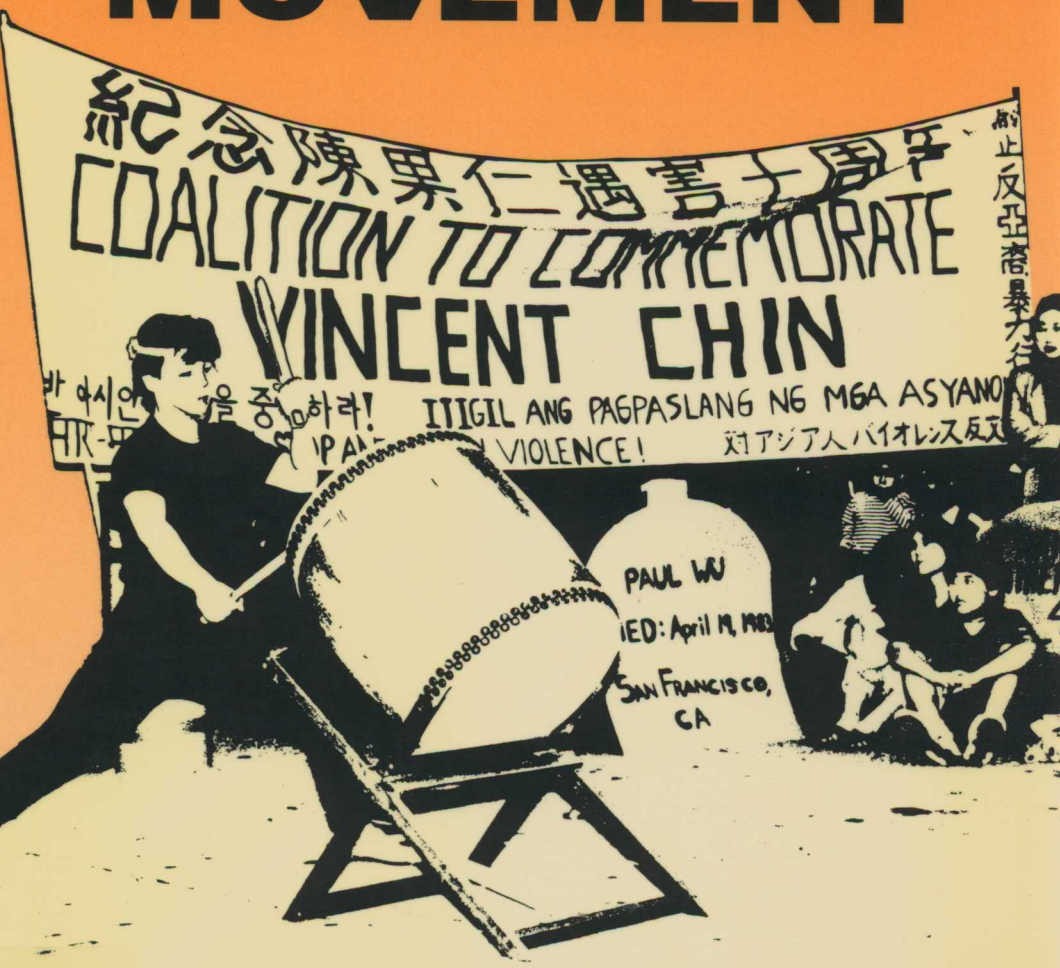


# THE ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT



**WILLIAM WEI**

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**WILLIAM WEI**

**The Asian  
American  
Movement**



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## Preface

"What are *you* going to do for the Movement?" an Asian American sister of the Maoist persuasion wanted to know. "I am going to write a history of the Movement" was my spontaneous reply. Clearly, I had erred in her eyes, for she looked at me with disbelief and disappointment. I suspect that she expected an Asian American brother who had participated in some of the same political struggles to express an interest in working on one of the many social issues being discussed at the Midwest Asian American conference we were attending at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in that fall of 1974. I suppose the "politically correct" thing to do would have been to fall back on some appropriate saying, such as "serve the people." But I did not. Instead, I had, without fully realizing it, committed myself to writing a history of the Asian American Movement. This book is a fulfillment of that commitment.

The decision to begin this book came after I gave a guest lecture on the Asian American Movement in Russ Endo's sociology class on Asian American communities at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in fall 1984. Russ and I went to the Student Union to drink some coffee and reminisce about our student activist days at the University of Washington, Seattle, and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. In the course of the discussion, I mentioned that someday I intended to write a book-length history of the Asian American Movement. Russ said that he had considered writing a similar work. I suggested that we write it together. The time was right; over fifteen years had passed, providing the historical perspective necessary for such a scholarly study.

Unfortunately, my friend and colleague Russ Endo experienced personal problems. His troubles were such that he was unable to do much work on the book and eventually was forced to drop out of the project altogether. This left me with sole responsibility for doing most of the research and writing all the chapters.

From the beginning, I made several decisions that shaped the study. Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City were selected as the principal research sites, because they were the places with the most Movement activity and were cities that could be reached on my limited resources. From these three locations I was able to take side trips to such places as Sacramento, Washing-

ton, D.C., and Boston. I thought about doing research in Hawaii, since some of the early activists were originally from there, and as Franklin Ng later reminded me at the Ninth National Association for Asian American Studies Conference in San Jose, much of the early materials used in Asian American Studies dealt with the islands and their diverse Asian American population. Besides, any excuse to visit such a beautiful place was worth considering. But I concluded that the Asian American Movement in Hawaii was, in many respects, unique from that of the mainland and deserved a book of its own.

In terms of the scope of the study, I decided that it should begin with the late 1960s and end in the present, which turned out to be, more or less, fall 1991. Even today, Asian American activists are emphasizing the need for a pan-Asian consciousness and an inter-Asian coalition to attain the basic goals of racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment. Originally, I had planned to pay equal attention to all the ethnic groups and social classes that made up Asian America. But in the course of my research it became evident that though in principle the Movement embraced all Asian ethnic groups and crossed socioeconomic lines, in practice it was a social movement dominated mainly by middle-class, second- and third-generation Chinese and Japanese Americans.

While Filipino and Korean American activists were present from the start of the Asian American Movement, they were not as visible as their Chinese American and Japanese American comrades, because it was not until the 1970s that their numbers increased through immigration. Understandably, recent Asian immigrants and refugees have been preoccupied with economic survival and social adjustment. Those who have been politically active have been involved in "homeland" issues, such as the corrupt Marcos regime in the Philippines, the legacy of a divided Korea, the establishment of communist regimes in Southeast Asia, and the religious divisions in South Asia, with little time for and interest in the Asian American Movement. But that is changing. As they produce a second generation, more and more of them are becoming involved in the Asian American Movement. Consequently, one of the important issues today is whether Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans are willing and able to share power with the leaders emerging from the other Asian American communities.

Perhaps my most significant decision was to base this study on materials generated by the Asian American Movement itself and on interviews of individuals

who had participated in it. Because I wanted the research to be a dynamic process, interviewees cited in the text or notes were sent a draft for comment. It was a time-consuming and paper-intensive process, but a worthwhile one, for many of them sent back critical comments and important information. I presume that those who declined to respond thought the reconstruction and explanation of events were satisfactory. It should be noted that a few interviewees asked to be anonymous, lest they offend erstwhile comrades, and some demanded that any reference to their comments be expunged because they disagreed with my interpretation of the Asian American Movement. All such requests were honored.

This work has taken far longer than I had originally planned; however, in spite of some unexpected problems and changed circumstances, I decided to carry on because of my firm conviction that the Asian American Movement is a significant but overlooked part of our history. It was one of the ethnic-consciousness movements that emerged during the 1960s and became integral to the ongoing movement to change the United States from a predominantly monocultural society into an authentic multicultural one. As such, it is part and parcel of the struggle to attain the ideal of an American cultural democracy.



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I am grateful to Sucheng Chan, the general editor of this series, and Judy Yung, my closest friend and colleague, for carefully reading the entire manuscript and offering incisive criticism and copious comments. Being the first-rate scholars that they are, both of them raised significant questions, helping me think through many of my ideas. Thanks also go to Janet Francendese, Joan Vidal, and the rest of the editorial staff of Temple University Press for taking the manuscript in hand and turning it into this book; and to Bob Hsiang, Connie Hwang, and Corky Lee, visual interpreters of the Asian American experience, for the use of their photographs.

I also wish to thank my University of Colorado colleagues Lee Chambers-Schiller, David L. Gross, Robert D. Schulzinger, and Thomas Zeiler for the conversations that we had on the social movements of the 1960s; Gladys Bloedow, Kellie Matthews-Simmons, Pat Murphy, and Betty Jo Thorson for furnishing the kind of staff support that makes scholarship possible in the academy; and Nancy Mann for editorial assistance.

Financial support for this work was afforded by the Rockefeller Foundation, and the University of Colorado's Council for Research and Creative Work, IMPART program, and the Committee on University Scholarly Publications. Research support was rendered by the Asian American libraries at the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses of the University of California, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which supplied documents requested through the Freedom of Information Act. Needless to say, the comments and conclusions in this study are my own, and not necessarily those of the above-mentioned institutions.

Chapter 3 is a revision and expansion of a paper presented at the University of California Forum on Asian American Women, Berkeley, 5-7 June 1987. Chapter 5 is a revision and expansion of Russell Endo and William Wei, "On the Development of Asian American Studies Programs," in *Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects for Asian American Studies*, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro et al. (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1988), pp. 5-15.

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# Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	I
<b>1</b>	Origins of the Movement 11
<b>2</b>	Who Am I? Creating an Asian American Identity and Culture 44
<b>3</b>	Race versus Gender: The Asian American Women's Movement 72
<b>4</b>	Speaking Out: The Asian American Alternative Press 101
<b>5</b>	Activists and the Development of Asian American Studies 132
<b>6</b>	"To Serve the People": Reformers and Community- Based Organizations 169
<b>7</b>	The Emergence and Eclipse of Maoist Organizations 203
<b>8</b>	From Radical to Electoral Politics: The Asian American Odyssey for Empowerment 241
Conclusion	271
Abbreviations	277
Notes	281
Index	337

## Introduction

Each group of Asians in America has had a long history of fighting for equality and justice, using its members' common cultural heritage and ethnic identity as the basis for collective action. Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Japanese have all mobilized their compatriots by appealing to shared values and customs, in a common language. On this basis they have engaged in labor struggles, initiated litigation in the U.S. courts, participated in "homeland" politics, and shared other activities to defend their interests. But the small size of each Asian ethnic group limited its effectiveness. Not until the civil rights movement of the 1960s exposed the pervasive problem of racism in U.S. society and raised questions about exactly how democratic the nation's political system in fact was did members of the various Asian ethnic groups begin to think of themselves, and to act politically together, as Asian Americans. Thus was the Asian American Movement born.

Among the last of the "ethnic-consciousness movements," the Asian American Movement has been essentially a middle-class reform movement for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment in a culturally pluralist America. It has functioned as an inter-Asian coalition that embraces the entire spectrum of Asian ethnic groups, acknowledging their common experiences in American society and calling for a higher level of solidarity among the groups. Central to its existence has been a new sociopolitical entity called the Asian American, for although the coalition reflects its members' diversity as Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, Japanese Americans, and other kinds of Asian Americans, it also affirms their unity with other Americans. The concept *Asian American* implies that there can be a communal consciousness and a unique culture that is neither Asian nor American, but Asian American. In defining their own identity and culture, Asian Americans bring together previously isolated and ineffective struggles against the oppression of Asian communities into a coherent pan-Asian movement for social change.

The Movement, as it was popularly called, began in the late 1960s and was primarily the result of the convergence of two historical developments: the emergence of a generation of college-age Asian Americans and the public protests surrounding the Vietnam War. The first wave of Asian immigration

## 2 : Introduction

produced few Asian American children, for exclusion laws effectively limited the ability of most Asian immigrants to establish families in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Those who were able to do so found it difficult to provide their offspring with an adequate education because in many places the children were forced to attend segregated schools or the parents had to establish their own schools.<sup>2</sup> But the eventual elimination of discriminatory laws and the baby boom of Asian American children in the United States during the immediate post-World War II period eventually resulted in a significant number of college-age Asian Americans by the 1960s. In 1970, 107,366 Asian Americans were enrolled in colleges and universities.<sup>3</sup> Of that group, 83 percent were Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. Except for a few activists from the working class, these Asian American college students made up the majority of Movement activists and were the Movement's main driving force.

These Asian American activists reached adolescence during one of the most difficult periods in U.S. history. The murders of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and his brother Robert F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968 sent the nation into a state of shock. Following Dr. King's death, riots exploded in urban ghettos across the land. All the while, the U.S. military was sinking deeper and deeper into the quagmire of the Vietnam War. Moved by a mixture of moralism and idealism, Asian Americans participated in the civil rights, New Left, women's liberation, antiwar, and other movements organized to change the country. But it was mainly the antiwar movement that brought them together psychologically and politically, making them aware of their "Asianness," their membership in a pan-Asian community, and the need for an Asian American Movement (see Chapter 1).<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning, Asian Americans participated in the antiwar movement as individual protestors; later, they joined "Asian contingents" of major demonstrations and Asian American antiwar coalitions that were founded across the country. They began in earnest to organize across Asian ethnic lines to oppose the war. To a certain extent, the formation of these Asian American antiwar coalitions was fortuitous, since the college-bound Asian Americans began arriving on campuses in large numbers just as the black liberation movement and the New Left student movement dovetailed in opposition to the Vietnam War. As antiwar activists, Asian Americans contributed a unique perspective that emphasized the racial underpinnings of the conflict overseas and linked it to the oppressive conditions in their communities. But they soon became es-

tranged from the antiwar movement, which treated them as "token" members and ignored the issues and concerns they raised, making them realize the need for their own movement for social change.

Even though the Movement has been an integral part of the Third World<sup>5</sup> effort to establish an equitable society in the United States, it has remained socially invisible. *Lau v. Nichols*, a 1974 landmark case involving non-English-speaking Chinese students who filed a successful suit against the San Francisco Board of Education for failing to provide equal educational opportunities for all students, mandated bilingual-bicultural education in the United States, yet Asian Americans are rarely acknowledged for taking this major legal step toward defending the rights of limited-English-speaking students and for "recognizing the pluralistic nature of our society."<sup>6</sup> More recently, one of the five key Supreme Court cases that "limited the rights of plaintiffs in job discrimination cases and stirred public outrage that eventually moved Congress to pass the . . . [1991] Civil Rights Act"<sup>7</sup> involved Asian Americans, but that too has hardly been noticed. In *Wards Cove v. Atonio*, the mainly Filipino American workforce filed suit against an Alaskan cannery for engaging in discriminatory employment practices that one U.S. Supreme Court justice characterized as bearing an "unsettling resemblance to aspects of a *plantation economy*."<sup>8</sup> Yet, a provision of the 1991 Civil Rights Act excluded the two thousand Wards Cove cannery workers from any changes under the legislation, shielding the employers from liability for unfair employment practices. The Northern California Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance has begun a broad campaign to support legislation to repeal this provision.

The nature of the Movement was one reason for its lack of visibility. It lacked a nationally known leader, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was for the civil rights movement, Malcolm X for the Black Power movement, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales for the Chicano movement, or Russell Means for the American Indian movement. The Movement had charismatic leaders, to be sure, but they were usually prominent only within a local area or particular Asian ethnic group. The diversity of the Asian American population made it difficult for people to rally around a single figure. The Movement also lacked an ideology or even a plan of action to attract and unite a following. The groups that sought to develop such an agenda and plan, especially Maoist groups, failed to capture the popular imagination. The Asian American Movement's invisibility was also a result of its small size. As a result of discriminatory immigration



#### 4 : Introduction

policies and antimiscegenation laws, the Asian American population was only 878,000 in 1960 and 1,369,000 in 1970—less than 1 percent of the total U.S. population.<sup>9</sup> Within such a small population, the proportion of Asian American activists was actually quite large.<sup>10</sup>

The obscurity of the Asian American Movement is also related to the dichotomous nature of race relations in the United States. Traditionally, the question of race has been addressed and understood mainly as a black and white issue, even though the United States has four major racial minorities with similar histories of oppression. Understandably, African Americans have received the most attention because of the widespread public awareness of their history of exploitation as slaves, their large proportion in the American population, and their long and visible struggle to achieve equality. Because their large numbers seem to threaten the dominant society, a concern that can be traced back to pre-Civil War days when the southern population lived in constant fear of a slave insurrection, African American issues have been taken more seriously than those of other minorities. Asian Americans, in contrast, have been ignored because of their small numbers and little-known history of labor exploitation and resistance to oppression. Having finally disarmed the imagined threat of the so-called Yellow Peril with a series of Chinese exclusion laws, the “barred zone” clause of the 1917 Immigration Act, and the 1924 Immigration Act, all of which excluded Asian laborers from the United States, European Americans expected that the Asians among them would eventually disappear. Furthermore, even though many Asian Americans have had forebears in this country for several generations, they are still perceived as foreigners, physically and culturally, whose issues and concerns are therefore irrelevant to the rest of society. Contradictorily, they are also perceived as the country’s “model minority,” that is, the one group to have successfully integrated into American society despite seemingly insurmountable racial barriers. Presumably, they have been able to accomplish this because of cultural values that were similar to those of European Americans.

Given the absence of national leaders, the lack of a set of specific aims, the small number of participants, and the common assumption that U.S. race relations involve mainly blacks and whites, it is reasonable to ask whether the Asian American Movement can be called a social movement, that is, an effort by “unconventional groups that have varying degrees of formal organization . . . to produce or prevent radical or reformist type of change.”<sup>11</sup> I would

argue that it can. As this study shows, Asian Americans, a group that has historically stood outside the institutionalized framework of American society, addressed significant social issues, participated in a plethora of political activities, and started numerous organizations in order to change the country into an authentic ethnically pluralist one. Though their organizational formats varied, the ultimate goal of all these groups was the same: to gain greater equality for Asian Americans. Moreover, in the early years of the Movement, when many Asian Americans participated in antiwar activities, their protests were national in scope.

One consequence of its invisibility is that the Asian American Movement has been overlooked in the literature on social movements.<sup>12</sup> Asian American activists have received short shrift even in works that mention significant events in which they have played a major role. A case in point is Stewart Burns's *Social Movements of the 1960s: Searching for Democracy*, which omits any mention of Asian Americans in the Third World strike at San Francisco State College: "Fighting institutional racism, black and Chicano students at San Francisco State, backed by white radicals, sustained the longest student strike ever, punctuated by police battles almost daily."<sup>13</sup> David Caute, in *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey through 1968*, does somewhat better and makes this single reference to Asian Americans: "At this stage the radical specter at San Francisco State was expanded by a new force, the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), composed of Orientals and Latinos."<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, recent books on Asian American history are starting to consider certain aspects of the Movement. Sucheng Chan, in *Asian Americans: An Interpretative History*, discusses recent political activism; and Diane Mei Lin Mark and Ginger Chih, in *A Place Called Chinese America*, depict social changes in the Chinese American community.<sup>15</sup> But others continue to ignore the Asian American Movement. According to L. Ling-chi Wang, Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore* and Roger Daniels's *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese Since 1850* are flawed by their failure to include the Movement.<sup>16</sup> He notes with dismay Takaki's "silence on the historic emergence of 'Asian America' in the late 1960s and early 1970s," especially since the "genesis of the Asian American movement is the turning point in our history in this country."<sup>17</sup> Takaki, however, argues that he implicitly deals with the Movement when he talks about some of the outstanding issues and concerns of the post-World War II era: "Actually my book does analyze and highlight

the movement for justice for Vincent Chin and also the movement for redress and reparations. The final chapter is entitled, 'Breaking Silences,' as a tribute to contemporary Asian American movements."<sup>18</sup>

Aside from books, a number of essays focus explicitly on the Movement.<sup>19</sup> Two early essays published in the alternative Asian American press include Amy Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power in America," and Paul Wong, "The Emergence of the Asian-American Movement."<sup>20</sup> Uyematsu's article first appeared in the October 1969 issue of *Gidra*, an Asian American underground newspaper, and was later reprinted in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*. In it she discusses the reasons for the emergence of the Movement, its relationship to the Black Power movement, and its relevance to Asian Americans. Besides explaining its existence, she seeks to encourage Asian Americans to participate in it. Those doing so must challenge two common assumptions: "first, that the Asian Americans are completely powerless in the United States; and second . . . that Asian Americans have already obtained 'economic' equality."<sup>21</sup> Uyematsu concludes that "the use of yellow power is valid, for Asian Americans do have definite economic and social problems which must be improved."<sup>22</sup>

Wong's article appeared in the fall 1972 issue of *Bridge* magazine. He too discusses the origins of the Movement, focusing on salient features and internal contradictions. Wong acknowledges the influence of other social movements but also attributes its emergence to certain external factors, such as the country's "imperialist foreign policy" and the resistance of Asian nations to that policy. Moreover, he asserts that in contrast to the white radical and other racial-minority movements, the Asian American Movement is the only one that is an integral part of the "Asian peoples' struggle for liberation" with strong ties to Asian nations. That is debatable. Except for the fact that its participants were of Asian ancestry, there is little evidence to support the assertion that the Movement had ties with Asian nations. In any case, both Uyematsu and Wong provide useful overviews of the Movement in its formative years.

There are also two essays about aspects of the Movement that were published in professional journals: Ron Tanaka, "Culture, Communication and the Asian Movement in Perspective," and Richard J. Jensen and Cara J. Abeyta, "The Minority in the Middle: Asian-American Dissent in the 1960s and 1970s." Tanaka tries to develop a model for "self-determination in communications," with particular emphasis on the Japanese American community. Tentatively