

Wong Chin Foo: A Chinese Voice Against Exclusion
Video Transcript

Scott D.
Seligman Ok, can everybody hear me?
Audience Yes!
Seligman Well thank you all for coming. I've been doing these talk stories long enough that this is more or less a re-run. The book that Stan mentioned, The First Chinese American, came out in 2013 and it was launched, actually, as a Talk Story event here with the 1882 Foundation. I want to thank Exfinity and also the sponsors of the 1882 Foundation for doing this. This is a very special day. I don't know whether any of you are aware of why the meeting is happening today. But today is the 75th anniversary of the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, on the very day.

Audience [applause, Seligman's speech unintelligible]
Seligman Well I want to tell you about Wong Chin Foo because even though he was not around to see the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, I think he fought the good fight to try to get it repealed. He was actually dead more than 50 years before that. But he was, well, I'll tell you about him in a minute. We don't have to start that way. I'll talk for about 20 minutes and I'll be very happy to take questions. So let's start here: America's various civil rights movements have all had their champions. Their Susan B. Anthony's, their Martin Luther King's, their Cesar Chavez's, their Gloria Steinem's. But who can Chinese Americans point to? Before I took up the task of researching this guy, I couldn't name a single important Chinese American figure who fought for Chinese American rights, certainly not in the 19th century. Maybe in the 20th century, more recently. But there was one! And I think his story is a shining repudiation of the impression that I certainly had, that the Chinese in America more or less bore everything that the white establishment dished out, and really without very much protest. As a practical matter, there was protest, and this was the guy who led it. And that's why I was so excited when I discovered that nobody else had written his biography and I got to it first.

Audience [laughter]
Seligman I think he's someone of whom certainly Chinese Americans, and I think all Americans, can be justly proud. So, let me tell you a little bit about him. Wong was born in Shandong Province in north China to a well-to-do family that had fallen on hard times. And he was known as— Wong Sa Kee was how they spelled his name when he was born. Wang Suiqi in Mandarin. That was his childhood name. And when the first missionaries came to Shandong, they came to a town that was referred to as Chefoo in the old days, Zhifu in Mandarin. We call it Yantai today. And Wong's elderly father had brought him up there. He was too poor and too old to raise him himself. So he handed him over to some missionaries and said, Would you raise my son for me? And that was kind of the beginning of it. Now I want to make one point

here: Shandong's all the way up there and Guangdong Province is really on the bottom here, next to that island there. That is where basically almost all of the Chinese in the 19th century who were here in the United States were from. Wong was an outlier. He spoke a different dialect; he was quite different when he finally got to the United States. So beginning at the age of 13, Wong was raised by a woman named Sallie Holmes who was from Virginia. She was a Baptist. And she realized how bright he was and she imagined a promising future for him, actually, as a preacher. You know the missionaries could only do so much in China as foreigners who were not native speakers. And their idea was that they were going to convert a lot of Chinese, who in turn would convert other people to Christianity. So she thought that he was going to be a real candidate to be a preacher. I think she was pretty appalled with the way he finally came out, but that's another story.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

He became baptized and when he was about 20 years old, she brought him to America to complete his education. And he studied at two Baptist schools here in the United States. The first one is here in the District of Columbia. Columbia College; we know it today as George Washington University. He was the first Chinese to study there. That is his transcript. That was hard to find! I had to go there, thumb through their original books to see if I could find it. They told me they didn't have it, but we found it. And he claimed he spent a year at George Washington, at Columbia College. According to the transcript, he spent a couple of months there. And then he moved on to another Baptist school in Pennsylvania, called Lewisburg Academy. We know it today as Bucknell University. He was the first Chinese to study there, too. And he claimed later on that he was an honors graduate of Bucknell. He didn't graduate. No honors.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

Wong was pretty good at reinventing his past when it made sense. And then he went home. He decided— He never finished his studies. He went home. He became an interpreter for the Customs Service. The Imperial Customs Service at this point was actually run by foreigners in China. It wasn't run by the Chinese. This is the Shanghai one. He had a job. He got married; married a Christian woman, a Chinese woman who had converted to Christianity, in Shandong. And then he moved down to Shanghai where there were more jobs. He got a job as an interpreter for the Customs Service but ran into some trouble there. I'm not exactly sure what it was, but he did something immoral and was thrown out of the Baptist congregation in Shanghai. So he moved up the river to Zhenjiang, which is where the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal cross. And then he worked for Customs there. And that's when he got involved in some anti-Qing government activity. There was a sort of an aborted rebellion that he started against the Qing Dynasty. It was kind of stupid. They were nowhere nearby, they were in Beijing. He was down in Zhenjiang, and it was kind of a ham-

handed thing. But he got on their list and if he had not gotten out of China, they would have beheaded him. So he left his wife and infant child behind, and headed back for America. That was the only thing he could do. He didn't see them again for a quarter of a century. So he's back on American soil and he adopts his adult name of Wong Chin Foo. And that's common with Chinese men. Once they get married they'll take an adult name. And in this case, it was Wong Chin Foo. He traveled mostly in the East and in the Midwest. And he made his living by lecturing about Chinese manners and Chinese culture. He was the first Asian most of these peoples had ever seen. He went to small towns in the Midwest and in the East. Nobody had ever seen anybody like him, and he played it up just as much as he could. He showed up with a garment. He told everyone this is the robe of the Emperor of China. I don't know where he got it.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

He showed little slippers, which were intended for women with bound feet, which they had never seen before. Lots of artifacts; He showed an abacus, which no one had ever seen before. And then he did things like, our customs are different: In America, when you meet someone you shake hands with him; in China we shake hands with ourselves. You know, things like that.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

Basically fun stuff about cultural differences, but nothing too terribly serious. But pretty soon he had to go from explaining the Chinese to defending the Chinese. The transcontinental railroad was finished in 1869 and after that, a lot of Chinese were put out of work in the West. Some of them got to China, but a lot of them stayed behind. And they started to compete with lower-class whites for jobs. And the Chinese were willing to undercut them on wages. So that's really when the animosity toward the Chinese started to really build. It was the late 1870s. There's a lot of malicious scapegoating and racial stereotyping with the Chinese. And that's what culminated in 1882 in the passage of the Exclusion Act. Which, by the way, a lot of people misunderstand. The Exclusion Act, in fact, did not stop all Chinese immigration into the United States. It stopped the immigration of Chinese laborers; blue-collar workers into the United States. That's what it did. There was a carve-out for diplomats, they could still come. The carve-out for businesspeople; carve-out for scholars and for students. They and their families were still welcome to come to the United States. It was just the workers that they wanted to keep out because they found them to be competitors. So, Wong at this point, he starts defending the Chinese. And I think he probably— Oh, and the other thing, I'm sorry, that the Chinese Exclusion Act did was it rendered all of the Chinese in the United States at the time it was passed, about 100,000 of them, ineligible for citizenship. They could not become citizens. Wong got in under the wire. He was passing through Michigan and he showed up in Kent County Circuit Court, and filed a declaration of intention of becoming an American Citizen. But

this is still the 1870s so it's before the Exclusion Act. You were supposed to— And the same day, he became an American citizen. That wasn't supposed to happen.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

There was a 5-year waiting period, but there was an exception. If you had come to the United States before you were 23, —excuse me, If you filed for citizenship before you were 23, and had been in the United States consecutively for 5 years, then you could jump the line and you could become a citizen the same day you filed your declaration of intention. Wong did not file before he was 23. He had not been in the United States for five consecutive years. But he said he had! And that was good enough for the court.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

And I don't think anybody ever figured it out until I started to do research on it and did the math. So, if anybody wants to take his citizenship away posthumously, have at it. But I think he got in under the wire. And Wong— One of the things that he felt he could add to the discussion about the Chinese in the United States was in the area of religion. And Wong spoke a lot about religion. He wanted to refute the notion that a lot of Americans had that because Chinese were not Christians, and because they didn't know Jesus Christ, that they were godless heathens who were going to Hell. And this was a very, very widely held view in the United States at that point. And Wong, let's say, he sort of turned the tables on them in a very imaginative speech that he gave in Boston. He told his audience in Boston that he was very grateful to the Americans for sending all of these wonderful missionaries to China, with these altruistic motives. And that he was China's first Confucian missionary to the United States.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

And that he was going to tell them about Buddhism and about Confucianism. I actually don't think he knew the difference between Buddhism and Confucianism.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

But he sang their praises in ways that he thought Americans might find familiar. Of course he was very tongue-in-cheek about it; and the church members, the preachers, didn't like it at all. But there you have it. He did a lot of this stuff with tongue in cheek. He really enjoyed kind of shoving it to the Americans when they said one thing and they behaved very differently toward the Chinese. Well by the late 1870s, a debate over Chinese exclusion was in full throttle. It was mostly a national conversation among a lot of white guys. Relatively few Chinese voices were even heard during this debate. He was relatively quiet, actually, in the run-up to the Exclusion Act. But I did find a letter that he wrote to the Chicago Tribune in 1879. And he used it to point out American hypocrisy, which was one of his favorite themes. There it is: "The Chinese Question." And here's the call-out that I like the most about it:

[reading] Even if there is such a thing as the possibility of bringing five or six hundred millions of Chinamen to American shores, have they not the same right to come here as men from other nations? Is not this the country that boasted of its free and liberal institutions? The land of the oppressed and the home of the unfortunate? We have expected so great a nation and so good a people like Americans will deal with us fairly.

Yeah, this is what you say you are, but I'm seeing something very different. So they passed the Exclusion Act in the 1880s; in 1882. And in the 1880s, Wong settled in New York City. He decided to become a journalist. And in 1883, which was the year after the Exclusion Act was passed, he launched the first Chinese-language newspaper east of the Rocky Mountains. Its English name— Its Chinese name was the Mei hua xin bao, the America-China New News I guess. But the English name was what was important. He called it the Chinese American. It's the first recorded use of the term "Chinese-American," was Wong's newspaper. The paper didn't last long. He had a really lousy head for business. He printed too many copies of it; there wasn't enough money. But it raised his profile and he became sort of the go-to guy for a lot of the American newspapers to find out what was going on in Chinatown. One of the things he believed was that the animosity toward the Chinese that he was seeing was a product of lack of understanding. It was based on misinformation. And actually he put the blame for a lot of it at the feet of the missionaries like the woman who had raised him in China. And he had a good point: these folks were in China trying to bring new souls to G-d. But in order to support themselves, they had to write letters back to their congregations talking about why they needed all this money to be sent out to support them. And the best way to do that was to talk about how awful the Chinese were.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

That they were godless; that they were heathens; that they were debased. You should see all the adjectives they used! So Wong decided that part of the problem was misinformation. That Americans didn't understand the Chinese; to understand them if not to love them was at least to accept them. So he set out to clear up some of the myths and educate the Americans. And he also made a living doing this. He became a columnist for lots of American newspapers. And he wrote about China and Chinatown. Here's some of the articles —sorry. He also, before I get to those, he also publicly challenged anybody in New York who believed that Chinese people ate rats, and there were a lot of them, to come forward and he would give them \$500. And he never had to pay that. But this was a serious contention. The New York Times actually wrote a whole article on "Do Chinese really eat rats?" It was a subject of discussion. And then he wrote all these articles I was just telling you about: Fashion in China; Chinese monasteries; the game of fantan; infant burial in China; Chinese barbers. All sorts of little things, little truths about Chinese and

Chinatowns to try to persuade Americans that Chinese were just like everybody else. And in one article in a Brooklyn newspaper, he was actually the first to introduce chop suey in English. Wong was the first person to write about it. Ok, well, after the Exclusion Act was passed, he became active in politics. And in 1884, he convened all of the naturalized Chinese in the New York area to form a political association. It was short-lived. It never had a name. But it was the first assembly of citizens of Chinese origin in American history. And these were citizens! These were folks who had become citizens before the Exclusion Act passed. Now, mind you, the State Department wasn't sure they still were citizens after the Exclusion Act was passed. And they played fast and loose with the way they would give these people passports. But they had certificates to prove they were citizens from courts. And the State Department wasn't really in power to withdraw citizenship. That had to be done by a court. So these folks were citizens and they technically could vote. And that's what Wong wanted to do. He wanted to pull together Chinese who could vote. Because the other ethnic groups that he saw around him in New York all had the power of the vote, and the Chinese didn't. And it meant that nobody took them very seriously in the government. They really couldn't get things done for themselves. But the fact that Wong decided to focus on Chinese who were citizens, or Chinese who wanted to become citizens, was very important because it was a signal that he had finally started to view Chinese in America, Chinese who wanted to make a commitment to staying in America, in a different light from the Chinese who were just coming over to make a lot of money and go back to Guangdong and retire in style. They were different as far as he was concerned. And henceforth, he wasn't going to spend much time worrying about those other Chinese. He wanted citizenship for the Chinese who were willing to Americanize. And he was really clear, also, on what he meant by Americanization. His definition was: Number 1, learn English. Number 2, stop dressing like Chinese; wear western clothing. Number 3, this was real important, cut off the pigtailed. You've seen those pictures of Chinese during the dynasties, the Qing Dynasty in particular, the long pigtail. And also stop smoking opium and gambling, which were vices that most Americans associated with Chinatown, because a lot of them happened in Chinatown. The pigtail is very important because this was something that was imposed on the Han Chinese by the Manchus when the Qing Dynasty was founded in the 1600s. And it was a sign, initially, of subjugation. And if a Chinese in China cut off his pigtail, he could basically get his head cut off. And so, if a Chinese in the United States was willing to cut off the pigtail, it was proof positive that he wasn't going back to China any time soon because he could get in big trouble. So that was Wong's criteria for being Chinese American. And those were the people, from then on, whom he focused on and who he fought for. Well he took on the most famous of America's Chinese critics, a guy by the name of— Oh, sorry, this is the Exclusion Act. I'm a slide behind. One of the problems that

he had in Chinatown was that, on one hand he was trying to teach, to tell the American that the Chinese weren't so bad. But he also had another job; he was trying to tell the Chinese that Americanizing was good. And, remember, their getting all sorts of hateful messages from the Americans. But Wong wanted them to understand that. And when he started talking about stopping opium smoking and stopping gambling, he ran afoul of other Chinese in the United States who were running these operations in Chinatown. And they were after him; a price on his head. Highbinders, which was a turn of art that meant Tong members, the Highbinders were after Wong Chin Foo and they were ready to get him. So he kept moving so they didn't find him.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]
He took on the most famous critic in the late 1800s. The most famous critic of the Chinese was a guy by the name of Denis Kearney. He lived in California. He was Irish-born, and I say that to point out how odd it is that he became the spokesperson for nativism in the United States. He was no more native than any of the Chinese who came from Guangdong, but he pretended that he was. He was a [unintelligible], he was kind of like Donald Trump, in a way. [chuckling] He was anti-immigrant, specifically anti-Chinese. He was a good speaker and he managed to sort of really drum up, get an audience roused up. [chuckling] So Kearney showed up in New York and Wong Chin Foo, who was extremely self-assured, and by the way very, very good in English. He learned it from childhood; first in China, then in the United States. He challenged Kearney to a debate. Well Kearney wasn't about to debate this Chinaman. He made very clear that that was not something he was going to do. So Wong, who had a sense of PR before there was such a thing as PR,

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[laughter]
He said, Ok, you don't want to debate? I'll challenge you to a duel.
[laughter]
And so a reporter comes up and says, well, Mr. Wong, what would the weapons be in this duel? And he says, well I'll give Kearney his choice. He can use chopsticks, Irish potatoes, or German guns, whatever the hell he wants.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]
Ok, now in 18— [trails off] Now the other thing about the Chinese Exclusion Act that people don't remember is that it had a sunset provision: it was a 10-year act. It expired in 1892 unless the Congress wanted to extend it. And of course, the Congress wanted to extend it. So in 1892, something called the Geary Act was passed, and it was a renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, but it was worse than the Chinese Exclusion Act. It added the provision that said that all Chinese in the United States had to be photographed and they had to carry their identity papers on them at all times. If they were found without them, they could be jailed and eventually be deported. And America's Chinese were really furious at this one. And they were resolved to either get the law declared unconstitutional, or see it repealed. One or

the other. And they had a strategy for it; there were different organizations working different sides of the aisle. The Chinese government was lobbying the Executive Branch. The Six Companies, which were an organization out of San Francisco, were trying to get the Supreme Court to overrule it. And Wong Chin Foo decided his job was to try to get the Congress to repeal it. And he was, as far as we know— [trails off] He set up a new organization to do this. It was called the Chinese Equal Rights League. And under the aegis of the Equal Rights League, Wong came down to Washington and testified before Congress. We believe he was the first Chinese ever to do that. The problem was that they had just passed the Geary Act and he was here lobbying to repeal half of it. And that just wasn't going to happen in the same Congress that had just passed it. The half that he wanted to repeal was the citizenship stuff; the stuff that said that Chinese couldn't be citizens. He said, and I don't believe him, that Chinese in the United States were fine with the restriction on further immigration. There were already 100,000 Chinese in the United States; we don't need any more competition in the laundry business and we'd be just fine. And he said he was speaking for other Chinese; I don't think he was. I think he was speaking for himself at this point. But anyway, that was the presenting position before the Congress, and it didn't go anywhere. Well in the [18]90s, he spent more of his time in Chicago. And he pursued several causes simultaneously. He actually lobbied both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party to repeal the Exclusion Act, and nobody paid any attention to him. So he says, Fine, who needs ya? I'm going to set up a political party of my own. Um, sorry, that was the last slide. Here we go. And he was going to call it the American Liberty Party, and he was going to set it up about two months before the presidential election. That one didn't go anywhere. And then he published two more Chinese newspapers in Chicago. He made an aborted attempt to establish a Confucian temple in Chicago. But only for whites. Not for Chinese. Don't ask me what he was doing with that one.

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

And he also hatched plans— this is the best part! He hatched plans to overthrow the Qing Dynasty from a South Sea island and establish a junta in Chicago of Chinese Americans who would be willing to go back and rule China after it fell. At this point I think he also met Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who I believe was passing through Chicago. And if you want to know the details of that, you can ask me in the Q&A. I'll tell you why I think that they actually met. Well, I think he was a little stressed out at this point. He was doing a lot of things at the same time. Now, I came up empty when it came to the end of Wong's life. As far as the English sources that I was consulting were concerned, he fell off the face of the Earth in 1898, returned to China, and was never heard from again. And that's not a very good way to end a biography; that you just don't know what the hell happened to the guy.

Audience

[laughter]

Seligman So, what I did was— [trails off] When Google fails you, which it did in this case, the solution is Google in Chinese. And that's what we did. And we found an article on the Chinese— Sorry, that's Sun Yat-sen. I'm a little behind. We found [an article] on the Chinese web called "Wong Chin Foo, the Chinese Martin Luther King."

Audience Oh wow...

Seligman And it was written by a guy named Wang Fan. And as you read the article it turns out that Wang Fan is Wong Chin Foo's great-great grandson. So I thought, wow, I gotta find this guy! Well you go try to find somebody named Wang Fan who lives in China, and that's all you know about him. Not so easy!

Audience [laughter]

Seligman But we had some clues. Turns out that this was in a blog, they had gotten it from another publication. We traced it— A Chinese friend of mine who was in Beijing at the time helped me with it. He called the publication that it was originally published in. The editor had left but they knew how to contact her. She still had Wang Fan's business card. It took about two weeks. And I got an email from my friend and he said, I just spoke with Wang Fan on the telephone; he's as excited to find you as you are to find him!

Audience Whoa!

Seligman So it turns out that Wang Fan is actually a historian. He works for a Chinese government organization. He is a historian, but not of the Qing period; he's a historian of the Communist period. And he knew about his great-great grandfather; he knew he had been important. But he doesn't speak a word of English and so he wasn't able to do any of the research. That's where I came in. I was somebody who was able to do the research for him. And he had something for me, too. He had about 4 or 5 letters that Wong Chin Foo had sent to his family in China just a couple of months before he died. And that's what wrote the last chapter of the book, because I knew what he was thinking before he finally died in China. That's Wang Fan on the left. That's his uncle who lives in North Carolina on the right.

Audience Wow!

Seligman Well, my biggest heartbreak in the two years that I researched Wong Chin Foo was that there were no photos of him. There was a great sketch. This sketch was actually made from a photograph. It was taken by a very famous photographer in New York City, the original photograph. Somebody who would photograph presidents and stuff as well. And I went to every archive that I could find that had his photographs and asked if anybody had a picture of an Asian man, and nobody did. But this was a sketch that was made from the photograph, and it was in Harper's Magazine. It was a pretty evocative sketch, he had sort of rakish look to him, I thought.

Audience [laughter]

Seligman And so we said, let's put this on the cover of the book, so that's what actually we did. But while the book is in production I was in touch with Bucknell University, and I was talking to their alumni magazine about

doing an article about him. And they said, Well we'd love an article on him! How do you know he went here? Well I dug through your archives and they actually found his transcripts, so I'm quite confident that he was a student there. Actually what the editor said was, I've been in this job 10 years; I know all the famous alumni. Who the hell was this guy?

Audience
Seligman

[laughter]

So I explained who he was and she said, Ok, fine, we'll do a cover story and see what you can find. So I went back to the original archivist who had helped me find the original transcript. And I had a few more questions about what the campus life was like when he was there, and stuff. And what happened was she wrote me back with a bunch of attachments and the very first one was a photograph.

Audience
Seligman

Whoa! Wow! Ahh!

She had missed it on the first run through the files. And we know it was Wong Chin Foo because on the back of it, it said, This is Wong Sa Kee— Remember I said that was his childhood name. This is Wong Sa Kee, father used to play chess with him. Well we don't know who "father" was and we don't know who sent the photo in but it was sitting in a file by itself named Wong Sa Kee, and there he was. And that's not the end of the story. Also, the interesting thing about it was that hair queue. Remember, this was the apostle of everybody should shave off their hair queues, and here we go.

Audience
Seligman

Ahh. Mmm.

Well it turns out that— [trails off] When we saw this photo, the book was in production. But I wrote to Hong Kong University Press and I said, Look, stop the presses! We finally got a photo of this guy! You gotta figure out a way to use it in the book! And they said, We can do it. We can put it on the back cover of the book. So they did. And then the book came out, and a couple of months later, I got an email from Jack Chen, who was a professor at NYU at the time. I think he's at Rutgers now. Jack was one of the founders of MOCA up in New York City; the Museum of Chinese in America. Jack said, I'm with a friend of mine who has a collection of old photographs and cabinet cards of early Asian Americans. And I'm looking at a photo of somebody; he looks a lot like your Mr. Wong! He said, But I don't have your book with me so I can't really compare. I said, Well scan it and send it to me! And it was a dead ringer. It was not only Wong, it was for sure it was Wong Chin Foo! He said, Scott, there are three others too. And we have since authenticated 4 more photos of Wong based on this photograph. I'll show him to you. Interestingly enough, every single one of these got the hair queue. In one case it's not visible, but I think he still— [trails off] He was very young, it was before he came back. These were all taken, I believe, when he first left for his first trip to the United States. That was here in Washington. This one, I think, was in Ohio? Am I right? Yep. Also about the same time period. This one you can't see the queue but I think it's still there. And then one more. This one showed up on eBay about a year ago. This one here. The only one

with the glasses. So anyway, this was real exciting! That we were able to bring him back from the dead, as far as the picture was concerned. Ok. This is the 75th anniversary of the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act. It was done in 1943 by something called the Magnuson Act. It lifted the restriction on Chinese immigration, sort of. And it allowed Chinese already in the United States to naturalize. I think they partially did this out of embarrassment. Because it was— I think, Ted, you'll talk a little more about this I think, later on. But I think this was World War II; we're doing battle with the Japanese; the Chinese are our allies, but they're not allowed to come to the United States. And I think it seemed like a huge embarrassment. And I think that's why they did it. Well, Wong Chin Foo didn't live to see this. He was dead in 1898; this is 1943. Do the math, it's about a half a century earlier. But I think that nobody deserves credit as much as he does for fighting the good fight against this thing, or at least half of this thing. Very few of the institutions that Wong built survived him. Sometimes not by very much time at all. And he was, you know, he had lots of flaws. He could be stubborn; he could lie through his teeth. But I think in the main, he was a principled man. And he believed deeply in justice, in enfranchisement. And he challenged Americans to live up to these values that, on the one hand, they so freely espoused, and on the other hand, failed, so totally failed, to apply to the Chinese. And more than 70 years before Dr. King dreamed of an America that judged people by the content of their character, Wong was sounding very, very similar themes.

[reading] Our motto is "character and fitness should be the requirement of all who are desirous of becoming citizens of the American Republic."

And he set a pattern for what "Chinese American" meant, but more [unintelligible] what it became in later years. And I think he deserves to be remembered for envisioning his goal, but also for the creativity and energy that he expended in trying to achieve it. Now before I stop, I want to tell you about one other person real quickly. One other early Chinese voice against exclusion; and I discovered this by accident doing the research on the Wong Chin Foo book. Wong had correspondence with William Lloyd Garrison, who, a lot of you may know, was a major figure in the abolition movement. And shortly before Garrison's death, there was something— In 1879, there was a senator in Maine named James Blaine, who put in a bill in Congress that would have limited trade and immigration with China, and would have violated the treaty that we had with the Chinese. Blaine was looking for the 1880 Republican nomination for president, and he wanted to curry favor with the people in the West, who were anti-Chinese. So he put this horrible bill in. And William Lloyd Garrison stood out, stood up and he wrote an editorial basically blasting Blaine into smithereens. And there was a letter in the files, not from Wong Chin Foo, but from another Wong. A guy by the name of Wong Er Chong, who was a Boston tea merchant. And there was a beautifully,

beautifully written letter. I don't think this is his penmanship, because he signed it at the bottom left there, and it's a different handwriting. And I'm also not sure it was his original words, but it certainly was his thoughts. And here are a couple of call-outs from it.

[reading] In your Declaration of Independence it asserted that all men are born free and equal. And it is understood by the civilized world that the US is a free country. But I fear there is a backward step being taken by the government. I ask you, where is your Golden Rule? Your Christian charity? And the fruits of your Bible teachings when you talk about doing unto others as you would have them do unto you? Nothing like shoving it back up at the Americans.

Audience [laughter]

Seligman And they deserved it. There were other Chinese voices as well. In both the 19th and 20th centuries, maybe fodder for another talk. I think Ted is going to talk about some of the 20th century figures as well. But for now I'll stop here with a great photograph of Wong Chin Foo that doesn't show his braid. And I'm very happy to take questions if you have some.

Audience [applause]

Audience [question audio comes in mid-sentence] ...the newspaper, the Chinese American, went under, and while Wong Chin Foo was doing all of his, you know, political organizing and activism, what did he do to, kind of, keep himself financially afloat during that time?

Seligman "Afloat" is a difficult word here.

Audience [laughter]

Seligman He didn't care very much for money. It really didn't matter much to him. He really was about principles. And it was one particular incident that I wrote about in the book where he was described to be, uh— He didn't have a permanent residence for a while in Chinatown. He slept wherever there was a free bed. And he kept his belongings in a trunk that was in a Chinese restaurant for a while. He really was no materialist, and he made that very clear. Money didn't matter. It was all, for him, about principle. Now when his family contacted him after 25 years and said, Mom's sick. Send money. He had a difficult time; he didn't have a lot of money. He eventually did go back to China and see them. He saw his family for about, oh, a couple of months before he died. It was very sad. There was a reunion but it wasn't a very long one. So he was a— The word in Yiddish is a "luftmensch." Someone who lives off of the air. He made money on his articles. But he didn't make money on any of his business ventures. He also was involved in the big exhibit in Omaha; one of those international exhibitions. And he was accused of stealing money, which I don't think he actually did. But I think it just went through his fingers. He just wasn't very good at it.

Yes?

Audience I'm curious about his family. Did he have any— So sometimes when you read about historical figures who transplant continents or

countries, they take up with another family. Did that ever happen with him? Or did he remain with his wife and—

Seligman Well he never saw his wife again until 2 months before he died. I found evidence of two affairs that he had. One with a prostitute up in upstate New York, and another with somebody else's wife in Manhattan. I'm not making him sound very moral here.

Audience [laughter]

Seligman And I don't mean to do that.

Audience [laughter]

Seligman But other than that, he was— Nothing else that I know about immorality. He was in Chicago when he got the letter from his son. He had really not communicated with his family for 25 years. He claimed he couldn't find them. And I don't believe that. But I don't think he had money to send, is what it really boiled down to. So eventually he went back and had this reunion, and then he died. Sad. Yeah?

Audience In your research, did you find any evidence of him creating teams or people following what he was trying to do? And after he passed, did you see that there were those who were continuing the fight?

Seligman The first answer is, yes, there was. This Chinese— [trails off] This organization that he set up, the Chinese Equal Rights League, they were recruiting people all over the United States. In fact, every so often in a historical article, you find somebody's certificate of membership in the Chinese Equal Rights League. So he got some people to pay dues, anyway. He had a small group of people that he worked with. You know, one of these I didn't talk about was— And this is going to sound odd, but he didn't have a very high opinion of the Cantonese. And of course, everyone in America who was Chinese really was Cantonese! But he was a northerner. And if you know anything about China, you know that the northerners look down on the southerners, and the southerners kind of give it back with interest.

Audience [laughter]

Seligman But there actually was another story about that, and it's kind of part of your answer, too. His name was Wong Chin Foo, and if you can read Chinese, then you know that first character [王] is pronounced Wang in Mandarin and it means "king." But that's the only time I found his signature where he used that character. In almost every other example where he signed his name, he used the character [黄] Huang which means, "yellow." In Cantonese, they sound the same. They're both Wong. But in Mandarin, they're very different: Wong and Huang. The one character is almost unknown in Guangdong province, whereas the Huang [黄] character is very common. So why did he use it? And I confirmed with his family, No, this is our name! This has always been our name. We were never "yellow," we were always "king!"

Audience [laughter]

Seligman I don't know why he changed it. And I came up with a theory, and all it is, is a theory because I can't prove it. But Chinatowns were matrices of organizations. They still are. But in those days, it was

really important to belong to some organizations because you needed the social support of other people. And, in particular, in addition to the Tongs and some of the benevolent associations, there were family associations. The Chen Family Association. The Moy Family Association. And the Huang Family Association, the Wong, the "yellow," was in almost any Chinatown. Every Chinatown in the United States had one. And when Wong was called to other Chinatowns, often to defend Chinese who were in trouble, it was almost always somebody named Wong. And I think that he deliberately decided that, in order to get the benefit of this organization, this membership, that it was not a big jump in Cantonese from Wang to Wong. It was just a different character! And I believe that's probably why he took it. I can't prove it. But it's the best theory I've been able to come up with! And if anybody has a better one, I'd love to hear it!

Audience: I don't have a theory but I have a question.

Seligman: Ok!

Audience: I noticed in literature about, you know, the paper, you used the word "manhood" a lot talked about [unintelligible] So I'm just wondering, well, where were the women? So, I guess what I'm asking is, is emphasis on manhood and masculinity with Chinese men, was that because there mostly were just Chinese men in the country? Or was that a symptom of larger patriarchy of the day? [unintelligible] early 1900s?

Seligman: Now we're really talking patriarchy here. Absolutely. That's what was going on. The status of Chinese women in the United States was not very high. Mostly— This was a bachelor society primarily, Chinatowns. Women were stopped in the mid-1800s I think it was, by a different piece of legislation, which was supposedly intended to keep prostitutes from Asia from coming to the United States. And as a practical matter, since Customs have no way to tell if an immigrating woman was a prostitute or was somebody's intending wife, it pretty much kept all Asian women out of the United States. So, these Chinatown societies are bachelor societies. A lot of these guys would go back to China, get married, maybe have kids, and come back to the United States. But they didn't bring their wives with them in most cases. So, number one, we're talking about a population that was overwhelmingly male. Number two, manhood in those kinds of terms, they were bandied about all through the 19th century. It was an important thing. In fact, at one point Wong talked about China as being a manly society as opposed to effeminate Japan when they were doing battle with each other. It was a metaphor that he used. But it was a patriarchy, no question about it. It's not like Wong didn't fight for women too, but they weren't that important to him. Does that make sense?

Audience: Yes.

Ted Gong: So, thank you, Scott.

Seligman: My pleasure.

Gong: Want to ask one more question? One last question? He's got all kinds of stuff to tell! Stories... He can do all kinds of things!

| | |
|----------|---------------------|
| Seligman | Dancing! |
| Gong | All right, come on! |
| Gong | So, thank you! |
| Audience | [applause] |