

## **The Flap of a Wing, the Overhaul of a City: Seattle's First Asian American Councilman**

**By Taylor Yingshi**

Asian American visibility and interracial solidarity: these sentiments could be felt throughout the Wing Luke Museum during my time as an artist there. Decades after the lifetime of its namesake, Wing Luke, the Museum continues to uphold the values of this visionary councilman. Born in 1925 as the “son of a laundryman and grocer and an immigrant from China,” Wing Luke navigated an era of violent vitriol against Asian Americans and other people of color residing in Seattle (“About Us”). When faced with backlash, however, Luke doubled down on what he believed was right. As a fierce advocate for those marginalized by society’s prejudiced treatment, Wing Luke displayed unwavering civic courage through constantly prioritizing his sense of justice over public approval of his actions in order to create a more unified, equitable Seattle.

Luke’s proclivity for breaking the status quo emerged at an early age. Tired of the anti-Asian ridicule he endured at school, Luke—with a charisma that would facilitate the rest of his career—began drawing funny comics that quickly garnered popularity and helped dismantle his classmates’ presuppositions about Chinese people. His ability to change his peers’ attitudes soon catalyzed his election as “class president at Roosevelt High School” (“About Us”). After attaining a leadership position, Luke’s efforts towards breaking down barriers magnified. When the school criticized mothers for letting their children become juvenile delinquents during World War II, Luke put forward an alternative perspective: that “those mothers were playing a vital role in the war effort, [and] perhaps the park department should step in and provide after-school programs” (Stripling). Luke’s outspoken leadership emerged as a result of his willingness to risk

the hard-earned relationships he had built with the rest of the school in order to uphold a fair, but unpopular opinion. By dissenting from the mainstream view of women at the time, Luke demonstrated his unbending sense of righteousness.

As the discriminatory atmosphere heightened, however, the future councilman soon desired a larger platform for his advocacy. Luke personally felt the growing aura of bigotry in Seattle after his return from World War II, when he received neither the respect nor support that a decorated veteran deserves. Instead, his landlady kicked him out while snapping, “Chinese, Japanese, what’s the difference[...] the country was at war with ‘those people’” (Stripling). Watching war fervor drive growing divisions along racial lines, Luke determined that the city urgently needed a force for interracial unity and solidarity. This bold idea prompted his first dip into Seattle’s political sphere—an exclusive, white-dominated field back then. Luke, however, refused to remain a passive victim of the system, instead launching a campaign for a seat on the all-white city council. His path to leadership comprised innumerable barriers which did not hinder his white counterparts. Luke was told “not to run for office[...] or at the very least not to use his photo so voters wouldn’t know he was Chinese born” (Stripling). After announcing his bid, Luke quickly faced a smear campaign of doorbellers “[going] out of their way to suggest that [he] was a communist” (Chin). Despite unabashedly racist discouragement and baseless accusations, Luke refused to hide his Chinese roots—treating them not as a flaw to be ashamed of, but a mark of the potential advancement in politics for Asian Americans that his win could symbolize. In 1962, he sent shockwaves throughout Seattle after mobilizing over 1,000 volunteers and winning the election by 30,000 votes to become Seattle’s first non-white person in office (Chin). Luke actively embraced his identity, providing unprecedented visibility for Asian Americans on the legislative level and proving the possibility of a non-white person

becoming a major political figure. His hard-won victory reflects a strong belief that one's race should not deter them from making an impact in politics.

In an era when support for segregation was the norm, Luke expressed respect and appreciation for disparate ethnic communities. The councilman, rather than sharing the public sentiment of disdain towards these groups, engaged in education and advocacy of their unique cultures. Luke “learned Norway’s national anthem for an address to the local Norwegian community” and “used publicity to[...] [save] the [indigenous] Wawona sailing ship” (Ramirez and Stripling). This intentional, active pursuit of knowledge about other cultures is rare even in modern day America, where “one-fifth to one-quarter of people [in 2019] said they seldom or never encounter people unlike themselves” (Green). Luke’s bold attitude—revolutionary for his time and still not fully commonplace today—reflects his rejection of what the laws and the predominant belief stipulated about how people of different backgrounds should interact. Luke did not vye for the approval of the white majority, but rather, focused his efforts on empowering and recognizing Seattle’s immigrants and minorities. By daring to branch beyond the established duties of a public servant, Luke illuminated a councilman’s obligation to respect and nurture multiculturalism.

By rejecting the societal norms that barred people like him from speaking out, Luke opened the floodgates for discussion about issues affecting communities previously not represented in the legislative sphere. His fiercest advocacy centered around Seattle’s rampant housing inequality. For decades, people of color had navigated a treacherous real estate landscape where majority-white neighborhoods upheld covenants that “no person or persons of Asiatic, African or Negro blood, lineage or extraction, shall be permitted to occupy a portion of said property, or any building thereon” (“Restrictive Covenant”). Wing Luke’s sister, Bettie,

recalled white real estate agents who corralled minorities in enclaves by refusing to “rent, buy or sell housing to people of color in other parts of the city” (Ng). Luke, having been raised in Chinatown and assailed with his landlady’s racist remarks, intimately understood Seattle’s practice of keeping minorities out of white spaces. Now, as the only non-white city councilman, he took up the hefty responsibility of updating these antiquated laws not only for residents in Chinatown, but for all victims of the city’s racist housing market. Luke “maneuvered the conservative council to commit themselves to pass an open housing ordinance,” a law that would prevent housing discrimination on the basis of race (Chin). Luke’s charisma and determination helped him guide the conversation towards uncomfortable topics that would otherwise be left unaddressed by white councilmen largely detached from the affairs of Seattle’s minority populations. In a political process that often ignored the needs of minorities, Luke’s relentless push against the status quo made him a beacon of hope.

But despite drafting the initial law, Wing Luke became one of only two councilmen who voted against the open housing ordinance when the council took out an emergency clause which would “put it into effect immediately upon passage, and prohibit the possibility that the ordinance could be referred to a vote by the public” (Frantilla). This critical clause would prevent community groups opposed to the ordinance from belittling its potential. Although he had originally spearheaded the ordinance, Luke refused to acquiesce to its now-diluted message. Resolute and uncompromising when it came to justice, Luke displayed immense civic courage by using his vote to express disapproval for this rollback despite almost all other members of the council and over 115,627 members of the public choosing otherwise as opposed to only 54,448 voting in favor—a crushing two-to-one margin (Frantilla). His efforts, too far ahead for his time, faced the wrath of the public who sided with those councilmen less progressive than him.

Despite this devastating loss, Luke never relinquished his anti-segregation values, exemplifying an unbreakable commitment to the improvement of his city.

Tragically, at the peak of his political career, Luke passed away in a helicopter accident. Yet his progressive ideas remain embedded in the history of civil rights, and his posthumous impact can be seen in Seattle's trek towards becoming "one of the most racially integrated cities in the nation by the 1980s" (So). The open housing ordinance, while a failed piece of legislation, made headway for the powerful civil rights acts that would desegregate Seattle and other cities nationwide later that century. Regarding the man's resolute moral standards, Bettie Luke—Wing Luke's sister—told reporters he had a saying: "Don't do things because of who is right, but because of what is right" ("About Us"). Luke harnessed civic courage to rise above bigoted constituents and politicians, promulgating civic reform far ahead of his time. He nurtured his community not only by championing unprecedented public policy across Seattle, but also by attempting to unify the city's many communities in a time when intermingling among people of different races was condemned. His courage guided the powerful, but unpopular proposals he presented amidst ceaseless detractors. Wing Luke's incomparable contributions to progress in racial equity reverberate throughout Seattle and the nation today.

In 2020, "2,808 incidents of anti-Asian discrimination" were reported in the U.S. alone, signifying a spike in hate crime against Asian Americans (Yancey-Bragg). This frightening statistic echoes the normalized harassment that Wing Luke faced nearly a century ago—but Luke's response to these hateful incidents serves as a reminder that fear and bigotry can be overcome with courage. His fortitude in the face of criticism from both politicians and the public has inspired future generations to remain compassionate and righteous despite—and especially when—the vicious hand of bigotry attempts to quash justice. Through the Wing Luke Museum,

he has indirectly given me the opportunity to feel seen and respected as an Asian American in a time when discrimination has resurfaced. Through his commitment not only to the Asian American community, but also to all marginalized peoples, he has demonstrated the importance of solidarity with other groups facing oppression. Wing Luke's legacy survives in the many communities of Seattle that enjoy greater freedom and equity today, and his relentless courage serves as a reminder to always value justice over reputation in order to fight for a better society.

## Works Cited

“About Us.” *Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience*,

<https://www.wingluke.org/about-us/>.

Chin, Doug. “The intellectual politics of Wing Luke.” *The International Examiner*, Oct. 1976, p.

4. Governor Gary Locke Library and Community Heritage Center, doi:1900.275.

Frantilla, Anne. “The Seattle Open Housing Campaign, 1959-1968.” *Seattle Municipal Archives*,

City of Seattle, [www.seattle.gov/cityarchives/exhibits-and-education/online-exhibits/seattle-open-housing-campaign](http://www.seattle.gov/cityarchives/exhibits-and-education/online-exhibits/seattle-open-housing-campaign).

Green, Emma. “These Are the Americans Who Live in a Bubble.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media

Company, 22 Feb. 2019, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/02/americans-remain-deeply-ambivalent-about-diversity/583123/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/02/americans-remain-deeply-ambivalent-about-diversity/583123/).

Ng, Assunta. “Wing Luke's 90th Birthday - Celebration Reveals Fascinating History.” *Northwest*

*Asian Weekly*, 22 Mar. 2016, [nwasianweekly.com/2015/03/wing-lukes-90th-birthday-celebration-reveals-fascinating-history/](http://nwasianweekly.com/2015/03/wing-lukes-90th-birthday-celebration-reveals-fascinating-history/).

Ramirez, Marc. “Wing Luke's Vision Lives in New Museum.” *The Seattle Times*, The Seattle

Times Company, 27 May 2008, [www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/wing-lukes-vision-lives-in-new-museum/](http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/wing-lukes-vision-lives-in-new-museum/).

"Restrictive Covenant for the Windermere Neighborhood." *Seattle Civil Rights and Labor*

*History Project*, 1 Apr. 1929,

<https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/CityArchive/DDL/OpenHousing/covenant.pdf>.

So, Connie. "Wing Chong Luke (1925-1965)." *Blackpast*, 9 Dec. 2020,

[www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/luke-wing-chong-1925-1965/](http://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/luke-wing-chong-1925-1965/).

Stripling, Sherry. "Wing Luke: the Man behind the Museum." *The Seattle Times*, The Seattle

Times Company, 24 Feb. 2005, [www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/wing-luke-the-man-behind-the-museum/](http://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/wing-luke-the-man-behind-the-museum/).

Yancey-Bragg, N'dea. "'Stop Killing Us': Attacks on Asian Americans Highlight Rise in Hate

Incidents amid COVID-19." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 12 Feb.

2021, [www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/02/12/asian-hate-incidents-covid-19-lunar-new-year/4447037001/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/02/12/asian-hate-incidents-covid-19-lunar-new-year/4447037001/).