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Asian Pacific Americans' Social Movements and Interest Groups

For at least 150 years, Asian Pacific Americans have faced racial discrimination, violence, and segregation. Unable to vote before World War II, many used legal challenges and other non-electoral means to fight for equality (Salyer 1995). Family and regional associations formed for economic needs, while other groups organized to defend worker rights (Bulosan 1973; Kwong 1997; Yoneda 1983). Civil rights organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League (founded in 1930) and the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (founded in 1915) promoted assimilation and opposed discrimination.

In the post-World War II era, Asian Americans built new forms of community-based institutions and organizations, including mainstream advocacy and service groups, and grassroots organizations that challenged fundamental inequalities (Lo 1992). In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, the campaign for redress for Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II combined grassroots protest and congressional lobbying, resulting in President Reagan signing legislation that provided for both an official apology and monetary compensation (Maki, Kitano, and Berthold 1999). The nationwide Justice for Vincent Chin campaign in the early 1980s galvanized a broad coalition of Chinese and other

Asian-American groups in opposition to racial violence (Zia 2000).

Within this wide range of Asian-American political activity, we have focused on a few areas: pan-Asian organizing, South Asian political integration, Filipino-American struggles against martial law, and defense of ethnic enclaves. These areas highlight the historic and current divergent political activities in Asian-American communities for social justice and full equality.

Asian Americans and Panethnicity

With the emergence of Asian Americans as a political force in many U.S. urban areas, the group's extraordinary diversity has raised a fundamental question: Is there a pan-ethnic identity? Panethnic categories—such as “Asian American,” “Latino,” or “Native American”—and ethnic categories—such as “Chinese American,” “Filipino American,” or “Japanese American”—are political and social constructions, with their boundaries and significance under constant negotiation and reconfiguration (Cornell 1988; Nagel 1996; Omi and Winant 1994; Padilla 1985).

Given that Asian Americans vary greatly by religion, language, and political ideology, structural factors appear to be the major contributors to a panethnic identity (Espiritu 1992; Lopez and Espiritu 1990; Saito 1998). Panethnicity is in part imposed by a shared history of racialization through discriminatory government policies in areas such as immigration, naturalization, and federal home mortgage policies (Daniels 1988; Lipsitz 1998; Massey and Denton 1993; Saxton 1971). These policies created common interests among Asian Americans, who found themselves grouped together in a racial hierarchy that was deeply imbedded in society and supported by government practices.

Community studies illustrate the construction of panethnicity. Examining local and national events, they show how actions such as hate crimes, neighborhood segregation, government actions, and labor market discrimination contribute to racialization (Fong 1994; Horton 1995; Kwong 1996; Lin 1998). These studies also show that while an Asian-American identity is in part imposed by external factors, such as census categories (Espiritu and Omi 2000), glass ceilings, or racial lumping, Asian Americans have used political action to negotiate the boundaries and consequences of this identity.

Political mobilization and identity formation develop from complex patterns of gender, race, class, and political relationships that are highly influenced by historical and contemporary contexts (Abelmann and Lie 1995; Lowe 1996).

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Future Leaders? Having long faced racial discrimination and segregation, including the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the Asian-American community today plays a more active role in advocacy and political life. The children of the internment are now community leaders, activists and elected officials. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Given their diversity, not all Americans of Asian ancestry classify themselves as Asian American, and tensions and differences exist within that category (Cho 1995). Immigrants from Asia come from relatively homogeneous populations in which they are part of a majority, giving them very different notions of race than those held by U.S.-born Asian Americans. Collective memory (Lipsitz 1988) and cultural construction (Nagel 1994) interact as new racial and ethnic identities form. Historical and contemporary issues create a sense of group membership

Studies show that while an Asian-American identity is in part imposed by external factors, such as census categories, glass ceilings, or racial lumping, Asian Americans have used political action to negotiate the boundaries and consequences of this identity.

and a basis for political mobilization, emerging from the activities, networks, and cultural practices of everyday life, and the broader economic and political context. Given the broad range of influences shaping identity, a pan-ethnic movement may comprise groups that reflect multiple, and often, contradictory interests (Espiritu 1992; Saito 1998).

Asian Americans have recognized the importance of political involvement and the need for networks, organizations, and other resources. To compete in electoral politics at local, state, and federal levels, they need the greater numbers and resources that come from pan-ethnic cooperation (Erie and Brackman 1993; Ong and Nakanishi 1996).

Capturing the full range of Asian-American political activity, however, requires an "expanded conceptual framework" (Nakanishi 1991, 31), one which looks beyond traditional electoral politics (Omatsu 1990, 1994; Ong 2000; Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng 1994). One may observe growing panethnic cooperation in studies of labor activism (Ichioka 1988; Scharlin and Villanueva 1992); hate crimes; community mobilization around local issues such as language restrictions on commercial signage and community empowerment (Park 1996; Saito 1998; Vo 1996); and the establishment of regional and national pan-ethnic organizations providing legal and social services (Ong 1994). While many of these initially began as ethnic-specific issues (such as the fatal beating of Chinese American Vincent Chin, or the Japanese American redress movement), they grew into panethnic movements because different Asian-American ethnic groups recognized their shared interests.

The Evolution and Integration of South Asians

The question of identity and shared interests is particularly significant for South Asians, who have substantial

cultural, historical, and geographical differences with East Asians. South Asians are marked by tremendous diversity.¹ The Indian region contains more distinct ethnicities than the entire European continent, and most South Asian Americans, especially immigrants, continue to identify themselves by geographic origin, language, religion, or other factors. Most South Asian Americans' political grassroots activity tends to be channeled through these characteristics, making multiethnic political efforts with other South Asian ethnic groups quite notable.

Since their arrival over a century ago, South Asian Americans have focused the vast majority of their political zeal and energy on events in their homeland. From the anti-imperialist Ghadar Party² of the early 1900s, to various recent militant nationalist movements in the region and other contemporary politics within South Asia, South Asian Americans have always kept an eye turned towards South Asia when mobilizing politically in the United States. In the past, this focus was in part necessitated by legislation that prevented nonwhites from becoming naturalized citizens of the United States,³ a restriction that remained in place until 1946 for South Asians.⁴

Most South Asian Americans have not yet entered the United States' political process in substantial numbers. First-generation South

Asian-American immigrants, who still compose the vast majority of the community, have focused their energies on establishing themselves professionally and financially, and are historically more likely to show interest in politics in their country of origin than in their adopted homeland. Some of the most financially successful members of the first generation have worked to serve as a conduit to the top levels of the United States Government on behalf of their mother country. In September 2000, President Clinton attended two fund raisers hosted by Indian Americans in the Silicon Valley. The fund raisers netted \$1.4 million and between April and September, Indian Americans contributed almost \$3 million to Democratic candidates.⁵

However, an increasing number of younger South Asian Americans have run for elected political office in recent years, and a number have taken prominent positions on the staffs of high-profile American politicians.⁶ Most of this new generation of political activists has been born in the United States, or immigrated to this country as young children.

Some of the most interesting grassroots political mobilization among South Asian Americans has come from the cab drivers, a profession with workplace homicide rates far higher than that of police officers. In San Jose, California, just two days after the Clinton fundraisers, over 300 Indian and Pakistani cab drivers practically shut down South San Jose with a cab procession protesting the lack of police protection in the wake of the murder of a Sikh-American driver. After the 1998 formation of a union, in conjunction with Ethiopian and Somalian cabbies who had also faced years of police harassment, the immigrant drivers created a "Taxi Task Force" of city officials, drivers, and company representatives to address industry issues.

On May 13, 1998, New York City awoke to the largest cab strike in its history, held at the urging of the New York

Taxi Workers Alliance, a group led primarily by immigrant cab drivers. New York's cab drivers—the majority of whom are South Asian American—threw the city into complete disarray. Estimates placed the success rate at 98% percent of the city's 24,000 yellow cab drivers. Feeling that New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani had targeted them, the cab drivers responded in a remarkable display of multiracial, working-class political action.⁷

Another area of significant mobilization has been in the creation of community-level service organizations, which deal with such issues as domestic violence, hate crimes, and immigrant-rights issues. Employing a broad-based South Asian staff, these groups serve large South Asian populations in areas such as New York City, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area.

Community mobilization has also occurred when non-Christian South Asian-American congregations attempted to construct sacred sites in white enclaves. Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus—the vast majority of who are immigrants, and many noncitizens—have become politicized when they faced “mainstream” opposition to their efforts to build religious and cultural centers. The resulting political struggles have united otherwise sharply divided communities, as they joined to demand their rights as members of the American religious and racial mosaic.

The Opposition Movement in the Filipino-American Community⁸

Filipino Americans are another Asian group who have often had an international political orientation. In the second half of the twentieth century, Filipino Americans were galvanized by opposition to the Marcos regime in the Philippines. Within a week of the September 1972 declaration of martial law, public forums opposing it were being organized in cities with significant Filipino-American populations, and Filipino Americans established a new organization, the National Committee for the Restoration of Civil Liberties in the Philippines (NCRCLP).

Five political streams contributed activists to the anti-Marcos movement. One was the nationalist movement that swept through the Philippines in the 1960s and pushed for national self-determination and freedom from U.S. domination. By the late 1960s many students and young professionals who had been part of this movement had immigrated to the United States, due in part to the 1965 immigration reform act and its elimination of race-based immigration quotas.

Another stream came from the Asian-American movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Inspired by the gains of the Civil Rights movement and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, Filipino Americans began to organize, drawing further inspiration from events such as the Third World Student Strike at San Francisco State University in fall 1968, and the fight against the demoli-

tion of the International Hotel, a residence for elderly Filipinos and Chinese in San Francisco. Also serving to politicize Filipinos was the annual Filipino People's Far West Convention, a conference held in California cities that had large Filipino communities.

A third stream was the farm-labor movement, which helped produce a cadre of urban activists. In 1965, Filipino farm workers initiated the strike that was eventu-



Shared History. Panethnicity is in part imposed by a shared history of racialization through discriminatory government politics. Here Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans protest the treatment of Wen Ho Lee. Many critics of the government felt that Lee, who was accused of spying for China, was a victim of racial profiling. Photo by Daniel C. Tsang.

ally to lead to the formation of the United Farm Workers Union. In the 1970s, this struggle, which had brought together Filipinos and Mexican Americans in the farming communities of California, attracted activists in the urban areas as it spread to the cities in the form of a boycott against table grapes. Filipino activists from this movement also became active in the opposition to martial law in the Philippines (Scharlin and Villanueva 1992).

In September 1973, a fourth source emerged: the Movement for a Free Philippines (MFP), headed by Raul Manglapus. The MFP represented the perspective of the former political oligarchy that Marcos had disenfranchised. It drew its membership from former political leaders who had fled the Marcos regime, but it also attracted immigrants who were anticommunist and anxious to maintain or establish ties with the former leaders.

A month after the establishment of the MFP, a group of antiwar and church-affiliated Americans and their Filipino allies formed the Friends of the Filipino People (FFP). This fifth stream of support originated in the antiwar movement, and was primarily anti-interventionist. The FFP brought mainstream political savvy into the movement, establishing the Congress Education Project, a Washington, DC-based lobby.

A key organization that emerged from those elements critical of U.S. involvement in the Philippines was the *Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino* (KDP—Union

of Democratic Filipinos). The product of a merger of organizations, the KDP had a dual focus: participate in the struggle for a socialist alternative in the U.S., while actively supporting the national democratic struggle in the Philippines. The KDP was the most organized, and the most ideologically driven of all the organizations that would emerge after the declaration of martial law in the Philippines. In 1974, it formed the Anti-Martial Law Coalition (AMLC), which then became the main umbrella organization for anti-Marcos opposition in the United States.

The American anti-Marcos movement worked closely with grassroots anti-Marcos groups in the Philippines. The Philippines-based groups had a strong left wing/socialist component, which heavily influenced the leadership and ideology of the opposition movement in America.

The anti-Marcos movement emphasized the elimination or reduction of U.S. military and economic aid towards the Marcos regime. A key element of its strategy was to expose the undemocratic character of the Marcos regime by calling attention to its human rights abuses, its suppression of the media, and the absence of free and democratic elections. The left wing of this movement would go one step further and demand the withdrawal of U.S. bases in the Philippines, but the principal push remained the reduction or elimination of aid.

Despite persistent efforts to change U.S. policy towards the Philippines in the 1970s, there were only cosmetic changes, as the U.S. was reluctant to abandon a long-term ally in the midst of the cold war. Even when Congress made foreign aid conditional upon the individual countries receiving of a clean bill of health on human rights, President Carter moved to exempt the Philippines and South Korea.

In 1983, the Manila airport assassination of popular opposition leader Benigno Aquino re-energized the movement here and in the Philippines. Under mounting pressure, Marcos called for a special presidential election. The elections took place in early February 1986, and were so fraught with fraud that it led to Marcos's ouster in a bloodless coup, and the installation of Corazon Aquino as president.

With the removal of Marcos, much of the energy within the opposition drained away. Some members of the political oligarchy began to return to the Philippines to join the opposition, and others returned en masse to compete for political office when Ms. Aquino called for new elections shortly after she took power. In the United States, those in support of the Philippine nationalist struggle and those who believed in U.S. nonintervention continued to monitor the new Aquino government with an eye on the institutionalization of democratic reforms and human rights.

One major goal remained: the withdrawal of U.S. bases from the Philippines. In 1991, when the basing agreement came up for renewal, the Philippine Senate saw an opportunity to send a message to the U.S., and voted against renewal of the treaty. Without a new agreement, the United States abandoned its bases in the Philippines at the end of 1992.

As the bases closed, a new cause emerged. Drawing energy from the environmental justice movement while including a number of activists from the Marcos years, a new coalition is campaigning to get the U.S. to acknowl-

edge responsibility for the environmental cleanup of its former base areas.

Defense of Ethnic Enclaves

Unlike more recent arrivals, early Asian immigrants often had to focus much of their effort at protecting themselves. Long before the establishment of black communities in New York and Chicago, "the Chinese were forced by racial violence and legal restrictions to retreat into Chinatowns throughout the West" (Ong and Umemoto 2000). In contrast to nineteenth-century white ethnic neighborhoods that served as transitional locations where immigrants learned to adapt to American society, the Chinese were forced to live in segregated areas in urban and rural communities (Kwong 1997). Although conditions have changed considerably, ethnic enclaves still attract newcomers as they face continuing threats to their existence.

Recent Asian immigrants and refugees have formed new enclaves or integrated into existing ones, including these Californian enclaves: New Phnom Penh in Long Beach, serving the Cambodian community; Little Saigon in Westminster, serving the Vietnamese community; and Koreatown in Los Angeles. There are also more affluent Asian Pacific enclaves, such as Jackson Heights/East Elmhurst area in Queens, New York, and Monterey Park in Southern California; and a growing number of South Asian commercial centers.

Many of the earliest enclaves disappeared due to racist violence by white workers and farmers who felt threatened by Asian immigrants (Chan 1991), and since the 1960s, many of the remaining inner-city ethnic enclaves have come under increasing pressure. San Francisco's Manilatown (located adjacent to Chinatown), for instance, was leveled for redevelopment. As urban renewal efforts targeted "blighted" areas, ethnic enclaves were declared redevelopment zones. Local governments used the power of eminent domain to force poor and elderly residents out of their homes, replacing them with office buildings, hotels, and tourist attractions.

There have been several grassroots campaigns to preserve ethnic enclaves. In San Francisco in 1968, efforts to evict elderly residents of the International Hotel sparked one of the longest running urban struggles in the post-World War II era. After tenants stalled the initial efforts, their building was transformed into a thriving community center, as community organizations, arts and cultural groups, and a bookstore moved into the street level of the hotel (Rodan 1970). From 1968-77, the hotel tenants and their community supporters rallied thousands of people to stop the evictions and demand the preservation of low-cost housing. The campaign was waged by a broad coalition which included community supporters, affordable-housing advocates, gay and lesbian activists, trade unions, women, and other progressive groups (Salomon 1998). The tenants were forcibly evicted in 1977, and the International Hotel was eventually torn down, but efforts to preserve Asian-American ethnic neighborhoods continued elsewhere in the country.

In the 1970s, the Los Angeles and San Francisco Japantowns were faced with attempts to transform the enclaves into tourist attractions (Little Tokyo Anti-Eviction Task Force 1976, Little Tokyo People's Rights Organization 1977). Much of the government-sponsored redevelopment efforts were ultimately successful and

thousands of residents and small businesses were evicted. However, due to grassroots efforts in both communities, much of the physical community still remains, with small businesses and some affordable housing, primarily for elderly community members.

Today in Los Angeles the Japanese-American community continues to rebuild the historic Little Tokyo neighborhood, establishing the Japanese-American National Museum and constructing the first multifamily housing since World War II.⁹ On October 28, 2000, 500 people rallied to demand a Little Tokyo recreation center. The coalition supporting the recreation center viewed it as crucial to restoring Little Tokyo as a community center for the larger Japanese-American community in Southern California (Yoshimura 2000).

On the East Coast, ethnic enclaves have also been under attack by developers. Boston's 125-year-old Chinatown faced increased pressures from urban renewal after World War II. Various grassroots organizations have responded to these issues, beginning with the Free Chinatown committee in the 1960s. The most recent effort has been the Campaign to Protect Chinatown (CPC), a joint project of several community organizations.¹⁰

In Philadelphia, a coalition of Asian Americans recently defeated efforts to build a new baseball stadium near Philadelphia's Chinatown. Business and city leaders sought to construct a stadium complex that would have destroyed the city's only Asian-American enclave. Led by the Philadelphia Chinatown Coalition to Oppose the Stadium, nearly 1,000 people rallied to oppose the project, and Chinatown businesses closed their doors to attend the protest.

Notes

1. This pan-ethnic label includes immigrants from Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bhutan, and India.

2. The Ghadar Party assumed the formidable task of trying to set India free from the colonial rule of the British Empire, while operating in a foreign country on the other side of the globe. It advocated the immediate removal of the colonial rulers of South Asia, going so far as to try to militarily dislodge the English. Remarkably, the Ghadar Party united behind one common cause, for a time, South Asian immigrants of immensely differing backgrounds, beliefs, and loyalties.

3. In 1790, Congress passed the United States' first naturalization law, limiting citizenship rights to "free white persons."

4. Dalip Singh Sand, the first Asian-American member of congress (elected in a district that included almost no Asians), was among the leaders in the national struggle to overturn the legislation that denied immigrants from South Asia the right to naturalize.

5. K. Connie Kang, "Indo-Americans Begin to Flex Political Muscle," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 October, 2000.

6. In 1990, there were fewer than half-a-dozen South Asian Americans working on Capitol Hill. Today there are over 40, many in positions as trusted advisers.

In these cases, and others in Washington, DC's Chinatown, Seattle's International District, and New York City's Chinatown (Lin 1998), the ethnic enclaves are perceived as politically weak, transitional communities with no sustainable community leadership, and thus vulnerable to attack by powerful economic interests supported by local governments seeking economic development. Asian Americans have countered with grassroots campaigns, which, while not always successful, have reflected a determination by residents to defend historic communities from destruction.

Conclusion

An increasingly diverse Asian-Pacific American population continues to organize to pursue goals and respond to threats. Advances in communications have helped in building nationwide networks. In April 2001, after a collision between U.S. and Chinese military planes led to increased tensions between the two countries, reports began to circulate of harassment of Chinese Americans. A leading Asian-American group, the Organization of Chinese Americans, responded with a statement that was transmitted around the country via the internet, while countless individuals used email to develop strategies to counter the racist attacks. When a poll (taken before the spy plane incident but released after it) revealed striking prejudicial attitudes toward Chinese Americans, the results were posted on the web for the benefit of advocacy groups nationwide. The latest technology aids an old struggle that continues in a new millennium.

7. Vijay Prasad, "The Day New York Stood Still," *ColorLines*, Fall 1998, vol. 1, no. 2

8. For an extended overview of the Marcos opposition movement in the United States, see Barbara S. Gaerlan's "The Movement in the United States to Oppose Martial Law in the Philippines, 1972-1991: An Overview" (1999). Except for Gaerlan's essay and two other essays published in *Amerasia* journal (Bello and Reyes 1986; Toribio, H.C. 1998), there is not much that has been published about the anti-Marcos movement in the United States. An account of opposition activities in Seattle, Washington, may be gleaned from *Triumph Over Marcos* by Thomas Churchill (1995). For a history of Filipinos in the farm workers movement, see Craig Scharlin and Lilia Villanueva's *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement* (1992). For more information, contact Enrique de la Cruz.

9. The Japanese American National Museum has drawn on support from Japanese Americans nationwide.

10. A web site chronicles this ongoing struggle: <www.protectchinatown.org>.

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