Welcome to the Inclusive Excellence podcast. May is Asian and Pacific American Heritage Month, a month that honors and celebrates Asian-American and Pacific Islander identity, also known as AAPI. While there are many events that recognize this special month, it is important to acknowledge that this time feels different. The wave of anti-Asian violence and racism that has negatively impacted the community is something that cannot be dismissed. We continue our series called AAPI at Cornell, where you will hear the stories of Cornell staff members, in their authentic voice, celebrating their heritage and the joys of being Asian and Pacific Islander, while also naming the very real concerns that they experience in this moment. My name is Toral Patel.

In the third part of our series, we engage with a new group of staff members, Caleb Yu, Hei Hei Depew, and Christina Liang. Hi, everyone. Thank you for being part of the show today. Why don't we start with some introductions? Christina, do you want to start?

Christina Liang: Sure. Thank you for having me. My name is Christina Liang, I use the she/her/hers pronouns, I currently serve as Interim Judicial Administrator at Cornell. I've been in that role for a hot minute, for about five months at this point, but I've been at Cornell for about six years at this point, doing a lot of, primarily, student conduct work.

Christina Liang: Salient identities. I identify as a first-gen college and law school grad, a daughter, a sister, oldest sibling, English is my second language. I'm a vegan, that's probably a big part of my identity as well. So the one that I hold near and dear to my heart is I am the child of immigrants. My parents are Chinese immigrants, they're from a southern part of China known as Guangzhou. So that's me.

Hei Hei Depew: Hi, everyone. My name is Hei Hei Depew, I go by she/her/hers. I'm also first-generation Chinese-American, I am the first in my family to graduate from college, I am Toisan, I come from a region in China not a lot of people know about, I speak a certain dialect of Chinese. And when I think about my identity, I just think of myself as somebody from Brooklyn who grew up with a very interesting intersection of identities in a place that's very multicultural. And then coming to a place that is a little bit more homogeneous, and bringing all of that experience and that identity with me in this space.
TORAL PATEL: Hei Hei, what about your role at Cornell?

HEI HEI DEPEW: I am a financial analyst at Cornell, and I'm also the Chair of the Employee Assembly, but outgoing Chair of the Employee Assembly. There's going to be a new chair, which I'm really excited about. I've worked with her before, and I'm just really excited about the future of the Employee Assembly and all the partnerships that we've built.

CALEB YU: My name is Caleb Yu, I go by he/him/his, and I am a Career Coach at the Career Services Center on campus and I work with graduate students and international students. Some of my salient identities are I'm Chinese, I define myself as Asian, I'm an immigrant myself. I was born and grew up in China, later moved to the States for school. English is my third language, I'm a die-hard Celtics fan, a husband and a father, and I'm a Christian.

TORAL PATEL: So let's talk a little bit about the heritage. I know that each of you described being first-generation and moving here. So how has your heritage shaped the person that you are today?

CHRISTINA LIANG: Wow, that's a really good question, because when I think about heritage, words that come to my mind, like my values, my belief system, those are the things that come to my mind. And as a first-gen college student, I also grew up in Brooklyn, like Hei Hei, and so much of that is interspersed with my cultural identity, my parents' culture, and then also American culture in this major metropolis. And so I think about the values that my parents instilled in me-- work very, very hard and try your very best, keep to yourself, do your own work, do your part, and what you can do today, don't do tomorrow. Those types of things, I think, perhaps a lot of folks from our community can relate to.

I think my heritage shapes every decision that I make in my life. So the risks that I take, the risks that I don't take. How this will affect my family and how it will affect how close I can be with my family and how responsive I can be with them is really how I see it shaping who I am. A large part of the reason I ended up in Ithaca, I think, is related to my heritage and how important family is in that way. A large part of my family is still in New York City and during the pandemic, the ongoing pandemic, it's been really hard. Being away from them and not having that physical connection with them. And it shapes the professional decisions I make in my life, as well. How far I want to be from my family, the places that I want to end up, because my family may one day move in with me. Those are the things that I think about. And so I think it's very much my day to day, but also my value system, the things that I choose to get involved in, and how I represent my family in every setting.

HEI HEI DEPEW: I think a lot of what Christina says has resonated so much with me, because we have so many things in common. Being first-generation Chinese-Americans, college graduates, children of immigrants, growing up in Brooklyn. I feel like when I think about my heritage, there's so much I appreciate about being
Chinese and so much I appreciate about being American. When you grow up with this
dual identity of being Chinese and American, I feel like you have one foot in one door
and one foot in another space. There's this identity that you grow up— much like
Christina, English is not my first language, but it's definitely the language I'm most
proficient in now.

[00:06:13.04] And my values as a Chinese person, my commitment to the elderly, my
commitment to the customs, my connection to the beliefs and a lot of these traditions
that I hold near and dear. Those are not American, but I think a lot of the things I
celebrate, like Christmas and Thanksgiving, a lot of those are culturally American
things. And sometimes, I feel there's this reconciliation of who you are and how you
define yourself when you think about your heritage, because so much of it is influenced
by not just being an American, but by this identity as a Chinese person in America. And
I think that's so different, and also different for different Chinese people.

[00:06:54.31] Having listened to the other podcasts and being able to see how other
people have navigated their identity in America has been really eye-opening for me and
really educational. And I've really appreciated the opportunity to learn from other people
and see what their experience was like, because it's not just like my experience or
Christina's, even though ours are very similar and we've ended up here in Ithaca in the
same space, it's really neat. But everybody's path to get to the space has been so
different and it's been so informative to hear about all these different stories.

[00:07:25.55] CALEB YU: Yeah, I think both Christina and Hei Hei talked about how
heritage shaped or impacts their values. And I think that's definitely something that I
would also agree with or identify. Moving to the States, in my life, I had gone through
this first-hand experience of experiencing two different cultures and really tried to rustle
within myself like, OK, now which one I identify with more or which one represents me
more? But then at one point, I felt like, I want to get rid of one but just keep to the other.
Then eventually, I realized, everything's intertwined together and one is not better than
the other. But when they come together, they complement each other. It makes you a
better person and makes this world a better place, in fact.

[00:08:16.56] And so when I think about my heritage, I definitely think about how that
impacts my way of living my life. Even thinking about the job that I'm doing right now, it
really helps me to connect with a large percentage of our international students, which
are Asian. And so it really makes sense when sometimes, they share with me, this is
actually something that I'm interested, but I'm pursuing this career or I'm pursuing that
major because that's more important for my family. And I felt like, yeah, it makes sense
to me, because that's where I see my part of heritage that helps me, even in my career
these days.

[00:08:57.17] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I have to say, something that all three of you said
is this concept of being bicultural, right? Caleb, you just mentioned it. I think that's
something that all of us live. And so growing up, I always looked at it from two different
lens. And one of the lens that I think I had for a little while that, I got out of that mode
quickly, but it's this concept that maybe I don't belong in either space, right? So as you know that I come from India, so I'm not truly Indian. But I'm also not truly American because, like all three of you, I was born in a different country, I migrated here. So I'm actually an immigrant myself. And my kids are first-generation Americans.

So that was my viewpoint for a while, that I didn't quite belong in either space, because I had one foot in both. And now my viewpoint, trying to switch that and putting a positive spin on it to say, that's a great thing. That I actually can step in either space at any given time, right? I could be over here if I want to be. So I can go ahead and still celebrate, to Hei Hei's point, the Thanksgivings and the Christmases, even though it's not part of my heritage. But then I can also then step back into the other space and dress traditionally, speak the language, cook the food, and celebrate that. So the messages I send my kids or share with my kids is that this is a great thing and this is a positive thing. And so I've changed the viewpoint of it all completely. And that's actually kind of cool.

CHRISTINA LIANG: Can I just jump in there, Toral? Because I think it's so interesting, because I think a lot of it is imposed on us, too, right? Whether it be from American culture or cultural heritage from our families, this notion of you have to pick one or you have to find one that is the most dominant piece. And some of that is, perhaps, societally imposed upon us, too. You're American. What does that mean to be American? And we see a lot of that tension, I think, day to day. And it's like a rewiring, I feel like, you're talking about, too, this idea of, it's both. It's just part of who I am. I don't have the ability to wake up and say, OK, today I'm going to be Chinese. And tomorrow, I'm gonna be American. That's just not how it works. So I really appreciate you saying that, because it's a struggle. Because a little bit of that immigrant mentality is, OK, you assimilate so you're accepted, and then life will be easy. And who doesn't want life to be easy? But guess what? Life's not easy. So I really appreciate you saying it's that reframing piece.

TORAL PATEL: So something that I'm hearing all three of you talk about is really family. It's the word that all of you have repeated. So let's talk about that atmosphere for you and are there any traditions that your family celebrates that maybe others don't know about? What's unique?

HEI HEI DEPEW: So my family is Chinese, but a lot of our traditions are based on the lunar calendar and a lot of the things that we celebrate are the Lunar Festival and also the Qingming Festival, the Moon Festival. And all of this is based on the moon, so it changes every year, the dates. And I love these traditions. Do I believe and the ideas behind them, that my ancestors are in the sky and I'm lighting incense and they're receiving all my prayers and all my well wishes? I don't, but I love this idea that this is a tradition that's been passed down hundreds of thousands of years, and I'm going to continue doing it. Hopefully, the traditions will continue. And I think it's so important to have a way to pay respect to your heritage, where you're from, the things that you hold dear as part of your values.
But also, there are things I celebrate-- for example, my sister's married to a Greek person, so they have Greek Orthodox holidays. My niece was baptized in a Greek Orthodox church, and I went to her baptism. My brother is married to a Christian Hawaiian woman, and my other brother is going to marry a Japanese-American woman. So our whole family is so multicultural, and we all celebrate a lot of these traditions. And we're all so open to learning more about each other's traditions and being a part of it, I think, has been really great, to say this is what we do and let's explain why we do it to everybody who is new here, and then we can do it together. We can learn about all of the other traditions that are important to all of us. So I think it's just been a wonderful opportunity to learn, really.

CALEB YU: I think it's unique for me, it is exactly what Hei Hei just shared. For my family, we also kind follow the holidays on the Lunar New Year. Even that's the way my family celebrates birthdays. So I was born in February, but the year I was born, my birthday fell on the first day of the Lunar New Year. And so as Chinese, we all know that Lunar New Year is such a big celebration. And so interestingly, my birthday, then, just blended into that big celebration where the entire family came together. And so for me, that's such a good memory, because we're just not celebrating my birthday with my parents only, but with all the extended family. So 20 some, 30 some people all get together. You get more presents. But that's a good time, when families get together.

And so I remember later on, when I moved to the States, friends started celebrating my birthday in February. And it was a little bit unnatural for me, oh, I guess this is also my birthday. This is the day I was born. But the emotional connection is sort of missing there, or then I need to start building, oh, this also means yeah, I get to celebrate. This is my birthday and whatnot.

And something else for me which is important, which a lot of Chinese families share, is what the role food or eating plays in all of these traditions and celebrations. So whenever I think about family tradition, holidays, food is definitely a huge part. Definitely yummy food, but you also share that with your family. That's even a more intimate environment and feeling for me. A kind of nostalgia now, though, when I think about the ability to celebrate and eat with the entire family every year. Now I don't get to do that as often.

CHRISTINA LIANG: I think the family tradition that came to my mind right away, Toral, when you asked the question, is actually Thanksgiving. And my family celebrates just textbook American Thanksgiving, right? Which is so funny to me, because I don't think anybody in the family knows how to cook a turkey properly. I don't know that a lot of Americans know how to do it right. Turkey is just one of those things, right? But we celebrate Thanksgiving, actually, because we moved into our first house on Thanksgiving day. So my family, we had bought a duplex, my uncle and my dad, and we are all this one big happy family in this duplex in Brooklyn. And we moved in on Thanksgiving day years and years ago.
And so Thanksgiving, then, became this anniversary celebration of us being together and connected to the meaning behind Thanksgiving, being grateful, being thankful for all the things that we have and we've worked hard for. And since then, I would say our family has split up into different parts of New York City. We've moved out and moved into our own homes, and we still do it. We still get together at my grandparents' house and everybody brings stuff. I'm in charge of the turkey nowadays, which is super ironic and uncomfortable, because I'm a vegan, but I do it for the family. All those different pieces. And it is so meaningful to me, because the part that stands out for me is I'm the only one who doesn't live in New York City right now. So all my sisters, my cousins, everybody is still in New York City. So to be able to be part of what I think is really important to our family in that way is really meaningful.

And something I think about as another tradition is, we've talked about Lunar New Year. Growing up, I wasn't allowed to miss school for any reason. You had a fever, you probably should go to school, even though you should probably stay home, right? You're going to school, you're fine, it'll wear away. Drink some water. And so for Lunar New Year, growing up, it was not acknowledged-- I went to public school-- it wasn't acknowledged as a holiday. So you'd go to school if it lands on a weekday. But my mom always made sure that we observed all the traditions. I would wear red, I would wear traditional outfits. And for her, I think it was this silent protest, of OK, our values are school is important. So she's going to school, because it's a school day. But she's going to observe the Lunar New Year in the way that we would want her to if she was home with us.

And so those are the pieces I remember, too. I remember going to school and students would ask me, oh, why are you dressed funny today? Or whatever kids say. And you'd have the opportunity to just bring about awareness and share why this day is really important to you. And sometimes, I remember some of my teachers asking about it, too. And then say, can you share with the class about what it means to be with us today, as opposed to being with your family to celebrate Lunar New Year? So those are the things that come to my mind in terms of tradition.

TORAL PATEL: For me, I think as a culture, there's so many different traditions that we celebrate, and some that have been Americanized, right? And so I tell people, I was like, did you know that The Color Run that we have here in the United States comes from a holiday that we have in India? And so we have a holiday called Holi, it's H-O-L-I, and essentially, it's a two day thing. The first day, we light a huge bonfire. And everybody brings something from their house to be put into this bonfire from the neighborhood. And then the next day, we throw color on each other, right? And that's our way of welcoming spring every single year. So you can see some of the bits and pieces that have come over in the US and just applied differently.

But one tradition-- and it's so funny, because I hear all of you say-- it's not necessarily funny, but to hear all of you say that your calendars are lunar-based. And the Hindu calendar is also lunar-based, but I'm sure the dates are completely off. And so our new year is also celebrated on a completely different day. And to Hei Hei's point
earlier, it's not on the same date any given year, because based on the moon, it changes every year. And I say it usually falls in October, sometimes it's in November.

[00:19:06.80] And so our traditional way to celebrate New Year's in India is that you actually get up way early, like you're up at 3 o'clock in the morning. 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. And you go and actually get blessings from all of your elders for the upcoming year. And so it's not the party night before until midnight like we're used to celebrating. It's actually getting up extra early to go get blessings from your elders for the upcoming year. And so being in the US, obviously, all of my elders are not here. And we have this concept of an extended family, so when I say elders, it's literally everybody in your neighborhood, everybody that you don't even know. As long as they're remotely older than you, you're going to go get blessings from them. So that's why you get up early, because it's a huge day. A long day.

[00:19:54.08] And so here, the way we've Americanized it is that we still try to follow that tradition somehow, of wishing people happy new year in the morning, so we call. We are on the phone all day long. We call everybody that we know and it's literally like, happy new year. OK, bye. Happy new year. OK, bye. It's quick, because you're calling so many people. And then some of us who were working or in school, we have to figure out how to do this before and after school. Christina, same thing. If it falls on a weekday, you're going to school, but then you better come home and call people. And so that's how we've still managed to hang on to the tradition, but modernized it in the United States, because we don't all live within walking distance from each other.

[00:20:36.37] CALEB YU: Technology definitely helps. I feel like these days and during major holidays, I know when families are getting together, I would just like Facetime in. And they'll just put the camera on the table and then just rotate or spin it. And so I get to say, oh, hi, uncle. Hi, aunt. And then, just like you, very short and briefly. Oh, hi, hi, hi, OK, done. Enjoy the meal. And then after that, they will send me photos of food I want. I'm like, stop it, I'm working now.

[00:21:12.13] HEI HEI DEPEW: I love how food is incorporated in celebrations, and I love how food has evolved. Like when I was a kid celebrating Thanksgiving with my family, we didn't like turkey, so we ate roasted duck for Thanksgiving. And now as an adult, I celebrate Thanksgiving with my husband's family, who are Irish Catholic, and I'll cook. The only difference between what I'm making-- and I'm making cranberry sauce from scratch, mashed potatoes from scratch, the whole thing from scratch-- is that I will be cooking the whole thing with chopsticks. And we'll have appetizers, and they'll be dumplings. Or maybe I'll have spanakopita, which is a Greek spinach pie, which is what I used to eat with my sister's family when we would celebrate Christmas together. So all these different elements from my life that come together and being able to incorporate all these different things has been really special. And food is just so huge and important. I think there's so much tradition passed on through food. I'll make wontons sometimes, and I'll make it with friends and I'll teach them how to make it the way my grandmother taught me how to make it. And we'll incorporate new things. So I just love talking about food.
TORAL PATEL: I love listening to the stories, because I know as we grew up here, we always learned from history that it's like, oh, America is the big melting pot, right? And then to actually hear the stories and seeing it all happening, I think that's neat. And so having this Asian-American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, what does that mean for you?

HEI HEI DEPEW: I think it's a time to celebrate. Celebrate our culture, celebrate our contributions as Asian Pacific-American Islanders here in America. I think there's such a rich history and we've been here for such a long time. And that history is sometimes good, sometimes not so great. My brother's fiancee, she's Japanese and her grandparents met at the internment camps. For a long while, my grandfather was here, but my grandmother wasn't here. And the immigration policy there kept them apart for decades.

So when I think about the history here, I think that it is rife with some issues, but I think there's also a lot that Asians have brought to this country that are really great. And I just love the opportunity to talk to more Asian people and talk about their experience here, because I think I've just learned so much and I feel like it's created a lot of camaraderie within this community that I've really appreciated, so I really am so thankful for these opportunities.

CALEB YU: Yeah I definitely agree. I think that's definitely a time to celebrate. But I feel like for me, maybe it's slightly different than Christina and Hei Hei, who was born and grew up here. Coming from China to the States, I felt like I just came from a place that was full of Asian or Chinese people that looked just like me. I mean, back in China, we didn't have anything like this, right? And so when I first came here, I thought, oh. I started seeing people that looked different than me. And obviously, you sort of gravitate towards people that look like you, and then try to get to know the history or start to know, oh, this is what it means to be diverse and whatnot.

But I feel like for me, myself, this month also means an opportunity for me to learn. Just because I feel like, coming from China, I didn't have the opportunity to learn about all these things. And seeing how society developed in the past couple of years, I definitely think it's important for us to keep learning about the history of Asian-Americans here in the States so that we can better share, advocate, and educate people around us. Because I feel like if we don't continue learning ourselves, I feel like sometimes we lack the knowledge or power to even share our own stories or educate people around us.

CHRISTINA LIANG: When I think about these types of naming of each month for a particular cause or heritage or awareness month, I'm always torn. Because I think about all the positive things that I think Caleb and Hei Hei have discussed. The awareness, sharing of knowledge, and paying particular attention and taking that pause in our day to day to share. But then I also think about, what about the rest of the year? What is the work that we're doing to bring about that awareness?
[00:25:30.80] And I have these moments sometimes when I'm talking to my husband, who's Irish-Italian, and we'll just talk about the most mundane things. We'll be like, oh, growing up, what did you do for summer? Did you go to summer camp? Oh, yeah, I went to lacrosse camp or whatever. And I'm like, yeah, I went to math camp. And by math camp, I mean my dad told me to go to the backyard and recite the multiplication table. You know what I mean? It's a completely different experience. And I feel like but for those day to day conversations, that awareness regarding the difference in our culture and our upbringing wouldn't happen.

[00:26:04.74] And so that's why I feel torn sometimes, when I think about, OK, May is Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. What about the rest of the year? What are we doing to share, to learn, to better understand this diaspora that we are all experiencing? So it's meaningful. I appreciate it, because it does make me take a pause to pay close attention to how I'm also sharing knowledge and sharing my experiences. But I wish that-- I'll share for me, I wish I was better about it the rest of the year, the rest of the time, in doing that type of work.

[00:26:40.01] TORAL PATEL: Hei Hei or Caleb, anything to add to that?

[00:26:42.96] CALEB YU: I would agree that it's good that we have a month that's dedicated to education or learning, right? But I think it's also a very important question to ask, what about the rest of the 11 months? And I think even more so because Asian culture, we value this be modest, be humble. Don't be that guy that sticks out and don't be loud or don't talk about all your problems, keep it within your self, respect. And these are great things.

[00:27:14.70] But sometimes, I feel like these are also the things that hinders us from sharing our stories or hinders us from learning more. It needs to be a constant, but also more intentional push. At least for myself. To think about, OK, outside of me, what are some things that I can do to at least keep this momentum going? Or continue to share my stories or continue to learn? Not just like, OK, May. When May 1 rolls around, OK, let me be vocal and let me share with you my story. And June 1 come around, OK, you missed the chance. Wait until next May. So that is a very good question. And I think, at least for me, I need to sometimes push myself to be more willing to share my stories, instead of just be-- not sure humble is the right word, or just be quiet.

[00:28:14.90] HEI HEI DEPEW: Caleb, you bring up a really great point. I feel like when you grow up the child of immigrants, I think what I've been told is always keep your head down, do well in school, get into college, find a great job. Do all these things and everything will be fine. And I think when it comes to voicing your opinion or being really loud about things that maybe are a little bit unsavory, I think the guidance has been, don't do that. Don't get yourself in trouble. Don't put yourself out there for that kind of exposure. And I think that can be really difficult when you're trying to reconcile some of the things, maybe, you're seeing in society, with this desire to just keep your head down and really just try to be as resilient and under the radar as possible.
I worry that we reached a point in time, with the rise in the anti-Asian crime and aggression, that the microaggressions maybe we've seen in our youth-- the common story about our food, about the way we look, about our names-- that is metastasizing to something violent and something that I think we have to speak up against. And I think that's where I find myself when I think about these things. When I think about growing up Chinese-American and some of the direction and the guidance that we've had and how that coincides with how I'm feeling right now and how to combat some of the things that we're seeing currently in society.

Can I quickly say, for the record, that on May 20, President Joe Biden signed into law the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act that passed through Congress and was a rare show of bipartisan support that is a hate crime bill that I think helps to address some of these anti-Asian incidences that we've seen. So I think maybe that's a good way to end Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Even though we're seeing some things that are unsavory, it's nice to see some support and acknowledgment of what we're going through and to see some legislation passed. I think it's pretty huge, especially since we live in divided times.

TORAL PATEL: So for me, I'll say that having a specific month, I agree with Christina that I've been having a hard time, again, I think, with all of the celebrations, right? Because it is a month, and then it's like, what do we do for the rest of the year? And how do we keep these conversations going?

But I also have to dig a little bit into what does it mean to even have a Heritage Month? What's the point of it? Is it just to talk about the history of Asian-Americans and what's happened and that? Or is it to really celebrate the traditions and the heritage that we bring to the United States? Or is it the next step moving forward, which is to really, for me, I think the most ideal situation is it's a celebration of how having Asian-Americans here in the United States has been a positive thing, right? And how it's evolved the American culture and how it's brought that culture to the next level. That's where I would want it to go. And I don't know that by saying that we have a Heritage Month that we're there yet, right? I guess that's what I'm struggling with, is what is the point of having a Heritage Month? I would hope it's a little bit of everything, right? It's a little bit of looking at the history, it's a little bit of celebrating all of that, and it's a little bit of recognition of the positive influences that Asian culture has brought within the American culture.

So I want to thank you all for sharing your stories with us on today's show and I look forward to continuing this conversation in our next episode. That's it for part three of this four-part special series. For the latest updates on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Cornell as well as resources to honor and celebrate Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, be sure to visit diversity.cornell.edu. My name is Toral Patel.

ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis. Thank you for listening to AAPI at Cornell.