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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.
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The Tragedy of Asian America

An editorial by Philip Chin

On February 23rd there was controversy when AsianWeek, a California publication by Asian Americans, published an article of Kenneth Eng entitled, "Why I Hate Blacks." I have been questioning the wisdom of the publishers and editors since his previous two articles came out titled: "Proof That Whites Inherently Hate Us" and "Why I Hate Asians." The latter was

especially surprising from a writer with a Chinese surname AND appearing in an Asian American publication. Eng's most recent and hopefully last racist rant was as unworthy of and shameful to all Asian Americans as the first two articles that somehow got printed.

(Continued on page 4)

Give Us Your Feedback

Please feel free to send us your reviews, comments, and book suggestions. You can contact us at - aacpinc@asianamericanbooks.com

Up Coming Events

Here are some events that AACCP will soon be attending. Invite us to your events.

Date/Time	Event	Location
Mar. 24	Shinenkai N. CA JA Seniors	Union City, CA
Mar. 24	4th Annual Academic Success Day	SC Office of Educ. Santa Clara, CA
Mar. 24-25	127th Bok Kai Festival, Parade, and Bomb Day	3rd & D St. Marysville, CA
Mar. 24-25 10am-5pm	The Chinese American Museum of N. CA Grand Opening Lectures and discussion with Profs. Gordon Chang, Ling-chi Wang, Judy Yung, Gregory Mark and others	232 1st St. Marysville, CA
Other Event of Interest that AACCP May Not Attend		
Mar. 15-25	25th San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival	San Francisco, Berkeley, San Jose, CA
Mar. 22-24	Nat. Assoc. for Ethnic Studies Conference	St. Univ. of NY New Paltz, NY
April 1 10:30-12noon	Ching Ming Tour So. Bay Historic Chinese American Cemetery Corp	300 A Curtner Ave. San Jose, CA
April 4-8	Association for Asian American Studies National Conference	Park Ave. Grand Hyatt NY, NY
April 20-21	NAAPAE 29th Annual Conference	Waikiki, HI
April 20-21	Asian Educator Alliance	NY, NY
April 29	Nikkei Matsuri Arts and Crafts Festival	San Jose, CA

An Interview With Brian Tom

(Continued from page 1)

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.

Editor's Message

Hello Everyone,

It's been a very busy month since we last wrote to you. Seems like we've had a conference or event every week since then. On top of this we're busy planning our May Asian Pacific American Heritage Celebration for San Mateo. If you live in the area, start planning to keep Saturday May 12 free on your calendars - we're hoping to see you at our event. Note that it's also not too late to make a donation, become a sponsor, place an ad in our program booklet, or just volunteer. For more information go to our website (<http://asianamericanbooks.com/apahc.htm>), email, or call us.

Thanks to all the authors that answer my call for information about their new books. I did receive your review copies and information. Now I have to find time to check out your books. As I state last month, be patient with us, we'll eventually get to your books.

This month, I'd like to put out a call for volunteer to help review books. There's always a need for this so let us know if you have some time.

Thank you to the InterVarsity Conference and their benefactor the L2 Foundation for granting conference goers coupons for buying books. This is an idea that I hope other conference organizer may learn from - there's grant money out there to help your attendees to buy books. Grantors, this is a great idea, thanks and keep it up :).

Thank you Brian Tom for finding time in your busy schedule to do an interview with us. If any of you are in Northern California on March 24th and 25th definitely make plans to go to Marysville that weekend to take part in the Bok Kai festival and the Chinese American Museum of Northern California's planned activities.

Thanks as always to Philip for your editorial and help with this newsletter.

Bye.

Leonard Chan
Executive Editor

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 (<http://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/oroville/orovillep?Description=&page=2>), 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.

Saturday March 24, 11am-6pm		Sunday March 25, 11am - 5pm	
11am	Bok Kai Parade	2pm	Defining the Chinese American Dream: A panel discussion: Stanford Prof. Gordon Chang, Sacramento State Univ. Prof. Gregory Mark, UC Santa Cruz Prof. Judy Yung
1:15pm	Remembering Chinatown, a walking tour with Lawrence Tom.	2:45pm	Great Grandfather Hom Hock Fun, a Marysville Pioneer-Encountering His Memory, Stanford Prof. Gordon Chang
2:30pm	Reception, Second Floor, Museum	3pm	Chinatown Memories: A Panel of Former Chinatown Residents, Frank Kim, Emily (Chin) Yue, Arthur Tom
3pm	Introduction to the Museum: Brian Tom, Museum Director	4pm	Moderator
4pm	Critique of Chinese American History in 10 (Easy) Steps-a Panel Discussion: Brian Tom and Jonathan Lee.		The Firing of the Bombs in front of the Museum
6pm	The Chinese Gods of Marysville-Jonathan Lee, Phd Candidate, UC Santa Barbara. Museum, Temple display. Award Dinner. Hengs Café, Yuba City		

The Tragedy of Asian America

(Continued from page 1)

As previous readers are aware one of the proudest moments in my life was when I realized that I'd unknowingly stood next to Rosa Parks, the African American civil rights pioneer who helped set off the modern day civil rights movement. We owe African Americans credit for what Asian Americans have today. Get educated and find out what other people did for us and educate other Americans about what we've done for all of them. Look up Wong Kim Ark (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wong_Kim_Ark) sometime and talk about US immigration policy with Latinos. Look up Yick Wo (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yick_Wo) and talk to African Americans about equal protection under law. We did more in American history than passively build railroads and get interned during World War II. We made American history through our struggles just as African Americans did.

It's a tragedy that anyone could be that ignorant and hateful but it doesn't symbolize how Asian Americans or any other group feels as a whole community when a few individuals are like that. A more legitimate complaint of Asian Americans though was expressed in a March 4th article of the International Herald Tribune (<http://www.ihf.com/articles/2007/03/04/news/singer.php>) addressing the lack of Asian American stars in music and blamed it on racial stereotyping as a primary factor. As quoted from the IHT, "There are very talented Asian-Americans out there," said Michael Hong, founder and chief executive of ImaginAsian Entertainment, a multimedia company that features Asian-American artists. "The only problem is nobody is signing them."

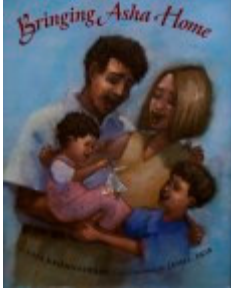

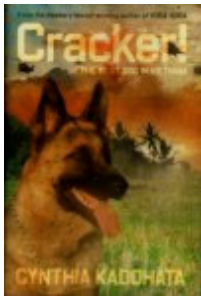

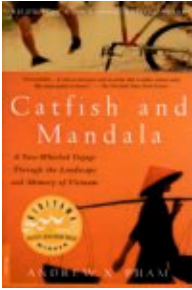
Where are the public faces of Asian America in the media? Why can't we be a normal part of America instead of some token model minority, stereotype, or freak show? African Americans have their

freak shows too but also "normal" stars like Beyoncé, Denzel, Halle, Morgan and many others on screen, radio, and movies appear all over the global cultural landscape. You know them so well that you only need their first names to remember them. We have William "She Bangs" Hung? More power to the brother for being as brave as he is to sing in public and appear on TV and in movies. Optimism can carry you far even if your singing is cringe-inducing, but seriously, he is no Paul Kim, another Asian American brother who recently lost on American Idol despite being praised by the judges for his great singing abilities.

I once worked with a young white man from South Africa. I told him that what was really sad is that as long as he didn't open his mouth everyone would assume that he was the American and that I was the foreigner. He said, "Isn't that ridiculous?" and he was right. African Americans, despite all the problems and racism they still face, are generally accepted as Americans having a legitimate place in this country. Few but the most committed racists are telling them to go back to Africa. Ask most Americans what they assume when seeing an Asian face though and you bring all the baggage of "foreignness" out. Yes, I speak and write good English, even compared to whites, but after over 150 years of my family being in this country I'd be ashamed not to. So why is there this automatic assumption that I'm not a "real" American who comes from a real American town rather than Tokyo, Shanghai, or some other place in Asia that is mostly as exotic and foreign to me as they are to most whites and African Americans?

Kenneth Eng was eventually fired by AsianWeek as he should have been after he came out with his first racist article let alone his third one, but will Asian Americans ever find acceptance as "real" Americans? Having to ask that question - Now that is a real tragedy.

The following books are discounted an additional 20% from the listed price for subscribers to our newsletter. The discounts on these books end April 9, 2007.

	<p>Bringing Asha Home By Uma Krishnaswami Illustrated by Jamel Akib 2006, 29 pages, Hardback.</p> <p>Bringing Asha Home is a wonderful story about a boy named Arun who anticipates the bringing home of his adopted sister from India to America. As he and his family waits many months for the adoption process to finalize, Arun makes paper planes imagining that they would help carry Asha home. When Asha finally arrives around the time of the North Indian holiday of Rakhi, she brings with her a rakhi bracelet for Arun. Rakhi bracelets are symbolic gifts from sisters to their brothers indicating their special ties to one another.</p> <p>Item #3444, Normally \$16.95 ... for newsletter subscribers \$13.56</p>
	<p>Okei-san The Girl from Wakamatsu By Joan Barton Barsotti Illustrated by Alpen Kelly 2006, 86 pages, Paperback.</p> <p>Last summer in the June 2006 newsletter I wrote about the <i>Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony</i>. The Wakamatsu Colony was the first sizable Japanese American community established in the continental United States. <i>Okei-san</i> is a fictionalized account of one of the actual colonist Okei Ito. <i>Okei-san</i> tells the story of Okei's escape from war torn 19th century Japan to her life in a struggling gold country colony in California.</p> <p>Item #3448, Normally \$11.95 ... for newsletter subscribers \$9.56</p>
	<p>Cracker! The Best Dog in Vietnam By Cynthia Kadohata 2007, 314 pages, Hardback.</p> <p>When a family moves to an apartment that doesn't allow dogs, they must give up the family dog named Cracker. After some searching, the family painfully decides to give the dog to the US Army. It's the Vietnam War era, and Cracker and her new handler Rick Hanski have adventures aplenty. <i>Cracker!</i> is very loosely based on the real heroic stories of dogs that served in the US military, during the Vietnam War, doing various tasks such as sniffing for bombs and the enemy.</p> <p>Item #3445, Normally \$16.99 ... for newsletter subscribers \$13.59</p>
	<p>Brothers By Yin Illustrated by Chris Soentpiet 2007, 31 pages, Hardback.</p> <p><i>Brothers</i> is the story of a Chinese boy named Ming who befriends an Irish boy named Patrick in 19th century San Francisco. Their friendship leads to mutual cultural learning and the saving of Ming's struggles family store when Patrick aids him in finding new customers.</p> <p>Item #3446, Normally \$16.99 ... for newsletter subscribers \$13.59</p>
	<p>Catfish and Mandala A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam By Andrew X. Pham 1999, 344 pages, Paperback.</p> <p><i>Catfish and Mandala</i> is a <i>Kiryama</i> and <i>Whiting Writers'</i> award winning book by Vietnamese American Andrew Pham who took a year long bicycle trip around the Pacific Rim. This is Pham's memoir of his external and internal trip of discovery. AACP is happy to now have copies of this wonderful book in paperback.</p> <p>Item #3447, Normally \$15.00 ... for newsletter subscribers \$12.00</p>

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