

# Mayor's Asian Affairs Liaison Raised Big Money — and Big Questions About Her Conduct

*Winnie Greco, Eric Adams' longtime link to growing Asian communities, demanded donations for Gracie Mansion access and pressured a city employee to work in her own home, campaign supporters tell THE CITY.*

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City Hall Asian Affairs advisor Winnie Greco speaks with Mayor Eric Adams at a community event in Flushing, May 31, 2023. Credit: Ben Fractenberg/THE CITY

In March 2021, a 33-year-old tech worker from Flushing, Queens, joined Eric Adams' mayoral campaign as a volunteer, working regularly with an effusive and understatedly powerful member of Adams's inner circle named Winnie Greco.

Shortly after Adams got to City Hall, Greco, by then on the city payroll as the mayor's \$100,000-a-year director of Asian affairs, promised the tech worker a job in the administration on the condition that he volunteer once more, he recently told THE CITY — this time on a kitchen renovation in her Bronx home.

After two months of shuttling a pair of local contractors to the small, white-shingled house and doing tasks that included buying, unloading, and stacking supplies from Home Depot, he was hired in July 2022 as a \$62,215-a-year program coordinator at the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs.

Then things soured, he said, when he refused some of Greco's requests to do renovation work on city time and he stopped responding to her directives to come to her office to help respond to her emails and translate English-language messages into Chinese.

After 12 months on the job, he was fired.

At roughly the same time the tech worker was volunteering on Adams' campaign, a Chinese-American business executive became a supporter as well, making significant in-kind contributions to the effort. (Both people asked THE CITY to withhold their names. The executive out of fear of retribution and the tech worker so as not to hurt his current job search.)

Requests from Greco, a prolific volunteer Adams fundraiser, for more support continued after the mayor's election, the executive said, and included an appeal for a \$10,000 donation as the price of admission to a Chinese-focused government event with Adams at Gracie Mansion.

The executive was willing to support the new mayor, but told THE CITY that Greco asked that the check be made out to a nonprofit she founded a decade earlier to construct an ornamental Chinese-themed "Friendship Archway" in Brooklyn's Sunset Park in partnership with a Beijing borough government — a project Adams has championed relentlessly.

The executive told THE CITY that five other people confided that they too had been approached by Greco in a similar fashion.

The two accounts, made in detailed interviews over the past two months, raise questions about whether one of Adams's most trusted advisers and biggest fundraisers has potentially violated city ethics rules.

The allegations were shared with THE CITY in the weeks before the FBI raided the Brooklyn home of 25-year-old Brianna Suggs, Adams's chief campaign fundraiser, as part of a probe of

whether his' 2021 mayoral campaign engaged in illegal fundraising involving money from Turkey.

Adams has defended Suggs, and said last week that his campaign's conduct was guided by his frequent morning reminders that, "We've got to follow the law."

Adams' campaign spokesperson Evan Thies said Greco, a volunteer, had no official role in the 2021 campaign, wasn't paid by the campaign and had no hiring authority in the administration.

When asked about Greco's alleged behavior since joining the administration, mayoral spokesperson Charles Lutvak said, "Our administration will always follow the law, and we always expect all our employees to adhere to the strictest ethical guidelines."

Speaking of Greco, Lutvak continued, "Throughout the time Mayor Adams has known Winnie, she has been a faithful public servant and advocate for her community. He is not aware of any inappropriate behavior whatsoever, and she strongly denies any allegations of illegal behavior."

He added, "This matter is under review," but, in response to multiple queries, wouldn't say what is being reviewed and by which entity.

Greco referred all questions from THE CITY to the mayor's office.

Lutvak characterized the tech worker as a junior staffer who was terminated for "documented cause," but wouldn't provide specific details after multiple queries from THE CITY, which reviewed the worker's annual performance review from May this year and his weekly work-tracker updates.

"This simply appears to be trumped up accusations by a disgruntled former employee who tried and failed to get his job back," Lutvak said.

Both the tech worker and the business executive supported their accounts with documentary evidence.

The campaign volunteer shared screenshots of his work on the Bronx house — including on weekdays after he started his government position — as well as a text message in which he told his boss he was helping Greco with her emails.

The business person shared a copy of a signed check whose date correlates with the purported Greco meeting.

Richard Briffault, former chair of the New York City Conflicts of Interest Board, said he's not aware of any rule or decision that specifically deals with the situation described by the business executive, but pointed to a [prohibition](#) on improper use of a city position to fundraise for private charities.

“This could violate City Charter section 2604.b.2 — ‘No public servant shall engage in any business, transaction or private employment . . . which is in conflict with the proper discharge on his or her official duties,’” said Briffault, a law professor at Columbia University.

He said the allegations described by the tech worker appear more clear-cut.

“What’s obvious is that it’s clearly in violation of the city’s ethics rules for a public servant to force a subordinate to do personal errands for them whether it’s on work time or not on work time,” he said.

### **From Fundraiser to Family**

Before Greco joined city government the day after Adams’ Jan. 1, 2022, swearing-in, she was an “Honorary Ambassador to the Brooklyn Borough President” when Adams held the office from 2014 to 2021, per a spokesperson at the time.

She was also a prolific fundraiser, unpaid by either Borough Hall or Adams’ campaigns, with the might to reportedly help raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for Adams’ campaign in a single night.

In her eight-year volunteer role with the borough president, Greco pitched Chinese government officials, business people and others for meetings and public appearances with Adams. Some of the business people would later host fundraisers for Adams’ mayoral campaign.

For years, Greco, who emigrated from Fujian province in China and whose Chinese name is Zheng Qirong, would also shepherd Adams and other New York elected officials and business people on trips to China — dating back to a 1998 excursion with two dozen state lawmakers that lasted 15 days, according to an [online posting](#) from a corporation founded by Greco.



Mayor Eric Adams poses with advisor Winnie Greco at the Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival at Meadow Lake in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Aug. 12, 2023. Credit: Caroline Rubinstein-Willis/Mayoral Photography

Now, ensconced in an administration that runs much like a family, Greco is part of its core.

She was one of only about a dozen associates onstage with Adams at his mayoral swearing-in ceremony at Times Square in the early hours of Jan. 1, 2022.

Earlier this year, she traveled to a work-related [gathering](#) in San Francisco, along with Adams' son, Jordan Coleman, as [reported](#) by Documented.

And while she has often operated behind the scenes, Greco's influence has become most visible at Gracie Mansion, where Chinese holiday events — like the one described by the business executive who told THE CITY of the \$10,000 donation request — bring throngs of business and provincial association leaders, many of them campaign contributors seeking to gain access to Adams.

At a recent celebration of the Chinese Mid-Autumn Harvest Festival at the mayor's official residence, Adams' chief confidant and top political advisor at City Hall, Ingrid Lewis-Martin, called Greco her "baby sister."

She then introduced Greco's mother, who was visiting from Hong Kong, to the crowd — and to the mayor.

“I have the pleasure of introducing Winnie's mom to her son, her son who this sister right here, Winnie, worked in partnership with a number of you and me to help elevate to become the 110th mayor of the City of New York — our Eric Adams,” she told the crowd.

Lewis-Martin then said to Adams, who was standing off stage, “Come out here and meet your mom.”

### **Money, Money, Money**

As Adams positioned himself for a run for mayor in his second term at Borough Hall, the role of Chinese-American donors, with Greco's help as a volunteer fundraiser, began to emerge in a critical way. This was the moment, early in a campaign, when a mayoral hopeful seeks to establish his gravitas with a display of fundraising might.

Adams' first large fundraiser was held on April 18, 2018, at the Royal Queen Restaurant in Flushing's New World Mall, and was organized by Greco according to sources in the Chinese-American community.

Records obtained by THE CITY show the Adams campaign reported the Queens event bringing in \$21,900 from 31 donors, mostly Chinese Americans. (City Campaign Finance Board records show an additional \$40,000 received that day from largely Chinese-American donors, but the Adams' campaign didn't link the donations to the event.)

When Adams experienced a major setback that June — committing a political blunder that turned some of his Chinese-American supporters against him — he tapped Greco to bail him out.



Winnie Greco speaks at a Gracie Mansion Lunar New Year celebration, Feb. 8, 2022. Credit: Michael Appleton/Mayoral Photography Office

His woes began when he exuberantly backed then-Mayor Bill de Blasio’s call for the state legislature to abolish the entrance exam for the city’s specialized high schools, in which Chinese students have excelled, but which has yielded a disproportionately small share of Black and Latino students.

Against a backlash of fundraiser cancellations by Chinese-American groups, Greco quickly assembled a meeting at Park Asia restaurant in Sunset Park, where Adams tried to make amends to an angry audience.

With Greco seated nearby, Adams sought to use the meeting to stake out a middle ground. But after the pushback continued, Adams [reversed his position](#) on the entrance exam just days later, telling Chinese news outlets it should remain in place.

“My goal is not to disappoint friends,” he told one outlet.

Suddenly the fundraisers were back on — and so was the financial muscle-flexing, with two 2019 events organized by Greco generating over \$45,000, plus nearly \$200,000 in potential matching funds, according to campaign finance records.

One of those fundraisers, held Oct. 10, brought in \$32,400 from dozens of \$250 contributions — the maximum amount eligible for the Campaign Finance Board’s \$8-to-\$1 public matching funds program. Nine of the donations came through money orders, a relatively hard-to-trace form of payment.

As THE CITY [previously reported](#), a college graduate said two of the money orders were forged in his and his father’s names, with his father’s occupation listed as “housewife.”

In 2021, after Adams’ primary runoff victory, when donors were eager to give to a man who was poised to gain control of City Hall’s levers for at least the next four years, Greco helped assemble a new group, multiple sources said, that hosted a string of fundraisers for the Adams campaign over the next six months — the [Alliance of Asian American Friends](#).

That July 2, the Alliance hosted a “Thank you banquet” for Adams, again at the Royal Queen Restaurant, with over 100 attendees.

Greco, Alliance president Tian Ji Li and Adams sat down next to each other at the main table, a [video](#) of the event shows.

“Big applause for Winnie Greco, who for the past three years has been a liaison, she’s been our ambassador, she’s the one who talks to us, and she’s the one who promotes Adams in our community,” Li, who formerly employed Greco at one of his Chinatown stores, said to the crowd in Mandarin. “Thank you! You are the most important one.”

The group’s fundraising hit its apex at a party in Queens on Dec. 12, 2021, after Adams had already won the mayoralty.

According to two major Chinese-language newspapers in the US, [US China Press](#) and [Sing Tao Daily](#), and two sources in the Chinese-American community, guests said the event, attended by Greco, Li, Adams and his brother Bernard, raised over \$400,000 for Adams’ transition.

An Adams 2021 campaign official said the total received on that date was far less, but a review of Campaign Finance Board records shows a number of donors who attended the event — including Li — made \$5,100 contributions in the days beforehand.

While the Alliance operated, Greco worked for months from a campaign office inside the New World Mall, according to the mall’s building manager, Shastri Etwaroo, and the tech worker who worked there with her.

Campaign finance laws require that rent for such offices be recorded at fair market price as a campaign expenditure. But Adams campaign filings show no rent payments on the space and an Adams campaign official said the campaign has no records of the office.





The mall is owned by Lian Wu Shao, chairman of JMart supermarkets, who hosted a fundraiser for Adams at his home on Aug. 8, 2021, that was the [subject of an investigation by THE CITY](#). The event brought in nearly \$55,000 from over 200 donors — many of them low-wage JMart or mall workers, or people listed as unemployed who donated exactly \$249 or \$250 each, the maximum amount to qualify for the City’s matching fund program.

One mall worker told THE CITY she was reimbursed for her donation of \$249, while a JMart worker said she thought her contribution had gone to an infrastructure project rather than a mayoral campaign, and almost a dozen others claimed they donated at the behest of or with encouragement from mall managers raising questions about potential straw donations.

Shao didn’t respond to multiple phone calls seeking comment.

Greco also used an office on nearby Main Street, in a building owned by Li, from June to October, according to the former tech worker. Adams campaign filings show only a single \$1,800 payment covering a portion of the June 2021 rent on that space, covering 22 days.

Asked about the lease and the rent paid by the Adams campaign, Li said that a 22-day lease at the office would have cost around \$20,000.

“These numbers you’re telling me, I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” he said.

The Adams campaign said the office was only used for a short while during the primary but didn’t specify the time.

## **The Archway**

After years of forging ties between New York elected officials and China — most notably through the international trips and signing of “sister city” agreements — Greco turned her attention to a singular project that would come to dominate her attention, and Adams’, during their time at Borough Hall.

She pitched both Adams and his predecessor at Borough Hall, Marty Markowitz, on a plan that would see the Chaoyang District government in Beijing gift and ship an ornate 40-foot archway to the main drag of Brooklyn’s Chinatown, spanning 8th Avenue near 61st Street.

Her vision called for the Beijing district government to pay for the cost of constructing and shipping the main structure, while local nonprofits — including one that she founded in 2012 — would cover the cost of maintaining it.

The plan initially required no funding from the city government, records show.

Greco's tenacious advocacy on the archway started almost immediately when Adams became borough president in 2014. It included raising funds from the Chinese-American community that she said would pay for the maintenance.

She used her nonprofit, the Sino-America NY Brooklyn Archway Association — for which she actively fundraised while volunteering at Brooklyn Borough Hall — to cover \$7,000 in costs for her first trip with Adams to China in May 2014, according to an Adams spokesperson at the time.



A rendering of a “Friendship Archway” that was supposed to be gifted from Beijing to Brooklyn’s Chinatown. Credit: Public Design Commission

On that trip, Adams signed sister city agreements with Yiwu and with Chaoyang, the Beijing borough set to gift the archway to Brooklyn, an internal Borough Hall memo shows.

On the same trip, a stop in the Gulou district of Fuzhou included a meeting with Lu Jianwang, president of the Manhattan-based American Changle Association. Earlier this year, the FBI arrested Lu and another Changle leader, with federal prosecutors [alleging](#) they were operating a spy station on behalf of the Chinese government that monitored Chinese-American immigrants.

According to the Department of Justice, Jianwang and an associate conspired to act as agents of the Chinese government and also obstructed justice by destroying evidence, including communications with a Chinese official, when the FBI confronted them in 2022.

Last year, the Director of National Intelligence issued a [memo](#) advising local U.S. officials to carefully scrutinize overtures from the Chinese government, including proposals to create “sister city” partnerships with U.S. municipalities.

But many residents of the city’s Chinese neighborhoods look at such relationships as expressions of ethnic pride rather than the ploys of an American global rival. One prominent elected official likened the agreements and China excursions as akin to the trips to Ireland or Israel sponsored by local Irish and Jewish groups.

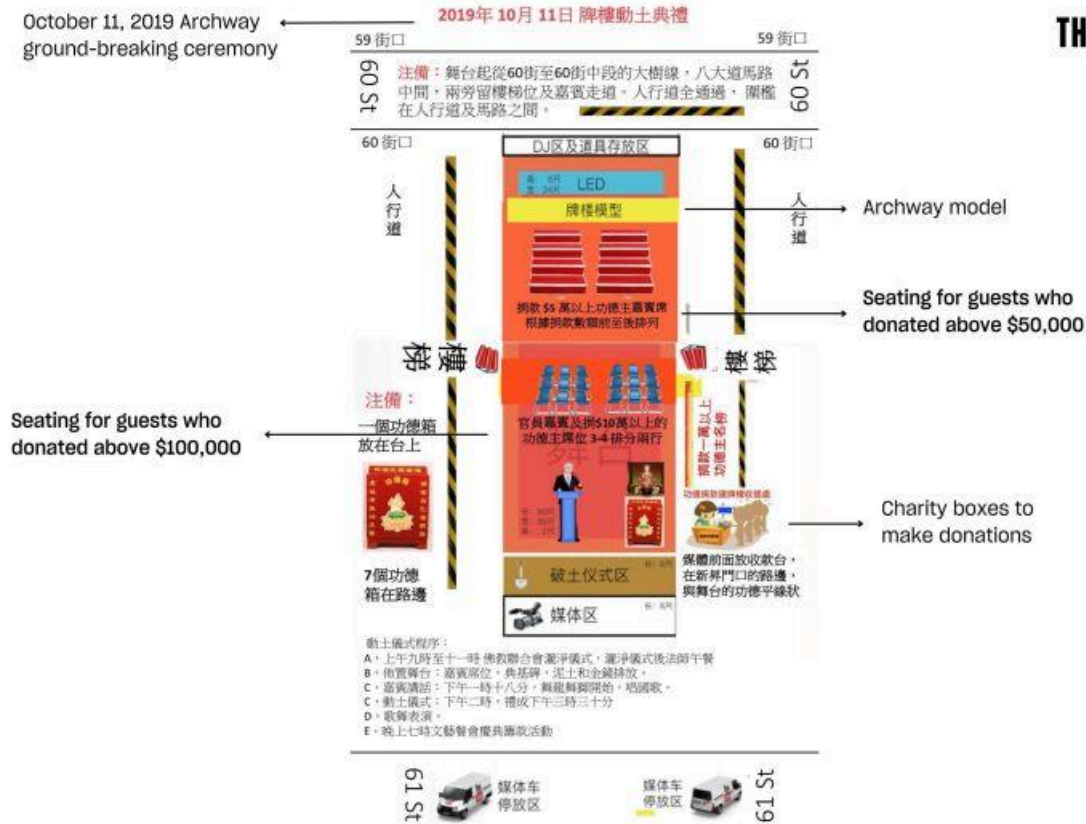
After that first trip to China with Greco, Adams pressed for the archway with City Hall at every turn, to the point that a former high-ranking official in de Blasio’s administration characterized him as “obsessed” with it.

In 2017, de Blasio and Adams [announced](#) that the archway would soon be arriving pending a traffic study by the DOT. But in January 2020, City Hall said that the Chinese government had rescinded its offer of gifting the archway — seemingly [derailing](#) the project.

Greco’s archway group reported raising more than \$221,000 between 2013 and 2018, according to available IRS filings, but said it spent most of that money on fundraising events along the way.

Then Greco’s nonprofit stopped filing its required IRS statements after 2018, although the fundraising for the archway continued, according to multiple Chinese-American community leaders.

In mid-2019, Greco circulated a poster on WeChat advertising a groundbreaking ceremony for the archway that had been planned for October of that year, with some seats going for \$50,000 and a number for donations of \$100,000, according to a screenshot viewed by THE CITY.



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 Credit: Screenshot of Poster with Translation by THE CITY

The fundraiser was ultimately canceled, and it’s not clear whether any funds had been collected.

In May 2022, the IRS revoked the archway nonprofit’s tax-exempt status over its failure to file financial statements in each of the prior three years, an IRS database shows.

Robin Mui, publisher of the Sing Tao US newspapers, who is friends with Adams and Greco, told THE CITY that he’s running the archway group since Greco can’t while on the government payroll.

Mui said he recently spoke to Adams and got the green light to move forward with the archway.

“He said, ‘Let’s get on it,’” Mui told THE CITY. “I’m going to mobilize the community and ask them to donate. I don’t think that will be a problem.”

At the same time, a [budget snapshot](#) for the city Department of Transportation shows completion of the archway isn’t expected until April 2029 — which would be Adams’ last year in office should he win a second term.

Mui was required by the U.S. State Department to [register](#) the newspaper as a foreign agent in 2021, but on the registration form, he argued that the U.S. segment of the Hong-Kong based publication is editorially independent.

He told THE CITY a change in ownership in Hong Kong sparked the registration requirement, with which he had no choice but to comply.

Multiple sources told THE CITY that Chinese-American community members have been trying to figure out how much was raised for the archway organization and how the money was spent. They say the lack of any visible movement toward construction — particularly with its two biggest proponents now at City Hall — is a sore point.

Queenie Ho, chair of a Brooklyn neighborhood advisory board, said she believed Greco's main engagement with the Chinese-American community was almost exclusively related to fundraising.

"She is always asking for donations. If she is not raising funds, then we don't see her," said Ho.

"Different Chinese organizations participated in those fundraising events for Eric Adams. But even after he got elected as a New York City mayor, the archway on 8th Ave of Brooklyn was never installed," she added. "We Chinese communities feel manipulated, used, and dumped."

### **In the Halls of Power**

Even after joining city government, Greco has continued to appear at fundraisers for Adams — now for his 2025 re-election efforts.

In June, she attended one in Manhattan, along with Adams, where donations were made from a number of people whose LLC was [subsequently awarded the management](#) of the East Broadway Mall, according to the publication [Documented](#).

On a recent Friday evening, Greco could be seen making the rounds at a Sunset Park restaurant event honoring a local nonprofit, giving a peck on the cheek to a local community leader, and embracing Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez in a long hug.

Across the street from the restaurant, her red Cadillac XT5 was parked with a placard in the window that read, "THIS VEHICLE IS ON OFFICIAL NYPD BUSINESS."

A City Hall spokesperson said city agencies issue parking placards to staff who conduct official business, but he didn't address the placard's claim regarding police work.

After assuming her administration position, Greco was joined at City Hall by her niece, Wai Ying Cheng, a recent college graduate, who was hired on the same day, and assigned to the mayor's office at a salary of \$80,000.

This June, Cheng became a scheduler for the mayor, with a pay hike to \$120,000 — \$20,000 more than her aunt, the city’s Director of Asian Affairs, receives, payroll records show. Lutvak, the mayoral spokesperson, called Cheng “an integral and high-performing member of the team.”

It wasn’t until May 2022, according to the tech worker who said he’d done work on Greco’s home, that Greco began to land him interviews with people at the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs.

He was hired two months later, according to city personnel records. But even afterward, the worker said, Greco continued to ask him to clean her kitchen and take out the debris from her home renovations — this time while on the city clock.

He says he tried to complete most of the requests on weekends but declined a few times to go to her house when asked to go during work hours.

He also says he informed his supervisors, including deputy commissioner Miosotis Muñoz and assistant commissioner Erick Salgado, every time he was called out of the office to Greco’s desk located three floors up in the same building, where he helped her read and reply to emails she received.

“I felt obligated to help her. Two weeks after I began working at MOIA she said to me, ‘Do you know how much effort I made to get you hired?’” he told THE CITY.

In March of this year, the former tech worker got a three-month warning from Muñoz and Salgado. He was terminated on June 26.

Salgado didn’t respond to messages seeking comment and Muñoz referred questions to the MOIA press office, which referred questions to City Hall.

But the tech worker said he recalls one of his weekly meetings with Salgado that took place in April, during which he asked Salgado what he could do to improve his performance.

He says the reply he got back from Salgado was: “Be good to Winnie.”