

# MuseumsForward

## Including immigrants: First-generation Chinese immigrants' virtual museum experiences

---

Jessica Ying Huynh

### Abstract

Significant research has focused on white visitors and museums, but there is a lack of research on Chinese immigrants and museums. This study examines first-generation Chinese immigrants' feelings during virtual museum experiences. Data were collected through self-administered online surveys and semi-structured interviews with first-generation Chinese immigrants above the age of 40 (n=15) recruited through snowball sampling across the United States. Results show that reading text, looking at images, and watching videos were the primary forms of online museum engagement. While the participants felt included through Chinese representation and personal connection to the content, they did not feel intentionally included overall. The participants suggested the following to increase inclusionary experiences: increased Chinese text translations, images, and videos, as well as more diverse and multilingual staff, intentional advertisements and outreach, and lower admission costs. These findings have implications for museum staff's understanding of the community and subsequent inclusionary experiences for implementation in museums.

### Keywords

Chinese Immigrants; Cultural Identity; Inclusion; Language Accessibility; Visitor Experience

### Committee Chair

Angelina Ong,

### Committee Members

LeiLani Nishime; Jessica Luke

*Accepted: June 11, 2021*

*Published: October 2021*

---

## Introduction

National ethnic and racial data show that the United States is becoming increasingly more diverse (United States Census Bureau, 2015). In the country, approximately 2.5 million people identify as a Chinese immigrant (Echeverria-Estrada & Batalova, 2020). In this study, the definition of a first-generation Chinese immigrant is a United States citizen of Chinese descent who was born outside of and immigrated to the country. Yet this population of Chinese immigrants has not been well-represented in museums that are outside the traditional realm of “Asian” museums, such as the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and the Seattle Asian Art Museum in Seattle. Museums have historically been institutions instilled in white privilege and exclusivity to the extent of viewing and stereotyping Asians as a monolithic group (Harding, 2021). However, there has been a gradual shift toward inclusivity because of the greater movement for social justice in the museum field and beyond (American Alliance of Museums, 2018). Museum professionals are advocating for museums to go beyond minority dismissal and tokenism through institutionalizing inclusion (MuseumNext, 2015).

Museums are attempting to be more inclusive by engaging more than just their traditional visitors, non-Hispanic whites with a history of American privilege, and focusing on historically excluded communities (Farrell & Medvedeva, 2010). As part of those communities, immigrants are an important group of future museum-goers. As the United States becomes a more majority-minority country, museums are starting to engage with the immigrant communities to forge relationships with the continually growing group (United States Census Bureau, 2015). The relationships serve to strengthen museums’ welcome and service to their changing local communities.

While research has been conducted on museum programs for Latinx and Hispanic immigrants, there is a lack of research on Chinese immigrants and museums, especially on how they feel during a regular museum visit physically and virtually (The Inclusion, 2013; Zacarias, 2018). Due to COVID-19, museums are encountering a new set of opportunities and challenges as they pivot to virtual engagement as a primary strategy for connecting with audiences. The switch from in-person to virtual experiences offers museums an opportunity to reassess their history and strategies of engagement with their Chinese immigrant audiences. It is also an opportunity to create a more accessible and inclusive online environment during this revolutionary time. This article shares results from an empirical study designed to better understand how virtual museum experiences can affect first-

generation Chinese immigrants' general feelings toward museums, make immigrants feel more included in or excluded from museums, and how museums can better serve this growing community in the online and physical space.

## Literature Review

### **Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI)**

The American Alliance of Museums (2018) states:

“Diversity is all the ways that people are different and the same at the individual and group levels. Equity is the fair and just treatment for all members of a community. Accessibility is giving equitable access to everyone along the continuum of human ability and experience. Inclusion refers to the intentional, ongoing effort to ensure that diverse individuals fully participate in all aspects of organization work, including decision-making processes (p. 8).”

The movement to amplify the four concerns stems from the museum field's origin as an elitist space founded on white privilege, exclusivity, and colonialism. Museums continue to have an overarching Eurocentric focus that excludes non-white narratives (Kauffman, 2018). Through reflection, activism, and an awakening of the current times, museums are experiencing a gradual shift away from the founding vision of the single white dominant narrative. Among this shift, the Cultural Competence Learning Institute released a national landscape study on the state of DEAI practices in museums, concluding that while museums report DEAI as a priority they do not take strategic and consistent action to address and enforce the concerns at the organizational level (Garibay & Olson, 2020). The lack of authentic intention for change results in minimal metrics and data to track progress and accountability. DEAI is part of an ongoing process that needs to be invested in and embedded into the core of the museum field for genuine sustainable and systemic change.

### **Inclusion**

Social inclusion in museums began in the United Kingdom and eventually became a component of DEAI in the United States (Sandell, 1998). During the late 1990s, activists began questioning institutions and pressing for accountability. They challenged museums to reinvent

themselves as agents of inclusion (Ang, 2005). However, as the concept of inclusion evolved, many museums in the early 2000s began practicing inclusion through performative action and “box-ticking” (Tlili, 2008). As the marketing departments designed advertisements with diverse populations, there was an overarching essence of tokenism and inauthentic outreach efforts. The unintended consequences of inclusion brought a new set of challenges to discuss, specifically understanding the importance of social diversity, which is recognizing that diversity is a source of strength to overcome challenges (Coffee, 2008).

Authentic and sustainable inclusion efforts require organizational change, strategic diversity management, and cultural competence (Garibay & Huerta Migus, 2014). Organizational change requires intentionally shifting organizational processes and procedures. With the shift, strategic diversity management is when individuals and organizations evaluate the opportunities and challenges of diverse environments. When evaluating, cultural competence is a key consideration as its behaviors and policies work together to enable effective work in cross-cultural situations.

Subsequently, the rise of sincere inclusion in museums poses a question of whether museums are capable of playing a greater role in social justice, particularly in the context of race (Sandell, 2003). Many people deem museums as non-neutral spaces that have the responsibility to take stances on social issues (Ng, Ware, & Greenberg, 2017). There is growing importance in providing inclusionary experiences for all races while decentering whiteness in the process.

### **Role of Language**

An integral aspect of inclusion in museums is the role of language. Offering content in multiple languages began to gain traction in the 1990s when museums in Europe and the United States started to serve more international tourists and venture into language accessibility (Koliou, 1997). However, the journey to complete language accessibility still encompasses many challenges and considerations. According to García-Luis, McDonald, & Huerta Migus (2011), only ten percent of the United States museums surveyed offered visitor information in more than one language, of which ninety-two percent was Spanish. In congruence with the report, the majority of language accessibility work and research in museums center on Spanish. The Bilingual Exhibit Research Initiative was launched in 2010 and specifically studied bilingual and multilingual signage at informal science centers (Yalowitz,

Garibay, Renner, & Plaza, 2015). Providing bilingual signage allowed for better facilitation experiences and had overall positive emotional benefits for visitors. Language is a powerful symbol of who is welcomed and who belongs at museums (Collazo, 2017).

### **Immigrants' Relationship with Museums**

As museums begin and continue to further their DEAI journey, immigrants will be part of the narrative. The term "immigrant" is used widely across the United States with the general definition as "an individual who resides in a country different than their country of birth" (Stein, Garibay, & Wilson, 2008, p. 181). Immigrants are seen collectively as a homogenous group based on the definition, but each individual's life is different based on their background, experiences, and own identification with the term. The factors and varying degrees to which an individual identifies with the term have impacts and implications on how they navigate society, specifically museums.

Engaging immigrants in museums include several factors coalescing into a well-rounded understanding (Stein et al., 2008). Those factors largely influence the immigrant museum experience, particularly involving feelings of inclusion and exclusion. Immigrants bring their own general feelings toward museums based on their upbringing and previous experiences. Some may have grown up never visiting museums, resulting in neutrality toward the spaces, while others may have grown up with museums as an integral part of their lives, resulting in comfort and nostalgia toward the spaces. They often visit museums with other people, such as their multi-generational family. Language access and interpretation are critical roles in those situations for groups to navigate the content and space. Understanding the importance of those nuances provides insight on how museums can improve their policies, work, and vision to include immigrants.

Programming for immigrants has been a common approach to provide specific experiences tailored to a group's cultural and social background (The Inluseum, 2013). The Cultures and Literacies Through Art for the 21st Century (CALTA21) is an initiative focused on bridging immigrant English learners and museums through a focus on intercultural dialogue. Rather than museums imparting information onto the immigrants, intercultural dialogue empowers immigrants to share their own knowledge and experiences as part of the programming. The sharing of stories, experiences, and knowledge is the basis of relationship-forming between immigrants and museums.

The relationship is extended into the virtual environment where museums use online technologies to reach existing and new audiences through unique experiences. From websites that sell tickets and provide visitor information, to online repositories of collections and exhibits, the internet is a critical element of museum infrastructure and one that must also contend with issues of access and inclusion. Museums are becoming aware that the driver for their virtuality and engagement is their mission and relationships with communities (Whitney, 2011). Co-collaboration and feedback on virtual museum experiences are more conducive to an inclusive online space. To foster true engagement and inclusivity, museums are required to understand the nuances of immigrants and place them as stakeholders rather than recipients of virtual and physical museum experiences.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand first-generation Chinese immigrants' feelings during virtual museum experiences. This study was guided by these three research questions:

1. How do virtual museum experiences affect first-generation Chinese immigrants' general feelings about museums?
2. When and in what ways do first-generation Chinese immigrants feel included and excluded during their virtual museum experiences?
3. In what ways can museums make themselves more virtually and physically inclusionary for first-generation Chinese immigrants?

### Methodology

This study was designed as a phenomenology, a qualitative study that describes the common meaning of multiple individuals' experiences of the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This study was originally designed as an in-person study before pivoting to a virtual one due to COVID-19. However, as virtual experiences become more prevalent, the findings of this study continue to be relevant for museums. The purpose was to place the participants and their experiences at the center of the study to truly understand how first-generation Chinese immigrants felt during their virtual museum experiences. Participating first-generation Chinese immigrants above the age of 40 were recruited through snowball sampling across the United States between January and February 2021. Select demographic data were collected according to aspects that were relevant to this

study. This group was focused on to better understand the nuances of a virtual museum experience where factors such as upbringing, language, and technology have a significant effect (Stein et al., 2008). Snowball sampling was the primary recruitment method due to the hard-to-reach community because of those factors.

Participants were initially identified by the researcher's familial connections to the community. Participants were first asked through email if they were willing to participate in a research study regarding understanding first-generation Chinese immigrants' virtual museum experiences. Upon agreeing and consenting to participating in the study, participants' names and contact information were recorded. All materials were provided in Cantonese Chinese and English for increased language accessibility and comprehension. To conclude their participation, they recommended other first-generation Chinese immigrants for recruitment until there were a total of 15 participants (see Table 1 for a description of the sample).

All participants received an email instructing them to select two out of three possible museum web-based experiences to engage in, complete a short self-administered online survey, and participate in an approximately 45-minute video-conference semi-structured interview. The three museum websites chosen for participants to visit were the Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA) Museum, the Exploratorium, and the de Young Museum, all of which are located in San Francisco, California. These were chosen specifically because of their location and museum type. Approximately thirty-two percent of Chinese immigrants in the United States reside in California, of which the most populated counties are Los Angeles County and San Francisco County (Echeverria-Estrada & Batalova, 2020). The selected museums in San Francisco aligned with the densely populated Chinese immigrant population that exists, and the museums' aim to serve Chinese immigrants with their physical and virtual content. In the past year, museums have especially expanded the breadth of their virtual experiences to include components such as additional 3D exhibit tours, videos, and more. The choice between the CHSA Museum (history), the Exploratorium (science), and the de Young Museum (art) offered participants agency in selecting which museum types they were inclined to view for this study.

Data were collected through surveys via Google Forms and interviews via the video-conferencing tool Zoom. The surveys consisted of 14 questions, seven about their overall experiences at the first museum website they visited and seven about their overall experiences at the second museum website they visited. The questions were open-ended

and closed-ended in nature, asking about the participants' actions, level of enjoyment, ease of website usability, and suggestions for experience improvement. The interviews were approximately 45-minutes long and consisted of five sections: their general museum background, a think-aloud activity where they shared their screen and walked through some of their website experiences, their feelings of inclusion, their feelings of exclusion, and the impact the experiences had on them and recommendations for improvement.

**Table 1**

*Description of participating first-generation Chinese immigrants (n=15).*

Characteristic	Sample
Participant Gender Identity	
Female	67% (10)
Male	33% (5)
Participant Age	
40 - 49 years	7% (1)
50 - 59 years	20% (3)
60 - 69 years	53% (8)
70 - 79 years	20% (3)
Participant with Disabilities	
Yes	7% (1)
No	93% (14)
Participant Location	
California	93% (14)
Virginia	7% (1)

The analysis of the data was conducted primarily through a combination of descriptive analysis methods. All written and verbal responses in Cantonese Chinese were translated to English by the researcher with no second translator due to the confidentiality of the data outlined in the consent form. The quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends. The qualitative survey data, namely the responses regarding recommendations to improve the participants' overall website experiences, were analyzed to identify common ideas. The interview data were analyzed similarly through identifying keywords, phrases, and ideas to see patterns in responses. Given the nature of this study with 15 participants, there is value in the authenticity of the participants' words resulting in the importance of incorporating verbatim responses into the results.

### Reflexivity Statement

The researcher is a young, bilingual, Chinese American woman who is the daughter of two first-generation Chinese immigrants from Ramaytush Ohlone land (also known as present-day San Francisco, California). She spent most of her life living with and surrounding herself with middle-class friends and family. She recognizes that the intersectionality of her social identities and Western-centered English literature review influenced and framed how she conducted this study and wrote this article.

### Participants' Background and Experiences

#### Museum Background

Participants described their varied lived museum experiences prior to their virtual museum experiences in this study. Most participants did not grow up visiting museums as children in their home countries which included Vietnam, China, and Malaysia. The main reason was that museums either did not exist or were not prevalent in their home countries during that time. Participants from Vietnam particularly felt the absence and low priority of museums because they were focused on surviving and fleeing a war-torn country at the time.

Other participants attributed not visiting museums during their childhood to the lack of time and the nature of Chinese culture. Consequently, other participants mentioned that within Chinese culture growing up, there was an emphasis on excelling in academics through school rather than learning at informal institutions such as museums. The responses were consistent with Stein et al.'s (2008) study, who

found that the perception of learning in immigrant communities can sometimes be seen as an activity only suitable in formal and didactic learning environments such as school, rather than inquiry-based institutions like museums. The lack of exposure to museums can result in a non-existent to minimal relationship with them until the later stages of the participants' lives:

“Growing up in China, at the time and because of culture, my parents were really focused on academics. The most important thing was studying so diversifying hobbies and interests like history and arts didn't happen as much.”

Despite having not grown up regularly visiting museums, most participants recalled visiting at least one museum in their adulthood. The three main reasons for visiting included socialization, travel, and convenience of location. The responses aligned with Stein et al.'s (2008) finding that an immigrant leisure time value is spending time and engaging in activities with people.

To develop a deeper understanding of their relationship with museums, the participants expressed which type of museum they felt more interested in and drawn to in general. The responses were split between art, history, science, and no particular museums. A notable through-line between art and history museums was that despite the difference, the participants frequently related the type specifically back to Chinese-related topics such as Chinese art or Chinese history. The through-line illustrates the important role identity has on the participants' interests and experiences:

“I like art museums, specifically those related to Chinese art because they reflect what Chinese people's lives were back then. I'm Chinese so I always want to know that history and artwork. I'm always amazed by Chinese paintings.”

Finally, in response to gauging the participants' feelings toward museums before participating in this study, two-thirds expressed positive feelings while others expressed negative and neutral feelings about museums. Participants mainly attributed negative or neutral feelings about museums to having a lack of interest or being busy with work and not having had the privilege of leisure time to visit museums regularly enough to form a relationship with them.

## Virtual Experiences During the Study

To understand how virtual museum experiences affected the participants' feelings about museums, it is important to first learn about and understand their experiences. Their feelings were mainly affected by the activities they engaged in and the personal connection they felt while viewing the museum websites of their choice (see Table 2 for a description of museum website choices).

**Table 2**

*Description of museum website choices.*

<b>Museum Website</b>	<b>Number of Participants Who Viewed Website</b>	<b>Participants' First Choice</b>	<b>Participants' Second Choice</b>	<b>Participants Who Have Visited In-Person Before</b>
CHSA Museum	12	10	2	3
Exploratorium	10	2	8	6
de Young Museum	6	3	3	2

*\*Note: Two participants only visited one museum website.*

Among the 12 participants who viewed the CHSA Museum, the most popular activities consisted of looking at images and reading text. During the interview, half of the participants recalled that they viewed the *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion* exhibit first. The participants frequently commented on initially being drawn to the concepts and images in the exhibit and eventually feeling a sense of sadness, anger, and unease while reading the content due to its sensitive and personal nature. All participants expressed how emotionally invested and connected they felt to the content at the end of their virtual experience because it was about their history and identity as Chinese people living in the United States:

“Looking at the images in the exhibit made me feel sad and heartbroken. When I think about the time during the Gold Rush and how Chinese people came here, I think about how hard it was for them and their families.”

The other half of the participants viewed web pages they felt personal connections with such as exhibits about places they have visited before and ones that were created from community members' own stories and lived experiences like *Chinese in the Sunset*. The responses mirrored the results from the CALTA21 program in which they found that centering and elevating immigrants' experiences and stories as main points of discussion resulted in empowerment, validation, and co-creation (The Inluseum, 2013).

The 10 participants who viewed the Exploratorium website indicated that the most popular activities consisted of looking at images, reading text, and watching videos as well. Due to the more expansive scale and content of the Exploratorium's website, all the participants initially chose different sections to explore but were mainly interested in web pages that posed content and activities relatable to their personal lives further illustrating the importance of personal connection to the content:

“I went to the Tinkering At Home page because it seemed like there were things I could do with my kids at home. I was wondering ‘Hmm, what kind of things can I do at home with the stuff I have?’”

As a common through-line among all the museum virtual experiences,

the six participants who viewed the de Young Museum's website expressed that the most popular activities included looking at images, reading text, and watching videos. Similar to the Exploratorium's website, the de Young Museum's website encompassed several different exhibits and collections that resulted in many of the participants looking through every section. However, the most commonly viewed portion was the *Frida Kahlo: Appearances Can Be Deceiving* exhibit because of the bright and attractive colors:

"When I looked at the information I was interested to learn about this lady. I thought the website in general was more colorful, attractive, and active. You know what I mean? It's very lively and captured my attention."

The artistic nature of the de Young Museum contributed to the mindset of universality which prompted the participants to enjoy the artwork and images fully.

## Results

### **1. How do virtual museum experiences affect first-generation Chinese immigrants' general feelings about museums?**

After their virtual experiences, the participants' feelings toward museums either improved or stayed the same. Many who felt that their feelings improved after their virtual experience noted that it was because of the exposure to exciting and relatable content, and that viewing museums online could be an interesting pass time while indoors during COVID-19:

"I felt even more excited about them. They're doing great things. The museum websites were really attractive and really awesome. I'm glad to have gotten to look through them since museums are closed now..."

"I developed more of an interest a bit because COVID-19 is too confining. It got my interest going a little."

Similarly, one other participant said, "All museums have their own specialties and this has just added to my museum experiences. I still really like museums." The virtual experiences acted as a reminder for the participants that museums exist and there is enjoyable and relatable content available for them.

Those who felt that their feelings stayed the same expressed that while the websites were a nice addition, the virtual content did not

significantly affect them and they still preferred to visit museums in person. One participant said that "...having websites is better than nothing. The websites [weren't] perfect, but [she preferred] to go to museums in person." Regardless, the participants' feelings toward museums did not worsen because of their virtual experiences. While the lived experiences varied, they generally impacted the participants in a positive to neutral way that prompted most of them to want to physically visit museums in the future:

"I'll definitely take the time to visit museums, especially the Exploratorium and the Chinese Historical Society of America Museum in the future. It now feels like a waste not to visit when museums and their knowledge have been established for such a long time."

## **2. When and in what ways do first-generation Chinese immigrants feel included and excluded during their virtual museum experiences?**

Understanding the participants' feelings of inclusion and exclusion during their virtual museum experiences informs museums to reflect on their work and guide their efforts to holistically practice inclusion, rather than accommodation. Two-thirds of the participants felt included while only a few felt not included during their virtual experiences. Interestingly, those who felt included primarily attributed it to the existence of Chinese museums, minimal translations, and Chinese representation on the museum websites. The moment of inclusion for some participants originated even before they began their museum website visits. From a long history of underrepresentation, the existence of museums in the United States solely dedicated to Chinese culture and history evoked a strong sense of visibility, recognition, and inclusion for the participants:

"When I looked at the first museum website I felt automatically included because the museum exists and they at least acknowledge us as Chinese in the United States. I'm happy that they recognize us, but the content reminded me of how we've been treated unfairly for a long time. I was still disappointed by the content and history because it's hard to face, but I'm still happy that we're recognized."

As first-generation Chinese immigrants, the participants' relationship with their Chinese identity proved to be a significant factor in their

virtual museum experiences as exhibited by a participant who said, “I felt proud that they were talking about Chinese history.” The pre-established kinship between themselves and specific content illustrated the inherent inclusion that many of the participants acknowledged and felt.

The presence of Chinese content was also a factor in contributing to moments of inclusion. For instance, one participant happened upon a fully translated Chinese webpage on the Exploratorium’s website outlining general information including what the museum is about and the logistical items such as hours of operation and admission cost. Despite the lack of translation expansion to the main content on the website, she said, “I felt included when I was on the Exploratorium website because there was Chinese. It felt intentional and that’s very important. Having Chinese is very important to me.” Similarly, another participant noted that seeing Chinese artists’ last names on the de Young Museum’s website offered her a sense of familiarity, representation, and pride. She expressed how represented she felt seeing last names similar to her own in a well-known art museum.

On the other hand, the participants who did not feel included noted that it was mainly due to the effects of the rise in anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) hate and feelings of inadequacy. In a time of heightened sensitivity, one participant’s feelings about the United States had a significant effect on his virtual museum experience as well. He spent the majority of the time responding to the question in a fervent manner detailing his thoughts on feeling a lack of general safety and dismay at how the museums were not addressing the ongoing violence:

“I think especially in the last 4 years and now, there has been a lot of anti-Asian violence which makes me feel less included everywhere... I read about Asians being attacked a lot in the news and it doesn’t feel like these museums are doing anything to be less racist.”

In addition, other participants expressed moments of not feeling included due to feeling inadequate and unfamiliar with the museum content. Regardless of the museum type, museums specialize in certain topics and content that historically have had the notion of existing for the elite class. The long-standing history and effects of museums rooted in elitism and colonialism are still present in museums’ curation, interpretation, and the visitors’ experiences. One participant felt that her lack of knowledge in specific topic areas made her feel social

discomfort and less invested in the experience:

“The de Young museum’s collections’ artifacts are from all around the world that I’m not too familiar with. Same with the Exploratorium - I’m not too science-minded and feel unfamiliar with the subject so it all feels out of my league and scope.”

Most of the participants did not feel specifically or particularly excluded. The keywords “specifically” and “particularly” play a crucial role in understanding the subtlety and nuance of the participants’ feelings throughout this study. Two participants similarly noted that while they did not feel intentionally excluded, they simultaneously felt that the museums were not meant for them:

“I just felt like it wasn’t a place for me. It felt like I wasn’t part of the target population too much. That being said, I didn’t feel specifically excluded.”

“I didn’t feel necessarily excluded, but it feels like some museums primarily have white people as an audience in mind.”

Despite the assimilation through time and a decrease in general feelings of exclusion for one participant, she also chose to use the word “intentionally” when describing her experience. She felt that while the museums did not actively exclude her, there was an underlying current that their main audiences did not include her:

“When I first immigrated here, culture and language were major barriers. But now, I feel like I’ve assimilated here and through time have felt less excluded. I didn’t feel intentionally excluded when I was looking at the websites.”

### **3. In what ways can museums make themselves more virtually and physically inclusionary for first-generation Chinese immigrants?**

The participants’ lived experiences encompassed a range of feelings, thoughts, and responses that ultimately led to the need for museums to become more inclusionary as evidenced by research questions one and two. The participants’ interview and survey responses regarding improvements and suggestions for further inclusion aligned with each other. Approximately half of the participants said that Chinese text

translations would significantly improve their virtual experience by allowing them to learn about and engage with the content more. Notably, many of the participants emphasized the importance of short and simple translations that summarize general main points so as not to overload information:

“Chinese translations would definitely help, but making them simple and easy to digest would be the best. Too many words can hurt my brain. I just want to understand the general picture of what’s going on.”

Following translations, other participants raised suggestions such as more videos, images, content, and easier website navigation. An increase in the number of videos and images proved to be a popular suggestion to increase online spaces’ sensory diversity and accessibility. Participants said that watching videos and looking at images allowed them to defy language barriers and absorb the content more easily than reading paragraphs of text. The additional layer of spoken Chinese in videos or short Chinese translations accompanying images would allow for greater inclusive and immersive experiences.

An increase in the amount of content and easier website navigation were important suggestions as well. One participant said, “I think they could also include more stuff on their websites because that would still entice people to go in-person afterward.” Another noted that websites with large text, white space, headers, and a main toolbar with clear links, such as the de Young Museum’s website, were aspects that would make navigation easier. Finally, some participants also expressed an inherent access barrier to online spaces due to technology. New technology in combination with complex websites could prevent and deter people from viewing museums online.

As museums begin to reopen for in-person visits post COVID-19, some participants noted that “having different language translations in text and audio would really be able to bring visitors immersed in the experience.” Many participants also insisted that diverse and multilingual staff accurately reflecting surrounding communities would contribute to a more accessible, comfortable, and enjoyable experience as well. Participants explicitly focused on how respectful attitudes from staff toward visitors, regardless of their backgrounds, would significantly improve their experiences:

“I think having staff with better attitudes like being patient is important. From what I remember, sometimes the white people working at museums didn’t

seem welcoming to me or I felt discriminated against. I think there will always be discrimination toward us, but intentionally doing something about it in a museum would be appreciated.”

Interestingly, some participants also expressed how intentional advertisements and outreach would greatly contribute to feelings of inclusion. A large majority of first-generation Chinese immigrants above the age of 40 are difficult to reach due to technology not being a large part of their lives. In contrast, the participants mentioned that creating advertisements and outreach efforts intentionally for the community through familiar mediums, such as local Chinese newspapers and television and radio channels, would be much more effective:

“I think if there were more advertisements intentionally within the Chinese immigrant community, then more of us would know about and possibly go to museums. Advertisements in KTSF channel 26, Sing Tao Daily, and community centers would be great.”

“I think museums can make a better effort to really reach out to and include immigrants. Some immigrants think they don’t belong or that museums aren’t for them, but when they have the invitation and opportunity to go, they can include museums in their lives. It can feel unfair for them because they’ll never feel included to begin with without intentional outreach.”

Finally, a few participants indicated that the expensive admission cost has been and continues to be a barrier regarding visiting museums. Admission costs range from being free to as high as \$43.75 per adult ticket at some museums like the California Academy of Sciences (“Buy Tickets,” 2021). Expensive admission automatically excludes and deters people from visiting, thus posing as an accessibility barrier prior to entry. With lower admission costs or increased free days, museums would be able to remove the prominent financial barrier for many people. Notably, one participant expressed that while lower admission could allow her whole family to visit, frequent group museum visits would also help develop a museum-going culture where it is not commonplace making museums relevant to broader communities:

“I think interest is built up over time... So it’s like building up a habit... When first-generation Chinese immigrants go with their kids, their kids develop a liking to

museums and when they grow older may visit or donate more. Lowering the cost of admission would be great. If one ticket is already \$30, you still have to multiply that by how many people are in the family to get in. If there's a typical family of four, that's already \$120. More free days would also be great."

## Discussion

Participants felt that the virtual museum experiences either improved their feelings toward museums or prompted their feelings to stay the same. Relatability of the content played a significant role in fostering improved feelings based on how previous research suggests that immigrants bring their own stories to museums (Stein et al., 2008). When personal identities and experiences are coupled with relatable content, the combination strengthens the connection between the participants and the museums (The Inluseum, 2013). On the other hand, participants who felt that their feelings stayed the same, viewed the virtual museum experiences as an extension and complement of the physical museum in accordance with previous research about visitors' opinions on the role of museum websites (Marty, 2008).

Furthermore, participants' reasonings for feeling included and excluded offered a deeper understanding of their virtual museum experiences. The reflection of their Chinese identity and ability to bring their own stories, voices, and opinions to the experience contributed to their feelings of inclusion. As seen in the CALTA21 program, the presence of sharing and intercultural dialogue empower immigrants in museum settings (The Inluseum, 2013). In contrast, feelings of inadequacy with museum content increased feelings of exclusion. Breaking down the hierarchy and elitism of museums invites collaboration and co-creation, both of which are qualities that overcome feelings of inadequacy. Additional feelings of exclusion originated from the greater context of COVID-19 effects in the United States since March 2020. COVID-19 has only exacerbated the existing anti-AAPI rhetoric as seen by the approximate 3,800 reported instances of anti-AAPI discrimination, racism, and violence (Nuyen, 2021). As the numbers continue to increase over time, psychologists have correlated the instances with an increase in anxiety and depression (Abrams, 2021). The ramifications and uptick in distress affect people of AAAP descent in multiple facets of their lives as seen with the participants and their virtual museum experiences.

As society continuously challenges museums to be non-neutral,

diverse, and inclusive institutions that embody the agent of social inclusion role, a crucial reminder is that inclusion requires museums not only to combat exclusion but also to actively embrace inclusion. Opening spaces to Black, Indigenous, and people of color is not synonymous with creating an inclusive space for them (Blackwell, 2018). The remnants of museums' passivity toward social issues and inclusion can still be felt as illustrated by the participants.

Finally, one of the main lasting effects of COVID-19 on museums is the recognition and acceleration of technology (Grant, 2020). Museums recognize that people's first interaction with museums may be with their online presence resulting in developing strategies to expand their audiences through that means. As museums' online presence becomes increasingly more important and permanent, the participants expressed ways to start and continue shaping a more intentionally inclusive online space. Interestingly, one of the main suggestions, an increase in multilingual staff with diverse backgrounds, would result in staff utilizing their language abilities to create welcoming and accessible spaces because language is a symbol indicating who belongs in these spaces (Renner, Garibay, Plaza, & Yalowitz, 2015; Collazo, 2017). As seen in the results from Yalowitz et al.'s (2015) study, language accessibility is a key factor in creating positive emotional experiences at museums for people whose native language is not English in the United States. It connects people to spaces that otherwise would feel foreign or ostracizing.

All things considered, museums are also notoriously known for being institutions that uphold a racial hierarchy for employing and retaining white people at the top while tokenizing Black, Indigenous, and people of color at the bottom (Schonfeld, Westermann, & Sweeney, 2015). Although employing more diverse and multilingual floor staff is important, it is paramount that museums do not use those staff as the "face" of the institutions to give the impression of diversity while the true decision-making power remains with white staff. While museums should listen to and implement the participants' suggestions, the institutions should also be aware that the suggestions do not address systemic issues on their own. As Garibay and Huerta Migus (2014) suggest, organizational change, strategic diversity management, and cultural competence are guiding pillars for authentic and sustainable inclusion.

## Conclusions

This study was designed to understand first-generation Chinese

immigrants' feelings during virtual museum experiences by exploring how the experiences affected their general feelings about museums, when and ways they felt included and excluded during their experiences, and ways in which museums can make themselves more virtually and physically inclusionary for the community. The results suggest that the participants' feelings are nuanced and reflect each individuals' unique lived experience. While most participants did not grow up visiting museums, some gradually established relationships with them after immigrating to the United States. During their online visit, the participants primarily engaged with the museum websites by reading text, looking at images, and watching videos. The virtual museum experiences only either improved or did not affect the participants' general feelings about museums.

Many of the participants felt included through the existence of a Chinese museum, some Chinese text translations, and the representation of Chinese last names on the museum websites. They generally felt the most connected to the museums when there were personal connections to the content. While they did not feel particularly excluded, they expressed how museums could practice intentional inclusion instead. A more inclusionary virtual experience could include short and simple Chinese text translations and increased images and videos. Suggestions for inclusionary physical experiences also included Chinese translations, lower admission costs, intentional advertisements and outreach, and diverse and multilingual staff.

There are still many nuances to the relationship between immigrants and museums left to research that will ultimately benefit museums and immigrants of all communities (Stein et al., 2008). This study and its findings are initial efforts to include and amplify the voices of the Chinese immigrant community in the world of museums. Despite the contributions of the findings, the effects of the researcher, subtlety in Chinese culture, and discussion of this topic during a sensitive time posed barriers for the most genuine and honest results. Participants may have found it difficult to express more negative opinions and emotions about their experiences due to short response times and the researcher's own personal position in this study. Social acceptability and politeness ingrained in the culture toward the researcher may have limited the depth and range of the responses. Language translation between Cantonese Chinese and English in this study was also nuanced and had its difficulties. Thus, continued further studies including the Chinese immigrant community, particularly in greater sample sizes within physical museum settings in other parts of the country like New York City, are valuable in reshaping the museum field to steer away

from white dominant narratives and center important and historically excluded communities in the lens of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion.

## About the Author

Jessica Huynh 黄雪莹 (she/her) is a Chinese American from Ramaytush Ohlone land (also known as present-day San Francisco, California). She has an M.A. in Museology with a specialization in museum evaluation from the University of Washington on Coast Salish and Duwamish land (also known as present-day Seattle, Washington). She is committed to embedding kindness, empathy, and equity into her work to be part of the movement for an equitable world.

## Acknowledgements

我非常感谢十五个参与者抽时间来参加我的研究。你们的故事意见和贡献是无价的。我很荣幸能听和了解你们的体验。希望未来会有更多研究关于中国人的故事。此外很感谢我妈妈爸爸和姑姑无条件的爱和支持。没有你们就没有我。谢谢。

I live on the unceded ancestral lands of the Coast Salish and Duwamish peoples while the research sites in this study sit on Ramaytush Ohlone land. I am grateful to respectfully and continuously live and learn as a guest on these lands with the Indigenous peoples who were here before us and are still here, alive and strong.

I am incredibly thankful for Angelina Ong, LeiLani Nishime, and Jessica Luke who have undoubtedly given their time, shared their expertise, and supported me to strengthen this study. Thank you as well to the University of Washington Museology program's faculty, staff, and colleagues. I feel honored and inspired to be part of a cohort that consistently carries out museum work through a diverse, equitable, accessible, inclusive, and decolonial lens.

I thank the participants of this study who took the time to share their lived experiences, opinions, and ideas about a topic that may not have been the most comfortable or familiar to them. Their stories, feelings, and visions guide me to be a museum professional who is an advocate for underrepresented, historically excluded, and important voices. Finally, many thanks to my partner, friends, and family who have given their unconditional love and encouragement as part of this empathetic

and supportive community.

## References

- Abrams, Z. (2021, April 9). *The mental health impact of anti-Asian racism*. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/07/impact-anti-asian-racism>
- American Alliance of Museums. (2018). *Facing Change: Insights from the American Alliance of Museums' Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Working Group*. <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AAM-DEAI-Working-Group-Full-Report-2018.pdf>
- Ang, I. (2005). The Predicament of Diversity: Multiculturalism in Practice at the Art Museum. *Ethnicities*, 5(3), 305–320. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796805054957>
- Blackwell, K. (2018, August 9). *Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People*. The Arrow. <https://arrow-journal.org/why-people-of-color-need-spaces-without-white-people/>
- Buy Tickets*. (2021). California Academy of Sciences. <https://calacademy.org/buy-tickets#step=type>
- CALTA21: A Model for Bridging Museums and Immigrant English Learners*. (2013, May). The Inclusion. <https://inclusion.com/2013/05/23/calta21-a-model-for-bridging-museums-and-immigrant-english-learners/>
- Coffee, K. (2008). Cultural inclusion, exclusion and the formative roles of museums. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 23(3), 261-279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770802234078>
- Collazo, J. (2017, January 4). *The Challenge of Making U.S. Museums Multilingual*. The Hyperallergic. <https://hyperallergic.com/349017/the-challenge-of-making-us-museums-multilingual/>
- Creswell, J. & Poth C. (2017). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Echeverria-Estrada, C. & Batalova, J. (2020, January 15). *Chinese Immigrants in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states-2018>
- Farrell, B. & Medvedeva, M. (2010). *Demographic transformation and the future of museums*. <https://www.aam-us.org/wp->

[content/uploads/2017/12/Demographic-Change-and-the-Future-of-Museums.pdf](#)

- García-Luis, V., McDonald, H., and Huerta Migus, L. (2011). *Multilingual Interpretation in Science Centers and Museums: ASTC Technical Report*.  
[http://www.astc.org/resource/equity/Multilingualism%20Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.astc.org/resource/equity/Multilingualism%20Report_Final.pdf)
- Garibay, C., & Huerta Migus, L. (2014). *The Inclusive Museum: A Framework for Sustainable and Authentic Institutional Change*.  
<https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ASTC/a6c0f3de-e0b1-4198-8ab7-01cee4a55b00/UploadedImages/CCLI%20Framework%20for%20Inclusion%20Paper.pdf>
- Garibay, C. & Olson, J. (2020). *CCLI National Landscape Study: The State of DEI Practices in Museums*. Cultural Competence Learning Institute. <https://community.astc.org/ccli/about-us/landscape-study>
- Grant, D. (2020, July 31). *Pandemic Pushes Museums Deeper Into Digital Age*. The Wall Street Journal.  
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/pandemic-pushes-museums-further-into-digital-age-11596196801>
- Harding, S. (2021, March 10). *Seattle's Wing Luke Museum Reopens to Public*. South Seattle Emerald.  
<https://southseattleemerald.com/2021/03/10/seattles-wing-luke-museum-reopens-to-public/>
- Kauffman, A. (2018, December 25). *Committing to anti-racism in galleries of European art*. The Hyperallergic.  
<https://hyperallergic.com/476685/committing-to-anti-racism-in-galleries-of-european-art/>
- Koliou, A. (1997). Foreign Languages and Their Role in Access to Museums. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 16(1), 71–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09647779700601601>
- Martin, J., & Jennings, M. (2015). Tomorrow's Museum: Multilingual Audiences and the Learning Institution. *Museums & Social Issues*, 10(1), 83–94. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1559689314Z.00000000034>
- Marty, P. (2008). Museum websites and museum visitors: digital museum resources and their use. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 23(1), 81-99.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770701865410>

- MuseumNext. (2015, September 26). *Beyond Tokenism: Institutionalising Inclusivity in Museums* [Video]. Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/167305491>
- Ng, W., Ware, S. M., & Greenberg, A. (2017). Activating Diversity and Inclusion: A Blueprint for Museum Educators as Allies and Change Makers. *The Journal of Museum Education*, 42(2), 142–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2017.1306664>
- Nuyen, S. (2021, March 17). *Anti-Asian Attacks Rise During Pandemic. Read NPR's Stories On The Surge In Violence*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/17/978055571/anti-asian-attacks-rise-during-pandemic-read-nprs-stories-on-the-surge-in-violence>
- Renner, N., Garibay, C., Plaza, C., and Yalowitz, S. S. (2015). Bilingual Exhibits: Current Practices, Collective Knowledge, Outstanding Questions. *Museums & Social Issues*, 10(1), 66–82. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1559689314Z.00000000033>
- Sandell, R. (1998). Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 17(4), 401–418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647779800401704>
- Sandell, R. (2003). Social Inclusion, the Museum and the Dynamics of Sectoral Change. *Museum and Society*, 1(1), 45–62.
- Schonfeld, R., Westermann, M., and Sweeney, L. (2015, July 28). *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey*. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. [https://mellon.org/media/filer\\_public/ba/99/ba99e53a-48d5-4038-80e1-66f9ba1c020e/awmf\\_museum\\_diversity\\_report\\_aamd\\_7-28-15.pdf](https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/ba/99/ba99e53a-48d5-4038-80e1-66f9ba1c020e/awmf_museum_diversity_report_aamd_7-28-15.pdf)
- Stein, J., Garibay, C., and Wilson, K. (2008). Engaging Immigrant Audiences in Museums. *Museums & Social Issues*, 3(2), 179–196. <https://doi.org/10.1179/msi.2008.3.2.179>
- Tlili, A. (2008). Behind the Policy Mantra of the Inclusive Museum: Receptions of Social Exclusion and Inclusion in Museums and Science Centres. *Cultural Sociology*, 2(1), 123–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975507086277>
- United States Census Bureau. (2015, March 3). *New Census Bureau Report Analyzes U.S. Population Projections*. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-tps16.html>
- Whitney, K. (2011). Going Virtual to Engage a Global Museum Community. *The Journal of Museum Education*, 36(3), 289–296.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23118053>

Yalowitz, S. S., Garibay, C., Renner, N., and Plaza, C. (2015). Bilingual Spanish-English Intergenerational Groups' Experiences in Bilingual Exhibitions. *Museums & Social Issues*, 10(1), 35–51.

<https://doi.org/10.1179/1559689314Z.00000000031>

Zacarias, E. M. (2018). *Museums and immigrant communities: Effective public programming*. [Master's Thesis, San Francisco State University]. San Francisco State University Digital Repository.

<http://dspace.calstate.edu/handle/10211.3/204078>