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Chinese American Museum nods to past, looks to future

Marking its fifth anniversary, the facility, at a corner of El Pueblo de Los Angeles, wants to pursue more than just 'accidental visitors.'

By Karen Wada

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The Chinese American Museum occupies what may seem an unlikely spot -- a corner of El Pueblo de Los Angeles, the historical park whose cultural attractions and touristy Olvera Street are reminders of the city's Mexican American heritage.

"People are always surprised when they find us," says executive director Pauline Wong. "But we're here for good reason."

The El Pueblo site is most famous as L.A.'s birthplace, pioneers from Mexico having arrived there in 1781. Nearly a century later, it became the home of Southern California's first Chinatown. (On a darker note, it was the scene of a deadly anti-Chinese riot in 1871.) The area was cleared in the '30s to make way for Union Station and later the 101 Freeway. Eventually, city officials enlisted help from community groups to turn the enclave's only remaining structure, the Garnier Building, into a museum.

"Our location is a challenge," Wong says. "We're in the original Chinatown, but we're not at the heart of the community, which is either in New Chinatown or the San Gabriel Valley. Making things more difficult is that our community is really complex -- old and newcomers, people from Taiwan and mainland China and Southeast Asia. Trying to be the Chinese American museum for all of them is a big responsibility."

As CAM marks its fifth anniversary this month, Wong and her colleagues are working to raise the

museum's profile, shift its focus from history to community and secure funding for a \$5-million expansion. "We want to go beyond being a hidden gem," she says.

Annual attendance is running 25,000 to 30,000, numbers that Wong acknowledges need to grow -- especially when it comes to Chinese and other Asian Americans. They make up 40% of the total visitors, even though nearly a half-million people of Chinese ancestry are scattered throughout Southern California. "We need to give someone a reason to drive in from Hacienda Heights," she says.

Even when you're at El Pueblo, the 118-year-old Garnier Building can be hard to find, its landmark status precluding highly visible signage. Many guests are "accidental visitors," people who wander in while seeing other sights. "We get lots of school groups and families, many of them Latino," Wong says, adding that everything at the museum is in Chinese, English and Spanish.

Admission is free. The atmosphere is intimate.

"We are so small it's easy to encapsulate things into an hour," Wong says. The bottom floor contains permanent exhibits, including a photo mural and wall-sized time line that traces the 150-year history of the Chinese in America.

Nearby stands a re-creation of a general store and an herb shop once housed in the Garnier Building. Another display describes Old Chinatown and three other enclaves, including the long-gone China City (the brainchild of Christine Sterling, the civic activist who created Olvera Street) and the current Chinatown, founded in the 1930s.

CAM tries to humanize its history lessons. Among the immigrants spotlighted in the time line's "journeys" section are founding executive director Suellen Cheng, a Taiwan native who now serves as the city's liaison to the museum, and public relations director Linh Duong, whose family fled Vietnam by boat in 1978. An 84-year-old nephew of the general store's owners often stops by to chat with guests.

The mezzanine and upper floor are reserved for special exhibits. The museum is celebrating its anniversary with two photography shows that run through May. "Asian Roots/American Reality: Photographs by Corky Lee" consists of more than 80 pieces by the New York journalist, who has chronicled Asian American life for nearly four decades. "This is a collection of images that normally do not get seen," Lee says. His subjects include parties and parades as well as folk singers, a pizzeria owner and a bleeding man at a police brutality protest.

The retrospective is CAM's first attempt to look beyond Chinese Americans in Southern California. "Stepping out of the normal realm" is crucial to our future, Wong says. So is attracting a younger, more diverse audience. That's one reason the companion show, presented in collaboration with Venice Arts, features works by San Gabriel High School students.

During the museum's first five years, Duong says, "we experienced a lot of growing pains. We learned to fly the plane while flying it. We also had a wealth of ideas but not the resources to carry them out."

The institution, run by the city and the nonprofit Friends of the Chinese American Museum, has an annual operating budget of \$650,000 to \$700,000. Most of its money comes from donors, corporate sponsors and grants. The city pays for facilities, maintenance, utilities and part-time guides. The nonprofit supports a full-time staff of six. (A much-needed development officer may be added in 2009.) Over the years, El Pueblo has wrestled with budget woes and, like other municipal departments, faces bumpy times. Even so, cuts imposed this year have been restored, says Robert Andrade, El Pueblo's general manager, and the city is working on a long-term operating agreement.

Thanks to recent grants, CAM is developing a business and strategic plan that will help it raise money for its expansion and revitalize its structure and programming. The museum hopes to triple its 7,200 square feet of space by renovating the Garnier and an adjacent structure. Existing exhibits will be transformed. Classrooms and a public meeting area will be added.

"The next five to 10 years will be used to cultivate our community's newer groups," Wong says. She envisions projects that will cover popular culture -- Chinese Americans in Hollywood, for instance -- as well as contemporary personalities and issues.

One role model is the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, a once-modest operation that this year moved to a \$23.2-million facility dedicated to producing community- rather than curator-driven exhibits. CAM also would like to develop relationships with local venues such as the Autry National Center and the Chinese Garden at the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens.

"We've called ourselves a community-based history museum," Duong says. "We lived up to the history part and now we have to live up to the community part."

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