



**Name in English:** Wong Chin Foo  
**Name in Chinese:** 王清福  
**Name in Pinyin:** Wang Qingfu  
**Gender:** Male  
**Birth Year:** 1847 - 1898  
**Birth Place:** Shandong Province, China

### “First Chinese American”

**Profession (s):** Publisher, Journalist, Civil Rights Activist, Lecturer

**Education:** Columbian College Preparatory School in Washington D.C. now George Washington University, 1868; University of Lewisburg in Pennsylvania, now Bucknell University 1869-1870

**Contribution (s):** Wong Chin Foo was one of the first prominent Chinese American civil rights activists in the United States. He was also certainly one of the most fearless, knowingly walking into situations where there was a high chance of being killed.

Wong Sa Kee was born in 1847 to a wealthy family in Shandong Province in China. Wong's family fortunes were ruined around the time of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864.) Family lore said his father had been swindled by relatives. He was cared for as a teenager by Baptist missionary, Sallie Little Holmes. In 1867, Wong was brought by the Baptists to the United States to study with the expectation that he would become a Christian missionary in China. After three years in America, of which only an aggregate of one year can be documented being spent in education, he returned to China in 1870. There he got married and had a son. He was excommunicated from the Baptist Church for his "dissolute life" in 1872. In 1873 he decided to return to the United States because of his revolutionary activities, a bungled and rather comical effort to recruit eight Westerners and smuggle them into China to start a revolution that failed because they were told to contact a man named "Wang" working at the customs house in Zhenjiang once they arrived. Another customs official, Wang Kumping, mistakenly received the note and immediately reported the foreigners. Being a Chinese advocate of democracy and the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty could literally cost a man his head no matter how ridiculous the plot was. Whatever the case Wong Sa Kee would not see or hear from his wife or son for the next 25 years.

Wong immediately drummed up favorable publicity in America for himself upon his return in September 1873 when he reported to the immigration authorities in San Francisco that several Chinese women and girls on board his ship were being brought to the United States to be forced into prostitution. This deed was reported in newspapers across the United States. Wong's continuing stance against Chinese prostitution and later gambling and the opium trade not only insured him continuing American media publicity but also made him enemies in the Chinese criminal underworld and led to several claimed assassination attempts and numerous lawsuits aimed at harassment for

the next few decades. Perhaps the first incident was when he visited a shoe factory in San Francisco later that September to speak on behalf of a friend for a foreman's job and was violently assaulted. Days later he was told that a \$1,500 reward had been issued for his assassination by the Hip Yee Tong whose prostitutes he'd rescued.

He left San Francisco and went east, adopting the name of Wong Chin Foo, and became a naturalized US citizen in Grand Rapids, Michigan in April 1874.<sup>1</sup> The very first American Chinese some people mistakenly said but this honor probably belongs to the Chinese reformer and first Chinese graduate from an American college, Yale alumnus [Yung Wing](#). Yung had been naturalized just over twenty years before in 1852. Others may have had earlier claims than Wong as well.

Wong published one of the first Chinese newspapers in America, *The Chinese American*, in New York in 1883. This was the first time the term "Chinese American" had been used in print and was also the first Chinese newspaper east of the Rocky Mountains. In his over-enthusiasm he printed 5,000 copies for a Chinese immigrant population that numbered around 1,000 at best. The paper folded in less than a year. He also established the first (albeit short-lived) association of Chinese-American voters in 1884 among naturalized citizens in New York to protest the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that banned the immigration of Chinese laborers and naturalization.<sup>2</sup> He expressed a jaundiced view of American politicians that wouldn't sound outlandish even today, saying, "You must remember that the politician that lords it over you today is an arrant coward, and trims his sails to every breeze that blows. When you don't vote and don't wish to vote, he denounces you as a reptile; the moment you appear at the ballot box you are a man and a brother and are treated (if you consort with such people) to cigars, whiskies and beers."

In 1891 he applied for a US passport from a US Commissioner in recognition of his US citizenship which may have been a calculated publicity stunt since there was no evidence Wong intended to travel outside the United States at the time. The commissioner told him that under instructions from the State Department, "... no Chinaman is entitled to a passport." Wong wrote in response, "I have just discovered that I am the only man in New York that has no country. The very thought of it knocks all the light and hope out of a fellow. A man without a country, kicked out by China, and disowned by the United States, and all for what?... Has the federal government of the United States the right to make a law which would be retroactive, as in this case, to strip me of my citizenship and franchise?"

Wong protested against the Geary Act passed in 1892 that required Chinese in America to carry an internal passport complete with photo ID, the first American law requiring

<sup>1</sup> Wong Chin Foo's Chinese name was changed to 黃清福 [黃清福] after his return to America. What is shown at the top of the page is how he rendered his original name in China. The reason for this name change is unclear. He may have wanted to join a Chinese family association in America.

<sup>2</sup> Although only Chinese laborers were banned by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, American immigration officials tended to try to find every legal and illegal means to classify every Chinese that came into their hands as either laborers or otherwise deportable, even those that truly came under exempt categories such as students or businessman. The federal courts became clogged with cases of Chinese appealing their deportations. The US Supreme Court finally ruled in *United States v. Ju Toy*, 198 U.S. 253 (1905) that such decisions were solely under the discretion of the immigration authorities and that no Chinese had the right to appeal their deportation to China through the federal courts, not even Chinese who were American citizens by birth.

any such form of identification. He founded the Chinese Equal Rights League in 1892 to fight for the repeal of all the Chinese exclusion laws. In 1893 he spoke in front of a Congressional committee on the subject, which is believed to be the first time any Chinese had ever testified in front of Congress. He also found time to protest as an American citizen against the Canadian head tax paid by Chinese immigrants after being forced to pay it during a visit to Canada in 1887. He was also arrested in New York and accused of fraudulently registering to vote in 1891 but was acquitted because the evidence indicated that the charge was motivated by underworld connected rivals in the Chinatown community that had bribed New York officials to bring up the charge.

Wong Chin Foo demonstrated his determination to promote equal treatment of Chinese by taking an active stance against Dennis Kearney, the rabidly anti-Chinese agitator from California. This went as far as Wong showing up to heckle Kearney at one East Coast anti-Chinese rally from the front row and publicly challenging him to a duel, giving him the choice of fighting with "chopsticks, Irish potatoes, or Krupp guns." Kearney dismissed Wong Chin Foo's duel challenge, "I'm not to be deterred from this work by the vaporings of Chin Foo, Ah Coon, Hung Fat, Fi Fong or any other of Asia's almond-eyed lepers." The popular press of the day loved it all and avidly covered the verbal jousting. East Coast newspapers were eager to reinforce the prejudiced views of the American upper class establishment at the time that the Irish were semi-literate barbarians. They even arranged a face to face debate between the two men. Their initial almost cordial greeting soon degenerated into heated exchanges. The contrast between the barely educated ranting of Kearny versus the erudite and educated Wong was irresistible and was reprinted in newspapers across the nation.

In addition to public demonstrations, Wong wrote essays which were published in prominent journals such as the North American Review, Chautauquan, Cosmopolitan, Atlantic Monthly, and Harper's Weekly. His most well known essay entitled, *Why Am I a Heathen?*, was published in North American Review in 1887. The essay explained why Wong chose to refute his Christian education in the United States, and chose to remain faithful to Confucian ideals. Wong boldly criticized the hypocrisy and prejudiced actions of Christians against the Chinese asserting that opium was forced into China by Christians "...this infamous Christian introduction among Chinamen had done more injury, social and moral, in China than all the humanitarian agencies of Christianity could remedy in 200 years." He taunted Christians by saying they had no monopoly on the Golden Rule and even less of a monopoly in the practice of it. He then ended his essay by scandalously inviting white Americans to turn to Confucius. Christian groups almost universally denounced the article but the Anglican magazine, The Churchmen, observed thoughtfully, "So far our heathen writer advances an irresistible argument for the restoration of Christianity, and for this he merits our thankful acknowledgement." An anonymous columnist at the Brooklyn Daily Eagle newspaper observed, "The church people call him a wicked young man. The Rambler chances to know Wong pretty well. He is not wicked. He is smart."

Wong sometimes paid the price for his activism from white racists, offended Christians, and his fellow Chinese by being beaten up and taking serious injuries. He sarcastically

described being induced to leave lecture venues “via a second-story window rather than the stairs” because of “enthusiastic” audiences armed with revolvers and shotguns.

Wong Chin Foo reported on various stories concerning the Chinese for prestigious American newspapers and was a regular correspondent for the New York Sun. He covered the brutal and inhumane conditions of the Chinese laborers in Cuba for the New York Times in 1874. This helped lead to the Chinese government banning Chinese immigration to Cuba under labor contracts in 1877. Wong was also an acid-tongued defender of Chinese culture and became popular among white Americans for his outrageous comments, once declaring that, "I never knew that rats and puppies were good to eat until I was told by American people." He even offered a \$500 reward in the newspapers to anyone that could prove that the Chinese ate rats, a sum that nobody ever stepped up to try to collect. By one economic status measure, \$500 in 1874 would now be worth around \$134,000 today.

In the 1890s, Wong moved back to Chicago, opening two newspapers and establishing a Confucian temple there, although probably more for publicity purposes rather than for serious religious worship. He may have met Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the eventual founder of the Chinese Republic in 1911 since Dr. Sun traveled through Chicago during that time. In 1896 Wong received his first letter from his son in China. Risking his life because the Qing government still wanted his head for his revolutionary activities he returned to China to reunite with his family. Exhausted by the long journey back he met his family but became ill and died of heart failure at the age of 51 in 1898.

His bravery and shining example still serves as a model and inspiration for civil rights activists and iconoclasts today. In commemoration of his heroism, playwright and member of the Asian American theater conference, Richard Chang, wrote a play titled, *Wong Chin Foo: The First Chinese American*, that was performed by the Pan Asian Repertory Theater in their 2012-2013 season. In 2013, the first full-length biography of Wong Chin Foo was published by Scott Seligman.

### **Publications:**

Wong Chin Foo, Why Am I a Heathen?, North American Review (1887)

<http://archive.org/stream/jstor-25101276/25101276#page/n1/mode/2up>

The Chinese American (weekly newspaper), New York, 1883

### **External Links:**

<http://www.villagevoice.com/1998-06-23/news/100-years-of-hell-raising/>

<http://www.historygrandrapids.org/learn.php?id=55>

<http://www.historygrandrapids.org/items.php?subject=408>

[http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/program2\\_transcript.pdf](http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/program2_transcript.pdf)

<https://www.bucknell.edu/x81224.xml>

<http://www.bucknell.edu/x81362.xml>

Scott D. Seligman, *The First Chinese American: The Remarkable Life of Wong Chin Foo*, Hong Kong University Press, 2013, ISBN-13 978-9888139903

<http://www.firstchineseamerican.com>