

Community-Based Art Projects in San Francisco Chinatown: A Survival Strategy

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ABSTRACT

While research about contemporary Asian arts exhibited in mega museums has attracted growing attention, there is little dialogue concerning community-based art practices in everyday Asian and Asian American neighborhoods. This interview article highlights community-based art projects led by a grassroots organization, the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco (CCC), to help understand Chinatown's stories as shared and lived by the community during a challenging time. Hoi Leung, CCC's chief curator, explained how the organization mobilized art to share diverse local stories, celebrate a sense of belonging, and raise public awareness about racial justice issues within the communities it serves. To counter socially constructed assumptions about Chinatown and its residents, CCC actively develops cross-sector partnerships to centralize underrepresented voices through community-based arts and projects.

KEYWORDS: arts, Contemporary Asian American art, community-based art, art education, Anti-Asian racism, non-profit organization, Chinatown

Background

In the previous two years, the anti-Asian racism amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly disruptive for Chinatown communities in the United States. Chinatowns, as sites with predominant Asian populations, quickly became public spaces where overt racism takes place. The Chinatown communities not only struggled with a loss of foot traffic and severe economic downturn amidst lockdowns, as did the rest of the city, but additionally they faced a tremendous surge in incidents related to racial discrimination.¹ The rapid rise in verbal abuse and physical assaults directed at people of Asian origins, especially women and

¹ Due to the public's biased association between Asian Americans and COVID-19, San Francisco Chinatown experienced a sharp decrease in visitors even before the city had the first confirmed case of the disease (Ho, 2020). Furthermore, Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council and Chinese for Affirmative Action have launched an online reporting website, STOP AAPI Hate, to record coronavirus-driven discrimination on March 19, 2020. The center has received 3,795 reported cases in less than a year (Jeung et al., 2021).

the elderly (Jeung, Horse, Popovic & Lim, 2021), unveiled that racism and xenophobia are still deeply embedded in our society. While the country has come a long way in moving towards racial equality with the ongoing efforts of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) groups and activists, discrimination and bias against minorities based on race and ethnic origin remain a reality.

Reflecting on historical events such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and Executive Order 9066 (Internment of Japanese Americans), the repeating cycle of anti-Asian sentiment and violence continues to impact people of Asian descent. In response to past and present systematic exclusion, grassroots organizations in Chinatowns have always played crucial roles in delivering services and providing public support to the neighborhoods they serve. During the rise of the Asian American movement in the 1960s to 1970s, Asian American activists, artists, writers, and students established a range of non-profit organizations that combined visual arts and community-based activism to lay the groundwork for the formation of Asian American identity and culture while attaining greater political power (Machida, 2008, p. 27). According to Machida (2008), these community-based arts and cultural organizations helped communicate messages regarding the pursuit of equality and justice for all to a broader audience while nurturing interracial solidarity amongst Asians and other communities of color. The non-profit sector has actively utilized community resources as a “countervailing power” (Wei, 1993, p. 10) to combat racial, political, and economic inequalities in the wake of calls for social justice. For instance, the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco (CCC), a non-profit art organization, emerged in the early 1960s at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was triggering an increase of awareness towards the pursuit of equality, and it quickly evolved into a counter-institution built to resist the dominant narrative that stigmatized the Asian immigrant communities as unassimilable foreigners.

This particular political context influenced the CCC’s earlier mission: “to present and promote Chinese culture to an ever-expanding audience both here in the U.S. and internationally” (CCC, About). Initially, CCC focused on promoting contemporary artworks to break down the orientalized perception of Asian culture as archaic and traditions as static. Fast-forward to 2009, the organization has continued evolving and expanding its programs to align with its current mission of “elevating underserved communities and giving voice to equality through education and contemporary art” (CCC, About). Thus, the organization’s primary goal has shifted from bridging the East and West to community-centered activities.

I (Bao) was working on a research project seeking to understand how grassroots organizations in Chinatowns operationalize the arts

to serve the community, and I have identified the CCC as a perfect match for a pilot study. The following interview featuring Hoi Leung, the chief curator at CCC, was originally performed as part of my qualitative data collection for the study. During the conversation, Leung shared her experience of curating community-based art projects in San Francisco’s Chinatown. The dialogue also sheds light on how CCC serves as a versatile platform for community expression and advocates for racial justice work through the lens of art and art education across the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

The Interview²

Xiaoxiao: Hi, Hoi. Could you tell me more about your work as a curator at CCC?

Hoi: Sure. I learned everything I know about curation by being in the community. So I came from being an artist undergrad, and it’s beginning to work at CCC that I was taking on the role of being a curator. What has been really amazing is to see how the community works, and in some ways, it has been very creative, resilient, and grassroots, so I take those into consideration in my curation.

Xiaoxiao: Thanks for sharing that. I know that CCC places Chinese and Chinese American contemporary art to the center of the stage, of which it is a genre less exhibited in mega museums. What is the significance of this artistic choice?

Hoi: The organization champions the use of contemporary art because art must be relevant, so presenting contemporary art is a direct way to support the voices coming out today. Additionally, contemporary art is meant to make people ask questions. We give our audiences full credit to contribute their ideas, interpret the work, or ask appropriate questions to understand the arts. We often get a lot of great insights by reaching out to our audiences and having conversations with them; many unknown possibilities come up this way.

Xiaoxiao: The lockdown situation probably has changed the way you interact or connect with audiences, as well as the way you share artworks. How did your organization adapt to the pandemic?

Hoi: Yeah. You can see the efforts of the organization being more physically present outside of the gallery space. A lot of my recent work reflects that adjustment: whether it is to have Chinatown stories into the gallery, or the other way around. Eventually, it is about

² The interview was recorded and conducted via Zoom Meetings on March 25th, 2021. The transcription is edited and rearranged for readability; for instance, filler words including “like”, “you know”, “just”, “um” and “uh” were taken off from quotes for clarity and consistency without changing their original meaning.

making arts available in common places and in processes that are more permeating or porous within one another.

Xiaoxiao: I can see how these adjustments may be an extension of your organization's long-term project, *Museum Without Walls*. What was your goal for introducing this initiative in the first place?

Hoi: *The Museum Without Walls* project was an initiative with a simple concept of having art in public spaces. We wanted to turn everyday spaces into artistic venues while using underutilized spaces for community goods. This initiative evolves into a community strategy, especially now during the COVID-19 pandemic. We see the strategy being used outside of CCC by all sorts of organizations. For instance, local businesses and other types of nonprofits are able to see the value of placing art in public spaces and they are integrating the arts into the way of survival. With these cross-sectors and community-level changes, we can say that the organization really accomplished the goals of *Museum Without Walls*. After all, the most critical part of the initiative is seeing how the community is accepting the idea in recent years.

Xiaoxiao: That's a significant accomplishment. It seems "the way of survival" speaks to the San Francisco Chinatown today, especially considering the economic downturn, public health crisis and gentrification that continue to trouble the community. In your opinion, how does art play a role in making changes or building the community?

Hoi: I'll use our most recent project, *Art, Culture, and Belonging in Chinatown and Manilatown*³, to address that question. The project has a twofold purpose: first, the project elevates and makes visible

3 *Art, Culture, and Belonging in Chinatown and Manilatown* is a year-long community engagement project that studies the roles of arts and culture in shaping people's sense of belonging in San Francisco Chinatown. During the first half year of 2020, the CCC and Chinatown Arts and Culture Coalition distributed a survey, "Story of Belonging," in the community to collect stories of art, culture, and belonging in San Francisco Chinatown. Individuals who live, work, or visit the neighborhood were invited to fill out the survey. A digital version of the questionnaire was also circulated on the organization's social media platforms. The responses collected from this process became source materials that informed three derivative artworks created by Christine Wong Yap: 1) a comic book featuring real S.F. Chinatown workers and residents' stories on belonging, 2) a text-based public artwork, installed at a local business storefront consisting of community members' wishes and messages for Chinatown amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and 3) a storefront installation at a community art space, accompanied by illustrated bilingual maps for the public to engage in self-guided Walking Tour of Belonging in S. F. Chinatown. Ultimately, the project has evolved into an activist response to counter the xenophobic hate against Asian communities unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic. By centering individual and collective sense of belonging in Chinatown, the project provided a culturally affirming space to celebrate personal histories, experiences, and identities in the community.

Chinatown's arts and culture assets through storytelling. Telling stories is a very accessible and approachable way to dive into a much deeper conversation that is ingrained in the Asian American experience. Second, the project highlights the idea of belonging. I worked on the project with a visual artist, Christine Wong Yap, whose roots are in the San Francisco Bay Area.

We (CCC) knew in the beginning that we needed to introduce the artist early and that we would be there every step of the way to assist the artist as she worked with different organizations and the general public. In essence, the project is one completed program, but we also see that as a meaningful beginning that will connect us with many more different partnerships that can also engage the same process and model to see how artists can play significant roles in the community, especially during times of crisis. We planned the project in 2019 before the pandemic happened. The execution part became a lot more challenging because of the lockdown situation and lack of connection among people. However, the artist has been working as a mediator to keep a sense of engagement and hope in the process of collecting stories and source materials. When it comes to the point where we are ready to show the projects, we want to create something distributable. As a result, we opt for a comic zine book for the final presentation of the Belonging project.



Figure 1. Christine Wong Yap (on the left) is sharing the *Art, Culture, and Belonging in Chinatown and Manila-town* project installed at the 41 Ross Gallery with two passersby. Image courtesy of the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco.

We are also using 41 Ross, a gallery space em-bedded in community alleyways, to provide a passersby experience of the project through store-front installations (see Figure 1). Visitors were able to engage with the arts independently, so these alternative ways of sharing arts worked well with social distancing protocols. More importantly, the project outcomes offered a side of Chinatown that is centered on human stories rather than just visuals or objects.

Xiaoxiao: I think the project worked out smoothly to address the temporary closure of the gallery through creating public accessible installations, free copies of books, and Instagram interactions. Speaking of bringing art into public spaces and involving people in conversations inspired by the arts, what is your general approach to community engagement or community-based art programming?

Hoi: We try to maintain our materials, both offline and online, with 80 to 100 percent bilingual. I consider language as the first point of access. If monolingual immigrant elders were to walk into any museum in San Francisco, they would see right in front of their faces if the organization served their language. We want to make this point of access clear. Secondly, as I mentioned about the idea of Museum Without Walls, it is really about bringing the art into unexpected everyday spaces without compromising the art. In doing so, we want to challenge all audiences to think critically through the arts. On top of that, we also market our projects through community partners, outdoor installations, ethnic newspapers and media stations. We adopt culturally appropriate marketing strategies when creating posters and flyers to make the message straightforward to target audiences. Lastly, we would bring out special events where dedicated staff members can really interact with audiences. It is always a challenge for any arts organization to advocate for its value and mission, but we are getting there.

Xiaoxiao: Yes, meaningful community engagement would require multiple points of access at various stages. Have you heard any comments or feedback from community members regarding the belonging project?

Hoi: Folks were really happy about it, and my colleagues have located three slots in the community to share the comic book and install the map of belonging that Christine created. We have people coming into the gallery to get more copies of the book, and they shared with us that the comic zine was popular in their SRO (single room occupancy).⁴

4 Most housing options in Chinatown are Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels, in which rooms fit in a bed and a small desk. Residents only have access to communal kitchens and bathrooms shared with multiple units. SROs were designed for transitional stays in the 1990s, but at present, they are one of the last affordable housing resorts for more than 380 families in Chinatown, including 532 children under 18 years of age

We also distributed many books to partnering organizations, and people appreciate the stories that remind them of Chinatown. We found out through the project that for people who are not physical-ly in Chinatown, the book has evoked a sense of place or nostalgia in them. The feeling of belonging is ingrained into their memory and their sense of home. What we want to accomplish here is to understand what makes Chinatown so special and wonderful to people, and our job is to help articulate and make visible the core values of the place that ties the community.

Xiaoxiao: Could you tell me more about how the Art, Culture, and Belonging in Chinatown and Manilatown project came into shape initially? Did CCC come up with the concept first, and then you reach out to the artist, or was it the other way around?

Hoi: It was a little bit of both, and that's happening with every project we do. We always start with our project by curating with the artists and the partners to determine the rules of engagement. We know that there have been a lot of talks in Chinatown about different assets in the community. In the planning process, we approached the artist, knowing that Christine has been delving into the idea of belonging and community-engaged social practices for a long time. Therefore, it was a perfect marriage for the organization and the artist to put together the project.

Xiaoxiao: Thanks for the explanation. Now that you've mentioned community-based assets a couple of times, what are some of the assets you've identified in Chinatown?

Hoi: I think Chinatown has this relentless sense of care for the community. You see Chinatown through different stages in history where we are on its facade, which looks very static. People of Asian descent, who grew up in the U.S. and visited Chinatown, may feel the place looks flashy at first glance. However, the more one digs into the reason why Chinatown looks the way it does; one would find that it was actually an ingenious idea to keep it around and to allow it to survive at a very critical time during the earthquake.⁵ If you flip the coin to the other side, the typical outlook of Chinatown is indeed a source of power. I see Chinatown today not feeling disempowered, but I feel very inspired that it was able to come up with such

5 After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and sequential fire, most Chinatown buildings were burned into ashes. When the Chinese Exclusion Act was made permanent in 1902, the anti-Chinese sentiment was at its peak. There were public proposals in the city that suggested the removal of the ethnic neighborhood conveniently with the natural disaster. A news report titled "Let us have no more Chinatowns in our cities," published in the Oakland Enquirer (1906), used discriminatory words to describe the ethnic enclave as a "plague spot" and the residents as "lower and vicious classes of Orientals".

a brilliant survival strategy. The idea of Chinatown as a tourist destination has also been adopted all over the United States. I'll say there are slight side effects of doing so, but what I see is power at the very heart of it.

At the same time, it was also a community heavily underserved by the local governments and agencies; that is why it has so many excellent social services around that are unparalleled with what the state provides. I consider that as an incredible cultural resource. It is a sense of care for its people and for the neighborhood. And you see that sort of theme manifesting in every sector of the neighborhood, from the businesses to artists, cultural bearers, and practitioners.

Xiaoxiao: Absolutely. Upon reading the comic book that Christine created, I can see Chinatown is a very close-knit community. The community contributors of the book also mentioned how local restaurants, architectures, organizations, art, and cultural sites make them feel a sense of belonging. And these, of course, also translate into community assets. That leads to my next question, what do you see as the value of art and art education in Chinatown?

Hoi: That's a tough one. Okay. There are so many complex issues in the world, and art is one of the most brilliant tools we can have to understand complex things because it allows us to ask endless questions. When we think about designing community-based projects, urban planning, activism, or policymaking that is not top-down, it meets that process of critical thinking. The other side about art is that people are getting on to the critical race issues at times, and the level of feeling disconnected, threatened, or unsafe is especially intense. Art is one of the best ways to build humanities and encourage empathy amongst different people. It is an integral part of building your voice and allows you to see other people as people. That is why every neighborhood in every community needs artists as support systems. Without art as a resource in the community, the relationships may be less stable (see Figure 2).

Xiaoxiao: Yes. Especially at present with murders of Black bodies and thousands of reported hate incidents against Asian people, these kinds of traumatic experiences constantly remind us about how many more miles we still have to go to progress toward equality. But at least we have art as something hopeful to help us advocate and imagine that future. How's your organization coping with the anti-Asian racism? Do you talk about it in the group?

Hoi: Yeah, everyone in the team has a different background with being treated in different ways coming into the country. We're always very supportive of one another, and we're lucky to be surrounded by an organization that is literally at the forefront of what they do. We

feel supported and we have the resources to make the space to talk about these things. And right now, we have been a bit more direct about it. But at the core, we just want people to understand that they are being centered, focused, and highlighted.



Figure 2. Community members reading bilingual posters on Black Lives Matter and racial solidarity. The bulletin board showcases public submissions of artwork and related bilingual resources. Image courtesy of the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco.

Then we think about how we can advocate for these issues in the different spaces we're in. AAPI communities face unique challenges in the struggle for racial justice (i.e. the model minority myth) and are left out of both mainstream and BIPOC conversations. In our neighborhood and nationally, we believe AAPI voices are crucial in advocating for all marginalized communities. Anti-Asian hate is nothing new, and it's reflective of a damaging, dominant attitude towards Asian people at-large, and our work is about shaping a narrative that counters white supremacist systems. We do so by supporting artists of diverse voices and allowing them a platform to be unapologetically who they are. Especially during times of crisis and trauma, the media can portray a homogenized or binary way of thinking that neglects different sorts of experiences that also existed and are valid.

I also think the problem is always there in the current state, people

have their misunderstandings. We're called the Chinese Culture Center, and that's literally our name regardless of what we do. Occasionally, we have people coming in to say that "this is not Chinese culture" or "that's not what I'm expecting" and things like that (see Figure 3). If people can open their minds to different sets of experiences, they will understand that culture is never static. There exist a plurality of stories out there and I think they all should be represented. Reclaiming and shaping our own narratives is a liberating process.



Figure 3. A group of children learning about the arts through artworks on view in CCC's gallery. Image courtesy of the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco.

Xiaoxiao: There are indeed expectations or stereotypes that people might have toward a particular culture or a group. It's like you can only be one thing, but not the other. However, in reality, there are multiple ways of being Chinese or American. The narratives that show diverse possibilities of people or the intersections of identities just don't get across to the public very often. The reduction of people to stereotypes continues to be a socially constructed tactic to separate the self and the other while perpetuating systemic racism. After all, there is a lack of space that facilitates this kind of conversation, so I think CCC is making a lot of effort in telling different groups' stories through what you do with the arts.

Hoi: Thank you for saying that. What you highlighted here is important because it's hard to enter the discussion of race. How do we begin this conversation? I think, especially now, we need more spaces to gather diverse communities to dialogue on equity (see Figure 4). Having some kind of small opening up to let different

communities occur is very important, as it provides an entryway into understanding the larger, wider landscape of issues related to people of color in this country. I think we really need that level of educating the community.



Figure 4. Hoi Leung (on the left) and Vida Kuang (on the right) pose with murals created during "Share the Square" Art Action Day in Solidarity with Black Lives Matter in San Francisco Chinatown. June 20, 2020. Image courtesy of the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco.

Xiaoxiao: So, with this being said, if you were to tell stories about Chinatown, what kind of stories would that be?

Hoi: Yeah, I would talk about its history of ingenuity. Like, there were a lot of moments where I couldn't help thinking this is so brilliant and smart as I work in the community. While the Bay Area has a reputation for tech companies in Silicon Valley, the smartest and most innovative processes and strategies actually came out of community building and grassroots organizing. I think that's the story I'd like to tell and that's the one thing that I've always been inspired by.

Xiaoxiao: Thank you so much for your time this morning. That was very informative and inspiring.

Hoi: Sure, keep us posted on how your project is going. Let me know how we can support your research and study. We're reachable!

Conclusions

One key takeaway from Leung's curatorial practice was that placing the community at the center is pivotal to keeping the organization and the art it offers relevant to the people. Through CCC's art programs, specifically the project that investigated belonging and local assets, it became clear that meaningful public engagement involves integrating accessible content, spaces, and a fully facilitated participation process. By using a participatory decision-making approach in its community-based programs, CCC was able to tailor its services to meet the community's changing needs.

In summary, the interview offered a glimpse into how CCC pioneered practices of making art more accessible and relevant to the community's everyday life. Through visual art and community-based activities, CCC's approach is geared toward developing inclusive and multifaceted narratives to centralize underrepresented voices. Acknowledging the dynamic and complex nature of Chinatown's stories, combined with ongoing efforts to end racial discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Americans, the proactive community arts led by CCC and similar organizations aid in tearing down stigmatized portrayals of ethnic groups as we build towards social justice for all in the future.

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