



# Protection & Preservation

# of New York City's Chinatown

*Speaking with Mei Lum  
about anti-gentrification  
work in Chinatown and the  
founding of W.O.W. Project.*



**Kimi Hanauer:** How did W.O.W. come to be and what is your role in the project?

**Mei Lum:** Everything got started in the winter of 2015, early 2016. I was transitioning back to New York after living abroad in Thailand, China, and Laos for a few years. I was going through my own transition of what my next steps were for my next few years. I was thinking about applying for graduate school and using New York and Chinatown as a landing pad to gain my grounding here, but I came home and felt the ground underneath me shifting.

At the time, my family was going through a turning point with the business [Wing on Wo & Co.]—the building that we owned on Mott Street was on the brink of a sale, and that was a really emotional time for me because I grew up in that store. My dad always talks about changing my diapers on the front counter. You know, I would meet my cousins, play hide-and-seek in the store—I have a lot of vivid memories in this space. My grandfather would teach me classical Chinese poetry after school and my grandmother would be in the kitchen in the back with a prepared after-school snack for me. I've always leaned on the store to be my safe haven and my launching pad to go out into the world and explore new things. When I came back and realized that could be taken away or erased ... it was really upsetting to me. I knew I had to spend time with my family and understand why they came to this decision before jumping up and saying, "No, we shouldn't do this!" I knew there had to be a reason, and I hadn't been living in New York for quite some time—I went to college outside of New York, and right after that, I graduated and went to work in Asia. At the time, I knew my place at my home and knew I had to spend more time understanding.

At that same time, I met a Ph.D. student, Diane Wong—she's one of my best friends now. She walked into the shop in 2015 serendipitously, starting her dissertation research on the gentrification of Chinatowns across the U.S. and how gender and race played into it as well. She started her field research in Manhattan's Chinatown by canvassing the neighborhood and asking different

Mei's grandmother and her sister smiling while hanging out at the shop after hours, October 1969.



Mei's grandmother posing in front of the shop just after she decided to take over the business from her father in 1964.





businesses if she could interview them. When she walked into W.O.W. and asked me and my dad if we'd be interested in being interviewed, we said that we would be the perfect people to talk to, since we were actually going through the motions of putting the building on the market. After I sat down with her, it was really refreshing to have a third party to vent to and unpack all my feelings about the possible erasure of this store. She was really generous and ended up inviting me on the rest of her interviews with her. I shadowed her for three months and we met with over 20 community stakeholders throughout the process. We talked to each person about their connection to Chinatown, their story of growing up here, and their concerns about the current changes in the neighborhood.

It was a really eye-opening experience for me because it really contextualized my family's situation against the backdrop of what other people were going through, and I realized that the struggle was not isolated to my family. I also started to think about the possible erasure of W.O.W. and what that would mean as a ripple effect to our block and the larger Chinatown community. That process of sitting down with people in my neighborhood really inspired me to think about ways to innovate within the store and create a space where folks could come in and talk about the changes that were happening.

I was working on a lot of things at the same time; I was working different part-time jobs and filling out graduate school applications and still going around interviewing others with Diane. We would debrief after each interview and talk about what resonated with us, what stood out to us and was surprising. We started to see a theme of second- and third-generation Chinese Americans coming back and opening up businesses that were "non-traditional" to Chinatown, like fixie bike shops, ice cream shops, galleries, all these different storefronts that one would walk in front of and assume that they weren't owned by people from Chinatown. So, we wanted to unpack the complexity of this and bring them [second- and third-generation Chinese American business owners] into a space to be in conversation with community mem-

bers. Naturally, the only space we had access to was W.O.W., so we started holding the meetings there. We didn't have a grand idea of starting the W.O.W. Project and creating a big initiative to bring this into conversation, and didn't realize folks would be so receptive to it. Not only our community, but other Chinatowns across North America reached out to us saying, "This is amazing! We need this for our community!" So that encouraged us to think about the W.O.W. Project as something bigger and something that is living and breathing. That was in May of 2016 when we officially started.

**KH: What was your takeaway from other people's situations and differing opinions on how to navigate gentrification in that moment?**

I think it made me realize how complicated gentrification is, how layered and complex it can be. People have such different definitions of what it means. I think there are opinions that, "This is so good for Chinatown, it's going to be clean now. I remember growing up in Chinatown and it was so dirty. All this development means clean streets and it won't be smelly anymore, people won't think of Chinatown as a poor ethnic neighborhood." So we had people saying things like that, along with people feeling really emotional about the displacement aspect of gentrification, specifically with housing and the shuttering of long-time businesses that has been happening over the past five years.

**KH: Too often gentrification essentially means displacement; it means pushing people out to make space for new, higher-income people, rather than addressing issues around poverty and housing directly. Would you be able to share more about your relationship with your family and how that exists within the collaboration? I know you and your grandma work together a lot, and that she was in a similar situation to you years ago when the family was going to put the store on the market and instead she took it over, right?**

It's so challenging to work with family. What's special about the store is that there are three different generations that work there. It's me, my dad, my great aunt, and my grandmother. That's the



core W.O.W. team during the week. On the weekend, my cousins come and they will help out with all the customers in the front and stamping bags. And my sister comes by too ... the weekends are more time for family to get together and catch up. But on an everyday basis, my experience working across cultures abroad gave me the patience to work across generations. They are similar because they both require patience, compassion, and empathy. For me, what has been helping working with my dad, my grandmother, and my great aunt, is asking them about what it was like when they first started working in the store, so that they can revisit a similar time in their own lives in order to relate to where I am right now. That helps me bring down the wall that I have with my grandmother. She's such a boss in the way that she has control issues with trusting me to do things. For an example, she has kept the books for the building and the store forever. This year, I was like, "It's okay, I'll do it myself," and she was like, "Are you sure?" and I said, "Yeah, I'm good, I'm using QuickBooks, I'm totally fine." A few weeks ago, she said, "Did you send the books to the accountant?" and I said, "Yeah I'm good." She asked me, "Are you sure? I think your books are a mess." I told her, "You have no idea what I've been doing!" She also still wants to be as involved as she has been. That's tough, letting go of something that has been in your life for the past 50-plus years. I totally understand that, so what I've been trying to do is go out to breakfast with her and update her to make sure she still knows what's going on. The worst thing would be for her to feel like a stranger in her own home, and that's not something I want to happen. Trying to keep the communication lines open is important but it's so challenging. It's like pulling teeth when I am trying to change something or update something. It is hard to explain why changes are happening for her to understand what the purpose of the change is because she is so stubborn in her ways. So yeah, there is lots of explaining in many different ways and perspectives.

**Bomin Jeon:** I am curious about programming that hadn't been done before in the space and the process of planning those events with your family. Has there been any positive or negative feedback? Do they tell

Mei's great-grandfather Walter Eng sternly stands in front of the shop, year unknown.



Mei's father, Gary, gives a closing speech at the W.O.W. Project's Cratewood Design Challenge Showcase, October 2016. Photograph by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin.







Mei welcomes everyone to the W.O.W.'s Cratewood Design Challenge Showcase, October 2016. Photograph by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin.



An intergenerational crowd gathers as Gary announces the Showcase winners, October 2016. Photograph by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin.

you straight up about how they feel about things going on?

Oh yeah. Yeah, they do. My grandmother is usually at home when I hold events because they go pretty late in the evening. She still to this day thinks I just hold meetings. She calls them meetings at least. She'll say, "Oh, how was your meeting?"

To answer your question, back in October of 2016 we hosted something called The Cratewood Design Challenge where we chose five finalists to design something for the community with this cratewood stored in our basement. Our cratewood came from when our porcelain inventory was shipped from Hong Kong. While I was cleaning out my basement, I was like, "Oh my gosh, we need to do something with this! This could be a cool way to engage people in the community who aren't professionally trained woodworkers."

My dad loves woodworking and making things. I involved him in the process of choosing the finalists, the process of designing what they want to make, and then the building out of those projects. I think that was an experience for him that was really transformative because when it came down to the showcase, with all the finalists standing by their projects and talking about it, he made a little speech about getting involved in W.O.W. He started talking about his family history—his dad was a stowaway in a crate on a ship to America—sharing his experience learning about how his father came to America. He got really emotional and actually started crying during the showcase. He still talks about that event, while talking about that being a turning point for him to finally feel comfortable in his skin, his family history, his identity, and who he is. I was really excited about that, wanting to keep him updated in everything that we do and what we are working on. He is the biggest W.O.W. Project ambassador. He talks to every single customer in the store about the W.O.W. Project so that they know that buying something from the store supports the mission that we are working towards.

Valentina Cabezas: How did the artist residency at W.O.W. come about?



When I thought the store was going to be sold, I started hanging out there late into the night to begin my slow goodbye. I started to sift around and look at old things. I started to find old photos and invited one of my best friends, Juliet, who is actually working really closely with us now, to redo one of our storefront windows. We ended up finding our old paper kites that we had in the shop and we hung them in a window in order to change the storefront, which hasn't been changed in 50-plus years. That started to get me thinking about how we might be able to engage other people in designing a window display for the Lunar New Year that was coming up at the time, which made me start thinking about how we might be able to support artists.

At the time I had met the director of China Residencies, Kira Simon-Kennedy. [China Residencies is an organization that offers artists resources to pursue residencies in China.] I started talking to Kira about my idea of possibly hiring an artist to redo our storefront window. She was like, "You should just turn it into a residency." And I said, "Wait, really? Do you think so? I haven't really started to redo the studio. It is slowly coming together..." Kira said, "Yeah! You can just clean up the studio, give it to an artist for three months, and then you can figure something out with the window display!"

I mentioned this to her in November and soon after she said, "We have to get out the open call in two weeks." So we ran around and it happened really quickly. That is really how it came about. Now that I think back on that process, I also had ideas of wanting to create a new tradition for the neighborhood for people to want to come to Chinatown for the Lunar New Year. Everyone comes out for the parade, but I wanted folks to come out and look at window displays like how people go to Fifth Avenue to look at Christmas windows. I want people to have a conversation about culture and tradition and for the window displays to live and engage with the people on the street.

We were lucky with Melissa Liu, the first artist that we had, and now with Emily Mock as well; it has been really amazing invit-

W.O.W. storefront, summer of 2016. Photograph by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin.



Inaugural storefront artist-in-residence, Melissa Liu, talks to a reporter about her window display, January 2017. Photograph by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin.





ing community folks into the studio space and engaging them in making the content for the window display.

VC: I love how that manifested and you just ran with it. I feel like that's how we [Press Press] work. [laughs]

Sometimes you just have to do it, you can't think too much about it.

BJ: I feel like my personal experience of visiting W.O.W. and coming into the space was so heavily tied with food! I went on the dumpling night where a lot of past residents were present and I got to talk to a few of them. That was really memorable for me. It was such a welcoming and warm space; I was learning so much about the shop and its history. I also learned about you [Mei]. I don't know if that's a regular thing that you involve food in your events, but do you consider that as a gateway into your practice, as way of perpetuating cultural understanding?

Connecting with people through our programs is really important to me. Bomin, you came to our potluck this week, right?

BJ: Yes, it was amazing!

I've been trying to hold those more often. The first year we started the W.O.W. Project, I don't know how I did it, but I was running the programs and also holding a potluck every two or three months. Because, like Bomin said, I wanted people to feel welcome and make a space where they felt at home. There's a lot of work that has to happen for people to have trust in a space that is trying to cultivate community, and I knew that I had to put in the work in order for that to happen. I am still trying to make it a sustainable practice for me and our community and to make it a regular, informal thing.

KH: Would you be able to tell us more about your anti-gentrification work in the area? It sounds like the gatherings you host at W.O.W. are part of that agenda.

Yes, the work with the W.O.W. Project is directly tied to the anti-gentrification movement in Chinatown and all over New York City in general. A lot of that work for me, outside of W.O.W., is collaborating with an artist collective called Chinatown Art Brigade. We educate artists about how they can be used as agents for gentrification to happen and for development to take place. On the local level, I am an active member of the community board, which is a community-level political body. I want young people to become part of the decision-making for things that affect gentrification in Chinatown, like liquor licenses and new developments. There are so many different things that come up in the community board that so many people don't know about until they become public and are already passed.

With Diane, I do a lot of awareness-building workshops through different talks in universities. We also went on a west coast Chinatown solidarity tour in October. We traveled to San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver, and L.A.'s Chinatowns. We met with other Chinatown grassroots organizers to listen, learn, and strategize together. That was amazing. There were things I learned there that I realized later had so much impact on me, all just in 10 days. It is a lot of education and awareness-building, and making sure I am informed as well.

KH: What do you hope for the future of Chinatown? And what does sanctuary mean to you?

I really like the quote that you brought up earlier in casual conversation from Emily Mock's artist statement ["...Chinatowns have existed throughout the world as centers for Asian immigrants to come together in the absence of their home country..."]. That quote resonates with me so much about what Chinatown is. I always get nervous when people ask me these questions, because I am really hyper-aware of my role in the community and my role at W.O.W. I don't at all want to become the mouthpiece for Chinatown. I don't want people to think I am positioning myself as the savior of this place. I am always hesitant about speaking out about the future of Chinatown because I only have control over





Showcase attendees marvel at the crate wood designed pieces, October 2016. Photograph by Eric Jenkins-Sahlin.

W.O.W., so I always try to talk about what I hope for W.O.W.

Our mission is to have an impact on Chinatown as a neighborhood. For me, what that looks like is having young people coming back to the neighborhood who feel a sense of belonging and ownership over the community and its cultural history, and them wanting to contribute in some way—it can be opening up a business, becoming part of a community organization, volunteering. I'm not hoping for everyone to take over their family's business and start a W.O.W. Project, but I want young folks to understand the value of our history and legacy of this place. That is why I am focusing on engaging young people with W.O.W., like high school students and college students. I want them to build the movement that they want to see in the neighborhood.

In terms of sanctuary, what that means to me ... it's a big question! I think about sanctuary in the terms of our homes and our sacred and safe spaces where people can be who they want to be and who they are. This is why displacement and gentrification are so violent because it disrupts our sanctuary spaces and erases all of the love and care it took to create them forever.