

Elisa Fong-Hirschfelder

Mr. Greco

English 3H

28 April 2020

Cupertino Village amidst COVID-19:

How the rising pandemic hit local Asian business hard

“Don’t put this on camera”, said Chinese boba shop worker Gabrielle Ma as she pulled out an electronic cigarette from her pocket and proceeded to take a hit. A rather contradictory and confusing action, my translator and I found, for she was wearing a mask and began recounting her worries regarding the spread of a respiratory tract-attacking virus. It was certainly one of the most interesting reactions we had received out of all our interviewees for our reportage. My partners and I had been walking around the Cupertino Village Plaza all day - an Asian business central for food, drinks, and desserts. On a typical day, one could witness restaurants such as Tofu Plus (a trendy Korean BBQ joint) and Ume boba shop lined around the block with customers eagerly waiting to get in (I’ve admittedly waited for over half an hour in line to dine at Tofu Plus myself). But on that day, I couldn’t find one line of customers in sight. The Plaza was eerily empty, and the strollers who we sighted appeared to be rushed and strangely cautious around others. Though we didn’t know it then, that would be the last day any of us would be allowed to dine in public with others for a long time.

Our initial goal as filmmakers was to explore the effects of COVID-19, or Coronavirus, on Asian businesses in the Cupertino Village Plaza. We spent more than a couple of hours searching for willing interviewees, and filming their responses in order to compile them into a

complete documentary. During this time, the virus was pretty well-known and had spread globally. However, many (including us) had doubts regarding its potential effects on our direct community. California's government hadn't taken any direct action, and life seemed relatively normal. That was, until a "shelter in place" was enacted throughout the state, the day after our final shoot at the plaza. We had never felt so lucky.

We quickly realized there was a lot more to our interviewees' perspectives than simply their business statistics. We found out about potential losses of jobs and long-standing businesses, family members and friends in difficult situations, and even underlying race-related assumptions that could be causing backlash. What sets apart the Coronavirus from past global epidemics is its association with Asian culture due to its origin in China. Common misconception of Asians being more likely to carry the virus' symptoms or Asian foods containing infectors are potential causes of declining business in the plaza. Ma noted that, "Because in American culture, wearing masks might mean that you are affected by some virus or something is wrong with your health. But in our [Chinese] culture, not wanting people to see you or not wearing makeup can be the reason for us wearing masks." Fantasia Coffee and Tea waitress Alicia Yim added on to this sentiment in her remark that customers "[weren't] coming in as much or wearing masks. It's bad for business, but I understand why people are doing that." Not only does misconception regarding the virus prove harmful to business, but misconception regarding Asian culture and Asian customers does as well. Though racism and xenophobia in current times is a whole discussion in itself, I found intriguing how little bits of it were sprinkled into the experiences of the workers I talked to.

So what really is the Coronavirus? According to the WHO (World Health Organization), COVID-19, an abbreviation for a type of Coronavirus found in 2019, is one of a larger family of viruses “transmitting between animals and people that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases”, originating from Wuhan, China. With its spread to the U.S. and many other countries, federal governments have put into place many preventative measures including the restriction of food businesses to only allow take-out orders, which have effectively caused huge financial losses and even business shutting down. Individuals have taken precautions such as “social distancing”, isolation, and extreme sanitary measures when leaving the house. Ma recounts an experience with a customer that seemed to her as an astonishing sight:

*“There was this one Chinese customer who asked us if we had gloves for him to sign on the screen or if he could just sign on the screen without touching it. But we sanitized the screen. And it’s just signing on screen, it’s not a big deal. But that customer paid a lot of attention to stuff like this. He also did this [gestures picking something up with her index and thumb carefully] when I gave him a mask. It was pretty interesting. We can’t say that that customer was being overdramatic, because they were just thinking for their health. We just try to understand customers and make them feel as safe as possible.”*

Since our interview, it has become much more common (and even encouraged) for customers to be wearing masks and gloves, and carrying sanitary wipes whilst shopping at stores or picking up take-out food. However, most aren’t willing to go to such lengths in order to purchase their meals, especially since cooking is a much simpler and safer option. The Bay Area population is

faced with the dilemma of drawing the line between supporting local business and staying safe at home.

As a result of this era of “social distancing”, augmented sanitary precautions and the danger involved in being surrounded by others, businesses have witnessed an increase in the use of online delivery services such as UberEats, Postmates, and Doordash. According to the SF Eater, these services have offered no-contact delivery options “borne from customer desires to minimize physical contact” and to show that their companies are “adjusting to conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic.” Judy Zhu, a waitress at the Shanghai Family Restaurant, mentioned her worry that “Even though the customers don’t come out to eat anymore, they still have the need to get food”, and her steps to serving customers that aren’t able to leave the house, including “letting people order take-out food or even give them discounts for the take out-food or food delivery.” Though our interview occurred before restrictions were put into place regarding restaurant semi-closures, it was clear that no matter the number of deliveries and take-out orders placed, they would never be able to reach their typical amount of business of a few months prior. Other restaurants in the Cupertino Plaza also face possible closure due to their lack of success with delivery options. Alex Zhou, waiter at Apple Green Bakery, expressed his distraught with his loss in business, saying that “Some customers come two or three times a week, but now, no customers are coming. They’re staying home or calling someone to deliver something, using UberEats or DoorDash.” The loss of regular customers has taken a toll on the business, which seemed to be a trend throughout the other eateries of the plaza.

Pandemics aren't a rare sight to see in the grand scheme of human history. Though each pandemic and epidemic is widely differentiable in that the era during which it occurred determined the population's likelihood of survival, there are social aspects of fear and ignorance that persevere through each. As mentioned previously, the workers of the Cupertino Plaza each detailed some aspect of misinformation that had caused a decline in their business, ranging from the stigma surrounding masks worn by Asians to the relation of the virus to its origin. This range of misunderstanding can be related to the concept of "theory blindness", a concept described by Steven Johnson in his novel *"The Ghost Map"*, about the cholera outbreak in London in the 1800s. "Theory blindness" consists of the notion of blindly following or believing a theory no matter the amount of counterexamples or logical fallacies it contains. This is demonstrated in an excerpt of Johnson's description of the plague:

*"During the plague years of 1665-1666, popular lore had it that the disease was being spread by dogs and cats. The Lord Mayor promptly called for a mass extermination of the city's entire population of pets and strays, which was dutifully carried out by his minions. Of course, the plague turned out to be transmitted via the rats, whose numbers grew exponentially after the sudden, state-sponsored demise of their own predators." (p.160)*

In this excerpt, the Lord Mayor demonstrated theory blindness in the sense that his belief of the theory of infestation by animals made him blind to any other theory that previously existed, and he acted upon only that. This obviously backfired, for the theory ended up being false and the action taken only resulted in the unnecessary killing of animals. Further along in his novel,

Johnson writes at length about the English political figure Edwin Chadwick, during the era of the cholera outbreak. Chadwick, in his time, also demonstrated theory blindness to a vast extent: his “miasma” theory, consisting of the belief that diseases such as cholera are transferred through unpleasant smells, was widespread within the country. No matter how much counter evidence to this theory was presented, however, by scientists such as John Snow, the “miasmists”, who were theory-blind, continued to actively worsen the living conditions in which cholera was prone to spreading. Connecting this concept to today’s time, I realized that the loss of business in Asian restaurants could be due in part to theory blindness, or at least a form of it. Many of my interviewees touched upon the misconception that masks worn by the Asian community symbolized sickness and unwellness, while in reality this had been a trend in Asia both as fashion and as protection from air pollution. This common misunderstanding led customers to associate sickness with the Asian community, and thus promoted the idea that Asians, or more specifically the Chinese, were more prone to catching the virus. Though as a global society, our technology and research have greatly improved throughout history, it sadly seems our fear-caused illogical attitudes have not.

Talking to the workers of Cupertino Plaza painted a picture in my eyes of the struggle of local businesses in the Bay Area as a result of the spread of the Coronavirus. Judy Zhu, the waitress at the Shanghai Family Restaurant, eagerly began talking about the history of their local eatery: from how they’ve been in business for more than 20 years, to how the founding family has passed down their dumpling-making techniques from generation to generation, and to how they make all of their noodles and dumplings by hand. She seemed to emphasize how special and unique their restaurant was, in order to attract customers. Judy even told the chef to start making

dumplings so we could capture their integrity on camera. I certainly gained a greater appreciation for the beauty of local businesses during that visit.

During this crisis, small and local businesses have unfortunately been some of the biggest victims of the economic collapse. A Small Business Administration initiative, called the Paycheck Protection Program, was created in light of businesses laying off workers and declining into debt. Unfortunately, it contains some unignorable flaws; according to the Washington Post, “Small businesses, which employ nearly half of the United States' private-sector workers, have said they are facing long waits, confusing rules and rejection as they scramble to secure loans through the fund.” The harsh unexpected realities that the virus has brought upon businesses has strained the federal government. The Economist shares that “As a result, many developed countries may, in the medium term, find themselves on the brink of a debt crisis. This is compounded by the fact that many of the European countries that are among the worst affected by the epidemic, such as Italy and Spain, already had weak fiscal positions before the coronavirus outbreak.” The domino-like chain of economic struggles is demonstrated in the above: as small businesses lose customers, they look towards the government, which is already in the midst of a crisis. I certainly hope that local businesses such as Judy’s can survive.

As for how business during and after the virus will look for the workers at the Cupertino Village Plaza, much is yet to be solved. Our last interviews were conducted a day before “shelter in place” was enacted in the Bay Area, and since, I’ve personally witnessed many restaurants and food businesses decline slowly to the brink of shutting down. Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to follow up in person with the businesses that we visited; as of this writing, it is currently

illegal to publicly congregate with non-household members. Globally, no one can be sure of how the virus will proceed to spread or be contained. New information is released every day regarding its capabilities, mutations, and symptoms, while the statistics of infections remain unpredictable. An interview with a small Chinese restaurant owner in San Francisco conducted by Aaron Mak from Slate depicts the worries many business owners are experiencing: “If it gets worse, unless there’s a short-term government loan or something, I’m considering closing down and then maybe reopening when it gets better. If it gets to the point where I can’t pay my rent and my reserve is out, I’ll close. Hopefully it won’t happen, but I’m lucky I’m not just dependent on my own income.” However, not every local business worker or owner is in the same lucky position - boba shops, restaurants, and cafés have already permanently closed as a result of the virus. Leaving the plaza on my last day of scouring for interviews, I left in hopes of a quicker containment of the virus and a brighter world with the words of my last interviewee, Gabrielle Ma, echoing in my head: “And they (Americans) also ask some hideous questions like, “It is only Chinese people who get the virus?” And that makes me think... we’re all humans. This is not a problem between the west and the east, this is a problem between humans and the virus. I hope that everyone can be smarter to fight the virus.”