



Wing Luke joins Mayor Braman and others in a walk around the International District. Photo—Wing Luke Memorial Museum.

## The intellectual politics of Wing Luke

By Doug Chin

Next month's gubernatorial election pits Dixy Lee Ray against John Spellman. Had it not been for a fatal accident, the late city councilman Wing Luke might well be on that ballot.

Wing Luke was serving his first term on the council when in 1965 he died in an airplane crash.

Luke was a rare individual. He made history practically everytime he did anything.

Besides playing a leading role in changing local conditions, particularly the rights of minorities, he established many firsts. He was the first Chinese to hold a high appointed state position, first Chinese to run for a major political office, first Asian public officeholder, and first minority to sit on the City Council.

### Earliest immigrants

The Luke family was one of the earliest Chinese immigrant families to settle in Seattle. "My family has its roots here," he once said. "We have been here more than 80 years. My paternal grandfather operated a laundry here in the early days. Henry Yesler was one of his customers."

Wing Luke, however, was born in China. He came here at the age of five. "The first words I learned were 'yes,' 'no' and 'he hit me first,'" Luke once told the press. "Not being able to speak English, there were lots of misunderstandings and boyhood fights," he explained.

Luke's family operated a laundry in the University District. He attended northern schools and quickly adapted to his new environment. Always an outstanding student, Luke showed signs of leadership and an interest in politics at an early age.

He first ran for office at John Marshall Junior High School, where he was

elected Boy's Club president. At Roosevelt High School, he was elected Boy's Club president.

### Served in military

Midway through his senior year, Luke was inducted into the Army to serve in WWII. He won a bronze medal and received six combat stars during the war.

After he returned, Luke continued where he left off. He enrolled at the University of Washington where he became active in numerous student organizations and received many awards.

Luke graduated with honors, earning a degree in political science and going on to American University in Washington D.C. to do graduate work in the same field. He returned to the UW to get a law

council seat would not be easy.

"The novelty of being Oriental does not help," Luke said in an interview after he won the election. "Being an Oriental does single one out, and one therefore has to work harder. The political Oriental image is not here as yet like in Hawaii, although it is getting that way."

What Luke did not expect were slanderous smear tactics. "During the primary, fraternities at the University of Washington were asked to help doorbell for Wing," said Bettie Kan, Luke's sister. Some did. But one fraternity doorbelled against him and went out of their way to suggest that Wing was a communist, she said.

Luke won the primary and faced Dr. J.C. (Joe) Aiken, a West Seattle physi-

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cian and surgeon, for the council seat. Kan said that all the candidates who were eliminated in the primary gave their support to Aiken in the general election.

Their support, however, could not stop the growing support for Luke. In a desperate attempt to defeat Luke, another smear campaign was initiated against him.

"An anonymous group printed and passed out flyers insinuating that Wing was associated with communists," Kan said. "The flyer alluded to a news item in the *Peoples World* about Wing's candidacy and alleged that he was supported

by communist sympathizers."

But there was no stopping Luke. Labor educators, leaders of the major ethnic groups, Democrats, and Republicans endorsed Luke. "I had the written endorsement of prominent Seattle citizens who represented an extremely broad cross-section of the community," remarked Luke.

Luke ran a well organized campaign with some 800 to 1,000 volunteers, mostly young people. But his biggest supporter and worker was himself. He spent some \$10,000 of his own money on the election and spent many hours attending "coffee hours" and doorbelling.

When the election was over, Luke was an overwhelming victor. Despite the smear campaigns, Luke produced the greatest margin of victory in that year's election, some 30,000 more votes than his opponent.

On March 13, 1962, Wing Luke began his term as city council representative.

"As the first person of Chinese ancestry ever to run for public office in Washington State, I have a great obligation to serve well," said Luke when he took office. "I accept that challenge of the job, in the spirit of my family, of which I am very proud."

Luke never forgot his family, with whom he kept close ties. Since grade school and as a councilmember, the industrious Luke worked at his family's business. "When he was on the council, he would stack groceries and talk to the customers," his sister said.

### Fought for civil rights

As a councilmember, Luke fought particularly hard for civil rights, urban renewal, historic preservation, and a plan to ease the downtown parking problem. A liberal on a very conservative council, he often stood alone on issues.

Perhaps no other issue meant more to Luke than civil rights. A staunch advocate for equal opportunity for all races, Luke almost single-handedly led on the entire council on the issue of open housing. At a tense, packed council meeting shortly after he took office, he maneuvered the conservative council to commit themselves to pass an open housing ordinance.

Despite a busy schedule, Luke found time to serve on the Board of Directors of the Urban League, Chinese Community Service Organization, and Jackson Street Community Council. He was also a member of other ethnic organizations.

Luke believed in a pluralistic society where each ethnic group could learn to share and appreciate other cultures. But he not only believed in that ideal, he lived it.

### Politician and intellectual

Emmett Watson, reporter, pointed Luke out at the time as being "the only Seattle politician that can be described as an intellectual." Another journalist said of Luke that he "is better informed on more local, national, and international issues than almost anyone I know."

Wing Luke was a confident and ambitious person who had higher political aspirations than the council. "If a man has no more ambition than to stay where he is, he'll soon burn himself out," Luke observed. "I feel I'm capable of filling any elective job in the state. I have no set design on any office, but I'm young enough to think that opportunity will manifest themselves."

In a poll taken among Seattle voters just before his death, Luke drew the highest ratings of any council person. He was "best known" by a wide margin and topped the list on all five categories — "good, active, powerful, brave, and wise."

With his popularity, Luke had a bright future. He might easily have been the mayor of Seattle or the next governor.