

Critical Asian American Education: Racial Identity Development in Chinatown Youth

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Introduction

Although it has been 50 years since the establishment of the first ethnic studies program at San Francisco State, ethnic studies programs in universities and grade schools continue to be under-resourced or simply do not exist at all. It is the precarity of Asian American Studies at Tufts and beyond, as well as the community based history of ethnic studies, that I look towards grassroots Asian American community organizations as examples of providing critical education for youth.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of high school students in the Chinese Progressive Association's (CPA) youth program and how learning critical Asian American and Chinatown histories outside of traditional education spaces affects their identity development.

Background

I collected qualitative data to better understand how youth receive critical Asian American education outside of traditional school spaces using a community based participatory research approach (CBPR). Over the summer, I was embedded at CPA as one of three youth program coordinators. Through this dual position as youth coordinator and researcher, I observed and shaped the progression of the program and conducted interviews with the youth at the end of the summer.

What is the Chinese Youth Initiative (CYI)?

- A youth program run by CPA, a grassroots community organization in Boston Chinatown building political power amongst working class, immigrant, and elderly residents in the area
- A 7 week summer internship program for high schoolers about political education and grassroots organizing (this summer on Zoom)
- 10 youth from Chinatown, Quincy, Brookline, and Wellesley, as mix of Chinese American and Chinese immigrant youth

Process

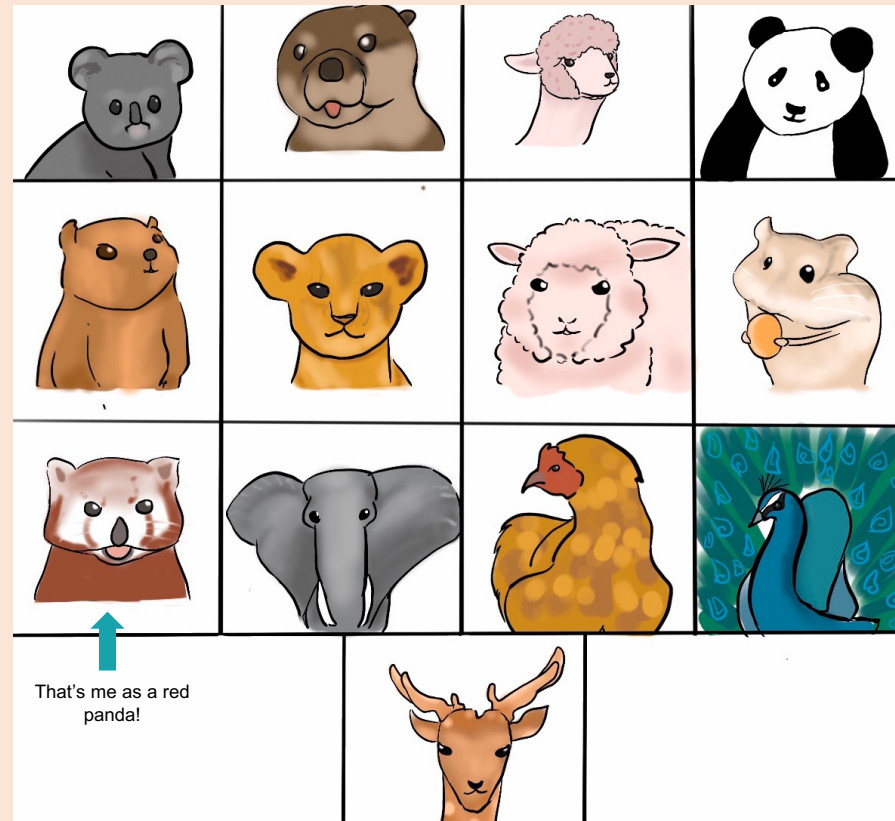
For the 7 weeks of CYI programming, I observed and took notes while also co-coordinating the program. I also took notes throughout the planning process.

Program Observations

- The way Zoom is being used (breakout rooms, etc)
- Participants' facial expressions and body language
- The dynamics between participants
- The content of these meetings

Interview Questions

- Tell me about your relationship with Chinatown
- How did you understand activism before CYI? How do you understand it now?
- How did you understand your identity before CYI? How do you understand it now?



Results

The program ended in mid-August and afterwards my co-coordinators and I collected written feedback from the youth that asked similar questions as the interview questions I listed. We each had a final check-in meeting with the youths that we had been checking in with weekly throughout the summer. In addition to those check ins, I was able to interview three youths and asked them to elaborate more on their written responses.

In reviewing the youths' written feedback and describing the check in meetings, we (the coordinators) found that the youth had learned a lot about Chinatown and community organizing, and that they felt a strong sense of community with each other.

Reflection

It was really rewarding to see the youth grow and learn throughout the summer and I had a lot of fun getting to know them. I think that all of us (the youth, the coordinators, CPA folks) had no idea what to expect of the program due to it being fully remote during this pandemic. That being said, I am so pleased with the way CYI turned out, largely because of the youth who were so enthusiastic, thoughtful, silly, and brought their whole selves into this space.

Acknowledgements

I am incredibly grateful to the 10 youth who made CYI so engaging and meaningful. Thank you to my co-coordinators Issay Matsumoto and Xiaoyin Qiu. Thank you to Mark Liu and the entire CPA staff and our powerful guest speakers. Thank you to my advisor Penn Loh.

On the left is a digital drawing made by one of the youth for their final project. It is a portrait of all of us on Zoom (with names blocked out), but as animals which most match our energy. Just one example of their talent and creativity!