Behind-the-scenes of China’s Unnatural Disaster: The Tears of Sichuan Province (2008)

Photo by Ming Xia
Why We Do This Work

VIVIAN LOUIE

I WAS BORN IN MANHATTAN’S CHINATOWN, but by the time I was age 14, I had lived in three vastly different worlds in the United States. Those three initial worlds became central to my identity and life’s work, namely, to how I understand the world to be, how I think the world should be—and to my friendship with the late scholar/activist Peter Kwong. Peter understood those transitions in my life and how they had shaped me. Throughout the years, I’ve learned from him, and his work, about the complex social and economic transformations that made those individual transitions possible. His writings about immigration, labor, and urban communities told the contours of my life story, and that of so many people.

From Chinatown to Jamaica

My immigrant parents had moved my older brothers and me from Chinatown to Jamaica, Queens. We were part of the exodus that Peter wrote about, when post-World War II America finally opened up, residentially, to previously segregated Americans, with the notable exception of African Americans. Back then, our Queens neighborhood was mostly native-born whites, although in the pocket where we lived some were Holocaust survivors, raising their second families after losing their first in the concentration camps. Our family went from seemingly knowing everyone in Chinatown (back then, there was only one Chinatown in New York City), to being one of the few Chinese families in the neighborhood.

My mom commuted an hour each way, first to the Chinese-owned garment factory in Chinatown and then later, to its new location in the Garment District. We went from living in an old tenement building where the lobby seemed to always smell of cat urine, to a brand new attached multi-family home with our very own tiny yard. But of course, we hadn’t really left Chinatown. My grandparents and step great-grandma were still there, along with other kinfolk and dear friends. Until I was 14, we would go down to Chinatown every weekend to visit. My mom got her hair done at John’s Beauty Parlor on Elizabeth Street, loaded up on vegetables, fruit and meat (haggling all the way in Chinese), and played mahjong on her one day off.

After moving, I realized I lived in two entirely different worlds, with two different sets of friends—my Jewish, Latino, Italian, black and Asian friends in Queens; and my Asian friends back in Chinatown. Young as I was, I often wondered why my friends in Chinatown had so little, and lived in such crappy housing, amid the unsafe streets of the 1970s—where youth gang wars had come to the neighborhood. I also wondered why my mom, who spoke little English, and couldn’t read or write in it, but literate in Chinese, had to work in the garment factory.

The Garment Factory

I used to accompany my mom to work before I started school—my daycare setting. I was struck by how hot it was in the factory; how hard it was to hear because of the roar of the sewing machines and the whoosh of the towering floor fans; and how the lady workers drank tea stored in their little glass jars. And I wondered...
why they had to work so hard for so little—my mom would sit spent on the long subway rides back home, tallying up what she made on the piecework. As I grew older, I realized the clothes she and her friends made were marketed towards middle-class professional women, like the one I eventually became, and who made a lot more than my mom did. It didn’t seem right. It also didn’t seem right that the factory bosses, also Chinese, made enough to live in the wealthy suburbs.

At the same time, I knew my mom relished the friendships she made, the chatter, and the gossip—the social identities of work that gave her independence. The information shared about their children’s schooling, and ways to grow their earnings. Theirs was a powerful network of comfort, knowledge-sharing, and care. Truth to say, my mom even liked her bosses. Even as I write this, I can hear Peter saying, “Vivian, what are you talking about?” But it was true. She recognized and experienced the inequality, which benefited the bosses way more than it did her, but she found a way to appreciate their humanity as well. She does this even today, as she continues to cope with the physical remnants of performing such punishing and repetitive work, with few breaks for decades, resulting in chronic hip and shoulder issues.

**Alone in Andover**

Through one of her garment factory friendships, my mom learned of an elite New England boarding school, to which I applied and was awarded a scholarship. I had the benefit of a high quality public school education, and so I was prepared for the opportunity at Andover, where I wanted to go intellectually.

In my 11th grade American history class I got to pick the topic for my own research paper to investigate through primary sources, and picked the Chinese Exclusion Act. I had never read about it in school, but my family made sure that I knew all about it. I read Jean Paul Sartre’s *No Exit* in French; and Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in English. Students were encouraged to find the connections between different time periods, writings and issues.

This transition however was the hardest that I had ever made. The expectation of my peers to downplay my heritage was not exactly subtle. Like any teenager, I wanted to fit in, but I quickly learned that there were certain things that I would not do to gain acceptance. There was only one hall phone for the entire dormitory, and my mom made her weekly phone calls to me, asking whoever happened to pick up the phone, in her high-pitched English, “May I please speak Vivian?” And of course, by necessity, we spoke entirely in Chinese, with everyone around me able to listen in. I didn’t have the choice to hide who I was, and in truth, I didn’t want to.

Even back then, I intuited that success was not worth it if one had to deny who you were to get it. My dormmates had taken me aside one day to educate me in some words that I should use to describe my black, Latino, Jewish, Catholic and Asian friends back home. Some of their words were new to me, but others I recognized—and recognized them all as being intentionally offensive, demeaning, and just plain wrong. I told them as much, and that it didn’t matter that they had learned to say such things from their parents. No harsh words were exchanged between us, but during that first year, I grew used to eating alone and being by myself.

**From Journalism to Dissertation**

By the time I met Peter, these experiences had crystallized into an inchoate set of interests that later became more defined and informed my career: to describe inequalities and to understand why they exist; why we have such trouble talking about them; and also, what we can do to change them. We became acquainted while I was a young freelance journalist. I would pitch stories on the complexities of Asian American communities and issues, and Peter, who had just launched the Asian American Studies Program at Hunter College/CUNY, was one of my sources. We kept in touch long after I left journalism and started my doctoral studies in another state. He was immensely helpful when I moved back to New York City to conduct and write up my dissertation research on the transition to college among Chinese Americans at Hunter College and Columbia College.
When I moved again, this time for a job in Boston, we continued to stay in touch. Peter was a big supporter of my work on family, school, and the community contexts in the academic success of children of immigrants, and the identities of both immigrants and their children. Because of this, he understood why I later joined the William T. Grant Foundation’s new initiative to support research on reducing inequality in youth outcomes, and why it was a good fit for me.

**Change the World**

It wasn’t until my tenure as the CUNY Thomas Tam Visiting Professor at Hunter College in 2013-2014, that I began to more fully grasp the scope of Peter’s work—and in truth, not until he passed away, that my understanding deepened. This was because whenever Peter and I would chat, it was mostly about me. How was I doing? What did I think of this piece of work? And always, he asked how my mom was doing. A woman he’d never even met, but somehow, through all those decades he spent studying and writing about workers in Chinatown—advocating for workers, organizing with the workers, and joining the workers—he knew who she was. Now that he’s gone, and myself much older, I realize what a gift that was. Because, of course, he could have instead talked about his own numerous accomplishments.

Certainly, Peter was never shy about speaking his mind. The only difference—Peter spoke his mind about things that mattered, and what we could do to change the world. When we talked about the 1992 Los Angeles riots, he never mentioned his *Village Voice* article on its multiracial and multicultural aspects, which earned him the prestigious George Polk Award and a Pulitzer nomination. Nor did he mention his earlier 1990 *Village Voice* article, which he and Dušanka Mišcevic, his wife, frequent collaborator and recognized scholar in her own right, co-wrote on the Chinese drug trade, which was also nominated for a Pulitzer. I don’t mention these accomplishments here to tout them, but instead, to highlight Peter’s work in advancing the goals of social justice. If doing that work led to recognition, then that was great, but also incidental. Personal recognition was not the point of doing the work that he did.

**Uptown Scholar, Downtown Activist**

At a memorial service held on April 9, 2017 at Downtown Community Television Center (co-founded by Peter), there were several film outtakes shown of Peter, including one from the 1970s with him on a truck pulling out fresh produce, sold at a discount, to Chinatown residents. Another clip, now of a much older Peter in the 1990s, filmed in China, was from a documentary on what drove Fujianese immigrants to leave their home and pay human smugglers exorbitant sums of money to come to America. I left the memorial thinking, “How could one person have done so much in so many realms?”

There is a tendency by many to think that Peter only studied and wrote about Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants, which of course he mostly did. But that misses the larger insight into Peter’s true work—the forces that drive inequality. He explored them in the case of Chinese Americans and in China too, and that’s a critical difference. In the case of Chinese Americans, he coined the terms “Uptown Chinese” and “Downtown Chinese,” to capture the social class differentiation amongst Chinese immigrants, what this meant for their children, and showed how this distinction was the result of much larger social forces. This distinction however does not only apply just to the Chinese. When I did research on Colombian immigration to the United States, I found similar differences between the Uptown Colombians and the Downtown Colombians.
Through his research and advocacy, Peter was always committed to what we could all do to create greater equality in our society. He did this both in the classroom and on the streets. The point is, to never stop trying, and to always remember why we do this work.

Author
Vivian Louie is Program Officer at the William T. Grant Foundation. She received her Ph.D. and M.A. from the Yale University Department of Sociology, M.A. from the Stanford University Department of Communication, and A.B. from Harvard University. Louie has previously worked as a newspaper journalist, journalism teacher and youth magazine editor, and an associate professor in education and lecturer in sociology at Harvard. She previously served as the 2013-2014 CUNY Thomas Tam Visiting Professor at Hunter College/CUNY.