

## **From East to West: The Museum of Chinese in the Americas (New York City, NY)**

**Date :** December 7, 2006

*Gabrielle Berlinger, Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Indiana University and editorial assistant, [Museum Anthropology](#)*

With the close of Chinese year of the pig (2007), the Museum of Chinese in the Americas (MoCA) will also close its exhibition galleries on the 2nd floor of a retired, century-old school building. It will open new doors in 2008 at 147-151 Lafayette Street on the west side of New York City's Chinatown. Although architect Maya Lin, renowned for Washington's Vietnam Memorial, is presently at work designing the new space, MoCA's past will remain present on Mulberry Street for one more year. I recently visited the Museum to grasp this past and imagine its future. While not grounded in its physical space, MoCA remains grounded in meaning and mission.

Founded in 1980 by John Kuo Wei Tchen and Charles Lai as a two-year venture called the New York Chinatown History Project, this 26-year old project-turned-museum (in 1992) makes up for its modest appearance and size with extensive collections and vibrant public programming. Upon my last visit, I discovered that the Museum affirms its founding mission to reclaim, preserve, and interpret the history and culture of Chinese in the Western Hemisphere by moving forward with dynamic material and interactive technology that increasingly involve the curious public.

Source: [www.gothamist.com](http://www.gothamist.com)

MoCA's main, ongoing exhibit entitled "*Where is Home? Chinese in the Americas*" welcomes visitors into a small space designed by architect Billie Tsien to resemble the inside of a Chinese lantern, though his intention is not initially obvious. The round, wooden structure supports a panoply of objects and is backed by thin rice paper onto which panel descriptions are printed. Among the objects, a worn "Chinese Laundry" sign hangs next to a vintage Chinese baseball team photograph, an ancestor worship shrine with incense and oranges, and three Chinese dragonhead costumes. The core aspects of Chinese-American life are divided into framed areas that define but also box in each section. The presentation feels crowded and over-stimulating but conveys a sense of the progression of Chinese cultures across continents and over time.

As you begin a clockwise tour of the room, the introduction on the wall asks, "*When Does an Object Become an Artifact?*," beginning a passage that is unfortunately obscured by the very artifacts that it goes on to describe. For those who succeed in reading between the legs of a wooden stool, however, a series of questions challenge their understanding of everyday objects: "Why are certain objects selected and labeled as meaningful? What do the objects say about their owners, their abandoners, their salvagers? Do they merely fulfill a useful function or do they also contain our longings, our identities, our imagination?" These rhetorical questions linger in viewers' minds as they begin their round.

English, Chinese and Spanish texts vary throughout the exhibit, but even more interesting than the language in which material is communicated is the form that it takes: repeated questions, poetic expression, personal account and historic data. The diverse tones created by these creative modes effectively evoke the individual, communal and global perspectives of the Chinese diasporic story. In the first section of the exhibit marked "Abandonments and Reclamations," you come upon family portraits, Chinese restaurant matchbooks Chinese film reels and other common home objects. A poetic description acknowledges these

Belongings left behind  
In cramped apartments, discarded in dumpsters  
Buried on a mining hillside in Montana  
Under a field in Idaho  
Behind the summer furniture in the garage ...

These words contextualize the artifacts by offering a personal sense of the physical loss and gain that characterizes diasporic movement. Though the text represents the generic immigrant experience more than the specific Chinese experience, its emotional evocation still affects visitors by making clear the tangible reality of the journey.

The second half of "Abandonments and Reclamations" poses the "Museum's Dilemma: a Drama in Two Acts," addressing the problem of respect for cultural heritage in its documentation and presentation. The passage reads:

Act One: the museum receives an artifact passed down four generations from great-grandfather to grandfather to uncle to nephew. The family kept the artifact safe for over half a century.

Act Two: to document the artifact, the museum asks the donor to interview his uncle. The uncle tells the rich story of the family and then warns his nephew not to tell anyone outside the family.

This panel clearly communicates the complicated issue of working with cultural and family lore. When personal history of an artifact carries equal or greater weight than its public meaning, one must consider what is actually on display – the artifact or its owner. Reading this commentary, visitors become aware of the sensitivity that cultural institutions must employ in issues of reclamation.

The next panel, “*Migrations*,” displays documents of the move including passports and death certificates, as well as family photos and translated letters from Chinese women to their emigrated husbands in America. These artifacts describe their stories in individual voices but with an overview of immigration history printed on the “lantern’s” rice paper backing for contextualization.

Here, as in the rest of the exhibit, the absence of glass cases, protective display covers and “Do Not Touch” signs kindly offer unique up-close viewing opportunities (you can even admire the strands of an elaborately woven Chinese opera robe); it is, however, sometimes difficult to identify these objects of admiration as many of their names and explanations are printed on small cuts of paper that are inconspicuously placed.

The third area of the exhibit takes a turn as it begins the series of interactive displays. “*Where is Home? ... the most basic question*” invites visitors to contribute their own answers. Pencil and paper are attached to the walls onto which posted notes already read, “*Right now, my home is with my wife and cat in Chicago, Illinois,*” and, “*Home is inside you. Your heart is your home.*” This writing exercise allows viewers to relate to the exhibit’s subjects with relevant but personalized questioning.

Below the notes, a laptop computer runs a video entitled, “*Transitions: a Changing Profile of New York Chinatown.*” The captioned slideshow of Chinatown’s demographic, geographic and cultural evolution allows for a deeper look into the social history that nurtured the Chinese-American way of life. During my visit, viewers were attracted to this station for its advanced presentation that sharply contrasts with the other dated physical artifacts. The transmission of information may be two-dimensional but it offers archives of material that engage the users in ways that the three dimensional pieces cannot. In a space as small as MoCA’s, multi-media technology can transport the visitor beyond the museum’s physical walls.

An even greater media display called “*Mapping Our Heritage Project*” occupies the next area. This section, considered an ongoing exhibit of its own, consists of a two-computer kiosk that contains a searchable database of Chinatown-related information, “based on the idea that places are made meaningful by the memories, stories and active engagement people have with particular sites” (as noted in its brochure). I fully recognized the impact that this technology can have on the museum experience when a five-year old boy sat alone and transfixed at these computers investigating

familiar Chinatown locations and repeating to himself, "This is funnn!" This medium empowers visitors by equipping them with tools to simultaneously entertain and educate themselves. The next two sections, "*Women's Voices*" and "*A Continuum of Faiths & Customs*" bring us back into the physical world by exhibiting a variety of female-related and spiritual artifacts: a sewing machine, The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan, article clippings about the feminist and Asian-American movements, shocking statistics (including the fact that that in 1852, only 7 of the 11,794 Chinese in California were women), incense sticks, and a transcribed memory of a father practicing ancestor worship. Each is a small but informative vignette.

Closing your circle around the room, you arrive at the last section, "*Many True Stories: Life In Chinatown On and After September 11th.*" This area includes video and audio interviews with residents of Chinatown, the largest residential area affected by 9/11. Partnered with Columbia's Oral History Research Office (OHRO), the September 11th Digital Archives (911 DA) at CUNY's Graduate Center and NYU's Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute, this "Ground One" project trained and enabled middle school students to collect oral histories in the fall of 2003. Though the audio and video technology was not without defect, most of the information could be accessed and the participants' contributions were evident.

Overall, despite the occasional lack of clarity in the Museum's presentation, its creative textual commentary and use of technology combine to produce an enriching experience for the viewer. Many of the displays are dated but the material is continually being updated, even by viewers who use the database. For an exhibition area the size of a large living room, MoCA impressively upholds its mission with a diversity of artifacts, media and textual sources. As the exhibit's introductory poem remarks,

...The mute sites, possessions, and other traces  
Of Chinese life in the Americas  
Each has a story to tell from the winding streets of 19th century  
Chinatowns to vibrant new settlements of recent  
Immigrants in Vancouver, Brooklyn, Mexico City and  
Toronto, to the suburban homes of thousands of Chinese families  
Our task is to ask, to listen, to remember and to retell.

By the end of 2007, the Museum will be renovated and relocated to a new space five times its current size on the western side of Chinatown. Until then, there is something wonderful about walking out of a second floor of a school building through a bevy of children ready to enter their "Chen & Dancers" dance class, then passing the office of the Chinatown Community Young Lions located below Chinatown Manpower on the fourth floor and The Refugee Vocational Training Program on the fifth floor. In this setting, the Museum, in more ways than one, draws you straight into the heart of Chinese in the Americas.

<http://www.moca-nyc.org/MoCA/content.asp>