

## “The most modern dining hall in the city” Chinese Immigrants, Restaurants, and Social Spaces in St. John’s, Newfoundland, 1918–1945

Miriam Wright

Volume 50, numéro 1, printemps 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085750ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Wright, M. (2021). “The most modern dining hall in the city”: Chinese Immigrants, Restaurants, and Social Spaces in St. John’s, Newfoundland, 1918–1945. *Acadiensis*, 50(1), 5–33.

Résumé de l'article

Cet article traite de la situation des immigrants chinois à Terre-Neuve en se concentrant sur les restaurants qu'ils ouvrirent à St. John's de 1918 jusqu'au milieu des années 1940. Les restaurants étaient pour ces immigrants une voie vers la stabilité économique et, dans certains cas, un moyen de se tailler une place comme membres respectés de la communauté. Toutefois, les restaurants étaient aussi des endroits contestés alors que les autorités civiles, s'appuyant sur des suppositions en matière de race, de genre et de classe, les voyaient – ainsi que les interactions sociales qui y avaient lieu – comme une menace à l'ordre moral. Cette histoire d'immigrants chinois et de leurs restaurants illustre la diversité et la complexité de l'histoire urbaine de St. John's.

# “The most modern dining hall in the city”: Chinese Immigrants, Restaurants, and Social Spaces in St. John’s, Newfoundland, 1918-1945

MIRIAM WRIGHT

Cet article traite de la situation des immigrants chinois à Terre-Neuve en se concentrant sur les restaurants qu'ils ouvrirent à St. John's de 1918 jusqu'au milieu des années 1940. Les restaurants étaient pour ces immigrants une voie vers la stabilité économique et, dans certains cas, un moyen de se tailler une place comme membres respectés de la communauté. Toutefois, les restaurants étaient aussi des endroits contestés alors que les autorités civiles, s'appuyant sur des suppositions en matière de race, de genre et de classe, les voyaient – ainsi que les interactions sociales qui y avaient lieu – comme une menace à l'ordre moral. Cette histoire d'immigrants chinois et de leurs restaurants illustre la diversité et la complexité de l'histoire urbaine de St. John's.

The article looks at Chinese immigrants in Newfoundland, focusing on the restaurants they opened in St. John's from 1918 through the mid-1940s. For the Chinese immigrants, restaurants were paths to economic stability and, for some, a way to establish themselves as respected members of the community. The restaurants were, however, also contested spaces, as civil authorities, drawing on racial, gendered, and class-based assumptions, saw them – and the social interactions taking place within them – as threatening to the moral order. This history of Chinese immigrants and their restaurants offers a diverse and complex urban history of St. John's.

**IN OCTOBER 1940 A PHOTOGRAPHER IN ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND, took a picture of nearly 100 immigrant men from China standing on the steps of the Nickel Theatre on Military Road.<sup>1</sup> The men had gathered to meet with**

---

1 I am grateful to Robert Hong for his generosity in sharing his research and knowledge on Chinese immigrants in Newfoundland, as well as his insights on earlier drafts of this paper. This paper emerged from work we did on a public history project on Chinese immigration to Newfoundland. For details, see “Monument Marks Chinese Head Tax History,” *CBC Newfoundland and Labrador*, 20 September 2010, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/monument-marks-chinese-head-tax-history-1.942159> and Tara Bradbury, “Righting a Wrong: ‘Taking Root’ Exhibit Outlines History of Chinese Immigration in the Province,” *Telegram* (St. John's), 24 March 2012. Thanks also to the

Miriam Wright, “The most modern dining hall in the city’: Chinese Immigrants, Restaurants, and Social Spaces in St. John’s, Newfoundland, 1918-1945,” *Acadiensis* 50, no. 1 (Spring/printemps 2021): 5-33.

Dr. Shih, the Chinese Consul to Canada, who had travelled to Newfoundland to support fundraising efforts for China during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945).<sup>2</sup> A remarkable image, the photograph challenges popular perceptions of the history of the city as almost exclusively white. In St. John's during the first half of the 20th century, Chinese immigrants were both numerous and visible. Between 1895 and 1949, more than 400 men, most from the "Four Counties" (Sze Yup) region of Guangdong province in southeastern China, came to the Dominion of Newfoundland.<sup>3</sup> Part of a larger diaspora fleeing economic and political upheaval in the Pearl River Delta in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these men settled in St. John's and surrounding communities and opened first laundries and then restaurants.<sup>4</sup>

For these men who had uprooted their lives to support their families remaining in China, arriving in Newfoundland also meant coming to a racialized world. Like Chinese immigrants throughout North America, the men who came to Newfoundland became objects of race-based assumptions and stereotypes created and perpetuated by the white settler population.<sup>5</sup> These racialized attitudes and assumptions shaped the lives of the immigrants from China politically, socially, and economically. The starkest example lay in North American immigration policy, which featured various "head taxes" and

---

editors and anonymous reviewers for *Acadiensis*, for their very helpful suggestions, as well as to Julianne Rousseau for research assistance.

- 2 "Chinese Consul Says Farewell to Friends Here," *Daily News* (St. John's), 21 October 1940.
- 3 Government of Newfoundland, "Newfoundland Register: Arrivals and Outward Registration – Registration of Persons of Chinese Race Admitted into the Colony of Newfoundland Under the Provisions of the Chinese Immigration Act 6 EDW VII CAP2. June 4 1910 to March 26 1949," RG 76-D-2-d-v, R1206-174-2-E, Library and Archives Canada (LAC). A scanned version of this source is available on the Memorial University Digital Archives Initiative site: <http://collections.mun.ca/PDFs/chinese/NewfoundlandRegister.pdf>. According to this source, 334 men from China arrived in Newfoundland between 1910 and 1949. For estimates for the period from 1904 to May 1906, see Robert Hong, "'To take action without delay': Newfoundland's Chinese Immigration Act of 1906," Table 1 (honours diss., Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1987), 60. Using newspaper sources, he estimated there had been between 184 and 198 arrivals in the period from 1904 until Newfoundland imposed its head tax on 1 May 1906. In 1906, government sources estimated 127 Chinese nationals were living in the Dominion; see "House of Assembly Debates for Tuesday, April 17, 1906," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 21 April 1906. Although the Chinese immigration act did not restrict women, none immigrated from China before 1950.
- 4 According to the Newfoundland immigration register, the majority of these men were from Taishan (Toishan) County and Kaiping (Hoiping) of the Sze Yup region of southeast China, and they would have spoken a Taishan dialect.
- 5 See Timothy Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy: School Segregation, Anti-Racism, and the Making of Chinese Canadians* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011) for a discussion of the racialization of immigrants from China in North America.



**Figure 1 – Picture taken on the steps of the Nickel Theatre (Benevolent Irish Society) on 20 October 1940 during Chinese Consul-General to Canada Dr. Shih's visit to St. John's to support fundraising efforts for the Sino-Japanese War. The photo includes a number of people mentioned in this article: Charlie Dean (Hong), row 1, fourth from left; Joan Hong, his daughter, is standing in front of him (her mother was a white, Newfoundland-born woman); Kim Lee, row 1, sixth from left; Ming Gong Au (Charlie Gong), row 1, seventh from left; Dr. Shih, Chinese Consul-General to Canada, row 1, eighth from left; Gordon Higgins, row 1, ninth from left; Davey Fong, row 1, 10th from left; and William Ping, row 2, fourth from left (directly behind and to the right of Charlie Dean).**

Source: Holloway Family Fonds (photo was originally taken by Holloway Studio in St. John's), Item 40 86, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL).

exclusions directed at Chinese immigrants. Canada adopted a \$500 head tax for people from China in 1903. Newfoundland, following the Canadian example, instituted its own \$300 tax in 1906.<sup>6</sup> As Robert Hong has argued, many Newfoundland politicians debating in the House of Assembly labelled the immigrants as alien, intractable, and threatening to the social and economic lives of white residents of Newfoundland.<sup>7</sup>

While Newfoundland's immigration policies were restrictive during the first four decades of the 20th century, the small dominion remained relatively more

6 Hong, "To take action without delay." For other work on the early history of Chinese immigration to Newfoundland, see Margaret Chang, "Chinese Pioneers in Newfoundland," *Asianadian* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1981): 3-7 as well as the documentary film *The Last Chinese Laundry*, dir. Charles Callanan (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1987), <http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/ref/collection/chinese/id/397>.

7 Hong, "To take action without delay," 47-55.

open to Chinese immigration than the rest of North America. Unlike Canada and the United States, which imposed bans on most Chinese immigration beginning in the 1920s, Newfoundland continued to accept these immigrants as long as they paid the head tax. In fact, after Canada introduced the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923, Newfoundland was one of the few destinations in North America open to Chinese immigrants.<sup>8</sup> Only the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 temporarily halted Chinese immigration to Newfoundland.<sup>9</sup>

Whether they arrived in Canada or Newfoundland, all Chinese immigrants faced a racist environment that handicapped them as they tried to earn a living. Most had to pay off their head tax debts, as many Chinese immigrants relied on family members or fellow villagers already living there to pay the tax for them on arrival. Racism limited their opportunities for employment in the wider job market, and many instead found work in laundries and restaurants – jobs considered unworthy of white male labour.<sup>10</sup> These laundries and restaurants, however, became the focus of the social and economic lives of Chinese immigrants as they worked to pay off head tax debts and saved money to send to family in China as well as accumulating capital to venture out in their own businesses. In Newfoundland the fact that a small number of family names (Au, Fong, Hong, Tom, Jin) predominated among immigrants from China points to the powerful pull of family and village ties in the immigration process, and how they remained vital to surviving in a hostile environment.<sup>11</sup>

While separation and exclusion were a feature of the migration experience, most Chinese immigrants also lived among and interacted with their non-Chinese-immigrant neighbours. Scholars, including Henry Yu, John Kuo Wei Tchen, Shirley Yee, Lisa Mar, and Ele Chenier, have argued that most Chinese immigrants in North America were not isolated in ethnic enclaves,

---

8 While it was often assumed, and discussed in St. John's newspapers, that Chinese immigrants were using Newfoundland as a "back door" entry to Canada or United States, Robert Hong argued there was little evidence to support this – at least in the earlier 20th century. He tracked migration in and out from 1904 to 1908, and he concluded the Chinese immigrants who arrived mostly planned to stay, and those who left did so because of limited economic opportunities, the relative isolation, and lack of a larger Chinese community in Newfoundland. See Hong, "To take action without delay," 58-61.

9 See Government of Newfoundland, "Newfoundland Register: Arrivals and Outward Registration."

10 For more on Chinese laundries in North America, see Paul Chan Pang Siu, *The Chinese Laundry: A Study of Social Isolation* (New York: New York University Press, 1988) and Ban Seng Hoe, *Enduring Hardship: The Chinese Laundry in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2003).

11 Government of Newfoundland, "Newfoundland Register: Arrivals and Outward Registration."

but were part of diverse urban neighbourhoods.<sup>12</sup> Chinese immigrants and their non-Chinese neighbours were connected in social, economic, and sexual relationships, as well as by violence and conflict. As Lisa Mar argued, "The history of the Chinese in Canada can only be properly understood if scholars explore interactions as much as exclusion."<sup>13</sup> Patrick A. Dunae et al. have used this approach in their study of Victoria's Chinatown in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Far from being an isolated enclave, they argued Victoria's Chinatown was a transactional, hybrid urban space that was shaped and defined by the economic, social, and cultural relationships between residents of Chinese heritage and their non-Chinese neighbours. Drawing on theorists such as Henri LeFebvre and Michel Foucault, they argue that space is "permeated by social relations," including sexuality, race, class, and gender.<sup>14</sup> Power underlies these relationships, making public spaces dynamic sites of interaction and sometimes conflict.

Looking at historical interactions between Chinese immigrants and their non-Chinese neighbours brings new insights into the urban history of St. John's. Earlier studies mention Chinese immigrants briefly, but they give no sense of their presence in the city.<sup>15</sup> As John Phyne has argued, however, early-20th-century St. John's, with some residents from Syria/Lebanon and China, as well as white people from rural Newfoundland, was more diverse than is commonly assumed.<sup>16</sup> Chinese immigrants who arrived during that period lived and worked in the downtown residential and commercial neighbourhoods of St. John's. Moreover, they relied almost entirely on non-Chinese customers for their laundry and restaurant enterprises.

- 
- 12 Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Shirley Yee, "Dependency and Opportunity: Socioeconomic Relations between Chinese and Non-Chinese in New York City, 1870-1943," *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 2 (June 2007): 254-76; Lisa Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era 1885-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); E. Chenier, "Sex, Intimacy, and Desire among Men of Chinese Heritage and Women of Non-Chinese Heritage in Toronto, 1910-1950," *Urban History Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 29-43.
- 13 Mar, *Brokering Belonging*, 14.
- 14 Patrick Dunae, John S. Lutz, Donald J. Lafreniere, and Jason Gilliland, "Making the Inscrutable Scrutable: Race and Space in Vancouver's Chinatown," *BC Studies* 169 (Spring 2011): 51-80, esp. 53.
- 15 For example, Paul O'Neill, *The Oldest City: The Story of St. John's, Newfoundland* (St. John's: Boulder Press, 2003).
- 16 John Phyne, "On a Hillside North of the Harbour: Changes to the Centre of St. John's, 1942-1987," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 29, no. 1 (2014): 5-46.

Indeed, the history of the restaurants the Chinese immigrants opened allows us to explore their impact on the city as well as the dynamics of public spaces. In many ways, Chinese immigrants built the restaurant sector in St. John's and during the 1920s through to the 1940s they owned the majority of public eating places. For the Chinese immigrants, the restaurants were firstly economic spaces, a source of livelihood and survival. In promoting them to the wider public, the restaurant owners presented them as desirable places to spend time. For some of the restaurateurs, these establishments were also a way to connect with the non-Chinese community and to show themselves as respectable business owners.

While the Chinese immigrants attempted to present and define their restaurants in a particular way, others in the city discussed and portrayed them very differently. As Kathryn Beebe, Angela Davis, and Kathryn Gleadle as well as other scholars looking critically at the spatial dynamics of urban places argue, space was and is "constructed, and contested."<sup>17</sup> In St. John's, the contested aspect of urban space can be seen in the language and actions of various civil authorities, who saw the restaurants owned by Chinese immigrants as dangerous.<sup>18</sup> Influenced by racial stereotypes about people from China, as well as assumptions and fears about female working-class sexuality, authorities sometimes described the restaurants as threats to the city's social and moral order. During the Second World War, when thousands of military personnel from Canada and the United States arrived in St. John's, both civilian and military authorities increased their scrutiny of the restaurants and the people spending time within them.

Despite the concerns from various authorities, the restaurants owned by Chinese immigrants attracted a wide range of people in the period from the 1920s through to the 1940s. They also became significant social spaces and sites of interaction. In these businesses, people of Chinese descent and local white residents, men and women, working class and middle class, and people of all ages ordered food and drink and socialized. As Dunae, Lutz, Lafreniere, and Gilliland have argued, public spaces are shaped by the social and economic

---

17 Kathryn Beebe, Angela Davis, and Kathryn Gleadle, "Introduction: Space, Place, and Gendered Identities," *Women's History Review* 21, no. 4 (September 2012): 524.

18 See Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy*; Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991); and Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989).



relationships within them “permeated by class, gender, and race.”<sup>19</sup> Ele Chenier noted that these restaurants, new commercialized social spaces, were places where young women and men could meet away from the eyes of family or the church.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes these interactions involved local white women and Chinese immigrants. In St. John's, as in other parts of North America, some interracial relationships and marriages developed. The restaurants were also occasional sites of conflict and racialized violence. Chinese immigrants had long been targets of racially based harassment and abuse from local white boys and young men in the city streets.<sup>21</sup> As Craig Heron argues, early-20th-century working class boys expressed their masculinity, class identity, and rebellion in part by tormenting those lower in the class/ethnic hierarchy.<sup>22</sup> In St. John's, Chinese immigrant restaurant owners sometimes faced violence and destructive behaviour from the city's young men.

Through these restaurants, we gain glimpses of the way that Chinese immigrants were part of the urban environment in St. John's as well as their interactions with local white residents who walked through their doors. The wider social dynamics of these relationships, shaped by class, gender, and race, played out within the restaurants – complex, contested spaces that provide a richer picture of the urban history of St. John's.

In St. John's, Chinese immigrants began arriving and opening laundries in the last decade of the 19th century, just as Newfoundland's fishing economy was diversifying into light manufacturing and the service sector.<sup>23</sup> This created new employment opportunities for both middle- and working-class people, leading to demands for personal services like laundries. The first Chinese laundries opened on New Gower Street, a commercial area on the southern edge of a St. John's working-class neighbourhood.<sup>24</sup> By 1908, the city directory listed eight Chinese immigrant-owned laundries, some on New Gower Street and others nestled nearby in residential streets.<sup>25</sup> During the subsequent

---

19 Dunae, Lutz, Lafreniere, and Gilliland, “Making the Inscrutable Scrutable,” 54.

20 Chenier, “Sex, Intimacy, and Desire,” 31.

21 See Hong, “To take action without delay,” 56-8.

22 Craig Heron, “Boys Will Be Boys: Working-Class Masculinity in the Age of Mass Production,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 13.

23 Sean Cadigan, *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 158-61.

24 Phyne, “On a Hillside,” 9.

25 *McAlpine St. John's Directory, 1908-9* (Halifax: McAlpine Publishing Company, 1909), 495.



decades the number of laundries continued to grow, with 20 listed in the city directory in 1932.<sup>26</sup>

While laundries were the first businesses that Chinese immigrants in Newfoundland founded, some began opening restaurants in St. John's following the First World War.<sup>27</sup> For these immigrants, restaurants offered new economic avenues beyond the laundry business. By the late 1920s, the number of hand laundries in St. John's had stabilized at around 20, suggesting the market had reached its limit for this service. As Chinese immigrants continued to arrive in the city throughout the 1930s and 1940s, restaurants offered new employment opportunities. For some Chinese immigrants, working in a restaurant was a welcome change from the hard toil of laundry work. In the 1987 documentary film, *The Last Chinese Laundry*, William Ping, who arrived in St. John's in 1931, recalled working late into the night, until "tears ran down my face."<sup>28</sup> While restaurant labour was challenging, it was less physically draining than laundry work.

While Chinese immigrants were opening restaurants to earn a livelihood, they also made a significant impact on the restaurant sector in St. John's. Before 1918, the city had few public eating places apart from hotel and boarding houses.<sup>29</sup> By the late 1920s, however, Chinese immigrants owned the majority of restaurants in St. John's. Over the next two decades, they continued to dominate the sector. By 1936, Chinese immigrants owned at least 16 of 29 restaurants in St. John's and at least 18 of 27 in 1946.<sup>30</sup>

Moo Sic (Charlie) Fong, Charlie Dean, and Kim Lee were among the first Chinese immigrants to open restaurants in the city. Moo Sic Fong had arrived in 1897, following a relative, Fong Choy, who had been one of Newfoundland's first Chinese immigrants.<sup>31</sup> After years in the laundry business, in 1919, Moo

---

26 *St. John's Classified Business and City Directory, 1932*, ed. A.R. Thomson and E.P. Button (St. John's: St. John's Publishing Company, 1932), 431.

27 I identified Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants through city directories, newspaper articles, and advertisements, and also by cross-referencing the restaurants' addresses with the home addresses of people with Chinese surnames in the Newfoundland manuscript census.

28 Callanan, *Last Chinese Laundry*.

29 See McAlpine's *St. John's City Directory, 1915* (Halifax: Royal Printing and Litho Ltd., 1915), 433.

30 *Newfoundland Directory, 1936* (St. John's: George H. Andrews, 1936), 17, 20; *St. John's City Telephone Directory, 1946* (St. John's: Avalon Telephone Company, 1946). In 1936, Chinese immigrants owned at least 16 of 29 cafés and restaurants, and at least 18 of 27 in 1946.

31 David J. Fong, "The Fong's[sic] Family in Newfoundland and Labrador," in Chinese Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, *Reflections of the Chinese Community on*

Sic Fong opened the King Cafe on Water Street. That same year Charlie Dean, who had been in Newfoundland since 1912, opened the European Cafe on Water Street, next to the Supreme Court building.<sup>32</sup> Charlie Dean also worked as a court interpreter in cases involving Chinese immigrants, suggesting his English-language skills were strong, an advantage for someone running a restaurant.<sup>33</sup> Another early entrant in the restaurant business was Kim Lee, the proprietor of the Dominion Cafe on Water Street (which opened in 1920).<sup>34</sup> Kim Lee, who had been in Newfoundland since 1899, was one of a small number of Chinese immigrants who worked briefly in the iron ore mine on Bell Island, just east of St. John's in Conception Bay.<sup>35</sup> By 1904, he was operating his own New Gower Street laundry.<sup>36</sup> An English speaker, Lee quickly emerged as a leader in the St. John's Chinese-immigrant community. Lisa Mar has described people similar to Kim Lee as "brokers" – early-20th-century community leaders who helped their fellow Chinese immigrants navigate their way within the wider Canadian society.<sup>37</sup> Robert Hong noted that Lee became a defender of the Chinese immigrants in the city – visiting newspaper offices to correct negative stories about them, writing letters to the editor, and petitioning city council on concerns related to their laundry businesses.<sup>38</sup>

By the 1930s, more Chinese immigrants in St. John's were moving from laundries into the restaurant business. This included Robert Hong's father,

---

*the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Chinese Association of Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's: Chinese Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006), 29-30.

- 32 "Chinese Restaurant," *Daily Star* (St. John's), 28 May 1919; Miriam Wright, Exhibit Guide – "Taking Root: Chinese Immigrants and their Families in Newfoundland, 1895-1970s – Work, Family, and Community" (St. John's: Newfoundland and Labrador Headtax Redress Organization (NLHRO) in conjunction with Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University, 2012), 24-5. The exhibit itself was curated by Miriam Wright and Robert Hong, and was a joint project of the NLHRO and the Centre for Newfoundland Studies. Charlie Dean, whose family name was actually Hong, also operated a laundry on Hutchings Street in the 1930s, and then the Convoy Lunch Room on Water Street West in the 1940s.
- 33 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 26 June 1929; "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 17 February 1930.
- 34 "New Cafe Opens," *Daily News*, 30 July 1920.
- 35 Callanan, *Last Chinese Laundry*; Chang, "Chinese Pioneers," 4. Kim Lee continued to run his New Gower Street laundry and, by the late 1920s, another Chinese immigrant was managing the restaurant.
- 36 "Notice," *Evening Telegram*, 27 July 1904.
- 37 Mar, *Brokering Belonging*, 3-8.
- 38 Hong, "To take action without delay," 43-5, 53-5, 64; see also Chang, "Chinese Pioneers," 4. Although he was known as "Kim Lee," his family name was Au. At the time he was writing those letters (c. 1906-1910), no Chinese immigrants had yet established restaurants.

Mon Jin (Gene) Hong, who had come to St. John's from Taishan County, Guangdong, China, in 1931, and who arrived on the same ship as William Ping.<sup>39</sup> Gene Hong worked in a Gower Street laundry for a few years before moving over to Bell Island to work in a café. In the 1940s, he moved back to St. John's and opened the United Nations Restaurant with his friend Lee Leung. William Ping, too, left his laundry job after a few years, and found work at a New Gower Street café.<sup>40</sup> While working at that café, he met former Newfoundland Prime Minister Sir Richard Squires, who offered him a job in his household. He spent a few years there before moving to Carbonear, near St. John's, to work in yet another restaurant. He later moved back to the St. John's and opened a mechanized laundry. Jack Chow arrived in St. John's in 1935 from Kaiping, Guangdong Province, and worked in the American Cafe, which was owned by his relatives.<sup>41</sup> In the 1940s, he left the city for the Grand Falls area in central Newfoundland, where he opened a restaurant of his own.

The Chinese immigrants opening restaurants in St. John's would have been well aware of the North American restaurant culture, fueled by urban industrial economies and an expanding middle class. Scholars including



**Figure 2 – Lee Leung (left) and Mon Jin (Gene) Hong, c. 1930s. Gene Hong and Lee Leung owned the United Nations Restaurant on New Gower Street, St. John's, from the early 1940s through the mid-1950s. Lem Bing later joined them in the partnership.**

Source: This is a family photo belonging to historian Robert Hong.

39 Wright, Exhibit Guide – "Taking Root," 8-12, 18-19. Gene Hong later owned a restaurant, Radio Lunch, on Main St. in Stephenville (1956-1964) and then the House of Hong (former Bamboo Gardens) on Harvey Road, St. John's, from 1964 until the early 1970s.

40 "Chinese Immigrant – From \$5 a week to business success," *Evening Telegram*, 13 January 1973. In the 1940s, Ping opened a modern, mechanized laundry in St. John's, and his was the first owned by a Chinese immigrant. Other laundries owned by people of Chinese heritage acquired mechanized equipment in the post-Second World War period as well. Most of the laundries founded by pre-1949 Chinese immigrants closed in the 1960s, but Ping's remained open until the early 1990s. His was the "last Chinese laundry" referred to in the 1988 documentary.

41 Wright, Exhibit Guide – "Taking Root," 12, 17, 24-5; see also May Soo, "The Four Generations of the Tom Family," in *Reflections of the Chinese Community*, 54-5. Jack Chow's family name was Tom, and members of the Tom family owned the American Cafe where Jack Chow worked when he first came to St. John's.

Andrew Coe and Samantha Barbas have described how white, middle class patrons flocked to Chinese restaurants in early 20th century North American cities in what was known as the “chop suey craze.” Restaurants owned by people of Chinese heritage in late 19th-century “Chinatowns” in urban centres had started offering stir-fried dishes featuring a variety of bite-sized meats and vegetables. The term “chop suey” for that type of dish became common in North America in the first decade of the 20th century.<sup>42</sup> Patrons searching for exotic dining experiences created opportunities for restaurateurs of Chinese heritage, but they also catered to those with less adventurous palates. Barbas also argued that the restaurants themselves were sites of cultural interaction: “Chinese restaurants encouraged Americans to maintain many social, ethnic and geographic boundaries, and at the same time, to breach others.”<sup>43</sup>

While chop suey was gaining popularity in other North American cities, little Chinese-style cuisine was served in St. John's restaurants before the 1950s. Coe noted that restaurants serving Chinese-style food reached a wider North American market only after the Second World War.<sup>44</sup> One surviving 1940s-era menu for a St. John's restaurant, the American Cafe, featured a few “Chinese Food” items, including chop suey and fried rice. Most of the dishes, however, were mainstream North American fare such as roast chicken, fish, pork chops, sandwiches, and desserts.<sup>45</sup> The Chinese immigrants who opened these restaurants had clearly found a clientele for their meals, judging by the large numbers of establishments they were operating in this period. Moreover, by the mid-1930s, similar restaurants owned by Chinese immigrants were operating in at least five other Newfoundland communities, from Port aux Basques in the west to Bell Island in the east.<sup>46</sup>

---

42 Andrew Coe, *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. 144-79; Samantha Barbas, “I’ll Take Chop Suey: Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Change,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 36, no. 4 (Spring 2003): 669-86. For Canadian examples, see Lily Cho, *Eating Chinese: Culture on the Menu in Small Town Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) and Ann Hui, *Chop Suey Nation: The Legion Café and Other Stories from Canada’s Chinese Restaurants* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2019). For a study of the Newfoundland experience, see William Ping, *Chicken Balls and Baymen* (St. John's: CBC Atlantic Voice, radio documentary, 2020). The director is a grandson of the William Ping who came to Newfoundland in the 1930s.

43 Barbas, “I’ll Take Chop Suey,” 670.

44 Coe, *Chop Suey*, 211-51.

45 See Wright, Exhibit Guide – “Taking Root,” 12.

46 Notes from 1935 Newfoundland Census, Margaret Chang Papers, MG 364, box 1, file “Newfoundland Census,” Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL). The Margaret Chang Papers consist of notes and documents collected by researcher

The restaurants the Chinese immigrants opened reached different customer bases. Some clearly aimed at a middle class clientele through their advertising and business locations in higher-priced rent/property areas in the central commercial district of Water and Duckworth Streets. When Charlie Dean's European Cafe was getting ready to open on Water Street, one of the men involved in the project spoke to the *Daily Star*, informing them he had "considerable experience in America" and that they planned to "conduct [the restaurant] in an up-to-date manner."<sup>47</sup> When Moo Sic Fong opened the King Cafe in 1919, he invited several local merchants and a member of the House of Assembly, William J. Higgins, to give speeches. The reporter covering the event for the *Daily Star* described it as the "latest up-to-date restaurant to be found in the city."<sup>48</sup> He also noted the restaurant's chef, Ah Chung, came with high credentials, including a period cooking for the governor of British Columbia.<sup>49</sup> A year later, when Kim Lee opened the Dominion Cafe on Water Street, he held a banquet attended by no less than three sitting Members of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland (and all three gave speeches).<sup>50</sup> The grand event reflected the efforts Kim Lee had made to establish his businesses, position himself as a liaison with the white community, and above all, claim some respectability for the Chinese immigrants.<sup>51</sup> The reporter covering the event remarked on the "beautiful" décor of the restaurant as well as the fancy multi-course meals of roast beef, ham, and chicken à la royal, with salads, fruit, and desserts. A reporter from the *Daily Star* also noted that the renovations to create the "modern and attractive" restaurant had cost the princely sum of \$20,000.<sup>52</sup> Another Water Street restaurant, the White Lily, owned by Tom Chong in the 1930s and 1940s, advertised a "Merchant's Lunch" and "high class meals at reasonable prices."<sup>53</sup>

---

Margaret Chang. This particular file contained a list of Chinese names transcribed from the Newfoundland censuses of 1921, 1935, and 1945. Beside the names in Roman script, someone wrote the names of the individuals in Chinese characters.

47 "Chinese Restaurant," *Daily Star*, 28 May 1919.

48 "King Cafe Opens," *Daily Star*, 22 August 1919.

49 "Clever Artist – Local Chinaman Paints Portraits," *Evening Telegram*, 6 August 1921.

Another example of this café's attraction for middle class patrons is that Davey Fong, the son of café founder Moo Sic Fong, drew charcoal portraits for customers – including "prominent citizens."

50 "New Cafe Opens," *Daily News*, 30 July 1920.

51 See Hong, "'To take action without delay,'" 44-5, for a discussion of Kim Lee's 1906 public defence of Chinese immigrants.

52 "New Cafe Opened," *Daily Star*, 30 July 1920.

53 Advertisement, White Lily Restaurant, *Daily News*, 19 October 1940.

Other Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants in the city catered to working class people, providing places to get a quick meal or a cup of coffee and a piece of pie at affordable prices. A number of Chinese immigrants opened restaurants on New Gower Street, where many of the hand laundries were located.<sup>54</sup> Other businesses in this neighbourhood, including artisan and trades shops, hardware stores, grocery stores, and a few small manufacturers, would have provided customers for the new cafés. Another working-class area where Chinese immigrants opened cafés was Water Street West, just outside the main St. John's business district. Hong Wee's People's Restaurant, on Water Street West, clearly aimed at a cost-conscious crowd, and advertised its 45-cent meals and fish and chips dinners, the latter being a relatively cheap meal in a seaport town.<sup>55</sup>

Whether they catered to a working-class or middle-class clientele, the Chinese immigrants who opened restaurants drew on their knowledge of North American restaurant consumer culture to attract customers. While most of the early St. John's restaurants owned by local white residents tended to be named after the proprietor (e.g., Stewart's or Sterling Restaurant), the Chinese-immigrant restaurant owners of St. John's gave their businesses exotic names that suggested luxury or far-away places: the London Cafe, the Holland Cafe, the White Lily, and the Silver Ball. During the Second World War some Chinese immigrants named their cafés after wartime themes, such as Charlie Hong's Carry On Cafe on Duckworth Street and Charlie Dean's Convoy Lunch Rooms on Water Street West.<sup>56</sup> These names, found on restaurants throughout North America, suggested to the customer that eating out was an exciting experience, even if the location and food were rather ordinary.

As well as giving their restaurants exotic names, some of the restaurateurs emphasized the modern features and cleanliness of their eating places. Perhaps aware of the way the dominant white society had racialized them as dirty and slovenly, in their newspaper advertisements Chinese immigrants often highlighted their restaurants' cleanliness. In 1924, for example, the Royal Cafe boasted of its recently painted dining room, adding that the

---

54 *Newfoundland Directory, 1936*, 17, 20; *St. John's City Telephone Directory, 1946*.

55 Advertisement, People's Restaurant, *Evening Telegram*, 22 October 1930. Unfortunately, the advert did not say what was in the 45-cent meals. Fish and chips would have been a relatively low-priced meal, as the cod was local in season. In that 1940s menu from the American Cafe, fried cod was about half the price of a piece of chicken or pork chops.

56 *St. John's City Telephone Directory, 1946*.

“white surroundings present a very neat and attractive appearance.”<sup>57</sup> In 1943, when city restaurants were busy with the influx of military personnel, several downtown St. John’s restaurants owned by Chinese immigrants ran advertisements featuring their clean, newly renovated spaces. Sam Gay announced the re-opening of his United Restaurant, calling it “the most modern dining resort in the city.”<sup>58</sup> Likewise, the Good View Restaurant, managed by Sing Lee, highlighted the “large, clean, bright dining room and kitchen.”<sup>59</sup> By focusing on cleanliness, these restaurant owners were trying to re-define their spaces as clean and modern to help counter the prevailing racial stereotypes of Chinese immigrants,

While the Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants in St. John’s did not specifically advertise to female customers, women were visiting them. For women, restaurants and cafés provided safe, social spaces where they could visit on their own, linger with female friends, and meet men at a time when commercial social spaces for women were still relatively rare. Ele Chenier, in their work on relationships between Chinese immigrant men and non-Chinese women in early 20th-century Toronto, argues that commercialized leisure spaces such as Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants created new heterosexual meeting spaces for young men and women. Chenier claimed white (often working-class) women visited these restaurants, where they would encounter both white and Chinese men. Chenier notes “restaurants were probably the safest place for a man to approach a woman, and for women to openly engage with him. By returning regularly, young women and men became acquainted over time.”<sup>60</sup>

For men of Chinese heritage, forming relationships with white women was an alternative to remaining single or celibate while living in North America. Although specific policies varied, immigration laws as well as Chinese immigration taxes meant few women of Chinese heritage came to North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Restrictions did not ease on female immigration from China until the late 1940s and early 1950s. In New York City, John Kuo Wei Tchen found that in the 1870s nearly one-third of all men of Chinese heritage were married to white women.<sup>61</sup> Mary Ting Yi

---

57 “New Cafe Opened,” *Evening Telegram*, 30 October 1924.

58 Advertisement, United Restaurant, *Evening Telegram*, 16 April 1943.

59 Advertisement, Good View Restaurant, *Evening Telegram*, 2 April 1943. There was a United Restaurant and a United Nations Restaurant.

60 Chenier, “Sex, Intimacy, and Desire,” 31, 34.

61 Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, 226.



Lui, also looking at New York in the same period, argued that one quarter of men of Chinese descent in the Sixth Ward were married to white women.<sup>62</sup> Chenier's study of 1930s Toronto suggests that more than 3 per cent of adult men of Chinese heritage were legally married to white women. Chenier argues the number of informal relationships was likely much higher, and notes these relationships happened despite the racism and disapproval within the wider community.<sup>63</sup>

In Newfoundland, some Chinese immigrant men had been in relationships with white local women since at least the second decade of the 20th century.<sup>64</sup> In 1917, a woman from Harbour Grace, a community outside of St. John's, took a man of Chinese heritage to court for failing to support a child they had had together.<sup>65</sup> Two years later in 1919, a laundry owner, Kong Wah, and his wife, "the former Miss Voisey," tragically died in a fire at their New Gower Street laundry.<sup>66</sup> Other relationships were recorded in the 1935 and 1945 Newfoundland censuses. The published census indicates that in 1935, 135 Chinese-born men were living in Newfoundland,<sup>67</sup> and, of these, seven were, or had been, married to white, Newfoundland-born women.<sup>68</sup> Four couples were in St. John's and two were in Grand Falls. As well, in St. John's a widowed Chinese man was caring for his six children he presumably had had with a white woman. A decade later, in 1945, the census indicates 135 men of Chinese

---

62 Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn of the Century New York City* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 154.

63 Chenier, "Sex, Intimacy, and Desire," 33, 36.

64 Letter to the Editor, Chas. Dean, *Daily Star*, 21 January 1921. Dean's letter called on the government to allow Chinese women to come to Newfoundland. Dean appeared to believe that the Chinese immigration act banned women, which it did not. That belief may have been widely held in Newfoundland.

65 "Magistrate's Court," *Daily Star*, 5 December 1917. The article said that the man was looking for a clergyman who would marry them. It seems they did get married, as they appear as a couple in the 1935 Newfoundland census; see Notes from 1935 Newfoundland Census, Margaret Chang Papers, MG 364, box 1, file "Newfoundland Census," PANL.

66 "Fire Claims Two Victims," *Evening Telegram*, 19 May 1919. According to the article, they had a young daughter who survived because she was staying at someone else's house that night.

67 *Tenth Census of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1935, Vol. 1*, Table 18 (St. John's: Department of Health and Welfare, 1937), 27.

68 Notes on 1935 Census, Margaret Chang Papers, MG 364, box 1, file "Newfoundland Census," PANL. It is hard to tell how many of the Chinese immigrants were business owners versus employees, as census takers called everyone working in laundries "laundrymen." They usually, however, differentiated restaurant owners from restaurant workers.

heritage<sup>69</sup> were living in the Dominion and that 12 of them were married to, or had been married to, white Newfoundland women (one couple was separated).<sup>70</sup> Six couples were living in St. John's and the rest were in other communities in Newfoundland. In both 1935 and 1945 the women were, on average, a decade younger than their Chinese-immigrant husbands, who were either restaurant or laundry owners thus indicating that the more established immigrants had more to offer the younger women. All but two of these couples had children (and most couples had more than one child), suggesting these relationships were long-standing.<sup>71</sup>

Some of the white, Newfoundland-born women who married Chinese immigrants may well have met these men while visiting their restaurants. For women, however, spending time in restaurants owned by men from China carried some risks. As Chenier argues, police and community authorities viewed white women who visited Chinese-immigrant-owned restaurants regularly as morally suspect.<sup>72</sup> The perceived moral danger of white women interacting with men of Chinese heritage led the Ontario, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan governments to prohibit white women from working in businesses owned by people of Chinese heritage during the 1920s and 1930s. Also, the well-known case of Velma Demerson in Ontario, charged with and convicted of "incurability" in the 1930s because she was living with her Chinese-immigrant boyfriend, reveals the willingness of authorities to intervene.<sup>73</sup> Such cases were rare, however, and authorities in Newfoundland never banned white women from working in businesses owned by Chinese immigrants. Nevertheless, fears and assumptions about the moral impact of the presence of men of Chinese heritage were present in early-20th-century St. John's.

These racialized assumptions about Chinese immigrants and the threats posed by transgressive female sexuality appeared in a 1926 newspaper report about the Newfoundland Constabulary's visits to several St. John's restaurants. The *Evening Telegram* claimed the Newfoundland Constabulary had

---

69 *Census of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1945, Vol. 1*, Table 28 ("Population of Newfoundland by Ethnic Origin") (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1945), 105.

70 Notes on 1945 Census, Margaret Chang Papers, MG 364, box 1, file "Newfoundland Census," PANL.

71 In all, there were 15 different couples identified in these notes made on both 1935 and 1945 censuses.

72 Chenier, "Sex, Intimacy, and Desire," 32.

73 Velma Demerson, *Incurable* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004).

These racialized assumptions about Chinese immigrants and the threats posed by transgressive female sexuality appeared in a 1926 newspaper report about the Newfoundland Constabulary's visits to several St. John's restaurants. The *Evening Telegram* claimed the Newfoundland Constabulary had investigated several of the restaurants owned by Chinese immigrants for "not operating on a healthy moral plane." The police, claimed the writer, had found situations at two of the restaurants that "were not all that could be desired in the interests of morality." Suggesting the restaurant owners were allowing sex trade work on their premises, the article noted that "quite a number of girls of questionable character were frequenters of the two places, as well as a number of married men, who made periodical calls in their motor cars."<sup>74</sup> The author's comments about married men suggested that the activities at these restaurants were threatening to the middle-class family, while also reminding the readers that motor cars were also spaces with sexual possibilities. The author acknowledged that the police had found no evidence to lay charges, but assured readers that police would "keep a close scrutiny on those who frequented the places."<sup>75</sup> With its outraged tone and language, the article reflected the way racialized constructions of men from China, as well as assumptions about female transgressive sexuality, were used to define Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants as morally dangerous spaces.

While the newspaper's reporting on the cafés focused on female transgressive behaviour, most of the crime taking place at Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants was committed by local white men. Since their first arrival in Newfoundland, Chinese immigrants had faced racialized harassment and violence from young white men and boys.<sup>76</sup> As Heron argues, "Working-class male bodies were the claims to class pride within demeaning wage labour, gender superiority over allegedly weaker women, and in an age of imperialist excess, racial triumph over the 'lesser breeds.'"<sup>77</sup> After Chinese immigrants began opening restaurants, magistrates' reports reveal that at least several incidents a year came before the courts (and an unknown number of others would have been unreported). For example, a report from September 1920 described a local white man, reportedly drunk, who "ran amok," breaking

74 "Chinese Restaurants Under Police Surveillance," *Evening Telegram*, 30 October 1926.

75 "Chinese Restaurants Under Police Surveillance," *Evening Telegram*, 30 October 1926.

76 Just a few of dozens of examples are as follows: "Teasing the Chinaman," *Evening Telegram*, 11 April 1904; "Charged with Larceny," *Evening Telegram*, 26 December 1908; and "Chinaman Robbed," *Evening Telegram*, 10 September 1907.

77 Heron, "Boys Will Be Boys," 8.

the impact of male violence on the lives of Chinese immigrant café owners and staff. Besides local white men, transient seafaring labourers also spent time in the Chinese immigrants' cafés and sometimes acted out destructively. For example, in 1927, the *Evening Telegram* reported that Chewy Lee, then manager of the Dominion Cafe on Water Street, brought charges against a sailor from Barbados for throwing a chair at him.<sup>79</sup> In 1936 a ship's engineer and a fireman, both from the United Kingdom, received fines for attacking Hong Yung, an employee of the People's Restaurant.<sup>80</sup>

The Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants of St. John's became a particular concern to both military and civilian authorities during the Second World War. A relatively small city, St. John's population swelled when its strategic position for the defence of the North Atlantic brought thousands to the region.<sup>81</sup> Through the Lend-Lease Agreement, the Americans built an army base, Fort Pepperrell, north of Quidi Vidi Lake, just outside downtown St. John's. Canada, as well, had both navy and air force personnel stationed in and around the city. While the American and Canadian military provided recreational facilities for their members, many service personnel still found their way to the public eating and drinking spots of St. John's.

The Americans in particular had a large impact on the social and economic life of wartime St. John's, reflecting the "imperial" relationships the United States had with nations and regions it came to control and influence. Historians looking at the United States as "empire" have argued that whether through its military or corporate representatives, the United States interacted with these other peoples and regions through unequal power dynamics of race, class, and gender.<sup>82</sup> American authorities attempted to define and control relations between their own military personnel and employees and the local, "native" population. Historians examining wartime St. John's, including Steven High and Ruth Haywood, have argued that both military and civilian authorities

---

79 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 23 November 1927.

80 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 30 March 1936.

81 For background on St. John's during the war, see John N. Cardoulis, *A Friendly Invasion: The American Military in Newfoundland, 1940-1990* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1990) and Steven High, ed., *Occupied St. John's: A Social History of a City at War, 1939-1945*. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

82 See Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman, eds. *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2015) and Julie Greene, "Builders of Empire: Rewriting the Labor and Working-Class History of Anglo-American Global Power," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 13, no. 3-4 (December 2016): 1-10.

actively monitored and tried to control social interactions in public spaces in the city during the war.<sup>83</sup> Young women, Haywood argued, “became the site of a moral panic over ‘sexual delinquency,’” particularly as authorities feared enlisted men would contact sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>84</sup> In an attempt to control women, both social welfare workers and police began making regular visits to public spaces where women and men would meet, including hotels and restaurants. The spots owned by the Chinese immigrants received close attention.

The American military also acted on its own to monitor and control its enlisted men’s interactions with local populations by visiting, evaluating, and then classifying the city’s restaurants and beer parlours. Shortly after arriving in St. John’s in early 1941, the American military sent inspectors to over 40 establishments in the city to determine if they were what they considered safe for American military personnel to visit. They then produced a list of restaurants and beer parlours that Americans could visit, as well as those deemed off limits. In a letter to Newfoundland health authorities, Daniel J. Berry, of the Medical Corps of the United States Army, explained their list was based on health criteria including cleanliness, equipment, and personnel.<sup>85</sup> Such a move so early in their tenure reveals the way the Americans were quick to “take charge” in their interactions with their host community.

While Berry claimed their inspectors applied objective criteria in creating their list, the restaurants deemed “acceptable” and “banned” fell strongly along racial and class lines. Of the 16 restaurants on the “banned” list, at least 13 were owned or operated by Chinese immigrants.<sup>86</sup> The only confirmed non-Chinese immigrant-owned restaurant on the list was the Crosbie Hotel on Duckworth Street, which had formerly been owned by the well-known political family.<sup>87</sup>

---

83 Ruth Haywood, “‘Delinquent, disorderly, and diseased females’: Regulating Sexuality in Second World War St. John’s, Newfoundland” (MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2002); Steven High, “Rethinking the Friendly Invasion,” in High, *Occupied St. John’s*, 151–90. See also Jessica Steffler, “Morals and (Im)morality in Second World War Newfoundland: American Servicemen’s Relations with Local Newfoundland Women, 1941–1945” (MA major paper, Memorial University, 2018).

84 Haywood, “‘Delinquent, disorderly, and diseased females,’” ii.

85 Daniel J. Berry to H.M. Mosdell, 20 February 1941; Memorandum, Headquarters, Newfoundland Base Command, US Army, St. John’s, Newfoundland, 11 February 1941, GN 38 S4/2/4, file 8, PANL. The letter from Berry explained that they had created a list of banned restaurants while the actual restaurant list was on the separate memorandum.

86 Memorandum, Headquarters, Newfoundland Base Command, US Army, St. John’s, Newfoundland, 11 February 1941, GN 38 S4/2/4, PANL.

87 For a history of the Crosbie Hotel, see O’Neill, *Oldest City*, 376.

As well, the banned restaurants owned by Chinese immigrants were primarily in the working-class neighbourhoods of New Gower Street and Water Street West. Meanwhile, of the 13 hotels and restaurant deemed acceptable for American service personnel, only four were owned by Chinese immigrants. These included Ming Gong Au's (Charlie Gong) London Cafe, the American Café owned by the Tom family, and Tom Chong's White Lily, all located in the more upscale area of Water Street, side-by-side with the banks and department stores.<sup>88</sup> Whether or not the enlisted men actually heeded these directives is unclear, but the list itself offers insights into the way ideas about race and class shaped military authorities' attempts to define and delineate public spaces in the city.

Local police and health authorities also drew on racialized conceptions of Chinese immigrants, as well as concerns about working-class female sexuality, in their interactions with local restaurants. Early in the war, the Newfoundland Constabulary began making regular visits to the city's restaurants and cafés, and occasionally referred cases to the health authorities.<sup>89</sup> One example can be seen in a series of reports in late December 1940 and January 1941 between two Newfoundland Constabulary officers and the Chief Officer of Health A. Bishop, who discussed a couple of restaurants owned by a Chinese immigrant.<sup>90</sup> They depicted the restaurants as small, cramped, dirty, and smelling of the "smoke from frying pork."<sup>91</sup> In describing the restaurant owner himself, they drew on racialized constructions of people from China as dirty and intractable, with Bishop claiming "We have been continually after him but we have been unable to make him improve." Despite blaming the restaurant owner, however, Bishop admitted that the restaurants were so busy and constantly packed with customers that it would have been difficult to keep the places clean.<sup>92</sup>

While cleanliness and health concerns were behind the complaints about the two restaurants, the police officers and the health official also emphasized

---

88 Memorandum, Headquarters, Newfoundland Base Command, US Army, St. John's, Newfoundland, 11 February 1941, GN 38 S4/2/4.

89 P.J. O'Neill to Commissioner for Justice and Defence, 26 April 1943, GN 13/1/B Box 240, PANL.

90 M. White to P.J. O'Neill, Chief of Police, Newfoundland Constabulary, 16 December 1940, GN 13/1/B box 240, PANL; see also Haywood, "'Delinquent, disorderly, and diseased females,'" 130-3.

91 GN 13/1/B, PANL: A. Bishop to Secretary for Public Health and Welfare, 4 January 1941; M. White to P.J. O'Neill, Chief of Police, 6 December 1940; and Leo Roche, Acting Sergeant, to P.J. O'Neill, Chief of Police, 11 January 1941. See also Haywood, "'Delinquent, disorderly, and diseased females,'" 130-1.

92 A. Bishop to Secretary for Public Health and Welfare, 4 January 1941, GN 13/1/B, PANL.

what they saw as the moral danger of these spaces. All three men pointed to the “foreign seaman and their lady friends” (as Bishop described them), who they claimed packed the place every night.<sup>93</sup> Describing them as “foreign seamen,” the officials invoked both a fear of strangers and stereotypes about the sexual behaviour of seafaring men. The two police officers identified the women in the restaurants as sex workers, calling them “our local street girls,” and “known to some of the police as common prostitutes.”<sup>94</sup> Whether or not they actually were sex workers is unknown, but the reports suggest that groups of women in the company of “foreign” sailors in a café owned by a Chinese immigrant could easily be labelled that way. Adding to the moral concern, one of the officers also warned that the restaurant owner was advertising for a “girl” to work as a waitress, suggesting it was inappropriate for a white woman to be in that environment.<sup>95</sup> Despite the clear attempt to define these restaurants as dangerous, the fact the restaurants were reportedly busy suggests they were filling a niche in the city – whether it was an affordable bite to eat or a place to socialize or find companionship.

As it happened, a stabbing incident at the Paramount Lunch in early January 1941 brought public attention to the presence of white women in Chinese immigrant-owned cafés. According to newspaper reports, a white female employee of the Paramount Lunch, stabbed the Chinese immigrant owner with a knife. Two *Evening Telegram* articles offered slightly contradictory accounts of the relationship between the woman and the restaurant owner. One article claimed the woman, who worked at the cafe and lived in rooms upstairs, stabbed the owner “in a fit of jealousy,” implying she was in a relationship with him.<sup>96</sup> In the other article a police officer told the Magistrate’s Court that the woman had told him that she was running the cafe, and that she and the restaurant owner had had a “falling out.”<sup>97</sup> While we do not know the precise nature of their relationship, the newspaper coverage offers insights into the

---

93 A. Bishop to Secretary for Public Health and Welfare, 4 January 1941, GN 13/1/B, PANL.

94 Leo Roche, Acting Sergeant to P.J. O’Neill, Chief of Police, 11 January 1941 and M. White to P.J. O’Neill, Chief of Police, Newfoundland Constabulary, 16 December 1940, GN 13/1/B, PANL.

95 M. White to P.J. O’Neill, Chief of Police, Newfoundland Constabulary, 16 December 1940, GN 13/1/B.

96 “Chinaman Stabbed During Altercation,” *Evening Telegram*, 11 January 1941.

97 “Magistrate’s Court,” *Evening Telegram*, 11 January 1941.



moral scrutiny that women who spent time in Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants could face.<sup>98</sup>

While the stabbing incident at the Paramount Lunch was dramatic, local police were also interested in even the more mundane activities at these places. According to Chief of Police P.J. O'Neill, the Newfoundland Constabulary sent plainclothes officers into the city's restaurants and beer parlours throughout the war period – taking brief notes on who was there and how they were behaving. O'Neill sent eight of these reports to Newfoundland government's Commissioner for Justice and Defence, apparently trying to reassure the government official that the police had the city under control.<sup>99</sup> O'Neill wrote: "We hear a lot about disorderly conduct in the restaurants and beer parlours . . . and while we realize that the town isn't quite as orderly as we would like to see it, I still think that taking all the circumstances into considerations, conditions are not so bad."<sup>100</sup> The reports covered eight evenings in late April and early May of 1943, and the officers made between one and two dozen visits each night.<sup>101</sup> All but a few of the restaurants they visited were owned by Chinese immigrants.

These reports suggest the police officers making the restaurant visits were trying to keep track of the military men while monitoring the civilian women for signs of behaviour outside middle class sexual norms.<sup>102</sup> Military men (identified by nationality and branch of service) and seafaring labourers (merchant marines and "sailors") made up more than 60 per cent of all the café and restaurant patrons.<sup>103</sup> That they outnumbered locals reveals how big an impact the military had in the social life of the city. After noting the military men, the Newfoundland Constabulary officer A. Pike listed the number of white civilian males but made no further notes about them; this suggests the

---

98 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 7 February 1941. The article suggests that the restaurant owner recovered from his wounds and the woman received a five-month jail sentence.

99 P.J. O'Neill to Commissioner for Justice and Defence, 26 April 1943, GN 13/1/B, box 240, PANL.

100 P.J. O'Neill to Commissioner for Justice and Defence, 26 April 1943, GN 13/1/B, box 240, PANL.

101 A. Pike, Sergeant, to P.J. O'Neill, Chief of Police, GN 13/1/B, PANL: 19 April 1943, 20 April 1943, 21 April 1943, 22 April 1943, 24 April 1943, 4 May 1943, 8 May 1943, 11 May 1943.

102 A. Pike, Sergeant, to P.J. O'Neill, Chief of Police, GN 13/1/B, PANL: 19 April 1943, 20 April 1943, 21 April 1943, 22 April 1943, 24 April 1943, 4 May 1943, 8 May 1943, 11 May 1943.

103 A. Pike, Sergeant, to P.J. O'Neill, Chief of Police, GN 13/1/B, PANL: 21 April 1943, 4 May 1943, 8 May 1943. While the American military had tried to stop American service personnel from visiting specific restaurants, Pike found American soldiers at several of the "banned" restaurants.

police were not concerned about them. While women comprised just 10 per cent of all café patrons, the officer made detailed notes about each one. Pike described the women as either “old ladies” or “girls.” He made no further comments on the “old ladies,” but for each of the “girls” he added a qualifier that noted if they were “respectable-looking” or were simply “unknown” to police. Pike described approximately half, or 36 of the 78 women identified, as “respectable” or “respectable-looking,” suggesting they met middle class norms of female appearance and behaviour and were not threats to the social order. Pike described a further 20 “girls” as “unknown,” a more neutral term that neither identified them nor ruled them out as possible sex workers. Almost all of the “respectable” women were found in two restaurants owned by local white residents, suggesting that the space itself may have influenced how the officer perceived them. Aside from the “respectable” and “unknown” women, he mentioned several women by name. In one case he implied the woman was a known drinker,<sup>104</sup> and he described another as “on the street.”<sup>105</sup> While we do not know whether the women knew the police were watching them, these reports underscore the way authorities defined and constructed the women spending time in the restaurants owned by Chinese immigrants.

Besides offering insights into authorities’ concerns about the restaurants owned by Chinese immigrants, the Newfoundland Constabulary reports also offer a snapshot of social life during the war. On 8 May 1943, for example, a busy Saturday night, Pike saw seventeen naval men, four civilian men, and four “respectable-looking girls” at the Good View Cafe on Water Street.<sup>106</sup> That same evening, the staff at the Red Rose Cafe on New Gower Street was serving four American sailors, six Merchant Marines, and two civilian men. Nearby, at the Lily Cafe, eight naval men, four civilian men and two “old ladies” were having refreshments. Ten young boys were eating chips at the Universal Cafe, while fifteen sailors and four girls “unknown” to the officers were patronizing the Western Cafe on Water Street. While we know little of the conversations or interactions on that Saturday night, apart from Pike’s assurances that generally people were sober and well-behaved, his reports offer a glimpse into these new social spaces of St. John’s. The restaurants were heterogeneous, hosting men and women, Chinese immigrants and local white people, military and civilian, young and old. These diverse social spaces were part of the neighbourhoods,

104 A. Pike, Sergeant, to P.J. O’Neill, Chief of Police, 24 April 1943, GN 13/1/B, PANL.

105 A. Pike, Sergeant, to P.J. O’Neill, Chief of Police, 19 April 1943, GN 13/1/B, PANL.

106 A. Pike, Sergeant, to P.J. O’Neill, Chief of Police, 8 May 1943, GN 13/1/B, PANL.

and they should be part of the way we think about the social history of St. John's.

While the restaurants and cafés owned by Chinese immigrants were places where people interacted peaceably, they were also occasionally sites of violence – much of it instigated by military men. Steven High observed that public drinking and violent behaviour were features of wartime St. John's, with local men and military servicemen fighting in and around the city's bars and beer parlours.<sup>107</sup> Magistrates' reports from the St. John's newspapers suggest violent incidents involving military service people also occurred regularly in Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants.<sup>108</sup> Property damage and theft were among the most common charges, as Chinese immigrants brought complaints and sought charges against men who broke windows, threw beer bottles, or stole from them. For example, in March 1943 a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force was convicted and fined for breaking a fan and a chair at a Chinese immigrant-owned restaurant on Duckworth Street.<sup>109</sup> In another incident in December 1941, a Newfoundland naval rating and a Canadian soldier were charged with disorderly conduct for fighting at Sing Lee's Good View Cafe after the Canadian supposedly made "disparaging remarks" about Newfoundland.<sup>110</sup> According to the article, one man threw the other through the café window, causing \$27 in damages. In the summer of 1945, Sing Lee brought charges against two Royal Navy men for eating 80 cents-worth of chips and not paying for them.<sup>111</sup> And sometimes servicemen were charged with assaulting Chinese-immigrant restaurant owners and workers, such as the Canadian seamen convicted in January 1943 for attacking a café employee.<sup>112</sup> During the war, the Chinese immigrants were increasingly bringing cases to court themselves. In September 1944, for example, a Chinese-immigrant restaurant proprietor

---

107 High, "Rethinking the Friendly Invasion," in High, *Occupied St. John's*, 171.

108 As part of the American Leased Bases agreement, the American military had full jurisdiction over criminal cases involving American personnel, even if the incident occurred off-base. Incidents involving American soldiers were not prosecuted in Newfoundland courts. See High, "Rethinking the Friendly Invasion," in High, *Occupied St. John's*, 176.

109 No title [article describing charges against a Royal Canadian Air Force member], *Evening Telegram*, 29 March 1943.

110 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 29 December 1941. "Naval rating" is the term for junior enlisted personnel.

111 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 27 June 1945.

112 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 15 January 1943.

asked for a bond against two "foreign seamen" who he claimed had caused a disturbance and threatened him.<sup>113</sup>

On Christmas night 1941, Newfoundland navy men committed one of the most severe cases of racialized violence against Chinese immigrants during the war.<sup>114</sup> According to the *Evening Telegram*, a group of Newfoundland navy men were walking the streets when they looked through the windows of the Imperial Cafe on Water Street and saw men of Chinese heritage having a private party. The navy men, who had been drinking, smashed the glass front door of the café and began attacking the people inside. Other navy men arrived from the ship's company, creating a disturbance that had a reported 150 men fighting in and around the restaurant. While the Chinese immigrants hid or escaped to the upper floors, military police came in to control the violence and order all men back to their ships. The attack led to a public outcry over the violence and some blamed the lack of social facilities for service personnel in the city.<sup>115</sup> In response, city officials agreed to meet with members of the Chinese immigrant community about their concerns.<sup>116</sup>

While men, and particularly military men, perpetrated most of the violence, newspaper reports suggest women occasionally appeared before the magistrate for their actions in Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants. In December 1941, for example, two young women were found guilty of throwing a bottle through a restaurant window when they and their male companions were refused service.<sup>117</sup> In another case, in February 1942, a Chinese immigrant restaurant owner reportedly called police to remove four young women for "loose and disorderly" conduct.<sup>118</sup> The women, according to the report, escaped from custody while waiting for the police van to arrive but were later caught, and they received fines. And at a restaurant on New Gower Street in November 1943, reported the *Evening Telegram*, a woman "who frequented the place" knocked over an American sailor by throwing a bottle at him.<sup>119</sup> Sometimes the cases involved theft or fraud; a case in point was the 17-year-old girl charged with passing a counterfeit \$10 bill to Tom Sing, the proprietor of the American

---

113 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 15 September 1944.

114 "Chinese Cafe Guttled by Naval Ratings," *Evening Telegram*, 27 December 1941.

115 Letter to Editor, "Suggest Wet Canteen for Sailors," *Evening Telegram*, 30 December 1941; Letter to Editor, *Daily News*, 30 December 1941.

116 "Meeting Chinese Residents in City," *Daily News*, 3 January 1942.

117 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 23 December 1941.

118 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 26 February 1942.

119 "Here, There and Everywhere: Hit by Bottle," *Evening Telegram*, 11 November 1943.

Cafe on Water Street.<sup>120</sup> She claimed she was doing it for a Canadian soldier. These examples are relatively rare, but they illustrate the rougher edges of urban St. John's and of some of the people who were part of that world during the disruptive years of the war.

Besides bringing cases of assault and vandalism to the local courts, Chinese immigrants also organized to protest a regulation banning booth seating in restaurants. The ban, introduced in the 1943 Health Act, was aimed primarily at the Chinese immigrant-owned restaurants, another example of the way that racialized constructions of "the Chinese" intertwined with fears about female sexual behaviour. While Chief Health Inspector A. Bishop had claimed the ban was for cleanliness reasons, the Newfoundland Constabulary had earlier complained the booths "obstructed" their views of the patrons when they made their nightly patrols.<sup>121</sup> When he brought the issue to city council in October 1940, the chief of police claimed the "Chinese restaurants" harboured "girls looking to attract foreign visitors."<sup>122</sup>

According to Bishop, the Chinese immigrant restauranteurs objected to the ban because authorities were not enforcing it equitably – specifically, that the Health Department had not demanded that the Newfoundland Hotel also remove their booth seating. In a memo to the secretary for the Department of Public Health and Welfare, he admitted that his office had issued notices to several Chinese immigrant restaurant owners, but they had not issued one to the Newfoundland Hotel. Bishop claimed the Chinese immigrant restaurant owners were "irritated" about the inequity, adding they had "united together in an effort to fight against the order." According to Bishop, Davey Fong, son of Moo Sic Fong, founder of the King Cafe, was leading the fight, and that the group had also hired lawyer Gordon Higgins to help them. Higgins had become an unofficial legal advisor to members of the Chinese immigrant community, and he was in the Nickel Theatre photograph taken during the visit of the Chinese Consul to Canada in 1940.<sup>123</sup> He was also the son of William Higgins,

---

120 "Magistrate's Court," *Evening Telegram*, 19 May 1941.

121 A. Bishop, Chief of Health Inspection to Secretary, Department of Public Health and Welfare, 11 September 1943, GN 38 S6/5/2, file 5, PANL; see also Haywood, "Delinquent, disorderly, and diseased females," 132-3.

122 "Chinese Cafes Subject of Complaint," *Evening Telegram*, 16 October 1940.

123 A. Bishop, Chief of Health Inspection, to Secretary, Department of Public Health and Welfare, 11 September 1943, GN 38 S6/5/2, PANL. Bishop claimed he sent notices to just a select number of restaurants owned by Chinese immigrants, not all that had booths. It suggested they were doing it as a test, to see how the restaurant owners reacted. In 1946, at least 18 of 27 total restaurants listed in the phone book were owned by Chinese

who had attended the grand opening of Moo Sic Fong's restaurant in 1919.<sup>124</sup> Bishop claimed Gordon Higgins told him the Chinese immigrant restaurant owners would not remove their booths while the Newfoundland Hotel kept theirs.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, Higgins argued he would emphasize the inequity if the Health Department tried to take them to court. It seems that the threat was enough for the authorities to back away from enforcing that particular regulation, as nothing further in the records suggests they went forward with the plan to enforce the removal of restaurant booths.<sup>126</sup> Having been subjected to decades of racialization and unequal treatment, the men who had come from China were pushing back against the latest attempts to label and define them.

The war years also gave the Chinese immigrants a chance to embrace a public role through fundraising activities. Chinese immigrants raised funds first for the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and then for the wider Second World War, and they did so in very public ways. They founded a branch of the Chinese War Relief Association and they also worked through their community clan associations: the Tai Mei Society, the Hong Heing Society, and the Chinese Co-operative Society.<sup>127</sup> The names of restaurants and laundries owned by Chinese immigrants appeared in newspaper articles, listing their donations to various causes such as Chinese War Relief, the Newfoundland Patriotic Association, and War Savings Certificates.<sup>128</sup> They held large gatherings (covered in the local press) and invited local dignitaries such as Mayor Carnell and lawyer Gordon Higgins to give speeches.<sup>129</sup> At one such event Mayor Carnell praised the Chinese immigrants as "good citizens," saying he hoped their work would help foster better relations between them and the local white residents.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, this was the kind of public recognition and respectability Kim Lee

---

immigrants.

124 "King Cafe Opens," *Daily Star*, 22 August 1919. William J. Higgins later became a judge.

125 A. Bishop, Chief of Health Inspection, to Secretary, Department of Public Health and Welfare, 11 September 1943, GN 38 S6/5/2, PANL.

126 Commissioner for Finance to J.C. Puddester, Commissioner for Health and Welfare, 15 September 1943, GN 38 S6/5/2, file 5, PANL. This letter indicates the manager of the Newfoundland Hotel had lobbied the Commissioner for Finance to ensure the new regulations were not applied to them.

127 "Chinese Consul Says Farewell to Friends Here," *Daily News*, 21 October 1940; "Chinese War Relief Association," *Daily News*, 2 August 1941. For information on the Tai Mei Society (Au family) and the Hong Heing Society (Hong, Jins/Gins), see Callanan, *Last Chinese Laundry*.

128 "Subscriptions to the Newfoundland Patriotic Association," *Evening Telegram*, 29 June 1940; "YMCA Appeal for War Work in China," *Evening Telegram*, 4 January 1943.

129 "Fighting with Guns of Dollars," *Daily News*, 5 June 1942.

130 "YMCA Appeal for War Work in China," *Evening Telegram*, 4 January 1943.

and others had been seeking for years. Kim Lee was one of the prominent figures in the Chinese immigrant-community's public fundraising, along with Davey Fong, Charlie Dean, and Ming Gong Au.<sup>131</sup> These men were also among the first generation of restaurant owners, and in that iconic October 1940 picture taken in front of the Nickel Theatre they were standing in a place of honour in the front row alongside the Chinese Consul to Canada Dr. Shih.

Whether they were presiding over fundraising events during the war, or serving customers plates of fish and chips in their restaurants, Chinese immigrants were a visible part of the everyday life of St. John's. While racism had limited their options in employment, Chinese immigrants in St. John's quickly transformed the commercial landscape with their laundries and particularly their dozens of restaurants. They invited the men and women of the city into these establishments, defining them as clean, modern, and exciting places. The restaurants were contested spaces, however, as various civil authorities, through their words and actions, framed them as dangerous to the moral and social order of the city. Racialized stereotypes about people of Chinese descent, as well as broad assumptions about the sexuality of working class women, led authorities to monitor those restaurants, particularly during the Second World War. Despite those portrayals, the people of St. John's came to these new public eating places – men and women, working class and middle class. A few local white women married Chinese immigrant restaurant owners, and they raised families with them. Not everything was peaceable, however, as young men sometimes made racialized attacks on the immigrants from China and the restaurants they owned and worked in. The restaurants were complex social spaces, and looking at their history offers a glimpse into the relationships and



**FIGURE 3 – Hong Family, 1954 – Mon Jin (Gene) Hong and family in St. John's. From left: Melvin, Gene's son; Gene Hong; Edna (Mansfield), Gene's wife; infant Robert Hong; and Ken, Gene's younger brother. Gene and Edna met at the United Nations Restaurant in the 1940s.**

Source: Robert Hong family photo.

<sup>131</sup> "Chinese Consul Says Farewell to Friends Here," *Daily News*, 21 October 1940. Ming Gong Au (Charlie Gong) owned the London Cafe on Water Street. After the visit from Dr. Shih, the Chinese Consul to Canada, the entire group went to the London Café for a banquet.



interactions between Chinese immigrants and local white residents as well as the class, gendered, and racial dynamics underlying those relationships and interactions.

These restaurants, along with the laundries and other small businesses, would also provide a foundation for the future of the men who had come to Newfoundland from China. After Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, the head tax ended and the path to Canadian citizenship became possible. As well, the Chinese Communist Revolution also meant that travelling back and forth to their communities of origin became more difficult for Chinese immigrants in Newfoundland. By the early 1950s, many men who had immigrated to Newfoundland from China were receiving Canadian citizenship, and they were applying to bring families to their new home. Those laundries, and particularly the restaurants, provided the economic means for those families, as well as for the men who were raising families with their Newfoundland-born wives and children.<sup>132</sup> While all of those restaurants founded by Chinese immigrants during the period from the 1920s through the 1940s have closed or changed hands, their stories remind us of the diverse and complex urban environment of historic St. John's.

**MIRIAM WRIGHT** est professeure agrégée d'histoire à l'Université de Windsor. Elle a participé récemment à des projets de recherche sur l'histoire des sports et des communautés racialisées au Canada.

**MIRIAM WRIGHT** is an associate professor of history at the University of Windsor. She has recently been involved with projects on the history of sports and racialized communities in Canada.

---

132 See Wright, Exhibit Guide – "Taking Root," 13-18.