THE SACRED CODE OF CHINATOWN

WE FIND OURSELVES IN A WORLD that appears to have lost its rhythm. We grapple with an existential crisis and yearn for a beacon to guide us through these turbulent and uncertain times.

Joy Harjo, a cherished Muscogee (Creek) Nation writer and performer who also holds the honor of being the twenty-third Poet Laureate of the United States, offers insightful wisdom about nurturing trust within our communities. In her eloquent poem "Once the World Was Perfect," she writes:

Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.
Then we took it for granted.
Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind.
Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head.
And once Doubt ruptured the web,
All manner of demon thoughts
Jumped through—
We destroyed the world we had been given
For inspiration, for life—
Each stone of jealousy, each stone
Of fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.
No one was without a stone in his or her hand.
There we were,
Right back where we had started.
We were bumping into each other
In the dark.
And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know
How to live with each other.
Then one of the stumbling ones took pity on another
And shared a blanket.
A spark of kindness made a light.
The light made an opening in the darkness.
Everyone worked together to make a ladder.
A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world,
And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children,
And their children, all the way through time—
To now, into this morning light to you.[1]

We have, time and again, witnessed the profound importance of ordinary life. "That's just how we do things around here," say locals, their words conveying the rich tapestry of a community's story. Within the mundane, the culture breathes, rising from shared experiences that guide individuals on their life journey. Culture manifests as distilled wisdom from the past, steering families, friends, groups, and organizations toward harmonious and welcoming coexistence.

> *"San Francisco Chinatown is a place where I feel welcomed and comforted. The people there remind me of my family and friends back in China. I love that Chinatown is able to spread Chinese culture to people of varying backgrounds to enjoy as well."* **—Eva Liu**

Cultivating trust across generations and between community residents, including those without homes, is critical to our collective health and well-being. This is particularly relevant for immigrant populations in America. US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy recently drew attention to the health implications of loneliness, especially in our aging population. Murthy highlights the troubling parallel between the deteriorating social relationships we observe today and the health effects of smoking fifteen cigarettes daily.

In agreement, Professor Andrea Wigfield, director of the Center for Loneliness Studies at Sheffield Hallam University in the United Kingdom, acknowledges high levels of loneliness among adolescents and young adults, declining in middle age, only to rise again in older individuals. Studies suggest loneliness and social isolation can lead to depression, dementia, heart attacks, lung disease, and overall frailty. Moreover, Professor Andrew Steptoe from University College London emphasizes the tendency of socially isolated and lonely individuals to adopt less healthy habits, particularly regarding smoking, diet, and physical activity.[2]

In collaboration with Direct Relief, Wildflowers fellows and friends, and our partner, Self-Help for the Elderly, we have documented how members of the Chinese community have managed to nurture their relationships under stressful conditions. Our mission is to amplify the voices of those less heard and learn from their resilience, adaptability, and growth. We endeavor to understand their Chinese and American values, their compass. We want to discover how they organize to achieve their goals and care for each other. Our goal is to uncover the "web" and its innate code of conduct that underpins relationships.

What follows is a snapshot of our experience in San Francisco's Chinatown during the COVID pandemic, approximately twenty-one months ago. As the oldest and second-largest Chinese American community in the United States, Chinatown represents a densely populated neighborhood with shared language, culture, and community practices.[3] Comprising single-room occupancy hotels, grocery stores, restaurants, community-based organizations, parks, and various social spaces, these public, private, and nonprofit entities have developed an affordable lifestyle for more than fifteen thousand Asian immigrant

families, with an average household income of around $20,000. Housing, transportation, public spaces, and small family businesses form the backbone of sustainability, essential for fostering social fabric and shared culture.[4]

To unveil the intricate, unseen "code" of cultural norms and values, we launched an arts and culture initiative, Hidden Gems III. This project invited residents to contribute artworks and narrate their personal stories, chronicling their experiences within the neighborhood. Roughly three-quarters of the participants were immigrants, and a quarter were first-generation American born. They ranged in age from a tender three years to a venerable eighty-nine.

Their artworks and narratives poignantly highlighted the difficulties of immigrant life, navigating a new societal system teeming with unfamiliar language and culture. Living in America presents formidable challenges, but Chinatown offers immigrants a sanctuary. A staggering 96 percent of participants perceived their experience in Chinatown as having a positive, profound impact on them, their families, and their friends. They lauded the community's cultivation of a sense of belonging and identity, cherishing the shared spirit of caring and joy. See Changlin Zeng's short video, *Immigrant Life in Chinatown,* at https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/830675196/privacy.

> ***"Chinatown gives me a very strong sense of belonging. It is a common community for overseas Chinese, a kind of spiritual support. It can give me the opportunity to move upward and can tell me the meaning of life. Although I don't live in Chinatown, my life is inseparable from Chinatown. What it means to me is a spiritual support like home, so I am more willing to discover the beauty of ordinary life here."*** **—Changlin Zeng**

The sixty unique artworks and personal narratives represent the community's collective consciousness. Arranged together, they form a vivid tableau of community life reminiscent of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's peasant paintings. A common thread running through the narratives was the emphasis on kindness and assistance to others, with good deeds being seen as fundamental to the community's ethos. The crux of this ethos is a code that cherishes unity amid diversity. Striving for improvement fortifies moral strength each time a helping hand is extended. At Wildflowers, we regard the pursuit of unity as a sacred endeavor.[5]

The Hidden Gems narratives unveiled rich stories featuring local places, food, and the resilience of families and friends who help each other overcome adversity. Some of the narratives commonly referenced shared mealtimes instilling a sense of nourishment. Other stories pointed to card games or Chinese chess at Portsmouth Square; social connections fostered in local bakeries, dim sum teahouses, and restaurants; spiritual objects for safeguarding loved ones and others; volunteers involved in community events, cultural festivals, and ceremonies; informal counselors mentoring high school students while

creating service opportunities for them in the community; and protectors standing up to hate crimes and discrimination.

These activities and experiences are the threads that weave the robust social fabric of Chinatown, fostering civic engagement among families, friends, and neighbors.

> *"Ever since the violence against the AAPI community ramped up in 2020, I put it on myself to defend the Chinatown community. We all cope differently. I coped by learning martial arts, joining [a local] board, supporting local businesses, and [I am] determined to be the change many of us want to see in America. My hope is that our project will encourage coalition building, inspire young people to get politically involved, and empower our community that has been targeted for centuries."* **—Kyle Shin**

The community's guiding light is a spirit of unity and goodness. This spirit doesn't merely promote social trust and cohesion within the community; it also facilitates the growth of relationships for children and youth with peers beyond Chinatown.

This paper aims to share our insights on the profound influence of local culture derived from our study of the Hidden Gems artworks and stories rooted in Chinatown. Our findings underscore the spirit of unity in shaping a neighborhood's social fabric. We witnessed a unique ecosystem in Chinatown, consisting of public, private, and community organizations, all intricately linked. The video *SHE is Chinatown* shows Shirley Quan's and Donna Lau's insights about the salient importance of proximity between residents and Chinatown's ecosystem to her grandmother expressing love to her and to the family. You can view the video at http://vimeo.com/833150295.

> *"I firmly believe I would not be the person I am today, had I not been born into an immigrant family (from Toisan, China) and having grown up in the heart of Chinatown. . . . I am now a 72-year-young great-grandmother myself, and want to ensure my extended, blended family, and future generations, understand their backstory, the experiences of their immigrant ancestors . . . ensuring they experience today's Chinatown with gratitude and a much deeper meaning of their roots."* **—Shirley Quan**

While doubts, metaphorically referred to as "spiked heads," are common, we found that the culture of unity in the Chinese American community, born from historical and contemporary experiences, serves as a robust safeguard against mistrust and the societal dysfunctions visible today.

Looking forward, we believe the future hinges on strengthening social trust through bolstering the cultural framework of the community. Kindness and helpfulness, although

expressed differently across locations, are universally positive forces. Our research continues, with meetings planned with local artists to further investigate the role of their artwork in boosting community spirit.

In solidarity, Wildflowers is establishing a Flow Fund, generously kick-started by an anonymous benefactor, to support small acts of kindness under the guidance of Hidden Gems artists, embodying the American spirit of giving back to the community.

Our commitment extends beyond Chinatown, as we aspire to learn from a range of neighborhoods to enhance local ecosystem conditions. Our focus is on fostering sustainability in the sense of equity, affordability, and social connections. In all our endeavors, Wildflowers operates step by step, meticulously ensuring that each action aligns with our values and sustainability perspective.

Our goal is to accurately interpret the challenges we face, highlight the creative forces at work, and acknowledge the champions of the sacred. Through this methodology, we hope to evolve individually and collectively into a beacon of positive influence, revealing avenues and social orders that could potentially navigate us out of our present darkness. Wildflowers Institute is dedicated to advancing the sustainability of populations in the grassroots.



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1. Joy Harjo, "Once the World Was Perfect," *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015).
2. See Anjana Ahuja, "Loneliness Threatens Health As Well As Happiness," *Financial Times,* May 17, 2023.
3. According to the Chinatown Area Plan, amendment by Resolution 13907 adopted on 7/6/1995, San Francisco Planning Department, City and County of San Francisco, "For over 100 years, Chinatown stood in this same location. In no other ethnic community of the city can be found such concentration and continuity of history."
4. See Gordon Chin, *Building Community, Chinatown Style: A Half Century of Leadership in San Francisco Chinatown* (San Francisco: Friends of Chinatown Community Development Center, 2015). Chin amplified strategies to advance affordable housing, transportation, and public spaces.
5. *The Oxford American Dictionary* defines "sacred" as having great respect and reverence by a particular group or individual.