

Jennifer Carpenter
Lewis Hine Documentary Fellow 2010-2011
October-November Report

Boston, Chinatown & the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center

My walk to work starts between two stone lions at the Chinatown Gate – where old men curse and spit among the Xiangqi boards in the park. Then I duck through Ping On Alley – the very first Chinese settlement – where back doors reveal the clatter and chaos from restaurant kitchens in a mid morning rush. My path wanders west down Oxford Street, where street vendors shout sales and mumble haggles. Then I turn the corner onto Beach Street, where chickens cackle from iron cages in a live poultry shop, opposite a large window display of dried ducks. I'm halfway there.

My pace quickens as I pass through the old Combat Zone – Boston's former red light district turned high-rise neighborhood – where flashy cars honk in traffic from the encroaching Theater District. Then I usually take a shortcut through the Josiah Quincy Elementary School, where children laugh in English and Cantonese on the kickball courtyard. At last my journey ends at Oak Street, where familiar faces greet mine as I push through the front doors of the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center.

In October I joined the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC) – one of Chinatown's oldest and largest social service organizations. BCNC serves a few thousand Asian Americans each year – through activities including adult English as a Second Language classes, bilingual preschool services, after school fitness programs, parenting workshops, etc. These activities are organized into eight distinct programs, and all fall under the BCNC umbrella. I am determined to get to know these eight programs, and to formulate how my documentary work can compliment and strengthen BCNC's mission.

BCNC's ongoing challenge is to ensure that Chinatown remains the cultural and service center of the Chinese population in New England – a seemingly unattainable goal in the face of Boston's extensive downtown gentrification. I can sense this pressure every morning I walk to work. The leaders at BCNC are well aware that in order to remain relevant and necessary in Boston's changing and scattering community, BCNC needs to reprioritize their public presentation and reorganize its internal structure. BCNC hopes my work on the Hine Fellowship will reshape BCNC's visual and narrative image in order to better promote, share and market their activities for their audience (be it for the Asian American community, for the greater Boston network, and perhaps most importantly, for themselves).

For my first six weeks, I've been doing a lot of listening. I've been connecting with BCNC's people and projects, piecing together Chinatown's history and present, and uncovering pertinent issues Chinese Americans have been confronting for generations. I've been acting like a sponge – absorbing as much Cantonese and context as I can from my daily interactions at BCNC and in Chinatown. Most days are elaborate tests of my ability to communicate with others. Simple interactions with immigrant Chinese often turn into outrageous performances of gestures and

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charades. Exchanges with my English-speaking colleagues can be equally challenging, as I learn who and how to approach members of the Chinese community for help and advice. And so I have become dependent upon listening to communicate – to demonstrate my sincere interest and respect for the people and projects I collaborate with.

I believe my active listening is the cause behind BCNC's growing acceptance of me as an asset rather than an outsider – despite my ethnic and linguistic disconnect, I am welcomed as an equal and as a colleague. Even more, this listening has led to the discovery of issues and needs within BCNC and the Chinatown community that are perhaps not often heard. I've been bearing witness to the retelling of painful stories of immigration from those who need to get them out (and perhaps don't have an outlet to share them). I've been observing the frustrating miscommunication between older and younger generations as they navigate language and culture for a common goal. And I've been quietly exposed to some of the unspoken issues in Chinatown that don't often reach outsider ears – including local family politics, discrimination, and gambling.

My work thus far is a reflection of this listening. Every week I have found opportunities to capture snippets of BCNC's world. I have been documenting healthy eating workshops to Halloween festivities to after school art classes – and everything in-between. My short pieces are exercises in light and sound – experiments to discover what mediums and processes feel comfortable in each unique setting. You can check out my work on my blog (www.jenniferalicecarpenter.com/in-chinatown.html).

Certainly my biggest project to date has been an oral history series for the 2010 StoryCorps National Day of Listening campaign. On November 26, StoryCorps asked BCNC and a few other organizations around the country to submit interviews from people from the community they represent. This was an excellent opportunity to get BCNC's name out there – and showcase some touching relationships between members of the Chinatown community. And what better way for BCNC to connect with its members than to encourage them to share their stories?

For four weeks, I worked with BCNC's Development and Arts & Enrichment teams to pair BCNC staff with interesting people from Chinatown for six, one hour-long interviews. Those selected were as eclectic as their conversation topics – from a nine-man volleyball tycoon to a shy high school ESL student to a retired civil rights activist. And their stories were just as varied – from lion dance footwork to bilingual education philosophy to inter-racial dating advice. Despite their variety, one message was clear: Chinatown is the heart of the Chinese population in New England – Chinatown is necessary.

The National Day of Listening project conversations will soon be available on BCNC's new website (www.bcnc.net) – six polished, four to five minute audio

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compilations, framed with portraits from the interview. These interesting voices bring a more accessible, personable perspective into BCNC's goings on. They are evidence that BCNC is listening.

Now in my third month in Chinatown, I am now comfortable with my work and contacts at BCNC to start listening with more focus. I want to concrete on a few compelling issues to look into it deeply, and comprehensively – to flesh out and turn into my main Hine project. Since December I have started to reach out to contacts at BCNC and in Chinatown concerning four major themes: Chinese language policy in Boston Public Schools, disability and mental health, satellite babies (American-born babies sent back to China and returned to Boston at school age), and old age in Chinatown. As I start asking questions around these themes, I expect the answers to foster interests in related issues, and to pull me in unexpected directions. Above all, I want to commit my Hine fellowship towards simple and sustainable documentary work that not only addresses an important issue, but also enhances BCNC's vision for Chinatown's future.