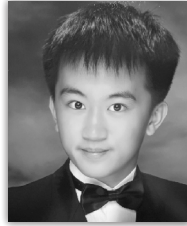


BEST *Essay Award*

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

By Jerry Yuan, Mission San Jose High School



My mother's family are Hakka people. The Hakka are a diasporic minority-ethnic group who fled mainland China due to violence and war. As such, my maternal great-grandparents migrated to Malaysia and Indonesia to make a living. A generation later, due to the Indonesian National Revolution, my grandfather was sent back to China alone, away from his family. Meanwhile, my grandmother, upon returning to China from Malaysia, was put up for adoption.

But the Hakka people, from decades of emigration in search of a better life, are especially known for their resilience, adaptability, and diligence. My grandparents made the most of their situations, raising two successful children in China and eventually immigrating to the US with my mother to give my sister and me a better life.

As I grew up, I glued my ears to my grandparents as they told stories, radiating the wisdom of their cultural values. I listened to my grandpa as he talked about how he navigated the loneliness of his childhood, building his independence and gradually integrating into his new family. I would hear my grandma recount tales of how she and her brothers would go hiking every week to carry water home from a well. And I would often hear how grandpa and grandma would bike for two hours each day to take my mother and uncle to school.

As I begin to navigate the adult world for myself, these Hakka values of hard work and persistence will stick with me wherever I go — to never give up nor to fear hardship. And more than that, I always try to reconnect with this Chinese and Hakka culture and ancestry, never forgetting the hardships that my family pushed past to get me here today.

In particular, I often recount my memories of learning Chinese. Non-native speakers often think written Chinese characters are nothing more than pictograms — only learnable through rote memorization. And in the beginning, I used to think this too as I spent hours copying strokes while learning the basic characters. But one day, my grandparents explained how many characters are composites of smaller, simpler ones.

For example, the character "metal chain (链)", has "gold/metal (金/钅)" on the left, plus "link (连)" on the right. Each week, I learned a new list of 30 characters, tied together by the same root. Silver 银, bronze 铜, pot 锅, nail 钉 — these words all related to metal! A week later, it was 江, 河, 汉, and 汁. 30 more words, this time on water 氵 or speech 讠, and one by one I could grasp this beautiful language.

When I grew older, I realized that, just like how those characters shared a root and meaning, communities of people are brought together by common interests. For example, let's say I was represented by the word 铜. My excitement for science would be embodied by the "钅" part of the character while my passion for badminton is encapsulated by the "同" component. Through the science community, I meet a wide variety of other talented individuals all united by this shared passion, much like how there are words ranging from mirrors (镜) to needles (针) all brought together by this relation to metal. Meanwhile, I get to experience an equally diverse and insightful family of people through badminton, just like how 同 is used in its own variety of words, from caves (洞) to tubes (筒).

But even with all these similar characters, 铜 stands alone as a unique word with its own definition, visual, and usage — it's more than the sum of its parts. And like how a Chinese character is defined from more than just one root people have multiple passions. The different parts of my identity — a journalist, an athlete, a researcher, and more — can all be traced back to my family, from grandma's time working for a Chinese newspaper to grandpa's career as a chemistry professor. And I've learned to embrace these different facets of mine to become a more cohesive character myself, appreciating and eager to further explore the culture, ancestry, and heritage that brought me here today.