Little noticed, Filipino Americans are dying of COVID-19 at an alarming rate - *Los Angeles Times*

USC professor Adrian De Leon, in front of a mural in L.A.'s Filipinotown, is looking at ways the pandemic affects Americans across racial and socioeconomic lines. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

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On March 10, Loretta Mendoza Dionisio became the first person in Los Angeles County known to have died of COVID-19.

Dionisio was 68, had diabetes and had just returned from a trip to her native Philippines. That made her a precursor of the coming pandemic in more ways than one.

For a variety of reasons, Filipino Americans have been hit hard by the novel coronavirus. People with roots in the Philippines account for about one-quarter of the Asian Americans in California, yet data compiled by The Times show that Filipino Americans account for at least 35% of COVID-19 deaths in the state's Asian population.

Of 48 Filipino Americans known to have been infected with COVID-19 in Southern California, 19 have died, according to the Philippine Consulate General of Los Angeles. Although the data may be skewed by a small sample size, this puts Filipino Americans at a 40% mortality rate,

significantly higher than the overall 3.7% mortality rate in the U.S., according to research by Johns Hopkins.

Data compiled by The Times have shown that preexisting health conditions and occupational hazards are among factors that contribute to the high number of Filipino American deaths during the pandemic. Most of those who died were older than 60, and many had diabetes and hypertension. Many were retired, living in multigenerational housing with their children or in nursing homes. Younger victims worked essential jobs, providing healthcare, working in law enforcement and at grocery stores.

Although the death rate among Asian Americans is about proportional to their share of the population, studies show health and socioeconomic disparities in the Filipino American community may be causing more severe cases of infection. A March 30 report from the UC Davis Bulosan Center for Filipinx Studies listed undocumented status, exposure for health workers, poverty and economic insecurity, preexisting respiratory conditions and lack of health insurance as factors that made Filipino Americans more at risk.

“It’s the perfect storm,” said Adrian De Leon, an assistant professor in USC’s department of American studies and ethnicity. “In terms of exposure to the pandemic, exposure to the virus, but also exposure to a lot of other factors, too — like dense housing tends to be in places that have environmental hazards.”

Black and Latino Americans also have alarmingly high mortality rates, and as more data are released, it has become clear to researchers that coronavirus affects racial groups differently. But the California Department of Public Health does not report ethnicity by Asian subgroups, which makes it difficult to identify more data from Filipino Americans. “Using ‘Asian American’ as an overarching label obscures a lot of the inequalities within and among communities,” De Leon said.

According to Dr. Melinda Bender, who specializes in health intervention work for Filipino Americans at San Francisco State University, Filipinos have relatively high rates of obesity, high blood pressure and heart disease, all of which are associated with more serious cases of COVID-19.

“People think that Asians as a whole are pretty healthy,” said Bender, who is Filipina. “But in fact, we are all very different in how we are represented in chronic disease.”

“Filipinos,” she added, “have the highest sedentary behavior of Asian Americans, and the Filipino diet is high in fat. All of these factors put Filipinos at risk.”

Bender also said that asthma was prevalent in the Filipino population in the United States, which would affect susceptibility to a respiratory infection like the coronavirus.

Another factor: In California, almost a fifth of registered nurses are Filipino, putting them at greater risk while on the frontlines in hospitals and nursing homes. They also tend to work in the ICU, acute care and surgical units, where COVID-19 patients are treated. This combination of working essential jobs while having underlying health conditions increases the risk of contracting more serious infections of COVID-19.

“People in certain ethnic groups are predisposed to working really hard — and they’re ‘heroes’ or things like that, which is an Asian American stereotype — but it’s more so because people need to continue to work in order to survive,” De Leon, who is Filipino Canadian, said. “In a country that has such weak social security, such as the United States, you have people ultimately sacrificing much-needed healthcare for themselves for the opportunity to work and continue to make money for the family.”

The high number of Filipino Americans in healthcare goes back to the United States’ colonial history in the Philippines. Medical education in the Philippines was modeled after the American medical education system. When there was a shortage of nurses in the United States in the 1960s, it was easy for American hospitals to recruit Filipino nurses who had learned nursing the American way.

“It’s a colonial relationship that reinforces the U.S. dependence on foreign labor,” Dr. Maria Rosario Araneta, a Filipina American who is a professor in the department of family medicine and public health at UC San Diego School of Medicine.

In the Midwest, the Filipino Consulate in Chicago tracked 17 Filipino American deaths. Half of the victims had been working in healthcare. “Nursing intrinsically requires being in close quarters with patients, and there is no way you can do six-feet social distancing,” said Dr. VJ Periyakoil, the director at the Stanford Aging and Ethnogeriatrics Research Center, which examines ethnicity and health.

According to Periyakoil, socioeconomic conditions are a big risk factor for Filipinos. “If you’re poor, your housing circumstances are going to be quite limited; there will be more people sharing the same space; you’ll be working on daily-wage or low-paying jobs, which require you to go into work,” she said. “When you’re forced to go into work, forced to be in contact, forced to take public transport, the nature of your finances imposes certain realities and restrictions on your daily life that put you at risk for higher stress and infections including COVID.”

Several generations of a Filipino family might live under the same roof, which can lead to difficulties isolating sick family members.

Dulce Amor Aguilo is among Filipino Americans to have died of COVID-19.(Family photo)

Dulce Amor Aguilo, a 55-year-old caregiver from San Jose, died of complications from COVID-19 on April 19. Although she was not working at the time, she was receiving dialysis for end-stage renal disease and also had type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and hyperlipidemia.

The family is unsure how Aguilo contracted the virus, but she began exhibiting symptoms three days after her last dialysis treatment. In the small, two-bedroom home in a retirement community she shared with her parents and sister, her mom would wear a mask and try to take care of her as best as she could.

But when Aguilo began having shortness of breath and fever, she was sent to the hospital. Ten days later, she died. "For Filipinos who already have these co-morbidities, this puts them at higher risk when they contract COVID-19," Bender said.

According to Aguilo's mother, Dalisay, diabetes is common in her side of the family, and all her children had it, as well as her mom. Her oldest daughter, Pamela, is also on dialysis.

Bender's work focuses on creating preventive measures to lower Filipino Americans' risk of developing chronic diseases. "There are a lot of cultural factors that go into why they have a lifestyle like this, and we're trying to make lifestyle changes such as helping them be able to

cook Filipino dishes in a healthier way," she said. "These are lifestyle-related chronic diseases that are preventable."

More research needs to be done to address the disparities within the Asian American community. A research brief published on Health Affairs reported that Asian Americans appeared to have a fatality rate from COVID-19 four times higher than that of the overall population. The article noted, however, that this result could be due to inadequate data on Asian Americans, and lack of standardization on the ethnicities counted as Asian American. Recently, Pacific Islanders have been found to suffer the highest infection rate of any racial or ethnic group in Los Angeles County, but the data remain limited.

Dr. Tung Nguyen, endowed chair in general internal medicine and professor of medicine at UC San Francisco, co-authored the article. He said disaggregating data on Asian Americans was one of the first steps to addressing health disparities among communities of color. "At best, it should be disaggregated by Asian American national origin group, and primary language," Nguyen said. "And then they should also invest efforts in collecting data so that there is a minimum amount of unknowns, because it is really hard to clarify disparities when there's a big group of people who we don't know anything about at all."

"The lack of investment," said UC San Diego professor Araneta, "the invisibility of health issues in the Asian community, is something that I'm hopeful [we can expose]. … We can't continue being invisible. We contribute meaningfully, financially, professionally to the growth of this country but remain invisible."

Hobo and Dreamer: A homeless man and his dog hoped to finally go home. Then COVID-19 arrived - ***Los Angeles Times***

Hobo and Dreamer in the park with chaplain Kathy Davis. (Deborah Barnes)

Published on July 28, 2020

Leland "Hobo" Goodsell might have just been another homeless man on the streets of Goleta, Calif., but he had gained something of a reputation over the 14 years he'd lived there.

His dog, Dreamer, might have had something to do with it.

Or it could have been the 946 citations he received for living on the streets. But no matter what, he was easily able to charm passersby into becoming friends.

It was his coy attitude and sense of humor that drew Goleta resident and lawyer Gabriela Ferreira to Hobo.

Ferreira would always do her best to give to the homeless, so when she spotted Hobo after attending a barbecue, her first instinct was to ask if he needed any food. He chose ribs from a restaurant across the street and insisted she join him for dinner.

“He was always pushing the limits,” she said. But they enjoyed a meal together on the outside patio of the restaurant and soon became friends. Since that first encounter, Ferreira would buy many meals for Hobo, let him live in her backyard and even paid for a year of motel stays when he was involved in a lawsuit, which he paid back in full when he settled the case.

It was an unlikely friendship and Hobo didn’t take it for granted. “Why do you do this for me?” he would ask. “I’m such a pain in the neck.”

“I don’t know why,” Ferreira would reply. “But I love you, so I’m going to keep doing it.”

Hobo was dropped off at an orphanage with his two sisters in Missoula, Mont., when he was 3. He was only 11 when he jumped a train and headed west. The other train hoppers all called him the “Littlest Hobo.” The name stuck, and he would correct anyone who called him by his birth name. “Don’t call me Leland! I’m a hobo and I’m proud of it,” he would say indignantly.

Once in California, he found work laying pipes, construction jobs, auto repair and building malls. He married twice. In Yreka, Calif., he ran a recycling business with his wife and son.

After losing his wife to pancreatic cancer and his son to a heroin overdose in the same week, Hobo and Dreamer packed up and left town. They lived for awhile in Santa Cruz before thumbing down the coast, landing in Santa Barbara. He decided they would stay.

Once, he bought an old motorboat and ended up stranded in the middle of the harbor for days, with no food or water or way back to shore. The harbor patrol finally rescued him after a friend reported him missing.

“The whole thing was just a desire to be housed again, and to have a place to call his own,” said his friend Deborah Barnes, an outreach worker who ran an advocacy group for the homeless. “He is a cowboy, not a swimmer. It was a foolish plan.”

A Labrador-ridgeback mix, Dreamer was the only family Hobo had left, and it was a miracle the two had lived so long. They had endured attacks by unwelcoming neighbors and street gangs and survived a serious accident with a gas tanker truck that split Hobo’s head and broke his leg. Hobo was never the same after that.

Hobo reunited with Dreamer after four months apart while Hobo dealt with surgery. (Deborah Barnes)

Hobo was friendly with a sharp sense of humor and a twinkle in his eye, which struck Barnes as an unusual source of positivity.

“When you serve in the street, there’s a lot of sadness and a lot of tension for people just trying to exist each hour of each day, especially the mentally ill,” she said. “But Hobo had a way of lightening everything up with his jokes.”

One day as Barnes was bringing sleeping bags, clothing and other necessities for her street friends, Hobo took his bicycle and dog cart to save a parking space for her arrival, and made a sign for her table that read “the doctor is in.” When she left the table to serve the evening meal to the long line, he replaced it with, “the doctor is out.”

He was also helpful with his mechanical skills, repairing bicycles and wheelchairs for other homeless people. “He created and repaired anything with chewing gum and string,” Barnes said. “Always helpful and always paid a person back. He expected that of his cronies too.”

Although his outreach friends provided for him on occasion, he always checked in on them too. His nearly daily calls started with, “Hey sis, this is your Hobo, and has anyone told you ‘I love you’ today?” he would ask Barnes. “Well, there you go. I just did.”

But alcohol brought out a different side and often interfered in his relationships. “He would go through phases where you’re the best person ever in his life, and then he hates you, and then he goes to the next one,” Ferreira said.

Barnes helped him into several rehab clinics, but he always relapsed. His alcoholism, combined with the lingering effects of the accident, made him even more belligerent. When he couldn't, Barnes and Ferreira would take care of Dreamer.

After the accident, Ferreira's colleague helped Hobo with a lawsuit, but he never stayed sober long enough to go to court, so they settled the case. Barnes attempted to get him into housing for years, but he was resistant, especially with places that wouldn't allow dogs.

"It was the most awful situation," Ferreira said. "He had money, but he couldn't have housing."

Hobo had a desire to return home in the last two years of his life. Montana was beckoning. "Dreamer needs to see where I came from," Hobo would say.

Barnes and the Santa Barbara Police Department tried to help Hobo get back to Missoula to see his last living sister, and one police officer even arranged to drive him, as a favor. But Montana's cold held Hobo back — living in a wheelchair in snow was not optimal.

He never would make it back to Missoula alive.

Hobo eventually bought an old 1987 Ford truck to sleep in during the rainy season, and to keep safe from late-night attackers. Goleta sheriff's deputies overlooked city rules on moving vehicles every 36 hours so he could keep it parked, and ignored the fact he didn't have a license.

The last time Barnes or Ferreira saw Hobo was in March, before the state went on lockdown. When he got sick, it was difficult for them to help. He refused to go to a hospital for fear of leaving Dreamer behind.

Instead, another man, Tino, took care of Hobo, cleaning his truck, walking Dreamer and bringing food to him. He checked on him daily until Hobo finally agreed to go to the hospital. "Tino was his guardian angel," Barnes said.

He was already delirious by the time he went into the hospital. After five days in ICU, the doctors didn't understand what he was trying to communicate. Over the phone, Barnes told them, "Do me a favor, walk in there, and tell him 'Dreamer is fine. Dreamer is doing really well.'" He died April 4, an hour after they told him. He was 66, and the first COVID-19 death in south Santa Barbara County.

His ashes were returned to Montana, where his sister still lives. Dreamer now lives in Goleta with Tino. When Dreamer's time comes, his ashes will be reunited with his master's in Hobo's hometown.

Financial aid options limit international student diversity - *USC Annenberg Media*

Flags outside the Von KleinSmid Center. (Photo by Grace Manthe)

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For international students, getting financial aid is not easy. Thousands of first-year applicants to the University of Southern California compete for Trustee and Presidential merit scholarships, which are offered to students who apply early and compete for on-campus interviews.

Amy Huang is one of seven students from China to receive a full-tuition or half-tuition scholarship to USC in 2017.

"It was a relief because USC is so expensive compared to other schools, and it was a huge weight off of my family's shoulders because it was the first U.S. school I was accepted to," Huang said.

Huang was one of the more fortunate international admits that year, but still struggled to fill out the Financial Statement of Personal or Family Support, a government-required document

guaranteeing international students' ability to pay for the first year of tuition and living expenses in full.

"Usually in China we live a good life, but after you convert your annual income you realize you're not really well off in the States," she said.

Even completing the requirements to receive the scholarship was a challenge. According to the Office of Admission, travel reimbursement for scholarship finalists is half of air fare or $200, whichever is less.

While students taking domestic flights to USC for the on-campus interview are able to be reimbursed completely, that's not the case for international students.

"They email you at the end of January and you have a month to get your tickets for the interview. It's like bidding $1,300 on getting $13,000 per semester for the next four years," Huang said.

"Every effort is made to accommodate applicants who are unable to travel to campus for their interviews," said a representative from the Office of Admission in an email.

USC prides itself on having one of the most diverse student bodies in the country, with more than 10,000 international students in 2017. Of those, only about 2,500 were undergraduates, as reported in the 2017 International Enrollment Fact Sheet.

At USC, the majority of the student population is comprised of people of color, with international students making up 13 percent of the class of 2022, according to the first-year student profile. An October email from the office of the Dean of Admission stated, "About 10 percent of freshman international admits are offered a merit scholarship and about half of them end up enrolling."

USC led the nation in international students for 12 years in a row, and now has the second-highest international student population for an American university, just behind New York University, according to the Institute of International Education's Open Doors Report.

Annual cost of attendance at USC has risen to a whopping $74,825, which includes $55,320 tuition, during the 2018-2019 academic year making it one of the most expensive in the country. And for international students, the price tag is even higher with costs such as flight tickets. Although admissions are need-blind, international students are ineligible for government-funded scholarships, federal work-study and must receive authorization to work off-campus since they are not U.S. citizens or eligible non-citizens, according to the USC Financial Aid website.

"It's discouraging that there are so few scholarships available to international students," said Jay Goldstuck, a sophomore from South Africa majoring in film production. "My loans come from South Africa, and the exchange rate is really bad at the moment. I'll basically be paying my loans back with not only interest but also the exchange rate."

Goldstuck does not receive any financial aid from the university but receives free housing and a meal plan as a Resident Assistant.

"People assume that international students are wealthy, but that's not always the case. People like me put education above everything, so I'm willing to sacrifice my ability to be wealthy in order to get this education," Goldstuck said.

Ria Xi is a sophomore studying computer science from Beijing, China. She is also the Chair of Assembly Operations for the International Student Association.

"USC's resources are really limited — maybe only two students can get scholarships," she said.

According to the Office of Admissions, 20 admitted students from China were awarded merit scholarships in 2017. Seven were awarded Trustee or Presidential scholarships, which covers all tuition or half of tuition, respectively.

"The international student body is predominantly on the upper scale of the wealth distribution, so there is not much economic or class diversity in the international student population," Xi said. "But some are not as wealthy as you would think."

USC students have a 55 percent chance of moving from lower income levels in childhood to high income levels in adulthood, according to a study on economic diversity by The Upshot, a data-driven New York Times website about politics and policy. The study did not include international student data.

Even when an international student faces a life-changing event, they may not be eligible for assistance.

In 2017, Meng Ru, a USC student from China, was denied university financial aid after her father suffered a stroke. According to Annenberg Media, the USC Financial Aid Office suggested that as an international student, she look for loans instead, but according to the office's website, international students would need a credit-worthy United States citizen or permanent resident to act as co-borrower in order to secure a loan.

Without loans, Ru altered her course plan so that she can graduate in three years instead of four to ease the financial burden on her family.

"USC does a great job at advertising itself to international students, but once we're here they don't do anything to guarantee we have the best international experience," Goldstuck said.

In protesting Myanmar coup, young Myanmarese Americans find inspiration from past generations - *[NBC Asian America]*

Okkar Min Maung, second left, holds a sign that reads, "free our leaders" during a protest outside United Nations headquarters on Feb. 8, 2021. Courtesy Okkar Min Maung

Published Feb. 13, 2021

It was 5 a.m. Feb. 1 in Yangon, Myanmar, and Juna Ko Ko’s mother couldn’t sleep. Rumors of a military coup had been circulating all week. A few hours later, the internet shut down.

Ko Ko had been texting his mom that afternoon from his apartment in Tampa, Florida, when the news came through. Hours before Myanmar’s Parliament was set to convene and swear in the elected officials from the November 2020 election, the military had detained leaders from the National League for Democracy (NLD). This included President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.

“For me to be talking to my mom, and to have it cut off just like that … it’s a very intense feeling to be so helpless,” said the 22-year-old, who came to the United States for college.

Juna Ko Ko, 22, demonstrates the three-finger salute. Courtesy Juna Ko Ko

But despite the distance, Myanmarese communities in the U.S. have joined the worldwide civil disobedience movement to protest the military coup in the Southeast Asian nation. From the United Nations headquarters in New York to the U.N. Plaza in San Francisco to the streets of Washington, D.C., and soon, Orlando, thousands of Myanmarese Americans have protested the government takeover in the past two weeks. They're urging international peace organizations to demand the release of the NLD leaders and urging the military to recognize the results of the 2020 general election and restore the civilian government.

The NLD has held a majority since 2015, which was seen as a sign of progress toward a more democratic government in Myanmar, and had once again achieved a landslide win of parliamentary seats in the 2020 election. Despite this, the military alleged voter fraud and declared a yearlong state of emergency.

For many younger Myanmarese like Ko Ko, this was their first time joining the fight for democracy. Members of the 88 Generation — Burmese student protesters who had participated in a pro-democracy movement in 1988 — had stood up for the Burmese people time and time again. (Burma was the former name of Myanmar until 1989.) During the Saffron Revolution, caused by the military's removal of fuel subsidies in 2007, they had joined students and Buddhist monks to protest peacefully. "That's what makes it so heartbreaking—because there's so much progress being returned," Ko Ko said.

Despite the setbacks, many activists are still hopeful that this time, things will be different. "You've messed with the wrong generation," posters read. "We've been advised by the generations of the past to prevent confrontation," Ko Ko said. "And then we applied something that they hadn't really incorporated, which was social media."

During the first few days of the coup, the military had shut down the country's internet and blocked several social media sites. But with virtual private networks and SIM cards from Thailand that work on foreign telecoms, tech-savvy Myanmarese managed to flood their Facebook, Instagram and Twitter timelines with footage from protests inside the nation, memes and hashtags to communicate their fight to the rest of the world.

"What the international students, or people my age are doing right now is funneling information on what's happening in Myanmar to raise awareness about the atrocities that are happening in Myanmar," Ko Ko said.

The internet was restored Feb. 7, and the military itself had recognized the power of social media and tried to use it to justify the coup. On Thursday, Facebook announced that it would reduce the distribution of content and profiles run by the military in an attempt to limit the spread of misinformation. It also will suspend Myanmar government agencies from sending content-removal requests to Facebook through normal channels in order to protect the free speech of the Myanmarese online.

Okkar Min Maung, 35, an actor and model from Yangon who now lives in New York City, has posted frequently to share protest information and news inside Myanmar with his over 280,000 Facebook followers. A newly created civil disobedience movement page has over 244,000 followers as of Feb. 11.

"There is a new generation that's much more confident than before," said Magnus Fiskesjö, an associate professor of anthropology at Cornell University. "They are connected to everyone else [in the world] in a way that didn't happen before."

They also have the support of the 88 Generation. For older Myanmarese, the military takeover was yet another painful reminder of their country's struggle to achieve democracy. More than 30 years later, they have sprung into action against the military government again.

Khin Maw, 67, an activist who had been jailed for his participation in student demonstrations during his youth in Myanmar, attended a protest at the Myanmar Consulate in Los Angeles last week. He had last visited Myanmar in 2019, and had seen the progress of free speech and free elections. "The country was changing a lot, I was so happy," he said.

In America, Myanmarese immigrants have used their tight knit national network to garner support for the civil disobedience movement. Ko Ko Lay, a spokesperson for the Free Burma Action Committee—San Francisco chapter, has been involved in the Myanmarese American community since immigrating to the U.S. in 1992. "Today, after the military took power, we have only two groups: a small group of the military regime, who have all the power, and the rest are the people of Burma. Our fight is very clear," he said.

Ko Ko Lay, organizer and spokesperson for the Free Burma Action Committee--San Francisco, helps lead a protest at U.N. Plaza on Feb. 3, 2021. Courtesy Ko Ko Lay

When he was 27, Ko Lay served as secretary of information for the central executive committee of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front, an armed student group founded in response to the 1988 uprising. Now, he is working to get international aid for Myanmar.

On Feb. 9, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution introduced by the Free Burma Action Committee, condemning the coup and supporting a peaceful transition to democracy in Myanmar. It also called on the White House to take action against the military government.

The widespread support from Myanmarese Americans is exactly what their community wants to show the world, Khin Maw said. "If I have a voice to our people back there: We stand with you all the time. We, the people from outside of the country, we are with you, we'll help you always. And be brave."

88rising reconnects Asian Americans with heritage - *U.S.-China Today*

Crowds gather at 88rising's Head in the Clouds festival in 2019. Jake West / @jakewestphoto for 88rising

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When movie director Jon M. Chu wrote a letter to Coldplay, asking to use the song "Yellow" in his 2018 film "Crazy Rich Asians," he explained what reclaiming the word "yellow" meant to him as an Asian American: although the word is commonly used as a racial slur, in the song, "yellow" is used to describe beauty. And singer and songwriter Katherine Ho's sweet, lilting voice is nothing short of beautiful.

With Mandarin lyrics laid over a familiar Coldplay song of the same name, the song has become symbolic of the Asian American experience for some. As a Chinese American, Ho says, "The cultural hybridity of the song kind of represents what it means to be an Asian person living in America; a beautiful mix of both cultures."

Music by Asian artists, such as the music collective 88rising, has been a way for Asian Americans, including Ho, to reconnect with their heritage. Formerly known as CXSHXNLY, the New York-based mass media company has been described by founder Sean Miyashiro as a "hybrid management, record label, video production, and marketing company." Its unique

position as a culture-based talent agency has allowed it to cultivate a brand that celebrates Asian heritage. The company's name comes from the symbol "88," which means "double luck" in Chinese culture.

Although Ho nearly gave up her dream of pursuing a music career because she "didn't really see a lot of Asian people going into the arts," that story is entirely different today. After becoming an overnight sensation with the release of "Yellow," Ho, now a junior studying biology at USC, found continued comfort and pride in her heritage through USC's East Asian a cappella group, Trogons, and derived inspiration from 88rising.

Since 2019, 88rising has been a way of connecting international and American members in Trogons, USC's East Asian a cappella group. With songs like "Midsummer Madness" — composed of half Chinese and half English lyrics — 88rising has been an important bridge in the group, and eventually, an important influence for Ho.

Even after the fame that "Yellow" brought her, Ho was still just a 20-year-old college student who loved listening to Taylor Swift in her dorm room. Although she had begun to establish her presence in pop music as a contestant on Season 10 of "The Voice" and attended A Cappella Academy — a singing camp founded by a former member of Grammy-winning a cappella group Pentatonix — three times, she was in the difficult process of rewriting her entire musical narrative.

"I want that Asian American identity part of myself to be interwoven into my music somehow," Ho said. She began listening to more music by Asian artists, but struggled to figure out where exactly she fit in. To connect her heritage and music, Ho auditioned for Trogons after seeing their on-campus performance of 88rising members Higher Brothers and Phum Viphurit's "Lover Boy."

"I wanted to join Trogons because I kind of had this panic moment of like, 'Oh my gosh, I am such a bad Asian American,'" Ho said. "I don't know anything about Asian culture, and I've kind of just been whitewashed my whole life."

After joining the group, she fell more in love with 88rising's music and message. "'Midsummer Madness' was my first song that I really fell in love with after I learned that we were going to do it for Trogons," Ho said. "I thought it was such a bop, first of all, but I also thought it was so cool that there were those Chinese rap sections, and it was so cool to see this pop song that I definitely would have loved in high school and love now too, but it was by Asian artists." Ho sang the English chorus of the song in performances with Trogons last semester, while other members took up the English and Chinese rap verses.

For many Asian Americans, 88rising is the first time they have seen themselves represented in mainstream music. The company brings together Chengdu-based hip-hop group Higher Brothers, Indonesian rapper Rich Brian and K-pop star Jackson Wang. While all of 88rising's artists are

Asian, artist manager Ollie Zhang says “identity is an unspoken part” of the artists’ brands. “It’s definitely something that binds us together and we want to continue to promote that, but we don’t necessarily have to speak on it all the time, because it’s apparent,” he said.

88rising’s success has proved that Asian artists can also make huge breakthroughs in the popular music industry. In 2018, 88rising artist Joji became the first Asian-born artist to top the Billboard Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart with his debut studio album “BALLADS 1.” In January this year, 88rising announced their own special stage at Coachella, “Double Happiness,” where fan favorites like Rich Brian, Niki and Joji would be performing. “[Rich Brian] toured North America twice and has done several European tours, Australian tours,” Zhang said. “He’s put in the work ethic of a touring artist and proven that he deserves that spot to be at Coachella.”

Indonesian rapper Rich Brian takes the stage at the second Head in the Clouds festival in Los Angeles State Historic Park. Photo by Jake West / @jakewestphoto

Searching for roots and seeking the soul

Many college a cappella groups, including USC’s Asli Baat, mash up popular songs from their native countries with American songs, bringing the artistic creations to big competitions like the International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella. Some groups perform 88rising songs as a

way to show that mainstream pop can come from Asian artists and also appeal to American and Asian crowds.

Aaron Sha serves as the vice president of USC Trogons, arranged “Lover Boy” and “Midsummer Madness” as a way to introduce Chinese-English fusion music into the repertoire, after observing South Asian a cappella groups like Penn Masala at the University of Pennsylvania.

“I think in a way that’s what 88rising is trying to do, they try to bring this kind of taste of their culture into the American mainstream by kind of fusing it through music,” Sha says. “Obviously pushing the Asian narrative is good, but I think for them pushing the music narrative is more important.”

Cultural identity is at once at the forefront of and separate from 88rising’s music. “I think they were just lucky in general. They kind of found themselves in the age where like, being Asian American isn’t looked down upon anymore,” Sha noted. “88rising just kind of fit into this wave of Asian American influence with ‘Crazy Rich Asians’ and ‘The Farewell’ in Hollywood getting a lot of press too.”

88rising founder Sean Miyashiro has a knack for catching on to trends early. “Sean also has a great intuition for identifying talent that stands apart from the crowd,” Ollie Zhang wrote in an email. Although Miyashiro is the CEO of the company, he also serves as each artist’s primary manager.

Indonesian rapper Rich Brian gained popularity in 2016, a year after the company was founded, after they released a video of famous rappers’ reactions to his breakout song “Dat $tick.” In the four-minute video, which has gained over 21 million views, Desiigner, 21 Savage, Tory Lanez and more deemed the then-16-year-old rapper “the hardest of all time.”

Now one of 88rising’s biggest artists, Rich Brian’s second studio album “The Sailor” was more directly tied to cultural themes, and even features a song titled “Yellow” for similar reasons as Ho’s. “He and Sean decided to make that album speak very directly about his experience as an immigrant to the U.S. and talk about his Asian identity and talk about what he wants to represent to other Asian immigrants around the world,” Zhang said.

The advent of “Head in the Clouds,” 88rising’s own music festival, has gained the clout of Coachella in the Asian community. For Asian Americans, seeing people from the same backgrounds on big stages like Coachella and in their own sold-out festival is unprecedented and inspiring. Sha attended the festival both years since its inception, and said they “nailed it on the head.”

“Something that really impresses me [about 88rising founder Sean Miyashiro] is his marketing abilities. He jumped on the TikTok train a couple months before it really blew up, and he got ‘Indigo’ and ‘Midsummer Madness’ really popular on that platform,” Sha said. 88rising’s

presence on up-and-coming social media platforms like TikTok supplement their fan interactions on Twitter and Instagram.

Making an impact and inspiring a generation

Although "Asianness" isn't always the focus of 88rising's music, it plays a big role in their branding. Previously, the company collaborated with San Francisco-based milk tea chain Boba Guys for a special "Head in the Clouds" drink and merchandise in the month leading up to the festival. And at the second Head in the Clouds festival, popular foodie event 626 Night Market brought Asian food vendors to the scene.

The company has also taken more direct measures to support the Asian community. In early May, 88rising hosted a five-hour online concert called "Asia Rising Forever" in celebration of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. Hosted by rapper Dumbfoundead and featuring Asian artists including Keshi, mxmtoon, beabadoobe and LOONA, the concert raised over $28,000 for Asian Americans Advancing Justice, a nonprofit dedicated to achieving equal rights for Asian Americans. Although the event was announced only a week in advance, over 3 million viewers around the world tuned into the livestream, which was hosted on YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook and Twitch.

NIKI performs at Head in the Clouds festival in 2019. Photo by Jake West / @jakewestphoto

A moment from the second Head in the Clouds festival captured the purpose of the benefit concert, and was replayed during the livestream. During her set, Indonesian singer NIKI said to the crowd, “As an Asian female, I do not take this day and this stage for granted. My hope is that above everything else today, that you feel heard, you feel understood, but most of all that you feel represented.” She opened her set with the Indonesian national anthem, in honor of its independence day.

21-year-old NIKI is only six months older than Ho, and is Ho’s favorite act from 88rising. She is best known for her soulful songs about love and relationships, like “I Like U,” “lowkey” and “La La Lost You.” Ho called NIKI “one of [her] biggest role models,” saying, “she holds the torch of representing Asian and Asian Americans too, but her music isn’t necessarily about like, ‘look at me I’m Asian American,’ it’s just music that everyone can enjoy.

“Because of my song ‘Yellow,’ people kind of think that I am part of the whole Asian American wave of music and I think they kind of expect me to put out stuff that’s in Mandarin or have original music in Mandarin,” Ho said. “I don’t really know what to do with it, because I don’t want to totally ignore ‘Yellow’ [and] do my own thing either. But at the same time, I don’t want it to prevent me from creating art I want to create, too.”

Finding the balance between honoring her heritage and making the music she meant to create can be a struggle. But a year after “Crazy Rich Asians,” Ho took a leap of faith and released her debut single “Bellyaches,” a heartfelt pop love letter to her closest supporters. Next, her voice will appear on the original soundtrack for “Let’s Eat,” an animated short film about a Chinese American mother and daughter.

Katherine Ho in the recording studio. Courtesy of Katherine Ho.

“As long as I’m true to myself and I create art that I’m happy with, then I don’t need to worry too much about crafting this image of myself as being an Asian American artist,” Ho said. Much like 88rising, she wants her music to be the focus rather than her culture.

With its diverse group of powerful solo artists including Rich Brian, Joji and NIKI and strong marketing presence, 88rising has demonstrated how blending Asian and Western music, style and language can still create hits on the radio. Through and through, 88rising’s artists have proved that they deserve their spot on the charts while still paying homage to their roots, inspiring a new generation of Asian artists, including Ho.

“After watching Crazy Rich Asians, singing this song and growing as a person in general since starting college, I truly have never been prouder in my life to be Asian American than I am now,” Ho said.

A long way from home: the coronavirus disrupts travel for students hoping to return home – *Annenberg Media*

The Dong family celebrated Chinese New Year in 2013. Sunny Dong, front row, second to the left, has not been home for the New Year for six years. (Courtesy of Sunny Dong)

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For USC junior Sunny Dong, Chinese New Year's Eve was meant for eating dumplings, playing mahjong and watching the CCTV New Year's Gala until midnight. It was the only time of year everyone in the family gathered together at her grandparents' house in Beijing. The celebrations would continue for two weeks, and students would get a whole month's break. "It's not a time when you would worry about anything else," Dong said.

The last time she celebrated Chinese New Year with her family was six years ago, before she left for high school in the United States. "I still miss it every year. I know my sister really misses me. It doesn't matter what I do with my friends over here -- it's just not the same," said Dong. But this year, it wasn't the same for her family back in Beijing, either.

"We only communicate with phones, but we don't visit each other," Sunny's father, Max Dong, said over a call on WeChat, the Chinese messaging app. Ever since the novel coronavirus broke out late last year, life in China has changed. From a near-complete shutdown of schools and

businesses to the new social norm of wearing face masks outside, the effects of the coronavirus could be felt in every region of China. To protect the older, more vulnerable, relatives from the coronavirus, Mr. Dong and his nine-year-old daughter, Zoe, held back on New Year's gatherings this year.

Max Dong and his daughter Zoe, 9, light up a sparkler in 2014.

Dong had planned to fly to Beijing to see her family for spring break. It would have been the first time she saw her family in almost a year. By the time her flight was canceled in early February, she already had concerns about her trip to China and whether she could return to the U.S. "I wouldn't have wanted to go, knowing that there were traveler's restrictions," Dong said.

She made plans for another spring break trip to Seattle, Washington, but that soon became an epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in the U.S. With both plans scrapped, she began to prepare for the imminent spread of the coronavirus and stock up on groceries and supplies. "[The coronavirus] is affecting other parts of the world much worse than it is affecting [the U.S.] now. But it's coming for us," Dong said.

Other students didn't see it this way. Many still planned to spend their spring breaks in countries like Spain and France, until President Trump announced a ban on travel from continental Europe, which he later expanded to include the United Kingdom and Ireland. "I understand that canceling plans is hard," Dong said. "I've had to do it twice. But it's not just about your personal belief that you can wash your hands often enough. You can't stop someone from coughing in your face."

Since the first known case in the U.S. appeared in late January, the coronavirus has been declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization. Several states, including California and Washington, have declared a state of emergency. But Dong thinks the U.S.'s response has been slow to contain the spread of disease, even following the mass outbreaks in other countries that had failed to control the spread of the coronavirus. "Even at this early stage, it's super important to stop it from being worse, like it did in China, in Italy, in Korea," Dong said. "I don't feel safe here, knowing that people aren't really doing anything about it, knowing that people who need to be tested can't do so because testing kits aren't available from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]."

Dong's father agreed. "I think Beijing is safer than L.A.," he said, noting the government's quick stop to domestic travel and surveillance capabilities for tracking patients, "but traveling is high-risk. Even if she could get a ticket, I don't recommend Sunny come back."

Despite news of the virus breaking out over Chinese New Year, families continued traveling in China to celebrate together, even coming from abroad. "That was the scariest thing of all, to wait until after [New Year's] was over to see which people who went home to their city, their village, and brought the virus home with them," Dong said. Later, China would impose a strict lockdown across the country to contain the spread of the virus.

In China, wearing a face mask is common courtesy when in public places. However, in the U.S., face masks are not a recommended form of prevention. With Beijing on lockdown, and masks out of stock in commercial pharmacies in the U.S., Dong's father offered to send the remaining eight N-95 masks to his daughter. "My dad is very adamant on sending those face masks," she said. "But I think they need them more than I do." Still, he insisted on shipping them, although tracking updates stopped after the package arrived at an international mail station in Beijing.

Since attending boarding school in Birmingham, Alabama, Dong relied on WeChat to keep in touch with her family. But being away at school, she lost touch with some of her relatives. News of the coronavirus has helped her reconnect with her family across the world, she said. But it also reminds her of the distance between them, and how long it's been since she was last home. "Now that I'm communicating with my family a lot more, with people other than my dad, who I sometimes speak English to, I'm struggling to find the words to say what I want to say [in Chinese]," Dong said. "The only time I ever use [Chinese] is when I read coronavirus news."

"I don't trust my family to tell me everything," Dong said. Earlier this year, her dad was outside for a few hours clearing snow so Zoe could practice volleyball. Over the next few days, he developed a fever. He didn't tell Dong until it had gone away. "It was just a normal cold, but hearing that was really hard. I'm sure he wouldn't even have wanted to let me know, which is

why I've had to make much more of an active effort to ask them about what's going on," Dong said.

Dr. Kelly Greco, Assistant Director of Outreach and Prevention Services at Keck, said that frequent communication with family can help forge the connection that can't be crossed by distance. "Be flexible and creative," Greco said. "If the choice is made for me where I can't be with [family], I need to create some structure on a daily basis… Having that time set will help in terms of something for me to look forward to, and knowing that I will get that connection and support from them," Greco said.

Even more, it is important to set intentional, open conversations, Greco suggested. "Family and friends make decisions without talking because they don't want to burden or stress someone out. But we know that for some people, not knowing stresses [them] out," Greco said.

The Dong family plays mahjong during a family gathering in 2017.

Spring break wasn't supposed to be this way. Dong had planned to introduce her boyfriend to her father, bring him to her favorite restaurants and show him around Beijing. Instead, she's holed up

inside her house just off-campus, spending her time cooking and trying to perfect a dalgona coffee.

For the time being, Dong doesn't know when she will be able to go home again. It might be this summer, or it could be the next year. A lot of things could change by then. Zoe will be older. Another New Year could pass. She looks sad as she talks about her favorite part of the holiday, how fireworks would go off the entire night, and every night after. "You could hear them when you're sleeping, you could hear them the next morning, and they'd gradually get quieter," Dong said. "But it was never annoying. It was just a part of the celebration."