

asian americans:
the Movement
and the MOMENT



edited by Steve Louie and Glenn K. Omatsu
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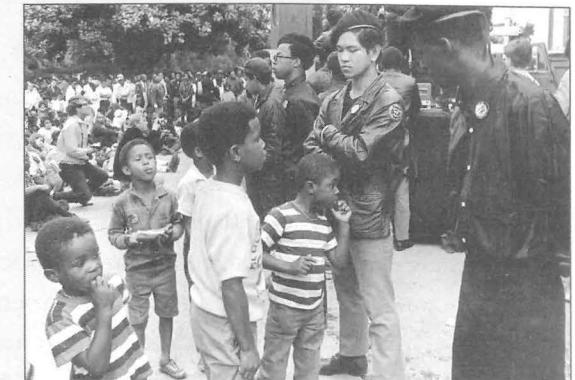
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"Free Huey" Black Panther Party rally, Oakland 1968.
© 1968, Jeffrey Blankfort/PF/courtesy of the artist



When We Wanted It Done, We Did It Ourselves

I have to admit, AzN PrYde kind of caught me off guard. Do a web search, and you can see it for yourself. I'm so far out of that demographic that I could cause my fifteen-year-old son serious embarrassment if I put up an AzN webpage and picked up a Honda Civic to trick out. :-) Don't get me wrong. There're parts of AzN PrYde (think fashion, hip-hop, and car culture wrapped around Asian-ness) that look like fun.. But I've also noticed elements of fierce racist thinking. (Note to parents: DON'T automatically assume the worst if you see the spelling around!)

The extreme nationalism worries me. One of the hallmarks of the Asian American Movement was to "unite all who can be united," whether that was within the Asian community or with other communities, especially people of color. This occurred because the Movement saw the glass as half-full, not half-empty; we emphasized our similarities, not our differences, in order to build a new consciousness of who we are and what we stand for. I invite you to see how strongly these ideas are reflected throughout this anthology.

Today, even as we continue to battle racial injustice and politics that pit people against each other, consciousness about race and nationality has become more strongly influenced by the "glass is half-empty" philosophy. Political careers and commercial empires can be built appealing to racial and nationalistic ideas, precisely because it is important to be vigilant about racism. A poll done earlier this year showed sizeable negativity towards Asian Americans. One of its findings: 32 percent still think Chinese Americans are more loyal to China than the U.S. (and 20 percent weren't sure). The poll's exposure of animosities towards Asian Americans was subsequently confirmed by the hostilities revealed in the media towards Chinese Americans after an American spy plane made an emergency landing in China.

But in being vigilant, is the glass half-full or half-empty? In big urban areas where Asian populations are especially large, middle school

Jonathan Jackson's funeral,
"Power salute" of respect,
Oakland 1970.
© 1970, Nikki Arai/PF



the Movement and the Moment

youth pick up the “my Asian brothers and sisters” beat. But there’s no rhythm and there’s no soul — it doesn’t reach out.

There’s more “us” or “us-first” consciousness in Asian communities than at any time in our American history, sometimes even in supposedly progressive organizations. Somewhere along the line, “unite all who can be united” became “watch out for yourself because no one else will.” But as society moves into a future where “majority” and “minority” may mean things very different than they have, what kind of society do we want and whose interests should prevail? Lessons from the Asian American Movement may have more relevance than anyone thought when this anthology project first got started nearly three years ago.



“Free Huey” Black Panther Party rally, Oakland 1968.
© 1968, Jeffrey Blankfort/PF/courtesy of the artist

In the late Sixties, the same kinds of questions were being asked because of what preceded us. We saw sit-ins become a common tactic to protest race discrimination at lunch counters and auto dealerships. Police batons, dogs, and water cannons were the common response. The Berlin Wall was built. Civil rights confrontations escalated. Armed federal authorities forced school desegregation. White-escalated violence against blacks soared. Black churches were bombed; children died. The Civil Rights Act was passed. Weeks later, four civil rights workers were killed. John Glenn went into space for the first time. African nations across the continent declared their independence from colonialism. Cold War tensions with the then-Soviet Union rose with the abortive U.S. government-backed Bay of Pigs invasion and the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba.



San Francisco State Strike 1968.
© 1968, Jeffrey Blankfort/PF/courtesy of the artist

United States and in dozens of other countries. Women questioned traditional roles and attitudes. “Orientals” were held up as “model minorities.” Martin Luther King was assassinated. Third World Liberation Front strikes heated up campuses, first at San Francisco State College and then at UC Berkeley.

Small wonder we questioned who we were, where we stood, and what we should do as we came of age.

Conventional wisdom now portrays that period in American history as suffering from divisiveness and its mass movements as chaotic, disorderly, and unruly. But this anthology’s stories affirm another analysis: minorities infused new vitality and strength into American society with struggles that opposed the inhumanity of discrimination and oppression of anyone different from “the majority.” It is not surprising, but it is fitting that America’s racial minorities rose to demand the best from humanity and nothing less.

From the beginning of this project, we sought to tell the story of the Asian American Movement from the point of view of its participants, who came from a variety of backgrounds and went on to varied lives. These are folks who were in the Movement’s trenches, the people without whom there would be no Movement. Their ideas and perspectives crossed many lines in the political spectrum – but broad as the Movement was, we still challenged the status quo in the community and society as a whole, and were radical and controversial.

In telling this story, it’s important to point out that the Movement’s visions aren’t isolated. In the late Sixties, our closest brothers and sisters were in the black, Chicano, and Native American movements. But struggles against oppressive conditions are not ours alone. Oppression wears many masks — ask people in Ireland, ask workers, ask people who are gay and lesbian, ask women, or ask minority nationalities *of every color* in countries around the globe. The Movement’s lessons and legacies are important because they come from our direct experiences — but we share them with many, many others.

Individually, the stories in this anthology are complex. They weave the experiences and emotions of race, gender, nationalism, class, and history into rich accounts of a handful of years. They tell you what it was like to live at the time, to deal politically and personally with the challenges society threw at us. Most are narratives; a few are essays. A one-act play waits for you to be seated; poetry dances with sentences. The writers will make you smile, chuckle, and laugh; they’ll make you clench your jaw, nod your head, shake your head, and, yes, bring tears to your eyes. You’ll share observation, revelation, jubilation, anger, despair, sorrow, quiet insight, happiness, and

San Francisco State Strike 1968.
© 1968, Jeffrey Blankfort/PF/courtesy of the artist



UC Berkeley, Third World Strike, 1969.
© 1969, Doug Wachter/PF/courtesy of the artist



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Sather Gate, UC Berkeley, Third World Strike 1969.
© 1969, Doug Wachter/courtesy of the artist



the exhilaration from being part of something that was bigger than any one of us.

Collectively, these stories chronicle the rise of the Movement at the point when it became a moment in history. They explore the nature of the relationship between movements and society. They point to the relationship between movements and the individual, and the importance of understanding how changes in people and society have a symbiotic relationship. They paint detailed strokes about how the Movement burst on the scene and how people's involvement changed their lives.

The visual record is no less compelling. Photographs captured moments. Graphics and drawings got us thinking. Leaflets and flyers rallied support. Newspapers reported new angles. Newsletters shared accomplishments. Posters inspired and ridiculed. Cartoons made a point. Lyrics and rhetoric spoke to our soul and emotions. (And a great rib recipe will make your mouth water!). What's here is barely a fraction of what's out there in garages, on bookshelves, and in closets. It's all culture from the street, created in the basements, storefronts, and living rooms of the community, not the boardrooms and plush offices that tower high above the street in glass-and-concrete canyons.

Rebellious and defiant, we were out to make society serve the needs of the people, and that included us. We would not be ignored, passed by, put down, or stereotyped. Even the name "Oriental," just like "Negro," became offensive

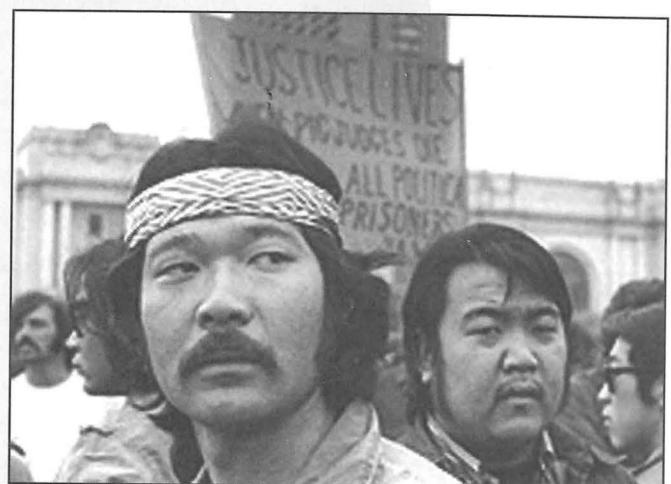
because it evoked all the negative aspects of an era we wanted to be done with. Profoundly influenced by the struggle of black people — and by people like Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, Bobby Seale, Huey P. Newton, and Leonard Peltier — we stood proudly alongside black, Chicano and Native American brothers and sisters in countless marches, strikes, and protests. The Movement struck a huge chord among the young people because we stood for doing things differently. We rejected the idea that a society that clearly had no interest in our well-being should define our social, political, and cultural life and needs.

Determined to change this, our vision included reform, immediate needs, revolution, and what the future should be. "Serve the people" became a rallying cry. We fought for, and forged, ethnic studies. To meet pressing community needs, we set up medical clinics, free breakfast programs, draft counseling, community advocacy groups, nutrition, children and youth programs, childcare, food giveaways, regular movie showings, senior drop-in centers, language and tutoring classes, and arts programs because those services were scarce in those days. To better understand what society needed to become and help ourselves change, we read and studied Franz Fanon, Marx, Lenin, and Mao, and debated dialectics. Because we shouldn't wait for the future to start making changes, we started women's groups and took on women's issues within our organizations.

We had an international perspective, drawing inspiration from and supporting independence and freedom movements of peoples in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, whether we wanted to help raise their standard of living, opposed colonialism, or saw imperialism as the enemy of people around the world. We opposed the war in Vietnam, whether we hated all wars, opposed genocide, or supported victory for the National Liberation Front and Ho Chi Minh. We learned from international struggles, whether we saw them as freedom movements, as countries that wanted independence, or as Marxist-Leninists who

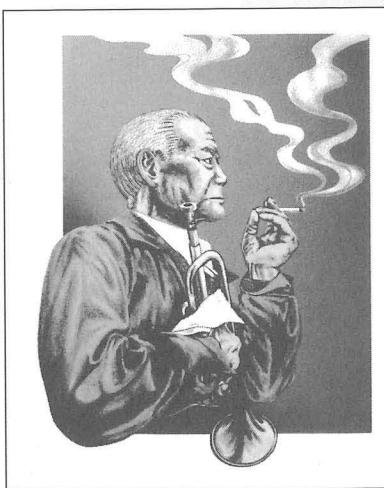
put people's needs before profit. Our heroes included Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara. We cut cane in the fields of Cuba and saw firsthand the successes of Chinese socialism.

"Los Siete" rally, Oakland, San Francisco 1969.
© 1969, Nikki Arai



Support for the Native American takeover of Alcatraz, 1970.
© 1970, Isago Isao Tanaka/
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Manong Blues.
© 1979, Jim Dong/courtesy of the artist



Clearly, this period lies in the past. Conventional wisdom in 2001's Asian America dismisses our radicalism as youthful excesses, and even some Movement veterans have turned their backs on the ideas they held at that time. These twenty-five writers celebrate them for reasons as varied as their backgrounds. But you won't find nostalgia here. The legacies span stories; there are personal lessons shared in each essay.

A note: the history of Asian America is a stage with a growing cast. One or more nationalities may hold the center stage momentarily, but as decades pass, others join them. Today, we enjoy the vibrancy of Southeast and South Asian communities. In 1970, we did not. Yet, the Movement's legacies don't belong to any one nationality because they speak more to the American experience than our roots in Asia. Are the Movement's lessons and legacies too far removed from those who came later? Is the glass half-full or half-empty?

For myself personally, I don't think there was ever a time when I didn't know I was Chinese — or, to put it a different way, when I wasn't *reminded* I was Oriental. Sometimes it was violence, like having to fight my way home after school because bullies thought our family didn't belong in "their" city. Sometimes it was "mere" name-calling and taunts, as in the mid-Sixties when classmates regularly joked about playing "kill the gook" with me on one side and everyone else on the other. They laughingly said they'd give me a gun, but they'd still kill me because they were a bigger force. When the Vietnam War ended years later, I thought again about bigger forces and smaller forces when that last U.S. military helicopter left the U.S. embassy in Vietnam.

As a youngster in the Fifties, the deal was you handled discrimination with dignity.



Young Lords Party spokesperson Juan Gonzalez speaks to community gathering in I Wor Kuen storefront basement, San Francisco.
© 1971, Nikki Arai

more than demanding the civil right to sit where they wanted on the bus and eat where they wanted in restaurants.

When the Black Panther Party marched into California's legislative chambers in Sacramento with unloaded shotguns, I sure liked their attitude. I didn't think it was a coincidence that the Civil Rights Movement was followed by increased

It didn't take with me. My father, a Christian minister, tried to teach me to "turn the other cheek" when confronted with indignities. I told him that doing so would only get the other side of my ass kicked. But more importantly, my folks taught me the lesson of whom to stand with. My dad eventually left the church because at that time, he felt the institution limited his ability to work on civil rights issues. I remember my mom getting angry whenever the television showed black people ("Negroes" then) being attacked by police dogs and water cannons for nothing

police brutality in the black community. I thought the Panthers were right to defend it. In my first year of college, I began volunteering in a storefront in Watts, one area in Los Angeles' black community.

Around the same time, someone told me that the first issue of *Gidra*, the first radical Asian American newspaper, was in the works. I started going to meetings of the L.A. Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), and I felt like everything fell into place. These were people who put reason and structure to experiences and emotion I'd grown up with. The chip on my shoulder and the isolation and frustration I'd felt trying to fight back by myself fell away, replaced by the growing realization that racism was a social issue, amid the solidarity I felt in AAPA. Fighting back took on a whole different dimension.

Slowly, my circle of friends began to change as I threw myself into Movement activities. I helped organize the first Asian group at Occidental College in Los Angeles. There were barely 60 Asian students there at the time, and they were pretty divided on whether we even needed a group. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was active on campus, the anti-war movement was in full swing, and the Black Student Union was making white students very uncomfortable with demands for funding from student body fees. Joining that mix seemed just a shade too radical for many of my peers, but a handful of us finally started a group. We successfully demanded and organized the first Asian American history class at Occidental, and were active in the Third World student coalition.

In college, although I didn't know it at the time, I started rethinking my life the deeper I got into Movement activities. I spent a year on the road meeting Movement activists throughout the country. In the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston and New York, I stayed long enough to help, and make some lifelong friends. At that time in 1970, I counted over sixty campuses with Asian American student groups, all of them homegrown. No one had gone on the road to start them; centuries of American capitalism had done that for us. Everyone had stories about their local experiences. You could already see that "bigger something" was changing our lives — right in front of us, history in the making. For the first time, Asian Americans were visibly joining en masse with black and brown people to fight racism and other forms of oppression.

International Women's Day, San Francisco 1971.
© 1971, Nikki Arai



If you want knowledge,
you must take part
in the practice of
changing reality.

If you want to know
the taste of a pear,
you must change
the pear by eating
it yourself.



Mao Tse-tung
On Practice, 1937

Some of my heroes were Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai who both abandoned their class backgrounds to join the revolution in China. Throughout the years, I have had a devil of a time explaining to my in-laws, relatives in China, and friends I have made during travels to China why I admired and studied Mao. They all assumed it was because I was a patriotic, overseas Chinese. Nothing could be further from the truth. I heard about Mao's ideas from the Black Panther Party. The Panthers introduced the Red Book to the American movement, and popularized the idea of "Serve the People." On my second trip to China recently, I finally met someone who "got it right." He'd heard about my activities on Kearny Street in San Francisco's Chinatown, knew about Mao's popularity, and asked me why I liked him. Thinking we were just making conversation, I told him, "Mao talked about eating pears." He grinned, and through the translator said, "You like Mao because he showed you a different way of looking at the world?" I was astounded. He asked me how I was introduced to Mao, and when I told him, he solemnly told me, "The Panthers served the people." I nearly fell over.

If Mao crystallized a different view of the world that I was struggling to learn, I still had to decide what to do with that, and how to do it. My decision to work on a truck dock unloading tractor-trailers to organize among workers of color was a political decision and something I sought, along with others I knew in the

Movement. But it was much harder to shed ideas I'd grown up with about what it meant to work with my hands, and to deal with how difficult it was to organize a workers' caucus. One organization decided I should step down from a

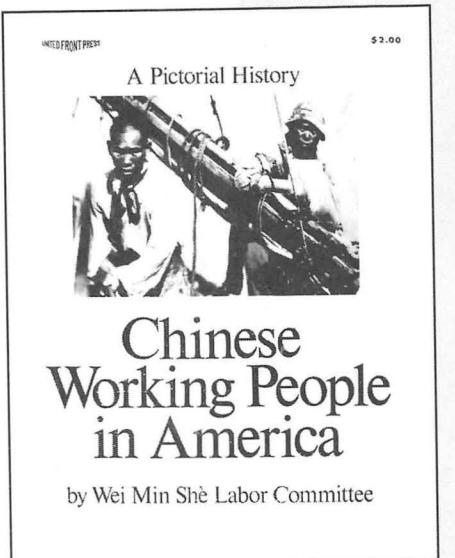
leadership body because I had some very individualistic tendencies and was not setting a good example (it's definitely a struggle to "walk the talk"). On the dock, we were working collectively. Could I learn how to lead people in making collective decisions when everyone, including myself, was accustomed to looking toward someone else for decisions?

To this day, those twelve years unloading trucks were the most important days of my life (not because of the work, mind you, because it was boring-ass work doing what we were told to do). I worked with others to get organized, to deal with problems on-the-job and support community issues like the International Hotel. I learned more about respect for people as human beings, more about what people care about in their lives, and how perceptively everyday people can analyze situations and the world around them, than I have learned at any other point in my life. These experiences taught me about how to listen to what people need, instead of making assumptions, and how to act with them to get things done.

Anti-war demonstration, Los Angeles City Hall, 1971. The old left in the new movement.
© 1971, Mary Uyematsu Kao/PF



Chinese Working People in America.
© 1972, Wei Min Shé Labor Committee



Chinese Working People in America

by Wei Min Shé Labor Committee

Everyone's experiences in the Movement were intensely political in an era when taking no stand was a stand, and intensely personal because we all had to decide things for ourselves. Our visions for the future were often different, reflecting the different backgrounds and outlooks we brought to the Movement. The twenty-five people who share their stories with you had differing visions, too, but collectively, their experiences tell us about one legacy of the Movement — the need for a political, cultural, and social vision. Their interests weren't sustained because there was an economic reward or the promise of a better position for themselves. I leave it to you to decide what each writer's vision was. But when you consider these stories as a whole, think about the kind of people whose stories you're reading. Did the Movement, its ideas, and the changes it brought about come from mannered speakers in hallowed halls? Or from people from walks of life that society dismisses as marginal, as "the governed"? Maybe it's not just the vision that's important, but who has it, and who we listen to.

In these twenty-five accounts, the character of the vision shows through in their ideas and actions. Serving the people doesn't just mean going down to the corner storefront to volunteer; it's a perspective, a state of mind that can apply to everything, including businesses and companies. At a time when medical costs force some to choose between food and prescriptions and when energy profits may be obscene but are still "just" profits, there's no doubt among the people on the streets about the nature of essential services. Recently, I overheard someone in a restaurant telling her date, "You know, I don't think I'm a communist but there's just some things that people shouldn't be making profits from." High up in the glass-and-concrete canyons, the view about profit doesn't include being able to warm a baby's milk, having a house but not being able to warm it, or having to choose between heat or food. Profit is simply part of an equation that keeps society running, and "it's just part of the price we pay." Maybe, it's not just that we have a vision, but whose interests the vision serves?

Finally, the effort to transform society intersects with a struggle to change ourselves, to do what's needed to be done — and embody the values of the kind of society we envision. My decision to go into the working class was primarily a political decision, as were others' decisions to do what they did. I may have been determined to do that, but determination isn't enough — there's also the "how you do it," because I didn't do it thinking I was some kind of savior or to make

Editorial staff of
Asian Women, 1971.
© 1971, Jean Quan



Asia Gardens restaurant strike, Chinatown, San Francisco, 1972.
© 1972, Steve Louie/PF

friends. The self-struggle in these stories ranges from the struggle to make some political sense of the world to efforts to change ourselves to match our declared principles. Personally, the success of my self-struggle was less a matter of whether I was perfect than it was a matter of how much I tried. Take the example of personal relationships and the traditional attitudes about the roles of women and men. Ultimately, it seems to me, changing society occurs when we change ourselves at the same time we try for big-picture changes, because even in personal relationships, we can treat each other with old ideas — or new ideas that enable every kind of person to develop to their fullest potential. Maybe, change starts — and proceeds — with each person individually at the same time that we're trying to change the world.

Another note: the Movement clearly had shortcomings, such as contradictions between what we professed and how we behaved, in our relations with other organizations, between leadership and membership, between men and women, and in our personal relationships. These kinds of difficulties existed Movement-wide. But I ask you — look at the companies, schools, organizations, and relationships you see around you. Where do you think the Movement or any kind of activism gets those contradictions? Looking back, I think our successes and shortcomings reflected how much we were willing to struggle with individualistic tendencies that come from the influence of the society we live in. These problems were hardly unique to the Movement, and they're present in progressive organizations today. Perhaps changing ourselves at the same time we try to transform the world is more important than it seems.

The Movement emerged and picked up momentum during the late Sixties and charged forward during the Seventies. By the end of the Seventies, many of its ideas had already been embraced and institutionalized widely within Asian communities. Organizations like the Japanese Community Youth Center in San

Loading dock crew.
© 1974, YRL/Louie



XXIV — steve louie

International Hotel Victory Mural, San Francisco.
© 1976, Jim Dong/courtesy of the artist

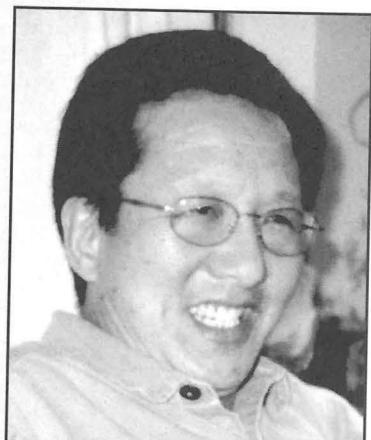


Francisco still exist today. Others, like the Basement Workshop in New York, no longer exist (but the people who nurtured it or were nurtured by it spread like the seeds popping from pinecones in a forest fire). As a result, the Movement began to fade as its ideas morphed. But the fading, far from being a bad thing, simply meant the Movement added to the political, social, and cultural legacies from others before us.

Steve Louie
San Francisco, May 2001

Steve Louie was active in the Asian American student and anti-war movements, working with Los Angeles' Asian American Political Alliance, and helped to start the Asian Alliance at Occidental College. He helped establish Joint Communications, an Asian prisoner support program in Northern California. He was an active member of the U.S.-China People's Friendship Association. He worked at the Asian Community Center in San Francisco Chinatown, and with Wei Min She, an Asian American community activist organization in the San Francisco Bay Area, nearly from its start. He co-edited and took pictures for *Wei Min Bao*, a monthly newspaper. He was active in working-class organizing in the San Francisco Bay Area. Today, he lives in San Francisco, and works as a business systems analyst.

Steve Louie.
Courtesy of Steve Louie



the Movement and the Moment

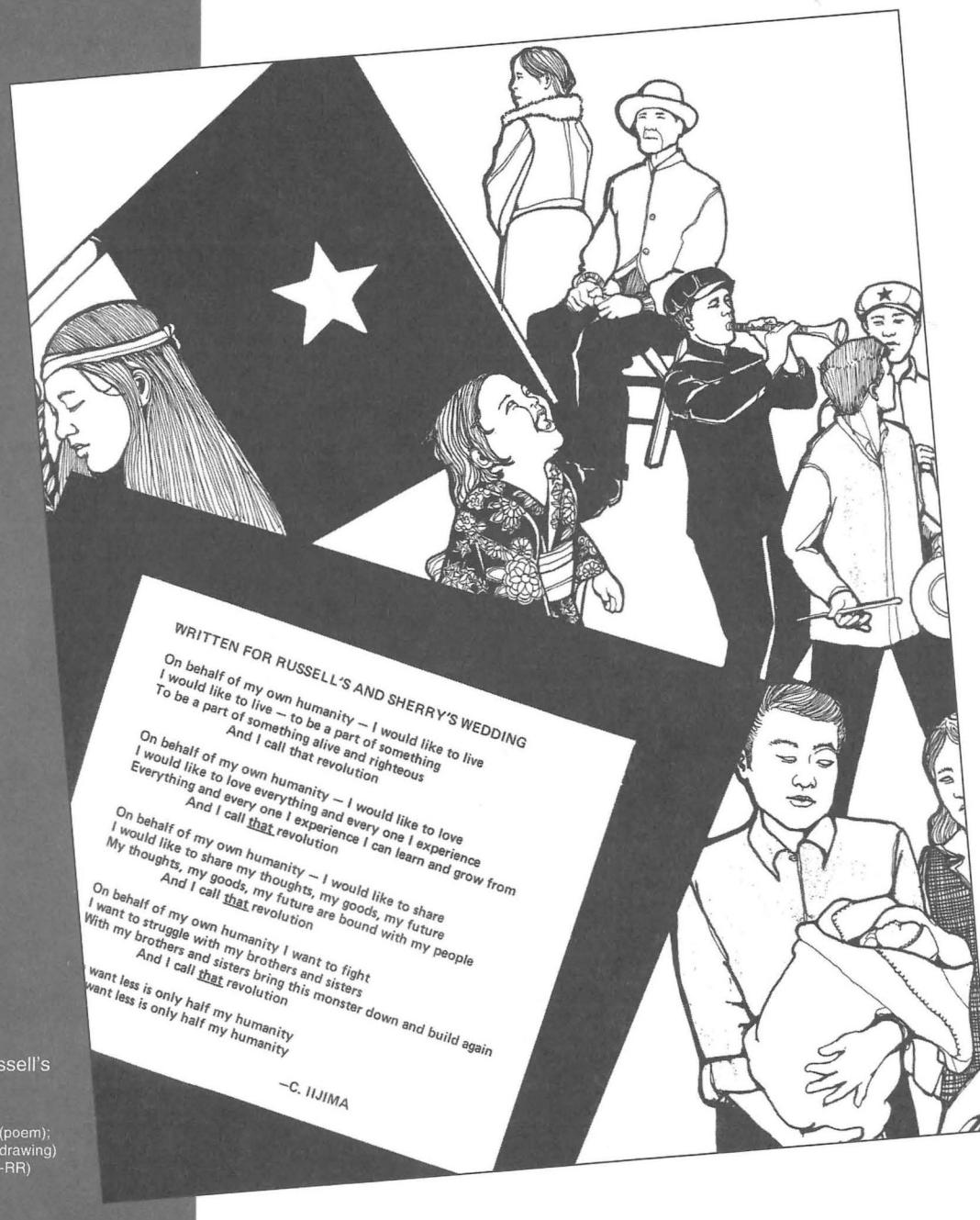
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Los Angeles anti-war demonstration, Asian Contingent, City Hall, 1971.
© Mary Uyematsu Kao/Amerasia 15:1 (1989)

Culture is not just the mirror of the system. It should be the hammer that should shape the people's destiny.

—Bertolt Brecht



Pontifications on the Distinction between Grains of Sand and Yellow Pearls

Chris Iijima

I'm at the age when people ask me to remember "when," and I am vaguely irritated because I think I'm still too young to be asked that question.

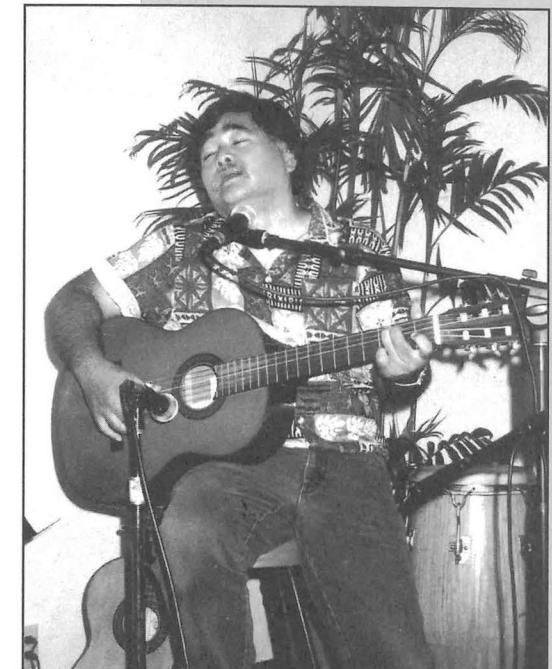
I'm at the time of my life when people ask me about "lessons learned," and I either can't remember enough of what happened to draw out lessons, or what I can remember isn't worth drawing lessons from. Moreover, what I do remember is dictated by my perspective then and now.

I'm at the point where what I don't remember, I just lie about.

I suppose in the final analysis, that is what history is about—what we remember, what perspective our memory reflects, and what we lie about to make the point we want to make.

In the early 1970s, we were involved in the Yellow Pearl Project at Basement Workshop in Chinatown (in, literally, a basement on Elizabeth Street). It was a gathering of dozens of young Asian American artists and non-artists who, in essence, wanted to work on something together. I remember we did a number of benefit concerts to raise money for the Project. In one of them Alex Chin and his brother Paul's band that was made of guys from Chinatown were on the program. Alex was not American-born, but I remember he could cover both James Brown and Frank Sinatra, and used to knock Charlie and me out regularly. We were worried about gangs even though the benefit was uptown in a hall at Columbia University. I remember being assured by Alex

One-man concert in Gardena, California.
© 1998, Mary Uyematsu Kao/PF



A grain,
A tiny grain of sand
Landing in the belly of
the monster

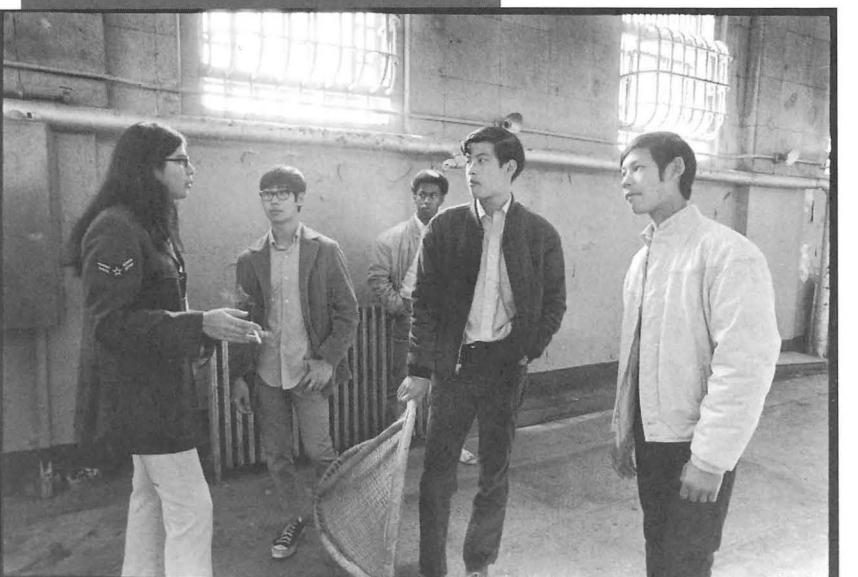
And Time is telling
Only how long it takes
Layer after layer
As its beauty unfolds
Until its captor
It holds in peril.

"A Grain of Sand"
© 1970, Chris Iijima and Joanne Miyamoto
Yellow Pearl album (AASC-RR)

"The Lumpen"
Artist: unknown/Gidra/AASC-RR
UCLA Asian American Studies Reading Room



...we were simply responding to what was going on around, about, and within us. It was an activity that found its meaning and purpose not intrinsically, but in relation to what it fed and what it was nurtured by.



Alcatraz support.
© 1970, Isago Isao Tanaka/
courtesy of the artist

that he would try to make people check their guns in the guitar cases. Maybe this is a lie, but I remember it vividly.

Some people ask me occasionally about my thoughts on "Asian American culture." This is ironic, because I never have envisioned myself as an artist of any sort (this does not include the countless others who, after they had heard me sing, told me that I am not an artist of any sort). John Coltrane was an artist. Diego Rivera was an artist. In my world, one cannot be an artist unless one approaches what one does as a craft or, at least, practices. I didn't really do either. My entry into singing and performing was a happy accident of my political organizing. So when I write something in response to a request to write about culture, I can't help feeling that I write as a fraud.

Actually, the problem of my fraud is exacerbated by the fact that I never thought of what we did when we (Nobuko Miyamoto, Charlie Chin, and I) recorded the *Grain of Sand* album as Asian American culture. We thought of it solely as a way to document what we were doing and were grateful to have been given the chance. Charlie and I sometimes now try to recreate what we thought we were doing at the time, and we come back to the notion that we were simply responding to what was going on around, about, and within us. It was an activity that found its meaning and purpose not intrinsically, but in relation to what it fed and what it was nurtured by. "Asian American culture" thirty years ago was, in essence, the cumulative political and ideological acts of many different Asian Americans contesting subordination in many different ways. All that we did was sing about it.

The inspiring aspect of what we saw as we traveled around in those years was the breadth and depth of activity. In almost every community we visited to play, particularly in California from Stockton to Santa Barbara, there were small pockets of Asian Americans trying to organize something whether it was a service project, a bookstore, a protest, or a community center. We were able both to witness the relationship and help be the

connection—years before there was an Internet—between what people were doing in Philadelphia, Chicago, or Boston. Whatever there was that was common among what we experienced and saw became the source of our musical material and our inspiration.

But our work was grounded by and grounded in what people around us were concretely doing.

*In 1972, we were approached by Barbara Dane to record an album for her company, a small independent record company called Paredon Records. We had gotten to know Barbara through singing at numerous antiwar rallies and events at which we all appeared. Given the lack of major financial resources, we recorded *A Grain of Sand* in a few days—often in one take as if in live performance. One can hear very clearly on the "We Are the Children" track that my voice cracks on the chorus, and I start laughing. I wanted to redo it, but everyone said it didn't matter; they were too tired to do it again, and so they left it in. To this day, it is my favorite part of the song. Whatever contribution the *Grain of Sand* album, I've always felt it was less the "first" identification of something expressly "Asian American," as it is often described, than it was a symbol of and an homage to the tradition of community survival and the political struggle of generations of Asians in the United States.*

In the last few years we have been asked to "reunite" and sing together again on a number of different occasions before a new generation of audiences. All three of us were apprehensive about doing it since we were worried that it would be merely an exercise in nostalgia. Our decision to perform for young people we decided had to have a purpose beyond a middle-aged recapitulation of "how it used to be." Our hope was if we were to perform again it was to be a reminder to another generation that the cultural history of Asian America is rooted in a culture of resistance to oppression and in a striving to achieve a more inclusive

Iijima, Miyamoto, and Charlie Chin in concert.
© 1972, Bob Hsiang/PF



*Nosotros somos
Asiáticos
Y nos gusta cantar pa'
la gente.
Hablamos la misma
lengua,
Porque luchamos por
las mismas cosas.*

We are Asian,
And we like to sing for
the people.
We speak the same
language,
Because we struggle for
the same things.

"Somos Asiáticos"
© 1971, Chris Iijima and Joanne Miyamoto
Yellow Pearl/AASC-RR

Chris and Charlie.
© 1981, Jun Kiyama



Asian American culture is too often defined backwards. That is, we tend to define it in terms of what artists do—poets, playwrights, filmmakers, jazz musicians, actors, and graphic artists—rather than in terms of the collective and shared experience of people.



Cultural workers.
© KDP Archives/Helen Toribio

society. In that sense we have seen our recent performances as a bridge between what they as a new generation could achieve and the struggle for equity by the generations before them.

My kids watched a videotape that was sent to me by a friend of when Nobuko and I were on the Mike Douglas Show with John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1970. It was painful for me to watch, not the least of which was watching myself at 21 in my complete incoherent cluelessness (not that at 50 I am any less substantively incoherent or clueless, except I now have the ability that comes with maturity to hide it). I watched the tape simultaneously with my Mom and Dad (my two greatest role models) and with my two boys, Alan and Christopher. And as I watched some of the segment sandwiched by my relevant generations, it dawned upon me that I was the same age now as my parents were at the time they originally watched the show. I'm not sure what it meant, but for me it was kind of a "moment."

Asian American culture is too often defined backwards. That is, we tend to define it in terms of what artists do—poets, playwrights, filmmakers, jazz musicians, actors, and graphic artists—rather than in terms of the collective and shared experience of people. I've always believed that artists, despite what they themselves believe, are really just reflections of the times. Thirty years ago, everything that was done in the context of the

"Movement" was Asian American culture irrespective of what its substantive content was—from silkscreen posters of Chairman Mao to cartoons of Charlie Chin describing his recipe for spare ribs. Our collective unity came not from the representations of a shared sentiment, but in the reality of our collective participation in political and community struggle.

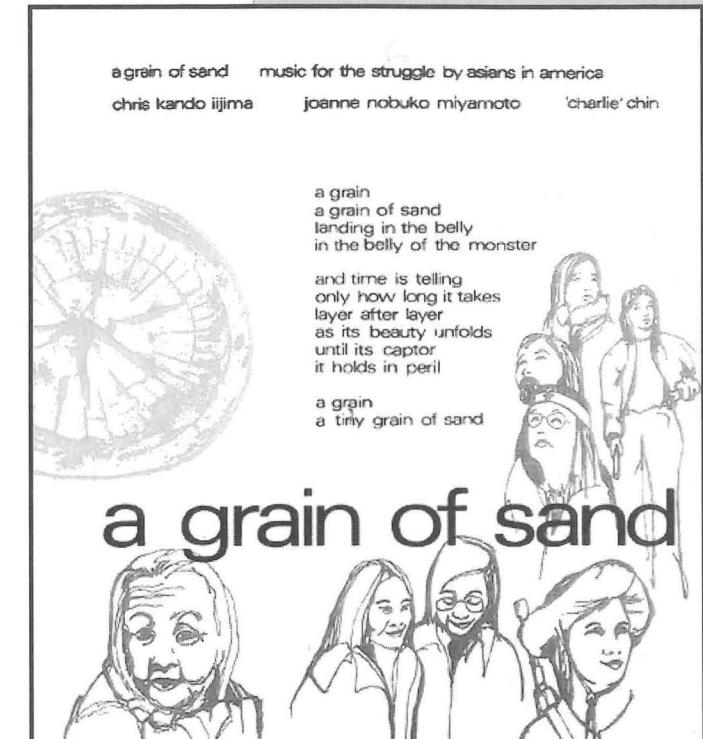
In fact, on a broader level, culture, like racial identity itself, is a dynamic and ultimately democratic construction. One of my law professor friends, Sharon Hom, has defined culture as "a set of values

and institutions, constructed by social forms, practices, and ideological beliefs that are constantly in negotiation." Another law professor friend, Eric Yamamoto, has postulated that culture is "not simply shared practices and values" but a "system of inherited conceptions . . . by which [group members] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life." It is how we "think about [ourselves] and others in social settings."

I often have thought that the original content of Asian American identity and thus the basis of Asian American culture was simply the construction of a counter-narrative—an oppositional voice—to the white supremacist narrative and culture about the inferiority of people of color and Asians in particular. In reality at its beginning, "Asian American culture" had no cohesive or thematic ethnic or even racial strain. It was a loosely connected sense among a broad spectrum of people that what we were doing separately was politically progressive, racially oppositional, and thus somehow interconnected. I once wrote in a law review article that Asian American identity was originally meant to be a means to an end rather than an end in itself. It was created as an organizing tool to mobilize Asians to participate in the progressive movements of the times. It was as much a mechanism to identify with one another as to identify with the struggles of others whether it was African Americans or Asians overseas, and that it was less a marker of what one was and more a marker of what one believed. That it has now become synonymous with "pride in one's ethnic heritage" is a complete evisceration of what it was originally and what it was meant to be.

There were two groups that we worked with when we had the storefront called "Chickens Come Home To Roost." As Nobuko tells young people these days, we wanted something militant sounding, so we took a phrase of Malcolm's for our name. Of course, we were known around the neighborhood as "The Chickens." The two groups were Operation Move, a community group that used to take over abandoned

"A Grain of Sand"
©Arlan Huang and Karl Matsuda



...Asian American identity was...as much a mechanism to identify with one another as to identify with the struggles of others whether it is African Americans or Asians overseas, and...it was less a marker of what one was and more a marker of what one believed. That it has now become synonymous with "pride in one's ethnic heritage" is a complete evisceration of what it was originally...

Yellow Brotherhood
© 1972, Gidra/AASC-RR



Photo by Flea

Yellow Brotherhood FOOD FOR THOUGHT

By Julia Allara

The Westside Optimists and community guests were roused from their complacent self-satisfaction during a Youth Appreciation dinner, Tuesday night, November 18, by the testimonies of Yellow Brotherhood members, Mark "Tiger" Tarobayashi, Ronnie Nakashima and Mike Yamaki.

"I just couldn't communicate with my family. I couldn't relate my problems to them, but we have sponsors (the older guys) who we can relate our problems to," said Tiger, who now plans to attend UCLA after graduating from Dorsey High School.

Another sincere statement came from Ronnie Nakashima who said, "I used to get louder and louder in all kinds of trouble. But my biggest problem was that I had no friends and I thought I could run with them. They made me change my viewpoint. They got me back in school, now I'm in the UCLA High Potential Program. They made me understand what life is really like and how to get through it."

"Ignorance and Apathy in Our Community," was the subject of Brotherhood member, Mike Yamaki's speech. He related the frustration of trying to gain support from the community during the formative stages of their self-help organization. In spite of the group's laudable goals, individuals and community groups were not willing to sponsor them or to back anything that was not established or socially acceptable.

We are the children of the migrant worker
We are the offspring of the concentration camp.
Sons and daughters of the railroad builder
Who leave their stamp on Amerika.

We are the cousins of the freedom fighter
Brothers and sisters all around the world.
We are a part of the Third World people
Who will leave their stamp on Amerika.

"We Are the Children"
© 1970, Chris Iijima and Joanne Miyamoto
Yellow Pearl (AASC-RR)

buildings in the neighborhood slated for demolition and convert them into apartments for poor people, and El Comité, a Puerto Rican organization in the neighborhood. Operation Move had created a cafe in one abandoned building called "The Dot," and we used to sing on occasion there with a group called Pepe y Flora, singers of nueva canción and of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement. We were invited to sing with Pepe y Flora at numerous Puerto Rican community and independentista events, and eventually cut a 45 rpm (I think I have the only one left) on an independentista label called Coqui Records (after the little singing frog in Puerto Rico) backed by musicians from Puerto Rico. Our songs in Spanish were created from that period since many of our gigs were in front of predominantly Spanish-speaking people.

This is not to suggest that art must all be Socialist Realist art. In fact, one of the complaints we had of much of the political music of the 60s and 70s was that it sounded like slogans set to music. I think one of the reasons I was so influenced by the Last Poets and the music of Roy Brown or Noel Hernandez (singer/composers identified as Puerto Rican independentistas) was because they had a powerful message that was engaging in more than an intellectual way—it was complex and beautiful. Yet in the end, the real emotional power of their music lay in the power of the Black liberation and Puerto Rican independence movements of that era. The promise inherent in the music was thought of as a real possibility in the context of those heady times, and it was that possibility that made the music so moving.

We used to go sometimes to Federico's apartment just to sing (Federico was the Chairman of El Comité). Mostly I went to listen to Pepe and Flora's fellow musicians and learn from them about the beautiful music of liberation that was being made in Chile and Cuba and Puerto Rico. I used to listen to their plenas and bombas and wish that we had something as gritty and soulful as that. I also remember I used to go to Charlie's house for his Mom and Dad's annual Christmas party and sing calypso along with his Trinidadian cousins and wish we had something as unifying and spontaneous as that.

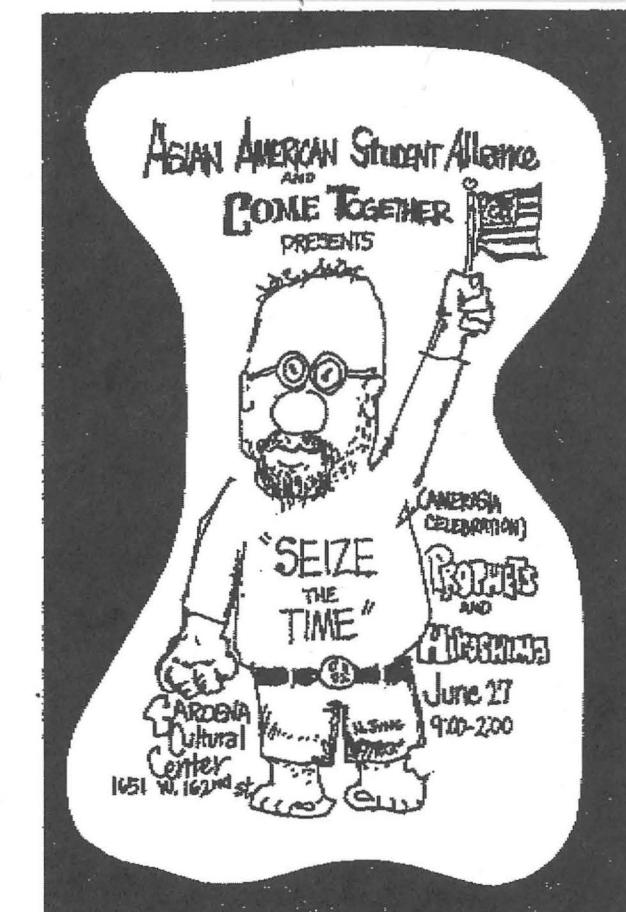
I live in Hawai'i now where there is a tradition of food, language, and culture, much of which is derived from the cultural roots of the different Asians who settled here,

except that it is known as "local" culture and has nothing to do with being identified as "Asian American." In Hawai'i, I see both the unifying power and the dangers of culture. "Local" culture has a powerful blend of Hawaiian and disparate Asian influences that arose from the grinding oppression of the plantation days and sustained the rural and underclass indigenous and immigrant populations and their ancestors against the haole dominated racial and cultural hierarchy. In the sense that it is an historical counter-narrative to class and racial domination, I feel comfortable with it, and although it is not "my" culture, it includes my family and me within its embrace. For example, the question, "where are you from?" has a different context here for me than on the continent. There, it was a question of exclusion implying that I was foreign. Here, it is a question of familiarity and inclusion because the basic assumption is that I belong, and it only asks about my neighborhood allegiance.

But I also recognize that to the extent that "local" cultural traditions are so profoundly Asian influenced and Japanese, in particular, it may also have an effect of marginalizing, certainly homogenizing, others. Indeed, only Hawaiians' indigenous culture—now resurgent after centuries of assault—can lay claim to being the authentic "local" one. Thus, maybe if we re-conceptualized a group's culture, or recognized it as a group's story about resisting subordination, culture may serve to strengthen bonds among racial groups rather than create barriers between them.

What often goes unmentioned in the revisionism of Asian American history by academia is how broad the level of support was within different segments of the Asian American community irrespective of where each was politically. There was no bright line between groups who were expressly "anti-imperialist" or groups that were primarily interested in providing services to under-served segments of the population. Indeed, people moved easily back and forth from one group to the other—each feeling ownership of the other's work. It was a time when much of the focus and activity of Asian American

The promise inherent in the music was thought of as a real possibility in the context of those heady times, and it was that possibility that made the music so moving.



"Seize the Time"
© 1970, Nathan Jung
June/July 1970/Gidra/AASC-RR

"Stop the Nihonmachi Evictions"
© 1974, Wes Senzaki/Coalition to Support Nihonmachi Tenants



*Si avanzo, sigueme
Si me detengo, empujame
Si te traiciono, matame
Si me asesinan, vengame*

If I go forward,
follow me
Push me, if I fall behind
If I betray you, kill me
If they take me,
avenge me then in kind

*Venceremos, todos unidos
Venceremos, todos unidos
Venceremos, todos unidos
Todos unidos, venceremos*

"If I go forward"
© 1970, Chris Iijima and Joanne Miyamoto
Yellow Pearl/AASC-RR

Studies on campus was how to respond concretely to the needs of communities rather than the demands of the academy. Nobuko and I often traveled to L.A. where we often sang for community groups dealing with Asian American youth. We did a concert once at the old Inner City Cultural Center in L.A., now long since torn down. We helped create a musical with folks working with the Yellow Brotherhood and Japanese American Community Services about young people and drug addiction in the Japanese community and opened with it. It was at the time when Superfly and Sweet Sweetbacks Bad Ass Song were popular movies, so people wanted to wear pimp costumes and have "professional" lighting. Nobuko made sure it was technically adequate (and damn near drove everyone crazy in the process), but it turned out to be, amazingly, off fairly high quality. More important, that night it wouldn't have mattered if it hadn't been.

This was reminiscent of times when we would play before organizations working with immigrant groups in Chinatown. I remember we played at functions put on by Wei Min She or people working at the International Hotel down the block from Wei Min's Everybody's Bookstore in which we were part of a program of Chinese folk songs and dances, films, and potluck food. I think many of the older workers in the audience had no idea what we were saying because although we could sing in Spanish we couldn't sing anything in Cantonese or Tagalog. But they appreciated the fact we were there, we supported them, and some of the younger people seemed to enjoy it. In a similar way, Nobuko and I once played outside a second story window to people in the street who were there in support of low-income families inside who were waiting for police to come and evict them from their apartments. I don't think there was any way they could have heard us over the street noise and the distance since there were no microphones—but we got a rousing ovation anyway.

I don't miss the 1960s and 1970s that much. I was in my early 20s then, and I don't miss that age at all except when I have to skip dessert because of my cholesterol count. That being said, I worry that I don't get a sense among enough young people I meet that they share the belief that there is a nobility inherent in the idea that

acceptance into the mainstream, if it comes at all, should merely be a byproduct of principled action for something better and not an end goal. While I'm still enough of an idealist to believe that one's contribution to others is ultimately measured by what one does for love rather than what one does for recognition, I'm enough of a realist to know that what one does for love is rarely "recognized."

In that sense, it is important not to get caught up in nostalgia for what the "Movement" was, but to move on to understand what the "Movement" meant. The "Movement" was an exhilarating moment in which many things were defined for me, but the lessons I learned from it are lessons that could be learned from many other kinds of experiences. Oliver Wang wrote in a recent *Amerasia Journal* that the legacy of the *Grain of Sand* album was to "push music as a legitimate space to debate politics, challenge the status quo, and envision new futures," but that "our era had passed." He was absolutely right. Our music reflecting 30 years ago cannot and should not be reflective of the demands of the present. But I also worry whether there is still a sense of urgency among Asian Americans to confront those who perpetrate present-day assaults upon people of color, the poor, and the disenfranchised. There is much talk at present about getting Asian Americans into positions of greater visibility and political power, but there is less talk about what should be done once that visibility and power is achieved. Perhaps that is why I have this nagging sense that much of "Asian American-ness" today looks backward—to vestiges of ethnic heritage, to searches for identity associated with familial ancestry, to contributions of earlier Asian American pioneers—rather than looking forward into the potential for a more just

We will win all united
All united, we will win!

*No tengas miedo,
todos unidos
No tengas miedo,
todos unidos
No tengas miedo,
todos unidos
Todos unidos,
venceremos*

Do not be afraid all
united
All united, we will win!

"Venceremos"
© 1971, Chris Iijima and Joanne Miyamoto
Yellow Pearl/AASC-RR



International Hotel and storefronts, Kearny St.
© 1974, Steve Louie/PF

society. It may be because the general political sense of the times today is so individualistic and reactionary.

We once had a weeklong gig at the now defunct Ash Grove club in L.A. I remember Nobuko and I actually told some people not to come since we would be playing the same set later on for free in the community. I always felt uncomfortable when we played clubs like that or Folk City in New York City because it was in front of audiences that felt "unconnected" somehow.

It may have been, because of the three of us, I was least experienced in the world of show business. It may have also been because it was in L.A. where I first had my taste of community—the neighborhoods of Japanese Americans; the place where Japanese American markers felt familiar; my first chance to identify with Japanese and Asian American men I could simultaneously admire as contemporaries—Warren, Vic, Art, Tats, Russell, Mo, Nick all wise in different ways about the culture of the street—a connection I had thirsted for as a very young Japanese American male growing up in New York City, but had never been able to have before; the place where I met and admired Sansei women—Sandy, June, Charlotte, Linda, Wendy—who were strong,

articulate, and knew much more about politics and the world than I ever did. I remember Warren Furutani absolutely blowing away a crowd at a rally in Harlem who had never heard an Asian American speak so powerfully, and I recall feeling very proud at that moment. Thus, playing music for payment outside of the context of serving the community felt to me like a betrayal.

I once had sort of an argument with my friend Akira Tana, the drummer. Akira is one of a few Asian Americans who can truly claim membership in the national jazz community and so what he says about jazz, I listen to. I told him in the car one day that I thought that jazz had become too esoteric and it seemed to me that jazz musicians didn't care about connecting with their listeners anymore. Akira nodded, kept

driving, and said he just enjoyed playing "out" music sometimes. I couldn't argue with that.

This brings me to my final confession. I have no idea what and how young people (that is, anyone under 30 years old) are approaching Asian American culture today. There is an explosion of Internet websites, 'zines, theater groups, art collectives, hip-hop scratchers, and young writers about whom and of which I am entirely ignorant. I am so far from the Information Superhighway that I am barely in sight of an on-ramp. Thus, I can only be authoritative about what I remember and what I can lie about convincingly. But despite those limitations, I also know that if my perspective about culture is fraudulent, it is not any less fraudulent than other views that mask their political biases about culture in other kinds of fictions about individual autonomy, political neutrality, artistic freedom, or the creative process.

We often are asked why the three of us didn't sing more songs together. Nobuko and I really started singing as a result of planning for a protest we were going to make at the National JACL Convention in 1970. Groups in New York and L.A. decided to present an alternative presentation for the young people at the convention and so Nobuko and I worked together, really as a one-time collaboration, to create some material for it. One thing led to another, and we first met Charlie when we were singing on the same program that was being sponsored by Pace College Asian students in New York City. It was a mix of traditional Asian culture and other miscellaneous acts, including us. They didn't really know what to do with us and had given us very little time at the end of the program. I think Charlie offered to relinquish his time, but we decided to just go on together, not having any idea what each other was going to do. The basic setup of that first time remained the basic setup of what we did afterward—Nobuko and I singing songs we worked out together backed by Charlie, interspersed with Charlie performing his songs, essentially solo. In all respects, our collaboration was a classic united front. We all had (and still have) political and ideological differences; our material reflected different concerns, experiences and perspectives; our performance

The fights and battles we had among ourselves were often and monumental, but our unity lay in our mutual commitment to serving what we thought was an important social and political movement, and in the fact that we were ourselves being profoundly changed by the process.



Mother and child.
© 1972, Tomie Arai
Yellow Pearl/AASC-RR

"Ti Mangyuna, Those Who Led the Way"
Helen Toribio/KDP Archives

Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP) presents
A Sining Bayan Production

TI MANGYUNA Those Who Led The Way

A DRAMA IN ENGLISH WITH MUSIC & DANCE DEPICTING A PART OF HISTORY ALMOST FORGOTTEN....A STORY OF FILIPINO LABOR IN BUILDING HAWAII...

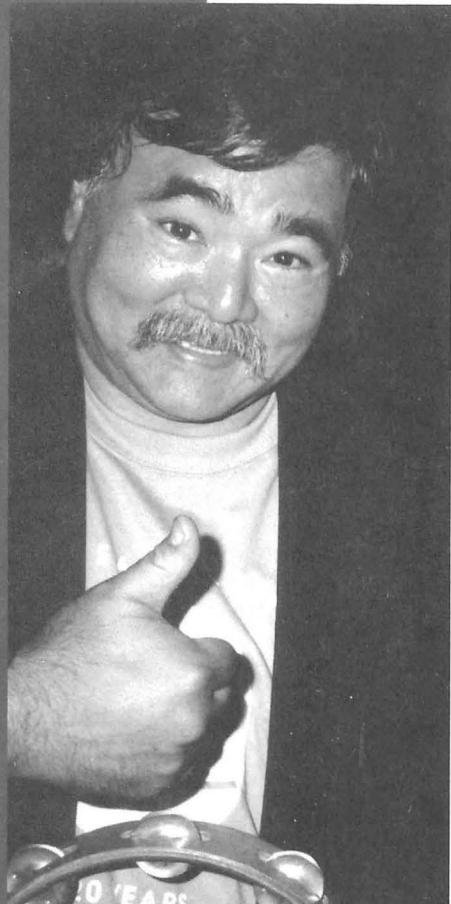
TOUR SCHEDULE

10/ 3 - Saturday, Farrington High School	- Auditorium - Oahu
7:00 P.M.	
10/10 - Saturday, Honokaa People's Theater	(Honokaa) - Big Island
7:00 P.M.	
10/11 - Sunday, Southern Star Theater (Naalehu)	(Old Naalehu Theater - Big Island)
7:00 P.M.	
10/12 - Monday, University of Hawaii	Hilo Theater - Big Island
3:00 P.M.	
10/24 - Saturday, Baldwin High School	Auditorium - Maui
7:00 P.M.	
11/ 1 - Sunday, Waialua Elementary	School Cafetorium - Oahu
3:00 P.M.	
11/ 6 - Friday, Lanai High School	Cafetorium -- Lanai
7:00 P.M.	
11/ 7 - Saturday, Molokai High School	Cafetorium - Molokai
7:00 P.M.	
11/14 - Saturday, Waimea Canyon Ele-	mentary Cafetorium - Kauai
7:00 P.M.	
11/15 - Sunday, War Memorial Conven-	tion Center Theater - Kauai
3:00 P.M.	
11/20 - Friday, Leeward Community	College - Oahu
7:00 P.M.	
11/21 - Saturday, Leeward Community	College - Oahu
7:00 P.M.	

FUNDED IN PART BY NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, STATE FOUNDATION ON CULTURE & THE ARTS, COOKE FOUNDATION
SPECIAL ASSISTANCE & SUPPORT BY ILMU LOCAL 142

...maybe if we re-conceptualized a group's culture, or recognized it as a group's story about resisting subordination, culture may serve to strengthen bonds among racial groups rather than create barriers between them.

...if my perspective about culture is fraudulent, it is not any less fraudulent than other views that mask their political biases about culture in other kinds of fictions about individual autonomy, political neutrality, artistic freedom, or the creative process.



Great Leap 20th Anniversary,
Los Angeles, 1998.
© 1997, Mary Uyematsu Kao/PF

was less a “blend” than a collective endeavor. The fights and battles we had among ourselves were often and monumental, but our unity lay in our mutual commitment to serving what we thought was an important social and political movement, and in the fact that we were ourselves were being profoundly changed by the process.

Even today when we get together every few months in some faraway venue, we approach what we do differently. Nobuko now sees herself as part of a greater spiritual community transcending traditional notions of politics. Charlie sees what we do as a part of his commitment to celebrating the lives and legacies of those who are too often forgotten. I am still on a soapbox. But we all trust that each other is still as committed now as we were then to a future where peace and human dignity—rather than profit and exploitation—will be the values by which we all are allowed to live.

Chris K. Iijima was born in New York City in 1948. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, he helped to form such groups as Asian Americans for Action, I Wor Kuen, Chickens Come Home to Roost, the Asian Community Center, Asian Tactical Theater, and Asians in the Spirit of the IndoChinese. He participated in the Basement Workshop, the Yellow Pearl Project, Asian Americans for Equality, and the Free Chol Soo Lee Committee. He has been an elementary school teacher, a law school professor, and a bartender. He performed with Nobuko Miyamoto and William “Charlie” Chin during the late 60s and 70s. He now lives in Hawai‘i with his wife, Jane, and his two children, Alan and Christopher. He is presently a law professor at the University of Hawai‘i, and is affiliated with the Na Loio Immigrant Rights and Public Interest Law Center.



“Charley’s Ribs”
© 1972, Larry Hama/Recipe: Charlie Chin
Yellow Pearl/AASC-RR