CUNY Ethics and Morality Essay

Familiar Faces In Chinatown: Through the Lens of My Family Elders

Elaine Li

Macaulay Honors College, Brooklyn College

In the early 1970s, Chinatowns formed in New York City were concentrated with East Asians migrating from Hong Kong and Mainland China. These multi-class communities consisted of educated entrepreneurs and the working class, mostly from Fujian Province (Guest and Kwong 2003). Anti-Asian sentiments that permeated throughout the 20th century, immigration bans, and the limited opportunities Asian immigrants had access to, forced them into dense ethnic communities known as Chinatowns. Chinatowns became sanctuaries that provided a place of residence, occupation, and several resources and services from transportation to shopping centers, and most importantly, the ability to live among Chinese-speaking people (Li 2005).

Among the virtues that Confucius formulated during Ancient China, Ren is the one that stands out when it comes to my Asian American identity and journey in America. Confucius established Ren as benevolence and love, allowing people from all walks of life to live compassionately, if not without hatred and opposition. To outsiders, my childhood neighborhood is known as an ethnic enclave, a Chinatown- a place where immigrants settle down to establish a sense of belonging in the New World, and assimilate into American culture. The virtue of Ren permeates these neighborhoods as residents help one another by creating socio-cultural networks based on similar languages, celebrations, and cuisines. Ethnic organizations were founded in hopes to foster community and a safe space for immigrants searching for financial stability and familiarity in the New World. Thus, many opened up businesses from butcher shops and ethnic grocery stores to restaurants to sell products, and dishes, and evoke a sense of community reminiscent of their home in the East.

If you've never visited Brooklyn Chinatown's major street, 8th avenue– imagine this: a relatively narrow, two-way street crowded with unmoving delivery trucks and impatient cars; overflowing sidewalks with street vendors selling *baozi* (Bread buns), *bing tang hu lu* (Candied

fruits), or *ban mian* (Noodle dish), and locals shopping at various fish and vegetable markets, chatting with each other in regional dialects. Located in a broader neighborhood known as Sunset Park, the popular street has been increasingly referred to as '8th Ave' or, in Chinese characters, 八大道 (Bā dàdào) by commuters, residents, and tourists. Their economy, dedicated to crowded street markets flowing with domestic and global imports from dragon fruits, durian, and green onion to herbal tea, rice noodles, and soybeans, is reminiscent of the landscape back home in China.

For my parents who migrated to America from economically depressed coastal villages, NYC Chinatown became their new, unfamiliar home where they eventually learned to harmonize their Chinese heritage with the American dream. However, it wasn't always easy to find this sense of balance and community.

An early but distinct memory I have is asking my mom for a note to be excused for Lunar New Year if it was on a school day. My mom and grandma would question why we needed a note to celebrate a well-known festival in our community. For me, it was a tedious job, but for my parents and grandparents, it was an insult. While other holidays were largely acknowledged, granted a couple of vacation days, ours wasn't given those privileges. Still, my mom grudgingly signed the permission slip, and I, along with more than half the students at my elementary school, handed it to the teacher the following day.

At the Lunar Year street festivals, there were familiar faces everywhere; I would see classmates and kids from upper grades running around, either holding cans of colored silly strings, snap pops, or both. They were also definitely *not* shy about using these dollar street vendor toys; the streets, sidewalks, and innocent bystanders' shoes were covered in silly strings of all the colors in the rainbow; every few seconds, a loud pop and snap would go off. But

despite the inevitable strenuous deep cleaning that would take place for the next couple of days, everyone had a smile on their faces. In the same vein, the humaneness of Ren glimmers by wishing everyone *gong hei fat choy* (Happy Lunar New Year), elders passing out *hong baos* (red envelopes), and families gathering for *yum cha* (dim sum).

It would take a couple of years- many festivals, dragon dances, and permission slips- before our annual celebration was recognized as a citywide school holiday in 2015. While students rejoiced at the idea of missing school, Asian parents and politicians celebrated and praised this decisive legislation. "This year's celebration is even more extraordinary because, for the first time in our City's history, all of our public schools are recognizing Lunar New Year," said councilwoman Margaret Chin (Grynbaum 2015). Finally, K-12 students didn't need to choose between our culture and education. Besides securing perfect attendance marks during school, this legislation was a step forwards for Asian American communities and our cultures. Here, it's obvious the inherent essence of Ren for Chinatowns in the West to thrive. It takes collaboration and openmindedness as Western societies accept integral parts of our identity and we unashamedly embrace our heritage.

Fast forward to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and see the progress undone with the rise of hate crimes, discrimination, and defamation. The fear that we as Asian Americans face every day since the beginning of the pandemic is palpable as we walk to the grocery store until we quickly reach our homes where we are safe.

Despite how hard it was for my parents and grandparents to assimilate into America, it was easy for the media to refer to the pathogen as the "Chinese virus" and us as illegal immigrants (Nguyen). Headlines such as *"A teenage boy kicked a 59-year-old Asian man"*, *"A man chased an elderly Asian woman down the street with Purell."* or *"A woman punched a young Asian*

woman in the subway, possibly dislocating her jaw." made their way on our news feeds. My mother, a Chinese immigrant who spent most of her days in ethnic markets catching up with friends while shopping for dinner, was confined to our home because of fear of being physically and verbally assaulted. Instead of making her daily walks to the Buddhist shrine where her friends and community were, my grandma was reduced to praying alone in her living room.

Qualities of Ren, benevolence, and humanity translated into familial love. Against our protests and amidst the violence outside, my dad still went to work every day to provide a warm haven for our family. They continued to nurture us the best they can in a contemptuous atmosphere; their fortitude and dignity proved to be steadfast in spite of weekly reports of violence against Asian Americans. The increasing hate stood no chance against our pride in our East Asian heritage. It definitely didn't stop the aromatic scent of grandma's homemade congee from wafting through the house, my maternal grandfather from caring for our bamboo plants in oriental jade vases in the living room, or my mom from praying for our welfare and prosperity at our modest Buddhist shrine.

At first glance, my family is just another typical Chinese American family living in New York City, but for me and my siblings, they have continuously provided a nestle of care and affection. They have shown me that, despite the sense of isolation and hate felt during the pandemic, our community's tenacity and determination to rise above it all is what matters. Ren is more than a relationship between two people, as the Chinese character indicates, but the strength from the tender love of my mom's playful nagging as we got ready for school, or the sacrifice my dad endures in America to keep a roof over our heads.

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