



10 Year Impact of the Cleveland Asian Festival

By Wayne Wong



The growing AsiaTown neighborhood buzzed with more activity than usual on May 18-19 as the Cleveland Asian Festival celebrated 10 years of bringing the best Asian food and culture to downtown Cleveland. Located on E. 27th and Payne Avenue, anchored at the Asia Plaza, the volunteer-powered weekend Festival had mostly ideal weather until late Sunday. Even with a bit of wind and rain Sunday, the festival attracted 40,000 attendees this year. Formal and informal surveys indicate that roughly 25% of the attendees are new to AsiaTown, which means each year the Festival introduces about 10,000 people to the neighborhood, and over the last 10 years, that is about 100,000 people. Survey results also indicate that most of the attendees will return to AsiaTown to dine or shop - which is one of the primary goals of the Festival: to help drive the growth of the AsiaTown neighborhood, and contribute to the rich diversity of Cleveland. Other goals include sharing of the Asian culture and celebration of Asian Pacific American Heritage month in May.

The Festival founders sought to create an event that welcomed all of northeast Ohio to enjoy the many diverse cultures and cuisines of Asia and that purpose continues with over 20 authentic Asian food vendors that offered a lot of variety. While the excellent food is usually the most popular attraction for the Festival, not far behind are the wonderful and diverse performances held at the two stages throughout the weekend. The performances range from martial arts, to cultural performances, traditional musical instrumentals and dance, to modern K-pop/Asian-pop dance. Many ethnicities are represented including Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Bhutanese, and more.

For performance highlights, this year, the Cleveland Asian Festival welcomed the Shaolin Gung Fu Performance Team, from Henan, China. They provided an amazing display of speed, power, and precision with their martial arts demonstration. Returning for a 10th year in a row was the Kwan Family Lion Dance Team that helped kickoff the Festival on Saturday with a crowd-favorite performance. Likewise, on Sunday, the O-CA Cleveland Dragon Dance Team performed on both stages to the delight of the audience. The

egg roll eating contest was very exciting and this year, a new Champion was crowned - Adam Thai Lewis! Beautiful fashions and cultural dress was also on display during the Festival's "Colors of Asia" Fashion Show. Joining Lead Master of Ceremonies (MC) Wayne Wong, were local celebrities who served as guest MCs: Lynna Lai from WKYC Channel 3,

Chris Tanaka from WOIO Channel 19/CLE43, and Homa Bash from WEWS Channel 5, all of whom did a fantastic job and helped introduce the Festival to their TV news fans.

The Festival once again hosted an Asian-Pop Dance contest which highlights the growing modern K-Pop/Asian-Pop cover dance genre. The contest opened up for video entries several months ago and the best eight entries were selected for online voting in Round 2. From Round 2, the top 5 finalists were determined to compete live at the Festival before a panel of expert judges and 100s of Asian Pop dance fans. After some wonderful and spirited performances, the 10th Anniversary winners were announced: 1st place with \$2000 is Thunder Stealers. 2nd place with \$1000

is SYN-R-G, and 3rd place with \$500 is Pink Soda. The other two finalists who also did very well were Soju and Solar Dance Team. The Asian Pop Dance contest also served as a special reunion for our 10th Anniversary. At the first Festival in 2010, a group of young dancers called A-PoPhasis impressed the audience with their excellent performance. 10 years later, original members of A-PoPhasis returned to the festival to help with the Asian-Pop Dance contest: Raymond Bondad was part of the performance committee and led the dance contest planning. Jane Tang who has gone on to dance competitively and teach K-Pop returned to Cleveland to serve as a judge and also to host a K-Pop workshop just prior to the contest. Other returning members who served as judges were Thai Le and Jasmine Ni. The last judge, also from California was Qingqing Yang.

During the Kick-off, VIPs that provided welcoming remarks were Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, Congresswoman Marcia Fudge, Brunswick Mayor Ron Falconi, Cleveland Police Third District Commander Todd, and Ward 7 Councilman Basheer Jones. Councilman Jones then announced a special recognition for AsiaTown. Through Councilman Jones, the AsiaTown Advisory committee was pleased to share that Mr. Stanley Eng, a pillar of the region's Asian American community, would be honored posthumously through the dedication of a street sign in his name later this year. Because of Mr. Eng, many lives in Cleveland's AsiaTown have been forever impacted through his good works especially for the poor and elderly residents. Among his lasting impacts is the founding of the Cleveland Chinese Senior Citizens Association, and him spearheading efforts to develop the Asian Evergreen Apartments for the elderly.

The Activities pavilion had some great games and activities for all ages including a custom built electronic trivia game, a custom Asian-themed free library, several photo booths, and demonstrations of the Chinese game of Go. The health Pavilion continues to be an important part of the Festival, providing free health screenings and consultations to the local community. For those that want to see more of the neighborhood, the Festival had free guided neighborhood tours both days. CAF Panda, the popular Festival mascot for the last 10 years, along with WuShu the Dragon greeted festival fans young and old.

This year, the Festival was produced by co-founders Lisa Wong and Johnny Wu, working with the Executive Committee members Vi Huynh, Mike Mendoza, Wayne Wong, and Debbie Yue. They are joined by dozens of committee members, and over a hundred day-volunteers. Many have been volunteering since the first Festival. In the last 10 years, the Cleveland Asian Festival has grown and accomplished much. But we are just getting started. Thank you, Cleveland and Thank You, AsiaTown.

(Photos Credits - Edmond Wong and Wayne Wong)
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