

**Henry:** Hello everybody. I'm Henry Yu, principal of UBC St. John's College and a professor in the Faculty of History. I'm here today with Santa Ono, the president and vice-chancellor of UBC, and we're going to talk about Asian Heritage Month. Asian Heritage Month is an opportunity for all Canadians to learn more about the many achievements and contributions of Canadians of Asian descent, who throughout our history have contributed so much to Canada. Like last year, this year, Asian Heritage Month is taking place against a background of anti-Asian racism, and racism against other ABIPOC groups and individuals, as well as the continued tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic. First of all, what does Asian Heritage Month mean to you, Santa?

**Santa:** Well, I'm Asian and I'm very proud of my Asian ethnicity and all the culture and education and practices that are a part of being Asian, but it also means a lot to me because over 50% of the students at UBC are Asian and they're a very diverse group, and it's a moment to really celebrate what they bring to the institution. Henry, I know that through your historical research and your community activism, that you're very familiar with anti-Asian racism in Canada. What does Asian Heritage Month mean to you and why is it important to celebrate Asian heritage?

**Henry:** Well, for me, it's actually personal as well as, even though I spent 365 days a year researching as a scholar and teaching students about Asian Canadian history. For me, I'm a fourth-generation Chinese Canadian on my mother's side and I have a more personal familiarity with how my grandfather and his father and his brothers, they really did suffer from discrimination. They couldn't vote, they couldn't work in many jobs, professional jobs.

They couldn't be doctors, lawyers. For me, the celebration is also a way of recognizing their struggles to belong, to be given the opportunity to be able to achieve, and so I'm so glad that we've come a long way, and so we're celebrating how far we've come in Canada, in British Columbia, but we also are acknowledging with this month that there's been a long history of anti-Asian racism.

**Santa:** Yes, and it's not over. There still is racism, it's systemic and it flared up during the pandemic and you played a key role in UBC hosting the national forum on anti-Asian racism. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Henry:** It was really your leadership that inspired us to deal with this problem as an institution, because as scholars, as students, we all try to do our own small contribution to combating anti-Asian racism, but I think your leadership in committing the University as an institution to combating anti-Asian racism is really important because this is not a new problem.

A lot of people were surprised when during the pandemic there were incidents of racism and violence. Random violence, often those incredibly hurtful and scary for some people I think they weren't aware of that long history of anti-Asian racism. It wasn't caused, this racism, by the pandemic. It wasn't caused by China or Wuhan or COVID. This has been here with us as part of our history for a long time.

I think that's why it's so important to have an event like the national forum, recognize that history, recognize the current contemporary issues that so many people are facing, from frontline healthcare workers who are overwhelmingly being impacted by

COVID to the types of attitudes about Asians not belonging, being foreign, somehow deserving less respect because they weren't fully Canadian.

I think these were all things that people began to experience because of that long history of racism and discrimination, but it flared during COVID, but it didn't get caused by COVID.

**Santa:** Absolutely. There's also much to be proud of, of the contributions of Asian Canadians to this nation from its very inception, from transportation to fishing, to healthcare and innovation, and there's much to be proud of as well. In the midst of that racism, Asian Canadians have been contributing to the formation of this province for the nation and its links to other parts of the globe.

**Henry:** I think it's important to recognize those contributions and to celebrate. I think it's important to be happy that we've had so many great Asian Canadians of various backgrounds do wonderful things to help society be better, but also that celebration needs to recognize that there was a resilience that it took to do this while basically being treated as second class citizens.

I think it's an inspiration to us all in this present moment and to not rest on our laurels, so to speak, to not just say, "Yes, look, we have a long history of contributions and celebration and struggle, but we have to continue to struggle." I think that's where the commitment of UBC and your commitment as our leader has made so much difference because it means that we're going to be in this for the long haul.

That we're not just going to be answering some questions when something terrible happens, spectacular happens in the news. Then we talk and then forget it about the rest of the time. We're here for that long haul and commitment.

**Santa:** Now anti-Asian racism is one thing that we're talking about now because of the month that we are celebrating, but there's systemic racism that's towards all groups on campus and all parts of society. We are concerned about systemic racism against indigenous people. That was brought to light in plain sight, focusing on what's happening in the healthcare setting in our hospitals, in our schools that educate future healthcare providers. Also against all ABIPOC people as well as antisemitism and Islamophobia. Can you talk a little bit about how focusing on anti-Asian racism is relevant to all forms of racism?

**Henry:** To me as a researcher and a scholar, it's vitally important that we can't understand any forms of racism without understanding that they're interconnected and related. I often use a metaphor of, they're all different legs of the same elephant, and if you only recognize that one leg, and if it's anti-Asian racism, you don't recognize that it's actually one elephant standing astride so many different people.

That's because it's systemic, it grew out of British Columbia being built around white supremacy and who would count as white and who wouldn't. That's been changing throughout the years historically, but one of the things that's endured is that that original foundation means that the way that British Columbia treated indigenous peoples, the way that we are still on unseated territory of the indigenous communities who were here long before others arrived.

That's related to how we treat non-whites in other circumstances of how Asians are treated, even the category of what is Asian or who is black or who is non-white, these are all connected and they have to be solved as one set of problems that are interconnected.

**Santa:** Now I had a task force, and you were a big part of that, but there were hundreds of UBC faculty staff and students that were included as well as community members. That's recognizing all of the great work that has occurred outside of the university with community groups. Really advocating for inclusion and for increased representation within this university and also addressing other barriers for them to truly flourish while they're here.

The task force is focused on anti-racism and inclusive excellence. Can you talk to us about the significance of those four words being together?

**Henry:** I think anti-racism, we often think of this as a negative somehow. That racism's bad and therefore we have to do this thing that combats it. It's a struggle inclusive of excellence to me, this idea that actually being inclusive, creating a society that is the way we want it to be, that we aspire to be, that's a positive. To me, those are actually both commitments that we have to make in order to make society better.

The already task force, it's a start. It's a start on a long term commitment, and I think the idea that we're combating racism and that's a struggle, maybe that is not going to end, and yet what we're really trying to strive for is an inclusive society, is inclusive institution at UBC, something that can have everyone feel like they belong and no one feels that they are being left out or cut out or that they don't have a voice

**Santa:** To me, actually, the juxtaposition of anti-racism and inclusive excellence gets at the myth, if I may. That there's some tension between those. That if you have a more diverse community with representation for all, for some reason, that's the antithesis of excellence. Actually, my view and I'm sure it's yours as well, is that when you have a diverse community of scholars and students and staff, as we do now at UBC, that we celebrate that, but we also recognize that that makes us better in everything that we do, that we make better decisions.

It's not just the issue of everyone being part of the university and feeling that they are loved and included and respected, but that their optimal performance as a faculty member, as a staff member, as a student actually contributes to a better institution.

**Henry:** I couldn't agree with you more. I think it's one of the lingering legacies of white supremacy that somehow non-whites when they are in an institution bring it down. That they're not as good. If you think about it, it's so obvious that that obviously is a legacy of racism. The idea that if you have a diverse room, it's not as good as a room that has no non-whites.

I think that to me is so important to acknowledge, to reinforce because sometimes that gets internalized. We have people who grow up here and I think they begin to believe and doubt themselves that they don't belong. That somehow if they're in the room alone, they're in a law firm or they're in an office, in a business or headquarters and they're the only non-white, that somehow we have people who have come to

believe that maybe they're an imposter, that they don't quite belong. That is the really pernicious effects of a long history of exclusion and of racism.

**Santa:** Henry, I wanted to just thank you because you've been focused on this and your scholarship and your activism for a long time, and it's not easy. I know that it's not easy because some people don't want to hear what you have to say. I think it's not easy because as a scholar in an institution that is evolving, that sometimes if you're actually driving that change, if you're a catalyst for the change, that some people may actually not be supportive of you to be very front.

Frank, I want you to know that you are longstanding commitment to studying the role of Asians in making Canada what it is today but also being very honest about these difficult conversations about systemic racism are groundbreaking, it's a game-changer to what we do as an institution to contribute to the field, to making the world a better place. Thank you, Henry, for everything that you've done.

**Henry:** It's not done alone. I think I couldn't be continuing to do this without again, leadership and commitment but also being a part of a large number of people. We need to be thankful to all of them, for some, often the silent struggles that they've endured. Our work is part of a larger coalition of people who have tried to make our society better.

**Santa:** Yes. Thank you very much, Henry.

**Henry:** Thank you, Santa for your commitment.