidence has been found that any Chinese were brought to the state as indentured laborers.

Unlike the first wave of Chinese who went to Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi as indentured laborers on contract, the early Chinese immigrants came to Charleston on their own as entrepreneurs to seek economic opportunities. The second difference between the early Chinese in Charleston and those in many other southern cities and states was their heavy concentration in the laundry business rather than in groceries and restaurants. In Charleston, while hand laundries were monopolized by the Chinese between the 1880s to the 1940s, there were no more than three groceries or restaurants owned by the Chinese that survived for more than three years. In contrast, the Chinese were extremely successful in the grocery business in Arkansas, Georgia, and Mississippi. They started in groceries about 1900 in Arkansas and were so successful that by 1976 approximately 100 grocery stores in that state were owned by Chinese. In Augusta, Georgia, as many as twenty Chinese grocery stores were listed in the 1890 *Augusta City Directory*; in 1891 an additional dozen Chinese groceries were added to the directory. In Mississippi, the Chinese had been engaged continuously in the grocery business from 1872 until the 1970s. According to one researcher, 97 percent of the Chinese population in Mississippi, which numbered 1,244 in the 1960 census, were engaged in or recently retired from the operation of grocery stores.⁷

The first three Chinese households recorded in the 1880 manuscript census for Charleston were engaged in businesses other than laundries: William Ah Sang was listed as a clerk at the Charleston Teapot, Sang Charles Ching as a grocer, and Robert Links as a fruiter. All three men were identified as Chinese. While Sang was listed as a "boarder," both Robert Links and Sang Charles Ching lived with their families. Robert Links had

⁶As early as 1854, the editors of two well-known journals, Daniel Lee of the *Southern Cultivator* and J.D.B. De Bow of *De Bow's Review*, wrote articles and exchanged ideas on the introduction of Chinese and East Indian labor into the British and French West Indies, the Spanish colony of Cuba, and Peru. By 1858, however, Lee was involved in the movement to bring Africans to the South again and had decided that Chinese would not be suitable. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, pp. 22-27, 418-420; Lucy Cohen, "Early Arrivals: Nineteenth Century Chinese and Their Descendants," *Southern Exposure* 12 (July-August 1984), pp. 26 (quotation), 41.

⁷Occupations can be determined in the business section of the *Charleston City Directory*, 1880 to 1940. Shih-Shan Henry Tsai, "The Chinese in Arkansas," *Amerasia* 8 (1981), p. 8; Catherine Brown and Thomas Ganschow, "The Augusta, Georgia, Chinese: 1865-1980," in *Georgia's East Asian Connection, 1933-1983* (Carrollton, Ga.: West Georgia College, 1983), p. 32; Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 34-36.

a large family with a wife, mother-in-law, and four sons living in the same residence. Links's wife, his mother-in-law, and the children were all listed as mulatto. They also had a black servant living with them. Robert Links evidently did not stay long in Charleston since no further record of him and his family can be found. Sang Charles Ching was the head of a family of six, including Ching's wife, sister-in-law, father-in-law, and two sons. His wife, Margaret, was born in Ireland. Therefore, Margaret Ching, her sister, and her father all were listed as "White," while Sang Charles Ching and their two sons were listed as "Chinese," as were the three guests recorded as living in the same residence.⁸

William Ah Sang was brought to the United States by the Hon. Anson Burlingame, the former minister to China. Before he came to be employed by the Charleston Teapot in 1872, Sang stayed briefly in Savannah, Georgia:

Savannah's first Chinese resident was William Ah Sang, who arrived in September 1872. He visited the [Savannah] newspaper office in his native dress to announce his arrival as a tea merchant and impressed a reporter as much by his novelty as by his dignified manner and fluent English. Although he was described as "converted to the faith and a member of Christ Church," the headline read "The Heathen Chinese." He evidently did not remain in Savannah, for no further reference to him appears, and the 1880 census did not enumerate any Chinese in Savannah.⁹

Sang was probably attracted to Charleston because of Charlestonians' love of Chinese tea. (An old saying in Charleston shows the natural affinity between Charlestonians and southern Chinese: they both drink tea, eat rice, worship their ancestors, and light firecrackers on New Year's Eve.) He was continuously employed by the Charleston Teapot from 1872 until his death in 1881. Established in 1865, the Charleston Teapot specialized in high-

⁸U.S. *Manuscript Census of Population*, 1880, Charleston, S.C.

⁹George Pruden, "History of the Chinese in Savannah, Georgia," in *Georgia's East Asian Connection*, pp. 15-16 (quotation); *Charleston News and Courier*, Aug. 20, 1881. Anson Burlingame was appointed minister to China in 1861 by President Abraham Lincoln. During his term, Burlingame developed a great admiration for the Chinese. On visits to the United States, 1865-1866, he sought to spread his enthusiasm for the Chinese among American mercantile houses. *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929, 1958), Vol. II, pp. 289-291. On November 22, 1867, Burlingame resigned his U.S. post, and received a diplomatic appointment from the emperor of China. With his Chinese colleagues, Burlingame negotiated the 1868 Burlingame treaty with William H. Steward, then U.S. secretary of state, which included a bilateral immigration clause. Jack Chen, *The Chinese of America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 129.

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The Charleston Teapot, established in 1865, specialized in high-quality, low-priced teas and coffees from around the world. This advertisement, emphasizing the business's ties to China, was placed in the 1884 *Charleston City Directory*. William Ah Sang of China worked there from 1872 to 1881. Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

quality, low-priced teas and coffees from around the world. A small pamphlet published in the 1870s boasted that the shop had the services of William Ah Sang, "the only educated Chinaman in South Carolina" to attract buyers of imported Chinese tea:

In buying Teas, there is no doubt that parties have to rely a great deal on those from whom they purchase, and in order that our patrons may reap the benefit, we have, at great expense, obtained the services of Wm. Ah Sang, the only educated Chinaman in South Carolina, and the best judge of Tea South of the Potomac. He is a native of Canton, and was raised in the midst of the Tea growing district of China. All our teas are selected by him, and our customers can rest assured that they can get the best goods for less money at our Store than any other place in the city.¹⁰

Sang apparently was widely respected at the Charleston Teapot, as indicated by the obituary that appeared after his death at the age of thirty-two in 1881. Sang was described as "the well known Chinaman employed for the last nine years at the Charleston Teapot.... [H]e had charge of the tea department in the Wilson's department, and was faithful and efficient." The obituary also revealed that Sang was buried in Magnolia Cemetery and "his family, who are living in Canton, China, will be notified of his death."¹¹

Groceries, Restaurants

From the 1880s to the 1940s, only two grocers with Chinese names, Sang Charles Ching and Chu Hoo, were named in the *Charleston City Directory*. Ching was the only one listed as a grocer for more than a decade. His name first appeared in the directory in 1875; his residence was given as the "Sailors Home," and his grocery at 83 King Street. It is likely that he was able to accumulate some money for opening his grocery when he was a seaman. The store was in operation continuously for about seventeen years, from at least 1875 until the family moved to Beaufort in 1892, where Ching continued his grocery business. Apparently the family enterprise succeeded there since the family bought a Beaufort bottling plant as a second business.¹²

Ching's descendants and individuals who know about the Ching family (commonly known as the Sangs) all associate the family with Caucasians in both Charleston and Beaufort. In fact, all Ching's children

¹⁰"Price List of Charleston Teapot," South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston.

¹¹*Charleston News and Courier*, Aug. 20, 1881.

¹²*Charleston City Directory*, 1875, p. 75, and personal communication from Lee Stevenson, granddaughter-in-law of Sang Charles Ching. The business section of the 1875 directory lists his grocery at 73 King Street.

went to white schools and were identified with whites. Two of Ching's sons eventually anglicized their names from Sang to Sanger, which seems to have facilitated their further assimilation into white, middle-class social circles. All the Sanger children married whites and became successful businessmen; some went into the bottling business in the West, buying Coca-Cola plants in Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Kansas.¹³

Three years after Ching left Charleston, another Chinese grocer, Chu Hoo, appeared in the 1895 *Charleston City Directory* at the same location as Ching's store, 73 3/4 King Street. Chu lasted as a grocer for only five years, 1895-1900, after which his name no longer appeared in the directory. No grocery with a Chinese name was listed again until 1948 when the Frank Lee Grocery was listed.¹⁴

Unlike the Chinese grocers in Mississippi who sustained their grocery businesses from the 1870s to the 1940s by selling goods primarily to African Americans, the well-established socioeconomic structure of Charleston posed a special challenge for the Chinese who sought to compete with the already established Germans, Jews, Irish, native whites, and African Americans working as grocery retailers. By the time the Chinese came to Charleston in 1880, the grocery business already was dominated by Germans who owned 77.8 percent of the business. (Native whites owned 13.6 percent of the business, Irish immigrants 5.5 percent, and blacks .7 percent.)¹⁵

In the restaurant business, competition was as keen as that in the grocery field when the Chinese came to Charleston: eleven restaurants and ninety-two saloons are found in the 1881 *Charleston City Directory*. Before 1970 no more than three Chinese restaurants operated simultaneously in

¹³Brown and Ganschow, "The Augusta, Georgia, Chinese," p. 31; personal communication with Lee Stevenson, Trudy Clark, and Larry Lepionka. Both the census and the *Charleston City Directory* have been inconsistent with Sang Charles Ching's names: he was sometimes listed as Sang Charles Ching, Sang Charles Chin, Charles Sang Ching, or Charles Ching Sang.

¹⁴Ching did not sell his grocery to Chu Hoo since a German named Kuchler is identified at 73 King Street in the 1893 directory. Two years later, Chu Hoo replaced Kuchler. *Charleston City Directory*, 1881-1900. Interviews with Frank Lee's family have revealed that Lee was one of the sons of Sing Lee and Lue Lee. Sing Lee was the owner of the well-known Sing Lee Laundry; Lue Lee's parents were of mixed European and African ancestries. Frank Lee started his grocery business when he was discharged from the U.S. Coast Guard after World War II. It was very successful because it also provided a delivery service. This service began with one truck and three bicycles and later expanded to five trucks, making deliveries throughout the Charleston, Berkeley, and Dorchester County area. The grocery advertised on a local black radio station and sold its goods primarily to black customers. Personal communication with Fred Lee and Singlee Murray.

¹⁵Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, pp. 34-57. Percentages do not total 100 percent because the total includes other foreign workers. *U.S. Manuscript Census of Population*, 1870, City of Charleston, cited in Bernard Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, p. 271.

any given year. In fact, only two Chinese restaurants, the Chow Mein Inn and the Oriental Tea Garden, were in continuous operation for more than a decade between 1880 and 1960.¹⁶

The Oriental Tea Garden was opened by Robert Miller and operated between 1939 and 1952 in Maryville, a small community across the Ashley River from Charleston. Prior to opening the restaurant, Miller was a farmer and merchant who raised both Chinese vegetables and "large, luscious strawberries" on a farm he rented from W. McLeod Frampton when he moved to Charleston from Florida sometime before 1911. Finances forced the farm to close in 1939. Miller then opened the Oriental Tea Garden in Maryville later that year with his wife, Wilhelmina Kilgus Miller. The restaurant served American food, such as fried chicken, as well as Chinese dishes such as "Chop Suey." It was a small "mom and pop" type restaurant catering to white customers and enjoyed a good patronage. The restaurant was closed in 1952, six years after Miller died in Maryville. Among many friends Miller had made over the years were some upper-middle-class Charlestonians, including Henry Schachte, a successful businessman in real estate and insurance.¹⁷

The second Chinese restaurant that left its mark in Charleston was the Chow Mein Inn, owned by Harry Wu (Chu Key Soon) from 1946 to 1977. Wu immigrated to the U.S. in 1923 as a student with citizenship status as his father already was a U.S. citizen. Before opening his own restaurant, Wu worked as a chef in Charleston first at the Argyle Hotel, and then at Gambling's restaurant. In 1934 he opened the Canton Palace at 314 King Street and in 1946 opened the Chow Mein Inn at 155 Spring Street. He later moved to King Street where he operated his business until his retirement in 1977. The Chow Mein Inn enjoyed good patronage since there was very little competition serving Chinese food.¹⁸

¹⁶Some Charleston residents remember another popular Chinese restaurant, La Brasca's at 975 King Street. This was actually an Italian restaurant known as La Brasca Spaghetti House. Its owners, Effie and George La Brasca, were Italians who loved Chinese food. They opened a Chinese section in 1949, and hired a Chinese cook, George Mark, from Washington, D.C. Mark worked at La Brasca's for twenty-five years and remained a family friend of the La Brasca's until he passed away at age 108. Personal communication from Pansy La Brasca, daughter-in-law of Effie and George La Brasca.

¹⁷Personal communication with Robert Miller, Jr., adopted son of Robert Miller and Wilhelmina Miller. "These are Strawberries," n.d., *Charleston News and Courier* clipping in possession of Miller family. Robert Miller, Jr., recalls that his father's telegraphs for business orders were sent directly to Shachte's office; Shachte sometimes delivered them to Robert Miller in person.

¹⁸Chu Key Soon's immigration paper courtesy of Edyth S. Stent, daughter of Chu Key Soon and Carrie Winston Soon; "Retired Restaurateur Chu Key Soon Dies," *Charleston News and Courier*, Nov. 24, 1982; personal communication from Edyth S. Stent; *Charleston City Directories*, 1946-1977.

TABLE 1:
CHINESE BUSINESSES IN CHARLESTON, 1870-1973^a

<u>Year</u>	<u>Restaurant</u>	<u>Grocery</u>	<u>Laundry</u>
1870-1879	—	1	—
1880-1889	—	1	1-5
1890-1899	—	1	8-14
1900-1909	—	1	13-17 ^b
1910-1919	1	1	12-15
1920-1929	1-2	—	11-15
1930-1939	1-2	—	10-11
1940-1949	1	1	8-9 ^c
1950-1959	2	1	4-6
1960-1969	2	1	2
1970-1973	3	—	1 ^d

Sources: *Charleston City Directory*, 1870-1973.

^aThe year 1973 was chosen as a cut-off date because after 1973 businesses owned by the second wave of Chinese immigrants started to outnumber those of the first wave of Chinese residents in Charleston.

^bIn 1895 the *Charleston City Directory* officially divided laundries into two groups: Steam and Chinese.

^cTwo of the eight Chinese laundries owned by widows or descendants of Chinese men were listed under the heading "Laundries — Hand" with (c) indicating "colored," instead of under "Laundries — Chinese." Both had been listed previously as Chinese laundries. After 1941 all the laundries with Chinese names were classified under "Hand Laundry" instead of "Chinese Laundry" probably due to the fact that they were operated by the descendants of mixed marriages rather than by pure Chinese.

^dFrom 1962 to 1973 only one laundry with a Chinese name, Jung Sing Laundry, was listed under the general heading "Laundries."

Laundries

Although the Chinese were not totally absent from either the grocery or restaurant businesses, it was in the laundry business that the first wave of Chinese immigrants found their economic niche in Charleston. (See Table 1.) Before 1881 the category of "laundry" was non-existent in the business section of the *Charleston City Directory*. The 1882 edition identified the first two laundries: the Charleston Laundry at 111 Meeting Street and the Lee Wau Laundry at 165 King Street. By 1895 the general heading of "Laundries" was changed to "Chinese Laundries" in the directory; all of the nine

laundries listed had Chinese names. The Chinese laundry business reached its peak in 1900 when seventeen appeared in the directory, of which twelve were located on King Street, Charleston's major business street. Five of the King Street laundries were located in the "downtown" area — from 142 to 367 King Street, while the other eight were located in the "uptown" area — from 401 to 641 King Street. By 1900 thirty-six Chinese were recorded in the census and all were listed as laundrymen except for one grocer.¹⁹

The number of Chinese laundries simultaneously in operation remained rather constant, about fifteen, from 1900 to the Great Depression in 1929. However, after 1932 the number of Chinese laundries started to decline. By the 1940s three out of six traditional Chinese laundries were owned by the descendants of mixed marriages of Chinese men and non-Chinese women although the laundries still carried their Chinese names. Consequently, the *Charleston City Directory* changed its category from "Chinese Laundry" to "Hand Laundry" from 1942 to 1961. By 1962 laundries identifiable by their Chinese names disappeared totally from the directory, as did the category of "Hand Laundry."²⁰

Although they were always associated with "hand laundries," the Chinese laundries did not do all their washings by hand. Interviews with the children of Chinese who owned these laundries indicate that so-called "hand laundries" had been equipped with washing machines as early as the late 1920s. "Hand" laundry referred to the manner of ironing. Washing was done by machines except for delicate items such as silk dresses and particularly stubborn stains. Drying was done in a "drying room." This room, heated by a large coal stove, was filled with wet items hanging on the walls and from wire clothes lines. After being dried, everything, including

¹⁹In 1891 the *Charleston City Directory* began listing street numbers and indicated the intersection of cross streets between the appropriate, consecutive numbers. The dividing line between the "uptown" and "downtown" areas is Calhoun Street. This division of the Chinese laundry locations between "uptown" and "downtown" remained about the same, approximately 50/50; from 1882 to 1962 Chinese laundries were found in seventy-three locations, thirty-eight of them downtown. The total number of Chinese laundries during these years was probably slightly less than this, approximately seventy, as some operations changed locations. However, based on ownership, there were approximately 104 Chinese laundries; the discrepancy in the numbers is due to an operation being sold to another Chinese or passed on to a descendant.

The occupations of the Chinese were traced from both the manuscript census and volumes of the *Charleston City Directory*. Some omissions and even distortions of actual data are inevitable due to a combination of factors. Some early Chinese immigrants might have had difficulties expressing themselves, and some might have wanted to evade the census takers in order to hide their immigration status. The actual numbers of Chinese employed in laundry shops and other occupations may be slightly higher than what is presented here.

²⁰*Charleston City Directory*, 1900-1962.

clothes, tablecloths, bedding, sheets, and handkerchiefs, was ironed. The irons were solid "cast irons" which were heated on the stove. When each iron cooled down, it was exchanged for a "fresh hot one" from the iron rack. In the 1940s the drying room was equipped with an electric spin dryer replacing the hand-roller wringer.²¹

In nineteenth-century Charleston various occupations in the city were divided between different social groups. Wealthy, southern-born whites dominated the ranks of bankers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, and planters; lower-class southern-born whites were concentrated in lower-end professional positions in the clerical and commercial work force; and most manual industrial jobs were held by European immigrants and free blacks. Before the Chinese opened their laundry shops, laundresses worked at home or in backyards. In the *Industrial Census of Charleston* for 1848, the only occupation monopolized by women, especially women of color, was in the field of laundry. Of ninety-one laundresses listed, thirteen were white women, thirty-three were slave women, and forty-five were free colored women.²²

It is unclear how the Chinese laundrymen competed with the existing home laundry services in Charleston. According to the recollections of some older residents of Charleston, Chinese laundries co-existed for many years with about three big commercial laundries and the backyard washer women. The Chinese laundries specialized in certain clothing, especially men's shirts. "It seemed that these Chinese had some mysticle [sic] power to launder shirts exactly the way which pleased the individual," remembered one individual, "or at least that is what many persons seemed to believe." To some Charlestonians, African-American laundresses and Chinese laundries served two different purposes:

Black women worked in the backyard. These women brought their own wash paddle and a rub board. They washed clothes in a tub of water heated over wood fires, and used lye as a cleaning agent.... They were pretty rough on clothes. They washed children's play clothes, and dirty work clothes.... The Chinese specialized in washing shirts

²¹Personal communication from Mai Lim Lee Riley, daughter of Sing Lee, owner of the Sing Lee Laundry.

²²Dale Rosengarten, Martha Zierden, Kimberly Grimes, Ziyaduh Owusu, Elizabeth Alston, and Will Williams III, *Between the Tracks: Charleston's East Side During the Nineteenth Century* (Charleston, S.C.: The Charleston Museum, 1987, Archaeological Contributions Vol. 17), p. 124; S.L. Dawson and H.W. Desaussure, *Industrial Census of Charleston for 1848*, cited in Rosengarten, "Between the Tracks," p. 50. The categories of "Whites," "Slaves," and "Free Colored" are taken from the *Industrial Census*.

with detachable collars. They did such an excellent job on men's shirts. The Chinese did special work, worked on valuable items....²³

Each of the three types of laundry — Chinese, laundresses, and commercial steam laundries — offered different types of services and prices. Therefore, they avoided direct competition with each other.

Social Lives

Information on the social lives of the early Chinese in Charleston is sketchy since very little has been published about them. The exception was newspaper articles on the Chinese New Year, a big event on King Street that always attracted much attention. In 1903 one reporter offered a personal account:

The Sing Cousins passed up their work last night to give the glad hand to a Reporter, who went into the Market Street Place to jolly them. The big table in the corner was loaded with candies. George Washington glared at the Emperor, and the Emperor was making goo-goo eyes at Jockey Redfern. Hop made goo-goo optics at himself. There was a stack of New Year cards with wireless writing from Chinamen in the Old World. Hop was just as happy as a bunch of June brides, and his cousins were as happy as the fathers who had got rid of them. Certainly, there was no kick coming to anybody in the shop....

After the night's labors were over the Chinamen went to Hop's boudoir and took a shot at the pipe. They did a wild, chattering stunt, and drank a toast to their wives and sweethearts.²⁴

Years later, another reporter wrote that New Years celebrations could continue for several days:

[A]ll laundries closed on the first day of the new year and became partying places for roving groups of Chinese

²³John Edward Maher, *An Older Timer's Memories: Charleston, South Carolina* (Charleston, S.C.: Furlong Printing Co., 1992), p. 73 (first quotation). Personal communication with Trudy Clark (second quotation) and one of her brothers who wished to remain anonymous. The prices set by the Chinese laundries were in line with those of the big commercial laundries, although they were higher than those of the backyard washer women.

²⁴"This Is Hop Sing's New Year," *Charleston News and Courier*, Jan. 29, 1903.



The Chinese laundries specialized in certain types of clothing, which helped them avoid direct competition with other laundry services. This photograph shows the Sing Lee Laundry, 133 King Street, after it was damaged by a 1938 tornado. Photo (MK 8907) courtesy of The Charleston Museum, Charleston, S.C.

dressed in traditional costumes, toting framed pictures of "honorable ancestors," bowing and scraping and having a grand time in the style of their ancestor land.

Rice wine, brewed in the back-shops for months, flowed and Fan Tan games (with beans as counters) found considerable sums of money changing hands.

When the ultimate happened and some of the Chinese gentlemen either appeared in public in an unsteady condition or actually engaged in fisticuffs, Charleston's finest came into the picture and the horse-drawn Black Maria of its day was kept busy.

However, as part of a détente establishment some years before, the sobered up culprits were released the next day with mild reprimands and the laundries once more opened for business.

Charleston matrons gave a sigh of relief, knowing that their wet wash problems were over — at least for another year.²⁵

Local newspaper accounts of the celebrations of the Chinese New Year during the 1900s reveal more curiosity than hostility toward the Chinese ethnic minority. No report of Chinese New Year celebrations can be found after 1905, indicating that the event became less public and more personal in nature. Some descendants of the early Chinese immigrants still remember the way each family celebrated the Chinese New Year. Usually the father would cook a big dinner Chinese style for the whole family. Children received red envelopes with money inside from their parents and other elders; they would also go around and visit all the Chinese families in town on the Chinese New Year's Day. All the supplies, from Chinese groceries to red envelopes, were bought from Puck Kai, a Chinese grocery in New York, by Sing Lee.²⁶ The observance of the Chinese New Year ended completely in the late 1930s when most of the early Chinese men had either passed away or migrated to other cities.

Another incident which attracted local media attention provides additional information on the lives of the early Chinese laundrymen in Charleston. This was the murder of Charley Loy on August 6, 1928. The *Charleston News and Courier* reported that Loy had about \$200 cash in his laundry and about \$4,000 savings in local banks. Police records indicate that Charley Loy was murdered by four black men for his money. Though all of the murderers were sentenced to death by electric chair, two were saved

²⁵Jack Leland, "Local Chinese Celebration Unlike Those of the Past," *Charleston Evening Post*, Jan. 30, 1976.

²⁶Personal communication with Mai Lim Lee Riley.

when Governor John G. Richards commuted their sentences to life imprisonment. The *News and Courier* commented that "Loy was well known in the upper part of the city, and enjoyed a good patronage. He was kindly and like most men of his race, a man of few words." Charley Loy was born and raised in California. The *News and Courier* disclosed that Loy's wife lived in China, his son in San Francisco, and his brother in St. Louis. Loy also had a cousin, Fong Joe, in Charleston whose laundry and living quarters were located at 584 1/2 King Street. It is unclear why Loy's wife was in China, though this was not uncommon, or why his other family members were scattered across the United States.²⁷

Few early Chinese had families and even fewer had Chinese wives in Charleston. Among forty-two adult Chinese men in Charleston found in the census between 1880 and 1920, only ten had families in town. Among the ten families, five wives were listed as white, three as mulatto, and two as Chinese. It was not unusual for Chinese men to live many years in the U.S. without spouses or to marry non-Chinese women since there was a severe shortage of Chinese females until as late as the 1960s. Like many Chinese immigrants to the United States before the World War II, early Chinese immigrants in Charleston were sojourners who had left their families in China and worked to save money so one day they could return to their families and live in comfort. In reporting how the Chinese laundrymen celebrated their 1903 Chinese New Year, the *Charleston News and Courier* reporter wrote sympathetically: "The poor Chinamen do not get much of the sunshine of ordinary life. They are slaves of work. They make money and sink in it, and all of them had one ambition — to return to their native land."²⁸

²⁷*Charleston News and Courier*, Aug. 7, 1928; *The State vs. George Palmer, John Brown, Sam Tolbert, and John Pinckney*, Indictment 16813, Charleston County Court of General Sessions (1928); *Charleston Evening Post*, Aug., 6, 1928.

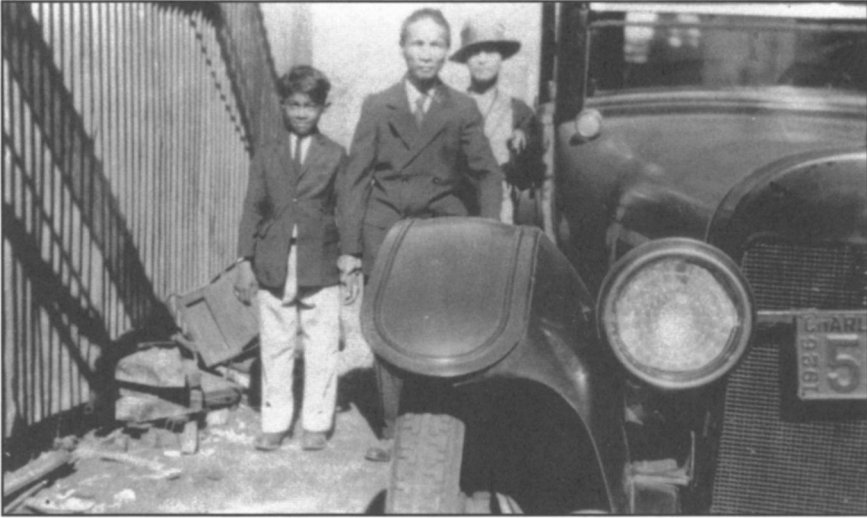
²⁸The two families with Chinese wives seem to have left Charleston before the mid-1930s since no further records about them can be found. Robert Miller, Jr. remembers playing with two full-Chinese boys before the mid-1930s, but he never saw any full-Chinese children or women after that time. Many Chinese men in Charleston left their wives and children in China, intending to return as soon as they accumulated enough money and when the political situation there stabilized. Traditional Chinese cultural values and the anti-Chinese immigration laws made it very difficult for Chinese women to emigrate to the U.S. before 1965, which caused a gender imbalance of the Chinese population in the U.S. In the census of 1890, there were twenty-seven Chinese males in the United States to every Chinese woman. Sung, *Mountain of Gold*, p. 155. Among those who were married, racially mixed marriages were the norm until after World War II when barriers to Chinese immigration and citizenship began to crumble and when many Chinese made plans to change their sojourner status to permanent residence in the U.S. Herbert R. Barringer, *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994), pp. 22, 27, 30. *Charleston News and Courier*, Jan. 29, 1903.

From the late 1920s to the early 1940s, three of the families of Chinese descent who were still living in Charleston were quite well off: they owned cars, lived in comfortable houses, and sent their children to private schools. We can gain some insight into the lives of the families by the following case studies of the families of Charley Lum, Sing Lee, and Robert Miller.

Charley Lum

Charley Lum was first recorded in the 1900 census as a partner in a laundry with Hop Sing, one of the first Chinese laundrymen in Charleston. Before he opened his own laundry in 1908, Lum also worked under another Chinese laundryman, Yee Lee, for two years. It was a common practice among the early Chinese immigrants to learn their trade by serving as apprentices in established businesses before opening their own enterprises. Lum was recorded in the 1910 census in Manning, South Carolina, with a family of six: his wife Mamie and four children, Ching, Ethel, Chung, and Sing. The family rented a building which was used both for their residence and as a laundry shop. By the 1920 census, Charley Lum and his family (now including a son named Herman) had moved back to Charleston, and were paying rent for their residence and laundry. When Charley Lum died in 1927, he left Mamie Lum about \$7,500 worth of cash, stock, and properties. After paying bills totaling \$1,254.89 (including funeral costs of \$513, Argyle Hotel rent of \$60, legal fees, medical bills, etc.), Mamie Lum distributed \$521 cash between herself (one-third estate) and her five children. Apparently Mamie Lum controlled the rest of the estate, estimated at about \$5,500. The next year, 1928, Mamie Lum purchased a house at 44 Mary Street, a beautiful antebellum house with a wrought-iron railing and white marble stairs. Mamie Lum and her young children lived there until the children were grown and moved away. One of the daughters, Ethel Palmer, and her family lived there with Mamie Lum until the house was sold in 1960. In addition to owning a big house, all of the Lum children went to private schools, either the Avery Institute or the Catholic Immaculate Conception (IMC) — private schools for African Americans with middle-class aspirations.²⁹

²⁹Petition in reference to estate of Charley Lum in the Probate Court, Charleston, S.C., 1927. The Charley Lum Laundry was located at 243 Meeting Street when he died in 1927; the Argyle Hotel was next door, at 237 Meeting Street. *Charleston City Directory*, 1927. Charley Lum may have rented his laundry from the owner of the Argyle Hotel. Information from Partition of Estate of Charley Lum, in which Mamie Lum acted as administratrix, Probate Court, Charleston, S.C. The purchase contract was signed by Mamie Lum in 1928. A total sum of “ten dollars and other valuable consideration” was paid according to the contract. Register of Mesne Conveyance, Charleston, S.C. Edmund Drago, *Initiative, Paternalism, and Race Relations: Charleston's Avery Normal Institute* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp. 5, 244.



Top: Charlie Lum (center), his wife Mamie M. Lum and their son, Herman Lum, in 1926. Charlie Lum was one of the pioneer Chinese laundryman in Charleston. Photo courtesy of Ruth Palmer Eagle.

Bottom: Margherita Palmer (left) and Ruth Palmer (right), granddaughters of Charlie Lum and Mamie M. Lum, with their mother, Ethel Palmer (center), in front of their house at 44 Mary Street, Charleston, in 1943. This beautiful antebellum house was purchased in 1928 by the Lum family. Photo courtesy of Margherita Palmer Fielding.

Sing Lee

The Sing Lee Laundry was listed continuously in the *Charleston City Directory* from 1925 to 1961, although ownership changed several times. Originally located at 133 King Street, it later expanded to 133-135 King. The laundry was in a prosperous downtown business section amid various businesses owned by Germans, Jews, Irish, and Chinese. During the height of its success, Sing Lee hired eight young black women from rural areas on the neighboring sea islands. His daughter has said, "the nature of the job was most attractive to the residents of the many surrounding islands. It brought them to the city to perform other than domestic and farm work. Therefore, we never had a labor problem." Sing Lee's family also hired two maids, one who helped clean the house and another who looked after ten children. Sing Lee was a good businessman who traveled to New York once every two months to learn new skills to improve his laundry operation and to buy Chinese groceries for distribution in Charleston. With his business skills and his desire to supply the needs of the Chinese community, Sing Lee partitioned the building at 133 King Street and used part of it to raise fowl (white pigeons, quail, and chickens) to sell to the community. In addition, he stocked dried and canned imported foods ordered from Hong Kong and New York City for distribution among the Chinese. All the children of Sing Lee and his wife Lue Lee attended private schools for blacks — Avery and Immaculate Conception. After Sing Lee passed away in 1932, the Sing Lee Laundry was continued by his widow, who managed it with the help of her children. The Sing Lee Laundry did not close until 1962 when the city bought 148 King Street, its final location, for a parking lot. Like many Chinese immigrants, Sing Lee maintained two families, one in China, the other, with his wife Lue Lee, in the U.S. On his trips to New York, Sing Lee often sent money to his Chinese family. Sing Lee yearned to move back to China, though political turmoil there prevented him from doing so.³⁰

Robert Miller (Chu Homm)

Robert Miller (Chu Homm) represents one of the very few early Charleston Chinese who was not engaged in the laundry business. The name Chu Homm was never used except in legal documents, such as real-

³⁰*Charleston City Directory*, 1925-1962; personal communication with Mai Lim Lee Riley and Singlee Murray, a grandson of Sing Lee and Lue Lee. Loewen has explained the two-family phenomenon among Chinese in Mississippi, "... For a man to be faithful to his wife, far away in China, during his stay in Mississippi, would require that he be entirely celibate for perhaps three decades, and such faithfulness was neither expected nor particularly commended. As long as the sojourner remained financially faithful, sending money back regularly, and as long as he still planned and promised eventual return, he was considered a good husband and provider, and what he did sexually in the far off land was more or less his own business." Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, p. 62.

estate documents and his will. Homm acquired the name "Robert Miller" from a German businessman, a sugarcane broker by that name with whom he had worked as a trader of sugarcane in Florida. Listings in the *Charleston City Directory* show that his was the one of the earliest Chinese clans to settle in Charleston. The first Chu of record was Chu Tie who had a laundry at 401 King Street in 1901. Therefore, Chu Homm might have decided to stay in Charleston because he had relatives there. Miller and his wife, Wilhelmina Kilgus Miller, raised a son in Charleston, Robert Miller, Jr. (Chu Kay Song).³¹

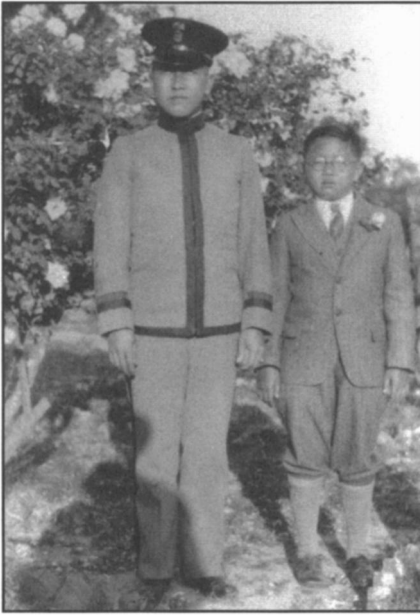
Robert Miller was well known in Charleston for the high quality of the strawberries he raised on his farm, as well as his honesty and integrity. This was reflected in the following obituary, which described him as "a plain man, working man who discharged his obligations":

He was willing to labor with his hands, and more than that, he was eager and resolved to produce things to sell that were better than those of most producers of the same things. This Chinese found friends in Charleston. The late Colonel Henry Schachte and his firm helped him, and their trust in him was not misplaced. Most beautiful and best strawberries were raised by Robert Miller, and he made his way in South Carolina where tens of thousands of persons could do likewise.³²

Like the Lum and Lee families, Robert Miller's family was economically comfortable. Miller left his wife and son an estate worth \$4,000 including real estate totaling \$1,850 and a car worth \$250. Credited as the first Chinese baby born in Charleston County, Robert Miller, Jr. was educated at home. From 1939 to 1946, Miller, Jr. worked in the family-owned Oriental Tea Garden. After the restaurant was closed in 1952, Miller, Jr. held various jobs, including work as a warehouseman at the Charleston Naval Shipyard Supply Department in 1966. He remained with the federal government until his retirement in 1982 as a general supervisor at grade level GS-11,

³¹Miller, Jr. explains that Chu Chy, not Chu Homm, was his biological father. Miller, Jr. was born about 1923, shortly after Chu Chy returned from China with a Chinese bride, Chu Lily. Chu Chy and his wife left for New York shortly after their son was born and left him to the Millers. In 1931 Chu Chy and his wife returned to Charleston to pick up their son after they decided to return to China. However, Chu Kay Song, then eight years old, preferred to stay in Charleston with his foster parents. Chu Chy and his wife then went back to China with their two daughters, Mena and May, who had been born in New York, and left Chu Kay Song with Robert and Wilhelmina Miller. The 1920 census lists Chu Chy as Robert Miller's brother, though Robert Miller, Jr., explains that Chu Chy and Miller were actually cousins. Personal communication from Robert Miller, Jr.

³²"Legacy of Robert Miller," *Charleston Evening Post*, Jan. 28, 1945.



Above left: Robert Miller, Jr. with a Chinese cadet attending The Citadel in the early 1930s.

Above right: Robert Miller, his wife Wilhelmina Miller, and their foster son, Robert Miller, Jr. This picture was taken in 1932 at their Maryville residence.

Right: Chu Chy and his wife, Chu Lily, with two of their daughters. Chu Chy and Chu Lily were the biological parents of Robert Miller, Jr. This photo was taken in 1931 in New York while their son was in Charleston with his foster parents.

All photos courtesy of Robert Miller, Jr.



higher than that achieved by most non-college graduates.³³

According to the *Evening Post*, the "Oriental look" in Charleston began to disappear in the mid-1930s as the number of Chinese dwindled along with their laundries. The decline of the Chinese laundries was due largely to the introduction of automatic washing machines, as well as to changes in fashions, such as the disappearance of the stiff collar and double cuff, and the appearance of the "drip dry" synthetic fabrics. These style changes cut deeply into the Chinese-owned laundry business since no starching, and very little ironing, was required.³⁴

In addition to the decline in the numbers of Chinese laundries, the decline of the Chinese community in Charleston from 1930 to 1970 can be attributed to three major factors: death, migration, and interracial marriage. By 1970 all but one of the early Chinese immigrants in Charleston had either died or migrated to other places. Furthermore, the descendants of Chinese fathers and non-Chinese mothers had merged into the local community through interracial marriage. Intermarriage was the process by which these descendants of mixed marriages blended, both visually and culturally, into the city's major ethnic groups. Thus, the Charleston Chinese "Oriental look" started to fade away about sixty years after the first full generation of Chinese arrived in Charleston.³⁵

Black or White?

As a general rule, the Charleston Chinese were classified as white in various government records. For example, the names of the Chinese residents were always listed in the white section of the *Charleston City Directory*; they were identified either as Chinese or White in the death certificates; and they were buried in white cemeteries in Charleston.³⁶ In the

³³Partition to prove will by Wilhelmina Miller, 1945, Probate Court, Charleston, S.C.; "First Chinese Baby" in "Art Gravure" section of *The Sunday News*, Apr. 11, 1926; personal communication from Robert Miller, Jr.

³⁴*Charleston Evening Post*, Jan. 30, 1976.

³⁵Harry Wu, owner of Chow Mein Inn, was the last full Chinese of the first wave of the Chinese immigrants in Charleston. Wu passed away in 1982 in Charleston.

³⁶Five persons with identifiable Chinese names have been buried in Magnolia Cemetery, two in St. Lawrence Cemetery, and one, Robert Miller, was buried in Bethany Cemetery, a German Lutheran cemetery (his wife, Wilhelmina Kilgus Miller, was the daughter of a German immigrant). The body of at least one Chinese, Sing Lee, was shipped to Atlanta and buried in the Masonic Cemetery reserved for the Chinese in Atlanta. The body of another Chinese, Charley Loy, was shipped to Hong Kong for burial. Information from Death Records of Charleston, Charleston County Library. Funeral records of Charley Lum, Sing Lee, and Charley Loy were found at the McAlister Funeral Home, Charleston. Other information was obtained from Magnolia Cemetery, St. Lawrence Cemetery, and Bethany Cemetery.

census, the Chinese most often were listed as Chinese, sometimes as “Mon” (Mongolian) or White, with the exception of a summary report of the 1888 social statistics of Charleston, which said that the population was made up of 22,699 whites and 27,285 coloreds, which included nine Chinese. Of the three marriage licenses found in the Probate Court records of Charleston, one Chinese man married a white woman (1901), another married an African woman (1913, though she had been born in Charleston), and the third married a woman of “brown” color (1919; the color of the groom, Charley Chu, who was born in China, was also listed as “brown”). Another five known cases of marriages/common-law relationships between Chinese men and non-Chinese women include two wives of European origin and three wives of mixed race. The children of the Chinese men and racially mixed women were classified as black by the local community because of the “one drop rule,” which defines a person as black if he or she had as little as a single drop of “black blood.”³⁷

Interviews indicate that the children of Chinese men and white women were accepted as white and went to white schools in Charleston. The children of the Chinese men and women of mixed race were considered black and went to black private schools — Avery and Immaculate Conception. However, there were more variations in ethnic self-identification and social perception of this group depending on their phenotype expression as well as their cultural orientations. Some children of the mixed marriages identified themselves as black, some identified themselves as mixed, and some claimed they were either Oriental or Chinese. Children of Sing Lee and Lue Lee were tutored by a Chinese teacher and a Caucasian teacher at home when their father was alive and later were sent to Avery or Immaculate Conception.³⁸

It is unclear what types of schools a full Chinese child would have attended during the segregation years since only one full Chinese child was found, Robert Miller, Jr., and he was educated at home. He explains that he

³⁷Department of the Interior Census Office, *Report of the Social Statistics of Charleston, South Carolina* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1888), p. 95; Probate Court records, Charleston, S.C. Although the descendants of all three families told the author that their mother/grandmothers were of mixed race, the members of only one family were certain and willing to acknowledge their Chinese/American Indian/English/African heritage; they considered themselves “black.” Members of the other families indicated that their mother/grandmother were partly “black,” “white,” and probably part “Indian,” but they preferred to be called just “American.” See also Lawrence Wright, “One Drop of Blood,” *The New Yorker*, July 25, 1994, p. 48.

³⁸Personal communication with Lee Stevenson, Creighton Frampton (assistant superintendent for Charleston County, 1931-1945, and superintendent, 1945-1967), Mai Lim Lee Riley, and Fred Lee.

never went to any formal school because of his poor health and because his German mother was very protective of him and did not want him exposed to any potential prejudice. As a result, Robert Miller, Jr. was tutored by his mother and a friend of the family who was a retired teacher. Mrs. D. Davey, a native Charlestonian of Irish descent, who was one of Robert Miller, Jr.'s childhood friends, told the author that Robert Miller, Jr. was not accepted by St. Andrews Elementary School in the early 1930s because "he was a Chinese.... I remember my friends Dorothy and Evelyn were very upset about it and they told me: 'Isn't it awful, he couldn't come to school with us because he is a Chinese!'"³⁹

One of the sons of Charley Lum, Chung Lum, later known as Chung Lem, attempted to send his children to a white public school after he changed his racial identity from black to Chinese about 1947. Chung Lum married a light-skinned African-American woman who could pass as white. As a result, Chung Lum's children had more distinctive Caucasian and Chinese features than African. Chung Lum took several steps to have himself and his children accepted as Chinese: the first step was to segregate himself and his family physically by moving away from the other members of the Lum family, and by associating only with whites, including attendance at a white church, Our Lady of Mercy. (The other members of the Lum family attended Centenary United Methodist Church, a black congregation.) He changed his name and his children's names from Lum to Lem (Lem is a variation of Lum in Cantonese Chinese), establishing an identity separate from those of his mother and siblings. Last, he made himself known as a Chinese interpreter for the Chinese embassy and Chinese natives who visited Charleston. After he established Chinese identities for himself and his children, two of his children were admitted to the Courtenay School, a white public school in Charleston, in September 1947. However, the two children were discharged in April 1948 after the school received an anonymous call from a local resident reporting that other members of Lem's family were attending the black school Immaculate Conception. Chung Lem made a determined effort to redefine his and his children's ethnicity "in order to be assimilated into the white world because of the segregation laws, which made second class citizens of Blacks. The fact that the children with 'new Chinese identities' could then attend a white school was just

³⁹Personal communication with Robert Miller, Jr. and Mrs. D. Davey.

another 'benefit' of this cross over."⁴⁰

Chinese children received different treatments from various white schools in other southern cities and states. For example, in Savannah, Chinese children were not allowed to go to white schools before 1920, but they were accepted by white schools starting in the mid-1920s. In Mississippi, "Greenwood was perhaps the first large system to admit Chinese in the late 1930s. Clarksdale changed its policy in 1941, while Greenville followed suit in the fall of 1945."⁴¹

The social status of the Chinese in Charleston also depended on their socio-economic status. Commenting on the Chinese influence on Charleston, journalist Jack Leland has written: "The laundry families appear to have been rather gentle people and, while Charleston's old and sometimes aristocratic community didn't accept them as social equals, they were friendly enough."⁴² The exception to this rule of acceptance was found in the Chinese cadets who attended The Citadel in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. The students were accepted at The Citadel, invited to the homes of some of Charleston's most prominent families, and participated in weekly salons at the home of Laura Bragg, a well-respected woman active in museum and library activities.

Chinese Citadel Cadets

Between 1926 and 1932, at least six Chinese cadets attended The Citadel as international students, with scholarships awarded by the Chinese government. Coming from a gentry class and with an excellent educational background, the Chinese cadets were well received at The Citadel. The following description of one of the Chinese cadets, Li Sui An, appeared in the 1929 Citadel yearbook:

Coming from distant climes, An has been quite fortunate in assimilating so readily the customs and habits

⁴⁰Quotation from personal communication with Ruth Eagle, one of the nieces of Chung Lem. Chung Lem learned Chinese from Hop Sing, one of the very few Chinese still living in Charleston in the 1940s. School records were obtained from Charleston County School Archives. According to the school investigation, children of Chung Lem did not attend school prior to their admission to Courtenay School. Instead, they were tutored at home. At the same time, the nephews and nieces of Chung Lum attended black private schools — Avery or Immaculate Conception. However, two nieces of Chung Lem claim his children did attend Immaculate Conception prior to the admission to Courtenay School. Personal communication with Margherita Fielding and Ruth Eagle.

⁴¹Pruden, "History of the Chinese in Savannah, Georgia," p. 17; Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, p. 93.

⁴²Jack Leland, "Chinese Connection 'Washed Up,'" *Charleston Evening Post*, Feb. 14, 1979.

of the West in general, and of the Citadel in particular — a thing which a good number of native South Carolinians have been unable to do! And his fortunes have also been quite favorable in his academic career, for neither the awe-inspiring Major Williams nor the equally terrible “tip” dare lower themselves to the level of a cadet by admitting that occasionally they fail to understand the full content of his recitation. Our only hope is that if his native country ever enters into a conflict with ours with General An as their leader, his good fortune will not be quite so consistent!⁴³

While they were in Charleston, the Chinese cadets attended weekly salons organized by Bragg. After they left Charleston, many corresponded regularly with her and mentioned nostalgically how much they missed attending her gatherings, known as the “Ta Tung Club” (“Ta Tung” means Utopia in Chinese). In a Christmas letter to the members of the Ta Tung Club, Li Sui An wrote:

I cannot resist the temptation to think about Charleston and all of you again.

I talked about our club with some young Chinese whenever I have a chance. They agree with me unanimously that it is really a remarkable and unprecedented event in the history of American-Chinese friendship! For, friendship is based upon equality and mutual understanding; without equality and understanding, the so called friendship is simply a bunk.

I recalled the friendship we have cultivated in our Club is a sacred or ideal one because there is no other motive behind it except mutual understanding and mutual appreciation since we all are the oppressed people of the Wall Street and Nanking. We are more or less created equal.... For this reason, in our club we forget that we are either American or Chinese, we are only conscious that we are intimate friends. No artificiality nor prejudice, but naturalness and affinity.... Long live the Ta Tung Club!⁴⁴

⁴³Correspondence between Chinese cadets and the director of the Chinese Educational Mission, Y.C. Mei, in Washington D.C., Box 7, Laura Bragg Collection, The Citadel Archives, Daniel Library, Charleston, S.C.; *Sphinx* (The Citadel yearbook), 1929, Daniel Library, The Citadel.

⁴⁴Li Sui An to “Fellow Members,” Dec. 22, 1929, Box 1, Bragg Collection.

Bragg also introduced the Chinese cadets to those of her friends who were interested in Chinese culture. Topics discussed at the Ta Tung Club ranged from Chinese history and philosophy to politics. Many letters from the Chinese cadets to Bragg attest to their great respect and appreciation for all that she had done for them. One Chinese cadet in particular, Chia Mei Hu, became a special friend to Bragg, who informally adopted him as her son. Hu wrote her many letters after he left Charleston to further his study in aviation. The letters from Hu to Bragg indicate a strong bond between them:

Before I say good night I want to remind you that what I have said is merely a presentation of my personal opinion in my usual undiplomatic spirit — this is particularly for a son to a mother. Rightly or wrong, it is my opinion.

I have been in a very much unbalanced state of mind since you left San Antonio; I feel, at least fifty times as lonesome as I used to be. This is apparently due to the meeting and separation of mother and son. What else would have, otherwise, been so upset me?⁴⁵

A letter from John H. Jouett, an aviation advisor in China, to Bragg informing her of the death of Chia Mei Hu in an airplane crash on a training flight in China confirmed their mother-son relationship:

I am just in receipt of your cablegram regarding the death of Captain Hu Chia-Mei. I immediately took up the question of having an official notification sent to you from the Chinese government, but as the authorities of the Central Aviation School were unaware of the relationship existing between you and Captain Hu, they asked me to answer your message. I regret you did not receive official notification of his death, but the authorities of the Central Aviation School were unaware that he was your adopted son.⁴⁶

Few of Bragg's close friends found it unusual that she had befriended the Chinese cadets, and even adopted one of them as her son. One

⁴⁵The following names of participants in the Ta Tung Club are listed in one of the club notes: Miss Auld, M. Hiron, Mr. Vzzle [?], Miss Cohen, and Miss Martin. Box 9, Bragg Collection, The Citadel Archives. Chia Mei Hu to Laura Bragg, Feb. 11, 1929, Box 2 (first quotation); Hu to Bragg, Apr. 25, 1930 (second quotation), both in Bragg Collection.

⁴⁶John H. Jouett to Laura Bragg, July 24, 1934, Box 2, Bragg Collection.

explained:

I know about her Chinese students and remember once her being moved to tears in her remembrance of one of them.

It was not at all unusual for Miss Bragg to have befriended them. She was very atypical of many Charlestonians of her day in that she valued intellect, intelligence and knowledge. She had a distinct habit of befriending those who were bright and perhaps did not fit in with the city. These she called her "boys," and she did all in her power to expand their horizons and to introduce them into her circle of friends. If these Chinese students were very bright and alienated from the rest of the city, she would have taken it as her mission to "take them up" and befriend them. She befriended other gifted young men and tried to put their skills to use for the museum.⁴⁷

To make the Chinese cadets feel at home in Charleston, Bragg introduced them to several of her personal friends who invited the cadets to their homes for dinner and socializing. Among the homes to which the cadets were invited were those of Mr. and Mrs. Earnest Henry Pringle and Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Raymond Jenkins. Pringle was president of an investment banking firm, and Jenkins was the assistant manager of the Atlantic Coast Life Insurance Company. Mrs. Eleanor Pringle Hart remembers vividly how the Chinese cadets came over to her family's house on Sunday evenings:

Mother was very fond of Miss Bragg.... We had a ballroom. I remember Mother invited the Chinese cadets come to a dance party (about 40 people). Girls danced with the Chinese cadets.... Someone mistook a cadet as a butler. He was a bit dark.... Of course, it was soon cleared. The Chinese cadets were very interesting, intelligent and dignified people....

Kinsey Jenkins, son of Jenkinses, also recalls that Bragg introduced the Chinese cadets to his parents, who often invited them for Sunday dinner. Jenkins remembers two Chinese cadets in particular, Li Sui An and Chia Mei Hu:

Mr. Li didn't talk much and he appeared to be very dignified. Mr. Hu appeared to be more boisterous, and he

⁴⁷Personal communication from Harlan Greene.



Celebrating Christmas in 1928 at Laura Bragg's home, 38 Chalmers Street, Charleston. The people in the photo are identified as, left to right: F.L. Wong, S.C. Liu (back to the camera), Laura Bragg, W.J. Tu (looking away) J.T. Li, L.S. An, and Robert M. Marks. Photo from the Laura Bragg Collection, The Citadel Archives, Charleston, S.C.

also talked about communism in China. My father and the Chinese cadets often entered big discussions about politics and China.... The Chinese cadets spoke very good English and earned good marks in the Citadel.... They were welcome to our home, mother was an excellent cook and she always prepared a big dinner for them.

Asked if the Chinese cadets were treated differently because they were Chinese, Mrs. Hart replied: "Only poor whites, ignorant people might have treated them differently.... As far as I know, they were treated as whites ... although the Chinese in the laundry were probably treated as second class." The Chinese cadets were well received in Charleston because they were highly educated and were believed to have come "from very aristocratic, very well to do, very influential families in China."⁴⁸

The social status of the Chinese in a biracial system is not clearly defined because there was such a small Chinese population in Charleston before the 1960s. The different experiences of the Chinese laundrymen and the Chinese cadets reflects a society divided by race and class. Interviews with

⁴⁸Personal communications from Eleanor Pringle Hart, Kinsey Jenkins, and (final quotation) William Halsey.



Above: Laura M. Bragg (on the porch, fifth from the left) in front of a vacation home at Snug Harbor, Maine, in 1928 with a number of Chinese Citadel cadets. Her friend Robert M. Marks, a writer from Charleston, sits second from left. Laura Bragg Collection, The Citadel Archives, Charleston, S.C.

Left: Chia Mei Hu, unofficial adopted son of Laura Bragg, in the 1928 Citadel yearbook. Courtesy of The Citadel Library.

older Charleston residents indicate that the Chinese as a group had cordial relations with the local residents but were rather withdrawn from the outside world. One African-American woman in her eighties recalled that the Chinese laundrymen were clannish, but they were friendly enough toward everyone. "They treated everyone well, blacks or whites. They did their work beautifully. They have their own customs, but they didn't bother anyone else." Although Chinese got along well with local residents, some considered them "loners" with little non-Chinese social life since many did not speak English well and had to work long hours. The Chinese cadets, on

the other hand, were treated as international students who were outside of the segregation system.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Although Charleston's connection to China can be traced back to the eighteenth century because of the "China Trade" and southern missionaries, Chinese did not come to Charleston in any substantial numbers until the 1900s when they found an economic niche in the laundry business. Since laundries had been traditionally considered to be women's work, Charleston men had little incentive to open laundry shops while women lacked both experience in managing a business and the capital for such a venture. Unlike many born in Charleston, the Chinese were far less concerned about the local residents' opinion of their occupation than they were about the evaluation of their esteem by families and peers in China. As one historian has written about Chinese men in America, "if he fulfilled his familial duties, sent money home regularly, and was successfully establishing his own independent business, he was meeting their requirement for self esteem."⁵⁰ The primary goal of the Chinese as sojourners in the city was economic success rather than local social status. The demand for professional laundry service and the occupational vacuum in this field provided opportunities for profitable work. Their concentration in one field, however, contributed to their eventual departure from Charleston. The rise of automatic washing machines and fashion changes gradually drove the Chinese laundries out of business. Chinese migrated away from Charleston and intermarried, adopting other racial identities. The shortage of Chinese women assured that the Chinese population would not grow.

Although the social status of the Chinese in Charleston is unclear due to very limited available sources, it seems closely associated with their socio-economic status and their racial affiliation. As the third race in a biracial system, the Chinese were considered neither white nor black and their racial and social statuses were not well defined. With no specific regulations regarding Chinese in South Carolina, some Chinese men entered into marriages with Caucasian women and their children sometimes were considered white; some married racially mixed women, and their children were considered black. The experiences of the Chinese cadets indicate that

⁴⁹Quotation from personal communications with Betty Washington. Trudy Clark, a woman of Irish descent, has written, "in speaking with the older members of my family, I get the impression that Chinese people were 'loners' in the twenties and thirties. They had no social life. They were kind and very hard working citizens. I can relate this to Irish Catholics in that time frame. I was born in 1924. In my childhood, hard-working Irish Catholics were looked down upon by the Anglophiles. The Chinese were evidently lonely and ignored — a mysterious people to most Charlestonians." Personal correspondence with Trudy Clark.

⁵⁰Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, p. 30.

the Chinese from well-to-do families, with strong educational backgrounds, were more readily accepted on a par with upper-middle-class whites than were working-class Chinese.

By the 1940s the individuals in the first wave of Chinese immigrants had either migrated away or merged into the local community in Charleston. In the 1970s a second wave of Chinese immigrants started to arrive in Charleston as students, professionals, and entrepreneurs. Today, people of Chinese heritage can be found working in all walks of life in Charleston. The history of the Chinese in Charleston reflects the tremendous changes Charleston has undergone in the past century and a half.