

Asian American Curriculum Project

An Interview With Brian Tom of The Chinese American Museum of Northern California In Marysville, California

Interviewed by Leonard D. Chan

This coming weekend on March 24 and 25, 2007, Marysville, California will hold its 127th annual Bok Kai Festival. **The Chinese American Museum of Northern California**, in Marysville, will hold its official grand opening to coincide with the Bok Kai celebration.

Here's is our interview with the museum's owner and curator Brian Tom.

Tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, and what you're currently doing.

My family has a long history in California. My grandfather, Hom Kun Foo joined the Gold Rush in 1851, settling in Marysville after striking it rich mining gold. He opened a store in Marysville that stayed open into the 1960's. My Father was born in Marysville. He went to China to study Chinese medicine. He was one of the few, perhaps the only American born Chinese that practiced Chinese medicine during his era. I was also born in Marysville and graduated from the local high school.

I graduated from Berkeley with a BA in political science, then went to law school. I completed my 1st year of law school at Howard University in Washington DC, and transferred to UC Davis. While at Davis, I helped start the Asian American Studies program. I taught the first AAS class in spring, 1969 and three of the first six classes offered in AAS. At the end of the spring, '69, I was appointed Coordinator of the program. As Coordinator, I hired the first professors, designed the courses, set up the physical facilities of the program and taught classes. UC Davis was probably the first AAS program in the country to hire tenure track faculty members.

After graduating from the Davis Law School, I worked for the San Francisco Chinatown office of the Neighborhood Legal Assistance Foundation, and later on, California Rural Legal Assistance. I was in private practice for a number of years in San Francisco. About ten years ago, I started building Asian American houses in the east bay hills. Then two years ago, I started the Chinese American Museum of Northern California.

Asian American houses, care to explain? Also, tell us a little bit about why and how you started the museum.

A few years after the great Oakland fire in 1991, I was driving around the fire area and saw the houses they were building: Spanish Colonial, English Tudor, French Provincial. Where, I asked myself, where's the Asian influence in architecture in the Bay Area? So I made a try to build Asian American houses.

Regarding the start of the museum. That goes back to my days at UC Davis almost forty years ago. My original thought was to start a museum on campus, but for various reasons that did not work out. I was in Marysville visiting one day and it suddenly hit me that the museum belonged in a town where a lot of Chinese American history took place. Sun Yat-sen had stayed in Marysville twice, it was part of General Tsai's tour of America, we had a Chinese Reform Party office in town, a Chee Kung Tong and it is the last Chinatown of Gold Rush California. It is the only Chinatown that dates back to that era that still has active Chinese associations, an active temple, an old Chinese school. So Marysville seems to be an appropriate place to start a Chinese American museum.

Tell us about the Bok Kai Festival, what does it celebrate?

I've heard various stories. I think it is part of the spring festival celebration, though there are some that claim it celebrates the "North God's" birthday.

Approximately when did it get started?

In the 1850's when the Chinese first came to Marysville.

What's the historical significance of the event, the parade, and the Bok Kai temple?

Once a number of the older Chinatown's celebrated the Bok Kai festival. Marysville is the only Chinatown that still maintains this tradition. It is a religious celebration, sponsored by the Chinese community and the Bok Kai Temple. The Bok Kai Temple, founded in 1852 and moved to its present location in 1880, is the only active Chinese temple in the United States that dates back to early California history.

So did your grandfather have a hand in the building of the temples? Are there any good family stories about this?

From family stories, we know he was very active in the temple, but I haven't had a chance to look at any temple records.

Tell us about Bomb Day, describe Bomb Day for our readers.

The main event on Bomb Day is the firing of the bombs at 4pm on Sunday at the intersection of 1st and C streets. The bombs are large fire crackers that have been built so that they will fire a small banner wrapped around a bamboo ring, 100 feet into the air. Waiting to catch the rings are usually 75 to 100 Chinese youths, who compete to catch them. Traditionally, 100 bombs are fired, but in recent years, that number has been reduced to 30 to 35. The banners have a fortune written on them. Whoever catches one will take the banner to the temple. After a donation is made to the temple, the banner is posted on the temple walls until the next Bomb Day.

I was talking to one of my cousins that grew up in Sacramento, her father, my uncle, grew up in Oroville - both towns that are close to Marysville - she told me that she didn't recall ever hearing of Bomb Day. I must admit that my first real awareness of the significance of the event came from one of my Asian American Studies courses. After hearing about the event in class, I finally put it together and realized that my dad had mentioned the event before, but had called it by its Chinese name. Do you hear of similar stories of people that lived near by and never heard of Bomb Day?

What I've heard are stories about how, as a child, many people recall going to Marysville for Bomb Day, because their parents took them. In the thirties, forties, fifties and even sixties, the Marysville Chinatown was still very active. When Bomb Day was celebrated in the old days, the festival lasted a week, with a lot of banquets, gambling, opera singing, lion dancing and other activities so it was a major festival that attracted many in the Chinese American community.

Why should everyone know of this event? What's the historical significance of it? Do you know if people in China ever did something similar to this event? I seem to recall that the reason that it was mentioned in my Asian American studies course was because the event is considered a truly unique "Chinese American" celebration.

I think you are correct, Bomb Day is a Chinese American invention. Today, the Bomb Day celebration in Marysville is the only traditional Chinese celebration in California that dates back to the gold rush. The importance of Bomb Day is the fact that it still survives; that the descendents of the early Chinese American pioneers, facing the anti-Chinese movement, Exclusion and the Red Scare, refused to give up. This is a history all Chinese Americans, including the more recent immigrants, should be familiar with.

One of the interesting things I discovered when I went to the UC Berkeley Bancroft Library's website, which had historic photos from the [Oroville Chinese temple archive](#), was that Chinese Americans have been holding major celebration all over the country and not just in the big cities like San Francisco. I found it particularly fascinating to see how all the town people and not just the Chinese came out to see and participate in the celebrations. In a way, Marysville is carrying on the tradition for all the small towns in America that ever had a Chinese celebration. I was able to catch one Bok Kai parade, but not Bomb Day. I noticed how the non-Chinese community had sort of taken over the celebration and carried on the tradition. In a way, judging by the old Chinese New Year Parade pictures from Oroville, it's always been the whole community's celebration. Isn't this America in a microcosm - multiculturalism at work? What are your feelings about this?

It's true, the Bok Kai parade, which is on Saturday, is now more a celebration by the general community. The major reason for that is the Chinese American community has almost disappeared in Marysville. But even with small numbers they haven't given up. Sunday, the day they fire the bombs, has always been reserved for the more traditional Chinese celebration. In addition to the Bombs, there are lion dances and martial arts demonstrations. I'm hoping the museum will be able to sponsor some of the more traditional aspects of the celebration in the future.

Give us a preview of the panel discussions that will take place at your museum during the 2007 Bok Kai festival on March 24th and 25th. Tell us about your guest speakers and if possible their points of views in regards to the session topics.

Because of my AAS background, we've always been able to attract some very strong academics to the museum during Bomb Day. Ling chi Wang of UC Berkeley and Yong Chen of UC Irvine came last year. Judy Yung of UC Santa Cruz and Greg Mark of Sacramento State will make return appearances this year. Gordon Chang of Stanford will be joining us this year as will Jonathan H.X. Lee, a religion studies PhD candidate. Jonathan will be talking about the Chinese gods and Gordon will talk about his great grandfather, who lived in Marysville in the mid-1800's.

What are some of the points you wish to address and educate your audience on?

I think that much of the history of the Chinese in America is yet to be told. Many historians have forgotten about the importance of politics in Chinese American history. In Marysville, that history is hard to forget. Down the street the Chinese Reform Party set up their headquarters. Across the street was the Chee Kung Tong. The Kuomintang is just next door to the museum. All these were important political organizations that had widespread support in the Chinese American community. Why did Chinese Americans support these organizations? How did they speak to their dreams and aspirations? Much of this history has been forgotten.

The study of history is important not only to understand the past, but also to give us some guidelines towards the future. This idea about studying the past to understand the future is particularly important today because of re-emergence of China on the world scene. A lot of what is going on in China today is made more understandable when we look at Chinese American history.

Will you be recording or transcribing any of the discussions and making it available to the public, maybe even placing it online?

We are looking for a volunteer that will help set up a museum website.

Tell us about your exhibits?

The first exhibit you see as you enter the museum is a replica of an old Chinese general store. The inspiration for the store is an old photograph I have of my grandfather's store. In the old days, the miners would come down from the mountains and go to the general store to get the latest news, send letters, meet their friends and stock

up on supplies. It served as a communications center and I'm hoping the museum will serve the same function as a communications center for those interested in the history of the Chinese in America.

In the hallway leading to the back the exhibition is called "Chinese American History in 10 (Easy) Steps. I highlighted the word easy and also highlighted the two or three key sentences in each step so that it is possible to get the general information just by reading the highlighted parts of each section. For example, in the first section entitled China-Still the Middle Kingdom, the highlighted sentence is "In 1850, China produced 33% of the world's gross national product." There are a number of pictures that illustrate the text. The next exhibition is the special exhibition entitled "The Lost Chinatowns of Old California-Ghost Towns and Survivors." As you enter the room, the ghost towns are on the left and the survivors are on the right. Dividing them are "The Keys to Survival." Then further in the back is an exhibition entitled "Defining the Chinese American Dream" This exhibition is a work in progress. Finally the back room is the restored Sanfow Bean Sprout Plant. The hope is that by going through the museum from front to back, one will get a good sense of the history of the Chinese people in America. There are over 200 photographs on display, many never shown before in public. If one takes his or her time, it could take an hour or two to go through the museum.

What's in the future for your museum? You had mentioned to me once about your desire to making the museum more than just a place to exhibit things, but also a place to facilitate further scholarly research. How's that going?

The museum has a mission of preservation, interpretation, research and communications. At this point we have started the first stage which is to finish the exhibitions and opening the museum. We will be developing the other goals of the museum in the future.

Thank you for this interview and your efforts to preserve a part of Chinese "American" history. I very much look forward to participating in your events and seeing Bomb Day.

<http://www.asianamericanbooks.com/newslets/nl0307.htm>