

Echoes of the Subaltern Voice: Unraveling the Survival Story of My Ancestors

Lilly Curtis, 2026

I am writing to express my gratitude for the support of the Sarah A. Gessner '96 Memorial Fellowship, which has allowed me to make significant progress on my creative writing honors project, under the mentorship of Professor Brock Clarke. This summer, I was able to dedicate sustained time to developing my novel and completing a short story.

The inspiration for this novel emerged not only from that of my own experiences as an Asian American of an immigrant mother but from the stories my ancestors told me of our family's history. Drawing from oral interviews I conducted with relatives in Beijing and my academic study of Chinese diaspora literature, I constructed a bildungsroman of a young woman in contemporary Beijing, shedding a new light on the typically Eurocentric coming-of-age trope. In my studies in behavioral neuroscience, specifically in a lab that researches PTSD and anxiety, I incorporated the challenges of mental health and intergenerational trauma within my protagonist to portray mental health without shying away from its ugliness and pervasiveness. The culminating hybrid creative work serves to bridge history with the modern day, science with the humanities, and fiction with lived experience.

Over the course of the fellowship period, I continued interviewing family members to preserve their oral histories and used these narratives as inspiration for my fiction. I also engaged in close reading of relevant memoirs, novels, and critical texts to better understand the historical and cultural contexts that inform my writing. These texts include *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) by Ottessa Moshfegh, *Spider Eaters* (1997) by Rae Yang, *A Little Life* (2015) by Hanya Yanagihara, *Asian American Psychology and Psychotherapy* (2024) by Shin Shin Tang, and *Edinburgh* (2001) by Alexander Chee. Most importantly, I spent dedicated time drafting and revising my novel, in which I have written over 31,000 words. I estimate this to be about one-quarter of the completed manuscript. In addition to the major storyline of the novel, I have also completed a standalone short story centered on a sexual assault case, which I plan to incorporate into the larger narrative.

My work thus far has expanded to include depictions of immigration struggles with acceptance in a new country, the cross-cultural shifts between China and America in the context of a technologically dependent society, the trauma of sexual violence in adolescence, and contemporary issues of romance, relationships, and mental illness. These narratives are united by a focus on silence, stigma, and resilience within both Chinese and Asian American communities. It is my hope that this novel will not only contribute to Asian American literature but also support my future path as a physician. I believe that narrative—particularly stories of trauma, healing, and survival—has the power to foster empathy, validate marginalized experiences, and advocate for more holistic, individual based medical care. I look forward to carrying the project forward in my honors thesis and beyond.