

Cries for Help Continue to Proliferate From Texas Asian American Communities

By Hillary Ma
April 8th, 2021

At 7 years old, Jason Lau dreaded waking up every morning for school. His fears inchingly crept upon him as his mother drove him closer to school grounds. It meant another day of stomaching the burden of the random “konichiwas” thrown at him, accepting the sneer that his Chinese ancestors eat dogs and nodding to the mockery of his eye physique — 吃苦 (chi ku), or eat bitterness.

But Jason wasn’t surprised he became the subject of their laughter. He checked nearly every box of the Asian stereotype: yellow undertone skin, “squinty” eyes, wide and flat nose, short height and protruding plump lips.

“No one batted an eye when those (jokes) were said (to me),” Lau said. “We were seen in the same light as white people... and when that happens, it’s OK to make fun of us.”

Now 21, Jason’s hidden trauma is triggered with each racially charged violence from Houston local news headlines. On top of worrying for his own safety, he is constantly thinking about his younger sister, mother and grandmother.

However, Jason isn’t the only person fearing for his family. Since the start of the pandemic, Asian Americans nationally have been viewed as potential carriers of COVID-19 and subjected to extreme measures of hate speech, physical violence and exclusion. According to the Stop Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Hate, an organization that collects data of reported AAPI hate incidents, people reported more than 3,700 hate crimes nationwide toward Asian Americans since March 2020.

Tony Vo, assistant director of the Asian American Studies program at the University of Texas at Austin, said hate crimes were exacerbated partially due to recent political complications with China. Former President Donald Trump’s past trade war rhetoric of name-calling was no mistake to channel aggression toward China and incidentally scapegoated Asian Americans, Vo said.

Just this past month, UT-Austin Korean-American freshman Hope Lee, said that she experienced racism while helping administer vaccines. An older, white male wearing a military cap approached her with a stern look and asked her if she was Chinese.

“He repetitively asked me if I was Chinese,” Lee said. “As if being Chinese was a bad thing.”

While anti-Asian racism is not necessarily new, Vo said the peaks of overt racism may seem new to second-generation and third-generation Asian Americans. He included that in the last 30 years Asian Americans have benefited from the “model minority myth,” a stereotype that describes Asian Americans as a group of successful minorities emulating proximity to whiteness, wealth, education and self-sufficiency.

“We’re told to be quiet, stay in our lane, and adopt this colorblind ideology in order to make it... Because we don’t know our history, a lot of us aren’t politically and civically engaged,” Vo said.

When asked about the reasons for the ignorance of Asian American history, Vo said that acknowledging the struggles of Asian Americans disrupts the perception of America as a welcoming space for all immigrants.

“The reality is that ever since the Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1965 Immigration Act, we have very much curated the immigration policies to only benefit certain types of people: well-skilled labor and highly educated people,” Vo said.

Vo also cited that the Atlanta shootings in March, in which a white man with a sex addiction killed six Asian women at a massage parlor, were among the first racially charged attacks seen at a systemic level in the eyes of most second and third-generation Asian Americans. He said that law enforcement issues have almost never been an issue for Asian Americans and that the shootings were one of the first instances displaying systemic violence toward younger Asian Americans.

“The hardest part is when you can see the historical connection to current-day issues and violence and other people do not,” Vo said. “It’s always been an uphill battle argument with people who don’t know this stuff.”

Newly Selected Redistricting Commission Members Will Be Responsible For Austin's New District Boundaries

Hillary Ma

March 25th, 2021

New members of Austin's Independent Citizens Redistricting Committee are now set to redraw council district boundary lines and reshape the future of Austin's democracy.

The Independent Citizens Redistricting Committee, comprised of 14 selected commission members, recently finalized 8 new committee members in its March 5 and March 11 online council meetings. The committee members said that council district maps will continue to be drawn by the people and accurately reflect Austin's growing diversity as best as possible.

As Austin's city demographic continues expanding further across all spectrums — race, gender, age, sexuality, etc — government representation of the growing diversity has been more crucial than ever to sustain a healthy democracy, said Peck Young, a political strategist and executive director of Voices of Austin, a grassroots voter education coalition that seeks to redefine the Austin local government.

“Every line can be backed up and every line can be pointed to public testimony and discussion... Don't tear down a fence until you know why it was put up,” TJ Costello, a former commissioner said in his commencing remarks. “As you adjust the map that is currently in place, remember that every line is drawn for a reason.”

The process of selecting redistricting members starts with the city auditor, who randomly selects eight members from a pool of qualified applicants outlined from the city's charter. The selected eight commissioners then vote the remaining six applicants into the committee.

Among the various residential qualifications, diversity in gender, age, and race have also been highly emphasized during the selection process. The commission members include Hispanic/Latino and Latina citizens, Asian men, a Colombian-Chinese descent woman, African American teachers and students, retired white senior citizens, and many more.

Caroline Webster is Austin's assistant city attorney under the Open Government and Ethics Appliances Division. Her expertise in elections, city codes and ethics, open meetings information, and campaign finance allowed her to lead the meeting and emphasize the heavy role in accurately scoping Austin's diversity. She said the committee's ultimate mission is ensuring “a fair and equitable representation of all of Austin residents” in an open and transparent manner.

“We really want the public to be as invested and committed to the commission,” Webster said.

Typically, redistricting in Austin occurs every ten years after the U.S conducts its annual census. The city then uses census data to redefine district maps that accurately reflect the growing city's population. In other words, redistricting is necessary to help growing communities feel represented and sustain democracy, Webster said.

Webster readdressed some of the redistricting requirements during the council meeting. The specified requirements included: defining a reasonably equal population, compliance with the Voting Rights Act, preserving geographically contiguous districts, adhering to the concerns of existing communities and their interests, sustaining nearly identical boundaries, and aiming for at least one council member from every district to maintain geographical diversity.

Despite the success of filling the 14 commission member seats, the timing of when redistricting will be complete is still uncertain. The unprecedented Texas winter snowstorm in February postponed membership appointments, delaying the process of solidifying commission members to March 5 and 11.

In addition to the unexpected winter storm, charter amendments to add an additional district may also go into effect depending on how Austin's May election outcomes, Webster said. In Austin's Council Orders Election, proposition G asks to "provide for an additional geographic council district which will result in 11 council members elected from single-member districts." In other words, if proposition G passes during the elections then the redistricting committee will have 11 districts, rather than ten, to account for and map out.

"If that ballot does get passed," Webster said, "it'll kind of shake things up quite a bit."

Despite efforts by grassroot groups like Voices of Austin advocating for citizens to care about redistricting, 20 year old UT freshman and Austin resident Rebecca Vargas said that she is still quite unsure about the process of redistricting.

"I've heard of gerrymandering and the issues surrounding the subject but I never really understood it," Vargas said.

When Vargas asked her 52 year old Hispanic father, Santiago Vargas, about the process of redistricting, his opinion mirrored his daughter. He said that he was not much concerned about the congressional districts because of how convoluted the subject was.

"I don't think I really have the time to sit down and understand the process. Quite frankly, I don't see a problem with what we have at the moment," said Santiago Vargas.

However, Peck Young is still optimistic about the outcomes of this year's new district boundaries. He said that the question of redistricting isn't necessarily about which representative gets elected, but rather to ensure that each part of the city has a proper voice in how the community runs.

"The credibility of any redistricting process," Young said "is the people being allowed to have input and (the commission's) credibility is tied to (the people's) sense to fully be able to participate to see and understand what is going on ... whether it be the League of Women Voters or the neighborhood associations."

With Faith, Asian American Christians Are Invincible Against COVID-19

By Hillary Ma

May 6th, 2021

Korean American Pastor John L. Staples II has had enough with the pandemic: online services, limited in-person contact, and most importantly— no hugs! But his biggest challenge yet lies not in his work to spread the Gospel: it's to mediate between the conflicting generations of the members of his church.

“I see these (conflicting) dynamics every day,” Staples said. “As Scripture exhorts us, we have to love one another, show kindness to one another, and we have to forgive one another. I think that is what I'm always reminding myself.”

Traditionally, Asian Americans, especially Asian American churches, have collectively shunned issues of racism, said Staples. This is especially true, Staples added, with the older generation of Asian Americans immigrants who uphold ingrained ancient customs of secrecy and silence.

However, with the recent rise of anti-Asian hate crimes across the nation, generations of Asian Americans within the church are disagreeing upon their responses to these attacks. The older generation adheres to a traditional avoidant philosophy, which puts younger people who expect more activism at odds with them.

“I think the Asian community as a whole is based on the honor-shame culture,” Staples said.

Staples always felt as if his second-generation Korean American identity has complimented his faith. After all, particular aspects of Korean culture coincided with Christianity.

“In Korean culture, our family surname comes before our first name,” said Staples. “The family comes before the individual. In the same way with our faith, that is what the Bible has espoused us: to love one another, to be selfless and to humble ourselves for the sake of each other.”

Staples said that his Korean American identity facilitated his understanding that there was always something bigger than just himself— that he wasn't just here to exhaust the blessings he said the Lord is giving him. He added that he's always looking outward: “what can I do to be a blessing to my family, the family of God, and the community that God entrusted to my care?”

“It's very intertwined both as a Christian and a Korean American,” Staples said. But with the polarized responses to these recent attacks from the members of his church, generational conflicts within the congregation are prompting him to take a closer look at both ends.

“I was really disappointed in the Asian American community,” said UT-Austin Korean American Hope Lee said. “I did not think a big enough deal was made about these attacks and I don't think they were angry enough.”

Lee expressed her disappointment toward the Asian American Christian community in the lack of productive conversations about these recent attacks.

“I think it’s part of Asian culture to deal with your struggles on your own and not make a fuss about it,” Lee said. “The pandemic definitely contributed to our lack of responses... we’re afraid to speak up because (we’re) Asian and everyone doesn’t like Asians right now in this pandemic.”

Staples also bears the burden of mediating between conflicting Confucian values of Asian culture, specifically Korean culture, and biblical teachings. While balancing the view of Christ as the final authority and recognizing every child of God on “equal playing fields,” Staples is also cognizant of the rigid hierarchical values instilled in Korean culture— ideals in which are especially exhibited through the older members of his church.

Reconciling between the distinct generational differences from the members of his church all boiled down cultivating empathy, Staples said. The trick was to help members see each other's feelings: the fears, the anxieties, the frustrations— “putting ourselves in their shoes,” he said.

“It’s just the process of grieving and a process that we all have to go through to get to a point where we can learn from each other,” Staples said. “Instead of judging them, let’s try to empathize and have an ongoing dialogue so that we can bring them over to where we are and continue to walk together.”

Regardless of the internal complications between generational customs and faith, UT student Lizzy Chong feels hopeful about the efforts churches are making to incorporate meaningful conversations about inclusiveness and diversity initiatives. However, progress is very slow as many churches are staying within their comfort zone to implement these programs, Chong said.

“There’s still a lot to learn because they just don’t know anything,” Chong said. “The majority of these congregations are predominately white.”

Chong grew up in a predominately white church, thinking that her identity played nearly no role in her faith; however, joining UT’s Asian American Christian ministry illuminated her identity intersecting with her faith. Now, Chong helps organize Ignite, UT’s university-wide Christian ministry retreat.

“Ever since I switched to Ignite, I felt like my identity is what set me apart,” Chong said. “It’s a perspective that I bring into those settings.”

However, Asian American Houstonian Elia Macha is still a little doubtful about social changes in churches.

“You have to make it an open space for people to learn about their own biases and prejudices. If they say something that isn’t politically correct, you have to make them aware of it rather than criticize them.” Macha said. “The first step is acknowledgment.”

Staples is well aware of the need for that safe environment. Nearing the age of 45 years old, Staples admitted that he sometimes thinks just like the older generation and their need to move forward.

However, the need to recognize the emotions of the younger generation— fear, apprehension, anguish— emphasized the magnitude of empathy needed for Staples’ church community from the older generation. The pastor was adamant about incorporating an anti-Asian racism seminar, inviting a professor from Seattle Pacific University just to spend two hours engaging in conversations to address these racially charged crimes, process these feelings, and heal ourselves.

But confusion ensued from the older folks, questioning the need for this seminar. After all, the attacks now feel like a replayed simulation of what they faced back in the 70s and 80s when they first arrived in America.

Nevertheless, Staples pushed for this seminar and negotiated with them. Engaging in ongoing dialogues through empathy eventually won agreements from the older generation, telling Staples that they will “walk with him together” through attendance.

“At the end of the day, this is a Biblical issue,” said Staples. “We are all created in the image of God. Whether we’re white, Black, Chinese, Korean— we all have equal value, worth, and significance because of imago dei, the image of God. I think churches are engaging in these talks and realizing the need to be more proactive in the areas of justice.”

COLUMN

Reinstate Vietnamese as a foreign language option

Vietnamese should be added back to the Department of Asian Studies to represent the Vietnamese community at UT.

By **Hillary Ma**
Columnist

As a kid, my family rarely traveled to our native country of Vietnam. I always dreaded anything remotely close to Vietnamese culture because of the dissonance between my hometown in a predominantly white community and my family. In other words, I lacked the space to explore my own cultural identity.

Coming to UT, I hoped for courses that could bridge my language gap, but instead, I learned that Vietnamese was cut from the Department of Asian Studies in 2010. The Vietnamese-American community in Austin is nearly 800,000 people, and our presence here on campus is strong and prominent. To represent the growing Vietnamese-American community, UT must reinstate Vietnamese as a foreign language option.

Advertising sophomore Zak Pham, a Vietnamese American, also felt distant from his own culture growing up. Pham was excited to form a closer relationship with his cultural roots and connect with students from the same background.

"I was not exposed much (to Vietnamese)," Pham said. "I

really didn't have an opportunity, and I really want to take advantage of it now."

Pham is an avid member of the Vietnamese Student Association, a student organization that aims to celebrate and spread Vietnamese culture through holding community-centered cultural events, workshops and socials. One of the organization's top agenda items is to urge the Department of Asian Studies to reinstate Vietnamese courses as a foreign language option.

"(Having Vietnamese) as a language at UT would help a lot of students on campus, especially ones who can't really connect as much as to their relatives or their native language of their own family," Pham said. "I think it'd be really important to them — and also me, especially."

However, implementing this decision is not easy. Donald Davis, chairman of the Department of Asian Studies at UT, noted that funding difficulties and other Asian studies program commitment issues make it hard for the department to expand Southeast Asia's cultural sphere.

"On behalf of our department, we understand that Vietnamese is an important language in the state of Texas," Davis said. "It makes sense that a major state



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university like UT would be a good fit to offer it."

Davis also said that the department is continuing to explore the possibility of offering Southeast Asian courses to supplement the language.

"Offering Vietnamese courses would happen as part of a wider strategy to kind of expand the presence of Southeast Asian Studies. ... You have to think about (other Southeast Asian) languages like Indonesian, Thai, Tagalog and Malay," Davis said. "Then on top of that, ... you might want to have cultural and historical aspects

of Vietnamese history or Southeast Asian culture more widely, so all of a sudden, you start talking about a much bigger and more ambitious project."

Although the issue is complex and will take more than just University funds to reinstate Vietnamese in the next few years, the demand is still strong here on campus and it's only going to grow stronger. We need a curriculum that bridges the culture and the languages that connect their own culture to their own identity. We need a space where Vietnamese students can fully

understand the nuances of our mother tongue.

Thus, it is imperative that UT provides the proper funding to the Department of Asian Studies to fulfill these demands.

The smooth articulation of the Vietnamese language will soon flow out of our mouths and help reclaim the lost culture from our childhood. Reinstating Vietnamese is not just to help us express ourselves to our relatives — it's a symbol of acknowledgement from the institution of our strong presence on campus.

Ma is a Journalism and Chinese junior from The Woodlands, Texas.

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COLUMN

MAKE CHILD CARE ACCESSIBLE FOR UT PARENTS

UT must address child care funding to help make these services more accessible to students and staff.

By Hillary Ma
Columnist

Parents can all empathize with the same question when it comes to raising a newborn child: How and where do you find adequate child care? Child care costs are on the rise in Austin; the financial pressures of COVID are only exacerbating the issue. To serve the community, UT must prioritize expanding their child care services to make child care more accessible for parents campuswide.

When the pandemic hit, Zoom accommodations gave Maile Marriott, a physics graduate teaching assistant, an opportunity to adjust to parenthood. Turning off cameras and keeping her microphone on mute enabled a semi-smooth balance between her research work and parenting obligations.

But with UT's push for in-person classes this fall, Marriott and her law student husband are struggling to find the proper care for their 18-month-old daughter.

"We're living off of my graduate stipend," Marriott said. "We can't really afford child care."

Marriott isn't the only parent struggling. Other graduate students and faculty members echo this sentiment.

"We don't get paid a lot (from the University)," Marriott said. "I'm an employee, but I'm also a student."

Student employee compensation for graduate students can range from \$2,000-\$7,000 monthly, depending on your work position. On top of that, graduate students are also victims of Austin's overpriced rent, utilities and groceries — the basic necessities.

If you are a new parent searching for affordable child care in Austin, UT's Child Development Center may interest you at a monthly tuition rate between \$800 and \$1,220. These tuition rates vary depending on two factors: your child's age and annual income.

"Austin's just exploding right now. It's only going to keep growing and it's getting harder to find openings anywhere in daycare — even if you can afford it," Marriott said.

Another obstacle while applying

for child care services at the UT CDC is the infamous waitlist system. Hara Cootes, program director of the Child Development Center, emphasized how important it is for new parents to get onto the waitlist.

"Even if you're not interested in enrolling today doesn't mean you might not need it next year," Cootes said. "That will assure access when you need it down the road."

The average wait time to receive proper child care could reach up to three years, depending on the age of your child. Infants are the longest on the waitlist due to high costs of infant care and rising demand.

Cootes said that the Child Development Center is also in the process of building new schools to open next summer, increasing the overall facility capacity by 20%.

"A lot of child care centers in Austin have closed due to COVID. ... The programs that are open don't provide infant care, which is why it's really important that we are doubling our infant

capacity next summer," Cootes said.

The solution sounds easy — pour more funds into the system and hopefully child care can expand accessibility — but it's a little more complicated than that.

The problem extends to more than just endowment. Not enough funds are being properly allocated to address the long waitlist and affordability for child care. The University's efforts should not stop at merely building another facility. The rigidity of the waitlist is causing parents to expend more unnecessary energy, time and stress for a monthly tuition bill way over what they can afford.

Dancing around these underlying issues and frustrations being expressed by employees and student parents isn't solving anything. During these turbulent times, parents need and deserve all the support they can get. At the end of the day, no parent at UT should feel punished for having a child.

Ma is a journalism and Chinese junior from The Woodlands, Texas.



EMILY MACCORMACK / THE DAILY TEXAN STAFF

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