

Museum of Chinese in America's unique collection devastated by fire

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On the night of January 23, a fire broke out in the archives of the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) in Manhattan, causing major damage. The archives stored some 85,000 artifacts, photos, memorabilia, documents, oral histories and artwork documenting Chinese communities in America. The museum itself relocated to another space more than a decade ago.

According to media reports, the fire broke out around 9 p.m. on the upper floors of the five-story, 125-year-old building at 70 Mulberry Street, leading to the roof eventually collapsing. Nine firefighters and one civilian were injured. Two hundred firefighters battled the blaze for over 24 hours.

While the archives were located on the second floor, which the flames never reached, the water damage was extensive. Museum officials initially believed that most, if not all of the collection had been destroyed.

The museum's president Nancy Yao Maasbach told the *Gothamist* that the archives included "old iron heating metal components that are from hand laundries. There's dresses—traditional Chinese dresses, *cheongsams* from the turn of the century. There was just an endless list of priceless family albums, postcards from Chinatown from the early 1900s. I mean, these things are not easily acquired. We have all the movie posters from the theaters that used to be in Chinatown that no longer exist, the ticket stubs from those things. And we have this signage from early restaurants and laundromats in Chinatown and these things are just priceless." The collection was built up over 40 years. Only about 40,000 of the items had been catalogued and digitized.

In the weeks following the fire, museum officials became concerned as the thousands of items remained stranded in the Mulberry Street building. Only 200

boxes have so far been recovered. Maasbach told *Hyperallergic*, according to the website, that "weeks of inaction since the city's pledge in January to assist with the recovery of the items made her grow 'a little anxious.'"

Hyperallergic reports that MOCA "had originally planned to stage a march—starting from its main museum space at 215 Centre Street and ending with a rally at 70 Mulberry Street—... to put pressure on the city to keep the MOCA collections 'at the highest priority.'" In fact, the only "high priority" item for New York City officials is the maintenance of stock market prices and real estate values.

In the face of the scheduled protest, however, the city's Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) pledged February 27 to allow the recovery of parts of MOCA's collection beginning March 3.

The city, MOCA believes, was dilatory in permitting such efforts. Recovery is urgent since further damage is certain unless artifacts are removed and treated.

The Mulberry Street building not only housed the MOCA archives, it also served as a vibrant community center for Chinatown residents, providing a home for the local Athletics Association and the Chen Dance Center.

The original museum was established in 1980, but in 2009 the exhibition space moved to the Centre Street location, designed by Maya Lin, the architect of the Vietnam War Veterans' memorial in Washington DC. The old location then became storage space.

The artifacts documented the variety of Chinese immigrant life in New York and around the United States. For example, in addition to the items mentioned by Maasbach, a vast number of letters between immigrants—typically young working men—and their families in China that charted their experiences and

struggles appear to have been destroyed, although nothing can be determined for certain until the rescue effort proceeds.

These potential losses only scratch the surface. Assembled from donations and purchases, many of the artifacts had been collected from streets, old buildings and even garbage dumps in a community-wide effort to track the local history of Manhattan's Chinatown.

Some original copies of the first-English language Chinese American newspapers and what is believed to be the oldest Chinese typewriter in the Western Hemisphere have been recovered so far. Since many storage rooms are still deemed unsafe, however, the true extent of the losses will most likely not be known for months.

The loss of these artifacts, even if the number of destroyed items proves smaller than originally feared, is a cultural tragedy. These objects and documents provide invaluable insight into the rich history of Chinese immigrants in New York City, and how one of the city's most famous districts developed. Like that of many immigrant diasporas, Chinese Americans have historically, and indeed still do, faced xenophobia, poverty and the violation of their rights to work and settle.

Accompanying the rise of mass working class struggle, such as the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, in the second half of the 19th century, Chinese immigrants came under significant attacks. Through the promotion of racist hysteria, both Democratic and Republican parties sought to divide the emerging American working class along racial and ethnic lines.

The most infamous expression of this was the Chinese Massacre of 1871, where a mob entered Los Angeles's Chinatown and lynched at least 17 Chinese immigrants. Politically, this agitation culminated in the racist Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. It is no accident that when the Nazis were formulating their Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935, they closely studied American immigration law.

The Exclusion Act was only partially lifted in 1943, as a partial concession to the Chinese Republic government of Chiang Kai-shek, which was allied to the US in World War II. It was not until 1965 that quotas on immigrants from China were fully lifted.

The development of New York's Chinatown reflected the course of these struggles. Following the

end of the great railroad construction projects on the West Coast, which had been the typical employment of Chinese immigrants, many of the latter moved into "Chinatowns" in major US cities. Domestic labor came to dominate these enclaves, which due to Sinophobia, often functioned as self-governing districts within these cities. Beginning in the early 1900s, in Lower Manhattan, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent System collected its own taxes and formed its own administration.

Chinatowns, including New York's, were rife with poverty and associated social ills. Famous for crime, visible poverty and its opium dens, Chinatown became a pilgrimage for wealthy New Yorkers to engage in "class tourism," while the lack of oversight by city authorities meant it became a haven for nightlife and counterculture during the Prohibition Era.

Since the elimination of quotas in 1965 Chinatown has grown by around 1,000 percent and has seen a rise in new immigration from various regions of China, most prominently from Fujian province in southeastern China.

The American media is once again raising the infamous specter of the "yellow peril" to justify exclusion of immigrants and violence toward Chinese Americans by elements of the political elite that place priority on geostrategic conflict with China.

Meanwhile, many responses to the outbreak of the Coronavirus have been characterized by implicit, and occasionally, explicit racism.

The museum itself enjoys the oversight and support of wealthy individuals typical of museums now, including executives from Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan Chase and various huge consulting firms such as Deloitte, and major utilities.

Nevertheless, preservation of the collection has rightly sparked widespread support from artists and curators and museumgoers around the world. Last week the online gallery Praise Shadows Fine Art organized a sale of paintings, drawings, sculptures and other works to benefit MOCA.



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