

Intro

Forget about the New York you know. In the next few minutes, you're about to explore a land of invisible treasures, accompanied by people who work hard to make a living out of our trash. They call themselves canners, and they collect empty cans and bottles on the streets. Once their shopping carts are full, they redeem their collection and they get five cents a piece.

This is Francesca Berardi, an Italian journalist who worked with a group of canners for more than a year. I'm sharing intimate details about their stories and some names have been changed to protect their identities. The canners I worked with all go to the same redemption center, Sure We Can, located in the concrete heart of Brooklyn.

Francesca: Before introducing you to Ma, I must be clear. I don't speak Chinese, and I can't even distinguish Mandarin from Cantonese. I asked two different people to help me reach out to Chinese canners and interview them, but we didn't have much luck. Canners in general work very hard, but Chinese canners seem to work even harder. Spanish and English speaking canners involved in this project - no matter how tired they were at the end of their working day - shared their stories and thoughts with me because we had the chance to build a relationship over time. But with the Chinese, the language barrier made that impossible. They looked at me as though they didn't have any time to waste.

The information I have about Ma and her activity as a canner comes from an interview conducted by a person who speaks Chinese and helped me translate a few questions I had for her.

Ma is 84 years old, and comes from Beijing. The only English words she knows are "Thank you,"[here it would be great to have her saying thank you], which is the equivalent of the only Mandarin word I know. But we found another way to communicate.

Ambi: Latino Music at Sure We Can

Ma: She loves dancing to Latino music. Any time someone at Sure We Can plays some salsa, mambo, or merengue, she starts swinging her hips and waving her arms, drawing circles in the air.

Ambi: Latino Music at Sure We Can

Francesca: Like many other female Chinese canners, Ma is always rather elegant. She usually wears a hand-made blouse, and uses floral-pattern sleeves to protect her forearms from liquids and other sources of stains. On the sunny afternoon in mid-October when we sat down to chat together with the translator, Ma was wearing a jacket whose colors - yellow-green-purple - matched her bracelets.

Ma: 美国？我91年来的。来了20多年了。

[I came in 1991, been here for over 20 years]

Francesca: Ma arrived in 1991 on a flight from Beijing to San Francisco, where she had a sister. She was brought to the country by her younger daughter, who years before had married a Chinese man with US citizenship. After only a few weeks, she moved to New York and found a one-bedroom apartment in Williamsburg where she still lives.

Ma: 五个人住一起。五个人住我就是一房一厅啦。厨房蓝开来。我家老头睡在厅里头那个沙发，媳妇他们住个房间。

[The five of us live together. Five people together in a one-bedroom apartment. The kitchen is quartered off. My husband sleeps in the living room on the sofa, and our children in the bedroom.]

Francesca: Ma shares it with her 91-year-old husband, her son who works as a delivery driver, her daughter-in-law who is a nurse caring for elderly people, and their child, who last year got accepted at what Ma describes as a very good high school.

Ma has a total of four children, and four grandchildren, all of them in the US. One of her grandchildren just finished the police academy to become an officer, another one is starting her studies to become a doctor.

For Ma, canning is a rather secret activity.

Ma:

冬天我就不去捡啦。夏天我白天也不出去捡，就是晚上吃完饭啦好像仍垃圾下去了，看到有了捡几个。偷偷摸摸拿。也不让，看大门的不让拿进来的，怕不卫生，不让拿。偷偷摸摸背两个回来。放在袋子里好像出去洗衣服，拿着布袋出来卖。[laugh] 白天我不出去。

[I don't go canning in the winter. In the summer I don't go out in the daytime either, only at night after having dinner if I see some cans I'll pick them up.]

Francesca: Ma simply goes downstairs, to the football field right next to the apartment building where she lives, and gets all the cans and bottles left by the players and their public.

[I'll take them very sneakily cause the people at the front door don't like me to take them inside, they're afraid they're dirty, so I'll sneak a couple back. Then I'll take a bag, pretend I'm going out to do the laundry and sneak them out to sell. I don't go out in the daytime to do this.]

Francesca: She does this at night, sneakily she says, because her neighbors don't like the idea that she brings trash into their building and stores it there. When her bag is full, she ties it to her small cart and walks to Sure We Can. Her family doesn't encourage this activity, but she doesn't

care. She wants to contribute to the household expenses, and - most importantly - this is an excuse to move around and stay in shape. After all, for Ma canning doesn't mean just walking. Her hips are swinging as well.

Ambi: Latino dance music at SWC