

## Ada Chen: Defining Chinese-America

By Audrey Mai

Growing up in the Sunset District of San Francisco, I've always been surrounded by other Asian folks. My elementary, middle, and high schools all had a plurality (if not a majority) of Asians in its student population, so as a Chinese-Vietnamese American myself, I never felt out of place due to my race. On the contrary; as I entered middle school and social dynamics at school grew in both complexity and perceived importance, it felt increasingly difficult to stand out. I was just one, insignificant drop swept away into a homogenous sea of black hair and yellow skin. My race seemed to sentence me to forever being labelled as just *another* quiet, boring, nerdy Asian, while the rare crew of cool white people were always fawned over. Rather than finding solace and strength in my community, I saw my peers as competitors and my heritage as an obstacle preventing me from becoming truly visible. In high school, I vowed to distinguish myself from other people who looked like me. I turned toward art and other interests that went against what was stereotypically associated with being Asian. Becoming “the artsy chick” would mean I'd be seen as fun, and interesting, and cool... Sure, I'd be breaking out of one box just to jump into another, but I thought that *this* persona, at least, would finally free me from my Asianness.

As I matured out of my relatively sheltered childhood and spent time in different, less Asian-populated parts of San Francisco, my race once again came up as a frustration of mine. Whether I was walking through the Mission District or shopping downtown, being Chinese was a frequent focal point of harassment, from catcalls to snide insults. I subconsciously began to *expect* to hear “chink” or “Lingling” or “ching-chong” if I ever felt a person's gaze linger on me

longer than usual. At some point, I had a crushing revelation: No matter how I dress or what kind of music I listen to, my race will inevitably be the first thing that most people see when they look at me.

With a newfound understanding of how I'm perceived in American society due to these experiences of being racially targeted, my plunge into art once rooted in self-hatred soon became a genuine creative outlet for me. Ironically, becoming involved with art and subsequently discovering contemporary Asian artists is what actually opened my eyes to the value and beauty of my cultures. One of the most influential figures in the shift in my worldview was Ada Chen, a young Chinese American artist and jeweler who grew up in San Francisco, like myself. Her pieces were vibrant and humorous, both heartbreaking and uplifting, and most of all, they spoke to my own experiences as an *Asian-American* unlike any other art I'd seen before. Chen's pieces are all very explicitly inspired by Chinese culture, while also drawing American cultural references. They are celebrations of both her ancestral culture and her creative influences growing up in America, and the celebratory spirit imbued in her art is contagious. The way Chen's pieces embodied and defined Chinese American culture gave me something to identify with and take pride in within my ethnicity. What once was only a source of emotional turmoil became a source of community and belonging, which illustrates the transformative impacts of Chen's work on young Asian Americans like myself.

I first discovered Chen's body of work through Instagram, a social media platform primarily based on sharing photos. The first piece I saw, titled "Text Message Earrings," got particularly popular on social media: a set of earrings constructed with laser cut acrylic text bubbles mimicking iPhone messages, with each bubble attaching vertically to the next via sterling silver loops such that the text hangs below the ear and reads like an actual screenshot.

Directly quoting two real conversations she had with two different men, the dialogues evoke both laughter and exasperation from anyone who can identify with the exchanges.

One earring reads (only the non-italicized text):

*Man:* I've never been with an asian [sic] girl before

*Ada Chen:* And how do you feel about that?

*M:* I don't know im [sic] kinda excited

*AC:* 🙄🙄🙄

And the other reads:

*M:* Are you Asian or Chinese?

*AC:* Im chinese but chinese is a typa asian so [sic]

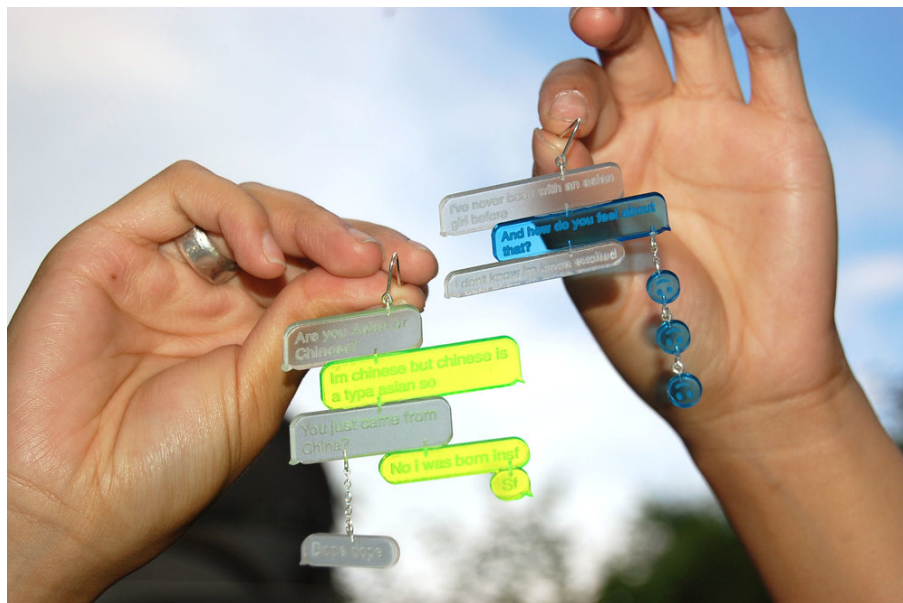
*M:* You just came from China?

*AC:* No i was born in sf [sic]

*M:* Dope dope

“Text Message Earrings” consists of two tiny snippets of conversation, yet they exemplify several obstacles that Asian Americans face on an unfortunately regular basis. The first earring is a prime example of the casual fetishization of Asians so normalized within American pop culture. What so many Americans don't understand is that *fetishization isn't flattery* -- It minimizes the person and maximizes their race. Chen reacts to the man's blatant objectification with nothing but upside-down emojis, conveying a sarcastic, pained smile. The second earring, which features the plain ignorance of the man Chen is speaking to, is where a more nuanced exploration of the conversation can be discussed. With this man, there's clearly a fundamental misunderstanding of what the words “Asian” and “Chinese” mean at all, but more importantly, a general confusion for what identifying as “Chinese” in America implies. The

question, “You just came from China?” coming immediately after Chen confirms that she’s Chinese exposes the assumption of foreignness that comes with being a person of color (POC) in the United States. This muddling of nationality vs. ethnicity is something that most American-born POC feel, at some point, an obligation to explain. As an Asian-American, the presumption that “Asian = foreign” takes away from the validity of American-born descendants of immigrants and their complex experiences. Being an afterthought leads to a feeling of alienation, a loss of a sense of home and visibility. The responsibility of educating non-Asian Americans often entirely falls on the shoulders of Asian American individuals due to the continual exoticization of Asians in American media and pop culture. *This* is the true impact of seemingly harmless ignorance. The spiritual and emotional exhaustion of constantly being pestered to justify your own identity is felt collectively, and is a culture-defining aspect of the Asian American experience.



The way that this piece resonated with so many folks in an online medium reflects Chen’s primary audience: young adults. Young adults make up the most active and influential demographic on most social media platforms, so it’s no wonder that a piece that references such

a core Millennial/Gen-Z experience was heavily circulated around Instagram. The imagery of a screenshot of a text is familiar to most people close in age to Chen, who is a very recent college graduate herself (class of 2018). In fact, there are entire Instagram pages dedicated to sharing user-submitted screenshots of absurd, often very uncomfortable messages received on dating platforms, such as *@beam\_me\_up\_softboi* which boasts 336k followers. In the age of platforms like Instagram and Tinder, the judgments that people impart on you based on how you look can be heard (or rather, read) at the simple touch of a button. With a stream of ignorant comments feeding right into the palm of your hand, the damaging impacts of such feedback is more virulent than ever with POC youth today.

Where Chen's narrative truly shines is with her more conceptual pieces, such as "Speak Chinese We're In America," probably my favorite one of her works. It consists of two components: the "earring-necklace" and a set of grillz. The earring-necklace is a single piece that connects two earring studs, made up of a chain of text cut out of fine silver which reads, "Speak English We're In America." The text dangles under the chin, over the throat in a wide "U" shape, somewhat reminiscent of bunting connecting the ears. What makes this first component so impactful is its unique form and placement, associated with both the ears and the throat. The proximity to the ears represents how "Speak English, we're in America" is so commonly heard by POC when speaking their native tongues. The phrase is extremely exclusionary, simultaneously establishing English as the only socially acceptable or legitimate national language and calling into question the place of non-white peoples and their cultures in the U.S. Additionally, the way the necklace crosses over the throat is connected to how this phrase silences the voices of POC, devaluing their languages and cultures.

The grillz, also made out of fine silver, cover three of Chen's top teeth and five of her bottom teeth. They read, "说中文 (top) // 我们在美国 (bottom)," hand-carved into the metal, which translates to "Speak Chinese (top) // We're In America (bottom)," with each character corresponding to a tooth. This turns the necklace's phrase on its head, directly and confidently affirming that Chinese (people, culture, and language) does, in fact, have a place in the U.S. The juxtaposition of the Chinese vs. English dialogue is empowering and builds a sense of belonging, combatting the "othering" that many Asian Americans feel in the US. Placement of the grillz is also key, with the mouth being intrinsically associated with speech. The impactful retort is invisible unless the wearer's lips are open, which symbolizes how the silenced can reclaim their voice by speaking out against the injustices they face. As Chen states herself, "The implicit conversation between the connected earrings and the grillz is that when all I hear is 'Speak English We're in America,' my response is 'Speak Chinese We're in America.'" (Pratt Institute, 2018).



Chen’s decision to feature grillz in “Speak Chinese We’re In America” is a bold, dynamic choice due in part to the cultural meaning and origin of grillz. Emerging from hip-hop culture, which was, of course, pioneered by Black Americans, grillz are a symbol of wealth and status. Chen likens that symbolic prosperity to the value she now places on her own ability to speak Chinese, and her success in defying the societal pressures that suppress the survival of non-English languages. This is just one example of how Chen draws inspiration from other POC communities in her work, and she attributes her multicultural influences to some of her core experiences in college. In an interview with DNAMAG, Chen describes the shock of moving from San Francisco, where she had mostly Asian-American friends, to a university with significantly more *international* Asian students than Asian-Americans (Vo, 2018). She describes how it was hard to connect with international Chinese students; having been raised in such starkly different societies, they generally had values and perspectives that were simply not relatable. It came much more naturally to bond with non-Asian American POC even compared to

people of the same ethnic background, solely due to the unique experiences that American-born POC share. Making friends from different backgrounds gave Chen the opportunity not only to learn more about different cultures, but also share her own. She credits this exchange to her fully realizing and embracing the merits of Chinese customs as well as becoming exposed to new cultures, both of which inform and enrich her art today.

Jewelry is a somewhat unusual choice of medium for Chen's work; it's quite rare to come across jewelry that provides social commentary. When contextualizing both Chen's goals and the symbolism behind jewelry, though, her work only gains more depth. Jewelry is often seen as self-indulgent and a symbol of wealth, which relates to the spiritual wealth that her pieces cultivate. With her focus on sculpting Asian American culture and showcasing the beauty of her heritage, she inspires self-love in Asian American youth, as well as other POC who can connect to her messages with similar life experiences. Though elaborate, expensive jewelry is often associated with superficiality, Chen's work contradicts this idea by going beyond aesthetics and bringing to light the aspects of Chinese American culture that aren't usually shared. On top of that, the craftsmanship of her work inherently subverts the cheapening of Asian cultures so prevalent in the US. Chen uses expensive, high quality materials to craft her jewelry, with each piece individually handmade by herself. As a Chinese American woman creating quality commercial pieces, she challenges the common association of "Chinese" with images of exploitative, cheap mass production such as sweatshops and factories. Chen often satirically counters this association by referring to both herself and her art as "Made in Chinese America," referencing "Made in China" product labels. Most importantly, however, jewelry at its core symbolizes self-expression and making oneself visible.



Through her work, Ada Chen not only makes herself visible, but she illuminates the experiences of Asian Americans across the country. An Asian American myself, I was blind to how much value was held in my own cultures, no matter how much my parents reminded me -- and as a result, I resented myself for many of my most formative years. I've lost both of my ancestral languages, Teochew Chinese and Vietnamese. I feel so much guilt and heartache every day for letting that happen. Even now that my mindset has changed so drastically, the years upon years of repression and aversion to my languages and cultures is a hard habit to break, and a deep wound to heal. My damaged relationship with my ethnic and cultural identities, however, is not unique to me; in fact, it's representative of a fundamental way in which white supremacy functions. This internalized hatred for one's own heritage comes as a result of the dominant (white American) culture continually devaluing marginalized peoples by silencing their voices and erasing their spaces. And as POC, these structural forces coerce us into embodying white supremacist ideals in order to survive. With Asian immigrants/Asian Americans in particular, assimilation has long been considered something to strive for in our history, and this idea has been passed down generationally. This is where the importance of Ada Chen's work comes in: it cultivates love and a deep healing for people like myself, whose relationships with their identities have been hurt by systemic inequities. Her art amplifies the complexities, the beauty, and the struggles of being Chinese American, validating our experiences and affirming that we belong in this country beyond racist caricatures portrayed in pop culture and media. Her narrative is a reminder that we collectively have the voice and the strength to confront the silence that invisibilizes our many identities. Today, I struggle to relearn the ancestral knowledge that I have forgotten and study the ancestral knowledge that I was never taught; but with the help of

pioneers like Chen, I'm now closer than ever to turning my past of internalized racism into growth and reconciliation.

### **Works Cited**

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