

December 6, 2021

Chairman Raúl Grijalva
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
House Committee on Natural Resources
1328 Longworth Building
Washington DC 20515

Re: Support of H.R. 3525, the Commission to Study the Creation of a National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture Act

Dear Chairman Grijalva and members of the subcommittee,

I'm Lisa Ling, Executive Producer and Host of THIS IS LIFE on CNN and the new HBO Max series TAKE OUT which is an awesome, fun, and highly emotional show about buried Asian American histories through the lens of food.

When I think about my 10 year old self—the one who grew up in a non diverse suburb of Sacramento, who was teased and carried so much shame around being Asian—I could have never imagined that one day, I'd be sitting before this esteemed committee advocating for a national museum that would highlight AAPI history and celebrate our achievements. Frankly, the mere notion of such a facility in our nation's capital—alongside other storied institutions, gives me chills.

After all, there are 23 million AAPIs in the US and according to a Pew study, it's the fastest growing demographic—expected to reach nearly 40 million by 2060. And although there is great diversity within the community, there are few institutions that celebrate the Asian Pacific American Experience in totality.

Growing up with working parents, my favourite babysitter was the TV. I had fantasies of being part of the Brady Bunch family or a guest on the Love Boat—I was a precocious child. But they remained just that—fantasies, because no one on TV looked like me. Except...for Connie Chung. Connie allowed me to know what was possible. And if you ask any Asian American journalist of my generation, I am quite sure all of them will cite Connie as their inspiration.

But it wasn't just TV, where there was a lack of AAPI representation. There was little to none in film, books, sports, business, politics or in American history classes.

Even though, Asians have been in America before the United States was even the United States. As I learned while working on my show “Take Out,” the first men from Asia to settle here were crew or indentured servants who jumped off Spanish galleon ships in the 1700’s and ended up in the bayous of Louisiana. They were an industrious group who built entire towns that would later get washed away by hurricanes. But they ran schools, operated businesses and even had their own currency—that I saw for my own eyes. Artifacts, that I’m sure, they’d love to donate to a national museum. In fact, in the town of Jean Lafitte, the current mayor, a blond, blue eyed descendant of one of those early Filipino settlers believes that 70-80% of the population of his town has Filipino blood running through it.

Asians built the most important construction project in mid-19th century America, the Transcontinental Railroad which physically and symbolically linked the nation and led this country on a path to prosperity. The state of California, the 6th biggest economy on earth, wouldn’t be what it is if it weren’t for Chinese labor. They helped build the levees along the Sacramento Delta and planted much of the agriculture for which the state became known.

But after being accused of taking away American jobs and spreading disease to the masses, As Dr. Jeung pointed out, the Chinese became targets of riots, arson and lynching—and ultimately the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The Chinese haven’t been the only Asian targets of violence here. During the Bellingham Riots of the early 20th century , hundreds in Bellingham, Washington pulled Indian lumber mill workers from their bunks, beat them and set fire to their lodging.

But through the many dark chapters of AAPI history, come stories of honour. Some may know that during WWII, Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps by Executive Order. What you might not know is that during that time, young Japanese American men were asked to volunteer to fight for the US armed forces. 18,000 of them became a fighting force known as the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. And fight they did. They would become the most decorated unit of their size in US military history earning over 4000 Purple Hearts, 21 Medals of Honour and an unprecedented seven Presidential Unit Citations. All the while, America was incarcerating tens of thousands who looked like them, including many of their families.

And yet, there is no mention of these American heroes in our history books. In fact, students might go through their entire educational life without learning single fact about Asian Pacific Americas.

Not about the Supreme Court case of a Chinese American man, Wang Kim Arc that went on to make Birthright Citizenship law.

Not about Dalip Singh Saund who, after working to overturn a policy that prevented South Asians from naturalizing, became a citizen and then the first Asian American elected to Congress.

Not about the reputed “First Lady of Physics,” Dr. Chien-Shiung Wu who helped the US develop the atomic bomb and became the first woman to serve as president of the American Physical Society.

Not about Jawed Karim and Steven Chen, two of the Asian American founders of a little known video sharing platform called YouTube.

I could go on and on but despite these extraordinary achievements, according to a study conducted the research organisation, LAAUNCH, when asked “When you think of prominent Asian Americans, what specific names come to mind.” 42% of respondents said “I don’t know,” despite having a Vice President who is Asian. 11% said Jackie Chan, who isn’t even American.

When the stories and histories of a people are excluded from a country’s narrative, it becomes easy to overlook and even dehumanise an entire population.

And while the inclusion of this history would go a long way, with a collective diaspora as vast and diverse as ours, it cannot just be a chapter in a text book.

Ours are the stories of 23 million Americans who deserve a place to learn about and honour those whose sacrifices and achievements have gone unsung for far too long.

We deserve a place to take our children to see that Asian Pacific Americans are and have been, an integral part of the fabric of this great nation that we all call home.