How My Chinese Ancestry/Heritage Affects My Goals and Interactions With This Society

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An 89-year-old woman set on fire. A store owner shot four times. A grandmother pushed onto subway tracks. A 75-year-old man dead after being assaulted. My classmate's parent whose shop was robbed. What connected all these people was their Asian identity. The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a surge of anti-Asian hate crimes. These acts of xenophobia are not isolated issues but widespread and close to home. These attacks are affecting people in my own community.

But what surprised me was learning that anti-Asian xenophobia this intense is not new, perhaps not even the worst of it. I learned that "the Yellow Peril" has existed since Chinese immigrants first came to America. With the Chinese Exclusion Act, with the murder of Vincent Chin, anti-Chinese sentiment has persisted in this country for centuries.

In a time of distancing and the separation of families and communities, this particular wave of Sinophobia is agonizing. Despite these barriers, the Asian American and Pacific Islander community has stood its ground, organizing rallies and funds to raise awareness. This has shown me the strength of community effort. Coming together with people who share your culture and understand your history is healing. The resilience of the AAPI population has shown me just how important it is to give oppressed groups a platform.

I turn to my community now more than ever to share and celebrate my heritage to raise awareness for all that Chinese Americans have done. Volunteering as a docent for a Chinese American history museum for the past few years, I exchanged customs and stories with visitors, many of whom were not Chinese, and realized that I did not need to be an expert in my culture to appreciate my roots. Strengthening my connection to my heritage helped me understand the necessity of diversity and become a stronger advocate for the cultural expression of those around me.

Sharing my heritage helps combat bigotry and cultural homogenization while also preserving history. Through the museum, I helped work on a documentary to honor the Chinese American veterans who served in WWII. Paying tribute to these veterans, who were one of the last groups from the war to gain national recognition for their efforts, weighs on me as they served in the face of rampant anti-Chinese sentiment. As one of two moderators for a speaker event that honored several Chinese American veterans, I learned about their experiences performing duties for their country proudly despite discrimination.

Another project I worked on was a successful letter writing campaign addressed to my city's council members to name a new park after the Chinatown that used to exist there. Practicing political activism at a local level gives me the opportunity to commemorate my community and culture. Especially with the rise of anti-Asian xenophobia with COVID-19, I am proud to make a mark in my surroundings that reflects the struggles and efforts of immigrants who form the backbone of the Bay Area, and more broadly, America. I want to continue to champion remembrance of the unacknowledged contributors to our modern privileges.

One important point that I have realized though is that we Chinese Americans deserve our place in the American fabric not solely because of our contributions. We matter not because of our success, or because we are hardworking, or because we are a "model minority." We matter since we are a part of America just as anyone else is. Our Chinese American veterans served for this country, and our immigrant ancestors have contributed to this soil like any other newcomer to America has. Just because our culture has encouraged many Chinese Americans of older generations to suffer in silence and toil without complaint to support their families does not mean that we feel any less pain in racist attacks and hate crimes. Above all, the Asian American community has inspired me to believe in giving a voice to those who might not be as loud.