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History comes alive

Annual Asian-American Neighborhood Festival honors culture

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It's fair to say that the Asian-American Neighborhood Festival, Sunday at El Presidio, started with a bang, literally. The sonic outburst came courtesy of a deep-toned, ceremonial bass drum and synched cymbals charging the air of the El Presidio and providing the musical backdrop for the vintage Chinese Lion Dance, presented in a polished form by Camarillo's Mi Zong Lo Han Kung Fu and Lion Dance Association.

Ornately-decorated papier-mache Lion costumes were maneuvered by two young dancers, in a ritual that has come to be a "symbol of all things that are good, while driving away all bad omens," according to one of the event's key organizers, Terease Chen. Later, during a half-hour performance, the lions wandered into the audience, gently harassing, teasing, and accepting goodwill dollar bill offerings from the audience.

The Lion Dance moment, stoking a traditional Chinese ritual generally seen at Chinese New Year and special festivals and events, came before noon in this sixth annual festival, which was presented by the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, and specifically its Asian-American History Committee. Later performances spanned various Asian cultural traditions, from a Tai Chi demonstration by the Wu-Hau Tai Ji Association, to a Japanese Shakuhachi (bamboo flute) and Japanese harp and Taiko performance, hula dance, and a finale by Florante Aguilar, representing the "Filipino-Latino connection."

As it happens, the festival's site, part of the original area where Santa Barbara sprouted, in its post-Chumash period, is more relevant than some realize, moving beyond the Spanish-centric legacy of the zone. As committee member Keith Mar noted, the festival is an "event that celebrates the Santa Barbara



ERICK MADRID / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Above, Wayne Tustin, 93, of Santa Barbara is greeted by the Camarillo Lion Dance Group. The group performed Sunday at the Asian-American Neighborhood Festival at El Presidio. Below, Art Gonzales, 60, of Santa Paula leads the group.

Presidio's Asian American Neighborhood... the historic Chinese neighborhood was primarily on the opposite side of the street and down toward State Street. In the late 19th and early 20th century centuries.

"If you take a peek at the Jimmy's Oriental Gardens," he continued, "Many of you may remember it as a longtime favorite for locals and tourists alike before closing its doors in 2006 with the retirement of the late Tommy Chung. Opening in 1947 by Tommy's father, Jimmy Yee Chung, the Chung family and Jimmy's Oriental Gardens have been a part of the diverse communities of people who have lived and worked within the Presidio neighborhood."

Locals now know the old Gardens site as home to lunchtime favorite Three Pickles, and a recreation of the popular watering hole half of the eatery/bar. Such history lessons are important in understanding the sometimes neglected or only incompletely understood roots of the Asian-American influence in this



very neighborhood. Out of an interest in paying respects to that heritage, and galvanizing interest and awareness in local Asian-American cultural factors, the SBTHP board committed to launching the festival.

As of Sunday's 2015 model, the festival has grown and solidified considerably. Apart from the intentionally varied and high-caliber performances, booths in the El Presidio property

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Cultures from across Asia represented at event

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included the Bansai Club of Santa Barbara, with its impressive specimens in the Shimpaku Juniper and Japanese Black Pine styles, a Chinese Brush Painting booth run by instructor/artist Suemae Lin Wihite, and a table with volunteers working up paper magic in the origami medium. Food offerings included Chow Mein from the local restaurant Madame Lu, Nomita's Indian Cuisine, and the Hawaiian-themed Kona Ice — so welcome on another unseasonably sweltering autumn day.

Asian-American History Committee board president Ms. Chen took some time off during Sunday's busy festivities, in a shaded nook of the El Presidio property, to talk about the event's history and goals. As

she pointed out, "We want people to enjoy the entertainment and to increase awareness of these different ethnicities" in the festival, "but also to experience this amazing place," she waved her arm to the chapel and open area in the back of the historic property. "Many people don't realize this is a State Park and is available for rent. There are weddings, concerts and other events going on here."

Of this slowly but steadily growing festival, she noted, "In the early years, it was a mostly Asian audience that came out. But now, it's a very diverse group, in terms of race and age, which is great. Each year, we ask the Board if we should do this again, and they say, 'Yes, it's a winner.'"

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