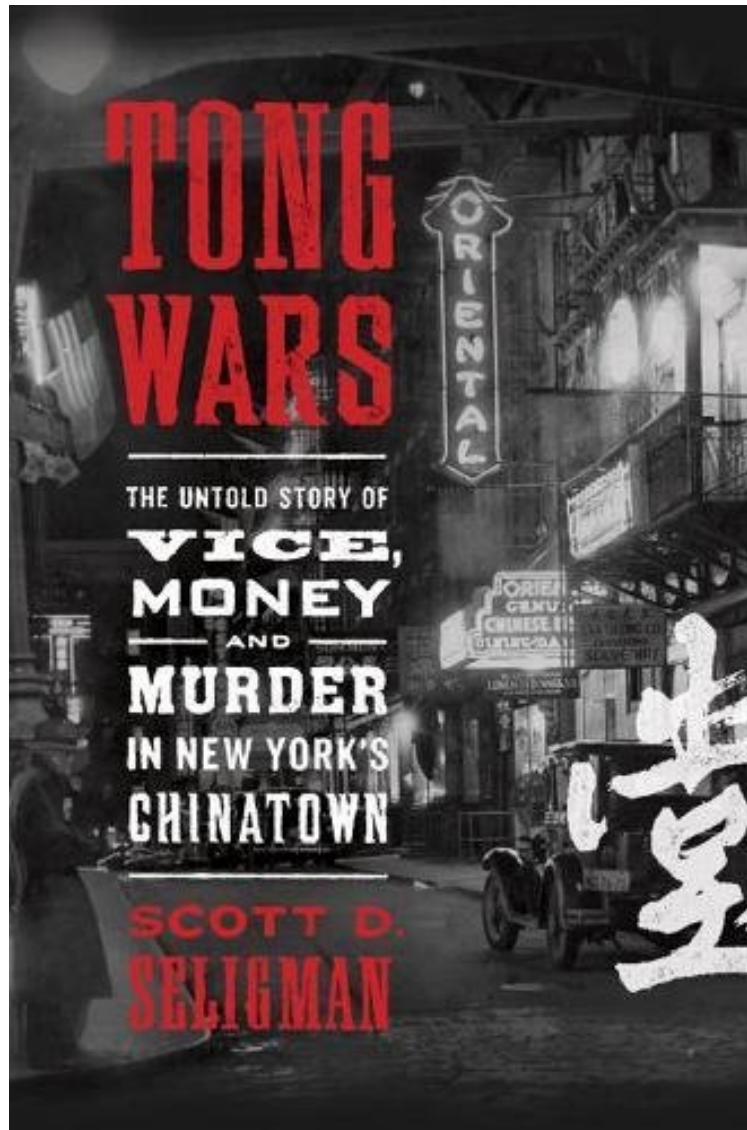


Tong Wars: The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York's Chinatown

Scott D. Seligman

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Scott D. Seligman : Tong Wars: The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York's Chinatown before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Tong Wars: The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York's Chinatown:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. A valuable and entertaining contribution to immigrant history By A. L. Wright Scott Seligman's exhaustive research, plentiful photographs, and everyman style has paid off in a rare work

of entertaining scholarship for those of us with a bent for American immigration history. Mr. Seligman demonstrates a rare ability to objectively describe the rise of New York's Chinese gangs: widespread racial and labor prejudices, the consequences of such long-standing Chinese traditions as gambling and extortion, and the generally corrupt, occasionally reputable political establishment that facilitated the tongs' growth. This is a much appreciated addition to the substantial body of literature on Chinese immigration and the infamous West Coast tongs. I would have liked more information on the lives of Chinese immigrant women--not just prostitutes -- during this violent period, but perhaps, as "Tong Wars" suggests, there were too few to be of notice. This work is a must for anyone striving to understand the American immigrant experience.³ of 3 people found the following review helpful. A fascinating and fabulous glimpse of the Tong Wars between ...By Raymond D. ChongA fascinating and fabulous glimpse of the Tong Wars between On Leong Tong and Hip Sing Tong in New York City and surrounding Northeast. from 1878 to 1934. The steamy world of vices and corruptions in Chinatown is vividly described by Scott D. Seligman. His marvelous research makes a lively tale of a forgotten time for the Chinese in America (Gold Mountain), especially with Chinese Exclusion Act.¹ of 1 people found the following review helpful. Since I grew-up in walking distance of NY Chinatown, ...By J. CrivelliSince I grew-up in walking distance of NY Chinatown, I found this book very informative. Organized crime is one of my interest, so this really added to the story.I don't know of any other work that covers this subject.

A mesmerizing true story of money, murder, gambling, prostitution, and opium in a "wild ramble around Chinatown in its darkest days." (The New Yorker)Nothing had worked. Not threats or negotiations, not shutting down the betting parlors or opium dens, not house-to-house searches or throwing Chinese offenders into prison. Not even executing them. The New York DA was running out of ideas and more people were dying every day as the weapons of choice evolved from hatchets and meat cleavers to pistols, automatic weapons, and even bombs. Welcome to New York City's Chinatown in 1925. The Chinese in turn-of-the-last-century New York were mostly immigrant peasants and shopkeepers who worked as laundrymen, cigar makers, and domestics. They gravitated to lower Manhattan and lived as Chinese an existence as possible, their few diversions—gambling, opium, and prostitution—available but, sadly, illegal. It didn't take long before one resourceful merchant saw a golden opportunity to feather his nest by positioning himself squarely between the vice dens and the police charged with shutting them down. Tong Wars is historical true crime set against the perfect landscape: Tammany-era New York City. Representatives of rival tongs (secret societies) corner the various markets of sin using admirably creative strategies. The city government was already corrupt from top to bottom, so once one tong began taxing the gambling dens and paying off the authorities, a rival, jealously eyeing its lucrative franchise, co-opted a local reformist group to help eliminate it. Pretty soon Chinese were slaughtering one another in the streets, inaugurating a succession of wars that raged for the next thirty years. Scott D. Seligman's account roars through three decades of turmoil, with characters ranging from gangsters and drug lords to reformers and do-gooders to judges, prosecutors, cops, and pils of every stripe and color. A true story set in Prohibition-era Manhattan a generation after Gangs of New York, but fought on the very same turf.

A "wild ramble around Chinatown in its darkest days." --The New Yorker"One secretive chapter in New York's criminal evolution...vivid."--The New York Times"A mesmerizing and brutal look at the hidden world of Chinese tongs."--Vice "Fascinating." The Paris "Aby demystifies the stereotypes in an age rife with discrimination and unchecked police abuse."--Kirkus s"The best kind of true crime book: a solid social history as well as a gripping narrative of murder and revenge."--Publishers WeeklyAdvance praise for TONG WARS"“With Tong Wars, Seligman pulls back the veil on thirty years of hidden history, revealing an amazing cast of gangsters, crooked businessmen and corrupt lawmen that gave rise to one of the most extraordinary eras in the underworld history of the United States. This is not only a Chinese story; it is an American story. The research is impeccable and the storytelling light on its feet. Seligman pierces the nexus of political, cultural and economic forces that are at the heart of organized crime, making this essential reading for crime buffs, historians and lovers of larger-than-life sagas about the American experience. You may think you know the full story of organized crime in America, but until you read this book – you don't.” --T.J. English, New York Times best-selling author of Where the Bodies Were Buried and Havana Nocturne "A great book! Scott Seligman is a riveting storyteller and he brings New York's Chinatown gang wars of the early twentieth century back to life with nuance and strikingly vivid detail." --Tyler Anbinder, Author of Five Points: The 19th Century New York City Neighborhood that Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum "New York's early Chinatown has been portrayed unfairly as an exaggerated Yellow Peril den of mysterious Orientals. By diligently and expertly trawling the evidence, however, Scott Seligman has unshrouded the mystery and offered up the gripping story of the men of Chinatown's underworld and their intramural battles over gambling, opium and other vices. In Tong Wars, he has rescued a tough and hardscrabble immigrant community from obscurity and offered a compelling new chapter in New York's great story.” --Paul French, author of the New York Times bestselling Midnight in Peking"“Tong Wars pulls no punches. Seligman brings the skills of a scholar and a detective to a story that plays out like a good police procedural novel. This is lively material, and Seligman deftly avoids the trap of simply cataloging the crimes of nameless, faceless denizens herded into an Asian American ghetto.

His linguistic fluency and obvious comfort with primary Chinese language sources allow him to assess the myths and the brutal realities of the tong wars, and he has brought a daring and fresh approach to an important American story.” —Sue Lee, executive director, Chinese Historical Society of America “Seligman masterfully examines the undercurrents of 1925 New York Chinatown in an engrossing depiction of a complex time. By shining a light on the power of association, the struggle for power, and the desire to survive, Seligman gives 'face' to the challenges of community-infighting, community-building, and community-identity in a racist and exclusionary America.” --Nancy Yao Maasbach, President, Museum of Chinese in America

About the Author Scott D. Seligman is a historian, retired corporate executive, and career China hand, and he holds degrees from Princeton and Harvard. Fluent in Mandarin and conversant in Cantonese, he lived in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China and has worked as a legislative assistant in Congress, a businessman in China, and a communications director of a Fortune 50 company. He is the author of many scholarly and business books, including *Chinese Business Etiquette* and *The First Chinese American*. He has published articles in the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, the *Seattle Times*, the *China Business*, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, *China Heritage Quarterly*, and the *New York History and Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center* blogs. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter 1 An "Army of Almond-Eyed Exiles"

New York's Chinese colony was just finding its permanent home in lower Manhattan when Tom Lee arrived in 1878. Although small numbers of Chinese immigrants had reached New York earlier in the century, they began to come in a steady stream only after 1869, when work was completed on the transcontinental railroad and the laborers had to look elsewhere for work. The flow increased dramatically throughout the 1870s, because many white men out west, hobbled by economic recession and threatened by cheap Chinese labor, took to doing whatever they could to make the Chinese among them feel unwelcome and unsafe. When California enacted laws in the late 1870s preventing Chinese from working in public projects and authorizing municipalities to relocate Chinese residents outside their city limits, and hoodlums in Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, California, and elsewhere in the West attacked Chinese businesses and homes in the 1880s, Chinese got the message. Many returned to China, but others headed east, where work might be found and where there was little violence against their kind. Most set their sights on the larger cities of the Midwest and the East like Chicago, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston. New York, America's largest and most important metropolis, was the favorite destination. The New York that greeted these new arrivals was developing briskly. Heady economic growth had followed the recession, though its rewards were distributed unevenly among the city's million residents. The ruling class, in their tony Murray Hill and Gramercy Park mansions, occupied themselves with lavish parties, fashion, theater, and tours of Europe. The working class, far more numerous, crowded into the tenements of the Fourth Ward—lower Manhattan's East River waterfront—and the Sixth Ward's Five Points neighborhood, named for an irregular intersection where Anthony (now Worth), Orange (now Baxter), and Cross (now Mosco) streets converged and which was notorious for its saloons, gambling halls, cathouses, and gang wars. Newly arrived Chinese, their numbers still minuscule, joined Irish, English, Jewish, Italian, and German immigrants and blacks in a struggle for survival in a quarter known for vice, crime, and grinding poverty. There was bias against all newcomers, but the Chinese were in a class by themselves. Although they were not widely viewed in New York as an economic threat, it didn't take long for anti-Chinese stereotypes, honed in California, to make their way eastward. Chinese were derided in the press as inferior, dishonest, immoral, indecent, unsanitary, and disease-ridden. They were called clannish and criticized for their unwillingness to assimilate—as if they were in any way welcome to do so. They were godless heathens with sordid habits, it was said, like smoking opium and eating rats and dogs. These very prejudices led Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, halting further immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years and rendering those Chinese already here ineligible for citizenship. In Manhattan, many early migrants were met at the railway station or pier by Wo Kee, a Hong Kong-born merchant who delivered them by horse-drawn coach over rutted streets to 34 Mott Street. There he ran a general store and a boardinghouse with accommodations for two dozen men sleeping two to a bunk. There he briefed new arrivals on life and business opportunities in New York. And there they might remain until they got established. Wo Kee—his real name was Wong Ah Chung, but he was popularly known by the name of his store—was the de facto leader of the tiny Chinese community when Tom Lee arrived. In 1873, at age twenty-four, Wo Kee had staked out the predominantly Irish neighborhood south of Canal Street that would become the permanent home of Manhattan's Chinese community. There was little to recommend the unsavory district, but rents were cheap. Wo Kee's shop carried just about everything a Chinese émigré might need. His front parlor, chock-full of merchandise, could barely accommodate four customers at a time. Waxen ducks, desiccated mushrooms, nuts, sweetmeats, dried sharks' fins, and a variety of teas filled his shelves, barrels, and crates. Pasteboard boxes spilled over with seeds, roots, herbs, and barks, remedies for various ailments that gave the place a decidedly pungent odor. But there were also sweet-smelling incense sticks and altars for use at funerals and religious rituals. Jade bracelets, sandals, Chinese garments, porcelain teapots, tobacco, opium pipes—and opium itself—rounded out his inventory. The sallow-skinned, mustachioed Wo Kee, a stout man who stood five feet four and spoke reasonably good English, served tea to all comers, totaled purchases on an abacus, and kept his accounts with a writing brush. Out of the same location, he also ran an underground gambling parlor and a mutual aid association called the Polong Congsee (which probably translates as "Conscientious Protection Company"). One of a pair of benevolent societies serving the

small community, it collected dues and met monthly in his basement. Boasting seventy-five members and assets of several thousand dollars, the Polong Congsee functioned in part as an immigrant depot, helping newcomers open laundries or secure other employment. In 1875, state census takers had enumerated only 157 Chinese in all of New York City, and the federal census five years later still tallied fewer than 1,000 in the entire state. This was likely a severe case of undercounting, however. The New York Times was probably closer to the mark in its 1880 estimate of 4,500 Chinese in the metropolitan area: about 2,000 in Manhattan, another 1,000 in Brooklyn, and 1,500 in New Jersey. The discrepancy arose because census takers found it especially problematic to get an accurate count. A New York Herald reporter gave a flavor for the obstacles: "A person unacquainted in the district might easily enough ask one of the Chinamen all the questions, and then, ten minutes afterward, meeting the same Celestial in another house, innocently endeavor to repeat the examination." This was true, he explained, because "they all look alike"-a generalization with which most New Yorkers would have readily agreed. Then, too, Chinese crowded a lot more people into a given dwelling than did other immigrants. It would have taken several trips to any given address and a good measure of patience and perseverance to interview all of its residents. Most of New York's Chinese lived in boardinghouses. Some had been built as tenements, with their cheerless railroad flats and gloomy hallways, jammed up against one another without so much as a narrow alley in between to let in a little light. Others had once been stately private residences but had deteriorated over time. Enterprising landlords fitted high-ceilinged rooms with makeshift, intermediate floors, doubling their profits even as they turned their properties into firetraps. Front rooms were typically given over to retail businesses, while rear chambers, attics, and cellars were used for housing. Many men could sleep, cook, and eat in one large, unheated dormitory, rudely furnished with a stove, a table, stools, and rows of shelves that served as bunks, some wide enough to accommodate three sleepers. Most of the early arrivals had been peasants or small shopkeepers in China, and most intended to make some money in America and then return home to a comfortable retirement. Many were literate in their own language, but few spoke much English, so even if they had not been shut out by white Americans, they had no choice but to fraternize exclusively with other Chinese. As a rule, they had little to do with outsiders and lived, ate, slept, and relaxed with their own kind. They dressed in traditional Chinese robes, blouses, flowing pantaloons, and wooden-soled slippers ill-suited to New York's muddy streets. And they sported the signature hair queues worn at the time by all men in China. They could scarcely have appeared more foreign to their New York neighbors. Diligent laborers with few deadbeats among them, the Chinese were closely associated with the laundry business, which permitted a hard worker to put away \$10 to \$14 per week, about what an average white grocery clerk or letter carrier made. None of these men would have dreamed of washing clothes back in China; there it would have been a job for their women. But it was an occupation that needed little capital-they could set up shop for as little as \$75-and it did not put them in competition with white males, which would have spelled trouble. By 1879, the city already boasted more than three hundred Chinese laundries. But Chinese worked in other trades as well. Skilled cigar makers-not a few of whom had logged time as coolies in Cuba's tobacco fields before sailing to New York-found employment in tenement cigar factories. They were paid by the piece and could take home as much as \$27 a week. More than seventy-five Chinese worked as domestics and were paid \$18 to \$25 a month plus room and board. Fifty Chinese-run groceries, twenty tobacco shops, ten drugstores, and six Chinese restaurants were operating in the Chinese quarter in 1879. And these didn't include enterprises in Brooklyn or New Jersey. By early 1880, Chinese had leased nearly every building-sixteen in total-on lower Mott Street, just up from Chatham Square. But the influx of what the New York Herald called an "army of almond-eyed exiles" arriving from the West-at the rate of twenty per day, by one count-soon overtaxed the boardinghouses. More space was needed, but there was opposition to expansion of "Little China." When the Rutgers Fire Insurance Company was offered a large advance on the rent for a property it owned at 3 Mott, the company asserted that it would sooner pull the building down than allow a "Chinaman" to live in it. The owner of two cramped houses on nearby Pell Street refused \$60 a month from a would-be Chinese tenant, even though the properties had not previously fetched anywhere near that amount. And another Mott Street landlord vowed to allow his property to sit idle rather than accept a generous offer of \$1,000 for the year from a Chinese. In May, Chinese tenants in five of the quarter's residences-including 34 Mott, which housed Wo Kee's establishment-suddenly received eviction notices. The landlords blamed opium-smoking Chinese for the fact that their properties' market value had plummeted and vowed to enjoin future lessees from subletting to Chinese or to blacks. When an offer by the Polong Congsee to buy two of the buildings was refused, Wo Kee tore down his sign, packed up his wares, and headed for nearby Park Street. In due course, however, he would be back, and he would bring his countrymen with him. Tom Lee, a crafty man with no small level of ambition, came to New York with four goals: to impose order and organization on its Chinese colonists; to build bridges for them to the white establishment; to make himself rich and successful; and to start a family. He saw no conflict among those objectives and wasted little time in pursuing all of them at once. His name wasn't actually Tom Lee; that was just the identity the courtly emissary from San Francisco's more established Chinatown assumed shortly after his arrival. Born about 1849 near Guangzhou, Lee-slender at five feet six inches-had come to America at age fourteen. He had worked in San Francisco as a labor contractor, supplying white-owned companies with low-paid Chinese workers, and had ingratiated himself there with powerful figures in the Chinese community. He had readily picked up serviceable

English, although it was always somewhat broken and he forever retained an accent. He was a man on the move, up the economic ladder and east across the continent. By 1876, Lee had reached St. Louis, where he opened a barrel-making business and took out citizenship papers-one of the first Chinese in America to do so-under his original name, Wung Ah Ling. And after a short stint as a merchant in Philadelphia, he moved on to New York, where he petitioned Manhattan's Court of Common Pleas for a new moniker, explaining that Americans had too much trouble pronouncing the old one. The judge assented, and Wung Ah Ling became Tom Lee forever after. Although Lee adopted Western dress earlier than most, he still sported a queue in the late 1870s, as did nearly all Chinese. The wearing of hair queues had been imposed on all Chinese males as a sign of subjugation when the Manchus, a minority tribe from the Northeast, conquered China and established the Qing dynasty in 1644. The penalty for noncompliance was death. After a couple of hundred years, however, the pigtailed came, paradoxically, to be accepted as a symbol of national pride, and even many Chinese living abroad refused to part with them, especially if they expected to return home. To appear more Americanized, however, Lee tucked the long plait into the crown of a stiff derby hat, which caused the hair on the back of his head to stand out, someone once said, "like the quills of an angry porcupine." The olive-skinned Lee wore a wispy mustache under his flat nose, and a sparse goatee obscured his pointy chin. Dapper, urbane, and distinguished looking, he dressed fashionably, a diamond stickpin securing his tie and an elegant, eight-ounce gold watch chain dangling from the third button of his waistcoat. Just before coming to New York, Lee, nearing thirty, had wed the comely Minnie Rose Kaylor, a buxom Philadelphia brunette of Scotch-German heritage who was more than a decade younger and quite a bit larger than he was. Marriage between Chinese men and women of other races was unusual in this era, but it was not illegal. A Lutheran minister performed the ceremony, even though Lee was not baptized. He moved his new bride to 20 Mott Street shortly afterward, and they lost no time starting a family. Minnie bore two daughters who died in infancy and then two sons-Tom junior in 1882 and Frank William in 1884. A huge celebration followed the birth of young Tom: Two traditions were honored, mirroring his mixed heritage. He was baptized and was feted at a "head shaving" party held, according to Chinese custom, thirty days after the birth of a male. The elder Lee did not stint on the festivities. On April 1, 1882, he closed both of his stores-he now had two of them-for a huge party. It took two restaurants to accommodate the three hundred guests from Manhattan, Brooklyn, and New Jersey. Three diplomats from the Chinese legation made the journey from Washington; the local representatives of the Manchu government had an interest in seeing to it that there was order among their countrymen in America, so they wanted to signal their approval of Lee's assumption of the leadership of the New York colony. VIPs were entertained in the parlor of the Lee home, where banners inscribed with good wishes adorned the walls. Lee had also invited American friends, some of whom attended. But he received regrets from several who found the idea of a party to celebrate a haircut so odd that they mistook the invitation for an April Fools' joke.