

## Chinatowns in Color

As an introvert, an ethnic minority, and a second-generation Chinese immigrant, invisibility is a reality for me within my community. I grew up in classrooms where my voice was barely heard, I was told that I was unable to take art classes because “people like me” were only good at technical fields, and English teachers consistently refused to acknowledge both my presence and the essays I wrote.

This invisibility wasn't just in the classroom; it was in my textbooks as well. In United States History, Asian Americans were always diluted versions of themselves: caricatures with long braids and railroads, friends of Mao ZeDong, and victims of Nanking. Chinatowns weren't portrayed as communities of color, but ethnic theme parks.

Many of my Asian American friends grew up with a lack of representation, and a lack of self-confidence as a result. The characters we read about were always those that didn't look like us; as a result, we believed our stories didn't deserve to be told. We saw diversity--the “token” Asian left on the sidelines--but we never saw inclusion. And looking at the future, inclusion is most important--the fair and accurate kind.

We need Asian Americans to take center stage in our narratives. Until our classrooms, libraries, and communities contain resources for learning about our heritage and culture, we'll always remain invisible. By socializing children to believe that being represented isn't a privilege, but a right, we affirm our voices as not only those on the margins, but also those that deserve recognition just as much as the voices currently on center stage.

My hope for the future is that stereotypes and misrepresentation are eliminated through the power of narrative storytelling. Instead of looking at communities like Chinatown through a black-and-white lens, we should look at them in color. Our stories may not fit inside the binary, but including them is part of the definition of “diversity.” If no others will write them, then our next generation must take up the responsibility to. Writing our own stories is a form of liberation.

The community I imagine for the world depends on the writing of Asian American stories. Twenty-five years from now, I want Asian American stories to be in the classroom--not just characters as caricatures, but complex individuals in both history and the here and now. I want Asian American stories on library shelves, and the Asian American presence in all walks of life: no longer defined only by an aptitude for “technical fields,” but by our statuses as multi-dimensional human beings.

When we choose to write about the multiple identities that define us, we give ourselves names, rather than depending on others to give them to us. When we give ourselves names, we become our own heroes. We create our own settings. We revolutionize our own conversations. We save the world, one story at a time.