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Community Resilience: Stories About Chinatowns in NYC during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It's known to those who paid attention to the history of Chinese Americans that ever since they set foot on American soil in the early 19th century, they have encountered a variety of unfortunate events, or struggles to be exact. Most of those unpleasant events were due to natural disasters, economic, violence, discriminations, or racial hate incidents. Many historians of this subject would agree that the chronicle has been dotted with hardship and disgrace. Although many were never awakened from the nightmare of these Chinese American experience in the United States, it is disheartening to see the history continue and repeat itself into the 21st century.

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

Looking back 20 years ago, take an example of the September 11 attacks. While this tragedy affected the entire country, Manhattan Chinatown, which is only a few blocks from the World Trade Center was considered a major disaster zone. A great majority of businesses in this district were shut down for an extended period. Then the United States Secretary of Labor, [Elaine Chao](#), stated: "*The September 11 attacked caused an economic shock wave throughout the entire national economy, but in Chinatown, that ripple was more like a tidal wave*". As a longtime resident of this neighborhood, I not only concur with her statement, but also can testify to the many inconveniences and trauma resulting from this tragedy that lasted for over two decades.

Then, the Covid-19 pandemic emerged from all over the country in early 2020. By March of 2020, 90% of businesses in Chinatowns of NYC halted operations due to the pandemic. Furthermore, it has been widely reported that due to the assumed origin of the virus, Chinatowns throughout the U.S.A. have been the victims of numerous incidents of assault and battery. According to [NYPD report at a news conference on 12/10/2021](#), from 2020 to 2021, crimes against Asian Americans rose 361%. Meanwhile, countless toxic language toward Asian businesses and individuals was having deadly impact in the Asian society.

THE THREAD OF COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

How could Chinatowns have survived through adversities and crises, one after another, during the span of two centuries? It must take enormous research effort and a multi-facets view of both historic and present studies to answer this complex question. However, from a cursory review of current documents and news media, one can surmise it is the spirit of community resilience that stood out as the engine of the vehicle that Chinese Americans have been riding to drive away from the many catastrophes and calamities over the centuries of suffering.

The most straightforward way for me to define community resilience is the reimagining of community resources and opportunities, with innovation, persistence, and indefatigable concerted efforts. Notwithstanding that this quality the Chinese community has been relying on does not follow a “cookie cutter” method, has remained unchanged over the course of history of Chinatowns. Upon review of some of the current neighborhood development in NYC Chinatowns, I bear witness of the collective community handling the coronavirus crisis, such as: confronting insufficient supplies of resources, reduction of visitors, and most of all, facing the fear of a deadly health issue. Chinatowns in NYC have appeared to meet the challenges head on with multifarious solutions. I truly believe that community resilience has been the gentle but firm hands that nurture this vibrant community back to health.

An old traditional way of dealing with community urgent problems was ignited by the community enthusiasts who are composed of **young** Chinese Americans and all **volunteers**. Such OUTSTANDING characteristic presented diversified approaches to making contributions to Chinatowns during difficult times and were all united under two goals: giving back to the community we love so much and the only way you can get through tough times is by serving other people.

The following brief descriptions of some initiatives took place around NYC Chinatown over the course of the past two years can handily serve as illustrations of this notion of community resilience. Their respective websites links provided are highly recommended to gain a fuller picture of their activities & commitments. I am very positive that you will be as impressed and touched, if not more, as I am.

1. LIGHT UP CHINATOWN



Purpose: Send a message to the city and the neighborhood—*hang in there!* - Please enjoy these good wishes and beautiful ornaments, from all the people in Manhattan Chinatown.

Approach: Stage 1: Having 250 colorful & individually designed lanterns installed above Mott Street, between Canal and Bayard Streets. Stage 2: Bayard Street from Mott Street to Bowery Street.

Effects: Major Business areas of Chinatown will be lit up at night, (shown as the picture) so it can boost the business for restaurants and some shops.

2. WELCOME TO CHINATOWN

Purpose: A non-profit organization, addressing the critical needs of the Chinatown community, and building relationships with small business owners.

Approach: Providing urgent relief; addressing broader community needs; providing resources for long term sustainability

Effects: Meet Chinatown Digital Directory, which includes a variety of available services <<https://www.welcometochinatown.com/#directory>>

3. THINK CHINATOWN

Purpose: Starting from 2018, this non-profit organization has periodically provided activities or performance, characterized with Chinese culture.

Approach: In 2021, from Oct. 15 to Oct 24, there were open-air cultural festivals, showcasing Chinatown, at a variety of locations in Manhattan, alongside street food.

Effects: Now, more than ever, it's so important to create art and get "together" to celebrate this community. It is understandable that the lasting effects go beyond the short periods when the activities take place

4. [ASSEMBLY FOR CHINATOWN](#)

Purpose: Creating beautiful outdoor dining solutions for Chinatown restaurants in need during the shutdown period of 2020 when indoor dining was banned.

Approach: In collaboration with [A+A+A+ Studio](#) a women-led design studio, committed to making places more joyful.

Together, they built many eye-catching & practical dining areas throughout Manhattan Chinatown. (Shown as the picture)



Effects: Their efforts helped to reduce the restaurant closings during that period. Even after the indoor dining gradually opened, many restaurants still chose, if the weather permits, to keep those beautiful installations.

5. [SEND CHINATOWN LOVE](#)

Purpose: During the lockdown of 2020, most Chinatown businesses were rejected for government loans because they were cash businesses, and the owners did not know how to build the platform to satisfy the requirements. This organization was there to help merchants figure out what opportunities might be there and grab them.

Approach: After identifying a merchant in need, the team works one-on-one with the small business owners. They also helped with menu design, marketing strategy, website development, grant applications, etc.

Effects: They helped to bring thousands of businesses online to weather the economic hardships of COVID-19 period.

REPURPOSING RESOURCES IN CHINATOWNS OF NYC

By mid-March 2020, lacking resources was evident everywhere in America. However, in Chinatowns, in addition to residents' unavoidable pain & panic, it also sparked a good nature of community resilience, and the outcome has been so remarkable from the onset.

Often time when life threw those neighborhoods a curveball, failure can be so appalling, and it can take a lengthy period for merchants accepting the status quo and coming up, SLOWLY, with the countermeasures for survival. In the case of NYC Chinatowns considering the pandemic, residents did not accept being defeated easily! **Community resilience, much more than before.** After enduring all the misfortune and tremendous loss during a long stretch of chaos, the community began as early as June 2020, under the governance of strict health guidance, to mobilize a series of structural adaptations and marketing activities with amazing progress toward reopening of the neighborhood.

Personally, I never stopped visiting those ethnic areas and patronizing their business throughout the period of the pandemic. I have been thoroughly impressed with the ways they have learned how to adapt to NEW normal and managed to thrive (beyond surviving) on what they intended to do during this difficult time. To say the least, their activities provide examples for an old saying. *Instead of praying for a favorable wind, you adjust the direction of the sails of your ship to move forward.*

The transformations of businesses and services are evidenced everywhere in these neighborhoods. As a consumer and beneficiary of these businesses and services, it is my pleasure to bring up the following few examples.

- [RENDR](#)

This is a sizable multi-specialty physician group. Established in 2019 (A bit ahead of the Pandemic), there are more than 30 locations in Chinese American vicinities across Manhattan Chinatown, Flushing Chinatown, Elmhurst, and Brooklyn Chinatown. The newest location was just opened in Elmhurst Chinese community in November of 2021. Their goal is delivering consistent, and affordable high-quality care to build a healthier Chinese community to help the community to **stay stronger**.

During the crucial period of the pandemic, they really played the role as: Guardians of the community's health, physically & mentally. It is an understatement to label their services provided as: Simple essential services, because they have been Godsend to the community.

- [MOTT STREET EATERY](#)

Located at 68 Mott Street, this eatery is the first one, in the food court style, in Manhattan Chinatown. Its grand opening in November 2021 was a bit of a surprising news to the community. At this unstable period, very few businesses dare to try their luck at this type of venture. However, we must give them round applause and support for a re-imagining giant stride from an unused premise for four years. Nevertheless, it is a morale booster for the neighborhood. For this reason, it deserves sincere appreciation.

I have patronized this establishment whenever I had the chance, and I can't say enough praises for the satisfaction I got. I trust it can ride on the good reputation and good fortune to go far beyond the pandemic.

- **86 STREET IN BENSONHURST**



The influx of Chinese immigrants has been apparent in a short stretch of 86th Street between either side of Bay Parkway. For recent years, restaurants, bakery stores, and full-scale markets, with awnings bearing the red and yellow colors (A favorite choice of

most Chinese businesses) have proliferated in this neighborhood. In addition to the Chinese businesses, this is still a community with mixed ethnic groups of Italian, Russian, and Jewish people. Many of the stores were in full operations throughout the pandemic and were the lifeline for the owners and workers, as well as consumers where they are the vital few places available for daily essentials such as bread, fruits, and vegetables. Incidentally, majority of these markets carry one similarity, which is they remained open to serve the community every single day during the lockdown period AND did not raise the prices of their merchandise. For those, including myself, who benefit from their contributions, the appreciation is well beyond the description of words. I am forever grateful for their persistence and resilience in serving the community during the most desperate time.

CONCLUSION

The American Chinese community has been moving forward with a positive attitude despite the uncertainty, and not being afraid of exploring new initiatives as those willing hearts and able people have been doing for the past two years. All those good deeds were honorable and absolutely deserving of high respect. Nonetheless, for the many merchants, restaurants, and shops, their business acumen was equally admirable. It is my belief that a single drop of enthusiasm can generate noticeable waves and leave a legacy for the community. In history, most occurrences, including failures and sadness, eventually would have been forgotten after a while, but **legacy** will forever remain in records for generations. The community's lasting resilience of today will be tomorrow's memorable legacy for Chinatowns.

Nevertheless, will those fellow Chinese Americans' efforts and strengths of community resilience leave a favorable trace on the path ahead of this community after this crucial point? At this juncture when the pandemic is still not in retreat, it is relatively hard to have a definite answer, especially considering the two important lessons we have learned from the coronavirus crisis: *1. What lies ahead will always be a mystery; 2. Why things happen may never be certain.* Unfortunately, we need to take heed of this different perspective during this period. They will continue to have a profound impact in our lives for years to come.

When I feel lost or discouraged, a friend of mine, who is a Swedish American, likes to read me a quote from her favored Swedish proverb, which is “*Fear less, hope more; hate less, love more; eat less, chew more; cry less, smile more, and then good things will be yours*”. What wise advice for me, and for everybody! Yes! It is all about **love and perspective!!** We should have faith that GOOD things will eventually prevail in our loving environment of Chinatowns in New York City.

FURTHER READING (Internet resources)

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