

Emma Wong
Poetry Award
2022 Poul Anderson Writing Contest

American or Not

When this American blocks that elderly Asian woman on the street
Who is hobbling her way down the streets of Chinatown,
Carrying bags of fresh groceries
With a mask tucked over her face,
She already knows what he will say.

She has heard it many times these past two years.

This American can claim he's done his research
From his trusty chosen sources:
“Those peasants in China are back at it again,
Eating bats and anything that moves—
That dreadful virus lives on the skin of every Asian in our town.”

As he hovers over the woman's tiny figure
He *could* see the deep crinkles from where she smiles too often
As she lifts her grandkids off the ground, beaming with pride,
And the tough calluses on her hands
From working countless hours to support her family in this new country.

He *could* see her smooth, silver hair,
Newly trimmed at the salon a few blocks down.

But hatred blinds the American from this.

Instead, he spits on her.

She flinches back,
Raising her hands as she steps away.

“Go back to your country,” he shouts,
Jabbing his finger as she questions him in Chinese.

Language—so powerful, isn’t it?
It carries the stories of generations,
Its words tossed back and forth like ripe dates at a market,
Flowing together over centuries.

When the disturbed old woman forms those words of *-ers* and *-shis* and *-shens*,
She mouths the sounds of a thousand years,
Of a thousand stories and journeys through dozens of dynasties.
She knows hundreds, maybe thousands, more words than him,
More stories, more tales of Chang’e, the moon goddess;
Of the turmoil and epics and legends of China

And its beautiful mountains and monsoon-drenched soil.

But he won't listen to these stories.

Instead, he'll call her things like a "dog-eater" and a "superspreader."

He'll tell her again to go back to where she came from.

To go home.

What he will never know

Is that Hong Kong is no longer a home for people like her.

Her birthplace full of bustling highways and speeding subways,

Where the smell of *bolo bao*, delicious steamed pineapple buns, and *cha siu*, sweet roasted pork, permeated the narrow alleyways,

Where newspapers once proclaimed truth,

Is being crushed by the iron fist of authoritarianism.

She feels torn apart over who she is supposed to be.

Every day she turns on the small TV and sees a new incident where a woman just like her is knocked to the ground; kicked, beaten, shoved. Shot.

Every day she feels a shard of her certainty that she belongs here fall away:

She has lived in this country for decades now,

Working, serving, paying her taxes, raising her family.

This is her country.

She is as American as the attacker.

The old woman hurries past him now,
Shaking off the insults as best she can.

She is stronger than she looks,
Seasoned by years of an immigrant's struggle.

The traces of spit on her face are gone,
No scratches or scars left by his words.

Instead, there is just this woman,

American or not.

Completely whole, though a little frayed at the edges,

Completely worthy, though a bit tense these days,

And completely, undeniably, irrevocably

Human.