

Higher Rises, Lower Depths:
Asian Americans and globalization, 1967 - 1996

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Acronyms

ACC = Asian Community Center
 ACMHS = Asian Community Mental Health Services
 AHS = Asian Health Services
 AIWA = Asian Immigrant Women Advocates
 ALC = Asian Law Caucus
 CACA = Chinese American Citizens' League
 CCBA = Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association
 CCD = Coalition for Chinatown Development
 CPA = Chinese Progressive Association
 CRA, CRA/LA = Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles
 CRP = Chinatown Redevelopment Project (Oakland)
 EBAC = East Bay Asian Consortium
 EBALDC = East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation
 EBMUD = East Bay Municipal Utility District
 HUD = Department of Housing and Urban Development
 ILGWU = International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
 IWK = I Wor Kuen
 JACL = Japanese American Citizens' League
 KDP = *Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino* (Union of Democratic Filipinos)
 NLRB = National Labor Relations Board
 OCCC = Oakland Chinatown Community Council
 OCPI = Oakland Chinatown Plaza Incorporated
 OCRI = Oakland Chinatown Redevelopment Incorporated
 ORA = Oakland Redevelopment Agency
 PRC = People's Republic of China
 SHE = Self Help for the Elderly
 WMS = Wei Min She
 WOPC = West Oakland Planning Commission

Introduction — *The ends of Exclusion*

During the last four decades of the 20th century, billions of dollars in capital and hundreds of thousands of people were set on the move from Asia to the United States. Urban California, with its large existing Asian populations and ethnic enclave neighborhoods, became an especially popular destination for immigrants and investment alike. Once there, these new arrivals joined a broader set of forces that were already busy remaking the American city. Deindustrialization, suburbanization, and racial unrest had compelled city governments in California and across the nation to turn outside America's borders during the late 20th century for solutions to their socioeconomic crises. With the gradual retrenchment of federal funds for urban development, local administrators and elected officials looked increasingly to the private sector—both foreign and domestic—for resources to finance their cities' transitions into a positive postindustrial future. Fortunately for them, at the same time America's economic fortunes seemed to be on the decline, East Asian economies were experiencing a period of unprecedented growth—helped, in no small part, by foreign aid from the United States.¹ Attracted to the wealth of these newly-industrialized countries, politicians in Oakland, Los Angeles, and San Francisco began re-evaluating the position of their local Asian American communities who, it seemed, provided already-existing bridges between their cities and the riches of Asia.²

While city governments were focused on intentionally courting foreign investors from across the Pacific, immigrants and refugees were a far more unexpected component of the United States' deepening ties to East and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, they came, with many drawn by the same Asian American communities that local officials hoped to leverage into magnets for overseas capital. Post-World War II

¹ See Aaron Forsberg, *America and the Japanese Miracle: The Cold War Context of Japan's Postwar Economic Revival, 1950-1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Mark Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019); Umesh C. Gulati, "The Foundations of Rapid Economic Growth: The Case of the Four Tigers," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 51, no. 2 (1992): 161–72.

² The practice of leveraging Asian Americans as "bridges to Asia" arguably originated in Hawai'i in the 1940s, and became a component of statehood debates in the subsequent decade; see Sarah Miller-Davenport, *Gateway State: Hawai'i and the Cultural Transformation of American Empire*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). The first city in California to take up this project was San Francisco, with an ambitious redevelopment project in the city's Japantown (or Nihonmachi) during the 1950s signaling the city fathers' growing interest in soliciting Asian trade; see Meredith Oda, *The Gateway to the Pacific: Japanese Americans and the Remaking of San Francisco*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019). While this practice originated in the context of U.S. empire in the Pacific, it became more widespread and more intense from the 1960s onwards, as domestic crises compounded and Asian economic growth increased.

migrants from Asia arrived in the U.S. in the largest numbers in history, joining communities that had spent the last eighty years living under an exclusionary immigration regime. Not only were existing Asian ethnic institutions ill-equipped to handle the sheer volume of new immigration; they were unprepared for its diversity as well. Migrants spoke different dialects and languages, came from different parts of Asia, and had often experienced traumatic events of famine and war prior to their arrival. More and more, they came as families instead of single working men, with women outnumbering men among Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and other immigrant groups. And while the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that enabled most of these postwar arrivals also introduced preference categories for well-educated professionals, the majority of Asian immigrants between 1965 and 1995 did not have a college degree, with most relying on low-wage service and manufacturing jobs to survive.³

It was out of the turbulence generated by these twin migrations—one of people, one of capital—that contemporary Asian American politics were born. Examining the local interactions between immigrants, capitalists, activists, and politicians in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland, this dissertation argues that Asian American institutions integrated themselves into mainstream American political life by leveraging their proximity to globalization and its effects. In the process, investing in Asian American communities became a way for local governments and civic organizations to manage the widening inequalities caused by globalization by using the instruments of minority rights.

Manage—but not resolve. While some fortunate Asian American elites amassed significant amounts of wealth and power by brokering the movement of people, money, and information from Asia to the U.S., the vast majority of Asian Americans experienced globalization as a source of uncertainty and exploitation. Low-wage workers, displaced enclave residents, and priced-out small business owners found that the new transpacific economy further privileged large, transnationally mobile corporations over the needs of poor, non-white people. Nevertheless, many of them also had a stake in perpetuating this new economic system for their own material subsistence. As Asian Americans became both more legible and more valuable to local institutions via their proximity to foreign capital, people like garment workers,

³ On gender ratios in postwar Asian immigrant populations, see Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy 1850-1990* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), 82-111. On the changing proportion of immigrants with college degrees to those without, see Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 240.

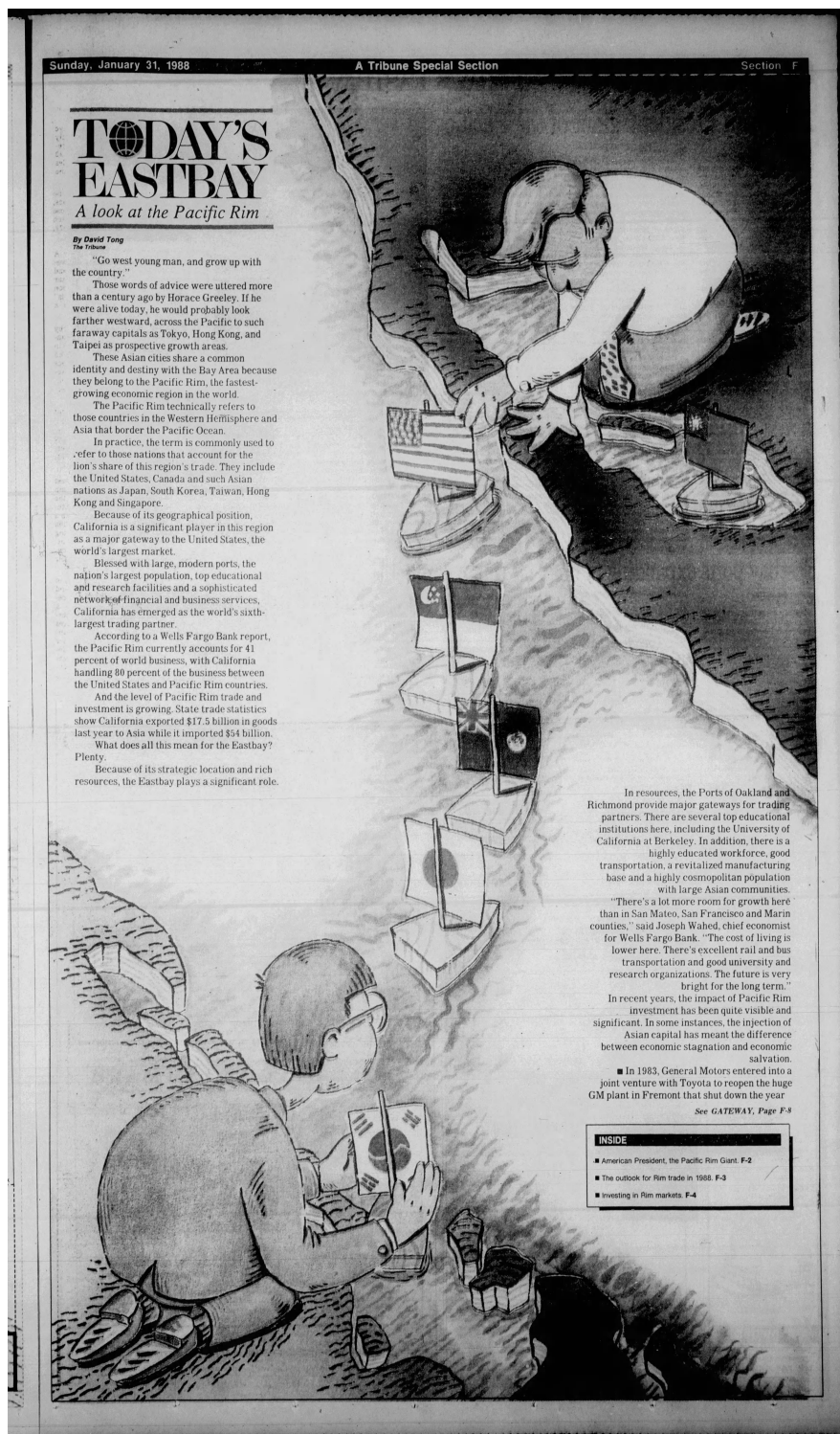


Fig. 0.1: A page from the *Oakland Tribune's* special issue on the East Bay's evolving relationship to the Pacific, showing toy boats traveling between East Asia and the port of Oakland. The suited, be-spectacled Asian counterpoint to the American businessman represents Asian capital in its benign or benevolent form. Source: *Oakland Tribune*, January 31, 1988.

shopkeepers, and tenants became further enmeshed in the transpacific economy—not only through their labor and their housing, but through the institutions they turned to for social aid.

Nonprofit service and advocacy organizations, many of which were founded in the late 1960s to address the growing population of vulnerable, lower-income Asian Americans, became a critical but unexpected link between their constituencies and the process of globalization. Most of these nonprofit organizations had either emerged directly out of the Asian American movement or were led by movement veterans, and attempted to carry forward some of the movement's broad commitments to anti-racist, anti-capitalist politics.⁴ As a result, Asian American nonprofits spent most of the 1970s and early '80s attempting to fight the effects of globalization on the ground, opposing Asian-financed redevelopment projects in the enclave and attempting to organize workers against multinational employers. By the 1990s, however, many activists and nonprofits had also become dependent on the prestige and the resources generated by globalization. In some cases, this meant receiving funding from foreign capitalists, either directly or via city governments. In others, it meant Asian American activists leveraged their capacity to attract foreign investment to gain influence in local government over issues like housing and unemployment. Having been incorporated into the mainstream based on their status as intermediaries between East and West, Asian American people and institutions thus discovered their capacity to effect change was bound to their ability to support—however tacitly—certain forms of transpacific corporate activity.

This dissertation brings together sociological, historical, and economic insights on the emergence of contemporary globalization with literature on racial capitalism in the U.S. to tell a story about globalization from the ground up. Scholars have made the case for contemporary globalization as a

⁴ For a sampling of literature on the radical Asian American movement, see Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity* (Temple University Press, 1992); William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Fred Ho et al., eds., *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* (San Francisco: Big Red Media, 2000); Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy A. M Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power in the Struggle for Social Justice, 1945-2000* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); Daryl Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Rychetta Watkins, *Black Power, Yellow Power, and the Making of Revolutionary Identities* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism During the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Haivan V. Hoang, *Writing against Racial Injury: The Politics of Asian American Student Rhetoric* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015); Karen Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2016).

consequence of Euro-American hegemony in other parts of the world, but as historian Andrew McKeivitt has argued, life in late 20th century America was also marked by the rest of the world coming to the U.S. in new and unprecedented ways.⁵ McKeivitt's work emphasizes the process of Americans learning to desire and consume Japanese goods as a significant turning point in their experience of globalization—a critical intervention, but one that only tells half the story. *Higher Rises, Lower Depths* begins to fill in the importance of day-to-day political processes in generating the conditions of economic globalization, which I argue was frequently the result of people and institutions turning to foreign solutions for local problems. Drawing on insights from historians of empire and international development, I have focused my attention on how novel global forces emerged from and interacted with pre-existing domestic social structures—namely, hierarchies of race, class, and gender. In the specific case of Asian America, this entails revealing how the remnants of the Exclusion Era, far from being erased by the legal and economic developments of the 1960s, produced the unequal foundation for Asian American incorporation into the new era of globalization.

To explain how this process of incorporation took place, I lean on the concept of *predatory inclusion* as developed by historian Keeanga-Yamahitta Taylor, which describes how the conditions of a group's historic exclusion become the terms on which they are fully integrated into capitalist political economy. Taylor uses the term to explain how low-income Black buyers were granted access to homeownership during the late 20th century on deeply unequal terms, having become “desired customers” because they were more likely to fall behind on their payments and thus would allow lenders to take advantage of certain government subsidies.⁶ For Asian Americans in urban California, their own inclusion into the state's newly globalizing economy relied on enduring features of Exclusion Era-politics,

⁵ See Andrew C. McKeivitt, *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017). For examples of scholarship on U.S. cultural and economic hegemony in the 20th century, see Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (University of California Press, 1993); Jan Neverdeen Pieterse, “Hyperpower Exceptionalism: Globalization the American Way,” in *Global America? The Cultural Consequences of Globalization*, ed. Ulrich Bech, Natan Sznajder, and Rainer Winter (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003); Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Nancy H. Kwak, *A World of Homeowners: American Power and the Politics of Housing Aid* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁶ Keeanga-Yamahitta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 3-4.

which have continued to undergird—albeit in mutated form—the supposedly colorblind cosmopolitanism of governing regimes in California’s major cities. Asian American ethnic enclaves, transnational business and cultural ties with Asia, and ethnic “self-help” organizations, all developed before and during Exclusion to manage life alongside a hostile white majority, became the tools through which Asian Americans became valuable to local state and civic organizations.

From these unequal foundations emerged an even more unequal future. In the 21st century, wealth inequality among Asian Americans is the widest of any racial group in the United States—a trend that began in the 1970s, when Asian Americans had the smallest intra-racial wealth gap, and has only widened since, with the richest Asian Americans having 183 times the wealth of the poorest between 2010 and 2016.⁷ Wealth and income disparities are most stark between different Asian American ethnic populations, but are visible within them as well: while Chinese Americans are among the wealthiest Asian ethnicities overall, their poverty rate was 13% in 2019—higher than the average for all Asian Americans combined.⁸ This dissertation proposes that Asian Americans’ proximity to globalization’s stratifying effects has contributed to these higher rises and lower depths of socioeconomic status, as some groups are able to access increasingly vast amounts of wealth while others are forced into increasingly vulnerable positions of risk and uncertainty.

Having sketched out the broad contours of my argument, the following sections set out some more specific interventions in the fields of immigration and urban history, while laying down some additional historical and theoretical groundwork for the chapters to follow.

⁷ Melany De La Cruz-Viesca, “Disaggregation Matters: Asian Americans and Wealth Data,” *AAPINexus: Policy, Practice and Community* 9, no. 1–2 (2011), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8vr3b69z>; Christian E. Weller and Jeffrey P. Thompson, “Wealth Inequality More Pronounced Among Asian Americans Than Among Whites,” *Challenge* 61, no. 2 (March 4, 2018): 183–202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/05775132.2018.1443998>; Rakesh Kochhar, “Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians,” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project* (blog), July 12, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/07/12/income-inequality-in-the-u-s-is-rising-most-rapidly-among-asians/>. Research on Asian American wealth inequality frequently explains it via the immigration system, with many low-income and less educated populations arriving from places like Southeast Asia as refugees while professionals are able to come through instruments like H-1B visas. This argument accurately describes the highly selective nature of the U.S. immigration system, but by failing to account for what keeps poor, “unskilled” immigrants in poverty, implies that they are fated to stay that way once they arrive in the U.S.

⁸ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Employed persons by occupation, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, and sex,” 2022; Abby Budiman, “Chinese in the U.S. Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project* (blog), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/asian-americans-chinese-in-the-u-s/>.

Post-1965 immigrants as a globalizing force

Between 1875 and 1965, Asian immigration to the United States was severely restricted by a legal and administrative state apparatus that perceived Asians as a racially inferior, socially degenerative source of economic competition against white labor. The Exclusion Era was born out of white violence, and white violence helped extend its formal lifespan: historian Beth Lew-Williams has meticulously documented both the everyday assaults faced by Chinese immigrants in America and the more organized forms of mob violence that aimed to expel Chinese people from cities and towns across the West, both before and after 1875. Similarly, historian Yuji Ichioka writes in his history of first-generation Japanese immigrants about their experiences of violent expulsions during the early 20th century, which intensified in the lead-up to the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act which brought Japan into the “Asiatic barred zone.” Mae Ngai discusses widespread instances of anti-Filipino violence during the 1920s as Filipino workers replaced Japanese labor in the California agricultural industry, with white mobs seeking to “deport” Filipinos from their midst. In addition to living with the omnipresent fear of death and displacement, Asian immigrants during the Exclusion Era were deprived of other forms of social stability. Most bachelor immigrants were rendered unable to return home for marriage and bring their wives to live with them; as a result, Asian immigrant society became largely homosocial, inviting further perceptions from the white majority that they were a sexually deviant population.⁹ Asian immigrant workers were also stereotyped by the white majority as naturally suited to grunt work, with “coolie”—an insult derived from words in various Asian languages meaning “slave” or “hard work”—becoming a catch-all term for Chinese and other Asian laborers. As Lew-Williams writes, white workers believed their Asian counterparts “could not be proletarian allies in the fight against capital; instead, they were destined to be tools in the hands of monopolists” who were seen as the new slaveholders to the coolies’ new slaves. As a

⁹ Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018); Yuji Ichioka, *The Issei: The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924* (New York : London: Free Press ; Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1988), 250-252; Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 105, 109-116. Filipino immigrants were a unique legal case due to their status as “nationals” (the Philippines being a U.S. colony between 1898 and 1935), which allowed them to enter the mainland during portions of the Exclusion Era. This did not prevent them from being understood in other contexts as “aliens” who were supposedly stealing “American” jobs.

result, labor organizations became some of the most vociferous proponents of Asian exclusion, as well as willing participants in acts of anti-Asian violence.¹⁰

Asian immigrant communities developed a range of survival tactics in response to white hostility, from practicing various forms of mutual aid and carving out economic niches in un-unionized industries, to circumventing the laws through illegal immigration and participating in legal advocacy against the Exclusion regime. By the mid-20th century, these legal strategies had been taken up by a cohort of native-born Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and other Asian American citizens, many of whom had college educations and were in the minority of middle-class Asian professionals.¹¹ While some groups and individuals were able to chip away at certain aspects of how immigration restriction was administered during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the anti-Exclusion movement achieved its most significant successes during and after World War II, when the United States's geopolitical concerns in the Pacific aligned with domestic Asian civil rights activism—a trend that would continue as world war transitioned into Cold War and countries like Japan, Korea, and the Republic of China became essential allies in the region. Following similar patterns in other civil rights movements, including the concurrent fight among African Americans for school desegregation and voting rights reform, it took a combination of dedicated lobbying from Asian Americans themselves and a re-alignment of national security interests to secure the passage of both the 1952 and 1965 Immigration and Nationality Acts.¹²

¹⁰ Lew Williams, *The Chinese Must Go*, 32-33. On the origins of the link between coolie labor and slave labor, see Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

¹¹ A notable pre-World War II legal victory was *United States v Wong Kim Ark* (1898), which established birthright citizenship for the Chinese despite their inability to become naturalized citizens. For more on the Wong case and other efforts to challenge and circumvent Exclusion laws, see Lucy E. Salyer, *Laws Harsh as Tigers: Chinese Immigrants and the Shaping of Modern Immigration Law*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Jane H. Hong, *Opening the Gates to Asia: A Transpacific History of How America Repealed Asian Exclusion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

¹² On the connection between domestic civil rights advancements and Cold War foreign policy, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011). On the reconfiguration of American racial attitudes towards Asian and Asian American populations post World War II, see John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2010); Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

With both acts, the U.S. government's goals were to shore up their country's reputation for racial pluralism abroad and to satisfy liberal critics of social discrimination at home. The subsequent sharp rise in immigration from Asia was, famously, an unintended consequence of reform. Moreover, as scholars of immigration policy have taken pains to point out, the 1965 Act by no means eliminated racialized and gendered restrictions on legal immigration—from Asia or from elsewhere. Its family reunification components, for instance, reinforced heteronormative and patriarchal notions about the role of families as socioeconomic units. Nevertheless, the policy also served to “continuously produc[e] new chains of migration” among Asian immigrant communities.¹³ The effect was staggering. In 1959, roughly 18,600 Asians legally entered the United States; in 1970, that number was up to just over 74,500. Subsequent refugee programs for migrants from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and other areas of Southeast Asia ensured that these figures would continue to rise throughout the 1970s and '80s. By the 1990 Census, the Asian population of the U.S. had topped 7.2 million, compared to just 1.2 million in 1965.¹⁴

Perhaps because of the magnitude of these numerical changes, the impact of post-1965 Asian immigration on the United States has too often been reduced to a matter of mere demography. Certainly, mid-century immigration reform altered both the number and the diversity of Asian people in the country in ways that were bound to have an impact on local social, economic, and political life. Demography itself was not destiny, however, and the specificities of how Asian migrants (and the communities that received them) engaged in political activity requires greater historical attention.¹⁵ My approach in this project is to

¹³ On the unintended consequences of the 1952 and 1965 Acts, see Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 262; David M. Reimers, *Still the Golden Door: The Third World Comes to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 91-100; Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 333-336. On the limitations and discriminatory effects of the 1952 and 1965 Acts, particularly when it comes to gender and sexual minorities and non-normative family units, see Catherine Lee, “Family Reunification and the Limits of Immigration Reform: Impact and Legacy of the 1965 Immigration Act,” *Sociological Forum* 30, no. S1 (2015): 528–48; Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), 218; Eithne Luibhéid, *Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America Through Immigration Policy*, 1-4; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 262.

¹⁵ For an example of the demographic argument, the authors of *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power* argue that the increased ethnic diversity and growing professional composition of post-1965 immigration was “a confounding factor” for the Asian American movement, with the movement “reced[ing] against the backdrop of a transformed Asian American community.” See Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy A. M Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power in the Struggle for Social Justice, 1945-2000* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 151-152.

begin with the assumption that post-1965 arrivals from Asia were agents of globalization, whose activities in the United States prompted local state and civic institutions to expand their capacity for managing global concerns. Viewing immigrants as both witting and unwitting globalizers helps position the transnational activities of immigrants within a broader field of international forces, from industrial offshoring to the movement of investment capital from Asia to the U.S.

The role of wealthy, highly mobile Asian elites as globalizers is relatively well-established within the literature.¹⁶ This study focuses additionally on Asian immigrant workers in the global garment industry, exploring how persistent efforts by workers to resist the demeaning and degrading conditions of their work compelled both Asian American nonprofits and organized labor to embrace more capacious, global conceptions of economic justice. Such efforts rarely resulted in unqualified successes, however, as most domestic institutions—even well-intentioned ones operating from progressive and radical assumptions—struggled to accept working class immigrant women as viable political actors in their own right. Post-1965 immigration thus posed both a challenge and an opportunity to those seeking to advance left wing politics within Asian American communities, with migrant and native-born activists alike struggling to develop new strategies for contesting against global systems of exploitation.

*High risers: or, “the Asian face of globalization”*¹⁷

At this point the reader may be asking why a project that is about contemporary globalization—necessarily a world-spanning phenomenon—focuses exclusively on the relationship between the U.S. and Asia. This dissertation does not claim to be a comprehensive history of globalization, and I am careful not to equate globalization with the emergence of a new transpacific economy in the late 20th century. Newly industrializing Asian economies were essential components in the making of contemporary globalization, however, both as a system of legal and economic policy regimes and as an experience lived by millions around the world. This was especially the case for people in the United States, who largely perceived and

¹⁶ See Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); AnnaLee Saxenian, *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007); Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng, “The Political Economy of Capitalist Restructuring and the New Asian Immigration,” in *The New Asian immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, ed. Paul Ong, Edna Boancich, and Lucie Cheng (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 172.

understood globalization through their late 20th century encounter with Asia. To just take the case of foreign direct investment, it is well documented that capital from dozens of countries flowed towards concerns within the U.S. during the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, with the U.K., the Netherlands, and Canada often holding the most stock in companies and real estate in the United States. Yet throughout the same period, journalists, artists, intellectuals, and politicians focused the majority of their public pronouncements about foreign investment on Asian capital, with Japan in particular becoming the boogeyman of economic nationalists. When organizations like Californians for an Independent America railed against foreign acquisitions of U.S. real estate, it was not the Dutch they feared, but East Asians. "God isn't making any more real estate," the group's founder stated in 1990; "Japan is buying cattle ranches in San Joaquin County. What do we do, close the barn door after the cows are gone?"¹⁸ Asia, as a longtime social and cultural foil for the West—the Other against which Europe and the United States defined themselves—was thus the object through which Americans grappled with their experience of the global 20th century, from reckoning with their own country's economic decline to understanding the growing cultural interconnectedness between the U.S. and the rest of the world.¹⁹

For Asian American communities, the emerging world of U.S.-Asia relations was rife with both risks and rewards. A great deal of scholarly attention has focused on the risks, with historians emphasizing the enduring danger of "perpetual foreigner" stereotypes and how they motivated much of

¹⁸ Thom Calandra, "Money Talks: Three debates," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 18, 1990. On the growth of foreign direct investment to the US (FDIUS) during the 1980s and '90s, see Norman J. Glickman and Douglas P. Woodward, *The New Competitors: How Foreign Investors Are Changing the U.S. Economy* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Simon Reich, "'Manufacturing' Investment: National Variations in the Contribution of Foreign Direct Investors to the US Manufacturing Base in the 1990s," *Review of International Political Economy* 3, no. 1 (1996): 27–64; Edward Felsenthal, "Threat to the Republic? The Politics of Foreign Direct Investment in the United States," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 14, no. 2 (1990): 354–71; Robert Grosse and Len J. Trevino, "Foreign Direct Investment in the United States: An Analysis by Country of Origin," *Journal of International Business Studies* 27, no. 1 (1996): 139–55; Daniel A. Gerlowski, Hung-Gay Fung, and Deborah Ford, "The Location of Foreign Direct Investment for U.S. Real Estate: An Empirical Analysis," *Land Economics* 70, no. 3 (1994): 286–93. Edward Felsenthal notes in his 1990 essay that "only one of the twenty largest foreign investments in the United States is a Japanese subsidiary; fourteen are European-owned."

¹⁹ See Christopher L. Connery, "Pacific Rim Discourse: The U. S. Global Imaginary in the Late Cold War Years," *Boundary 2* 21, no. 1 (1994): 30–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/303396>; Narelle Morris, *Japan-Bashing: Anti-Japanism since the 1980s*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011); Marie Thorsten, *Superhuman Japan: Knowledge, Nation and Culture in US-Japan Relations*, (New York: Routledge, 2012); McKeivitt, *Consuming Japan*.

the racist violence against Asian minorities during the late 20th century.²⁰ When Chinese American engineer Vincent Chin was murdered by white autoworkers in Detroit in 1982, activists understood his death to be the most recent manifestation of century-old practices blaming Asian people for economic downturns and general unemployment. Economic globalization, which in the case of Detroit had enabled both U.S. auto manufacturers to offshore production to Asia and Japanese manufacturers to penetrate the U.S. market, became the collective sin of Asian Americans to bear.²¹

Alongside this story of growing vulnerability for Asian Americans, however, was also a story of their changing value. Specifically, Asian Americans became a valuable resource for city governments and other domestic institutions hoping to intervene or participate in the transpacific economy. This often consisted of relying on Asian American knowledge and expertise to broker certain deals and business arrangements, but it manifested in more expansive ways as well. Working with local Asian American elites, cities began investing for the first time in ethnic enclaves as sites with the potential to attract Asian investment and international tourism. Businessmen, local media, and elected officials praised their local Asian populations as assets in the new global economy; one 1985 *San Francisco Examiner* article about Chinese American entrepreneurs declared that “the real key to the Bay Area’s success is people. They are the bridges to Asia that count the most.” Racial diversity was also a selling point to overseas investors: when courting Hongkonger and Taiwanese financiers for a project in Oakland Chinatown in 1978, Oakland city councilman Carter Gilmore, himself African American, assured skeptics that “there already are many Asian companies operating in Oakland and that...the black community would welcome the additional business to be generated and the jobs to be created.”²² Within this context, some Asian

²⁰ For a range of representative examples of this perspective, see Erika Lee, *The Rise of Asian America*, 381-382; William Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 193-194; Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*, 137-138; Ronald Takaki, “Who really killed Vincent Chin?”, *San Francisco Examiner*, September 21, 1983; Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 58-61.

²¹ The idea that Asian Americans become the racial representation of the worst excesses of a given stage of capitalist development has been explored by Asian American theorists and cultural critics. See Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Helen Heran Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011); David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

²² Frank Viviano, “The New Taipans,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 5, 1985; Ernie Cox, “Self blasts state’s Asia trip probe,” *Oakland Tribune*, November 7, 1978.

Americans experienced dramatic financial and political success promoting the movement of people and money between the U.S. and Asia. Realtors sold properties to wealthy Asian immigrants, neighborhood activists entered the halls of government by leveraging their ties to Asian capitalists, architects helped design the local projects of Asian real estate developers, and ethnic elites moved into both elected and appointed political offices. Rather than viewing these success stories as aberrations or the result of these individuals “chasing whiteness,” we should see their rise as the product of globalization’s mobilization and reconfiguration of existing racial categories. Moreover, their success was not possible *in spite of* the increasing vulnerability of less fortunate Asian Americans who found themselves struck by the racist backlash against globalization’s Asian face; instead, it was the very vulnerability of this underclass that made the production of the new Asian American elite possible in the first place.

High rises: the politics of globalized redevelopment

The existing literature on urban experiences of postindustrial decline in the United States is vast. Recent contributions have emphasized the simultaneous exit of manufacturing industries and of federal funds for local welfare and development projects, leaving urban communities and governments to develop their own innovative strategies to grapple with crisis and economic decline. Some historians have focused on the state’s increasing reliance on prisons and policing to manage in place of (or alongside of) welfare programs.²³ Others have looked at the evolving role of urban renewal, which largely emerged in the first half of the 20th century out of ambitious efforts towards centralized planning and urban public service provision, but was quickly neutered during the Red Scare years and increasingly driven into compromise with private sector interests across the late 20th century.²⁴ Others still have looked to the changing role of

²³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: Harvard University Press, 2016); Christopher Lowen Agee, *The Streets of San Francisco: Policing and the Creation of a Cosmopolitan Liberal Politics, 1950-1972*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

²⁴ Donald Craig Parson, *Making a Better World: Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Andrew R. Highsmith, *Demolition Means Progress: Flint, Michigan, and the Fate of the American Metropolis*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

government itself, from the further proliferation of public-private partnerships to both grassroots and elite, left-wing and conservative criticisms of the role of the state in managing social and economic inequality.²⁵

Among these strategies, local governments' turn towards foreign capital has remained largely unexamined. When it comes to the specific relationship between America's postindustrial decline and capital mobility, U.S. political historians have generally limited their scholarship to the effects of capital leaving the United States.²⁶ Neglecting the role of capital investment coming to American cities has impoverished our understanding of how the U.S. transitioned out of the postwar liberal order into our neoliberal present. In particular, it misses how the ideology of growth liberalism and its reliance upon public-private partnerships underwrote local governments' pursuit of overseas funds, revealing how the globalized moment of the late 20th century was less of a break with the past than an expansion of its logics. Growth liberalism held that the solution to social inequality lay in perpetual economic expansion paired with "modest social welfare and increased wages in an economy directed by employers."²⁷ Borne out of the 1960s, growth liberalism was both a product of the United States' postwar economic boom and a justification to keep the boom going. After its Kennedy and Johnson-administration adherents lost power at the federal level, Democratic urban administrators and officials in cities across the country continued to adhere to its logic in order to address intensifying local problems. *Higher Rises, Lower Depths* explores how, in addition to turning towards domestic financial institutions and taking on new

²⁵ Benjamin Holtzman, *The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021); Andrew J. Diamond, *Chicago on the Make: Power and Inequality in a Modern City* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017); Claire Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022); Lily Geismer, *Left behind: The Democrats' Failed Attempt to Solve Inequality*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022); Brent Cebul, *Illusions of Progress: Business, Poverty, and Liberalism in the American Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

²⁶ See Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011); Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1999); Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019). Some recent scholarship has begun to examine the role of foreign investment in 20th century urban transformations; see for instance Jessica Ann Levy, "Selling Atlanta: Black Mayoral Politics from Protest to Entrepreneurism, 1973 to 1990," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 3 (May 2015): 420–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144214566953>.

²⁷ Robert O Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2005); Geismer, *Left Behind*; Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

forms of debt, city governments also began investing in redevelopment projects that could attract the new wealth of Asia.²⁸ These local, globalized responses to liberals' national failure to resolve the tension between capitalist growth and social crisis offer a new perspective on how policymakers dealt with the collapse of the New Deal order, and constructed the neoliberal one in its stead.

As historian Robert Collins notes, growth liberalism possessed global dimensions from its inception, namely in the form of overseas wartime spending and in its role amidst the geopolitics of the Cold War. The primary difference in the case of globalized redevelopment was the direction in which money flowed (and the increasingly diminished role of the federal government). Nevertheless, the underlying logic was the same: in order to resolve the problem of slowing economic growth, cities needed to seek out new sources of capital to fuel their continual expansion. Such strategies often allowed administrators and elected officials to neglect the underlying causes of crisis—namely, the systems of racial discrimination and class exploitation that had fueled white flight, tax revolts, and industrial offshoring. Instead, much as the massive federal spending programs of the Great Society failed to address the root of social inequality, the presence of foreign capital in U.S. cities had the similar effect of exacerbating existing inequalities instead of resolving them.²⁹ Exploring the foreign dimensions of late-stage growth liberalism also tells us something about the character of slow-growth and anti-growth politics of the late 20th century—namely, how their ability to mobilize racist and xenophobic ideologies against certain forms of urban development was, in part, enabled by city governments' eagerness to allow overseas builders and investors unfettered access to some of their cities' most vulnerable populations.

Lastly, restoring the role of foreign direct investment in America's cities helps restore the legacy of U.S. empire into our understanding of race, urban space, and inequality. A great deal of scholarship has focused on how social and economic disparities have been inscribed into the metropolitan landscape by city planners, housing authorities, and local legislatures, but most of these works have taken a strictly

²⁸ See Destin Jenkins, *The Bonds of Inequality: Debt and the Making of the American City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

²⁹ Thinking about local globalization as a form of growth liberalism also helps us connect the slow-growth and anti-growth politics of the 1980s and '90s with certain nascent forms of anti-globalization, something I discuss briefly in Chapter 5.

national frame.³⁰ This dissertation builds on a growing body of scholarship that seeks to tie late 20th century globalization to the globalizing empires of a hundred years prior. Both late 20th century Asian investment and Asian immigration into places like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Oakland are symptoms of these cities' historic function as launching points for the America's imperial conquests of the Pacific during the late 19th and early 20th centuries—arguably the country's first period of globalization.³¹ People and capital who moved from Asia to the U.S. between the 1960s and 1990s thus did so along political, economic, and social channels produced out of the United States' earlier colonial ventures.³² Once again, what distinguishes the late 20th century from the previous era is the mechanism of Asian capital's arrival: no longer as the direct result of the American state's imperial plunder, but as the targeted investments of Asian capitalists themselves, who had partnered directly with local administrators and business classes instead of dealing with the U.S. federal government. Indeed, it was the federal government's refusal to offer certain forms of aid to states and localities—or, just as often, the new conditions imposed on such assistance—that motivated West coast cities to seek out more independent ties to Asia, a project which consistently relied on the labor, knowledge, and built environments of their Asian American populations. Incorporating this new global-local perspective requires historians of urban

³⁰ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1985); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

³¹ On America's Pacific empire, see Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1963); Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Paul Kramer, *Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2007); Sarah Miller-Davenport, *Gateway State: Hawai'i and the Cultural Transformation of American Empire*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

³² Vanessa Ogle, "Archipelago Capitalism: Tax Havens, Offshore Money, and the State, 1950s–1970s," *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 5 (December 1, 2017): 1431–58, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/122.5.1431>; Andrew Hedden, "Empire in Need: Seattle and the U.S. Federal Government in the 1970s" (paper presentation, American Political History Conference, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN: June 11, 2022).

inequality to widen our gaze beyond the standard urban-suburban divide and see cities as embedded in much larger geographies of resource extraction and labor migration.

Asian immigrant enclaves provide an especially potent illustration of how globalization mapped itself onto existing hierarchies, altering some of them while leaving others intact. Enclaves like Little Tokyo, Los Angeles and Oakland and San Francisco's Chinatowns were products of virulent anti-Asian racism before and during the Exclusion Era, with legal restrictions on Asian land ownership and restrictive housing covenants preventing most Asian Americans from living outside certain dense urban neighborhoods. During this period, mainstream portrayals of Asian enclaves stereotyped them as dens of crime, vice, and disease, turning Asian immigrants' poor living conditions into a racial pathology about Asian degeneracy.³³ By the 1960s, however, white residents and city governments had begun to see enclaves in a whole new light. Following a nationwide interest in Asian cultures and commodities during the early Cold War, non-Asian locals increasingly treated Asian neighborhoods as exotic tourist attractions, an association enclave business owners sought to cultivate and satisfy.³⁴ As suburbanization emptied enclaves of many of their middle class residents, ethnic elites began looking to urban renewal to turn these neighborhoods into modern commercial centers for regional Asian American communities. In Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Francisco, these efforts aligned with broader plans to re-vamp the downtown districts where most enclaves were located in order to attract jobs and retail spending back from the suburbs. When federal funding for these redevelopment efforts began to run dry during the late 1960s and city governments looked to foreign sources of capital, Asian enclaves became the ideal landing grounds for Asian investors and developers. Enclaves didn't just come with a strata of ethnic elites who could help coordinate redevelopment efforts on the ground and broker arrangements with foreign capitalists. Their status as exotic, racialized bubbles within the urban landscape meant they could also contain the detrimental effects of foreign capital's arrival, from the displacement of low-income tenants to the pricing out of "mom and pop" businesses. Having begun the century as tools of Asian American

³³ Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³⁴ See Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 2002); Chiou-ling Yeh, *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

exclusion from mainstream life, by the end of the century, ethnic enclaves had become an instrument through which Asian Americans were integrated into the globalized urban economy.

I am far from the first to notice the Asian enclave's particular role within transnational flows of people and finance and the production of "world cities."³⁵ This study builds on the existing literature on enclaves as sites of globalization by foregrounding the globalizing actions of Asian Americans themselves, as opposed to just focusing on the state or Asian capitalists. Doing so reveals how these globalizing processes emerged from local, grassroots struggles for racial justice and economic advancement, and were not simply imposed onto Asian American communities by external entities. As such, globalization should be understood as an essential factor in Asian Americans' changing relationship to the state during the late 20th century.

Asian Americans and the associational state

The contemporary iteration of a pan-ethnic, Asian American politics was born out of federal welfare spending during the 1960s, and has since been shaped and re-shaped by federal retrenchment. As discussed above, the U.S. government's retreat from certain forms of federal aid to cities and localities helped open a space for foreign capital from the 1970s onwards. This very same pattern of disinvestment also ensured that Asian American organizations would have to develop their own innovative strategies to both secure scarce federal dollars and to seek aid from the private sector. Those institutions that were able to rise to the challenge did so by leveraging their proximity to either Asian capital, Asian immigrants, or both, becoming on-the-ground partners in the state's evolving effort to manage growing socioeconomic inequality.

³⁵ See Jan Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *Koreatown, Los Angeles: Immigration, Race, and the "American Dream,"* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2022); Dan Abramson, Lynne Manzo, and Jeffrey Hou, "From Ethnic Enclave to Multi-Ethnic Translocal Community: Contested Identities and Urban Design in Seattle's Chinatown-International District," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 23, no. 4 (2006): 341–60; Michel S. Laguerre, "The Globalization of a Panethnopolis: Richmond District as the New Chinatown in San Francisco," *GeoJournal* 64, no. 1 (2005): 41–49; Daniel Iwama, Karen Umemoto, and Kanako Masuda, "Calling Nikkei to Empire: Diaspora and Trans/Nationalism in the Redevelopment of Historic Little Tokyo," *Journal of Historical Geography* 74 (October 2021): 44–54.

To explore this phenomenon, this dissertation focuses on the evolution of Asian American nonprofit activism, from its emergence out of the radical movement of the 1960s to its expansion into virtually every aspect of Asian American political life. In this sense, Asian American communities were largely unexceptional. The 1960s saw the proliferation of service nonprofits aimed at helping the poor and advancing social justice causes; many of these organizations had direct ties to various rights movements, from the Black liberation struggle, to women's and LGBTQ+ rights, to the burgeoning consumers' rights and environmentalist movements. For Asian Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities, nonprofits were a critical tool for building deeper institutional ties between themselves and the state during a period of government expansion in the field of public provision. As historian Claire Dunning and others have noted, the War on Poverty's famous mandate for community participation in federal programs created widespread demand for nonprofits that could bridge the gap between government institutions and vulnerable, marginalized populations. In turn, nonprofit organizations and their staff were legitimized as the *de facto* representatives of their communities within critical processes such as urban renewal and welfare administration. In the case of Asian Americans, this meant a new generation of left wing and progressive activists could effectively challenge the authority of more conservative ethnic elites by organizing themselves into nonprofits and aligning themselves with the liberal welfare state.³⁶

By the mid 1960s, Asian ethnic politics was already divided between those who were wary of government intervention and sought to maintain older practices of self-sufficiency, and those who had begun successfully integrating into state and local party politics.³⁷ The emergence of the Asian American movement, the arrival of post-1965 immigrants, and the desirability of Asian capital all combined to

³⁶ On the relationship between Johnson administration's War on Poverty and the development of the United States' nonprofit sector, see Martha F. Davis, *Brutal Need: Lawyers and the Welfare Rights Movement, 1960-1973* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Andrew J. F. Morris, *The Limits of Voluntarism: Charity and Welfare from the New Deal through the Great Society* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods*; Brian Balogh, *The Associational State: American Governance in the Twentieth Century*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). For examples of studies about charities, voluntary organizations, and nonprofits among other racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S., see Lila Corwin Berman, *The American Jewish Philanthropic Complex: The History of a Multibillion-Dollar Institution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Benjamin Marquez, "Mexican-American Political Organizations and Philanthropy: Bankrolling a Social Movement," *Social Service Review* 77, no. 3 (2003): 329–46, <https://doi.org/10.1086/375794>.

³⁷ See Charlotte Brooks, *Between Mao and McCarthy: Chinese American Politics in the Cold War Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) on Chinese American involvement with the Democratic party in both New York and San Francisco;

weigh the scales in favor of integration. Left wing and progressive activists clashed with business owners and professionals on many issues within enclave life, but by the 1970s, the vast majority agreed that they needed the state to weather globalization's volatile storms—from growing populations of unassimilated, low income immigrants to the disruptions caused by foreign-financed real estate development.

The relationship between Asian American organizations and the state was by no means a smooth one, however, and nowhere was this more true than among Asian American nonprofits. While many of these organizations operated with support from public sources, historian Paul Sabin notes that the staff and founders of progressive nonprofits during the 1960s and '70s often distrusted the government's capacity to tackle inequality. Within the Asian American movement, the New Left's suspicions of the state merged with both longstanding strategies of ethnic "self-help" and Third World internationalist ideas of minority self-determination to propel activists into nonprofits, "'rather than try to seize control of the government itself or pursue reform through well-established labor organizations.'"³⁸

By accepting a limited role for government, however, nonprofits also accepted an expanded role for the private sector—which, in the globalizing neighborhoods of Asian America, necessarily meant an expanded role for foreign capital. Asian American nonprofits did not straightforwardly embrace the possibilities of Asian investment; rather, most organizations approached it from a desire to redistribute its benefits among a wider swathe of their communities. Instead of seizing control of government to do so, however, nonprofits instead leveraged their role as managers of globalization's new inequalities. Whether that meant building affordable housing for the people displaced by globalized redevelopment or providing essential services to low-income immigrants, Asian American nonprofits successfully argued that they deserved a slice of the Asian capital pie. As one activist in Oakland put it, nonprofits and their allies' goal was to "pressure the politicians to repay, in effect, Chinatown for the lost properties to redevelopment and to serve a growing Asian population."³⁹

In embracing their role as a third party to local government's relationship with overseas investment, Asian American progressives inadvertently reinforced the marginal position of the immigrant

³⁸ Paul Sabin, *Public Citizens: The Attack on Big Government and the Remaking of American Liberalism*, (New York, N.Y: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), chap. 4, Kindle edition.

³⁹ William Wong, "Oakland Asian cultural center's long struggle," *Oakland Tribune*, January 17, 1996.

communities within this process. Immigrants were unquestionably political agents in their own right, but many relied on relationships with acculturated, English-speaking Asian Americans and their institutions to access certain political processes. Rather than choosing to organize older, low-income, non-English speaking immigrants into winning a greater share of political power within globalized redevelopment, however, many progressive Asian American activists prioritized meeting their immediate material needs using resources diverted from both the state and from private foreign capital. Nonprofits have thus proven a useful partner to city governments hoping to manage the impact of globalizing projects, while becoming a far more inconsistent tool for working class immigrants and other Asian Americans seeking to prevent these projects from taking place.

Organization

Higher Rises, Lower Depths is divided into five case studies progressing in rough chronological order, with each set in either Oakland, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. It opens in 1968, with the implementation of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and the creation of the Asian American movement, and ends in 1996 on the eve of the Asian financial crisis.

Chapter 1 explores the immediate aftermath of the passage of the 1965 Act in San Francisco's Chinatown. By the mid-60s, local Chinese American politics was poised at a turning point, with elite elites torn between continuing to abide by older practices of ethnic self-sufficiency or embracing integration with local Democratic institutions. I argue that the arrival of tens of thousands of new immigrants helped tip the scale in favor of integration, as the institutions of "self-help" proved insufficient in addressing the diverse and widespread needs of new arrivals. Chapter 1 also charts the emergence of the Asian American movement in this integrationist moment, as a younger generation of activists—radicalized by the campus and anti-war movements—sought out War on Poverty funds to form their own organizations aimed at helping both new immigrants and elderly old-timers, approaching "self-help" from a left-wing perspective. In seeking to bridge the divide between themselves and Chinese immigrants, however, Asian American activists' Third World internationalist politics proved more hindrance than help, with activists struggling to see immigrants as political subjects in their own right.

In Chapter 2, I continue this thread by focusing on a 1974 labor strike among immigrant garment workers in San Francisco Chinatown, which drew in allies from both the Asian American movement and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU). I use this occasion to explore the challenges and opportunities facing immigrants attempting to organize within a globalizing sector, as neither unions nor Asian American radicals seemed prepared to make use of garment workers' transnational experience of the industry. Moreover, Asian American activists and the ILGWU struggled to come to terms with the union's history of anti-Asian racism. Ultimately, I argue that garment manufacturers benefitted from workers, activists, and unions' failure to overcome the political divisions of the Exclusion Era, contributing to the strike's eventual defeat.

Chapter 3 turns to Little Tokyo, Los Angeles to explore the globalizing efforts of second-generation Japanese American professionals during the late '60s and '70s, who sought to entice Japanese capitalists to help finance urban renewal in the old ethnic enclave. In doing so, I argue that these brokers helped make tools for maintaining intra-ethnic hierarchy—namely the sexualization of Japanese American women and the exploitation of Japanese American workers more broadly—into tools of transnational capitalist accumulation.

In Chapter 4, I examine the evolution of progressive Asian American politics in Oakland Chinatown between the 1970s and '90s, where a series of Hong Kong developers attempted to construct a massive mixed-use commercial development. While progressive Asian American nonprofits initially sought to contest the terms of foreign-financed redevelopment, federal retrenchment from social welfare spending ensured those same nonprofits would become increasingly dependent on Hong Kong capital. From this new position of dependency, activists successfully developed deeper relationships with local government in order to lobby for their inclusion into the Chinatown redevelopment project.

Chapter 5 looks at how Asian American nonprofits in both San Francisco and Oakland attempted to revive labor organizing among immigrant garment workers during the 1980s and '90s. During this period, nonprofits succeeded in bridging certain divides between themselves and organized labor while also expanding their capacity for both legal advocacy and direct worker organizing. Their efforts were increasingly circumscribed by the conditions of the garment industry itself, however, as plant closures escalated during the 1990s. In the case of Asian garment workers, their inclusion into the organized labor

movement was too late and too incomplete for them to mount a meaningful offensive against the practice of offshoring, leaving them and their allies to instead develop defensive mechanisms to survive the transition.

Methodology

Just as Asian Americans were among the first communities to experience certain on-the-ground effects of globalization, California has served as a front-line for many of the political consequences wrought by Asian capital and Asian immigration during the late 20th century. This bellwether status echoes other trends in which California has led the nation, from the New Right's emergence from the suburbs of Orange County to the rise of radical student activism on university campuses across the Bay Area. Of particular relevance to this project is California's longer history as a front for multiracial civil rights activism, and all the tensions and opportunities therein.⁴⁰ This, paired with the state's longer history of Asian settlement, makes it an ideal case study for exploring the transition from the Exclusion Era to the new multicultural consensus of the late 20th century.

To establish a pattern of globalization's effects on Asian American communities, I have chosen to conduct a multi-city study. I chose Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland as three major urban centers with sizable Asian populations and large archival source bases where all three city governments engaged in projects targeted at Asian neighborhoods. These three cities also serve as useful contrasts to one another; Oakland in particular offers an example where attempts to leverage socioeconomic ties to Asia were constrained by the city's steep economic decline during the 1970s and '80s, whereas Los Angeles and San Francisco were more successful in re-branding as "world cities"—though, as we'll see, such imaging obscured racial and economic divisions that were just as stark, and just as consequential.

⁴⁰ See Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Chapter 1 — “*The Winds of Change are Blowing*”: *New immigrants, local politics, and the birth of Asian America*

In the spring of 1968, a camera crew from KRON-TV, a Bay Area local public television news station, gathered on the tarmac at San Francisco airport to watch a hundred newcomers from Hong Kong set foot on U.S. soil. Some passengers fluttered down the aircraft stairs in brightly colored dresses, jackets, and suits; others moved more slowly, holding young children and scattered belongings, smiling shyly into the lens as they passed. It was impossible to tell from their dress and their manner who among them was an educated, English-speaking professional and who constituted a monolingual, “unskilled” member of the immigrant working class, but the KRON reporter took care to mention in his final broadcast that the majority of Chinese arrivals still fell into the latter category.¹ For this latter group, as for generations of ethnic Chinese migrants who had crossed the Pacific before them, Chinatown was the only destination within San Francisco where most could find guaranteed employment, social services, and housing. By the late ‘60s, the neighborhood encompassed a roughly eight-by-seven block area on the city’s eastern edge, with the historically Italian enclave of North Beach bordering to the north, the affluent Nob Hill to the west, the Embarcadero to the east, and Market Street forming the neighborhood’s southernmost border (fig. 1.1). By the mid-20th century, Chinatown had survived earthquake, fire, and mob violence largely through the persistent activism of Chinese merchants and professionals, who helped broker the business arrangements that kept Chinatown an integral part of the city economy. On that spring morning in 1968, new arrivals would enter a neighborhood dense with family associations, political organizations, social clubs, and organized crime, all of which were practiced at receiving and integrating newcomers into the special relationships—social, cultural, economic—that Chinese Americans had developed over the past century between themselves and mainstream San Francisco.

While Chinatown remained a functioning enclave in certain respects, it, like the rest of city, was also undergoing dramatic transformations to its social and political order. New Chinese immigrants were themselves a significant factor driving these changes. The KRON broadcast described this particular group of arrivals as one small part of a “profound human drama unfolding daily in San Francisco,” as

¹ *Chinatown: Community in Crisis*, Documentary (KRON-TV, 1968), Bay Area TV Archive, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/215046>.

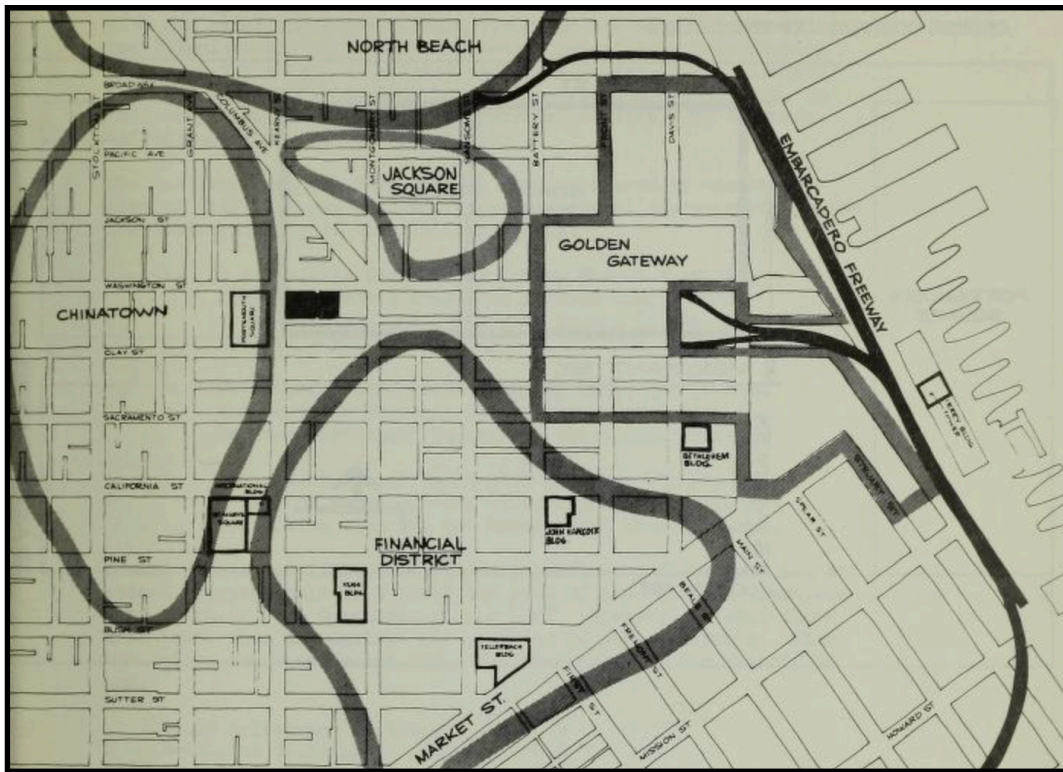


Fig. 1.1: San Francisco Redevelopment Agency map showing the rough location of Chinatown and its surrounding neighborhoods, 1965. Source: San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, "Chinese Cultural and Trade Center project announcement," March 29, 1965.

federal legislative reform three years earlier had removed all formal racial barriers to legal immigration from Asia to the United States. As a result, between 1960 and 1970 San Francisco's Chinese American population grew by over 20,000 people, with thousands finding residence in and around Chinatown itself. Yet immigrants' particular blend of needs and vulnerabilities quickly exposed the fact that Chinatown's social infrastructure was far from capable of meeting increased demand. Housing in the neighborhood was already at a premium, and much of what working class immigrants could afford was sub-standard; a government report from 1968 described cramped, run-down buildings where residents were forced to share bathrooms and kitchens with dozens of others, while basic amenities such as heat and electric lighting could not be guaranteed. Meanwhile, the city's job market for new immigrants was highly constrained, both due to employer discrimination and to immigrants' own English language capabilities. Options within the enclave were themselves limited by the neighborhood's shrinking retail economy, as its customer base was slowly eroded by a suburbanizing middle class. One main exception to this were the Chinatown garment manufacturing industry, which primarily employed women, but these jobs

frequently paid a pittance for long hours of hard labor. Meanwhile, young immigrant men suffered most acutely from a lack of jobs and adequate schooling, driving up fears within the neighborhood that they were all turning to gangs and crime instead.²

San Francisco's administrators and politicians scrambled to respond to this growing crisis, turning to both the federal government and to the local Chinese American establishment for help. For a better resourced, better connected community, several thousand newcomers over two decades might not have caused significant strain. But Chinatown in the 1960s had only recently been incorporated into the city's Democratic Party-controlled politics, and many ethnic elites were concerned that recent immigrants would disrupt the emergent "model minority" view of Chinese and other Asian ethnic groups in the U.S.: the idea that Asians were uniquely assimilable into mainstream norms due to their traditional values surrounding family, education, and work. Yet new immigrants also represented a political opportunity for the native-born Chinese American elite. They were quickly repopulating urban centers which had previously been losing residents to the suburbs, reviving Chinatown's relevancy within the local ethnic economy—a boon for elites who owned businesses and properties in the neighborhood. Furthermore, immigrants could become useful subjects in Chinese American elites' ongoing PR campaign to portray their communities as freedom-loving anti-communists, having explicitly chosen the United States over Red China. It was only a matter of organizing newcomers into existing Chinese American political interests and concerns—easier said than done. Perhaps most importantly, immigrants were giving local elites a highly visible problem through which the neighborhood could receive increased public and private investment to address problems both old and new.

While San Francisco's newest residents were settling into their Chinatown apartments, another human drama was quietly unfolding across the San Francisco Bay. That same spring (perhaps even that very same day), a small band of young people had begun gathering in the living room of UC Berkeley graduate students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka, bringing with them copies of Mao's *Little Red Book*,

² San Francisco Department of City Planning, "Chinatown: 1970 Census: Population and Housing Summary and Analysis," August 1972, Box 17, folder 36, Him Mark Lai papers, UC Berkeley Ethnic Studies Library (henceforth ESL); Scott Blakey, "Aid for Chinese Immigrants in S.F.," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 26, 1968; Leonard Neft, "Chinatown: New Immigrants, New Woes," May 17, 1968; "Report of the San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Survey and Fact Finding Committee" (San Francisco, August 1969), <https://archive.org/details/reportofsanfranc1969sanf/page/n7/mode/2up>, 54, 62-63.

Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and editions of the Oakland Black Panther Party's newspaper. Attendees sported cheeky "Yellow Peril" buttons Ichioka had ordered, turning the old stereotype of malevolent Oriental villains into a battle cry as they held forth on the anti-war movement, campus organizing, the state of Asian community politics, and what was to be done about it all. This reading group was the birthplace of the phrase "Asian American," with Gee and Ichioka eventually dubbing their cohort the Asian American Political Alliance.³ The couple was inspired by the Black Panther Party and the African American civil rights movement and sought to build the infrastructure for similar organizing among Americans of Asian descent, as they found existing avenues for Asian political organizing "too committed to the status quo" of model minority striving.⁴

"Asian American" would soon come to encapsulate a number of emerging radical tendencies and organizations within Asian ethnic communities during the late 1960s, from student activists like Gee and Ichioka to the political activities of down-and-out immigrant and native-born youth in Chinatown. Scholarship on the movement has emphasized its campus origins, pointing to the higher rates of college education second- and third-generation Asians during the postwar period. Such trends track similar rates among other racial groups in the U.S. generally, and California in particular. The California Master Plan for Higher Education of the 1960s made public college and universities tuition free for in-state students, allowing the Asian American children of merchants and gardeners alike to achieve secondary schooling. On campuses at Berkeley, UCLA, San Francisco State College, and beyond, these students became drawn into ongoing campus activism, from the Berkeley Free Speech movement to anti-war protests to the Black power movement. It was out of this milieu that some of the movement's earliest institutions were born,

³ A brief note on terminology: so as to avoid confusion, I have tried to be deliberate in my use of "Asian American" in this chapter to refer solely to people and organizations who considered themselves members of the Asian American Movement or can be reasonably associated with it. For non-Asian American institutions, I have referred to them either by their specific ethnic group (Chinese American, Filipino American, etc.) or as "Asian ethnic organizations."

⁴ Yuji Ichioka interview with Yen Le Espiritu, quoted in Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*, 52; K. Connie Kang, "He Brought Together Asian Americans for the First Time," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 1995.

from Gee and Ichioka's Asian American Political Alliance to the radical Asian American magazine *Gidra*.⁵

While universities, anti-war politics, and Black radicalism helped birth the Asian American movement, the rapid expansion of Asian immigrant communities was what motivated and sustained its growth on the ground. Activists, drawn to ethnic enclaves as critical sites of Asian identity formation, focused their organizing efforts on both elderly, longtime enclave residents and more recent arrivals, starting with unemployed immigrant adolescents and young adults who were disenchanted with the promises of life in America before progressing to immigrant workers.⁶ Members of the Asian American movement approached this organizing as both Third World internationalists and as varying shades of ethnonationalists, who believed in the importance of self-determination for Asians both at home and abroad. Their radical orientations not only put them at odds with the ethnic elite, but with recent immigrants themselves, whom activists tended to conceptualize as passive, unknowing dupes of capitalist white supremacy. While contemporary elites (and some subsequent scholars) claimed immigrants' suspicions of far left, communist politics were what prevented Asian American organizations from gaining more ground, such explanations suppose immigrant politicization as a static, unchangeable feature instead of something that could be transformed through experience. While many recent immigrants may have had negative feelings about communism, Asian American activists were right to say that many also found life in America to be challenging, lonely, and repressive. Psychiatrist Chalsa Loo, whose research team interviewed dozens of Chinatown residents during the 1970s, reported alarming rates of anxiety and depression among many of her subjects. A significantly higher proportion of Chinatown residents—20%—“saw their lives as ‘disappointing’” compared to the national sample; a similarly high proportion of Chinatown residents were “‘discouraged’ with their lives.” The difficulty of

⁵ See Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 7-9 for the effects of the Master Plan on Black college enrollment. On the Asian American movement and other New Left and Third World movements, see Deryl Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*; Lai et al, *Snake Dance*; Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, “Yellow Power: The Formation of Asian-American Nationalism in the Age of Black Power, 1966-1975,” *Souls* 3, no. 3 (July 1, 2001): 29–38; Adalberto Aguirre and Shoon Lio, “Spaces of Mobilization: The Asian American/Pacific Islander Struggle for Social Justice,” *Social Justice* 35, no. 2 (112) (2008): 1–17.

⁶ Michael Liu and Kim Geron, “Changing Neighborhood: Ethnic Enclaves and the Struggle for Social Justice,” *Social Justice* 35, no. 2 (112) (2008): 18–35.

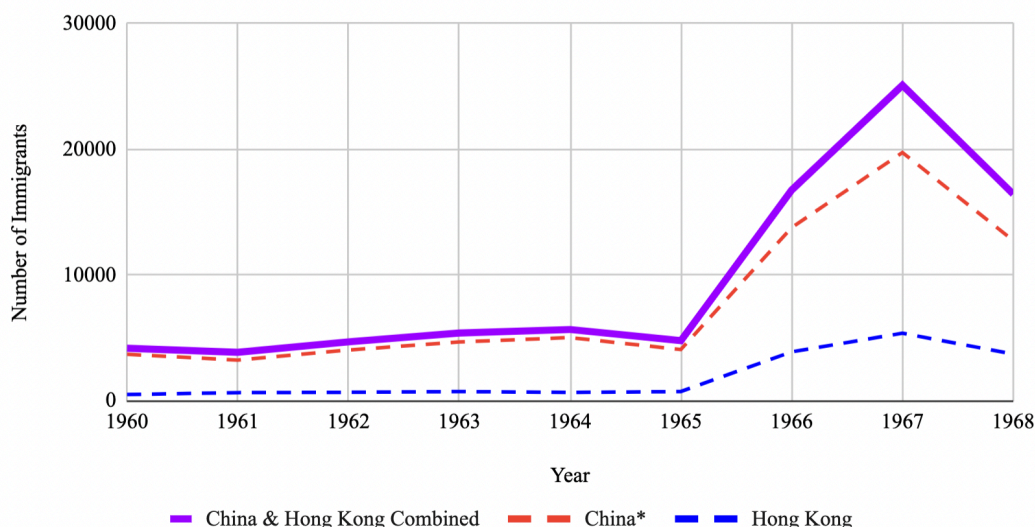
life in a new country was among the reasons cited for such attitudes: respondents shared how hard it had been “to start a new life in a new country” and encounter “low income, poor housing.”⁷

Such widespread feelings of disappointment could have become ready tinder for Asian American radicals to build into a new mass politics, but none was forthcoming. Asian American activists’ trouble reckoning with immigrants’ diverse, multifaceted motivations for coming to the U.S. further complicated the already difficult political project of building ties between young, educated revolutionaries and older, working-class immigrants. Rather than seeing the political potentialities in working class immigrants’ desire to make better lives for themselves in San Francisco, activists instead reduced them to victims of capitalist and imperialist propaganda. Moreover, I argue that the early Asian American movement’s heavy emphasis on resurrecting the history of Asians in the United States as fodder for radical politics led members to discount the increasingly transnational histories of new arrivals, with unfortunate consequences for their contemporary activism.

This chapter is broken into two main sections. The first explores dynamics among liberal and conservative Chinese elites, progressive Chinatown nonprofits, and Chinese immigrant newcomers in the years immediately following the implementation of the 1965 Act. I show how the simultaneous arrival of new migrants and the availability of War on Poverty funds pushed Chinatown politics away from self-sufficiency, and further towards domestic political institutions. The second section charts the rise of the Asian American movement and its first forays into community organizing, identifying the ideological roots of activists’ ideas about immigration and immigrants themselves. I lay out some of the features of the movement’s Third World internationalism, before turning to how those features informed activists’ day-to-day efforts in the streets of San Francisco.

⁷ Chalsa M. Loo, *Chinatown: Most Time, Hard Time* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 221-223.

Table 1.1: Immigrants admitted to the United States born in China and Hong Kong, 1960-1968



Source: INS Annual Reports, 1965-1968.

* Includes both mainland China and Taiwan.

I. Ethnic politics in the postwar enclave

Good immigrants?: Self-sufficiency and integration in the wake of legal reform

The three years between the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act being signed into law and taking full effect were an anxious time for San Francisco, Chinatown. The mere passage of the Act was enough to create a spike in arrivals, as it triggered the INS to allot unused visa slots from low-emigration countries in Europe to China and other nations with long waiting lists. In October of 1966, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that some 3,000 Chinese people had arrived in San Francisco from Hong Kong that year, with indications of more to come. The INS would eventually record that a total of 16,751 people from China and Hong Kong arrived in the United States between July of 1965 and June of 1966, and additional 25,096 more would arrive before July of 1967, a marked increase from previous years (table 1.1).⁸

⁸ Donald Canter, "New Law Brings Rush of Chinese," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 23, 1966; U.S. Department of Justice, *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*, 1967, 1966. The INS data is not inclusive of refugees or nonimmigrants admitted into the U.S. who may have gone on to acquire permanent residency. "China" in the INS data primarily to both Taiwan (or Formosa) and the mainland; Hong Kong, as a British colony, was counted as a separate point of departure.

Local responses to this increase exemplified the state of local Chinese American politics at the time, with some elites quick to defend the gains they had recently made in improving the image of Chinese people within the U.S. mainstream. At a meeting of neighborhood social workers and community elders, Jack Wong Sing, attorney and national president of the Wong family association, insisted that “the Chinese here have always managed to make it on their own and have never been a burden on anybody,” noting that “not a single one of the newcomers has called upon his association for help.” Others, however, were less sure. Local Presbyterian minister Reverend Larry Jack Wong, who was actively involved in Chinatown’s ongoing anti-poverty programs, worried that “if nobody has called for help, maybe it is because their relatives have told them the family associations aren’t what they used to be.” Reverend Wong went on to say that notions of Chinese self-sufficiency were, in fact, “[forcing] the newcomers into the old vicious circle: ‘Work 14 hours a day, don’t get a chance to learn English, lack the time to be involved in anything.’” Another participant, Chinatown YWCA director Hannah Surh, pointed to the example of one recently-arrived Chinese couple “who jointly put up with a 135-hour work week for a combined \$125 pay.”⁹

The renewed presence of vulnerable and easily exploited immigrants from China and Hong Kong revealed both the power and the limitations of Chinese American politics between World War II and the end of the civil rights era. On the one hand, Chinese American liberal assimilationism had helped secure the very same legal reforms that allowed thousands more Asian immigrants to come to the United States. Since the turn of the century, civic organizations like the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA) and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Society (CCBA) had been lobbying politicians to repeal restrictions against Asian immigration to the United States. Their success during the postwar period relied heavily on the new geopolitical importance of Asia to U.S. foreign policy, but it also reflected Chinese Americans’ own narrative-making about the nature of Chinese cultural and social values. Legal activists paired appeals to Chinese Americans’ constitutional rights with arguments about their easy embrace of U.S. capitalist democracy, rooted in an innate Chinese respect for hard work, family cohesion, and educational achievement. Jack Wong Sing was among the cohort of Chinese and other Asian ethnic elites

⁹ Donald Canter, “New Law Brings A Rush of Chinese,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 23, 1966; “Reunion in Chinatown: 2000 Wongs Meet Here,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 19, 1960.

who testified in Congress in 1965 to lobby for the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act, stating that “in every field, the Chinese have distinguished themselves and have made valuable contributions towards America’s security, growth, progress, and prosperity,” and that Chinese refugees, once admitted to the U.S., had “no resettlement problems... and are readily assimilated into the various communities.”¹⁰

Yet while elites used arguments of Chinese assimilability to transform federal immigration law, Jack Wong Sing’s comments at the social welfare meeting in 1966 also illustrated how model minority politics relied on tropes of Chinese American self-reliance and sufficiency, usually to the detriment of poor, monolingual, and other “non-normative” members of the community. The primary beneficiaries of liberal assimilationism tended to be its most vocal champions: members of the upwardly mobile middle class, largely composed of doctors, lawyers, architects, and other white collar professionals. Yet despite abiding inequalities within their communities even before immigration reform, Chinatown elites—particularly the more conservative family association heads like Jack Sing—hesitated to solicit certain forms of government intervention unless they could be portrayed as either rewards for model behavior or tactful investments on the part of the city.¹¹ The Ping Yuen public housing projects offer an instructive example. The campaign to secure their construction during the 1940s emphasized both benefits to Chinese American nuclear families and to the city’s tourist industry, with ethnic elites arguing that improving Chinatown’s living conditions would make the neighborhood more attractive to outsiders. Chinese and non-Chinese advocates alike stressed how the project would support the health of mothers and children, who were confined to low-quality housing dating from the neighborhood’s years as an enclave of working class bachelors. In comments before the San Francisco Housing Authority, Chinese American social worker Lim P. Lee also “played up the tourist card” by arguing that modern housing would “pay for itself in a short time by increased tourist trade.” After Ping Yuen opened to residents in 1951, white commentators would praise its Chinese tenants for their “unequaled record in punctual rent

¹⁰ “Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Naturalization of the Committee on the Judiciary on S. 500” (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1965), 726-728. For more on Asian ethnic lobbying and activism towards immigration reform during the Cold War, see Jane H. Hong, *Opening the Gates to Asia: A Transpacific History of How America Repealed Asian Exclusion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), Meredith Oyen, *The Diplomacy of Migration: Transnational Lives and the Making of U.S.-Chinese Relations in the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Wu, *Color of Success*, 119-120;

payments, maintenance of their apartments and low turnover of the residents,” as well as noting how the buildings’ “distinctive Oriental architecture” was an asset for “tourist-conscious Chinatown.”¹²

Despite the self-sufficiency argument’s staying power, the 1960s saw the beginning of a paradigm-shift among Chinatown’s ruling elite, caused in no small part by the changing composition of elites themselves and the inviting political landscape generated by the federal government. Over the course of the previous two decades, Chinese American Democratic Party members and allies had succeeded in wresting political control of the neighborhood away from the much more conservative CCBA, or Six Companies. As historian Charlotte Brooks has detailed, this process consisted of a delicate dance between foreign affairs—namely, the “China Question” of whether to support the Nationalists or the Communists—and old-fashioned machine politics at home, as Chinese American Democrats were able to deliver the votes of their fellow native-born citizens. The new class of leaders was much more invested in soliciting aid from both local and federal governments, enthusiastically seeking out funding through the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty programs and joining local planning councils. By 1968, they had succeeded in assembling a patchy network of family associations, churches, social welfare agencies, and public institutions on which San Francisco’s Chinese American residents were reliant on for assistance, most of which were administered by Chinese Americans themselves with occasional support from various charitable organizations and the state.¹³

Even as Democratic activists managed to begin integrating Chinatown into city-wide politics, they still struggled against the demands—both internally and externally imposed—of self-sufficiency. In August of 1968, workers broke ground for the Chinese Cultural Center and Trade Center to be located on Kearny Street took place in August of 1968, a pet project of local Chinese businessmen and politicians. The Center, which was planned and approved in partnership with the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, signaled a major investment from the city into Chinatown’s future development relative to years past. Still, the project was accompanied by insistences from outside commentators that the Chinese needed to contribute their fair share to the project’s funding. “City officials should encourage those

¹² Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 237.

¹³ William Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 172-178.

Chinatown spokesmen who want a Chinese culture center,” one article in the *San Francisco Examiner* ran, “But the Chinese also need to do more to help themselves.” Moreover, contemporary reporting indicated that “unlike The City’s other renewal projects, federal aid would not be sought” to help finance the Center’s construction. As with Ping Yuen, it would take appeals towards San Francisco’s municipal interest to secure financial support from the city with the project developers frequently emphasizing how the Center would both supplement the downtown district’s existing hotel stock and deepen the city’s ties with the Asia-Pacific region. As the project progressed, emissaries from Chinatown began drawing on contacts within the Taiwanese government to solicit their participation, resulting in the latter pledging to donate various works of art as well as “publications, prints, scrolls, books and replicas” for use in the completed Center. In February of 1970, Taipei’s mayor even travelled to San Francisco to attend the groundbreaking ceremony for a bridge connecting the Center to adjoining Portsmouth Square. Demands for self-sufficiency thus paved the way for greater degrees of transpacific interconnection facilitated by a range of Asian ethnic brokers, a theme I will return to in more detail in chapter 3.¹⁴

Further underwriting the Culture Center’s development was San Francisco’s own greater sense of impending internal crisis, and politicians and city planners’ growing belief that ethnic neighborhoods held a crucial part of the solution. While the Japanese Trade Center had emerged from the optimistic pro-growth politics of the 1950s, the intervening years had provided a new set of incentives for the city to become a modern “gateway to the Pacific.” Black uprisings against police violence, protests in Japantown and the Western Addition against redevelopment, declining industrial outputs, and a shrinking tax base—

¹⁴ “A Plan for Old Hall of Justice,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 14, 1965; “Herman’s Formula for a Chinese Cultural Center,” *San Francisco Examiner* June 16, 1965; “Artist to Help Design Bridge,” *San Francisco Examiner*, December 2, 1968; “Real ‘Gold’ S.F. Bridge Under Way,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 4, 1970; “Ground Broken for New \$14 Million Hotel,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 20, 1968; “Chinatown Ready to Pay for Culture,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 11, 1965; “Ground Broken for New \$14 Million Hotel”; San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, “Chinese Cultural and Trade Center project announcement,” March 29, 1965’ Charlotte Brooks, *Between Mao and McCarthy: Chinese American Politics in the Cold War Years* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 30-35.

all this and more plagued city officials' attempts to grow the city along their desired lines.¹⁵ As a magnet for both tourism and global prestige, Chinatown was the ideal successor to the city's efforts in Japantown; indeed, Chinatown had a much longer history of serving as both an exotic curiosity to white visitors and as a symbol of San Francisco's central position within the Pacific Rim economy.¹⁶ Yet projects like the Culture Center did not and were never intended to resolve the deeper social problems plaguing the majority of Chinatown's residents and constituents. Redevelopment was instead the most sweeping and visible option from a range of methods designed to gild the ghetto and produce a version of Chinatown that was outwardly compatible with San Francisco's new color-blind cosmopolitanism.

By threatening to further upend the delicate balance between image and reality in Chinatown, the arrival of thousands more Chinese residents in San Francisco had dealt a significant blow to self-sufficiency hold-outs within the Chinese American establishment. Despite Jack Wong Sing's optimistic projections, immigrants would almost certainly require more resources and jobs, which were already in short supply. They would also, Chinatown's elites acknowledged, need to be educated about the customs and traditions of the United States—for, contrary to certain assertions that traditional “Chinese values” were inherently compatible with U.S. capitalist democracy, immigrants would not arrive with an innately correct understanding of the latter; nor would most Americans be able to automatically understand their new Chinese neighbors. Fortunately for them, officials in the newly-elected Joseph Alioto's mayoral administration agreed that an under-resourced, unregulated crowd of new arrivals would not only be detrimental to Chinatown, but to the city as a whole. In 1968, the mayor's office commissioned a number of Chinatown political influencers, academics, and social workers to form the San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Study and Fact Finding Committee and survey the neighborhood's residents to

¹⁵ Destin Jenkins, *The Bonds of Inequality: Debt and the Making of the American City* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), chap. 6, Kindle edition; Christopher Lowen Agee, *The Streets of San Francisco: Policing and the Creation of a Cosmopolitan Liberal Politics, 1950-1972*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014)., chap. 5, Kindle edition. On the urban crisis from a other regional and national perspectives, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert O Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2005); Elizabeth Hinton, *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion since the 1960s*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

¹⁶ Oda, *Gateway to the Pacific*, 16-17.

determine precisely how to meet a number of challenging objectives. These included how to “provide guidance” to new arrivals “to an understanding of America — its opportunities, obligations and problems” and how to extend “into the entire public domain an appreciation of Chinese culture.”¹⁷

In proving themselves unable to adequately employ and house new immigrants, the existing ethnic elite had revealed the obvious limitations of self-sufficiency. To abandon self-sufficiency, however, was to threaten the very real social and economic advances that the community had made during the past two decades—even if those advances had proven to be unevenly distributed among the city’s Chinese American population. Thus, even as liberal elites pivoted more towards the state, they continued to couch their demands in terms of the community’s self-starting nature. In the 1968 report on Chinatown’s many overlapping crisis, the report’s—largely drawn from the neighborhood liberal political elite—both explicitly disavowed the “‘myth’ of self-reliance” while perpetuating it in subtle ways. “Chinatown,” the authors wrote, “is an integral part of its economy, its life, and should share with all other segments of the population in full consideration of its problems by City Hall.” And, at the same time, the authors held up the report itself as an autonomous effort “initiated... by the citizens of San Francisco’s Chinatown,” even claiming it represented “the first time in modern events [that] the... citizens of a common ethnic origin unified and determined to solve their problems.”¹⁸ Chief among these problems were the issues posed and experienced by immigrants; indeed, the report was clear that “every problem area to which other sub-committees have directed their attention invariably leads to that of immigration.” Having created a problem for enclave leadership because they could not be self-sufficient—immigrants needed infrastructure to acquire jobs, language-training, affordable homes, and schooling—the goal, then, of the new liberal elite was to turn them into self-sufficient citizens. “We fail [the recent immigrant] if we do not properly instruct him in the problems we may face here,” the authors insisted, “and provide motivation for him to become ‘American.’” Accordingly, the report recommended that a network of public and private institutions, from Congress to the Chinese Six Companies, take responsibility for transforming new

¹⁷ Lim P. Lee, Albert Lim, H. K. Wong, “Report of the San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens’ Survey and Fact Finding Committee (Abridged Edition),” August 15, 1969, https://archive.org/details/sanfranciscochi1969sanf_2

¹⁸ “Introduction to the Report of San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens’ Survey and Fact Finding Committee,” April 1969, San Francisco Public Library, 3, 6.

arrivals into proper Americans. What liberal elites were not counting on, however, was for a much more radical contingent to step in and seize control of the process.¹⁹

Immigrant political participation

Immigrants did more than just incite political debates among the ethnic elite: they became political actors themselves. Despite the fact that such activity was often highly constrained by language barriers, lack of formal education, and un-naturalized immigrants' inability to vote, many of Chinatown's new working class residents nevertheless sought out political means of improving their lives and advancing their interests. Education was an especially urgent issue: many immigrants had left China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan in the first place in order to secure a better future for their children. When a California district court ordered the San Francisco Unified School District to desegregate its public schools via a busing program in 1971, Chinatown parents filed a motion to stay the order and attempted to have themselves added to the suit as intervenors, arguing that their needs and circumstances had not been considered in the original case. Representing the parents was local attorney (and soon-to-be Board of Supervisors member) Quintin Kopp, who had the help of a small team of Chinese American lawyers, including then-Civil Service Commissioner William Jack Chow. The Chinese parents vigorously opposed the prospect of their children being bused out of Chinatown for a number of reasons, from worrying they would be unable to walk their children home from school themselves to no longer being able to send kids to after-school Chinese language schools. In addition to ensuring foreign-born, Chinese-speaking children gained "bilingual training... education in Chinese history, and... education in Chinese culture," the language schools doubled as a low-cost form of childcare for Chinatown's working parents, many of whom had long, irregular shifts in garment factories and restaurants.²⁰

To build their case, Chow's team interviewed dozens of Chinese parents, including some who had been in the country for less than five years. Of the 21 who agreed to join the suit, 10 reported knowing "little" to "no" English, and relied on translators to participate. Affidavits were submitted by three

¹⁹ San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Survey and Fact Finding Committee, "Subcommittee Report on: IMMIGRATION," San Francisco Public Library, 1, 42

²⁰ Affidavit of Quentin L. Kopp, August 9, 1971, Box 5, folder 2, Chow family papers (henceforth CFP), Huntington Library.



Pickets at the Commodore Stockton meeting carried anti-busing signs

Fig. 1.2: Photo from a *San Francisco Chronicle* article on the Chinatown anti-busing movement, showing hundreds of Chinese parents gathered at a Board of Education hearing in the summer of 1971. Source: Donovan Bess, "S.F. School Busing Plans Are Assailed," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 3, 1971.

Chinese women, including 38-year old Guey Heung Lee, who arrived from Hong Kong with her two daughters in 1967 and was sending them to both a public elementary school in Chinatown and a nearby Chinese language school. Lee attested that living near the school allowed her to "be present... whenever there is any emergency or mishap at a moment's notice," while sending the two girls to the Chinese school gave them "the advantage and opportunity to study the Chinese language and culture." While the affidavits are filtered through the three women's translators and lawyers, the three women's willingness to devote time and energy towards the endeavor—all three were employed, with one working as a hairdresser and another as a sewing machine operator—speaks to the high premium they placed on their children's schooling, and their intense desire to avoid venturing too far from Chinatown. All three stated that transferring their children outside the neighborhood "would only create great hardship,

inconvenience, and anxiety” for them, due to “their inability to converse and understand the English language.”²¹

Chinatown parents’ investment in the busing issue was further demonstrated when, after their attempt to intervene in the suit failed, hundreds began pulling their children out of the public school system and established their own independent schools within the neighborhood. With the support of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, the schools were up and running within months of the final decision. By September of 1971, the newly-formed Chinese Parents Committee reported that over 1,000 children had been signed up to attend the private “Freedom Schools,” a term that had originated among African American efforts to establish alternative schools in the South during the civil rights movement. Hundreds of parents repeatedly showed up at Board of Education hearings to testify about the damage they felt busing would do to their children and their community, bearing signs in both English and Chinese (fig. 1.2) A *San Francisco Chronicle* article documenting one such hearing referred to the “usually unobtrusive mothers and fathers of Chinatown” as agitated, resentful, and well-organized, with roughly 400 having shown up to protest the Board’s busing plan.²²

The Chinatown anti-busing movement’s successes can largely be chalked up to the alignment of interests between working class parents, the neighborhood’s conservative ethnic elite, and the city’s

²¹ Affidavits of Guey Heung Lee, Foot Sit Yee, and Yung Ngoi Toy, June 19, 1971, Box 6, folder 10, CFP, Huntington Library; interview forms for Hui Suit Lin, Wai Han Chu, Donald Chung, Choi Kuen Cheung, Yim Kee Yue Tim, Joanne Louie, Yung Wo Yu, Yin Jung, Yut Tsong Gai, Fung Him Chan, Lau Chu Nie Lam, Ngai — Wong, Shi Oi Chan, Wai Jing Sun, Yuen Ma Chun, Marlana Lock, Hoi W. Chow, Choi K. Dong, Bick Woon Lee, Mae Kin Lin Toy, and Gam Shing Young, Box 5, folder 4, CFP, Huntington Library.

²² Donovan Bess, “S.F. School Busing Plans Are Assailed,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 3, 1971; Douglas Kneeland, “San Francisco’s Chinese Resist School Busing,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1971. These numbers are supported by enrollment figures, as documented in Rand Quinn, *Class Action: Desegregation and Diversity in San Francisco Schools* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020) and Philip Albert Lum, “The Chinese Freedom Schools of San Francisco: A Case Study of the Social Limits of Political System Support,” (Ph.D., United States -- California, University of California, Berkeley), 1975. Quinn also cites contemporary polling data that indicates Chinese opposition to busing was, in some regards, stronger than white opposition. 54% of Chinese respondents believed their children “will not benefit from the experiences of racially balanced schools,” as opposed to 51% of white respondents; and 92% of Chinese parents opposed the busing plan, as opposed to 83% of white parents. On the Black independent school movement, see Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

white-majority anti-busing movement.²³ The vigorous participation of Chinese parents themselves, however, including those who had only recently arrived in the United States, demonstrates how quickly some immigrants could be activated into local political life by dedicated organizers who appealed to immigrant self interests. Far from being passive, docile subjects who were willing to quietly suffer the perceived indignities of their new lives, many working class immigrants understood that their success in the United States depended on their willingness to struggle—both in the private realms of hard work and financial sacrifice, and in the public realm of political agitation. It must be said, however, that the anti-busing parents had a special advantage in these efforts: not only could they tap (either consciously or not) into the existing vein of anti-Black racism in anti-busing politics to win outside support; they were also able to present themselves as respectable family units, whose investment in their children’s schooling reinforced model minority stereotypes about Asian communities. The political activities of other immigrant groups would have a much more difficult time bearing fruit—especially when those activities challenged the interests of the enclave elite.

“Organized Bad, Bad, Bad Guys”

Upon its 1969 publication, the San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens’ Study and Fact Finding Committee’s report provided Alioto with the ammunition he needed to approach the Johnson administration and request “federal help for a problem created by a federal program.”²⁴ Tasked with administering this help on the ground was that same network of social welfare agencies that had begun to emerge a few years earlier, who were quickly joined by new organizations with increasingly younger staff and progressive—even radical—political motivations. Groups like Self-Help for the Elderly (SHE) and Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) were understood by the old guard as perhaps even more

²³ Careful examination of the Chinatown anti-busing movement requires much more space than I’ve been able to afford it here. While Chinatown parents’ opposition certainly gave white anti-busing advocates a fig leaf to disclaim charges of racism, it is also worth understanding on its own terms. The Chinatown movement in many ways built on the anti-integration fight surrounding the Ping Yuen public housing complex. Both incidents pointed to conflicting interpretations of “equal protection” between various racial and ethnic groups. For parents in Chinatown, equal protection meant a schooling experience that catered to their children’s cultural and linguistic needs—as, they charged, the mainstream public schooling system catered to white children’s needs. No doubt, Chinese parents’ anti-Black racism further fueled their other anxieties about the world outside Chinatown, which was also built on very real experiences of economic and social discrimination.

²⁴ Sydney Kessen, “Alioto Punched at Georgetown U. Rioting,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 14, 1969.

threatening than the Democratic Party-aligned liberal elite, given their stated interest in empowering newcomers to exit, transform, and challenge the enclave hierarchy rather than simply integrating them into its existing social order. Perhaps the most popular form of aid was English-language training programs, whose stated objectives were to improve the mobility and freedom of newcomers in seeking economic opportunities outside of Chinatown; but SHE and CAA also provided various forms of counseling and advocacy to arrivals attempting to navigate the welfare system and other bureaucracies.²⁵ Moreover, these groups were reaching out to people who frequently fell outside the remit of assimilationist, “model minority” politics, including elderly single bachelors and delinquent youth. SHE drew particular attention to the plight of older Chinese men who often lived in extreme poverty without any support systems or assistance whatsoever, with many going hungry. By drawing attention to their plight through meal delivery programs and public gatherings in Portsmouth Square, SHE was also shaming the Chinese family associations for neglecting some of their community’s most vulnerable members for years.²⁶

By contrast, youth delinquency had been at the public center of Chinatown’s worries for well over a decade, and had already motivated a number of successful attempts by the new liberal establishment to seek out amenities from the city government like parks and playgrounds.²⁷ But the trouble had re-intensified since 1967, with many in the community blaming newcomers from Hong Kong for inflaming native-born youth and leading them into crime and rebellion. They pointed to a collective of roughly 300 immigrant youth called the Wah Ching—literally, “Chinese Youth”—which had formed that same year and begun functioning as both a gang and a protest group, drawing together mostly jobless young men who had recently arrived from Hong Kong with their families. In their own words, Wah Ching’s members simply wanted places to socialize without fear of police harassment while receiving English-language and vocational training services, “so that we can find jobs that pay better than the ghetto’s 50 cents an hour wage. And we’ll be damned if we work for such sweat shop wages.” In February 1968, Wah Ching and

²⁵ Jane Eshleman Conant, “A Bold Chinatown Language Program,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 12, 1967; “Pilot Work Plan for the Elderly,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 9, 1968;

²⁶ “A ‘Happening’ for the Elderly,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 26, 1969; “Self Help Food for the Elderly,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 16, 1972.

²⁷ Wu, *Color of Success*, 185-186.

another group composed of mostly native-born youth, Leway (short for “Legitimate Ways”), presented an unusual petition to the city’s Economic Opportunity Council, announcing that “either you are going to help us or there will be more mugging, stealing, street fighting—and worse—than Chinatown has ever seen.” Specifically, the Wah Ching wanted the Economic Opportunity Council to allocate its unexpended Chinatown poverty funds to them so that they could set up their own clubhouse. Despite their threats of violence, however, the EOC’s hands were tied: all unused money needed to be returned to the federal government.²⁸ Undaunted, the Wah Ching turned to a tried-and-true strategy of survival in Chinatown: “self-help.” During the spring of 1968, they set about holding dances, street fairs, and other cultural productions to raise money for the clubhouse on their own. Their spokesperson, photographer George Woo, told the *San Francisco Examiner* that “through self-help... we hope to raise enough money to get a clubhouse where we can start communicating with these youths. Otherwise, they’ll continue to run in the streets.” Members by no means gave up on more militant tactics, however, and even stormed into Mayor Alioto’s office in May to present him with a two-page list of complaints about the EOC, which they claimed “had not planned a single program to help the poor” and “would ‘not listen’ to the youths and their problems.” A bemused Alioto promised that his office would investigate.²⁹

In their bombastic disregard for the vast majority of Chinatown’s traditional social service institutions, their public embrace of criminal activity, and their pointed criticisms of the enclave hierarchy, the Wah Ching were the neighborhood elites’ worst nightmare. Much to their chagrin, more and more white commentators in the mainstream San Francisco press were beginning to take notice of the Wah Ching’s activism, with one columnist remarking that for all their extremism, the “young rebels” had a point: Chinatown was in crisis, and its ethnic leaders were mostly to blame. Moreover, they did not ask politely for public resources the way groups like the SHE did; instead, they demanded them, however clumsily, with displays of collective action. Yet without any organizing political or ideological commitments, the Wah Ching’s biting critique of both Chinatown elites and the city government could

²⁸ Sam Blumenfeld and Harry Johanesen, “Chinatown Delinquents Renew Warfare Threat,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 29, 1968.

²⁹ “Clubhouse First Wah Ching Project,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 3, 1968; “Fund Drive for Clubhouse: Chinatown’s Troubled Wah Ching,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 3, 1968; “Mayor Soothes Wah Ching,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 21, 1968; KPIX-TV, “Wah Ching news conference,” aired April 2, 1968, Bay Area TV News Archive, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/239222>.

only go so deep, particularly once the organization largely gave up on seeking voluntary donations from the community and committed fully to organized crime. By the summer of 1971, the San Francisco Police Department reported that gang members were visiting various Chinatown merchants and informing them they would have to “‘donate’ between \$25 and \$200 a month to ‘youth movements’ in order to remain open with undamaged businesses.” That year, five Chinese grocers were murdered by robbers, a clear sign to most community members that the Wah Ching were following through on their threats. Most of the group’s original members, perhaps made uncomfortable by this turn of events, had already departed, leaving the Wah Ching’s total membership hovering somewhere between 50 and 100. The remainder became not only practiced hands at shaking down neighborhood merchants, but also soldiers in an escalating gang war with other Chinatown youth formations, resulting in a number of public shootouts and murders.³⁰ In response to the violence, certain members of the regional Chinese American community went so far as to suggest that immigration reform was a mistake altogether; one letter-writer to the *San Francisco Examiner* suggested that “our sluggish government... stop all immigration now, solve our dangerous economic problems, our dangerous racial problems and our dangerous environmental problems before importing any more possible problems.” Far more common, however, were cries from various ethnic elites and small business owners that the city had failed to provide them with sufficient public resources in the form of police. The police for their part insisted that the problem was not with them, but with the Chinese community’s longstanding habit of refusing to report gang activity or engage with law enforcement.³¹

Across San Francisco, similar uprisings from Black and Chicano youth gangs had been taking place since the early 1960s, spurring similar responses from citizens, the police, and the press regarding

³⁰ “Gang Victim Gets Tentative Name,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 25, 1971; Rev. Lester Kinsolving, “Slayings Bring Fear in Chinatown,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 31, 1972.

³¹ This back-and-forth was merely the latest in a century-long history of Chinatown’s conflicted relationship with the city’s police department, as the neighborhood was once seen to be a hotbed of illicit activities such as gambling and prostitution—a perception rooted in some degree of truth. Christopher Agee notes in his history of policing in postwar San Francisco that in the 1940s, the principal issue for Chinatown’s new liberal elite was not merely a lack of police, but a lack of police accountability, as the neighborhood was still served by the highly autonomous plainclothes Chinatown detail. As with other aspects of Chinatown’s quest for more equal provision of public services, ethnic elites’ eventual successes on this front relied on growth-oriented arguments, with merchants pointing out that visiting tourists would be better served by a reliable, professionalized, and uniformed police force. See Agee, *The Streets of San Francisco*, chap. 1, Kindle edition. “San Francisco: Violence to and Among the Chinese,” *Examiner*, November 14, 1971; J. G. Yee, “To the Editor: Chinatown Explosion,” *Examiner*, June 30, 1971.

the dangers that “un-digested” migrants—whether from other nations or from other regions within the United States—brought to San Francisco. Black-majority Hunters Point likewise responded with “grassroots peacekeeping” and various social and economic programs targeted at the young, while Mayor Alioto likewise reached out to certain peacekeeping organizations to insist that they had his ear, a function of what historian Christopher Agee has described as Alioto’s cosmopolitan liberal outlook which tolerated race-conscious critiques in the name of keeping the peace. Yet by the early 1970s, Chinatown occupied a very different position within San Francisco’s evolving economic landscape than Hunters Point. High-profile construction projects like the Chinese Cultural Center and Mandarin Towers (a luxury apartment-office complex), as well as the creation of the city’s first comprehensive redevelopment plan for the neighborhood, signaled Chinatown’s near-total inclusion within the Alioto administration’s growth agenda, which hinged on bringing white middle class consumers, real estate development, and white collar employment into the struggling downtown district. As a result of Chinatown’s strategic importance, Alioto would sanction a 1972 police crackdown on Chinese youth groups despite his former pledge to cooperate with some of their representatives.³²

Caught up in the fervor surrounding immigrant gangs and violent crime were a handful of non-violent youth organizations, some of whom had ties to the Wah Ching but who stayed away from any organized criminal activities. Among these was Leway, or the Leway Club, an organization founded in 1967 as a native-born corollary to the Wah Ching. Leway had more success than the Wah Ching in sticking to their original goal of leading young men away from crime, in part because the group formally incorporated itself as a non-profit in 1968 in order to operate a Chinatown pool hall. Despite the group’s far more innocuous activities, however, their hall was shut down after less than a year by a slew of police raids and a rent hike from their landlord, an event which further embittered the neighborhood’s down-and-out teenagers by taking away one of their only venues for socialization (fig 1.3). Yet the group’s founders and supporters persisted in their quest to set up a functioning youth center, and in 1969, social worker Albert Cheng secured funds from the Economic Opportunity Council to renovate a former nightclub into

³² Agee, *Streets of San Francisco*, chap. 5, Kindle edition; Jenkins, *Bonds of Inequality*, chap. 3, Kindle edition; Paul Takagi and Tony Platt, “Behind the Gilded Ghetto: An Analysis of Race, Class and Crime in Chinatown,” *Crime and Social Justice* 9 (1978); Donald Canter, “Redevelopment Plans for Chinatown Expected Soon,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 18, 1972; Baron Muller, “Cops Get Tough in Chinatown,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 22, 1972.



Fig 1.3: A Chinese American teenager stands in front of the shuttered Leways headquarters in late summer of 1969. Source: *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 13, 1969.

a recreational and service center where young people could receive counseling on “education, drugs, draft and sex.” The center, which opened in 1970, was located in the basement of the International Hotel on Kearny Street, where elderly Filipino tenants were currently embroiled in an ongoing eviction battle with their landlord. It was here that the frustrated, frequently directionless anger of Chinatown’s young men would transform into a coherent radical politics.³³

The struggle of Chinatown’s immigrant and native-born youth to be recognized by both their own community elders and the social welfare state was perhaps the most overtly violent outcome of Chinatown’s fluctuating status during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The political problem of newly

³³ Mike Mills, “Leway—The ‘Self-Helpers’ of Chinatown,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 19, 1969; Bill Moore, “Street Gangs of Chinatown,” August 13, 1969; “32 Poverty Projects Approved by EOC,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 9, 1969; “‘Self Help for Elderly’ Program: A Struggle to Aid The ‘Hidden Poor’,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 16, 1967, “Chinatown Report: Youth Center Renovated,” *San Francisco Examiner*, December 30, 1969; Steve Zonsmer, “Youth Center Opens at Site of the Old hungry i,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 13, 1970.

arrived immigrants became a convenient container for more longstanding debates about the Chinese American community's relationship with both city government and its own class of ethnic elites, who were by no means consolidated to a single strategy for addressing the neighborhood's overlapping crises. Most community leaders would eventually come to agree that some form of government assistance was required to expand Chinatown's capacity to receive vulnerable new residents, but they did not agree on what form this assistance should take, or who should be responsible for administering it on-the-ground. In other words, while Exclusion Era strategies of "self help" had been mostly delegitimized by the early 1970s, someone had yet to step forward and offer a clear alternative that the majority of the neighborhood could use to forge a more promising future.

II. Moving forward, looking back: Theory and praxis within the Asian American movement

While Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee were hosting AAPA meetings in their Berkeley home in the spring of '68, 22-year old Alex Hing was busy devouring *Red Star Over China* across the Bay in San Francisco Chinatown. Up until 1967, Hing had paid recent developments in the neighborhood little mind. In his own words, he had been something of a ne'er-do-well, committing petty crimes, doing odd jobs, and aspiring to become a martial arts master. After a two-month stay at a juvenile prison, however, Hing committed to studying hard so he could leave Chinatown and his criminal past behind, enrolling in San Francisco City College. There, he became involved in the Peace and Freedom Party, where his fellow student radicals introduced him to the writings of Edgar Snow, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party. At that point, Hing recalled, "I felt that I had gone pretty much full circle... I had experiences with these White radicals and that wasn't really my calling. I decided to go back to Chinatown and hang out with my old gang... and try to politicize them." Hing started off as a member of the Leways, drifting in and out of their headquarters until they were shut down for the last time. By 1969, he was Minister of Information for the newly-formed Red Guard Party, a militant, Maoist organization that hoped to spread the message of armed revolution to the city's Chinese American community.³⁴

³⁴ Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), chap. 2, Kindle edition; Fred Ho and Steve Yip, "Alex Hing: Former Minister of Information for the Red Guard Party and Founding Member of I Wor Kuen," in *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* (San Francisco: AK Press, 2000), 283.

Hing's Red Guards was one of a number of non campus-based youth formations which would eventually become drawn into the Asian American movement, establishing the first of many links between the movement's student and enclave components. While the AAPA would cut its organizational teeth in the Third World Liberation Front strikes at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State College, emerging from existing networks for student anti-war protest and the campus labor movement, neighborhood-based organizing was catalyzed by the dire situation of unemployed and criminalized Asian youths.³⁵ For people like Alex Hing, the cluster of progressive-minded social agencies funded through the War on Poverty and the social affinities of Chinatown's youth gangs became the material foundation for their scrappy, militant, and revolutionary politics. Despite their disparate origins, the movement's two halves would ultimately consolidate around broadly shared ideological beliefs and political pursuits. Rejecting the "model minority" orientations of their parents' generation, Asian American activists instead turned to socialist revolutions in the Third World and Black Power organizations at home for alternatives, seeking to awaken radical consciousness within communities they believed had been cowed into passivity. The result was a diverse but broadly leftist social movement whose activities ranged from direct services in Asian-majority communities to cultural productions and academic research. Tying these disparate formations together were a handful of core commitments: interracial solidarities with Black, Chicana, and Indigenous movements; internationalist solidarities with Vietnam, the People's Republic of China, and other socialist nations in the Third World; and pan-Asian solidarities which saw Asian American identity as emerging from shared histories of oppression and exploitation in the United States.

These last two points in particular would become crucial to how Asian American activists approached the problem of organizing recent arrivals from Asia, as activists merged a leftist-internationalist schema of East Asia during the Cold War with their historical knowledge of the Asian immigrant experience in the U.S. to develop an understanding of their targeted constituency. While activists advocated for a sharp departure from both liberal and conservative ethnic elites' approaches to racial inequality, their alternatives also relied upon their own set of rapidly aging and incorrect assumptions—namely, that they occupied a world order split between imperialist and anti-imperialist

³⁵ On the Asian American movement's "street gang" origins, see Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, chap. 4, Kindle edition.

powers, and that most Asian immigrants were transplants from feudal, underdeveloped nations who could be transformed into U.S. analogues to the revolutionary peasants of China, Vietnam, and other Asian socialist nations.³⁶ Despite these shortcomings, however, the Asian American movement also produced a series of deeply effective political assessments of ethnic enclaves and their constituents. Movement members saw delinquent youth, immigrants, and the elderly—many of whom were excluded from model minority citizenship—as the necessary mass base behind any lasting transformation in communities like Chinatown. They also assessed the need for strategic coalition-building beyond Chinatown’s borders, both with other oppressed groups and with certain civic and state institutions, though the precise nature of such coalitions was a source of constant internal disagreement. Lastly, radicals’ critique of commercial redevelopment and foreign-financed growth in Asian enclaves would prove highly prescient. As early as 1968, movement members predicted that if left unchallenged, such trends would erode a crucial prerequisite for ethnic-based community-building and identity formation: a shared physical locality in which day-to-day solidarities could be produced and reproduced. It was this last point in particular which motivated some of the movement’s most fervent and impactful organizing in the streets of San Francisco’s Chinatown.

Producing Third World internationalism

Before we return to the enclave, however, we must first understand how members of the Asian American movement came by some of their ideological commitments, beginning with Third World internationalism. Internationalism’s centrality to the early AAM is in large part a symptom of the movement’s origins within the anti-war movement, with many of its members first radicalized by accounts of U.S. military atrocities in Southeast Asia. Through their participation in anti-war protests, Asian ethnic individuals began to gain a systemic analysis of how U.S. violence against Asian people in Vietnam could be linked to the oppression of Asian minorities at home. As one movement activist put it at a 1971 peace rally in San Francisco, “The vicious imperialism which seeks to commit total genocide

³⁶ My critique of left-internationalism draws heavily on that of Marxist critic Moishe Postone, as articulated in “History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 93–110, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-18-1-93>. Postone argues that the dualistic internationalism of movements like the American New Left were uniquely ill-suited to understand the conditions of the post-Fordist order, particularly when it comes to understanding forces such as economic globalization.

against the proud people of Indochina is the same imperialism which oppresses those of us here in the U.S. by creating dehumanizing conditions in our Asian communities.”³⁷ Such insights were developed through contact and collaboration with Black radicals, who were themselves drawing on older traditions of Black internationalism and anti-imperialism, as well as through contact with Southeast Asian people themselves.³⁸

Third World internationalism created a language through which people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds in the United States could conceive of their struggles with the same urgency as those taking place in the decolonizing global south. Internationalism was more than just a set of signifiers, however; it also helped build real organizational muscle, allowing small groups to form effective coalitions and building the mutual commitments necessary to sustain long-term organizing. Historians Sean P. Malloy and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu both note that internationalism helped young, Third World organizations like the Black Panther Party and the Third World Women’s Alliance “overcome their minority status in the United States” and link up more established groups at home and abroad. Such affiliations were rarely ever frictionless, but illustrated how internationalism could drive a mass politics with shared goals—ending the war, anti-colonialism, women’s liberation—at its core.

Some of the venues in which these alliances were made in their most concrete terms were international peace conferences. Three notable examples, the Hemispheric Conference to End the Vietnam War in Montreal in winter of 1968 and the two Indochinese Women’s Conferences (IWC) in

³⁷ Patsy Chan, “The Third World People Demand: End Your Racist War,” *Gidra*, June 1971.

³⁸ Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, chap. 5, Kindle edition. The scholarly literature on African American and Black internationalisms is vast; for a sampling see Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), Kevin Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014); Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *In Search of Power: African Americans in the Era of Decolonization, 1956-1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017). On Asian American and Black radical solidarities, see Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism During the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Aaron Byungjoo Bae, “‘The Struggle for Freedom, Justice, and Equality Transcends Racial and National Boundaries’: Anti-Imperialism, Multiracial Alliances, and the Free Huey Movement in the San Francisco Bay Area,” *Pacific Historical Review* 86, no. 4 (2017): 691–722 and Daryl J. Maeda, “Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity through Performing Blackness, 1969-1972,” *American Quarterly* 57:4 (2005), 1079-1103.

April of 1971, offered crucial opportunities for Asian American activists to not only meet fellow North American leftists, but revolutionaries from Latin America, Africa, and Indochina. These conferences also served as highly visible stages for the U.S. Third World left to offer their internationalist critique of the mainstream anti-war movement. At the Montreal conference in 1968, Berkeley's AAPA joined the Oakland Black Panthers and other local organizations in a Bay Area delegation, forming part of the "Radical Caucus" once there. AAPA participants reported scuffles with "peaceniks and assorted old left people" as their caucus "demanded that the thrust of the Conference change from a 'peace in Vietnam' convocation to a 'stop U.S. imperialism' organizing session." Despite these conflicts, the delegates agreed that "the one unifying factor was the presence of the Vietnamese, and what they represented... For the AAPA people, the Vietnamese were the focus."³⁹

Encounters with Vietnamese revolutionaries, however brief, were often powerful and deeply emotionally affecting experiences for those who had them. Candace Murata, an Asian American participant in the Vancouver IWC, described how "meeting the Indochinese people"—among them Vietnamese women soldiers Madame Phan Minh Hien and Madame Dinh Thi Huong—shook her into a new political consciousness. "For a while I was so much ashamed of being from the United States," she later wrote for *Gidra*:

[But] through meeting the Indochinese people, I began to understand the important role the people of the U.S. have in the struggle... I now see the importance of our struggle—being in the belly of the monster itself—and I am only ashamed when I know I am not doing all that I can for the liberation of mankind.⁴⁰

Confronted with vast differences between themselves and their revolutionary brethren, young Asian American activists used internationalist commitments to rouse themselves into action rather than remain petrified by guilt. Murata openly acknowledged the gap between her own "comfortable, petit-bourgeois background" and the lifestyles of most Indochinese people. She did not brush such disparities aside with facile essentialism—"[B]esides the color of our skin, I saw no other relationship between these nine

³⁹ "Area Movements -> AAPA," *AAPA Newspaper*, Nov-Dec 1968, Box 1, folder 2, Steve Louie papers, UCLA Special Collections.

⁴⁰ "From the Vancouver Conference...", *Gidra*, May 1971, Densho Digital Repository (henceforth DDR).

revolutionaries... and myself”—but Murata also refused to let the mere existence of such disparities prevent her from seeing herself, too, as an agent of revolutionary history.

Personal encounters with Indochinese soldiers were the exception, not the norm, in how most Asian Americans encountered the rest of the Third World. Like their non-Asian comrades in the Third World left, Asian Americans were much more likely to read about travels to Asia than to meet Asian revolutionaries or go to Asia themselves, and most relied on journalistic dispatches and English-language revolutionary literature to access what many considered the realities of life under socialism. Western Third World internationalism was thus largely produced through the interactions between radical activists, mainline journalists and artists, and the propagandizing of socialist nations themselves. Depictions of the PRC were especially popular among the Asian American movement, both in Chinese American and pan-Asian American organizations, with movement members gravitating towards material from white American journalists like Edgar Snow and Jack Belden, both of whom had spent significant amounts of time in China during the civil war and World War II.⁴¹ Snow’s *Red Star Over China* and Belden’s *China Shakes the World* were unabashedly sympathetic to Mao, the Red Army, and the Chinese Communist Party. Both accounts had the flavor of an adventure story, populated with a gallery of dashing guerrillas, heroic soldiers, and brave peasant maids; as historian Julia Lovell writes of *Red Star Over China*, the book “humanized the Chinese Communists, giving remote revolutionaries characteristics that seemed comfortably familiar to Anglo-American readers: humor, candor, approachability, statesmanship, patriotism.”⁴² Yet as the AAM’s interest in Snow’s account shows, it wasn’t just Anglo-Americans who found the account compelling. An ad for *Red Star Over China* in a left-wing Chinatown publication called it “the classic on the beginnings of the Chinese Revolution with many first handed [*sic*] stories of Mao,

⁴¹ Notably, authors like Snow and Belden were elevated in the radical AAM press while the reports of Chinese-language newspapers were not. In San Francisco, this was a reflection of both the Chinese American community leaders’ pivot away from “international” issues towards the domestic, and the much more uniform anticommunism of the Chinese American press in the wake of Red Scare censorship campaigns. Those publications which survived were often directly sponsored by the KMT, but even those which were relatively independent were generally “right of center,” with many continuing to mark the date from the founding of the Republic of China and referring to the Communist government as “Communist bandits.” See Him Mark Lai, “The Chinese Press in the United States and Canada Since World War II: A Diversity of Voices,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* 4 (1990): 107-155.

⁴² Lovell, *Maoism*, chap. 2, Kindle edition.

Chou En-lai, Lin Piao, Chu Teh, and many others.” A similar ad for Jack Belden’s *China Shakes the World* called it “a beautiful human history of China during the civil war period.”⁴³

While both Snow and Belden set out to produce sympathetic portrayals of the Chinese Communist Party, their works nevertheless continued to trade in certain orientalist tropes and stereotypes, which went largely unremarked about within the AAM. The country both authors depicted was deeply alien, “almost lunar in its strangeness.”⁴⁴ Even the trees in China “somehow seemed different than those in America,” Belden wrote in *China Shakes the World*, “somewhat more delicate—a little feminine, with long slender twigs reaching out from branches like fine hair.” Snow described a landscape full of “fantastic, incredible, and sometimes frightening shapes, a world configured by a mad god—and sometimes a world also of strange surreal beauty.” Both books saw their authors immersed in rural China as they tracked the Red Army through barren plains, rolling rice fields, dirt roads, and remote villages. *China Shakes the World* contained several portraits of peasants and soldiers Belden supposedly met on his journeys, through whom Belden presented a vision of daily life in China that was nasty, brutish, and short. There was Old Lady Peng, for instance, who helped the Nationalist Army murder her own daughter; or Gold Flower, a revolutionary who was sold to her husband as a young woman only to rebel against him and join the Red Army—more on her later.⁴⁵

Much of what would attract readers to *Red Star over China* was Snow’s insider access to the Chinese Communist Party’s upper echelons, but Snow’s depictions of discipline and collective action among the rank and file at the Yan’an soviet were just as crucial in sparking the imaginations of revolutionaries around the world, from China to Europe to the United States of America. As Alex Hing would later say, “I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Red Star*, probably back to back, and then I became a revolutionary.” From Snow’s account of life in Yan’an, Hing learned that “if you implement the revolution scientifically, you can achieve not just the liberation of the country but the liberation of the whole world from US oppression.” When Hing helped start his own revolutionary group in San Francisco

⁴³ “Everybody’s Bookstore,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, November 1971.

⁴⁴ Lovell, *Maoism*, chap. 2, Kindle edition.

⁴⁵ Jack Belden, *China Shakes the World* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1949), 25; Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Random House, 1937), 27.

a year later, *Red Star* was the first book on their suggested reading list for would-be recruits.⁴⁶ Snow's descriptions of Red Army discipline and camaraderie created the same response in the AAM as Pat Sumi's encounter with Laotian soldiers: that revolution was a tangible set of tasks and strategies, a lesson Asian socialists could teach and Asian American socialists could learn.

Relegated to experiencing the revolution from afar, members of the Asian American movement were left with two choices: they could become members of the small minority who actually traveled to the People's Republic of China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and North Vietnam; or, they could make similar revolutions in their own cities and locales. There, the long arm of U.S. imperialism had made itself known to them in a variety of guises, from thuggish police to "banana" politicians (white on the inside, yellow on the outside) to exploitative bosses and landlords. Instead of looking to peasant farmers, however, the AAM found in their neighborhoods a combination of poor, older immigrants who had arrived in the United States during or before the Exclusion Era, more recent immigrants who had arrived in the period after World War II, and an increasingly middle class and professionalized cohort of native-born Asian ethnics, many of whom were of the movement members' parents' generation. From this population, activists would have to cultivate appropriately revolutionary subjects with whom they could struggle, organize, and defeat U.S. imperialism in all its localized manifestations.

Triply oppressed: Asian American feminisms

The Asian female freedom fighter occupied a uniquely privileged position within AAM discourses of revolutionary subjecthood. The superhuman quality with which both Asian Americans and sympathetic white journalists described Asian revolutionaries was especially true for their depiction Asian women, who were frequently portrayed as both fierce, devoted fighters and equally fierce, equally devoted mothers and caretakers. Jack Belden in particular was interested in the emerging ideas about gender, sex, and marriage he encountered in Chinese women revolutionaries, describing one of them as "not a Communist, but... evidently dying to become one... Having once seen a movie in which the women spent a great deal of time fixing up their hair... she thought American girls must be very foolish."

⁴⁶ "Suggested Reading List," *Red Guard Community News*, April 9, 1969, Box 1, folder 34, Steve Louie collection, UCLA Special Collections.



Fig 1.4-1.6: The “breastfeeding guerrilla” was featured on the covers of several Asian American newsletters during the early 1970s. Her travels are a testament to both the appeal of the image itself and of the linkages that had developed between various Asian American institutions across the country. From left to right: the March, 1970 edition of *Gidra*, based in Los Angeles; the October, 1970 edition of *Asian People's Newsletter*, a publication of San Francisco Chinatown's Asian Community Center; and the March, 1971 edition of *Getting Together*, the publication of I Wor Kuen, a Maoist organization then based in New York City.
Sources: Densho Digital Repository; Box 5, folder 2 and Box 2, folder 18, Steve Louie papers, UCLA Special Collections.

Likewise, *Red Star Over China* contained several descriptions of women doing hard manual labor and offering their limited stocks of food to nourish Red Army soldiers (and the American journalist following them around), challenging prevailing Western notions of Asian women as delicate and submissive.⁴⁷ In embodying the duality between the revolution's militant and communitarian aspects, Asian women become powerful symbols for the socialist Third World writ large. A drawing of a Vietnamese guerrilla with a rifle across her lap, a book in her hand, and an infant at breast was reproduced across the AAM, graced the covers of numerous newsletters and magazines during the early 1970s (fig. 1.4-1.6). She frequently appeared in proximity to the phrase “We will fight and fight from this generation to the next,” implying that her combination of martial, intellectual, and maternal skills would ensure socialism's survival in her children, who would take up the same task.

⁴⁷ Belden, *China Shakes the World*, 42; Snow, *Red Star Over China*, 85, 241.

Deploying women as symbolic representations of the revolution was far from unique to the Western left. The USSR and the PRC drew from a similar visual lexicon in their own propaganda, which leftists in the United States and Europe would in turn reproduce in their materials for their own local contexts. Historian Robeson Taj Frazier, writing about the circulation of these images between Black American revolutionaries and socialist China, argues that they exported “the CCP’s gender analysis that women could only be freed from patriarchal oppression by creating a socialist society where women behaved and lived like men.”⁴⁸ Of course, the U.S. Third World hardly needed the CCP to introduce these masculinist attitudes into their political discourses surrounding gender and sexuality; for instance, scholar Cynthia Young notes their appearance in the way Black nationalists like LeRoi Jones related to male revolutionaries such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara during the late 1950s, and other scholars, female members, and contemporaries of the Black Panther Party have described how the Party’s militant, masculinist vision of racial liberation reproduced patriarchal elements of the same white supremacist system they hoped to overthrow.⁴⁹ The AAM could likewise associate liberation with robust hyper-masculinity and oppression with feminized, de-sexualized Asian “Uncle Toms.” One writer in an early issue of *Gidra* compared “assimilationists” to literal eunuchs, arguing that “for their silence, [Orientals] have paid the price of emasculation.”⁵⁰ Shared attitudes surrounding revolutionary masculinity speak to the common intellectual lineages many Third World activists shared, while also demonstrating how the circulation of ideas through the socialist internationalist sphere could amplify damaging political beliefs as easily as it amplified empowering ones.

Toxic ideas about gender and sexuality did not go unquestioned at the time, however, and internationalism was instrumental in distributing feminist consciousness throughout the anti-imperialist sphere while also inviting Third World women to explore intersectional interpretations of their experiences. In her comparative study of Black, Chicanx, and Asian American radical activism in ‘60s Los Angeles, historian Laura Pulido points out that feminists within Third World organizations worked hard to create spaces for themselves to challenge patriarchal attitudes and foster their own communities.

⁴⁸ Frazier, *The East is Black*, 154.

⁴⁹ Malloy, *Out of Oakland*, 13-14, 44-45.

⁵⁰ The Oriental As a “Middleman Minority.”



Fig 1.7: The Asian American women who contributed to *Gidra*'s January 1971 special women's issue.

Drawing from sources like *Gidra*'s special 1971 "women's issue" and the elevation of Asian American women writers and artists within the magazine's pages, Pulido argues that there was "a unique sense of sisterhood within the Asian American left... [reflecting] a higher level of collective feminist consciousness than existed in either [the Latina] CASA or the [Black Panther Party]." Pulido pays special attention to a photograph in *Gidra*'s women's issue of all the female contributors, noting that the picture signaled an institutionalization of feminist solidarity that their contemporaries often lacked (fig 1.7).⁵¹ In addition to capturing a well-developed sense of feminist consciousness, the women's issue showcased a wide range of political perspectives contained within internationalist feminism, with critiques levied at U.S. militarism, capitalism, and the Asian American movement itself. Some Asian American men within the movement used the issue to take up their female comrades' call, recognizing that "the women's struggle is the liberation of MEN," as one *Gidra* writer put it.⁵²

The same tendency which led some in the movement to fetishize Asian female revolutionaries led others to respect and revere them as sisters. Writing about the two Indochinese Women's Conferences in

⁵¹ Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles*, American Crossroads 19 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 210.

⁵² "Male Perspective," Mike Yamamoto, *Gidra*, January 1971.

1971, historian Judy Wu notes how their centering of womanhood created additional space for international solidarity and, in the case of many participants, identification. For Asian American women in particular, the category of “Third World sisterhood” operated alongside the category of “Asian American”; to be the latter was to embrace the former.⁵³ Asian American feminist internationalism also prompted movement members to look to countries like the PRC as living examples of what a more egalitarian social order might mean for gender relations. In this, as in their other attempts to understand life in socialist Asia, the movement relied on a mixture of eyewitness testimony from Asian American travelers and the reportage of people like Snow and Belden. “Gold Flower’s Story” from *China Shakes the World* became especially popular on the Asian American left. Belden presented the chapter as a portrait of a real peasant woman he had met in North China. Readers got a description of Chinese rural gender relations, which Belden portrayed as utterly barbaric, in stark contrast to the “free love” values of the New Left: “Although there are thousands of authentic instances of Chinese men selling their women into wifery, concubinage or whoredom, there is scarcely any record of a girl indulging in a romance with a boy with the consent and knowledge of her parents...”⁵⁴ Belden’s story then channeled Gold Flower, who described how she fought her family, her husband, and her village before joining the Communists’ 8th Route Army and becoming a self-liberated woman. She had become a participant in the great effort to shift her society from backwardness to modernity, and in the process, had learned to live and act as a free person. When Belden met her, Gold Flower was in the process of divorcing her husband, something she could not have dreamed of before the revolution. Belden concluded by saying that while he didn’t want to extrapolate *too* much from Gold Flower’s individual perspective, “her story has been multiplied to infinity throughout the length and breadth of rural China.” Perhaps not all Chinese women were quite so militant in their revolt as Gold Flower, but as a class, they were nevertheless effecting a dramatic change in China’s gender and sexual norms.⁵⁵

Living history: Early organizing in the ethnic enclave

⁵³ Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, 254-256.

⁵⁴ Belden, *China Shakes the World*, 277.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 308-309.

In the brief window of time that the Leways' pool hall was up and running, a number of visitors from across the Bay would occasionally stop by the building to spend the evening. Bobby Seale and David Hilliard of the Oakland Black Panther Party (BPP) were there on the invitation of Chinese American women who were dating BPP members, and they were intrigued by what they saw. Bonding over their shared experiences of police harassment and political marginalization, the two BPP leaders struck up a friendship with the young men of Leways and encouraged them to do more than just operate a pool hall. Among those who took up the call was Alex Hing. Hing and a handful of other Chinese American youth soon began visiting the BPP headquarters in turn, where they were "introduced formally to revolutionary theory" such as the writings of Mao, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro. Within months, Leways had acquired an underground revolutionary unit that was calling themselves the Red Guard Party. When the Leways' continued existence was threatened in 1968 by a sudden rent hike, the Guards attempted to take over some of its functions, drawing disaffected Chinatown youth into its ranks and attempting to train them for the coming revolution. At its largest, Alex Hing claimed the organization had two hundred members, with a core of two dozen active participants—half men, half women, the latter of whom Hing admitted "were the backup and did most of the work."⁵⁶

The Guards drew inspiration from the Black Panthers' and the Young Lords' combination of militant cultural nationalism with Third World internationalism, priding themselves on resisting what they saw as the worst assimilationist impulses in their community by embracing Maoist politics and rejecting the neighborhood leadership's definitions of socioeconomic success. While the majority of Chinatown's political and business elites were desperately trying to avoid any positive comparisons between Chinese and Black Americans, the Red Guards were building active ties with Black nationalists. While the press focused on high-achieving and hard-working Chinese American families, the Guards helped draw attention to the neighborhood's many problems: namely, unemployment, poverty, and police brutality. While Chinese American liberal reformists largely stayed mum on "the China issue," backing Taiwan

⁵⁶ Daryl J. Maeda, "Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity through Performing Blackness, 1969-1972," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2005), 1090; Fred Ho and Steve Yip, "Alex Hing: Former Minister of Information for the Red Guard Party and Founding Member of I Wor Kuen," in *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* (San Francisco: AK Press, 2000). Seale supposedly helped the Red Guard Party choose their name, guiding them away from the "Red Dragons" to something "more political."

whenever asked, the Red Guards publicly embraced not just the PRC, but Vietnam and other socialist nations of the Third World. Their innovation within the AAM was in what Alex Hing called their “political theater”: dressing up in Red Army-esque uniforms, marching through the streets, and disrupting neighborhood gatherings with loud music and PRC flag-waving. This pageantry merged internationalist solidarity with nationalist expression, the abstract principle of solidarity with socialist China made concrete through publicly enacting a certain Chinese identity within the local sphere. Unlike Chinese American Democrats, the Red Guard Party was deeply contemptuous of the city’s politics as a whole, and particularly contemptuous of Chinese American “bananas” who were attempting to the system to their own benefit while neglecting the rest of their community. These attacks lumped the newly emergent liberal wing of Chinatown’s elites in with the Nationalist old guard, even going so far as to call liberals the Nationalist Party’s puppets.⁵⁷ Charlotte Brooks has noted how these attacks frustrated Chinese American Democrats in particular, who saw themselves as liberal reformers who had recently pried absolute political control over Chinatown from the hands of organizations like the Six Companies. They were particularly incensed at the Guards reopening “the China question,” which liberals had steadfastly ignored in order to build political alliances within local government.⁵⁸

The Guards’ dogmatic stance on the PRC may have prevented them from seeking out strategic alliances with Chinese American liberals, but it was not the only—or even the principal—point of conflict between liberal and radical Chinatown. On neighborhood issues of policing, housing, and labor rights, the left had good cause to be angry with Chinese American Democrats, who were not shy about pushing for increased police presence in Chinatown. One Guards newsletter called out Assistant District Attorney George Chinn, a Democrat and then-candidate for the Board of Supervisors, for “helping to ‘process’ (condemn) people off the streets.” “You claim to...represent the people of this community, George,” the anonymous author charged. “If you really think so, you had better... take a look at how the pigs treat your own children in the streets of Chinatown.”⁵⁹ Another article criticized Gordon Lau, a

⁵⁷ Red Guard Party flyer, “Rally,” March 1969, Carton 41, folder 46, Him Mark Lai papers, ESL; “Six Companies Plug Chinn,” June 25, 1969, *Red Guard Community Newsletter*.

⁵⁸ Brooks, *Between Mao and McCarthy*, 241.

⁵⁹ “Six Companies Plug Chinn.”

different Democratic candidate for Supervisor, for believing that “his system can still be saved if the people will elect him.” “Suppose Lau does win,” the Guards speculated; “...he would be impotent against the Alioto machine.”⁶⁰ In this, the Guards perhaps had a more accurate assessment of the balance of political power than most Chinese American Democrats, who remained committed to electoralism even as Chinatown’s population was increasingly composed of people ineligible to vote and un-integrated into formal politics. The Guards correctly noted that while the Democrats’ way of doing business had netted advancements for a portion of the neighborhood, people who were inconvenient to their image of “Chinatown U.S.A.”—delinquent youth, sweatshop workers, the poor, the unemployed—were often left out.

The Red Guard Party may have accurately diagnosed many of the problems plaguing Chinatown, but their bombastic approach eventually began to alienate radical allies as well as liberal and conservative elites. The Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA), a group of Chinese American students at San Francisco State College, were veterans of the Third World Liberation Front strike and all its internal conflicts by the time they set up shop in Chinatown in 1969, but still found themselves put off by the Red Guards’ methods. “We all know, of course, that the black power pattern works,” reflected one ICSA member, “[but] we can also see the pitfalls in using too much of the blarney, as the Red Guards did... They alienated immigrant youths and the whole community in three months’ time.”⁶¹ Hing remembered things differently, recalling diverse crowds showing up to the Guards’ rallies and a popular lunch program for elderly Chinatown residents. Even he, however, conceded that after the police raided the Guards’ offices in the summer of 1969, the group was not allowed to resume their work from the I-Hotel, where many other left wing Asian American groups were settling. With their offices closed, the Guards were adrift, torn between two internal tendencies: one advocating for immediate armed struggle, another for long-term community organizing. When Hing returned from a tour of socialist Asia in the fall of 1970, he found the group had begun to disintegrate.⁶²

⁶⁰ “Can Chinn Win?,” June 25, 1969, *Red Guard Community Newsletter*; “Gordon Lau - Pig Liberal,” September 8, 1969, *Red Guard Community Newsletter*.

⁶¹ Bill Moore, “Chinatown’s Militants,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 14, 1969.

⁶² Hing interview, 291.

It was in this state of disarray that the remaining members received a phone call in early 1971 from a New York organization called I Wor Kuen (IWK). Their name, which translates to “Righteous Harmonious Fists,” was the Cantonese name for the Boxers, an anti-foreigner martial arts group active in Northern China during the late 19th century which had led a violent rebellion against Europeans and Chinese Christians. IWK was founded in New York City’s Chinatown the same year the Red Guards emerged and had spent their first year tackling many of the same problems: “the same slumlords and rotten over-crowded housing, the same money-hungry hospital system... the same bad schools... the same hard, low-paying laundry, restaurant and sweatshop jobs or no jobs at all, and so on.”⁶³ The two organizations first met at the Asian American Reality Conference, an “east-coast gathering of all Asians to discuss problems relevant to our people” held at Pace College in December of 1970. Afterwards, various members remained in touch. Hearing about the troubles that the Guards were facing, IWK members Carmen Chow and Gordon Chang offered a merger that would transform IWK into a national organization. Their only terms were that the Guards drop their “ultra-military position,” a compromise Hing and a handful of remaining Guards accepted.⁶⁴

1971 also marked the emergence of Wei Min She (WMS) in the Bay Area, a Chinese American organization with similar politics and focus on issues in Chinatown. WMS, whose name is Mandarin for “Serve the People,” was affiliated with a larger left-wing organization of which it had become the Asian American wing, the Revolutionary Union (RU). The RU was the primary organizational center of the burgeoning New Communist Movement, a coalition of mainly white Marxist-Leninists who were attempting to build a new Communist party in the United States that was allied with the People’s Republic of China rather than the Soviet Union. Perhaps for this reason, WMS’s origins are somewhat less clear than IWK’s—IWK members at one point accused the Revolutionary Union of poaching its members to establish WMS as a kind of puppet organization, a charge the RU vocally refuted.⁶⁵

⁶³ “National I Wor Kuen,” *Getting Together*, July-August 1971,

⁶⁴ Hing interview, 291.

⁶⁵ On the New Communist Movement, see Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London New York: Verso, 2018).



Fig 1.8: AAM activists and I-Hotel tenants pose in front of the hotel's main entrance with hands raised in the spring of 1972. Source: I Wor Kuen, *Getting Together*, March 3-17, 1972.

In addition to engaging in petty turf wars, the two groups also possessed legitimate differences of political opinion from the start, though these were significantly less marked in the early '70s than they would eventually become. IWK was a nationalist organization first, a Marxist-Leninist organization second (indeed, they did not define themselves as an explicitly Marxist-Leninist group until after the 1971 merger), whereas WMS's relationship with the Revolutionary Union gave it a more class-forward political inflection from jump. WMS literature tended to emphasize the need for Chinese workers to link up with workers of other backgrounds and ethnic identities, including white workers, and spoke often of the necessity for a workers' revolution. By contrast, IWK—despite frequently invoking the desired end goal of Third World unity—considered themselves a group working primarily to improve conditions of Asian people in the United States, and Chinese people in particular. IWK's community-first organizing placed the unity of Chinese people in the United States on equal footing with working class unity as such, and this included encouraging coalitions between Chinese workers and “the petty bourgeoisie” in order to “struggle against racial and national oppression in a revolutionary way,” thereby suggesting that the

history of racial discrimination in the United States had produced a situation in which Chinese workers could have more in common with their Chinese employers than with the white working class.⁶⁶

The first practical testing ground for both IWK and WMS was the ongoing struggle at the I-Hotel. Since 1968, the hotel's tenants—most of them elderly, low-income Filipino bachelors—had been threatened with eviction by their landlord, Milton Meyer & Company, which hoped to build a parking lot where the building currently stood. The I-Hotel was the last remaining physical vestige of San Francisco's once-thriving Manilatown. By late 1960s, the neighborhood had been largely erased by both redevelopment and out-migration, as more recent Filipino immigrants moved directly to the suburbs while the majority of older immigrants returned to the Philippines. The retired laborers, or “*manongs*,” who lived in the I-Hotel either couldn't afford the journey or were too ashamed to return home with empty pockets. In spite of their poverty, however, many of the hotel's tenants were former or current leaders within the city's working class Filipino community, and most possessed some knowledge of industrial trade unions or the agricultural labor movement. When they learned of their impending eviction, these tenants drew upon their previous experience as organized members of the immigrant working class and began picketing on the street in front of the building.⁶⁷

When the consolidating Asian American movement learned about the I-Hotel, student, professional, and “lumpen” organizations alike began flocking to the building to picket and rally alongside the *manongs* (fig 1.8). After the tenants negotiated a new lease with Milton Meyer, many of these same organizations moved into the building's ground floor, providing much-needed revenue for the building's management and gaining themselves a steady base of operations from which to begin engaging with the rest of Chinatown. Wei Min She and I Wor Kuen were among the groups who set up shop in the hotel in some form or another, with Wei Min She operating out of the Asian Community Center (ACC) and I Wor Kuen working through a front called the Chinatown Progressive Association (CPA). WMS and IWK also published their own newspapers from their I-Hotel offices, *Wei Min She Chinese Community News* and *Getting Together*, respectively.

⁶⁶ I Wor Kuen, “On Nationalism.”

⁶⁷ Estella Habal, *San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 21.

While this period of the hotel's history was later known as the "peace with a lease," not all was tranquil within the building's aging walls. Activist and historian Estella Habal, who was a member of the Filipino American organization *Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino* (KDP, or Union of Democratic Filipinos), later recalled how Wei Min She and I Wor Kuen's blossoming rivalry adversely impacted day-to-day politics at the I-Hotel by introducing additional conflicts and distracting participants away from the primary fight. Both organizations vied for tenants' allegiance while refusing to build a tactical alliance with one another, much to the consternation of Filipino American organizers like Habal. Despite their institutional grievances and personal inexperience, however, Habal concedes that both groups were highly adept at mobilizing their respective bases of young, politically engaged Chinese Americans and raising awareness around a given issue.⁶⁸

For Filipino and non-Filipino activists alike, the building's *manongs* were a source of awe and inspiration in much the same ways Indochinese soldiers were. The nickname "*manong*," an Ilocalo term for "elder brother," was popularized by young activists during the eviction struggle as a way of establishing lineage and community between old retirees and young organizers. Habal describes how she and her peers flocked to the *manongs* to satisfy their hunger for "a more 'authentic' connection to national identity... We rebelled by venerating the elderly 'bachelors,' rejecting the conservatism of our parents and favoring the radicalism—and the broken English—of the manongs."⁶⁹ *Manongs* were also a tangible link to the history of Asian immigrant labor and radicalism, as they were able to share their previous experiences and hard-earned lessons from former strikes and organizing drives with members of the AAM. Activists often emphasized how tenants had worked in "canneries, restaurants, hotels and ships in Hawaii, California, Alaska and all over North America," thus rooting themselves in the history of the nation and the continent through the products of their labor.⁷⁰ Complementing young organizers' veneration of the *manongs* was a sense of shared interests, particularly after AAM groups moved into the

⁶⁸ Habal, *San Francisco's International Hotel*, 76. Habal positions her own organization, the KDP, as the most practically-minded of the three, though it too eventually focused more on Communist party-building than on-the-ground organizing.

⁶⁹ Habal, *San Francisco's International Hotel*, 30.

⁷⁰ "I-Hotel Fights Eviction," *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, October/November 1974; "The Right to Decent Housing," *Getting Together*, March 1972.



Fig 1.9: Visitors inspect radios and other electronic gadgets from “New China” at the Asian Community Center. Source: *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, November 1971.

I-Hotel and became fellow tenants whose fates were also tied up in the eviction struggle. Writing in their community newspaper 1974, WMS pointed out that eviction not only threatened the building’s longtime residents; it also “threatens the progressive work that has been based in the different community centers and organizations located in the International Hotel.”⁷¹

It was during the five-year-long “peace with a lease” between threats of eviction that the Chinatown AAM began to develop and expand its organizational capacities, turning to new terrains of struggle in sweatshops, restaurants, and public schools. Both WMS and IWK worked directly with tenants, ran health clinics and draft counseling sessions, and offered free breakfast programs through their respective offices on the Hotel’s first floor. They balanced their direct organizing work with political education campaigns, with the twin goals of introducing Chinatown’s residents to the history of the Chinese revolution and educating them about the history of Asian labor and persecution in the United States. During this period, left wing activists both benefitted from and helped to produce a wave of positive feelings towards Communist China, with their efforts aided by thawing relations between the

⁷¹ “I-Hotel Fights Eviction,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, October/November 1974.

United States and the Communist government and growing interest among the overseas Chinese in learning about life “behind the bamboo curtain.”⁷² As the Chinese Red Army had used “Red Theater” to educate the masses about their crusade against the Japanese and the Nationalists, so the main purpose for the AAM’s film screenings was to show Chinatown the “truth” about the People’s Republic and how its citizens were going about building a socialist society. This primary goal had limited success, however. Harvey Dong, a WMS member who helped put on the organization’s bi-weekly Film Program at the Asian Community Center (ACC), later admitted that demand for the films came less from interest in their political message and more from “feelings of nationalism for China” amongst “old men, long separated from the country of their youth.”⁷³ The popularity of the screenings, however—lines were so long for *The East is Red* that the Community Center had to show it fifteen times—indicates that WMS and IWK were steadily building an alternative space for neighborhood socialization which had the potential to draw in members of the community who were less familiar with the Maoists’ radical politics. Other events included an exhibit at the ACC of “art and products” from the PRC, from fine arts to film projecting equipment, radios, leather goods, and traditional medicine (fig 1.9). “The Chinese community who have so long been deprived of Chinese herbs and medicine showed keen interest in the display of those items from China,” WMS reported. Another October 1st, 1972 event celebrating thawing relations between the United States and the PRC was reportedly attended by 500 people, and a film showing held that evening was done before an audience of 2,500.⁷⁴

In addition to hosting events, IWK and WMS both made targeted use of their community newspapers, which were published in both English and traditional Chinese. Issues contained a combination of local current events, national and international reporting (usually reprints from other left-wing newspapers or the mainstream press), and historical primers. Both organizations also published regular dispatches from the Third World; for instance, in 1971 IWK ran a series of articles called “A Society Making Revolution Daily” by member Gordon Chang, who “spent one month in China traveling with a group of Chinese-Americans and visited Canton, Peking, Nanking, Shanghai an Dachai

⁷² Author interview with Gordon Chang, October 5, 2022.

⁷³ Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, chap. 6, Kindle edition.

⁷⁴ “Friendship growing between American and Chinese people,” October 1972, *Wei Min Chinese Community News*.

commune.” In these reports, the People’s Republic of China provided a seemingly endless well of evidence that socialism, built by and for Chinese people, was indeed possible—and not in some distant future, either, but in their own historical moment.⁷⁵

Complementing contemporary descriptions of Asia were historical descriptions of Asian America. WMS ran a series in their newspaper about the American media’s historic portrayal of Chinese immigrants as wicked, grotesque, and untrustworthy. The authors made a point of describing “in the beginning, the American media attempted to present an image of the Chinese as hard working and uncomplaining workers,” and that this image only changed as anti-Chinese sentiment—itsself a product of narrowing economic opportunity across the board—became more widespread.⁷⁶ How IWK and WMS chose to assemble Chinese American history reflected their differences in political orientation. Both organizations emphasized the particular oppressions faced by Chinese and other Asian laborers, but WMS also made a point of highlighting longstanding class divisions *within* Chinese immigrant communities, as merchants held power over regular laborers. Meanwhile, IWK tended to describe how historic anti-Chinese violence affected business owners and workers alike, with mentions of how merchant-run civic organizations like the Six Companies could act as protectors of the community at large.⁷⁷

IWK and WMS’s wide range of community-facing events and political education efforts were the result of their urgent striving to bridge the gap between both groups’ revolutionary aspirations and their immediate social reality. Though their members professed deep respect and love for Chinatown’s residents, they were also quite critical of the masses’ current stage of political development and engagement. In attempting to not overstate Chinatown’s preparedness for revolution, however, the Asian American left tended to err on the side of understating the community’s existing degree of political engagement. The author of an article titled “The Winds of Change are Blowing” wrote in 1971 that “Chinatown residents have until recently been apathetic towards community affairs,” a relatively narrow-minded assessment that left out over a decades’ worth of electoral and social reform within the

⁷⁵ Gordon Chang, “A Society Making Revolution Daily,” *Getting Together*, November 1971.

⁷⁶ “Chinese Images in the Media,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, January 1972; “Chinese Images in the Media,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, November 1971.

⁷⁷ “Early Immigrants of San Francisco,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, November 1971; “Chinese American History—Part II,” *Getting Together*, August 1970.

community, including the social agencies to which the current Asian American left could trace its institutional origins. It was true that recent immigrants, the poor, and the elderly were frequently excluded from formal politics, but these groups were far from apathetic about events which influenced their daily lives and aspirations. Yet WMS and IWK often described grassroots initiatives like the Chinese Parents Committee as emerging from seemingly nowhere, no more than a symptom of the “changing mood of the community,” as WMS put it.⁷⁸

The AAM primarily attributed this state of affairs to the tight-fisted grip of organizations like the Six Companies and the Chinese Nationalist Party, but they also blamed traditional Chinese culture itself, particularly the tenets of Confucianism. “The Confucian thinking we were taught,” one WMS article insisted, “with its rules such as passive obedience to authority and maintaining harmony at any cost... has obstructed our full and active participation in changing American Society for the better.”⁷⁹ Activists paired the old guard’s backwards thinking with the neighborhood’s backwards surroundings, as though the decaying buildings and cramped streets of Chinatown were physical manifestations of an outmoded way of life. Painting the Chinatown “old guard” as paternal Confucianists allowed groups like WMS to put themselves in a position like that of the Chinese Communist Party, sweeping away backwards tradition in favor of not just modern values, but modern amenities as well.⁸⁰ In doing so, however, the AAM was unintentionally reproducing certain damaging stereotypes about the Chinese community: that it was frozen in time, unable to shake itself free from the regressive, barbaric ways of “Old China.” The only difference was that whereas liberal reformers and city government officials had seen electoral participation and economic development as the answer, Asian American leftists saw socialist revolution as the only true path to modernity.

⁷⁸ Despite its overall support for the anti-busing movement, Wei Min She realized at the time that Chinatown parents did not have any particularly radical intentions behind their opposition to integration, and cautioned their readers about the movement’s reactionary potential. As long as the parents had to depend on “the Chinatown establishment” for funding and guidance, WMS wrote, “they will be unclear in their direction and purposes.”

⁷⁹ “KMT: Shadow Over Our Community,” *Getting Together*, 1971; “Confucianism and Asian Women,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, July 1974.

⁸⁰ “Medical Care for People,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, December 1971; “Mission Emergency: Unfit for People,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, January 1972.

Activists were careful to reject the capitalist modernity represented by the rest of the United States, where Chinese and other Asian people faced violent racism and additional economic exploitation. Indeed, they argued, it was American capitalism which had allowed the old guard elite to maintain their control over Chinatown in the first place, both by making it difficult for low-income Chinese Americans to venture out from the neighborhood and by providing material support to the Chinese Nationalists. Writing in 1971, the IWK said: “The Chinatown political establishment knows that its life is tied to the Nationalist government of China. The Nationalist government, in turn, is dependent on the continued support and recognition of the United States and the United Nations.”⁸¹ This critique, enabled by the AAM’s anti-imperialist internationalism, established ordinary residents of Chinatown as the doubly-captured victims of both the United States and its colonial puppet.

Into these binaries—backwards and modern, empire and colony—entered recently arrived Chinese immigrants themselves. Unlike the Filipino *manongs* at the I-Hotel, recent immigrants had no personal attachment to a pre-1965 history of Asian labor in the United States; nor, the AAM perceived, could immigrants have any assumed affinities with Asian socialism. As a result, their characterization within the AAM differed quite widely from those of the *manongs*—or, indeed, from characterizations of Asian socialists who had stayed put in Asia. *Manongs* were widely understood by the AAM as victims of greedy landlords and developers, but they were also described in heroic, vigorous terms, with an emphasis on the labor they had done in the past as immigrant workers. In contrast, recent immigrants were conceptualized almost exclusively as victims. The AAM’s narratives about immigrants coalesced around a certain set of themes: that immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan had merely exchanged one oppressive, imperialist environment for another; that immigration was caused by misleading imperialist propaganda about life in the United States; and that immigrants were a uniquely marginalized group within the Chinatown community as a result. In 1971, IWK published an interview with a 22-year old immigrant from Hong Kong who described how he’d hoped to “make it rich” in the United States, only to find himself working in sweatshops and restaurants and seeing the same street violence and poverty he’d lived through in Hong Kong. “Did you ever think of China?” the interviewer asked, to which the young

⁸¹ “KMT: Shadow Over Our Community,” *Getting Together*, 1971.

man responded, “In the People’s Republic of China, they don’t have any of these problems. A good youth contributes to his country to work for his people and the society.” So why didn’t he go there instead? “[There] are so many newspapers in Hong Kong that said China was like a black curtain, and that America and Europe were so good—they confused a lot of people.”⁸² Another IWK article described how Chinese workers in Hong Kong slaved away to serve their British colonizers, and thus were eager to buy into an “image of U.S. life... making the U.S. the desired country where all freedom-loving people should live and enjoy their lives.”⁸³ Such descriptions of immigration attempted to contradict both liberal and conservative framing of immigrants as either grateful beneficiaries of the American dream or job-stealers and social burdens, but they also had the effect of stripping immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan of all autonomy. The AAM’s internationalist renderings of the United States and its relationship to the rest of the world consigned people who opted to come to the U.S. as dupes of empire who, by choosing America over nations like the People’s Republic, were missing the chance to participate in the most urgent revolutionary project in modern world history.

How IWK and WMS thought of recent immigrants was deeply influenced by their understandings of the places from which most immigrants came.⁸⁴ Taiwan during the late 1960s and ‘70s was kept under martial law by the Chinese Nationalist Party, which brutally repressed both radical and reformist movements alike while receiving financial and military support from the United States. The AAM and other left-wing movements regularly criticized the U.S. for this state of affairs, and publicized the efforts of Taiwanese resistance activists whenever possible. “It is with bitter humor that I take a look at my homeland,” wrote one Taiwanese correspondent to *Gidra*, “and try to understand the type of government that the United States endorses there, because Taiwan is anything but free.”⁸⁵ Hong Kong, then still under

⁸² “Hong Kong,” June 1971, *Getting Together*.

⁸³ “Immigrants: a History of Poverty & Harrassment [*sic*],” *Getting Together*, December 1971.

⁸⁴ It is important to clarify that no portion of Chinatown’s AAM left was hostile to immigrants as such or advocated restrictive immigration policy. WMS and IWK both denounced “anti-immigrant hysteria” for the racial fear-mongering that it was, and strongly opposed attempts to deport immigrants or strip them of social services.

⁸⁵ Alex Hing also mentions that in 1969, the Red Guard Party had allied with Taiwanese international students in San Francisco in protesting the Nationalists’s influence over Chinatown, which is most likely how the AAM first made connections to Taiwanese dissidents. “Political Persecution in Taiwan,” *Gidra*, July 1971; “Account of KMT Fascism,” *Getting Together*, September-October, 1971. For a recent account of US-Taiwan relations in the early Cold War, see Stephen G. Craft, *American Justice in Taiwan: The 1957 Riots and Cold War Foreign Policy*, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

British colonial rule, was often painted in even bleaker terms than Taiwan. In his series of reports on the PRC for *Getting Together*, IWK-member Gordon Chang set aside a few paragraphs to describe the shocking contrast between “old and new China... a colonial society and a prosperous socialist one.” Hong Kong was not just ridden with poverty and poor housing; it was also a den of vice, filled with “pornography, prostitution and crime.” The PRC was a land of joy and plenty, “the fields of the commune... broad, abundant and beautiful”; Hong Kong was a world of stark inequality and fear, where “millionaire Westerners [lounged] in the lobby of the Peninsula Hotel” and played cricket while “poor children... begged for change.” Chang also made sure to mention the American battleships floating in Hong Kong harbor, on leave from waging war in Vietnam, to drive home the connections between British and U.S. empire.⁸⁶

A sense of foreclosed possibilities and limited agency further permeated the AAM’s discussions of Chinese women, both in China and in the United States. Chinese women were seen as having suffered “feudal” gendered exploitation in their homeland, but left before they could experience the revolution in gender equality brought about by the Chinese Communist Party. “In China, Vietnam, Cuba, Tanzania, and Korea, they have had or are in the midst of having revolutions to eliminate... oppression of people. In the above-stated countries, the status of women has been elevated,” WMS reported, before arguing that Asian women in the United States needed to similarly cast away their old gender roles and call on men to do the same.⁸⁷ Indeed, many of the films and other cultural productions from the PRC that Asian American groups shared with Chinatown featured women throwing off their chains and joining in the revolution. In addition to *Red Detachment of Women*, I Wor Kuen re-printed journalist Jack Belden’s “Gold Flower’s Story” from *China Shakes the World* as a series across several issues of *Getting Together*. IWK’s purpose in sharing Gold Flower with their audience went beyond informing the public about the experience of Chinese revolutions and extended to describing Chinese American society as well. Soon after IWK finished serializing “Gold Flower’s Story,” *Getting Together* published a piece on women in Chinatown

⁸⁶ Chang, “A Society Making Revolution Daily.”

⁸⁷ “Asian Women: Outlook In A Changing Society,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, December 1971; Hung Ying, “Women in China On Equal Footing with Men,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, March-April 1973.

which drew a direct connection between Gold Flower's pre-revolutionary experience and that of Chinese immigrant women:

[Gold Flower] talked about how women in feudal China were bought like slaves for their husband's household, and then were forced to put in long hours in the fields. This is a lot like women's position here ... where women do all the household and child-raising work and at the same time have to hold down sweatshop jobs at rock-bottom wages.⁸⁸

In drawing such comparisons, IWK—especially its female members—was both attempting to respond to the real needs experienced by many women in their community, and to explain these needs within their own political language. Having spoken to neighbors and loved ones who had experienced domestic violence, the burdens of childcare, and strict gendered expectations from family in addition to poverty, activists' first response was to transform Chinatown's women into versions of the only kind of revolutionary subject the movement understood. In this way, they hoped include Chinese immigrant women in their own process of personal and social transformation, having been denied the opportunity to see the one which had transformed the country of their birth.

Conclusion

What did the future look like from the perspective of San Francisco, Chinatown's radical scene in 1973? In many ways, organizations like WMS and IWK had cause for optimism. With the ongoing thaw in U.S.-China relations, even liberals in their communities were beginning to explore greater degrees of openness towards the People's Republic, including traveling there themselves once restrictions were lifted.⁸⁹ Peace in Vietnam seemed to be on the horizon, even if Nixon continued to interrupt peace talks for fresh rounds of carpet bombing.⁹⁰ Greater degrees of political activity were taking place among Chinatown's immigrant workers and parents.⁹¹

⁸⁸ "Women in Chinatown," June 1971, *Getting Together*.

⁸⁹ Gordon Chang interview; Richard Springer, "The Jackson Hus' journey to China," *East West*, November 10, 1971; Richard Springer, "The Hus' Travels Continued," *East West*, November 17, 1971.

⁹⁰ "What Kind of Peace in Vietnam?" *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, January 1973.

⁹¹ "Emporium Strike," *Getting Together*, August 8-19, 1972; "Workers Fight Asia Gardens," *Getting Together*, December 16-29, 1972.

Nevertheless, movement members' prognosis for what challenges they would face next within the belly of the beast were almost uniformly grim. In February 1973, WMS published a cover story in their newspaper about the Nixon administration's drastic cuts in domestic spendings and its downstream effects for San Francisco, noting that the city's EOC had already laid off half of its staff and stood to lose \$35 million in "various minority communities." In Chinatown alone, programs at risk of being cut included English language programs, a nursery, Self-Help for the Elderly, and job training services. Suddenly, neighborhood liberals' and progressives' tenuous new pact with the welfare state was due to collapse overnight. "The immediate concerns will be how to contend with the added numbers of workers out of work, how to cement the availability of services," the authors wrote. "But the answers to ending this teeter-totter governmental oppression of working people will lie in how to change the economic priorities of the country..."⁹² Articles in the coming weeks and months dove into other aspects of the Nixon administration's economic policy, including a piece on the devaluation of the dollar and the elimination of the gold standard, rising military spending, and expanding attacks upon the U.S. working class. "The lines are being drawn clear," WMS concluded, with a network of "banks, international corporations, and the US military" firmly on one side and Third World people firmly on the other. "Conditions are being laid for a new era of resistance [*sic*] to the American Empire... However, at the same time, US ruling interests are trying hard to tell us that the root of the problem is overseas competition, communism, terrorism, and everything else but the truth."⁹³ Meanwhile, redevelopment efforts in both San Francisco and in cities across the country were eroding Third World communities, scattering ethnic minorities and reducing their capacity to rise up against shared deprivations. Writing in the fall of 1972, IWK predicted that "San Francisco itself will increasingly develop as the trade and investment center for the western United States and the Pacific Rim," with Chinatown to be maintained as a "top tourist attraction" and source of cheap garment labor. The pending demolition of the I-Hotel was only a sign of further things to come: as another 1972 pamphlet noted, I-Hotel's then-owner Walter Shorenstein was just one of a cohort of businessmen and politicians seeking to turn the city into "the Wall Street of the West," a project with Pacific ambitions. "The most important stimulus to San Francisco's economic base has been the

⁹² Wei Min Staff, "After Vietnam, It's the Working Class," *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, February 1973.

⁹³ "Dollar Devaluation," *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, March-April 1973.

increasing involvement in this century in Asian geo-politics with the concurrent build up in armament production,” the pamphlet quoted Shorenstein as saying, linking his desire to re-build the city to the country’s ongoing military presence in Southeast Asia.⁹⁴

Undoubtedly, great changes were afoot. Yet while Chinatown’s Asian American movement was able to clearly diagnose their situation, their sense of how they themselves ought to respond was much murkier. What programs ought IWK and WMS pursue? How could they bring Chinatown’s working class immigrant constituency along with them? As I have tried to show, internationalism was an unwieldy tool for interpreting—much less intervening in—the situation of most Chinese immigrants arriving in the post-1965 era, not least because it flattened immigrants’ wide range of motivations and conditions into a black-and-white story of capitalist deceit. Moreover, the movement’s desire to faithfully reproduce the national revolutions of China and Vietnam in miniature within their own ethnic communities resulted in a certain disconnect between members’ diagnosis of what was to come, and what was to be done. Could a politics premised on viewing the United States as the world’s premier empire still hold, now that “American financiers [face] more competition from other capitalist nations and more difficulty for overseas investments”? Could an internationalism built on the conflict between socialist and capitalist blocs adapt to a rapprochement between the two great orders? And could an analysis of Asian immigrants as victims of old world ideologies adapt to reflect the transnational and varied perspectives of immigrants themselves? Such questions were not merely theoretical quandaries for the Asian American movement to ponder, but had urgent relevancy towards their capacity to further expand their influence within their chosen community. No campaign would encapsulate their attempts to work out the answers so well as the Chinatown labor struggle of the mid-1970s, as the city’s Asian American movement decided to focus its on-the-ground energies on cultivating Chinese worker power.

⁹⁴ “BART and Redevelopment: Threat to Third World Communities,” *Getting Together*, October 22-November 4, 1972; “Our community will not be destroyed!!!” *Getting Together*, November 1971; “Greedy Jaws of Big Business,” *SAVE CHINATOWN!!! as a community for our people*, April 25, 1972, Box 1, folder 44, Steve Louie collection, UCLA Special Collections.

Chapter 2 — *Moving the needle: The Jung Sai strike and immigrant worker organizing in San Francisco*

The boss was visiting Jung Sai for the first time.

It was late morning on July 12th, 1974. The boss was Doug Tompkins: thirty-one years old, tan, fit, and clean-shaven, co-founder and owner of the clothing company Esprit de Corp. Tompkins would eventually become famous for selling adult business and casual sportswear with a socially and environmentally-conscious ethos, but at the time, Esprit principally carried clothing for girls and children, with most of it still made in Northern California factories by immigrant women workers. Tompkins had thus become the co-owner of the Jung Sai garment factory—known to him as the Great Chinese-American Sewing Company—in San Francisco’s Chinatown, where Esprit sent cut fabric to be turned into finished items.¹ Despite having a stake in Jung Sai since its opening in 1971, Tompkins had yet to set foot on the premises while its employees were present. He much preferred to run things from the Esprit headquarters, to which he could summon factory management if necessary. But extraordinary times required extraordinary measures.

Over the course of the next forty-five minutes, Tompkins, with the translating effort of floor manager Handa Lai, delivered a set of prepared remarks to the assembled Chinese immigrant workforce. His terms were straightforward: if employees agreed to “collectively forsake the Union,” they could all go back to work with a 25 cent per hour raise. If they continued to pursue union representation, Tompkins would shut down the factory. Lam Bick Chung, a seamstress, later recalled that as soon as Tompkins finished speaking, Handa Lai brought in the workers’ paychecks but refused to hand them out. Instead, she announced that “if an employee [had] signed the Union’s ‘greenish-bluish’ card then ‘on Monday you do not need to return to work.’” Chung subsequently demanded everyone’s wages, to which Lai said, “‘After you give me your signed [green] cards’ and walked away.” The next morning, one hundred Jung Sai workers met at the offices of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union Local 101 where, after

¹ “Jung Sai” is the abbreviated and anglicized version of the shop’s Chinese name, 中西車衣工厂, or “East West Sportswear Factory.”

a discussion of all that had transpired the day before, they voted to strike. Less than a week later, Tompkins shuttered Jung Sai, citing “financial difficulties.”²

Over the course of the following year, the strike at Jung Sai became the high-water mark of worker, student, and union organizers’ attempts during the Long Sixties to establish a labor movement within San Francisco’s Chinese American working class. Within histories of the Asian American movement, the strike has generally been remembered as a breakthrough moment for Chinese immigrant worker consciousness—“an earth-shattering and heaven-startling event,” as one Chinese-language newspaper put it at the time—which demonstrated to both outsiders and other Chinese Americans that middle-aged seamstresses could stand up against their employers, thereby shattering pernicious stereotypes about passive Asian women.³ Looking beyond the strike’s cultural impact reveals a more ambiguous set of outcomes, however. With help from both the ILGWU and their community allies, Jung Sai’s workers successfully organized militant picket lines, protests, and marches, weathering arrest and other forms of violence and effectively using the press to rain negative attention down on Doug Tompkins and his allies.

Despite their courage, however, Lam Bick Chung and her colleagues would never work under a union contract at Jung Sai. Once Tompkins shuttered the plant as a union-busting measure in the summer of 1974, it remained inoperative, with all machines and other equipment quietly removed sometime in the winter of that same year. Attempts to negotiate a contract fell apart, with the ILGWU resorting to a protracted legal battle rather than maintaining the picket lines, leaving the workers to fend mostly for themselves. The strike’s most positive material outcome would only manifest almost a decade after it began, when workers were finally awarded a cumulative \$1.5 million in backpay by order of the National Labor Relations Board. In the interim, Jung Sai did not set off a wave of similar organizing in Chinatown’s garment industry; nor did it spur any voluntary reforms from Chinatown’s shop owners

² James R. Browning, Anthony Kennedy, and Proctor Ralph Hug, *Great Chinese American Sewing Company, Esprit de Corp, v. N.L.R.B.*, 30 Court Decisions Relating to the National Labor Relations Act 1155 (Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals 1978).

³ Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy A. M. Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power in the Struggle for Social Justice, 1945-2000* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 73-74; Karen Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2016), 318; Daryl J. Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 64-65.

regarding working conditions and compensation. Within the span of a year, it seemed, the earth had put itself back together again, and heaven had ceased to be amazed.

This chapter uses the occasion of the Jung Sai garment workers' strike as a window into the challenges and the opportunities of labor organizing within both a globalizing industry and a globalized workforce. At its high point, the Jung Sai strike demonstrated the new possibilities made available by the presence of thousands of immigrant workers in Chinatown, many of whom had already experienced industrial unrest as garment workers in Hong Kong and were more willing to both challenge the neighborhood's ethnic elite and accept the support of "outsiders" like the ILGWU and the Asian American left. In its eventual defeat, however, the strike revealed just how powerful old ideas about the backwards, degrading nature of Chinese labor still were—ideas which, in most cases, dated back to restriction debates during the late 19th century—even as Chinese Americans were being hailed as model minorities. While the workers of Jung Sai challenged pervasive stereotypes about the docility of Chinese women, both their employer and their union allies continued to characterize both them and the Chinatown garment industry in which they worked as aberrant, outmoded relics of older forms of production, rather than as the harbingers of global economic restructuring. Indeed, in the decades following the strike, globalization would help ensure that vast swathes of the U.S. garment industry would look far more like Jung Sai and other Chinatown shops than the unionized factories of the mid-20th century, with wages and working conditions cratering as more domestic manufacturers turned to poorly-paid, highly vulnerable workers to compete with foreign imports.⁴

The specter of Exclusion Era politics haunted Jung Sai in more ways than one, as even radical strategies for contesting against Chinatown's racialized exploitation were themselves wedded to earlier notions of ethnic autonomy and self-sufficiency. Asian American radicals' mixture of anger and ambivalence towards trade unionism, and their subsequent attempts to separate Jung Sai workers from the ILGWU, was itself an effort to reproduce a lost history of Chinese mutual aid societies and cooperatives, whose histories were frequently shared within the radical Asian American press. Such strategies were increasingly unsustainable given the neighborhood's accelerating integration into both the fabric of San

⁴ On the globalization of the garment industry, see Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital*, Bonacich et al, *Global Production: The Apparel Industry in the Pacific Rim*, Ellen Israel Rosen, *Making Sweatshops: The Globalization of the U.S. Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

Francisco politics and networks of transpacific commerce, however, and largely functioned to weaken the integrity of the strike. Moreover, as we have seen in the previous chapter, leftist organizations were hardly immune from conceiving of Chinese women workers as uniquely trapped by feudal norms and social relations, which influenced how they related to the women of Jung Sai. Even groups like WMS, which frequently acknowledged the need for interracial and international class struggle, failed to recognize seamstresses' experiences of the garment industry on both sides of the Pacific as a strong potential foundation for transnational organizing, instead describing them as newcomers to the realities of collective action.

Despite these failures and defeats, it is worth keeping alive the possibility of alternative outcomes to class struggle in Chinatown. Economic globalization, particularly when used as shorthand for "offshoring and imports," is often considered by scholars to be an overarching structural limitation on worker organizing during this period, damaging the ability of unions to negotiate further gains for their members over time and giving employers a to-hand escape valve whenever their employees became too troublesome. Yet as historian Lane Windham has pointed out, globalization was not "a neutral, inevitable force undermining workers' unions," but a tool wielded by employers and manufacturers to discipline an increasingly insurgent working class, which was itself being transformed by new regimes of movement and migration.⁵ Post-1965 immigration was building a new working class constituency of immigrants from the global south entering the small manufacturing, farm work, and service industries, who joined existing populations of women and workers of color to constitute a growing percentage of unionized and union-friendly workers. As a result, the 1970s saw tremendous attempts by immigrants, women, and workers of color to build a renewed rank-and-file-led labor movement, a development which invited ever-harsher forms of retaliation from both capital and the state but also imbued the labor movement with new strains of social justice- and globally-oriented politics.⁶

⁵ See Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005) for multiple versions of this argument.

⁶ On immigrant, women, and worker of color labor organizing in the 1970s, see Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2019), Aaron Brenner, et al, ed., *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below in the Long 1970s* (New York: Verso, 2010).

Chinese immigrant workers arriving from Hong Kong late '60s and '70s, particularly women working in so-called "unskilled" industries, were especially well-situated to participate in this new wave of labor organizing, given that they occupied a unique social and historical position within the regional Chinese American community. Their previous experiences of industrial garment, textile, and electronics industries abroad, paired with their limited means of participating within the pre-existing political power structure of Chinatown, formed the social base from which a new workers' movement could be built. Immigrant worker mobilization like the Jung Sai strike rattled a power structure dominated by native-born men, who had only recently wrestled control of the neighborhood away from the Chinese Nationalist Party by establishing themselves as brokers between Chinese American voters and the local Democratic machine. Despite this changing of the guard, Chinatown's new leadership persisted in pushing back on certain aspects of the Democratic Party's agenda which they felt compromised neighborhood and community autonomy, workplace regulation among them. By seeking unionization, immigrant workers were poised to not only challenge the exploitation of Chinatown by manufacturers and retailers, but the internal ethnic hierarchy as well.

Further heightening the political potential of Chinatown in this moment was its strategic importance within the transpacific economy. More than just straightforward holdovers from earlier forms of small-scale manufacturing, factories like Jung Sai were also evidence of new trends in the garment industry and its increasingly global scope of production. Processes of trade liberalization and U.S. developmental aid in East Asia had been laying the groundwork for the re-territorialization of garment production since the immediate postwar period, but such trends would further intensify during the 1960s, when "newly industrializing countries" such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan began seriously competing with domestic producers for the spending-money of middle class American consumers. Sociologists such as Saskia Sassen, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng describe immigrant garment workers on the Pacific Rim as being pushed and pulled between two ends of the same global production chain: laid off from garment manufacturing jobs in newly industrializing countries, workers would emigrate and pick up similar jobs in factories in urban centers like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, their journeys further enabled by a combination of legal reform and existing social networks among the diaspora. Bonacich and other scholars claimed that the new immigration "created a 'Third

World within” advanced countries like the U.S., pockets of cheap labor that replicated the conditions sought by offshoring corporations overseas. Yet these supposedly novel trends were invariably built on the bones of the old. In the case of San Francisco’s Chinatown, manufacturers did not so much create these conditions anew as find them already existing within the neighborhood’s garment manufacturing industry, where they could be amplified for production on a larger scale. In other words, Chinatown’s long-standing status as a source of cheap, racialized labor—immigrant or otherwise—for the surrounding region made it an ideal site for the globalizing garment industry to establish yet another node upon the Pacific Rim. From there, the socioeconomic unit of the “sweatshop”—a factory where employees made below the minimum wage, where labor law was weakly enforced, and where workers were frequently abused—would spread to other U.S. cities, suburbs, and territories for the next two decades, where mainstream America would at last encounter them in the early 1980s. But before sweatshops and the global transformations they heralded became America’s problem, they were the problem of communities like San Francisco, Chinatown: for unions, activists, and workers alike.⁷

I. The workers

I begin by setting out to describe the experiences of immigrant Chinese women in San Francisco during the late 1960s and 1970s, with an emphasis on women as transnational subjects whose political and social perspectives were shaped by experiences on both sides of the Pacific. Doing so involves some speculative leaps and educated guesses, as immigrant women rarely had the opportunity to speak in their own voices about their life stories. Even rough sketch of aggregates and averages offers a strong sense of how Jung Sai workers’ histories—both individually and as a collective—informed their choices in the years and months leading up to July 1974. It shows that for many of them, the strike would not have been

⁷ San Francisco and the rest of the California Bay Area has (somewhat understandably) been less studied in histories of the U.S. garment industry, with New York and Los Angeles—the first and second largest production centers—receiving the majority of scholarly attention. For notable examples, see Xiaolan Bao, *Holding up More than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948-92* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), Nancy L. Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), Roger David Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York’s Garment Trades* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), Edna Bonacich and Richard P. Appelbaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

their first encounter with either workplace organizing or radical politics, as post-war Hong Kong was rife with both.

Following immigrant workers also offers us a critical perspective into Chinatown politics as experienced from the ground up. While the previous chapter touched on the recent ascendancy of the native-born Chinese American Democrats into community leadership, this section further explores how this changing of the guard affected Chinatown's most marginalized constituents. While seen as liberal reformers, the new cohort of community leaders nevertheless maintained certain aspects of the GMD's politics, including a strong relationship with Chinatown's business class and a patriarchal, paternalistic attitude towards women and workers. For working immigrant women who suffered abuse from their employers, this often meant their only recourse lay outside the neighborhood power structure, a move that was as potentially risky as it was promising.

Living and working in Hong Kong, 1949-1970

Lam Bick Chung—also known to the United States federal government as Bick Chong Chung and Lam Bick Lam—was fifty-two years old, married, and a mother of six when she came to the United States in 1970. According to her naturalization documents, she was born in Jiangmen, China, at the time a small city in southern Guangdong province, during the early years of the Republic.⁸ Assuming she spent most of her adulthood within a hundred mile radius of her hometown, she would have lived through back-to-back periods of hunger and violence, from the civil war which broke out in 1927 to Japanese occupation during World War II to the great famine of 1959. At some point, Chung joined the many thousands who fled the turmoil of the mainland for neighboring Hong Kong, either by getting lucky in the increasingly restrictive legal immigration system or by smuggling her way over the border. Most likely, Chung was one of the 700,000 migrants who entered Hong Kong shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, where they were initially received by the colonial government as

⁸ Immigration and Naturalization Service, "Petition for Naturalization by Bick Chong Chung," December 10, 1975, National Archives and Records Administration / Ancestry.



Fig. 2.1: Women working in a small garment factory in Hong Kong, 1941. Source: Hong Kong Museum of History, via <https://zolimacitymag.com/hong-kongs-industrial-history-part-iii-squatter-factories/>

“refugees” but would eventually become long-term residents in the city’s cramped network of squatters’ settlements.⁹

Like most women from poor families, Chung would have taken on some form of paid work to help support her husband, children, and other extended relatives. It is entirely possible that it was here in Hong Kong that Chung first found employment in the garment industry, which was steadily expanding during the postwar period. In 1965, Hong Kong contained nearly 1,000 clothing factories employing over 87,000 people; by 1970, the year Chung arrived in the United States, both figures had doubled.¹⁰ Most of these factories were small—no more than forty or fifty employees—and made their business subcontracting out to larger, overseas-based firms (fig. 2.1). By the late ’60s, most garment workers in Hong Kong were women, with men leaving the industry for better paying jobs in construction, iron bending, and electrical work. Those men who remained, however, tended to occupy the more skilled,

⁹ See Laura Madokoro, *Elusive Refuge: Chinese Migrants in the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016) for a detailed account of border crossings to Hong Kong from both the Republic and the People’s Republic of China and the legal regimes that emerged to manage these migrations during the Cold War.

¹⁰ T L Lui and S Chiu, “A Tale of Two Industries: The Restructuring of Hong Kong’s Garment-Making and Electronics Industries,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 53–70, <https://doi.org/10.1068/a260053>.

highly-paid positions within the factory, such as fabric cutting, embroidering, and quality control. Wages for female shop floor workers varied depending on skill and productivity; one woman who worked in Hong Kong as an embroiderer in the late 1950s and early '60s made up to \$100 Hong Kong dollars a month (around \$64.00 USD in today's money), while others recalled daily wages between \$2 and \$4.50.

Child labor was not uncommon, despite being illegal since 1922; according to later worker testimonies, some girls started working as early as ten or twelve years old. Assuming Chung's children were raised in Hong Kong, the family may well have put them to work as soon as they were old enough, or else they themselves might have sought out odd jobs to make a little extra spending money. In his memoirs, pathologist Chi-Sun Feng, who grew up in a Hong Kong squatter settlement during the 1960s, recalls how he spent his summers packing men's shirts at a family friend's garment factory: "I was fifteen or sixteen, but not by far the youngest person working there. There were hordes of younger girls who worked as seamstresses... I was told they were paid less than me, because they were girls." Through the "sweated" labor of women and children, Hong Kong became the world's top exporter of garments between 1973 and 1977, with the United States being a major destination for the colony's products.¹¹

Depending on the decade Chung arrived in Hong Kong, she may have entered a militant, rebellious workforce, as in the immediate post-war period of the late '40s, or experienced relative industrial peace in the '50s, with strikes declining in frequency from 22 per 100,000 workers to 5 per 100,000. Outside of official strikes and trade union-sanctioned activity, non-unionized women workers also took part in traditions of uncoordinated bargaining, which frequently involved using short strikes and work stoppages to enforce certain workplace practices or secure higher wages. Militancy and strike activity subsequently increased during the 1960s across multiple industries, including textile manufacturing, as wages stagnated and cost of living grew, with communist-dominated trade unions often

¹¹ Kim-Ming Lee, "Flexible Manufacturing in a Colonial Economy," in *Hong Kong's History: State and Society Under Colonial Rule*, ed. Ngo Tak-Wing (London: Routledge, 1999); Ho-Fuk Lau and Chi-Fai Chan, "The Development Process of the Hong Kong Garment Industry: A Mature Industry in a Newly Industrialized Economy," in *Global Production: The Apparel Industry in the Pacific Rim*, ed. Edna Bonacich et. al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); To Sui Wan, "Male and female workers of woollen knitting factories" | 毛織廠的男工和女工, Audio, September 5, 2009, https://www.hkmemory.hk/collections/oral_history/All_Items_OH/oha_64/records/index.html#p64564, Ah Ying, "Ah Ying's working life in the embroidery factory" | 顧繡廠的工作生涯, April 29, 2010, https://www.hkmemory.hk/collections/oral_history/All_Items_OH/oha_45/records/index.html; Chi-Sung Feng, *Diamond Hill: Memories of Growing Up in a Hong Kong Squatter Village* (Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books, 2009), 43.

serving as workers' best line of recourse; scholar David Clayton notes that "even the Hong Kong Police admitted that communist unions were the 'only' mechanism for workers to air a grievance" outside of uncoordinated bargaining. Worsening conditions and the infectious currents of the Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China came to a head in the summer of 1967. What began as a number of strikes by left-wing trade unions erupted into a months-long uprising of workers, anti-colonial protestors, and pro-PRC sympathizers, who were met with incredible violence and suppression by the colonial police. The vast majority of Hong Kong's workers did not rush to join the riots, but the violence did spur certain legal reforms from the colonial state, which was keen to avoid similar incidents in the future. Among these reforms was the creation of a legal entitlement to an eight hour working day for women workers, with weekly hours capped by statute to forty-eight. Chung most likely never enjoyed the benefits of this reform, however, which was phased in over five years and weakly enforced. Indeed, by 1970—the year Chung left for the United States—growing competition from Taiwan and South Korea gave employers all the more incentive to evade the law, hire more women than men, and work women for longer hours.¹²

Living and working in San Francisco, 1970-1974

It is difficult to say by which legal mechanism Chung ultimately came to the United States, or what her motivations for making the trip might have been. Most likely, she relied on the sponsorship of relatives who were already in the United States, and was at least partially driven by a desire to be reunited with members of her family. While she may have passed through Chinatown shortly after arriving, her address of record during the mid-1970s was in the Crocker-Amazon neighborhood at the southern edge of San Francisco.¹³ Chung's essentially suburban residence reflected broader trends in Chinese out-migration from the urban core since the mid-1950s, but the majority of these new suburbanites were educated professionals leaving for the previously all-white middle class neighborhoods of San Bruno and South

¹² Benjamin Leung and Stephen Chiu, *A Social History of Industrial Strikes and the Labour Movement in Hong Kong, 1946-1989* (Hong Kong: Social Sciences Research Centre, University of Hong Kong, 1991), 41-43; David Clayton, "The Riots and Labour Laws: The Struggle for an Eight-Hour Day for Women Factory Workers, 1962-71," in *May Days in Hong Kong: Riot and Emergency in 1967*, ed. Robert Bickers and Ray Yep (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 140-141.

¹³ Immigration and Naturalization Service, "Petition for Naturalization by Bick Chong Chung," December 10, 1975, National Archives and Records Administration / Ancestry.com.

San Francisco.¹⁴ Chung, however, had moved into an historically working class neighborhood, joining a growing Samoan and Filipino community in settling alongside long-time Irish- and Italian-American residents. It's hard to say how Chung responded to being relatively isolated from other Chinese Americans outside of her immediate family, or to living in what was still a predominantly white neighborhood.¹⁵ Most likely, she would have relied on family members to help her integrate into her new surroundings, which were a significant departure from the cramped streets of Hong Kong's poorest neighborhoods. Michael Arago, a mixed-race Filipino American who grew up in Crocker-Amazon during the 1960s and '70s, described the neighborhood as “the ‘white flight’ haven developers hoped it would be” on the surface with simmering racial and political resentments boiling underneath, with white residents resenting the arrival of non-white newcomers. Nevertheless, the area was known for being quiet; perhaps the most exciting incident Chung could have witnessed from home was the 1973 discovery and arrest of renegade heiress Patty Hearst in a house just down the street from her own.¹⁶

Having arrived in the United States as a middle-aged adult, Chung most likely had limited English capabilities, restricting her options for work to the local Chinese ethnic economy. Chung eventually found employment in Chinatown as a seamstress—perhaps to make up for the inadequate income of family members, or perhaps to socialize alongside other women of her age and background. Garment manufacturing had formed a part of the local Chinese ethnic economy since the mid-19th century, with Chinese workers constituting a ready pool of low wage, non-union labor in a city where trade unions otherwise held significant political power. Yet the industry Chung found in 1970 was undergoing certain significant changes from its previous iterations as well. Increased competition from manufacturers in the global south was pushing U.S. garment and textile manufacturers to seek out cheaper domestic sources of labor (and, during the 1960s, to begin offshoring production themselves), leading them to move away from historic sites of garment production like New York City and into the west and

¹⁴ Charlotte Brooks, *Alien Neighbors, Foreign Friends: Asian Americans, Housing, and the Transformation of Urban California* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 226, 229.

¹⁵ Michael Arago, “The Crocker-Amazon,” FoundSF, 1997, https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=THE_CROCKER-AMAZON; U.S. Department of Commerce, *1970 Census of Housing and Population: San Francisco-Oakland Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area*, 1972.

¹⁶ Arago, “The Crocker-Amazon.”

the South, where labor was cheaper and unions fewer. Between 1959 and 1987, garment industry employment in New York fell from almost 350,000 to under 150,000, while California's figure grew from just over 50,000 to 150,000. In San Francisco alone, the industry's size expanded from roughly 3,000 garment jobs in San Francisco 1967 to roughly 10,000 a decade later.¹⁷ Partially as a result of changes to immigration policy discussed in the previous chapter, manufacturers were attracted to cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles with their growing pool of recent arrivals, among them women from Asia and South America with low English capacity and, in many cases, previous experience of industrial garment manufacturing. Likewise, they found an existing network of small, Chinese-owned factories which could be squeezed and pit against one another to bid for contracts.

Garment shops' middleman position meant contractors tended to pass on the pressures they faced from their clients to their underpaid, overworked employees, who put up with severe conditions out of both desperation and convenience. Most of Chinatown's garment factories were owned by other immigrants who often had been garment workers themselves, some of whom continued to work in their own factories alongside their employees. The small social world of Chinatown and the reliance of many immigrants upon family networks to remain employed made any kind of workplace organization difficult to muster. Employers either developed personal ties with their workers or had drawn upon personal ties to hire them in the first place. Writing in 1983, sociologist Morrison Wong described "paternalistic feelings of responsibility for workers" among some factory owners, who bought workers gifts, employed their family members, and did them other small favors.¹⁸ With the carrot, however, came the stick: garment workers in Chinatown often spoke of informal blacklists for "troublemakers" and hesitated to approach any state regulatory body for fear of losing work. The list of other fireable offenses, according to one worker who did summon the courage to speak to the press, went on: refusing to work weekends, refusing to work up to 14 hours a day, and getting sick. While the state minimum wage was \$1.40 in 1967, the piecework system in most factories meant slower workers could make well below that, while in other

¹⁷ Ian M. Taplin, "Recent Manufacturing Changes in the U.S. Apparel Industry: The Case of North Carolina," in *Global Production: The Apparel Industry in the Pacific Rim*, ed. Edna Bonacich et. al., 1994.

¹⁸ Morrison G. Wong, "Chinese Sweatshops in the United States: A Look at the Garment Industry," in *Research in the Sociology of Work*, vol. 2 (Greenwich, CT: Jai Press Inc., 1983); Bao, *Holding Up More Than Half the Sky*, 128-133.

cases employers simply withheld pay for long stretches of time.¹⁹ For their part, factory owners complained that they were squeezed too much by manufacturers to afford higher wages; any attempts to regulate wages or working conditions could spell the difference between turning a profit and going under water.²⁰

To travel to the Jung Sai factory, Lam Bick Chung would have had to commute at least half an hour each way to Chinatown—longer if she relied on the bus—arriving at a tan, three-story building near the intersection of Washington and Kearny Street. Rather unusually for the Chinatown garment industry, Jung Sai was owned and operated directly by Esprit Clothing Company. The factory boasted slightly better conditions than were the norm: more modern equipment, a well-lit and ventilated workspace, even a coffee machine on each floor. Nevertheless, the plant operated by squeezing every last drop of working time out of its employees. Workers later described ten hour workdays with no overtime pay, only two, brief bathroom breaks with two rolls of toilet paper split amongst over a hundred employees, and frequent verbal harassment from managers.²¹ Crouched together for long hours every day, Chung and her coworkers may well have marveled with one another at how little had changed in their working lives, despite their 7,000 mile journeys across the Pacific.

The similarities between factory conditions in Hong Kong and San Francisco were not, as both labor leaders and government officials would later claim, a function of Chinese cultural backwardness, but rather a result of the very nature of industrial garment manufacturing. The complex transformation of uncut fabric into finished garments was and remains highly labor-intensive work, and could only accommodate so much automation. Though by the 1970s the process had become increasingly segmented (instead of workers finishing an entire garment from start to finish), many jobs within a garment factory still required high levels of skill and experience, particularly among machine operators and seamstresses.²² And, as already mentioned, the shops' contractor relationship to retailers and

¹⁹ Wong, "Chinese Sweatshops in the United States"; Johanesen, "Chinese Sweatshops: Sad Toil Behind Draped Windows," July 2, 1967, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

²⁰ Ralph Crail, "Chinatown Gets a Pretty Clean Bill," September 7, 1967, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

²¹ Great Chinese American Sewing Company, Esprit de Corp, v. N.L.R.B.

²² Bao, *Holding Up More Than Half the Sky*, 114-115; Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work*, 176.

manufacturers—both in Hong Kong and in San Francisco—meant that even Chinatown employers felt they had limited control over the price and the pace of work, and frequently operated on slim margins. As a result, owners cut costs throughout the manufacturing process, from wages and benefits to workplace safety and hygiene measures. Within such demanding conditions, shop owners tended to interpret any attempt to intervene in their business practices—whether by their workers, by labor unions, or by the regulatory state—as an attempt to put them and their entire industry out of business.

How then, were newly immigrated workers able to effectuate change in their surroundings? Some clearly hoped for more regulatory influence in their places of work, but the extent to which factories and shops were able to dodge legal standards seemed a formidable obstacle. One seamstress who went to testify before the State Industrial Welfare Commission in 1967 was “obviously frightened” when she spoke to a reporter and described how “wage and hours of work orders issued by the commission are mere scraps of paper as far as the Chinatown garment factory proprietors are concerned.”²³ Moreover, as non-citizens and non-voters, immigrant workers like Lam Bick Chung were of limited relevance to Chinatown’s newly ascendent Democratic elite, who had in no small part won their positions by turning out Chinese American voters for Democratic candidates and ballot initiatives. Instead, Chinese American politicians were far more likely to throw their weight behind Chinatown’s employer class, to which the vast majority of them belonged.²⁴ Seen in this light, the decision to unionize—to seek an organizing power from outside Chinatown’s borders—becomes a natural choice for a demographic with few other avenues for political expression. Yet as Chinatown’s newcomers would quickly discover, the power of the trade union could just as quickly be used to harm workers as to help them, particularly in a city where the politics of organized labor and the politics of Asian exclusion were long of a piece with one another.

The union

Jung Sai’s predecessors

Throughout the late 19th century, California’s trade unions had led the charge to expel and exclude Asian immigrants from the United States, frequently engaging in violent attacks on Chinese and

²³ “Chinese Sweatshops: Sad Toil Behind Draped Windows.”

²⁴ Brooks, *Between Mao and McCarthy*, 143.

Japanese people and businesses and lobbying the federal government to pass restrictive immigration laws. Unions wielded their capacity for collective action as an effective weapon to enforce nativist and white supremacist legislation, even when government agencies would not. After the passage of the Geary Act, which required all Chinese residents in the U.S. to carry a resident permit, historian Beth Lew-Williams describes how the Labor Council of San Francisco “urged all union members to ‘ascertain the names and addresses of every unregistered Chinaman living or working in your vicinity’” and report them to the federal district court, all but guaranteeing they would be jailed and deported.²⁵ White labor ensured that those Chinese and Japanese workers who did remain were largely excluded from unions and unionized industries, with dock work being the most significant in the Bay Area. In manufacturing industries, unions even created “white workers labels” to distinguish their goods from Chinese-made ones, essentially turning “union-made” and “white-made” into interchangeable descriptions.²⁶

Chinatown’s garment industry was in no small part the product of these restrictionist trends. Chinese workers, excluded from more union-dense industries, turned to the city’s much smaller and less-organized needle trades (as well as laundry and restaurant work) for employment. When the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union first came to San Francisco in the 1910s, the union ignored Chinatown in favor of organizing white dress- and cloak-makers, with some limited success. By the time of the Great Depression, the district was increasingly concerned by would-be union contracts being routed into Chinatown since the early 1930s, but failed to extend unionization to the neighborhood when only one ILGWU local proved willing to admit Chinese workers. The union’s first real breakthrough came in 1937, when a group of Chinese workers at the National Dollar Stores garment factory reached out to the ILGWU for representation. With the union’s help, workers—most of them women—formed ILGWU Local 341, or the Chinese Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (CLGWU). The local later went on strike for fifteen weeks to maintain their contract when the factory was sold to a different owner. The Chinese

²⁵ Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018), 206.

²⁶ Fred Glass, *From Mission to Microchip: A History of the California Labor Movement* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 68-69; Paul Duguid, “A Case of Prejudice? The Uncertain Development of Collective and Certification Marks,” *The Business History Review* 86, no. 2 (2012): 311–33; Mae Ngai, “Who Is An American Worker? Asian Immigrants, Race, and the National Boundaries of Class,” in *Audacious Democracy: Labor, Intellectuals, and the Social Reconstruction of America*, ed. Steven Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

Ladies' Garment Workers' Union briefly overcame half a century of discriminatory, anti-Chinese unionism in San Francisco to win the support of the San Francisco Labor Council, resulting in white, male union workers honoring the Chinese women's picket lines. Victory was short lived, however, as the factory's owners soon chose to close shop rather than follow through on negotiations. Even so, the ILGWU found union jobs outside of Chinatown for all of Local 341's members, who then became members of Local 101.²⁷

The dissolution of the Chinese Ladies' Garment Workers' Union did not mark the end of ILGWU's presence in Chinatown, but it did point to lasting problems for the union down the road. In the forty intervening years between the National Dollar and Jung Sai strikes, a number of changes—both on-the-ground and nationally—took place to alter working and organizing conditions for Chinese garment workers. First was a wave of federal anti-labor legislation, namely the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which significantly circumscribed the range of legal strategies available to workers and their unions in the wake of mass industrial unrest. The loss of secondary boycotts—which made it illegal for workers in one industry to boycott the products of another in support of an organizing drive—was especially hard on smaller, weaker segments of the workforce who had frequently relied on support from larger industries and their unions²⁸

The second change was within the politics of the ILGWU itself. A significant factor in the CLGWU's success was the radical organizing climate of the 1930s. In San Francisco Chinatown alone, a succession of anarchist, communist, and socialist ILGWU organizers had chipped away at both anti-labor and anti-Chinese attitudes to help Chinatown's seamstresses build their union. Jennie Matyas, herself a socialist and union organizer who assisted with the winning CLGWU strike, won the trust of Chinese workers by trusting them in turn. As Matyas put it, "This was one strike I had in which I was able to turn almost everything over to the Chinese members themselves. They arranged their picketing schedules; they arranged who was to be on what shift. It was all very democratically done. They took turns, they lived up

²⁷ Glass, *Mission to Microchip*, 257-258; Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 211-221.

²⁸ Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 118.

to it completely.”²⁹ Yet even as left wing organizers racked up successes, the ILGWU was becoming increasingly less tolerant of communists, socialists, and anarchists within its ranks, despite the union’s roots among socialist and anarchist immigrant workers in New York City.

Under its new president David Dubinsky, the union grew closer to the Democratic Party and developed an increasingly ossified governance structure, with fewer new leaders emerging from the rank-and-file. The ILGWU had long struggled to resolve tensions between its membership—most of whom were women and many of whom were immigrants—with its white, male leadership. Despite the efforts of left wing and women organizers to shift the internal culture of the union, these trends continued into the 1960s and ‘70s, even as the ILGWU’s pool of members and potential members became increasingly diverse. Historian Dana Frank describes the union leadership of this period as “an engine that ran of itself, with little interaction with the members” and a rigid top-down relationship between national headquarters in New York City and the locals.³⁰ In San Francisco, where organized labor was entrenched in the city’s governing structures and enjoyed a significant degree of political influence, this hierarchical system reproduced itself in miniature—as did the union’s frequently paternalistic attitudes towards workers and their communities. Sue Ko Lee, a button machine operator at National Dollar who participated in the ’37 strike and went to work for Local 101 in the 1950s, described the ILGWU’s new strategy as being principally top-down, pressuring manufacturers rather than directly engaging workers. “Otherwise,” she explained, “you’d never be able to organize them and they won’t strike...” Even Lee betrayed flashes of frustration towards the passivity she perceived among her fellow garment workers, perhaps the result of years working within the ILGWU’s local, white-majority leadership: “They don’t want to do anything for themselves. They want you to hand them the benefits, and still they won’t fight for them.”³¹

²⁹ Jennie Matyas and Corinne L. Gilb, “Jennie Matyas and the National Dollar Stores Factory Strike in San Francisco Chinatown,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, January 2008; *Unbound Voices*, 213.

³⁰ Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 144. Dubinsky himself embodied the worst of this culture, blaming the union’s stagnating leadership development in the 1940s on its largely female membership, complaining that too many members “left the shops when they got married,” and arguing that women were ill-suited to serve as stewards and business agents. See Robert D. Parmet, *The Master of Seventh Avenue: David Dubinsky and the American Labor Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 258-259.

³¹ Judy Yung, *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 397-398.

Paternalism and a history of anti-Chinese racism dogged the union's postwar struggle to organize the neighborhood's garment trades. Two renewed attempts, one in 1967 and another in 1969, both targeted Chinatown on the belief that its working conditions made it a relic of less civilized times, with one union official referring to the neighborhood's factory owners as "rats" in need of driving from their holes. Another representative from Amalgamated Clothing Workers, with whom the ILGWU was collaborating for their campaign, "suggested a mass picket line around all of Chinatown... until it is made 'part of San Francisco and this nation.'"³² Rather than mobilizing support among Chinese seamstresses themselves, the ILGWU repeatedly called down the power of the city government to force either compliance with union standards or the relocation of Chinatown's entire garment industry. Health inspectors were sent to comb the factories for violations while the union lobbied the city's Board of Supervisors to rescind an ordinance allowing those same factories to operate within the neighborhood.

The Chinatown political elite quickly rallied against these measures, forming a committee in fall of 1967 to "counteract the wholesale attacks on Chinatown" by the city of San Francisco. The committee's membership reflected recent Chinese American political successes at the municipal level, featuring Postmaster Lim P. Lee, Housing Authority member Jack Chow, Parking Authority member Frank Louie, and Deputy District Attorney George Chinn. Representing the garment factory owners was attorney Charles F. Wong, who had suggested the formation of the committee. In a press statement, Wong accused the union of spreading false charges about workers' wages and claimed any workers making less than minimum wage did so because they were "handicapped." "In any case," he asserted, "unionization is *not* the answer to Chinatown's problems."³³

Wong's remarks echoed a common sentiment among garment factory owners: that they were doing the community a favor by offering these jobs to begin with. Owners painted a portrait of Chinese housewives willingly participating in a flexible part-time economy, in which they could earn a little extra money "and [take] care of the kids at the same time by skipping off for a few hours each day to the nice little cottage industry around the corner."³⁴ Another manager insisted the workforce was generally well-

³² Dick Meister, "A War on Chinatown's Sweatshops," August 23, 1967, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

³³ "New Group To Defend Chinatown," September 8, 1967, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

³⁴ Maitland Zane, "Union Proposal: 'Shift' of Sweatshops," August 13, 1968, *San Francisco Chronicle*.



Fig. 2.2: A garment worker attends to an infant while sitting at her work station in Chinatown, 1977. Source: *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, 2008.

compensated, remarking, “Hell, the young ones all go to Reno on the bus every weekend. The older ones earn a few dollars but don’t have to go far from home to do it and work just what hours they want.”³⁵ Such portrayals fit into Chinatown leaderships’ wider narrative of stable, nuclear families and stay-at-home mothers who might, on occasion, bring some piecework home to pad the household budget. The garment industry, they claimed, was fully compatible with their idealized versions of domestic femininity, as it gave women the freedom to “abandon their sewing machines to go home to cook the noon meal or... attend their family’s wants.” Members of the Chinatown establishment went so far as to argue that Chinatown workers were already “unionized” in the sense that there was “a cohesiveness of the workers, forced by discrimination from the outside to maintain what they already possess in the way of self-generated jobs—jobs which for the most part arose from their willingness to work hard and long in performing menial tasks and services others would not undertake.” According to the 1969 Chinese

³⁵ Ralph Crail, “Chinatown Gets a Pretty Clean Bill,” September 7, 1967, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Community Citizens' Survey and Fact Finding Committee Report, workers had rejected the ILGWU out of rational self-interest, and summarized the dialogue between the two groups thusly:

When the unions say, "We will negotiate better wages for you," [garment workers] respond by saying, "Would this not force the prime contractors for our output to accept the offers from other states for 'cheap labor'—move out of San Francisco—leaving us with nothing? Or put us in an unfair competition with the Spanish-speaking community? Who would then supply a market? Would the union back us in obtaining government contracts for uniforms and other garments?"³⁶

As was so often the case with Chinatown leadership's defense against outside intervention, there was some truth to these claims. Many workers, most of them women, did rely on the geographic proximity of the factories and their Chinese ownership, and would have struggled to find work without them. When industry relocation was on the table during 1969, two garment workers interviewed by the city's Human Rights Commission testified against the measure, saying that "they lived in Chinatown and that they didn't want to move out." The shops' proximity to workers' homes allowed mothers to meet their children as they were returning home from school, or to rush home in case of emergency; some employers even allowed women to bring their young children to work with them (fig 2.2).³⁷ But convenience was not the only reason immigrant women settled for the low wages and harsh conditions of the garment factories; nor was appreciation for their work the reason why they so often shied away from unionization. Most immigrant families could not survive on the income of a single male breadwinner, forcing women to find work wherever they could get it. Once employed, fear for loss of income and retaliation in the intimate, close-knit social spaces of the neighborhood made organizing difficult. In a 1968 interview for a local public television station, former garment worker and union activist Bernice Wong Aston insisted that labor groups would "definitely not get any response from the people who are hungry, who need the money, because they would rather make \$5 a day than make nothing, and they would rather not go on welfare."³⁸

³⁶ Lim P. Lee, Albert Lim, H. K. Wong, "Report of the San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Survey and Fact Finding Committee (Abridged Edition)," August 15, 1969, https://archive.org/details/sanfranciscochi1969sanf_2, 66-67.

³⁷ Dick Hallgren, "Chinatown Issue: Human Rights Unit and Sweatshops," August 29, 1969, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

³⁸ *Chinatown: Community in Crisis*, Documentary (KRON-TV, 1968), Bay Area TV News Archive, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/215046>.

Despite these obstacles, however, the ILGWU's 1969 unionizing drive was apparently more successful than the union's previous attempts to get Chinatown factories to abide by industry standards, and did manage to improve conditions for a certain number of garment workers. Workers, it turned out, were not always ruled solely by their fears of unemployment, or by their sense of responsibility to their employers. As Lorraine Yee, a Chinese seamstress participating in a 1968 Chinatown unionizing effort, put it: "I don't want to strike the boss; I feel sorry for him... But we've got no benefits at all. That's why we want a union for us."³⁹ And indeed, unionizing did have some tangible results. By 1971, the Human Rights Commission ran a survey of 72 workers at 44 shops which indicated that wages had increased and over 70% more workers were covered by employer-provided health care plans. The Commission's executive director put most of these positive changes down to "increased unionization of the shops," though non-union shops may also have chosen to improve labor conditions because the threatened alternative—relocation—was significantly worse. Even so, the survey still found that over half of workers received no sick pay, and almost half still made poverty wages of under \$3,000 a year.⁴⁰

Such was the landscape between the ILGWU and Chinatown's garment factories at the start of the new decade. Despite improving conditions for a number of its Chinese American members, union officials by and large continued to see Chinatown as a backwards holdout, misattributing the reasons for the neighborhood's problems to culture instead of necessity. Chinatown's parallel economy had developed in response to its exclusion from the city's main industries, and with it had emerged a parallel social and political structure whose elites were deeply hostile to outside intervention. As a result, even the union's more well-intentioned impulses could be dismissed by figures such as Charles Wong as too little, too late. When the ILGWU claimed that integrating Chinatown's garment industry was best for its workers, Wong's only response was, "Since when has San Francisco shown any concern for Chinese people?"⁴¹

Wong and other Chinese American critics of the union had another point: in targeting Chinatown rather than manufacturers who insisted on sending cheap contracts into the neighborhood, the union and the city government were demonstrating a racialized callousness towards Chinese factory owners'

³⁹ "Chinatown's First Strike," March 21, 1968, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁴⁰ Dick Hallgren, "Chinatown Factories Improving," June 11, 1971, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁴¹ Zane, "Union Proposal."

continued economic survival. The San Francisco Planning and Urban Renewal Association even said as much when it declared that “hours and wage laws should be vigorously enforced in the factories... even if it puts some of them out of business.” “Historically,” SPUR stated, “our society has felt this an acceptable sacrifice.”⁴² Yet the criticisms of men like Wong were made largely in favor of their own self interest rather than that of factory owners, much less that of workers themselves. Chinatown leaders needed to justify the garment industry’s harsh labor practices to some extent, both in order to maintain control over any future reforms and to protect Chinatown’s image in the eyes of white San Francisco, upon which their own legitimacy rested. To preserve their own positions in the economic and political hierarchy, many of Chinatown’s most successful individuals began pushing a narrative of self-starter, immigrant entrepreneurs who were being given the chance to work for the American dream, an effort that government and trade union intervention would only hamper. “I’m sure there are infractions of the minimum wage act,” one local businessman admitted to a news crew in 1968, but “what would be the alternative? Instead of having people working in these conditions, would it be better to throw them completely upon, say, a government agency for support?”⁴³

The union’s persistence in seeing Chinatown as backwards had effectively blinkered it from recognizing the sophisticated and highly effective political counter-organizing of Chinatown’s civic leaders for what it was. These men, many of whom were otherwise quite comfortable participating in San Francisco’s Democratic machine, were now digging their heels in to prevent organized labor from intervening in neighborhood business with a blend of civil rights rhetoric—defending minority businesses from unfair scrutiny on the part of the state—and market boosterism. Neither of these tactics was a relic of the past, though they did deftly draw upon the city’s history of anti-Chinese violence to make their case; nor were they “foreign” in nature. Rather, they were rooted in the language and the precedent of market liberalism as it was being actively practiced by businesses and politicians all over the country, including San Francisco’s own pro-growth municipal politicians like former Mayor George Christopher and current Mayor Joseph Alioto. If any party in the struggle over unionizing Chinatown was held down

⁴² “SPUR Urges Strict Chinatown Pay Reform,” October 21, 1969, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁴³ *Chinatown: Community in Crisis*.

with historical baggage, it was the ILGWU, which clung to notions of the neighborhood as a world where the Chinese “live by their own laws.”⁴⁴

Yet for all the ILGWU’s many limitations, workers continued to organize for better conditions at work, and to seek assistance the union’s assistance when doing so. The nature of work itself was doubtless a radicalizing force: while defenders of Chinatown’s garment industry emphasized the shop’s function as a space for feminine socialization “where [the newly arrived immigrant seamstress] where the local gossip is exchanged,” it was also a place where solidarity was forged, as women worked in close quarters with one another and experienced the same difficult treatment, unfair compensation, and constant threat of dismissal. But the rapidly changing nature of Chinatown’s politics influenced garment workers well, as a new generation of Chinese American organizers began building alternatives to both the ILGWU’s rigid trade unionism and the commerce-friendly influence of the neighborhood’s liberal elite.

II. The strike

Preconditions

As described in Chapter 1, Chinatown during the late 1960s and early 1970s was a hotbed of radical Asian American organizing, producing some of the most militant and far left organizations of the movement’s history. While Wei Min She and I Wor Kuen both originated as youth groups with a much more diffuse political program, by 1974 both organizations had made a deliberate pivot towards labor organizing, starting with offering strike assistance to a number of smaller-scale actions among Chinatown restaurant workers and other garment shops. This pivot was partially driven by both groups’ shared belief that big changes were afoot within the neighborhood; as WMS put it, “There exists today a latent and explosive force which is beginning to effect changes in our community.”⁴⁵

The Maoist left’s sense of overlapping crises and opportunities was heightened by deteriorating economic conditions during the latter years of the Nixon administration, with unemployment rising,

⁴⁴ Quote from “A War on Chinatown’s Sweatshops,” August 23, 1967, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁴⁵ I Wor Kuen, “Political Summation of the Jung Sai Strike” (I Wor Kuen | Getting Together. Vol 2, May 1975), Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/iwk-journal/jung-sai.htm>; “After Vietnam, It’s the Working Class,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, February 1973; “The Winds of Change are Blowing,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, December 1971.

wages stagnating, and a worsening energy crisis that culminated in the 1973 gas embargo. In August of 1971, in response to sinking domestic manufacturing and a growing sense of the United States' decline on the global stage, Nixon and his advisors rolled out the New Economic Policy (NEP), which closed the gold window allowing foreign governments to convert U.S. dollars to gold, imposed a surcharge on foreign imports, and set up a system of wage and price controls to stem inflation.⁴⁶ In San Francisco, Chinatown, Asian American activists warned of the policy's adverse affects for the Chinese working class in the U.S., particularly those in the garment industry, focusing on the policy's wage-price and import regulations. "Sewing factories will be shut down, putting hundreds of seamstresses out of work" due to the rising cost of foreign textiles, IWK predicted, while capped wages would depress tourism and limit worker organizing for better pay.⁴⁷

No data indicating a resulting surge in garment factory closures is readily available, but the NEP did certainly have a deleterious effect on worker power in the U.S. By closing the gold window, the Nixon administration had taken the first step towards undoing the Bretton Woods global monetary system, inadvertently opening the door for the finance-led globalization which began ramping up in the years after 1973. The breakdown of Bretton Woods and the Nixon administration's subsequent loosening of capital controls put the squeeze on the manufacturing sector of the economy, as foreign competition and the immediate demands of the stock market pressured corporations to look for fat to trim. More often than not, they turned their attention to labor costs, particularly in unionized sectors of the economy. It was no coincidence that organized business's mounting war on organized labor reached new heights in the early 1970s, when membership in the Chamber of Commerce quadrupled and lobbying activity and campaign donations skyrocketed. Increased political organization was paired with greater rates of labor law circumvention and violation, such that by 1977, unionizing workers were losing more NLRB elections than they won for the first time since the passage of the Wagner Act.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 50.

⁴⁷ "How Nixon's Economic Plan Affects You," January 1972, *Getting Together*.

⁴⁸ Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 101-102; Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*, 60, 64-65.

If the early '70s saw a rise in union-busting activity, however, it was also because workers during that time were increasingly looking towards unionization as a means of improving their lives, both at work and in terms of long-term social safety nets. This was especially true for women and workers of color, who were either entering already unionized sectors of the economy or were actively working to build a union presence in areas such as service and clerical work. The swelling ranks of non-white, women workers came alongside—and helped to generate—growing worker militancy during the first half of the 1970s as rank-and-file workers took up social movement strategies and ideologies to challenge both their employers and their union bosses. Strike activity for the decade peaked in 1974, the year of the Jung Sai strike, with over 6,000 recorded work stoppages and 48 million days away from the job.⁴⁹

Chinatown was by no means exempt from these trends. Despite the lack of large industry within the neighborhood and low union density overall, during the early years of the 1970s growing numbers of workers began challenging their employers, both with and without union support. The action started in spring of 1972 with a busboys' strike at Nam Yuen Restaurant. Seven busboys walked off the job after the restaurant workers demanded higher wages, which led to ten days of picketing outside the restaurant. In the face of growing financial pressure, the restaurant owners caved, much to the elation of the workers and their community supporters. WMS editorialized that “the successes of this whole affair can be seen as a good beginning point for working people in the Chinese community to struggle for a decent living,” calling on small business owners to recognize their shared working class interests with their employees.⁵⁰

On the heels of the Nam Yuen walkout came a strike at the Emporium department stores, where workers represented by Department Store Employees Local 1100 and Retail Store Employees Local 410 walked out to win a union shop as part of their contract. IWK and WMS's varying responses to the strike are instructive as to their diverging positions on the usefulness of unionization. IWK's reporting

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Work Stoppages in 1970,” January 11, 1971

⁵⁰ “A Nam Yuen Busboy Writes: We All Have A Right To A Decent Wage” and “Editorial: Nam Yuen and the wage problem in our community,” April 1972, *Wei Min Chinese Community News*. Being young men from the community, some of the busboys may have considered themselves members of the Asian American movement, or at least adjacent to it; one busboy wrote an article for *Wei Min Chinese Community News* about the strike which WMS published in English and Chinese, where he spoke of support on the picket line from friends and bystanders. The porousness of the movement and its popularity among Chinese American youth meant that many young people in the neighborhood may have loosely identified with its goals and political tenants, shown up for events, or been in shared social circles with more centrally involved individuals.

emphasized the experiences of Asian strike participants, mentioning that they made up ten to fifteen percent of the strikers overall. In their analysis, IWK positioned the strike—and unionization as a whole—as a means to an end, a vehicle for further radicalization rather than a goal to seek in and of itself. They interviewed one worker who spoke of how the action was reorienting their perspective on labor politics: “Before I struck...I was getting tired of hearing people wanting higher wages.... But now that I am out there four to eight hours a day... I now know that people have a genuine purpose before voting to strike.” IWK was careful to follow up her testimony with a reminder that “unions can do only so much for us and no more,” but nevertheless expressed optimism that Asian workers were participating and urged all Emporium employees to join the union.⁵¹ By contrast, WMS’s reporting further emphasized the Emporium strike’s multiracial character, ending with a more union-friendly message, stressing that while the Chinese shouldn’t “forgive and forget” organized labor’s historical treatment of Asians, racism itself was ultimately a tool of big business “to keep the working class divided, wages low, and their profits high.”⁵² For WMS, unionization was a necessary component of coalition building between races and communities; as they wrote elsewhere, “[we] must be careful not to concentrate on the mistakes and sometimes reactionary actions” of union leadership, but instead focus on the “more necessary task” of drawing Asian workers “around a powerful multi-national union.”⁵³

In addition to reporting on contemporary labor actions, WMS and IWK both published dozens of articles on the history of Chinese immigrant labor organizing in the United States. Popular subjects included the Alaska Cannery Worker’s union, organized in 1937 by a group of Asian cannery workers; and its successor organization, the California Chinese Workers Mutual Aid Association, a bastion of left-wing Chinese politics in San Francisco before and during World War II. WMS and IWK were especially admiring of the Association’s internationalist and anti-GMD politics, which ultimately contributed to the group’s dissolution during the anti-communist purges of the 1950s. Such pieces impressed upon their readers that while trade unions were unreliable allies, Chinese workers had historically been able to rely upon one another for support and solidarity, even if the results were circumscribed by the effects of anti-

⁵¹ “Emporium Strike: Asian Workers Comment,” August 5, 1972, *Getting Together*.

⁵² “Strikes—Based on Need and Unity,” August 1972, *Wei Min Chinese Community News*.

⁵³ “Racism and the ILGWU: Time to Change the Leadership,” November 1972, *Wei Min Chinese Community News*.

Asian racism. As one WMS article about the 1867 Chinese railroad workers' strike put it, "Chinese workers, under such oppressive conditions and with or without the support of white labor, will struggle against their bosses." In addition to providing a somewhat romantic view of previous Chinese worker organizing, these histories were meant to provide inspiration for contemporary efforts as well. In an article about the Mutual Aid Association from 1972, IWK ended by remarking that while "the American reactionaries gained the upper hand... resulting in their controlling workers' unions that were once progressive... the broad masses of the laboring people are more politically conscious day by day," citing the Nam Yuen Restaurant strike as one potent example.⁵⁴

Perhaps the most hands-on opportunity for Asian American activists to improve working conditions in Chinatown was the Chinatown Cooperative Garment Factory, established in the basement of the I-Hotel in 1970. The co-op was the brainchild of Asian American student organizers at UC Berkeley, proposed as a more radical response to the ILGWU's 1969 attempt to re-zone Chinatown. In proposing the co-op, the students argued that "a basic distrust of whites and their institutions exists in Chinatown" and called the ILGWU "a powerful bossism trade union, with tendencies to negotiate with management and employers and not workers." A co-op, they insisted, "would be a progressive, self-perpetuating and revolutionary alternative," which could become a force for positive political change within the community and make workers more aware of "how they are exploited and suppressed in their community and job."⁵⁵ By spring of 1971, WMS was reporting that the co-op was up and running. Three women working at the factory told a WMS member that "the young people are very nice," referring to the students and activists who helped with day-to-day operations: "All the bosses want is dollars, but the young people want what's good for the people."⁵⁶ A few months later, WMS reported on the co-op's English courses for workers, which were run by volunteers. Organizers hoped that by improving workers'

⁵⁴ "Alaska Cannery Workers," *Getting Together*, March 1972; "The beginning and end of the California CHinese Workers' Mutual Aid Association," *Getting Together*, April 1972; "5-7,000 Chinese RR Workers Walk Out As One Man," *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, June 1973.

⁵⁵ "The Cooperative: A Viable Alternative for Garment Factory Workers," November 1969, *Asian American Political Alliance Newspaper*.

⁵⁶ "A better garment factory: The Chinatown co-op," October 1971, *Wei Min Chinese Community News*.

English abilities, they could take on more of the day-to-day interactions with salesmen, deliverymen, and customers.⁵⁷

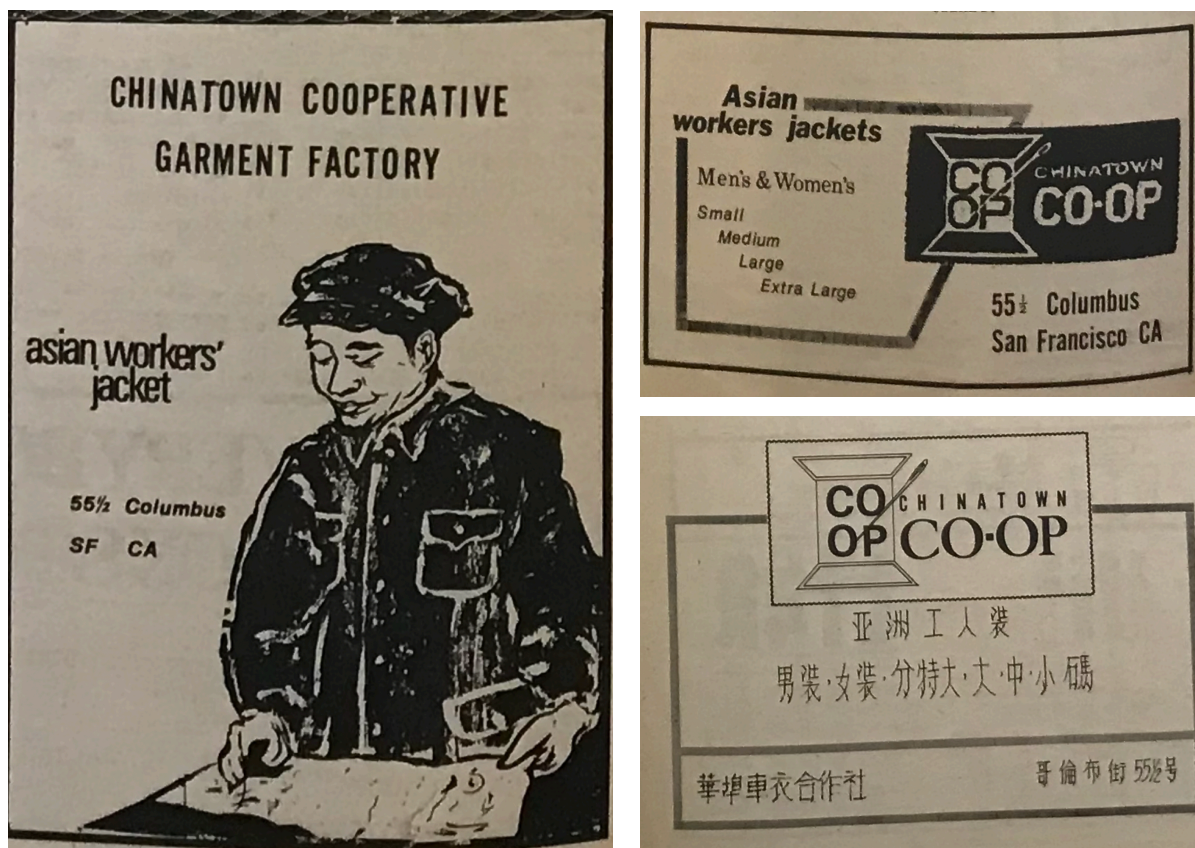
In their reporting, WMS linked the co-op to the history of guilds and other labor associations that arose among Chinese workers due to their exclusion from other industries and unions, with the co-op extending the tradition of worker self-organization to women and more recent immigrants. By contrast, WMS pointed out, the ILGWU was an outside force which did not understand Chinese workers, and failed to do anything for them except take their dues money. In their analysis, the co-op was “not only... the first business in Chinatown with no boss and run by its workers, but... the first where workers are helping their fellow workers out in the production as well as providing a personal social life.” Certainly, the social atmosphere at the co-op seems to have been a positive and friendly one, but WMS’s characterization belies the organization’s lack of understanding regarding the solidarities and affinities which could emerge even in highly exploitative working environments. The final implication is that unless the organizing context had an explicitly radical orientation, workers’ class consciousness would remain entirely undeveloped.⁵⁸

As an experiment in self-organization and workplace democracy, the co-op was a brief but vibrant success story. Unfortunately, however, the business struggled to sustain itself economically, and seems to have relied a great deal on young organizers for its clientele by selling them denim “Asian worker jackets” (figs. 2.3-2.5). By 1973, organizers were applying for outside grants to keep the co-operative going, and by 1974, the factory was no longer operating due to its inability to “meet operating expenses from the low bids required by manufacturers.” The co-op and its influence upon its worker-participants does not appear to have gone gently into that good night, however. Upon closing, two of the Cooperative’s employees found jobs at the garment factory just around the corner: the Great Chinese American Sewing Sewing Factory, or Jung Sai.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ “Learning English in the Co-op,” January 1972, *Wei Min Chinese Community News*.

⁵⁸ “A better garment factory.”

⁵⁹ Harvey Dong, “Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike of 1974: ‘An Earth-Shattering and Heaven-Startling Event’” in *Ten Years that Shook the City: San Francisco, 1968-1978*, ed. Chris Carlsson (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011), 309.



Figs. 2.3-2.5: Advertisements in both English and Chinese for the Chinatown Cooperative Garment Factory from *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, 1971-1972.

"If you're not afraid, join us": Jung Sai workers on the line

The workers at Jung Sai had tried to unionize twice prior to 1974. The first attempt, made soon after the factory opened in 1971, failed because not enough pledge cards were signed. The second failed when the organizing was done in public, and Esprit de Corp subsequently threatened the workers into withdrawing their pledge cards. The third attempt in 1974 was thus initially carried out in secret until July 4th of that year, when Frankie Ma, a bundler and one of the few men who worked at the factory, and seamstresses Lam Bick Chung, Lily Lee, and Nam Hing Leung distributed union authorization cards in full view of their floor supervisor. 83 out of 102 workers signed the cards, and on July 12th, Local 101 of the ILGWU contacted Jung Sai with an official request for union authorization.

At the time the Jung Sai workers reached out to the ILGWU, the international was seeing a decline in membership that had started in the late 1960s and would continue through the rest of the

decade, from 450,000 in 1969 to 404,000 in 1973. Despite this trend, however, union leadership had not substantially altered their organizing model, nor had they improved outreach into the immigrant communities the garment industry was increasingly hiring from. By 1973, Local 101 in San Francisco had organized fifty garment shops in Chinatown, but according to WMS did not have a single shop steward across them.⁶⁰ Further hampering the union's relationship with immigrant workers was its ongoing "Buy American" campaign, which appealed to consumers to shop domestic and help save native jobs. The implicit message behind much of the ILGWU's messaging—that foreign workers were to blame for American workers' woes, and that the union's interests were coextensive with the nation's—was sharply spelled out in an August 1972 ad campaign in New York City's subway stations. Commuters were greeted with posters featuring a large American flag with the words "MADE IN JAPAN" splashed under it, and the question: "Has your job been exported to Japan yet? If not, it soon will be. Unless you buy the products of American workers who buy from you."⁶¹ Other posters read, "Every year, Americans salute more and more American flags that weren't made in America. Flags that bear the stars and stripes and little tags reading Made in Japan or Taiwan or Hong Kong."⁶²

At the time, the Asian American left joined in a wave of criticism that spanned from the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* to the halls of higher education. For groups such as WMS and IWK, the ILGWU's actions constituted less a betrayal than unshakeable proof of the union's true interests, which ran in strict opposition to those of Third World workers.⁶³ The union for its part remained largely unapologetic for the campaign; one letter from the ILGWU to an Asian American activist group in New York even reminded them that, "ironically, among the victims of unregulated imports are Oriental-Americans."⁶⁴ Yet as WMS, IWK, and others repeatedly pointed out, the reason why Chinese immigrant women in the United States suffered from low wages and bad working conditions had little to do with garment workers in Japan or

⁶⁰ "Lessons from the Farah strikers," February 1973, *Wei Min Chinese Community News*.

⁶¹ "San Franciscan Chides NY Garment Union For Misinforming Posters," October 31, 1972, *Hokubei Mainichi* (reprinted in *Wei Min Chinese Community News*, November 1972).

⁶² Frank, *Buy American*, 139; Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 237-238.

⁶³ "Racism & the ILGWU."

⁶⁴ Quoted in Frank, *Buy American*, 142.

Hong Kong—indeed, some women had been both the supposedly privileged unionized “American worker” and the supposedly villainous “foreign worker.” As one former seamstress in Chinatown told IWK, “The garment workers in Chinatown are all immigrant women.... Most of them worked in the factories in Hong Kong. They came over here because the conditions in Hong Kong are too oppressive... and find themselves slaving away for American capitalists.”⁶⁵ The ILGWU’s campaign essentially demanded that its immigrant members in the United States organize against workers in the countries they had come from, workers who they themselves *were* not too long ago.

Despite the Asian American left’s vocal criticism of the ILGWU, their overall propagandizing about the effectiveness of worker organizing may have nevertheless served to push garment workers to pursue unionization. Lacking their own institutions for building worker power independent of labor unions, WMS and IWK continued to portray unionization as the most immediate means of worker empowerment available, even as they also urged workers to seize more power within union institutions. For those workers with whom Maoists had managed to build lasting relationships, either through the Cooperative, their social programs, or their cultural work, unions would have been the mode of worker organization they were most frequently exposed to. For some, Maoist organizations and labor unions may even have been interconnected entities, as their members continued to show up on picket lines and put on events with striking workers elsewhere to talk about the benefits of unionization.⁶⁶ This association may have been what led the two former co-op employees at Jung Sai to walk back around the corner to the Asian Community Center to seek WMS’s support when Esprit de Corps cracked down on their unionization campaign.⁶⁷

The company’s response was swift and vindictive. On July 9th, Frankie Ma was fired, ostensibly for “lack of work.” Esprit de Corp later claimed he’d been let go because of his unwillingness to adopt a new bundling practice. That Ma was supposedly the principal ringleader whose firing might dampen pro-union sentiments among the other employees, however, proved to be a serious miscalculation on Esprit de Corp’s part, and one that was likely produced by gendered bias on the part of Tompkins and his partners.

⁶⁵ “Garment Worker Interviewed,” August 20 - September 3, 1972, *Getting Together*.

⁶⁶ “Farah Strike Going Strong,” *Wei Min Chinese Community News*,

⁶⁷ Dong, “Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike of 1974,” 309.

Ma was, indeed, one of the more vocally pro-union workers at the plant, and also spoke some of the best English, which made him a natural go-between for workers and the ILGWU. But in his absence, workers such as Lam Bick Chung continued to speak up against their managers and employers, as evidenced by Chung's public demand from Handa Lai that everyone be paid (and not to mention the strike vote itself which took place days later.) Ma's firing ensured him a prominent place in later documentation of the strike, particularly in the NLRB's various rulings, but he did not by any means become the face of the strike in the weeks to come. That role was reserved exclusively for the pro-union women of Jung Sai, dozens of whom quickly began picketing the entrance to the factory once the strike was authorized. Doug Tompkins' immediate response was to close the factory, claiming publicly that he would have done so whether or not his workers voted to unionize. Again, Tompkins did not succeed in shutting down the picket lines, which immediately moved from Chinatown to Esprit de Corp's main plant and headquarters in Potrero Hill.

By now, the ILGWU had registered the case with the National Labor Relations' Board. According to organizer Phil Russo, however, the union was also following employees' lead in picketing "right away," rather than "wait the two or three years it would take to get a decision."⁶⁸ Workers' militant strategy, intended to publicize the factory's closure and the workers' plight, quickly paid off. On July 18th, after two hours of blocking the entrance to the Esprit de Corp plant, a truck driver attempting to back into the loading dock struck and knocked over 46-year-old Mei Kok Tse. The workers would later insist that the driver did it on purpose; police at the scene reported that it was possible Tse had run into the truck instead and left her on the ground for more than two hours while "repeatedly telling her to get up, saying she was 'faking it.'"⁶⁹ Police eventually used Tse's injury as an excuse to move in and arrest thirty-eight strikers and two supporters, including Phil Russo, who were all processed that evening by "bewildered booking officers" at the Hall of Justice and charged with blocking the sidewalk and obstructing the police. The ILGWU quickly posted bail, and the very next day the Jung Sai workers called a press conference. There, worker Yook Young Lee took the spotlight and "delivered a passionate harangue over working conditions" on behalf of her coworkers for the press, before bursting into tears.

⁶⁸ "38 Pickets Arrested in Chinatown Labor Dispute," July 18, 1974, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁶⁹ Dong, "Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike of 1974," 307.

“Any warmed-over stereotypes about Oriental impassiveness were convincingly shot down,” the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported.⁷⁰ The workers demanded that Tompkins, who they claimed “was present and witnessed this entire incident,” take full responsibility for Mei Kok Tse’s injuries.⁷¹

Tompkins, who was finally speaking to the press about the strike, told the *Chronicle* he wasn’t sure what all the fuss was about. Esprit de Corp had paid everyone at least the minimum wage, provided healthcare, and enrolled all employees in “a very generous profit-sharing plan.” The shop, he insisted, was “one of the very nicest sewing shops in the city and I think by that one can see there was a definite attempt to make good working conditions.” He went on to accuse the union and the workers of using illegal, “strong-arm tactics,” pointing out that of the ninety-odd picketers, “only about 20 of them are actually workers. The others... were from the Red Guards and other groups.”⁷² Tompkins’ narrative of “outside agitators” stirring up grievance where none existed previously reinforced popular perceptions of Chinese workers as passive subjects, easily bent to the political will of others. In conjunction with his claims that his shop was “one of the very nicest in the city,” it also demonstrated his utter disbelief that the conditions of work he and his partners had created could have been the instigating factor for unionization.

Unbeknownst to Tompkins himself, the unique structure of Jung Sai which he claimed made the factory so pleasant to work in likely contributed a great deal to workers feeling they could rebel in the first place. Striking against a community outsider such as Tompkins would have had fewer social consequences than standing up to a Chinese shop owner, and workers likely felt fewer social obligations towards a white factory owner. Moreover, workers understood that the ultimate reason wages in Chinatown were so low was due to manufacturers such as Esprit de Corp creating a race to the bottom among their subcontractors.⁷³ Former Cooperative employees in particular, who had experience negotiating directly with manufacturers, would have had intimate experience of how difficult it was for most Chinatown shops to stay afloat given manufacturers’ low rates. By directly employing garment

⁷⁰ Julie Smith, “A Tearful Protest in Chinatown,” July 20, 1974, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁷¹ Dong, “Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike of 1974,” 307.

⁷² Smith, “A Tearful Protest in Chinatown.”

⁷³ Wong, “Chinese Sweatshops in the United States: A Look at the Garment Industry,” 372.

workers, Esprit had inadvertently given some of the neighborhood's most exploited workers a small sliver of stability on which to stand as they set about building their union.

Getting together, falling apart

IWK later looked back upon those first few weeks of the strike, when energies were high and press attention more or less constant, as the peak of unity between themselves, WMS, and the union. Conflict quickly began to emerge, however, particularly as another labor struggle involving Chinese immigrant workers emerged, this one on the outskirts of Chinatown in the city's North Beach district at an electronics factory called Lee Mah. Forty-two workers had been fired in late May during a Teamsters unionization effort, during which they had complained about many of the same conditions as those at Jung Sai: low wages, stressful working conditions, and disrespectful management. The two factories had even opened in the same year, with Lee Mah being owned by local Chinese businessman Bing Hong Mah. "The bosses are especially harsh on us. They belittle us... Even more ridiculous is how we are not allowed to talk to each other," one letter from the striking workers to WMS read.⁷⁴

WMS began agitating for a unification of the two struggles as early as late July, something both the ILGWU and IWK resisted. IWK would later accuse WMS of building support for unification among the workers by "[calling them] off the picket line in twos to secret meetings" where they were aggressively asked how they "felt about 'linking up' Jung Sai and Lee Mah."⁷⁵ It is difficult, however, to put all the success of WMS's efforts at building solidarity between the two groups of workers down solely to intimidation. The "Chinatown Workers Festival," a benefit for the two strikes put on in late August, featured women from both factories joyfully performing in skits together and singing songs with lyrics such as, "We must stand together/JUNG SAI — LEE MAH!"⁷⁶ WMS's cross-strike organizing culminated in a September 6th joint demonstration which started in Chinatown's Portsmouth Square. There, within shouting distance of the shuttered Jung Sai factory, workers from both strikes joined

⁷⁴ "Letter from Lee Mah Workers," July 1974, *Wei Min Asian American News*, Vanessa Hua, "Chinese workers protest abrupt firings," September 11, 2001, *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Lee Mah Workers Remain Firm, Stand up to Police Harassment," July 1974, *Wei Min Asian American News*.

⁷⁵ I Wor Kuen, "Political Summation of the Jung Sai Strike."

⁷⁶ "Chinatown Workers Festival: 'We Must Stand Together!'," November 1974, *Wei Min Asian American News*.

together to chant, “Immigrant workers fighting back, support the Lee Mah and Jung Sai workers!” and “Workers unite to lead the fight against all oppression!”⁷⁷

Despite clear interest from some Jung Sai workers in joining up with the women from Lee Mah, however, IWK’s assertion that not all strikers agreed with WMS’s had some evidence to support it, and spoke to deeper divisions among the Jung Sai workforce regarding how best to proceed as the possibility of a quick victory became increasingly faint. While some workers enthusiastically participated in youth-organized events like the joint demonstration and the Workers Festival, others were more ambivalent. In September, as WMS and IWK made their conflict more public, the Jung Sai workers’ own strike committee issued a statement thanking “justice-loving groups and individuals from all sectors of society” for their help, but also making it clear that “[our] demand is to join the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union... during the course of this labor dispute, we do not want to be dragged into any other political activities and/or propaganda.” In the same statement, the workers requested their supporters not to attack the union or to “make inappropriate criticisms” without first consulting the workers themselves.⁷⁸ Dislike or distrust of the Maoists’ politics may have had something to do with this decision; Harvey Dong from WMS records one of his comrades saying that some workers “had this fear about us as leftists...they tended to do what the union said [to do].”⁷⁹ On the flip side, the ILGWU—despite being unreliable in winning benefits for its Chinese members—had demonstrated institutional power in ways the Maoist organizations had not: it had lawyers, full-time organizers, and could pay for workers’ bail and offer strike support. Moreover, the ILGWU was laser-focused on getting Esprit and Doug Tompkins to come to the table with their employees, while WMS and IWK frequently invoked much more amorphous concepts of capitalist and imperialist exploitation. But to the workers—or a least, to their strike committee—“it is the Company who exploits us; therefore anyone who supports us should stand together with the union in joint opposition to the company.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ “SF Workers Get It On!” September 1974, *Wei Min Asian American News*.

⁷⁸ “Important Statement from the Workers of the Great Chinese-American Sewing Co., JUNG SAI,” *Getting Together*, September 1974

⁷⁹ Dong, “Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike of 1974,” 312.

⁸⁰ “Important Statement.”

Rather than interpreting union-friendly workers as acting upon a reasonable set of expectations and immediate needs, however, WMS dismissed the strike committee as “the most backwards... of the masses.”⁸¹ By September, they had set up an independent strike committee from the union and sought to pull workers away from the ILGWU altogether. This was somewhat ironic given that, of the two groups, WMS had always been the more positive regarding unionization. Harvey Dong later wrote that “a strong rank-and-file movement was incompatible with a highly centralized union leadership that leaned heavily towards workers’ compromise,” a significant shift from WMS’s position a year and a half prior when they were calling for broader Chinese participation in organizations such as the ILGWU in order to transform them from the inside out. Now, WMS advanced a position that “trade unionism is reformism,” and that left wing organizations “must not lead workers to think that capitalism can be made to work (e.g. through unionization).” “Through our practice,” WMS concluded, “we are learning that we must not only expose all ‘trade union misleadership’ [*sic*], but expose all forms of opportunism that holds back the workers movement... We must expose the *entire system* and all its parasites.”⁸²

That the Jung Sai workers’ own strike committee emphasized unionization above all other objectives does not mean some workers were not engaged—or at the very least, intrigued—by IWK and WMS’s more radical ideas. In addition to choosing to participate in various cultural events and non-union rallies, IWK recorded that several workers came to the annual October 1st celebration left wing organizations threw in the neighborhood celebrating the founding of the PRC, and several more attended a celebration for Chairman Mao’s birthday in December.⁸³ Some workers would even credit both the union and WMS’s “Strike Support Committee” for sustaining their energy on the picket line, with one

⁸¹ “I Wor Kuen’s Reactionary Line on May Day and the Workers’ Movement: Wei Min Shé Reply to IWK Criticism of 1974 May Day Asian Contingent Statement,” September 1974, 6.

⁸² Dong, “Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike of 1974,” 308; Wei Min She, “I Wor Kuen’s Reactionary Line on May Day and the Workers’ Movement,” September 1974. Dong’s essay about the strike is noteworthy for its refusal to mention either WMS or IWK by name, instead referring to “supporters” and saying the independent strike committee “was formed” without mentioning who helped to form it. Dong instead name-checks the ACC, which was widely known at the time to be affiliated with Wei Min She, and the Chinese Progressive Association, which overlapped extensively with IWK. Dong may have wished to keep the focus on the strike itself without re-litigating sectarian tensions between WMS and IWK, but the final effect is to position the Asian American left as broadly unified behind WMS’s perspective.

⁸³ I Wor Kuen, “Political Summation of the Jung Sai Strike.”



Fig. 2.6: Jung Sai workers and their supporters sit in the shade at a picket line in front of Esprit de Corp's headquarters, 1974. Source: Box 1, folder 20, San Francisco State University Labor Archives, Union WAGE Photo Collection.

seamstress expressing gratitude for the “support of people from all walks of life.”⁸⁴ Given the length of the strike and the dedication of WMS and IWK members, there would have been plenty of time for all parties to get to know one another as people, not just propagandists. The constant proximity of workers and left wing organizers lends some weight to IWK's assertion that they were able to educate workers about communism and even help them overcome certain misconceptions about left wing ideology. Photographs and video footage from rallies and picket lines show young and old, men and women, all packed together under a canopy of signs and parasols (fig. 2.6).⁸⁵

While we must account for these possibilities, however, we must also take IWK and WMS's descriptions of their political education efforts with a grain of salt. Both groups had a vested interest in claiming the organic support of the workers; when neither succeeded at winning them all over, they fell to dividing the group up into “backwards” and “advanced” categories to explain why some women had

⁸⁴ “中西車衣工人罷工詭珊，勞資雙方簽訂復工會添,” 时代报 (*Shidai Bao / San Francisco Journal*), January 15, 1975, Box 72, folder 7, ESL, Asian American Studies Archives.

⁸⁵ I Wor Kuen, “Political Summation of the Jung Sai Strike”; “Garment Workers Rally in San Francisco,” *KPIX Eyewitness News* (San Francisco: KPIX, July 16, 1974), San Francisco Bay Area TV News Archive, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/229528>; Box 1, folder 20, Union WAGE Photo Collection, c. 1971-1982, San Francisco State University Labor Archives.

joined the other camp. Both organizations, which had historically used their print publications to amplify quotes from workers, saw themselves as translating the workers' will into revolutionary terms.

This took on its most literal form in an article published by Wei Min She in December of 1974, which took the form of a "composite" interview with workers at Lee Mah and Jung Sai. Unlike the direct quotes they had shared in coverage of the Garment Cooperative and other labor actions, the testimonial was instead an interpretive stitching together of conversations WMS members had with workers from both factories. The interview ended up reading a great deal like many of WMS's own articles, with workers speaking as a monolith about their youth in "feudal China," where "we women were taught that the only things we needed to know were cooking, laundering, cleaning, and having babies." As married women, they had come to the United States from Hong Kong "and other Asian countries" with their husbands, who relied on them to do all the child care and housework. "We know that our struggle is not isolated from the struggles of other workers all over," the interview concluded, neatly echoing WMS's line about the need to connect Chinatown's labor issues with those elsewhere. It is unlikely that information from the interview was fabricated, or even meaningfully exaggerated, but the act of aggregation clearly had a flattening effect which could not address certain contradictions within workers' life experiences. The composite worker spoke of her "feudal" upbringing, but also had come through Hong Kong, a large, industrialized economy where worker organizing and radical politics were widespread throughout the postwar period. Her formal political education began with going on strike, an act which "awakened" her "to the problems we face as immigrants, workers, and women," but the text did not cover her decision to join a union, and how difficulties at work may have influenced that decision.⁸⁶

The idea that what was really at stake in the strike was the social and political development of Chinese immigrant workers themselves, and not the immediate circumstances of their relationship to work or to their employer, was one Doug Tompkins espoused as well. In a September 1974 interview with a local public television station, Tompkins reiterated that he was "not anti-union," and that "the real question for the garment industry was one of modernization," suggesting that the government should not

⁸⁶ The interview was published in *Wei Min Asian American News* in both its English and Chinese sections, and is identical in both save for one area: the Chinese-language version leaves off the final paragraph, which is aimed entirely at refuting IWK's line, arguing against "some people" who "are saying that this is a struggle of only Chinese immigrants." "Immigrant Women Workers: An Interview..." December 1974, *Wei Min Asian American News*.

send inspectors but experts to “bring the small piecework shops into the 1970s.” “The question of ‘the union or not’ would sort of be a moot question at that point,” Tompkins concluded.⁸⁷

Oddly enough, the negation of the union question was one the Asian American left hoped for as well, as both WMS and IWK believed once workers’ radicalism was elevated past a certain point, they would no longer need to base their struggle in trade unionism; as WMS put it, “Marxist-Leninists and anti-imperialists must take the spontaneous struggles to advance workers’ class consciousness and not just trade union consciousness.” In both cases, such beliefs were rooted in a refusal to fully engage with the existing circumstances of Chinatown’s political scene, or with the stated perspectives of workers themselves. Indeed, given how little labor activity of any kind had existed in the forty years since the National Dollar strike, the militancy of Jung Sai’s workers was already evidence of a highly evolved and rapidly developing worker consciousness which, if nurtured, could well have spread to other sectors of the industry. As it was, the Asian American left seemed much more intent on disabusing workers of their supposed trust in the ILGWU before the strike was even won.

Perhaps the most unfortunate element of both WMS and IWK’s varying degrees of hostility towards the ILGWU was that it blinded them from recognizing the extent to which they’d succeeded in making the union maintain its militant strategy for as long as it did. After he was arrested alongside Jung Sai workers, ILGWU organizer Phil Russo laid out the union’s strategy for future protest, declaring that the strike’s success relied on community support. “The only way this can be successful is if they arrested 38 Thursday, it should be 300 the next day and 3,000 the next,” Russo stated at a press conference, going on to suggest that “it would also be a good idea for all the Chinese-American contractors who do garment work to go on strike themselves until they can get enough money from manufacturers to pay workers properly.”⁸⁸ Russo’s invocation of the community would necessarily have included young Asian American activists, who were making their way to every picket line and press conference the Jung Sai workers organized to march, leaflet, and help translate on behalf of workers. In addition, Russo’s vision for growing the strike to the contractors was not at all incompatible with what either IWK or WMS

⁸⁷ Pat O’Brien on the *Garment Workers Strike*, KPIX Eyewitness News (San Francisco: KPIX, 1974), Bay Area TV News Collection, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/229529>.

⁸⁸ Julie Smith, “A Tearful Protest in Chinatown,” July 20, 1974, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

desired; though it may have hewed closer to IWK's position on shared interests between factory owners and their employees, it agreed with both organizations' longtime insistence that non-Chinese manufacturers were the ultimate culprit in Chinatown's low wages.

Despite Russo's pronouncements, the ILGWU did eventually change tack, largely due to a legal injunction from Esprit de Corp in August which put an end the picketing. Mattie Jackson, vice president of Local 101, redirected the union's efforts towards boycott activities and their case before the NLRB. Workers and their supporters began leafletting at department stores such as Macy's and the San Francisco Emporium, encouraging shoppers to stay away from Esprit de Corp's many clothing lines. Dong writes that the ILGWU "did not want any more blocking of trucks or similar tactics," and wouldn't have supported more arrested strikers, despite Russo's proclamations to the contrary a few weeks earlier.⁸⁹ This move to a more "legalistic" approach, as IWK and WMS called it, seemed to pay off initially: in October, Tompkins announced he was selling Jung Sai to Mike Kozak, a manager at the factory, who would reopen and rehire all the strikers. The combination of bad press, delayed production, and damaged profits had apparently prompted Esprit de Corp to give in. While the workers' strike committee and the ILGWU debated how to respond to this offer, WMS continued to organize rallies with Jung Sai and Lee Mah workers, culminating in a large December 1st "Three-In-One" rally with representatives from Lee Mah, Jung Sai, and the International Hotel. "A return to work appears to be on horizon for the 130-odd workers who struck the largest Chinese garment factory in July," *East/West* reported from the rally. "...The Jung Sai employees are expected to ratify a union-management contract this week," with wages set at \$2.50 an hour and guaranteed work from Esprit de Corp.⁹⁰

High expectations quickly soured. Esprit de Corp put forward one misdirection after another: Kozak was unable to produce a bill of sale proving his new ownership of the factory; reinstated workers were given strict conditions in order to keep their jobs, including precise matching between their products and those made at the Potrero Hill headquarters; and the guaranteed work contract was limited to a single year. Despite these new conditions, the ILGWU signed an agreement with Mike Kozak on January 13th, 1975, six months after the beginning of the strike. The workers celebrated what they thought was a

⁸⁹ Dong, "Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike of 1974," 311.

⁹⁰ Mabel Ng, "Chinatown Holds Three-In-One Rally," December 4, 1974, *East/West*.

victory. Yet the next month, when they appeared at the plant ready to resume their work, they found the building emptied of machines, with Kozak nowhere to be found.⁹¹

In spring of 1975, nearly a year after the strike began, the ILGWU published notices in the city newspapers signed by Mattie Jackson announcing that “unfair labor practice charges are currently pending before the [NLRB] against the Great Chinese-American Sewing Factory (Jung Sai),” with an injunction forthcoming that would force the factory to reopen.⁹² Workers, meanwhile, had largely moved on. “Objectively, the strike has ended,” IWK wrote in a political summary of their experience at Jung Sai published in May; “The workers are too disunified [sic], split and bitter towards each other to struggle any further.” The speed with which the workers dissolved and the bitter feelings which IWK described were a far cry from the strike’s heady early days, when workers overcame both police and employer violence to persist on the picket lines. IWK and WMS, meanwhile, became more preoccupied with exchanging political denouncements of one another and eventually moved on to other causes. Lacking internal cohesion, the institutional support of the ILGWU, and the social support of neighborhood youth, Jung Sai’s workers dissolved into individual courses of action. “Some,” the IWK reported in May, “have found other jobs, and others are waiting until their unemployment runs out.”⁹³

Conclusion

The defeat of efforts like the Jung Sai strike by manufacturers and Chinatown’s political elites would have significant consequences for the neighborhood’s future. Having been disciplined by their employers and disappointed by both the ILGWU and the Asian American left, Chinese seamstresses by and large retreated from militant workplace organizing in the following decades. For their part, neither the ILGWU nor the Asian American left would escalate their commitments to immigrant workers in the neighborhood, instead ceding the work of managing immigrants’ expanding socioeconomic needs to the emergent Asian American non-profit class.

⁹¹ “中西車衣廠工人復工無期，勞資關係局決定控訴資方,” 时代报 (*Shidai Bao* / *San Francisco Journal*), February 5, 1975, Box 72, folder 7ESL, Asian American Studies Archives.

⁹² “Notice,” April 30, 1975, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁹³ I Wor Kuen, “Political Summation of the Jung Sai Strike.”

Certainly, labor agitation continued in Chinatown and in Chinese-majority businesses throughout the city, but few were quite so large, long-lived, or well-publicized as Jung Sai. Organizing momentum in the neighborhood garment industry in particular continued to wane over time, such that by 1977, the *Chronicle* was once again reporting from “cloistered sewing shops” about suspicious factory owners and overworked seamstresses. One owner whom the paper interviewed trotted out the old line about how he was doing his employees a favor by “providing work for people who can’t get anything else.” Also interviewed was Mattie Jackson, now president of ILGWU Local 101, who commented that the ILGWU still only represented 25% of garment workers in the neighborhood and was having difficulty reaching any more. Jackson complained of the underhanded tactics manufacturers were using to union-bust, including calling immigration authorities on their own employees and shutting their factories down altogether. Tellingly, neither the reporter nor Jackson brought up the struggle at Jung Sai, with Jackson choosing to draw upon two earlier examples of failed organizing drives to make her point. If the Jung Sai workers still loomed large in the ILGWU’s approach towards organizing Chinese workers, they weren’t speaking about it publicly two years down the line.⁹⁴

For their part, Esprit de Corp experienced an unexpected rebirth in the year after the picketing ended. The company’s Potrero Hill headquarters burned down in the summer of 1976 in a four alarm fire, but Tompkins and his partners quickly sprang back, expanding the headquarters’ sprawl and installing modern workplace amenities such as a day care center and a gym. While Esprit de Corp grew at home, the company’s expansion of its offshore production continued as well; in 1985, the company was “the largest exporter of clothing from Hong Kong,” according to a report in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, with other manufacturers scattered throughout Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Over the course of the 1980s, the company and its founders would consolidate themselves as “socially conscious” capitalists who, supposedly, cared about people and the natural environment more than they did about profits. As Doug Tompkins’ then-wife and Esprit co-founder Susie Tompkins would later say, she and Doug were “kids of

⁹⁴ Katy Butler, “Inside S.F.’s Cloistered Sewing Shops,” January 17, 1977, *San Francisco Chronicle*.

the sixties and really took responsibility for what we created.”⁹⁵ Meanwhile, the company’s court case against its own former employees ground on. The NLRB’s first ruling in December of 1975 came decisively in the workers’ and ILGWU’s favor, ordering that Esprit de Corp reopen the factory, rehire every worker they laid off during the union drive, and award over a half a million dollars of back pay.⁹⁶ Esprit de Corp quickly appealed, eventually leading to a decision from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in July of 1978 which broadly reaffirmed the NLRB but concluded that ordering Esprit de Corp to reopen the Jung Sai plant would be “unduly burdensome,” as the entire factory had since been dismantled. “In addition,” the Court went on to say, “since the closing, the trend in the garment industry has been to subcontract sewing work to low cost foreign companies. To require Esprit to do its sewing domestically... would put Esprit at a competitive disadvantage within its industry.”⁹⁷

Even with a series of court orders in the ILGWU’s favor, Dong writes that the struggle did not really end until the last of the workers received their back pay five years later, with individual settlements averaging around \$10,000 each—a sizable sum for workers accustomed to barely scraping by on piece-work wages. Workers’ responses to these settlements illustrates the hard sacrifices they paid for their organizing, and the lasting strength of their transpacific attachments. One woman, Gin Son Leung, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1983 that “she had survived for several years after the layoff only because she received aid from her son.” With her \$14,194 settlement, she planned to visit family in Hong Kong and set aside the rest for her children. Another woman, Kane Gin Chin, would use her \$6,000 settlement to visit China. Evidence of garment workers’ continued relationships with people and communities in Asia offer a tantalizing glimpse of an untapped and un-recognized resource during the recent history of

⁹⁵ “Esprit: Grown-ups, yes; yuppies, no,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 23, 1985; Maureen Orth, “Esprit de Corp.: For sportswear mogul Doug Tompkins, image and attitude are everything,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 22, 1987; “Our History,” Esprit Company, accessed January 31, 2021, <https://www.esprit.com/en/company/corporate/history>.

⁹⁶ Dong, “Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike of 1974,” 314; Betty S. Murphy, John H. Fanning, and Peter D. Walther, *Great Chinese American Sewing Company; Esprit de Corp and San Francisco Joint Board, International Ladies Garment Workers Union, AFL-CIO*, 227 Decisions and Orders of the National Labor Relations Board 1670 (National Labor Relations Board 1977).

⁹⁷ James R. Browning, Anthony Kennedy, and Proctor Ralph Hug, *Great Chinese American Sewing Company, Esprit de Corp, v. N.L.R.B.*, 30 Court Decisions Relating to the National Labor Relations Act 1155 (Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals 1978).

worker organizing among Chinatown's immigrants, most of whom had experienced the global labor market at various ends of the production chain.⁹⁸

Dampening some of the excitement surrounding the NLRB settlement was the fact that, by the time of its announcement, the ILGWU had lost track of almost half the workers employed at Jung Sai in 1974. "We really want to find these people," a union attorney told the *Chronicle*; "Most of them are first-generation Chinese women locked into low-paying jobs and they need the money." If the women had been rehired in the Chinatown garment industry, chances were good that they found it much as they had left it. The 1977 *Chronicle* report described non-union rates as low as 32 cents a garment, with the industry continuing to swell as more immigrants kept arriving from Hong Kong. Employers continued to give many of their workers piecework to be done at home, for which they were paid under the table.⁹⁹ A decade later, yet another article in the *Chronicle* described the same broad set of characteristics, focusing on underpaid at-home work, which factory owners said was necessary to continue to compete with industries in South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Without a robust structure of workplace or community organizing, workers and their bosses were both left defenseless against rising imports and shrinking wages.¹⁰⁰

By the 1980s, the ILGWU had quite not given up on Chinatown, but the union had made no major inroads either, continuing to complain of non-cooperation from large manufacturers. Some of the workers Local 101 was able to help most were seamstresses who later went to go work for the union, following in the historical footsteps of Sue Ko Lee after the National Dollar Strike of 1937. Among most workers, however, both union and non union, perceptions of the ILGWU were mostly negative. Interviews conducted by legal scholar Barbara Koh with workers and their legal advocates during the mid-'80s revealed similar circumstances IWK and WMS had complained about ten years ago: many unionized seamstresses had never seen copies of their union contracts, did not receive union wages, and did not take part in union procedures. The only benefit for most was receiving health insurance. Among

⁹⁸ Vlae Kershner, "Garment Company to Pay Ex-Workers," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 18, 1983; Dong, 314.

⁹⁹ Butler, "Inside S.F.'s Cloistered Sewing Shops."

¹⁰⁰ Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*, 107.

non-unionized seamstresses, “an unfavorable image [of the ILGWU] persists... because of failures in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s,” when businesses and leaders in the community “successfully labelled the organizers as Communists, a strong pejorative in Chinatown where many of the people have earlier fled from communism.” Koh specifically pointed to the failed attempt at Jung Sai as a reason why many did not trust the union’s methods, as it had been unsuccessful in getting the plant reopened. “The union,” one worker concluded, “has yet to prove itself in Chinatown.”¹⁰¹

Trapped between the continuing legacies of racial violence and discrimination during the Exclusion Era and the emerging uncertainties of a new political economic reality, Chinatown’s existing labor and social movements were unable to harness either the power of the immigrant working class or the strategic position of Chinatown within the transpacific economy. The strike’s often confused and contradictory internal politics exemplify the challenge of organizing within unprecedented social and material transformations, but they also speak to the compatibility between the old regime and the new. When the resurgence of domestic garment sweatshops became a national issue during the 1980s, most Americans would express shock and horror at the possibility of such dire conditions existing in their own backyards. By then, scholars and activists alike knew to blame “globalization” for, in the words of one labor leader, “[creating] a Taiwan within the United States.”¹⁰² Yet as the trajectory of the Jung Sai strike shows, long-standing domestic ideas about race, gender, and labor would have as much a hand in perpetuating the cruelties and inequalities of industrial garment manufacturing as globalized production chains. It was upon the fault lines produced by a century of exclusion that the globalized garment industry of the future had planted its feet, while at the same time offering employers novel mechanisms for disciplining an increasingly diverse and vulnerable workforce. Contesting against this regime would thus require a combination of old and new thinking alike. By the end of the 1970s, the hard task of finding this combination was largely left to a network of Asian American legal aid advocates, worker centers, and social service providers, who would play an increasingly prominent role in the politics of immigrant worker organizing during the late 20th century.

¹⁰¹ Barbara E. Koh, “Alterations Needed: A Study of the Disjunction between the Legal Scheme and Chinatown Garment Workers,” *Stanford Law Review* 36, no. 3 (February 1984): 825–62.

¹⁰² Bao, *Holding up More than Half the Sky*, 267; Rosen, *Making Sweatshops*, 2-3.

Chapter 3 — *Hotel Asiamerica: Little Tokyo and the globalization of Los Angeles*

In the spring of 1972, Frank Chuman looked out at the empty lot on the corner of 2nd Street and imagined he was seeing into the future of Little Tokyo, Los Angeles. For Chuman, this future took the shape of a four hundred-room, seventeen-story luxury hotel, “graceful to behold and subtly attractive.” He pictured businessmen from Tokyo conducting their meetings in the hotel’s cocktail lounge and banquet halls. He saw tourists being served by waitstaff in kimonos, sleeping in zashiki rooms on authentic tatamis, and soaking in an “o-furo” bath. “From the moment the guest, tourist, visitor, or business client enters the hotel,” Chuman explained, “he must experience Japan.”¹

Chuman’s plan for his future hotel’s Japanese aesthetic was not merely an idiosyncratic dream. Rather, the project’s design reflected both the city government and local private industry’s shared desire, expressed through an ambitious urban renewal plan, that Los Angeles become the United States’ gateway to Japanese business and tourism. Little Tokyo’s cultural and economic ties to Japan made it ideally suited to serve as a landing ground for this new influx of people and capital from across the Pacific, and the hotel would be their first port of call. Chuman likewise thought himself—a son of working class Japanese immigrants turned prominent lawyer—and his diverse array of white, Japanese, and Korean American business partners to be ideally suited to serve as brokers who would facilitate these new movements and exchanges between East and West. To reflect their transpacific mission, the group dubbed their development company Asiamerica, Incorporated. They soon set about contacting potential business partners from throughout the Pacific Rim, telling hotel operators and construction companies that Asiamerica was a “very strong contender” for Little Tokyo’s hotel contract.²

Chuman’s self-confidence was rooted in his decades-long experience as a civic leader within the Nikkei—or Japanese American—professional community, a position which had already allowed him to play the role of intermediary between Japanese and American interests. By the early 1970s, his Rolodex was packed with names drawn from the board-rooms of Tokyo to the rosters of the Los Angeles

¹ “Proposal and Proposed Development Plan for Hotel and Commercial Complex, Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project, by Asiamerica, Inc,” April 5, 1972, Box 560, folder 2, Frank F. Chuman papers (henceforth abbreviated as “UCLA FCP”), UCLA Special Collections.

² Frank Chuman to Shinichi Sukeyasu, May 14 1971, Box 559, folder 8, UCLA FCP.

Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA). Neither friends in high places nor an impressive zeal for the project would prove to be enough to seal the deal, however. Within a year's time, and to Frank Chuman's immense shock, the Community Redevelopment Agency passed over Asiamerica to grant exclusive negotiating rights for the hotel to the Kajima Corporation, a multinational Japanese construction company. The hotel's future visitors would indeed be able to "experience Japan," but Asiamerica would have no part in putting on the show.

For Southern California's Japanese American community, the Los Angeles city government's slighting of a local, Nikkei developer in favor of Kajima would become emblematic of Little Tokyo's colonization by Japanese interests during the postwar period. As a number of critics, including Frank Chuman himself, would charge in the months to follow, the city had firmly put foreign moneyed interests over those of Little Tokyo's existing residents, business owners, and regional patrons, the vast majority of whom were working- and middle-class Nikkei. Lost in the drama surrounding the CRA's decision, however, was the fact that Asiamerica's own vision for Little Tokyo was no less cosmopolitan, globalized, and commercialized than the one offered by Kajima; indeed, Asiamerica had once hoped to recruit Kajima as a business partner in their own development scheme in order to lend additional legitimacy to their "Japan-themed" design. In their quest to realize Little Tokyo's first luxury hotel, Chuman, other elite Japanese American transnationalists, and the CRA had already replaced a far *more* localized vision of urban renewal—one proposed ten years earlier by a group of neighborhood small business owners—converting an attempt at saving a small-scale enclave economy into a project of large-scale capital accumulation. In doing so, they not only helped pave the way for the arrival of Japanese corporations like Kajima, Sumitomo Bank, and Bank of Tokyo; they had also turned Little Tokyo into the unwitting (and largely unrecognized) epicenter of Los Angeles's eventual transformation into a modern "world city": a meeting-ground for globalized networks of labor, leisure, and lucre.

Faced with fiscal crisis and civil unrest during the late 20th century, municipal governments across the United States began remodeling ethnic enclaves to attract foreign investment as part of a larger turn towards private funding for urban renewal. In the process, cities across the country were able to refashion themselves as multicultural, cosmopolitan sites of leisure and capital accumulation. Defining and enabling the early success of globalized development were Asian American elite professionals who, motivated by a

desire to both save and control ethnic economies, actively sought and procured Asian private investment in Asian American urban enclaves. Asian American elite activism during the 1960s and 1970s capitalized on novel phenomena such as the dramatic boom of Asian economies, the deregulation of international finance, and the concurrent decline of American industry. But their particular strategies of attracting private Asian capital to the U.S. were largely drawn from pre-existing forms of immigrant transnationalism, self-stereotyping, and intra-ethnic exploitation, which elites subsequently adapted to suit the demands of the postwar transpacific economy.

As old methods met new conditions, a few crucial changes took place. First, the target audience for Japanese American self-stereotyping expanded from middle-class white America to an international professional and tourist class—a class which, in the case of Little Tokyo, explicitly included upwardly mobile Japanese professionals. Second, the scale of the projects themselves expanded significantly, from street festivals and souvenir shops to themed resorts and luxury hotels. This shift in scope necessitated far greater extents of capital and technical expertise than the Japanese American community were capable of marshaling on their own, prompting their elites to look first to Japan and then to the Los Angeles city government for assistance. Along the way, individuals like Frank Chuman made the class and gendered divides of Japanese American society—previously used by ethnic elites to regulate their community’s relationship to a hostile white majority—available to state and corporate entities, who would in turn leverage them in the service of economic restructuring on both sides of the Pacific.³

The history of public-private development in Little Tokyo captures critical continuities between the Cold War and the emergence of contemporary globalization, with Asian American model minority politics

³ My analysis of Asian American professionals’ role in globalizing processes builds on the work of scholars like Mae Ngai, Kay Anderson, N. D. B. Connolly, and Geraldo Cadava, whose work has highlighted the role of minority landlords, business owners, and politicians in perpetuating various dimensions of racial capitalism within non-white communities. Within the field of Asian American history, Ngai, Anderson, and other scholars have pointed to the specific role Asian merchants and entrepreneurs played in exoticizing neighborhoods like Chinatown and Little Tokyo for white tourists and capital investment. See Mae Ngai, *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Greg (“Fritz”) Umbach and Dan Wishnoff, “Strategic Self-Orientalism: Urban Planning Policies and the Shaping of New York City’s Chinatown, 1950-2005,” *Journal of Planning History* 7, no. 3 (August 2008): 214–38, Kay Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875 - 1980*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*, (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), Geraldo L. Cadava, *Standing on Common Ground: The Making of a Sunbelt Borderland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

themselves acting as a bridge between postwar liberalism and the multicultural, multinational, and neoliberal paradigm to follow. Thanks to the Cold War and the growing strategic importance of the Asia Pacific to the United States, legal equality for Asian Americans had become a matter of geopolitical importance for the U.S. government by the 1950s. Japanese Americans in Southern California with the means to do so could now buy property in previously all-white neighborhoods and send their children to previously all-white schools as a result of legal reforms, fought for by men like Frank Chuman who leveraged their education and class status to ensure middle class Japanese Americans a slice of postwar abundance. Yet as historian Ellen Wu has meticulously documented, there was a limit on the extent to which Japanese American elites were willing to seek direct assistance from the state, both due to a rising anti-Black politics surrounding welfare and public provision, and to an abiding fear of government overreach when it came to ethnic affairs. Using the rhetoric of ethnic self-sufficiency, Japanese American elites instead appealed to both federal and municipal governments to facilitate greater U.S.-Japan cultural and economic exchange, through which they could then accrue cultural and financial resources for both themselves and their communities. Their resulting “success story” during the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s would rely heavily upon the marriage of private Japanese capital and the facilitating hand of domestic governments, which provided the containers through which foreign funds could flow.⁴

Urban renewal represented the apotheosis of Nisei professionals’ faith in the ability of public-private and foreign-domestic partnerships to benefit the Japanese American community. While Nisei redevelopers in Little Tokyo initially turned to Japanese capital to avoid relying on government assistance, it was ultimately the alignment of Nisei interests with those of Los Angeles city hall that opened the floodgates for Japanese corporate investment. Both groups hoped to bring Japanese tourists and businesses to Los Angeles, and viewed Little Tokyo as the ideal means of attracting them. To do so, Nisei professionals drew upon the neighborhood’s historic function as a stage for consolidating,

⁴ See Victor Bascara, *Model-Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 41-42, and Jun, *Race for Citizenship*, 128-132 on the compatibility of Asian American model minority stereotypes and neoliberal, “noninterventionist” prerogatives regarding the relationship between the state and inequality. Bascara and Jun both note that the mainstream view of Asian Americans as a minority capable of “making it” without relying on the state buttresses the idea that racial equality can not only be achieved without government interference, but is in fact incompatible with programs like welfare spending. In reality, of course, the Asian American “success story” was never as complete as its advocates claimed; nor could it have been possible without certain marked forms of state support.

performing, and commodifying various aspects of Japanese cultural identity for outside audiences, but now with the added imperative of large-scale capital accumulation. When corporations like Kajima arrived in Little Tokyo in the late 1960s, they thus found a repertoire of cultural and material mechanisms already capable of subsuming the experiences of the Japanese American diaspora to a fantasy of Japan, the needs of the longtime resident to the desires of the paying guest.

I am far from the first to identify global processes at work in domestic city planning and urban renewal. Little Tokyo in particular, and Asian American communities in general, have proven useful subjects for a number of scholarly studies regarding the role of ethnic brokers and enclaves in bringing about greater forms of transpacific connection.⁵ Yet most historical studies stop short of seeing projects like Little Tokyo as precursors to, much less constitutive of, contemporary globalization. The result is a conceptual and a chronological gap between urban renewal during the Cold War and the redevelopment practices that emerged to replace it, many of which have relied on global finance and international tourism to succeed.⁶ In other words, while historians have named some of the ways in which global exchanges of culture and commerce influenced urban renewal, we have yet to fully grasp how urban renewal's demise and its afterlives were affected by the new conditions of globalization. Asia's role in the

⁵ See, for instance, Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 2002), Miya Shichinohe-Suga, "Little Tokyo Reconsidered: Transformation of Japanese American Community through the Early Redevelopment Projects," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, no. 15 (2004): 237–56; Hillary Jenks, "'Home is Little Tokyo': Race, community, and memory in twentieth-century Los Angeles," Ph.D. diss., 2008, Daniel Iwama, Karen Umemoto, and Kanako Masuda, "Calling Nikkei to Empire: Diaspora and Trans/Nationalism in the Redevelopment of Historic Little Tokyo," *Journal of Historical Geography* 74 (October 2021): 44–54, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2021.08.007>.

⁶ A notable exception to this tendency within the historiography to avoid globalization as a descriptive framework is Cadava's *Standing on Common Ground*, which explicitly positions its description of redevelopment in the southwest as a part of globalizing processes on the border. More recently, For histories of urban renewal in a transatlantic Cold War context, see Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012) and Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For examples of historical studies which depart from this transatlantic focus, see Oda, *The Gateway to the Pacific*, A. K. Sandoval-Strausz, "Latino Landscapes: Postwar Cities and the Transnational Origins of a New Urban America," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (December 1, 2014): 804–31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jau657> and Lydia R. Otero, *La Calle: Spatial Conflicts and Urban Renewal in a Southwest City* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2010). Non-historians have generally been more receptive to understanding cities in general, and redevelopment in particular, as key sites in which globalization is produced and experienced during the late 20th century. For notable examples, see David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1985); Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*, Fifth Edition (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2018); Mike Davis and Robert Morrow, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York, 1990).

globalization of America makes Pacific-facing projects like Little Tokyo particularly useful for understanding how this transformation took place. As historian Andrew McKevitt has argued, the United States's earliest experience of contemporary globalization emerged from its encounters with Japan's cultural and commercial products during the 1970s and '80s. These encounters were consequences of "Cold War orientalism," but departed from it in crucial ways as Japan moved from being an American client state to a global competitor.⁷ This chapter merges McKevitt's insights on the historical origins of contemporary globalization with recent scholarship on urban renewal to highlight both the role of ethnic elites and local politics in globalizing processes, and the impact of globalizing processes upon the fate of ethnic communities.⁸

This chapter begins with an exploration of how Nisei transnationalism emerged out of the postwar moment, with transnationalism winning out over more cautious and skeptical views among Nisei professionals about their relationship to Japan. Part two briefly traces the trajectory Japanese American self-stereotyping from the early 20th century to the Cold War, surveying the landscape of transnational Nisei enterprises in Southern California. Part three delves into the early days of redevelopment in Little Tokyo, where a project that began as the local enterprise of neighborhood elites gradually evolved into a transnational enterprise as federal funds for urban renewal began to disappear during the late 1960s. Part four explores the rise and fall of Frank Chuman's Asiamerica, Inc. I show how Chuman and his colleagues actively pursued transpacific ties to developers and hotel operators from Hawai'i to Tokyo, only to proclaim their local allegiances after the CRA passed them over for Kajima. I conclude with a

⁷ Andrew C. McKevitt, *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁸ My analysis here draws from the work of David Held, et. al. in *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, a detailed account of globalization in both its historical and theoretical dimensions. The authors lay out a model of globalization which argues that it both reproduces old hierarchies and inequalities, while also generating new ones. Terming this process *stratification*, the authors note that "the pattern of stratification of contemporary globalization is quite distinct from that of earlier eras," highlighting two main historical factors: the Cold War hierarchy of "core allies, client states and notionally non-aligned states" and the "old North-South hierarchy" of colonialism. I see both these hierarchy-producing events as being present within the history of redevelopment in Little Tokyo, while having been augmented by the "new" of contemporary globalization—in this case, the presence of multinational corporations like Kajima, whose border-crossing activity was enabled by the post-Bretton Woods global financial system and a loosening U.S. regulatory apparatus towards overseas capital. See David Held et al., eds., *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002), 20, 27, 429.

brief evaluation of Kajima's final product—the New Otani Hotel—and the globalized Los Angeles to which it belonged.

I. The class character of Nisei transnationalism

The infrastructure of immigrant transnationalism upon which Japanese Americans helped construct contemporary globalization had a deeply engrained class character, a symptom of its imperial origins. During the first half of the twentieth century, intra-diaspora hierarchies were largely structured by the Nikkei community's relationship to the Japanese colonial state, which designated educated elite immigrants to lead the settlement of the western United States. Japanese Americans of all backgrounds had engaged in a wide range of transnational processes to fulfill various ambitions, needs, and desires: parents sent their U.S.-born children to Japan to be educated; adult Nisei made the same trip in search of greater economic and social opportunity; workers sent money and taxes back to Japan via a network of public and private institutions; "picture brides" travelled across the Pacific to marry men in America; emigrants read Japanese newspapers, pamphlets, and literature. While such practices were ubiquitous among Japanese Americans, elites maintained a special access to—and derived special authority from—transnational flows of labor, capital, and knowledge, using them to manage hierarchies within the diaspora community. As a number of scholars of the Japanese and Japanese American diaspora during the interwar period have noted, workers could be disciplined, women and sexual minorities controlled, and political enemies excluded via transnational legal and economic processes.⁹

After World War II, these same hierarchies became reoriented around Japanese Americans' newfound relationship with the U.S. government, one which allowed well-positioned Nisei to engage in emerging networks of trade and political influence between the U.S. and Japan. The ability for these privileged few—usually college-educated men involved in private enterprise—to access resources from both sides of the Pacific reinforced their positions of leadership, as they merged personal pursuits of profit

⁹ Yuji Ichioka, *The Issei: The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924* (New York : London: Free Press ; Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1988), Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Eiichiro Azuma, "Dancing with the Rising Sun: Strategic Alliances between Japanese Immigrants and Their 'Home' Government," in *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), Michael Jin, *Citizens, Immigrants, and the Stateless: A Japanese American Diaspora in the Pacific* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2021).

with their public pursuit of political power for Japanese Americans. It also reinforced the specific class and gender dynamics of transpacific processes themselves, which tended to revolve around the tastes and material interests of Nisei professionals. Facilitating the consolidation of such tastes and interests were civic organizations like the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), where men and women of similar social classes not only organized together towards Japanese American legal equality, but constructed a shared world of leisure, cultural knowledge, and entrepreneurial pursuits. The ideological environment of the Cold War made it easy for Nisei brokers to reconcile their dual roles as both civic leaders and private businessmen—and the class tensions they occasionally generated—as part of the same patriotic crusade. Their personal success, the success of the U.S.-Japan relationship, and the success of Japanese Americans were linked together under the imperatives of domestic racial liberalism and global capitalist democracy.

The path to Cold War Nisei transnationalism was by no means smooth, however. Throughout the 1950s, the national JACL grappled repeatedly the cultural, economic, and political re-entanglement of the United States and Japan and its implications for Nikkei communities. Proponents of what the JACL referred to as “interventionism”—actively participating in U.S.-Japan affairs and even championing Japanese interests before the U.S. federal government—believed that securing Japanese Americans’ domestic civil rights hinged largely on securing a healthy, collaborative relationship between the two countries. Anti-interventionists, on the other hand, feared that wading into U.S.-Japan relations would reignite accusations of dual loyalty and drag them back into the terrors of the recent past. Certainly, up until 1945, the JACL had almost exclusively championed assimilationism as the solution to anti-Japanese discrimination, in stark contrast to the more flexible and even Japanese nationalist approaches of now-defunct Issei organizations like the Japanese Cultural Center of Southern California or the Japanese Association of America. The JACL had relied in particular upon narratives of patriotic sacrifice—whether from Nisei soldiers or internees—to reclaim the full rights of citizenship in the war’s immediate aftermath. But the changed geopolitical conditions of the postwar period had transformed Japan from a bitter enemy to a crucial Cold War ally in the Pacific, a situation which demanded a different kind of patriotism from Japanese Americans. Now, any activity that maintained Japan’s status as a client state and trading partner could be construed as advancing America’s regional interests. By the late 1950s, hundreds

of well-positioned Nisei elites had already begun taking advantage of this fact as they lobbied for more favorable trade deals with Japan, spoke publicly about bolstering the U.S.-Japan relationship, and sought out roles in various private transpacific enterprises.¹⁰

Transnationalism also functioned, and was understood, as a class project. Indeed, while the majority of anti-interventionists were concerned about reviving accusations of dual loyalty, others were more worried about what interventionism meant for preserving the civic-minded nature of Japanese American political activism, much of which had emerged from the shared suffering of forced evacuation and incarceration during the war. The JACL's Southwest Los Angeles chapter president, Kango Kunitsugu, argued vigorously against interventionism on the grounds that it would turn the JACL into "lobbyists for Japanese business interests," a "mere voice in Washington which will speak for private interests and not for public interest." Kunitsugu was almost certainly referring to the exploits of one man in particular: the JACL's Washington, D.C. representative and former President, Mike Masaoka, who by 1958 had become an ardent champion for liberalizing trade between the U.S. and Japan and had even begun lobbying on behalf of U.S. importers of Japanese goods. Even though he would later stress that his commitment to the JACL and its "militant Americanism" came first, Masaoka nevertheless came to assemble a lucrative consulting business that represented a number of Japanese commercial interests, work that would become his "bread and butter."¹¹ Masaoka's pro-Japan ventures had already made him a controversial figure within the JACL, but he was far from alone in his pursuit of personal success within U.S.-Japan trade relations. Nisei architects could frequently be found working on joint ventures between Japanese and U.S. developers, from the Japanese Center in San Francisco to the U.S. consulate in Kobe, Japan. Nisei owners of import/export businesses both stoked Americans' growing interest in Japanese goods and satisfied Japanese Americans' consumer desires, selling everything from handicrafts to Sony

¹⁰ Oda, *Gateway to the Pacific*, 168-172.

¹¹ Mike Masaoka and Bill Hosokawa, *They Call Me Moses Masaoka: An American Saga*, (New York: Morrow, 1987), 255, 272; Oda, *Gateway to the Pacific*, 167.

electronics. Restaurateurs adapted Japanese cuisines for American palettes, with categories like *hibachi* moving from strange, exotic fare to a more mainstream place in the middle-class dining experience.¹²

The '50s also saw the arrivals of several Japanese corporations to the United States, including the Bank of Sumitomo and Toyota, both of which employed Nisei brokers—many of them legal professionals who had cut their teeth on Japanese American civil rights activism—to facilitate their overseas expansion.¹³ Here, Frank Chuman's biography provides an illustrative example of the linkages between Nisei civil activism and transnational success. Born in Santa Barbara, California to a family of working class Japanese immigrants in 1917, Chuman was raised and educated in Los Angeles, attending the University of Southern California Law School for roughly one year until his studies were interrupted by the forced evacuations in the spring of 1942. Chuman worked as a hospital administrator in the Manzanar camp until he was permitted to return to law school, graduating in 1945 from the University of Maryland just as the war in the Pacific was coming to a close. After receiving his degree, Chuman immediately went to work for the special counsel to the JACL, where he cut his professional teeth defending former internees who had been pressured to give up their American citizenship and were now living under threat of deportation. Chuman notes in his memoirs that prior to his appointment, he had been effectively isolated from the particular problems of Japanese Americans: "I did not read any of the West Coast newspapers and I was not a member of the [JACL]. I had no knowledge of the many legal issues involving persons of Japanese ancestry."¹⁴ As a member, however, he threw himself into the work, and by

¹² Oda, *Gateway to the Pacific*, 1-2, 151; Meghan Warner Mettler, *How to Reach Japan by Subway: America's Fascination with Japanese Culture, 1945-1965*, 123-124, 127-128; McKevitt, *Consuming Japan*, 163-164; "Display Ad 50 -- SONY: Santa's Best Friend," *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1961; Mary Lou Luther, "Clotheslines," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1978; Alexander Kaplan-Reyes, "A Pillar of Little Tokyo: Uyeda Department Store," *Discover Nikkei*, accessed October 26, 2021, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2009/5/12/it-community-profiles/>.

¹³ "JACL Stand on U.S.-Japan Argued"; "'Benchmark' asks, Nishikawa answers," *Pacific Citizen*, October 4, 1957, sec. A; Jobo Nakamura, "Nisei in Tokyo," *Rafu Shimpo*, December 20, 1956; Oda, *Gateway to the Pacific*, 163.

¹⁴ Frank F. Chuman, *Manzanar and Beyond: Memoirs of Frank F. Chuman, Nisei Attorney*, (San Mateo, CA: Asian American Curriculum Project, 2011), 87.

the 1950s had moved from the citizenship renunciation cases to integrating the suburbs outside Los Angeles.¹⁵

Chuman described work for the JACL as both personally and politically satisfying, but it had other advantages as well. Being a prominent legal activist pulled him back into the social orbit of the Japanese American community, bringing him into contact with Southern California's Nisei professional class who soon welcomed him as one of their own. Chuman eventually rose to become the national JACL's legal counsel and was nominated numerous times by his local district for the position of JACL national president, finally accepting and winning election in 1960. As legal counsel, Chuman joined the pro-interventionists in advocating for greater Nisei participation in U.S.-Japan affairs, even proposing the official framework the JACL would eventually use to sanction Nisei individuals' transnational ventures. Around the same time, Chuman began working as the official legal counsel to the Japanese Consulate General in Los Angeles and would advocate on behalf of Japanese economic interests for the next twenty years. His work for the Consul General and his leadership position within the JACL provided him with numerous opportunities to meet Japanese business executives, many of whom he would later take on as clients in his private law practice and accompany on trips to Japan.¹⁶

Kango Kunitsugu's objection to Nisei interventionism speaks to the growing class divide which transnationalism created between fellow Nisei professionals. Disparities among the Japanese American elite had certainly existed before the war and persisted even through incarceration; indeed, the violence of evacuation, incarceration, and the expropriation of Japanese American property often exacerbated certain class, gender, and political divides. But the rhetoric promoted by the JACL during the immediate postwar period emphasized internment as a shared experience, a leveling force which had reconsolidated Japanese Americans through their suffering and sacrifice (much the same way World War II had reconsolidated the United States). The transnational success of men like Mike Masaoka and Frank Chuman, who represented

¹⁵ Scott Kurashige, *Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 244; Charlotte Brooks, *Alien Neighbors, Foreign Friends: Asian Americans, Housing, and the Transformation of Urban California* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 210, 213, 219.

¹⁶ Frank Chuman to Consul General Matao Uriu, March 13, 1963, Box 557, folder 3, UCLA FCP; "President's Corner: For a Bigger Nisei Week Festival," *Pacific Citizen*, March 2nd, 1962; Chuman, *Manzanar and Beyond*, 106, 127.

the upper stratum of Nisei brokers in terms of their access and influence, now threatened the fragile coherence of Japanese America not only by diverting the JACL away from its civic mission, but by elevating well-connected Nisei at the expense of Japanese Americans' interests overall. Kunitsugu seems to have realized that sooner or later, the majority of Japanese Americans would either be confined to more unassuming positions within the new transpacific economy, or else be stranded outside of it entirely.

More than just a discussion about whether the JACL should adapt to Japanese Americans' renewed transnationalism, then, the intervention debate was also about who should benefit materially from the process. Even pro-interventionist Dr. Roy Nishikawa, who was JACL national president during the late 1950s, balked at the idea of the JACL becoming directly involved in areas "strictly commercial in nature," emphasizing that the organization should stick to issues like "immigration and naturalization, soldier brides, vested property, [and] temporary farm laborers."¹⁷ At the heart of the debate was whether the personal successes of well-connected Nisei professionals served as an index of Japanese American success more broadly, or if—as Kunitsugu's comments suggested—there was an inherent tension between the private pursuits of men like Mike Masaoka and what would benefit even other Nisei professionals, much less the Japanese American community writ large. As the JACL's official policy threw the floodgates open for Nisei transnationalism, pessimists like Kunitsugu would have increasing cause for concern.

II. Selling Japan

As the Cold War had enabled Japanese Americans to make significant advances in their civil rights through legal and legislative activism, so now did it enable a thin slice of the Japanese American community to achieve economic prosperity and political influence by becoming transnational operatives within the U.S.-Japan relationship. Both the capital and the knowledge they accumulated as a result reinforced these Nisei professionals' elite positions within their communities, as their ability to access the institutions of one country could often be leveraged into accessing the institutions of the other. As a result, three distinct layers of Japanese American society began to emerge, defined by their access (or lack

¹⁷ "Benchwarmer."

thereof) to the transpacific arena. The first consisted of upper-class, highly mobile elites like Frank Chuman, whose language abilities, political cache, and institutional affiliations allowed them to carve relatively autonomous roles as brokers to interests throughout the Pacific, frequently traveling from Los Angeles to Tokyo to Honolulu and back. The second consisted of middle- to upper-middle class professionals who made a living at the intersection of U.S.-Japan relations, but who did so locally: owners of import-export shops, artists, architects, and gardeners who designed Japan-themed attractions in the U.S., or restaurateurs serving Japanese food to American diners. Finally, the third tier consisted of working-class Japanese Americans whose primary relations to the transpacific economy were either as consumers of its goods, or as the employees of the men and women in the tiers above them. In this way, they became instrumental to delivering a local “experience of Japan” to mainstream America, but had very little control over the contents of that experience or who would pay the price for whatever negative externalities such commercial ventures produced.

The Cold War did not merely provide a political incentive for Japanese American economic mobility; it helped create a more favorable cultural environment for consumers of Japan-themed goods and experiences. The 1940s and ‘50s saw white Americans become increasingly interested in representations of Asia and the Pacific, their curiosity bound up with the expansion of U.S. military and political influence in the East during and immediately after World War II. Japan and Hawai’i both represented the exotic periphery of the informal U.S. empire, the latter gaining prominence in the white American imagination during its quest for statehood during the 1950s.¹⁸ As air travel became more accessible, Hawai’i had turned into a popular tourist destination for middle-class families, with hotel companies such as InterIsland Resorts pitching themselves as simultaneously luxurious and affordable. InterIslands’ facilities manifested white mainlanders’ expectations of Hawai’i as a laid-back playground, in some cases directly invoking the islands’ colonial status by converting plantations into vacation resorts. Often, the appeal for guests was returning to a simpler times of the past while on vacation; one InterIslands hotel was supposedly designed “to reflect the comfortable, turn-of-the-century plantation

¹⁸ Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), Mettler, *How to Reach Japan by Subway*.

days,” while another situated alongside “King Kalakaua’s summer residence” had “all the easy charm and dignity of an earlier time.”¹⁹

For those unable to make the journey themselves, developers were more than willing to bring the sights and spectacles of the Pacific directly to their front doors. Hot on the heels of a nationwide “Tiki craze” in the 1950s, when Polynesian-inspired design and Tiki bars proliferated across the American landscape, California saw a local flourishing of East Asian-themed attractions. In San Diego, the new Sea World theme park built in 1964 featured an “authentic” Japanese pearl village where tourists could watch as a team of six “Japanese girls” dove for oysters in a glass tank. Two years later, a Japanese pavilion opened in the Descanso Botanical Gardens north of Los Angeles, where guests could sip tea in the shade of bamboo and Japanese black pines.²⁰ In San Luis Obispo, California Theme Resorts, a Nisei-owned development company, opened a Japanese-themed hotel and resort called “Saru-Hashi” which catered primarily to white American businessmen.²¹ These attractions emphasized an “authentic” Japanese experience to varying degrees, often grounded in direct Japanese involvement in their development and operation. In the case of Sea World’s Japanese Village, the \$1 million dollar attraction was sponsored by a Japanese pearl company, with rocks shipped from Japan and buildings designed and manufactured by Kajima. This authenticity was curated in such a way to serve the white consumer by delivering on their expectations for a certain kind of immersive cultural experience. “You could climb aboard a jet and be in Nippon in nothing flat,” a *Times* writer remarked—or, you could simply pile the family into the car, drive over to Mission Bay, and still get to see “a bit of storied Japan.”²²

Japanese Americans were often involved in designing and delivering these enterprises, but—with the exception of Saru-Hashi—were rarely ever in charge of them. Gardeners and landscapers were in particular high demand, given Japanese Americans’ regional dominance of the industry and the

¹⁹ Sarah Miller-Davenport, *Gateway State: Hawai‘i and the Cultural Transformation of American Empire*, Politics and Society in Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); “Hawaii: Fun Birds of Hawaii,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1976.

²⁰ Dan MacMasters, “A Japanese Pavilion,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1966.

²¹ California Theme Resorts Corporation, Specialized Sales Promotion and Total Environmental Experience Applied to the Little Tokyo Hotel (Los Angeles, California: CTR Corporation, 1972), Box 560, folder 1, UCLA FCP.

²² Tom Cameron, “Property Development Innovation Is Success,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 1964.

proliferation of interest in Japanese zen gardens and horticulture. A Nisei flower merchant helped sponsor the Descanso Gardens project, a Nisei landscaper named Joe Yamada and his partner were hired to work on Sea World's Japanese village, and another Nisei landscaper was tasked with building and managing a Japanese garden at Dodger Stadium. Japanese American participants were often brought onto these projects by white developers to provide cultural interpretation between American audiences and Japanese content, their presumed innate foreignness marking them as "experts" on Japan despite the fact that most of those involved were born or raised in the United States. In the case of Dodger Stadium's Nisei gardener, Mich Inamura, local press coverage noted that he had never been to Japan and relied largely on books and consultations with employees at the Japanese consulate to carry out his work.²³

Nisei professionals were not starting entirely from scratch, however. While many needed to read up on Japanese customs and aesthetic preferences, Nisei also had a vast repertoire of self-stereotyping and self-orientalizing strategies to draw from, accumulated over half a century of surviving violent anti-Asian racism and a system of legal exclusion in the U.S. Scholars Fritz Umbach and Dan Wishnoff have identified "strategic self-orientalism" as the design and aesthetic components of Asian American participation in crafting exotic associations around their people, neighborhoods, and cultural productions. By definition, self-orientalism's expressions were a marriage of what Asian Americans themselves were willing to display and what white Americans wanted to see. During the early decades of the Cold War—and particularly in the wake of the Korean War—what white Americans wanted were explanations of why Asia was worth the spilling of American blood, and reasons why Asian people were assimilable into American capitalist democracy. Yet fulfilling these desires were often expressed in the neutral terms of "educating" U.S. citizens about their Asian neighbors and allies, both at home and abroad. Japanese gardens, tea ceremonies, and cuisine could at once entertain and edify, particularly if delivered through the "authentic" hands of Japanese Americans, whose diasporic and immigrant identities were elided in favor of a flattened, timeless version of "storied Japan." The end products fit squarely within what historian Jessie Kindig has named "High Imperial Aesthetic": "a style that turned foreign policy into a language for everyday life, depoliticizing the spread of American empire and obscuring much of its

²³ Khan Komai, "O'Malley's 'Nut On Upkeep,'" *Rafu Shimpo*, December 19, 1966, EastView Global Press Archive.

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Fig. 3.1-3.2: Advertisements for Japan Air Lines featuring kimono-wearing women from 1960 and 1962.

violence, and suggesting that ordinary Americans could reap the fruits of global engagement without much discomfort or challenge.”²⁴

Few places was this aesthetic more evident than in the gendered vision of fantasy Nisei and Japanese developers co-produced. Many of the aforementioned projects featured female staff, hired to dress in traditional costume and serve majority-white guests. The Descanso Gardens pavilion featured kimono-wearing Japanese American waitresses, while Sea World's village had its Japanese women pearl divers. Such displays were hardly limited to the recreational facilities; when Sumitomo Bank opened a new building in Los Angeles in 1963, “visitors were greeted by attractive kimonoed hostesses distributing fortune cookies and refreshments,” with some cookies containing the slip to “a \$10 savings account” inside.²⁵ At these sites, customer service and cultural performance quickly blurred into one another,

²⁴ Jessie Kindig, “The Sorrow and the Self-Pity,” *The Baffler*, October 3, 2022, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-sorrow-and-the-self-pity-kindig>.

²⁵ Vartanig G. Vartan, “Branch Banking Thrives Under the California Sun,” *New York Times*, October 5, 1963.

reproducing white American conceptions of Japanese refinement, elegance, and servility as embodied by Japanese—or, just as frequently, Japanese American—women.

The strategic use of exotic femininity to invite mainstream American acceptance of Japanese Americans had a long history. In Los Angeles, the annual Nisei Week festival in Little Tokyo had included a beauty pageant since its founding during the 1930s, an event which simultaneously consolidated the community around shared expectations for Nisei women and communicated “ethnic fantasies” to outside observers. Queens were ambassadors to mainstream America, and particularly to the city’s ruling elite: many were tasked with greeting the Mayor and other politicians during official events involving the Japanese American community.²⁶ During the postwar period, Japanese American elites’ strategic use of beautiful Nisei women fed into mainstream American perceptions of Japan as a feminized, subservient nation relative to the United States. As historian Naoko Shibusawa has pointed out, the image of a kimono-wearing geisha quickly became a stand-in for Japan, the U.S.-Japan relationship characterized in terms of a “love affair.”²⁷ Japan’s transformation in the American imagination from “Yellow peril” to “geisha ally” helped justify and explain its postwar rehabilitation into a U.S. client state in the Pacific, but it also bled into Americans’ consumer relationships to Japanese goods, services and “experiences.” Japanese businesses hoping to appeal to American consumers, both in Japan and in the United States, quickly learned to deploy Japanese women and their bodies in ways that benefitted their own bottom line.²⁸ As a result, Kimono-wearing women were prominently featured in both Japanese and Japanese American commerce, from stewards for Japan Airlines to brand mascots for various food and household objects (fig. 3.1-3.2). For Americans visiting Japan during the 1950s and ‘60s—including Americans of

²⁶ Kurashige, *Celebration and Conflict*, 56, 65, 145; Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain, *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 62; “Council Lauds Nisei for Children’s Day,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1962;

²⁷ Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally*, 291.

²⁸ This adaptation on the part of Japanese businesses points to a larger reconfiguration in postwar Japan towards ideas of gender and sexuality. Japanese women were being encouraged through both U.S. and Japanese state propaganda to “adopt consumerist attitudes and the white, heterosexual, and middle-class view of gender relations” while simultaneously being offered up as sexual conquests for American occupiers. See Ji Hee Jung, “Seductive Alienation: The American Way of Life Rearticulated in Occupied Japan,” *Asian Studies Review* 42, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 498–516, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2018.1474171>, Robert Kramm, “Haunted by Defeat: Imperial Sexualities, Prostitution, and the Emergence of Postwar Japan,” *Journal of World History* 28, no. 3/4 (2017): 587–614, and Jan Bardsley, “Girl Royalty: The 1959 Coronation of Japan’s First Miss Universe,” *Asian Studies Review* 32, no. 3 (September 2008): 375–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820802302512>.

Asian descent—geisha were often a “must-see” attraction, first for men and eventually for blended audiences.²⁹ By the mid-1960s, both Japanese and Japanese American entrepreneurs had successfully adapted longer traditions of objectification and feminine service to a contemporary consumer market incentivized by geopolitical conditions to seek out cosmopolitan pleasures.

III. Making the global metropolis

While Japan-themed attractions were springing up across Southern California, Little Tokyo, Los Angeles—the traditional center of Japanese American life in the region—remained largely neglected by both the Anglo tourism trade and by Japanese developers. This was in spite of the fact that many of the cultural and material strategies Nisei professionals deployed in venues like SeaWorld and Descanso Gardens had first originated within Little Tokyo’s ethnic economy: self-stereotyping, straddling the line between exoticism and familiarity, and using Japanese American women to stand in for the community at large. Little Tokyo’s marginal status in the landscape of Japan- and other ethnic-themed attractions would quickly change, however, as elite Nisei brokers and Japanese corporations alike began turning their attention—and investment dollars—back towards the enclave. Sparking their interest was a growing urban renewal initiative, initially introduced by the neighborhood’s Nisei business owners, which had come to garner the city government’s enthusiastic support. This, combined with the promise of federal funding for the project, would set into motion Little Tokyo’s rapid transformation from neglected enclave to Los Angeles’s very own “gateway to the Pacific.”

Created in the 1910s, Little Tokyo served as a social gathering ground and commercial center for Japanese Americans throughout the southern California region. Downtown Los Angeles at the turn of the 20th century was a highly ethnically and racially diverse area; Nikkei bumped shoulders with Black, Jewish, Mexican, and German Angelenos, many of whom were fellow recent arrivals to the city. Unlike Los Angeles’s “New Chinatown” and Olvera Street attractions, Little Tokyo was not initially designed as a tourist attraction for white Angelenos, instead containing dozens of restaurants, shops, social venues,

²⁹ Japan Gray Line “Bright ’N’ Gay Night Tour,” April 4, 1960, Box 126, folder 1, Chow family collection, Huntington Library; Katie A. Callam et al., “Marian Anderson’s 1953 Concert Tour of Japan: A Transnational History,” *American Music* 37, no. 3 (October 1, 2019): 266–329, <https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.37.3.0266>. See Oda, *Gateway to the Pacific*, 165–166 for more on Japanese and Japanese American stewardesses, flight attendants, and waitresses.



Fig. 3.3: Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron participating in Nisei Week festivities in 1940, flanked by Japanese American women. Source: UCLA Library Digital Collections.

and boardinghouses which swelled and emptied as Japanese American agricultural workers moved in and out of the city. Middle class Japanese Americans straining to rid themselves of the “ghetto” quickly moved to whatever sections of Los Angeles that restrictive housing laws and white violence would allow, making Little Tokyo the province of working class immigrant bachelors relatively early in its history. The neighborhood’s ethnic economy suffered significantly with the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act, which placed a total ban on immigration from the “Asiatic Triangle,” including Japan; as a result, Japanese American merchant elites began devoting significant energies towards retaining the business of their fellow community members, particularly the younger Nisei, who they feared were becoming too Americanized to continue patronizing Little Tokyo. These efforts only intensified after the onset of the Great Depression, culminating in the creation of an annual Nisei Week festival in 1934. The festival not only worked to ritualize Nisei participation in Little Tokyo’s economic survival; it became a useful container for Japanese American self-stereotyping aimed at white American consumers, taking nearby Chinatown and Olvera Street as illustrative examples. As ever, Japanese American women formed a large

part of the festival's appeal, with the celebration's centerpiece being a beauty pageant to crown a Nisei Week queen (fig. 3.3).³⁰

The enclave was also an important site of ethnic consolidation across lines of class and generational difference, a project initially led by first-generation Issei elites. As an essential meeting-place for regional Japanese Americans of multiple class backgrounds, as well as the seat of various Japanese state-affiliated ethnic organizations such as the Japanese Association of America, Little Tokyo became the staging ground for elite-driven performances of nationalist and ethnic unity. Cultural displays like Nisei Week served to hide class and political division "behind a facade of entrepreneurial success," with Nikkei business owners becoming stand-ins for the entire ethnic economy. Likewise, the festival established the most important intra-ethnic relationship as the one between Nisei shoppers and enclave entrepreneurs, with consumption becoming an act of social obligation.³¹ Absent were the migrant workers who helped produce and provide these goods; left wing union organizers; and the unruly youth, "good-time girls," and unemployed poor who constituted "the Nisei underclass," to use historian Paul Spickard's term. For them, intra-ethnic relations were largely understood and experienced as oppressive, dominating structures—as bad, if not worse, than the anti-Japanese racism of the white mainstream.³²

In the wake of the human and economic devastation wrought by Japanese evacuation and incarceration during World War II, Little Tokyo briefly became a residential center for returning Nikkei who had lost their homes and businesses. In their absence, the neighborhood had been re-dubbed Bronzeville, becoming a majority-Black residential and commercial hub catering to the demands of Los Angeles's growing African American population during the war. Historian Scott Kurashige has explored the brief period between 1945 and 1950 when the neighborhood's Black and Japanese American constituents labored to develop a constructive, cooperative politics together, a movement led by

³⁰ S. Kurashige, *Shifting Grounds*, 41-42; L. Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict*, 46-47. Both New Chinatown and Olvera Street were designed as tourist attractions from the start; Olvera Street in particular owed much of its existence to the efforts of preservationist and art collector Christine Sterling, who lobbied the city government to preserve remnants of Los Angeles's "Spanish" past. See William D. Estrada, "Los Angeles' Old Plaza and Olvera Street: Imagined and Contested Space," *Western Folklore* 58, no. 2 (1999): 107, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1500162>.

³¹ Lon Kurashige, *Celebration and Conflict*, 47-48.

³² Paul R. Spickard and Blackie Najima, "Not Just the Quiet People: The Nisei Underclass," *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 1 (1999): 78-94, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3641870>; S. Kurashige, *Shifting Grounds of Race*, 87-90.

progressive social activists on both sides. Their efforts were stymied both by the heavy hand of city government, and the intra-ethnic contradictions posed by Japanese American “success” as they gradually became model minorities during the postwar period.

Like many commercial downtowns across the United States, Little Tokyo’s economy struggled to survive as its consumer base of middle class Japanese Americans moved further into the suburbs, taking their spending with them. As discussed in the previous section, the politics which made this migration possible were the product of Cold War imperatives that incentivized white Americans to accept Asian neighbors where they might not otherwise have done so. Most Japanese Americans stayed within the borders of Los Angeles, but by and large avoided the inner city in favor of more outlying neighborhoods. Between 1950 and 1960, the Japanese American population of places like Gardena, Torrance, and Culver City had grown by as much as 400%.³³ The increasingly suburban character of the Asian American middle class represented a success story for legal activists like Frank Chuman who had devoted years to integrating white-majority neighborhoods in and around Los Angeles. Yet it posed a problem for them as well, as their enclave—which remained, in the eyes of Nikkei and white Americans alike, an important symbol of Japanese American community—fell into disrepair. Residents and outsiders alike complained that Little Tokyo was, in the words of the *Los Angeles Times*, turning into “a world of shabby hotels...and a culture diluted by contact with Western America’s largest metropolis.”³⁴ Adding fuel to the fire, the Los Angeles city government’s repeated expansion of the civic center area continuously threatened to swallow up the neighborhood’s geographic imprint altogether. The 1949 demolition of a large portion of the neighborhood for the new civic center building and police station were still fresh in many Little Tokyo residents and business owners’ minds when, in 1961, the city’s Traffic Department planned to condemn a large swath of East First Street—which ran right through the center of Little Tokyo—to add new lanes in order to accommodate civic center traffic.³⁵

³³ S. Kurashige, *Shifting Grounds*, 243.

³⁴ Ray Hebert, “Little Tokyo Makes New Survival Bid with Building Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 1970. On changing patterns of consumption as a result of suburbanization, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, Ill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2012).

³⁵ Jenks, “Home is Little Tokyo,” 226.

The revived threat from the city, combined with Japanese American fears that their community was losing its cultural coherence, spurred a number of local civic and business leaders into action. In the summer of 1963, a group calling itself the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Association (LTRA) began putting together a neighborhood redevelopment project intending to redress issues of housing and deteriorating “social conditions.” Led by local businessman Bruce Kaji, Japanese Chamber of Commerce president Katsuma Mukaeda, and Reverend Howard Toriumi of the neighborhood’s Presbyterian church, the LTRA initially planned the construction of a “20-story office building, 250-room hotel and a ‘high-quality’ department store” alongside a community center, additional parking structures, and “landscaped pedestrian ways,” all of which they would pay for through private sources of funding.³⁶ Despite its aversion to public support, however, the LTRA would take full advantage of its members’ connections in both Los Angeles’s city government and the Japanese private sector to fulfill their vision of a revived Little Tokyo. In doing so, the group hoped to participate in the recent reorientation of the city’s urban renewal program towards ethnic neighborhoods as new sites of commercial development, and do so on their own terms.

Urban renewal in Los Angeles had emerged from a progressive push to build public housing for poor and working class residents during the first half of the twentieth century. Throughout the 1930s and ‘40s, a coalition of left-liberal reformers succeeded in utilizing federal funding to significantly expand the city’s public housing projects, many of which were assembled to house the thousands of workers who flocked to Los Angeles to find jobs in its booming defense industry. By the late 1960s, red baiting and increasingly racialized ideas about the welfare state had shorn urban renewal of its more radical and redistributive possibilities.³⁷ As urban renewal became more accommodating of free market principles and commercial development, however, it was also becoming nominally more attentive to community input and the particular needs of racial minorities, a consequence of both grassroots activism from below

³⁶ “Beautification Plan for Little Tokyo Proposed,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 28, 1963.

³⁷ On the history of urban renewal in Los Angeles, see Tom Sitton, *Los Angeles Transformed: Fletcher Bowron’s Urban Reform Revival, 1938-1953* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Donald Craig Parson, *Making a Better World: Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); John H. M. Laslett, *Shameful Victory: The Los Angeles Dodgers, the Red Scare, and the Hidden History of Chavez Ravine* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2015); Leland T. Saito, *Building Downtown Los Angeles: The Politics of Race and Place in Urban America* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2022).

and legislative reform from above.³⁸ The 1965 Watts Rebellion—itsself the result of the cycle of segregation and disinvestment caused by white and middle class flight, an expanding carceral apparatus, and a weakened organized labor movement—was an especially powerful catalyst for renewed public and private attention towards Los Angeles’s neglected downtown district. The uprising initiated a downward economic spiral so alarming that business leaders and local politicians, once ambivalent about government-run redevelopment, began explicitly calling for it.³⁹ For their part, Los Angeles’s city planners hoped that by making the downtown district attractive to the middle-class again—if not for living, then at least for doing business—the mechanism of the market would help distribute suburban wealth back into the city to fund desperately needed social programs, making a second uprising less likely. But if urban redevelopment programs were to get off the ground, they would need to increasingly rely on aid from the federal government and investment from the private sector rather than the local tax base.

It was in this moment of flux within local approaches to urban renewal that the LTRA developed its first proposal for redevelopment in Little Tokyo. The group’s membership drew largely from the Nisei community’s second tier; most were local businessmen and community leaders, several of whom were well-connected within the Southern California region and were carving out their respective niches within the emerging world of transpacific commerce. The LTRA’s president, Bruce Kaji, got his start as a businessman running a small accounting firm out of Gardena that boasted Toyota Motors USA as an early client when the company first began exporting to the U.S. during the 1950s.⁴⁰ Tetsujiro Nakamura, the LTRA’s resident attorney, dedicated a portion of his private practice to helping Japanese “treaty traders” set up corporations and businesses in the United States.⁴¹ Another member, Kiichi Uyeda, was the owner of a Little Tokyo department store which did much of its postwar business importing and selling Japanese

³⁸ See Don Parson, “‘This Modern Marve’: Bunker Hill, Chavez Ravine, and the Politics of Modernism in Los Angeles,” *Southern California Quarterly* 75, no. 3–4 (October 1, 1993): 333–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41171684>,

³⁹ Mara Marks, “Shifting Ground: The Rise and Fall of the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency,” *Southern California Quarterly*, no. 3 (2004): 241–290.

⁴⁰ Bruce Kaji, Bruce T. Kaji Interview, interview by Martha Nakagawa, September 1, 2010, <https://ddr.densho.org/interviews/ddr-densho-1000-300-3/>, DDR.

⁴¹ Tesujiro Nakamura, Tetsujiro “Tex” Nakamura Interview, interview by Tom Ikeda and Barbara Takei, September 24, 2009, DDR, <https://ddr.densho.org/media/ddr-densho-1000/ddr-densho-1000-263-transcript-e5daf860e3.htm>.



Fig. 3.4: Artist's conception of the "Little Tokyo Office Building," designed by Cejay Parsons & Associates. Construction began in 1964. Image from the *Los Angeles Times*, December 6, 1964.

goods to both Japanese American and non-Japanese American consumers.⁴² Although their class positions were partially secured by their participation in U.S.-Japan commerce, the members of the LTRA did not initially consider themselves or their redevelopment project to be bridges for Japanese capital to Los Angeles, a fact reflected in the relatively community-oriented nature of their original plan. While a hotel and department store would cater to tourists, a community center, outdoor recreation areas, new churches and banks, and pavement-widening measures were intended to primarily serve the neighborhood's residents and longtime Japanese American visitors.⁴³ In addition, the LTRA pursued a sleek, modernist

⁴² "Display Ad 50 -- SONY: Santa's Best Friend," *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1961; Mary Lou Luther, "Clotheslines," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1978; Alexander Kaplan-Reyes / 12 May 2009, "A Pillar of Little Tokyo: Uyeda Department Store," Discover Nikkei, accessed October 26, 2021, <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2009/5/12/lt-community-profiles/>.

⁴³ Seidenbaum, "Little Tokyo's Sun Rises."

architecture that would fit in with the rest of the downtown area. A ten-story medical and professional office building, the first major project to be constructed, was designed by local architect firm Cejay Parsons & Associates, whose other “corporate modernist” office buildings already dotted the Los Angeles skyline. The “Little Tokyo office building” was no different: simple, rectangular, emphasizing its glass, steel, and concrete materials (fig. 3.4).⁴⁴

The self-financed nature of the Little Tokyo Office building was no accident. Despite the city government’s growing interest in financing redevelopment in the city downtown with public funds, the LTRA eschewed government assistance, raising the money for the office building entirely from future tenants. Their decision squared with a broader ideology of anti-welfare and aversion to federal assistance among Nisei community leaders, who felt it important to narrate their postwar success story on their own terms, as far-removed from the influence of the state as possible. As government-funded programs became increasingly associated with African American communities throughout the 1950s and ‘60s, Asian Americans seeking to distance themselves from other minorities made a point of community self-reliance. As Ellen Wu writes, Asian Americans knew they could not be white, but they could be “definitively not-Black.”⁴⁵ This strategy was amply rewarded by the local press, as white observers lauded the LTRA’s plans as the turning of a historical page. The *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed that “citizens of Japanese descent no longer have to worry about knowing their place,” and that redevelopment indicated the community’s willingness to move past its “ghetto philosophy” of the past.⁴⁶

Pooled resources from the Japanese American businessmen, attorneys, and doctors who would become its occupants helped secure the \$3 million loan for the Little Tokyo office building, but future projects proved harder to fund. The LTRA’s dream of community-driven and financed redevelopment was faltering. As Bruce Kaji would later put it, “There was no one around that had any wealth to do the projects that ordinarily there would be someone with money to get into a development. All the big money

⁴⁴ “‘Little Tokyo’ Office Building Under Way,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 6, 1964; Parsons, *Making a Better World*, 2; Oda, *The Gateway to the Pacific*, 150; Miles David Samson, *Hut Pavilion Shrine: Architectural Archetypes in Mid-Century Modernism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 1-4. Oda and Samson both point out in their respective works that mid-century modernism was heavily influenced by Japanese design and architectural principles.

⁴⁵ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 149.

⁴⁶ Art Seidenbaum, “Little Tokyo’s Sun Rises,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 1964.

that came in was either from Japan or from outside our community...”⁴⁷ The avoidance of one form of outside aid from the city of Los Angeles thus forced the LTRA into accepting another. Help came in the form of Kajima International Incorporated, the American arm of Japan’s Kajima Corporation. The company’s own account of its arrival in Little Tokyo claims the Los Angeles city government and the Japanese Consul General both approached its chairman, Morinosuke Kajima, and asked him to undertake the redevelopment of Little Tokyo two years before the LTRA even got off the ground. But as Daniel Iwana, Karen Umemoto, and Kanako Musada point out in their article on Kajima’s relationship with Los Angeles’s Nisei, it was a 1963 letter from the LTRA which kick-started the corporation’s interest in Little Tokyo. LTRA Vice President Katsuma Mukaeda promised that a “reconstructed Little Tokyo” could be “a major base for Japanese entry into the US Pacific Coast,” offering up the Nikkei enclave as a site for Japanese capital expansion.⁴⁸ By 1964, Kajima International Inc. was born, and two years later, was breaking ground on the company’s first major project in the United States: an office building in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles.⁴⁹ The Kajima Building, which would eventually house the Japanese Consulate General and Sumitomo Bank’s local headquarters, replaced two residency hotels with yet another modernist skyscraper. The building was completed in 1967 after a \$6 million investment from Kajima, with the *Los Angeles Times* praising its “classic simplicity” which melded “into the Civic Center architecture” next door. Kajima would later describe the building as standing “tall amidst the squalor of Little Tokyo to make a remarkable statement of modernity and progress,” ignoring the equally modern “Little Tokyo office building” just one block over.⁵⁰

Non-Japanese press coverage was unclear on whether the Kajima Building ought to be seen as a success for the local Japanese American community or for Japanese corporations, using the term “Japanese” to describe both local and overseas participants. This blurring was ultimately beneficial to

⁴⁷ Kaji interview.

⁴⁸ Daniel Iwana et al, “Calling Nikkei to Empire.”

⁴⁹ “First 50 Years in the USA – Kajima U.S.A. Inc.,” accessed October 27, 2021, <https://kajimausa.com/first-50-years-in-the-usa/>. The same company history also claims Kajima executives authored the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Master Plan eventually approved by the city planning department, which contradicts both Bruce Kaji’s account and contemporary reporting in the *Los Angeles Times*.

⁵⁰ “Dedication Scheduled for Kajima Building,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1967.

Kajima, as their arrival in the United States was framed by the media and the city government as a generous contribution to a local redevelopment effort (or, as one city councilman put it, “cleaning up the area”).⁵¹ It wasn't just the *Times* that failed to distinguish between Japanese and Japanese American success, however. Local Issei and Nisei, including members of the LTRA, were similarly eager to frame Kajima's investment in Little Tokyo as an index of their own miraculous recovery as a community since the end of the war. For some, the neighborhood's bright economic future even made the trauma of internment a worthwhile experience. “On the whole, in a way, it did the Niseis a world of good,” Ruth Ozaki said in 1965. “It pushed us ahead... The evacuation forced us to become independent.” Such attitudes further strengthened Japanese Americans' mainstream status as model minorities who professed “no bitterness” at their former discrimination, but were instead busily going about building themselves a better future by investing in multi-million dollar development projects—and refusing federal funds to do it.⁵²

Despite the LTRA's material achievements, its rhetorical usefulness, and a few powerful proponents, with both Mayor Sam Yorty and city councilmen lauding the project, LTRA-led redevelopment was still not enough to hold the city's relentless quest to turn its downtown into a viable commercial district at bay. City traffic engineers continued to prioritize moving more cars in and out of the Civic Center area, leading to a series of street-widening ordinances that successively encroached onto Little Tokyo and threatened to swallow half the neighborhood. The LTRA was still unable to accumulate the funds necessary to continue its own construction projects, including the proposed hotel and shopping center. As for Kajima International, although their debut had been a success, the company was still not licensed to conduct its own architectural design and construction in the US. and knew itself to be an inexperienced developer in the American context. As a result, Kajima “limited itself to undertaking design development,” which constrained its ability to expand construction in Little Tokyo.⁵³ It was during this lull in Kajima's local activities that the LTRA, lacking other options, began making formal appeals to the

⁵¹ Dave Felton, “Japanese Bless Site for 15-Story Building: Two Shinto Priests Conduct Rites for Ground Breaking in Little Tokyo,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 1966.

⁵² Jack Jones, “Japanese Americans Regain prosperity,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1965.

⁵³ “First 50 Years in the USA – Kajima U.S.A. Inc,” 7.

city government for assistance. By 1968, their requests reached the offices of the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles.⁵⁴

The Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) was established through the California Community Redevelopment Law of 1945, enacted to combat earlier waves of capital flight to California's suburbs and resulting "urban blight."⁵⁵ The law empowered city governments to acquire real property and exercise eminent domain, as the city of Los Angeles had done when it razed a portion of Little Tokyo in 1953. By the late 1960s, however, the CRA under the leadership of administrator Richard Mitchell had learned from its prior experiences in developing other downtown neighborhoods, particularly after efforts to rebuild Bunker Hill were met with prolonged resistance from local property owners. The CRA's Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project, adopted by City Council in February of 1970, reflected a shift in the CRA's public approach towards redevelopment: more transparent, more open to resident feedback. While in 1958 the Agency had dismissed the claims of Bunker Hill residents that they could "rehabilitate their property or redevelop it themselves," writing off most efforts at owner participation, the 1970 Little Tokyo project plan actively invited business owner and tenant participation. Home and business owners were, at least on paper, given the opportunity to retain or acquire property in the Project area. Local leaders were invited to join "the Mayor's Little Tokyo Community Development Advisory Committee." Most importantly for local developers, the Agency offered them first pick of "real property in the Project area for purchase and development."⁵⁶

Because the CRA was funded through increases in property taxes above the level generated at the start of redevelopment, Little Tokyo's redevelopment would only turn the city a profit if properties within the project area rose in value, an unlikely scenario if the CRA only committed to building public housing and community centers for local residents to use. The money would have to come primarily from commercial development. Little Tokyo's already-existing ties to companies like Kajima and Sumitomo

⁵⁴ Jenks, "'Home is Little Tokyo,'" 240; Ray Hebert, "Little Tokyo Makes New Survival Bid with Building Plan," *Los Angeles Times*, January 26, 1970.

⁵⁵ Marks, "Shifting Ground," 245.

⁵⁶ *Bunker Hill Urban Renewal Project Rebuttal Statement*; Community Redevelopment Association of Los Angeles, *Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project (Calif. A-3-5)* (Los Angeles, California, 1970), http://www.crala.org/internet-site/Projects/Little_Tokyo/upload/littletokyoredevelopmentplan.pdf.

Bank, as well as Japan's growing economic presence in the Los Angeles area, made it easy for the CRA to pick up right where the LTRA had left off in its quest to raise local property values. The CRA's plan for Little Tokyo likewise centered a new hotel and adjoining shopping center, which was framed by the Agency as the "gateway" to the neighborhood. Agency-sponsored studies pointed out that the hotel's proximity to downtown Los Angeles would help fulfill the brand new Los Angeles Convention Center's demand for nearby hotel rooms for convention-goers and provide them with easy access to nearby commercial attractions in Chinatown, Olvera Street, and Bunker Hill.⁵⁷ More importantly, however, the hotel's location in Little Tokyo and proposed Japanese character would appeal to Japanese tourists and businessmen in Los Angeles, whose numbers were projected to nearly triple by 1980.⁵⁸ Little Tokyo's hotel was thus expected to help bridge both spatial divides within Los Angeles itself and between Los Angeles and the rest of the world.

In addition to accelerating the global and commercial character of Little Tokyo redevelopment, the CRA also successfully brought in federal funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) after a public urging from Mayor Yorty.⁵⁹ The project would be financed as part of HUD's Neighborhood Development Program (NDP), which was established under the 1968 Fair Housing Act. With the start of Richard Nixon's administration in 1969, however, the Fair Housing Act—and HUD more generally—came under political attack. No sooner had the CRA and the Little Tokyo Citizens' Committee secured the money did HUD suddenly announce that it was cutting NDP funding in half the following year. Richard Mitchell traveled to Washington, D.C. in November of 1969 to urge House Committee on Banking and Currency to maintain funding to the NDP. He was accompanied by Akira Kawasaki, chairman of the Little Tokyo Citizens' Committee, who described to the House how the CRA

⁵⁷ Ray Hebert, "City Convention Center's No. 1 Worry — Hotels," March 15, 1971, *Los Angeles Times*; Community Development Agency of the City of Los Angeles, California, "Development Information: Little Tokyo," 1; Real Estate Research Corporation, "Market Analysis and Projected Operating Experience Proposed Little Tokyo Hotel Los Angeles, California," March 15, 1971, Box 559, folder 10, UCLA FCP.

⁵⁸ Real Estate Research Corporation, "Market Analysis and Projected Operating Experience Proposed Little Tokyo Hotel Los Angeles, California," Box 559, folder 10, UCLA FCP; Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict*, 191.

⁵⁹ "Yorty Asks Council to Apply for U.S. Funds," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1968; Richard P. Nathan et al., "Block Grants for Community Development," Brookings Institution Monitoring Study of the Community Development Block Grant Program (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, January 1977), <https://www.huduser.gov/Publications/pdf/HUD-000048.pdf>.

was helping the local Japanese American community save Little Tokyo from becoming a “ghost town.” Kawasaki mentioned that while the neighborhood still catered to “the real needs of the Japanese-American community,” it had also become “an active asset to the city in its uniqueness as a window to Japan and Asia.”⁶⁰ While the CRA’s plea for the federal government to maintain funding failed, Kawasaki’s testimony reveals the extent to which Japanese Americans invested in renewal had come to reconcile Little Tokyo’s dual roles as “gateway to the Pacific” and a hub for Southern California’s Japanese American community.⁶¹

IV. Big Tokyo blues

Frank Chuman’s interest in becoming an owner-developer in Little Tokyo began not long after HUD first approved the city of Los Angeles’ request for federal funding. By this time, Chuman was running a well-established private practice out of offices in Little Tokyo, working with a mixture of local and Japanese corporate clients. It was these connections which Chuman drew upon in December 1970, when he embarked on a trip to Tokyo to meet with Japanese real estate developers and visit malls and shopping centers for inspiration. A few months later, Asiamerica, Incorporated came together as a partnership between Chuman, his brother George, mortgage banker Clem C. Glass, architects David Hyun and William Stockwell, State Senator Alfred Song, urban planner Robert Goe, and land developer Everett Ross. Their plan was to purchase land in Little Tokyo and sell it to the CRA at below-market value, thus assuring themselves priority bidding position for the development of the hotel. While Chuman and his partners hoped that Asiamerica would be responsible for the hotel’s construction, they wanted to recruit a Japanese hotel management company to deal with day-to-day operations to provide an authentic experience for who they imagined would be predominantly Japanese guests.⁶² In a marked departure from the LTRA’s initial properties, Asiamerica’s heightened, fantastical vision for their hotel was drawn largely

⁶⁰ “Hearings before the Committee on Banking and Currency,” § House Committee on Banking and Currency (1970), 257.

⁶¹ “Little Tokyo Project in Planning Stages,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1971.

⁶² Asiamerica, Inc., “Suggested Form for the LETTER OF INTENT TO LEASE a Proposed Japanese Hotel and Inn in the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Area of Downtown Los Angeles, California, USA,” n.d., Box 559, folder 6, UCLA FCP.

from other “Japan-themed” attractions. Such attractions were themselves the partial result of Nisei entrepreneurs and professionals taking historical practices of exploiting white Orientalist stereotypes incubated within Little Tokyo and applying them to developments outside the neighborhood, where they were further exaggerated to please white American audiences. Now, Chuman and his partners were bringing things full-circle by re-integrating these design and labor features into their plans for Little Tokyo’s future. To ensure the fantasy was built on authentic foundations, however, Asiamerica knew they would have to look to Japan.

Chuman hoped to appeal to his prospective Japanese partners by emphasizing Little Tokyo’s proximity to local and federal government entities, realizing the stability government funding implied and the attractive relationships foreign corporations could hope to cultivate. Redevelopment “has the support not only of the Federal Government, but also the City of Los Angeles Planning Commission,” Chuman wrote in one letter, and the neighborhood would form part of the backbone of Los Angeles’s civic district, “where the large government buildings for the City, County, State and Federal governments are located.”⁶³ Chuman also leveraged his ongoing role as broker between Japan and California’s political elite, attaining a letter of introduction from Sam Yorty for himself and Everett Ross when they visited Japan in 1970.⁶⁴ Chuman’s Japanese correspondents echoed his view of Little Tokyo as a pin in U.S.-Japan relations more broadly. An executive of Japan’s Hotel Okura wrote to Chuman saying, “As a Japanese who has been in [Little Tokyo,] I appreciated how and what our predecessors have developed the little town to a reknown spot [*sic*] in the world. Therefore I would not hesitate to co-operate with you in any way possible as to be an assistance to U.S.-Japan relations.”⁶⁵

Enthusiasm did not translate into partnership, however. Throughout 1970 and 1971, Asiamerica reached out to a string of Japanese hotels and construction companies, including Kajima, whom Chuman asked to join the project as an architectural associate. They were politely declined in every case, with letters citing the higher costs of doing business in the United States and worries over the ability of

⁶³ Frank Chuman to Sadakazu Funakura, October 17, 1969; Frank Chuman to Takeo Miki, December 2, 1969, Box 559, folder 6, UCLA FCP.

⁶⁴ Mayor Sam Yorty to Governor Ryokichi Minobe, December 8, 1970, Box 559, folder 6, UCLA FCP.

⁶⁵ Takichi Shigematsu to Frank Chuman, February 21, 1970, Box 559, folder 6, UCLA FCP.

Japanese staff members to manage foreigners.⁶⁶ These excuses may have been polite means for Japanese corporations to distance themselves from a chronically delayed project. The promised federal funding Chuman had used to draw many potential partners in was proving difficult to rely on, and in early 1971, CRA officials were forced to publicly admit that federal budget cutbacks had “substantially hampered the project,” limiting the agency to “acquiring land and relocating residents.” Privately, CRA communicated to owner-developers like Asiamerica that proposals to develop the hotel, once scheduled to be sent out in late 1970, would be delayed indefinitely.⁶⁷ These delays made it difficult for Asiamerica to communicate to overseas partners, but it also gave them more time to find a suitable substitute for a Japanese hotel operator. By early of 1971, Asiamerica had set about looking for an American alternative, eventually narrowing their options down to two contenders: InterIsland Resorts, based in Hawai’i, and California Theme Resorts (CTR), based in Laguna Beach.

Early in Asiamerica’s search for an American hotel operator, Chuman and his partners clearly favored CTR, going so far as to draft a letter of intent to partner with them in November of 1972, a mere month before the bids were due to the CRA. This may have had something to do with the fact that CTR and Asiamerica were very similar institutions—for one thing, CTR’s President, Ken Yamaguchi was also a member of the Southern Californian Nisei male professional class. Yamaguchi was an optometrist by trade, and during the late 1950s had served as president of the JACL’s Pasadena chapter. He and his business partners established CTR in 1965 and worked along many of the same principles Chuman and Asiamerica would hope to execute in Little Tokyo, specializing in “culturally themed” resorts whose primary target audience was white American businessmen looking for exotic locations to host corporate getaways. Despite the stylistic affinities between their two organizations, however, Asiamerica worried that CTR did not have the global reach they wanted for their project; indeed, while Yamaguchi and Chuman had certain biographical details in common, by the early 1970s Chuman was far more influential within the regional Nisei community and had far more successfully situated himself within the field of

⁶⁶ Yusuko Uchida to Frank Chuman, February 9, 1971, Box 559, folder 8; Frank Chuman to Yukio Hasumi, January 12, 1971, Box 559, folder 6; Asiamerica, Inc.; “Minutes of Asiamerica Inc., Board Meeting,” March 13, 1971, Box 559, folder 2, UCLA FCP.

⁶⁷ “Little Tokyo Project in Planning Stages,” February 1, 1971, *Los Angeles Times*; “Minutes of Asiamerica, Inc., Board Meeting,” March 13, 1971.

U.S.-Japan economic and political exchange. Yamaguchi, then, belonged to the second tier of Nisei professionals, reaping some of the rewards of America's fascination with Japan but lacking the transnational connections to politicians and businessmen that someone like Frank Chuman drew upon in his private dealings. Chuman and his colleagues were on the hunt for bigger fish.

InterIslands was suggested to Asiamerica in late 1972 by one of the project's prospective financiers as "a great gap between Japanese, Hawaiian Islands and the mainland."⁶⁸ Chuman wrote to CTR a few months later to let them down, noting that he personally had been excited by CTR's concept but that InterIsland ultimately "had more financial capability over a longer period of time, operating large size hotels with world-wide travel referral connections."⁶⁹ Even though CTR wasn't present on the final bid, their vision nevertheless remained impressed on Asiamerica's product. Asiamerica's proposal to the CRA included an emphasis on an authentic Japanese aesthetic, paired with personnel who had been specially trained in "performance of service with friendliness, courtesy and patience in the old traditional Japanese style." Wherever possible, employees would be dressed in kimono or other traditional Japanese outfits.⁷⁰ With InterIsland on their team and CTR's theatrical approach in their development philosophy, Asiamerica's proposal merged knowledges about tourism and racial fantasy from California, Japan, and Hawai'i. Their next step was to convince the City Redevelopment Agency that Asiamerica was up to the task of bringing this vision to Little Tokyo.

While redevelopment in Little Tokyo dragged on for two years as a result of federal funding cuts, in spring of 1972 the CRA had finally begun buying up parcels of land in the neighborhood and approving them for new construction. By September, the CRA had acquired the still-occupied Sun Building and Hotel, upon which the new Little Tokyo hotel would be constructed. Just as the project seemed to be tapping into some momentum, however, so too was activist-driven opposition to redevelopment. Though concerns about the fate of displaced residents had dogged the project for some time, by the early 1970s, these fears were consolidated and organized into a robust on-the-ground movement by activists from the Asian American movement. Many of these activists were Sansei who had been radicalized by campus

⁶⁸ Clem C. Glass to Frank Chuman, November 14, 1972, Box 559, folder 9, UCLA FCP.

⁶⁹ Frank Chuman to Guy Taylor, January 10, 1973, Box 560, folder 7, UCLA FCP.

⁷⁰ Asiamerica, Inc., "Little Tokyo Hotel Project Proposal," November 10, 1972, Box 560, folder 2, UCLA FCP.

politics in the late '60s and were now bringing the movement's anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist critiques to their own community, intent on serving the most underserved.⁷¹ Some initially started out working for the redevelopment project, drawn to its promises of building housing for the poor and elderly. They were quickly disillusioned by Agency's affinity for Japanese corporate capital, however, and soon set about "[making] life miserable for the CRA," barging into meetings and demanding accountability for Little Tokyo's displaced residents.⁷² One action in September 1972 featured protestors popping fire-crackers on a balcony of the Kajima building while marchers burned a Japanese Rising Sun flag, thereby linking Kajima's take-over of Little Tokyo to a longer history of Japanese imperial expansion.⁷³

Activists' principal critique of Japanese-funded development was that it took away community control of their own neighborhood, robbing Japanese Americans of their right to self-determination. In a reference to the Asian American movement's ties to the anti-war effort, one organizer compared what was being done to Little Tokyo to the violence committed by "U.S. and Japanese imperialists" in Southeast Asia: "[O]ur issue, like that of the people of Vietnam, is our people's self-determination."⁷⁴ Further feeding the analogy was the vast difference between Little Tokyo's small business owners and the Japanese developers, which for activists mirrored the gap between Viet Cong fighters and the might of the U.S. army. In an article for *Gidra*, writer and organizer Evelyn Yoshimura quoted the proprietor of the old Chinese restaurant as saying redevelopment was "pretty tough on the small places. No chance against those big companies. Lotsa money." Activists marveled at the growing list of "Japanese corporation representatives in Southern California," the increased presence of Japanese businessmen in Little Tokyo's streets, and the waxing influence of figures like the Japanese Consul. They feared, in explicit terms, that Japanese Americans were being replaced. Organizer Jim Matsuoka, who had previously worked for the

⁷¹ In Little Tokyo, this often meant working with the low-income and elderly Issei, as well as the Latinx and Black occupants of the neighborhood's SROs and cheap hotels, instead of recent immigrants from Japan. Japanese immigration to the United States was relatively low among Asian nationalities during the post-1965 period; Bill Ong Hing notes that only 116,000 Japanese immigrants came to the U.S. between 1965 and 1990, a function of Japan's economic growth and ability to retain much of its professional class during this period. See Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America Through Immigration Policy*, 106-108.

⁷² Jim Matsuoka, Jim Matsuoka Interview, interview by Martha Nakagawa, May 24, 2010, DDR, <http://ddr.densho.org/interviews/ddr-densho-1000-281-37/>.

⁷³ Mike Murase, "Nisei Week," *Gidra*, September 1972.

⁷⁴ George Umezawa, quoted in Yoshimura, "Higher Rises, Lower Depths."

CRA on Little Tokyo redevelopment before resigning in protest, stated in 1971: “Our control may well be gone. There will be faces down there [in Little Tokyo] that look Oriental, but we’ll be pushed out to the hinterlands... We may be on the outlying areas looking in, and we’ll see a whole bunch of people and it won’t be us...”⁷⁵ Matsuoka and Yoshimura’s statements about Little Tokyo’s role within Japanese American society reflected their position as Sansei who saw the neighborhood as a physical anchor for their developing sense of political and ethnic identity. As Yoshimura would later write, “Little Tokyo represents a living link with the history of Japanese in America—a history that Japanese American young people are just beginning to realize... But that history is also important to our community as a whole, in order for us to begin understanding and dealing with problems we share.”⁷⁶ To efface the neighborhood of its distinctive ethnic features and replace them with a more cosmopolitan, “Japanese-Japanese” character would be robbing Japanese Americans of their collective past, and thus destroy the possibility of a collective future.

If the partners of Asiamerica, Inc. were at all aware of what was going on in the streets, no indication of it survives in their correspondence and meeting minutes. One late addition to their submission may have been an indirect response to community dissatisfactions, however. Chuman and his colleagues had gathered signatures from ten local business owners attesting that Asiamerica’s vision for the hotel was “designed to help the local community to participate through job and management training, commercial leasing assistance, profit sharing and investment opportunities.”⁷⁷ This attestation formed the bulk of the Asiamerica proposal’s “Community Participation and Involvement” section. Asiamerica apparently recognized this aspect of their presentation was a little thin in the aftermath of their December 14th oral interview with the CRA, and scrambled to send a supplement to the following week in which they went into effusive detail about the hotel’s potential benefits for the community. The letter explicitly stated that “employees in all areas of service, marketing, and management within the hotel... will be

⁷⁵ Jim Matsuoka, “Little Tokyo, Searching the Past and Analyzing the Future,” in *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971), 322–34.

⁷⁶ Yoshimura, “Higher Rises, Lower Depths,” *Gidra*, March 1973.

⁷⁷ “Little Tokyo Hotel Project Proposal.”

recruited as much as possible from within the Japanese community...”⁷⁸ It seemed that for the average Japanese American resident of Little Tokyo, who lacked the capital to invest in the hotel or their own storefront, the primary means of “participating” in Hotel Asiamerica was to work in it.

On December 20th, 1972, at the CRA’s regular bi-monthly meeting, the Agency announced that Kajima International would be given exclusive negotiating rights for the Little Tokyo hotel. The news came as a shock to the partners at Asiamerica. Chuman’s initial response was despondency, but three days later, disappointment had curdled into anger. Chuman took to the local media, publicly accusing CRA director Richard Mitchell of taking a bribe from Kajima in the form of a promised job in Japan, a rumor he seems to have picked up from a fellow Little Tokyo businessman.⁷⁹ Mitchell roundly denied the accusation, pointing out that from the beginning of the project, the CRA had solicited bids from companies in both Los Angeles and Japan and that Asiamerica by no means had a monopoly on support from the community. “At every step the Kajima organization assured our Agency that it would actively and energetically encourage the investment participation by local residents,” he wrote.⁸⁰ To the Agency board, Mitchell had stated that it was “a close choice. Two of the proposals were outstanding. But Kajima has had a great personal interest in Little Tokyo.”⁸¹ Asiamerica understood themselves to have been the “runner up,” and Frank Chuman was deeply wounded by Mitchell’s implication that a company made up of California locals led by a Nisei should have had less “personal interest” in the neighborhood than a Japanese corporation.⁸²

That Kajima should have scooped up the hotel project when Asiamerica had actively courted their participation less than two years earlier could not have been lost on Chuman, who had written to Kajima’s local executive personally. Indeed, Chuman’s entire response to Asiamerica’s failure is shot through with irony, as Asiamerica’s own concept for the Little Tokyo hotel had repeatedly emphasized its Japanese

⁷⁸ Clem C. Glass to Richard G. Mitchell, December 19, 1972, Box 560, folder 3, UCLA FCP.

⁷⁹ There’s no evidence to indicate that this was at all true—Mitchell retired from the CRA six years later and by all accounts seems to have stayed in the Los Angeles area, though a 1978 profile does mention that he worked as a consultant for unspecified “public and private interests.” Frank Chuman, “Meeting Notes,” December 21, 1972, Box 560, folder 3, UCLA FCP.

⁸⁰ Richard Mitchell to Frank Chuman, December 29, 1972, Box 560, folder 3, UCLA FCP.

⁸¹ Ray Hebert, “Firms Picked to Build Little Tokyo Hotel,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1972.

⁸² Frank Chuman to Richard Mitchell, December 12, 1972, Box 560, folder 3, UCLA Library Special Collections.

appeal with only brief (and last-minute) references to how the enterprise would benefit the Little Tokyo community. In opposing Kajima's victory, Chuman took on a protectionist attitude hitherto absent from his approach to Little Tokyo, using language seemingly lifted straight from radical Asian American critiques of corporate-funded renewal. "I am personally concerned," he wrote to Little Tokyo's small business owners, "...because Kajima and the large business interests of Japan are...coming into the Little Tokyo area to buy up land and construct buildings for their own interest without considering the local businessman."⁸³ In a letter to Mitchell, Chuman invoked Asiamerica's rootedness in the area, noting that while "Kajima officers and staff personnel and their families are constantly being assigned and re-assigned... we of Asiamerica... consider LA the central focus of our entire lives."⁸⁴ This latter point may have been strongly and sincerely felt, but as we have seen, it was not reflected in Asiamerica's business strategy up until this moment. Indeed, Asiamerica itself had sidelined a local southern California company, CTR, for an out-of-state partner, InterIsland, because of the latter's "global reach."

The local English-Japanese language newspaper *Rafu Shimpo* followed what they called the "Chuman-Mitchell dialogue" closely. Columnist Ellen Endo wrote that the dispute had "opened a Pandora's Box concerning the redevelopment plans for Little Tokyo." To Endo, the possibility that redevelopment might lead to Little Tokyo gaining a cultural center and affordable housing for the elderly was not worth the very real risk of "[smothering] the life blood of the area, the small businessman." The "small businessman" apparently included Frank Chuman and the other members of Asiamerica, despite the fact that half of Asiamerica's officers were non-Japanese and that Chuman was significantly wealthier and more influential than most of Little Tokyo's merchants. Nevertheless, Endo referred to them as a "small contractor" who "may be invited to submit a bid, but when it comes right down to awarding the contract, who will be chosen?"⁸⁵ Thus, in the furor surrounding the CRA's decision and the menacing threat of Kajima and other "larger, Japan-owned businesses," Asiamerica was reconsolidated into the

⁸³ Memo from Frank Chuman to LTHCC Advisory Committee et al, December 22, 1972, Box 560, folder 3, UCLA FCP.

⁸⁴ Frank Chuman to Richard Mitchell, December 23, 1972, Box 560, folder 3, UCLA FCP.

⁸⁵ Ellen Endo, "Part I: Don't Do Me Any Favors," *Rafu Shimpo*, January 20, 1973, "Part II: Don't Do Me Any Favors," *Rafu Shimpo*, January 22, 1973, Box 560, folder 3, UCLA FCP

second tier of merchants and small business owners—the very group they had once sought to distinguish themselves from in their pursuit of transpacific partnerships.

Yet despite a growing consensus that Japanese-financed redevelopment was no longer benefitting locals, the hotel project's fate had already been sealed. Chuman, lacking the support of his fellow Asiamerica board members, withdrew his accusations and publicly came to terms with the CRA's decision. Meanwhile, Asian American activists responded to the news by regrouping under new organizational umbrellas and trying to stall redevelopment schemes, including the hotel project, to make them more community-minded.⁸⁶ There seemed to be increasingly little patience for activists' attempts to push back on the globalization of Little Tokyo's privatization, however. An anonymous letter writer to the Asian American magazine *Gidra* captured the frustration felt by Little Tokyo's more conservative advocates, complaining, "Take away the Bank of Tokyo, Sumitomo Bank, Kajima... and you will have a dead dead town... PLEASE GET OUT OF FANTASYLAND... BE MORE REALISTIC AND CONSTRUCTIVE."⁸⁷ According to the author, not only did commercial redevelopment need to continue, it needed to remain funded by Japanese financial interests. It was better to have a changed, maybe even alien neighborhood, than no neighborhood at all.

Anti-redevelopment activists may have failed to alter the larger course of redevelopment in Little Tokyo, but their participation in the politics of urban renewal did influence the way previously pro-redevelopment actors articulated their grief. Asiamerica was hitherto a poster-child for the ways in which well-connected, first tier Nisei businessmen like Chuman utilized transnational ties to assert ownership over the Japanese American community and its spaces. That Chuman so readily fell back on anti-corporate, protectionist rhetoric in the wake of the CRA's decision indicates that his true priorities never lay in Hawai'i, Los Angeles City Hall, or even big Tokyo itself. Such entities had always been desirable only insofar as they could be subordinated to local control. Yet while Chuman's concern for the Japanese

⁸⁶ "LT Task Force to Block Rezoning of Proposed Hotel," *Kashu Mainichi*, August 1, 1973, Box 560, folder 8, UCLA FCP; Hebert, Ray, "Little Tokyo Renewal Starts as Work on New Hotel Begins," *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 1974; "Groups in Little Tokyo Demand Evictions Delay," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1976; "3 Protesters Arrested in City Council," *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1977, sec. D; Lynn Simross, "Redevelopment in Little Tokyo Stirs Conflict among Citizens," *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1977; Jim Matsuoka, Jim Matsuoka Interview, interview by Martha Nakagawa, May 24, 2010, DDR, <http://ddr.densho.org/interviews/ddr-densho-1000-281-37/>.

⁸⁷ Anonymous, "Dear Mr. Iwasaki," *Gidra*, September 1972, DDR.



Fig. 3.5: Kajima's hotel, the New Otani, under construction in 1976. Source: UCLA Digital Collections, Los Angeles Times Photographic Collection.

American community may have been genuine, he and other elite professionals channeled these feelings through a market-based ethos which emphasized rights to land, property and employment. In order for them to protect Little Tokyo, they first needed to own it. They did not account for the possibility that someone richer and more powerful, playing by the exact same rules they were, might get to it first.

Conclusion

A century of foreign associations and legal exclusion, paired with decades of groundwork in the form of Japanese American transnational redevelopment strategies, allowed most of Los Angeles to look the other way as Kajima slowly entrenched itself in Little Tokyo. While Little Tokyo's redevelopment struggles were of occasional interest to the mainstream press, they were framed in terms of intra-community conflict rather than events with implications for the city at large. A 1977 *Times* article about the redevelopment project painted the issue as a battle between the neighborhood's over-excited youth and pragmatic elders, calling the efforts of anti-development activists "little more than idealistic" and saying Kajima's hotel "must have the space... [otherwise] it cannot meet its anticipated September

opening.”⁸⁸ Compare this to another *Times* article a decade later, covering the expansion of Japanese corporations into the domestic construction industry. “Powerful foreign construction giants—led by firms with the *still unfamiliar names* [emphasis mine] of Ohbayashi-Gumi [*sic*], Kumagai Gumi and Kajima—are mapping plans for \$100-million skyscrapers in Manhattan, redoing the face of Little Tokyo in downtown Los Angeles and building a \$450-million automotive plant in Michigan,” the author intoned. To hear the *Times* tell it, there was no mainstream memory of previous events in Little Tokyo which had led to the present state of affairs, no earlier signs that could have signaled Japan’s new presence in American cities, and “Kajima” still did not roll easily off of most Angelenos’ tongues.⁸⁹

By 1986, the year the second article was published, concerns over the influence of Japanese corporations on the American economy had gone mainstream. Critics referred to negative views towards Japan during this period as “Japan-bashing,” and some of its flashier iterations did involve literally destroying goods manufactured by Japanese corporations, which “bashers” argued were crowding out domestic industry. Others turned their attention to flashy real estate acquisitions by Japanese companies, including the Rockefeller Center in New York City and Pebble Beach golf course in Monterey, California, to argue that the United States no longer belonged to Americans but was instead being slowly sold to foreign interests. Bashers were responding to a set of evolving material conditions, but they were also rebuking a continuing trend among American intellectuals and politicians who, like Nisei transnationalists, saw Japan as a poster child for the United States’s Cold War campaign to spread democracy and capitalism across the globe. By the mid-80s, a new kind of Japan booster was also emerging, one which saw in U.S.-Japan exchange a model for “a ‘borderless’ future of economic prosperity and technological transformation.” These figures saw the United States’s growing transpacific entanglements as laying the foundation for a framework that academics and policy-makers would eventually call globalization.⁹⁰ Yet neither Japan boosters nor Japan bashers seemed aware that these entanglements had relied on the labor, influence, and built environments of Japanese Americans for their

⁸⁸ Lynn Simross, “Redevelopment in Little Tokyo Stirs Conflict Among Citizens,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1977.

⁸⁹ Tom Furlong, “Foreigners Build New Base in U.S.,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1996.

⁹⁰ McKevitt, *Consuming Japan*, 30, 37.

early survival. As two former anti-redevelopment activists put it in a 2006 interview, “The way they [Kajima] got mainstream, I think, was coming through Little Tokyo....They came in...they got some downtown property, they had a downtown base to work from, and then eventually they became accepted.”⁹¹

Kajima did follow through on certain promises to make the building and its surroundings distinctively Japanese. The final product, dubbed the New Otani upon its grand opening in 1977, featured three “Japanese suites” with “tatami mats in the bedroom and deep tub in the bath.” Feminine labor remained at the heart of the New Otani’s appeal to traveling businessmen, from a “Golden Spa” on the rooftop “complete with sauna and female Japanese massage experts” to Japanese women working at the reception desk.⁹² Overall, however, the company was significantly less faithful to any notions of hiring primarily from within the Japanese American community or from within Little Tokyo itself. Both the hotel’s concierge and corporate representative would come from Japan; as for the remainder of the staff, hotel manager Thomas Cullen mentioned most would be recruited from Central and East Los Angeles, areas largely occupied by Black and Hispanic Angelenos.⁹³ These hiring practices were likely less reflective of Kajima’s own racial preferences than of the changing demographics of low-skilled workers in the area.⁹⁴ What was under Kajima’s control, however, was the New Otani’s active resistance to

⁹¹ Hillary Jenks interview of Evelyn Yoshimura, quoted in Jenks, “Home is Little Tokyo,” 254.

⁹² Reviewers did eventually complain that the hotel’s aesthetic and amenities were not Japanese enough, an indication of the mismatch between Americans’ desire for a “timeless,” traditional version of Japan and the modernist reality of much of contemporary Japanese design. See John Dreyfus, “It’s ‘Gomen Nasai’ at New Otani,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 1977; Art Seidenbaum, “A Hotel Grows in Little Tokyo,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1977.

⁹³ The one exception seemed to be in the hotel’s restaurants, where Japanese and English speakers were specifically desired according to classified ads placed in the *Times*. Nancy Yoshihara, “Otani: High Rise, Low profile,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1977.

⁹⁴ The 1980 census indicated an 8.8% poverty rate for people of Japanese descent in Los Angeles—the second lowest in the city, after Filipino-Americans. That same census reported that the entire demographic category of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (itself something of a recent creation) in the United States had a higher percentage of individuals in “managerial and professional specialty occupations”—28.4%—than the nationwide average of 21.7%. For more on the changing class composition of Asian Americans in the United States, see Hsu, *The Good Immigrants*, Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity* (Temple University Press, 1992). Data from 1980 Census.

unionization, becoming the first of the luxury hotels in downtown Los Angeles to do so in an era of weakened organized labor.⁹⁵

During the late 1980s and early '90s, at the height of both American anxiety and American enthusiasm for Japan's rapid economic ascent, the New Otani became a symbol of Los Angeles's newfound status as a "world city." Writer David Rieff, in his 1991 book *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World*, used the hotel's prominence to complain about Japan's near-total conquest of Los Angeles. Sitting at the hotel bar, Rieff scowled at "groups of [Japanese] tourists," whose conversation dotted with "English loanwords sounding all the more peculiar in the polyglot atmosphere of this Japanese-owned and -operated hotel in what had formerly been a neighborhood of poor Japanese immigrants...and now was the outcropping of a world in which Japan reigned supreme." Los Angeles, Rieff noted, was had been meant to "supply the needs of Asia, not the other way around."⁹⁶ For enthusiasts, however, the New Otani was a gateway to Japanese luxury—at once more futuristic and more traditional than other offerings in the U.S. Food critics gushed about the hotel restaurant, where guests were greeted by a "kimono-clad hostess" and served wagyu beef on a "*teppan-yaki*" grill.⁹⁷ Or, reporters described it as a fancy way-station for the lonely, hard-working transpacific elites who made up the modern global economy, sacrificing a stable life at home to ensure money and goods continued to make their way between Asia and the United States.⁹⁸ For better and for worse, then, Kajima's final product had become embedded in the fabric of modern Los Angeles.

The residents of Little Tokyo's cheap hotels and apartments were the ones who paid the highest price for Kajima's acceptance. By the mid 1970s, they were a diverse mix of Hispanic, African American, and Japanese American tenants, many of them single older men. Most were ineligible for relocation payments from HUD due to not having lived in the area for long enough. While activists agitated on their

⁹⁵ Kim Geron, "The Local/Global Context of the Los Angeles Hotel-Tourism Industry," *Social Justice*, no. 2 (1997): 84-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29767008>.

⁹⁶ David Rieff, *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* (New York: Touchstone publ. by Simon & Schuster, 1991), 139.

⁹⁷ Charles Perry, "BEEFED UP: What's Full of Fat and Costs About \$13 an Ounce at the New Otani Hotel?," *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 1994.

⁹⁸ Nancy Yoshihara, "THE NEW: BICOASTALS Transpacific Commuting Is a Way of Life for Many. Among the Challenges Are Jet Lag and Loneliness.," *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 1988.

behalf throughout the decade and into the next, most residents and Japanese American community members already saw redevelopment as inevitable.⁹⁹ The local conversation moved away from whether or not commercial construction needed to continue and instead began to focus on how best to help those being evicted. Community organizers' tireless activism and the CRA's eventual cooperation finally culminated in the building of Little Tokyo Towers, a HUD-subsidized project specifically for Little Tokyo's low-income elderly community completed in 1976. The Towers by no means fully mitigated the entirety of the human toll that redevelopment had levied on the neighborhood, but activists nevertheless lauded them as an achievement on behalf of Asian American housing rights.¹⁰⁰

The Towers' groundbreaking ceremony took place in February of 1975 in an event open to all members of the public, with the *Rafu Shimpo* reporter fondly describing it as "a typical disorganized community event" in stark contrast to the highly manicured New Otani groundbreaking six months earlier, which had been restricted to invited guests and had featured armed security guards. Present at the Towers ceremony were a smattering of elected city officials, CRA administrators, representatives from various Little Tokyo institutions and non-profits, and Frank Chuman himself. His rift with the CRA having been largely mended by 1974, Chuman went on to work for them on the Towers project, putting to use some of the institutional knowledge he had learned through his own multi-year long relationship with the Agency as a petitioner.¹⁰¹

Frank Chuman's reunion with the CRA offers an early example of a new model of Asian American political participation which became increasingly common during the 1970s, as elite professionals reconciled themselves to formal cooperation with the state in order to achieve certain aims within their ethnic communities. Whereas previously, ethnic elites had relied on the levers of local government in

⁹⁹ Lynn Simross, "Redevelopment in Little Tokyo Stirs Conflict among Citizens," *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1977.

¹⁰⁰ "Little Tokyo Anti-Eviction Task Force Minutes," March 4, 1975. Box 558, folder 1, UCLA FCP.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Frank Chuman to Board of Directors, Little Tokyo Towers, "Re: Participation Agreement," August 9, 1974. Box 557, folder 9, UCLA FCP. Chuman had been involved in the earliest stages of the project in winter of 1970, when the non-profit developing the Towers was first established; the project was held up by the same funding delays that plagued the hotel's development, however, and no papers referencing any work Chuman did for the Towers exist in Chuman's collection between December, 1970 and December, 1973. (The one exception is Chuan extending an offer on behalf of a Japanese corporate client to donate money to the Towers in 1973.) I interpret this gap as Chuman leaving the Towers project to concentrate his energies on Asiamerica, only for him to return after the hotel project evaporated.

order to expand their influence outside the enclave—to integrate previously all-white suburbs, for instance, or to strike down restrictive immigration laws—the growing presence of foreign capital within neighborhoods like Little Tokyo meant that those same individuals now needed the coercive power of the state on their side to maintain their elite status. By the late 1970s, people like Frank Chuman had learned how poorly their well-laid plans could go if the state did *not* take their side against the arrival of well-resourced entities like Kajima.

Yet Asian American elites were not alone in seeking out protection and accommodation from domestic government and civic institutions. As we will see in the next chapter, the vulnerable victims of their development schemes—tenants under threat of displacement, workers enduring crushing new conditions, and social welfare organizations facing ever diminishing resources—were also turning to the state in more organized and deliberate ways. They hoped to defend themselves from globalized development's violences and, wherever possible, to seek access to its rewards.

Chapter 4 — *“Far East funds find way to Chinatown”: Globalization and progressive politics in Oakland Chinatown*

Ted Dang hadn’t intended to stay put in the East Bay. The son of an immigrant herb shop owner, Dang had spent his entire life—all 22 years of it so far—kicking around his Oakland Chinatown birthplace, collecting baseball cards, getting into trouble with friends, and dreaming of escape. College was supposed to be his ticket out of town: Dang got into UC Berkeley in 1969 and enrolled that fall, with plans of progressing to business school after receiving his bachelor’s degree. As luck would have it however, he’d arrived at the high point of Third World Liberation Front, Black Power, and Asian American activism on campus. The TWLF had just concluded its successful strike the previous spring, securing the formation of a Department of Ethnic Studies. Curious, Dang eventually enrolled in a number of Asian American studies courses and was transformed by what he learned. The emerging discipline’s call for young Asian Americans to go back to their communities and change them for the better stuck with him. “Serve the people,” the movement declared, borrowing a phrase from the Chinese poet Lu Xun — and Ted Dang obeyed.¹

And so, in the winter of 1973, Dang found himself looking looking up at the grimy facade of a run-down storage facility at 845 Harrison Street at the edge of Chinatown. By then, the building had become something of a local eyesore: its ornate French gothic design, with terra cotta human faces, flowers, and vines adorning every pilaster, was overshadowed by over fifty years of grime, chipped paint, and missing windowpanes. Dang, now enrolled at Berkeley’s business school and newly-minted realtor, saw the potential behind the decay. He and a fellow Berkeley alum, architect Andrew Gee, were on the lookout for just such a space: large, cheap, and located near Chinatown. There, the two men envisioned what they were referring to as an “Asian Resource Center”: a shared home for the dozens of Asian American nonprofits which had proliferated in the East Bay over the past decade.

Starting in the late 1960s, nonprofits like the Asian Law Caucus (ALC), the Oakland Chinese Community Council (OCCC), and Asian Community Mental Health Services (ACMH) had begun setting up storefronts in Chinatown and working with community members to deliver job training, language

¹ Ted Dang, interview by Rick Moss, May 21, 2007, African American Museum and Library at Oakland, <https://californiarevealed.org/islandora/object/cavpp%3A23096>.

classes, housing and welfare assistance, health care, and legal aid. The spread of Asian American institutions reflected growing demand for social services and advocacy on the part of recent Asian immigrants, whose numbers in the East Bay had risen significantly over the past decade and would continue to rise over the next. Between 1970 and 1990, Oakland's Asian American population grew from 17,373 to 55,332, with much of the growth being driven by refugees from Southeast Asia. Existing religious and family association resources were rapidly stretched too thin, leaving nonprofits to step into the gap. Filling these organizations' ranks were young Asian Americans who shared Ted Dang's trajectory from campus to community, many of them born and raised in Oakland or the surrounding East Bay. By the mid-1970s, progressive politics in Chinatown had become synonymous with the neighborhood's nonprofit scene, as agency workers and volunteers became the leading advocates for affordable housing, accessible healthcare, and immigrants' rights.

As for Asian immigrants themselves, Oakland Chinatown in these two decades represented an alluring economic opportunity—both for low-skilled wage workers and for entrepreneurs and business owners themselves. During the '70 and '80s, Asian-owned and operated businesses proliferated throughout Oakland, resulting in explosive growth for Chinatown's retail industry. By 1988, the neighborhood contained 150-odd markets, jewelry stores, sewing factories, and banks, and was pulling in \$50 million in annual retail sales alone—“\$16 million better than the combined sales of all downtown Oakland's stores on Broadway,” according to the *Oakland Tribune*.² Helping to fuel the boom was an influx of Asian investment capital, most of it coming from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. Exact figures regarding foreign investment in the city are difficult to come by; nevertheless, in 1985 alone, the *Tribune* recorded a series of high-profile projects by Asian developers whose costs totaled over \$22 million: banks, office buildings, a scrap paper operation, even a cement packaging plant. Where big money went, smaller ventures such as restaurants, accounting and insurance agencies, and retailers followed, with many of their owners taking out loans from Chinese- and Chinese American-owned banks

² Kelly Gust, “Oakland Chinatown: A golden phoenix rises from ashes of hard times,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 28, 1988; Gilbert Chan, “Rapid growth transforms Chinatown,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 29, 1988.

to join in on the bonanza.³ While some individuals rode the investment wave to great success, however, others found themselves suffering from higher rents, fewer housing units, and more competition—both from their peers and from well-financed Asian corporations and developers.

Drawing all of this economic activity to the neighborhood was the Chinatown Redevelopment Project (CRP), a four-block area set aside by the city government in 1967 for mixed-use development in cooperation with members of Chinatown's business elite. At the same time Dang and Gee were scouting out the future location of their resource center, the CRP had just secured federal funding from HUD and was soliciting bids from private developers to build office buildings, apartment complexes, "a major hotel," and underground parking structures. HUD's dwindling investments in urban renewal during the 1970s, paired with Chinese American Oaklanders' ambitious plans for their neighborhood and the city government's own dreams of bolstering Oakland's economic ties to Asia, soon drove officials to seek additional financing overseas. As Oakland plunged further into economic decline, its politicians and administrators placed more and more importance on the CRP as the herald of a positive postindustrial future—one marked by the cosmopolitan multiculturalism which Asian Americans and their neighborhoods had increasingly come to represent.

The CRP would soon become more headache than hope, however, as the next two decades saw a series of overseas developers come onto the project with grand promises only to abandon it amidst scandal and financial distress. Having tied Chinatown's fortunes to the performance of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore-based capital, Oakland's elites unintentionally subjected their own metropolitan economy to some of the same fluctuations and boom-bust cycles that plagued East Asia throughout the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Hong Kong was an especially unstable partner during this period, in large part because of its unstable geopolitical status. While the colony's residents and colonial administrators had known about the possibility of a CCP takeover as early as 1979, every subsequent milestone in the British and Chinese governments' negotiations seemed to trigger another round of economic instability. Moreover, as a financial center on the periphery of both the British empire, China, and the U.S. sphere of influence in the Pacific, Hong Kong was the favored regional way-station for what economist R. T.

³ David Tong, "Asia is source of development cash for Oakland," *Oakland Tribune*, October 21, 1985; Dunson Cheng, "Chinese Banks: An Economic Engine for Community Growth," *1996 Los Angeles Chinatown Souvenir Book*, 1996, Box 5, folder 8, Asian American Studies Archive, ESL.

Naylor termed “hot and homeless money”: volatile, short-term investments and deposits often tied to illegal or clandestine activities.⁴ In Oakland’s case, two out of the three Hong Kong developers who came onto the Chinatown redevelopment project disappeared after accusations of fraud and subsequent bankruptcy. Even after these risks were known, however, a series of Oakland mayors, Redevelopment Agency officials, and council members persisted in seeking Hong Kong participation in the project, a testament to both their desperation and their continued faith in the capacities of growth liberalism. By the time the CRP was completed in 1992, Oakland’s government had sunk hundreds of millions of dollars into buying out insolvent developers and realizing various aspects of the project which developers refused to take on.

While redevelopment in Chinatown did not herald an economic turnaround for Oakland writ large, the project did have a significant impact Chinatown’s internal political economy. By the late 1970s, Chinatown’s newly emergent nonprofit sector was facing many of the same funding cuts and resource scarcity as neighborhood nonprofits across the country. At the same time, they were also confronting greater amounts of social need—including housing displacement and rising costs of living as a result of the redevelopment project. Rapid construction of retail space, growing competition between small business owners, and little-to-no new housing construction had combined to make Chinatown far less hospitable to its traditional base: newly arrived immigrants from Asia. As a result, Chinatown nonprofit workers were among the CRP’s fiercest critics, arguing that redevelopment in the enclave should emphasize affordable housing for immigrants and elderly “old-timers” instead of shopping malls for middle-class suburbanites.

Even as the CRP generated challenges for progressive nonprofits, however, its development also helped create novel opportunities for Chinatown’s resource-strapped organizations. First, urban renewal created a formal mechanism through which nonprofits could build robust relationships with local, state, and federal governments, largely by presenting themselves as legitimate representatives of the community

⁴ Robin T. Naylor, *Hot Money and the Politics of Debt*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 1987). Naylor’s account is somewhat sensationalized, but provides a useful portrait of Hong Kong’s function as a clearinghouse for both legitimate and illegitimate financial activities in Southeast Asia, beginning with capital flight caused by the Vietnam War.

within the planning and implementation of redevelopment projects.⁵ Second, the CRP's importance to the city of Oakland elevated Chinatown's overall political standing within the city, which also had the effect of raising the profiles of neighborhood nonprofits (and of Asian Americans as a political constituency in general). While Chinatown started the postwar period as a sleepy, mixed-use neighborhood at the edge of downtown Oakland, it entered the 1990s as a core part of the city's plan for a revitalized city center—a testament to the centrality of foreign investment in government officials' attempts at remaking the metropolitan economy.

Lastly, globalized, public-private redevelopment came to serve as an important source of material resources for Chinatown's struggling nonprofits. This shift began with nonprofits demanding to receive a portion of the wealth invested into the CRP, which they would in turn use to serve those whom redevelopment had either left behind or made more vulnerable. By the late 1980s, however, organizations escalated into asking for the CRP to incorporate various social and cultural functions into its very structure. Framed as forcing foreign corporations to take responsibility for Chinatown's wellbeing, nonprofits' demands also served to further entangle public goods with the neighborhood's commercial sector. Most notably, neighborhood nonprofits fought for private developers to build several dozen units of affordable housing in the CRP—a measure that both allowed more low-income Asian American residents to maintain homes in Chinatown, and cemented the common-sense understanding that the state could no longer be expected to directly provide such amenities to its citizens. Instead, the government's role had shifted towards mediating between the for-profit private sector and the demands of various neighborhood constituents. As the experience of the CRP would show, this role still demanded significant expenditures of public money, but required public agencies to operate through channels that were less accountable, less durable, and less transparent to the people they were meant to serve.

For their part, Chinatown's neighborhood nonprofits were caught in a difficult double-bind. Chinatown had never been an entirely residential neighborhood, but redevelopment had effectively foreclosed any possibility of the area returning to its historical function as a working-class enclave. This was not just because increased competition and new developments were raising rents throughout

⁵ See Claire Dunning, *Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022).

downtown Oakland, but also because Chinatown had acquired a new function within the city's economic geography. No longer a marginalized enclave in the industrial zone of discard, Chinatown—along with the rest of downtown Oakland—was now an essential source of revenue for the city, due to its supposed capacity for attracting foreign investment and tourist dollars. As much as Chinatown nonprofit workers regretted this state of affairs, their service-oriented framework also gave rise to a political pragmatism that prioritized continuing to meet constituents' immediate needs over longterm efforts to build Asian American political power. For this reason, activists gradually accepted that commercial development would remain a central part of Chinatown's political life. Instead of organizing constituents towards a fundamentally new approach towards urban renewal, Chinatown's nonprofits instead sought to equitably redistribute the revenues and opportunities it generated.

This chapter is broken into three sections which, taken together, trace progressive nonprofits' changing relationship to the Chinatown redevelopment project from antagonism to accommodation. In the first section, I lay out how the Chinatown redevelopment project went from a regional enterprise of local Chinese American elites to the lynchpin of Oakland's transpacific ambitions. Scarce federal funds compelled Chinese American elites to seek an overseas solution to their local problems, leading them to partner with the first of three wealthy, Hong Kong-based real estate developers. Part two discusses the emergence of progressive Asian American nonprofits in Oakland during the early 1970s and their early efforts to oppose commercial, foreign-financed redevelopment in Chinatown. Driven by their desire to restore the enclave's status as a haven for newly arrived working-class immigrants, progressive activists grasped for tools to influence the project's trajectory, with little success. Part three shows how a number of structural transformations compelled progressive nonprofits to seek accommodation with redevelopment. As trends in federal disinvestment reached the social service sector, activists began searching for ways to access private capital in Chinatown. These efforts resulted in the establishment of the Asian Resource Center, which saw nonprofits embracing a co-dependent relationship with the neighborhood's commercial elements. Activists subsequently exported the Resource Center's model to the redevelopment project as a whole, petitioning both the city and the project's developers to accommodate community interests within the final product.

Scholars of urban America have frequently noted how de-industrialization and white flight imposed new constraints on the racial and economic justice movements of the late 20th century. In metropolitan areas across the country, multiracial coalitions helped put a wave of African American mayors and other local officials into office in the wake of the Black freedom movement. Oakland was no exception, with former Black Panther Party members, progressive union members, and other African American community activists working together to successfully elect the city's first African American mayor, Lionel Wilson, in 1977. Once in office, however, mayors like Wilson were confronted with a shrinking tax base, high unemployment, and persistent public concerns about crime and racial unrest within the urban core, all against a backdrop of reduced federal commitments towards welfare spending. Faced with these constraints, even former progressives found themselves pivoting towards more moderate and pro-business agendas once in office, while struggling to retain certain aspects of their civil rights platforms. Historian Jessica Levy has demonstrated how Black mayors in Atlanta welded pro-business politics with elements of the Black power and civil rights movements, which were reconstituted under the more neutral label of "multiculturalism." Similarly, Scott Kurashige has pointed out how Tom Bradley in Los Angeles assembled a highly diverse, multiracial coalition in support of his plans for redeveloping downtown Los Angeles.⁶

This chapter builds on the work of scholars like Levy and Kurashige by exploring how globalized redevelopment produced similar political transformations at the grassroots level. From Atlanta to Los Angeles to Oakland, foreign investment—and Asian investment in particular—was central to mayors' pro-business, pro-growth politics. More than just practical solutions to economic crisis, city governments' pivot towards international partnerships allowed them to disaffiliate from a national narrative of postindustrial decline. Instead of being poster-children for the problems of late 20th century America—crime, racial unrest, high unemployment, and poverty—"world city" and other cosmopolitan rhetoric

⁶ David R. Colburn and Jeffrey S. Adler, eds., *African-American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), Jessica Ann Levy, "Selling Atlanta: Black Mayoral Politics from Protest to Entrepreneurism, 1973 to 1990," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 3 (May 2015): 420–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144214566953>, Kurashige, *Shifting Grounds of Race*. On Wilson's election, see Self, *American Babylon*, 312–314; Robert Stanley Oden, *From Blacks to Brown and Beyond: The Struggle for Progressive Politics in Oakland, California, 1966–2011* (Solana Beach, CA: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2012), 33–40; Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 227.

gave places like Oakland a means of identifying themselves with the Pacific Rim. By seeking out relationships with Asian capital on their own terms, often to replace a vanishing national welfare apparatus, mayoral administrations could be seen as innovators and risk-takers instead of failures; advocates of self-sufficiency instead of reliant on federal assistance. Within this context, multiculturalism—abstracted from the more radical and redistributive aspects of the civil rights movement—became a means for city governments to sell their cities to overseas developers. In turn, Asian ethnic enclaves became important sites for the production of multicultural cities, with Asian Americans themselves moving from excluded outsiders to valuable components of the cosmopolitan world city.

The same dynamic that effected cities as a whole thus played out at a smaller scale among Asian American people and institutions. Having been elevated into a position of expanded political importance, Asian Americans also had to navigate their own novel challenges, from fiscal austerity to new immigration to the commercialization of their historic neighborhoods. As a result, community activists also began seeking out ways to marry pro-business tactics with social justice politics, similarly describing their pursuits as exercises in self-sufficiency and economic independence. In Oakland, their efforts would ultimately result in Chinatown's for-profit and nonprofit entities sharing physical spaces, social functions, and resource bases within the altered landscape of the enclave.

Table 4.1: Housing Units in Oakland Chinatown*

Census Year	Number of Renter-Occupied Units	Number of Owner-Occupied Units
1960	2627	198
1970	2247	436
1980	1539	621
1990	1661	1287

Source: U.S. Census Data, 1960-1990.

* Approximations given shifting census tracts over time and Chinatown's shifting borders. Data here is derived from current Census Tracts 4030, 4031, and 4033 and their rough historical equivalents.

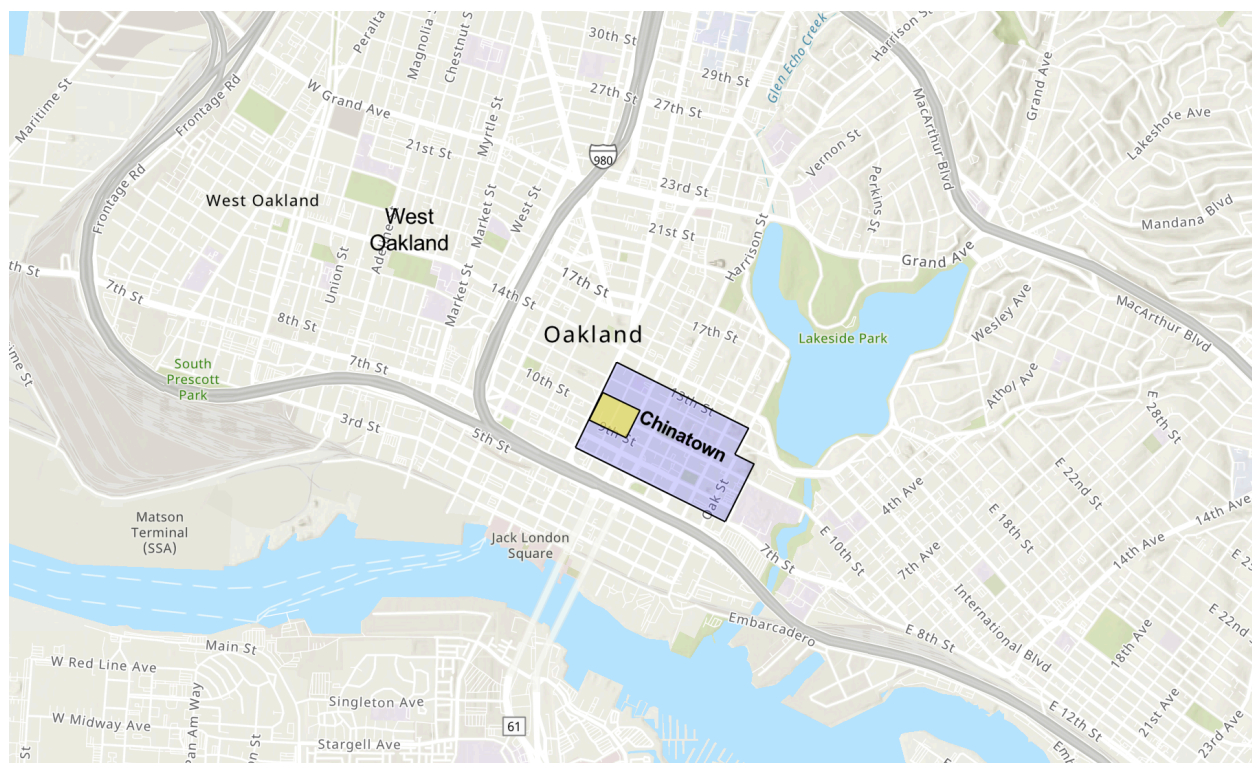


Fig. 4.1: Map showing the location of Chinatown relative to Lake Merritt and West Oakland. The Chinatown Redevelopment project Area is marked in yellow.

I. From “Chinese Village” to “Hong Kong/USA”

“A warm, fuzzy ghetto”: Chinatown before 1960

Oakland almost didn’t end up with a Chinatown at all. In the three decades following Chinese immigrants’ arrival in the East Bay in the 1850s, Oakland’s various “Chinese quarters” were repeatedly uprooted and destroyed by the city government and white vigilante violence, the latter of which crested during the late 19th century with hundreds of attempts to expel Chinese residents from cities and towns across the American West.⁷ Violence worked in tandem with an economic downturn and loss of job opportunities to push the majority of Oakland’s Chinese residents out of the region; by 1900, only 1,000 of them remained in and around the city. Oakland Chinatown’s final iteration, located at 8th and Webster street, only survived due to its sibling across the Bay’s ill fortune. San Francisco Chinatown’s near-total destruction in the 1906 earthquake sent thousands of Chinese refugees fleeing to the East Bay, where they

⁷ On the history of the Chinese exclusion movement in Oakland, see Eve Armentrout Ma, *Hometown Chinatown: A History of Oakland’s Chinese Community, 1852-1995* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2000), and Eve Armentrout Ma and Jeong Huei Ma, *The Chinese of Oakland: Unsung Builders* (Oakland, CA: Oakland Chinese History Research Committee, 1982).

set up sprawling tent cities and other forms of temporary housing. Those who ended up sticking around included a number of well-to-do merchants, who built out Oakland Chinatown's network of businesses and family associations. They also forced the expansion of the neighborhood's physical boundaries, as restrictive covenants in the surrounding suburbs prevented them from migrating out of the city into the more desirable neighborhoods in the surrounding hills (fig. 4.1).

Earthquake refugees helped ensure Chinatown's survival, but the neighborhood still only boasted around 3,000 residents during the 1910s. The city's Chinese Americans rode out the last forty years of the Exclusion Era in relative peace, punctuated by the occasional bout of gang violence between warring tongs.⁸ It took the shock of World War II to properly initiate new degrees of social and economic mobility for minorities throughout the region, including Chinese Americans. Newcomers, many of them African Americans from the South, flooded into Oakland to pursue work in the docks and shipyards, chasing what historian Marilyn Johnson has termed "the second gold rush." Between 1940 and 1944, Oakland's population grew by 43,182 people, an increase of over 14%.⁹ Some local Chinese Americans also found employment in the defense industry, where a labor shortage compelled employers to eliminate racial restrictions on hiring. Other Chinese Americans enjoyed increased business in their shops and restaurants from the influx of workers and military personnel. Artist Flo Oy Wong, born in Chinatown in 1938, later remembered how the counters of her parents' restaurant were consistently packed with workers from the Alameda shipyards during the war. In addition to serving defense industry workers, Wong's mother briefly became one herself, sewing parachutes alongside other Chinatown women at a newly-opened factory located at 845 Harrison Street.¹⁰

Wong and others in her generation would go on to describe the neighborhood of their youth with deep fondness. The lack of services and humble surroundings were off-set by a close-knit sense of community, which redevelopment would eventually come to endanger. "Chinatown was a ghetto, but it was, for me, sort of a warm, fuzzy ghetto," she recounted in a 2007 interview. "It was Chinatown that

⁸ Ma, *Hometown Chinatown*, 64, 75-77.

⁹ Marilyn S. Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 154.

¹⁰ Flo Oy Wong, interview by Rick Moss, August 24, 2007, African American Museum and Library at Oakland, <https://californiarevealed.org/islandora/object/cavpp%3A23131>.

began to identify me and let me know with whom I would and could connect.”¹¹ Ted Dang, born in the neighborhood over a decade later in 1951, would describe a similar childhood during the tail end of Chinatown’s days as an enclave community. Almost all of his friends were from the neighborhood and attended the same school, Lincoln Elementary. “We didn’t have scouting, we didn’t have swimming, there were no facilities available,” Dang recalled; instead, he and other neighborhood children would spend their weekends and summers playing baseball beneath the freeway, where pop flies would bounce off the concrete underbelly. But according to Dang, “we didn’t know what we missed out on... There was plenty to keep us busy.”¹²

Wong and Dang’s nostalgic recollections of a small and close-knit Chinatown during the 1940s and ‘50s help us to understand what local Chinese American progressives meant in later years when they spoke of saving the neighborhood, or wanting a “living community.” Scarcity was to be remembered as humility; the inward-facing nature of the ghetto transmuted from a side effect of white racism to a source of ethnic pride. Meanwhile, activists would come to view the Chinatown of later decades as suffering from too much of the wrong kind of attention—both from Asian capitalists and from local government.

These changes began with the rapid post-World War II suburbanization of Chinese Americans and the encroachment of public infrastructure projects into the neighborhood, which quickly ushered in a new reality during the late 1950s. The former signaled a largely positive development for middle class Chinese Americans, whose newfound mobility during the war translated into even greater gains in its aftermath. State and federal governments overturned restrictive housing covenants and immigration laws, allowing many Chinese Americans—including Ted Dang’s own father, who brought Dang’s mother to the U.S. via the War Brides Act—to either start or reunify their families. Greater access to higher education prompted a broad shift into the region’s middle class; according to local scholar Willard Chow, Chinese American employment in the professional and technical occupations rose from 2.9% in 1940 to 17.9% in 1960.¹³ Upwardly-mobile parents were especially keen to get their children into more well-funded public schools

¹¹ Wong, interview by Rick Moss.

¹² Dang, interview by Rick Moss.

¹³ Willard T. Chow, *The reemergence of an inner city: the pivot of Chinese settlement in the East Bay Region of the San Francisco Bay area* (San Francisco: R&E Research Associates, 1977), 67.

than what was available to Chinatown, or to move into more spacious surroundings. Others left to avoid Chinatown's rising rents and deteriorating housing stock. Both Flo Wong and Ted Dang's families left Chinatown when their children were of high school age. In Wong's case, her family joined the majority of departing Chinese Americans who stayed within Oakland's borders in the Lake Merritt area, where she had her first encounters with anti-Chinese racism from her schoolmates, many of whom she said were from much wealthier backgrounds.¹⁴

The construction of the Nimitz and Grove-Schafter freeways and the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) headquarters, was an especially traumatic experience for Chinatown's remaining residents. Sixty years later, Ted Dang still spoke about the project with bitterness, noting that it displaced several of his friends' households and destroyed their neighborhood playground.¹⁵ These infrastructure projects were signs of a broader shift in the regional economy: as the railroad and manufacturing industries declined during the 1950s and '60s, taking thousands of jobs with them, Oakland found itself dealing with a mounting unemployment and declining productivity. Planners hoped that additional transit options would help circulate suburban workers and consumers in and out of the urban core, with low-income and minority neighborhoods paying the price for their middle class counterparts' increased mobility. Yet as historian Robert Self has pointed out, the freeways and the BART served primarily to connect East Bay suburbanites to San Francisco, skipping downtown Oakland entirely. And while the gains for Oakland were marginal, the damage was significant: thousands of homes, small businesses, and civic institutions, many of them owned by African American, Chinese, and other non-white Oaklanders, were destroyed to clear the freeways' paths.

As part of its overall effort to revive consumption and employment in the urban core, Oakland's city government also invested in urban renewal and blight removal campaigns throughout the 1960s. Majority-Black West Oakland served as a laboratory for the city's experiments with redevelopment as a cure-all for economic depression. Acorn, a housing project located at the intersection of the Nimitz and Grove-Schafter freeways just a mile away from Chinatown, was an early example of a project intended to serve existing residents eventually becoming a vehicle for their displacement, as the Oakland

¹⁴ Wong, interview by Rick Moss; Chow, *Reemergence of an inner city*, 126-127.

¹⁵ Author interview with Ted Dang, May 31, 2022, Oakland, California.

Redevelopment Agency opted to bulldoze rather than rehabilitate every block in the project area over the objections of Black renters and homeowners.¹⁶ On Chinatown's southern border, another redevelopment initiative, "Project Padlock," sought to condemn roughly eighty residence hotels in the city's skid row district. Begun in 1960, the initiative was ostensibly meant to shut down hotels that had become health or fire hazards in the interest of protecting residents, but it was also a crackdown on the so-called "transients and winos" who lived in the neighborhood. Hotels found to be in violation of the city building code were quickly shut down—"padlocked"—with most residents forced to fend for themselves. Among the people targeted by Padlock were several Chinese American hotel owners who, like others affected by the policy, resented the new costs and legal hurdles Padlock had piled onto them without a definitive sense of Oakland's ultimate plans for the area. For all they knew, the city would bulldoze the neighborhood in a few short years regardless of whether or not they invested in repairs and improvements. As the legal representative for one Chinese American hotel owner put it: "Who knows what the city will want to do to us five years from now?"¹⁷

Ethnic elites and the Chinatown Redevelopment Project

The first stirrings of redevelopment in Oakland, Chinatown began during the early 1960s as a direct response to the neighborhood's losses during the preceding decade. The project's champions—Edward Wong, an insurance company owner, and Dr. Raymond Eng, an optometrist—had both been prominent members of the city's Chinese American community and successful, white-collar professionals since the 1940s. In winter of 1961, they presented the first of many proposals to Oakland city council "to redevelop 12 blighted blocks of downtown Oakland into a bright new Chinatown."¹⁸ None of Wong and Eng's earliest plans envisioned any involvement from overseas investors, but they did seek to

¹⁶ Chow, *Reemergence of an inner city*, 141, 149-151.

¹⁷ Ed Salzman, "Hotel Fire Hazards Target of City Drive," *Tribune*, February 19, 1961; "Owners of Doomed Hotels In Squeeze Over Improving," *Tribune*, February 21, 1961. Andrew Highsmith and other historians of postwar urban renewal have pointed out how, as revitalization and demolition became linked concepts in the minds of city planners, politicians, and federal housing administrators, non-white and low-income neighborhoods acutely vulnerable to destruction. See Andrew R. Highsmith, *Demolition Means Progress: Flint, Michigan, and the Fate of the American Metropolis*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁸ "Council Aid Sought On Redevelopment Plan," *Oakland Tribune*, December 7, 1961.



Fig. 4.2: Chinatown's 9th Street Market, 1955. Source: William Wong, *Images of America: Oakland's Chinatown* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004).



Fig. 4.3: Herbalist Young Tung Dang and his sons, Lucas and Ted Dang, in front of their Chinatown home with Young Tung's business occupying the ground floor, 1955. Source: Wong, *Images of America*.



Fig. 4.4: Businesses on 8th Street, 1958. Source: Wong, *Images of America*.

“modernize” the neighborhood with new amenities to reflect the neighborhood’s changing demographics, including “a community center to help new Chinese immigrants.” Projects like Acorn and Padlock may well have been on Chinese American elites’ minds as well, as they insisted on community control of the neighborhood’s redevelopment, perhaps to avoid the widespread displacement suffered by the residents of West Oakland and skid row.

Like their Nisei peers in Los Angeles, Chinatown’s merchant elites initially hoped that by bringing redevelopment to the neighborhood, they could attract middle-class Chinese Americans back to the urban core and reintroduce traditional Chinese values to the Americanized youth. The project thus began its life as a regional enterprise, not a global one. Ed Wong was particularly committed to the task of reviving young Chinese Americans’ attachments to the enclave, and made it his primarily public justification for why the redevelopment project was necessary. In a 1962 interview with the *Oakland Tribune*, Wong mentioned that “some of the young people” raised in the suburbs “don’t even know how to prepare Chinese food.” In 1965, when the project began moving forward again in earnest, he told another reporter: “Basically, we are worried about our children. They are getting into more trouble. They ape the wrong things in American culture... I think the Chinese culture had better seep in again. We want to give our young people pride in the fact they are Chinese-Americans.”¹⁹ Wong may have cared about young people in their own right, but his statements also served the purpose of appealing to mainstream American racial thought. Asian Americans’ newfound model minority status was built on the perception that traditional Asian cultural norms of filial piety, discipline, and educational attainment were uniquely compatible with the Protestant work ethic of white, Anglo-Saxon America. If future generations of Chinese American youth lost their connection to these traditional norms, then their status as assimilated, respectable minorities might be at stake as well. By emphasizing his desire to keep young people

¹⁹ Strobel, “Plan to Rebuild Chinatown Wins Support”; “The Wong Family Decides Its Culture Will Survive,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 12, 1966.

embedded in the values of their ethnic community, Wong was reassuring white Oaklanders that their Chinese American population would remain a non-threatening, well-adjusted minority population.²⁰

Wong's PR strategy clearly paid off among Oakland's administrators and elected officials. The project was received enthusiastically by the city government, so much so that in 1967 the city council grouped the Chinatown project in with an existing plan for Oakland's "City Central" downtown district and submitted the entire package to HUD as its General Neighborhood Renewal Plan. Redevelopment in Chinatown would live or die alongside the revitalization of the entire "South Broadway Area," which included neighboring Madison Square and a section of Victorian buildings labelled the Old City.

Chinatown's envelopment into the Oakland Redevelopment Agency's plans for central Oakland was both an index of broader trends in Chinese American sociopolitical integration during this period, and of the evolving appeal surrounding multicultural, "ethnic-themed" urban spaces. This was a new role for Oakland's Chinatown, which had not been built with tourists in mind and thus failed to satisfied certain non-Chinese expectations regarding what a Chinese ethnic enclave "ought" to look like. Unlike San Francisco's Chinatown, which had cultivated a reputation for being a gaudy and exotic tourist attraction since the 1906 earthquake, Oakland Chinatown had remained primarily a neighborhood of and for local Chinese Americans (with a smaller number of Japanese and Filipino business owners and occupants). Photographs of Oakland Chinatown before redevelopment show streets lined with low- and mid-rises which, apart from their Chinese-language signage, were not usually visually distinct from the rest of the architecture in downtown Oakland (figs. 4.2-4). Chinatown's overall appearance reflected the Chinese American community's tenuous social status during the 19th and early 20th century, when they moved into whatever pre-existing buildings the city would permit them to occupy. From the city government's perspective then, to redevelop Chinatown also meant to "ethnicize" it in important ways, making it more like its sister across the Bay. By contrast, the Chinese American elites who initiated the project expressly wished to avoid turning their neighborhood into a "garish" carbon copy of San Francisco's Chinatown. Their positions would evolve over time, however, as both external and internal pressures incentivized

²⁰ Wu, *Color of Success*, 155. Wong's particular focus on youth reflects a dynamic Wu returns to throughout her book about the politics of youth delinquency among Chinese and Japanese Americans. As discussed in Chapter 1, the supposedly "non-delinquent" nature of Asian American young people was a major plank in their model minority status. As a result, throughout the 1950s and '60s Asian ethnic elders devised all manner of strategies to either suppress youth delinquency itself, or keep occurrences of it out of the public eye.

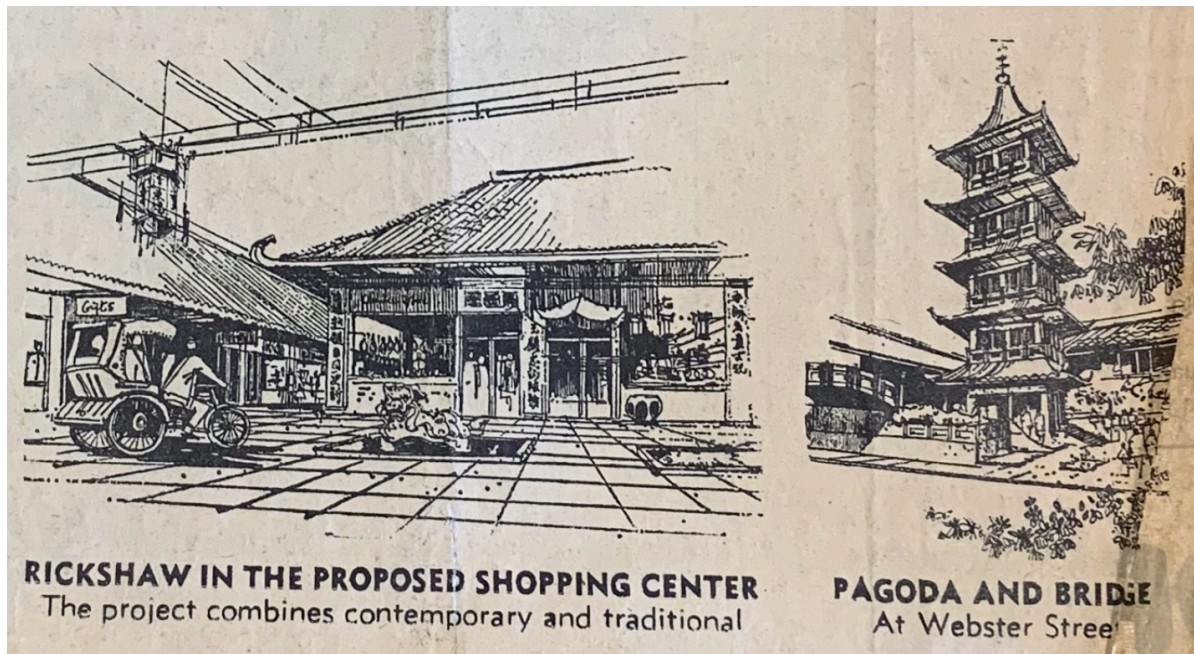


Fig. 4.5: Publicity drawings for the Chinatown Redevelopment Plan, taken from a “24-page brochure” which was presumably published by Wong and Eng’s coalition of pro-redevelopment merchants. Source: “Oakland Plans New Chinatown,” *Montclair-Piedmont Spectator*, January 12, 1966, Oakland Public Library.



Figs. 4.6-7: Drawings from the Oakland Redevelopment Agency’s formal offering for the Chinatown Redevelopment Project. Oakland Redevelopment Agency, *Chinatown Offering 1*, February 1974.

them to associate economic revival with a much more stereotypically Chinese—and, eventually, cosmopolitan—version of the neighborhood.²¹

Encouraged by the city's enthusiasm for their project, between 1967 and 1974, Ed Wong and Raymond Eng set about establishing their own development corporation, Oakland Chinatown Redevelopment, Inc. (OCRI), and successfully put forward a bid to develop the project area's first block, which they named Hua Tsun, or "Chinese Village."²² No schematics of the Village are readily available, but the name suggests that Wong and Eng may have chosen to hew closer to their own earliest iterations of the project, as well as the ORA's suggested design scheme. Early drawings dating from the project's inception, which were circulated among the local press in 1966, show buildings and landscaping that "[combine] the contemporary and traditional," with sloping, tiled roofs and pagoda towers. One sketch even depicted a rickshaw driver taking passengers across a small plaza, which was adorned in its center with a guardian lion statue (fig. 4.5).²³ The ORA's drawings, which were featured in the 1974 "offering" which served to formally solicit bids from developers, further developed the "contemporary-traditional" blend by juxtaposing certain Chinese architectural elements with midcentury modern building forms (figs. 4.6-7). While the offering took care to note that "the design need not incorporate Asian design motifs, an Asian design theme... will be preferred." However, "the use of design clichés which quickly become obsolete will not be accepted."²⁴

By 1974, both Wong and Eng had become members of city government, part of a small wave of local Asian American political success. Nisei businessman Frank Ogawa had been appointed to City Council in 1966, where he would stay for the next three decades; Eng became Oakland's first elected Asian American city councilman in 1967 for District 3, which included both parts of West Oakland and

²¹ William Wong, *Oakland's Chinatown*, (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2004). A small number of exceptions did (and do) exist, including 700 Harrison Street, which was constructed in 1924 as an elaborate "Chinese palace"-style restaurant by a white architect and developer (see "New Pekin-Low Restaurant Embodies the Best of Chinese Art; Built By W. K. Owen," *Oakland Tribune*, December 7, 1924).

²² "Oakland Chinatown Redevelopment Project," February 1972, Box 2, folder 4, CFP, Huntington Library.

²³ "Oakland Plans New Chinatown," *Montclair-Piedmont Spectator*, January 12, 1966, Oakland Public Library (henceforth OPL).

²⁴ Oakland Redevelopment Agency, *Chinatown Offering I*, February 1974, UC Berkeley Environmental Design Library.

Chinatown; and two years later, Ed Wong was appointed to the Oakland Planning Commission. For Wong and Eng, their leadership on the CRP had helped elevate them into the community's formal representatives and turn them into trusted voices on redevelopment in downtown Oakland, both for other city officials and for the city's electorate. As one Chinatown writer would later put it, "We now possess a little more clout! ...New restaurants, more shops... and the construction of the [redevelopment] project... having excited everyone."²⁵ In his first successful city council campaign, Eng was able to take partial responsibility for Chinatown's progress and position himself as a "pro-growth" candidate, calling for "more downtown development," an effort to "secure a major hotel to restore Oakland as a leading convention city," and "better city planning" overall. Using his experience in the CRP, Eng effectively painted the incumbent councilmember, Howard Rilea, as an obstacle to progress. Under Rilea's watch, Eng claimed, projects were started and abandoned; budgets grew out of proportion; and promising endeavors were left unexplored. "A strong councilman will not permit such things to occur," ran one of Eng's campaign ads. "It is ridiculous to see so many unsolved problems... such as a Need for New Major Hotel... Racial Misunderstanding...Zoning, Redevelopment, etc."²⁶ When Eng ran for re-election four years later, he beat back a challenge from community organizer Paul Cobb in part by citing his redevelopment experience, including his work on the "City Center project." Eng's path to victory merged his typical boosterism on urban renewal with racist dogwhistles, alleging that Cobb was involved with the Black Panther Party and represented a "certain radical element" in the city. Where Eng was a builder, Cobb and his fellow Black activists were "destroyers"; where Eng wanted growth and unity, African American militants sowed division.²⁷

Eng's anti-Black campaign rhetoric emerged from a longer history of Chinese American elites' attempts to distinguish themselves from their African American counterparts in West Oakland. Such

²⁵ Howard Ah-Tye, "Oakland Historian Recalls Chinese Heritage," *AsianWeek*, May 31, 1980, Box 99, folder 1, CFP, Huntington Library.

²⁶ "'Oakland Needs A Change Now': Dr. Raymond L. Eng's 12-Point Plan for Progress," *Oakland Tribune*, May 8, 1967; "'Ned Initiative To Get Things Done' — Dr. Eng: Elect A New Councilman for 'Action'," *Oakland Tribune*, May 11, 1967.

²⁷ Cobb had once worked alongside the Panthers' founders at a youth program, but historian Robert Self documents that "Cobb and the Panther founders took divergent paths after 1966—Cobb into academia, political organizing, and journalism." "To Build... Not to Destroy: Re-Elect Dr. Raymond Eng," *Oakland Tribune*, April 16, 1971.

efforts got at the heart of the two communities' diverging approaches towards redevelopment politics. Ever since the disastrous implementation of the Acorn project during the 1950s, Black West Oaklanders had been organizing for greater community control over redevelopment proceedings in their neighborhoods. Cobb had been a leading figure in these struggles, as had an organization called the West Oakland Planning Commission (WOPC). When Oakland set about developing a Model Cities application in 1968, residents and other West Oakland stakeholders formed the WOPC to serve as a "community-centered administrative apparatus" for the project. As historian Robert Self notes, some individuals, including Paul Cobb, saw the WOPC and the Model Cities program as a means for expanding African American political power within the city; as such, they sought unprecedented degrees of veto ability over various aspects of the plan. In addition to seeking more control over federally-funded projects in West Oakland, the WOPC sought to expand the geographic scope of the Model Cities plan in order to maximize resources and jobs that would go to communities within the project area. Even more controversial than their attempts to gain control over the Model Cities program, however, was the WOPC's firm, public stance on police violence and racial injustice. The WOPC's embrace of protest politics to achieve their demands made them a hated enemy of downtown business elites, who accused them of "extortion" and "holding the city hostage" through their militant tactics, which included boycotting downtown businesses.²⁸

By contrast, Chinese Americans were held up by white officials as registering their needs and desires through the proper channels. It helped that what businessmen like Eng and Wong were advocating for meshed almost perfectly with the city's desires for downtown Oakland. When the two men first proposed their Chinatown plan in 1966, politicians and administrators were publicly "bowled over" by what they called its "self-help" aspect, as Wong and Eng had raised \$10,000 from other Chinatown business owners to finance the planning stage. Oakland's State Senator, John Holmdahl, introduced a resolution in the California State Assembly commending the Chinatown Redevelopment Project before any construction even took place. ORA director John Williams praised it as a "case of the people telling

²⁸ Self, *American Babylon*, 244-245.

US what they want—and offering their own money to get things rolling.”²⁹ Of course, the WOPC and other West Oakland organizations were also stridently telling city government what they wanted. But their vision for West Oakland would have necessitated a major shift in the existing racial and class power balance within the city, whereas the Chinatown project largely reinforced the status quo. For their part, Wong and Eng publicly leaned into their model minority position, with both men opposing an effort to include parts of Chinatown into the Model Cities plan, which would have linked the neighborhood with West Oakland instead of the downtown redevelopment plan. At a 1968 hearing on the issue, mere months after WOPC members participated in a controversial boycott of a downtown retailer, Ed Wong testified on the issue before the City Council, noting that he and others in Chinatown were “confused about... the impact of part of their community being included in Model Cities.” Requesting more time to review the plan, Wong ended his testimony by saying: “Being Chinese, we don’t say an awful lot; we don’t go out and demand certain things.” A week later, Eng and Wong had negotiated for the six blocks of Chinatown on question to be withdrawn from the Model Cities proposal.³⁰

Mr. Chou’s offer

Having secured the Chinatown redevelopment project’s full separation from West Oakland, won themselves influential posts within city government, and established their own development corporation, Wong and Eng had seemingly paved the way for Chinatown’s business elites to have total control over the project’s progress. Despite a promising start, however, their development corporation made little progress for over a year, with the group requesting multiple 120-day extensions from the ORA when it failed to come up with the necessary funding. From the start, it seems the OCRI was willing to include overseas investors in their financial model: in February of 1975—roughly nine months after winning the bid—the development group’s officers informed the Redevelopment Agency that they had failed to obtain “financing from international sources,” and were now seeking to “obtain the necessary funds from more local sources.” This, too, proved unsuccessful, and the project lay dormant for the next calendar year.

²⁹ “Holmdahl Lauds Chinatown Plan,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 1, 1966; Herman Wong, “Chinatown: Past, Future,” *Oakland Tribune*, February 12, 1967.

³⁰ “Model Cities Row Almost Cooled Off,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 23, 1968; “Way Cleared for Model Cities Aid,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 28, 1968.

The possibility of soliciting an overseas developer to replace OCRI (as opposed to just seeking a foreign source of financing) seems to have originated with Wong and Eng themselves: according to his own later narrative of events, Wong traveled to Singapore sometime in 1975 and there became acquainted with a Chinese-Malaysian real estate developer named Y. T. Chou. Chou had emerged from obscurity during the early 1970s to make a fortune in the booming Hong Kong real estate market. By the time he took an interest in expanding his ventures to Oakland, he sat on the Board of Directors of Gammon Construction, Hong Kong's largest construction company and a subsidiary of Jardine Matheson, a British multinational conglomerate with roots in the early 19th century. Matheson's ongoing dominance of the Hong Kong real estate market was one of the many ways in which British colonial influence had embedded itself into the city's contemporary economy, all while continuing to make junior partners out of regional Asian elites like Y. T. Chou.

Besides his professional credentials, Oaklanders knew little else about Chou, and he did not prove to be forthcoming about his life history or other personal details. On his first visit to Oakland in July of 1977, Chou primarily expounded to his hosts on the health benefits of their eight-course dinner while leaving all talk of business to his U.S. representative John T. McAlister.³¹ Chou's mysterious background did not seem to deter Oakland's government officials in soliciting his participation in their plans for Chinatown; indeed, most of them were insistent that they not look their \$100 million dollar gift horse in the mouth. "Fiscally," City Councilman John Sutter told the *Tribune* as public hearings on the project went forward, "...it looks a lot more attractive than some other proposals we have seen in the past"³²

Chou's proposal, titled Hong Kong/USA and developed through his newly-formed US corporation Sunrise California, was certainly much flashier and more elaborate than the Chinese Village design. Chou didn't just intend to develop a single block of the project area: he wanted it all. His proposal merged contemporary trends in Hong Kong retail and residential development with the city's desire for a visually distinct Chinatown district. Instead of 15- and 10-story offices and apartment buildings, Chou put forward 30- and 23-story high rises, surrounding a sprawling shopping center and parking facility. At the development's southeastern corner, Chou's architects incorporated a traditional pagoda topping off his

³¹ Lloyd Boles, "Kumquats and \$100 million," *Oakland Tribune*, July 20, 1977.

³² "Chinatown Project: Public Hearings Scheduled," *Oakland Tribune*, May 20, 1977.



Fig. 4.8: Artists' conception of the completed Hong Kong/USA from a promotional pamphlet. The Chinese pavilion is featured prominently in the center front. Source: Sunrise California Inc., *Hong Kong/USA Commercial Condominium Complex and Asian Trade Center*, c. 1977, Oakland Public Library.

version of the community center, to be completed in the project's fourth and final phase. Promotional material for Hong Kong/USA drew attention to its "special 'vocabulary' of design," which incorporated aspects of "Chinese art, architecture, philosophies, religions and geomancy." Some features, like the pagoda and Chinese gate, were obvious; others were more subtle, such as the repeated use of the octagon, or "*pa kau*" form, in the shapes of buildings themselves and the shapes of their inner courtyards. The final result was meant to both capture "the cultural background of Oakland's community" while possessing "an international quality that spans all cultures in the changing times of the 20th century." (figs 4.8-9)³³ This dual character—merging tradition with cosmopolitan modernity—spoke to the center's diverse intended constituencies. While Chou's company gestured at their desire to integrate their center into Oakland Chinatown, Hong Kong/USA's future commercial occupants were intended to consist almost entirely of

³³ Sunrise California Inc., *Hong Kong/USA Commercial Condominium Complex and Asian Trade Center*, n.d., OPL; Hong Kong/USA "Architects' statement of design," October 17, 1977, OPL.

Asian retailers from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. The center's ideal tenant was an "established retail [business] in Asia," looking to expand their operations to the United States. To offer these tenants a familiar space for their businesses, the center was designed in the vein of similar condominium-type shopping centers in Hong Kong, with various phases even named after four Hong Kong neighborhoods: Causeway Bay, Happy Valley, *Tsim Sha Tsui*, and Aberdeen.³⁴



Fig. 4.9: Artists' conception of Hong Kong/USA's interior; note the 8-sided glass ceiling. Source: Sunrise California Inc., *Hong Kong/USA*.

Hong Kong/USA signaled a dramatic departure from the Chinatown Redevelopment Project's previous ambitions, both in terms of its product and its politics. This was mirrored in the way Oaklanders, from Ed Wong and Raymond Eng to the office of the mayor, began talking about the project. Despite their previous insistence that the CRP was an exercise in Chinese American "self help," by 1977, both men

³⁴ Sunrise California Inc., *Hong Kong/USA*.



Fig. 4.10: Oakland City Manager Robert Self fires Hong Kong's Noonday Gun in Causeway Bay while on a 1978 junket to the city, kicking off the city's campaign to pitch Hong Kong/USA to local investors. Self was joined by then-Vice Mayor Raymond Eng (not visible) and Councilman Carter Gilmore (third from the left). Source: *Oakland Tribune*, November 2, 1978.

were comfortable admitting to the public that their community “can’t handle the revitalizing locally,” and thus had turned to a figure like Chou. To further justify their seeking out an overseas partner, the two businessmen traded in old ideas of Chinatown as the anchor of Chinese American traditions for a newer, more modern conception of the neighborhood—and, by extension, the whole of Oakland. In an the same promotional pamphlet for Hong Kong/USA as quoted above, Wong and Eng were both attributed as saying: “Oakland is becoming more cosmopolitan... In Oakland there is a warm welcome for Asian people, an enormous market for Asian goods... Hong Kong/USA is right for Oakland.”³⁵ The shift from “Chinese” to “Asian” was significant: whereas four years earlier Wong had hoped the CRP would “revive, sustain and enhance the rich culture of Chinese heritage in America,” now the area’s value lay in its ability to bridge the United States with external sources of wealth and prestige. In the process, Chinese

³⁵ Sunrise California Inc., *Hong Kong/USA*.

American Oaklanders became an asset rather than a constituency, a reason the project would succeed rather than the reason for the project's existence.

Oakland had long served as a landing ground for Pacific cargo through its port, which was among the largest in the country. But Hong Kong/USA signified an evolution towards an even more robust economic relationship with the Far East. As work on Hong Kong/USA began, the city government quickly pivoted from viewing the CRP as a special interest for local Chinese Americans to a potential benefit for the entire East Bay area. Robert B. Shetterly, president of the Clorox Company and chairman of the Oakland Council for Economic Development, emphasized how the project would help Oakland attract "businessmen from Southeast Asia who decide to participate in this magnificent and exciting project."³⁶ Constructing a closer relationship to Asia required dedicated emissaries willing to represent Oakland to her new Far East partners. Several Oakland representatives—including Raymond Eng and City Manager David Self—travelled to Hong Kong in 1978 to participate in sales drives for commercial units within the project area and lend the enterprise their personal authority (fig. 4.10). While Mayor Wilson did not join them, his image certainly did: advertisements in Hong Kong magazines all prominently featured "a photograph of Mayor Wilson... in the upper left-hand corner." City officials and Sunrise California both understood that what they were selling was not just another commercial development, but Oakland itself. Sunrise's own promotional materials gushed about the quality of Oakland's public school system, housing stock, and recreational facilities. Instead of speaking directly to Oakland's ongoing economic woes and negative domestic reputation, Sunrise referred to the city as an untapped, overlooked market: "Paradoxically, there are few major retail facilities in Metropolitan Oakland. For this reason and many others, Hong Kong/USA will be warmly welcomed in Oakland...."³⁷

Oakland's politicians and administrators were further buoyed by their understanding of Hong Kong's political situation, which they felt provided urgent motivation to investors to move their assets out of the colony. Thawing relations between the U.S. and the People's Republic of China paved the way for the PRC's admission to the United Nations, allowing its government to make a formal request at the UN

³⁶ Sunrise California Inc., *Hong Kong/USA*; Lester On, "\$100 Million," *Oakland Tribune*, March 3, 1977.

³⁷ Richard Paoli, "China project \$2.36 million for Oakland," *Oakland Tribune*, January 5, 1979; Lionel Wilson, "A Message of Welcome," n.d.; *Hong Kong/USA Commercial Condominium Complex and Asian Trade Center*.

in 1972 that Hong Kong's status be settled "in an appropriate way when conditions are ripe." Despite the lack of a firm deadline, parties in both Great Britain and China speculated that 1997—the year Britain's lease of Hong Kong was set to expire—would be the best time for a formal handover. Almost immediately after the PRC's announcement, investors and other members of Hong Kong's business class began to grow anxious, despite reassurances from Hong Kong's governor and the PRC that their assets and interests were not under threat. Nevertheless, anticommunist sentiments, general fears of losing the status quo, and pre-existing doubts regarding the stability of Hong Kong's rapid industrialization continued to motivate capital flight from the mid-70's onwards.³⁸ Around the same time, large numbers of Hongkongers—a significant proportion of them members of the upper- and middle-classes—began leaving the colony. The narrative that tens of thousands of moneyed emigrants were fleeing (or preparing to flee) an impending Communist government satisfied certain preconceptions among the Western media, and Oakland's local press was certainly no exception. Reporters frequently discussed economic developments in Chinatown in the context of Hong Kong's growing political instability, referring to the growing presence of "flight capital" in the East Bay.³⁹

But the prospect of a Communist government was only one of many factors pushing Hongkongers of all class backgrounds to either leave or export their wealth. Rapid industrialization during the 1960s and '70s had created a class of well-off locals with global economic connections and transnational social ties. Many had themselves gone to school in the United States or United Kingdom, or were sending their children abroad to benefit from an education overseas. For these upwardly mobile entrepreneurs, investment opportunities like Hong Kong/USA and the possibility of expanding private enterprise to new markets was often an appeal in and of itself, as was the idea of giving themselves and their families a "Western lifestyle." As one Hongkonger businessman affiliated with Chou put it, "Hong Kong businessmen have long been eyeing California as a market for garments and other goods"; another

³⁸ For more on political and economic conditions in Hong Kong during the 1970s and resulting capital flight, see: Loyti Cheng, "An Economic Analysis of Capital Flight in Hong Kong," *New York Journal of International Law and Politics* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 683-716 and Tak-Wing Ngo ed., *Hong Kong's History: State and Society Under Colonial Rule* (Taylor & Francis, 2002).

³⁹ Richard Paoli, "China project \$2.36 million for Oakland"; Paoli, "China money going into Hong Kong-USA project," *Oakland Tribune*, April 22, 1979; Mark Schwartz, "Foreign Investors Trouble Oakland's Chinese Community," *East/West*, February 15, 1978; Wayne Beissert, "Hong Kong's buying binge," *Oakland Tribune*, January 25, 1982; Stephen Maila, "Far East funds find way to Chinatown," *Oakland Tribune*, February 17, 1985.

referred jokingly to fears that “the whole of Southeast Asia will be overrun by Communists,” before insisting that “the main thing is the potential trade.”⁴⁰ For Oaklanders, however, situating their encounter with Asian capital within the context of Cold War geopolitics may have amplified local optimism about Hong Kong/USA and the CRP. Such discourses reinforced the idea that Oakland could be a stand-in for what was good about America instead of the country’s many problems—crime, unemployment, racial unrest, and poverty among them. If Oakland could become desirable alternative for wealthy Asian capitalists fleeing Communist expropriation, then perhaps the city was no longer doomed to be the poster-child of de-industrialization’s failures.

As Oakland’s boosters folded Hong Kong/USA into a city-wide narrative of progress and rebirth, officials and the press remained quick to credit Chinese Americans with initiating redevelopment in Chinatown to begin with, noting in particular the persistence of local businessmen like Ed Wong and Raymond Eng. Indeed, Hong Kong/USA’s early success even helped Eng survive a tough reelection race in 1979, with the *Tribune* endorsement arguing it was important he “be retained on the City Council during the initial development of Hong Kong USA.” Hong Kong/USA’s developers apparently also threw their weight behind Eng after “[making] it clear... that they want a continued Chinese presence on the council.”⁴¹ Eng’s victory showed that for a small strata of Chinatown elites, globalized redevelopment was a successful route towards reasserting their own political legitimacy, even if they were not the ones directly financing the project. Instead of pursuing a “self-help” model, Wong and Eng had instead managed to reinvent themselves as canny brokers whose cultural and linguistic knowledge made them indispensable agents in Oakland’s new transpacific ventures.⁴²

⁴⁰ “Chinatown Plans Unveiled,” *Oakland Tribune*, October 18, 1977; Schwartz, “Foreign Investors”; Janet W. Salaff, Siu-lun Wong, and Arent Greve, *Hong Kong Movers and Stayers: Narratives of Family Migration*, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 60-62; John Flowerdew, *The Final Years of British Hong Kong: The Discourse of Colonial Withdrawal*, (New York: MacMillan, 1998), 79-81.

⁴¹ Sidney Jones, “Praise for a job well done,” *Oakland Tribune*, February 11, 1979; “We recommend Raymond Eng,” *Oakland Tribune*, April 5, 1979; “Tribune recommendations,” *Oakland Tribune*, May 13, 1979.

⁴² Historian Meredith Oda, writing in the context of Japanese American involvement in redeveloping San Francisco’s Japantown during the 1950s and ‘60s, notes that second-generation Asian American professionals were seen as ideal candidates to serve as brokers due to their presumed natural fluency in both U.S. and Asian cultures, as well as their shared class status with other architects of urban renewal. Rarely was this natural fluency ever truly the case, as most brokers had to go to great lengths to acquire expertise in Asian languages, design, and business practices. It is unclear how much of this work Wong and Eng needed to do in order to first attract Y. T. Chou to Oakland, but both men were undoubtedly considered fitting representatives by non-Asian Oaklanders due to their heritage. See Oda, *The Gateway to the Pacific*, 138-139.

II. Early conflicts over redevelopment & the birth of progressive Chinatown

“So-called Asians” versus social outcasts

As Ed Wong and Raymond Eng had been hard at work getting Hong Kong/USA underway, other earth-moving transformations had come to Oakland as well. Between 1970 and 1990, Oakland’s Asian American population grew from 17,373 to 55,332, with much of the growth being driven by new arrivals from Southeast Asian, many of them refugees. Low-income workers, many of whom did not speak English, brought with them a high demand for social services Chinatown’s existing institutions—often based in family associations or religious institutions—struggled to meet.⁴³ “We have rural Laotians who don’t even know how to flush a toilet or turn on a stove,” a Catholic aid worker bemoaned in 1981, by which point his organization had resettled over 5,000 Laotian refugees in the Oakland area. Others, including Chinatown business owners, associated newcomers with higher rates of burglary, robbery, and gang violence, complaining of inadequate policing. “The immigrants leave Hong Kong where the police are really tough,” one anonymous resident complained; “and they come here and do not understand what freedom is.”⁴⁴

Seeing growing social needs in their communities, young, college-educated Asian Americans like Ted Dang began moving to Oakland to help fill the void. Throughout the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, organizers started building new institutions that specifically targeted the needs of low income Asian immigrants in Oakland and the greater Bay Area. In the process, key leaders of these organizations began building relationships with various arms of Oakland’s city government, including the public school system and the anti-poverty council, through which Chinatown’s nonprofits received crucial federal funding.⁴⁵ They quickly realized, however, that both city government and their own ethnic elites were more intent on investing in Chinatown’s commercial infrastructure than in low-income housing, adult education, and affordable health care. As a result, by the mid-1970s progressive Asian American social

⁴³ Bay Area Census -- City of Oakland -- 1970-1990 Census Data,” accessed May 30, 2022, <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland70.htm>.

⁴⁴ Denise Tom, “Getting a Picture of Chinatown’s Gang,” September 11, 1977, *Oakland Tribune*; Abby Cohn, “New Americans face violence as dream turns to nightmare,” May 31, 1971, *Oakland Tribune*.

⁴⁵ “\$1.6 Million OEO Aid for Oakland,” “New City Target: Chinatown.”

service workers and community organizers would become some of the Chinatown Redevelopment Project's loudest critics.

When Ed Wong and Raymond Eng first proposed redeveloping the neighborhood in the 1960s, most opposition came from isolated individuals who would occasionally voice their complaints at a public hearing or city council meeting, but go no further.⁴⁶ More serious criticisms of the project emerged during the 1970s, both as foreign investors and developers like Y. T. Chou became involved and as Asian American social agencies and their allies gained more of a toehold within the neighborhood. Capturing the nature of the progressive critique of Chinatown's proposed redevelopment was Willard T. Chow, an urban geographer and UC Berkeley graduate student. In 1975, Chow published a report (and eventually, a dissertation) calling on Oakland planners to preserve Chinatown's residential and social welfare functions. "Oakland's city fathers have favored the development of Chinese shops and restaurants in order to bolster the city's nighttime activities," Chow wrote, but they were far less interested in rehabilitating the neighborhood's housing stock, which would preserve Chinatown's working- and middle-class base. Preservation need not be incompatible with revenue-raising goals; indeed shoppers and tourists, Chow argued, might be more drawn to a "living" Chinatown filled with "kids and their grandparents... than one dominated by office buildings with no social character or special activities other than housing a daytime workforce that leaves for the suburbs when the workday is over." Chow was even more blunt in his dissertation, published the same year Hong Kong/USA was first proposed, in which he singled out Wong and Eng's original redevelopment plan for slating 75% of families and 68% of businesses in the Project Area for displacement. More recent plans still did not prioritize any housing for low- or moderate-income families, invariably relegating such components to the project's final phase.⁴⁷

Although the Oakland Redevelopment Agency was legally obligated to seek community participation in the planning process, the neighborhood's low-income residents were rarely consulted about the project's impact. Instead, businessmen like Ed Wong had become Chinatown's *de facto* spokesmen before the city, repeatedly claiming that the neighborhood was enthusiastic about Hong Kong/USA. As a result, when Chinatown's poor and elderly did speak up, many expressed a combination of

⁴⁶ "First Hitch In Plan for Chinatown," January 13, 1966, *Oakland Tribune*.

⁴⁷ Chow, *Reemergence of an Inner City*, 115.

dissatisfaction and powerlessness. In 1978, the *Tribune* interviewed a number of tenants facing displacement as a result of Hong Kong/USA, including 70-year-old Chao Jing, an elderly immigrant who had lived with his wife “in the same 10 by 10 foot Chinatown tenement room for 30 years.” When reporters asked how he was feeling, Jing grimly responded: “I cannot be happy. I have to go.” Other elderly Chinatown residents were reportedly ambivalent about what happened next, so long as they received replacement housing. “This kind of passivity,” the *Tribune* noted, “...tends to give bureaucracies a relatively free hand.”⁴⁸

Activists, for all their investment in the well-being of Chinatown’s vulnerable residents, seemed to agree with the *Tribune*’s assessment. From Willard Chow’s perspective, the only people standing up to men like Wong and Eng were “American-born, liberal college students and social agencies.” Perhaps the most successful attempt to disrupt the CRP’s progress to date had come from the Asian Law Caucus, a left-leaning legal aid organization founded in 1972 which went on to defend tenants at the International Hotel and various members of San Francisco Chinatown’s Maoist organizations. In 1973, when Wong and Eng’s company OCRI first submitted its bid to redevelop part of the project area, the ALC challenged their participation on the grounds that both men sat on government bodies which had decision-making power over the project: Eng on city council, and Wong on the Planning Commission. The ALC’s challenge eventually progressed into a lawsuit filed on behalf of five Oakland residents, in which the ALC formally accused the Oakland Redevelopment Agency of neglecting to enforce state and federal conflict of interest law. As a result, Wong and Eng’s proposal was eliminated from consideration, with the redevelopment commissioners’ attorney stressing that while there was “no personal impropriety on the part of anyone connected with OCRI,” the two men were in “technical violation” of the law. Luckily for them, the ORA passed on both of their competitors’ bids, allowing them to submit their winning second proposal the following year, with Eng having left OCRI’s board and Wong having stepped down from the Planning Commission.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Scott Winokur, “Downtown renewal: What residents think,” *Oakland Tribune*, November 19, 1978.

⁴⁹ “HUD Ruling on Chinatown Issue,” *Oakland Tribune*, December 4, 1973; Fran Dauth, “Chinatown Project Denied,” *Oakland Tribune*, December 6, 1973.

Critics of the redevelopment project found this fortuitous turn of events highly suspicious, even going so far as to imply foul play. Former Asian Law Caucus clerk Garrick Lew told the *Tribune* that few in Chinatown were willing to challenge Wong and Eng once it became clear that the city was intent on handing them the project. Lew did not mince words when it came to characterizing Wong and Eng, calling them “so-called Asians... who don’t give a damn about the community.” On the flip side, Chinatown’s business elites saw groups like the ALC as carpetbagging meddlers. “Look at the [Oakland Chinatown Community Council] and the health and child care centers,” businessman Young Lee said in the same *Tribune* article. “Everyone of them is paid a salary by the government, and they call themselves an organization... That’s why the nonprofit social groups are considered outcasts.” Ed Wong took a slightly softer position, arguing that young activists simply had no memory of how hard things were during the Exclusion Era, and thus no sense of how far the community had really come in the intervening years: “I know I’ve been a target... because they feel I don’t do enough... On the other hand, they never had to go through what we went through... They do not have to fight [housing, employment, and educational discrimination] and if you have all these against you, how far can you go?”⁵⁰

As Yew, Lee, and Wong’s comments imply, the conflict was not always understood by its participants in the same categorical terms. Lee and Wong preferred to see the fight as one between naive youth against older, wiser, and more practical elders such as themselves, who were legitimate representatives of the Chinese American community. Willard Chow, looking at the situation from his geographer’s perspective, diagnosed the whole thing as a border dispute over where “Chinatown” ended and began. Chow argued that elites like Wong, Eng, and their allies in the ORA were pushing for Chinatown to become a “community without propinquity,” meaning that the bonds of communal life and identity would extend much further than the few dozen city blocks Chinatown had historically occupied, out to the Chinese occupants of the suburban hinterlands surrounding Oakland. One would no longer have to live in or around Chinatown to feel like one belonged in—perhaps even had ownership of—the neighborhood and its functions. For Chow, this definition of community not only expanded who counted as a member, but changed the nature of the relationship between people and the neighborhood as well.

⁵⁰ Jo Murray, “Seeking Out the Leaders,” *Oakland Tribune*, February 9, 1975; “A Difficult Past, A Brighter Future,” *Oakland Tribune*, February 14, 1975.

Instead of primarily relating to Chinatown as a place to live, work, and go to school, this regionalized definition of community prioritized a consumer relation between Chinatown and its constituents. As Chow pointed out, median family incomes in Chinatown “would not be able to support the kinds of new activities which both Chinatown businessmen and the [Redevelopment Agency] had envisioned,” but the Chinese population of the entire East Bay just might.⁵¹

Against “community without propinquity,” Chow and other progressives advanced an inclusive form of localism, which emphasized the neighborhood’s historic function as a receiving area for working class immigrants and an oasis of affordable housing within Oakland’s urban core. To be sure, Asian American progressives’ emphasis on housing was more a reflection of their own aspirations than Chinatown’s contemporary status, as most Asian Americans no longer lived in downtown Oakland. By 1980, the combined Asian American population of the two census tracts which contained Chinatown was 2,235. For comparison, the entire Asian American population of Oakland at the time was 28,000, with most of them concentrated in East Oakland around Lake Merritt.⁵² Even at its peak, Oakland Chinatown had never accommodated even half as many people. To transform Chinatown into an enclave suited for the contemporary scope and scale of immigration would require more than just preserving existing housing, as Chow had suggested; it would necessitate significant expansions in available housing stock, perhaps even the expansion of Chinatown itself. This was both a radical re-envisioning of how the Chinatown Redevelopment Project ought to look, and what purpose it ought to serve. Progressives did not necessarily dispute that the city was in dire need of revenue, but they did object to Chinatown being turned into little more than a commercial appendage of downtown Oakland.

While conflicts over the CRP generally played out between Chinese American Oaklanders, critics of the project did occasionally make reference to Hong Kong/USA’s foreign ties. Redevelopment

⁵¹ The term “community without propinquity” comes from a 1963 essay by professor of urban planning Marvin Webber, who was attempting to counter prevailing ideas about dispersed living arrangements—in particular, suburban sprawl—as a source of loneliness and alienation. Arguing against density as a necessary precondition for community, Webber instead hypothesized that as people became “woven into an increasingly complex social, political, and economic web” with one another—and as transportation and communication technology advanced—the need to live in physical proximity while maintaining meaningful communities would decline. See Melvin Webber, “Order in Diversity: Community without Propinquity,” in *Cities and Space: The Future Use of Urban Land; Essays from the Fourth RFF Forum*, ed. Lowdon Wingo Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963).

⁵² 1980 Census.

boosters' expanded sense of community was thoroughly compatible with the transpacific ambitions of politicians and developers, who went to great lengths to attract new tenants, homeowners, and businesspeople from Asia and position them as desirable neighbors to existing Oaklanders. Accordingly, critics of the project held up its foreign associations as proof that developers neither understood nor were interested in Oakland Chinatown's historic function and local constituents. Paul Wong, a local businessman, stated in 1978 that the developers "have no desire to really give what the community wants." "The community loves to have foreign investors in our town," Wong clarified, "But not the way the developers want to do it... These people come from Hong Kong and Singapore and want to make money. They come in and go out with no feeling for Chinatown."⁵³ Others criticized Hong Kong/USA of being an instrument for wealthy Asian investors to immigrate to the U.S., as opposed to a benefit to the local community. Gordon Lew, editor and publisher of left-wing newspaper *East/West*, questioned: "What's being promoted—Oakland or immigration?"⁵⁴ Oakland's Asian Americans progressives were not anti-immigrant by any means, but comments like Gordon Lew's show how their vision of local self-determination could lead them to oppose certain forms of immigration, resulting in a sort of "Oakland for Oaklanders" message. Still, statements of this sort were relatively rare within anti-redevelopment activists' public pronouncements, where pro-CRP businessmen and the Oakland city government remained the primary targets.

Wither the anti-redevelopment movement?

Amidst the debate over the CRP, almost no one opposed the idea of redevelopment in Chinatown in principle. All parties seemed to understand that redevelopment could mean either riches or ruin; as Chow put it, "The ballad of urban renewal in Oakland may be sung in different keys." Serena Chen, a young activist in Chinatown who worked for Asian Community Mental Health Services during the late 1970s, summarized the progressive view when she argued that redevelopment "is supposed to be for the community," a means of distributing more resources towards one of the city's most vulnerable neighborhoods. But instead of expanding Chinatown's capacity, Chen felt the CRP was "shrink[ing] the

⁵³ Mark Schwartz, "Foreign investors trouble Oakland's Chinese community," *East/West*, February 15, 1978.

⁵⁴ Martin Halstuk, "Hong Kong/USA project size and cost questioned," *Oakland Tribune*, March 23, 1980.

existing Chinatown, which... has been ‘systematically eaten up by public and private enterprises.’”⁵⁵ In this sense, the CRP’s early trajectory mirrored that of redevelopment projects in West Oakland a decade earlier. As historian Robert Self documents, many of the area’s predominantly low-income and African American residents initially saw redevelopment as the public support and private investment their community desperately needed, only to be betrayed when the city chose demolition over rehabilitation. But while West Oaklanders were able to successfully pivot to a militant contest for political power during the late 1960s, Chinatown’s progressive and left wing constituents struggled to assemble a similarly effective bloc. No Chinatown analogue to the West Oakland Planning Council would emerge for almost a decade and a half, during which time the ALC’s lawsuit constituted the neighborhood’s most public and effective attempt to challenge elite-led urban renewal.

A number of structural reasons explain the lack of an organized, grassroots alternative to Hong Kong/USA during the 1970s. The first was a sheer question of numbers. The dispersal of middle class Chinese Americans into the suburbs had removed much of the residential base that could be mobilized against redevelopment. Even if organizing them was possible, Chinatown progressives’ brand of localism meant that suburbanized Chinese Americans weren’t a particularly desirable constituency; after all, they were the distant consumers whose tastes and desires were being elevated over those of Chinatown’s working class residents. For the few thousand residents remaining in the neighborhood, many were disgruntled with the CRP’s impact on their neighborhood, but few felt capable of doing anything about it—in large part because the city and their ethnic elite partners had shut them out of the planning process, only publishing announcements in English and recruiting neighborhood representatives from the business owner class.

Changing residents’ attitudes and convincing them better alternatives were possible would require progressives to engage in deep political organizing—something most of the neighborhood’s nonprofit agencies lacked both the capacity and the expertise to do. As service organizations, groups like the Asian Law Caucus, Asian Community Mental Health Services, and the Asian Health Center were primarily geared towards meeting poor and working-class Asian Americans’ immediate material needs, rather than

⁵⁵ Halstuk, “Hong Kong/USA project size and cost questioned.”

organizing them around a given set of goals. When it came to the limitations of service and legal aid work, the ALC was perhaps the most introspective and clear-eyed about its own role within Oakland's progressive scene. Dale Minami, one of the organization's founding members, wrote in a 1975 history of the Caucus that the public "should not be mislead [*sic*] by the belief that legal challenges are the ultimate solution to many of the problems which beset Third World and poor communities... [C]hanging the law or winning a legal battle does not necessarily mean your problem is solved." The best position for an organization like ALC was playing a support role to other "progressive organizations" which were engaged in the hard work of "political organizing."⁵⁶ While members of the West Oakland Planning Council had successfully organized business boycotts and run coordinated electoral campaigns (Cobb's 1971 city council run was part of a dedicated attempt to put progressive organizers into citywide office), groups like the ALC had principally offered legal aid to abused workers and tenants facing eviction.⁵⁷ Such services had been invaluable to the people and organizations involved, but they could neither instigate nor sustain mass action on their own. Service agencies with discrete functions also had few institutional incentives to seek out lasting coalitions with one another. While Chinatown's nonprofits were largely on good terms with one another, with various organizations writing endorsements for one another's grant applications, the 1970s did not see many collaborative efforts emerge within Chinatown's social service ecosystem.

Lastly, Oakland Chinatown's political scene lacked the same radical component of either its analogue across the Bay or of West Oakland, where more moderate organizers like Paul Cobb had developed a symbiotic relationship with the Black Panther Party.⁵⁸ While San Francisco's Chinatown was stuffed to the brim with Marxists and Maoists, Oakland remained more placid. San Francisco Chinatown, with its vaunted status as one of the oldest and largest Chinese settlements in the country and its much larger population, proved a more successful magnet for even East Bay radicals, many of whom traveled straight from UC Berkeley to the basement of the International Hotel. Radical organizations like I Wor

⁵⁶ Dale Minami, "Asian Law Caucus: Experiment in Alternative," 1975, Box 22, folder 7, San Francisco Foundation papers (henceforth SFF), UC Berkeley Bancroft Library (henceforth Bancroft Library).

⁵⁷ Self, *American Babylon*, 246-248.

⁵⁸ Self, *American Babylon*, 211, 225; Murch, *Living for the City*, 205-207.

Kuen and Wei Min She's sectarian squabbles often made San Francisco's Asian American political scene unnecessarily chaotic, but the two groups also succeeded in producing some of the cultural and social foundations necessary for constructing an alternative mass politics. Their free meal programs, garment worker co-op, and film screenings explicitly targeted older immigrants, helping to bring them into community with young radicals. No such analogue existed in Oakland, where a smattering of short-lived youth organizations like East Bay Asians for Community Action (EBACA), Concerned Asians of Oakland (CAO), and Asian Community for Mass Action quickly pivoted towards exclusively service work; indeed, Asian Health Services was a direct outgrowth of EBACA.⁵⁹

None of this is to discount the effectiveness of Chinatown's nonprofits in improving the immediate conditions of poor and working class immigrants. Most organizations served hundreds of needy clients every year: Asian Mental Health Services, for instance, provided direct counseling services to 250 people between 1974 and 1975, and offered group programs and referrals for hundreds more, all with only eight staff employees.⁶⁰ Nonprofits' ability to become part of their constituents' daily routines by offering medical care, legal advice, and English-language instruction would eventually allow them to mobilize certain members of Oakland's Asian American community towards political ends. When Alameda County threatened to slash funding to Asian Health Services in 1979, the organization rallied its patients to protest at the County Board of Supervisors, where elderly immigrants joined clinic employees on picket-lines and sit-ins. One patient, garment worker Fun King Chan, described AHS as a foundational aspect of her wellbeing. When she learned the clinic's funding was being cut, Chan said she felt "heartbroken... [and] puzzled by the supervisors' actions because 'they're not helping people. Isn't that what government is supposed to do?'" Fun King Chan and people like her demonstrated how recipients of care could become politically activated when their services were threatened, their strong reactions a testament to service nonprofits' essential work within Chinatown. Likewise, nonprofit workers developed lasting emotional connections to their work and their clients. One AHS doctor had to choke back tears when she described the poor conditions of elderly immigrants who frequented the clinic, many of whom

⁵⁹ Dexter Waugh, "Alameda's Asian Health Day," *Oakland Tribune*, September 17, 1973; Ma, *Hometown Chinatown*, 119-120.

⁶⁰ Asian Community Mental Health Services, "First Annual Report: May 1, 1974 - June 30, 1974," 5-6, Box 24, folder 16, SFF, Bancroft Library.

suffered from severe conditions that had gone untreated and undiagnosed. Faced with the prospect of the clinic closing, she admitted: “It’s really frightening to me.”⁶¹

Yet despite their deepening social ties within the community, Chinatown progressives remained a marginal political presence within the CRP for the duration of the 1970s. They would not have to wait much longer, however, as further changes to the federal landscape of social service funding and the project’s mounting internal crises would soon create new opportunities for Asian American nonprofits to intervene.

III. Seeking accommodations: Progressive Chinatown and redistributive redevelopment

“Far East funds find way to Chinatown”: Asian capital beyond the CRP

After two whirlwind years of promising beginnings, the entire Hong Kong/USA enterprise came to a sudden and unceremonious halt in the spring of 1980. In March, Y. T. Chou suddenly informed the city government that he wished to pull out of the project after a \$508 million dollar lawsuit was brought against him by Moscow Narodny Bank, who alleged that Chou defrauded them of \$65 million. City Manager David Self quickly sprang into action to find a new developer and ensure the city was free from any legal liability. Over the course of the next two months, Self traveled to Hong Kong numerous times to hold “delicate, secret negotiations” with retailers who had already bought units within the project area, as well as “unidentified potential developers” and other investors. By October, new deals had been reached with both current unit-owners and a Hong Kong conglomerate called Asian Holdings Incorporated. Asian Holdings committed to completing phase one of construction in return for significant concessions, including an interest-free investment to fund the underground garage’s construction and limited city control over what Asian Holdings might choose to build on the remaining four blocks of the project area.⁶²

Asian Holdings was the joint venture of three Hong Kong real estate companies: Inland Realty, Princehill Investment, and Carrian. Of the three, Carrian eventually owned the largest share of the project,

⁶¹ Martin Haistuk, “Health care cuts have Asians in quandary,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 5, 1979.

⁶² Martin Halstuk and Sue Soennechsen, “Hong Kong owners OK funding proposal,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 11, 1980; Soennechsen, “Hong Kong developers get city OK,” *Oakland Tribune*, October 1, 1980.

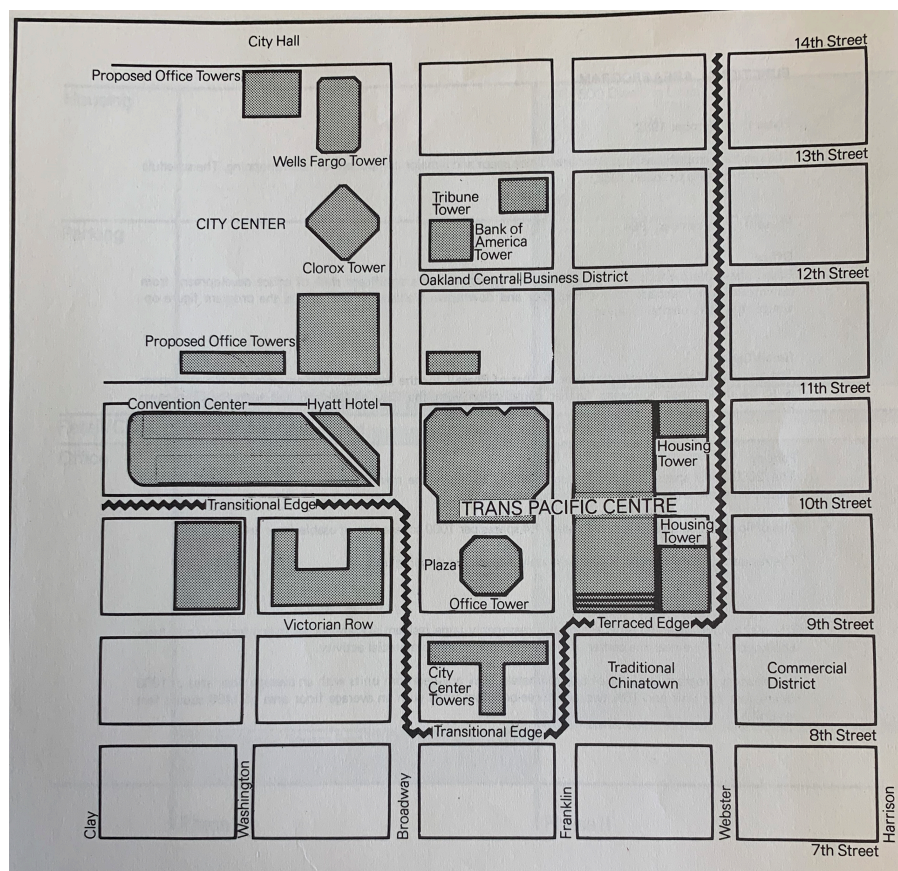


Fig. 4.11: A map showing the Trans Pacific Centre's site context from an early project proposal presented to the Oakland Redevelopment Agency. Source: Asian Holdings Inc., *The Plan: Trans Pacific Centre*, December 1981, Oakland Public Library.

and Carrian's owner George Tan soon replaced Y. T. Chou as the mysterious figurehead of the redevelopment operation. Rumors swirled through the local press that Tan never allowed himself to be photographed, and refused to leave Hong Kong on the advice of a "spiritual advisor" who had cautioned him to stay put until his 45th birthday. Not that anyone in Oakland city government begrudged Tan his eccentricities, invented or otherwise: as one writer for the *Tribune* put it, Tan was giving the city "anything [it] could possibly want. The city finally found its Sugar Daddy from the Far East."⁶³

As construction on the CRP resumed in November of 1980, Carrian announced they had renamed the development "Trans Pacific Centre." By 1982, they had succeeded in delivering the first phase—a

⁶³ David Tong, "The Hong Kong giant behind the Trans Pacific Centre," *Oakland Tribune*, October 18, 1981; Pamela G. Hollie, "Carrian's origins are mysterious," *Oakland Tribune*, August 22, 1982; Brenda Payton, "You gotta have faith," *Oakland Tribune*, March 15, 1983.

mixed use office and retail building with accompanying underground parking garage—much to the relief of city council. Carrian had other, more ambitious plans for the project as well, including a 68-story office tower that would be the tallest building west of the Mississippi.⁶⁴ Their proposals kept the earlier Hong Kong/USA plan's sheer scale—Trans Pacific Centre would contain over 1.5 million square feet of office space alone, with tens of thousands of additional square feet reserved for retail and housing—but shed some of its more overtly Asian theming. The Centre would also have a more ambivalent relationship to its Chinatown surroundings than its predecessor. On the one hand, Carrian's planners proposed for the south side of the development to blend into the existing look of the neighborhood, complete with themed "street elements and signs." This side of the development would also be where Carrian planned to include a cultural center, whose design would "be sensitive to the character of the surrounding community." Other aspects of the project, however, indicated a desire on Carrian's part to transcend the Centre's Chinatown location. Rather than contextualizing the project within the neighborhood, for instance, planning materials stated that the site was an "anchor location" for a number of Oakland's "most attractive and dynamic features"—with Chinatown only being one of three neighborhoods that were all supposedly "within easy walking distance." An 1981 map of the site situated Trans Pacific Centre at the "transitional edge" between the City Center and "Traditional Chinatown," which was relegated to a single block.⁶⁵ Rather than being *in* Chinatown, the Centre instead seemed to have displaced four blocks of it, incorporating them into the downtown area's existing patchwork of hotels, convention centers, and office towers (fig. 4.11).

The cost of building downtown Oakland this "dynamic new landmark" was eye-popping, and dwarfed Y. T. Chou's initial plan of spending \$100 million on Hong Kong/USA. By late 1981, the total proposed cost of the Centre hit \$300 million dollars, driving immense enthusiasm from investors and developers in building up other projects to soak up the revenue they were sure the newly-revived CRP would generate. Land in Chinatown jumped in value from \$25 a square foot in 1976 to \$50 by 1982, and

⁶⁴ Asian Holdings Inc., *The Plan: Trans Pacific Centre*, December 1981, OPL.

⁶⁵ Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, *Trans Pacific Centre: Oakland, California*, November 1981, OPL.

one developer predicted it could go as high as \$80 that same year.⁶⁶ Carrian's influence on the Asian market also seems to have been at work, as a small "buying binge" of Asian investors ensued, eager to follow Carrian's lead. A Chinatown lot owned by the BART sold that March for \$850,000 to "two unidentified Hong Kong investors," apparently "the highest price ever paid for vacant land in Chinatown."⁶⁷

In addition to taking over and expanding the CRP, Carrian sought to further sweeten the pot by investing money in the city of Oakland itself. This included pledges of \$75 million on building low-cost housing, \$1 million on job training, and relieving the city government of a \$3 million obligation to repurchase certain components of the completed project. Carrian and its CEO's motives for this unexpected generosity were somewhat opaque: according to some "inside sources," Tan possessed a sincere desire to help the city deal with its ongoing issues of housing affordability and high unemployment. In Lionel Wilson's words, "At first, [Tan] thought of [the Trans Pacific Centre] as an investment, now he is committed to the city and wants to remain in it." Others, however, speculated about more nefarious reasons, claiming that the gift was a way to avoid participating in an affirmative action plan that would mandate certain hiring practices during and after construction.⁶⁸ Tan, in a rare interview in 1982, claimed it was a simple matter of buying himself and his business guaranteed economic stability: "Our investment policy is set up in the United States with the idea that the United States is stable on the political side and that growth will be stable. The United States is for long term." As for Wilson and his administration, money was money, and the funds were sorely needed. The job training fund was met especially enthusiastically, with Wilson saying in fall of 1981 that it "could not have come at a better time": "The city has depended heavily on CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] funds to provide

⁶⁶ Lonnie Isabel, "Oakland City Council approves high-rise," *Oakland Tribune*, December 16, 1981; Wayne Beissert, "Chinatown land to be sold," *Oakland Tribune*, January 25, 1982.

⁶⁷ Beissert, "Hong Kong's buying binge," *Oakland Tribune*, January 25, 1982; Beissert, "Oakland Chinatown lot sells for \$850,000," *Oakland Tribune*, March 11, 1982.

⁶⁸ David Tong, "Asian firm's offers overwhelm Oakland," *Oakland Tribune*, November 27, 1981; Wayne Beissert, "Low-cost housing plan told," *Oakland Tribune*, November 24, 1981; David Tong, "\$1 million offered city for job training," *Oakland Tribune*, November 24, 1981; Lonnie Isabel, "After 4 years, part of developer's gift to aid Oakland's Asians," *Oakland Tribune*, December 9, 1984.

badly needed employment training... [But] this year, the funds were drastically reduced to less than \$4 million,” compared to \$40 million in previous years.⁶⁹

Wilson’s comments alluded to the rapid disappearance of federal programs aimed at helping states and localities make the transition from manufacturing to service economies. CETA in particular had begun its life during the Nixon administration as the closest thing to a federal jobs program since the New Deal. But as it approached its expiration date in 1982, the Reagan administration had signaled through dramatic cuts to the program that they would make no effort to replace it. Rising unemployment in the early 1980s, however—national rates topped 10% in mid-1982, with the Bay Area seeing 7.2% in April of that same year—forced both federal and local governments to shift gear. Rather than re-investing in a jobs program like CETA, however, the Reagan administration instead championed the creation of what would be called the Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA), passed in October of 1982. Scholar Gordon Lafer has characterized the JTPA as “a radical break from the policies that preceded it,” marking a sharp turn in how the federal government theorized the reasons behind high unemployment, especially among the poor. While middle class unemployment was still chalked up to a lack of appropriate jobs, lower-class unemployment was ascribed to a lack of skills—a problem conservatives believed public employment would only exacerbate, as it “sapped participants’ work ethic without teaching them the real skills needed by private employers.” Instead, Reagan appealed to the private sector, whose “successful community models of school, church, business, union, foundation and civic programs that help community needs” and were “almost invariably far more efficient than government in running social programs.”⁷⁰

In Oakland, Carrian was not alone in stepping in to fill “the job-training vacuum.” In summer of 1982, the corporation teamed up with Chevron to finance a nine-month program to train unemployed adults in the East Bay for three hundred new jobs, at the cost of \$650,000. Named the Cooperative Educational Program (CO-OP), the initiative would focus on jobs in the fields of “high technology,” tourism, hospitality, and communications—what the city hoped were emerging industries to replace its lost shipping and manufacturing jobs. In an editorial, the *Tribune* called CO-OP “a pioneering effort

⁶⁹ Pamela G. Hollie, “Carrian’s origin is mysterious,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 22, 1982; Tong, “\$1 million offered”; “\$1 million put in fund for Oakland job training,” *Oakland Tribune*, January 24, 1982.

⁷⁰ Gordon Lafer, *The Job Training Charade*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 8, 164-165, 185; “Transcript of President’s State of the Union Message to Nation,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1982.

because funds for the job training will come from the private sector” as opposed to the federal government, making it a best-case scenario for Reagan administration’s post-jobs program approach towards unemployment. As the *Tribune* editors went on to say, “The trouble with privately financed efforts in this area has always been a lack of money and commitment from the private sector... Fortunately, in Oakland’s case, the Carrian Group has donated \$1 million to the city...”⁷¹

Not everyone was equally effusive about Carrian’s gift, however. Beyond those who accused it of being a way to circumvent affirmative action hiring practices, critics—particularly those in Chinatown—worried that the fund was being spent far too slowly. Under- and unemployment was a major issue for the city’s Asian immigrant population, and had been a focus of Asian American nonprofits for some time: by 1984, the unemployment rate for recent immigrants was 28% (compared to the city’s overall rate of 8.8%), and 47% of Chinatown’s Asian-majority population made less than \$7,990 a year.⁷² Meanwhile, Chinatown was losing a number of job-training programs that had relied on CETA funds—most prominently Asian Manpower Services, which had been run for years by organizer Dianne Yamashiro. After Asian Manpower Services saw its primary source of funding cut in 1982, Yamashiro and her colleagues began eyeing the Carrian job-training fund, over half of which was sitting unused in a bank account. Thus, in 1983, a small coalition of nonprofit workers led by Yamashiro began lobbying the city to release the money to Chinatown organizations, eventually receiving \$325,000 to establish the Asian Community Employment Training Fund. Alan Yee, one of the coalition-members and eventual administrator of the fund, told the *Tribune* that he and other activists were intent on making “that money to do what it was supposed to do.” Yee himself was convinced of the fund’s necessity when he saw middle-aged immigrants working low-wage service jobs—“jobs generally held by teenagers.” Under such conditions, Yee argued, George Tan’s ulterior motives for giving Oakland the money mattered less than the urgent need for it in Chinatown. Serena Chen, the AMHCS worker who had been a vocal critic of Hong Kong/USA and had also helped secure the fund, shared Yee’s position. “I really don’t think about

⁷¹ “Into the job-training vacuum,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 26, 1982.

⁷² Isabel, “After 4 years...”

the money as scandalized at all,” she told the *Tribune* in 1984, the year the fund went into operation. “It is one of the few instances in which the city’s residents have directly benefited from development.”⁷³

The Asian Resource Center and progressive coalition-building in Chinatown

The Asian Foundation’s success in accessing Carrian’s job training fund was a significant turning point in Chinatown nonprofits’ relationship to the CRP, but it did not come out of nowhere. Dianne Yamashiro and her colleagues’ efforts were a consequence of over a decade of consensus-building within the neighborhood’s social services sector regarding their relationship with for-profit developers. While Oakland’s Asian American political scene had never achieved the same degree of strident anti-capitalism that San Francisco’s did, over the course of the 1970s, Chinatown progressives moved from being broadly antagonistic towards commercial development to recognizing its occasional usefulness. By the 1980s, many of the neighborhood’s most prominent organizations would themselves become reliant on Chinatown’s for-profit sector for their own survival—and it would all be thanks to the Asian Resource Center (ARC).

Having selected 875 Harrison as the location for the Resource Center in winter of 1973, Ted Dang, Andrew Gee, and their allies spent the rest of the decade raising money to acquire and renovate the run-down building and finding tenants to populate it. To structure their efforts, the group organized themselves as a new nonprofit: the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC).⁷⁴ Most of EBALDC’s members came from the same background as Dang and Gee themselves: young Asian American professionals and nonprofit workers, recently graduated from college and eager to use their expertise to improve living and working conditions for Asian American people. On paper, the center’s concept was simple. The building’s first floor would be devoted entirely to commercial tenants, with priority given to small businesses that would struggle to break into Hong Kong/USA. The second floor would be turned into office space for various neighborhood nonprofits, who could transfer their base of operations to a single, centralized location. Centralization was an important feature of the ARC; as one

⁷³ Lonnie Isabel, “\$325,000 grant for job training,” *Oakland Tribune*, December 22, 1983; Lloyd Boles, “CETA program funds allocated for training of youths and adults,” *Oakland Tribune*, October 16, 1979; Isabel, “After 4 years...”; Dianne Yamashiro, “On unemployment of Asians in Oakland,” *AsianWeek*, December 14, 1984.

⁷⁴ Paul Chann, “Leasing Progress,” 1978, Box 100, folder 14 SFF, Bancroft Library.

EBALDC employee later put it, “We’d like to have a one-stop service center. It would also eliminate duplication of services, and increase communication between the different agencies.”⁷⁵

The idea of concentrating social services in one location was not, in and of itself, a major innovation. Members of the regional Asian American movement would all have been familiar with San Francisco Chinatown’s International Hotel, where a cohort of left-wing organizations operated a range of community aid initiatives out of the same building. Ted Dang would also reference Oakland’s Spanish Speaking Citizens’ Foundation, which had opened a community and service center in Fruitvale in 1964, as an inspiration. The Asian Resource Center departed from its models in one important way, however: its revenue-sharing structure. In EBALDC’s initial pitch, the center’s nonprofit tenants would have their rents subsidized in part by the commercial revenue of their downstairs neighbors, offering social service agencies a stable home amidst a backdrop of resource scarcity. At the same time, small businesses could access well-situated storefronts near the center of Chinatown for below-market rate rents, which was meant to help preserve the neighborhood’s “mom and pop” character. In the long term, EBALDC hoped the Center could be a step towards self-sufficiency and “community self-development” for Chinatown. If successful, the center would represent “economic power owned, developed..., and controlled by the community.” Though EBALDC never stated as much, the Center’s model of self-sufficiency contained an echo of earlier forms of ethnic solidarity as practiced in Exclusion Era, in which neither state funds nor large-scale private investments were available to the city’s Chinese Americans. Instead, it was left to wealthier members of the community to sponsor charitable programs and mutual aid associations, with churches and family associations playing a leading role in administering aid. EBALDC’s emphasis on neighborly assistance between commercial enterprises and service agencies seemed to be an effort to revive these relations, right down to housing everyone in immediate proximity with one another—a corrective, perhaps, for the Chinese American community’s geographic dispersal in the decades since the war.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Dexter Waugh, “Social center ‘long shot’ gaining,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 8, 1977.

⁷⁶ Interaction Associates, Inc., “East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation,” January 7, 1976, Box 100, folder 14, SFF, Bancroft Library.

Armed with a bright idea, EBALDC's Board members and staff set out to make the Resource Center a reality. 1975 and '76 saw the group go through severe growing pains, however, as representatives from various nonprofit had to learn how to work with one another and how to operate a community development corporation all at once. By early 1976, EBALDC's Board of Directors already contained representatives from Chinatown's most prominent nonprofit organizations, including Asian Health Services, the Asian Law Caucus, Asian Community Mental Health Services, and the Oakland Chinatown Community Council. Despite a broad agreement that the Resource Center would be a valuable contribution to the neighborhood, the Board initially struggled to outline a concrete set of objectives and maintain morale. In addition to sluggish recruitment, EBALDC had also hit a wall with fundraising; in one conversation, Board members described their financial situation as "desperate," with only \$1.5 million raised out of the \$3 million that would be necessary for a full refurbishment of the building and their own operational funds running low.

In January of 1976, the group went on a two day-long team-building retreat in San Francisco to build "a closer sense of working together" and develop "clearer priorities that are not generalities," in the words of one participant. They emerged with a set of action items, most of which hinged on making friends and allies among the city's political elite and Chinatown's business class. In particular, current Board members concluded that their body needed a "high status" chairperson with connections to major sources of funding—namely, banks and philanthropic institutions. Options floated at the meeting included the Bank of Canton, Sumitomo Bank, California First Bank, and United Way, with the only firm requirement that the person in question "should be Asian." Other candidates to join the Board included Milton Shoong, wealthy owner of the National Dollar retail stores; Gene Roh, president of the Berkeley School Board; and Robert Shetterley, Clorox CEO. By 1978, EBALDC's board had Shetterley join as an Honorary Chairman, along with a smattering of city planners, civic servants, and a Chinatown business owner, Herbert Eng (no relation to Raymond). Eng's inclusion as EBALDC's Vice-Chairman was particularly notable given his strident support for the Chinatown Redevelopment Project, which at the time was still known as Hong Kong/USA. When asked to speak on the project pricing out small business owners in 1980, Eng had told a reporter, "Competition will settle everything. This is a competitive world. If they can't compete, they should do something else." Despite his much colder outlook on

redevelopment's victims, Eng made sense as a representative to Chinatown's business owning class: in addition to having served on the Project Advising Committee for the CRP, Eng was a prominent member of the Chinatown Property Owners Association and had stakes in a number of neighborhood enterprises.⁷⁷

EBALDC's new Board signaled the organization's evolving willingness to serve as a political bridge between the neighborhood's property owners, progressive social agencies, and representatives of the city government. This orientation ultimately proved successful at winning the organization important friends in high places. Ted Dang would later name Hugh Taylor, the regional director of the Economic Development Administration (EDA), as an important champion for EBALDC and the Asian Resource Center. Taylor eventually helped the group receive over \$1 million in EDA funding to acquire the warehouse in 1978, with Dang recalling that Taylor was enamored with the Center's concept and target constituency. Likewise, Lionel Wilson publicly praised the project and was present at its ribbon-cutting ceremony in the spring of 1981, where he tidily summed up the forces motivating its creation. "With less public funds available," Wilson declared, "community organizations have to look to a commercial/community agency mix as the new approach."⁷⁸

The Asian Resource Center did more than win political elites over to its model; it also, by its very nature, served to win social service organizations into deeper relation with the neighborhood's business owning class. Despite some initial difficulty convincing nonprofit agencies to sign leases, by the time the Center opened, its nonprofit tenants included Asian Health Services, Asian Community Mental Health Advocates, Oakland Chinese Community Council, Filipinos for Affirmative Action, and of course, EBALDC itself. Chinatown's nonprofit sector had never sought a purely antagonistic relationship with the neighborhood's commercial functions, but they were now partially reliant on retailers' success for their own survival. Insofar as neighborhood retailers were counting on the redevelopment project to continue attracting consumers to Chinatown, the Resource Center had made it such that nonprofits, too, had a stake in the project's health. EBALDC even admitted as much, noting that Hong Kong USA had helped generate "some additional interest in our project." Far from competing with one another,

⁷⁷ Halstuk, "Hong Kong/USA project size and cost questioned"; "Advisers Named For Chinatown," *Oakland Tribune*, October 25, 1973; "Chinatown Garage Plan," *Oakland Tribune*, October 8, 1976.

⁷⁸ Dang interview; Lon M. Cariston, "Asian center a long and arduous task," *Oakland Tribune*, March 29, 1981; Brenda Payton, "Lion's dance opens the new Asian Center," *Oakland Tribune*, March 29, 1981.

EBALDC viewed the Resource Center and Hong Kong/USA as complements: “We expect to contract more of the local business community while Hong Kong U.S.A. concentrates on foreign investors.” By EBALDC’s own estimation, social services and redevelopment could readily supplement with one another, thriving off the same widespread phenomenon of Chinatown’s economic ascent. As the Resource Center’s success demonstrated, this approach had the potential to open up new resources and avenues for political influence for nonprofits themselves—influence that nonprofits would soon seek to expand to greater heights.⁷⁹

Pacific Renaissance Plaza

In the fall of 1982, bad news struck the Chinatown Redevelopment Project once again. That November, construction on Trans Pacific Centre’s 68-story office building was suddenly put on hold as Carrian announced its financial situation had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. The Hong Kong real estate bubble which had been growing since the early 1970s had finally begun to pop. News that the People’s Republic of China would take back Hong Kong from Great Britain in 1997 fueled the ensuing panic, and by January of 1983, the trouble had spread to the colony’s financial sector.⁸⁰ That same year, Carrian’s many creditors came calling, successfully pressuring the company to sell the Oakland CRP in May to two newly-formed Hong Kong conglomerates for \$75 million. Both companies’ provenance remained somewhat mysterious to Oakland city officials, but rumors reported in the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and the *Tribune* indicated that their members were all individuals related to Tan’s previous business ventures, and that Tan himself might even be a shareholder in both. Amidst rising panic that Trans Pacific Centre was going the way of Hong Kong/USA, Oakland city council initially attempted to reach an understanding with its new partners, who promised to repay Carrian’s outstanding debts and complete construction on the CRP’s second phase. Much to city councilmembers’ relief, the former was accomplished before the end of 1983, but even then, neither conglomerate was forthcoming with details about where their funds were sourced from. Finally, in November of 1983, the city terminated its

⁷⁹ “Leasing Progress.”

⁸⁰ Steve Lohr, “Overbuilding Affects Banks,” *New York Times*, January 18, 1983; Y. C. Jao, *The Asian Financial Crisis and the Ordeal of Hong Kong* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), 30-35.

agreement with the Centre's new owners, in what redevelopment agency officials named the harshest action ever taken against a major developer in the city.⁸¹

The CRP had gone without a developer for over a year by the time Oakland City Council began reviewing new bids to complete the project's subsequent phases in the summer of 1985. By then, the project had taken on a new public sector participant: the East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD), which provided drinking water and sewage treatment to the whole East Bay region and was to become the CRP's largest tenant upon the project's completion (fig. 4.11). EBMUD's participation significantly sweetened the pot for both domestic and foreign developers: whoever was chosen would be guaranteed payment of over \$40 million from a bond, floated by EBMUD, to cover all building costs. By July, four teams were competing for the bid: C & L Financial, a San Francisco-based affiliate of a Hong Kong hotel and housing developer; New Asia Center Inc., led by a local realtor and investor; Pac Rim Development Group, backed by Japanese firm Sumitomo Construction; and Oakland Chinatown Plaza Incorporated (OCPI)—initially “the ‘most’ local of all the development teams.”⁸²

Prominently featured in the press among OCPI's partners was Ted Dang himself, who by 1985 was well-established in his own private real estate business. Boasting to the public of his “intimate knowledge of Chinatown” and deep local ties, including his ownership of “a lot of properties in this area,” Dang felt confident about OCPI's chances. Still, he wasn't the only Chinatown native in the running. Most competitors, eager to satisfy the city's requirement that they include minority suppliers and contractors, had recruited local Chinese American participants onto their teams. C&L had even hired Ed Sue, then chairman of Oakland's City Planning Commission, to serve as an advisor—a move which harkened back to the conflict of interest controversies that had dogged the CRP in its first decade.⁸³

By soliciting bids for the Chinatown redevelopment project, City Council was hoping to protect itself against a recurrence of the previous decades' two scandals. Some healthy competition,

⁸¹ Wayne Beissert, “New deal proposed for Hong Kong/USA,” *Oakland Tribune*, September 10, 1980; Steve Lohr, “Hong Kong's Realty Tumble,” January 18, 1983; Lonnie Isabel, “Trans Pacific Centre owners put in default,” *Oakland Tribune*, November 9, 1983; Ali Cromie, “Carrian fraud trial opens in Hong Kong,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 19, 1986.

⁸² David Tong, “Competition for Chinatown heats up,” *Oakland Tribune*, July 21, 1985.

⁸³ Roger Yim, “EBMUD makes it official: New office to be in Oakland,” *Oakland Tribune*, October 8, 1986.

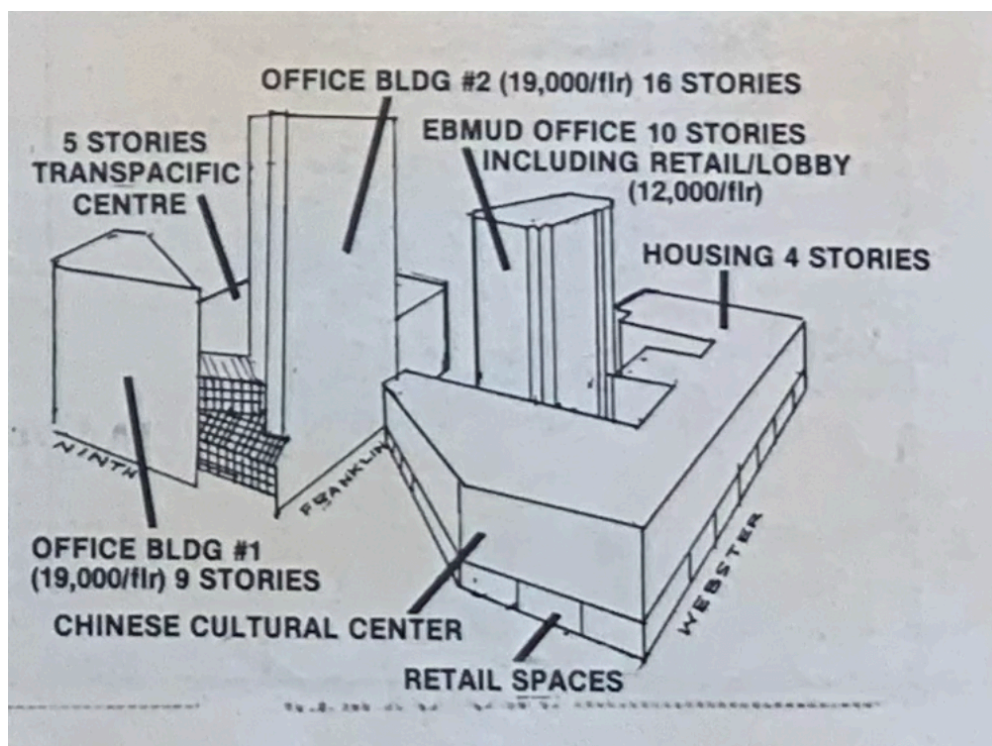


Fig. 4.12: Speculative drawing showing the EBMUD headquarters' relationship to the rest of the Chinatown Redevelopment Project, 1985. At that point, only the 5-story Trans Pacific Centre on the far left had been constructed. Source: *Chinatown Monthly*, February 1985, Stanford University Library Special Collections.

councilmembers reasoned, would allow the city to properly vet each participant and force developers to demonstrate they had the money to back up their plans for the area. For all its letdowns, the project remained a central component to the city government's efforts to revitalize downtown Oakland, especially now that EBMUD was involved. According to the city's own design requirements, "the proposed project is going to play a pivotal role in strengthening office and hotel development along Broadway," while also serving to tie together developments in Chinatown, the City Center, and a nearby new Convention Center.⁸⁴ While city officials may have felt reassured by the drawn out, elaborate bidding process, however, participants were less enthused. OCPI in particular complained that the longer timeline and complex requirements were imposing high costs onto smaller, less well-resourced groups like their own. Hours before their final submissions were due, OCPI sought out a dramatic solution to their own financial limitations and agreed to a merger with Sumitomo-backed Pac Rim Development. The "local team" had

⁸⁴ "Project has pivotal role," *Oakland Tribune*, July 21, 1985.

become a little less local as a result, but Dang and his colleagues were unfazed, believing their group now had the ideal combination of neighborhood knowledge and transpacific financial clout.

OCPI represented one of two major local efforts to reintroduce Chinatown's "community interests" into the redevelopment project during the 1980s. While OCPI took a more institutionalized, market-side approach, Dang's old coworkers at the Asian Resource Center were organizing towards a more grassroots complement: the Coalition for Chinatown Development (CCD). Drawing on a combination of community mobilization and political brokerage, the Coalition would eventually become the far more successful of the two efforts. While the OCPI would meet a similar end to Frank Chuman's ill-fated Asiamerica Inc. in Little Tokyo Los Angeles, the Coalition would succeed in inserting itself into various decision-making processes surrounding the Redevelopment Project's final years. Though the Coalition didn't always get their way, they did win what many agencies and individuals had been seeking for decades: a guarantee of 50 affordable housing units in the final development and the inclusion of a cultural center. How they went about it, however, spoke to the shrinking political horizons in both the city of Oakland and within the mechanisms of urban renewal itself.

The CCD had first come together to push the city on meeting its obligations towards Chinatown's residents when Carrian was going down in disaster two years earlier. In the intervening year, they had successfully gotten the city to recommit to including a cultural center in the project, as well as incorporating a new space for the Asian library and 50 units of affordable housing—a significant success for the Coalition's members.⁸⁵ The group was composed of an odd distribution of organizations, ranging from nonprofits like the Asian Law Caucus and EBALDC to family associations and the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. Neither of the latter two participants had been especially active in the redevelopment process up until now, but EBMUD's arrival into the project and some diligent organizing from the nonprofits had convinced them to dip their toes into the water. Of particular concern to the Coalition was EBMUD's seeming lack of accountability to either the city government or the Chinatown community; rather, city government seemed entirely too content to follow EBMUD's lead on all matters, including its selection of a developer for the redevelopment project. Much like prior City Councils had

⁸⁵ Letter from George H. Williams to Henry Gardner, Re: Selection of Master Developer for Chinatown Redevelopment Project, October 3, 1985, OPL.

been dazzled by both Hong Kong/USA and Trans Pacific Centre's capacity to transfer new wealth to Chinatown, EBMUD now posed the same possibility. The agency was proposing to spend tens of millions on its new headquarters, thus preventing the city from the possibility of shouldering the project's cost alone, and would bring 500 permanent jobs to downtown Oakland while it was at it.⁸⁶

Despite the agency's similarity with foreign developers of years past, however, its public status may have made it an easier target for Chinatown's more conservative constituencies. As one local commentator wrote in an op-ed 1985, "Since WWII, institution after institution after institution have bitten off big chunks of Chinatown and its residential units: BART HQ..., the Nimitz freeway... and now the proposed EBMUD building." It was telling that the op-ed author chose to invoke the history of state incursions into Chinatown, as opposed to the more recent series of disastrous private sector failures.⁸⁷ As previous chapters have shown, Chinese family associations and other more traditional ethnic institutions were historically much more wary of the government than they were of corporate enterprises; as a result, highlighting EBMUD's role as a public utility may have helped Oakland Chinatown's progressives secure broad consensus around criticizing the project.⁸⁸

For progressive nonprofits themselves, however, their main issue was with EBMUD's lack of consideration for neighborhood concerns. The Coalition for Chinatown Development, presenting themselves as a representative cross-section of the neighborhood's various interest groups, insisted that they serve as the *de facto* avenue for community participation in the project. As the selection process between OCPI/Pac Rim and C&L Financial extended into fall of 1985 (New Asia Center had dropped out shortly after announcing its bid), the Coalition began gathering information to make a formal recommendation between the two groups to the City Council. In August, the Coalition hosted a Q&A session at the Asian Resource Center with representatives from both development teams present. Roughly forty community members showed up, "a cordial but skeptical group of citizens," according to one report. Despite the small showing, the forum was still a rare venue for residents and business-owners to

⁸⁶ Yim, "EBMUD makes it official"; Kathy Zimmerman, "EBMUD votes today on Chinatown developer," *Oakland Tribune*, September 24, 1985.

⁸⁷ Ron Lai, "The Water Company's \$30 million turn-off," *Chinatown Monthly*, February 1985, Stanford University Special Collections.

⁸⁸ Editorial, "Formula for cooperation," *Oakland Tribune*, July 3, 1984.

participate in a major project decision. Armed with participants' feedback from the session, the Coalition spent a month mulling over their recommendations.⁸⁹ In September, the group sent a letter to the Oakland Redevelopment Agency expressing that neither development was acceptable in its current form, with more concerns laid out for C&L's proposal. The Coalition argued that C&L's drawings showed a design that was far too massive to suit Chinatown's existing proportions, with a layout that had interior shops "walled off from the existing Chinatown." Perhaps most importantly, the Coalition pointed out that C&L had failed to make the library and cultural center "accessible and exposed to the public," and pressed for both units to be moved to the ground floor in an exterior-facing unit. As for OCPI/Sumitomo, the Coalition's primary concern was financial. Their letter requested that OCPI/Sumitomo produce "concrete evidence of alternate financing... in the event that bond financing may not be feasible or available," a written statement attesting that the two developers had in fact merged, as well as "a commitment to expand and diversify the retail element" in their proposal to make the project more attractive to the regional market.⁹⁰

Despite the Coalition's lingering concerns with both proposals and slight preference for OCPI/Sumitomo, Oakland's economic development director George Williams characterized their letter as saying they found "either development acceptable, provided [conditions]... are met." Meanwhile, EBMUD had stated a clear preference for C&L Financial's proposal, noting the team's "financial strength, clarity of team organization, and the individual expertise of the group." Upon learning of EBMUD's choice, the Coalition members lashed out publicly, telling the *Tribune* they were being pressured by Williams and members of EBMUD's board to go with C&L. In mid-September, only a day after communicating their stipulations to Williams, the Coalition stated in the press that their members had voted in favor of OCPI/Sumitomo's bid. For their part, OCPI used the opportunity to argue that Oakland officials were giving C&L an unfair advantage and may even have decided to go with the bigger team from the very start.⁹¹ The drama came to a head less than two weeks later, when EBMUD formally

⁸⁹ David Tong, Marilyn E. Bailey, "Developers' ideas for Chinatown," *Oakland Tribune*, August 11, 1985.

⁹⁰ Letter from George H. Williams to Henry Gardner, Re: Selection of Master Developer for Chinatown Redevelopment Project, October 3, 1985, OPL.

⁹¹ Kathy Zimmerman, David Tong, "Chinatown group claims exclusion from city's redevelopment process," *Oakland Tribune*, September 13, 1985.

voted for C&L Financial to develop their new headquarters. Oakland City Council shortly followed suit, selecting C&L to complete work on the Chinatown Redevelopment Project in late December.⁹²

In making their choice, EBMUD and City Council had signed up to work with 31-year old Lawrence Chan, who was to become the last of the eccentric Hong Kong businessmen who left their mark on the CRP. Unlike previous developers who rarely ever deigned to visit Oakland and tended to be reclusive men of mystery, Chan was locally based and clearly enjoyed talking to the press. The son of a wealthy hotel magnate, Chan had been placed in charge of the family's U.S. investments, whose scope he hoped to expand over the course of the next decade. In addition to the Chinatown redevelopment project, he was eying two additional sites in the East Bay for new hotels, as well as plans for San Diego, Anaheim, and Los Angeles.⁹³ For Oakland, Chan had a familiar scheme planned. The remaining blocks of the redevelopment project area would consist of a large-scale mixed-use center, with 200 residential condominiums stacked above four floors of retail and communal space (fig. 4.13). Dubbed Pacific Renaissance Plaza, Chan intended for the center's primary tenants and owners to be well-off Asians seeking a foothold in the United States. Expressing "huge confidence in Oakland's Chinatown," Chan was adamant that he could sell the city to Asian buyers, claiming that as soon as the Plaza's condos hit the Hong Kong market, they'd be snatched up. "Everything is going gangbusters in Hong Kong," Chan declared, referring to the city's economic rebound in the wake of its housing bubble collapse a few years earlier.⁹⁴

Market watchers tended to agree with Chan's optimistic projections, citing Chinatown's continued economic vibrancy and attractiveness to new immigrants. By the late 1980s, a new crop of local boosters had emerged to make their own private fortunes at the intersection between Oakland and Asia, and looked to the Plaza to secure Oakland's position as a gateway to the Pacific. One realtor enthused that the Plaza would ensure Chinatown "will no longer be seen as an area with crummy shops and dirty streets," but instead a modern, tourist- and professional-friendly attraction. Locals hadn't quite forgotten the disappointments of Hong Kong/USA and Trans Pacific Centre, but they also had watched

⁹² Letter from Williams to Gardner; "C&L Financial," *Oakland Tribune*, December 29, 1985.

⁹³ Laura Evenson, "Bay Area hotelier's roots are planted in real estate," *Oakland Tribune*, November 16, 1987.

⁹⁴ Michael Robinson, "The Asian connection," *Oakland Tribune*, December 1, 1992.

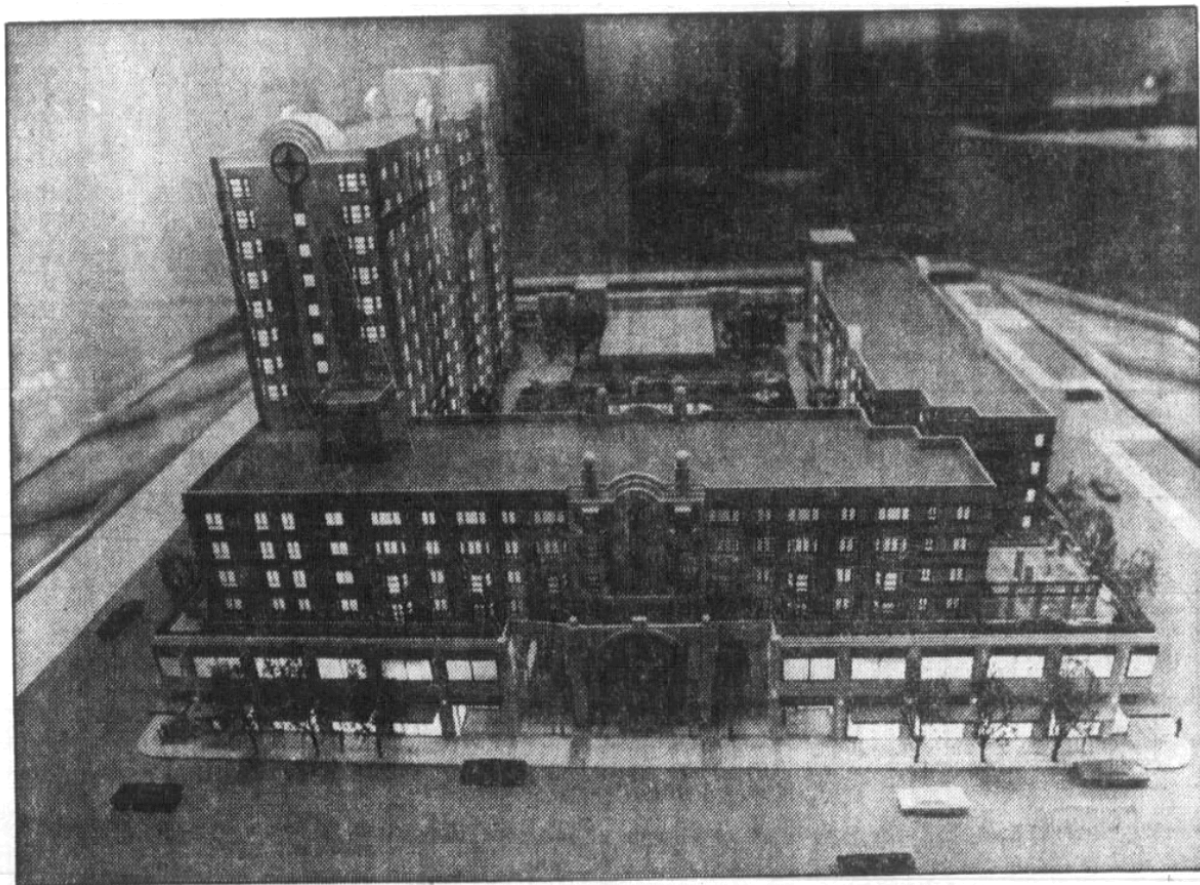


Fig. 4.13: Model of Pacific Renaissance Plaza, September 1990. Source: *Oakland Tribune*.

other Asian investors continue to bring their money and their businesses to Oakland in the intervening years. Ted Dang reported that many of his real estate clients were wealthy Chinese looking to develop condos and buy investment properties in the Bay Area. During the early 1980s, Dang and his staff helped put together “million-dollar deals” in adjacent Walnut Creek and Hayward for foreign buyers to turn into condominiums. Ten years later, business was just as good, with Dang’s company selling new homes to immigrants who, supposedly, paid with paper bags and briefcases full of cash.⁹⁵

Lawrence Chan and C&L Financial were eager to get in on the bonanza, but they first needed to finalize the structure’s plans and finish construction—easier said than done, considering how many stakeholders were now involved in the project’s development. While the Coalition for Chinatown Development may have been disappointed with their perceived marginalization in the developer selection

⁹⁵ Dang, interview with author; Beissert, “Hong Kong’s buying binge”; Tong, “Hong Kong money, talent heads for West,” *Oakland Tribune*, October 16, 1989; Brett Mahoney, “Immigrants find haven in Alameda,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 10, 1992.

process, a great deal of their demands and recommendations for the design itself made their way into the final project requirements which Oakland imposed upon C&L. C&L initially agreed to these provisions with no objection, but in 1987, the company began to quibble with the original provisions of its agreement with the city. First, it reduced the size of the Cultural Center from 20,000 to 15,000 square feet. Then, it moved the Center from a “prime corner location” to the courtyard, where it was no longer “exposed to the public.” Finally, it refused to pay to complete construction of the Cultural Center as originally promised, demanding \$700,000 from the city to cover its remaining costs. The CCD threatened to sue the city if they handed over the money, to no avail. Lawrence Chan later admitted his company simply failed to do its homework when it originally signed the agreement. After planning began, however, “the company quickly learned the project was not economically feasible.” George Williams also refused to blame C&L for the situation, claiming that “changes demanded by the Chinatown community boosted the price tag, making it necessary for the city to step in.”⁹⁶

Even after letting C&L off the hook for the Cultural Center, however, the city delayed appropriating funds for it, and some on city council supported dropping it altogether. This was the final straw for the CCD. Yui Hay Lee, an activist and later a city planning commissioner, remembered Oakland Chinese Americans “[packing] council meetings to pressure the politicians to repay, in effect, Chinatown for the lost properties to redevelopment and to serve a growing Asian population.” Organized by the CCD and the newly formed Oakland Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, the public shaming eventually worked: by the time the project was finished in 1992, the city would spend over \$4 million of public money filling in the gaps between what C&L was willing to do and what the community demanded.⁹⁷ These acts of community mobilization stand out amidst narratives of the CCD’s activism during this period, in which the dominant mode of politicking was for CCD representatives to take meetings, make phone calls, and write letters to city agencies voicing concerns on behalf of the community.

⁹⁶ Kathy Zimmerman, “Chinatown residents threaten lawsuit over Asian cultural center,” *Oakland Tribune*, December 7, 1987; “Compromise on the cultural center,” *Oakland Tribune*, December 14, 1987; Deborah Hallberg, “Bail-out of developer has district fuming,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 13, 1988.

⁹⁷ “Oakland Chinatown Redevelopment Project,” *Oakland Chinatown Chamber of Commerce Monthly Newsletter*, January 1988; William Wong, “Oakland Asian cultural center’s long struggle,” *Oakland Tribune*, January 17, 1996.

Lee did not go into detail regarding how the CCD got people to turn out to city council meetings, or who populated the crowds. Perhaps most attendees were themselves nonprofit workers or community activists—or perhaps the CCD’s nonprofit members had successfully mobilized their constituents to call for expanded social services within Chinatown, as Asian Health Services had done successfully in the past.

Deep ties between nonprofit workers and Asian American community members could easily have been what motivated people to attend city council meetings between 1987 and 1988. Yet the memory of *how* the Coalition for Chinatown Development secured community provisions within the Plaza have largely faded, replaced by the mere fact of the provisions’ existence. This act of forgetting, paired with the neighborhood’s unchanged political structure in the wake of the CCD’s limited victory, indicate that community members were only briefly activated during the late 1980s—a symptom of the highly specific, narrowly targeted nature of their fight, and of the limitations nonprofits persistently faced when it came to organizing constituents instead of merely serving them.

The struggle over the Asian Cultural Center was only one of several salvos in a long, five-year waiting period between C&L receiving the development contract and groundbreaking on what had been renamed “Pacific Renaissance Plaza.” By 1991, the CCD claimed an additional victory for its role in securing a cooperative relationship with both the Plaza’s developer and its construction firm, which reported meeting regularly with community representatives after the CCD “lobbied... to ensure the company hires workers from the Asian community.”⁹⁸ While the coalition had been unable to wring a financial commitment to the Chinatown community from C&L directly, activists were eventually willing to credit the city for its role in subsidizing the Cultural Center and affordable housing units. Even the CCD’s own members had to admit they could only blame C&L so much for the final result. “If I was a developer, I’d do the same thing,” one of them said. “If the city is willing to pay for the project, why should I pay?” And pay the city did: by the time negotiations had ended, Oakland was on the hook for

⁹⁸ Daniel S. Levine, “Not the typical high-rise project,” *Oakland Tribune*, April 1, 1991. Most of the delay was due to an expensive and extensive project to clean polluted soil at the building site, the result of leaks from a gas station for Oakland police vehicles that had previously been on the site.

nearly \$18 million in subsidies and loans to C&L, in addition to selling them the land the project sat on at a steep discount of \$20 per square foot.⁹⁹

As the CCD member's empathetic statement indicates, by the 1990s, Chinatown's nonprofits were by and large reconciled to operating within the logic of the market, even when doing so meant diminished results for themselves and the city. Organizing against C&L's various broken promises and unfulfilled deals was not a political impossibility, necessarily, but it was significantly less attainable than demanding the city step in to fill the void. Not even Oakland's redevelopment officials could muster up too much animus towards Chan, who was, after all, still putting a great deal of C&L's money on the line. "It's not about the developer 'having the money,'" George Williams told a *Tribune* reporter when all was said and done. "'People make investments based on the economics of individual deals,' not based on how much money they have."¹⁰⁰ Unspoken in both his and the CCD's statements was the assumption that, at the end of the day, Chinatown needed men like Lawrence Chan to help keep the wheel turning.

Conclusion

C&L Financial, having evaded the full cost of fulfilling community demands, was subsequently quite happy to participate in the pageantry of being a socially conscious corporation. When Pacific Renaissance Plaza opened to the public in July 1993, representatives from C&L handed the mayor a \$50,000 check to the city's new mayor Elihu Harris to fund "various multicultural social programs." Holding the check up, Harris closed the book on the Plaza's fraught development by tying the whole endeavor back to Oakland's newfound status as a globalized, cosmopolitan metropolis: "With the spirit in which this is given, Oakland is a diverse city which we think is hometown to the world."¹⁰¹

In its final iteration, the Pacific Renaissance Plaza functioned as a strange mirror to the nearby Asian Resource Center. A number of nonprofits and public entities, from EBMUD to the Asian Library, would find themselves housed amongst the Plaza's commercial tenants, their presence subsidized by the

⁹⁹ Hallberg, "Bail-out of developer has district fuming"; Matt Carter, "Asian cultural center to serve diverse community," *Oakland Tribune*, January 15, 1996.

¹⁰⁰ Hallberg, "Bail-out of developer has district fuming."

¹⁰¹ David K. Li, "Chinatown center opens amid fanfare," *Oakland Tribune*, July 18, 1993.

millions of dollars in public money. Nonprofit tenants included the Oakland Asian Cultural Center, the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce, the Asian Advisory Committee on Crime, and the Wa Sung Community Service Club, which had once considered headquartering themselves at the Asian Resource Center.¹⁰² Despite their somewhat grudging inclusion, the Plaza's nonprofit and state-funded elements have remained some of its most long-lasting tenants, particularly when Lawrence Chan's attempt to market condos and retail units in Hong Kong failed. Looking back on the project in 2003, Chan seemed to admit as much, saying the Plaza was "'far from a home run' as far as retail business earnings," but had been "a good community project." At the time, he was being interviewed by the *Tribune* because C&L Financial was in the process of evicting tenants from the Plaza's 50 affordable housing units, much to the shock and despair of the tenants themselves. Unbeknownst to them, C&L had only agreed to keep the units below market rate for 10 years, and the clock had run out. The nonprofits may have endured, but low- and moderate-income families and individuals—many of them elderly immigrants—had not.¹⁰³

Oakland Chinatown and enclaves like it illustrate how certain urban populations became valuable to their city governments beyond their capacity to deliver votes or swing elections. As ethnic neighborhoods became drawn into post-industrial, pro-growth agendas, their residents and small business owners became secondary considerations to the value of the space itself—space that was often highly racialized, and desirable partially for that reason.¹⁰⁴ As the material needs of Oakland Chinatown's occupants were subordinated to the neighborhood's capacity for generating tax revenue, the area's service agencies adapted accordingly. Opting not to pursue the militant antagonism that characterized Asian Americans' responses to redevelopment in San Francisco and Los Angeles, Oakland's organizations instead sought to accommodate redevelopment, and be accommodated in turn. Lacking the capacity to engage in direct organizing, Oakland Chinatown's nonprofits embraced a technocratic fix that reconciled

¹⁰² Cecily Burt, "Asian crime committee is thriving," *Oakland Tribune*, February 26, 1993; "Pacific Renaissance Plaza: Directory," March 15, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160315203927/http://prpoakland.com/directory.php>.

¹⁰³ "Larry Chan," *Oakland Tribune*, January 3, 1993; Michael A. Robinson, "Buyer-friendly financing aims to boost Chinatown condo sales," *Oakland Tribune*, August 27, 1993; Cecily Burt, "Asians get pushed out of apartments," *Oakland Tribune*, May 12, 2003.

¹⁰⁴ See Diamond, *Chicago on the Make* on Mayor Richard M. Daley's "city of neighborhoods" and Kurashige, *Shifting Grounds of Race* on Mayor Tom Bradley's multicultural "world city."

their interests with those of the for-profit private sector. Low-income and working-class Asian immigrants doubtless benefitted from this arrangement, which helped secure service agencies' long-term viability in a hostile political climate. Yet just as often, Chinatown's most vulnerable constituents were left out of the deals and arrangements that helped determine their fates. Working class immigrants' relative marginalization within Oakland's political landscape continued through the end of the 20th century, even as the nonprofits that served them became fixtures at city council meetings and on planning commissions. Their unchanging status demonstrates that, as much as globalized redevelopment altered the face Oakland Chinatown, it also helped ensure that certain aspects of the neighborhood would remain unchanged through the end of the Exclusion Era and beyond.

There was, however, one significant exception to the service-oriented nonprofits that found themselves gathered under the Asian Resource Center's roof. Merging lessons from the labor union movement and newly emergent strategies from the Asian American nonprofit sector, an organization called Asian Immigrant Women Advocates dedicated itself to organizing garment workers across Oakland and the East Bay. As the following chapter shows, AIWA introduced novel elements into decades-old efforts to unionize seamstresses in California in an effort to build power amongst some of the region's most marginalized communities: low-income immigrant women.

Chapter 5 — *Sweat and blood: Bay Area nonprofits and the global garment industry*

In the previous chapter, I introduced an assessment of Bay Area Asian American nonprofits' constrained ability to intervene within globalization's impact on their communities. I briefly noted that social service agencies' particular relationship with their constituents put them at a structural disadvantage when it came to shifting the balance of power between working class Asian immigrants, ethnic elites, and the city government. This chapter delves into two organizations that sought to transcend the social service model and directly organize specific sectors of the immigrant working class: the Asian Law Caucus, and Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA). In the wake of the failed encounter between Maoists and workers during the Jung Sai strike, both of these organizations represented renewed efforts by young Asian American activists to organize older Asian immigrant workers within the Bay Area garment industry. Eschewing the dogmatism of revolutionary parties, AIWA and the Asian Law Caucus instead prioritized coalition-building with other left-wing and progressive organizations (including labor unions), giving workers practical educations in workplace issues, and organizing targeted issue campaigns. In the process, both the Asian Law Caucus and AIWA created a durable infrastructure for Asian American worker organizing in the region, one that recognized the global forces shaping immigrant laborers' lives and industries. Their embrace of immigrant workers' transnational experiences would anticipate and shape that of domestic labor unions, who by the 1990s would not only name "international free trade" and globalization as tools in the class war, but would explicitly call for unions to take on a similarly borderless approach towards organizing.¹

The emergence of worker centers and other more heterodox forms of worker organizing during the late 20th century was the result of overlapping economic and social transformations, from the rise of service sectors in the place of heavy industry to increased immigration from the global south. Organizations like AIWA and the Asian Law Caucus began tackling workplace organizing during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period when both public faith in unions and union density began to decline at the national level. This was principally the result of a concerted political attack on organized labor, but also of unions' own mistakes and shortcomings throughout the postwar period. As discussed in Chapter 2,

¹ Andrew Herod, "The Practice of International Labor Solidarity and the Geography of the Global Economy," *Economic Geography* 71, no. 4 (1995): 341–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/144422>

unions like the ILGWU failed to adapt in the face of a hostile legal and political landscape, and the changing demographic composition of their own membership. Despite recent immigrants from Asian and Latin America offering unions a significant opportunity to grow their ranks and expand into new industries, many organizations remained too hide-bound by historic prejudices and exclusions to take advantage of it. New Left formations—particularly those emerging from so-called “Third World” communities—were thus highly critical of unions and their capacity to effect lasting change. While some attempted to transform unions from within, others turned to alternative forms of worker organization—so-called “alt-labor”—which included co-ops, mutual aid organizations, and worker centers.

Between them, the Asian Law Caucus and AIWA ran the gamut of nonprofit organizations’ approaches to worker organizing. Both placed a heavy emphasis on member education, something researcher Janice Fine has argued was important to a majority of worker centers, many of which were inspired by Paolo Freire’s idea of liberation pedagogy.² Both emphasized recruiting and developing leaders from among garment workers themselves, hoping to mitigate against the tendency for nonprofit activism to be led exclusively by college-educated young professionals. Where the Asian Law Caucus failed and AIWA succeeded, however, was building a worker-led campaign against a specific manufacturer within the industry. While the Caucus remained largely constricted to various forms of litigation and educational programs, during the 1990s, AIWA helped its members win significant financial concessions from clothing manufacturer Jessica McClintock Inc., demonstrating that a non-union organization could manage to hold corporations responsible for their low-paid contract laborers.

² Janice Fine, “Worker Centers,” *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 14, no. 1 (2007): 54–57; Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take On the Global Factory* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2001).

AIWA's attempts to not just advocate on behalf of, but to organize Asian American workers, set them apart from most other Asian American nonprofits in the Bay Area.³ Like other worker centers, AIWA encountered critical challenges when it came to replicating union methodology without the benefit of contracts and a dues-paying membership. However, their ability to meld education and service with direct organizing—paired with their deep understanding of seamstresses' communities and personal histories—did represent an important development in Asian American labor activism. In particular, AIWA's worker education program helped seamstresses make both macro-level analyses and more local observations about their working and living conditions. This included teaching garment workers about the chains of production they were enmeshed in, the history of immigration to the United States, and the phenomenon of globalization itself. Worker empowerment, AIWA argued, began with giving workers a systematic education in the structures governing their lives. Ideally, members who moved through the program would come out the other end seeing themselves as agents of change—not just in their workplaces, but in their broader communities as well. As Hai Yan, a garment worker who first encountered AIWA in 1996 when she went to them for English classes, put it in a 2011 interview: “[Since] coming to AIWA, I meet a lot of people, come into contact with [people from] other races, go into different groups and organizations to give speeches... And if we see something that is unfair, then we will fight for change.”⁴

For all of AIWA and the Asian Law Caucus's notable successes, however, both organizations were eventually forced to contend with a difficult truth: that despite the garment industry's historic and,

³ On the distinction between organizing, advocacy, and mobilizing, I borrow primarily from the work of scholar and labor organizer Jane McAlevey, who defines advocacy as work where “the key actors are ...paid lawyers, lobbyists, and public relations professionals” who work on behalf of “ordinary people,” but do not engage them directly. A step removed from advocacy is mobilizing, a tactical approach which is still directed by professional staff but targeted at activating “dedicated activists” among their constituency towards a common goal, rather than a meaningful majority. By contrast, organizing “places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don't consider themselves activists at all.” See Jane McAlevey, “The Crisis of New Labor and Alinsky's Legacy: Revisiting the Role of the Organic Grassroots Leaders in Building Powerful Organizations and Movements,” *Politics & Society* 43, no. 3 (September 2015): 415–41; McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Steve Jenkins, “Organizing, Advocacy, and Member Power,” *WorkingUSA* 6, no. 2 (2002): 56–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-4580.2002.00003.x-11>.

⁴ Jennifer Jihye Chun, “Living Outside the Cup: Asian Immigrant Women Workers Fighting for Change,” report for Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, September 12, 2011, https://www.aiwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Outside_The_Cup_091211.pdf.

indeed, cultural centrality within Asian American labor struggle, by the end of the 20th century it was no longer a strategic site upon which to build Asian American worker power. In this way, the Bay Area garment industry joined other Asian ethnic sites and formations—family associations, fraternal organizations, even the urban enclave itself—in losing much of its political force during the post-Exclusion Era. An industry that had been sustained by globalization’s one hand was now being relocated by its other: fed for decades by a growing pool of cheap, racialized, feminized labor as a result of post-1965 immigration reform, by the early 1990s a critical mass of Bay Area manufacturers were leaping to take advantage of even cheaper racialized and feminized labor in Asia and Latin America. Yet while the jobs moved on, the people remained: some thrust into new sectors of the economy, others into unemployment, and others still into regions beyond nonprofits’ original geographic scope. The challenge for Asian American political actors in the wake of the industry’s decline was to adapt, once again, to the shifting ground beneath their feet.

This chapter is broken into two main sections. In the first, I explore post-Jung Sai efforts within San Francisco Chinatown to organize Asian immigrant garment workers, focusing in particular on the Asian Law Caucus. After providing a brief overview of how social and political dynamics in Chinatown had evolved since the conclusion of the Jung Sai strike, I show how the Caucus spearheaded critical relationship-building between Asian American institutions and organized labor, resulting in a productive partnership between them and the ILGWU. While the partnership resulted in successful legal advocacy against the problem of the sweatshop industry, it did not succeed in improving union density among the city’s garment workers—a result of the Caucus’s continued focus on litigation and the inhospitable organizing conditions within the globalized industry.

In the second section, I turn to AIWA’s development in the East Bay, starting with an outline of its early days in the 1980s before covering the organization’s campaign against manufacturer Jessica McClintock during the 1990s. AIWA has received some degree of scholarly attention as an example *par excellence* of what worker centers—as opposed to traditional labor unions—could achieve in an era of weakened organized labor. In particular, scholars have pointed to AIWA’s practice of leadership development among immigrant workers as an innovative departure from “professionally led” worker

centers.⁵ I attempt to situate AIWA's success in the context of Oakland's greater Asian American nonprofit ecosystem, arguing that the organization's program—while not strictly led by professionals—was nevertheless dependent on the contributions of full-time nonprofit employees and educators, who gradually shifted AIWA's institutional priorities from service delivery to worker organizing.

I. Beyond Jung Sai: The Asian Law Caucus and the ILGWU in San Francisco Chinatown

Mattie Jackson knew that she needed help.

It was November of 1983. After ten years of legal struggle, Jackson and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union had just finished negotiating a final settlement with Esprit de Corp and the NLRB to award backpay to the workers of Jung Sai. Now, with \$1.25 million in settlement money to distribute and only six months to do it, the ILGWU had to find the 128 workers in question and deliver the good news. This was easier said than done: in the intervening years, Jackson and the ILGWU had, by their own admission, lost track of around half the former employees. "One of the problems was [that] the records of the workers were burned in a 1976 fire at the Esprit plant," Jackson told Chinatown publication *East/West*, but the other problem was the ILGWU's weak ties to the community. With only 15 unionized shops within Chinatown and no Chinese-speaking organizers, the union was ill-equipped to go looking for the remaining 60 workers, and the days were already running out.⁶

It was a lean time for the ILGWU, not only in Northern California but in the country as a whole. In Chicago, Pennsylvania, and Florida, the union had begun branching away from organizing garment workers to drivers, manufacturing workers, and care workers—a tacit admission that the domestic garment industry, eroded by offshoring and imports, was no longer able to sustain the organization on its own. New York City in 1982 offered a glimmer of hope when 20,000 garment workers—most of them Chinese immigrants—went on strike to successfully protect their contracts. But despite the occasional

⁵ See Lisa Lowe, "Work, Immigration, Gender: New Subjects of Cultural Politics," *Social Justice* 25, no. 3 (73) (1998): 31–49; Nilda Flores-Gonzalez et al., *Immigrant Women Workers in the Neoliberal Age* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 207–231; Jennifer Jihye Chun, George Lipsitz, and Young Shin, "Intersectionality as a Social Movement Strategy: Asian Immigrant Women Advocates," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (June 1, 2013): 917–40, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669575>; Jennifer Jihye Chun, "Building Political Agency and Movement Leadership: The Grassroots Organizing Model of Asian Immigrant Women Advocates," *Citizenship Studies* 20, no. 3–4 (May 18, 2016): 379–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2016.1158353>.

⁶ Mark Jue, "Jung Sai Garment Workers Win Back Pay," *East/West*, November 23, 1983.

defensive victory, new organizing largely stagnated during the 1980s. Among other unfortunate developments, a hostile Reagan administration NLRB gave employers more leeway to use offshoring as both a justification for their union busting, and a tool to conduct it. In major manufacturing centers like Los Angeles and the Bay Area, shops' reliance on immigrant labor allowed employers to collaborate with the repressive arm of the state, including the Immigration and Naturalization Service, to strike back against unions and other worker organizations.⁷ The ILGWU's historic failure to build a strong presence among these workers had thus left both the union and workers themselves exceptionally vulnerable to the vagaries of the global economy and the repressive arm of the state.

Despite the challenges confronting her union, Jackson was not yet ready to publicly concede defeat. Making the former Jung Sai workers whole was only part of her plan to resume active organizing among the Bay Area's immigrant garment manufacturing workforce, a project which would necessarily require expanding into San Francisco Chinatown. Born in Texas to an African American farming family in 1921, Jackson and her husband had joined the Great Migration north during the 1940s, relocating to San Francisco in search of expanded economic opportunity and social mobility. After moving through a series of retail jobs, Jackson found work at a garment factory in 1947 and became a sewing machine operator. On the shop floor, Jackson distinguished herself as an outspoken critic of management and a natural leader, resulting in then-district Vice President Cornelius Wall recruiting her into Local 101 leadership, first as a steward and later as a business agent. By 1974, the year of the Jung Sai strike, Jackson had risen to Vice President of the Local, a position which kept her closely involved in the seamstresses' legal battle after the disappointing conclusion of their strike itself. Over the course of the next decade, she took on a number of higher leadership roles, including a term as international vice president of the union (making her the ILGWU's first Black woman executive officer). Despite these

⁷ See Gus Tyler, *Look for the Union Label: History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 289; Dana Frank, *Buy American*, 152; Shulamit Kahn, "Union Membership Trends: A Study of the Garment Workers," *Monthly Labor Review* 109, no. 6 (1986): 33–35. On the ILGWU in Los Angeles during the 1980s, see Edna Bonacich and Richard P. Appelbaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 264–270; Tobias Higbie and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, "The Border at Work: Undocumented Workers, the ILGWU in Los Angeles, and the Limits of Labor Citizenship," *Labor* 19, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 58–88, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-10032376>. On the Reagan NLRB and declining national union membership during the early 1980s, see Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door*, 182–183. According to Tyler, between 1966 and 1986, ILGWU membership fell from over 455,000 to around 196,000, a decline of roughly 60% across three decades. This exceeded the decline in domestic garment manufacturing jobs overall, which fell by 24% during the same period.

turns in executive office, Jackson never stopped being an active force in her San Francisco local, where the dovetailing problems of imports and exploited immigrant labor would remain a priority for the rest of her organizing career.⁸

Jackson brought a more sensitive approach to organizing neighborhoods like Chinatown than her white male predecessors. Gone was the racially charged language from 15 years ago about “driving rats out of their holes” or the insistence that Chinese contractors were uniquely “backwards” in their mode of production. In a 1977 interview with the *Chronicle*, Jackson proclaimed that her fight was “with the manufacturer,” not the factories in Chinatown—a hard-learned lesson after years of targeting contractors with limited success.⁹ Jackson recognized that manufacturers frequently abused workers’ immigration status to circumvent the unions, recounting how a successful 1973 organizing drive was quickly shut down when the factory owners called in immigration authorities on their own undocumented workforce. Yet her long history with the ILGWU also meant that she was attached to organizing shop-by-shop, election-by-election—a method that was proving more and more inefficient in an era of runaway manufacturers who were increasingly willing to flout labor law, and an NLRB that was increasingly inclined to let them. New terrain would require new tactics. Seeking out the remainder of the Jung Sai workers would thus not only be the closing of an old chapter; it would hopefully be the start of a new one as well.

San Francisco Chinatown in the 1980s

Before delving into the ILGWU’s attempts to renew garment worker organizing, let us set the scene for their efforts and explore the political environment of San Francisco Chinatown during the 1980s. There, housing development—not labor rights—was the issue of the day. Throughout the decade, public hearings over new construction, re-zoning, and architectural preservation in the neighborhood regularly attracted the most attention from community members and the press, the latter of whom eagerly

⁸ Mattie Jackson, “Labor Leader, Businesswoman, Public Servant and Activist,” interview by Nancy Quam-Wickham, February 20, 1996, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/jackson_mattie.pdf; Kelly Zito, “Obituary: Mattie Jackson — community advocate and labor leader,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 20, 2009.

⁹ Butler, “Inside S.F.’s Cloistered Sewing Shops,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 17, 1977.

covered the debate between more pro-business factions and affordable housing activists. Yet while concerns regarding the future of who could afford to live and do business in Chinatown crowded out many of the previous decades' concerns regarding workers' rights, they nevertheless formed the context within which all neighborhood political organizing would take place. As such, they offer insight into the reasons behind the garment industry's eventual decline within the city, the broader social conditions facing garment workers, and the dynamic between Chinatown's working-class residents and the nonprofit organizations that sought to serve and represent them. Moreover, the parallel evolution of Asian real estate development and the city's garment industry reveal crucial interconnections between these two halves of the new Pacific economy.

The politics of real estate in Chinatown were shaped by a number of structural factors, population growth among them. Between the 1980 and 1990 censuses, the number of Asians living in the Bay Area almost doubled, growing from 462,890 to 919,279. San Francisco county alone saw an increase of roughly 60,000 Asian residents during the 1980s, the vast majority of them immigrants from China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Southeast Asia (table 5.1). While Chinatown's own population did not expand significantly during this period, the neighborhood had already been at near-maximum residential capacity for over two decades. The housing that was available was even more overcrowded in the 1980s than in the previous decade, with wide-ranging social and psychological effects on residents. In a 1984 survey, 42% of Chinatown respondents lived in overcrowded homes, according to the census definition of 1.01 or more persons per room; 99% of respondents said they "considered crowding a problem." Researchers Chalsa Loo and Paul Ong shared excerpts from participants' statements, in which Chinatown residents described how crowding "makes me yell at my kids" or "made me hate my brothers"; "kills your personality"; and "lowers my productivity."¹⁰

Worsening living conditions for Chinatown's average resident existed alongside a boom-period for foreign investment and the neighborhood's small business scene, both of which were also fueled by new immigration. Lower Grant Avenue, which formed the neighborhood's main drag and had long contained its highest concentration of shops and restaurants, received one of the more dramatic face-lifts

¹⁰ Chalsa Loo and Paul Ong, "Crowding Perceptions, Attitudes, and Consequences among the Chinese," *Environment and Behavior* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 1984): 55–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916584161003>.

in Chinatown, leading *AsianWeek* to report that the “ghetto” had at last “transform[ed] into a glittering tourist attraction.” Some saw the neighborhood’s new commercial appeal as a sign of Asian Americans’ rising social status in the city. Judy Tran, a jewelry store worker, described how economic and racial success could dovetail through small business enterprise: “I enjoy working in Chinatown because it gives me the chance... to explain Asian history and culture to [American people]. I still like Vietnam but I love the freedom in America, and I want to tell people about my culture so they will accept me.” When a McDonald’s opened on a prime lot on Grant Avenue in 1985—the first to do so in Chinatown—neighborhood boosters celebrated the arrival of the popular chain in the former ghetto. “McDonald’s is America,” the location’s franchisee, Alan Wong, told the *Chronicle*.¹¹

Table 5.1: Asian Population Change in San Francisco County, 1980-1990

Race/Ethnicity	1980 Census	1990 Census	Amt Change	% Change
Japanese	12,461	11,591	-870	-6.98%
Chinese	82,244	130,753	48,509	58.98%
Filipino	38,690	40,977	2,287	5.91%
Korean	3,442	6,538	3,096	89.95%
Indian	2,704	2,891	187	6.92%
Vietnamese	5,078	8,952	3,874	76.29%
Cambodian	n/a	1,593	1,593	n/a
Hmong	n/a	20	20	n/a
Laotian	n/a	928	928	n/a
Thai	n/a	592	592	n/a
Hawaiian	1,048	975	-73	-6.97%
Samoan	1,568	1,310	-258	-16.45%

Source: 1980 & 1990 Census of Population.

¹¹ “Lower Grant Avenue spruces up its act,” *AsianWeek*, January 27, 1984; Patrick Andersen, “New high for C-town rent; ‘Your kind of place’ may cost as much as \$30,000 a month,” *AsianWeek*, January 11, 1985; Steve Rubenstein, “McDonald’s Noisy Debut in Chinatown,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 29, 1984.

Others were less enthusiastic. The influx of development cash meant that, much like its sister in Oakland, San Francisco Chinatown saw skyrocketing rents during the 1980s. The McDonald's became a lightning rod for the issue when news broke that the restaurant paid between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a month in rent, leading other neighborhood entrepreneurs to fear that they would soon face similar rates. Moreover, the franchise had replaced a well-known attraction called Chinatown Wax Museum, much to the chagrin of both residents and non-Chinese locals who had once treated Chinatown as a quaint—if somewhat seedy—curiosity. Writing for *East/West* in 1989, local journalist Richard Springer bemoaned the replacement of old standbys with “trinket shops, camera stores, jewelry emporiums, savings institutions,” and malls crowded with the same, writing that he “longed for the days of the Chinatown Wax Museum.” Tourists, Springer argued, would not be satisfied with mere kitsch; they needed to experience “authentic examples of Chinese culture” to keep coming back. Rose Pak, a Chinese American activist and former journalist, anticipated his sentiment in 1985 when she had dryly remarked to the *Examiner*, “Tourists don’t come to Chinatown to see shops selling T-shirts reading ‘I got crabs in San Francisco.’ They want to see a living community.”¹²

Chinatown had always balanced being a tourist draw and a “living community,” but the line was becoming harder to tow than ever as investor interest in the neighborhood grew. A 1983 report in the *San Francisco Examiner* revealed that on one block alone, \$4.6 million worth of real estate had changed hands in under a year, with most going to foreign companies. The Chinese Six Companies sold a “dingy” apartment building to a conglomerate which included “Hong Kong interests” for \$1.6 million; another plot was sold to a Netherlands Antilles-based corporation for almost \$1 million.¹³ Activists like Rose Pak, as well as residents themselves, looked upon these developments with growing distress, but neighborhood business interests saw it as a sign of progress. Planning Commission hearings and other agency meetings soon became popular venues for Chinatown’s various factions to litigate their disagreements in public. At one such session, which concerned the construction of a 12-story condominium on Stockton Street, members of Chinatown’s Chamber of Commerce and the Six Companies turned out en masse to testify in

¹² Gerald Adams, “Coalition offers a new plan: ‘Tourist’ Chinatown vs. living community,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 17, 1985; Richard Springer, “The Real Chinatown,” *East/West*, July 28, 1988.

¹³ Gerald Adams, “Condominium proposal stirs Chinatown ire,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 5, 1983.

favor of the development. Of particular concern to the pro-development crowd were height restrictions, which had been set to 40 feet in Chinatown and most other parts of the city by the Residential Rezoning of 1978. The condominium would be a welcome addition of dense, market-rate housing in a taller building that would further soften the difference between downtown proper—with its looming skyscrapers and rapid growth—and Chinatown. “Some at the session,” the *Examiner* reported, “seeing the Financial District’ towers lapping at the Kearny Street banks of Chinatown, want their quarter... to become more like the new Hong Kong, a city of skyscrapers.” From the perspective of pro-development parties, aesthetically and economically merging Chinatown with the rest of the downtown district would be a measure of the neighborhood’s value, both in terms of dollars and in terms of prestige. As one local business owner put it, “We want a first class Chinatown. We want to build to what the property here is worth.”¹⁴

As Chinatown threatened to become more integrated with downtown, downtown was becoming more integrated with Chinese capital. Throughout the 1980s, buyers from Hong Kong continued to lay down significant sums for properties in the area, favoring hotels and office buildings but occasionally branching into entertainment and retail venues such as theaters and restaurants. Hong Kong buyers and developers’ desire to boost their own long-term investments in the U.S. fit neatly into the San Francisco city government’s ongoing effort to build up its downtown—an effort that had begun during the ‘60s with ambitious (and controversial) projects such as the Transamerica Pyramid, but was picking up new steam during the 1980s, in part because of the new availability of foreign capital. In 1980, unnamed Hong Kong investors bought what was once the Philippine Airlines’ local headquarters for \$4.75 million; a year later, another unnamed investor snatched up a neighboring office building for \$7.75 million. In 1984, Hong Kong developer Caleb Chan oversaw the completion of the new, \$130 million Ramada Renaissance Hotel

¹⁴ On the San Francisco anti-high-rise movement, see Alison Isenberg, *Designing San Francisco: Art, Land, and Urban Renewal in the City by the Bay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Frederick M. Wirt, *Power in the City: Decision Making in San Francisco* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974). Height limits have been a major sticking point in debates surrounding real estate development within San Francisco. This is in part because homeowners are highly protective of their views of the Bay, as well as the city’s microclimates and the importance of sunlight for warmth; detractors have complained that taller buildings create wind tunnels and cast long shadows, which can combine to make entire neighborhoods colder and less hospitable. Critics have similarly couched their objections to height as avoiding the “Manhattanization” of San Francisco, wishing to preserve the city’s low-rise character. Such considerations have largely served to give cover for homeowners and business interests that were opposed to increasing density and housing availability in certain affluent parts of the city, including wealthy Nob Hill, which directly bordered Chinatown.

in the Tenderloin district, as well as a 22-story office building on Market Street. Leading many of these projects were the U.S. and U.K.-educated children of Hong Kong business tycoons, individuals like Lawrence Chan of C&L Financial. This second generation of rich, acculturated young businesspeople attracted the lavish attention of the local press, who referred to them as “Hong Kong yuppies” and portrayed them as the city’s invisible “new money elite.” Local profiles of these new yuppies were half business, half pleasure, lingering over the minutiae of each tycoon’s professional credentials while also divulging details of their flashy personal lives. Descriptions of their growing presence in San Francisco mingled awe with anxiety, emphasizing Hong Kong investors’ alien backgrounds: “Chances are, [the new elite] own the lot where you park your car while shopping... Chances are good they own the building you shop in as well... They are Hong Kong millionaires and billionaires, and their names are Chan, Cheng, Tang, Lui, Kwok and Ho.”¹⁵

Helping to broker the arrangements between these young, well-resourced foreigners and the city government were members of the new Chinatown political elite, including activists like Rose Pak, who would become a powerful member of Mayor Art Agnos’s inner circle when he assumed office in 1988. Pak helped Agnos pull influential members of Chinese American society into key city positions, including Police Commissioner, Public Utilities Commissioner, and Port Commissioner. As the *Examiner* noted in an extensive report on the “new Chinese power base,” many of the new occupants of these offices were involved with Hong Kong businesspeople seeking to invest in San Francisco: “Planning Commissioner [Jackson] Hu worked for one of them. Police Commissioner [Pius] Lee is a property investor who represented some of them in real estate deals. Deputy Mayor [James] Ho was partners with them. Parking Commissioner [Gordon] Chin counseled them.”¹⁶ These same individuals would subsequently seek to parley their new political influence into expanded control over development within Chinatown itself—influence they would, ironically, use to mitigate the negative effects of real estate development on neighborhood residents. Such strategies seemed largely naive about how growth around Chinatown

¹⁵ “Hong Kong Buyers for S.F. Building,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 21, 1980; “Hong Kong Investors Buy S.F. Building,” *AsianWeek*, October 30, 1980; “Sold,” *San Francisco Examiner*, C1, March 11, 1981; “Who’s who in S.F.: Meet your well-heeled neighbors from Hong Kong,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 7, 1987; Thom Calendra and Philip Matier, “A New Money Elite,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 20, 1989.

¹⁶ Philip Matier and Thom Calendra, “Asia influence comes of age: Agnos’ Chinese connections crafting a new financial, political base,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 21, 1989.

effected growth within; Rose Pak, for instance, had worked closely with Agnos to attract Hong Kong developers to San Francisco, but was also one of the leading voices against most forms of commercial development in Chinatown proper. Pak's tricky balancing act reflected the ongoing reality that local Asian American political power was still largely tied to Asian Americans' capacity to secure transpacific ties between their cities and Asia, with uneven results for their enclave constituencies.

For Chinatown's lower-income residents, whose number included not just garment workers but food service and retail employees, laundry workers, clerical workers, and the unemployed, the neighborhood's integration into downtown San Francisco brought a mixed-bag of changes.¹⁷ Certainly, there were those like Judy Tran who embraced the rise in foot-traffic and consumer interest in the neighborhood. At the same time, real estate developers' increased interest left many residents terrified of displacement. In the summer of 1985, these anxieties coalesced onto one development project in particular when hundreds of people protested for the Board of Supervisors to oppose its construction. Dubbed "Orange Land," the mixed-use development would have contained 130 housing units, with 70 of them set aside as subsidized housing for senior citizens. Despite the promises of more housing, the tract's existing 195 occupants mistrusted developers' promises they'd all be found new homes within the neighborhood, and worried their families would be separated when only the elderly would be allowed to move into the subsidized units. Unsubstantiated rumors swirled that "Hong Kong money" was involved—a testament to residents' associations of Asian capital with detrimental real estate development (Orange Land's would-be developers were in fact, Chinese American). By the fall, the project was dead, killed by

¹⁷ See 1980 Census, 1990 Census; Chalsa Loo, *Chinatown*, 194. In 1979, between 20% and 30% of "core Chinatown" (Tracts 113, 114, and 118) were below the federal poverty level; for the city as a whole the rate was 13.7%. Median household income in "core Chinatown" was roughly \$9,807, whereas for the whole city it was \$15,866. Sub-poverty rates in the area had lowered to an average of 20% by 1990, but still high compared to the citywide rate of 12.4%. In 1980, neighborhood residents' most common occupations by far were in the service and manufacturing industries, in that order; by 1990, clerical work had edged out manufacturing for the second most popular kind of work.

a coalition of the existing building's tenants association, historic preservationists, and small business owners.¹⁸

This was much to the chagrin of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and other local businessmen and professionals, who saw activists and city politicians as preventing Chinatown from enjoying the full financial fruits of its new success. One CCBA member accused activists of “not [being] concerned about the future of all Chinatown, but only low income housing...” Moreover, by restricting new construction, the CCBA argued activists were part of the unaffordability problem. “There has been almost no new construction in Chinatown for the last 30 years,” one architect insisted. “Rent in Chinatown has gone up to \$10 per square foot per month... This hurts consumers; business goes down... and we lose jobs too.”¹⁹

Orange Land's developers and Chinatown business elites certainly lost out as a result of the failed initiative, but so did neighborhood nonprofit Self Help for the Elderly, which had sponsored the development's elderly housing component. SHE workers had emphasized the importance of providing elderly tenants with clean, spacious condos free from crowding, as opposed to their existing strategy of renovating units. Renovation, in the words of one social worker, “says that a senior citizen here will always have to be sharing a kitchen with 30 people, as well as having to share a bathroom.”²⁰ Yet SHE had clearly failed to win over enough residents to their vision, or even to assuage tenants' fears of displacement and separation. Their disappointment indicated that while well-established Asian American nonprofits served integral functions within the neighborhood—by 1985, SHE was coming up on its 20 year anniversary—they did not necessarily capture a majority of Chinatown residents' political beliefs

¹⁸ Gerald Adams, “Showdown over old vs new housing splits Chinatown,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 1, 1985; Adams, “Orange Land project goes to board on a tie,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 3, 1985; Ken Wong, “Fusion of methods,” *San Francisco Examiner*, September 25, 1985. This cross-section of anti-development activists in Chinatown reflects the broader shape of slow-growth politics in the city, which united both progressive and conservative elements in the quest to keep San Francisco “livable” for its residents. Wealthy homeowners and left wing anti-gentrification activists alike came together during the 1970s and ‘80s to push for height restrictions and other downzoning measures; for the former, the emphasis was on preserving exclusivity, views, and property values; for the latter it was about preventing gentrification and preserving existing housing. On slow-growth politics in San Francisco, see Richard Edward DeLeon, *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992); Karl Beitel, *Local Protest, Global Movements: Capital, Community, and State in San Francisco* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ “‘Don’t kill Chinatown!’: Feinstein, Macris reportedly lower development controls,” *AsianWeek*, January 11, 1985.

²⁰ Adams, “Showdown.”

and interests. In short, two decades after their tumultuous birth alongside the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, progressive Asian American nonprofits were still striving to bridge the political gap between themselves and the populations they served.

One last substantial change that had taken place in the intervening years, which also found itself bound up in the wave of real estate development within the neighborhood, was the disintegration of San Francisco's organized Asian American left. This process had begun as early as 1975, when Wei Min She merged with the Revolutionary Union and ceased to act as a separate party focused specifically on Chinatown. The most significant turning point, however, took place in 1977, with the fall of the International Hotel. At its height, the anti-eviction struggle had served to draw the Bay Area left together into brief and powerful unity. Estella Habal remembered the International Longshore Workers Union, the ILGWU, United Farm Workers and other unions joining university students and Maoist revolutionaries in human barricades around the hotel up to 7,000 people strong (fig. 5.2). For a time, it seemed like they might even succeed: Mayor George Moscone, Assemblyman Art Agnos, a number of City Supervisors, even the Sheriff Richard Hongisto, all expressed their sympathy for the tenants' plight at varying points during their conflict against the building's owner, Thailand-based Four Seas Investment Co. It all came crashing down in the course of a single August evening, however. A May court ruling blocked a plan for the city to condemn the hotel and sell it to the tenants' association, and in July, the California State Supreme Court denied a stay of eviction. In the early hours of August 4th, over two hundred Sheriff's deputies officers beat their way past a crowd of protesters, stormed the building, and marched the hotel's remaining elderly occupants and their allies out onto Kearny Street.²¹ Foreign capital and local government, wielding the brutal tool of police violence, had colluded to bring the decade-long I-Hotel struggle to a swift and decisive end.

With the eviction of the hotel's *manong* tenants, the various social service agencies, political organizations, and cultural groups that had taken up in the hotel's basement were pushed out as well. Some, such as the artists' collective Kearny Street Workshop, moved to other storefronts in the Chinatown-North Beach area and were able to resume day-to-day operations. The International Hotel

²¹ Habal, *The International Hotel*, 140, 146-147.



Fig. 5.1: A photograph by protestors stand arm-in-arm to blockade the entrance of the International Hotel from police in the early morning hours of August 4, 1977. Note the sign for the Chinese Progressive Association headquarters to the left of the hotel entrance. Photo by Nancy Wong. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Tenants' Association, which continued to pressure the city to provide for replacement housing for the *manongs* and prevent the hotel site from being used for commercial purposes, lingered on without a home-base for two more years before dissolving. A similar fate awaited I Wor Kuen, San Francisco's remaining Asian American Maoist party, which dissolved in 1978 for its members to form the League of Revolutionary Struggle, which focused its efforts on student organizing in the Bay and electoral work.²²

Absent any remaining organized revolutionary parties, Chinatown's surviving nonprofits became the primary vehicle for left and left-leaning politically minded Asian Americans in the city during the 1980s. Indeed, while I Wor Kuen had moved on, its nonprofit ally and "mass organization" front, the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA), has continued to operate into the present day. After it, too, was evicted from the I-Hotel in 1977, the CPA set up shop in new headquarters on Grant Avenue. In a period of thawing U.S.-China relations, it continued to host panels and presentations in favor of normalization

²² Bryan Hsuan, "Kearny Street Collective,: Pioneering workshop turns 25," *AsianWeek*, September 5, 1997; Habal, *The International Hotel*, 168; William Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 231-238.

throughout the late 1970s, providing a counterbalance to the continued anti-PRC hostility of organizations like the Six Companies. And, in the spirit of its predecessor, the organization ran after-school Chinese classes for Chinese American students and mutual aid programs for workers and tenants.²³

Left wing and progressive nonprofits like the CPA never quite replicated the momentum in labor organizing that had led up to Jung Sai, but they did remain invested in improving the conditions of Asian workers—garment workers most of all. Part of this was garment workers’ sheer prominence within the neighborhood: garment manufacturing was by far the most common occupation among Chinatown’s women, with 47% working as sewing machine operators during the late 1970s and early 1980s.²⁴ Another was the industry’s growing prominence within the regional manufacturing economy: despite national trends of offshoring and rising imports, the Bay Area garment industry actually grew during the 1980s, from 250 shops in 1979 to roughly 500 a decade later. By then, the garment industry had become the largest manufacturing sector within San Francisco, with shops concentrated in and around Chinatown. For this reason, Chinese American ethnic elites continued to occasionally defend factory owners as providers of desperately needed jobs, claiming most employees worked in “pleasant, modernized work space[s],” although the issue remained a marginal one relative to housing.²⁵

More than just being an important foundation of the San Francisco economy, the Chinatown garment industry remained a potent representation of the drudgery and exploitation experienced by Asian immigrants in San Francisco. It was by no means the only industry in which Asian workers found themselves overworked and underpaid, but it *was* the most infamous. Throughout the 1980s, local media coverage continued to sporadically marvel at the dim, cramped factories populated with hunched-over seamstresses. Local station KPIX ran an investigative report in 1981 evocatively titled “Blood, Sweat and Fear” about the “exotic shops” of Chinatown, with one executive producer recalling that “there were times when we were physically revolted by the filth and odor” when filming for the piece. Politicians considered the industry an incurable headache that had been plaguing them for decades, with individual

²³ Ken Wong, “Chinatown Wall Posters Assail Carter and Peking,” *San Francisco Examiner*, December 18, 1978; “US/China Relations,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 24, 1978; Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 216-217.

²⁴ Loo, *Chinatown*, 193-194.

²⁵ Gerald Adams, “City planners clash over sweatshops,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 29, 1981; Steven A. Chin, “Bay sweatshops flourish,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 13, 1989.

officials torn between attempting to eliminate the industry altogether or keeping poor, unskilled immigrants employed. The garment industry's very existence, so at odds with the slick modernity promised by McDonald's and Hong Kong yuppies, represented the dark inverse of globalization's impact on Chinatown and its constituents. While foreign capital (or the promise of it) had helped elevate the neighborhood's political economic profile during the last two decades, immigration had also continued to attract garment manufacturers to the neighborhood's working population, who proved a cheap and captive source of labor. "This presents a part of city life that a lot of people would apparently like to pretend doesn't exist," one journalist said of the industry.²⁶

While the suffering of poor Asian garment workers seemed a far cry from the success of well-heeled Hong Kong investors and their local Chinese American allies, the two populations were in fact bound together by the flows of the transpacific economy. In more than one case, the city's second generation cohort of wealthy Asian investors were playing with money their families had made in the colony's booming textile industry, former employees of which were now living in San Francisco.²⁷ In other words, capital raised from the sweated labor of working class Hong Kongers was now flying across the Pacific to contribute towards increasing rents and reduced housing for onetime members of that exact same population, many of whom had left Hong Kong to escape low wages and rising costs of living. This cycle of capital had concrete effects on the local garment industry itself, too. As rents rose within Chinatown due to growing real estate development, garment factories began moving outside the neighborhood, tracking the simultaneous expansion of Hong Kong investment properties across downtown San Francisco. One *Examiner* article from 1990 noted the proliferation of factories south of Market Street, which had once formed the southernmost border of the Chinese garment industry—evidence, the reporters argued, that the Chinese ethnic economy was "no longer confined to its traditional Chinatown base" but was "spread[ing] across San Francisco," giving the city "the bustling air of Taipei or

²⁶ John Stanley, "In the Shops, On the Mountain," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 17, 1981; "Life in a Chinatown sweatshop," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 27, 1981; Jon Carroll, "The Sweatshop Syndrome," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 25, 1986; James Leung, "Sweatshops thriving in Bay Area," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 5, 1988; Chin, "Bay sweatshops flourish."

²⁷ Caleb Chan, for instance (unrelated to Lawrence Chan) came from a family which owned "one of the largest apparel-making companies" in Hong Kong, Crocodile Garments. Real estate investor Leslie Tang received seed money for her Bay Area corporation from her family, owners of South Sea Textile Manufacturing Company.

Hong Kong.” The *Examiner*’s coverage was tinged with xenophobic anxiety, resurrecting old tropes about how the Chinese “live in their own economic world” while still managing to remake the city around them. Despite the paper’s exaggeration of Asian immigrants’ impact on San Francisco’s social and economic life, there was some element of truth to its analysis—but only when it came to changing conditions for Asian immigrants and Asian Americans themselves. San Francisco’s hunger for both foreign investment and immigrant workers had drawn labor and capital alike from across the Pacific, allowing them to confront one another in a different city in ways both new and old. Far from a “foreign” problem, both the proliferation of Hong Kong-financed developments and Chinese garment factories had intensely local causes, from the city government’s ambitions to grow downtown San Francisco to the domestic garment manufacturing industry’s ongoing quest for cheap labor.²⁸

In short, the contradictions posed by increased immigration and increased capital—including growing sums of Hong Kong money—that had emerged post-1965 had only intensified by the 1980s. Furthermore, intra-neighborhood politics was increasingly dominated by issues of housing and real estate development as a result of greater commercial interest in the area, with questions of workers’ rights becoming a marginal issue by comparison. While the new crop of Chinatown elites focused their energies on debates over affordable housing, re-zoning the neighborhood, and attracting (or repelling) private developers, the remaining elements of the Asian American movement retained a dedicated interest in worker organizing. Concerned that low-income workers were being left behind, Chinatown nonprofits returned to the question that had dogged their predecessors throughout the previous decade: how to build political power within the neighborhood’s immigrant garment manufacturing workforce.

The Asian Law Caucus and the Garment Worker Project

Leading the charge to organize garment workers in the 1980s was the Asian Law Caucus. Founded in Oakland in 1972, the organization had since become an indispensable resource to both Asian American left wing organizers and to Asian immigrants in the Bay Area by practicing both various forms of “movement lawyering” and offering community legal aid. Over the course of the next five years, the

²⁸ Philip Matier and Thom Calandra, “Beyond Chinatown,” *San Francisco Examiner*, April 15, 1990.

Caucus would also develop a positive working relationship with the ILGWU, which began with helping Mattie Jackson locate the remaining Jung Sai workers and would culminate in the two organizations partnering on various successful legal suits against garment manufacturers. In sum, the Caucus's attempts to revive organizing among the neighborhood's garment workers would, at long last, establish a firm bond between institutions of the Asian American movement and organized labor, one that would succeed in educating workers in their legal rights and giving them access to legal resources. Moreover, it turned the ALC into a vehicle for litigating the abuses of the sweatshop industry beyond San Francisco when the issue reached new national prominence later that same decade.²⁹

Like many other Asian American nonprofits, the ALC had its origins in the wave of Chinese immigration after 1965 and the subsequent crisis of youth unemployment and organized crime. Co-founder Ken Kawaichi, who had defended Third World Liberation Front strikers at SFSC and UC Berkeley, became Chinese youths' go-to attorney when they found themselves in jail for everything from illegally selling firecrackers to assaulting police officers. Kawaichi brought in interpreters, legal assistance from law students at Berkeley where he worked as an instructor, and his own knowledge of the community. The ALC eventually emerged out of a course Kawaichi taught at Berkeley—"Asian American Communities and the Law"—that first became a working group, and then became the Caucus. The ALC was explicitly designed to be a departure from the traditional legal aid model, which they felt was too limited by its emphasis on individual cases. Instead, the ALC sought to engage in political struggle over the structural position of Asians in America, becoming movement lawyers much like Black litigators had been during the civil rights movement or poverty lawyers during the welfare rights movement.³⁰ Dale Minami was one of the Caucus's original staff attorneys, and described its early ambitions as "astronomical":

²⁹ Asian Law Caucus, "Asian Law Caucus: Garment Worker Project, 1983-1984," Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library.

³⁰ Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Martha F. Davis, *Brutal Need: Lawyers and the Welfare Rights Movement, 1960-1973* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

We wanted to provide free and low-cost legal services for Asian Americans, initiate broad suit attacking institutional racism, forge close ties with community organizations, participate in community struggles, publish educational articles..., de-mystify the law and legal process..., train law students for future community-oriented legal work.... We quietly swallowed our presumptuousness at a later date.³¹

The Caucus began as a rickety, bare-bones operation. Minami recalled in a 1975 history of the organization's activities how he and the law school volunteers rustled up donated furniture, built their own bookshelves, and painted the walls in their offices, all while some of them consumed "enormous quantities of beer." Their initial caseload continued to center on criminalized youth in Chinatown, including a number of police harassment cases in 1972, but quickly branched out into other arenas, including employment discrimination, immigration, and family law. Staying true to their activist roots, the Caucus also found themselves offering legal support to various left wing and progressive organizations in the Bay Area, including anti-redevelopment activists in San Francisco's Japantown and protestors at the International Hotel.³² From there, the organization became an indispensable partner to other local nonprofits and citizen organizations. As early as 1974, both established liberal organizations like the Japanese American Citizens League and more recent, left-leaning groups like Asian Health Services were attesting to the Caucus's value. In endorsement letters to help the ALC secure foundation funding, some organizations thanked the ALC for helping them write their incorporation papers; others shared how they had referred their own clients to the ALC for legal aid. As Asian Health Services' coordinators wrote, the Caucus was "the only community organization in the greater San Francisco-Bay Area region that is sensitive to the unique legal needs of Asians," having helped Asian workers pierce "the 'bamboo' curtain—the language and cultural barriers—that have in the past prevented Asians from receiving... legal services."³³

³¹ Dale Minami, "Experiment in Alternatives."

³² Asian Law Caucus, "Funding Proposal," 1975, Box 22, folder 9, SFF, Bancroft Library.

³³ In just two years, ALC processed letters of incorporation for dozens of community organizations, including I Wor Kuen's newspaper *Getting Together*, Asian Health Services, Asian Community Mental Health Services, and United Pilipinos for Equal Employment. Letter from Steve Yee, Karen Mori, and Robert Pon to San Francisco Foundation, September 6, 1974, Box 22, folder 9, SFF, Bancroft Library.

Of particular importance to the Caucus's success was offering legal aid in multiple Asian languages. Between their three staff attorneys and crew of paralegals and law students, the ALC was able to offer services in Chinese, Japanese, and Tagalog from its founding, gradually expanding its capacities over time. Between 1972 and 1974, the ALC served a total of 400 clients, the majority of them Chinese, Japanese, Pilipino, and Korean (as well as a smattering of Chicanx, Indigenous, white, and Black clients). By focusing on monolingual immigrant communities, the Caucus also ended up working with a largely low-income clientele. The vast majority of their clients made between \$0 and \$99 a month, with the majority paying either no fees or only covering expenses.³⁴

The ALC's deep connections to both a working-class Asian clientele and other Asian American nonprofits undoubtedly made them a useful ally to the ILGWU, but so did their relative lack of ideological dogmatism—a position that was partially enabled by the Caucus's sense of professionalism. Dale Minami, for instance, remembered having deep frustrations with revolutionary organizations like I Wor Kuen and Wei Min She. Their self-righteousness, he told former activist Karen Ishizuka in an interview during the 2010s, “was so prevalent and oppressive, it mirrored the system we were trying to change.” When he brought these feelings to another “leftist lawyer,” however, he was told: “We were lawyers. Our role was not to organize, our role was to support left organizations—whether we agreed totally with them or not.”³⁵ Based on the wide range of organizations the ALC built common cause with, this was as true for the Caucus's support of liberals and moderates as it was for revolutionaries and radicals. Minami described the Caucus's broad ideological worldview as being “a fuzzy arrow pointed to the left,” and that a mounting workload and internal diversity meant they “did not take time to unfuzzy the arrow and figure out our role in the context of politics and Asian-American communities.” As a result, the Caucus lacked its own distinct political character—a drawback for committed leftists hoping to use the organization as a vehicle for radical change, but a draw for groups like the garment workers' union who were looking to partner with Asian American institutions.³⁶

³⁴ Rudy Glover, “Environmental and Civic Affairs Application Summary No. 3,” 1974, Box 22, folder 7, SFF, Bancroft Library; Asian Law Caucus, “Annual Report, 1974,” July 1974, Box 22, folder 7, SFF, Bancroft Library.

³⁵ Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, chap. 9, Kindle edition.

³⁶ Minami, “Asian Law Caucus: Experiment in Alternative.”

The slow road towards a collaborative relationship between the Caucus and the ILGWU began in the summer of 1982, when the Caucus initiated what it called a “Garment Worker Project”: “a comprehensive effort to remedy the exploitation of garment workers in San Francisco Chinatown.” The project was to have a number of components, including legal aid for garment workers, educational programs that taught garment workers their workplace rights, and deepening the involvement of “community agencies, labor organizations and government departments” in achieving reforms on a number of target issues—namely, enforcing and improving the minimum wage, securing health benefits, childcare access, and increasing representation within labor unions. The project’s most novel departure from the Caucus’s previous work was its establishment of a Garment Worker Advisory Board to advise and work alongside Caucus employees, part of an effort to develop leadership skills among workers themselves. The inaugural Board consisted of 8 current or former seamstresses, between the ages of 43 and 60, who attended monthly meetings and helped run the project’s educational elements. These programs primarily consisted of teaching workers about their legal rights, with topic areas covering “minimum wage, overtime, health and safety regulations, employee benefits and unionization.” These legal education classes were paired with English-language training, which offered workers instruction “in job-related words and phrases.”³⁷

In pursuit of their goal to increase union representation within the industry, in June of 1982 Caucus staff and the Advisory Board members met with Mattie Jackson to “[establish]... an ongoing working relationship with the ILGWU.” The Caucus was well aware of the union’s poor track record among Asian workers, attributing the problem to a combination of communication barriers and the ILGWU’s previous failure to focus on Chinatown-specific issues.³⁸ A decade after the Jung Sai strike, the union had still neglected to hire a Chinese-speaking organizer, something the Caucus would repeatedly press for. Yet despite the ILGWU’s obvious flaws, Caucus staff prioritized building up their presence within Chinatown—in no small part because, weakened though it was, the ILGWU had greater organizing capacity than the Caucus themselves. As one report on the Garment Worker Project stated, “due to limited

³⁷ Asian Law Caucus, “Garment Worker Project Summary of Activities, June 1982 through June 1983,” 1983; Asian Law Caucus, “Garment Worker Project, 1983-84,” Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library.

³⁸ Asian Law Caucus, “Garment Worker Project Midyear Report, 1983-1984,” May 1984, Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library.

resources and an orientation on legal education and advocacy, ALC is not fully equipped to organize and mobilize the majority of the workforce and is therefore forced to rely on organizations such as the ILGWU to come in and organize the workers and to represent them on the job.”³⁹ In other words, the Caucus had assessed that it was more worthwhile to create trust between workers and the union than to create organizing capacity within the Caucus itself.

For the ILGWU’s part, the union’s leadership seems to have initially met the Caucus’s enthusiasm with their own. Mattie Jackson made a number of big promises at her first meetings with the Caucus in 1982, an indication of her eagerness to make meaningful inroads into the neighborhood industry. In addition to committing to information exchanges between the ILGWU and the Caucus, Jackson also agreed to work with them on a case-by-case basis on legal issues for garment workers, conduct a needs assessment for a childcare facility, and seek funding for the Garment Worker Project through the ILGWU’s own channels.⁴⁰ Jackson seemed to be aware that, as much as the Caucus needed the union, her organization needed the Caucus as well, relying in particular on the nonprofit’s connections to neighborhood residents and multilingual capacities. A year after the Garment Worker Project got off the ground, Jackson had built enough of a relationship with the Caucus to turn to them for help tracking down the missing Jung Sai workers, with Advisory Board members using their personal connections within the industry to assist in the effort. According to the Caucus’s own reports, their efforts helped the ILGWU to locate roughly 40 additional workers, bringing the total to around 100 out of 128.⁴¹

In June of 1984, the San Francisco ILGWU took their biggest concrete step towards establishing a more permanent foothold in Chinatown by hiring a Chinese-speaking business agent, Shiree Teng. Teng’s hire was the direct result of Caucus lobbying, with Caucus staff recommending her to the union after she briefly interned with them upon moving back to the Bay Area after working for the New York

³⁹ Nelson Holl, “San Francisco Foundation Monitors Report,” August 27, 1984, Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library.

⁴⁰ Asian Law Caucus, “Garment Worker Project, 1983-1984”; Asian Law Caucus, “Grant Report Form,” May 29, 1984, Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library.

⁴¹ Holl, “San Francisco Foundation Monitors Report.”

Chinatown ILGWU.⁴² Teng herself was the product of both post-1965 immigration and the turbulence of the Asian American movement. Born in Hong Kong in 1959, she arrived in the United States in 1970 with her mother to join her older siblings, first living in Arlington, Massachusetts before re-locating to the Bay Area a few years later. Teng described a difficult adolescence in white-majority Arlington, referring to it as “the worst years of her life” as she was only one of two Asian students at her school and was bullied by her classmates and teachers for her accented English. While in Massachusetts, Teng also witnessed white parents’ furor over busing, recalling the sight of adults throwing rocks at Black children who were arriving in Arlington from Boston. Upon moving to San Francisco, Teng was quickly radicalized, both by her own personal experiences with racism and by her observations of wealth and racial inequality in both the U.S. and in Hong Kong, which she returned to for a visit during the mid ‘70s. She ended up joining I Wor Kuen as a 17-year-old, citing a desire “to see freedom in my lifetime,” and moved to Los Angeles, first to help immigrant Chinese parents receive bilingual childcare and eventually to support striking UAW workers in the San Gabriel Valley.⁴³

As a result of these experiences, Teng decided she wanted to be a full-time organizer, eventually relocating to New York to work with low-income tenants. In 1982, Teng was hired as an interpreter by the ILGWU, just in time to participate in their historic strike among Chinatown garment workers. Teng remembered sitting through meetings and participating in rallies alongside Chinese immigrant worker-leaders, translating their speeches to crowds of up to 10,000 fellow workers. While the strike was a major success, the high-stakes campaign and an unhealthy social environment within the New York ILGWU—Teng described long nights of drinking and drug use—took a severe toll on Teng’s health, and in the mid-‘80s she found herself returning to the Bay Area to be near her family.

Having transferred to the San Francisco ILGWU, however, Teng found herself frustrated with a vastly different organizing scene: “At least in New York, you had volume, you had momentum, you had energy! In San Francisco it was... so deflating... It was pathetic, it was pitiful.” Though she had been hired to help organize Chinatown, Teng later recalled having very little to do on a day-to-day business,

⁴² Teng may well have been the union’s first Chinese-speaking business agent since Pius Lee worked for the ILGWU in the late 1960s. Holl, “San Francisco Foundation Monitors Report.”

⁴³ Author interview with Shiree Teng, February 23, 2023, Zoom.

often sitting for long hours in the car with another business agent and waiting out the rest of the workday after they had run out of factory visits. Workers were disillusioned and mistrustful of the union, while the small number of ILGWU members in Chinatown saw the union as another boss, taking dues money but giving back very little.⁴⁴ In other words, it seemed little had changed since the 1970s.

Despite Teng's eventual disappointment with her assignment, however, her arrival was a source of optimism for the Asian Law Caucus, which saw her as proof that the ILGWU remained committed to Chinatown and to Asian garment workers. At the time, even Teng herself spoke somewhat optimistically about the prospect of acting as a bridge between her union and the Chinatown nonprofit world through the Asian Law Caucus. While she noted that her job was "to provide assistance to Union members," she was also "willing to support non-Union garment workers however she can," and she shared that she "fundamentally support[ed]" the Caucus's legal advocacy on behalf of garment workers.⁴⁵ Indeed, there is some evidence that the union began warming to the Caucus's emphasis on education and awareness-raising about the problems within Chinatown's garment industry. As a possible indication of the ILGWU's shifting orientation in favor of more social and cultural activities, in 1985 Shiree Teng helped put on a screening in Sacramento of *Sewing Woman*, a short documentary film about San Francisco garment worker Zem Ping Dong made by her son Arthur Dong. Teng hosted the screening alongside two government and media representatives, pairing it with a "slideshow on sweatshops" intended to show the public what working conditions were like for immigrant women.⁴⁶ Yet there was clearly not enough work or material support to keep Teng invested in the San Francisco ILGWU. A year after she was hired, she had begun running strike support for frozen-food workers at a Teamsters-organized canning plant in Watsonville, California, a town 90 miles south of San Francisco on the Monterey Bay. By October of 1985, Teng was the official spokeswoman for the Northern California Watsonville Strike Support

⁴⁴ Teng, interview with author.

⁴⁵ Holl, "San Francisco Foundation Monitors Report."

⁴⁶ "Asian film series opens tonight," *Sacramento Bee*, May 10, 1985.

Committee; two years later, she was working for the Teamsters full-time, organizing food-packing workers in Salinas.⁴⁷

Teng's departure likely reflected the ILGWU's continued inability to penetrate the Chinatown garment industry, despite Mattie Jackson's stated desire to do so and her willingness to accept neighborhood nonprofits as organizing partners. The disconnect between what Jackson had promised the Asian Law Caucus and the press and Teng's frustrating experience on the ground demonstrate the San Francisco ILGWU's uneven development towards a more robust and inclusive program for Asian immigrant workers. While the union did go on to hire more bilingual staff, including hiring workers out of the ranks of Chinatown's factories, it did not achieve sufficient density within the neighborhood to properly enforce its contracts, much less pull of a strike like the one the New York ILGWU had done in 1982.⁴⁸ Teng's experience also showed the Asian Law Caucus's weakness in advancing the Garment Worker Project's organizing goals, which looked good on paper but proved much harder to pull off. The Caucus, having essentially ceded organizing responsibilities to the ILGWU, ultimately could not replace the ILGWU in terms of expanding either union membership or further empowering existing members to take ownership of their organization. In short, they would have to trust the ILGWU to devise its own strategy for growth and survival.

T&W Fashions & the legal turn in local anti-sweatshop politics

While the Asian Law Caucus and the ILGWU's partnership bore little initial fruit in the organizing department, the two organizations would eventually see some significant success in the world of legal and legislative advocacy. The Caucus's most significant legal victory with garment workers during the 1980s was a suit they initiated in October of 1983 on behalf of 11 seamstresses at T&W Fashions, a garment shop located well outside of Chinatown at 1061 Market Street. With several hundred

⁴⁷ Keith Muraoka, "Strikers, Shaw officials meet," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, October 22, 1985; "Solidarity Day march postponed," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, October 25, 1985; Brenda Payton, "Strikers hang tough in Watsonville," *Oakland Tribune*, June 25, 1986; Bob Johnson, "United Food label cleared from shelves of food store chain," *The Californian*, October 14, 1987; Connie Rux, "Teamsters broaden United Foods protest," *The Californian*, November 3, 1987; author interview with Shiree Teng.

⁴⁸ By 1988, the ILGWU had at least two more Chinese American business agents: Wendy Tjon and Rachel Poon. See Leung, "Sweatshops thriving the Bay Area."

employees at any given time and an annual gross volume of sales of around \$250,000 each year, T&W was one of the larger factories in the city, often taking contracts for well-known name brands such as Levi Strauss & Co. Owned by Chinese immigrant Tammy Ho, the majority of the factory's employees were Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino immigrant women, most of whom spoke little to no English. The workers in the ALC's suit alleged that T&W had failed to pay them and their 400-plus coworkers a minimum wage or overtime pay, largely as a result of the piecework system the company used. Many workers, the Caucus alleged, "were paid as low as \$6-12 per day," compared to the state minimum wage of \$3.35 per hour. A year later, the U.S. Department of Labor also filed a charge of \$800,000 against T&W after an eight month investigation of the factory, which the Department had initiated as a direct result of the ALC's suit.⁴⁹

Notably, the Asian Law Caucus's suit named not only T&W Fashions as a defendant, but the clothing manufacturer, Fritz of California, as well. The Caucus's reasoning was that Fritz bore some of the responsibility for their contractor's shoddy employment practices. As one of the Caucus's grant monitors pointed out, the ALC was "attempting to establish a precedent for manufacturer liability for labor violations in garment shops, based on the hypothesis that the competitive bidding and contracting process of manufacturers directly results in wage and labor violations." There was some limited precedent for this line of attack—ALC staff cited one other 1969 suit, also filed against Fritz of California—but the Caucus maintained that their lawsuit was an innovative attempt to target the structure of the industry instead of solely punishing factories.⁵⁰

The Asian Law Caucus's coordination with the Department of Labor to pursue charges against T&W and Fritz encapsulates both the benefits and the pitfalls of the Caucus's reliance on legal and administrative processes to accomplish its goals. The DOL's initial inclination to take the Caucus's suit seriously, and to use it to guide their own subsequent suit, was seen as a significant victory within the

⁴⁹ Asian Law Caucus, "Garment Worker Project Report, June-December 1984," December 28, 1984, Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library; "Labor Department Sues T & W Fashions," *Asian Law Caucus Reporter*, Volume 6, Nos. 3-4, June-December 1984, Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library; L. A. Chung, "U.S. Sues S.F. Clothes Maker—Charges of Cheating on Pay," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 4, 1984; Gene Ayres, "Labor Department sues contract sewing company," *Oakland Tribune*, October 4, 1984; Mireya Navarro, "U.S. sues garment shop over substandard wages, overtime," *San Francisco Examiner*, October 4, 1984.

⁵⁰ Holl, "San Francisco Foundation Monitors Report"; "Garment workers sue manufacturer," *AsianWeek*, December 16, 1983.

Caucus—evidence that certain branches of the federal government were finally willing to properly take on the issue of garment worker exploitation. Unfortunately, the era of good feelings between the Caucus and the DOL did not last long. The Department dropped its suit a year after it was announced, citing a lack of evidence. “Our decision was based totally on a legal analysis of the facts,” the DOL’s lawyer told the press at the time, claiming the DOL had “carefully analyzed records kept by T&W Fashions... and had done extensive interviews of the workers, including some recommended by the Asian Law Caucus.” In response, the Caucus and thirty-three T&W workers attempted to object in court that the DOL had failed to adequately investigate the case, an effort that was struck down by a district judge. “This action by the Department of Labor serves to demonstrate its continuing lack of interest in the concerns of minority workers,” Caucus staff lawyer Dennis Hayashi fumed at the time.⁵¹

Despite this disappointment, the Caucus persisted with their own separate suit, driven by their commitment to their garment worker clients and empowered by their ability to define their own litigation agenda. Supported by foundation grants towards its Garment Workers Project, ALC was able to sustain its legal effort against T&W and Fritzi for a total of three years, despite having only two staff attorneys—Dennis Hayashi and Charles Wong—dedicated to the suit, with one of them working on a half-time salary.⁵² Their doggedness finally forced both T&W Fashions and Fritzi to the table, as a combination of bad press and mounting attorneys’ fees convinced both defendants to settle; T&W’s owner Tammy Ho had already claimed to the press in 1985 that the suits were causing her to lose contracts.⁵³ The Asian Law Caucus’s strategic victories within the case had begun racking up in 1986, when they located a former Fritzi supervisor who agreed to testify to T&W’s wage theft practices. In August of that year, a San Francisco Superior Court judge denied Fritzi’s attempt to remove themselves as a co-defendant in the case. Finally, in October, both Fritzi of California and T&W Fashions settled with the thirteen workers out

⁵¹ L. A. Chung, “Claims Against Garment Maker Thrown Out,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁵² Between 1982 and 1984, the project had a budget of roughly \$87,000 a year, with the majority covered by grants from the San Francisco and James Irvine Foundations of \$25,000 and \$20,000 respectively (client fees, by comparison, covered less than \$3,000 a year). Letter from Peggy K. Saika to James Jeong, September 13, 1984, Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library; San Francisco Foundation Proposal Information Form, October 7, 1983, Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library; Asian Law Caucus, “Garment Worker Project Budget for Fiscal Year 1983-1984,” Box 191, folder 2, SFF, Bancroft Library.

⁵³ Chung, “Claims Against Garment Maker Thrown Out.”

of court for a total of \$172,000—\$22,000 from T&W, and \$150,000 from Fritzi. Neither contractor nor manufacturer would admit any wrongdoing, but the Asian Law Caucus and their clients accepted the settlement as a major victory. “Our clients got everything they asked for,” Dennis Hayashi announced.⁵⁴

Much like Chinatown’s Maoist parties and the workers of Jung Sai, ALC staff had needed to overcome certain barriers between themselves and T&W employees in order to successfully represent them through the suit. While their suit eventually included 13 total T&W employees, the Caucus was always holding out for more to join, speaking about it in much the same way union organizers might explain why workers were yet to sign a membership card: “Project Staff... maintain that because of threats and harassment... many T&W employees have yet to join the lawsuit. However, it is felt that more workers may become involved when they see they have more to gain than lose by becoming directly involved.”⁵⁵ Ultimately, however, the ALC had far fewer hurdles than either their union counterparts or the revolutionary parties of the previous decade. While joining the suit was an intimidating experience for some T&W workers, the Caucus ultimately only needed the cooperation of a few dozen to pull off a successful case, rather than a majority. Moreover, while the Caucus hoped to develop leaders from among the garment worker community as part of its Garment Worker Project, such leadership was not strictly necessary when it came to litigation, where staff attorneys and assistants did the majority of the work. Thus, while the ALC’s legal offensive against garment manufacturers would secure meaningful financial reparations to garment workers, it did not support the Garment Worker Project’s other aims of expanding union membership or building up garment workers’ own organizing capacity. Indeed, given the amount of resources litigation inevitably ate up, cases such as the suit against T&W Fashions may even have made achieving these other goals less likely.

The ILGWU was not initially involved in the Asian Law Caucus’s case against T&W, but did watch it unfold with guarded interest. Shiree Teng was asked about the union’s support for the suit when she was first hired, and shared that “while the Union fundamentally supports the Caucus’ efforts in pursuing the T&W lawsuit, the Union is not about to step in unless asked by ALC or the workers.” A win,

⁵⁴ “Ex-garment workers win motion,” *San Francisco Examiner*, August 1, 1986; Laird Harrison, “All Claim Victory In S.F. Garment Workers Case,” *AsianWeek*, April 1, 1988.

⁵⁵ Holl, “San Francisco Foundation Monitors Report.”

she acknowledged, would be significant, given that the Caucus was also going after the manufacturer; but even without a victory in the courts, the case “will serve as a focal point for organizing the workers.” This last point seems to indicate that Teng hoped the T&W suit could serve as an empowering anecdote for other garment workers, proof that immigrant seamstresses could challenge the boss with the support of institutions like the Asian Law Caucus and the ILGWU; nevertheless, there is no evidence regarding whether union membership rates increased after the suit was initiated.⁵⁶

The ILGWU did not begin to actively participate in the struggle against T&W Fashions until 1986, when it filed its own charge against the company, accusing them of violating the NLRA by retaliating against two employees for participating in the Department of Labor’s investigation the previous year. Representing the ILGWU in their case was Victoria Chin, who had worked for the Asian Law Caucus as a clerk and program coordinator a decade earlier, raising the possibility that the ALC may have recommended her to the union and that the two organizations were coordinating on the ILGWU’s case.⁵⁷ The case was ultimately successful, with the NLRB affirming an administrative judge’s ruling that Tammy Ho had effectively fired two seamstresses for participating in DOL interviews after stalking and surveilling them.⁵⁸

The NLRB’s 1988 judgment marked the end of the Asian Law Caucus’s largest offensive against the garment industry so far, and set the stage for the organization to continue intervening in the industry and its impact on Asian immigrant workers. That same year, the Caucus initiated suits on behalf of former employees at Ocean Garment Manufacturing and Moviestar Garments Manufacturing—two San Francisco factories owned by Hong Kong entrepreneur Alice Lam through a Hong kong-based manufacturer, M. S. Universe Textile Ltd. Once again, the ALC collaborated with the ILGWU to secure a legal victory, this time with significantly more active participation from the workers themselves. Since

⁵⁶ Holl, “San Francisco Foundation Monitors Report.”

⁵⁷ Victoria Chin, like Shiree Teng, represents yet another instance of Asian American movement activists crossing over into working for and alongside organized labor: between 1973 and 1976, Chin offered legal and community support for tenants at the International Hotel, as well as working to build out ethnic studies programs as a law student at UC Berkeley. “Victoria Chin: Resume,” 1977, Box 1, folder 32, Columbia Foundation papers, Bancroft Library.

⁵⁸ Stephens, Johansen, and Carcraft, T&W Fashions, Inc and Pacific Northwest District Council, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, AFL-CIO, No. 20-CA-19884 (National Labor Relations Board September 30, 1988).

both Moviestar and Ocean had gone defunct, part of the ALC's suit took place in bankruptcy court, where the case culminated in a May 1994 hearing at a courthouse just a few miles west of Chinatown. There, 150 angry garment workers, organized by the ILGWU, stood outside the courthouse with signs and paper hats, "changing pro-union slogans and singing 'Solidarity Forever' in Chinese." ILGWU official Katie Quan later told the *Chronicle* that the demonstration was "the first time in the last couple of decades that garment workers have come out militantly to fight for their rights—to not be afraid to stand up and show their faces."⁵⁹

What had changed since Shiree Teng's disappointing experience a decade earlier? Katie Quan herself was part of the answer. A former garment worker born in the Bay Area who had begun working as a seamstress in Oakland, Quan had moved to New York City in 1975 and participated in the ILGWU's historic strike there as a shop steward. In 1990, she returned to the Bay Area to serve as manager of the ILGWU's Pacific Northwest District Council, succeeding Mattie Jackson in the role. Quan had been involved in the Asian American movement as a young woman, joining Oakland's East Bay Asians for Community Action and becoming a garment worker in part to help organize the industry. Quan brought to San Francisco the memory of militant struggle from both the Asian American movement and from the New York ILGWU. Moreover, she brought a sharp criticism of the ILGWU's failure to deepen its presence among immigrant workers, even in union-dense New York. Organizers, she told a *New York Times* reporter in 1983, "don't go into shops and shake things up and explain." What was needed, in her estimation, was for organizers to be "energetic in explaining workers' rights" and enforcing contracts—not to mention a more intimate understanding of the fears and concerns unique to immigrant labor.⁶⁰

Once in San Francisco, Quan's willingness to work closely with the Asian Law Caucus could largely be explained by her own history in the movement, but her ability to do so in the 1990s had been enabled by Mattie Jackson's nascent efforts during the previous decade to strengthen ties between the union and community organizations. While Jackson presided over a period of low organizing momentum,

⁵⁹ Bill Wallace, "Defunct firm must release \$281,500," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 10, 1994.

⁶⁰ Bao, *Holding up More than Half the Sky*, 193-196; William Serrin, "Sweatshops still flourish in the U.S.," *Oakland Tribune*, October 14, 1983. Quan was part of a cohort of Asian and Latinx organizers who began rising into ILGWU leadership during the 1980s and '90s in New York and Los Angeles. See Frank, *Buy American*, 157-158; John Laslett and Mary Tyler, *The ILGWU in Los Angeles*, 99.

she also saw the writing on the wall in terms of the ILGWU's future: to survive, the union would have to expand among Asian immigrant workers, which meant they needed the help of individuals and organizations immigrant workers had come to trust.⁶¹ Quan's arrival thus represented a step forward—albeit a very large one—rather than a change in the direction Jackson had initiated with regards to the ILGWU's presence among Asian garment workers.

Though Quan seems to have been committed to a more hands-on organizing strategy as district manager, the conditions she and her organizers faced during the 1990s were even more dismal than what Mattie Jackson had encountered the previous decade. While the 1980s were at least a period of sporadic growth for the Bay Area garment industry, the 1990s saw a wave of plant closures and the start of the industry's long regional decline. Koret, the company where Mattie Jackson had gotten her start almost half a century earlier and one of the largest garment manufacturers in the region, inaugurated the decade by closing its remaining San Francisco plants in spring of 1990 despite years of concessions from the ILGWU. Union members demonstrated outside the company's Mission Street headquarters and brainstormed various other ideas to pressure the corporation to keep the plants open, including “a national consumer boycott” and “sending delegations of workers to lobby in countries where Koret is shipping work” (by 1990, 45% of Koret's production took place overseas). Their efforts resulted in Koret offering a few hundred seamstresses jobs at its remaining plant in Napa, but the company was firm on its decision to leave San Francisco, citing rising costs and a shrinking market.⁶²

Koret's plant closures were a major hit for the ILGWU, resulting in the San Francisco local losing a quarter of its membership, but the worst was yet to come. With the passage of NAFTA in 1994, closures accelerated during the late 1990s, with remaining factories squeezing their workers harder than ever; just a year after the trade agreement went into effect, the Bureau of Labor Statistics was estimating that the domestic garment industry would lose another 200,000 jobs before 2005. The decline had already had a significant impact on ILGWU membership, both nationally and in the Bay Area. In just 15 years, Quan

⁶¹ Steven A. Chin, “Garment union organizer fights export of jobs,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 15, 1990.

⁶² Steven A. Chin, “Koret to close plants in S.F.; Union, mayor fail to thwart plans to move abroad,” *San Francisco Examiner*, April 5, 1990; Judith Lyons, “Asian garment workers rally against Koret's S.F. closure,” *AsianWeek*, April 13, 1990; “Koret offers workers jobs in Napa,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 8, 1990.

told reporters in 1995, the ILGWU membership in its Pacific Northwest district had fallen from 4,000 to just 2,000. “If we don’t do something,” Quan warned, “we’ll have nothing.”⁶³

The ILGWU thus had to contend with both fleeing factories on the one hand and more exploitative, unlawful conditions on the other, all while its dues revenue continued to shrink. In San Francisco, the union pursued separate strategies for both problems, pivoting towards industry reform to help lower the costs of domestic manufacturing while pursuing an aggressive legal strategy against certain manufacturers over their enabling of “sweatshop conditions.” The industry reform solution consisted, in part, of participating in a local consortium alongside manufacturers, contractors, university researchers, and labor organizations called “Garment 2000,” which emphasized technological updates to the manufacturing process and a cultural project to encourage consumers to desire “Made in San Francisco” brands.⁶⁴

As for the problem of sweatshops, the union found itself looking increasingly towards legal and legislative strategies, thus extending and strengthening its relationship with local nonprofits like Asian Law Caucus. From 1996 onwards, the garment workers’ union—now known as UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees) after a 1995 merger with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers—worked together on a number of high-profile legal offensives against the garment industry. Most notably, in 1999 UNITE, the Asian Law Caucus, and two other Bay Area nonprofits initiated a class action suit against more than two dozen American clothing manufacturers and retailers—

⁶³“Union members oppose trade agreement,” *Reno Gazette-Journal*, October 5, 1993; Tom Abate, “Lilli Ann plans to close ladies’ garment factory,” *San Francisco Examiner*, April 14, 1995; “SF clothier to close up shop,” *North County Times*, April 15, 1995; Abate, “Local manufacturing under stress,” *San Francisco Examiner*, April 17, 1995; Tim Simmers, “NAFTA tears up sewing trade,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 13, 1995. The mobility of the garment industry was hardly unique to the late 20th century. Like many other light manufacturing industries, garment manufacturers regularly took advantage of “capital moves” in search of regions with lower union density and lower labor costs; indeed, California cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles were the beneficiaries of these moves during the early 20th century when manufacturers left the union-dense northeast for the South and the west coast. The period of relative industry stability between the 1930s and the 1970s, both in California and elsewhere, was partially the product of militant worker activism and partially the product of postwar economic growth and resulting labor-capital accord. As historian Kenneth Wolensky has pointed out, mid-century ILGWU leaders’ failure to account for the possibility the impact of U.S. postwar trade policy or how manufacturers would inevitably respond to rising wages left them ill-prepared for the industry’s revived mobility in the 1980s and ‘90s. See Kenneth C. Wolensky, “‘An Industry on Wheels’: The Migration of Pennsylvania’s Garment Factories” and Richard A. Greenwald, “Labor, Liberals, and Sweatshops” in *Sweatshop USA: The American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective*, ed. Daniel E. Bender and Richard A. Greenwald (New York: Routledge, 2003); Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA’s Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁶⁴ Steven A. Chin, “New pattern for apparel makers,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 25, 1995.

including Gap Inc. and Levi Strauss—over worker abuse in sweatshops in Saipan. Located in the western Pacific, Saipan was the largest of the Northern Mariana Islands, an unincorporated territory of the United States since they were seized from Japan during World War II. Saipan was an appealing destination for U.S. manufacturers who hoped to keep the “Made in the USA” label on their products while also seeking out cheap, easily exploited workers, many of whom were immigrants from China and Southeast Asia who had arrived via the Mariana Islands’ loose guest worker laws. Starting in 1992, federal investigators observed thousands of instances of forced and indentured labor, with workers kept behind barbed-wire fences and housed in unsanitary conditions while they worked off debts to their recruiters.⁶⁵ UNITE and the Caucus’s suit specifically targeted retailers for violating the state of California’s Business and Professions Code by falsely advertising their products “when they place ‘Made in the USA’ on the merchandise tags” and when they claimed their products were “sweatshop free.”⁶⁶ The case concluded in 2002 with a historic \$20 million dollar settlement, which included commitments from retailers to fund monitoring on Saipan by the International Labor Organization, a U.N. regulatory body.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ George Miller et al, “Beneath the American Flag: Labor and Human Rights Abuses in the CNMI” (Washington, D.C.: House Committee on Resources, March 26, 1998), <https://web.archive.org/web/20040427105739/https://www.house.gov/georgemiller/cnmireport1.pdf>; Robert Ross, *Slaves to Fashion: Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 139-144; Jill Esbenshade, *Monitoring Sweatshops: Workers, Consumers, and the Global Apparel Industry*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 126-127; Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 129.

⁶⁶ “Saipan: Frequently Asked Questions,” Global Exchange.org, November 4, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991104112049/https://globalexchange.org/economy/corporations/saipan/faq.html>.

⁶⁷ Esbenshade, *Monitoring Sweatshops*, 127; Robert Collier, “Saipan Workers Describe Slavery of Sweatshops / They Say American Dream Turned into Nightmare,” *SFGATE*, January 22, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220813211759/https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/saipan-workers-describe-slavery-of-sweatshops-2950970.php>; Miller, “Beneath the American Flag.” Saipan’s evolution into a crucial node in the Pacific garment industry is a powerful illustration of how the legal and economic geography of U.S. empire became the terrain for economic globalization. Saipan’s exemption from certain aspects of U.S. labor and immigration law while simultaneously existing under U.S. legal jurisdiction made it “just American enough” for both U.S. manufacturers and Asian contractors to find it desirable. UNITE and anti-sweatshop nonprofits’ legal strategy in the California case shows how even progressive, pro-worker advocates bought into this same colonial logic by disputing the accuracy of “Made in the USA” labels on Saipan-manufactured goods. Indeed, many critics of the island’s garment industry, including workers themselves, repeatedly invoked their shock that such conditions could exist in the United States or “beneath the American flag”—statements with clear resonances to how San Franciscan critics of Chinatown’s garment industry spoke of the neighborhood as a world where the Chinese “live by their own laws” three decades earlier. Such perspectives allowed activists to preserve ideas about American manufacturing as superior by disavowing Saipan-based contractors as perverting or circumventing U.S. standards, rather than seeing the island’s garment industry as a product of the United States’s intentionally uneven governance across its imperial holdings.

The Saipan suit represented the intersection of several trends within both the domestic garment industry and the world of Asian American nonprofit activism. For one thing, it demonstrated the Asian Law Caucus's expanded influence and capacity, both for bringing major suits through powerful, issue-based coalitions with other organizations and for targeting major multinational corporations in cases with international—as opposed to merely local—implications. Second, the suit's success spoke to the fervor of the national anti-sweatshop movement, whose emergence sociologist Matthew S. Williams credits to the national coverage of “virtual slavery” in a factory in El Monte, California and the exposure of Kathy Lee Gifford's clothing brands and their sweatshop production practices. Williams notes that while sweatshop production “had been common since the 1970s, the salacious nature of the scandals... gave these cases attention that more run-of-the-mill sweatshop cases did not,” leading to the creation of student anti-sweatshop organizations on college campuses around the country who often began with demanding their universities stop manufacturing apparel with brands that used sweatshop labor. UNITE quickly became a node for student activists intent on targeting the apparel industry, with the union establishing summer internship programs during the mid '90s to help with research and campaign development. Nonprofit participants in the class action lawsuit credited the grassroots energy of student and consumer activists for the suit's early victories, and reflected critically on their inability to sustain it for longer than a few years. “At the beginning of the campaign,” representatives from the ALC, Global Exchange, and Sweatshop Watch wrote in 2004, “we mobilized activists in dozens of cities around the country and abroad, holding protests at Gap stores... every month. As the case dragged on for several years, it became harder to muster the resources for a sustained campaign.”⁶⁸

Lastly, the Saipan settlement exemplified the legal turn in both union and nonprofit activism against the worst abuses of the garment industry, with noteworthy implications for international worker organizing. While the suit's plaintiffs recognized the importance of activism to the suit's success, they conceded that the suit's outcomes did little to empower garment workers themselves beyond distributing resources to them—and even then, the results could be quite limited, with some workers receiving as little

⁶⁸ Matthew S. Williams, *Strategizing against Sweatshops: The Global Economy, Student Activism, and Worker Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020), 2-3, 57-59; Nikki F. Bas, Medea Benjamin, and Joannie C. Chang, “Saipan Sweatshop Lawsuit Ends with Important Gains for Workers and Lessons for Activists,” Clean Clothes Campaign, January 8, 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100613213729/https://cleanclothes.org/newslist/617-saipan-sweatshop-lawsuit-ends-with-important-ga>.

as \$100.⁶⁹ In the same 2004 reflection on the case, the three plaintiff representatives concluded that while the settlement was a significant step forward in the anti-sweatshop movement, particularly in reaffirming manufacturers' responsibility for the conduct of their contractors, its very form "allow[ed] each side to claim victory," with none of the retailers admitting any wrongdoing.⁷⁰ Such constrained victories thus took place in the context of a longer defeat, as both unions and nonprofits failed to develop working strategies that either prevented manufacturers from offshoring, or that helped workers in these new locales to organize robust unions of their own.

Neither the Asian Law Caucus nor UNITE ever fully gave up on more local forms of worker advocacy and organizing, but as with labor and "alt labor" organizations throughout the country, both found themselves torn between various models and strategic approaches during the hostile organizing conditions of the 1980s and '90s.⁷¹ Amidst crisis and uncertainty, both organizations looked to one another as effective strategic partners in their shared mission to improve the lives of Asian immigrant garment workers. While they started out seeking to organize workers into unions, their collaborative efforts increasingly centered on litigation—a strategy that, at its best, won financial reparations for exploited workers and a limited extent of industry reform, but was a far cry from the Asian Law Caucus's initial hopes to expand union density among San Francisco's immigrant labor force, or to involve large numbers of workers themselves in fights against garment manufacturers.

Was such organizing simply impossible under the new conditions of the global garment industry? Or did it simply require a different approach to the problem altogether? For an example of such a different approach, let's return to the other side of the Bay, to the familiar Gothic edifice of the Asian Resource Center, and conclude with a brief appraisal of Asian Immigrant Women Advocates.

⁶⁹ David Briscoe, "Sewing in Saipan," *Associated Press*, June 18, 2003.

⁷⁰ Bas, Benjamin, and Chang, "Saipan Sweatshop Lawsuit."

⁷¹ UNITE's subsequent 2004 merger with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union to form UNITE-HERE! further expanded the union's membership base and industrial scope,

II. From advocacy to organizing: AIWA and the campaign against Jessica McClintock

Training wheels: AIWA and the world of East Bay worker nonprofits, 1983-1990

Young Shin came to America to make a difference. “I thought I could do more here,” she told a reporter in 1991, explaining how emigrating to the U.S. provided her an alternative to “the path of a traditional woman in Korea.” Arriving at the age of 24 in 1975, Shin got her start as a social worker at Oakland’s Asian Community Mental Health Services, before going to law school at the the University of California Hasting’s College of the Law across the Bay.⁷² As a bilingual Korean immigrant with a law degree, Shin quickly became a highly sought after resource in the area’s nonprofit and activist scene, a reflection of the region’s growing Korean population and the relative dearth of Korean-speaking organizers. The number of Koreans in the Bay Area grew from 18,632 in 1980 to just over 40,000 by 1990, with many recent immigrants working in the garment manufacturing, electronics manufacturing, and hotel industries.⁷³ Sometime in the early 1980s, Shin was contacted by an organizer for the Hotel Employees and Restaurants Employees (HERE) union for assistance working with a group of Korean maids at “a five-star hotel in San Francisco.” They wanted to learn English, so they could “tell their supervisors not to yell at them.” Shin later recalled that none of the women quite knew what their supervisors were yelling about—just that “it made them feel bad.” She set up a program of English classes for the maids, which she also used to inform them about their legal rights at work surrounding minimum wages and unemployment insurance. These classes formed the foundation for Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, which would start its life as a typical worker-focused organization dedicated to education and training—a product of its embeddedness within the world of Oakland’s Asian American and alt-labor nonprofits.⁷⁴

While AIWA began as an initiative to help Korean hotel maids, the organization soon found its core constituency among the immigrant garment workers of Oakland. The city’s Chinese-owned and operated garment industry was significantly smaller than the one in San Francisco, but similarly

⁷² Steven A. Chin, “Low-paid Asian American women have an advocate,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 28, 1991.

⁷³ “Bay Area Census -- Bay Area -- 1980-1990 Census Data,” accessed March 1, 2023, <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/bayarea70.htm>.

⁷⁴ Brenda Payton, “Hint: Don’t serve sandwiches,” *Oakland Tribune*, May 3, 1998.

employed a large proportion of local immigrant women. In 1975, local officials estimated that between 25 and 50 shops existed in and around Oakland Chinatown, where conditions were roughly comparable to those across the Bay. An *Oakland Tribune* report from that year found that some owners were unable or unwilling to pay their workers the minimum wage, with some justifying their decision based on the fact that “too many of the women come in mainly to socialize and tie up... machines while chatting with their friends.” Many workers were employed through the same piece-rate schemes that plagued San Francisco’s industry, meaning slower workers often made sub-minimum wages. Katie Quan, who had gotten her start as a seamstress in an Oakland garment factory in 1975, remembered encountering a “sweat shop” next to East Bay Asians for Community Action’s office that was “filthy inside,” with ceiling-high piles of fabric littered around the room. Still, even some progressive activists claimed that circumstances in Oakland were not as dire as elsewhere. “We hear about workers in San Francisco being intimidated,” the director of the Oakland Chinese Community Council (OCCC) told the *Tribune* that same year. “In Oakland I have not heard many complaints... If we did, we would look into them.”⁷⁵

Community attitudes and industry conditions alike quickly shifted during the next decade. By 1981, the *Tribune* was reporting that “several score” shops had sprung up in Chinatown, fueled by both rising immigration rates in the East Bay and by rising rents in San Francisco. Soon, employee blacklists became as much a fact of working life in Oakland Chinatown as they had been in San Francisco, while low wages persisted as a fact of industry employment. A 1990 Department of Labor sweep of Oakland factories found 75% to be in violation of wage and hour laws. The ILGWU openly admitted it had no resources to devote to Oakland’s industry, having committed its limited resources to San Francisco’s higher number of factories and workers.⁷⁶

While organizations like the OCCC had provided immigrants job training and English-language classes starting in the early 1970s, AIWA’s founding in 1983 was the first dedicated effort within the East Bay Asian American community towards the needs of “sweatshop workers.” In its first decade of

⁷⁵ Jo Murray, “Sewing Factory ‘Mystery’,” *Oakland Tribune*, February 13, 1975; Chin, “Garment union organizer fights export of jobs.”

⁷⁶ Michael Robertson, “Empowering the Women Of the Sweatshops,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 24, 1990; Carolyn Newbergh and Kelly Gust, “Benign Neglect: Garment workers owed thousands in pay, overtime,” *Oakland Tribune*, July 29, 1991.

operations, AIWA was very much a product of the world of Asian American nonprofits and East Bay “alt-labor” organizations. Like many other Chinatown organizations, AIWA was based out of the Asian Resource Center, thereby benefitting from the subsidized rent arrangement that Ted Dang and the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation had established two years before AIWA’s founding. Moreover, AIWA partially survived off of foundation grants from the emergent network of Asian American philanthropic organizations. These included Dianne Yamashiro’s Asian Foundation for Community Development, which had gotten its seed money from the \$1 million Hong Kong developer George Tan gave the city of Oakland during the development of Chinatown’s Trans Pacific Centre. Alongside AIWA, the Foundation also funded the Asian Law Caucus and EBALDC during the mid 1980s, revealing the dense network of money and personnel that bound various regional Asian American nonprofits together.⁷⁷

Grants in hand, AIWA spent its first decade focusing on job training and English lessons. Young Shin told *AsianWeek* in 1986 that her organization’s focus was helping women exit the garment industry for slightly better options in housekeeping or hotel businesses, which were more likely to be unionized: “AIWA trains immigrants to obtain union work at triple their present salary, and they have the benefits of sick leave and vacation pay besides.” These programs were highly practical. Volunteers helped immigrant women fill out job applications, practice for English-language interviews, and learn key English phrases “to function on the job.” AIWA’s strategic orientation fit into the broader pattern discussed in Chapter 4, where Reagan-era shifts in federal funding priorities tended to incentivize job training over other interventions around under- and unemployment. With their focus on moving immigrant women into better-paying jobs, AIWA successfully navigated the federal funding landscape in 1987 and received \$114,000 from the Department of Education to help the organization produce “instructional videos and publications” on topics such as “effective communication, sex equity, employment advancement, sexual harassment, cultural adjustment, and domestic violence.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Bobbie Lee, “Oakland group helping immigrant women,” *AsianWeek*, March 7, 1986; Rebecca Smith, “Fighting the image of the ‘model minority’,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 23, 1987.

⁷⁸ Lee, “Oakland group helping immigrant women”; “Employment training class,” *AsianWeek*, May 5, 1989; “Asian women group receives \$114,000,” *AsianWeek*, February 20, 1987.

In helping garment workers transition into service work, AIWA was also following the lead of other regional nonprofits aimed at addressing the decline of the manufacturing sector. The Plant Closures Project, a nonprofit also based out of Oakland, was founded in 1981 out of an effort by local churches to help workers who had lost their jobs due to plant closures and relocations. Initially, the plant attempted to fight plant closings, but soon “found it could do little to reverse plant closure decisions once they had been made.” Like so many other nonprofits, the Project soon turned to education and prevention. Coordinator Ellen Green told the *Tribune* in 1982 that the Project’s main focus was “job retention and job creation, showing the community how to pick up the project or company when the larger corporation decides to move.” To do so, the Project similarly focused on training sessions and workshops which aimed to “help recently laid-off workers explain their plight on the community” without antagonizing “outside forces” such as immigrant workers.⁷⁹

One of the Plant Worker Project’s most significant—albeit short lived—success stories came out of the garment industry with the formation of the Rainbow Workers Cooperative, a worker-owned sewing co-op that was founded by the laid-off seamstresses of Sierra Design, a local camping gear manufacturer. When Sierra Design announced it would be closing its Oakland factory in 1984, its un-unionized workforce—which was described by the press as a diverse mixture of “Chinese, Filipino, black, Mexican and white” women—initially organized to prevent the shutdown, picketing outside the firm’s storefronts and attempting to organize a nationwide boycott of its products.⁸⁰ Betty Chisolm, the seamstress who spearheaded the workers’ organizing effort, spoke of the irony in Sierra Designs’s parent company outsourcing to Asia: “Half of us [came] from Hong Kong sweatshops,” hoping to escape “the very working conditions and wages in overseas companies to which American firms are now farming out work.” Despite the workers’ zeal, however, the boycott failed to stop the shutdown. The Plant Closures Project eventually stepped in to help the workers negotiate a worker buy-out in which Sierra Designs agreed to donate money and equipment towards a worker-run corporation.

⁷⁹ Connie Rux, “Local churches working to feed and aid the poor,” *Oakland Tribune*, September 26, 1982; Daniel S. Levine, “Oakland group fights causes of blue-collar job losses,” *Oakland Tribune*, November 18, 1991.

⁸⁰ Jack Cheevers, “Seamstresses follow their rainbow,” *Oakland Tribune*, February 3, 1985.

Thus the Rainbow Workers Cooperative was born, its name “borrowed from Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition.” Chisolm described the process as “a little like Emancipation... This is how our forefathers must have felt when there was no master anymore. They were on their own. It’s scary but I say go for it.” For their part, Sierra Designs was equally satisfied with the outcome. “We’re thrilled that we could settle this amicably... and that they can keep people employed,” company controller Stephen Langmaid told the *Tribune* in 1985. Sierra Designs even held a special sale at its Berkeley retail location to finance the Collective, donating 10% of its \$300,000 sales revenue. Langmaid openly admitted part of their motivation was reversing the bad PR generated by the closure and subsequent boycott, telling the *Examiner*: “We got a fair amount of negative publicity when this thing started. We’re hoping to reverse that.” News outlets giddily covering the Rainbow Workers Collective as an innovative solution to runaway shops spoke of it as an ideal outcome for all parties involved, a new kind of labor-capital accord for the post-industrial, post-union age. As one writer put it, “People had work again, Oakland had a shining example of what can be done to retain local jobs, and CML... had new reputations for progressive thinking in labor relations.”⁸¹

Much to the disappointment of the co-op’s worker-owners and their supporters, it would quickly become clear that the new accord would not succeed. In April of 1986—almost exactly one year after they opened—the co-op board voted to dissolve the corporation. Writing in a letter to the *San Francisco Examiner*, which had published a glowing report on the Cooperative’s success two weeks after it shut down, board member Jan Gilbrecht shared that the dissolution came as the result of a “financial crisis... caused when the co-op went after a new market and expanded its work force but couldn’t get high enough prices to support the payroll.” Gilbrecht acknowledged that making the Cooperative work had required immense sacrifice on the part of the worker-owners, “many of whom worked long hours during six-day weeks,” not to mention the financial and technical contributions from nonprofit organizations like the Plant Closures Project and Sierra Designs themselves. Still, the Cooperative “could not compete with low-wage offshore and local sewing shops... In the end we had to recognize that there was not enough

⁸¹ Beth Kivel, “Workers form coop in wake of shutdown,” *Off Our Backs*, Vol. 15, No. 4, April 1985; Brenda Payton, “A giddy time for Rainbow Workers,” *Oakland Tribune*, February 25, 1985; Gregg Levoy, “Sewing the seeds of success,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 4, 1986; Christine Keyser, “Firm’s big sale to help finance laid-off workers,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 25, 1985.



Fig. 5.2: A photo of some of the women of the Rainbow Workers Cooperative, from a May 1986 story on the success of their corporation published in the *San Francisco Examiner*. Roughly two weeks before the article went to print, the Cooperative board had voted to dissolve their corporation over what they described as an internal “financial crisis.”

domestically sewn work in the outdoor equipment industry to sustain the co-op on the scale that it existed.”⁸²

The Rainbow Workers Cooperative’s brief life and sudden death demonstrated the limits of its particular form of alt-labor organization. The Cooperative was not necessarily doomed to financial failure because of its organizational structure, as evidenced by the success of worker cooperatives elsewhere. The East Bay during the 1970s and ‘80s was an especially fertile ground for worker collective development, with corporations benefitting from a socially conscious consumer base. There were enough such organizations in the region by 1980 that several dozen came together to form the Intercollective, a networking and mutual aid organization for Bay Area cooperatives.⁸³ As a mode of doing business,

⁸² Jan Gilbrecht, “End of the Rainbow,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 1, 1986.

⁸³ The Intercollective’s most famous member is probably Berkeley’s Cheese Board Collective, which was converted into a worker-owned co-op in 1971 and has continued to operate into the present. John Carl and Craig Stehr, “Collectives Fair Sunday,” *The Berkeley Gazette*, October 5, 1983; “Workers set on collectives,” *The Berkeley Gazette*, March 29, 1983.

worker co-ops had their unique advantages and disadvantages relative to employer-owned corporations, and were largely subject to the same market forces (as the Rainbow Workers Cooperative sadly discovered). But as a method of improving the conditions of the garment industry, the co-op was highly constrained, both in terms of its scale and its replicability. Just sustaining the Rainbow Workers Cooperative had required a significant expenditure of time and resources, both from the 50-plus worker-owners themselves and from the network of nonprofits and other institutions that supported them. In addition to six-day work weeks for the worker-owners, Rainbow Workers Cooperative survived for a year on \$100,000 in loans from the city of Oakland, \$50,000 from a Massachusetts co-op association, and another \$50,000 from New York Presbyterian Church, as well as a smattering of smaller grants from a California state job training program—not to mention money and contracts from Sierra Designs.⁸⁴

Perhaps the largest flaw in the co-op's conception as a solution to the garment industry's decline was that it persisted in seeing garment workers' plight as one of insufficient skills and opportunity, rather than a problem of insufficient political and economic power. While the women of the Rainbow Workers Cooperative certainly acquired new abilities and opportunities in the process of running the co-op, such developments both took place as a result of their collective inability to prevent Sierra Designs from uprooting in the first place and failure to stop corporations from favoring cheaper offshore contractors. The co-op, far from shifting power away from entities like Sierra Designs and towards their former employees, reinforced larger corporations' control over the fate of industry workers while reducing their share of the blame for the seamstresses' ultimate fate. When the Rainbow Workers Cooperative failed, workers blamed the market, and even themselves—but they no longer mustered any outrage at Sierra Designs' decision to offshore the majority of its production.

Despite the Rainbow Workers Cooperative's closure, cooperatives and "economic development" continued to appeal to regional nonprofits as a method of worker empowerment. AIWA was hardly exempt from such trends, with Young Shin helping six Korean women set up a food manufacturing cooperative, Shin-sun Foods, in the fall of 1990. "We see women's empowerment not only coming from

⁸⁴ Levoy, "Sewing the seeds."

organizing within the industries, but also by owning their labor,” Shin told the *Examiner* at the time.⁸⁵ Co-ops were thus the most extreme version of alt-labor nonprofits’ emphasis during the 1980s on job training and re-skilling in response to de-industrialization. If the modest form of this work was teaching workers to enter more well-paying industries with less abusive conditions, then surely its more ambitious corollary was teaching workers to become their own bosses entirely.

Seeing the big picture

AIWA’s eventual transition away from job-training emerged in large part from the organization’s expansive approach towards worker education. During the early 1990s, AIWA began providing its members with a much broader range of trainings that went beyond just skilling them up for better paying jobs. These trainings called attention to the structural forces shaping workers’ lives and employment prospects, from racism to globalization itself. To offer such programs, AIWA partnered with a wider range of regional nonprofits and institutions of higher education, thus expanding their own network within the Bay Area progressive ecosystem.

One example was AIWA’s relationship with the Center for Ethics and Economic Policy (CEEP), a Berkeley-based nonprofit. Originating out of a program at the Graduate Theological Union, demand for CEEP’s programs grew such that they became their own organization in 1991. Its core emphasis was providing unions, community organizations, and other nonprofits with a usable, progressive education in economics, focusing on a range of topics from wealth inequality to the negative effects of government deregulation. AIWA specifically asked the group to “put together a session... on the garment industry,” which would provide workers with “a bigger perspective as they gained an understanding of the global market and how the companies that buy their work operate.” AIWA organizer Yin Ling Leung described the positive impact the session had on the organization’s garment workers members, many of whom initially came to AIWA wanting to win back wages and who “saw their wages and work conditions tied directly to their employers.” Post-CEEP training, however, Leung said the women experienced “a leap of

⁸⁵ The collective seems to have been slightly more long-lived than the Rainbow Workers Cooperative; California state records indicate Shin-sun Foods was suspended in 1995. Chin, “Low-paid Asian American women.”

consciousness”: “What [they] understand now is that we are going to have to reform the whole garment industry.”⁸⁶

The idea that industry-wide reform was necessary to effect real change for individual workers was a new one for AIWA, and a notable departure from the highly practical job training programs the organization had started with. But what did achieving reform actually look like? By the early 1990s, AIWA staff had begun to grapple with the necessity of helping workers actually confront their employers—either to win higher wages, to secure backpay, or to resolve workplace grievances. Yet Young Shin and the other staffers remained hesitant about certain solutions, and were especially cautious about what the *San Francisco Chronicle* profile of the group called “the Norma Rae solution”: “Organize. Strike.” Shin rejected that strategy, saying to the reporter that “you can’t impose that kind of labor action on the women with whom she works. It’s like asking water to freeze at 80 degrees.” Yin Ling Leung described their approach as “‘soft-core’ organizing,” in which “two or three [AIWA staff] go to a garment factory and knock on the door. There is no sign-waving or fist-shacking. Instead, the organizers hand out leaflets asking the workers to the next AIWA party,” where attendees were encouraged to attend an English class. Young Shin’s hope was that, through training and education, “somewhere down the road enough women may become articulate and aggressive enough... to change working conditions in the garment industry.” The way Shin saw it, immigrant women currently had two options: “You can be a nice Asian or a dumb Asian. You can be a kind of role model or, if you’re low-income, as invisible as familiar wallpaper.” AIWA’s job was providing them with the third option of becoming assertive self-advocates. Still, she admitted, the work was slow going. Shin recounted the story of one seamstress who had learned about minimum wage laws through an AIWA training and worked up the courage to ask her boss about it. “Without complaining, he agreed,” Shin reported, “but he did not start paying minimum wage to the other seamstresses who didn’t ask.”⁸⁷

Of paramount importance to AIWA’s mission was that they did not risk the women losing their jobs: as Shin put it, “that’s not empowering.” AIWA staff were also wary of asking too much from their

⁸⁶ Daniel S. Levine, “Educators dispel myths, show human side of economics,” *Oakland Tribune*, December 23, 1991.

⁸⁷ Robertson, “Empowering the women of the sweatshops,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 24, 1990.

clients, preferring to give “their clients what they want rather than telling them what they ‘should’ want.” When describing the program to the press and the public, Shin frequently emphasized that the life of the average garment worker was not conducive for organizing. “When is [there] time for them to put everything into perspective, to get together, to organize together? They’re too busy,” she stated in one interview. In another, responding specifically to the question of increasing union membership among garment workers, Shin said “seamstresses don’t have the time for union meetings”: “People are working day and night so how are they going to organize?”⁸⁸ Shin, whose husband had been an organizer for Texas Farm Workers United, probably knew better than most people the amount of work that went into a successful union campaign, and her comments sprang from her empathy towards the over-worked and under-resourced who came to AIWA. Nevertheless, they had an air of defeatism about them, seemingly accepting low union density as a permanent condition of garment work. Such concessions were at odds with Yin Ling Leung’s assertion that the solution was “to reform the whole garment industry”—if garment workers were too tired to organize themselves, then how would a project as ambitious as industry-wide reform ever take place?—but reflected AIWA’s ongoing orientation as a service organization. Despite the group’s evolving ideas around what might empower workers most, AIWA staff continued to see their role as advocating on behalf of their exhausted, scared, and un-informed clients. This tension between empowerment and advocacy thus undergirded AIWA’s operations throughout the first few years of the 1990s.

“Jessie, Jessie, stitch by stitch”: the Jessica McClintock campaign

All this would change in the summer of 1992, when a dozen women approached AIWA to complain that their paychecks from a factory called Lucky Sewing Company had bounced, leaving the women short a collective \$15,000. Upon further investigation, AIWA discovered that Lucky Sewing had declared bankruptcy, with insufficient remaining assets to cover their former employees’ back pay. AIWA thus decided to take a page out of the Asian Law Caucus’s book and go after the manufacturer for the money, which in this case was designer Jessica McClintock—known at the time for producing “designer

⁸⁸ Robertson, “Empowering the women”; Chin, “Low-paid Asian American women”; Newberth and Gust, “Benign Neglect.”

perfume, evening wear, and prom, wedding, and children's dresses" through her company, Jessica McClintock Inc.⁸⁹

To convince the women to participate in the initiative, Shin and the other AIWA coordinators "took them sightseeing," traveling to expensive department stores in downtown San Francisco where the seamstresses could see their work on sale. Most of the women had been working ten to twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week, to be paid roughly \$5 a dress. Seeing that their work was being sold for upwards of \$175, the women were infuriated. "I was angry," one of them later recalled; "I didn't expect our dresses to sell for such a high price." Shin and her coworkers drove the point home with presentations that explained the mark-up process, with contractors and workers getting just a fraction of the profit, while retailers and manufacturers took the majority. In 1991 alone, McClintock's company had made over \$145 million in sales. Soon, the seamstresses agreed that McClintock had not just the practical ability, but the moral responsibility, to cover their wages.⁹⁰

The campaign began on relatively conciliatory terrain, with AIWA writing a public letter to Jessica McClintock in the fall of 1992 appealing to her reputation as a supporter of various social justice causes. In San Francisco, McClintock was especially known for her advocacy on behalf of AIDS patients—a reputation organizers thought might work to their advantage. They were quickly proven wrong, however, when her company responded to their letter by denying all responsibility: "We do not exercise any control over contractors... and therefore do not involve ourselves in the internal workings of these businesses." As local press began picking up the story, the company became even more agitated, writing in a letter to the *San Francisco Examiner* that they believed it was "unfair and totally unjustified for [AIWA] to single out a responsible manufacturer such as Jessica McClintock, Inc., in an attempt to make us liable with whom we ceased doing business over a year before the contractor went bankrupt." The letter emphasized McClintock's supposedly rigorous vetting and training process for contractors, and the

⁸⁹ Gary Delgado, "How the Empress Gets Her Clothes: Asian Immigrant Women Fight Fashion Designer Jessica McClintock," in *Beyond Identity Politics: Emerging Social Justice Movements in Communities of Color*, ed. John Anner (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996), 83.

⁹⁰ Steven A. Chin, "Seamstresses ask designer for pay," *San Francisco Examiner*; October 5, 1992.



Fig. 5.3: Former Lucky Sewing employees picket outside Jessica McClintock, Inc.'s San Francisco headquarters in the fall of 1992 while wearing masks to hide their identities. Photo by Tu-Minh Trinh. Source: Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, *Sweatshop Warriors* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2001).

company's respect for California law, which did not hold manufacturers responsible for the violations of subcontracting firms.⁹¹

McClintock's cold response pushed AIWA and the seamstresses into high gear, and by October the group had begun organizing picket lines around the company's San Francisco headquarters. Leading the charge was a seamstress-led organizing committee, whose members were initially too scared to even show their faces at the public rally and showed up in masks (fig. 5.3). But they came anyway, and even took the megaphone to tell the crowd about the ugly conditions they'd worked under at Lucky Sewing, where signs had admonished workers not talk too loudly or to go to the bathroom. At a second picket later that same month, with roughly 100 people in attendance, AIWA called for a national boycott of McClintock clothes until the seamstresses were paid the full \$15,000 in back wages. Workers and their

⁹¹ Chin, "Seamstresses ask designer"; "Designer tries to get contractors to follow labor law," *San Francisco Examiner*, October 12, 1992.

supporters carried signs in English, Chinese, and Korean and chanted: “Jessie, Jessie, stitch by stitch; sweatshop labor made you rich.”⁹²

As the campaign escalated, AIWA began leaning on their connections within the Bay Area nonprofit and labor organizing world. An Asian Law Caucus attorney was called in to help represent the seamstresses before the California Labor Commission, and the ILGWU under Katie Quan sent members to help populate the picket lines.⁹³ In his account of the campaign, scholar and activist Gary Delgado noted that AIWA was too small to win on their own, with just seven full-time staff and an annual budget of \$350,000. In keeping with the broader anti-sweatshop movement, AIWA organizers identified college students as key activist constituents. Organizer Helen Kim even called her brother, “who’d just graduated from college and asked him to get his friends involved in the boycott.” By the fall of 1993, the boycott had support chapters at 22 different campuses across the country. AIWA also tapped connections to churches, training centers, and neighborhood nonprofits, eventually working with over 150 local community organizations to set up picket lines at stores carrying McClintock products in almost a dozen cities. The ILGWU’s national network proved especially helpful for organizing on-the-ground logistics in other cities. Finally, Delgado gave special credit to a successful ad campaign produced *pro bono* by the Public Media Center, which accomplished “the difficult task of making the people behind the sewing machines visible”:

A simply-dressed older Asian woman held the bright, frilly white dress against a drab background reminiscent of conditions in garment sweatshops in the nineteenth century... Bold white-on-black type in the center reads: “It’s rags to riches for Jessica McClintock. But the women who sew in the sweatshops still have not been paid. You can help.”⁹⁴

AIWA organizers credited the PWC ad campaign with elevating their boycott’s national profile, resulting in a wave of favorable press coverage. In the fall of 1993, Center for Investigative Reporting journalist Sarah Henry published an extensive piece on sweatshops in the garment industry that centered

⁹² Delgado, “How the Empress Gets Her Clothes,” 87-88; “Rights advocates open garment boycott,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 23, 1992; Sarah Henry, “Labor & Lace,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, September 1993.

⁹³ Chin, “Jessica McClintock picketed for wages owed by subcontractor,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 14, 1992.

⁹⁴ Delgado, “How the Empress Gets Her Clothes,” 87; Randy Shaw, *Reclaiming America: Nike, Clean Air, and the New National Activism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 105-107.

on the McClintock boycott, and featured a number of interviews with the former Lucky Sewing seamstresses which furthered AIWA's mission of humanizing sweatshop laborers. In describing her impoverished conditions and difficult working life, one woman recalled their former shop being dirty and unsafe—windows were sealed shut and there was no other ventilation—while the women were repeatedly disrespected by the factory owner. Another woman told the reporter that “when you break the money we earn, it contains blood and sweat, so we use every penny very carefully.”⁹⁵

Sarah Henry's piece also provides a glimpse into how and why AIWA seized upon the McClintock campaign as their first real organizing opportunity. Young Shin told Henry that she had “been looking for a chance to wage a battle for better pay and working conditions by going after bigger fish than the sewing-company middlemen,” most of whom were barely getting by themselves. But most of AIWA's clients had historically been too scared to go against the manufacturers. Shin explained that she had been “pleasantly surprised” when the Lucky seamstresses decided they “were willing to fight.” What Shin credited to an evolution among the workers was most likely paralleled by a shift within AIWA itself, however, as the organization's staff repeatedly watched training and educational efforts lead to piecemeal solutions. Worker empowerment, Shin and her colleagues were learning, required moving workers past their fear instead of allowing them to give into it. Indeed, many of the Lucky Sewing seamstresses were *still* afraid, speaking to Henry using false names. But, with AIWA's support, they spoke regardless. A year later, many of the same women decided to be interviewed by *60 Minutes* with un-blurred faces, knowing the program would be seen by millions—including possible future employers. AIWA staffer Miriam Louie went on to recall how frustrated the women were when the program neglected to translate their interviews while, they felt, minimizing manufacturers' responsibility for sweatshop conditions. But the *60 Minutes* producers' betrayal could not undo the fact that participating in the campaign had helped workers overcome their fears, instead of amplifying them.⁹⁶

The campaign's continued growth also demonstrated that the work of worker empowerment could not rest entirely on garment workers themselves. Rather, it was built through productive partnerships between workers themselves and allies from universities, nonprofits, and community members. The

⁹⁵ Henry, “Labor & Lace.”

⁹⁶ Henry, “Labor & Lace”; Louie, *Sweatshop Warriors*, 1-2.

campaign was particularly indebted to the labor movement and the Asian Law Caucus, both for immediate support and for inspiration. Young Shin specifically cited the ALC's success in going after manufacturers as precedent for the McClintock boycott, and when the ALC won their case against Ocean Garment and Moviestar, AIWA staffer Wing Yee Wong wrote a letter to the *Chronicle's* editor celebrating the victory. Wong added in her letter that AIWA hoped "Jessica McClintock learns from this case that she should demonstrate corporate responsibility."⁹⁷ While the McClintock boycott drew tactical inspiration from the Asian Law Caucus's activism, however, its grassroots base and refusal to solely engage the McClintock corporation in the courts ensured its effects would be more far-reaching. In addition to elevating many of the twelve Lucky Sewing workers into highly visible leadership positions, the campaign mobilized hundreds of activists and linked up with dozens of other worker campaigns around the country. At just one McClintock picket line in Beverly Hills, local organizers with Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates stood alongside college students and members of the Justice for Janitors campaign, who were drawn to the campaign by the fact that "garment workers and janitors face many similar issues."⁹⁸

Lastly, young Asian American women became an integral base of local support for the campaign, organizing boycotts among their college and high-school classmates and showing up to volunteer at AIWA. Organizer Helen Kim explained their enthusiasm to Gary Delgado as the natural energy generated by the personal meeting the political: "On a very basic level, it is their aunts, their cousins, and, for many, their mothers who they're fighting for." The intergenerational bonds between student activists and the garment workers themselves harkened back to the heady days of the Long Sixties and the attempts of youth-led Asian American groups to organize with middle-aged seamstresses. The youth activists of the '90s may have lacked some of the revolutionary consciousness of their predecessors, but they also benefitted from not having the distractions of petty sectarian infighting. Tying the two generations of activists together, however, was their shared journey into an Asian American political identity through their encounter with immigrant workers, who were consistently seen as the face of their community's ongoing struggle against racist and gendered exploitation. As Helen Kim put it, "These young women are

⁹⁷ Wing Yee Wong, "Garment Workers' Case," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 20, 1994.

⁹⁸ Andrea Adleman, "A Loveless Valentine," *LA Weekly*, February 23, 1995.

angry... about how these seamstresses are treated, and angry about how they themselves are treated because of this model minority myth... This campaign offered them an opportunity to channel their anger in an *Asian American* struggle.”⁹⁹

By late 1993, the bad press and ongoing boycott had begun to wear the McClintock company down. In an interview, Jessica McClintock herself wearily said she had “tremendous sympathy” for the seamstresses, but was upset that there was “a lot of energy being spent on the negative and not on working together.”¹⁰⁰ Despite her rejection of “the negative,” in December McClintock’s team began pivoting towards more underhanded tactics, including donating tens of thousands to Bay Area Asian American nonprofits, from Asian Community Mental Health in Oakland to an Asian women’s shelter in San Francisco. That same year, McClintock also made a \$24,000 donation to the Northern California Chinese Garment Contractors Association and asking them to pass the money on to the twelve Lucky Sewing seamstresses. According to AIWA, however, the money came with strings: workers had to sign a statement affirming that “they were never employees of Jessica McClintock Inc. and that McClintock wasn’t responsible for any back pay.” Five seamstresses reportedly took the company up on their offer, while the remaining seven had their names published in the Chinese-language newspaper *Sing Tao* in January of 1994—something organizer Miriam Louie later described as “an act tantamount to blacklisting them.” Still, the tactic failed to dissuade the remaining women from continuing their campaign; if anything, Louie remarked, they were more motivated to see the fight through.¹⁰¹ The vigor with which the McClintock corporation fought the seamstresses and AIWA, over what everyone acknowledged was a relatively small sum, indicated to AIWA that their tactic was working: McClintock did not want any major precedent to be set regarding manufacturer responsibility for their subcontractors’ working conditions, and was willing to spend prodigiously on both legal fees and donations in pursuit of its goal.

In the end, federal intervention helped resolve what would end up being a three year long dispute. The Clinton administration’s Department of Labor under Robert Reich had made cleaning up the

⁹⁹ Delgado, “How the Empress Gets Her Clothes,” 90.

¹⁰⁰ Henry, “Labor & Lace,”

¹⁰¹ Louie, *Sweatshop Warriors*, 42; Delgado, “How the Empress Gets Her Clothes,” 89; Chin, “Garment workers fight for back pay,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 16, 1994.

“sweatshop problem” a priority as part of its effort to save the domestic garment industry, an effort which had included helping Bay Area manufacturers and contractors negotiate a “model contract” in 1993 that was designed “to prevent underbidding, cutthroat competition and wage and hour violations.” The idea, according to a DOL spokesman, was “to eliminate the ‘sweatshop’ connotation from this industry” and restore some stability for both struggling manufacturers and factory owners by standardizing the working relationships between them.¹⁰² Having stepped into help broker the model contract, DOL officials once again acted as mediators two years later between the Lucky Sewing seamstresses and Jessica McClintock, serving as go-betweens during a months-long negotiation process. Finally, in March of 1996, AIWA announced it was formally calling off the boycott: McClintock was settling. The final amount paid to each worker was undisclosed, but Young Shin stated at the time that the seamstresses and AIWA were all “very pleased about the agreement.” In addition to the back pay settlement, McClintock agreed to donate money to establish an education fund for garment workers, sponsor a number of scholarships, and pay for two “toll-free numbers for Jessica McClintock employees to get information about wage and hour laws in English and Cantonese.” Labor Secretary Robert Reich lauded the agreement as “an important milestone in efforts to establish cooperative relationships among all levels of the industry,” a reflection of his Department’s belief that saving the garment industry required manufacturers, contractors, and workers to set aside their differences.¹⁰³

For AIWA, the settlement was a victory in and of itself, but so were the changes that had come to the organization as a result of their campaign. While some observers hailed the organization’s successful PR campaign as the most important aspect of the boycott, Young Shin would take the most pride in AIWA’s evolving leadership development program. “Out of our 15 years of organizing experience,” Shin told an Oakland journalist in 1998, “we’ve developed a methodology”: a seven-step program for moving a woman from her first encounter with AIWA to becoming a membership of the organization’s “core

¹⁰² Keiko Ohnuma, “Garment makers reach historic pact,” *Oakland Tribune*, September 15, 1993; Bill Wallace, “A Plan to End ‘Sweatshops’ in Bay’s Garment Industry,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 14, 1993.

¹⁰³ Kathleen Sullivan, “McClintock, rights group end dispute,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 22, 1996; Victor Colliver, “Jessica McClintock ends labor conflict,” *Oakland Tribune*, March 23, 1996; Bill Wallace, “Jessica McClintock Accord Ends Long Boycott,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 22, 1996.

leadership group.”¹⁰⁴ Shin and her colleagues eventually named their method the “Community Transformational Organizing Strategy,” or CTOS—a roughly seven year process that trained immigrant women to “participate in collective action campaigns and take organizational leadership roles.” For those who successfully made their way through the entire program, the result was both expanded external opportunities and an empowered sense of self; in the words of garment worker Hai Yan, “Your confidence has gone up a little, so you are more daring, and you know how politics in America works.” Crucially, AIWA considered worker participation in campaign actions and planning as critical stages in CTOS; no longer was it enough for women to simply go to training programs and workshops. She would have to conquer her fears and doubts to become an agent in her own struggle—and thus inspire other women to make the same leap.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

CTOS has understandably received a fair amount of both scholarly and activist attention for its emphasis on developing vulnerable, non-white, non-English speaking women into community leaders. In reckoning with AIWA’s practice of worker empowerment, it is worth keeping in mind the long historical process that gave rise to the organization’s current methods and strategic approaches. AIWA began as a classic service nonprofit, seeking to meet workers’ stated needs and help them enter more well-paying industries. However, staff members’ desire to intervene in the root causes of garment workers’ job insecurity and dire working conditions led them to seek more active methods of engaging the workers themselves. The success of the McClintock campaign represented the synthesis of worker organization and professional activism: Lucky Sewing seamstresses were moved from fear to self-confidence with the support of hundreds of nonprofit staff, college students, legal professionals, union organizers, and political officials. AIWA thus found a path forward that rejected both the self-sufficiency of the worker co-op route, and the advocacy model of nonprofits such as the Asian Law Caucus.

¹⁰⁴ Payton, “Hint: Don’t serve sandwiches.” For instance, activist and attorney Randy Shaw, writing about the McClintock boycott, called the publicity campaign “AIWA’s greatest strategic accomplishment” next to their national network of grassroots allies. See Shaw, *Reclaiming America*, 109.

¹⁰⁵ Chun, “Building political agency and movement leadership,” 380.

Still, the question lingered: would it be enough? Judged on the metric of meaningful industry reform, AIWA failed far more often than they succeeded. The boycott model AIWA established with its McClintock campaign had been, and would be, used repeatedly in the global fight against sweatshops, but generally did not prevent manufacturers from continuing to rely on low-wage labor in both the global south and in certain regions of the United States. Such interventions, powerful as they could be within certain contexts, had arrived at the tail end of a much longer historical process through which garment workers had been systematically deprived of political power.

During the first half of the 20th century, the institutional response from activist, militant labor unions towards the problem of “runaway shops” was to follow where the shops went. When garment contractors began popping up in Northeastern Pennsylvania, the New York-based ILGWU set about establishing locals in the region, with organizers who labored to establish organic social ties between the union and the area’ working-class communities. Then as in the late 20th century, garment factories were coming into regions that older forms of industry were starting to abandon—in Pennsylvania’s case, anthracite coal mining—and employing mostly women. Scholar Kenneth Wolensky argues convincingly that the ILGWU’s eventual success in the area hinged on both providing workers and their families critical services, such as health care, while also bringing working women into active political life. By the early 1960s, Northeastern Pennsylvania “boasted the largest share of ILGWU members in the anthracite region... and the second largest in Pennsylvania.”¹⁰⁶

As I’ve discussed elsewhere in both this chapter and in Chapter 2, the ILGWU of the late 20th century did not believe it had the option of following shops across the Pacific or south of the Rio Grande. Having attached itself to the interests of the Cold War state—and in particular, the Democratic Party—trade unions found themselves strapped to the sinking ship of economic nationalism, unable to pursue alternative responses to the problem of offshoring and rising imports. It was that very same Cold War state which had brokered the postwar trade deals and aid arrangements that helped industrial economies in Taiwan, Japan, and Southeast Asia become competitors to domestic industry. And, during the 1990s, it was a reinvented Democratic Party that helped deal one of the killing blows by championing NAFTA,

¹⁰⁶ Wolensky, “An Industry on Wheels,” 100-103.

over the objections of their erstwhile allies among the labor movement. NAFTA fit squarely into what historian Lily Geismer has identified as the New Democrats' governing principle: that good business and private sector growth was the best tool for addressing poverty, racial and gender inequality, and other socioeconomic ills, and that this was true on both the national and the international scale. Within such a scheme, unions were not just seen as counterproductive; they were viewed as obsolete.¹⁰⁷ When organizations like the ILGWU did seek to inject new blood into their organization by turning to Asian immigrants, they continued to see workers as a way to intervene within globalization rather than a constituency to empower directly—hence the union's turn towards legal strategies instead of shop-floor organizing.

Despite having taken quite a different route to get there, the Asian American nonprofits and alt-labor organizations of the 1980s and 1990s found themselves in a similar boat as the trade unions. Having shed the Third World internationalist politics of their more radical predecessors, organizations like AIWA and the Asian Law Caucus conceived of their obligations as being towards local communities of Asian and Asian American people. Their sincere dedication to the wellbeing of these communities—and to garment workers in particular—would eventually lead both organizations to conclude that any lasting interventions would require structural changes to the garment industry itself. Yet by the end of the 20th century, even the most optimistic of garment worker organizers and anti-sweatshop activists had acknowledged that their fight was necessarily a global one. The choice for neighborhood nonprofits was to either scale up their operations and become an entity like Sweatshop Watch, or to scale down their ambitions and focus, once again, on the more immediate needs of their local constituencies.

The accomplishments of Asian American alt-labor organizations like the Asian Law Caucus and AIWA, meaningful as they were for their constituents, must be understood within this greater context. The very proliferation of such organizations was a response to the failure of both organized labor and government officials to resolve the contradictions of free trade in favor of American workers. Even AIWA's historic victory against Jessica McClintock was emblematic of both the alt-labor movement's possibilities and its constraints in tackling a globalized industry. On the one hand, the McClintock

¹⁰⁷ Lily Geismer, *Left Behind*, chap. 1, Kindle edition.

campaign was further proof that nonprofits could enable the kind of worker organizing that had long been associated with trade unionism among populations that had been excluded from organized labor. Once again, AIWA helped prove—as the Jung Sai strikers had—that Asian immigrant women were not just the passive victims of globalized exploitation, but could be the protagonists of a movement against it. On the other hand, AIWA and its partners were not been able to expand upon this success in ways that addressed East Bay immigrant workers' conditions at scale. Since 1996, no other AIWA campaign has matched the McClintock boycott in terms of scope and ambition. A 2002-2006 campaign aimed at getting more ergonomic furniture into garment factories was targeted at subcontractors instead of manufacturers; others have succeeded in helping workers win back wages from their immediate employers. Such initiatives were a ways removed from Young Shin and Miriam Louie's 1993 insistence that "with the squeeze on workers coming from the top, the pressure must be applied at the top."¹⁰⁸ These shifts are likely reflective of a myriad of pressures, from limited resources to AIWA's nonprofit funding model, with grant-givers possibly being loathe to support certain forms of worker organizing. But above all, they reflect the bad odds of highly local organizing within a globalized industry.

Switching frames away from combating an entire industry to organizing a single community, however, we can still appreciate AIWA's method of building up community leaders, cohort by cohort, step by step, among immigrant women in the Bay Area. Indeed, such methods have allowed the organization to be resilient against the garment industry's decline in ways that unions frequently were not. As garment work—and thus, garment workers—began disappearing from the East Bay during the late 1990s, AIWA focused more resources on working with electronics workers in Silicon Valley, opening a second office in San Jose in 1997. Since then, it has further expanded its activism to meet the needs of immigrant home care workers, all the while continuing to offer English language, workplace safety, and leadership development programs.¹⁰⁹ Far from mitigating the possibility of future large-scale worker organization, such programs are essential to their success, training organic leaders from within Asian immigrant working class cohorts instead of teaching the women to solely look to nonprofits for assistance. As AIWA

¹⁰⁸ Chun, "Building political agency and movement leadership," 389-391; Young Shin and Miriam Louie, "Seamstresses deserve decent wages," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 22, 1993.

¹⁰⁹ Payton, "Hint: Don't serve sandwiches"; AIWA, "2015 Recap," *AIWA.org*, December 2015.

member Chao-Ju put it during a 2000s interview, “If people do it all for you, then you don’t have to do it. But, now, we make the plan ourselves in cooperation with youth, in cooperation with other women... What’s different? The feeling is different.”¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Chun, “Living Outside the Cup: Asian Immigrant Women Workers Fighting for Change.”

Conclusion — *The price of inclusion*

Higher rises

In 1997, the East Asian miracle had seemingly come to an end. The IMF's preliminary diagnosis of the 1997 Asian financial crisis crash was that "East Asia had exposed itself to financial chaos because its financial systems were riddled by insider dealing, corruption, and weak corporate governance" paired with certain forms of strong state interference—what economist Helen Hughes labeled "crony capitalism."¹ In the same way Western commentators had ascribed the ascent of economies like Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan to certain cultural advantages, their collapse was frequently put down to cultural foibles. Each positive attribute seemed to have its darker inverse. The vast networks of *guanxi*—influential personal and business relationships—that commentators had once praised were now re-coded as "cronyism." The axiomatic declaration among Asians and Westerners alike that Asia's economic success was built on Confucian values was now re-coded as inflexibility and obsolescence.²

By December of the same year, California cities and localities braced themselves for the trickle-down effects of Asia's financial woes. "Winds of trade will carry the Asian financial flu across the Pacific in 1998," one journalist predicted, "infecting California's economy but not causing a full-blown outbreak." These predictions turned out to be largely accurate: the following April's national Jobs Report showed unemployment rates beginning to spike in the manufacturing sector as a result of declining export sales in Asia, but no major ripple effects came for the U.S. economy. "Increasingly, it seems that the U.S. and Western Europe are islands in this sea of turmoil," one analyst stated in August of 1998.³

¹ Steven Radelet et al., "The East Asian Financial Crisis: Diagnosis, Remedies, Prospects," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 1998, no. 1 (1998): 1–90; Helen Hughes, "Crony Capitalism and the East Asian Currency and Financial 'Crises,'" *Policy: A Journal of Public Policy and Ideas* 15, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 3–7; Byung-Kook Kim and Hyug-Baeg Im, "'Crony Capitalism' in South Korea, Thailand and Taiwan: Myth and Reality," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 5–52. Hughes did not originate this term, but it was apparently first applied to the Philippines in 1981 and has since been persistently associated with Asian economies; see Robert L. Youngblood, "The Philippines in 1981: From 'New Society' to 'New Republic,'" *Asian Survey* 22, no. 2 (1982): 226–35.

² Sterling Seagrave, *Lords of the Rim: The Invisible Empire of the Overseas Chinese* (London: Bantam, 1995), 274–275; S. G. Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism* (New York: W. de Gruyter, 1990); Evelyn Hu-DeHart, ed., *Across the Pacific: Asian Americans and Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2000), 17.

³ Greg Frost, "California's economy due for a hit from Asia," *San Francisco Examiner*, December 18, 1997; Duncan Martell, "Applied materials earnings plummet," *San Francisco Examiner*, August 12, 1998; Art Pine, "Jobless Rate Up Slightly; Easing in Growth Seen," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 1998; Walter Hamilton, "Dow Jostled by Reports of Worldwide Sell-Offs," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1998.

While the Asian financial crisis did not put an immediate crater in the U.S. economy, smaller changes did take place across California's cities, where the shine seemed to have come off on Asian investment capital. Throughout 1998, Indonesian, Hong Kong, South Korean, and other Asian investors began selling off their various properties in the state, much as Japan had done during the early 1990s when it weathered its own economic recession. Unlike then however, analysts in 1998 pointed out that these sales weren't solely motivated by mounting debts at home. One expert pointed out that "some Asian investors believe the U.S. real estate market... is near its peak" and were turning towards new markets back in Asia, where the financial crisis was creating low-cost opportunities for anyone with cash on hand: "They are looking at... places like Bangkok, where prices have gone down 80% in the last 10 months."⁴

Asian investors' pivot back to Asia in the wake of the 1997 crash mirrored a worldwide trend.⁵ For years leading up to the crash, U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) abroad in the Asia/Pacific region had been steadily rising, and would only continue to increase as the People's Republic of China continued to open up its markets to overseas capital. 1997 marked the first year since 1987 where U.S. FDI in Asia overtook Asian FDI in the United States, a trend which continued into the 21st century (table 6.1).⁶

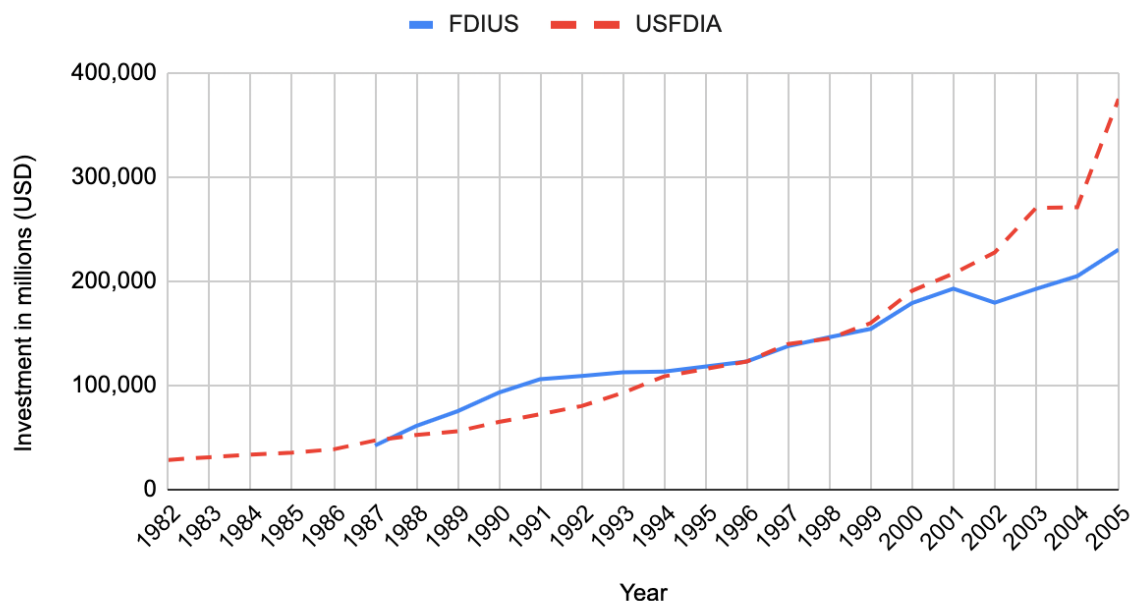
Just as Asian American brokers had been essential to supporting Asian capital ventures in the U.S., so too were they players in America's efforts to break into Asia. Corporations like Hewlett Packard and Coopers & Lybrand (which would soon merge with Price Waterhouse) made a point of hiring bi-cultural professionals to help them penetrate markets in China, South Korea, and Japan. Emily Ou, a Shanghai native who had come to the United States from Taiwan in 1971, started as a secretary for Coopers & Lybrand but was tapped to go with members of a New York law firm on a 1979 business trip to Shanghai. Ou served as translator on their trip, and eventually was catapulted into a full-time assignment as Coopers & Lybrand's Shanghai representative—"not because of any special training but because she was intimately familiar with the culture." Ou conceded that after decades away from her

⁴ Evelyn Iritani, "Indonesians Selling Off Southland Properties," *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1998;

⁵ "Investors ready to tap Asia: With turmoil, real estate prices could fall," *The Californian*, January 20, 1998; Michael White, "US investors can get some deal in Asian commercial real estate," *The Lompoc Record*, January 23, 1998.

⁶ See Bureau of Economic Analysis, "U.S. Direct Investment Abroad: Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data," <https://www.bea.gov/international/di1usdbal>.

Table 6.1: Asian FDIUS vs USFDIA in Asia: General Position



Notes: US foreign direct investment = USFDIA. Foreign direct investment in the US = FDIUS. Since 1987, the Bureau of Economic Analysis's FDIUS dataset has grouped Australia, China (PRC), Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand together as "Asia/Pacific." China entered the World Trade Organization in 2001, accounting for some of the rapid takeoff of USFDIA in subsequent years. Source: US Bureau of Economic Analysis, "U.S. direct investment abroad data" and "Foreign direct investment in the United States data," <https://www.bea.gov/data/intl-trade-investment/direct-investment-country-and-industry>.

hometown, she was "a foreigner, but not as foreign as someone who had no immediate ties at all to the culture of Shanghai."⁷

Since the early 1980s, well-heeled Asian American entrepreneurs had been organizing themselves to share resources and expertise about how to take advantage of the Pacific economy. The San Francisco-based Asian Business League was founded in 1980 to work towards "the advancement of Asian-Americans in business, & the expansion of business [with] the Pacific rim." By the late 1980s, the League was putting on conferences and panels for its members on subjects like the "myths and realities of Asian real estate development and investments," "Being a U.S. Expatriate: Challenges and Opportunities in the 1990s," and "Reaching the Emerging Markets in Asia."⁸ The Asian Business League's transpacific

⁷ Frank Viviano, "The New Taipans," *San Francisco Examiner*, May 5, 1985.

⁸ David Flores, "Entrepreneurs tell how to succeed," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 25, 1981; "Bulletin Board," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 5, 1988; "Calendar," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 29, 1989; Bruce Koon, Stephen A. Chin, and Wendy Tanaka, "Pacific Rim Overtures," *San Francisco Examiner*, September 25, 1994.

networking by no means meant they were unattached to the existing network of Bay Area Asian American social service nonprofits—on the contrary, the League helped raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for, among other organizations, Self Help for the Elderly. Their onetime president Leslie Tang Schilling had previously worked on the board of another nonprofit, Chinese for Affirmative Action, which was heavily involved in electoral organizing among the city’s Asian Americans. And, in 1985, the League’s Chairman wrote to the *Examiner* to applaud their coverage on anti-Asian sentiments, noting that the League “recognize[d] the dangers which such... sentiments would present if unchecked.”⁹ Far from feeling that their fortunes exempted them from the racial politics of Asian America, then, the League’s upwardly mobile members remained invested in the advocacy of Asian American social services, knowing their own success relied in part on maintaining a positive image for all Asians in America.

Among these enterprising Asian Americans who struck it out on their own was Palo Alto resident David K. Lam, who had come to the U.S. from Hong Kong (via Toronto) to earn his PhD in chemical engineering from MIT. Lam started his career working for Hewlett Packard before founding his own company, Lam Research, which began producing etching equipment for silicon chips in the early ‘80s. Lam’s independent success kicked off after he negotiated a lucrative deal with Tokyo Electronics in Japan, then took his company public less than two years later before becoming CEO of a computer terminal manufacturing company. Lam Research, which branched into chip manufacturing in 1997, would eventually survive both Japan’s recession in the early ‘90s and the ‘97 financial crisis, weathering the latter by eliminating much of its California-based workforce.¹⁰ From the start, Lam’s chips and terminals were built in factories on both sides of the Pacific, from shops in Silicon Valley and Fremont to Japan, Hong Kong, and Korea, often by low-wage workers—many of them women. On the winners and losers of the globalized economy, Lam was blasé. “Yes, some people are getting hurt,” he admitted to the *San*

⁹ “Financial District; Golden Gaiters,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 1, 1989; Gerald D. Adams, “Praise greets Jordan’s pick for Hom’s successor on panel,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 28, 1993.

¹⁰ “Lam Research Agrees to Acquire OnTrak,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1997; “Lam Research Laying Off More as Orders Drop: High Tech: Semiconductor Equipment Maker Will Fire as Many as 1,100 in Its Second Round of Cuts This Year,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 1998.

San Francisco Examiner in 1985, “because this is an economy in rapid transition. But Bay Area companies have to think globally now. That’s the reality.”¹¹

Lower depths

One didn’t have to look far to find the “people getting hurt” in David Lam’s rapidly-expanding, increasingly high tech Pacific economy. In February of 1995, employee Rodrigo Cruz was sent to clean toxic sludge out of a railroad tank at the Romic Corporation waste transfer station in Redwood City. The tank had previously been filled with effluent from the area’s electronics plants which, once pumped away, left behind a mixture of “xylene, benzene, methyl ethyl ketone and trichloroethane.” Cruz, who was sent into the tank with a faulty breathing apparatus, quickly began experiencing shortness of breath, coupled with “a terrible smell and taste in his mouth.” After almost collapsing inside the tank, his coworkers hauled him out into the fresh air. In the aftermath, Cruz—an immigrant from the Philippines—suffered from “excruciating headaches,” damaged reflexes, and loss of memory, symptoms he was told would follow him for the rest of his life.¹²

The environmental hazards of working in the electronics industry were a persistent issue for immigrant laborers like Cruz, who was ultimately helped by a network of Filipino electronics workers to file claims against Romic with OSHA. Asian Immigrant Women Advocates would open an office in San Jose in the late 1990s to help deal with this exact issue, with Young Shin noting that workers were “exposed to new chemicals the medical community has little information about.” In 1993, Asian Americans made up 43% of electronics workers in assembly and operative jobs in Silicon Valley, where wages and benefits for semiconductor workers were decent but the treatment of contractors, janitors, and workers in affiliated industries like waste processing was far worse. A union organizing drive in the Valley during the 1990s was quashed by the high-tech companies, who argued that unions represented an

¹¹ Frank Viviano, “The New Taipans,” *San Francisco Examiner*, May 5, 1985.

¹² David Bacon, “Filipinos in Toxic Valley,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 8, 1997.

“archaic” relic of the past, whereas corporations like Hewlett Packard and National Semiconductor were part of the future.¹³

For Chinese immigrant electronics workers in neighboring San Francisco, the future of the tech industry looked a lot like layoffs. In the fall of 2001, 250 former employees of Lee Mah Electronics—most of them Chinese women in their 30s—rallied at City Hall to protest their sudden firing. The same company that had laid off workers amidst their unionization drive in 1974, leading them to join the women of the Jung Sai garment factory on the picket lines, was now reducing its presence in the Bay Area and shifting more of its production to Texas and China. The layoffs had happened without warning: the plant’s monolingual workers were asked to sign “a letter of termination, written in English, before they could receive their final paychecks.”¹⁴

Protesting alongside the workers was another child of the 1970s: the Chinese Progressive Association, I Wor Kuen’s onetime front group, which was helping Lee Mah’s former employees seek recourse from the city government. Supervisor Leland Yee, who was elected to the Board in 1996, told the workers the city could “help provide rental assistance and other services,” but that Lee Mah Electronics had not violated the law. “It’s extremely sad that this is happening to Chinese workers,” Yee remarked, “particularly since the owner of the business is Chinese himself.” More than just that, however, Lee Mah’s owner Bing Hong Mah was a well-known donor to Chinatown nonprofits, having gifted \$10,000 to the Chinese Newcomers Association two years earlier and been recently honored by Self Help for the Elderly “for his longtime support.” Mah’s charitable giving functioned much the same way older forms of paternalistic behavior among Chinatown employers had, allowing him to represent himself as a benefactor to poor immigrants rather than one of the people responsible for their poverty.¹⁵

¹³ David Bacon, “LAND OF THE OPEN SHOP: The Long Struggle to Organize Silicon Valley,” *New Labor Forum* 20, no. 1 (2011): 72–80; Steven A. Chin, “Asians organize for environment,” *San Francisco Examiner*, June 14, 1993; Brenda Payton, “Hint: Don’t serve sandwiches,” *Oakland Tribune*, May 3, 1998.

¹⁴ Vanessa Hua, “Chinese workers protest abrupt firings,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 11, 2001.

¹⁵ Hua, “Chinese workers protest abrupt firings”; Bing Hong Mah obituary, *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 27, 2011.

As above, so below

This brief portrait of the transpacific electronics industry reveals how the forces of globalization continued to generate both poverty and wealth among Asian Americans, even after the Asian economic bubble popped and the presence of Asian capital in the U.S. ceased to be quite so newsworthy. Much like the garment industry before it, the Bay Area's electronics manufacturing and assembling industry would not stay put for long.¹⁶ As cheap and readily exploitable as Asian immigrant labor was, it would seemingly always have cheaper and more exploitable counterparts in Asia itself. Meanwhile, Asian American nonprofit continued to fulfill their role as both mitigators of the injuries inflicted upon vulnerable immigrants, and redistributors of successful Asian Americans' wealth—wealth which had frequently resulted from global economic activity that extracted capital from the sweat, blood, and injured bodies of Asian workers on both sides of the Pacific ocean.

With the end of the Exclusion Era, globalization helped herald in a new paradigm of conditional, predatory inclusion for Asian Americans on the basis of their proximity to foreign capital. These terms have shaped the fates of Asian American communities throughout the country, but first became visible in cities like San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles. There, Asian capital and Asian immigrants were both drawn into the pre-existing hierarchies of Asian American social and economic life in the United States. Rather than remaking these hierarchies from scratch, immigrants and capital alike adapted themselves to them, often with the result of further entrenching their place within local politics. In turn, city governments and other domestic institutions, hungry for foreign investment and global prestige, selectively invested in Asian American communities to facilitate the movement of money across the Pacific. Favoring instruments such as public-private urban renewal, officials across California turned the vestiges of Asian Americans' formal exclusion into tools of capital accumulation. Neighborhoods like Los Angeles's Little Tokyo and Oakland and San Francisco's Chinatowns were now part of the broader fabric of their respective "world cities"; as one 1995 ad in the *Los Angeles Times* put it, "Imagine visiting China, shopping in Japan, and eating in Mexico all in the same day. You can."¹⁷ The ad's total

¹⁶ Clair Brown, Greg Linden, and Jeffrey T. Macher, "Offshoring in the Semiconductor Industry: A Historical Perspective [with Comment and Discussion]," *Brookings Trade Forum*, 2005, 279–333.

¹⁷ Display Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1995, Box 13, folder 4, Roger S. Hong papers, Huntington Library.

effacement of Japanese, Chinese, and Mexican American people themselves revealed the cold calculus at the heart of cities' globalizing projects: immigrant and ethnic communities becoming means to an end, perpetual bridges to elsewhere.



Fig. 6.1: Full page ad that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1995, created by the city's own marketing agency.

In the wake of the Atlanta spa shootings in the spring of 2021, an anonymous Korean American writer wrote a blog post titled “Asian American After the Atlanta Shooting.” Among other things, the author reflected on the yawning cavern of socioeconomic difference between his own immigrant family and the six Asian immigrant masseuses—Delaina Ashley Yuan, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jun Grant, Suncha Kim, and Soon Chung Park—who were murdered at their places of work. Quoting from a 2019 Korean-language article by writer Im Myeong-muk, the author raised the specter of two globalizations, “happening in two separate worlds: one inhabited by people who speak fluent English and travel to cities around the world, and the other inhabited by people who survive with physical labor” who

were left more vulnerable to all manner of racialized and gendered violence. The products of these two globalizations—the “upper” and the “lower,” the lawyer and the masseuse, the success story and the victim—were, the anonymous Korean American blogger worried, increasingly unable to understand one another. “What if,” he asked, “instead of imagining ‘Asian America’ as a unitary body traveling through history, we imagined it as a story of different streams of migrations, collecting eventually into two pools?”¹⁸

There is a great deal of evidence to support such a claim. The lives of wealthy—or even just financially stable—Asian Americans have always looked starkly different from those of immigrants and Asian Americans at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy. While Asian Americans collectively remain “not white,” their racialization is lived in different ways up and down the class ladder. Wealthy Asian Americans and immigrants certainly suffer from various forms of discrimination and exclusion, but the highest price of Asian Americans’ inclusion into the global economy has consistently been paid by those at the bottom, who are not only more vulnerable to overt racial violence, but to the more quotidian threats of eviction and unemployment as well.¹⁹

While outcomes may have diverged, however, this project has sought to cover the arc of late 20th century globalization within Asian America as a single story. I have shown how the same forces that exploited poor garment workers and evicted elderly tenants also created luxury hotels and successful corporations. And, I have shown how Asian American organizers—many of them college-educated

¹⁸ “Ask a Korean!: Asian America after the Atlanta Shooting,” *Ask a Korean!* (blog), March 24, 2021, <http://askakorean.blogspot.com/2021/03/asian-america-after-atlanta-shooting.html>; “지방의 눈으로 본 세계화 - 슬로우 뉴스,” 슬로우뉴스 - fast is good, slow is better., May 27, 2019, <https://slownews.kr/73438>.

¹⁹ See Timothy Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010) for an account of anti-Asian racism as experienced by more well-off Asian American and Asian residents of Monterey Park, California; see Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) for an account of similar dynamics among well-off Chinese immigrants in Vancouver. For a recent example of Asian American economic vulnerability, Asian American unemployment rates spiked sharply during the pandemic and have taken longer to recover, a reflection of Asian American overrepresentation within the service sector and high rates of small business ownership; similar trends took place during the aftermath of the 2007 Recession. See “Jobless for Longer: How the Pandemic Has Hit Asian Americans,” *Bloomberg*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-27/jobless-for-longer-how-the-pandemic-has-hit-asian-americans>; “Unfairly Disadvantaged?: Asian Americans and Unemployment during and after the Great Recession (2007–10),” Economic Policy Institute, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.epi.org/publication/ib323-asian-american-unemployment/>; “Asian Americans Continued to Suffer the Most from Long-Term Unemployment in 2011,” Economic Policy Institute, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.epi.org/publication/ib323s-asian-american-unemployment-update/>.

children of the so-called upper globalization—and the Asian American working class have persistently (if imperfectly) attempted to bridge the divides between one another. Having learned throughout the turbulent upheavals of the 1960s and '70s that they could no longer survive the new global economy on their own, Asian Americans repeatedly prevailed upon public institutions. To their detriment, those same institutions have largely looked at Asian Americans as instruments through which the United States could shape globalization, rather than as constituents in need of protection *from* globalization—much less political actors who might work to confront it. As we face an even more unequal future, one avenue this history offers those of us in the present is to seek new terms of Asian American inclusion along more equitable grounds—terms that at once acknowledge these communities' transnational ties but no longer seek to exploit them.

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