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Memorandum to
Board of Directors

cc
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From
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Preparing MOCA for the next 40 years

The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) is embarking on a wide-ranging transformation into a national institution that will culminate in a new facility with a re-envisioned space. At the same time as its physical footprint is being refreshed, and in light of social shifts in the United States and the changing geopolitical environment, many of us have asked ourselves how MOCA's mission should also shift. Specifically, the questions we have raised include:

1. Should MOCA be a national museum and what does that entail?
2. What is MOCA's role in advancing versus recording history?
3. What is MOCA's relationship with the Chinese diaspora, and which diaspora?
4. Should MOCA be transnational and how to go about being so?
5. What can we do to fill the new venue?

Building on the momentum from our 2Q 2021 board meeting, the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) has convened over a dozen small-group and one-on-one discussions with members of our Board of Directors over the past few months. As may be expected, discussion topics often overlapped, and we were able to engage most, but not all, Directors. We have done our best to capture the diverse and often impassioned perspectives, based on recorded discussions, notes, reflections, and general research on our peer institutions.

This memo anonymizes and captures what we believe to be the best reflection of these conversations, and presents recommendations on how to refresh our mission and our strategy. We look forward to continued conversations.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Directors broadly agreed that MOCA is *already* a national museum. By definition, this recognition meant our “community” extends beyond Manhattan Chinatown and frankly beyond New York City itself. Our strategy and decision-making must therefore reflect a broader purview than the narrow confines of our former mission as a community or neighborhood-centric institution. We should avoid “allegiances” to any particular group or region. For instance, while we should be mindful of our roots and of course maintain good relations with the Manhattan Chinatown community (and navigate around the small number of antagonists), this community does not have any “ownership” of MOCA.

Directors recognized and aligned that MOCA has a role to play in terms of being involved in current events that impact Americans of Chinese ancestry and the broader Asian American Pacific Islander community. However, it was also clear that we should not cross the line into becoming an “activist” or “advocacy”-type organization, of which there are also existing organizations that are better positioned (and resourced) to act. Directors understood our role to add nuance, background, details, and facts to the story, and entrust our visitors to draw their own conclusions. Many Directors remarked that there is simply no other comparable resources or programs to teach people about the Chinese experience in America, and by simply teaching and showing these facts, education has always been a form of advocacy, whether intentional or not. Where appropriate and mutually beneficial, we could play a “convening” or a “facilitation” role with peer institutions to ensure our voices are fully and appropriately heard.

There was near-unanimous sentiment that fully telling the story of the Chinese diaspora in America requires expanding the narrative beyond laundromats, restaurants, and railroads. Some Directors expressed distaste for the perceived heavy focus on the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as a form of “oppression Olympics”, i.e. comparing the struggle of Americans of Chinese ancestry with other immigrant groups in the United States. The years since (and the years prior) have seen their fair share of struggles, but also incredible successes and generally positive stories of the Chinese diaspora that have built their lives in America. Celebrating these successes and the fact that many of these stories are as American as can be seems to be a missing element.

As an aside, our discussions touched on the programmatic focus of the new MOCA. In particular, we were made aware of a suggestion to reinvent MOCA as a “MoMA for Asian Americans”. Directors we spoke with all believe this to be misguided. MOCA can leverage art as a way to illustrate and storytell, but collecting art by Americans of Chinese ancestry as an end in itself seems misaligned with our mission. Our audience is much broader than art aficionados and we should strive to make MOCA relevant beyond the connected and “woke” few. In brief, MOCA should not be an art museum.

Several conversations briefly touched on what was meant by “America”, and most Directors agreed we were speaking of the United States, i.e. not North America or the Western Hemisphere. This identity – a function of both Chinese ancestry and a choice to make one’s life in the United States – is key. As such, Directors agreed that MOCA should be as inclusive as possible within that framework, embracing ethnic Chinese people from Singapore or Thailand in addition to China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, generational stories, regional stories across the U.S., etc.

A topic of interest and particularly ardent discussion was how to think of MOCA’s (and the diaspora’s) relationship with the nation-state of China. A representative view was that Americans of Chinese ancestry represent a completely separate socio-cultural group with a different culture, identity, and history from Chinese people from China or other diaspora groups in Europe, Southeast Asia, or Australia – as different as Americans of European ancestry are from Europeans. One Director summed it up thus, “Chinese is an adjective, not a noun.” Long-standing attitudes of Sinocentrism often regards a separate socio-cultural identity as an “aberration from the norm”, but MOCA should be a “home” where this identity – whether sixth generation or just moved here six months ago – is always seen as legitimate, recorded, and celebrated.

Along these lines, most Directors also believe that MOCA should avoid being drawn into geopolitical topics such as the US-China relationship. As a museum dedicated to Chinese in America, events happening in Asia seem off-target. Such a focus invariably muddles the separate socio-cultural identity of Americans of Chinese ancestry, even to the point of inadvertently portraying them as an extension of China. The majority of Directors are of the position that our community is not an extension of China, and this distinction must be drawn in how we present the stories and exhibits going forward. While the US-China relationship is important for reasons that we will not rehash here, MOCA is not a political or governmental organization, particularly with respect to foreign affairs. As such, if there isn’t an American filter to tell stories in terms of a historical event, then MOCA shouldn’t do programming around it.

To draw these various strands of discussion together, Directors had high regard for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). NMAAHC is go-to source for history, scholarship, and information about African Americans, but the role of pure advocacy and policy is left to others. At the same time, they add context and information that can very often be omitted from the conversation when events are happening at a rapid pace.

Finally, the connection and value of being New York City-based should be a lever to further integrate into the programming and visitor outreach, particularly given the pent-up demand and expected rise in tourism following the COVID-19 pandemic. Directors see New York City as an advantage and believes we should concentrate our efforts here around certain New York City “events weeks” or peak travel seasons, as opposed to attempting to convene a “constellation” of similar

institutions nationwide. We should aspire to a world where a MOCA visit should be on the same level as MoMA, Central Park or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for people visiting or living in New York – whether of Chinese ancestry or otherwise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

MOCA as a national museum

1. Be a Chinese American analog to the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Ensure that the experiences of Americans of Chinese ancestry are fully told and reflected in the fabric of American life.
2. Lean into our credibility on both historical and current issues impacting Americans of Chinese ancestry and AAPIs by proactively looking for ways to provide important context and detail as events unfold.
3. Play a critical convening and facilitation role in the larger AAPI movement, lifting up all AAPI voices and focusing on purpose-driven education, without crossing the line into direct, “frontline” advocacy.

MOCA’s role in advancing or recording history

4. Provide context, detail and nuance, but give our visitors the opportunity to make up their own minds. Paint the fullest picture we can without advocating for a particular point of view in our programming and events.
5. Focus on American history and stories of the Chinese who came here, stayed and built a life, contributing to the fabric of American society. International political entanglements without a connection to an American story are out of scope.

MOCA’s relationship with the Chinese diaspora in America

6. Feature more positive stories and “wins” across the spectrum; avoid rehashing the existing stories and avoid participating in the “oppression Olympics” (see Appendix for potential programming ideas).
7. Focus on the American part of these stories; prioritize connection to the American story overall. For example, we are not telling the stories of the global Chinese diaspora writ large, Chinese people remaining in China, or overall Chinese civilization.
8. Continue our diversification beyond laundromats, restaurants, railroads and the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Should MOCA have a transnational character?

9. In terms of programming, focus on Americans of Chinese ancestry. Other non-U.S. Chinese communities are out of scope.
10. Be very careful about accepting foreign donations without adequate diligence and risk management as to source and motives, particularly those with a government or political nexus.

Audience strategy in preparation for new MOCA

11. Make MOCA a “must-see” site to anyone visiting NYC just like Central Park, the Met or MoMA – by marketing beyond the ethnic Chinese community. Connect with as many groups (beyond schools, researchers and history buffs – bring in corporates, strategic local government officials, professional services firms all focusing on diversity & inclusion initiatives, etc.), particularly those that have never heard of MOCA or do not regard the museum as “for them”, as we can who are interested in an unseen/unspoken aspect of the American story.
12. Connect MOCA to Asian and non-Asian events happening during the year in New York City. Devise some sort of metrics around who visits, when, etc. to uncover synergies.
13. Refresh main exhibits via rebalancing proportion of permanent versus rotating exhibits. Consider guest curators to broaden audiences.
14. Transform gift shop to be a destination in and of itself, not an afterthought to a museum visit. Review product assortment and potential for synergies and connections with the community in New York City and elsewhere.

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The SPC is grateful to the members of the Board who have contributed to these conversations. We see this as the beginning of an ongoing dialogue, and look forward to working in collaboration with the Board and staff on the strategic priorities for new MOCA and beyond.

APPENDIX: IDEAS FOR POTENTIAL EXHIBITS

- **Asian fraternities and sororities.** The first known Asian American fraternity was founded in 1916 at Cornell by Chinese Americans, while the first multi-chapter fraternity, Pi Alpha Phi, was founded in 1929 by predominately Chinese Americans at UC Berkeley because Asian Americans were not permitted to join other “mainstream” fraternities. With the explosion of Asian Americans on college campuses, we saw the proliferation of Asian interest fraternities/sororities, including Lambda Phi Epsilon (Chris Shen and Chieh Huang are both alums) and Kappa Delta Phi, as there were still unwritten rules discouraging Asian Americans from joining mainstream fraternities.
- **Education experiences.** Chronicle the education experiences of the 6 different “segments” of Chinese in America across the years (i.e., Mainland Chinese student at Berkeley in 2010s vs. first-generation ABCs in the 80s-90s vs. Taiwanese PhD candidates in Kansas in 70s vs. post-WWII students, and all the way back to the first Chinese “exchange students” sponsored by the Boxer Rebellion indemnities). Weave in the stories and adversity they had to deal with, which included the usual racism and ostracism, quotas, model minority stereotypes, lack of Asian-American studies programs, reverse discrimination with affirmative action that is still going on today, etc.
- **Successive generations of success.** Before this [list](#), there were a lot of traditional founders who defied some pretty incredible odds to being Chinese American and building groundbreaking, successful businesses in the US.
- **Chinese out of the historical backdrops:** everyone knows the big years and events in history (1979, 1945, 1939, 1914-1918, 1865, 1776, etc.) but it is always painted with a Western brush, focusing on global great powers and western historians, but perhaps we can ask how did the Chinese and Chinese Americans interface with these big events? For example:
 - WWII started in China in the early/mid 1930s as the Japanese made incursions into Northern/coastal China (well before Nazi Germany invading Poland), thus scattering more Chinese overseas and prompting China to interact with the US for aid
 - The Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery in 1863 in the US and other European powers before that, but Chinese coolies were implemented as replacements in the US and beyond
 - Upheaval in China, whether Qing Dynasty instability, the turmoil between the Nationalists and Communists, and even up to Tiananmen Square Protests/June 4, 1989: were all events that spiked considerable and significant waves of Chinese immigration to the US
 - US Civil War: there are documented ethnic Chinese Americans fighting on both sides.

- **Consolidating that Asian-ness.** It’s a poorly kept secret that many Asian groups do not like each other but the pockets of food (boba, pho, Thai food, Korean BBQ, etc.) are starting to connect groups quite a bit. Many types of food are offshoots of the Chinese diaspora bringing their recipes to other Asian countries and then these diverse groups bringing it to the US. Perhaps something about Chinese food culture as a “unifier”?
- **Random stories.** Again, focusing on the positive (and quirky) here. Examples includes:
 - Regional Chinese Americans growing up in random places (i.e., away from large US cities) and their stories – even within our own group, we have some pretty diverse upbringings that allow for interesting (and somewhat funny) coming-of-age stories. Leads us to discuss what “code switching” meant for a lot of us who did not grow up in Flushing, San Gabriel Valley or San Francisco (being white or something else on the weekdays to fit in and Chinese on the weekends)
 - Chinese Americans who enter professions to the consternation of their parents ([comedians](#), etc.)
 - The documented Asian-American (with significant Chinese American representation) [love](#) of New Wave music
 - Chinese Americans who reconnect with their native roots in lands their families left a long time ago, which leads them to question what it means to “Chinese American”