THE FIRST CHINESE IN TUCSON
New Evidence on a Puzzling Question

by

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Legend has it that Chinese were among the early arrivals in southern Arizona after the U.S. acquired the territory in 1854. Although neither the 1864 nor the 1870 census record any Chinese living in Tucson, it is generally believed that the first Chinese settled in the Old Pueblo in the 1860s. In the absence of nineteenth-century written documents, most scholars have based their claim on the recollections of one man, Don Chun Wo, published in a Tucson newspaper in 1935. A careful examination of Don's claims, coupled with new evidence, suggests the need to reconsider this puzzling question.

Harry T. Getty was the first modern scholar to examine the Chinese experience in southern Arizona. In his 1950 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Chicago (published in 1976 as Interethnic Relationships in the Community of Tucson), he observed that "the territorial census of 1864 does not list any Chinese in Tucson, nor does the regular U.S. census of 1870. However, Chinese informants generally agree that the first Chinese came to Tucson in the late 1860's." John L. Schweitzer, in "The Social Unity of Tucson's Chinese Community," his 1952 University of Arizona master's thesis, noted that "in 1870 the U.S. Census found 20 Chinese in Arizona. It is not known how many of them were in Tucson. But according to the Arizona Daily Star of February 22, 1935, which devoted a section to Tucson's Chinese, those who were here in 1870 arrived during the 1860's."1

Subsequent scholars have cast doubt on the early arrival of the Chinese. Lawrence Fong, in his article "Sojourners and Settlers: The Chinese Experience in Arizona," in the autumn 1980

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Don Chun Wo and wife. (AHS/SAD #B89203)
issue of *The Journal of Arizona History*, observed that “before the Southern Pacific had reached Gila Bend, Arizona . . ., three men who shared the family name Wong left the work gangs and came to Tucson. They arrived in the late 1870s and established the O.K. Restaurant on the southeast corner of Church Plaza and Mesilla Street.” Fong was careful not to identify the Wongs as the first Chinese settlers in Tucson. His source for the date of their arrival and the name of their business was a letter, dated January 22, 1935, from Don Chun Wo to Joseph A. Roberts in the collections of the Arizona Historical Society. In his letter, Don recalled that the Wongs arrived prior to 1870. Fong, no doubt aware that the railroad arrived at Tucson on March 20, 1880, changed the date to the late 1870s.

Anthropologists Florence C. Lister and Robert H. Lister agreed with this later date, stating in *The Chinese of Early Tucson: Historical Archaeology from the Tucson Urban Renewal Project*, published in 1989, that “no Chinese people can be documented as being in Tucson prior to the mid 1870’s, despite loose claims for their presence ten years earlier.” The earliest documentary evidence the Listers uncovered was an advertisement in the
November 4, 1876, *Arizona Citizen*. In his 1998 article, "Uncovering the Story of Tucson’s Chinese Gardeners," archaeologist J. Homer Thiel concludes that "Chinese immigrants arrived in Tucson in the mid-1870's, the first probably a pair of men named Wong Tai and Louy, who opened a restaurant by July 1876." Although Thiel provides no source for his statement and the date is slightly misleading, he no doubt refers to an earlier advertisement in the *Citizen*.²

Claims that the Chinese arrived in Tucson in the 1860s apparently originated in the article, cited by John Schweitzer, in the February 22, 1935, Rodeo Edition of the *Arizona Daily Star*. In "First Chinese of Old Pueblo Came in 1860's," the author dates their arrival "a little before 1870." As proof, he quotes a letter to the editor from Don Chun Wo, in which Don states that "I place the arrival of the Wongs in Tucson as prior to 1870 because they had a case in court which could not be tried without an interpreter. Finally a man by the name of Chan Tin Wo was found who was able to understand Chinese and English. Chan Tin Wo was cooking for one of the railroad building camps near Maricopa, and he was called to Tucson in 1870 to act as an interpreter for that particular case." According to Don, the three Wongs had followed the railroad east and settled in Tucson, where they opened the O.K. Restaurant on the southeast corner of Church Plaza and Mesilla Street. They charged seventy-five cents for a meal and used a laundry basket as a cash register.

Another article on the same page of the *Star* seemingly bolstered Don Chun Wo’s recollection that the first Chinese arrived in Tucson in the 1860s. According to Yee Hoy, who at eighty-eight or ninety years of age in 1935 was considered the oldest Chinese inhabitant of the Old Pueblo, "the three original Wongs" were already settled in when he arrived in Tucson as a youth in about 1870.

Other writers quickly picked up on Don Chun Wo’s recollections. In a 1938 article in the San Francisco-based magazine *Chinese Digest*, May Y. Tom—a University of Arizona graduate and the only teacher of Chinese descent in the Tucson public school system—wrote that "the earliest Chinese who settled in Tucson in 1860 were three members of the Wong clan." Citing the files of the *Arizona Daily Star* and Arizona Historical Society records, she
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described how the Wongs “worked as section hands on the Southern Pacific line when the railroad was blazing its way to the east, but left this employment when the construction gangs arrived at Gila Bend, some 150 miles west of Tucson.” To her credit, Tom realized that something was wrong with Don Chun Wo’s account, “since the Southern Pacific did not begin building until 1865 and then it was several years before the line reached anywhere near Tucson.” Nevertheless, several subsequent newspaper articles repeated Don’s story.5

The question naturally arises: Who was Don Chun Wo and what was the source for the story that Chan Tin Wo was called to Tucson in 1870 to assist the Wongs in their court case?

Known for many years as the “mayor” of Tucson’s Chinatown, Don Chun Wo was born in San Francisco on October 3, 1873, the son of a goldsmith and jeweler. He came to Tucson in March 1895 at the request of his uncle, Chan Tin Wo, the man who served as the interpreter in the Wongs’ lawsuit. On October 5, 1895, he purchased his uncle’s general merchandise store when, according to Don’s recollection, Chan Tin Wo decided to return to Hong Kong, where he died about 1902. Don Chun Wo was active in Tucson’s Chinese community and was a member of the Arizona Historical Society. He served as the liaison between the Chinese and occidental communities in civic and charity projects. In 1927, he moved to Casa Grande, where he continued his business until his death in 1945.4

Obviously, Don Chun Wo did not witness the arrival of the first Chinese in Tucson, nor did he have personal contact with the three Wongs. He was sixty-two-years old in 1935, when he publicized what he knew about Tucson’s Chinese pioneers. Although Don did not disclose the source for his story, it is safe to infer that he learned it from his uncle, Chan Tin Wo, forty years earlier. As he stated in his letter to Joseph Roberts, “this data [regarding the first Chinese] is compiled entirely from the memory of a few old-timers and my own.”5

From other sources, we know that Don Chun Wo’s memory did not always serve him well. For example, although Don said in his 1927 recollection that he bought out his uncle’s business in 1895, the 1897–98 Tucson Directory carries, on the same page, advertisements for both Don Chun Wo and Chan Tin Wo’s busi-

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nesses. Moreover, Don remembered that his uncle returned to China in 1895 and died there in 1902, but the 1902 *Tucson Directory* lists Chun Tin Wo as a “capitalist” residing at 90 Pear[1] Street. The November 2, 1904, *Tucson Citizen* reported that Chan Tin Wo created a local stir when he was the first Chinese man to serve on a Pima County jury. According to the newspaper, he “conducted himself with as much of a show of brains as his white colleagues.” Obviously, Don’s recollections were confused. In 1927, he told the Arizona Historical Society’s Edith Kitt that his uncle “came to Tucson before the railroad” in 1880. Eighteen years later, he stated that Chan Tin Wo arrived in 1870. Don Chun Wo’s recollection that Tucson’s original Chinese restaurant charged seventy-five cents for a meal is equally suspect. Other Chinese and American restaurants at the time typically offered meals for twenty-five cents and board for $5.00–6.00 per week.⁶

Yee Hoy’s recollection that he reached Tucson in 1870 is similarly suspect. In publishing Yee Hoy’s account, the *Arizona Daily Star* cautioned readers that the eighty-eight- or ninety-year-old elder’s “memory is marred by the incertitude of age.” Indeed, Yee Hoy was not even certain of the year of his birth.⁷

Fortunately, a careful examination of Don Chun Wo’s story of the three Wongs’ arrival enables us to date more precisely the arrival of the first Chinese in Tucson. According to Don, “the three Wongs had been employed in building the railroad on its march eastward across the land from [the] California coast. They stayed with the construction gangs until the line reached a point between Gila Bend and Maricopa; then they left the employ of the Southern Pacific to strike out on their own and look for better opportunities. Still traveling eastward, the Wongs came to Tucson, and decided to settle here.”⁸

As May Y. Tom noted in 1938, if Don Chun Wo’s account is true, the Wongs could not have settled in Tucson in the 1860s. The Southern Pacific Railroad reached Yuma, the port of entry to Arizona, from California on September 30, 1877. The tracks extended eastward to Gila Bend sometime in 1878 and reached Maricopa in April of 1879. The first train entered Tucson on March 20, 1880. If the three Wongs moved eastward with the construction gangs and quit the railroad at some point between Gila Bend and Maricopa, then they would have reached Tucson in late

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1878 or early 1879.9

Likewise, if the Wongs found Chan Tin Wo in "one of the railroad building camps near Maricopa," he too must have reached Tucson in 1878 or 1879. This echoes Don Chun Wo's recollection in 1927 that his uncle "came to Tucson before [the] railroad (1880)." The 1881 Tucson Directory, the earliest we have, lists Chan Tin Wo as a dealer in "Chinese goods" operating a store at 111 N. Main Street. In that same year, Chan became Tucson's first Chinese naturalized citizen, and the following year he became the first Chinese in Tucson to register to vote. In 1884, the Arizona Daily Star recognized him as one of the community's "most prosperous grocery men."10

So, if the three Wongs arrived in Tucson between 1878 and 1879, followed shortly thereafter by Chan Tin Wo, can we conclude that the first Chinese settled in Tucson in the late 1870s? The answer is "no." Newspaper records from the mid-1870s indicate that Chinese immigrants had already left their mark in the Old Pueblo.

In their Tucson urban renewal project report, the Listers point to an advertisement and an article in the November 4, 1876, edition of the Arizona Citizen. The advertisement invites customers to the Celestial Restaurant, operated by Wong Tai, on Congress Street near the Church Plaza. It goes on to state that "the Chief Cook and Baker is 'Louy,' one of the very best and who is well known to be such. Patronage is solicited. Fare Excellent and Charges Reasonable by the Day, Week or Month."

The article in the same issue of the Citizen opens a window into the hardships and discrimination experienced by Chinese and other ethnic groups on the frontier. Apparently, a group of pampered wags among the Celestial Restaurant's customers tried to pull a joke on a new waiter who, because of his thick accent, had difficulty pronouncing the English names of dishes on the menu. In particular, they explained to the waiter that Americans had a special craving for cold tongue, which he pronounced "cold dung," and persuaded him to offer it to everyone who came into the restaurant. We can imagine the result. The newspaper reporter concluded his story with the observation that "the proprietor of the place has a suit for damages under way against the perpetrator of this joke."11
In tracing the advertisement back through the newspaper, I discovered that it first appeared in the December 4, 1875, issue of the Arizona Citizen, almost a year earlier than the issue cited by the Listers and eight months prior to Homer Thiel's reference. At that time, the Celestial Restaurant—at the same location and with the same chef—was owned by Hop Kee & Co. The advertisement also noted that "Hop Kee & Co. have their own garden and always keep their table well supplied with the best articles in the market." Hop Kee is Cantonese pronunciation. Converted into Mandarin, it should be he ji 伙計. The Chinese word he means "partnership or joint venture" and the word ji refers to the mark or sign that merchants once used to indicate the name of a commercial enterprise. In keeping with the custom of early Chinese immigrants when launching a business in America, the Celestial Restaurant was a joint-venture enterprise. The advertisement for the Celestial Restaurant under Hop Kee & Co.'s ownership continued until May 6, 1876, after which Wong Tai was listed as the owner. Consequently, we may safely conclude that the first Chinese arrived in Tucson at least by 1875, and perhaps earlier.12

Don Chun Wo grocery. (AHS/SAD #30034)
Chinese Mission School, c. 1880. (AHS/SAD #B200020)

While newspaper references to the Celestial Restaurant help clarify the date of the first Chinese arrival in Tucson, they also raise further questions about Don Chun Wo's recollection of how and when the Wongs reached the Old Pueblo and about their association with an establishment that he refers to as the "O.K. Restaurant." Two interesting facts immediately leap out. In both cases, the last name of the owner was Wong and the restaurant had a case in court. While it is possible that two restaurant owners by the name of Wong lived in Tucson in the 1870s, it is highly improbable that both restaurants would have been involved in litigation. Interestingly, Don Chun Wo recalled that the O.K. Restaurant operated on the southeast corner of Church Plaza. An advertisement in the September 6, 1888, Daily Arizona Citizen locates an O.K. Restaurant—with nothing to indicate that it is a Chinese establishment—on the west side of Church Plaza.

It seems obvious that, once again, Don Chun Wo's memory failed him and that in 1935 he may have confused the O.K. Restaurant of his day with the pioneering Celestial Restaurant (also near the Church Plaza) a decade and a half earlier. Moreover, it seems highly unlikely that Chinese immigrants would
select a typically American name like "O.K." for their business. In this regard, the Chinese generally followed two rules: either selecting an auspicious name such as "dragon" or "phoenix," or something associated with China, such as "Sichuan" or "Guan-dong" ("Celestial" would be appropriate in this case because it was a term that Americans used to refer to the Chinese); or using the name of the owners, as in the case of Chan Tin Wo General Merchandise and Don Chun Wo Groceries and Provisions. The fact that the Celestial Restaurant was at least in part owned by a man named Wong, and that it had a case in court, bolsters the conclusion that Don was mistaken when he identified the O.K. Restaurant as Tucson's first Chinese business, and that Wong Tai was one of Tucson's pioneering Wongs.13

How then to account for the fact that the Wongs appear to have arrived in Tucson at least by 1875, several years prior to the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad? It may be that Don Chun Wo confused his uncle Chan Tin Wo's story of working in the railroad camps with the experience of the Wongs. In reality, the Wongs may have traveled to Tucson directly from California sometime prior to the construction of the railroad. Yee Hoy, in his recollections for the Arizona Daily Star, offers an intriguing clue as to how this may have happened. According to Yee, "the Sum Yip people [referring to a locality in China] came [to Tucson] before the railroad, walking here from Yuma." Yee, himself, traveled with his employer, a Mr. Stippi, from San Francisco to Santa Barbara and then accompanied a wagon train to Tucson, by way of Yuma, probably in 1876 or 1877. And, of course, he recalled that the Wongs were already in Tucson when he arrived, making it still more likely that Wong Tai was one of the pioneering Wongs.13

The legend that Tucson's Chinese settlement dates to the arrival of the three members of the Wong Clan has endured for almost a century, and there is no reason to doubt its veracity. Claims that they arrived just prior to 1870 and operated the O.K. Restaurant rest solely on Don Chun Wo's recollections. A careful examination of Don's story in the Arizona Daily Star and his reminiscence at the Arizona Historical Society raise important questions about when they settled in Tucson and other details of the early Chinese experience in the Old Pueblo. Circumstantial evidence indicates that the Wongs actually came to Tucson no later
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than 1875 and that the O.K. Restaurant recalled by Don Chun Wo may in fact have been the Celestial Restaurant owned, at least in part, by Wong Tai. Until further early records are uncovered, the issue of the first Chinese arrival in Tucson remains an open question and a fertile field for further research.

NOTES


3. May Y. Tom, "The Chinese in Tucson, Arizona," *Chinese Digest* (March 1938), pp. 8–9; ibid. (April 1938), pp. 8–9, 19. As examples of other newspaper articles, see Ralph Mahoney, "Our Chinese-American Heritage," *Arizona Days and Ways*, September 30, October 7 and 14, 1956; and Esther Don Tang, "Tucson’s Chinese Pioneers: A Tradition of Giving to Community, unidentified clipping, AHS. Mahoney states that "if history is correct, the first three Chinese came to Tucson in 1860—about 15 years before many of their countrymen were driven out of California. They were members of the Wong clan and came from the San Ysidro (Poon Yee, Fa Yuen, Sun Tuck and Nam Hoi) district of China." Tang, likewise, reports that "history records that three Chinese came to Tucson in 1860, 15 years before the mass exodus from California. Members of the Wong clan from the San Ysidro District in China, they opened Tucson’s first Chinese restaurant, charged 75 cents for a full meal and fed their employees a complete dinner at the end of the day."


6. "Reminiscences of Don Chun Wo," Chan Tin Wo is also listed in the 1901 *Tucson Directory* according to the *Tucson Citizen*, November 2, 1904, "one of the members of the jury in the Casanova case the other day was a Chinaman, Chan Tin Wo, the first one of his race to ever take part in an exercise of that sort in this county. . . . The Chino is a resident merchant of this city, pays his taxes like any other good citizen." The *Tucson Directory*, 1897–1898 lists Chan Tin Wo as a "wholesale and retail Dealer in family groceries. Corner Main and Mesilla Sts. Goods delivered free to any part of the city." Don Chun Wo is described as a "Dealer in Groceries and Provisions. Family Trade Solicited. Goods delivered free to all parts of the city. Corn[ner]. Ott and North Main Streets." See also, *Daily Arizona Citizen*, June 24, 1880; September 6, 1888.

8. Ibid., p. 4.


12. Paul Lim of Tucson, a native Cantonese, assisted in the translation. Apparently, Wong Tai did not purchase the Hop Kee & Co. garden.

13. Daily Arizona Citizen, September 6, 1888, contains the following advertisement: “The O.K. Restaurant, On the West Side of the Church Plaza. The Best Meals in Town Will be served. The table being supplied with everything the market affords. Single meals . . . . 25 Cents. Board by the Week . . . . $5.00.” The advertisement ran for several years. Even if the O.K. Restaurant were Chinese, no trace of it can be found prior to 1888. The Arizona Citizen, November 24, 1891, also carries an advertisement for Chan Tin Wo, “Wholesaler and Retail Dealer in Groceries, Provisions, [and] General Merchandise. 102 and 104 North Main Street. Corner of Ott Street.”


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