

# Home Away From Home

Asian American Cultural Center embraces diversity through community

By Amy E. Lemen  
Special to this section

The Asian American Cultural Center — and centers like it throughout Austin — is a gathering place for people of all cultures. The center's motto says it all: Where East meets West. But beyond its emphasis on celebrating Asian culture, the Center is a crucial part of adjustment to life in the U.S. for many Asians. Amy Mok, the Center's executive director who is also a psychotherapist, moved to Austin from Boston in 1983, and she knew the importance of having a home for the Asian community.

"There is a lot of depression, isolation and adjustment issues with adapting to a new culture," she says. "In the community center, they feel at home."

When she moved to Austin, a community center for Asians didn't exist. That's one of the reasons she started the Center in 2000, citing Texas' "pioneering



spirit to leave no person behind."

"We're so diverse — Chinese, Japanese, Korean," says Mok. "To tell our story, we must do it ourselves. The center has provided people of all ages with an opportunity to connect."

One of those people is Dongpo "Paul" Huang. Originally from China, he and his wife came to Austin eight years ago so they could be near their daughter and her family and help with their grandchildren. Fluent only in Cantonese, Huang came to the center in 2003 to learn English, and took his U.S. citizenship test six months later.

A senior college physical education teacher in China who taught track and field, volleyball and martial arts for more than 20 years before he retired, he now teaches t'ai chi and kung fu at the center, as well as tutors others for their U.S. naturalization exams. He also organizes a monthly Chinese gathering for seniors.

"People come from China and they can't speak English and they can't drive," he says. "The party helps build up relationships and communication for these seniors. It creates a home-warming environment and reduces their isolation feelings and culture shock. They come here, learn the language and meet people from their own country. It makes them happy and makes them feel good."

The center features a wide variety of programs to make all Asians feel more at home, and to introduce Westerners to Asian culture. For example, a group of elderly Japanese women, most of whom are World War II brides and widows, meets each Friday to practice traditional folk dances and socialize. The center also sponsors health-related lectures about diabetes and Alzheimer's and also runs an international preschool where students learn Chinese, English and Spanish starting at age 3.

"It's their home-away-from-home where people can embrace and nurture their culture," says Mok. "Asian thinking is very community-oriented. We have a responsibility to give back."

And, for people like Huang, the center has provided a positive influence and a real driving force in his life.

"I like it here, in Austin and in America," he says. "I'm here with my wife, daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren, and I help with them and help others. I have a good life here and am very happy."

Amy E. Lemen is a freelance writer based in Austin.



Photos by Mark Matson  
Dongpo "Paul" Huang, above, came to Austin to be near family eight years ago. Since then he has become a U.S. citizen and he teaches t'ai chi and kung fu to other people at the Asian American Cultural Center. Amy Mok, inset, is executive director at the Asian American Cultural Center in Austin.