



Jean-Baptiste Perroneau, "*Magicien Chinois*," 1738–1745.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

“Magic is the only honest profession. A magician promises
to deceive you and he does”.

(American magician Karl Germain, 1878–1959)

“All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is
properly no history, only biography.”

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803–1882)

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FOREWORD

by Jim Steinmeyer

Once upon a time, a long time ago, a mysterious land—a land of mysterious traditions and concealed arts—decided to introduce itself to the rest of the world.

It did this not with a statesman or craftsman or poet, but by sending its greatest wizard to demonstrate what he could do—to impress and charm and inspire awe about the mysterious land. It was actually a diplomacy of magic.

There's no question that he was a great wizard. The rest of the world quickly proclaimed him so. He changed the way other wizards thought, and what they considered possible and impossible. He inspired imitations and began contentious arguments about his miracles—and, of course, intrigued everyone about the mysterious land that could have produced such a man.

He was also wise enough to realize that every culture had its wizards and had developed its own sort of magic. As he made magic, he also watched, learned, and was inspired. And so, he returned to his own mysterious land a far greater wizard than he'd been before.

The moral of the story is that a great wizard learns his craft and then makes magic. But a *truly* great wizard understands that “magic” is always in the perception of his audience. And so—with new

audiences, new opportunities, and new ideas of what is impossible—a truly great wizard never stops learning.

Actually, there were many morals to this story, and you're now holding them in your hand in Samuel Porteous's remarkable book, *Ching Ling Foo, America's First Chinese Superstar*.

The story is not a legend. It's history. The land was China. The wizard was Ching Ling Foo, and the long-ago era was the time of vaudeville, when a wizard and his troupe could travel on trains to America's largest cities and establish his preeminence in popular showplaces. In fact, Ching Ling Foo, the charismatic Asian magician, transfixed American audiences and established a taste for Asian culture and Asian skills. He was a superstar. And he was, as Porteous makes clear in this fascinating new biography, a truly great and truly versatile wizard.

As a writer on the history of magic and magicians, I've been dealing with the aftermath of Ching Ling Foo—which corresponded to the Golden Age of Magic in the West—and the powerful influence of this master. He befriended the great American magicians of the era, who quickly recognized him as a colleague. These included Harry Kellar, Harry Houdini, and David Abbott. In my book, *The Glorious Deception*, I told the story of an inventive American magician, William Robinson, who was gripped with simultaneous envy and admiration when he encountered Ching Ling Foo. Ambitiously, Robinson changed the course of his career. Working in disguise, he outraced Ching Ling Foo to Europe, becoming Chung Ling Soo (a name intended to deliberately generate confusion). Robinson erased his previous identity and achieved fame as the world's greatest "Chinese" magician, a favorite with British audiences between 1900 and 1918. He even challenged the real Ching Ling Foo to a duel of magic, in a bold attempt to establish which one of them was the real Chinese wizard. This affront may have served as Ching Ling Foo's most powerful lesson about western culture.

In the West, we've been fascinated with what Ching Ling Foo had left behind. In this book, the author effectively explains the origins of this wizard, and how his return to China inspired important new achievements.

It's a story that, quite simply, could not have been told in the days of Ching Ling Foo's success. His career was so intermingled with the secrecy of magic, the stereotypes of Asian culture, and the exaggerations of vaudeville publicists that it seemed inevitable that this wizard would be shrouded in layers of mystery. So, it's remarkable that Porteous has determinately decided to link the stories—the East and the West—at a time when we are able to appreciate the efforts to link divergent cultures. Here is the truth of Ching Ling Foo, and the honor which has been long overdue a master magician and unexpected diplomat in the world of show business. It is, as any great wizard can tell you, a story about what we think is impossible.

Jim Steinmeyer, described by the New York Times as the “celebrated invisible man—inventor, designer, and creative brain behind many of the great stage magicians of the last quarter-century”, is also one of the field's preeminent historians and author of best-selling books about magic and magic history, including Hiding the Elephant, The Glorious Deception, and The Last Greatest Magician in the World.

PREFACE

Why did you write “Ching Ling Foo: America’s First Chinese Superstar?” That’s a question I get a lot. Here’s my three-pronged answer. First, because as a story teller, artist, and illustrator the romance of Foo’s tale with its almost unbelievable scale, breadth and color captured my imagination. I came to Foo via the curious tale of Chung Ling Soo a.k.a. William Robinson, the American who stole Foo’s act, and I never looked back. Quite simply, the Original Chinese Conjuror’s life with its combination of peak era stage magic, the irrepressible global village that was vaudeville, and international intrigue is one fascinating, beautiful, almost unbelievable yarn. Second, as an optimist who believes in the net good in humanity, despite all indications to the contrary, this story of cultural exchange, people to people diplomacy, and good natured barrier transcendence ultimately warmed my heart. Third, because, as a former risk analyst, I recognized Foo and his troupe’s multi-faceted history still speaks to and informs us on the modern roots of the ongoing uneasy push/pull relationship between China and the West, particularly America; a dynamic that, given the multiple existential crises the planet now faces, will likely have the definitive impact on whether human civilization, as we know it, makes it into the 22nd century.

INTRODUCTION

“I can recall to this day the tremendous fanfare that accompanied the arrival of Ching Ling Foo, the great Chinese magician, to this country; and how we hustled down to the theatre as fast as we could to get close to the footlights to see every single thing that was going on. And how Ching Ling Foo, this dignified and very tall Chinese, in his magnificently embroidered robes, suddenly turned a somersault, and came up with a large bowl of live goldfish in his outstretched hand, and a kindly and amused smile on his face, which made me feel good all over. In fact, it still makes me feel good.”

(Dwight Taylor, noted American playwright, screenwriter, and child of vaudeville veterans¹)

Ching Ling Foo’s story is a magical one that, with its focus on the interaction of Chinese and Western cultures, geopolitical tensions, international intrigue, nativism, the importance of celebrity and disruptive technological developments seemingly has much resonance for our current era.

Even a partial list of the Original Chinese Conjurer’s accomplishments still dazzle.

- One of the highest paid and most popular performers in American vaudeville, twice breaking box office records from 1898–1900 and again from 1912–1915,
- Inspired a mania for Chinese magic, a seemingly endless list of copycats, and one real genius: William Robinson, a.k.a. Chung Ling Soo, the doomed rival with whom Foo would become paired for eternity.
- Subject of a historic, precedent-setting deportation trial, closely followed across the U.S.
- Maker, in 1899, of the first sound recordings of Chinese music and singing.
- Instigator of the infamous 1905 London “World Championship of Chinese Magic.” This much-hyped “War of the Wizards” would pit Foo against archrival Chung Ling Soo, the stage name of American performer William Robinson—the man who had appropriated both Foo’s act and his identity. The contest and its denouement would result in an enduring mystery when, at the last minute, the sphinxlike Foo walked away from his own challenge. (This biography will provide, for the first time, a plausible and research-based solution to this otherwise puzzling outcome.)
- Maker, in 1911, of *Wuchang Uprising*, considered by many to be China’s first documentary. This daring and innovative war documentary, which played to rapt audiences in theaters across China, would play a significant role in rallying opposition to the Qing Dynasty and the founding of the Chinese Republic.
- From 1912–1915, during vaudeville’s last gasp as America’s premier form of entertainment, would break, along with daughter (and bilingual ragtime singing sensation) Chee Toy, records for salary and box offices, and break more barriers by headlining the legendary Ziegfeld Follies and then touring

with Lillian Russell and Gertrude Hoffman—the Oprah/Gwyneth Paltrow and Lady Gaga of their day.

- In the 1930s, more than a decade after his death, his impact on the evolution of the film industry would be acknowledged when the man who would become known as the father of film special effects—and an inspiration for George Lucas’s *Star Wars*—would identify Foo as the man who mentored him in the field of optical illusion.

Beyond all this—and there is more—perhaps the genial and charismatic Chinese conjurer’s greatest legacy was in the area of person-to-person diplomacy. In the era of the uniquely discriminatory Chinese Exclusion Act, over a period of almost 20 years, Ching Ling Foo and his talented family, through the joyful and dignified presentation of their sheer talent and shared humanity managed to introduce to an American public awash in very hostile representations of the Chinese involving opium, deceit, vice, and ‘otherness’ what was aptly termed a very “different picture.”

CHAPTER TWO

THE 1898 OMAHA WORLD'S FAIR—FIRST STEP TOWARDS UNPRECEDENTED FAME AND FORTUNE

Such an opportunity began to materialize in 1897 when plans for the upcoming Omaha Trans-Mississippi International Exhibition (the Omaha World's Fair) began to take form.

The late 19th century was the golden age of world's fairs and exhibitions. Since the tremendously successful London Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851, cities and countries around the world vied to host these promotional (and thus far, economically stimulating) extravaganzas that celebrated and promoted new technologies, manufacturers, and the international exchanges rapidly characterizing global commerce and politics—all while educating and entertaining the host population. According to Mark Kishlansky, the prime motive behind Britain's seminal "Great Exhibition" was for the empire to make "clear to the world its role as industrial leader."¹⁸

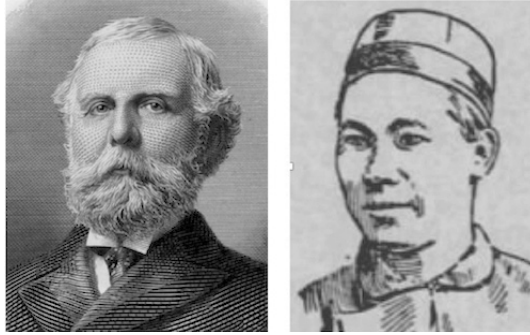
Among the most successful world expositions, after the inaugural London event, were those hosted by Philadelphia in 1876, Paris in 1889 and Chicago in 1893.



The Omaha World's Fair was ceremonially opened by President McKinley's press of a button transmitting an electrical impulse from the White House in Washington, D.C. to Omaha, which lit the thousands of lights embedded in the exhibition's center: the neoclassical buildings surrounding an artificial quarter-mile lagoon.

In 1898, it was plucky and ambitious "Gateway to the West" Omaha's turn. Between June 1st and October 31st of 1898, over 2.6 million people would come to Omaha, a city barely 44 years old to experience an exposition focused on celebrating and promoting the development of the American West and the United States' emerging role as a global power. Financially supported by Washington and regional business leaders eager to reverse the momentum of several recent economic downturns, the 184-acre exhibition grounds radiated out from a newly constructed artificial quarter-mile lagoon. At the exhibition's center, surrounding the lagoon, was a "New White City" of fantastic electrically-lit neo-classical buildings serving as exhibition halls that rivaled in grandeur what had been created for the famed Chicago Exhibition of 1893.

As with the very successful 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the Chinese Manchu government did not officially participate in the Omaha Fair. However, American-based Chinese businessmen jockeyed for the opportunity to put together a Chinese exhibit, meant, as the other countries' exhibits were, to introduce their nation and its culture and products—all the while, ideally, turning a tidy profit.¹⁹



The men who made it happen: Treasury Secretary Lyman Gage and an 1888 newspaper illustration of Chicago Chinese-American businessman Hip Lung.

In 1897, the two groups of Chinese businessmen competing to obtain the right to finance and manage Omaha's Chinese Pavilion even travelled to Washington to personally lobby then Treasury Secretary, Lyman J. Gage, who was responsible for the decision. Both groups were backed by rival major U.S. railway lines interested in the business that came with shipping the people and materials required for the building of a major Chinese exhibition across the country.²⁰

Ultimately, the Mee Lee Wah Village Company consortium, fronted by major Chicago Chinese-American businessman Hip Lung, received the Chinese Village concession.

The Mee Lee Wah company's design for the exposition's Chinese Village set out to recreate on a miniature scale life in a Chinese city. The Chinese Village envisaged would involve almost 250 Chinese participants and included a Chinese tea house, A Chinese "Joss House" (temple), a Chinese bazaar, a Chinese restaurant, gardens, and a Chinese theater featuring continuous performances. Interspersed among the major buildings would be an ethnographic display, typical of world's fairs of the era displaying 'ordinary' Chinese people going about their days. The Chinese organizers' goal was to recreate a Chinese city in miniature, representing all classes of Chinese life and illustrating their customs, amusements, goods, and religions.

To find the population to both build and populate their Chinese city in miniature, and do so within budget, Mee Lee Wah Company representatives headed to China in search of staff who could both erect and man the various elements of the village and the performers who would keep the Chinese Theater's continuous performances going.

In bringing so many Chinese from China into the U.S. for the purposes of the Omaha fair, the Chinese-American organizers had to navigate the 1882 China Exclusion Act. Since the act excluded all Chinese except a very narrow class of merchants and select others from entering the U.S., a special act of Congress had to be enacted to enable the production of special certificates for the hundreds of Chinese who would be required for the construction and operation of the planned exhibits. The required special act was passed with the support of U.S. Treasury Secretary Lyman J. Gage on June 20th, 1897.²¹

Omaha's "Chinese Village" Emerges

On May 6th, 1898, the first Chinese arrived at the newly built Omaha railway station. Under the careful gaze of a U.S. government Chinese inspector, over 200 Chinese were transported via rail from San Francisco in a special train of seven passenger railway cars and two freight cars. The Chinese brought with them 1,000 sacks of rice, smoked fish and other materials to help ease their stay in far-off Omaha. The newly arrived group included translators, actresses, teachers, merchants, and the Chinese painters, decorators, and carpenters who would design and erect the Chinese village. The train was greeted by a huge crowd that reportedly included almost all the local Chinese and those from neighboring states. Upon arrival, the inspector who had been escorting the Chinese across the country handed off his supervisory authority to Omaha customs officials, who would later distribute to the Chinese arrivals the certificates which authorized their presence in the U.S.²²



Crowds in and around the entrance to the China Pavilion of the 1898 Omaha World's Fair. The Chinese "city" graced by American and Chinese flags was entered through a gate in the large building across from the Pabst Pavilion in the top photo. It was one of the most popular attractions at the Fair. One of the main reasons for this popularity was the performances of the Ching Ling Foo troupe.

The arrival in Omaha of the first Chinese working at the exposition was cause for excitement. The Chinese Village was one of the most anticipated elements of the planned midway, and the people of Omaha were eager to see what the Chinese builders would create.

The construction of the various structures took the assembled Chinese a little over a month, and the Chinese Village was officially opened on June 12th. Contemporary reports somewhat optimistically described the structures as “exact reproductions of those used in the city of Peking.”²³ Imported bamboo was a major building material, and the Chinese artisans reportedly did an excellent job, given the circumstances, in recreating the architecture and the “odd, fantastic design” elements of their homeland for the Omaha crowd.²⁴

By early June, the miniature Chinese city was peopled with almost 250 Chinese men, women, and children “representing all classes of Chinese life”, illustrating “their customs, amusements, industries, and religious ceremonies.”²⁵ Wire service pieces published across the U.S. promoted the educational and entertainment value of the Chinese Village in the ethnocentric language of the time. “The Chinese Village, with its picturesque moon-eyed Celestials, its quaint nooks and corners, its wealth of curios, its corps of skilled artisans who will display their art in painting, carving in wood and ivory, and embroidery—native theatre with their queer, unintelligible interpretation of the drama, their religious exercises and the worship of the great dragon, their wonderful uneatable meals, with chop-sticks, a rug and stool as unmanageable accessories: All this will prove an attractive novelty to the thousands who study the doings of this strange, soft-voiced, and ever-entertaining people.”²⁶

Reviews of the Chinese Village, which was located on the West Midway (the enormous grounds contained both an East and a West Midway) found the Chinese exhibition had lived up to its hype. The Chinese café and numerous tea houses, with their “queer but



Tickets to the Omaha Exhibition's Chinese Village and Chinese Theater.

nonetheless pleasing decorations” and the Chinese bazaar, “a costly collection of exquisite Chinese wares—wonderful curios gathered from all parts of the celestial empire” proved great successes.

The Chinese theater also proved a hit with the crowds. The Chinese opera, and the theatrical performers engaged for the Omaha exhibition received high praise. “The performances in the theater are continuous and large crowds always go away singing the praises of the fine array of talent engaged.”²⁷

“THE YELLOW DANGER”

At about the same time the Chinese Pavilion opened in Omaha, in July of 1898, M.P. Shiel published *The Yellow Danger*, a book cobbled together from a fictional magazine serial he wrote to feed into the public’s strong interest in the ongoing crisis that China was facing in the 1880s. China’s territory at the time was slowly being divided up among aggressive, expansionist European powers, as well as Japan and Russia. The enormously successful book featured what would become a popular fictional ‘invasion narrative’, wherein the West, in response to this aggression, faces a threat from an invading China. The book’s villain, Dr. Yen How, was supposedly inspired by Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, who first gained fame in Western eyes when he was kidnapped and imprisoned in the Chinese Embassy in London for attempting to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. Sales of *The Yellow Danger* would surge again in 1900, when the Boxer Rebellion seemed to confirm the book’s theme of Chinese hostility towards the West.

Shiel’s Asian villain, Dr. Yen How, also served as an inspiration to author Sax Rohmer for his more famous Asian villain, Fu Manchu. Elements of the iconic Western concept of the Chinese magician created by Ching Ling Foo and his many imitators were also supposed to have influenced Rohmer, who earlier in his life had worked both as an aspiring vaudeville writer and journalist and was very familiar with the stage milieu of the time and its various acts.

Interestingly, Shiel considered the magazine serial and the resultant book to be “hackwork” written rapidly for profit and to take advantage of popular sentiment. Regardless, it remained his most popular book; it was republished several times and was of a piece with the popular Yellow Peril narrative of the time, which was personified in Hermann Knackfuss’s notorious 1895 lithograph (commissioned by Kaiser Wilhelm), *Peoples of Europe, Guard Your Dearest Goods*; it later became famous as *The Yellow Peril*.



"PEOPLE OF EUROPE GUARD YOUR MOST PRECIOUS POSSESSIONS" ALSO KNOWN AS "THE YELLOW PERIL"
Herman Knackfuss (1895)



Premised on the Asian reaction to European imperialism, M.P. Shiel’s novel *The Yellow Danger* was published and met with tremendous success in 1898.

Just three years earlier, in the service of European imperialism in China, Hermann Knackfuss produced the notorious lithograph “*Peoples of Europe, Guard Your Dearest Goods*”, also known as “*The Yellow Peril*”—designed and commissioned by Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm, complete with a menacing, glowing Buddha riding a dragon, to warn of the Asian threat.

‘LAWLESSNESS’ AND TECHNOLOGICAL DISRUPTION AT THE OMAHA EXPOSITION: LIQUOR ON SUNDAYS AND THE UNLICENSED USE OF NEW PORTABLE CAMERAS

Not a month into the exhibition, the Chinese Village, along with the Bohemian or German Village and the Pabst and Schlitz Pavilions, would be admonished for selling beer on Sunday.²⁸ Nearly all the beer

concessions are said to have ignored the ban on the Sunday sale of beer. The preferred modus operandi for the scofflaws was to serve the beer in cups and saucers as “cold tea.”

Fair organizers also had to deal with policing a new technology, personal ‘portable’ Kodaks and other brands of box camera. To protect the business of professional photographers who had paid for the right to produce photographs, a fee and tag system was established by the Fair for personal cameras. Attendees were reportedly happy to pay the required one-dollar fee to take their cameras on to the fairgrounds. Fair guards were instructed to seize untagged cameras, resulting in some comical misunderstandings when the ‘boxes’ they wished to seize turned out to be something else.

In one account, one of the Fair guards, spotting a man carrying a suspicious-looking black box without a tag, set out after him. Once the guard had caught up to him, he loudly insisted the man would need a permit “to use that thing.” “Don’t need a permit,” replied the man. By this time, a crowd had gathered to witness the altercation. The guard then repeated himself: “I don’t want to make you any trouble, but ...” The man persisted. “I don’t intend to buy a permit and you can’t make me.” Straightening himself up, the guard stated, “Now look here mister.” The man seemed pleased by the crowd that had gathered and rose to the occasion. He looked the guard in the eye and said, “I don’t need any permit, and I’m going to use it right now. Just watch me!” The man winked at the crowd, took a quick seat, popped open the box, and extracted ... a sandwich. The crowd roared and the now-sheepish guard returned to post.

Foo Family Hit of the Fair

First and foremost, among the Chinese theatrical talent attracting the crowds amidst the sprawling and highly competitive Midway was the Ching Ling Foo troupe, which was appearing as part of the continuous entertainment to be provided in the Chinese Theater. The Chinese magician’s colorful troupe for the Omaha engagement was comprised of the core elements that he had already worked with on stage for

MIDWAY AMUSEMENTS.

Trans-Mississippi and international Exposition, Omaha.
These attractions on the Midway are worth seeing and are recommended by this paper's Omaha representative.



CHINESE VILLAGE AND THEATRE

The most instructive entertainment on the Midway. Do not fail to see the Ching Ling Foo troupe of acrobats, jugglers and magicians.



The core of the Foo troupe as they would have appeared during the Omaha World's Fair: Ching Ling Foo, his wife Hai Quai and their two children, Foo Quai the boy acrobat/contortionist, and Chee Tai, the bilingual singing tot.

over a decade. The Omaha team included Foo as the master Chinese conjurer; Foo's "small-footed" wife Hai Quai; Chee Tai (later Chee Toy), their adorable toddler daughter, who Foo often produced out of thin air; a "slack wire" performer, Foo Quai; Foo's son, Harry Foo; Foo's humorous assistant, a juggler of heavy vases; a horizontal bar performer; and an acrobat/contortionist.

The Foo troupe's American fame came quickly. A guide to the Midway published by the Nebraska *State Journal* and authored by their Omaha correspondent singled out the Chinese Village and the Foo troupe in particular as "the most instructive entertainment on the Midway." The guide to the Fair the paper published daily stated boldly, "Do not fail to see the Ching Ling Foo troupe of acrobats, jugglers, and magicians!"²⁹ This guide, with its recommendation for the Chinese

Village and the Foo troupe, would appear in this key Nebraska publication throughout the duration of the exposition.

Accounts vary as to how Ching Ling Foo and his troupe came to participate in the China Village of the Omaha Fair. There is some question as to whether Foo was already in San Francisco at the time he and his troupe were engaged for the Omaha Exhibition, or whether he was engaged by a general agent for the Fair while in Peking (Beijing) for what would turn out to be a bargain sum of \$600 for the length of the Fair.³⁰ Certainly, in some accounts given by Foo or his representatives, the story is told that Foo was already in San Francisco when the Chinese performers were heading there. This rendition may or may not have something to do with U.S. immigration laws at the time, since, if one examines what was argued by Foo's counsel in his deportation case, they had to say Foo was in San Francisco before he came to Omaha if his status as a "duly authorized merchant of the United States" was still to be valid. If Foo had returned to China without notifying U.S. authorities, he would have lost this status. However, we can see from records of his performances in Asia that even by late 1897 Foo was not in the U.S. So it is very likely he was, in fact, hired in China and came over for the show after, at some earlier point, having left America without notifying the appropriate immigration authorities.³¹

The fact that the Chinese theater did so well on the Midway was no small feat. The competition for visitors' attention and coin was intense. There were thrilling water-chute rides, demonstrations of the new technological wonder "Dr. Roentgen's X-Rays" that were even riskier to one's health, and giant swings. Other Midway attractions included "Hagenback's Trained Wild Animal Show", situated right across from the Chinese Village. Also nearby was "The Cyclo-rama", which recreated the legendary Civil War battle between the only two ironclad ships of the time, the *Merrimack* and the *Monitor*. "Chiquita, the Living Doll", an exhibition built around a young Cuban



The competition: “Roentgen Wonderful Ray of Light” and the pavilion devoted to “Chiquita the Living Doll.” (Courtesy Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition Digital Archive, University of Nebraska-Lincoln)

lady presented as “a Veritable Cuban Fairy” at “twenty-six inches” tall, also proved an enormous hit.³²

For those fairgoers who dared, there was even a visit to “Heaven and Hell” on offer. This exhibit featured a saloon where, escorted by “monks,” visitors could drink beverages from hollowed-out human skulls, served on tables made from coffins while attended to by waitresses dressed in “widow’s weeds.” On the menu was Schlitz beer, lemonade, soda and sandwiches “a la Diabolo,” or brimstone wafers. The exhibit would later reopen with the less controversial name “Darkness and Dawn.”

Unfortunately, this auspicious start for the Foo troupe would turn to tragedy less than two months into the exposition, when it was reported that a boy working with the troupe—identified as one of Foo’s sons, but not Foo Quai—was struck down by fever. The young performer’s funeral was attended by all the Chinese in the village and the local Chinese population. Some local media made specific note of the lack of any particular Chinese ceremonies of a public nature other than the wearing of “white badges of mourning,” and were particularly struck by the fact that “a number” of the local Chinese attending the funeral “were accompanied by white wives.”³³ Papers reported that Foo and the other members of the troupe, despite their heartbreak, continued to perform, and as they did, the acclaim accorded them continued to grow.^{34,35}

As a consequence, in a pattern that would be repeated across the American cities Foo would later perform in, he and his family's popularity and charm led to a steady stream of social courtesies, invitations for meals, and other get-togethers tendered by "the society people" of the host city. During their time in Omaha, several receptions were given for "Mr. and Mrs. Ching Ling Foo" in their honor, and Omaha's society matrons competed for the Foo family's rare downtime. These gatherings often included "several other Chinese friends" and augured future multicultural get-togethers that would become a mainstay of the Foo troupe's interaction with the outside world while off the stage.³⁶

Foo's English-Language Skills

At this point it is useful to address Foo's English-language skills. While Foo used interpreters throughout his U.S. and other foreign tours, it was evident he did speak some English. Clearly, his career as a merchant dealing with foreigners and his entertainment career would have facilitated the acquisition of this skill. As to how good Foo's English was, we can make some surmises.

It appears from the record that Foo could, when he wanted to, attempt to converse in English. However, he seemed to save these efforts for the relatively comfortable environments of conversations with friends, close professional colleagues, or dealings with old business partners.

Foo's habit of using interpreters when dealing with journalists may have been reinforced by the less-than-flattering assessments that emerged from his initial attempts, during his first tour of the U.S. to communicate with reporters directly. These initial efforts resulted in reports highlighting Foo's limited English skills, compounded by his stutter, rather than focusing on his magic. Typical of this sort of result was a 1900 report in the Richmond *Times*, which informed its readers, "Ching is not a fluent conversationalist in English. He is acquainted with but a few words and stutters at that."³⁷ It would not have taken

many of these sorts of reports for Foo and his promoters to recognize that the best way to maintain his mystique and have the media focus on the magic was to use an interpreter.

It was understandable, then, that Foo would in the future save his efforts in English for more comfortable environments, kibitzing with fellow magicians at Martinka's famous New York magic shop or the friendly rooftop Chinese dinners and lunches he would come to regularly host for fellow performers and journalists.³⁸

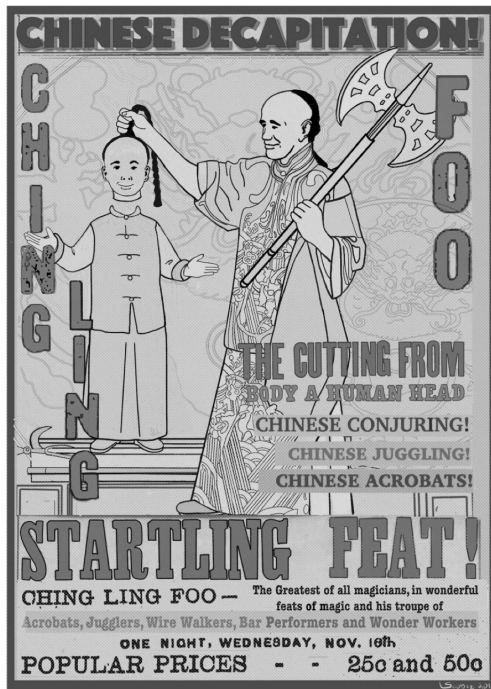
Meanwhile, the media focus on all things Foo, generated by his success in Omaha, accelerated, with stories about the colorful conjurer being picked up by the national newspaper wire services and distributed across the country. The Omaha *World-Herald* was the source of one such humorous report that centered around "a well-known society matron of Omaha" attending the Chinese Theater, hoping to better understand Foo's conjuring act. She reportedly approached Hong Sling, the Chinese-American manager of the Chinese Village, but since the woman had never met a Chinese person before, she relied on her knowledge of 'Chinglish' garnered from a few "funny newspaper columns." Her sing-song request, peppered with phrases such as "What allee samee is that?" and "What he say?" while pointing towards Foo, received the following reply from the popular and very Westernized Hong Sling: After listening patiently to the woman's request, he bowed courteously and replied in perfect English, "The performer is explaining that he has appeared before our emperor and performed feats of magic, and that he has been given several medals for his proficiency in the art of legerdemain. You will observe, madam, that he has no confederates and does not use any mechanical appliances in the performance of his tricks."^{39,40}

Foo Performs the Chinese Decapitation Illusion

By the time the Exposition was in its last month, the excitement engendered by the Foo troupe, as well as the warmth the audience

felt towards the charismatic family of performers, was at its peak. News that Foo, that “wonderful man,” would be performing a number of new tricks resulted in a “packed to overflowing audience” at the Chinese Theater, and according to the Omaha *World Herald*, being “astonished and mystified” was only the start of their theatrical experience that night. The real magic had only just begun. Soon they were “awe-stricken and dumbfounded” when Foo, before their very eyes, cleverly severed his assistant’s head “from his shoulders.” The audience, for a moment believed that perhaps the performer had been killed. “But in a moment Ching Ling Foo stopped the flow of blood, placed the head back on the shoulders, and the boy walked off the stage very much alive.”⁴¹

With startling performances like these, the fame of the Foo Troupe continued to spread. According to the local media, thousands



Recreation of 1898-style poster promoting Foo’s decapitation Illusion. (Scobie)

from across the country were regularly inquiring about the times and locations of Foo's performances, while the crowds at the Chinese Village were such that "it looked more like a thickly populated city" than a village. "The restaurant, the joss house, the bazaar, the theater and every other building were crowded from morning until night."⁴²

THE OMAHA FAIR'S TRAFFICKING CASE

One of the first intercultural fumbles involving the management of the Omaha Chinese Village involved a lawsuit brought by a Chinese businessman, claiming that the Mee Lee Wah Village Company intended to engage in human trafficking with the over 50 young Chinese women brought in for the Fair. The ensuing court drama, which seemed to originate out of a business conflict that occurred after the Chinese Pavilion changed hands, received national attention.⁴³

In the first instance, the local judge the matter was raised before ruled that three girls (representing the 50 girls working at the Fair) should be placed in the custody of a female missionary from Kansas, who claimed expertise in things Chinese and had given as evidence of incipient immorality the fact that she had seen some of the Chinese men speaking with the Chinese women. However, the girls—aged 14 to 16 years, and described as "giddy, frisky young celestials" and "likely good at gum chewing" if they had grown up in the U.S. by the local press—refused to quietly surrender themselves to the guardianship of the female missionary. For her part, the missionary, after briefly having the girls in her care, admitted she did not want the situation to continue before retreating back to Kansas.⁴⁴

Brought back before the local judge who had put them in the custody of the missionary, the less-than-pleased magistrate ordered the girls imprisoned for not following his orders. This closely watched judgement inspired widespread derision, and a federal judge brought into address the issue immediately rescinded the local judge's orders and freed the girls.

In his judgement, the federal judge noted that the evidence presented revealed nothing untoward in the situation of the girls working at the Chinese Village, and that the girls were evidently well-treated. He also noted that it was an odd thing to imprison the girls while the man accused of wrongdoing was free. Finally, in reference to the missionary's earlier provided 'evidence' of immorality, he responded, "It's never been immoral in this country for men and women to talk." He therefore freed the girls, who "evinced the greatest delight" at the happy turn of events. They then thanked the people who had looked after them at the jail for the past weeks and happily returned to their work at the Chinese Theater.⁴⁵

President McKinley, Chinese Minister Wu Ting Fang, and the Peace Jubilee

On October 12th, 1898, on the last scheduled month of the exhibition, President William McKinley visited Omaha to attend a "Peace Jubilee" and give a speech to commemorate the end of the Spanish-American War. The event was also designed to signal America's emergence as a new power in the Pacific with its acquisition of the Philippines, Guam and Hawaii. The Philippines and Guam were acquired as a result of the war; Hawaii had come under U.S. control through an insurrection directed by foreign plantation owners that led to the kingdom becoming a U.S. territory. As a result, on June 11th, 1898, what had been the independent Hawaii exhibit at the Omaha Fair was moved from the International Building into the Agricultural Building, as the former kingdom was now a U.S. possession.

Accompanying President McKinley to Omaha was Wu Ting Fang, China's powerful ambassador to Washington, who had trained as a British barrister in Hong Kong.⁴⁶ Wu Ting Fang met with Foo as part of his responsibilities during the Omaha Fair, which included a speech of Wu's own on world peace and lobbying McKinley to ensure the U.S. would not apply the restrictive immigration rules of the China



Chinese Minister to Washington Wu Ting Fang. In 1900, the storied American publication *Harper's Weekly* described Minister Wu as one of America's most popular after-dinner speakers and published the illustration above of Wu addressing a gathering of New York merchants.

Exclusion Act in its newly acquired territory of the Philippines.⁴⁷ Wu also found time to engage in an interaction with new cutting-edge technology when he participated in a phone call from the ground to a team of “ascensionists” in a hot air balloon a thousand feet off the ground.

As a result of their meeting in Omaha, Foo and Wu would become lifelong acquaintances. Foo would meet with Wu again a few years later when the Foo troupe's engagements took them to Washington and Wu, the Chinese minister to Washington, would play a key role in mediating a dispute Foo was having with his American business partners at the time.

The relationship the two men developed was a signal of the importance with which the highly influential Wu, who would later serve as China's Foreign Minister and rise as high as acting Premier of the Republic of China in 1917, took the good work Foo was doing rehabilitating the image of Chinese in America.

Foo's Last Days in Omaha

As the Trans-Mississippi International Exposition continued to wind down, Omaha proved reluctant to let go of the Fooks—and the Fooks, on their side, seemed in no hurry to leave either. After the close of

the Exposition at the end of October, the Foos lingered in Omaha into early November. On November 7th, the beloved Foo was guest of honor for a well-covered tour of the offices of the Omaha *Daily Bee* wherein Foo, ever interested in new technological developments, paid great interest to his introduction to the newspaper's ultra-modern typesetting process and printing presses.⁴⁸

Interestingly, during his tour of the newspaper facilities, Foo seemingly filled in some gaps in his past while commenting on the relative hospitality of Americans. The cosmopolitan Foo, in speaking with his hosts, claimed he had "spent one year in France, one in England, and some months in Germany." The conjurer, ever the diplomat, then went on to state that the welcome he had received in those countries paled compared to what he had lately received in America; Foo, auguring much of what he would encounter in the near future, stated, he "never met such friendship as has been extended to him in America." It was not clear from this statement whether Foo was referring just to his time in Omaha or the earlier time he had spent in San Francisco.

Did Foo and William Robinson Cross Paths in Omaha Before Robinson Became Chung Ling Soo?

A few days later, on November 9th and 10th, Leon Herrmann, nephew of the more famous and beloved Alexander Herrmann, appeared for an engagement in Omaha after taking over his now deceased uncle's show. An account in the April 1909 edition of the magical periodical *The Sphinx* by David P. Abbott claimed, on the basis of second-hand accounts, that Foo had attended a Herrmann performance in Omaha, seated prominently in a box seat surrounded by his Chinese troupe. During the performance, Herrmann supposedly spotted the now-famous Chinese magician and moved towards Foo to demonstrate his skills with the Chinese linking rings. According to Abbott's sources, an unsportsman-like Foo supposedly "looked on coldly without enthusiasm."

Worse yet, the same informant claimed days later that Foo, no longer performing at the Chinese Theater since the Fair had closed down, rented a hall of his own and gave a performance wherein he purposely performed some amazing feats with the linking rings then contemptuously tossed them aside with a dismissive “bah” as “utterly below the standard of his art.” According to the story, all this occurred while an undoubtedly chagrined Leon Herrmann and his entourage looked on. This, along with an account in the same *Sphinx* article of Foo blowing up when another magician attempted some tricks during a social gathering in Omaha, were brought together by Abbott to emphasize an alleged point about Foo’s personality: “He would tolerate no rivals.”⁴⁹ Abbott’s account of Foo was otherwise quite positive.

Christopher Stahl, in his piece “Outdoing Ching Ling Foo”, finds these second-hand accounts of Foo’s crossing paths with Herrmann and Robinson—and Foo’s alleged intolerance of competitors—suspect. He rightly argues that they appear to be part of a post-1905 London Foo-vs.-Soo contest effort to paint Foo as in some way disagreeable and as an overly competitive foreigner. In Stahl’s thinking, this portrayal was designed to render Foo a less sympathetic figure than he otherwise would have been, given the highly questionable post-contest liberties taken by his great imitator William Robinson/Chung Ling Soo during and after that contest.⁵⁰

Indeed, scheduling realities eat away at Abbott’s premise that Leon Herrmann and William Robinson would have stayed on in Omaha for several days, waiting for Foo to rent a theater to perform his own show and thus face the alleged humiliation. Touring demands ensured the Herrmann troupe spent not an extra day in Omaha after their performance. The Herrmann troupe was on the way to Lincoln, Nebraska the evening of November 10th; by November 16th, when Foo actually held his going-away show at the Boyd Theater, which was the only time on record Foo had rented a hall in Omaha, the Herrmann troupe was already performing in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, more than a day’s train ride from Omaha.

Beyond these temporal issues, the ideas that Foo was somehow cantankerous or that it was his nature to “tolerate no rivals” seem to be belied by the numerous instances during his first and second tours of his camaraderie with fellow magicians and the many enduring friendships he developed with so many of them—and of the honors their associations would bestow on him. These long-term friendships included a young Nicola, who, while still a teenager, got his start in professional conjuring at the 1898 Omaha Exposition. Years later, the now-“Great Nicola” spoke fondly of the friendship with the ever-amiable Foo that began there.

Indeed, what seemed to most impress the populace of Omaha, and most of Foo’s audiences, during his run at the Omaha Exposition was the magician’s evident good nature.

The Foo Troupe Farewell to Omaha

When the Foo Troupe finally said goodbye to Omaha with a one-night “Grand Farewell Performance” held at Omaha’s Boyd’s Theater on November 16th, 1898, the Omaha *World-Herald*, which had repeatedly referred to Foo as “this wonderful man”, made note of Foo “having made a host of friends” in Omaha and the consequently “large circle of his acquaintances” present at his celebratory going-away performance.

Demonstrating his capacity for invention, novelty and getting the audience on his side, Foo, for this last exhibition, “performed many new feats not seen at the Exposition,” including the production, from what would become known as “Foo Cones”, of “a large vase filled with carnations, roses and chrysanthemums, which were thrown to the ladies in the audience.”

For the troupe’s final performance in Omaha, the core elements of the Foo troupe act and its particularly appealing familial nature were all in evidence. Foo’s wife Hai Quai contributed a song, while his son Foo Quai provided “a splendid exhibition of plate spinning,

BOYD'S THEATER PAXTON & BURGESS
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CHING LING FOO — The Greatest of all magicians. In wonder-
 ful feats of magic and his troupe of
 Acrobats, Jugglers, Wire Walkers, Bat Performers and Wonder Workers.
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Foo's farewell to Omaha. "The Greatest of all magicians."

acrobatic, and contortion feats." Chee Tai, the emerging star that was Foo's daughter—"the only baby Chinese performer in the world and certainly a wonder to all Americans"—sang "a baby song in her native tongue." And finally, Harry Foo, Foo's humorous assistant, did some "extraordinary juggling." The audience for Foo's final performance, as they had been during his entire run in Omaha, was "appreciative in the extreme", calling out for "frequent encores and curtain calls."^{51,52}

For this final Omaha performance, Foo was touted as "The Greatest of All Magicians," an assessment shared by newspapers that had for months been singing his praises across the country. As a result, by the time they left Omaha, Foo and his troupe, with their stage presence, charm and family appeal, had captured not just the imagination of "the Gateway to the West", but of people across the country.⁵³

However, despite the tremendous boost their Omaha engagement gave the Foo troupe, it would not be all clear sailing for the adventurous ensemble. Foo's initial foray into the American entertainment market had ended, but the roller-coaster ride that would be his first American tour had just begun.