

Alongside

ON CHINESE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE FIGHT FOR BLACK LIVES

Evelyn Hang Yin

Evelyn Hang Yin is an interdisciplinary artist and filmmaker based in Los Angeles. Yin investigates how her experience moving between China and the United States informs her cultural identity and is invested in issues of race, history, place/displacement, and collective memory.

I was hiking deep in the Cascade Range two years ago when I discovered a hand-stacked rock wall made of mining tailings that locals call the Chinese Wall. Since then, I have been tracing and documenting the footprints of early Chinese immigrants in rural parts of the West Coast in the United States. At an unmarked burial ground full of body-sized indentations, in narrow alleyways filled with temples, herb stores, and gambling houses, and in the reclaimed swampland of the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta, I search for their wandering spirits.

More than 150 years after Chinese laborers first came to the United States, I arrived in San Francisco. I am one of the over 300,000 Chinese students in the United States who make up a third of the total one million international student population.¹ International student enrollment dramatically increased after the 2008 recession, when US colleges started turning toward international students to fill the budgetary hole left by state funding cuts, and I am no different from many of my peers who benefited from China's recent economic boom.² Thanks to the one-child policy, the family culture that prizes its children's success, and China's psychologically damaging education system, both newly affluent parents and those

who sacrifice to save decide to send their kids abroad.³ While international students contribute over \$30 billion to the US economy every year, we are gentrifying college towns and neighborhoods and taking resources away from those with less in the first place—with most institutions heavily relying on tuition revenue, our very presence strips away many domestic students' chance to receive higher education.⁴ This is especially true at public universities, where in-state students pay a fraction of what out-of-state and international students do.

What is our role in the United States, especially when there are so many of us? Too often I see a disconnect between the lives we lead and the social issues that are happening around us.

Amid COVID-19, tightened China-US relations, and protests against police brutality (in Hong Kong and in the US), the large community of Chinese nationals living in the United States oscillates on a pendulum between hypervisibility and hyperinvisibility. We became hypervisible when Trump shouted “Chinese virus” and “kung flu” at his rallies and saw related, increased racially motivated attacks against Asians. However, when the killing of George Floyd sparked nationwide protests, we went back to hermit mode, and the aforementioned disconnect resurfaced. I observed a disappointing lack of interest in participating in conversations, let alone taking up the fight, as if it is a problem between Black and white people in the United States or, worse, a problem between Black people and the US government. Meanwhile, Chinese state media seized the opportunity to call out the United States' hypocrisy in condemning Hong Kong police brutality while mistreating Black Lives Matter protesters; the Trump administration planned to cancel visas of Chinese graduate students with ties to China's military; and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), by presidential mandate, prohibited all international students from returning to or remaining in the States if their school planned to go fully online in fall 2020.⁵ Although later retracted, this worsened the plight of many international students who had already waited for months to go home due to travel restrictions, and further deterred Chinese students who reconsidered US study plans even prior to the pandemic.⁶

I believe a few factors contribute to the political apathy of Chinese students despite our being constantly affected by policies in the United States. The sheer number of Chinese students in any academic institution makes it easy for us to socialize only with our fellow Mandarin speakers. With linguistic and cultural barriers, we don't feel the need to step out of our comfort zone to make non-Chinese friends and are thus not in tune with what others are talking about.⁷ Schools also lack the staff and know-how to accommodate the needs of international students. The increasingly diverse

student body is not reflected in largely white, majority-male faculty, who are oftentimes unwilling to adapt their teaching methods for students coming from a very different educational background.⁸ Often unwelcomed by domestic students, who have joked that the University of California, Irvine (UCI), is the “University of Chinese Immigrants” and that California College of the Arts (CCA) is “Chinese College of the Arts,” we are also branded and actively distanced by Chinese Americans as FOB (fresh off the boat).

Most significantly, we grew up in a comparatively homogeneous and politically censored environment where race issues seem absent (though not in reality). We are a generation showered in aggressive nationalist views yet are politically disengaged and taught to focus our energy on math and science, not politics or the arts. Only when I left China did I first see the photo of the Tank Man at Tiananmen Square. Only when I left China did I realize the omnipresence of colorism and xenophobic ideologies in my upbringing: the historic association of white skin with the elite class, the blatant racism in the 2016 detergent ad and the Africa skit from the 2018 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, and the evictions and mistreatment of African students in Guangzhou during the pandemic.⁹

A historical parallel might offer some perspectives on how the fate of Chinese students has always hinged on politics. After the failed attempt of the “Chinese Educational Mission” (1872–81) by the Qing dynasty to educate a group of Chinese students in the United States, the second wave of Chinese students arrived under the “Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program” in 1909. They faced the same set of challenges and racial discriminations under the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, a law that wouldn’t end until 1943. Not welcomed in the United States, many returned home, only to be politically alienated by both the Kuomintang (KMT) government and the Communist Party. When Mao took over China in 1949, having no tolerance for US influence, he completely cut off the flow of students to the States. Those who stayed, regardless of their political views, faced the new reality of the Red Scare. “In many American eyes, the day China became communist was the day that all of its students abroad did as well,” writes Eric Fish.¹⁰ They were monitored, interrogated, and denied job opportunities and housing simply because they were Chinese. Those who returned home received even crueler treatment, where they were accused as spies and traitors during the Anti-Rightist Movement and Cultural Revolution—also interrogated, humiliated, beaten, and even driven to suicide. Chinese students have been and always will be chess pieces in the geopolitical game, easily disposed of by both powers vying for greater global control.

Chinese students were, however, exempt from the Chinese Exclusion Act and allowed in the United States at that time. One should not forget

the large-scale violence against Chinese laborers during the gold rush and the exclusion era, where entire Chinatowns were burned down, and Chinese people were lynched and massacred. Unlike students that were financially supported once by the government and now by their families, the earliest Chinese immigrants came to the United States as indentured laborers, substituting for the newly emancipated Black enslaved laborers. They mined gold, dug trenches, built the railroads, and were rendered hypervisible by ubiquitous racist cartoons and exclusionary laws, and yet historically invisible by a complete erasure of their contributions.

Chinese and other Asians have been, ever since the internment of Japanese Americans in the United States during World War II, described as the model minority who, despite discrimination, excel in academics and the workforce. As long as we keep our heads down and work hard, we will achieve “success.” In response to the 2020 protests against police brutality, I’ve heard voices asking, “If we were also discriminated against, why did we make it and not Black people?” What these voices don’t consider is the fact that the majority of Chinese immigrants in the United States today (and many other East and South Asians) came here *as* students and highly skilled laborers after the 1965 Immigration Act reversed quotas on Asian immigrants. The law wouldn’t be possible without the civil rights movement and the activism of Black Americans, who, on the other hand, were forcibly brought to the United States as enslaved laborers (though also highly skilled) and endured over four hundred years of racial segregation, lynching, redlining, housing discrimination, and police brutality thereafter. How can we even begin to compare Asian “successes” to the struggles of Black people? The framework of white proximity is a tactic used by white supremacists to distance us from Black and Brown bodies, while masking our real struggles. It also discounts the huge socioeconomic disparities within Asian communities and the colorism that comes with it.

My goal in writing this is not to stand on high moral ground and exclude myself from my own complicity and the privilege of having financial support throughout my time in the United States. What I intend to do is to call attention to the importance of engaging in politics and our interconnectedness with the struggle of Black lives. Two years of researching and documenting rural Chinatowns led me to a gradual process of unlearning and relearning. In between paint-peeled walls and rusted artifacts, I found the wandering spirits of my Ancestors, who urged me to pick up this heavy piece of history. Greater privilege comes with greater responsibility, and it is on us to unlearn racist ideologies and relearn our own past so that we can envision a future, alongside our Black neighbors and other marginalized communities.



Evelyn Hang Yin, *Chinese Pagoda and Imperial Dynasty Parking I*, 2018. C-print, 40 × 50 in.

Notes

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