



Season 6, Episode 2: Isleton Tong

Gwen: Our last story examines a colorful building and the sometimes secretive societies of the Chinese immigrant past. In the mid 19th century Chinese immigration is transforming the American west. Some new arrivals dig for gold, but most build railroads and toil as farm laborers. Many of the immigrants band together for support. One kind of community group or association is known as a Tong modeled after similar organizations in China. But news accounts often brand the Tong societies as sinister, and some reports tie them to violence and occasional criminal activity. Now, a peculiar building in a small California town may give us a chance to go inside the little-known world of the Chinese Tongs. Charlene Andersson of the Isleton Brannan-Andrus Historical Society has long been curious about the building's past and its connections to the Chinese who once lived here.

Charlene: We would like to just know more about it so we can properly preserve the town's history.

Gwen: I'm Gwendolyn Wright and I'm on my way to Isleton, located in the Sacramento Delta about an hour and a half from San Francisco.

Gwen: Hi Charlene, I'm Gwen Wright.

Charlene: Very nice to meet you Gwen.

Gwen: Well, I'm very interested in this story, so tell me about the building.

Charlene: This used to house a Chinese Tong, but I don't know very much about it. I tried to do some research on my own, but I haven't been able to find out a lot about the building.

Gwen: It clearly hasn't been used for some time; do you know when they ceased operations?

Charlene: I understand in the 40's, 1940's.

Gwen: Now, this mural in the front seems conspicuously new. How was that done?

Charlene: We wanted to get the children involved in the town's history. So we asked an after school group if they would do a temporary mural for us.

Gwen: Well it's clearly old. Do you know when it was constructed?



Charlene: Everything on this street burned in 1926, so it was constructed right after that.

Gwen: Charlene tells me a terrible fire in 1926 leveled Isleton's Chinatown. Hundreds of residents lost everything. Is there still a sizable Chinese population in Isleton?

Charlene: There's just a handful now, but we did once have a very large population in Isleton.

Gwen: Well tell me what you'd exactly like for me to find out.

Charlene: I'd like to know more about the Tong, the building, and what went on there.

Gwen: It's potentially a fascinating story. I know that Tong's were community associations, but some of the press of the day also tarred them as secretive and dangerous. There are Chinese characters on the façade. And I wonder what other clues the building has for me. This is in many ways a fairly conventional, late 19th early 20th century western frontier town commercial building. These kinds of roofs, often called false fronts, were taller than the building themselves and made quite elaborate – in this case an unusual shape of a parapet – to give a sense of importance to the building. Unfortunately, I can't check out the inside myself; the Historical Society has begun renovations and the building is too unstable. There's a temporary museum nearby where Charlene has moved some of the items from the building.

Charlene: These are the wooden panels and then these are the six panels of the silk panels that we don't have the translation for.

Gwen: It's exquisite embroidery. And two of them have calligraphy. Do you happen to have any documentation in English?

Charlene: Yes. I happen to have the deed. This is from the Bing Kong Tong benevolent association of San Francisco.

Gwen: So they were the owner of the building and they sold it to you?

Charlene: No. They gave it to us to restore in 1994.

Gwen: The deed doesn't explain how the building may have served Isleton's Chinese community. But there is a name. Now this is signed by a Gordon Wong who was the president of the Bing Kong Tong association in San Francisco; did you ever try to contact him?



Charlene: I tried to reach him several times, but I wasn't able to. I did finally reach a wife of one of the presidents, but she said she couldn't help me.

Gwen: Well, I'll do what I can.

Charlene: Wonderful. Thank you.

Gwen: The first thing I want to do is head to San Francisco and find out more about this Bing Kong Tong listed on the deed. Did the San Francisco group use the Isleton building as their local chapter, as Charlene's story seems to indicate? I've made several calls, but the Bing Kong Tong isn't answering. Here's the address listed on the deed. No one's answering the door, and if they're here, they're still not returning my calls. So, I'm heading to the Chinese Historical Society of America. They don't know anyone associated with the Bing Kong Tong who can answer my questions, but they can help me delve deeper into Tong history. From the mid-19th century, large numbers of Chinese arrived in the United States, most as manual laborers. Tongs and other similar community associations developed in strictly segregated Chinatowns. In the U.S. there were multiple reasons for Tongs, and sometimes different groups. They provided cultural continuity, as they had in China. People speaking the same dialect, familiar with certain ways of life. A place that was safe. By 1882, the immigrant dream of finding a promised land in the United States had been shattered by harsh realities. That year, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned Chinese workers from immigrating for ten years, and eventually for decades. Listen to what the act decreed: "in the opinion of the Government of the United States, the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities. And so, it shall not be lawful for any Chinese laborer to come or to remain in the United States." Much of the reporting about Tongs also seems sensationalist, and quite possibly racist. *Highbinders and Tong wars. Tong war still a possibility. Tong war again breaks out in Chinatown. Let us have no more Chinatowns in our cities.* I want to dig beneath these headlines while I'm in San Francisco. I'm meeting with a colleague, Chris Yip. He's studied the architecture of Chinese community buildings in the American west. Hopefully he can confirm the Isleton building did house a Tong. You're the person who can tell me a lot about these things.

Chris: Well, thank you for saying that.

Gwen: Is there any way of telling what would be a Tong building as opposed to some other kind of public building from the façade?

Chris: It's more there is an association building type. And this is a good street to view the association buildings, because there's such a high concentration on Waverly.



Gwen: Chris explains that Tongs and other community or association buildings took a similar form in Western American Chinatowns. The immigrants put commercial or retail enterprises on the ground floor, while the main functions of the Tong occupy the ornate upper levels.

Chris: The top space would be the most important. And there is where the association would have their main offices and the big show. And so you can see that's where the architects concentrated the decoration.

Gwen: I show Chris a photo of the Isleton building, and ask him what he makes of it.

Chris: Well, it follows the pattern of association buildings established in San Francisco's Chinatown after the 6th earthquake and fire.

Gwen: But it's the fading characters on the top of the facade that appear to confirm Charlene's story.

Chris: And you have across the top "Bing Kong Tong".

Gwen: He's almost certain our building was used as a branch of the San Francisco Bing Kong Tong. But he can't tell me much about this Tong's activities. Charlotte Brooks is an expert on Asian American history, so I'm going to put the question to her.

Gwen: Nice to meet you.

Charlotte: Nice to meet you, too.

Gwen: I have a deed that says the Bing Kong Tong association of San Francisco gave this building to the local historical society. Now have you heard of the Bing Kong Tong?

Charlotte: They were one of the major Tongs in San Francisco. One of the major five or six that were really a power in Chinatown. The first Tong came out of a protest against merchant elites in Chinatowns arrogating power to themselves.

Gwen: Charlotte explains that over time, as employment opportunities for Chinese were further restricted, the activities of several Tongs became more associated with sometimes criminal activities.

Charlotte: They were more involved actually in what at the time was called the 'vice industry', prostitution, gambling, eventually opium trading and finally immigrant smuggling.



Gwen: How many Tongs would you say there were in 1880 or 1900?

Charlotte: You know, it's very funny. It's difficult to know because the way it's portrayed in the 19th century press, every Chinese organization is a Tong and they all fight. And that wasn't the case.

Gwen: The so-called Tong wars. Right... but that was sensationalism to some extent, wasn't it?

Charlotte: There was sensationalism. But you know, they did happen. By the 1870's and 1880's, as there is a great deal of pressure on Chinese Americans as a whole, a lot of the disputes over things like jobs, over things like a piece of the gambling pie or prostitution were settled by Tong wars.

Gwen: But Charlotte insists that even when Tongs were involved in activities that skirted or outright broke the law, they remained loyal to their members, and helped a vulnerable community come together.

Charlotte: In a lot of these small towns vigilantes were burning these places to the ground. They were beating up Chinese. They were threatening employers who hired Chinese. It was really good to have that on your side, someone who is looking out for you. The Bing Kong Tong also ran schools to teach young Chinese Americans the Chinese language and about Chinese culture. To also teach them to be patriotic to Cheng Hi Shek and the nationalist.

Gwen: While the Bing Kong Tong did open chapters outside San Francisco, conditions in small towns were often very different from the city. Charlotte can't say exactly how this Tong may have served its local community. But you don't know anything about the Isleton Bing Kong Tong in particular?

Charlotte: I don't. I don't really know much at all.

Gwen: Charlotte's mention of arson reminds me of the terrible fires in Isleton's Chinatowns that Charlene had told me about. What really happened, and what history has our building seen? I've contacted the Sacramento Library, who've mailed me some news clippings about Isleton. Here's something on the 1926 fire. "Old Chinatown district wiped out by \$600,000 conflagration." According to investigations by the deputy sheriff, it started by an oil stove. The newspaper makes no mention of arson, still there's nothing here to suggest the Isleton Tong was involved in some of the unsavory activities that Charlotte described. *Delta Chinese honor leader*. This clipping leads me to what may be an important discovery. Obituary about someone named Yee Toy. The mayor of the Chinese district. He had organized the Isleton chapter of the Bing Kong Tong. It seems our Tong was founded in 1903, and rebuilt in 1926 after the fire. The deceased leaves three daughters. If I could find a living relative of the founder, maybe I would have a first person account of what role the Isleton



Tong had in this community. I make some calls, and get lucky. My office has found Roger Chin, who may be the son of one of the daughters mentioned in the obituary. Roger and I agree to meet in Isleton.

Gwen: Hi, are you Roger?

Roger: Yes, you're Gwen?

Gwen: Yes I am.

Roger: Glad to meet you.

Gwen: Thank you so much for coming up here.

Roger: You're welcome.

Gwen: Now just to confirm, this is your grandfather, is that right?

Roger: Yes, that is my grandfather, Yee Toy.

Gwen: So your grandfather established the Bing Kong Tong in Isleton in 1903 is that correct?

Roger: That's correct. He became one of the leading merchants in Isleton. He founded the Tong by going to the Tong in San Francisco, the Bing Kong Tong, and asking them to form an affiliate and there was a large Chinese population there.

Gwen: Roger tells me that at its peak, there were about 1,500 Chinese in Isleton. They first came to this area in 1875 to build the levees. They then did agricultural labor, harvesting pears and asparagus, and later working in the canneries. Most worked for only a dollar a day, 6 days a week, boarding in farm barracks. He says the Tong was a hub for the entire Chinese community.

Roger: The downstairs was used for a language school, a Chinese language school.

Gwen: So you went to Chinese language school at this Tong building?

Roger: Yes I did.



Gwen: Roger offers to show me around. He was one of a new generation of Chinese-Americans that played in the small lot adjacent to our building.

Roger: This was the playground that was established by the Tong for the Chinese children. And this was the only playground we had. The upstairs of course is the Tong facilities.

Gwen: Most of the Chinese spent their work day in the fields and canneries, but on their day off they came into Isleton to unwind, to socialize... and to gamble, a popular, if illegal, past time.

Roger: This empty lot, this building and this building were gambling houses, as was that one and that one.

Gwen: Now which ones did your grandfather own?

Roger: My grandfather owned this one and that one.

Gwen: He has a photograph that he thinks may give me a unique look inside the Tong his grandfather founded. Oh this is wonderful; it's decorated for some festival it seems.

Roger: Yes, probably Chinese New Years.

Gwen: That's Charlene's building all right... and those are the wooden panels I saw earlier. Do you know what some of these people did, since you knew some of them from later on?

Roger: Yes, they came from all walks of life within a Chinatown community. There were merchants. There were gamblers. Like this man and this man. These two were *bu hau doi*, or hatchet men.

Gwen: Roger says there wasn't much need for hatchet men in a small town like Isleton. Just the presence of these strongmen helped keep the peace among the Chinese community.

Gwen: But was there any violence within the Chinese community in Isleton? What Roger says next gives me an answer for Charlene. Well, Charlene, I have a lot that I can tell you about the history of this Tong. I explain to Charlene some of the conflicted history of Tong in the cities and towns of the west. But it was Roger's answer to whether there had been violence associated with the Isleton Tong that helped me understand its place in the community.



Roger: I don't know of any disputes or any warfare that took place in Isleton. As far as I knew, it was a pretty organized effort to not only run the gambling, but also more important the running of assistance to the whole community.

Gwen: Roger says that although there may have been violent incidents in Isleton, and there was always an undercurrent of mistrust between the races, the Chinese experience there improved with each generation.

Gwen: What was the purpose of the Tong for your grandfather?

Roger: The basic purpose was to provide a place to meet, a place to discuss problems and solve problems, and to help resolve any disputes that may be going on.

Charlene: That's wonderful it helps us understand the culture, the history of the Tong and what it means to us today.

Gwen: Roger also introduced me to Sharon Fong and Kim Cheung, who could translate our panels. The silk panels were long-ago gifts from other local Tongs, illustrating a web of support among Chinese immigrants in the area. It turns out these are poems that need to be read across as well as top to bottom to reveal their meanings.

Sharon Fong and Kim Cheung: [speaking in Chinese] There will be a balance, there will be a peace, fairness and justice throughout the entire nation.

Gwen: That's a wonderful aspiration still. This has been a fascinating story for me to work on. Thank you so much.

Charlene: Thank you.