

# The Honourable Benjamin Wong-Tape, OBE, JP Charter Secretary of Hong Kong Rotary Club in 1930

By Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian)

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*Benjamin Wong-Tape 黃炳耀*

## Birth of The Rotary Club of Hong Kong

The British Crown Colony Hong Kong located at the south China coast was the first prospect of Rotary International to extend Rotary landing on the continent of Asia. The story has to be dated back to June 1918. However, failure reports were received after several attempts not until the visit of Jim to Hong Kong in 1930---the last goal of his Far East Rotary Extension Mission in two and a half years. The birth of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong (香港扶輪社) was given by the voluntary mission of Past President “Jim” James Wheeler Davidson of Calgary Rotary Club, Alberta, Canada, and who was the 3rd Vice-President of Rotary International in 1926-1927, with the assistance of his wife Lillian and daughter Marjory. Jim was an explorer, writer, United States diplomat, merchant and philanthropist. Affectionately, Jim was honoured as “The Marco Polo of Rotary” who established most of the first Rotary clubs in countries of the Orient.

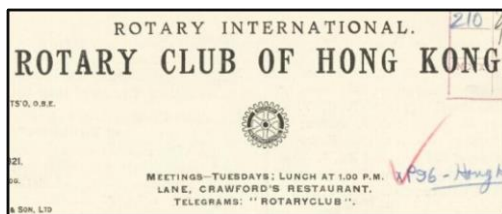
In overcoming the previous experiences of failure by others, Jim’s first approach to each new country would be contact of the government officials from whom he had letters of introduction. He approached the difficult problem in Hong Kong without any fears of failure. He was fortunate in the fact that the new Governor, Sir William Peel, had come to Hong Kong from Kuala Lumpur, The Federated Malay States, and that he had attended the official inauguration meeting of Kuala Lumpur Rotary Club in 1929 there. As he was seated next to Jim at that dinner meeting, Jim was able to tell Sir William much about Rotary.

With eight introduction letters issued by Governor Sir William Peel (香港總督貝璐爵士), Jim was able to invite a group of potential members to the organizing meetings through the efforts of leading citizens, Dr. Robert Hormus Kotewall (羅旭龢博士), William Edward Leonard Shenton, William Woodward Hornell, Dr. Arthur W. Woo (胡惠德醫生), etc.

Sir William Woodward Hornell (康寧爵士), Kt, CIE, MA, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong (香港大學校長) (1924-1937), was elected Charter President of the Hong Kong Rotary Club. There were 2 joint club secretaries elected: (1) Leonard Charles Fenton Bellamy, MC, AMIEE, MInstT; and (2) Benjamin Wong-Tape (黃炳耀太平紳士), JP, who was responsible for the communication with the Chinese communities, with the Chinese news press in particular. Holding the Classification “Insurance – Life Insurance”, Wong-Tape was the General Manager and Regional Secretary of Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada (加拿大永明人壽保險公司).

The inaugural dinner meeting of the Hong Kong Rotary Club was held on Tuesday, 8 December 1930, at the Lane Crawford restaurant (The Café Wiseman) in the basement of the newly built Exchange House, the center of industry and finance in Hong Kong. The charter members included 79 of the leading citizens: 31 Chinese, 46 Americans and Europeans, 1 Indian and 1 Japanese. The Club was admitted to Rotary International on 20 February 1931.

Within the Great Chinese Region, Hong Kong Rotary Club remains today the oldest with more than 80 years of regular weekly meetings. The Club is the home of most number of Rotary International officers, including vice-president, director, administrative advisors, and district governors, and was also the home of 13 knights bachelor invested by the sovereign of the British Empire.



## New Zealander Wong-Tape

Benjamin Wong-Tape (黃炳耀), also named Wong Ben-Yew, OBE, JP (26 December 1875 - 16 June 1967) was born in Dunedin, New Zealand, the eldest child of Forsigh Wong-Tape and his second wife Hie Toy. Forsigh, a merchant from Sunning County, Kwantung Province, Ch'ing Empire (大清國廣東省新寧縣) (now Taishan City of Guangdong Province, China 中國廣東省台山市), had led an early group of Cantonese gold-seekers to Otago. Forsigh and Hie Toy were married by Donald Stuart, the minister of Knox Church, on 20 March 1875, immediately following Hie Toy's arrival in Dunedin.

### Early Life

### Birth and Family Background

Benjamin (Ben) grew up amid New Zealand's Chinese community during a period of anti-Chinese sentiment and restrictive immigration policies. Ben expanded his father's trading operations, dealing in commodities like tea and silk, while navigating colonial-era barriers to Chinese enterprise.

Ben's father Forsigh established commercial ventures that bridged New Zealand and the Ch'ing Empire (China), including the Hip Fong Tie Store (協豐泰) in Dunedin and an export

office in Hong Kong, underscoring the family's ongoing ties to their ancestral homeland. He had a prior family in China, which included at least one son, Wong King-Yip, who immigrated to New Zealand around 1889 and became a half-brother to Benjamin. With Hie Toy, Forsigh fathered at least seven children, among whom Benjamin was the firstborn. Later family members included a younger brother, Wong Ben-Chung, and likely four sisters, though specific names for the sisters are not well-documented in available records.

The family's position within New Zealand's early Chinese immigrant community reflected the challenges and opportunities of the era, with Forsigh's entrepreneurial activities in trade and gold-related pursuits providing a foundation amid growing anti-Chinese sentiments. Hie Toy and several children eventually returned to China, highlighting the transnational nature of many Chinese families in the diaspora during this period.

## Education in New Zealand and Hong Kong

Ben received his early education in local schools in Dunedin, New Zealand, benefiting from a curriculum emphasizing English language proficiency amid the era's emphasis on assimilation for Chinese immigrant children. This foundational schooling equipped him with basic literacy and numeracy skills in an environment where formal education for Chinese New Zealanders was limited but accessible in urban centers like Dunedin.

Around 1887, at approximately age 12, Ben accompanied his father to Hong Kong, where he enrolled in Victoria College (維多利亞書院), a government institution later renamed Queen's College (皇仁書院) until today. This secondary education in Hong Kong provided a more structured English-medium program, focusing on academic subjects and moral instruction typical of Anglo-Chinese schools, which aimed to cultivate bilingual elites among overseas Chinese communities. At Victoria College, Ben won the Belilios Scholarship and passed the Oxford local examination. Following his father's death, Ben returned to New Zealand in 1891 and attended Otago Boys' High School in 1892.

Ben's dual educational experiences reflected the transnational mobility of early Chinese merchant families, bridging New Zealand's settler colonial system---where Chinese pupils faced occasional segregation but pursued standard curricula---with Hong Kong's hybrid Anglo-Chinese schooling under British rule. No records indicate advanced tertiary studies, but his "good English education" was noted as instrumental in navigating business and legal contexts.

## Professional Career in New Zealand

### Entry into Trade and Merchant Activities

Ben entered the mercantile trade through his family's established business Hip Fong Tie. The firm, operational in Dunedin, imported goods such as tea, opium, silk, fireworks, fancy items, and Chinese foodstuffs and beverages to serve the Chinese mining communities in Otago and Southland, while also extending loans to local Chinese residents.

Ben rejoined the family enterprise more actively upon his permanent return to New Zealand in 1898, partnering with his half-brother, Wong King-Yip, who managed daily operations in Dunedin. Ben focused on fieldwork, traveling extensively to Chinese settlements across Otago and Southland to conduct sales, distribute goods, and build networks among miners and

laborers, leveraging his bilingual skills as an English-Chinese interpreter to facilitate transactions and resolve disputes.

This involvement marked Ben's transition from education to commerce, building on his early exposure to trade during frequent childhood travels between New Zealand and Hong Kong alongside his father, who maintained an export office in Hong Kong to supply the Otago market. By insuring his traditional pigtail for £1,000 against potential vandalism by anti-Chinese elements, Ben demonstrated both his commitment to cultural identity and awareness of the social hostilities faced by Chinese merchants in colonial New Zealand. His role quickly elevated him to prominence within Dunedin's Chinese community, where Hip Fong Tie served as a vital economic lifeline amid restrictive immigration policies and local prejudices.

### Business Operations in Otago and Southland

Upon returning to Dunedin in 1898, Ben joined his half-brother, Wong King-Yip, in managing the family firm Hip Fong Tie, a prominent importer and merchant operation centered in the city. Hip Fong Tie also extended loans to Chinese customers, functioning as an informal banking service within Dunedin's Chinese quarter, which supported local miners and laborers during the post-gold rush era.

Ben's operations extended beyond Dunedin through frequent travels to Chinese settlements across Otago and into Southland, where he built networks as a trader and intermediary for goods distribution. These regions, remnants of the 1860s Otago goldfields influx, hosted dispersed Chinese populations engaged in mining, market gardening, and small-scale commerce, creating demand for imported provisions that Hip Fong Tie fulfilled. While Wong King-Yip handled much of the Dunedin-based administration, Ben's mobility enabled direct engagement with rural and southern communities, fostering trade links as far as Invercargill in Southland, though specific branch operations there were limited compared to the central Otago hub.

By the early 1900s, Ben had established a reputation in Otago as a reliable merchant and interpreter, leveraging bilingual skills to negotiate imports and resolve disputes for Chinese clients. The firm's model relied on connections to the father's earlier export office in Hong Kong, facilitating bidirectional trade that exported New Zealand produce like wool and gold in exchange for Asian commodities. This period of activity lasted until 1905, when Ben departed New Zealand permanently, leaving the Otago-Southland operations under family oversight amid shifting economic conditions for Chinese traders.

### Navigation of Anti-Chinese Policies and Discrimination

Ben benefited from New Zealand citizenship by birth, exempting him from restrictive immigration measures like the poll tax introduced under the Chinese Immigrants Act 1881, which targeted arriving Chinese laborers and merchants with fees up to £100 by 1900 to curb population inflows. This status allowed him unrestricted travel between New Zealand and Hong Kong, facilitating his management of the family firm Hip Fong Tie.

Despite legal privileges, Ben encountered pervasive social discrimination and anti-Chinese hostility in late 19th-century Otago, where gold rush-era resentments lingered, manifesting in harassment by "larrikins" (youthful rowdies) who targeted visible Chinese cultural markers. Ben navigated these barriers through bilingual proficiency and strategic networking, honed via English-language education at Otago Boys' High School and earlier Hong Kong schooling,

enabling him to serve as a trusted interpreter for Chinese residents in legal and commercial dealings often marred by linguistic mistrust and bias. His peripatetic trade across Otago and Southland Chinese enclaves, coupled with cultivating endorsements from Dunedin elites by 1905, built a reputation that transcended ethnic animus, allowing business expansion without evident regulatory sabotage under local ordinances restricting Chinese mining claims or urban residency.

Ben was a professed Christian. Although baptized a Presbyterian, he was most active among Baptists and Methodists: a veiled attack on his parents' lifestyle, highlighted cultural snobbery by the Presbyterian minister Alexander Don in his 1898 book 《Under Six Flags》 was, no doubt, partly the cause of this. Yet Ben responded by aligning with Baptist and Methodist circles, leveraging Christian identity to foster alliances in a society where anti-Chinese rhetoric often invoked moral and economic “threats”. His eventual 1905 departure to Hong Kong reflected accumulated strains but also capitalized on transnational ties, preserving wealth accrued despite discriminatory headwinds that confined many Chinese to marginal roles.

## Relocation and Later Career in Hong Kong

### Move to Hong Kong and Initial Settlement

In 1905, Ben relocated permanently from Dunedin to the British Crown Colony Hong Kong, departing New Zealand for the final time at the age of 30, motivated by a combination of expanding business opportunities and family considerations. He arrived with endorsements from prominent Dunedin figures, reflecting his established reputation as a merchant and interpreter in Otago.

Upon settlement, Ben rejoined his wife, Emma Kwai-Chun (伍貴鑽), whom he had married during a visit to Hong Kong between 1894 and 1898. She had remained there after Ben returned to New Zealand in 1898 to manage family affairs following his father's death.

Ben promptly assumed the position of General Manager and Regional Secretary for an insurance company, Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada, leveraging his commercial experience from New Zealand to establish a foothold in Hong Kong's colonial economy. This period marked his transition from a peripatetic trader to a settled figure bridging British colonial administration and the overseas Chinese elite.

### Expansion of Business Interests

Upon relocating to Hong Kong in 1905, Ben transitioned from merchant trading to a leadership role in the insurance sector until his retirement in 1934. This shift represented a key expansion of his business interests beyond the family-operated Hip Fong Tie import-export firm.

In Hong Kong, Ben first joined China Mutual Life Insurance Company (永年人壽保險公司) which was later acquired in 1923 by Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada (加拿大永明人壽保險公司). He became the General Manager and Regional Secretary. Although he retired in 1934, he was asked by Sun Life in 1945, after the Pacific War, to re-open the Hong Kong Office.

This involvement sustained economic ties with New Zealand exporters, aligning with broader patterns of overseas Chinese merchants diversifying into finance to mitigate trade risks. Ben's business expansion capitalized on Hong Kong's role as a British entrepôt, where insurance facilitated maritime and commercial ventures amid growing Sino-Western trade volumes. His

efforts contributed to stabilizing post-war financial services, though specific firm revenues or client portfolios remain undocumented in primary accounts.

Though the principle profession of Ben was an insurer, he had served since 1947 as Chairman of Directors, On Lok Yuen (安樂園) Biscuits and Confectionery Manufacturers, and restaurant chain, which was also one of the leading ice cream producers. By then, On Lok Yuen already had at least 5 branches in Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, and also had restaurant and manufacturing operations in Canton (*Guangzhou*) (廣州). In 1949, the firm recorded HK\$783,933 in profits. The same year, the Chinese Communists took over Canton and On Lok Yuen's operations in the city were subsequently merged with other private firms to form a state-owned enterprise.



*Advertisements of On Lok Yuen biscuits, chocolate and ice cream*

### Public Service Roles and Honors

Ben faithfully attended church, and was Secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and participated in his spare time a host of public-spirited organizations such as a director of Po Leung Kuk (保良局總理). An early member of the Hong Kong Police Reserve Unit (香港後備警察隊) since 1914, he attained the rank of inspector. The commandant and later Honorary Commissioner (榮譽總監) was Ts'o Seen-Wan (曹善允)---Charter Member and Vice President 1930-1932, President 1932-1933 of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong.

Other than a charter member of the Hong Kong Rotary Club, Ben could be claimed as one of the co-founders of the University of Hong Kong (香港大學). When the then Hong Kong Governor Sir Frederick John Dealtry Lugard (香港總督盧吉爵士) announced the establishment

of a university in Hong Kong in 1908, Sir Ho Kai (何啟爵士) was elected as the Chairman and Ts'o Seen-Wan (曹善允) as the Honorary Secretary of the Chinese Sub-committee to raise the Endowment Fund. Benjamin was one of the members.

In 1925 Ben was appointed an Unofficial Justice of the Peace for Hong Kong (香港非官守太平紳士) by Hong Kong Governor Sir Reginald Edward Stubbs (香港總督司徒拔爵士).

In 1936, by order of Hong Kong Governor Sir Andrew Caldecott (香港總督郝德傑爵士) (Charter President 1929-1930, Rotary Club of Kuala Lumpur, Federated Malay States), Benjamin was appointed one of the first Unofficial Members of the Urban Council (市政局非官守議員) until outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941. Sitting on the same Council were also 4 Rotarian colleagues: (1) William Ngartse Thomas Tam (譚雅士), JP, (Hong Kong Rotary Club President 1936-1937); (2) Roberto A. Basto; (3) Tang Shiu-Kin (鄧肇堅), MBE, OStJ, JP; (4) Li Tse-Fong (李子方). After the War and again in 1946 until 1950, Benjamin's appointment was renewed by Hong Kong Governor Sir Alexander William George Herder Grantham (香港總督葛量洪爵士). The Urban Council was first established as the Sanitary Board (潔淨局) in 1883. On 1 March 1935, the Sanitary Board was reconstituted to carry out the work which remained much the same until Pacific War broke out. The Board was renamed the Urban Council in 1936 when the Government passed the Urban Council Ordinance, which gave legal motive to the already expanding range of services provided by the Council---cleaning, burying the dead, running bath houses and public lavatories, hawker control, the use of bathing beaches throughout Hong Kong, etc.

After the Victory of the Pacific War, on 1 May 1946 during the hand-over ceremony from the military administration of Vice-Admiral Sir Cecil Halliday Jepson Harcourt (海軍中將夏慤爵士), KCB, CBE, of the Royal Navy, Benjamin served as the duty interpreter for the resuming Hong Kong Governor Sir Mark Aitchison Young (香港總督楊慕琦爵士) to translate his speech from English to Chinese. Harcourt received on 16 September 1945 the surrender of Imperial Japan (under Major-General Hisakazu Tanaka 岡田梅吉 and Vice-Admiral Ruitaka Fujitain 藤田類太郎) in the Government House. Then he was the *de facto* Governor of Hong Kong as Commander-in-Chief and Head of the Military Administration until June 1946.

Later in 1948, Benjamin Wong-Tape was appointed Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE), by George VI, King of the United Kingdom and the Dominions of the British Commonwealth. In later years, Ben's prominence earned him invitations as an honored guest at Government House receptions, underscoring his respected public role.

## Personal Life and Legacy

## Family and Relationships

Ben married Emma Kwai-Chun (伍貴鑽) (born 1874) in Hong Kong during one of his early visits there, likely between 1894 and 1898. She remained in Hong Kong upon his return to Dunedin in 1898. The couple had two sons. No records indicate additional marriages or significant personal relationships beyond his immediate family and business ties.

## Death and Posthumous Recognition

The Honourable Rotarian Benjamin Wong-Tape, OBE, JP, died on 16 June 1967, aged 91, was survived by two sons. His wife Emma had died earlier on 30 June 1953. They are interred (together with their son Eric 黃兆良) next to Sir Robert Ho-Tung (何東爵士) in the Hong Kong Cemetery in Section 11B Row 12 Grave No. 3, Happy Valley, Hong Kong Island. The Hocken Collections in Dunedin holds papers and documents of Wong-Tape.

No major posthumous honors or awards are recorded, though his contributions as a Chinese pioneer in New Zealand commerce and public service in Hong Kong have been documented in biographical entries, such as the 《Dictionary of New Zealand Biography》, affirming his historical role despite anti-Chinese discrimination during his active years.

## Historical Significance and Assessments of Achievements

Benjamin Wong-Tape holds historical significance as one of the earliest New Zealand-born individuals of Chinese descent to achieve prominence in trans-Pacific commerce during an era of intensifying anti-Chinese sentiment. His legacy is viewed as a counterpoint to victimhood tropes, illustrating first-mover advantages in niche trades.

Benjamin spoke constantly of Dunedin and New Zealand. Had he stayed, Benjamin would probably had attained a position comparable to that of his compatriot, Choie Sew-Hoy (徐肇開), also known as Charles Sew-Hoy, who was a notable New Zealand merchant, Chinese leader and gold-dredger.



*The joint grave of Mr. Benjamin and Mrs. Emma Wong-Tape in Hong Kong Cemetery, Happy Valley.*

