

Mobilizing an Asian
American Community



L i n d a T r i n h V ã

D771.238
E200913

华2

华人中心

MOBILIZING

AN ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Linda Trinh Võ



Temple University Press
PHILADELPHIA

Temple University Press
1601 North Broad Street
Philadelphia PA 19122
www.temple.edu/tempress

Copyright © 2004 by Temple University
All rights reserved
Published 2004
Printed in the United States of America

⊗ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Võ, Linda Trinh, 1964—

Mobilizing an Asian American community / Linda Trinh Võ.

p. cm. — (Asian American history and culture)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 1-59213-261-8 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 1-59213-262-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Asian Americans—California—San Diego—Social conditions—20th century.
2. Asian Americans—California—San Diego—Ethnic identity. 3. Asian Americans—California—San Diego—Politics and government—20th century. 4. Asian Americans—Social conditions—Case studies. 5. San Diego (Calif.)—Social conditions—20th century. 6. San Diego (Calif.)—Ethnic relations. I. Title. II. Series.

F869.S22V6 2004

305.895'0794985—dc22

2003068669

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

MOBILIZING

AN ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

In the series

Asian American History and Culture

edited by Sucheng Chan, David Palumbo-Liu, and Michael Omi

Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*

Franklin S. Odo, *No Sword to Bury: Japanese Americans in Hawai'i during World War II*

Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa, eds., *Re/collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History*

Linda Trinh Võ and Rick Bonus, eds., *Contemporary Asian American Communities: Intersections and Divergences*

Sunaina Marr Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*

Teresa Williams-León and Cynthia Nakashima, eds., *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed-Heritage Asian Americans*

Tung Pok Chin and Winifred C. Chin, *Paper Son: One Man's Story*

Amy Ling, ed., *Yellow Light: The Flowering of Asian American Arts*

Rick Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space*

Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, eds., *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*

Martin F. Manalansan, IV, ed., *Cultural Compass: Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America*

Ko-lin Chin, *Smuggled Chinese: Clandestine Immigration to the United States*

Evelyn Hu-DeHart, ed., *Across the Pacific: Asian Americans and Globalization*

Soo-Young Chin, *Doing What Had to Be Done: The Life Narrative of Dora Yum Kim*

Robert G. Lee, *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*

David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, eds., *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*

A list of additional titles in this series appears at the back of this book.

For my loving partner, Bill Ross,
and our children, Aisha and Kian—
who remind me always of what is important

and

For the San Diego Asian American community—
who taught me the meaning of having a voice

Acknowledgments

I must thank first and foremost the many individuals I met during my ethnographic fieldwork in the San Diego Asian community. They welcomed me so warmly and allowed me to observe and participate in their community. My deepest gratitude goes to those I interviewed for generously giving me their time and sharing with me the richness of their lives (their names are listed at the end of the manuscript). I have tried to present their stories from their perspectives so their voices may be heard, although I take full responsibility for the interpretations. My appreciation to the individuals who shared invaluable personal documents with me, especially Gil Ontai and Mary Ann Salaber, and to Margaret Iwanaga-Penrose for giving me access to the Union of Pan Asian Communities documents at San Diego State University library. I owe Amber Matthew a debt of thanks for helping me transcribe endless hours of taped interviews. My appreciation also to the artists and activists who allowed me to use the mural that graces the cover of this book—their struggles for social justice are not forgotten.

At the University of California, San Diego, I acknowledge the encouragement and guidance of Steve Cornell, Jeff Haydu, Yen Le Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and David G. Gutiérrez, who as my dissertation committee members saw an earlier version of this project. They helped me sharpen my analytical skills and challenged me with their insightful comments. My deepest gratitude goes to Wendy Ng, Judith Liu, and Don Kelly for introducing me to the possibility of studying Asian Americans. I thank the faculty in the Department of

Ethnic Studies at UC San Diego for providing me with an intellectual home, especially Yen Espiritu, Ross Frank, Ramon Gutiérrez, Leland Saito, Paule Cruz Takash, and George Lipsitz, who has been especially encouraging. I was fortunate enough to participate in a graduate study group that provided me with camaraderie over many meals: Cindy Bauer, Berit Dencker, Ana Devic, Cristina Escobar, Laura Miller, Mary Rose Mueller, Margaret Ovenden, and Anna Szemere.

Many thanks to the colleagues who have enriched my life personally and intellectually over the years: Margaret Abraham, Jose Calderon, Sucheng Chan, KarenMary Davalos, Shilpa Davé, Pawan Dhingra, Hien Do, Augusto Espiritu, Tim Fong, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Shirley Hune, Emily Ignacio, Victor Jew, Peter Kiang, Nazli Kibria, Becky King, Russell Leong, Nhi Lieu, Antoinette Charfauros McDaniel, Ken Maffitt, Martin Manalansan, Gina Masequesmay, Gail Nomura, Franklin Odo, Gary Okihiro, Edward Park, Lisa Sun-Hee Park, Isabelle Pelaud, Kristie Peterson, Vu Pham, Chandan Reddy, Dylan Rodriguez, Curtiss Takada Rooks, Marian Sciachitano, Jiannbin "J" Shiao, Paul Spickard, Brett Stockdill, Steve Sumida, Dana Takagi, David Takeuchi, Hung Thai, Charlene Tung, Kieu Linh Caroline Valverde, Brandy Liên Worrall, David Yoo, Henry Yu, and Helen Zia. I appreciate the warm support of my friends Susan Amick, Steve Amick, Andi Ricker, and Collin Tong. LeLy Hayslip and Shirley Cameron touched my life in ways they will never know. I thank Benson Tong for his sustaining support and friendship. Rick Bonus, an exceptional collaborator and friend, has been generous in all respects. Mary Yu Danico has enriched my life professionally and is an extraordinary friend.

At Oberlin College, where I was a visiting assistant professor, I wish to thank David Kamitsuka and other faculty, staff, and students for teaching me important lessons about the struggle for Asian American studies. I also learned much from my colleagues in the Department of Comparative American Cultures at Washington State University, especially Jose Alamillo, Kelly Ervin, Shelli Fowler, Yolanda Flores-Niemann, Rory Ong, Marcos Pizarro, and Theresa Schenck. My appreciation for the support of my colleagues in the Department of Asian American Studies at UC Irvine: Yong Chen, Dorothy Fujita-Rony, Ketu Katrak, Claire Jean Kim, Karen Leonard, John Liu, Glen Mimura, and Mary Ann Takemoto. June Kurata, Danielle McClellan, Tammy Sung, and Debbie Chu deserve thanks for their assistance. While at UCI, I have benefited greatly from knowing Victor Becerra, Jackie Dooley,

Raul Fernandez, Anne Frank, Tiana Johnson, Gil Gonzalez, Anna Gonzalez, Inderpal Grewal, Doug Haynes, Val Jenness, Laura Kang, Bill Landis, Sunny Lee, Nancy Naples, Vivian Price, Rowena Robles, Vicki Ruiz, David Smith, Prany Sananikone, and Rudy Torres. Sincere thanks to my talented research assistants Chris Cameron, Chiayu Chang, Nicole Chiu, Rosie Rimando, Jessica Shim, and especially Quan Tran, who has been so resourceful. Over the years at all the campuses with which I have been affiliated, I was fortunate to benefit from intellectual exchanges with numerous undergraduate and graduate students who sharpened my analytical skills and shared my commitment to building a meaningful intellectual community.

Bing Wong, a Chinese American restaurateur in San Bernardino, California, provided me with a scholarship to attend college, and I will always remember this. I thank the University of California Humanities Research Institute for providing me with a fellowship and appreciate the dialogues I had there with colleagues who helped me reshape this project. The University of California, Berkeley Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellowship for Diversity, during which I was affiliated with Asian American Studies, gave me valuable time to revise this manuscript. The UC Irvine Humanities Center was also instrumental in providing crucial funding for this book project.

My thanks to my exceptional editor, Janet Francendese, at Temple University Press, who supported this project in its early stages and whose wise guidance has been invaluable. I appreciate the support of Michael Omi, the series editor, who has been extraordinarily generous with providing me constructive comments to reorganize and redefine my ideas. Thanks to Bobbe Needham and Lynne Frost for skillful copy editing and project management, as well as to Jennifer French, who moved production along so smoothly.

I thank my mother, Thuy Hanlon, for passing on her energy and determined nature to me. Thanks to my father, Robert Hanlon, for literally showing me much of the world and initially instilling in me an interest in sociology. My sister Christine has given me special support over the years. I am grateful to the Crosson, Cuthbert, Hassan, Langga, and Robinson families for their understanding and encouragement as well.

Since my undergraduate days, I have been extremely fortunate to have an amazing and devoted partner, Bill Ross, who has shared in my every accomplishment. Simple words of thanks cannot express my appreciation for all he has provided me—constant encouragement,

editorial skills, wit, sharing of household chores and child-care responsibilities, and gentle reminders to “enjoy” life. Our children, Aisha and Kian, give me wonderful balance in my life and bring me an abundance of joy and laughter. I have learned much from seeing the world through their eyes.

My thanks to the editors and publishers who allowed me to include, in this book, sections of some chapters that have appeared in earlier publications:

Chapter Three includes revised sections from Linda Trinh Võ, “The Politics of Social Services for a ‘Model Minority’: The Union of Pan Asian Communities.” Pages 241–272 in *Asian and Latino Immigrants in a Restructuring Economy: The Metamorphosis of Southern California*, edited by Marta López-Garza and David R. Diaz. Copyright © 2001 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. Used with the permission of Stanford University Press, www.sup.org.

Chapter Five includes revised sections from Linda Trinh Võ, “Asian Immigrants, Asian Americans, and the Politics of Economic Mobilization in San Diego.” *Amerasia Journal* 22, no. 2 (1996): 89–108. Copyright © 1996 by the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. Used with permission of UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press.

MOBILIZING

AN ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
1 Introduction: Paths of Resistance and Accommodation for Asian Americans	1
2 Asian Immigration and Settlement in San Diego	15
3 The Politics of Social Services for a "Model Minority": The Union of Pan Asian Communities	34
4 Cultural Images and the Media: Racialization and Oppositional Practices	66
5 Economic Positioning: Resources, Opportunities, and Mobilization	92
6 "Where Do We Stand?" Politics, Representation, and Leadership	129
7 Mapping Asian America: In Search of "Our" History and "Our" Community	166
8 Ambiguities and Contradictions: Narratives of Identity and Community	197
9 Conclusion: Milestones and Crossroads for Asian Americans	229
List of Interviewees	243
Notes	245
References	265
Index	283

Introduction

Paths of Resistance and Accommodation for Asian Americans

San Diego calls itself “America’s Finest City.” It is certainly admired for its ideal weather, miles of beautiful beaches, and manufactured tourist attractions, such as Sea World, the San Diego Zoo, Legoland, and Hotel Del Coronado. It is also known for its proximity to Mexico, as well as for its large military complexes, most notably its navy docks. However, it is not widely identified with having a large community of Asian Americans (more than 200,000), especially one that is engaging in social change.¹ Perhaps few people notice San Diego’s Asian American communities because there is no recognizable “Chinatown” or compact Asian ethnic enclave that draws tourists searching for inexpensive trinkets, photo opportunities, or exotic meals. Rather than being concentrated in well-defined and highly visible areas, Asian Americans in San Diego are dispersed in residential pockets, where they blend into multiracial neighborhoods; their commercial clusters, which are located throughout the region, cater mainly to locals. In many ways, Asian residents, like other San Diegans, lead ordinary daily lives that go unnoticed. Nevertheless, they also engage in a wide array of political, cultural, social, and economic activities that are specific to their shared identity as Asian Americans.

In cities across the country, Asian Americans are often viewed as passive, quaint populations that are immune to anti-immigrant policies, civil rights backlash, labor exploitation,

glass-ceiling discrimination, hate crimes, and police mistreatment. This view regards Asian Americans as well integrated and accepted on equal terms into mainstream America, evidence that "multiculturalism" has been achieved. In fact, their histories and their lives today show a deep engagement with matters of racial justice. Asian Americans have challenged unjust immigration policies, antimiscegenation laws, prevention from U.S. citizenship, marginalization from educational institutions, exploitation in the workplace, exclusion from labor unions, and enforced residential segregation; when necessary, they have used their fists to defend themselves (Chan 1991; Takaki 1989a). Despite efforts to exclude them from America's borders and to marginalize them from every facet of U.S. life, Asian Americans have survived and persisted, and at times, even thrived.

Asian Americans in San Diego who work for social change are constrained by a shortage of resources, lack of access to elite positions of power, and profound differences within their group. The majority are foreign-born, with a substantial percentage being non-English or limited-English speaking; they have differing immigration histories and trace their ancestry to numerous countries; they are an economically stratified group with varying educations, occupations, and incomes; and they are spatially dispersed throughout urban and suburban areas. What interests could members of this group possibly share? What injustices affect them all? Do they have the ability to form coherent resurgent ideologies, leadership, and organizations? Despite the obstacles, Asian American coalitions have grown in San Diego, with increasing numbers of activists and organizations working to defend and advance their economic, social, cultural, and political interests. In this book, I look to these activists and their organizations to gain a more nuanced understanding of how people and groups negotiate and resist oppression on an everyday basis and to broaden our understanding of how racialized people of color engage in political action, as well as how they build and sustain a community.

This book is a critical analysis of how both the larger sociopolitical changes and the demographic transformations of the Asian American population affect its mobilization and activism and how these, in turn, affect the formation of Asian American organizations, communities, and identities. Marxist scholars, using the functionalist approach, theorized that industrial development and the processes of political and economic modernization are antithetical to ethnic persistence. However, my work supports scholars who have proposed that larger-scale cultural identities

have survived, and that, in some cases, ethnic mobilization has been revitalized in modern societies (Nagel 1996; Smith 1981). In the contemporary period, social structures provide both opportunities and constraints for collective action for racialized groups. Asian American demographic shifts simultaneously hinder and enhance the availability of resources and the viability of collective struggle. Rather than seeing mobilization as a smooth, linear process for Asian Americans, I use the *interactive mobilization model* to show that it is a dialectical relationship between social order and human action marked by interplays of resistance and accommodation. This is an analysis of coalition building as much as of internal conflict within the Asian American community and with the greater San Diego community. It is about how Asian Americans have challenged San Diego to live up to its slogan, "America's Finest City." Although it is a story about San Diego, it could as easily describe other sites across the country where Asians reside.

The San Diego Case

My work builds and expands on the overviews of contemporary Asian American activism by Espiritu (1992) and Wei (1993), who focus on national Asian American activities and grassroots organizing in major cities such as San Francisco, New York, or Los Angeles and on selective moments. I focus on perhaps the less dramatic but no less important mobilization efforts that take place from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s in one setting. San Diego represents the type of mobilization that occurred, and continues to occur, in sites where Asians are perhaps fewer in number and do not hold confrontational street protests but are no less vigilant in their efforts to provide for the needs of their communities. What I captured in San Diego reflects myriad Asian American communities throughout the country where people struggle to organize diverse groups, find sufficient resources, create leaders, and define strategies. These daily occurrences may not capture media attention, but collectively and over time, they create social improvements for Asian Americans.

By contextualizing how and why mobilization emerges and evolves in one community over three decades, my study provides an understanding of long-term models of everyday forms of activism. In contrast to earlier studies, it explains the impact of recent demographic transformations on organizational resources and efforts. San Diego provided an ideal site because of the diversity of its Asian American population

and the existence of both longstanding and newly formed Asian American organizations. I focus on various social, economic, political, and cultural pan-Asian organizing in San Diego to examine the contradictions and complexities of identity and community formations. In comparison to discussions of mobilization that focus on specific groups of Asian Americans, such as the Chinese and Japanese (Fong 1994; Saito 1998), I focus on organizational processes among a diverse population that includes Filipinos, Koreans, Southeast Asians, and, to some extent, South Asians. My study has broader implications for analyzing the complexity of mobilization at the national level, since nationwide organizations are based on regional and local organizational processes.

Bordered by the Pacific Ocean and Mexico, San Diego is the second-largest city in California and the sixth largest in the nation. In the 1990s, when I began my research, Asians were estimated to compose 8 percent of the San Diego County and 12 percent of the San Diego city population (U.S. Bureau of Census 1990c), and the growth of the latter correlates closely with the increasing percentage of Asians in the state as a whole. The Immigration Act of 1965 brought large-scale immigration from Asia, and the arrival of refugee populations in the post-1975 period added a new generation to a once dwindling Asian American population. San Diego reflects changes in California, where people of color are becoming the numerical majority, making it a prime site to also examine relations among Asian Americans and other racial groups.

Methodology

My research methodology involves both historical and ethnographic approaches. I collected historical data from the local libraries, historical foundations, the downtown redevelopment agency, local organizational archives, governmental institutions, and private individuals to piece together the history of Asian American organizations and mobilization in San Diego. For nearly two years, from 1992 to 1994, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork as both an observer and a participant. My project included attending, and sometimes participating in, primarily Asian American activities, including planning meetings, political events, ethnic festivals, community forums, redevelopment project discussions, business meetings, and informal gatherings. As part of my fieldwork, I was a board member of the San Diego chapter of the Asian Business Association (ABA) and served as its newsletter editor. My involvement in this organization gave me wider entrée into the Asian

American community, because many of the individuals involved in ABA were also involved in various other single-ethnic and pan-Asian organizations and activities. I told all those I regularly interacted with that I was there to study Asian American organizations (Võ 2000). The kind of data I was able to gather differed according to the origin and development of the organization or the processes of organizational activities.

In addition to my fieldwork, I completed thirty formal interviews with Asian American activists and informal interviews with Asians and non-Asians involved with Asian American activities.² What I have captured is a glimpse of a lifetime endeavor for many, while for others it consumes only a phase of their life. The individuals I had close contact with and those I chose to interview to some extent reflect the great diversity of the Asian American population in terms of ethnicity, immigration history, class background, political viewpoint, and organizational strategy. However, these organizational leaders do not represent a cross section of the Asian population in San Diego; they are a select group who play key roles in assessing the needs of the community, defining the agenda for the community, and representing the Asian American community to the larger society. There are multiple levels of power, and being a recognized Asian American community leader does not mean one is powerful in the larger society. Such differential distinctions of power are important if we are to understand why Asian American activists continue to mobilize for social justice and racial equality.

Ethnographic fieldwork is an interactive and subjective process. Although I was considered an insider because of my ethnic ancestry as a Vietnamese American, there were also noticeable differences—including ethnic, cultural, political, generational, class, educational, sexual, gender, and linguistic—between my Asian American informants and myself that shaped the process of my research project (Võ 2000). As I immersed myself in the community, I was constantly negotiating these differences while also figuring out how others positioned themselves. I have tried to present the voices and actions of those I studied with respect and sensitivity, even when I did not agree with their ideologies or strategies. However, I am quite aware that the data collected and the analysis of the data are colored by my biases and agendas as a scholar and activist. Given the complex nature of fieldwork, this study is a selective and partial collection of facts, observations, interviews, and interpretations—essentially snapshots of an evolving, dynamic community, with highlights of some of its members.