

Asian chamber gala honors area business entrepreneurs

By **CHUNHUA ZEN ZHENG**

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Local Asian businesses showcased their vitality and strength symbolically in the radiance of golden dragons and the thundering beat of the Taiko drums as five entrepreneurs were honored at a gathering in southwest Houston.

The sixth annual Asian Chamber of Commerce Gala 2000, galvanizing more than 800 business and corporate representatives at Ocean Palace restaurant, gave a special award and four entrepreneur awards to the honorees for their work promoting businesses and giving back to the community.

“This is also a celebration of the 10th anniversary of the



Lee

chamber in the Year of the golden Dragon,” said S. Ming Sung, a member of the Asian Chamber’s board of directors. She said the dancing dragons adorning the walls of the ballroom marked the occasion.

The gala also brought in the performances by the Kaminari Taiko of Houston traditional drumming ensemble and the local Asian American Dance Company.

Sung said the event celebrated the collaboration among Asian businesses and between Asian and non-Asian businesses as well as their growth and having an impact on the city.

“We hope all of the Asian businesses



Sahni

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FROM THE FRONT

Gala

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and more non-Asian businesses will join us and take advantage of what the chamber offers," Sung said.

Dick Heubner, executive director of Houston Minority Business Council, received a special award for his service to the Houston minority business community.

Entrepreneur Awards went to Nancy T. Chang, co-founder, president and CEO of Tanox Inc.; Randhir Sahni, an architect and investment advisor; Ernie B. Azucena, founder and president of Pacific Waste Industries, Inc.; and Wea H. Lee, founder and publisher of the Southern Newspapers Group.

Sung said recipients of the entrepreneur award must meet the criteria of being Asian, having more than 50 percent Asian ownership in their enterprises with substantial growth and impact on the community.

Gala co-chairwoman and the chamber secretary Dolly Haim said the honorees, who overcame obstacles in achieving business success themselves, have made significant contribution to the "worthy causes" of the Asian community and business community in the Houston area.

"My business moved to Bellaire Boulevard in southwest Houston about 18 years ago, and this was a vastly bare and empty land

then," Lee said. "But today, this is one of the most prosperous areas in the city."

The 1996 U.S. Census Bureau estimated the Asian-American population in the Houston area to be more than 200,000, and experts say the figure suggests a potent force economically.

"There are more than 4,000 Asian businesses in Houston, including six Asian-owned banks, 20 supermarkets and many more Asian restaurants. We are very proud of our contribution to the city," Lee said.

Lee and his wife came to the United States from Taiwan as students 28 years ago with \$500, finished their education at Lamar University, and launched the first Chinese newspaper in 1978 in Houston that has evolved into a newspaper group of 10 publications in major U.S. cities. Late last year, he started a Chinese radio service.

In addition, Lee's plan to construct a 10-story building on a 6.2-acre land on Bellaire at Boone is under way. The building, to be named Southern Media Square, will house both print and electronic media, and serve other cultural and communication purposes.

Chang, a Chinese-American who co-founded the Houston-based biotechnology company in 1986, focused on the development of therapeutic monoclonal antibodies in the areas of immunology, infectious diseases and oncology.

With research facilities in Houston, the Netherlands and Taiwan, the company has grown rapidly to be worth more than \$1 billion and joined the ranks of publicly traded companies earlier

this year.

Sahni, of Llewlyn-Davies Sahni Inc., an Indian-American, is another success story of an immigrant. His experience includes a Theater District master plan for Houston, re-development of Central Business District Houston, San Antonio and Pittsburgh, master plans for the Houston Center and Uptown Houston along with numerous new towns in the United States, Middle East and Africa.

In addition to being the principal-in-charge for the construction of Ben Taub and L.B.J. Hospitals, Sahni has been responsible for more than \$1 billion in redevelopment and construction projects. His landmark contribution is the "light spikes" designed for the hosting of the 1990 Economic Summit, which are currently displayed at Bush Intercontinental Airport.

Filipino Azucena created his company two years ago to provide wastewater disposal and other environmental remediation services in both the Houston area and his home country. The company, with a staff of 16 full-time and 15 part-time and contract workers, is generating annual gross revenues of more than \$1 million.

The spectrum of the ethnic backgrounds of nominees from which the honorees were chosen mirrors the diversity of the Asian immigrant population reflected in the chamber membership.

However, strong ethnic identities did not blur their aspiration to serve the community as U.S. citizens, which was expressed in the pledge of allegiance at the beginning of the gala led by Victor Bhatt, Asian Chamber's vice president.

"No matter where we came from, we all should be proud we are the citizens of this great country, because this land gave us the unique opportunity to have liberty and freedom," Lee said.

Asian Chamber was established in 1990 to promote and facilitate commerce and trade between Houston and the countries of Asia and to work with the local chambers and civic and business organizations to foster economic development in the Houston Asian-American communities.

Membership consists of individuals and companies, Asian and non-Asian, involved or interested in doing business with the Asian communities or trade between Houston and Asian countries. The chamber includes representatives of local and federal government bodies and consulates.

"I have very strong and positive feeling about the Asian businesses," said Robert Mosbacher, former U.S. Secretary of Commerce in the Bush administration. "They are doing very well by and large and are very good for Houston."

In his speech at the gala, Mosbacher cited the nation's \$370 billion trade deficit — figure released in July by the U.S. Department of Commerce — and urged expanding trade with Asian countries.

"We are facing the largest deficit in history and China is taking the number one spot from Japan in our deficit. We used to talk about deficit in terms of goods, but now also services . . . we are really financing the whole world, especially these two countries. We are buying more than selling," he said.



Azucena