

Interview with MOCA Collections and Research Center Director Yue Ma

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Located at 215 Centre Street, Manhattan, the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) is a home for the precious narratives of diverse Chinese American communities. Beginning as a small Chinatown organization in the 19th century, MOCA's archive has grown into a nationally-significant collection of



Yue Ma, Director of MOCA
Collections and Research Center.
Photo by Jing Zhao

documenting the dynamic profile of Chinese America. From last winter to this summer, I worked at MOCA as a media production intern. Some of my jobs was to photograph the museum's collection and help the collection department to edit the oral history video. From this experience, I've learned about this department and got to know the director of MOCA's Collections and Research Center - Yue Ma, who made great contributions to the museum collections management. I admired the works done by her, and I was touched by the richness of MOCA's collection. And, she is one of the reasons that I decided to learn more about collection management and pursue a career as an archivist at a museum. So, in the middle of September, I interviewed Yue for a brief chat to get a better understanding of the MOCA collection department and her story as an archivist who worked both in China and America.

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JZ = Jing Zhao

YM = Yue Ma

JZ- Can you tell us about your position as the Director of Collections and Research Center at the Museum of Chinese in America?

YM- I'm doing collection management for the museum, and the responsibility of this job consists of two phases - 'Collections' and 'Research'. And this is why our department is called "Collections and Research Center". In general cases, there are four parts included in the 'Collections' phase: conditions-checking, digitalization, categorization, and conservation. The 'Research' phase, which means realizing the ultimate

purposes of the collections, is divided into two parts: “Internal exploitation” and “External exploitation”. The ‘Internal exploitation’ refers to collections for the museum’s own usage, such as for our exhibition, education, and promotion. The ‘External exploitation’ means that collections for the public to use, such as for researchers, and for other museum’s exhibitions through inter museum loans. It is an intense job.

Currently, there are only two full-time staff in the Collection and Research Center. If you have read *Waves of Identity: 35 Years of Archiving* (published in 2014), you will notice that I listed hundreds of interns’ names that worked for our department in this book. I’m very thankful for the interns’ assistance. We won’t accomplish today’s achievement without them.



MOCA's Collections and Research Center at 70 Mulberry Street, New York. Left: Kevin Chu (Assistant Director of Collections), Right: Yue Ma. Photo by Jing Zhao

JZ- What is the long-term goal of MOCA’s Collections and Research Center?

YM- In the beginning, we started as an organization that preserves Chinatown's history. And, it slowly developed into the current Museum of Chinese in America. At present MOCA is the biggest Chinese American museum on the east coast of the US, and our goal is to make it the biggest in America. Every department in MOCA is following this long-term goal. The thing that MOCA's Collections and Research Center is continuously doing is filling the gap of our Chinatown history collections, including important events and the family collections of the first generation of Chinese Americans (and their offspring's). Secondly, we need to consider the topics that researchers are interested in. We will classify and

summarize these topics, and do in-depth research. The purpose of doing this is to provide researchers the right information and materials when they come.



MOCA's Collections and Research Center at 70 Mulberry Street, New York. Photo by Jing Zhao

JZ- What led you to work as an archivist?

YM- I studied computer science when I was an undergraduate student in China. This major was actually demanded in any industry. I started working in the archives because the Shenzhen City Archives needed someone who was capable of building and maintaining an archive database. So, I joined the archiving field by chance and worked at the city archives for ten years. Preserving the documents of the municipal government was Shenzhen City Archives' mission. Since it was a government agency, I had to change my job position every two years. Having worked in different departments, I became very familiar with the workflow of the archives as a whole. After working at the city archives, I went abroad and was involved in a program about photographic preservation and collection management sponsored by Toronto's Ryerson University and Rochester, New York's George Eastman House. This training led to my current position at MOCA, which I have now held for ten years.

JZ- Can you tell us a bit about the difference between your experience of working in Chinese archives and American archives?

YM- I feel that China has more human resources, therefore China's archives are managing the documents very carefully. When I was working at Shenzhen City Archives, every page of the documents would be recorded to enhance the preciseness and prevent accidental loss. Us archival management was generally described on box level and folder level rather than item level. MOCA's collection department is using big boxes and folders to categories the files. For example, if we have many files about a specific event, we will put all of them into one box, then use the name of that event to label the box. In 1999, China sponsored many Chinese youth archivists to study in the US for two months. And, I was one of them. During that training, we figured out our problem of achieving and got deeply inspired. Of course, that event wasn't just a learning opportunity but also a process of communication. I think it is better to take advantage of each country's method. Chinese archivists can appropriately save human resources, and, American archivists can manage the archive in a more detailed way.

To a certain extent, archival work will be affected by the organization's economic condition. When working in China, I also found that different organizations were receiving different amounts of funding. The Chinese government automatically gives full funding to government organizations annually. However, non-government organizations may only be able to obtain the government's balance allocation. When I was working in the Shenzhen City Archives, there was a museum nearby. Because we were a government organization but that museum was not, I felt that its economic condition was significantly worse than us'. The model of obtaining grants in the United States is very different and is more complicated. If you need federal or state funding, you need to apply first. MOCA has a fundraising department to specifically work on this.

JZ- You assisted the curation of the permanent exhibition at MOCA - *With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America*, what was your experience when you participated in curatorial collaboration?

YM- I happened just to be hired at the time, my job position was collections manager. For this exhibition, my major responsibility was to help find the collections designated by the curator. After finding them, I checked the collections' conditions and repaired some of the items. During that time, MOCA's collection and exhibition space were both located in 70 Mulberry, after packing the collections, we can efficiently transport them to install. Also, another critical job I did for the exhibition was assessing the lighting

angle/level and the distance between the audience and the item. I put a detailed note together with each item to give the curator a reference.

In addition, the title of this exhibition was first proposed by me. The phrase “With a single step” was quoted from the sentence “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” said the Chinese ancient philosopher - Laozi. And, our co-founder - Jack, who was a professor at NYU, came up with the subtitle - “Stories in the Making of America”.



With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America, Museum of Chinese in America, New York.
Photo retrieved from Google Maps

JZ- Has there been a project that you have worked on that you’ve enjoyed more than others?

YM- It was *Waves of Identity: 35 Years of Archiving*, an exhibition that was organized in conjunction with the New York Historical Society’s *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion* exhibition in 2014. During the curatorial process, the MOCA’s collection department worked with the MOCA’s Exhibition Department, and we co-edited the book of the exhibition. This project excited me because it actually showed what we collected. It invited visitors to see how the Museum began, how far we have come as an organization, and why our work still matters today. We placed archiving shelves to display the objects, which made the form of this exhibition interesting too. Eventually, we received many positive feedbacks. I still can remember clearly, one article published in the New York Times commented that *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion* was very general, and, *Waves of Identity: 35 Years of Archiving* was very close to life.

However, my good reflection is not just about the exhibition’s success itself, it was about the big achievement I’ve accomplished since I worked for MOCA’s Collection and Research Center. In the beginning, I was the only person working in the department. I remember, the department (located in

Manhattan) at that time was filled with high shelves and documents on the floor. There was almost no place to step on. Searching items was very difficult. MOCA also had off-site storage in Brooklyn, two storages at two locations made the searching process even harder. This experience made me think about how to start, how to overcome difficulties, how to establish policies and standards, and how to move forward. It was very meaningful to me.

For instance, there were only about 200 items recorded in our PastPerfect database, and the database was for local use only. We had so many boxes that we had no idea about what's inside of them. I negotiated with the PastPerfect company to link the collections online and started using ArchivesSpace to make the general description possible. Currently, we have more than 33,000 items in our online database. Many peers from different organizations said MOCA's database is strong. This achievement makes me very proud of myself.

JZ- Do you have any advice for students who are pursuing to work in Museum Collections?

YM- Firstly, I think the integration of knowledge in various related fields is very important. I haven't learned that archives, libraries, and museum collections are three different fields until I attend the courses in the US's grad school. I know that the majors are separated. But, when I worked in the museum collections, I found that these three fields were actually going together. For example, we often can find a museum that has an archive and a library for managing different items. Secondly, I recommend students to combine their own advantages when working. Taking me as an example, I studied computer science when I was an undergraduate. This academic background provided me the ability to think logically and helped me with the collection management work. Finally, certain historical knowledge is required. Many students might focus on building the collection management skill sets and ignore history learning. It is also important.

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On the night of January 23, 2020, a fire broke out in 70 Mulberry Manhattan, where MOCA's Collections and Research Center and many other Chinatown associations were located. 1/3 of the collections were retrieved on January 29th and 31st. The second retrieving happened on March 8th, MOCA was able to retrieve the rest 2/3 of its collections. The saved artifacts were transported to a temporary storage room on the same day. And, a volunteer team of conservators assisted MOCA staff to open the boxes to assess each items' condition. Although the majority of the collections were retrieved from the 70 Mulberry, the collapse made by the accidental fire up the floor and the long period of exposure to water and

moisture caused certain damages to some of the collections. In this interview, Yue mentioned that every archive does storeroom management and draws the map of the archive to prevent accidents. And, MOCA is no exception, the emergency measures have been already set long before the accident in January. But, the fire accident indeed let her learn the insufficiencies of the previous storeroom planning.

In the middle of September, I had a chance to visit MOCA. And I was informed that the collections will move to a new space, which is a block away from MOCA's main building on 215 Centre Street. Located on 3 Howard St, the new space is under construction currently, and it is not just a replacement of the previous archives in 70 Mulberry, but an upgrade of MOCA archives' functions. An advanced shelving system and a specific space for digitalization will be applied to the new archive. Meanwhile, the new archive will be more reachable for the visitors since its space will begin on the first floor with a library.

I think the existence of the Museum of Chinese of America and its contribution means a lot to the local communities and the narrative of Chinese Americans. It also provides a platform for visitors from different cultural backgrounds to objectively view the history of America. From my conversation with Yue Ma, I learned so much about the MOCA Collections and Research Center's story, its mission, and the efforts made by the staff behind the scene. More importantly, because we share a similar cultural background, to know Yue's personal reflections on her two work experiences in both China and America makes me feel that this interview is very meaningful.