commentary

OPEN BORDERS

Images of U.S. law enforcement officials firing tear gas at babies seeking asylum is more dangerous than having an open border, our editorial board writes

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sports

CIGAR MILE DAY

Aqueduct Racetrack hosts its biggest day of racing on Saturday, with the Grade 1 Cigar Mile and a stacked undercard

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HI LUCK

A small but delicious Filipino restaurant in Queens Village is attracting customers from the borough and beyond

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QUEENS

SELF-CENSORED

By THOMAS MOODY

Mo Kong's Deeply Researched Work Straddles The Line Between Journalism and Art. Using Censorship As A Method, The Long Island City-Based Artist's Stunning Installations Address Themes As Vital As Land Use, Politics, Climate Change And International Affairs.

AN IMMIGRANT'S TALE

By LIUYU IVY CHEN

Queens is home to more than a million people who identify as immigrants. Many of them arrived in the last few years, speak little to no English, and have found refuge in the borough by living in ethnic enclaves that allow them to feel at home, even though they are not in their homeland. We at the *Queens Tribune* think it is important to tell these stories about our neighbors, delving into both the struggles and circumstances that brought them to Queens and the difficulties they face here. Our first edition in this series of stories features the life of a Chinese immigrant, a talented clothes maker who was forced to leave Zhejiang province and is now trying to make her way in downtown Flushing.

Read her story on page 6

politics

STUNNED COMMUNITY MOURNS SEN. PERALTA'S DEATH

By ARIEL HERNANDEZ

HUNDREDS GATHERED TUESDAY at Saint Joan of Arc Roman Catholic Church in Jackson Heights to say goodbye to state Sen. José Peralta, who tragically died on Thanksgiving Eve at age 47 due to septic shock.

During the funeral, his widow, Evelyn Peralta, fought through her tears to deliver his eulogy.

"My husband was an incredible man and no one could ever replace him," said Evelyn. "I will miss his smile, his scent, his affection."

Evelyn shared the story of their first encounter in 2000 on the 7 train. She said the two had seen each other twice a week for a month before Peralta approached her at the Grand Central train station.

"My life changed because I had finally found a partner who was passionate, hardworking, intellectually stimulated and had so many aspirations," said Evelyn. "José and I were perfect together. We were inseparable."

She went on to share how important family was to him.

"His love for his family was indescribable," said Evelyn. "He looked forward to coming home to us every day, after long days...and believe me, there were very long days. I shared him with his community, but I understood and came to terms with it because I knew this was his passion. He was proud of his two boys, Matthew [21] and Myles [13]. They were the light of his life."

During her eulogy, Evelyn thanked and shared kind words with individual family members and members of Peralta's office.

"José's passion for politics began at Queens College as the student body president. He was elected to the New York State Assembly in 2002 and became the first Dominican-American elected to the New York State Senate in 2010, a position he was proud of and worked tirelessly to make sure his district was well represented, even though he had very little resources," said Evelyn. "José had a humble heart and went out of his way to help those in need."

Evelyn grew very emotional at the mention of the DREAM ACT (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act), of which Peralta had been the lead sponsor and for which he pushed for almost a decade.

"This was a piece of legislation he was most passionate about," she said. "I truly hope that the New York State Assembly and Senate will finally pass the DREAM ACT and give my husband some credit for being the main sponsor."

continues on page 4

All The Crows Are Black

THE STORY OF A CHINESE IMMIGRANT IN FLUSHING

By LIUYU IVY CHEN

"I don't have friends here. I spent last Chinese New Year alone," Annie told me as she massaged my feet. She was in her 50s: small frame, short hair, fair skin. Her reticent air and dull eyes betrayed a bitter past I was eager to unveil.

I had arrived at Annie's massage parlor on a crisp October day. I took the 7 train and got off at the Main Street station, where large casino billboards and two small bible stands competed for my attention. I walked up the stairs and faced a human-size poster of Falun Dafa, a religious sect banned by the Chinese government that preaches truth, kindness and tolerance.

As I approached the intersection of Main Street and Roosevelt Avenue, I walked past modern buildings covered with busy signs advertising practical goods and services: beauty salons; drug stores; regional restaurants; markets selling fresh meat and produce; travel agencies; tutoring companies; and tax, legal and immigration consulting firms.

On the curb, I bumped into an old Chinese man handing out fliers advertising a foot reflexology center. I took one and followed his lead. Walking with a limp, this man hailed from Changle, Fujian province—the hometown of many Flushing residents. He and his wife came to America to join their children and grandchildren; he worked part time while she stayed home looking after their grandchild.

Weaving through the crowds, we turned past a Chinese herb market, walked up a narrow staircase and arrived at this stuffy third-floor massage parlor. More than a dozen women and a few men lounged on purple sofas, chatting or staring at smartphone screens. The boss, a skinny man in his 40s, slouched on a center sofa surrounded by masseuses.

"Ten dollars an hour, plus a minimum 10-dollar tip," the boss said in a crude southern Chinese dialect. When Annie walked over, she lowered her head and lifted my feet from the water basin to the pleather ottoman. To initiate conversation, I asked where she was from and found out that we both hailed from Zhejiang province, to our mutual delight.

"You are the second Zhejiang person I've met in America," Annie said with a smile, her doleful eyes mellowing. "The other Zhejiang client is a successful real estate businessman making it in America all on his own."

We understood right away that it was a classic Zhejiang story. Zhejiang people are famous for being entrepreneurial, both at home and abroad.

Annie is one of over 30,000 Flushing residents born in China, a thread in the tapestry of Chinese transplants in Queens, New York. After I came to the United States in 2011, I mainly stayed in academic and professional circles, rarely interacting with Chinese people like Annie. The immigrants from Mainland China to the United States have grown more than sixfold since the normalization of U.S.-China relations in 1979, reaching over 2 million in number today. These Chinese expatriates are usually skilled or wealthy, holding F1 student visas, H-1B work visas or EB-5 investor visas, propelling America's global economy. They present a stark contrast to the often-overlooked Chinese immigrants like Annie, who have commonly arrived through family ties or as asylum seekers, and now work in the service sector in Flushing or other Chinese enclaves.

Annie was born in a small village in Zhejiang province along the East China Sea. She ate fish daily as a child, "steamed, braised, fried, dried…three, four different kinds of fish in a meal," Annie recalled. In an old photo, Annie posed confidently with four high school friends, their thin ankles planted in the muddy ocean. In a popular 1980s' style, Annie wore a pink cable-knit sweater, a string of white pearls and a pair of blue jeans; her right hand was casually tucked in her blue-jean pocket as she smiled into the camera.

In the 1980s, the Cultural Revolution was becoming a memory as the Chinese economic reform delivered unprecedented opportunities. Yet modern education and economic resources were primarily allocated to urban households—excluding rural residents—and the urban-rural gap widened. Today, China's overall development still lags. According to a 2016 government survey, less than 6 percent of Chinese people have a college degree. The majority of Chinese employees earn less than $600 a month.

In Annie's rural high school class of more than 200 students, only five were admitted to college. Annie would have had to score at least 60 points higher than a city student on the entrance exam to enter the same university. Like most of her peers, Annie dared not dream. Instead, she learned to sew at home, making embroidered handkerchiefs, aprons, pillow cases, sleeve covers and shirt collars.

Later, the local government acquired Annie's family's land to develop real estate, compensating her and her younger brother with assembly-line jobs in a new village factory. Annie worked hard and was soon promoted to a larger factory in the city. "I cried because it was too far away—a 10-minute bike ride from home," Annie laughed, now half a world away. In this new factory, she met a young man whom she later married at her parents' request. This would become her most bitter regret.

Annie talked more freely outside the massage parlor. "Our 'three views' [views of the world, life and values] are completely different," Annie told me over a bowl of duck blood soup with glass noodles in the New World Mall food court. She tried to break up with him before they married, but he cried and she softened. Annie's mother also scolded her for attempting to spoil the opportunity and threatened to summon her father to give her a good beating. "It was not until three decades later that I proved myself right. When I realized I had been living a lie, my youth was gone."

After Annie got married, she applied for a reproductive permit at her regional government office in order to give birth to a child. She had a healthy son in 1996. But when she was pregnant again in 1998, government affiliates persuaded her to obey the one-child policy and have an abortion. Annie's husband was detained for his resistance while she was taken to a hospital for the forced abortion and IUD insertion. Annie suffered from bleeding and depression afterwards. She tried to take time off work, but was fired instead—a biased dismissal legitimized by her stained official record of attempting to break the family-planning law. When the one-child policy was relaxed in 2013, Annie and her husband tried again to have a second baby and to save their marriage, but she could no longer conceive.

After she lost her second baby and her stable job, Annie opened a factory with her husband, selling molding machines. Although the business was under Annie's name, her husband managed it while she took care of their growing son. She tried to trust his business acumen, but worried in the back of her mind. "When he described his rosy investment plans, I would give him a cold stare and point out things that made no sense. He felt unsupported and I felt I was talking to a child."

To distract herself from her unhappy marriage, Annie began working out in a gym, and traveled to South Korea and Japan to take sewing classes. She opened her own fashion studio and made it a success. "When a client presented a magazine image, I could make an identical replica using the right fabric, colors and cut."

Annie did not hesitate to share her opinion of fashion with me: "Flushing's fashion scene is terrible. Manhattan is a lot better. New Yorkers wear a slim fit with simple colors, complementing their self-confidence. In China, perhaps because women are smaller, they wear more baggy outfits with busier colors."

I looked at Annie, still chic in middle age, wearing a pair of wide-rim green glasses, a black linen scarf and a loose denim coat. I encouraged her to open a boutique clothing store in Queens. She had also noticed a lack of designer stores in Flushing: "Most tailor shops here only *xiu xiu bu bu* [fix and mend]." But when Annie imagined a future, a streak of fear crossed her eyes: Her legal status, the expensive rent and machines, and the foreignness of America were all uppermost in her mind.

To find out what it would take to open a clothing store in Flushing, I took Annie to the nearby Roosevelt Plaza to chat with shop owners. A young Chinese mother received us warmly. She had moved to Flushing with her husband a few years before, following the suggestion of a hometown friend who had settled in Flushing. This young mother had had a stable government job back in China, but she quit it to take a chance in America. Her husband now runs a home-renovation contracting company in New Jersey.

"That's very kind of your friend," Annie commented, "to invite you to live in America."

"Yes, yes," the shop owner smiled evasively, lowering her head.

"You must be hanging out with this friend quite often now," I chimed in.

Silence.

"Once we are here, we are on our own, right?" Annie quickly understood.

"Yes, yes."

This young mother showed us an empty storefront for rent across the aisle. Annie could rent it for just over $2,000 a month. Although a green card was not needed, it required a substantial rental deposit. As we stood in the empty room painted in light blue, Annie measured the space with her eyes and arms. She needed three machines and a storage room, and concluded the storefront was not big enough.

Annie's life began to derail in 2014. More than three decades into the economic reform, traditional manufacturing and shipping industries in Zhejiang province suffered a painful slowdown. Exports declined, the currency deflated, the price of labor soared, and the real estate bubble seemed ready to burst. Off the record, many Zhejiang business owners had routinely taken out high-interest loans from family members and friends; others lent money to larger developers; debts and interest snowballed. In a good economy, everyone benefited. When the capital chain ruptured, almost every household felt the agony.

Annie's husband ran her factory into an enormous debt involving her relatives (while sparing his own family) without Annie's knowledge. The stab of betrayal nearly crushed her. She took over the wreck and sought his support, but he dodged. Annie divorced him. "I told him that his big head was filled with shit," Annie said, clenching her jaw.

Unable to pay the exorbitant loan her husband had stacked up behind her back, Annie was further punished by the authorities. She was prohibited from checking into a decent hotel, booking a high-speed train, taking a domestic flight, or making any big purchases to open a new business. In her darkest moments, Annie thought of ending her life. "I told myself that if I ended it here, there would be no more pain. But once I thought of my parents, how they've raised and cared for me….I had to pay my filial piety."

Annie then gave me a warning: "A woman needs to be in control of the family finances. Do not leave it to the man."

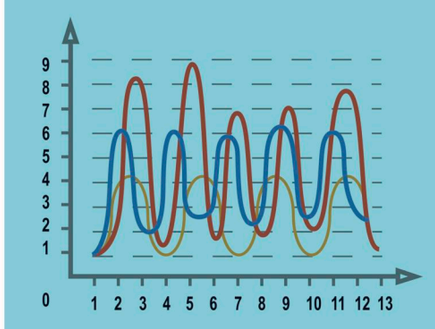
I nodded. My own mother is a living example. Born a villager and quasi-literate, my mother escaped the family-planning policy, moved our family to the city and opened a small factory in the early 1990s, putting three daughters through college. When the Chinese economic slowdown began to hurt Zhejiang entrepreneurs in 2014, I had finished graduate school in New York. My mother told me on the phone that several local bosses, bankrupted or blacklisted, had disappeared or committed suicide; numerous family relationships had turned sour; and divorce rates had skyrocketed. My family also suffered, but my mother led everyone to "walk carefully on a thin wire between two peaks" and survived.

Annie continued, "Now, weirdly, I feel relieved. Why? Three reasons: I've made him see clearly what he is made of, I've proved myself right, and I've finally started to live in truth." Annie leaned forward. "Isn't America a country of free speech? Is that why I'm telling you all this?"

Annie did not share her feelings with her friends back in China out of fear that they would judge her. She has a niece in America who studies economics at Columbia University. Her niece's parents are small government clerks dedicated to supporting her education.

Annie sometimes invites her niece out to eat in Flushing. Without revealing details about her current life, she shows her niece consistent generosity. In the same spirit, Annie fought hard to pay for my food, and my protest seemed to hurt her feelings. "Oh, I just can't get used to this clear separation between people," she murmured as she put away her wallet.

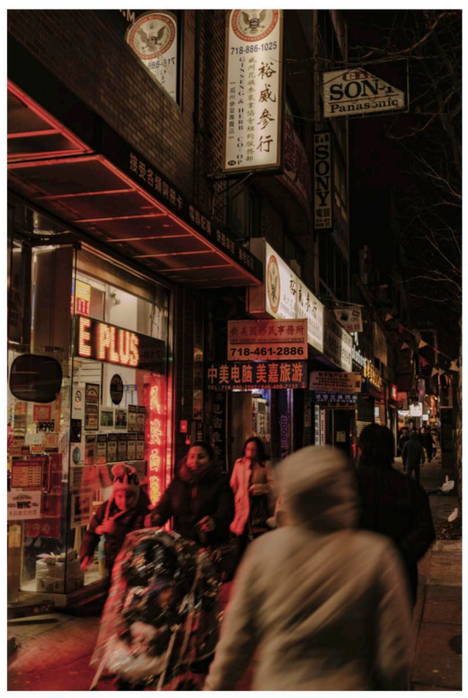
"My mother said I have a smart face but a dumb belly—bright but gullible—which is true," Annie self-mocked, and then turned serious. "After I lost everything in those humiliating years, I felt my life had suddenly become…richer. When I saw the pitiful look in the eyes of my hometown people, including those who I had grown up with, I was speechless. They thought I had been reduced to nothing, and avoided me in case I asked them to borrow money….I realized my



90'S ECONOMIC SHIFT

By the early 1990s, China had shifted its collective economy to a market economy for over a decade. Besides managing regional finances, local governments began pulling resources to actively participate in profitable real-estate developments which enjoyed an explosive growth in the following decade. "Turning land into profits" became the norm, and rural residents who lost their land were usually content to receive compensations including cash, property, and stable jobs.

world had become so much bigger."
Once Annie made up her mind to live, the path became clear: go to America. To Annie's gratitude, her parents were supportive. After arriving in the United States last winter, Annie worked as a maid for her friend's daughter, who found Annie's work unsatisfactory and fired her after a month.
"I tried my best, but still lost my job. I was so worried that my hair began falling out," Annie said as she brushed her thin hair. "Then I realized I was totally alone in America."
Without a work permit or the ability to speak English, Annie resorted to the Chinese community in Flushing. Annie found a temp agent and got another family-service job in New Jersey; she earned $2,000 a month working 90 hours a week as a maid, cook and nanny for a young Chinese family until they moved to Shanghai. Annie struggled to keep up with the endless work and felt relieved when she left.
"They tried four different housekeepers in Shanghai but found none as good as me. They said a high-quality worker like me would never become a maid in China," Annie laughed.
Now, Annie wakes up at 7:00 every morning, boils an egg, pours a cup of milk, and stirs black sesame seeds into a bowl of oatmeal to enjoy. She prefers American milk to Chinese milk: "American milk tastes like real milk!" She prepares only light food in her rental apartment in Flushing because her Chinese landlord dislikes a greasy kitchen. She pays $500 a month for a single room with a bathroom in the hallway.



ONE-CHILD POLICY

Introduced in 1979 and terminated in 2015, China's family planning policy required each family to have only one child, exceptions may apply. It is argued that about 400-500 million births have been prevented during this time. This policy's consequences include worsened female infanticide, gender ratio disparity, personality disorders in young people, and birth tourism to foreign countries.

After breakfast, Annie studies English on a WeChat app for an hour, but she has fallen behind lately. Around 9:30 a.m., she heads off to work at the foot massage parlor. She works from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.; her boss pays her $30 a day in cash, plus tips. On a good day, she has about five clients. Some days she has none. Without a work contract, she can leave at any time, a freedom she enjoys. She is not insured and says, "I have to be careful not to get sick." Annie recently opened a checking account in the nearby Chase Bank and is learning to use the Chase Blue debit card.
Lili Huang, a Chinese banker at the Chase Bank on Main Street, told me that she has many clients who, like Annie, arrived in America with hope and promise but soon faced harsh reality. One of them, an undocumented mother who sends her son to school in Flushing, feels guilty to have left her daughter behind in China. After doing different odd jobs, she recently secured an enviable full-time position at Xi'an Famous Foods, earning above minimum wage with benefits.
Among Lili Huang's clients are many undocumented Chinese men who run their home-renovation contracting companies out of state--New Jersey and Atlanta are popular destinations. Every year, these men return to Flushing to sort out their finances and have their health checked. Working hard in this business can generate over $50,000 a year, enough to purchase a suburban home in cash after a few years.
I asked Ms. Huang if her undocumented clients felt anxious under the current administration. She said they appeared calm, taking care of their own businesses.
Chinese people seem to have an extraordinary resistance to external disturbance. Recently, Flushing shocked the rest of America with two incidents: the baby stabbing in a Chinese maternity center and the suicide of a Chinese prostitute disguised as a masseuse. Meanwhile, Chinese commoners in Flushing go about business as usual.
I asked Annie if she was aware of these current events. Annie shook her head and said no. To her, life in Flushing goes on in the same way every day: noisy but peaceful, carrying on in an endless loop. She occasionally complains about the airplanes buzzing around nearby LaGuardia Airport, and fantasizes about having a suburban home with a garden of her own.
We walked past two well-dressed men on Main Street: "That's the doctor who always comes to our parlor. His black friend comes too," she explained. I glanced at the Hispanic doctor, who was engaged in an animated conversation with his friend against the backdrop of a crisp autumn night. I wondered what Flushing looked like through their eyes.
"Half Chinese, half *laowai* [foreigner]," Annie answered when I asked about her clientele. Business is good between one and four in the afternoon, at night and on the weekend. On weekday afternoons, lonely seniors visit. At night, local clerks arrive.
Annie knows of the underground prostitution often associated with the massage industry. "Our massage parlor is not like that. That's why I'm still working there." Annie has never been coerced to provide sexual services. On this matter, her boss stands up for the masseuses, turning the predators away. Annie has rejected a few *laowai* clients who took an interest in her, using broken English and body language.
I asked Annie about her boss. "He is not a bad person, but he is not always on our side," she replied. She once had a colleague who performed a two-hour massage and received a five-dollar tip. The colleague complained but their boss didn't defend her for fear of offending the client. So she quit.
Although she can barely make ends meet, Annie feels that massaging feet is much better than being a maid. For the time being, she is undocumented. Today, approximately 12 percent of the 2.3 million Chinese immigrants in the United States are undocumented. Many of them seek asylum in hopes of gaining reproductive, political and religious freedom in the United States. The Trump administration continues to clamp down on this population.
Annie is skeptical of the Chinese lawyers in Flushing, who she believes overpromise and overcharge. Through her landlord, she found a lawyer she trusts: "He is a Jewish lawyer with several Manhattan offices." This lawyer is helping Annie build a political-asylum case on the grounds that she was forced to have an abortion under China's coercive family-planning laws. He is charging her $10,000 and she has paid $2,000 up front. Annie is now waiting to be summoned for the first U.S. immigration interview.
With another flier stuffed into my hand, I visited the "Honest Immigration" agency near Annie's workplace. This third-floor office has two reception desks near the entrance, a classroom, and an executive office in the back. I asked a receptionist some questions and was received coldly. As I stood up, I peeked into the classroom and saw a young Chinese instructor lecturing to a group of senior Chinese immigrants. I asked the receptionist what they were doing in there. "Test preparation!" she exclaimed, referring to the naturalization test.
As I turned to leave, I saw a poster on the wall near the classroom: "Better Than Ever Before!" "Make America Great Again!" I wondered if the elderly American-citizens-to-be inside the classroom could read those English slogans. If they could, would they understand the political and cultural implications? Would they revere Trump in the manner that senior Chinese citizens revere President Xi, whose images and slogans shine on the billboards and red banners covering China's streets and buildings?
When I met the old man with a limp on the street again, I was holding Annie's arm. "Thank you for finding me a friend," I said to him, smiling.
He laughed, showing crooked teeth. "Our boss is stingy," he complained to Annie, who agreed. He is paid $7 an hour for five hours a day.
"Can you find a job elsewhere?" I asked.
"No use trying. All the crows are black!"

BLACKLISTING BUSINESSES

Beginning in October 2013, the Chinese government started to blacklist local business owners who defaulted on bank loans. This blacklist of debtors heralded the Orwellian social credit system that monitors Chinese citizens' trustworthiness in realms of finance, commerce, daily habits, and political and social behaviors. One can be unknowingly added to the list after posting sensitive information online or simply forgetting to pay a fine. So far, nearly 10 million Chinese people have been blacklisted, resulting in limited personal, financial and social freedom. The Chinese government plans to "rate" its 1.4 billion citizens with a comprehensive social credit system by 2020.