

Our Past, Present, and Future
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I have been associated with the Wong Family Benevolent Association on and off for over 54 years, beginning with my arrival in 1960 as a 12-year old. Due to my father's devotion to the Association, I spent numerous days during my youth hanging around in the Association waiting for him to finish his businesses. I was privileged to hear many tales of the Association, to include stories of our ancestor – the Sir Juzheng. Those tales and stories not only filled a young mind with fascination for the folklore of the old kingdom, they also enriched my quest to learn more. I gained a sense of pride of knowing who I am and where my roots are.

Now, after a half a century had past, all of the Great Grand Uncles and Grand Uncles are gone. Even I have entered into my “Golden” years with a head full of silver hair. With this being the Golden Anniversary of the major renovation of our Association building, I was honored to be tasked with publishing a Special Journal to commemorate the occasion. I thought this might be a good time to look back and re-examine ourselves and to foresee what the future will bring.

Because I was away serving our country during the last few decades, I have only had infrequent contact with the Association, until the past two years. I'd like to use my childhood recollections, combined with my most recent observations, to provide my view of the Association's past, present and future.

For nearly 150 years the family associations have been a mainstay for all the overseas Chinese. When the Chinese immigrated during the 1800s, for the railroads or the gold rush later to follow, different associations were quickly formed to provide various the necessary daily support required by those new arrivals. These associations served as their link to the old country and their savior in the new country. They provided services such as a mail drop for home, job referrals, housing, translation/interpreting service, food and other life support requirements. During those earlier days, associations were formed based on the home village location or people having the same sure names – such as Wong, Lee, Chin ...etc. As the Wong's, we have generally adopted the notion that we are all cousins from some generations ago and therefore, we must stay close together and help each other when the need arises, no questions asked. This practice held true for the past century as each immigrant would receive assistance from the association and in return they were expected to provide the same for those to come later. Because of this type of system, they were able to quickly settle down and start to work their way to fulfilling their “Gold Mountain Dream”. In the 1800s and early 1900s, this practice was repeated over and over again. When one earned enough money, they gave. When one was sick or no longer welcome by harsh immigration policies, they borrowed. They would pack and go back to the old country to enjoy the fruits of their hard labor. During those years, there were hardly any children or women in the Chinese sectors. It was mainly a bachelor society, and the association was their lifeline to the old country and the new world.

Things changed quickly after WWII and the subsequent civil war in China. Many Chinese who served in the US Armed Forces were able to bring back with them their “newly wedded wife”. With the unsettlement and dangerous situation in China, it forced many who were here to face the reality that maybe they would not be able to go home, so they started making plans to stay. This, coupled with the repeal of the Chinese Excursion Act by the US Government, allowed many families to be reunited in the years to follow. The addition of women and children to various Chinatowns created a total change, in that the associations were now filled with the laughter of the children and the chatting of the young wives. The associations still provide much needed assistance to some, but many have learned to reach out on their own. They realize that the association is not their only link to success in the new world.

When we reached the 1980s and the 1990s, things begin to change again. The second or third generation, with their education and better job opportunities, were out to search for their “America Dream”. Their

WWII generation parents were aging and no longer able to carry on the running of the association. During this critical period, the overseas Chinese communities received an important infusion of new blood. Due to China's move to modernization and its open door policy, many Chinese were able to travel and stay abroad. Also, the unstable situation in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia forced many families to exodus to the US. This steady flow of immigrants continues to this date and helped to restock some needed membership, but it also created some unexpected problems.

The new immigrants normally come from a variety of backgrounds, with most having a higher level of education than the early generation. When they arrive in the US, they have better opportunities for employment and housing. Many chose to live far away from Chinatown because of the cost and many decided to settle where new Chinatowns were building up in different parts of the city. In short, they don't really need the association anymore. All of their social and private needs can be provided by numerous Government and/or social service organizations throughout the city with bilingual service. This change takes away some of the key elements for the association's survival. We no longer serve as the link to the old or new world. We are no longer needed to provide the necessities to start a new life. The associations' services have been taken over by the Government and our community. When the original associations were formed, most members were related to each other; therefore, things were normally handled following the family tradition. Elders were given the proper respect and more authority in the running of the association. Most times they could settle matters in a family way, with fair and just rulings. However, with the newer membership, the family connection no longer plays a major role in any decision making process, the days of listening to the wise elder are gone. We see more open confrontation, more challenges to the old tradition, and more disagreements based on conflicted social/ideological/political backgrounds in meetings. Many meetings will end in a stalemate, some in fights and some even in court. These does not borne well for the image of the association and further discourages membership involvement.

I have had discussions with some of my cousins about our Association. They often show some level of frustration as to the trend of where we headed. While I shared some of their concerns, I also believe that, due to my observations for the past half-century and especially the past few years, our Association does have a legitimate right to exist into the future. Take my story as an example; 12 years ago I was seeking funds to my campaign to be the Commander of the American Legion for the State of New York (The American Legion, the largest veterans organization in the US with 2.4 million members, really has no direct impact and/or relationship to the association). I knew full well, as Commander, I could not bring any real benefits back to our Association. Nonetheless, it only took one "uncle" to raise the issue at a meeting and without question our Association donated a substantial amount to my campaign chest. Five years ago I had the great opportunity to seek the high position of the National Commander for The American Legion. Just like the last time, the subject came up in a meeting and our Association and many members donated generously to the campaign again. Just think about this, our Association and its members were willing to contribute a large sum of money to someone who really hadn't been a very active member for the past four decades and was probably more like a stranger to many newer members. They did it for nothing more than I'm a "Wong" and they would like to see me do well. This touched me so deeply that, for the years that I traveled, regardless of campaigning or as the National Commander, I always carried an extra sense of responsibility with me. Throughout my travels in the US, Asia or Europe, while I performed my duties as Commander of The Legion, I constantly reminded myself that I must stand tall and serve proudly as a "Wong". I have to live up to our ancestor Lord Sau Sun's words written in 950 A.D. He told us that as we settle in a new land, we must inhabit the new land as our own. As we set out for our new life we should always remember to "li-gang-chang" (立綱常), which stresses for us to follow the three rules (ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife) and five constant virtues of Confucianism (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity). The rules and virtues were created to allow us to observe and share our culture, heritage and traditions to others, to improve and simplify human relationship, to produce a set of decrees to follow, and to keep cooperation and harmony in our daily lives. I try hard to live

up to the above expectations, as a payback for the support and trust our Association placed in me. I believe I'm not the only one feels this way. There must be others who may have even deeper feelings toward our Association.

Since my retirement two years ago, I've had more time to offer my service to our Association, and thus, have a better understanding of some of the obstacles facing us. Here are a few suggestions that I would like to throw out for consideration/discussion:

First, I believe we need to adjust our mindset. We should not allow one's individual ideology to influence our decisions. Yes, we should be involved with politics, but only to improve our community, our quality of life, and our rights as citizens of the US. We should not carry on politics that are not germane to our cause. By speaking only on issues relevant to our life here in the US, we can expect more members to join us in our path.

Second, the younger generation, no doubt, is the future of our Association. They need to be guided. They need to be challenged to learn more of our heritage and tradition. The Scholarship Fund is a very good start, but we need to find and build a more common bond among them. A database or website to network is needed. With the computer and internet readily available, I believe a little encouragement from our Association, and an enthusiastic mind, will do nicely in this area.

Third, we need to concentrate on the participation of the working age members. We should construct a network/database so we can more easily identify their need, their preference of activities and time available for meetings. If we have that information, our Association can arrange special meetings and/or activities to ensure maximum participation. Moreover, while we have associations located in many cities, we only have a national convention every three years, and only for three days. Very little interaction happens during the rest of the time. We must seek ways to proactively share concerns and success with others so that we all can prosper.

In closing, as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of this wonderful building that our ancestors built with their sweat and tears, we must pause and reflect upon the greatness of our past generation. It has withstood many obstacles and yet it's safely delivered to us. No doubt there will be more difficult challenges ahead and we are on a crossroad once again to face an uncertain future. I see that it's our responsibility and our destiny to carry on the legacy. My clan members, let us join hands and fall in rank, we need to search and find our way to a brighter future in honor of the Wong Family.