



No Place for Hate: Post-Pandemic Actions for London's Chinatown

a report by China Exchange
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FOREWORD

Since the start of 2020, anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiments have grown in the UK. Reported hate crimes against the people of East and Southeast Asian backgrounds have increased by nearly 50% from 2018 to 2020 according to End Violence and Racism Against ESEA Communities (EVR), a UK-based advocacy group. This has been reflected in other countries and is exacerbated by public figures using anti-Chinese rhetoric, which directly or indirectly encourages xenophobia, racism or hate crimes. London's Chinatown, which is a symbolic place for many people of East and Southeast Asian heritage living in London and around the UK, faced significant pressure, with a dramatic decline in footfall since the first reports of the outbreak emerged from Wuhan in January 2020. This prompted the development of a specific project to explore the impact of COVID-19 related racism on a specific part of London.

The Chinatown Recovery Project facilitated discussions about the impact of the pandemic and anti-Asian racism on London's Chinatown. Working with Chinatown business community members, community organisations, regular visitors, artists, activists and a team of dedicated volunteers, this project provides insights of Chinatown workers', business owners', into community organisations' and visitors' understanding of anti-Asian racism and their experiences when facing prejudice and discrimination. This project provides counter-narratives to racist sentiment and prejudice in the context of Chinatown.



Advocacy workshop hosted in collaboration with [besea.n](#) as part of the Chinatown Recovery Project.

Community^[1] participation and collaboration are at the heart of this project which consisted of five phases:

1. **Community consultation** – Project volunteers conducted consultations with 12 members of the Chinatown business community to understand their needs for the post-pandemic social recovery of Chinatown. Representatives of two community organisations and four anti-racism activist groups were consulted for community-building advice. China Exchange staff undertook community building training. This process shaped the ways of working for this project.
2. **Volunteer training and project development** – The consultation showed us that many people we wished to include in this project, in particular Chinatown workers, were hesitant to acknowledge the existence of racism or being involved in activities relating to the subject. We quickly learned that it was not feasible to formally engage with Chinatown workers by inviting them to online or offline workshops about racism or hate crime. Therefore, we adapted our approach and trained a group of volunteers who then worked to engage Chinatown workers with conversations about racism. We trained a group of 12 committed volunteers with skills and principles of raising understanding of hate crime, community outreaching and active bystandership. A wider group of volunteers and China Exchange team members were also trained in active bystander skills.
3. **Community conversations** – With shared aims for the project, the 12 trained project volunteers conducted 20 face-to-face community outreach conversations with Chinatown workers to raise their awareness of racism and hate crime. The process not only made having discussions about racism possible, but also helped the project volunteers identify some of the changes needed for the social recovery of Chinatown.
4. **Creative responses to issues around Chinatown recovery** – We involved 36 people in creative workshops focused on how to share experiences of racism and their inner responses. We worked with artists of East and Southeast Asian heritage to amplify the voices and experiences of restaurant workers through the art of tie-dye, and to create a new dialogue between Chinatown community members’ experiences of racism and their inner responses using scent as a medium.
5. **Advocacy** – We worked with volunteers to create collective voices to address racism in the context of Chinatown. We involved our volunteers, Chinese-focused community groups and a Chinatown business manager in a training session on advocacy skills. Following this training, our volunteers developed this report and an accompanying toolkit with a plan for how to use these communication assets.

[1] “Community” could be interpreted differently in different contexts. In this report, “community” refers to a group of people with a shared interest or characteristic in common, rather than a geographic area.

The Chinatown Recovery Project was supported by the Churchill Fellowship (formerly known as the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust). All activities undertaken were completed under all local and national social distancing regulations.

This report is written from material gathered by the project volunteers collectively to summarise the findings and experiences of the Chinatown Recovery Project, led by China Exchange.

About China Exchange

China Exchange is a UK registered charity that creates opportunities for people to learn more about China, Chinese culture and London’s Chinatown. www.chinaexchange.uk

KEY TERMS

ESEA	East and Southeast Asian
Chinatown	Nine streets of Central London Soho formally designated as Chinatown in 1985
Hate Crime	Any criminal offence which is perceived by the victim, or anyone else, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice on the basis of the victim’s (perceived or actual) race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or because they are transgender. (Adapted from the Metropolitan Police website)
Hate Incident	Any incident where the victim, or anyone else, thinks is based on prejudice towards them because of their actual or perceived race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or because they are transgender . These are not necessarily criminal offences but can still be reported and recorded by the police. (Adapted from the Metropolitan Police website)
COVID-related racism	Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism against a person or people on based on their racial or ethnic (or perceived racial or ethnic group) group targeting towards those of East and Southeast Asian heritage.
Active Bystander	Someone who witnesses and recognises inappropriate or threatening behaviour and chooses to challenge it or intervene safely.



INTRODUCTION

This report has been developed with material generated by the Chinatown Recovery Project volunteers, a group of 12 people who contributed considerable time and energy during 2021. The volunteers are people from different generations and cultural backgrounds.

Volunteers interviewed Chinatown business community members and visitors to better understand how the community may be served, and to provide a platform for individuals to express the difficulties experienced throughout the pandemic. These difficulties spanned the financial and business stresses caused by the pandemic, but also whether individuals had experienced anti-Asian hate crime motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chinatown was used as the backdrop for many national media reports about the viral outbreak in Wuhan at the start of 2020 and before any UK outbreak of COVID-19. The conscious and less conscious connections made between events and decisions in Mainland China and the events and decisions in nine streets of London have a significant impact. Footfall declined dramatically in Chinatown from January 2020, meaning that businesses suffered a significant reduction in income even before the national lockdown began. National media persisted in using images of people of East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) heritage wearing facemasks to illustrate stories about the pandemic, and political leaders and opinion formers using terms like “The China Virus” contributed to an environment where anti-Chinese sentiment, hate and racism could flourish. The Metropolitan Police responded swiftly and established regular working group calls, and funding was provided to London organisations to provide hate crime training. Informal groups and volunteer-led programmes sprang up (resulting in some new Community Interest Companies (CICs) and registered charities) and led advocacy primarily through social media during the lockdowns. The work undertaken for this project was motivated by a need to support Chinatown beyond the financial and practical pressures that the pandemic introduced and allow for the additional factors of racism and hate to be explored.

This project focused on London’s Chinatown specifically and prioritised connecting with Chinatown workers as well as people who make use of the area. During the pandemic, the people involved in this project described their fear, their concerns for their livelihoods and businesses, and the urgent need for visitors to return to Chinatown to sustain existing businesses. They shared feelings of disconnection within the Chinatown business community and reflected the complex relationship between Chinatown’s reputation and public image and the perhaps different individual experiences of those making use of the area.

About our Chinatown

London is a global city, and Chinatown is well known to Londoners as well as UK and international travellers. Chinatown sits under the jurisdiction of the City of Westminster. It is not a residential neighborhood but a commercial area, formed by a group of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) with a strong representation of businesses with ESEA ownership, management or cultural offering. That said, around 20% of the area's businesses are not ESEA culturally focused or owned. It pulls its weight in London's tourism economy (the annual lunar new year celebrations, for example, attract 250,000 visitors over a single day) and contributes to London and the UK economy. Its fluid 'inhabitants' are workers who serve the businesses mostly in catering and food related businesses, with the majority of the area's workforce being ethnically East or Southeast Asian.

The Chinatown "community"

There are mixed ideas and uses of the term "community". Some will use "the community", "the Chinatown community" and "the Chinese community" interchangeably. These terms, while providing a shorthand to describe groups of people with perceived shared characteristics, can be problematic: for example, is a person of Vietnamese heritage part of this community if they do not identify as Chinese? What about a business based in Chinatown that has operated in the area for over 20 years but is owned and run by a non-ESEA family?

In this report, "community" is used to refer to a group of people with a shared interest or characteristic. In the context of London's Chinatown, community consultations with Chinatown workers showed that, while many people functioning outside Chinatown would describe "the Chinatown community" and "the Chinese community", the area is not as cohesive, monocultural or monolingual as this would suggest. For many people, Chinatown is not united as one community. The common factors are geography (working in the same area of London) and an East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) cultural connection, which provide a perceived strong foundation for a community. However, many Chinatown workers consulted throughout this process reported a lack of a sense of community and a feeling of being unsupported during the pandemic.

Within the scope of this project, Chinatown workers were identified as an important group both in terms of understanding the impact of COVID-19 racism and gathering ideas for Chinatown's post-pandemic recovery. These are the people who work in the area each day and who keep the businesses that create the distinct cultural focus of the neighbourhood operating. These people, often of ESEA heritage, are at risk of racism and also more likely to be present for hate incidents that occur within the artificial boundaries of Chinatown due to the perceived Chinese features and characteristics in the area.

This report introduces three themes identified through the project:

1. There are cultural, linguistic and generational differences in ways to talk about and recognise racism
2. Structures and hierarchies in Chinatown influence the possibilities of understanding Chinatown's recovery and exploring themes of racism and hate crime
3. The impact of the lack of awareness of hate crime and available community support structures in Chinatown

The report concludes with recommendations on how these themes can be acknowledged and addressed and makes recommendations for ways in which a stronger sense of community can be harnessed in relation to racism and post-pandemic recovery.

This project was undertaken during the uncertainty of the year's pandemic restrictions. Plans needed to adjust to reflect the changing national health context. The result was to focus on activities that were achievable and possible. We recognise the following accessibility issues and limitations within our work:

- Much of our training was delivered online, creating a barrier for those without digital access or capabilities.
- Convening volunteers remotely meant dedicating more time to building trust within the group.
- Specialist training and organisations are not resourced or skilled in working in Chinese languages, presenting a barrier to those who would be more confident in these languages.
- Workshop participant numbers had to be controlled to meet social distancing requirements.
- The community consultation process (face to face, reliant on volunteers' interpretations and recollections of content) may have created inconsistencies in the experiences collected.
- The extensive time and resources needed to carry out community consultations face to face by volunteers meant that a limited number of people could be interviewed.
- This was a new subject area for China Exchange and our volunteers and required everyone involved to learn and adjust existing views as we progressed.

This project was made possible through the many people working in and visiting Chinatown who shared their lived experiences with us.

With special thanks to our volunteers:

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- Koa Pham
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- LCCA
- CIAC
- Chinese Community Centre
- End Violence and Racism Against ESEA Communities (EVR)
- Protection Approaches
- besea.n
- Communities Inc
- Newham Chinese Association



The work undertaken for this project highlighted three themes, which will be expanded on throughout this report.

What gets in the way? Barriers in discussing and acknowledging racism: how to address different perceptions of hate crime across cultural, linguistic and generational gaps

Understanding the impact of Chinatown's hierarchies and workforces and the ways in which these influence participation in conversations about racism and recovery

Raising awareness of community support structures and organisations in Chinatown

What gets in the way? Barriers in discussing and acknowledging racism: how to address different perceptions of hate crime across cultural, linguistic and generational gaps

The two community consultations, the creative workshops and training events identified cultural, linguistic and generational differences in ways of talking about and recognising racism. Many of the areas identified in this section are divided into separate elements; however they are not mutually exclusive with many overlaps and should not be seen as such. When conversations about prejudice and discrimination against East and Southeast Asian communities are more important than ever, which is the best way to facilitate this dialogue among this group of people?

Terminology and the Generation Gap: Understanding and Classifying Experiences as Hate Crimes

Within the work undertaken for this Project, the terms “hate crime” and “racism” were not commonly used by older people (typically first generation East and Southeast Asian people living in the UK) while those who are born and brought up in the UK tend to be both more aware of, and comfortable to use, these terms. Therefore, young people and second generation people were more likely to acknowledge racism and hate crime in a Chinatown context.

Hate crime is a topic that many interviewees were not comfortable to discuss. Volunteers learned that asking direct questions about racism and hate resulted in conversations ending swiftly, but that a less direct conversation that incorporated other topics or issues would allow for people to share experiences that reflected the impact of racism or hate in the area. When asked if they had experienced racism themselves, it was common for interviewees to say that they had not. However, they would often then go on to reference examples of racism they had experienced. This shows that direct questions can be problematic. It could also suggest that incidents of racism may not be recognised and labelled as such. Some were particularly keen to highlight that racism and hate are things that impact people of ESEA heritage living in other parts of the UK rather than in London. In one of the conversations, an interviewee pointed out that racism is more “often in the countryside where there is a smaller Chinese population”. However, as the conversation went on and more examples of hate incidents were mentioned, several people started to acknowledge these cases, and recognise that what had happened around them in Chinatown can be categorised as hate crimes or incidents. This demonstrated a lack of awareness of what could constitute hate crime or hate incidents along with a reluctance to accept these experiences as racism.

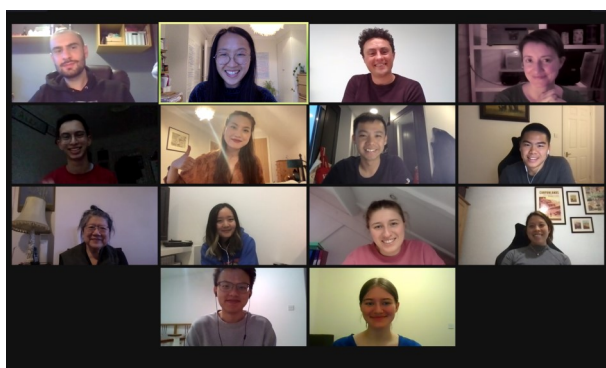
Conversations happening online and via social media might suggest that racism and hate towards ESEA people is widely understood, with highly visible campaigns such as #StopAsianHate and the sharing of experiences in other Chinatowns around the world in response to COVID-related racism. This awareness was not, however, reflected in the



One of the Chinatown Recovery Project advocacy workshops hosted in collaboration with besea.n.

community conversations held during this project. Within the two stages of community consultation, it was surprising to find out that many people, especially those who work in Chinatown, report being unaware of increased hate crime against the East and Southeast Asian communities. Visitors of ESEA heritage coming to Chinatown may have very different levels of understanding of racism and hate incidents, and very different values about addressing or discussing the topic. There is a potential disconnect between visitors who may be very attuned to and aware of these themes, and Chinatown business community members who are unwilling to acknowledge these themes within Chinatown. These differences present an opportunity for the Chinatown business community, support services focused in the area, and the Chinatown London marketing channels (led by the area's majority landlord) to champion safe spaces and places where racism and hate will be challenged.

While almost everyone denied their experiences of racism, many started to consider how their experiences could be categorised as hate crime as conversations continued. When Chinatown Recovery Project volunteers mentioned that there were community organisations, namely the Chinese Information and Advice Centre (CIAC), that provide support toward reporting — especially for those who require language support — people were keen to have contact details and more information.



Hate crime workshop (online) hosted in collaboration with Protection Approaches as part of the Chinatown Recovery Project.

perceive that the restaurant's more "Chinese" styling, as opposed to their own more "Western" decor, contributes to the frequency of these customer disputes. After pointing out the above, they said, 'racism only happens in poor areas, not here'. This reluctance is part of a wider expectation that people will protect the positive image of Chinatown and not voice concerns that would tarnish the area's reputation. Denying racism or people's experiences of hate makes it harder for Chinatown to be a safer space for exploring identity, belonging and negative experiences. Mixed levels of awareness around hate crime, racism, reporting and advocacy make a cohesive Chinatown narrative on this subject complex. Often one person's view or experience is taken to represent all ESEA people and/or the whole Chinatown experience.

Lost in Translation: Cultural Differences and Linguistic Barriers in Reporting to Authorities

The translation of "hate crime" into Chinese, namely 仇恨犯罪 (simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese), has a stronger connotation than in English. In Chinese, the word holds a certain degree of violent undertone; it is an extreme emotion and it tends to give a deeper impact at a personal level. In Chinese speaking communities, the word tends not to be used in day-to-day life, and especially not by those who migrated to the UK (first generation). The Chinese term would not be used casually, thus creating a barrier in being able and willing to discuss hate crime using this word. The term "hate crime" in English can be used more

Reticence to recognise and report racism

There is a strong reluctance to admit or report that racism or hate exists in Chinatown. Interviewees described incidents of racism and hate in their daily lives — for example, in their interactions with their neighbours — but would not offer examples of it happening in Chinatown. One volunteer reflected: "if it's happening in neighbour disputes, how can it not be happening here?". Another respondent described how a restaurant on the same street as theirs often has customer disputes that escalate and sometimes involve the police. They

flexibly and allows for language to recognise the varying degrees of hate. This linguistic difference reflects a language barrier, a complexity in translating terms into Chinese and the way that language influences the concepts that we are each comfortable to use.

The importance of reporting was highlighted by authorities, hate crime and bystander training organisations as well as community support organisations, having been consistently mentioned throughout training workshops and conversations with local support services. In particular, reporting hate crime helps by contributing to local and national data on the topic. During the community conversations held for this project, volunteers found there was a lack of understanding of what can be reported as a hate incident and a hate crime and very little awareness of different reporting methods for doing so. Within our project group, and subsequently within community consultations and creative workshops, we identified low levels of awareness of what legally constitutes hate, and how hate incidents and crime could be reported. The police, local authority and support services describe the importance of reporting to ensure that resources are allocated, but the very low levels of awareness make reporting less likely — people are unlikely to report something as a hate crime or hate incident if they do not know that it could be treated as such.

A lack of reporting of hate crime can lead to a lack of awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by particular communities nationally. It is vital that community members are made aware of the importance and the possible impact of reporting hate crime, even if it is not possible to identify and punish the perpetrators of the crime itself. Interviewees expressed concern that calling the police to a hate crime scene bears little effect as the perpetrator leaves before the police arrive and that victims need to provide certain information that they may not possess. An environment needs to be created where victims feel able to report hate crimes safely and effectively, consequently helping to build a safer community for all members. Add to this the cultural and linguistic barriers in involving people of ESEA heritage, particularly first generation and older people, in activities related to hate crime, training them to recognise and report hate becomes even more challenging.



Participants at a Fragrant Bag Workshop led by Chung-Yu Perng and Koa Pham as part of the Chinatown Recovery Project.

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Contacting the police was the most referred-to method of reporting incidents of racism and hate crime during the interviews carried out by the Chinatown Recovery Project volunteers. Some interviewees expressed satisfaction with this service, stating that the police have contributed to the safety of Chinatown. Possible amendments to the

service were suggested by interviewees, including a greater number of Chinese-speaking police officers, increased police patrols within Chinatown, and specific police departments for handling such issues. These specific departments do, in fact, exist, but may not be known or understood by the people who contributed to the community consultations.

There are language barriers that persist in communicating with authorities and with each other. These barriers exist due to concerns about needing to be proficient in English to make a report and/or a lack of awareness of the translation services that may be available to support victims. This lack of awareness and the language barriers make reporting less accessible and contributes to a sense of mistrust of the police.

Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

There are cultural, linguistic and generational gaps within the Chinatown business community. The volunteer reflections gathered as part of the project show a range of complex feelings about holding conversations with people about racism, with some describing how questioning people about this difficult topic led to negative feelings and reluctance within the volunteer group. Volunteers also shared concerns about their own safety and asked for personal alarms and agreed to work in pairs so that they were not walking in the area alone.

Overall, there is a need to spread awareness in recognising and reporting racist hate incidents or crime. It is imperative that ways to do this are developed that can be sensitive to the linguistic and cultural needs of the generations of people of ESEA heritage who connect with the area. The existence of community centres can prove vital in the reporting of anti-Asian hate crime. Given the nature of the community setting, people feel more comfortable approaching these centres and they are likely to have necessary language facilities and a familiarity with the community they serve. At such centres, some people may feel more likely to report incidents of hate crime, allowing for a greater understanding of racist experiences.

Having conversations about this challenging topic requires time, sensitivity and persistence. It takes time for people to feel able to share their experiences or be willing to discuss and address often painful or conflicting experiences. The community consultations have shown that it was not easy to talk about this with, for example, the business community members in Chinatown. Volunteers needed to spend more time than anticipated and hold broader conversations around more general issues, in addition referring to other people's experiences, so that interviewees would be willing to share their experiences. Creative workshops and training sessions provided a different way to approach the subject and allowed for people to share experiences at their own pace. Making significant progress in this area will not be achieved with one-off conversations, contacts or simple one-way communication tools. A consistent, persistent and sensitive approach is needed. It is essential that support services and authorities recognise the time needed to address this topic and consider using other activities as a route to holding sensitive conversations.

Appropriate language interpretation is essential. The language we need in order to talk about racist experiences is different from day-to-day use of language. Racism brings about deep and complex emotions that may involve words that are not used on a day to day basis. Therefore, some people who may appear to be able to converse fluently in English may find it challenging to explain their psyche and deeper feelings well, or even brush these complex feelings aside.



As participants create their own fragrant bags, they are encouraged to share their thoughts on racism and hate crime.



Completed fragrant bags displayed along a table.

This shows the importance of skilled interpretation rather than mere translation to allow for racism and hate to be discussed, addressed and people supported appropriately.

What can be done to address these areas?

1. Ensure that support services and authorities are aware of Chinatown's needs and can provide specialist services to address racism and hate within Chinatown.
2. For specialist organisations to invest in nuanced, sensitive and culturally appropriate training materials and resources for ESEA communities.
3. For organisations to harness creativity and devise different activities for people to gather to discuss a challenging topic.
4. Develop active bystandership practices within Chinatown for all people working in the area. We would like to see hate crime training sessions and bystander training to be offered to people working in the area and that this be done whilst considering how Chinatown workers committed to the long and irregular hours of the hospitality sector can attend. We would also encourage Chinatown business owners and managers to consider how they could make it possible for their employees to attend.
5. Normalise talking about hate crime and racism. Recognising racism and hate should become a standing part of the agenda for Chinatown community-related forums and meetings so that discussing the topic becomes normalised and support services can be regularly signposted. If Chinatown community leaders are seen to recognise and acknowledge the issue, more Chinatown workers and visitors are likely to have more exposure to the term and ideas. This in turn would contribute to Chinatown being a safer space.

The activities held for this project showed that there are varied ideas of hate crime and ways to aid Chinatown's recovery post-pandemic. Hate crimes towards people of ESEA heritage have increased due to the pandemic, and conversations with the Chinatown business community have evidenced that there is an underlying need for help. More focused awareness raising is needed and more urgent than ever.

Understanding the impact of Chinatown's hierarchies and workforces and the ways in which these influence participation in conversations about racism and recovery

Within the scope of this project, Chinatown workers were identified as an important group both in terms of understanding the impact of COVID-related racism and gathering ideas for Chinatown's post-pandemic recovery. It was easier to find ways to discuss Chinatown's recovery with business owners, investors and community service groups. Video calls were simple to arrange and most often could be held during regular business hours. For this project, we endeavoured to include a wider range of voices and experiences and resisted the ease of only engaging with those in the more senior roles in Chinatown's business hierarchies. This presented our project with challenges: we wanted to include the people who work in the area each day and who keep the businesses that create the distinct cultural focus of the neighbourhood operating. These people — often of ESEA heritage — are at risk of racism and also more likely to be present for hate incidents that occur within the boundaries of Chinatown.

The Businesses of Chinatown

This section focuses on recognising the different hierarchies within Chinatown and the experience of engaging with Chinatown workers and the businesses they represent for this project. Chinatown is composed of many different types of businesses, many with their own cultural focus and distinct character. From herbal medicine and acupuncture, to restaurants and supermarkets, each business and its staff offer a unique contribution to Chinatown and the local economy. Furthermore, although categorised as 'Chinatown' businesses, those who make their livelihoods in this area encompass a wide array of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including Hong Kong, Mainland China, Malaysia, and other East and Southeast Asian regions. Many of them are people who moved to the UK from another country (first generation); others are people of ESEA heritage raised in the UK (second and third generations). There are also businesses in the area without a cultural connection to ESEA culture and heritage that are operated by people from other backgrounds. While these businesses are unlikely to experience COVID-related racism in the same way, the experience of the decline in footfall in 2020 and a desire to support friends and neighbouring businesses makes this a topic that is relevant to anyone in Chinatown (not only those of ESEA heritage).



Restaurant staff participating in a Natural Tie Dye Workshop led by Odella Yue in a restaurant as part of the Chinatown Recovery Project.

The Chinatown Workforce

Many of Chinatown's workers are people employed in catering and hospitality. This industry is well-known for anti-social hours and long working days and nights. Many of Chinatown's workers are busiest in the evenings and at the weekends. This makes participation in community-based activities in the area difficult. People working in Chinatown are unlikely to live there (as are most Londoners — Zone 1 rents and house prices would limit the majority of people's opportunity to live in the area). Longer commutes and anti-social hours create

barriers for those working in Chinatown to be more heavily involved in civic activities, community events outside of work and campaigns or programmes to advocate for the area.

Testing how to include Chinatown Workers

During the project, we made opportunities for free training sessions and activities available to Chinatown community organisations and local businesses. It proved difficult for Chinatown workers to contribute to sessions for this project outside of their daily working routines. Sessions were held on understanding hate crime, active bystander skills and advocacy skills, as well as creative and wellbeing sessions working with artists and creative designers. For activities focused directly on hate crime and racism, the response was to ignore the invitation. For creative sessions, we adapted our approach further so that we could offer workshops within the restaurants for workers to take part at the end of their shifts. One restaurant manager was willing to make arrangements for their staff to take part and closed the restaurant earlier than usual on a quieter day of the week. This allowed for this group of Chinatown workers to join a creative and relaxing session at the end of their working day and for conversations about racism and personal experiences to be held in a more nuanced way. For training on advocacy, one business manager made time to attend and four representatives from community organisations (based outside Chinatown) also attended. The pressures of the pandemic have made it difficult for Chinatown businesses and their employees to engage with activities beyond their survival. Our workshops and training sessions were attended by people attracted by the activity and with the leisure time to commit to the event.



Participants applying tie-dye to T-shirts.



A participant holding up a completed tie-dye T-shirt from the workshop.

Business investors and owners may not be physically present in Chinatown as frequently as the daily workforce. This group of people are more likely to have time to be involved in civic activities and community meetings than those staffing Chinatown businesses. Business hierarchies imposed another challenge to conducting interviews, and it was fairly common for staff to express that they felt only their managers were qualified to speak. This was the case for one of the declined interviews above, and other interviewees had to be reassured that we were happy to hear from them.

Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

During both community consultations, it was vital to reach out and engage with Chinatown workers and businesses in order to understand their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working to engage with Chinatown businesses means considering how to limit disruption to their livelihoods and this presents challenges for anyone hoping to, for example, raise awareness of hate crime or racism.

What can be done to address these areas?

- Authorities can be encouraged to capture a wider range of voices and experiences about Chinatown by encouraging more meaningful engagement with Chinatown workers and non-ESEA businesses in the area.
- Creativity can be applied to the ways in which views are gathered and sought. For example, what mechanisms could be created to involve people who cannot physically attend meetings during regular working hours?

Many Chinatown workers work long hours and have little time for leisure and chores. Consequently, many are unable to devote a lot of personal time to community engagement and it is difficult to reach them outside their working day. Here are some practices we identified as useful in reaching these people:

- Choosing the right moment, both in terms of the time of day (avoiding busy service periods, for example) and the mood or atmosphere.
- Taking no for an answer. It was not uncommon for Chinatown workers to decline to be interviewed. Our volunteers agreed to respect this answer every time.
- Connecting in person. This proved challenging during the lockdowns and restrictions of 2021 but was identified by our volunteers as the most effective way of engaging with people.
- Using home languages/first languages where possible to allow for better self-expression on challenging topics
- Allowing enough time. The community consultations required considerable time and energy and progress could not be achieved in one single conversation.
- Practising active listening and validating what the person has to say. Engaging with topics such as racism and hate crime is a difficult endeavour. Therefore, it is vital that you make the interviewee feel heard, and to validate their experiences. Doing so makes them more receptive to engagement, and will also hopefully help them process any negative experiences they may have encountered.
- Considering your own energy levels and being mindful of the impact of having challenging conversations on your own wellbeing.

Raising awareness of community support structures and organisations in Chinatown

There are vibrant and valuable community-focused organisations in Chinatown that exist to support people who identify as culturally Chinese such as the London Chinatown Chinese Association (LCCA), the Chinese Information and Advice Centre (CIAC), and the London Chinese Community Centre (LCCC). There are also networks of clan associations, Chinese community centres and support services based in other London boroughs. While “Chinese” is used to describe the backgrounds of the organisations and their members and users, this may refer to people who are culturally Chinese rather than people of Chinese nationality. Along with these culturally connected services, there are specialist organisations and teams within institutions focused on anti-racism (including anti-Asian racism), hate crime and hate incidents, allyship and active bystandership and community building.

The community consultations revealed a limited awareness of the community support structures catering for people within Chinatown. Community consultation interviewees suggested that they would welcome:

- Stronger connections with the police with a more visible police presence in the area**
- Community services and support that could meet cultural and linguistic needs**
- Advocacy for Chinatown in local and national decisions**
- Initiatives that encourage footfall**
- Focused financial support for the area

In fact, those suggestions highlighted are services that do exist and are available including local dedicated ward police officers, the Chinese Community Centre (LCCC), the Chinese Information and Advice Centre (CIAC) and the London Chinatown Chinese Association (LCCA), the Chinatown Stakeholders group, and the Chinatown ward policing panel.

From the conversations volunteers have held with people about their experiences, references to community organisations were rare, and when asked about their knowledge of these organisations, many community members are either unaware of, or apathetic towards the help available to them. Specifically, volunteers were tasked with asking what support was sought after having experienced COVID-related racism or prejudice. Only four people confirmed their, or knowledge of another person’s, encounters with anti-Asian hate crime. No community member, however, expressed the support provided by the LCCC, CIAC and as a source of counsel. An increase in awareness and involvement could strengthen Chinatown.



The lack of a sense of belonging impacts the contributions that the Chinatown business community members can make to wider civic issues, especially for those who do not belong to the formal business associations or clan associations. There was ambiguity about who could speak for Chinatown and which organisations, businesses or individuals would and could lead change or activities in the area. Bringing the Chinatown business community together is, therefore, more complex than perhaps perceived. This is important to highlight to both local and national authorities. The business uncertainty and strain from the pandemic suggests that businesses and their staff may be focused inwardly and on survival and adaptation rather than on community engagement or wider civic participation within Chinatown. This presents risks both in terms of a lack of participation and in terms of lone voices and experiences being presented as “the” Chinatown or worse “Chinese” experience. We are conscious that this report could be used in the same way and hope that the reader can consider how to gain insight from this document while also considering other views and experiences.

There is a role for all Chinatown businesses to play in the area’s recovery and response to COVID-related racism beyond a company’s immediate survival. Engaging and connecting people to inspire this wider agenda is challenging, time consuming and requires sensitivity, cultural awareness and skill. The work itself is difficult. Gathering opinions, collaborating with different people with different ideas, creating an environment suited to action rather than merely discussion and holding contributors accountable for any activities they undertake all takes considerable effort.

Suggestions for ways to increase this awareness:

1. Coordinate an effort to share the basic contact information for Chinatown’s support organisations and spread this through the area’s workforce.
2. Develop a communications tool or channel for Chinatown’s workforce to share information.
3. Share the report findings with community organisations and specialist support services so that they are aware of the opportunities for them to increase awareness.
4. Engage with the social media posts of these community organisations and encourage people to share these posts.



CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the nine months of work done by the 12 Chinatown Recovery Project volunteers, we were able to gather insights on how the pandemic has affected London's Chinatown's social recovery. The focus of the work was on COVID-related racism and how this impacts the area's future. Our project has identified cultural, linguistic and generational differences in ways that business community members talk about and recognise racism. These differences might create barriers in recognising and discussing racism and hate crime. We identified the influence of hierarchy and the makeup of the Chinatown business community workforce and the complexities this presents in creating civic engagement with hate crime and racism awareness. Our work highlighted the diverse understanding of community structures and support services and the risks and opportunities that this presents.

Our recommendations are to focus on:

- Encouraging cultural awareness and sensitivity when working in this area (and with ESEA communities and different generations)
- Raising awareness of racism and hate crime with this greater understanding of cultural, linguistic and generational differences. These more sensitive approaches are essential in building trust and increasing the understanding of this issue
- Recognising the differences in Chinatown structures and how these influence what people understand, experience and connect with in terms of civic participation and community building
- Normalising talking about racism and hate crime within the Chinatown business community and its visitors
- Supporting the positive image and reputation of Chinatown by including narratives and conversations about combating racism and hate crime as part of creating a safe and resilient space for all, rather than focusing on how these narratives would damage the area's reputation.
- Helping people and organisations, particularly within the media, to portray a more sensitive and nuanced depiction of Chinatown. This could involve presenting guidelines or a standard briefing that would show better practices in using images of Chinatown, people of ESEA heritage and creating casual connections between Chinatown and events in other countries

- Taking greater steps to show the range of community services and hate crime awareness materials to those in the Chinatown business community and Chinatown workers in particular
- Advocating for resources focused on making Chinatown a safe, open and resilient space in response to the pandemic and COVID-related racism
- Building a stronger business community and working towards an environment where different views and ideas about racism can be held and not taking one person's viewpoint as the truth for everyone

Our project has shown that there is a range of perceptions on the sense of community among Chinatown workers and business owners. Some of them described that they did not feel a sense of solidarity or connection with fellow Chinatown colleagues through the pandemic. Community building takes time and we recommend that community building in Chinatown needs to focus on topics that are in the direct interest of the business community.

This report marks the end of intensive work by China Exchange volunteers during a period of global uncertainty. We commend their courage to undertake this challenging and complex work. We hope that the themes we have shared can provide inspiration for change and for future work. There is no place for hate in Chinatown.



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