

From Taiwanese to Asian American: An Unfinished Journey

By Tommy (Chien-wei) Tseng

I was born in Taipei, Taiwan in August 13th, 1983, and moved to the United States permanently in 1996. Due to my significant upbringing in Taiwan, it is difficult to think of myself as an Asian American; I am, in many ways, more Taiwanese than Asian American. Growing up in a mono-ethnic society where economic and educational inequalities were not nearly as significant as they are in the United States, I was not exposed to the concept of discrimination, oppression, and privilege. There are two distinct stages that I think should be discussed differently. The first stage will focus on my experience growing up as Taiwanese and the second part will focus on the nascent development of my identity as a working-class Asian American in the United States.

In February 28, 1947, a Taiwanese cigarette peddler was beaten to death with the butt of a rifle by a Chinese government agent in Taipei. A large crowd immediately gathered and protested the government actions. Large-scale protests ensued in the streets of Taipei and, to simplify the story, the governor of Taiwan calmed the crowd by making apologies and promises for political reform while waiting armed reinforcement from China. When the armed reinforcement arrived several days later, unarmed people were decimated with machine guns in the streets of Taipei. Following the public massacre was a period known as the “white scare” during which many people, similar to the Russian “great purge,” were taken away by unidentified government agents. This event, known as the 228 incident, and the ensuing “white scare” was responsible for the murder of approximately 30,000 Taiwanese people. I brought up this event not because I known a member of my distant family tree participated in the protests; instead, I talk about it

because the 228 incident was the momentous event in Taiwanese history when the native Taiwanese people rose up against the imperialist Chinese oppressors. The Taiwanese democracy movement that ensued and culminated in the 1980s gave me a freer society to live, and I am forever thankful for those people who risked their lives and the lives of their families for the ideals of democracy.

However, the threat of my participation in democracy did not end there. For some reason, I have always been very political. I walked to the first political rally by myself when I was nine years old. Even in elementary school, I attended many political events and convinced friends' parents to vote in certain ways. Taiwanese politics was, and still is, complicated because of the threat of a Chinese invasion. Ever since the retreat of the nationalists to Taiwan in 1949, China has always pronounced their willingness to use force if the Taiwanese people were to exercise their rights of self-determination. As a nine-year-old, I was not impressed, to say the least, with the imperialist Chinese when they shoot missiles over my head and hold mock-invasions during election time. The actions of the Chinese oppressors really solidified and strengthened my identity as Taiwanese. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I was really comforted when the United States, regardless of their motivation, sent the Kitty Hawk battle group through the Taiwan Strait. I really thought the People's Liberation Army was coming and the presence of US troops made me feel safe enough so I could go on with my politicking. These events are significant and yet ironic because dealing with Chinese imperialism was the first instance when I began to think critically about power dynamics in the world and yet, when I came to the United States, the Chinese were the oppressed, not just presently but historically as well. Later, learning about the detrimental effects of U.S. militarism also brought a different light to the comfort that I felt when

the US navy was in the Taiwan Strait. As a student organizer who believes strongly in democracy, equity, and socio-economic justice, I have to constantly negotiate with the activist culture of anti-militarism to the extreme and the tendency of some activists to extend the oppression of people of color in the United States as an excuse for the authoritarian China to act as a bully on the international scale. “The U.S. does not want China to rise up because it has racist policies,” some may say. I completely agree; but I cannot ignore the fact that, if it weren’t for the United States, I may be living in an authoritarian regime where I cannot even practice my own religion without being persecuted. I have always been reluctant to talk about this part of my identity with my fellow activist friends just because I do not want to be seen as anti-Chinese and pro-militarism. But I highly suspect that anyone in my position will feel the same about the Chinese oppressors and the comfort of the American military.

I came to the United States with my family when I was 13 years old as a tourist and overstayed my visa; I’ve been here ever since. The event that led to my immigration was ahistorical: what happened was my father had borrowed money from lone-sharks in Taiwan and did not have the ability to pay back. So we ran. And we stayed. I was undocumented for about five years, and then I was fortunate enough to receive my permanent resident status right before coming to UCLA, which meant that I was able to receive federal and state financial aid. For the first two years, I went to school in rural New York where I was one of a couple API students in a school of more than 2,000. Not surprisingly, I never heard the term Asian American during these two years. However, the immigration experience cultivated in me a strong working-class consciousness and enabled me to learn, first hand, another dimension of institutionalized discrimination. As a working-class undocumented person who has zero social capital, I could not

go to the doctor when I was sick; I was afraid to play with friends lest they “found out” and report me to the INS; I was not able to participate in any of the school’s fun activities because there’s always the damn form asking for my health-insurance information and I didn’t have jack-shit; and I was not able to work for money because I did not have papers. When I was 14, an owner of a local deli asked if I wanted to work for \$2 per hour cutting chicken breast pieces from the bones; I promptly agreed and worked on cutting the damn chicken for five hours. But I never got paid. Damn those lying bastards. Surprisingly, I did not experience significant racial discrimination on a personal basis. There were a couple of times when some random white kids called me “chink” but they were always immediately reprimanded by their peers.

Two years after I arrived in the United States, I moved to California where I attended a high school with a 60% Asian population. That was the first time when I saw and interacted with people from different Asian countries. However, these interactions did not make me feel anymore Asian American. I went to Walnut High School, an awesome school with innumerable resources, by living in the outskirts of town and then borrowing someone’s address. I was scraping by on \$20 a week for food (No, that’s not “lunch” money; that’s all I ate for an entire week), while my rich-ass Asian American peers were complaining about their relationship problems, the strictness of their parents, and random problems associated with middle-upper class lifestyle such as being picked up late from school, etc. I always walked myself home even in the rain. Not to say that there were poor Asians in that school, but the overwhelming majority is at least middle-upper class. As a result, my high school experiences strengthened my identity as a working-class person but not that as an Asian American. The only thing that I had in

common with those “Asian Americans” was probably the color of my skin and a couple pieces of my chromosomal sequences.

It was not until I came to UCLA and got involved with student organizing that I finally learned about the struggle of the Asian Americans in this country. It is still very difficult for me to identify as Asian American through my personal experience because my experiences with institutionalized oppression has to do mainly with class. Even though I can articulate the experience of Asian Americans and the common struggles that we face historically and presently, I do not feel it in me because neither I nor my family has significantly experienced these struggles.

I am not passionate about being an Asian American even though I guess that’s who I am. Just as history intersects with lives, different identities created by these intersections intersect themselves. I value my identity as a queer working-class individual more than I do my identity as an Asian American. But that doesn’t mean that I am hesitant to use the API identity as a tool for political mobilization because there are issues within the API community that demand attention. I feel the need to organize, and organizing is one thing that I do best. I organized with other students in CAPSA to educate students at UCLA about the struggles of the Korean workers, coordinated the student-solidarity campaign with the UFCW workers, lobbied on saving outreach programs, led the student campaign to save the Labor Center in 2004, directed the campaign to repeal Expected Cumulative Progress that disparately and negatively impacts certain APIs, and organized Asian American childcare providers in San Francisco with AFSCME International Union.

I'm not saying that being an Asian American carries no value; I'm simply stating that my Asian American experience may be far from the mainstream second-generation Asian American experience and that the mainstream experience creates an environment where my type of experiences do not get articulated often. Perhaps the term "Asian American" will matter to me more as I continue my permanent stay in these United States. But regardless, my other experiences will give me drive to campaign for social and economic justice for Asian Americans and others oppressed people in the world.