

Impact Statement

David Ha, Grade 11

***Sword of Justice*, 2025**

Acrylic, colored pencil, graphite, marker on paper, 18 x 24 inches

Independent Study, The Science Academy STEM Magnet, North Hollywood, CA

Unsung Hero: Corky Lee

Corky Lee, Chinese American civil rights activist and photographic journalist, was born on September 5, 1947, as the second child of his family. Unable to afford his own, Lee self-taught himself photography from borrowing cameras. His inspiration for photography began in middle school, when he viewed a photograph of a handful of white railroad workers celebrating the completion of the transcontinental railroad, which didn't reflect the thousands of Chinese immigrants employed. Lee knew from this moment that he wished to dedicate his life photographing truth, in order to combat racial inequality and stereotypes. Lee metaphorically compares his camera as a "sword against injustice," thus educating the world one photograph at a time, exploring the side of Asian American culture hidden from mainstream media.

Following the publication of his famous photograph (of a bloodied and innocent Peter Yew abused by police) in The New York Times, nearly 20,000 Chinatown community members marched to the street protesting to "End All Oppression!" Displayed on their signs in both Chinese and English, the community united together to combat the discrimination of the Chinese American community, in regards to employment, health, education, as well as any other social services for all minority groups as well as the working class. This influential photograph highlighting the power of photography to unite one another, is depicted in the top left of my drawing. I decided to include another photograph from the Peter Yew protests in the top right corner, symbolizing the diversity of age and racial groups involved in the cause for combating inequality. In the bottom left corner depicts Lee's photograph of Sikhs, protesting against anti-South Asian and anti-Muslim sentiment following 9/11. This photo shows a Sikh man, many of which were targets of post 9/11 hate crimes, draped in the American flag. Lee thus confronts this discrimination, reminding the viewer he as well is an American who grieves this tragedy with his nation, and also combatting the Islamophobia present in America, which especially spiked following 9/11.

In the middle of the bottom end of my drawing, depicts a partial photograph representing Lee's photograph at an opening-night picket of "Miss Saigon", a Broadway Musical infamous for its inaccurate portrayal of Asians and women, containing racist and sexist undertones; essentially doing "yellowface", white actors dressing and wearing stereotypical makeup to falsely represent Asian Americans. The sign reads "We are real, Miss Saigon is not" representing public disdain against false depictions of

the behaviors of women present in the Musical. Lee shows how he utilizes his gift for photography to inspire and unite people for activism against injustice and racial stereotypes.

Corky Lee unfortunately passed on the 27th of January 2021 from Covid-19 complications. Nonetheless, the legacy of young “Corky” Lee continues to inspire young photographers around the world to incite change, combat inequality, and challenge stereotypes. His photographs highlight the history of Asian Americans in the late 1900s till the early 2000s, from daily life to injustice; a significant and remarkable individual who not only should be recognized by the Asian American community, but also worldwide for his impact against inequality.

References:

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Genzlinger, N. (2021). *Corky Lee, who photographed Asian-American life, dies at 73*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes-com.translate.goog/2021/01/29/nyregion/corky-lee-dead-coronavirus.html>

Hsu, H. (2021, January 30). *Corky Lee’s photographs helped generations of Asian-Americans see themselves*. The New Yorker.
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Lee, J. (2025, February 2). *Corky Lee’s quest for “Photographic justice.”* CBS News.
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/corky-lee-photographic-justice/>