



HARVARD Kennedy School
JOHN F. KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT



ASIAN AMERICAN POLICY REVIEW

VOLUME 19, 2009–2010

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Rising to Political Power
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Zoned Out in New York City



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EDITORS REMARKS

The 2009-2010 *Asian American Policy Review (AAPR)* staff is proud to present our 20th Anniversary Edition.

This year's theme, "Defining Moments," examines significant events of the past, tipping points, and policies that have defined and shaped the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community in the decades following the civil rights movement.

Our 20th anniversary volume includes pieces that address issues of Asian American identity as well as political and social empowerment over time.

Some of the AAPI community's most defining moments covered in this edition include the political and social conscience born from the beating of Vincent Chin, the wrongful conviction of Chol Soo Lee, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and Hurricane Katrina.

Additionally, this volume delves into some of the most complex issues that characterize the AAPI community, such as diaspora and migration. One of the feature articles highlights a new documentary directed and produced by John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University student Jason Ahn, who shares his personal story as he explores the problem of Korean American families divided during the Korean War and their hopeful reunification.

Finally, the *AAPR* seeks to understand the nature of AAPI civic and political leadership, with interviews featuring Campbell, California, Mayor Evan Low, the youngest openly gay mayor in the country, and Edward Tom, principal of the Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics in New York. We also study the successful election of Judy Chu, the first Chinese American woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Happy reading.

HARVARD JOURNAL OF ASIAN AMERICAN POLICY

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VOLUME XIX

The 2010 *Asian American Policy Review (AAPR)* staff is proud to present our 20th Anniversary Edition. This year's theme, "*Defining Moments,*" examines significant events of the past, tipping points, and policies that have defined and shaped the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community in the decades following the civil rights movement.

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Changing Perceptions: An Interview with Mayor Evan Low

*Interviewed by Ke Ji (MPP2) and
Clarence Tong (MPP2)*



On 10 December 2009, the AAPR interviewed Campbell, California, Mayor Evan Low.

Evan Low is a twenty-six-year-old Chinese American who began his term

as mayor of Campbell, California, a Silicon Valley city of 38,000 people, in 2009. Low is the youngest openly gay and youngest Asian American mayor ever. A fourth-generation Californian, Low was first elected to the Campbell City Council in November 2006. In addition to receiving his bachelor of arts in political science from San Jose State University, Low graduated from the Senior Executives in State and Local Government Program at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He currently serves as a senior district representative for California State Assembly Member Paul Fong.

In recognition of Low's service and commitment to the city, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom named 5 June 2006 "Evan Low Day" in San Francisco. Low's

record of serving his community includes co-instructing a college leadership program focused on youth empowerment and identity. A member of a number of Democratic Party organizations, Low was president of the Silicon Valley LGBT Democratic Club, cochair of Healthy Silicon Valley, and secretary of the National League of Cities Asian Pacific American Municipal Officials. In 2008, he was appointed by Governor Howard Dean to the Democratic National Convention Rules Committee.

AAPR

What made you decide on a career in public service and to run for political office? As a fourth-generation Chinese American how did your heritage and culture play a role in that decision?

LOW

If you think about elected officials, generally speaking, you ask them why they want to serve in public office, and most of the time they will tell you that they care about public safety, nice, safe neighborhoods, good education, safe and fiscally sound budgets. Those are all really important things. But I think what's also important is to have a sense of identity—where I've come from and how I can utilize those experiences to help those traditionally underserved communities.

I understand the challenges of being Asian and Chinese American, for example, of language access being a barrier. Here in California, it wasn't all too long ago that Chinese could not marry Caucasian people. Chinese could not own property. Those are really major issues of bad public policy that, quite frankly, were set at various levels of government. But as we all hear, politics is always local.

AAPR

Your dad was the president of the chamber of commerce. How did that play a role in your political career?

LOW

That was the major reason why I was engaged and am currently involved in the city of Campbell. I think many Asian Americans grew up doing speech and debate, piano lessons, tennis, and Chinese school. I didn't have any memory of that. My memory was of carrying ice from trucks to deliver to various vendors at the festivals, doing food and clothes drives, volunteering at the blind shelter. That was my upbringing. Those are my memories of my childhood upbringing, and largely because of my father, who brought me to many of those things as I was younger. So certainly that gave me the skills and the perspective that I have today.

AAPR

You mentioned that you want to serve underrepresented sections of the community. You represent a community that's not predominantly Asian American. In fact, Campbell is about 77% White and actually 11% Asian American. How does this affect the policies that you're enacting in your first term as mayor?

LOW

Well, certainly, as a representative of the city, I try to do my best to represent not just only one community but also the larger community as a whole; not to serve just one constituency, but to represent everyone. And so I think what's important is to recognize some of those facts and see how we can help populations, again, that are typically underserved as it relates to affordable housing, as it relates to language-access issues. Those are real issues.

Let's take the issue of domestic violence. We know that in the Asian American community, we have a sense of pride, and to call the police to report a domestic violence incident is something that we typically probably wouldn't do. And it's important for us to have individuals, for example, in domestic violence outreach, to understand those communities and how to best serve and utilize those services for the residents and the populations at large.

AAPR

Part of what we wanted to discuss was how you would govern in a community that isn't predominantly Asian American. But we are also interested in finding out how you run an effective campaign in a place where most people aren't like you. Do you have any thoughts on this? What strategies did you use when you were campaigning that you found to be effective?

LOW

Well, I think one thing that can be effective is to be able to talk to individuals and get them to understand and know us. People are always fearful of the unknown and fearful perhaps of something that they're not used to. So it certainly took time. I did run for council the first time in 2004 and lost by a small percentage. But they were also able to see that I was committed to this community, and because I ran a second time, that this was not just a fluke. And having a knowledge of the issues is important. "Does the person represent my interests? Does the person or candidate understand the issues of my neighborhood?" I think that's what it comes down to—being able to connect to people and being able to articulate a reason why they should represent the entire city. So I think part of it was to be able to convey a clearer message as to

some of the priorities that I think were important for the city of Campbell. And the residents agreed.

AAPR

What are your major priorities and objectives for your term as mayor?

LOW

First and foremost is the budget, making sure that we have a fiscally sound budget and that we can prevent the impacts of the cuts that we are—and will need to be—making. These are tough economic times, and as much as possible, we want to try to maintain the quality of life for our residents that they're used to and to prevent the impact. So that's first and foremost what we'll be working on.

AAPR

What do you see as the major issues facing the Asian American community in the Bay Area, the state of California, and also across the country?

LOW

I think participation and filling the pipeline for our future. I also think it's important for us to be visible in other broad communities that represent many different people, whether it be in suburban areas or in the middle of the country. . . . You know, every night when I turned on CNN, they would have a segment where there was this red scare, and [former anchor] Lou Dobbs would be reporting on China taking our jobs, [something] particularly [sensitive] here in Silicon Valley, where a significant percentage of the workforce in these high-tech companies are of Asian Pacific origin or descent. It's important to demonstrate understanding and awareness of diversity and to also understand how that plays as a factor in international relations. I think

what's important is that we work one by one, as people get to know the Asian Pacific Islander community—what we are, who we are, what we represent, and what better aspects and perspectives we can bring to the table.

Certainly college campuses are much more aware and active on the West Coast and East Coast. But there's also middle America in which Asian Pacific Islander communities are pretty small. So [some people's] only exposure to our communities may be mainstream media, when they watch CNN and Lou Dobbs, or when they watch kung-fu movies, or when they watch American Idol or William Hung [who was famous for his off-key singing while auditioning for American Idol]. We need to really demonstrate that we have broad people from all different sectors and highlight our talent.

AAPR

Just to follow up on political participation, what do you see as being the major barriers in the Asian American community? Do you feel like the community could be better mobilized?

LOW

Part of it, quite frankly, is our culture. Our culture discourages our participation in the political process because it's too dirty. It's expensive. [They say] "why don't you become a lawyer or doctor, make money to support a family, have kids," that type of thing.

So I think one of the things that we have to change is the culture, the perception. And I think that's starting to happen. Quite frankly, even in our communities, we need to work on the issue of discrimination. And that might sound funny, but during the [2008 Democratic presidential primary] election between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, I would see

many people in the Chinese American community who were more traditional say that they were not going to vote for Barack because he was black. And so there still is, to this day, work that we need to do within our own community. And then once we try to work on that particular aspect within our community, we can work on empowering and bringing other people along.

But, here in Silicon Valley, we have a number of different participation levels from the Asia Pacific Islander community in which we've actually reached a critical mass. And now we have Asian Americans running against each other, which is a good thing. Now we just have the opportunity to select the more qualified individual. So when you ask that question, it depends where we're all located. If you're in Silicon Valley, the answer might be different than, say, in Nebraska. So there are different challenges there.

AAPR

What do you think U.S. President Barack Obama's election meant for the Asian American community?

LOW

Well, I think, for the first time ever, this is really history in the making. When the inauguration occurred, we saw a family member of Asian Pacific Islander descent in the White House, walking on the steps of the White House. And, as Congressman Mike Honda from [California] would say, "It's amazing to see that there would be an Asian American there and they're not staff. You know? They're not the helpers. They actually belong there. It's not just a rare incident. They actually do belong there." And I think that's what's really important. But also the perception—it's actually what President Obama has been able to concretely deliver in terms of

leadership positions. For the first time ever, we have three Asia Pacific Islanders serving in Cabinet-level positions, and that makes a huge statement to our community. Certainly he is a man of his word, and he has demonstrated his commitment to diversity and also to bring qualified talent into the administration.

AAPR

Let's shift gears into the issues of identity and leadership. Did you encounter any challenges when you were pursuing your elections as a young, gay Asian American?

LOW

Yes, there were great challenges as it relates to the different things that I identify with, first and foremost, with the issue of age. People have said, "Does he have enough experience to lead a city of 40,000 people in the heart of Silicon Valley, with over a \$50 million dollar budget?" The second issue was the Asian American issue. I did receive hate mail saying that, "We want American interests, not Chinese interests. We want businesses in English, not in Chinese." And this is coming to a person who is fourth-generation Californian here.

And then of course being a member of the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] community, I received correspondence from people that said, "We don't want the homosexual agenda in the city of Campbell." I have yet to see what that agenda is. I'd be happy to take a look at what that agenda might be if someone could give it to me. But certainly, those are some of the barriers and challenges that I faced.

I think actually rather than seeing those as barriers and negatives, those are actually positives. Campbell is one of the youngest cities in Santa Clara county. The

average age is thirty-five years old. And so we have a lot of newer families who cannot afford a single-family home on their income. A starting teacher qualifies for low-income housing on their salary. And some of my fellow colleagues, perhaps, purchased their homes when it was \$50,000 dollars, whereas now, it's much out of the reach of the average citizen just starting off their career.

As it relates to the LGBT community, it's bad public policy in a day and age in which the mayor of a city can't get married to the person that he loves, cannot donate blood. You know, that's a pretty selfless act, to donate blood. And I can't even make the ultimate sacrifice and serve my country and serve in the Armed Forces if I wanted to. So as it relates to those things, there are huge, real barriers to those communities.

And of course the Asia Pacific Islander community, as I already alluded to earlier, there are still some perceptions that we need to change, some stereotypes that we need to change. And we're working on it day by day.

AAPR

There's a question that David Gergen, professor of public service and the director of the Center for Public Leadership at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, always asks people. He's always very interested in trying to dig deep into someone's psyche and to try to get a sense of the kind of person that they are. How did you deal with failure during your first campaign, and more generally, how did you overcome that? Were there lessons you learned from that time that

ended up being helpful to you as you ran subsequent campaigns?

LOW

Failure is only truly failure if one does not recognize some of those issues that perhaps could have been improved on. And certainly for me, it was an opportunity, rather than a blow. It was more like an opportunity for me to recap and to get right back up and try again. I think persistence is important. Certainly we know a number of U.S. presidents who have, at some point in time, failed in various sectors, even President Obama, who lost previous elections, or George W. Bush who lost elections, too.

So there are different avenues to take a look at, but I think the perspective as it relates to failure [is if someone can] pick themselves up and use that as an opportunity versus . . . something that discourages them from pursuing their passion.

AAPR

Have you applied any of the lessons that you learned through the executive education program at the Kennedy School now as mayor or before in your political career?

LOW

Well, the main thing that I learned from that program was that people hold certain values and perspectives very near and dear to their heart. And so in public discourse it can be at times challenging to change one's mind on a particular issue. And what I learned from the program was that we might not be able to change their mind on a particular issue, but rather looking at it from an "us versus them" standpoint, [we can] try to approach it from a win-win situation and [ask] where can we find common ground? I think that was important.

One of the good examples of that is the issue of marriage equality. I was in... discussion with another individual who had really strong religious beliefs and did not want to use the word “marriage.” So the common ground was to call it “civil unions” and/or to not even have the word “marriage” for anyone, but to offer equal rights for everyone. And we were able to come to an agreement on the issue. I understood that he held the issue where marriage [was] a religious institution. I had complete respect for that, but under the law, we must all be equal. So that’s an example of a learned lesson from the Kennedy School.

AAPR

What are your future aspirations, short and long term?

LOW

Well, what I hope for me is that I’ll always be active in any avenue in which my abilities are best utilized. I’m always going to be passionate in serving in advocacy, community-based organizations, and in government. And I’ll continue to be doing that.

What I hope to see for the next generation and the current generation of Asia Pacific Islanders is a sense of commitment to the community and how important it is to not forget the struggles of other communities [as well as of our own communities but also] of the African American movement or Latino farm workers movement—to not forget and to bring perspective to that [in order] to try to better our communities. I think the challenge that we are facing now is this level of complacency, the complacency to feel free and not experience discrimination when yet, it wasn’t all that long ago that our parents, our grandparents,

people before us, faced that type of discrimination. It can happen again.

So unless we have that recognition and knowledge of those issues, we will be less served. We must understand these issues to move forward and empower our communities. Many of us want to pursue education and become doctors, lawyers, whatever it might be, the typical, stereotypical positions in the Asian American community.

But one can be just as effective, if not more effective—one can be a doctor and work at a clinic . . . one could be a lawyer and offer pro bono work to undocumented immigrants, for example, whatever it might be. And it doesn’t necessarily need to be politics, but again, I think what’s important is to have an understanding of identity and history and the struggles of those who came before us.

Reinventing the School: An Interview with Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics Principal Edward Tom

*Interviewed by Stacey Tsai (MPA1),
Angelica Salazar (MPP2), and
James Nguyen (MPP2)*



Edward Tom is the founder and principal of the Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics. Tom

spent five years in the corporate sector working for Lord & Taylor and Saks Fifth Avenue in the retail industry prior to embarking on a new career in education in 1997. Tom taught high school mathematics for five years before being recruited to work as a district staff developer for mathematics teachers in the Washington Heights neighborhood in upper Manhattan. In 2002, the New York City Department of Education underwent a reorganization, creating ten instructional regions to service the 1.1 million New York City students. Tom was offered a promotion to become a Regional Instructional Supervisor in Region 1 where he was responsible for mathematics curriculum and instruction for thirty-two high schools in the Bronx. In 2004, Tom submitted a new small school proposal to replicate a highly successful high school in East Harlem, the Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics, where Tom

taught for three years. He opened the Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics in September 2005 in the poorest congressional district in America, the South Bronx. Tom's school is the subject of a 2009 documentary, *Whatever It Takes*, directed by Christopher Wong, which chronicles the first year of the Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics.

On November 20, 2009, the AAPR staff interviewed Bronx Center Principal Edward Tom on the topic of leadership as an Asian American in the urban education field.

AAPR

What motivated you to leave Saks Fifth Avenue as the men's clothing associate buyer to pursue a career in education?

TOM

I was miserable—hated my job. And I didn't know what I wanted to do until my wife, Jane, asked, "What is it that really drives you? Is there anything that you're doing right now that you're happy about?"

And I said, "The only thing that makes me happy is I look forward to teaching Sunday school. I get so excited on Friday nights because I know I'm preparing for Sunday school."

She said, "Well, I see how your eyes light up when you talk about your teaching of these kids on Sunday." And she goes, "Pray about it. See where it leads."

And in three days I took a one-week vacation from retail. And in three days, I had a temporary license for teaching high school mathematics. In the 1980s the NYC Department of Education had a shortage of mathematics, science, ESL, and special education teachers, so they issued temporary certifications allowing college graduates and career changers like myself the opportunity to teach in those

shortage areas while working on our permanent certification over five years.

AAPR

It seems like you just went after your dream. Why did you decide to participate in the documentary *Whatever It Takes*, which focuses on you, your students, and the school?

TOM

I totally wanted to be a part of this. I wanted the opportunity to dispel this societal stereotyping on two fronts: [First] our children, whom people say because of their socioeconomic situation lack the DNA to do higher level math and science, which I think is ludicrous. And the other [is] dispelling the stereotyping of Asian men as portrayed in the media. We're not all martial artists or techno geeks. We are confident and are able to serve as role models to kids.

I'm not patting myself on the back claiming to be a role model for Asian Americans, but I think in the documentary, producer/director Christopher Wong does a really good job in showing that there are many sides to Asians that are underrepresented in the media.

AAPR

A lot of the issues that you addressed are exactly the ones that we want to talk about. Let's focus on your personal story here, which is obviously not a traditional story. You grew up in a community named Washington Heights, located in northern Manhattan with a predominately Hispanic population. You were encouraged by your family and parents to find your own personal calling and purpose in life. It was nontraditional in the sense that Asian American parents tend to encourage their kids to pursue traditional, safe jobs. And for

you, you took a risk going into education. How were they supportive?

TOM

Now, it sounds a little cliché, but I attribute a lot of who I am today—my passion, my drive, and my boldness to pursue things that are unconventional and that are untraditionally Asian, Chinese-American—[to the fact that] I have special parents. My parents supported my decision. Yes, we have relatives and cousins and uncles and people who are doctors, lawyers, business entrepreneurs, but they never required that of me. They wanted me to be happy. They wanted me to pursue the things that I was passionate about.

They were surprised, I think is the word, when I made such a drastic career move from business to education. They didn't have a problem with it because the Asian culture respects educators.

And so it was a really simple transition for me, because I didn't have that added pressure from my family and my parents. I had that support. They were fine with it. They were okay with it. It was an internal struggle for me because I had worldly values that were driving me. I wanted to make a lot of money very quickly, and I wanted to retire at a young age, to enjoy the money. And then I think my faith and my commitment to religion took over. And it was no longer about worldly wealth; it was about kingdom wealth.

We're taught to be obedient, to be pleasers, to not rock the boat. "Don't cause waves," you know? "You don't want to be perceived as the loose cannon," you know? You want to be proper and respectful.

But I think my parents knew that they had done a good enough job with me in terms of raising me that they can let go and let me find myself. And I have to say,

you know, my friends are really jealous of the fact that I can say I love what I do. Now this is the oxymoron: it's the hardest work I've ever been confronted with in my life. But I wake up every day and I'm like, "it's so hard," but I love it.

AAPR

Sounds like you really love what you are doing. You talk about dispelling myths of minority children in the urban school, as well as how you view yourself as a role model. Could you also talk a little bit about issues that you think Asian-American students face in grades K through 12?

TOM

Let's talk about what I perceive to be an issue with Asian American kids in the system as a whole despite the fact that I don't work with Asian American kids. I work predominately with Hispanic kids in the South Bronx. Having been an Asian American kid that went through the public school system we are viewed as "the model minority." So there is an expectation that the kids are going to be well-behaved, which I know firsthand is not necessarily true.

I think it's when I step back and I think of how I was treated in school, there was an expectation by the teachers that I was going to be one of the better kids in class. And so therefore—in looking back now—I can look at things from [that] vantage point. I'm a principal now. So I can actually step up onto the balcony and look down and see how that can impact the way that a teacher teaches the child.

When you have a mental perception that a child is self-motivated, a child that's obedient, you don't push as hard. You feel that you can just delegate and you can assign, and the kid will miraculously figure out solutions to things that require less of an effort on your part to teach.

Whereas kids that we feel have extra need, we take on a different work ethic around those kids and how we transfer knowledge and transfer our teaching to those children.

So the second question that I would address is the stereotyping of the kids that currently exist in the school that I serve. It's funny; college admissions officers that have visited our school call us the "little miracle in the South Bronx." So I think that speaks to also a mental stereotype.

So when I hear people in a subconscious way pay us a compliment in their minds by calling us "the little miracle" I can't help but to think how much of that is because they didn't expect kids that were of certain ethnic groups and socio-economic means to be able to achieve the way that our kids are achieving.

AAPR

Why do you think your school is so successful?

TOM

There are a lot of pieces. I spend a lot of time interviewing teachers before I hire them. I have a more rigorous vetting process than I think the U.S. Senate in terms of vetting for Supreme Court justices. I remember in my first year when I had to hire seven teachers, I must have interviewed close to eighty to a hundred teachers. Because, literally, the standard that I go by is, can I see you teach my own three children? Can I see this teacher, does she have the "X" factor?

And here is one of the magic formulas that I feel I use more than how much content knowledge you have—[it's] this "X" factor. And the X factor is, is this person, do they genuinely love children? Do they want to be here for the kids? And are they willing to do whatever it takes for the sake of the kids? And again, that sounds

simple. And I usually catch my interviewees by surprise by asking them that question: “What does ‘whatever it takes’ mean to you in the context of serving the needs of children in education?”

And they’re, like, “What? You’re not going to ask to see my portfolio? You’re not going to ask to see my lesson plans? You’re not going to ask to see how I plan my curriculum?”

And I have to tell you, there are not a lot of people that can answer that [question] in a way that I would be satisfied with. And that’s the X factor. The X factor is to assemble a team where you see the passion in their eyes to say, “Mr. Tom, this is what ‘whatever it takes’ means to me. If I have to come in early before everybody else, if I have to leave after the custodian leaves, if I have to come in on Saturdays because the kid is really struggling, I’m there. I don’t care if you pay me. I don’t care if anybody sees what I do. If I know that I’m servicing the children and their needs, then that’s what ‘whatever it takes’ means to me.”

And if people can convey that, then they’re a serious consideration. Okay? How do I retain them—because attrition of teachers in the urban inner city is extremely high? Well, I make it very clear to them as their leader that they are as important to me as the children, and that their personal well-being, and helping them create balance in their life, is as important to me as monitoring the progress of the children and paying attention to the children and their families. My team is my priority.

So when my teachers need time off because they’re feeling burnt out or they’re getting married or they’re getting engaged or whatever it is—personal well-being day—I’m there with you. . . . What do you think the number one factor is for why teachers leave schools? Just take a

guess. What do you think is the primary factor for why teachers leave a school?

It has to do with, one, feeling like they have ownership in the process: ownership that “my opinion matters, that I have a say in what textbooks I use, what school trips I take my kids on, and that I feel that you as the school leader will support me.” And that’s the support piece. “When I put in a request to take my kids to the Holocaust Museum when I’m teaching about the Holocaust, that you would support me and you would find the money to pay for the bus and the admissions, to let me make this learning come alive.”

And I understand that. And I realize that. And so as part of my teacher/staff training, I differentiate. So isn’t that a concept? If we expect our teachers to differentiate for the children, what makes us think as principals we don’t need to differentiate the teaching and learning for our staff? It’s the same theory. It’s the same concept.

And these are all the elements that help creating this dream team. I have this dream team. I will put my team up against any other team, not just in New York City, but in this country. Our teachers have all their cards on the table. They’re ready to go. And that’s why the results are the way they are, not because there is something that is just miracle. It required committed professionals to make this happen.

Data is another thing that is important. At the end of every marking period, I have every kid’s grades up on a chart. I have 460 (students) for the entire school. So the beauty of data is that I can personalize my attention for every child. I can look at everybody’s needs by subject, by content, by ability level to the tenth degree. I know every kid’s name. I know the kid’s mother. I know their siblings.

AAPR

How would you replicate what you've done in the South Bronx to other parts of the country?

TOM

So my next move in carrying and replicating this opportunity that we've created in the South Bronx [involves the fact] that there are far too little seats for too many kids that need this. I only offer it to 460 kids at a time. The Bronx is big. It's larger than many total systems. And so my proposal—and I've been thinking long and hard about this—is there's a lot of talk out there in the educational arena about college prep and college readiness. How do we better prepare kids for college?

And overwhelmingly people only talk about the academic readiness. But I'm curious as to how many of the urban inner city kids actually drop out of college because of the cultural inability to assimilate. It's such a culture shock for kids that have never been offered the opportunity to be self-efficient.

So the proposal that I have on the table right now is to create a college university campus for urban, inner-city high school kids so that they can exist on a campus where there are standalone schools like the mini-schools that we have right now—that have their themes—but they will function like a university where you have the school of business management, you have the school of medicine, you have the school of engineering, you have the school of performing arts. And for the first four hours of the day, every school leader is responsible for their 460 kids, because we don't want to lose the beauty of the small environment, so that the principal knows every kid, they know their parents, they know their siblings. We

want to retain that. You don't want to give that up. That's beautiful.

But then at 12:30 pm, the kids can rotate around the campus, and they start taking courses in different schools. And they start experiencing the college campus life. And we are going to have collaborations with the CUNY system—the City University of New York system. Now what's lovely about this model is that it is replicable in any major urban city. Because every major urban city has a city college system that they can partner with.

So in New York City alone, for our school of business management, we're going to partner with Baruch College. For the school of performing arts, maybe Hunter? For the school of medicine, Sophie Davis biomedical program at CUNY. And City College, of course, in Harlem for engineering.

So not only will the kids have the opportunities within that campus to take courses, we will have university professors as adjuncts come on campus; [they can] either teach the kids on campus, or the kids can go to the CUNY campus and take those courses there. Now, I want you to dream with me: what do you think the rate of success of those kids making it through college would be if they had four extra years of prepping them in that type of an environment, where they have been supported to be self-efficient? And that's the proposal. That's on the table. And I've been in closed-door meetings with the chancellor about this already. I have two large organizations that want to write this into their proposal.

And here's another unique feature. It's going to be under the charter model as opposed to just the public school model. Because there is a unique feature to this campus. I think unionization creates too many constraints.

AAPR

The labor union?

TOM

The labor unions, like the teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and the supervisors union, the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA). The only way that you can mandate people to collaborate, forced collaboration, if there's such a term, is that you have their compensation tied into how well they collaborate.

For the leader of each school, 50 percent of their compensation will be their 460 kids. There should be greater stakes for the 460 that you're asked to know on an intimate level. Twenty-five percent will be peer review. How much of a team player are you? Does your colleague like you? Do they think that you play fair?

And then the fourth leg, the other 25 percent, will be how well the entire campus does. How well does the entire campus of 2,000 kids perform? We've just multiplied our impact, ladies and gentlemen. We're not servicing 460 kids for success. We're serving 2,000 kids for success without reinventing the large school model, and [we're] maintaining the integrity of the characteristics of the small school that makes it strong and good.

AAPR

This sounds like an exciting plan. But will you be shortchanging fundamental core courses in light of electives?

TOM

There's a misconception that time commitment equates to higher level proficiency, [but] servicing children . . . has nothing to do with how much time you spend. I'll tell you what's a bigger factor—class size. If one teacher gets to service no more than fifteen kids, you're

going to get a lot more out of forty-five minutes than a teacher that has ninety minutes with thirty kids.

So to me, it's about being very careful with class sizes, being very careful about quality instruction. It's not about time. It's about what you do with that time.

AAPR

Have you seen changes in the national agenda for education since U.S. President Barack Obama's inauguration?

TOM

I'm going to try not to be too political. But I'm going to borrow some quotes from Obama. We are on the right side of history. This is our time. With this administration and with Arne Duncan leading as the Secretary of Education, and what they're willing to do in terms of out-of-the-box innovation, this is our time. I mean, I'm fairly young. Not in my lifetime have I seen such boldness when it comes to federal funding of innovation in education. I think this is the administration that will support it. That's not to say that there isn't going to be a lot of political red tape that you have to go through in order to get to it. But the fact that it's on the table, billions of dollars for school districts and states to tap into to come up with ideas that may change the way urban inner city children are serviced. They're encouraging innovation at a scale never experienced before in American history. That's wonderful.

Our educational system has been stagnant from innovation for decades. We've been failing generations and generations of kids. This opportunity has led to the campus model that I just described to you that is being written into two different proposals for federal money, because it innovative and "out of the box." We're encouraged to take chances.

But at the end of the day, show me how that's going to improve teaching and learning for the children. [You might say], "you know what, Ed? That's great. You have this campus model. Show us how that's going to change the way that kids are prepared for the rigors of college. Show us. Give us results." And so, policy, race to the top, new administration—this is a very exciting time if you're in the field of education.

And I think that, not to tout the New York City public school system, but I think we are pioneers. It's coming out of Bloomberg-Klein [NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg and New York Schools Chancellor Joel Klein], Geoffrey Canada [president and CEO of] the Harlem Children's Zone, all these billionaires, financiers from Wall Street, funding this innovation. And now the federal government is jumping in and saying, "We're going to support this innovation with billions. So let's see what you've got."

If your drive and your passion is in education policy, this is a really good time for you. It's a really good time. There's a lot of money that will support your thinking. And never before has money been spent on ideas. They're asking for ideas right now. And they've put a lot of money in front of ideas. And that's not even, like, "We're going to invest in facilities for you. We're going to invest in putting together that team for you." That's going to be another round of money. These are planning funds right now.

So it's exciting. I am excited to be where I'm at, in the position to try to tap into some of those billions for the sake of children. In my gut, I have never been as optimistic as I am today in terms of being able to live and see how we can change the landscape of urban education in my lifetime. We are closer than we've ever been before. And I feel that our country

is going to move in the direction where you're going to see some major, major changes coming up.

And if Obama gets a second term, you're going to see even greater change. Because then you're going to be able to see what he started being carried out.

HARVARD JOURNAL OF ASIAN AMERICAN POLICY

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Embracing Mistaken Identity: How the Vincent Chin Case Unified Asian Americans

by Frank H. Wu



Frank H. Wu served on the faculty of Howard University Law School for a decade and as dean of Wayne State University Law School in Detroit before being named Chancellor and

*Dean of the University of California Hastings College of the Law in 2009. He is the author of *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* and is writing a book about the Vincent Chin case.*

This much is certain.

On 19 June 1982, on the outskirts of Detroit, Michigan, an individual named Vincent Chin—twenty-seven years old, of Chinese ancestry, an American citizen, from a working-class background, engaged to be married the following week—went out with a few friends for a bachelor party to celebrate his upcoming wedding. At a strip club, they encountered two other gentlemen, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, father and stepson, similarly out enjoying the evening.

There was an altercation at the bar, the Fancy Pants Lounge. Then time elapsed

before another encounter occurred between these strangers. After the sun had set on Woodward Avenue, the major thoroughfare of the Motor City, they met once again.

And this is what happened: Ebens swung the baseball bat while Nitz held Chin down, and the bridegroom ended up with his head literally split open. Blood, spinal fluid, and cerebral matter pooled on the pavement under his body. Before collapsing into a coma, he uttered his last words, “It’s not fair.”

Four days later, Chin died.

In state court, Ebens and Nitz faced criminal charges. Represented by counsel, sobered up, dressed in business suits, they accepted a plea bargain.

At the hearing, the prosecutors failed to show up. The judge, Charles Kaufman, imposed on each man the sentence of three years’ probation and a \$3,000 fine, plus court costs.

Everything else is in doubt.

Eventually there would transpire two federal prosecutions, two civil lawsuits, a national protest movement, and more attention than had ever been paid to any single incident involving an Asian American. According to witnesses, Ebens and Nitz had used racial slurs to refer to Chin, they had offered a bystander \$20 to help them find “the Chinaman,” and they had said, “It’s because of you little motherf***ers, we’re out of work.” That comment was made at a time when the nation was experiencing double-digit unemployment and equally high inflation and in place that had prospered because of “the Big Three”—Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler, the domestic automobile manufacturers—until imported cars became popular. While

Japan was feared as the Land of the Rising Sun taking economic vengeance for its World War II defeat, to Ebens and Nitz, the implication was that Chin stood for Tokyo and Toyota.

Whether it was a bar brawl, a hate crime, or perhaps both, the context, causes, and consequences of the Vincent Chin case have been the subject of unceasing controversy. Throughout, Ebens and Nitz have insisted they are not bigots; they said Chin inexplicably decided to accost them, and Ebens “just snapped.” By their understanding, the community had drummed up the charge of racism and thereby wronged them. The first federal jury convicted Ebens and acquitted Nitz; the appeals court, rejecting the claim that “Orientals” were not protected by civil rights statutes nonetheless reversed the judgment; the second jury acquitted Ebens, too.

The Asian American movement began with the Vincent Chin case. To be sure, Asian Americans existed before then, and they were politically active. But it was not until the Chin case that they formed the Asian American movement as such.

BEFORE “ASIAN AMERICAN”

Asian immigrants had begun coming to the United States in significant numbers in the 1830s. They and their native-born progeny participated in public life to a much greater extent than stereotypical images portray. They organized themselves into civic associations, agitated for their rights, and started businesses. For the male workers who formed the bulk of the new arrivals, racial restrictions made it difficult to bring their wives or find mates across the color line. Despite such formal barriers, they managed to start families and form communities.

For 150 years when Asian Americans described themselves, they did not use the title “Asian American,” which was invented by scholar Yuji Ichioka in 1968. Instead, they preferred to identify themselves by what would come to be regarded as ethnicity, or perhaps culture, clan, language, province, or family. They were as distinct from each other as they were separate from Whites and Blacks. The lines of division among the groups were as obvious to them as they were obscure to outsiders: Chinese from Japanese, and vice versa; among the Chinese, the Mandarin-speaking, middle-class professionals who arrived as students on scholarships from the Cantonese-speaking lower-class laborers who had opened restaurants and operated laundries in the inner city.

Many individuals in these distinct groups in America remained active in homeland politics. The Korean independence movement of 1919 relied on leaders who had developed significant ties to America and a trans-Pacific network of support. At times they disassociated themselves from other groups. During World War II, Chinese-Americans explained who they were in an effort to distinguish themselves as the “good” Asians compared with the Japanese (and tacitly the Japanese-Americans) who were the “bad” Asians. Homeland politics was a reason to disassociate one group from other groups, whether it was Communism versus Nationalism as to the China-Taiwan Straits or the partitioning of the Indian subcontinent.

Nor were Asian Americans unique. European immigrants constituted distinct races in the popular culture—the “Irish race” and so on—until they assimilated into and enjoyed the benefits of the classification of White.

The Chin case changed all that. Its violence highlighted the importance of both aspects of “Asian American” as a self-proclaimed name; it was crucial to claim the status of a “real American,” for protection if no other reason, as well as to build bridges to other Asians, even if one’s grandparents may have been at war with their grandparents. It also became apparent that Asian Americans had to assert themselves more aggressively. It was not enough to succeed in school and at work, and indeed, the very image of Asian Americans doing well as a collective could be the undoing of an individual.

THE ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT

Of course, before the Chin case there had been efforts to bring together Asian Americans. The Yellow Power movement flourished briefly in the 1960s, with origins in the San Francisco Bay Area. Filipino Americans, Chinese Americans, and Japanese Americans, primarily young people, copied the example of Black Power radicalism. A few individuals even became militants, actually joining the Black Panthers. Although these activists could boast of underground magazines, folk music, and meaningful social gatherings, their activities were limited in duration, by geography, and by generation. Theirs was a phenomenon of the Summer of Love, centered on the Golden State, and it garnered slight enthusiasm among the elders. However, they deserve respect; they were vital. They created the conditions that were needed.

What made the Chin case so significant is the fact that the legal proceedings took so many years, allowing enough time for the protest effort to expand from its Midwestern roots to the East Coast and West Coast, enlisting young and old, American and immigrant, along the way

The Chin case was so compelling that it overcame other considerations. It was irrelevant whether one was a “banana”—yellow on the outside, White on the inside—in the pejorative phrase, or if one had ever marched before, or if one had considered civil rights a Black issue. Immigrant engineers, who were conservative in their lifestyles, comfortable in the suburbs, and ambitious for their children, who spoke with accents and otherwise counseled avoiding controversy, became involved in the Chin case, even if they had never heard of the Yellow Power movement or would have found it anathema.

The campaign for justice also attracted the sympathy of many others. For example, the cause was endorsed by such groups as the Detroit City Council, the city’s chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Christian organizations, Jewish groups, and labor groups. Whites and Blacks who had not hitherto been aware of Asian Americans recognized the universal nature of the appeals made by Chin’s grieving mother. Crying, scarcely able to control her lamentations, she admitted candidly she wished she could kill her son’s killers as she sought an explanation of how they could escape punishment.

The Vincent Chin case was so powerful to average Asian Americans because it was exemplary. The killing of Chin displayed all of the characteristics of hostility toward Asian Americans, certainly if the account offered by the protest and the prosecution were accepted and even to an extent on the terms of the defense.

Most importantly, the killing of Chin was mistaken identity twice over. Chin was singled out not because of who he understood himself to be, but rather as a

representative of Asia—possessing yellow skin, coarse black hair, and almond eyes. The assault appeared to have been motivated by the association of an American citizen with a foreign nation, solely on the basis of superficial traits beyond his control. Chin had been adopted at a young age, and he had no relationship with Japan. The assault also seemed to confirm the charge “you all look alike” that had rendered the Far East the source of a faceless horde since the advent of Yellow Peril. Chin was of Chinese descent, but he was assumed to be of Japanese background.

The Chin case, especially within the context of the severe recession of the early 1980s and its effect on Detroit as the Motor City identified with automobile manufacturing, showed the powerful effects of scapegoating. The anger directed toward “little yellow people,” in the phrase of Congressman John Dingell, who represented part of the region then and now, held them responsible for the genuine concerns about layoffs and downward mobility (Penenberg 2008). Asians were blamed for a set of much more complex problems, including corporate leadership that had refused to consider fuel-efficient cars, consumer habits that took for granted the abundance of imported oil, lack of universal health care that imposed the insurance costs on employers, the failure to diversify the economic base of a metropolitan area, and cultural expectations about wages that could not continue to be met in the face of global competition, among other factors. Asians, and by extension, Asian Americans, were resented, because, it was believed, even as everyone else suffered “those people” continued to do well.

The legal proceedings in the Chin case revealed how difficult it was for Asian

Americans to establish—even in what was among the more clear cases—that they were subject to genuine racial discrimination. Asian Americans did not look like victims of bigotry; they were not credible. The state court proceedings demonstrated that the government would not treat Asian Americans with respect, even in death. The federal court proceedings showed that, for many observers, even the admission by the perpetrators that they had killed Chin was insufficient to demonstrate that a wrong had been done. The result left many Asian Americans with the sense that if even someone who was brutally beaten to death with a baseball bat, after the use of common slurs, could be deemed to not have had his civil rights violated, then it was impossible for all practical purposes for an Asian American to prevail under the law.

Finally, the Chin case provided a sense of the futility of assimilation. The defense lawyers noted pointedly that Chin was not so different than Ebens and Nitz. After all, they were blue-collar men who liked to drink at strip clubs; they were full of testosterone, and they did not lack tempers. That was the greatest irony. Chin was very much like Ebens and Nitz—except for race. And in the end that was all that counted.

The cultural response to the Vincent Chin case offers solace. It has achieved a mythic status. “Remember Vincent Chin” is a rallying cry, and a reference to him is a synecdoche for prejudice toward Asian Americans in all its forms. The smiling Chin, innocent in his high school photograph, became an iconic image through its reproduction on homemade flyers and in the mainstream media alike. American Citizens for Justice, the nonprofit Asian American civil rights

advocacy group founded to advance the Chin cause, is memorialized in a series of pictures by Corky Lee, the “official” photographer of Asian America. There are two documentary movies about Chin, one a nominee for an Academy Award and the most widely used text in Asian American studies courses, likely watched by every student enrolled in such a class. An episode of the *Twilight Zone* television series, entitled “Wong’s Lost and Found Emporium,” based on a science fiction vignette by William F. Wu, was inspired by the case. A stage play, *Carry the Tiger to the Mountain*, has been produced. A children’s book, *A Day for Vincent Chin and Me*, has been published. Paintings commemorate Chin, including a pop art rendering by Roger Shimomura, a cityscape by Evri Kwong, and a mural in Detroit’s Chinatown. He appears in songs, including a rap at the beginning of the 2007 comedy movie *Ping Pong Playa*. Conferences and a pilgrimage to the grave site are held on the anniversaries of the crime. Through the Internet, T-shirts are available featuring a plain, black background with simple white lettering, “V. Chin, 1955-1982.”

A PERSONAL CONNECTION

I know I am at risk of confusing my own coming of age with history. I grew up in Detroit in the 1970s and 1980s. My father was an engineer at Ford Motor Company for virtually his entire career. He designed brakes. I remember the place and the time that are integral to this account, and I doubt I could forget either. Although I did not know Vincent Chin, I can identify with him. At a gut level, I feel as if he could be my cousin, or, for that matter, even me, with the circumstances altered imperceptibly.

The Vincent Chin case changed my life. As a child, like almost all children, I merely wanted to be accepted as normal. I would not have wanted to discuss race or civil rights, and I would have avoided the myriad issues that this story requires us to confront. As a boy, I wanted to ride my bicycle around the block with my friends, all of whom, perforce, were White, and as an adolescent, I wanted to hang out at video arcades with them.

The events that make up the Vincent Chin case made me realize that the childhood cruelties I experienced, the teasing and the taunting of the playground, could and should not be remedied or overcome with the teacher’s advice to retort that “sticks and stones may break my bones but words could never hurt me.” In fact, kids suffer all sorts of bodily harm—falling off swing sets, breaking bones, enduring high fevers—and in general they heal just fine, even if an adult could not do the same. Against all outward appearances, the psychological damage, which may seem trivial and not worthy of remarking upon at the time, can turn out to be much more severe and lasting. The risk of physical attack, moreover, comes directly from verbal abuse. A beating follows from slurs often enough. The wrong differs in degree but not kind.

Yet nobody wants to call themselves a victim either. To be pitied is to be powerless. It remains by no means easy for Asian immigrants and their American-born progeny, most of whom sought to identify with the dominant majority and few of whom aspired to stand up and speak out, to organize themselves into a cause. The protest in this situation had never been seen before by Asian Americans or anyone else. We hesitated then, and do still, from causes

internal as well as external—from the traditions of cultures that did not embrace democracy to newcomers striving to meet basic material needs to the heckler’s jeer that we “go back to where we came from.”

The Vincent Chin case deserves to be known and studied because it not only represents the many Asian American experiences but also presents the great American challenge of a diverse democracy. While words cannot make right the tangible acts that were wrong, they at least can assure us we recognize the importance of our common memories in framing our shared future.

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American Citizens for Justice takes the street. Photo by Corky Lee.

From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: Commemorating the Vincent Chin Case

by Frances Kai-Hwa Wang



Frances Kai-Hwa Wang is the former executive director of American Citizens for Justice, the nonprofit Asian American civil rights advocacy group founded when Vincent Chin

was killed. She is now on the organization's advisory board. Ms. Wang is also a freelance writer and speaker on Asian American history, identity, and multicultural parenting issues. She writes a nationally syndicated column called "Adventures in Multicultural Living." She is also acting arts and culture editor for IMDiversity.com's Asian American Village, lead multicultural contributor for AnnArbor.com, and a contributor for Ethnoblog.NewAmericaMedia.org. She is currently working on a book about Asian American identity in the Midwest. She team-teaches a course at the University of Michigan and University of Michigan-Dearborn on Asian Pacific American history and the law. She is also the outreach coordinator of the Ann Arbor Chinese Center of Michigan where she leads a group of rambunctious young lion dancers. She is a second-generation Chinese American from California who now divides her time

between Michigan and the Big Island of Hawaii.

The last words whispered by Vincent Chin, who was beaten to death in 1982 in Highland Park, Michigan, were, "It's not fair." This sentiment would be echoed by Asian Americans as the lenient sentences meted out to his assailants caused an outcry in that community and led to the birth of a civil and victims' rights movement. This article presents Frances Kai-Hwa Wang's remarks about the role of the media in the Chin case and in the birth of the Asian American civil rights movement. Wang was the executive director of American Citizens for Justice (the nonprofit Asian American civil rights advocacy group founded when Vincent Chin was killed) when she gave the speech, which was made at the State Bar's 34th Michigan Legal Milestone ceremony commemorating the Vincent Chin case, "From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry," held on 19 June 2009. A bronze plaque memorializing the case was unveiled and is now installed in Ferndale, Michigan, near the former site of the Golden Star Restaurant where Chin worked as a waiter. These remarks were broadcast on Michigan Government Television on 24 August 2009.

SPEECH BY FRANCES WANG

One of my favorite stories surrounding the Vincent Chin case is how it went from a local story about a barroom brawl to a national one about civil rights in America — at a car rental place. Helen Zia was a founding member of American Citizens for Justice and one of the lead activists, and her car was in the shop, so she had to rent a car. As she stood in line at the rental car agency, she noticed that the tall African American woman in front of her had both the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit*

Free Press open to articles about the case, and she noticed that the woman was also holding a small notebook embossed with the words, “*New York Times*.” So she leaned over and asked, “Are you interested in this case? I have some press packets right here, if you’d like.” It turns out that when reporters are on vacation, if they can find some story to write about while they are there, they can get part of their expenses reimbursed. So this *New York Times* reporter, Judith Cummins, was in Detroit visiting family and looking for a story to do while she was here. I believe that this story caught her eye, in part, because she was African American and had some understanding that race and racism sometimes play into these things. And so from the beginning, this case has been about people recognizing across ethnicity and across race that this could have been any one of us, this could have been me, that the danger of racial stereotypes is that real people and real lives are reduced to caricature.

I have been asked to speak about the role of the media regarding the Vincent Chin case and the birth of the Asian American civil rights movement, and so I will talk about the role of the media at the time of the case, what has happened since that time, and what the future holds for American Citizens for Justice and civil rights.

When Judge Kaufman sentenced Vincent Chin’s killers, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, to a \$3,000 fine and three years probation, Asian Americans came together at the Golden Star Restaurant, and in the stunned silence that followed the lawyers’ conclusion that legally there was nothing more to do, counterpointed by the sobs of Mrs. Chin, Vincent’s mother, Journalist Helen Zia’s voice

broke the silence, “But we have to say something. We can’t not say anything.”

Before this moment, there were many Asian Americans who thought that if they just worked hard, laid low, and taught their children good English, that they would be able to quietly assimilate into the American dream. This case taught them that they cannot make such assumptions. And thanks in part to the leadership of American Citizens for Justice, Asian Americans woke up to the importance of being involved, speaking up, being visible, forming coalitions and building networks. There were protest rallies and remembrance vigils across the country—including Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago—that brought together Asian Americans of all ethnicities. And these protests were well-covered by the media because they seemed so incongruous—the Model Minority waving protest banners?

In *Asian American Dreams*, Helen Zia talks about how the Chinese American scientists and engineers from Ford, GM, and Chrysler planning the protest in Detroit joked that this would be “the most precisely planned demonstration in history” [(Zia 2000)]. The signs were all uniform, and the words were all in straight lines, and they had it choreographed down to 20-second intervals what people would chant and how they would turn.

This was the first time that Asian Americans spontaneously mobilized around a unified cause. It taught Asian Americans how to organize, network, build coalitions, fundraise. It created new organizations to watchdog and monitor civil rights issues for Asian Americans. This was the birth of the Asian American civil rights movement.

Key to this awareness and mobilization was education and media coverage—education of the Asian American community about their rights in America, education of the general public about what Asian Americans are really like, education of the legal community about whether or not Asian Americans are even covered by civil rights laws, education of elected officials about the impact of racially suggestive campaigns directed against Asian imports. Without this national mobilization, and national and international media attention, there never would have been a federal hate crime trial, and we would have been left with only Mrs. Chin's words:

“What kind of law is this? What kind of justice? This happened because my son is Chinese. If two Chinese killed a white person, they must go to jail, maybe for their whole lives. . . . Something is wrong with this country.”

Since then, the history of the Vincent Chin case has become a staple in Asian American studies, ethnic studies, American cultures, and law courses around the country. The Academy Award-nominated documentary film by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Pena, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, has been shown to generations of college students. There have been remembrance events—vigils, dinners, conferences, poetry slams—organized around the country on the 10th-, 20th-, and 25th-year anniversaries of Vincent Chin's death. Now there is a new documentary film produced by Asian Pacific Americans for Progress, *Vincent Who?*, about how too many college students—who at this point are all born after 1982—do not know about this case or its importance, even as they take being Asian American and being a part of

Asian American clubs and communities for granted.

I wish I could say that something like the Vincent Chin case could never happen again. However, the sad truth is that it already has. Last July, Luis Ramirez, a 25-year-old Mexican immigrant and father of two, was walking in a park with his Caucasian fiancé when he was beaten to death by a group of drunken White teenagers—high school football players with good grades—in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, a depressed coal-mining town. Several witnesses report that they shouted ethnic slurs before, during, and after the attack that left Luis Ramirez unconscious and foaming at the mouth, his skull fractured in two places, his brains leaking onto the pavement. He died two days later. The attackers were acquitted by an all-White jury of all serious charges, including third-degree murder and ethnic intimidation. They were convicted of simple assault, and this Wednesday, they were sentenced to 23 months in a county prison and could become eligible for parole in as little as seven months.

However, 27 years after the death of Vincent Chin, there are striking differences. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) already exists and is taking the lead on this case. They are about to deliver a petition signed by more than 50,000 people across the country to demand that the Department of Justice press federal charges against Ramirez's attackers. Hispanic American, Asian American, Arab American, and African American civil rights organizations are joining forces, offering support, and sharing technical expertise. The Internet, e-mail, blogs, and social networking sites offer huge opportunities for getting the word

out. Finally, despite the current struggles of mainstream newspapers, ethnic media and ethnic new media are on the rise, and they are covering this story because they know that with this recession and the current anti-immigrant climate, it could have been any of us, and any of us could be next.

And so, for the future, American Citizens for Justice will continue to educate the Asian American community about hate crimes, fair treatment, and civil rights; continue to educate the public, the legal community, and elected officials about Asian American civil rights issues; continue to build coalitions with other Asian American and civil rights groups; continue to do court watches and monitoring of cases that may have civil rights implications; continue to advocate and speak out against racially motivated injustice everywhere.

From a whisper to a rallying cry, indeed.

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March on Washington: A History of Asian Pacific Americans' Growing Political Power in the Nation's Capital

by Phil Tajitsu Nash

Phil Tajitsu Nash currently teaches Asian American Studies courses at the University of Maryland, serves as Curator of the Asian Pacific American component of the 2010 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and serves as CEO of two internet companies, Campaign Advantage and NashInteractive, Inc. Nash has been involved in civil rights issues for Asian Pacific Americans and others for over 30 years, starting with the movement to redress the unjust incarceration of his family and other Japanese Americans during World War II. He went on to serve as Founding Executive Director of the Asian American Justice Center, and worked as a staff attorney for the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), the Education Law Center, and District Council 37's Municipal Employees Legal Services Plan in New York City.

In the summer of 2010, more than a million people are expected to descend on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the achievements of the Asian Pacific American (APA) community at the federal government's 44th annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Among the celebrants will be APAs who have lived in the D.C. metro area for generations, APAs

who have arrived since the 1960s to work in the federal bureaucracy, APAs who work in the national offices of Asian Pacific American organizations, and APA scholars who represent the full flowering of APA studies that started in San Francisco forty years ago.

This large, D.C. metro APA community, which includes southern Maryland and northern Virginia and currently numbers at least 350,000, is the fourth-largest in the United States after San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles. The D.C. community is extremely diverse as APAs from all fifty states and all territories have sent representatives and staff delegations to Washington, resulting in every APA subgroup being represented in the D.C. area.

Quantitative growth of the APA community in Washington, D.C., over the last three decades has run parallel to an increase in that community's political sophistication and power, which, in turn, has helped APAs nationwide to move closer to political and social parity with Whites.

This article looks at APA political power in Washington, D.C., before and after the 1980s and concludes with thoughts about the direction the APA community needs to follow to complete its march to social and political parity with other communities in the nation's capital.

APAS IN PRE-1980S D.C.

Each of the distinct groups that makes up the APA community has its own history in Washington, D.C. This section provides an overview of those ethnic sectors up until the 1980s.

The history of the APA community goes back to the 1800s. In fact, the *New York Times* on 18 January 1888 noted that

“Secretary of State Bayard to-day [sic] formally presented to the President the newly-accredited Envoy from Corea [sic], Mr. Pak Chung Yang” (*New York Times* 1888).¹

While Asian and Pacific Islander nations were sending formal delegations such as this one to Washington, D.C., throughout the late 1800s, the first record of an ethnic enclave in the city dates from 1851. As with many large cities in the United States, Washington’s first Asian section was a Chinatown, but it never reached the size of Chinese enclaves in other major cities such as New York or San Francisco.

Those seeking the history of old Chinatown might have to venture to the Wah Luck House at 6th and H streets in Northwest Washington, which was built in 1982 to accommodate the elderly, low-income Chinese Americans displaced by the demolition that accompanied the construction of the nearby convention center. Otherwise, by early 2010, only a few restaurant and street signs in Chinese characters near 7th and H streets remain, reminding us of the 1970s urban renewal that drove many Chinatown residents to new APA population centers springing up in the Virginia and Maryland suburbs. This APA suburban growth also was aided by the influx of Vietnam War-era refugees, immigrants benefiting from the easing of immigration law restrictions in 1965, and the increased need for federal employees up until 1980 (Rucker 2009).

Washington’s Chinatown still functions as a mecca for Chinese Americans in the tristate region on the Chinese New Year, when thousands come to the Friendship Arch at 7th and H streets to see traditional dragon dances and parades. Its remaining restaurants also pack in lunch-time, evening, and weekend diners

all year long with fare that ranges in origin from Guangdong to Hong Kong, and from Vietnam to Burma (Myanmar). Therefore, while there are only a few Chinese Americans who actually still live in Washington’s Chinatown, it continues to function as a cultural center for the local Chinese and APA community.

In 1989, the Sackler Gallery, Freer Gallery, and Smithsonian Institution commissioned a study on the D.C. metro APA community that was carried out by Filipino American demographer and author Juanita Tamayo Lott (Tamayo Lott 1989). This pathbreaking study showed that only three APA groups—Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino American—were identified in the 1970 federal census. The total number of these groups in D.C. and the surrounding metropolitan area was only 18,097 people. By 1980, that number had more than quadrupled to 87,037 persons, including Korean, Indian, Vietnamese, Thai, Pakistani, Laotian, Cambodian, and Indonesian Americans.

Filipinos in Washington, D.C., a book by Tamayo Lott and Rita Cacas (2009), describes how Filipinos arrived in the D.C. metro area shortly after the annexation of the Philippines to the United States in 1900. These new settlers included students, soldiers, seamen, and laborers who went on to become permanent residents, military servicemen, government workers, and community leaders.

Part of the Japanese Americans’ history in D.C. can be traced back to World War II. West Coast Japanese Americans were rounded up and interned en masse during World War II despite 77,000 of the estimated 110,000 being American citizens due to birth on American soil. Upon leaving the concentration

camps, many headed east, ending up in the Midwest and many cities on the East Coast.

Some Japanese Americans, who were U.S. citizens by birth on American soil, received college degrees before World War II but were prevented from taking good jobs due to racist laws. The federal government's growth from the 1940s to 1970s required many new employees, however, so some Japanese Americans took their chances and headed for the nation's capital.

Throughout the 1960s and beyond, the local chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) organized events that provided a focal point for many Japanese Americans who came to D.C. to work for the civilian, military, or legislative arms of the federal government. Pioneers such as Lily and K. Patrick Okura became leaders of the local and national Japanese American community, organizing picnics and producing a newsletter, *D.C. Notes*, while also participating in national issues such as the fight for civil rights.

As the 1970s were drawing to a close, a new generation of baby boomers with top credentials and an awareness of being Asian Pacific American started coming to Washington. These individuals formed informal networks and groups to help each other and to further their joint goals. One such group was the Organization of Pan Asian American Women, "Pan Asia," as it was called. Pan Asia was established in 1976 as a result of a national conference held by the National Institute of Education that focused on educational and occupational needs of women of Asian and Pacific Islander ancestry. Pan Asia took this a step further by deciding to focus on public policy issues that

impact APA women disproportionately. The founders include women of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino ancestry who have gone on to become leaders in the APA community, in state legislatures, and in other venues as well.

APA POLITICAL POWER IN PRE-1980S D.C.

Before 1980, the physical presence of APAs in Washington did not correlate with political power for the APA community. Many local APA nonprofit groups were focused mostly on social networking, education, and community-preservation and information-gathering activities, with less of a focus on affecting national political debates. Political power was found only in certain congressional offices and in the offices of nationally focused nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the JACL and the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA), which was founded in 1973.

By 1946, the JACL Anti-Discrimination Committee had opened an office in Washington, D.C., to promote a legislative campaign to support Japanese American civil rights. While some of the JACL's leaders were criticized by civil libertarians within their own community for embracing the federal government's plans for the forced removal and incarceration, JACL postwar campaigns to overturn onerous restrictions on land use, licenses, and other essentials were widely hailed as progressive efforts to move the community closer to parity with Whites in an era when racial segregation still was legal in many states.

By 1948, JACL was a cofounder of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), the largest and most respected coalition of major civil rights organizations in the nation. As a civil

rights organization with an agenda that transcended APA concerns, JACL participated in many LCCR campaigns, such as the filing of an amicus brief with the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, which urged that segregation in state-supported educational institutions violates the equal protection guaranteed by the 14th Amendment.

One sustained political presence for APAs on Capitol Hill comes from members of the Hawaii congressional delegation and their staff members. Like other states, Hawaii has two senators, at least one of whom has been of Asian ancestry since its statehood in 1959. Indeed, Hawaii has had only five men filling its two U.S. Senate seats since statehood, with four being APAs (Hiram Fong, Daniel Inouye, Spark Matsunaga, and Daniel Akaka) and one being non-APA (Oren Long).

In the U.S. House of Representatives, Hawaii was represented as a nonvoting territory until statehood in 1959 and with one at-large seat from 1959 to 1963, two at-large seats from 1963 to 1971, and two congressional district seats since 1971. APA representatives have been the majority (Daniel Inouye, Patsy Mink, Spark Matsunaga, Patricia Saiki, Daniel Akaka, and Mazie Hirono), but even non-APA representatives (Cecil Heftel, Neil Abercrombie, and Ed Case) have filled their staffs with APAs, thus creating a group of APAs knowledgeable about how government works and able to use that knowledge on behalf of APA community issues.

A second major source of legislative power for APAs came from Norman Mineta and Robert Matsui, members of Congress elected to congressional seats from non-APA majority districts

in California's San Jose (1974) and Sacramento (1978), respectively. They and their staff members were responsive to APA community issues such as the movement to redress the unjust incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II and the first APA Heritage Week bill in 1978 that Mineta, a Democrat, cosponsored with Republican Frank Horton.

A third way APA power was increased was through the APA staff members to non-APA legislators from states all across the nation, including Ruby Moy (New York Rep. Frank Horton), Kaz Oshiki (Wisconsin Rep. Robert Kastenmeier), and Ruthann Kurose (Washington State Rep. Mike Lowry). Their insights shaped legislation that would otherwise be too Hawaii- and California-centric and helped to galvanize support for legislation such as the Japanese American redress bill.

A fourth source of power came from APAs who were climbing the rungs of power as federal civil servants in civilian and military chains of command. For example, C.F. Kwok and his family moved to Washington in 1962, before the Beltway was completed. As an engineer with project management skills, he became the first APA to hold a senior executive service position at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and helped to build several VA hospitals in the D.C. region. While he had no official power to affect the actions of the VA or any other government entity, his knowledge of how things worked and who the key players were allowed him to be an effective mentor for future leaders such as his own daughter, Daphne Kwok, who went on to head the OCA and other APA organizations.

While some political successes and some growth in power for the APA community occurred before 1980, it was the Japanese American redress campaign, which moved into high gear after the publication of Michi Weglyn's *Years of Infamy* in 1976 (Weglyn 2000) along with the development of a new cadre of community-minded students and young professionals that helped to move the political empowerment of APAs in D.C. to a higher level.

BUILDING CAPACITY: THE STORY OF NICHOLAS CHEN

The development of ethnic studies and Asian American studies at San Francisco State College after the student strike there in 1968-1969 sparked the development of similar programs at the University of California, Berkeley; University of California, Los Angeles; and schools all across the country. Programs linking community needs to campus concerns led to a rediscovery of APA histories, increased attention to community services, strategies for attacking systemic discrimination, and liberation from the business-as-usual APA existence that accepted White male supremacy. The post-1969 rise in APA consciousness led to the creation of student and community groups with first a local and then a national focus.

The life of Nicholas V. Chen provides an example of the development of a younger generation of APAs who came of age inspired by the post-1969 climate. One of the APA community's most prolific community builders, Chen has gone on to build not only enduring APA community groups, but also innovative international networks of business associates and attorneys.

Nicholas Chen showed early promise as a student but also had a knack for making friends and bringing people together. For high school, he attended the prestigious Horace Mann School in the Bronx. Going beyond a focus on individual achievement and scholarly pursuits, the school emphasizes mutual respect and meaningful service to one's community. While there, Chen was elected as the first APA to head the Black-Latin Student Union and organized Third World student groups at a number of schools in the Bronx so that they could coordinate Black and Latino community education programs.

Continuing his community service, Chen served as a volunteer at the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) in New York in 1975. Taking the long train ride down to Canal Street in New York's Chinatown on a regular basis, he was present when the idea of APAs defending their own rights and demanding equal treatment as Americans was still in its infancy.

Once in college at Yale, Chen became one of the principal organizers of the East Coast Asian American Student Union, which celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2007. Each semester, he was heading up to Boston or down to Princeton, New Jersey, to organize conferences. He was constantly on the phone in that pre-Internet era, and he attended so many meetings that he became an expert at group facilitation.

At NYU Law School, Chen was one of the principal organizers of the first National Asian Pacific American Law Student Association (NAPALSA) conference in 1981 and was also a leader of the first Third World Law Students Conference, held at Columbia University Law School the same year.

Using the community connections he had made at AALDEF, he was the innovator who thought of bringing redress litigants Fred Korematsu and Gordon Hirabayashi, singers Charlie Chin and Chris Iijima, and many others to these early conferences. He was cochairperson of the New York Independent Committee to Free Chul Soo Lee, the Korean American who was wrongfully convicted of murder, sentenced to life in prison, and then put on death row in San Quentin after being charged with the murder of a fellow inmate. Chen also supported AALDEF and the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association in its efforts to unionize New York City Chinatown restaurants and bring basic legal benefits to working class APAs.

After graduation, Chen moved to Washington, D.C., where he focused his practice on Africa and China, but continued assisting NAPALSA until there was enough of a critical mass of APA lawyers to organize the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA), of which he became one of four founding members.

While rising up the ranks as a D.C.-based law firm associate in the early 1980s, Chen played several critical behind-the-scenes roles in the Japanese American redress movement. As an AALDEF board member, he participated in the group's amicus briefs and legal activities in support of redress. He also assisted the *United States v. Hohri* class action team with research, writing, and community education as the Hohri case, another case for redress, wound its way through the courts. Finally, Chen was a member of the archival research team working in the U.S. National Archives under the supervision of Jack Herzig and Aiko Yoshinaga Herzig that supported the coram nobis cases that

eventually rendered void the wartime Supreme Court internment cases.

The work of Nick Chen helped break down barriers and ultimately helped with the idea of setting up organizations in every state and in every profession. Creating more APA lawyers was especially important for APA political participation because many politicians and legislators are lawyers and lawyers are disproportionately represented in the power corridors of Congress.

POST-1980: LOCAL ACTIVISTS GO NATIONAL

Dynamic, local ecosystems of community-minded APAs that spanned the spectrums of age, gender, occupation, political party, country of origin, and immigrant status were being duplicated in many communities all across the country as the Nicholas Chen generation came of age. Tapping into and building upon the network of APA activists who were already in their thirties and older, these twentysomething activists built local institutions and local networks and then used their college and graduate school ties to build national networks such as the Third World Student Conference, the National Asian Pacific American Law Student Association, and the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association that Chen helped to establish.

When I first came to Washington, D.C., in the early 1980s as part of Nicholas Chen's generation, I found a vibrant APA community and social network. For example, Theo-dric Feng hosted a regular broadcast on the Pacifica Foundation radio affiliate WPFW called "Gold Mountain, D.C." In addition, caterer, government worker, and civil rights activist Franklin Fung Chow was working with George Liao to host a weekly Pau

Hana Connection to encourage informal networking.

Local activists, such as Samuel Mok, were serving as leaders of the OCA local chapter. Wendy Lim was promoting women's issues as part of Pan Asia as well as promoting APA arts as part of the Asian American Arts and Media group. Attorney Ranu Basu, also a member of Pan Asia, helped to establish ASHA, a network to help battered women of South Asian descent.

Sekwon Kenneth Chong was serving as a volunteer leader of the Korean Association of Greater Washington. Filipino American activist Emilie Gaborne-Dearing was teaching at a local college while serving on the U.S. Public Health Service's Asian and Pacific American Substance Abuse Task Force. Nguyen Minh Chau was promoting Vietnamese American community concerns and going on to serve as a local elected official in Garrett Park, Maryland. Susan C. Lee, another Pan Asia founder, went to law school and is now a member of the Maryland State Assembly.

When pioneering APA folksingers Chris Kwando Iijima and Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto were traveling around the country in the late 1960s to sing at local JACL conferences, they were like town criers bringing news to communities of local activists before the invention of cell phones, e-mail, and Facebook. As the 1980s and 1990s unfolded, better photocopy capabilities and then the Internet made networking easier.

By 1989, the informal mentoring networks for APAs in Washington were formalized by the founding of the Conference on Asian Pacific American Leadership (CAPAL). To increase the number of APAs in public-sector jobs,

ten interns and ten young professionals were hired during CAPAL's first summer Washington Leadership Program (WLP). During the past twenty years, CAPAL has graduated more than 1,700 interns and young professionals from the WLP and has awarded more than \$50,000 in internship scholarships. Its nonpartisan network of more than 750 public policy professionals, educational workshops, and nationwide scholarship outreach programs has encouraged countless young APAs to consider public policy careers.

Another key organization devoted to encouraging participation by APAs in government, founded in 1994, is the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS). Like CAPAL, APAICS has established scholarships and internships for students. However, it also provides training for up-and-coming APA elected officials to encourage them to run for higher office. It also works in conjunction with the UCLA Asian American Studies Center to publish the *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac*, a collection of information and contacts for the growing number of APA elected officials.

The year 1994 also marked the founding of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC), which includes members of Congress of Asian and Pacific Islander descent and members who have a strong dedication to promoting the well-being of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community. It currently is chaired by Representative Mike Honda of California, who himself has risen up the ranks to serve as a vice chair of the Democratic National Committee.

The presence and importance of APAs had risen to such a high level by 1999 that

U.S. President Bill Clinton established the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, which is tasked with the broad mission of ensuring that all federal agencies are addressing the needs of underserved Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

Another source of power that was focused locally but that had an effect on the national representatives living in the D.C. area was the D.C. Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs (OAPIA). Created in 1987 as part of the executive office of the mayor, it became an independent agency in October 2001 through D.C. Act 14-85, "District of Columbia's Asian and Pacific Islander Community Development Act 2000."

According to its Web site, "OAPIA's mission is to ensure that the full range of health, education, employment, social services and business information, programs and services are accessible to the District's API community. OAPIA is the liaison between the District government and the API community. OAPIA works with all levels of government to ensure the delivery of information and services to the API community" (OAPIA n.d.).

Ensuring that the government is responsive to APA community concerns requires not only APAs on the inside, but also APA organizations lobbying and making demands from the outside. Many APAs of the Nicholas Chen generation saw the importance of this during the Japanese American redress struggle in the 1980s, when congressional leaders helped move the bills along, but outsider actions were also needed. For example, community education was done by the National Coalition on Redress and Reparations; the aforementioned class action lawsuit

(*United States v. Hohri*) was filed by the National Council for Japanese American Redress; and independent research (as well as research done for the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians) was done by Jack Herzig and Aiko Yoshinaga Herzig. Each of these outsider sources of activity played a role in the legislated redress campaign's success, as legislators do not always move with dispatch except with the threat of a large lawsuit payout.

Three regional APA legal organizations (AALDEF in New York, the Asian Law Caucus in San Francisco, and the Asian Pacific American Legal Resource Center of Southern California in Los Angeles) joined forces to create the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (now known as the Asian Pacific American Justice Center) in 1993. As the organization's founding executive director, I remember the warm welcome we received both from government insiders and NGO outsiders, because having an advocacy group based in Washington and focused on APA issues was understood to be a necessary evolution in the APA community's march to power in D.C. While AALDEF has since split from the group and now has its own national presence, this has only increased the number of legal advocates who are monitoring the national legal terrain as it pertains to the APA community.

Other groups that came to Washington, D.C., to establish national offices in the 1980s and 1990s include the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development (1999), a national advocacy organization dedicated to addressing the community development needs of APA communities; National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse (1988), a private,

nonprofit, membership organization dedicated to addressing the alcohol, tobacco, and other drug issues of APAs; and the Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum (1986), dedicated to promoting policy, program, and research efforts to improve the health and well-being of APAs. Korean American, Asian Indian, Hmong, Vietnamese, and other nationality-specific organizations also set up offices in D.C. during this time.

One other major development in the move toward the center of federal power in Washington was the establishment of the first strong Asian American studies program in the D.C. area at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP), barely ten miles from Capitol Hill. While courses on APA issues had been offered since 1995, it is only with the hiring of Associate Professor Larry Shinagawa as director in 2006 that the program took off. The U.S. Census Bureau has established UMCP as the East Coast national Asian Pacific American Census Information Center, and the U.S. Department of Education designated the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Maryland as an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving-Institution, awarding a grant of \$2.4 million dollars to contribute toward expanding the program and building sustainability.

Working with OCA, JACL, and other community groups, the UMCP Asian American Studies Program has produced scholarly demographic profiles of the Chinese and Japanese American communities, while also initiating other census and scholarly research that will further the public policy debates in a way that cannot be done by APA advocacy organizations.

In 2010, UMCP's Asian American Studies Program will be teaming with APA Assistant Professor Yoonmee Chang at George Mason University in Northern Virginia and educators at the Center for Folklife at the Smithsonian Institution to conduct oral histories of local APA community leaders and cultural treasures. In this way, the significant gains made by APAs in the D.C. area will be preserved for posterity in the nation's official museum, the Smithsonian Institution.

MR. KOH GOES TO WASHINGTON

The political sophistication and insider knowledge of the APA community was recently on display when Harold Hongju Koh, former dean of Yale Law School, was nominated by U.S. President Barack Obama in 2009 to serve as the U.S. State Department's chief legal officer. While outsiders might imagine that Koh's stellar credentials and outstanding service as a government and human rights lawyer would make him a shoo-in for this prestigious job, Republican legislators and right-wing operatives mounted a concerted campaign to keep him out. Indeed, some were concerned that his excellent resume and experience as a Supreme Court clerk might put him in line to serve as a Justice of the High Court, so they wanted to stop his ascent at this lower level rather than wait for a Supreme Court confirmation battle.

While the White House and Democratic Party operatives worked the press and rallied public support for Koh on the Internet and in Congress, NAPABA and other D.C. APA groups mounted their own aggressive campaigns to support Koh's nomination. Working both with and separate from the top power brokers in D.C., APA politicians used phone calls, letters, meetings, and insider strategies to

help win the day. Their reward was that one of the most qualified lawyers to ever hold the job was finally confirmed. The tenacity and power of the APA community was confirmed as well.

While Koh's struggle is a public affirmation of the power and insider knowledge of APA community members, other less visible developments have been bringing more members of the Nick Chen generation to Washington. For example, attorney Ivan Fong was confirmed as general counsel of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security at the same time as Koh, while Steven Chu, Gary Locke, and Eric Shinseki were approved as secretaries of the Departments of Energy, Commerce, and Veterans Affairs, respectively.

NEXT STEPS IN THE MARCH TO PARITY

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival in the summer of 2010 will have many APA community achievements to celebrate. The ten days of activities will feature dozens of performers, craftspeople, chefs, storytellers, educators, and community leaders discussing the history and achievements of APAs.

Within the Smithsonian itself, an ongoing Asian Pacific American Program is using its prestige and leverage to support the once-a-year Folklife Festival and make sure that the visibility and connections made by the APA community at this historic event are channeled into future projects.

At the same time that these milestones are being achieved, however, the APA community faces new challenges, including cutbacks in APA studies on many campuses, decreasing funds for APA community groups, and efforts to eliminate programs for APA communities

(including one effort to eliminate the Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs in D.C. that was successfully defeated in 2009 by a coalition of APA leaders headed by local attorney Francey Lim Youngberg).

In order to face these challenges and continue moving APAs up the political ladder to the Supreme Court, to leadership in top agencies, and even to the Oval Office itself, APAs will have to continue supporting the organizations that provide internship opportunities for emerging leaders as well as the D.C. offices of groups that are keeping the APA presence alive on Capitol Hill.

An increasing number of APAs will have to strengthen their political voice and get more APAs elected to local, state, and national offices.

A research think tank devoted to APA issues is needed, as is an institution that can help APAs see themselves as transnational people whose lives are grounded both in Asia and the United States. Skype, global cell phones, and other technological advances allow all of us to live local and think global.

Finally, more APAs will have to endow and otherwise institutionalize key APA organizations in every state capital so that the presence and power of APAs in Washington will be mirrored all across America. Once that is done, the APA community's movement from the margins to the mainstream of U.S. society will be complete.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Thanks to H.K. Park for his research into Korean American history in the nineteenth century, which unearthed this and other references to Korean influences in D.C.

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An Issue of Time and Place: The Truth Behind Korean Americans' Connection to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots

by Angela E. Oh

Angela E. Oh is the executive director of the Western Justice Center Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to peaceful resolution of conflicts that promotes education, engagement, and peace-building.

The Los Angeles riots of 1992 marked a watershed moment in American history, with Korean Americans playing a central role in the events. Since that time, the Korean American experience in politics has shifted in many ways. This article describes my perspective on these events based on my own personal and work experiences, which range from active engagement in the formal political process (involving fund-raising and campaign strategy), to service as an Asian American adviser to the U.S. president, to work at the local level with community groups, to my position as a commissioner of the City of Los Angeles Human Relations Commission. In each situation, my training as an attorney who worked as a trial advocate in the fields of criminal justice and civil rights proved to be invaluable.

In Los Angeles on 29 April 1992, a jury acquitted four Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers accused of assault in the 1991 videotaped beating of African American Rodney King following a high-speed pursuit. The verdict sparked several days of looting, burning, and vandalism that caused damage to more than two thousand family-owned businesses, the vast majority of which were owned by Korean immigrants. In the aftermath, there were tremendous community mobilizations to repair the physical damage, to build relationships among divided communities, and to reflect together on what happened that spring. During all of that, Korean Americans entered a new era of social, cultural, and political activism.

Almost twenty years later, the events of April 1992 are all but forgotten among many in the Korean American community. For some, it is simply a desire to move on with their lives. For others, it is important to remember and to learn from what happened. In this essay, I hope to contribute to the lessons we learned.

LOS ANGELES, 1992: WHAT HAPPENED?

In the months and even years before the implosion of Los Angeles in 1992, conditions in the region were ripe for disaster (Oh 2002). It had been a few decades since previous burning and protests among poor people in Los Angeles, specifically since the Watts neighborhood burned in riots in 1965. Those riots were about brutality by the police in the face of the poor trying to build a civil rights infrastructure that was finally codified both at the federal and state levels (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968). By the 1990s, things came full circle and

more. Now the fact of the interconnectedness among all people (and places) was raised (Abelmann and Lie 1997).

In the early analysis, the destruction and frustration that manifested itself in Los Angeles in 1992 in the several days of burning, looting, and theft was initially attributed to poor race relations between African Americans and ethnic Koreans. The shallowness of this analysis was eclipsed only by the utter lack of cultural awareness on the part of the mainstream mass media.

Time and again, the mainstream English-language news covered only those incidents that highlighted the conflicts involving Korean immigrant family-owned businesses and local residents, many of whom were African American. In its own way, the mass media contributed mightily to the implosion in 1992 by cultivating intolerance, suspicion, and antipathy between and among residents of the economically depressed parts of Los Angeles.¹ While the metro section of the Los Angeles Times reported inflammatory stories about the insensitivity of Korean immigrant “merchants,” the *Hankook Ilbo* (Korea Times) reported on the assaults and killings of small business owners at the hands of hostile and often intoxicated local citizens. It was the perfect illustration of how people who occupy the same geographic space can live their lives in entirely different worlds. For non-Koreans, the problem was the Korean immigrant population itself. There were stories of greed, foreign invasion into local neighborhoods, and rudeness by foreigners taking money from struggling local residents. For Koreans, the problem was the society into which they had moved. In their newspapers were stories about experiences with a police force that ignored

calls for help, young people from the local community who were verbally abusive, and hostile local activists who accused store owners of being disrespectful of the community and intentionally trying to sell inferior quality products. For those who never had the chance to actually meet and befriend “the other,” the impressions were entirely negative and hostile—without the benefit of real experience.

In addition to the media stories generally, there was also the effect of a highly publicized case in the Los Angeles Superior Courts—*People v. Soon Ja Du*. Du, a Korean immigrant, was tried for first-degree murder for the killing of an African American teenager named Latasha Harlins. Du shot Harlins when she thought the girl was trying to rob the convenience store where she worked. Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter. The judge, Joyce Karlins, granted Du probation, which caused an outcry of injustice in the local African American community. Tempers were already running high, therefore, when the police brutality case of *People v. Stacey Koon, et al.*, in which the Los Angeles police officers were accused of assaulting Rodney King, was pending. The outcomes of these cases not only damaged the public’s confidence in the criminal justice system but also sparked the days of protest, outrage, and destruction known as the Los Angeles riots of 1992.² Again, the coverage of these cases by the mainstream mass media lacked the kind of depth that could have turned the proceedings into an opportunity to educate, illuminate, and bring attention to emerging issues in the region.

The fact of the media’s shortcomings was well-recognized. Even the major networks and media coalitions active during that

period held post-riot forums and conferences in which the members of the news profession reflected on the role they might have played in contributing to the violence and destruction that took place in Los Angeles during the days of looting, burning, and chaos.

Other factors were also at play. At the time, unemployment levels had been in the double-digits for months, with no apparent relief in sight; men and women, ready, willing, and able to work, were confronted with the reality of a lack of jobs. Poor people saw the financial district thriving while their communities were met with negligence; the hunger for jobs, for affordable housing, and for improved conditions in public schools went unmet. Finally, there was a subtle but important shift in Los Angeles; demographics were changing and natural tensions from such changes were creating encounters with “microaggressions” on every front.³ As tensions and conflicts grew, the recipe for disaster could not have been more perfect.

On 29 April 1992, the day the verdicts were delivered in the *People v. Stacey Koon et al.* case, Korean America was born. The verdicts were reached. There was no hung jury. It was a unanimous decision, and there was no uncertainty. The verdicts were read, and Los Angeles was stunned: “not guilty” to each and every count charged against each of the four officers involved in the 3 March 1991 beating known as “the King incident.” Each of the officers—Stacey Koon, Lawrence Powell, Theodore Briseno, and Timothy Wind—had all been seen in the videotaped beating, and each one was found innocent of criminal misconduct. The jury’s verdict, which followed the Du verdict that had been rendered six months earlier, was too much for the

public to understand.⁴ The cry on the streets was, “No justice, no peace!”

The immediate reaction was silence, but within hours, burning, looting, and vandalism were rampant throughout the city of Los Angeles (Staff of the Los Angeles Times 1996). There were protests in front of the then-LAPD headquarters at Parker Center. There were break-ins and looting in stores owned by Korean immigrant families throughout the southern and central part of the city. There were vigilante squads of Korean immigrant men who took up arms to protect their stores. Images of all of these events were captured by writers, scholars, and filmmakers from across the nation and, eventually, across the world.⁵ The media frenzy was palpable, with images of fires burning unabated, police and U.S. National Guard units unable to stop the looting and vandalism, and elected officials having no answers for the public awaiting a sign of leadership or explanation for what was happening.

When the city police was called, there was no effective response. When the county sheriffs were called, there was no effective response. When the fire department was called, the members were attacked with rocks and bottles. When the National Guard was called after two days of rioting, it was held in a staging area because strategic plans had to be finalized. It was the worst civil disaster of the century, destroying more than 2,500 small, immigrant-owned businesses and producing almost a billion dollars in property damage (Ong and Hee 1993).

In the meantime, individuals were left to do whatever they needed to do to protect themselves and to help others in need. The churches in the local Korean community became centers of assistance for

every need, from spiritual guidance to sustenance in the forms of food, housing, and medical assistance. The Korean language radio stations became the organ of news and information about what to do in the midst of nonresponse to calls for help.

In the aftermath, millions of dollars were raised to assist “victims.” But those dollars evaporated within months, having no systematic process for accounting for contributions that were pouring in from local, national, and international donors.

The Korean American Grocers Victims Association was formed to serve as an advocate for all small store owners who were impacted by the events of April and early May 1992. But that organization, too, eventually dissolved after bringing modest relief to those families that had the ability to stay with the organizing and advocacy (i.e., lobbying politicians and participating in rebuilding plans) over a period of two and three years (Chang and Leong 1994).

There were countless meetings with politicians, with scholars who wanted to survey the affected population, and with philanthropists whose charitable resources were being given to rebuilding the City of Angels—not small businesses that suffered losses. Local leaders wanted a new police chief, and got one in Willie Williams. Politicians were voted out of and into office. A new mayor, Richard Riordan, came from the sidelines with a base of public education organizing. The police department was investigated, reorganized, and placed under a consent decree. There was a steady stream of filmmakers and storytellers who wanted to capture every nuance of what happened during the implosion of 1992.

KOREAN AMERICANS IN LOS ANGELES DURING THE EARLY 1990S

Prior to the riots, Korean Americans formed a thriving and emerging community in Los Angeles. Aside from a strong presence of churches of the Christian faith, the region was developing into the largest enclave of ethnic Koreans outside of Seoul.

There were organizations such as the Korean American Coalition in Los Angeles, founded by Tong Soo Chung, a Harvard-educated lawyer and local activist with the Democratic Party. Chung personified the energy and interest of a community that was beginning to recognize the importance of engaging in mainstream politics. He broke barriers by placing himself on the ballot for local elected office, by organizing a largely first-generation, limited English-speaking population to begin examining local politics, and then by leading younger, second-generation community activists into the political arena with voter registration drives and advocacy campaigns for more access to the political process.

The dominant community organizing among Korean Americans was in the realm of social and family services. The Korean Youth Center (later to be renamed the Korean Youth and Community Center) provided social services and programs for immigrant youth who were facing difficulties navigating a bicultural existence, with immigrant first-generation expectations and demands at home and more Western, “Americanized” expectations and demands outside the home.

The Korean American Family Service Center provided assistance to first-generation women and children who

were faced with domestic violence and mental health needs. Founded by the first woman in Korea to become a lawyer, this agency was dedicated to helping families in crisis. The agency leveraged the relationships between bilingual social services, churches, Korean women's university alumni groups, and private counselors in the southern California region.

The Korean language media was mostly represented through newspapers and radio stations, with in-language television outlets only beginning to emerge in the early 1990s. The Korea Times, the Central Daily, and Radio Korea were the main news arteries for Korean-speaking audiences. Each of these played a critical role in providing immediate news, analysis, and in-depth coverage of events and people related to the 1992 riots in Los Angeles.

For English-speaking Korean American audiences, the Korea Times—English Edition provided coverage, led by award-winning journalist and editor K.W. Lee. In addition, the KoreAm Journal (published by the Ryu family and edited by James Ryu) served as an important source of information and access to the Korean community for non-Korean and limited-Korean-speaking journalists interested in learning more about the emerging community.⁶

At the time of the 1992 riots, these were the facts:

- There were no Korean American judges appointed to the Los Angeles County Superior Courts.
- There were no Korean American political officials elected to office in southern California.

- There were no Korean American political appointees widely recognized or known in southern California.
- There were no advocacy groups that pushed for policy changes to improve access and services specifically for Korean Americans.
- There was one Korean television station trying to emerge in the early 1990s in Los Angeles.

Korean America was born in April 1992.

IMPACT OF 1992 LOS ANGELES RIOTS ON KOREAN AMERICANS ACROSS NATION

The impact of the events in Los Angeles in 1992 reverberated among Koreans across the nation, both on the continent and across the Pacific Ocean to Hawaii. Communities outside of Los Angeles were clearly shaken by the images of families devastated by the lack of response. The targeted looting, vandalism, and destruction were shown in Korean language news accounts, heard on Korean radio, and shared with mainstream media for weeks.

The most common question was, “Why did this happen to Koreans in Los Angeles?” Initially the answer was presented in a way that appealed to mainstream media: Blacks and Koreans had conflicts. This answer opened up a wide range of public conversations that brought the discourse about race relations to a new level—beyond Black and White. At first, the discussions lifted up stories about store owners who were rude and suspicious while doing business in poor communities. There were stories of Koreans avoiding eye contact and refusing to place change from purchases directly into the hands of customers. Such experiences being shared became opportunities for education and insight into

cultural and historical differences that needed to be reconciled. It was the beginning of what later became an entire field of work for professionals who trained the growing international and global business community about “cultural competence.”

The racial tension between Blacks and Koreans was obviously not the reason for the mass destruction visited upon Los Angeles in 1992. Rather, it was a far more complex set of factors that produced the tragedy of that spring. It was all of the factors described earlier in this article, as well as a total failure by local leadership to recognize that the economic and demographic shift was causing deep rifts in the community. The conscience and leadership that was absent is what the next generation of leaders has the opportunity to acknowledge and build going forward.

For example, the verdicts that led to acquittals in the LAPD officers’ trial should not have been a surprise. Had the public been educated about what the justice system has the capacity to accept and disregard as part of the trial or fact-finding process, expectations could have been managed. In the context of a lot of public discourse during the pendency of the trials and publicity about the justice system, lawyers could have played a meaningful and active role. That role could have been fulfilled in describing how the justice system in general, and the criminal justice process in particular, operates. While the justice system often has the ability to deliver what most would see as a “just” result, it is also notorious for falling short in meeting the expectations of lay observers. This is because there are rules of evidence, rules of procedure, and unexpected occurrences that inevitably arise in a courtroom. The

trial was covered nightly on the television news; rather than giving pundits the chance to comment on the legal tactics being employed, there could have been commentary acknowledging the public’s sentiment about the trial and then deeper discussions about the reasons a jury would not have access to the same information that was available to the general public. There could have been an explanation about the importance of the integrity of the process that redounds to the benefit of the entire society when an angry public is not permitted to taint the prosecution of a case. There could also have been an explanation about the fact that dual jurisdiction exists so there was the possibility of further pursuing a just prosecution. One can only imagine what might have happened had select leaders, such as clergy and civic leaders, been gathered for a briefing about the intersection of race relations, justice, and immigrant experiences in the cases that sparked the 1992 events.

Had there been acknowledgment of the convergence of these big issues and an ability to bring clarity to what was happening to all communities displaced by the economic and political imbalance of the times, true leadership would have been asserted. The entirety of society could have been saved from the hardships that followed the destruction.

To the question, “Why Koreans or Korean Americans?” the answer was less clear. It was, in some respects, a matter of being in the space known as South Central Los Angeles as small store owners at exactly the wrong time in the city’s history and development.

The fact of migration among Koreans to Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s was part of a larger, global phenomenon that

was unfolding. The search for economic, social, and cultural freedom and opportunity was not limited to Koreans. Los Angeles was experiencing a demographic shift that has proven predictive of things to come in communities all across the United States. Many found their economic foothold in businesses that did not require strong language capabilities, deep social networks to find a job in a new society, or heavy reliance upon mainstream financial institutions; these factors made ownership of a small business attractive. Many chose to rely on family members who already had businesses operating in the area, and many also chose to rely on a traditional practice of pooling funds, known as the *kaei*. In this way, a family of modest means could look to their brethren in the ethnic Korean community and gain access to a pool of funding that might be enough to start an investment into a business—hopefully, a cash-intensive business like a grocery store or dry cleaning operation—that would generate enough of a flow to allow repayment over a relatively short period of time. This is how Koreans opened businesses—not through any secret government program that allowed for foreigners to gain access to federal funds belonging to the United States (a belief that was commonly held among non-Koreans in the inner city of Los Angeles).

The fact that the media images were unflattering, that during a time of high unemployment the Korean store owners seemed to be collecting what little money was available to economically depressed families, and that there were few opportunities for meaningful, nontransactional experiences for each side—Black and Korean—to get to know each other all contributed to the targets being ethnic Koreans during the 1992 riots.

The anxiety among Koreans not living in Los Angeles was high. In some instances, people cried out of feelings of both helplessness and anger.⁷ Common remarks included expressions of sympathy for losses sustained by families living in Los Angeles, anger toward mainstream society for failing to see the struggles of immigrant families, and confusion about why Koreans were being criticized for arming themselves in a time when law enforcement agencies were clearly unable or unwilling to respond to calls for help. Some women reported that they felt fear for their children because the impression they had of non-Koreans was that violence could be unleashed upon their families at any moment, for no reason other than their Korean identity.

My experiences with Korean Americans not living in Los Angeles were invaluable for many reasons. One of the major reasons is expressed in the term *jung*—a connection among people of the same ethnic/Korean heritage that is not amenable to any explanation that can be shared in words. It is a feeling of common connection. In that “connection” is the ability to empathize with complete strangers, to feel compassion and caring for the well-being of another without knowing a single thing about that person, and to have a desire to help in whatever way one can without expectation of anything in return.

Encountering this led me to the realization that such a connection is possible among all persons—among all human beings. Therefore, to understand what causes the divisions and distrust is as important as the endeavor to understand the commonalities and connections. It was the beginning of my awareness of the inextricable interconnections among all people.

Has Los Angeles Changed for Koreans and Korean Americans?

Los Angeles has changed in many ways for Koreans and Korean Americans. First, there is a realization that there is a difference between the two.

During the 1992 riots, Koreans and Korean Americans were viewed interchangeably. This is why it was possible for me, a second-generation Korean American woman born and raised in Los Angeles—who had never even visited the Korean peninsula and who was decidedly progressive and nonreligious at the time—to be identified as “the spokesperson” for the affected community. It happened that the ignorance of the media and the dearth of leadership in Los Angeles opened the way for a relatively young trial lawyer like myself to emerge as a voice.

The Koreans of the first generation were stunned, as were the Korean Americans of the second and third generations. The label of “spokesperson” created a drive for more spokespersons to be recognized, and thankfully, today there are many who speak on behalf of the diverse community of ethnic Koreans, both native-born and immigrant.

The communities have changed in significant ways and, at the same time, have preserved certain institutions and practices to meet the needs of today’s population.

Among the organizations, churches remain strong. They have always been the center for social engagement and fellowship as much as religious fellowship. Recent reports suggest there are more than 273 churches and temples that serve the Korean community in the Los Angeles and Orange county region.

The Korean American Coalition created the 4.29 Dispute Resolution Center in memory of the Los Angeles riots of 1992. The organization is now national, with chapters in cities across the United States and in the nation’s capitol.

As mentioned earlier, the Korean Youth Center is now the Korean Youth and Community Center; it serves as many non-Koreans as Koreans in its youth, environmental, economic development, and leadership development programs.

The Korean American Family Service Center continues its focus on domestic violence and the mental health needs of mostly first-generation, Korean-speaking children and adults.

There are new organizations that have emerged as important new voices working in the Korean community in Los Angeles. The Korean Cultural Center and the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium are two organizations that have emerged as effective advocacy groups that bring first-generation Koreans to public policy discussions about key issues such as health care reform, access to education, and immigration policy reform. Both organizations have been successful in creating chapters across the nation, with a clear progressive political analysis that is designed to ensure that the needs and viewpoints of a first-generation community is recognized and served.

The KoreAm Journal now has another publication targeting a younger, more hip demographic: Audrey Magazine, named after the daughter of publisher James Ryu, which provides images and stories that capture the creativity and energy of a more comfortably ensconced Korean American demographic that is seeking

to set trends in the mainstream from a distinctly Korean American space.

Today there are more radio stations, television stations, and Internet-based outlets that appeal to the Korean American community, both in Korean and English. The range of subjects and portals that are used to attract a still-growing segment of the population in southern California is astonishing; it includes comedy, music, fashion, furniture, cooking, and political analysis from conservative to radical.

In the justice system, Korean American lawyers have been among the most frequently appointed Asian Pacific Americans to be named judges in Los Angeles; Tammy Chung Ryu, Mark Kim, and Howard Halm are among those who were appointed after 1992.

In the realm of business, banks and other financial institutions are taking advantage of the global nature of business and travel among ethnic Koreans. Many of these are key partners in large developments and acquisitions of businesses that seek to build opportunities in a global marketplace. The portion of Los Angeles between the north-south boulevards of Beverly and 11th streets and the east-west corridors of New Hampshire and Crenshaw provide the geographic space serving as the base of operation for most Korean-owned and -operated businesses in the city proper. Other parts of the region are emerging as newer centers of Korean American life; for example, the San Fernando Valley, the towns of La Palma and Cerritos, and Orange County all are becoming thriving centers of commerce, politics, and cultural activity.

WHAT'S NEXT?

In the next phase of development, Korean Americans should look forward to being present in local politics as elected officeholders on the Los Angeles City Council and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. These are important political bodies that still do not have a single Asian American elected representative. Whether a Korean American might be elected to serve at either the city or county level is uncertain. From among the Asian American elected officials who have succeeded to win office at the state and federal levels, there are many of Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese heritage, but none who are Korean American, yet.

To be open, to walk gently, and to admit the possibility of failure are key qualities that any leader must possess in order to make good use of the experiences of Korean Americans in Los Angeles in 1992. There is no easy way. It is a long, often uphill path that requires great determination.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For more on this, see K.W. Lee's analysis of the media coverage of the Korean community and Los Angeles in *Korea Times*, English section, throughout April and May 1992.
- ² The implosion of the city has also been called "the civil unrest," "the rebellion," "the crisis," and "the civil disobedience."
- ³ "Racial microaggressions" is a term that refers to subtle unconscious insults directed toward people of color, contributing to racial tensions and conflicts.
- ⁴ A year after the state's case, Koon and Powell were tried and convicted in federal court for civil rights violations and both were ordered to serve a prison term of thirty months. Wind and Briseno were acquitted.
- ⁵ Authors and scholars who produced books and films based on the experiences of Korean Americans during the 1992 incident include: Kyung-Ae Park, Ed Chang, Eui-Young Lee, Elaine Kim, John Park, Edward Park, Margaret Chon, David Kim, and Michael Park.
- ⁶ The *KoreAm Journal* was recognized as a valuable resource by mainstream media, receiving awards for its coverage from Pacific News Service, New California Media, and others.
- ⁷ I spent three years almost continuously traveling to all parts of the country at the invitation of local Korean organizations. In all parts of the nation—the South, the East, the Midwest, the Pacific Northwest, and the Hawaiian islands—the conversations included questions about why Koreans were targeted, and inevitably, tears would follow.

Judy Chu for Congress: A Case Study for Mobilizing Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders for Legislative Campaigns

by Clark Lee and Tommy Tseng

Clark Lee served as targeted field consultant for Judy Chu for Congress. Tommy Tseng served as targeted field coordinator for Judy Chu for Congress.

Judy Chu became the first Chinese American woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives when she won the special election in California's Congressional District 32 (CA-32) in 2009.

In California's hyper-partisan electoral politics and creatively gerrymandered legislative districts, the battle for a legislative seat during a regular election cycle is often fought during the primary election, in which the winner of the primary is all but guaranteed to win the general election. California fashions a modified closed primary system in which members of each political party vote in the primary of their respective parties. Additionally, prior to a scheduled primary election, each political party elects to allow or disallow decline-to-state (or nonpartisan) voters to vote in their respective primaries. However, the CA-32 special election was an atypical election with an atypical mix of candidates and an atypical electorate.

For decades, CA-32 has been a Latino Democratic seat. It lies in the heart of the San Gabriel Valley in Los Angeles County, covering a high number of Latinos and a high concentration of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). Upon becoming U.S. President Barack Obama's secretary of labor, the previous representative in the district, Hilda Solis (D-El Monte), vacated the seat, prompting the special election to fill it.

In California, the governor is required to call a special election to fill a legislative vacancy. Additionally, California's special election rules for filling a legislative vacancy call for an open primary, in which all candidates, regardless of their party affiliation, are voted upon by all voters residing in the district, regardless of the voters' party affiliation. If a candidate receives more than 50% of the total votes cast, the candidate becomes the outright winner of the special election. If no candidate receives more than 50% of the total votes cast, then the top vote-getter of each party advances to a special general election; in that case, the top vote-getter of the special general election becomes the winner.

In a special election with an open primary, expected low voter turnout, and a diverse electorate, this election cycle featured a perfect storm of voter turnout challenges that required campaigns to combine old-fashioned voter contact, creative campaign tactics, and cultural/linguistic understanding to persuade and mobilize voters.

A dozen candidates filed for candidacy and got their names on the 19 May 2009 special primary election ballot. Among the Democrats, State Senator Gilbert Cedillo (D-Los Angeles), State Board of Equalization Member Judy Chu

(D-Monterey Park), and recent Obama Treasury Department transition team member Emanuel Pleitez were in contention. On the Republican side, Monterey Park City Council Member Betty Chu and businesswoman Teresa Hernandez were considered the top contenders.

Judy Chu emerged in first place in the twelve-way primary on 19 May but fell short of the majority needed to avoid a runoff. She then won in the runoff election in July.

For Judy Chu, who had represented parts of the western portions of CA-32 as a local and state elected official for more than two decades, the race was not a cakewalk. In order to win, she needed to overcome a crowded field amidst an open primary, increase her name identification, and persuade voters in the eastern portion to vote for her. She also needed to obtain the votes of a diverse electorate that includes a majority Latino district, fight a well-funded opponent, and minimize voter confusion over another candidate who had her same last name in a low turnout election. In response she mounted a complex, multipronged campaign with a multiplicity of programs, each designed to reach out to a specific demographic. Her election is not only a breakthrough for AAPI history, but also a testament that her campaign strategy could be a model for future campaigns.

This article will examine the targeted AAPI campaign program of Judy Chu for Congress and the challenges that the program faced during the special primary election.

THE LAY OF THE LAND

To set the stage, it's important to have an understanding of the voter landscape including party affiliation, demographics, and language issues.

Voter Registration

According to the California Secretary of State's voter registration report sixty days prior to the 19 May 2009 Special Primary Election to fill the vacancy, the district reported 245,537 registered voters, with 128,236 (52.23%) Democrats; 55,263 (22.51%) Republicans; and 52,237 (21.27%) Decline-to-State voters (California Secretary of State 2009). (Note: other minor parties and/or designations were not counted in this figure.)

Demographics

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 demographic estimates on CA-32, the district has a total population of 650,454, including 247,453 (38%) White; 16,077 (2.5%) Black or African American; 135,319 (20.8%) Asian; and 416,123 (64%) Hispanic or Latino. (Note: respondents can cite more than one category.) Those foreign-born total 270,446 (41.6%). The Asian communities are represented as follows: 65,839 (10.1%) Chinese; 24,571 (3.8%) Filipino; 22,192 (3.4%) Vietnamese; 4,663 (0.7%) Korean; and 4,729 (0.7%) Japanese (U.S. Census Bureau 2008).

Foreign-Born

In California, Asians have the highest rate of foreign-born population at 62%, compared to 44% for Latinos. Among persons age 18 and over, 78% of Asians are foreign-born. Also, a majority of foreign-born Asians are naturalized citizens, compared to 26% of foreign-born Latinos (Asian Pacific American

Legal Center of Southern California 2006b, 11, 12). Even though these figures represent a statewide trend, one may infer that the AAPI electorate in CA-32 is also majority foreign-born (see Table 1).

Language Diversity and Linguistic Isolation

California's Asian households have the highest rate of linguistic isolation—the inability to communicate in English—in the state, and CA-32 encompasses some of the cities with the highest linguistically isolated Asian households, including

El Monte at 50%, Rosemead at 49%, and Monterey Park at 44%. Further, CA-32 features large linguistic diversity, with the majority of households speaking languages other than English as their primary language, including Spanish at 49.6%, Chinese at 8.9%, Vietnamese at 3.1%, and Tagalog at 2.9% (see Table 2) (Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California 2006a, 170).

Table 1 — Population Characteristics by Racial (Sub)Group in CA-32

Selected Groups	Population		Limited English Proficient		Foreign-Born	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
African American	20,710	3%	540	3%	1,000	5%
Asian	125,670	20%	61,810	53%	87,030	69%
Asian Indian	2,770	0%	760	31%	1,860	67%
Cambodian	1,930	0%	950	52%	1,410	73%
Chinese, NT	60,250	9%	34,430	61%	43,130	72%
Filipino	23,570	4%	5,420	24%	16,130	68%
Hmong	20	0%	—	—	—	—
Japanese	8,390	1%	1,430	17%	1,660	20%
Korean	2,690	0%	1,340	53%	1,900	71%
Vietnamese	21,600	3%	13,640	68%	17,000	79%
Latino	398,020	62%	148,530	42%	169,030	42%
Guatemalan	3,220	1%	1,870	56%	2,330	72%
Mexican	327,110	51%	124,380	42%	137,750	42%
Salvadoran	6,940	1%	4,210	62%	5,470	79%
Non-Hispanic White	100,780	16%	4,890	5%	9,320	9%
Armenian	1,770	0%	350	32%	740	63%
Iranian	380	0%	150	42%	280	74%
CD32	639,087	100%	214,840	37%	266,160	42%

(Source: Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California 2006a, 170)

Table 2 — Primary Language of Households in CA-32

	Primary Language	Number	Percentage
1.	Spanish or Spanish Creole	289,883	49.6%
2.	Speak only English	185,008	31.7%
3.	Chinese	52,219	8.9%
4.	Vietnamese	17,877	3.1%
5.	Tagalog	16,948	2.9%
6.	Japanese	3,257	0.6%
7.	Korean	2,644	0.5%
8.	Arabic	1,842	0.3%
9.	Thai	1,612	0.3%
10.	Other Pacific Island Languages	1,524	0.3%

(Source: Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California 2006a, 170)

THE JUDY CHU FOR CONGRESS TARGETED FIELD PROGRAM

At the crack of dawn at 5:45 am on Election Day, 19 May 2009, one could have peeked into the Judy Chu for Congress campaign headquarters in Baldwin Park and mistaken it for a Model United Nations meeting. More than one hundred canvassers were squeezed into a makeshift training back room, each armed with a bag full of door hangers, voter lists, a clipboard, instruction sheets, and doughnuts. As the field trainer gave instructions for poll monitoring in Mandarin, his words were simultaneously translated into Cantonese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and English at different corners of the room.

In a district that features a diverse minority-majority electorate with a high concentration of linguistically isolated voters, the campaign required a multi-pronged approach to effectively persuade, motivate, and mobilize voters to choose its candidate.

For Judy Chu, several demographic-specific voter contact programs were conducted during the nine-week campaign. Specifically, the AAPI program, which targeted Judy Chu’s base votes (voters who would vote for Judy Chu if they actually voted), consisted of three methods to outreach to voters, featuring five distinct languages/dialects to encourage AAPI voter turnout. The three methods were direct voter contact, direct mail, and earned media (unpaid media coverage). The five languages/dialects were English, Chinese Mandarin, Chinese Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Tagalog.

EXPECTED TURNOUT AND TARGETS

The CA-32 special primary election coincided with a statewide special election featuring ballot measures relating to the California budget. Even so, the turnout was expected to be about 20%, according to the campaign’s targeted field plan (Lee 2009b). The campaign featured multiple targeted programs designed to increase the turnout of Judy Chu’s base

vote by signing up supporters to vote by mail (VBM) and engaging in VBM and Election Day Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) (Lee 2009b).

The program aimed to contact about 28,000 targeted AAPI voters with the goal of turning out about 11,300 voters and signing up about 5,500 voters to vote by mail (Lee 2009b). Contrary to studies that question the effectiveness of VBM campaigns, the campaign sought to pursue a VBM program with the mantra that in an election with expected low turnout, voters would opt to vote by mail rather than vote on Election Day if they were properly persuaded to do so. Hence, the program sought to educate voters about the candidate's campaign. The program succeeded in persuading voters to apply for VBM ballots, pushing voters to mail in their ballots as soon as they received them, and turning out the voters who had not already cast their VBM ballots as well as those who had not applied for VBM on Election Day.

As a result of linguistic isolation, high immigrant rates, cultural differences, and political differences, the AAPI community is complex, and AAPI voter outreach is distinct from other minority outreach models that candidates often use. For example, African American outreach may rely on religious leaders or church outreach and Latino outreach may rely on using a common language or invoking community leaders. There is arguably no such thing as a pan-AAPI approach to AAPI outreach (Lee 2004, 6-10).

As mentioned earlier, the campaign used three methods of outreach—direct voter contact, targeted mail, and earned media—in five distinct languages/dialects. The direct voter contact component of the program focused on contacting voters

at the doors and on the phone, targeting precincts with a high density of AAPI voters and making contact with these voters on numerous occasions to accomplish different tasks.

An advantage that Judy Chu possessed among AAPI voters was a high level of name identification and sense of approval that resulted from more than two decades of public service in the San Gabriel Valley area. Throughout the entirety of the campaign, the canvassers and those on the phone in the targeted program received assignments that best utilized their linguistic capabilities; consequently, if a campaign worker knew a specific language or dialect, that worker would almost always be the one outreaching to those voters who shared that language or dialect.

The result of the targeted program was the overperformance of the AAPI electorate's turnout in a Latino majority district that, together with Judy Chu's wide appeal, subsequently advanced her to become the first Chinese American woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in the runoff election in July.

Indeed, Judy Chu's election was the result of a combination of many key factors, such as her across-the-board appeal to voters of various demographics and political affiliations as a longtime elected official in the San Gabriel Valley area, her public service experience, and her well-disciplined campaign apparatus. Nevertheless, the targeted program arguably had a notable effect in consolidating and mobilizing the complex AAPI electorate behind Judy Chu, while also increasing the AAPI voter turnout.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Despite the complex nature of the operation, it still encountered several major obstacles. A campaign must not only persuade the voters to throw their support behind a particular candidate; it must also educate the voters on how to correctly cast a ballot for a vote to count. In AAPI communities, educating voters is particularly difficult given the multiplicity of linguistic and cultural differences that exists.

More important than language and culture is the political experiences of voters who are immigrants, because these experiences affect voter behavior. For example, an immigrant from a Communist country may have a different attitude toward politics and political participation compared with an immigrant from a Democratic country. Additionally, foreign-born voters may be more inclined to follow the politics of their home countries rather than becoming civically engaged in the United States (Lee 2004, 18-20).

VOTER EDUCATION: VBM APPLICATION AND THE BALLOT

These differences present formidable obstacles in every step of the electoral process, including registration, signing up for vote by mail, and actually mailing in a ballot or casting a vote on Election Day.

Registration will only be briefly discussed here since the campaign did not mount a significant effort to register voters. In registration, the language barrier is not the only obstacle that prevents some Asian Americans from registering to vote. For example, according to a Chinese Daily News article reporting on the 2004 presidential election cycle:

The interns [of the Center for Asian Americans United for Self Empowerment] that register voters at Chinese supermarkets often encounter Chinese American shoppers who are interested in registering to vote. But as soon as they find out that the voter registration is for American elections and not for Taiwanese elections, they would turn their heads and leave (He 2004).

Some AAPI voters who have dual citizenship exercise their vote only in their country of origin (Lee 2004, 66). In order to register eligible AAPI citizens to vote, a campaign must help these potential voters overcome the language barrier and convince them that their participation in the American political system will be worthwhile.

The process of signing up voters to vote by mail is not immune to cultural and linguistic differences, either. Targeted voters were urged to complete VBM applications. Most targeted voters had no problem completing and mailing in the application but some voters experienced significant difficulties such as not knowing how to write in English, not filling out the form completely, and failing to provide the signature that makes the VBM application valid. Many of the voters who did not fill out the applications completely or did not provide a signature cited privacy and identity theft concerns. A campaign's best strategy to deal with the hesitation on VBM sign-up is to emphasize to the voters in their native language that their information is protected by federal election law and that having the ability to vote by mail is the best and most convenient way to ensure that they will be able to cast their votes for the candidate.

The most complicated process in voter education is explaining to the targeted voters how to fill out a ballot. Due to election regulations, only the voter can fill out his or her own ballot (with narrow exceptions), making this process more difficult than completing both a voter registration application and the VBM application since campaign workers are allowed to complete those forms for the voter, with the exception of the signature or other validating lines (i.e., checking a box validating voter's age and citizenship status). However, campaign workers cannot make contact with any part of the official ballot.

In response to this difficulty, the campaign used official voter guides published by the election officials, created multilingual booklets, and hosted workshops to train campaign workers on the process of filling out the mail-in ballot. Still, the process of filling out the ballot frustrated many potential voters; in fact, many reported never having dealt with such "complicated" procedures in the American political system before (i.e., placing ballot in a sleeve prior to placing it into an envelope). Also, many voters were confused about having to send out the actual ballot after already sending in the vote-by-mail application.

A campaign's best strategy in dealing with these obstacles is to educate the voters persistently in their own language through door-to-door and phone contacts. Once the voters have gone through the process of completing their mail-in ballots, they will become more comfortable with civic participation, and future campaigns would then need to spend fewer resources to mobilize these voters.

VOTER EDUCATION: CONSEQUENCES OF BALLOT ROTATION

The election featured seven different ballot rotations in which the placement of candidate names on the ballot were randomized by geographic ballot groups; hence, candidate number two on the ballot in Monterey Park may not have been the same candidate as candidate number two in El Monte. An aggravating factor that enhanced the effect of ballot rotation as the basis for voter confusion was the design of the Los Angeles County ballots, similar to the Scantron forms used for school exams, in which voters shade a bubble corresponding to a candidate's number on the sample ballot section of an official voter guide.

Campaign workers heard reports of AAPI voters in one end of the district asked their friends or relatives living in another end of the district to shade a particular numbered bubble, rather than using the sample ballot as a guide to look up candidates' numbers according to their names. Furthermore, there were actual grassroots efforts mounted by Judy Chu supporters telling voters to "vote for Judy Chu, vote number five" with flyers and buttons.

Judy Chu's campaign quickly responded by holding in-language press conferences and used earned media, urging voters to locate candidate names prior to marking their ballots because of ballot rotations. Additionally, the targeted program included a voter education component at the doors and on the phone to address the same issue.

OPEN PRIMARY AND PICK-A-CHU

The open primary election also became an obstacle to the campaign’s effort to mobilize Asian American voters for the Democratic candidate.

In this particular election, a Republican candidate with a similar name entered the race. Betty Tom Chu is Judy Chu’s cousin by marriage. As a local council member, Betty Tom Chu had consistently used her full name in previous elections. During this election cycle, however, she appeared on the ballot as Betty Chu. Furthermore, both of their Chinese names include three Chinese characters, but two of those three characters are identical. Having two similar names in both English and Chinese caused major voter confusion and hindered the campaign’s effort to engage in effective voter mobilization.

In response, the campaign devised a two-pronged solution to minimize voter confusion. In addition to highlighting Judy Chu’s party affiliation for certain targeted voters (i.e., Democrats and decline-to-state voters), for all non-Chinese direct voter contact efforts, the campaign emphasized Judy Chu’s first name and urged voters to vote for Judy.

For the Chinese-language voters, the campaign devised a play-on-words tactic to emphasize the one character that is different between both candidates’ names. In Judy Chu’s Chinese name, the character that is distinct from Betty Chu’s Chinese name literally means “heart.” The campaign created several pieces of literature featuring a red heart symbol to brand Judy Chu’s Chinese name, with the text “There is only one Judy Chu!” prominently featured in both English and Chinese within the heart symbol. The same message was repeated in direct voter contact and during Chinese-language press conferences for earned media hits.

With this message, the campaign minimized voter confusion to ensure that the candidacy of Republican Chu did not cause the Democratic Chu to lose a significant number of votes.

SPECIAL PRIMARY ELECTION RESULTS

By the end of the nine-week campaign, the targeted program made 76,469 attempts to contact households and collected 5,043 VBM applications (Tseng 2009).

Table 3 – Certified Election Results, Top Four Candidates

	Total Votes Cast	Judy Chu (D)	Gil Cedillo (D)	Emmanual Pleitez (D)	Betty Chu (R)
VBM Votes/% of Total VBM Votes	21,382	8,226 38.47%	3,583 16.75%	1,773 8.29%	2,475 11.57%
Election Day Votes/% of Total Election Day Votes	35,875	9,442 26.32%	8,994 25.07%	5,484 15.28%	3,173 8.84%
Total Votes/%	57,257	17,668 30.85%	12,577 21.96%	7,257 12.67%	5,648 9.86%

(Source: Lee 2009a)

Table 4 — Turnout by Race

	Total Voters	Voted	Turnout	Permanent Absentee Voter (PAV)	PAV Voted	VBM Applied	VBM Voted	PAV + VBM	PAV + VBM Voted	Election Day Voted
Total	245,319	56,437	23.0%	29,095	14,812	12,668	5,718	41,763	20,530	35,844
Latino	125,422 51.2%	24,118 42.7%	19.2%	10,531 36.2%	4,567 30.8%	4,153 32.8%	1,638 28.6%	14,684 35.1%	6,205 30.2%	17,913 49.9%
API	40,164 16.4%	10,078 17.8%	25.1%	6,643 22.8%	3,383 22.8%	4,618 36.5%	2,057 35.9%	11,261 30%	5,440 26.5%	4,638 12.9%

(Source: Lee 2009a)

Results of the top candidates' performance are shown in Table 3.

A postcampaign study of the election results and the data collected during the campaign revealed that:

- Among the AAPI voters who signed up to vote by mail through the campaign, 63% voted.
- Among all identified AAPI supporters, 56% voted.
- Overall, AAPI voter turnout percentage was higher than the total voter turnout percentage (see Table 4).
- Among the VBM applicants, AAPIs had a higher percentage, even though they represent only a small percentage of the total voters in the district.
- Among the VBM applied voters, AAPIs had a distinct higher turnout (Lee 2009a).

FUTURE AAPI MOBILIZATION AND CAMPAIGNING

In the past, campaigns have excluded AAPI outreach programs, citing various factors such as time and resource constraints coupled with fragmentation of the AAPI community, linguistic challenges, and low return on the number of votes such outreach would yield. Nevertheless, as the AAPI communities grow, it becomes an increasingly

important electorate, especially for jurisdictions with high concentrations of AAPI voters or in competitive races where the AAPI vote can swing an election.

Increasingly, candidates for local and legislative office are using targeted direct voter contact programs to reach AAPI voters in their native languages. For example, in Rosemead, California, city council member Polly Low and school board member Henry Lo used Cantonese-speaking and Vietnamese-speaking canvassers for their campaigns. In 2006, candidate Mike Eng's successful State Assembly campaign engaged voters using Mandarin, Cantonese, and Vietnamese for VBM sign-ups and GOTV.

Last year, the Judy Chu for Congress AAPI field program became one of the most complex AAPI direct voter contact programs ever assembled for a legislative race in California featuring its five-language multilingual and multi-ethnic outreach strategy (Rendon 2010). In practice, Chu's AAPI program was five distinct parallel programs that were run simultaneously. The election result proved that the program was a worthwhile investment for the campaign. Even though the AAPI electorate was a minority, the AAPI field program sought to and succeeded in mobilizing this

electorate behind Judy Chu, making it a significant voting bloc in the low turnout and competitive election. Her broad appeal to non-AAPI voters was also a major factor in her election.

For future competitive races in districts that feature an AAPI electorate, candidates should consider investing in substantive targeted direct voter contact outreach strategies and not discount the AAPI community simply because of its diversity. Even though such strategies may be complex and may require additional resources, in the end, every vote counts.

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Finding Family: How a Personal Journey Led to a Dream Project

by Jason Ahn



Jason Ahn is a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley (2005) and is currently in his third year of studies as a dual degree student at Harvard Medical

School and the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard University (2012). The urgency of the divided families issue has pushed him to pursue this project. He writes:

“Reflecting upon the opportunities that I have been afforded just by mere virtue of having been born and raised in the United States, I experience a deep sense of gratitude toward my predecessors for their sacrifices. Understanding my own personal and collective history informs my own identity and pushes me further to consider how it was not my decision to have been born here, yet I am flourishing. Conversely, the poor and marginalized that I have encountered all across the world, from Africa to Asia and the Middle East, share the fact that they did not chose to be in the situations that they are in, and yet they suffer. Juxtaposing my narrative with the narratives of the others, I have realized that it is my privilege and duty to be able to serve.

I am honored and deeply blessed to be a part of the Zuckerman fellowship program

at the Kennedy School. I hope to complement my medical education by being able to analyze and tackle problems on a large scale through health policy, systems, and management. My commitment to global health and delivery of quality health care to the poor continues to drive my passion. I look forward to developing meaningful and lasting relationships with my esteemed colleagues and professors so that we can together make a positive impact in this world.”

When I was a college student in 2004, my mother showed me a picture of someone I had never seen before. The photo had been taken in China a few years earlier and was of my mother’s cousin. This cousin had left Hamkyong province in North Korea, making a harrowing escape across the frozen Tumen River. She had survived the arduous path of a North Korean refugee and was living as a fugitive in China—a faceless illegal immigrant. It was at this time that I learned I was part of a divided family. My grandmother, who went to South Korea before immigrating to America, had left a younger sister and brother in North Korea, and this younger sister’s daughter was the woman in the picture. In that moment, I realized that my roots were much more complex than I had ever known and that there must be more family stories that I had yet to hear.

Reflection on my family history led me to a place of gratitude for all the opportunities I have in America that some of my relatives have never and will never know. I was intrigued by the way in which the history I’d learned about in books was finally connecting with my own family’s story and by just how far removed I was from the events that my flesh and blood had experienced only one generation

ago. In college at the University of California, Berkeley, I discovered the words of the poet Francisco X. Alarcón, who also contemplated the cultural duality of his identity in the following poem: “I carry my roots with me all the time/Rolled up I use them as my pillow.” His words resonated with me, inspiring my own poem about Korea: “divided/torn/and/turned/into/ two, North/and/South Korea, divorced/ like my father/and mother, when/will they/embrace/again?”

I wanted to know why we were separated. And more importantly, how could we allow such a situation to continue? I then began to wonder how the legacy of a divided family has manifested itself in my life. This reflection and questioning would later lead me to create the Divided Families Documentary Project.

BACKGROUND: THE KOREAN WAR

On 25 June 1950, the Korean War erupted, and the chaos of the war led to patterns of refugee migration and the separation of families. The Korean People’s Army of North Korea pushed down to the southeastern tip of the peninsula, leaving only a perimeter around Pusan. On 19 September 1950, the U.S. and United Nations (UN) forces entered the war, landed in Inchon, and pushed the communists to the northern border. However, on 20 November 1950, the Chinese “volunteer army” joined the war and pushed the U.S./UN forces south. A wave of communist forces began flowing south from the Yalu River, and many families fled along with the U.S./UN forces, a result known as the “1.4 Hutoe” (Foley 2003) or the “Retreat of January 4.” Some left because they were landowners and/or past collaborators with the Japanese, some left because they

believed in the Christian religion, and others just wanted to live in a free society (Foley 2003).

After three years of fratricidal bloodshed, a cease-fire agreement between North and South Korea was signed on 27 July 1953; this armistice remains active to this day without a formal peace treaty. Since then, there has been very little communication between civilians in North Korea and the outside world and very limited mechanisms for reuniting divided families. According to a definition from James Foley, “The divided families are those Koreans still separated from their family members by Korea’s division into two rival, ideologically opposed regimes, the subsequent Korean War of 1950-1953, and ultimately by the failure of Korea’s leaders to create a context in which they could be reunited with their loved ones... [They] are also to be found wherever Koreans have settled to form communities” (2003, 1).

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY

The idea of divided families took hold and became something I wanted to learn more about. The more I discovered about the history of Korea’s divided families, the more I wanted to see how these major events impacted my own family history. As a result of Korea’s division, my relatives were dispersed and suffered in various ways. I uncovered the story of my grandmother, who had no contact with her sister for more than 40 years. Finally, in the midst of a tiring battle with cancer, my grandmother was able to locate her sister through a broker. My grandmother wrote a letter entitled “Calling out to you, my sister!” vowing that she would go to North Korea to meet her, but she passed away before she could fulfill her promise. My uncle in the United States sent the

letter and photos of the funeral to my grandmother's sister in North Korea. When my grandmother's sister received that letter, she responded, "We were supposed to meet when we are alive . . . who said to send pictures of a dead body?" She then burned those pictures and wept.

My grandmother's story stuck with me, and as I finished my undergraduate degree at the University of California, Berkeley, I decided to fuse my two passions: medicine and Korea. I found myself in Seoul, South Korea, under the auspices of the Fulbright Program to study structural violence and health amongst North Koreans.

Given my personal interest in researching health and medicine in poor countries and specifically in North Korea, I visited Stephen Linton of the Eugene Bell Foundation, a humanitarian aid organization that provides one-third of the support necessary for the treatment of tuberculosis in North Korea. He introduced me to the Saemsoori project, a nonprofit organization that works toward formal family reunions between Korean Americans and Koreans living in North Korea. By now I had realized that my grandmother's story was very common. By estimates from the Congressional Research Service, between 100,000 to 500,000 Korean Americans still have family living in North Korea (Kirk 2007).

The separation of Korean families occurred in several waves. After independence from Japan following World War II in 1945, the 38th parallel was drawn, dividing North and South Korea as well as the family members who resided on opposite sides of this new border. Other Korean families were in exile in Manchuria during the Japanese occupa-

tion and became separated en route to their hometowns in South Korea. Ideological differences also played a part, as some intellectuals who were sympathetic to the communist ideology went North, leaving families behind in the South, and as many in the North who were against communism fled South.

In my research, I discovered that although South Korean divided family members also suffered similar plights to that of the Korean American divided family members, the South Koreans had something that their Korean American counterparts didn't—formal mechanisms for reunion. In 1985, after thirty years of intense negotiations between the inter-Korean Red Cross, a total of one hundred divided family members were allowed to meet for the first time. Following this landmark event, then-South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy of detente led to the 15 June 2000 summit between the North and South Korean leaders, during which an official reunion program was set up. This program resulted in temporary reunions for one thousand first-generation divided family members and the release of information about relatives to ten thousand families between 2000 and 2001 (Foley 2003). Though the reunions represented major progress, the Korean peninsula has a cumulative population of 62 million people. This was just the tip of the iceberg.

However, Korean Americans were not included in the formal family reunions that took place in the Koreas because North Korea didn't accept applications from U.S. citizens and South Korea prioritized its own citizens. Very few Korean Americans were able to join family reunions, and if they were, it was by proxy through family members who had citizenship in South Korea.

As a result, Korean Americans seeking reunion resorted to other channels of contact and reunion through pro-North Korea organizations in Canada and in the United States, such as the Korean American National Coordinating Council. Some who took this route typically found themselves paying anywhere from \$3,000 to \$90,000 in an attempt to simply learn about their family members' whereabouts or for an opportunity for reunion. Many ended up swindled by brokers. Even worse, these attempts often led to dangerous and exploitative relationships that put everyone at risk or resulted in further monetary obligation to their families in North Korea. Some were able to fulfill their dreams and reunite with their families, but most were not. The need for formal mechanisms became clear.

In the fall of 2006, Alice Jean Suh, then-director of Saemsoori, filled me in on her efforts to create a formal mechanism of reunion for Korean Americans, which was based on democratic engagement in the United States. She was working with congressmen, community organizers like Chahee Lee Stanfield in Chicago (then spokesperson of Saemsoori), and humanitarian aid workers like Stephen Linton to build a strong coalition.

The seeds of change had begun to take root. In 2007, Congressman Mark Kirk from Illinois (10th district) successfully created a bipartisan Congressional Commission on Divided Families. He said, "All too often we forget the human face of North Korea and the devastating impact the regime's policies have taken on ordinary Korean Americans" (Kirk 2007). I was greatly encouraged by the small steps of progress. However, I realized that much more could still be done.

HISTORY OF THE DIVIDED FAMILIES FILM

In spring 2007, the idea of the Divided Families Film (DFF) was born. Armed with my growing knowledge of divided family history, I knew that the personal stories of family members and their often complex and heartbreaking efforts for reunion had to be told, both for history's sake and in order to inspire further support of official reunions for Korean Americans.

Consequently, I sought the counsel of Fulbright colleagues as to how we could raise awareness of these stories. As several of my colleagues had a background in film and the arts, we determined that documentary film could be an effective medium to deliver poignant messages to the greater public. As I began voicing this idea to others, the support I received encouraged my commitment to what would be my dream project.

Upon finishing my Fulbright research, I embarked on a new stage of life at Harvard Medical School (HMS) in the fall of 2007. I was excited to be at an institution that had professors and students who believed in combining medicine with social justice. I spent my first year adjusting to the all-consuming nature of medical school, and I found myself putting the Divided Families Film on the back burner. During my second year at HMS, I also decided to apply to the John F. Kennedy School of Government, which I felt would supplement my interests in global health, medicine, as well as divided families.

Despite my increasingly demanding schedule, the plight of the divided families continued to pull at my attention, and I found myself faced with a choice. I realized that being a doctor and working

to bring health to the poor would be something I could do for the rest of my life, but in five to ten years, the Korean American divided family members would no longer be with us. The opportunity to help them would soon be lost forever. I realized that with every day that passes, time continues to run out for this generation. I was standing at this critical juncture of history where I could make a difference. Thus, at the end of my first year of medical school in the spring of 2008, I committed to taking practical steps toward making my earlier dream of the Divided Families Film a reality, despite my day job as a dual-degree graduate student.

By the summer of 2008, I began to conduct preproduction research for the film. Scant academic research available on divided families led me to the only two English-language books on the subject: James Foley's *Korea's Divided Families* (2003) and Choong Soon Kim's ethnography *Faithful Endurance* (1988), which provided the backbone of research for the film.

From there, Saemsoori, with whom I had maintained contact from my Fulbright days, provided me with transcripts of the life accounts of members of divided families. Then, in the fall of 2008, accompanied by some of my fellow Fulbright colleagues, I filmed my first interview for the documentary. We interviewed a man in Queens, New York, who had fled North Korea as a refugee during the 1.4 Hutoe. He wanted help in searching for his family but was disillusioned by being swindled out of \$10,000 by an alleged broker in Manchuria.

His story spurred me on, and I began to pull together a team of other individuals interested in supporting the film in

various capacities. I met Eugene Chung, a private-equity analyst at the time (and now a first-year Harvard Business School student), who was also passionate about the divided families issue and about making a documentary on the subject. We are now working together as the two executive producers for DFF.

In January 2009, I flew to Chicago to meet Chahee Lee Stanfield, one of the first-generation divided family members who had been mobilizing support for divided families. I witnessed how much her own separation from her father had affected her life and also how much responsibility she placed on her own shoulders for this cause. "We have hundreds of thousands of stories that are too painful to bury in our hearts and take to our graves," she said. "Millions of people, including my father who lived in North Korea and my mother who lived in Chicago, died heartbroken. The people who left their spouses and children in North Korea are in their 80s now, and within several years, this population will be gone. Time is zeroing in on us as it did on our parents."

PRODUCTION ON DFF

The first step toward building our production was fundraising. We began assembling a team to plan and execute the first DFF fundraising benefit in New York City. On the 59th anniversary of the start of the Korean War, 25 June 2009, we kicked off the summer with the benefit, sharing our vision and goals with the community and raising nearly \$15,000 for our production. Our New York City fundraiser was followed by our second fundraiser in Los Angeles, and we also received donations from generous benefactors. To date, we have raised roughly \$20,000 for the film.

Production for the film started in the summer of 2009. We interviewed divided family members in Virginia, Washington, D.C., New York, New Jersey, Chicago, and Utah. It was our first time on a full-time production schedule, and the learning curve was steep as our team discovered how independent documentary filmmaking was much like running a start-up small business. This was made even more difficult by the fact that many of us had started with little to no experience in film.

First, we had to learn how to deal with many of the basic technical elements of filmmaking, including how to work a camera, how to produce the best sound, and how to frame the best shot. We also had to juggle all the storytelling strategy concerns, which involved determining the best interview subjects, creating appropriate interview questions, and figuring out the connective thread between all the individual stories.

However, all of these concerns paled in comparison to one of the great life lessons that we were all forced to learn—how to work well with other people.

Despite our good intentions and our shared passion for divided families, conflict of ideas was common, and miscommunication was rampant. We were forced to figure out a way to function amid different personalities and working styles, and it was a humbling experience for everyone involved. We had to build an organizational structure that could allow for delegating work amongst a greater team without compromising our original vision. This became even more crucial as our team expanded to an international volunteer staff of forty members located in Boston, New York, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Korea. Our staff continues to grow today.

As a result of these growing pains, we took several months to regroup and improve our staff management as well as our overall strategy for the film.

Our second round of production commenced in December 2009, and over the winter, we began to interview more divided family members in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C. This round of production saw many of our lessons learned being put into practice. The improvement is a testament to our team's commitment and perseverance, and I feel so blessed to be a part of making this film.

DFF STORIES

To date, we have filmed seventeen divided family members in the United States, with each story being unique and personal. I want to share a few of their stories, however, because of the sensitive nature of their respective situations, I will not use their real names.

In Northern Virginia, "Mr. L" went through a pro-North Korean organization to reunite with his mother and a brother whom he'd never met. Upon seeing her in North Korea, his mother recognized Mr. L by a raised birthmark on his right arm, which she used to touch when he slept. Mr. L found that he and his mother didn't have much to say to each other, leaving him to wonder whether too much time had passed or whether the thought of separating again prevented them from getting emotionally attached. When Mr. L returned to the United States, his brother requested financial support, and when he couldn't deliver, he never heard from either of them again.

In New Jersey, "Mr. Y" was able to reunite with his two older sisters in North Korea, one of whom still bore a striking

resemblance to their mother. During the chaos of war, he had been separated from his family at the Daedong River in Pyongyang, when men were urged to flee to the south to escape conscription to the Communist Army. Women felt safe to stay in the north given the popular sentiment that the war and division would be over in a few days. Those few days turned into fifty years. For Mr. Y, the family reunion brought closure to his parents' pain. Although they had already passed away, he felt that they could finally rest in peace.

We also interviewed "Mr. K," a New York City cab driver who had no idea what happened to his older sister in North Korea, leaving him to wonder about the endless possibilities of both life and death. This constant negotiation between hope and fear in his "deep within" engenders the Korean sentiment of *han*, loosely translated into regret or sorrow. It encapsulates the pain of the Korean people, having experienced domination by larger nations across time as well as civil war and the ensuing separation of family and country in the 20th century.

A Long Journey

When I started this documentary film project, I thought that reunion was the simple solution for divided family members. However, even for those who have been reunited like Mr. L or Mr. Y, experiences are still widely varied. After all, every reunion is but one fleeting moment that will eventually end in separation. Many have waited for normalization of relations between the United States and North Korea and/or reunification of the Koreas to see their families. Some have moved on, but many have not. In showing their stories through the Divided Families Film, their

experience of pain and sixty years of wanting closure can be known. For folks who have no closure, they deserve the chance to know what happened to their loved ones.

Looking forward into 2010, we plan on filming more subject matter experts, Korean War veterans, South Korean nongovernmental organizations, and reunion brokers to continue fleshing out the story.

As I sit in my hotel with my executive team waiting to interview a man who left his wife and two children in North Korea, I see how far our team has come. Upon reflection of our more than seventy-five hours of recorded interviews to date as well as the generous support of our large volunteer staff, I realize that this feat is even more remarkable given how inexperienced I was when I first embarked on this journey.

I am not only confident that our efforts will preserve history, but also hopeful that it will have an impact in time for a resolution for the many Korean American divided family members who still yearn for reunion with their North Korean relatives.

Call to Action

The hardest part of the entire process is bearing the responsibility of the stories of the divided family members, wanting to do more than just record their stories—wanting to bring them closure. We are taking steps in the right direction, but I hope that we as a community can observe, judge, and act quickly enough toward justice. And that is why I need your help.

To partner with the Divided Families Film, contact info@dividedfamilies.com. For more information on how to get

involved with advocacy on the divided families issue, contact Saemson at info@saemson.org.

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1898, U.S. Militarism, and the Formation of Asian America

by Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony

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Rightfully, many would point to the 1965 Immigration Act and its emphasis on family reunification and professional migration as an important tipping point in the formation of Asian America. However, 1965 and its consequences need to be viewed through the lens of U.S. military actions beginning in 1898, actions whose consequences continue to reverberate to the present time. Rather than looking solely at the unidirectional migratory flow of different people to the United States, we need to examine the larger patterns that emerged that established U.S. dominance due to the country's militarism in the Pacific. U.S. militarism in Asia has profoundly shaped the formation of Asian America and directly promoted the growth of Asian

American communities in the United States. To put it succinctly, many Asian Americans are here in the United States because the United States went to Asia and stayed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF 1898

1898 is the year that heralded the entrance of the United States into colonizing status as it jostled for position with European rivals like Germany, France, and especially Great Britain (Hobsbawm 1989, 51-52, 58-59). This realignment of political positioning would have an impact on many peoples in and around the Pacific, both in Asia and in the area we now consider the Pacific Islands. Through the Spanish American War in 1898, the United States emerged as an imperial power in its own right, making economic and military claims throughout the Pacific and the Caribbean. At the turn of the century, the power of the United States became the most extensive to date as it gained political dominance over Guam, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines (Bonacich 1984, 109; Painter 1987, 141-169).

Military objectives, as well as trade, shaped U.S. priorities in the Pacific region. By 1898, U.S. ambitions on trade with China were long standing. The United States had previously gained a foothold in other Asian countries. For example, Japan had to allow the United States access to its ports by an 1854 treaty, and less than three decades later, the United States gained entry to Korea as well due to a treaty between Japan and Korea (Bonacich 1984, 106).

Mapping U.S. intervention in the Pacific and Asia at the turn of the twentieth century highlights clear patterns of U.S. military dominance. In order to maintain

a naval presence in the seas and an army presence on land, the United States required the development of several bases and ports, especially because the short-ranged naval vessels of that period required frequent refueling at coaling stations. Hence, following war on sea or land, the United States sought to establish bases and a large and continued military presence throughout the region at sites that included Hawaii, Samoa, Guam, and the Philippines.

In 1898, the United States annexed Hawaii, following the 1893 armed invasion by the U.S.S. Boston and Queen Lili'uokalani's decision to abdicate her throne to prevent the bloodshed of thousands of her people. The United States quickly expanded its military presence by developing sites like Pearl Harbor, turning Hawaii into a highly militarized space (Hanlon 1994, 110; Kiste 1994, 250-251). Four decades later, the 7 December 1941 Japanese bombing attack on Pearl Harbor became a decisive turning point for World War II as it brought the United States into the war. Hawaii and its population were mobilized, turning the territory into the preeminent forward training supply and command center of U.S. military power in the Pacific (Odo 2004, 101-219; Okihiro 1991, 195-224; Kiste 1994, 250).

Samoa was partitioned in 1899, with the United States administering Tutuila Island and six other smaller islands in the eastern region. American Samoans became U.S. nationals but not citizens. The U.S. Navy became the administrator of this section, with Germany governing the area that would eventually gain independence as Western Samoa, officially the Independent State of Samoa. Prior to the use of oil as a fuel for the Navy, the United States was interested in

American Samoa as a possible coaling station in Pago Pago Bay. During World War II, American Samoa was also used as a military installation, with a Marine training base organized near Pago Pago and the implementation of other road, airfield, and infrastructure improvements. The fitafita, the Samoan marine guard, was expanded. After 1945 when military operations were curtailed, many in the fitafita were able to transfer to the U.S. Navy, leading to community formation outside Samoa (Hanlon 1994, 111; Howe et al. 1994, 245-246).

In 1898, Guam was transferred from Spanish to American control. From 1898 to 1941, Guam was ruled by the U.S. Navy, which also became a major employer. During World War II, Japan held the island from December 1941 until the Americans returned to reclaim it in 1944. After the United States returned, Guam became a crucial military installation, with the Navy regulating access to Guam after the 1950 Organic Act when Guam became an unincorporated territory of the United States. Guam's strategic importance for the United States is exemplified by Guam's role as an air base for B-52s on bombing missions during the Vietnam War (Hanlon 1994, 110-113; Howe et al. 1994, 240-242).

Military objectives shaped U.S. involvement in the Philippines as well. After victory over Spain in the Spanish American War, the United States continued to fight against Filipinos trying to establish the Philippines as an independent nation from 1899-1903 (Miller 1982). It is unclear how many suffered during the American takeover due to war, pestilence, hunger, and sickness. Death toll estimates have ranged from 200,000 for the whole country to as much as 600,000 for the province of Luzon alone,

concentrated in Manila and the center of the province (Sharma 1984, 342-343). For example, Major General J. Franklin Bell organized concentration camps in Batangas in 1901, and according to U.S. government sources, at least 100,000 were left dead (Francisco 1987, 17-18).

The United States benefited from its economic control of the Philippines as a new colony, particularly because of exports, production, and its control over labor (Bonacich and Cheng 1984). In fact, the Philippine economy became so reliant upon the United States that it had to import basic needs like food and clothing (Sharma 1984, 341-346). While the Republic of the Philippines gained “independence” from the United States on 4 July 1946, the United States still retained economic, political, and military control over the Philippines through legislation that favored the United States like the Bell Trade Act of 1946. Later, the 1955 Laurel-Langley Agreement, while reforming some of the worst provisions, continued U.S. economic control.

Through the 1947 Military Bases Agreement, the United States gained the right to a ninety-nine-year lease of military facilities in the Philippines. The Philippines was prevented from giving base rights to other nations, and there were no barriers to U.S. utilization of these bases including the kinds of weapons that could be used there. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the United States poured enormous resources into containing the Huk rebellion, which sought massive land reform. Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base became the largest U.S. military facilities outside of the United States and the forward operating bases from which U.S. military forces planned and fought the Vietnam War (Schirmer and Shalom 1987, 87-123,

140). When Ferdinand Marcos came into power in 1965, the United States also continued prominent military funding in its postcolonial relationship with the Philippines, heavily financing and providing military support for the Marcos regime until Marcos was finally deposed in 1986 and Corazon Aquino took power (Schirmer and Shalom 1987, 224-358).

Throughout the twentieth century, the United States flexed its power all over Asia, especially in the context of the Cold War and the fight against Communism. This battle would dictate U.S. priorities, as the United States intervened in the affairs of several Asian nations, including Korea, Vietnam, and Cambodia, as well as supported Indonesian forces in the occupation of East Timor. These military interventions would result in a heightened U.S. military presence in both Asia and the Pacific (Kim 2000, 41-42; Tyner 2007, 67-146).

THE MILITARY TWENTIETH CENTURY

U.S. military actions would have a direct impact on the development of Asian America throughout the twentieth century. For instance, the early migration of Filipino workers into the U.S. Navy (as U.S. colonials they had national status and could enroll in military service) would later prompt the formation of military base communities throughout the country. Other groups who served with U.S. military forces, such as the Chamorros from Guam, also migrated to Hawaii and the continental United States, building communities in sites like San Diego. These, in turn, became the nuclei of larger Asian American communities (Espiritu 2003). The 1946 War Brides Act, which governed servicemen bringing home spouses from overseas, also affected Asian Americans. For example, Chinese

American veterans in World War II were finally permitted to send for their wives back in China, individuals who had faced barriers in migrating because of exclusionary legislation from the late nineteenth century. In recent decades, the Vietnam War brought attention to these issues because the long and ultimately unsuccessful war in Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia resulted in new migration patterns. For instance, the American Homecoming Act, popularly known as the Amerasian Homecoming Act, was passed in 1988 and brought the children of U.S. servicemen and Asian women to the United States. Meanwhile sites such as Little Saigon in Southern California burgeoned following the massive migration of Vietnamese refugees after the Vietnam War (Chan 1991, 140, 163-164, 197-198).

The specter of war shapes the relationship of Asian Americans to the nation, no matter the generational history of the community in the United States. As an example, the long shadow of the “model minority” myth hobbles people’s understanding of Asian American community formation. The willingness to sacrifice self as the price for inclusion in the United States is a narrative bolstered by considerable political power, as demonstrated by Franklin Odo and his arguments about the Varsity Victory Volunteers in Hawaii. These volunteers would go on to form the core of the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team in World War II, known for its extraordinary bravery and high levels of casualties (Odo 2004, 1-8, 221-242).

Even in contemporary times, Asian Americans are seen as both ally and enemy, depending on the winds of social pressure. The imprisonment of Wen Ho Lee, a scientist at the Los Alamos

Laboratory in New Mexico, for allegedly passing national secrets to another country is an indication of how these issues are realized (Lee 2002). The persecution of Wen Ho Lee by the U.S. government was so egregious that on the occasion of Lee’s sentencing hearing, the chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of New Mexico apologized to Lee after his 278 days of solitary confinement (Lee 2002, 1-5).

CONCLUSION

The historical events of 1898 can help us to better see the role of the United States in the global arena and the positioning of Asian Americans within the United States. Militarism is one more vector by which we can measure Asian American community formation. Analyzing militarism moves us away from an immigration view that focuses on the individual and makes us look at the larger actions of the United States as a nation-state.

Furthermore, this analysis pushes us to think about intertwined histories and geographical spaces. Militarism helps us to consider the history of Asian Americans in conjunction with the history of Pacific Islanders and to look at the similarities and differences between the two groups. The long shadow of 1898 continues not just to haunt our community formation but to inform the very nature of how Asian America has been constituted, up until the present day.

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Twenty-Five Years Later: Lessons Learned from the Free Chol Soo Lee Movement

by Grace J. Yoo, Mitchel Wu, Emily Han Zimmerman, and Leigh Saito

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ABSTRACT

Chol Soo Lee's wrongful incarceration in 1973 became the focal point for the first broad-based political coalition in Asian American history. Many of the young activists who led the successful campaign for Lee's release and exoneration went on to pursue idealistic careers in public service. More than twenty-five years after Lee's release from prison, these individuals still remember the movement to free Chol Soo Lee as an inspiration and key formative experience in their lives. At the same time, many reflect on lessons yet to be learned about support for prisoner reentry, education for youth at risk, increasing criminalization among Asian Americans, and class divides within Asian American communities, as well as how

these issues pose fresh challenges for contemporary activism.

In 1973, Chol Soo Lee, a Korean immigrant, was arrested as a murder suspect in a gang killing in San Francisco's Chinatown. He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. Three years later, he self-defensively killed a fellow prison inmate, resulting in his transfer to death row. In 1978, investigative journalist Kyung-Won ("K.W.") Lee helped to expose the unfairness of the Chinatown murder trial and raised compelling doubts that pointed to Chol Soo Lee's innocence and wrongful conviction. Within months, Chol Soo Lee's case began to galvanize a broad and diverse coalition of political activists, united in their demand for justice and Chol Soo Lee's release from prison.

This convergence marked a defining moment for the fledgling Asian American movement as it was the first pan-Asian American activism to receive nationwide and even international attention. When Korean Americans rallied to help one of their own, many were surprised by the unprecedented support they received from other Asian ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the idealistic young adults who led many of the movement's key initiatives found their lives transformed by the experience. Through collective grassroots organizing, they saved a man's life and secured his release and exoneration. Many took this lesson profoundly to heart and pursued lifetime careers in social and public service.

More than twenty-five years later, they still recall the movement with a sense of wonderment at its power. Yet, not all outcomes were positive. As a real human being, not just a symbol to rally around, Chol Soo Lee struggled to adjust to

freedom. His story raises troubling questions about lack of support for postincarceration reentry, increases in Asian youths at risk of criminalization, and class-based divides and prejudices within Asian ethnic groups. As such, lessons yet to be learned from the Chol Soo Lee movement continue to challenge Asian America.

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR THE FIRST PAN-ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT

Without the formation of a pan-Asian American movement, Chol Soo Lee's life could have ended in execution. In 1973, only a handful of people cared about Chol Soo. The earliest efforts on his behalf came from his mother, Mea Yea, and two young activists, Ranko Yamada and Tom Kim. Together, they struggled to galvanize support and raise money (Furutani 1983).

Yamada, poised for a career as a civil rights attorney, had the prescience to see the wider implications of Chol Soo Lee's story, years before his case gained popularity. She and Tom Kim both embodied the zeitgeist of the early 1970s—a passion for social justice inherited from the civil rights movement. As activists, they stood at the fulcrum on which Chol Soo Lee's fate hinged. A newly forming Asian American movement looking for its first cause célèbre would allow the story's hero to transform from a hapless individual victim to a potent public symbol of coalition politics. Tom Kim, advocate for the Korean Community Service Center and for youth programs at the time in Chinatown, is a third-generation Korean American. To him, it was inconceivable that a Korean kid could commit a Chinatown gang killing. Tom Kim eventually approached fellow Korean

American K.W. Lee, an award-winning investigative reporter, and urged him to make Chol Soo Lee's case into news. An innocent young man, framed by the system and trapped on death row, was a story worth telling. When K.W. started telling it, people started listening.

K.W. Lee himself recalls stumbling across Chol Soo's Korean name in a court report (Furutani 1983, 75). The details of K.W.'s first contact remain a mystery, but one thing is historically clear: once K.W. got interested, he exercised all powers of persuasion to interest everyone else. He asked Asian Americans to stake their collective future on the case, calling them to heroic action in a fight against injustice, racism, and death. As an investigative reporter and Pulitzer Prize nominee for the *Sacramento Union*, K.W. Lee embarked on a six-month investigation, producing a two-part feature article entitled "Alice in Chinatown Murder Case" (Wong 1997).

By November 1977, Chol Soo Lee and K.W. Lee were corresponding regularly by U.S. mail. In one letter, K.W. Lee wrote:

"The only way to fight this injustice is to unite. If we Korean Americans unite for one purpose, I am confident that we will be able to bring justice in your case. This is an issue affecting all Koreans in this country, their children, and their children's children" (Kim 2005).

By the late 1970s, several Chol Soo Lee defense committees had taken shape. According to Warren Furutani, committees in California differed demographically. The Sacramento Defense Committee, made up mainly of older and professional Koreans, served primarily to raise funds and establish legitimacy in the

public eye. Organized in March 1978 by Grace Kim, K.W. Lee, and University of California, Davis law student Jay Yoo, the Sacramento committee investigated the case, pooled its resources, and corralled additional supporters (Furutani 1983, 77). As public speakers, Jay Yoo and K.W. Lee possessed personal charisma that helped stoke the cause into a spreading blaze of popular support. Gail Whang, then a student at San Francisco State University, got inspired when K.W. Lee spoke to her class and proceeded to organize students at University of California, Berkeley and in San Francisco.

Defense committees in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area also formed in 1978. Compared to Sacramento, the major metropolitan cities assembled a much younger crowd of community activists, college students, and street youths (Lim 1983). During this early formation stage, Furutani and Charlie Park, a “street-wise youth,” both got involved, and Tom Kim’s efforts inspired Jai Lee Wong, a Korean American college student, to start spreading the word. Over time, the Free Chol Soo Lee Movement attracted national and international support, garnering financial contributions from Hawaii, Seattle, Texas, Washington, D.C., and Chicago.

With the main objective of freeing Chol Soo Lee, the movement identified three goals: raise money, educate the community, and pressure the judicial process. Even with this unified purpose, however, the movement wrestled with its own internal diversity, as points of contention arose on political priorities, immigrant experience, race/ethnicity, generation, class, sex, and age (Lim 1983). Politics and perception of issues divided many movement participants into two factions fixated on either “freedom” or “proce-

dural justice.” Believers in procedural justice demanded a fair trial for Chol Soo, while proponents of freedom believed Chol Soo’s innocence was paramount and the criminal justice system was broken (Lim 1983). A crisis point arrived when the defense committees split. At a meeting in Oakland, California, the Worker’s Viewpoint Organization made a motion to remove members of the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS), and the LRS members walked out (Lim 1983). With this split, the movement to free Chol Soo Lee became called the Committee to Free Chol Soo Lee by the San Francisco and Los Angeles chapters.

Many see success in the fact that the movement to free Chol Soo Lee was the first pan-Asian American coalition in history, and its primary aim to secure Chol Soo Lee’s vindication and release was achieved in 1983 (Lee 2005). Asian American scholars have often believed, incorrectly, that the first Asian American race-based organizing occurred in response to Vincent Chin’s murder in 1982. Gaining popular support by the late 1970s, however, the Free Chol Soo Lee Movement predated the Vincent Chin case by several years.

LESSONS LEARNED

Countless multitudes of people participated in the Chol Soo Lee movement. These included older adults from the Korean immigrant community as well as ministers and professionals, but the bulk of movement organizers and leaders were young Asian American college students. Many ended up pursuing legal services careers, including Jeff Adachi, public defender of San Francisco; Sook Nam Cho, an attorney in New York City; Mike Suzuki, public defender of Los Angeles County; and Susan Lew of the Asian

Pacific American Legal Center in San Francisco. Others, such as Peggy Saika, executive director of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, sought a career in public service or a career in politics, as in the case of Warren Furutani, California State Assemblyman. To commemorate the movement, more than twenty former Chol Soo Lee activists agreed to participate in an oral history project we conducted. Between the fall of 2008 and the fall of 2009, former activists were interviewed in person or by phone about what this historic movement meant both to the Asian American community and to their personal lives. The following summarizes the key reflections garnered from these interviews.

ASIAN AMERICANS COMING TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME

In the early 1970s, very few Koreans in America were exploring the new racial identity politics in which “Asian American” was a freshly coined idea. Only a handful of adult, U.S.-born Korean Americans existed, and they were therefore accustomed to marginal status as a tiny minority. The post-1965 wave of Korean migration to the United States, however, resulted in a rapid burgeoning of freshly established Korean American communities. Inspired by the vibrant politics of the times, some of those scarce second- and third-generation Korean Americans, such as Tom Kim, longed for solidarity with the new Korean Americans. As American-born idealists, however, they soon perceived immigrant communities to be insular, difficult to organize, divisive, and overfactionalized; working with them was generally thought to be frustrating.

The Chol Soo Lee movement reversed this disappointment, however, with its

unprecedented forging of creative political alliances. Committees formed by Korean Americans oversaw the whole movement—the legal strategies, fundraising drives, publicity campaigns—and never ceded control to other interest groups that might have maneuvered to take over. Yet, at the same time, the Korean American organizers accepted crucial and generous help from other Asian American ethnic groups, as large numbers of young Asian Americans flocked to the cause. Until then, the second- and third-generation Korean Americans had felt like outsiders among Asian Americans, always fighting an uphill battle to be seen and included. Incredibly to them, the Chol Soo Lee case placed Korean Americans in the spotlight, at center stage in a pan-Asian political drama, with wholehearted backing from hosts of non-Koreans. For once, the then-scarce American-born Koreans could join the abundant ranks of recent Korean immigrants and fight for the same cause.

In contrast, from the point of view of Korean immigrant communities, the movement touched and astonished those who never expected a Korean concern to attract support from other Asian groups. Min Paek, who came to the United States at the age of twenty-one and is founder and executive director of the Korean American Women Artists and Writers Association (KAWAWA) in San Francisco, discusses the transformative impact on Korean American immigrants who opened up for the first time to collaborative work with other Asian American communities:

The Chol Soo Lee movement...still haunts me today. It was our issue—a Korean American issue. It touched so many people and...I found out

through this movement that for many Korean American youth, when you get into trouble there is not help.

Han Yun, now working for Asian Community Mental Health Services, states:

[The] Korean American community owes a lot to Asian America. Many Korean Americans didn't know people working really hard who were not Korean. Young [Chinese] American, Japanese American, Korean American, some Filipino...mainly, Japanese American, they're the ones who usually help...things move up.

Yun recalls that this was the first time he witnessed Korean Americans and other Asian Americans working together in a mass movement. Seeing different Asian Americans join together to exercise their rights was his most lasting impression of the movement.

Jai Lee Wong recalls how the movement uniquely galvanized Korean immigrant churches to protest and donate resources; this marked the first time the churches reached beyond dealing exclusively with Korean immigrants and joined forces with other Asian Americans. Korean churches also provided an effective network for organizing Koreans not only in the United States but around the world. She recalls:

We understood, to organize Korean communities, we have to go to Korean churches. And talking to the ministers, some of them [were] very skeptical about [this kid] who was a trouble maker...But...many of them...came around, so churches were sending these offerings on weekends...It was the first time [the] church's story got out of the Korean community...All of a sudden

it became a huge movement. It's a beautiful thing. When I look back I sometimes wonder whether or not it really happened. In the beginning it was so slow, so frustrating, and yet once we became a movement it went very broad and very deep.

Sook Nam Cho of New York City was working at a public interest law firm and became involved in 1982. She helped galvanize older Koreans to show up in court; she especially recalls the contributions of Korean immigrant grandmothers:

We packed a van full of elderly Korean grandmothers and grandfathers in the traditional Korean outfits...We brought them to San Francisco...and they were sitting in the courtroom, day in and day out, all day long, even though they didn't understand anything...because they wanted to show the judge and jury that the community really supported him... They all found out that Chol Soo loves Gim-Bahp [Korean sushi]...They would make Gim-Bahp, and since I was the attorney I was able to visit Chol Soo in the prison...I would sneak in the Gim-Bahp...and while the security guard looked away [Lee] just shoved down this Gim-Bahp in like two minutes...It was very rewarding because people really got educated about the case...the community was mobilized around the case.

In the Korean American communities a full spectrum of participants pitched in—young people, elderly people, church folks, working people—while Asian American activists rushed to form a powerful new political consciousness.

The driving force for this movement sprung from ideals about social justice

embraced by young Asian American college students. As K.W. Lee recalls, most Asian American middle-class professionals and intellectual elites at that time were silent or politically disengaged, not only from the wrongful incarceration of Chol Soo Lee, but also from a plethora of other issues impacting the Asian American community. K.W. Lee states:

We have a thundering absence of what we call public intellectuals who are engaged with the...underdogs of their own people...It's always young kids who have to bear the burden of sacrifice...not Ph.D.s and M.D.s and CPAs. It's always college kids who pay the sacrifice while they should be studying...That's one of the great tragedies of the Asian American experience.

Grant Din, a fourth-generation Chinese American, was twenty-two in 1980 when he joined the movement. He had first met Ranko Yamada at the Nihonmachi Street Fair in San Francisco, where she handed out "Free Chol Soo Lee" brochures. Din recalls the sense of urgency. He was working at Oberlin College in Ohio as an Asian American counselor when he started publicizing the case back East. He also organized a bike-a-thon from Seattle to San Francisco to raise awareness of the case and raised \$1,000 in pledges. He recalls:

We didn't really train very much, and so during the trip...my friend hurt his knee and well, [we said], "Chol Soo's in prison! So we're going through nothing compared to what he's going through. So let's keep riding!" And so we stuck it out and finished the ride, and the people from the committee met us at the Golden Gate Bridge.

The movement to free Chol Soo Lee coincided with the dawn of a rising Asian American consciousness, especially among young adults. In 1977, Peggy Saika was in her twenties, working as a community organizer for the Asian Community Center in San Francisco, when she heard about the Chol Soo Lee case. Looking back, she marvels at the improbability of it all. She saw several factors converge that made the movement possible. Until the 1970s separate ethnic organizations such as the Japanese American Citizen League took care of their own. No pan-Asian American identity existed. The civil rights movement and antiwar and free speech movements of the 1960s, however, prepared fertile ground for the growth of grassroots activist movements in which a new Asian American consciousness could take root. Meanwhile, Korean American immigrant communities were perhaps searching for ways to locate themselves meaningfully in the new diverse society of the United States. Chol Soo Lee's case met a need for internal cohesion and a unifying stake in connecting with non-Korean Americans. All these developments coincided when Korean Americans and Asian Americans met in the middle, setting in motion an unprecedented convergence of interests.

Esther Leong, a second-generation Chinese American, now at the Asian Pacific Islander Legal Outreach, joined the Free Chol Soo Lee Movement when she was nineteen. She attended weekly meetings and created music to educate people about the issues. She remembers trying to get Chinese American and Japanese American organizations involved. Reaching across ethnic differences was a vital way for the movement to build strength. Leong recalls:

Very few penetrate into the Korean or other communities [be]cause we didn't know how. This [Chol Soo Lee's cause] started us to bond through East Coast/West Coast, and it was an opportunity to learn about other communit[ies]. . . . Back in those days, people were sort of segregated, J-town with J-town, and Manila-town with Manila-town, and Chinese with Chinatown.

Leong further discusses how she encouraged people to channel their pent-up frustrations into collective empowerment:

It was a real sense of empowerment. . . . I mean, we reach all the way to Korea. And you know, you can't stop us. . . . We wanted to deal with all the things that we have harbored, you know, and I know that young people have a lot of energy. . . . Do not take that frustration and injustice and just bury it inside yourself, because it eats at you.

Din recalls how memorable it was to be part of such a broad range of people in one movement:

[It spanned from] students who are recently graduated to folks who figured that we could make a difference. And so that's really impacted me and the things I do. . . . nothing that I've done since then has had the same kind of broad-range organizing.

Although college students were a dominant force in the movement, active participants spanned intergenerational differences. The older generation was organized and led by Luke and Grace Kim, leaders in Sacramento who were instrumental in organizing Korean immigrant churches. Several activists still recall the sight of Korean grandmothers wearing traditional *hanbok* dresses

packing the courtroom. Every day of the trial the community presence was felt. Tom Surh, a young attorney at the time, recalls:

Every day, day in, day out. It was just an amazing thing to see. And so, of course when that acquittal came down it was like, "Wow!" And we were on our way.

Many activists, even twenty-five years later, still feel amazed by the movement's power to unite people across a broad spectrum of social backgrounds and by the variety of key players who made a difference—from K.W. Lee's investigative articles, to budding young activists across the nation, to Korean churchgoers' donations. This movement pivotally demonstrated the capacity of Asian Americans to unite behind a common cause. Chol Soo Lee's dire situation on death row impelled many to passionate involvement. As Din says:

Asian Americans from all walks of life can work together, whether it be Korean grandmothers or business-people who had probably not ever been politically aligned with students on any issues, except this one. People can work together on these issues and make a difference.

Susan Lew, a young law student in San Francisco when she joined the movement, recognized the shift in consciousness to pan-Asian American unity, but she also saw more at stake than racial identity politics. Many people, regardless of race or ethnicity, recognized in the cause a universal appeal to anyone, Asian or not, who longs for a just society. She saw how the sheer injustice of Chol Soo Lee's case motivated some people to put extraordinary efforts and contributions into the fight. As she remembers:

I know that when the defense fund went really low on funding for attorney's fees and legal costs, there were people who willingly mortgaged their homes in order to provide funding to keep the case going...I mean to mortgage your own home for a person on whom an injustice was perpetrated...not even your own family...I think that was really amazing.

In the 1970s, Furutani worked in Los Angeles as a grassroots community activist focused on civil rights, advocating primarily for disenfranchised Asian Americans. He helped retired elderly bachelors, Chinese and Japanese Americans living in cheap hotels, and he advocated for at-risk youth, becoming familiar with their typical issues—the allure of gang involvement and drug use and the invisibility of “deviants” from the “model minority” stereotype. Thus prepared to empathize with Chol Soo Lee's vulnerabilities as an inner city youth, Furutani recalls:

One of the first things we did was ...we met with him personally. And...you could see that he was a good guy...and our involvement became political and became very personal.

David Kakishiba joined the movement in his twenties while at the University of California, Berkeley. Most memorable to him was the grassroots nature of the movement, the fact that, “a bunch of nobodies got together and persevered, step-by-step, little things at a time.” Kakishiba recalls speaking to college campuses throughout California:

And you do that for sixty months. That a group of nobodies overcame the criminal justice system here in

the Bay Area and got a guy initially innocent and got him out...That's history! And the fact that it was primarily a Korean immigrant thing...and a bunch of relatively young...Asian community activists...I think that it's an example...you can organize, exercise your democratic rights, and win!

The effect on those who participated was momentous, as they came to feel a part of a movement in which a wide variety of ordinary people joined their wills together into one united demand for justice. The fact that the movement's pursuit of justice resulted in the freeing of an innocent young man proved to everyone that people—even marginalized, recently immigrated, racially devalued people—can take charge of democracy in the United States and insist that the system serve them. Political power can be wielded when people work together as a collective force. History has proved this point true in countless examples, but for most people who fought to free Chol Soo Lee, a moment in history was being made for the first time, and they were part of the making. Collective grassroots people power won the day, and the experience was thrilling and unforgettable. The most exhilarating moment in the memories of all concerned came when Chol Soo Lee was released. Din recalls:

This is before the Internet, there's no e-mail, there are no text messages... [Holds up hand in the shape of a telephone to his right ear.] “Oh, Chol Soo's going to be out today.” So everyone gathered in Stockton and went to the prison where he was released, and that was probably one of the most exciting days in my life. Just

being...a small part of the movement and seeing that he's out.

WHAT STARTED AS THE CHOL SOO LEE MOVEMENT BECAME A MOVEMENT IN LIFE

More than twenty-five years later, many of these same activists are still engaged in public service. As Grace Kim states:

This kind of grassroots movement, really bringing [together] so many people, [they] inspire each other, they get the energy, and after they leave the group, they start another organization or another movement in another city.

This movement became a catalyst, stimulating a whole cohort of young Asian Americans. For many of these activists, this movement opened their eyes to the existence of disenfranchised Asian Americans and awakened a desire to advocate for these individuals. Many discovered that the goal of social justice requires a never-ending struggle to defend disadvantaged communities, give a voice to recent arrivals, and protect even themselves from systemic abuses. With countless battles still to come, the movement instilled in many of its adherents a moral strength, confidence, and vision necessary to fight on and to sustain their hopes for the long term, regardless of setbacks or new victories.

Leong continues the fight through the Asian Pacific Islander Legal Outreach, where she advocates for a variety of Asian American clients including seniors, survivors of domestic violence, and victims of human trafficking. While striving to educate Asian Americans reluctant to join the movement, she learned how to recognize cross-cultural differences and barriers. As a result, she discovered a passion for advocacy in areas

where Asian immigrants need the most help adjusting to U.S. culture.

Saika says that her involvement in the movement became an integral part of her evolving sense "of politics, political consciousness, commitment to the community, a lifelong commitment to justice and equity." She says:

I think the struggle was one opportunity for us to really engage and learn not be just one in theory but in practice. So those [lessons] are with me forever and Chol Soo is always with me forever.

Paek of KAWAWA says she did not feel the full impact until years later. She mentions that she was a supporter on the sidelines watching it unfold and learning from the veteran activists. She recalls:

It helped me later [with] what would follow in my...organizing Korean American artists in the U.S. who were often ignored from the mainstream arts community. My first organizing experience was at Mills College...and I started my own nonprofit.

Furutani observed how this movement propelled everyone to work a bit harder and stay passionate about issues impacting disenfranchised Asian Americans. He states:

So there's a lot of people that...took what they learned and were inspired... For me, the only thing that I could do was politics...politics was critical relative to...education. So that's why education's been the area that I worked in, whether on the board of education in Los Angeles, or the community college board in Los Angeles, or...now that I'm on the California Assembly. But I took the political path. So out of

the movement, a lot of people took a lot of paths to put them in the place where they are today.

Kakishiba became a member of the Oakland School Board. He states that the movement made him aware of issues that are still relevant to his work today:

But in the district, you tend to aggregate from all Asians!...So it looks like Asians are doing really well. But in neighborhoods here, they are not... their economic conditions...are related to everybody else in the neighborhood...Southeast Asians...are not doing particularly well in school. They don't go on to higher education.

WHAT WE WISH WE HAD KNOWN: REENTRY AN ISSUE THEN AND NOW

After his release from prison, Chol Soo Lee struggled with assimilating into society. At first he worked at a Korean multiservice center for six months as a receptionist. After that, he worked as a janitor, met union organizer Pat Jackson, and consequently moved to Los Angeles to work as a union organizer. During his sojourn in Los Angeles, however, he developed a cocaine dependency and eventually quit his job. Around 1990, Chol Soo Lee served eighteen months in jail on a drug possession charge (Kim 2006). After his release, he returned to San Francisco, where, ironically, he got involved with gangs in Chinatown. In 1991, Chol Soo was charged with arson after he tried to burn down a house (Isaacs 2000). In 1995, Chol Soo fired his gun in a housing project when he believed he had been sold phony drugs (Sward 1995). This chain of troubling events perhaps suggests the overwhelming transition facing someone who, after ten years of intensive training in prison

survival skills, must re-adapt to unfamiliar norms and rules of life on the outside. Internal suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and external barriers of social fear and stigma remain invisible to everyone except the ex-convict who faces these obstacles, regardless of his original innocence and exoneration.

Many movement activists expressed disappointment or sorrow about Chol Soo's severe tribulations after his 1983 release. One former supporter, Sooknam Cho, mentions that her biggest regret is not following up with Chol Soo after the case ended. Many supporters thought the battle was won, and they moved on, imagining naively that, postrelease, Chol Soo would have to settle into a normal life, somehow. Suzuki describes how the support committee disbanded after the court case victory:

There was no transition...the big movement just kind of died out...then we forgot about Chol Soo as a person...Chol Soo...the movement...all of a sudden was Chol Soo...the freed prisoner who...needed to get a job...to re-adjust back to society.

After Chol Soo Lee's release, effective help with adjusting to freedom was hard to find. Some people assisted him with housing and job opportunities, but in general, support for reentry was scarce. Some supporters were unaware of reentry issues, while others felt baffled over how to help.

Umemoto, now professor of urban planning at the University of Hawaii, refers to the problem's magnitude with a question: "What kind of support do we give people that have spent close to a decade in prison, and what kind of future do people who are incarcerated face

when they get released?” For any formerly incarcerated American, establishing a normal productive life is certain to be challenging, and some, like Chol Soo Lee, never experienced a “normal” life to begin with.

Looking back, many activists realize that they were highly idealistic about winning Chol Soo Lee’s release without ever understanding his life. Even though Chol Soo was innocent of the crime for which he was incarcerated, the fact remains that he spent ten years of his young adult life in prison, in a micro-society where harsh and extreme dynamics of gender and race politics dominate everyday life. He survived this brutal environment as one among few Asian Americans in a world where racial gangs and strength in numbers can determine predator or prey, life or death. Understanding his needs would require accepting the cruel realities of his life, not ignoring or minimizing them. His idealistic supporters had little common basis for relating to Chol Soo Lee’s mindset and were poorly equipped to empathize with his nihilism.

Kakishiba observed how some people felt let down by Chol Soo’s behavior and frustrated when well-meaning efforts to assist his reentry met with difficulties. Kakishiba notes the jarring discord between social and cultural attitudes typical of Chol Soo Lee’s supporters and his own world view by comparison:

There were a lot of people that had very unrealistic expectations about who he was. That he was like going to be this angel, super model citizen—and the dude is from the streets. And his lifestyle and other people’s lifestyles aren’t the same. And I think there were some people there that just couldn’t

accept that. And so they pushed him away.

As a new immigrant in his teenage years, Chol Soo Lee came from a working-class background and a broken family. Never knowing the security of a strong loving home life, he was an at-risk youth in a strange urban environment. Even prior to his wrongful incarceration, his adolescent development was stunted by unusual hardships and trauma, burdening him with multiple social barriers to a healthy productive life. Postrelease, for Chol Soo Lee to integrate into society, realistically, he would have needed help addressing his whole life, including the tragic circumstances that put him originally at risk. Despite the difficulties he has faced postrelease, he uses his experience today to give speeches to at-risk youth, those recently released, and college students across the United States.

RELEVANCE TO TODAY

A lesson learned from this movement is that reentry issues—including the lack of family and community support—continue to plague Asian Americans released from prison (Oh and Umemoto 2005). Asian American community-based organizations, moreover, lack adequate capacity to provide services for ex-prisoners (Oh and Umemoto 2005). In recognition of a need to break the silence that still stifles openness about incarceration and Asian Americans, several events transpired in the spring of 2008 at San Francisco State University including remembering the movement that freed Chol Soo Lee. A day-long summit that followed focused on the issues that face Asian Americans postrelease including transitioning, substance abuse treatment, housing, employment, immigration status, reuniting with family

and community, formation of support networks for reintegration, and avoidance of re-incarceration. These events aimed consciously to bolster missing areas of activism that the original movement neglected to address.

The memorable, history-making movement to free Chol Soo Lee spawned the first “united front” of diverse Asian American communities, whose efforts should be commended. Yet, looking back more than twenty-five years later, what would we most benefit to remember? Of the many lessons learned, which are the most important to preserve for future generations? Chroniclers of the movement’s successes often concentrate on the community organizing and the legal victory. Major endeavors to raise money, educate the public, publicize the story, and navigate the judicial process all required courage, determination, and ingenuity from a host of people acting in the name of justice. The case also served as a benchmark event for the rising political strength of Asian Americans. But the implications of Chol Soo Lee’s case extend beyond the specifics of his story and the dramatic movement that his case generated. Recognition garnered by the defense committee’s victory overshadowed subsequent issues, particularly the issue of reentry and the negotiating of a healthy transition into society. An issue that still remains and exists in the Asian American community today.

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Rising to Political Power in New Orleans: Vietnamese Americans Respond in Katrina Aftermath

by Yoojin Janice Lee



Yoojin Janice Lee has more than twelve years of experience in community building for social justice, leadership development, and political mobilization. Ms. Lee currently works at Health Resources in Action, a Boston-based, nonprofit public health organization where she provides training and consulting services to coalitions, government agencies, and youth-serving organizations. She was formerly executive director and lead organizer of the Boston-area Youth Organizing Project where she supported youth from low-income communities of color build power for justice in their schools and neighborhoods. As an independent consultant, she has supported the Vietnamese American community in New Orleans in gaining political voice and strengthening internal capacity. She graduated from Smith College and holds

a master's degree in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

In the weeks following Hurricane Katrina, which hit the U.S. Gulf Coast in August 2005, the nation watched transfixed as the television news showed image after image of destruction and suffering. We were shown a story of anguished New Orleans residents—mostly African American and some White—who had suffered overwhelming losses of loved ones, property, and dignity. During that time, however, another story—one not covered by TV cameras—began to be written by a community few are even aware exists in New Orleans. It is a story that Asian Americans need to hear. Full of courage, leadership, collective power, and, most of all, hope, it is the story of a quiet—and sometimes not so quiet—rising of Vietnamese Americans into undeniable political power in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

As a community organizer, I was invited to New Orleans in August 2006 by a New Orleans Vietnamese American group with the original purpose of leading workshops for young adults on leadership skills. Once I arrived, though, I eagerly became involved in helping to strategize and plan for what had already become a powerful campaign to shut down a toxic landfill placed in a neighborhood in New Orleans where most Vietnamese Americans reside.

In recounting this story, it is my hope that we will come to recognize these events as being part of a new, defining moment in Asian American political history. Witnessing the political rise of Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans as they successfully closed down the landfill,

built political power, and eventually elected the first Vietnamese American member of Congress has inspired me as a Korean American to believe that we all can gain political visibility and influence.

AFTER THE HURRICANE, ANOTHER CRISIS HITS

At least 22,000 Vietnamese Americans made the greater New Orleans area their home before Hurricane Katrina struck. Originally arriving in 1975 as refugees fleeing communist persecution after the invasion of South Vietnam, the most concentrated group lived in a neighborhood in the eastern part of New Orleans, far from downtown and out of sight of tourists and most non-Vietnamese residents. Referred to by Vietnamese Americans as “Versailles,”¹ officially, “Village de L’est,” this neighborhood of New Orleans East had become a safe haven where shop signs were in Vietnamese and the familiar trade of fishing continued as it had in Vietnam.

Although it took more than a year for just 50 percent of New Orleans residents to return to the city, many of the Vietnamese American residents of New Orleans East were back to rebuild their homes within just a few months. Due to its close proximity to the levees, the New Orleans East neighborhood was among those hardest hit when the levees broke. The rebuilding work was arduous and often heartbreaking. This community, having survived hardships during the Vietnam War, including fleeing the country as refugees, had made a life in New Orleans. The members of the community had grown to view New Orleans as their home, and hence they returned.

While the Vietnamese American community was committed to New Orleans, the city’s commitment to it was less evident.

This was apparent during a post-Katrina public meeting during which the city revealed a redevelopment proposal that literally left the Versailles neighborhood off the map. The neighborhood—full of homes, churches, businesses, and schools for its modest-income, primarily African American and Asian American residents—was designated in the proposed city plan to become “green space” (public parks) to absorb any future flooding.

Worse yet, on 14 February 2006, Mayor C. Ray Nagin claimed emergency power and issued an executive order that suspended zoning ordinances and opened a landfill in New Orleans East, endangering the nearby residents and the viability of the neighborhood in several ways. First, the dump was not secured for toxicity. Second, it was placed only a mile away from people’s homes. Third, the dump opened without any public hearing taking place. By April 2006, seven months after Hurricane Katrina struck, the neighborhood’s children, parents, and grandparents began to witness caravans of trucks bringing in 7,000 tons of Katrina cleanup debris daily. Soon, familiar neighborhood smells were replaced with the offensive odor of trash decomposing in the hot Louisiana sun. The dump was hastily built, without protective measures that would prevent seepage into nearby canals. These canals run beside homes and provided water for vegetable gardens that some Vietnamese families relied on for food or income. The city’s actions showed little regard for the well-being of New Orleans East residents.

THE COMMUNITY’S RESPONSE

Vietnamese American community members could have responded in any number of ways. Until this time, they had lived quietly, largely invisible to the rest of

the city. Culturally and politically isolated, they had not been previously involved in the affairs of greater New Orleans. They could have responded with silent resignation, perhaps fearing that speaking out would bring further hardship. They might have resigned themselves to having their fate largely controlled by others. Silence and passive consent are responses that are often expected of Asian Americans. In Asian American history, some have in fact chosen silence as the best course of action that could be identified at the time.

Instead, the Vietnamese American community of New Orleans stepped forward into bold civic engagement. The community had initially approached the city to negotiate a compromise solution. When the members were rebuffed, not only by the city but also by the state and the private company managing the site, they decided, according to Rev. Vien Nguyen, the pastor of Mary Queen of Viet Nam Church and a leader in the fight against the landfill, “to fight them every step of the way!”² As the priest of the Catholic church, the spiritual and social hub of the community, Father Vien, along with Father Luke, pointed to the clear injustice of unilaterally locating a toxic dump in a predominantly working-class, non-English-speaking community mostly made up of people of color; the two priests helped lead residents to take a stand.

Outraged by the city’s actions, the community—youth, adults, and elders—came together to stage protests at city hall and file lawsuits at the federal (against the Corps of Engineers) and state (against the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality) levels. Forming a coalition with environmental legal advocacy and faith-based groups,³ the Vietnamese American community

also successfully reached outside of itself to embrace allies. The community built bridges across racial lines, within and outside the neighborhood. At the first protest, hundreds converged on the steps of city hall, holding signs that some elders with limited English could not read but nonetheless held with fierce determination. The next protests grew larger and more racially diverse. The effort began to receive significant media coverage, including in daily newspapers and on CNN. Although at one point the Vietnamese American community received unanimous support from the city council to shut the landfill down, it remained open and tons of trash continued to come through and into the neighborhood.

By August 2006, after more than three months of daily dumping, the community members became frustrated with the slow response to their demands to cease dumping. Seeing no other options, they announced an ultimatum that either the city stop dumping by 15 August or they would shut the landfill down themselves through acts of civil disobedience at the dump site, including placing their bodies in front of the trucks if necessary.

VICTORY DAY

On the morning of 15 August, early enough that the air had not yet heated to its usual sweltering above-ninety-degree-Fahrenheit temperatures, hundreds of community members, along with allies, gathered in the Mary Queen of Viet Nam Church parking lot to prepare for the rally. Those waiting to board buses to the landfill gate included lines of antsy small children, teenagers, and elderly men and women adorned with traditional straw hats and parasols to protect them from

the sun. Wrinkled and youthful faces alike anticipated the action to come.

Off to one side stood a smaller group of protesters who were prepared for civil disobedience and had signed up beforehand to indicate that they were willing to get arrested if necessary.⁴ These thirty-four courageous volunteers exuded a palpable sense of fierce conviction and an almost gleeful enthusiasm. Most were men over the age of 65.

Suddenly, word came through the crowd that the gates to the landfill had not opened that day and would remain closed permanently. The dumping had been stopped!

The crowds proceeded to the gates of the landfill and held an energetic victory rally as a show of community power. The rally was conducted in both Vietnamese and English, and elders and young people delivered stirring speeches. One fifteen-year-old girl, Jennifer Tran, brought the crowd to tears when she spoke about the pain her family endured being displaced from their home twice, first because of the Vietnam War and then because of Hurricane Katrina. The prospect of being forced to move again due to the unlivable conditions caused by the landfill was unbearable to her and her family. The crowd chanted, "The power of the people shall never be defeated!" Media coverage spanned local and national TV stations and newspapers.

The community had so effectively applied public pressure through its organizing and media messaging, as well as through legal action, that the mayor's order could no longer stand.

It was clear that this community had built power and influence in the corridors of city hall and beyond.

FROM VICTORY TO MORE POWER

In the wake of this victory, the community has gone on to begin implementing its own redevelopment plan for New Orleans East, a plan that the members had begun crafting soon after returning post-Katrina. The plan includes community-run schools, an urban farm, senior housing, and reclamation of the dump's site. This work is spearheaded by Mary Queen of Viet Nam Community Development Corporation (MQVN CDC), an organization both led and largely staffed by residents. MQVN CDC has already made many advancements and, along with other community-led institutions, is helping Vietnamese Americans actualize their dreams and visions.

After the rally, it has become highly unlikely that others would dare make decisions affecting Vietnamese Americans without first consulting them. They are recognized as a force to be reckoned with on local, state, and even federal levels.

In December 2008, the community helped elect Anh "Joseph" Cao as the nation's first Vietnamese American member of Congress. Representative Cao made further history by being the only Republican to vote in favor of the health care reform legislation that was passed in the U.S. House of Representatives in November 2009, saying that he was upholding the desires and interests of his constituency.

A COMMUNITY UNITED

One thing that struck me on the day of the rally was the unity and mutually expressed appreciation across generations. "I can't believe [Grandpa] is willing to get arrested; I'm gonna cry!" said a girl when she saw the elders preparing for potential civil disobedience. During the

celebration later that day, Father Vien said to the exuberant crowd that spanned all generations, “We could not have done this if not for the leadership of the youth!”

In the months before the rally, young adults in their twenties, high school students, and younger children had banded together as the Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA-NO) to help the campaign that shut down the landfill. The youth’s energy, English-speaking ability, and compelling stories (one teen had begged his reluctant parents to move back after Katrina and was determined to keep the neighborhood habitable) were crucial contributions. As their parents had prohibitive work schedules and were toiling in building efforts, the youth planned details of the action. In the days leading up to the rally, the youth met with individual members of city council and secured their crucial support, which resulted in an ordinance to close the landfill and two councilors speaking as advocates at the rally.

CLOSING REMARKS

This example of Asian Americans of all ages (from the elderly to the very young) uniting across generations to effectively take bold political action to uphold justice defies stereotypes and, possibly, some of our own expectations.

The story of Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans can provide us with a far more expansive sense of what our role in local, state, and national politics can look like today and in the future. From grassroots mobilization to holding an elected position at the federal level, we are and will continue to successfully engage the political process.

The rise to power of the Vietnamese American community of New Orleans indicates important shifts for the Asian American community as a whole. Progress can and is, in fact, being made toward greater inclusion of Asian Americans into the political fabric of this nation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ENDNOTES

¹ The Versailles nickname derived from the fact that a public housing complex where many families had originally been settled was called “The Versailles Arms.”

² This quote is from a movie, *A Village Called Versailles*, directed by S. Leo Chiang (Walking Iris Films, 2009), in which Father Vien speaks about Waste Management, Inc., who oversaw the Chef Menteur Landfill.

³ Key groups in this coalition, Citizens for a Strong New Orleans East, included the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, which provided pro bono legal services, and ACT-PICO, a faith-based organizing group.

⁴ Acts of civil disobedience (e.g., trespassing on landfill property to protest or blocking trucks) carried the risk of arrest.

Zoned Out: Chinatown and Lower East Side Residents and Business Owners Fight to Stay in New York City

by Bethany Y. Li



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ABSTRACT

In November 2008, the New York City Council unanimously approved a rezoning plan despite significant opposition from Chinatown and Lower East Side community members. City planning had determined that the rezoning would not significantly harm the community and even characterized the rezoning as a preservation plan. In contrast, an independent analysis by urban planners found that the rezoning disproportionately impacted low-income communities

of color, including Chinatown and the Lower East Side. In response, hundreds of residents and small business owners for the first time became active in seemingly mundane city planning and land use decisions. They organized their neighbors and others to demand that the city protect long-time tenants and ethnic stores that provide for the community. Going forward, they are continuing to engage in the city planning process to ensure that Chinatown and the Lower East Side remain vibrant, working immigrant neighborhoods.

Latino, Black, and low-income residents filled a town hall meeting of Manhattan's Community District 3 chanting "Chinatown, not for sale! Lower East Side, not for sale!" (Murray 2008).

Many of these residents had already gone to previous meetings to voice their opposition to the East Village/Lower East Side rezoning plan, a plan that excluded Chinatown and the predominantly immigrant portions of the Lower East Side. People were especially enraged at this meeting after community board members refused interpretation for non-English speaking residents, principally Chinese and Latino immigrants, in a long-time immigrant community district that includes Chinatown, the Lower East Side, Two Bridges, and the East Village. Furthermore, some Chinese and Latino residents, by virtue of being Chinese and Latino, had been denied entry to the meeting even though it was not entirely full. The rezoning plan, which the city council unanimously approved November 2008 and is now in effect, is the third-largest rezoning initiative in New York City since 1961 when the city last implemented broad land use changes (Murray 2008; Department of City Planning 2008a). Covering 111 city blocks

in Manhattan's southeastern portion, the rezoning generally limits building heights in the East Village and parts of the Lower East Side to reflect existing building density while concentrating development along certain corridors. The plan also allows for voluntary inclusionary zoning, which permits a height bonus and more market-rate development space in exchange for creating some units of affordable housing (Murray 2008). Although the city purports that the plan provides incentives for affordable housing through the inclusionary zoning program, very little affordable housing is created because the program is voluntary and inflated income guidelines make most units unaffordable to the area's low-income residents.

By excluding Chinatown and parts of the Lower East Side and concentrating development near these lower-income areas, the rezoning has a serious potential for displacing low-income residents and small businesses from these neighborhoods—something the city downplays. In fact, the Executive Summary of the Department of City Planning's Final Environmental Impact Statement states, "The proposed actions would not cause any significant adverse impacts related to direct residential displacement, direct business displacement, indirect residential displacement, indirect business displacement, or effects on specific industries" (Department of City Planning 2008b).

A closer look, however, reveals a different story.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ZONING

At first glance, zoning seems too mundane and technical an aspect of city governance to be worth understanding. Changing streets from an R6 zone to an R7A zone or imposing a commercial

overlay or a manufacturing district often appear so insignificant that people living in the community may never realize any changes have occurred. Yet the impact of these changes is very real. Zoning controls neighborhoods' physical boundaries, determines the height and bulk of buildings, and establishes which areas contain residential, commercial, or manufacturing uses. Zoning therefore dictates where market-rate development will or will not flourish.

Prior to the rezoning of the East Village and parts of the Lower East Side, overdevelopment affected almost the entire community district. Although rezoning does have the ability to protect neighborhoods, the East Village/Lower East Side rezoning fails to protect low-income communities of color, in particular, in Chinatown and the Lower East Side. In fact, White people comprise the majority of residents in the rezoned area, in stark contrast to the more than 70 percent of people of color living in Community District 3, according to analysis done by the Hunter College Center for Community Planning and Development (Angotti and Ervin 2008).¹

Learning from communities like Harlem that had previously battled their own rezoning, residents and small business owners in Chinatown and the Lower East Side became engaged in what previously would have seemed banal land use discussions once they discovered the city's proposal to revise the zoning map in the East Village and parts of the Lower East Side. Although the community board began the planning process in 2005, many community members did not hear about the rezoning until two years later when the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association, a workers' rights group, was alerted to a serious increase in

upscale development. The Coalition to Protect Chinatown and the Lower East Side formed thereafter to oppose the disproportionate racial impact of the rezoning (Coalition to Protect Chinatown and the Lower East Side n.d.). The coalition includes groups like the National Mobilization Against Sweatshops, Chinese Staff and Workers' Association, the Chinese Restaurant Alliance, and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF THE REZONING INITIATIVE

Analysis conducted by Hunter College independent of the city planning department reveals that the rezoning disproportionately harms Asian, Latino, Black, and low-income residents by concentrating development adjacent to low-income communities of color that are most vulnerable to displacement without providing any protections (Angotti and Ervin 2008). In contrast to the city planning department, the Hunter College analysis concludes that the accelerated luxury development that would arise from the rezoning would intensify gentrification and displacement pressures that these low-income communities of color already face (Angotti and Ervin 2008).

The Hunter College analysis describes how the rezoning essentially caps development in the more affluent, White areas above Houston Street while upzoning areas south and east of this dividing line where predominantly Chinese, Latino, and low-income families live. Upzoning is a planning device that permits increased building density, thereby creating greater incentives for market-rate development. Streets in the more affluent area north of Houston Street would retain their current

character because they are only slightly upzoned (and even downzoned in some areas). On the other hand, the area south and east of Houston, made up of primarily low-income people of color, has the highest upzoning and therefore the most potential for development (Angotti and Ervin 2008). For example, buildings on Avenue D where public housing is located are generally four stories or lower, but the rezoning allows for twelve-story buildings. Similarly, on Chrystie Street in Chinatown, buildings are generally five stories or lower, but the rezoning now permits fourteen-story buildings.

Although increasing building density would provide for more housing for the millions expected to move to the city in the future, much of the new residential units created would be market-rate and therefore unaffordable for many of the area's long-time, lower-income residents. Furthermore, many residents would not be able to afford the so-called "affordable" units that city planning promoted as part of the rezoning (Angotti and Ervin 2008). The voluntary inclusionary zoning program uses income guidelines based off of an inflated "area median income" that is much higher than the income of the average Chinatown and Lower East Side resident (Angotti and Ervin 2008).² The Hunter College analysis, as opposed to city planning's review, exposes the heightened vulnerability of residents and small businesses in Chinatown and the Lower East Side due to the rezoning.

The rezoning is not the only reason for rising displacement in these neighborhoods, but it intensifies and encourages, rather than tempers, the real estate speculation that has been slowly destroying Chinatown and the Lower East Side. Particularly since September 11, increased real estate speculation has

displaced many low-income residents and small businesses from these neighborhoods. Luxury condominiums, boutique hotels, and trendy restaurants and shops have replaced former factories, warehouses, and tenement buildings in Chinatown and the neighboring Lower East Side (New York Times 2009). The number of new building permits in the neighborhood increased from just forty in 1990 to 970 in 2006 (Urban Justice Center 2008). Immigrant residents and small businesses face intense harassment from landlords and city agencies. Similar to stories of other Chinatowns up and down the east coast, New York City has marked Chinatown for tourism and allowed luxury development to flourish.³ The rezoning further accelerates the transformation of this community from a living, working immigrant neighborhood into a sanitized tourist destination.

Although city and state environmental laws require city planning to disclose the types of impact identified by the Hunter College analysis, the city planning department evaded studying the displacement resulting from this disparate rezoning and ignored the notable racial impact (Angotti and Ervin 2008). After the rezoning passed, community groups, residents, and small business owners filed a lawsuit challenging city planning's failure to analyze the potential impact of the rezoning by ignoring race and other relevant socioeconomic factors.⁴ However, the court found city planning's environmental review sufficient because it had jumped through the proper procedural hoops (Chinese Staff and Workers' Association et al. v. Bloomberg 2009).

FIGHT TO STAY CONTINUES

The residents of this area did not keep their concerns about the rezoning quiet. At a series of public hearings during the rezoning process in 2008, including the one in May cited earlier, hundreds of community residents testified in opposition to the rezoning. Opponents of the rezoning submitted more than 11,000 signatures demanding that the city stop the rezoning.⁵ However, community board members, who represent the first level of the rezoning approval process, made participation for opponents of the rezoning difficult. At meetings, community board members refused to provide information to opponents, would not provide Chinese or Spanish interpretations, and screamed at individuals who tried to interpret meetings for non-English speakers to "be quiet and stop your Chinese rebellion."⁶ In an e-mail sent before the community board public hearing, the board chair encouraged board members to "drown out" the Chinese. Board members subsequently denied entry to many Chinese and Latino individuals even though the hearing was not full, chose supporters to speak first, and again refused interpretation for non-English speakers.⁷

Despite these tactics and being unable to ultimately change the city's decision, the neighborhood has been emboldened by its opposition to the East Village/Lower East Side rezoning. Residents, small business owners, and community groups that are members of the Coalition to Protect Chinatown and the Lower East Side are now proposing their own rezoning and community plan for both Chinatown and the Lower East Side. This new plan is based on anti-displacement principles, focusing on limiting luxury development, preserving the current stock of affordable

and public housing in Chinatown and the Lower East Side, protecting ethnic small businesses that provide for the community, and providing for mandatory on-site, low-income housing for every new residential construction.

When immigrant enclaves are reduced to glorified tourist destinations, the entire city suffers. In the coming years, the protections that Chinatowns and other ethnic enclaves can implement will determine whether these neighborhoods become empty shells for tourism or continue as vibrant, living, and working communities. Residents and small business owners in New York's Chinatown and the Lower East Side are fighting for their vision of a better community.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See maps from Angotti and Ervin (2008): Percent Asian by Census Block Group (2000); Total Asian Population by Census Block Group (2000); Percent Black/African American by Census Block Group (2000); Total Black/African American Population by Census Block Group (2000); Percent Hispanic by Census Block Group (2000); Total Hispanic population by Census Block Group (2000).

² Angotti and Ervin (2008) point to the following: "Under the proposed actions, developments are eligible for the inclusionary housing bonus provided that 20% of the residential floor area is used for units affordable to those earning up to 80% of the area median income (AMI). According to the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) Web site, 'For 2008, 100% of the HUD Income Limit for a family of four in New York City is \$76,800, and it is \$53,700 for a single person.' Thus, HUD income limits range from \$43,000 (for a 1-person household) to \$61,450 (for a 4-person household). Maximum rents for the Inclusionary Housing program are also established by HPD, which requires that tenants pay no more than 25-30% of their income in rent. Given these restrictions, only about 25% of CD3 households fall within the income range to qualify for these units. Over 45% of CD3 households do not earn enough to qualify for these affordable units. Moreover, the average median income for CD3 households outside of the rezoned area is just over \$25,600, far below the

minimum income required even for an “affordable” studio apartment.”

³ For example, Boston’s Chinatown has struggled against the expansion of the New England Medical Center and luxury development. Most recently, Philadelphia’s Chinatown fought against the citing of a slots parlor right next to its neighborhood. Finally, only about 700 elderly Chinese residents remain in Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown, which has been completely redeveloped and even marketed as D.C.’s “Times Square” since the basketball and hockey stadium was built.

⁴ Based on documents on file with the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

⁵ See 4.

⁶ See 4.

⁷ See 4.

Local Lives, Global Ties

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Congratulations to the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program, whose collaborative research (assisted by University of Maryland's Asian American Studies Program) will result in the first celebration of the Asian Pacific American Community at the annual

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