

Elder Wisdom, 1960s Asian American Activism,
and the Struggle for Third World Education

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Abstract

The 1960s Asian American Movement and 1968–69 Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) Strikes dismantled racist stereotypes of Asian Americans as “silent citizens” while also connecting the community to a broader global liberation movement. This research explores how these 1960s radical movements continue to influence modern Asian American community organizing and efforts to build multiracial solidarity. This paper draws upon the wisdom of interviewees who participated in the 1960s TWLF Strikes at SFSU and UC Berkeley, and the radicalizing lessons they shared with a younger generation of students, activists, and community leaders.

Through a series of conversations with former TWLF student members and leftist activists, this paper reflects on the following questions: In light of the broad political changes that emerged from the 1960s Third World struggle, how do we begin to understand the significance of these movements today? What lessons can we learn from Third World solidarity and the origins of Asian America, given the institutional limitations of the Ethnic Studies department at UC Berkeley? The theoretical and social foundations of these past movements challenge capitalist, imperialist perspectives and emphasize an urgent community focus. By rediscovering community-oriented learning and “self-determination,” Asian American students can revitalize the spirit of the Third World struggle in Ethnic Studies and the broader community.

Introduction

The Asian American movement of the 1960s was not an isolated questioning of self-identity in American society. Rather, Asian American self-identity and panethnic “Yellow Power” ideology developed as a direct result of the 1960s–70s Black Power liberation movement.¹ These two mutually-influencing forces of social consciousness contributed to the overarching Third World struggle to liberate oppressed people across the world. Rooted in the long legacy of struggle and resilience by communities of color, this historical period of unrest was characterized by various acts of resistance against capitalism and white supremacy. The founding of the Asian American movement coincided with the Indigenous occupation of Alcatraz Island, protests against the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, the Free Huey movement of the Black Panther Party, and the formation of La Coalición Latinoamericana de Empleos.² As such, the creation of a pan-Asian identity was inspired by, and in turn inspired, the radical politics of simultaneous social movements in other communities of color.

Despite contemporary shifts in demographic and political positions of Asian Americans, the legacy of Yellow Power and founding of the Asian American movement continues to influence modern-day civil rights. Yellow Power and the rise of Asian American identity harnessed the collective power of a “consolidated yellow people”³ through a shared pan-Asian identity in opposition to racist and imperialist powers. This paper will explore whether the original 1960s vision of the Asian American movement has been realized, drawing upon the elder wisdom and lived experiences of 1960s–80s community leaders, educators, and former student activists. My research also strives to address how elder wisdom can galvanize younger

¹ Amy Uyematsu, “The Emergence of Yellow Power in America,” (reprinted from *Gidra*, October, 1969), in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, eds., Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong, Franklin Odo, Buck Wong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971), 1–5.

² Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*, (Temple University Press: 1996), 1-15.

³ Amy Uyematsu, “The Emergence of Yellow Power in America,” 9–13.

generations towards radicalization, enabling them to identify with and address critical issues in the local community.⁴

Through my conversations with elder activists, I plan to analyze the present-day effects of TWLF and Asian American identity. One of the lasting impacts of this movement was the creation of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies within institutions of higher education. This was a direct result of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) Strikes of 1968–1969 at San Francisco State (SFSU) and UC Berkeley (UCB), with student protests continuing after the creation of the university-sanctioned Ethnic Studies Department at UCB. Young people of color organized a collective strike under the project of the “Third World” in solidarity with communities of color worldwide, seeking to build an autonomous “Third World College” that centered the histories and priorities of Third World people.⁵ However, tensions emerged in the strikes’ aftermath as a result of many demands being left unfulfilled, and growing discontentment regarding institutional control superseding student autonomy in Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies. More specifically, while TWLF protestors initially demanded a student-led “Third World College” led by and for the people, this autonomy gradually disappeared as university administration further entrenched the program in academic institutionalization and top-down leadership.⁶ While the TWLF Strikes centered on the voices of oppressed and exploited people, the resulting creation of detached academic programs gave insufficient control to Third World people.

My research aims to further illuminate the long legacy of multiethnic coalitions of color

⁴ This paper uses the lexicon employed by Dr. Jennie M. Luna in an Ethnic Studies Review publication: “We used the “tw” in lowercase to highlight how society marginalized people of the Third World. When referring to the twLF in 1999, I use the lower case “tw”; I use TWLF when referring to the 1969 strike. In 1999, through oral history, we were told that in the movements of the 1960s and 70s, the “tw” was used in the lower case. As such, this became the standard on our documents.”

⁵ Gilmore, Anthony, and Kai Nham, “The Third World Liberation Front.” *The Berkeley Revolution*.

⁶ Harvey Dong, “A Bookstore for Everybody.” *Seizing the Moment: Twentieth-Century Chinese American Activism* (2009): 122–127.

in the Bay Area, and the unfinished work of the Third World Liberation movement at home and abroad. Despite the unsatisfactory institutionalization of Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies, past social movements such as the TWLF Strikes set a historical precedent for cross-community solidarity between people of color. The strikes dismantled the pre-existing assumption of Asian Americans as “silent citizens” striving for white assimilation.⁷ The 1960s vision of the Asian American movement envisioned a radical force with the power of the people, upholding the principles of multiracial solidarity, decolonization, and self-determination.

Literature Review

To understand the role of the Asian American movement in broader struggles for liberation, it is necessary to establish a distinction between the commodification of race and racial identity as a form of resistance.⁸ Although the Asian American movement and TWLF were founded on principles of opposing expansionist, capitalistic, and imperialistic forces, modern demographic and political changes have enabled the commodification of race and ethnicity as forms of social capital.⁹ USC Professor and writer Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, “The entire concept of panethnic entrepreneurship, with its basis in race as a product or function of economic capital and its connotations of ‘selling out,’ is antithetical to Asian American academia specifically and to Asian American intellectuals generally.”¹⁰ As Nguyen stated, the process of transforming a marginalized racial or ethnic identity into a form of capital to be marketed is directly opposed to the Asian American identity’s founding anti-capitalist principles. While the

⁷ Amy Uyematsu, “The Emergence of Yellow Power,” 1–5.

⁸ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford University Press: 2002), 5-7.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The term “panethnic entrepreneurship” was first used in this context by Yen Le Espiritu in *Asian American Panethnicity*. Viet Thanh Nguyen writes: “Panethnic entrepreneurship is a product of the dialectical relationship between a capitalism that exploits race and the democratic struggles that have fought for greater racial and economic equality. This dialectic has transformed race and racial identity into focal points of organization and struggle, but it has also transformed race and racial identity into commodities.”

formation of pan-Asian unity has also influenced American capitalism by creating a panethnic market for goods, its foundation is inherently rooted in working class, multiethnic solidarity and resistance against economically and politically exploitative systems.¹¹

The original concept of the Asian American movement served as a rallying point for activists, allowing them to channel their anger at the historical oppression of Asian ethnic communities into organizing for an anticapitalist people's liberation. The Vietnam War also served as a major impetus for the movement, with many anti-war protestors recognizing the underlying motives of US colonialism embedded in the invasion of Vietnam.¹² Questioning their identity and belonging in traditional American society, Asian Americans took pride in the collective power of a new political identity. The original term "Asian American" was first created in 1968 by activists Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka, who founded the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) at UCB to "unify previously separate groups of ethnic Asian students."¹³ After witnessing the Black Panther Party rally around the spirit of self-definition, the two student activists created the label to restore autonomy separate from the derogatory "Oriental" and "Asiatic" labels of old.

The Asian American label also created a sense of solidarity with colonized and decolonized communities across the world. Asian American college students began to perceive themselves as part of the global youth rebellion. As stated by Richard Aoki in a 1968 AAPA rally at UCB: "We Asian Americans support all non-white liberation movements and believe that all minorities in order to be truly liberated must have complete control over the political,

¹¹ Larry Kubota, "Yellow Power," *Gidra* 1, no. 1 (April 1969): 3-4.

¹² Helena Kim, "The Vietnam War," A Creatives Guide to Asian American Media Studies, Cornell University, December 10, 2018, <https://blogs.cornell.edu/asianammedia/2018/12/10/the-vietnam-war/>.

¹³ Nina Wallace, "Yellow Power: The Origins of Asian America," *Densho*, June 26, 2020, <https://densho.org/catalyst/asian-american-movement/>.

economic, and social institutions within their respective communities.”¹⁴ In turn, the creation of the Asian American identity forced U.S. institutions to respond to the formation of a new, burgeoning Asian American political body. Ichioka and Gee’s creation of “Asian American” occurred in tandem with the 1968–69 TWLF Strikes, synergistically driving major civil rights advancements in higher education. The collective student-led movements reflected a major cultural shift within the Asian American college-aged population in the Bay Area. Rather than focusing on professional development (as was the standard post-World War II push towards acculturation), students began to address the systemic discrimination they faced within institutions of higher education and towards the Asian American community at large.¹⁵

Third World solidarity motivated an outpouring of advocacy and youth leadership in the community. Various Asian American-led groups participated in the TWLF movement, including the newly-formed Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), the Chinese Students Club (CSC), and the Nisei Students Club (NSC). One participating body, Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA), consisted of SFSU and UCB student activists who worked within the San Francisco Chinatown ethnic enclave. This organization focused especially on socioeconomic issues in Chinatown, advocating for an education with an “urgent community focus.”¹⁶ One bulletin detailing the ICSA’s involvement in the TWLF strike stated: “Chinatown is a ghetto in San Francisco, there are approximately 50,000 Chinese of whom the vast majority live in Chinatown ... There are no adequate courses in any department or school at S.F. State that even begin to deal with the problems of the Chinese people in their exclusionary and racist

¹⁴ Amardeep Singh, “Asian American Little Magazines 1968-1974,” Lehigh University, July 17, 2019, <https://scalar.lehigh.edu/asian-american-little-magazines/asian-american-little-magazines-welcome.9>.

¹⁵ Harvey Dong, “Third World Liberation Comes to San Francisco State and UC Berkeley,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (2009): 95–106.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

environment.”¹⁷ This desire to bridge the gap between college campuses and communities became one of the driving factors behind the TWLF and student-led activism in Bay Area Chinatowns.

The focus of the TWLF struggles at both UCB and SFSU was the demand for a “Third World College,” autonomously administered by Third World people and students. Self-determination was a critical founding principle of this aspiration, with one editorial in the TWLF newspaper stating: “We do not need non-Third World people to do it for us; we are capable of doing it ourselves.”¹⁸ The original vision of the Third World College would enable the education rather than indoctrination of communities historically underrepresented in higher education, paving the way for resistance to broader exploitative structures in the U.S. and abroad. Growing community support was simultaneously met with an escalation in violent repression tactics, with Reagan ordering the National Guard onto campus, “effectively making it an armed camp.”¹⁹ On March 4th, 1969, the Academic Senate overwhelmingly adopted the face-saving measure of establishing a Department of Ethnic Studies. As Dong writes: “The Senate allowed for third world student participation in the formulation of course curriculum and promised that the department’s structure would be ‘of sufficient flexibility to permit evolution into a college’.”²⁰ In response, the TWLF suspended all strike activities, with support waning over the following years as more original strikers graduated from UCB.²¹

Compared to its initial founding where lessons were almost entirely student-guided and curriculum tailor-made to local advocacy opportunities, present-day Ethnic Studies programs

¹⁷ “San Francisco State Strike 1968 Student Brochure.” *Asian American Movement 1968*, Asian Community Center Archives, 16 Jan. 2008, http://aam1968.blogspot.com/2007/12/blog-post_3620.html.

¹⁸ Kubota, “Yellow Power,” 3-4.

¹⁹ Dong, “Third World Liberation,” 95–106.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

have become institutionalized at the expense of community-oriented learning.²² According to Ethnic Studies professor and former TWLF activist Harvey Dong, “The balancing act at times leaned toward bridging the campus and community, but more often the focus was on legitimization on campus at the expense of the community.”²³ This trend included the gradual removal of Third World student decision-making power for the Ethnic Studies course curriculum originally granted by the UCB Academic Senate on March 4, 1969.²⁴ The Senate also promised the Ethnic Studies department would be “of sufficient flexibility to permit evolution into a college.”²⁵ Despite this settlement, budget allocations for a single department prevented the expansion of the program into TWLF’s original vision of a Third World College.²⁶ Contemporary Asian American Studies curriculum is almost entirely devoid of its proletarian roots and anti-capitalist critique, preserving only some analysis of racial identity politics. While students formerly tailored instruction to poverty-related issues in Chinatowns and other local communities, current programs remain deeply entrenched in institutional trappings that serve university rather than community interests.

The Third World struggle to link campuses and oppressed communities has experienced a constant back-and-forth in progress from its founding in the 1960s. The 1999 twLF Hunger Strike for Ethnic Studies serves as a key example; Dong described the late 90s as a period of U.S. institutions “taking back gains from the 60s and 70s.” This included the rescindment of affirmative action, reduction in social services, and Proposition 227 ending California’s three-year bilingual education program. The conservatism of the 90s also included the cutting

²² Dong, “Third World Liberation Comes to San Francisco State and UC Berkeley,” 95–106.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Gilmore, Anthony, and Kai Nham. “The Third World Liberation Front.” *The Berkeley Revolution*, UC Berkeley's Digital Humanities and Global Urban Humanities Initiative, <https://revolution.berkeley.edu/projects/twlf/>.

and cancellation of Ethnic Studies courses at UCB. However, students were able to build a localized movement with the goal of saving Ethnic Studies.

The conservatism of the 1990s included increasing attacks on “multiculturalism,” as well as issues concerning racial diversity.²⁷ Amidst this widespread cultural oppression, the concept of “multiculturalism” began to serve as a diluted, shallow replacement for the critical perspectives in Ethnic Studies. By 1999, budget cuts and administrative pressure heightened the risk of UCB’s Ethnic Studies Department being eliminated altogether. Recognizing the fight was in their hands, students first organized to occupy the Social Sciences Building²⁸, then escalated to a hunger strike when the administration remained indifferent.²⁹ In the face of police brutality and violent crackdowns, student activists maintained collective unity and pressure on the administration. After the sixth day of the hunger strike, the chancellor was pressured to meet with students and negotiate the twLF 1999 demands.

The 1999 twLF hunger strike resulted in eight faculty positions, the creation of a new institute on race and gender studies, the establishment of the Multicultural Community Center, and approval for an Ethnic Studies mural in the Social Sciences Building. “I don’t know how many [UCB Ethnic Studies] instructors realize they [are] here as a result of the hunger strike,” Harvey remarked in our interview. Nevertheless, the 1999 Hunger Strike signaled to students and the broader campus community that reunification under the Third World cause was not only possible but politically influential.

The far-reaching impact of the Third World Liberation movement extended beyond college campuses to local communities. Many former TWLF student activists went on to play

²⁷ Jennie M. Luna. “1999 TwLF at UC Berkeley: An Intergenerational Struggle for Ethnic Studies.” *Ethnic Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (2019): 83–98. <https://doi.org/10.1525/esr.2019.42.2.83>.

²⁸ Formerly named Barrows Hall.

²⁹ Luna, “1999 TwLF at UC Berkeley,” 83–98.

major roles in the founding of mutual aid radical organizations.³⁰ The original location of International Hotel, for example, served as one locus of this work, where organizations including Asian Community Center and Everybody's Bookstore spearheaded the creation of mutual aid networks, community events for youth and elderly folks, educational programs, and labor rights organizing.³¹ Drawing upon their past experience under the TWLF banner, these organizers became advocates for radical movements led by the Black, Chicano, and Indigenous communities.

Simultaneously, these communities of color also demonstrated solidarity with Asian Americans in their fight against racism and imperialism. This was particularly illustrated by the outpouring of support for the Asian American community following the killing of Vincent Chin in 1982. When 27-year-old Vincent Chin was beaten to death by two white autoworkers, the pan-Asian American movement was joined by Black political allies, including renowned activist and U.S. presidential nominee Reverend Jesse Jackson.³² The precedent of interracial solidarity and Asian American community organizing created opportunities for mutual support and knowledge sharing in the collective Third World resistance.

In light of the broader political changes that emerged from the 1960s Third World struggle, how do we begin to understand the significance of these movements today? What lessons can we learn from Third World solidarity and the origins of Asian America, given the institutional constraints of an Ethnic Studies department compared to a Third World College? This paper seeks to explore these questions through the perspectives of former TWLF student

³⁰ Harvey Dong, "The Origins and Trajectory of Asian American Political Activism in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1968-1978." (PhD diss., UC Berkeley, 2002), 1-3.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Eddie Wong et al. "Asian Americans and Jesse Jackson – From Vincent Chin to the Rainbow Coalition – A Conversation with the Rev. Jesse Jackson." East Wind Ezine, September 10, 2020, <https://eastwinezine.com/asian-americans-and-jesse-jackson-from-vincent-chin-to-the-rainbow-coalition-a-conversation-with-the-rev-jesse-jackson/>.

activists and elder leftist organizers, in order to inform the younger generation of students on lessons from the 1960s Third World struggle. To develop a holistic analysis of elder wisdom and its influence on modern-day radical movements, we must not only explore TWLF gains and losses in academic spaces but the broader community changes that emerged from the 1960s liberation movement.

Methodology

My research draws upon interview conversations with Asian American elders with a history of involvement in spaces including TWLF strikes, anti-war leftist movements, women's liberation, and Black-Asian solidarity marches. This research is motivated by a strong personal interest in Asian American community organizing and political discourse. As a community organizing fellow at the Chinatown-based Banteay Srei and volunteer for Eastwind Books, I am deeply curious about how modern-day Ethnic Studies and community organizing tactics are influenced by their historical precedents. In my experience working with these organizations, I also wanted to uplift potential best practices and reforms for the future of the Asian American movement. By sharing examples of potential solutions, I hope to encourage and engage academic peers in the much-needed work of reimagining Ethnic Studies as a site of radicalization and community-centered learning. Furthermore, I recognize that addressing the problem of self-identity requires me to deconstruct harmful stereotypes depicting Asian Americans as passive, subservient followers. Through this research, I aim to acknowledge the linkage of Asian American civil rights to multiethnic solidarity, anti-imperialism, and social reform.

Despite the importance of elder wisdom and intergenerational knowledge-sharing within

the Asian American community and broader civil rights activism, there is a dearth of academic literature exploring this theme. Considering the ongoing influence of TWLF's legacy on Ethnic Studies and Asian American community organizing, the wisdom of former student activists is invaluable to current student leaders and educators. These folks possess both lived experiences of resistance against patriarchal racial capitalism and an intimate understanding of community organizing and mutual aid networks, particularly in the Oakland and San Francisco Chinatowns. Their knowledge ties Asian American community activism to a broader liberation movement including Black, Indigenous, Chicano, and other marginalized communities of color.

To analyze the legacy of TWLF and the Asian American movement, I decided upon a qualitative interview study. This approach allowed me to collect insights aligned with the narrow scope of the project. Furthermore, these methods allowed me to reflect upon the perspectives of former TWLF activists and elder community activists. I chose participants for the research through my existing connections in Asian American community-based organizations, including Eastwind Books and the Asian Pacific American Student Development office.

I conducted four separate 1-hour interviews, two in-person (conditions permitting) and two online in video call format. To collect insights, I used a combination of video and audio transcripts and notetaking, depending on each participant's comfort level with having the conversations recorded. To address issues of confidentiality, I initially confirmed the participants' preference for interview location and the use of their actual name or an alias in the paper. All interviewees agreed to have their actual names used in the research findings. I utilized a standard list of questions for each interview with added clarification and follow-up questions, allowing for a combination of uniformity amongst participants while tailoring conversations to the specific experiences of each interviewee. While all participants were active in the SFSU or

UCB TWLF strikes (if not both), each contributed unique insights based on their involvement in broader community-facing work inside and outside Chinatowns.

Results

Jean Dere is a leftist activist and former member of the 1970s Asian American anti-imperialist organization Wei Min She.³³ Dere was deeply involved in the activist movement of the 1960s activism through anti-war and women's liberation marches, the SFSU TWLF movement, and the Asian Community Center. In addition, she also worked at Everybody's Bookstore, which was the first Asian American bookstore in the U.S. and an integral part of the Bay Area leftist movement during its ten-year existence.³⁴

Harvey Dong is a current Ethnic Studies professor at UCB, teaching AAADS classes, as well as a former TWLF student activist and co-owner of the Asian American and Ethnic Studies bookstore Eastwind Books of Berkeley. Dong was heavily involved in community organizing, particularly in Oakland and SF Chinatown, including the founding of the Asian Community Center, Chinatown Cooperative Garment factory, Lee Mah and Jung Sai Garment Workers Support in Chinatown, and the I-Hotel. He also helped establish Everybody's Bookstore.

Donald Wong is a leftist activist who was deeply influenced by the UCB TWLF Strikes as a Berkeley High School student. Similarly, he has been involved in leftist community organizing in collaboration with radical grassroots groups on Kearny Street in San Francisco, which served as a central location for organizations such as Everybody's Bookstore and Asian Community Center.

³³ Wei Min She is an Asian American anti-imperialist organization in the S.F. Bay Area. The name means "organization for the people." Wei Min She is committed to building an anti-imperialist, multi-national, revolutionary mass movement in this country. For more information, visit <http://aam1968.blogspot.com/search/label/Wei%20Min%20She>.

³⁴ Harvey Dong, "A Bookstore for Everybody," 122–127.

When discussing the origins of TWLF strikes at UCB and SFSU, interview participants noted how the movement was deeply rooted in the social turmoil of the 1960s. Jean Dere claimed her radicalization was largely “a product of the period [she] grew up in.” During the initial 1969 formation of the Red Guard Party (a Chinese American youth group modeled after the Black Panther Party), Jean’s brothers brought the founder Alex Hing home to ask for their father’s help in translating leaflets. Dere would go on to join forces with Berkeley students in the creation of the Asian Community Center and Everybody’s Bookstore at the end of 1969.

Similarly, former TWLF activist Donald Wong was also deeply influenced by the rise of liberation movements at home and abroad. Wong attributed his involvement in the founding of the Asian Student Union to the Bay Area ethos of progressive activism: “You could just walk around campuses and things would be going on.” He spoke of how the youth was deeply influenced by panethnic solidarity: “The Black Panthers captured [our] imagination.” As a Berkeley High School student, he cut classes to work in college campus demonstrations and participate in Chinatown-based community work, I-Hotel protests, and radical programs on Kearny Street. Throughout our conversation, he emphasized a strong linkage between the struggle for Third World Studies and communities of color locally and abroad.

Although the TWLF strikes at UCB and SFSU resulted in the creation of Ethnic Studies departments, it is important to distinguish the differences between today’s Ethnic Studies and the original students’ vision for Third World Studies. The original idea of Third World Studies was grounded in international struggles of former colonies—including a critical analysis of capitalistic exploitation, and critiques of imperialism and racism.³⁵ By comparison, Dong described what the UCB administration would instate as “Ethnic Studies” as “a more

³⁵ Jean Dere, interview by Jaide Lin, 2022.

watered-down version of what the movement's original goals and purposes were."³⁶ Ethnic Studies created a facade of autonomy by omitting the international component and critical perspectives on imperialism and capitalism, while retaining some analysis of racism.

Although the activists eventually reached a dissatisfying stalemate with the university administration, Berkeley TWLF students worked to establish a strong program linkage between the academy and the community. Dere mentioned how the "character of early Asian American Studies was really different—classes expected fieldwork in the community. There was an academic aspect, but they wanted it also put into practice."³⁷ Early versions of Ethnic Studies programs still provided space for student input on course development, community fieldwork, and the hiring and firing of faculty members.³⁸ The Third World College never came to fruition, but the initial creation of Ethnic Studies courses attempted to maintain the vision held by the strikers; one example of this was holding practical language courses to serve the largely Cantonese-speaking Chinatowns, with learning objectives for communication on issues such as employment, housing, and immigration. With the requirement of third world student participation in curriculum building and the establishment of Chinatown field offices as an extension of Asian Studies in the broader community, the two disciplines retained some of the community-oriented focus envisioned in the TWLF's initial proposal.³⁹

Dere recalled her participation in SFSU Ethnic Studies class planning. In the period after the 1968–69 TWLF strikes, many fledgling Asian American Studies courses were involved in Chinatown-based community work. Instructors frequently organized field trips into Chinatowns, visiting and supporting grassroots initiatives. UCB and SFSU students would participate in

³⁶ Harvey Dong, interview by Jaide Lin, 2022.

³⁷ Dere, interview.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Dong, interview.

volunteering at the original location of the International Hotel at Kearny Street, which served as a central hub for radical organizations. Student activists had the opportunity to become student teachers for classes, and form committees to seek out potential new instructors.

As a member of the Asian Studies field office that was established in Chinatown, Harvey Dong supported the development of community programs, from food distribution to film showings for seniors. This involvement also enabled the students to respond quickly to urgent community needs, such as a call for support from Hong Kong and Taiwanese students to organize a mass protest against the government of Taiwan. At the time, frustration arose from the Taiwanese government's capitulation with Japan and the U.S. for the Tiao Yu Tai islands. Despite violent pushback by campus administration and police, local student activists stood with their peers during the rally. Dong remarked: “That [violent response] was a reality or wake-up call for us—We were affecting the politics in the community.”⁴⁰ Although political forces continued to decry the mission of TWLF and community organizers, student activists continued their involvement in labor struggles, public health campaigns, and social movement-building.

Despite a strong community focus during their inception, Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies became more deeply entrenched in university administration over time. This institutionalization is reflected in the gradual disappearance of student autonomy and self-determination via the uneven retention of teachers or the development of coursework and lessons. In turn, this has also contributed to the omission of key lessons learned from the TWLF period in current Ethnic Studies curricula. When reflecting on the implications of these changes, Harvey Dong said: “The younger generation has had to kind of rediscover lessons from that [1960s] period because it’s not exactly part of the modern lesson plan in Ethnic Studies—maybe

⁴⁰ Ibid.

it could be intentional, or they might just see it as irrelevant.” He mentioned the past work of the Ethnic Studies collective, an influential student-founded group that organized community events and conferences honoring the spirit of the 1960s Third World strikes. These student-founded communities are and will continue to be an essential part of upholding the Third World struggle’s legacy. Donald Wong also noted the dearth of attention given to community-oriented learning in Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies. Coupled with the competitive environment of elite academic institutions such as UCB, a meritocratic mindset serves to further remove strong community awareness from courses. Wong imagined the current mindset of an average UCB student to be, “I can’t think about anything else outside, I gotta get my straight A’s ... I know the [college campus] environment now is completely different.”⁴¹

Jean brought in teachings from Mao Ze Dong’s *Little Red Book*: “Leftist groups throughout the world were using it in the long 60s. When doing organizing work, the people involved had to be broken down into sections—the advanced are those ready to act.” By determining which people were able to immediately participate in organizing, radical organizations were able to create a successful Chinatown worker’s group. As for what she called “the vacillating intermediate people,” she discouraged prioritizing their engagement for community organizing. “They’re still deciding whether to care or not.”

Research Limitations

One key limitation of this research study is the dominance of East Asian perspectives within the Asian American community and broader liberation movements. Even during the initial founding of “Asian American” as a collective identifier, Ichioka and Gee received

⁴¹ Donald Wong, interview by Jaide Lin, 2022.

criticism from Southeast Asian, primarily Filipino, community leaders who noted the frequent exclusion of South and Southeast Asian views in the Asian American political body.⁴² It is important to note that these interview insights, composed entirely of Chinese American community activists, are not wholly representative of the entire elderly Asian American political collective in the Bay Area. While I've incorporated literature and findings from South and Southeast Asian intellectuals to supplement this gap in perspective, I also acknowledge the general discourse on Asian American activism is already heavily skewed toward East Asian-dominated dialogue.

When drawing upon the historical context of 1960s Black, Indigenous, and Chicano-founded liberation movements, it is also important to note that I reference these events as an outsider to these communities. As an Asian American and student researcher, it is essential that I acknowledge the distinction between multiethnic solidarity and reductionist parallels to other minority communities. Therefore, I refer to these events as widely influential challenges to the existing white supremacist system, while also being influenced in some ways by growing Asian American political advocacy. While this research is intended to contribute to a body of literature on the 1960s Asian American movement and TWLF strikes, it must be supplemented by the voices of other minority student revolutionaries.

Discussion

Although TWLF's legacy remains deeply influential for Asian American activists today, major demographic and political changes have led to a shift in ideal organizing tactics and challenges to movement-building. In our conversation, Donald noted the impact of rising higher

⁴² Wallace, "Yellow Power: The Origins of Asian America."

education costs: “It seems to me there’s a new elite class populating the colleges.” The growing unaffordability of college, notably in the elite UC system, has led to a major influx of upper class, out-of-state, and international students. While these individuals still retain the potential for radicalization, Donald noted that barriers exist to unifying “elite class” students around highly localized, poverty-related working class issues.

Harvey maintained that educators play a key role in galvanizing students to continue the 1960s vision of Third World Liberation: “There’s space in Ethnic Studies to develop understanding, but in order to do that, there has to be a foundation.” He goes on to mention the theme of “passing on knowledge,” a difficult feat to accomplish without the inherent conviction and involvement of instructors. “If the teachers don’t believe in it, then it’s hard to pass on knowledge unless the students rediscover it themselves.” In a similar vein, Jean mentioned that a call to action could make a difference if educators “tell students to get out and show up.”

At the practical level, a radical education in Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies requires the reinstatement of critical analyses of imperialism and capitalism. Jean mentions how current Ethnic Studies programs are distinctly lacking in the “class component,” leading to the de-platforming of working-class struggles while also leaving out a key aspect of community organizing potential. One example is a critical analysis of Sinophobia-motivated violence in America as a result of China’s expanding overseas labor market. A lesson purely based on an analysis of racism may touch upon white supremacy, xenophobia, and historic context such as the murder of Vincent Chin by white autoworkers. However, Jean also encouraged the introduction of a class component: “Don’t blame China for the loss of jobs in the U.S., blame the corporations.” A holistic analysis would acknowledge the role of corporations in prioritizing profit over domestic labor opportunities, while mass media and elite news outlets have

strategically misled American laborers on the “source” of the issue. This encourages a critical perspective that sees racist violence as deliberate and calculated, rather than a natural fallout during public health crises or periods of economic downturn.

At the student community level, Donald maintained a sense of optimism for meaningful leadership and movement-building. He spoke of the Berkeley High School student response to post-9/11 attacks on the Muslim community. Student leaders organized teach-ins on the issue, encouraged broader solidarity with Muslim students, and engaged peers in educational activities to spread awareness. He was hopeful that this proactive youth leadership will continue as student activists create and rediscover community organizing tactics for contemporary social issues.

Jean and Harvey both emphasized the necessity of creating a “critical mass” of student activists to ensure ongoing and consistent leadership. “There needs to be some way to allow for the next entering group to continue the work,” Harvey said, highlighting the importance of education and intergenerational knowledge-sharing to continue the movement for Third World Studies. “We also had a lot of help from the old left.”

Conclusion

The TWLF and the 1960s Asian American movement continue to have lasting impacts on modern, student-led community organizing. Asian American activists during the 1960s and 70s not only helped establish a major precedent in multiethnic solidarity across racialized minorities, but also bore the burden of intense trauma and tragedy from immigration and refugee experiences.

My research has indicated a strong necessity for these stories and elder wisdom to be centered in academic literature and political discourse on contemporary Asian American

community organizing. In a previous conversation with East Wind ezine editor Eddie Wong, Dere remarked, “I don’t think the current younger activists know much about the work of the early Asian American movement ... They didn’t know about the Third World Liberation Front that fought for Ethnic Studies on school campuses and that there were Asian American Studies departments that were created out of their struggles.”⁴³

Linking the early Asian American movement and contemporary struggles for liberation is not only powerful, but necessary. Understanding the shoulders we stand on provides a foundation for shared learning and intergenerational wisdom, instead of starting from scratch with each new influx of young activists. There’s much more to be rediscovered. “You’re just hitting the tip of the iceberg in terms of the people you’ve talked to,” Dong said.

A lack of clarity remains about how new, contemporary social problems will influence the evolving political landscape of Asian America and the broader community as well. Interviewees listed global warming, right-wing extremism, and potential economic collapse as only a few of the widespread social problems younger folks have to contend with. At the same time, the early Asian American movement and TWLF were also founded during a period of intense social turmoil. “The situation is what will force people to come forward. They’ll act when they have no choice,” Jean claimed. Perhaps, this political instability and growing pressure also have the potential to push college-aged youth toward radicalization.

Even with these external factors, educators and students alike must share the responsibility of re-introducing a community-oriented vision for Ethnic Studies. This not only involves a general “call to action,” but the inclusion of actionable opportunities for students. The Asian Community Center that Harvey and Jean were deeply involved in provided a locus for

⁴³ Jean Dere, “A Wei Min Sister Speaks – Then and Now.” East Wind Ezine, *Eastwind: Politics and Culture of Asian America* (2021).

shared student and community involvement, allowing for immediate and strongly-localized responses to educational, employment, and public health concerns in the community. Educators are uniquely positioned to direct student attention towards “openly radically-thinking organizations”⁴⁴ that early-phase Ethnic Studies instructors would bring classes to in the past. However, modern Ethnic Studies instruction is also constrained by heavily limiting Letters & Sciences directives. Therefore, students must also assume the responsibility of re-establishing semi-autonomy in the colleges and departments, creating an independent and self-determining space for learning about and sharing community engagement opportunities.

Students play an inherent role in re-instilling these disciplines with the core values of TWLF. The fight extends beyond college campuses, with high schools in the present day implementing or considering the inclusion of Ethnic Studies in their core curriculum. At the university level, potential actions include increasing pressure on UCB administration to develop a more robust “American Cultures” requirement that ensures a critical analysis of race and ethnicity, with the eventual goal of instating Ethnic Studies as a graduation requirement. This can include advocating for budget allocations, a Dean of Ethnic Studies and chairs rather than department coordinators, and more opportunities for students to engage in community-based work as part of coursework. Amongst students, this can involve uplifting Asian American organizations that have a strong political focus, rather than accepting the “meek and passive stereotypes” that inhibit the self-determination of Asian Americans and all people of color.

Only by learning from the past can we carry on the torch of those TWLF student protestors before us. Elder wisdom deserves to be honored as a key component in modern Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies education. What I’ve recounted in this research only

⁴⁴ Dere, interview.

captures a fragment of the vast knowledge from 1960s “old-timer” Asian American activists. When this knowledge is merged with the younger generation’s fight for liberation, we have the potential to move mountains.

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Interview Questions

1. Did your experience as a student influence your understanding of Asian American community building and social movements?
 - a. If so, how, and has that understanding evolved over time?
2. Did your involvement in community leadership, demonstrations, and/or organizing tie in with broader liberation movements? If so, how?
3. What do you see missing in the broader public conversation around Asian American community building and civil rights activism?
4. A large part of Asian American civil rights and Third World liberation movements centers around generational wisdom (understanding the shoulders we stand on, etc.).
What role do you think generational wisdom plays?
 - a. Do you see this role being upheld currently in activist movements and education on civil rights?
5. One frequent critique of Asian American Studies (and Ethnic Studies) is that they fit the same university mold of other academic programs, creating an isolated and monolithic sense rather than tying into other forms of Third World resistance. Do you believe this to be true? How do you think students and community leaders can reform the programs to reach their true potential?
6. What hopes, knowledge, and understanding of liberation movements do you have for the younger generation of Asian American community activists? For Asian American

⁴⁵ Note: Interview notes with the participants are all in the form of summaries from conversation rather than a word by word transcript, as some interviewees were not comfortable with a voice transcription.

⁴⁶ Editors' Note: The full appendix for this paper is not included in the Volume III 2023 print publication, and can be found on AARJ's eScholarship site or by contacting the author at lin.jaide@berkeley.edu

Studies students?

Interview Notes from Jean Dere

1. Did your experience as a student influence your understanding of Asian American community building and social movements?
 - a. If so, how, and has that understanding evolved over time?

[TWLF] Strike happened 1st year in college (Didn't know anyone, no one tried to recruit me when I was at the picket lines). After the strike, got involved in class planning (Lots of meetings, by the start of these classes had gotten involved in Chinatown, Berkeley students went to Kearny Street (Locus for radical organizations and original location of I-Hotel). AAPA collected money to open a bookstore (Everybody's Bookstore) "I was a real bookworm. I like being surrounded by books." That's how I got involved with Berkeley students.

2. Did your involvement in community leadership, demonstrations, and/or organizing tie in with broader liberation movements? If so, how?

Frederick Engle: Origin of the Family, Communist Manifesto (Could really relate to this). "The idea that society could be completely restructured. Dialectical materialism." When did slavery, feudalism, and capitalism develop. A society not organized around private ownership and a small minority controls means of production.

More is constantly being discovered about history and resistance (Ex. Native children, boarding schools, abuse and harassments, being torn from families). "These stories are still being told, still being discovered. Telling is an indictment against the U.S. institutions and capitalistic system." This stuff is still being uncovered... it radicalizes you."

3. What do you see missing in the broader public conversation around Asian American

community building and civil rights activism?

Feels like the class component is missing... Lots of sympathy for poor white (This society [also] offers nothing to them); their lives are miserable... The auto industry is gone, moved overseas (Don't blame China, blame the corporations). These corporations just want more profit. These people don't understand that, and target the wrong people, they're deliberately misled!

We weren't the only ones, lots of other organizations started down there, not just a community center but formation of a political party. Organizations such as Wei Min She. Anti-imperialist, studied Mao, Lenin, Marxist writings. Literature about imperialism, and lots of monthly magazines. Study group to discuss issues (Women's question).

4. A large part of Asian American civil rights and Third World liberation movements centers around generational wisdom (understanding the shoulders we stand on, etc.).

What role do you think generational wisdom plays?

- a. Do you see this role being upheld currently in activist movements and education on civil rights?

"Character of early Asian American Studies was really different — classes expected fieldwork in the community. There was an academic aspect but they wanted to put it into practice." Not like now. Formerly a Health Sciences major, worked with a health clinic in Chinatown (ACC initiated a health fair in Portsmouth for education and screening). "After I graduated, I lost touch with what was going on." Departmental conflict over orientation, whether it's academically or community-oriented.

"That's just gonna happen when the situation in the world forces them to do it." The 60s was inspired because students were subject to the draft, anti-war was driven by this, leading to huge demonstrations.

5. One frequent critique of Asian American Studies (and Ethnic Studies) is that they fit the same university mold of other academic programs, creating an isolated and monolithic sense rather than tying into other forms of Third World resistance. Do you believe this to be true? How do you think students and community leaders can reform the programs to reach their true potential?

Events in society and the world, people feel compelled to act → Could make a difference if the instructor tells students to “get out and show up”. “What’s available out there for them to get involved with.” Not just ACC, CPA, I Wor Kuen, Kearny Street Workshop

“Openly,radically-thinking organizations.” That instructors would bring classes to in the past. For example, bringing students to Chinatown, or to I-Hotel protests in the past.

6. What hopes, knowledge, and understanding of liberation movements do you have for the younger generation of Asian American community activists? For Asian American Studies students?

“We have to unbrainwash ourselves and envision a new society where people share... eliminate class, racism... It’s going to take a lot of education.” To poor white workers: Who’s putting you in your position? In your oppressed position? Without class analysis things won’t change. Read Marxist literature, Lenin, Mao even. Ho Chi Minh (Fighting imperialism in Vietnam).

Interview Notes from Harvey Dong

1. Did your experience as a student influence your understanding of Asian American community building and social movements?
 - a. If so, how, and has that understanding evolved over time?

You can see how things change from campus, lots of ideas (over war, over Ethnic Studies) but

you take a step into the community and things change dramatically. On campus, they started clamping down on the community work, stopped funding/paying for the rent and the telephone and transportation, so we had to decide “Well, we have to do our own fundraising, can’t just recruit students from campus but have to recruit people from the community” and that’s how we set up ACC.

“We had to figure out a lot because the core of people who started all this were people who were involved in twLF, some from AAPA (lasted 1 year and 7 months), just remember the last activity AAPA did was to pull together monies to open a bookstore (50 dollars each), 10 people would pull together 500 bucks, got a small space and went to a book distributor nearby and opened a credit account.”

2. Did your involvement in community leadership, demonstrations, and/or organizing tie in with broader liberation movements? If so, how?

It’s a pretty big deal when we’re doing work in Chinatown or Manila Town and get pushback or threats from the establishment, it’s kind of an isolating experience, if there’s earlier generations that try to do similar things that makes a big difference. Two groups that stood out: Veterans from the labor movement (Chinese Works Mutual Aid), Mun Ching (Chinese American Democratic Youth League), those people were all in their 50-60s by the time we were involved.

3. What do you see missing in the broader public conversation around Asian American community building and civil rights activism?

Previously, there was an organization (Chinatown Red Guards) modeled after Black Panthers, that group shrank in membership and lost their space and kind of disappeared (down to 2-3 people), what happened was conservative newspapers in Chinatown saying that Everybody’s Bookstore and other Kearny Street-based radical organizations were the “New Red Guards”,

lots of articles as they were trying to figure out who these young people were.

You don't want to leave people behind or turn people off if your politics are too hard and people can't comprehend them – we would do things like labor support (Ex. busboys at Nam Yuen Restaurant), would go out and support them while they were picketing, write articles, do petitioning, use it to educate the community. I thought that should be the focus instead.

4. A large part of Asian American civil rights and Third World liberation movements centers around generational wisdom (understanding the shoulders we stand on, etc.).

What role do you think generational wisdom plays?

- a. Do you see this role being upheld currently in activist movements and education on civil rights?

People from an earlier generation were involved, during the student movement-founding it would inspire the younger people. The ones we considered “old-timers,” activists during the 50s and 60s, those voices were silenced by the establishment government, their citizenship taken away. When we stepped into the picture, they thought we would carry on the baton. In a lot of ways, we did do that. Earlier generations had to deal with trauma and tragedy (Many were paper sons, if you spoke out you could be deported and lose all your rights) – internally, forces that would use violence against them. Constantly told us those stories, we've all grown up hearing them; We all looked up to them because they were brave to still keep up that work.

5. One frequent critique of Asian American Studies (and Ethnic Studies) is that they fit the same university mold of other academic programs, creating an isolated and monolithic sense rather than tying into other forms of Third World resistance. Do you believe this to be true? How do you think students and community leaders can reform the programs to reach their true potential?

Distinction between Third World Studies and Ethnic Studies influenced by international, global struggles around the world (Included self-determination, a critical analysis of capitalism and imperialism and racism, finding connections) – the University administration would grant what we call “Ethnic Studies”, it removed the international component and critical analysis of capitalism and imperialism, only some analysis of racism (maybe some more emphasis there) Essentially, receiving Ethnic Studies was more of a watered-down version of what the original goals and purposes were. There’s space in ES to develop understanding, but in order to do that, there has to be a foundation (What are we trying to do?) and a lot of new instructors that go into the field might go to Berkeley which has a tradition of twLF but may not agree with its traditions. They might come from disciplines (Anthro, History) that are generally Eurocentric.

6. What hopes, knowledge, and understanding of liberation movements do you have for the younger generation of Asian American community activists? For Asian American Studies students?

This stuff is always going on, there’s a whole history behind it. The movement for Third World Studies, community, self-determination. Because young people today have that behind them, can also learn and build off of it, whereas if you start from scratch you wouldn’t really know where to go (How do people work together, how do people communicate, how do you create demands, community work). All of these things are part of building mass movement.

Interview Notes from Donald Wong

1. Did your experience as a student influence your understanding of Asian American community building and social movements?
 - a. If so, how, and has that understanding evolved over time?

Part of early formation of Asian Student Union: Lots of activism going on. Berkeley HS, Oakland HS, Washington HS. "Walk up and there's just things going on." Black Panthers influenced youth, captured their imagination. Community demonstrations – you had to question it with all this stuff going on. Knowing how to deal with violence pushback.

2. Did your involvement in community leadership, demonstrations, and/or organizing tie in with broader liberation movements? If so, how?

Country and the whole world influenced him (Vietnam War, etc.). That's what moved students. Working class background, participated in work in Chinatown, I-Hotel, radical organizations on Kearny Street.

3. What do you see missing in the broader public conversation around Asian American community building and civil rights activism?

What's missing: Linkage to Asian American/Asian community, maybe due to instructors' background. Contradiction of UC system and funding.

4. A large part of Asian American civil rights and Third World liberation movements centers around generational wisdom (understanding the shoulders we stand on, etc.).
What role do you think generational wisdom plays?

- a. Do you see this role being upheld currently in activist movements and education on civil rights?

Exterior influence (Not just campus) is not as apparent in intergenerational knowledge-sharing. See the links with the outside world struggle: Telegraph and Derby: South Asian Radical Walking Tour.

Example: Student response to post 9/11 attacks on the Muslim community and South Asian community. Teach-ins, self developed activities.

5. One frequent critique of Asian American Studies (and Ethnic Studies) is that they fit the same university mold of other academic programs, creating an isolated and monolithic sense rather than tying into other forms of Third World resistance. Do you believe this to be true? How do you think students and community leaders can reform the programs to reach their true potential?

Price of education has changed the demographic. Now, college is more unaffordable (Less blue collar students and families). More out-of-state, international students. Many professors' main goals are writing books, less about teaching and educating students on local issues so they can take them into the community.

6. What hopes, knowledge, and understanding of liberation movements do you have for the younger generation of Asian American community activists? For Asian American Studies students?

Keep an open mind, keep reading, analytical/critical to current events and news: Climate change, for example. They're quietly drumming up the war mechanism in America. Defense funding, China, Sinophobia, possibility of World War. World wars are just a redivision of the world.