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HCAP URA Summer 2025 Project
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Exploring the Needs of Chinese American Seniors in Flushing

My name is Izzah Amir and I am a junior at Hunter College studying Creative Writing, Studio Art, and Asian American Studies. This summer I worked as an undergraduate research assistant with HCAP. Initially, due to my interests in environmentalism and food justice, I felt motivated to research how Asian and Asian American residents utilized community-based initiatives to combat food insecurity. I wanted to understand how mutual aid efforts impacted the quality, affordability, and accessibility of fresh produce in Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. However, even after a lengthy deep dive into the funding behind community gardens, Asian agricultural practices, farming as a form of resistance, and nutrition related issues, I discovered that my research question was quickly changing. I realized that community gardens surrounding predominantly AAPI communities in Brooklyn and Manhattan were not abundant. I wanted to be able to conduct qualitative research and be involved with the community I was engaging with. Thus, as my research continued, gentrification and other neighborhood changes became more prevalent.

With the help of my mentor, Professor Sonu, I developed a new research question: *How are community centers serving and sustaining the Asian American community?* I reached out to the Nan Shan Senior Center in Queens, which operates under the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC), for an interview. This insight into the Chinese-speaking community in Flushing was integral to this project. Before conducting this interview, I created an interview protocol with Professor Sonu. This included informed consent as well as open-ended and flexible semi-structured questions. I learned how to avoid asking limiting and heavily leading questions while still remaining on topic.

During this interview with Peter Cheng, the program director of the Nan Shan Senior Center, I asked about the history of the organization, what struggles it faces, and how it supports Chinese seniors. Peter Cheng spoke about how closely intertwined US immigration history was with the CPC and the senior center. He mentioned how the Chinese Exclusion Act and anti-miscegenation laws caused the Chinese population in the US to decline significantly. However, in 1965, due to the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the Civil Rights Movement, Congress loosened immigration laws and the Chinese population exploded. The Chinese American Planning Counsel was founded this same year in order to help Chinese immigrants. 60 years later, the CPC is the largest Asian American serving organization in the whole country with a budget of around \$200 million.

Through this interview, I learned how Flushing shifted from being a mostly white ethnic area with Italian, Jewish, and Irish people, to being full of Asians. In 1965, during the New York World's Fair, Chinese and Korean pavilions (temporary displays) were built. The staff working at these pavilions started renting houses and living in Flushing. After the fair closed, they stayed in America and started bringing their friends and relatives here. When moving to Flushing, Asians encountered a lot of racist violence and resistance. At the time, white people would say that the last white person to leave Flushing should take away the American flag. Thankfully, due to voting rights fought for by the Civil Rights Movement, almost all of the elected officials in Flushing are now Asians.

The Nan Shan Senior Center was established in 1977 by the CPC to assist this great population of Chinese Americans. It is funded by the NYC Department for the Aging, so it serves everyone as long as they are 60 years or older. Since being founded, 20,000 people have registered at this center, with 99% of them being Chinese American. Many of the Chinese seniors are sponsored by their adult children in the US and move here as elderly adults, meaning that they lose all their friends and relatives and are forced to start over again. Compared to the suburbs, where no one speaks Chinese, Flushing is a source of comfort and ease for these seniors. The Nan Shan Senior Center takes elderly immigrants out of social isolation by helping them find friends, reestablish connection, and feel that they belong somewhere.

The senior center hosts a variety of cultural and intergenerational programs. For example, during Chinese festivals, they invite pre-K students to learn how to fold dumplings from the seniors. Members learn about American culture through events on Christmas, Independence Day, and Easter. The center also has a Chinese musical ensemble that competes in the Department for the Aging's annual competition for all the senior centers. Additionally, there are workshops that help the seniors learn English, use computers, and become US citizens as well as events where lawyers come to talk about housing laws and doctors speak about diabetes, osteoporosis, and other diseases that mostly impact seniors.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a 300% increase in anti-Asian sentiment that was worsened by racist remarks made by Donald Trump. As a result, the seniors in Flushing were cursed at, pushed, and spit on. Gentrification is another growing problem that impacts seniors in Chinatown as well as in Flushing. The Sky View Parc condos are each worth more than one million dollars, and right across from them are the NYCHA houses which are occupied by mainly Black residents. New, expensive buildings in Flushing such as the Tangram Mall and the New World Mall are making it harder for seniors to afford rent. I learned that the major problem that seniors face is housing insecurity. Landlords divide single family apartments into multiple cubicles. Having so many people living in these small areas causes a lot of problems. Not to mention, landlords hold a lot of prejudice against old people and refuse to rent out to them. They don't want the seniors to die in their homes. Peter Cheng stated that, according to Chinese

superstition, if someone dies in your home, it becomes a ghost house. Nobody would want to rent an apartment that is considered to be haunted.

Peter Cheng emphasized that “The needs in Flushing are not being served.” In July, 160 people wanted to join the center. In three years, 3,000 people have joined, but the center only has 30 staff members. There is a high demand for social services and support for seniors, but not enough resources to go around.

Nearing the end of our interview, Peter Cheng spoke of how elder abuse is becoming increasingly detrimental to seniors. The majority of these cases of physical violence, neglect, and financial exploitation go unreported due to victims feeling ashamed and lacking the ability to advocate for themselves. He mentioned that in some cases, beliefs in reincarnation might lead elders to feel that their hardship was justified, or even deserved. This issue becomes more and more concerning as time goes on and the vulnerable elderly population grows.

I hope that my project can act as an example of how researchers can serve the public by listening to their needs and being receptive to their concerns. Peter Cheng is looking to connect with students at Hunter’s Silberman School of Social Work. He has applied for funding to hire a social work student who would research elder abuse and ensure the safety and wellbeing of Chinese American elders by helping victims. This funding will begin in January of 2026. I hope that my project can bring awareness to the importance of preventing elder abuse by allowing Hunter students to become involved with these community centers and work towards resolving the issues that are harming Chinese seniors.

This information surrounding the needs of seniors and the urgency in preventing elder abuse marked a second shift in my project where I began to address how we, as serious researchers, can partner and work with underserved communities ethically. It felt productive to ask these communities to speak on their own behalf regarding neighborhood changes and challenges that they were experiencing rather than approaching them with preconceived ideas.

**An Interview with Peter Cheng, Program Director of the CPC Nan Shan Senior Center
Conducted at the Nan Shan Senior Center on July 18, 2025**

1. Could you tell me about the history of this community center?

PC: Yes, let's talk about the Chinese-American Planning Council and Asian American history in general. Back in about 1882 I believe, at that time there was a very strong anti-Asian feeling. During the time of the Gold Rush in California, a lot of Chinese people went to find gold but white people did not allow them to. So they turned to restaurants and laundromats. Chinese Americans in California faced lynchings and the destruction of Chinatowns happening in the West Coast.

Eventually, in 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was in effect for 60 years. No Chinese people were allowed to immigrate to the US and even those who were born here were not allowed to become American. In Chinatown, the male to female ratio was about 50 to 1. 50 men for every woman. At that time, the US also had anti-miscegenation laws, meaning that it was against the law for people of different races to marry each other. Chinese men could not find wives, there was a lack of Chinese women and they were not allowed to marry outside of their race. Basically genocide of the Chinese population. The Chinese population was dwindling. Sociologists were predicting that soon, there would be no Chinese people left.

Then, in 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor so the US and China became allies in WWII. Japan was using the Chinese Exclusion Act as propaganda against America. The US was embarrassed. So in 1943, Congress passed a law to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act. However, they only allowed 105 Chinese people to immigrate every year. Only 105. It didn't make much of a difference. All of this changed in 1965 with the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the Civil Rights Movement. Because the US was competing against the Soviet Union, Congress changed the immigration laws in 1965 and allowed 20,000 people to immigrate from each country in the world. In New York City, Chinatown was dying, but after this law was passed, the Chinese population exploded. It was like every ten year census, the Chinese population doubled: 80,000; 120,000; 220,000; 360,000; and so on and so forth. Currently, there are about 630,000 Chinese people in New York City. But that's for the city, that's not for the metro area.

The Chinese American Planning Counsel was founded in 1965, the same year the immigration laws changed because at that time, Chinese people were coming to America. This organization was founded to help those Chinese immigrants. 60 years later, the Chinese American Planning Counsel is the largest Asian American serving organization in the whole country. Right now, I believe the budget is around \$200 million. We are linked so closely with the US immigration history.

In 1965 in Flushing, the New York World's Fair had Chinese and Korean pavilions. The staff working at the pavilions started renting houses and living in Flushing. Flushing was a suburban, mostly white ethnic area in 1965, with Italian, Jewish, and Irish people. Because of the World's Fair, Chinese and Korean people began to live here and after it closed they didn't go home. Instead, they stayed in America and started bringing their friends and relatives here. That's how Flushing started becoming Asian. It's a tremendous difference. Right now, Flushing is almost all Asian. The Nan Shan Senior Center was established in 1977.

The Queens Historical Society preserves Flushing's historical buildings. You may not know this, but the separation of church and state started in Flushing. This has had a major historical impact on America because at that time, a lot of Quakers lived in Flushing. Peter Stuyvesant was the mayor of New York at that time and he didn't like the Quakers so he persecuted them. The Quakers got into a legal case with him. Eventually, in the Supreme Court, the separation of church and state was established. There's a sacred document called the Flushing Remonstrance, which is the basis of why we have separation of church and state nowadays. This is something so important for everyone. If you walk around Flushing, you will notice so many churches. Flushing is also where freedom of religion started. We have synagogues, we have mosques, we have Hindu temples, we have Buddhist temples, we have all types of religion.

And another thing I forgot to mention, now birthright citizenship is in big danger. Donald Trump is trying to do away with birthright citizenship, and birthright citizenship was born because of the Chinese Exclusion Act. There was a Chinese person at that time who was denied citizenship even though he was born in America. He took his case all the way to the Supreme Court [United States v. Wong Kim Ark] to establish that if you were born in the US, you get citizenship. He sued the US government and he said: I was born here, my whole life was spent here. Donald Trump is trying to erase this. We saw history right here. This history is not something you just know, it is something that connects with our lives.

So that's how the Asians moved to Flushing. Initially, they encountered a lot of resistance. White people didn't like it, there was a lot of racism. At the time, they said that the last white person to leave Flushing should take away the American flag. There was a city councilwoman named Julia Harrison who was very racist towards Asians. She looked at stores with Chinese and Korean signs and said: We want the signs to be in English. We want to know if these are places for prostitution.

I think that the good thing about America is that because of the Civil Rights Movement, everybody got to vote and as there were more and more Asians, almost all of the elected officials in Flushing are Asians now. The city councilmember is Asian, the assemblyman is Asian, the senator is Asian. It's all Asians now.

2. *Who is the community that this center serves?*

PC: We are funded by the NYC Department for the Aging, which means that we serve everyone. They don't need to have Medicare. They don't need to have Medicaid. They don't even need to have a green card. Even those who are undocumented, we still serve them. The only requirement is that they have to be 60 years or older. Last year, we served 3,371 individuals. From 1977 to now, 20,000 people have registered at this center.

3. *Who is using the community center the most? Are there any unexpected groups?*

PC: The vast majority are Chinese Americans. We track people's languages and we do occasionally have a sprinkle of Cherokee, white, African American, Hispanic; very few though. Our members come from different parts of China and speak different dialects. There are people speaking Fujianese, Cantonese, Mandarin, people from northeast China, people from the south, everywhere. People from Shanghai, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Malaysian Chinese, Indonesian Chinese, Singaporean, Vietnamese. I would probably say 99% are Chinese American.

4. *Would you say that this center makes that community self-sufficient?*

PC: The thing about a lot of these Chinese seniors is that they were sponsored by their children in the US. So by the time they come here, they are already middle aged or older. Their children often live in the suburbs and work in the mainstream. So when the elders come here, if they live in the suburbs with their children, no one speaks Chinese in the suburbs. I often say that they are more like disabled people when they live in the suburbs because they cannot talk to anybody. It is like they are deaf because they cannot understand what people are saying. They are blind because they cannot read the signs, they do not know what the signs are saying. Because they move here when they are already adults, they have lost all their friends and relatives. They start over again.

The biggest problem immigrant seniors face is isolation; the feeling of isolation. Their adult children go to work in the day and their grandchildren go to school and they are left home all day. That's the biggest problem. That's why some of them want to live in Flushing, they find it much easier. They can go shopping, visit doctors, and do all normal things that people do without needing a translator to go with them. In my opinion, the major function of our senior center is to take people out of social isolation. To help them be able to find their friends, reestablish connection, participate, and feel that they belong somewhere. To have a place that they can belong to.

5. *How would you describe the relationship between youth and their elders within this community? Are they close? Is there an element of caregiving?*

PC: In Flushing, the seniors are able to find people who understand them. Our center provides them with activities and cultural programs. We have them learn English, use computers, become US citizens. That's what we do. Regularly, there are workshops where we have doctors, nurses, and lawyers come here to talk about different topics of interest to seniors. The doctors talk about diabetes, osteoporosis, all these diseases that mostly impact seniors. Lawyers talk about housing laws. People find these very useful.

We have a few very successful intergenerational programs here. For example, we have a pre-K upstairs. During Chinese festivals, we invite them to come down and the seniors will show the little kids how to fold dumplings. They cook them and eat them so everyone is happy. There was one time that a group of white kids from Minnesota came here because they studied Chinese and wanted to come to Flushing. We had a group of 60-70 people from Minnesota and they spent a week with the seniors. Everybody tried to tell each other about their lives. The children focused on the different perspectives of immigrants and the elders learned what growing up in the Midwest is like.

Not that long ago, we had a senior prom during May. A lot of seniors never experienced this because there's no prom in China. In China, when you graduate high school, basically, the teacher calls your name, you walk up, you bow to the teacher, and the teacher gives you a certificate. So we had a senior prom with the members here and there were a whole bunch of young people from here, a lot of snacks, we had music, we had disco. It was an 80s themed senior prom. The seniors got a glimpse of what was missing in their lives.

6. *Have there been any significant changes recently? Possibly due to COVID or gentrification in the area?*

PC: During COVID there were a lot of strong anti-Asian feelings. Donald Trump was blaming people who came from China so the seniors here had a hard time. My seniors got cursed at, they got pushed, they got spit on. I also taught at Baruch for 15 years and during this time I worked with other professors. We did a study on anti-Asian violence during COVID and submitted it to a journal. We studied the hate crimes around that time, there was a significant spike. I think there was a 300% increase in anti-Asian incidents during that period. We did qualitative surveys and asked them how they felt about what Trump was saying at that time.

Gentrification is one of the challenges faced in Chinatown. It's definitely a bigger problem there. That doesn't mean that it doesn't happen in Flushing. Each condo in Sky View Parc is worth more than one million dollars, and right across from Sky View we have the NYCHA houses. I

used to help the people in NYCHA find jobs. They were very resentful of what had been built right across the street from them. A lot of the NYCHA residents are Black. Flushing is constantly making new buildings. This is just one example. There is also the Tangram Mall, which is about two-and-a-half blocks from here, and the New World Mall.

7. *Are there any steadfast constants?*

PC: No, everything has changed. Our only constant would be the historically preserved houses such as the Old Quaker Meeting House.

8. *Can you share a story about an impactful or proud moment?*

PC: I have a few stories about my seniors. We used to have a senior who was deaf, she couldn't hear well. I guess because of vanity, she refused to wear a hearing aid. She didn't want to have a hearing aid, it made her look old. When she came here to try and make friends, she would talk to people but she couldn't hear what they were saying but she pretended she did. She would answer something totally different. So people were looking at her strange, they thought she must be crazy or something. You could be talking about one thing, she would answer something totally different. People started avoiding her because they thought she was crazy. She became very depressed so I went to her and I talked to her and I found out she knew how to do a Chinese dance called the chopstick dance. Basically, she used a pair of chopsticks and she *knocked knocked knocked* and danced to the beat. Even though she was deaf, she could hit a beat. She could feel it. Every knock she would do a dance, she knew how to do that. So I gave her a class, I made her an instructor. She was teaching the seniors how to do the chopstick dance and then people knew that she was not crazy so they started to become friends with her and she also found a purpose. She found a role in the senior center and she was very happy.

9. *How has food insecurity played into the lives of the community members? What is their main source of food and where does it come from?*

PC: Supermarkets. The major problem is housing. I think that every New Yorker has housing problems. In Flushing we have places that are supposedly for one family. Landlords divide that into ten different places. Small cubicles. So there are a lot of people living in these small areas, which causes a lot of problems. Ten families have to use the same refrigerator. Even worse, landlords don't want to rent out to old people. They think that they are going to die, they don't want them to die in the homes. In Chinese superstition, if someone dies in your home, there's ghosts wandering around. It becomes a ghost house. Nobody would want to rent the place anymore if they knew that someone died there. This makes it very difficult for our seniors to find a place to live. Not only is it so expensive, there is also a lot of prejudice against old people. People believe that old people must be a lot of trouble.

10. Is there some way that this is combatted?

PC: Yeah, we have lawyers.

11. Do you consider yourselves a cultural center? Do you celebrate cultural holidays or events with your community?

PC: Yes, for example, we have a Chinese musical ensemble. We compete in the Department for the Aging's annual competition for all the senior centers. It's called "Talent is Timeless." All the seniors compete in this. Our team won the Queensboro contest last year. We went to Manhattan to compete for the whole city. But you know what? The seniors in Manhattan all retired from Broadway. They were all Broadway stars, they were all Broadway singers. They retired and went to senior centers. We couldn't compete against them. These people were so talented, so we didn't win New York City, but we won Queens. I thought it was unfair because we were competing against professionals.

During Chinese New Year, we rented a restaurant and 500 of our seniors came together to celebrate. We celebrate all kinds of major festivals. Of course, we also do American ones like Christmas. I try to teach the seniors about American culture. We have events on July 4th and Easter.

12. Where are the people working in the community center coming from?

PC: Most of them are Chinese seniors too, so we have no problem communicating.

13. Let's say that funding wasn't an issue. Where do you see your organization?

PC: The needs in Flushing are not being served. We have so many people joining our center. In the past, people would just walk in and we found that to be too hectic. Basically, we set up a date at the beginning of the month and everybody joins then. In July, on the day where we let people join, we had 160 people wanting to join our center. There was a line all the way back there. We actually get complaints from the stores back there because they say our seniors are blocking their entrance. 160 people in one month want to join this place. In three years we have already had 3,000 people join us. There are needs that are not being fulfilled. There are so many people needing service in Flushing. I always tell my supervisor, we should have another senior center here, we should make another one. There is a high demand but there's not enough. We serve 3,000 people and we have about 30 staff.

14. When you say that the needs in Flushing aren't being served, would you say that this is the result of governmental failure, a lack of funding, or overpopulation?

PC: What can I say, I don't know. I don't know whose failure it is. I just know that we don't have enough.

15. Is there anything else that you'd like to mention about your organization that I haven't brought up yet or that we haven't talked about?

PC: Well, I don't know whether this is relevant or not. I have a friend and her father used to be a member here. Her father passed away now. He used to be a member here. She told me that her father told her that the happiest ten years of his life he spent at this center. The happiest ten years of his life he spent here. This is something I would like to duplicate for our members. I would like to help them so it would be the happiest years in their life. I always told my members, when you were young, you had to raise a family, you had to go to work, you had so many responsibilities, and now you are retired, now it is your time. You should do all the things that you didn't have time to do while you were young so you have no regrets in life. Do all of the things you always wanted to do.

16. How do you think that this project could help your community center?

PC: When I did my master's thesis, I did it on elder abuse. Maybe your project can bring the message of preventing elder abuse, and people at Hunter can become more aware of it and would like to come here to help. I am applying for funding now that would start in January of next year. If I get this funding, I am looking to hire a social work student. Hunter has a very good social work school. If I can be connected to the social work school, that would be good. Finding a student to help me research about elder abuse and help the victims is something I would like to do. I am 80% certain that this will be funded and I will have the ability to hire a social work student. That would be wonderful.

Elder abuse is becoming a bigger and bigger problem. Basically, there are more old people. Victims feel ashamed because their adult children are abusing them. Chinese people believe in reincarnation. There is a belief in Chinese culture that if you did something wrong in your former life, then in this life you pay for it. They are being abused by their children and they believe that they must have done something wrong to them in their previous life. They don't even want to talk about it. This is very hidden.

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