

Essential Workers' Pandemic Struggle to "Deliver Justice:" *A Conversation with Filmmaker Jing Wang*

By Gregory DeFreitas

It took a global pandemic to make Americans realize that food deliverers are “essential workers” and street heroes. But even now, far too little is known about the reality of their daily work lives. A new documentary, film, *Ride With Delivery Workers*, follows low-wage immigrant men and women delivering food on the streets of New York, confronting racial insults, assaults, robberies and police fines for their bikes. At least 10 were killed on the job in 2020 alone. But the survivors rallied in a 3-year “Deliver Justice” campaign that won support by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Senator Charles Schumer and the NY State government for new protective legislation. In late November 2020, the New York City Council legalized use of most e-bikes and e-scooters, if ridden in bike lanes under 25 mph.

Filmmaker and activist Jing Wang has taught at CUNY’s Brooklyn College and Queens College, and is now a professor in the Film and Television Division at Five Towns College. She moved with her family from her native Beijing in 2008 and graduated from Hunter College with a MFA degree in Integrated Media Art. Her work has been shown at the Museum of the City of New York, the Rooftop Film Festival, and WNYC – The Greene Space and has been reviewed by the *New York Times*, *Gothamist*, *World Journal*, and *China Press*. After a public Mayday screening by Hofstra University’s Center for Study of Labor and Democracy, she spoke with the Center’s Director, Gregory DeFreitas.

Q: When did you first start getting involved with the delivery workers and why?

JW: In 2016 I was helping a friend of mine, Do Lee, a PhD candidate in CUNY Graduate School, on a survey about Chinese immigrant delivery workers and worker organizations. We started to conduct interviews at that time. When I was a student at Hunter College, I took several classes in urban sociology, particularly with the late Professor Peter Kwong. He wrote books about Chinese immigrants like *The New Chinatown*.¹ It inspired me to tell a story about this generation, which is unknown to a lot of Americans who don’t know that the restaurant workers serving them came to this country through quite a journey.

Q: Why were you so interested in this project? Presumably you could have worked on other issues. Did you see a lot of delivery workers in your neighborhood? Or was it purely as kind of a team effort that you got involved?

JW: When my friend, Do Lee, introduced the topic to me one thing he mentioned, I remember is: The workers were being portrayed badly in social media. A lot of people called them terrible, terrible names like “Mongol mafia.” They said that they don't belong on our streets, there should be more law enforcement on delivery workers.

I thought that was totally wrong. Personally, I grew up in a migrant worker family. I know how hard it was when most of the time my father was absent because he had to migrate to another city to work, to support the family. And all the sacrifices they made to provide support their family wasn't being valued in American society. So that's what really triggered me to think: the least I can do is use my camera to tell their story, so that a lot more people understand them as being just like any other human being. They're just like other Americans here who work to support their family.

Q: Do Lee is in your film and gives testimony at a hearing. Isn't he Korean American rather than Chinese?

JW: He's a Korean American, but he came here at a very young age, so he is more American. He feels a lot of connections from growing up in immigrant neighborhoods. Even as an American Korean, he still has had a lot of conflicts like other immigrants, who people see as outsiders in the community. So we share the same values.

Q: Did he speak the language? Or did he need you to help win trust with them.

JW: Yes, but I'm the translator. He's really the one who provides strategy and analysis, connecting the outside world to our organization. And we had many volunteers working in the nonprofit organizations. They all have a passion to help workers.

Q: What's the name of your organization?

JW: It's called the Biking Public Project. It existed before this research and was founded by some Asian bikers, especially Asian female bikers who kind of declared their existence in the biking world. The traditional biker world then was all middle class men. They founded this project and Do Lee brought in his dissertation research project about delivery workers. Then we kind of geared up, especially once I brought the documentary. They helped me do crowdfunding for a Kickstarter documentary and then the crackdown on e-bikes kind of like armed us up to become an activist group to fight for legalizing e-bikes.

Q: Besides your group, are there any groups that provided on a regular basis, you know legal help or any sort of me, did you have some sort of coalition help basically?

JW: Yes, I think right at the beginning, when they started activist work for legalizing e-bikes, we all responded to the mayor's announcement. There are several organizations: Make The Road New York, the Legal Aid

Society, Transportation Alternatives, the Asian American Foundation, and many elected officials from the immigrant neighborhoods such as Jessica Ramos.



Do Lee (far left) and Jing Wang (second left) speak with Manhattan delivery workers (photo credit: Jing Wang)

Q: Jessica Ramos was a Hofstra undergrad. She gave a rousing speech at one of our recent events.

JW: Her energy is amazing. Definitely a role model for me.

Q: How did you choose which workers to talk to? For them to talk with you so much, you obviously somehow built up trust with them. Some, I assume, were undocumented. Did you already know a few of them, who then introduced you to other people?

JW: No, I didn't know any of them when we started. The thing is, the group we are focused on in Chinatown is mostly Fujianese immigrants. They all are from the same regions and villages. And they are elderly, with an average age from late 50s to 70s.

Q: Why is that? Why weren't there more young immigrants in the group.

JW: They are the generation that my Professor, Peter Kwong, described in his book. They came into this country in the late 1990s to early 2000s, as young men. Many came as young fathers with their children. They really struggled to make money to support their family. They came in by human traffickers, smugglers. They're

undocumented and there's a language barrier. Many of them not only don't speak English, they also don't speak Mandarin! They only speak a local dialect. So it's limited them to stay in this close community which occupied a couple of blocks in Chinatown. They have their own system to work well with one another, to help one another survive.

Q: And this has been only Manhattan Chinatown, not Brooklyn's Sunset Park?

JW: Well, actually, Sunset Park is also a part of that community as well.

Q: So did you interview some people there, as well as in Manhattan Chinatown?

JW: Yes, and a lot of workers who work in Manhattan Chinatown have their home actually in Sunset Park, or in Queens as well. But the elderly we started with work in Chinatown with the little group of people they know, or are related to, as well as family from a similar village. So they all kind of know each other.

I showed up a young girl, not even knowing anything about their life. These elderly Chinese men have these traditional Asian values that, when they see me there trying to help them, they really appreciate it. They sensed that I'm a much younger generation, like their child. So they were really nice to accept me in their community.

Q: Do you speak the local dialect? Are you from that region?

JW: No, I'm from Beijing. I started learning some words but they have a heavy accent. I think it was good enough for me to understand. It's funny, sometimes they don't feel comfortable to let me know what you're talking about, so they switched to their local dialect.

Part of my activist work is bringing American media into the Chinatown neighborhood to talk to workers and get really on-the-ground stories. So a lot of the time I brought journalists from the New York Times and from WNYC. I seemed like an insider to the different media who liked to talk to the workers. I'm the translator so they know I'm kind of the bridge person to help them get their voice out. That's why they want to make sure I understand what you're saying.

Q: Were they pretty cautious when this young woman came in to interview them? Did they kind of question you on your life before they opened up more?

JW: It's a very interesting relationship. They see me as a young girl -- but educated. They look at me like their child, sort of like a big brother taking care of me. And they also see me as an educated woman and, especially later on, gradually, they realize I'm the organizer to help them with many issues and bring more journalists to tell their stories. So they started really taking me seriously and asking me for help. It's really a process to gain trust and respect that took me the first two years to build that. One thing about the traditional Chinese values is that a lot of people approach them, but they come and go. They show up and then they disappear, they take what they want, they disappear. That's why it's been very hard for American journalists to tell immigrant community

stories like this. They just came in and the workers gave them everything, and then (the journalists) disappeared. No follow up, nothing changed.

But we not only did a survey, we brought people in to tell a story. I filmed them, I stayed with them. I got a lot of phone calls from them, like at midnight! Because, say, someone confiscated a bike or they go to court and there's no translator. I was on call whenever there was something that I could help with. So that's a way of building trust with the community.

But there were also times, especially at the beginning, when I showed up with a young woman's face and no one took me seriously. They think I'm someone's daughter or someone's wife and they even refuse to add me on their chat group because they think they are gonna post a male comment that is not appropriate for a young girl like me.

It was very interesting, but the one thing about those elderly Chinese immigrants is that they hold strong values. When you help them once, they realize you're there whenever they need you. They respect you, they are extremely loyal to you. There were times other organizers tried to get into the community to talk to them, and they asked me: is this a good person they can talk to? Do you trust them?

Q: So far as I can tell, E-bikes were first banned in the city way back in 2004. But Mayor DeBlasio announced an increased enforcement push in 2017, when you guys got involved. Was that also when they raised the fines?

JW: Well, it was before that actually. Fining and confiscating e-bikes had always been a huge issue for a lot of workers and they were really angry about it already. The fact is, the community was already on the edge of surviving, and that was also the first year of the Trump administration. Immigration policy was tightening and they worried so much about ICE catching them on the street or the police checking their ID and turning them in to ICE. So there was a lot of fear and anxiety in the community. And that was when Mayor DeBlasio held a press conference on the Upper West side to ban bikes with \$500 fines. He did it without talking to any delivery workers or doing any research.

And Do presented his research from survey data on 200 workers, showing what a \$500 fine means to them and how many tickets they get in a month. We hoped that, by providing this evidence, it would help the government to talk to the immigrant community and to change its mind and make them see there are people there. But it wasn't worth anything, so we had to try something over and over.

Q: And how did you finally get the attention of a AOC and Charles Schumer? Was that through coalition building and then they heard about it?

JW: After the pandemic, there were many robberies and crimes attacking delivery workers. Actually, last night I was in a vigil for the Chinese worker who was shot to death in Forest Hills two weeks ago. The pandemic

motivated hate crimes toward the workers. And then the Latino workers formed an organization called Workers' Justice Project.² They are the ones to start organizing a lot of Latino workers to get Chuck Schumer and AOC's attention to be on their side. They kind of informed this new law, which is to protect employees and improve their working conditions. Which is awesome.

Q: So the obvious question is what kind of relationship has there been between Worker Justice and the older Chinese workers? Can they try to ally with each other to push the issue?

JW: Well, we actually had a couple of conversations and visited them and they want to recruit us professionally to be part of their movement and to organize Chinese workers. It's just my teaching job is really demanding and I have my two kids for two years at home. During the pandemic I just couldn't, as before, travel all the time to talk to people all the time. I wasn't able to help them. The Chinese workers have opted out from that movement.

But we did interviews for another survey during the pandemic last year. It has a lot of data about workers conditions, such as access to bathrooms and robberies. It's very valuable data. It was published by Workers Justice Project and Cornell University

Q: I want to ask you some things about the film and some of this is inspired by my students who saw it. In the first part of the film, the workers are very concerned about the rising fines and as well as the attacks. And then they organize. You play a role in that they talk about immigration problems, the people in the family afraid to work, debts to "snakeheads" Is that is that the same as a "coyote," the person who's paid to help border crossers?

JW: Or human traffickers, smugglers, yes.

Q: Then we have those scenes with some of the activists. Well, some of them might not have been regular activists, but they were drivers who spoke out. Then there's an older worker in the film. He said he was 59 and he did 20 to 30 orders a day and talked about the need for e-bikes.

JW: Right and I wasn't able to get his name. He just randomly was in that restaurant and wanted to speak. A lot of times when we have a camera and crew on set, even the workers in the back stop. He was just like observing us, tried to help me hold a tripod and then tried to talk, like: "Can I say something?" They will answer any question that you ask, but then they will disappear a lot of times because they're not in legal status and don't want to be identified.

Q: that's understandable. It's a really clear build up in the film to the ultimate victory, first at the State level, and also the City Council? And there are limits on E-bike use in the laws, like a low speed limit.

JW: Yes, at the time we were really asking for regulating it. You know: give a rule set for them to follow, instead of just banning them to catch them like criminals on the street.



Filmmaker Jing Wang speaks at Hofstra University's annual "Mayday At The Movies" event, May 4, 2022 (photo credit: Regional Labor Review)

Q: One thing my students asked after seeing the film was: Why no celebration, a party or something once the law was changed? Why did you just move on to the next thing?

JW: It's a political movement, you know. If it's a Hollywood film, there's all always a celebration and the good people work to change the world, they say "Yay, we won!" But in the real world it's a really long, exhausting process and.

Like my friends, I mean there's times you're just really too exhausted to do anything. But the workers, they were talking about their own big dinner they were going to invite us to at the best restaurant in Chinatown.

Q: That never happened, because they all have to just go back to work?

JW: That's one cause. And there's also a lot of a conflict inside the Chinese community, a lot of a conflict during the campaign and it was February (2020) when we got the great news. Then the pandemic hit in March. In April, when they announced legalizing bikes in New York State, it was supposed to be big news. But no one really saw anything, maybe they quickly announced it. But by that time, New York was in the heart of the pandemic and nobody wanted to get into groups. And a lot of workers are still suffering from lousy jobs, so we all collectively felt it's impossible to have any celebration.

Q: Initially, when the pandemic came, in the film the workers are talking about the health dangers and also how members of their family were not able to keep going to work. So that was hurting their family income. But we think of them as essential workers, we think of how much we were relying on delivery to survive in 2020. In a way, those workers were more valuable than ever. But were they getting more competition from Amazon and Fresh Direct? After the first few months of the pandemic, did they start to

get an increase in work again because of all the people staying home asking for deliveries, even though a lot of their restaurants shut down?

JW: Definitely since January, the beginning of the pandemic, the Chinese restaurants were already facing a real economic crisis. Many restaurants shut down -- especially those Mom and Pop small restaurants. And then the Asian hate crimes and a lot of robbery on street. The young workers were able to switch to platforms like Amazon. But the elderly workers really were out of the market because the restaurants they'd been working at for 15 to 20 years were just not able to survive. If no tourists go to Chinatown, there's no business. It's now changed, but the whole place is still suffering. It is only now slowly getting back. I see new shops open here and there, but a lot of landmark Chinatown restaurants were shut down.

Q: So they had very little opportunity, those older workers, to transition to anything else because there were so many closures of businesses. And they were nervous about their immigration status?

JW: Well, at that time, people really had at top of their list the health threat by COVID. And the robberies were the number one problem they were facing. When they delivered food, some people take their money, take the food and take their bike. That was the number one struggle for them during the pandemic.

A lot of those elderly workers have their own network in the sense that they get together as a group, they call each other about work schedules. Like I do two days this week, you do three days; or if some restaurant is looking for substitute riders. Like a while ago, I had an elderly friend in his late 70s. Half of the time he needs someone to take care of him, so he had us. And then, when he slowly recovered, he'd take over a bike and go to Chinatown to deliver for Chinese restaurants. It was really heartbreaking to talk to him at that stage, you know. He was always so supportive. During the movement, he was always trying his best to help us. But then I didn't know what I can do to help him, when we were in the lockdown quarantine situation.

Q: Let's talk about the last part of the film. At first, it's almost all men, especially older men. And then all of a sudden this young woman rider appears! Where did she come from?

JW: I'm an immigrant woman and a feminist. I'm saying this not just because it's my identity, but it really is.

During the Trump administration there was the #Me-Too movement, then the pandemic. And I'm an activist in this male- dominant Industry. I have lots of firsthand experience with the power dynamic between males and women, so I just hope there's a way I can have my point of view, have my voice out there. Because this is how I feel.

Last summer, I was doing a phone interview with an elderly worker and he said that you have to talk to this girl. She's just been robbed and has a terrible injury. They treated her very badly and we all feel so sorry for her. If you can talk to her and get her story out, that will be really helpful. Xiao Yan was just injured about two or

three weeks ago. That was a time she had still not recovered from that emotional trauma and her body still had not recovered. She just poured out her situation, as a single mom surviving this pandemic with her son.

I just felt she's such a great speaker and she's saying exactly like my words as a woman about suffering throughout the pandemic, and the emotional roller coaster we went through. I just felt like I have to include her in the film. She is always on the run, because they have to work very fast to deliver, competing with men to deliver food at night and have a day job and just try to survive in this time. It's really empowering for many of us. We all have our social Identity as a waiter, as a teacher as a student, trying to survive in this world that's going back to the jungle age. Being treated without any dignity, that's really sad. The great value about her is she always has a spark in her eyes, she always so appreciates any little help you receive from the people, always looking at the bright side of the world.

I follow Xiao Yan in a chat room. All the time she's posting beautiful flowers, posting photos of restaurants that gave her hot water to drink. I just like the warm-hearted moments she always posts. She rarely posts how terrible the continual struggle is paying the rent. But she just always has that bright side. And when we sit down to talk, she will talk about her taste for fashion. She's a real human being. This is something wonderful, I think. I would love people to see, this is an immigrant woman, even though the society is throwing us back in the jungle. Women like Xiao Yan are still working hard, very hard and still never give up hope to survive, hope to see the bright side.

Q: She really came across as a very positive, mostly smiling person in that great long conversation you had with her. Where does she get that? Is she from Fujian? Could she speak with the men?

JW: Yes. She's actually quite educated. She used to work in the office. At the beginning of the pandemic when she lost her job, she started volunteering to help. A lot of Chinese looked to their friends in China to buy facemasks and ship them to the US to donate to hospitals or to anyone who needed them. She was really an activist with community spirit. And then the pandemic and its financial struggles kicked in that put her on the street.

Q: Did she view yourself as a kind of feminist or was it just sort of an I'm-a-mom-helping-my-kids-survive kind of attitude?

JW: She's very soft spoken, always very humble and I don't think she identifies as a feminist. But, she's doing all the things that should be inspiring to other woman. I hope that there's something in this film to make more young girls, more immigrant woman try to mirror her.

Q: What's next for you? Are there things on the horizon you're thinking of working on?

JW: Well, right now we're running on zero budget to move forward. It's always been a labor of love, but I am so lucky that a lot of people just come in, help and support us. Like Hofstra University and you professors. And

then it's just really keep this film alive by showing it to college students and to the community. Every time there's community screening I'm so excited to see audience and to hear all the feedback. I make adjustments based on the feedback every time and push it forward. Last year, I started out doing the first community screening of the film when it was only 15 minutes long. Since then, after each screening we grow it longer.

I think the support from people has been the drive for me to keep moving forward and now luckily I have a lot of friends and I can use interns, like Chinese international students. In turn, they want to help me finish the film they were interned for me in the summer. But hopefully soon it is going to turn around. It won't stop us; we're still going to work on it with or without money. I think somehow someday this work will be recognized by wider audiences.

I'm glad if it actually inspires students to think about this. We all collectively experienced the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, and they saw delivery workers on every corner all the time. Now maybe the film will make them notice the workers more and think about their status and their situation. Professor Kwong's work really inspired me to change my mind. Maybe this film could even change some of their thinking about our society That would be wonderful.

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¹ Kwong, Peter. *The New Chinatown* (NY: Hill & Wang, 1996). See also by same author: *Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor* (NY: New Press, 1998).

² See the report on a survey of 500 app-based delivery workers, funded by the Workers' Justice Project and Cornell University's ILR School/Worker Institute: *Essential But Unprotected: App-Based Food Couriers in New York City*, by Maria Figueroa, et al. (Sept 2021): www.ilr.cornell.edu/worker-institute.