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Conference Proceedings: Lead the Change
Storytelling: Preservation at its Best

CASSIE CHINN AND JAMIE FORD

Cassie Chinn: Hi, I’m Cassie Chinn, and I am with the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. We’re located in Seattle’s Chinatown-International District. I’ve been fortunate to work at the museum for over 20-plus years now. I’m currently serving as its interim executive director. The Wing Luke Museum, for those of you who might not know, is the only Pan Asian Pacific American museum in the nation. We were created in the 1960s, and we’re over 50 years old. A number of years ago, we were named an affiliated area of the National Park Service in order to help tell all of America’s stories. I’m grateful to be here with Jamie Ford, who happens to be on the Wing Luke Museum board of directors, but is definitely amazing in his own right.

Jamie Ford: Hi, I’m Jamie. I am an author of several historical fiction books and a bestselling author. My wife says I should get used to saying that. I have books in 35 languages. The most recent language was Persian. I have books in Iran, which is just amazing. The story of this neighborhood in Seattle, the International District, home to Chinese American and Japanese American people, is being read in Tehran. It doesn’t get better than that.

Even before I was on the Wing Luke Museum board, it was a place that I went. It was a resource for me. And the old location was about as big as my office. It was very small, and now it’s in this wonderful historic building.

My first novel, Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet, is based on the actual hotel in Seattle, and it has very special, important historical significance, as does the entire neighborhood. Which is why most of my books and even my short stories all are set in that neighborhood. Some authors make everything up—“Here’s a street, and here’s a town”—and it’s all fictional. I try to use the real places, and I try to use not just the streets, but the actual businesses that were there at the time, the restaurants. I even dig up old menus from the ‘40s. I try to re-create that whole neighborhood as closely
as I can, so that when people read this book, it’s an immersive experience and they can step back into that time.

Cassie Chinn: I think that’s going to be our connection point as we think about place, story, and connecting them with people.

I am grateful for the opportunity to spend this upcoming time in conversation with you, Jamie, on a topic that is near and dear to both of our hearts: storytelling. We’ve known one another awhile through the Wing Luke Museum, but we haven’t quite had a chance yet to have this conversation, to sit down and talk about storytelling and to explore its power, its impact in personal lives, communities in place. I thought I would start by asking you for a story. What’s the story of your storytelling? Why is it such a critical part of your life?

Jamie Ford: For me, much of it comes from a deeply personal thing, being that I’m biracial. I’m half Chinese, and so I have one foot in two different worlds. I call it the “demilitarized zone between cultures.” You get the best of everything. And because of that, I’ve been super curious about my dad’s childhood, my grandpa’s childhood. Basically, the history of my Chinese family in the Seattle area and, by extension, San Francisco and Nevada, where there is so much rich history. The more that I dig in, it’s a rabbit hole that just keeps on going. It’s super fascinating. I think everyone has those kinds of stories in their family, but because my dad grew up in a very specific part of Seattle—the International District, the Chinatown neighborhood—there’s a physical footprint. The buildings that have been there have been the silent sentinels for several generations.
Cassie Chinn: It’s interesting you talk about the buildings. The buildings in the Chinatown-International District hold a special part in why I started storytelling as well. In my family, we didn’t talk a lot about our family history and stories, but every time my dad would go by one of the buildings, which happens to be the building that the Wing Luke Museum is in right now, he would point to a balcony. And that would be his opportunity to tell me a story about his father, my grandfather, and that would spark an entryway into hearing my family’s stories. I think if it wasn’t for that balcony, that place, I might not know as much about my own family history or have that reason to dive into it.

Jamie Ford: Definitely. All of those places, if you walk through the neighborhood, you’ll look up and you’ll see the family associations. Those places have been there for 100-plus years. They’ve been these fixtures in the community. That’s where my grandma went and played mahjong and won and lost money, depending on the day. But those places were often built with collective, pooled money from a ton of families. So everyone has a piece of that history.

Cassie Chinn: I love that. I’m even thinking about the building that the Wing Luke Museum is in, the East Kong Yick Building, and the story of that building. One hundred seventy-plus Chinese American pioneers pooled their money and decided to start an investment company, the Kong Yick Investment Company. Kong Yick means “for public benefit,” because they wanted to create a new home in the Chinatown-International District.
I like to tell myself the story that maybe there were a bunch of pioneers—it could have been your grandpa, my grandpa, I don’t know—sitting around a table, and they said, “We need to create a place. What if we did this?” I don’t know if that happened, but somehow me telling me that story gives me that sense of community members coming together to do something powerful and strong.

Reflecting on your professional storytelling, your books, and how rooted they are in Seattle’s Chinatown-International District, the places themselves read like characters in your book. How do you go about choosing those places?

**Jamie Ford:** I’m an author of historical fiction. Authors have a choice, and some will just make up streets and names and buildings and places. But I like to re-create the past. I basically like to re-create that world to the best of my ability through interviews and the historical record and photographic evidence and all the stuff that goes with it. I love using the actual places. Basically, my first book is a love letter to that whole neighborhood. The book is called *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*. The hotel in that book is the Panama Hotel, built in 1909. And it is a silent character.

My book is a split narrative. The building occupies a footprint in both time periods, the ‘40s and the ‘80s, but was a working man’s hotel. There was a *sento* [public bath] in the basement, and it was a part of the community there. But during the time of the Japanese internment, dozens of families stored their belongings in the basement. And those belongings still reside there today, so that building is really a repository of all of these families’ stories and their possessions. That’s one of the reasons why that building is so important. We don’t want to see it turned into condos or a Starbucks. It’s important for places like that to be recognized as not just historically
significant, but awarded the status of a national treasure, local treasure, so it doesn’t disappear and then the historical record with it.

Cassie Chinn: I love how you’re piecing things together. There are the historic collections materials that are in the basement, there’s the structure of the building itself, and then there are also the stories of people who passed through the space, bringing all those together. Were you able to connect with individual people who had lived experiences in the Panama Hotel as you were doing your research?

Jamie Ford: Oddly, my great aunties had a laundry, and they brought laundry back and forth from the people who lived there. My aunties spent lots of time in that hotel when they were young.

As a writer, I think of myself as someone in the compassion creation business, and these places really create compassion. They work your empathy muscles, and by retaining them ... what’s the quote by Mark Twain? “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.” You don’t have to travel, you can go to a museum and all of it is right there. Whether it’s a monument or battlefield or a place of industry, these places are super important. I think you take one of these things, inject it into our culture, and it inoculates us against narrow-mindedness, bigotry, hatred, a lot of the things that cause a lot of stress on the world.

Cassie Chinn: You know, through our work at the Wing Luke Museum, we think about place as a way to connect with people and how to center people in what we do. It’s interesting, your creation of the book parallels in a sense our work in creating exhibits each and every day, to tell stories centered on the people we bring together—community members who have some type of connection with whatever the subject matter is or the place—to find out from them directly what’s important to them. What do they want other people to learn about? What are the walkaway messages that they want people who experience that place or that exhibit to have? And then how can we tell their story? We tell it often through gathering photographs, artifacts, archival documents, recording people’s oral histories and stories, and then bringing them together. We actually work with our community members to
develop the storyline as you’re going through the space. We ask community members, “What do you want people to be able to see, hear, and feel as they’re going through the exhibit?”

All that layering of what goes into a good story, we do that through our exhibitions, but toward what point? We definitely want to educate people about what happened, but we also want to make those connections. Strong stories have some way to move people’s hearts to connect with universal things that we as humans experience. Through our exhibitions, we also hope that the story will motivate people to action, to do something, and to have some type of response. I think if we’re thinking about increasing compassion and empathy for each other [when creating these exhibits], that will play out in our daily lives, too.

**Jamie Ford:** Sure. These places, not just the Wing Luke Museum, but so many of these preserved historic sites, are our grandparents’ legacy. They’re what we enjoy in the present, but there’s another generation. That story has continuity now because of the physical location. Oral tradition is the oldest form of story, but when you have a place that people can go to and that story comes alive, then it’s sustained. It helps the community and the people who live there retain their identity, have a source of cultural pride, understand that they, too, are part of the American story, the American experiment, and the tapestry of all the immigrants who have come to this country to find a new life and redefine themselves in this great new context.

**Cassie Chinn:** That brings to mind places that maybe are not there, that have been leveled. I can’t help but think about the
history of Chinatowns in the U.S., and early Chinatowns that unfortunately have been leveled. You go to a town like Walla Walla here in Washington, or some early mining towns in Nevada, and it’s always that story. “There used to be a Chinatown here, but it’s been leveled.” I know we’ve been trying to do work to go back and do all that heavy research to uncover what was once there. Oftentimes that lack of presence speaks volumes to the history of what happened in the case of Asian Americans, Chinese Americans. The removal of people from place speaks volumes to the experience of the people and to the history of our nation. Jamie, how have you reflected on the absence of place, the absence of material presence, the silence of stories, and what does that mean?

Jamie Ford: It makes me so sad, it’s so heartbreaking. You may not be aware of it, but the China Gate Restaurant that’s just right around from the Wing Luke Museum, that building has been there forever. It was originally built as a theater. The rake seating and all has been long since removed. In the late 1800s, the Knights of Labor [a labor organization] got together and they basically paid to have the Chinese community removed and put on a ship and sent to San Francisco. They held their meeting in that building, in that theater, which became the Chinese restaurant where my grandparents had their 50th wedding anniversary celebratory dinner. But that place is part of the historical record. It’s part of this whole journey of the community there, good and bad.

Cassie Chinn: It’s making me think about value. What stories or what materials do we value, and what materials can we do a better job at expressing value to? I know when I started working at the Wing Luke Museum, I was the first collections assistant that was hired. Collections was really my forte, and I remember at that time, about 20 years ago, we were always one step behind. We would hear from family members, “Oh, you were looking for that? I just sent a box away to Goodwill.” And we’d respond, “Don’t do that. Please don’t do that. It’s so valuable for our communities.” It’s taken a while to demonstrate that value through our exhibits and to say to community members, “This is the power of the materials that you have. They contain your stories, contain your historical records.” It’s taken showing and demonstrating that to members
for them to recognize, “Oh, yes. Now, of course we wouldn’t throw this away. We need to check with the museum first.” I think that’s that ongoing process just as we get better at opening up what is the full American story that we value and want to tell.

**Jamie Ford:** I have a question, if I may: How do you decide what to collect? With the way the world is now, with Twitter and social media, there’s not room for nuance. But in a museum, there is room to tell the whole story, the good and the bad. I know there was a building that when it was purchased and they went in the basement, there was all this gambling equipment from when it was a backroom casino. And I thought that was super cool. People can speak of Prohibition times, even though there was criminal activity. We look back on it now and see it as this interesting part of our history. How do you decide what to share with the public?

**Cassie Chinn:** That’s a great question that comes up. We start with our place of values and what’s important for us. And for us, people give us meaning and purpose, and our goal is long-term relationships of trust. So we’re going to make decisions based on that, and that leads us to collecting, gathering, and sharing stories hand-in-hand with community members. I love that aspect because it also brings ownership of the story back into the hands of the community members. They get to determine the readiness to be able to tell a story. Are they personally ready to share these stories? I think we heard already in our conversation a lot of these stories reflect real, lived trauma, intergenerational trauma, wounds that people carry. And we need to respect where they are in that healing process, either personally, in families, or across generations. Who am I to say, “This is what you need to do,”? Instead, let me center, “What will help you heal? What would bring restoration to our communities?” And make decisions based on their answers. I know sometimes that’s not satisfying, because people question, “But it’s what happened. Everybody should know.” But because we’re centering people, we’re centering community in the decision, then I trust that time will come when that readiness, that time to tell that story, that time to give birth to that story happens at the right moment.
I come from a position of relative privilege being a fourth-generation Chinese American. I’ve been protected from real-life retribution or consequences that could happen from me telling a certain story. But I think back to within the Chinese American communities, people who were coming as “paper sons” or “paper daughters,” under a different identity, because the Chinese exclusion laws prohibited them from coming to the United States. Well, if they told that story right then and there, that would have negative impacts for them being able to live in the U.S., for them to be able to start their families here.

I think about other stories within our Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, refugees who had to purposefully protect themselves, put aside whatever their cultural traditions had been, because of the cultural genocide that was happening under the Khmer Rouge. Those real-life consequences for being who you are impact your ability to tell your stories. I understand the impetus to protect and to keep things within. We try to provide a safe place for people to join together in community. I think there’s safety in numbers, which allows people to feel more empowered and to tell their stories. To create that safe space, we have to say, “It’s your story, you can tell it when you want to.”

**Jamie Ford:** I like that. That’s incredibly thoughtful, measured, and respectful, as it should be.

**Cassie Chinn:** I think I first connected with you and knew about your storytelling through the graphic novel *Secret Identities*. Being deeply embedded in storytelling, what have you learned about storytelling over time? How have your techniques or your thinking about the process improved?
Jamie Ford: Being half Chinese, I’ve realized, once I start writing something, especially in a genre that I haven’t explored, what I bring to the party is a different cultural perspective. I was asked to write three apocalyptic stories by a friend who’s a very famous science fiction author. “Do you want to write about the end of the world?” I replied, “Yeah, I want to write about the end of the world. That sounds great!” And so I wrote stories set in 1910 in Seattle in the International District, in the genre known as “steam-punk,” using the actual streets and locations and hotels. Once I had sent it in, the editor remarked, “Wow, I’ve never seen anything like this,” because so many of those stories have been through a Caucasian lens. There was a wonderful African American science fiction author and Seattle resident who passed away a number of years ago named Octavia Butler. And she said, “The future is scary, because there are no people of color in the future.” She looked at science fiction and the future was always white people and robots. The reality is much more diverse. So everything that I do, I try to bring that wrinkle.

I was asked to write a middle-grade horror story for a collection, and I wrote one based on a Chinese folktale. In a collection of about 50 stories, mine is the only story with the character who’s a person of color. I thought there would be others, but sometimes the cultural inertia is one way. I come at it with a point of passion, and I want to write about these things. It’s fortunate for me that there is a space there, that people haven’t been vigorously telling these stories or telling these stories through an Asian American lens. Secret Identities was a superhero graphic novel anthology, and it was looking at Marvel Comics and DC Comics. So many of the artists and writers, even those in upper management, Jim Lee, who is the chief creative officer for DC Comics, is Asian American, and yet there are so few Asian American superheroes. There are Asian American villains, oddly enough, because that’s how our culture rolls sometimes. It was an opportunity to create a whole world akin to the Marvel Cinematic Universe but populated with people who are Korean or Filipino or Chinese or Japanese, just to tell a different kind of story. And of course, everything that we bring to it is
unique and hasn’t been told and so the readers just love it, because it was something that they hadn’t seen before. These places that we talk about preserving, the stories are there. I think of myself as a cultural archaeologist. I turn over the rocks and look at the squishy things underneath. You just sift the sands, and every once in a while, you find something of profound significance, and you can build a story or a book or a world around those items.

**Cassie Chinn:** It’s pretty exciting to be in both of our positions, because you get those moments that shake your world. I had a recent experience, where we’re fortunate to be partnering with community members here to create a Chinese American legacy artwork project. It’s a public artwork that will finally recognize publicly the anti-Chinese riots from 1886 in Seattle, which you referred to. It’ll be a public work that Stewart Wong, the artist, has been commissioned for. It’ll be near the original space where the Chinese were rounded up along Seattle’s waterfront. It tells that story, but the location of the artwork is adjacent to what is currently transitional housing and a shelter for unhoused people. It’s the Compass Center. We were talking, sharing about the artwork with them, the history and how the Chinese Americans were removed. We started talking about this idea about who belongs and who doesn’t, who is displaced for whatever reasons.

I just had never thought about it in that context, thinking about the displacement of these Chinese pioneers way back in the day from their homes, how they made a living because of racist structures that were in place, and then thinking about current day issues around who is housed and who’s not, who’s forced out of their homes and why, in the context of enduring racist structures as well. It made me have to pause a moment and take it all in and have my worldview perspective shifted in such a good way.

**Jamie Ford:** I love that. I’ve been to the Minidoka reunion several times. Minidoka is, for those of you not aware, an internment camp in Idaho, where 10,000 Japanese Americans and nationals were sent and put behind barbed wire. I’ve gone to the reunion, and one of the best parts of the reunion is they have a “talk story” session where they have one of the elders who’s in their late 80s
and spent four years in that internment camp sit there with college students and share and exchange and let them ask all the questions. They may seem like silly questions, but they’re questions. It carries that record and it keeps it alive. There are always things that have been lying dormant, and these stories have not been told.

My great-grandfather, his name was Man-Chung, but he changed his name to William Ford in the late 1800s. He came from China to San Francisco and ended up in Tonopah, Nevada, a little mining community. I have access to newspaper archives and found that he’s mentioned in the Tonopah newspaper 20, 30 times. Tonopah is a little town, but one of its tourist places is this old pioneer cemetery. But my grandfather and my grandmother who died in that town are not there because people of color were not buried in that cemetery. That’s part of the story too, and it’s not something that we’d want to dwell on with any kind of animus, but I want to recognize that my ancestors had a tougher go of it and are often left off the pages of the history books.

Cassie Chinn: Your reflection reminds me of some brief moments where I’ve uncovered materials from the past where I was so grateful that those stories hadn’t been left off the history books, as you say. I remember doing some work and finding out that in the 1930s under the WPA, there was a group of social scientists who went around and interviewed business owners in Seattle’s Chinatown. Here were names that I heard of, and then suddenly I had transcripts of interviews that they did. They’re incomplete in the sense that you’ve got a stranger wanting to do interviews and capturing maybe not the full story, but at least that material was there.

Then I think about how in the late 1980s, in Seattle, a group of community members came together and did the Chinese Oral History Project, to interview folks who were passing away. They wanted to capture those stories. I found out that they had done an interview with my grandmother. I found that out in the early 1990s. I wouldn’t have known my own history if that interview hadn’t taken place. So that always causes me to say, “Okay, what work can we be doing in the here and now?” To preserve these stories, to talk to the people while they’re still living, to have that material
in abundance, instead of it being a rare find that you can’t believe happens. I’d love to see greater and abundant activity and all the different stories that we can collect. I was wondering, as you think about this time period in the here and now, what stories really stand out to you that are ripe for the collecting?

Jamie Ford: I think there’s a lot of great work already being done. Like you mentioned the Chinese oral history project or Densho with Japanese Americans’ internment. I think people don’t realize that in many communities of color, they’re not monocultures. Because of redlining, it often compressed a neighborhood together. And so you would have Black people, Hispanic people, and Asian people, and Jewish people, and in some cases, Italian Americans, all congregated in one area living together and their kids going to school together, and a very diverse kind of microcosm of the American experience, as everyone is fighting to catch up, riding on the coattails of the dominant culture, which was the European culture.

That’s why I love the Wing Luke Museum, because it’s a Pan-Asian museum. Yes, there’s a museum in New York about the Chinese in America, and there’s the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. But the Wing Luke Museum is the only Pan-Asian museum where, like in Hawaii, there’s just a beautiful mix of everything, and everyone has their own unique identity. They are as American as someone in the Midwest, but they just have a different cultural point of view, and they all have equal weight and merit. I see that at the Wing Luke Museum, where there’s one group’s story and then another group’s story. There are all of the heroes in media and sports and entertainment and fashion, all together in an exhibit. It’s one of those places where the aggregate is so much more powerful than the individual pieces.

Cassie Chinn: I’ve been thinking, we’ve been providing examples from our own personal experience, within our Chinese American experience. I know a lot of folks are learning and getting more exposure to the Japanese American experiences as well. One thing from a Wing Luke Museum perspective I was thinking about is what are more stories and places that we want to share out all the more?
I’ve been thinking lately about temple locations, places of worship within the Southeast Asian American communities that often reside in residential areas. Under the COVID pandemic, I’ve been doing a lot of walks in my neighborhood and getting hyper-local and noticing things that I might have passed over in the past. Stories that I’d love to see more, which I think are just perfect. People are living there, and places being used. There are incredible places to study and to gather information about. Temples that are right in our neighborhood. It’s that opportunity to be able to record, gather, preserve the materials, and then maybe that material can go to help in preserving that place. To build the significance, to build that value in a city like Seattle, where displacement is happening at an incredible rate. Before we lose places like that, we could actually use stories and preservation and all the tools that we have to not need to look back years from now and say, “Oh, if only we could have done something to save that place.” That’s what’s driving my passion right now.

**Jamie Ford:** There’s a Buddhist temple in Seattle’s International District. You can stay there for about $30 a night. Basically they bring out a bunch of cots, and they put them in the main temple where the altar and the shrine and the statuary are. It’s kind of like being able to sleep in the chapel of a really amazing Gothic church. That building is important, too. Having tourists crash there in the temple and experience the vibe of the place, I think, is really amazing.

**Cassie Chinn:** What are the multiple ways that we can strategize to bolster these places up? How do we value them, and how do we raise the awareness and the value of them? Let’s say for instance, with the Panama Hotel, in your book *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*. Telling that story bolsters the value of that place and broadens how we think about it.

We need to think on an organizational level, too. What are the organizations, where are they at to be able to sustain places like this? To be able to steward them well? Even when I think about the Wing Luke Museum, we’ve grown over time, we’ve been fortunate to develop intergenerational leadership being passed on from one generation to the next. Now the Wing Luke Museum has grown into
its own being where I don’t think any board member or staff member views themselves as the owner of the museum at one time. We’re stewards of the place, we’re stewards of the organization. We’re meant to fulfill our role and ensure that the museum continues on for the next generation. So how do we build the organizational strength to be able to do that as well?

Your example is interesting when it comes to that temple in the Airbnb. We do have to think about, financially, how do we sustain? How do we support and make these things feasible, in the face of incredible market forces? I think that’s going to take a lot of hands. It’s going to take public investment. It takes hopefully private investment, where foundations see it as mission driven, where businesses see it as attractions, to strengthen the business core, to be those amazing places that we love to go visit and spend money in and support all of the businesses, too. Also, how do we think financially from the perspective of whatever that place’s business model is, too? I think we can find ways to be able to contribute to making those aspects come together.

**Jamie Ford:** How do you feel about the future of the neighborhood?

**Cassie Chinn:** On the one hand, I feel like Seattle’s Chinatown-International District has some of those elements that I think it takes to preserve a place and to help a place thrive in place. We’ve got a number of anchors. We’re fortunate to have the Wing Luke Museum. We’ve got the Seattle Chinatown-International District Preservation and Development Authority. We’ve got InterIm Community Development Association, as well. We’ve got organizations that are working to sustain and to support our neighborhood. Even in a newer part of our neighborhood, Little Saigon, we’ve got...
the Friends of Little Saigon who were able to open their creative space and create a new anchor.

The neighborhood itself is a National Register Historic District, so there are some safeguards, at least for the core. We can go into depth on what's in the core and what's not, and what can and cannot be done in our special review district. But that is still a point of protection for us. And yet there are still all these forces that are happening within our neighborhood that cause the future of our neighborhood to be uncertain. There are a number of cranes, a lot of new buildings that are being built in our neighborhood. We also have a new expansion of Seattle’s light rail and a new station that is being planned, yet another kind of public project that will impact our neighborhood, on top of stadium one, stadium two, and stadium three, and I-5 freeway.

Also, how well and how long will it take us to recover and emerge out of the pandemic for our small businesses? I think on good days, I’m probably a little bit more optimistic. Some days are hard, and it hurts my heart to think about what could happen. But then I lean back on just drawing on the strength of all the amazing community folk who are involved in all the different ways. And I know we’re going to fight hard, and we’re going to come together, and that gives me strength.

**Jamie Ford:** That’s good. The whole neighborhood, the Chinatown neighborhood, was originally the site where Seattle planned to build its first giant sports stadium, the Kingdome. It was a huge effort on the community to say, “Hey, people live here. These people have just as much value as the other people. And there’s some industrial area to the south that you could use.” It’s funny that I say this because the Kingdome only lasted 20 years before they tore it down. The city wasn’t even done paying for it. No one wanted to preserve the Kingdome. If there were any preservationists, they were just like, “Nah.”

But how do you feel about people from within the community redeveloping some of these places? There was a hotel called the Publix Hotel. Generations of immigrant families lived there and have lots of stories of kids playing basketball in the basement.
It had fallen into tremendous disrepair, and then it was given a facelift by someone within the community. How do you feel about those kinds of things?

**Cassie Chinn:** I think about two questions, for me, at least initially. I think about community wealth building versus displacement. If we’re able to build community wealth from within and not be displaced from the neighborhood and be able to benefit from giving a place like the Publix Hotel a facelift, providing a place for new business incubation to happen there, then there’s goodness that had happened. They went through an outstanding relocation process for the residents who were in the Publix Hotel. I think about these issues of displacement and community wealth building, I also think about the connection to the community itself. The community ecosystem. How connected are you to all that is happening in the neighborhood and really becoming a part of the neighborhood and what’s happening there and contributing to the ecosystem in a way that helps build up the neighborhood overall? I think if those aspects are in place and in good ways where the goodness gets to stay inside of the neighborhood, instead of it being extracted out of it, then those are some ways that we can pinpoint thinking about new developments, preservation, rehabilitation of places, and what makes sense within the context of where they’re at.

**Jamie Ford:** Years ago, I took my kids on the Wing Luke’s International District Tour. The woman who was our tour guide, Bi, took us to all the places that were not very established and known outside of the community. She took us to the places that are perhaps lesser known, and they need our dollars to sustain them, and that was a message that was never lost on me. Whenever I’m going there, instead of going to a well-established place for groceries, I’ll go to this lesser-known place. Instead of going to this popular bakery, I’ll go to this other bakery. And it’s just a way to sustain everybody as well as just to discover some really cool stuff that other people may not know about. There’s so much there.

I love how you talk about worrying about people being displaced, because first-generation immigrants, they are the hardest
working, most law-abiding people you will ever find. They just are on the lower end of the economic spectrum, and they need a place to live and a place where they can build a life just like everyone else’s ancestors. When we turn all of these places into condos, we turn them into office buildings, we rip the heart out of the neighborhood. You’re removing the only real place of comfort for people coming from afar to our country. The analogy I always use is if someone travels to Tanzania and there is a McDonald’s. My wife and I went to Tanzania and were there for a month, and when we saw McDonald’s thought, “I’m going to go there, because it’s a piece of home, that quarter pounder.” For this other wave of immigrants from the Pacific, this is their piece of home. It’s not a gated, walled community. Everyone can go there. Kids can go there on field trips, businesspeople can go there for lunch. There’s so much to offer. If we displace all the people, then it is Disneyland and not real anymore, and no one wants to live at Disneyland.

**Cassie Chinn:** I think your point is a great one. Maybe that’s a nice place to wrap up, because when I think about place, these places, I think about the people, I think about the stories that they bring. We bring our stories because we’re trying to find places of comfort and belonging and home. Where is that? What does that mean for us as we try to connect? I think that’s the power and the potential for stories, and place, the combination of them, because it’s trying to figure out what our roots are, where can we find that place of belonging?

**Jamie Ford:** It reminds me of [Maneki](https://www.manekijapaneserestaurant.com), a Japanese restaurant in the International District. It is one of the oldest operating Japanese restaurants in the country, and in the ‘20s and ‘30s, the Asian workers who would come here, they’re bachelors, they came to make money and they’re far from home. They would go there not just for the food, but the waitresses would sing Japanese folk songs because all the boys were homesick. They stayed and raised families here and became part of the grand American experiment. These places are so special and they’re still open and operating. I went there and had dinner last time I was in town because I just love being in that place where you just feel the spirit of all those people who came before.
Cassie Chinn: Thank you, Jamie. It’s been amazing to spend this time talking with you. We don’t get to do it enough.

Jamie Ford: We’re always too busy doing other things when we’re together.

Cassie Chinn: I’m looking forward to future times that we can keep talking about the power of storytelling, because there’s a lot of power there.

Jamie Ford: I agree. I could write about that neighborhood forever.

Cassie Chinn: I hope you do.

Jamie Ford: I’m planning to. Thank you. FJ

CASSIE CHINN is the interim executive director of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience. JAMIE FORD is an international best-selling author of historical fiction.

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