

Man realizes sea of dreams

□ Garage served as shipyard

By JIM LOZERON
of The Advocate

SYLVAN LAKE — Restaurateur Gary Chong's dream came true last week when he launched his hand-built boat in Sylvan Lake.

"My dream was to have a sampan in this country and build it myself and I did it this year," the Chinese-born businessman says proudly.

The Chinese-style craft, built by Mr. Chong and three friends in just 45 days, arrived at the Sylvan Marina less than two weeks ago.

But the unique mahogany boat has already become a favored conversation piece around the lake, says marina owner Al Carruthers.

Mr. Chong, the 34-year-old owner of Gary's Family Restaurant and Lounge, feels at home in the resort town where he went into business 18 months ago.

"I always liked water because I grew up near the water," says Mr. Chong, raised in a port city in southern China.

Before coming to Canada at the age of 21 he spent two years as a fisherman sailing a sampan in the South China Sea. The idea of building a sampan in his adopted country came to him during a three-month return visit to China in 1983.

Nine years later he designed and oversaw construction of his craft — the first boat he ever built — in a friend's double car garage in Edmonton.

The sampan, made from reddish-brown mahogany imported from the Philippines, is slightly less than seven metres long and just over two metres wide — similar in size to some factory-made sail boats of fibreglass construction.

However, it is the only wood sail boat in the marina where about 100 wind-powered craft are docked.

Mr. Chong said that in designing the craft he relied solely on his memory of a sampan that he inspected when he was in China nine years ago.

But he also had the expertise of his uncle, Le Senh, a long-time fisherman and experienced marine carpenter from



GARY CHONG, RIGHT, RIGS THE TIAN AN MEN, HIS NEW SAMPAN AT SYLVAN LAKE

... he's helped by his uncle Le Senh, of Oakland, Calif., who spent 45 days building the boat

Photo by RANDY FIEDLER

Sacramento, Calif.

Mr. Senh acted as a long-distance consultant at first and later joined his nephew in Alberta for the final 20 days of the construction.

By the time all the bills are tallied, the genial restaurant owner estimates his prize boat

will cost him about \$20,000.

But there is no question in his mind that the project which took 2,000 hours to finish was well worth the time and effort.

Mr. Chong's face lights up as he recalls the thrill of sailing his long sampan last week for

the first time.

"I felt like a baby opening presents at Christmas time," he says of his boat, named Tian An Men in memory of the pro-democracy demonstrators who were killed by Chinese soldiers in Tienanmen Square in June 1989.