

**Promoting Equity and Inclusion Through Poetry: A Project to Empower Students to Speak  
Out Against Anti-Asian Discrimination**



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**Abstract**

This article presents a transformative project within the Intermediate Chinese Language Course at Boston University, which creatively addresses the surge in anti-Asian discrimination following the COVID-19 pandemic. By employing poetry as a tool for advocacy and empathy, students are empowered to voice their stand against injustice and support the Asian community. The article explores the purpose, implementation, and significance of the project, highlighting its impact on students' engagement and cultural awareness. Through collaboration, creative expression, and linguistic exploration, the initiative fosters an inclusive learning environment and exemplifies the potential of artistic means to advocate for marginalized communities and drive societal change.

*Keywords:* creative expression, diversity, inclusive learning, social justice

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about not only physical but also social and psychological challenges worldwide. Unfortunately, it has also led to a rise in anti-Asian incidents in the U.S., including bias, threats, violence, and hate crimes towards Asian and Asian American individuals. According to a report by Stop AAPI Hate, over 10,000 incidents have been reported since the pandemic began, and the number is still rising (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). These incidents pose a threat to the health and well-being of members of the Boston University (BU) community, which includes more than 30% Asian students (Boston University, 2021).

To address these issues and promote belonging and inclusion, the Intermediate Chinese Language Course at BU has implemented a project that encourages students to write poems in Chinese to speak up for Asian communities and stand in solidarity with them to stop anti-Asian discrimination.

This article aims to describe the project, its purpose, and significance, as well as its impact on the instructor's teaching and students' engagement and learning. Through creative expression, the project not only raises awareness about anti-Asian discrimination but also empowers students to take action against it. Additionally, it offers a platform for Asian and Asian American students to share their experiences and voices, which is essential for building a more inclusive and just society.

This article hopes to inspire other similar initiatives in support of marginalized communities and contribute to ongoing conversations on social justice and inclusion.

## **Project Description**

The Intermediate Chinese Language Course at Boston University aimed to help students explore the Chinese language and culture and develop cultural sensitivity and understanding. As

part of the course, students participated in a project that encouraged them to use their language skills to speak out against anti-Asian discrimination and support the Asian community.

Various literary genres provide excellent supplementary materials for teaching grammar and vocabulary (Khatib, Hossein, & Rahimi, 2012). These resources are not only useful for students but also help teachers create a more comprehensive learning experience that results in better learning outcomes. Arthur (1968) highlights that using novels, short stories, fables, poems, and plays for language teaching is valuable because it provides both a literary and language experience. Poetry explores human experiences and universal themes, which provides students with a platform to express their emotions and ideas. This enables them to engage personally in writing tasks, thereby aiding in the acquisition of a foreign language (Heath, 1996). In addition, using poetry as a creative medium can be a powerful tool to promote social justice and support inclusion and diversity. Poetry has been used to express social and political issues and to create a sense of solidarity among different communities. By encouraging students to use poetry to speak out against anti-Asian discrimination, the project at BU aimed to empower students to advocate for social change and promote empathy towards different cultures and backgrounds.

The project involved a workshop titled "Chinese Poetry of Hope and Healing: Reflections on Equality and Empathy". The workshop aimed to introduce students to the beauty and significance of Chinese poetry and inspire them to use poetry as a means of promoting empathy and social change. The workshop began with an introduction to the healing properties of Chinese language, and how Chinese poetry has been used as a form of therapy and self-expression for centuries. Students were then introduced to a range of Chinese poems. Through close reading and analysis of these works, students gained a deeper understanding of the emotions and values embedded in Chinese poetry and learned how to identify different poetic devices, such as

metaphor, simile, and repetition. In the second part of the workshop, students were given the opportunity to create their own works of poetry. The speaker guided students through a series of exercises designed to help them generate ideas, find the right words to express those ideas, and structure their works effectively. At the end of the workshop, students had the chance to participate in a sharing session where they read their works aloud to their peers. This session offered a supportive environment for students to share their creations and receive constructive feedback and encouragement.

Following the workshop, students were paired with a partner to work on a creative project together. The project focused on using poetry to support the Asian community and call for an end to anti-Asian discrimination. Students had the freedom to choose from a variety of formats for their creative poetic work, including a poster, hand-made artwork, a social media post, a photo with a message, a drawing with a description, a four-panel comic, a short poem, a short story, or another format approved by the teacher. By giving students the flexibility to choose their format, the project encouraged them to be creative and expressive while also allowing them to explore their individual strengths and interests.

Throughout the project, students were encouraged to work collaboratively with their partner and to engage in frequent discussions to exchange ideas and provide feedback. The collaborative aspect of the project promoted a sense of community and supported the core values of belonging and inclusion. In addition to working closely with their partner, students also received guidance and support from the instructor, who played a vital role in helping them refine their ideas and develop their creative work. The instructor provided students with feedback and suggestions throughout the project to help them explore new creative directions and build on their strengths.

At the end of the semester, students' works were gathered, published, and shared with the BU community and the public. To ensure that the works were accessible to a wider audience, English translations of each poem were provided. The resulting manuscript provided a powerful call to action, urging readers to persist in the fight against oppression and to foster a society that embraces inclusivity for all.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Project**

The purpose of the project was to use poetry to support and advocate for Asian community members in the face of anti-Asian discrimination and hate crimes that have risen drastically in the US since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The project aimed to give students a platform to express their opinions and feelings on this important issue, to call for an end to anti-Asian racism, and to support inclusive values at Boston University.

The project's significance to equity and inclusion is multifaceted. First, the project aligned with BU's vision to attract, support, and promote a wide variety of voices and backgrounds on campus. Through the project, the students demonstrated its commitment to standing with its Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities and promoting inclusivity and diversity.

Moreover, the project served as a powerful call to action for the broader community to come together to address the problem of anti-Asian discrimination with compassion and respect. The publication of the poems in a book format made the works accessible to a wider audience and furthered the message of unity and solidarity.

The project's significance also extended to the participating students. The project provided a unique opportunity for students to develop their artistic and linguistic skills while also promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Through their participation in the workshop and the

creative project, students gained a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of Chinese poetry and developed greater cultural awareness and sensitivity. By using poetry as a means to call for social justice and inclusivity, the project inspired students to make meaningful contributions to their communities and to society as a whole.

### **Reflections and Feedback**

The project offered a truly unique and enriching learning experience for the students, as it provided them with a fascinating opportunity to delve into the world of Chinese language and culture through the captivating medium of poetry. At the outset, many students found themselves faced with a noteworthy challenge—the task of expressing their ideas and emotions within the constraints of Chinese poetry, a realm they weren't accustomed to exploring creatively. Nevertheless, owing to the collaborative nature of the project and the guidance and support from the instructor, they were able to conquer this hurdle and embark on an incredible journey of growth.

The project's collaborative approach was pivotal in nurturing the students' language skills and fostering cultural awareness. Through working together, they exchanged insights, cultural nuances, and linguistic expertise, gaining a deeper appreciation of the subject matter and forming a strong bond within the class. The atmosphere of unity and support not only enhanced their language acquisition but also instilled a sense of belonging and community among the students.

It was heartening to witness the positive feedback from the students regarding the project's impact on their learning and engagement. In particular, the project provided a safe space for them to candidly express their thoughts and feelings about the social issues confronting the Asian community. It encouraged them to explore and embrace their own cultural identities and values, fostering a profound sense of self-awareness and pride.

Beyond language acquisition, the project had a transformative effect on the students' perception of the power of poetry. They discovered that through the medium of verse, they could effectively advocate for empathy and social change. This realization added an inspiring dimension to their learning journey, as they began to view language not merely as a tool for communication, but as a potent instrument for influencing hearts and minds.

## **Conclusion**

The creative project was a meaningful initiative that provided a platform for students to express their thoughts and feelings about the social issues affecting their community. By emphasizing the power of collaboration in promoting empathy, understanding, and social justice, the project not only fostered a more inclusive and compassionate learning environment, but also showcased the potential of using creative expression to support marginalized communities and drive social change.

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