PastForward Online 2022 Conference Proceedings: From Vision to Action
A Conversation About Supporting Chinatowns and Cultural Preservation

Di Gao: Hi. I’m Di Gao, senior director of research and development at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Welcome to the keynote plenary conversation on saving Chinatowns. Over the past year, I’ve been leading efforts at the National Trust to find ways that we can support historic Chinatowns through preservation, as Chinatowns across the country continue to find themselves in a fight for their survival. Chinatowns have been bastions of community resilience for over 170 years, but today, many of them find themselves facing a multitude of existential threats. In the wake of these challenges, we are exploring what activism and preservation looks like in Chinatowns today.

I am honored to be joined by award-winning cookbook author, culinary historian, and fierce activist for Chinatowns across the country, Grace Young. Among her many accolades, Grace is a three-time James Beard Foundation Award winner and a six-time International Association of Culinary Professionals’ award winner, including the 2021 Lifetime Achievement Award. She has authored numerous cookbooks and devoted much of her career to preserving the traditional iron wok, an endangered culinary tool that’s traditionally used in Chinese cooking. Her family has donated cookware to the Smithsonian Institution as significant artifacts for Chinese American culinary history. Grace has been named the Poet Laureate of the Wok by food historian Betty Fussell, and recently was dubbed the “Accidental Voice for Chinatown” by Grub Street for her advocacy for Chinatowns and Asian American and Pacific Islander small businesses across the country. This year, Grace received the Humanitarian of the Year Award from the James Beard Foundation and received the Julia Child Award at the Smithsonian. She’s partnered with many nonprofits to raise money and elevate the profile of Chinatown’s legacy businesses, and her activism has been widely chronicled. Grace, thank you for fighting for Chinatown, and thank you so much for being with us today.
Grace Young: It’s my pleasure. It’s a great honor to be here with you.

Di Gao: This year’s theme for our National Preservation Conference is “from vision to action.” Like many of us, I think you saw that Chinatowns were struggling and were in need, and you took action. Could you share your personal journey about what caused you to act?

Grace Young: Absolutely. I’m a Chinese cookbook author, so generally I’m in Chinatown two or three times a week to shop and to eat. In January of 2020, I was stunned to see that Chinatown suddenly emptied out because of xenophobia and misinformation. In New York City and across the country, Chinatowns were shunned. It was so painful to see that so many restaurants and shops lost 40, 60, and even 80 percent of their business.

On March 15, 2020, I went to Chinatown with videographer Dan Ahn to interview restaurant and shop owners. It was my idea that if New Yorkers could hear the personal stories of all the hardships that they had gone through in January and February and the start of March, that we could rally support and bring business into Chinatown. The director of Poster House museum, Julia Knight, had contacted me, saying that she wanted to help Chinatown. When I told her this idea, she said, “If you do these videos, we will post them on the Poster House website.” So that’s how we ended up in Chinatown on Sunday, March 15. Unbeknownst to us, that evening after we did the interviews, Mayor de Blasio would put New York City in lockdown. As we went into Chinatown to do these interviews, we were not prepared for what we discovered, that 70 percent of Chinatown restaurant owners had decided to close the following day because business was so bad.

One of the interviews we did was at Hop Kee, one of the oldest restaurants in Chinatown. The owner told us that he had no choice but to close the following day. Generally, when you go into Hop Kee, there’s a line out the door. That day when we arrived at Hop Kee, there was only one table that was occupied. Peter Lee, the owner/manager, brought us into the kitchen, and I’ve been in many, many Chinese restaurant kitchens in my life. They’re always the noisiest place in the world. That kitchen was silent because
there were no orders. I will always remember the looks on the faces of the dishwashers, the cooks, the waiters. Nobody knew what was about to happen, but I think all of us knew that we were in trouble. The faces of all those workers still haunt me today. Many of the employees at Hop Kee had been with Peter for 10, 20, even 30 years. I think doing these interviews on Sunday, March 15, right before Chinatown shut down on one of Chinatown’s darkest days, profoundly affected me, and it inspired all the work that I ended up doing in the last two and a half years. I realized that so many of those workers had no voice, and that they had no way of getting their story out to the public.

After we did these videos, called “Coronavirus Chinatown Stories,” Mayor de Blasio put us into lockdown. Then in the latter part of March, April, and May, I made many walks into Chinatown with my husband. It was stunning because Chinatown looked like a Hollywood movie set of Chinatown. It was completely empty. Normally there’s bumper to bumper traffic going down Mott Street. There were no cars, no pedestrians. At that point, New York City was the epicenter of the pandemic. We had 700 to 800 deaths a day. For the first time in my life, I saw the real possibility of losing Chinatown. It was just chilling and devastating to see Chinatown emptied out like that.

By the time we reopened in June, there were legacy businesses that did not reopen. There was a little life in Chinatown, but nowhere near what Chinatown normally feels like. In 2019, New York City had 66.5 million tourists, and historic Chinatowns in San Francisco, New York, and Boston are dependent on tourism. In 2020, I would
venture to guess that there were no tourists whatsoever. Not only did we lose the tourists, but in Manhattan and lower Manhattan we lost workers. In San Francisco and Boston, Chinatowns are adjacent to the financial district. All of those workers suddenly disappeared. Chinatowns were really struggling to survive. Locals were afraid to come out for fear of catching COVID. I realized that even though I had never been an activist, I had to do everything in my power.

I reached out to every contact that I knew and drew on every skill that I had. Because I’m a cookbook author, I had some contacts with the media, and so I reached out to the local NPR station to do an interview to raise consciousness and raise public awareness that Chinatown needed our support. I wrote articles for different magazines like Food and Wine. Media reached out to me, like BBC and Today.com. I ended up raising money with a local grassroots organization called Welcome to Chinatown. I raised over $40,000 to save legacy businesses in Chinatown. Those restaurants fed people in the community that were dealing with food insecurity, who were on low income or seniors. I raised money to provide personal security alarms for seniors and workers in Chinatown. I started an Instagram campaign with the James Beard Foundation in 2020 to save Chinese restaurants. In 2021, it shifted to supporting AAPI—Asian American and Pacific Islander—mom
and pop businesses across the country. I just tried to do everything in my power to try and lift Chinatown up.

**Di Gao:** It sounds like you really drew on every connection and every tool you had access to and really leveraged your position. I want to back up a little bit for this audience and ask you what you love about Chinatown and what makes it so unique, and why it’s important to America that Chinatowns are saved.

**Grace Young:** Well, Chinatown is a vibrant living community, where every restaurant and store is one of a kind. Often, I feel when I go to Chinatown, it transports me to another world. There are moments I feel like I also take a little trip back in time. When I think about Chinatown, I think about some of my favorite places. I love to eat in Manhattan’s Chinatown at Hop Lee, which reminds me of the kinds of restaurants my father used to take me to. I would describe it as Cantonese soul food. When you go there in the daytime, I love to see that all the Chinatown postal workers have a table of their own. It’s all about community, and I call it sort of the “Cheers of Chinatown.” It’s a very special feeling being there.

In San Francisco’s Chinatown, I’m very, very fond of the Wok Shop. Tane Chan opened the store over 50 years ago, and when you go into this store, it’s mind blowing. It’s packed to the gills. It’s a very tiny shop, but with all of these treasures. They carry the old-fashioned traditional cast-iron Cantonese-style wok. Tane Chan is in her 80s now, and during the pandemic, never missed a day of work. She went into that shop every single day. She reduced hours, but she is a national treasure.
Here in Manhattan’s Chinatown, we just had the Mid-Autumn Festival. There’s a little Malaysian bakery called Kuih Cafe, and I posted on Instagram that they sold moon cakes for one day, and they are works of art. They are so gorgeous and even more delicious to eat. So there are all these little specialty things that you can find in Chinatown and only in Chinatown.

I love the people of Chinatown and their work ethic. Whether you’re in a restaurant or a store, most people work seven days a week, 10, 12, or 14 hours a day. During the pandemic, they showed even more grit and determination and dignity showing up when there was no business, or during times when there was the threat of anti-Asian hate crimes. Chinatown is a place to celebrate history and tradition and culture and fabulous food. I love that Chinatown is the story of America. For me, it represents one of the things that makes this country great. It’s about diversity and inclusiveness.

**Di Gao:** Wow, thank you so much for that vivid picture of what’s at stake and all that Chinatowns across the country have to offer. When we talk about saving Chinatowns, I think that can mean a lot of different things to different people. There’s a philosophical question in the preservation field, as well, about what it means to preserve something. When you talk about saving Chinatowns, what aspects of Chinatown do you talk about preserving or saving?

**Grace Young:** Well, I am always focused on the businesses. I know that there are so many different areas of Chinatown that are in need of help, but I feel as though if you don’t save the businesses, that just opens the door to gentrification and redevelopment. Right now in Chinatown in the last months, there’s a new pizza shop,
there’s coffee shops, bubble tea, ice cream, Korean fried chicken. I wish them all well, but to me, they are not Chinatown. If more of that happens as Chinatown becomes gentrified, we will lose Chinatown.

I think one of the things that is so important about Chinatown are the mom and pop businesses. In Manhattan’s Chinatown, 98 percent of the businesses are mom and pop. In San Francisco’s Chinatown, there are 1,000 family-owned businesses. I don’t know the stats for all the other Chinatowns in America, but they’re all mom and pop. I think that there was a time when mom and pop businesses were the backbone of America, and it’s what made this country so special. When you go to Chinatown, everything is done the old-fashioned way. It’s about people-to-people connections. It’s about sometimes cash-only businesses.

During the pandemic, all of us heard that online business has skyrocketed, and Amazon is making more money than they ever made. I understand that during the pandemic we needed to do online business because it was safer, and it was more convenient. But you have to consider the idea of scrolling, clicking, and then the next day the box arrives, versus going to Chinatown and supporting a little mom and pop business. I have never shopped at Fresh Direct or ordered groceries at Whole Foods and had it delivered to me. I love the experience of going to Chinatown and going to one store to buy my fish and another store to buy my produce.

One of the stores where I love to buy my produce is 88 Natural on Mulberry Street. It’s run by a husband and wife who get there early in the morning to set up and work all day. Roughly around 3 or 4 in the afternoon, their daughters arrive from school. Sometimes if you peek into a back room, you can see them doing their homework, or they’re eating a snack. When things get busy, they pop out and they help their mom and dad at the cash register, or they’re prepping vegetables. At the end of a long day, they all go home together, and you want them to succeed. I want to support that business rather than Amazon to make sure that they make it.

Every single one of those stores and businesses in Chinatown have a story that is similar to that. I think when we are supporting
mom and pop, our lives are richer. The experience of going to buy your groceries or eating in a restaurant, where the waiter knows what you want even before you open your mouth because you’ve come in so many times and they know what you like, is what makes our lives a fuller experience. I think that it’s really important right now to have this consciousness that when we’re saving Chinatowns, we’re actually saving small town USA the way America used to be.

**Di Gao:** You really highlight an important point. It’s not just the businesses. These businesses are family institutions, they’re cultural anchors, and they serve such important roles for the community. Are there other issues—you started talking about gentrification, displacement, continued fallout from the pandemic—that you want to elevate and let people know about that Chinatowns are still struggling with at this point in time?

**Grace Young:** Everyone suffered during the pandemic, but Chinatown suffered more. As I mentioned, at the start of the pandemic in January and February, business went down 40, 60, even 80 percent. For historic Chinatowns like San Francisco, New York, and Boston that are dependent on tourism, there were no tourists in 2020. So many of the Chinatown businesses have dealt with mounting debt. There are certainly landlords who were lenient and negotiated a lower rent, but I’ve heard enough stories about the landlords who were tough, who were hounding their tenants for the rent, even when we were in lockdown when they knew that their tenants were not taking in any income at all. The variety of hardships that Chinatowns have endured include not only the mounting debt, but also anti-Asian hate crimes. That’s had a huge impact on Chinatowns.

Right now in New York, San Francisco, and all across the country, Chinatowns used to be open late into the night. In the old days in Manhattan’s Chinatown, there were restaurants that were open until 4 a.m. Pre-pandemic, many restaurants were open until at least 1 a.m. Nowadays, many of the restaurants are closed at 7 or 8 o’clock in the evening, because there’s simply no business. That is because locals are afraid to come out at night. During the daytime and this past summer when the weather was warm, when
you’re in New York’s Chinatown, it actually feels a little pre-pandemic. There’s a vitality to it. But in the old days after work, lots of Chinese Americans and Asian Americans would swing by Chinatown on their way home from work and pick up groceries or have a meal. Nowadays because of safety issues, they go directly home. There are the smaller markets in Manhattan’s Chinatown that are closing at 4:30 or 5 o’clock. There are a few restaurants that are open until 10 o’clock, but I think 10 o’clock is now the cutoff point. Most restaurants are closed by 8 o’clock. In the spring of this year, in New York City, there was a small study that was done, and it revealed that 75 percent of Asian seniors are afraid to leave their homes. This really impacts the business in Chinatown. Without people feeling comfortable and safe, it limits how much restaurants are going to make, and they cannot survive if there is not dinner business. So it’s really critical that everyone else come into Chinatown.

Everyone, all businesses in America right now, are dealing with supply chain issues and inflation, but in Chinatown, the impact of inflation is even more dramatic. One restaurant owner told me pre-pandemic, the cost of cooking oil was $26, and now it’s more than doubled. It’s $59. The price of all foods has also gone up. But on top of that, the energy bills have gone up by a 100 percent. So pre-pandemic, they were paying $4,000 to $5,000 and now paying nearly $10,000.

When you think about Chinatown, most people expect inexpensive meals. There is a restaurant in Chinatown that pre-pandemic was selling lunch at $5.95. When you think about how they could make money for a lunch for $5.95, when you take into account the cost of their food, labor, rent, electricity, gas, water, garbage, insurance, what could the profit be? The Chinatown business model has always been reliant on selling volume. They set a very, very low price, but they’re hoping they are going to sell 200 or 300 lunches, and that’s the way they squeak by. When you have these rising prices because of inflation or energy costs are going up, it’s so hard for these businesses. The restaurant that had the $5.95 lunch now has a $7.50 lunch, and the owner says he’s not making money. He also gives away complimentary rice and a bowl of soup. And he
does it just to keep the doors open, hoping that the clients also come back for dinner. But the customer mindset is they want that inexpensive meal. There are a lot of challenges for Chinatown right now. I’m really worried because when it’s really cold in New York, you don’t even want to cross the street to get some orange juice. So that means that there’s also going to be a greater decline in business for Chinatowns all across the country.

**Di Gao:** It sounds like Chinatown is no stranger to crisis, but this is so much more sustained and long term to be suffering this lower level of foot traffic and lower level of business that’s really pushing things to the brink.

**Grace Young:** There’s actually one other issue that’s very important. Right now in New York City, they are talking about congestion pricing. Cars coming into New York will be charged a surcharge to enter the city, and they haven’t determined what that price is going to be. Many businesses in Chinatown are very worried about this because it means that Chinese Americans, Asian Americans, or Americans, in general, who want to come into the city to visit Chinatown might not do it if it is going to be $23. They might not come into Chinatown just to have their kids get a haircut and to have a lunch of dim sum because everyone has to tighten their belts right now. There are multiple challenges facing Chinatown even though the pandemic is over.

**Di Gao:** When we talk about preservation, I think a lot of people think that it only focuses on the buildings. So I think this conversation is really interesting around the lifeblood and cultural assets of Chinatowns being the legacy businesses. I came across some words that you used in an article to describe your journey, as you realized you have always been a preservationist and your life’s work has come into sharp focus. I want to hear in your words, what does being a preservationist mean to you?

**Grace Young:** My work as a Chinese cookbook author has always been about preserving recipes that are at risk of being lost. I’ve always been fascinated with getting recipes from the older cooks, because I think there is so much wisdom in the old ways, and I’ve been so focused on the traditions of wok cooking. But as
the pandemic unfolded, I shifted my focus to saving Chinatowns. At first it did not sink in, but I realized that I was of course trying to save one of the great centers for Chinese cuisine and culture. But in fact, I am also preserving a piece of the American story.

Chinese food has such a long history in America, which dates back to the mid-1800s. There is this wonderful author, Jennifer 8. Lee, who wrote a book called “The Fortune Cookie Chronicles. In the book, she talks about the fact that we think of apple pie as being the quintessential American food, but when was the last time you had apple pie, and when was the last time you had Chinese food? And for most people, they eat Chinese food more often than they have apple pie. If you Google “what is the most popular ethnic food in America,” it’s Chinese food that comes up. I think most people don’t even think of it this way, but Chinese cuisine in America is an important part of the American culinary landscape. I’ve always thought about how I’m preserving the traditions of Chinese culture, but now I realize that I’m preserving a piece of American history when I fight to save Chinatowns and mom and pop businesses. There’s a vast array of different Asian cuisines that you will find in Chinatown, and all of them are part of the American story.

Di Gao: That is so beautifully said. Thank you for that. You had brought up a common understanding of preservation that you yourself held before we started talking, which is that people often think that preservation focuses on the distant past or the “long dead past,” and it’s not really relevant to people today. I wonder what could show communities like Chinatown that preservation is a tool for good?

Grace Young: Well, I think that without preservation, there will be the loss of Chinatown as a way of life. All those stores that I feel are so unique and special—from the herb shops to where you can find artisanal tofu in Chinatown bakeries—there’s so much richness in Chinatown. Here in Manhattan’s Chinatown, you only have to look at Little Italy to understand what the ramifications are if we don’t save Chinatown. Right now, Little Italy is just a tourist destination, it’s like Disneyland. The restaurants are geared toward tourists. There are only two remaining markets. It used to be a vital community, and it’s all been stripped away.
One of the things that came up during the pandemic was in April of 2020, I read a CNN report that 59 percent of independently-owned Chinese restaurants in America had ceased their credit card and debit card transactions, implying that they had permanently closed. In the same news piece, it said that P.F. Chang’s, which is the largest chain of Chinese restaurants in this country, had received PPP loans and their sales had doubled. At that time, I thought to myself, “Oh my God, are we going to lose all the little mom and pop restaurants that have so much character and make Chinese food so interesting in this country and be left with the equivalent of the Olive Garden of Chinese food?” Now, as I see Chinatown struggling, there is a P.F. Chang’s that opened in the financial district in 2020. There’s another one opening up about a mile or so from Chinatown, and I think there’s another one about 2 miles away. So if we do not take action and actively preserve and support Chinatown, I fear that we will be left with just big chain Chinese food restaurants.

Di Gao: Yes, it seems like so many Chinatowns are battling for their soul right now with commercial development. They are also facing issues around razor-thin margins and inequities and access to incentives and other sources of public support because of issues like language barriers and lack of translation. Thank you for sharing with us some of those challenges. I want to end on a question about how people can act to save Chinatowns. If people walked away from the session today with one to-do item, what would you say people can do to support their local Chinatowns and help their survival?

Grace Young: I think it’s really important to make an active effort to support your local Chinatown frequently. And not just to eat in the restaurants, but to shop in the markets and the stores. When I go to Chinatown, I ask my friends or my neighbors if there’s anything I can pick up for them—some takeout, some produce. Do you want the mangoes, the baby bok choy, some fresh ginger? I’m happy to do that, because every little bit counts. It is important to actively do less online shopping and to go into Chinatown and experience how wonderful it is to shop from these little mom and
pops. You can find everything in Chinatown. It’s not just Asian ingredients. You can find milk, yogurt, you can buy paper towels, there’s tons of pharmacies, you can get your drug prescription filled in Chinatown. In New York’s Chinatown, there are a ton of eyeglasses stores. Chinatown is infinite in what it has to offer.

I urge people to support their local Chinatown. If you don’t have a local Chinatown, support your local AAPI mom and pop businesses, because they’ve all been suffering during the pandemic. Or remind your friends and relatives who live in cities that do have Chinatowns that they need to show up.

**Di Gao:** That is fantastic. And an absolute last question. What’s next for you, Grace? Are there any exciting campaigns or projects in the pipeline that you would like to share?

**Grace Young:** I’m partnering with the James Beard Foundation on a national social media campaign called #SupportChinatowns that we are launching on November 15 of this year. We are reaching out to famous chefs and celebrities to share their Chinatown story. So many of us have a special love for Chinatown and tips for things that we love to eat or do in Chinatown. We want to gather up those stories and memories as a tribute to Chinatown and to raise public awareness that we can’t take Chinatown for granted. The idea is to have this outpouring of love and support for Chinatown and that it’s a way to recognize that Chinatowns are an important part of American life. I hope all of you will do a post about why you love Chinatown and use the hashtag #SupportChinatowns.

**Di Gao:** Thank you so much, Grace. I’m really excited about this continued partnership to protect Chinatowns for future generations. I will end on one of my favorite quotes from Grace, even though I can’t possibly say it any better than she has said during this session: “Chinatowns and the businesses within them are links to our past, and when we lose our past, we lose a part of ourselves.” That’s why this work is so important. Thank you all again, and please enjoy the rest of the conference. FJ

---

GRACE YOUNG is an award-winning cookbook author, culinary historian, and fierce activist for Chinatowns across the country. DI GAO is the senior director of research and development at the National Trust for Historic Preservation.