

# *Chronicles of Brunonia*

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## Providence's Black Chinese: A Love Story

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In 1901, Chung Yik, one of the city's "best-known Chinese restaurateurs" and his wife, Cynthia Monki, survived the burning of their Charles Street apartment.

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On the morning of February 23rd, 1901, Chung Yick stood chatting with Mr. Joseph Hoffman, the proprietor of the picture frame shop on the ground floor of the Charles Street house the two men shared with several other tenants. The house wasn't much better than a tenement building, with its dirty wooden face and narrow crooked stairs. A crude sign on one side said "PICTURES" in bold letters, marking the entrance to Hoffman's store. The Yicks lived on the other side, along with the Rileys and the widow Driscoll, who were cramped up on the second floor. Still, it was a decent street to live on, with a mixture of small shops and residential homes and the Mosshassuck River creeping alongside it like an emaciated and sleepy serpent.

Chung was a gaunt man in his forties with hollow cheeks and intense brown eyes—he projected a certain gravity that was somehow incongruous with popular notions of the jolly, docile Chinaman. Instead of the traditional Chinese collarless jacket, he sported a conservative brown suit, complete with vest, tie, and polished black shoes. Chung was a cook by trade and a good one, too—well enough respected for the Providence Journal to dub him one of the city's "best-known Chinese restauranteurs." Most likely, he was an employee of the Wah, Yee, Hong & Co. eating house, the Chinese restaurant located closest to his home, just a brisk fifteen-minute walk away at the bottom of College Hill.

It was a windy Saturday morning with temperatures well below freezing, and Chung relished these last moments of warmth inside the store before he'd have to venture out into the cold. Several thousand miles away from his old home in southern China, where temperatures fluctuated between hot and hotter, Chung still hadn't quite adjusted to Providence's bitter winters. That walk would be

especially brisk today!

"John," Mr. Hoffman said suddenly, addressing Chung by his chosen American name, "What's all that racket?"

Indeed, some great noise-frantic footsteps and shouting-could be heard coming from the general direction of Chung's kitchen where, minutes earlier, he had left his wife and stepdaughter bustling about their morning chores.

"It's a fire!" someone shouted from outside. "The attic's on fire!"

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The first official Chinese resident in Rhode Island appeared on the state census in 1865, but there may have been at least one "Chinaman" in Providence even earlier. A 1908 article in the Providence Journal cited local records suggesting that, as early as 1818, a volunteer company put out a fire on Stampers Street "caused by the explosion of fireworks a Chinaman was making." The poor fellow, the article speculated, was a bit overzealous in his anticipation of some local celebration.

The steady trickle of Chinese immigrants into Providence didn't begin in earnest, though, until the 1870s, when a number of Chinese laundries opened. Most of the aspiring entrepreneurs who started up these marginally profitable businesses came to Providence from the West Coast in search of better opportunities. Opening a laundry was, at that time, one of the few business ventures accessible to Chinese immigrants, requiring little capital and only a minimal understanding of English.

The cheerful tone of an 1876 Providence Journal article indicates that these early "celestial invaders," with their "funny, double-monosyllabic names"

and writing that resembled "hen tracks," were largely a source of amusement for Providence's predominantly white population; however, local prejudices sometimes manifested themselves in ways that weren't so amusing. According to the 1908 Providence Journal article, Chinese laundrymen were often assaulted and robbed-sometimes the clothes they had washed would be soiled by mud and "other, more offensive matter, which was thrown into their shops."

Chung Yick was one of a growing number of Chinese immigrants at the turn of the century who opted instead for the restaurant business, which was fraught with its own share of obstacles. In September of 1899, the Providence Common Council proposed a resolution that would prohibit the granting of licenses to prospective Chinese restaurant keepers. The Providence Journal confirmed that police had never "heard a word of complaint" against any of the city's five or six existing Chinese restaurants; nevertheless, the common perception was that they were "dens of iniquity" where prostitutes seduced young boys and opium pipes could be found in abundance.

As a result, the Providence government imposed a series of humiliating regulations on these restaurants, including a 1909 police order for them to remove "all doors and draperies at the entrance to booths or rooms where food is served." Local leaders felt more comfortable having everything out in the open, the assumption being that all kinds of strange and deviant behavior took place behind those closed doors. Restaurants owned by other ethnic groups were not likely to be treated with comparable levels of suspicion.

Despite such strong adversity, the Chinese community in Providence slowly grew. Noticeably absent, however, was the female segment of the

population. By 1895, the Rhode Island census indicated that there were approximately 105 Chinese men in Providence County-76 in the city proper-and exactly zero Chinese women. Nor was Providence the only American city to witness this phenomenon. According to the 1900 federal census, there were an estimated 1,887 Chinese males for every 100 Chinese females in the country.

Why was there such a disparity? Chinese custom dictated that the wife of a prospective emigrant ought to stay behind to take care of her husband's parents, so the vast majority of Chinese immigrant men left for America on their own. Many came with the full intention of returning to their homeland after having made a sufficient profit; in fact, most sent money back to China to support their families throughout the course of their stay in the US.

The Page Act of 1870 prohibited all "Chinese, Japanese, and Mongolian women" from entering the US for the purpose of engaging in "immoral or licentious activities." This law mandated a series of humiliating character interrogations for women applying for visas, which, in any case, were rarely granted. The assumption was that Chinese women inherently wanted to become prostitutes. There were, in fact, as many as 900 Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco during the late 1870s, but most of these young girls were kidnapped, sold, captured, or lured from China by false promises of marriage. They would then be contracted to a brothel in one of America's emerging Chinatowns.

The existence of these Chinese prostitutes was seen as a public health threat because they presumably carried strange and extraordinarily potent venereal diseases. The Page Act was an attempt to quell that threat. The reality was that, aside from on the West Coast, there were relatively few Chinese

prostitutes in America. In New York's Chinatown, for example, the vast majority of prostitutes were white. Nevertheless, the Page Act effectively prevented immigrants already in the US from bringing their wives over from China.

To complicate matters, white working class men began to see Chinese laborers as dangerous competition—a threat to their own economic well-being. In response to these fears, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 cut off almost all Chinese immigration, exempting only merchants and students, who were, presumably, less likely to steal American jobs. Chinese wives of immigrant laborers now had no legal means to join their husbands in America.

Perhaps Chung too had a wife and children back in China, but it was unlikely that he would ever see them again unless he returned to his homeland. Immigrants like him were left with few choices, then, as far as women were concerned. A life of total celibacy was one possibility, although this was an unattractive option for many Chinese immigrants. Some turned to prostitutes periodically for momentary satisfaction of their sexual cravings. Others, like Chung, chose a third option: intermarriage. Despite the total absence of Chinese women in Providence, 20 of the 105 Chinese men listed in the 1895 census were married, mostly to white women. Chung himself had married a black woman named Cynthia Monki.

It's possible that many of these men found real love in these interracial relationships. However, even intermarriage didn't preclude the possibility that these early immigrants would eventually return to their families in China; indeed, about a third of them did. Some who had established families here in America willingly broke off those ties for a chance to go home.

Still, there is good reason to believe that Chung had decided to stay — he had, after all, cut off his queue, the long braid that Chinese men were accustomed to wearing. Cutting it meant a significant loss of social status if he ever returned to China. Now Chung, or "John," wore a short western hairstyle—a symbol of his new identity and, perhaps, of his commitment to his new American bride.

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Cynthia Monki, otherwise known as Mrs. Yick, was already on her second Chinese husband. A stout, coffee-colored woman in her early thirties, her face always seemed marked by some hint of sadness. Cynthia was, according to the Providence Journal, a woman of "Spanish negro [sic] blood." Perhaps she had come over from Cuba, where over 60,000 Chinese "coolies" had arrived during the 1860s and '70s to work on the sugar plantations. Perhaps that was where she met her first Chinese husband, John Monki, years before they ever set foot on American soil.

In any case, the couple ended up in Rhode Island, and their marriage produced three beautiful children—10 year-old Sara, 5 year-old Gongpoy, and little 3 year-old John. Cynthia was happy with this new life in America until her husband passed away suddenly, leaving her grief-stricken and alone. It was then that she had met Chung. She thought, with gratitude, about how this new Chinese John had taken her in, despite the fact that she already had three young children that he would have to feed and clothe. They had gotten married a few months ago, on December 15th, 1900.

At 9:00 on this Saturday morning, Cynthia and her daughter Sara were busy cleaning the kitchen. Sara was a slight, serious-looking girl with sharp Asian

features-the only hint of her mixed heritage was the subtlest curl in her thick black hair. She had developed a certain maternal instinct, even at the age of 10, and was forever trying to keep her mischievous little brothers out of trouble.

They had just started scrubbing the floors when Cynthia's mother, Sara Lumb, came racing into the kitchen as quickly as her weary old legs could carry her.

"Fire!" she said, trembling with excitement. "The boys-the attic-the whole place is on fire!"

Horrified, Cynthia realized that her two little boys were still trapped in the attic, where, moments earlier, their grandmother had dozed off watching them play. Cynthia grabbed the bucket she'd been using to wash the floors and rushed upstairs, stumbling and knocking her knees against the walls painfully several times. By the time she rounded the corner and headed up the second flight of crooked stairs, Cynthia had already spilled most of the water in her little bucket. A thick curtain of dark, stifling smoke filled the corridor, stinging her eyes mercilessly. She couldn't seem to stop coughing.

The attic had become a hellish and fiery furnace, and the flames only seemed to dance more vigorously as she poured out the scant contents of her water bucket. Throwing it to the ground in frustration, Cynthia reached for little John Monki, who was lying on the floor in front of her, barely conscious and already badly burned. She pressed his face tightly against her bosom to shield him from the smoke, even as she felt the flames singeing her own hair.

Cynthia couldn't see Gongpoy through the flames, but she heard him, quite clearly, crying for his mother. She turned instinctively toward the sound, wanting



to cradle him in her arms and let him know that everything would be okay. She pictured his chubby little fingers, the way he and his brother would take turns sitting on Chung's shoulders-but she knew she had to move quickly. This fire was a pitiless tyrant and wouldn't hesitate to consume both mother and child.

"Mama will be right back!" she shouted, choking back a sob as she turned away.

The younger child lay limp in his mother's arms as she carried him out of the attic and down the stairs. She stumbled out the back door and left John at a neighbor's house, barely pausing to explain what had happened.

When she got back to her house and found the stairway blocked by a solid wall of flame, Cynthia let out a low, desperate moan. She could do nothing more to save her son.

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There were probably some within the Providence community who believed that all those involved in interracial marriages deserved to perish in flames-the flames of hell, to be exact. They were mainly concerned, however, with the prospect of Chinese men stealing away white women.

In the Northeast, marriages between Chinese immigrant men and white working class women, though rare, were far more common than relationships such as that between Chung and Cynthia. An excess of Irish working class women, more of whom survived the Irish famine than did men, led to a surprisingly high proportion of intermarriages between Chinese men and Irish women. In New York, for example, there were 75 Chinese men who married, or at least lived with, Irish women between 1820 and 1870-roughly one quarter of the

population of Chinese men in that city.

White working class males saw these intermarriages as a threat-now not only were Chinese men taking their jobs, they were even taking their women! Fourteen states passed miscegenation laws that prohibited both Asians and blacks from marrying whites. Even in regions where no such legislation had been passed, the public tended to ridicule these marriages and call into question the motivation of all parties involved. A 1906 article in the Providence News-Democrat cited "opium" as one of the top reasons that white women elect to marry Chinese men.

"He spends money," the article continues, "he banquets her in the private rooms of chop suey restaurants, and-it is alleged-if then she does not agree to marry him, he does not surrender and mourn the loss, but he inveigles her into smoking opium-and having once tasted the charms of "the pipe," she is his."

Still, many white women insisted that they married Chinese men because they loved them. Many talked about how kind and generous their Chinese husbands were. Mae Franking, a young college grad from Michigan, eventually published a book about her romance and marriage with Tiam Franking, a handsome law student from China. *My Chinese Marriage* is filled with letters in which the happy couple repeatedly declared their undying love for one another.

Whatever the motivations may have been, interracial marriages were a reality of life all across America at the turn of the century. In Mississippi, marriages between Chinese men and black women were fairly common. During the 1870s, hundreds of Chinese immigrants moved down to the delta valley to work on the plantations. Most of them eventually opened grocery stores geared

primarily toward the black community. According to some of the Chinese men living there at the time, they really didn't have any choice when it came to marriage. "[The Chinese] were considered on the same status as the Negro. If a Chinese man did have a woman, it had to be a Negro." It appears, however, that the Yicks were the only example of such a relationship in Providence.

The relatively low social status of both the Chinese community and the African American community probably sheltered the Yick family from a lot of the criticism that would have come if Chung had married a white woman. They were an anomaly, but one that didn't pose any serious threat to those in positions of power.

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By the time Chung managed to push his way through the crowd of people that had gathered outside his front door, it was all but over. Little John Monki was rushed to the Rhode Island Hospital with severe burns to his head and a cut on his wrist, but he was expected to make a full recovery. Gongpoy wasn't as fortunate-a fireman had pulled his body out of the flames, still breathing, but he died before he reached the street. Cynthia sat huddled in the corner, weeping silently. Placing a hand on her shoulder, Chung blinked away his own tears. It was 9:15.

Little is known about what happened to the Yicks after that fateful morning. Before the year's end they had moved to a different house at 121 North Main Street-perhaps to escape the haunting memories of the Charles Street attic, perhaps just to be closer to the restaurant where Chung worked. They disappear entirely from the local records by the next year.

Meanwhile, the Chinese population began to concentrate itself around Burrill Street-Providence's first Chinatown. It's unclear whether Chung and Cynthia were still around to explore that little cluster of shops and restaurants. And what about when Providence had its first all-Chinese wedding in 1926? Did they join in the festivities?

The Providence Journal account of the 1901 incident attributed the fire to "a small kerosene oil stove" that the two boys had stumbled upon accidentally. No mention was made to the sense of loss experienced by the grieving family, but the article did note that damage to the building amounted to less than \$200, "including the loss by water to the stack of picture frames of Hoffman in his store on the ground floor."

Did the local media value a pile of picture frames more than the lives of the black Chinese of Providence? Perhaps. Or perhaps they were just reporting the facts. Nevertheless, the Yicks were, at best, a novelty item in Providence, representing all that was alien and unknown to the dominant white culture. At worst, they were probably seen by some as something less than human and may well have been the victims of repeated injustices and humiliations. The 1901 fire was probably not the first time the Yicks had grieved. It would not be the last.

Yet in spite of all the obstacles they faced — and must have known they would face — Chung and Cynthia had chosen each other and had made a life for themselves here in Providence. If there were a hundred practical reasons for them to marry each other, there were probably just as many reasons their marriage was completely impractical. Maybe it was love that had tipped the scales. Maybe it was love that allowed them to persevere.

This week they would bury Gongpoy. Next week they would move on.

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