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Capstone Project

Family in the Chinese American Takeout Restaurant – Conceptualizing History

In the beginning, the Family in the Chinese American Takeout Restaurant project was an archiving endeavor to collect the story of the unique food cuisine and its operations in New York City. The initial plan was to piece together the many decisions that led to the formation of a kinship-centered Chinese immigration story, a version of the American dream held by Fujianese Chinese villagers in the 80s and 90s. Every participant interviewed plans to stay in America indefinitely and raise future families in the United States. Evidently, this is a successful American story, made possible by a franchise-like business model replicated across America. The Chinese American Takeout restaurant and its distinct restaurant signs, menus, pictures of food, and cheap and fast but very oily dishes drenched in sweet sauce provide the key to sustainable socioeconomic mobility for entire families and villages across generations.

           Essential to this phenomenon is the extensive Chinese immigrant network built by Chinese in America, ranging from all members of the Chinese immigrant community to townships and family-level networks. Quickly, it became apparent only a few participants wished to donate records of their lives, and anonymity became a privacy safety net. After consulting mentors, it became evident that there were many ways to show the critical role of Chinese American Takeout restaurants and the connections it forms without revealing the identity of participants and without a large archive collection. Because the project's exploratory focus is influenced by its donors and the materials gathered centered on family life and immigration experiences, it became individual-oriented. The best way to highlight the importance of the kinship network with a limited repository was to direct attention toward oral interviews. As a result, the connections made in the oral history collection highlight the indispensable role the Chinese American Takeout business plays in the immigrant experience of many expectant Chinese looking abroad.

           The most challenging part of the project was to weave together a coherent and truthful narrative of overcoming hardship to achieve prosperity faithful to each participant's account. As a result, the WordPress website hosting the project was incredibly time-consuming to build, requiring reflection on the approaches taken and the reception garnered to improve how each component could complement the other. To fulfill my role as the interviewer, recordkeeper, and historian, it became necessary to put myself in the shoes of each interviewee and understand how they conceptualized their stories. Echoing the core values of the Society for American Archivists to expand access by documenting past events using primary sources and actively sharing knowledge with a broad range of people, including the records' creators,[[1]](#footnote-1) the ultimate goal is to utilize narrative power and archival power to benefit the people who work in Chinese American Takeout restaurants, by articulating and compiling the histories of a unique under-researched group.

           The Family in the Chinese American Takeout Restaurant project's methodology was finding willing participants through my kinship network. I took an inductive approach by exploring questions raised by interviewees and through data collection. As the interviewer, I participated in each interviewee's intimate storytelling. At times, I encouraged interviewers to elaborate on intriguing points. Outside of the interviews, I approached likely candidates, asking for interviews, scheduling, recording interview sessions, asking for additional records to build a fuller picture, digitizing documents, and then making contextualizing components to illustrate the insightful nature of the primary sources on display. My experience working on a virtual Omeka exhibit at the Oskar Diethelm Library for Internship Seminar influenced the idea of building a WordPress website. I transferred my digitization, processing, and metadata-input skills from my archival background to enhance this project.

The community archive movement sought to deconstruct the narrow definition of archives and expand groups represented within archival walls and, ultimately, recorded in history. To prevent biases as a curator selecting documents to share and interview questions to ask, I reminded myself of the limits of archiving and the filters it inadvertently adds to collections. When I removed records from the collection or added an extra barrier to access the interview, such as for Person D's second interview, I needed to do so with the community's best intentions in mind. It soon became evident that the MPLP method was required; transcribing interviews and building this website were the most time-consuming tasks. To process as many interviews as possible, the transcribing process was shortened by adding detailed indexes while editing audio files in Audacity. I have yet to have the time to manually review transcripts for later interviews. As a graduate student in the New York University Archives and Public History program, I understood the significance of which records are preserved and which narrative is selected.

As a member of this community, an essential objective of the Family in the Chinese American Takeout Restaurant website is to portray, as accurately as possible, the untold stories of immigrant families working in the labor-intensive food business serving dishes that are foreign to people from China to fulfill their American dreams. It was essential to remind each participant of the importance of their lived experiences and the purpose of community archiving their cultural heritage not only for future researchers but also to include in New York City's history. Unsurprisingly, many candidates I approached did not see the value in their stories, instead viewing history as stories written in textbooks. When it became clear that participants were unsure what information to contribute and whether anything shared would threaten their privacy, the project took a participant-focused approach. Realizing the importance of community in archiving and conceptualizing the collection, the task became to illustrate, to the best of my abilities, individual experiences, and values as they navigate the impact of being a part of the kinship network.

           Reflecting on the historicizing of a collection I gathered to reveal a phenomenon, lessons include experiencing first-hand the power of the curator to affect primary materials. As I created themes to elucidate the key takeaways, it became evident that it was impossible to bring attention to each discussion presented in the materials. As a student with a strong interest in women's rights in China, I would create a tag for Gender Perceptions where all family relations-related topics are currently placed in Parent-Child Dynamic. ArcGIS StoryMaps, Canva videos, and references to additional works on those whose livelihoods are tied to the Chinese American Takeout restaurant are strategically placed on the website. As a graduate student seeking to build a Capstone project on Chinese immigrant families, I did not want to portray accounts in misleading ways. At the same time, my close proximity to interviewees meant it was necessary to examine the broader framework and consult mentors to ensure my project would weave a comprehensible narrative for audiences.

The ONWARD project[[2]](#footnote-2) and the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project[[3]](#footnote-3) were insightful public history case studies teaching the importance of giving back to communities that lead to a more inclusive story building. To ensure participants and their families can access the collection, the website will remain public, and interactive story maps were written with a broad audience in mind. Limitations include the limited English proficiency of many Chinese immigrants, an infusion of my own experience in the story told, and the technological barriers for some to access a website-based project. Many community archives aim to give archiving power to creators, allowing participants to contribute their experiences. The Family in the Chinese American Takeout Restaurant project also sought to incorporate the different pieces of each person's life if they were willing to share.

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2. Allison H. Fischer-Olson, and Claire Perrott, "The ONWARD Project and Native Voices: Interventions in Biased 1930s Archival Collections," in The Public Historian 42, no. 1 (February 2020), 80-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Linda Shopes, "Oral History and Community Involvement: The Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project," in Susan Porter Benson, Steve Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public (Temple University Press, 1986), 259-260. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)