

Divining the “Celestials”: The Chinese Subculture of HBO’s *Deadwood*

by Paul Wright and Hailin Zhou

Introduction

America was never innocent. We popped our cherry on the boat over and looked back with no regrets. You can’t ascribe our fall from grace to any single event or set of circumstances. You can’t lose what you lacked at conception. Mass-market nostalgia gets you hopped up for a past that never existed. Hagiography sanctifies shuck-and-jive politicians and reinvents their expedient gestures as moments of great moral weight. Our continuing narrative is blurred past truth and hindsight. Only a reckless verisimilitude can set that line straight. ... It’s time to demythologize an era and build a new myth from the gutter to the stars. It’s time to embrace bad men and the price they paid to secretly define their time. Here’s to them.

—James Ellroy, *American Tabloid*

(epigraph)

Like the work of James Ellroy, David Milch’s historically ambitious and brilliantly coarse *Deadwood* pursues “reckless verisimilitude” in its discomfiting embrace of “bad men and the price they paid to secretly define their time.” *Deadwood*, both as an historical stage and in the unflinchingly Hobbesian imagination of show-runner Milch, offers us a fascinating, disquieting glimpse into a cauldron of civic ambition, predatory avarice, Machiavellian statesmanship, and unrepentant vulgarity—all of which fueled the American project to transform an untamed frontier into a domesticated

heartland. *Deadwood's* byzantine and un-sanitized look at the American West chips away at the pieties of the “melting pot” narrative of American history. And like Ellroy’s dyspeptic meditations on the racism, corruption, and “Imagineering” of 1950’s Los Angeles,¹ Milch’s series unapologetically explores the darkest aspects of American expansionism and economic adventurism.

This essay will shed light on the role in *Deadwood* of the town’s Chinese immigrants, and in particular of their deceptively muted public representative, Mr. Wu. We will also reflect on the thematic uses to which the “Celestials”² are put in the show and in the historical literature surrounding the town. A case in point is the relationship between Wu and Al Swearengen. As reigning avatar of the show’s political and criminal consciousness, Ian McShane’s Swearengen is a most menacing power-player—aggressively vulgar pimp; calculating manipulator; cyclically abusive civic father; and yet at the same time, an almost Byronic soul self-conscious that he is both a denizen and an architect of his own backwater Hell-on-earth. The show’s developing dynamic between Wu and Swearengen trades on their parallel roles as community leaders and criminal overlords. In some respects, their relationship is as close to a grudging and professional friendship as any other on the show.

Aside from Wu’s fascinating doppelganger to Swearengen, the anonymous Chinese of *Deadwood* who serve Wu are equally compelling in the brief glimpses we get into their misery and subjection to the “civic father” of their own subculture. It seems that through the Chinese community of the show, Milch is evolving both a rival to and a microcosm of the political landscape of the town at large. This demimonde is worth exploring as it hints at an understanding of the Chinese experience in America that is refreshingly candid and unusually rich. Milch confronts both the shameful oppression and the abiding complexity of the Chinese pioneers

who journeyed to and through the American West. Like Ellroy's celebrated "bad men" of the "gutter" who made America, the Chinese of *Deadwood* are seen not only in the light of their all-too-real victimization, but also in the shadow of their collaboration with the darker genius of the American frontier spirit.

The conclusion of this essay is born out of our own research and a recent visit to Deadwood itself, where we tried to flesh out the historical picture of the town's Chinese community. We also touch on scholarly and archaeological efforts to unearth evidence of the vibrant, three-dimensional human beings who comprised Deadwood's Chinatown—and on how the town's project of historical preservation is affected by legalized gambling and a tourist industry now driven in part by the HBO production. We end by returning to Milch's vision and what it might mean for reconstructing a frontier-Chinese identity—an identity deployed by *Deadwood* as a unique, pop-cultural instance of "Wild Western" Orientalism.³

America as Nursemaid and the Bloody Founding of *Deadwood's* Chinatown

When did you start thinking every wrong had a remedy, Wu?
 Did you come to camp for justice or to make your fuckin' way?
 —Al Swearingen (*Deadwood*, Episode
 1.12)⁴

In "Sold Under Sin," the closing episode of *Deadwood's* first season, Al Swearingen (Ian McShane) asks this of an incensed Mr. Wu (Keone Young), Chinatown's first citizen and resident counterpart to Al. In essence, Wu and the denizens of *Deadwood's* Chinatown have spent the first two seasons in the life of the show attempting to answer that very question. We know very well what Al's personal answer to that question has been: "Every fuckin'

beatin' I'm grateful for. Every fuckin' one of them. Get all the trust beat outta you. And you know what the fuckin' world is" (1.3). This encapsulates Swearingen's philosophical outlook on both his own miseries and those he inflicts, his profession of exclusive faith in the Nietzschean dictum that what fails to kill him outright makes him strong enough to see the world clearly. And yet there is a deeply political dimension to Al's thinking, a way in which the clarity he seeks in a good beating is ultimately a means to avoid beatings in the future—and hence pass them on to the next dreamer in the circuit foolish enough to think the unfairness of the world matters. Of all the delusions that forestall the full absorption of this lesson, justice ranks highest on Al's list.

This is precisely why Seth Bullock intrigues and disturbs Swearingen all at once. To the extent that Bullock takes justice seriously, even when he fails to reconcile its dictates to his passions, he remains an enigma to Al—a “priggish fucking douche bag ... who only wants to sell pots and pans, fan his pretty face and hold his nose from the stench of our fuckin' sordid carryings on over here ... all the time thinking he can protect the meek and innocent” (1.8). Al calculates, however, that it is precisely the distasteful, hypocritical naïveté of Bullock that makes him “the perfect fucking front man” (1.8) for the camp as it navigates the treacherous waters between assimilation to the United States and genuine autonomy. In his inimitable locution, Al sums up the camp's dilemma: “Our moment permits interest in one question only: Will we of Deadwood be more than targets for ass-fucking? To not grab ankle is to declare yourself interested. What's your posture, Bullock?” (2.20).

In the wake of the various crises that consume the town in Season One (the murder of Wild Bill Hickok and the trial of his assassin; the outbreak of plague; the threat of domination by political hacks in Yankton), Al becomes ever more active in trying to engineer Deadwood's political

destiny. As a result, he comes to acknowledge the need for that defensive “posture” to be coupled with at least the appearance of civility and order. As the absurd E.B. Farnum reminds the first assembly of the town council, “More than providing services to ‘em, taking people’s money is what makes organizations real, be they formal, informal, or temporary” (1.9). Taking money quietly and under the veneer of municipal efficiency becomes the parallel formula to Al’s criminal interest in doggedly mining the miners of Deadwood, the so-called “hoopleheads.” To satisfy both of these agendas increasingly demands the cooperation of the town’s Chinese community, which entails regular negotiation with their taskmaster Wu. In fact, it is precisely Al and Wu’s intertwined interests and often murderous exchange of professional courtesies that fuel many of the show’s central conflicts, as well as its brutal and blunt depiction of racial politics.

Initially, Swearengen’s relationship to the Chinese is defined by Wu’s ability to dispose of the bodies of Al’s enemies and failed lieutenants in his pigsty. The gruesome image of Wu’s pigs devouring bodies is a macabre running joke in Season One, and for a time seems to be Wu’s only dramatic purpose given his lack of English and his existence on the cultural periphery of town. Al’s major concern with Wu is making sure that he is not overcharged for the use of the pigsty: “Don’t want to be suckin’ hind tit on disposal fees” (1.8). Two key developments move Wu to center stage, or rather, to the revelation that he was there all along. The arrival in Deadwood of Cy Tolliver, Swearengen’s more polished and arguably more brutal rival, fosters an ongoing antagonism between the two pimps that highlights their competing visions for the camp’s future. Where Al finds himself gradually evolving into a perverse, yet savvy statesman for the town, Tolliver eschews politics for real estate, angling to establish new brothels that will exploit anticipated new markets—namely, Chinatown itself. When Al discovers that Tolliver has purchased lots in “Chink Alley,” he must

credit Tolliver's ingenuity: "Nonetheless it says the man sees the fuckin' possibilities of things. I mean to come up at this fuckin' juncture, with the idea of creatin' an emporium for the fuckin' chinks takes brass fucking balls, and a long term vision for the future" (1.6).

This move on Chinatown combines with another explosive turn in the relationship between Al and Wu in episodes 10 through 12, which prove to be a defining arc in the series. Opium destined for Wu's organization and earmarked for Al to distribute is stolen by a pair of opportunistic addicts, one of whom works for Swearngen while the other has cast his lot with the Tolliver camp. The desperate theft sparks a now archetypal confrontation between Wu and Al which is at once abrasive and comical, and which illustrates a deepening relationship that transcends the vulgar pieties of racism itself. What is most revealing is how Wu for once initiates the conversation, while boldly refusing to make his way to Al's office by the usual backdoor route reserved for Chinese or African-Americans. Instead, Wu barges loudly into the Gem Saloon and into Al's inner sanctum, making his complaint in a surreal, almost primal combination of stick figure drawings and curses directed at the "white cocksuckas" who have stolen their opium (1.10).

As Al's dimwitted aid Johnny Burns attests to co-worker Dan Dority, "Those are the first 'cocksuckers' I have ever heard shouted from that room, Dan, that didn't come from Al's mouth that wasn't followed by Al comin' over to that railin', pointin' at you and beckoning you up them stairs with your fuckin' knife." Although Johnny dismissively adds that Wu's "people worship a fat man seated on his ass" (1.10), Wu's arrival on the scene of *Deadwood* as something approaching an equal has been made apparent. David Milch has said the following about the power and the limits of language with respect to these recurring exchanges between Al and Wu:

The generation of words is an expression of electrical energy. The reason storytelling engages us perhaps more fully than other kinds of communication is because the words in a story can mean in different ways. They contain their opposites. In that scene—"Swearengen!" "Cocksucker!"—we understand how provisional the meaning of a word is and that its fundamental meaning is contingent upon the energy with which it's endowed by the speaker. Energy is a gossamer and intangible and variable commodity, and words in a story are more clearly contingent and variable than words in a proof.

—David Milch (qtd. in Singer 203-4)

Al's grudging decision to give Wu one of the addicts presents him with a new dilemma: Should he execute Tolliver's man and preserve his own, or surrender his own in order to avoid a conflict with the rival pimp? Swearengen pursues the seemingly safer course, only to find that Tolliver exploits the execution of Al's man in order to stir up resentment towards the Chinese—whose land Tolliver would like to see usurped and in his hands ultimately. Tolliver claims to Al that he stands "on principle," namely that "A white dope fiend's still white; I don't deliver white men to chinks." Swearengen responds to Tolliver's disingenuous suggestion that he get out of the business of "traffickin' in fuckin' junk" with his own mission statement: "I'm a purveyor of spirits, Cy, dope fuckin' included, and when chance affords, a thief, but I ain't no fuckin' hypocrite" (1.10).

Tolliver subsequently orders the surviving addict, Leon, to publicize his story of indignity suffered at the hands of Swearengen and an uppity "Celestial," of the devouring of his fellow dope-fiend as "a hell of a way to treat a white man" (1.11). Leon enacts his criminal, race-baiting passion

play, making his melodramatic case for the moral (i.e., racial) high ground: “Are we that far west that we’ve wound up in fuckin’ China? Where a white man kowtows to a celestial like that arrogant cocksucker Wu!” (1.11). Other incidents are staged for the benefit of propagandizing Deadwood, portending a near race-war in the town. Leon accuses an uninvolved Chinese launderer of trying to douse his eyes with lye, and then publicly abuses Wu, reminding him that “You may be a big shot in this alley, but you are less than a nigger to me!” (1.12). The brutal incident ends with the death of Wu’s underling, and to Seth Bullock’s horrified decision to become sheriff. These conflicting agendas and acts of violence are tied brilliantly together in the complex denouement of Season One, which dramatizes the intrigues surrounding Deadwood’s potential incorporation into the United States. The backdrop for the unfortunate murder of the Chinese launderer is provided by elements of the U.S. Cavalry billeting in the town, fresh from a war of brutal retribution on Native Americans in the aftermath of Little Big Horn. The murder is intercut with General Crook delivering an oration celebrating the restoration of white order in the Black Hills, “to the progress of the United States, of which I am certain this camp will soon be a part” (1.12).

The second season complicates and raises the stakes of this relationship between white and Chinese Deadwood, as Wu endures a rival Chinese leader entering the scene—the more polished, English-speaking Mr. Lee, who clearly plays Tolliver to Wu’s Swaenggen. Lee’s “juice” and native intelligence are impressive enough to bring Al to remark half-jokingly to Wu that “Maybe you and me should be working for him” (2.18).⁵ Lee has arrived at the behest of interests tied to George Hearst, father of William Randolph Hearst and eventual chief officer of the enormous Homestake mining concern. The Homestake “open-cut” mine heralded the end of small-scale entrepreneurship among the original miners drawn to the Lead-

Deadwood region. As “amalgamation and capital”⁶ exert a new stranglehold over Deadwood, Al is torn between maintaining his connection to Wu and severing it in the interest of preserving his autonomy and the camp’s. The camp is under assault on multiple fronts, from one-sided offers to join the Dakota Territory to the machinations of Hearst’s disturbed proxy, Francis Wolcott, who employs Tolliver to spread panic that will encourage cheap sales of existing gold claims to the Hearst interest.

Tolliver is also commissioned by Wolcott to co-administer with Lee a band of Chinese sex-slaves brought in as bargain prostitutes for the increasingly underpaid miners, many of whom have been tricked or coerced into abandoning their old claims for lives as wage-laborers in the Hearst orbit. These miserable women are systematically and openly degraded, living like animals in cages and with barely enough food to survive (2.18). Part of Wolcott’s ultimate strategy is to introduce male Chinese laborers into the camp down the road, virtual slaves who will work under deplorable conditions and for lower wages that will drive the price of white labor down or eliminate the need for it altogether; as Wolcott writes to Hearst, “Anxious as I know you to be ... to move to 24-hour operation, until workers at wage outnumber individual prospectors in the camp, the matter of Chinese labor remains delicate of introduction” (2.20). In the interim, the Chinese sex-slaves are the symbolic vanguard of this de-humanizing project to undermine labor standards, earning power, and entrepreneurial confidence in the camp’s existing arrangements.

In a show such as *Deadwood*, already unflinching in exploring the dark violence of which our language is capable, what is said of these anonymous and debased women is striking for its utter inhumanity. Tolliver suggests to his stooges that they sell the white miners of the town on the Chinese prostitutes by appealing to the exoticism and mortal danger of their very flesh: “I’d go with the strangeness, boys. Take it head on, turn it to your

fuckin' advantage. Ah ... 'among humans, for grip, the Chinawoman's snatch has no peer. In all of nature, the python is its only rival, though few have lived to tell the tale'" (2.19). The repulsive Stapleton complies, telling barflies that "the Chinese whore has a ancient way of milking ya of yer sorrow, your loneliness, and that awful feeling of bein' forsaken," to which bartender Tom Nuttall glibly replies, "Seems to me that'd leave you with nothing" (2.19). When the reliably decent Doc Cochran angrily challenges Tolliver on the appalling conditions endured by the sex-slaves, Tolliver conveniently lays the blame at the doorstep of the Chinese: "I ain't one, Doc, holds the white man's as the sole and only path. I strive to tolerate what I may not agree with. But those people's culture, their women are disposable" (2.20).

If Wu and the male Chinese of the first season of *Deadwood* had to suffer indignities in relative silence and anonymity, this is still more the case for the voiceless women in the second. In fact, it is their suffering that ultimately galvanizes Mr. Wu to murderous action that may cost him everything. When Lee begins burning the ravaged bodies of prostitutes who have failed to survive, thereby ruling out any proper burial in China, Wu calls on Al to sanction his intervention (2.23). Al, faced with a choice between Wu and Lee's backers, a choice not unlike that between the two addicts in Season One, is uncertain how to proceed. Seeing advantages in either course, his gut leans towards Wu since "Hearst's chink bossin' that alley ain't to my fuckin' taste"; if only because of the social capital Al has invested thus far in Wu, he opts to delay the "battle of the chinks" and put Wu "on ice" until further notice. Al exploits the occasion of the death of Sheriff Bullock's son, telling Lee there will be "no violence between you and Wu while the grievin' goes on. My God, act civilized even if you ain't" (2.23).

In the second season finale, Wu nearly undoes all the groundwork Al has laid for ultimately backing him by breaking the imposed truce in a street

fight that ends with dead foot-soldiers from both Chinese factions. Despite his irritation at Wu and his fears that he may have backed the wrong side in the Chinese conflict, Swearengen expresses a bemused respect for Wu, who “forsakes safety and even odds in a future fight for immediate fuckin’ dubious combat” (2.24). Al is left baffled by “what gets into people’s heads,” but one begins to suspect that admiration mingles with bewilderment in his assessment of Wu. In order at last to confidently loose the reins on Wu, Al must strategically subject him to one final, humiliating test of restraint and loyalty.

When the formidable George Hearst arrives in Deadwood to survey his newly won assets, he parleys with Swearengen to discuss the Lee/Wu clash and its ramifications for the new economy. Al trots Wu out like a degraded zoo curiosity, with his Chinese braid or “queue” leashed in Al’s hands:

Al: This yellow monkey’s Wu.

Hearst: Older fella. Not often you can tell how old they are.

Al: Done a turn or two for me, Wu has. And well-liked enough among his own. His display against *your* chink was my first *fuckin’* inkling that he’s irrational.

Hearst: Mr. Lee, the man he tried to kill, has worked well for me in several camps.

Al: Then God bless Lee and off with fuckin’ Wu’s head! You’ve got your finger on the cause of it too—your chink bein’ forward-looking. “Set the bodies ablaze, on with the day’s trade!” This one bein’ longer in the tooth—

Hearst: Set what bodies ablaze?

Al: Custom holds stronger to what passes for his mind.

.....

Hearst: Do you know prospecting, Mr. Swearengen?

Al: Fuckin’ nothin’ of it.

Hearst: And the securing of the color once found?

Al: Not a fuckin' thing.

Hearst: All I really care about.

(2.24)

With Hearst's summary judgment that only the "securing of the color" ultimately matters—and that it absolutely depends on stability and the illusion of propriety—the subtle, rigged game being played for Wu's livelihood and life concludes. Key to the infernal bargain struck, however, is that "Wu will staff your mines. And those [Chinese] that survive the explosions, he can place in laundries or kitchens." Hearst and Al also demand of Wu a decisive, personal reckoning of his mettle—Wu, to use a "fuckin' mining term" Al has actually heard, must "prove out" (2.24) by ritually murdering his competitors, and in particular the now expendable and embarrassing. Lee.

In the closing moments of *Deadwood's* sophomore season, Wu joins Al's white lieutenants in a *Godfather*-style assault on Lee's headquarters, where Lee is slaughtered in the grips of a sex- and opium-driven haze. As in the season one finale, the massacre is intercut with other key developments in town, including the marriage of wealthy Alma Garrett, the suicide of the homicidal Wolcott, and the drafting of documents to incorporate Deadwood into the Dakota Territory. When Wu emerges victoriously from the carnage, he cuts off his queue in a public demonstration of defiance, autonomy, and—according to Al—his bloody purchase of an authentically American identity. Holding up what remains of his braid, Wu shares his triumph with his mentor, who presides not only over the marriage of Deadwood to the Dakotas, but of Wu and the Chinese to the United States.

Mr. Wu: Wu! America! (his braid in hand)

Al: That'll hold you tight to her tit!

Mr. Wu: (holding crossed fingers up to Al) Heng dai! [loosely translated, "Brotherhood!"]

(2.24)

In a moment that is imagined as both birth and death, as nursing at the bosom of America and sacrificing at the altar of her cult of success, Wu has both murdered his rival and symbolically murdered his Chinese identity in amputating his queue, the conventional symbol of subjection to the Manchurian emperors of the Qing Dynasty. He makes a primal bargain with assimilation—to the Hobbesian ethos of survival and the American ethos of prosperity at any cost. Held tight to America's "tit," Wu has finally answered Al's question in Season One, opting to make his way in a world where justice is too tall (and too white) an order. In correspondence with the authors, actor Keone Young was asked whether he thought his character's choice was in any way a betrayal of his heritage; Young's answer says volumes:

There is a lot to articulate about Wu and why he cut his queue. It is as complex as the whole Chinese in America question. All I can say is that at some point we ChinaMEN [sic] decided that we would stop being sojourners in this country and become part of America. The queue was some kind of passport for us. Imposed on us by the Manchu's the queue would make us different from them. To make us look like animals or their horses when we prostrated before them. If we did not wear it we would be beheaded and so if we had come to America and cut it off we would not be able to go back home. Wu by cutting it off swears not only his allegiance to his newfound home but flies in the face of all those that want to colonize him and his people. I believe he finally finds that like all Americans to be free from tyranny is the appeal that this new country has. Even though it was rife

with chauvinism and race prejudice. It was a country that was screaming and groaning for freedom. It is the sacrifice that one must make in order to be free is what Wu swears he will do. ... Hopefully if all goes right [in Season Three] Wu will make the next step up in the history of the "new" in America. I repeat from last season: "WU—'MELICA—HENG DAI!"⁷

"Indomitable Argonauts" and "Celestial Chuckle-heads": The Chinese of Historic Deadwood

In his *Pioneer Days in the Black Hills: Accurate History and Facts Related by One of the Early Day Pioneers* (1939), John S. McClintock, "meditating on the present physical status of our thin, gray line of Black Hills pioneers of '76," glumly observes that "there are few surviving members of that one time vigorous and venturesome band of indomitable Argonauts." McClintock thus concludes his history of the Black Hills gold rush era, carrying himself back one last time "in vivid remembrance and serious thought to an epochal period of time long past; a time when there assembled in virgin forests a mighty host of civilian immigrants." "This great army of agitated humanity," he muses, "apparently all of one accord, had arisen simultaneously from all sections of the country and from all walks of life" (McClintock 253). McClintock's history shines in many respects, and it includes gems such as Deadwood's first directory of commercial services (the town's "Yellow Pages" in essence) and a grim, but informative "Summary of Early Day Fatalities" (202-06; 269-74). And yet for all of the insights and memories preserved in McClintock's sweeping memoir, his book scarcely acknowledges the existence and importance of the Chinese community to Deadwood's economy, culture, and overall prosperity.⁸ Neither his directory nor his fatality lists include a single reference to a

Chinese merchant or combatant.⁹ McClintock's account leaves unspoken a key presumption—that enlistment in this “great army of agitated humanity,” whose ranks were filled by “indomitable Argonauts” who despite all their differences tamed a frontier rich in “color”—was in fact the exclusive province of whites.

Historians of Deadwood and the Black Hills have been gamely wrestling with omissions such as these ever since, begging some very important questions: How does the historian go about rectifying someone else's act of forgetting without stumbling into the pitfalls that seem to attend all of our efforts to discuss race today? In trying to unearth something that has been buried wrongfully and buried alive, as it were,¹⁰ can the historian insensitively do more harm than good? Is each of us inescapably hostage to a rather unenviable choice, namely, the choice between willful ignorance of the past's complexity and facing squarely what are our clumsy or even brutal ways of talking about one another?

The official history produced in 1976 to commemorate the centennial of the Deadwood region is a case in point. In the thorough *Gold, Gals, Guns, Guts: A History of Deadwood, Lead, and Spearfish, 1874-1976*, editor Bob Lee and his co-authors struggled to come to terms with the vital role played by non-Whites in the evolution from the chaos and criminality of the mining camps to the relative stability of what would eventually become Lawrence County, South Dakota. Yet in remembering and scrutinizing what others like McClintock had glossed over, *Gold, Gals, Guns, Guts* betrays an equally problematic urge to endorse the white perception of the Chinese as exotic, clannish, and inscrutably mysterious. As the centennial narrative has it, “The stolid, honest, and hard-working yellowmen, loyal only to their own race, built their own city within Deadwood City, the largest self-ruled Chinatown east of San Francisco” (Lee 36). And of the clan of entrepreneur Fee Lee Wong, “the most famed and honored [family] of Deadwood's

Chinatown," we are told that "although the family returned to China before the children reached adulthood," by all accounts "all members of it grew up to be a credit to their race," with some eventually returning to the United States to settle in California (Lee 39). Hand in hand with this oddly condescending praise, the centennial history also titillates its readers with romantic allusions to any number of cultural "oddities": the mysterious rites of the local Chinese Masonic Lodge; the vaguely demonic Lord of the Chinese house of worship known as the Joss House¹¹; the arcane rituals of "colorful" Chinese funerals; the complexities of Chinese labor contracts stipulating the transplantation of the buried in a "small zinc-lined box, sealed for shipment to San Francisco and thence to China for reburial"; and the "lawlessness" of the "Tongs" and opium dens (37-39).

The point is not to take easy shots at the datedness or implicit racism of the rhetoric here. In fact, I think the Centennial history makes an honest effort to be as inclusive and comprehensive as possible within the terms provided by an already skewed historical record, a record comprised of newspaper accounts, judicial proceedings, and selective memories that were engineered from the beginning to represent white, propertied interests. What will prove useful, however, is a re-interrogation of our assumptions about what *counts* as significant "pioneer history" and what is mere window-dressing. We somehow need to thread the needle between not-so-benign neglect and rhetorical sensationalism, in the service of fully appreciating the emergence and growth of the Chinese community *on its own terms*, as much as this is conceptually possible given our biases and our truly limited knowledge of what was really happening "on the ground" in the Deadwood of the gold-rush era.

A means to this end is revisiting and deconstructing some of the iconic figures and tales in the existing historiography. These larger-than-life characters were made to stand in for the Chinese of Deadwood and to be

avatars of traits ascribed to them individually and collectively. Before turning to two such figures, we must acknowledge that foremost in the apprehensive minds of the Deadwood pioneers was dread of the Chinese population influx in the abstract. Watson Parker tells us that “From the start of the rush in early 1876, the *Cheyenne Leader* noted [the Chinese] arrival from the West and their departure for the Hills, unkindly recording that an apocryphal group composed of ‘Hop-Lee, Ding-Dong, Heap-Wash, and Hang-Jeff, Celestial chuckle-heads from the Flowery kingdom’ had pulled out of town for the new mines” (qtd. in Parker 143).¹² Beneath the playfulness and the cruelty of reports such as these lies a deep-seated anxiety (and later, paranoia) over the economic threat posed by Chinese competition in the newly rich Black Hills.

One way in which Chinese immigrants sought to minimize the risks of being viewed as outright competitors was to learn quickly how “to negotiate the Wild West’s fierce rivalries and racism”; Chinese in general “chose to avoid the highly contested world of gold digging in favor of heavy labor or service work” (Khatchadourian, par. 7). As upwards of 100 Chinese in Deadwood plied what was even then the stereotypical laundry trade, they found in the cliché both relative safety and economic leverage; the so-called “knights of the washtub” were legend and legion, in particular for the perhaps mythical practice of washing down miners’ clothes for even trace amounts of placer gold.¹³ Another tactic was simply to stay under the communal radar and to dissimulate the actual extent of their numbers: “Population figures for the Chinese of Deadwood are no more reliable than those for the rest of Deadwood’s people, and probably considerably less so due to the secretiveness of the Chinese who feared various anti-Chinese laws or hostilities if it were known how many of them there actually were” (Parker 144). Hence the official and unofficial censuses made of the settlement only tell us so much, given Chinese self-interest in downplaying

their numbers.¹⁴ A survey of the historical literature on this question reflects estimates of the Chinese population at its zenith being anywhere from 200 to 500 residents; what most recent accounts agree upon is that boasts made for Deadwood as the largest Chinatown east of San Francisco are mythical at best (Parker 144; Zhu, "Ethnic Oasis" 5).¹⁵

Nevertheless, the white *perception* of Chinese as populous and omnipresent in the town is significant, less forthcoming accounts such as McClintock's notwithstanding. As Parker awkwardly puts it, "Not everybody was completely entranced by the oriental oddities of the Chinese." He recounts that attorney Henry Frawley "defended a white client who had murdered a Chinaman by alleging that there was no law against it, and he urged the judge to fine the murderer twenty-five dollars for 'cruelty to animals' instead" (Parker 146). Whether in approbation of that sentiment or simply in the interest of imposing *some* penalty where capital punishment would otherwise be out of the question, the judge concurred with this settlement of the painful question. What this and countless other indignities speak to is an assessment of the Chinese as subhuman, at least in moments of communal duress when tolerance yielded to race-baiting. There are indeed instances of genuine kindness and respect for the Chinese in accounts of the era, and we will touch on these shortly, but for now we must seriously attend to this animus under which the Chinese community labored.

What in part fueled anti-Chinese sentiment was, again, the spectre of economic competition and the "desire to expel cheap labor ... always lurking in the back of the minds of the rougher laboring men" (Parker 147). This resentment eventually incited the formation of the 1878 "Caucasian League," whose express purpose was to protect white interests and employment from encroachment; the methods of the League ranged from legal devices to extra-legal violence (Parker 147-48; Zhu, "Ethnic Oasis" 7-8). The League's success was mixed at best, and its excesses mitigated by

white businessmen and their families whose economic interests and personal sentiments ran toward toleration.

Where naked economic paranoia failed to take root, persistent concern over the prevalence of the opium trade brought in a moral dimension to anti-Chinese prejudice. In 1879, *The Black Hills Daily Times* reported: "The whites down in Chinatown are making a strong effort to oust the heathen of that part of the gulch, or at least close up their smoke house and other crooked concerns in that quarter. It is a fact, not generally known, that the smoke houses are just as numerous as before the raid ... but not so open. Only the initiated have access to the pipes of peace—and death" (qtd. in Lee 36).¹⁶ This captures well just how often the pendulum swung between drug enforcement and implicit indulgence of the opium trade in Deadwood's Chinatown, as well as the degree to which, as now, drug problems that do not discriminate are nonetheless made to serve the divisive interests of racism—which pretends addiction is somehow a "colored" (in this case, "yellow") phenomenon. It did not help matters that Deadwood's Chinatown, by chance or choice perhaps, was situated in the heart of the town's notorious "Badlands" or "Tenderloin" district, the home of "the ever-popular dance halls, brothels, opium dens, gambling halls, and saloons" (Toms 3) featured so prominently in the HBO series.¹⁷

It also did not help that opium itself was perceived as a specifically *Chinese* importation given its history of usage in the Chinese homeland, the complexities and tragedies of the British Opium Wars conveniently forgotten or genuinely misunderstood. Despite the fact that opium was "a legal medicinal and recreational supplement" in early Deadwood (at least prior to its incorporation into the Dakota Territory) (Fosha 66), "many 'respectable' people tended to look upon opium smoking as just another vice of the heathen Chinese" (Toms 83).¹⁸ The disfavor showed to the practice of smoking of course belied the class contradictions inherent in the less

discussed and equally pernicious use of laudanum among wealthier white addicts, a subject touched on in Milch's *Deadwood* in the character of Alma Garrett, who spends much of Season One kicking her "fashionable" habit.¹⁹ When a reporter for the *Black Hills Daily Times* accompanied a Lawrence County grand jury in 1878 as it visited Deadwood's opium dens, with an eye toward systematic legal action to shut them down, he described the practice of smoking in terms that were both titillating and strikingly honest about the color-blind nature of opium traffic. He recounted how "The victims are reduced to a semi-unconscious state when all is placid, calm, serene, no hilarity or mirth is observable, and if there is any enjoyment in its effect it must be in the mind or imagination of the smoker. ... We visited other dens and found (very unexpectedly) many whom we meet in the better circles of society. Alas! That human nature should be so frail" (qtd. in Toms 85).

The *Times* was in fact a regular thorn in the side of the opium trade and of local addicts, editorially taking any opportunity to reduce the problem to a Chinese pathology: "We will state for the benefit of the industrious Chinamen who honestly attend to their legitimate business that there is much anger concerning the opium smoking among the American people, and especially the allowing of young girls in these dens. If the entire Chinese population do not wish to get into trouble, they must aid in putting this vice down, so far at least as the young people are concerned" (qtd. in Toms 87). The concern for young, white, and especially female "Americans" here suggests the extent to which the opium question had been politicized and made the opportunity for a deeper racism to manifest, a racism rooted in the demographic and economic pressures mentioned above. The *Times* in 1878 did not fail to point out that while "opium smoking is a greater evil than whiskey drinking," its most glaring offense was that "a thousand dollars a week is taken from circulation here by the Chinese smoke houses." This could only be answered by wayfaring Christian soldiers, such as an

anonymous “muscular matron,” who “armed with a big iron poker, knocked at the door [of a den] and demanded admittance, which being refused she brought her artillery to bear ... and put the inmates to flight by the back entrance” (qtd. in Toms 89). A true “Christian at work,” the matron embodied a spirit of righteous and religious indignation that could not be troubled by the moral and socio-economic complexities of the opium trade in Chinatown.

Yet why was Christian “artillery” inadequate to the task of reducing opium use in Deadwood? This touches on an especially sore subject, namely, the ongoing complicity of white businesses and political interests in the maintenance of the trade. “[L]enient judges, hung juries, claims of inadequate evidence, and the seeming ease with which the Chinese, in particular, made bail” (Toms 88) all contributed, it seems, to the perpetuation of the trade and the reduction of raids to mere nuisances. Where moral outrage proved ineffectual, however, the ferocity of nature and of vigilante justice sometimes collaborated with spectacular, ugly results. A fire in the Badlands broke out on a frigid morning in the winter of 1885, starting in a “two-story combination store, opium joint, and gambling house operated by Wing Tsue and with the aid of high winds, spread quickly to surrounding frame buildings.” Again, the *Times* was on hand to gloat:

In an hour, the miserable dens so long an eye-sore and disgrace to our city, had vanished, and the laddies exchanged congratulations over their good work—and that of the fire fiend. Losses are nominal. Ten buildings were destroyed, only two of which were worthy of the name of building. These were owned by Wing Tsue and Hi Kee, dealers in Chinese goods and immorality. (qtd. in Toms 90)

Aside from the cold dismissal of the swath of destruction through the heart of Chinatown, what should also trouble us is the celebration of the “laddies,” likely firemen or ordinary citizens who did not do all they could to prevent “the fire fiend” from visiting righteous, divine anger upon purveyors of “immorality.” Deadwood was often enough referred to as the “Gomorrhah of the Black Hills”; here we see that religious rhetoric deployed selectively and viciously, in order to invoke God’s wrath upon a specific racial enclave. Yet if Chinese capital and white allies together conspired to protect “dealers” like Wing Tsue, one must wonder why the angel of God was at last so partial, assuming for the moment that we can rule out arson at the hands of white moralists who would “just say no” to opium and “yes” to a race-war.

This tension between white rage at the drug trade and the whitewashing of its economic origins provides an opportunity to look more closely at the first of our two iconic figures in the lore of Chinese Deadwood, namely, that shop-owner Wing Tsue Wong, also known as Fee Lee Wong (c. 1846-1921). Wong rarely drew the ire of Deadwood’s populace as he did in the wake of that 1885 fire; instead, Wong was often respectfully hailed as a luminary of his community. The eventual mayor of Deadwood, Sol Star, befriended Wong and the Chinese early on, and hence there developed abiding personal and commercial connections that would sustain both parties for generations (Lee 37; Ames 113-16). In Star’s case, it would indeed be wrong to reduce his relationship to the Chinese community as one born solely of mutual self-interest; there is ample evidence that Star was viewed as a sincere, impassioned, and “outspoken advocate of the Chinese in Deadwood” (Zhu, “Ethnic Oasis” 27).

The reader may recall that in the Centennial history of Deadwood discussed above, Wong and his descendants were remembered as “a credit to their race” (Lee 39). The source of that “credit” and the ultimate reasons for Wong’s privileged place in the cultural memory of Deadwood are to be

found not only in his tactically-chosen connections, but also in an uncanny ability to leverage his business profile and his image—both as a legitimate businessman and as a *de facto* Black Hills pioneer, *pace* McClintock and his white “Argonauts.” As a pioneer, Wong is said to have “arrived in the Black Hills in 1876 as a cook and, according to an oral history taken from his descendents, was traveling in a convoy of miners when they were attacked by outlaws. Wong fought well, and for his bravery the miners awarded him two mining claims. He sold one for \$75,000 and would become one of Deadwood’s leading businessmen” (Khatchadourian, par. 12).²⁰ Wong’s “Wing Tsue Emporium,” which was rebuilt in the wake of the 1885 fire and expanded in 1896 (see Fig. 1), offered diverse wares, including: “Chinese groceries, chinaware, herbs, Chinese novelties, Japanese curtains, wastepaper baskets, intricately hand-carved work boxes, napkin rings, fancy inlaid bread knives, and ‘hundreds of other appropriate gifts’ in surroundings advertised as ‘unique, neat, and appreciative’” (Parker 144-45).



Fig. 1. Last vestiges of Deadwood's Chinatown: The Wing Tsue Building (built 1896, photographed by the authors in 2005)²¹

The aspect of Wong's business that no doubt prompted the most curiosity, both on its own exotic terms and for its proximity to the sensitive question of the opium trade, was the apothecary, patterned after those that had dotted the urban landscapes of China since classical times (Sulentic 74). A *Times* reporter made his way to the Chinatown drugstores in 1883, recounting in provocative detail the complex cures and ingredients essential to traditional Chinese medicine. Yet despite his obvious fascination with the offerings, which must have been shared by many other citizens of a town wracked with the occasional frontier pestilence, the reporter nonetheless condescended to the "healing qualities of root-quackery in good faith." He

mockingly added that “the patient is at liberty to decide for himself which is worse, the remedy, or the disease,” and that “taking all things into consideration, nature had a hard time rescuing a patient from the clutches of a Chinese doctor” (qtd. in Sulentic 74, 75).

By skillfully negotiating the rhetorical and political minefield that stretched from “root-quackery” to potential implication in the opium trade, Wong managed over the years to rise from pioneer cook and apothecary to civic leader. Such was the influence that Wong and his peers came to wield that they were able in later years to mount serious defenses of their community against anti-Chinese legislation at the state and federal 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” (Zhu, “Ethnic Oasis” 32). The official penalty for non-compliance was deportation, but the Chinese response to the laws was a combination of civil disobedience, crafty evasion of the laws, and legal strategies that included bringing to trial “test cases in various places from San Francisco to New York” (32). While most Chinese eventually found themselves compelled to abide by the Geary Act, for a significant period of time “more than 90 percent of Chinese in the Black Hills” were in active non-compliance while their attorneys continued to make the government pay dearly in terms of time, treasury, and energy expended by the national court system (Zhu, “Ethnic Oasis” 33).

The relative success of this two-pronged attack, i.e., local resistance to the laws and federal activism designed to undermine their legal credibility, was due in large part to the leadership and capital provided by Deadwood luminaries like Fee Lee Wong and to quasi-governmental organizations such as the Chinese Six Companies of San Francisco (32).²² Over time, the

Chinese self-defense rallied a growing number of white supporters to their cause, allies who had now come to see the Chinese as an integral part of the Black Hills cultural landscape, including those who had come to that realization by way of their pocketbooks and ledger sheets. When Wong made a trip to China in 1904 and was detained upon re-entry to the U.S. under the terms of the Exclusion Act, the outraged citizens of Deadwood “appealed to their congressman, who interceded” and obtained Wong’s release (Wolfe 55). By the early years of the twentieth century, “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’” (Zhu, “Ethnic Oasis” 41). While this sea-change in the understanding of the Chinese no doubt failed to erase or compensate for the most pernicious effects of systemic racism, McClintock’s “indomitable Argonauts” had nonetheless found some noteworthy company in complex figures like Fee Lee Wong.

Never so fortunate in her alliances or her fate, one Chinese woman of Deadwood nonetheless made her own mark on the cultural memory of the Black Hills, to both the credit and the shame of the region. This most remarkable woman was known variously as Di Hee, Lee, or Gee, but her most prevalent and racist monikers in the literature are “Yellow Doll” and “China Doll.” Di Hee arrived in Deadwood in 1876, most likely from San Francisco. As the Centennial history has it, she emerged on the scene “young and beautiful, and lived in secluded luxury until she was crudely chopped to bits with a hatchet in 1877” (Lee 38). The *Black Hills Daily Times* described the grisly details of her infamous murder, unsolved to this day:

The corpse lies in the rear of a small shanty in Chinatown, face and blood presenting a disgusting spectacle. An inquest was held this morning, at which several witnesses were examined but

no evidence throwing light upon the crime was elicited. Stabbed with a pocket knife and a fractured skull caused by a blow on the head from a hatchet were the causes of her death. Her effects, consisting of three houses and lots on Main Street and considerable personal property were, upon order of the acting coroner, delivered by officer Johnson to one Hong Gee, who claims kinship.

(qtd. in Lee 75)

The Centennial history adds that by all accounts, “the ‘good’ women of the community shed few if any tears at her enigmatic death” (Lee 38). The not-so-subtle implication that Di Hee was a Chinese woman of ill repute and illicit means winds its way throughout the histories and recollections of her life. Watson Parker makes the explicit claim that “China Doll,” whom he never properly names, was “a young and beautiful Chinese prostitute, who was chopped to pieces, presumably by some of the more reclusive Chinese citizens” (147). Joe Sulentic avoids directly identifying “Yellow Doll” as a prostitute, but tells us that “she reportedly performed as a singer and dancer on the stage of a Main Street bar,” where she was said to be “a favorite of both Chinese and white men in Deadwood, but the dance hall girls called her the ‘slant-eyed come on’” (63).

These dodgy accounts rest far too complacently in uncritical, racist, and moralistic assumptions about Di Hee’s life and killers, assumptions that some have scrutinized more closely. In his own 1975 study of Deadwood’s Chinatown, Grant Anderson dropped this brief but provocative hint about an alternative thesis for Di Hee’s murder, a thesis born of his own research and of conversations with a Deadwood librarian: “One theory, advanced by Postmaster Adams, was that the Yellow Doll was murdered because of the opium question. She had discussed the effects of the drug with him, and he

contended that she was in Deadwood to close the opium dens" (Anderson 422). If fully substantiated, this bombshell would demolish the presumption that Di Hee was merely a high-class, exotic whore murdered for love, lust, moral outrage, or some arcane agenda of the Chinese underworld. More recently, Jerry Bryant, Research Curator at the Adams Museum in Deadwood, has devoted his own energies to fleshing out and humanizing the tale of Di Hee—as a woman not only of means, but moreover of extraordinary character, elegance, and courage. Bryant maintains that the image of Di Hee as a prostitute is essentially a convenient fiction propagandized in the wake of her controversial life and death; instead, Bryant finds in her a respectable and respected member of the Deadwood community whose outspokenness in tweaking the established arrangements between white and Chinese Deadwood no doubt led to her death at the collaborative hands of a number of interests.²³

We are unlikely ever to know fully the intrigues and prejudices that led to the brutal slaughter of Di Hee, but it is vitally important that she be remembered as much as possible in the fullness of her identity as a Chinese woman who would ultimately not be silenced. This demands an imaginative, yet historically informed reconstruction of the circumstances of her life and death that has mostly gone neglected. While Deadwood has traditionally included the "Yellow Doll" as "a theme for floats appearing in various 'Days of '76' parades" (Anderson 427) or as part of the continuing Chinese New Year celebrations there, these gestures fall far short of the relatively three-dimensional and sympathetic accounts of figures like merchant Fee Lee Wong. By and large, the "China Doll" legend remains an eroticized and exotic piece of Orientalist myth-making; in a sense, there is a vested interest in keeping Di Hee's murder unsolved and mysterious, and her identity anonymous and titillating. This is no longer a matter of protecting any particular agenda or guilty party in Deadwood, all of which are long

gone and buried; instead, we are now talking about the convenience and inertia of communal forgetfulness, which lodges legends like the “China Doll” in spaces where they are thought most comfortably to fit, even at the expense of messy but essential truths.²⁴

Given the time frame established in Milch's *Deadwood*, one might speculate that the Di Hee murder will eventually find its way onto the show, but one must also hope the show would deconstruct the image of Chinese femininity as ruthlessly as it targets so many other commonplaces about the West. This in a sense has begun already in Season Two with the sympathetic yet characteristically silent portrayal of the miserable Chinese sex-slaves brought to Deadwood as part of the Hearst takeover. One wonders what the show would do with an articulate and self-possessed Chinese woman, given its exploration of Mr. Wu's minimally-verbal dialogues with Swearingen and Mr. Lee's polished, English-speaking rival to the Wu faction. An eloquent Di Hee might pose the single greatest challenge to a writing team that is already knee-deep in the complexities of women and misogyny in the Old West.

Finally, what figures such as Di Hee and Fee Lee Wong suggest is that, whatever the indignities suffered in life and in memory by the Chinese of Deadwood, their story (and that of the Black Hills) can never be reduced to a simplistic tale of victimization. Liping Zhu emphatically reminds us that:

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.

(Zhu, "Ethnic Oasis"

43)

Given the conditions under which the Deadwood Chinese sought their dignity, recreating their history is not merely a matter of setting the record straight in the sense of rigid accuracy. If accuracy in its most austere and dull incarnation were the sole criterion by which we judge truth, Milch's *Deadwood* would be, by his own admission, as much a failure as the Orientalist myths that have passed for history in the records thus far. Rather, *Deadwood* mythologizes as a way of exposing rather than avoiding truths, and what is ultimately at stake both in the show and in the legends of the historical Chinatown are far more important things than merely "getting the past right" (which usually amounts in television to making it *look* right). Alternatively, we are talking about an historical ethic and a narrative justice that starts with the myths left to us by forgetful communities, if only to complicate and re-shape those myths in the service of something deeper—and no doubt something at once more ugly and more beautiful than we ever imagined. In this vein, we turn now to one of old Deadwood's most ambivalent and penetrating memoirs of Chinatown, and to the shaky accommodation made by today's citizens with their own past, a Chinese past hiding in plain sight.

"Arteries of a Strange, Different Life": Memory, Preservation, and
Deadwood's Chinatown Today

A young girl named Estelline Bennett found herself amid the chaos of Deadwood in 1877. Daughter to federal judge Granville G. Bennett, who had been assigned to the town to tame its already notorious lawlessness, young Estelline would later publish her own memoirs of *Old Deadwood Days*

(1928). With the arrival of her father, Estelline noted that “Law and order came early in ’77 and for more than a dozen years lawlessness and law, order and disorder drifted along together in the seclusion of the deep, narrow gulch without interfering seriously with each other” (Bennett 5). Her memoir brims with honest accounts of her own voyeuristic relationship to Deadwood’s Badlands, where “lovely light ladies” collected “their wages of sin under our very eyes” and enjoyed their “little span of glory ... too brief to leave any illusion in our minds about the desirability of such lives” (6). Yet despite the moral certainties with which Estelline tempered her recollections of the Badlands’ prostitutes, gamblers, and opium-smokers, she could not help but acknowledge: “Everything about those alleyways was of deep interest. They were the arteries of a strange, different life” (7).

Bennett and every other child knew well where the dividing line between respectability and ill repute was: “Wall Street was a naughty little thoroughfare that divided the good and the bad in Deadwood. It was known as the ‘dead-line’ below which the police never interfered after six o’clock at night ...” (21-22). Estelline recalls how one of the brothels at the end of Wall Street, a structure whose curtained windows endlessly fascinated her circle of friends, “perched perilously over the creek, and when the big flood came, it went down with the current” (22). Yet unlike that *Times* reporter who gloated in 1885 that the “fire fiend” had consumed the businesses of “dealers in Chinese goods and immorality” (Toms 90), Estelline never rests quite so comfortably on knowing the will and wrath of God: “[The flood] might have served to point to a moral if it had not been that the schoolhouse and the Methodist Church went too, while the Gem Theater and a lot of saloons stood fast” (22). This wary refusal to judge too sternly is a hallmark of much of Bennett’s memoir, and it is no doubt borne of the recognition that, especially in a town like Deadwood, nature rains on the just and unjust alike, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde.

Naturally, Chinatown looms large in the moral and cultural topography of Estelline's Deadwood—where “below the badlands, Chinatown twisted along its narrow picturesque way”; where “in the shabby little shops were piled great quantities of beautiful Oriental silks, embroideries, egg-shell china, sandalwood, teak, and carved ivory”; and where “there were gambling games that no one interfered with—naturally, considering the number that ran wide open for the pleasure, profit, and occasional tragedy of the white man” (27). The prostitutes there “could not have belonged to the underworld for the term was not used in Deadwood. Everything was too open and aboveboard” (30). Yet Estelline's Chinatown was not merely the Orientalist fantasy of her more segregated fellow citizens; rather, her father was “the unofficial counsel for the Chinese” (27) whose service to his “clients consisted entirely in seeing that they were given fair trials when they were arrested for selling opium” (28). Estelline proudly added, “I think he always managed an acquittal,” in part because “neither judicial nor public opinion was very strong about such things,” the reigning sentiment being that “If a Chinamen [sic] wanted to smoke opium, who cared? They were rarely in trouble about anything else” (28).

Despite Estelline's suggestion here that public opinion on the opium question was less divided or angry than imagined, one must wonder whether the “lenient judges” and “hung juries” (Toms 88) blamed for the persistence of the trade were thinly-veiled references to the work of Judge Bennett. In any event, Estelline at a young age recognized the obvious advantages that accrued to her family as a result of her father's services, such that “When there was not a Chinese servant to be had in the whole gulch, one would spring up from some dark corner at Father's bidding and come cheerfully into our kitchen.” It is clear what Estelline means when she says, “They were real Chinese in those days too, wearing queues wound round their heads” (28)—“real” Chinese looked and played the part of devoted lackeys.

When the Bennett family developed close connections to merchant Fee Lee Wong, Estelline met her first “real” Chinese woman, the “only ‘respectable’ Chinese woman that ever came to Deadwood” (30)²⁵: “Mrs. Wing Tsue herself was the loveliest bit of exquisite china I ever saw. She was painted and mascaraed in a way no nice American woman could understand in those days, but on her the effect was charming” (29).

The unconscious racism of Estelline’s memoir perhaps makes far too easy a target at last; after all, it is no great feat to expose a young girl whose prejudices were as much inheritances of her class and her family’s privileges as anything else. If anything, Estelline’s racism must have been unique in comparison with her young peers who likely avoided the “deadline” at Wall Street altogether. The combination of regular contact with the Chinese and the abiding conviction that they were radically different from whites must have made for a confusing psychic relationship to their place in Deadwood—and to the place of her father’s curious alliance with a community so often under siege. Yet for all the Orientalist impulses of Estelline’s narrative, a fundamental humanity emerges from it too, a humanity and an inclusiveness that is missing from other accounts, such as McClintock’s “whitewashed” *Pioneer Days*.

In ending her chapter on “A Little Girl in Old Deadwood,” Estelline eschews the narcissism to which any memoirist can fall prey, and instead comes to a retrospective appreciation of Deadwood’s collective diversity. “We were a very friendly people in Deadwood,” she writes; “We had come so far in the late nineteenth century as to believe that Deadwood Gulch was wide enough for as many races as could find it” (31). There is no simplistic or politically correct invocation of diversity on Estelline’s part; rather, she suggests that the vitality, brutality, and eventual prosperity of Deadwood depended on an entire community of people desperate to reinvent themselves. She writes of the apparent gulf between the “exquisite china”

that was Mrs. Wing Tsue and the “Indian squaws in their wind-swept, fire-lit tepees”:

Between them came all the rest of us—miners, lawyers, stage drivers, merchants, gamblers, doctors, priests, saloon keepers; women with their memories of older, gentler lands, and children growing up with their minds and hearts full of the glory of the old mountains and the charm of the young camp; men from the farms and villages of the prairie states, and men from the “effete east,” political exiles from Europe and remittance men from England, and men whose pasts could not travel by stage. We were all children of the present and the future. No one was ever curious in old Deadwood. No one ever asked a man “what his name was back in the States.”

(Bennett 32)

If we are to bring nuance to the account of the Chinese frontier experience, we would do well to entertain Estelline’s sentiments here as being absolutely sincere and forward-looking, and allow them to complicate our understanding of frontier racism. At last, it is as grave an error to oversimplify the discourse of racism as it is the sin of racism itself to reify us and strip us of our humanity, be we perpetrators, victims, or both. One way to avoid error and sin alike is to return to Deadwood with something of the openness displayed by Estelline, who saw in her town the “arteries of a strange, different life,” arteries clogged and teeming with “children of the present and the future.”

None of this optimism, however salutary, can change the fact that Deadwood’s Chinatown is no more—whether we ultimately explain this as a consequence of shifting demographics, economic collapse, racism, communal homesickness, or something else entirely. To know any place truly is hard

enough; to know one long gone still more so. Aside from the remnants of Fee Lee Wong's businesses, the only remaining traces of Deadwood's Chinatown are to be found in its graveyard, whose once populous Chinese section has now dwindled to two plots, one of which is captured here (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. One of two Chinese graves remaining in Mt. Moriah Cemetery, Deadwood (photographed by the authors in 2005).

As the plaque near the graves explains: "Chinese immigrants came to Deadwood to make their fortune. After burial in Mt. Moriah, with appropriate ceremonies, the remains were removed for reburial in their home village in China. Not more than two bodies remain in the Chinese section."²⁶ When Joe Sulentic wrote his 1975 study of Deadwood's Chinatown, he was able to devote an entire section of his piece to Mt. Moriah, including an extensive listing of the Chinese plots and those interred there (76-85). While even then many bodies had already been removed to

China, a significant number of Chinese remained; it would seem that by 2005, the exodus of Deadwood is nearly complete.²⁷

We hope to have captured through our words and images here the extent to which Deadwood's Chinatown lingers on, much like a phantom limb whose pain and former vitality are palpable just below the veneer of a town made prosperous again—by legalized gambling, historical tourism, and the popularity of the HBO vehicle. Fully appreciating what was here and what was lost, however, demands more than the local gift shops (which feature everything from photos of the Wong family to "Mr. Wu" T-shirts) can provide (or should be asked to provide). It has fallen to researchers such as Jerry Bryant and archaeologists like Rose Estep Fosha to continue the archival work necessary to re-imagine Deadwood's Chinatown. In our conversation with them as we prepared this essay,²⁸ we found Bryant and Fosha ambivalent and excited about the future of historic research and preservation in town, and about the role Milch's *Deadwood* might ultimately play in that agenda. Bryant, who has worked extensively as historical consultant to the production,²⁹ finds himself taking a few of his otherwise high marks away from the elaborate, multi-million dollar sets erected for the show—one objection being that HBO's Chinatown is far too modest and underdeveloped by comparison to its historical counterpart. Bryant also suggests that as compelling as the show's depiction of Wu and the Deadwood Chinese has proven to be, much work remains to be done in fleshing out the realities of Chinese goals and daily existence in the Black Hills. If Bryant has one overriding concern, it would be that the show runs the risk of perpetuating the distorted, criminal image of the Deadwood Chinatown.

Archaeologist Fosha has spent her talents and energies literally digging into what remains of Deadwood's Chinatown. As she notes in her report on digs undertaken between 2001 and 2003, "With the modernization of

Deadwood over the past five decades, much of what has been recognized as 'Chinatown' has been destroyed" (Fosha 52). What Fosha and her corps of professional and volunteer diggers have been able to unearth are archaeological substrata made accessible by the razing of an eatery known as "Louie's Chicken Hut."³⁰ A document of "Old Deadwood" has proven most useful in targeting sites for current and future excavations, namely, fire insurance maps dating from 1891 to 1948 (Fosha 53-54). Ironically enough, these maps, intended to buttress liability claims in the event of catastrophe, are now being used to resist the ravages of time and the cultural catastrophe of losing Deadwood's Chinatown. Thus far, Fosha's team has begun the long-term project of cataloguing hundreds of artifacts, many of which have made their way to the collection from Chinatown privies, a surprisingly rich source of information (57-58). Everything from stoneware wine jars to patent medicine vials, ceramic teapots, hair combs, toothbrushes, opium bowls, currency, lottery paraphernalia, and loaded dice have been unearthed.

Despite the richness of these excavations, Fosha insists that far more (and perhaps even more significant) materials await exhumation should her team obtain access to the land under Fee Lee Wong's emporia (see Fig. 1). Given Wong's importance to the Chinese community and to Deadwood at large, she is undoubtedly correct. Of her previous discoveries, Fosha remarks: "Today, Deadwood's Chinatown exists in more than just memories and legends. It has not vanished" (68). At her most buoyant, she is confident that "Deadwood has chosen to uncover its local history, preserving its colorful past before the color fades away" (68). In being exhorted not to privilege the "color" pursued so single-mindedly by George Hearst in Milch's *Deadwood*, but instead to collect the living wealth of the town's own memories, today's Deadwood stands at an interpretive and moral crossroads—namely, the showdown between the relative priorities of historic

preservation and re-capitalizing gambling revenues.³¹ In her quest to secure permission to excavate Wong's emporia, Fosha now finds herself in an agonizing limbo as she makes her case to city planners, local merchants, gambling interests, the current property-owners, and state officials whose interests may run elsewhere than to making the dead speak again. If this essay accomplishes anything worthwhile, we hope that at the very least it will add to what is already an iron-clad argument for a new dig.

It should also be granted that the advocates for a revived and modernized Deadwood do have something of a case—Deadwood in the twentieth century saw a slow, but steady decline in its fortunes, an economic collapse that culminated in the 2001 closing of Hearst's once formidable Homestake mine. The financial situation in the town was indeed dire for a long time, so one cannot always or exclusively ascribe the motives of modernizers to greed; desperation and genuine hardship play their part. Still, it is our contention that Deadwood must find an accommodation with its past and future that honors both. This challenge is obviously not unique to Deadwood, and it confronts every historic settlement in our nation, for which Deadwood's experience no doubt provides both sound examples and cautionary tales.

It remains to be seen how HBO's *Deadwood* will ultimately affect this balance between revitalizing the town's economy and saving its past; in any case, the tourist industry now has a third element to go with the gamblers and the old-school history buffs. Given that we would likely never have written this essay at all but for our enchantment with Milch's *Deadwood*, one can argue that the preservationists have found intelligent, passionate, and unusually vocal allies among the many fans of the show. If there is any agenda that should unite all parties to Deadwood's future, it is perhaps what Eliot in *Four Quartets* calls "exploration" in order "to arrive where we started

/ And know the place for the first time.” Or, as David Milch suggests, to know not merely our spaces, but ourselves.

Some people will not know themselves. As the minister says at Hickok’s funeral, he quotes Paul ... “If the hand shall say, ‘Because I am not the foot, I am not therefore the body of Christ,’ is it not of the body?” In other words, because we misunderstand our natures, does that exclude us from the community of spirits? And the answer is no, it just means we misunderstand our natures. So many of these characters misunderstand their natures, but that does not prevent us from recognizing that they’re of the body of Christ. My feeling about “Deadwood” is it’s a single organism, and I think human society is the body of God, and in a lot of ways it’s about the different parts of the body having a somewhat more confident sense of their identity over the course of time.

—David Milch (qtd. in Havrilesky)

Notes

¹ Even before *American Tabloid*, Ellroy’s disturbing and provocative “L.A. Quartet,” which included the well-known *L.A. Confidential*, indulged this irreverent mixture of nostalgia and disgust at the pretenses of American boomtowns like Los Angeles. In a sense, Milch’s *Deadwood* is the spiritual inheritor of this fictional project to unearth truths about our communities and our history that we might rather see remain buried. It is obvious too that Milch and company have taken plenty of inspiration from Pete Dexter’s excellent 1986 novel *Deadwood*, a National Book Award winner of which Jonathan Franzen has said: “If you want to call [Dexter’s] *Deadwood* a Western, you might as well call *The House of Mirth* chick lit” (qtd. in Dexter, cover). Many thanks to our friend Bob Legnini for putting us on to this book, which only recently came back into print, and for his hospitality on our own journey west.

² In William Locklear’s “The Celestials and the Angels: A Study of the Anti-Chinese Movement in Los Angeles to 1882,” a possible explanation for the epithet “Celestial” is offered: “This was one of several popular terms of reference to the Chinese and appears to have been second only to ‘John Chinamen’ in usage. In California it was frequently

used to ridicule the ‘obviously non-Celestial’ Chinese immigrant. The term probably derived from ‘Celestial Empire,’ an Occidental name for China” (Locklear 255). It is indeed difficult to account for the term with any certainty, and no doubt context played a very large role in its deployment, as its uses on the show amply demonstrate. It is also plausible that the term was sometimes used to express genuine bafflement at the seductive exoticism of a people who were both close neighbors and cultural aliens, granting that the “exoticism” here was as much imposed on the Chinese as it may have been cultivated by them to various ends.

³ This of course alludes to the important work of the late Edward Said, whose classic and controversial study *Orientalism* discusses how the West must literally invent and continually manipulate its vision of whatever counts as “Eastern” (be it Arabic, Asian, or so on). Said’s most significant claim about Orientalist discourse is that it is about everything *but* the East; instead, cultures play out their own traumas, preoccupations, and cultural anxieties in the conceptual crucible afforded by subject peoples (or at the very least, peoples who exist at a remove and at the economic and political pleasure of more powerful rivals). A fair question here is whether Milch’s *Deadwood* subverts Orientalism, or merely re-packages it in an edgier and more hip vehicle; the answer may well be a little of both.

⁴ In all subsequent citations from the *Deadwood* series, this format for identifying episodes will be followed, i.e., “1.10” being season one, episode 10. We would like to credit and thank Cristi H. Brockway (aka “turtlegirl 76”) for her outstanding efforts in transcribing every line from the first two seasons of the production; her hard work can be found and downloaded at <http://members.aol.com/chatarama/>. Our quotations from the series are drawn from these transcripts and from our own cross-checking upon repeated viewings. We would also like to thank our friend David Perry for his shrewd and witty insights into *Deadwood*, and for reviewing this manuscript.

⁵ While Mr. Lee enjoys Al’s cautious respect and the backing of some powerful new players in *Deadwood*, he nonetheless remains a target for resentment, not only from Mr. Wu, but also from Tolliver’s buffoonish underlings, Leon and Stapleton. At one point, the articulate and mannered Lee is dismissed by them as a “glorified fuckin’ monkey,” although even they later acknowledge him to be the superior pimp, one “better suited than us in every fuckin’ aspect of the task, fluent in both languages and don’t mind standing in the filth” (2.19).

⁶ This is the title of episode 2.21, and it is clearly an overriding theme for the second season, both in terms of the economic destiny of *Deadwood* and of the effects of industrial capitalism on the town’s moral landscape and frontier values.

⁷ We are grateful to all the posters on the “Mr. Wu” thread on hbo.com’s official *Deadwood* forum, most especially the great Keone Young. Since the show first aired, he has been a tireless respondent to *Deadwood* fans. The dignity Young has brought to what could easily be a truly hackneyed role is admirable; the insights that he brings to the role are equally so. For another perspective, consider historian Liping Zhu, who recounts the following incident: “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’” (“Ethnic Oasis” 28). It is curious to contrast Wu’s autonomous decision to cut his queue with the strenuous and equally autonomous *defense* of the queue on the part of this historical resident of Chinatown.

⁸ In his introduction to *Chinese on the American Frontier* (2001), Arif Dirlik explains how this blindness to the Chinese frontier experience is not merely something prevalent in “white” historiography of the Old West, but also a feature of certain biases within Asian-American studies today. For all of the efforts to recover the Asian-American experience, the emphasis on “diasporas” has come at the expense of “place-based histories that offer a critical counterpart to the globalizing tendencies of the present” (Dirlik, xvi). “Unless it is place-grounded,” Arlik continues, “the study of diaspora in its very naming (‘Chinese’) invites the return of reified racial and cultural identifications to mark diverse populations—a ‘Chineseness,’ in other words, that exists independently of time and place” (xvi). And if this bias has limited the effectiveness of Asian-American historians, it has positively ham-strung the historian of China proper, whose training has been skewed to the paradigm of the motherland: “Chinese overseas always presented problems to a Chinese nationalist historiography; the history of Chinese overseas was excluded from the national history of China and left to specialists of regions or countries where the overseas populations were located” (xvii).

⁹ McClintock explains that his chapter on the directory is drawn from an 1878 rare volume originally compiled by Charles Collins, fellow pioneer and first postmaster of Central City. Given that the “Business Directory” is said to have “included” over 1000 names (McClintock 202), it is not clear to us whether McClintock reproduced the directory in its entirety or merely excerpted from it. Watson Parker points out that subsequent directories in 1902 and 1910 listed Chinese businesses and merchants ranging from restaurateurs to grocers and launderers (Parker 144). To our best knowledge, this suggests that earlier directories were “white” only. This raises the fair question of whether McClintock can be said to have consciously omitted Chinese business interests from his listing, or whether he was merely faithful to the extant 1878 document; this is less important ultimately than his memoir’s overall failure to recollect the Chinese presence in the settlement, at least by comparison to other pioneer accounts that we will discuss in this piece.

¹⁰ Rose Estep Fosha, the senior archaeologist of Deadwood’s Chinatown whose work is touched on later in this piece, points out that her project is all about precisely this recovery of voices that would otherwise be silenced or forgotten: “I want archaeology to come alive in this project. ... These [Chinese] people had names. They had faces. These people were alive” (Khatchadourian, par. 13).

¹¹ As the centennial history puts it, “The Chinese erected their own house of worship in the form of a log cabin known as the Joss House. Joss himself was represented on

canvas but ordinarily he was a large, hideous character carved out of wood. He sat in a chair, or rather on a throne, with two demons supporting him, one at each shoulder, standing beside him. According to the high priest, the Joss would do anything for a Chinaman if he was asked in the proper spirit" (Lee 39). In *Deadwood Gulch: The Last Chinatown*, Joe Sulentic suggests that "the term joss house, meaning church, is pidgin English ('joss' is a mispronunciation of the Latin word 'Deos' [sic] or God and originated with Portuguese sailors in China)" (Sulentic 56).

¹² In this particular case, the authors have unable to cross-check with the original newspaper article quoted by Parker here; however, other quotations from newspapers like the *Black Hills Daily Times* have been cross-checked unless indicated otherwise. For Deadwood papers in particular, we recommend that interested readers begin at the newspaper index available at: http://dwdlib.sdl.n.net/newspaper_index.htm.

¹³ This is one source for the well-traveled expression "mining the miners." In the face of some objections that the amount of gold to be gathered via this method would be negligible in value at best, Joe Sulentic maintains that this practice was common and generally successful. In fact, one of the strengths of Sulentic's often problematic account of the Chinese in Deadwood is that it credits Chinese pioneers with a number of important innovations, including the design of a "unique apparatus [to expedite placer mining] that white men called the 'Chinese pump'" (Sulentic 65-66).

¹⁴ It was not merely numbers that were downplayed or spun, but occupations themselves. When Chinese were involved in mining operations of any kind, for example, they were usually savvy about not being identified as partners in the official censuses (Zhu, "Ethnic Oasis" 18).

¹⁵ What is said of Deadwood's last Chinese resident is as much an act of myth-making as anything else in the town's earlier history. Joe Sulentic writes that the final resident, nicknamed "Teeter," departed "in 1932 for Canton, China. His true Chinese name and the reason for his nickname have never been explained. The Happy Chinaman enjoyed buying candy for Deadwood children. He worked in Wing Tsue's store and as a janitor in Deadwood in his later years" (82). This bit of mythologizing both claims and fails to inform us, remaining complacently hostage to the image of the "inscrutable Oriental," whose life is at last reduced to playing "Candyman" to the (presumably) white children of Deadwood. Other accounts have at least taken the trouble to name Teeter: Ching Ong's departure from town is also treated with a bit more deserving gravitas (Parker 148; Lee 246).

¹⁶ See note 12 for more on the original articles and how to access the Deadwood newspaper index.

¹⁷ Compare here the Centennial history, which offers that whether "it was by chance or premeditation, ... the bustling Chinatown was located in the most strategic section of long, twisting Deadwood Gulch." The history notes too that "All people entering Deadwood from the north had to thread their way through the narrowest section of the gulch" (Lee 36). These ordinary commercial considerations in the "town planning" of the Chinese section might well have pre-dated or trumped any later interest in a so-

called “criminal” monopoly. Alternatively, Liping Zhu suggests the “Badlands,” rather than being planned at all, were born out of the “low economic and social status of its residents” and the natural center of gravity such poverty fosters in “drawing both morally and racially undesirable groups” together (Zhu, “Ethnic Oasis” 10).

¹⁸ In her account of the archaeological digs she supervised in Deadwood’s former Chinatown, Rose Estep Fosha acknowledges that “abundant paraphernalia associated with opium-smoking has been recovered ... including complete and fragmented ceramic pipe bowls, one bamboo stem, opium lamp parts, opium tins, bottles that contained opiate derivatives, and preparation and pipe-cleaning tools” (67). That Deadwood’s Chinatown was riddled with opium-use is indisputable, but as Fosha insists, we ought to tread lightly and avoid over-simplification in accounting for it. “There were many different reasons for smoking opium and just as wide a variety of effects on the user. Historical accounts demonstrate that Chinese both benefited and suffered from regular use of the drug, whose effects depended on a number of cultural, technological, and physiological factors. Medicinally, it was an effective treatment for pain, spasm, inflammation, nervous disorders, and insomnia. Recreational use, usually in a social setting, provided a means of relaxation or coping with stress and was the most common reason for consumption. The addiction rate was high, but not all opium smokers became addicted” (Fosha 66-67).

¹⁹ As John Ames rightly observes in connection with the Alma character, “The idea that the Chinese were needed to support an opium addiction in the 1870s is laughable. Their support wasn’t needed – hundreds of thousands of Americans were addicted because narcotics simply weren’t yet controlled by law (not until 1914). Opium was openly sold in drugstores throughout the country” (Ames 29).

²⁰ Khatchadourian’s piece for the *Smithsonian Magazine* alludes here to research in progress by Liping Zhu and Eileen French. For Zhu’s earlier work on the Asian experience in the West, see his book, *A Chinaman’s Chance: The Chinese on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier*.

²¹ For more information on this historic building and the architecture of Deadwood at large, we highly recommend Mark Wolfe’s *Boots on Bricks: A Walking Tour of Historic Downtown Deadwood*, esp. pp. 55-57. “Wing Tsue” suggested in Chinese a “place where many wonderful things could be found” (Wolfe 55). His guide includes a 1925 photo of the Wing Tsue complex where the Wing Tsue plaque and balcony are still visible; sadly, these buildings are now in serious decay and the subject of speculation as to the future uses of the real estate beneath them. For more on the civic, archaeological, and financial issues involved, see the conclusion of this piece.

²² Organizations such as these are often conflated with or reduced in the literature to the stereotype of the nefarious *tong*. While these Companies were by no means unsullied by criminal ties and activities, they were no more so than many other civic organizations of the era. It is telling that Tammany Hall is so often portrayed as the corruption of an otherwise legitimate institution, while the Chinese Companies are

conventionally depicted as rotten through and through, with little room left to see them as genuine organs of Chinese dissent and community support.

²³ As is true for so much of what we've learned about Deadwood's Chinatown in our research, we are genuinely indebted to Jerry Bryant and to archaeologist Rose Estep Fosha, who took time to meet with us and answer our many questions when we visited Deadwood in August 2005. They have proverbially forgotten more about Deadwood's real history than most of us will ever know; what they have remembered, unearthed, and shared with us has proven invaluable. That they do their work with such humanity, passion, and respect for their long-dead subjects is exemplary.

²⁴ Compare Pete Dexter's novel *Deadwood*, which deals with the "China Doll" legend in interesting ways that suggest a fictional counterpart to the new history championed by Jerry Bryant and others.

²⁵ This assertion by Estelline is certainly controvertible, even if we were to count Di Hee as a prostitute. As the research staffers at the Adams Museum are at pains to insist: "A minority of the [Chinese] population engaged in other occupations such as prostitution and selling opium. In Deadwood's Chinatown there were fewer than twenty Chinese women and of these approximately one-third were wives" (Adams Museum & House 18).

²⁶ Mt. Moriah Cemetery is a treasure trove for all students of Deadwood's rough and complex history. Another testament to the evolving perception of the Deadwood Chinese as fellow pioneers can be found even in the location of the graveyard's Chinese section, boasting one of the most spectacular vistas in an already stunning site; the section was selected by the Chinese themselves according to the principles of *feng shui*.

²⁷ See note 15 for more on the last Chinese resident of Deadwood, Ching Ong, also known as "Teeter."

²⁸ See note 23.

²⁹ Aside from catching his ready wit and erudition *in situ* at the Adams Museum, Bryant's sense of the HBO project can also be gleaned from his comments in documentaries included on the Season One DVD edition of *Deadwood*, where he speaks eloquently about the tragedies of Native American history in the Black Hills.

³⁰ This icon of *twentieth* century Deadwood dates, we believe, back to the 1950s. This does raise the question of *which* historic Deadwood ultimately takes precedence, and whether multiple "Deadwoods" can or should be preserved; if so, how?

³¹ Gambling was legalized in Deadwood in November 1989, and according to a complex set of arrangements over the years, a certain percentage of the profits are by definition earmarked for historic preservation efforts. For detailed explanations of the stakes and the problematic bargains struck on behalf of history, see the most recent edition of the Centennial history (Lee xiii-xiv).

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