

This op-ed addresses the question of what to do with the resources traditionally allocated for the Feast of Lanterns in my hometown of Pacific Grove, CA. The piece is intended for publication in the local newspaper, the Cedar Street Times.

If you have been in or around our town of Pacific Grove, California, you are likely familiar with the Feast of Lanterns. A festival that originated over a century ago, the celebration has been centered around a pageant involving the story of a Chinese Queen and her forbidden love. The festival traditionally included a pet parade, various food events, and fireworks. Additionally, the teenagers selected to serve on the Royal Court, hosting events as community service and performing in the pageant, earned scholarships as recognition. Like many other local residents, I spent many fun afternoons at the festival and heard from friends on the Royal Court about their experience.

But despite the appearance of an innocent and inclusive, small-town celebration, as an Asian American, I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable at the premise of this festival. I wasn't alone in this feeling, as many residents and the local Asian American community have raised the glaring issues with the festival for years. Since its inception, the pageant has primarily featured white residents dressing up, and sometimes even doing make-up, to dress up in a caricature of Chinese people and celebrate a blatant act of cultural appropriation. The villain in the story, tastelessly called "The Mandarin", is often booed by the audience. Furthermore, while the pageant claimed to be based on ancient Chinese fable, activists have pointed out that the tale was actually part of a British porcelain company's marketing.

This cultural appropriation is even more hurtful when the history of Pacific Grove is considered. In 1853, fishermen established the largest Chinese village within the US at the time, at Point Alones on the Pacific Grove coast. This community helped establish one of the primary commercial operations that continues to support the local economy. However, in addition to various discriminatory laws passed in the city at this time, a disturbing tragedy took place in 1906 – the year after the Feast of Lanterns was founded. A mysterious fire erupted in the village, and as the Chinese residents' homes burned, white onlookers cheered, looted the destroyed neighborhood, and forced survivors to leave the area. While the Feast of Lanterns continued as a mimicry of the once lively village, these families and their descendants have been excluded from Pacific Grove, physically and culturally.

Some claim that practices like enacting a Chinese story were honoring underrepresented people; the Feast of Lanterns had been touted by many Pacific Grove residents as honoring the Chinese Fishing Village. To these stakeholders, the festival is a way to appreciate local history while incorporating and celebrating aspects of Asian American culture. However, to the Asian American community, especially those who no longer live in Pacific Grove due to the violence their ancestors faced, calling the festival a "celebration of culture" is offensive and completely disregards its racist and hateful roots. For a historically marginalized group, the event was yet another indication of white Americans disrespecting the depth of Asian culture and history. Through appropriating stereotypes for the town's pleasure and publicizing a Western view with no input from the Chinese American community, the city sent a clear message that Asian Americans and our history aren't worthy of inclusion or acknowledgement.

Thanks to the tireless work of activists, the origin, intentions, and impact of the festival have been increasingly scrutinized. Efforts in the past years included rewriting the pageant to have a story focused on Pacific Grove rather than China; last year, the board voted to permanently cancel the entire Feast of Lanterns. Last year, activists held a history walk at the time that the festival has traditionally been held. Now, the question remains about what to do for this year and in the future.

Some people involved in the planning of the festival may feel that they are facing harsh consequences for a tradition that they have worked hard to preserve and continue. After committee efforts to remove the most egregious parts of the pageant, the decision could be seen as a blow to their time and commitment to the festival and anyone historically involved. One option that these stakeholders may advocate for is the reinstatement of the Feast, but with an improved focus on diversity and inclusion. This option may be more favorable from the autonomy lens, as the decision would allow those planning and attending the festival to continue their involvement with lessened harm to others. However, from a justice perspective, this action signals to activists that the core of the tradition and profit to the city is more important than reevaluating the origins of the Feast of Lanterns. Furthermore, from the consequences point of view, reinstating the festival might continue to accrue harms to the Asian American community while the benefit to other stakeholders is prioritized.

On the other hand, activists who do not want to perpetuate any more cultural appropriation and erasure might advocate for the festival remaining closed permanently. Other stakeholders who may support this point of view include sponsors who did not gain financially from the festival or residents who were bothered by its crowd, noise, and road closures. There also may be elected councilmembers who do not want to associate with the growing negative connotations of the festival, and do not want to receive any backlash for changing their minds on this decision. However, if the festival is entirely cancelled, the next generation of high school students and their families will not have the opportunity to give back to their community through the service aspects of the Feast, and will not be able to benefit from the scholarship. Vendors and performers who used the festival as a platform to generate revenue and visibility might also be negatively affected by the cancellation of the festival, and any resident of the city who benefits from the increased tourism during the festival will experience a decline in revenue.

To take into account both of these points of view, our city has the opportunity now to create a new event to bring the community together. A new festival, with a clear distinction from the Feast of Lanterns, should focus on inclusion, showcasing the diversity of local residents, and acknowledge the history of the city honestly. While the events included can still bring together vendors and performers from the Feast, new aspects of the festival can elevate the point of view of minorities in the area. The board should include descendants of the Chinese Fishing Village community and local Native American Ohlone tribal members, and develop events featuring local artists and vendors of color and providing a platform for Asian American students to hold culturally important community festivals and earn scholarships. While continuing to grapple with our town's painful history, let's take this chance to come together as the Pacific Grove community and uplift the voices of those we have left behind for too long.

References:

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