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# **The Unknown History of New York City's Chinatown: A Story of Crime During the Years of American Prohibition**

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Popular interpretations of immigrants in New York City during the era of Prohibition have looked at it through the lens of European immigrants. Groups such as the Italian Mafia, and Irish gangs in New York City are a well-rehearsed story within the history of Prohibition. However, Europeans were not the only immigrants that began to flood into the ports of New York City during the early 20th century. Within New York City's Chinatown there was the emergence of a vast network of organized criminal activity, along with various raids revealing rice wine moonshine and other violations of the 18th amendment, just like their European counterparts. Though largely overlooked in the historiography, this paper argues that Chinatown, and the Chinese in New York City played an integral role in the Prohibition era United States.

In order to understand the Chinese population that lived in the United States during the early 1900s, it is important to lay the framework for why they first came to the United States. Like many other immigrant groups that immigrated during this time, many Chinese came over to escape a difficult political and economic climate. In China, the Opium war left the Chinese defeated by the British Empire leaving its reputation as the protectorate and superpower of the East shattered. This was accompanied by famines and floods across the nation resulting in economic catastrophe which further resulted in

civil war and several uprisings, most notably the Taiping Rebellion.<sup>1</sup> The unstable environment in China caused several Chinese to flee the country. While most Chinese moved to various locations in South-East Asia, some would travel to the United States. The discovery of gold in California in 1848, and the needed labor along the West Coast to build railroads would create the perfect environment for a massive Chinese diaspora to come to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of Chinese immigrants who first immigrated over came from the province of Guangzhou which was particularly affected by the economic decline since their main source of income was sea trade which suffered greatly with a failing economy. By 1880 more than 100,000 Chinese men had immigrated to the West Coast of the United States and about 3,000 women.<sup>3</sup>

While the first wave of Chinese immigrants went to the West Coast, by the late 1800s more Chinese began to populate the Eastern half of the United States. There was a massive dispersion of the Chinese population from 1880 to 1910 from the western half of the country to the East Coast.<sup>4</sup> As an article in the *New York Times* argued in 1923: 45% of the Chinese living in the United States at the time resided on the East Coast.<sup>5</sup> It is important to take note that the Chinese along the Eastern Coast also came to the United States to escape a difficult situation in China, and arrived with

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<sup>1</sup> Lin, Jan. *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclaves and Global Change*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ebrey, Patricia Buckley *Cambridge Illustrated History: China* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 251.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 251.

<sup>4</sup> Jin, *Chinatown: Ethnic Enclaves and Global Change*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> "Chinese in America." in *New York Times* (Nov. 04, 1923).

little resources and money. This was an important factor in determining where Chinatowns emerged.

Chinatowns emerged in urban centers such as New York City. Within New York City, Chinatowns sprung up in low-rent districts that white Americans that already resided there deemed undesirable. Despite common misconceptions, Chinatown was not a homogenous area populated by one united Chinese people. The Chinese who did occupy Chinatown came from various different provinces, spoke different dialects, and had different cultures. These Chinese groups also divided into various different political affiliations from the Civil War that raged in China. In actuality, the Chinese were not one cohesive group of people.

Chinatown was also not just the home to Chinese immigrants, though they did make up a large percentage of the population. Chinatown was occupied by several ethnic groups. The 1900 federal census of Mott Street, considered the center of Chinatown, was the home to people from Algeria, Africa, Canada, China, Cuba, England, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, and Russia. Surprisingly, the Italians in the census made up the largest group, with Chinese and Russians as the second largest groups populating Chinatown.<sup>6</sup> Part of this can be explained by the close proximity of Chinatown and Little Italy at the time. The two often blended together as gastronomically exemplified by the restaurant “Chinese Delmonico” on 24 Pell Street.<sup>7</sup>

This multi-ethnic environment would create what Ko-Lin Chin in his book *Chinese Subculture and Criminality: Non-traditional Crime Groups in America*, describes as a

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<sup>6</sup> . Yee, Shirley. *Immigrant Neighborhood: Interethnic and Interracial Encounters in New York Before 1930*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.), 5.

<sup>7</sup> “Is the Sinister Shadow of the Hatchet Again Falling on New York’s Chinatown” in *The Evening World*, page 16 (August 16, 1922).

“disorganized community.” He defines a disorganized community as one “incapable of implementing and expressing the values of its residents.” With so many different cultures of both the Chinese immigrants from various backgrounds, and the other immigrant groups, Chinatown was unable to express a concrete “value” for its residents. Chin goes on to say that the “lack of cultural and structural control within the community leads to the emergence of a delinquent subculture.”<sup>8</sup>

Three things I have mentioned thus far are of extreme importance to keep in mind going forward. First, Chinatown was occupied in general by Chinese escaping economic hardships and had very little resources. Second, the areas in which Chinatown emerged were poor, undesirable areas which in part was caused by the monetary situation of the Chinese immigrants. Third, Chinatown was a multi-ethnic “disorganized” community. All of these aspects of Chinatown would be a breeding ground for criminal activity that Chinatown would be famous for throughout the 20th century.

The relatively small amount of research on crime in Chinatowns has focused on tongs, a term coined in the United States by Americans for Chinese gangs. There had been some reference of the term tong used towards secret societies in China such as one with the express purpose of overthrowing the Qing Dynasty, but for the most part the term tong is exclusive to American Chinese gangs.<sup>9</sup> These gangs developed from

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<sup>8</sup> Chin, Ko-Lin. *Chinatown Gangs: Extortion, Enterprise, and Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, C. N. “The Chinese Tongs” in the *American Journal of Sociology* 40 (University of Chicago Press, 1935), 618.

organized crime groups based in China known as Hung, or as they were later called, “The Triad.” The tongs, were essentially Hung branches in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

To fully understand the nature of the Chinese tongs that would later emerge in the United States, it is important to take a close look at the development of these Hung groups based in China. The nature and culture of the Hung would cross over into the tong groups that plagued the streets of New York City in the early 1900s. While the Hung were stationed exclusively in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, the tongs in the United States adopted their practices. Many of the traditions, and methods in which they functioned were adopted from these Hung groups. Tong members would emulate the Triad initiation ceremony and take an oath based off of the thirty-six Triad oaths of loyalty, and bow to the god of the Triad societies practiced by the Hung groups in China.<sup>11</sup>

According to Ko-Lin Chin who examined the development of Chinese gangs both in China and in America, the Hung, and the later American tongs had five core values.

These were Loyalty, righteousness, nationalism, secrecy, and most importantly the concept of brotherhood.<sup>12</sup> These groups were extremely exclusive and as Chin points out, these attributes of loyalty and righteousness only extended to other members of the group.

Brotherhood was by far one of the most important aspects of the Hung. This was inspired by the traditional story of the *The Three Kingdoms* where three generals “became brothers through an elaborate ceremony of taking oath, burning yellow papers, and drinking each other’s blood mixed with wine.” Hung members took this story

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<sup>10</sup> Chin, Ko-Lin. *Chinatown Gangs: Extortion, Enterprise, and Ethnicity*, 15.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 59.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 18-19.

seriously, and literally as they would recreate this ceremony as an initiation.<sup>13</sup> Loyalty, and brotherhood defined and created a complex network of affiliated gangs. It was not uncommon for a war to break out on the West Coast, and for it travel across the country with a gang war breaking out over in the East Coast Chinese communities.<sup>14</sup> This was in part due to the sense of loyalty and brotherhood these gangs would have for each other, even stretching across the United States. The level of secrecy makes it difficult to find a lot of information on the tong from inside sources. Most of the available information comes from the American perspective and publications in the media about these ongoing gang wars.

The first appearance of the Hung or tong in the United States was established on the West Coast in the 1850s by the Chin Kung group who came over with the railroad workers. The political goal of the Chin Kung organization was to overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming.<sup>15</sup> Very commonly, these gangs in their early appearance in the United States would affiliate themselves with a political group or movement back in China which would also aid their sense of unity since they would believe in a similar ideology. Tongs and tong warfare would spread to the cities of Boston, Chicago, and New York City in the late 1800s and early 1900s.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of the challenges in finding sources from tong members, barely any scholarly work has been done on the tongs along the East Coast during the years of Prohibition. In fact, the only significant monograph is Scott D. Seligman's *Tong Wars: The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York's Chinatown*. However, it is

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<sup>13</sup>Chin, Ko-Lin. *Chinatown Gangs: Extortion, Enterprise, and Ethnicity*, 16.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, 64.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 54.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 4.

not yet out but slated for publication in July of this year. It is therefore extremely difficult to piece together the nature of crime in Chinatown during the early years of the 20th century and, in particular, its relationship to Prohibition. Such an inquiry demands a heavy reliance on American media accounts of the tong wars and alcohol violations in Chinatown.

I was able to uncover the two main tongs operating in Chinatown during the years of Prohibition, the Hip Sing, and the On Leong. Wars that would break out between these two groups happened for a variety of reasons. According to one publication from the *New York Times*, gang warfare between these two groups in New York City were caused by, “contest over the graft from *pie-gow* and *fantan* houses”, which were Chinese gambling establishments, and “white women.”<sup>17</sup> Wars fought over women was a common theme. According to this account, there were outbreaks over white women who the Chinese men fancied, but there are also several other instances where violence would erupt over Chinese women or “sing-song girls.”<sup>18</sup> One of the most destructive and violent wars was fought over the killing of a Chinese slave girl described in a *New York Times* article: This war, “waged for a year, which followed the murder of a Chinese slave girl in a dingy Mott Street tenement. The killing of the girl was an atrocity, even for Chinatown. She was Bow Kim and she was twenty-one years old when she died.”<sup>19</sup> “Sing Song” girls, and slave girls, if killed by an opposing tong would

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<sup>17</sup> "Chinatown Cowers as Raids Continue." in *New York Times* (Sep. 16, 1925).

<sup>18</sup>Chin, Ko-Lin. *Chinatown Gangs: Extortion, Enterprise, and Ethnicity*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> “Is the Sinister Shadow of the Hatchet Again Falling on New York’s Chinatown” in *The Evening World*, page 16 (August 16, 1922).



be grounds for retaliation since these girls were enslaved sexworkers and viewed as property. This war resulted in the death of about 60 people.<sup>20</sup>

These were not the only reasons for tong wars. Tong wars would also occur if a tong recruited a rival tong's members, invaded another tong's territory, or if a rival tongs failed to show proper respect to another tong.<sup>21</sup> However, according to a Chinese ambassador in the 1930's, the real reason for the tong wars were drugs and gambling while the other reasons that the American media publicized were of less importance.

He argued, "Narcotics and gambling are the causes of the tong wars. The tongs are generating unlimited amounts of income from operating opium and gambling dens."<sup>22</sup>

These conflicts could last for weeks, months, or even years.<sup>23</sup> Every time a tong war broke out either on the West Coast, or the East Coast, the nation would devolve into a frenzy of fear of yet another brutal, violent street war. Within the 1920s this fear became very prominent in New York City as exemplified by several publications on the issue in the *New York Times*. Anxiety over another war erupting began with the murder of the Hip Sing leader, Ko Low. He was found shot dead at Chinese Delmonico on No. 24 Pell Street.<sup>24</sup> Since he was the leader of the Hip Sing, there was concern that this murder was committed by the opposing gang, the On Leong, or that they would be blamed for it resulting in a gang war. The murder of the Hip Sing leader was not the only incident that added to the fear in the American public. Fears heightened with the discovery of the body of a Chinese man, Pong Tom on Division Street in a hallway at 61

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Chin, Ko-Lin. *Chinatown Gangs: Extortion, Enterprise, and Ethnicity*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>24</sup> "Is the Sinister Shadow of the Hatchet Again Falling on New York's Chinatown" in *The Evening World*, page 16 (August 16, 1922).

East Broadway. The body “had been hacked in a hundred or more places by a cleaver or a hatchet.” The Assistant District Attorney interviewed in the article, John R. Hennis, stated “We believe that Tommy has met his death in the continuation of the tong which raged here for a brief period several weeks ago.”<sup>25</sup>

The fear that was generated over these incidents proved justifiable with another outbreak of gang violence in 1923 with another gang war erupting because of these events. The police raided Chinatown to stop the violence, facilitated a peace treaty between the two groups, and deported 134 Chinese. These Chinese, however, were not deported because of their participation in gang warfare, but rather because as the police involvement resulted in their identification as undocumented Chinese immigrants. Thus gang violence had the potential to (and did) impact the entire Chinese community beyond those who were directly involved in the violent outbreaks. Those who were directly involved were “sent to Ellis Island” where “They have the right to seek their liberty by habeas corpus.”<sup>26</sup> That is, the Chinese who were involved in the gang violence were not deported, and remained to be tried and charged in the United States.

Police going into Chinatown to resolve such conflicts also resulted in the uncovering of other legal violations such as illegal alcohol imported into the United States by Chinese men. At 24 Mott Street, for example, \$60,000 worth of liquor was confiscated by the authorities.<sup>27</sup> In another instance, 172 tea chests imported by Yoing Chong and Co. actually contained “nyka py”, a type of Chinese whiskey, each bottle

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<sup>25</sup> "Slain With Hatchet, Chinese Put in Sack" in *New York Times* (Sep. 23 1922).

<sup>26</sup> “Is the Sinister Shadow of the Hatchet Again Falling on New York’s Chinatown.” in *The Evening World*, page 16 (August 16, 1922).

<sup>27</sup> "Find Oriental Rum in Chinatown Raid." in *New York Times* (Aug. 03 1922).

worth \$14 a piece. The same company was also found of importing 150 more cases of alcohol, each at 96 proof.<sup>28</sup>

Raids on Chinatown became common as a result of these alcohol violations. Eventually, keeping illegal alcohol imports a secret grew so challenging that some Chinese opted to import winemakers themselves to produce wine the United States. On 11 Pell Street, authorities found Wong Gee, an expert rice winemaker, with an abundant amount of wine. Authorities brought in “Chinese wine experts” to put a value on the wine that was confiscated. According to the *New York Times*, “These men, who by virtue of long duty in the precedent have become authorities on things Chinese, tasted the rice wine, said it was equal to the very best imported and worth about \$15,000.”<sup>29</sup>

The Italian Mafia and Irish gangs are commonly associated with alcohol violations that occurred in their communities and bootlegging. Conversely and interestingly, the Chinese tongs did not play a large role in the illegal alcohol dealings that went on in Chinatown. In fact, a large number of saloons, some of which would become home to speakeasies, within Chinatown were ran and operated by non-Chinese, such as the show place owned by Patrick Mullins on 6 Mott Street in Chinatown. While before the years of Prohibition, Patrick Mullins would lose his license to sell liquor due to selling it during prohibited hours.<sup>30</sup> This is just one of the many examples of speakeasies that non-Chinese owned and operated within the boundaries of Chinatown. Indeed, speakeasies, gambling establishments, and opium dens would be common, if not expected, in impoverished Chinatowns.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> "Chinese Raid Yields Precious Rice Wine." in *New York Times* (Feb. 06, 1922).

<sup>30</sup> "Mott Street Saloon Loses Its License." in *New York Times* (Mar. 24, 1909).

The American media helped transmit these negative stereotypes of a crime-ridden Chinatown. The media covered several stories of Chinatown housing illegal alcohol and subsequent operations. Other publications other than newspapers would also help create negative depictions of Chinatown such as publications from Limehouse fiction, a publishing group from England, which relied on the stereotype of gambling, opium addiction and prostitution in the “Chinese underworld.”<sup>31</sup> One disgruntled Chinese American of the time said that the Chinese “are vilified as an immoral and vicious people. Their life is depicted as mysterious and dangerous. Their colonies are described as centers of lawlessness and crime.”<sup>32</sup> An American observer stated when people go into Chinatown they expect to see “haunts of crime, hangouts of the underworld, opium dens.”<sup>33</sup> Scott Reynolds, who examined the Chinese tongs along the West Coast argued, “Criminal practices of the tongs tended to intensify a feeling of the vast distance between the East and the West.” He also stated that the negative stereotypes of criminal Chinese was also attributed to the entire Chinese race.<sup>34</sup> All these depictions of the Chinese in the media as either violent criminals, or the owners of shady establishments colored the American mindset. This imagery of the Chinese, would help create, and continue the idea of the “yellow peril” that began to emerge during this time.

It is important to realize that the majority of my sources have come from American publications *about* the Chinese. It is quite possible that the amounts, and costs of the alcohol were exaggerated. It would on one hand make the police seem

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<sup>31</sup> Knüsel, Ariane. *Framing China: Media Images and Political Debates in Britain, the USA and Switzerland, 1900-1950*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 137.

<sup>32</sup> “Chinese in America.” in *New York Times* (Nov. 04 1923).

<sup>33</sup> “Save the Sacred Myths.” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Aug 15, 1923.

<sup>34</sup> Reynolds, “The Chinese Tongs.”, 623.

more impressive for unearthing a large illegal alcohol operation, and would also support the existing idea of Chinatown being crime ridden. It is also possible that certain accounts about the gang violence were exaggerated to make the concern over the incoming Chinese populations more justified. However, this does not negate the value of these sources. On one hand, they show that Chinatown and the Chinese did have a role to play in crime and alcohol violations during the time. Furthermore, these publications give a great amount of insight into the ways in which white Americans made sense of Chinatown. This was the reality that was shown to them, and it would color their perception of Chinatown and the Chinese.

What these sources do undoubtedly say is that Chinatown, as a geographic space, and the Chinese population, played a role in Prohibition-era illegality and violence. Simultaneously, non-Chinese perceptions of this space and its inhabitants exoticized and embellished it as dangerous and different; rendering it of great concern to the American public. By taking into account the role that Chinatown and the Chinese played in New York City during Prohibition, the history of one of America's greatest cities during the years of Prohibition is better understood.

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