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From Anti-war Activism to Community-Based Organizing

For Asian Americans, the 1960s were synonymous with political protest. Asian Americans of diverse ages helped to transform the Antiwar Movement from its emphasis on saving American lives to exposing racism, sexism, and capitalism at home and abroad. Activists linked the U.S. war in Vietnam to critiques of U.S. imperialism and militarism in Cambodia, Hiroshima, Okinawa, the Philippines, Hawaii, and elsewhere (Fujino 128). Because most of the early Asian immigrants were predominantly working class between the sixties and the eighties, most of them had closer ties to their local communities and promoted hard work and nonresistance. As shown in the film “The Fall of the I-Hotel”, more than 2,000 community activists and protesters nonviolently locked arms in front of the hotel to prevent the police from entering the building, with I-Hotel guards lined up in nine rows and shouting “We won't move!”. The families of Asian American activists were often either working-class or promoting study in the sciences, professional fields, or pragmatic occupations (Fujino 130). On the other hand, the Black Freedom and New Left movements inspired Asian American student activists and socialist radicals to transition from anti-war activism to community-based organizing, as in the case of the Black Panther Party's plans for participatory democracy, beloved communities, and interracial solidarity. Although the Black Panther Party was founded in response to police brutality, it quickly expanded to advocate for other social reforms and to win community support for service to the people. "Serve the people" programs and connections to the community, particularly working-class communities, became central guiding principles of the AAM. Activists developed programs to meet basic human rights, including the provision of housing, jobs, healthcare, and education (Fujino 128).

More importantly, the influence of the New Communist movement also fostered a direct connection between the Asian immigrant working class and the local community. Capital encourages and manipulates labor migration to maximize its leverage over the working class (Kwong 295). So, to avoid capital's use of migration to hold the entire working-class hostage, the community workers' movement, including Asians, strengthened its ties with independent groups that cooperated in multinational organizations. The labor struggles were integral to the AAM, not only because of the working-class location of many Asian Americans in that period and historically but also because of the influence of Marxist theory, which identifies capitalism as the primary source of oppression and class struggle as key to liberation (Fujino 128).

Work Cited

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Peter Kwong, “The Politics of Labour Migration: Chinese Workers in New York” Socialist Register, vol. 37, no. 17, 2001, pp. 293-312.