Biography of Sai Wing Mock



Power, Conflict and Retirement: The Life of a New York Hip Sing Tong Leader

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Introduction



On 21 March 1905, the court section of The New York Times carried a striking report under the headline: “Bad Mock Duck in Jail; His Enemy in Hiding — A Dozen Men Guard Chinatown's Mayor Against a Plot by Assassins.” The article opened with the words: “Mock Duck, the mild-looking, well-mannered outlaw of Chinatown, was rearrested yesterday.”

At the time, Mock Duck was only twenty-six years old, yet he had already become one of the most feared figures in

Manhattan's Chinatown. He was a leader of the Hip Sing Tong, the principal enemy of the On Leong Tong, and a Chinatown boss whom newspapers described as strutting along Pell Street covered in diamonds. To the police, he was a moving target, a man who had survived repeated assassination attempts under extraordinary circumstances.

His life tells the story of a Chinese-American boy from San Francisco who rose to become a powerful figure in New York's Chinatown underworld. It is also a story that extends from violent tong conflicts to withdrawal from organised crime. In 1941, he died quietly in Brooklyn, leaving behind a complicated legacy of power, violence and retirement.

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Chapter 1
A Young Man from San Francisco: From Mak Sai-wing to Mock Duck

Mak Sai-wing was born in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1879 to Chinese immigrant parents from Guangdong Province. His Chinese name, 麦世荣, was pronounced Mak Sai-wing in Cantonese. In New York's underworld, he later became known as Mock Duck. The name “Duck” was a romanised rendering of the Cantonese pronunciation of the Chinese character 德, which also appeared in his alternative name, 麦德.

The Mak family belonged to a relatively small but influential clan. However, it was not affiliated with the Six Companies, the largest federation of Chinese community organisations in North America at the time. According to some accounts, the family was consequently excluded by the Six Companies. This position on the margins of established Chinatown society may have influenced Mock Duck's later willingness to challenge existing power structures.

Growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown, Mak attended a missionary school, where he learned to read and write English. Such proficiency was relatively uncommon among Chinese immigrants of the period and subsequently became an important advantage in his rise within New York's Chinatown. He could communicate directly with white police officers,

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politicians and journalists. At a time when Chinese immigrants were widely marginalised, this ability provided him with an unusual source of influence.

In the spring of 1899, when he was approximately eighteen or twenty years old, Mak moved to Manhattan's Chinatown. The Hip Sing Tong had recently established its headquarters at 10 Pell Street under the leadership of Lang Yue. Mak had already acquired a favourable reputation within the New York branch of the association for his wealth and gambling abilities. He moved into shared accommodation at 19 Pell Street, where other newly arrived Chinese residents gave him the nickname “Duck,” a romanised version of the Cantonese pronunciation of 德.

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Chapter 2
Emerging Influence: From Murder Charges to Leadership of the Hip Sing Tong

In 1900, conflicts between rival associations in New York's Chinatown were intensifying. On 12 August, an argument involving five Chinese men on Pell Street resulted in the fatal shooting of Lung Kin, a member of the Chee Kung Tong, by Hip Sing member Goo Wing Chung. Goo claimed that the victim had initiated the confrontation, but he was eventually convicted, largely on the testimony of Ah Fe, a Chee Kung Tong member visiting New York from Newark.

On 21 September, Ah Fe returned to Pell Street and became involved in a gunfight with Hip Sing member Sue Sing. Ah Fe was killed, while two Italian passers-by were injured. Assistant District Attorney Francis W. Garvan alleged that two additional Hip Sing members, Mak Sai-wing and Dong Sue, had also participated in the incident.

Mak was arrested but fled to Buffalo after being released on bail. His whereabouts were disclosed to the police by Tom Lee, the unofficial mayor of Chinatown and leader of the rival On Leong Tong. Lee maintained close connections with Tammany Hall and was frequently portrayed in newspapers as a respectable Chinese community leader. Mak was defended by four prominent lawyers, including the social reformer Frank

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Moss. His trials in 1901 and 1902 both ended with juries unable to reach unanimous verdicts, and he was acquitted on both occasions.

During this period, Hip Sing president Ton Bok Woo returned to China and was succeeded by Huey Gow. Mak and an interpreter named Wong Get became close advisers to the new president. Under this leadership, the Hip Sing Tong began challenging the On Leong Tong's dominant position in Manhattan's Chinatown.

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Chapter 3
The Tong Wars: Conflict Between the Hip Sing and On Leong Associations

In 1900, a dispute over underground gambling establishments triggered a confrontation between the Hip Sing and On Leong Tongs. According to accounts of the conflict, Mock Duck demanded that Tom Lee surrender half the proceeds from his gambling operations. When Lee refused, open hostilities began. Hip Sing members allegedly carried out an arson attack that killed two people and subsequently sent assassins who beheaded an On Leong member. By that point, the conflict between the two organisations had become irreconcilable.

On 3 November 1904, Mock Duck was the target of an assassination attempt on Pell Street. Two bullets struck his abdomen, leaving him dangerously wounded. The alleged gunman, Lee Sing, was arrested. However, while police were escorting their prisoner, three armed Chinese men surrounded the officers and demanded Lee Sing's release. The confrontation was brought under control only after more than a dozen additional police officers arrived.

During the period when Mock Duck was receiving medical treatment in San Francisco, he remained engaged in a rivalry with Tom Lee of the On Leong Tong. Lee Sing was alleged to have been an assassin employed by the rival association and

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to have been selected by drawing lots at a recent banquet of the Hop Sing Tong. At the time of the shooting, Mock Duck was reportedly working for the Parkhurst Society, an organisation concerned with reforming Chinatown, and had been investigating fan-tan gambling activities.

In March 1905, District Attorney William Travers Jerome ordered Mock Duck's arrest again. He was accused of bringing a group of assassins from San Francisco who were allegedly even more dangerous than himself, with the intention of killing Chinatown's mayor, Tom Lee. Jerome told the court: “This man is generally recognised as a killer and a leader of the Hip Sing Tong. I do not care whether the members of that association continue playing fan-tan, but when they begin killing people, something must be done to stop them.”

Mock Duck attempted to counter his reputation through his appearance. He was only about twenty-six years old and looked even younger. Standing in the dock, he kept his eyes modestly lowered and wore a meek expression. Nevertheless, the judge ordered him detained without bail.

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Chapter 4
The Mayor of Chinatown: The Height of Power and His Public Image

By 1904, Mock Duck had firmly established his authority over the Hip Sing Tong. Reports in The New York Times described him as walking ostentatiously along Pell Street adorned with diamonds. The newspaper further observed that, having risen to a position of leadership, he no longer needed to carry out the dangerous tasks assigned to ordinary gang members. He had consequently grown long, slender fingernails that suited his public image as a powerful underworld figure.

In 1905, Mock Duck and Tom Lee separately visited the police commissioner, each revealing the locations of gambling establishments frequented by members of the rival organisation. Armed with intelligence from both sides, the police conducted extensive raids targeting members of both associations without distinction. This strategy of using law enforcement authorities against a rival demonstrated the calculated methods employed by Mock Duck in his struggles for influence.

Mock Duck survived numerous assassination attempts, prompting newspapers to nickname him Chinatown's moving target. One of the most extraordinary episodes occurred in February 1932, when he reportedly appeared at a shop in

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Newark's Chinatown wearing chain mail beneath his clothing. The image of an ageing Chinatown boss wearing protective armour captured both the danger and the almost theatrical character of the underworld in which he had lived.

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Chapter 5
Retirement and Death: From Pell Street to Brooklyn

In March 1925, the Hip Sing and On Leong Tongs signed a peace treaty. The signing ceremony took place at the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, witnessed by Chinese Consul General Ziang Ling Chang, who affixed the consulate's official seal to the agreement. Afterwards, hundreds of detectives and plainclothes police officers maintained a presence in Chinatown to safeguard the peace. The New York Times observed that the agreement was regarded as a victory for the Hip Sing Tong.

In 1932, Mock Duck reached an agreement involving the American and Chinese authorities that announced a cessation of hostilities among Chinatown's rival tongs. He subsequently withdrew from underworld affairs and retired to Brooklyn.

His retirement was marked by an almost legendary tranquillity. A report published in The New Yorker in 1933 described his routine: he visited Pell Street no more than once a year, usually to see his brother, who operated an import business almost next door to Hip Sing headquarters. Mock Duck would arrive in an expensive limousine, leaving its engine running while he drank tea with his relative and perhaps ate some dried squid. During these visits, approximately ten younger Hip Sing

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members would typically gather outside the shop, apparently doing nothing in particular.

The report also noted that Mock Duck rarely associated with Westerners and that his followers were reluctant to discuss him with outsiders. Journalists who had once filled newspaper columns with accounts of his alleged crimes could now obtain little more than an occasional distant glimpse of him outside his brother's import business.

On 23 July 1941, Mak Sai-wing died in Brooklyn at the age of sixty-two.

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Chapter 6
Concluding Reflections: The Rise and Disappearance of a Chinatown Underworld

Mak Sai-wing's life is a story of an individual shaped by his historical circumstances.

He was born in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1879, during a period when Chinese immigrants experienced systematic discrimination. Following the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, Chinese labour immigration was severely restricted and Chinese immigrants were barred from naturalisation. Life became increasingly difficult for Chinese communities. When immigrants could not reliably depend upon police protection or the courts to resolve internal disputes, they established mutual assistance associations to strengthen their ability to withstand economic and social difficulties. Some of these organisations gradually developed into tongs that exercised control over underground commercial activities.

Mock Duck's rise reflected this wider historical process. Rather than viewing him simply as a criminal by nature, his story can be understood within the conditions of the period. He was a young Chinese American who grew up under the restrictions imposed by Chinese exclusion and subsequently chose to compete for power through violence and organised associations within a society where Chinese immigrants

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frequently lacked equal legal protection. The Hip Sing Tong had originally been established to protect its members against widespread anti-Chinese prejudice and to provide a semi-legitimate community structure. Mock Duck eventually became one of the most powerful figures within that structure.

His withdrawal from criminal activity and subsequent quiet retirement also carried historical significance. The peace treaty of 1925 and the truce of 1932 marked important stages in the decline of the era of violent Chinatown tong conflicts. Mock Duck transformed from a moving target into a retired elder, and from the so-called mayor of Pell Street into a relatively anonymous resident of Brooklyn. His life therefore offers a narrative of how a particular underworld developed, exercised power and eventually receded.

From a missionary school student in San Francisco to a leader of New York's Hip Sing Tong, and from a diamond-adorned Chinatown boss to a moving target protected by chain mail, Mock Duck experienced an extraordinary rise within the underworld. His final years, spent quietly in Brooklyn, contrasted sharply with the violent struggles that had previously defined his public reputation.

Across sixty-two years, Mak Sai-wing followed a path from marginalisation to power and ultimately retirement. His story reminds us that, amid historical discrimination and violence,

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individuals respond in different ways. Some resist, some adapt, and others organise themselves to acquire influence. Mock Duck was a man who used organisation and force to compete for power during one of the most turbulent periods in the history of New York's Chinatown.

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