Senior Column: History and the search for selfhood

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Body

When I first arrived at Stanford in fall 2016, I thought I was going to major in Computer Science and History. Like many other freshmen, I wanted to do "social good" in the world. Imbibing the neatly packaged Silicon Valley ethos of our time, I convinced myself that if I learned to code, I could change the world for the better. I told myself I'd also major in history because I loved the subject, but more importantly because history could provide my imaginary start-up with an "ethical framework" for solving contemporary social problems.

Though I was not aware of it at the time, this early self-conception of my Stanford education emerged out of my family history. My parents both arrived in the United States in the winter of 1989, a few months after participating in the pro-democracy protests of Tiananmen Square that June. In China, they were part of a burgeoning group of pro-Western university students who hoped to fashion a new political future for their country. But when that dream evaporated after the government clamped down on political protests across the country, they arrived in the United States as immigrants. Their histories became intertwined with the American Dream as they joined an influx of college-educated and highly-skilled immigrants who came from Asia in the 1970s and 1980s to the United States, hoping to achieve financial success in the West.

Like so many of my friends from similar backgrounds, I felt that my responsibility as a second-generation immigrant was to complete this family history of economic progress, through a career as an engineer, doctor or lawyer (in that order of desirability), in the hope of fulfilling what is now so pervasively enshrined as the "myth of the model minority." My understanding of my family's history, then, influenced the way I thought of my own life trajectory, and where a Stanford education would fit within it.

After receiving a rather embarrassing grade in CS106B the winter quarter of my freshman year, I decided that computer science was "not for me." Yet an instrumentalist conception of my education - the idea that a degree had to be tailored to financial success and technical utility - remained. I decided to become an economics major my freshman spring.

Having grown up in an immigrant community, I never thought of my education in any way other than as a tool for upward mobility. Yet Stanford began to change this. I met students who showed little interest in this instrumentalist model of education; Structured Liberal Education students, for example, who truly seemed to embrace the then unfamiliar cliché of "knowledge for knowledge's sake," or counter-culture types who lived in co-ops and only wore thrifted clothes in protest of a capitalist system that my parents, having fled from Communist China, saw as a necessary historical triumph over socialism.

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A more inspirational figure was my freshman year roommate Zach, a half-white, half-Tongan, ex-Mormon who plastered a Malcolm X poster in our room right after we moved in. His dad had immigrated to Glendale, Utah a decade before my own parents had, and converted to Mormonism shortly after. Yet prospects for a brown Tongan man in America were obviously different than those available for two East Asian college graduates, and social mobility in Glendale was restricted by racial segregation between white working-class and Tongan, Black and Latino populations.

While I initially rationalized a history major through the narrow frames of business competency and ethics, Zach studied the subject to better understand his own family past and political identity. Reading The Autobiography of Malcolm X in high school made him skeptical of the liberal politics that often aided the racist policing and housing policies that had dogged the Tongan side of his family. The classes he's taken on racial politics and black radical movements at Stanford have influenced his own activist work against youth criminalization and police violence in the Bay.

Each one of us in the Class of 2020 carry our own family histories, histories that are also interwoven with the stories of entire peoples and nations, tales of political triumph and tragedy. It was these unique biographies that underpinned the plethora of attitudes toward a Stanford education that so shocked me when I first encountered them freshman year. They are what motivate some students to pursue a Stanford degree to equip themselves in the fight for racial justice, or others to become doctors and engineers to fulfill an immigrant story of economic triumph following social dislocation. They are also what motivate (mostly white) students to indulge in the humanities as a way to escape a world rendered too impersonal by the triumph of commodity capitalism and corporate culture.

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As I prepared a scholarship application to study in China last fall, I began trying to put into words my decision to study history at Stanford. I always love learning about the time periods and geographies my history peers choose to study; it is almost always in some way a reflection of their personal politics or identities. I've taken a variety of history classes at Stanford, but my focus has narrowed to histories of the British Empire and Soviet Union. I wrote my senior thesis on George Padmore, a black Trinidadian anti-colonialist who turned to Marxism to theorize a plan for African independence from Britain during the 1930s and 1940s.

Put to the task of explaining my academic path, I struggled to explain why I chose to study these particular histories. Conspicuously absent from my transcript was much Chinese history, or even American history. The omissions were odd, given that I had staked my graduate application on using my identity as a Chinese-American to improve U.S.-China relations in the future. When I decided to settle for an economics minor instead of completing the major after my junior fall, I also began to relinquish a narrowly-instrumentalist approach to my Stanford degree. (My fate was all but sealed a few months later, when I decided to take a major grant to do thesis research and turned down a cushy SF consulting job.) But what model of education did I come to embrace in the wake of these decisions? What drove me to embrace a discipline that I had treated as nothing more than useful "real-world" knowledge back in freshman year?

The answer, I think, lay somewhere in my growing uncertainty and dissatisfaction with the way I imagined my own family history, with how I related to the complex political events and ideologies that molded me into a Chinese-American growing up in suburban New York and now attending an elite American university.

Raised by Chinese emigres, I had internalized an almost knee-jerk aversion to anything even remotely sympathetic to Communism. I accepted a vision of history symbolized by the American Dream, the promise that the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy would herald what Francis Fukuyama declared the "end of history." I learned a more complicated story at Stanford, one where the development of liberalism accompanied the rise of slavery and colonialism, and where the rule of law was used to protect white private property and justify violence against oppressed populations. As a historian, I also began to unlearn my unthinking hostility to Marxism and the political regimes it birthed. Through my thesis, I learned that Marxism's record was not just defined by violence. Throughout

the 20th century, it also promised (if unsuccessfully) for colonial peoples something that liberalism could not: immediate political self-determination and a more equitable global redistribution of wealth.

Whether I was conscious of it or not, rethinking modern history also pushed me to rethink the stories that supposedly undergirded my own immigrant narrative. Historical figures I studied like W.E.B. Du Bois and George Padmore were sympathetic to Chinese Communists, whom they viewed as fighting the same system of Western imperialism that had kept Africa under the stranglehold of European domination. Yes, the Chinese Communist Party under Mao was responsible for millions of deaths. It had also turned its back against the democratic values my parents held as college students back in the 1980s. But didn't it also end centuries of colonial domination at the hands of the West? Did Mao not also inspire anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia during the 1950s and 60s with his commitment to promoting equitable socialist development across the Third World?

These questions began to change the way I perceived my own cultural and political inheritance. As I discovered historical figures who challenged the liberal telos of history I grew up believing in, I learned that my grandfather, who currently lives in Beijing, is an ardent member of the Chinese Communist Party and an avid defender of Mao's legacy. Growing up in the 1940s and 50s, he shared Padmore's criticisms of Western imperialism and the mass economic inequality that capitalism had generated. My dad used to tell me never to listen to what my grandfather had to say. But I now share at least some intellectual affinity with him, one of the more curious outcomes of my own journey through elite American education.

Like the discipline of history itself, the ways in which we imagine our own family histories are oftentimes creative endeavors. Elevating my grandfather's story allows me to give the increasingly progressive politics I've developed at Stanford the authenticity of my own political ancestry. At the same time, rethinking my parents' story not just through the lens of model minority culture, but also through their pro-democratic political activism has recently helped me develop my own sense of civic identity as an American citizen. As I joined hundreds of other people marching down Columbus Circle in New York supporting Black Lives Matter last week, I thought about the central role my dad in particular played in the Tiananmen Square protests thirty years ago.

Perhaps unfortunately, our cultural inheritance still defines our selfhood in ways that are often impossible to escape. "All my notions - notions of good and evil, of pleasant and unpleasant, of funny and serious, of ugly and beautiful - are essentially middle-class notions," George Orwell writes in The Road to Wigan Pier. "The fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself." We can extrapolate his conclusion, I think, to our broader gender, ethnic, racial, and sexual identities. I grew up within a model minority culture, one that emphasized political quietism and placed an unusually high premium on education; at home I listened to classical music and I had an unhealthy and somewhat embarrassing obsession with EDM. The temperaments and tastes I've developed from such an upbringing will always stay with me, albeit in more attenuated forms.

I often joke with the few Asian-Americans friends I have who studied the humanities at Stanford about our double alienation: from the code-crunching engineering culture we were expected to enter into, and from the mores and mannerisms of white academia. Yet studying history has also allowed me to reimagine my own identity in ways that have pushed against the values and beliefs my immigrant childhood produced. In the wake of Black Lives Matter, I think this has begun to turn into a broader community project. Many privileged Chinese-American students like myself have made conscious efforts to unlearn the white assimilationism espoused by our upbringing, instead turning towards civil rights histories of antiracist solidarity among Asian and black Americans as a model for today's Black Lives Matter movement.

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By the time I finished my application for graduate study in China, I paradoxically realized that studying history was, more than anything else, a personal project. To my benefit, it's still easier to concoct some instrumental reason for studying History than, say, English, to those who challenge the value of my degree. Yet I now know that the endeavor actually emerged from my own dissatisfaction with the immigrant narrative I had inherited growing up, and from the sense of rootlessness and unbelonging that I think in some way defines the experiences of almost every minority student at Stanford. History provided me with something I never could have expected coming into college:

a way to dialogue with my own (still very much uncertain) identity, politics, and past. It is this personal experience, as much as the amazing people and relationships I formed over the past four years, that I now cherish as a newly-minted Stanford alumnus.

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