asian americans:

the Movement and the MOMENT

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Preparing for the sheriffs and police,
International Hotel eviction night, August 1977.
Photograph by tenant from across the street/Louie/PF

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Tomie Arai, B.Y. Chen, Alan Okada, James Wong, and unknown artists.

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Protest demonstration against "energy crisis," Lower Eastside New York City, 1974.
Photograph by Mary Uyematsu Kao/*Amerasia* 15:1 (1989)

Drinking Tea with Both Hands

Nancy Hom

Author/artist at work.

I drink tea with both hands
boil a chicken on holidays
I celebrate old traditions
dancing wildly

—from the poem *"Drinking Tea With Both Hands,"* 1977

I am a first-generation Chinese American who immigrated to America from Toisan, China, when I was five years old. I grew up in New York City in a small, cluttered railroad flat on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. After I graduated high school in 1968, I decided to become an artist and got accepted to Pratt Institute, a private art college in Brooklyn.

In New York
old women from Toisan
laugh about the times
they cradled me in China
the times they rolled eggs
on my forehead
to wipe away bruises
and made bitter teas
to break my fever

But it would be too simple
to say that I seek my roots
because of them
that in them I find
the pulse of my culture

—from the poem
"Drinking Tea with Both Hands," 1977

The old ladies from Toisan didn't know, couldn't have known, that this dutiful daughter sitting silently beside her mother was the same person sprawled on the floor of

The old ladies from Toisan didn't know, couldn't have known, that this dutiful daughter sitting silently beside her mother was the same person sprawled on the floor of somebody's dorm at Pratt Institute the night before. . .

"Vietnam will win."
YRL/Louie

Chinatown Workers Festival poster.
© 1972 Lee Mah Jung Sai Support Committee/
San Francisco *Wei Min* Chinese Community
Newspaper (September 1974)/AASC-RR.

I believed I had a gift of seeing the world in a different way. Collective art was not part of my vocabulary. Giving up that image of myself as a lone visionary and opening up to another was a difficult process.

somebody's dorm at Pratt Institute the night before, listening to the Beatles drone *"She's so heavy"* on and on as the colors of the walls came alive in sprays of red, blue, and yellow. This young Chinese immigrant was Toisanese enough to know that you never visit without bringing oranges; this is the same person who wrapped toilet paper around an armature for her art final and drank dark beer in questionable Bedford Stuyvesant bars with men in Hells Angels jackets. There were so many things the old ladies didn't know about me; I was an artist—I drew the wind and clouds; I followed the patterns of light as it lit the trees and buildings; I wrote odes to the lily child.

A piece of window wriggles just a little beneath the smoky wave of heat. Here you sit totally undisturbed in your own mind cavern, feeling with your groping fingers a touch of something not materialized yet. It seeps in through sponge walls in the form of a lily child; with eyes searching for that ever-present mystery in your face, with eyes black like far-away waters, with her baby voice she sings strange lullabies to you and the jasmine night. . . . *(circa 1969)*

When Chris Iijima and Joanne (now known as Nobuko) Miyamoto came to sing at Pratt one afternoon, I was intrigued. They sang of things that resonated with me, songs of garment workers and railroad builders, people like my parents. They told me to come to this group they belonged to called "Chickens Come Home to Roost" on New York's Upper West Side. I went there and entered another world. But it was not so simple; I was an artist and not used to being connected to a group. I felt uncomfortable at these meetings, and didn't want to associate myself as a member of an ethnic identity.

The faces are new to you, the eyes scrutinize you, define and package you and label you. . .the eyes have been

tested for slantiness and accepted as a credit card into a group. . . . *(circa 1971)*

I believed I had a gift of seeing the world in a different way. Collective art was not part of my vocabulary. Giving up that image of myself as a lone visionary and opening up to another was a difficult process.

"Join the Asian Contingent" leaflet, c. 1971.
© 1971, *Getting Together*/IWK/AASC-RR.

> Once you ran after butterflies in magic forests and saw colors in the air and stained glass trees. . .like phantoms people moved around you, polite and admiring, but not understanding and you pitied them. It was easy in those days to carve your own space and make up your own songs. . . . Now the voices that once crooned "see" "feel" "be" are whispering something else; a new vocabulary has taken over but you are reluctant to follow. . . .
> *(circa 1971)*

Still, awareness that I was Asian American was starting to sink in. When Cambodia was invaded, I watched the newscast and felt a connection with the victims. I began to see myself as an Asian American with ties to Asians in Asia—what happened to them also affected me. I was moved by what was happening in other parts of the world, like Latin America. Participation in study groups and Asian women's groups helped me to face issues of identity and to understand the oppression of minority cultures both in this country and abroad.

It was a fertile, exciting time. As artists our loose, bohemian attitude contrasted with more dogmatic approaches, but we reflected the soul and spirit of the movement through our creativity.

> You have already seen yourself in the mirror and the image sticks to the back of your mind, the taste lingers in your mouth, the smell has entered your nostrils. . . . It is all around you and you cannot deny what you saw. . . . Too tired to question, to analyze/dissect/define, you empty your mind and let the new ideas seep in, accepting finally the slanted eyes that beseech you, the voices that plead with you, the arguments that persuade you, saying with no regrets or uncertainties—yes, I am Asian American. *(circa 1971)*

Henry Street Fair, summer 1972, New York City.
Photographer unknown/YRL/Kochiyama.

At "Chickens Come Home to Roost," I met Bob Hsiang, Corky Lee, John Kao, Gordon Lee and others. They were part of a group called the Asian Media Collective, and since one of my majors at Pratt was filmmaking, I joined them. We

"The Great Food Conspiracy" pamphlet cover.
© 1974 Asian Women's Group (United Asian Communities Center, New York City) Mary Uyematsu Kao (photographer) Nancy Hom (designer of pamphlet)/Kao/RF

It's just another word
for hunger,
Taking from you what
you need,
It's just another word
for hunger,
When it's time, when it's
time to eat! . . .

It's just another word
for struggle,
Taking back what you
need,
It's just another word
for struggle,
We will go where the
people lead.

Imperialism is Another Word for Hunger
© 1974 Chris Iijima/Joanne Miyamoto

produced Super 8 films and slide shows that captured the emerging Asian American movement—the Vietnam War protests, the first Chinatown health fair, the admission of China into the UN, the first mural in Chinatown, Asian women's issues. I spent a lot of time downtown at 217, the apartment in Chinatown that they shared, talking late into the night and working on projects. Bob Hsiang moved to another apartment on Pike Street, and we held many meetings of the Asian Media Collective there. I also worked on slide shows with Nobuko Miyamoto and the Asian Women United women's group. It was a fertile, exciting time. As artists our loose, bohemian attitude contrasted with more dogmatic approaches, but we reflected the soul and spirit of the movement through our creativity.

A wineglass in our hand, we smile softly and talk of Asian American themes. . . . We hang out in the streets eating mai fon at 3 o'clock in the morning. . .

(circa 1971)

My mother made *mai fon*, but it didn't taste as good as when I went out with my new friends at the 217 Collective. Mother's *mai fon* had seasonings from 4,000 years of righteous upbringing, served on Sundays to the old ladies who came by to visit and reminisce about China. My parents and the old ladies clucked at my lifestyle—coming home at 2 in the morning or not at all, wearing beads and headbands made of men's ties. I didn't understand why they disapproved; what I was doing was for them—the Health Fair, Food Fair, the protests, the films and slide show—the movement was for their benefit; yet all they saw were the strange clothes and the demonstrators being dragged by police on TV.

In me echoes the cries of ancestors
screams of Westerners
blending in dissonance
and harmony*

I also frequented Basement Workshop, where the beginning of an Asian American arts community was forming. I took some of the classes, worked on a film about the first mural in Chinatown, and volunteered on some of the events. Still, there were conflicts between my individual expression and collective identity. . . .

Sometimes
I want to forget it all
this curse called identity
I want to be far out
paint dreams in strange colors
write crazy poetry
only the chosen can understand

but it's the hands
I still drink tea with both hands

— from the poem *"Drinking Tea With Both Hands,"* 1977

In 1974, I moved to San Francisco and joined Kearny Street Workshop, an Asian American arts organization situated in the International Hotel. My work at Kearny Street Workshop and other organizations helped me to evolve a definition of community arts that continues to guide me to this day. In the Bay Area, I silk-screened posters for community causes, participated in creative writing workshops and readings, painted murals, and mounted exhibitions on such topics as the Chinese Detention Center at Angel Island. Interaction with the International Hotel tenants and their struggle, and my awareness of other social issues within and beyond the Asian American community, helped to shape my art and my writing. Some of the issues included:

The International Hotel's struggle for low-income housing

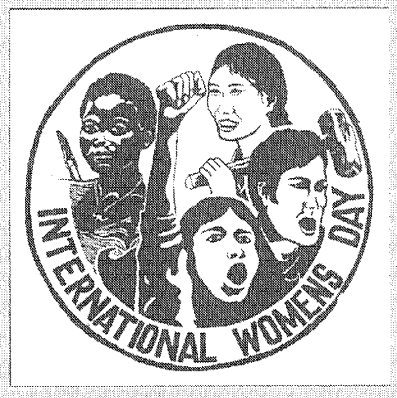
manong
hold high your cane
the battle is not over

this land lies red
with the blood
of ancestors
this ocean rages
with their tears...

for every mouth
that hungers
while others feast
the struggle must
continue

(1977)

International Women's Day button.
© San Francisco Bay Area Committee to Celebrate International Women's Day/YRL/Louie



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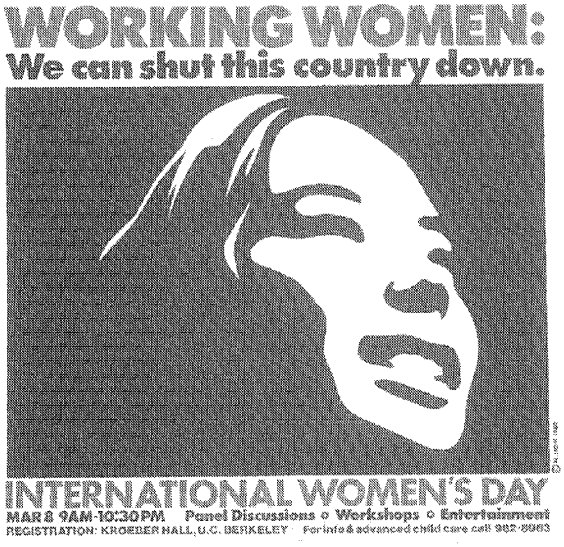
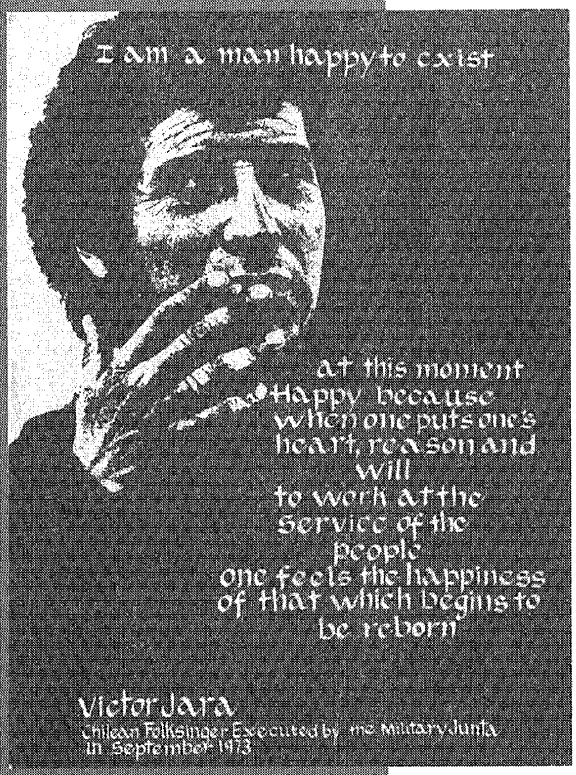
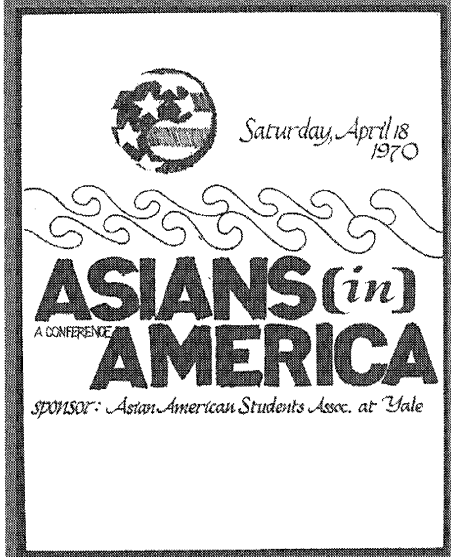


International Women's Day poster, 1980.
© 1980, Nancy Hom/courtesy of the artist



"Victor Jara" card.
September 1973/Helen Toribio/KDP Archives



"Asians in America" conference leaflet, 1970.
© Asian American Students Association at Yale/YPIL/Louie

Sweatshop workers

she sews
in a sweatshop

still
dreaming
of gold
mountains

reliving
her past
through
holiday
rituals

patiently waiting
for her house
in the suburbs

helplessly
I watch the
years roll by

on the horizon
no house in sight
just mountains
made of brass
and sweat

(1977)

Solidarity with Third World cultures

Across the rocky stretches of Bolivia,
not a gun in sight for you, Paulina.
How will you fight them –
the arrogant white foreigners
who decided for you
that you should not have children;
who stole them from your womb
and buried them with your fertility dolls
in the high mountains?

When I saw "Blood of the Condor,"
I saw your face mirrored in the eyes
of all those who have felt the weight of poverty,
whose lips are pressed in painful silence,
and whose hearts are heavy with the burden of living.
Someone has told your story, Paulina;
and I will add my small voice to the thunder,
telling the next person and the next
until the skies blaze red with outrage! (1977)

Bridging intergenerational understanding

Oba-san
sits in a Buddhist temple
her hands folded
like birds resting
on her lap
Her eyes half-closed
she lets gagaku winds
blow her to Japan
to old and dignified rituals
of harmony and order...

But Oba-san
Did you know that the one
who blows his sho so forcefully
stayed up all night
trying to save a girl
who had OD'd on drugs?
And did you know that the one
who dances so precisely
was seen that morning
passing out leaflets
protesting an eviction
in downtown Nihonmachi?
You might not have approved
the way he defied police orders

But Oh! Oba-san!
He dances the bugaku so well
holding his head high
flicking his wrist just so
like in the old days
You shake your head in confusion
What does it all mean?

Oba-san
He plays gagaku
He dances bugaku
for the orphaned souls
in America
so that they may embrace
your heritage
He passes out leaflets
so that they may fight
for its right to survive

(1977)

When I joined the movement, I was fresh out of art school and I had just started becoming aware of my identity as

Asian Center, New York City, c. 1971.
Photographer unknown/*Gidra* (July 1973)/AASC-RR

Drinking Tea with Both Hands

I drink tea with both hands
boil a chicken on holidays
I celebrate old traditions
dancing wildly
In me echoes the cries of
ancestors
screams of Westerners
blending in dissonance
and harmony
Sometimes
I want to forget it all
this curse called identity
I want to be far out
paint dreams in strange colors
write crazy poetry
only the chosen can
understand
but it's not so simple
I still drink tea
with both hands

an Asian American and discovering what my parents went through as immigrants in this country. I was wondering what I was going to do with my art and how I can use my skills to contribute to society. Then I came to San Francisco and visited the International Hotel, where Kearny Street Workshop was, and I knew it was home.

I have made Kearny Street Workshop and the Bay Area my home for over 25 years. The lessons of the movement are not forgotten as I nurture a new generation of artists who, while honoring the experiences of the older artists and activists, are forging their own identity and defining their own issues. Kearny Street Workshop is a creative incubator for them and other members of the community. It provides a base for artists who desire who seek a connection to their cultural roots, their history, and their sense of activism and civic responsibility. As its director and as a community artist, I am able to provide an important link. My personal art has broadened to include topics that are not as didactic or issue-driven. But it's not so simple; I still drink tea with both hands.

Nancy Hom.
© 2000, Karl Ma

My personal art has broadened to include topics that are not as didactic or issue-driven. But it's not so simple; I still drink tea with both hands.

Nancy Hom was introduced to the Asian American movement in 1971, when she joined the Asian Media Collective and other groups in New York. The political climate of the 1970s influenced her development as an artist. Since 1974, she has been involved with Kearny Street Workshop, a San Francisco based multi-disciplinary Asian American arts organization. She became its Executive Director in 1995. At Kearny Street Workshop, she produced shows and exhibits that were relevant to minority communities and found creative outlets for her interest in writing and visual arts. An artist, writer, and Executive Director, Hom inspires, nurtures, and supports efforts that honor and celebrate communities through historical, cultural, and artistic expressions.

BRIDGE, An Asian American Perspective, May 1975

Kearny Street Workshop—
A Story of Survival

by Genny Lim

An old brick, two-story structure, known as the International Hotel, stretches block-long over a complex of storefronts, on the bottom perimeter of San Francisco's Chinatown. This block, Kearny Street, situated between Jackson and Washington Streets, has been the site of a bitter, political tug-of-war. The owner of the building considers it an eyesore and unfit to live in. But the some 100 tenants, mostly elderly Filipino and Chinese men who live in it think otherwise. They and the storefront occupants, with the support of various segments of the community and local media publicity, have managed to stave off eviction notices collected over a period of six years. But the future of this Kearny Street complex is tenuous as the litigation between its owner, the Four Seas Investment Corporation, and its building occupants, totters on a seesaw of mutual animosity.

One of the supporters of the struggle to save the "I" Hotel from being razed and converted into a parking lot or tourist emporium has been a group called the Kearny Street Workshop. The Workshop started in the fall of 1972, operating from a storefront on Kearny Street, with a two thousand dollar grant from a "Neighborhood Arts" National Endowment to develop a graphics workshop. The nucleus of the group — Jim Dong, Lora Foo, and Mike Chin, immediately sought to expand the graphics workshop to include other workshops as well and solicited the aid of other creative people to their helm.

From the beginning the staff has been voluntary and relatively autonomous. The original workshops in graphics, drawing, silk-screening, sewing, pattern-making and leather-making have since expanded to include ceramics, photography, guitar-playing, stained-glass, jewelry-making, creative writing, and needlepoint. Plans are under way to begin a film workshop. Approximately 10 to 15 people attend each of these workshops.

As the expense for supplies gradually became overbearing, with people banging out five belts or two purses a week, the workshops succeeded in acquiring a few more grants to ease their rising costs. Although the Workshop operates on a marginal, non-profit basis, it has managed to launch a number of projects.

One of these projects has been to organize summer outings for kids. Last summer, 200 kids were involved in field trips and other activities. The graphics workshop has, to date, designed and silk-screened 300 posters for community organizations free of charge.

The latest and most impressive addition to the Kearny Street Workshop is the Jackson Street Gallery. The Gallery, which was the former "Home of the Topless Wedding," a nightclub dive known as the Paddy Wagon, opened last November, after five to eight people spent less than a month working off and on to transform the nightlife debris into a presentable Asian-American art gallery.

The building exterior, nearly a block wide, displays a mural dedicated to the people's struggle. The mural, depicting Chinese workers, was sketched by artist Jim Dong and painted by workshop volunteers. Since the gallery opened, three exhibits have been held.

The idea was to provide a community forum, a drop-in, hang-out, hang-loose kind of a place that would involve people. There were never any blueprints to create an institutional atmosphere. Its members shudder

"Kearny Street Workshop—A Story of Survival."

"Cornell Asian Students Against Genocide" Anti-War March.
© 1972, Bob Hsiang/PP, courtesy of the artist

Many young men my age were being drafted and sent to fight against a bloody guerilla-style war in the jungles of Vietnam only to return in wooden caskets. At first, I regarded this as a necessary sacrifice to prevent the "domino theory" which dictated that Communist insurgency must be contained in order to save the "free world".


N.Y. ASIAN COALITION
NEWSLETTER vol.1 no.3 Nov. '72
oct.14th demo
DEMONSTRATE AGAINST THE WAR NOV.4th
Time:11:30... PLACE:125th ST. and 7th AVE.
MARCH TO LEWISOHN STADIUM 138th ST. & AMSTERDAM AVE.

N.Y. Asian Coalition Newsletter
N.Y. Asian Coalition [November 1972]/YRL/Louie

Growing Up in Turmoil

Thoughts on the Asian American Movement

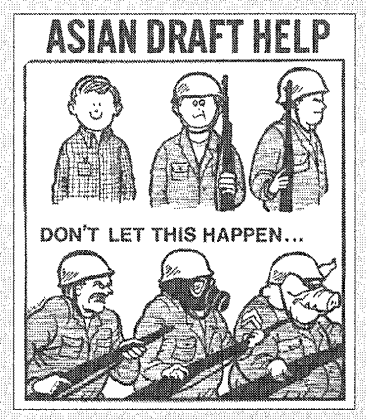
Bob Hsiang

One afternoon, my friend and I were leaving our New York City high school when we heard via the radio that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. Shock and disbelief raced through my mind as we came home only to watch the confirmation of the assassination by a tearful Walter Cronkite on a black-and-white TV. This momentous event was the end of a tranquil adolescence I spent in my birth city, the Big Apple. But in the early 1960s, there was trouble brewing nationally and globally as the Civil Rights Movement gathered strength, and the frightening Cold War came to a head with the downing of a U-2 spy plane and the Cuban missile crisis.

Growing up in this period was a blend of moments: happily playing on the New York City handball courts; cheering the dominance of the New York Yankees; preparing for nuclear attack in the classrooms and bomb shelters; and my family fighting deportation to Taiwan. Strict immigration policies prevented Chinese immigrants from remaining in the U.S. and obtaining citizenship. Learning why Chinese were being singled out for deportation was one of many lessons of my later involvement with the Asian American Movement ten years later.

I was the youngest son of a successful Chinese banking and insurance manager who identified strongly with Confucian values, the Chinese classics and the Kuomingtang Party of China, overthrown in 1949. I was taught that Communism was a form of tyranny to oppose with all one's heart and that the Japanese had committed unspeakable acts against my

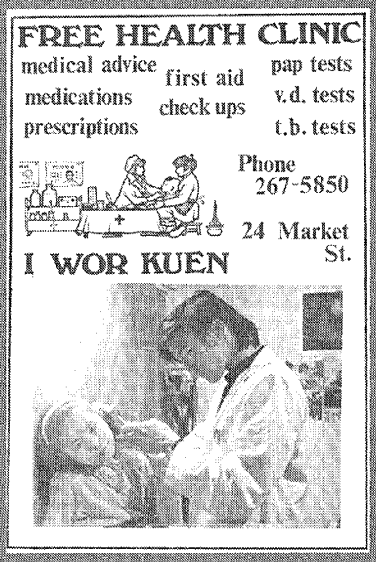
"Asian Draft Help"
© 1969, Lisa Lyons/San Francisco Draft Help Booklet/YRL/Louie



Gradually my notions of a just war were challenged as I witnessed the bloody events unfold on nightly television and saw the mounting tension in the country.

Chris Iijima and Joanne Miyamoto, Martin Luther King Day, New York, 1971.
©1971, Bob Hsiang/PF/courtesy of the artist

I Wor Kuen ad.
© *Getting Together* 2:2 (March 1971) NWKYRL-Louie



. . . there was an emerging movement that questioned the U.S. role in Vietnam and the commitment of soldiers and materiel to the far-off country being ruled by a puppet government.

relatives and the Chinese people in the Sino-Japanese War. Completing high school with honors, I enrolled at a school in Buffalo, New York as a pre-med major. My mission was clear — to get into medical school and train for the ultimate goal of being a doctor.

But around 1966, the war in Vietnam began to take on a serious escalation. Many young men my age were being drafted and sent to fight against a bloody, guerrilla-style war in the jungles of Vietnam only to return in wooden caskets. At first, I regarded this as a necessary sacrifice to prevent the "domino theory," which dictated that Communist insurgency must be contained in order to save the "free world." At the same time, there was an emerging movement that questioned the U.S. role in Vietnam and the commitment of soldiers and materiel to the far-off country being ruled by a puppet government. There were events called "teach ins" and tables manned by groups called "SDS," or Students for a Democratic Society.

I began to develop an interest in art and photo-journalism after seeing many works by war photographer Eugene Smith and the Magnum Agency. Later, I joined the newspaper staff on campus. I began covering all the various political and cultural events of the lively campus known as the Berkeley of the East.

New York Asian American Tactical Theater Basement Workshop.
© 1971, Bob Hsiang/PP, courtesy of the artist.

Gradually my notions of a just war were challenged as I witnessed the bloody events unfold on nightly television and saw the mounting tension in the country. I noticed many of my peers undergoing a similar re-evaluation of the U.S. intervention and the pressing domestic issues that were facing our generation — the treatment of people of color including Native Americans, the inequalities of wealth and power, i.e., class nature of the society, and the growing sense of urgency that the war had generated.

It was in November of 1967 that a major shift in my consciousness occurred as I carpooled with several friends to participate in the Pentagon March. It was my first anti-war march, and it galvanized my beliefs toward my country's foreign policy. The sheer terror of that event, which included being tear-gassed and cornered by the police at the entrance of the Pentagon, was surreal and a fitting reflection of the overwhelming military power and will of this country. My life was changed forever after that night.

Chinatown Health Fair, New York.

Aside from Vietnam, I began to recognize the Black Power Movement that gathered steam after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. With John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Dr. King gone, it seemed that this country was due for some major changes and upheavals that it hadn't seen since the Civil War. The disillusionment with the American Dream was only to get worse as the 1968 Democratic Convention debacle unfolded, and many college students dropped out of traditional roles of following the status quo.

Leaving college with my ideals and beliefs shaken to the core, I returned to New York City and shared living arrangements with a "collective" of Asian Americans near Chinatown. With the belief that my government was involved in a genocidal war against a country that posed no direct threat to its power, I joined a small group called "Chickens Come Home to Roost."

It was within this context of young Asian Americans like myself that I became interested in working in media and still photography. I discovered so many other students that had come together to reclaim their identities as Asians and work to stop the war against their Vietnamese brethren.

These were heady days for a newly formed movement that was rooted in a blend of old left politics, 60s counter

These were heady days for a newly formed movement that was rooted in a blend of old left politics, 60s counter culture, Asian pride and Third World politics from the Black and Latino communities.

Yellow Pearl logo.
© 1972, *Yellow Pearl*/ASC-RR

Yellow Pearl

... the war also became symptomatic of a wider domestic problem that could partially explain the fundamental racism and disregard for the poor and the disenfranchised.

culture, Asian pride and Third World politics from the Black and Latino communities. It was between 1971 and 1974 when I began to perceive myself as a person of color, clearly unwelcome in this country and at war with the established order of a basically white, Eurocentric ruling class. During this time frame, the Vietnam War had clearly become a costly military blunder of the highest order, forcing the majority of the U.S. population to oppose it and demand the government to pull out it forces.

But the war also became symptomatic of a wider domestic problem that could partially explain the fundamental racism and disregard for the poor and the disenfranchised. The war abroad was clearly becoming the war at home. Authors such as Franz Fanon, Le Roi Jones, Mao Tse-tung and alternative media like *Ramparts* or *Gidra* magazines became crucial in establishing a new method for analyzing society and establishing models for "revolutionary" changes and "self-determination." The equally important and pivotal role of the women's movement had caused a major shift in our lives as the old assumptions of women's roles began to disintegrate with each new rally, consciousness-raising session and pro-feminist book published.

Van Troi Anti-Imperialist Brigade, New York
© 1972, Bob Hsiang/RF/courtesy of the artist

Although the Vietnam conflict didn't officially end until 1975, politicized Asian Americans shifted their focus from opposing the war to "bring the war back to the communities" where Asian ghettoes were being neglected. I felt it important to work with those attempting to address issues in Chinatown such as lack of decent health care, discrimination in job opportunities and educating people against racism. With primitive tools and small resources, the Asian Media Collective

collaborated in creating slide shows and super-eight films to present an alternative view of the events concerning Asian Americans.

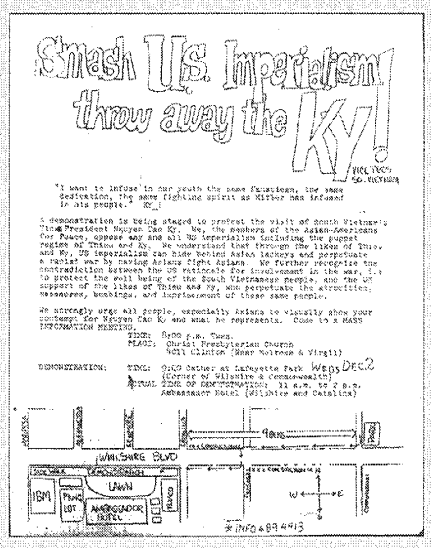
Our purpose was to inform in a direct and simple way the need for action in the communities and in the anti-war effort. We attempted to persuade people that there was another way to view the events in the news media and that Asians didn't have to be passive in their lives. Some called these "agit-prop" shows, as in the classic Marxist-Leninist style. The images were powerful and designed to make an immediate imprint on viewers. Some of those subjects included Asian GIs — a treatment of Asian Americans conscripted to fight in Vietnam and the racism they faced in the military. Another production dealt with the Chinatown Health Fair that was conducted in 1971.

This grassroots event was organized by students and health professionals attempting to address the health needs of the community faced with racism, language barriers, lack of information of basic health matters, and the importance of alternative therapies that have since become commonplace in the 1990s. These first attempts in community-related involvement created the groundwork for future health clinics in New York Chinatown, similar to the way that health clinics came to be in various Chinatowns throughout the country. I also participated in guerrilla-style theater and media productions that addressed the same kinds of issues.

During 1974, I moved to San Francisco as it had close parallels to New York and a vibrant Asian American community. With Nancy Hom, I joined Kearny Street Workshop (KSW), located in the International Hotel. This area, known as the "Block," was the central location and base of operations for several community groups. The goals of Kearny Street Workshop were to provide an alternative place to acquire art and writing skills in the community.

Large-scale murals were created reflecting the realities of a community facing displacement and evictions. Exhibitions revolved around the Angel Island experience, the threatened eviction of the International Hotel tenants and other community issues. There were poetry readings by Al Robles, Genny Lim, George Leong, collaborations

"Smash U.S. Imperialism"
c. 1970. YRL/Louie



The war abroad was clearly becoming the war at home. Authors such as Franz Fanon, Le Roi Jones, Mao Tse-tung and alternative media like *Ramparts* or *Godzilla* magazines became crucial in establishing a new method for analyzing society and establishing models for "revolutionary" changes and "self-determination."

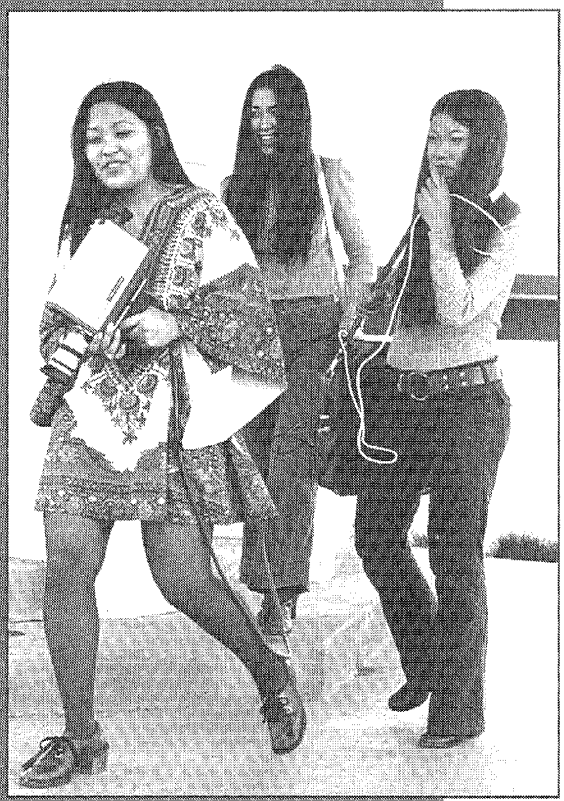
Jackson Street Gallery poster.
© 1974, Leland Wong/Kearny Street Workshop, San Francisco

with *Manongs*, or the elder Filipinos, that lived in Manilatown, photography classes and life drawing sessions.

As an instructor of photography, I became good friends with fellow photographers and became a student myself as I shared knowledge with other KSW members. In August of 1977, the I-Hotel struggle culminated in a stand-off and subsequent eviction of all residents including KSW members and other community organizations. KWS documented the entire evening until the last *Manong* was removed from the building.

The event reminded me of that night at the Pentagon where armed police shoved and pushed demonstrators literally "up against the wall," and now, another group of armed police imposed a virtual martial law order upon the old besieged hotel on Kearny Street. I asked myself: where are these old people to go? This was just another symptom of a society that values property and urban development over human beings.

The equally important and pivotal role of the women's movement had caused a major shift in our lives as the old assumptions of women's roles began to disintegrate with each new rally, consciousness raising session and pro-feminist book published.



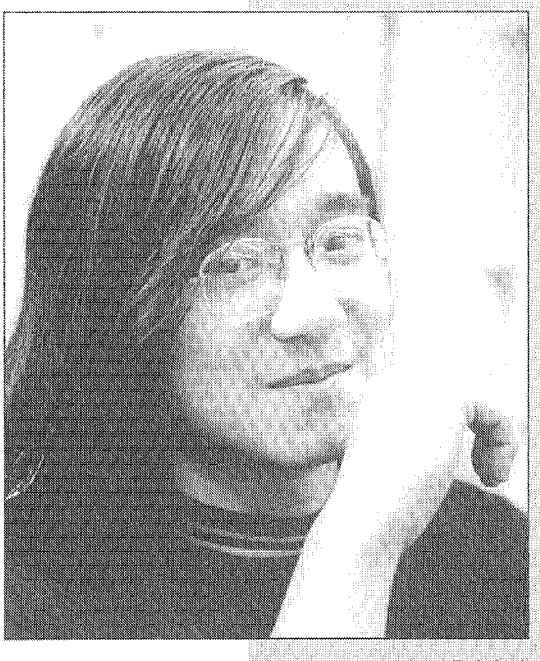
Sister video crew
© Nikki Arai

As KSW moved to other locations, I continued photographic documentation of the I-Hotel aftermath, the beginnings of the Asian American Jazz movement and Festival, Nihonmachi Street Fairs, and portraits of artists in the community who were creating powerful and self-affirming work in the Bay Area. It is my continued belief that Asian Americans have much to offer to America beside the negative stereotypic roles as meek, congenial workers, exotics, martial arts experts and technicians.

Bob Hsiang: I am a second-generation Chinese in New York City. My parents, brother and sister emigrated from Shanghai, China in the late 1940s and early 1950s. My interest in photography was influenced by the late 1960s' counter culture and the national student mobilizations against the Vietnam War. During those years, I was a photojournalist at S.U.N.Y. (State University of New York) at Buffalo, where I covered the teach-ins, marches on Washington, demonstrations against the administration and the jailing of political prisoners. In 1971, after undergraduate studies, I moved to New York City and became involved in the nascent Asian American Movement. With others, I helped form the Asian Media Collective, a group dedicated to creating multimedia productions and films. In 1974, I moved to San Francisco and took a job as a photography instructor at a local museum school. During this time, various community groups in Manilatown

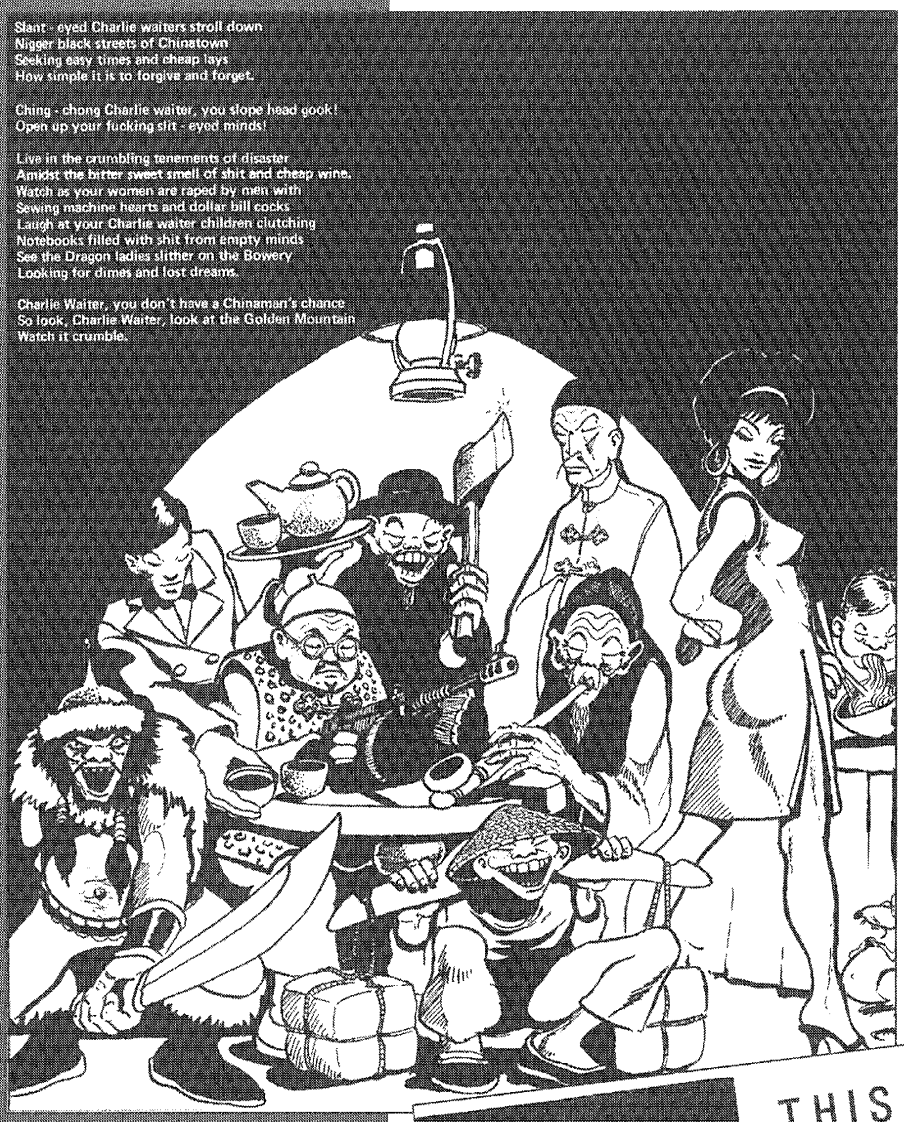
Preparing for the sheriffs and police, I-Hotel Eviction Night, August 1977.
Photographer, residential hotel tenant from across the street of I-Hotel/Louie/PF

were waging the struggle for the preservation of the International Hotel. I was a volunteer at Kearny Street Workshop, a grassroots arts organization that developed exhibits, held poetry readings and taught art classes, and had a ground-floor storefront in the International Hotel. In addition, I became involved in various San Francisco Asian American arts groups as a documentary and publicity photographer. Presently, I am a freelance photographer in the Bay Area covering both corporate and nonprofit sectors. My work has been regularly featured in local and national magazines and books.



Bob Hsiang.
Courtesy of the author

"Chinatown Lament"
©1971 Larry Hama (drawing); George T. Chew (poem)/
Yellow Peril/AASC-RR



"This is a Gook"
YRL/Louie

Parting the Wild Horse's Mane:

Asian-American Images and the Asian Media Collective

A One Act Readable Play

Act I

the year 2000, USA

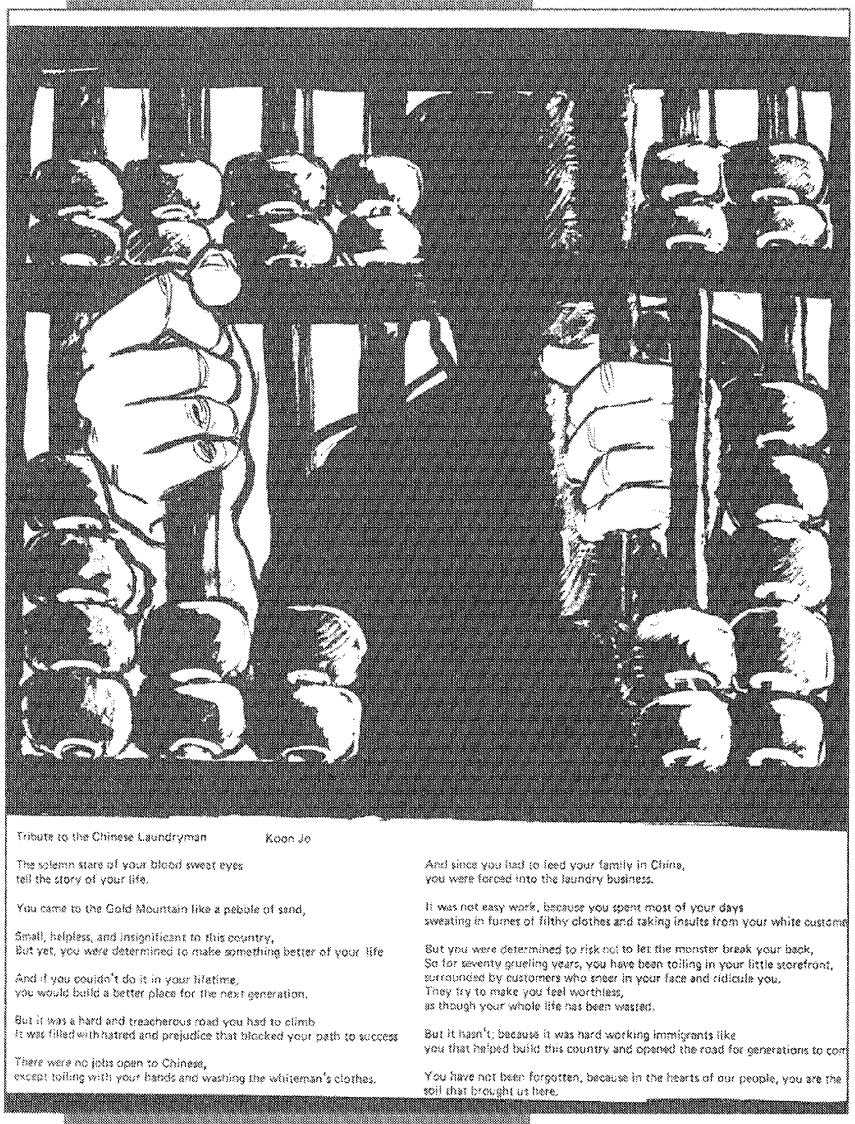
Narrator: I'm sitting in a large room on the campus of a graduate school. The subject is diversity. The group is mostly white. They talk for what seems to be a long time and no decisions are made. I see two other Asian faces in a room of about forty people. It's my first meeting so I wait. I listen. After thirty, forty minutes the room becomes tense. People seem uncomfortable. There is a lot of "dancing," verbal dancing.

Reporter: Americans of Asian origin reported a 17 percent increase in 1996 in the number of anti-Asian incidents apparently motivated by racism, a report stated. They included two murders, two bomb threats, an arson attack and many types of harassment. They cited many cases of racist slogans, hate mail and abusive telephone calls. According to the statistics of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the most frequently reported anti-Asian crimes were ones of intimidation.

Faces of Chinese kids who live in New York Chinatown. Instead of smiling, waving, they have their fists clenched, defiant. It's not what you would expect—not the Coolie, devoted to toil, unfeeling— obedient— cunning— unassuming . . .— servile (pausing with each word, with a slightly derogatory tone).

Protest demonstrations against white tourist buses in New York City Chinatown, c. 1969.
Photographer unknown/Kao/PF

"Tribute to the Chinese Laundryman"
© 1972. Corvoya Ohoy Lee (drawing); K.J. Wu (poem). *Yellow Peril* AASC RR



Tribute to the Chinese Laundryman — Koon Jo

The solemn stare of your blood sweat eyes
tell the story of your life.

You came to the Gold Mountain like a pebble of sand,

Small, helpless, and insignificant to this country,
But yet, you were determined to make something better of your life

And if you couldn't do it in your lifetime,
you would build a better place for the next generation.

But it was a hard and treacherous road you had to climb
It was filled with hatred and prejudice that blocked your path to success

There were no jobs open to Chinese,
except toiling with your hands and washing the whiteman's clothes.

And since you had to feed your family in China,
you were forced into the laundry business.

It was not easy work, because you spent most of your days
sweating in fumes of filthy clothes and taking insults from your white custome

But you were determined to risk not to let the monster break your back,
So for seventy grueling years, you have been toiling in your little storefront,
surrounded by customers who sneer in your face and ridicule you.
They try to make you feel worthless,
as though your whole life has been wasted.

But it hasn't; because it was hard working immigrants like
you that helped build this country and opened the road for generations to com

You have not been forgotten, because in the hearts of our people, you are the
soil that brought us here.

It reminds me of when I first came to the "mainland" for college. "Did I speak English? Gee, you speak so well. Do you live in a grass shack?" I couldn't believe it.

the year 1971, New York City

Narrator: My mind wanders—1971, New York City. I'm sitting at a light table, looking at slides. Bob Hsiang is sitting nearby. He had done a bunch of *Kodaliths*—black and white negatives transferred onto positive transparencies, like slides. Bob was from New York but had returned from college at Buffalo. We're putting together a "multi-media show." Joanne Miyamoto was able to get a film about Chinatown. We're going to have two sets of slides to be shown with the film. This is going to be interesting. Multiple images, stills and film, and live music—all simultaneous. Using the *technology* like this has not been done before.

It's exciting. But the presentation is for tomorrow, and it's already late into the night. Bob and I aren't worried, though. We focus in on the images.

The images. Faces of Chinese kids who live in New York Chinatown. Instead of smiling, waving, they have their fists clenched, defiant. It's not what you would expect—not the *Coolie*, devoted to toil, *unfeeling—obedient—cunning—unassuming . . .— servile* (pausing with each word, with a slightly derogatory tone). Instead, they're yelling at *haole* (Caucasian) tourists who are gawking at them. It's almost as if *they* (the tourists, the kids?) live in another land, another country.

It reminds me of when I first came to the "mainland" for college. "Did I speak English? Gee, you speak so well. Do you live in a grass shack?" I couldn't believe it. Where did these people come from? But I never objected.

It *was* like coming to a different country, only I didn't need a passport. And when I drove upstate to see my college friends, on the way I usually stopped somewhere between

Binghamton and Rochester. I once walked into a diner, and everyone in the diner, they *all* turned their heads, a bit like Linda Blair in the *Exorcist*, and stared. It was weird. But I had let it go by. I ignored it. It was the way things were.

the year 2000, USA

Reporter: In the San Francisco suburb of Novato, Eddy Wu was stabbed repeatedly in a supermarket parking lot by Robert Page. Page said he didn't have anything to do when he got up on Nov. 8. So he decided, "What the f____, I'm gonna kill a Chinaman."

Narrator: I am waked from my mental wanderings. One of the Asians in the room speaks. He seems to have a lot on his mind. He has been waiting to speak, but he seems frustrated. No one seems to hear him.

the year 1971, New York City

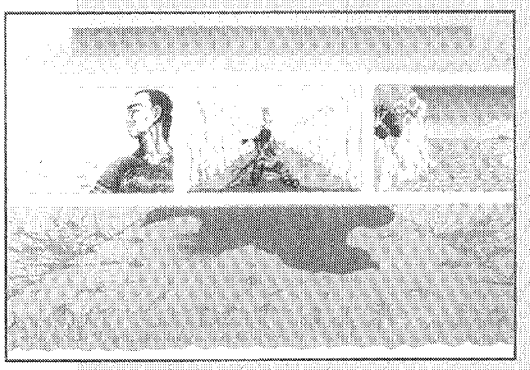
My mind shifts back to New York. The Chinatown kids would know how he feels. Perhaps it's how they see us. Images could be very powerful. The first time I heard Chris and Joanne sing, something opened inside me.

> *A grain, a tiny grain of sand, landing in the belly, in the belly of the monster. . .*
>
> *Layer after layer, as its beauty unfolds, until its captor it holds in peril,*
>
> *A grain, a tiny grain of sand . . .and I am a yellow pearl, and you are a yellow pearl,*
>
> *and we are the yellow pearl, and we are half the world.*
>
> —Iijima & Miyamoto, from the song, "Yellow Pearl"

I had never thought of myself that way—a grain of sand, in the belly of a monster, a yellow pearl—descended from a line of courageous workers who built railroads, endured great hardships, faced exclusion acts, were not allowed to own property or to marry outside our race—and raised by women who slaved in sweatshops. But these images were not commonplace, they were not the ones the tourists saw, nor what those people in the diner found so compelling.

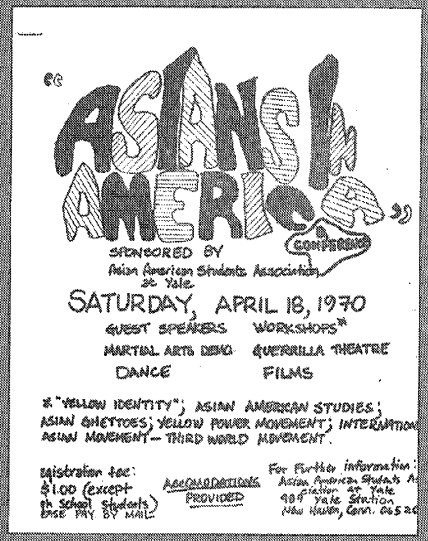
I hadn't seen them either. When I first saw Asian students at college protesting, I thought they were crazy. Later, when I heard that they were going to take over one of

"Myths and Realities/Past, Present and Future of Earth, Heaven and Hell"



Getting Together front page.

"Asians in America"
© 1970, Yale Asian American Students Association YRL/Louie



Immigrant Daughter: I want to hear the stories about your life, the Chinese stories. I want to know what makes you scream and curse, and what you're thinking when you say nothing, and why when you talk, you talk differently from Mother ...

the college classroom buildings, demanding an Ethnic Studies program, I hadn't felt any connection.

the year 2000, USA

I awake to the present. Someone said we are just trying to decide if students and faculty can hold voluntary meetings to discuss diversity issues.

the year 1971, New York City

Memories. It is early morning, the sun begins to rise and you can see the early morning light. Bob and I are still sorting through slides. We have the skeleton pretty well set. But there are still a few more images to find. We had first met at a storefront on the West Side where Joanne and others had organized a group that was fighting evictions. There was an immediate connection. We often stayed up all night, talking—about photography, media, images.

Had I really rooted for the cowboys against the Indians? Had I really played war and pretended I was the heroic American soldier?

Enter, Immigrant Daughter, Father, and Observer

It's hard to explain why it affects me so deeply, but it is like "seeing" for the first time. Seeing that we didn't have to fit into someone else's world, into someone else's image. Learning about our own history, our own culture, one that had been hidden for a long time. It is—like finding a piece of myself. I learn how to write my Chinese name. I begin looking for my own stories. Something stirs within me, something similar to what Maxine Hong Kingston talks about in *China Men*:

Immigrant Daughter: I want to hear the stories about your life, the Chinese stories. I want to know what makes you scream and curse, and what you're thinking when you say nothing, and why when you talk, you talk differently from Mother ...

Father: All Chinese know this story, if you are an *authentic* Chinese, you know the language and the stories without being taught, born knowing them.

Observer: So inextricably bound to the family's life is the oral tradition that its content and forms are passed along *unconsciously* from parent to child, performer to listener,

for *talk-story* is the language of common people in its most soulful form. [Linda Ching Sledge, *Redefining American Literary History*].

Narrator: That's what this media stuff is all about. And it affects all of us. We can't go back to being, to fitting those old images anymore. Rather, can we find those images that will reflect, will show us what we are and what we can be?

Exit Immigrant Daughter, Father, and Observer

the year 2000, USA

Now, some thirty years later, I'm sitting here in this room, and I'm wondering, how have our images changed? Have we become part of this culture? In this school, why aren't there more authors of color in the curriculum? Why so few students of color are in this program? Something seems to be missing. There is still a gap, a chasm between America and Asian-America?

I turn to the left, and I hear, in my imagination, two friends, talking:

George: The situation hasn't really changed, but we think it has. Well, in a way it has. Asians seem more "successful." But really, it is like being on the tip of an edge; one little shift and there we go, back to the *Coolie,* back to being the *Yellow Peril.*

Father: All Chinese know this story, if you are an *authentic* Chinese, you know the language and the stories without being taught, born knowing them.

"Generations."

Fighting for Chinese construction workers at Confucius Plaza, New York City Chinatown. © 1975, Mary Uyematsu Kao©

Uncover the wrong questions divorced from social reality and raise new questions rooted in it.

Emma Gee

Alice: True.

George: In a way we can never be a part of the dominant culture; we will always be the *other*.

Alice: Yes.

Alice: Did we think it would change?

George: But we live with these illusions, these false images that we can all be rich and successful. We thought we could change the images.

Alice: But the 80s happened, and the media was co-opted.

George: We thought that if we could put out the real images—the restaurant workers, the sweat shop seamstresses—we thought we had found our real identity, our lineage ...

George: ... and in a way we did, didn't we?

Alice: Yes, but not everyone wanted to be identified with that.

Alice: In the 80s and 90s we wanted to be identified with the rich. . .except for those of us who didn't fall for the popular media.

George: and how did that happen?

Alice: The popular media is very seductive, and a lot of people became worried about money when they became parents.

George: This is our "story," isn't it? When we got married, had kids, things shifted?

Alice: For some, yes.

George: So in a way this is my own "story."

the year 1971, New York City

Narrator: We finally get the last slide in place. We're tired, but excited. We've been up all night. We think it's pretty good, but who knows since we're not exactly awake. We load up the carousels, the projectors, the film. It's a big load. Joanne's up. She actually slept. She asks us if we're ready.

We arrive early—to set up the equipment. We've never done this before but it goes pretty smoothly. I'd never

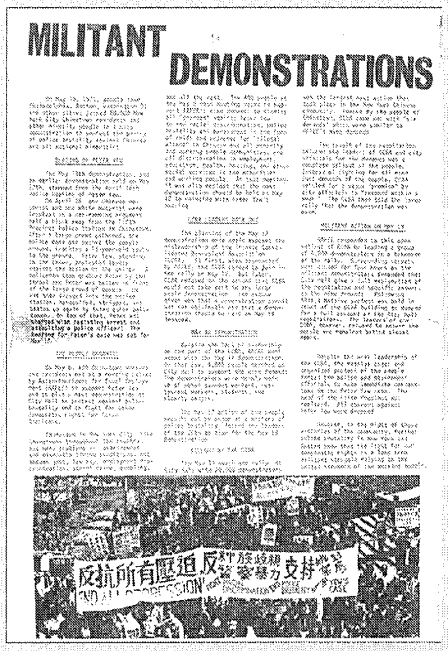
seen a public school in Manhattan. Film projector. Slide projectors. Mikes, speakers, sound. Chris and Joanne set up their stuff on stage. Bob and I make sure all the equipment is functioning properly. We run a test to see how it looks. It's a pretty big auditorium, holds maybe about 300 students? Ok. Everything seems set. We're ready to roll.

We take a short break as the students begin to file into the room. There's that kind of nervousness before you have to make a speech or something like that. We look at Joanne, and she seems perfectly calm. She's looks as if she's done this many times. Later, I found out she used to be on Broadway. No wonder. The room is full. Every seat taken. And there's a lot of noise, a lot of energy.

Chris and Joanne open it up. They introduce the show. We get ready. I feel a strange calmness, like when you know it's too late to worry anymore. The lights dim to black. We switch the slide projectors on. We start the film. The music begins. The slides come up from black. Here we go.

It is kind of a blur. But I remember the crowd becoming quiet. Then, they roar when the Chinatown kids make obscene gestures at the tourists. Yes, they could relate. They could connect with the images of defiance. It is interesting because most of the kids aren't Asian. They are black and Hispanic, but they know the same feeling. They know what it feels like to be looked at that way. By the time it is finished, I know it is going to be ok. They stand and cheer for what seems an eternity. I am numb by then. Drained, exhausted, thankful that it is over.

"Militant Demonstrations."



the year 2000, USA

Narrator: I hear those voices again—those two are talking again.

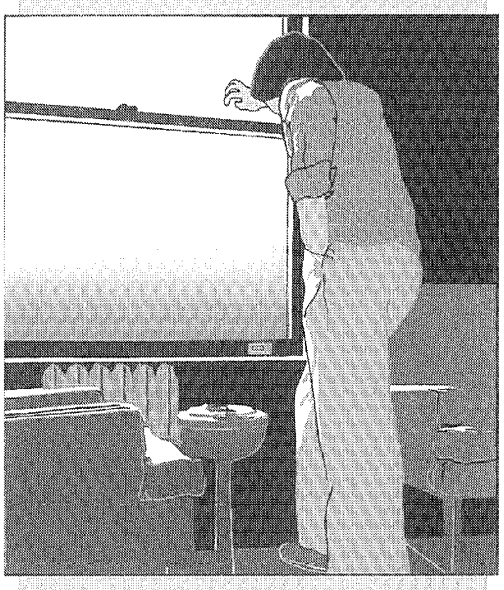
George: To be Asian in America today. . .do they still struggle to find a de-colonized, an authentic self?

Alice: If they are aware of it.

George: But many are not aware?

Alice: I don't think so.

George: Because they have "bought" into the image of the dominant culture?



"Kearny St. or Stockton"

I-Hotel, flanked by Chinese Progressive Association and Asian Community Center, with Leways' storefront next door.
© 1972, Steve Louie/*Mei Mei Bao* Collection

To be hard-working is to be unfairly competitive; to be good at math and science is to lack people skills and leadership abilities; to have strong families is to be too insular.

Alice: Except perhaps some gnawing thing inside. . .yes.

George: And they have not connected with their lineage?

Alice: Probably not.

George: . . .becoming American, to hold onto our roots or to assimilate. . .

Enter Observer

George: to be the "model minority". . . .

Alice: Yes.

Observer: If you fail to live up (or is it down?) to your submissive image, you may be told to "go back to where you came from." On the other hand, if you are *seen* as some sort of super-minority it is also dangerous. *Every commendable trait can become its opposite in another context:*

To be hard-working is to be unfairly competitive; to be good at math and science is to lack people skills and leadership abilities; to have strong families is to be too insular.

[Frank Wu, "The answer is not black and white."]

George: So these are really "new" faces in old clothes?

Alice: hmmm?

George: In a way there is a certain truth in both of them? Or, is one truly authentic and the other not?

Alice: It's hard to be so didactic. You run into the problem like in the 70s, alienating people about who is of the righteous lineage, and who is an Uncle Tom.

George: Yes.

George: In a way we could say both have a certain truth?

George: It's ok to be a *banana,* or is it the *egg*?

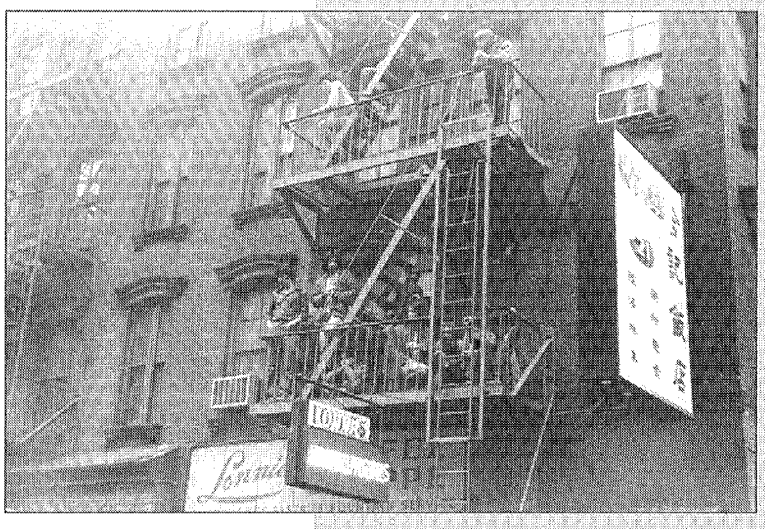
Alice: I would think so. We can't deny the both in both of us. Because we have lived in this country so long.

George: Yes.

Observer: Because we have grown up as a racial minority,

imbibing the customs of two cultures, our centers are not stable and single. Our consciousness is double; our vision bifocal and fluctuating. We have a need to explain ourselves to ourselves. We often look within and express the conflicts of the two cultures, whose two heritages are our own. [Amy Ling, *Redefining American Literary History*]

Chinese New York's Chinatown.
© 1974, Mary Uyematsu Kao/PF



Exit Observer

George: Yes. I think you're right. They both exist in us.

Alice: We don't want to only align with the seamstresses. It's a hard life, and we all, including the seamstress, want a better life yet we can't deny where we came from.

George: I see the *banana* and it is me. How could I not be? I live in a culture which *bananizes* me.

Alice: Yes. And you also buy into it.

George: Yet another part of me hates it. So I live with this internal rage.

Alice: Part of you doesn't want to acknowledge that you have bought into it. But you have to accept that too. It is part of you.

Man with melon.
© 1976, B.Y. Chen/*Counterpoint*

the year 1971, New York City

Narrator: We pack up the stuff. I am ready for some extended sleep. But as we are walking to the car, Joanne looks at Bob and me, and she says something like, "Well, you're a hit, you can't stop now." I am so tired I don't quite get the impact of what she says. But I do know that somehow we touched a chord, and it is something significant.

Later, after Bob and I had recovered, we start talking about creating alternative media, media that would present the real images of Asian-America. Joanne tells us we had to meet someone—a student at Pratt. Her name was Nancy Hom. Others like Corky Lee and John

In our bodies
a terrible thunder is
building its nest. . .

Janice Mirikitani

Kao are also interested, and we decide to form a group. We call it the Asian Media Collective, and its focus is to generate media for the people, by the people.

The collective "covers" the movement—street Health Fairs, anti-war demonstrations, community murals. One early morning Bob, Corky, and I load up our cameras. We go out into Chinatown at 5 AM. We patrol the narrow streets, Corky on the right, I take the left and Bob is in the middle. It turns into a slide show about the life of the community before the world is awake.

The work we produce is collective. No one has their name on the "credits." People take the shows all over the country: Upstate New York, New England, the Midwest, college campuses, community groups. We share the images with each other. And somehow it helps us stay connected, to create and be part of a larger community.

the year 2000, USA

Here I am, sitting in this meeting, wondering where that community is today, and how this meeting will end. . .and it strikes me that the work we started is still. . .unfinished.

Gordon Lee with Nancy Hom.
© 1979, Bob Hsiang/courtesy of the artist

Gordon Lee: Born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. In the fall of 1967 he went to Columbia University. He became involved in the Asian-American movement in the spring of 1970 when students at Columbia took over Kent Hall demanding an ethnic studies program. He was active in an uptown Asian American organization fighting for squatters' rights. He was one of the original members of the Asian Media Collective, and soon thereafter moved to New York Chinatown. After leaving New York he joined Third Arm, a community organization in Honolulu, Chinatown and spent many years there assisting residents to fight urban renewal.

Subsequently, he became an attorney. In addition to his legal work, he has developed a health insurance counseling and assistance program for seniors. He wrote, directed and produced a video on Japanese internment in Hawaii during World War II. Currently, he is pursuing a Ph.D. in depth psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California.