

The 1903 Anti-Chinese Riot in Tonopah, Nevada, from a Chinese Perspective

Two Letters Published in the *Chung Sai Yat Po*

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Translator's Note: These two documents were written by the Tonopah Chinese community and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA),¹ respectively. They were originally published in the San Francisco Chinese newspaper *Chung Sai Yat Po*.² Supplementary information on the subject taken from earlier accounts in the same newspaper appears in the endnotes.

The Tonopah incident occurred at what may well have been the nadir of the Chinese experience in America. By this time Chinese exclusion had been implemented for more than two decades. In 1902, Congress had just renewed the exclusion laws and had also extended them to apply to all American-governed territories and possessions; in 1904, the year after the riot, it extended the exclusion laws for an indefinite period. At the same time, a weak Chinese imperial government, the hapless victim of aggressive imperialist powers, was largely ineffective at protecting the rights and interests of its subjects abroad. In America, the Chinese were harassed at every turn. They were regarded as inferior and were given to understand that they were an unwelcome minority.

However, this adverse environment worked to help the Chinese in America develop a stronger sense of community, as evidenced by the Tonopah letter writers' appeal to the newspaper *Chung Sai Yat Po* and to the CCBA in San Francisco, as well as to fellow countrymen all over America. Leaders in Chinese America were at least partly responsible for initiating the 1905 boycott in China against U.S. goods to protest their treatment under the exclusion laws. In the U.S. itself, the Chinese learned how to use the legal system to fight back. Often the odds were stacked against them, as in the case in Tonopah, but even though they did not win every legal battle, the Chinese won affirmation of a number of legal rights and gained some breathing room, enabling the community to accommodate, survive, and even grow and develop in America, albeit slowly and in a limited fashion.

Thus the Chinese in Tonopah held on tenaciously, even after the violent events of 1903. A decade later, a directory listed seven general merchandise stores, one grocery, one laundry, and one restaurant in town,³ indicating that the Chinese population, though not increasing greatly, was at least holding its own. However, Chinese residents of Tonopah did eventually leave as mining activities declined and, with them, the town's economy. Tonopah today is a small tourist town on the northern outskirts of the Las Vegas metropolitan region, with a population of 2,627 but no Chi-

nese enumerated in the 2000 Federal Census. The area is also noted for the Tonopah Test Range, a major test facility 32 miles southeast of town that is used for weapons programs funded by the Department of Energy.

LETTER FROM THE TONOPAH, NEVADA,
CHINESE COMMUNITY PUBLISHED IN
THE CHUNG SAI YAT PO,
NOVEMBER 5, 1903

Chinese Observer [in America]: News of the brutal expulsion and murder of fellow countrymen sojourning in Tonopah, Nevada, USA, has been reported repeatedly in this paper. We have received another letter jointly signed by our fellow countrymen in that town that they beg us to publish. We do not mind going into the details and therefore are printing it verbatim below. Any Chinese [in America] reading this cannot help but weep. If generous fellow countrymen wish to donate to the legal fees to pursue damages for the survivors and redress for the dead, they should forward it to the addresses of the Doc Chung and Woh On Tai stores listed below in English:

Doc Chung Co.
Tonopah, Nev.

Woh On Tai
Tonopah, Nev.

In order to report again in detail our forced expulsion from the town of Tonopah by a vicious gang of Labor Union members on the evening of the 25th day of the 7th moon [September 15, 1903],⁴ we beg the editors of the eminent newspaper *Chung Sai Yat Po* to take the trouble to publish this in the newspaper to spread the news far and near so that our fellow countrymen will all know about the tragic events that occurred in our community. We will be extremely grateful for your favor.

Our town was newly established in Nye County, State of Nevada. It was named Tonopah, and was established during the 26th year of Guangxu [1900]. The founder was a Westerner named Butler, who was a fair-minded person. At that time the Chinese had not yet arrived. Due to the restaurants having an urgent need for workers, the owners went to other

towns to recruit Chinese to come here. Still, there were only six Chinese cooks in the entire town. During the third or fourth moon of the 27th year of Guangxu [mid-April to mid-June 1901], white ruffians were already meeting to discuss banning the Chinese presence. Several ruffians did go to the restaurants, threatening the owners and also entering the kitchen to expel the Chinese, telling them that all must leave town within twenty-four hours or they would immediately face disaster. However, the owners notified Mr. Butler, and he immediately did his utmost to quell [the disturbance]. He told the ruffians that anyone living in this town must abide by the law and is not permitted to make trouble. [He went on to say that] those who do not wish to live in this town can move elsewhere, [and that] the laws of the land will be brought to bear upon those who live here and foment trouble.

After hearing him, the ruffians temporarily lay low. Everyone minded his own business, and relations between Chinese and Westerners were amicable as the town developed. During this period more Chinese and Westerners settled here, so that the population became several thousand, including seventy or eighty Chinese who opened five restaurants and seven laundries, with the rest working as domestic cooks and at the bars. The Mining Union was also organized during this period.

During the seventh and eighth moon of the 27th year of Guangxu [mid-August to mid-September 1901], there were those in the Union who were envious of the Chinese restaurants for making money off them, so they advocated a ban—though it was only internally imposed—forbidding members to board at Chinese restaurants. As yet they did not interfere in other areas. Fair-minded individuals in the group actually did not agree with this unprecedented act; however, business at all the Chinese restaurants decreased day by day. Since the owners were also afraid of inviting more trouble, they sold their businesses at low prices, relying on the fact that they could still find work at Westerner-owned restaurants and so temporarily place themselves, in the hope that better opportunities might develop in the future.

During the 9th moon [mid-October to mid-November 1901], the non-Chinese, regardless of [whether they were] white or black, male or female, who were employed as cooks, dishwashers, [and] waiters, as well as shoe-shiners and woodcutters, organized into a group named the Labor Union. Once it became established, the Labor Union banned the hiring of Chinese workers or domestics. If such acts were uncovered, the Union [said, it] would persist in forcing the discharge of the Chinese until successful. The actions of these ruffians affected and restricted not only us Chinese, but Westerners also. But fair-minded Westerners could do little in the face of the group's numbers, and since they did not wish to incur the wrath of these mean persons, they could only nurse their anger. Our fellow countrymen thus had nowhere to place themselves, and one after another they left for other locations. Thirty or so individuals remained

because they were owners of property and businesses and could not leave even though they wanted to. Although they wished to sell their property, there were no buyers. Therefore they were forced to stay temporarily, biding their time.

Who could have foreseen that the power of the Labor Union would increase day by day? It established a rule that chief cooks in town shall be paid \$6.25 daily, dishwashers \$3.00, and waiters \$2.50. Their workers also discarded materials at will, with no consideration for the cost to the owners. If the owners ordered them to be more frugal, the workers would rely on the Union's power and call strikes. Thus many owners were unable to sustain their enterprises, and from the 27th to the 28th year [1901 to 1902], more than half of the businesses closed. The economy of the town became even more depressed. Due to the high labor costs, existing restaurants had to decrease the portions of their servings. People paid \$35 monthly for board, yet there were many who could not allay their hunger. Boarders complained, and some declared that the portions previously served at the boards of Chinese-run restaurants were generous compared to those served by the Westerners today, each portion of which was so small that it was not worth a dollar. That is why people in the Mining Union all wanted the Chinese restaurants to reopen. Owners of equipped restaurants that had closed also wanted the Chinese to reopen them, charging them some amount to purchase or to lease the businesses. Some individuals who had maintained contacts with the Chinese informed them that they could reopen restaurants and that according to the Mining Union there would not be any trouble. Therefore it was expected that those who had operated restaurants previously should have no problems.

A fellow countryman rented a place for \$100 per month and opened on Monday, the 24th day of the 7th moon, or September 14, [1903]. Who would have guessed that that Labor Union would again immediately create a furor? They held a meeting at 8:00 p.m. on the 15th. The Labor Union leader, by the name of Arandall, whom the group addressed as President, had opened a clothing market⁵ during the winter of the 27th year [1901–02]. His workmanship was not skillful and his prices high, and the Westerners did not think highly of him. He had harbored his resentment for a long time; therefore he used this opportunity as a pretext and declared to the members: "The Chinese presence today is detrimental to our Union. Since we are now strong, it would be better and timely to expel them completely to avoid future problems. What do you think?" The crowd signaled their approval of his proposal. Between 8:00 and 9:00 p.m. on the evening of the 25th day of the 7th moon [September 15], sixty to seventy members gathered and descended on Chinatown and laundries like a swarm of bees to expel the Chinese, demanding that they leave town immediately or else be killed without exception.⁶

At that time a fellow countryman reasoned with them and said, "If you want us to leave, we will leave, but we cannot

leave so quickly. If you give us a time limit, we will surely leave as you wish." But those ruffians would not accept any explanations and immediately seized our throats with both hands, intending to kill us. Fortunately, there were among them some good-hearted individuals, who counseled them to release us and then set a 24-hour limit within which all Chinese would have to leave town. If they had not left by the time limit, they would all be hung or killed without exception.

The group also went to other places, harassing residences one after another. This was the first time these places had been visited, and actually nobody was harmed nor property damaged. The individuals can only say that they were bullied, and we also thought that it would only come to that.

Our fellow countrymen prepared to leave town at daybreak and then report the incident to the authorities. By this time Li Maofen [Charlie Fawn] of Heshan had already gone looking for the constable to ask for protection. Who could have known that the officers of the court and their staff all belonged to that gang? All had gone into hiding beforehand. When Li Maofen finally found the constable, the latter made excuses and ignored his request. Since Li's laundry was at the edge of town and he was fearful that the vicious ruffians would return, he begged the constable to put him in the jail to keep him alive that night, whereupon the constable led Li to the jail to stay for the night.

When this happened, it was only about 10:00 p.m. If the constable knew that he would be unable to protect the Chinese, why didn't he ring the bell to sound the alarm? Instead, he waited until daybreak before he spoke to others, and still pretended that he did not know what had happened. But after the ruffians had expelled all of us, they returned to the bar to drink and make merry and shout that all the pigtailed Chinese had been chased out of town. How could he not hear and know about this? That is why we say that the town constable actually intended to let the ruffians have their way. Even if he gives a hundred excuses, he cannot be absolved of blame. When Li Maofen found him, it was only about 10:00 p.m. Why didn't he find means to provide protection? If he had done so, the later rash of injuries by beating would not have occurred. Moreover, earlier, under the pretext of searching for opium, that constable had gone through houses and rooms, overturning chests and ransacking suitcases, and exposing all the money and goods. This was illegal; however, we had no choice but to let him do as he wished.

Who was to know that at 11:00 p.m. or 12:00 midnight that night, members of the Labor Union would gather and descend on us like a swarm of bees, with each person bearing firearms?⁷ Their ferocity and cruelty exceeded that of wild animals. They broke down doors to gain entry and pistol-whipped people they encountered right and left, destroyed furnishings and goods, and searched for and seized money. Afterward they herded the Chinese out of town under guard, some for 2 to 3 miles, others for 4 to 5 miles, and then fired several pistol shots. Fortunately, no one was hurt. However,

the guards were beating the Chinese as they were on the way out of town, so a number sustained head injuries. Among those forced to leave town, eight were severely wounded: Kuang Chengjiu [Kwong Sing Chow], Tan Liansheng [Tom Lim Sing, George Sing], Xie Liansheng [Jay Lim Sing, Lum Sing], Zhang Baiwei [Bok Wai, Ah Sam], Li Xiang [Lee Yet Heong, Gee Lee, George Lee], Liang Ahong, Xiao Qijin, [and] Zhang Bingliang [Chong Bing Long, Wing Sing].⁸ Some were injured even while they were proceeding under guard within the town limits. Several residences were wrecked and countless furnishings damaged.

After the incident and [after] the Chinese returned to town and accounted for the people [who had been herded out of town], it was discovered that Zhang Bingliang⁹ was missing. On the morning of the 26th day of the 7th moon [September 16], we sent telegrams to the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and the Chinese Consulate General [in San Francisco] asking them to find means to provide protection. Your Excellency the consul then sent a telegram to the [Chinese] envoy [in Washington, D.C.]. The latter immediately dispatched a telegram to the Nevada State governor, who in turn telegraphed the town, ordering the merchant leaders to do their utmost to provide protection.

Even before receipt of this telegram, some business leaders had come to Chinatown to advise our fellow countrymen: "Do not be afraid and leave town. We merchant leaders surely will work out a plan to provide protection." Later that evening, after receiving the telegram from the governor at Carson City, they called a special meeting to discuss how to exert every effort to provide protection. We saw that they were sincere and therefore felt somewhat more at ease. We also met and decided to send people in different directions to look for Uncle Zhang Bingliang. They all returned by nightfall and reported that they could not find him. The next morning everybody again went searching in different directions, bringing along tea, rations, and herbs. Westerners and Indians also joined the search. A little after 10:00 a.m., a Westerner found Uncle Zhang Bingliang dead by the roadside about 3 miles out of town. The Westerner returned to town to report his find. The government attorney ordered the corpse returned in a wagon [and that it] be examined for the record, and we then reclaimed the body to be buried with appropriate rites.

The injuries on Uncle Zhang Bingliang were horrible. According to the doctor's examination, he was injured by a chopping hatchet blow on his forehead, his back was black and blue, and his entire body was covered with wounds. All men and woman looking on who had any compassion at all could not help but weep. On that same day, based on evidence provided by Chinese and Westerner witnesses, seventeen ruffians were jailed. However, the ruffians were wicked and had ample financial resources. They hired six lawyers, intending to exert every effort to win this case.

The [Chinese] population in this town is small. Also, we have been hard-pressed for a lengthy period. At this time we

have spent more than \$2,000 in legal fees, our funds have been depleted, and we are exhausted. We had intended to accept the humiliating treatment and stopped pursuing the case, but the merchant leaders reproached us severely, saying, "Even the fox grieves the death of the hare [i.e., like grieves for like] and does not like his own kind to be harmed. People will regard you with contempt if you don't do your utmost to fight back against these Westerner ruffians after you have suffered this cruel treatment [from them]." We answered that we had depleted our funds and were exhausted. But they said, "Even though the strength of a single person cannot sustain this effort, a collective effort can. Your eminent Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association should help as a matter of course, and even all Chinese in America should lend a hand. Moreover, we hear that your eminent Protect the Emperor Association¹⁰ has a gentleman's sense of justice and should endeavor to help you. Earlier, in the case of the murder of a Chinese in Fresno, it offered a reward for apprehension of the criminal. It surely would donate funds for this cause to express its righteous indignation and punish those bullies. If you do not unite in this matter and strike at the gang of ruffians, then from now on you Chinese will not be able to find anywhere to set foot. This move can lead to a permanent solution, and you should do your utmost."

We feel badly about dragging our compatriots into this affair of a small town, but we have done so because we had no choice. At first we thought of putting up with the humiliating treatment and letting it go, but we were censured by the Westerner leaders, who urged us to disseminate the facts widely. What we regret is that fellow countrymen in our community have had scant education, and a bamboo writing brush in our hands feels as heavy as Mount Tai. We cannot tell the world the myriad details of the tragic events, but can merely present the broad outlines. We earnestly beg the *Chung Sai Yat Po* to publish our request for help. Also please publish the original letter from the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association as an appendix, to let readers of your newspaper know all about the tragedy that has befallen fellow countrymen in our town. We wish to hire an attorney to redress the wrong done us, but are distressed that we lack funds for the legal fees. It so happens that the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association is short of funds and thus cannot simultaneously give consideration to us. Therefore we prostrate ourselves and beg benevolent individuals and men of noble character to express their kindness and, regardless of whether or not they have received a donation book, contribute and send us funds one after another. Then payment of the legal fees can be ensured. With the help of our fellow countrymen, we hope to win the court case and execute the head ruffians to avenge the soul of the innocent dead and to comfort those of us who were brutally expelled. We surely would be steeped deeply in your favor [should you help us], and it will be difficult to forget your virtuous act. If Zhang Bingliang is aware in the nether regions, he, too, will not forget the beneficence bestowed by our fellow countrymen and

will return their kindness. Reverently we respectfully inquire after your peaceful sojourn [in America] and hope for your sympathetic response.

LETTER FROM THE CHINESE
CONSOLIDATED BENEVOLENT
ASSOCIATION [TO THE CHINESE
POPULATION OF TONOPAH, NEVADA]

We had sent you a letter the previous month with a request to list the lost or damaged clothing, money, and goods. Why hasn't the reply arrived after such a long interval? The Chinese Minister has now sent a telegram urging quick action on such a list, so that it can be turned over to the U.S. State Department to ask for reparations. We request that each person and store list the goods and money lost, that you hire an attorney to make two or three copies in English, and that you forward them at an early date so that we can send it to the Minister. Please do not delay. As for the attorney's fee for making the copies, it is imperative that you explain to him that you in the town will raise the funds to pay him.

The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association is extremely short of funds and cannot give consideration to your case. The \$250 previously paid to the attorney was advanced by each *huiguan* (district association), for currently the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association has many bills that it is still unable to pay. We send this and wish our fellow countrymen well.

Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association
8th day of the 9th moon [October 8, 1903]

NOTES

1. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) was also known as the Chinese Six Companies. This coalition of *huiguan*, or district associations, in San Francisco was acknowledged as the leading spokesman for Chinese in America during this period. Chinese in other locations would often appeal to the Association for assistance in solving their problems.
2. The *Chung Sai Yat Po* was founded in 1900 and was the earliest daily Chinese-language newspaper in America. Slightly later, the *Mon Hing Po*, an organ of the Chinese Emperor Reform Association, also became a daily.
3. Wong Kin, *International Chinese Business Directory of the World* (San Francisco: International Business Directory Co., Inc., 1913), 1,517.
4. Before the founding of the Chinese Republic in 1912, Chinese in America customarily reckoned time to correspond with that in China, i.e., 16 hours earlier (or, for all practical purposes, the preceding day).
5. Arandall was described in English-language newspapers as a laundry owner.
6. *Chung Sai Yat Po*, September 18, 1903. There were two general merchandise stores in Tonopah and more than a dozen restaurants and laundries.

7. *Chung Sai Yat Po*, September 18, 1903; 12 to 15 persons were involved.
8. The Chinese names in the letter are those that each person used in the Chinese community. In many cases Chinese residents were known by different names to the non-Chinese community. Since this event occurred during the exclusion era, some may have used surnames other than those they were given at birth. Here most but not all the Chinese names have been successfully correlated with the names used in the English-language press, in most cases using information from the article by Professor Sue Fawn Chung with Elmer Rusco that appears in this volume, along with additional insights offered by Professor Chung.
9. *Chung Sai Yat Po*, September 18, 1903. Zhang Bingliang (Chong Bing Long) owned the Wing Sing Laundry. According to one news item cited in the newspaper, Chong was seventy-three years old, but the telegram sent by the Tonopah Chinese

community to the Chinese consulate in San Francisco, also published in the same issue, gave Zhang's age as "approximately sixty." According to Professor Sue Fawn Chung, the coroner's inquest gave his age as sixty-six.

10. The name of the "Protect the Emperor Association" in English was the Chinese Empire Reform Association. It was founded by Kang Youwei and his followers in Victoria, B.C., in 1899, after Kang fled China when the ultraconservatives, led by the Empress Dowager, quashed the Reform Movement that Kang led, imprisoned Emperor Guangxu, and arrested and executed many leaders of the movement. The organization advocated reform and a China ruled by a constitutional monarch. It attracted many adherents among Chinese abroad and became an influential political force in Overseas Chinese society during the first years of the twentieth century.

CHINESE GLOSSARY

- Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (San Francisco) 中華總會館
 Chinese Empire Reform Association 中國保皇會
Chung Sai Yat Po 中西日報
 Doc Chung Co. 德昌號
 Empress Dowager 慈禧太后，西太后
 Foo Yen 扶源
 Guangxu 光緒
 Kuang Chengjiu [Kwong Sing Chow] 鄭成就
 Li Maofen [Lee Fawn, Charlie Fawn] 李茂芬
 Li Xiang [Lee Yet Heong, Gee Lee, George Lee] 李享
 Liang Ahong 梁阿洪
Mon Hing Po 文興報
 Protect the Emperor Association 保大清皇帝會，保皇會
 Tan Liansheng [Tom Lim Sing, George Sing] 譚連勝
 Tom Den Sen [Charley Hey] 譚纘湘
 Woh On Tai 和安泰號
 Xiao Qijin 蕭起錦
 Xie Liansheng [Jay Lim Sing, Lum Sing] 謝聯勝
 Zhang Baiwei [Bok Wai, Ah Sam] 張百維
 Zhang Bingliang [Chong Bing Long, Wing Sing] 張炳亮