

COMMENTARY

The Chinese American Silence

The roots of Chinese American silence on political events can't be overlooked

By Li Jin

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New York police officer Peter Liang was patrolling a dark staircase in a Brooklyn housing complex when his gun discharged accidentally, and the bullet struck and killed a man walking down the stairs with his girlfriend. This was terrible enough, but what made it worse was that it happened during a time of intense scrutiny of use of excessive force among police officers.

Liang was convicted of second-degree manslaughter for this accident, and the Chinese population immediately erupted in sympathy for Liang and outrage over what they considered a vengeful and unfair verdict.

The problem was that most of this unhappiness was never heard until this past weekend's nation-wide protests.

Despite the rampant anguish inside the Chinese American community and plans for a march and protest, very few U.S. mainstream media covered the a story. Most information and opinions were circulated only on Chinese-language newspapers and social media.

Keeping opinions tightly within the community has a cultural root. There are a variety of reasons for this, such as lack of security on a culturally distinct land, lack of language proficiency, and a tendency to cluster internally. Many who have been in the United States for decades still choose to reside inside the various big-city Chinatowns across the nation and still cannot converse in English. In 2013, 62 percent of Chinese immigrants (ages 5 and above) were identified with limited English proficiency, compared to 50 percent of the total foreign-born population.

Chinese Americans also have a cultural indifference to politics. Governed by feudal emperors for millenniums, the Chinese, as a people, are prone to avoid political activism as much as possible. Wisdom tells them politics involve conflicts, confrontations, and even killings, which is much less desirable than economic prosperity and social harmony.

These Confucian values were brought to the United States by millions of Chinese immigrants during the 19th century and more or less inherited by their descendants who are more likely to shun the rowdiness of American democracy than other ethnic groups. According to Pew Research Center, 31 percent of eligible Asian Americans voted in the 2010 midterm elections, compared with 44 percent of [Black] Americans and 49 percent of [white] Americans.

This is the conundrum: If the Chinese American community does not know how to use their political voice to seek fairer treatments of their community, how will the rest of society know what's on our minds?

The United States is blessed with people with diverse racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds, which makes this country full of life and changes. The Liang case is one milestone in a long and difficult conversation about the proper role of policing, especially in [Black] American neighborhoods.

Progressive social changes demand active participation of all citizens. Being a so-called "model minority" does not mean Chinese Americans should be tolerant of the status quo. Joining the national conversation on various issues and helping this country become a more

equal and fair land for each and every citizen should be the responsibility of any majority or minority group.

The Chinese American community should be a more active participant by voicing out and offering constructive solutions in this process. Some people criticized the past weekend's nation-wide protests as being "offensive." But on the other hand, it is the first time in decades the Chinese American community stepped out and shared their voices to the society. It epitomizes what it means to live in a democratic society where a requirement of being heard means firstly a willingness to speak up in the face of injustice. It should not be the last one the Chinese American community come out and support the national movements. *(end)*

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* This piece was edited Feb. 29 to correct a factual error.

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