



*Finding a Path Forward*

**ASIAN AMERICAN PACIFIC ISLANDER  
NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS THEME STUDY**

*Edited by Franklin Odo*





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## Essay 14



# Asian American Activism and Civic Participation: Battling for Political Rights and Citizenship, 1917 to the Present

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In the early 20th century, Asian immigrants were denied citizenship, and even American-born citizens of Asian ancestry suffered from systematic legal, social, and economic discrimination that relegated them to second-class citizenship. Scorned as a “Yellow Peril” that threatened the economic and moral fabric of the nation from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, they were transformed into the so-called “model minority” during the Cold War yet still faced prejudice and violence. Over the past century, Asian Americans have battled for equal inclusion in the United States, participated actively in the political and judicial processes that define the nation, and mobilized grassroots efforts that sought to better the living and working conditions of poor and working-class people. People of many different Asian ancestries have come together in the U.S. under the umbrella category of “Asian American”—a term coined in

Jack Maki, regional specialist for Japan Far East Section, Overseas Branch, Office of War Information. Despite the incarceration suffered by West Coast Japanese Americans, individuals like Maki were able to find good opportunities during the war.  
Photo by Esther Buble, 1943; courtesy of the Library of Congress.



the 1960s to unite groups with diverse ethnicities, cultures, languages, and nations of origin in alliances for social justice.

### EXCLUSION AND BARS TO NATURALIZATION

By 1917, Asians were largely barred from immigrating to the U.S. An active and powerful anti-Asian movement successfully targeted Chinese, Japanese, Asian Indians, and Filipinos for exclusion. The Page Law of 1875, the first anti-Asian immigration act, prohibited “Chinese, Japanese, and Mongolian women” from entering the United States “to engage in immoral or licentious activities.” Although it was intended to combat the importation of prostitutes, officials enforced it under the presumption of poor moral character of all Asian women attempting to immigrate. Hence, the Page Law effectively resulted in a de facto bar on immigration of Chinese women. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 bestowed upon the Chinese the dubious distinction of being the first people to be specifically barred, on the basis of their race or nationality, from immigrating to the U.S. It prohibited the migration of Chinese laborers, who were by far the bulk of Chinese immigrants, and so effectively ended Chinese immigration.

While the flow of Chinese workers was largely stanching, the need for the labor they provided continued unabated, and Japanese began immigrating in large numbers in 1885. The 1907 to 1908 Gentlemen’s Agreement formed the mechanism for Japanese exclusion. School officials in San Francisco had decreed that Japanese students had to attend segregated public schools with Chinese rather than whites. (The mere existence of public education for Chinese was itself the result of litigation by Chinese Americans in *Tape v. Hurley* (1885), which forced the San Francisco school district to enroll Chinese students, though the Board of Education chose to comply by enforcing segregation.<sup>1</sup>) To avoid an international incident with Japan, President Theodore Roosevelt pressured school officials to rescind their orders, segregating Japanese students with the Chinese; in return, the Japanese government agreed to cease issuing exit visas to Japanese laborers bound for the U.S. However, Japanese women continued to migrate as picture brides until 1920, when the U.S. again pressured Japan – this time to stop allowing women to join their husbands in the U.S. After Japan colonized Korea in

1905, it severely curtailed Korean emigration, and Koreans, as subjects of Japan, were barred under Japanese exclusion. Historians Yuji Ichioka and Eiichiro Azuma have detailed widespread community efforts to combat exclusion by Japanese Americans, who appealed, largely unsuccessfully, to both the Japanese and U.S. governments to protect their rights.

Asian Indians migrated to the U.S. in small numbers in the early 20th century, but were confronted by exclusionists, who included them in the ranks of the undesirables, with the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League, renaming itself the Asiatic Exclusion League in 1907. Indian immigration ended with the passage of the 1917 Immigration Act, which created an “Asiatic Barred Zone” that included the Indian subcontinent. But as Seema Sohi has shown, South Asian migrants used the United States as a base for radical social movements organizing that pursued ambitious goals, including ending the British occupation of India.<sup>2</sup>

The 1924 Immigration Act, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, tied immigration to eligibility for citizenship by barring the immigration of aliens racially or nationally ineligible to naturalization, a category that applied to Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Indians (Filipinos continued to be admissible because the Philippines was an American colony). The 1790 Naturalization Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1870 reserved naturalization to “free white persons” and persons of “African nativity or descent,” respectively. Because neither law enumerated Asians, the eligibility of Asians to naturalization rested on a number of court decisions in what the legal historian Ian Haney Lopez has termed the “prerequisite cases.”<sup>3</sup>

Asian Americans vociferously and repeatedly pursued citizenship rights through the courts, beginning in the late 19th century. A Chinese immigrant named Ah Yup applied for naturalization but was denied by the Federal District Court of California, which decreed that as a member of the “Mongolian race,” he was not a “white person” and therefore was ineligible to naturalization (*In re Ah Yup*, 1878). During World War I, a law called the “Act of May 9, 1918,” encouraged aliens to join the military in exchange for the promise of naturalization. In 1921, a Korean American veteran, Easurk Emsen Charr, petitioned for naturalization under the Act but was denied because the federal District Court

of Western Missouri deemed him to be a member of the “Mongol family.” The eligibility of Japanese was tested by Takao Ozawa, a well-assimilated Japanese immigrant of impeccable character, who applied for naturalization in 1914 but was denied. The push to advance Ozawa’s case to the Supreme Court was broadly supported by the Japanese American community and widely covered in the immigrant press. Indeed, Ozawa had been selected as an ideal subject for a test case by the Pacific Coast Japanese Association Deliberation Council, a confederation of Japanese Associations throughout the western U.S. and Canada, which hired former U.S. Attorney General George Wickersham to represent the community’s interest.<sup>4</sup> In 1922, the Supreme Court ruled in *Ozawa v. United States* that Takao Ozawa was ineligible for naturalization, being neither “Caucasian” nor of African descent. The very next year, the Supreme Court took up the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian immigrant who had been naturalized in 1920 due to his service in the U.S. military during World War I. Federal officials sought to deport Thind because he was an advocate of Indian independence from Great Britain but had to strip him of citizenship in order to do so. The Supreme Court ruled in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923) that Thind, who claimed he was “Caucasian,” was not white according to “the understanding of the common man” and thus ineligible to naturalization. In 1925, the Supreme Court ruled in *Toyota v. United States* that Filipinos who had served in the military during World War I were eligible for naturalization under the Act of May 9, 1918, but were otherwise ineligible to naturalization. Though unsuccessful, these cases demonstrate the determination with which Asian immigrants sought to attain citizenship.

One of the chief economic results of being denied naturalization was that Asian immigrants fell prey to Alien Land Laws enacted in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and other states. These laws were tailored to bar Asian immigrants from owning land and property, which had particularly harmful effects on immigrant communities whose economies were based on agriculture. Litigants challenged the legality of the Alien Land Laws, taking their cases to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld their constitutionality in four cases decided in 1923.<sup>5</sup>

## WORLD WAR II AND THE COLD WAR: TRANSITION TO THE MODEL MINORITY

Decades of exclusion and discrimination culminated in the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. But even as the war had disastrous consequences for Japanese Americans, it opened opportunities for other Asian Americans. From 1943 to 1965, Asian Americans enjoyed a number of victories in areas including immigration and naturalization and social acceptance.<sup>6</sup>

Wartime geopolitics impacted the fates of Asian Americans in multiple ways. The World War II alignment of the United States with China, the Philippines, and India as allies against Japanese imperialism cracked the edifice of exclusion. During the war, the California Attorney General reinterpreted alien land laws to enable Filipinos to lease agricultural land, often the abandoned farms of Japanese Americans sent to concentration camps.<sup>7</sup> With the Chinese now seen as brave resisters against the hated Japanese, rather than racial undesirables, Congress repealed the Chinese exclusion in 1943 with the passage of the Magnuson Act, which allotted a meager quota of 105 Chinese immigrants per year but, perhaps more importantly, enabled Chinese immigrants to be naturalized. Similarly, in 1946, the Luce-Celler Act ended Filipino and Indian exclusion, designating each group an annual quota of 100 immigrants and legalizing their naturalization. It is important to note the minuscule size of these quotas in comparison to those designated for Europeans.

The rapid transition from World War II to the Cold War similarly reoriented U.S. treatment of Asian Americans. Japan experienced a dizzying transformation from being seen as a bloodthirsty conqueror to a domesticated junior partner of the U.S. in the struggle against communism. The 1952 McCarran-Walter Act nullified Japanese exclusion, granting Japan an annual quota of 185 immigrants and other Asian nations quotas of 100. Most importantly, it abolished the racial bar to naturalization, making all Asians eligible for citizenship. Although these affordances constituted major advances in Asian American civil rights, the bill also contained provisions barring the entry of suspected subversives and deportation of aliens and naturalized citizens suspected of communism. The Japanese American Citizens League lobbied strongly for the passage of the Act, while Asian American progressives opposed it. President

Truman vetoed the bill over civil liberty concerns, but Congress overrode his veto. Four years later, California repealed its Alien Land Laws, a symbolic act given that the McCarran-Walter Act had effectively negated the category of aliens ineligible to citizenship.

In Hawai'i, long governed by a white plantation-owning elite, Asian Americans surfed the postwar political wave of the "Democratic Revolution of 1954" into the statehouse. Many of the newly elected officials were Japanese American veterans of World War II who had proven their patriotism by serving their country, even while co-ethnics were locked away in concentration camps. Most notably, Daniel Inouye, who lost his right arm in Italy fighting as a member of the legendary all-Nisei 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team, earned a seat in the Territorial House of Representatives and went on to serve in the U.S. Senate for 40 years. The Honolulu-born Inouye gained fame for his role in the Watergate hearings and chairing the Senate inquiry into the Iran-Contra scandal. Hawai'i also elected Patsy Mink—born in the tiny town of Paia, Maui—to Congress in 1964, making her the first female Asian American to serve in the House of Representatives. As an ardent proponent of women's rights and educational opportunity, one of Mink's signal accomplishments was writing Title IX, which prohibits gender discrimination in higher education.

The Hart-Celler Act of 1965 represented a major breakthrough in Asian American rights. Also known as the Immigration Act of 1965, it abolished the national origins quota system that had underlain immigration policy since 1924. Under a racist wrinkle in the national origins system, Asian immigrants were the only group to be enumerated by ethnicity rather than nation. For example, an Indian person migrating from London counted against India's quota rather than Great Britain's, whereas a British subject migrating from New Delhi also counted against India's quota. Hart-Celler eliminated this unequal treatment of Asians and, in place of national quotas, established a system of preferences that aimed to reunify families and attract immigrants with desired job skills. In the decades since 1965, Asian immigration has skyrocketed and, as a result, remade the demographics of Asian America and the United States itself.

Popular representations of Asian Americans reflected the legal gains they made during the Cold War. The

emergence of the "model minority" representation of Asian Americans is generally dated to 1966, when the *New York Times Magazine* published William Petersen's "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," a laudatory tale of Japanese Americans overcoming prejudice through hard work, education, family values, and strong communities. *U.S. News and World Report's* subsequent "Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S." repeated these claims for Chinese Americans. Published in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, these parables contrasted Asian Americans' purported meekness (an extraordinarily untrue supposition) to increasing African American militancy, posing Asian Americans as a model for other minorities to follow by arguing that equality is most effectively gained through education and industriousness rather than social protest.

### THE GRASSROOTS ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT

Even as the model minority representation lauded Asian Americans for their supposed docility, a defiant social movement arose. Known as the Asian American movement, this grassroots movement represented a break with prior Asian American strategies of using courts, political lobbying, labor organizing, and ethnic mobilization as means by which to fight for justice. The Asian American movement emerged from the Black Power and anti-Vietnam War movements, adopting an analysis that understood racism as a common ill shared by Asians of all ethnicities in the U.S., declaring solidarity with blacks, Latinos, and American Indians, and positioning Asian Americans alongside "Third World" people around the



Local 7 leaders Ernesto Mangaoang, Vincent Navea, and Irineo Cabatit in the early 1940s. Photo courtesy of the Filipino American National Historical Society.

globe. It operated on college campuses, urban areas, and countrysides from Hawai'i to the east coast.<sup>8</sup>

### EARLY ORGANIZATIONS

Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) constituted one of the most important early Asian American movement organizations. Formed in Berkeley in 1968 as an effort to bring together progressive Asians of all ethnicities, AAPA grew out of the fertile soil of the New Left. Founder Yuji Ichioka coined the term “Asian American” in naming the new group; he and co-founder Emma Gee recruited members by combing the roster of the antiwar Peace and Freedom Party (which ran Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver for President in 1968) for Asian surnames. AAPA adopted anti-racism and anti-imperialism as its principles, locating Asian Americans as subjects of racism alongside other people of color and condemning the Vietnam War as anti-Asian genocide.

Asian Americans for Action (AAA), established in New York City in 1968, shared many similarities with AAPA, but had key differences as well. Like AAPA, AAA drew from the Black Power and antiwar movements. Its two women founders, Kazu Iijima and Minn Masuda, were inspired by the pride and militancy expressed by leaders like H. Rap Brown and James Farmer, who harshly condemned U.S. racism and militarism. They recruited members by scouting antiwar demonstrations for Asian American participants, regardless of ethnicity. But unlike AAPA, which was composed of college-aged students, AAA had ties to older generations of Asian American radicals. Iijima was a veteran of the Young Communist League and had belonged to a Japanese American progressive group called the New Democrats before World War II; Masuda shared Iijima's history of prewar radicalism. Another older member was Yuri Kochiyama, whose radicalism developed in New York after the war. Kochiyama called Harlem in the 1960s “my university-without-walls,” at which she learned about black struggles from leaders including Malcolm X. Her apartment in Harlem became a center of organizing and a salon for progressive activists. Although Kochiyama became the best-known Asian American radical, she remained thoroughly enmeshed in the struggles of black and Puerto Rican peoples. AAA's name bespoke its commitment to creating social change. Members protested against nuclear weapons by commemorating the atomic



Founding members of the Cannery Workers' and Farm Laborers' Union Local 18257 obtain a charter from the American Federation of Labor 1933. Back left: Tony Rodrigo. Front left: Joe Mislang; President Virgil Duyungan. Front right: Frank Alonzo. Photo courtesy of the Filipino American National Historical Society.

bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and held demonstrations against the Vietnam War.

Unlike AAPA, which began with college students, the Red Guard Party arose from the streets of Chinatown in San Francisco. Despite the reputation of Chinatown as an exotic wonderland, Chinese American youth experienced chronic underemployment, standard education and social services, and regular police harassment. A group called Legitimate Ways (Leways for short) opened in 1967, offering job training and operating a pool hall as a recreational opportunity to keep kids out of trouble. Leways attracted both street kids and progressive Asian Americans who had imbibed the politics of the black power and antiwar movements. Alex Hing had grown up in Chinatown but left to attend San Francisco City College, where he joined Students for a Democratic Society and later joined the Peace and Freedom Party. When he returned to Chinatown, he found a group of rapidly politicizing youth at Leways. The Black Panthers—famous for their analysis of racism as a systemic problem impacting all non-white people—also noticed the rising militancy in Chinatown and invited some of the Leways members to study political theory with them. The group formed the Red Guard Party with Hing as its Minister of Information and announced their presence in April 1969. The Red Guards endorsed Mao Tse-tung, called for the liberation of “yellow people” in a 10 Point Program, operated a Free Sunday Brunch program for Chinatown elders, published the *Red Guard*



*Community Newspaper*, and provided draft counseling that condemned the Vietnam War. One significant site for the Red Guards was Portsmouth Square on the edge of Chinatown, where the group held rallies and protests.

The conditions in New York City's Chinatown mirrored those in San Francisco, with congested housing, substandard healthcare, and endemic poverty. Some members of AAA and the Columbia University chapter of AAPA formed a group called I Wor Kuen (IWK) and opened a storefront in February 1969. IWK published a newspaper, *Getting Together*, in English and Chinese, operated a free health clinic, screened films lauding the People's Republic of China, and called for "Yellow Power" that would lead to the "freedom and power for all non-white (YELLOW, BROWN, BLACK) peoples." In 1971, the Red Guards and I Wor Kuen merged to form National I Wor Kuen, the first and eventually largest national Asian American revolutionary organization.

### CAMPUS ACTIVISM

The opening salvo of Asian American campus activism was fired at San Francisco State College (now University), an urban commuter campus in a diverse city with a long history of student activism. Throughout the 1960s, SFSC students supported the Civil Rights Movement, protested hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and demonstrated against the Vietnam War. Three Asian American student groups aimed to make higher education more available and more relevant to their communities. The largely Japanese American San Francisco chapter of the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) operated in Japantown; the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA) in Chinatown; and the Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE) in the Mission, working on community issues including fights against redevelopment, operating off-campus tutoring programs, and recruiting community members to college. In spring of 1968, AAPA, ICSA, and PACE joined the Black Student Union, Latin American Student Organization, and Mexican American Student Confederation to form the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), a multiracial alliance dedicated to remaking the college in fundamental ways. Although the college had begun a Black Studies program, students found the pace of progress and the administration's commitment of resources to be unsatisfactory. TWLF declared a strike on November 6, 1968, demand-

ing the establishment of "schools of ethnic studies" for each group, with students "having the authority and the control of the hiring and retention of any faculty member, director, and administrator, as well as the curricula." In addition, they demanded 50 faculty positions be allocated to ethnic studies, with 20 reserved for the Black Studies program. Finally, they demanded blanket admissions for nonwhite applicants in fall of 1969, control over financial aid, and non-retaliation against faculty members. Throughout late 1968 and early 1969, TWLF did its best to shut down the college with sit-ins, picket lines, mass demonstrations, and various disruptions. The strike reduced class attendance by as much as half at times and even forced the temporary closure of campus, even though the authoritarian Acting President S. I. Hayakawa called in the San Francisco Police Department's tactical squad, which broke up rallies and conducted mass arrests. Notable locations at SFSU include the corner of 19th and Holloway Avenues, where Hayakawa was photographed clambering onto a sound truck and pulling wires out of the amplifier to silence speakers (an image that catapulted Hayakawa into the national consciousness as a conservative hardliner) and the central quadrangle where the TWLF held daily rallies. After five months of protest, organizing, and battling the police, the TWLF settled with the administration. The agreement established a school of ethnic studies (albeit at far less faculty strength than the strikers had demanded) but did not grant student control over hiring, curricula, or financial aid. The TWLF strike at SFSC continues to be the longest student strike in U.S. history.



Sam Mukaida leads fellow students at the University of Hawai'i in song during a special rally on the steps of Hawai'i Hall, saying Aloha to Varsity Victory Volunteers, 25 February 1942. Photo #765, Hawai'i War Records Depository; courtesy of the University Archives & Manuscripts Department, University of Hawai'i at Manoa Library.

East of San Francisco, across the Bay Bridge, stood the prestigious University of California, Berkeley, widely known for the Free Speech Movement (1964) and antiwar protests. Berkeley students formed their own Third World Liberation Front, which was inspired by and ideologically aligned with the SF State version, but organizationally distinct. The Berkeley TWLF was comprised of Cal student groups including the Afro-American Student Union (AASU), the Berkeley chapter of the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), Mexican American Student Confederation (MASC), and Native American Student Union (NASU). The TWLF demanded the establishment of a Third World College, departments for the study of each constitutive racial group, and community control of hiring, curricula, and financial aid. As at SFSC, students had been negotiating with administrators prior to the strike but became frustrated with what they deemed to be intransigence. The Berkeley TWLF began on January 22, 1969. Strikers picketed, protested, rallied, and withstood police brutality. Notable locations include Sather Gate and Sproul Plaza, both sites of protests and arrests. Among Asian American protesters, Richard Aoki held the most notoriety. A founding member of AAPA, Aoki had first joined the Black Panther Party and rose to the position of Field Marshal, though he didn't advertise his Panther affiliation to AAPA.<sup>10</sup>

Like their counterparts at SF State and Berkeley, Asian American and Pacific Islander students at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa fought for ethnic studies. The key difference in Hawai'i was that students pressed for curricula on Native Hawaiian history and culture, as well as on Asian immigrants. Although the UH administration agreed in 1969 to establish ethnic studies, it did so as an experimental program that did not receive permanent status until 1977. The Panther-Asian American linkage embodied by Aoki recurred in Seattle, where Black Panther members Mike Tagawa and Alan Sugiyama founded the Oriental Student Union at Seattle Central Community College in 1970. OSU took over the administration building in the protests to demand the hiring of an Asian American administrator.

### **SERVE THE PEOPLE**

Asian American organizations adopted Mao's slogan of "Serve the People" in urban settings like Honolulu,

Seattle, the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia. After the TWLF strike at Berkeley, some AAPA members came to believe that they could make a greater contribution by working within the community and thus created the Asian Community Center (ACC). To improve living conditions in Chinatown, ACC operated a free food program that distributed food to 300 people per month and a free health clinic that screened elders without health insurance for glaucoma and dispensed glasses and hearing aids. ACC also brought alternative perspectives to Chinatown through Everybody's Bookstore, which sold books and magazines on Asian American history and the People's Republic of China, and newspapers published by the Black Panthers and the Puerto Rican Young Lords Party. In addition, its free film program screened movies from the PRC, providing immigrants with much-appreciated access to the sights and sounds of home that were censored by the anti-communist elites who dominated Chinatown. ACC morphed into Wei Min She (WMS, "Organization for the People"), a self-described anti-imperialist organization in late 1971 to early 1972.

ACC/WMS's undertakings in San Francisco were but one example of the principle of "Serve the People" in action. As mentioned previously, the Red Guards/IWK operated similar programs in San Francisco and New York. In New York, Asian Americans for Equal Employment (AAFEE) waged a campaign that demanded that Asian American construction workers be employed in the building of Confucius Plaza, a high-rise housing project in Chinatown. In Philadelphia, a multiethnic organization called the Yellow Seeds (formed in 1971) fought against a freeway expansion that threatened Chinatown; helped immigrants find apartments and negotiate with landlords; provided advice on healthcare, education, immigration paperwork, and taxes; provided job training and placement; provided translation services; and advised young men on the draft. In Los Angeles, Yellow Brotherhood and Asian Hardcore reached out to youth at risk of falling into gangs and fought drug abuse. A coalition of Asian American organizations in Seattle provided health, nutrition, and legal aid programs in the International District, published a community newspaper, the *International Examiner*, and renovated the Milwaukee Hotel to enable elderly residents to remain in place.

## TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZING

Although groups like AAPA, IWK, and WMS declared solidarity with Asians subjected to imperialism across the Pacific, the group Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino (KDP, “Union of Democratic Filipinos”) arose directly from the intermixture of American leftists and Philippine radicals. Many of the Filipino American activists who eventually formed KDP had been radicalized in the student, antiwar, and Third World power movements. Meanwhile, student activists in the Philippines, some of whom were associated with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), fled to the U.S. to escape political repression in their homeland. These two streams came together in the Kalayaan (Freedom) collective, which published the *Kalayaan* newspaper from 1971 to 1972. Articles in the pages of *Kalayaan* attempted to enlist support for the CPP and its armed wing, the New People’s Army (NPA), and argued that revolution in the Philippines and the fight against racism in the United States were integrally connected. After President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines, the Kalayaan collective formed KDP, which adopted a dual focus on advocating revolution in the Philippines and socialism in the U.S. In 1981, Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo, two KDP activists and union leaders of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), were gunned down at the union hall of Local 37 in Seattle. Their murders—which were eventually traced back to the Marcos regime—made Viernes and Domingo martyrs to the progressive movement in Seattle and across the nation, and in 2004 a low-income housing complex in Seattle’s International District was named the Domingo Viernes Apartments in their honor.

## URBAN REDEVELOPMENT

Urban redevelopment threatened Asian American neighborhoods in cities across the country. These communities featured ethnic restaurants and small businesses and offered affordable, though often substandard, housing to poor and elderly immigrants. But because they were often located on prime real estate near city centers, which were expanding, developers proposed to destroy them in order to erect office buildings and parking structures. The Committee Against Nihonmachi Eviction (CANE) and the Little Tokyo People’s Rights

Organization (LTPRO) combatted redevelopment in historic Japanese American neighborhoods in San Francisco and Los Angeles, respectively, and Inter\*IM opposed the construction of the King Dome in Seattle. Similarly, in Honolulu, a group called People Against Chinatown Evictions (PACE) opposed the eviction of Asian American elders from cheap residential hotels and pressured the city to build replacement housing. In all of these cases, Asian American organizations fought on the streets through pickets and demonstrations but also organized tenants to stand up for their rights.

The best-known fight for affordable housing occurred at San Francisco’s International Hotel.<sup>14</sup> The shabby hotel housed Chinese and Filipino elders on the residential floors, which stood above a basement containing a number of movement organizations, including the Kearny Street Workshop, Kalayaan, Wei Min She, Everybody’s Bookstore, and I Wor Kuen. A developer purchased the hotel and threatened to evict all tenants on January 1, 1969, but was turned back by community pressure. Asian American students from the Bay Area and as far away as Los Angeles, Seattle, and Honolulu flocked to the I-Hotel to help renovate the dilapidated building. But four years later, a new owner renewed efforts to evict the tenants. A coalition including the International Hotel Tenants Association (IHTA), KDP, WMS, and IWK continued to fight eviction. Students and activists found a sense of purpose and identity working at the hotel, where they learned Filipino American history firsthand from the pioneering generation of manongs (a term of respect and endearment meaning “older brothers”). Kearny Street Workshop artists produced works celebrating the struggle, including an acrylic that depicts a manong defiantly stopping a wrecking ball and a block-long mural on the I-Hotel itself, showing the struggles of Asian American workers. Although the I-Hotel campaign brought together many Asian American movement organizations, it also exposed fault lines over ideology and tactics. The eight-year long I-Hotel struggle died on August 3, 1977, when the final eviction took place. Two hundred activists barricaded themselves inside the building, while 2,000 supporters locked arms outside to block sheriff’s deputies from entering. Riot police waded through the crowd on foot and horseback, clubbing protesters as they went. After gaining entry, deputies led tenants out one by

one. Although the hotel was demolished, the developer was unable to build on the lot for decades, leaving only an ugly hole in the ground. In 2005, instead of a high rise office building or parking structure, International Hotel Senior Housing opened at the site of the old hotel. Featuring 15 stories of senior housing above a ground floor cultural center run by the Manilatown Heritage Foundation, the new building represents a resurrection of the dreams of dedicated tenants and activists and a testament to their years of struggle.

### RURAL ACTIVISM

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders applied the same principles of serving the people outside of cities, most notably in California and Hawai'i. Just as they had organized to aid manongs at the I-Hotel, Asian American students sought to create better living conditions for elderly farmworkers in California's Central Valley. Inspired by the little-known history of Filipino labor organizing by figures including Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), students made pilgrimages to Delano, the site of the famous United Farm Workers (UFW) grape strike.<sup>12</sup> AWOC initially struck against grape growers in 1965 and was joined a week later by the largely Chicano National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. AWOC and NFWA combined to form the UFW union in 1966 and remained on strike until 1970. In 1972, construction began on Agbayani Village, a UFW retirement center for Filipino workers named for Paolo Agbayani, a Pinoy laborer who had died while on the Delano strike. Students from the Bay Area and Los Angeles traveled to Delano to help construct housing, which opened in 1974. Agabayani Village remains open as a part of the National Historic Landmark historic district, Forty Acres.

Where Asian Americans worked alongside Chicanos in Delano, in Hawai'i, Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans joined forces to save Kalama Valley. The rural valley, located east of Honolulu, was home to pig and vegetable farming families who were threatened with eviction in 1970 by the Bishop Estate, which intended to build hotels, subdivisions, and a golf course. Residents found allies in the antiwar movement in Hawai'i, who connected the dispossession of locals on Oahu to the displacement and genocide of Vietnamese peasants.

Valley resisters and college students formed the Kokua Kalama Committee ("Help Kalama Committee"). Decisions concerning leadership of the committee revealed the relationship between Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians. Although Kalama residents appreciated the support of haoles (whites), they often dominated their own media interviews and images. Thus, the committee reserved leadership positions for Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) people. However, this requirement was loosened to allow Japanese, Filipinos, and Chinese to serve in leadership because of the Third World perspective that Kokua Kalama adopted. Understanding that racism and exploitation made common cause among people of color, the committee viewed Asian Americans as "peoples who were oppressed by the plantation system" and natural allies of the Kanaka Maoli. Although Kokua Kalama eventually lost the eviction fight, it morphed into Kokua Hawai'i, an organization based on a capacious notion of Hawaiian sovereignty. The ideology of Kokua Hawai'i resembled the nationalism of the Black Panther Party: members developed a 10 Point Program; read Marx, Lenin, and Mao; and found solidarity with groups like I Wor Kuen and the Young Lords Party. Kokua Hawai'i also supported Filipino families at Ota Camp and farmers in Waiahole-Waikane who were resisting eviction. As the Native Hawaiian movement moved forward, it embraced sovereignty and came to see itself in alignment with other indigenous movements.

### ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Women in the Asian American movement often faced the contradiction of being in organizations that professed to be dedicated to women's liberation, yet also practiced sexism. However, women operated within the larger Asian American movement rather than breaking away; occupied leadership positions in important movement organizations; carefully theorized the intersections of race, class, and gender; created Serve the People programs tailored to women's needs; and built their senses of self and sisterhood through their activism. Women proved integral to the movement from its birth, co-founding or leading groups including AAPA, AAA, IWK, KDP, and the movement newspaper *Gidra*. Nevertheless, they confronted being sexually objectified; were at times relegated to the scut work of the movement, such as typing, serving food and drinks,

and cleaning; and were sometimes dismissed as serious political thinkers.

College classes on Asian American women examined the “triple oppression” of race, class, and gender. The publication *Asian Women* (1971), which contained essays, poetry, and interviews, resulted from a seminar on Asian women at Berkeley. It argued that because racism, sexism, and class exploitation were intertwining systems of domination, none could be addressed effectively without confronting the others. Similarly, the January 1971 special issue of *Gidra* focused on women and pointed to racism, capitalism, and imperialism as the root causes of “male chauvinism” against Asian women.

Women’s organizations put theorization about gender into practice. In Los Angeles, Asian Sisters investigated and combatted drug abuse among young Asian American women, and the Asian Women’s Center provided health and family planning counseling.<sup>13</sup> Other Asian American groups integrated gender into their ideologies and programs. WMS condemned Confucianism for teaching women to be subservient to men and capitalism for exploiting women as wage workers and unpaid domestic workers; covered women’s issues in its newspaper, *Wei Min Bao*; and provided free food and nutrition tips to families.

Because Asian American women believed that racism and sexism had to be confronted as parts of a unified system of power and privilege, they did not form a separate movement but rather continued to fight from within the Asian American movement. Doing so enabled them to build a sense of sisterhood with each other. In addition many women testified that their movement activities enabled them to grow as confident speakers and leaders. For example, Jeannie Dere recalls that her work in WMS transformed her from being too timid to speak in public to “leading group meetings and discussions [and] talking to people on the various issues we took up.”<sup>14</sup> Fighting for Asian Americans thus resulted in the empowerment of Asian American women.

### REDRESSING INTERNMENT

For decades after the end of World War II, Japanese Americans remained relatively silent on their history of incarceration. However, the rising race consciousness of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, along with the swelling of the Asian American movement, invit-

ed a return of what had been repressed.<sup>15</sup> The redress movement began in 1970, when Edison Uno introduced a resolution at the national Japanese American Citizens League convention calling for the federal government to pay monetary reparations to Japanese Americans for exclusion and incarceration. Although the JAACL adopted the resolution, it took no further action. Around the same time, grassroots activists began organizing pilgrimages to former sites of incarceration. The first, a pilgrimage to Manzanar in the desolate Owens Valley of California, occurred on December 27, 1969. The Manzanar Committee, led by Sue Kunitomi Embrey and Warren Furutani, organized annual pilgrimages that continue to this day. Similar pilgrimages have visited the incarceration sites at Tule Lake, Amache, Minidoka, Heart Mountain, and Poston.

The redress movement to secure official apologies and monetary reparations for Japanese Americans incarcerated during WWII gained steam in the late 1970s and contained three strands. First, the JAACL pursued a strategy of political lobbying and capitalized on access to Japanese American politicians, Senators Daniel Inouye and Spark Matsunaga, and members of Congress, Norman Mineta and Robert Matsui. (Notably, Japanese American Senator S. I. Hayakawa staunchly opposed redress.) Second, the National Council for Japanese American Redress advocated a lawsuit to recoup financial losses suffered during incarceration. Finally, the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRP) organized at the grassroots, mobilizing Japanese Americans and organizing letter-writing campaigns. NCRP was filled with veterans of the Asian American movement, who continued their activism in this new cause. Federal law established the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) in 1980, and the commission held hearings in 10 cities throughout the nation, with witnesses testifying before packed audiences about the experiences and losses during the war. The CWRIC’s report, *Personal Justice Denied*, acknowledged the injustice of the exclusion and incarceration, and documented suffering and property losses.<sup>16</sup> The commission released its recommendations separately; these included an apology and monetary compensation to individuals impacted by evacuation and relocation.

Bolstered by the CWRIC report, supportive politicians introduced several bills to enact its recommenda-

tions over the next four years, but none passed out of committee. Finally, Congress introduced, debated, and passed House Resolution 442, named in honor of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team, and the Senate passed its version as well. President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which authorized payments of \$20,000 to each survivor of exclusion or incarceration alive on the date of its signing, and authorized \$50 million to educate the public on civil liberties in general and the wartime wrongs imposed on Japanese Americans. Most importantly, the bill apologized for the “grave injustice done to both citizens and permanent residents of Japanese ancestry by the evacuation, relocation, and internment of civilians during World War II,” calling them “fundamental violations of basic civil liberties and constitutional rights.”

### **ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE: RETURN OF THE YELLOW, BROWN, AND TURBANED PERIL**

Combatting anti-Asian violence has constituted a major part of Asian American activism since the 1970s. The Asian American movement based its opposition to the Vietnam War on the understanding that U.S. wars in Asia were enabled by racism that dehumanized Asians and devalued their lives. Instances included the slaughter of thousands of Filipinos in the Philippine-American War (1899 to 1902), which was instigated by Filipino resistance to being handed from one colonial power (Spain) to another (the U.S.) following the Spanish-American War; the horrific civilian toll of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945); and the casting of Vietnamese people as “gooks,” undifferentiable from combatants, and therefore subject to be killed in free fire zones. Closer to home, the 1975 beating of a Chinese American professional, Peter Yew, by New York City police, drew 10,000 protesters into the streets. Organized by Asian Americans for Equal Employment (AAFEE), the demonstrators marched on City Hall and shut down Broadway for several hours.

The 1982 murder of Vincent Chin in Highland Park, Michigan, proved to be one of the most consequential incidents of anti-Asian violence, not only because of the notoriety of the crime or the fact that his killers never spent a day in jail, but also because it spawned a pan-Asian social movement for justice.<sup>17</sup> At the time, Detroit and the auto industry were in decline due to competition

from Japanese manufacturers. Chin, an aspiring automotive engineer, went to the Fancy Pants strip club with friends to celebrate his upcoming wedding. Autoworkers Ronald Ebens and Mike Nitz confronted Chin, shouting, “It’s because of motherfuckers like you that we’re out of work,” and a fight ensued. Ebens and Nitz followed Chin out of the bar and beat him to death with a baseball bat in a parking lot on Woodward Avenue. The perpetrators escaped justice, incurring only a \$3,000 fine by a judge who stated, “These aren’t the kind of men you send to jail.” Chin’s murder became a pivotal point in Asian American history, as Asians from all ethnic and class backgrounds rallied around the case. Ebens’s misidentification of the Chinese American Chin as Japanese showed the continuing power of race, as it rendered all Asians as equally part of a revived Yellow Peril. A new group formed in Detroit, American Citizens for Justice (ACJ), pushed for a federal indictment, and demonstrations around the country mobilized Asian American communities and garnered national media coverage. ACJ succeeded in part, as federal prosecutors charged Ebens and Nitz with violating Chin’s civil rights and a jury convicted Ebens but acquitted Nitz in 1984. However, Ebens’s conviction was overturned in 1987. Despite failing to attain justice for Vincent Chin, the efforts of activists like the journalist Helen Zia galvanized Asian American communities by underscoring the continuing power of anti-Asian racism.

The New York City-based Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV) was established in 1986 in the aftermath of the Chin murder. Although CAA AV was initially formed as a pan-Asian way to oppose anti-Asian violence, it has branched out to address issues such as tenants’ rights, workers’ rights, and environmental justice for Asian Americans; further, it operates within a framework of solidarity with all people of color recognizing the gendered and sexualized nature of race and racism.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Asian Americans, particularly South Asians and Muslims, were targeted for retaliation. South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT) cataloged 645 incidents of hate crimes against South Asians and Arab Americans in the first week after 9/11, including murders, assaults, threats and intimidation, and vandalism of businesses, mosques, temples, and gurdwaras; eight in 10 attacks were against South Asians, and four in 10 targeted Sikhs.<sup>18</sup>



**Labor Day in Seattle, Washington, 1939.** Photo courtesy of the Filipino American National Historical Society.

In the weeks following 9/11, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) documented some 75 incidents against Asian Americans, ranging from name-calling, intimidation, tire slashing, and graffiti to murder. A Sikh home in Colorado Springs was vandalized on September 13 with graffiti that read “Terrorists” and “Terrorist on board.” On September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi was shot and killed at his Mesa, Arizona, gas station. The assailant, Frank Roque, went on to shoot at the Lebanese American owner of another gas station and then fired shots into the home of an Afghani family. In contrast to Ebens and Nitz, Roque was convicted of murder. But as in the Chin case, the assailant committed murder based on a mistaken identification that racialized Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans as threats to the nation. Sikhs and South Asian Americans bore the brunt of post-9/11 violence, but Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino Americans felt the sting as well.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the 20th century and into the present, Asian Americans have fought for social justice in the courts, in the public mind, on campuses, and on the streets. They have tackled issues including citizenship and immigration rights; the living and working conditions of poor people; access to affordable housing, historical neighborhoods and land; women’s rights; and violence. The most successful moments of Asian American activism have occurred when Asians of all ethnicities declared common cause with each other and demonstrated solidarity with other people of color in the U.S. and abroad.

Despite progress on many fronts, Asian Americans continue to face problems of poverty, discrimination, and invisibility, but if the past century offers any indication, they will continue to mobilize multiethnic and multiracial coalitions for the foreseeable future.

## Endnotes

1 See Mae Ngai, *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010) on the fascinating Tape family.

2 Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

3 For more information on the prerequisite cases, see Ian F. Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

4 Yuji Ichioka, “The Early Japanese Immigrant Quest for Citizenship: The Background of the Ozawa case,” *Amerasia Journal* 4, no. 2 (1977): 1-22.

5 The four cases were *Terrace v. Thompson*, *Porterfield v. Webb*, *Webb v. O’Brien*, and *Frick v. Webb*. See Keith Aoki, “No Right to Own? The Early Twentieth-Century ‘Alien Land Laws’ as Prelude to Internment,” *Third World Law Journal* 37 (1998-99): 37-72, note 61.

6 On the rise of the model minority, see Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014).

7 Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 362.

8 On the Asian American movement, see Karen Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (New York: Verso, 2016); Daryl Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012) and *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2008); William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

9 *Getting Together*, Feb. 1970, quoted in Chin, “New York Chinatown,” 10.

10 Diane C. Fujino, *Samurai Among Panthers: Richard Aoki on Race, Resistance, and a Paradoxical Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

11 The best scholarly source on the I-Hotel is Estella Habal, *San Francisco’s International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007). See Curtis Choy’s documentary, “The Fall of the I-Hotel,” for interviews with tenants and activists, along with arresting footage of the eviction.

12 On Filipino labor organizing and the UFW, see Craig

Scharlin and Lilia V. Villanueva, *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Labor Center and Asian American Studies Center, 1992; reprinted, University of Washington Press, 2000).

13 Susie Ling, "The Mountain Movers: Asian American Women's Movement in Los Angeles," *Amerasia Journal* 15, no. 1 (1989); 51-67; Mary Uyematsu Kao, "Three Step Boogie in 1970s Los Angeles: Sansei Women in the Asian American Movement," *Amerasia Journal* 35, no. 1 (2009); 112-138.

14 Jeanie Dere, "A Wei Min Sister," *Stand Up*, 175-81.

15 For an overview of the movement, see Mitchell T. Maki, Harry H. L. Kitano, and S. Megan Berthold, *Achieving the Impossible Dream: How Japanese Americans Obtained Redress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). A more particular Seattle-centric account can be found in Robert Sadamu Shimabukuro, *Born in Seattle: The Campaign for Japanese American Redress* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001). The CWRIC report is United States Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

16 Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

17 On the Chin case, see Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) and the documentaries by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña, "Who Killed Vincent Chin?" (1987) and Curtis Chin, "Vincent Who?" (2009).

18 Deepa Iyer examines the post-9/11 period and its broad impact across racial, ethnic, and religious lines in *We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future* (New York: The New Press, 2015).

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