

BOOK REVIEW

Murder in New York's Chinatown

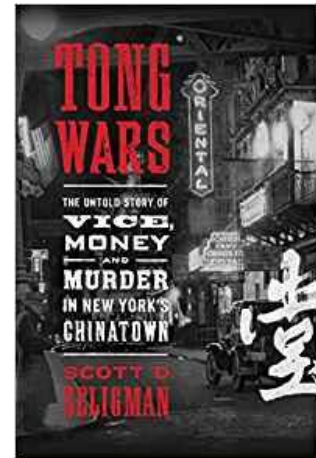
By Foster Stockwell

Scott Seligman, in his book *Tong Wars*, has unshrouded the secret and real history of the ruthless gang battles that raged in New York's Chinatown for three decades during the early twentieth century. Seligman has woven a gripping story of those in Chinatown's underworld who were engaged in gambling, smuggling, opium, and other vices, and his book will hold the interest of any reader from first page to last.

He begins the book by pointing out that when hostilities against the Chinese on the West coast of the United States became so unbearable that some of the immigrants returned to China, many others moved to the largest cities of the Midwest and East. Most of these displaced Chinese settled into crowded tenements in what is now New York City's Chinatown area. Here they set up laundries, restaurants, and gambling establishments. They paid tribute to corrupt police officials and Tammany bosses in order to be left alone. The time was around the turn of the century, and at that time crime was rampant throughout the city.

For protection and social reasons, the men (there were few Chinese women in America then) joined family associations, regional societies, and Tongs. The latter groups were secret societies open to any Chinese who paid dues and underwent an initiation. The word "tong" means "chamber." Although these sworn brotherhoods were ostensibly benevolent

Tong Wars, The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York's Chinatown
by Scott Seligman
Published by Viking Press



associations, they eventually came to be associated with a variety of underworld activities.

The two main Tongs in New York were the Hip Sing Tong and the On Leong Tong. Their rivalry began around the turn of the century after a sailor, who claimed to have been cheated out of \$2.50 at one of the gambling houses, began a fight with the proprietor. The sailor enlisted the help of a boarding house keeper named Lee Sing, and the matter soon elevated into a general riot. The police finally restored order and arrested Lee Sing, but from then on members of the Hip Sing Tong and the On Leong Tong conducted a series of assassinations and retaliatory assassinations that lasted until America's Great Depression in the 1930s.

Using a variety of guns, knives, hatchets, and other weapons, members of the two rival Tongs tried to obliterate one another. At least four times these confrontations became pitched battles that were listed in the New York City papers as wars. The first such war took place in May 1905 at the Doyers Street Chinese Theatre when members of the Hip Sing Tong set off a string of fire crackers to terrorize the audience and then began shooting members of the

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On Leong Tong who were in the audience. The ensuing battle shattered windows, splintered benches, and knocked plaster from the walls of the theatre. More than one hundred bullets were fired.

The Fourth and last Tong War took place in 1933. It was finally ended with a cease fire agreement. But this didn't last long, and at one point New York's District Attorney Banton warned that he would send all the Tong men "back to China by the shipload" if the killing didn't stop. As the violence grew in New York, the operations of the two Tongs spread to other cities—Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Seattle, Newark, and several others.

All in all the Tong wars were expensive. Guns had to be purchased in quantity and explosives and tear gas were far more costly than the earlier hatchets and cleavers that had been used. Also the Tong leaders increasingly began to employ imported thugs to do their bidding. These gunmen had to be hired and paid. Their escapes had to be underwritten, as well as their court cases should the police apprehend them. Many of these thugs were eventually arrested and spent time in jail or they were deported.

Seligman quotes from a book by a Chinese author to explain why men joined the Tongs. This says: "Chinese of all classes join the Tongs mostly for economic protection, sometimes for revenge. Except for the higher-ups and the hatchet men, most of the Tong members are plain victims of exploitation. They do not brag about being Tong members, for there is a general feeling among the Chinese that no one would join a Tong if he could help it. Among Tong members the hatchet men are considered a bad lot. It is they who start and profit by Tong wars, though they take orders from the men at the top."

This book is a fine addition to the history of Chinese-Americans. It is well researched and well documented. It includes biographical information about most of the participants, a year by year chronology of events, many pictures and

a map of the Chinatown area. It is well worth including in your library.