

SOMETHING LIKE HEALING, SOMETHING LIKE HOPE

Amid a nationwide increase in anti-Asian hate crimes, one writer considers what Chinatown means to America—and to her.

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MANHATTAN'S CHINATOWN IS MY HOME CHINATOWN.

FORTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, I snoozed my way through my own baptism at the venerable Transfiguration Church on Mott Street, where countless Chinese and other immigrant families have celebrated beginnings with showy weddings and honored endings with solemn funerals. Mine is not a religious family, so I'd say the baptism served to bless my introduction more to the neighborhood than to God. Chinatown is where my grandmother worked as a seamstress, my grandfather in a fortune cookie factory. Well into elementary school on Long Island, my brother and I wore clothes she sewed, and cookies he had folded were tucked neatly away in our lunches.

Most Sundays, we'd slip into the riverine press of humanity en route to the small apartment on Madison Street that our grandparents shared with three other relatives. Things we saw from our vantage point as kids on these family visits included precarious fruit displays, toy bins, and fishy puddles; affectionate hands squeezed our faces and rewarded us with sour fruit candy. Chinatown was where we could be Chinese, outside of a daily existence spent amid mostly white peers. Ours was an intensely bifurcated upbringing. As a young writer in the East Village, I tried to live differently. I circled back to Chinatown in a more routine way, for everyday things—language lessons, fresh vegetables, a good steamed bun—and for loftier reasons, a connection to something bigger than myself. As a Chinese American kid on Long Island, I never quite felt like I fit in. In Chinatown, I didn't stand out unless I wanted to, and I began to understand that this kind of physical comfort and anonymity in a place is a privilege. Visiting Chinatown made me feel like I maybe *could* fit in, if only I had a better understanding of how my family got here and what the place meant to them.

Chinatown was born of diaspora but also of the human need to gather and make a home. It's the most American story there is.

A little more than a decade ago, I wrote a book, *American Chinatown* (Simon & Schuster), about five of the most significant Chinatowns in the United States—including the oldest, in San Francisco, where

Opposite page: Manhattan's Chinatown covers an area of about two square miles.

Previous page: Nom Wah Tea Parlor first opened in New York City in 1920, and cooks have been turning out dim sum ever since.

I'd recently moved. I spent time with the late historian and architect Phil Choy, who taught me how to read the distinctive, pagoda-roofed skyline for the story of Chinese American self-invention and self-preservation after the 1906 earthquake. I hung out with earnest teens who were reclaiming their identity by leading lively lion dance troupes and neighborhood tours. And I met recent arrivals, who came in with hearts and minds open to possibility. As they navigated their new lives, I learned along with them. Across geography and generations, people I spoke to had stories of setbacks and struggle, but there was something to share about the paths that led them there: something that looked and sounded like optimism.

The last few years have left many Americans shocked at the precariousness of our sense of belonging. The surge in anti-Asian hate crimes and harassment across the country means my older relatives fear going out alone, anywhere, even to places where they'd always felt at home. Many of the mom-and-pop shops they used to frequent in Chinatown have shuttered; those that remain close earlier than they used to, so their owners can get home before dark. I never thought that my friends and I would be texting each other about how to defend ourselves on public transit or while walking alone in a city at night. These days, I find myself thinking more about how fear and racism built the very first Chinatowns. It's the parallel tale we don't like to tell, the unpleasant companion on the immigrant journey, every bit as American as the dream.

NOT LONG AGO, I guest-taught a class of Stanford University medical students on Asian American history, racism, and public health. I was steeped in reminders that the words we use matter: When a cholera epidemic hit New York City in 1832, the Board of Health called it "the Oriental cholera." Later that century, Chinatown was portrayed as home to "an inferior race" and full of "foul vapors." Chinese women were not allowed to enter the country because they were deemed "prostitutes," "filthy," and "morally corrupt," and yet were exoticized and exploited by white men.

In this persistent othering is an unbroken line to "the China virus." Visitors have always sought out Chinatown for the seemingly foreign yet familiar, whether it's to try dim sum, listen to another language, or admire the pagoda rooflines. That forever foreignness is a problem. Last year, after the Atlanta spa shootings left six Asian women dead, the journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote on Twitter that "anti-Asian & anti-Black racism and violence run in tandem," originating from a society "where nationalism has again been stoked & normalized." She



beginning," Jew told me, as his six-month-old son, Bo, who had just learned to crawl, scooted toward me. We chatted in the dining room, which looks out across the main thoroughfare of Grant Avenue and toward the sun-bleached point of the iconic Transamerica Pyramid. Directly across Grant is the Wok Shop, a beloved kitchen supply store where proprietor Tane Chan has been selling Chinese cookware since 1972.

Outside, Chinatown still felt quiet. But behind a neighborhood seemingly lying fallow, there was renewal. Jew pointed out the just-remodeled playground that had reopened across the street; the planned \$66 million redesign of Portsmouth Square by the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department; and the scheduled September opening of the Central Subway underground light rail connecting Chinatown to the neighborhoods south of Market Street. The physical and civic investment in the community, he said, signaled support in a time when it desperately needed something like hope.

For Jew, the assaults on Asians in Chinatown and elsewhere in the Bay Area during the pandemic solidified his commitment to the neighborhood and sharpened his understanding of racial injustice. The resilience of his neighbors helped him to push forward and to keep Mister



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Jiu's open. He felt a deep responsibility to the elders who had supported him.

"There is strength in this community," Jew said. At 42, he is of a generation for which this kind of public vitriol had seemed bygone, not least of all because he lives in the Bay Area, home to a robust Asian American population dating back to the mid-1800s. The violence against Asian seniors stunned him, and he felt an urgency to speak up, on social media and elsewhere, about what Chinatown needed and to make noise against AAPI hate. The restaurant raised funds to support the organizations Cut Fruit Collective and the Chinatown Community Development Center. "Being reminded of what that older generation went through, in this time of renewed

pointed out that both groups were brought to the United States for labor—but with no intention of ever allowing them full and equal citizenship with whites.

In ways that reflect this reality, Chinatown is a place of contradiction. It serves as scapegoat *and* sanctuary. The first Chinatowns were ghettos for male Chinese laborers, who were forced to live among, and yet apart from, whites; Chinese women were barred from immigrating to prevent those laborers from starting families. And yet a Chinatown like San Francisco's is now celebrated as a historic neighborhood, a gateway, an example of the American dream made good. Many Chinatowns have been shrinking for years under pressures of gentrification and remain reliant on a fickle tourism economy. The questions around what Chinatown means—why its existence is important, and how its future should be stewarded—are familiar ones, but they have been made even more acute by the pandemic.

One bright spring afternoon, I went for a walk in San Francisco's Chinatown. I hadn't gone to the area much during the last two years—well, I hadn't gone anywhere much at all—and the familiar kinetic vibration of life in Portsmouth Square, one of my favorite places to people-watch, was comforting: children screaming from the play structures, their minders chatting on benches; elders making their rounds, hands folded behind their backs. A few blocks away on Waverly Place, a narrow lane that's one of the oldest in the neighborhood, I stopped in to see the chef Brandon Jew. His restaurant, the Michelin-starred Mister Jiu's, is only the third business to occupy the 10,000-square-foot space at 28 Waverly Place, after the iconic Four

Seas restaurant, where he remembers attending his uncle's wedding banquet in the upstairs hall. (The restaurant name is his reclamation, a correction to the misspelling of his family's name upon arrival in America.)

Two men stood calmly smoking in the alley as music wafted from under the turned-up eaves of the Eng Family Benevolent Association. Colorful painted goldfish swam on the sidewalk outside the restaurant, which had reopened on a four-day-a-week schedule in January. Jew opened Mister Jiu's—known for creative, meticulously prepared Chinese American dishes that rely on seasonal local produce—in 2016, after working in the kitchens of such quintessential and respected California establishments as Zuni Café and Quince. At this year's James Beard Awards, he won best chef in California and best restaurant cookbook for *Mister Jiu's in Chinatown* (Ten Speed Press), coauthored with Tienlon Ho. Growing up in San Francisco, Jew has strong connections to Chinatown; as a child, he performed with his kung fu class in the district's Chinese New Year celebrations.

"The thing that draws Chinese Americans back to this neighborhood is that this was our



This page, from left: Waverly Place in San Francisco; Brandon Jew, the chef/owner of Mister Jiu's.

Opposite page, from left: a dish of local halibut, ogo seaweed, hot mustard, and lotus root from Mister Jiu's; Portsmouth Square, which is slated for a redesign by the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department.

Street vendors sell fresh fruits and vegetables in New York City's Chinatown.



CHINATOWN, EVERYWHERE

by Mae Hamilton

San Francisco, New York City—some of the world's most famous Chinatowns are found in the United States. But with an estimated 50 million ethnically Chinese people currently living outside of China, these enclaves aren't just a U.S. phenomenon; they're scattered in major metropolitan areas across the globe.

YOKOHAMA, JAPAN

Four elaborately decorated gateways mark the entrances to Yokohama's Chinatown, Japan's largest, which sits just a few blocks from Tokyo Bay. Pick up some *chūka* (aka Japanese Chinese food) such as *karaage*—small pieces of meat, usually chicken, that have been deep-fried with a light, crispy batter—and peruse the area's 250 storefronts. Don't miss the Kanteibyō Temple, considered the spiritual center of the neighborhood.

LIMA, PERU

When slavery was abolished in Peru in 1854, Chinese indentured laborers were brought in to work on sugar and cotton plantations. After their contracts were completed, many ended up in the Peruvian capital and established one of the oldest Chinatowns in Latin America. Spanning merely two downtown blocks, the Barrio Chino would become the birthplace of *chifa*—Peruvian Chinese food—which features dishes like *sopa wantán* (wonton soup), *lomo saltado* (stir-fried beef), and *arroz chaufa* (Chinese-style fried rice).

PARIS, FRANCE

There's not just one, but three Quartiers Chinois in Paris. The original, and smallest, is located in the 3rd arrondissement around Rue au Maire. Better known are the other two areas, one of them in the 20th arrondissement and home to a predominantly Chinese population. The other, and best known, is in the 13th arrondissement and is primarily occupied by people of Chinese and Vietnamese descent who fled Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and other Southeast Asian countries during the Vietnam War

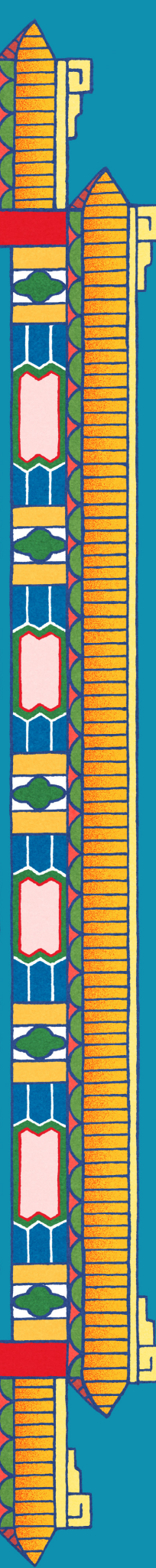
and in the years that followed. Amid decidedly European architecture, the 13th arrondissement has Buddhist temples, Asian supermarkets, and numerous Chinese restaurants.

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Melbourne's Chinatown dates to 1854, when the first Chinese-owned houses were completed in the Little Bourke Street area. It's considered to be not only the oldest Chinese enclave in Australia but arguably the oldest continuously inhabited Chinatown in the Western world, since San Francisco's was decimated by the 1906 earthquake. Think about stopping by RuYi Modern Chinese, which serves reimagined Chinese cuisine in a minimalist setting, or check out the Museum of Chinese Australian History, which highlights the legacy of Australia's Chinese community.

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa has the largest Chinese population on the African continent, and Johannesburg, the country's sprawling metropolis, is home to two Chinatowns. The original, located on Commissioner Street in the city's central business district, is nearly as old as Johannesburg itself, dating to the late 1800s. The second Chinatown is situated in the suburb of Cyrildene. Known as "New Chinatown," the neighborhood was formed during the social upheaval of the 1990s and is home to a booming Chinese community. Restaurant options abound, including Delicious Casserole Food, where dishes are cooked and served in clay pots, and Shun De, a local dim sum favorite. Here, diners can enjoy *siu mai*, egg tarts, and other classic Chinese offerings.





hate, it helps shape your understanding of yourself. And that you deserve a place." He paused. "That matters."

TALKING WITH JEW made me long for the rhythms of my home Chinatown, so I headed to New York City. For the last few years, I'd been exchanging notes about the state of the neighborhood with Grace Young, the James Beard Award-winning author and culinary historian. She has lived in New York for more than 40 years. In January 2020, she began walking into Chinatown every day to check in on businesses like Hop Lee, a restaurant that has long catered to a working-class clientele of old-timers, postal workers, and local teachers from P.S. 1. She hasn't stopped since. "The immediate shunning of Chinatown just took the life force out of the neighborhood," she told me. Restaurants and supermarkets emptied; street vendors had no customers. In the first three months of the pandemic, Chinatown businesses saw their revenues drop by up to 80 percent. By March 2022, nearly a quarter of the ground-floor storefronts in New York's Chinatown stood empty.

A slight, birdlike woman with glasses and a bright smile, Young, 66, had always seen herself as a quiet person. But watching low-income immigrants, workers, and owners struggle to survive, knowing they could lose their jobs and businesses, turned her into an activist. "I never ever dreamed that you could lose Chinatown," she said. She couldn't stand by and let it happen.

Young found her voice as a committed advocate: She began a video series called "Coronavirus: Chinatown Stories," documenting the economic hardships faced by Chinatown residents; she worked with the nonprofits Asian Americans for Equality and Welcome to Chinatown to raise funds for the community; she launched social media campaigns in partnership with the James Beard Foundation, including #LoveAAPI and #SaveChineseRestaurants. "I want people to show up by showing their love," Young told me one afternoon as we dodged weekend visitors on Canal Street. The crowds weren't quite what they were prepandemic, but they were encouraging. "All these people are here because they love the food and the people who carry on those valuable traditions. In a time when people in the



This page, from top: Bookstore owner Lucy Yu; shrimp, pork, and chicken *siu mai* from Nom Wah Tea Parlor in Manhattan.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Scenes from Manhattan's Chinatown; author and advocate Grace Young at Hop Lee restaurant.





PERHAPS BETTER THAN MOST, PEOPLE IN CHINATOWN HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN WHAT IT MEANS TO CARE FOR THEIR NEIGHBORS.

community are struggling and afraid, everyone can help by being visible with that love."

Her humanitarian efforts have won her recognition and financial investment from the James Beard and Julia Child foundations; the former lauded Young's "work to save America's Chinatowns amid Asian American and Pacific Islander hate" while the latter honored Young's "important contributions to preserving and sharing Chinese culinary traditions." The attention from these historically white organizations felt momentous: Chinatown mattered to them, too. "I have no grand plan for the future," Young said, as we sat on a bench in Columbus Park, watching seniors attend to card games and young people play basketball on the adjacent courts. We shared stories about our families and pointed out places that meant something to each of us: a favorite restaurant here, a beloved shop there. "But I react to what I feel: Chinatown tells the story of America."

The long history of Chinatown, and of the Asian American resistance movement rooted there, is also a meaningful anchor for Lucy Yu. In December 2021, she opened Yu and Me Books, a cozy, light-strung bookshop and café on the east side of Columbus Park, on Chinatown's funeral parlor row. Six months into what had been a whirlwind time for the business, I sat with Yu, 27, as she chatted with customers and pulled coffee drinks from an espresso machine. Behind her, a vivid aquamarine wall was covered with framed prints and paintings, as well as photographs by the late Corky Lee, an influential photojournalist who began documenting Chinatown and Asian American activism and life in the 1970s.

Before Yu opened the bookstore, she worked as a chemical engineer and, later, as a supply chain manager. "It was my personal dream to do this," she said. "And it's been surprising and wonderful that it has resonated with so many people. My neighbor's grandparents came in. They said, 'I was born and raised on this block. I've never seen anything like this here, and I'm so glad you're here.' That means so much."

Part of her mission is to provide comfort and community. In mid-March, a month after Christina Yuna Lee was murdered in her Chinatown apartment just a half-mile away, the bookstore held an event in which it gave out free pepper spray and personal alarms provided by the nonprofit Soar Over Hate. A thousand people showed up; some waited two hours. Brooklyn artist Leanne Gan made art for those who came in. In a time of trauma and loss, everyone was searching for healing.

"I constantly say that I'm three kids in a trench coat," Yu said with a laugh. "I have zero percent idea what I'm doing." But she's bold enough to ask, *What would make me feel better?* Pepper spray: OK. The feeling of being in community: Yes. And sharing drinks and dumplings with friends and neighbors in Chinatown? That's always a good thing.

THE WRITER CHARLES YU told me that, when it comes to place, "we all live in some amalgam of emotional feelings, ideas, and mental assumptions," whether we realize it or not. "That resonates in an especially powerful way with Chinatown." His novel *Interior Chinatown* (Vintage), which won the 2020 National Book Award, interrogates the evolving mythology of the neighborhood and the people inside, exposing stereotypes that devalue Asian lives. Yu said that the writing of the book was influenced by his changing perception of his parents' own immigration story after President Donald Trump's election. Fifty years into their American lives, the country was back to talking about who gets to be American and who doesn't. Everything was cast in a new light.

Yu pushes against stereotypes with specificity, by writing about individuals with complex inner lives, fears, regrets, and hopes. In *Interior Chinatown*, Willis Wu lives in a tiny, one-room apartment in Chinatown; he's also a bit-part background actor. He wants a shot at being Kung Fu Guy—a chance to play the most respected role someone who looks like him can have. This is brilliant, biting satire, but the heartbreak is what he doesn't yet realize: He can be a leading man, wholly realized, driving the action on his own terms. He can be more.

In some ways, Yu said, imagination is how we hope. The quintessentially American belief that if you work hard enough, you will earn something like success and belonging has always animated Chinatown. Today, the Asian American community inside and outside the neighborhood feels less sure of belonging or even of safety. There's a brutality to that fact. But the idea of Chinatown as a place rich in possibility is the one I still champion—yes, with fear and hope. It deserves to be seen in its full humanity. And so do we.

What does Chinatown mean to me, years after my introduction? I'm still fiercely compelled to declare solidarity with the community and what it represents: *We're here. We've been here.* It's staking a claim on being American, and fighting for that right, however uncomfortable and scary it is to do that now. It's been a long time since I had a daily relationship with Chinatown, but communing with some of the most vocal, visible champions working in the neighborhood restored in me a kind of faith. Perhaps better than most, people in Chinatown have always known what it means to care for their neighbors. It's not clear how we'll all get through this difficult and divisive time. Maybe it helps to know that we're fumbling our way forward, together. 🍵

Bonnie Tsui wrote about open-water swimming in the Spring 2022 issue of AFAR. Photographer Alex Lau is profiled on page 12.

Opposite page: Roughly 24 square blocks, San Francisco's Chinatown is a civic and cultural center not only for the city but for the greater Bay Area as well.

