

Life on the Street: Ethnographic Moments in Chinatown Wet Market

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Introduction

Cities are eternal attractions to many, and New York City is one of the most alluring metropolitans. Many come to New York City with the hope of finding the most dazzling and beautiful parts of an urban area. New York City defines what a global city is. It juxtaposes the homeless and the billionaire, the beauty and the ugly, and the east and the west. Every day, visitors from around the world would visit Chinatown hoping to find a historical neighborhood that is so exotic, Chinese, and alienated from their own lives. To name a few visitors' favorite contents for a photo:

- The alive crabs fighting with each other in the buckets in the seafood stores
- Durians on the fruit stalls
- Lanterns hanging between the buildings
- The storefronts of souvenir stores

Very few of the visitors focus on the people of Chinatown: the restaurant workers who always smoke in the corner, the fruit vendor who is crippled, the grocery owner who stars on the street as if he is waiting for an old friend to come in. There are two Chinatowns, the one on Tripadvisor or Lonely Planet, and where actual people live and struggle to survive on the street.

Here is a paragraph of description of Chinatown on Lonely Planet's website:

"A walk through Manhattan's most colorful, cramped neighborhood is never the same, no matter how many times you hit the pavement. Peek inside temples and exotic storefronts. Catch the whiff of ripe

persimmons, hear the clacking of mah-jongg tiles on makeshift tables, eye dangling duck roasts swinging in store windows and shop for anything from rice-paper lanterns and 'faux-lex' watches to tire irons and a pound of pressed nutmeg. America's largest congregation of Chinese immigrants is your oyster." (Lonely Planet, 2021)

For visitors who follow Lonely Planet's advice, Chinatown is featured as an ethnic ghetto, a neighborhood that can satisfy one's curiosity about the exotic lifestyles of the Chinese (mah-jongg, eye dangling duck, 'faux-lex watches'...). Not to mention the fact that Lower Manhattan Chinatown has no longer been the largest congregation of Chinese immigrants—Flushing, Queens and Sunset Park, Brooklyn both have a larger Chinese population than Lower Manhattan. (Homeland Security, 2012)

The Chinatown in Lonely Planet is more of an imaginary and timely figure that feeds the curious gaze of the tourists.

While tourist magazine tries to turn Chinatown into a flattened figure of tourist attraction to an outsider. This essay attempts to provide another look at a dysnified neighborhood with a misunderstood market structure. Chinatown's wet market setting means that the vendors resemble dendrites of a nerve a cell, extending from core groups with information and receiving impulses from its surrounding environment 24-7. Vendors who work in the Chinatown wet market spend most of their time on the street. Yet, I argue that vending is only part of their life on the street. As individuals and wet market participants simultaneously, they are subject to physical pain, practical difficulties, state surveillance, street violence, and nostalgia. I will also argue that the wet market setting also

means that no vendor stands alone. Occasionally, vendors collaborate and help each other in onerous and anguish times.

This chapter will feature three ethnographic moments in the Chinatown wet market. The three moments reveal the Chinatown community's daily intransigence to urban planning that tries to dysnify, stifle, and compartmentalize Chinatown. In Part I, I will review a day of Sister Jin, a fruit stall owner who works all year round, capturing the latest market dynamics to keep her in business. In Part II, I will walk with a former urban planner and community leader Wellington Chen, exploring Chinatown and Civic Center's entangled relations. In Part III, I will describe the interdependent relations between licensed and unlicensed vendors through a couple's story.

Ethnographic Moments

In the 1950s, cultural anthropologists shifted their focus from describing the "salvage" in museum collections to establishing anthropology as a systematic discipline that studies the ethnographic presence of isolated "primitive" people. (Redfield and Friedmann, 2006 p.vii) Robert Redfield, in especially, challenged that tradition that isolates "primitive community" from a wider world. His research in a village in Mesoamerica indicates that it is not a static, isolated community but rather local, traditional cultures that engage and are within the influence sphere of a complex urban culture. (Redfield and Friedmann, 2006 p.vii) Showing in their correspondence, Friedmann adds to Redfield's conceptualization by suggesting the adaptation of an interdisciplinary approach and drawing on historical, philosophical, and other kinds of research in peasantry study. (Redfield and Friedmann, 2006 p.viii) Redfield and Friedmann are interested in the peasants' world views and "everyday

philosophy." Redfield's methodology is to put the local community back into their everyday experience instead of judging them from the stand of point of a Westerner. Friedmann agrees with this approach and emphasizes how it helps to understand peasants' expression of precariousness and commented that:

"From these results, a broad understanding of every human phenomenon, a tendency to see something plausible in every human weakness. It also helps to explain a certain restraint in everyday behavior, particularly remarkable in a region where the passions are naturally fierce: people speak little and what they say is measured and precise; even when pointing to the hopelessness of their position, there is little tendency toward self-pity or playing upon the pity of the visitor." (Redfield and Friedmann p.11)

The ethnographic moments of Italian peasants in Redfield's "La Miseria" also put their narratives against the authorities and explore peasants' response to state's rhetoric and exploitation in a form of a conspiracy of silence. (Redfield and Friedmann p.15) Thus, depicting peasants' everyday life helps us conceptualize their relation to a broader world. From a moment in their life, the anthropologist could gain insights into how they decide to do what they do. Moreover, their everyday modes of living--how they work, engage with each other, talk about their work and their concerns--reveal their relation to a more extensive infrastructure of ideas and practices.

In Lower Manhattan Chinatown wet market, I study the moments of their lives. The ethnographic moments I found them in will help us understand them as human subjects living not by years or

months or days, but by moments. Their livelihood in the wet market precisely depends on their sensitivity to every moment in time, every moment they encounter the state, and every moment they engage with each other.

Moments in Time

Let us familiarize ourselves with the layout of the wet market in Chinatown first. The wet market in Chinatown comprises three styles of vending: the licensed vendors who vend on a mobile cart, the unlicensed vendors who rent a storefront and operate, and the unlicensed vendors who built their stalls with cardboards and planks of wood at street corners. While each vendor seems independent, they relate to each other like polyps on the same coral reef, sharing distributors, information, and taking care of each other.

Urban streets are no easy working environment. Chinatown wet market worker is undoubtedly among the most hardworking and onerous jobs one can find in New York City. Spending over 12 hours a day on the street, their days are long and painstaking. Sister Jin has been selling fruits for over 20 years on the same street in Chinatown. She immigrated from Toishan, China, and married a Vietnamese man who already had 4 kids from the previous marriage. She doesn't speak much English, but she can pronounce "Columbia University," where 2 of the kids went for medical school. She showed me a family photo of her, her husband, and two boys. Although she is the stepmother, she is very proud of them. In the photo, she dressed appropriately, but her wrinkled face and dumpy stature expose her hard work. The strain in a long term of years has told severely on her health. She is a bit crippled and couldn't stand for a long time. Most of the day, she sits on a special highchair as tall as the stall so she

can oversee her workers. On the day we met, I was doing my routine observation right next to her stall. One customer mistook me as a stall worker and asked me where the plastic bags were. I quickly grabbed one behind the stall, and she immediately paid me. I handed in the money to the owner, and she looked me in my eyes and said in Mandarin with a Toishan accent: "Thank you, little sister." Since then, I became an unofficial helper on her team, "a warm-hearted little sister who is doing community service as schoolwork," as she introduced me to her coworkers. "Interning" for Sister Jin helps me visualize a day of a wet market worker in Chinatown.

Vendors like Sister Jin have their street economic strategies. Sister Jin is a licensed vendor who owns 9 mobile carts. Thus, her stall blocks one side of the street. The most attractive and seasonal fruits occupy the street corner adjacent to Canal Street, the major traffic artery of Chinatown. Fruits that can be found all year round, such as apples, pears, and oranges, are less popular and are stacked by the end of the stall. The layout of her stall makes sure that a customer can find a variety of fruits as they walk along the street. The busy commuters and visitors would be attracted by the most time-sensitive and expensive seasonal fruits at the bustling traffic intersection. The seniors who live in Chinatown are more price-sensitive than the commuters and visitors. They would rather avoid the populated Canal Street and enter Sister Jin's stall from the other end where yearlong and discount fruits can be found. The placing of the fruits shows the owner's promotional strategy. Based on their observation of who purchases what and when they purchase it, the owner designs the layout of their stall accordingly.

Moreover, the layout and the price are subject to change every minute. I always found it difficult to tell my friends how much some fruit on a particular day was. Even on an average, sunny day, peach

can be worth 2 dollars in the morning and 1.5 dollars at night. In a few days, its price will drop to 0.5 dollars. The reasoning behind the practice is that the vendors would change prices according to the condition of the fruits. Size, texture, sweetness, locality, and freshness are critical to the retailing price of fruit. For example, when Sister Jin's team was on a water break, she opened a watermelon and shared it with the team. When she realized the watermelon was not as watery as she expected, she lowered the price immediately. "They [the watermelons] need to go as soon as possible...the longer I store them, the worse they taste. By the end of the week, they will be tasteless and valueless," Sister Jin explained.

A wet market setting typically means vendors do not have access to refrigerators. Vendors will have to pay for refrigerated storage for the leftovers of the day. Thus, for owners like Sister Jin, it's crucial to predict the daily and weekly popularity. If the expecting profit does not make up for the storage fee, she will be losing money.

Chinatown wet market vendors are constantly trying to minimize labor costs. Compared to other costs, labor costs comprise a small part of the total cost. Sister Jin has two long-term helpers and two part-time workers who transport products from the storage to the stall using pushcarts. Her stepdaughters, Dora and Emily, would join the team after school and on weekends. She also has herself—there isn't one day I didn't see her present at the stall. Although Sister Jin is the stall owner, she is still working class. She owns enough to send two kids to medical school, which does not put her in a better working environment or suggests working fewer hours.

As I spent more and more time with the vendors, I realized that many of them walked a similar path. They came to New York City as undocumented immigrants. They worked for their relatives or friends for the first few years, days and nights, to pay their debts to the snakeheads. Once they are debtless, they start saving up and looking to legitimize their legal status. In another year or two, they started having kids and saving up for their future education. The first generations themselves do not have a lot of time for themselves. Sister Jin began to set up on the street at 8:30 am. She only eats two loaves of bread a day, one at 11 am and another at 4 pm. Both times are earlier than mealtime, so she can finish her meal cursory and start attending to customers who walk out of the office for lunch.

Besides self-employment, another way to save up labor costs is to hire acquaintances. Many workers are the owner's family members, relatives, or countrymen. Providing a job for a newly immigrated fellow countryman is both a gesture of benevolence and a tactic to suppress the cost. The newcomers, many of whom are undocumented, cannot negotiate the wage with their boss and take it as given. The undocumented workers in Chinatown wet market are vulnerable and often suffer from sprains and strains. Repetitive and arduous work has torn up their bodies. Many vendors and workers I talk to suffer from joint pains and muscular injuries. Once, a worker of Sister Jin's had his right hand cramped heavily and dropped the fruits he was triggering to the ground. Sister Jin asked him what happened, and the man said he's felt a burning pain in his palm. I checked his hand and helped him stretch the muscles. As soon as he felt a little better, he returned to work. I told him that he should find a doctor, and I heard him murmur: "But there is no time to take a rest..." (Field note p. 10). Sister Jin didn't offer the man a day off the entire time. Including Sister Jin, these wet market workers do not have time to rest. If Sister Jin does not open, her workers will find another daily job. If she stays out

of business for more than a week, she will lose track of the latest market dynamics. Her sensitivity to costs, customer needs, and product quality will soon go stale. She opens 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, and only takes 1 day off on Lunar New Year's Eve. There is no time to rest for Sister Jin and everyone because their stall's survival depends on their uninterrupted daily presence in the community.

Sister Jin's stall resembles many others in Chinatown. Together, they comprise the Chinatown wet market, a marketplace assemblage that supplies fresh fruits, vegetables, seafood, and meats to the Chinatown community a wider world. Sister Jin's stall serves mostly individual customers; some vendors primarily serve restaurants in Chinatown or other neighborhoods. The hustle and bustle streets of Chinatown are their battlefields for livelihood. Many of them work in the wet market because there aren't many jobs for an immigrant who does not speak English and has a limited skill set. The wet market helps them put down their roots in an urban environment. However, working in a wet market also means long working hours and low pay. A few workers told me that they receive about 80 dollars a day, a wage that is way lower than the minimum wage of New York City. I provided compensation for interviewees at 20 dollars per hour. Yet, none of my coworkers has a complete hour to take the interview. They are constantly working on various jobs: attending customers, weighing fruits, receiving and organizing products on the stall, opening umbrellas when it's sunny, installing lights when it gets dark... Leisure time is a precious resource for everyone working on the street.

Moments Under Surveillance

Another element that overwhelms the Chinatown community is state presence. Neighboring the Civic Center, Chinatown has been receiving more and more surveillance from the state. However, although surveillance does not physically harm the community, it is slowly killing Chinatown and its vitality in the long run for the local community members. Wellington Chen is the first informant who systematically reviews this issue. After many walks with him in Chinatown, he showed me the moments under surveillance in this community.

Wellington has a rich experience working with the Chinese community in New York City. Born in Taiwan and grew up in Singapore, Hongkong, and Brazil. His dad died of a shipwreck when he was young. His mom took him and his younger brother to Brazil and New York City. He attended high school in NYC and trained to be an architect. He worked as a city planner for many years. He was also the first Asian American to serve as a Commissioner on the New York City Board of Standards and Appeals. He works as the Executive Director of Chinatown Partnership and Chinatown Business Improvement District. He also sits on the board for several non-profits, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Queens Economic Development Corporation, and Asian American/ Asian Research Institute. In addition, he served on the board of trustees for the City University of New York for many years.

Wellington spoke of his mom a lot. Besides being a mother, she was a nurse, a feminist, and an activist. She advocated for women's rights since she was young. His mom cares about hygiene a lot, so she influenced Wellington to be detail-oriented and tidy. In the annual report of Chinatown Partnership, it was clear that cleaning the streets and removing graffiti were two core missions of the

crew. Wellington's family education led him to focus on infrastructure rather than service and communication. In doing his job, it was apparent to me that he only interferes with the business owners when he must. His focus has always been on improving the public spaces, not the private ones. The tragedy of the commons is very present in his daily work: many residents and business owners dispose of garbage at the public corners so they can save the garbage collecting fee. It would then be Chinatown BID's burden to clean up the corners and put them into garbage bags so the city garbage team can collect them.

We had a few conversations about the layout of Chinatown. Wellington believes that the most potent problem with Chinatown and its vitality is the existing urban planning. First, the streets are old, narrow, lacking adequate infrastructures such as sewage systems, signposts, and night lights. For example, only one small signpost directs people to Chinatown from the Brooklyn City Hall subway station, and there is none from the Canal St. subway station. Inside the Canal St. station, a mosaic collage decoration says "华埠" or "Chinatown" in Chinese, but I didn't find any sign that says Chinatown in English, even though 4 out of 6 exist are at the entrance of Chinatown. If one comes out of the subway, it would be unclear where Chinatown is, even though it is a few blocks away. Lack of signs leads to it makes Chinatown invisible to many visitors. Besides lack of signs, the federal and municipal buildings create visual barricades and block Chinatown from pedestrians.

When people walk on urban streets, they tend to see new, tall buildings within their sight. Historical buildings are much smaller in scale. If we look at the map of Chinatown, it is unclear that Chinatown

navigating away to Chinatown. Foot traffic to Chinatown would decrease accordingly. In Wellington's opinion, Chinatown cannot expand to the south of it if the federal buildings remain in their positions.

Figure 2. A Look of the Civic Center on Chinatown Street



The grey building in the back is the Louis J. Lefkowitz State Office Building, home to Manhattan Marriage Bureau and New York Supreme Court.

Suppose one tries to list the federal buildings next to Chinatown. In that case, one will find every single bureau an illegal immigrant wants to avoid: the Department of Homeland Security, the Social Security Administration, the office of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Internal Revenue Service, the New York City Health Department, and multiple courthouses and the detention centers attaching to them. These buildings post visual blockage of

Chinatown and resemble the systematic and structural barriers that an immigrant needs to deal with daily.

The pressure of living under bureaucracy is a significant part of Chinatown vendors' configuration of life. It's one of their primary concerns to avoid fines. In my conversation with Alice, a female tea shop owner in her 40s, she mentioned that she follows every single COVID protocol required by the city and the State because an official from the Department of Building publicly scolded and warned vendors on her street to follow all the protocols even though shop owners on other parts of the city never took them seriously. Alice felt embarrassed by such a visibly public education if not humiliation. Like Alice, all vendors I visited in Chinatown knew precisely which time of the year their scales would be inspected, how much they would be fined if they provided undegradable plastic bags, or how much they would be fined if they broke one of the COVID protocols. People are trained to be sensitive and cautious of Chinatown's rules, norms, and regulations. For them, official presence is part of their business, too. The Civic Center is the hub for thousands of government workers, and Chinatown is their most convenient place for lunch. It is nothing surprising for the vendors to serve a customer one day and find them with inspection forms and tickets at the front of the store the next day. Chinatown and the Civic Center are more entangled than it appears to be.

Besides the Civic Center's physical and symbolic encroachment of Chinatown, people working for the Civic Center have more parking spaces than the Chinatown community members do. Jingrong is a grocery owner in his early 60s. Running a small grocery for over 15 years, he gets used to hiring pushcart men to unload his products from the distributor's truck to his store. His store locates on a

narrow one-way street with parking spaces on both sides. In the ideal situation, the truck would park at the parking slot right in front of his store so he can directly unload the product from the truck to his basement. However, that slot is often occupied by a vehicle with a special parking permit that says "state/city official parking." Once, Jingrong found a police car parking in front of his store for over 48 hours and he had no means to complain. Jingrong's distributors can only park on another street or park illegally and have workers deliver products from the truck to his store. For decades it's been a rule that certain officials who work in the Civic Center can park on Chinatown streets with no charge and no time limit. (Field notes, p.13)

A study funded by the city, *Chinatown Street Revitalization* (1976), confirms that residents do not contribute significantly to chronic parking congestion. The report concludes that the congestion is more of heavy tourist, shopper traffic, daylong truck movements. The city believes that congestion results from the scarcity of parking space. However, based on my field research, the problem is tourists', shoppers', and truckers' lack of access to street parking since court and police officials can park on all streets in Chinatown at no charge. Wellington is aware of such a problem and has worked with the Department of Transportation to solve it. He proposed that the public officials take public transportation to work twice a week, but the Department of Transportation turned down his proposal. The power asymmetry between the Civic Center and Chinatown is tremendous. The Civic Center and Chinatown are not two unrelated neighborhoods of New York City.

Over time, Chinatown has been a sub-neighborhood that serves the needs of the Civic Center and the rest of the city. An important timing that signifies the recession of Chinatown is 911. I was shocked

when I found out that Chinatown is less than 15 minutes walk from Ground Zero. The media rarely discuss 9/11's impacts on this neighborhood over the years. Right after 9/11, Chinatown south of Canal Street was in the "frozen zone," in which all vehicle and non-residential pedestrian traffic was prohibited. For nearly two months, Chinatown residents and businesses were effectively isolated by the loss of telephone service. (MOCA, 2021)

Local to Manhattan Chinatown, the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) interviewed 30 individuals living and working in Manhattan's Chinatown starting in 2003. (MOCA, 2021) For example, Jack Qin, an owner by then, reported that his business had been influenced after 9/11 because fewer visitors visited Chinatown. (MOCA, 2021) Wing Ma, a landowner, recalls that all her tenants moved out gradually, and her building was vacant for more than twenty months. By the time she was interviewed in 2003, she only had 60 percent of her building rent. (MOCA, 2021) In my field research, I encountered two Chinese American 9/11 survivors who started their businesses, one restaurant, and one retail tea shop in Chinatown because they wanted to help with their recovery. Jingrong, the grocery owner I mentioned earlier, says he lost access to his store for 3 months and waited another 3 months to open it because he worried about air pollution. He needed time to raise money for a rising insurance premium. Steven Wong, a long-time volunteer and later a community leader, lost two of his coworkers in 9/11. He volunteered in Chinatown and didn't go to work, so he survived. After 9/11, he volunteered with the Red Cross and FEMA to clean up "Ground Zero" but soon suffered from severe pulmonary fibrosis due to a lack of personal protection equipment. (Field notes p.46, and Worldjournal_US, 2021)

Besides the loss of foot traffic, parachuting shop occupancy, rising insurance cost, and long-term health influence, 9/11 further exposes Chinatown to state surveillance. One of the 9/11 protocols that sustain till today is the closure of Park Row. The street that connects Chinatown to the Financial District was shut down after 9/11 and remained closed for twenty years. All private vehicles are prohibited from entering the street. Armed with multiple sentinels, patrol dogs, and barricades, the street is functionally a private driveway for employees in the Civic Center. Walking down it as a shortcut to the subway station for a few months, I didn't recall seeing any significant foot traffic on it. I tried to take photos and videos of the barricades, and both times, the guard interrogated me. Rong Xiaoqing explained in her column why Park Row is seen as the artery of Chinatown:

"Zigzagging from City Hall Park on Broadway, stretching under the beginnings of the Brooklyn Bridge and ending in Chatham Square in Chinatown, the four-lane Park Row had been a lifeline to the restaurants and shops in the neighborhood. Visitors from Brooklyn and New Jersey could drive off the FDR and easily access Chinatown via thoroughfare. Tour buses unloaded hundreds of tourists a day on the road, and office workers in the civic and financial districts walked down Park Row to food heaven for a dumpling or dim sum lunch." (Rong, 2021)

A civic group formed shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the Civic Center Residents Coalition (CCRC) has been working hard to address street shutdowns, including Park Row, rerouting of MTA bus routes, and rampant government permit placard abuse. In their narrative, the residents have never welcomed the NYPD command center's siting since the 1970s. (Dou, 2010) They believed it would make the neighborhood an even bigger terrorism target. (Dou, 2010) Residents

complain about how the barricades and surveillance turned a bustling area into a ghost town. (Dou, 2010) What further angered the residents was the police department's arrogance and indifference. In the same op-ed, the Police Commissioner says he is aware of residents' inconvenience but doesn't see the street opening. (Dou, 2010) Another 10 later, "persistent calls from the community for the reopening of Park Row in the past 20 years have gone nowhere," as Rong reported. (Rong, 2021)

Closure of the Park Row physically cut off Chinatown from a broader world and significantly increased the number of state-owned surveillance cameras in Chinatown. According to data gathered by individual citizens and civic groups, there was a significant increase in surveillance cameras in Chinatown after 9/11. In 1998, there were only 30 cameras on the streets. In 2002, there were 82 cameras, within which only 1 of them belongs to the DOT. In 2004, the number jumped up to 605 cameras, and 38 of them were installed on the city, state, or federal government buildings; and the DOT installed 2 on city-owned poles. (the Surveillance Camera Players, 2011) In 2011, when the team returned to Chinatown, they found this community experiencing a bad economy, with many shops closing up. However, it became the first neighborhood they had found more than 700 cameras, with 32 cameras on official buildings, down from 38; and 12 Department of Transportation cameras, up from two. (the Surveillance Camera Players, 2011) Noticing that the team only counted the cameras at the entrance of Park Row. I decided to count all the cameras on Park Row since it remains a shortcut for many community members commuting from the subway station to Chinatown. On December 11th, 2021, my count shows 38 cameras on Park Row. I only counted the ones on the street, at the building corners, and on the traffic poles. I excluded the ones at the entrance and exits of

the barricaded NYPD command center because armed police guarded them, and I didn't want to be interrogated another time.

Another key finding of the citizen group is the skyrocketing number of surveillance cameras on private properties. From a neighborhood with only dozens of cameras in 1998 to the first neighborhood the team mapped that had more than 700 cameras in 2011, surveillance camera has been an everyday presence in Chinatown. The team suggests that after 911, business owners in Chinatown started to purchase surveillance cameras as a strategy to lower their increasing insurance costs. (the Surveillance Camera Players, 2011) While it could be confirmed when the effects of 911 ease up, why do people still keep the surveillance cameras? The wife of Jingrong, for example, installed 11 cameras in their storefront. "I was not in the store all the time, so I need to keep a record on those distributors. The cameras will record it when they came in and make sure they don't fool me with short measures of the product," said her. Yet, spying on her distributors is not the only goal. "Of course, if anyone tries to break into the store or steal cash from the money box, the cameras will capture one's face." (Field notes, p. 50)

A Jie, a female lottery store owner, has a camera at the entrance of her store. A monitor shows her the street scene when she is behind the counter. "I need to know the danger before it happens. A Chinese lady punched into her face on this street a few days ago. If something like this happens again, my camera might help identify the offender," said A Jie. Her husband A Cheng soon added: "And those who try to blackmail us by saying we do not provide handicap access. If we filmed him lingering outside and not asking help from us to move him in, he could not sue us." (Field note, p. 51) A Cheng

addressed a common type of lawsuit faced by many Chinatown shopowners. Some interest groups would profit by filing lawsuits against business owners who violate the Americans with Disabilities Act. A Jie and A Cheng believed that their surveillance camera could provide evidence when they were blackmailed.

Accounts from the vendors indicate that many are keeping surveillance cameras because they worry about personal and property safety. Their daily presence on the streets means they are exposed to street violence, vandalization, and blackmailing. Vendors believe that cameras can protect them from dangers on the street. However, I never see them installing cameras to their stalls for those licensed and unlicensed vendors who vend on the street. However, it doesn't mean that wet market workers don't expose the dangers on the street. Then how do they effectively protect themselves from such hazards? It's necessary to understand that the licensed and unlicensed do collaborate in times of crisis. Their engagement is out of economic concern and compassion to those who shared a similar immigration path.

Moments of Engagements

Two types of engagement are crucial to wet market vendors on the street: their engagement with each other and with the customers. I will use a couple's story as an example of how such engagements unfold. Wang Jun and Zhou Cui are a couple; they co-own a stall in the wet market under Manhattan Bridge. Originally from rural Fujian province, Jun has been in the U.S. since 1999, and Cui was smuggled into the U.S. six years ago from Mexico. The couple got married so Cui could stay legally. The couple has a male helper, Lao Cui, who only speaks Toishanese. When I told the couple that I

wished to be their helper for my research, they didn't understand or appreciate the value of social science, but they happily took me in and shared their lives with me.

Jun was a Chinese veteran. Enlisting in 1993 and retiring in 1997, he came to the U.S. in 2000. His father was a village secretary in Fujian, so Jun is aware of corruption within a local C.C.P. bureau. He was lucky to have the channel to come to the United States. Leaving China during the 1990s wasn't easy. He recalled that only those who had relations and connections could get out of the country. His village is the overseas Chinese(华侨村) hometown, which means many villagers worked overseas and had channels to smuggle people out of the country. At the time, he saw going the U.S. as an inevitable choice: "I didn't read many books, and I don't have a skill. To earn a living, I didn't have a choice but to go the United States." (Field Notes, p.8) Jun's time in the army makes him realize that he would not make a living without devoting most of the time to dealing with the political conflicts and the corrupted local officials. He came to the U.S. with the hope of living everyday life.

Cui is one of the few people who is not afraid of talking about how she gets to the U.S. "I smuggled in from Mexico," she said. I was surprised by her candidacy since I was not asking about her immigration experience. "I took the ship to South America first. Then I took the bus to the U.S.-Mexico border. From there, I walked for three days. My feet were sore and bleeding, but I kept walking until I reached Taxis," she recalled. Her experience makes her a sensitive woman. She likes chatting with other vendors. She knows how old the boy of another Mexican vendor is and which school he goes to. When it was hot, she shared fruits fresh out of the refrigerating storage with other vendors on the street. (Field notes, p.9)

The couple is one of 9 vendors in the wet market under Manhattan Bridge. The street serves as a shortcut connecting Chinatown and Lower East Side neighborhoods. Most of the customers are from the local communities where tourists rarely visit. Jun and Cui have licensed vendors. Four other vendors are not licensed but share the corner with them. Each licensed vendor has a designated spot on the street assigned by the Department of Health. Those unlicensed are subject to prosecution and a fine from 120 to 300 dollars. Before COVID, the vending space under the bridge is more orderly. After COVID, the officials just let the unlicensed vendors be.

Firstly, I thought they competed since sometimes the unlicensed vendors also sell similar products with Jun and Cui. However, Jun denied my speculation. He would not report the unlicensed ones because sometimes they function as his distributors. When he has some fruits that must go within 1 or 2 days, he sells them to the unlicensed vendors at a wholesale price. In this case, he can save the storage fee for the night. Besides economic reasons, Jun commented that the unlicensed vendors usually lost their job due to COVID. So they vend things on the street in exchange for some cash. "We can certainly report them to the Department of Health, but we don't want to do that. We felt for them," said Jun. (Field notes, p.10)

Jun's response overturned my assumption about the licensed and the unlicensed power dynamics. It turns out that the licensed are not as risk-free as I thought compared to the unlicensed. The unlicensed, moreover, are not as helpless as they seem. The two collaborate for both to stay in business. In other words, the formality and legality of the licensed make sure that their stable and long-term connections with the distributors. The informality of the unlicensed helps the licensed speed up the circulation of

fresh products. Together, they comprise a mobile and responsive wet market mechanism. Risks, however, still exist, especially during the COVID. No matter how compassionate the couple was, they could not ensure themselves or the unlicensed stay in business. Their mechanism can be fragile, confronting a volatile national economy.

Although the couple, like many others, benefited from the relief fund, they felt like the U.S. was not doing well during the COVID. They each receive 800 dollars a month as compensation, but everything has been much higher since the COVID started. She missed home, but she can earn much in the U.S. than in China. Take a box of longan's costs as an example. A box typically includes 20 pounds of longan. Jun told me that the package costs 4 dollars per box and the box itself costs 1 dollar. He ordered the fruit from a Florida farm, and he must chip in for the truck driver's expenses on the road, and a two-way trip costs 4 days. The unit cost of longan is 3 dollars per pound, and he sold them at 5 dollars a pound in the morning but only 3.99 dollars a pound in the afternoon because he wanted to save the overnight storage fee. Besides all these visible costs, he must bribe the driver every time he delivers, so he delivers to Jun's stall early in the morning rather than in the afternoon. One bribe takes about 50 dollars. The profit of Jun's business is then meager. The couple operates almost every day in the summer, but they will have to take a day off when it rains or gets colder. In winter, they operate even less. (Field notes, p.32)

Staying business is also difficult under a group of scrutinizing customers. The customers who shop within the wet market are very picky. They would check every fruit, pick out the ones with scars, and ask the vendor to lower the price because of the blemishes. The customers expect fresh, impeccable,

seasonal, and cheap products from the wet market. Thus, Jun develops specific strategies and performances to attract customers. He does not usually sell the fruits himself. However, he attended to the customers himself when he needed all longan to go another day. Firstly, he would grab many longans for the customers, calling them sisters or brothers to attract their attention. Then he emphasized that he would trim the branches before he weighs them, and the customers usually agreed because the branches would add weight to the scale. Lastly, Jun weighed more fruits than the customers requested. If the customer disputed and wanted less, he refused to take the fruits out of the bag because the branches were trimmed, and the fruits won't last long without the branches. Half angry, half regretful, the customers conceded and paid for the fruit. With this strategy, he sold 13 boxes of longan in 2 hours. (Field notes, p.33)

They often complained about the hardship on the street and yearned for lives in China. Yet, China is more like an unreachable antidote that eases their anxiety of the reality in the U.S., rather than a realistic backup plan to their lives. "America is not doing good. The government distributed too many relief funds, which drove up prices. Inflation hurts us a lot," said Jun. Cui added on with China's prosperous and stable social environment. Jun seemed nostalgic and yearned for the things his wife described. After a while, when I asked him if he wanted to return to China after he retired, he said no. "I don't believe I will be able to enjoy the good things there...I am not privileged enough," Jun said with a sigh. (Field notes, p.9)

Moments and Anthropologist

In this chapter, I scrutinize a flattened, timely Chinatown by juxtaposing it with ethnographic moments in the wet market. Ethnography accounts help us bear with the vendors and community leaders in moments of their lives. Their moments in time, under surveillance, and engagement reveal their concerns, fears, and compassion and yearn. People built ethnic enclaves for their residence, work, leisure, and consumption, usually because they felt threatened by state schemes and alienating gaze. Chinatown is such a community misrepresented by tourist magazines like Lonely Planet. This neighborhood is depicted as a vice neighborhood where people have all sorts of dirty, heathen, and exotic lifestyles. However, for those who live and work in the community, every moment of their lives is full of meaning.

Sister Jin operates 12 hours a day to keep up with the market dynamics. Wellington takes photos of every vendor he talks to, with the hope to cherish their efforts in staying in Chinatown after 911. Jun and Cui gave used cardboard to an unlicensed old lady, so she didn't have to sell her handmade tofu on the ground. These ethnographic moments are full of gestures of gratitude, persistence, and resilience to an ever-changing urban environment. I didn't find these ethnographic moments. These ethnographic moments found me when I was in my moments of wayfinding in urban America.

I have temporal legality to stay in the U.S. makes me a vulnerable researcher in the field. When I did my fieldwork, I never wore makeup or a dress in my fancy clothes. Instead, I wore old t-shirts and pants. I wore the same pair of shoes the entire summer. I tried to be as low-key and straightened as possible. When people asked me which university I went to, I told them that I go to Connecticut. It seems that I was performing as a working-class young Chinese immigrant. My old clothes and

somewhat sloven appearance did give people the impression that I was a recent immigrant from China. If people sit and eat at the front step of a store, I did so too. I tried my best to be approachable to my informants. But they always pointed out that I must come from a well-off family because I went to college in the U.S.

The moments in their lives only made sense to me when I started participating in their routines. Growing up in a well-off family in central China, I realized that I couldn't ignore the feeling of vulnerability and overwhelm when I first helped with vending on the street. I suddenly realize that their moments are also my moments. Part of the job of an anthropologist is to play a compassionate, unbiased role that coexists with their research participants. But in actual practice, anthropologists are still biased subjects. Because we are limited, aligning the reality we see, and what they see, identifying the gap, and explaining it is part of the task. Thus, all my observations in Chinatown are often influenced by my own living experience as an immigrant.

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