Preserving history and lives: Stories of the Chinese in America
United States
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This project was the culmination of ten interviews conducted throughout the summer in various Chinatowns across the United States, with Chinese-American and Asian-American individuals of all different backgrounds. In this documentary, the interviewees and I shed light on their unique personal experiences and beliefs as Chinese diaspora and the many complicated, multifaceted issues that they have confronted in their lifetimes.

One of the most glaring issues facing the Chinese-American diaspora is the lack of faithful, nuanced depictions of this diverse ethnic group in American media. Whether in television shows or classroom discussions, China, the Chinese people, and all the issues surrounding it are reduced to narrow-minded narratives and shallow labels. Where are the voices of Chinese people about Chinese people? This was my greatest concern, and in order to address it, I decided to travel the country in search of differing perspectives, unique stories, and distinct voices. Very rarely do members of a marginalized identity get to stand up on a platform to speak directly about their lives and their beliefs, so in order to close the gap as directly as possible, I reached out to ten individuals in Chinatowns across the US, flew to their residences, stayed with them, followed along their everyday lives, and ultimately interviewed them. In the end, I was able to reach Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Portland, and Philadelphia. These areas have large populations of Chinese individuals stemming from the fact that they are in or nearby respective Chinatowns which of course are the largest ethnic enclaves for the Asian-American diaspora. I chose these locations in particular because I was able to reach out to individuals gracious enough to let me follow around them in their daily lives, show me around their hometowns, and talk to me about their experiences. It was an honor and a privilege getting to know them, and I am extremely grateful that they supported my project through these thoughtful, hospitable gestures.

In getting to know these individuals, we were able to facilitate a number of fruitful conversations from a wide variety of angles: gender, generation, and class. Discussions ranged from the immigrant experience of those escaping the Cultural Revolution’s consequences, to those fleeing from Tiananmen Square (Wuxian, Christina). We discussed the language barrier, immigrant isolation, coming to a foreign country with no knowledge, no support system, and no financial backing (Wuxian). In conversing with the American-born Chinese, we reflected on our experiences attending American high schools and being subjected to the quiet, nerdy stereotypes and how that was a blessing and a curse. We discussed the model minority myth and the benefits we derived from it as well as how it hurt us and other ethnic diasporas (Matthew). With historian David Lei, we discussed the questions: what kind of activism works? How do we consolidate such a diverse group of people under one cause? Is education the way to prevent hate crimes? How much can social media bring awareness and tangible change? Across class borders, IV and I discussed how different her experiences were growing up in the United States with parents who owned convenience stores and lived in low-income neighborhoods as opposed to other Asian-American diaspora whose parents had academic connections and well-to-do corporate jobs (Shengyu). It was especially important to illuminate how varied our experiences are because in order to dispel stereotypes and overdone narratives, it was imperative to me that I brought forth different and unique perspectives.

Moreover, there are a plethora of ways that I can continue to work on this issue. My biggest goal moving forward is to approach diversifying narratives through two main pathways: academic research and through entertainment. This academic school year, I plan on beginning a two-year extensive research project about the perception of China by American students in order to create a more accurate Chinese-American curriculum to be implemented in the K-12 education system. My other passions include writing and film, so I hope to produce a collection of short stories and a film about my own experiences as a Chinese-American woman and the various struggles and obstacles I have faced.
Specific issues I’d like to cover are the Chinese patriarchal family roles, fetishization, and the politics of sexuality in regards to East Asian women.

Reflection

What is peace? Oftentimes, our society frames peace in terms of lack: a lack of war, turmoil, discourse, etc. But I’ve come to understand that this sort of ideal is unrealistic and unproductive. Peace isn’t when nobody argues or disagrees or clashes. It’s when people argue and disagree and clash and yet we still listen to one another. We stand by one another. We hold different beliefs and yet we care for one another. We pour into our community. We bolster one another. We become a support system. We withstand arguments, disagreements, clashes, and turmoil. We are stronger because of it; we have the ability to be distinct individuals while never failing to stand strongly as a community. There is no such thing as a melting pot—we should never have to concede and blend into what our neighbors are. We simply have to acknowledge one another’s personhood and proudly stand on our own as well.

I hope my project contributes to this definition of peace—being distinct and yet standing as one—by providing alternative narratives about the Chinese-American diaspora that are not commonly heard, acknowledged, and memorialized. I do not wish nor claim that my project is the ultimate source for the unbiased, unfiltered voices of the Chinese-American diaspora; I only wish that my project contributes something new and different to our collective consciousnesses in a way that is productive to humanizing a group of people, rather than totalizing their identities into something one-dimensional.

One particular obstacle I encountered in the making of this documentary was that many of my participants were hesitant to speak their minds. Sometimes they deflected questions if I asked for a personal opinion rather than an objective recounting of an event. I noticed that they felt inadequate to answer certain things or speak on certain issues, even though they were individuals directly affected by it. I wondered whether or not this fear of speaking out and speaking up stemmed from something deeper and more long-lasting than just insecurity or hesitancy. In my growing up, I have often observed my Chinese-American counterparts staying silent rather than making a scene, agreeing rather than standing up for what they believe in, being compliant rather than defiant. This I say not as a personal attack but as a cultural critique: Asian-Americans are not socialized to be vocal or dissident. They are, as the model minority myth indicates, perfect, passive second-class citizens. I attempted to be as supportive and encouraging as possible during the interview process to help alleviate some of the burden they may be feeling, but ultimately I recognize that allowing a group of people to feel safer and more confident in expressing themselves cannot be achieved through a quick fix. It requires a deeper investigation into the systemic factors that cause this sort of dynamic, which leads me to wanting to learn more about the cultural, sociological, and political reasons for the lack of outspoken voices and dissidence in Asian-Americans.

This project has certainly fundamentally altered the way I think about the world. It has led me to realize how complex issues are and how they are all interconnected, none existing in a vacuum. I wanted to amplify the voices of the Chinese-American diaspora, and ended up having to contend with generational, gender-related, and class-based issues as well. In the implementation of this project, I had to learn to set my own biases aside and remind myself that I am learning just as much as my audiences are and that everyone—truly every single individual—has something worth saying and worth hearing. It has challenged me to be more open-minded, more curious, more ambitious, and more idealistic than I ever allowed myself to be. Change is possible even with one small step, and one small step turns into great milestones with time and dedication.

Personal Statement

“To aid a group of people, we must first acknowledge their existence. And to do that, we must hear their stories, learn their history, and memorialize their experiences.” - Ella Wu