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#### *Chinese American Museum Taps News Photographer Corky Lee for Anniversary Show*

by Jeff Favre

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**DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES** - For photojournalist Corky Lee, being in the right place at the right time has rarely been a matter of luck.

In 1975, during a New York City protest against police brutality in Chinatown, Lee spotted a man being clubbed by police officers and taken away. Lee, camera in hand, captured the action head on, and despite being a relatively



The work of longtime news photographer Corky Lee is on exhibit in the Chinese American Museum. His 1975 shot of a victim of police brutality made the cover of the *New York Post*. Photo by Corky Lee.

unknown photographer, the image was splashed across the front page of the *New York Post*.

Whether it's key moments of the protests in Detroit over the killing of Chinese American Vincent Chin, Muhammad Ali's casual visit to New York's Chinatown or Connie Chung speaking to other Asian-American journalists, Lee always seems to be close. He is unafraid to pick unusual angles, even if it means jumping on a table or laying on the ground.

Lee's doggedness to cover all aspects of pan-Asian culture put him on the radar several years ago of Pauline Wong, the executive director of the Chinese American Museum in Downtown Los Angeles. Wong selected *Asian Roots/American Reality: Photographs by Corky Lee* as the signature exhibition for the museum's fifth anniversary.

The exhibit at the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument museum contains nearly 100 photographs from Lee's 35-year career. It is paired with a second photo show, *Picture This! My Life, Your Life, Our Lives: Photographs by Youths from the San Gabriel Valley*. Both shows opened last month and run through May 31, 2009.

Lee's work represents the museum's first exhibition to move beyond showcasing only the Chinese-American experience.

"Corky's work in many ways parallels what we are trying to do at the museum by documenting the Asian-Pacific American community," Wong said. "There is a scarcity of this kind of work, just as there are few institutions dedicated to talking about the Chinese-American experience."

Lee, speaking by phone from his New York office, said he began with a borrowed camera in the early 1970s. The self-taught photographer said he wanted to cover stories and people that the mainstream media were ignoring.

"It was hard to get the images into the papers sometimes, and I would have to explain why these events and these people were important," Lee said.

Through persistence and sheer volume, Lee became one of New York's most notable freelance newspaper photographers, virtually cornering the market on covering Asian-American events. He ultimately dubbed himself the "Unofficial, Undisputed Asian American Photographer Laureate."

Organizing the mid-career retrospective with thousands of possible images fell to artist Steven Wong and photography instructor Joanne Kim.

"I've known Corky's work well for 10 years," said Steven Wong, whose work was part of the museum's inaugural show. "We worked with Corky on selecting the photographs, and then worked on the logistics of getting them framed and how to hang them. His work is diverse and we wanted a full representation of what he has done, from covering activism to intimate portraits and still-life work."

Spread across two galleries, the work is primarily in chronological order. The police brutality photo from 1975 is near a portrait of activist Goldie Chu at an Equal Rights Amendment Rally in 1977.

Lee is closely associated with the civil rights protests surrounding the case of Vincent Chin, who was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two men in Detroit in 1982. The men were given probation, sparking many protests that Lee attended.

Lee said he has an ability to sense news, which often puts him at the epicenter of action. For example, his photograph from the 1991 demonstration surrounding the casting of a non-Asian in the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon* is packed from top to bottom with determined protestors carrying picket signs.

Most of Lee's work is from New York and is in black and white. The exhibit's second gallery contains a few color images from Los Angeles' Chinatown, including a portrait of Marvin Lee, owner of Hong Sang Lung Grocery.

Wong also included one of his favorite photographs, an image of Connie King, a woman from Locke, Calif., a small city that once was home to many Chinese railroad workers. King, who was born in 1923, is one of the few remaining Chinese Americans in the town. She created a garden using toilet bowls, which has become a local landmark.

"Wherever or whatever it is, Corky has published so many images of the Asian and Pacific Islander American community that it's interesting to wonder in what ways he has helped define what that community is with his camera," Steven Wong said.

#### The Kids Take Over

Lee hopes his legacy will continue with younger generations following his path. To that end, and to add a local component to the Lee retrospective, the museum created a project featuring the work of a dozen San Gabriel High School students.

The students participated in a 12-week program to learn the art of black-and-white photography. Lee met with the students at the beginning and end of the program, providing insight about using an image to tell a story.

"Many of the students had never used the kind of professional cameras we loaned them," Pauline Wong said. "But what they created is amazing."

Lee agreed, commenting, "It was wonderful to see young people inspired by what I had done."

Steven Wong placed the youths' shots in between the two galleries of Lee photographs, allowing the exhibits to comment on each other.

As the Chinese American Museum begins its sixth year, Pauline Wong already is looking ahead. Next up is an exhibition on Hollywood, as seen from an Asian-American perspective.

"We hope for the museum to continue evolving to tell stories from all types of Chinese-American experiences," she said. "As immigration increases, we want to share the stories of those who have

come recently from Hong Kong, Taiwan, from the 1970s and '80s from Cambodia, as well as those whose grandfathers came out here for the Gold Rush. And having Corky Lee's photographs here is a good way to move in that direction."

*Asian Roots/American Reality: Photographs by Corky Lee and Picture This! My Life, Your Life, Our Lives: Photographs by Youths from the San Gabriel Valley* run through May 31, 2009, at the Chinese American Museum, 425 N. Los Angeles St., (213) 485-8567 or [camla.org](http://camla.org).

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