“Asian American Activism and Interracial Involvement during the Era of Protest”

Brian Chow (2005)

All through the picket line, there are many like him. Wearing a leather jacket and a black beret, this protestor of the late 1960s clutches a banner in one hand and a 2x4 in the other, demanding self-determination and liberation from the white imperialist establishment. This time, however, the angry protestor is neither a member of the Black Panther Party nor a Brown Beret. The individual is an Asian American. Passers-by give a look of astonishment as they wonder why such a seemingly nice young man would want to stir up such a commotion. Even family members and elderly people from his community find themselves in dismay as they witness his acts to disturb the peace. Many will also be surprised to learn that this Asian American speaks in black English, addresses his peers by “brother” and “sister,” and salutes with clenched fist in the air. Some may wonder what happened to the quiet, peaceful “Oriental” who lived by traditional values. Audiences of today might even ask, “What happened to the model minority?”

While the term “model minority” may not have been popularized until the early 1980s, the notion was not entirely unfamiliar to Americans of the late 1960s. Twenty years after the forced relocation and containment of Japanese Americans in internment camps, an article titled “Success Story: Japanese American Style” appeared in the New York Times Magazine in January 1966, proclaiming Japanese Americans as hard-working and law-abiding model citizens.[1] Later that year, an article from U.S. News & World Report, titled “Success Story of One Minority Group in US,” praised Chinese Americans for the same qualities.[2] These reports, along with many other similar accounts that appeared later, served to distinguish Asian Americans from other American minorities. Moreover, most of these articles elevated Asian Americans as an ethnic group whose discipline and values should be emulated, all while reproaching every non-model minority during a volatile period of African American civil rights activism and militant revolt. Such articles, while noting that all ethnic minorities in America have had to face tremendous adversity in the history of the nation, argue that Asian Americans have been succeeding in the realms of education, business, and social standing, while fellow racial minority groups continue to falter in finding adequately paying jobs, do poorly in educational testing, and possess high crime rates among its members. Hence, in the 1960s, Asian Americans were beginning to become associated with an image of the model minority who has risen above the rest to successfully assimilate to American society.

The emergence of this model minority perception is rather surprising, however, if one is to consider the extent of the anti-Asian attitudes and the “yellow peril” belief that was prevalent among European Americans throughout the last half of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s. Anti-Asian sentiment dates back as far as the earliest arrivals by Asians who hoped to make a living in America. Since the 1850s,
early Chinese immigrants, most of whom left their problem-ridden country in hopes of finding gold in California, were branded as a depraved group and a threat to national identity. Entire Chinese communities became the targets of anti-Asian violence by the 1870s.[3]

The notion of the “yellow peril,” a widespread belief that Asian immigrants threatened to undermine white American values and racial qualities (as well as the economy of the nation) through rapid population growth and miscegenation, began around the early 1880s and was first applied to Chinese immigrants.[4] The initial Chinese Exclusion Act, which all but eliminated further Chinese immigration into America, was also passed during this time. As America started making its way into the twentieth century, however, the focus of the yellow peril notion began to shift toward Japanese citizens and immigrants, and manifestations of these anti-Japanese sentiments climaxed with the Japanese internment during World War II. Thus, Asian Americans did contend with a number of negative portrayals for much of their history in the United States prior to the 1960s.

However, just as Asian Americans have faced considerable racial discrimination and mistreatment, they engaged in activism prior to the 1960s as well. In fact, there were many instances in which Asian Americans responded to injustices against them with social protest and political action. One of the earliest and most notable examples of Asian protest in America occurred in 1867 when 2,000 Chinese migrant railroad workers went on strike to demand more livable wages and improved working conditions.[5] Many similar instances of Asian activism occurred over the following several decades involving Japanese, Korean, and Filipino Americans as well. Even after World War II, Asian American social activism continued as Japanese Americans lobbied for the Evacuation Claims Act, which resulted in monetary compensation for the losses accrued by a certain number of Japanese Americans as a result of the internment.[6] In addition, they campaigned for the removal of California’s alien land laws, which had dramatically hindered the rights of Japanese immigrants (along with other nonwhite immigrant groups) to own land in the past.[7] Asian American activism has thus been recurrent throughout the history of the nation.

The late 1960s and early 1970s had been a particularly significant period for Asian American activism, however. Domestic unrest manifested itself in various forms such as the New Left movement, Women’s Liberation movement, Black Power movement, and Chicano movement, which made for a volatile atmosphere within the country. In the international arena, the nation was engaging in the Vietnam War, and Asian Americans were realizing that those who were being fought and killed by American troops did not appear all that different from themselves. As a result, Asian Americans united to form their own movement—the Asian American movement, as it is now called.[8] Sparked by the Third World strikes of San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, the movement signaled a unified struggle by Asian Americans for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment. Participants of this movement formed numerous community
organizations, wrote a variety of publications, fought for Asian American related curricula on campuses, and presented an important voice in the nation-wide protests against the Vietnam War. Consequently, as with other movements, the energy of the movement gradually began to dissipate around the end of the Vietnam War.

Past scholarship on the Asian American movement thus far, although limited, has provided a number of extensive investigations in the movement and various insightful means of understanding the nature of Asian American activism during this time. On the other hand, these studies have also given minimal attention to the influence which other racial minorities had on the Asian American movement as well as the extent of collaboration between Asian American activists and these groups. Through various first-hand documents and accounts from the portion of the Asian American movement that prevailed throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, I would argue that these factors were immensely important in shaping the goals and approaches of Asian American activists at the time and deserve attention if the essential nature of these activists is to be fully understood.[9]

Historiography

For the most part, previous investigations into the Asian American movement have marked the inclusion of all Asian ethnicities as the defining characteristic of the movement, but such discussions on the inclusiveness of the movement invariably stopped short of discussing the interracial support and cooperation in which Asian American activists engaged with other minorities. On the other hand, prior studies of the movement often attribute the Black Power movement as one of the motivating factors for Asian American activism in the late 1960s. However, such claims are often briefly noted and lack supplementary evidence to deepen such discussions. While past investigations on the Asian American movement have produced important examinations of the motivating factors of the movement as well as the extent of multiethnic unity it involved, such investigations have lacked any deep analysis of the crucial role which other minority movements played in inspiring Asian American activists as well as how interracial support and collaboration have characterized the Asian American movement.

Of all the original scholarship that has come out regarding the Asian American movement, William Wei’s The Asian American Movement is by far the most extensive and in-depth analysis of the movement. In his book, Wei touches on the range of motivating factors of the Asian American movement, and he acknowledges the movement as “a common crusade for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment.”[10] However, for Wei, the chief cause for the wave of activism among Asian Americans in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the Vietnam War. As Wei states, “[I]t was mainly the antiwar movement that brought [Asians] 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.”[11] According to Wei, the broad perception of Asians (with little
distinction between differing ethnicities) as the enemy during the country’s involvement in the Vietnam War forced Asian Americans of all ethnicities to unite as a single community. Asian Americans realized they all faced the same racial oppression and discrimination in American society, and they set out to collectively make their voices heard and to classify themselves as Americans who deserved equal treatment, like everyone else in the nation.

Wei also acknowledges the influence which the Black Power movement had on Asian American activists as well as the interracial collaboration that took place in the Third World strikes in the late 1960s. Regarding the effect which the Black Power movement had on Asian American activists, Wei explains, “The Black Power movement, which had cultural nationalism as one of its central features, was therefore a natural model to emulate. By emphasizing racial pride and African American culture, the Black Power movement inspired Asian Americans…to assert themselves as people of color.”[12] As insightful as his observation is though, Wei does not give any extensive discussion on this topic. On the matter of interracial cooperation involving Asian Americans, Wei offers an investigation of the Third World Liberation strikes, which involved African Americans, Chicanos, and Asian Americans collectively fighting for ethnic studies at San Francisco State College and the University of California, Berkeley.[13] Nevertheless, with the exception of the Third World strikes, he does not offer any discussions about Asian American cooperation with other racial minority organizations, such as the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, or the Young Lords Party. Wei’s analysis of the Asian American movement, although thorough and indispensable, is nevertheless incomplete in the examination of the interracial influences and collaboration that helped to characterize the movement.

Sucheng Chan’s analysis of the Asian American movement in Asian Americans reflects a number of the same conclusions discussed in Wei’s work. Regarding the main cause which led Asian Americans toward activism, Chan notes, “[T]he movement against U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam caught their attention in the late 1960s.”[14] Like Wei, Chan claims that Asian Americans began feeling threatened for themselves as they saw people who looked like them being labeled as the enemy and killed halfway around the globe; as a result, they united to fight against the racist attitudes that prevailed throughout their country as well as for better conditions in their communities. Being perhaps the first analysis on the Asian American movement in a published book (as well as being an analysis based entirely on personal recollection), Chan’s two-page examination of the movement is brief compared to other accounts of the movement. Thus, unlike Wei, Chan does not discuss how the Asian American movement was affected by the Black Power movement. Any instances of interracial collaboration involving Asian American activists are not mentioned either. While Chan’s early examination of the Asian American movement provided a starting point for future analysis, it makes no mention of interracial influences or endeavors which helped characterize the movement.
Glenn Omatsu’s “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movement of Liberation” provides another analysis of the movement. In his essay, Omatsu explains how the Asian American movement was a struggle for self-determination and to take part in the historical forces that affect American society. Omatsu briefly notes how African American struggles have affected the Asian American movement: “[T]he Asian American movement coincided not with the initial campaign for civil rights but with the later demand for black liberation...the leading influence was not Martin Luther King, Jr., but Malcolm X.”[15] Although Omatsu denies that the peaceful civil rights movement had a major impact on the Asian American movement, he does claim that the more militant Black Power movement did produce such an effect on Asian American activists. Hence, according to Omatsu, “[T]he movement was not centered on the aura of racial identity but embraced fundamental questions of oppression and power...the main thrust was not one of seeking legitimacy or representation within American society but the larger goal of liberation.”[16] This then becomes one of the main points of his analysis.

While Omatsu’s observations serve as important points in explaining the radical and confrontational aspects of Asian American activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, his discussion of African American influence on the Asian American movement does not go much farther. Omatsu also includes a brief examination of the Third World strikes, but aside from listing the races involved, he does not place much emphasis on the fact that the strikes were a collective endeavor by racial minorities.[17] Similar to Wei’s discussion on the interracial influences and collaboration among Asian American activists, Omatsu touches on the Black Power movement and the Third World strikes but does not extend beyond those two topics.

In Kim Geron’s essay “Serve the People,” the Asian American movement is understood in terms of social movement theory and is placed alongside other liberation movements of the time. Regarding the impact of other Third World political struggles on the Asian American movement, Geron notes, “The strongest external influences on the AAM during the 1968-1970 period were the black liberation movement and national liberation struggles in the developing world, rather than the traditional civil rights organizations.”[18] Like Omatsu, Geron also identifies the Black Power movement as one of the strongest motivating factors for the Asian American movement. Moreover, Geron also credits liberation movements outside the country such as those in Africa and Latin America (in addition to the struggle in Vietnam). However, Geron does not provide much depth to the discussion on interracial influences, and the discussion he offers on the subject matter lacks any original evidence for support.

Unlike previous writers of the Asian American movement though, Geron does note the desire of Asian American activists to unite with other American minorities: “[T]he media-hyped ‘model minority’ myth...pitted Asian Americans against other people of color. This blatant attempt to sow divisions among America’s minority groups was opposed by Asian Americans, particularly young people, who identified
strongly with other oppressed groups.”[19] According to Geron, despite perceived attempts by white media to distinguish Asian Americans and put down other racial minorities, many Asian Americans nevertheless related to and desired to unite with other such minorities. Although this is a significant observation, it is also rather brief and lacking in evidentiary support. No discussion of interracial endeavors involving Asian Americans is offered either in Geron's essay. Thus, while providing a number of new insights on Asian Americans' inspiration from and collaboration with other peoples of color, Geron's analysis of these aspects of the Asian American movement are not very extensive.

Among all the investigations that have been made on the Asian American movement, Yen Le Espiritu's analysis of the movement in Asian American Panethnicity provides the most insight on late 1960s and early 1970s Asian American activism in terms of race and ethnicity. Although she primarily sees the movement as an effort to unite all Asian American ethnicities in a collective struggle, Espiritu also recognizes the extent to which the Asian American movement was influenced by both the civil rights and black liberation movements: “Critical to its development was the mobilization of American blacks. Besides offering tactical lessons, the civil rights and the Black Power movements had a profound impact on the consciousness of Asian Americans, sensitizing them to racial issues.”[20] Moreover, Asian Americans naturally related to African American and colored people in America, since these groups shared common racial concerns. As Espiritu explains, “Asian American activists joined in the struggles against poverty, war, and exploitation. However, they often viewed these struggles from an Asian American perspective, emphasizing race and racism directed against Asian Americans. This racial perspective bound them to other Asian groups as well as to other minorities, while separating them from whites.”[21] Although Espiritu makes this important observation on the commonality of racial concerns among peoples of color in America, she does not examine any specific instances of interracial collaboration involving Asian Americans. Nevertheless, her analysis of this racial aspect of the Asian American movement provides a solid foundation for understanding how Asian American activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s found inspiration and, eventually, allies in the movements of other racial minorities.

Is it any coincidence that the factors which led individual Asian ethnicities to unite with other Asian ethnicities also led Asian Americans to unite with other racial minorities? The reasons for unity among different Asian American ethnicities had nothing to do with common languages, customs, or cultures (for they all varied among these ethnicities). Instead, they came together because they faced the same racial oppression and discrimination that the greater American society had cast on them. This racial motive for unity not only prompted separate Asian ethnicities to join each other in shared struggle, but also Asian Americans to join and support all other American racial minorities in an even greater struggle. Therefore, I feel this aspect of the Asian American activism has been long overlooked in prior historical scholarship, and, through the accounts of individual activists as well as entire
Learning from Others

Before investigating the nature of the collective endeavors between Asian American and other racial minority activists during the late 1960s and early 1970s in the Bay Area, it is crucial to first understand how these Asian Americans came to be inspired by the movements of other peoples of color. Indeed, the principles of Asian American activists were impacted by other racial minorities in a variety of ways. As these activists were growing up, they saw and admired the struggles of African Americans in the civil rights movement and the early phases of the Black Power movement. One writer of The Asian Student applauds African Americans for starting the fight for racial equality in America: “Our black brothers and sisters were the first to cry out in protest in the Civil Rights Movement, and were the first to make militant, radical demands for the transforming of society.”[22] These early movements for racial parity became sources of inspiration and strength for the upcoming generation of Asian Americans.

The civil rights movement was characterized by a high level of activism by African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s. Led by Martin Luther King Jr., this struggle for racial equality took on a message of tolerance and nonviolence among all its participants. One of the most notable events of this movement was the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Lasting from 1955 to 1956, the bus boycott ensued after Rosa Parks, an African American woman who rode the bus back home one evening after a day’s work, was arrested after she refused to give up a seat in the front of the bus to a white man. Another important event were the public sit-ins, which began when African Americans in Greensboro, North Carolina began sitting down at “whites-only” restaurants in 1960. Soon after, the sit-ins spread to many other states in the region and took place in a variety of other segregated public locations, such as churches and parks. The nonviolent civil rights movement later reached a climax in 1963 with the March on Washington. Consisting of more than 200,000 black and white Americans advancing through the nation’s capital, the March on Washington became the largest demonstration for racial tolerance in American history. Witnessed by every American in the fifties and sixties, the civil rights movement was marked by numerous events that demonstrated the determination and yearning for justice among African Americans that inspired countless future activists of all skin colors.

Hence, the participants of the Asian American movement from the Bay Area appeared to have deep respect and admiration for the early African American activists of the 1950s and 1960s. Asian American activist Henry Der recalls his keen interest in Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement while growing up: “In the 1950s and 1960s, I grew up reading the newspaper and watching television and witnessed the Civil Rights Movement to achieve equality for Black Americans. The news was filled with stories about the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott,
protests at white-only lunch counters...the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech."[23] Der continues, "These events and images of the struggle for civil rights instilled in me the need for America to address legal and social injustices in society....King's words inspired others and me then as they continue to do so today."[24] As Der indicates, Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement awakened a sense of social awareness within himself and other Asian Americans. This early struggle for racial equality by African Americans shaped the minds of innumerable young Asian Americans at the time.

Moreover, just as Martin Luther King's civil rights movement stirred the spirits of Asian Americans along with those of countless other young Americans, the Black Power movement continued the legacy. The Black Power movement began in the mid-1960s as many African Americans across the nation, impatient with the passive resistance tactics that were promoted by King, began taking more militant approaches in their demands for self-empowerment. One of the leading figures of the emerging Black Power movement was Malcolm X. After living much of his life in crime and then serving a long prison sentence, he converted from Christianity to Islam and replaced his surname (which was originally Little) with “X” to symbolize the discarding of his slave identity. He then became a leading spokesperson for black liberation and militant resistance by the early 1960s, championing the slogan “by any means necessary.” Another major black liberation figure at this time was Stokely Carmichael, who coined the term “Black Power” in 1966 and, during his leadership of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, threw out all the white members of the student organization as well as their bygone philosophy of nonviolence. The most prominent Black Power organization, however, was the Black Panther Party, which primarily consisted of African Americans from inner-city neighborhoods. Like other Black Power organizations, the Black Panther Party stressed self-empowerment and militant revolt. Although they were often seen as offensive and threatening, the Black Panther Party and other organizations of the Black Power movement helped to instill racial pride in African Americans as well as a greater sense of self-determination.

Hence, the early incarnations of the Black Power movement often became an alternative source of inspiration for subsequent Asian American activists who were disillusioned or impatient with peaceful and passive approaches for battling racial oppression. As Pat Sumi describes, “After my experiences with the pacifist part of the anti-war movement, I became more interested in Malcolm X and the Black Panthers.”[25] She found that, in some instances, the most forceful means of putting forth one’s demands were often the most effective. Many other Asian Americans found inspiration from Malcolm X's radical stance as well. Harvey Dong, for instance, recalls how Malcolm X affected his own outlook on racial oppression: “I read Malcolm X's autobiography and empathized with his life, his example, and how he came to the understanding that it’s beyond just race itself, but having to do with the entire system.”[26] Malcolm X became an important figure to Asian American activists who would follow several years later.
In many ways, Malcolm X and the early Black Power movement awakened the political senses of Asian Americans in ways that the earlier civil rights movement had not. Bay Area activist Merilynn Quon remembers, "When Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement challenged the traditional Civil Rights Movement, many young Asian Americans like myself began to ask: what implications does black power have for us? What is our identity and history as a people?"[27] Malcolm X and the Black Power movement brought up fundamental concerns that paralleled those of Asian Americans, jumpstarting their latent social consciousness and drive for activism. While discussing the origins of the Asian American movement, Amy Uyematsu reveals, "A yellow movement has been set into motion by the black power movement. Addressing itself to the unique problems of Asian Americans, this 'yellow power' movement is relevant to the black power movement in that both are part of the Third World struggle to liberate all colored people."[28] Having been strongly influenced by the Black Power movement, Asian American activism also shared many of the same goals, such as freeing Third World people from oppression, as Uyematsu indicates. In addition, Asian American activists adopted some of the same principles of the Black Power movement. Uyematsu reveals, "As derived from the black power ideology, yellow power implies that Asian Americans must control the decision-making processes affecting their lives."[29] Hence, the early Black Power movement proved to be a significant influence for Asian Americans to begin fighting for their own rights.

Such movements were not the only factors that influenced Asian American activists, however; personal relationships with racial minorities provided a strong source of motivation for social activism among Asian Americans as well. Asian American activist Liz Del Sol recollects how she looked up to her African American friends for their inner strength and social resolve throughout her youth: "[M]any of my childhood friends that I felt close to were from the Black community....I admired their pride and stand while growing up in San Francisco."[30] Indeed, Asian Americans were often influenced by their close relationships with African American friends. As activist Ray Tasaki recalls, "While doing time, I met a few Black Muslims and I was fascinated by their sense of pride, their discipline to their beliefs and how they identified very clearly who they felt was their enemy. I started learning concepts like oppressors, ‘our people,’ Fruit of Islam, ‘Brother,’ and Malcolm X."[31] As a result, interracial friendships between Asian Americans and other minorities helped to increase and expand the social consciousness of many Asian American activists.

While local and national influences proved to be important to the Asian American movement, Asian American activists also found heroes and models in the Third World movements outside the country. Many anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist revolutions sprouted soon after World War II.[32] In 1945, the Chinese Communist Party, headed by Mao Zedong, renewed its efforts in fighting the Kuomintang, the ruling party of China at the time. Four years later, the Chinese Communist Party successfully ousted the Kuomintang and set up its own government throughout the mainland. Independence movements and political upheaval also occurred in much
of Latin America around this period; the most successful of these movements took place in the 1950s with the Cuban Revolution, led by Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, which ended with the overthrow of the ruling Batista regime and the establishment of a communist government that later withstood its own overthrow by the U.S. government. However, the most visible anti-imperialist insurrection by the late 1960s was, of course, the ongoing struggle between North Vietnam, fronted by Ho Chi Minh, and South Vietnam, which was aided by the United States. This conflict helped bring the philosophies of both Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong to the attention of the American public. Also notable at this time were the writings of Frantz Fanon, an African anti-colonial thinker who advocated the energizing role of violence in the struggle for national liberation. Hence, many crucial international movements and figures emerged just prior to the birth of the Asian American movement in the late sixties.

As a result, Asian American activists from the San Francisco Bay Area around this time appeared to have drawn upon numerous sources of inspiration outside their country. Those who were willing to look outside the states for motivation and rationale for social protest easily came across other movements and people who the struggled for justice and liberation. Activist Steve Louie recalls, "We had an international perspective, drawing inspiration from and supporting independence and freedom movements of peoples in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, whether we wanted to help raise their standard of living, opposed colonialism, or saw imperialism as the enemy of people around the world."[33] Many Asian American activists were very knowledgeable of the struggles occurring in Africa and Latin America as well as Asia. Moreover, these activists were impacted by the determination of their fellow revolters in the international arena. Asian Americans admired and studied a number of Third World revolutionary leaders, both Asian and non-Asian. As Louie describes, “To better understand what society needed to become and help ourselves change, we read and studied Franz Fanon, Marx, Lenin, and Mao, and debated dialectics….Our heroes included Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh, and Che Guevara. We cut cane in the fields of Cuba and saw firsthand the successes of Chinese socialism."[34] Asian American activists, as Louie describes, often looked to international movements and revolutionaries of all races for lessons and inspiration.

Moreover, just as Asian Americans in the Bay Area appeared to be influenced by other Third World people, other Bay Area racial minorities were influenced by Asian revolutionary figures as well. Of such figures, the most widely studied among Third World activists in America was Mao Zedong, who led the communist revolution in China and became the chairman of the national government afterwards. As Asian American activist Harvey Dong observes, the Black Panther Party was particularly moved by Mao’s ideas: “In Oakland, California, in the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party was talking about Mao Tse-tung, the Red Book, and ‘Serve the People’ as a working part of their ‘Ten-Point Program’ for ‘land, justice, bread and peace.’”[35] The Black Panthers were not only inspired by Mao’s teachings, however. Some credit the Black Panther Party for introducing Mao’s teachings to the rest of the...
nation. Steve Louie remembers, “I heard about Mao’s ideas from the Black Panther Party. The Panthers introduced the Red Book to the American movement, and popularized the idea of ‘Serve the People.’”[36] Surprisingly, it was the Black Panther Party that first championed the teachings of Mao in America.[37]

In the Bay Area’s academic settings, Mao’s lessons were familiar with student activists of all ethnic backgrounds. Alex Hing, in his recollection of the Third World strike at San Francisco State College, remarks, “Most of the leaders of the TWLF were revolutionaries; many of them Marxist-Leninists. They carried the Red Book and tried to apply Mao’s thoughts to their situation.”[38] Those that were a part of the Third World Liberation Front included African and Hispanic Americans as well as Asian Americans, and they drew just as much inspiration from Mao Zedong as they did from Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara. Hence, other minority activists in the country were open to revolutionary guidance from Asian figures as well.

Evidently, there was a clear sharing of ideas and mutual inspiration between Asians and other Third World activists in the San Francisco Bay Area throughout this volatile era. As they were growing up, participants of the Asian American movement were moved as they watched African Americans struggling for racial equality in the civil rights movement throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Later, there social consciousness was further awakened by the aggressive and self-empowering activities of those involved with the Black Power movement of the late sixties. In addition to the African American activists they saw on the television screen and read about in newspapers, many Asian American activists were also inspired by the radical attitudes of the minorities they befriended from their communities. Moreover, local influences were complemented by international influences as Asian American activists read the writings of Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and other Third World revolutionaries as well. Conversely, other ethnic minority activists in America also admired the deeds and principles of contemporary Asian revolutionaries. Thus, there was a mutual openness and exchanging of ideas between Asian American activists and other American activists of color. This time, all roads did not lead to Rome—or any other European location—but, for the most part, to Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Black America.

Looking into the Mirror

While Asian American activists of the San Francisco Bay Area were enlightened by the teachings and movements of other racial minorities, what was more significant at the time was that they began to fully realize their own Third World identity as they observed the struggles of other people of color. Globally, Third World identity surfaced shortly after World War II, with the term “Third World” applying to Asian, African, and Latin American peoples and states (as opposed to the “First World,” which applies to North American and European states, and “Second World,” which applied to the Soviet bloc during the Cold War era). The term usually brings with it connotations of people of color who have suffered from exploitation and oppression by people of European descent—though as time passed after World War II, the
United States became increasingly viewed as the primary oppressor. Principles of Third World movements chiefly focused on the attainment of national liberation and self-determination through revolutionary means. Thus, their stance was always anti-imperialist, and consequently, it was typically anti-capitalist and anti-American as well. Demands included racial equality as well as the protection of the weak and exploited.

In the United States, the Third World people consisted of the racial minorities in America, which included African, Hispanic, Asian, and Native Americans. The movements of Asians and other Third World people in the United States during the sixties and seventies reflected the same principles that were prevalent in global Third World movements, but generally on a domestic level. In fighting imperialism, Third World Americans protested against white political and business leaders in their country. They also sought racial equality and the improvement of the conditions of underprivileged minority people. It should be noted, however, that most Third World activists saw their battle essentially as a class struggle, rather than a race struggle. Ultimately, the political movements of Third World Americans aimed to make systemic changes in their country that would bring upon self-determination for all people without the threat of being suppressed by institutional power holders.[39]

As they were witnessing the discrimination and mistreatment suffered by other racial minorities in America, Asian Americans began to realize that they, too, had often been in similar predicaments. As the members of the Berkeley Asian American Political Alliance observed, “We believe that the American society is historically racist and one which has systematically employed social discrimination and economic imperialism, both domestically and internationally, exploiting all non-white people in the process of building up their affluent society.”[40] The phenomenon of racial oppression did not only pertain to descendants of Africans, Hispanics, and Native Americans; it was a reality for Asians as well.

Such attitudes of shared hardships among racial minorities were especially familiar to many Asian American students, given the institutional nature of their colleges and university. An examination of the Third World strikes in the Asian Student notes, “Third World students had already begun to develop a consciousness of their identity and history before the Third World strikes. They came to realize that their education was not meeting their needs and that in fact, institutional racism pervaded colleges and universities.”[41] Asian American students, along with other students of color, had felt that the very institution they depended on for learning was discriminating against them and inadequate in providing the education they deserved. In one instance, these students also found that their colleges were cutting back funds from the programs that mattered to them the most; as another article in The Asian Student declares, “Asian students, along with other Third World and working class students, are facing major cutbacks that are seriously affecting the nature and direction of our education....[T]he University [of California, Berkeley] is removing its façade of ‘changing’ the conditions of Third World people, and is
reverting back to its basic policy of 'controlling' Third World people."[42] As Third World college students, Asian Americans saw themselves with other students of color as victims of racism and mistreatment by their own schools. Such concerns of racial discrimination were more immediate to Asian American students than other Asian Americans, because these concerns originated directly from their own educational experience.

Although these feelings of shared oppression were especially acute among Third World college students, such sentiments were also prevalent among Third World people in the community setting. While reminiscing about growing up in South Stockton, Nelson Nagai notes, “Because of restrictive covenants, South Stockton was home to most Asians, as well as other nonwhite minorities...External oppression forced Asians together, and, as in my case, forced Asians to interact with Chicanos and African Americans.”[43] As Nagai describes, the racial minorities in South Stockton were brought together as a result of shared hardships and circumstances. Consequently, much interaction occurred among these minority groups in the community. Various histories and customs were often shared and spread throughout the multi-ethnic neighborhood. Nagai remembers, “There was a tremendous sharing of cultures, language, and ideas among the minorities in South Stockton. I can proudly say that I can cuss in five languages: baka tade, kai'ai, pautang ina mo, vendejo and shit.”[44] Whether through the sharing of rich cultures or profane language, Asian Americans found friends and allies in their multi-racial communities who shared the same fate and conditions. Moreover, the interaction that subsequently arose among these groups allowed them to further understand the similarities in their circumstances and struggles.

Hence, participants of the Asian American movement often sought to join with other racial minority movements and organizations. On the other hand, the public perception of the “model minority” frequently complicated the efforts of Asian Americans to unite with other Third World peoples. Asian Americans in the Bay Area were apparently well aware of this hindrance to the goal of minority unity, and they saw it as a deliberate attempt by white society to divide America’s racial minorities. An article in the Asian American Political Alliance newspaper remarks how it is commonly said in American society that “the Orientals are a hard working, self respecting people (insinuating blacks, browns, and reds are not).”[45] Likewise, Asian American activist Joanne Miyamoto notes in one of her poems, “we made it / now they use us as an example / to the blacks and browns / how we made it / how we overcame.”[46] Many socially aware Asian Americans realized the “model minority” image often made other minority groups appear inferior and separated Asian Americans from these other groups. Accordingly, Asian American activists rejected such a notion, as they felt they shared many more commonalities than differences with other Third World people and aimed to unite with such people. Moreover, many participants of the Asian American movement were willing to give up their “model minority” status so equality and justice could be obtained for all American racial minorities. As Jeff Leong remarks, “For Asian-Americans to make it in the U.S. we have to go to school and then oppress other minorities. But I’m willing
to give up this slice of the pie so that we all can have self-determination.”[47] Asian American activists genuinely desired unity among all the Third World people in America, and they often worked hard to establish and maintain that unity.

Consequently, Asian Americans in the Bay Area often called upon themselves to join and collaborate with people and organizations of other racial minority groups. As UC Berkeley’s Asian American Political Alliance declares, “AAPA is not meant to isolate Asians from other people; it is unhealthy as well as unwise to do such a thing. AAPA must constantly grow, and reach out to other people and groups....[W]e must begin to build our own society alongside our black, brown and red brothers.”[48] Many organizations of the Asian American movement sought to establish comradery with other racial minorities in their community. They urged their members to participate with other Third World people to fight for their common goals and help transform their society for the better. Alex Hing declares to his fellow Asian Americans, “Our people must take up the struggle and move to free ourselves along with the rest of the world....We cannot do this by dealing with identity crises on a personal level. Rather, we should identify ourselves with all oppressed people who are struggling for their liberation.”[49] Asian Americans activists recognized that the oppression they encountered by American society was essentially the same as that experienced by other racial minorities. Thus, it was not enough that they worked to alleviate their own concerns: they had to solve the problems of all people of color.

Hence, those who were involved in the Asian American movement in the San Francisco Bay Area appeared to have commonly identified with their Third World brethren. They realized that Asian Americans shared a long and deep history of racial exploitation and discrimination with other racial minorities in the country. Additionally, these separate ethnic minority groups all essentially shared the same demands even as they engaged in their own political movements. And while this attitude of relatedness was particularly conducive in academic settings, it was also very prevalent in multiethnic community settings as well. Still, the common perception of the “model minority” made the task of uniting with other racial minorities more difficult for Asian Americans; nevertheless, Asian American activists rejected this image of themselves and tried to express their solidarity with African, Hispanic, and Native Americans. Moreover, Asian Americans strongly encouraged each other to reach out to other racial minorities to reinforce this multiethnic unity. These Asian American activists realized that it was not enough for them to fight for Asian concerns by themselves, but to fight for the concerns of all Third World people alongside other fellow activists of color.

Rooting for Other Teams

With all the shared commonalities and mutual feelings of relatedness between Asian Americans and other Americans of color, interracial support became noticeably prevalent throughout the Asian American movement. In reflecting on the activities of his community service organization, Yellow Seed, Nelson Nagai mentions, “The
Yellow Seed supported the struggles of other Third World people (we acted as security for Cesar Chavez when he spoke in Stockton)….We collected clothing and food for the Native Americans who had taken over Alcatraz.”[50] As Nagai indicates, Asian American activists often gave their support and assistance to other activists of color. Stockton Asian Americans provided security assistance for Hispanic American leader Cesar Chavez, for example, and they helped gather supplies for Native American activists who hoped to convert Alcatraz into an Indian community center during the early 1970s.

Asian American support for African American struggles was very prominent in the San Francisco Bay Area. Asian American activist Alex Hing declares this support and appreciation for African American activists in his article in East-West: “On the streets of Amerika Black Panthers are being murdered and imprisoned by the pigs for trying to free poor people from a system that is exploiting them…. [O]ur brothers and sisters around the world are giving up their lives to aid our common struggle.”[51] Like many socially conscious Asian Americans at the time, Hing expressed great admiration for the struggles of African American activists and lamented over their mistreatment by the political and law enforcement institutions in American society. Moreover, Hing indicates how the efforts of the Black Panthers symbolized the struggles of people around the world who aimed to stop racial exploitation and oppression. Thus, Asian American activists often found themselves agreeing with and supporting the struggles of African Americans.

Additionally, Asian Americans in the Bay Area supported Hispanic Americans causes as well. In the early 1970s, Asian Americans supported the Farah Strike, which primarily consisted of Mexican Americans who were discontent with the working conditions and salaries they were receiving from a major clothing manufacturer. An article in the Asian-American Community Alliance newsletter cheers, “When we joined with [the Farah strikers] to force the Farah Company to recognize their rights to a union, to agree to a contract that begins to improve their conditions, we all put Farah and his supporters and the others like them, on notice. No more will the Southwest be a safe place for run-away sweat shops based on such exploitation of Chicano labor.”[52] Participants of the Asian American movement not only supported the Chicano strikers, but they clearly shared in the strikers’ victory as well.

In most situations, however, interracial support from Asian American activists extended to all Americans of color, rather than a specific racial group. For example, in an essay by the Asian Students Marxism Group of UC Berkeley, the authors express concern over the past mistreatment of Natives, Hispanics, and Africans in America. As the essay indicates, “The Native-Americans and the Mexicans were relentlessly pushed back and killed to satisfy the expansionist appetites of the then-developing American bourgeoisie. The Blacks were enslaved in order to build up the agricultural wealth of the South.”[53] Referring back to African slavery as well as the driving back of Native Americans and Hispanics during the period of western expansion, the Asian American authors of the essay acknowledge the mistreatment
of these racial minorities in the past and subsequently express support for their desires for justice in American society.

Similarly, an article in the Asian American Political Alliance Newspaper raises the issue of how every racial minority group, except Asians, were underrepresented at UC Berkeley. Regarding the composition of the student body at Berkeley, the article contends, “About 10% or 2700 are Oriental, ½% or 100 are Chicano...2-3% are Black, and there is a small handful of Native Americans. The Chicanos are the largest minority in California, 10% of the state population, and yet are only sparingly represented. The Orientals...are conspicuously better represented and yet constitute only a small portion of the population. Why is this?”[54] Even though Asians were already well represented (and, in all likelihood, overrepresented), they still addressed the underrepresentation of other Third World students and recognized the need for the increased enrollment of such students. Thus, Asian American activists of the late sixties and early seventies appeared to have taken on the concerns of other racial minorities and backed their demands.

Conversely, other students of color sometimes addressed the specific issues and concerns of Asian American students as well. In such instances, the concerns of Asian Americans were usually voiced by African American students, who often composed the most outspoken minority group on campuses. The Black Student Union of California State University at Hayward occasionally expressed their support for the Vietnamese and demanded the end of the Vietnam War, which was usually the main concern of Asian Americans at the time. An article in the Black Student Union News Service describes the intentions behind their participation in an anti-war demonstration: “We are for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam...for self-determination for Vietnam and Black America.” The article adds, “The demonstrations of November 13, 14 and 15 are important components of the people's fight against America’s imperial ambitions and a concrete show of support for the courageous Vietnamese who have labored under Western oppression.”[55] As this article shows, the Black Student Union shared the same concerns for the Vietnamese people as fellow Asian American students. African American students felt that the Vietnamese, like Blacks, were oppressed by American power holders and recognized that they, too, were fighting for liberation. Thus, African American students occasionally expressed their support for the struggles of the Vietnamese people for self-determination, which was often more of an Asian-centered issue.

In most instances of support for Asian American causes by other minorities, however, such support for Asians was extended to all other Third World people. In another issue of the Black Student Union News Service, one article declares, “ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE. Black power to Black people, Brown power to Brown people, Red power to Red people, and Yellow power to Ho Hi Minh, and Comrade Kim Il Sung, the courageous leader of the 40,000,000 Korean people.”[56] In addition to voicing their support for the struggles of Ho Chi Minh, Kim Il Sung, and
their respective peoples, the Black Student Union extended their support for all other Third World people as well.

Regarding more local matters, the Young People's Socialist League, a predominantly African American student organization at Berkeley, demanded ethnic studies programs for Mexican, Native, and Asian Americans in one of their handbills: "Commendable as it is, however, the Black Studies program should be considered the first step towards the establishment of an Ethnic Studies department covering other ethnic groups in the United States, such as Mexican-Americans, American Indians and Oriental-Americans."[57] Although the African American students had already obtained a Black Studies program for themselves, they still conveyed the need for Chicano, Native American, and Asian American studies programs. Such instances of interracial support—not only by Asian American students for other Third World people, but also by other Third World students for Asian Americans and all other people of color—illustrate the inclusiveness of the Asian American movement and its sibling minority movements.

Asian Americans and other colored people also found their separate communities openly accepting each other, despite their superficial differences. Participants of the Asian American movement actively immersed themselves with other racial minority communities and, in turn, welcomed non-Asians into their own groups. Activist Miriam Louie recalls how she visited “young bloods from communities of color across the U.S....We met Roy Whang, a Korean American from Detroit who was working with Black auto workers in the Dodge Revolutionary Workers Movement; George Singh, a Vietnam vet and ‘Bi’ with Indian and Mexican parents.”[58] These activists, in addition to purposefully immersing themselves in other minority communities, discovered other Asian Americans who naturally found themselves immersed with people and struggles of other colors.

Conversely, Asian Americans accepted other minorities into their community organizations. While discussing his Asian American community service group, Nelson Nagai notes, “Non-Asians could also belong (Yellow Seed adopted a homeless Chicano kid and let him live at the center).”[59] Not only did Asian Americans welcome other people of color into their own group, but in this instance, they also took a Hispanic child under their own wing. Guest speakers from other minority movements and communities were often invited as well. As Pat Sumi remembers, “We did everything from bringing in folk singers and blues singers, Angela Davis as a speaker, Panthers, and Brown Berets.”[60] Participants of the Asian American movement were interested in the perspectives of fellow minority activists and were keen in receiving them into their organizations. Hence, Asian American activists and activists of other minority movements were eager to accept each other.

Evidently, there was a considerable amount of mutual support and acceptance between Asian Americans and other activists of color. Asian American activists supported the specific causes of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. Moreover, they addressed the broad issues that pertained to all
underprivileged racial minorities, even the issues that had less relevance to Asian Americans. Likewise, other Third World activists took up Asian American concerns, in both international and domestic terms. Moreover, Asian American communities and other colored communities opened up to one another and welcomed their Third World brethren into their own lives. Thus, the experiences of Asian American activists in the San Francisco Bay Area during the late sixties and early seventies were marked by a considerable amount of interracial support and acceptance.

Working Together

With mutual acceptance and shared goals came shared efforts, and Bay Area Asian Americans found themselves joining in the struggles of other racial minorities in a variety of settings. In describing the guiding principles of Asian American activism in the late sixties and early seventies, Steve Louie mentions, “One of the hallmarks of the Asian American Movement was to ‘unite all who can be united,’ whether that was within the Asian community or with other communities, especially people of color.”[61] Asian American activists mainly took an inclusive approach in their activities, and they joined with other Third World people when the opportunity arose. As a result of this open attitude, Louie describes, “For the first time, Asian Americans were visibly joining en masse with black and brown people to fight racism and other forms of oppression.”[62] Moreover, the collective efforts between Asian Americans and other people of color led to stronger feelings of unity.

For instance, Shin’ya Ono describes the sense of interracial comradery that developed while he worked at a community mental health center that was established and maintained by African, Hispanic, and Asian Americans: “[C]lose working relationships based upon mutual understanding and trust were built among the core group of workers of different ethnic groups: Chicanos and other Latinos, African Americans, Chinese (both Chinese Americans and immigrants), Filipino, Japanese Americans.”[63] At their mental health center, Asian Americans and other racial minority groups joined together to provide counseling and assistance for other people of color in the community. Thus, the shared characteristics among the workers (being racial minorities) and their common goal (to help other underprivileged people of color from the community) helped to unite these seemingly diverse groups of people.

Asian American cooperation with other races extended internationally as well, as a number of Asian American activists from the Bay Area apparently traveled outside the United States on occasion to personally participate in the activities of international people of color. In recalling her participation in the activities of fellow Third World revolutionaries outside the country throughout late sixties and early seventies, Miriam Louie describes, “We also met and partied with ‘the enemy’—revolutionaries from national liberation movements around the world, including Vietnam, Korea, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa.”[64] In addition to partaking in the events of Korean and Vietnamese revolutionaries, Asian Americans such as Louie engaged with people from Latin American, Caribbean, and African
liberation movements. Louie elaborates on one of her activities with Cuban revolutionaries: “Back in 1969 some of us…decided to go on the first Venceremos! ("We Will Win!") Brigade. We cut Cuban sugar cane to break the U.S. government blockade and show our solidarity with those cheeky brown folks who had the nerve to make a revolution right under Uncle Sam’s nose.”[65] As Louie illustrates, some Asian Americans dared to defy U.S. embargo regulations to show their support for Cuban resistance and symbolize their unity with them.

Direct collaboration between Asian Americans and other racial minorities was especially common in San Francisco Bay Area colleges and universities, however. The most prominent example of interracial collaboration involving Asian Americans was the Third World strikes at San Francisco State College and UC Berkeley near the end of the sixties. The Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) of each school led the strike in its respective campus, and they both possessed practically all the same principles and characteristics. According to the Berkeley TWLF, the strikes were a collective effort among various students of color: “The AASU [Afro-American Student Union], Mexican-American Student Confederation (MASC), and Asian-American Political Alliance (AAPA) formed a united position and began to function as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF).”[66] The Third World strikes were especially significant given the variety of racial minority student organizations that were involved.

In terms of general principles, the TWLF ultimately wanted liberation and self-determination for all people of color. Moreover, they understood that the best way to attain this was for all Third World people to unite in struggle, as that would provide the greatest threat to the American elite and ruling class. A booklet from the San Francisco State Strike Committee (which was led by the TWLF) recognizes the power which each minority group had in fighting against the American elite, stating that such institutional power holders see American minorities as “a threat to their horded wealth. So too, a threat are the Vietnamese, Latin Americans, and African people who have taken up the gun in the name of Liberation to fight against those economic powers that are materially oppressing them.”[67] Hence, the TWLF envisioned all Third World people fighting against imperialism—in both domestic and global terms—to obtain liberation for all people of color.

Regarding more immediate goals at their colleges, the TWLF made broad and inclusive demands that reflected their collective Third World stance. These demands often pertained to enhancing the education of all the Third World students at their respective campuses:

Members of the Afro-American Student Union, the Asian-American Political Alliance and the Mexican-American Student Confederation have formed the Third World Liberation Front around the following basic interests and issues: 1) the autonomy of Third World Departments and funds for a future Third World College, 2) more Third World personnel at all levels…3) increased enrollment, economic and academic aid for Third World Students.[68]
While the demands from the TWLF were usually made in broad and collective terms, demands pertaining to specific minority groups were also addressed by the TWLF, and it is worth noting that the specific demands of Asian American students were acknowledged and respected as well. Demands by the Berkeley TWLF, for instance, included “30 Work Study positions for the Chinatown and Manilatown projects, and 10 EOP counselors, including a full-time Asian Coordinator.”[69] Hence, Asian American students and their concerns were also recognized as valuable components of the TWLF.

The Third World strikes eventually gained a partial victory. While students were not able to obtain an entire Third World college, they were able to have an Ethnic Studies department that included curriculum for each of the racial minority groups the students demanded: “The University established a department of Ethnic Studies in the Fall of 1969. The Ethnic Studies Department had four separate programs: Afro-American Studies, Asian American Studies, Chicano Studies, and Native American Studies.”[70] Thus, with ethnic studies curriculum for African, Mexican, Native, and Asian Americans, the Third World students at San Francisco State and Berkeley made significant gains through their united efforts. Moreover, these concessions made by their respective schools became a testament to the force of collective activism by various racial minorities.[71]

A number of other notable instances of interracial collaboration involving Asian American students in the Bay Area occurred around this time as well. The Asian American Political Alliance at Berkeley lists the variety of activities they had been involved with as of the fall of 1969: “Some past activities of Berkeley AAPA include: Free Huey Rallies at the Oakland Courthouse, Chinatown Forums, McCarran Act lobbies, MASC Boycott, Third World Liberation Front Strike.”[72] As the Asian American Political Alliance indicates, Asian Americans participated in the demonstrations to release Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton and helped with the boycott by the Mexican American Student Confederation. Participation in such events showed that the attitude of Third World unity among Asian American students had been prevalent outside the context of the Third World strikes as well. In another issue of the Asian American Political Alliance Newspaper, an article describes how members of the Asian America Political Alliance coordinated with Black Panther members to interrupt the Hemispheric Conference to End the Vietnam War. As the article illustrates, “[W]ith the aid of New York and California Black Panthers, [AAPA-Berkeley members] promptly rushed and seized the podium during the progress of the meeting.”[73] Both the Asian American Political Alliance and the Black Panther Party collectively interrupted the conference to demand that their own views also be heard at the meeting.

Another notable example of Asian American students unifying with other students of color occurred in 1972 at Boalt Hall. Third World student organizations at the Berkeley law school joined together to demand greater enrollment for minority students. Of this event, the Asian American Review describes, “[N]early all Asian law
students at Boalt Hall, the University of California Law School, walked out of classes. This walk-out signified their support of a decision by the Black Law Students Association (BLSA) to boycott law school classes, and served as their affirmation to a request by BLSA that Asian and Chicano students join in the boycott.”[74] To show their support and cooperation with other minority law students, Asian American students at Boalt Hall joined in the boycott against the admissions system at the school. Moreover, the Asian American Law Students Association (AALSA) made demands that represented the needs of all the minority students at the law school: “[U]pon walking out, Asian law students met to determine what their position would be...[which included the demand] that minority representation on the faculty and in the administration be increased, particularly that the dean in charge of the special admissions program be a member of a racial minority.”[75] While they did make demands that specifically related to Asian American enrollment, the Asian American students also made demands for the general minority population at the law school, thus demonstrating their Third World solidarity with other students of color at Boalt Hall.

The interracial collaboration and solidarity at the Boalt Hall strike did not go along perfectly, however. Through the early and later portions of the strike, the minority student organizations mainly worked separately and gave little consideration to coordinated demonstration efforts: “[I]t had been the position of the AALSA that Asians would join the strike only if a Third World coalition was instituted to control strike tactics and negotiations with the administration. It is not clear if this position was ever brought home to the Chicanos or Blacks who, in any event, continued independently to pursue their own goals using their own tactics.”[76] Although African, Hispanic, and Asian Americans all agreed to boycott their classes, the implementation of a fully coordinated demonstration was minimal through parts of the student revolt. What mainly contributed to this absence of multiracial collaboration was a lack of confidence and trust among the protesting parties. The Asian American Review describes, “Asian spokesmen were sent to meet with other Third World group spokesmen on two occasions with instructions to try to form some kind of working alliance. On the first occasion the spokesmen returned saying that they had been put down by the Blacks because Asians had become invisible and that the Blacks were not to be trusted in any event.”[77] Throughout parts of the strike, the African Americans believed the Asian American students would only provide insignificant contributions to the cause, and, conversely, the Asian American students had little faith in the loyalty of the African American students.

With all this close interaction among these various races, it should be no surprise that conflicts would occasionally arise, as it did at the Boalt Hall strike. Even while uniting under the banner of racial justice and parity, these separate groups undoubtedly faced subtly different conditions and had distinct demands among each of them that divided them at times. Nevertheless, such instances of division should not overshadow the overall cooperation and collective endeavors that was achieved by these diverse groups of people in the late sixties and early seventies. While multi-racial collaboration involving Asian Americans was frequent in college campuses
such as Berkeley and San Francisco State, it was prevalent in the Bay Area’s community settings as well. Moreover, Asian American activists participated in the activities of Third World revolutionaries outside the United States. Although not every attempt at interracial cooperation involving Asian Americans and other people of color was a flawless demonstration of multi-ethnic solidarity, the prevalence and sheer intentions of such collective activities reveal the extent of the unifying attitude among Third World activists during this period.

Conclusion

As shown above, interracial influences and collaboration have played a significant role in shaping the Asian American movement. Asian American activists found themselves inspired by the struggles of other minority activists who preceded them in political movements such as the civil rights movement and the early Black Power movement. Moreover, Asian Americans increasingly realized that they were in the same boat as the rest of their Third World brethren in America, with similar histories of racial discrimination and political oppression. Consequently, interracial support and cooperation involving Asian American activists were fairly prominent throughout the late sixties and early seventies, not only in left-leaning college settings but also in ordinary non-academic settings as well. Thus, both the why’s and how’s of the Asian American movement strongly incorporated other people of color.

While this investigation explicitly focused on the Asian American aspect of interracial solidarity and collaboration among Third World people, it also attempted to give a picture of what basic features composed one’s attitudes of Third World solidarity, regardless of one’s color. If we can learn why Asian Americans, the alleged “model minority” of America, were able to engage in the same activities as fellow racial minorities in the country, who were generally less well off in American society, then we can understand what characteristics compose the most fundamental components of Third World identity. Asian Americans were never sold and raised as slaves to toil under the hands of cruel plantation owners, and they were never murdered in wars or forced off their own land to satiate the territorial appetites of European-Americans. Nevertheless, like their African, Hispanic, and Native American brethren, Asian Americans realized that they also suffered injustice throughout their history in America and continue to experience unfair treatment in the present. This observation of Asian Americans, bound to the “minority” label but uncertain of the “model” descriptor, will hopefully shed some light on what composes the foundational attributes of Third World identity.

This investigation on multiracial unity involving Asian Americans is not complete, however. Although nearly all my evidence from the late sixties and early seventies appears to indicate that Asian American activists and their inter-ethnic allies were unified by race, I believe the battle they were fighting was essentially one of class. These activists studied from the writings of Marx and Lenin as well as Mao, Guevara, and Fanon, who all had clear Marxist influences. Moreover, the struggles of Third
World people, at least in the international realm, were identified more as struggles of class than as struggles of race.

Aside from the occasional mention of Marx and Mao, I only came across two pieces of evidence which explicitly indicate the priority of class over race in multi-ethnic collaboration involving Asian Americans. The lack of overt Marxist ideology around this time should be no surprise, however. With the United States in the midst of the Cold War, government agencies attempted to crack down on American communist organizations, and those in college settings who had Marxist associations were fired or disciplined by college administrators. Openly expressing Marxist attitudes was almost dangerous in such an environment. Instead, it was probably much safer for the Third World movements in the country to take up the same racial concerns that the civil rights movement addressed before them. Moreover, race was just a simpler issue to identify: one could find an exploited poor-working class individual somewhere in America, and if that person happened to be African, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American, one could easily conclude that the person was exploited just by looking at the color of that person’s skin. The issue of racial discrimination was simpler to understand than the complex theories of Marxism. Thus, there were a few important factors which may have been the cause for the minimal prevalence of evidence that emphasized class concerns over race in the Third World movements in America.

The first piece of evidence came from a panel discussion that took place in New York in 1971, in which one of the panelists explained, “I think those in the Asian-American movement recognize the fact that if they go purely on an ethnic line, the movement would be a self-defeating one. Rather than defining their alliance in this country in racial terms, they define it on a class basis. They ally themselves with the blacks, the Puerto Ricans, the poor whites.”[78] The other piece of evidence comes from the Asian Students Marxism Study Group of UC Berkeley, who state, “[W]e must not limit the basis of our unity to our individual identities as ethnic minority groups (although that is generally the starting point when we stand up in the struggle against racism) because this inevitably leads to division based on an overriding concern with the immediate interests of one’s group.” They continue, “Instead it must be based on the development of a more long-range common perspective based upon an understanding of the material basis of racism in this capitalist society and therefore what is ultimately the object of our struggle.”[79] While this piece of evidence does originate from the Bay Area, it would be no surprise if the political leanings of this student organization provided a more Marxist perspective on the Third World movements than was typical.

If anything can be concluded from these two passages—and be in accordance to what has been said in the rest of this paper—it is that some of these activists, too, understood that their interracial alliances appeared to be forged by race on the surface, but if these alliances were to survive in the long term, they had to recognize the class unity that was actually underlying their interracial solidarity. Looking back on the flaws of the Boalt Hall strike, it can clearly be seen that the divisions
 originated from the racial differences among the protesting parties. Asian American students were dismissed by the other Third World students because Asians were believed to be politically invisible, and African Americans were not trusted by other Third World students because they were thought to be unreliable. Perhaps these racial distinctions that these groups placed on one another would not have surfaced had their unifying theme been based on class rather than race. While my analysis of the priority of class in the multi-ethnic endeavors of the Asian American movement stops here, it is with great hope that subsequent research will be able to uncover the secret to this important aspect of the movement.

Notes:


[6] This should not be mistaken with the redress for Japanese internees in 1988, however, which provided an apology and $20,000 payment to each survivor of the internment camps.

[8] There is debate on (1) whether the “Asian American movement” ended as the Vietnam War ended, (2) whether the movement continued on into the mid-1980s, or (3) whether the movement continues today. In order to provide this analysis with the depth it deserves, my time frame for the “Asian American movement” will be limited to the late sixties and early seventies, when political activism among Asian Americans was at its height.

[9] My original research for this project could not have been possible without the help of a number of extremely thoughtful and hard-working individuals. I would first like to thank Ms. Wei-Chi Poon, who maintains the Asian American Studies Collection in the Ethnic Studies Library at UC Berkeley. Although I was unable to have the pleasure of personally meeting her during my stay in the Bay Area, my highest regards go out to Ms. Poon for the boundless time and effort she has put into cataloguing and organizing the countless archival documents at the Asian American Studies Collection. I would also like to thank the staff of the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, especially Mr. James Eason, who personally assisted me in gathering archival material that pertained to the Third World strike at Berkeley. My gratitude also goes out to the staff at the Labor Archives and Research Center of San Francisco State University, who helped me obtain additional material on the Third World strikes. Lastly, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Jeffrey Barlow, for suggesting that I conduct archival research in California in the first place and for his constant encouragement and guidance throughout this endeavor.


[12] Ibid., 42.


[16] Ibid., 136.

[17] Ibid., 136.

[19] Ibid., 168.


[21] Ibid., 42.


[24] Ibid., 161.


[29] Ibid., 12.


For a very thorough overview of the anti-imperialist/post-colonial movements and ideologies of the twentieth-century, see Robert J.C. Young's Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001). The people and movements I cover regarding this subject matter are merely those that helped influence the Asian American movement, and they by no means reflect the most important (or the full extent of) anti-imperialist/post-colonial figures and events that emerged throughout the past several decades.


Ibid., xix.

Dong, 195.

Steve Louie, xxii.

Particularly notable was Huey P. Newton’s admiration for Mao. The co-founder of the Black Panther Party studied Mao alongside Marx, Fanon, and Guevara as early as the beginnings of the Black Panther Party. Newton intermittently refers to Mao’s teachings throughout his autobiography Revolutionary Suicide (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), and he reflects on his 1971 trip to China with much respect and admiration in Chapter 32 (pp. 322-327) of his book.

Alex Hing, East Wind 2, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1983), 44.

For more on the concept and nature of the Third World, see Hedley Bull’s “The Revolt Against the West” (217-228) and Peter Lyon’s “The Emergence of the Third World” (229-238) in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson’s The Expansion of International Society (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).


[44] Ibid., 251.


[51] Alex Hing to East-West, 5.


[59] Nagai, 258.


[61] Steve Louie, xv.

[62] Ibid., xxi.


[64] Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, 93.

[65] Ibid., 93.


[71] Regarding the impact such Third World strikes has across the country today, the National Association for Ethnic Studies reports at least two dozen major ethnic studies programs throughout U.S. college campuses in its website (http://www.ethnicstudies.org/programs.htm, accessed 27 April 2005). For more information on the development of Asian American studies in particular since the late 1960s, see Chapter 5 (pp. 132-161) of Wei’s The Asian American Movement.


[75] Ibid., 6.

[76] Ibid., 7.

[77] Ibid., 9.

[78] K.C. Foung, quoted in Bridge 1, no. 1 (July-August, 1971), 11.

[79] Asian Students Marxism Study Group, 12.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


Asian American Students Association to the editors of ???. Letter, Yale University, April 26, 1970. Document found in: University of California, Berkeley; Ethnic Studies Library; Asian American Collection; archival documents cabinets; Organizations, Student folder.


1974, 12. Document found in: University of California, Berkeley; Ethnic Studies Library; Asian American Collection; archival documents cabinets; Asian American Studies folder.

Black Student Union. “Student Mobilization Committee.” Black Student Union News Service, California State University, Hayward, October 23, 1969, 2.


“Cutbacks Hit Asian Students,” The Asian Student 1, no. 1 (November 1973), 1, 8-10.


Hing, Alex to East-West. East-West 2, no. 2 (April 22, 1970), 5.

---. “On Strike! Shut It Down!” East Wind 2, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1983), 42-46.


Secondary sources


