

“Kung Flu” Fighters: Illuminating Resilience & Solidarities Among the Chinese Diaspora
USA

Amherst College

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www.xinshengproject.org/virallovepodcast

VIRAL LOVE, the podcast series I developed and recorded for my Project for Peace, hopes to paint a more nuanced picture of Chinatown, amidst reports of racial violence during the pandemic: as not just a place that has cheap food and hardworking immigrants trying to chase the “American dream,” but a place with stories and dramas of its own, and a place that we might look to as a microcosm of class and race tensions in America as we move towards becoming a majority-minority country. Chinatowns are indeed sites of racial violence, explicit and less explicit, but exploring the nuance of each community's narrative also reveals how dynamic, resilient, and full of potential Chinatown communities are—thus providing a compelling way forward beyond the devastation of the pandemic.

Anti-Asian racism has been around for as long as Asian people have been in America. The pandemic's violence has been a particularly ugly variation on these historical patterns, further compounded by transnational tensions stoked by an irresponsible administration. My Project for Peace emerged out of an idea for a Watson proposal, which in turn emerged out of my senior thesis in anthropology. My thesis examined intergenerational difference in how Chinese American women were navigating the pandemic's resurgence in violent xenophobia, a project that was both intellectual and personal, and one that gained terrifying relevance after the Atlanta shooting that killed six Asian women in March 2021. My hope was to extend the general premise of my thesis on a global scale by speaking with Chinese diasporic communities around the world. I wanted to investigate how Chinese people around the world were grappling with identity and community during the pandemic. I hoped that by sharing these stories, I'd be able to foster increased understanding during the pandemic's resurgence in xenophobia, and maybe understand a little more about myself, too. After being awarded funding for my Project for Peace, however, I began encountering challenges that forced me to change the project before I really got started.

VIRAL LOVE would not exist without the pandemic, but the pandemic was almost the reason that the podcast didn't end up happening. During the fall of 2020, the semester during which I was putting together my Davis application, I managed to winnow down my original list of countries from five to two: Spain and South Africa. I thought that things would surely start opening up by the following summer. In the spring, the pandemic didn't get any better. And as the summer approached, the pandemic still didn't get any better. Even as parts of the US began re-opening, Amherst College made the decision to prohibit international travel over the summer. In the end, I shifted the focus of the podcast to domestic, as opposed to international, communities: instead of traveling to Spain and South Africa, I interviewed Chinatown communities in Oakland, Los Angeles, Houston, and New York City. (I also interviewed my international collaborators in Spain and South Africa over Zoom.)

While this reduced the health risks of the podcast, it also meant I had to redo the logistical planning of the project—reaching out to potential interviewees, researching travel and lodging plans, conducting background research, drafting interview questions, etc.—within a much tighter timeframe. Any interview project that requires people to donate their time needs a little bit of patience to coordinate interviewees' willingness and availability, and the initial challenges I faced were mostly concerned with wondering if I could pull off the podcast at all. By the end of the spring semester, only one of my interviewees had confirmed a date and time with me. After several rounds of e-mails and Instagram direct messages and short-lived group chats at the beginning of the summer, however, I finally did coordinate all of my interviews, often confirming future conversations and booking flights and lodging while I was in the midst of conducting interviews scheduled for earlier in the summer. I also learned that these sorts of broad interview-based projects tend to have a snowball effect: as I interviewed more and more people,

interviewees would excitedly encourage me to talk to their friends, collaborators, and colleagues. As the summer came to a close, the biggest challenge I faced was having too many potential interviewees and not enough time to meet them all, not to mention the seemingly impossible task of attempting to condense all of these experiences into a podcast episode that would inevitably be unable to capture every person's story. On the ground, I also faced a fair amount of language barriers. My Mandarin is elementary school level at best, and the most commonly spoken dialect of Chinese spoken in Chinatowns is Cantonese. In many cases, I ended up speaking to business owners' second generation children in order to get in touch with their parents—which perhaps says a lot about the contested future of Chinatowns across the country. Ultimately, I developed one episode per Chinatown location—Oakland, Los Angeles, Houston, New York City—and an additional introductory episode. Episodes will be released on a weekly basis starting at the end of September, meaning that the podcast in its entirety should be completely out by the end of October. All relevant links to each episode (on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud, etc.) will be housed at <https://www.xinshengproject.org/virallovepodcast>. (Xin Sheng Project is an initiative I co-founded in the summer of 2020 that aims to fight misinformation and provide progressive perspectives on Chinese ethnic media platforms like WeChat. I hope to eventually get the episode transcripts translated into Chinese, so that I can post them on WeChat and reach a wider, first-generation audience!)

In contexts of racial violence, it's easy for definitions of peace to collapse into tired maxims of multiculturalism and colorblind harmony—"why can't everyone just get along?" VIRAL LOVE takes peace building to be a much more complex project. Centuries of racial discrimination, layered and complicated by compounding factors of class, gender, ability, and more, cannot so easily be smoothed over by an insistence to just "get along." It requires an unraveling of all of these layers—for us to take a long, hard look at violence that has seeped its way into generations of Chinatown communities, even when (or perhaps especially when) it causes community members to turn against each other. I would argue that community building that arises out of a nuanced understanding of these intertwinements is what truly builds peace.

It would be impossible for any singular project to comprehensively examine such widespread violence, but I hope that each episode plays a small part in complicating viral media headlines that seem to portray the streets of Chinatown as a place where elderly residents are constantly getting shoved into the ground. As I argue throughout the podcast, such a narrow portrayal of Chinatown inaccurately concentrates the primary source of the violence onto a few "racist" individuals. While it's very possible that each documented perpetrator held racist prejudice against their victims, I found that many Chinatown community members in fact understood these physical incidents as symptoms of a deeper systemic violence. Chinatowns are primarily populated by working-class and often elderly members of the Asian diaspora, chafing against stereotypes of Asian Americans as a legion of white collar robots in medicine and engineering. Any under-resourced community, including Chinatowns, is more susceptible to incidents of physical violence. Gentrification has been pushing out Chinatown residents for decades, though this isn't the type of violence that goes viral on Twitter.

While I anticipate that the biggest impact of the podcast will happen after its release, it's also been incredibly gratifying to see the cross-community connections were already being made over the course of the podcast's production. I posted Instagram content highlighting each location I visited, which allowed not only potential listeners to follow along, but also allowed my interviewees to get a sense of the other perspectives that they would eventually be placed in conversation with. My Los Angeles interviewees told me that they had been following along with my social media content while I was conducting interviews in Oakland, and that they really enjoyed learning about the Oakland organization they previously hadn't known much about. I helped facilitate a future collaboration between advocacy groups I interviewed in Los Angeles and New York City, because the New York City organizers that I talked with had seen the social media content I posted about Los Angeles, and wanted to help highlight other Chinatown communities in their own work. While each episode of VIRAL LOVE will highlight the

community building happening in each individual city, putting all of these locations in conversation with each other has also generated community connections on a national scale—before the podcast has even been officially released.

No matter the wider impact of this project, however, producing VIRAL LOVE has also been enormously valuable for my own personal growth. I've learned how to travel across the country on my own and adapt to last minute changes in my plans; I've learned how to approach people I've never met before and strike up a conversation about what's been worrying them for the past year and a half. Being Chinese American certainly connects me in some way to all the communities I spoke with, but in many other ways, producing this podcast has shown me that this shared connection tells me almost nothing about the lives of other Chinese and Asian Americans. I hope that the final product will foreground these differences in interesting, creative, and hopeful ways.

Most of all, I've learned that even something as huge as a global pandemic doesn't have to just be framed as a devastating catastrophe—it can also form the basis of exciting, new forms of collaboration, and it can be a compelling point of departure for telling stories about human resilience. VIRAL LOVE certainly happened despite the challenges of the pandemic, but it also happened *because* of the pandemic, and its scope expanded far beyond just the pandemic itself. I don't say this to imply that the pandemic should be something we celebrate, but a singular focus on its negative impacts can foreclose possibilities of hope and joy.

Section II

