



ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

in Celebration of the
City of Sugar Land
60th Anniversary



CITY OF SUGAR LAND

Charles Liu
Artist & Curator



GOODSILL: I am talking today with Charles Liu and his wife, Shirley. Will you tell us where you were born, Charles?

LIU: I was born August 16, 1947 in Shanghai, China. My father, Chi-Chao Liu, was in the Chinese military and was posted to Japan after World War II. When I was 2 years old China had a civil war and the communists took over the Chinese mainland, so my mother took my older sister and me to Hong Kong when I was 4. After that we moved to Japan to be with my father. When I was 6 we moved to Taiwan, where my father had another job working with the national government. Sadly he died in the Taiwan Strait when I was in high school.

GOODSILL: Tell us a bit about your mother.

LIU: Her Chinese name is Chi-Lin Chow Liu but she goes by her English name, Priscilla. She is turning 100 years old in September so she must have been born in about 1919. As a young man her father studied at Yale University. His career was as a professor at Beijing University. She went to an American school established by the missionaries and learned to speak excellent English. She attended university and learned about early childhood development. During the Korean War she worked at the United Nations in Japan as a translator. Later she worked at the Commerce Department in Taiwan. She has three children: my older sister, my younger sister, and me. During the time of the civil war the youngest child was too little to travel so my mother left her with her parents and took my sister and me to Hong Kong, then to Japan and Taiwan. This began many years of separation between her and her younger daughter, which was hard for everyone. They reunited in the U.S. after China reopened its doors.

After I graduated from college, I studied art. I spent 7 years in Spain studying art. The first three years I was in Madrid studying fresco and mural painting. Shirley and I had met in Taiwan. She was still in college

getting a bachelor's degree in biology. After she graduated she came to Spain and we got married in Madrid. Our daughter, Josephine was born in Spain. In 1978 we moved to the United States.

I had a one-man show at Cornell University at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum. Afterward the curator asked me if I was a Taiwanese artist, a Chinese artist or an American artist. That was the big question. I was not sure how to answer. Sometimes I feel I am all of them and sometimes I feel I am none of them. Identity is a very important question.

Later on I taught art, created art and began curating exhibitions for the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts and the Pacifica Museum in Pasadena, California, etc. I've curated exhibits of traditional Chinese ink painting, modern art, Japanese artists, Korean artists and so on.

GOODSILL: What is involved with curating an exhibit?

LIU: I choose artworks, I get permission to use the art, I find funding, I find a venue, I make discussions on how to display the art and I write the catalogue that goes with the exhibit.

The Taiwanese Ministry of Culture is interested in showing Taiwan art in the United States. I write a proposal and if they think it is good enough, they may fund the exhibit. As an example, I got some funding from Taiwan so I did an exhibit, which included some young Taiwanese artists. Here is the catalogue. I write it in Chinese and most catalogues show it in Chinese and it is translated into English as well.

I have arranged exhibits in universities and some museums all over the country. I received the Challenge America Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 2011. So I did a project in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with a one-man show, a discussion panel, and demonstrations at universities and many schools and society's to talk about the differences between Eastern and Western art. I have done shows in Louisville, Kentucky; Las Vegas, Nevada; Columbus, Georgia; Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and in Beaumont, Texas. I have also held exhibits in New York, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, Vancouver, Beijing, and Taipei.

I wrote a book about 100 overseas artists in the 20th century. In another book, I wrote about 58 different museums in the United States and Canada, including the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and the Menil collection. I also write an art column every two weeks in the World Journal Weekly, the largest Chinese newspaper in the U.S. for 14 years. My column educates people about all kinds of art.

GOODSILL: I see. So we get to the question, why choose Sugar Land to live?

LIU: As a painter, art writer and art curator, I have the opportunity to travel to different cities in the world. My dream was to find a place to live where I could have a large creative studio, as well as a quiet writing and thinking environment.

Back in 2003, we had been living in Chicago for more than 20 years; I had the chance to come to Austin and Houston for art exhibitions. I found out that the house

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Charles Liu

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prices and living were good. Then in 2005 my wife, Shirley, got a job at Rice University as a senior research technician. Sugar Land had nice houses, good transportation, a large Chinese community, and a good quality of life. Our house has a lake in the backyard and is quiet and beautiful, which makes us very satisfied. We are often awakened by the sound of wild ducks in the morning. It is a great pleasure to watch them swim back and forth or walk on the water's edge. There are also a variety of water birds, squirrels, and even alligators. Shirley majored in biology, I love nature, and we think it looks like heaven.

As an artist and curator I looked at the cultural construction here and felt it was relatively conservative. I often wonder if innovative, contemporary, lively and colorful public art installations might rejuvenate and energize American cities.

In the last five or six years, I've noticed a change in the cultural atmosphere of Sugar Land, specifically with the opening of the Museum of Natural Sciences in 2009, followed by the establishment of Art Center & Gallery, the Children's Discovery Center, and the Sugar Land Heritage Foundation Museum in the old Imperial Sugar refinery area. Smart Financial Center has also opened as a venue for performance art as

well as being a building with a modern face of public art. I feel Sugar Land is closer now to my ideal city cultural blueprint.

In 2016 the Taiwanese artist, Huang Hsin-Chien, won the Golden Lion Award for the Venice Film Festival's Best VR Experience. Laurie Anderson was co-winner with him on that project. After I saw another of Huang's creations, called "Psychic of Light", I contacted Lindsay Davis, Cultural Arts Manager, Office of Economic Development of the City of Sugar Land, and put forward a plan for bring this lighting show to Sugar land. Very luckily, with the city's support and funding sponsorship from the Taiwan government, we had a successful exhibit in 2017 in the Sugar Land Town Square Plaza. It was a pleasure to be able to give back my professional talents to my favorite city of residence.

As you can see from these pictures, there is a plain white balloon, which has "arms" of a sort. During the performance images are reflected off this balloon and it seems to come alive. This same technology is also captured in a YouTube video called Shall we Dance Shanghai.

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GOODSILL: Tell us about your son and daughter.

LIU: Our daughter, Josephine, is a skilled musician and music educator. She received a doctorate in viola performance from the University of Texas in Austin. She has played for Yo Yo Ma, Pacido Domingo, Andrea Bocelli and others. She is married to Jonathan Moerschel, violist of the Calder Quartet and they have two daughters, Zoe and Audrey. Our son, Albert, got his Ph.D. from Cornell University and works in education policy research. His wife, Denise Leung, got her MBA from Berkeley and they have a daughter names Maddie.

I once heard a sentence:

*“Architecture makes the city huge,
but the culture makes the city great.”*

I feel Sugar Land might be even better if there were a visual art museum, not necessarily used simply to showcase art collections, but also to be an art platform and educational venue.

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