



AT A GLANCE WITH ESEA SISTERS

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A gross regurgitation of unconforted traumas and buried emotions from childhood sit heavily in my stomach. Having laid dormant for quite some time, the resurfaced feelings overwhelm my central nervous system, trembling like an onset of a volcanic eruption. Overcome with emotion, I'm reduced to tears. It's all too familiar and all too painful. A dreadful reminder of the bullying, othering, and loneliness that we've all had to endure throughout our entire existences. And unlike the US, the UK doesn't have a very large ESEA community, and we don't densely inhabit one specific area, we are dispersed across the country. So, being of East and Southeast Asian origin and growing up here can be a lonely, isolating, experience when the community element is non-existent. It can mean being detached from your cultural identity, heritage, and the history of your ancestors.

The recent acts of hate and violence towards our community have traumatised us, injured us, even horrifically killed some of us. But if there is any silver lining in the devastation, it's that from it we've united and found solace in one another's story. These experiences of racial abuse are no stranger, they're a shared experience amongst all British, ESEA people, but they are so often unspoken of. Generations of conditioned behaviour taught us to conceal our emotions. Now the time has come to share them with each other. To confront the uncomfortable, together. We find ourselves in a place where we have more power than ever, through simply having a voice and using it. With a plethora of platforms that now exist, allowing us to facilitate our voices, we must be reflective of the time when they didn't. Back when our grandparents and parents were subjected to racial discrimination, that luxury was not there for them. Therefore, we must be mindful of these facts, be grateful, and use the resources to encourage change as best we can.

ESEA Sisters, a collective of like-minded, determined, and courageous womxn, queer, and non-binary folk, who each share a united goal, are already taking up the initiative to change our future with their growing Discord community. Having amassed an impressive network of over 600 members, they've deservedly established themselves as prominent community figures who are inspiring others in a variety of ways. Each

member contributes to increasing the visibility for people of ESEA heritage in the UK and highlighting issues that face the community, ultimately leading the way for future generations. And, if 2021 has opened our eyes to anything, it's that community is exactly what we were all lacking.

One founding member of the group, Ying Suen, explains to *The WOW*: "It was early in the year after being racially abused. I needed to vent, and at the time, Instagram felt like the only way I could. From that a few ESEA women reached out to me, who I knew but not well and others who I had never spoken to before. We started on a WhatsApp group of 11 of us and we kept growing to what is now well over 600 of us, on a Discord group called *ESEA Sisters*. This all happened in the space of a couple of months, which I think really demonstrates just how much we all needed to connect."

All stemming from one impactful Instagram story that just so happened to reach thousands of people. *ESEA Sisters* was birthed very organically, possessing a unique charm in the tale of how it came to be. In continuation of its unique identity, *ESEA Sisters* pride a strict, non-hierarchical, ethos which firmly distinguishes there to be no clear leaders in the group. This alone conveys exactly why it's the perfect embodiment of how a community group should be in 2021 – progressive, inclusive, safe, and most importantly, equal for everyone.

The idea of familiarising ourselves with complete strangers might feel unnerving for some, but at this moment in time, I feel like we have a necessary need for it and personally, I have a yearning like no other, to connect with others who share my same pain and anguish. Those who understand what it's like to experience Asian hate. It's not only finding those people that draw you to this community, but it's that nothing like it has ever really existed in the UK before, at least not for Gen Z or millennials. It's also the first, localised, ESEA community to reach far and wide, whilst comprising only womxn, queer and non-binary members.

"What I lacked until recently, was an ESEA community in my life, beyond my family"; "It was something I had grown up with, which as I mentioned, slowly disintegrat-

ed”, continues Suen. This also really resonates with me, as someone who’s lacked the presence of an ESEA community in their life, extending to my family as well, as all of my Chinese relatives live in China and have done since I was born. So, I’ve never fostered that ethnic presence and only until growing up did I acknowledge just how much I needed it. It’s always meant I’ve gone above and beyond in my own research and attempts to learn about my culture. One way of doing this, for me, was through having icons. One of my first introductions to an Asian, female, face on Television was Brenda Song, who played London Tipton in *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*. For a long period of time during my early years, I probably considered her to be my icon. It wasn’t that she’d done something heroic or revolutionary, but simply down to the fact that she was a face that resembled mine, which I hadn’t seen before in the western, mainstream media, and that made me feel seen. Growing older, I realised the importance of having icons, specifically, cultural icons. They act as a guiding force, an inspiration you might lack from elsewhere in your life. I often look to poignant ESEA figures from creative disciplines, both past and present, like Anna May Wong, Bruce Lee, Gemma Chan, Sandra Oh, and the list continues. Looking back on their achievements helps to re-ignite the inspiration that I’m lacking in the present moment. Bruce Lee is an icon to me for so many reasons, too many to culminate in a simple list. He was not only an extraordinary artist but a revolutionary who opened the doors for many more generations of East and Southeast Asian aspiring actors and martial artists to follow in his footsteps.

Growing up, Ying’s inspirational figure was her grandmother whom she shared a deep connection with. As she describes it: *“She made everyone feel deeply loved and I have never known anyone as generous and giving.”* Our elders are the reminder of the generations before us who fought tooth and bone to allow us to even exist in this country. Hence, in Chinese and generally all East and Southeast Asian cultures, our elders are highly respected, regarded as the chiefs of the family if you will. As so we praise their accomplishments and admire their tenacity – strive to be as great as them.

“We honour our ancestors and the struggles they endured to give us the lives we have now.”

The presence of activism comes as no stranger to ESEA Sisters, who have found themselves to be a disruptive voice in the present, political landscape. Recently, they called out the institutional racism embed-

ded into the literal pages of some British newspapers, who were perpetuating an Anti-Asian rhetoric in their headlines and imagery. Further fuelling the narrative of Asian people being associated with Coronavirus. ESEA Sister, Kimberley Pang, persisted to challenge the perpetrators of these articles and succeeded in getting one of them to change its imagery. And, although it comes across so effortlessly, like they’ve been doing this work for years, Ying proclaims, *“ESEA Sisters is still finding its feet and voice when it comes to the activism side of the community. Activism wasn’t something we set out to do; however, we found a mutual desire to act and speak up. For many of us, activism is still very new, which can be daunting and difficult to know where to start. We would love to see more people who might not have engaged with such issues otherwise, feel that they finally can and for our collective voice to be listened to.”*

ESEA Sisters are a symbol of hope amidst the chaos of the current climate. They provide an insight into a hopeful and potential, future cultural shift. When I asked Ying who she considers as her cultural icon today, she replied: *“For where I am in life right now, I would say Grace Lee Boggs. She’s an American activist and philosopher born to Chinese immigrant parents in Providence, Rhode Island. As a young adult in the 1940s she managed to overcome many barriers and her work with multi-racial and intergenerational communities has been important in the activist and political landscape. She was a first generation Chinese American and being a first-generation Chinese Briton myself, her work and theories resonate with me profoundly, despite it being 2021.”* Changemakers like Grace have led us to where we are today. It’s crucial as a society that we reflect on those that came before us, to allow us to make even more impactful changes in the future.

“It’s important to look at history to learn what worked, but most importantly, what didn’t.”

For anyone wishing to join the community, there is a Linktree in ESEA Sisters Instagram bio, with a Google form which will take you to the ESEA Sisters Discord group. There’s also an identity verification process along with this, as keeping the community safe as they continue to grow is ESEA Sisters main priority. ❀