



Chew Chong born between 1827–1844 Canton (Guangzhou), China, died New Plymouth 7 October 1920 was among the 100,000 mostly illiterate Chinese peasants who left the Canton (Guangzhou) region between 1840–1876 to seek gold in California, Canada, and Australia. They typically intended to return home. Their villages, built according to Feng Shui, were nestled among rice paddies and bamboo groves.

Chew Chong was a little different in that he had an education including English before going to work in a merchant's office in Singapore. In 1856 he emigrated to Victoria Australia becoming a storekeeper.

In 1857, Chinese miners in Victoria shipped 205,464 ounces of gold to Canton amid growing hostility. A £10 poll tax was imposed that year, and violence peaked in the Buckland Riots (July 4, 1857), when 50 armed miners attacked Chinese camps, killing, looting and driving out 2,500 residents near Chong's store.

In 1867 he left for Otago New Zealand where by this time the Otago goldfields were waning, and 1,185 Chinese migrants, including Chong, arrived to replace departing miners. Though spared Australian-style mob violence, anti-Chinese sentiment persisted, fuelled by groups like the Anti-Chinese Association and by future Premier Richard Seddon, who in 1879 declared Chinese "a hard pill to swallow."

Over 40 anti-Chinese laws passed before Chong's death in 1920, including bans on naturalisation, pensions, and games of chance, mandatory thumbprinting, restricted laundry hours, and a £10 poll tax in 1881—raised to £100 in 1903.

Chong began exporting scrap metal in 1867. Working his way up the country to New Plymouth in 1870 and in 1872 turned to fungus, or *Auricularia polytricha*—The Chinese called it mu-er. Maori called it hakekakeka or harori. Taranaki folk coined many names for it: wood ear fungus, edible jelly fungus, Egmont gold, black gold and "Taranaki wool". Rich in nutrients and used in both cuisine and medicine, it fetched up to 10 pence per pound in the 1890s. Between 1872–1904, Chong exported 8,400 tons, paying £309,343—more than the region earned from butter exports. He often paid in cash, aiding struggling farmers. By 1871, a man could collect 2–5 sacks daily, earning 6 shillings per sack.



Chong was known for bartering and peddling goods door-to-door. His exotic appearance and friendly manner made him popular with children. In 1873, he moved into his first shop in New Plymouth, and on July 1 that year, he became a New Zealander. In 1875, he married Elizabeth Whatton, with whom he had 11 children (five died young).



By 1882, Chong had stores in four towns, including Eltham. There, he expanded into multiple businesses and rebuilt after two fires. He also bought butter, exporting it as early as 1874. Following the advent of refrigerated shipping in 1882, he established the Jubilee Butter Factory in 1887—installing New Zealand’s first refrigeration unit in a butter plant.

He pioneered share-milking, invented a rotary butter worker, air cooler, and standardised butter blocks with a branded mould. By 1900, co-ops had largely replaced proprietary factories.

Chong retired after closing Jubilee at age 73 but remained active. In 1905, he visited China for six months, and in his final years, enjoyed cooking, entertaining children, and gardening in two large glasshouses.

For further information see:

NZ Dictionary of Biography <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2c17/chew-chong>

Chew Chong by James Ng

The Tawhiti Museum <https://www.tawhitimuseum.co.nz/attractions-4-1/chew-chong>

NZ Geographic <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/chew-chong/>