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## About the "Independent"

As Harvard College's weekly undergraduate newsmagazine, the "Harvard Independent" provides in-depth, critical coverage of issues and events of interest to the Harvard College community. The "Independent" has no political affiliation, instead offering diverse commentary on news, arts, sports, and student life.

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# A New Normal for Taiwan

From naval operations to misinformation, China is putting pressure on Taiwan.

BY MORGAN JAY '29

On Dec. 30, 2025, the People's Liberation Army launched what it called "Justice Mission 2025"—a two-day operation during which PLA artillery units fired 27 rockets into the waters surrounding Taiwan while Chinese ships and aircraft reportedly practiced repelling an approaching enemy force. The operation marked a sharp escalation in a long-standing trend of aggression from Beijing toward Taiwan, raising questions about President Xi Jinping's intentions in a period of heightened geopolitical uncertainty.

"December of 2025 not only constituted the largest air and maritime presence around Taiwan ever, but attempted to normalize that presence as a new peacetime baseline," Asia security expert Dr. Mira Rapp-Hooper told the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party in early February. This comes in the months leading up to President Donald Trump's summit with Xi, which will occur in China at the start of April.

For some, exercises like "Justice Mission 2025" demonstrate Xi's resolve to take Taiwan by force. "Beijing's aggressive maneuvers around Taiwan are not just exercises—they are dress rehearsals for forced unification," Admiral Samuel Paparo, who heads the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, reported to the House Armed Services Committee last spring. An invasion would test the resolve of key Taiwanese allies like Japan and the United States, whose current war with Iran could disrupt Washington's ability to send forces to the Indo-Pacific.

Another possibility is a Chinese blockade of Taiwan. During "Justice Mission 2025," eight of the 19 Chinese ships that entered Taiwan's contiguous zone—the area within which the country's laws can be enforced—belonged to the Chinese Coast Guard. Their presence could be indicative of a larger role to come; enforcing a blockade would mean relying heavily on CCG ships to carry out "inspections" of merchant vessels. Such inspections could worry the underwriters who insure commercial cargo ships, potentially severing Taiwan's energy and supply lifelines.

In the past, China has also leveraged economic and diplomatic pressure. Ahead of the 2024 Taiwanese presidential election, Chinese officials met with Kuomintang (KMT)—the Chinese Nationalist Party—leadership and temporarily imposed embargoes on the import and export of several important Taiwanese goods, like pineapples. They hoped that voters, feeling economic strain, would support the KMT, which was more willing to negotiate with Beijing than the Democratic Progressive Party is. Despite these measures, the DPP's William Lai prevailed.

To understand the path forward, the "Independent" spoke with Professor Rana Mitter, the S.T. Lee Professor of U.S.-Asia relations at the Harvard Kennedy School. He emphasized the importance of recent turnover in the Central Military Commission, referring to the fact that in

January, CMC generals Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli were placed under investigation for "serious violations of discipline and law."

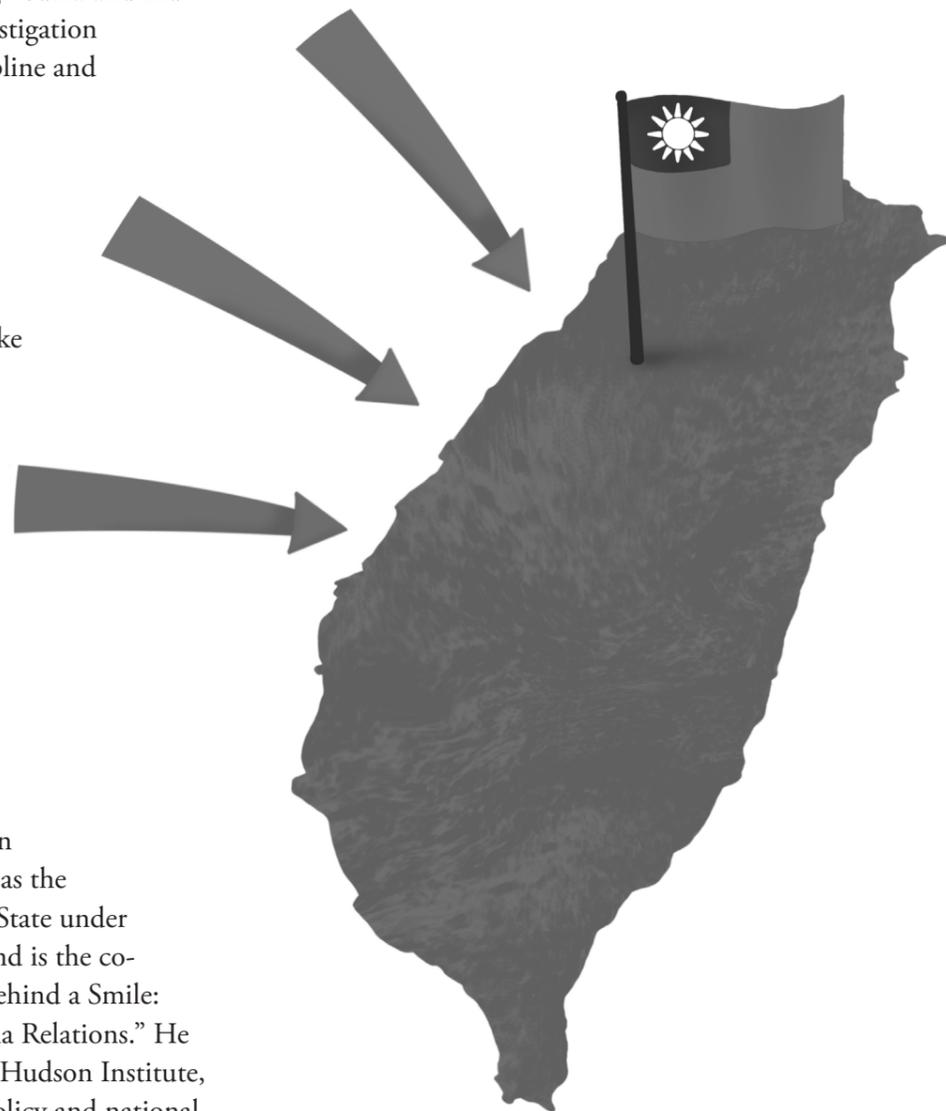
In removing them, Xi effectively completed a purge in military leadership that had been ongoing for the duration of his time in power. Mitter believes that these changes make an imminent confrontation unlikely. "We have to assume there is serious turmoil within the CMC, which makes it less likely there is an immediate plan for a military confrontation over Taiwan," he said. "An attack on Taiwan would involve a very complex amphibious operation."

Charles Horner, an expert on U.S.-China policy, also said an attack is unlikely in the short term. Horner served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State under Presidents Reagan and Bush and is the co-author of "Hiding a Dagger Behind a Smile: The Coming Era of U.S.-China Relations." He works as a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a Washington-based foreign policy and national security think tank. "Military leaders tend to be cautious about the use of military force," Horner said in an interview with the "Independent." "And the prospect of a thoroughly rearmed Japan has got to be very unsettling—the Japanese are an enormously capable people."

Horner emphasized that the CCP has other priorities. "The CCP struggles every day to maintain its monopoly on political power in a country of 1.4 billion people," he said. "That is a daunting task." According to Horner, in light of this struggle, Chinese leaders are likely to avoid a potentially costly invasion of Taiwan.

Their concerns are heightened because China relies on trade amid broader economic uncertainty. With new home sales at a 15-year low and apartment prices plummeting, exports are crucial for maintaining growth. For this reason, Horner thinks that a blockade is unlikely. "The People's Republic of China may have the ability to blockade Taiwan, but its own links to the world can be severed easily," he said. "The CCP's leaders know that about 90 percent of China's oil comes in by sea." Mitter described a similar effect: "If there were a conflict over Taiwan, it would mean huge amounts of physical destruction and air and shipping routes would be disrupted, not least because insurers would be cautious about protecting vessels in the area."

In light of these potential disruptions, China may opt for other short-of-war strategies, like attempting to influence Taiwan's 2028 elections using "information warfare." The 2024 Annual



Report to Congress, produced by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, reported that "the CCP's Propaganda Department and a PLC psychological warfare unit would conduct election influence campaigns through news outlets and social media."

As a result, social media has been flooded with propaganda, much of it AI-generated. One such fake news clip accused President Lai of corruption. Other videos, some even depicting U.S. leaders, intend to push the narrative that Taiwan is on its own and should negotiate with China.

Horner suggested that Beijing views non-kinetic tactics like those as the safest path forward. "The CCP's leaders believe they can undermine Taiwan's will to resist with a variety of political, economic, and psychological pressures," he noted. "They also believe that key foreign countries can eventually be intimidated into abandoning Taiwan. So why bet the future of the regime on one throw of the dice?"

With Japan's decision to deploy missiles to an island near Taiwan and Trump's looming summit with Xi Jinping, tensions remain high. But for now, Beijing seems resolved to play the long game.

**MORGAN JAY '29 (MJAY@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) WRITES NEWS FOR THE "INDEPENDENT."**

**GRAPHIC BY NESHAMA RYMAN '28**

# Restrained But Not Restricted: International Students' Free Speech On Campus

Amid ICE detentions and pressure from the Trump administration, Harvard's international students continue to navigate their rights to free speech.

BY OLIVIA LE '29

*Editor's Note: Certain names and countries in this article have been redacted to protect students' requests for privacy amid citizenship concerns.*

A Harvard College international student—who chose to remain anonymous due to security concerns—was playing frisbee in the Harvard Yard when a man approached her, introducing himself as a reporter for “CNN.” He asked if she felt scared or threatened. “I didn’t want to just say yes, because of course I’m scared and of course I’m threatened,” she told the “Independent.”

“If I say I’m threatened, [the headlines are] going to be ‘Harvard International Students Threatened by Harvard,’ and I don’t want to feed that. So I was like, ‘It’s feeling really supportive. They’re very responsive and responsible. They care for us, and I feel pretty safe on campus,’” she continued.

Stumbling across the published “CNN” article months later, titled “A New School Year Starts at Harvard as Students Live with Lingering White House Threats,” she realized that the reporter presented her as passive. “I look like an unhindered, performatively peaceful [student],” she explained. But her intention was far from wanting to dismiss fears. “I didn’t want to look like a miserable international student.”

Over the past few months, Harvard has been under particular scrutiny as the Trump administration examines higher education. As of the fall semester, 6,749 of the total 24,317 students enrolled at Harvard University were non-U.S. residents. Between threats made by the administration to revoke student visas in Apr. 2025 to current ICE raids throughout the United States, many international students feel they cannot make public statements. In the midst of political tensions and debate, domestic students also feel pressure to be careful about how they articulate themselves and speak out in public spaces and on media platforms.

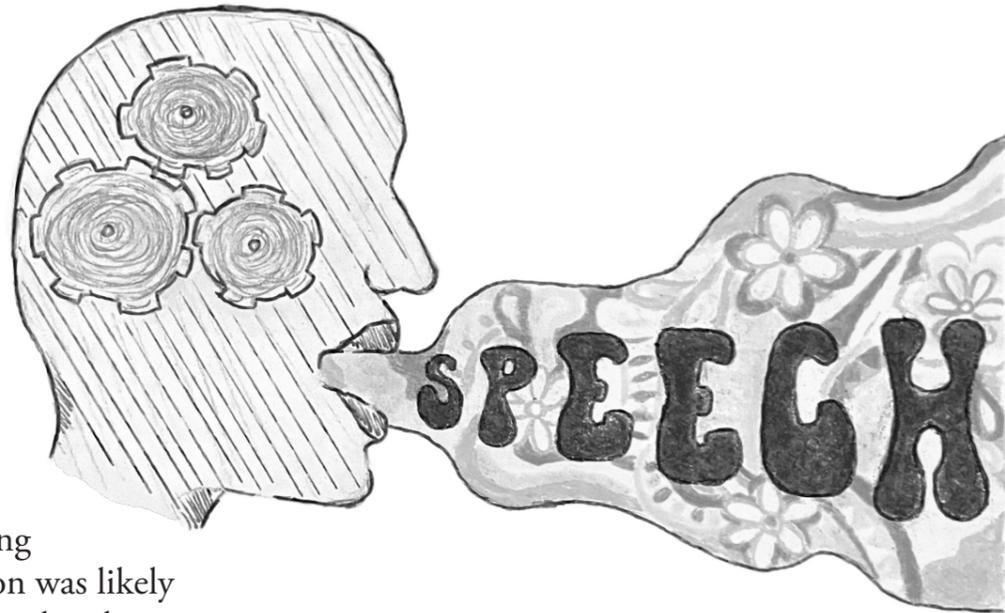
The series of lawsuits filed by both the University and the Trump administration contributed

to this culture of worry. Last May, the Department of Homeland Security tried to revoke Harvard’s authorization to enroll international students. The measure was blocked by U.S. District Judge Allison D. Burroughs after finding that the administration was likely taking illegal actions and violating constitutional rights. Harvard also filed a lawsuit against the government’s cancellation of \$2.2 billion in research funding, which accused the university of being non-compliant with antisemitism standards.

Only last month, President Trump requested \$1 billion in damages from Harvard. The tense back-and-forth between Trump and Harvard has left international students wondering about the risks of speaking out on social media, in school newspapers, and in certain on-campus events. Many fear jeopardizing their education and take measures to avoid doing so. “My academic career and my life career depend on whether I have to speak out or not,” one international student said.

On Mar. 8, 2025, a Columbia graduate student and Palestinian rights activist, Mahmoud Khalil, was detained despite being a lawful, permanent U.S. resident. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights commented on this situation just a few weeks later. “We are alarmed that the U.S. authorities are openly weaponising deportation as a tool to censor critical voices, seriously damaging the precious rights of free speech and assembly that the U.S. has long cherished and promoted at home and abroad,” they wrote. Khalil was released in June 2025.

The recent detention of a Columbia undergraduate student, Elmina Aghayeva, sparked national uproar. Aghayeva, an online influencer, was taken into custody on Thursday, Feb. 26, and released nine hours later.



ICE agents entered her residential building without a judicial warrant under the pretense that they were searching for a missing child. They later claimed her visa was terminated in 2016 after failing to attend classes.

Several Harvard students also shared that while they have not encountered direct violations of their right to free speech, they experience an atmosphere of restraint. “I don’t really feel threatened, but then I do feel an anxiety that other domestic students wouldn’t have [about] going out of the U.S. or going to immigration courts,” the same international student said. “If I speak against the government or against something that might make me stand out, even if it’s a valid opinion ... when my name comes out, what’s going to happen?”

Besides the “CNN” reporter, the first international student described how media and newscasters have not had a large presence on campus, limiting the moments in which she has to decide whether or not to speak out.

“I haven’t felt the impact of that in our day-to-day conversations. People still talk openly about their opinions; I value that we have a safe space to do so,” the second shared.

Domestic student Juliana Yal ’29 reflected on the campus climate this academic year: “I really haven’t had any instances where I felt particularly about speaking out and not being able to,” she said, citing the recent grading policy where she felt students were able to

Students interact differently with free speech depending on how they learned to express themselves in the past. Oftentimes, local communities both inside and outside the United States are more homogeneous than Harvard. Encountering contrasting opinions for the first time may influence whether students feel comfortable enough to take a firm stance on a controversial issue or if they feel that their voice would really contribute to ongoing discussions.

Avani Shah-Lipman '29 attended a small all-girls high school in Philadelphia. "Everyone agreed on everything," she said.

The second international student described a similar cultural distinction to her own country that she believed many tend to overlook. "Certain societies believe that protecting the overall social harmony is more important than protecting individual free speech," she explained.

Yal also explained the unique emphasis that the United States places on expression: "Free speech was always something that was important and something that I always knew was integral to America as a whole."

Attending Harvard, one of the most widely recognized academic institutions in the world, has also made a difference in how students present their own opinions. For Shah-Lipman, the exposure is new and refreshing. "I feel like I have been confronted with more political debate here, which has been a positive experience for me," she said.

Concerns over exercising free speech may be less in response to judgment or consequence by others in the Harvard community, but may instead result largely from Harvard's public profile.

Harvard's Free Speech Guidelines claim that the prominence and character of the University should encourage free speech and contrary views. "Because no other community defines itself so much in terms of knowledge, few others place such a high priority on freedom of speech," the guidelines state.

Yet many students experience the opposite. The University name also holds students' opinions to a higher standard, creating pressure to be politically sound and articulate. "It makes people more hesitant to freely speak their minds because of the responsibility of being affiliated with an institution like Harvard," Yal said.

Shah-Lipman is not critical of Harvard's intellectual environment, but attributes the pressure to a more general American trend. "This issue of feeling like there is no free speech is not Harvard-specific, because America has become increasingly polarized over the years," she said.

She also appreciates Harvard's efforts to create platforms with diverse and contrasting opinions, including "Berg Banter"—a space for first-years to meet every few months and debate contentious topics. "Some of the even more manufactured intellectual vitality events are important to remind people that constructive debate and sharing of ideas are possible, even in this political climate."

Another fear that the first international student shared was of her words being misconstrued. "Because I don't know how my opinions are going to be taken, I feel like I'd rather choose not to talk in public," she said in regards to participating in demonstrations, answering online interviews, or responding to bloggers.

This student further shed light on how her experience may differ from other international students due to factors far from her control—interstate politics. "I feel comparatively less threatened than other countries because [my country] and U.S. relationships are not the worst. But I imagine there are other countries out there that have worse relationships with the U.S."

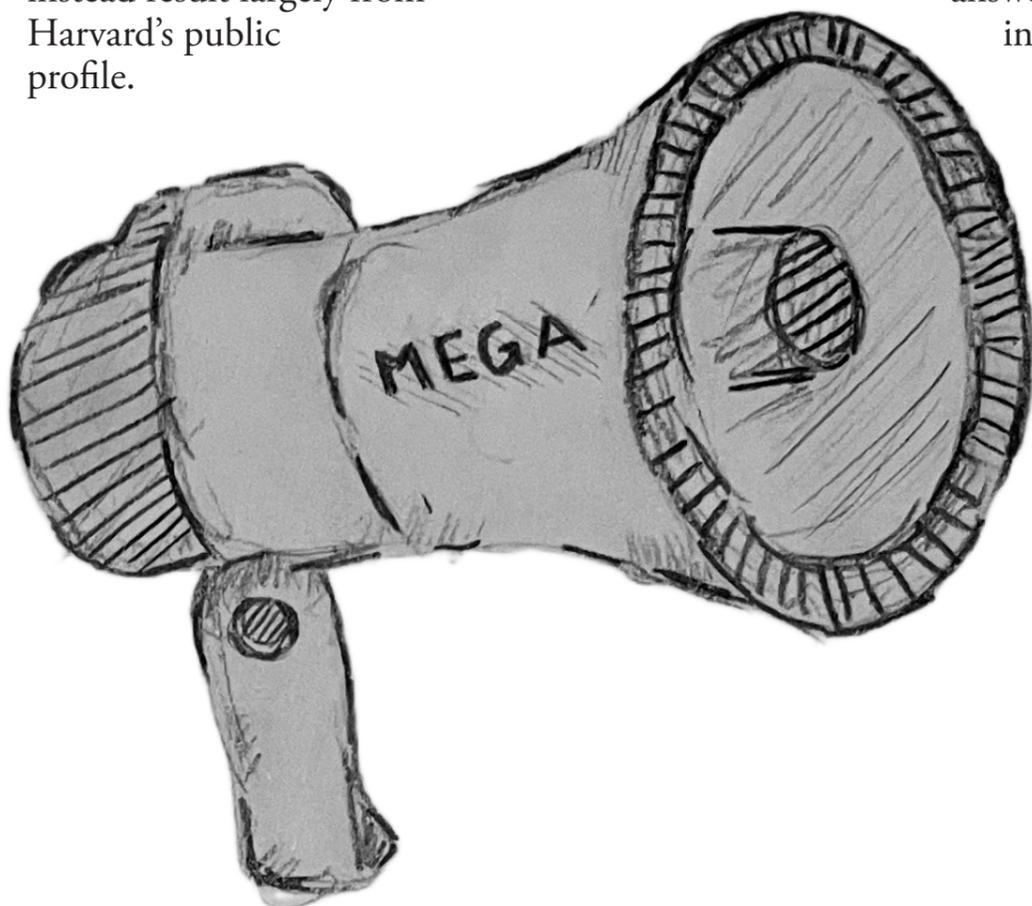
Some students argue that fear surrounding free speech amounts to a form of censorship by the Trump administration, an issue scarcely addressed by Harvard leadership, yet students also feel that they have the right to choose how they engage with publicity. "I respect that here at Harvard, here in the U.S., free speech is something that people prioritize ... but my not exercising free speech is also me exercising my free speech," the second international student said.

For some international students, being able to access and engage with their Harvard education is most important. "The situation could be a lot worse, and I'm getting what I would want," the first international student said. Her choice not to be disturbed by threats from the government is another form of defiance. "I'm generally against this overgeneralized depiction of international students being scared of the government."

Even if the Trump administration has forced international students to take caution on how they present themselves in public, many refuse to live in fear and are continuing to engage wholeheartedly in their education. The country's political climate will inevitably continue to shift, and despite the pressures it brings, the voices of Harvard students are still drawing attention.

**OLIVIA LE '29 (OLIVIALE@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS AN "INDY" WRITER AND AN EVEN BETTER LISTENER.**

**GRAPHICS BY JAMES FOSS '29**



# Celebrating Your Roots

An account of how Harvard students keep in touch with their cultural identities when away from home.

BY JOCELYNE DELGADO '28

Every September, a new class of Harvard students arrives on campus with a beaming smile and an ambitious look in their eyes. Yet between academic pressures and unfamiliar environments, one challenge many students do not realize awaits them: staying connected to their cultural identity when home is now a college dorm.

Language, for many students, is the first culture shock they encounter. For Tibetan student Tenzin Yiga '27, everyday conversations were the first indication of change: “The biggest [change] I can think of is being able to speak Tibetan with my peers. I don’t really get the chance to do that as much here on campus,” she said to the “Independent.” “Tibetan was my first language growing up ... I still speak [it] at home with my parents and family.”

Although about 22% of Americans speak a language other than English at home, nearly 70% of university students report experiencing homesickness at least once. For many students, language can be a powerful way to reconnect with home. “If I ever do feel a disconnection, I have my family a phone call away ... I like getting to talk to someone in Spanish again. [It] always helps me, you know, re-emphasize that feeling [of being Mexican] and re-establish myself if I’m ever feeling lost,” Mexican-American student Joseph Barrera Jr. '29 shared.

Recognizing not only the language barrier but also the cultural differences upon arriving at a distinctly American institution, ethnic and international student organizations strive to preserve the native backgrounds of foreign undergraduates. The College is home to more than 50 cultural spaces, spanning from affinity groups such as the Black Students Association to internationally focused communities like the Harvard Organization for Latin America.

For Barrera, he found his “home” as a first year—in the cultural performance group, Mariachi Véritas. “It’s one of my most comforting activities. If I ever feel like I’m just down in the dumps, mariachi is always there, and it always brightens my spirit and makes me feel like I’m at home,” he said.

This desire to re-establish oneself in the roots that guided their upbringing is shared by many of Barrera’s peers. “I’m involved in Harvard Society of Arab Students, and I’m also involved with Arab Conference at Harvard,” Arab Middle Eastern student Saarah Hassan '28 explained. “[It] has gotten me a lot closer with my Arab friends, and it’s made me a lot closer to the community itself, because we’re constantly put in places where we’re all together.”

Yiga is a part of the Harvard Undergraduate Tibetan Cultural Association and serves as its current president. “There is a Tibetan Culture Association here at Harvard, and obviously, [it’s] a very small community of 10 students. But the association itself is open to all,” Yiga said. “All of our events are very welcoming, and they center on cultural awareness and sharing different parts of Tibetan culture, whether it’s food, music, dance, or more educational teachings and film screenings.” As Yiga shared, beyond celebrating and practicing traditions and rituals, these organizations also foster a sense of inclusivity across campus. They are a space to celebrate individuals’ identities while also allowing a sense of cross-cultural exchange.

Collaborations and mixers between organizations allow for an organized exchange of traditions by bringing students of different backgrounds together through shared experiences. “We just had an Iftar [for Ramadan] which was a combination of the Society of Arab Students, E.S.S.A, which is the Ethiopian and Eritrean Group, and also B.A.S.H.A, the Bengali Student Association,” Hassan said.

“I think every year I very much look forward to when we get closer to

Tibetan New Year ... we always have Guthuk, a nine-ingredient soup dish ... we have little dough balls, and within those dough balls we have little words that represent different fortunes or predictions of the year,” Yiga added. “That’s always an event I look forward to because we invite all of our friends and the public to the broader Harvard community. It’s always so exciting for everyone to cook together and then open up their fortunes.”

For Harvard undergraduates, events like these draw countless students from all backgrounds, looking to not only honor important events and traditions but also promote a larger ethnic awareness. Peers arrive in reserved rooms across campus to learn from one another while enjoying international cuisine, music, dances, and games that they might not have otherwise known. “I think that the students that I’ve been around are some of the most excited to learn about new cultures, and they’re all very appreciative of things that they didn’t know [about before],” Barrera said.

“I think that Harvard does quite a good job of allowing students to meet new people [and] learn about different people’s backgrounds and cultures,” Yiga said.

Though students carve out distinct communities across campus, the University brings together all demographics through the Cultural Rhythms Festival—thrown by the Harvard Foundation to prompt intercultural engagement on campus.

The festival starts with the Cultural Rhythms Fashion Show, in which students can sign up to showcase their traditional attire down a runway. The Cultural Rhythms Food Festival follows. Ethnic clubs on campus bring traditional dishes to share with the rest of the student body. The festival ends in Sanders Theatre with student groups performing their music and dance in a vibrant showcase. For students feeling far-from-home, Cultural Rhythms marks a critical turning point.

“The main thing that’s the hardest about being away from home is finding other people who also are not afraid to showcase their culture,” Hassan explained. The variety of events and opportunities on campus allows students to express their cultural identities while also deepening their understanding and appreciation of other identities.

This creates a space for cultural discovery and exploration of languages, traditions, and cuisines. As Hassan shared, “A lot of us are still discovering what our cultural identity is.”

**JOCELYNE DELGADO '28  
(JIDELGADO@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) CANNOT WAIT FOR THIS YEAR'S CULTURAL RHYTHMS FESTIVAL.**

**GRAPHIC BY LINDEN MCCARL '28**



# FORUM

## Where Are You Really From?

I'm here now, isn't that enough?

BY NOAH BASDEN '29

"Where are you from?" I gave my answer, as one does, and they looked at me, confused. I looked back at them, also confused (I was only a child; I hadn't realised that this was a canonical "living while Black" moment). Like two dueling cowboys who both missed their first shot, we stood feet from each other, staring each other down in silence. Nobody moved.

"Where are you really from?"

Another shot comes my way; another miss.

I give the same answer. It flies at my target and hits them square in the chest, yet they remain standing. This one's resistant to a straight answer.

Again, we look at each other, confused. Then the kicker comes ... "Ok, but where are you from in Africa, though?"

They think they've got me dead to rights with that one; you can see it on their face.

The bullet flies, zipping through the air, and the grin grows on their faces as they think they've finally got me. It hits me. Though in a similar way, I am unfazed. I don't like dumb questions.

I reply, "I'm not from anywhere in Africa," and again, just like the time before and the time before that, we look at each other, confused.

Over the years, I have been asked this question more times than I can bother to count, yet my answer remains the same every time. Where I'm really from hasn't changed since the first time I was asked, nor the most recent time (which was this Monday, in case you were wondering). What has changed, though, is how I think about that question and its implications.

Despite maintaining that same answer, I have struggled with this question a lot as I've grown older. Where am I really from? The answer for me, like many other African Americans (a term in itself I find testing), is clear in its lack of clarity; we don't know.

In lots of cases, our names aren't even a reminder of home; we carry the familial name of men who kept our ancestors as slaves and profited from their pain. Their ties to home were literally beaten out of them to the point that when freed, many knew no other name but that of their slave master to

take as their own.

Names changed, and histories erased: as the years went on, the homes their forefathers left became a foreign concept. America's cold embrace became our comfort, and from its arms came a resilient people who weathered every storm and made it out in one piece. Our roots in this country are deeper than most, and they're stubborn SOB's who have survived the weed killer, the bow saw, and the flame. This "tree" wasn't transplanted from somewhere else but grown by ourselves for ourselves by a people whose original trees were bound in chains and whose roots were dragged out by force.

I recently had a conversation with a friend who debated with me if I was truly African American because I was born and raised in a different country, have a different accent, and wasn't like the ones he knew. I wasn't offended by the question, oddly enough, but I pointed to roots as my main counter-argument.

Our roots, as I understand it, are a thread of a particular kind—one that doesn't simply bind us but connects us to those we know and those we never get to know. Invisible in nature, yes, but unbreakable nonetheless. A thread that doesn't care about borders, accents, or circumstances, but one that simply runs through each of us, whether you like it or not.

We don't choose where we are born or who we are born to; nevertheless, we are all born to a family, however you choose to define that, and that means something. That 'something' is hard to explain but cannot be ignored. It's a laugh you've never heard before but sounds familiar, or a smile that's passed down from generation to generation, a mark that says they're one of us.

Edmund Burke, commonly known as one of the key founders of conservatism, in "Reflections on the Revolution in France," spoke on the idea of society as a contract, saying "It is a partnership ... not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." If we remove the commentary on society from the equation, it perfectly encapsulates my feelings towards my own roots.



The person I am was confirmed before I took my first breath. I carry the lives, struggles, and smiles of those who came before me. Their stories become mine, and all our stories will be someone else's one day in the future.

I imagine in the future someone will ask my children where they're really from. I can hope they'll have learned something from their father and answer without hesitation. Not because our culture or family history is simple, but because they know what they are, not just who they are.

Roots, to me, are separate from ancestry; ancestry can tell you what you are, but roots tell you who you are. Ancestry is like an old photograph; it captures a moment, serving as a record of existence. It says we were here. Roots, on the other hand, aren't moments in time but are living; they grow deeper and get stronger, generation upon generation. They don't just say we were, but we are.

**NOAH BASDEN '29  
(NHBASDEN@COLLEGE.  
HARVARD.EDU) IS TIRED OF  
BEING ASKED WHERE HE'S  
REALLY FROM.**

**GRAPHIC BY HAFSAH KHAN '29**

# Are You In A “Chinese Time of Your Life”?

Chinese-Americans reflect on the benefits and dangers of the growing trend.

BY ELLIE GUO '29 & CLORIS SHI '29

**A**ll over social media, being Chinese has become the new trend. Over the past year, Americans have begun “Chinamaxxing,” imitating Chinese culture in all aspects of their lives. From adopting Chinese wellness practices like traditional medicine and tai chi, to discovering a newfound passion for Popmart figurines, the year of the horse, and dim sum, many people have found themselves increasingly devoted to mimicking the customs of a country thousands of miles away.

The movement began with an April 2025 X post parodying the famous final line of the 1999 film “Fight Club.” “You met me at a very Chinese time in my life,” user @girl\_virus tweeted.

Social media users and influencers of all different ethnicities quickly joined in, producing content ranging from misinformed satire videos to explanations that reflect a genuine, respectful interest in engaging with traditional Chinese practices. Several users identified how Chinese practices centered around balance, moderation, and mental health can provide a clarifying contrast to the workaholic and productivity culture that dominates Western channels.

Eventually, this trend circulated back to Chinese people, often invoked as parody. Asian-American comedian Jimmy O. Yang posted a video of himself wearing the Chinese-inspired Adidas jacket, with the caption “You met me at a very Chinese time of my life, which is EVERYDAY.”

So, is “Chinamaxxing” cultural appropriation? Or is it a genuine attempt to connect with different cultures in the age of globalization?

There are various perspectives on Chinamaxxing. For one, assuming another culture can be dangerous, particularly through a curated social media persona. “Saying that you were becoming another race, however ironically, used to be the kind of thing that would get you canceled,” author Zeyi Yang wrote in a 2026 “Wired” article titled “Why Everyone Is Suddenly in a ‘Very Chinese Time’ in Their Lives.”

For Yang, in a social media landscape that is becoming increasingly polarized, claiming another ethnicity is dangerous because it suggests that one is also familiar with the cultural and historical context alongside the flashy, glamorous cultural exports.

When people select traditions and pare down the cultural context surrounding them, they risk reducing a country to what is arbitrarily augmented by social media algorithms.

Others interpret the situation as a shift in the psychology of Americans. “It’s no coincidence that Chinamaxxing comes as the American Dream seems to be dimming,” author Koh Ewe wrote in a 2026 “BBC” article titled “Is this a ‘very Chinese time in your life’? The trend boosting China’s soft power.” In other words, when America seemingly no longer represents idealized freedom and ceaseless opportunities, people turn to alternative cultures to find power and purpose in their lives.

In fact, the fascination with Chinese culture actually occurred before the current wave of Chinamaxxing, with the proliferation of the “Xue Hua Piao Piao,” or “Chinese eggman,” meme. The video of a Chinese man with a distinctly egg-shaped head singing a song in Chinese went viral in May 2020, amidst the COVID-19 lockdowns, which spurred a massive spike in pandemic-related Asian hate crimes. John Cena’s infamous “Bing Chilling” video was posted a year later in May 2021 and subsequently permeated Americans’ cultural lexicon.

Then, in January 2025, when the United States TikTok ban went into effect, countless American users flocked to “RedNote,” the Chinese social media equivalent. American users joked about finally meeting their alleged “Chinese spies,” which Chinese netizens found hilarious. People used auto-translate features to bridge the language barrier, giving way for Chinese speakers to explain the idioms behind the nonsensical English translations. For a few brief moments, it seemed like there was a genuine moment of camaraderie and connection between American and Chinese netizens.

“Many Chinese users are sharing memories of their English classes at school, where they were often asked to write letters to imaginary American pen pals. Now they’re hearing from real friends writing back,” author Aowen Cao wrote for “NPR.”

It seems that cultural appreciation is still possible, but there is often a dissonance between the effort made to connect across cultures and the actual outcome of cross-identification. Indeed, anti-Asian hate was still prevalent in 2025, when Chinamaxxing began.

Unlike the previous intersections with Chinese culture, Chinamaxxing seems to be increasingly reliant on deductive stereotypes. Social media influencers have been oversimplifying Chinese culture, simply regurgitating the latest buzzwords that just happen to be related to China. The nuances of Chinese culture—from the history behind wellness practices to Confucianism that permeates social relationships—are lost within short-form media crafted to hook viewers in.

In other words, the trend of Chinamaxxing feels like getting your own culture and traditions misexplained to you in glaringly simplified and ignorant language.

Ultimately, Western enjoyers of Chinese culture still view the East as something “other”—something so wildly different from their own culture that it becomes funny.

As a result, for us, as Chinese-Americans, this meme is also our opportunity to reclaim authority on our culture and speak to what the entire Chinese experience is.

We have experienced the dance between reconciliation and identification with both parts of our hyphenated identity. For us, saying that we are in a transitory “Chinese time of my life” is simply inaccurate. We identify as individuals who have developed confidence and assuredness in our mixed cultures.

Our pride in our Chinese heritage cannot be disentangled from China’s growing geopolitical role. Over these past years, with the rise in semiconductor technology, China has grown into a powerhouse of exports and enviable products, boosting national pride and patriotism. Since 2020, the volume of China’s exports has increased by 43%, well above China’s pre-pandemic trend. Whether in consumption goods or high-tech exports, China has evolved into an impressive economic engine.

For example, Starbucks, which has a flagship store on Nanjing Road, the busiest part of Shanghai, is now outnumbered by Luckin Coffee, Manner Coffee, and other chain stores that originated from China. Once dominated by Japanese, Korean, and European brands, the cars on the roads—among which most are electronic—are now produced by Chinese companies, such as BYD, Geely, and SAIC. These native-born companies proudly manufacture products labeled “Made in China.” Chinamaxxing is implicitly tied to a growing admiration for China.

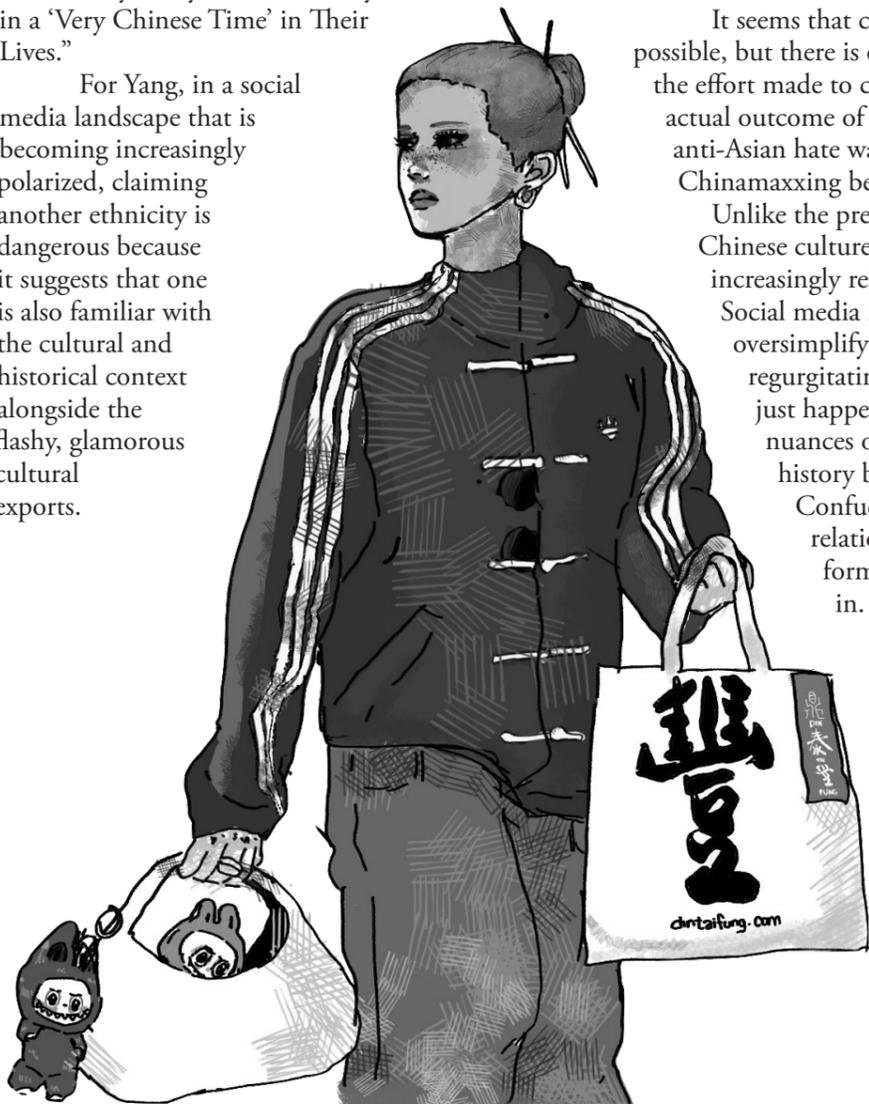
Yet, our pride cannot be completely explained by the status China has achieved on this scale. Maturity has also granted us the perspective to appreciate the Chinese lessons that enable us to speak the language of a civilization that spans more than 5,000 continuous years. Speaking the language offers us the opportunity to engage in dialogue with our relatives, to participate in popular trends, listen to new songs, and adapt to the ever-evolving country.

At the same time, understanding the language unlocks the key to understanding Chinese practices, values, and stories encoded within the linguistic structure. As college students living far from the scents and flavors of home, we find that speaking Chinese to each other helps to keep us grounded in our culture and safe in our identities. As a result, watching the internet engage blindly with Chinamaxxing and mistranslating Chinese language, like any other trend, is frustrating, destabilizing, and even offensive to our culture.

It is no coincidence that one of the most common topics in ancient Chinese poetry is homesickness. For us, we are faced with the unique predicament of being homesick for a land where we were not born, while watching the internet exoticize the rituals that we hold dear. With its flaws and temporality, watching the Chinamaxxing trend only makes us yearn for the true China more.

**ELLIE GUO '29 (EGUO@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) AND CLORIS SHI '29 (CLORISSHI@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) ARE ALWAYS IN A VERY CHINESE TIME OF THEIR LIVES.**

**GRAPHIC BY SAGE WILLEY '29**



# Harvard: Not Your Mother's School

Tracing Harvard's evolution through the story of Radcliffe's integration.

BY ADIN HOOTNICK '29

If you think your mother went to Harvard, that likely isn't the full story. If she graduated before 1999, her diploma bears the seals of both Harvard University and Radcliffe College and the signatures of both schools' presidents. While it is easy to overlook this detail, it points to a chapter of Harvard's history when women's education was entirely separated from the College rather than within it.

Harvard opened its gates in 1636 as a college for men. For two and a half centuries, that intention shaped everything about it—its classrooms, customs, and networks. The traditions that still exist throughout the University today were formed in a world that did not envision women as students walking through Harvard Yard. However, this does not mean that women arrived at the College in the late twentieth century without precedent; they carried with them a rich and important past that had long been developing over at Radcliffe.

Established in 1879 by a "Committee of Seven Lady Managers," Radcliffe College was intended to give women access to Harvard's undergraduate instruction and resources without having to grant them admission to Harvard itself. Radcliffe functioned in close coordination with Harvard—albeit without the same access to funding, prestige, or institutional power. Women attended lectures taught by Harvard professors, completed the same coursework, and pursued rigorous intellectual lives, but did so under a separate administrative structure and received degrees bearing the Radcliffe name. Despite its structural limitations, Radcliffe was more than a mere footnote to Harvard; for generations of women, it was the meaningful center of their academic lives.

Under a 1977 "non-merger merger" agreement, Radcliffe students were admitted as official Harvard College students, and their degrees began to reflect that shared identity. On paper, the divide appeared to narrow significantly. However, in practice, Radcliffe still operated as a separate space oriented towards women's experiences at a university that had never carved out a space for them.

A full merger was not accomplished until 1999. Radcliffe College ceased to exist as an independent undergraduate institution; in its place emerged the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, devoted to research and academic fellowships.

But while this union symbolized an institutional move forward towards equality, it was nonetheless bittersweet for many Radcliffe students who sought recognition as academic

equals, yet also valued having a college explicitly dedicated to prioritizing women's academic lives and experiences.

For nearly a century, Radcliffe had provided a space where female education was the primary focus. Even as students took courses taught by Harvard professors, Radcliffe offered advising networks, leadership opportunities, and community structures centered solely on women's experiences. It cultivated its own alumnae networks and traditions. For generations of female graduates, Radcliffe was not merely a pathway to Harvard; it was a destination in its own right.

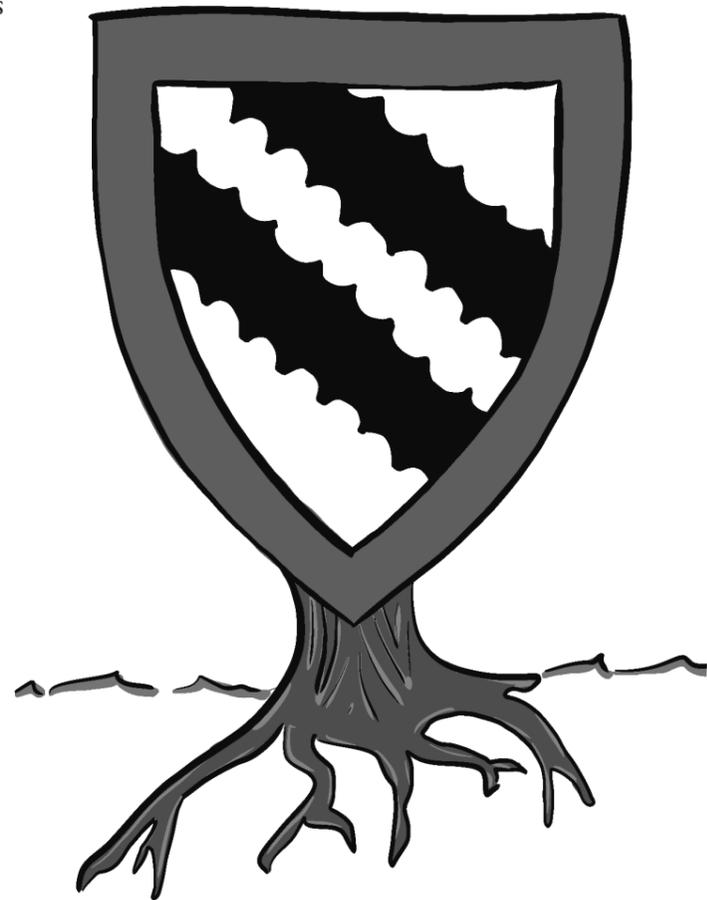
When the merger dissolved Radcliffe College, it brought an end to this distinctive undergraduate community. In classrooms, leadership roles, and faculty mentorship, women were not the exception or the minority—they were the norm. Some alumnae described the change as both historic and complicated: historic in its affirmation of equality and exciting in its potential, yet complicated in the loss of an independent college designed explicitly to support them. Others wondered whether, in a University still overwhelmingly male at the senior levels, there would remain enough institutional focus on the particular needs of women in higher education.

Today, Harvard presents itself as fully coeducational, and it is. Over half of its undergraduates are women who occupy visible positions of power and influence within the University. Current students of all genders move between Harvard Yard and the Radcliffe Quadrangle without considering the history of that geographical divide. For many, the Quad is simply housing, little more than a slightly longer shuttle ride.

The history that shaped Harvard's geography rarely enters the conversation, and yet, traces of it remain all over the University today. The legacy of Radcliffe remains visible in the architecture of the Quad, in alumni networks and stories, in the Radcliffe Institute, and in the broader narrative of Harvard's history.

For instance, the College's women's rowing team still competes as Harvard-Radcliffe—the only women's varsity program to keep the Radcliffe name and black-and-white colors after the 1974 athletic merger.

This deliberate decision ensures that the identity of the original Radcliffe crew is preserved even within a unified athletics department.



For men, Harvard's institutional identity reads as continuity. For women, it reads as convergence—an intellectual establishment first built and defined by exclusion, and only later recognized as coequal. Radcliffe was not merely Harvard's step-sister; she was a matriarch. Radcliffe was the space in which generations of brilliant and pioneering women proved that they already belonged to a university that had not yet figured out how to include them.

Harvard likes to imagine its rich history as an uninterrupted tradition. But the story of Radcliffe suggests something more complex. Harvard is Harvard not only through the preservation of its great traditions, but also through the examination and transformation of others. The University we know today exists because another institution insisted on being a part of its story, until Harvard could no longer tell its own history without it.

**ADIN HOOTNICK '29 (AHOOTNICK@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS COMPING THE "INDEPENDENT."**

**GRAPHIC BY CLARA LAKE '27**

# New World, Same Indy

A look back at the forces that created the “Independent.”

BY TÉA SHOULDICE '29

What’s the use of a college newspaper if it doesn’t actually represent the student body? Discourse in a democratic society can rarely survive with only one source of news, and the microcosm of the world that is Harvard’s campus is no exception.

In 1969, Morris Abram, Jr. ’71, Roland Cole ’70, Richard Paisner ’70, and Mark Shields ’70 founded the “Harvard Independent,” intending to challenge prevailing campus narratives, ideological homogeneity, and the dominance of “The Harvard Crimson.” The convictions of the Indy’s founders had a tremendous influence on the philosophy of the paper—the unofficial motto “We Belong to No One but Ourselves” exists for a reason—and continues to be just as important more than 56 years after the first issue of The “Independent” ran. Yet while the circumstances are very different from those of the 1960s, today’s

political climate is possibly even more complex, making the “Independent’s” contributions all the more important.

The late 1960s marked the height of student upheaval regarding the Vietnam War on university campuses across America. On Harvard’s campus, anti-war protests were spearheaded by Harvard’s chapter of Students for a Democratic Society, a major New Left student activist organization. Anti-war sentiment was certainly not uncommon on campus, but the student protesters were far from a monolith; in Nov. 1966, for instance, around 800 students forced then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara out of his car as he attempted to leave campus. Yet just days later, nearly 3,000 Harvard students signed a letter apologizing for this treatment. Harvard student protests escalated in Apr. 1969, when between 30 and 70 students occupied University Hall and forcibly expelled faculty from the building to demand reforms.

At the time of such extreme turmoil at Harvard, “The Harvard Crimson” was the main source of campus news. However, the paper had acquired a reputation for writing with a political slant—it was, as former paper President James M. Fallows ’70 described to “The Harvard Crimson,” “kind of lefty.” Abram, Cole, Paisner, and Shields understood it was time for a public forum rooted in contradiction and diverse discourse.

The Vietnam War protests that inspired the “Independent’s” founding are often cited as one of the most—if not the most—chaotic eras of American college life. It’s unsurprising that under these circumstances, the founders of this publication believed it necessary to dissent from the loudest voices among their peers and devote space to contradicting the mainstream.

The “Independent’s” inaugural issue, published on Thursday, Oct. 9, 1969, made no secret of its goal to platform dissident perspectives. The cover of the first issue alone includes an overview of different opinions on student participation in University policy reform: “Student Participation Disastrous?—Brewster;” an interview that engages with “The Emerging Republican Majority,” a book by Nixon political strategist Kevin Phillips—“Lowenstein Calls for Renewal;” and a collaboration between two students to provide different opinions on SDS activism—“SDS Activism – Three Fronts.”

Over 50 years since the upheaval surrounding its founding moments concluded, the “Independent” continues to carry on its original purpose and the legacy of its founders.

The first article in the most recent Pop Culture issue, published Feb. 26, reported on the administration’s subpar treatment of

over 2,000 essential workers during the recent blizzard. The Wellness issue, which ran the week prior, covered the discourse surrounding the Institute of Politics’ Spring 2026 Visiting Fellows from opposing political parties—contrasting with a “The Harvard Crimson” sarcastic op-ed criticizing Visiting Fellow and former Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy. The “Independent” also enshrines subversion with its annual Weed and Sex issues, published in Apr. and Nov.

But in keeping with the “Independent’s” founding, on-campus controversies are not the only topics of concern within this publication’s paragraphs. Today, Harvard students are confronted with a very different type of disruption; instead of a divide between factions of the student body, the Trump administration has launched a review of higher education and academic independence from the outside.

Harvard and the Trump administration have traded legal blows as the administration has sought to revoke billions of dollars of federal grants, interfere with admissions practices, and bar admitted international students from attending. Members of the Class of 2029, 2028, and 2027 do not know a version of Harvard that is not under speculation by the federal government.

Though recent tumult with the White House has united the student body in representing their home institution, the ability of University affiliates expressing dissatisfaction with Harvard or American political leadership has become particularly precarious—especially because the larger cultural zeitgeist seems to have adopted, intentionally or otherwise, the Trump administration’s resistance toward Harvard’s policies. Now, everything from guest speakers to student concerns about prospective grade policy overhauls falls under national scrutiny, and may very well show up as a “New York Times” headline.

In this new reality, it becomes all the more important that the “Independent” remains steadfast in its values and continues to provide a platform for dissent of all kinds. The “Independent” would do well to continue to remember its roots, even as changing circumstances and university politics force constant adaptation and growth.

**TÉA SHOULDICE '29  
(TEASHOULDICE@COLLEGE.  
HARVARD.EDU) WOULD LIKE TO  
STAY OUT OF THE NEWS.**

**GRAPHIC BY NESHAMA RYMAN '28**



# ARTS

## A Satirical College Essay: Furikake on my Avocado Toast

A story about my ancestors and their home: Wasia.

BY AUDREY ADAM '27

Harvard values building a diverse student population and asks applicants to reflect on their roots and how their backgrounds shape them as students today. In exactly 893 words, describe your roots and their impact on your personal growth.

I am a vessel of my ancestors during the most unexpected of times.

They do not visit me in dreams or make their presence known as I roam the streets of Taiwan, photographing signs for Google Translate. They do not bless me with forgotten knowledge during my Advanced Placement European History unit exam on the Victorian era. No, my ancestors are far too selective for that. They intervene only in moments of dire consequence.

It's in the grill parties on warm summer nights in California, surrounded by friends and family, when I stand at the condiment table and confront the binary that begs me to identify my existence: Kewpie Japanese mayo or Hellmann's mayo on my sandwich?

I am Wasian, a child of two proud citizens of the Republic of Wasia, founded in the late twentieth century after the two provinces finally put the Green Tea Feud of 1979 behind them. My mother comes from the Eastern Province and my father from the West. While the two sides officially reconciled after the Treaty of Tea (commonly known as the TreaTea), historians agree that lingering tensions persist. I am a melting pot of traditions and geopolitics, serving as a symbol of Wasia's interprovincial reconciliation. From afar, I am a symbol of peace. But inside my head, a constant war rages over how to represent my nation, especially from across the ocean.

I can often feel my East-Wasian ancestors on my left shoulder and my Western ancestors on my right—my great-grandmother Pam-Mei of the East at war with my great-grandfather Ignacy of the West, locked in a heated argument across my collarbones. While it may seem like a trivial choice, one that should be determined by flavor preference, my condiment preference is a choice between which province of Wasia to publicly favor. Until Hellmann's drops their own Kewpie mayo, I must choose between my regional identities, at least momentarily.

"This," my ancestors murmur in my ear, "is why we endured. Why we fought. For your strength, for your decision, for your being."

Whose struggle for power do I honor through this sandwich?

Perhaps their intervention comes at odd times. I do know this—it is something I've grappled with my whole life. When I most desire them, their voices disappear. My ancestors are not impressed by accolades or awards.

I heard no whispers of congratulations when I founded a nonprofit that provided clean drinking water to 1,000,000 underserved communities at the age of ten. They were silent when I rescued one of the Queen's swans from drowning in a pond at Hyde Park, and I was given the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

But my East-Wasian ancestors seem to speak for me when someone asks where to find Lao Gan Ma chili crisp at H-Mart, and my Western delegation chimes in to locate Cadbury chocolate fingers at the Waitrose off Gloucester Road. During these times, I feel the full weight of my lineage lean forward in their chairs behind me, infusing me with wisdom, knowledge, and the strength to walk down aisle three.

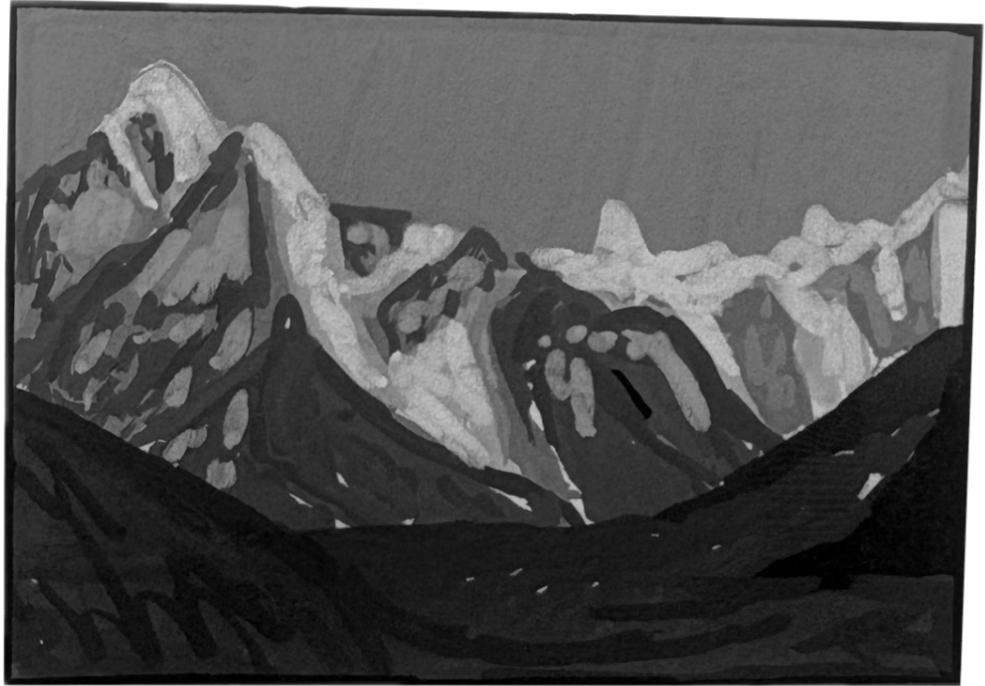
In this struggle, I have come to see the discourse of my ancestors as no longer an argument to tune out, but a (not so) gentle reminder of their presence.

"You are Eastern," Pam-Mei insists. "You love scallion pancakes and don't digest dairy properly."

"Ignore her, Audrey," Ignacy replies. "Once you take Lactaid, you are Western. Join us for some croissants and tea this morning."

I remain torn, but in the struggle, I find some comfort. Without their disagreements in my ear, there would be no discussion. And without discussion, would Wasia even exist?

Harvard asks me to describe my roots, and I will not offer a miraculous reconciliation or outlet in how I choose to identify myself. It's not something I think I can ever resolve, unlike my work at the latest Davos Conference, where I streamlined the creation of a five-century plan for environmentally conscious AI initiatives. But to Harvard, I offer myself as curious individual



eager to come to campus and open this often-overlooked discussion.

At Harvard, I hope to pursue a degree in the rigorous interdisciplinary field of Wasian History Studies with a secondary in Psychology. I want to spend my next four years diving deeper into courses such as WSNS 102: "The White-Washing of Matcha," and WSNS 1067: "Keanu Reeves, Alysia Liu, and Olivia Rodrigo: Role-Model Wasians." I am also greatly interested in contributing to Professor Walton-Shi's research on the "Wasian Check" TikTok trend and its geopolitical implications. I am eager to immerse myself in a discipline that sits close to my heart, and more importantly, my shoulders.

But for now, I will continue to live my embodied experience as a Wasian, listening to my ancestors' thoughts and learning to define my identity on my own. Perhaps, this is what Harvard is really asking—the willingness to keep sitting with the question, even when both provinces insist they have the answer. I'll put Kewpie on one half of my sandwich and Hellmann's on the other. It's no longer just a sandwich; now, it is a representation of me.

**AUDREY ADAM '27  
(AUDREYADAM@COLLEGE.  
HARVARD.EDU) IS PLANNING  
A GIRLS TRIP TO WASIA THIS  
SUMMER.**

**GRAPHIC BY LINDEN  
MCCARL '28**





# Exploring American Hometowns: Brentwood, California

Suburbia, reconsidered.

BY ROHAN TYAGI '29

When I introduce myself, I say I'm from "the Bay" to be strategically vague. If I'm lucky, someone mentions a cousin in San Jose or an internship in San Francisco, and we nod at each other in mutual recognition of tech-adjacent geography. If I'm less lucky, they ask the question: "Where in the Bay?"

There's a pause when I decide how honest I want to be that day.

Sometimes I say East Bay. Sometimes I say "near Antioch," the end of the yellow line on Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), which feels concrete enough to be real but vague enough to avoid scrutiny. And sometimes I tell the truth—Brentwood.

If I'm in NorCal, someone inevitably tilts their head and says, "That's not really the Bay." If I'm in the rest of California, they ask if I mean the Brentwood next to the Pacific Palisades. The neighborhood with gated hedges and political power, the one adjacent to the ocean. This is not my home. From the masses in Cambridge, I get two polite nods and no follow-up questions.

My Brentwood sits at the tail end of Contra Costa County, where suburbs loosen their grip, and the land remembers it used to be dotted with farms. We are technically tethered to the Bay, but we lean toward the inland Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, toward heat that presses down on you in late August and sunsets that turn the sky a violent blood orange over the water.

The stereotypical Bay Area culture—the one of venture capital and kombucha on tap, of startup

culture and transplants cycling in and out—feels sterile to me. Brentwood couldn't be farther from that. We are dirt bikes roaring down residential streets, Norteño bass vibrating through the pavement, and low-riders bouncing to Mike Sherm. We are country music pulsing from block parties where someone's uncle grills corn next to a tray of Ilocano empanadas. We are Americana filtered through the delta wetland breeze, blowing queen palm trees whose shadows stretch across sun-baked lawns.

We live in the shadow of Mount Diablo, which looms so large in our skyline that it's easy to assume that the devil himself chooses Brentwood for his summer home. Maybe that's why everyone was so eager to renounce the town. The senior year of high school felt like a collective shedding. Loving Brentwood was suspicious because ambition meant leaving. To linger in Brentwood felt lazy; to admit you loved it felt naïve. I imagined myself packing my suitcase, feeling the sunburned asphalt under my sneakers one last time, watching windmills spin down Vasco Road, and stepping into a city that promised more than rows of orchards and chain-link fences. And yet, the pullback was relentless.

It is hard to admit that there is love in Brentwood. That I love it.

I find love in the Filipino grocery store with the flickering sign that reads MA(B)UHAY, the B perpetually unlit. It's in the Indian market that became an Afghan outlet before becoming Indian again, but still stocks bakhoor next to bolani—a refrigerated dosa mix beside halal cuts of meat. It's in the fruterios: white fruit carts with rainbow umbrellas, parked outside school at 3:20 p.m., plastic cups of mango dusted with Tajín, chicharrón bags swinging from wrists as kids spill downhill toward two competing bagel shops that have somehow both survived.

Brentwood is green grass hills in the spring, the kind you roll down and regret immediately because the foliage leaves green ghosts on denim. Brentwood is endless rows of coral champagne cherries ripening in u-pick orchards. People climb a

clanky metal staircase to reach the sweetest fruits, brimmed hats stained red by fallen berries, by the end of the afternoon.

Brentwood is my neighbor's grapevines creeping over the fence, wine esters mixing with citrus zest off my dad's sumo oranges. We sit on the edge of the Sacramento River Delta, boats idling under the Antioch bridge overpass, their wakes folding into each other as the sun drops heavily, its intensity surpassing whatever that day's ultraviolet index predicts.

What I love most about Brentwood is how it keeps revealing itself. For a place that prides itself on its unassuming nature and low expectations, Brentwood holds multitudes of stories: Filipino, Punjabi, Afghan, Mexican, Midwestern transplant, corn farmer, commuter, and a kid plotting their escape. It is stubborn and generous and warmer than it lets on.

Now, when I return home from college, I hear it again, the headstrong insistence on leaving, in search of an escape from suburbia's grasp. Before, that was all I used to hear. Now, I hear sweet longings to return to a Delta sunset and a familiarity that no walkable city with good public transportation can reproduce. They were always there. Now I hear them in the quiet pull of the fields and the warm light over Freeway 580, in the part of myself that knows some places never really leave you.

I still say I'm from the Bay because it's easier that way.

But when I think of home, I never picture fog rolling over bridges or glass office towers reflecting the sun. I see a flickering B basking in dry heat. I taste cherry skin split between my teeth. I feel the wary eye of a cow on a narrow hiking trail.

And I know exactly which Brentwood I mean.

**ROHAN TYAGI '29  
(ROHANTYAGI@COLLEGE.  
HARVARD.EDU) IS BUSY  
PUTTING EVERYONE ON TO  
BAY AREA LEGEND MIKE  
SHERM.**

**GRAPHIC BY ANNABELLA  
BURTON-BOONE '29**



# wood & would've-beens

of timber, tongue, and time.

BY CINDION HUANG '29

Today I learned the  
history  
of my people. Of how their  
story survived  
in blocks of wood I now hold—how, in  
times of  
strife, they turned toward nature  
to be understood.

Today I learned that history  
can be as small as a weaver's pin  
or an old bottle filled with life  
or a bracelet of yarn so thin  
like a Florentine wishbone at night.

I watch the movements  
contained in these blocks of wood—  
how my miniature monkey model  
journeys toward 西天 from his 水帘洞;  
how the hooves of my wooden horse  
kick  
as it brings success swift & quick.

Today I ache for the history  
of my people—for the woods would've  
been  
a statement of prosperity &  
craftsmanship  
instead of a cheap medium for street-sold  
stereotypes  
at tourist sites—  
for the northern woods protected us  
from foreign fights  
until they faltered under brute forces  
from the West—

the West that Wukong longed for  
& risked his life to reach, became  
colonized by  
the same West that slaughtered millions  
in the next millennium—

for 木 sounds exactly like 目,  
yet the limbs of the still wood spread  
like stories while the moving gaze held  
still  
like a bookshelf, tacitly waiting

to be filled—

still, we can't seem to do anything  
but tacitly wait &  
watch our woods  
become  
would've beens—  
& then it'll be too late.



**CINDION HUANG '29**  
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IS MISSING DISHES FROM  
SHANGHAI, HER HOME, AS  
SHE WRITES THIS PIECE.

**GRAPHIC BY KERRIE ZHU**  
'28

<sup>1</sup> Pronounced “xī tiān”; Literally “West Sky,” the destination in the famous Chinese canonical text Journey to the West.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced “shuǐ lián dòng”; “The cave of Water Curtains,” where the Monkey King Wukong was raised.

<sup>3</sup> Pronounced “mù”; “Wood”

<sup>4</sup> Pronounced “mù”; “Eye” or “gaze”

# “Truth or Illusion?": A Review of “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”

What a middle-aged couple’s crumbling marriage can teach us.

BY ELLIE GUO '29

From Feb. 26 to March 1, the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club performed Edward Albee’s 1962 play “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” in the Loeb Experimental Theater. The play contains dark themes and explores the deepest recesses of human behavior, including multiple screaming matches, copious drinking, glass smashing, profanity, and violence. Though it takes three acts and roughly three hours to perform, the show does not feel long at all—the actors skillfully build tension and drama until it bursts.

“[The show] just gets crazier and crazier and crazier, and then at the end, we’re left with this kind of deep, emotional core,” director Ben Arthurs ’27 said in an interview with the “Independent.”

Before the house lights dim and the actors take the stage, the audience is invited to survey the set as part of the Loeb Ex’s layout. The time—around 2 a.m.—is projected onto the back wall, the seconds ticking ominously.

The set, designed by George Atkin ’28, is both familiar and eerie. The wooden furniture and Persian rugs are exactly what one would expect in the living room of a middle-aged couple, yet there are jagged figurines and a human skull on their side table. Behind their couch is a bar table covered in liquor bottles, wine glasses, and decanters filled with amber liquid from which the actors constantly drink throughout the show. The audience is seated on three sides of Martha and George’s living room. The entrance of the Loeb Ex and one of the theater’s side doors are used to represent the house’s front door and an exit from the living room, shaping a fully immersive setting.

## Act One: Fun and Games

The play begins with George (Vander Ritchie ’26), a history professor struggling to climb the academic ladder, and his wife Martha (Natalie Bernstein ’28), the daughter of the college’s president. According to the characters themselves, George is “40-something but looks 55,” and Martha is six years older than him. They enter, arguing about a trivial detail from a movie, and Martha compulsively adjusts the decor in their home, physically creating tension in the space. George walks with a bit of a slouch, embodying a bitter man so disappointed with his life that he can only make fun of it.

In an interview with the “Independent,” Bernstein described how she uses her character’s walk to convey meaning. “Walking as a woman in her 50s who’s very weighed down by life is

very different than walking around as a 20-year-old,” she said. “And so for me, I literally just walk around and get weighed down, feel heavy, get the combination of intoxication and just try and physically embody that around the space.”

The opening scene oscillates between tense, uncomfortable quarreling and moments of relaxed humor. George is, at times, a familiar character—a sarcastic, eccentric history professor in tweed, reminiscent of Robin Williams’ “Dead Poets Society” Mr. Keating—and at other times, unrecognizably cruel with his words, frustratingly passive-aggressive. The heated argument between him and Martha is suddenly interjected with a moment of earnest laughter.

As Ritchie describes these opening moments, “we’ve got this dynamic of playful arguing. We’ve got real humor, real affection for each other, and it’s truly just one of the most profound scenes of the entire show.”

Martha sings, “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?”—a pun on “who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?” The name fits into the meter of the original song and is a nod to the strenuous relationship between the author Virginia Woolf and her husband, Leonard. Ostensibly, the tune came from a joke song that a guest at the faculty party sang, which George does not find amusing.

Martha tells George that a young couple—Nick (Theodore Ansell ’29), a biology professor at the College, and Honey (Oona Yaffe ’28)—are visiting their home for a drink. George is upset that Martha invited the couple without his knowledge, and every subsequent interaction among the four is filled with awkward laughter and tension. Though it initially seems like a normal conversation, subtle details in the actors’ body language make the scene extremely off-putting. For example, Honey drinks her brandy with both hands, grimacing after every sip.

The cast’s costumes, designed by Emily Kuang ’29, blend in with the neutral and beige tones of the set, except for Honey’s sky blue blazer, which she deposits on the couch when she enters and does not move until the end of the play.

Again, the character dynamics alternate between normalcy and enmity. In a scene in which George and Nick converse alone, George is genial, offering advice to the younger professor. Then, suddenly, he asks about Honey’s weight, calling her “slim-hipped,” and accusing Nick of being a eugenicist. Nick, sitting on the couch, fumes as George paces the room, his fists clenching and shoulders twitching. The tension dissipates when Nick responds with an eerily calm, “Are you finished?”

Ansell described the link between

speech and character when playing Nick. “I’ve been watching a lot of ‘Mad Men’ recently. It’s been making me think about how people talk. And so the way I approach my character was through speech. I am British, so I’m doing an American accent,” he said.

“I kind of went to the accent first, and then came out through it, and developed a character from the accent,” he added.

The situation escalates when Martha and Honey return to the living room, as George grows ominously perturbed at the mention of his son. Martha begins to taunt him relentlessly, mocking his lack of ambition, as he was supposed to rise to become the president of the college. In rage, George smashes a bottle and loudly sings “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” to drown out Martha’s voice.

## Act Two: Walpurgisnacht

“Walpurgisnacht,” which is the German word for an annual witches’ meeting, begins in several seconds of silence as George reflects on what he has just done. He talks to Nick candidly, telling a humorous story about a boy who was mocked for mispronouncing “bourbon” as “bergin.” Nick reveals that Honey had a hysterical pregnancy and married her because he believed she was pregnant. George mentions that Martha’s father’s second wife looks like a witch, connecting to the title of the act.

The women return to the room, and Honey suggests they put on music to dance. George initially puts on a record of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7.

Yaffe spoke about the importance of music in developing her performance. “I did a private moment in my room, which is where you pretend that you’re your character alone, and you try to do things that if someone walked in, they would stop doing. And so I put on Beethoven’s Seventh, which plays in the play, and I just tried to behave like Honey for 20 minutes,” she said.

Honey dances to the symphony in a frenzied manner, as if possessed. This is put to an end when Martha replaces the music with a sultry jazz song and begins to dance sensually with Nick. George reveals to the group that Nick told him about Honey’s hysterical pregnancy through an ostensibly fictional story. Once Honey realizes that the story is about her life, she breaks into devastating sobs.

Throughout the play, but especially in these scenes, there is a sickness motif. Honey is constantly vomiting off-stage and clutching her stomach. As they hurl insults, Martha and George call each other “sick” and “disgusting.”

The act ends with Martha threatening to have sex with Nick, and George acting completely indifferent, reading from his history book about the fall of a civilization. As Martha and Nick kiss, they hit the windchimes in the entryway, filling the theater with a cacophony of noise before plunging into silence once again.

### Act Three: The Exorcism

“The Exorcism” begins with a monologue from Martha, in which she pretends to speak directly to George and her father. Bernstein’s gaze, fixed on the armchair, is thoroughly convincing—it is unclear whether Martha is only pretending to be in dialogue, or if she is actually hallucinating. Nick joins her in a moment where the audience is allowed a glimpse into Martha’s sorrows. She talks about herself in the third person, saying “Martha is abandoned,” and describes feeling like she is “suffocating.” She genuinely believes George makes her happy, but constantly pushes him away, denying herself joy. “George and Martha, sad, sad, sad,” she repeats.

“It really touches on this theme of stagnation and this fear of my life not being as I wanted it to be. And I think that on a human level, I very much fear stagnation and not moving forward in the way I want to,” Bernstein reflected.

George returns with a bouquet of snapdragons for Martha, which seems to genuinely impress her. However, he quickly begins throwing them on the ground and at Martha, yelling, “Truth or illusion?”

He demands that Martha and the guests sit down and play a game, which escalates into Martha and George screaming at each other, “I want you mad!” He insists that Martha tell an elaborate, detailed story about how they raised their son, calling it a “recitation.” As she does so, George chants in Latin.

The eerie chanting, which none of the other characters seem to acknowledge, conveys the exorcism. However, it is unclear who is getting exorcised. Martha’s recitation of her son’s childhood is nostalgic and motherly, seemingly purging her of her pent-up sorrows. Honey breaks into sobs and curls up into the fetal position on the couch. Nick convulses in his chair, clutching his chest.

After Martha’s recitation, Honey sits up and exclaims, “I want a child!”

“I love the Honey-Martha connection,” Bernstein said about this touching moment.

“[This connection] doesn’t exist before [this point in the show],” Yaffe added. The play’s commentary on societal expectations, especially the nuclear family, is illuminated in this moment.

George then tells Martha that he received a telegram saying that their son is dead, using the same wording from a story he told Nick earlier. Nick recognizes this and slowly comes to realize that Martha and George have made up a story about an imaginary son because they discovered they were infertile. Martha, distraught, desperately repeats, “You can’t kill him,” to George. But he does not seem to feel any remorse for Martha, as she broke the only rule of their game by mentioning their son to Honey.

Nick and Honey leave—finally taking her blue blazer off the couch, reminding us of just how much has happened in the past three hours—leaving Martha and George collapsed against the couch in emotional and physical exhaustion. Perhaps, then, it was the illusion and game dominating their life that was being exorcised. In the play’s final moments, all the lights dim except for a lamp and a spotlight with a shadow in the pattern of a window.



“It was very important to Ben that the setting be as realistic as possible. And so there were a lot of little things that I did try to do,” co-Tech Producer and Lighting Designer Alex Nugent ’28 said.

The cool-toned spotlight looked exactly like moonlight streaming through a window (so much so that I almost believed there was a glass pane in the theater). Martha and George sit next to each other, grieving the death of their fictional son. George begins to weakly sing “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” to which Martha responds, “I am.”

On the title of the play, Albee said in 1965: “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf means who’s afraid of the big bad wolf ... who’s afraid of living life without false illusions?” Perhaps this connects to the original story of “The Three Little Pigs,” as the big bad wolf blowing down the pigs’ straw and stick houses could symbolize the destruction of life’s illusions in Albee’s play.

The production’s realism drew attention to the significance of its themes despite the tumultuous, uncanny context of the play.

“This is hopefully something that leaves people thinking about their own lives and what fulfills them, sort of what we tell ourselves to make ourselves happy,” Arthurs said.

The clock projected at the beginning of the show is also displayed during both intermissions, showing the time creeping into the early hours of the morning. We get the sense that the play happens in real time—no time skips or flashbacks—so we experience every minute alongside the characters. The Loeb Ex setting enhanced the experience, giving the impression of being a silent spectator, watching the play’s events unfold directly in front of us. The ambiguity of the fourth wall in the play reminds the audience to reflect on the lies they tell themselves.

“With student actors too, it kind of is like a warning of what can become,” Arthurs added.

Despite the inebriation and drama, the characters are more similar to ourselves than they seem. “[I asked myself] How would I actually react in this situation? Well, that might be actually how my character reacts in a slight variation of some sort,” Ansell said.

This play was an ambitious production—as Arthurs wrote in the program notes, they had “so little time that a professional theater company would be legally forbidden from performing the play with a timeline like this.” Despite this challenge, the cast and staff worked together to produce a devastatingly beautiful performance. Each character had their own distinct set of fears, regrets, and aspirations that I could see in myself.

“Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” is a play that pushes everything to the extreme. But in doing so, it provokes us to question the stories we tell ourselves.

“I think that this idea of the illusions that we convince ourselves are true in our lives, like what we buy into to satisfy ourselves or to fulfill ourselves,” Arthurs said. “Maybe it’s on a smaller scale, but I think that’s something that everybody kind of has in their lives. And it’s not necessarily a bad thing, but this is a show that exposes that in the most forward way.”

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**PHOTO COURTESY OF “THE WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF” PRODUCTION TEAM**

# Kitchen Sink No. 6

BY LUKE WAGNER '26 AND JONAH KARAFIOL '26

The weeks accumulated like dust on the library's upper shelves—fine at first, then enough to blur the edge of the wood, dulling the days until it was unclear where one ended, and the next began.

At first, I had mistaken this for stability—an order upheld gently by schedule and certainty, the comforting tyranny of bells and deadlines and meal-times. But by the middle of the term, it began to feel mechanical, autonomous—the same corridors presenting themselves with the slightest variations of light, the same phrases uttered by different mouths. If you watched closely, you could see the university doing what it did best: molding more of the same.

But I, of course, was not watching closely. Instead, I was watching the rain. It had been raining all afternoon, and when I returned to the quad, my shoes left dark prints on the flagstones that held for a few seconds before fading. The oak tree outside my window had dropped a handful of leaves; they lay in the wet like discarded notes. I paused at the entrance to the stairs and looked up at the third-floor landing that led to my room. Room fourteen. The number did not feel like a name, but it had the obstinacy of one.

Inside, the room was unchanged. The two beds. The desk beneath the window. The wardrobe with its old brass handle that was always colder than expected. And beside the door, fixed to the wall with a kind of municipal confidence, the sink—white porcelain, two taps, a faint rusted mark clinging to the basin like a reprimand. The hot water had its habitual delay. It liked to make you wait. It liked to remind you that there were rules, even for water.

I washed my hands anyway. I had not touched anything filthy. My hands simply felt wrong—too present, too capable. I worked the soap in until my knuckles burned slightly and the skin tightened. I had barely dried them when there was a knock. It was a quick, private rhythm—two taps, a pause, one more—like someone reminding you of something you had already agreed to.

I opened the door. She slipped in without pausing, coat damp at the shoulders, gloves still on, the rain in her hair darkened by lamplight. She did not look around in the tentative way visitors do. She looked past me, into the room, then back to my face, and I resented the way the impatience in her eyes steadied me.

You're late, she said. Late for what? I questioned. For the decision, she replied, and began undoing the buttons of her coat. She hung it over the back of the chair with the ease of someone who had done it before, then drew off her gloves and set them on the desk beside my papers. The sight of her hands—bare, unprotected—registered as an intimacy before I had decided it was one. She flexed her fingers once, as if relieved to have them back, and then her attention moved to the page on top of my stack.

*Hamlet* again, she said. You love a man who can talk himself out of any act.

I had the immediate impulse to defend myself, which was childish, and the secondary impulse to agree, which was worse. I said nothing. Silence never sat comfortably between us; it sharpened instead, became a tool she could use.

You've been watching yourself, she continued, scanning the ink as if it were evidence.

You sit here and narrate your own life. It makes you feel safe, she said.

I felt heat rise at my neck. The accusation landed too close to whatever was true.

And you? I asked. I don't have time for that, she said, and finally looked up. Her eyes held mine without apology. You're going to do something, Thomas, or you're going to spend the whole term rehearsing what you might have done.

The name did not snag. It came out of her mouth and entered the room like a key turning, as if it had been waiting. I crossed the space between us with a kind of obedience I would have denied in any other context. There was no declaration, no negotiation—only the sudden collapse of distance and the unmistakable relief of being in the body without commentary. The bed springs complained. The chair struck the wall. Somewhere in the building, a pipe clicked, indifferent. Rain tapped the window in steady, patient strokes.

...

Later, she lay on her back and studied the crack in the ceiling as if it were a problem to solve. The lamplight had lowered; the room's edges softened. She seemed untroubled. I began gathering myself back into place—sheet pulled higher, breath measured, mind returning to its officiousness—until she turned her head and said, almost lazily, You have an ugly room.

It isn't mine, I said too quickly.

She rolled onto her side, propped her head on her hand, and regarded me with that look of hers that made me feel I had offered the wrong answer on purpose. Whose is it, then?

The question should have been absurd. It was my room by every measure the university cared about. My name on the roster. My trunk under the bed. My books on the desk. But the question lodged anyway, because the room did not always feel like an extension of me; sometimes it felt like something I inhabited provisionally, a space that tolerated me so long as I performed the right routine. I swallowed.

Mine, I said.

She watched me for a moment longer, then let it go, the way she let most things go when they ceased to amuse her. She sat up, reached for her stockings, and began to dress with the brisk restoration of order that mother left early. Buttons, hooks, the return of symmetry. Her gloves went back on last. She stood, smoothing her skirt, and the whole room seemed to tighten around her, leaving.

Hendricks mentioned you at tea, she said without looking at me. Hendricks does not take tea with you, I said.

Not with me. With my uncle. My uncle likes the illusion of influence. She said it casually, but I heard the effort beneath it; she had been holding in the sentence for some time. Maybe since she entered. I stayed quiet. I could feel that the next thing she said would matter.

He asked if I knew you. I said I did. He said he was glad. He said you were—how did he put it?—capable of a certain kind of penetration. She paused, almost smiling. He meant it as praise. Men like him always mean it as praise.

I laughed once, sharp and involuntary,

because the phrasing was so perfectly Hendricks that it made my lips tighten.

Then her voice altered slightly. He also asked about Edward.

The name struck the room with a weight the earlier one had not. I felt my stomach tighten, the way it tightens before you step onto a slippery stone. I made myself answer evenly.

Edward?

She nodded. He said Edward wrote something too. On madness. On tragedy. He said it was strange, having two students with such different temperaments arrive at the same conclusion.

I said, I don't know anyone named Edward. I heard how thin it sounded, even to me. Not because I disbelieved it, but because the name had arrived with an odd familiarity that I could not locate. The mind hates an unplaced familiarity; it treats it like a threat.

She held my gaze. I could see her deciding whether to accept my denial as truth or as performance. Finally, she shrugged, a gesture of temporary dismissal rather than belief.

He is old, she said. They all are. They mix up names. They call people the wrong thing and then act astonished when the wrong thing answers.

She went to the door, hand on the latch, and looked back once.

Come tomorrow, she said.

Where?

Do you need to be told everything twice?

And then she was gone, footsteps diminishing down the corridor, the building swallowing her whole. I stood for a long moment in the aftermath, listening to the quiet settle. Only then did it occur to me that I could not place the exact instant she had arrived. I remembered the knock, opening the door, the damp coat at her shoulders; between those moments, the lines had blurred, as though someone had rubbed a thumb over wet ink.

I went to the sink. The hot tap hesitated—one, two—then complied. I washed my hands again, though there was nothing on them. The gesture felt necessary in a way I could not justify. The skin along my knuckles was already red from earlier; I scrubbed until it tightened and the pain gave me something clean to hold. When I dried them, my hands looked like hands that belonged to someone else, attached to me only by habit.

...

The next day, Hendricks asked me to stay after lecture. The others filed out, chairs scraping, papers gathered, the room emptying in that orderly exodus that always made me feel slightly ill. Hendricks stacked his books with deliberate irritation, then looked up, and his eyes narrowed not with suspicion but with a kind of bored appraisal, the look of a man who has seen enough students to believe none of them are exceptional except in their failures.

Mr. Hartley, he said. Yes, sir, I retorted. How are you finding *Hamlet*? he followed.

The question pretended to be casual. It was aimed at something else, and we both knew it. I answered anyway.

Difficult.

Everything worth reading is difficult, he said. The question is whether the difficulty instructs you, or merely flatters you.

He leaned forward. Your essay was very good. It had a clarity that suggests intelligence or desperation. Possibly both. Consider something for me. Tragedy is not guilt, Mr. Hartley. It is the structure that manufactures guilt as the only coherent end. Macbeth does not become guilty by accident; the play constructs a man for whom guilt is inevitable. You wrote as if guilt were a moral achievement.

I felt irritation rise—not at the criticism, but at the sensation of being handled, being shaped by his certainty. I held it down. Hendricks loved obedience almost as much as he despised it.

I understand, I said. Do you? Hendricks replied, and then, without changing tone, said, Because Mr. Edward's work suggests you do.

I felt my throat tighten. Whose work? I said. Your friend, he responded. The student in room fourteen.

Room fourteen. My room. He said it with the calm certainty of a registrar reading from a ledger. For a second, I thought I must have misheard him. Then I realized he had placed the words carefully, and he was watching to see what they did to my face.

There is no student in room fourteen but me, I said.

Hendricks's mouth tightened with impatience. Then you are lying, he said, or you have not been paying attention. He tapped the desk once, a small act of punctuation. Edward arrived in October. He writes with a kind of severity, not unlike yours, but with less theatre. He will become either a judge or a priest, depending on where his fear settles.

I stared at him. I could feel a laugh rising, then dying—laughter had no place to land here; it would have been interpreted as confession. Panic had rules. Silence had rules. I stayed within them.

I do not know an Edward, I said, and hated myself for how defensive it sounded.

If you insist, Hendricks replied, then explain why I have two essays with near-identical architecture. Two temperaments, one conclusion. Do you think I cannot tell when one mind has written in two hands?

Heat climbed my face. I said nothing. Hendricks watched me a moment longer, then dismissed me with a flick of the fingers.

You may go.

I left and walked quickly down the corridor, past portraits of dead men who had expected their names to outlast their bodies, down the stairs, and into the quad, where cold air hit me with a clarity that felt punitive. Students crossed the grass with books held to their chests. The oak tree stood where it always stood. Nothing in the scene registered what had just been said, and that was the most frightening part of it: the world's refusal to participate in my confusion.

I went back to room fourteen with the urgency of someone returning to a scene to see whether the evidence still exists. The room opened onto its familiar shape—bed, desk, wardrobe, sink—and for a moment I felt relief at its sameness. Then I saw the desk. The papers were not arranged as I had left them. A stack sat slightly left of its usual position. Someone had tried to put it back and missed by a fraction.

I crossed the room and lifted the top page.

The handwriting was not mine.

It was neat, restrained, the sentences

built with an iron patience. At the top, I caught a glimpse of the title, etched in a hand that felt more confident than my own: "Orestes: Madness as Duty." I flipped through and found quotations from Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles; marginal notes on fate, recognition, and blood as inheritance. Words I did not use. Words I knew anyway. My stomach tightened, and with it came a childish impulse to search the room for a hiding place—behind the wardrobe, under the bed—as though a second person might be crouched there with a candle and a secret. There was nothing. Only my breathing and the room's ordinary noises: a board settling, a pipe shifting in the wall.

I sat at the desk and read the pages. The argument held together. It held together too well. It read like someone trying to prove inevitability to himself. I looked down at my hands on the paper. There was a thin dark line beneath my thumbnail. Ink, I thought. Dirt. I scraped at it; it held.

I went to the sink and turned on the hot water. Under the stream, the dark line loosened. It was soot. I stared at it until my eyes began to ache. I washed, rinsed, and washed again. The soap lathered; the water ran clear; the soot disappeared. The sensation remained, lodged somewhere deeper than skin. My hands, never clean.

After a time, the door opened and my neighbor stood there, book under his arm, smile prepared. He said my name and stopped when he saw my face. Are you all right? he asked. I watched him watch me: a student at a sink, hands wet, posture too still. I said I was fine. He stepped in, glanced at the desk, and relief crossed his face in a way that made me want to strike him. Ah, he said. You have been working. That will do it. He picked up the top page without asking, read the title, and nodded, approving. This is good, he said. You have got an angle.

It is not mine, I said.

He blinked, then gave a soft laugh. Do not be modest. Hendricks will be pleased.

It is not mine, I repeated, and heard the strain.

His laughter died. His eyes flicked to my hands. You have been washing a lot, he said, with the

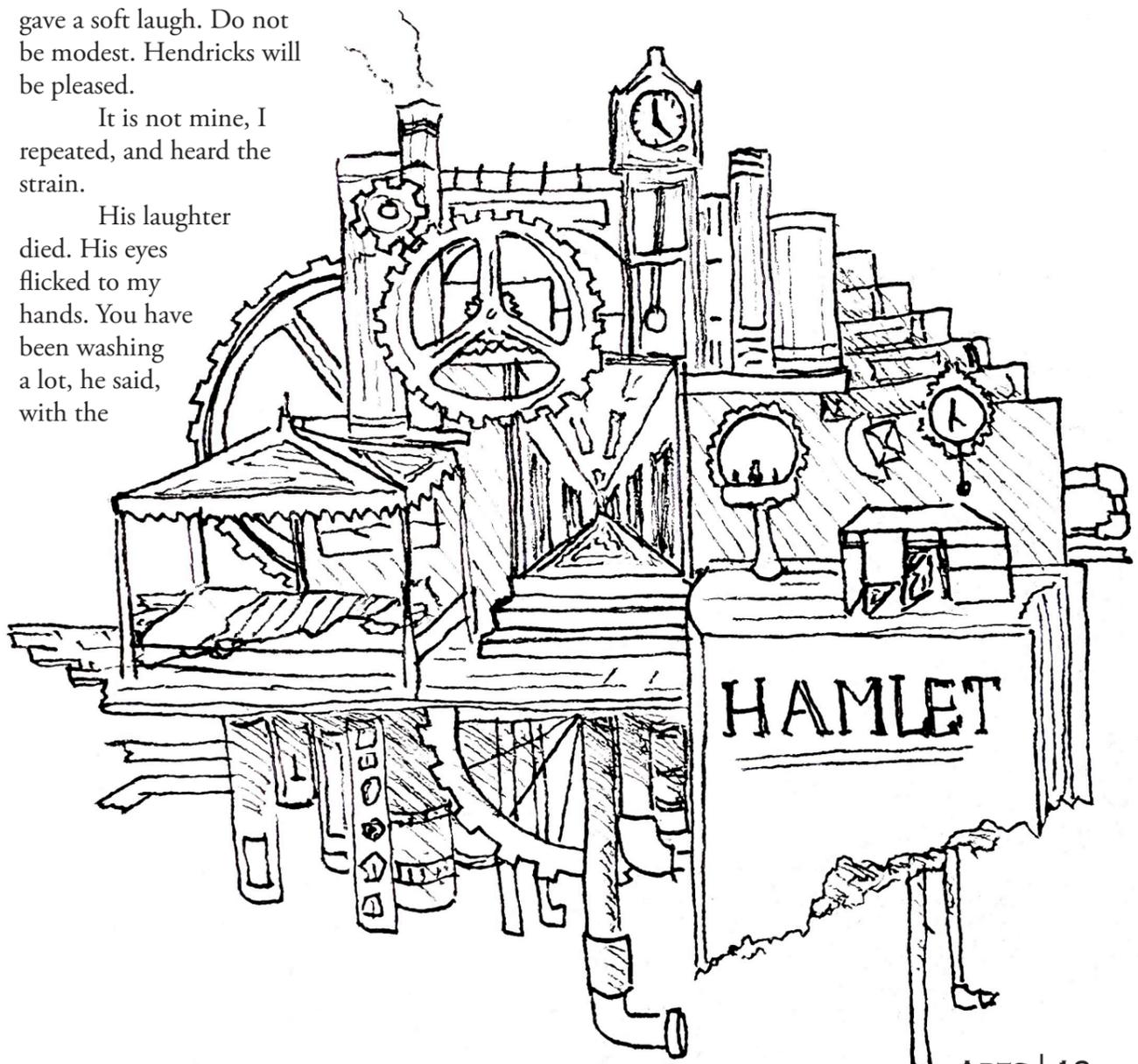
careful tone people use when they do not want to name what they are thinking. He began to offer kindness—stone does this, the first term is unsettling, everyone feels measured—and the words slid off me without entering. He left soon after, claiming another lecture, another engagement, and when the door shut, the room did not change; it simply became quieter, more exposed.

I did not go to supper. I sat in room fourteen and tried to lay the day out in order: Hendricks, the lecture hall, the corridor, the quad, the cold door handle, the papers on the desk, the soot under my nail. The sequence held until it did not. There was a small gap, a missing turn, and I could not tell whether the gap belonged to memory or to the day itself. The name Edward returned, uninvited, and sat in my mind with the dull insistence of a stain.

I went back to the sink. I turned the hot tap. It hesitated, then ran. I washed my hands again, and the skin reddened. Pain stayed honest. I shut off the water and listened to the silence. My breathing sounded too loud in the room; then, beside it, a second rhythm appeared—faint, misaligned, present enough that I could not pretend it was nothing. I held my breath. The rhythm stopped. I let mine resume, alone again, and for a moment I did not feel comfort so much as warning.

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**GRAPHIC BY CALEB BOYCE  
'29**



# SPORTS

## The Olympian of Canaday A

Four-time Olympic defenseman, gold medalist, and Hall of Famer, Angela Ruggiero '04, on how Harvard developed her identity and success outside of athletics.

BY MEGAN LEGAULT '28

*A cold wind cuts across your nose as you skate down the ice. The colors of the audience—red, white, blue—blur into a muted shade of purple as your heartbeat makes its presence known in your throat. In what feels like the blink of an eye, you look down. Gloves and helmets are scattered across the ice below your skates. You catch a glimpse of your golden reflection on the medal that hangs around your neck. The red glow of the scoreboard burns the moment into your memory: USA 3-1 CAN. The stars and stripes that decorate your jersey appear smudged like wet paint by the tears that fill your eyes; not of disappointment, but of disbelief—you've done it! You've won gold at the Olympics!*

**BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!**

*The glaring red glow awakens you again. This time, it's your alarm clock: 7:00 a.m. "I must have been dreaming," you think. You grab your No. 2 pencils and head for the door. It's the morning of your SAT.*

Although slightly altered for dramatic effect, this scene echoes Angela Ruggiero '04's senior year of high school. In reality, Ruggiero took her SAT on the road with Team USA before, not after, the 1998 Olympics. Regardless, it remains true that during her senior year at Choate Rosemary Hall, Ruggiero became both a gold medalist and an admitted Harvard student. Each accomplishment stands alone as something most people could only dream of.

Ruggiero is undeniably a legend in women's sports. It would be quicker to list the awards that she has not won than all those she has accumulated both during and after her retirement from women's hockey. Aside from her casual four Olympic medals and induction as just the fourth woman into the Hockey Hall of Fame, Ruggiero has also served as a board member on the International Olympic Committee, founded Sports Innovation Labs, a data-driven sports strategy company where she has impacted the growth and engagement of women's sports, and earned a spot in "Forbes's" "25 Most Powerful Women in Sports."

Starting with her Olympic gold medal and Harvard acceptance letter, the momentum of her early career continues today.

The list above scrapes only the surface of what she has achieved in her career, and has yet to accomplish. It's safe to say that she, like most other Harvard students, is safe from being labeled an underachiever.

The star's introduction to hockey was the result of a hilarious two-for-the-price-of-one deal between Ruggiero's dad and a local hockey coach in her home state of California. Raised in New Haven, Ruggiero's father played hockey recreationally. Decades later, he wanted to immerse his son in the same sport that accompanied his childhood. But as he went to sign Ruggiero's brother up, the coach desperately asked if he had other kids that could contribute

to an underfilled youth team. "We'll give you three kids for the price of two if you sign them all up," Ruggiero joked in an interview with the *Independent*. "My dad actually signed us all up." The rest was history.

After their somewhat comical introduction to the sport, Ruggiero and her younger brother Bill became hooked, developing their love for the game together. Their unwavering support for one another's hockey careers eventually earned the Ruggiero duo a spot in history in 2005: Bill was the goalie for the Central League's Tulsa Oilers, an all-male professional hockey team. Upon hearing they needed a defenseman, he naturally recommended his sister. In her appearance, Angela accomplished three historic firsts for professional North American hockey. She was the first woman to play in a regular-season professional game. She and Bill were the first brother-sister duo to play together. And her third first, by notching an assist, she became the first woman to earn a point on this stage.

Ruggiero's journey to Harvard was, like most things in her career, benefited by good timing.

Her recruiting trip fell on the night that Harvard Women's Basketball pulled off its historic 16-over-1 upset of Stanford. "I remember going, oh my God, this is the best place for women's sports. The whole campus went crazy that night, and I was like, well, they love women's sports," Ruggiero said.

Just one year later, having just won gold at the first Winter Olympics in which women competed in hockey, 18-year-old Ruggiero took on a feat arguably just as "challenging" as earning a gold medal: adjusting to life as a Harvard freshman.

Just like the normal Harvard student, she was placed in subpar freshman housing: Canaday A, to be exact. However, unlike the typical Harvard freshman, she grappled with the question of "How do I translate my hockey success into academics?"

Ruggiero lived out her upperclassman years first in Leverett House, and then Mather after taking two gap years during her second stint at the Winter Olympics in 2002. During her four years in the Harvard Women's Hockey program, she practically

filled a trophy case of her own, bringing home a National Championship in 1999, two runner-up titles in 2003 and 2004, multiple All-American honors, and a Patty Kazmaier Award—the women's equivalent of the Hobey Baker award—that distinguishes the best hockey player in the NCAA.

Decades after her career for the Crimson, Ruggiero emphasizes that the duality Harvard provided, a commitment to being a student and an athlete, fundamentally contributed to her prolonged success. "I think it helped me realize I'm not just an athlete. It gave me more of a worldview, helped me explore

who I am outside of the rink."

To this day, Ruggiero remains part of a Harvard hockey legacy and community that is a stronghold in her personal life. The members of her class remain close; most attended her wedding. She even noted that their college group chat remains alive and well: "We have this text thread that blows up, a few times a week, all these little inside jokes that you can imagine happen on a hockey team," Ruggiero said. An insight into a program defined by relationships that are not tethered to Cambridge or Bright-Landry hockey rink.

Harvard provided an environment where Ruggiero could develop her athletic capabilities alongside her intellectual and professional competencies. Concentrating in Government, she graduated *cum laude*, attesting that her time at Harvard pushed her to explore her identity and ambitions outside of hockey. Among her peers, athlete and non-athlete alike, Ruggiero felt a shared fundamental motivation to be excellent at all they pursued. In the classroom, she enrolled in courses and met professors who challenged her worldviews, consequently expanding her vision of what was possible in her career.

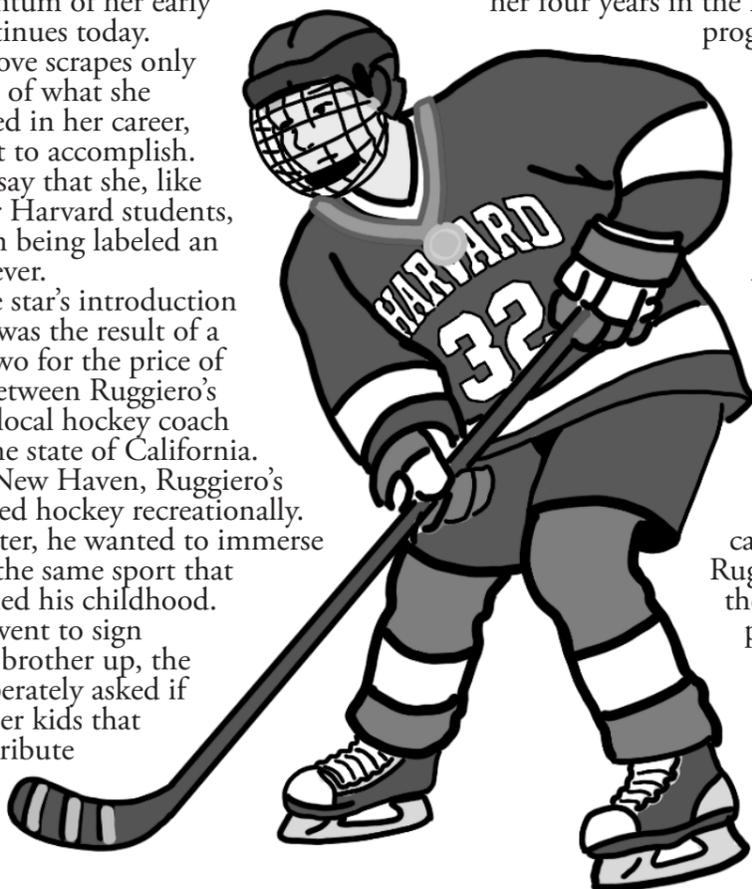
"Harvard allowed me to see all the different things out there and pushed me in a way that helped me develop as a person," Ruggiero said. "You could have that true student-athlete experience, get to play elite sports, but also develop a capability as a human," said Ruggiero. "I think the biggest benefit was, [that Harvard] taught me how to critically think."

After the conclusion of her athletic career, Ruggiero returned to Cambridge, completing an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School in 2014. As a CEO, author, sports announcer, advocate, keynote speaker, investor—the list goes on, and on—Ruggiero required an education enriched by experiences that would give her a multidisciplinary toolkit for success. Both Ruggiero's Harvard education and personal experiences as an athlete have propelled a career that contributes to the development of platforms, visibility, and investment that are actively reshaping the market for women's sports. Grounded, ultimately, in a mission to provide opportunities to female athletes that she did not have herself.

Ruggiero's ability to utilize her Harvard education to extend her success beyond the reach of any hockey rink she ever played in is a testament to what can come from the unconventional culture of Harvard athletics—a culture that invests equally in the value of the individual outside of their sport as it does the athlete within.

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BELIEVE HER COLD EMAIL  
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WAS SUCCESSFUL—NEVER  
UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER  
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EDU."**

**GRAPHIC BY ANGIE LI '28**



# Oars and Origins: The History Behind Harvard Rowing

How a student experiment on the Charles River evolved into a tradition shaping collegiate sports.

BY AURORA CHARBONNEAU '29

One often overlooked part of Harvard College's identity is its enduring connection to the Charles River. Though it may go unnoticed, the College's rhythm and structure are shaped by this neighboring waterway. On one side of the river lies the hub of student life—bustling classrooms, historic houses, and academic excellence. On the other side stands the proud home of athletic dedication, historic games, and intense competition. Much like the Tigris and Euphrates rivers sustained the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, the Charles River has provided Harvard undergraduates with a setting that sustains both intellectual and athletic eminence.

All this is to say, the river has never been merely a boundary. It has long served as the stage for one of Harvard University's defining traditions: crew.

But despite the sport's modern-day significance within the Harvard community, its origins were relatively humble. Crew at Harvard began as a student experiment rather than a formal varsity team. In the mid-1840s, Horace Cunningham, Class of 1846, alongside his peers, launched Harvard's first rowing club after purchasing what would become the team's inaugural shell, a boat they renamed Oneida.

The program quickly developed from there, and a mere year later, Harvard undergraduates had begun competing against outside opponents. One of Harvard's earliest crews claimed victory in a grueling three-mile race at the 1858 Boston City Regatta, beating six rival boats from Boston, New York, and St. John. This race gave rise to a symbol that would come to define Harvard's identity: its color.

Up until the late 1850s, Harvard's unofficial mascot had been John Orangeman, a popular campus figure known for selling and delivering fruit to undergraduates. However, this would come to change in late June of that year. While preparing for the Boston City Regatta, Harvard's eight-man crew faced a problem: their supporters couldn't tell which boat was theirs. Charles Eliot, Class of 1853, who would later go on to serve as Harvard's 21st president, solved the issue by purchasing eight handkerchiefs that just so happened to be a shade of dark red. The crew tied them to their oars so spectators could spot their boat. This Harvard boat, named Huron, went on to win the race, defeating six other teams over the three-mile course, bearing the now-iconic crimson hue. The color stuck as crimson came to symbolize the spirit of Harvard students, even before its official adoption in 1910 as the University's color.

Harvard's rowing legacy also lives on in one of its most famous rivalries. Today, most people associate the Harvard-Yale rivalry with the annual football game—a frenzy of travel logistics, housing hunts, and overpriced bus tickets. However, the rivalry actually began on the water with the crew. Though both schools had established boat clubs by the early 1840s, they were mostly social groups. This dynamic changed when Yale challenged Harvard to a race “to test the superiority of the oarsmen of the two colleges.”

On Aug. 3, 1852, the two crews met on New Hampshire's Lake Winnepesaukee

for what became the first collegiate athletic event in the United States. Harvard's boat, the Oneida, defeated both of Yale's boats in a two-mile course, earning a pair of black walnut oars as trophies, which are still recognized today as the oldest intercollegiate athletic prize in North America.

This race not only marked the beginning of the rivalry but also launched collegiate athletic competition in the United States. Harvard and Yale varsity heavyweight teams now meet each year for a four-mile race on the Thames River in New London, Connecticut—the longest collegiate rowing event of its type in the United States. In recent years, the Harvard Men's Heavyweight team has continued that tradition, including a sweep at the 185th Regatta.

Beyond influencing domestic rivalries, crew at Harvard played a role in inspiring international competition. In the late 1860s, an unprecedented rowing match captured the public's imagination on both sides of the Atlantic. Half a million people gathered along London's Thames to watch boats from the oldest and most prestigious schools of each country battle for victory.

The excitement surrounding the event was amplified by the recent invention of the transatlantic telegraph cable. This device allowed news of the race to be transmitted across the Atlantic and followed in real time in the United States. Though Oxford ultimately won after a hard-fought contest, this race had a broader impact than the result. It was a competition that ultimately elevated the status of American collegiate rowing, inspiring new clubs and competitions across the United States.

More than a century later, that surge of attention still reverberates along the Charles. The legacy of those landmark races endures not only in record books, but in the landscape itself—where crew continues to quietly shape the rhythms and scenery of everyday campus life.

When crossing a footbridge, the shouts of coxswains and the rhythmic splash of oars cutting through the water can be heard. Whether jogging along the riverbank, walking to a tailgate before the big game, or heading back to Harvard Square after practice, the journey is accompanied by this steady pulse—a soundtrack to campus life itself.

I first noticed this on a cold, gray morning run. The air was damp, and everything felt unusually still. When I stopped halfway across a bridge to catch my breath, I glanced down and realized what was missing: the river's usual movement and sound. It had frozen over during the previous weeks, and with it, the echoes of the crew teams had fallen silent. The emptiness was striking—a reminder of how vital that hidden rhythm is to Harvard's atmosphere.

The home of this ever-present emblem is the boathouses, steeped in history.

On one side of the river sits the Newell Boathouse, named for football player Marshall Newell, Class of 1894, known throughout Harvard for his compassionate nature. Across the river, the Weld Boathouse was rebuilt in 1907 thanks to a \$100,000 gift from George Walker Weld, Class of 1860. These boathouses are epicenters for Harvard's athletic history, hosting the men's varsity team, women's

varsity team, and House intramural teams across the two locations. Both are physical testaments to crew's legacy, cemented into Harvard's campus.

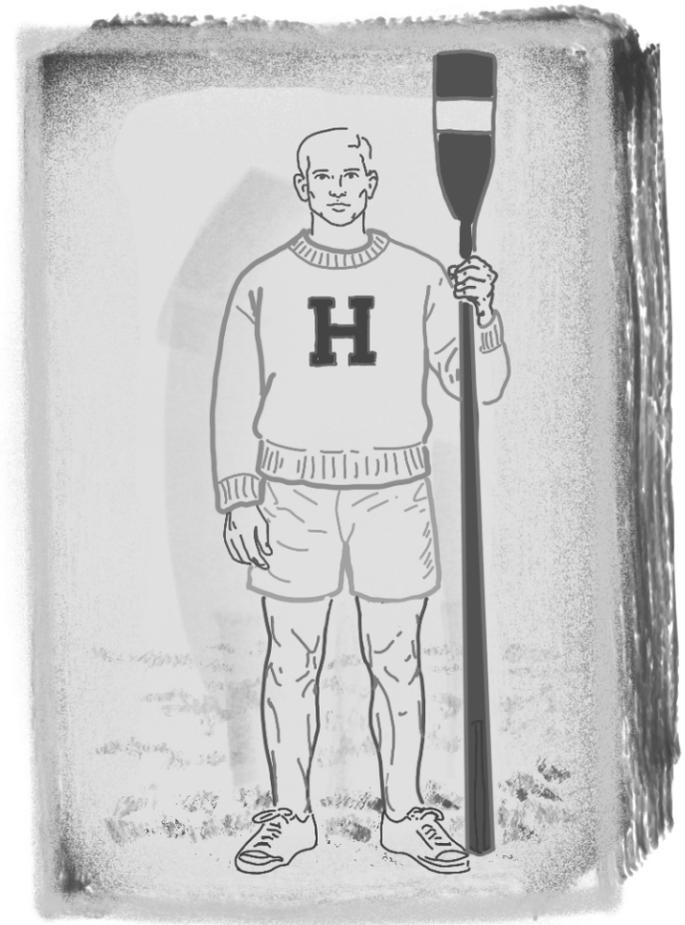
When spring finally breaks through the bleakness of March, it can feel as though all of Harvard flocks back to the riverbanks, gathering in warm patches of sunlight to cheer on friendly House rivalries. Each year, more than 1,500 contests unfold. These competitions ultimately culminate in the presentation of the Straus Cup, which is awarded to the first-place House in May.

Many of these casual showdowns—kickball, soccer, spikeball—play out on nearby fields and stretches of grass, where boats glide by, completing the picturesque scene, all grounded in rowing's original, inclusive vision of what sport at Harvard could be.

Today, both the men's and women's teams—united under Harvard Athletics after the 1974 merger of the Harvard and Radcliffe athletic departments—carry this legacy forward. Most mornings, as the sun rises over the Charles, you can spot rowers crossing over the footbridges, returning from their early practice and continuing a tradition nearly two centuries in the making.

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**GRAPHIC BY ANGIE LI '28**



# Point/Counterpoint: Should Eileen Gu Have Represented China?

A discussion on the significance of cultural identity in the midst of U.S.-China tensions.

BY KALVIN FRANK '28 AND COURTNEY HINES '28

**E**ileen Gu and Alysia Liu are two of the most prominent young athletes in international winter sports, whose lives seem to run in parallel. Both were born in the United States to Chinese single parents who had their children by surrogacy with white American donors, and both rose quickly to the top of their respective disciplines.

Gu competed in freestyle skiing, representing China at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, where she won one gold and two silver medals. Liu is a figure skater who has represented the United States in many international competitions, earning national titles and global recognition, and now has two gold medals at this year's Winter Olympics in Milan. Their athletic achievements and national identities have placed them at the center of international attention.

Gu's decision to compete for China, despite being raised and trained primarily in the United States, created widespread public controversy. The International Olympic Committee requires athletes to compete as nationals of the country they represent, making questions of affiliation part of the broader conversation. Because the Olympics function not only as a sporting event but also as a global platform for national representation, her choice prompted debate about identity, citizenship, and the relationship between sport and geopolitics.

**Courtney:** Before Calvin and I get into what will inevitably be an international relations debate, I think this conversation needs to start with recognizing the pure skill and bravery both

these women have. They are clearly two amazing athletes. I may be exhibiting bias, but to me their wins feel personal, given both Eileen Gu and Alysia Liu are half Chinese and half White—just like me! Their backgrounds and stories reflect my own. Beyond their decisions to represent different countries, they've largely helped the same people: fans from all countries who were simply amazed by the power both possess.

**Kalvin:** I think this is such an interesting debate. Considering I am on the counterpoint side, before I start critiquing someone who has achieved feats beyond the abilities of 99.99% of humans, I do believe that Eileen Gu and Alysia Liu are great people and role models for people everywhere. That said, I strongly disagree with Gu's decision to compete for China.

**Courtney:** While it's true she was raised in the United States, I've found that most criticisms of Gu's decision flatten what it means to have a Chinese parent, Chinese language and culture at home, and a childhood spent in China every year. Gu's mother is Chinese, and she has spent every summer in China throughout her childhood; I think it's more complicated than simply competing for another country. For someone who's genuinely bicultural, choosing which flag to compete under isn't automatically betrayal. In that same vein, if the moral logic is "you should compete for where you were trained," then lots of athletes, across many sports, would be morally suspect. But we don't treat most of them that way.

**Kalvin:** I don't think Gu's decision was made with nefarious intent; outside of maybe the millions more she would make by competing for China (which is not a valid criticism, we are a monetary society). My main problem is not that she is

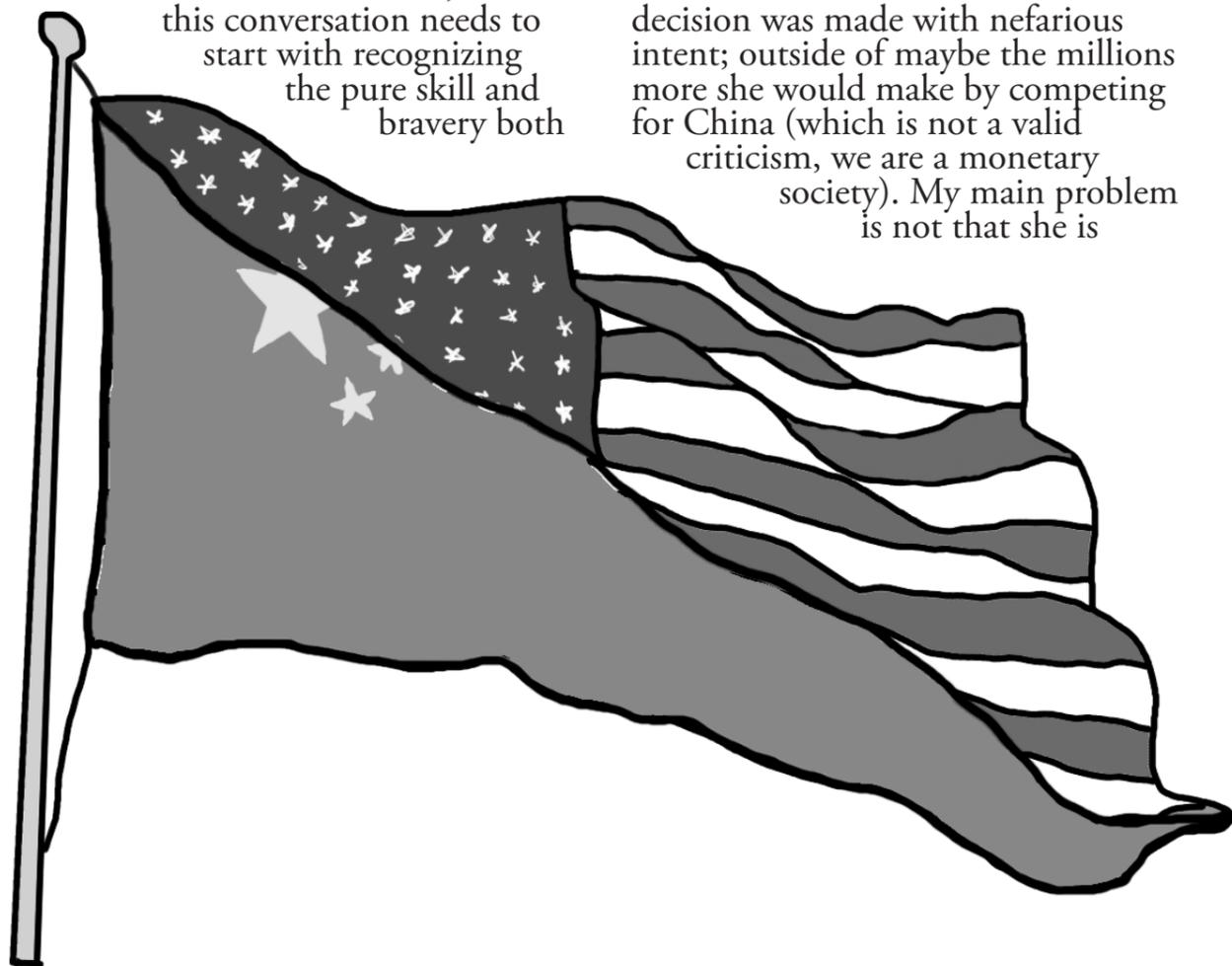
representing a country other than the United States; it's the country she is competing for that I take issue with. A common argument is that it's sinophobic to focus on Gu because many athletes live in the United States and compete for a foreign country. This argument entirely ignores why there is a problem with competing for China: it's the United States' number one geopolitical adversary.

Do we really think everyone would have been fine with an American citizen competing for the Soviet Union in the 1970s at the height of the Cold War? My argument is not that we should deny multinational people the right to choose another country, but rather that a born-and-raised American, morally, should not compete for a country the United States is actively competing with militarily, economically, and institutionally.

**Courtney:** I can understand how the Chinese optics feel different, and I agree it isn't automatically "sinophobic" to name geopolitics. But while you can disagree with China's government, it's inconsistent to treat multiethnic athletes' choices as neutral until the country is politically unpopular. Still, if we were to follow that principle, we need to create a criterion: What counts as an adversary? Who decides? Is it war? Human rights? Cyber? Trade? "Adversary" status shifts with administrations and headlines.

On the Cold War analogy: The height of the Cold War is exactly when societies imposed loyalty tests and treated bicultural identity as suspicious, which we now recognize as a moral failure. This bleeds into another point: representing a country in sport is not the same as endorsing its regime. Otherwise, every athlete becomes a proxy ambassador for every policy of their state, which is an impossible moral burden. I think your main ethical concern is the Chinese Communist Party's use of athletes, not a bicultural person choosing to represent part of her heritage.

**Kalvin:** If the world were perfect, I think that your point would be 100% valid, but unfortunately, the Olympics are and have always been political. The United States, its allies, and its adversaries use it to project power and stability on the world stage. They effectively use it to say we built athletes like these. I don't argue that Gu endorses the Chinese government, but that doesn't mean she's not used by Chinese state media for propaganda. It is a media win for China that a gold-medalist American athlete competes for us.



You pose the question of who decides our adversaries; we honestly don't have the time to say. Because of the number and complexity of the factors that determine them, it would take a textbook to explain. What is important is the fact that China is a competing economic, government, and military system. While her reasons might not be anti-American, competing for China just is that: joining an opposing force.

**Courtney:** I agree with you that the Olympics are political and that states use athletes symbolically, but if the standard shifts to participating in a sport that authoritarian states can spin as propaganda, then no athlete is morally safe. The United States constantly uses Olympians to project institutional superiority and multicultural success. In Alysa Liu's case, for example, competing for the United States is a soft-power win that the media has similarly used to signal American opportunity and freedom, and that same coverage does not claim that she's morally implicated in the United States foreign policy.

The problem with calling Gu's choice a "media win" is that it treats her as if she were exclusively American who defected, rather than a genuinely bicultural person choosing which part of her heritage to represent. The "switching sides" language restricts her identity to heighten the geopolitical symbolism.

If the real principle is now to not represent states with human rights abuses, then that standard would disqualify a large portion of the international community. Telling athletes not to represent U.S. adversaries is more of a nationalist loyalty standard, not a human rights one. The deeper question isn't whether China uses athletes politically; it does, as do other nations, including the United States. Instead, we should be asking whether bicultural individuals should have to structure their identities around American strategic interests, and I argue that this is not a reasonable moral demand.

**Kalvin:** I never argued that Gu endorsed China's foreign policy or political nature; however, "freedom of expression" is heavily restricted in China, so publicly opposing the government's stances is near-impossible. Every American athlete has the power to disagree with the government, so in effect, they aren't endorsing it; some of them even choose to critique it. Chinese athletes do not. Gu chose to represent a country that doesn't grant its own people the basic right to publicly express an opinion. Because the International Olympic Committee requires that you be a national citizen of the country you compete for, it is then clear that Gu either revoked her American citizenship for Chinese or was given special treatment by the CCP. Because of her decision, she can't critique anything the Chinese government does; is it morally acceptable that she signed up for a state to control what she says?

Touching on your question about whether people should structure

their identities around our strategic interests, I think this framing is wrong. In the United States, you have the freedom to identify however you want, including as culturally and ethnically Chinese. But this isn't just an identity; Gu has legally become a national of an adversarial government to compete for them in the Olympics. I would understand Gu if it were as simple as identity and supporting the people of China, but her decision is much more.

**Courtney:** China does restrict freedom of expression, and that matters. But just because China limits speech does not mean Gu's decision to compete for China endorses those limits. If representing a country makes you implicated in its political constraints, that standard applies everywhere. American athletes would then be implicated in U.S. foreign policy or structural injustices simply by wearing the flag. That collapses into collective guilt instead of individual responsibility.

You argue that American athletes can publicly criticize their government, which distances them from endorsement. But in practice, most Olympians, regardless of country, cannot operate as political dissidents. The IOC itself restricts political expression, so all athletes face institutional pressures that discourage overt political speech. More importantly, your framework effectively requires that diaspora athletes represent only liberal democracies to remain morally clean. That turns identity into regime validation.

Alysa Liu, competing for the United States, signals American freedom, yet we don't treat her as morally implicated in every dimension of U.S. policy. Her political silence isn't called complicity in that case. Why is it only complicity when the country is China? Should China scrutinize her the same way the United States scrutinizes Gu?

The Olympics are political at the state level, but athletes don't primarily represent governments: they represent people. They represent families, communities, diasporas, and millions of viewers who see themselves reflected in these athletes across borders. States may try to instrumentalize that symbolism, but the meaning of athletic representation isn't reducible to regime endorsement. If we treat it that way, we turn individuals into extensions of governments, when really, each athlete is an autonomous actor navigating complex identities.

**Kalvin:** Gu is not just representing the people when she joins the country as a national and chooses to subject herself to these restrictive speech policies. The distinction becomes immediately clear when you consider that many Americans have critiqued the Trump administration at these Olympics. There are very few Chinese athletes competing internationally who have ever spoken against the government. The most notable incident was when tennis player Peng Shuai accused a senior CCP official of sexual assault and demanded a full investigation

on the Chinese social media app, "Weibo." Not too long after, the post was deleted, and Shuai made a statement calling the situation a "misunderstanding." To this day, Shuai's name is blacklisted on the Chinese internet, and she has publicly disappeared, not to be seen.

Pretty understandable why Chinese athletes don't speak out against the country, right?

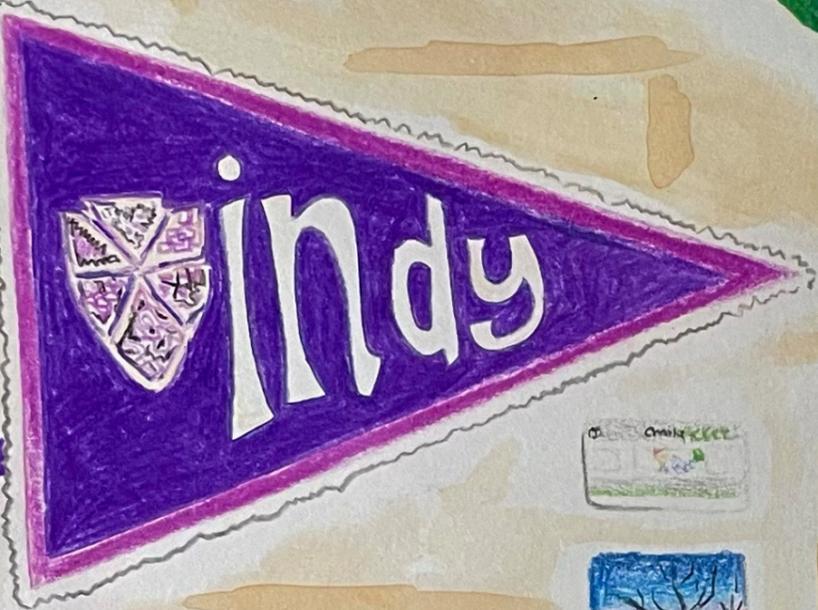
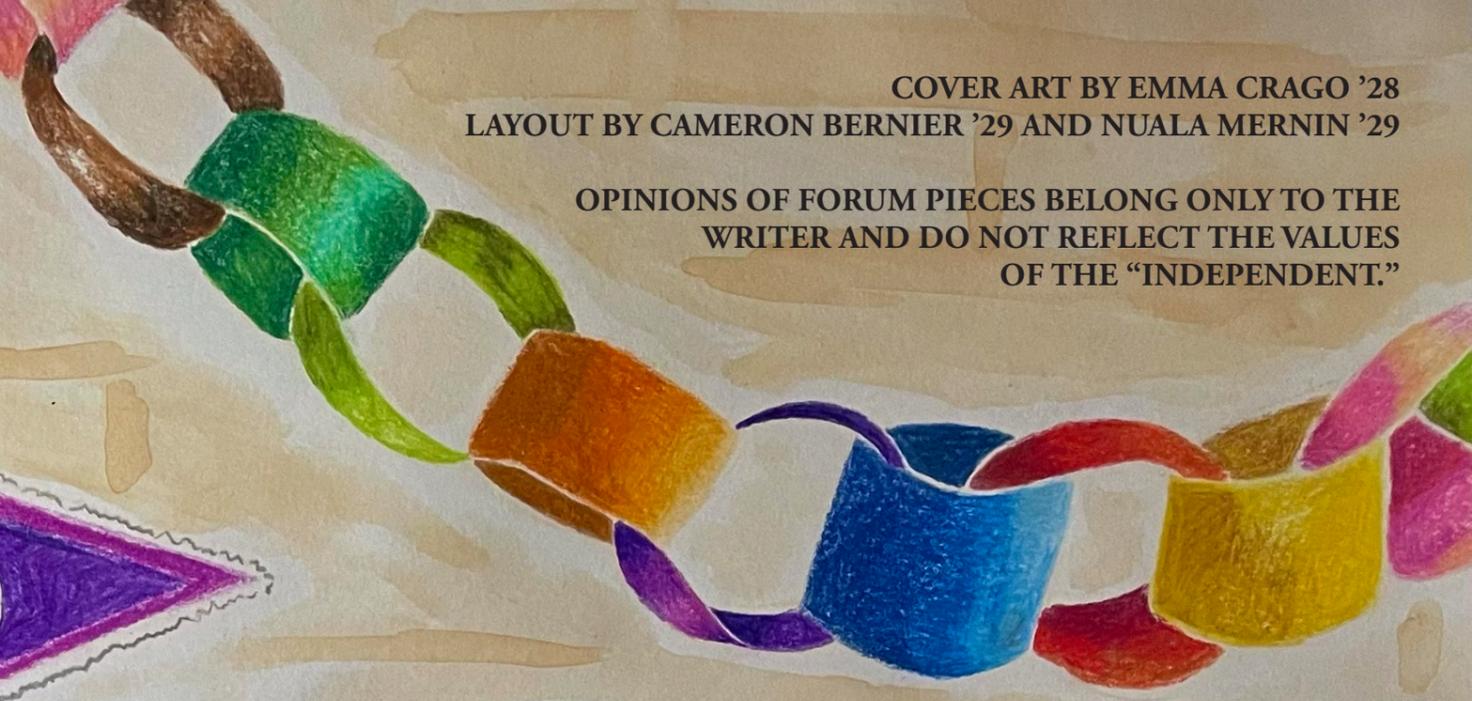
In the end, I recognize Gu as someone who has done amazing things and seems like a good person. That being said, I also call into question her decision to legally join an adversary country. It is no one's responsibility to talk politics, but should you not still have the right? When someone asked Gu about China's human rights offenses against the Uyghur Muslims, she responded, "I haven't done the research. I don't think it's my business. I'm not going to make big claims on my social media." Is this a belief, or is it because history proves what happens to Chinese athletes who respond differently? In choosing to become a Chinese national, she is complicit, in part, in her own silencing.

**Courtney & Calvin:** Despite the debate over joining the Chinese Ski Team, Gu has been wildly successful, winning multiple medals. Her stated goal of increasing youth skiing participation in China is working, with a 12% increase in ski days year-over-year for the 2024-25 season. Gu was the fourth-highest-paid female athlete in 2025, excluding the millions she received from the Beijing Municipal Sports Bureau. She is an undergraduate at Stanford, where she is majoring in International Relations. The world will watch on as Gu continues to push the sport of freestyle skiing to new limits, regardless of her chosen country of representation.

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**GRAPHIC BY SOPHIA  
RASCOFF '27**

OPINIONS OF FORUM PIECES BELONG ONLY TO THE WRITER AND DO NOT REFLECT THE VALUES OF THE "INDEPENDENT."



2) 2018 HBO show about a battle of heroes  
4) Which came first, the \_\_\_\_\_ or the egg?  
5) The root of the entire universe  
6) What a gold-digger wants from an elderly spouse.  
7) # part of company specializing in genetic testing

**ACROSS**  
ROOTS

1) The oldest form of life. Also the cause of strep throat.  
3) The monologue a villain gives about their tragic past.  
8) Metaphorical object used to chart family origins

**DOWN**

**CROSSWORD** MARCH '20  
ROOTS

*Rania Jones*  
*Mia Park Tavares*