

## EXHIBITION, FILM, AND NEW MEDIA REVIEWS

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### *Big Fight in Little Chinatown*

Directed by Karen Cho

Montreal: EyeSteelFilm, 2022.

Documentary. 90 minutes.

APRIL LIU

*Vancouver*

**I**N KAREN CHO'S *Big Fight in Little Chinatown*, we finally have a film that pushes past the touristic gaze to reveal several Chinatowns from the perspective of those who have lived and worked there for generations. Featuring individuals running the local shops, restaurants, associations, and gathering spaces, the film provides a moving portrait of why they're fighting for Chinatown's right to exist. Weaving stories from the Chinatowns in Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto, New York, and San Francisco, the film draws primarily on present-day testimonials to highlight the profound sense of rootedness and love for community that is prevalent among those who call Chinatown home. The residents' resilient spirit of mutual care has helped the communities survive generations of discrimination, yet it's being tested again by the resurgent pressures of gentrification, racism, and cultural erasure. With COVID-19 unfolding during the filming, followed by the dramatic rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, the stakes are as high as ever for this timely piece.

As a cultural worker in Vancouver's Chinatown, I had the privilege of attending a free community screening held at the Tinseltown International Village theatre. Large groups of elders lined up to enter, talking excitedly in Cantonese. We packed the place full as the Hon Hsing lion dancers (also featured in the film) opened the screening with an

energetic performance. As the film played, the reactions were palpable – laughter, sighs of recognition, and tears flowed abundantly. Here was a community seeing itself honoured and reflected on the big screen, probably for the first time. The minutiae of our daily struggles became heroic, even beautiful, cast within a larger perspective that transcended borders and generations. The shots of mundane activities, artfully framed in soft light, became monumental tableaux reflecting tight-knit relations: elders playing cards in the park, women folding dumplings, lion dancers braving the snow to cheer up residents during a pandemic. Karen Cho has given a wonderful gift to these Chinatowns by holding up a mirror to show us our collective strength and power.

Against the backdrop of an aging population, the film highlights the courage of the next generation called into leadership roles at a critical time. Like their forebears, they must struggle to keep their communities intact. When his father falls ill, William Liu gives up a promising career as an opera singer in New York to return home and run the family business. “I’m okay giving up something I love for something that I love *even more*, which is my family,” says William, the owner of Kam Wai Dim Sum, an important anchor business in Vancouver’s Chinatown. William’s determination to support his parents is inseparable from the family business, which is in turn an integral part of the neighbourhood. The cultural, social, and economic issues are thus deeply intertwined, with so much resting on the next generation to renew those vital connections.

In New York’s Chinatown, the young Mei Lum steps up to steward the Wing On Wo Co. porcelain shop, the neighbourhood’s oldest continuously operating store. With inspiring optimism, she’s keen on figuring out “what is significant, what is still relevant, and how to breathe new life into it.” Meanwhile, the city is planning to build an enormous three-hundred-foot (ninety-one-metre) “mega-jail” in a densely populated part of Chinatown, a devastating prospect for the residents. We see the community forming a human blockade to protest the jail construction; some are handcuffed and arrested by force. Mei Lum’s father, Gary, gives the most moving explanation of why they’re staying put: “We’re here in America, fifth-generation Chinese American and we developed a home here. Nobody’s going to kick us out of our house. This is *our* house. I, for one, don’t call it resistance, I call it staying where you *belong*.”

These personal stories will likely strike a universal chord. Yet for those not easily convinced, the film could have made a stronger case for why people living outside the Chinatowns should care about saving them.

For instance, in the interview with urban planner Andy Yan, it would've been enlightening to hear him talk about how activists in Vancouver's Chinatown and Strathcona successfully fought against freeway construction in the 1960s and 1970s, paving the way for a new urban vision for Vancouver ("Vancouverism" in urban planning speak) that would make it more livable, walkable, and sustainable for all. He's written on the topic as a "founding myth" for Vancouver, a city with international accolades for its urban planning.<sup>1</sup> Providing a more explicit rationale for why these issues should matter to *everyone* would have bolstered the film's argument for a larger audience.

Nevertheless, I'm glad the film prioritized the personal stories of those carrying out the daily labour that keeps the Chinatowns going. These voices have been historically marginalized and silenced for over a century; it is about time we heard from them. The ancestors would be proud to see their sacrifices were not in vain, that the "big fight" for justice and the right to belong is still under way. This film will certainly play a galvanizing role in bringing us together to protect and revitalize Chinatowns everywhere.

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<sup>1</sup> "Andy Yan: Where Goes Chinatown, So Goes the City of Vancouver," op-ed in *Vancouver Sun*, 25 May 2017. <https://vancouver.sun.com/opinion/op-ed/opinion-where-goes-chinatown-goes-the-city-of-vancouver>.