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Asian American Identity and Museum Collections

Natasha Wang

Introduction

In June of 2022, the Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture Act was passed in Congress (Commission to Study 2022, 117-140):

As part of the report, the Commission will need to address:

- (A) The availability and cost of collections to be acquired and housed in the Museum
- (B) The impact of the Museum on existing Asian Pacific American history-related museums. (Hirono 2022)

While the national museum would include Pacific American history and culture, this paper will only address Asian American museums and collections. Among the Asian American museums and collections that currently exist are mostly limited to groups that fall under the umbrella term of Asian American, a geographic region in the United States, or collecting criteria, scope, or policy that is inadequately defined. If existing Asian American museums are having difficulties defining the parameters of their collections, then this presents a major issue for the much larger national museum. This paper examines four examples of existing Asian American museums: The Museum of Chinese in America in New York, the Filipino American Historical Society Museum in Stockton, California, the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles, and the Japanese American Museum in Oregon.

A contributing factor to poorly defined collection policies is that the term Asian American, in reference to identity at this point, is much too broad, inconsistently defined, and actively changing. One needs to understand the history and dialogue around Asian American identity to understand the full impact of an Asian American museum. First, how we define Asia is already complicated, creating its own issues, but adding the layer of national identity makes defining and understanding Asian American identity very complex. The term encompasses a vast and diverse group of people whose day-to-day experiences are not unified, until they are faced with discrimination and violence.

Museums are places where cultural memory is preserved, and identity is negotiated and formed. As a result, an Asian American museum poses a great opportunity to form and shape or further fracture and blur Asian American identity. Museums fill a role in preserving memory and forming identity through its housing and use of collections. All museums are legally defined as having and using collections to achieve specific goals. Collections also require management policies that include collecting scope and criteria. Acquisitions adhering to a policy ensures objects are evaluated consistently and will directly support the museum's purpose and mission. But without a clear collecting scope, criteria, or policy, the National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture will have a hard time supporting and achieving the mission of educating the public on Asian American history and culture and preserving Asian American cultural heritage.

While an Asian American museum faces unique challenges in organizing and creating policies to manage their collections, there are other museums that can serve as examples of possible ways Asian Americans can be represented. Even so, as a distinctive and living culture, those models cannot and will not be a perfect way to organize an Asian American museum or its collections.

Asian American Museums and Collections in the United States

First, there are not very many "Asian American collections" that currently exist. Most collections are more specific to ethnicity or nationality such as Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, et cetera. Currently, collections that are deemed as Asian American have broad definitions that include the process of an immigrant becoming American, both in legal status and culturally. This phenomenon extends to museums in that 'Asian American' is the becoming, but begins with a specific nationality or ethnicity. This paper does not address the full scope of all the different Asian American museums across the United States; however, I will highlight a few. I was able to contact a few Asian American museums about their collections' policies or I found them online available to the public.

The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), New York

The MOCA's mission is "a full-time, professionally staffed not for profit museum dedicated to the reclaiming, preserving, and presenting the history and culture of people of Chinese descent in the United States. Through its thought-provoking exhibits and programs, MOCA encourages dialogue among people of all cultural backgrounds" (Collections 2022). (This mission is supported with additional guidelines, including for acquisitions and accessioning. Aside from general practice for these processes, like legality and ethical binds, the MOCA has a single guideline pertaining to their collecting scope. That guideline is that "the Museum can accept only those items that are pertinent to its mission" (Collections 2022). The guidelines and mission of the MOCA allow for a lot of room for interpretation. While getting more clarification in a phone call with Harvey Ngai, a collections associate at the MOCA, he said that objects directly from China or of Chinese origin would not be considered for potential acquisition unless it had a compelling connection to, or history of, being related to a person of Chinese descent in America. Additionally, the terms 'people of Chinese descent' and 'Chinese American' were used interchangeably. This ultimately means the legal status of one's citizenship does not impact whether one is considered "Chinese American."

The MOCA collection's policy also addresses material types of objects that they would be willing to accept. It reads:

Collection building is fundamental to the long-term success of the museum. MOCA aims to include in its collection, but not be exclusive of, historical objects, documents, photographs, audio and visual material and ephemera relating to the history of Chinese persons in the United States. Of particular interest are those objects with a clear link to the Chinese American experience. Relevant secondary source materials in varying formats also will be collected for staff and research use. All permanent collections and library material will be evaluated in terms of its historical significance and relationship to other material in the collection. (Collections 2022)

It is clear from this section of the museum's policy that the collecting scope in terms of object type is also very broad. The broad nature of this collections policy allows for flexibility in potential acquisitions, but the ambiguity can also be risky. At this museum, it is ultimately up to the best judgment of the acquisitions committee to decide what will be acquired and accessioned. Furthermore, doing so without good guidance of clear parameters or written definitions would obstruct following and adhering to the museum's mission. The collections can easily become burdened with

objects that do not support the goals of the museum and ultimately drain limited resources.

*The Filipino American National Historical Society
Museum (FANHSM), Stockton, CA*

In an email, Terri Torres, the Museum Manager, was able to clarify their museum's collections policy. She stated:

The FANHSM Museum collects and showcases the history of Filipino Americans in the United States from as early as the 1500s to current day. Right now, it covers the US, but areas of North America, Central America and South America are considered depending upon history or artifact. All generations are considered, our strong focus is on the 'disappearing' generation—those who are in their 80s and 90s, to get their stories before they pass. (Torres 2022)

In terms of the museum's current collecting goals, it is to collect "anything that we can find to preserve that history and retell it" (Torres 2022). This collecting goal has no specific stipulations of what should be collected.

Both aspects of the collecting policy and scope of the FANHSM Museum are broad and unfocused. There are no specific objects or limitations to focus the collection. The geographic region of objects considered as potential acquisitions spans continents. Like the MOCA, while the broad collecting criteria and scope creates flexibility in what the museum can accept, the burden falls on the staff to decide what is consistent with the museum's mission and does not guarantee consistency in the collecting criteria or standards. While at this point, they may be working on building up their collections; a clear policy regarding scope and criteria would ensure that all objects support the museum's mission and purpose and efficient use of resources.

The Chinese American Museum (CAM), Los Angeles, CA

The Chinese American Museum has their collecting scope and criteria posted online. It says, "The Chinese American Museum houses objects related to the history, livelihood, and experience of Chinese Americans, particularly in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, and the Garnier Building. The collection has grown to over 7,500 artifacts, documents, and photographs, spanning the late 19th century to the present" (Collections 2022). The Museum outlines its areas of interest and collection. Some of the list are as follows:

- Immigration to the United States, immigration issues (past and present)
- Sun Wing Wo Herb Store, which operated out of the Garnier Building
- Chinese American participation in the U.S. Military

- Clothing, costumes, and other textiles
- Work created by Chinese American Artists
- The San Gabriel Valley (Chinese American Museum)

Their collecting scope has some criteria specific to their local geographic region as well as other criteria that are very broad. This shows both focused and flexible categories of potential acquisition.

The Japanese American Museum (JAM), Oregon

This museum's mission statement states, "The mission of the Japanese American Museum of Oregon is to preserve and honor the history and culture of Japanese Americans in the Pacific Northwest, educate the public about the Japanese American experience during WWII, and advocate for the protection of civil rights for all Americans." Their website further states that the museum is "charged with preserving and sharing the history and culture of the Nikkei community—Japanese emigrants and their descendants" (Mission and History 2021). Like the Chinese American Museum, they limit their collecting scope to a local geographic region. They also focus on a specific time period in history and generation of immigrants.

While the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles and the Japanese American Museum of Oregon have relatively clear collecting scopes and objectives, one of the issues with these museums is that they focus on a specific group that falls under the Asian American umbrella and local history. The strong benefit of these collections is that they can focus on local history and a subset of Asian identity, making their mission and collecting practices clearer and more attainable. The disadvantage, of course, is that they have limited appeal. As far as a comprehensive Asian American museum and collections, a collecting focus on local history and a subset of Asian identity will not be able to encompass the entire nation's Asian American history and culture.

Asian American Identity

One of the key elements of creating a policy for an Asian American museum is understanding Asian American identity. The policies of the museums mentioned previously are byproducts of each museum's understanding of Asian American identity. The term "Asian American" is not adequate in describing who falls under the term, what experiences unify groups that fall under the term, and how it represents all these elements in a museum or collections.

The Asian population in America is very diverse and includes a vast group of people. For the U.S. Census Bureau, a standard was created on race and ethnicity (US Census Bureau 2022). Their definition for "Asian"

is “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam” (Census Bureau). Thus, the Asian population in America encompasses many very different experiences and cultures. The definition used for Asian does not account for regional differences, and the “Far East” is a broad region not representative of local regional divisions or social identity divisions (The Far East Definition & Meaning 2022). Adding in the element of how each of these cultures present themselves” in the American context and how people viewed their own identity makes this an incredibly complex issue that this paper cannot fully dissect.

The term Asian American was coined sometime in the mid-1900s as an effort to unite Asians in America under a pan-ethnic term for purposes of fighting for rights and a rejection of other terms (Ghymn 2000, 12-13). Asians came together against the discriminating and racist attitudes of America at the time and were inspired by African American movements (Juan 1994, 20-21). However, because of differences in economic situations and day to day experiences, Asian Americans are easily divided (Coleman 2021). The term Asian American does not encompass the experience of all that fall under it. The term also seems to be adopted most frequently in the presence of violence against Asians in America (Coleman 2021). In recent history, Asian Americans found themselves the target of discrimination, violence, and racism because of COVID-19. Even so, this “unifying” experience was for people who had certain physical features more characteristic to East Asia and not in other regions of Asia.

As seen in the examples presented in the previous section, museums representing Asian Americans struggle to define the parameters of the community and have worked around it by focusing more on a single ethnicity, nationality, or geographic region. Even then, it is unclear what represents each group’s experience and what makes this experience different or the same as other Asian Americans.

Museums, collections, and identity

The legal definition in the United States of a museum is, “a public, tribal, or private nonprofit agency or institution organized on a permanent basis for essentially educational, cultural heritage, or aesthetic purposes, that utilizes a professional staff, owns or utilizes tangible objects, cares for the tangible objects, and exhibits the tangible objects to the public on a regular basis. Such a term includes museums that have tangible and digital collections...” (Museum and Library Services Act 2018, 115-410). This definition displays that a museum’s primary focus is the use of objects, or collections, for a specific purpose.

Functions of a museum are meant to fulfill the mission and purpose. In August of 2022, the Extraordinary General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) approved the proposal for a new museum definition that states that a museum, “researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing” (Museum Definition 2022). The ability of a museum to conserve, interpret, exhibit, and facilitate research depends solely on the objects or collections that it has. Collections are the foundation of other museum functions but also at the core of a museum’s mission and purpose.

Along with its collections, museums are legally required to create policies regarding collections management. In the legal case of the Museum of the American Indian, the attorney general of the state of New York stated that the museum, as a charitable corporation, has certain obligations to the public (Malaro 2012, 15). These obligations require a standard of conduct that, at minimum, establish policies and keep records concerning the acquisition and disposal of collection items (Malaro 2012, 15).

Managing and maintaining a collection involves many processes. The Smithsonian Directive 600, the collections management policy of the Smithsonian, “covers all aspects of collection management, including acquisition and accessioning, deaccessioning and disposal, preservation, documentation, life-cycle management, inventory, risk management, safety and security, access, storage, loans, and intellectual property management” (Smithsonian Directive: 600 1980, 1-134). Most museum collections policies include the same elements and are based on “a museum’s purpose, scope and uses of its collections, and more immediate goals” (Malaro 2012, 49). All parts of collections management are ultimately to support the museum’s purpose and mission the most effectively and efficiently.

Amongst the many aspects of collections management, acquisition and accessioning are the first steps as an object enters a museum. Once an object enters the care of the museum, the museum is bound by ethics to care for the object (Besterman 2011, 437). It is, however, ethical to refuse to acquire an object (Besterman 2011, 437). Because a museum’s resources are limited, it is critical to have a clear acquisition policy. This ensures that potential acquisitions support the museum’s mission and purpose. If a museum does not have a clear policy specifically addressing acquisitions, it allows for the potential for a museum to acquire objects outside the scope and purpose of the museum. Not only does this waste limited resources and allow for inconsistency in the collections, but this will also affect all

functions that rely on and utilize the collections. Those functions, like research and education, will eventually find it difficult to fulfill their roles supporting the mission and purpose of the museum.

Museums also have the power to shape and affirm identity. In the past and present, museums give people, “the opportunity to amass and present evidence of their own pasts, so turning their histories into ‘objective’ fact and legitimizing their right to exist” (Macdonald 2011, 85). An unconscious assumption made about objects acquired for museum collections is that what is collected is valuable. A museum exhibition communicates this value to its audience. In history, the development of “[n]ational museums acted as symbols of the existence of the newly formed nation-states . . . they helped materialize the new political-cultural forms into beings” (Macdonald 2011, 85). While legal and sociopolitical atmospheres have changed, museums have carried the power, prestige, and status acquired in the past into the present day. So, not only does a museum’s collection carry an unconscious assumption of value: it can also be a symbol. Susette Min, an Associate Professor at the University of California-Davis states, “Asian American art is now on the verge of institutional legacy and legitimacy as (1) something to be collected by museums such as the Smithsonian and Asia Society. . .” (Min 2018, 1). The reason why legitimacy is gained from the museums, she mentioned, is that objects in those collections are assumed to be valuable. Furthermore, a museum like the Smithsonian directly symbolizes the United States and what being American means and looks like. Even though an Asian American museum could shape and affirm Asian American identity, one without a clear definition could have negative effects. It has the potential of further blurring the experiences and identity of Asian Americans, erasing the diversity of the groups that fall under it, and not acknowledging the living and changing cultures of Asian Americans (Min 2018, 17).

Creating a collections policy for an Asian American collection presents certain challenges. As previously stated, Asian American identity is still constantly evolving and being redefined. The way we define Asia and Asian Americans as well as what experience binds them together is broad and ambiguous. This is evident in organization structures of Asian American collections currently organized. The lack of all-encompassing Asian American museums or collections raises the question of whether it would be feasible to represent those who fall under the term adequately. Breaking down the term Asian American in parts to attempt to define policy or scope only raises even more questions.

Furthermore, if the goal of Asian American museums and collections includes creating legitimacy and visibility of Asian immigrants who have become American, is this really the solution? An Asian American museum

still perpetuates an othering and foreignness, rather than integration of Asian Americans into the mainstream canon of American history, where they have been and do belong.

So What?

Asian American identity has and will evolve continuously, making the creation of an effective collections policy a perpetual challenge. Even so, some ideas can be gleaned from other institutions that represent different minorities and living cultures like the African American Museum of History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian. Currently, the African American Museum of History and Culture divides up its gallery space, which reflects its collections, into twelve exhibitions (Meet Our Curators 2022). They also have special exhibits. Their history exhibits are divided into three time periods: *Slavery and Freedom*, *Defending Freedom*, *Defining Freedom: Era of Segregation 1876–1968*, and *A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond*. The community galleries focus on specific stories of African American communities. The culture galleries examine African American music, the idea of African American, and African diaspora culture, African American art and artists, the history of African Americans in film and theater, and African American contributions in sports (Exhibitions 2022).

For an Asian American museum, it is possible to focus some galleries on specific stories of Asian American communities and cultural contributions, but Asian American groups do not necessarily fall into similar historical patterns, community experiences, or contributions. It would take more examination on where the crossroads are between all these groups and if there are enough similarities to create cohesive exhibits.

The National Museum of the American Indians's object collection, accessible online, divides their collections as follows: North American ethnology, North American archaeology, Central American ethnology, Central American archaeology, Caribbean ethnology and archaeology, South American ethnology, South American archaeology, and Modern and Contemporary arts (Object Collections 2022). From there, each category breaks down into regions, sometimes a specific state, country, or people (Object Collections 2022).

This can also be a plausible way to divide up Asia—accounting for existing collections that are tied to specific nationality or ethnicity. But from that point, would the collections be divided by regions of the United States? Or, broken down by descent, then region in the United States, and subsequently with every other region of Asian descent and region in the United States? These categories are not only extensive but have the poten-

tial to overlap in ways that objects will not fit into each category neatly. It is also possible to split up the collections by geographic regions in the United States, then by descent. This has the advantage of emphasizing the focus on the American experience of people of Asian descent. However, both of these potential structures do not account for multiracial individuals or when those categories may become obsolete.

Conclusion

Based on the four museums and collections presented in this paper, collections policies of Asian American museums either center on specific nationality or ethnicity, historical periods, regional or local history, or case-by-case assessments without a detailed policy. Neither method is fully effective. The collections policies of Asian American museums and collections are, in part, a reflection of Asian American identity, which is actively changing and being redefined. It is also a broad and ambiguous term, one that some argue is outdated and can no longer serve the needs of all people that it claims. This is all important in the context of a potential Asian Pacific American Museum of History and Culture, as museums are places where identity is formed and shaped. If museums are unaware or unclear in their representation of the Asian American community, it can directly impact Asian American identity.

Even so, the examples of other museums representing living cultures and peoples that can give insight to a potential Asian Pacific American Museum of History and Culture. The Museum of African American History and Culture has historical, community, and cultural exhibits that allow for different kinds of interpretation and topics. Another museum is the Museum of the American Indian which uses both geographic and sociopolitical elements to organize its collections. Elements of both museums could help create an effective collections policy, while others would be incompatible with the context of Asian American history and culture.

This research barely scratches the surface of difficulties that face the potential creation of an Asian American museum. Even before creating an effective collections policy, the museum has fundamental things to decide like Who is the audience of this museum? What is the appeal for people to go to this museum? If the purpose of the museum is for people to see and understand the contributions of Asian Americans, is an Asian American museum going to be effective? Or, would it be better to integrate that content into the Smithsonian National Museum of American History? There will also need to be considerations for things that may arise down the road like, What will happen to the museums that have catered to their local communities and their collections? Will Asian American museums across the United States be able to come together to add to this space

collectively? As a group that is evolving and changing, an Asian American museum will need to be active and engaged in the community as it works through these details.

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