



COMMUNITY ACTIVISM IN NEW YORK CITY'S CHINATOWN:  
**CHINESE-AMERICAN FIGHT FOR A BETTER LIFE**

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**On the cover:** Collage of historic photos of New York City’s Chinatown from our [collections](#).

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**Contributors:** Yu Bao, Carrie Gardner Weinrib.

## OVERVIEW

The influx of Chinese immigrants to the west coast of the United States during the mid-1800s was propelled by various factors, including the allure of California's gold, the upheaval of the Taiping Rebellion, and the demand for labor on the Transcontinental Railroad. However, by the 1870s, economic downturns post-Civil War fueled the scapegoating of Chinese immigrants for stagnant wages and job scarcity leading to violent outbursts and pervasive discrimination. In response, many Chinese immigrants sought refuge in New York City, drawn by its diverse population and promising job market. By 1880, Manhattan's Chinatown had burgeoned into a thriving enclave, predominantly inhabited by male immigrants who formed tight-knit social networks and organizations.

The enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 dealt a severe blow to Chinatown's growth, yet its appeal endured, attracting non-Chinese residents and gradually expanding its demographic. By the 1920s, Chinatown had become a hub of cultural and economic activity, particularly in the food industry, with its population steadily increasing to over 4,000 by 1930.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 heralded a new era for Chinatown, ushering in a fresh influx of immigrants, notably women who revitalized the garment industry. By 1981, Chinatown boasted approximately 500 garment factories, predominantly staffed by women, leading to the expansion of Chinatown's borders into the former Little Italy as Italian residents relocated to suburban areas. However, escalating rents exacerbated housing challenges for Chinatown residents, prompting efforts for improved labor conditions and wages through unionization.

By 1980, New York City's Chinese community had become the nation's largest, surpassing San Francisco's, indicative of its growing influence. Despite the employment in garment factories, disparities persisted, with many Chinatown residents facing financial hardships and minimal

community service organizations, advocacy groups, and unions highlighted the community's resilience and its demand for better educational, healthcare, housing, and labor conditions. Exploring primary sources such as letters, newspapers, and photographs illuminates the struggles and triumphs of Chinese-Americans in their pursuit of a better life in New York City.

(Adapted from [www.nps.gov/places/new-york-chinatown-and-little-italy-historic-district.htm](http://www.nps.gov/places/new-york-chinatown-and-little-italy-historic-district.htm))

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

Primary sources offer firsthand accounts of events, while secondary sources provide analysis, interpretation, or commentary on primary sources.

Encourage students to explore the significance of utilizing primary sources in the study of history. Responses may include:

- Provide an authentic link to the past;
- Reveal the complexities and contributions of the past;
- Help us to construct nuanced interpretations of history;
- Help us understand the many experiences and viewpoints of people who were directly involved in a moment in history;
- Offer accounts that have not been altered or influenced by subsequent interpretations or biases; and
- Help us to better understand the social, cultural, economic, and political context of a particular time and place.

Discuss different types of sources (letters, photographs, press releases, videos, newspaper articles, statistical tables, etc.), including:

- Explaining any source types that are unfamiliar to students; and
- Discussing the pros and cons of different types of sources.

Before examining the specific sources provided, discuss the students' prior knowledge of the immigrant experience in Chinatown during the 20th century. In addition to eliciting information from the class, introduce the essential questions and have the class read and discuss the overview.

Before answering the specific questions associated with each document, model general strategies for examining primary sources. You and your students can choose a few of the documents provided and answer some of these questions:

- What type of source is this?
- What do you notice first?
- What do you notice that you can't explain?
- Who do you think was the intended audience for this document?
- Why do you think this document is important?

After the class has engaged in a discussion about some of these questions, the students can return to the documents and answer the questions associated with each document. This can be done independently or in groups.

Finally, conclude by discussing the essential question—How do these primary sources illustrate the Chinese-American fight for a better life in NYC? - and engaging students in the culminating activity.

### NYSED 11th and 12th Grade Social Studies Curriculum Framework

11.10 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE/DOMESTIC ISSUES (1945 – present): Racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities were addressed by individuals, groups, and organizations.

(Standards: 1, 4, 5; Themes: ID, TCC, SOC, GOV, CIV, ECO)

- 11.10 b Individuals, diverse groups, and organizations have sought to bring about change in American society through a variety of methods.

12.G4 POLITICAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION: There are numerous avenues for engagement in the political process, from exercising the power of the vote, to affiliating with political parties, to engaging in other forms of civic participation. Citizens leverage both electoral and non-electoral means to participate in the political process.

- 12.G4e Citizens participate in civic life through volunteerism and advocacy, including efforts such as contacting elected officials, signing/organizing petitions, protesting, canvassing, and participating in/organizing boycotts.

## KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

**Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882:** Federal legislation that created a 10-year ban on Chinese laborers immigrating to the United States.

**Collective Bargaining:** The process in which employees, through their unions, negotiate contracts with their employers to determine the terms and conditions of their employment.

**Council:** A group of people who come together to consult, deliberate, or make decisions.

**Doris Koo:** Asian Americans For Equality's (AAFE) first executive director, serving from 1984 to 1992, transformed the organization into the largest owner and developer of low-income housing in Chinatown and the Lower East Side.

**Equitable Resources:** Distributing resources to people in a just and fair way.

**ESL Classes:** English as a Second Language (ESL) programs offer international students the chance to learn English or improve their English language skills.

**Garment Industry:** Producers of all types of clothes, from high fashion to uniforms to workwear.

**Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965:** Federal legislation that abolished quotas and created a preference system focusing on immigrants' skills and family relations with citizens or U.S. residents.

**International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU):** The largest labor union to represent workers in the women's garment industry in the United States and Canada in the twentieth century.

**Johann Wolfgang Goethe:** A German polymath and writer, who is widely regarded as the

greatest and most influential writer in the German language.

**Proclamation:** Official declarations issued by a person of authority (i.e., mayors) to recognize historical, cultural and civic celebrations or events.

**Mount Laurel Doctrine:** A judicial doctrine that requires municipalities to provide an opportunity for the creation of affordable housing.

**Social Services:** Government services provided for the benefit of the individual and the community, such as education, medical care, and housing.

**Systemic Inequality** (also known as Structural Inequality): Specific policies, standards, and practices, as well as attitudes and prejudices that create privilege for some groups and lack of privilege and access to resources for others.

**Taiping Rebellion:** A religiously motivated peasant revolt against the Qing dynasty (Manchu rulers) from 1850-1864.

**Transcontinental Railroad:** Constructed between 1863 and 1869, it was the first continuous railroad line across the United States.

**Union:** Organized association of workers in a trade or profession that is formed to protect and further rights and interests.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

Abeles, Schwartz, Haeckel & Silverblatt, Inc. *The Chinatown Garment Industry Study: submitted to Local 23-25 International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the New York Skirt and Sportswear Association*. The Local and The Association, June, 1983.

Anbinder, Tyler. *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

Bao, Xiaolan, *Holding Up More Than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948-1992*. University of Illinois Press, 2006.

## EXTERNAL LINKS

"About AAFE." *Asian Americans for Equality*, 2023, [www.aafe.org](http://www.aafe.org).

"A Bluer Sky: A History of the Brooklyn Chinese-American Association." *Brooklyn Chinese-American Association*, 2023, [www.bca.net/eng/about.html](http://www.bca.net/eng/about.html).

"Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District New York, New York." *National Parks Service*, March 4, 2020, [www.nps.gov/places/new-york-chinatown-and-little-italy-historic-district.htm](http://www.nps.gov/places/new-york-chinatown-and-little-italy-historic-district.htm).

### EDUCATION & FAMILY LIFE

In the 1980s, New York City's Chinatown grappled with the educational implications of a significant influx of Chinese immigrants, predominantly facing language barriers and economic challenges. The community, characterized by a dense immigrant population, encountered difficulties in navigating the educational system due to limited English proficiency. Economic struggles in the neighborhood impacted educational resources, with lower-income areas facing additional challenges. Despite these obstacles, the decade saw increased community activism and the emergence of grassroots movements advocating for improved educational opportunities. Educational programs were adapted to address the unique needs of the Chinese immigrant population, including bilingual education initiatives. ([www.bca.net/eng/about.html](http://www.bca.net/eng/about.html))

### SANITATION & SAFETY

In the 1980s, Chinatown contended with sanitation and safety challenges reflective of broader urban issues. The densely populated neighborhood faced overcrowding, leading to difficulties in waste management and limited city resources for maintaining cleanliness. Concurrently, safety concerns were exacerbated by high crime rates. Despite these challenges, Chinatown exhibited resilience and a vibrant cultural identity, with ongoing efforts from community organizations and residents to address issues and improve living conditions over time.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

By the 1980s New York City's Chinatown was the largest in the country but city officials often ignored the needs of this and other immigrant communities. Inspired by the Black and Latinx civil rights struggles of the era, Asians in New York City fought against **systemic inequality** and for racial, social, and economic justice. Community organizations such as Asian Americans for

Equality (AAFE) championed safe and stable affordable housing, essential **social services**, and **equitable resources**. Since the 1980s, AAFE has created thousands of units of affordable housing across Chinatown and the Lower East Side, including Equality House which opened in 1988. (Adapted from <https://www.aafe.org>)

## **BUSINESS**

The growth of Chinatown's **garment industry** in the 1970s helped to revitalize an industry that once flourished in midtown. By 1982, close to 20,000 **unionized** garment workers were employed in over 400 separate factories in Chinatown, representing 60% of Chinatown's households (Abeles, Schwartz, Haeckel & Silverblatt, Inc.). The earliest settlers in Chinatown were single men but, by the 1980s, the neighborhood was transformed into a settlement of families due in large part to available jobs in the garment industry. The mainstay of Chinatown's economy, the garment industry, provided jobs to immigrant women outside of the home and transformed many Chinatown households into modern dual-income families. However, women's employment options were limited, they earned lower wages than their male counterparts, and men were still considered the "legitimate" breadwinners. (Bao)

The booming garment industry in Chinatown was a result of increased immigration (following changes in U.S. immigration laws in 1965), Chinese entrepreneurship, and production organized around strong family and kinship ties within the Chinese community. The growth of Local 23-25 of the **International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU)** and other unions helped to stabilize an otherwise precarious industry by creating a **collective bargaining** process, enforcing contracts, monitoring working conditions, and providing essential benefits like health insurance (Abeles, Schwartz, Haeckel & Silverblatt, Inc.). The 1982 garment workers' strike, organized by the ILGWU, was the largest strike in the history of New York City's Chinatown. Nearly 20,000 garment workers rallied for better working conditions including thousands of Chinese immigrant women. Within a week, all the Chinatown contractors had pledged to sign the union contract.

In addition to the strike's impact which resulted in a comprehensive union contract, the movement opened doors for women to be more politically involved in their community. It was said to have made a dramatic change in the perception of Asian American women. Once seen as silent and compliant, through union participation, these women engaged in workforce discussions that enabled them to become leaders in their community.



**BCA** 布祿崙華人協會  
**Brooklyn Chinese-American Association**

A MULTI-SOCIAL SERVICES ORGANIZATION

5313 8th Avenue • Brooklyn, NY 11220 • Tel: (718) 438-9312  
5023 8th Avenue • Brooklyn, NY 11220 • Fax: (718) 438-8303

October 18, 1993

會長 麥保羅  
PAUL P. MAK  
President / CEO

Mr. Virgo Lee  
Director  
Mayor's Office on Asian Affairs  
52 Chamber Street  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mr. Lee:

Allow me to thank you for your participation at the Opening Celebration of our Senior, Youth, and Cultural Center. Since its inception, almost 200 Asians are being served daily through its senior recreational activities, adult ESL classes, youth leadership training, and other related functions.

Since mid 1980's, the Asian population in Sunset Park, Boro Park and Bay Ridge communities has been increasing rapidly to the current 60,000 estimated number, but services and resources allocated to the Asian community are relatively limited. The formation of the Center is a milestone in our service development, and is crucial in revitalizing the community and bettering the lives of the many Asians who find their new homes in Brooklyn.

Once again, on behalf of the 1,000 senior, youth and adult members of the Center, I salute to your continuous support.

Best regards.

*Thanks for everything  
Don't forget to  
Count on us  
for anything*

Sincerely,

Paul P. Mak

Letter from Brooklyn Chinese-American Association to Mayor's Office on Asian Affairs.  
From Mayor Dinkins' Collection.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 1 QUESTION

What have organizations like the Brooklyn Chinese-American Association done to bring Asian Americans better educational opportunities?



THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR  
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10007

December 19, 1990

Chinatown Head Start  
The Chinese Community Concerns Corp.  
180 Mott Street  
New York, N.Y. 10002

To All In Attendance:

I extend my warmest greetings to the children, parents and staff of Chinatown Head Start on the occasion of its Annual Christmas celebration. Today's activities highlight some of the many wonderful aspects of publicly supported pre-school educational programs.

By helping immigrant families adjust to a new way of life through bilingual education, Chinatown Head Start makes an important contribution to the Chinese community. Bilingual education is a vital part of New York City's public educational system. Chinatown Head Start's success in teaching three to five year olds from low income families has made it a model bilingual program for the City.

I wish you a joyous Christmas celebration today and many more in the years to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David N. Dinkins".

David N. Dinkins  
MAYOR

Mayor Dinkins Office letter to Chinatown Head Start.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 2 QUESTIONS

1. What critical role does bilingual education play in shaping New York City's public educational system?
2. Illustrate the significance of bilingual education in the lives of immigrants and their integration into society.



THE NEW YORK  
CHINESE BILINGUAL EDUCATORS COMMITTEE

invites you to celebrate

**CHINESE HERITAGE AND CULTURE MONTH**

1992 Year of the Monkey 4690

Monday, January 27, 1992

<b>PART I</b>	<b>PRESENTATION OF THE MAYOR'S PROCLAMATION "CHINESE HERITAGE AND CULTURE MONTH"</b>
10:00 AM	City Hall (Old Board of Estimate Chambers)
<b>PART II</b>	<b>CHINESE BUFFET LUNCHEON</b>
11:45 AM	Auditorium Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association 62 Mott Street, Chinatown (Please return tear-off below)
<b>PART III</b>	<b>CHINESE HERITAGE AND CULTURE WORKSHOPS</b> Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association
1:00-2:15 PM	<b>OPENING SESSION</b> <i>Chinese Americans: Unity Through Diversity</i> Speaker: Nora Wang Associate Commissioner, Department of Employment, New York City
2:30-4:00 PM	<b>CONCURRENT WORKSHOPS</b>
Workshop 1	<i>Practical Classroom Techniques in Dealing with Diverse Chinese Students</i>
Workshop 2	<i>Teaching ESL to Chinese Students: Effective Techniques</i>
Workshop 3	<i>Food Carving</i>

Chinese Heritage and Culture Month activities are sponsored by the New York Chinese Bilingual Educators Committee (NYCBECC) and co-sponsored by the Chinese/Asian Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Center (CABETAC). NYCBECC membership includes representatives from the following agencies:

- Community School Districts 1 and 2
- Division of Bilingual Education, New York State Education Department
- Division of Bilingual Education and Division of Human Resources of New York City Public Schools
- International High School
- Lower Eastside Prep. High School
- Project EXPLORE/Aviation High School/Long Island City High School
- Project CHOICE/Seward Park High School/Norman Thomas High School
- After-School Day Care Center/ Chinese American Planning Council
- Chinatown Manpower Projects, Inc.

Please return this pre-registration form by January 21, 1992 to:

THE NEW YORK CHINESE BILINGUAL EDUCATORS COMMITTEE (NYCBECC)

c/o Seward Park High School  
350 Grand Street, NYC 10002

Or call Katherine Sid at (212)673-8896  
or John Hu at (212)387-9384

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
School/Agency: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Please check the activities you will attend:

	YES	NO
PART I	_____	_____
PART II (Luncheon)	_____	_____
PART III	_____	_____

\* Please enclose a check for \$8.00 for each participant made out to NYCBECC.

Chinese Bilingual Educators Committee Presentation, January 27, 1992, celebrating Chinese Heritage and Culture Month.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 3 QUESTIONS

1. Explore the profound impact of the mayor's proclamation recognizing Chinese Heritage and Culture Month.
2. How has this declaration empowered the community and fostered public awareness and understanding of Chinese heritage and culture?

## PRIMARY SOURCE 4



New York Hotline: Episode #131: Immigrants, Tape 2, 1990.

Click [here](#) to watch.



Screenshots from New York Hotline: Episode #131.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 4 QUESTIONS

1. What measures does the city government implement to support the academic success of Asian immigrant students?
2. How is an informed community of parents and guardians critical to this success?



美化華埠協會  
**CHINATOWN**  
BEAUTIFICATION COUNCIL

FOUNDER: PAUL B.Y. YEE

(212)431-3557

180 PARK ROW • SUITE E • NEW YORK, N.Y. 10038

Honorable Mayor Edward Koch  
The City of New York  
Office of The Mayor  
New York, N.Y. 10007

May 6, 1986

Dear Honorable Mayor Koch:

In answering to your cry for "A Clean Healthy City", we the Chinatown Beautification Council have decided to sponsor a historical "Chinatown Clean-up Campaign" with the co-sponsorship of the New York City Department of Sanitation and We Care About New York, Inc., also with support from the New York City Police Department; the Fifth Precinct and the Department of Highways, various organizations from the Chinese community such as the CCBA, Chinese Chamber of Commerce, CPC, City Hall Lioness Club, Local 23-25, Youth Council (5th Pct), YMCA (Chinatown Branch) and the United East Athletic Club etc.

In order for us to accomplish this task with great satisfaction, we have planned to preach the teaching of "Pitch In" and to reach out to every resident, merchant, property owner, and our beloved tourist, and request their direct assistance. Direct assistance means just take care of your own front door as Goethe said "Let everyone sweep in front of his own door, and the whole world will be clean".

"The Chinatown Clean-up Day" is part of the campaign which has been scheduled for Saturday, June 14, 1986 from 8-10 am. and rain date is one week later (June 21, 1986).

With the tremendous amount of interest, the anticipated manpower and the joint effort from the Chinese community plus all the support from the city, I have great confidence in this Chinatown Cleanup Campaign and I know that it will be a big success and hopefully other communities would be responsive favorably to this campaign so it would eventually become a city-wide movement in the near future.

Sanitation Commissioner Sexton will be coming to join us on that day and will be served as our consultant. I would like to invite you, Mr. Mayor to officiate the kick-off of this event and certainly your participation will enlighten this meaningful community project much more.

I am looking forward seeing you.

Sincerely

  
Paul Yee, Founder

CC: Richard Mei  
Cynthia Rosel

Chinatown Beautification Council letter #1 to Mayor Koch.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 5 QUESTION

What is the long-term goal of the “Chinatown Clean-up Campaign”?



FOUNDER: PAUL B.Y. YEE

Tel. (212) 431-3557

168 Canal Street Suite 202 New York, N.Y. 10013

Mr. Edward Koch, Mayor  
City of New York  
City Hall  
New York, N.Y. 10007

August 13, 1987

Dear Mr. Mayor Koch:

Many Chinese American citizens are victims of crime at one time or another. One would be considered lucky if he were only brutally beaten and not killed by a robber. What alarmed us the most is just how common this sort of thing happens in the homes, stores, factories, hall ways, elevators and streets in Chinatown.

We the Chinese American citizens live, work or even just visit under a curfew of fear and it must stop.

By realizing this has become a major problem community, we the Chinatown Beautification Council has launched a campaign "Fight Against Crime" by sponsoring a community meeting on "Chinatown Public Safety" (see exhibit I) on March 18, 1987. Request of additional police officers to the community was made from the floor and the proposed Police Post (see exhibit III) was introduced by the Chinatown Beautification Council.

To test the response for this concept of installation of police post in Chinatown, a survey was conducted on the street corner of Mott and Canal. For a two days period, we were able to obtain about 4,000 signatures from residents, shoppers, merchants and tourists for our demand for more police protection and the new idea of placing police post in the problem area in Chinatown.

Like what the Chemical Bank ad says "Every neighborhood has its own chemistry", so this idea of installing of police post may work in Chinatown.

This is our suggestion, what is your opinion and we like to know?



Sincerely yours

Paul B.Y. Yee, Founder

CC: Benjamin Ward, Commissioner  
NYC Police Department

Chinatown Beautification Council letter from Paul Yee to Mayor Koch regarding the "Fight Against Crime."

## PRIMARY SOURCE 6 QUESTIONS

1. What issue is the Chinatown Beautification Council aiming to address with this proposal?
2. How did residents of Chinatown perceive and respond to this proposal?

**AMERICAN PLANNING  
ASSOCIATION**

New York Metro Chapter

and

**ASIAN AMERICANS  
FOR EQUALITY**

invite you to join in a

PLANNING SYMPOSIUM

**MT. LAUREL COMES  
TO NEW YORK  
HOUSING AS A  
CONSTITUTIONAL  
RIGHT\***

**MARCH 19, 1986**

6-8 pm

at the

**CUNY GRADUATE CENTER**

33 West 42nd St.

3rd Floor Studio

\*as rendered in the case  
"AAFE vs. KOCH"

Housing Planning Symposium hosted by the American Planning Association and Asian Americans for Equality, March 19, 1986 (page 1 of 2)

**"As the crow flies,** Chinatown is only a short distance from suburban New Jersey, but for the moment, the rules that oversee their development are a world apart. New York City has a Special District where new housing will be built for the rich alone. Yet in the Jersey suburbs, the *Mount Laurel* rule requires the provision of housing for poor persons.

"At a time when the federal courts are retreating in the field of civil rights, the *Mount Laurel* doctrine offers a beacon of hope for progressive change. In an era of devastating attacks on lower-income housing, including the virtual elimination of federal housing subsidies, there are constitutional burdens on the state and its subdivisions to provide housing for the needy.

"No one can deny the comprehensive role of the state in every aspect of the provision of housing. Zoning can and must do more than merely unleash the forces of the free market. If the New York courts reject the *Mount Laurel* mandate for affirmative zoning, then current development trends will ensure that sooner or later, there will be no more lower-income housing. The New York State Constitution prohibits the City from zoning for the benefit of the rich alone; the New York Judiciary may not build housing, but it must enforce the Constitution."

Steve Dobkin, Geoffrey Smith, and Earle Tockman, "Zoning for the General Welfare: A Constitutional Weapon for Lower Income Tenants," *NEW YORK UNIVERSITY REVIEW OF LAW AND SOCIAL CHANGE*, pp. 928-929.

## Distinguished Guest Panel:

**Peter Abeles,**  
Partner, Affordable Living Partnership  
(Developer of Mt. Laurel Housing & Planning Expert in Mt. Laurel I & II)

**Peter Marcuse,**  
Professor, Graduate School of Architecture and Planning, Columbia University

**Stuart Meck,**  
Assistant City Manager and Planning Director, Oxford, Ohio; Member, Board of Directors, American Planning Association; Member, American Institute of Certified Planners Commission

**Susan Motley,**  
Commissioner, New York City Planning Commission; Program Director, Local Initiatives Support Corporation

**Philip Tegeler,**  
University of Connecticut Law School

**Lydia Tom, (Moderator)**  
Director of Neighborhood Preservation Company, Asian Americans for Equality

*\*Organizations for Identification Only*

Housing Planning Symposium hosted by the American Planning Association and Asian Americans for Equality, March 19, 1986 (page 2 of 2)

## COMMITTEE OBJECTIVE

In 1975 the Mount Laurel Doctrine was established in New Jersey's Mount Laurel Township. Its intention was to create pathways for racial and economic integration for a better quality of life. It mandated that local governments contribute to affordable housing needs. The two committees desire was to allow Chinatown's community members access to this information so they could advocate for realistic opportunities for construction of moderate and low income housing while providing for the general welfare of the community.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 7A & 7B QUESTIONS

1. What was the purpose of this symposium?
2. What impact might it have had on housing opportunities?

## Chinatown Prepares a Shelter for the Temporarily Homeless

Doris Koo vividly recalls a three-alarm fire that gutted a tenement at 54 Eldridge Street, leaving two people dead and 125 homeless on Jan. 21, 1985, one of the coldest nights of the year.

It was that fire, one in a long line of neighborhood misfortunes, that convinced Ms. Koo of the urgent need for temporary housing for the homeless in the Chinatown area. Today, what she describes as the first temporary shelter for Asians in the country is on its way to becoming a reality.

Ms. Koo is executive director of Asian Americans for Equality, a Chinatown group that has been given two abandoned city buildings for the shelter and major state financing.

The shelter, Equality House, will be at 176-180 Eldridge Street on the Lower East Side. The neighborhood was once a center of narcotics trading. It has been undergoing revitalization since the police disrupted the drug market with Operation Pressure Point in 1984.

### 'Stabilize the Neighborhood'

"The operation had a tremendous impact, but squatters and drug dealers still haunt the abandoned buildings and construction sites after sunset," said Lee Brozgold, a painter and mask maker.

Mr. Brozgold, who, with a group of artists, has just completed the rehabilitation of an Eldridge Street tenement, welcomed the Equality House project. He said he it would "help stabilize the

neighborhood."

Homelessness, Ms. Koo said, is a problem in Chinatown, but the homeless are generally "hidden" — people forced by fires or other disasters to move into relatives' already overcrowded apartments or rent bunk-bed space at \$200 a month. On average, she said, there are five or six major fires a year in Chinatown because of the old housing and landlords who fail to provide heat or repair wiring.

Equality House is to provide 34 temporary and permanent units for homeless families and the elderly. It is to open by the end of next year, according to a board member of Asian Americans for Equality, William Chong.

### Major Rehabilitation

The original plan was to establish the shelter in central Chinatown, where there are schools and other services for Asians. But no city buildings were available, Mr. Chong said.

The Eldridge Street buildings, which are in walking distance of the heart of Chinatown, had been scheduled for demolition and will require extensive rehabilitation. The State Department of Social Services has granted \$1 million for construction, and the group is trying to raise \$400,000 to complete the project.

Mr. Chong said Asian Americans for Equality had been supported by the main Chinatown groups and contributions from a wide range of donors, in-

cluding the Chinese Hand Laundry Association, China Buddhist Association and the American Express Foundation.

### Case of Battered Woman

Ms. Koo recalled that she was called in by the Red Cross to be an interpreter for the victims of the fire at 54 Eldridge Street. The Red Cross took care of the 25 homeless families for two months. Then they were transferred to ordinary city shelters, where they faced language, commuting and security problems. Although the adults continued working, it took 14 months to find public housing for them.

Discussing the need for a shelter for homeless Asians, she told of a battered Korean woman who sought security in a midtown women's shelter on March 12, 1985, only to be beaten and robbed. Officers of the Ninth Precinct found her "freaked out," and, as she spoke no English, referred her to Asian Americans for Equality.

Ms. Koo also recalled the collapse of a single-room-occupancy hotel in Chinatown that left 134 people homeless in April 1985. Few, if any, of the victims turned to city shelters, Ms. Koo said. "But," she said, "they would come to Equality House."



BONSAI DESIGNS

Chinatown Prepares a Shelter for the Temporary Homeless,  
*New York Times*, November 23, 1986.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 8 QUESTION

How do community organizations such as Asian Americans for Equality work to bring about change?

# Chinatown gets housing

By KEITH MOORE

Daily News Staff Writer

A ground-breaking ceremony was held yesterday for a mixed combination of housing for the homeless and the elderly in Chinatown.

Equality House at 176-180 Eldridge St. will "provide us with a unique opportunity to meet the housing needs of at several groups," State Social Services Commissioner Cesar Perales said.

When completed next summer, Equality House will have 59 units comprising 18 units for the elderly homeless, 16 for the homeless, and the balance for low-income tenants.

Perales said the \$4.5 million project was being financed by the state and the private sector. He said the financial mix and the homeless mix was unusual in housing developments in the state.

Ordinarily, he said, many of the homeless projects are either publicly subsidized or built by private money.

Perales said he had served in the community when he was a young lawyer, "so I know the need for housing in the area."

He added, "We don't ordinarily think about it, but there are a number of Chinese who are poor and who



**UNICORN TEAM** bestows Asian blessing at ground-breaking for low incoming housing in Chinatown.

ED MOLINARI DAILY NEWS

have been burnt out of their homes and have no place to go."

The project is being sponsored by Asian Americans for Equality.

Chinatown Gets Housing, *Daily News*, September 29, 1988.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 9 QUESTIONS

1. What is the goal of Equality House?
2. What makes it a unique organization?

TABLE 9  
 LOCATION OF WOMEN'S AND MISSES' OUTERWEAR EMPLOYMENT IN MANHATTAN  
 1969, 1975, 1977, 1980

	Number of Employees							
	1969		1975		1977		1980	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Manhattan	63,965	100.0	46,286	100.0	50,870	100.0	51,318	100.0
Chinatown	8,095	12.6	13,373	28.9	14,430	28.4	16,379	31.9
Garment Center	39,966	62.5	22,024	47.6	25,771	50.6	25,290	49.3
Other Central Business District	15,904	24.9	10,889	23.5	10,669	21.0	9,649	18.8

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SOURCE: New York State Department of Labor: unpublished employment data at zip code levels.

DEFINITIONS: Chinatown includes zip codes 10002, 12, 13, 38

Garment Center consists of zip code 10018

Other Central Business District includes zip codes 10001, 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08, 09, 10, 11, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 36

Note: See note on sources of data on Table 5.

Chart from report entitled "The Chinatown Garment Industry Study," submitted to Local 23-25 International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the New York Skirt and Sportswear Association by Abeles, Schwartz, Haeckel & Silverblatt, Inc. June, 1983.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 10 QUESTIONS

1. How did the number of outerwear employees in Chinatown change between 1969 and 1980?
2. Why is this change significant?



at Craft Sports, Inc., a union shop at 198 Canal Street, 1956. (Courtesy of the UNITE Archives, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.)



working conditions in a Chinatown garment shop in 1992. (Photograph by Xiaolan Bao)

Bao, Xiaolan, *Holding Up More Than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948-1992*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Chinatown Garment Shops, 1956 and 1992 from *Holding Up More Than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948-1992* by Xiaolan Bao.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 11 QUESTIONS

1. What do these images reveal about the role of men and women in the garment industry?
2. What differences do you notice between 1956 and 1992?



Chinese women workers on strike. The slogan in Chinese reads the same as in English. (Courtesy of UNITE Local 23-25; used by permission of the photographer, Earl Dotter)



A women striker wearing her union badge in preparation for the strike. (Courtesy of UNITE Local 23-25; used by permission of the photographer, Earl Dotter)

*Holding Up More Than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948-1992* by Xiaolan Bao. UNITE Local 23-25 Chinatown Union Workers rallied and struck, June 24, 1982, over important issues including wages, healthcare, and retirement benefits.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 12 QUESTIONS

1. Why are these women striking? What were their demands to their employers?
2. Would these women have been more or less likely to strike if they were not part of a union? Explain.
3. Explain the community impact this Asian-American led movement of union organizers and workers made.



The Chinese CLUW at the 1988 Labor Day Parade advocating the need for quality day care. (Courtesy of UNITE Local 23-25)

*Holding Up More Than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948-1992* by Xiaolan Bao. The Chinese Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) marched in the 1988 Labor Day Parade for quality daycare.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 13 QUESTIONS

1. Explain one similarity and one difference between Primary Sources 12 & 13.
2. Why was the role of women in the garment industry significant? Use evidence from the historical context and the documents 10-13 to support your answer.

## FURTHER EXPLORATION

### Give students a choice of questions to explore further:

1. How did the Chinese-American experience and the work of activists change from the 1960s to the 1990s?
2. Why should we be interested in studying this change?
3. Compare Chinese-American community activism with activism in another specific community. What insights does this comparison reveal about the prevalence of injustice and the need for collective community action?
4. How does New York City continue to be shaped by social activism?

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