

Chinese Americans & 9/11: The changed & unchanged

Written by New America Media, Rong Xiaoqing
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When I called Steven Wong last week for a story I was preparing for Sing Tao's special edition of the tenth anniversary of 9/11, I was hoping to find something that could reflect the strides of life.

Wong, a hotel bartender who used to work in the Marriott World Trade Center before the attacks now works for the Ritz Carlton. He started an organization called the Chinese Hotel Workers Association in 2007 to cater to the needs of the rapidly increasing Chinese new immigrants working in the hotel industry.

His members represent part of the transition Chinatown has been making since 9/11. The attacks largely terminated the traditional garment industry which new immigrants used to rely on to make a living. And now many of them have moved to other industries, with hospitality being a major one.

But Wong started by recalling the details of the doomed day -- how he witnessed the collapse of the towers on his day off in Chinatown, how he fell on his knees on the street and cried, how he heard some colleagues were killed, how the survivors found jobs in other hotels when their own became a pile of dusts and ashes...

Then Wong must have realized my impatience and said: "Now, when I talk about 9/11, people always say hey, can you stop nagging? 9/11 was ten years ago. But to us who witnessed the tragedy, it is a pain in your heart forever."

I joined Sing Tao Daily in 2002. The first 9/11 related story I covered was the re-opening of the Winter Garden in the World Financial Center. To me, 9/11 means more about rising from the ashes than the ashes themselves.

Ten years later, the 9/11 Memorial is opening. Downtown Manhattan is thriving. In Chinatown, which was severely impacted because of its adjacency to Ground Zero, a whole generation has grown up. And smiles reappear on the faces of victims' family members. I have never doubted for a second that this is what the anniversary stories should be about.

But Wong did make me think these may not be the whole story. And it's not hard to find the evidence.

Park Row, the main traffic artery in Chinatown which was closed by the city after 9/11 for

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security reasons, remains closed for political reasons despite the constant protests from the community.

Former garment workers who are now seeking jobs in other industries have found that their opportunities are limited because of their language barrier. And community organizations who used to provide free English classes held their last classes in July because of the funding cuts from the state and city governments.

A police officer who served at the 5th precinct in Chinatown and was dispatched to the Trade Center site during the attacks has just died from lung cancer. And the city insists his death is not related to 9/11 and has therefore refused to compensate his family.

Most news media including my own will focus on the progress that has been made in the past ten years in their anniversary coverage. This is a wise angle from the perspective of journalism. Still, the unsolved problems may at least deserve one or two paragraphs. Life has moved on. But the old wounds shouldn't be overlooked when we are looking for hope.