Overseas Chinese Have Played Major Role In Educational Progress in Guangdong

By H. M. LAI

The arrival of a delegation from Taishan to encourage Chinese Americans to help improve educational facilities in Taishan is but the latest chapter in a tradition which began more than a century ago when Yung Wing, a Chinese living in the US and the first Chinese to graduate from a US college, proposed establishing the Jinxian School in his home village, Nanping, near Macau, in Zhuhai.

In subsequent decades numerous other education facilities in the Pearl River Delta and Sze Yup were built with money contributed by Chinese living abroad. Chinese in North America played a particularly active role. This interest in education was due in part to the traditional Chinese reverence for learning and in part to the concern by overseas Chinese for the welfare of relatives and kinsmen in their native villages. These philanthropic actions transcended politics. Starting in the late 19th century with imperial China, they continued after the 1911 Revolution, through the warlord period, the Nationalist government and into the era of the People's Republic.

A gate commemorating contributions made by US Chinese to the First Taishan Middle School in the 1930's.

The first half of the 20th century saw a high tide in such construction. Over a period of three decades hundreds of thousands of dollars were remitted from abroad for the construction of hundreds of schools at all levels—from primary grades through middle schools and universities, as well as establishing reading rooms and libraries in the Pearl River Delta and Sze Yup. This greatly helped raise the local literacy and education levels.

For example, in 1909 and 1910 Chung Wing Kwong of the Canton Christian College went among Chinese communities all over the world to solicit funds to build a dormitory for the school, which later became Lingnan University, a school attended by many young Chinese from abroad. In succeeding years many buildings and facilities at the university were also constructed through additional contributions from overseas Chinese. However, it was Taishan and Kaiping counties, with the greatest emigration abroad, which were the greatest beneficiaries of overseas Chinese largesse.

In Taishan, support for education by her sons abroad started during the late 19th century, when Leung Lai Tin, a Chinese in America, donated money to establish a school of the traditional type at Dajiang (Dai Gong), northern Taishan. Later, in 1905, members of the Wu (Ng) clan in the US raised funds to found the first school organized along more modern lines, the Chengwu Primary School in the south central part of the county.

But the best-known monument to the generosity of North American Chinese can be found on the grounds of the Taishan Middle School, located in the county seat. The school building, designed in western classical style, was made possible by $209,000 contributed by Canadian Chinese in 1920. In 1930–32 during the depths of the Great Depression, the school's principal traveled to the US to raise another $200,000 to construct a library, a classroom building and a dormitory.

This school still is one of the top educational institutions in Sze Yup. Due to these contributions, Taishan became one of the few counties in Guangdong to have modern schools during the first half of the 20th century. In 1934, the county led the province in the number of pupils attending primary schools. Zhongshan, another emigrant county, was in second place.

JOE SHOONG

Similar constructions abound in other emigrant counties. In 1928, Joe Shoong, founder of the National Dollar Stores, donated funds to his native village of Longtouwan, Zhongshan, to finance the building of a primary school and provide for its operating expenses. In nearby Xiaze (Hatzak), successful Hawaii Chinese grocer Chun Hoon gave $30,000 in 1930 to construct classroom buildings for a new primary school.

In most cases, however, the donations represent the sum of many smaller contributions from fellow villagers abroad. For example, in 1925, when Huaxian was still a backwater, construction of a modern school was advocated by a visiting Chinese of the Lau clan from the US. The 300 or so members of the Lau clan living in the US then raised the $35,000 needed for construction of the Siming School.

Sometimes rivalries also led to projects beneficial to posterity. In Kaiping county, a successful fund drive raised $600,000 from Chinese in Shanghai and abroad to build the Kaiqiao Middle School near Changsha in 1933. Due to inter-clan friction, the Guan (Quan) and Situ (Soohoo) clans were deliberately excluded from the project. Indignant at this slight, the latter two clans then proceeded to donate buildings for the First Kaiping Middle School at Chikan (Chikhom) in 1936. Both of these became leading schools in Kaiping.

ZHOU CLAN

Similarly, in 1923 the Zhou clan built a library at Xiangang, Kaiping. This was followed by another in Chikan constructed by the Situ clan in 1925. Not wishing to be outshone, the Guan clan in the same area then solicited contributions to build a second library in 1929.

With the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, control of the education system in China became more centralized, but overseas Chinese concern for their kinsmen's educational opportunities continued. Contributions for education began to dwindle, however, when ultra-left tendencies began in the PRC during the late 1950's. The flow of money ceased altogether during the xenophobic Cultural Revolution.

But since the downfall of the "Gang of Four," especially since the relaxation policy dating from 1979, remittance of money from abroad for educational purposes has resumed and even increased.

$130 MILLION

In Taishan alone from 1979 to 1983, remittances from abroad for public projects totaled the equivalent of $130 million (HK), with most of this being earmarked for educational facilities. This included funding for the construction of 253 elementary and middle schools representing over half of the schools in the county. Sixteen new middle schools and eleven primary schools were built, and expansion of remodeling work was done on 207 others. In one example, LA restaurateur Bing Tew Wong raised $350,000 RMB from fellow villagers in the US to build a school and establish a scholarship fund for a school in his native village of Ganbian.

This new high tide of school construction was not limited to Taishan. In Zhongshan retired Hawaii Chinese restaurateur Veronica Char donated money for a primary school in her ancestral village, Hakka-speaking Shiman (Shekmun) in Zhongshan, and established a plastic-bag factory nearby to earn money to support the school.

Money has also been channeled into building other types of facilities as in the case of William and Phyllis Lowe of the Bay Area who built and equipped the Xiaolai Kindergarten in his father's native village of Longtouwan. Even more people donated equipment and books.

AVIATOR

Tim Oy Young of the South Bay gave books, two microcomputers, and eleven microscopes, in addition to establishing a $65,000 RMB scholarship fund for students at Shiqi's (Shekki) Sen Yat Middle School, named after his father, a Hawaii Chinese aviator killed while serving Sun Yat-sen during the early 1920's.

In meeting the demands of the times there is currently a drive to raise funds to build a Wuyi (Five Counties) University at Jiangmen to give people in Sze Yup, Heshan, Yangjiang and Yangchun better opportunities to have a university education. There is also a campaign to raise $320,000 to build a 300-watt educational television station in Taishan.

The Chinese abroad have played a major role in establishing modern educational facilities in the Pearl River Delta region in the past. It appears that their interest in education has not abated. And from all indications, in the realm of education at least, the emigrant areas will be able to meet the needs arising in the decades to come from China's efforts to modernize. □

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