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Fee Lee Wong was among the first Chinese immigrants to arrive in the Black Hills with the gold rush of 1876. He remained there for the next twenty-five years, becoming a prominent merchant and community leader in Deadwood's Chinatown.

Born in Canton, China, in 1846, Wong immigrated to the United States in 1870 and settled in Deadwood soon after the Black Hills were opened to non-Indian settlers. Many Chinese who came to the region sought their fortunes in gold mining, laundries, restaurants, and other trades. Wong found his niche as the owner of the Wing Tsue Emporium. Located at 566 Main Street in the heart of Deadwood's Chinatown, the store stocked Oriental groceries, herbs, chinaware, and novelties. Wong returned to China to marry Hal Shek on 10 October 1882. The couple moved back to Deadwood in 1883, and their first son was born the following year. Over the next twelve years, they would have three more sons and four daughters.

Early on 13 February 1885, a fire consumed Wong's emporium, which was also reputed to be an opium den and gambling house, and nine other buildings in Chinatown. The *Black Hills Daily Times* for 13 February billed the disaster "A Blaze from Which Little Harm and Vast Good Resulted." Part of the community's hostility arose from the fact that Chinese laborers were willing to work hard for low pay, undercutting non-Chinese workers. In addition, community leaders considered Deadwood's Chinese prostitutes and opium dens to be a public health threat. In order to discourage the businesses from rebuilding, the Deadwood city council convened an emergency meeting to assess the costs of improving Main Street through Chinatown. Wong and other Chinese businessmen recognized that the expense could ruin their livelihoods and offered a compromise. In return for helping to fund moderate improvements, they agreed to build respectable houses on the west side of Main Street while keeping the opium dens and brothels on the east side.

Fee Lee Wong looked after the needs of other Chinese people throughout his years in the Black Hills, raising funds for New Year's festivals and paying for the funerals of the destitute. Wong moved his family back to China in 1902 and joined them in 1919. They settled in the British colony of Hong Kong, where he died in 1921 at the age of seventy-five.

by Christopher Leatherman

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Dakota Images

Fee Lee Wong

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