

Testimony by Jaja Chen

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Waco Cha, LLC

“Harnessing the Power of Immigrant-owned Businesses to Build Back Better.”

Committee on Small Business U.S. House of Representatives

April 28, 2021

Good morning/afternoon Chairwoman Representative Velázquez, Ranking Member Luetkemeyer, and distinguished members of the Committee on Small Business. Thank you for the honor of providing a testimony before the House Committee on Small Business.

My name is Jaja Chen and I am here today on behalf of my small business Waco Cha and representing the over 3.4 million immigrant-owned businesses in the United States - of approximately 2 million of which are owned by an Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI). I am a daughter of Taiwanese immigrants - my parents are from a small farm town on the East Coast of Hualian. My father was the first in his family to leave Taiwan - leaving the small town of 11,000 in which he grew up to move to Norman, Oklahoma to attend University of Oklahoma. My mom grew up helping my grandmother sell vegetables in a market and was a full-time mom of 3 after she immigrated to the U.S. with my father. She had barely finished high school and did not know any English prior to moving to the U.S. at age 26.

As a child, I remember going to Asian supermarkets in Oklahoma City with my mom to help her find ingredients to prepare Taiwanese dishes. I observed how to make boba tea, dumplings, and other delicious food at home. At the age of 13, I moved to China with my parents as they returned overseas due to work purposes and I completed high school in Taiwan and eventually moved to Waco, Texas for college.

My husband Devin Li - a first-generation immigrant from Guangzhou, China - and I met at Baylor University. After I completed school, we got married and settled in Waco due to job opportunities - I as a social worker and Devin as an Engineering High School teacher.

Throughout our time in Waco post-graduation, we enjoyed getting involved in the downtown Waco community by supporting local small businesses. Devin's students at a local Waco ISD high school - majority of whom identify as Hispanic, Latinx, or Black often voiced feelings of not belonging and thoughts of not being able to see representation of their cultures within downtown development. As immigrants and children of Chinese and Taiwanese immigrants, Devin and I both resonated with this experience of not belonging. We would often drive on weekends to Dallas or Austin to stop by the Asian grocery store - similar to what I did with mom

as a child - and to find the food we grew up with; we often commented on how we hoped for Waco to one day have an authentic Taiwanese boba tea cafe.

Rather than continuing to hope for this to one day happen, we sought to be part of the change we wanted to see. We were inspired to start a business that celebrates diversity and cultures so we opened our Saturday morning Waco Cha pop-up at the Waco Downtown Farmer's Market summer of 2018 in a small 10' by 10' tent. That first year was filled with time spent educating our community about boba tea and Taiwanese & Chinese culture; we even had one individual come up to us with anger yelling at us "You're not Texan!" after we offered samples.

After one year of pop-ups, we upgraded from the tent to a mobile tea truck. We then grew to the point of being able to launch our first storefront this past year in downtown Waco alongside an additional launch of our Chinese dumpling food concept at the Farmer's Market in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the week that our boba tea shop was cleared by the Health Department to open, was the week that Waco's shelter in place order was enacted.

During the early months of the pandemic, we had to quickly pivot and adapt our business. We delayed our new storefront opening for about 3 months and we took precautionary steps by shutting down operations when some team members had potential COVID-19 exposures. Our small business received much support in the midst of this time. For example, our guests pre-purchased thousands of dollars worth of gift cards to help us stay afloat; many also came regularly to show support as we mobilized our mobile tea truck to sell drinks to-go.

Our values are lived out both within our team - through the ways we strive to represent our culture through our products, in our shop, and the ways we seek to hire a diverse team - and through the ways we are involved in the community. Throughout the pandemic, we had opportunities to use our Waco Cha social media platform to disseminate information about the SBA Paycheck Protection program (PPP) for other small businesses. We also created a Masks for All campaign and donated hundreds of masks to local nonprofits and the city - supplied by our immigrant parents from China and Taiwan.

Our cultural values of connection and hospitality lead us to find deep joy in developing business collaborations and partnerships with other small businesses. One of my greatest joys in our community work last year was partnering with the NAACP to host a non-partisan voter registration booth on-site at our boba tea shop. I was particularly excited to help many guests, including Asian Americans, register to vote for the first time.

As we continue growing in profit, we are also seeking to give back to local non-profits around us by sharing the stories of nonprofits led by and serving marginalized communities. This has included contributing portions of our profits recently to support Hate is a Virus' commUNITY

Action Fund - particularly with the rise of anti-Asian racism and hate crimes within our nation. We now have 19 team members on staff and look forward to continuing to grow our team as we open our second boba tea shop in downtown Temple, Texas this upcoming year.

I go on record today acknowledging the privilege my husband Devin and I have in being both U.S. citizens and fluent in English. Although we had our own difficulties navigating COVID-19 relief programs like the SBA PPP, many immigrant-owned businesses, particularly those in the AAPI communities continue to face persistent language barriers - on top of increased fears, trauma, and challenges with anti-Asian racism and the COVID-19 pandemic.

My parents and ancestors are Hakka Chinese - HakkaYin (客家) - in which the literal translation means “guest families.” I come from a line of Hakka farmers, educators, and business owners that worked hard and moved across lands as “guest people” to pave the pathway for us to do what we do today. I owe it to them for cultivating the Chinese and Taiwanese heritage and culture we embody in our business.

I am thankful to the House of Representatives and committee members as you continue to highlight the gift of immigration and the impact of immigrant-owned business innovation in our country, particularly as we continue recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Our lives in America are enriched and our economy is stronger when we celebrate the diverse and rich perspectives, stories, and strengths of immigrants. Thank you.