

THE BACKGROUND

Ethnic Oasis: Chinese Immigrants in the Frontier Black Hills

LIPING ZHU

Few events in the nineteenth-century American West drove settlement faster than did the advent of the mining boom. In the quarter century after the fever of the Forty-niners, ongoing gold rushes attracted hundreds of thousands of people from all parts of the world, including many Chinese. Branching out from California and following the mining frontier eastward, these gold seekers gradually spread to almost every corner of the West. Their extensive placer operations reached Nevada, Oregon, and Washington in the 1850s; Idaho and Montana in the 1860s; and Arizona, Wyoming, and Colorado in the 1870s. Of the estimated eighty thousand Chinese living in the United States by the mid-1870s, more than seventeen thousand of them were miners, constituting about 25 percent of all those mining in the West.¹

As soon as the news spread of Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custler's expedition finding gold in the mountains of western Dakota Territory, Chinese immigrants joined the last major gold rush in the nineteenth century, arriving in the Black Hills by the winter of 1875-1876.²

The author thanks Eastern Washington University, the South Dakota Humanities Council, and the South Dakota State Historical Society for providing financial assistance for this project. He also wishes to thank the anonymous reader for his or her critique of the manuscript.

1. There are only a few general overviews of the Chinese mining frontier. One that contains some basic information, although somewhat dated, is Randall Rohe, "After the Gold Rush: Chinese Mining in the Far West, 1850-1890," *Montana, The Magazine of Western History* 32 (Autumn 1982): 2-19. Another is Liping Zhu, "No Need to Rush: The Chinese, Placer Mining, and the Western Environment," *Montana, The Magazine of Western History* 49 (Autumn 1999): 42-57.

2. Agnes Wright Spring, *The Cheyenne and Black Hills Stage and Express Routes* (Lincoln:

In the next few years, the *Cheyenne Daily Leader* and *Black Hills Daily Times* acknowledged their continuous arrivals from three directions. Most of them traveled on the Union Pacific Railroad to either Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, or Sidney, Nebraska, and then took a stage-coach for the final three-hundred-mile journey to the Black Hills. The trip from the jumping-off points to Deadwood usually took three to eight days. Some Chinese in Montana took a more adventurous northern route, descending on the mighty Missouri River to Fort Pierre. Then another one-hundred-ninety-mile ride took them across the prairie to their final destination. A contemporary reporter wrote, "Chinamen are the best patrons stage companies have, they never go on foot."³ Some hardy souls blazed their own trails, such as the Chinese man who "made a lone trip on horseback from Oregon."⁴ In another case, five Chinese men and one Chinese woman drove with teamsters in three wagons from Cheyenne to Deadwood. Although each man carried a pistol, two "road agents" still succeeded in robbing the group outside Custer City.⁵ Enduring both hardship and danger in the journey, the Chinese found their way to the Black Hills.

Like other parts of the frontier American West, the Black Hills of South Dakota has its own lore concerning the Chinese. Salacious stories of the activities in Deadwood City's Chinatown, inhabited by colorful characters like Deadwood Dick and Calamity Jane, affirm the early presence of the Chinese in the region but provide little insight

University of Nebraska Press, 1948), pp. 77-79; Watson Parker, *Deadwood: The Golden Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p. 143. Spring states that the Chinese came to the region in late 1875; Parker gives an account that white miners drove out five or six Chinese thieves from Custer City in 1875, but neither of the books cite any primary source. According to Watson Parker, the *Cheyenne Leader* in early 1876 noted the Chinese departure for the Black Hills.

3. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 3 Oct. 1880 (quotation); *Cheyenne Daily Leader*, 30 Jan. 1877; *Black Hills Pioneer*, 26 May 1877; Daniel Liestman, "The Chinese in the Black Hills, 1876-1932," *Journal of the West* 27 (January 1988): 75. From 1877 to 1880, the *Black Hills Daily Times* regularly listed the stage passengers to and from Deadwood. Among them were many Chinese.

4. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 24 July 1877.

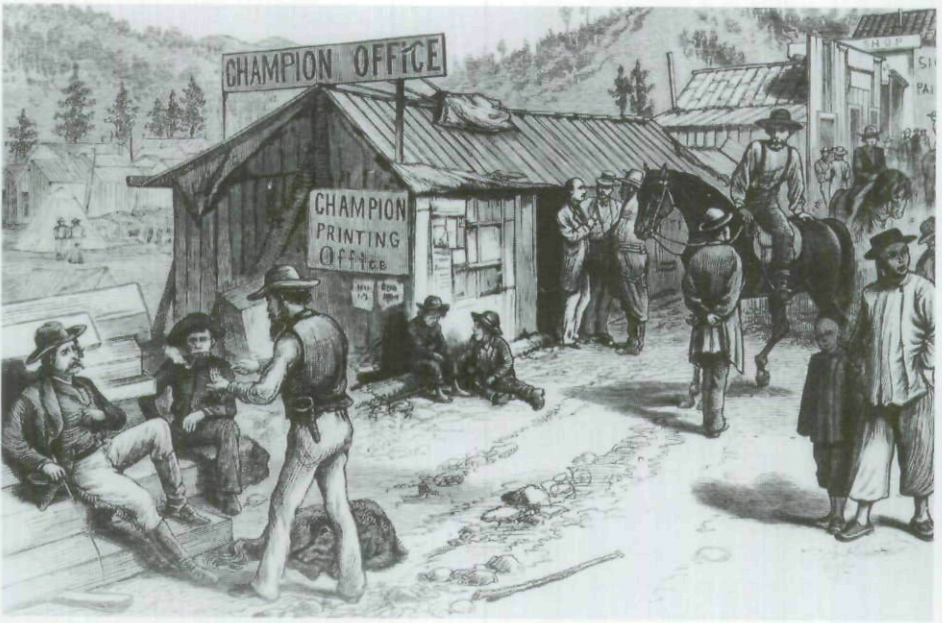
5. *Ibid.*, 13 June 1877.

into the role these pioneers played in its development.⁶ Deadwood itself had aliases like the "Outlaw Camp," "Sin City," and "Toughest City in the World," and, in acknowledgment of the Asian presence, "The Last Chinatown." Today, the line between history and legend is often blurred. After making a pilgrimage to Mount Moriah Cemetery where Calamity Jane, Wild Bill Hickok, and many Chinese citizens are buried, tourists do not question the authenticity of the Chinese Tunnel Tour, which is not even located within the limit of Deadwood's historic Chinatown, or the myth that nineteenth-century Deadwood had the largest Chinatown east of San Francisco. The popular enthusiasm for including Chinese pioneers in the region's history has fueled the need for historical accuracy about their frontier experience and fresh interpretation of the Chinese experience in the Black Hills.

According to the United States census, the Chinese population in the region never exceeded more than two hundred fifty people, most of them engaged not in mining directly, but in less romantic and more mundane jobs, such as washing clothes and cooking in restaurants. Despite their relatively small numbers and occupational conformity, Chinese immigrants played a visible role in building a multi-cultural society in the early Black Hills. An overview of the Chinese experience in the area from 1876 to 1910 reveals how this small minority cultivated a social and economic niche, an "ethnic oasis," in the predominantly white region. The determination, perseverance, and dexterity of these Chinese immigrants were the key factors for not only their survival on the American frontier but also their success in creating a cultural fusion between themselves and their Anglo-American neighbors.⁷

6. Joe Sulentic, *Deadwood Gulch: The Last Chinatown* (Deadwood, S.Dak.: By the Author, 1975), p. 36; Helen Rezatto, *Mount Moriah: The Story of Deadwood's Boot Hill* (Rapid City, S.Dak.: Fenwyn Press, 1989), p. 107; "Frontier Sketches," *Field and Farm*, 9 Mar. 1907, p. 8. Two popular booklets on the subject are Sulentic's *Deadwood Gulch* and Mildred Fielder's *The Chinese in the Black Hills* (Lead, S.Dak.: Bonanza Trails Publications, 1972).

7. There are few scholarly works on the Chinese in the Black Hills, including Daniel Liestman's article in the *Journal of the West*, "The Chinese in the Black Hills, 1876-1932" [cited hereafter as Liestman, "The Chinese," JOW]; Grant K. Anderson, "Deadwood's Chinatown," *South Dakota History* 5 (Summer 1975): 266-85; Daniel D. Liestman, "The Chinese in the Black Hills: 1876-1932" (master's thesis, Midwestern State University, 1985) [cited hereafter



Deadwood scene with Chinese man and boy, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 8 September 1877

Asian trailblazers joined the first rush of prospectors to the Black Hills, seeking to acquire their fair share of what was reputed to be easy gold. Local newspapers paid attention to their mining activities, typically providing brief travel bulletins, such as: "A party of fifty Chinamen are between Denver and here on the road to this city. They are coming fully equipped for the mining business."⁸ In 1876, seven thousand prospectors of all nationalities produced \$1.5 million worth of gold from the region. A year later when placer mining reached its peak, the area's population grew to more than fifteen thousand, but the rush lasted for only two seasons. Starting in the summer of 1877, mining operations shifted from the easily excavated placers to hydrau-

as Liestman, "The Chinese," master's thesis]. Based almost exclusively on newspaper sources, these works have overlooked other important primary sources such as court documents.

8. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 14 Apr. 1877.

lic and hard-rock mining.⁹ The latter required more capital and less manpower. Chinese placer mining activities increased, however, after they began reworking the old claims abandoned by whites.

Superb skills in water management gave Chinese prospectors an edge over others in extracting scarce gold. One reporter wrote, "The Chinese who have been sluicing all winter in the Cape Horn district, have been taking out at the rate of \$4 to the heathen, while the white miners were unable to make the water run."¹⁰ Some Chinese were making more than just minimum wages. In 1877, a group of Chinese bought a claim on Whitewood Creek for twelve hundred dollars. A year later, they purchased another claim for thirty-five hundred dollars in cash. The *Black Hills Daily Times* enviously commented, "From this it is evident that they have struck something, and that there is gold in that district after all."¹¹ One Chinese miner was reported to have found "a nugget on his claim that weighed over four hundred dollars."¹² These sensational reports generated jealousy among other, less fortunate miners.

Meanwhile, in the 1870s, Americans had already begun serious debates about limiting the growth of Chinese entrepreneurs or laborers, which led to the first Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, prohibiting Asians from entering the United States. The national political environment, combined with the publicity about Chinese mining success and the decline of placer operations, led to an increase in white resentment toward Chinese in the Black Hills. In the spring of 1878, some desperate white miners organized the Caucasian League and Miners' Union, which decided to wage a "general war" on the Chinese. In Lead City, an opium den was blown up with powder; in South Bend, people set fire to four homes belonging to Chinese and overturned

9. Watson Parker, *Gold in the Black Hills* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), pp. 95-96.

10. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 27 Mar. 1879. In general, the Chinese were successful in western mining for various reasons. A spirit of teamwork, water management skills, nutritious diets, advanced health care, and environmental adaptation abilities all contributed to the success. The author has made this argument in his article "No Need to Rush: The Chinese, Placer Mining, and the Western Environment."

11. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 26 Mar. 1878.

12. *Ibid.*, 4 Oct. 1878.

another. That summer, residents in Elizabethtown, with the help of the local Democratic Party, called for a meeting to discuss the issue of "Chinese cheap labor." A mob of agitators led by a Dr. Meyers issued the ultimatum, warning the Chinese to fear the worst if they did not quit their work the next day.¹³ The intimidation did force some Chinese to give up reworking the claims owned by whites. Nevertheless, though they were a convenient scapegoat for the economic depression following the two years of the gold boom, the Chinese were not helpless. They had received little welcome from the general population when they arrived in the Black Hills, but their previous experiences in other parts of the American West had helped teach them how to survive in such an unfriendly environment. Equipped with political savvy and economic motivation, they sought to seize every possible opportunity and utilize every available skill to make a decent, peaceful living in a foreign land.

To ease both the anger and fear of white miners, the small Chinese community immediately asked one of their members, Kuong Wing, to publish an open letter in the *Black Hills Daily Times*, announcing a cooperative effort to "stop such influx of my people as shall tend to interfere with the labor of white men in the mines in this country, and engage that no immigration of my people shall visit the Hills, except to engage in the lighter occupations of washing, cooking and house servants."¹⁴ He further promised the Miners' Union that "Chinese mining operations in the Hills shall be confined to working ground that they shall own in their own right by purchase and in their own interests."¹⁵ It is hard to measure the effectiveness of this letter in cooling the anti-Chinese rhetoric, but such a move demonstrated Chinese awareness of the importance of public relations. After 1878, the Black Hills did not see a collective anti-Chinese campaign or organized violent incident.

13. Ibid., 22 Feb., 8 Apr., 6 Aug. 1878; Anderson, "Deadwood's Chinatown," pp. 272-74; Liestman, "The Chinese," *JOW*, p. 76. For more information on the Chinese Exclusion Act, see Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

14. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 27 Feb. 1878.

15. Ibid.

Despite some anti-Chinese hostility and sporadic violence, the population of this Asian minority steadily increased in the Black Hills, reaching its peak around 1880 (Table 1). Concentrated in the Deadwood-Lead area, 221 Chinese, according to the United States census, constituted 1.7 percent of a general population of 13,248 in Lawrence County.¹⁶ The Chinese residents numbered 202 males and nineteen

16. Manuscript Population Schedule, Lead and Deadwood, Lawrence County, South Dakota, in U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880* (hereafter cited *Tenth Census*), National Archives Microfilm Publication T9, roll 113, sheets 191-205 (for Lead), sheets 247-284 (for Deadwood). The population schedules give a number of 220, but a manual count in the manuscript totals 221.

Table 1. Population of Chinese, Lawrence County, and South Dakota

Year	Chinese Population		Total Population	
	Lawrence County	South Dakota	Lawrence County	South Dakota
1861	0	0	0	2,402 ^a
1870	0	0	0	11,776 ^a
1880	221	230	13,248	98,268 ^a
1890	152	195	11,673	348,600
1900	120	165	17,897	401,570
1905		150	21,060	455,185
1910	54	121	19,694	583,888
1915	45	115	17,710	583,747
1920	32	142	13,029	636,547
1930	12	70	13,920	692,849
1940	2	36	19,093	642,961

Sources: U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population*, 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940; South Dakota, *Census of the State of South Dakota*, 1895, 1905, 1915, 1925, 1935.

^aThe population of the northern and southern portions of Dakota Territory combined was 4,837 in 1860; 14,181 in 1870, and 135,177 in 1880.

females, between the ages of seven and sixty. The male-female ratio was 91 to 9; the average age for the group was 30.6 years, with 209 people, or 95 percent, between the ages of eighteen and forty-five. Like their Anglo-American counterparts in the American West, the Chinese in the Black Hills were mostly young, unmarried men.¹⁷

Seeking mutual support and native culture in a foreign country, the Chinese immigrants formed their own camp, commonly known as Chinatown, between Elizabethtown and Deadwood, as early as 1876. Actually, early Chinatown consisted of only a few unpainted wooden structures. Along with other surrounding camps, it was officially incorporated into the City of Deadwood in 1881. Located at the northern end of Main Street along Deadwood Gulch, Chinatown became the region's cultural center for Chinese immigrants, but it was never an exclusive Asian community as the Chinese originally wished.¹⁸ Instead, people of many races and walks of life moved in, including some African Americans and even the notorious Calamity Jane, who once resided in a small shack in Deadwood's Chinatown.¹⁹ Since Dakota Territory did not have a Jim Crow law, which required the separation of minority races from whites, ethnic concentration in a particular location was not a matter of legal coercion but individual choice. However, the low economic and social status of its residents made Chinatown more attractive to various business establishments associated with social vices and bawdy entertainment, such as saloons, theaters, brothels, dance halls, gambling houses, and opium dens. Drawing both morally and racially undesirable groups as its main dwellers and customers, the place soon received the nickname of "The Badlands."

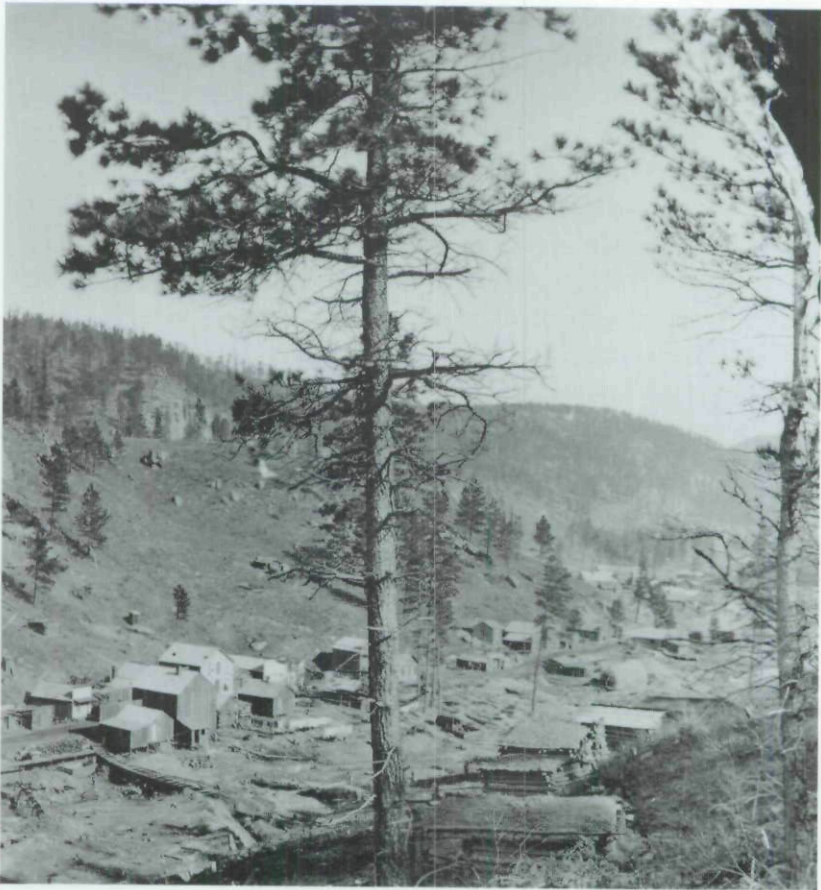
17. Ibid.

18. Dakota Territory, *An Act to Incorporate the City of Deadwood, Dakota Territory* (1881), pp. 1-27; Watson Parker, *Deadwood: The Golden Years*, pp. 17, 216-17; Sulentic, *Deadwood Gulch*, p. 55; Anderson, "Deadwood's Chinatown," p. 268.

19. *Tenth Census*, roll 113, sheets 247-284; Manuscript Population Schedule, Deadwood, Lawrence County, South Dakota, in *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900* (hereafter cited *Twelfth Census*), National Archives Microfilm Publication T623, roll 1551, sheets 100-289; *Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps*, Deadwood, South Dakota (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1885, 1891, 1897, 1903, 1909).

Ironically, the residents of this dynamic, multiethnic neighborhood, including the Chinese, were never isolated from the main society.

Certainly, the Chinese had no intention of excluding themselves from economic competition and pecuniary improvement. Although Chinese immigrants in nineteenth-century America generally encountered exploitation, injustice, and discrimination, they were aggressive in both the world of business and in the job market, trying to get the best deal they could. In western mining areas in the 1870s, a large percentage of the Chinese population was involved in placer op-



View of Deadwood Chinatown looking north, 1877

erations. By the time of the 1880 census, however, 50 percent of all Chinese in the Black Hills engaged in the laundry business; there were 110 laundrymen to only 39 miners. Their experience in the past quarter century of gold rushes had taught the Chinese immigrants that digging and shoveling for gold was not the only way to succeed on a mining frontier. A low-profile wash house often produced as much profit as a high-flown claim did. Other service professions, such as those of a cook or a servant, also provided these Asian immigrants with a degree of economic mobility. Hence, almost 70 percent of the Chinese in the region held service-oriented jobs.²⁰ While avoiding direct confrontation with white labor in some job markets, the Chinese maintained their competitiveness in others.

Chinese laundrymen arrived in the Black Hills with the first stampede of prospectors. Although laundry work was not a prestigious occupation, it was often quite profitable. Low investment and little risk almost guaranteed a hard worker's success. In China, women did most of the domestic work, including washing clothes. With the attraction of self-employment and the margin of decent profits, laundry in America drew many male Chinese immigrants, who preferred economic mobility over social status. A twenty-foot-by-twenty-foot wash house with necessary equipment could easily be set up for ten or twenty dollars. Free wood and water made operations inexpensive. One creative person, Coon Sing, located his wash house on the bridge over Whitewood Creek in Deadwood. In the late 1870s, when the daily wage for mining was between four and seven dollars, Chinese laundrymen charged twenty-five cents for a shirt or thirty-five cents for a heavy piece. Washing and ironing forty pieces a day meant a daily income of ten dollars or more. Avoiding direct competition with others in placer operation, most of the Chinese cleverly chose to "mine the miners" and "wash" for gold.²¹

Nevertheless, the Chinese dominance of the unpretentious but profitable laundry profession demonstrated their cultural awareness

20. *Tenth Census*, roll 113, sheets 247-284.

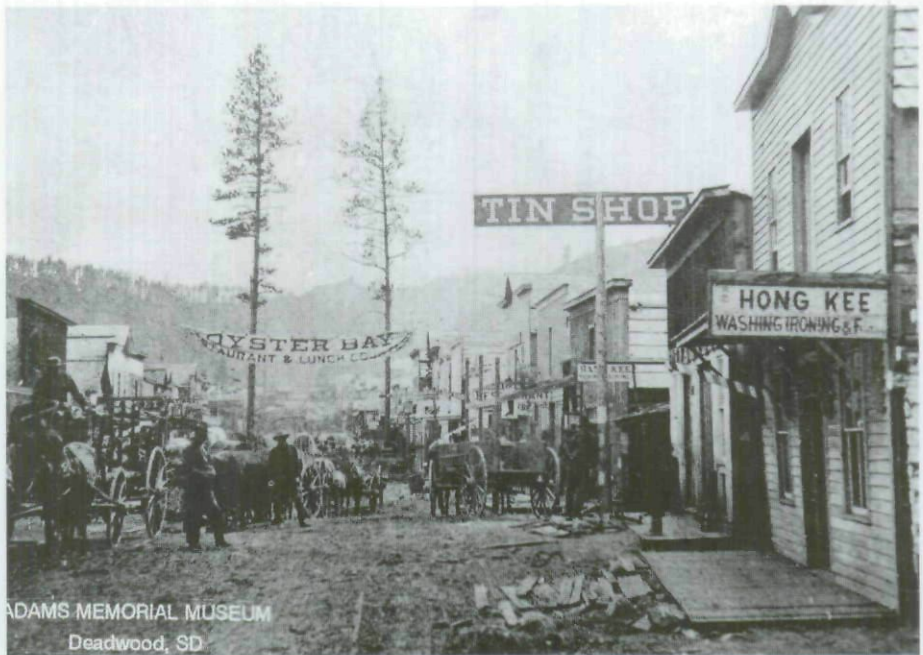
21. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 4 July, 1 Oct. 1877, 29 May 1878, 30 Sept. 1879; Anderson, "Deadwood's Chinatown," p. 272.

and business adroitness. The scarcity of women on the frontier created a high demand for domestic workers, and the Chinese seized the opportunity. Even in a community with enough white females who had little choice but to do such work for a living, the Chinese were still able to eliminate potential competitors by providing better service. In fact, according to a newspaper report, they avidly competed with one another for business. One Chinese man, new to town, was reported to have run down the street, downplaying another Chinese laundryman, shouting, "Coon Sing no good washee, me belly good washee."²² Not only did the Chinese laundrymen actively solicit customers in the neighborhood, they also offered a free pick-up and delivery service. A sense of pride and desire for privacy made most white men reluctant to take their dirty clothes to white women for cleaning. A combination of cultural and economic forces gave the Chinese laundries a monopoly, which in turn meant profits. As early as 1877, one newspaper article claimed that the prices charged by the Chinese were "so exorbitant that people of moderate means are unable to experience the luxuries of a clean shirt even once a week." The editor further urged those "knights of the washtub" to "place the price of a clean shirt within the reach of those not possessing 'bedrock' claims."²³ Frequent complaints about the high laundry prices implied a considerable amount of profit for Asian laundrymen.

To guarantee high profits, the Chinese tried to control the market and gave little tolerance to white competition. In 1880, two white women set up the Minneapolis Laundry in the town. All the Chinese laundries immediately dropped their prices, underselling their white competitors, and, as a result, the Minneapolis Laundry soon went out of business. The Chinese then raised prices to the previous level. A few years later, two white men founded the Deadwood Steam Laundry, accompanied with a bath house, giving the local community another hope of ending the Chinese monopoly. Praising its efficiency, the *Black Hills Daily Times* asked local citizens to "patronize this institution and not cater to the Mongolian elemen[t] of the city." But this

22. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 23 July 1880.

23. *Ibid.*, 14 July 1877 (quotation), 21 Sept. 1878, 23 July 1880.



Chinese laundries on lower Main Street, Deadwood, 1877

excitement was quickly dashed as Wong You leased the enterprise from the owners only a few months after its establishment.²⁴ According to Sanborn Company's fire insurance maps, the Chinese had strategically located laundries in every part of Deadwood and Lead. There was at least one Chinese laundry for each of the nearby communities, including Spearfish, Hot Springs, Sturgis, Golden Gate, Terraville, South Bend, Central City, Whitewood, and Rapid City. One ingenious Chinese, Hop Sing, enjoyed the only laundry establishment in Sturgis for years without ever doing actual washing. Instead, he sent all the dirty clothes to Deadwood, subcontracting the work to others.²⁵ By the

24. *Ibid.*, 20 Apr. 1880, 30 Aug., 4 Sept. 1887 (quotation); Liestman, "The Chinese," master's thesis, pp. 45–52.

25. *Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps*, Deadwood and Lead (1885, 1891, 1897); *Sturgis Weekly Record*, 29 Feb. 1884, 3 Sept. 1886, in Liestman, "The Chinese," master's thesis, p. 49.

early 1880s, no one expected to break the Chinese monopoly easily. The Chinese success in commercial laundry can surely be attributed to both individual skills and collective efforts.

The Chinese fought continuous political harassment to protect their lucrative business domain while they fended off business competitors. As soon as Deadwood was incorporated in 1881, a proposal was floated to tax Chinese laundries at a quarterly rate of twenty-five dollars. The rationale was to "create quite a convenient source of revenue." Four years later, the city council passed an ordinance relating to laundries, which required every wash house to obtain a ten-dollar permit every four months.²⁶ Advised by some American friends, the Chinese openly defied the law and refused to pay such a discriminatory tax. When Justice of the Peace Frank Hall went to collect the "fees," he discovered that some Chinese, in an effort to confuse the officials, had removed the laundry signs to vacant buildings. In the summer he had to order Marshal Dunn to raid all Chinese wash houses in Deadwood. After the arrests, all the Chinese demanded a fair trial and hired Judge Granville Bennett as their defense attorney, willing to "fight council to the end." Several convictions eventually led to general compliance with the ordinance.²⁷

The Chinese did not give up their fight until they exhausted all possible means. In 1887, a territorial law exempted laundries from licensing on the condition that an operator either be an American citizen or declare his intention to become one. A few Chinese promptly announced their intentions to become United States citizens and stopped paying licensing fees again. The courts upheld the Chinese decisions. Most people did acquire lawful business permits, but the small license fees actually had little impact on Chinese dominance in the laundry business. In 1892, the Deadwood city directory listed nine laundries; eight of them belonged to Chinese owners. One of the op-

26. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 26 Mar. 1881 (quotation); Deadwood, South Dakota, *An Ordinance Relating to Laundries, and Fixing the License Therefor, Ordinances of the City of Deadwood, South Dakota* (1893), p. 66.

27. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 4, 5, 6 (quotation) Aug. 1885; Liestman, "The Chinese," *JOW*, pp. 76-77.

erations also included a bath house to enlarge its services.²⁸ Throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many Chinese in the Black Hills made their profitable wash from common washtubs instead of gold pans.

Beginning in the 1890s, a number of Chinese quietly capitalized on the hungry stomachs and weary bodies of bachelor miners by running restaurants, hotels, and boardinghouses. Aware of the contemporary negative attitude toward Asian cuisine and culture, the Chinese injected as much western flavor as possible into their business establishments. Most of the Chinese eating houses bore American names such as "Sacramento Restaurant," "Philadelphia Café," "Lincoln Restaurant," "Bodega Café," "Elegant Restaurant," "OK Café," "Club Restaurant," "Empire Café," "Drakes Chinese Noodle," and "Paris Café." Some operated as if they were part of a white-owned establishment; for example, Sam Wols Chiung's Restaurant was located on the first floor of the Bullock Hotel in Deadwood. Except for a few exotic items like rice wine and chicken rice soup on the menu, the Chinese-owned restaurants mainly served familiar western dishes, including roast beef, T-bone steak, rabbit stew, French bread, and apple pie. Each meal usually cost only twenty-five cents, with a five-dollar discount plan that covered twenty-one meals. The restaurants were often open from early morning to late evening to accommodate their customers. The Empire Café was advertised in various issues of the local newspaper as a place with "everything new," "neat and clean," "best of Service," and "cuisine unexcelled." The Club Restaurant claimed that it had the "best table in city." Reasonable prices, fine cuisine, and prompt service assured these restaurants a stream of loyal customers.²⁹

Like the restaurant business, Chinese-owned hotels and boardinghouses demonstrated the individual shrewdness and business savvy of their owners. From names to furniture to service, these enterprises

28. Ibid.; *Minnesota, Dakota, and Montana Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1892-93*, vol. 8 (Chicago: R. L. Polk & Co., 1893).

29. Lawrence County, South Dakota, Assessment Rolls, 1899, 1902-1905, South Dakota State Historical Society (SDSHS), Pierre; *Twelfth Census*, roll 1551, sheets 100-289; *Deadwood Daily Pioneer-Times*, 1 July 1897, 3 July 1898, 20 Feb. 1902, 28 June, 14 Nov. 1905; Anderson, "Deadwood's Chinatown," p. 270.

DUBLIN HOTEL.

At Pat Smith's new town in Two Bit will open for business JUNE 1, 1898. Good rooms and meals. A first-class Hotel in every respect.

TOY & LUNG, Prop^r.

THE
Sacramento Restaurant
SING YOU & CO.

Will reopen in the building Next to the Mansion, lately occupied by Wilson & Kinny. The best meals and rooms in the city.

Rooms and Board \$25.00 Per Month
Meal Tickets \$5.00

THE ELEGANT....

The New first class and up to date

RESTAURANT

Located at No. 19 Lee St.

Will be open to the public on Thursday, Feb. 6, for 12 o'clock dinner. Cuisine and service unexcelled.

Meals 25c. **Wong Woo & Sam Wing, Props.**

Business advertisements, *Black Hills Daily Times*, ca. 1900

cleverly disguised themselves to appear as western as possible. In 1898, two Chinese men, Toy and Lung, opened a new boardinghouse in Two Bit and named it the "Dublin Hotel," apparently catering to white laborers, especially the Irish, who were usually an important work force in a western mining town. An advertisement in the 2 June 1898 issue of the *Deadwood Daily Pioneer Times* claimed, "A first-class hotel in every respect." One month later, Sing You described his new Palmer House in Deadwood as having "ten finely furnished rooms with hot and cold water and bath." The building, furniture, and bedding were all brand new. To make it look more genuine and American, Pain Fong's boardinghouse even hired a white widow, Francis Malhoney, as a servant.³⁰ These so-called hotels or boardinghouses charged each person twenty-five dollars per month for room and board, a very reasonable rate for ordinary people.³¹ No records showed

30. *Deadwood Daily Pioneer Times*, 2 June, 3 July 1898, 28 June 1905.

31. *Ibid.*, 28 June 1905.

any complaints about the quality of Chinese-owned boardinghouses; apparently they met either contemporary standards or local expectations.

In addition to plentiful service-related jobs and occupations (Table 2), Black Hills placer mining offered Chinese immigrants other golden opportunities for economic improvement. The early white resentment of the Chinese did not fully exclude them from gold washing. On the contrary, the Chinese, who tried to avoid direct confrontation with others in the industry, continued to work on either played-out claims or on land they had purchased. The earliest Chinese claim purchase took place in 1878. Although the total of Chinese miners never exceeded 18 percent of its population during this period, their success was noticeable and sometimes attracted envy from white prospectors. In the spring of 1880, the *Black Hills Daily Times* stated, "The Chinamen are all out in full force on their claims and have started in systematically, and as sly as you keep it. John is as good a miner as the most proficient Montana expert. He is a little slow but almighty certain."³² Later that fall, the newspaper enviously reported that the Chinese had "made good wages all summer." Some large nuggets were sold for fifteen to twenty-two dollars a piece.³³

In the next three decades, the record of deeds indicated the deep involvement of the Chinese in mining activities. The 1900 census identified only one Chinese miner in Lawrence County, but there were several exchanges of mining grounds involving the Chinese. Some purchases included several partners in each case. At the same time, those who held multiple jobs or ran more than one business were often classified as other than miners. For example, Wong Fee Lee, the head of Wing Tsue General Store, and Sing You, the owner of Sacramento Restaurant, frequently engaged in mining transactions and operations, but they were never listed as miners.³⁴ The court records

32. Lawrence County, South Dakota, Record of Deeds, vol. 4, p. 186, Lawrence County Courthouse, Deadwood, S.Dak.; *Tenth Census*, roll 113, sheets 191-205, 247-284; *Black Hills Daily Times*, 24 Apr. 1880.

33. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 19 Oct. 1880.

34. Lawrence County, Record of Deeds, vol. 67, p. 47; vol. 108, p. 395; vol. 140, p. 482; vol. 152, p. 331; vol. 160, pp. 78-79; vol. 170, pp. 366, 392; vol. 175, pp. 22, 280, 511, 570-71, 589.

Table 2. Occupations of Chinese in Lawrence County, 1880–1910

Occupation	1880	1900	1910
Barber	1	1	
Bathhouse keeper			1
Bookkeeper			1
Boarder	1		
Children	1	9	5
Clerk	2	1	1
Cook	21	28	6
Doctor	1		
Farmer		2	
Gambler		2	
Housekeeper	15	2	2
Inmate			1
Janitor		5	
Laborer	2	5	
Laundryman	110	37	18
Lodging-house keeper		5	
Merchant	4	5	6
Miner	39	1	1
Porter	2	1	
Prostitute	2		
Real-estate speculator	1		
Restaurant owner		12	6
Servant	19	1	
Waiter			5
No information		3	1
Total	221	120	54

Source: U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population*, 1880, 1900, 1910.

provide a truer picture of Chinese mining activities in the area than do the census records.

To a certain extent, various court documents also substantiate general newspaper accounts of the Chinese mining prosperity, at least furnishing some specific measurements of their achievement. Keeping a low profile for their own safety, both sellers and buyers sometimes concealed the exact amount of money of the purchase from the public. The recorded price of a piece of ground in the deed was only one dollar. Many official transactions, however, did show the real value of an exchange. Depending on size and quality, a placer claim could bring from one hundred to more than ten thousand dollars. Most claims sold for between two hundred fifty and five hundred dollars. In 1880, Ah Ping and Sam Sing sold their claim near White-wood for five hundred dollars and then spent three hundred dollars on a nice city lot in Deadwood. A few more affluent persons were willing to make bigger investments. In 1879, Sam Toy bought a claim for one thousand dollars. After seven years of extracting gold from the ground, he liquidated the property to a group of whites for half of the original price. In the early 1890s, a group of Chinese led by Wong Fee Lee confidently put down twelve thousand dollars for a piece of quartz ground. One share of the investment cost fifteen hundred dollars. These high-priced transactions implied not only Chinese willingness to take risks but also a handsome return of profits.³⁵

Though it is difficult to determine statistically, the Chinese in several professions experienced some level of upward economic mobility through their efforts. One Chinese wittily told the local newspaper, "A man got no money is no smart. Smart man always got money. Poor man no good."³⁶ The existing records show that at least a few lucky individuals fared extremely well. Fewer than 10 percent of the Chinese

35. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 186; vol. 11, p. 503; vol. 12, p. 128; vol. 15, p. 65; vol. 16, p. 93; vol. 33, p. 507; vol. 46, p. 429; vol. 108, pp. 115-16; vol. 116, p. 45; vol. 160, pp. 78-79; *Sing You vs. Wong Fee Lee* (1901), Eighth Circuit Court Records, Civil Case Files (CCF), 1886-1935, Box 43, SDSHS. The name of Wong Fee Lee is presented here as it appears in the United States census and deed records. He is typically identified as Fee Lee Wong in the newspapers and other published articles.

36. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 6 Mar. 1880.

population ever appeared on the tax assessment rolls, and those who did were obviously most affluent. In 1879, the average assessment value of their properties was \$331. The number almost doubled to \$633 in seven years. During the same period merchant Wong Fee Lee increased his personal wealth from \$1,620 to \$3,200. By 1900, his total assets included \$3,620 in real estate and \$9,000 in quartz mines. In 1890, the value of another Chinese store owned by Hi Kee & Company already exceeded ten thousand dollars.³⁷ While most of the Chinese in the Black Hills could not claim such assets, the laundry and restaurant proprietors were part of the region's self-employed middle class.

Aware of the importance of racial equality in economic competition, the Chinese strenuously fought for political and legal rights, although they were not party to full benefits from the American legal system in the nineteenth century. They were not allowed to serve on juries or influence legislation. Nevertheless, Chinese immigrants made the best efforts they could to defend their rights in the existing system. Almost from the start, Dakota's judicial authorities and law enforcement officers assured the Chinese of equal protection, especially from physical harm and property damage. As early as 1877 the courts began to punish anyone who took violent action against a Chinese resident or even raised a threat. In one case, a Chinese woman in Elizabethtown reported to the authorities that two whites spat tobacco in her face. They were immediately arrested and put on trial. One was convicted and punished accordingly. A newspaper article warned such mischievous persons, saying, "Chinamen had no rights in the Hills that the whites were bound to respect, but it is different now. The celestials receive the same protection in our courts of law that white men are favored with."³⁸ Personal safety was the minimum requirement for surviving in a strange land.

As their basic rights were affirmed, the Chinese boldly asked the American legal system to respect some of their customs by allowing

37. Lawrence County, Assessment Rolls, 1879-1905, SDSHS; *Sing You vs. Wong Fee Lee* (1901).

38. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 23 Oct. 1877, 24, 26 June, 13 Sept. 1879, 9 Sept. 1880 (quotation), 30 May 1883.

non-western etiquette in United States courts. As a result of the 1866 Civil Rights Act and the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), all previously underprivileged racial groups gained the right to testify against whites in court. Since Chinese immigrants were not Christians, the question of whether a Chinese witness could be bound by a Christian oath became a major issue in the American judicial system. Both American and Chinese-style oaths were accepted in the court, but the form chosen usually depended on the presiding judge. In the late nineteenth century, it was common for a Chinese witness to ask for a native oath-taking ceremony in the court. If the judge granted permission, each witness cut off a live chicken's head to draw the blood on a platter. The witness, who had written his oath on a piece of paper, dipped it in the blood. The paper then was properly burned with a candle. Once, two Chinese defendants, through their attorney, asked Judge Clark for this kind of ceremony. In denying such an animal sacrifice, Judge Clark joked that he would rather spare a chicken than a Chinese. One of the accused was eventually acquitted, while the other "remained in jail in default of \$1,500 bail."³⁹

Meanwhile, the Chinese put subtle pressure on the local community for fair play in the legal system by threatening to set up their own court. In the spring of 1884, Deadwood policeman Charley LaBresche was invited to observe a Chinese tribunal. As soon as he entered the hall, a man with his hands tied behind him was brought to the center of the room. He was accused of frequently threatening his countrymen and freely using "his knife with dangerous results." In front of all attendants, one of the self-appointed judges read the indictment and verdict. The punishment was thirty-six lashes on the bare back and banishment from the community. Using "a bundle of green birch," three executioners took turns carrying out the sentence. "After a few artistic whirls," each one "brought it down on the nearly

39. The Chinese oath-taking ceremony was widely accepted by western courts in the nineteenth century. Documents show that judges in Idaho, Montana, and other western states often allowed this kind of ceremony held in court. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 31 Mar. 1880; *Owyhee Avalanche*, 26 June 1869; Thomas Donaldson, *Idaho of Yesterday* (Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1941), pp. 52–53; John R. Wunder, "Chinese in Trouble: Criminal Law and Race on the Trans-Mississippi West Frontier," *Western Historical Quarterly* 17 (Jan. 1986): 25–41.

nude back with all the force that was in him." Realizing his own position as "a conservator of the peace," LaBresche finally decided to intervene and told the executioners that "they had given him enough." The convict was then taken to a rear room to await deportation. "Wine and cigars and confectionary [sic] wound up the ceremonies."⁴⁰ As Americans often held frontier courts in saloons, the Chinese introduced alcohol into its tribunal. Although the quasi-legal system existed in almost every Chinese community in the American West, the deliberate invitation of an officer to the Chinese trial and the consequent front-page report probably served the special purpose of persuading local whites to consider judicial fairness for everyone. Otherwise, the people could simply take the law into their own hands.

As long as courts in Dakota Territory allowed the Chinese to file complaints against anyone, including whites, in civil disputes, Asian residents apparently put their faith in the American legal system. The existing court documents and contemporary reports indicate that the Chinese, with the assistance of white counsel, used litigation frequently and skillfully to defend their self-interests. The earliest case occurred in 1877 when Coon Sing appeared before Justice Baker to charge John Dough, an African American, for "having stolen clothes from his laundry."⁴¹ The offender was eventually brought to justice. The Chinese also challenged whites. In one case, a Chinese cook, who worked for a white-owned hotel, took his boss to court, with Coon Sing acting as an interpreter this time. The plaintiff demanded twenty dollars for overdue wages. According to the report, "four lawyers and a small army of Chinamen were found necessary to try the case," with the final judgment in favor of the employee.⁴² In another similar case, Ah Sam sued Runkel-Rowley Company for unpaid wages in South Dakota's Eighth Circuit Court. Between July 1895 and October 1896, the plaintiff worked for the company as a cook, agreeing to accept a salary of forty dollars per month. By October 1897, the company still owed Ah Sam the sum of \$233.89. Hiring a white lawyer, Ah Sam

40. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 16 Mar. 1884.

41. *Ibid.*, 16 June 1877.

42. *Ibid.*, 8 Sept. 1880.

even demanded that interest be included. After a year of legal battle, Judge Joseph Moore finally awarded him a total of \$262.04.⁴³

On occasion, Chinese took collective action in challenging a company, a group, or even the local government. As the leading Chinese merchandise seller since 1883, Hi Kee was located on the lower Main Street of Deadwood. In 1893, the city government passed a resolution ordering improvement of the street. The project included curbing, draining, and grading. To make the other sections of the street conform with the improved portion, workers raised the sidewalk about fifteen inches in front of Hi Kee's gaudy brick building. As a result, the doorsteps and floor of the store were suddenly located below street level and became less attractive for business. In 1895, the ten business partners, led by Yee Dan Gee, decided to take the city to the state's Eighth Circuit Court and demanded a compensation of one thousand dollars. Hiring W. S. Elder as their attorney, the Chinese argued that raising the street level had made their stores more susceptible to flooding from both rain and melting ice. In addition, they claimed that the city did not put sufficient drainage gutters around the buildings. The owners had to spend at least seven hundred dollars to protect the premises. During the trial, Judge Adoniram Plowman subpoenaed several city officials to testify. The litigation lasted for more than a year. Finally, in February 1896, the judge dismissed the case "on its merits."⁴⁴ The real message here was not the outcome of the case but the courage of the Chinese, who were perfectly willing to protect the group interest even if it meant taking on the local power elite.

In solving conflicts among themselves, from property rights to marriage disputes, the Chinese also relied on the American judicial system. One interesting case gave the court and public a dose of ethnic complexity. After paying another Chinese eleven hundred dollars for a woman, Charles Gam took her from Deadwood to Crook City, where they were married by a justice of the peace. But Lin Hem, the former boyfriend of the bride, tried to steal his lover back. He was charged

43. *Ah Sam vs. Runkel-Rowley Company* (1898), Eighth Circuit Court Records, CCF 1886-1935, Box 29, SDSHS.

44. *Yee Dan Gee et al. vs. City of Deadwood* (1895), Eighth Circuit Court Records, CCF 1886-1935, Box 25, SDSHS.

with grand larceny. At the trial, Hem proved that he “had a right to marry the woman without buying her at the above price.” Justice Barker accepted this argument and awarded the bride to Hem.⁴⁵ Another case over property disputes went all the way to the Supreme Court of South Dakota. In the early 1890s, Wong Fee Lee, Hiram Young, and others invested in some quartz lodes near Deadwood. Wong Fee Lee owned a six-eighth share and Young one-eighth. In 1893, Sing You agreed to pay fifteen hundred dollars to Wong Fee Lee for Young’s

45. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 30 June 1877.



Wong Fee Lee with family members

share. During the patent proceedings, Sing You left on a three-year trip to China, having paid only seven hundred fifty dollars. While he was absent, the deal was finalized. Because Sing You never came up with the full amount, the remaining one-half of Young's one-eighth interest went to four other buyers. After his return from China, Sing You demanded a full one-eighth share. Following a few years of bickering with Wong, Young, and the four other buyers, Sing You decided to take them to the Eighth Circuit Court in 1901. The lengthy trial ended the following year with a decision in favor of the defendants. Denied a new trial by Judge J. B. Moore, Sing You immediately appealed to the State Supreme Court. In 1902, the upper court affirmed the lower court's decision.⁴⁶ For seven hundred fifty dollars, the plaintiff and defendants fought an almost decade-long battle. Such determination in pursuing justice in a foreign land required emotional fortitude as well as financial capability.

For additional protection, the Chinese maintained some old but effective methods, such as cultivating good relationships with white policemen, judges, lawyers, and politicians. When the Chinese were involved in litigation, they regularly hired white lawyers who had earned their trust, some of whom were former or future judges. In 1877, Federal Judge Granville Bennett arrived in Deadwood to change the town's notorious habits of lawlessness and made his reputation for bringing law and order. Knowing his power, some Chinese offered to cook for his family. As his daughter Estelline Bennett later recalled, Judge Bennett could command a cook or dishwasher on a moment's notice, even when Chinese cooks were scarce in town. During holidays the Chinese presented Asian-inspired gifts to his wife and daughter. Estelline Bennett wrote, "the connection was valuable to us in many ways." Of course, the Chinese were the real beneficiaries and soon asked the judge to be their "unofficial counsel." His service to Chinese clients consisted "entirely in seeing that they were given fair trials." Sometimes, his court proved to be more than just fair. When

46. *Sing You vs. Wong Free* [sic] *Lee et al.* (1902), Eighth Circuit Court Records, CCF 1886-1935, Box 43, SDSHS; *Northwestern Reporter* (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Co., 1903), 92:1073-75.

Chinese men were arrested for selling opium, Judge Bennett often managed to secure an acquittal. His daughter's naive explanation was, "If a Chinaman wanted to smoke opium, who cared?" After serving his term, Judge Bennett practiced law in Deadwood and had many Chinese clients. Again in the 1890s, Bennett was elected county judge. Without question, his court was friendly to his former clients.⁴⁷

Perhaps the most powerful guardian of Chinese interests was Deadwood's mayor, Sol Star. As early as 1877, some Chinese residents became acquainted with Star, who was then a prospector and city council member, and asked him to help facilitate some mining transactions for small service fees. The relationship between Star and the Chinese gradually deepened. In the next three decades, Star was, if not a business partner, an outspoken advocate of the Chinese in Deadwood. In addition to selling and buying properties from each other, Star and certain members of the Chinese business community worked together on projects that ranged from investing in mining claims to taking out bank loans. Around the time the city was incorporated, Star became mayor of Deadwood, a post he held for twenty-two years. Starting in the early 1890s, he was elected clerk of the Lawrence County Court and served well into the new century. During his tenure as mayor and court clerk, Star did his best to protect the Chinese from injustice and violence. Meanwhile, the Chinese community looked upon him as its mentor, often going to him for advice and information. For example, the continuous shooting of firecrackers beginning at sundown on the eve of the Chinese New Year annoyed most of the local residents, who wanted to ban such practice. Instead of prohibiting firecrackers altogether, Mayor Star persuaded white residents to make a compromise, confining firecracker discharges to the hours between 2:00 A.M. and 5:00 A.M. on New Year's Day. Starting in 1892, Deadwood assigned a police officer to Chinatown during its holidays "to prevent malicious mischief and interruptions by ruffians" and give the Chinese greater security for their celebrations.⁴⁸ One

47. Estelline Bennett, *Old Deadwood Days* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 27-29.

48. Lawrence County, Record of Deeds, vol. 5, pp. 333-34; vol. 26, p. 580; vol. 33, p. 552;

white pioneer later recalled that Mayor Star “worked for the best interests of both races and it is probably due to this fact that both Chinese and white people were able to live so harmoniously in the days of stress and strife.”⁴⁹

Although the Chinese were not without some legal rights and extralegal protection, they understood the occasional need to settle disputes outside Dakota’s courts in the rougher arena of frontier justice. As a result of a few high-profile incidents in the nineteenth-century American West, the Chinese are sometimes viewed as innocent victims of racial violence. Although there is no record of collective violence against them in the Black Hills, neither were they spared immunity from acts of individual violence any more than their counterparts in the larger community. A frontier mining town was a rough-and-tumble existence, and the residents of Chinatown could not expect police protection on every occasion but often had to be self-reliant when it came to personal safety. An insult or assault invited Chinese retaliation. In 1896, when a white man attempted to pull the queue of a Chinese man for fun, the targeted man immediately knocked his attacker down and kicked him into submission, which a newspaper editor said “served him exactly right.” The editor went on to comment, “It is more than likely that ‘Englewood Jimmie’ fully understands that he cannot take liberties with a Chinaman’s ‘queue.’”⁵⁰ In another case, a mischievous white youth used his blowgun to shoot a pellet into the eye of a passing Chinese man. The enraged man dashed after the youth and started a fistfight. In their struggle, the two broke a store window. The Chinese man quickly paid the owner half of the damage, and the other half was “charged to the boy’s father.”⁵¹ Many similar incidents reminded residents in the region that the Chinese were not passive targets of mischievous or violent activities.

vol. 40, p. 242; vol. 60, p. 535; vol. 170, p. 392; *Deadwood National Bank vs. Sol Star, Kin Kee, & Yick Fow* (1894), Eighth Circuit Court Records, CCF 1886–1935, Box 23, SDSHS; Liestman, “The Chinese,” master’s thesis, pp. 85–87.

49. *Black Hills Weekly & Daily Telegram*, 24 May 1928.

50. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 1 Feb. 1896.

51. *Ibid.*, 25 June 1892.

At times, self-defense required more than fists. According to contemporary reports and documents, many Chinese immigrants, who were not allowed to own any firearm in China, found their new freedom in America. They not only possessed various weapons but also frequently violated local gun ordinances by carrying concealed weapons or firing them illegally. The newspapers commonly ran items describing incidents, such as the *Black Hills Daily Times* report on 6 February 1878 announcing, "Three pistol shots were fired in quick succession in Chinatown early this morning by some of the Celestials." In December 1880, a Chinese man who had just purchased a rifle went up Deadwood Gulch to test his weapon. After unknowingly putting his target mark on the wall of the city's powder magazine, he "prepared to blaze away." Before anything happened, John Allen, a bystander, promptly stopped him and prevented a possible disaster. Another report, dated 1 August 1883, described the fairly common occurrence of "the Chinamen residing in isolated places amusing themselves by shooting off pistols and then rushing into their houses and bolting the doors." On 11 January 1891, the *Daily Times* reported the arrest of a Chinese man by an Officer Connors, who "was not a little astonished on searching the fellow to find a revolver, pretty nearly a yard long, and carrying a ball as big as a pigeon's egg."⁵² Psychologically, six-shooters offered individual Chinese a sense of security and equality, lending aptness to historian Walter Prescott Webb's observation that "God made some men large and some small, but Colonel Colt made them all equal."⁵³

Like other knife-carrying and gun-toting westerners, the Chinese in the Black Hills rarely hesitated to use deadly weapons against anyone for self-defense, in property disputes, or criminal activity. Their aggressiveness was reported in newspaper accounts, such as the following from 4 March 1878: "Two Chinamen got into a row last Saturday in Bear Gulch and one stabbed the other in the left side with a butcher knife, inflicting, it is thought, a fatal wound." Sometimes a woman was at the heart of the conflict, as in the case on 25 January 1879 of the

52. *Ibid.*, 6 Feb. 1878, 14 Dec. 1880, 1 Aug. 1883, 11 Jan. 1891.

53. Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1931), p. 494.

"two Chinamen [who] got into a dispute here this evening, about a woman, which resulted in one trying to shoot the other." The weapons were sometimes unusual. "Yesterday afternoon," one news story from 24 August 1877 recounted, "a couple of celestials started on the war-path down in Chinatown, one armed himself with a razor, the other with a hatchet."⁵⁴

In protecting their property and safety, the Chinese appeared even more determined to pursue the so-called frontier justice. In December 1895, three white men went to the Chinese-owned South Dakota Restaurant for supper. After dinner they realized they had left the pre-purchased meal ticket at home. One of them tried to explain matters to the owner and promised that he would go back to get it. Mistaking the intention of this customer as another trick of a meal hustler, the angry Chinese owner grabbed a cleaver from the counter and lunged. The sharp blade cut through the customer's coat and two shirts into his arm. The restaurant owner was quickly arrested. After discovering the misunderstanding, the Chinese man, with the help of his friends, offered to settle the case out of court. There was no pity, however, for a true perpetrator. One evening in 1884, a Missourian forced his way into a Chinese residence in Spearfish and robbed the man of \$14.50 in cash. Unexpectedly, the Chinese man pulled out a gun and fired at the robber. The first shot missed the target and the second hit his hand. Surprised, the Missouri ruffian, with bleeding hand, immediately fled the place, afraid of both Chinese bullets and sheriff's warrant. The Chinese man was not charged for any wrongdoing.⁵⁵ These incidents help dispel the image of Chinese as passive victims of frontier violence.

While employing extralegal methods to defend their own rights, a number of Chinese also violated others' rights by engaging in illegal activities. Crime was often the choice for someone trying to survive in a competitive world. In the wild years of the late 1870s, Chinese in the Black Hills murdered several of their own countrymen. None of the cases were ever solved. Except for a relatively few cases of murder

54. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 24 Aug. 1877 (quotation), 4 Mar. 1878, 25 Jan. 1879.

55. *Ibid.*, 16 May 1884, 19 Dec. 1895.

or assault and battery, the crimes committed by the Chinese were usually nonviolent and property-related, ranging from stealing their neighbors' chickens to fencing public land. It was not unusual for laundrymen to be caught unlawfully keeping customers' clothes. Since the Chinese loved chicken for their diet, neighbors' hens often ended up in their pots. A few creative minds developed a unique method for committing this theft. Using a fishing line with a piece of beef on the hook, they threw the bait into the neighbor's yard and then waited inside their own cabin. When the chicken took the bait, they quietly hauled it back into their kitchen.⁵⁶ Some criminal activities were less insidious but no less troublesome. In one case, two Chinese men and a white woman illegally occupied a mineral lot in Deadwood belonging to a few whites and refused to leave. The legal owners had to take the case to the county court in order to repossess the land. In nearby Custer County, a Chinese man, Fong Kun, fenced off six hundred acres of federal lands for his exclusive use. After being indicted by the grand jury, he pleaded guilty in federal court and received a fine of one hundred fifty dollars.⁵⁷

If a statute were unjust, the Chinese rarely had a second thought about openly breaking the law. They often used the weapon of civil disobedience to challenge legal injustice in society. In the early 1880s, almost three decades before Congress outlawed opium, Dakota Territory passed its own opium code to prohibit both the use and sale of the substance. Any violator was subject to either a thirty-day imprisonment or a one-hundred-dollar fine. In 1894, the City of Deadwood also passed an opium ordinance. In enforcing the law, the local police often targeted the Chinese, many of whom smoked opium as part of their social life. Their "poppy houses" also received white customers. To challenge this racially motivated drug war, the Chinese frequently violated the law and kept their opium dens open. On many occasions, convicted smokers and dealers chose to stay in jail rather than pay

56. *Ibid.*, 16 Apr. 1884, 2 Nov. 1892.

57. *William Stillwell et al vs. Sing Lee et al* (1884), Lawrence County Court Records, CCF 1879-1906, SDSHS; *U.S. vs. Fong Kun* (1910), District of South Dakota, Western Division, CCF 1890-1938, Records of the District Courts of the United States, Record Group (RG) 21, National Archives Central Plains Region (NA-CPR), Kansas City, Mo.

finer in order to put a financial burden on the government. In early 1895, the *Black Hills Daily Times* reported the conviction of three Chinese men, Hi Wo, Jim Kee, and Mon Sing, for "keeping of smoking houses." They refused to pay their fines, ranging from fifty to seventy-five dollars each. After a month, Sheriff Remer presented the city council a seventy-one-dollar bill for boarding the Chinese prisoners, who were said to be "perfectly satisfied to remain there indefinitely so long as they did not have to work." Considering that it was too costly to keep the prisoners, Mayor Steele finally issued an order to release these three men from the county jail without collecting a single penny for the fine.⁵⁸ Such a strategy of civil disobedience more or less neutralized the opium laws by making local government less interested in enforcing it.

The Chinese in the Black Hills also challenged federal laws at the local level. In 1892, ten years after the Chinese Exclusion Act, Congress put additional restrictions on Chinese immigration by passing the Geary Act, which required all Chinese immigrants in the United States to register with the Internal Revenue Service and keep their identification papers with them all the time. Anyone who failed to do so would be deported. Led by the Chinese Six Companies of San Francisco, an ethnic organization with quasi-governmental functions, the Chinese-American community fought vigorously against the new discriminatory law. Not only did these immigrants initiate many test cases in various places from San Francisco to New York, but most of them also turned their backs on the government's demands. As historian Lucy E. Salyer noted, "Chinese did not simply complain about the new law; they also refused to obey it."⁵⁹ Joining the massive resistance by their countrymen across the United States, more than 90 percent of Chinese in the Black Hills did not comply with the law. Instead, they hired several attorneys, threatening that their "countrymen were going to fight the registry law if it took all the money they had." The battle

58. *Dakota vs. Wing Tsue* (1882), Lawrence County Court Records, CCF 1879-1906, SDSHS; Dakota Territory, *The Completed Laws of the Territory of Dakota* (1887), pp. 495-96; *Black Hills Daily Times*, 7 Feb. 1895, 5, 9 Mar. 1895.

59. Salyer, *Laws Harsh as Tigers: Chinese Immigrants and the Shaping of Modern Immigration Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 46.

with United States marshals lasted for a couple of years until most of the Chinese eventually acquired registration papers.⁶⁰ However, the resistance to the Geary Act cost the federal government dearly.

Constant battles for economic success and legal rights did not prevent the Chinese from developing a relatively good relationship with the local community, often by making certain social and cultural concessions. Understanding the importance of getting along with the majority in daily life, the Chinese actively pursued an ideal of cultural tolerance and racial inclusion. In addition to common activities like business transactions and social gatherings, special events, such as Chinese funerals, New Year's celebrations, and the Fourth of July, provided great opportunities for ethnic education.

In some cases, cultural infusion took place. Chinese funerals in Deadwood were a good example. After a Chinese person died, the body was temporarily left in the care of the county coroner until the Chinese community determined a proper day for the ceremony. A Chinese funeral in Deadwood started at the Joss House, a religious center, where the casket was laid. Next to the coffin was a table full of foods, fruits, tea, incense sticks, and tapers. Some local dignitaries and white friends were always invited. After the performance of Chinese rituals, a gong sounded, announcing the beginning of the funeral march from Chinatown to Mount Moriah Cemetery. While the party was passing through the town, firecrackers were set off to expel evil spirits. In the nineteenth century, it almost became a western tradition for the Chinese to hire an American band to lead the funeral procession. The Black Hills were no exception; every Chinese funeral procession was led by Deadwood City's brass band. The wail of Chinese mourners and the music of the brass band together created an almost theatrical scene for the town. Starting in the 1890s, the brass band even learned how to play some Chinese melodies for the event. At the burial site, Chinese presented food, including roasted pigs, boiled chicken, and sweet beef for the ritual. According to the Asian custom, the deceased was not going to starve in the next world. A local legend holds that once a Deadwood citizen asked a Chinese mourner

60. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 13 May 1892 (quotation), 13, 20, 26 May 1893.

whether the dead would ever rise to eat the feast prepared for him. The Chinese wittily replied, "Same time Melican [American] man comes up to smell the flowers."⁶¹ A Chinese funeral usually drew a large crowd of white spectators, including visitors from nearby towns. One reporter wrote of this ceremonial occasion, "To those who have never witnessed a Chinese burial it is a very amusing and in fact picturesque affair."⁶²

61. Liestman, "The Chinese," master's thesis, pp. 78–85; *Black Hills Daily Times*, 2 Sept. 1878, 6 Nov. 1879, 27 Oct. 1880, 28 June 1888, 3 Feb. 1891, 2 Dec. 1893, 1 June 1898. The quotation appears in Parker, *Deadwood*, p. 146.

62. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 25 Jan. 1896.



Burial Service of High Lee, Deadwood, 1891



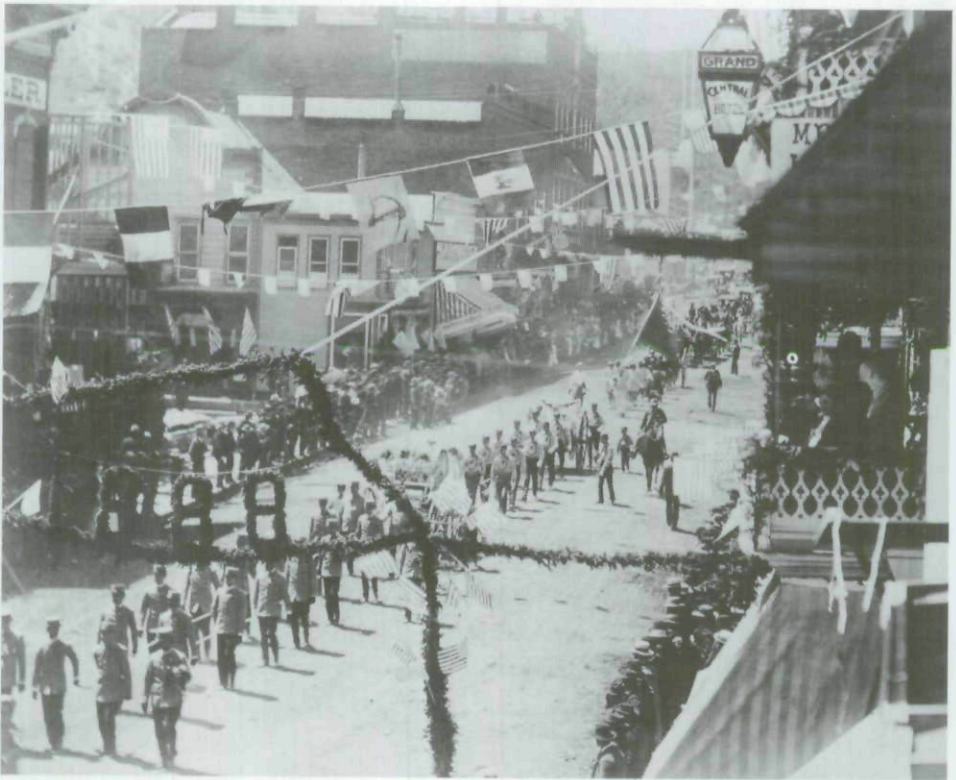
Chinese funeral procession, Mount Moriah Cemetery, Deadwood

Chinese New Year was another exciting occasion for local residents who wished to view the exotic. The Chinese often spent weeks in preparing for their biggest holiday of the year, decorating their dwellings and stores with colored papers, banners, ribbons, lanterns, and ornaments. During the holiday season, candles were burning all day. About midnight following the New Year's Eve banquet, celebrants set off firecrackers intermittently, which lasted until the next morning. On New Year's Day, all Chinese residences and stores stayed open to receive visitors. Tables were loaded with candies, nuts, fruits, cigars, liquors, and gifts. Guests felt free to enjoy anything they liked. A great number of whites usually paid a call to Chinatown. "During the day," one report from 30 January 1881 described, "there was a constant stream pouring into their [Chinese] houses, consisting of ministers, Indian agents, express messengers, postal agents, bull whackers, mule skinnors and ladies, to say nothing of children and rounders, all

participating in such of the festivities as had been left by the night herd.”⁶³ In 1880, for example, most of Deadwood’s white women reportedly visited Chinatown during the holiday season. It was likely the only time of the year for “respectable” ladies to set foot in the so-called Badlands. Children went for candies and nuts; young men preferred rice whiskey. Some happily commented that “it has cheering qualities that are superior to our native sour mash.”⁶⁴ Despite the fact that people went to Chinatown with different motives, Chinese New Year gradually turned into a festival for all races.

63. *Ibid.*, 30 Jan. 1881 (quotation), 8 Feb. 1883, 8 Jan. 1891, 8 Feb. 1896.

64. *Ibid.*, 22 Jan. 1879, 8 Feb. 1880 (quotation).



Fourth of July parade with Chinese marchers (center, in white), Deadwood, 1888



Hi Kee's hose team, Deadwood, 1888

Just as they welcomed Americans to their Chinese celebration, Chinese wisely participated in American holiday activities whenever there was a chance. As early as 1879, more than two dozen Chinese individuals and firms made their contributions to Deadwood's Fourth of July fund. The *Black Hills Daily Times* praised their patriotism and reminded many whites to do the same. The editor wrote, "Our heathen residents are not such a bad crowd after all, when there is a deficiency to be made up for any patriotic purpose. They have already contributed to our Fourth of July fund \$45, and stand ready to give more if their [American] neighbors fail to make up the amount required to settle the expense of our celebration, which still lacks about \$40."⁶⁵ Throughout their stay in the area, the Chinese regularly contributed to the celebration of Independence Day. A few businessmen might have seen this as an opportunity for selling more fireworks, but most individuals participated to better public relations. As a result, the newspaper listed these Chinese donors' names side by side with those

65. Ibid., 11 July 1879.

of other white citizens, often addressing them with conciliatory terms such as "our Chinese neighbors" and "our Chinese friends."

In 1888, the Fourth of July executive committee for the first time officially invited the Chinese community to participate in the parade, and it promptly responded to the call. According to the newspaper report, the Chinese display was unique, as the participants dressed in both native and western clothes and carried Chinese flags and banners. A Chinese band played Asian music. The Chinese column received an ovation as it passed through Main Street. After the parade, two Chinese fire-hose teams entered the competition for the title of "fastest team in the world." Each consisted of ten men pulling a two-wheeled cart loaded with fire hoses. As the largely white crowd cheered for the racers, Hi Kee & Company's team won the contest by covering a distance of two hundred yards in 30.25 seconds.⁶⁶ Certainly, enthusiastic participation in the celebration of the Fourth of July had a positive influence on reshaping public opinions about Chinese immigrants.

The adoption of some elements of the dominant culture was another way to improve race relations. While keeping their ethnic identity to some degree, the Chinese conscientiously embraced American culture by living, acting, and playing like their neighbors. Except for special occasions such as festivals and funerals, most Chinese men and women wore western clothes. In 1883, women were reported to appear in the "Yankee form" of dress, such as "a dark blue calico gown and a modern straw hat." Men preferred suits, boots, and derby hats. The *Black Hills Daily Times* for 14 September 1895 described a "Chinese cowboy," who had been "seen on the street yesterday. He was rigged out with leather pantalets, belt, cartridges and gun."⁶⁷

Language, however, served as the primary vehicle for building relationships between the groups, and the Chinese in the Black Hills worked hard to learn English. Chinese families took advantage of the free, integrated public education in Dakota Territory by sending their children to schools. Sometimes, adults wanted to enjoy this privilege

66. Ibid., 4 July 1883, 6 July 1888, 9 June 1891.

67. Ibid., 7 June 1883, 14 Sept. 1895.



Wong Yeo in traditional dress with western hat

as well. In 1881, a newspaper report noted, "A Chinaman, full grown, has lately been entered as a student in our public school, and reads in the second reader. He is making remarkable improvement."⁶⁸ Other adults attended the night school sponsored by religious groups. In the spring of 1884, for example, fifteen Chinese enrolled in the evening classes offered by the Congregational Church. Because of their strong

68. Ibid., 7, 13 (quotation) Jan. 1881.

desire to learn and concentrated effort, many Chinese immigrants spoke fluent English. A few Chinese also adopted American names like Richard Roe, Jim Otis, George Wang, and even Hot Stuff.⁶⁹

In fact, true acculturation required more than just accepting the dominant culture's costume, language, or name. Like other pioneers in the community, the Chinese were willing to try new things and to follow their neighbors' lead regarding conduct and lifestyle. In 1879, a Chinese man opened a saloon in Deadwood's Chinatown. Imitating white owners in the same business, he posted behind the bar a prominent sign that read, "In God we trust; all others must pay cash."⁷⁰ When the fad of bicycling hit the country in the late nineteenth century, it was not unusual to see a Chinese person riding a bicycle on the streets of Deadwood. Seeking more memorable pastimes, a few took trips to other parts of the United States to sightsee. One day in 1893, a Chinese man named Murk, who was employed by Judge McLaughlin, brought a friend to the office. Murk told his boss that he was going to Chicago to visit the World's Columbian Exposition and asked the judge if his friend could replace him at work during his absence. Although a little surprised, the judge was delighted to grant his employee's self-planned vacation. He also advised Murk to "stop at the Saratoga hotel in Chicago where he would find Dan McLaughlin, Will Whealen and a lot of Chinamen from the Black Hills."⁷¹

The more the Chinese became Americanized, the more accepted they were by the majority in society. The relationship between Chinese and Americans in the Black Hills improved steadily in the late nineteenth century. To many whites, Chinese culture became less offensive and more tolerated, as these examples demonstrate. Celebrating their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, John Baggaley and his wife surprised their dinner guests by lighting the entire house with Chinese lanterns. The elegant party drew a news report. One newlywed white couple hired a Chinese band to play at their wedding reception,

69. *U.S. vs. Long On* (1892) and *U.S. vs. George Wang* (1892), District of South Dakota, Western Division, CCF 1890-1938, RG 21, NA-CPR; *Black Hills Daily Times*, 1 Mar. 1883, 22, 23 May 1896.

70. *Black Hills Daily Times*, 17 Aug. 1879.

71. *Ibid.*, 3 May 1896, 17 Oct. 1893 (quotation).

an unprecedented event that was reported to have given friends and guests a great time at the party.⁷²

Despite some unerasable racial and ethnic differences, by the 1890s the Chinese had become part of the larger community. Even those less tolerant white citizens had to acknowledge the reality of coexistence. Chinese began to be referred to as "old timers," "pioneers," and "neighbors" instead of the identifiers the papers had used decades earlier, such as "moon-eyed John," "triangle-eyed heathen," or "celestial brethren."⁷³ When three Chinese merchants from Hi Kee & Company took a trip to China, the *Black Hills Daily Times* of 15 December 1894 expressed its best wishes, saying, "All of them are well-known and reputable Chinamen of Deadwood and we hope they may have a safe and pleasant journey, as well as a speedy return to this, their adopted country."⁷⁴ The same newspaper, which cried the "Chinese must go" fifteen years earlier, now chanted a very different message: "Chinese come back."

Although the local community became more welcoming to these Asian immigrants over the years, the national political environment around the turn of the new century became less favorable for them. The federal policy of Chinese exclusion took a heavy toll on this ethnic group. Starting in 1882, a series of measures to restrict Chinese immigration to the United States effectively reduced the number of Chinese in this country. Because of an overwhelmingly male population, this "bachelor society" was unable to sustain itself without fresh immigrants. Similar to a national trend, the Chinese population in the Black Hills continued to decline in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. During that period the male-female ratio changed little; it still stood at 90.8 percent to 9.2 percent in 1900. The population aged significantly, however, as the mean age of Chinese in Lawrence County increased from 30.6 in 1880 to 39.4 in 1900. Now 54.2 percent of the population was more than forty years old. The number of Chinese in Lawrence County declined from 221 in 1880 to 152 in 1890, and again to 120 in 1900. Ten years later there were only fifty-

72. *Ibid.*, 9 Nov. 1883, 10 Aug. 1895.

73. *Ibid.*, 27 Oct., 14 Dec. 1880.

74. *Ibid.*, 17 Nov., 15 Dec. 1894.

Table 3. Distribution of Chinese in Lawrence County

<i>Place</i>	<i>1880</i>	<i>1900</i>	<i>1910</i>
Centennial Prairie	1		
Central City	24	1	
Deadwood City	110	67	40
Elizabethtown	1		
Enumeration District 121	35		
False Bottom	1		
Gayville		1	
Golden Gate	7		
Lead	18	24	9
Maitland			1
North Range		8	
Porttend School Township		2	
South Bend	19		
Spearfish		12	4
Terraville	5		
Terry School Township		2	
Two Bit		2	
Whitewood		1	
Total	221	120	54

Sources: U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population*. 1880, 1900, 1910.

four Chinese (Table 3). Through natural attrition, this ethnic group gradually phased out, with the last member passing away in the 1940s.⁷⁵ In the second decade of the twentieth century, this small Chinese frontier community had virtually passed into history.

75. *Tenth Census* (1880), roll 113, sheets 191–337. *Twelfth Census* (1900), roll 1551, sheets 100–289; Manuscript Population Schedule, Lawrence County, South Dakota, in *Thirteenth*

Their disappearance from the region notwithstanding, the Black Hills Chinese and their complex story contribute to a better understanding of frontier history and race relations. Like many other minority groups, the Chinese have traditionally occupied a peripheral position in research and writing. As an underprivileged group in general, the Chinese did suffer from economic exploitation, legal discrimination, and racial violence in the American West, but they were never passive victims, fatefully accepting existing conditions. Instead, the Chinese aggressively competed with others in these burgeoning communities for economic mobility, political equality, social justice, ethnic pride, and individual dignity. Understanding well how to survive in the country with a white majority, the Chinese skillfully used various methods to develop their ethnic oases as both Asian enclaves and American neighborhoods within predominantly white towns or camps. The example of the Chinese in the Black Hills further supports the argument that they were much like other immigrants or American citizens who flocked to the gold country in terms of their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors on the American frontier. Historian Gary Okihiro perceptively points out that "racial minorities, in their struggle for inclusion and equality, helped to preserve and advance the very privileges that were denied to them, and thereby democratized the nation for the benefit of all Americans."⁷⁶ Indeed, the Chinese struggle for inclusion on the frontier belongs to the mainstream of American history as well as the history of the West.

Census of the United States, 1910, National Archives Microfilm Publication T624, roll 1480, sheets 401ff. The *Sixteenth Census* (1940) recorded only two Chinese people in Lawrence County.

76. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), p. 151. According to my study, the experience of the Chinese in the Black Hills greatly resembles the experience of Chinese in the Boise Basin, Idaho. In fact, many incidents and events occurring in these two unrelated places are almost identical. A case study of the Boise Basin Chinese appears in my book, *A Chinaman's Chance: The Chinese on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1997).

Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

All illustrations in this issue are property of the South Dakota State Historical Society, State Archives Collection, except for those on the following pages: front cover (left) and pp. 300, 325, from Adams Memorial Museum, Deadwood, S.Dak.; front cover (right), back cover (top), and pp. 332, 333, 339, 341, 345, 349–57, 359, 360, from State Archaeological Research Center, Rapid City, S.Dak.; pp. 292, from Denver (Colo.) Public Library; p. 297, from Haynes Foundation Collection, Montana Historical Society, Helena; pp. 321, 323, from Centennial Archives, Deadwood Public Library, Deadwood, S.Dak.; p. 303, from Liping Zhu, Cheney, Wa.; pp. 365, 373, 375, 377, from Donald L. Hardesty, Reno, Nev.; p. 384, from Uinta County Library, Evanston, Wyo.; pp. 386, 388, from A. Dudley Gardner, Rock Springs, Wyo.