

Welcome Speech delivered at Asian Culture Society's Lunar New Year Celebration, February 23, 2018, Clark University

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How excellent it is to be invited here to say a few words to all of you tonight! I want to thank Clark's Asian Culture Society, Crystal Tang, Carly Ngo, and most importantly, Maya Duffy, for the invitation. It's always a great honor for a professor to be invited to speak at a student event. You know that faculty likes to walk around campus like we own the whole place. But events like these are yours, where you do your thing on your terms instead of on ours. And so I feel very privileged to be invited in.

I am particularly touched to be here because, like many of you, I am Asian American and I proudly celebrate the Lunar New Year. Like many of you, I am an immigrant. I left Taiwan with my family and arrived in Flushing, New York at the age of 10 a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. It was a very science fiction-y experience. It was as though I had landed on a different planet, where the inhabitants spoke, dressed, ate, behaved differently. Now that I've been here in the U.S. for over 40 years, it still feels science fiction-y. This is because Asian Americans have a long and often unrecognized difficult history here in the United States.

Chinese Americans were the first "guest workers" imported from another country to fill the labor demands for American westward expansion, to build mountain-crossing railroads that became a major trade route in the American West. Chinese Americans were also the first immigrant group to be discarded and demonized after they were no longer needed and excluded through official federal anti-immigration policy via the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. They were, in today's parlance, denied "paths to citizenship" in spite of the labor contributions.

Japanese Americans were the first population to be mass incarcerated by the U.S. Government on the basis of race and national affiliation via Executive Order 9066 during World War II. Koreans still feel the legacy of the partition of North and South Korea—a U.S.-backed policy in the wake of World War II that ended Japanese rule with a scar down the middle of Korea that remains today. And Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian Americans still feel the residual trauma of being resettled in a country responsible for destroying so much of their nation and their land.

And so, whether we've been here for four years or four generations, a residue of alienation persists for us. We have made a home in a place that has waged war with Asian countries for much of the twentieth century.

Our celebration of the Lunar New Year, then, is a ritual that strengthens our transnational ties and our deep connection to our Asian and American roots. The Lunar New Year means many things to us. On this day, tradition tells us to leave behind the woes of the past year as we look forward to a new year; to share food; to give money; and to dance with lions. All of it is done with this underlying spirit: to start anew, to usher in the good and leave behind or ward off the bad.

But as a student and teacher of the stories we tell about ourselves, I cannot so easily leave behind the past. The worst we could do on the first day of the new year, my mother used to tell me, is to carry those woes into the new year. But, to me, a good future is made possible only through our unblinking recognition and remembrance of our past. To forget or erase the past is to engage in a kind of blind optimism that allows the repetition of past tragedies.

So, what do we celebrate when we celebrate the Lunar New Year?

We welcome the new year, but we do not forget the past year. 2017 was a difficult year for immigrants, refugees, populations vulnerable to the whims of national and local leaders who enact bans, write exclusionary laws, build walls, wage wars, and fail to serve and protect all lives. To them, some lives clearly matter more than others. We Asian Americans can do much to change this. We know a thing or two about the challenges of immigration, of refugee resettlement, of state-sponsored

racist policies that incarcerate, deport, and even kill. So we do not forget nor avert our eyes. We remember what the previous year was like and we make sure the new one looks nothing like it.

We make, share, and consume an excess amount of food to show our love for one another. Our celebration can be a form of food diplomacy that brings people together from across cultural, political, and economic divides. But even as we celebrate our bounty, we do not avert our eyes from the endemic poverty and hunger around the world. We continue to ask important questions about our footprints, about whether our acts of consumption are contributing to economic inequalities and hunger elsewhere. Clark is a good place that teaches tools for asking these questions. Asking questions is an act that says “I choose insight over blindness.”

We give money to the younger members of our families and friends as a gesture of our investment and our belief in the future. But this, too, can be an act of generosity that extends beyond the investment in only our own. Many of you here are new to “adulthood,” which means you have graduated from receiver to giver of money. How will you distribute your “wealth,” however much or little you have? Will you invest only in “your own,” or will you have a more expansive notion of family? Will you hold your money close, or will you expand the reach of your generosity?

And finally, we dance with the lions to ward off bad fortune. To me, lion dances are like protests. We dance in the face of forces that would do us harm and let these forces know that they will not defeat us. We have happy examples. We lion-danced (protested) the internment of Japanese Americans after so many years and finally received a formal apology and financial compensation from the U.S. government in 1988. We lion-danced (protested) the whitewashed history of literary giants for many years and finally witnessed the Pulitzer Prize awarded to Vietnamese-American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen last year—on the 50th anniversary of the putative end of the Vietnam War. But we have many more lion dances to put on. We need to put them on for our refugee, DACA, and immigrant families and friends, and for so many more problems that require our vigilant attention.

So, celebrate the Lunar New Year, but understand that this is not the only thing that makes Asians and Asian Americans interesting or embraceable. We are more than the food, the red envelopes, and the lion dances. We are embedded in the histories of the countries we call home, whether it is America, China, Korea, Vietnam, or anywhere else. This is what the Lunar New Year reminds us of. This is what it means to us.

新年快樂