

The Museum of Chinese in the Americas: Fighting Stereotypes and Building Community

Angie Chau, NYU

The word “Chinatown” evokes a strange stirring of the senses for most visitors. Fish smells, incomprehensible chatter, and crowded streets mingle with the appeal of inexpensive imposter designer handbags. In some ways, much of Chinatown in New York City seems frozen in time. One Sunday afternoon, as I pass by the door of the building that houses the Museum of Chinese in the Americas (MoCA), I see three Chinese men, all older than my grandfather, sitting on stools. Ten or so pairs of old leather shoes are laid out on the ground by their feet. Bent over their work, each has a hammer and nail in one hand and pieces of shoe in the other. With a million questions running through my head, I throw my companion a look of bewilderment.

“Did you see that?” I ask him.

Behind me, my friend suggests, “Maybe they’re part of the museum.” He points to the handwritten signs behind the old men, covered with cryptic Chinese characters that both of us are incapable of reading.

The geographical location of the MoCA is by far its strongest asset; few things are more appropriate than a Chinese museum situated in the middle of Chinatown. But the museum’s location is also at times a liability. As I learned more about the MoCA, I was intrigued by the evolution of its professed ideologies involving education and civic engagement, as well as the sacrifices, either for appearance’s sake or for a greater good, that were made in the process. I became interested in the media’s presentation of the Chinese-American community, and in turn, the MoCA’s counter-presentations of its own community.

Chinatown’s tourism industry reaches as far back as the turn of the century, when the district was featured in New York City guidebooks as a place of “picturesque foreignness.”¹ Ethnic scholar Ronald Takaki points out, however, that for its inhabitants, Chinatown was anything but a “quaint ghetto [or] an attraction for tourists.”² For the Chinese, Chinatown provided a comfortable environment with the everyday conveniences of groceries, newspapers, and clothing that they were accustomed to in China, without the inconvenience of a language barrier. But historian and cultural activist John Kuo Wei Tchen finds this explanation over-simplistic, calling it a “non-Chinese” assumption that “Clannishness, language, new immigration, and unassimilability are often given as the reasons” why Chinatowns continue to exist.³ In his argument, Tchen suggests a “more complex reality” that was never “populated only by Chinese.”⁴ He asks the questions, “How have people of diverse cultural experiences and national origins remembered Chinatown?” and “How have communities interacted? How have they segregated themselves or been segregated?”⁵

These are some of the questions that the MoCA attempts to address. Founded as the New York Chinatown History Project in 1980 by Tchen and other Chinese-American scholars and artists, the museum changed its name (to the current one) fifteen years later. A desire to address pluralistic interests is evident in the name change, from location- and genre-specific to one indicative of a broader mission. Tchen says that one of the museum’s main objectives is to “target segments of the non-Chinese community,” such as the Italian American inhabitants of Chinatown.⁶ Towards this end, the MoCA has since 1987 organized a “series of reunions for those who attended P.S. 23, the grade school once

located in the building" (of the museum).⁷ According to Tchen, these reunions, "long frowned upon as simple nostalgia or distorted celebrations of the past," have now become "an excellent beginning point for historical research and programming."⁸ The reunion program "has brought together Chinese and Italians to recall and reconsider their childhood experiences with history students from New York University and staff members of the Chinatown History Museum."⁹ In a 1990 newsletter of the Public History Department at NYU, Dr. Janet Greene recounts the experiences of students who participated in the Public History seminar during Fall 1989.¹⁰ Collaborating with the museum, students were challenged by numerous obstacles to their research, such as destroyed school records and language and cultural barriers.

Greene also points out advantages of linking the Chinese-American experience with the Italian-American experience, both immigrant groups that have historically been portrayed as "other" in the media and excluded from mainstream American culture. This type of project, at least in its early stages, seems to have increased the cultural awareness of all participants. In a rare opportunity, NYU students (who were not necessarily Chinese-Americans) interacted with both the Chinese- and Italian-American communities, as well as with the MoCA staff. At the same time, old schoolmates were reunited. This event clearly succeeded at including non-Chinese, but it seems that by 2003, the reunion may have evolved into an enterprise with established commercial ramifications. When I visited the Museum in October of that year, I found a four-page packet of forms soliciting funds and advertisements for the upcoming November reunion.

Another striking museum publication is the *Bu Gao Ban*, a bilingual newsletter produced twice a year. In the Spring 2003 issue, trivia facts and quotes border the four-page spread. The first quote that captured my eye features a photograph of Jackie Chan answering the question, "Why are you a MoCA member?" Jackie Chan smiles that cheesy Jackie Chan smile, and responds in black and white, "People need to know each other's culture and history. Then everybody understands, then no more fighting, no more war going on. Only thing you're left with is the peace. MoCA is a place where people can get that understanding."¹¹ How does Chan's appearance in the *Bu Gao Ban* on the one hand give credit to the organization and on the other hand discredit their work? Is the average reader more likely or less likely to join the organization knowing that Jackie Chan is also a member?

Perhaps an equally pertinent question is that of language. Chinese text appears below the English version of Chan's quote. As a Chinese-American, I read his words first in English and my immediate reaction was something like, "Oh, that Jackie Chan, when will his English improve." With the help of a translator, I discovered that in Chinese, however, his words are not incoherent; in fact, he sounds rather intelligent. If my gut instinct is correct, Chan was interviewed in Chinese by MoCA, which means that the Chinese text consists of his words rather than a translator's. I am left to wonder at the MoCA's translation job: is the English text choppy and grammatically flawed because the translator translated word for word into English rather than meaning for meaning? Or, even more problematic, is the poor English a perpetuation of the stereotypical Chinese broken-English? Either way, the intent of Chan's quote is ambiguous.

Another headline that caught my eye is on the same page as Jackie Chan. It reads, "MoCA Does Lunch with Mayor Bloomberg," and features a brief, two-sentence introduction with stronger emphasis on visual representation. The accompanying photograph shows Mayor Bloomberg seated at a circular table flanked by MoCA board

members. The caption explains that on April 16, 2003, the mayor “invited seven community leaders to have lunch with him in New York City’s Chinatown” to discuss “a variety of issues of concern to the Chinatown community.”¹²

The photograph clearly illustrates the MoCA’s status not only in Chinatown, but also in the city of New York. As physical evidence of the museum’s influence on the mayor, the photograph also validates the museum’s civic role in the Chinese-American community. From a purely educational standpoint, explanatory text rather than a photograph would have helped the reader achieve a higher level of understanding; however, from the MoCA’s perspective, a photograph with the mayor of New York may receive more attention and command more respect. Various conflicts of interest come into play here, at the price of education. The newsletter’s creators wish to feature their colleagues or themselves in the newsletter, especially in the company of Bloomberg. At the same time, Bloomberg was thrilled to be featured in a minority publication. But the reasons for the lunch, and the subjects discussed during it, are entirely lost on the reader.

In conclusion, these kinds of conflicts between the museum’s attempt to attract a wider community audience and the ambiguous messages that are conveyed by printed materials subtract from the active civic engagement that the museum’s ideology encourages. Because the media has always played such an integral role in the history of Chinatown, the MoCA needs to find a more consistent way of using print to encourage civic engagement. Instead of focusing on celebrities, the museum should concentrate their efforts on its main asset, location, and take advantage of community involvement through work such as the oral history projects that have been successful in the past. In this way, the MoCA could show that Chinatown is not frozen in time.

¹ Ronald Takaki, *Ethnic Islands: The Emergence of Urban Chinese America*, New York: Chelsea House, 1994, p. 250.

² Takaki, p. 253.

³ John Kuo Wei Tchen, “New York Chinese: The Nineteenth-Century Pre-Chinatown Settlement,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, Chinese Historical society of America, San Francisco, 1990, pp. 304-305.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

¹⁰ Janet Greene, “From the Outside Looking In: A Public History Workshop in New York’s Chinatown,” *NYU Public History Department Newsletter*, 1990,

http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/history/public_history/1990_newsletter.html, accessed 11/1/03.

¹¹ Jackie Chan, *Bu Gao Ban*: New York: Museum of Chinese in the Americas, Spring 2003, p. 3.

¹² *Bu Gao Ban*, p. 3.