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## MUSEUM

### From Chinatown to Everytown

By JAMES M. BERGQUIST

*New York*  
The relocated and newly designed Museum of Chinese in America held its formal opening on Sept. 22, displaying an ambitious exhibit, "With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America." This was a landmark occasion for the museum, which was founded in 1980 as a project to collect historical information and artifacts about New York's Chinatown. While marking the opening of the new location in

#### Museum of Chinese In America

Relocated and redesigned  
[www.mocanyc.org](http://www.mocanyc.org)

Chinatown's northern limits, the museum also celebrates the story of the emergence of Chinese-Americans into the mainstream of American life, thus extending the museum's scope beyond Chinatown into the national realm.

The new site is on the lower floors of an industrial building at 215 Centre St. (the former one, at 70 Mulberry St., continues to hold research archives). The exterior of the building gives little hint of what is inside. The interior space was

designed by the noted architect and designer Maya Lin, who kept some of the "old" feeling of the building by retaining a rough brick central courtyard and skylight. The area suggests a traditional tenement courtyard, perhaps in Chinatown, or perhaps in China itself. The exhibition space, designed by Matter Architecture Practice, wraps around this area, lending a modern feeling in contrast with the courtyard.

In the fashion common to most ethnic museums, the Museum of Chinese in America chronicles the stories of successful Chinese-Americans and the contributions Chinese have made to American life. But beyond that lies another major theme, framed as two parallel "journeys": the transition in the Chinese-Americans' own vision of their place in America, and other Americans' evolving perceptions of the Chinese. The Chinese view is conveyed by testimonies of individuals through television monitors spread throughout the exhibition.

The changing perceptions of Americans are most tellingly represented in a section of the exhibit displaying stereotypes of the Chinese, as seen in posters, cartoons and advertisements. These reflect the varying ways in which the Chinese became imprinted in the Amer-

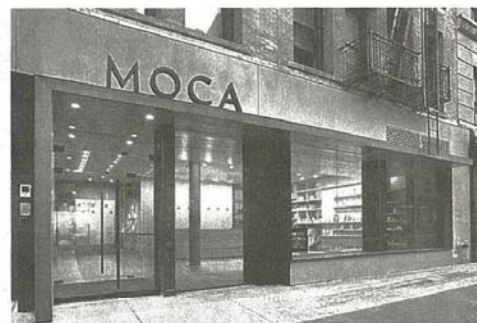
ican mind. The "Yellow Peril" image of the Chinese can be seen in the images of the villainous Fu Manchu, created in novels by Sax Rohmer and repeated in many early 20th-century movies. But there was also the innocuous stage Chinese laundryman, offering his "so so" apologies for missing shirts. There was the image of the mystical and occult conjurer, as cultivated by the magician William Ellsworth Robinson, who colored his face yellow and took on the name Chung Ling Soo. Mystery, seductiveness and evil seemed wrapped up in a sketch of the Dragon Lady, originally created in 1934 by cartoonist Milton Caniff for his comic strip "Terry and the Pirates." The co-curators of the exhibit, Cynthia Ai-fen Lee and John Kuo Wei Tchen, noted that these older stereotypes, developed in the days when Chinatowns were segregated and mysterious places in American cities, seem to have little resonance with younger Americans today. In the past half-century, there has been an emerging stereotype of the Chinese as "Model Minority," represented by honor students, computer geniuses and violin prodigies—a stereotype perhaps as false as any of the others.

In many ways the Chinese-American story reflects that of

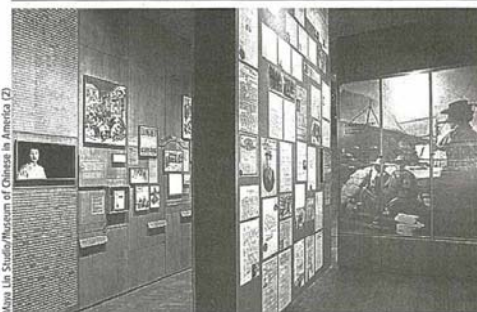
other immigrant groups in America. However, a deeper inquiry reveals many aspects that are unique to the Chinese. From the early days in the gold fields of California, their circumstances created an unusually insular and defensive ethnic community. Chinese came as sojourners and were expected to return to their homeland. Those who stayed were denied citizenship under the naturalization laws of the time. Their presence raised the ire of white working-class elements, and the result was the first American law to specifically exclude a racial or ethnic group, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The act excluded working-class Chinese, while allowing merchants, teachers and tourists to enter. This aspect of Chinese-American history is amply documented with photographs of Chinese American life, and by documents produced by their adversaries.

There thus developed demographically a highly unusual ethnic community. The overall number of foreign-born Chinese steadily declined, even though there were many illegal immigrants who eluded the exclusion law or entered on falsified documents. Those born in America were citizens under the terms of the Fourteenth Amendment, and had civil rights that their parents did not have. At all times there was a severe imbalance between men and women—about 20 to 1 toward the end of the 19th century. The number of minor children was small, and a "normal" family life was practically impossible. The result was an inbred and culturally stagnant community.

The Chinese communities also harbored many internal conflicts, between dominant merchants and other classes,



MOCA takes its story beyond Chinese-American neighborhoods.



among immigrants from various regions in China, and among rival community organizations. Conflict was intensified with the outbreak of the Civil War in China, beginning in the late 1920s; there were supporters of both sides in the American Chinatowns. The tensions abated while the Chinese united to defeat the Japanese, but they broke out once more when the civil war renewed and the Communists took over the mainland.

In 1943 the U.S., now in alliance with China against the Japanese, repealed the exclusion laws, but under the existing quota system it allowed the entry of only 105 Chinese per year. Those limitations were lifted by the new general immigration law of 1965, which abolished the old quota system. It was only then that the closed, introverted Chinese communi-

ties could be transformed by a larger influx of immigrants from both mainland China and Taiwan.

The MOCA exhibit gives us a better understanding of many of these complexities of the Chinese-American story, although it perhaps softens its account of the internal tensions within Chinatown by focusing instead on those issues which united Chinese Americans. It certainly carries outsiders' understandings beyond stereotypes and into a more accurate perception of Chinese-American life.

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