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Chinatown Community-Based Cultural Institutions on the Brink of Crises



Manhattan Chinatown is experiencing a tough start to the year 2020. As a loving resident of the neighborhood, for the past six weeks, I have been closely following the development of two major incidents that had struck the community: the salvation of the Museum of Chinese in America collection which had been devastated by the 70 Mulberry Street fire in January¹ and the increasing damage done to Chinatown businesses due to coronavirus misconceptions². While the former has made significant progress by the first week of March, according to the museum's constant social media updates³, the latter situation is expected to escalate from one born of paranoia

to that of crowd-control necessity. Out of my deep concern to the community, I decided to visit two integral memory institutions to the local cultural scene—the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) and the Chatham Square branch of New York Public Library (CSL), and observe not only their crowds and displays but also how they are juggling multiple crises.

MOCA (215 Centre Street) and CSL (33 East Broadway) border respectively the northwest and southeast edge of Manhattan Chinatown. I paid my visits to the two sites during the same time of days, from 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., on Sunday (March 8) and Monday (March 9). As I had never been inside these locations, I posed myself as a regular first-time visitor, wandering around exhibition spaces and book shelves, while

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/24/nyregion/chinatown-fire.html>

² <http://www.thelodownny.com/leslog/2020/03/chinatown-businesses-continue-to-suffer-due-to-coronavirus-misconceptions.html>

³ https://www.facebook.com/mocanyc/posts/10157205660130432?__tn__=K-R

taking notes of everything that provoked my interest and assigning special attention to my fellow patrons. Since neither institutions have any docents or security guards on site during my time there, I talked to the front desk staff to get their impression of how the aforementioned crises were influencing the attendance of their audience.

The current MOCA building, designed by renowned Chinese-American designer Maya Lin, houses its exhibition spaces on the first floor. The three exhibitions on view at the moment are the permanent “With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of American” in eight central galleries, the special exhibitions “Gathering: Collecting and Documenting Chinese American History” to the north and “The Chinese Helped Build the Railroad – The Railroad Helped Build America” to the south—all manifestations of the museum’s chief mission to “make Chinese American history accessible to the general public⁴.” As the core exhibition of the museum, “With a Single Step,” provides a general yet vivid introduction to the Chinese American history with photos, slideshows, audio guide, moving images, museum labels, and collected objects. It is also where most visitors I observed spent the majority of their time. “Gathering” tells the origin stories of 28 sister organizations around the country, mapping and delineating the groups and communities that have devoted themselves to Chinese American historiography. This exhibition might be what attracted me the most for its relevance to my research interest, yet I noticed that more generic audiences were less patient with its highly informative and lengthier reads. On the other side of the floor, the Railroad photo exhibition is a historicizing and commemorating effort of “Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project” at Stanford University.

As I was walking away from the last exhibition, I noticed that the wall to the left of the reception is devoted to the makeshift exhibition of “Recover, Restore, Rebuild: MOCA Collection and Research Centre.” It features the reportage of the fire at 70 Mulberry Street, the race against time to recover the collection, and the community support that had made the salvation effort possible. The



condition of the damaged building and the daily recovery progresses are documented by short videos (which echo the museum’s social media posts on Twitter and Instagram) and looped on ten flat screen televisions.

⁴ <http://www.mocanyc.org/about/>

Later, the museum staff explained that this display was put together one week after the fire, an endeavor to inform the visitors, call for donations, and express gratitude to the community.

The CSL building has three floors over street level and one in the basement. The first floor holds shelves of the library's English collections, while the Chinese-language books are downstairs. The entire second floor is devoted to children's books. All three floors provide abundant seatings and work stations, with lower and more colorful chairs for kids on the second. The volumes collected in this particular branch of NYPL, be that in English or Chinese, range mostly from best-seller fictions and non-fictions, YA literature, graphic novels, comics, and cook books to old health and lifestyle magazines, dictionaries, and test prep books. And a section downstairs focuses on the history of Chinese American and Chinatown.

Both institutions attach great importance to their accessibility to the community public⁵ and make considerable efforts to regular public programming. For instance, both devote an entire floor as family event spaces: with MOCA, it is the basement, whereas CSL chooses its top floor of the 4th. During my time of the visit, neither of these spaces were holding any event, so MOCA was very quiet downstairs, while CSL sealed off its fourth floor from public access.



During my 1.5 hour stays at MOCA, I calculated thirteen guests, the majority of who were young Asian single visitors or couples, with the occasional young Caucasians. Most were females in their 20s or 30s except the 2 males that joined their female friends. On average, MOCA's visitors spent 40 minutes to 1 hour looking at the exhibitions, with some spending longer in the gift shop later. In comparison, CSL, as one of the busiest branches of the NYPL system⁶, was occupied by an average of thirty patrons on their first floor

⁵ <http://www.mocanyc.org/about/>; <https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/chatham-square>.

⁶ <https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/chatham-square>

and about a dozen in the basement. Demographically speaking, almost all visitors were people of color; around one third were Asian retirees, while another one third were people of African or Latino descents coming from a variety of age groups. While I was the only person wandering around shelves looking at the collection, other visitors were all seated, working on their own phones and laptops, using the library's computers, or reading magazines and newspapers. Everybody, except for those who came in with a specific, straightforward task to accomplish on the work stations, stayed longer than an hour. The second floor was particularly quiet with only one Asian teen working on her homework. This made sense since it was an early Monday afternoon when the morning events for younger kids and families were over, while the older kids were probably still in schools.

I asked staff at both institutions about whether they were sustaining their regular crowds. Either was witnessing a slight thinning of visitors but for different reasons. MOCA's receptionist on duty told me Sunday afternoons tend to be quieter, since most families come in on Saturdays. He expressed concerns of the recent impact over Chinatown businesses in general, though after the 70 Mulberry Street fire, there were indeed people coming in to make donations for the recovery or send notes of encouragement and gratitude. When I asked the same question to the staff behind CSL's circulation desk, they explained to me that it was possibly because most regular visitors were not aware that the library had just reopened in March. During February, the library was closed for wall-painting works. As more people in the neighborhood will walk by the library and notice its reopening, more visitors will be expected.

Nowadays, every public space has hand sanitizer dispensers on its counters or walls; so do MOCA and CSL. Though staff at both institutions acknowledged people may cease to come in for fear of the coronavirus, they were all relatively optimistic. When I asked the staff if they were seeing potential closure for public health purposes on the horizon, nobody believed that would be the problem. MOCA's staff said that since the museum is a small institution that does not witness large crowd of visitors on most days, closure to avoid mass gathering would be too dramatic. CSL's staff also mentioned the significant role of library as public space, saying that other issues may emerge if the community loses access to their service.

However, the pandemic situation has been deteriorating at an unexpected speed. As of this morning, MOCA just announced that they will be closed from March 12 to 16, in line with other cultural institutions and events, "to encourage social distancing at this critical time⁷." An increasing number of events and

⁷ <https://twitter.com/mocanyc/status/1238100115769999363>

workshops are being cancelled at CSL as well to prevent vulnerable groups like children and elderly people from indoor gathering⁸, though there is no information on closing the library entirely.



Last Sunday, just as I came to the end of my observation trip in MOCA, a group of five Caucasian tourists, possibly attracted by the vibrant book covers and merchants through the large glass windows, burst into the gift shop. I didn't stay till the end of their shopping spree so I wasn't sure whether they manage to buy tickets to the museum eventually. I really hope they did.

⁸ <https://www.nypl.org/events/calendar?location=15>