

Chan Kong Wong was born April 19, 1916 in Honolulu, the son of Wong Lum, also known as Butt Ting Wong, and Puy Chang Ching. The couple had migrated to Hawaii as teenagers in the 1880s and Butt Ting worked in a dry goods store until he saved up enough to open up the Yat Sing Co., a clothing store that stood at 184 N. King Street in Chinatown for more than eight decades.

Chan Kong Wong was the sixth child of the couple. In all, there were 13 children, eight sons and five daughters. As youths, many of the Wong children accompanied their mother back to China because she wanted them to be schooled in Chinese language and culture.

This was a significant time for Chan Kong and, as you will see later, it was to have a profound impact on his future.

Returning to Hawaii as a young man, Chan Kong worked as a blacksmith at Hickam Air Force Base and, in the afternoons, taught Chinese language at Hoo Cho Chinese School, which was then located on Johnson Lane in downtown Honolulu. For many years, he also worked at the Yat Sing store. I recall going into the store as a kid and buying shoes from him. The store had high ceilings and shiny waxed floors.

Thelma Wong, wife of Chan Kong's oldest brother, Wai Kong, said that many of the Wongs lived with her family during the early years, including Chan Kong.

Thelma recalls fondly that Chan Kong could be a rascal, sneaking outside of the house to smoke cigarettes or go swimming at the beach only to come home and get caught because he was still wet and shivery.

But perhaps more than any of others, Thelma said, Chan Kong was the most scholarly and the one most likely to be seen reading a book or writing calligraphy.

Wai Kong told me that Chan Kong was a masterful calligrapher, an excellent writer of Chinese characters. He was assigned by the Wong Kong Har Tong, the Wong Society, to do many of the couplets that hung for special occasions such as New Year's, banquets and Ching Ming.

In 1959, the year of statehood in Hawaii, Hoo Cho's principal, Lau Wai Leong, announced his retirement and asked Chan Kong to replace him.

For the 35 years, until his own retirement in 1995, Chan Kong Wong guided the tiny yet very resilient Hoo Cho School, leading it to its present home in Kaimuki.

It was here where Chan Kong Wong built his legacy teaching generations of young Chinese Americans. Even if they forgot how to write the characters or how to converse in Cantonese, they were able to learn a little bit about the land from which there ancestors came.

Donald Lum, today an ophthalmologist in Seattle, said Principal Wong felt a strong obligation to teach Chinese language and culture to his students. "I learned to appreciate how difficult but rewarding it can be to learn Chinese calligraphy," Donald said.

But Donald's fondest childhood memory of Hoo Cho was that of the then-middle-aged Mr. Wong's frequent visits onto the playground to play basketball with the students.

"He always had the energy to play like a teenager and would not hesitate to demonstrate his skills," Donald said. "He loved to teach both in the classroom and on the playground."

Another student, Paul Chun, said he remembers very little from his Chinese School days although one lasting memory is that of Mr. Wong, dressing very dapper, carrying his briefcase, walking to and from school and TheBus stop.

Love and family came later in life for Chan Kong Wong. In the early 1960s, he married Joanna Wong, like himself a Chinese school teacher. Together they had Eric Wong and Lisa Wong. He was the steady, quiet influence in their lives.

I asked Lisa the other day what his most enduring character trait was. She told me it was his ability to put away half a carton of ice cream every once in a while without getting ever getting fat! That's a pretty good character trait to have!

Being Eric's best friend and growing up on Young Street a block away until I was 10 years old, I remember Uncle Wong affectionately as someone who was kind and gentle, a man of few words who was supportive when he spoke. A slight yet spry man throughout his life, he always walked briskly and with confident purpose, something that, while Eric probably won't admit it, is the most noticeable thing his son picked up from him.

When Auntie Wong, as I know her, fell sick, Uncle Wong was there to take care of her. When he himself took ill a few years ago, we were shocked as most of you probably were, but were also happy to see when he appeared to recover quickly and once again took to helping his wife again.

After retirement, Chan Kong kept active with the Wong Kong Har Tong, the Wong Society his father helped start. He researched and wrote the history of the organization as it approached its centennial year.

When Lisa got married to Lee and started a family, he became the doting grandfather. One of our lasting memories of his later years undoubtedly will be of him lovingly struggling to hang on to that constant bundle of energy we know as Logan as Lace invariably would stand nearby laughing at the site.

When Eric finally got married two years ago to the very patient and loving Jennifer, I remember Uncle Wong beaming with pride – and relief.

Perhaps because he was always on the go, maybe because he was so light on his feet, he always seemed so much younger than he really was. That makes Chan Kong Wong's passing so much more difficult for all of us.

But he lived a long, colorful and active life and, without being loud or boastful about it, was able to touch many people in a positive way. And like all great teachers, that influence will continue on through those he touched for years to come.