

Collecting and Archiving Asian-American Stories During COVID-19

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States earlier this year, the administration insinuated that it was caused by the Chinese. While it was later revealed that many of the cases that proliferated the virus through the US had originated in Europe,¹ this fact was ignored. On 16 March 2020, US President Donald Trump turned the insinuations into outright accusations when he took to Twitter and wrote, 'The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!' This was the first time that he had assigned the virus to a race. The president has continued to employ this racist narrative, even referring to the virus as the 'Kung Flu'. This has allowed him to shift the blame for his administration's handling of the pandemic onto Asian Americans throughout the country. His racially motivated rhetoric has led to many acts of violence directed at Asian Americans, who have now been seen by some as the direct cause of the pandemic.

At the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), an institution founded in 1980 to preserve and present the stories of Americans of Chinese descent, we watched the media discuss these racially motivated attacks and felt that it was our duty as a cultural and historical institution to document and correct the misinformation, to combine our commitment to social history with an effort to improve public understanding of science. As MOCA co-founder Jack Tchen wrote, 'unless the humanities can more effectively provide forums to address racial antagonism, interethnic violence, the persistence of ugly stereotypes in the media, ... scholars and institutions risk absenting themselves from meaningful involvement in public discourse on these issues' (Tchen 1992). Adhering to this principle, MOCA launched a collection effort called OneWorld COVID-19 on 27 April 2020. In the initial press release, we emphasized that the effort was meant 'to counter the hate that has surfaced', whilst the name 'OneWorld' was meant to convey the connectedness of the global community in the fight to contain and eradicate the virus. The initial plan was to collect stories of Asian Americans resisting the coronavirus-fuelled hate through acts of compassion and generosity. But as the narrative evolved, it became apparent that all experiences needed to be documented, not just the positive ones.

The need for a collection like this is of paramount importance because COVID-19 has affected every facet of human life and will be an important part of history for future generations. With racially motivated rhetoric circulating, it is important for MOCA and other cultural institutions to document the voices of minority communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic, so that they will have a voice in the larger social and medical narratives; this is part of our responsibility as a cultural and social-minded institution. The American educational system has been notorious for lacking minority voices in the telling of history. In primary and secondary school textbooks, history is often rendered in unoffensive and easily digestible bits with many darker aspects (usually involving minority groups) glossed over or omitted completely. Similarly, museums have often been accused of perpetuating narratives of privilege that exclude or stigmatize minorities. The omissions of minority voices have become even more apparent as a result of the recent Black Lives Matter movement.

To begin to alleviate this situation, we initially asked Chinese Americans to share digitized photographs, letters, articles, journals, messages, notes, certificates, medical records, videos, and oral histories of their experiences during the pandemic. After our first

call, we received dozens of submissions of photographs accompanied with personal accounts of Chinese American communities rallying to deliver Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to local hospitals or supporting local first responders. One of the submissions was from Barbara Yau and her daughter Kyra Yip, who decided to create informative bilingual posters to display around their neighbourhood to combat racism against the Asian-American community and promote public safety. The sentiment was supported by local politicians, such as Speaker of the New York City Council Corey Johnson, who retweeted the poster. A woman in Delaware found stacks of fliers in her neighbourhood that simply read “KILL CHINESE VIRUS” in bold red letters and sent them to us. Some contributors wanted to make physical donations, including artwork and pictures, but due to the stay at home orders we were unable to accept them. This has proven difficult in terms of growing the collection. Fortunately, we have been able to speak with potential donors and to arrange to receive these materials when pandemic restrictions are eased. Once again, we found ourselves navigating between our commitment to public history and the emergent conditions of a public health crisis.



I am Asian, but I am NOT a virus.

Do not blame me for something I did not cause. If you choose to be cruel to me, you will be **reported, found and arrested.**

我是亞洲人，但我不是病毒。別怪我因為這不是我造成的。如果您對我不禮貌或施加暴力，您將被檢舉及被捕。

VICTIMS AND KIND BYSTANDERS:

- 1) Take a picture or video.
- 2) Call **911** if urgent. Or go to/call the police station at:

3) And call NYS Attorney General at **1-800-771-7755.**

受害者及旁觀者：

- 1) 請拍照或錄影為證據
- 2) 撥打**911**和/或聯繫NYPD於以下電話：

3) 聯繫紐約州總檢察長 **1-800-771-7755.**

仇恨也是一種病毒，但我們也可以共同對抗！

Brought to you by Concerned AsAm Citizens of NYC

As the initial fervour died down, so did the flood of submissions. It became apparent that while people were eager to share positive efforts, it was hard for them to share negative experiences such as those of prejudice and discrimination caused by the pandemic. This reluctance to speak about unpleasant experiences among certain groups within the Chinese American community seems to be an ongoing issue, with Tchen attributing it to ‘alienation and low self-esteem’ (Tchen 1992). Our collection efforts were further hampered when the pandemic was displaced in the news cycle by the murder of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis Police Department. The murder changed the priorities of the nation from the pandemic to police reform and accountability. This has led many cultural institutions to rethink their priorities and programming to align better with the social needs of the public.

Figure 1. Bilingual poster created by Kyra Yip and distributed by her mother Barbara Yau, Museum of Chinese in America OneWorld Collection

While MOCA hopes to continue gathering materials for our OneWorld collection, we, too, decided to shift our priorities to support the Black Lives Matter movement. It is important to use our platform to speak out in support of other marginalized populations and the reforms that the protesters are seeking. This sentiment harkens back to Tchen’s principles when he established the museum: wanting to create ‘a more integrative and inclusive community history [that] can help to counter the sense of marginalization and disempowerment vis-à-vis the larger society that was imposed by the Chinese Exclusion

acts and decades of racism' (Tchen 1992). This has meant shifting our personnel as well as social media resources and presence away from collection efforts and more towards solidarity and allyship. The museum staff conducted virtual meetings about the issue before deciding on a course of action. We determined to use our social media to spotlight activism in the Asian-American community by highlighting figures such as Grace Lee Boggs. MOCA also organized two virtual roundtable events moderated by our organization's president Nancy Yao Maasbach; one to discuss systemic racism with Frank Wu (President of Queens College, part of CUNY, the City University of New York) and Gary Locke (former US ambassador to China), and another to talk about allyship with Precious Williams Owodunni (President of Mountaintop Consulting). In the wake of these shifting social priorities, the collections team at MOCA began thinking about partnerships to bolster the OneWorld Collection.

In May 2020, we began to talk with Amy Starecheski, director of Columbia University's Oral History Master's program. Along with her colleagues, Starecheski has been conducting oral histories all over New York City with people and families affected by the pandemic. The project's website states that 'this crisis is highlighting structural fault-lines in our society as well as the strength and resilience of our communities, even as our society transforms in ways we do not yet understand. It will be important for those navigating the post-COVID future to hear the voices of those who lived through this period'.² MOCA will work with Starecheski and her team to reach out to and interview Chinese Americans about their experiences during the pandemic, and at the end of the project the oral histories will be archived and held by both Columbia University and MOCA. In the future, these firsthand accounts will serve as vital resources for American history scholars, and the project will serve as a model of collaboration under pressure.

While we do not currently have access to the galleries, we have been curating and presenting some of the submissions on our social media outlets and on a dedicated project page that can be found at <https://moca40.mocanyc.org/oneworld>. Additionally, our curatorial team has been working on incorporating some of the submissions into an exhibition that will be presented in the museum's four street-level windows, which can be viewed without museum access. This strategy allows us to present to our diverse and multi-racial neighbourhood the ways in which a museum in the midst of a public health emergency can combat prejudice and discrimination. It is entirely consistent with the history of the neighbourhood, which has housed immigrants from many nations since the nineteenth century. When the museum reopens, we hope to incorporate the submissions and donations from the OneWorld collection into the museum's telling of Chinese American history and its importance within national debates. While we still are not certain what form this will take, the stories of surviving and persevering during this volatile time will become intrinsic to telling the story of America, and that story has to include the minority voices that have been stifled and omitted in the past.

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Notes

- ¹ Carl Zimmer, 'Most New York Coronavirus Cases Came from Europe, Genomes Show', *The New York Times*, 8 April 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/science/new-york-coronavirus-cases-europe-genomes.html>, accessed 18 September 2020.
- ² NYC COVID-19 Oral History, Narrative and Memory Archive, <https://incite.columbia.edu/covid19-oral-history-project>, accessed 18 September 2020.

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- Tchen, J.K.W. (1992) 'Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment', in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine (eds) *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, 285-326, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

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