

ASIAN AMERICA

'I see myself on the shelves': First Asian American woman-owned bookstore opens in N.Y.C.

Yu and Me Books in Manhattan's Chinatown opened Saturday and features 1,600 titles that reflect the diversity and depth of the Asian American community.



— Award-winning Vietnamese authors Nguyen Pham Que Mai, left, and Ly Ky Tran, center, with Lucy Yu at the soft opening of Yu and Me. Courtesy Lucy Yu

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By Claire Wang

For the past year, Lucy Yu has been converting a funeral supply shop in Manhattan's Chinatown into the city's first Asian American woman-owned bookstore.

In a ground floor space on Mulberry Street that faces Columbus Park, Yu built a snug refuge for a community that has been a target of attacks during the pandemic. A turquoise wall framed by string lights showcases works by legendary New York photographer Corky Lee, as well as Japanese woodblock prints. A bar table faces a wall of shelves stacked with thousands of books by Asian and Asian American authors.

Yu and Me Books, which opened Saturday, is both the fulfillment of a lifelong vision and a direct response to the surge in anti-Asian violence during the pandemic.

"I just felt there's so much that can be done by reading in a time when we're not able to see each other in person," Yu, 27, told NBC Asian America. "There's a lot of resistance and power in reading and sharing books."

— Lucy Yu. Courtesy Lucy Yu

Since she was a child, Yu has dreamed of opening a bookstore that highlights immigrant stories, particularly from the Asian diaspora. A chemical engineer and self-proclaimed bibliophile, she reads more than 100 books a year and spends time perusing shops for works from writers of color. She often ends up disappointed.

"A lot of bookstores tout bestsellers," she said, "while Asian, Black and Latinx voices aren't amplified in the way they deserve to be."

Yu spent more than a year curating inventory that reflects the diversity and depth of the Asian American community. Given that many bookstores carry acclaimed Japanese and Korean literature, she made a conscious effort to research pivotal but lesser known works about Southeast Asia and the island nations. One of her rare finds is "Coming of Age in Samoa," a 1928 psychological study of Samoan youth by the American anthropologist Margaret Mead.

— Yu and Me Books. Courtesy Lucy Yu

This level of literary representation, Yu said, has become crucial as events of the past year have exposed the peril of being Asian in the United States.

“I want to showcase an inventory of all those voices at a time when it feels like our lives are in danger,” she said. “I dreamed of a place where people who look like me can walk into and think, ‘I see myself on the shelves, I feel seen here.’”

Through a network of publishers and independent vendors, Yu has procured more than 1,600 works, including some of her favorite titles from recent years: “Crying in H Mart,” a memoir by Korean American musician and Japanese Breakfast lead singer Michelle Zauner, and “A Place for Us,” Fatima Farheen Mirza’s novel about an Indian American Muslim family. The store also carries a selection of children’s books and graphic novels.

Yu said she didn’t realize she was entering uncharted territory when she decided to open the store. She didn’t know she was all alone until she started searching for other Asian American bookstore owners to partner with – and came up with nothing.

After exhausting her savings on rent and overhead costs, she started a GoFundMe in May and raised [nearly \\$16,000](#). Many neighbors dropped by the store to share their excitement.

“It’s a good reminder that more people want this than I thought,” she said.

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Yu said she chose Chinatown as the location for her bookstore because the neighborhood provided some of her fondest childhood memories with her mother, who raised her alone.

While growing up in the Los Angeles suburbs, she spent her Sundays in Chinatown taking art classes. Her mother, who made the two-hour drive every week, treated her to breakfast and lunch at local restaurants.

“It was a day when we could share food and talk over our meals,” she said, noting that language and cultural barriers made holding casual, intimate conversations challenging. “It was our way of communicating even when we didn’t quite know how.”

The bookstore is, in many ways, Yu’s love letter to her mother, whose initials (YM) gave form to the name “Yu and Me.”

“I’m very proud of my last name and wanted to represent my mom and how proud she was of where she came from, and how our stories are still intertwined,” Yu said. “I couldn’t have got to where I am without all the sacrifices she made.”

In the coming months, she plans a host of author signings and events with groups like Asian American Writers Workshops.

Following a tumultuous year marked by violent attacks on Asian Americans, Yu wants the bookstore to be a place where people can breathe, heal and talk to one another. She sees the potential for her store to become an incubator for young Asian American writers and artists, but she wants more than anything to create an inclusive space where anyone can feel at home.

The addition of the bar and cafe – which serves beloved Asian snacks such as red bean buns, sesame balls and sweet butter loaves – fulfills that purpose.

“Having a little bit of space where you can sit down and chat, where you can have authors come here and read,” she said, “is a really good facilitator of conversation.”

CORRECTION (Dec. 15, 2021, 12:45 p.m. ET): A previous version of this article misstated how many books are in the store. It is 1,600, not 16,000.

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