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Photos by Larry Tung Images from exhibits at the Museum of Chinese in America

A first-generation American born to immigrant parents from Shanghai, China, Helen Zia did not learn Chinese growing up in New Jersey in the 1950s. Her parents wanted her to speak only English in the hopes that she could be fully accepted in America and escape racism they experienced themselves. She went on to become a member of Princeton University's first graduating class of women and a celebrated journalist and author.

"My parents instilled in me their respect for America -- and their love for China. China was their passion and the home of their heart, while America was my home and my future," narrated Zia in a short video telling her story growing up as Chinese American. This narrative is part of an exhibition in the new home of the Museum of Chinese in America located on Centre Street in Chinatown in Manhattan.

In its new space, set to officially open Sept. 22, the museum hopes to boost its presence in the Asian-American community and serve as the city's premier spot to honor Chinese-American history and showcase Chinese-American arts and culture. With the additional room, the museum wants to expand its emphasis to include the national Chinese-American experience. "The museum's board has long decided to position MOCA as a national museum," said Alice Mong, executive director. "This country is a country of immigrants. We are part of the fabric of American society. We need to tell our stories."

Zia is one of the 10 Chinese Americans whose stories are featured in an installation exhibition titled "Core Portraits" that wraps around the museum's courtyard. Their stories exemplify a particular historical ear in Chinese-American history. The subjects include Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American movie star; Hazel Ying Lee, one of the first Chinese American women pilots to serve in the American military; and Yung Wing, the first Chinese graduate of an American university.

The museum was founded as the Chinatown History Project by Chinatown community activist Charlie Lai and John Kuo Wei Tchen, a historian at New York University, in 1980. It was created to promote Chinese-American arts and culture, and to inform, educate and engage visitors about Chinese-American history and continuing development. Its original home on the second floor of 72 Mulberry St. in the old school building for Public School 23, will remain and serve as the museum's archives and research center.

The museum's new home is designed by Maya Lin , who designed the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. and a first-generation Chinese American herself. It is "larger, street-level, and closer to the subway. People can find us," said Beatrice Chen, education director of the museum.

Preparing for Official Opening

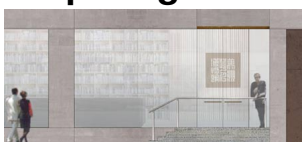

Image from the Museum of Chinese in America A rendering of the new museum

The core exhibit, entitled "With a Single Step," is inspired by the Chinese Taoist philosopher, Laozi, who said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Following the layout of a traditional Chinese house where all rooms are connected through the courtyard, each section of the exhibition is connected with chronological and thematic threads.

The exhibition's script is written by notable Chinese American writers, including David Henry Hwang, Ha Jin, Maxine Hong Kingston and Zia. It is a part of the museum's ambitious summer program leading up to its official opening.

"It is about a journey," said Ting-Chi Wang, curatorial assistant of the museum. "But this is not just about a journey from China to America. It is also a journey in the making. It is a continuous story. We are not rushing to make a conclusion to the journey. We are trying to tell a living history." Wang added that there will be an interactive device for visitors to record their stories.

The museum also will feature "The Journey Wall," an art installation designed by Maya Lin to honor family history. It consists of bronze tiles marked with various family names, their origins in China and where they settled in America. For a donation of $10,000 to $25,000, a family can honor and its family roots in this installation.

"Through the tiles, you can see that the Chinese have settled in different cities, not just New York or San Francisco," said Wang. "We are also aware that people come from different places. We are trying to educate our audience that not all Chinese are the same. But I think it is more important that people share some experience and background. Where they are from is the beginning, where they finally arrive at is what we are talking about."

Chinatown Film Project

The Museum of the Chinese in America also has commissioned 10 filmmakers, including Wayne Wang, who directed the critically acclaimed "Joy Luck Club," and the Emmy-winning editor and producer Sam Pollard, to produce short films about Chinatown.

The filmmakers, Chen said, were given very small budgets but complete freedom, and the results were unexpected, ranging from experimental films to documentaries.

"It is really about dealing with the perceptions of Chinatown," said Chen. "Part of our mission is to encourage people to question and not make assumption about race and ethnic groups."

In Pollard's film, titled "Chinatown: In Their Own Words," he followed three Chinatown natives who reminisced about growing up in Chinatown decades ago. Ann Chan, one of the main characters, shared her memories of being chased all the way down to her house on Mott Street by a boy every day after school, and winning the Chinatown baby contest in Columbus Park with an orange dress bought in China.

In Rose Troche's film "Sunday at 6," a Chinatown woman cooks an elaborate meal for her own birthday, but her son does not attend. The film questions the notions of assimilation and its price -- the loss of family tradition.

While the 10 short films are in exhibitions on site until the end of the year, visitors can watch other films on MOCA's at YouTube channel . Visitors to the site can upload their films on Chinatowns in New York and around the world.

Showcase for Chinese American Arts and Culture

With its bigger space, the museum hopes to broaden its horizons and forge partnership with other Asian-American organizations. This summer, the museum held the Asian-American International Film Festival with screenings and panel discussions. The museum also was the site of Asian American Comicon, which brought together top artists, writers, fans and readers of mainstream and alternative graphic fiction.

"Something that we found out after we opened the new space is that there really is a need for a space like this for the Asian American community," said Chen. She noted that about 500 people attended Asian American Comicon.

"The museum is expanding not just physically, but also in terms of our mission," said Wang. "We are serving a wider audience, national or international. The topics we select will reflect the needs and interests of our audience."

Funding for the New Home

The museum's new home, converted from a former industrial machine factory, is almost six times bigger than the original location. It took several years to locate the funding necessary for the renovation from federal, state and municipal sources. According to Sam Krueger, the museum's chief operating officer, the Museum of the Chinese in America received about $2.4 million from the City of New York for furniture, fixtures and equipment, and $2 million from the Lower Manhattan Development Corp for construction. It also received $2.2 million from the September 11th Fund for construction costs. The museum also gets grants from the New York State Council on the Arts.

Larry Tung is a Brooklyn-based media artist and journalist. He also teaches media courses at Kean University in Union, New Jersey.