

Exhibit Review
Chinatown: Place or People?

On May 16, 2003, the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. opened the City Museum of Washington, D.C. with a vision to make “the history of the Washington metropolitan area and its people accessible and understandable...in order to promote a sense of identity, place and pride...” A product of this vision is *Chinatown: Place or People?*, a temporary exhibit in one of the museum’s two Community Galleries. The purpose of the exhibit is to tell of Chinatown’s “struggle to maintain a physical presence” and to ponder whether it can continue to “exist as a place or will it exist only as a community of people who share traditions.” The museum attempts to address these issues through the use of dozens of photographs taken of Chinatown and complemented by a handful of historical artifacts donated by people who lived in the community during its development. Oral histories given by these community members are also incorporated into the exhibit through pull-out quotes on the display panels and through the audio-visual component, “Chinatown Memories.” Together, these objects present a history of the Chinatown neighborhood from the 1880s to the present day. Whether or not their interpretation accomplishes the museum’s goals to foster a sense of identity or pride among Chinatown’s residents or promote a better understanding of the neighborhood to outsiders is what I will examine in the following review.

The City Museum’s Community Galleries are both small, one-room exhibit spaces where the visitor must enter and exit through the same door. The design of *Chinatown: Place or People?* incorporates muted variations of gold and red: two colors of great significance in the Chinese culture. Upon entering the space, the visitor encounters a central square-shaped module that supports four scroll-like panels that drape from the outer edges of the ceiling: the first panel

is the entrance label to the exhibit and the other three feature the pull-out quotes from the interviews collected from past and present Chinatown residents, written in both English and Chinese. While the draped panels give the space a more exotic atmosphere, they also block the light fixtures and make the room dim. The exhibit panels begin to the left of the entrance and run in a clockwise direction around the room. Each panel focuses on one phase of Chinatown's history and proceeds chronologically, describing events such as the arrival of Chinese immigrants in the Washington area, the relocation of Chinatown from Pennsylvania Avenue to its present location, the participation of Chinese-Americans in the U.S. war effort during WWII and the more recent displacement of a section of Chinatown in order to make room for the newly constructed Convention Center. Sociological aspects of Chinatown's history are interlaced within the historical text and panels are also dedicated to the role of family associations during Chinatown's early years, the formation of community organizations such as the Chinese Youth Club and the community schools that were started in order to preserve Chinese culture among the new generations. The photos are largely impersonal, most of them exterior views of old buildings or large group shots of community groups. None provide an "insider's point of view" into community members' home life and few document the traditions that are so central to the Chinese-American culture.

The exhibit also includes historical objects such as an immigration card, a suitcase used by one Chinese immigrant and an old magazine heralding the dedication of the Friendship Arch that spans the entrance to Chinatown. Facing the entrance, a small video screen and listening station is set up for visitors to listen to first-person accounts of what life was like in Chinatown, set to a video presentation of the exhibit's photographic record. While these objects offer variation to a very photography-heavy exhibit, they provide little insight into the Chinatown

residents' lives. Even the audio-visual component contains no more than descriptive snippets of what life was like in Chinatown, with no mention of what motivated its residents to stay or leave or how the community interacted with other Washington communities. Again, little attention is paid to the role of tradition among Chinatown's residents and the exhibit as a whole can only provide insight into what it meant to be a member of the Chinatown community and how it influenced its residents' lives.

Beyond its entrance label, *Chinatown: Place or People?* does little to go beyond the superficial recounting of the traditions that hold the Chinatown community together. Visitors to this exhibit will no doubt leave with an enhanced historical knowledge of the Chinatown community, but they will not leave with any sense of the human element that shaped that history. Comments left in the visitor's book testify to this. Chinese-American visitors applauded the museum's effort, but regretted that the exhibit did not address issues such as inter-community relationships, anti-communist based discrimination and most importantly, a sense of community pride. A simple recounting of history may answer the questions of how a community is formed, but the whys are left unaddressed to the detriment of all the museums visitors: both from outside and inside the Chinatown community.