

Wing Chao / The soul figure of Disney parks

BY OLIVIA HSU
Special to ASIA

Turning ideas into a visual dreamland has been a magical mystery tour for **Wing T. Chao**.

As vice chairman of Asia Pacific Development for Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, he waves his architectural wand over a worldwide landscape. Last year, for example, Chao's role in overseeing the design of Disney's Hollywood Hotel resulted in a major award: best themed hotel in China, presented at the China Hotel Industry Summit.

Chao, who also holds the title of executive vice president of Walt Disney Engineering, oversees master planning, design and development of Disney real estate holdings in such venues as California, Florida, Paris, Tokyo and Hong Kong.

In July, he presided over the grand opening of the third Disney hotel at the Tokyo Disney Resort in Japan. The hotel's blue and gold exterior resembles a castle.

Inside, the décor is in a classic Victorian, evoking an era of opulence.

Since joining Disney Parks and Resorts in 1972, Chao has steadily climbed the corporate ladder—all the while living a dream of his own.

Growing up the son of an architect, Chao was inspired by his father's career. He spent many hours, some at play, in his father's office and developed an affinity for architecture. He was equally enchanted by the world of Disney characters and the theme parks that they spawned.

But for the 64-year-old native of Chung King, China, admission into Disney's world was more methodical than magical.

After moving to the United States to further his education, Chao earned bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture at the University of California Berkeley. As a freshman, he washed pots for the College Women's Club to help finance his

education. He later worked for architect William Liskam in San Francisco.

Chao went on to study urban design at Harvard University and completed post-graduate work in urban planning and real estate development at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Two years after joining Disney, Chao was assigned to the firm's Imagineering headquarters in Glendale, where he spearheaded planning for the Epcot Center.

By the late 1970s, he was involved in planning Disney's first international theme park, Tokyo Disneyland. He later helped negotiate with the French government to build Disneyland Paris Resort.

During his career, he constantly promoted the concept of teamwork. It's at the core of his philosophy, he says. To his way of thinking, ideas can take as long as a year to come to fruition.

The philosophy defines a career that has been richly rewarded. In 2005, Chao was honored for excellence in architecture and design innovation by the Los Angeles Committee for Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage.

He's also been named one of the 500 most influential Asians in the U.S. by *Avenue* magazine and was ranked among the top 40 Asian-American professionals by *Transpacific* magazine.



Wing Chao: Waving the architectural wand

Maria Gee / Her works evoke culture

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The Soyodo bookstore, is presenting a collection of books by Chinese community professor and documentarian Maria Gee. The collection includes her documentary "Adrift Without Roots," which continues to be featured on public television.

"More and more American people visit Chinese bookstores since the Chinese language and culture has been getting notice in San Diego," said Gee. "Many American people bought the DVD "Adrift Without Roots" because they are interested to learn Chinese language and culture."

Gee, also known by her Chinese name, Li Xian, was born and raised in China, where she worked as a writer and editor for screenplays at Heilongjiang TV station for 11 years before emigrating to the United States in 1992. She has since published four books and numerous articles and teaches teaching Chinese language and literature at the University of San Diego, Thomas Jefferson School of Law and San Diego Mesa College. She also serves on the board of the American Chinese Culture and Education Foundation.

The Soyodo Book Store, 7373A Convoy Court in San Diego, is the largest store carrying books on China and Chinese culture.

"Adrift Without Roots" is a film that consists of 12 episodes that are 30 minutes each. In the film, Gee, acted as a spokesperson for many new immigrants in the United States in exploring how they had adapted to their new lives in a new country.

The film has been shown on the Educational Channel for two years and many American universities have used it in their Asian studies programs. Gee's other works include "True Feeling of America," "Great book of Well-Known Chinese" and "Step Across the Half-Opened Country Door."

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