



The **SAVE CHINATOWN** Movement:

Surviving against All Odds

BY MARY YEE

Those of us who came to Philadelphia after 1980 are likely to take for granted the existence of Chinatown. Then as now, Chinatown represented the spiritual and cultural center of not only the Chinese but of the Asian American community in the Delaware Valley. Even if families didn't live in the neighborhood, they came here to attend church, socialize in fraternal and district associations, buy Asian groceries, eat out, or just be around some folks who spoke their home language or looked like them.

In the 1970s, however, the survival of the neighborhood was in serious jeopardy due to several government projects—foremost among them, construction of the Vine Street Expressway, I-676.

The story of the Save Chinatown movement could be told as a litany of government projects, plans, consultant studies, community responses, and a catalogue of what got built and what didn't. But to do so would be to miss the deeper significance this struggle for social justice had in unifying the community and inspiring Asian Americans in Philadelphia and across the country. The experience of being part of this social movement deeply affected many community members, myself included. The Save Chinatown story is both about the historical events and the meaning the experience had for us.

From 1971 to 1977, the crucial formative years of the Save Chinatown movement and the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC), different sectors of the community united to fight the Vine Street Expressway; a wall of Market Street East (MSE) parking garages along Filbert Street; the 9th Street ramp to MSE; and the Center City Commuter Rail Tunnel (CRT). Along with the massive Reading viaduct west of 11th Street, these projects constricted Chinatown from growth on all four sides. The map of this "Noose around Chinatown" provided the visual representation that really galvanized the community. This image prompted metaphors of strangulation from the elders and cries of "cultural genocide" from more militant sectors.

SAVE CHINATOWN!! STOP THE CULTURAL GENOCIDE!!

VINE ST. EXPRESSWAY

**Write or Call Your:
Councilman,
The Mayor, Your
Congressman &
Senator!!**

CHINATOWN

MARKET STREET EAST DEVELOPMENT

Your Support Is Needed... Time Is Short!!

Map of proposed Chinatown redevelopment project, including impact of the Vine Street Expressway and Market Street projects, 1973. Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church is located below the "D" in "Genocide" within the path of the expressway. Courtesy of PCDC.

The pivotal event that instigated the Save Chinatown movement was the 1966 public meeting at the Free Library, where Chinatown residents first saw the proposal for the Vine Street Expressway, which was to replace the 12-lane Vine Street with an even wider depressed highway with service roads and several ramps. It would demolish most of Chinatown and the Holy Redeemer (HR) church and school.

Chinatown's beloved HR became the icon of the Chinatown struggle; planners intended to sacrifice it so that a mere 25-foot swath of one of Penn's original five squares, Franklin Square, could be saved. Built for Chinese American Catholics in 1941, HR served as recreational center and community hall—hosting basketball games and community meetings as well as weddings and wakes. However, we understood that saving HR and undoing the noose were not enough. We also had to fight for affordable new housing for working families and seniors. A quarter of Chinatown's housing stock had already been lost to the Independence Mall IV and the CRT projects. The lack of affordable housing was further exacerbated by increased demand from recent Chinese immigration.

The community responded by forming the Committee for the Preservation and Advancement of the Chinatown Community, the predecessor to the PCDC. In 1969, PCDC, originally a committee under the Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA), the traditional governing body of Chinatown, incorporated as a nonprofit charitable organization. The small group of dedicated Holy Redeemer alumni and parishioners were soon joined by the Sisters at Holy Redeemer; Mitzie Mackenzie, then director of the Chinese Christian Church and Center; second-generation Chinese American professionals; and university students.

One of PCDC's earliest challenges was to get CBA's approval to represent the community "in matters of urban renewal and physical development." The elders' attitude was that only they could speak for Chinatown, that the second generation was too Americanized, and that "you can't fight city hall." In time, PCDC overcame the political, cultural, and language differences between the first generation of men who had little formal education and spoke little English and the second generation of native-born and educated Chinese Americans who spoke little Cantonese. Subsequently, PCDC had the major task of



*Just because the government
says something is going
to happen, it doesn't mean
it has to happen.*

————— (Gary Lee, Attorney) —————

mobilizing support from inside and outside Chinatown—community leaders; both first- and second-generation Chinese Americans; members of the faith-based institutions; professionals living outside of Chinatown; college students from the Asian American activist group Yellow Seeds; and community youth, many of whom had attended HR.

The threat to community survival prompted the different sectors of the community to bridge generational, religious, educational, and geographical boundaries. Adversity brought us together, tensions and all. Although PCDC was the recognized leader in the fight, the Save Chinatown movement also extended beyond PCDC. The youth, other community residents, and Yellow Seeds members sometimes took more aggressive and independent actions, such as confronting bulldozers to stop demolition, picketing in front of Cardinal Krol's residence, or exposing community sell-outs in print. A Chinese American cinematographer obtained an NEA grant to produce an independent documentary. Nonetheless, PCDC, with CBA, the churches, and Yellow Seeds, as the loyal opposition, forged a unity that could make concerted public action happen—such as a couple hundred people protesting at Philadelphia City Council or in Harrisburg.

By establishing our identity as a community and by being a public presence in political forums and in the media during the early years, we became a force to be reckoned with. We used the 1970 Environmental Protection Act to demand a full-scale Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), a legal document that would state fully the potential physical, social, economic, and cultural impacts of all the surrounding governmental projects. The convergence of a number of external factors aided our fight to save HR and defeat the enormous scale of the original expressway proposal. Following Chinatown demands in 1973, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) required an EIS. However, because of community protests and negotiations with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, it took three years to finish just the Draft EIS (1977). In 1980, under pressure from escalating construction costs and the possibility of losing federal funding for I-676 to local mass transit, the Vine Street Task Force, comprised of city, state, and federal transportation officials, worked to resolve the alignment issue. With significant community input this time and revised traffic estimates, the final EIS (1983) recommended a scaled-down version of the expressway that left HR untouched; provided a pedestrian plaza at 10th Street to connect the north and south sides of Vine Street; and stipulated various design criteria to ameliorate noise, air, and visual impacts. Finally, with FHWA approval, construction was completed in 1991—15 years after the original 1976 Bicentennial target date.

Protestors, including Mary Yee, sitting atop a pile of rubble.
Philadelphia Inquirer, Aug. 3, 1973. Used with permission of
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HELP SAVE CHINATOWN!



COME TO THE
EASTER SUNDAY RALLY
12 noon · April 22, 1973
10 th & Race Sts.

TOWN MEETING
8:30 PM · May 3, 1973
ON LEONG MERCHANTS ASSOC.
911 Race St.

CHINATOWN HAS BEEN PART OF THE PHILADELPHIA SCENE FOR OVER A HUNDRED YEARS. THE COMMUNITY CELEBRATED ITS CENTENNIAL IN 1972. ITS PEOPLE AND BUSINESSES CONTRIBUTE TO THE SOCIAL-ECONOMIC AS WELL AS TO THE CULTURAL WELL BEING OF PHILADELPHIA.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VINE STREET EXPRESSWAY AND THE MARKET STREET EAST DEVELOPMENT ARE DETRIMENTAL TO THE FUTURE OF CHINATOWN, AFFECTING BOTH THE RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL STABILITY. AS TAXPAYERS, THE COMMUNITY HAS THE RIGHT AND THE RESPONSIBILITY TO DETERMINE ITS FUTURE. UNITED AS ONE STRONG VOICE, THE PHILADELPHIA CHINATOWN DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION WAS FORMED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE CHINESE BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION. THE CORPORATION HAS BEEN WORKING WITH THE REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY, THE CITY PLANNING COMMISSION AND OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT, SUPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING IS NEEDED. CHINATOWN BELONGS TO THE PHILADELPHIA COMMUNITY. CHINATOWN BELONGS TO YOU.

COME TO THE EASTER SUNDAY RALLY!
COME TO THE TOWN MEETING!

SPONSORED BY:
PHILADELPHIA CHINATOWN DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
AN AFFILIATE OF THE
CHINESE BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION
1006 RACE STREET
PHILADELPHIA, PA. 19107

大厄運
都是一項嚴重打虫
義務，也有這枚利，來研討，來決
定我們華埠自己的命運。

禮士街九百一十一號

時半

本門城

A major consequence of the construction of the Vine Street Expressway would be the potential impact on the social and cultural functioning of Chinatown as a community. . . . The breakdown of Chinatown will be exacerbated by building the Expressway

(Draft EIS for Vine Street Expressway, 1974, pp. 81–82)

Many battles culminated in one momentous year, 1973. We forced agencies to recognize us by mobilizing vociferous protests to demand inclusion in the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation hearings at the State Office Building; to pressure Lynn Abraham, then executive director of the Redevelopment Authority, to prioritize relocation housing; and to pressure Philadelphia City Council to eliminate the footings and funding for the Ninth Street ramp. We also prevailed on Governor Shapp to redesign the Vine Street Expressway and petitioned the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to recognize our plight. The same year, our struggle received widespread coverage through the airing of Jon Wing Lum's documentary *Save Chinatown* on WPVI, Channel 6.

Our constant clamoring for a professional neighborhood plan to locate new affordable housing and community facilities resulted in the city-funded 1975 Gluck and Chadbourne Comprehensive Plan for Chinatown, which, importantly, sited new housing and extended the planning boundaries of Chinatown south to Arch and north to Callowhill Streets. When the funding moratorium for housing in Philadelphia was lifted in 1979, we pressed the Redevelopment Authority, Philadelphia City Council, and the politicians for a budget line item. This victory, by providing for relocation housing and an infusion of city investment into the neighborhood, signified the stabilization of Chinatown.

Because of Chinatown's Center City location, PCDC had to overcome a bureaucratic tangle of funding, zoning, construction, and land acquisition issues. Nonetheless, from 1982 to 1990, PCDC developed 164 new units of affordable housing and 22 commercial storefronts and collaborated with the Philadelphia Department of Commerce to build the landmark Chinatown Friendship Gate at 10th and Arch Streets. Because of PCDC's efforts, Philadelphia City Council passed Chinatown Special District zoning (1989), which protects the scale of the neighborhood and provides for compatible land uses. Between 1999 and 2003, 61 low/moderate-income dwelling units were added in Chinatown North, the area north of Vine Street between 9th and 11th Streets. All this has catalyzed private small business development in the community, now extending to the limits of the planning area.

Having fought long and hard for survival, Chinatown has put down deeper and wider roots, nourished by the influx of Asian immigrants and their successful entrepreneurship. This would not be the case if PCDC and its allies had not waged the fierce struggle for existence and then pressured government to provide the necessary capital funding for projects that would symbolize its affirmation of Chinatown's right to exist, grow, and flourish.

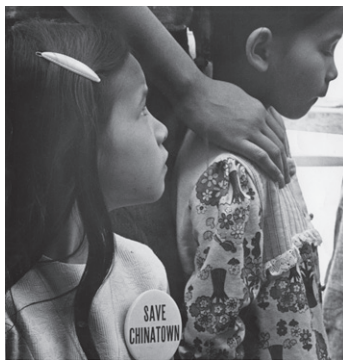
But the Save Chinatown movement has other lasting legacies. We—members of the community—gained a sense of agency, added new identities, and confronted the unjust actions imposed by government policy. Had we not resisted what government officials and politicians thought was inevitable at the outset, we would probably have suffered the sad fate of Washington, DC's Chinatown, devastated by its

convention center and the Verizon Center. We all strongly believe that community activism and a unified movement were crucial for Philadelphia's Chinatown's survival and that in the process we also disrupted the prevalent image of Asian Americans as passive.

As an active member of both Yellow Seeds and PCDC, I learned community organizing through the Save Chinatown movement. It laid the conceptual and practical foundation for my future work around issues of educational equity and social justice with other working-class communities and communities of color. For Harry Leong, being part of Wing's film crew made a deep and lasting impression. His exposure as a 10 year old to the community's protests at public meetings and in City Council nurtured the belief that it was his natural right to speak out and confront city hall. For Gary Lee, then in high school and now an attorney, going to meetings of Philadelphia City Council and with city and state officials instilled in him an appreciation of community activism and a healthy

skepticism in regard to the inevitability of public plans. Jon Wing Lum regarded his documentary *Save Chinatown* as a social justice project, a participatory democratic exercise, and the beginning of a new genre, "catalytic cinema."

The success of the Save Chinatown movement and the longevity of PCDC can be attributed to the continuity of grassroots community



Children attend rally regarding the construction of the Vine Street Expressway and Market Street East in the Chinatown section of Philadelphia (DETAIL).

Courtesy of McDowell Bulletin Collection, Urban Archives, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia.

We learned that we need to be involved with community. We need to speak out for the community, especially with a community that is primarily an immigrant population.

(Harry Leong, Director, Chinese Christian Church and Center)

leadership provided by Cecilia Yep, longtime community resident and PCDC executive director emeritus, and George Moy, longtime PCDC board member and community advocate. From working-class families ethnically tracked into the laundry business, they saw Chinatown as central to their lives. They developed pride and confidence as circumstances demanded they challenge the power structure and take political action. They became community role models of commitment, tenacity, and courage.

Countering the stereotype of the passive Asian—“keep a low profile” and “don’t make trouble”—the Save Chinatown movement represented the time that we broke the mold, overcoming feelings of inferiority and speaking out. For George Moy, speaking out on behalf of Chinatown compelled him to develop a more forceful public identity. Tony To, former Yellow Seeds member and now executive director of Homesight in Seattle, said, “It’s an attitude you have to overcome because if in this country you don’t do that, you will be encroached on.” We all acknowledged our uncomfortable identity as members of an immigrant working-class community of color seen as compliant, submissive to authority, and always the “other.” Our struggle to save Chinatown and to free ourselves of the stereotype went hand in hand, one reinforcing the other.

The interwoven story of people who lived the experience of Save Chinatown—people from different generations who played different roles and who found different meanings from their participation—is that epic David-and-Goliath struggle. The story of the Save Chinatown movement tells of the importance of community connections, of working together for common cause, and the strength and power that comes from a strong belief in what is right and just. Moreover, for many of us it was the first time that we had to confront the American political system in such a direct way. We became activists, challenging not only our own personal dispositions influenced by Asian culture but the bureaucratic and irrational decision making of government officials and politicians. Survival has been at the core of the immigrant experience, and our community has survived and grown because of the perseverance and forbearance of several generations of Chinese immigrants and their descendents.

What are the lessons that have come out of our struggle for recognition, respect, preservation, growth, and self-determination? I think most people who were involved in the movement would agree that the experience was a great civics lesson. The struggle demanded much personal sacrifice, long volunteer hours away from family, and frustrating confrontations with power. On one hand, it emboldened an

ethnic neighborhood whose public identity had been that of a quaint place to dine or find Asian gifts and groceries and whose people were inscrutable. On the other hand, it taught us that we had to force the democratic system to be true to its own promise of giving voice to and protecting the livelihood of the minority as well as the majority. Nonetheless, we continue to see the primacy of profits and bureaucratic disregard for people’s lives and livelihood. In 1985, the Convention Center took more Chinatown properties but never generated more business for Chinatown. In the last 15 years Chinatown has fought off a federal prison, a baseball stadium, and, most recently, a Foxwoods casino. Thus, economic injustice and political expediency continue to challenge our community’s existence. No longer naïvely believing that we can avoid politics, we have engaged and strategized on many levels and learned to build coalitions and communities across the city and the country that have fought the structures of power. But like Sisyphus in his endless task, we seem never to be free of the onus of rallying at a moment’s notice to confront the next threat. And we will do that to save Chinatown. ■

Mary Yee was active in the Save Chinatown movement as a graduate student and young professional in city planning. She came to Philadelphia having experienced the trauma of urban highway construction in Boston’s Chinatown, a close-knit immigrant community that had been decimated by the Central Artery and the Southeast Expressway (I-93) in the 1960s, where the fracturing of relationships with neighbors, homes, community gathering places, and places of worship was not merely physical but spiritual.

Children march outside Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church and School to protest the proposed demolition of their school to build the Vine Street Expressway. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Apr. 8, 1966. Used with permission of Philadelphia Inquirer Copyright © 2012.



STATEMENT OF THE CHINATOWN COMMUNITY— OCTOBER 1973

PHILADELPHIA CHINATOWN DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

The Chinese community feels the need to reassert our stand with regard to our community. Chinatown, as an ethnic community and an important cultural nucleus, is a significant part of the City's social fabric and a worthy contribution to its commercial life. As such, we believe that Chinatown has a right to remain and to develop.

We have been in existence for over a hundred years. Our goals are no different from those of other communities around the City. We desire the establishment of a stable community with an environment conducive to growth and residential, commercial, and institutional development. We need housing affordable to our people and adequate community facilities. We need an opportunity and resources to plan for the future of our community as an integral whole—for the land use and development in the best interests of the community and the people of Philadelphia in general. We believe that the highway and urban renewal projects surrounding Chinatown, as presently conceived, would only act as a noose—preventing expansion and growth according to the needs of the Chinese community. We ask that Chinatown be accorded its rightful democratic demand to be able to participate in the decision-making processes which directly affect it.

Recent events have led people to believe that the Chinese community is against progress—against the City's attempt to promote commerce and revitalize the inner core. That is untrue. We believe that these things should happen in the interests of the people. However, when projects are promoted without regard to the rights and livelihood of the people they will affect, we feel that this is neither in the interests of progress nor of the City at large. On the contrary, we feel it is a great injustice to the basic principle of equal individual rights, on which are founded our great American democratic traditions.

We feel that it would benefit both the City and the community to be able to work together in solving their common problems as soon as possible. We feel that further discussion should focus on the following issues:

MAJOR ISSUES:

1. The Market Street East ramps along 9th and 11th Streets. The community is opposed to the construction of these ramps as presently designed. We feel that their construction would result in undue detrimental effects to the environmental, social, and economic health of our community. We believe that it would be in the best interests of both parties to require an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) in order to reassure the people of Philadelphia that no harmful effects would result from the Market Street East project.
2. A comprehensive proposal for Chinatown and the designation of Chinatown as an Urban Renewal Area. We feel that the community should be given a chance to plan for its future.

3. An appropriation of around \$40,000 to hire consultants for a comprehensive plan. A full-time consultant would expedite the resolution of City-Community problems with a comprehensive proposal.
4. Allocations for housing and community facilities in the City's current Capital Programming. We feel that a commitment of this kind by the City on a significant scale would facilitate the working relationship between it and the community.
5. Recognition of P.C.D.C. as the official representative of the Chinatown community in matters concerning urban renewal and physical development.

OTHER ISSUES:

6. Chinatown's potential for expansion east to 8th Street, west to 13th Street, and north to Callowhill Street. Being the shortage of land and housing in Chinatown caused by government activity, we need to have more land in which to grow and develop.
7. Rezoning of the Chinatown area to be consistent with a community of residences and retail commercial establishments and other beneficial uses. We feel this is important to insure the stability of our community and to control future growth.
8. Low and moderate income housing for families and elderly.
9. More community facilities. Presently there is no public elementary school closer than the McCall School. There is no City recreation facility nor is there a facility for a senior citizen purpose.
10. Better municipal services. We feel that sanitation and care of the derelicts on Skid Row who are moving into Chinatown could be greatly improved.
11. The police parking lot at 11th and Race Streets. We feel that since this land is near the nucleus of Chinatown the Chinese community should be involved in determining its use.
12. Off-street parking in Chinatown. The residents of Chinatown have recently been harassed by ticketing of their cars parked in front of their houses in the early morning hours. Furthermore, there have been problems with customers getting their cars ticketed on the residential streets as well. Chinatown needs a resolution to its parking problems both in the interests of traffic efficiency and commercial viability. ■

Text and image of blank petition form protesting Vine Street Expressway development plans courtesy of PCDC.

