

# THE MAKING OF THE SUZHOU ALLEY WOMEN'S MURAL: *A Conversation with the Artists*

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## **1. *How did the artist team meet and come up with the idea for the Suzhou Alley Women's Mural (SAWM)?***

The idea was initially proposed by the Vancouver-based interdisciplinary artist Elisa Yon. She recognized that much of the recorded history of Chinese immigration and settlement in British Columbia focuses on the stories and contributions of men, including the existing commemorative murals in Vancouver's Chinatown. She felt it was time to uplift women's voices in the community and make them visible in Chinatown's cultural landscape and public realm.

In 2019, Elisa reached out to fellow local artists Janet Wang and Laurie M. Landry. She also reached out to the City of Vancouver's Chinatown Transformation Team (CTT) to see if they would support the idea of a community-initiated mural and storytelling project. Once Elisa had the support of local artists and the City, she reached out to Yun-Jou Chang at Cinevolution Media Arts Society to see if

they would be interested in being a community partner and to assist the artist team in applying for project funding with the BC Arts Council and, later, the Canada Council for the Arts. Additional artist team members were selected based on their interest and connection to Chinatown, lived experiences, and artist practices, including Carmen Chan, Carol Chan, Daniel Chen, Alger Liang, Catrina Megumi Longmuir, Mengya Zhao, and Stella Zheng.

## ***2. Why did you take a community-engaged approach?***

A community-based mural project had the potential to engage members of Chinatown's community in dialogue and discussion on various topics of relevance, including collective identity, cultural representation, place-making, and safety and security. Since this project aims to recognize the contributions of women within the community, it was important for us to engage women of diverse ages and lived experiences to capture their stories, voices, and messages for future generations.

## ***3. How did you get the community involved and how did community feedback shape the mural?***

The artist team implemented a robust and extensive approach, guided by principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity. This included the following activities:

- » ***Community Project Advisory Committee.*** *With the help of the CTT, we were able to bring together a group of women who represented a diversity of ages and lived experiences. Many of the women also were connected to community cultural and heritage organizations such as the Chinese Canadian Museum, Vancouver Heritage Foundation, Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia, Pacific Canada Heritage Centre — Museum of Migration, and Youth Collaborative for Chinatown.*

- » **Community Storyboards.** *The first exercises with the advisory committee and artist team were a series of community storyboards to collect and invite contributions in the form of keywords, images, drawings, and archival materials and research. Since we needed to navigate in-person gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, we developed a series of digital storyboards. We divided the storyboards into subject areas, including arts and culture, law, education, medicine and nursing, community and social development, social justice, government, and military.*
- » **Seniors Art Activity Workshops.** *The project team presented and hosted workshops in collaboration with staff at the S.U.C.C.E.S.S. Simon K. Y. Lee Seniors Care Home and Harmony House. The first was a floral drawing workshop with women elders and staff, who helped us research and identify Chinese floral species that hold symbolic value in Chinese culture. Mengya Zhao incorporates these drawings into her design and composition of floral and medicinal imagery as foundational pattern elements (appearing along the bottom portion of the mural). The second workshop with women elders consisted of a collage and storytelling workshop. The artists led a short skills- and knowledge-sharing lesson, followed by the prompt: What guidance or message would you like to share with future generations of women in the community? The elders responded to this question in their artwork collages. As a thank you, the artists gifted the art supplies — tote bags, scissors, materials, paper, and glue sticks — to the seniors for their future art-making activities.*
- » **Mail Art Project.** *To reach out to younger members of the community, the artist team presented a mail art project. A call out was issued to the community inviting women to participate. We sent out 16 mail art kits, which include a pre-stamped blank postcard, limited edition “Solidarity Forever” tote bag, and instruction page. Participants created artworks in response to the prompt: What have you learned from a woman elder in your life that helped connect you to your cultural heritage?*

» **Online Survey and Website Engagement Portal.** We also launched a project website and online survey on International Women's Day (March 8) in 2021. The "Auspicious 8 Question Survey" invited members of the community to provide feedback and responses to question, such as: What colours do you think symbolize strength, resilience, and endurance? The artists then collected the responses into word clouds, with popular keywords and themes transferred to the digital storyboards. In addition, we made the Instagram account @suzhoualley mural to share updates, work in progress, and completed pieces. Community members have reached out to us on Instagram, through direct message, and by leaving comments.

#### **4. How did you get the resources and various permissions needed to create the SAWM?**

In partnership with Cinevolution Media Arts Society, we were able to apply to funding programs at the BC Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts. Both organizations offer grants that support community-based art projects.

Implementing art projects in public space require artists to work with multiple project stakeholders. In our case, this included the City of Vancouver, Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee, Chinatown Legacy Stewardship Group, Lim Sai Hor Kow Mock Benevolent Association, and S.U.C.C.E.S.S.

#### **5. As a community advocacy project, what are the top three takeaways or social impacts you would like the community to understand or experience in relation to the mural?**

Firstly, we would like women in the community (present and future) to understand that we see them — we acknowledge their sacrifices and the hardships their ancestors endured to benefit future generations.

Secondly, we would like children to learn about the contributions and legacies of their elders and shared ancestors so they feel empowered to take on the struggles — both personal and collective — that they will inherit from previous generations.

Thirdly, we would like arts and culture funding programs, as well as city authorities, to take note and use this project as a case study on how mural projects can be more than beautification exercises for a community or neighbourhood. They can offer and do so much more, including:

- » *Uplift marginalized voices and offer communities a place within the cultural landscape of a city, neighbourhood, and community.*
- » *Build community relationships and social capital.*
- » *Be a symbol of community pride and collective identity.*
- » *Raise awareness of the contributions and stories of people in the community.*
- » *Raise awareness of issues and topics of relevance for people in the community.*

## **6. *What was your biggest challenge in creating the mural?***

One of the biggest challenges was navigating the COVID-19 pandemic while implementing the community engagement phase of the project

Time commitment was also a challenge. Community-initiated projects tend to have longer project timelines to accommodate funding processes and the availability of the individual members of the project team. This project started in 2019 and was a passion project — meaning that much of the time required to get the project off the ground was volunteered time. People believed the work they were doing was worthwhile and would benefit the community.

Another key challenge was navigating stakeholder opinions about how the mural might positively or negatively impact the use of public space in Chinatown, especially during a time of increased anti-Asian sentiment and neighbourhood vandalism. Finally, building collaboration within the team and with the larger community required openness in dialogue while developing ideas for what to depict in the mural.