

‘Excellence, empathy and equity’: Chinese negotiate the next turn in their American Dream



A broad cross-section of the Livingston community, including Jewish, Black, Latino, Indian, Asian, and non-Jewish White community members, who support Fang Gong. PHOTO: COURTESY OF FANG GONG

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WASHINGTON/NEW YORK – In 2005, Ms Fang Gong arrived in the United States as a young student from Tianjin, China.

On Tuesday, she was elected to the board of education in Livingston, New Jersey – earning a mandate to set policies for the school district

and shaping the future for the population of around 31,000 people, of whom 28 per cent are Asian Americans.

It is a fine line that Ms Gong walked on her way to victory as a Chinese American, in the town named after the state's first governor, William Livingston, who served during the American War of Independence.

All through her campaign, she was careful to tailor her message to fit mainstream American values. The Nov 7 elections filled up hundreds of seats across the nation for local offices as well as some mayoral, gubernatorial and legislative seats.

In her victory, too, she stuck to the middle ground, not at all an easy job in the aftermath of the Covid-19-pandemic-era spike in hate crime against Chinese Americans.

She alluded to her passion to serve, derived from the two cultures she inhabits. "Chinese culture teaches us to perform good deeds without expecting returns, while the American spirit inspires us to pay it forward," she told The Straits Times after her win.

"And every student needs to feel valued and seen irrespective of their background," added Ms Gong, who is in her 40s and the mother of two elementary-school-going children.



In 2005, Ms Fang Gong arrived in the United States as a young student from Tianjin, China. PHOTO: COURTESY OF FANG GONG

What she did not bring up was that children of Asian-American and Pacific Island (AAPI) heritage have experienced a surge in hate in recent times, choosing to emphasise the commonalities instead.

But the community is today still recovering from a broad spectrum of harassment directed at it, from racist taunts to outright assaults. One in three has been victimised, according to a 2021 national survey by advocacy group Stop AAPI Hate.

In New Jersey, almost a quarter of the bias incidents against Asian Americans, which rose by 248 per cent from 2019 to 2021, have happened in schools, more than in any other location.

Chinese Americans in Livingston warmed up to Ms Gong's platform of "Excellence, Empathy and Equity".

One of them, Ms Lina Huang, a 42-year-old business manager, is hopeful that Ms Gong will champion greater inclusivity, pointing to her efforts in the diversity committee and equity team at the Burnet Hill Elementary School, where Ms Gong's children study.

"In past elections, we would try to figure out which of the candidates might look out for Chinese interests more. This year, we can *fang xin* (put our hearts at rest)," she said.

Hate crimes and harassment faced by the community remain under-reported, but increasingly more Chinese Americans are willing to talk about them.

Even more significantly, a growing number are willing to stand for elections – from the grassroots to Congress – to reshape how the community is perceived and to project a louder voice on how the country is run.

The trend began in recent years and appears to have gained a greater sense of urgency post-pandemic and in the run-up to the Nov 5, 2024, presidential election.

With the Biden administration viewing the rise of China as a threat to national security, and positioning the Asian giant as an authoritarian superpower, many in the Chinese-American community worry about becoming collateral damage as candidates vie to see who can be the most hawkish against the Chinese threat to democracy.

There is no national data available, but in New York City, for instance, where public safety has been a hot issue in the community, several Asian-American names were on the ballot this month.

Asians are the fastest-growing ethnic group in New York City. According to the 2020 US population census, 630,000 new residents arrived over the previous decade, 55 per cent of whom were Asian. Separate figures for Chinese Americans are not available.

A redistricting exercise, conducted every 10 years, led to the creation of a new constituency in Southern Brooklyn, where the population is majority (53 per cent) Asian American.

Democratic Susan Zhuang won the city council contest for the new district on Tuesday. She was up against a fellow Chinese American, Ms Ying Tan, a Republican, and a Conservative candidate, Mr Vito LaBella.

In District 20 of Queens, which has the highest concentration of Asians at 72 per cent, two Taiwan-born Americans squared off against the eventual winner, a Cambodia-born incumbent.

When geopolitics becomes personal

The visibly higher political profile is a new turn for the community, which faced a rash of violent attacks, harassment and abuse after then [President Donald Trump and other elected officials blamed China for Covid-19](#) and referred to the “Chinese virus”, “kung flu” and “China plague” in their speeches and tweets.

Stop AAPI Hate, a non-profit organisation, began gathering data on racially motivated attacks related to the pandemic, recording 11,467 hate incidents between March 2020 and March 2022. Nearly half targeted people of Chinese descent.

The FBI’s latest report on hate crimes – those motivated by bias against race, religion, colour, sexual orientation and other factors –

revealed a record 1,643 in 2022. Against Asian Americans, crimes dipped 33 per cent from 746 to 499, the first recorded drop since the start of the pandemic, said the report released in October.

However, this may not be the whole picture, with the FBI's own survey showing that fewer than half of hate crime victims report them.

Many Chinese Americans say they do continue to face harassment and abuse. One of them is New Yorker Victoria Lee, 33, who, in 2020, co-funded "Welcome to Chinatown", an initiative to support businesses which took a disproportionate hit during the pandemic.

In September, a stranger on a passing motorbike spat at the unsuspecting Ms Lee on a pavement in midtown Manhattan. The gob of saliva that splattered her back was bad enough; but the savage look on the face of the man on the motorbike was worse.

"It was the most hateful look," she recalled, the memory provoking a shudder even weeks later. The daughter of immigrants from Hong Kong, Ms Lee took a long shower when she reached home.



Ms Victoria Lee co-funded “Welcome to Chinatown”, an initiative to support businesses which took a disproportionate hit during the pandemic. ST PHOTO: NIRMAL GHOSH
Then there is Ms Norina Li, 39, who helps her parents run a general store in New York’s Chinatown. She carries pepper spray when she goes out after dusk or to areas where there are few pedestrians. She has given up listening to music when she is walking to be more aware of her surroundings.

A new study, to be released in the coming weeks, confirms the trend. Offering a preview to ST, Professor Qin Gao at Columbia University’s School of Social Work said the survey revealed that Chinese New Yorkers continue to face daily discrimination, like not being treated with respect, worrying about family safety and feeling the need to constantly be on their guard.

“What we found is that the daily discrimination experiences actually kept increasing as Covid subsided,” she said, adding that respondents complained that it takes considerable effort to report them.

“And eventually, nothing happens. So people just report less,” she said.



Ms Norina Li at her parent's store KK Discount, in Manhattan's Chinatown. ST PHOTO: NIRMAL GHOSH

In 2022, Prof Gao led a landmark year-long nationwide survey of nearly 6,500 Chinese Americans, jointly with the Committee of 100, a non-profit composed of prominent Chinese Americans.

Founded in 1990, the committee came about after renowned architect I.M. Pei and former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger discussed organising an influential group of Chinese Americans to address domestic issues in the US and bilateral issues with China.

Shockwaves rippled through the community when the survey, released in September, found that three out of four Chinese Americans had experienced racial discrimination in the past 12 months.

Nearly half reported being treated with less respect than other people.

Over a quarter experienced bias or hate incidents such as being physically intimidated or assaulted, having their property vandalised or damaged, and being called names or racial slurs.

Ms Bel Leong-Hong, who co-chairs the AAPI Leadership Council in the Democratic National Committee, a part of the Democratic Party, laid the blame squarely on Trump.

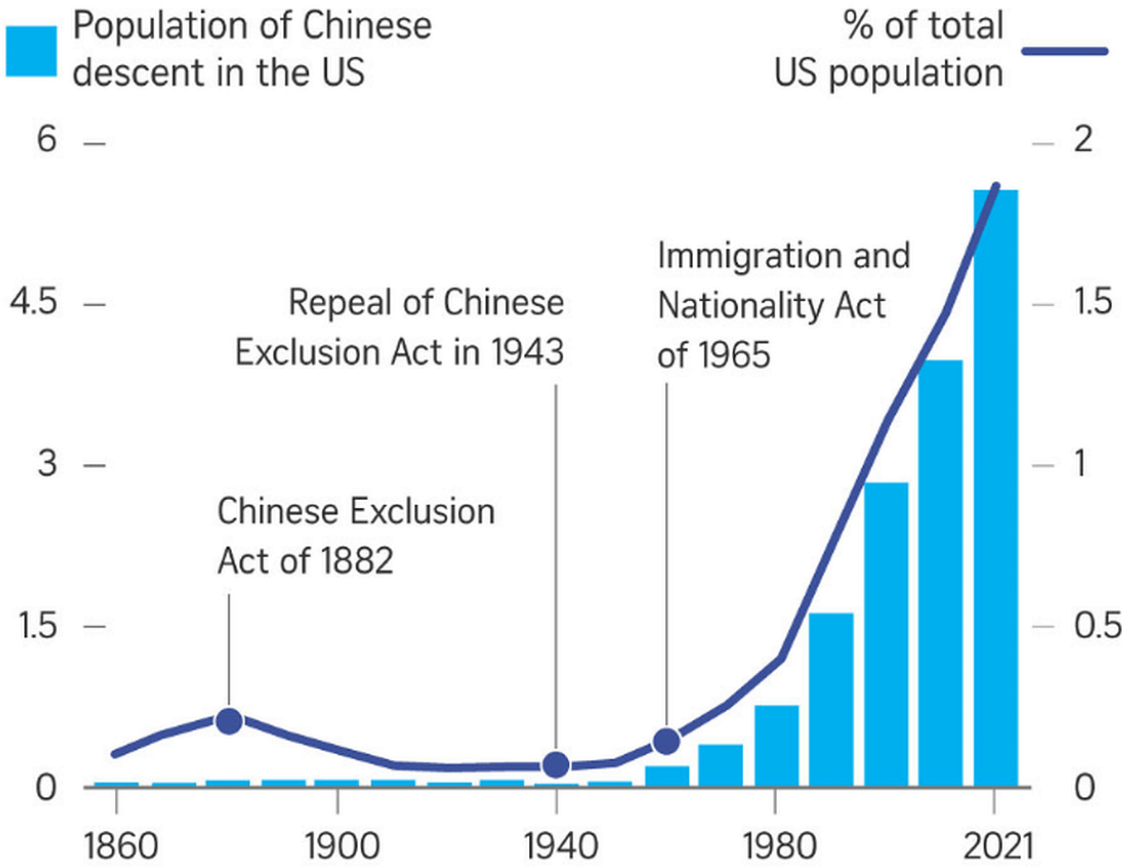
“Chinese Americans are frustrated because we’re being viewed as foreigners in our own land,” said Ms Leong-Hong, whose grandfather boarded a ship sailing from Guangdong to California during the Gold Rush in the 1800s, only to be stranded in Cuba. The family eventually made its way to the US in the late 1960s.

“In some cases, we have been Americans for several generations. And yet, because of the way we look, we get treated with scorn and hate

because of the psychological permission that the last president gave for people to hate,” the septuagenarian said.

Discrimination against the Chinese, however, is not a recent phenomenon. It was formalised more than 140 years ago in the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the first significant law excluding immigration into the US by ethnicity.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 ended discriminatory immigration policies, allowing an increase in immigration for Chinese Americans



Source: THE STATE OF CHINESE AMERICANS, 2022. CARRIED OUT BY THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK AND COMMITTEE OF 100, A NON-PROFIT MEMBERSHIP ORGANISATION OF PROMINENT CHINESE AMERICANS, THE SURVEY GATHERED INFORMATION FROM NEARLY 6,500 PARTICIPANTS FROM ACROSS THE UNITED STATES

STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

The Act was a xenophobic response to the arrival of the first Chinese immigrants during the California Gold Rush. These immigrants eventually supplied the bulk of the labour that enabled the transformation of America, connecting its eastern and western coasts through the Transcontinental Railroad. More than 1,300 Chinese lives were lost during the gruelling construction work as they manually cut through mountains of solid granite.

Today, less than 1km from the White House, the Chinese American Museum tells their story.

Museum director David Uy said the latest twist in the tale is the rise of China.

“We go through cycles,” Mr Uy said. “Chinese Americans have had a long history of discrimination. What happened during the pandemic was just one other form of that.

“Now, it’s less about the pandemic and more about concerns about the rise of China as a superpower.”

Some people will always see Chinese Americans as “perpetual foreigners” with loyalties elsewhere, according to Mr Uy.

“A lot of people are surprised to know that Chinese in America have served in the US military ever since the Civil War.”

In World War II, for instance, some 23,000 Chinese fought for the US even though 40 per cent of them at the time were not allowed to become citizens.

Ms Yue-Sai Kan, an Emmy-Award-winning TV host often referred to as the Chinese-American Oprah Winfrey, laments the damage being

done to relations now and the perceptions of ordinary people because of geopolitics.

“Of late, American leaders have been very negative towards China. And this definitely has something to do with the way people look at us,” said the 74-year-old, whose productions in the 1970s and 1980s were widely followed in both the US and China.

The Guilin-born Ms Kan, the only living American to be featured on Chinese postage stamps, studied music at Brigham Young University in Hawaii before she arrived in New York in 1971. She set up a TV company which introduced Asian cultures and customs to a receptive American audience.

“I think that a lot of Chinese Americans are very depressed and fearful because there have been many incidents,” she said, revealing that a close friend was recently punched in broad daylight in New York City.

In 2017, Ms Kan tried in vain to persuade New York City to bring two pandas from China to the Central Park zoo. “It would have revived the fortunes of midtown Manhattan, brought tourists and business worth billions of dollars,” she said. But the effort floundered as anti-China sentiment grew.

Mr Uy argues that US policy towards China is based pragmatically on the desire to protect American interests. The problem is the tendency to conflate Chinese American people with the Chinese sovereign nation.

“It’s just this perception that Chinese Americans have the perspective of China. The assumption should be that they are Americans like everyone else, with American hopes and dreams, concerns and interests.”

The lack of nuance in the US' shifting China policy has negatively shaped people's attitudes, according to Mr John Yang, the president and executive director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC), a 32-year-old non-profit organisation founded in Washington DC.

Testifying before Congress in March 2023, he urged caution in the use of anti-China rhetoric.

“Leaders on both sides of the aisle must be challenged if they engage in ‘China-bashing’ without the proper nuance to distinguish between the actions of the Chinese government and Chinese or Asian culture generally,” he said.

“Language that conflates Asians and Asian Americans with the Chinese government has been weaponised to mischaracterise and harm an entire race. Such ‘dog whistles’ perpetuate and escalate harm to Asian-American communities.”



Posters in Chinatown, a reminder that it could happen again. ST PHOTO: NIRMAL GHOSH

As the clock ticks down to presidential, congressional, state and local level elections in 2024, the community is bracing itself for the fallout from a rise in anti-China rhetoric that is almost routine on the campaign trail for all parties.

Chinese Americans, one of the nation's fastest-growing groups, are estimated to be 5.5 million strong, or 1.7 per cent of the US population.

Eight in 10 Chinese Americans are registered voters, and nine in 10 among them turned out to vote in the 2020 presidential election. Chinese Americans also form the largest chunk – one in five – of the total AAPI population of 24 million, according to 2021 figures.

Ms Cindy Tsai, the interim president and executive director of the Committee of 100, said the 2022 survey left no doubt that Chinese Americans want to continue to be part of the political process.

“Maybe that’s because nearly three out of every four respondents have experienced racial discrimination in the last 12 months, and more than half worry about their safety,” she said.

Ms Madalene Xuan-Trang Mielke, the president and CEO of the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS), will not be surprised if more Chinese Americans run for office in 2024.

The non-profit organisation was founded in 1994 to promote Asian-American participation and representation at all levels of the political process, from community service to elected office.

In the 2022 midterm elections, Ms Mielke said, a record number of Asian Americans, including more than 50 Chinese Americans and more than 25 Taiwanese Americans ran for elections across federal, state and local levels.

Prof Gao said that there is a perceptible rise in the number of Chinese-American candidates, noting that there are more Chinese-American faces in the city council races in New York.

“It’s really happening, it’s a trend. We probably want it to happen faster,” she said.

Braced for another round

Ahead of the [2024 campaign for the White House](#) and congressional races, community leaders are preparing for anti-China rhetoric. They are taking practical steps, including conducting lessons on how to deal with harassment.

The AAJC began offering bystander intervention training at the height of the pandemic in 2020.

“It was immediately clear that we were meeting a need. We offered two sessions, and had more than a thousand people register for each one,” said Ms Marita Etcubanez, the outfit’s vice-president of strategic initiatives.

This form of training equips a person witnessing harassment, say in a bus, to come to the victim’s aid using tactics such as distracting the attacker, documenting the act and trying to rope in other passengers.

The organisation offers two other kinds of training, one aimed at de-escalating conflict and the other for victims, on how to respond to harassment.

By the end of 2020, AAJC had trained over 16,000 people but it was just the beginning. Demand soared in 2021, as videos of violent physical assaults against elderly Asian Americans began to appear online.

There was also widespread outrage after [eight people, including six Asian-American women, were shot by a white American](#) who went on a rampage at three spas in the Atlanta area.

“It really ramped up fear and anxiety in the community. We had to increase our Zoom capacity so we could accommodate up to 5,000 people at each training session.

“That spring, every time we announced a new batch, places filled up quickly. We were offering virtual training pretty much every day for the month of April,” she said.

Mr Ireneo Reus, a 44-year-old Filipino-American lawyer in Los Angeles, attended a session in June 2023.

“I faced the threats of violence constantly, due to my race – or perceived race – while growing up in Southern California in the late 1980s and 1990s. So this is nothing new to me,” he said.

But he is glad that the session equipped him to help when others are harassed.

By mid-2021, the AAJC had trained over 100,000 people. And it was not just Asian Americans, Ms Etcubanez said.

“Certainly, we got a lot of people from our community participating, but there were also others,” she said.

“People wanted to know: What do I do if I see this happening to someone? It was good to see so many allies showing up.”

As attention turns towards the presidential election, AAJC is focused on getting more activists trained so that they can prepare vulnerable members of the community, like the elderly.

Meanwhile, Asian Americans are increasingly being courted as a voting bloc. In the 2022 midterm elections, Senator Raphael Warnock rolled out ads in Mandarin, Korean and Vietnamese to mobilise these voters, eventually carrying Georgia's tightly contested race.

There is a vast spectrum of opportunities to be involved when the town calls for volunteers to join various committees, like the zoning and planning committees to event-specific ones like the July 4th committee, said Ms Gong, the newly elected member on the board of education in Livingston.

And Chinese Americans are stepping up, she observed. "In the past, there was a noticeable absence of Chinese representation in these groups," she said.

"Now, numerous Chinese parents are expressing interest in applying, taking those initial steps to play integral roles where our voices matter."

Politics is not the only arena where bridges can be built, said Mr Kit-Keung Kan, an 80-year-old naturalised American who came to the US to study nuclear physics in 1968. The Guangdong-born Mr Kan teaches traditional painting and calligraphy at the local Chinese association where his students include non-Chinese Americans.

"My career prepared me to study matter and how it moves through space," he said. "My art helps to cross cultural boundaries."



Mr Kit-Keung Kan's work is on display at an exhibition at the Chinese American Museum in Washington until Dec 31, 2023. His art has been collected by the Hong Kong Museum of Art and IMF, among others. ST PHOTO: BHAGYASHREE GAREKAR

In politics, the lines are harder to cross.

Prof Gao said: "Some local officials or candidates I've met said they have to navigate this narrative of being non-Americans. A fourth-generation Chinese American told me he was questioned about loyalty and identity, whether he was Chinese or American, as he campaigned."

Ms Mielke of APAICS noted that surveys have shown that more Asian Americans turn out to vote when an Asian American is on the ballot. "But there has to be a substantive answer as to why you are running.

Tackling anti-Chinese sentiment may be a reason, part of the personal narrative. But most candidates make public service across the board their main emphasis. It's about how you intend to improve the quality of life for those in your community and across all communities.”

Practically speaking, minorities need to build coalitions to win elections. As Ms Mielke said: “You have to be seen as someone who can unite people.”

- Additional reporting by Grace Ng in Livingston, New Jersey