



The Ancient Kong Chow Temple of Southern California

- A discussion on the spirit of the pioneers

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The early history of Kong Chow in Los Angeles – the “Golden Mountain Uncle”

Los Angeles is a major metropolitan city along the West Coast of USA. Besides the world-famous Universal Studio and Disneyland, the city has the most busy freeway system and the harbors with the highest loading volume of containers cargoes. The ethnic diversity of residents has made the city a renowned “global village”. There are numerous ethnic districts, whereas the Chinatown is the best well known one.

The record of Chinese residents in Los Angeles was noted in as early as the 1850 census. The local newspaper first reported the arrival of Chinese women and the development of some local Chinese communities on October 22, 1859 (Mak , 1992). The Chinese immigrants to the foreign countries can be traced back to as early as Tang dynasty. The corruption of the Qing (清) Dynasty and the invasion of the foreign powers have contributed to the increase in immigration to America in the 19th Century.

The early immigrants were mainly from the provinces of Guangdong (廣東) and Fukien(福建). Many came from the ancient Kong Chow region, sometimes also known as the Five Districts or Wu Yi (五邑). These districts include Xin Hui, Heshan, Taishan (or Xin Ning), Hoiping and Yenping. Due to the proximity of the seaport facilities, folks from the above districts have been able to sail across the Pacific Ocean through Hong Kong and Macau. Kong Chow was named by the Great Qin (秦) Emperor, who conquered the region. Later on in the Sui (隋) dynasty a lieutenant with his thousands of soldiers were officially stationed there. The name Kong Chow implied the region is hilly with granite, which is different from the Yellow River plateau with loess sedimentary deposits.

In 1953 the Chinese population in California reached several ten thousands. The folks from Taishan organized themselves the Ning Yang (寧陽) Association, while those from Hoiping and Yenping formed the Hehop (和合) Association. Kong Chow Association consists of members from Xin Hui and Heshan. At present Jiangmen (江門) City is responsible for the administration for all the five districts. In the early days, since most Chinese in USA were from the above districts, their habits and customs have been regarded as the main stream of the Chinese culture. When these immigrants returned to China, the local people respected them as Uncle “Gold Mountain”, because gold was discovered in California at that time.

The Kong Chow Temple – a moral support and safe harbor

After the immigrants have settled down in the new homeland, most people had solved their needs for food and shelter. However, their hearts and soul were still longing for their own family members in the ancestral land. They looked for the days to be united with their families. In many cases they felt helplessness. They were unable to voice their concerns due to language difficulties and their heart-

ached feeling was compounded daily. The best solution for them was to beg for mercy from their gods. The Kong Chow Temple has become their safe harbor and solid support (See, 1995).

Many family associations have built their temples first and then the meeting hall. It is understandable that the feeling of emptiness existed among the newly arrived immigrants. Settling in a foreign country is similar to the situation of floating lilies without embedded roots or as a kite in the sky without an attached string. The temple provides an irreplaceable position for moral support.

The history of the temple can be traced back to 1892, which is more than 114 years ago. That year was also known as the 17th years of Emperor Guang Xu (光緒). This was some 50 years after the Opium War and 13 years after the British and French Coalition Force jointly occupied Beijing and burned down the Emperor's Summer Palace. The Emperor Guang Xu had just been in power for only three years. The red color Kong Chow Association inscribed in a board hanging at the top of the stage was marked at the year of Xinmou (辛卯) (1891). Three years afterwards, the Sino-Japanese War broke out and in the subsequent Treaty of Horse-Gate (Ma Guan), Taiwan was occupied by Japan.

The four verses with engraved pictures – a reflection of the pioneers

The temple has four famous engraved verses, which may shed some lights on the attitude of the early Chinese immigrants.

(1) Words of Safety

The first one is an engraving of two officers meeting on their horseback. The poem reads: “We meet on horseback. I have no means of writing. I have to rely on you to bring back the message that I am safe” This was written by poet Cen Shen (岑參) with the title “On meeting a Messenger Going to the Capital” in Tang Dynasty (Xu, 1987). The poet was demoted from Zhangan (長安) to Anxi (安西). He was more than thousands of miles away from home. He felt bitter. He was worried and deeply concerned for his family and hometown. The first part of the original poem reads: “It is a long way home, a long way east. I am old and my sleeves is wet with tears..” The poet described his feeling of running tears, helplessness, lack of communication, and unforgettable memory of his loved ones. It is really impressive. On the way, he met some messengers. Both of them were on horse-back, without brush and ink. The only message was just “safe and sound”. In the early days most of the pioneers did not received much formal education. Their verbal messages were probably only simple but to the point.



(2) Adaptation to the new environment

The second poem says “The wind shakes the branches creating moving shadows. The running water spreads the falling flower pedals and fragrance across the stream.” The wooden engraving shows a scene of lilies, which is famous for its purity even though uprising from dirty mud. However, when the wind blows, the branches have to adjust their position and the flower pedals will fall and move with the running water.



This implies that the new immigrants have to make adjustment or adaptation to the new environment. Here is the common saying: if the mountains do not move, you have to turn around to overcome the obstruction. In a capitalist society, everyone has to start from the ground level. Forget about all the glorious historical past. Although this is somewhat

unexpected, everyone has to learn and follow the local custom. We have to challenge the glass ceiling, and to demonstrate that we, as the descendants of the Hans, have not lost the original faith to be successful in going abroad.

(3) A red spot among the greens



The third poem says “A red color dot can be highly visible among the thousands of green bushes. A winning spring color does not require plentiful.” This poem may be derived from another one in the Tang dynasty, which says “The red spot is highly visible among the young green color. A touch of spring color suffices and it does not need plentiful.” The legend goes to a drawing competition using this poem as the title. Most of the painters tried to use different spring colors, but the winning one was a charming lady standing among the green bushes. The prime minister Wang An Shek (王安石) in Sung (宋) Dynasty depicted the beauty of pomegranates as “In the late

winter days, the freezing fog is dancing over the sky. Only the pomegranates are still smiling as though in the spring.” Pomegranates have traditionally been regarded as a symbol of fortune in the Imperial Palace.

The poem has been used by the early immigrants to express their feeling of minority. They may be only a red spot in a Caucasian society. There may be a feeling of uneasiness, but still should be able to shine and make use of our capabilities. The road of winning is not unsurpassable. We only need to develop our own niche to be ahead of everyone. The little red dot is comparable to the finishing touch of an eyeball of a painted dragon. No matter what happens, we can still shine and make a major contribution.

(4) Apricot Village

The last poem reads “Please let me know the restaurant. The cowboy points to the Apricot Village at a distance.” This poem is composed by the famous Poet Du Mu (杜牧) in the



late Tang Dynasty. It describes the Qing Ming (清明) festival (corresponding to the Easter period). Kong Chow Benevolent Association follows the tradition of sweeping the graveyard of the pioneers every April. The original poem starts as “During the Qing Ming Festival the weather is mostly with drizzle rain. The travelers on the roads are feeling so sad, almost collapsing.”

Although Southern California has a sunny climate, but the chilly and wet weather in the late spring time is not uncommon. We live in a metropolitan city with many ethnic restaurants, but we still prefer our Apricot Village, where we have the music and color to our taste. The wine and the food served will bring back the memory of our hometown. We loved to share our table with friends and relatives. It will relieve our sorrow.

These four selected poems imply the desire of early immigrants to send a note of safety back to hometown, to adjust to the new environment, to make the utmost contributions, and to keep their cultural background. These four items can be described as the fundamental concerns of the pioneers. It reminds themselves their own situation. They have to concentrate their effort of improvements, to struggle for the winning path, and never forget their roots. All these are essential to the survival in their newly adopted country.

Guan Yun Chang



In the temple, the central figure is Guan Yu (關羽) or Guan Yun Chang (關雲長) or the God of War (Hucker, 1975). The sculptured figure has a golden face, somewhat different from the ordinary red one. Only a few temples in China use the gold color, representing the highest respect to the Emperor Guan. There is a verse on each side of the main altar. “Beating Wei, Fighting Wu, outstanding record in assisting the Han Dynasty; Protecting China, Blessing America, charming temple standing firm in Los Angeles.”



The last verse emphasized the feeling of the early immigrants to bless both countries and their people. They worked hard to promote the relationship between the two countries.

Non-discrimination and bilateral relationship



There is another board with verse saying, “People, regardless of their race, will share your kindness.” Perhaps this is the earliest demonstration of non-discrimination. Some pioneers were perhaps jeopardized, but in the temple they have dreams without any discrimination of race or sex. Many years later, Dr. King promoted the concept of “I have a dream” to promote non-discrimination. This becomes a movement of equal rights.

Outside the temple one can find an engraved board with the big characters “Bless China and America”, which shows even more distinctly their desire of promoting the relationship between the two countries. The Chinese Americans are especially sensitive to the relationship between the two countries. The pioneers living in the adopted country have taken the promotion of the bilateral relationship as their top priority. They took such an issue as personal responsibility without any recourse.



Cooperation and Peace in the family

The early pioneers have suffered from the wars. Their own country was divided. The encroaching foreign powers have made China in concession of land and financial resources to the point of beyond description. They deeply understood that the whole country had to be united together. Peaceful co-existence is the major principle. In the temple there is a very sharp and brilliant red engraved scripts saying “Peace, united and co-operate.” There is a common saying that “Everything will blossom if there is peace in the family.” Dr. Sun Yat Sen’s statue is in the neighboring square. His last will was “Peace, struggle, and save China.” He treasured peaceful environment as the most needed ingredient. Even in the present days, development is only possible if we share and increase in trading. A successful negotiation has to be a win-win situation. With this script in sight, everyone should respect the wishes of the pioneers and follow their steps to be united together.

A showcase of unity, harmony and love of Chinese culture

The members of the Association have consistently, generation after generation, followed such principle and continuously contributing outstanding efforts towards such goal. They have become models in the Chinatown. They love peace, help their ancestral land, and promote US-China friendship. There are many cases being well reported in the local newspaper.



In May 2005, Mr. Chen Yu Cheng, the Honorary Chairman of the Guangdong returned Chinese Association visited Chinatown (center in the photo). When he came to Kong Chow Association, he was so happy to receive the banner with both USA and China flags. This was his first banner received in the local region. He was grateful and treasured the spirit of Kong Chow. In the dinner reception, the Ladies Auxiliary Chorus sang the song, "My Chinese Heart" to express their feelings. The scripts of the song mention that no matter the time and location, we always have the feeling as a family member to the

visitors from China."

In April, 2005 in the dinner reception to Mr. Lo Hoi Choi, the Vice Chair of the Political Co-ordination Committee, the same chorus group was invited to sing the song, "Great China." In the script, there is a verse saying "Bless China, you are forever in our hearts." The descendants of the pioneers completely expressed the devotion to their ancestral land.

Value and the Spirit of Kong Chow-A challenging question in the Parade

The old temple has survived over more than a century. The members of Kong Chow Association have restored the cultural artifacts to their original brilliance, saving the same style. This is not an easy job, especially in the overseas. The temple is no longer a simple worship alter or a spot for daily ritual of burning incense or citing doctrines. If you pay attention to every item in the temple, read carefully the engraved characters, and evaluate the poems or verses, suddenly you may realize that the temple is a representation of the spirit of the pioneers. It has preserved the philosophical points of view of your "Golden Mountain Uncle, or Golden Mountain Auntie."

In the recent years, there is an increasing trend of Chinese American settled in the Greater Los Angeles area. They moved eastward to Rowland Heights or southward to Orange County. Numerous temples and alters were built for worship. Some of them were built in the form of a royal palace. However, out of the charming exteriors, there is no one can be comparable to the Kong Chow temple in reflecting the spirit of the pioneers. This ancient and the cultural artifacts definitely arouse the spirits of the descendants to follow the steps of the pioneers and the association will become more prosperous as time goes by.



As the parade of the Kong Chow National Convention went around the blocks of Chinatown, thousand of residents stood along the route watching the parade. They were highly impressed by songs and sights. Many of them are wondering what have made the members so devoted to keep up the spirit of Kong Chow. Some may even simply ask about the pioneer Kong Chow spirit. The answer may be just in the artifacts of the temple. They have inspired, encouraged, and nourished every Kong Chow members for more than a

century! The long term objective is just simply to build a harmony community in the West Coast of the Pacific Ocean.

Reference

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