

Core Exhibition: *With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America*

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. – Lao Tzu

With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America presents the diverse layers of the Chinese American experience while examining America's journey as a nation of immigrants—an overview of Chinese immigration to the United States, individual stories that reveal what it has meant to be Chinese in America at different points in time, and the physical traces and images of past generations left for us to consider, reflect on and reclaim.

The exhibition is tied together by three main threads:

- a. The relationship between China and the United States; and its impact on Chinese Americans.
- b. How Chinese Americans have perceived themselves in American society (and been perceived) over time.
- c. The impact of Chinese Americans on American politics, culture, and life.

It is organized thematically and chronologically by section:

1) **Go East! Go West! (1784-1870)**

- a. The flows and exchange of goods (i.e. Chinese luxury items) and people (i.e. laborers, missionaries, and students) between the United States and China in the nineteenth century.
- b. How this encounter helped shape the formation of new American identities and brought America into the industrial revolution.
- c. Chinese workers played a diverse role in the building of America: developing commercial fishing, reclaiming swamplands, building irrigation systems, inventing new agricultural varieties.

2) **Down With Monopolies! The Chinese Must Go! (1870-1930s)**

- a. The political climate in America leading up to the Chinese Exclusion Act, and its impact as the first federal law to restrict the immigration of a specific group based on nationality, defining in legal terms who could not “become American.”
- b. Chinese fight for their civil rights in American courts, helping to define the Constitution as we know it today.
- c. The Exclusion Act creates a two-tiered community of “exempt classes” and “paper sons”; both, however, are denied citizenship through naturalization.

3) **Imagined and Intimate (1900-1930s)**

- a. Artists, writers, and photographers create “Chinatowns” in the American imagination, creating a false perceptual intimacy with little real knowledge of real lives and real people.
- b. Excluded from entering the skilled trades, Chinese laborers enter the service trades: washing clothes, cooking, raising children, and providing domestic help—providing service to whites on an intimate level.

4) Welcome to Chinatown!

- a. **Yellowface:** Chinese characters in pre-Hollywood and Hollywood films project influential exotic images of Chinese as figures of fear and desire, guile and treachery, cleverness and inscrutability.
- b. **Chop Suey:** Well aware that Chinatowns are tourist attractions, businesses capitalize on the popular perception that they a little piece of “the Orient” in America. Serving chop suey emerges as means to attract tourists into an economically marginalized neighborhood.
- c. **Chop Suey Circuit:** During the 1930s and 1940s, pioneering performers go on the so-called chop-suey circuit. While it emphasizes the exotic “Chineseness” of the performers, it is an opportunity to participate outside the traditional lines of work in restaurants and laundries.

5) Building Community

- a. The “store” presented here is a composite of salvaged objects and memories from Chinatown stores across the United States (Los Angeles, New York City). The general store is, at once, a supplier of everyday and specialty Chinese goods, pharmacy, post office, travel agency, and community center.
- b. Merchants hold a privileged status in Chinese American communities. They represent the community on local government matters, to the police, and to American society, especially for those who didn’t speak or write much English. They show what is possible, using their wealth and their freedom, in America.

6) The Rising Spirit

- a. **New Year:** Traditions of careful preparation knit isolated people and fragmented families and communities together. Visitors are asked to identify the various traditions, as depicted in a folk painting, that Chinese in America have continued. Visitors are given cards to write out their wishes for the New Year and place in a red envelope. MOCA collects the wishes, and displays them each year.
- b. **New Nation:** Believing that the injustices endured in America are due to a weak and corrupt China, many Chinese Americans become active in the Chinese Revolution. Chinese-language newspapers published in the U.S. provide a forum, safe from Chinese censorship, for public debate.
- c. One of the greatest strengths of the Chinese immigrant community is its capacity for social organization and networking.

7) Allies and Enemies (1940-1950s)

- a. **Allies:** U.S. and China become Allies during WWII. Over 13,000 Chinese enter the U.S. armed forces; although an estimated forty percent are not permitted to become naturalized American citizens under the Exclusion Act.
- a. **American Dreaming:** World War II is a turning point for Chinese Americans, as sentiments shift to pave the way for citizenship and class mobility. The U.S. benefits from the Chinese brain drain when it welcomes a new type of Chinese immigration—political refugees from the Chinese civil war and students unable to return to China after the 1949 Communist Revolution.
- b. **Enemies:** During the McCarthy era, Chinese Americans silently find themselves targeted for investigation as potential enemies of the state. Scratching below the surface of the American Dream of the post-WWII era is a complicated reality.

8) Towards a More Perfect Union (1960- Present)

- a. The **Civil Rights Act of 1964** and its attendant cultural shift helps level the playing field in education and employment for people of color in the United States, including Chinese Americans. **Nixon’s dramatic 1972 meeting with Chairman Mao Zedong** marks the beginning of a new era in U.S.-China relations.

- b. **The 1965 Immigration Act** “repair[s] a very deep and painful flaw in the fabric of American justice,” placing Chinese immigration on equal footing with other countries. It promotes family reunification and attracts highly educated and skilled workers. After a hundred years, Chinese immigration is no longer bounded by racism. Consequently the Chinese American population increases tenfold.
- c. Visitors are invited to contribute a photo/object to MOCA’s Re-collection Wall— a mosaic of Chinese American responses to questions of identity, home, journeys of the past and future.
- d. *For me growing up Asian American, having been a child of immigrant parents — all of that difficulty did serve as a kind of amiable irritant, the grain of sand that hopefully produces the pearl.* –Gish Jen

MOCA presents projects inspired by an idea, a question, a discovery ... that have caused ripples in the society in which we live. Through examples of creative collectives, out-of-the-box projects, and historical reclamations, we come to see that America is an ongoing project, an adventurous undertaking with changing players and inspired outcomes. Visitors are asked to tell the museum of ongoing projects they think we should know about.

9) MOCA video archive *Many Voices, One Humanity*

Twelve individuals discuss their own personal connections to the Chinese American story. Each year, another 12 are interviewed.

1. Agnes Chan, first Asian American woman NYPD officer
2. Emily Chang, spoken word artist/actor
3. Ti-Hua Chang, broadcast journalist
4. Jeff Gammage, journalist/ father of two daughters adopted from China
5. Jennifer 8. Lee, journalist, New York Times
6. John Liu, first Asian American NYC councilmember
7. Roger Brue McHayle, co-founder PNB clothing
8. Taiyo Na, spoken word poet/musician
9. Father Raymond Nobiletti, Transfiguration Church
10. Anna Sui, fashion designer
11. Frank Wu, legal scholar
12. Henry Yung Jr., descendant of Yung Wing

MOCA’s Vision:

Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition human. The art of storytelling, is what gives us a shareable world.

The above quote by philosopher Richard Kearney reflects MOCA’s approach to its research projects and exhibitions. It is our goal to create a shareable world that deeply explores the Chinese American experience; and through this sharing, to create a better understanding of America’s journey as a nation and as a people. Throughout its history, America has questioned its own identity as “a nation of immigrants” – questioning who is, or can be, American; and Chinese Americans have been caught in these debates. Some of these historical events may be painful and unfortunately, over time, made invisible. However the museum’s intent is not to tell a story of victimization, but one of great determination, spirit and creativity.

The exhibition was designed by MGMT Design/Matter Practice Architecture with co-curators historian John Kuo Wei Tchen and Cynthia Ai-fen Lee.