EXHIBIT BY INIS CHEN
ZINE BY KAYLEIGH ROCHE


# WHEN WE COME TOGETHER WE WIN


# When We Come Together We Win

Exhibit By: Inis Chen

Zine By: Kayleigh Roche

## WELCOME!

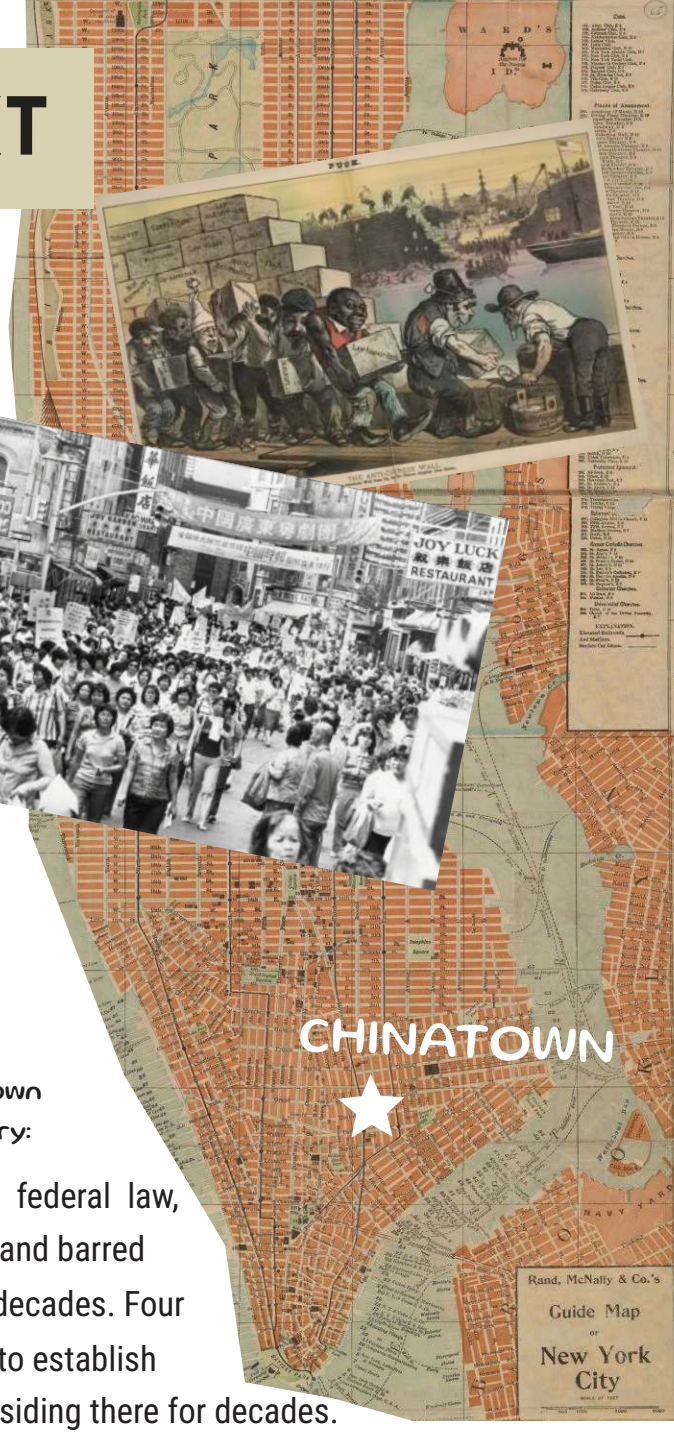
In this zine, we'll discuss intergenerational solidarity through art in Chinatown, specifically, the Basement Workshop in the 1970s & contemporary collectives like the Chinatown Art Brigade and Apex for Youth. We'll talk about how Asian American artists & organizers have used visual storytelling, poetry, murals, projections, and education to fight erasure caused by racism and gentrification. We will learn from oral histories and archival materials that challenge the stereotypes that portray Asian Americans as passive or apolitical, and discover how artistic practices are a continuum of Asian American activism.

ART IS NOT JUST A MEDIUM OF EXPRESSION, BUT A VOICE WITHIN POLITICAL LANDSCAPES

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## How did the legacy of colonialism shape New York City's Chinatown?

Orientalist stereotypes of Asian people being "passive and silent" were created to justify colonialism in the East, stripping cultural groups of individual human traits. In the mid 1800s, white Americans crafted stereotypes to economically benefit from Asian people while making sure they could never be equal. Fear of competition incentivized racist attacks, and propaganda posters took over newspapers to warn people about the "yellow peril." Characteristics of Orientalism, portraying Asian Americans as inferior and easily manipulated, have since served as a foundation of racism, silencing and influencing which stories were considered worth telling.




Betty Yu (co-founder of the Chinatown Art Brigade) shared her family's history:

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a U.S. federal law, restricted immigration by race and nationality and barred Chinese immigrants from citizenship for six decades. Four generations of Betty's family were unable to establish permanent roots in the U.S. despite residing there for decades. Her great-grandfather entered the country as a "paper son," using false family documents to circumvent the restrictive policies. This practice was a survival tactic in response to the racialized deportation and surveillance.

In New York City, exclusion continued through economic exploitation. Garment factories and restaurants in Chinatown relied on the labor of immigrants under harsh conditions, limited legal protections, union corruption, and stolen wages. Betty's mother was one of those people, working 12 to 13 hours a day, sometimes 7 days a week. In the 1980s and 1990s, workers organized hunger strikes and lawsuits that led to landmark victories, including the recovery of millions of dollars in wages, a **testament to the power of collectivism in challenging systemic exploitation.**

"It really showed that when Chinatown workers come forward, and they unite, they can win, so that was really inspiring."

– Betty Yu

# THE RISE OF COLLECTIVE ART: BASEMENT WORKSHOP

## Did a basement really help redefine what it means to be Asian American?

During the 1970s, many children of immigrants came of age during the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements. Chinatown was transitioning from a bachelor's society into a neighborhood with many young families. This created a need for cultural and creative spaces where "all ideas and discourses were welcome, and nothing was impossible." The Basement Workshop emerged from a literal basement as the first self-identified Asian American arts collective in New York, in a time when being "Asian American" was newly invented, replacing the term "Oriental." The Basement Workshop drew young people who wanted to play a part in redefining what it meant to be Asian in America.

Basement was an umbrella organization where anyone who had the interest and initiative could organize programs of their choice. It attracted people who were just graduating or still in school, who were not yet professional artists, where it was acceptable to "proclaim" oneself a poet even without publication. It was a blank canvas for art-centered political activism on Asian American identity.

The inception of the Basement Workshop goes back to 1969 with Danny N.T. Yung, who was a Columbia University urban planning student. He was doing research, later known as the Chinatown Study Group and the Chinatown Report 1969. Then, Danny Yung, along with Eleanor Yung, Peter Pan, Frank Ching, and Rocky Ching, found a basement on 54 Elizabeth Street to continue their work. At the time, these spaces were available at relatively low prices, and this basement became a gathering place for young artists and activists alike.

The Basement Workshop was founded on the principle of reciprocity. It was through love and care for other people's happiness that the Basement Workshop thrived.

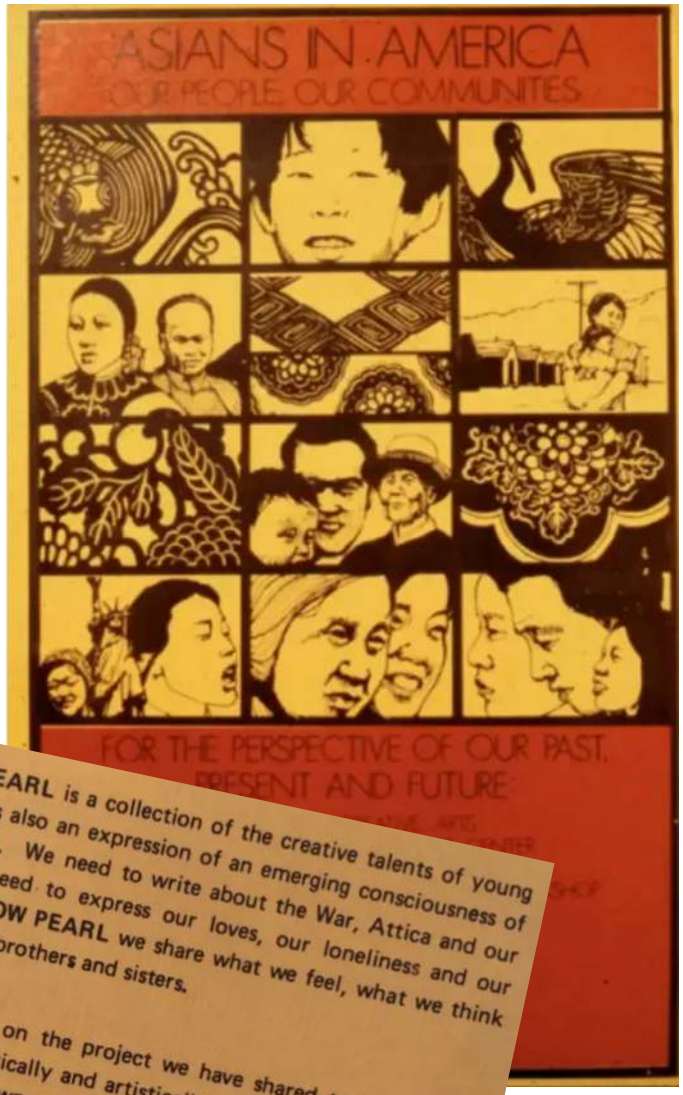

Basement member Teddy Yoshikami emphasizes this idea through her descriptions of Fay Chiang, the executive director of Basement, who gave so much to the organization. She says, "Fay gave her time and energy freely, even dropping out of college to run Basement." This was not uncommon; members sacrificed so much. Many put a pause on their education, and most worked without pay. In fact, Fay never paid herself; she always volunteered.

When asked why these sacrifices were made, Basement member Arlan Huang said, "Well, I think that during those times, it was an audacious time. I think people ran on a very romantic notion that revolution was a real possibility. So…it was really dedicated to changing this society. And [Basement] was important enough not to go to school, because school seemed to be really irrelevant to what we were doing. [Basement] was very important."

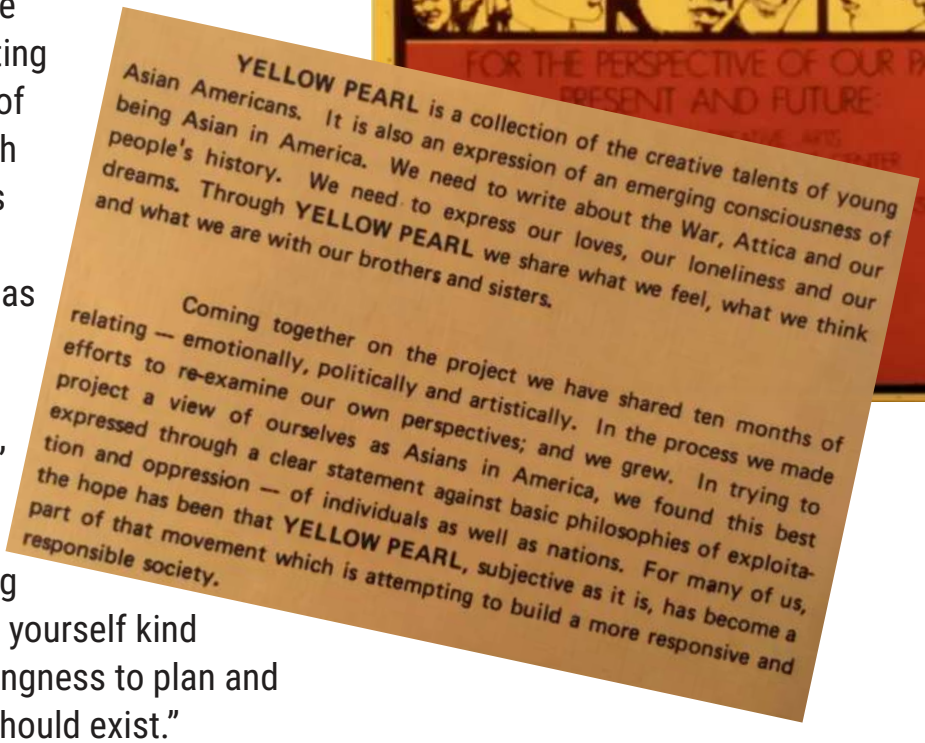
Basement members relentlessly contributed their efforts and talents to the collective, which was powerful in a time when there were very few spaces for them to do so. The Basement Workshop was not just a space for creative expression, but a site of possibility and imagination. Here, y**oung Asian American organizers rejected socially approved paths that they were expected to follow under Orientalist logic**. These were routes that emphasized respectability and "model minority" behavior of not protesting or disrupting how society is, which was heavily reinforced by schools. Basement members challenged this logic of Orientalism by choosing direct engagement with their community. **They prioritized collective art creation because they believed it could make a difference and took control of their own identity.** Basement members were producers of resistance, showing how art became inseparable from teaching and organizing, offering more than school could provide. Members were the shapers of their own reality.

# YELLOW PEARL

The Yellow Pearl (1972) featured writings and artworks of over 30 Basement workers. The Yellow Pearl was a play on the term "yellow peril," a racist phrase used to provoke anti-Asian sentiment across the United States. The Basement Workshop deliberately flipped this language built on exclusion into a phrase of collective identity and pride. The creative choice of printing on yellow paper reinforces this reclamation, embracing the idea that Asian American voices were not dangerous, but vibrant and political. The Yellow Pearl is a powerful example of **using art to rewrite racist narratives and challenge Orientalism.**




Basement Workshop member Tomie Arai compared the process of creating the Yellow Pearl with a philosophy of the Black Panther Party called "each one teach one," in which individuals empower each other by passing on skills. Tomie says that Basement was a part of this philosophy, building a space that trained artists, writers, and future educators. Arai explains, "There wasn't anything like this in Chinatown, so it did feel like a way to create and rebuild something that wasn't there…there was a 'do it yourself kind of spirit,' and a commitment or willingness to plan and construct things that you thought should exist."



**YELLOW PEARL** is a collection of the creative talents of young Asian Americans. It is also an expression of an emerging consciousness of being Asian in America. We need to write about the War, Attica and our people's history. We need to express our loves, our loneliness and our dreams. Through **YELLOW PEARL** we share what we feel, what we think and what we are with our brothers and sisters.

Coming together on the project we have shared ten months of relating — emotionally, politically and artistically. In the process we made efforts to re-examine our own perspectives; and we grew. In trying to project a view of ourselves as Asians in America, we found this best expressed through a clear statement against basic philosophies of exploitation and oppression — of individuals as well as nations. For many of us, the hope has been that **YELLOW PEARL**, subjective as it is, has become a part of that movement which is attempting to build a more responsive and responsible society.

This image depicts Uncle Sam, a symbol of the United States government. He is shown covering his ears, refusing to listen, while the phrase "the People's Beat" takes over across the background, illustrating the willful ignorance with which Asian American voices have been dismissed. The repetition portrays this community of resilience that is refusing to give up. Here, yellow is used to reclaim a color that has historically been used to stigmatize Asian people.

"So many of the young people who joined Basement and Yellow Pearl…they're really beginning to try to understand who they were…how they could really shape their own identities…I felt like Basement was…an example of something that came out of **a real need for [this] kind of space, for people who are really searching…for a way to express themselves and to really find a place for themselves**, not just in Chinatown, but in the world, around them, and it was possible in those days, to create those…spaces." - Tomie Arai

# WALL OF RESPECT: THE WORKING PEOPLE OF CHINATOWN

"The Wall of Respect for the Working People of Chinatown" (1977) was a third mural in a community mural revival series that took place in New York, sponsored by the City Arts Workshop located on the side of the Music Palace Theater at the corner of Bowery and Hester.

Tomie Arai situates this mural within China's Cultural Revolution, with the abundance of propaganda in the streets of NYC's Chinatown. It was a very divided time, and this political climate contributed to the idea that people needed to band together to achieve community benefits. Rather than contributing to state propaganda, **the mural used a community-centered approach to depicting the realities of Chinatown's working class.** The mural was a way to bring people together, rooted in listening, conversation, and collaboration

"'The Wall of Respect for the Working People of Chinatown' was really a mural that came out of the discussions we had with young people who lived near the wall and wanted to honor their fathers who were waiters and their mothers who were garment workers. I think that was something that came out of a storytelling experience, a sort of oral history sharing experience that later became a big part of what I was doing with my work, which I really still value as part of the process of learning about a place, and the people who live there."

– Tomie Arai

There weren't many mural in 1970s Chinatown, so as Arai painted, she had an audience that would walk by every day. She explained how much time she spent talking to people. Murals or public art in gneral can transform spcaes - and the people within them. They weren't necessarily trying to create monumental, permanent works of art, but **murals by nature can be territorial**, marking a space and boundary. "At the time, we weren't thinking the murals were going to last very long, but this one was up for decades. Mr. Wong, who had lived at 81 Bowery for almost 20 years, told me that he loved that mural, that every time he saw that mural, he knew he was almost home. I thought it was very moving." For these residents, the mural became part of their daily life. It affirmed the dignity of the working class that lived there, transforming this public wall into a memory. **Though the mural was taken down along with the building it adorned in the fall of 2006, its legacy lives on through the people it has impacted.**

# THE CHINATOWN ART BRIGADE

Chinatown Art Brigade Founders Tomie Arai, ManSee Kong, and Betty Yu

"I feel like we're just one part of a big chain of people. Now it's successive generations of people who build on what others have done. And I feel like there's tremendous overlap. People are beginning to see the value in working together."
– Tomie Arai

The concept of intergenerational impact as a "big chain" is the core of artistic activism in NYC's Chinatown. Not only was Tomie Arai an active member of the Basement Workshop, but also a co-founder of the Chinatown Art Brigade. Founded in 2015, the Chinatown Art Brigade (CAB) was created out of necessity. CAB is a collective of Asian American and Asian diasporic artists and organizers driven by **"the belief that our cultural, material, and aesthetic modes of production have the power to advance social change."** These artists felt the urgency to respond to the mass gentrification occurring in Chinatown.



Since 9/11, Chinatown has seen the loss of over 15,000 housing units for low-income families. There has been a 30% increase in luxury housing and an increase in the white population that threatens the cultural identity of the neighborhood. The small businesses and places that Chinese people have called home for decades are under attack.

As New York City becomes increasingly unaffordable for these longtime residents, mass displacement has occurred due to "predatory equity." This is the practice of corporations investing in buildings with rent-stabilized and low-income apartments to renovate and increase market rent rates. Landlords evict their tenants with construction-related harassment, legal action, and aggressive buyout, often involving neglect and intimidation. Simultaneously, this practice has driven a movement to build tenant power, which is the heart of CAB's work.

# THE "HERE TO STAY" PROJECT

The Here to Stay Project was created in 2015 in collaboration with the Chinatown Tenants Union of CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities*. The multimedia project includes a series of large-scale outdoor projections that center on themes of **gentrification and stories of people impacted by housing displacement, with the goal of community resilience in New York City's Chinatown**.

The artwork is based on oral histories, "placekeeping" anti-displacement walking tours, mapping, photography, and powerful images, videos, and animation created in cultural art workshops. These were featured on the Here to Stay Projection event through video montages that were projected onto public buildings in Chinatown and the Lower East Side in partnership with The Illuminator.

These projections could be seen by everyone on the streets, as they were coming out of the subway or even when buying groceries. People would look up unexpectedly at these messages saying "We're here to stay; our struggles are connected; gentrification is the new colonialism" in Chinese, Spanish, and English. People would stop, and there was a chance for organizers to talk to passersby.

The public projections onto the buildings of Chinatown created this two-way dialogue in the community that would have otherwise been impossible if it were in a museum or other private space. This created a conversation for everyday people to communicate the issues they were facing.

One of the most popular interactive activities was The People's Pad, which was a tool made by The Illuminator that let people write messages as they passed by that were projected on a large scale. During September 2016, CAB used quotes from tenant stories that showed the conditions they lived in and were projected across the street from a building where tenants had sued their landlord.

Want to learn more? Watch FIELDWORKS' video on the project: vimeo.com/256650984

*Originally the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence, now focusing on fighting displacement and advocating for institutional change

"A lot of them were everyday Chinatown residents learning about the organizing. That was a very powerful moment. The tenant members of the organization also rewrote the lyrics of a very famous pro-tenant Chinese song, and you had all these people on the street singing it because they knew the song."
– Betty Yu



By projecting multilingual messages and artwork drawn from oral histories onto public buildings, CAB's Here to Stay Project became a site of **reclaiming public space for the community.** The moment that Betty describes of residents spontaneously singing a rewritten pro-tenant song they already knew as the lyrics were projected onto the building shows how art can bring out these shared cultural memories for solidarity. The projections invited people to talk about their shared struggles through familiar languages and narratives. And in this way, it clearly shows that the **v**as well as how art can be a unifying tool.



When asked how these projections changed how people experienced Chinatown, Betty responds that these projections were one tactic, among many, designed to be visible for tenants to learn about self-advocacy and for gentrifiers to stop and think about their role in displacement. Betty explains that in the context of gentrification, "There's no such thing as neutral." Everyone has a footprint and can make a choice.

By celebrating resistance and giving residents an outlet to tell their own stories about displacement, the Chinatown Art Brigade is one example of many that brings us as a society one step closer to understanding how **art and culture can influence the communities we live in and contribute to a "culture of resistance."**

# CARRYING ART FORWARD

Across decades of organizing in Chiantown, artistic activism has never been encapsulated into a single moment. From the Basement Workshop's creation of an Asian American cultural and artisticcultural and artistic space in the 1970s to the Chinatown Art Brigade's public resistance against gentrification, art has consistently united residents of Chinatown. Like the Black Panther Party's "each one teach one" philosophy, the **Basement Workshop and Chinatown Art Brigade reject art as just an individual pursuit. Instead, both groups are rooted in storytelling, collaboration, and a responsibility to the community.** CAB encouraged everyone, regardless of their artistic experience, to contribute something to their projection campaigns to fight for the preservation of Chinatown creatively. By doing projects together, initiated by the community, tenants, and organizers, CAB reaffirms art as a shared responsibility. It is this idea of kindness and collectivity that enables movements to form for generations. As Chinatown continues to evolve, the new question becomes, how can art equip young people to carry these histories forward? The legacy of the Basement Workshop and the Chinatown Art Brigade is not just resistance, but mentorship and the passing of ideas.


Tomie Arai on:

## CULTURE IN CHINATOWN

"It's not just art with a capital A, it's language and food and how you treat each other. It's about behavior, it's about caring, it's about your legacy and what you bring with you to the process."

## THE SHARED RESPONSIBILITY OF ARTISTIC ACTIVISM

"The most important thing is to build a movement and everybody can take part in that, and everyone has a role to play. This has to be a priority because we're not going to be able to change what's been happening overnight."

## TAKEAWAYS FROM HER WORK

"Right now, I feel like kindness is so important. How we treat each other and how we envision the world we want to live in are so important. What is the end goal here? I think that art that comes out of genuine love for people and for this earth is life-altering and can have an impact on other people."

Tomie Arai's lifelong commitment to this work across both collectives demonstrates an evolution: **art not only preserves memories, but also serves as a medium of inheritance that can be shared and passed on to future generations.**

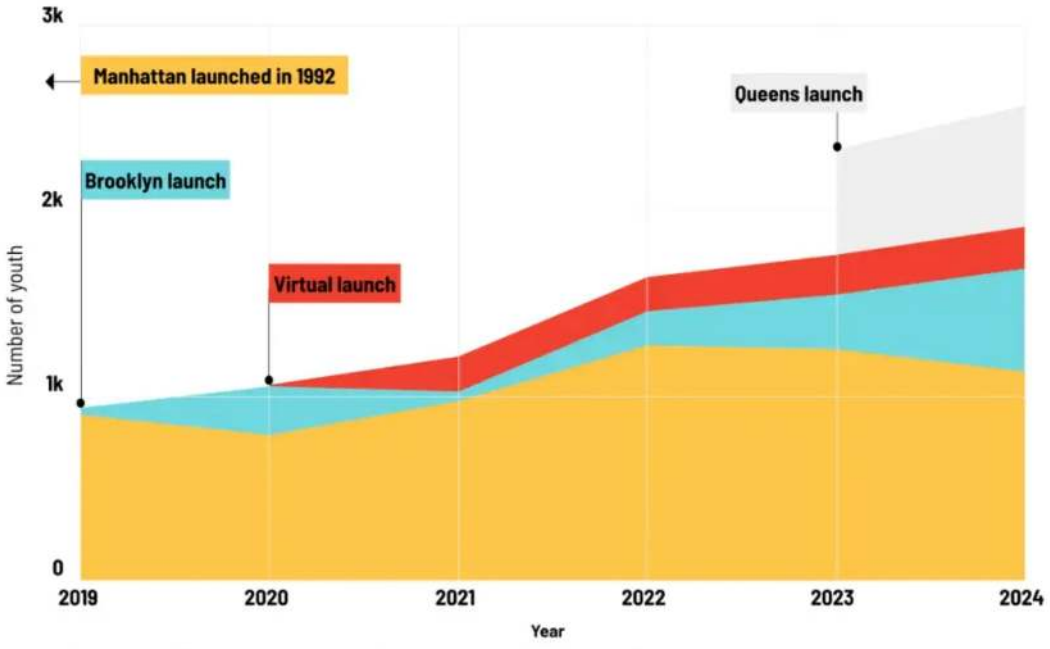
# APEX FOR YOUTH

Tomie Arai's reflection of culture being a part of "how you treat each other" is the same framework for understanding Apex for Youth.

Apex for Youth, originally called APEX, was founded in New York City's Chinatown in 1992 by five friends who saw that Asian American youth were lacking support. Apex was established to combat the model minority myth, the perception that all Asian Americans are affluent.

**1 in 2** Asian American youth live in or near poverty in NYC
**1 in 5** live in homes where no one over 14 speaks English well or at all

Starting with a small budget of $2000, Apex was created as a volunteer-led mentoring program to allow youth to imagine greater possibilities. It started very volunteer-based; this was not anything they were paid for. It was born out of amodel of mentorship and hope and vision for a world where Asian Americans, especially those from low-income immigrant backgrounds, can thrive. From its beginnings, Apex was built on relationships, paralleling the organizing principles of Basement and CAB. As one student, Lau, reflects, "Apex isn't just providing the support. They're almost like a second family."




**Please note:** This chart illustrates unique youth served per year and is not cumulative year over year.

Now, Apex is one of the largest organizations in the United States serving Asian American Youth across three New York City boroughs and national remote programming. In 2025 year, 2,700 youth were served with over 1,000 volunteers engaged. Despite this growth, Apex's core mission is rooted in the same values articulated by Tomie Arai: kindness, reciprocity, and imagination.

Part of what makes Apex significant in Chinatown's history of artistic activism is its commitment to reimagining possibility. Like the Basement Workshop's belief that young people could proclaim themselves artists even with zero experience, **Apex encourages young people to envision futures beyond constraints of poverty, racism, and the model minority myth**. And it is through mentorship and creative programming that Apex extends this legacy of artistic activism that remembers Chinatown's history and is ready to take part in changing its future.

# CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

**INIS CHEN**
**Author**

Inis Chen is currently a senior at LaGuardia High School, majoring in fine arts. In the fall, Inis will be attending Harvard, concentrating in History and Government. She identifies herself as an "artivist" who enjoys exploring how creativity is a powerful outlet for change-making. At LaGuardia, she has enjoyed creating a community of "artivists" through her initiative, LaGuardia's Equitable Arts Program (LEAP), bringing art to under-resourced communities through the means of sketchbooks, symbolizing the first step to their creative journeys. Her research is rooted in her artistic upbringing and the importance of visual storytelling to preserve memories that are often erased by gentrification. She hopes to spotlight the real-world impact of the arts, showing how artistic practices have connected Asian American community resilience.

**TOMIE ARAI**
**Oral History Narrator**

Tomie Arai is a third-generation Japanese American born in New York City. She is a visual artist and community activist who attended the High School of Music and Art, now known as Fiorello H LaGuardia High School of Music, Art & Performing Arts. Arai was a valuable member of the Basement Workshop involved in the Yellow Pearl and working on a Mural called the Wall of Respect for the Working People of Chinatown in 1977. Tomie Arai has continued to impact the Asian American community through co-founding the Chinatown Art Brigade alongside Betty Yu and ManSee Kong.

**BETTY YU**
**Oral History Narrator**

Betty Yu is a multimedia artist, filmmaker, educator and activist raised in Sunset Park, Brooklyn to Chinese immigrant parents. In 2015, Yu, along with Tomie Arai and ManSee Kong, co-founded Chinatown Art Brigade, a cultural collective telling stories of Chinatown tenants fighting gentrification through public projections and art that received the 2016 A Blade of Grass Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art. Betty Yu's documentary, Resilience, about her garment worker mother fighting sweatshop conditions, screened at national and international film festivals, including the Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival.