

Visiting the Wongs' Association

Climbing the narrow staircase to the Wongs' Association's third floor office in downtown Toronto, past the plaque reading Wong Kung Har Wun Sun Association in Chinese and English, you reach a nondescript door that gives no hint of what lies beyond. When the Association bought the building in 1979 the entire top floor was redesigned and the space opened up. Along with offices and a small kitchen, it now accommodates a large assembly hall with a 20' ceiling where the shrine to the Wong ancestors stands in gilded solemnity, lit from above by large windows encircling the raised roof – itself a first in the neighbourhood. So, past the door you walk into a burst of natural light – even on a rainy day.

Chuck K. & Chuck C.
on duty at the
Wongs' headquarters



Tuesday afternoon at the end of March might seem an unlikely time to find anyone at here, but my visit is at the invitation of Chuck K. Wong, a director of the Association for more than a decade. He is on duty today, one of a roster of volunteers who make sure “there’s always someone here to let members in.” He shows me around, pointing to the Wong family tree and the photographs of Association members that line the hallway, and the place of honour inside the Hall for the photos of the Association chairmen going back to the 1950s. He relates the story of the ancestor commemorated here (one of 21 sons of the original patriarch) and gives me a thumbnail sketch of the history of the Association and its two antecedent organizations. The original members were Toishanese, and given the small Chinese community living in Toronto during the Exclusion years (1923-47), their numbers dwindled. “To strengthen the Association we needed more members, so other Wongs were invited to join us,” he explains. His knowledge, he tells me, comes largely from conversations; what he knows is what elders have told him over the years. So he worries about losing these memories before the history of the Association has been properly recorded.

What’s on Chuck K. Wong’s mind, though, is not the past but the up-coming tri-annual national convention which will bring Wongs from around the world to Toronto for three days in August. He sees the event as an opportunity for re-engagement. The international dimension of the clan’s experience is a key part of the Wong heritage. Emigration has produced an astonishing diversity in the name itself, he notes. It has also, obviously, nurtured a skill for negotiating cultures, not to mention foreign languages and customs. Two characteristics seem to be key. First the

model to all of us. One important piece of advice he gave to young members was how to become a good citizen while living in a foreign country. He encouraged us to work hard on the job and to form the habit of saving money. He felt that the young members were the future of the Association and that it was important that we always stay together and give time and energy to the Association. He wanted the Wongs' Association to be involved in the community and in Canada.

My great uncle was my mentor as well as my guardian. I took his teachings and his wishes to heart. But in the early days, the necessity of making a living in a new country meant I did not really have time for the Association. When he passed away, I lost someone dear to me, but I didn't lose the example of his commitment to the Association and his belief in its work. Since his death, I have taken my family to the cemetery to pay him our respects, usually at the time of the Ching Ming Festival. Ching Ming is traditionally the occasion for worshipping at ancestral graves, and means "sweeping the graves". It usually falls in the first week of April. The Association used to celebrate Ching Ming by organizing a group trip to the local cemetery to visit as many Wong graves as possible, placing a burning incense stick and a candle on each one. When a member died without family, we would also collect donations to pay his funeral and burial.

Saving money was difficult for us then because we were earning so little. Borrowing money from the local bank was next to impossible because few Chinese people owned the collateral to secure a loan, or earned enough to make the payments. So the Association created a small committee

to help members both save and borrow money. This small committee was called San Yik Wui which means "three party benefits" and it worked like a credit union. Each week members would deposit the same amount of money into a pool. Any member within a particular pool could borrow all that was deposited provided that he paid a set amount of interest to each of the other depositors of that pool. Each week, a different person would borrow all the deposited funds in that pool and this process continued until the end at which point everyone recovers all the money that they deposited from the beginning. The Association benefited by keeping the first deposit from each member at the creation of each pool to pay for administration and services. Members borrowed money from San Yik Wui to start businesses, or send money home to family in China, or to pay off personal debts. Like many others, I participated in the San Yik Wui. As time went by I saved enough to pay off all the debts I owed.

I worked hard for over thirty five years, and in 1990 was able to take early retirement. Today I am enjoying the leisure activities I missed in my early life – including learning how to play musical instruments like the erhu (Chinese two-stringed fiddle) and the violin. Never forgetting my great uncle's example, I have been active in the Association now for fifteen years, and have served as a Director at the Association for the past twelve. I enjoy the work and am happy to think I am fulfilling my great uncle's wishes.