

New Home For Chinese Experience In America

By LARRY ROHTER

The newly expanded, newly re-located Museum of Chinese in America has chosen to open the doors of its new home on the edge of Chinatown quietly and gradually as it settles in over the summer. But it aims to make a big statement once it's fully moved in about the role that Chinese immigrants and their descendants have played in constructing American society.

"The long-term goal is to create a national museum that will also be a cultural anchor" for Chinatown, said S. Alice Mong, the museum's just-hired director. "There is a lot to do, we have many stories to tell, but we begin with this new building, which will allow us to have the programs to go along with what we envision."

That building, a converted industrial machine repair shop at 211-215 Centre Street, was designed by Maya Lin, who also designed the Vietnam Memorial in Washington and is a member of the museum's board. With about 12,000 square feet spread over two floors, the Centre Street building is nearly six times larger than the museum's current home, and cost \$8.1 million to re-vamp. In the lobby Ms. Lin has created an art installation called "The Journey Wall," which consists of bronze tiles that link Chinese-American families' names and places of origin in China with the towns or cities where they settled in America.

She has created two entrances for the building, which are meant to symbolize the museum's twin missions: helping Americans to understand the Chinese world better, and vice versa.

"Sometimes Chinese history is

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New Home for the Chinese Experience in America Opens Its Doors, Gradually

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seen as unchanging, and put into a lacquered box," said Cynthia Lee, the museum's chief curator. "There is also a notion that Chinese isolate themselves into that box and don't want to interact with the rest of society. We want to get away from that and show our history as a living, dynamic thing."

The Museum of Chinese in America began nearly 30 years ago as the Chinatown History Project, and has amassed a large collection of documents and objects that register the history and culture of Chinese immigrants in America. But before the move to the new site the museum was confined to 2,000 square feet on the second floor of a building at 70 Mulberry Street, in the heart of Chinatown, that it shared with

A bigger museum hopes to show 'our history as a living, dynamic thing.'

numerous other community groups.

The Centre Street location opened without fanfare late last month, and many of the artifacts collected over the years are still in transit from one building to the other. On Sept. 22 the museum is scheduled to hold a grand opening ceremony at the new building, when its permanent "core collection" will be unveiled, along with an exhibition of art combining the work of Chinese-American artists and Chinese artists

Until Sept. 22 the Museum of Chinese in America is open on Thursdays, at 211-215 Centre Street, between Howard and Grand Streets, Lower Manhattan, (212) 619-4785, mocany.org.

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Images from the Museum of Chinese in America:

nytimes.com/design

living in the United States.

Ms. Mong, who formally assumes her new duties next week, comes to the museum from the Committee of 100, a Chinese-American leadership group whose founders include I. M. Pei and Yo-Yo Ma. Born in Taiwan and raised in Virginia and Ohio, she said she envisioned the expanded version of the museum as a place that would attract not just Chinatown residents and non-Chinese New Yorkers but also "tourists from Tennessee and Qingdao."

Sam Quan Krueger, the museum's chief operating officer, said: "The Committee of 100 is known as a network of prominent Chinese-Americans, the movers and shakers. So Alice's coming here is a boon to our ability to raise individual capital while tapping into the vibrancy of the Chinese-American community."

In this initial phase, with most exhibits still being installed, the museum is open only on Thursdays, with no admission charged. After the formal inauguration ceremonies it will be open Thursday through Monday, with an admission charge of \$7 for adults and \$4 for students and those 65 and over.

The new museum's first public offering is the Chinatown Film Project, which began last week and will continue on Thursdays throughout the summer. Ten directors based in New York City, some of them of Chinese descent but most not, were commissioned to make short films, less than 10 minutes long, focusing on some aspect of daily life in Chinatown.

The results include impressionistic, plotless efforts like Wayne Wang and Richard Wong's "Tuesday" and Jem Cohen's "New York Night Scene" as well as story-driven shorts like Rose Troche's "Sunday at 6" and Cary Fukunaga's "Kiwi Lotion." Once the museum has opened fully, the films will be shown in rotation throughout the day until year's end.

Karin Chien, the film project's producer and curator, said she hoped the new, larger museum and the chance it offers to showcase Chinese-American or Asian-American films and performers, from spoken word artists to musicians, would "facilitate a huge renaissance for Chinatown."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LIBRADO ROMERO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Near Chinatown: The Museum of Chinese in America, in a former industrial machine repair shop, was designed by Maya Lin.



Cynthia Lee, left, chief curator of the museum; Sam Quan Krueger, chief operating officer; and S. Alice Mong, director.

"In the same way that the museum is expanding physically," she added, "it wants to expand the scope of the media and artists

it works with and the audience it attracts, and this seemed a good way to start."

Two other events scheduled for

this month also exemplify that approach. On Saturday the museum will be the host of Asian-American ComiCon, an event devoted to the role of Asians and Asian-Americans in comics and graphic fiction, and on July 24 through July 26, part of the 32nd annual Asian American International Film Festival, for years a staple event at the Asia Society, will be held there.

One section of the museum's permanent exhibition that is already up and running, a multimedia presentation called "core portraits," focuses on Chinese-Americans who in one way or another "exemplify a particular historical period." The 10 subjects include a celebrity, the silent film era actress Anna May Wong, but the display also incorporates a restaurateur, a laundryman and the first Chinese graduate of an American university, Yung Wing, who studied at Yale in the

mid-19th century.

Each of the video portraits runs three to five minutes and is accompanied by a scripted first-person monologue, delivered in English, that is based on statements made by the subject. Those texts have been written by some of the country's most prominent Chinese-American literary figures, including David Henry Hwang, Maxine Hong Kingston, Gish Jen and Ha Jin.

"I think this museum can be a way for us to celebrate and investigate the role that Chinese people have played in building this country," said Mr. Hwang, a playwright whose work includes "M. Butterfly" and "FOB." "It is important to have an institution that can make the statement that we have always been a critical part of American history and at the same time ask what it really means to be a Chinese-American."