
HUPING LING

“On Leong” means peaceful. If they have problems and don’t know what to do or if there is a dispute about payment of debt, they go to one of the two co-presidents instead of going to a lawyer. The men at the meetings hear the story — like a jury. They consult and the co-presidents hand down a decision. You know, we Chinese like to keep our problems within our community and solve them ourselves.

— Annie Leong, St. Louis Globe-Democrat, 1962

LIKE OTHER URBAN CHINESE immigrant communities, the St. Louis Chinatown (1860s–1966) generally known as “Hop Alley” developed a self-defense and self-governing structure, the On Leong Merchants and Laborers Association, commonly known as On Leong Tong. Since its founding in the beginning of the twentieth century, it had been the dominant community organization in St. Louis Chinatown. Its presidents were referred to as “the Mayors of Chinatown” by the public, as the Chinese were believed to prefer resolving problems within the community to leaving issues to civil authorities. Because On Leong bore the term “tong” in its name, it had been often mistakenly perceived as one of the Chinese secret societies associated with criminal activities. Was On Leong connected with the criminal fighting tongs? What were the nature and functions of On Leong? What was the impact of On Leong on the St. Louis Chinese community? This essay attempts to address these questions.

FORMATION AND FUNCTIONS OF ON LEONG

The effort of community-building by the Chinese in St. Louis was most evident through the formation and operation of the On Leong Merchants and Laborers Association. Although other social organiza-
tions existed before the establishment of On Leong, such as The Chinese Grand Lodge of Free Masons of the State of Missouri (also known as the Chinese Masonic Hall), The Chinese Empire Reform Society of Missouri, and the Chinese American Educational Association, none of those organizations possessed the power and influence of On Leong.

Regarding the founding of On Leong, there are different accounts from different sources. One of the early studies on Chinese tongs, Tong War by Eng Ying Gong and Bruce Grant (1930), claimed that On Leong was established in 1899 in New York by a group of Chinese gambling-house keepers in order to protect their business from the members of Hip Sing, another tong formed in the later part of the nineteenth century.4 A 1949 article in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat reported the National Convention of On Leong as “the sixty-year-old society.” By this account, On Leong was founded in 1889.5 A more recent study by Kuo-lin Chen, Hua Ren Bang Pai [The Chinatown Gangs] states that the National On Leong Tong Chinese Merchants Association was formed in 1894, and in a few years its headquarters was moved to New York. It had branch associations in the Eastern and later Midwestern states.6 Thus, it is certain that the national On Leong Association came into existence during the last decade of the nineteenth century.

In order to assist their newly arrived compatriots and to respond to institutionalized discrimination, the Chinese in St. Louis formed the St. Louis On Leong Tong Chinese Merchants Association with support and guidance from the national On Leong Association. In 1906, they registered with the St. Louis City government, according to oral history tradition.7 The corporation deed discovered by the author, however, indicates that 1912 was the year On Leong registered with the City of St. Louis.8 Despite the discrepancy between the oral tradition and archival documentation, there is no doubt that On Leong was one of the few early community organizations in St. Louis.

The name On Leong is the Cantonese form of An Liang and is derived from the Chinese phrase Chu Bao An Liang, meaning “eliminating despots and bringing peace to people.” Generations of Chinese peasant rebels and secret societies had employed this slogan to challenge the established order and to propagate their own political agenda. In a foreign land, surrounded by cultural unfamiliarity, Chinese merchants, who were the elite class of Chinese immigrants, felt the need and obligation to establish a social organization to protect their interests and assist newcomers from China. As a vulnerable minority group, Chinese immigrants were unable to “Chu Bao” or eliminate those who legally ex-
cluded them or socially discriminated against them. The best they could do was to maintain peace and social order within their own communities through mutual aid and self-governance. Therefore, adopting only the term *On Leong*, the On Leong Merchants and Laborers Association formed as a self-reliant, quasi-legal, and social organization of Chinese immigrants.

The On Leong Merchant and Laborers Association was popularly known as On Leong Tong. The term *tong* in Chinese literally means "hall," and has no implication of crime or secrecy. In China, the term *tong* often means a school, a church, a district association, or an herb drug store. In America, Chinese community organizations using *tong* as part of their names included those providing mutual aid to their members as well as those primarily engaged in criminal activities. These organizations, however, have been uniformly perceived as secret societies associated with alleged crimes, particularly the tong fighting.

An article entitled “Housekeeping in St. Louis Chinatown” in the *St. Louis Republic*’s 14 August 1910 issue pointed out the popular confusion about the Chinese tongs and attempted to clarify it:

A good deal of mystification and misunderstanding about the Chinese tong exists in the American mind. We confuse all tongs with the one called Highbinders, a gang of the criminal class of the Chinese, most of them hired cutthroats and thieves, and nothing could be a greater injustice. The Chinese tong — or secret society — is an organization branching from the ancient Free Masons. The secret society of Free Masons has flourished in China for thousand of years and the tongs are merely branches of the original society. They are based on exactly the same principle as are our secret societies and should not be confused with the criminal Highbinders. The Gee Kong Tong holds its meetings in elaborately appointed lodgerooms in which only tong members are allowed to enter. The better clans of tong members will not tolerate the Highbinders and there have not been any in St. Louis for several years. An occasional Highbinder soon leaves town after an interview with police or the more law-binding Chinese.

Unlike one of his earlier counterparts who reported that there were “three hundred Highbinders in St. Louis” in 1892, the author of the article was more objective about the Chinese residents in St. Louis and was able to distinguish the regular tongs from the criminal Highbinders. However, the news reporter could not offer further information about the differences between the Chinese tongs.

Scholars have tried to clarify the confusion for the general public.
Sociologist C. N. Reynolds in 1935 examined the earliest forms of Chinese tongs in America. He argued that these organizations had their roots in secret societies in China. Yet he differentiated other Chinese community organizations such as the Six Companies (the fraternal organizations of Chinese immigrants that were based on common lineage or geographical origins and founded on the West Coast between 1851 and 1862), and trade or craft organizations from the fighting tongs. He noted that many tongs in America had modified their criminal activities and developed benevolent-protective functions.  

Several decades later, Yung-Deh Richard Chu’s study, “Chinese Secret Societies in America: A Historical Survey,” systematically explored the origins, structures, functions, and historical development of various Chinese secret societies in America. According to Chu, three types of social organizations developed in America. First, the district associations emerged to assist new immigrants by providing free lodging, food, and employment services. Soon the clan associations were formed to provide services to those without the support of the district associations. Meanwhile, as the district associations grew, different clan associations within a district began to compete with each other for hegemony. As a result of the competition, small clans began to coordinate their efforts secretly in order to avoid control by bigger clans, and to use violence as a means to force larger clans to act reasonably. When the environment in America turned extremely hostile after passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the third type of organization, secret societies, became very active and widespread. Chu also divided the development of Chinese secret societies into three periods: from the beginning of Chinese immigrants in America to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; from the Exclusion Act to World War II; and from World War II to the present, coinciding with the periodization of Chinese immigrant history in America. Chu concluded that “the tongs have both their vices and positive aspects, especially for the peculiar situation of the Chinese immigrants. They can not be simply regarded as the Chinese version of Mafia existing merely for pursuing organized crimes.”  

A more recent study by sociologist Kuo-lin Chen, Hua Ren Bang Pai [The Chinatown Gangs] lists the Chinese criminal organizations alleged by American law enforcement agencies into the following categories: triads, tongs, gangs, heroin smugglers, and smugglers of illegal immigrants. Like the other two scholars cited above, Chen also attempts to make distinctions among the various Chinese organizations that have been unexceptionally labeled as “Chinese Mafia” by the media. Based
on sworn brotherhood (a typical organizational structure of secret societies that binds the members by uttering an oath of brotherhood), the tongs in America today include Chih Kung (or Gee Kung, Zhigong), On Leong (Anliang), Hip Sing (Xiesheng), Tung On (Tongan), Fukien (Fujian) American, Hop Sing (Hesheng), Bing Kung (Binggong), Suey Sing (Cuisheng), and Ying On (Yingduan).15

Among the tongs, Chih Kung, On Leong, and Hip Sing are the most influential. Chih Kung, the oldest tong, formed in 1850 in Hawaii, extended to British Columbia in the late 1850s, and finally established itself in San Francisco in 1863.16 Some members of Chih Kung established On Leong in 1894. Its headquarters were moved to New York a few years later and have remained there ever since.17

The works discussed above have categorized On Leong as one of the secret societies and have noted both meaningful services and the criminal activities of the secret societies. Although historically the National On Leong Association had been involved with tong wars at different times, its branch organization in St. Louis may not fit the general structure and functions of a secret society. The term “secret society” is defined by some scholars as any association using secrecy as a major feature of its organization.18 On Leong, on the contrary, has been registered with the St. Louis City government since its founding in 1906. The organizational structure of On Leong also differed from Chih Kung, the first Chinese secret society in America, which classified its members in six major ranks: (1) Tsung-li, literally General Manager, to insiders known as the Elder Brother; (2) Hsiang-chu, or Incense Master, also known as Number Two Brother; (3) Pai-shan or White Fan, known as the Number Three Brother; (4) Hsien-feng, or Vanguard; (5) Hung-kun, or the Red Stick; (6) Ts’ai-hsieh, or Straw Sandals.19

The structure of On Leong did not follow the above pattern, but rather modified it to fit the American environment. Like its counterparts in other states, the On Leong Association in St. Louis normally had a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and seven directors who formed the governing board of the association. It resembled the American Chamber of Commerce more than anything else. In fact, On Leong in St. Louis was often referred to by the media as the Chinese version of Business Men’s League.20

In many ways, On Leong in St. Louis is more comparable to the Chinese Six Companies, which controlled most Chinese immigrant communities in America up to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. The Chinese Six Companies were social organizations of Chinese immi-
grants in the United States based on lineage and geographical origins. The Chinese Six Companies included Kong Chow Company (or Gangzhou Huiguan), Sam Yup Company (or Sanyi Huiguan), Yeoung Wo Company (or Yanghe Huiguan), Yan Wo Company (or Renhe Huiguan), Ning Yung Company (or Ningyang Huiguan), and Hop Wo Company (or Hehe Huiguan). They were founded between 1851 and 1862 on the West Coast. In 1882, the Six Companies formed a national umbrella organization, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA, or Zhonghua Huiguan), to react collectively to the harsh treatment of Chinese immigrants from government institutions and the public.21

Different from other Chinese communities throughout the country, the Chinese in St. Louis did not belong to the network of CCBA, but were dominated by the On Leong Merchants and Laborers Association.22 Unlike the Chinese Six Companies that were based on common ancestry and common geographical origins, On Leong Association was a trade/professional organization. It sought to promote and protect Chinese businesses in the United States regardless of the lineage and geographical origins of its members. The 1912 corporation deed of the On Leong Tong Chinese Merchants Association stated that “the corporation is formed for the following purposes: to bring about cooperation of its members in buying and importing goods, wares and merchandise, and obtaining better facilities of transportation for the same, to provide relief for its sick members, to bring about a better social and friendly relation among its members, and to elevate them morally and educationally.”23 Clearly, to protect and promote the commercial interest of buying, importing, and transportation of goods were the primary objectives of the organization, and On Leong was more a business/trade corporation than a social one. Furthermore, the corporation deed shows that, when registered with the City of St. Louis in 1912, On Leong had $2,000 in capital stock divided into two hundred shares, and the four members of the Board of Directors — Lee Look, Hang Jue, Heuy M. Fot, and Gin Suey — were named as shareholders, each holding fifty shares.24 Judging by this trait of shareholding, the members of the Board of Directors were more like business partners in 1912.

On Leong gradually evolved after 1912, but still mostly retained as a trade/professional organization. In 1919, On Leong underwent two major changes. First, it become more inclusive, expanding its membership to include not only merchants but also common laborers. This change could indicate On Leong’s attempt to transform itself from an elite trade
organization to a broader community service organization. To reflect the structural change, On Leong also decided to alter its official name. The new name dropped the term “tong” and added “laborers” to it. The issue of naming reveals On Leong’s awareness of the negative connotation of “tong” and the American public’s equation of tongs with criminal organizations. The reorganized On Leong again registered with the City of St. Louis under its new name of On Leong Chinese Merchants and Laborers Association in 1919. The 1919 corporation deed of On Leong indicates that the organization seemed more democratic in name as well as in structure. On Leong had purchased a headquarters for its regular meetings and activities. The officers of On Leong consisted of a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and seven directors, all elected annually by its members. Although On Leong consciously tried to disassociate itself from the criminal tongs, the St. Louis public continued to refer to the organization as “On Leong Tong.”

Despite the difference in organizational form, the social functions of On Leong Association largely resembled those of the Chinese Six Companies. First of all, On Leong Association was the unofficial local government of Chinese immigrants in America. It served as the legislative, judiciary, and administrative authority within Chinese communities. To avoid competition among Chinese entrepreneurs, On Leong dictated the “one mile one laundry” (later one mile one restaurant) rule, allowing only one Chinese laundry to operate within a radius of one mile. The Chinese laundry associations established a similar regulation in San Francisco and Virginia City as early as the 1860s. Violators of the regulation were often penalized. They were first given a warning by the On Leong Association for the offense. The timid offender would close his shop voluntarily after the warning. Those who refused to obey the order were forced to close their businesses when mysterious tragedies such as burning of the business premises or murders of family members occurred.

Those types of law enforcement, though effective, largely resembled the cruel and secretive means of the secret societies and therefore were primarily attributed to the stereotypical image of On Leong as a criminal gang. Although despotic and tyrannical in certain aspects of its operation, On Leong did not fit readily as a criminal organization, since the latter was primarily engaged in criminal activities. More often, On Leong acted as a Chinese court on American soil, using Chinese legal codes and customary laws to convict criminals or wrongdoers in cases presented at its board meetings.
The judiciary function of On Leong was in part a tradition of the Chinese secret societies that took laws into their own hands. It was, however, more a reaction to the reality of their immigrant experiences in America. When cases of the murder of Chinese immigrants were deliberately delayed or ignored by American law enforcement agencies, On Leong decided to handle the crimes within Chinese communities by utilizing Chinese laws.28 The presidents of On Leong, elected every year by its members, were regarded by the American government and the public as Mayors of Chinatown, particularly for their judicial power. Similarly, the Chinese Six Companies arbitrated disputes among its members and represented Chinese immigrants dealing with American authorities.29

On Leong was the most powerful economic force within the Chinese community. The association usually owned properties that earned considerable income. Its presidents were generally prominent and successful local entrepreneurs who often donated large sums of money to the association, while the rank and file consisted of petty merchants and common laborers. However, On Leong did not have absolute economic control over its members. In contrast, the Chinese Six Companies wielded almost complete control of the socioeconomic lives of Chinese immigrants, mandating that Chinese immigrants register with them upon landing and pay fees and debts before departure for China.30

On Leong also provided useful social services to its members and families, one of the most valued of which was translation aid. Since most new Chinese immigrants were not able to speak English, they faced tremendous difficulties and frustrations in the initial years following immigration. The St. Louis On Leong Association hired as interpreters a group of Chinese youth who were able to speak both Chinese and English. When newcomers arrived, On Leong would dispatch the interpreters to the train station to meet them, bring them to their new apartments, help them settle in, and assist them in finding jobs.31 On Leong helped many new immigrants in getting licenses and starting laundries in St. Louis. On Leong was also a social center for Chinese immigrants. The association headquarters often was used by members at no charge for special social events such as weddings, celebrations of newborn babies, funerals, and other social gatherings.32 The Chinese Six Companies also provided various services to the communities, ranging from offering temporary lodging to newcomers to funding the needy and establishing Chinese language schools.33

Additionally, On Leong fulfilled the spiritual needs of Chinese immi-
When members merchant patch. Many Chinese immigrants came to America with the intention to work hard, save as much money as possible, and eventually return to their home villages to join their families. Some were able to realize their dream and returned to China with some savings after years of toiling on the gold mountain. Many others, however, met sudden death due to violence or died of diseases in America. Their bodies were buried temporarily in local cemeteries, awaiting the opportunity to be transported back to their homeland. On Leong faithfully performed the duties of sending the bones of deceased members to China, as described in an article in the 17 November 1928 issue of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. In mid-November of 1928, Lee Mow Lin, a prominent Chinese merchant in St. Louis and the leader of On Leong, along with two more members of On Leong, performed the pious task in a shelter of boards and canvas under a tree in a corner of the Wesleyan Cemetery on Olive Street, where most deceased Chinese were buried. They were surrounded by the remains of one hundred of their fellows. Lee Mow Lin and his companions washed and dried the bones before placing them in metal boxes. Some bones bore marks of bullet wounds, and one had a gash across the forehead, indicating sudden and violent death. The prepared bones then would be shipped to San Francisco, where a steamer would leave for Hong Kong with a cargo of hundreds of wooden crates, each about three feet square and containing four tin boxes with the remains of thousands of Chinese formerly buried in the United States. From Hong Kong, the parcels would be distributed throughout the interior of China. When the bones of those who had died in foreign lands were returned home, they would be placed in jars and buried near those of their ancestors.

Like most traditional Chinese organizations, On Leong also held superstitious beliefs and preserved rituals accordingly. Members of On Leong depended on Chinese gods for their good fortune and protection. The meeting hall of On Leong’s headquarters had an altar with a shrine to Guan Gong, a Chinese god who was believed to be a protector of the merchants. When the St. Louis On Leong Association’s board of eleven members gathered to have its monthly business meeting, they would light incense and bow to Guan Gong before conducting the meeting. During the Chinese New Year celebration, the most important ceremony was to pay homage to Guan Gong. Before midnight, the members of On Leong would gather in the association’s conference room and light aromatic joss sticks in front of the idol of Guan Gong to display their
respect. The members would then donate from two to five dollars to cover the cost of this ceremony. The proceeds served as a source of funds for On Leong, in addition to the annual membership fee of twenty-five dollars.\textsuperscript{36}

Similar to the Chinese Six Companies, On Leong was also virtually a fraternal organization that excluded the participation of Chinese immigrant women.\textsuperscript{37} The 1919 On Leong corporation deed stipulated that “the active membership of the organization shall consist male only, and they of the Chinese race.”\textsuperscript{38} Although the wives of members were occasionally allowed to attend meetings, women seldom participated in decision-making. However, On Leong provided services to Chinese businessmen and their families that consequently benefited Chinese women. Since the 1950s, On Leong has utilized services provided by women of the community. Annie Leong’s longtime service to On Leong was the most illustrative example of the St. Louis On Leong’s openness to women. Growing up in an apartment right above the headquarters of On Leong in Chinatown, Annie Leong became a significant part of the St. Louis On Leong. Although never a member, she had served as On Leong’s unofficial spokesperson since 1950 and tremendously contributed to the organization. She was the mistress of ceremony at various celebrations sponsored by On Leong, served as interpreter for senior On Leong officers, and entertained reporters from local newspapers during the period between the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{39}

Writers of Chinese American studies have recognized the protective functions of the traditional Chinese community organizations. Julia I. Hsuan Chen’s 1940 dissertation relates On Leong’s “generous” contributions to “all good causes.”\textsuperscript{40} William Hoy’s writing on the Chinese Six Companies (1942) praises the Chinese Six Companies’ campaigns against Chinese exclusion legislation through protests, appeals, and memorials to all levels of the government.\textsuperscript{41} While noting the tight social control over the Chinese immigrant community by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), Him Mark Lai recognizes the CCBA’s role in ensuring the smooth operation of the community.\textsuperscript{42} Peter Kwong categorizes the functions of the district or clan associations in New York Chinatown into “defensive” and “offensive” associations: defensive capacity refers to dealings with the larger society, and offensive capacity refers to efforts to develop business within Chinatown. Kwong believes both had positive effects on the community.\textsuperscript{43} Sue Fawn Chung’s recent study on Zhigongtang (Chih Kung Tong) also lists the protective features of the organization, including community protec-
tion, creation of an artificial family, establishment of basic rules of conduct among members, labor recruitment, economic assistance through mutual aid, celebration of traditional festivals and entertainment, housing facilities for travelers, and funeral arrangements.\textsuperscript{44}

On the other hand, the protective functions of the traditional Chinese organizations, scholars believe, could be used to control the community. Him Mark Lai’s study of the CCBA meticulously analyzes its control over the Chinese immigrants. Upon landing, a Chinese immigrant would be put under the protection or control of the association in regard to food, lodging, and employment. An immigrant could not purchase a steamship ticket back to China until he had cleared his debts and obtained a permit for departure from the association.\textsuperscript{45} Along the same line, Peter Kwong claims that the unofficial political structure in Chinatown helped the elite exploit the working class.\textsuperscript{46} The traditional Chinese organizations’ control over the Chinese immigrant communities was comparable to New York City’s Tammany Hall’s functions among the Irish immigrants, except that Tammany Hall had transformed itself into a political machine in mainstream urban politics.\textsuperscript{47}

Although On Leong did not sustain a complete and deliberate control of its members like the CCBA, it was a self-confined community structure that did not intend or make an effort to reach out and blend into the larger society. This mentality of self-confinement was partially a result of the socioeconomic background of the Chinese immigrants and partially the socioeconomic conditions of American society. Prior to World War II, most Chinese immigrants had come from rural and impoverished areas in China and spoke little or no English. Lack of an understanding of American systems resulting from lack of education and language ability naturally nourished the mentality of self-confinement; the Chinese immigrants clung to each other for comfort and security. Meanwhile, Chinese immigrants had been excluded legally; persecuted by immigration authorities and law enforcement agencies; economically segregated from the mainstream labor market; and socially isolated from the majority of the population. The hostile climate against Chinese immigrants in America effectively forced them to develop mutual aids and collective protection for the sake of survival.

Meanwhile, as business leaders, the Mayors of Chinatown had a vested interest in keeping the community isolated and dependent on its internal socioeconomic structures, as many writers have suggested.\textsuperscript{48} An isolated community would guarantee a steady pool of laborers and a profitable market. However, economy alone cannot explain the self-confine-
ment nature of On Leong, as the primary occupation of Chinese in St. Louis prior to the 1960s was laundry, and its clientele mainly consisted of white Americans.

The self-confinement nature of St. Louis’s On Leong probably lies more in cultural and psychological factors. The dominance of the Chinese business class over Chinese immigrants was a distinctive feature of Chinese societies in America and in other parts of the world. This pattern of social control departed from the social structure in traditional China, where the social elite class of gentry-scholars dominated every level of the governing machine, and merchants were despised as social parasites that would corrupt government and society. Secure in wealth and power, Chinese gentry-scholars had little incentive to immigrate. The absence of the gentry-scholars among Chinese immigrants thus gave Chinese merchants, who were better educated and more sophisticated than common laborers, the opportunity to emerge as leaders of their communities. Therefore, the more confined a Chinese immigrant community was, the more indispensable its Chinese business leaders were. Chinese business leaders certainly enjoyed the elite status, and tried to maintain the established order in the community.

While On Leong inherited elements of Chinese tradition, it also adopted cultural practices of the New World. The organizers of On Leong quickly learned the rules and customs of the American business world. In the 1910s, Chinese businesses were rapidly expanding and the Chinese population was steadily growing. The development of the community required a larger meeting space for On Leong. In 1914, On Leong purchased a three-story building at 20 South Eighth Street and moved into the new headquarters on 10 October. The St. Louis Republic featured an article entitled “Hop Alley Feast Like B. M. L.” to report the event:

The Chinese Merchants’ association celebrated the removal into their new headquarters at 20 South Eighth Street yesterday . . .

This association is to the Chinese about what the Business Men’s League is to the rest of St. Louis.

The Chinese are apt pupils. They have been reading of the functions of the B. M. L., and their celebration possessed all features of that organization, and then some. First, they had a banquet. It has come to be recognized in St. Louis that no function of the B. M. L. is complete without a banquet. The Chinese brethren has a series of them.

Music, too, features the functions of the B. M. L., and the Chinese were not daunted. While they had no celebrated vocalists like George W. Simmons or William Flewellyn Saunders, they got along fairly well. Har-
mony has no particular place in a Chinese musical production. But they sang, anyhow.

Each Celestial chose his own song, and delivered in his own pet key. While the words were not overly intelligible to the American ear, that made no particular difference, and as rapidly one banquet table was emptied, other banqueters took their places, and the revelry lasted all day and until late in the night.49

This report clearly is filled with a stereotyping and patronizing tone. The Chinese men here were portrayed as ones with backward and inferior cultural backgrounds. However, it provides information on the development of the Chinese community. This elaborate celebration not only reflects On Leong’s growing economic capability, but also indicates the adaptability of Chinese businessmen in the city. The businessmen were not merely scions of traditional Chinese merchants; they were modern businessmen eager to absorb new ideas and grasp new opportunities to survive and prosper in a more competitive world.

In performing its legal, economic, social, and spiritual functions, On Leong effectively eased the initial cultural shocks and difficulties of many newcomers, and successfully maintained the peace and order of the Chinese community in St. Louis. It was instrumental to the community building of St. Louis Chinese.

“THE MAYORS OF CHINATOWN”

Referred to by the American public as Mayors of Chinatown, the presidents of On Leong Merchants and Laborers Association were mostly affluent merchants and powerful men in the Chinese community. Although a few leaders of On Leong were involved in criminal activities that tainted the reputation of the organization, the majority provided useful services to the community and were highly respected. To understand the complexity of On Leong and its contributions to and impact on the community, it is helpful to examine the personalities of its leaders during its peak years.

Jeu Sick (Presidency: ?–1917)

Jeu Sick was one of the early presidents of On Leong. Judging from the limited information we have about Jeu Sick, he probably served as a negative example of the leaders of On Leong. According to the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, Jeu Sick was a wealthy merchant and the leader of On
Leong in the 1910s. There is not much information about his life; only one source recorded his death. On 15 December 1917, he shot Leong Fou, his business competitor, to death in the rear of a house at 714 Market Street in Hop Alley. Jeu Sick then turned the revolver on himself, inflicting a wound in his stomach. He died before medical aid could be summoned. The dramatic and violent death of Jeu Sick contributed to the misconception of On Leong as an organization associated with tong fighting.

*Lee Mow Lin (Presidency: 1917–1929)*

Lee Mow Lin served as president of On Leong from 1917 to 1929. He probably came to America from China at an early age. It is also likely that he spent some years in San Francisco where he learned the grocery business, and then came to St. Louis. His business, Quong On Lung, at 17 South Eighth Street, was one of the earliest Chinese grocery stores in St. Louis, and was first recorded in the *Gould’s St. Louis Directory for 1897*. During the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, Chinese groceries proved difficult to sustain and the turnover rate was quite high, with most businesses surviving no longer than five years. Lee Mow Lin’s Quong On Lung, however, managed to stay in the business in the same premises until 1914.

Lee Mow Lin’s success in business and influence in Hop Alley soon attracted the attention of the local news media. Dick Wood, a reporter for *The St. Louis Republic*, visited Quong On Lung and other Chinese businesses and wrote an article for the Sunday magazine section of the *St. Louis Republic* on 29 July 1900. The article occupied an entire page, with accompanying photos portraying Chinese grocery business and social life in Hop Alley. According to the article, Quong On Lung carried a wide range of Chinese goods, including dry foods, tea, native-made cloth, and medicine. In the article, Dick Wood portrayed Lee Mow Lin as a well-educated and highly respected Chinese merchant. A convert to Christianity, he had acquired a thorough English education in a sectarian school in America when he was a young boy. With his education, intelligence, and a successful business, he was regarded as the spokesperson for St. Louis’s Chinatown.

Dick Wood’s visit to Hop Alley took place at a critical moment: the so-called Boxer Rebellion in China. At the turn of the century, the increasing presence of foreign aggression and influence in China fol-
ollowing the Opium Wars had agitated the Chinese populace. Members of *Yi He Quan* (meaning “righteous and harmonious fists”), known to westerners as Boxers because they practiced martial arts, arose to challenge the foreign powers. On 13 June 1900, the Boxers besieged the legation quarter in Beijing, where 450 foreign guards protected 475 foreign civilians, including twelve foreign ministers and 2,300 Chinese Christians who had fled there for protection. Western powers immediately dispatched an international relief expedition. The war in China aroused anxiety among the Chinese in St. Louis. Reflecting the sentiment of the community, Lee Mow Lin voiced his opinions on the Boxer Rebellion to Wood. He first dispelled the rumor that uncontrollable manslaughter was taking place in China, and then expressed his confidence in the ability of the Chinese government and Chinese philosophy in prevailing over the turmoil and evil forces:

We can’t believe all the things the papers have told. It surely could not be that our Government has been unable to protect the lives of foreign Ministers and their households. If such were the case, we, the Chinese merchants of St. Louis, would certainly have been informed through Chinese sources.

If such were the case, it would mean untold suffering to many millions of our home people. Should the lawless element in China triumph over her centuries of economic adjustment, it would mean more of a reign of terror to the law-abiding representatives of our own race than the Western world is capable of grasping.

In China, we have had dissensions and rebellions, as has been the case with many other nations not nearly so old, and there may be some who would gladly welcome a change in the Government, a shifting around of rulers — much the same as new blood is welcomed in the leader of a herd. The lawless element may gain, or may already have gained, the upper hand, but if so the bad effect will be nullified by the great unity and philosophy of the Chinese as a race.\(^{54}\)

This statement reveals Lee Mow Lin’s political skill and sophistication: he defended the integrity of the Chinese government and Chinese culture while condemning the turmoil and violence caused by the Boxers. It is probably the best source depicting the characteristics of Lee Mow Lin.

As a successful businessman and a capable leader, Lee Mow Lin dominated On Leong Association from its formation in 1906 to 1929. Many non-Chinese St. Louisans viewed him as a “venerable sage of the
Chinese quarter.” Under his leadership, On Leong provided legal, social, and spiritual services for the community.

Joe Lin (Presidency: 1929–1940)

Born in China in 1881, Joe Lin became a prominent restaurant owner in St. Louis. His Orient Restaurant at 414 North Seventh Street was in operation from 1937 to 1952. He was elected president of the St. Louis On Leong Merchants and Laborers Association in 1929 and remained in the post till 1940. From 1937 to 1947, he served as president of the National Association of On Leong, a position usually held by Chinese merchant leaders from New York City or Boston. He was referred to by the local media as the Mayor of Chinatown from 1929 until his death in 1947.

Like most early Chinese immigrants, Joe Lin lived in America alone, leaving his wife and children behind in China. Also like most of his country-fellows, Joe Lin was keenly interested in politics in China. In 1927, the Nationalist Party or Kuo Min Tang (KMT) split with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after a four-year coalition and consolidated its control in China in the following year. The KMT-CCP split affected the Nationalists in St. Louis. As a Nationalist, Joe Lin was enthusiastic about a republic in China, but he did not favor the Nationalist government. He abhorred the corruption and irregularities within the party and its government. He was accused of disloyalty because of his criticism of the party and Chiang Kai-shek, the president of the Republic of China. He revealed his political views in a St. Louis Times article on 12 March 1930:

A few Chinese here favor the restoration of the monarchy in China. But they are the older men. The big majority of us are strong for a republic. But in favoring of a republic, we all do not necessarily favor the same group for control. I don’t care who is president of China, he should clean house, raise the standard of honesty, and oust all underlings who accept bribes and are guilty of corruption. President Chiang is giving a good administration but there is room for improvement. Those are my views and because of them some people charge me with not being loyal to the Kuo Min Tang.

Joe Lin’s leadership ability was most visible during the Sino-Japanese War, when he organized various activities to raise funds supporting China’s resistance war. Immediately after Japanese waged a full-fledged
war against China on 7 July 1937, On Leong called for Chinese in St. Louis to make contributions to assist China’s war effort, and named Joe Lin treasurer of the fund. Although most Chinese in St. Louis were poor laborers working in laundries and restaurants, they made contributions every week of as much as they could afford. One thousand dollars was donated weekly for purchase of weapons and ammunition for use against Japanese invaders. On 17 June 1938, Joe Lin gave a speech at a fundraising party for the St. Louis Committee of the United Council for Civilian Relief in China. The party was a great success, with 250 people attending. Joe Lin’s friendly relations with his American customers also generated donations from them for China’s war effort from time to time.

Joe Lin’s funeral further revealed his influence in the St. Louis Chinese community and among his American patrons. He died at the age of sixty-six on 13 December 1947 at Jewish Hospital, where he had undergone an operation for a brain tumor. His funeral, held on 23 December, was so elaborate and well-attended that the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* featured a story headlined, “All Limousines in City Hired for Mourners.” The article began, “A lavish and colorful funeral service, followed by a procession including a thirty-piece brass band and forty-six limousines which tied up the heavy downtown Christmas traffic, marked the last rites yesterday of Joe Lin, unofficial Mayor of St. Louis Chinatown.” According to the article, the total cost of the funeral was $5,000, a considerable amount even by the present standard. Five hundred people attended, including Chinese leaders of On Leong Association from twenty-eight cities, local Chinese, and a large number of Joe Lin’s American friends. Their numbers spoke eloquently of the power On Leong possessed over the Chinese immigrant community. The service also interestingly reflected the adaptive characteristics of Joe Lin and many Chinese immigrants — a combination of East and West, Chinese and American. Christian services were held in Cantonese dialect. A brass band played traditional Western music, including “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “Adeste Fidelis.” Joe Lin was buried at Valhalla Cemetery, the final resting place for St. Louis Chinese.

*Charles Quinn Chu (Presidency: 1940–1950)*

Charles Quinn Chu (also Charles Quin Chu), known as Charles Quinn, was another charismatic and powerful leader of On Leong. Born in Hong Kong in 1900, he came to St. Louis in 1912 with his parents. His
father owned an importing business at the corner of Eighth and Market Streets, the heart of Hop Alley. Growing up in Chinatown, Charles Quinn spoke both fluent Cantonese and English. Like Joe Lin, he was also a restaurant proprietor. At his restaurant, Shanghai Café at 6314 Delmar Boulevard, he also sold Chinese art objects as a sideline of his business.63

As a prominent businessman, Charles Quinn enjoyed not only social respect but also economic comfort. He and his family lived at 434 Melville Avenue, in a colonial brick house handsomely furnished with just a touch of the Orient in vases and ornaments. A new Pontiac parked outside his house further indicated his economic well-being. Charles Quinn and his wife, Lum Shee, had one son, Chu Wah Chu, and two daughters, Rose Chu and Peggy Chu. All his children received a college education. His elder daughter, Rose, a graduate of Washington University School of Dress Design, married Man Hing Au, a graduate of the Washington University School of Medicine in 1949.64

Tall and with a pleasant manner, Charles Quinn gradually emerged as a leader of Chinatown. Even though he had been president of the St. Louis On Leong Association since 1940, he was referred to as the Mayor of Chinatown only after Joe Lin’s death in 1947. Like Joe Lin, Charles Quinn also expanded the influence of Chinese in St. Louis during his tenure as president of the St. Louis On Leong Association and president of the National Association of On Leong from 1938 to 1948, through a series of activities, especially the National Convention of On Leong held in St. Louis in April 1949.65

Although his presidency of On Leong Association ended in 1950, Charles Quinn remained influential and was known as the Mayor of Chinatown till his death in 1976. News reports from time to time portrayed Charles Quinn as a powerful leader of Chinatown. Dickson Terry, a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, interviewed Charles Quinn in December 1950. During the interview, Charles Quinn explained On Leong’s functions to Terry. When asked about the Communist takeover in China, Charles Quinn said that the entire St. Louis Chinese population was anti-Communist and they were going to hold an anti-Communist parade, as On Leongs in other cities had already done.66 This statement was Charles Quinn’s attempt to protect members of On Leong from investigation by the FBI (in the Red Scare climate in the early 1950s) for Communist sympathizers.67

Charles Quinn retired in 1961 from his restaurant business and died in 1976 of a heart ailment at the Clayton House Health Care Home, at
the age of seventy-six. With Charles Quinn’s death, and more importantly, with the emergence of a new social organization, the St. Louis Chinese Society, primarily comprising Chinese professionals, On Leong was slowly and gradually losing its control over and influence on the Chinese community in St. Louis. The age of the Mayors of Chinatown ended.

Among the Mayors of Chinatown, Joe Lin and Charles Quinn Chu were the more dominant figures, influential not only within but also outside the Chinese community. However, they did not forge a long-term familial clout in the Chinese community like the aristocratic families of Moy, Wong, and Lin did in Chicago’s Chinatown, as indicated in Adam McKeown’s study of the Chinese communities in Peru, Chicago, and Hawaii. The rivalry of the dominant clans in Chicago, first between the Moys and the Wongs and later between the Moys and the Lins, resulted in tong fights, murders, and community political disunity. In St. Louis, the lack of the major feuding clans helped On Leong operate as a unified community political structure.

HEADQUARTERS OF ON LEONG

On Leong’s headquarters were moved several times during its history. In the early years, voluntary relocation was a result of the growing need of the Chinese community in St. Louis for more space to facilitate the various functions of On Leong. After 1966, when Hop Alley was demolished under urban renewal programs, the forced removal of On Leong headquarters reflected the discriminatory nature of urban renewal, which demanded clearance of the districts where ethnic minorities resided, deeming them unsafe and unsanitary and therefore doomed. Meanwhile, the forced removal of On Leong headquarters also indicates the powerlessness and lack of resources and means of On Leong in fighting discrimination and social injustice.

The First Headquarters at 20A South Eighth Street (1914–1948)

The headquarters was first located at 20A South Eighth Street from 1914 to 1948. The building included meeting rooms upstairs and a Chinese grocery store downstairs. The grocery store was first owned by Wing Chong Tai Company from 1914 to 1917, and then Yen Lung & Company from 1918 to 1944. During the first decades of the twentieth century, South Eighth Street was the busiest street within the commercial
area of Chinatown. In addition to Yen Lung & Company, there were also other Chinese grocery stores such as Quong Hong Fat (or Quong Hong Frat, Fat Quong Hong) at 19 South Eighth Street, Quong Sun Wah Company (or Wah Quong Sun) at 16 South Eighth Street, Sang Fat Company at 27 South Eighth Street, Wah Chong Lung & Company at 23 South Eighth Street, Wah Hing Lung Company at 21 South Eighth Street, Wah Yee & Company at 13 South Eighth Street, and Yee Yuen (or Yuen Yee, Yuen Lee) at 17 South Eighth Street. Meanwhile, the Chinese community in St. Louis maintained a steady population of over three hundred in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Centrally located on Eighth Street, the heart of Hop Alley, the headquarters of On Leong was a convenient place for Chinese to congregate. There the On Leong Association held its board meetings, and clansmen gathered to celebrate the Chinese New Year. In 1936, the largest celebration of the Chinese New Year in the history of the Chinese in St. Louis took place in the headquarters of On Leong. Over three hundred Chinese crowded the meeting hall on New Year’s Day. The spirit of festivity was everywhere in Chinatown. The owners of Chinese stores placed bowls of candied fruits, lily roots, and tangerines for anyone who wanted them. The Chinese children on the street received lucky money wrapped in red paper from adults. Firecrackers were set and a dragon dance was performed. About fifteen men paraded under the dragon costume. The man in the head led the crew in a conga line down the street.


In September 1948, to better serve the community and to prepare for the national convention to be held in St. Louis the following year, On Leong planned to move its headquarters from 20A South Eighth Street to a bigger property. A property at 720–24 Market Street, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Gus Katcher, was for sale. The Chinese already owned several other structures on the east side of Eighth Street, and south of Market Street. The purchase of the building on the Market corner would consolidate Chinese holdings north to the main traffic artery. The board members, including Charles Quinn (president), Yee Hing (vice president), and Joe Jones (secretary-treasurer), looked at the property and decided to purchase it. The deal was mediated by real estate agent George H. Streiff. After necessary negotiations, On Leong agreed to pay $100,000 for the building. The building was a two-story brick structure
with 12,000 square feet of floor space, including five stores on the first floor and a number of meeting rooms above. The meeting rooms were planned to accommodate the eight hundred members expected to attend the convention.\textsuperscript{73}

On 2 April 1949, the annual National Convention of On Leong Merchants and Laborers Association opened as planned. The newly finished building with its modern design was furnished with handsome teakwood chairs and desks and expensive Oriental rugs. A fourteen-course dinner of Chinese delicacies, including shark-fin soup and abalone with oyster sauce, and lavish Chinese music entertained 125 delegates and their wives and children from twenty cities in the East and Midwest states.\textsuperscript{74} The leisurely three-week-long convention impressed national delegates and promoted St. Louis Chinese businesses. It is important to note that the wealth displayed by On Leong at the convention was in sharp contrast to most Chinese in St. Louis, who were earning about $30 a month then. The concentration of Chinese economic power enhanced On Leong’ social and political control over the community.

After the convention, the headquarters of On Leong continued to facilitate activities of the community. The Chinese Youth Association, for instance, utilized the meeting rooms for its monthly dance party. Annie Leong’s family restaurant, Asian Café, moved from 714 Market Street to the downstairs of the On Leong headquarters in 1949. On weekends, Annie and her friends would go upstairs to attend the parties held by the Chinese Youth Association in the large meeting room of On Leong headquarters.\textsuperscript{75}

The most elaborate and important activities held in the headquarters were the annual Chinese New Year celebrations. On 27 January 1952, about fifty guests attended the celebration of the 4,650th Chinese New Year. The association served Chinese oyster soup and Charles Quinn delivered a speech addressing his hope to see China freed from Communist rule.\textsuperscript{76}

On 7 February 1959, about one hundred members of On Leong celebrated the 4,657th Chinese New Year. In keeping with Chinese tradition, no women were invited to the ceremony at the headquarters, although they could attend a more elaborate celebration a few weeks later. The ceremony started before midnight. The men, nearly all of them born in China, solemnly walked toward a shrine at the end of the meeting room. The statue of Guan Gong, protector of merchants, was placed in the center of the shrine. Before the idol were three delicate cups filled
Figure 1. The co-presidents of On Leong Robert Chu and Hai Leong ringing the gong to start the Chinese New Year, 5 February 1959. Courtesy of St. Louis Mercantile Library.

with wine. In front of the cups, two red candles were burning, with a jar of sand in between. The men bowed to their protector and then lit aromatic joss sticks that they propped in the sand. Hai Leang, president of On Leong, struck a brass gong to start the Chinese New Year. Following the ritual, the men were served a dinner of oyster and seaweed soup, and variety of vegetable dishes.

In 1962, the fifty-ninth annual National Convention of On Leong was held in St. Louis. From 19–23 April 104 delegates from thirteen Eastern and Midwestern states gathered at the headquarters of On Leong. The primary business of the convention was to hear and give advice or judgment on problems among Chinese in individual communities. Al Delugach, a reporter from the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, visited the convention and wrote an article depicting the event:
They take their food seriously. Serious enough to import five Chinese cooks from Chicago to fix their vittles. Some of the delicacies they whip up are shark fin soup, chicken stuffed with bird’s nest, abalone sauté with oyster sauce, steamed imported Chinese black mushrooms and other goodies . . . It’s a men-only affair. All the men we talked to were genially uncommunicative about the sort of problems that actually are dealt with. They would smile and reply something like: “Any problem.”

Miss Leong, 27, who manages the Asia Restaurant downstairs, gave us some additional help: “‘On Leong’ means peaceful,” she pointed out. “If they have problems and don’t know what to do or if there is a dispute about payment of debts, they go to one of the two co-presidents instead of going to a lawyer. The men at the meetings hear the story—like a jury. They consult and the co-presidents hand down a decision. You know, we Chinese like to keep our problems within our community and solve them ourselves.”
Figure 3. Nin Young and Jim Leong, co-presidents of On Leong, and Annie Leong of the Asian Food Products Co., celebrated Year of the Sheep with the ceremonial wine, 5 February 1967. Courtesy of St. Louis Mercantile Library.

Three staffs on the roof fly the American, the Chinese, and the On Leong Tong flags.

Colored lights and red-white-and-blue bunting drape the outside walls. Inside the front door, at the foot of a broad staircase, flowers are banked. A stack of empty cartons near the door are marked: "made in Japan."
Upstairs are curved teakwood furniture, incense burners, red drapes, a Gwan Gung (protector of merchants) idol and hosts of flowers.

Before a gong signaled the start of the daily business session and our departure, we observed that the delegates’ places bore white pads of paper, fresh-sharpened pencils and ashtrays—just like the more usual businessmen’s conventions. The only difference: the name tags were in Chinese characters.78

This convention was probably one of the last major events organized by the St. Louis On Leong. In the 1960s, St. Louis began its urban renewal. Hop Alley was leveled to make way for the parking garage of the Busch Stadium project. As early as 1963, there had been discussions about the relocation of Chinatown, and the sad news affected the annual celebration of the Chinese New Year. Chinatown residents wondered if this would be their last time in what was left of the old Chinatown at Eighth and Market streets. Annie Leong, born in 1935 behind the On Leong headquarters, expressed the feeling of loss among the Chinese residents. “I hate to see this place go. I’m the last of the Chinatown babies.”79 The leaders of On Leong were also uncertain about where the headquarters would be moved. Co-presidents Ing Hong and Wai Lee and Secretary Joe Jone had no immediate plan for the future of the headquarters. “We don’t know when we have to get out,” Jone said to Beulah Schacht, a reporter from the St. Louis Globe-Democrat.80

That sense of loss dominated Chinese residents of St. Louis during the following years. In 1965, the celebration of New Year was dampened and reported as a “mourning” of passing of the Chinese tradition, since the old Chinatown and On Leong had been associated with the preservation of Chinese customs. The St. Louis Chinese community was afraid that, with the physical removal of Chinatown, Chinese tradition would disappear as well. Nin Young, president of On Leong that year, expressed his anguish towards the removal of Chinatown. “This neighborhood is our home. We are going to stay as long as we can.”81

On Leong was still holding on both physically and psychologically in 1965, when seventy-five percent of the buildings bounded by Seventh, Eighth, Market, and Walnut streets had been purchased by the Civic Center Redevelopment Corp., the agency in charge of urban renewal. The city officials then negotiated with On Leong to purchase the two buildings owned by the association on South Eighth Street. On Leong was hesitant, for it had just spent $75,000 to remodel the headquarters. Dozens of hand-carved teakwood chairs inlaid with marble had been imported from Hong Kong to beautify the meeting rooms. The associa-
tion once had planned to construct two new buildings on property it owned on the west side of South Eighth Street. It had planned to put Chinese stores on the first floor and apartments for Chinese on the second floor. The leaders of On Leong were also concerned about the old residents. About thirty elderly Chinese men lived in apartments above the shops on South Eighth Street and in two buildings bordering Hop Alley behind the Asian Cafe owned by Annie Leong. Nin Young said it would be difficult to find a place where all the old generation could live near one another.\textsuperscript{82} Annie Leong expressed the same concern. “I was born in this building. It’s home and I don’t want to leave. I think some of the older Chinese people will be lost when they’re forced to move out of this block. I guess I feel like a landmark myself. This neighborhood with its closely-knit, old-fashioned Chinese families built character, juvenile delinquency didn’t exist in Chinatown.”\textsuperscript{83}

The feeling of uncertainty continued till the end of 1965, when On Leong finally bought a building at 1509 Delmar, the old R. E. Funsten Company nut-packing plant. Vacating the headquarters was emotionally difficult, and for that reason the celebration of Chinese New Year in 1966 was canceled.\textsuperscript{84} On Leong chose 4 August 1966 as its moving day. Beulah Schacht, the reporter from the \textit{St. Louis Globe-Democrat}, recorded the sad moment.

I’ve been following the Chinese around our old little Chinatown, an area which once stretched from Seventh to Ninth streets and bounded by Market and Walnut streets, for so long they opened the door and let me see the moving-day mess. But, they moved so quietly to their new quarters that a policeman came in right on my heels and said: “You should tell somebody. We didn’t know you were here.”

All through the years, on very special occasions, the association has received gifts from China and from other associations in the United States — gifts which would be impossible to replace. They were housed for so long in the headquarters at 720 Market St., there are tears in the eyes of the old-timers when they are reminded of the move.

The precious carved teakwood chairs are covered with the usual “moving dust,” the intricately embroidered silk banners have been carefully placed on the very long ceremonial table, and the shrine which houses Gwan Gung, protector of merchants, has been given special care.

Framed embroidered silks have been carefully stacked against walls but there was no sign of the big gong which is sounded shortly before midnight to celebrate the arrival of the Chinese New Year.

Annie Leong, who has called the new headquarters “the Chinese nut
Figure 4. At the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association headquarters in the 1500 block of Delmar boulevard were cards with names of persons who had donated funds to the association, 14 February 1972. Courtesy of St. Louis Mercantile Library

...house,” said it’s going to be very difficult to make it take on the appearance of the old one.85

Two weeks after the move, like the rest of the buildings in the area, the old headquarters was torn down to make way for commercial developments connected with the downtown stadium project.86 The physical disappearance of Chinatown and the removal of the headquarters of On Leong largely contributed to the decline of On Leong and its influence in the Chinese community.

WAR EFFORTS AND ON LEONG

In 1931, the Japanese invaded Manchuria, China. The Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek stressed its policy of “unification before resistance,” insisting that only after completely eliminating the Communist party and its influence on China could the Nationalist government organize an effective resistance against the Japanese invasion. Meanwhile, the League of Nations condemned the Japanese aggression,
but without taking any effective action to stop the aggressors. Encouraged by the hesitation and ineffectiveness of the Chinese Nationalist government and the lack of international sanction, Japan expanded its war by waging a full-fledged war against China on 7 July 1937.

When news of the Japanese invasion reached America, Chinese communities throughout the country rose to organize fundraisers to assist China’s war effort. Six Companies called an emergency meeting on 21 September 1931, immediately after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The meeting gathered representatives of ninety-one Chinese organizations throughout America. It resulted in the founding of the China War Relief Association of America, which ultimately included forty-seven chapters in the Western Hemisphere. The most urgent business of the association was to raise money for the war effort in China. One effective means was the “Bowl of Rice Movement,” which was the collective effort of Chinese in America to raise funds and collect supplies to send to China during the war.87

Chinese in St. Louis joined the collective effort at once under the leadership of On Leong Merchants and Laborers Association. On Leong formed its fundraising committee with Joe Lin, president of On Leong at the time, as its treasurer. Although suffering from the economic de-
pression, the Chinese in St. Louis enthusiastically and generously contributed to the sacred cause. Joe Lin described the fundraising activity through the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* of 14 October 1938. "We are accepting subscriptions from anyone. A lot of Americans who patronized my restaurant voluntarily have given me small sums from time to time. Most of the money being raised is from Chinese, however. As treasurer of the fund I transmit money from it at intervals to a New York bank, which in turn sends it to a bank in China. While it is not as much as is being raised in other cities where there are larger populations of Chinese, yet every little bit helps." According to Lin, there were 350 Chinese residing in St. Louis and many of them were comparatively poor. Nevertheless, all were giving as much as they could each week.

In addition to collecting regular individual contributions, On Leong also organized many fundraisers. On 17 June 1938, a Bowl of Rice fundraising party was held at Hotel Chase by the St. Louis Committee of the United Council for Civilian Relief in China. Joe Lin and the Rev. Phillip Y. Lee of the Chicago Chinese Christian Church spoke, and a total of 250 St. Louisans, most of whom were Chinese, attended. Chinese musicians performed and Chinese boys and girls served tea to the guests. As the news report indicated, the fundraiser was a great success.89

According to the 11 August 1939 *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Chinese in St. Louis contributed about $1,000 weekly to support China’s war efforts. Charles Quinn, secretary of the Chinese Emergency Relief Society, said the contributions had been made weekly since the Japanese invasion in July 1937. The Chinese gave a certain percentage of their income. The same system was employed throughout the United States and other countries. From July 1937 to July 1939, Chinese in the United States contributed $15 million, and those in Canada gave $13 million. Approximately $500,000 was used to purchase weapons to fight the Japanese.90

On Leong’s minutes recorded that in 1944, it raised $35,000 to $50,000 to aid China’s war effort. Many individuals contributed from $500 to $1,000. Given the fact that most Chinese then worked for $30 a month, their contributions were enormous.91

**ASSESSMENT OF ON LEONG**

The dominance of On Leong Merchants and Laborers Association in St. Louis was a complex phenomenon. Unlike the hierarchical structure
in traditional China, the power of the Chinese immigrant society in America was controlled by businessmen who possessed better education and economic means and thus were able to emerge as community leaders. Although publicly known as On Leong Tong, On Leong was by no means an organization connected with tong wars. The formation and dominance of On Leong was not a result of the cultural peculiarity of the Chinese who had been falsely charged with forming secret societies and committing the crimes of gambling, smuggling, tong-fighting, and prostitution. On the contrary, the emergence and existence of On Leong, as with other prominent Chinese community organizations, stemmed from the socioeconomic environment of America. As immigrants and a socioeconomically and legally oppressed group, the Chinese received protection from neither the Chinese government nor American authorities. Without protection necessary for survival in a strange land, the Chinese had to rely on their own resources, and consequently On Leong emerged as an organization to meet the social, economic, and legal needs of the Chinese immigrants.

Although its reputation had been tainted by criminal activities committed by some members, On Leong was generally a benevolent-protective trade and community organization as well as a powerful group of businessmen within the Chinese community. This benevolent-protective nature bears resemblance to Chinese community organizations such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and other traditional Chinatown community organizations. Meanwhile, the power of business leaders over the community also suggests the hierarchical characterization of the Chinese immigrant society in St. Louis, and probably Chinese communities everywhere else.

The various functions of On Leong are similar to those of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. During the time when On Leong was powerful and predominant, it made a great effort to protect its members on all fronts. It maintained peace and order in the Chinese community by acting as an unofficial and despotic self-governing body for Chinatown. On Leong represented the Chinese community and negotiated with American authorities in legal disputes and socioeconomic interactions. It provided translation aid, lodging accommodation, and business assistance for new immigrants. On Leong also organized various celebrations of traditional Chinese holidays and significant occasions. It dutifully performed the funeral and burial ceremonies of its deceased members in local cemeteries and handled the shipping of remains to China for reburial. The legal, social, economic, cultural, and
spiritual functions of On Leong were invaluable and much needed in the Chinese community at a time when Chinese were segregated from the mainstream society and were vulnerable to physical attacks and social ridicule of the larger society.

On the other hand, the protective and hierarchical nature of On Leong prevented it from reaching out and bridging the gap between the Chinese community and the larger society and between the two cultures. The protection provided by On Leong was not only necessary for the social and economic functioning of the community, but essential for the commercial success of the business leaders. Thus, the self-confinement nature of On Leong was shaped by the alienating socioeconomic environment in the larger society and the socioeconomic hierarchy within the Chinese community as well.

The Mayors of Chinatown, like most of their counterparts in other Chinese communities across the country, were chiefly benevolent community leaders. Their better educational training, English language skills, and financial ability enabled them to emerge as leaders of the Chinese immigrant enclave. The colorful personal characteristics and the individual life of each of the community leaders reflected the gradually changing socioeconomic and cultural elements in both the motherland and the host society.

The forced physical removal of the On Leong headquarters clearly reveals the limitations of On Leong’s self-defense and self-governing strategies, and its lack of political clout in the larger society. This displacement also indicates the racial bias and bureaucratic limitations of urban renewal policies. In conclusion, with all its positive and negative effects, On Leong played a significant role among Chinese in St. Louis prior to 1966 when Hop Alley, St. Louis’s historical Chinatown, finally vanished in the dust and debris of old buildings razed as a result of urban renewal.

NOTES

* The author wishes to thank the two anonymous readers for their constructive comments on the manuscript, and the editor for his encouragement. A book-length study of the Chinese American community in St. Louis with substantial coverage of On Leong by the author, entitled Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community, will be published by Temple University Press in 2004.

1. On Leong’s official name was On Leong Tong Chinese Merchant Association when it registered with the City of St. Louis in 1912, and later it was listed as On Leong Chinese Merchants and Laborers Association in its 1919 corporation deed. See “On Leong Tong Chinese Merchants Association,” Corporations Book


4. Eng Ying Gong and Bruce Grant, Tong War (New York, 1930), 157.


6. Kuo-lin Chen, Hua Ren Bang Pai [The Chinatown Gangs] (Taipei, 1995), 42–43. Chen’s study states that On Leong was formed in 1894, and in a few years its headquarters was moved to New York. So in terms of the founding year of On Leong, Gong and Chen are consistent. Historically, On Leong has been a national organization of Chinese immigrants primarily existing in Eastern and Midwestern states. Presently, it has over twenty branches in the Eastern and Midwest. For more information on the recent activities of On Leong, see, for example, The World Journal, 27 December 2001.

7. Chung Kok Li, president of On Leong, interview by the author, 12 October 1998, transcripts and tape recording, Bridgeton, MO.


11. “75 Years Ago — Thursday, June 8, 1892,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat, 9 June 1867.


15. Ibid., 37.


17. Chen, Hua Ren, 42–43.


19. Ibid., 27.


22. The reasons why the Chinese Six Companies did not penetrate into the Chinese urban communities in the Midwest remains unknown. I have attempted to find answers for the question, but have not yet succeeded.


24. Ibid.


26. Li, interview; Don Ko, interview with the author, 19 October 1998, St. Louis.


28. Li, interview.


31. Li, interview.


34. For a related study see Sue Fawn Chung’s article “Between Two Worlds: The Zhigongtang and Chinese American Funerary Rituals,” which details the funerary rituals performed by Zhigongtang (Chih Kung Tong).


36. Ko, interview.

37. In recent decades, the Chinese Six Companies have carried out some reforms, ranging from sponsoring programs improving conditions in Chinatowns, to moving toward greater political involvement in American society, to including women in their offices. On 29 December 1996, Ye Lili, a journalist who emigrated from Taiwan in 1974, was elected by Renhe Huiguan as its representative to the board of governors in the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA). Ye thus became one of the fifty-five board members and the first female in the office since the foundation of the CCBA. See *The World Journal*, 5 January 1997.


42. Lai, “Historical Development.”
45. Lai, “Historical Development.”
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
60. “Chinese Here Aiding Homeland.”
62. Ibid.
65. Note that Charles Quinn’s term (1938–1948) as president of the National On Leong Association overlapped with that of Joe Lin’s (1937–1947). The overlapping of their services might be an error in one of the newspaper articles quoted in the study.
66. “St. Louis Chinese denounce the Reds.”
67. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
73. “Chinese Group Buys a $100,000 Building Here,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 12 September 1948; “Chinese Pay $100,000 for Building Here,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 12 September 1948. The first article quoted “8,000 members expected to attend” which I suspect to be a typographical error for 800, as a later article reported that 125 delegates actually attended the convention.
75. Leong, interview.
77. “St. Louis Chinese Wishing You ‘Kung Hsi Fa Tsai’,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 8 February 1959.
80. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
91. Li, interview.