



Impact Statement

Danjun Gao, Grade 10

Photographic Justice, 2026

Acrylic, colored pencil, pen on paper, 30 x 22 inches

The Cambridge School of Dallas, Dallas, TX

Unsung Hero: Corky Lee

The Unsung Hero I chose is Corky Lee, a Chinese American photojournalist who dedicated his life to documenting Asian American history, activism, and everyday life. I first noticed his name because we share the same identity as Asian Americans, and as I learned more about him, I was deeply impressed by the persistence in his career and his deep belief in justice. Starting in the 1970s, Corky Lee chose a camera as his tool for social change. He described his camera as a sword against injustice and quickly began documenting, highlighting, and advocating for the Asian American community. He called himself the “undisputed unofficial Asian American photographer,” a title that reflects both his awareness and acceptance that his important work would likely go unrecognized. This selflessness and the passion Lee had for his mission inspire me to connect more deeply with his beliefs and to see that the essence of artistic expression is to speak from the heart for those who cannot speak and to stand up for the rights of those who cannot stand.

Corky Lee’s impact comes from his role as what he called a “photographic justice” advocate. For over five decades, he documented protests, cultural festivals, community gatherings, and political movements within Asian American communities. His work allowed American society, and even the wider world, to learn about these cultures, to hear their voices and perspectives, and to recognize their humanity. One of his most well-known works is a recreation of a historical photograph of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. In the original image, Chinese workers who made up the majority of the labor force were excluded. Decades later, Corky Lee staged a new photograph placing the descendants of those Chinese railroad workers where they rightfully belonged, correcting the historical record. This act was not only artistic but also political: it challenged erasure and reclaimed visibility. Through thousands of photographs, Lee preserved moments that might otherwise have disappeared, including events such as protests against racist violence, celebrations of immigrant culture, and milestones in civil rights movements. His archive has become an essential resource for understanding Asian American history, as without his work, many of these stories would have remained undocumented. In this way, Corky Lee did not simply record history but actively shaped how future generations would understand it.

My artwork is a painting created on Bristol board. I chose acrylic as my primary medium because of its thick, firm texture and its ability to produce strong, vivid colors. Just as acrylic produces bold and layered results, the history captured through Corky Lee’s camera is rich, complex, and powerful. At the center of my composition, I placed a large camera representing

the essential tool Lee used in his pursuit of photographic justice. Within the lens of the camera, I painted a half-length portrait of Corky Lee himself. Because photographers often remain behind the camera and out of sight, I chose to bring him into focus, allowing this unsung hero and his contributions to be seen. Surrounding the central image, I included painted references to three of Lee's most significant photographs, illustrating moments of Asian American activism and community life. I also incorporated traditional Chinese elements, such as lion dances and lanterns, to emphasize cultural identity. The portrait of Corky Lee is the only colorful part of the painting, while the surrounding images are rendered in black and white, reflecting their origins as photographs. Behind Lee, I placed a red halo that gradually shifts from deep to lighter tones. This gradation in color suggests that Lee himself is the source of the vibrancy, symbolizing how his work brought visibility and voice to Asian American communities. Just as color radiates outward from him, his photography allowed the voices of Asian Americans to be seen and heard more clearly. His contributions played a major role in shaping the more visible and culturally rich present of Asian Americans today. Although he was not widely recognized during his lifetime, his impact establishes him as both a cultural and moral hero.

In the process of creating this artwork, I felt a profound sense of connection and gained a deeper understanding of Corky Lee's beliefs and mission. As this piece is soon to be featured in my school's art exhibition, it is my sincere hope to share the story and convictions of this "Unsung Hero" with a wider audience, whether they be friends and family in my immediate circle or those reached through online platforms. Lee's actions have impressed upon me a profound truth: the power inherent in art often transcends the loudest verbal outcry. His photography reveals the truth and champions justice; through the sheer impact of a silent, frozen moment, he exerted a profound influence on history. Where voices cannot reach, or where language barriers persist, art steps forward to tell stories in its own unique way. I also hope that my work will inspire others to pay attention to the figures who have shaped our world—figures who are all too often overlooked by the public. Furthermore, I hope it encourages people to follow in the footsteps of these pioneers and by standing on the shoulders of giants to work together to create a better world. The spiritual legacy left behind by Corky Lee has taught me that history is not a static, immutable entity; rather, it is something that can be examined, corrected, and most importantly, continually enriched and expanded. It is my heartfelt wish that, whether through his photographs or my own artistic endeavors, I may contribute, however modestly, to this ever-evolving historical narrative.

References:

Lee, Corky. Corky Lee's Asian America. Clarkson Potter, 9 Apr. 2024.
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/dear-corky/32905/>