

I

Origins of the Movement

I looked in the mirror,
And I saw me.
And I didn't want to be
Any other way.
Then I looked around,
And I saw you.
And it was the first time I knew
Who we really are.
—“Something about Me Today”
A Grain of Sand music album

During the late 1960s, Asian American political activism began spontaneously in different places, at different times, and with different perspectives. On the West Coast, it began when community activists focused attention on the wretched conditions of San Francisco's Chinatown, and campus activists protested the absence of their historical experiences in college and university curricula. From these demonstrations came a plethora of community-based organizations providing much needed social services to the Asian ethnic communities and campus organizations offering vehicles for Asian American student activists throughout the western seaboard to participate in protest politics. On the East Coast, political activism began quietly in New York when two *nisei* women lamented the absence of a Japanese American community and the steady erosion of a Japanese American identity among their children. It was based mainly in New York City and its leaders developed an early enthusiasm for radical ideologies. In the Midwest, political activism began when Asian American college students came together for mutual support and col-

lective action Many of them eventually left college to go to an Asian ethnic community, usually on one of the coasts, in search of their roots

The West Coast: "Beyond the Chinatown Youth Problems"

As with other social movements of the 1960s, the **Asian American Movement** owes a debt of gratitude to the civil rights movement for exposing the gap between the country's image of itself and reality: Instead of a land of equality where a person could achieve success through individual effort, the United States was criticized as a land of inequality where racial discrimination degraded African Americans, relegating them to second-class status. Raising the **issue** of race forced the nation to examine its concept of democracy and the inferior place it reserved for African Americans and other people of color. In the vanguard were southern blacks, America's "wretched of the earth," living in an oppressive milieu undergirded by organized terror. With a courage and determination that they did not **know** they possessed, they confronted authority and fought tradition: Rosa **Parks** was arrested in December 1955 for refusing to leave a seat reserved for whites on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama; David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell **Blair**, and Joseph **McNeil**, four freshmen from the then all-black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, sat at the Greensboro Woolworth store's white-only lunch counter and asked for service in February 1960; Medgar E. Evers, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader in Mississippi, was murdered by racists in June **1963**; and there were many others. Their moral example moved people of every hue to support the civil rights movement. And that movement was triumphant: The U.S. Supreme Court's momentous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) concluded that **public** school segregation was inherently unequal and denied African Americans equal **protection** under the Constitution; the 1964 Civil Rights **Act** and the 1965 Voting Rights **Act** prohibited discrimination in voting, education, employment, and public facilities and gave the federal government the power to enforce desegregation by denying federal funds to segregated schools and programs; the 1968 Civil Rights Act barred racial discrimination in the sale or rental of housing.

Asian Americans, too, crossed the color line to embrace the ideals of the **civil** rights movement. Out of a sense of moral outrage, they participated in the effort to eliminate discrimination and segregation of blacks from the rest

of society. But in working to attain legal rights for African Americans, they came to realize that the struggle for social justice in America was more than an African American and European American issue; it involved other people of color. In a rude awakening, Asian Americans became acutely aware that they had more in common with African Americans than with European Americans, that racial injustice had been visited on them as well. As individuals, they too had experienced prejudice and discrimination; as a group, they too had been victims of institutionalized racism and had been excluded from mainstream society. They became aware that the discrimination they suffered was more than the work of individual bigots who should know better; it was in fact an intrinsic feature of American society. This new awareness generated not only ambivalence about their own identity but also disillusionment with a society that failed to live up to its principles of equality and justice for all. While they had started out identifying with liberal European Americans trying to help oppressed African Americans integrate society, they ended up empathizing with African Americans and saw the need to achieve racial equality for Asian Americans.

Inspired by the civil rights movement's breach of racial barriers, community activists tried to reform the condition of their own communities. On the West Coast, one of their earliest efforts was to get the San Francisco city government to address the concerns of Chinatown. Activists held a series of forums at the Commodore Stockton Auditorium and Portsmouth Square to focus public attention on the community's problems. Of these meetings, the most significant was an all-day "informational convocation" for Bay Area Chinese American students held on 17 August 1968 at the Cumberland Presbyterian Church by the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action. It was designed to educate people about Chinatown's socioeconomic ills, such as poor housing and health, unemployment, "negative" education, and the fact "that her poor, 50 per cent of the population, needed help."³ At the end of the day there was a protest march down Grant Avenue, Chinatown's main street. L. Ling-chi Wang, a graduate student in Near East linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, and a community activist who was working for the Chinatown Youth Council at the time, recalled

It was quite a political event in Chinatown. Those of us who were involved in it were very nervous of possible violence. Although our intentions were peaceful, we did not know whether the Chinatown

establishment considered us a threat or not. But it turned out to be very peaceful, although we were denounced by the Chinese Six Companies. For the first time problems were articulated beyond the Chinatown youth problems which were publicly aired before?

It was these "youth problems" that made the public aware that something was amiss in Chinatown. An increasing birthrate among Chinese Americans, and the influx of immigrants after the country's discriminatory immigration laws were changed in 1965, swelled the ranks of young people dissatisfied with the patently unpleasant, unproductive, and unpromising life of the ghetto. Caught between the "American Dream" and their inability to attain it, many of them gravitated toward gangsterism and threw in their lot with groups like the Wah Ching (literally, "Chinese youth"), the largest street gang in Chinatown.

A few youngsters joined Leway (a contraction of "legitimate ways"), a local self-help group begun by some American-born Chinese street youth whose pool hall was about to be closed.⁵ In an effort to preserve their "hangout," one of the few recreational facilities in Chinatown, they came up with the idea of a nonprofit youth agency. So in May 1967 they established Leway to manage the pool hall and a soda fountain, the profits from which would be used to fund programs that would serve the needs of local youth. As it turned out, the monies were used for legal assistance and rent instead. As one former member recalled, operating the facility was an effort at cooperative capitalism, purer than that practiced by most corporations because Leway eschewed government assistance in any form. As a matter of principle, the group refused to apply for federal funds because its leaders believed that the existing antipoverty monies available to youth groups were being used to coopt them.

In its own inimitable fashion, Leway sought to rehabilitate erstwhile juvenile delinquents and combat the social causes of their delinquency. As Leway president Denny Lai put it, "Most of us cats are misfits, outcasts with a rap sheet. What we're trying to do is to keep the hoods off the streets, give them something to do instead of raising hell."⁶ Besides providing a haven, Leway tried to find its members jobs and get them admitted to college, and it offered draft counseling as well. But a number of factors conspired to close Leway down. It was never able to build on its initial support from the community, which began to blame Leway members as well as other youths for the increasing violence in Chinatown. Nor was it able to establish a working relationship with

the police, whose continuous surveillance and harassment, more than anything else, forced Leway to shut its doors in the summer of 1969.

Meanwhile, Asian American student activists were addressing the adverse conditions at San Francisco State College and at the University of California, Berkeley. Their source of inspiration here was different. They were influenced more by the militant Black Power movement than the pacifist civil rights movement. They were particularly impressed with the Black Panther party, which had been founded in nearby Oakland in 1966. The Panthers traced all oppressed people's problems, foreign and domestic, to American imperialism, an idea that was gaining currency in the New Left student movement around the same time. In general, radicals began placing the problem of Third World people in the political context of U.S. imperialism and thought it imperative that people of color and progressive European Americans join together in what they believed was a movement for their common liberation.

"Shut it down!" was the rallying cry of Asian Americans and other students of color who participated in the Third World strikes at San Francisco State College (6 November 1968 to 27 March 1969) and the University of California, Berkeley (19 January 1969 to 14 March 1969). As part of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), they went on strike to achieve self-determination for themselves and their communities and to eradicate individual and institutional racism. Their immediate goal was the establishment of autonomous Ethnic Studies programs for the racial-minority groups in the TWLF, programs in which the students would control both the faculty and the curriculum. It was an educational goal rooted in cultural nationalism.

Ethnic Studies was to be open to all students of color who wanted a higher education. Its central purpose was to imbue them with the knowledge, understanding, and commitment needed to solve the problems of their communities. It would increase the diversity of the student body and faculty at San Francisco State and the University of California, Berkeley, making them more representative of the society they served and **less** exclusively European American. It was deemed necessary because conventional educational institutions offered a curriculum that was said to be irrelevant to the experiences of people of color. University courses, the strikers claimed, suppressed the social and political consciousness of students of color by denying or distorting their historical experience and by promoting a Eurocentric ideology that denigrated other cultures.

These Third World strikes were the labor pains that gave birth to Ethnic Studies programs on the two campuses as well as others across the nation. Ethnic Studies programs at San Francisco State and the University of California, Berkeley, failed to meet completely the demands of the students but nevertheless represented partial victories. The strike at San Francisco State was more effective than the one at Berkeley. At State, the strikers were able to shut down the campus three times and win the support of the American Federation of Teachers, which struck for several weeks in solidarity with the students. At Berkeley, the strikers were unable to close the campus.

One study argues that the difference between the San Francisco State and University of California, Berkeley, strikes essentially reflected the class character of the two campuses.⁷ San Francisco State was a working-class commuter school with students from the inner city, while Berkeley was an elite school with students from all over the nation. The strikers at State were more willing to employ militant confrontational tactics and had greater faculty and community support, which was indispensable in the protracted struggle against the college administration. The strikers at Berkeley were isolated from fellow students and the community. Nor did they get much sympathy from the faculty, who felt that the style and substance of their scholarship were being impugned, and who, as a professional elite, lacked the trade union consciousness of their colleagues at State.

Community support was of critical importance to the Asian American students. A former member of San Francisco State's Asian American Political Alliance recalled that some community leaders, such as Clifford Uyeda, long-time Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) member and national president from 1978 to 1980, opposed the actions of the students. Ever since World War II, when conservative JACL leaders cooperated with the authorities by convincing fellow Japanese Americans to go quietly into the concentration camps, the JACL had advocated that "Japanese must 'prove' themselves as American; by solidly integrating with the larger society."⁸ But other *nisei* (second-generation Japanese Americans), people like Yori Wada, Edison Uno, and Ray Okamura, supported the students? A former member of the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action recalled that the more conservative Chinatown leaders initially denounced the students as violent radicals, but later gave their support when they realized that the strike was to enable their children to attend San Francisco State.¹⁰

The Asian American contingent of the TWLF at State consisted of the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA), Philippine-American College Endeavor (PACE), and the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA). Both ICSA and PACE were Asian ethnic organizations, that is, they represented a particular Asian group, with ties to Chinatown and Manilatown, respectively. Their commitment to improving their communities through the existing educational system in general and State in particular shaped their social and political agenda. While AAPA shared ICSA and PACE's desire to provide community services, its main interest was in the then novel idea of creating a pan-Asian identity, that is, a collective identity that encompassed all Asian ethnic groups in America.

Of these three groups, ICSA was the most prominent." Established in November 1967 to work for social change, ICSA was a refreshing change from the social clubs of years past, which had spent their time preparing for the annual party for Chinese students in Bay Area colleges. It attracted the more socially concerned and politically aware students, most of whom were from relatively well-off families that had managed to escape from the ghetto to the suburbs. Later, its ranks were augmented by students directly from the ghetto, many of whom were recruited through a special admissions program. According to Stanford Lyman, one of the significant though unintended effects of the recruitment of students from Chinatown was to compel the organization to reconsider "the whole relationship of college to community and eventually to reevaluat[e] their priorities of education and service."¹²

Though the innovative Community Internship Program, San Francisco State students volunteered to work for some of Chinatown's social service agencies, such as the War on Poverty office; they also set up their own project to teach English to immigrant youth. At the suggestion of George Woo, who had been working with Chinatown youth, ICSA then requested funds from the college's Associated Student Government to set up community programs of its own. Under the leadership of Mason Wong, ICSA established a youth center in Chinatown and served as its direct link to the Chinese American community.

During the Third World strike, the youth center housed the Free University of Chinatown Kids, Unincorporated, which attempted to teach local youth about the history of Chinese in America and in the process to politicize them.¹³ But neither a political organization nor a revolutionary ideology emerged from it because its focus was on the oppression of the Chinatown community, rather

than racism as a larger social phenomenon. More than anything else, it served as a drop-in facility for youth, many of whom belonged to the Wah Ching, an informal grouping of rebellious immigrant youth from Hong Kong who, like their American-born peers in Leway, were under- or unemployed and excluded from the wider society, but had the additional burden of being illiterate in English. Wah Ching's leader was Stan Wong, who later joined San Francisco State College's Asian American Political Alliance, and its spokesman was George Woo. The Wah Ching sought help from various city agencies and the Six Companies, the umbrella organization that traditionally represented the Chinatown community, but to little avail. Eventually, it fragmented into factions, some of which were absorbed by Chinatown associations that used them as "looksee" men (i.e., sentries) for illegal operations.

Initially, ICSA was reluctant to join the Third World Liberation Front because its members thought that belonging to the coalition might jeopardize their programs. They were also uneasy about the militancy of the Black Student Union, which was allied with TWLF. ICSA's vacillation about joining TWLF threatened to rend the organization asunder. With the support of an insurgent faction within the organization and Leway, Mason Wong convinced ICSA to ally itself with the other students of color. In late spring 1968, Mason Wong was elected chair; soon after, the group officially joined the TWLF. In retrospect, Wong noted that the group eventually decided that "not to be involved was to be out of touch."¹⁴ By the following fall, at the height of the Third World strike, ICSA boasted a membership of about a hundred students, though far fewer actively participated in the strike.

Some of the most active Asian American student leaders in TWLF were from Philippine-American College Endeavor (PACE). PACE was organized principally by Pat Salavar, who served as campus coordinator, and Ron Quidachay, an early leader of the TWLF. Like ICSA, PACE had a strong community orientation and was actively working with youth from low-income families. Its major service program was to recruit and tutor Filipino American college applicants. Its political goal was to organize disaffected Filipino American students to oppose racism and "internal colonialism"; leaders like Salavar also hoped that it would stimulate the development of a "revolutionary consciousness" among the students.¹⁵ But most Filipino American students were uninterested in PACE's political perspective.¹⁶ PACE participated in TWLF mainly to ensure that the proposed School of Ethnic Studies would teach Filipino American cul-

ture, language, and history. Of primary importance to PACE members would be the educational and socioeconomic plight of Filipino Americans.

Histories of the State strike make only passing reference to the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), yet AAPA members were among the most militant of the Asian Americans involved in TWLF, with proportionally more of them involved in strike activities than either ICSA or PACE members." AAPA's relative newness and the amorphousness of its purpose contributed to its lack of prominence, but the main reason was the visibility and credibility of ICSA and PACE leaders such as Ron Quidachay, the chairman of TWLF the year before the strike, and George Woo of ICSA, who represented all the Asian American students in negotiations with other minority groups in the coalition and with the college administration. A former AAPP member humorously recalled that Woo had the respect of friends and foes alike because he seemed to embody every negative stereotype that they ever had about Asians.¹⁸ He appeared to be the quintessential "inscrutable Oriental" with hidden powers ready to be unleashed on unsuspecting opponents, an incarnation of Genghis Khan. AAPA, in contrast, was led by Penny Nakatsu, an intelligent and strong person whose gender placed her at a decided disadvantage in dealing with Third World student leaders and European American college administrators, all of whom were men.

Penny Nakatsu and two other Japanese American women started the San Francisco State AAPA in the summer of 1968.¹⁹ They had met at a Berkeley AAPA meeting and agreed that their school needed a similar group. An informal group of middle-class students with continuing but attenuated ties to the Asian American community, the State AAPA consisted mainly of Japanese Americans. This led Stanford M. Lyman to conclude that "although it had its leftward leaning and radical members, AAPA at San Francisco State College came to be more a Japanese-American group and less an outlet for radical expression."²⁰ Unlike the Chinese and Filipino Americans, who had their own ethnic organizations on campus, the Japanese Americans had only AAPA. But AAPA's main attraction to its members was its emphasis on pan-Asianism.

Even though AAPA was in the midst of defining its ideology and setting up its organization when it joined the strike, it was clear from the beginning that this group was committed to an Asian American community. Alienated from an Asian culture with which they had little contact and an American culture that excluded them, its members developed an interest in unifying Chinese,

Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and other Asian Americans instead of committing themselves to the well-being of a specific Asian American community like Chinatown. That was probably why AAPA disappeared after the Third World strike at San Francisco State; its members devoted their energies to Ethnic Studies or the Equal Opportunity Program, both of which gave them a chance to realize an Asian American community that had previously existed only as an abstraction.

AAPA's initial agenda called for consciousness-raising sessions dealing with Asian American identity as a prelude to political action. Its focus on action was the reason that the group attracted people with previous involvement in social movements. They were anticipating a major political action at State as the campus remained tense after the previous spring's sit-in to protest cutbacks in the Equal Opportunity Program and the termination of one of its minority faculty, Juan Martinez. The stage was set for the Third World strike in the fall semester.

Probably more than any other single event, the Third World strike at San Francisco State symbolized the potential of Asian American activism. On the basis of a shared identity and history, the students coalesced into an inter-Asian coalition that in turn became a part of a still larger student-of-color coalition. Together, they challenged school authorities and acquired the power necessary to change their educational institution so that it reflected more accurately America's ethnic pluralist society. Doing so was an empowering experience, one that convinced many Asian American activists that they could collectively change themselves and their communities through direct action. But, as a later chapter discusses, the next major challenge was to ensure that the changes at State and at other campuses, and in the Asian ethnic communities lasted.

As political as State's AAPA was, it was considered less radical²¹ than Berkeley's AAPA, which had its beginnings in the Peace and Freedom party, a coalition of antiwar activists and Black Panthers promoting third-party candidates. On the basis of the party's mailing list, Yuji Ichioka called together an Asian Caucus to discuss issues of mutual concern. His appeal to all Asian Americans, rather than to members of a single ethnic group like the Chinese or Filipinos or Japanese, reflected a recognition of their similar history in America and an appreciation of strength through numbers. From this caucus came the Berkeley Asian American Political Alliance, the first of many AAPAs that sprang up around the country.

In the beginning, the Berkeley AAPA consisted of about ten members. Later, these ten contacted Bay Area students and community workers they thought might be interested in a political, rather than social, organization. The first members were a diverse group. Richard Aoki, one of the leaders of the Third World strike at Berkeley, recalled that AAPA included people of various political persuasions, from liberal to anarchistic (though there were no conservatives) and represented "the best, most highly conscious, most politically developed members out of these social clubs that Asians tend to join when they go to college."²² These students "made a strong recruitment drive in the community drawing in ex-farm workers, ex-detainees of the concentration camp from the Japanese American community, progressive elements from the Chinese [American] community, and a large anti-Marcos grouping from the Filipino [American] community."²³ Their general purpose was *to* bring about the kind of social and political change in America that would result in self-determination for people of color. For that reason, while preparing to teach an experimental course at Berkeley on the Asian American experience, they participated in the campaign to free Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther party who had been convicted of voluntary manslaughter. The course would be a way of educating Asian Americans about themselves, a prerequisite for determining their own lives and asserting their own identity.

AAPA held meetings to address issues and concerns that were pertinent to Asian Americans. According to George Woo, it was at the second meeting that Larry Jack Wong first brought up the internment of the Japanese Americans, saying, "Hey you're Japanese. Why don't you people protest about the concentration camps?"²⁴ Woo noted that a long discussion ensued and, ever the gadfly, he said, "Hell, the way things are going now, they might do that to us. So you're not doing this just for the Japanese, but for all other people. I'll handle it different, I'll take a few of them with me."²⁵ Wong and Woo had touched upon a taboo topic, one that older Japanese Americans had sought to forget. After that tragedy was revealed to *sanssei* (third-generation Japanese Americans) participating in the Asian American Movement, the internment during World War II became *the* issue among Japanese American activists and, for many of them, the sole reason for being involved politically.

In spite of their successes at Berkeley, some AAPA members became increasingly disenchanted with campus politics. Feeling also some guilt about being in college while other Asian Americans lived lives of quiet desperation

in the ghetto, they decided in December 1969 to return to the community. They moved into the baserrent of the United Filipino Hall in the International Hotel; but, except for a vague yearning to return to their roots, the Berkeley AAPA students were uncertain about what to do there. Initially, they maintained an informal office that provided reading materials from Asia, especially China, and on the weekends showed movies to local residents. During the two months following their arrival, they analyzed the abysmal conditions of the community and concluded that it and other Third World communities in the United States were nothing more than internal colonies exploited for their manpower, "insulted constantly, and brutalized by the forces of law and order."²⁶ In the course of this brief period of study, some of them decided to formalize their presence by establishing, in March 1970, the Asian Community Center (ACC).

Officially, the ACC was a collective guided by a steering committee, but because of the high degree of camaraderie decisions were made through mutual consultation and consensus.²⁷ According to ACC leader Steve Yip, initially the organization consisted mainly of second-generation Chinese Americans; later, its ranks were augmented by Chinese students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) whom it had protected against local thugs hired by the Kuomintang (KMT Nationalist party).²⁸ It envisioned itself as an "idea" around which the Asian community could rally and unite. That idea was a common Asian American identity rooted in a past history of oppression and a present struggle for liberation. In this it was heavily influenced by Maoism, particularly the belief that once ideas are grasped by the masses, they turn into a material force that changes society and the world. But the members were shrewd enough to realize that before the idea could be grasped by the working people in the community, the group needed to attract their attention. Thus it did by providing community services.

Among its activities, the ACC's Free Film Program was one of the most popular. Initially intended as entertainment for local residents, the program evolved into what was mainly a pro-PRC film series, interspersed with political movies about liberation struggles all over the world and in the United States. But the films attracted viewers interested not so much in communism as in learning about their homeland and how it was faring, information that was scarce in Cold War America, especially in KMT-influenced Chinatowns. Needless to say, this more than anything else antagonized the KMT and its clients, the Chinese Six Companies.²⁹

The interest in movies about the PRC was not just a San Francisco Chinatown phenomenon. Whenever films about the mainland were shown in the United States, Chinese and Chinese Americans turned out in large numbers to see them. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, the organizers of China Week were astounded when hundreds of people attended the film showings. It seemed as if the entire Chinese American population in Michigan had come to see *The East Is Red*, a tedious propaganda film about the Chinese Communist Revolution. I Wor Kuen, a militant group in New York City, had a similar experience when it showed the film on three consecutive nights in a vacant-lot playground in Chinatown. Such were the emotional ties that Chinese Americans had to their former homeland and their craving for information about it.

Among the filmgoers were Chinese students from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities. Alienated from their home countries and, in the case of those from Taiwan and Hong Kong, dissatisfied with dependence on the United States and England, they identified with the People's Republic of China, the homeland that their parents or grandparents had left during the Chinese diaspora. While democratic nations (and the Soviet Union after 1960) considered China a pariah, overseas Chinese students admired it as an increasingly powerful nation that commanded respect in Asia and in the world. Many of them abandoned their studies to join pro-PRC groups, especially those working for the normalization of relations with the United States.

ACC's main political action was its participation in the struggle to save the International Hotel from destruction. The I-Hotel, as it was known, was what remained of Manilatown, a once thriving community that had covered ten city blocks between Chinatown and the nearby financial district and served as a debarkation point for Filipino laborers. It was one of the few low-income dwellings in the area, housing mainly elderly Filipino and Chinese bachelors, victims of California's anti-miscegenation laws. It came to represent the right of senior citizens and others to decent low-cost housing in their own communities. In December 1968, the hotel owners tried to evict the tenants to build a parking lot in its place.

The Filipino and Chinese communities were unwilling or unable to take a stand against eviction; but for many young Filipinos in search of their ethnic identity and cultural place, the I-Hotel symbolized the history of the *manongs*—aging Filipino immigrants, the generation of their fathers.³⁰ They went to defend the hotel and their cultural legacy. They were joined by Asian American stu-

dents from Berkeley, Davis, Stockton, Sacramento, San Jose, and as far away as Fresno. Saving the I-Hotel was the first issue that brought large numbers of Asian American students into the community. Students organized demonstrations, tried to rehabilitate the building to meet city codes, and negotiated with the owners and the city in a futile effort to save the hotel. Meanwhile, renovated storefronts on the ground floor were sublet to programs that sought to serve the community: the Kearny Street Workshop, Jackson Street Gallery, Asian Community Center, Chinese Progressive Association, Chinatown Youth Council, and Everybody's Bookstore. The students were aided by Berkeley's newly founded Asian American Studies program, which provided university transportation to ferry students from the campus to the hotel several times a day and even used university money to pay the first year's rent. Floyd Huen, who was in charge of the program at Berkeley, recalled paying the rent with student fees and rationalizing it as returning resources to the community.³¹

Unfortunately, the campaign to protect the I-Hotel became mired in factionalism, the worst antagonism being between the Asian Community Center (ACC) and the International Hotel Tenants Association (IHTA). The IHTA, representing the interests of the elderly residents, focused on immediate steps to safeguard the hotel and was willing to work with the mayor's office and employ legal strategies to achieve its goals. But the ACC considered this a class struggle between the rich and poor, for which building a mass support base was a political prerequisite. ACC members thought that negotiating with the mayor was useless, since he and other public officials would accede to their demands only if they applied constant community pressure. Each group thus accused the other of undermining the struggle to save the hotel.

On the night that the I-Hotel fell, hundreds of demonstrators linked arms to prevent the police from carrying out the eviction order. In spite of this valiant effort, the building was finally torn down in 1977, leaving a huge hole in the ground and an unresolved issue. After all these years, the community and the city are still negotiating about what will be built in its place.

The East Coast: "The Center of the . . . Power Structure"

Asian American activism is commonly seen as an exclusively West Coast phenomenon because of its intensity and breadth there. In a letter published in *Gidra* (November 1969), Don Nakanishi, a member of the Asian American

Political Alliance at Yale University. noted that Asian Americans on the West Coast seemed to believe that their few compatriots on the East Coast were all "bananas," that is, Asian American **Uncle Toms.**" Referring to the large population and the existence of radical political organizations on the East Coast, he pointed out that the east was "the center of **mass** communications, the power structure, **and** the major capitalistic undertakings" and that any actions that eastern political groups took would have greater national impact in the long run.³³

Among the groups that Nakanishi mentioned were the Asian American Political Alliance at Yale and at Columbia. Indirectly influenced by the Berkeley AAPA (they had "heard about this group on the West Coast, and it sounded good"),³⁴ East Coast AAPA members identified with the antiwar and black liberation movements rather than the conservative social clubs at their schools. In September 1969, the Columbia AAPA sent two of its members to Berkeley for an Asian American Studies conference. It was an inspiring visit that renewed their efforts to organize students on their own campus, though a sustained and systematic drive for an Asian American Studies program never materialized. Instead, some of them began to be involved in Asian Americans for Action, an anti-imperialist and intergenerational organization.

One of the first pan-Asian organizations on the East Coast,³⁵ Asian Americans for Action, or Triple A, was founded by Kazu Iijima and Minn Matsuda, two *nisei* women with an extraordinary history of fighting for social justice. In 1968, on one of those beautiful fall days that mask the grimness of New York City, they got together on a park bench to eat lunch and to talk. Among other things, they expressed admiration for the Black Power movement, with its emphasis on ethnic identity and pride, and concern about their college-age children, who were losing their cultural identity. What was needed, Iijima and Matsuda decided, was a Japanese American community and cultural organization that their children and other young adults could belong to. But Chris Iijima, Kazu's son, convinced them that only a pan-Asian organization was viable.³⁶ The thought of bringing together diverse Asian Americans was a new and exciting idea, as it proved to be elsewhere in the nation. Only after Triple A was established did they learn of Asian American political activism on the West Coast.

Iijima and Matsuda proceeded to contact both mature and young people they knew or had heard about. Only a few, like Yuri Kochiyama, an activist in the Japanese American community, responded. Much to their disappointment,

other progressive individuals of their own generation, including those who had been active in the antifascist Japanese American Committee for Democracy, were uninterested in participating in an Asian American organization. Some had become complacent or concerned with their careers, others were still feeling the aftereffects of the McCarthy period, and most were wary of working with young people. At the antiwar demonstrations they attended regularly, Ijima and Matsuda approached every Asian they saw and got his or her name and address. Kazu Ijima recalls with a certain amount of mirth that at the time these young people must have thought that they were "crazy little old ladies."³⁷ From these encounters, they compiled a long list of names.

On 6 April 1969 Ijima and Matsuda held their first meeting, which drew about eighteen people. Most participants were Chinese American college students from Columbia University and the City College of New York. Ijima and Matsuda expected that the students would want to focus on cultural and identity issues, but much to their surprise and delight, the young people, most of whom had participated in the Black Power movement, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), or other New Left student organizations, also wanted to address political issues. They agreed that their purpose would be to establish a political voice for the Asian American community and serve as a means for collective action; hence the name Asian Americans for Action. Their primary political concern was opposing the Vietnam War. They called for the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. and allied troops from South Vietnam, upheld the Vietnamese struggle for self-determination, and acknowledged the National Liberation Front as the military and political representative of the people. Naturally, those who were uncomfortable with Triple A's political dimension dropped out quickly. Those who stayed did so because they had finally found a group that they could identify with racially and relate to politically. Among their Asian "brothers and sisters" they felt a level of comfort that they never felt as members of European American or even African American organizations.

Unlike most other antiwar groups, Triple A placed the Vietnam War in the larger context of imperialism and racism." According to its analysis, the war was being fought to obtain resources from and to promote business in Asia and was part of a "Pacific Rim" strategy that placed the defense of American interests in the nations surrounding the Pacific Ocean above the rights of the people in those nations. From Triple A's perspective, American foreign policy was controlled by a military-industrial complex that greedily sought profits at the expense of other countries, especially vulnerable Third World nations

like those in Southeast Asia. Victims of American neoimperialism thus had a common interest in resisting America's designs on Asia. Emphasizing the racial aspects of American foreign policy in general and in the Vietnam War, the Triple A reasoned that, because American government leaders considered Asians biologically and culturally inferior, an Asian nation had been invaded to satisfy the United States's insatiable search for resources. Moreover, this racial bias served to justify the American military's brutality toward the Vietnamese people and mirrored the racial animosity directed against Asian Americans and other people of color in the United States. Conversely, any setbacks experienced in Asia resulted in an increase in hostility toward Asian Americans.

As part of its anti-imperialist activities, Triple A took the lead in opposing the United States–Japan Security Treaty. It published *Ampo Funsai* (literally, Smash the Treaty), which indicted both countries as imperialist partners in Asia, and in November 1969, on the occasion of Prime Minister Eisaku Sato's visit to the United States, Triple A organized a rally against the treaty. About three hundred people went to Washington, D.C., where they put on street theater that featured a cloth dragon bearing a cardboard head resembling a malevolent imperialist Uncle Sam and a tail labeled Sato. The group marched to the Japanese embassy and tried to present a petition to the prime minister. Twenty of the demonstrators allowed themselves to be arrested. As a media event, the demonstration was a success: Not only did it receive front-page coverage in the *Washington Post* and *Washington Star*, but it was reported by journalists from Japan as well.

But all was not well with Triple A as it struggled with external subversion and internal dissension. A takeover was attempted by the Progressive Labor party (PL), a Maoist fiction that had splintered from the Communist party, U.S.A., over the Sino-Soviet dispute, attacking the revisionist policies of the Soviet Union and identifying with the People's Republic of China. Its disciplined cadre lived a puritanical lifestyle (among other things, they eschewed rock music to avoid offending "the workers") and were committed to creating a dictatorship of the proletariat in the United States. PL espoused revolution, talked of violence, and studiously cultivated college students as part of its so-called worker–student alliance. It had already successfully absorbed the Students for a Democratic Society and tried this tactic during the Third World strike in San Francisco State. Leroy Goodwin, a Black Student Union Central Committee member, described the PL as "professional at meeting disruptions, coup de *tai [sic]* (overthrown) manufacturers," who were always trying to "show why the

people should transfer their allegiance from the present organization to PL.”⁴⁰

Several PL members, including Jerry Tung, who later went on to establish the Communist Workers party, tried to insinuate themselves into Triple A for the purpose of recruiting new members and influencing its policies, a ploy used by many Marxist–Leninist organizations of the period. They waged an incessant ideological struggle at Triple A meetings, trying to direct discussions and packing meetings whenever there was a vote on some important social or political issue. But their political philosophy, which held that nationalism in any form was reactionary and racism was a social aberration rather than an intrinsic part of the American social fabric, was fundamentally at odds with Triple A and other ethnic-based organizations. Their ideology and methods were intolerable to the rest of the members, and eventually they were expelled from the group.

The internal dissension was less manageable. One interpretation is that “ultraleft” elements in Triple A (as well as in Columbia AAPA) polarized the organization.⁴¹ In one camp were the older members (mostly Japanese Americans) who advocated working on the “anti-imperialist international front”; in the other were younger members (mostly Chinese Americans) interested in working in New York’s Chinatown.⁴² The latter employed “wreckingtactics,”⁴³ accusing those unwilling to organize in Chinatown of being insufficiently political. Another interpretation is that the split was mainly a matter of style. On the basis of their past experience, older members viewed the issues in a larger international context and wanted to tone down the rhetoric in order to obtain the support of as many people as possible. But the younger ones would have none of such moderation, preferring the rhetoric and style of SDS and militant African Americans. An older member analyzed the problem this way:

For the young people this was the first time that they had the opportunity of taking a political thing and doing it on their own so that rhetoric and everything was part of the catharsis. They had to get it off their chests. . . . Before they were always a part of larger white or black groups. And this was the first time that we were taking responsibility for our own way of demonstrating, our own slogans, our own everything. So the tendency was to be very rhetorical, very militant, very up front.⁴⁴

In hindsight, a younger member concluded that such behavior was simply a matter of political immaturity on the part of his peers.⁴⁵

In all probability the conflict was a manifestation of the generation gap that

was talked about so much during the 1960s. It was natural for young people to lash out against authority figures. After all, it was an era when the young distrusted anyone over thirty. These generational conflicts resulted in bitterness, name-calling, and finally the departure of practically all the young people, most of whom later went on to establish I Wor Kuen, a Maoist sect based in New York's Chinatown.

Those remaining in Triple A felt dejected, abandoned, and weary. They considered simply ending the organization but were convinced by Pat Sumi, who had just returned from visits to North Vietnam and North Korea, to carry on. In spite of its reduced size, Triple A continued to be active in the New York area. One of its major initiatives was a plan for an Asian community center, an effort that quickly expanded beyond Triple A and became the main focus of activity among Japanese Americans in the city.⁴⁶ The Ad Hoc Committee for an Asian Center, chaired by Bill Kochiyama, had ambitious plans, including a day-care center and a multilingual informational hot line. On 10 December 1972 the United Asian Communities Center opened its doors. The Center became a hub of Asian American social and political activities in New York City but eventually was forced to close because of inadequate financing. The acrimonious relations within the Asian American Movement during the mid-1970s made it impossible to launch a fund-raising campaign to save the Center.

The latter half of the 1970s was a difficult period for the Asian American Movement. Unity provided by the antiwar movement ended with the end of American intervention in Southeast Asia in 1975, while radical Asian American organizations, particularly Marxist-Leninist ones, engaged in bitter and violent rivalries. Many groups experienced significant changes, including Triple A. In 1976 it changed its name to the Union of Activists and moved away from being an exclusively Asian American group concerned with ethnic issues to one that embraced all progressive people involved in multinational class struggle. It managed to continue its activities to the end of the decade, when it decided to dissolve itself after its members began to have a falling out over the issue of Soviet socialist imperialism.

The Midwest: "This 'Vast Banana Wasteland' "

While East Coast Asian American activists felt misunderstood by those on the West Coast, the ones in the Midwest felt ignored by both. As the Rice Paper Collective of the Madison Asian Union put it, "Our invisibility is so total that

Asian Americans are not thought to exist in this 'vast banana wasteland.'⁴⁷ Except for those living and laboring in such places as Chicago's Chinatown, most midwestern Asian Americans had disappeared into suburbia. Without a physical community to relate to, midwestern Asian Americans found it difficult to start and sustain an ethnic-consciousness movement. Accordingly, Asian American activism started later in the region and Asian American groups had a harder time recruiting and retaining members. In order to overcome the geographic and spiritual isolation they felt, midwestern activists regularly visited on: another as well as activists on the coasts.

These problems notwithstanding, during the 1970s there was significant Asian American activism in the Midwest, enough to warrant organizing two Midwestern Asian American Conferences in Chicago (12-14 April 1974) and Madison (26-29 September 1974), and a Midwest Regional Conference on Asian American Mental Health (Chicago, May 1974).⁴⁸ Most of the Asian American groups in the region were campus groups whose central concern was personal identity.⁴⁹ The Minneapolis Asian American Alliance (organized in 1971) spent its first year holding "rap sessions" on Asian American identity and awareness, for example.⁵⁰ The purpose of the University of Illinois Asian American Alliance (also organized in 1971) was to "create a new sense of awareness and identity, to derive some sense of belonging, and to provide a deeper and broader understanding of our Asian heritage."⁵¹ The Oberlin Asian-American Alliance (organized in 1972) designed an entire program around the issue of identity.⁵² Not surprisingly, the Second Midwestern Asian American Conference (Madison, 1974) was organized around the question "What's beyond identity?"

One of the centers of significant Asian American activism was the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, home of three successive groups: the Ann Arbor Asian Political Alliance, Yisho Yigung, and East Wind.⁵³ The Ann Arbor APA was born during China Week, a series of events focusing on the People's Republic of China, held on campus in spring 1971. China Week was sponsored by the University of Michigan's chapter of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, a group of radical Asian Studies students and scholars, and Armed Revolutionary Media, a media collective that had emerged from the 1969 Woodstock music festival. While each had its own reasons for organizing this event, both groups agreed that one of the legacies of the Cold War was an American public ignorant about China, which was still considered an outlaw nation. So China Week was organized to inform the people.