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## Multiracial identity: Asking questions about mixed-race culture

‘What are you?’ Chinese/American Indian man takes on identity issue

**DEAN KAHN; The Bellingham Herald**

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BELLINGHAM – Louie Gong grew up eating American Indian bread for breakfast and Chinese dinners cooked on a camp stove.

In the evening, his Chinese and native relatives got together for mahjongg.

Gong’s mother was of French and Scottish descent. His father was half Chinese, part Nooksack and part Squamish.

Early on, Gong was raised by his grandparents, father, stepmother and scads of relatives in a rustic community north of Abbotsford, B.C. Later, his family moved into Nooksack Indian Tribe housing near Deming.

Growing up in Whatcom County – he graduated from Nooksack Valley High in 1992 – Gong learned to navigate in a world where mixed-race people often struggle to define themselves, and where other people prefer to slot them into simple categories.

“I couldn’t quite figure out what I was,” he said, “but I knew I wasn’t part of the mainstream.”

Today, Gong, 35, is a rising young figure in the world of multiracial culture and advocacy. An educator and activist, he’s using art and modern media to help multiracial people gain self-respect for their mixed heritage.

“The way that people respond to us really creates the mixed-race experience,” he said.

After high school, Gong became the first member of his family to attend college, graduating from Western Washington University with a master’s degree in school counseling.

He has been a school counselor and therapist for American Indian kids, an English teacher in South Korea and an advisor to students at the University of Washington.

Today, he’s an administrator at Muckleshoot Tribal College, near Auburn. He’s also board president of the MAVIN Foundation, a nonprofit outfit in Seattle that sponsors a magazine, community events and an online resource library for people of mixed race.

Last year, he posted a video on YouTube asking other multiracial people to post their own videos that answer the question, “What are you?” His video has garnered more than 16,000 hits and inspired numerous videos from other people, ranging from sweet to serious to funny.

More recently, Gong has added shoe art to his repertoire. A fan of Vans shoes, he bought a plain pair, decorated it with a Coast Salish design, and immediately won compliments when he wore them. He now

makes a dozen or so a month to sell, and has posted a video at YouTube explaining how he decorates the shoes.

Some of his shoes will be on exhibit, along with a short film about his life and work, at the American Indian Film Festival at Bellevue College in early November.

Multiracial people are a small but rapidly growing segment of the U.S. While issues of race haven't disappeared, Gong said his multiracial life has been less challenging than what his parents' generation faced, and he expects his children will be even more readily accepted.

“We’re making progress,” he said, “but we have a long way to go.”

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