

The pandemic -- a turning point of a new Manhattan Chinatown

By Zoe Han

“Who’s here for the first time, the first time?” yelled Leland Yu, a 29-year-old Chinatown native, into the crowd. A few hands went up. My hand went up. The big crowd cheered.

The group was gathered outside of Lantern Candle Lab, a custom candle-making store on the corner of Mulberry Street and Columbus Park, roughly the heart of Chinatown. In their running shoes, phones up their arms and sometimes with a dog standing by, the crowd was here to run. Every week, the group meets and together runs for three to five miles: running past the City Hall area, the Financial District, the Two Bridges, and coming back to the candle store. The goal is to promote running in the Chinatown community and drive some foot traffic.

Yu asked every person that raised their hand to introduce themselves. A toy store owner introduced himself and promised us a discount if we went to his store, located on Elizabeth Street. A woman whose family used to own a shoe store also joined — she happened to walk past by. Someone visiting the city from Germany came here with her friends, and I was guided by a young woman I came to interview. But one thing was true for most of us: we had dark eyes and dark hair, much softer facial bone features than others in New York City — most of us were Asian and were in our twenties and thirties.

“First-timers in the front row!” Yu gestured toward us to take a group photo, a tradition before each week’s run.

Holding a camera in his hand, another runner shouted out before clicking the shutter: “Who do you run for?”

“Chinatown!” shouted back the crowd.

Chinatown faced its own crisis long before the pandemic hit: gentrification and losing traction to new residents. Covid-19 crashed the neighborhood to the ground first, by xenophobia, the lockdown-induced business loss and delayed relief. But today, there’s a glimmer of hope for a kind of rebirth, characterized by young blood, and a renewed sense of belonging. What unites the runners to come back every week is new to the neighborhood. It only emerged after the pandemic hit, and the shared sense of trauma it brought with it. Although the crisis is still ongoing, the town has found its heroes to fight a good fight: A new generation of Asian Americans have made their way back to the town, which was unimaginable to a slowly aged out neighborhood. For some, they’ve seen how a virus has punched something they love hard — families, businesses, or the community that has given meanings to their identity and name. Reshuffling their priorities, young people have started new groups, businesses, and seem to be rebuilding the face of Chinatown.

There are still reminders of the pain. Around us that day when we gathered for the Monday run, rows of old stores were closed, with their iron gates rolled down. But here and there, between the rolled down iron gates, a pop of art seemed to spring through: either it's yarn-made flowers, or vibrant wall paintings that recreated some traditional Chinese cultural symbols. And some new storefronts opened during the past year like Lantern Candle Lab.

Above our heads, strings of hand-painted lanterns lined up. The community hand-painted shoes on each one of them, all different kinds: sneakers, high heels, boots... They were part of Lights Up Chinatown, a community initiative by a grassroots organization Think!Chinatown to drive foot traffic to the badly-hit neighborhood by the pandemic.

Before the 2020 pandemic, Manhattan Chinatown was facing serious issues. Rising rents had pushed Chinese immigrant residents off the block, as well as old-time legacy stores. Wing On Wo, the oldest store in Chinatown, was nearing closing. The old-time ceramics store was not making enough profits to cover the rents. The neighborhood was aging. Senior and adult day care centers were now springing up in place of closed businesses. Mei Lum, the new owner of Wing On Wo explained to me that few from the younger generations who grew up in the town live here. Some people might come back to visit their elders, she said, but they are not in the neighborhood anymore. And few new working-class Chinese immigrants make the Manhattan Chinatown their destination like their ancestors did. They have two other Chinatowns, Sunset Park in Brooklyn and Flushing in Queens, where, according to the 2010 Census, have [surpassed](#) the Manhattan Chinatown to become the destination to more Chinese immigrants. In fact, the attraction was so large that New York developers are now betting \$800 million dollars to make Flushing look like a modern day Shanghai.

The mainstream media wondered, what would become of Chinatown, a neighborhood with no Chinese? Then the pandemic brought the hardship to a peak.

Jiayang Fan, a Chinese immigrant and a New Yorker staff writer, visited her favorite restaurant, Sichuan Hot Pot, in Chinatown in early March for a video. The owner told her that ever since the Chinese New Year in early February, there have been few people coming in. Eating alone with the empty tables and chairs, Fan said to the camera that it would be devastating for places like this to have to close, even only temporarily: "There's just the sense that your reality has been inextricably altered in this way."

The pandemic hit all of New York City hard, but it's also hard to find another neighborhood that has been hurt in the same way and extremity as New York Chinatowns. As the virus first broke out in Wuhan, China, anxiety of being around anyone who appeared to be Chinese emerged across the country. People actively avoided them on the streets and on the subway, and naturally, Chinatown as a whole. New Yorkers stopped visiting the area when the outbreak in China happened in January, fearing they might contract the virus because the business they frequent was Chinese. A recent Mastercard [survey](#) has found that the three Chinatowns in the New York City area saw a sharp decrease in sales starting from early February, 2020, a month before the virus broke out in the city and the government issued lockdowns. To be sure, the

whole nation went into lockdown. And job losses, sickness and business closures were happening everywhere, but xenophobia made it extra hard for Chinatown. As a result, while on average, restaurants in the city lost 85 percent of business during the pandemic, Chinatown restaurants lost more than 95 percent.

“Business and tourism, that’s what Chinatown is,” said Gary Lum from Wing On Wo, the old ceramic shop, “and the pandemic has taken all of it.”

As businesses closed, instances of targeted racial violence popped up with frequency. Many stores made their closing time at least two hours earlier than the pre-pandemic time; when night falls, harassers emerge.

Leland Yu’s mother, Minerva Chin, was one of the many victims that fell to the violence before it became a topic for the media. Chin was taking a night stroll on the sidewalk of the street when a bearded, bulky man punched her in the face, sending her straight into blackout. A camera caught the encounter on tape, but the police refused to recognize it as a hate crime.

The government relief programs were supposed to help the neighborhood out, but they didn’t reach Chinatown due to its zip code. As the Canal Street part of Chinatown shares the same postcodes as Tribeca and Soho, two neighborhoods with high-end real estate and trendy shops, the city [excluded it](#) from receiving the Small Business Loans. The program was for lower income zip codes, not the high-income ones where this part of Chinatown was located. Around 70 percent of the Chinatown businesses are still behind on their rents — months of rents — to pay back now that the city has opened up.

Seeing how the businesses they grew up with disappeared one by one in the past year, a wave of young Asian Americans decided to venture back and launched community-minded groups and campaigns. The girl who guided me to the weekly run, Chloe Chan, is one of them. She and her friend Anna Huang started a walking tour group after the pandemic hit called the Mott Street Girls, named after the oldest and busiest street of the neighborhood. Both former volunteers at the Museum of Chinese in America and having some free time working from home, Chan and Huang wanted to utilize the skill set they have to make some contributions.

Chan didn’t technically grow up in the four squares of Chinatown, but nonetheless, she has a bond with it that many young people share: the weekly family Chinatown ritual. Every week when Chan was young, her family traveled to the Mott Street area to send Chan off for piano lessons, pick up daily meal essentials that were hard to find elsewhere, and capped off the day by sitting together at one of the many crowded restaurants in the neighborhood to taste some authentic flavors. “Growing up, that was where I formed my identity as a Chinese American,” Chan said. What if this place were to vanish because of Covid? The thought was painful to Chan.

Like Chan’s organization, Welcome to Chinatown, a grassroots community campaign was launched by a group of young Asian Americans and aims to advocate for Chinatown

businesses. It has been vocal for a postcode change. It also seeks to put the Chinatown Mom and Pop small stores onto the “digital” map. Most of those stores never had any online presence before — no social media, Yelp reviews, or even Google Map entries. Because of that, it was hard to draw customers who were not locals.

Liz Yee’s sponge cake store was one of them. Yee, 27, owns two shops, Kam Hing Bakery, which sells sponge cakes and coffee, and Tonii’s Fresh Rice Noodles, which sells Hong Kong-style cheap breakfast items. The two shops are only a few blocks away, five to eight minutes on foot. The two stores were well-known before the pandemic, but only to those who live close by. Yee was never social media savvy, but that has all changed. Welcome to Chinatown and Send Chinatown Love, another grassroots organization, have featured Yee’s store in their Instagram feed and did collaborations with her. It has proved to be productive. Gen Z’ers who grew up outside of the community are Kam Hing’s fastest growing patrons. Today the marketing effort attracts visitors from everywhere from the Bronx to Belgium.

Send Chinatown Love has also helped with Kam Hing’s funding and helped attract major TV exposure. Yee initially thought they were just talking about the sponge cakes to the interviewers, but at the end of the session, she realized that the TV show wanted to help to raise \$25000 for her entire family business, including the noodle shop.

Meanwhile, Chan and Huang, the Mott Street Girls, were planning to drive more real foot traffic to those stores and create impacts similar to the one on Yee’s. In the past year and a half, the duo introduced many themed tours to the general public. There was a tour featuring all the flavors of old and notable Chinatown flavors by numerous old shops: fresh soy milk, almond cookies, Toisan-style zongzi, pan-fried dumplings, and Yee’s fluffy sponge cakes. They also made a few collaborations with other community-minded young Chinatown natives, such as a Chinatown history tour with Leland Yu from Run for Chinatown. The themes are flexible, as long as it introduces the community’s legacy and drives more people to visit and support the businesses. Chan enjoys sharing her personal favorites along each curated trip.

One tour has been a constant; Relive Life Under the Chinese Exclusion. I hopped on a tour with Chan, together with a couple living in Texas visiting Manhattan Chinatown for the first time. Miriam, the wife, wanted an authentic experience and booked the tour through Airbnb. With an iPad in hand, Chan led us through the thick and thin of Chinatown streets and took us into the neighborhood’s history.

In 1882, the US government issued the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first U.S. law that banned a whole ethnic group from entering into the country for more than half a century. And the Manhattan Chinatown has witnessed all of it, not only the discrimination in the last century, but also in the past year. Chan was making the connections.

We walked past by a line of Chinese barber shops on Doyer Street. Chan pointed to a current day bar in the corner and introduced it as the one-time Chinese opera house. Even in a theatre that plays Chinese plays, seats were reserved for Americans. Underneath us, the pavement

was painted into a rainbow mural and has become a new must-see for the Chinatown tourist. It was part of the business rebound program the city offered.

But Chan gestured to the rainbowed streets and introduced it as one of the most notorious, dangerous streets that used to be flooded with crimes from old Chinatown gangs, and the police were not there to help. “Sound familiar?” Chan asked us. In the pandemic, when racial-targeted violence surged in the neighborhood, there was little response from the government or police. The mainstream media took note, but late in the game. Therefore, the community had to step up themselves to solve it — a group of commoners living in the neighborhood volunteered to form a patrol and walk around the area daily, to convey a sense of security to their neighbors.

The tour has resonated with the attendees. In the past 10 months, it received a 4.95 rating out of 55 reviews and has quickly become a tourist favorite. People hop on the tour from all over the place, Europe, Texas, Vermont as well as people from the neighborhood. In fact, on Airbnb’s booking page, the Chinese Exclusion tour was labeled as a local favorite and often booked by people who live nearby.

A customer of Chan’s recently left a passionate review raving about the double lens the tour offered. “This is not just another tour,” the customer wrote, “Not only are the Mott Street Girls knowledgeable about the history of Chinese immigration, they present it through a political lens - very timely, especially in the light of current anti-Asian sentiment.”

The lens is much needed to the community, as it has drawn back some residents who grew up here and moved away. Yee was one of those teenagers who wanted to fly away from Manhattan Chinatown, the further, the better. Until an abrupt family tragedy shook her and reshuffled her priorities. Now, she puts family matters above anything else. Handling and taking care of the family business enables Yee to stay close to her loved ones. Yee said it is similar for those who came back because of the pandemic. The enormous hardship has given them a renewed sense of community.

“After they saw what COVID did to their family members, how COVID can just take somebody away. You see a person one day and you don’t see them any more than the next day. It makes it so much more important what family means to you,” said Yee. A lot of the young people are making their way back to the community they grew up in, making a nest in Chinatown.

As a result, fresh faces are popping up everywhere in the business scene. Aside from the Lantern Candle Lab, a bubble tea shop called Miss Du’s Tea opened on Pell Street back in Summer 2020. Next to Yee’s noodle roll shop, Alimama, a mochi donut shop opened in 2019. The owner was a lower east side native, and grew up with both parents operating and owning Chinese restaurants. And the wave has also created a national first —on Mulberry Street, inside an old Chinese funeral parlor storefront, the first female, Asian-American-owned bookstore in the country, Yu and Me, opened its door to customers this December. The store focuses on AAPI authors and takes pride in its immigrant-centric curation.

Yee said those new stores, owned and managed by the younger generation, are creating a lot of foot traffic and will benefit the business landscape of the whole neighborhood.

The trend to create something new out of the old Chinatown was there before, but if anything, the pandemic magnified it and encouraged more people to join. Mei Lum, the fifth and youngest owner of Wing On Wo, after taking over the hundred-year-old store in 2016, revamped the whole marketing strategy and started a community project, the W.O.W project, which encourages the voices of female and queer creatives. It's a first for the neighborhood. This year, the group made it to the MOMA annual celebration and headed multiple mural projects in the neighborhood. One painting featuring jade, praying hands and an Asian grandmother hugging an Asian teenager — all kinds of Chinese symbols of blessing and security—reads: In Our Future, Our Asian Community is Safe.

If the outside world cannot hear it, “you need to scream, scream it out loud,” said Gary Lum, Mei Lum’s father. “And the W.O.W project is an initiative like that, the same for all the young people in the neighborhood these days.”