Growing up, I noticed a distinct gap in the history I was taught throughout my K-12 education, and it occurred to me only recently that it wasn't just because ‘history covers so many topics that it's impossible to comprehensively study each one.’ In my American history classes, when we learned about the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, it was briefly mentioned that Chinese railroad workers built the western half of it. However, it was never mentioned that the railroad companies mistreated and underpaid their workers and barred any Chinese worker from attending the ceremony celebrating the railroad’s completion. Moreover, in learning about the Red Scare in the 1960s, we discussed the consequences of accusing someone of being communist–how that led to being fired from jobs or even thrown into jail. It was never mentioned that one of the most vulnerable groups during this time were the Chinese in America. We never learned about the fact that Chinatowns were regularly raided and homes were ransacked by the FBI because of the government’s prejudiced assumption that Chinese immigrants were connected to the communist cause. Last, one of the most prominent and discriminating laws in United States history—the Chinese Exclusion Act–gets a brief glossing over. How many people know that this is the only federal legislation in US history to ever ban an ethnic group from entering the country? History only repeats itself when we fail to learn the lessons it has taught us previously. In the past three years that COVID-19, the virus which was first located in China, has spread to the United States, the Chinese in America have once again been subject to discrimination, erasure, and attack, all of which spawn from prejudice, lack of information, propaganda, and otherwise unempathetic and inaccurate sources of information that have made the community a target of bigotry.

I give these examples to demonstrate that what school curricula, news, movies, or social media omits about a people’s history—in this case, Chinese-Americans’—directly impacts how the world perceives them, or more alarmingly, does not perceive them. As a Chinese-American, I am hyper-aware of the lack of knowledge and resources there are to learn about Chinese-American history, having felt a deep desire for much of my life to connect with my heritage and history and coming up short. I could not find the stories of the lived experiences, struggles, successes, and everything in between of the Chinese diaspora here in America, which has created for myself, and for so many Chinese-Americans, a deep sense of lack in feeling understood and welcomed. I firmly believe that to subconsciously disregard someone’s history is to disregard their existence. To do so consciously is to endanger their existence altogether. Since hate crimes against the Chinese have skyrocketed in America in the past few years, it is urgent, now more than ever, that we do not repeat history. How can we achieve this goal? By actively preserving history and learning from it.

First, it’s crucial to recognize that history is more than just a blanket statement. In fact, it is anything but that. Every single person has a unique lived experience, one that is just as valuable as the next person’s. It is my goal to document these distinct stories, memorialize them, and share them with the world. For the past two years, I have been working with an organization called the Association of Chinese-Americans for Social Justice, whose aim is to accomplish just that: preserving and celebrating Chinese-American history. Since the organization’s inception, it has written three volumes of *Historical Records of Chinese-Americans* which document various instrumental historical events and historical figures in Chinese-American History. For the newest volume of *Historical Records of Chinese-Americans*, I am leading the effort to seek out unique stories from the Chinese-American community to tell. With the Projects for Peace grant, I would be able to expand my efforts on a nationwide scale, reaching Chinese-American communities from all around the United States. I would target three major cities: San Francisco, Washington D.C., and New York City. These cities hold some of the oldest Chinatowns in our nation’s history; they are ethnic enclaves of rich culture and knowledge waiting to be shared with the rest of the world.

I will reach out to Chinese-American organizations in D.C., San Francisco, and New York to speak with members who will then introduce me to folks in respective Chinatowns. I will immerse myself in these Chinatowns and speak to members of these communities in-person. I will conduct interviews and listen to their stories. Before conducting interviews, I will formally work with an Institutional Review Board to obtain consent from each of my participants. I will document these interviews in the form of articles,
Project Title: Preserving History and Lives: Stories of the Chinese in America
Project Location: United States
Nominating College: Bryn Mawr College
Project Leader: Ella N. Wu

eSSayS, and in the cumulative documentary I will be making throughout the trip. I plan to make connections and strengthen bonds with Chinese folks in these cities, speaking to them, interviewing them, and ultimately documenting their stories through written articles to be published onto ACASJ’s online archives. As a cumulative project, I will also be documenting this entire process of discovery and preservation on film. Once written and documented, these works will be distributed and publicized to the general public as well as to the communities I traveled to during the summer where the members of these Chinatowns will have the opportunity to see their stories memorialized and celebrated. I will spend approximately two and a half weeks in every city, building close relationships, conversing regularly with the members of the Chinese-American community, all while writing and documenting throughout my trip. In the last two and a half weeks, I will complete editing of the documentary to be published on ACASJ’s online forum and submitted to various documentary film festivals and local broadcasting services.

Last, I want to give back to the communities that have helped me in making this project possible by hosting small community events in each of these Chinatowns. I’ll collaborate with local community groups and faith-based groups to host a gathering where we can hold discussions about our unique experiences, connect through games and karaoke, and in true Chinese-bonding fashion, eat a meal together. And as a final thank-you, I would like to donate published versions of the articles and essays to Chinese schools (local organizations created to teach the younger generation the Chinese language).

My goal is to ensure that the multitude of stories exist and are heard, because though people have lived through certain experiences, unless they are documented and preserved in good faith, they do not take up space in our collective consciousness. They have no impact on our perception of certain people, their histories, and their personhoods. Only when we tell these stories, and never stop sharing them, do we make a place for ourselves to exist safely. Storytelling has always been humankind’s greatest tool for learning and building empathy. It has the power to transform grand concepts into easily digestible plots, to connect us to people who are hundreds of miles away, to transport us decades and centuries into the past, and ultimately to catapult us into a kinder, safer future. This project is about building a strong, unshakeable platform that past, present, and future generations of Chinese-Americans and American citizens as a whole have access to speak from, learn from, resonate with, and look up to.

With this project, I intend to
1. Disrupt the singular, limiting narrative given to Chinese-Americans,
2. Disprove the inaccurate and incomplete information that does exist in the mainstream,
3. Dismantle harmful stereotypes and propagandic sources that speak over the voices of Chinese-Americans,
4. Distinguish individual people to celebrate our unique lived experiences,
5. Discover the history, courage, and power that resides within the Chinese-Americans communities’ diverse stories, and
6. Disseminate their stories across the nation in order to create large-scale connection, empathy, and peace.

Peace can be cultivated when people do not have to fight for their right to exist, but peace can only truly flourish when people’s existences are validated. We can validate people’s existence by hearing them when they speak and by amplifying their voices so that others can hear their stories. Receiving this grant would give me the chance to hear Chinese-American communities across the United States and allow me the opportunity to transform histories into stories, adding one brushstroke in the vibrant and diverse picture of the Chinese in America.