

PRYTANEAN WOMEN'S HONOR SOCIETY

Prytanean 150 Years of Women at Berkeley History Research Project

Yueyi Che
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Introduction

The Prytanean Women's Honor Society was founded at the University of California, Berkeley in September 1901. Prytanean is the oldest women's honor society in the United States. In its 120 years of history, generations of Prytanean undergraduate students lived unique and colorful lives on the Berkeley campus, inherited traditions while bringing an innovative force to serve the university. Started by three bright young ladies, Prytanean now has over 2,500 alumnae. These amazing women demonstrate leadership and service through contributing long-lasting support for the university: establishing the University Health Service Tang Center; creating Ritter Hall, an all-women co-op student housing; aiding the establishment of women's physical education program; creating the Center of Continuing Education for Women; and establishing an annual Faculty Award for untenured women. Prytanean Alumnae have shown true Cal spirit, following their pledge of: "faith, service, and loyalty to the University of California."

In 2020-2021, UC Berkeley has celebrated the 150 Year of Women at Berkeley (150W). To recognize the significant contributions of Prytanean to the campus community, current Prytanean active members at Berkeley initiated an oral history project in spring 2020. Current Prytanean members interviewed and collected video and audio records of Prytanean alumnae, honorary members, and faculty award winners from the Class of 1950s to the Class of 2000s. These interviews not only provide insights into the lives of outstanding women student leaders at Berkeley from past decades, but also build on the Volumes I, II, and III of the Prytanean Oral Histories in Bancroft Library on Prytanean alumnae from 1901 to 1950s. This history project will continue to live on in the libraries at UC Berkeley after the 150W celebration to inspire more generations of young women to come.

References:

[Prytanean Alumnae History](#)
[Prytanean Alumnae Timeline: The First 100 Years](#)
[Prytanean Oral Histories](#)





Interview Analysis

by Yueyi Che

I started my Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program in January by reviewing the background of the Prytanean Women's Honor Society through literature and previous student research. In March, after preparing questions that will suit my research interested with my advisor Sheila, I conducted two interviews. After that, I spent a month processing and editing the interview transcripts, followed by summarizing and reflecting on the data. I am excited to share my interviewees' insights and my interpretations with you today.

I interviewed two Prytanean Alumnae, Dr. Phyllis Tien, and Ms. Anh Tran. I picked those two women because they are Asian American women, and as an Asian student, I am interested in learning about their experiences at Berkeley and Prytanean.


Dr. Tien is a Prytanean alumna and a graduate of the UC Berkeley Class of 1986 with a molecular biology degree and she grew up in Berkeley. Currently, she is a Professor of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF)). She also serves as the 2020-2021 Interim Prytanean Faculty Award Chair for the Prytanean Alumnae Chapter.


Ms. Tran is a Prytanean alumna and a graduate of the UC Berkeley Class of 2006. She double majored in Economics and Mass Communications with a minor in Education. She is a Vietnamese second-generation American and first-generation college student from Westminster, California. Currently, she is the Senior Director, Scholarships Administration, and Development at the Cal Alumni Association and the CFO for the Prytanean Alumnae Berkeley Chapter.

These two exemplary women have many common experiences, but first I want to discuss their differences.

The first difference between the two interviewees is their student activities. Phyllis Tien traveled with her father to Germany for 6 months before college and also traveled to China in the summer after her freshman year to visit colleges in China. Anh Tran was more involved in community service. She led her DeCal class on environmental justice, organized a student leadership symposium, and conducted three years of service-learning trips, including an Alternative Spring Break to help the rebuilding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Dr. Tien and Ms. Tran also faced different difficulties navigating their college career. Dr. Tien followed a meandering path for her academic focus: coming to Berkeley hoping to major in Classics, and ended up in molecular biology and later on, going to Harvard Medical School for global public health. In contrast, Ms. Tran spent time learning to embrace her identity, from finding social space on campus for her cultural background as Vietnamese American to academic interest groups such as those in environmental justice. When navigating those social spaces, Tran faced stereotypes such as the model minority myth. In New Orleans, she found herself being ignored by a White man when she was trying to help him rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. Anh Tran had to learn to speak up for herself and to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.





In Dr. Tien's days, 1986, she didn't see students of color in student leadership positions at Berkeley, while Ms. Tran, in 2006, saw a diverse group of students as student leaders. Phyllis Tien was more confident in traditionally less diverse social spaces like sororities because of her more privileged background, but Anh sought support more from her friends who share similar cultural backgrounds with her to have the courage to explore new resources on campus.

From Anh Tran's struggle applying to Prytanean, and Phyllis Tien's participation on campus, we can see that being an Asian woman is a very specific intersectional identity.

In our interview, we touched on Prytanean's selection process. Dr. Tien was being nominated through her sorority while Ms. Tran applied on her own. The switch from nomination to application opened up the opportunity for more diverse students to join and possibly led to the increasing diversity in Prytanean.

The third point is, both 2nd generation Asian American women expressed that they learned about Asian history for the first time at UC Berkeley, which had a profound influence on their career trajectory. This also reflects that their pre-college education in school was Eurocentric that outweighs the influence of their experience growing up in Asian families.

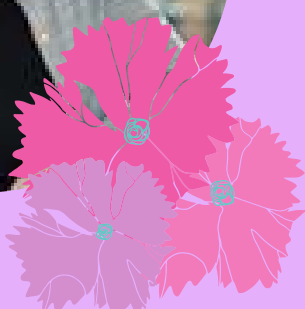
Last but not least, both women learned the power of giving back from their student experience at Berkeley and continue their service for the University and Prytanean till today. They are also generous with their time to interview with me and are very patient in reviewing the transcript and helping me with this presentation.

Main Takeaways From the Two Interviews

- Prytanean became more diverse but did not reflect the diversity of the student body, either in 1986 or in 2006.
 - Change in the Admissions process for Prytanean increased the diversity of the organization.
 - Minority students better explore campus resources when they have a support system from their peers of the same minority background.
 - I think Asian American history education in college is critical for individuals to learn about their own culture.
 - Intersectionality of female and Asian American experiences remains significant for students, both in 1986 and in 2006.
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Interviewee: Dr. Phyllis Tien
Prytanean alumnae. UC Berkeley
Class of 1986, majored molecular
biology.



Interviewer and Summary

Author: Yueyi Che.

Current Prytanean member. UC
Berkeley Class of 2022, majoring
in Geology with a minor in
Climate Science.



Abstract

Phyllis Tien is a Prytanean alumna and a graduate of the UC Berkeley Class of 1986. Currently, she is a Professor of Medicine in the Division of Infectious Diseases at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and a Staff Physician at the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center (SFVAMC). She also serves as the 2020-2021 Interim Prytanean Faculty Award Chair for the Prytanean Alumnae Chapter. In this interview, Dr. Tien recounted her journey of academic and student activity at Berkeley. She explained the impact of her summer trip to China after her freshman year through illustrative anecdotes. She shared her connection to the campus and Prytanean. From her perspective as a 2nd-generation Asian immigrant she provided a snapshot of the composition of student leadership and organizations in the 1980s.. Dr. Tien reflected on her cultural education growing up in the city of Berkeley and at UC Berkeley, as well as how she identified herself and worked with other students. Dr.Tien also discussed the nomination system of the Prytanean Honor Society in her era and how that affected the diversity in that organization. Dr. Tien’s experience deepens our understanding of the Berkeley campus student body in the 1980s.



Interview Transcript:

Date: Feb 22, 2021

Yueyi Che: Dr. Tien, can you introduce yourself?

Phyllis Tien: I grew up in Berkeley, went to Berkeley high school and UC Berkeley. Then finally I decided that I should see somewhere else. So I went to Harvard for two years and got a Master's degree there. I then came back to medical school at UC San Diego. After that, I went to Stanford to do my medical residency and fellowship, where I did a sub-specialty or postdoctoral fellowship in infectious diseases. Since I finished my training at Stanford, I've been at the University of California San Francisco as a faculty member for the last 2 decades. I feel so lucky that I've been able to stay in the Bay Area because I love the Bay Area.


I was at Cal from 1982 to 1986 as a molecular biology major. I was fairly active on campus. I joined Prytanean my final year and was president of the Honor Student's society. I was an officer in a Greek sorority. My recollection of Prytanean was that someone had to nominate you to be a part of the society; I don't remember filling anything out myself. Back then, to me, it was more of an honor to be selected as a member of Prytanean. I don't remember doing much in terms of activities at Prytanean. It wasn't like a club, it was like an honor. Recently when my daughter Alexandra joined Prytanean, they had their book that included the signature of all former initiates of Prytanean, and my daughter found my name on the book. The funny thing is that the person who signed on the same page as me was Carol Christ, the current Chancellor, as well as Elizabeth "Libby" Gardner who was then the wife of the President of the University of California system. In 1985, when I became part of Prytanean, both were also initiated into the Prytanean Society but as a faculty member or associate of the University. Back in 1985, I had no idea that Carol Christ would one day become the Chancellor. She was an English professor at that time.

YC: What was your experience as a woman at Cal?

PT: Honestly, I don't ever remember feeling any different being a woman. It could be because I was part of a sorority and was living with a group of women. I didn't feel like it was an issue in the clubs that I was a part of.

I think back in the 1980s there were fewer Asians on campus. I became very interested in my Chinese culture while I was at Berkeley. Because after my freshman year there, I went on a summer trip to China through a program with Jiaotong University. We visited the four Jiaotong Universities in China. It was a group of mostly college students but also some professional students from all across the US. There were medical students and law students in my program. We were all Chinese-Americans and some were also from Taiwan. We spent six weeks in China together and it really changed my life.





When I came back to Berkeley, I was excited to learn everything I could about Chinese culture. I started studying Chinese and realized that the Chinese program at Berkeley is amazing. I had some of the most amazing teachers that I think about even today. I made more Chinese friends because before going to Berkeley, I really did not have many Chinese friends. At Berkeley High, there weren't that many Chinese students. Only when you went to Berkeley, which was only a few blocks away from Berkeley High, did I notice more Chinese students, but not as many as there are today.

Many of my Chinese friends were from Taiwan. There were very few students from China at Berkeley from 1982 to 1986. Many of them were born in Taiwan and then they came to the United States when they were young kids. I think they were fairly Americanized. I do remember my friend from my pre-med courses who was Taiwanese from Taiwan and his parents had bought a house for him to stay in, so that he could attend high school in the US, and then go to Berkeley.

YC: Were there other Asian Prytaneans when you joined Prytanean?

PT: I think there were fewer Chinese or Asian students in general at Berkeley back then. There maybe were one or two Asians in Prytanean, but not many.

YC: Do you remember anyone in Prytanean that were People of Color?

PT: I can't think of any. I can barely remember the people in Prytanean and a lot of Prytaneans back in my day were a part of the Greek system. I was part of the Greek system. I think being nominated to become part of the society was really based upon the group that I associated with and their knowledge of my academic record. The Greek system was not very diverse. It sounds like they're doing a much better job now than back in my day.

When I went to the Prytanean alumnae event at University House in 2019 where they recognized the Prytanean faculty award winner, I met a lot of alumnae that were probably students during the 60s, the 70s, and they were all in sororities, even the same sorority that I was in. I was from the 1980s so that was really interesting.

YC: If any, what major world events most impacted your time at Cal?

PT: The event that I remember the most was the South Africa apartheid movement. Students really protested the University of California associations with South Africa and to divest from any interests there. People built little shanty towns at the campus, all around Sproul Hall.





YC: Had those student protests at Berkeley changed your view or your action?

PT: I don't think those protests specifically have changed me. But at Berkeley, you become much more aware of social issues around the globe. A lot of the work that I do today is motivated by wanting to improve the lives of socially marginalized and vulnerable populations. I don't know if it was because I had grown up in Berkeley or if it was the influence of being at the University for college that inspired my current work.

YC: Looking back, what advice would you give to your past self?

PT: Something that I really regret is that I wasn't more involved at Berkeley, like taking advantage of all the great people that come to the campus to speak. I wish I had done more of that.

YC: Are you involved with Prytanean at present?

PT: I am involved with Prytanean this year. I'm the Interim Prytanean Faculty Award Chair right now. I have been sending out the applications to eligible faculty members, and I have been filling their questions when they put in the application. Now we're organizing all the applications and putting together the review committee. The review committee includes alumnae, which would do the initial review and ranking. After that, it goes to a faculty review committee to do a more detailed vetting because of their knowledge of the UC Berkeley faculty situation.

Honestly, since graduation, I have not been involved with the Prytanean Alumnae group, until now. I did go to some of the meetings in the 1990s. What drew me to become more involved these past few years is because my daughter Alexandra is an active Prytanean. Her enthusiasm got me much more interested.

I went to a Prytanean brunch last year; you may not have been part of Prytanean at that point. It was hosted by my high school classmate who also went to Berkeley. She graduated in physics and her mother was also a Prytanean. So it was another mother-daughter Prytanean. That was a nice way to connect my Prytanean experience with my Cal experience, and also my high school experience.





YC: What is your favorite part about Prytanean?

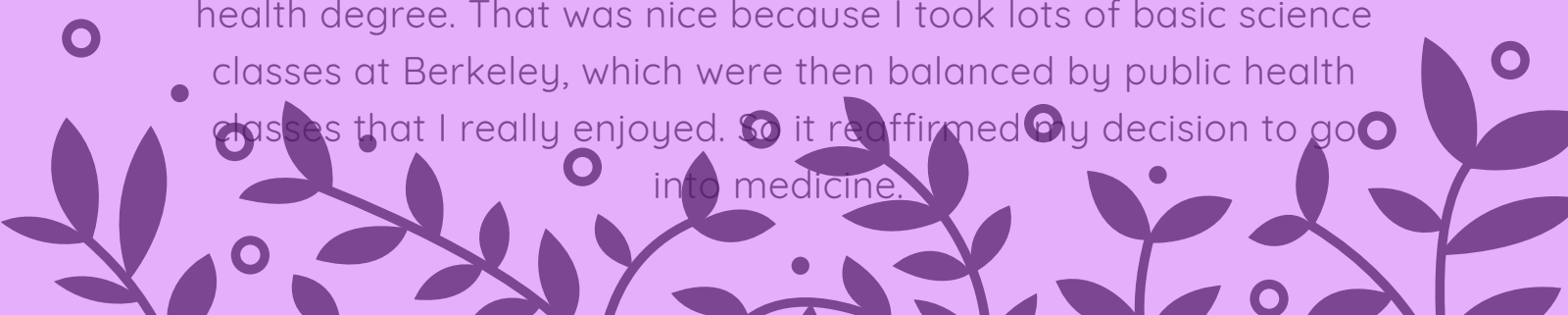
PT: For me, it was such an honor to be part of the Prytanean, but I didn't realize that it had a club function. I believe someone nominated me and then I got the acceptance letter and went to a special get-together in April. The gathering was a mix of Prytanean alumnae, faculty who were elected into Prytanean like Carol Christ and the undergraduates which was a nice opportunity to see life beyond being just a student at Cal. So I told my daughter Alexandra to learn about Prytanean and then she told me that by chance, many residents at Bowles Hall were active members of Prytanean. When I was part of Prytanean, I didn't think you could join Prytanean until you're a junior or senior. It sounds like there might be people who are joining the society earlier now. I graduated in three and a half years so I was only part of Prytanean for two semesters. I don't recall social activities. It may be because I was only a part of Prytanean for two semesters or I was too busy with my pre-med classes. To me, it was always such an honor to be in the Society, and I list it proudly. It's on my resume.


YC: What made you decide on your major and doing pre-med?

PT: I was always interested in global health when I was young. I traveled around with my parents a lot as a child. My dad was a professor at Berkeley and later he became the Chancellor at Berkeley in the 1990s. From what I saw during my travels, I wanted to help people, but I also was interested in ancient civilizations and their impact on the world. When I first started at Berkeley, I didn't think I was going to go into medicine; I wanted to be a classics major. I was interested in studying Latin and learning about Greek and Roman history.

I remember my freshman year, I signed up for a classics class. I signed up for German because my family lived in Germany for six months when my dad was a visiting professor there. I think when I started at Berkeley my academic interests were very Eurocentric, influenced by what I had learned in my high school curriculum and my experiences. And maybe that's why my China trip after my freshman year changed me, because I discovered how fascinating Chinese culture is and I think this was facilitated by the fact that I grew up in a household where we spoke Chinese. Being able to speak Mandarin opened doors to a deeper discovery of Chinese culture when I spent six weeks in China.

I also started thinking of getting a doctorate degree in biochemistry or molecular biology. I ended up majoring in molecular biology. I remember that my professor for molecular biology was Elizabeth Blackburn, who at that time was an Assistant Professor and would later get the Nobel Prize. I remember it being an incredibly challenging course. I started re-evaluating what I should do with my life and then after my junior year, I decided to pursue a career in medicine. I went to visit the pre-med counselor in my senior year and the counselor said, Phyllis, you've missed all the medical school application deadlines, you're going to have to think about what to do after you graduate while you apply for the following year. I thought really hard about what I enjoyed studying at Berkeley? And it was public health, so I ended up going to Harvard for a public health degree. That was nice because I took lots of basic science classes at Berkeley, which were then balanced by public health classes that I really enjoyed. So it reaffirmed my decision to go into medicine.





YC: How did it look like for East Asian Studies in Berkeley back then?

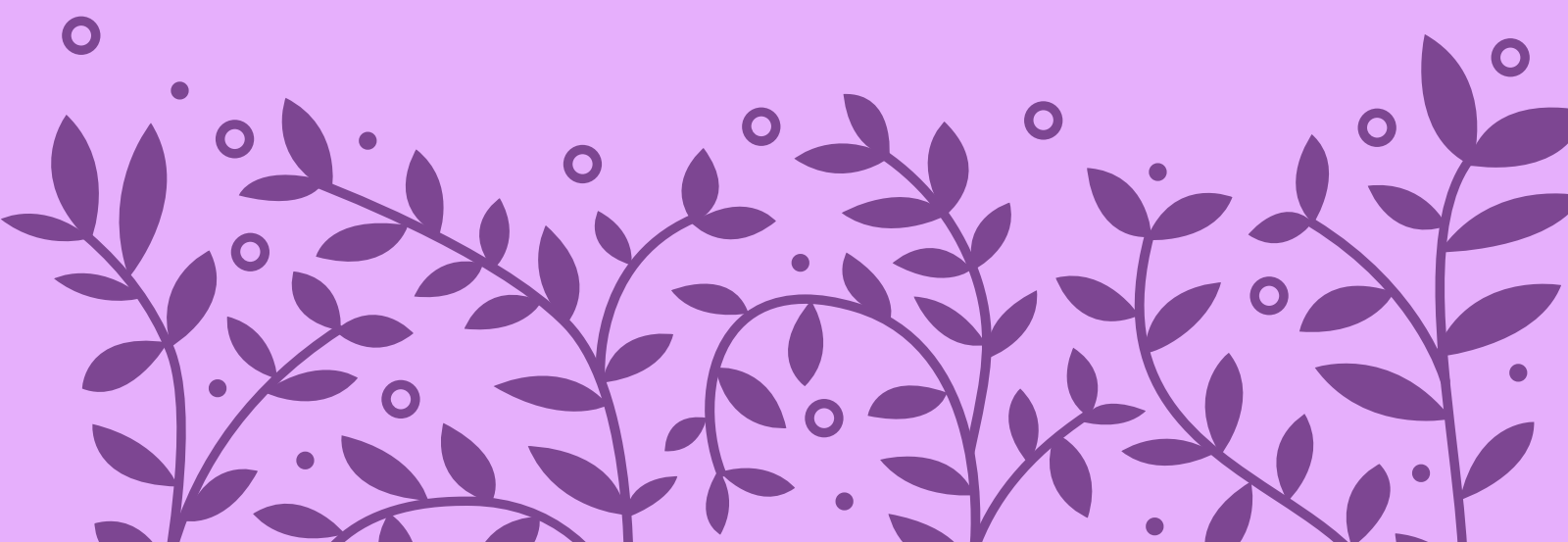
PT: They had an East Asian Studies Department, I think it's not too different from what it is today, other than today we have a beautiful East Asian Studies library. It's nice because it has my dad's name on the side: Chang-Lin Tien Center of East Asian studies. I don't think the Chinese program is that different, because Alexandra is minoring in Chinese now, and everything that she tells me about the program sounds similar to how it was when I was there. I still think fondly of my Chinese 10 teacher, and recently, I was trying to locate her to thank her for her amazing teaching.

YC: Were there any Asian student organizations on campus back in your time?

PT: Yes, there was the Chinese Student Union, which I think was mainly people from Taiwan. There is a Chinese Student Association, which was mainly people from Hong Kong, and they would have social events like showing movies from Taiwan and Hong Kong. I don't know if you know any of the Qiongyao books, but back then Taiwan produced so many movies based on Qiongyao's novels that were all with the actress Lin Qingxia. That was like one of the fun things that we used to do, going to Dwinelle where they would show these movies. I think they did other things like bowling. There was also the Asian Student Union, ASU, that included Asian students who were mostly born here. I remember gravitating to students that were mostly from Taiwan because my parents grew up in Taiwan.

YC: In retrospect, did you work more with people from different ethnic groups, or did you work more with those whom you identify?

PT: In the organizations I was active in at Cal such as the honor students society, there weren't many Asians that were in these officer positions. In my sorority, I think it was the same way. But I do think that as a Chinese-American, you have a cultural connection with other Chinese-Americans. I always tell people that even though I'm a second-generation Chinese, I always feel like I am a 1.5 generation because I feel a closer connection with people that were born in Taiwan and came to the United States when they were children due to shared values. In my classes, I tended to gravitate toward students that were either of Chinese descent or from Taiwan. Being in a sorority back then, I had a lot of Asian and non-Asian friends. Some of my closest friends were non-Asians. I had friends from diverse backgrounds.





Interviewee: Anh Tran.
Prytanean alumna. UC Berkeley
Class of 2006, double majored in
Economics and Mass
Communications with a minor in
Education.

Interviewer and Summary

Author: Yueyi Che.
Current Prytanean member. UC
Berkeley Class of 2022, majoring
in Geology with a minor in
Climate Science.



Abstract

Anh Tran is a Prytanean alumna and graduate of the UC Berkeley Class of 2006. She double majored in Economics and Mass Communications with a minor in Education. She is a Vietnamese second generation American and first generation college student from Westminster, California. Currently, she is the Senior Director, Scholarships Administration and Development at the Cal Alumni Association and the CFO for the Prytanean Alumnae Berkeley Chapter. In this interview, Tran vividly described her experience as an Asian American female undergraduate student at UC Berkeley. She described her journey of struggling and learning about the intersectional identity of being female and Asian, and how these identities shaped her unique experience as a leader at UC Berkeley. At Cal, Tran developed a deeper understanding of diversity, including learning about the history of Asian Americans. Passionate about service and environmental justice, Tran led her own DeCal class on environmental justice, organized a student leadership symposium, and conducted three years of service-learning trips, including an Alternative Spring Break to help the rebuilding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Through academic and service experiences, she learned about others' perceptions of her identity. Tran's advice for female students is to learn "how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable." Tran's perspectives and insights on student leadership are inspiring for Asian and female students today.



Interview Transcript:

Date: Feb 24, 2021

Yueyi Che: Ms. Tran, can you introduce yourself

Anh Tran: My name is Anh Tran and I am a Senior Director at the Cal Alumni Association, and I was a Prytanean back when I was a student at Cal, maybe in 2003 I believe. After graduation, I became part of the Prytanean Alumnae Chapter when I moved back to the Bay Area. I've been participating as part of the Prytanean Alumnae Chapter since 2016, so I've been involved for the last five years. Currently, I'm the CFO for the Prytanean Alumnae Chapter.

YC: How was your experience as a woman and an Asian student at Cal?


AT: I think it's hard for me to separate being a woman and being Asian. I think being an Asian woman is a very specific intersectional identity.

I've been in organizations like Prytanean which is great because we have lots of women on campus who are really strong leaders and contribute a lot to the livelihood of campus to communities, whether in Berkeley or the greater Berkeley community. And then I think when I was Cal I didn't realize that all of these things were integrated. At Berkeley, I met amazing people through Prytanean.

I was really involved with the REACH! Asian Pacific Islander Recruitment and Retention Center to bring particularly underrepresented Asian students to campus. From my high school Westminster High, I was one of two people who identify as Asian American. I came to Cal right from my area. I was really looking at organizations and student clubs where I can be myself, in particular, being an Asian American woman. That meant that I could talk about my culture.

Some of the skills I've had to learn to thrive at Cal were not something I learned in my family. I was raised not to be speaking up all the time in classes or in meetings. I had to learn that skill set through leadership programs at Cal. I was able to lead student groups at Cal and that was where I picked up some of those skill sets.

It was about learning about my history, too. I learned about Asian American history for the first time as a student at Cal. I just didn't encounter it all through my education before. A lot of that history, the learning, and just being more comfortable being myself, I think that was the hardest part. I'm still learning to be more comfortable being myself every day. What it means to be an Asian American woman in a leadership role is something I learned a lot early on from meetings, clubs, and leadership at Cal. It's still something I'm working on to this day.





YC: What other campus organizations have you participated in and/or had leadership experience in?

AT: I was part of the Public Service Center (at Cal) for three years. Back then it was called Cal Corps. I knew early on that I wanted to get involved in some form of service. So for three years I was involved with a program called Alternative Breaks, where I would do service-learning trips and take students around California and around the country. My senior year at Cal, that was with Hurricane Katrina struck the New Orleans area. With a group of students, I led a class to learn more about the issues impacting the Greater New Orleans area and we took a trip that spring to do some rebuilding. After Hurricane Katrina, our project led to a 10-year project that other students at Cal since then continued

. I am happy to be part of that legacy of students, the public service legacy with students.

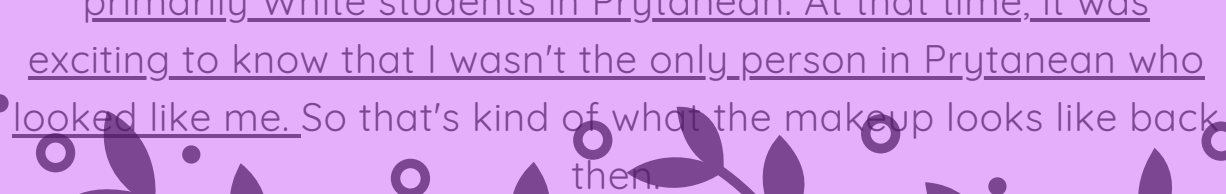
I also spent a good chunk of my time working as a work-study student. I worked in the English department. The other piece for me was being exposed to new things that I wasn't aware of until I got to Cal. I had openness and curiosity to learn about people and organizations. I got really involved in the Cal student leadership symposium. That was something I initially didn't sign up for but I thought I'm really enjoying my leadership roles and these different areas, how do I give back? One way was to create a conference for other student leaders. The first year, it was just Berkeley students and then after that, we created it for all college students. I think if anything, Cal really taught me the power of giving back. If you have received a lot from Berkeley, it's also important to give back.


YC: What was the demographic composition of student leaders?

AT: There were a lot of women leaders. We have a diverse campus and I saw people of different races from different backgrounds serve as student leaders, whether it's in clubs or for me leadership is also people are working multiple jobs to support their families. We had a lot of students who are also born untraditional, depending on their backgrounds. After I left Cal, I was surprised to see that people like me aren't really represented in leadership roles, which was different from what I saw on the UC Berkeley campus.

YC: Were there many Asian women or People of Color in Prytanean of your time?

AT: Not so much. I didn't know anything about Prytanean before I joined. My friend Chau Nguyen who I knew from REACH!, the organization that serves Southeast Asian students, sent it to me and said "hey Anh, I think you should apply." At first, I didn't know if I should apply because I didn't really know if anyone who looked like me would be in Prytanean. But my friend Chau Nguyen recommended Prytanean and I applied. It was really great to connect with a group of people who were all interested in service and leadership. But compared to the other leadership groups I was part of, Prytanean was not as diverse; it was primarily White students in Prytanean. At that time, it was exciting to know that I wasn't the only person in Prytanean who looked like me. So that's kind of what the makeup looks like back then.





YC: Did you know that Prytanean used to be a nomination-only honor society?


AT: I didn't know. I wonder if that affects the makeup of the student as well. Because in nominations, we nominate those who you know, and usually you know these people who look like you, come from the same neighborhoods or same high school. I don't think I would have been a part of Prytanean because I wouldn't have known anyone. The application process gave me the opportunity to join.


YC: As a female Asian student, have you ever faced any stereotypes or hardship in your work, extracurricular, or education at Cal.

AT: One of the stereotypes is the ***model minority myth***. I think people assume that I'm good at math. I was an econ major and I wouldn't say math is my strongest suit. In fact, I struggled in a math class at Cal. I wasn't going to be like the science majors. I was definitely more of a social science person. I don't know how much of it is internalized throughout the years from what we see in the media about the model minority myth, but I have to say, that it creates certain perceptions. I think people sometimes just expected me to be really great at math, which I wasn't. I found out fast that this is not my strong area.

A lot of my student experience was more just finding places that I felt were comfortable, welcoming, and inclusive for me. In the beginning, I was really hesitant about Prytanean because I didn't know this is an organization that made sense for me, that I can come in and be fully myself. I identify as a woman, but I also identify as an Asian American woman. My parents don't speak English, so that's an example of an experience I had that made me wasn't sure if I can fit in. If I could feel comfortable in a space, I'm sure people there would understand that.

I think at Berkeley, a lot of that was navigating these structures in this culture of so many student groups. It's such a lively environment, but yet you know I might be the first Asian American woman, the first Vietnamese American woman, that some people might meet. I met a friend of mine who's South Asian and where I grew up, there were no South Asians. She identifies as Indian American, and she was the first person I know who identifies as Indian American. She lived on my floor in Unit Two; I thought, gosh, I learned so much. I wonder how much of it was the fact that the history we learn and the neighborhoods we grow up in. Even you mentioned that you're living in a house, but how did you come about to live in that house, right? I think Berkeley sometimes becomes a little bit of a bubble because then I had to really navigate campus and how to find resources. It was hard to find out who were the right people. I think that was a big piece.







The other piece that I learned the hard way was how to ask for help. I think culturally I was never taught how to ask for help. I didn't know that you can ask professors for extensions or go to office hours and ask. This is something I had to learn. I wonder how much of it was me being an Asian American woman. It's just something that I wasn't taught to do as part of who I am growing up. That was something I had to learn by myself. But also sometimes, I had to really reach out to folks because they might not know that I was really struggling. I think some of it might be a perception of how I am. I was naturally more shy and reserved. I wonder how much of that is internal or is it from external forces like people's expectations of me. I'm pretty small physically, so they expect that I won't cause any ruffles. I've been described as intense when I do speak my mind, but I'm not the one who's going to be yelling. I speak my mind to really advocate, usually on behalf of others, but I find that that surprises some people because they look at me and they go, oh, Ahn's not going to make a big deal about something.

YC: When you were a student at Cal, did you feel you work more with people from different ethnic groups, or did you work more with whom you identify?

AT: I actually did both. I had this internal conflict because I always felt like I didn't belong. It's almost like Barack Obama. I just listened to his podcast this week, and he talked about how he didn't really fully belong. That's what I felt because I was in a lot of different organizations and student clubs and because I care about different issues. You mentioned climate science; I wish that minor was around then. I taught an environmental justice DeCal course because I care a lot about nature and the environment as well. Where I'm coming from is that people are so complex. Part of my identity at college is based on what I was curious about, what I wanted to learn, and where I wanted to explore. I wasn't able to do that either in the Asian American organizations or the non-Asian American organizations, and I had to create my own space. I was probably equally involved in the Asian American organizations and the broader issue-oriented organizations, versus identity-oriented organizations.

I was able to see kind of the big picture, but also, internally, when I was a student at Cal, I felt very conflicted. I felt I'm not good enough for the organization or I'm not good enough myself. I wasn't Asian enough, or I wasn't social justice enough, or whatever it is. Over time I realized that that's a part of being in America. There's so much diversity and it could be used as a divisive tool, like you're not this or you're not that. Or it could be used as a unifying piece of like not only are you an Asian American woman, but you're an Asian American woman who's interested in the environment, who's interested in economics, who is interested in all these things. I've recently started to understand and really own all my gifts, my identity, the things I'm good at, hobbies, all of that. It's being okay with the fact that I can be fully myself, but in some areas I do have to learn new skills or show up a little differently because people might not be at the same wavelength. I always think they're trying their best, but maybe their best might be they have no idea what Asian history looks like, so they might say something inappropriate.





I have a story for you. When I did that service-learning trip in New Orleans for Alternative Break, I was with a student who's White and another student who is Black. The three of us went door-knocking to check-in on the residents. This was a few months after Hurricane Katrina. I was coming in thinking this is a service-learning trip. I've had a lot of reflection thinking about social justice. I was wearing that hat, not even thinking about my identity as an Asian American woman. But when we knocked on that door, the man who answered, this older White man, didn't talk to me or my classmate who is Black. He only talked to my White classmate. And at that moment, I remember so vividly that we didn't matter to him. Even though we came there to do a service trip, what he saw was our race and what we look like. Then he called me Oriental, which I have never heard that word used before at Berkeley, or ever in my life. He said where are you from, you are Oriental. It really shook me up for a moment and I said I grew up in California and I go to school at Berkeley. That experience hasn't left me because I think that was when I understood that you can't separate the boxes. I got there on a service trip thinking we're going to give to his community, and I came back, knowing more about the fact that my identity as an Asian American woman might be perceived differently by other people. I also learned that I had to understand that when I show up, people might perceive me in a certain way, but also I have some control over how I want to show up, and I don't have to separate all these boxes.

YC: Now looking back, what advice would you give you to your past self?

AT: I think my advice would be to be comfortable being uncomfortable. I think being an Asian American woman leader, there's first of all not a lot who look like me. So it's already uncomfortable from the beginning. In fact, about 10 years ago I said I never want to be in a leadership role because I was so scared of how much emotional labor I would have to do to navigate the fact that not everyone wants me in a leadership role; maybe people don't even see me in a leadership role. I knew the learning curve would be very steep and there are things I can't control.

Early in my career I was put in these leadership programs. I was leading these clubs at Cal and that effort to work on rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina, but I never wanted to be a leader. In fact, I remember in this room they asked how many of you would want to be a leader and lead an organization, and I raised my hand and said, I would never want to be a leader. Now looking back, I think what it is is that you know when you do really meaningful work. There are moments when it's uncomfortable, but there are so many moments when it's deeply meaningful and satisfying. It really makes me want to wake up and show up. I feel really lucky that I do what I do because it doesn't feel like I have to get up and do work; it really feels like I'm making a difference in the world every day. I would tell myself and I would tell you, other Prytanians, and other people who identify as Asian American women that there are people like you out there in leadership roles and they are happy to mentor. I would also say that practice being comfortable with being uncomfortable because it will serve you for the rest of your life, whether you decide to be a leader or not.

