

# The Milwaukee Chinese

## Early history in Milwaukee

The first Chinese immigrants to arrive in Milwaukee in the late 1800s were from the southern Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. Records suggest they were all single men or married men who had left wives and families back home.

### *Laundries*



Nearly all of the early arrivals opened laundries<sup>i</sup> in Milwaukee. By 1887 there were approximately 90 Chinese living in Milwaukee and 30 laundries—most downtown. One of the most exclusive addresses was a laundry opened in 1885 by Sam Ring Kee in the Plankinton House Hotel (which later became the Plankinton Arcade).

By World War Two, there were Chinese laundries in nearly every neighborhood in Milwaukee with a commercial district, including the following:

- Bronzeville: Moy Sing Laundry, Charlie Sing Laundry, and others
- Mitchell Street: Sun Fang Laundry (unusual because this one was owned by a woman)
- Clarke Square: Sam Yen Laundry
- Brewer's Hill: Fred Moy Laundry and Frank J. Moy Laundry
- Franklin Heights: Jim Lee Laundry
- Silver City: Jim Chung Laundry
- Sunset Heights in the Sherman Park area: Mon Lee Laundry
- Lincoln Village: Ernest Leong Laundry

### *Meet your past Chinese neighbors*

#### **Charlie Hong and Dick Moy of the Murray Hill neighborhood**

Charlie Hong, age 52, and Dick Moy, age 25, were Chinese-born single men living in a rented flat at 2410 N. Murray in 1937, where they also ran a laundry. Charlie had originally taken up the trade in Illinois where he roomed with an older man who may have been Dick's father.

"The earliest Chinese immigrants came to the West Coast, especially in search of gold. They were very involved with building the Transcontinental Railroad. But once their usefulness waned, the local governments passed laws to send them home, or restrict their comings. That sent many of the early Chinese east, looking for new opportunities in the Midwest, like laundries. . . The federal government then passed the Chinese Exclusion Act which made it impossible for Chinese to become citizens."

*Quotes of Chinese informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.*

Charlie was listed as an alien in the 1940 census and there is no record of him remaining in the United States past the early 1940s. He may have come to America to earn money to take home to help support his family. However, the younger man, Dick Moy, had been naturalized by the mid-1930s. Furthermore, Dick served in the Army in World War Two. He enlisted in April of 1942 and was released in July of 1946. Dick remained in the United States until his death in Phoenix, Arizona in 2008.

Records shed no light on how long Dick Moy remained in the Murray Hill neighborhood or whether he ever married. Today there is a Chinese restaurant, Huan Xi, several addresses down from the former location of the laundry, but there is no known connection to Dick Moy or any of his family's descendants.

There was an early episode of violence involving Chinese laundries. In 1889, two laundrymen were accused of soliciting European American girls for "immoral purposes." Newspaper articles carried the story, and this was followed by a riot where thousands of white men vandalized dozens of Chinese laundries. The case was ultimately dismissed by the Wisconsin Supreme Court over unclear statutes on the age of consent. The US government compensated the Chinese community for losses during the riot.

### *Other businesses*

Early Chinese immigrants also engaged in other commercial activities in Milwaukee. These included restaurants, import businesses, medicine, and entertainment. One of the early Chinese leaders in the city was Charlie Toy who'd arrived in Milwaukee in 1904. He quickly opened a restaurant and import store. He was so successful that by 1913 he erected a Chinese-style building on North 2nd Street that housed a restaurant that was at the time advertised to be the largest and most luxurious Chinese culinary establishment in the world.

### *Meet this past Chinese neighbor*

#### **Charlie Toy**

Born Moy Toy Ni in 1863 in Canton, Shunde, Guangdong, China, Toy modified his name to Charlie Toy when he arrived in the United States at age 20.

He and his young wife originally settled on the West Coast, but facing local laws that made it impossible for his family to start a business, he moved east. He found a home in Oshkosh, Wisconsin where he opened his first restaurant. By 1904 he and his fast-growing family moved to Milwaukee and rented a house on West Water Street where

"In the Chinese community most of them open restaurants, but in the Taiwanese people there aren't patterns. They are here for school or job. Not like a typical immigrant to move here and do what they can do. They move here because the boss or company wants them here. Most have a higher education, a PhD, or they're engineers or something."

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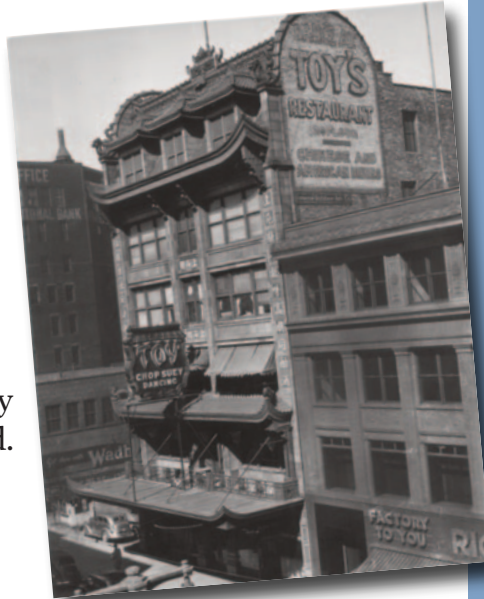
he lived with his wife, four children, and seven boarders. He soon opened another restaurant.

Due to a combination of austerity and ambition, Toy's success would become historic. Milwaukeeans found Chinese cuisine much to their liking and Toy soon built the impressive six-story, Chinese-style building in downtown Milwaukee with multiple businesses including a restaurant, dry goods shop, and a motion picture house on the ground floor. The building was described as the largest and most luxurious Chinese restaurant building in the world (see photo<sup>ii</sup>) and Charlie Toy was being dubbed the "Chinese Rockefeller."

Toy worked tirelessly to promote American-Chinese relations. He frequently entertained dignitaries from his homeland. While he owned a grand home in Milwaukee on North 29th Street, he also built a 50-room house near his natal home of Canton.

When the six-story Toy building was demolished in 1946, the business was relocated to 300 W. Wisconsin Avenue above Walgreens and later to 830 N. Old World 3rd Street. After the death of Charlie Toy, one of his sons, Moy Toy, continued to run the business.

Charlie Toy returned to the Canton area and died in 1955. Over his lifetime, he outlived four wives and had at least 4 children and 33 grandchildren.



"All my friends here, they all have a PhD degree or a high degree. They're all professional type people. I don't know too many people who don't have a high education. That's a bias in terms of the way I look at things. It affects a lot. They live pretty well because of their high education. Good jobs. I don't really know the people who work for restaurants or anything. I don't have close connections to them."

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Chinese medicine was another popular commodity in downtown Milwaukee. The earliest establishment was a Chinese herbal medicine clinic opened in 1890. While some questioned the efficacy of the cures, posters advertising Chinese medicine were ubiquitous during these early years.

Another interesting Chinese business was the Dime Museum which was named after its price of admission—10 cents. Opened on West Wisconsin Avenue (then Grand Avenue) in 1883, it featured performers from the East, including one advertised to be a Chinese giant and the tallest man in the world.



## Later history in Milwaukee

The Toy family continued to dominate the Milwaukee world of Chinese cuisine into the early 21st century. Charlie Toy's son, Moy Toy, continued in the business, while raising his own family on North 47th Street.

Other Chinese restaurants took root in the city. Gradually, ethnic cuisine became the pathway to Milwaukee success, just as the laundries had earlier. Today there are nearly 150 Chinese restaurants in Milwaukee, located in all sections of the city.

But Chinese Americans are also strongly represented in the professions today in Milwaukee. Many are in healthcare; others have doctorate degrees and work in academia; still others are active in import/export businesses. In 2006, the local Chinese community founded the Milwaukee Chinese Community Center, a nonprofit. Its goals are "to offer the best learning experience in Chinese language and cultural programs for those interested at different proficiency levels through the Milwaukee Modern Chinese School (MMCS), not only to facilitate community development and showcase Chinese culture and heritage but also to embrace the awesome cultural and ethnic diversity in Great Milwaukee region." The



organization has programs and activities such as a women's club, a performance troupe, language tutors, a youth leadership academy, and newsletters. Together, these programs help sponsor events such as Rock 'N Sole, the Dragon Boat Festival, booths at the Holiday Folk Fair, and China Lights, to name a few.

There is also a Milwaukee Chapter of the Taiwanese Association of America (TAA). The

TAA provides opportunities for Taiwanese Americans to connect socially, retain their history and language in America, showcase achievements of local Taiwanese, and promote arts and culture.

Like most Asian Americans, the local Chinese community strives to retain its own traditions, while demonstrating appreciation for the freedoms and opportunities available in the United States. Retaining the languages and respect for elders and ancestors are among the cultural issues Milwaukee Chinese families stress.

"Most of Taiwanese people recognize that culturally they are Chinese—from genes and blood, it's Chinese. Ninety percent are culturally from China. Political-speaking or legally, we always say we are Taiwanese. Especially political ways are far different from Chinese ways."

"It's a different language, but close to Mandarin. Taiwanese language is originally from Chinese, but there are differences. Some people now speak the local language, and it's different from Mandarin. So, we want to pass that to the second generation, especially if they are born in the States and look at themselves as American, not Taiwanese. We want them to know our culture. That's the big thing in the organization. So, we have a school that teaches them our language. These associations usually have a language school."

"Also, they do have a Chinese summer school that teaches Chinese [in Milwaukee]. Kids aren't that serious about it, though, because the population here is still very small, so they don't feel it's very useful. For example, my kids went to this Chinese summer school and they didn't learn much. When they went to college, they realized that they should have learned a little more then."

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## Sources

Holmes, D. B. and Yuan, W. (2008). *Chinese Milwaukee*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.

Urban Anthropology Inc.

<http://neighborhoodsinmilwaukee.org/index.html>

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<sup>i</sup> En.Wikipedia (licensed as "Free to Share and Use")

<sup>ii</sup> JSonline (licensed as "Free to Share and Use")

"My kids do really well. But inside my heart I want them to be a little more like Chinese thinking, but I can't push it. So, I leave them. For example, parents cannot penalize the kids by spanking. In China that's common. I don't do that. One side, I let them do whatever they want American style, but inside my heart I wish they could be more Chinese. [Like] Respect for elders. You cannot argue with your parents. Then respecting teacher. First-name basis with teachers is very different than in China. Also, the values are different. In China the individual is not important. The most important is the country, and then the family. Here it's the opposite."

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