

The Righteous Fists of Harmony:
Asian American Revolutionaries in the Radical Minority and Third World Liberation
Movements, 1968-1978

By

Angela L. Zhao

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Abstract

In the late 1960s, a group comprised mostly of young second-generation Asian Americans began an attempt to start a socialist political revolution alongside other radical groups of color to uplift their communities from racial discrimination and poverty and critique the capitalist and imperialist structures that caused oppression. The group became the first national Asian American political organization and called themselves I Wor Kuen (IWK), meaning The Righteous Fists of Harmony. This thesis traces the origins and growth of IWK between 1968 and 1978 to show how it radicalized the Asian American political identity by connecting with the activism of the Black Panthers and the Puerto Rican Young Lords, as well as with revolutionary uprisings particularly in Asia but throughout the “Third World.” Predominantly featuring oral histories, I argue that I Wor Kuen played a fundamental role in shaping the concept of *Asian American* by turning it into an political identity that used racial solidarity and global revolutionary inspiration to resist assimilation and contest racial, class-based, and gendered systems of oppression.

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Introduction

In 1970, a group of Asian American college students attended a church service in an old red brick building on Lexington Avenue and East 111th Street in East Harlem, a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood. They did not, however, plan on sitting through the service. Beforehand, they met with friends from the Young Lords Party, a local Puerto Rican radical activist group. Together, the activists interrupted the church service and forced people to leave. They barricaded the building, closed off all of the entrances using railroad spikes, and declared an occupation. The purpose of the occupation was to demand that the church provide a free breakfast program for the neighborhood's children. The Asian American and Puerto Rican activists remained in the building for eleven days before the police forcibly removed people and made 105 arrests.¹ The fight was ultimately a success; soon after, the church operated a free breakfast program -- one of the many programs the Young Lords ran to serve the needs of their community. Afterwards, the Asian American students were inspired to echo similar demands beyond East Harlem.

The students were part of an organization formed in 1969 that served New York City's Chinatown community through a revolutionary Marxist lens. They called themselves I Wor Kuen (IWK), meaning the "Righteous and Harmonious Fists," deriving their name from the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, in which young men who were trained in the martial arts used militant tactics to rebel against the Western colonial and religious influences on China's modernization. Nearly seventy years later, the students of IWK were inspired by the rebellion's militant, revolutionary and resistant tactics, adopting them to the localized issues facing the Chinatown community and also to the heightened concern for issues they faced as an oppressed minority in

¹ "Young Lords Mar Services, Including East Harlem's," *The New York Times*, January 12, 1970.

America. They were influenced by and supported the revolutionary programs of neighboring groups like the Young Lords in East Harlem. The organization was led by young Asian Americans such as Carmen Chow, who considered herself a product of the anti-establishment and antiwar movements of the sixties. She prioritized IWK's support for the multigenerational women of Chinatown who faced abusive relationships, unsafe working conditions, and inadequate standards of living. IWK provided English classes, taught the women how to obtain welfare assistance, and ran programming for their children.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to IWK in New York City, a similar student group with a revolutionary Marxist lens was forming to serve the needs of San Francisco's Chinatown community. Its members called themselves the Red Guard, based off the Black Panthers and their radical militarism. "There was no doubt in our minds that [a revolution] was happening and that the Panthers were in the forefront of that," said Alex Hing, founder of the Red Guard. "If we really wanted to get out of our situation we had to hook into that process."² Headquartered at a Chinatown pool hall, they politicized the neighborhood's young people, who felt trapped in a cycle of violence and delinquency resulting from structural systems that oppressed Chinatown's working-class families. They attended Black Panther meetings at the national headquarters in Oakland, as well as study sessions on Marxism and Leninism at the Panther president's home. They supported the ethnic studies student strikes in San Francisco from 1968 to 1969, and hosted free community breakfast programs for the youth and elderly.

It is no surprise then that in 1969, the two cities with the largest populations of Asian Americans birthed two radical Asian American groups. While similar in their approach to Third World unification and Marxist underpinnings, IWK was fundamentally feminist and condemned

² Fred Ho -- et al., eds., *Legacy to Liberation : Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian/Pacific America* (Edinburgh, Scotland ; San Francisco, CA: Big Red Media / AK Press, 2000), 284.

male chauvinism, while the Red Guard lauded Black Panther-like militaristic masculinity. Yet by 1972, these two organizations merged into the national IWK, becoming the first national organization dedicated to the fight for Asian American self-determination. What did it mean for this national Asian American movement to have been inspired by two seemingly contrasting modes of operation yet both swept into the same revolutionary momentum? How did IWK shape the Asian American identity as we understand it today? My thesis addresses the creation and function of IWK as one of the most prominent forces of the Asian American New Left of the 1960s and 70s, and its resulting impact on the Asian American community and identity that exists today.

While there are numerous other Asian American groups and individuals contemporaneous with IWK, its significance as the first group to unify spontaneous uprisings of Asian American racial consciousness happening across the country warrant examination. Focusing on the stories of IWK's members and events in turn illuminates both particularities and overarching aspects of the Asian American movement that could only have come out of a fortuitous collision of the post-Civil Rights Movement, the peak of anti-Vietnam sentiments, and the rise of determined "Third World" peoples.³ Only after seeing the global revolutionary movements in which Asia significantly played a role, through the lens of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, did IWK find an impetus for mobilization. I argue that IWK brought Third World radicalism into Asian American communities to fashion an identity of resistance against a predominantly White and ethnocentric country. They did this by "hooking into" the already existing Black and brown domestic struggles for self-determination, which helped them

³ I use the term "Third World" throughout my thesis within its historical context of Third Worldism, in which developing countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa transitioned to socialist political structures and resisted Western imperialism after the Cold War.

understand how their own identity as Asian Americans could change the racial dynamics of the U.S. and draw connections with Marxist revolutionary movements around the world.

Historiography and Methods

Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot believes there are two types of histories: one that happened, and one which is said to have happened. This thesis combats the erasures of “history as told” by intervening in the historiography in three ways.⁴ First, it complicates analyses by sixties scholars who focus on White radicals and Black Power by centering firsthand narratives from members of IWK. Secondly, it traces the shaping of the Asian American identity to an earlier origin than commonly thought, from before anti-Asian violence and racial injustice in the 1980s. Lastly, my thesis also reverses the narrative order of previous Asian American radicalism scholarship. By illuminating the most prominent organization in particular I will argue that they were crucial to fashioning the goals and legacy of the widespread movement.

The realities of these Asian American activists in the sixties and seventies demand a revision of what we think we know about this time period. First, I use oral histories, both ones I conducted and ones recorded by other researchers as a crucial way to highlight individual experience, thus creating a narrative with voices that have previously slipped through the cracks in both histories of the Long Sixties and Asian America. I spoke with members of IWK from both the New York City and San Francisco contingents. On the East Coast, I interviewed founding members Lorraine Leong and Virgo Lee. On the West Coast, I interviewed Ben and Pam Lee and their comrades Alan Fang and Karen Wing from their days in both the Red Guard and IWK, multi-organizational activists such as Greg Morozumi who participated in both the Asian American Movement and the Black Liberation Movement, and IWK contemporaries

⁴ Michel-Rolph. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995), 2.

including Harvey Dong and Mary Kao who belonged to competing organizations across the nation, to achieve a diversity of perspectives regarding IWK. Recording their recollection of experiences that happened over 40 years ago still with such vividness and clarity preserves their stories for the history of Asian Americans. It uproots the history that is said to have happened with the one that actually happened, as told by the people who made it. I also examined articles from *Getting Together*, IWK's bilingual monthly newspaper used to organize and educate community members. Making sense of the personal stories of and surrounding IWK helps fashion an understanding of the organization and the radical Asian American movement overall as one that was integral to the self-determined and revolutionary fervor of the long sixties.

The vast majority of scholarship on the sixties constructs a history which ignores the contributions of Asian American activism. The most recent textbook on the era, *The Long Sixties: America, 1955-1973* (2016), identifies significant yet overlooked events that upend popular culture conceptions of the movement.⁵ Yet the chapter titled "Minority Empowerment: From Margin to Mainstream" focuses only on the Black Power movement, while its chapter on the New Left is about White socialist student movements. The anthology *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism* (2010) has been frequently cited and praised, and analyzes leftist radicalism, transnational solidarity, and community activism through the lens of both well-known organizations such as the American Indian Movement, and more obscure ones.⁶ While covering Black, White, American Indian, and Latinx subjects, it has no mention of Asian American or even the influences of Pan-Asian revolutionaries. Where are Asian Americans in these histories? Radical activism requires vocal, hyper-visible, and sometimes even violent

⁵ Christopher B. Strain, *The Long Sixties: America, 1955-1973* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2017).

⁶ Dan Berger, *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

agents, which conflict with common perceptions of the Asian American community as one of passive and assimilative quietness; even the term “Asian American radicals” sounds like an oxymoron. The FBI’s Counter-Intelligence Program quelled disruptive Black and Puerto Rican groups, and although Asian American groups were in close proximity they largely operated under the FBI’s radar.⁷ The assumption that Black, Latinx, Native American and even young White communities resisted America’s oppressive systems while Asians conformed to them prevents any recognition of their role in the revolutionary sixties. By excluding them, these histories are complicit in the perpetuation of the model minority narrative which deepens erasure. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act selected to naturalize Asians who were educated and had desirable skills, thus enabling their integration into society. These immigrants have become the most visible members of Asian America and shaped the idea that Asians are a talented, hardworking and model minority, fostering the belief that they rarely challenge U.S. institutional and cultural systems -- thus excluding them from narratives of resistance. If they immigrated to gain access to these American systems it would be illogical to think that they would want to challenge them.

Even in Asian American history, relatively little has been written about Marxist radicals in the 1960s and 1970s. Courses in Asian American history often mark the infamous murder of Vincent Chin as the beginning of an Asian American racial consciousness. In 1982, Chin, a Chinese-American autoworker in Detroit, was murdered by two White assembly workers. Assuming Chin was Japanese, they hit him with a baseball bat, saying “it’s because of you little

⁷ An exception may be found in the case of the Japanese American Richard Aoki, who was an early member of the Black Panther Party and the only Asian American on its leadership. In 2012, newly FOIA-released documents suggest that Aoki was an FBI informant who helped infiltrate the Panthers as part of the FBI’s COINTEL program. Many of those who were close to Aoki have denied this claim, and thus his true identity remains a mystery.

motherfuckers that we're out of work!"⁸ The Academy Award-nominated documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988) tells the story of a growing national campaign for Chin's justice that succeeded in mobilizing historically apolitical Asian communities and unifying all Asian ethnicities to rectify the justice system.⁹ But crediting this moment implies that the identity was a reaction to White violence against Asian Americans. Doing so contributes to historical narratives that treat minority racial consciousness as a byproduct of White violence, making people of color a periphery that frames central narratives of whiteness. In reality, movements of self-determination in which people of color seize ownership over their futures and the futures of their communities are at the epicenter of shaping racial identities. Furthermore, mobilization around Vincent Chen solely consisted of Asian Americans. The history of earlier radicals proves that the Asian American identity emerged not in racial isolation, but from racial solidarity with Black and Latinx movements and ties to political revolutions in the Third World.

The work of Asian American sixties scholars has been crucial in preventing double erasure by sixties history and Asian American history. Narratives of Asian American radicalization in the 1960s and 1970s portray the mission of the movement in its united goals for racial self-determination and community vitality, and then catalogue individual groups and their localized modes of operation. The encyclopedic listing of radical groups has failed to produce a singular, or synthetic, narrative of IWK. Furthermore, structurally they emphasize the dissonance among groups rather than collective action. Karen Ishizuka's *Serve the People* focuses on the political divisiveness of the many leftist radical organizations, and how they often fought more with each other than with the common enemies of capitalism and imperialism, summarizing the

⁸ "Our Political Program," *Red Guard Community Newspaper*, September 8, 1969, Box 74 Folder 48, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

⁹ Christine Choy et al., *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, VHS format. (New York: Filmmakers Library, 1988).

political and personal clashes between groups such as IWK, Wei Min She, and the Worker's Viewpoint Organization.¹⁰ While she introduces her book by saying that she focuses on the lived experiences of the individuals within the movement, her brief mention of IWK lacks personal narratives, which I resolve with my oral histories. Lastly, she traces the political formation of IWK from the Red Guard Party, and its community engagement arm, the Chinese Progressive Association in a way that makes generalizations about the organization and positions it as one of several factions in the movement.

Another book that falls into the same pattern is *The Asian American Movement: A Social History* (1993) by William Wei, one of the foundational works of Asian American history.¹¹ Wei defines IWK as the first Asian American Marxist group in the post-Civil Rights era. Yet he argues that the Asian American New Left was more reformist than revolutionary, delegitimizing the more radical elements of the movement. In contrast I argue that IWK's failure to create a socialist state made them no less revolutionary in their thought and practice. Wei says that IWK ultimately "proved insufficient to mobilize the 'masses,' and that it "could not attract adequate community support...Rather than rally people, its revolutionary ideology and actions alienated them."¹² In my thesis, I show how IWK was not only aware of this critique but made successful efforts to overcome it. The final concern with Wei's book, like Ishizuka's, is that he focuses on IWK's devolution as leftist infighting exacerbated. Yet I shift the focus from IWK's downfall to their legacy and argue that they ultimately strengthened the Chinatown community, supported transnational revolutionaries, and built a lasting Asian American consciousness. Their ultimate failure in creating a socialist state does not delegitimize their revolutionary nature.

¹⁰ Karen L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People : Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (London: Verso, 2016).

¹¹ William Wei, *The Asian American Movement : A Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

¹² Wei, 215.

My thesis is most concerned with the formation of “Asian American” as a political and racial construct. The term Asian American itself was allegedly coined in the late 1960s by Yuji Ichioka, who participated in the Third World Liberation strikes and was one of the first teachers of Asian American studies.¹³ Historian Barbara Fields has claimed that race is an ideological construct and a historical product, and that therefore, conceptions of race are formed in particular historical moments.¹⁴ By the end of the decade, the political climate at home and around the world provided the ideal historical conditions for IWK to undertake a political Pan-Asian identity to stand alongside Black and Brown Americans and Asian countries and challenge the power of White, Western hegemony. The agency of individuals in forming an Asian American identity refutes the common belief that it was a result of “categorization,” which sociologist Yen Le Espiritu defines as “the process by which one group ascriptively classifies another.”¹⁵ Rather, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and Korean young people chose to look past their histories of separation and opposition to mobilize under a single racial category for political power.

Thus with an emphasis on Asian American racial and political formation, my thesis most closely builds on Daryl Maeda’s argument in *Chains of Babylon* (2009) that Asian Americans used a self-determined identity to insert themselves into the existing racial paradigms of America.¹⁶ First, Maeda argues that previous histories posit that the term Asian American was a “state-sponsored identity,” obfuscating the efforts of grassroots organizers like IWK in creating an agent-driven identity that decried the state as “repressive and complicit in the maintenance of

¹³ Yuji Ichioka, “A Historian by Happenstance,” *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 1 (2000): 48.

¹⁴ Barbara J. Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Van Woodward*, ed. J.M. Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 151.

¹⁵ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 6.

¹⁶ Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

capitalism” and thrived in spite of it.¹⁷ IWK subverted institutional constructions of race. Secondly, Asian American families participated in what I call “performative whiteness” as they experienced post-World War II economic mobility and suburbanization. Maeda argues that the Red Guard rejected this trend of performative whiteness by adopting methods of Black radicalism to declare that Asian Americans were united with all oppressed people of color and rejected assimilation into the White majority. I show how they declared solidarity with the Panthers to make these political claims. Yet Maeda’s grassroots cultural lens that focuses on domestic cultural influences like the Black Panthers fails to give the same weight to the influence of state-driven Third World liberation movements on IWK. I argue that the movement’s relations to global politics and institutions, especially China’s Communist Party, were just as significant to the shaping of IWK and the greater Asian American Movement as was ground-level community organizing.

Although I focus on the years between 1968 and 1978, I do not suggest that the movement began and ended in that time. While the overall movement started much earlier and is arguably ongoing today, this decade marked the finite boundaries of the Red Guard and IWK as independent organizations. I use that timeframe to contextualize the movement in between the suppressed Chinese American leftists of the McCarthy Era and contemporary Asian America, to demonstrate that the movement was not spontaneous, but was rather a culmination of already existing communist sympathies, emerging transnational liberation movements, and growing racial consciousness after the Civil Rights Movement. I conclude my thesis in 1978 because in that year IWK and its competing organizations collapsed. “By the end we were fighting each other, instead of the real enemy,” said Mary Kao, a member of a competing faction called the

¹⁷ Maeda, 16.

Workers Viewpoint Organization.¹⁸ After disbanding, IWK and other groups of ethnic self-determination reemerged as international and interracial communist revolutionary organizations, while the urgency that propelled the Asian American identity waned until 1982 with the murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit.

Former student activist Harvey Dong said that “groups will come and go, but it’s the knowledge behind them that lasts.”¹⁹ This thesis reveals how IWK furthered knowledge of Marxism, Third World liberation, and feminism to establish a lasting Asian American movement. While previous research on this topic surveys IWK as just one of several groups who participated in the Asian American movement, I invert these narratives using a grassroots approach via oral histories and other primary sources. I show that the legacy of IWK, the first national Asian American political organization, is the Asian American identity itself: one that challenged White ethnocentrism, rejected minority assimilation and sided with the revolutionary Third World to fashion a collective racial consciousness of self-determination.

The Early Red Guard: The Legitimate Ways

In San Francisco’s Chinatown during the early 1960s, Cantonese youth from neighborhood gangs who were known as *kai duoy-kai nuoy*, or bad boys and bad girls, frequented a dusty pool hall on Jackson Street. They were members of Chinatown’s violent youth gangs, which were a result of structural barriers and racial segregation that limited the prospects of the neighborhood’s residents. In the first issue of IWK’s community newspaper *Getting Together*, a columnist defended the prevalence of gang violence by rhetorically asking “Who wouldn’t be angry with all this poverty, unemployment, racism, stupid war and hard

¹⁸ Mary Kao, Interview with Mary Kao, September 5, 2017.

¹⁹ Harvey Dong, Interview with Harvey Dong, August 31, 2017.

life?”²⁰ In 1960, the median education for people over 25 in Chinatown was 1.7 years whereas the citywide median was 12 years, and the rate of male unemployment was nearly double the city average.²¹ Leways member Alan Fang described his surroundings as a teenager: “you had guys going to jail, doing drugs, it was a lumpen lifestyle.”²² The gangs faced heavy policing: in 1969, the San Francisco Police Department arrested or cited 514 Chinatown youth, a majority of whom were American-born Chinese.²³ Seeing a need to do something about the violence and over policing, the *kai duoy-kai nuoy* met in the dusty pool hall to create a coalition of the neighborhoods youth gangs who were experiencing what historian Laura Pulido calls a “political awakening” as they realized the ways that structural conditions shaped their existence.²⁴ The youth called themselves the Legitimate Ways or Leways, gained non-profit status, and used federal grants to create programs and jobs for the unemployed gang members.

Through their working-class backgrounds and lifestyles of unemployment and gang violence, the Leways embedded failures of and resistances against assimilation into the history of Chinese America, refuting the model minority myth. The myth claims that Asian Americans had overcome racial discrimination through hard work and assimilation. It emerged after the post-Cold War alliance between the U.S. and China in which the U.S. highlighted Asian immigrant integration and attempted to prove itself as an exemplary democracy on the world stage.²⁵ The model minority narrative was not only an international relations strategy, but most importantly, it

²⁰ “Getting Together,” *Getting Together*, February 1970, Volume 1 Issue 1 edition, Box 74 Folder 41, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

²¹ L. Ling-chi Wang, “Chinatown in Transition,” *Amerasia Journal* 33, no. 1 (January 2007): 34–35, <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.33.1.3246116125188729>.

²² Alan Fang, Interview with Alan Fang, In Person, December 11, 2017.

²³ Paul Takagi and Tony Platt, “Behind the Gilded Ghetto: An Analysis of Race, Class, and Crime in Chinatown,” *Crime and Social Justice* 9 (Spring-Summer 1978): 11.

²⁴ Lauren Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left - Radical Activism in Los Angeles*, n.d. Beginning of Chapter 3.

²⁵ Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History*, First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

was a racial wedge that elevated Asian Americans while disenfranchising Blacks. Historian Vijay Prashad argues that the model minority narrative emerged during the Civil Rights Movement to condemn Black protest “as if to say protest is un-American... to redress power relations.”²⁶ It then exacerbated after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act admitted a wave of professional East Asians immigrants who rapidly assimilated due to occupational success and a lack of strong ethnic networks.²⁷ As a result, racial divisions among minority populations intensified as other minority communities were now expected to overcome institutionalized racism.

The Leways challenged the damaging model minority narrative because they exemplified “downward assimilation,” a term coined by immigration scholars Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut that describes the experience of working-class immigrants who due to their proximity to urban ethnic ghettos are exposed to behavior and attitudes that are “inimical to upward mobility.” In particular, second-generation youth like those in Leways took in messages about the futility of education and the realities of discrimination in inhibiting people of color from succeeding.²⁸ The Leways were unashamed of their delinquency and rebelliousness and declared the legitimacy of their experience with downward assimilation, demonstrating that the realities of their upbringing in Chinatown invalidated the universal application of the assimilation narrative to all Asian Americans. They made the model minority stereotype impotent in wedging minority groups. Furthermore, the Leways’ claiming of an unassimilable ethnic identity portends IWK’s use of an Asian American identity to also challenge existing racial narratives. IWK too would

²⁶ Vijay. Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 7.

²⁷ Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, “Who They Are and Why They Come,” in *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Los Angeles: UC Press, 1996), 20.

²⁸ Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Los Angeles: UC Press, 1996), 61.

rebuke the model minority narrative and link Asian Americans to the struggles of all people of color in combatting structural oppression and racial discrimination.

From Leways to the Red Guard

In 1968, a young organizer named Alex Hing returned to San Francisco after a year of campaigning with the SCLC across the South for housing, education, healthcare, and employment rights for people of color. The experience inspired him to mobilize his home community of Chinatown and he met with the Leways to create a revolutionary sect.²⁹ While the Leways focused on resisting cultural assimilation, under Hing's leadership they sought to achieve community power, first by being "defenders of their ethnic community" and secondly by engaging in interracial revolutionary organizing.³⁰

First, the Red Guard countered the structure of "dual domination" in Chinatown, or what Historian Ling-chi Wang calls the overlapping oppressive forces of political authority and systemic discrimination of residents.³¹ The first structure came from Taiwan's Nationalist party, the Kuomintang (KMT), who exerted extraterritorial control over the Chinese diaspora and legitimized its authority in the mainland by controlling the Chinatown Chinese Benevolent Associations (CBAs), and colluding with the FBI to spy on communist sympathizers in cities across the nation. In New York Chinatown, one newspaper reported that the FBI was taking "extraordinary actions" to track "Communist activities, disruption, and infiltration of Maoist agents."³² The Red Guard used public rallies and newspaper publications to protest the

²⁹ Fred Ho -- et al., eds., "Interview with Alex Hing, Former Minister of Information for the Red Guard Party and Founding Member of IWK," in *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian/Pacific America* (Edinburgh, Scotland; San Francisco, CA: Big Red Media / AK Press, 2000). Daryl Joji Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 15.

³⁰ Wei, *The Asian American Movement: A Social History*, 1993, 208.

³¹ L. Ling-chi Wang, "The Structure of Dual Domination: Toward a Paradigm for the Study of the Chinese Diaspora in the United States," *Amerasia Journal* 21, no. 1-2 (1995): 149-169.

³² Richard Farrell, "FBI Recruiting Informers in Chinatown," *Boston After Dark*, November 2, 1971, Box 74 Folder 39, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

Nationalist-controlled CBAs, and advocated for those in Chinatown who supported the People's Republic of China (PRC) and thus were under constant fear of backlash from the community. They rebelled against institutional authority, protected the lives of insubordinate community members, and created initial momentum for community power. This political work became a foundation upon which they would expand to go beyond Chinatown politics and support revolutionary movements happening across the Third World in the 1960s and 1970s.

Second, the Red Guard strove to overcome the racially exclusionary federal immigration laws and local policies that designed Chinatown's systemic health disparities, housing discrimination, high crime rates and unsafe working conditions.³³ They implemented public programs like health centers and free breakfasts to resolve the dearth of public services, and informed their community engagement with relevant ideological, historical and linguistic studies. To respond to dual domination's discriminatory structures, the Red Guard embraced racial solidarity and Marxist thought and saw how their own experiences with oppression were connected to those of all communities of color. Their maturation into revolutionaries would be a years-long process that declared the place of Asian Americans within the domestic social strata and political upheavals around the world.

The Black Panthers and the Red Guard

The radicalism of the Black Panthers had the most significant influence on the Red Guard's ability to harness community power and politicize the Asian American identity. The relationship began when two women in the Red Guard, who at the time were dating Black

³³ Takagi and Platt, "Behind the Gilded Ghetto: An Analysis of Race, Class, and Crime in Chinatown," 7. These structures perpetuated economic inequality; just prior to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, Chinatown's 30,000 residents had a median income between \$4,301 and \$4,770, the poorest of any section in San Francisco, and 40.7% of the population had an income below \$4,000, compared to the city average of 21.1%. For context with other neighborhoods in the city, The Mission, a primarily Latinx neighborhood, had 31.4% of its population below \$4,000. Hunters Point, a primarily Black neighborhood, had 37.2% below.

Panthers, suggested visiting the headquarters in Oakland and participating in a Panther study group which involved reading works of Mao, Fanon, Guevara, and Castro and discussing Marxist revolutionary ideology.³⁴ Several members went on the initial visit and were impressed with what they saw: steel plating covering the building's walls and windows, while on the inside, guns filled street-level holes made around the building's perimeter. Alan Fang said he was "shocked" at his first visit in which he saw that the Panthers "were ready to the point of political power grow[ing] out of the barrel of a gun."³⁵ This visit inspired the Red Guard to imitate their militancy, as they began to wear similar uniforms of berets and sunglasses and collected guns. The Red Guard and Panthers then formed a joint study group that initiated an interracial coalition between Black and Asian radicals that would soon extend to link the greater Asian American and Black Power Movements and the communities they fought for. Given that the two groups were united in the struggle for self-determination and were both working towards armed defense against the state, a few Chinese Americans wanted to join the Panthers. But the Red Guard wanted to focus on issues specific to the Chinese immigrant community, and in 1969 they officially split from the Leways to do political organizing.

Members wanted to implement the Panthers' militaristic self-defense strategies in Chinatown to protect themselves from racist policing and the CBAs' crackdown on Chinese Nationalists. Lee said that the goal of the Red Guard was to "arm every Chinese in America, prepare for revolution!"³⁶ Imitating the Panthers, the Red Guard armed their community with both social and political power and stockpiled military weapons for self-defense against the

³⁴ -- et al., "Interview with Alex Hing, Former Minister of Information for the Red Guard Party and Founding Member of IWK." Daryl J. Maeda, "Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen," in *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 73–96.

³⁵ Fang, Interview with Alan Fang.

³⁶ Ben Lee, Interview with Ben Lee, In Person, December 11, 2017.

suppressive structures of dual domination. Fang worked on the military and self-defense branch of the Red Guard, and also taught a community-organizing seminar at Stanford to recruit students to the grassroots effort. The Panthers strengthened Asian-Black community links by frequenting the pool hall on Jackson Street to promote their campaign to free their founder Huey P. Newton from jail, and members Bobby Seale and David Hilliard hosted political education sessions in Chinatown to mentor youth on political activism.³⁷

The Red Guard's creation of a Black-Asian coalition complicated the Black and White racial binary and asserted the place of Asian Americans within America's racial landscape. IWK member Ben Lee remembered meeting the Panthers and thinking that he could relate to them through their shared identity as working-class minorities. Alan Fang recalled relating to them instantly, saying, "They were street thugs like us. The proletariat."³⁸ Lee said of solidarity, "It wasn't like we were separate, but we all came from the same strain," and spoke about how members of the Panthers also referred to the Red Guard and IWK as their comrades.³⁹ Through their revolutionary Marxist lens, interviewees rejected the idea of Asian and Black "allyship" and instead identified with a unified colored working-class. Maeda argues that the Red Guard declared a shared experience with Blacks in facing racism and thus "inserted Asian Americans into a racial paradigm."⁴⁰ The Red Guard reclaimed the Asian American identity from the manipulative narrative of assimilation and created a self-determined one that aligned with the

³⁷ The Panthers are also credited with naming the Red Guard. Greg Morozumi recalled that Hing wanted to be called the Red Dragons, but Seale suggested the name Red Guard instead, referring to the name of Chairman Mao's student army in the Cultural Revolution. By the end of the year, the original Red Guard would become a fanatical organization that collapsed under the suppression of the People's Liberation Army in China and the name would be a source of confusion for outsiders. However Hing and Seale were not yet aware of that and at the time saw it as a source of inspiration.

³⁸ Fang, Interview with Alan Fang.

³⁹ Lee, Interview with Ben Lee. Khury Petersen-Smith and Emory Douglas, "We Always Had Solidarity," SocialistWorker.org, May 13, 2015, <https://socialistworker.org/2015/05/13/we-always-had-solidarity>.

⁴⁰ Maeda, "Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen," 75.

Black identity. While the Leways first subverted the model minority myth by legitimizing the experiences of Chinese American gang youth, the Red Guard further dismantled the assimilationist narrative by declaring racial solidarity with minorities who were seen as unassimilable, especially Blacks. The Red Guard echoed the Black Panther strategies of noncooperation and armed self-defense, linking Asian and Black Americans in unified protest against assimilation and the authority of White power structures. The Red Guard's performance of blackness caused them to contemplate their own race and "catalyzed" the formation of the Asian American identity.⁴¹ They claimed the Asian American identity and not only used it to build community power, but also imbued it with the power to resist assimilation, assert solidarity with Black and Brown activist communities, and dismantle wedges between racial minorities.

The Eleven Point Program

The Red Guard published an Eleven Point Program to codify its revolutionary aims and insert the Asian American identity within existing racial and political paradigms. It was first published in the *Red Guard Community Newspaper* in 1968 and members distributed it in Chinatown, albeit with limited circulation. The Red Guard decried the dual domination of business associations and political agents over Chinatown as they demanded to "end the exploitation of the people in our community by avaricious businessmen and politicians."⁴² By invoking Black Panther terminology within their demands for Chinatown they linked Black and Asian struggles. In the introduction to the program the Red Guard demanded "an immediate end to the brutal harassment of our people by the racist pig structure." By adopting the Panthers' use of the word "pigs" to refer to the police, the Red Guard connected Chinese and Black

⁴¹ Maeda, "Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen," 75.

⁴² "Our Political Program," *Red Guard Community Newspaper*, September 8, 1969, Box 74 Folder 48, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

communities through a shared experience with discriminatory policing and linked racial identities which were often thought as oppositional. They also demanded the “power to determine the destiny of our people, the Yellow Community,” decent housing, an education that “exposes the true nature of this decadent American society,” removal of all Asians from the draft, and other health, labor, environmental and political demands. The eleventh demand for environmental justice was unique among the platforms of the radical colored Left. The Eleven Point Program marked the beginning of the Red Guard’s imitation of the Panthers as a form of racial solidarity with Blacks that tied together their struggles, rejected Asian assimilation, and strengthened colored community power.

The Red Guard then held a rally to announce their program in which the Panthers participated and encouraged Asian Americans to recognize and fight against racial injustice. Hilliard spoke last, telling the Chinatown audience that they must step up to support the youth, stop being afraid, and support the Black Panthers. He called Chinese people “the Uncle Toms of the non-White peoples” and “jive-ass motherfuckers” for “accepting all the shit that comes from the oppressors.” Hilliard’s speech reveals the Panthers’ investment in Chinatown that enabled them to build a coalition with the Red Guard. In seeing similarities between the issues Oakland and Chinatown residents faced, Blacks and Chinese could garner a collective power to confront racial oppression. While frustrated with the inaction of the Chinese community, the Panthers hoped that a connection would foster a more politically active climate. “You’re fucked over because you are passive,” Hilliard was reported to have said. “You’ve got to unite against the oppressor.”⁴³ Seeing the Panthers as a successful model of defiance inspired the Red Guard to use militant tactics and community organizing to achieve their goals and contest the structures of

⁴³ “Red Guard Rally,” *AAPA*, December 1968, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

dual domination. The Panthers inspired the Red Guard to ground their activism in Black-Asian solidarity, which they used to unite the struggles of their communities and jointly contest forces of racial and class oppression.

Study and Serve the People

The Red Guard took their first official actions at the ethnic studies strikes at San Francisco State University between November 1968 and March 1969, in which Black, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Latino and Native American student activists at San Francisco State University created a unified coalition known as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) and held the longest student strike in American history.⁴⁴ The coalition successfully established a School of Ethnic Studies and sparked a national movement for ethnic studies programs at colleges across the country, including New York, where IWK fought for ethnic studies programs at Columbia and the City University of New York.⁴⁵ The establishment of ethnic studies programs at universities nationwide became one of the most successful products of the movement in which the Red Guard and IWK participated.⁴⁶

Student strikers demanded ethnic studies in part so they could better serve their communities, extending beyond campus activism to engage in service projects in the wider community and often extended support to racial and ethnic groups different from their own. The

⁴⁴ Third World Liberation Front, “No Deals - Fight Against Racism for Self-Determination - Grant the 15 Demands for TWLF Now!” (San Francisco State University, Undated), Special Collections/Archives, J. Paul Leonard Library, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/strike/bundles/187974>. Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*.

⁴⁵ Fred Wei-han Ho, “The Inspiration of Mao,” in *Afro Asia : Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans*, ed. Fred Wei-han Ho and Bill Mullen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 159.

⁴⁶ TWLF and the Asian American student groups translated Third World self-determination into the context of minority self-determination within the US, offering a simultaneous critique of imperialism abroad and racism at home and demanded change in complicit institutional systems. Standing alongside Black, Chicano, and Native American Studies, Asian Americans demanded an education which promoted ethnic history and culture because it not only equipped them with the necessary skills to serve their communities but also repudiated the academy’s role in propagating White supremacist and western ethnocentric worldviews.

Red Guard and IWK's participation within the TWLF strikes indicates their demands for a practical education that could help them better serve Chinatown, whose overcrowding, a majority low-income renting population, and persistent language barriers among other factors created "an impenetrable social, political, and economic wall" around Chinatown that delineated its ghetto.⁴⁷ Operating between campus activism and community outreach, they participated in the strikes, demanded the preservation of a tuberculosis testing center in Chinatown, assisted Asian Legal Services and the Asian American Draft Help Center, and provided breakfast for Black children in housing projects. They also used their programs to recruit members; Ben Lee, for example, joined the Red Guard after volunteering at its Asian Legal Services program. Using tactics learned from the Black Panthers as well as a few from the Latinx radical group the Mission Rebels, the Red Guard approached Chinatown's systemic challenges through a revolutionary socialist structure.

The Red Guard successfully modified the revolutionary socialist programs of the Panthers and Mission Rebels to fit the specific cultural frameworks of their area. Just as the Panthers provided free breakfasts for Black children in Oakland, the Red Guard hosted their own breakfast program. An article in the newspaper publicizing it said "we realize that our Children must be healthy and well fed in order to struggle for the liberation of our people."⁴⁸ They provided eggs, potatoes, toast, fried hot dogs, fruit and milk on weekday mornings before school. Yet the program was less popular than they hoped and only three children participated on the first day. Fang suggested that the initiative failed because Chinese familial and cultural values demanded that children were well-fed.⁴⁹ Adapting their program to serve the neighborhood

⁴⁷ Wang, "Chinatown in Transition," 34.

⁴⁸ "Breakfast for Children," *Red Guard Community Newspaper*, September 8, 1969, Volume 1 N.4 edition, Box 74 Folder 48, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

⁴⁹ Lee, Interview with Ben Lee.

elderly, they served over 300 people on Sunday afternoons in Portsmouth Square. Their adoption of already existing programs among the radical colored Left proves the significance of racial solidarity in planting public service programs across ethnic enclaves. The Red Guard's Marxist political education and newfound knowledge of Asian American studies enabled them to unite with other radicals of color, establish "community power," and enrich their approach to combatting structures of oppression.

IWK in Chinatown New York

At the same time the Red Guard was mobilizing in the community in the late 1960s, the Asian American Political Association (AAPA) at Columbia University in New York was experiencing an intensifying political climate on campus that resulted in the younger members demanding greater engagement in the Chinatown community.⁵⁰ Students founded AAPA as an antiwar and anti-racism organization with a focus on Asians.⁵¹ By 1968, antiwar activism at Columbia was at its height; students for a Democratic Society (SDS) occupied the president's office for nearly four days and accused the University of aiding U.S. involvement in Vietnam.⁵² This event galvanized thousands of students to organize and protest. Student activism "was not something you could just ignore, everywhere you went there'd be a demonstration or a group of students taking over buildings," AAPA member Virgo Lee said, an engineering student who was involved in the SDS occupation and would later serve as IWK's Minister of Finance.⁵³ This sense of extreme urgency for organizing was a sentiment that spanned both coasts, as Morozumi said of his own political awakening in San Francisco, "If you're draft age, and you're going to pick up an M-16 and kill other Asians for some false democracy, you better step to and start

⁵⁰ Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*.

⁵¹ Ishizuka.

⁵² Newsreel, *Columbia Revolt (Part I)*, 1969, <http://archive.org/details/Columbia1969>.

⁵³ Virgo Lee, Interview with Virgo Lee, Skype, January 28, 2018.

understanding the world.”⁵⁴ AAPA grew as they coordinated with Asian groups both on campus and across the city, and led an Asian coalition at the peaceful antiwar demonstration in Washington D.C. in 1969 that attracted over 250,000 people and over 100 organizations that made up the moderate, radical, and militant New Left.⁵⁵

In an amicable split, twelve students broke away from the group and formed IWK, and left campus to focus their efforts full-time on Chinatown.⁵⁶ Like the Red Guard they adopted the militancy of the Black Panthers by imitating their uniforms of berets and sunglasses.⁵⁷ However, in terms of grassroots coalition building, IWK in New York linked themselves more closely with the Young Lords Party (YLP), a Puerto Rican radical Leftist group based in Chicago with a measurable contingent in New York. Close friendships between leaders of the Young Lords and IWK formed when members of each were students at Columbia. IWK became involved in the political activism within the Puerto Rican community, participating in Young Lords events, occupations, and demonstrations regarding police brutality in East Harlem, or El Barrio. Members published articles in *Getting Together* that signaled racial solidarity among Puerto Rican and Asian radicals; one article from 1970 urged readers to fight, but not against their Black and Brown brothers, saying “the fighting amongst ourselves is used by rich White people in the government and in the schools to keep the Chinese and Puerto Ricans in their places.”⁵⁸ Another article announced an event in which the Young Lords, which had “helped and worked closely with” IWK, would visit Chinatown to speak about their organization. The event was to

⁵⁴ Greg Morozumi, Interview with Greg Morozumi, In Person, December 17, 2018.

⁵⁵ Joan Herbers, “250,000 War Protesters Stage Peaceful Rally In Washington; Militants Stir Clashes Later,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 1969, <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/1115.html#article>.

⁵⁶ “Righteous Harmonious Fist,” *Gidra*, June 1971, Box 74 Folder 40, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

⁵⁷ William Wei, *The Asian American Movement : A Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

⁵⁸ “Free Puerto Rico,” *Getting Together*, September-October 1970, Volume 1 N.5 edition.

feature central committee member Juan Gonzalez, a poetry reading, and a documentary about the organization called “The People Rising Up.”⁵⁹

IWK’s relationship with the Young Lords complicates the history of racial solidarity dominated by Asian-Black relations as a result of the groups in the Bay Area, expanding the narrative of Asian American racial solidarity among the colored Left to include their close ties to the Latinx community. Members of IWK New York spoke of coalition building with the Young Lords in a similar vein as the Red Guards in San Francisco did about the Black Panthers. As founding member Lorraine Leong saw it, the Young Lords of East Harlem “were in the streets,” just like the youth of Chinatown, and both were working-class minorities living in urban ghettos. “We had trouble with the KMT in Chinatown, they had police issues. What was fundamental was our oppression. It was not based on race or nationality. It was based on oppression. It didn’t matter what color you were,” she said.⁶⁰ The Asian-Latinx coalition building was crucial to forming interracial political power that resisted structures of oppression which affected all people of color. IWK participated in events and organizing in East Harlem. One photograph from the



1: Funeral Procession of Julio Roldan, October 1970

⁵⁹ “Young Lords Party Will Visit Chinatown,” *Getting Together*, November 1971, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

⁶⁰ Lorraine Leong, Interview with Lorraine Leong, January 30, 2018.

neighborhood shows brothers of IWK, the Young Lords, and the Black Panthers jointly holding the funeral casket of Julio Roldan, a Young Lords member who died mysteriously in jail.⁶¹

There, they also helped the Young Lords take over the First Spanish Methodist Church on Lexington Avenue. The Young Lords' demand that the church provide a free hot breakfast program for 50-75 youth was a revised plea that initially included demands for an education center and daycare.⁶² Their successful efforts in El Barrio were the model for IWK's social welfare programs in Chinatown. Thus, just as the Panthers galvanized the Asian American political consciousness, so too did the Young Lords inspire Asian Americans to mobilize their own communities under a common racial identity.

Additionally, the Young Lords' advocacy for the Puerto Rican independence movement enhanced IWK's ties to Third World liberation and further implicated Asian Americans in the struggles of the Third World umbrella. IWK members wrote articles in *Getting Together* about the underground armies that were fighting to liberate Puerto Rico from colonialism. "We are literally fighting the same enemy," writes one author, speaking about the common enemy of U.S. imperialism.⁶³ IWK drew a connection between the movements of self-determination for Asian Americans, Latinxs, and Puerto Ricans. They linked the liberation of people in Puerto Rico to their fight for racial equality at home and generated Asian American clout by imbricating the identity into domestic racial paradigms and global politics.

IWK in Chinatown

⁶¹ "Excerpts from Correction Board's Report on the 'Death of a Citizen, Julio Roldan,'" *The New York Times*, November 18, 1970.

⁶² Michael T. Kaufman, "Puerto Rican Group Seizes Church in East Harlem in Demand for Space," *The New York Times*, December 29, 1969, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/12/29/archives/puerto-rican-group-seizes-church-in-east-harlem-in-demand-for-space.html>.

⁶³ "Free Puerto Rico."

While IWK grew in a few years, the local, national and international political climate had intensified by 1970 to the point that a dozen students from schools in New York City and its surrounding areas felt compelled to drop out of school and become full-time organizers in Chinatown. “I didn’t feel I could in good conscience ignore everything that was going on and finish school. If my heart wasn’t in it, then I [knew] I should drop out,” Lee said.⁶⁴ 19-year-old Leong had to make a difficult choice as the daughter of a Chinatown small business owner and the recipient of a full-scholarship to Sarah Lawrence College. During the early days of her involvement older women in the organization such as Carmen Chow gave her invaluable mentorship, supported her personal and political growth, and took care of her when she faced severe domestic violence from a male member. The women Leong befriended were a major influence on her decision to stay in the organization. Leong felt “totally inspired” by the energy of the people and the climate surrounding her, and decided to take a break from school to become a full-time activist.⁶⁵ Today a similar situation is hard to imagine, where students feel so compelled to devote their lives to their community that they would sacrifice their often elite educations to do so. The intensity of the cause and the urgency of the situation at the start of the decade was one of the most unique moments in American history and one that was inextricably linked to the revolutionary political happenings around the world that galvanized Asian Americans to develop a new racial consciousness of resistance against authority and empowerment of their community.

Like the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Red Guard, IWK operated public service programs around health, food, and education, and also organized demonstrations for tenants’ rights and garment workers. They opened a health clinic, believing that “the health of

⁶⁴ Lee, Interview with Virgo Lee.

⁶⁵ Leong, Interview with Lorraine Leong.

Third World communities in Amerika continues to decline as preventable diseases like TB, anemia, malnutrition, and lead poisoning are allowed to sap the people's strength."⁶⁶ The clinic primarily focused on tuberculosis testing, where the rate of the disease in Chinatown was five times the national average.⁶⁷ They worked with the National Lawyers' Guild attorneys to monitor health inspectors who were suspected of harassing Chinatown restaurant owners. From their headquarters on 24 Market Street they hosted screenings two to three times a week of films from Vietnam, China, as well as other progressive documentaries and cultural films that were free to the public, which Young Lords members would occasionally attend too. During one screening of *East is Red*, a propaganda musical made for the Communist Party in 1965, KMT agents firebombed the storefront and threw garbage at viewers from the roof.⁶⁸ Just like the Red Guard in San Francisco, the organization faced backlash from the wrath of dual domination as police and the KMT harassed the IWK storefront through vandalism and property damage.⁶⁹ Yet members defied the authoritative institutions in Chinatown by continuing to run their programs.

IWK New York's operations were independent of yet nearly identical to those of the Red Guard in San Francisco. Although Asian Americans groups organized across the nation independently of each other by the late 1960s, they had the same goal of fashioning an Asian American identity that subverted institutional authority. Furthermore, both branches were heavily influenced by other radical groups of color, i.e. the Panthers in San Francisco and the Young Lords in New York, proving that Asian Americans across the nation saw a need to politicize as a minority group and implicate themselves within existing racial paradigms. The social climate of

⁶⁶ "IWK Free Health Clinic Opens," *Getting Together*, October 1970, Issue 1 Number 5 edition.

⁶⁷ "Health Crisis," *Rodan*, February 1971, Volume 1 Number 7 edition, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

⁶⁸ Leong, Interview with Lorraine Leong.

⁶⁹ "NYC Chinatown Repression of IWK," *Getting Together*, April 1971, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

the 1960s and 1970s inspired young Asian Americans to politicize to declare racial solidarity with all people of color and resist assimilation.

IWK's Twelve Point Plan

In 1970, IWK published a Twelve Point Plan in a similar vein to that of the Red Guard and the Panthers that would define the national Asian American Movement. Members abided by the program for the organization's entire lifespan, showing that IWK was uniquely strong compared to contemporary groups that faced internal fracturing. The Young Lords also adopted a Panther-inspired program which reflects how the latter influenced not only Asian American radicals but much of the colored Left. One of IWK's demands for an ethnic education was "We Want an Education Which Exposes the True History of Western Imperialism In Asia and Around the World; Which Teaches Us the Hardships and Struggles of Our Ancestors In This Land..."⁷⁰ and paralleled that of the Panthers': "We Want Education That Teaches Us Our True History And Our Role In The Present-Day Society."⁷¹ By adapting specific verbiage from the Panthers Ten Point Program, IWK fashioned a shared Black and Asian platform of reclaiming education against White ethnocentrism. Additionally, IWK inserted not just a demand for "True History," but one that exposed "Western Imperialism in Asia and Around the World." In doing so, Asian Americans implanted their own community's demands into the Black Panther narrative, just as the Red Guard was doing simultaneously on the West Coast. Like the Red Guard, IWK also imitated the Panthers as a way to signify racial solidarity while also asserting their place in the radical Third World struggle.

⁷⁰ "IWK 12 Point Platform and Program," *Getting Together*, May 1971, Box 74 Folder 40, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

⁷¹ "Black Panther's Ten-Point Program," accessed April 4, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm>.

The organization used the program to launch their revolutionary actions in Chinatown. The mantra of “serve the people” was perhaps the most important core value of IWK; “To be good revolutionaries, you have to serve the people,” said Carmen Chow in an article about IWK in *Chinatown Daily News* from 1974.⁷² It was a core edict of the Panthers that originated from Mao’s *Serve the People* speech in 1944, in which he established the common ground of the revolutionary working-class and necessitated that they “must care for each other, must love and help each other” to overcome suffering and achieve liberation.⁷³ IWK saw the value in Mao’s approach to leadership, especially through seeing the Panthers’ commitment to their Oakland community, and adopted his Third World approach to help the people of Chinatown, whom they perceived as victims of systemic racism and barriers to health access, education, and economic mobility. IWK’s “serve the people” programs were based on their Twelve Point Program, from which they established draft counseling services to exempt Asian Americans from military service, and participated in ethnic studies strikes on campuses that were inspired by those at San Francisco State University. Some programs addressed multiple goals at once. Fusing both their programs’ feminist principles and the demand for relevant educations, female members established a Chinese school where they taught heritage lessons for Chinatown children, language classes for non-English speakers, and home economics courses for mothers regarding the use of bus passes, food stamps, and cooking lessons for American food.

IWK also realized that these immediate issues were tied to global systems of oppression, and this realization came through the Panthers’ connections to the Third World. The ninth point, “We Want an End to the Amerikan Military,” was a reference to the Panther program’s point six,

⁷² Murry Engle, “From Fist to Open Hand,” *Chinatown News*, June 3, 1974, Box 74 Folder 40, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

⁷³ Mao Tse-tung, “Serve the People,” September 8, 1944, Marxists.org, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_19.htm.

“We Want All Black Men To Be Exempt From Military Service,” calling out the hypocrisy of a racist and imperialist government. The Twelve Point Plan was not a co-optation of the Panthers’ work, but rather an act of deference to it and a way to legitimate the Asian American’s role in the Third World liberation. Ultimately, IWK politicized the Asian American identity as result of comradeship with a Black Marxist group and a Puerto Rican progressive radical organization to challenge American White hegemony. They repudiated the history of Asians in America as one of racial assimilation, and since the early days of the Red Guard, members were asserting their identity in the American racial hierarchy to express solidarity with all oppressed peoples of color.⁷⁴

Blacks and Asians in the Vietnam Antiwar Movement

During the antiwar movement of the 1960s, IWK both tapped into the Black Power movement’s support of Asian anti-imperialist struggles and made their own direct ties to support their colonized Asian brothers and sisters in Vietnam, Korea, and China. As a young student prior to joining IWK, Greg Morozumi attended antiwar protests in Oakland with his family and found himself gravitating towards the Asian contingents. At the rallies White activists did not let the Asian or Black attendees speak, which was particularly ironic given the war’s locale in Asia and the enlistment and drafting of Black and Asian American soldiers. Through this event, Morozumi learned about the disparity between White and Black-Asian antiwar arguments: the former called for the safe return of naïve young American men from the brutalities of the Viet Cong while the latter advocated for Vietnam’s defeat of U.S. forces, chanting phrases such as “Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam Has Got to Win!”⁷⁵ The latter’s sentiments were a change from African Americans’ strategy during the Cold War, in which civil rights activists advocated for a

⁷⁴ Maeda, “Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen,” 75.

⁷⁵ Morozumi, Interview with Greg Morozumi.

double victory campaign that would end racial inequality at home and promote democracy abroad. Now, the Black Power movement shared an identity with the Vietnamese as victims of racial exploitation, an identity that Asian Americans would soon also take up to join the fight against racism and imperialism.



2: IWK Women at an Antiwar Rally

Both IWK and the Red Guard echoed Black antiwar sentiments and particularly emphasized U.S. imperialist exploitation of Asians, both of which bolstered their consciousness as Asians in America. They participated in antiwar protests both in San Francisco and New York and published numerous sensationalist articles decrying the genocidal nature of the Vietnam War. The cover story of *Getting Together* in January 1973 titled “Nixon Must Sign Ceasefire: Vietnamese Defeat U.S. Air War,” was one of many articles written from a perspective sympathetic to the Vietnamese. The author wrote that the Nixon administration “purposely tried to give the American people the illusion that ‘peace was at hand,’”⁷⁶ challenging the jingoistic narratives that mainstream journalism produced. Just as imitating the Black Panthers was an act of defiance against the Chinese assimilationist narrative, so too, was IWK’s support of the Third

⁷⁶ Staff Writer, “Vietnamese Defeat U.S. Air War,” *Getting Together*, January 6, 1973, Volume 4 Number 1 edition, East Side Arts Alliance & Cultural Center Archive.

World against American imperialism an act of defiance against expectations of immigrant patriotism and assimilation.

IWK and the greater Asian American movement were critical of the Vietnam War in particular for its enlistment of Asians to fight a war against other Asians. *Gidra*, a UCLA-based Asian American newspaper circulated throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, ran an issue with the cover depicting a White officer telling an Asian American soldier to “kill that gook, you gook!”⁷⁷ The Black and Asian critique of the Vietnam War as a genocidal, imperialist war that should be won by the communist armies was distinct from the battle cry of White leftist organizations for which the antiwar movement is largely remembered. The latter focused on world peace, the return of young male soldiers to their families, and the economic blight of war’s costs on taxpaying Americans. The Black Power and Asian American antiwar narrative made Asian Americans intersect their identity first with those suffering imperialist wars in Asia and second with other citizens of a racist democracy, ultimately strengthening the solidarity between the two racial groups and further gave cause for Asian Americans to call for an identity of political resistance.

The First National Asian American Organization

By 1972, the Red Guard faced a growing impression among Blacks that they were an Asian subsidiary of the Panthers.⁷⁸ This undermined their legitimacy as an organization that focused on community power and overlooked the Red Guard’s efforts to improve the difficulties of life under dual domination, a reality unique to Chinatown. Furthermore, the escalating political climate by the turn of the decade led to a meeting between IWK’s Chow and Gordon

⁷⁷ Alan Takemoto, “Cover,” *Gidra: Monthly of the Asian American Experience*, May 1972. “Gook” was a prominent racial slur used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam and Korean Wars targeted at Asians.

⁷⁸ Lee, Interview with Ben Lee.

Chang and Red Guard leadership, to call for unification. In 1972, the two groups merged to establish the first national Asian American political organization. The first issue of *Getting Together* writes about the merger, saying that “instead of being scattered like leaves,” the Asian American movement had unity for the first time in history. “We must constantly look ahead and dare to unify, grow and expand to reach more people each day. With all our communities united we will be strong,” the author continues: “Together with other oppressed peoples in America we will be stronger still.”⁷⁹

Chow and Chang reached out to other Bay Area organizations such as Wei Min She, meaning Organization of the People, which was an anti-imperialist organization that rivaled the Red Guard.⁸⁰ However, the two failed to convene due to personality conflicts.⁸¹ Leader Harvey Dong recalled that Chow had a “demanding personality” and was “high-class.”⁸² IWK’s educated East Coast elite membership conflicted with the proletariat backgrounds of Wei Min She and Red Guard members. However, while the former found her off-putting, the latter embraced her leadership. Fang recalled his first impression of Chow when she arrived in Chinatown from New York: “If a guy had to go up against [Carmen] that was as strong and heavy, they would be bumping heads. She’s very heavy, and has no end to it. You are going to say hey, whatever you want. She was strong. She still is.”⁸³ Unlike Wei Min She, IWK and the Red Guard reconciled their class and educational differences and reached the same conclusion: that more groundwork was needed to mobilize Asian Americans to achieve national political power, resist assimilationist narratives, and condemn racial discrimination. Furthermore,

⁷⁹ “IWK,” *Getting Together*, February 1970, Volume 1 Issue 1 edition.

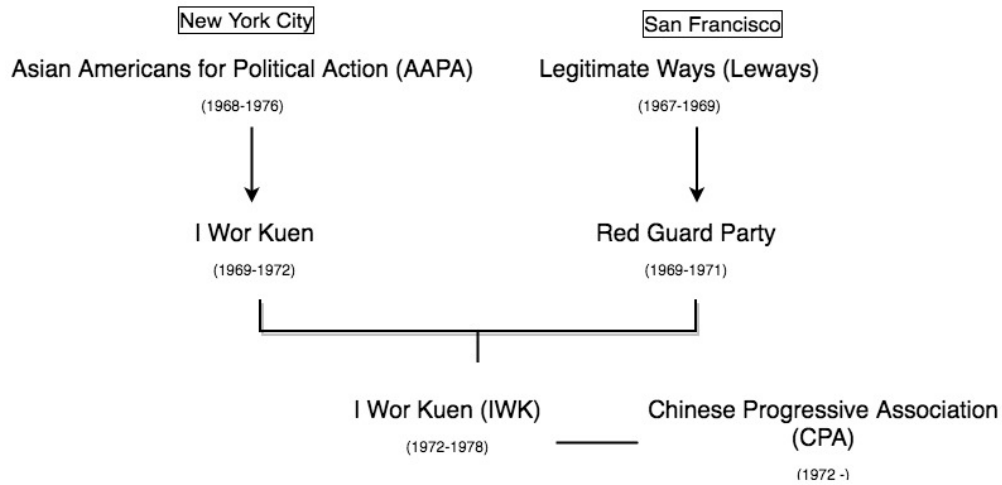
⁸⁰ Wei, *The Asian American Movement : A Social History*, 1993. See **Wei Min She**.

⁸¹ Dong, Interview with Harvey Dong.

⁸² Dong.

⁸³ Fang, Interview with Alan Fang.

unifying contingents on the East and West Coasts would strengthen a network of solidarity for Asian Americans nationwide.



3: Organizational Flowchart.

IWK then shifted its focus to building working-class consciousness and repudiated the Red Guard’s call for an armed struggle. These reforms were attributed to the female leadership of the New York cohort who refuted the hyper-masculinity of militarism and they suggest the clout of IWK’s female leaders who played significant roles in solidifying the merger and establishing the organization’s feminist principles. Maeda argues that now under a national IWK, “the bad-ass Chinatown cat, a role that could be played only by a man, was eclipsed by the dedicated community worker, which a woman could play just as well as a man.”⁸⁴ The organizational transformations that occurred through the merger reveal the ways that perceptions of the Asian American identity itself were changing at the time. The insertion of women’s liberation within an Asian American political agenda demonstrates how IWK’s members were constantly negotiating

⁸⁴ Maeda, “Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen,” 93.

their racial identity with other social structures such as gender and class. They not only laid claim to the identity, but proved that it was inextricably tied to various social frameworks.

The newly formed national IWK organization signified the greater unification of Asians in America. The history of its formation also reveals the heterogeneity of the Asian American population: one was a group of poor juvenile delinquents from the West Coast that touted militarism, the other was a group of elite students from the East Coast that was less keen on militaristic self-defense and more focused on feminism. Additionally, the diversity of factors (ethnic, class, language, generations, age, profession, and others) speaks to the diversity of the Asian American experience and how IWK aimed to create solidarity within the movement that did not erase, but rather embraced the internal diversity of Asian America. Each group's members looked past their differences in background and experience for the sake of establishing an overarching identity with which to mobilize their communities.

Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Ideology

After the national merger, IWK declared an official ideological basis of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism and made their political activism revolutionary as opposed to reformist. At first many were confused by the announcement. Morozumi, who had been in the Red Guard, recalled the moment that they merged with IWK and declared being Marxist-Leninist-Maoist: "I was like what is that? [They said] We're gonna become communists! I said what?"⁸⁵ Morozumi's reaction speaks to an initial discord among members of the newly unified organization, in which former gang members in San Francisco were now standing side by side with college-educated youth in New York. Ben Lee's wife Pam Lee, who organized for IWK, remembered rejecting Chow's suggestion that they read particularly dense philosophical texts because she and others

⁸⁵ Morozumi, Interview with Greg Morozumi.

from the San Francisco branch would not understand them.⁸⁶ Despite individual preferences, members ultimately agreed upon texts to read, showing the commitment they had to the philosophical foundations of their organizing. *The Red Book* in particular was popular among Asian and Black revolutionaries, particularly due to its accessible writing style as a publication for the masses. And in addition to being Marxist-Leninist-Maoist, IWK was also nationalist in their support of communist and anti-Western revolutions in the Third World nations. They frequently discussed the political uprisings in China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, so to Morozumi, adopting the ideology “wasn't completely off the wall.” However, he felt that he “had to do a lot of catch up.”⁸⁷ IWK overcame the initial conflict of intellectualism between the East and West Coast contingents as they both desired to take a revolutionary approach to Asian American organizing.

Pulido argues that activists of the colored Left “turned to Marxism because issues of domination, oppression, resistance, and revolution have been the most fully developed within this tradition.”⁸⁸ Black radicals after the Civil Rights Era saw Mao Zedong as the model revolutionary because he successfully complicated the White, western Marxist model of class struggle.⁸⁹ Under the guidance of the Panthers and the larger Third World Movement, the Asian American New Left adopted their own militant and egalitarian visions of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism that defined the movement. Using their own experiences of racial oppression, they “made their own space” among the Left and adopted a colored lens with which to view their Marxist theory, further binding together their visions and values and using an intersectional

⁸⁶ Pam Lee, Interview with Pam Lee, In Person, December 11, 2017.

⁸⁷ Morozumi, Interview with Greg Morozumi.

⁸⁸ Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left - Radical Activism in Los Angeles*. Chapter 5

⁸⁹ Robin Kelley and Betsy Esch, “Black Like Mao,” in *Afro Asia : Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 90.

approach to dismantle systems of control.⁹⁰ IWK's ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism was an essential framework with which Asian Americans conceptualized their racial identity.

IWK distinguished itself from other Marxist-Leninist Leftist groups that emerged at the time, like SDS, by focusing on people of color. It emphasized the revolutionary leadership of Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native Americans in the United States, as well as the global liberation movements that were occurring outside of the West.⁹¹ Similar to how Red Guard members connected to the Panthers as a rejection of the model minority myth, IWK connect to the Third World through Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to also make a political statement that rejected norms. They abandoned the patriotism they were taught to profess growing up to unite with the struggles of the Third World, many of which actively fought against the United States. The establishment of Marxist ideology was the final step in IWK's transformation from what began as a group of gang youth and a group of East Coast college kids, to a national self-determined Asian American revolutionary organization. IWK established a transnational, interracial, and class-based political unity among Asian Americans that challenged White imperialist hegemony. They used the Asian American identity as political power to instigate a Third World revolution at home.

The Women Leaders of IWK

National IWK had a uniquely feminist platform that informed their construction of an Asian American identity rooted in socialism, anti-imperialism, and Third World self-determination. Half of IWK's leadership were women, suggesting the source of IWK's feminist principles, and making the organization unique among the radical colored Left. The fourth point in its Twelve Point Program was "We Want An End to Male Chauvinism And Sexual

⁹⁰ Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left - Radical Activism in Los Angeles*, 100.

⁹¹ Fred Ho -- et al., eds., "Individually We Contributed, Together We Made A Difference," in *Legacy to Liberation : Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian/Pacific America* (Edinburgh, Scotland ; San Francisco, CA: Big Red Media / AK Press, 2000).

Exploitation.”⁹² Chow declared that Asian women’s liberation struggles were closely tied to the struggles of all people, a belief that fundamentally changed IWK’s mission when it became a national organization.⁹³ Asian American women complicated IWK’s mission of racial and Third World solidarity to demand that women’s equality was not just a subset of the overall mission, but one of the most essential parts.

IWK’s female members organized around issues specific to Chinatown’s women, the elderly in particular, such as health access and factory worker rights. After visiting a healthcare clinic in the Mission District run by the Latinx Mission Rebels, they opened a Women’s Health Clinic in San Francisco’s Chinatown as a way to learn about and provide access to healthcare for Chinatown’s mostly uneducated, low-income and working class female residents.⁹⁴ While the door-to-door clinic had limited success, it was a transformative experience for the women involved who gained exposure to the health issues specific to Chinatown. Through the clinic, IWK increased the self-sufficiency of Chinatown, whose people had no other choice, and it also exemplified collaboration between the Mission Rebels and other minority organizing groups to support each other in the face of a lack of social services for urban minority communities. And internally it created a space in which the women of IWK grew together and supported each other. IWK member Karen Wing moved to San Francisco after graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1970 and she stumbled upon the IWK storefront. She volunteered with their Women’s Health Clinic, became close to the women involved, and as a result decided to make a long-term commitment to IWK.

⁹² “I Wor Kuen 12 Point Platform and Program.”

⁹³ Engle, “From Fist to Open Hand.”

⁹⁴ Karen Wing, Interview with Karen Wing, In Person, December 11, 2017.

IWK not only espoused anti-male chauvinism but actually acted on the principle. In one instance, they used the newspaper not only for external outreach, but to rectify misogynistic behavior among its members through journalistic transparency. A staff writer wrote an article in *Getting Together* that condemned a brother for treating his girlfriend, who was also in IWK, “like she did not have a mind or a life of her own.” The article states that he intimidated her psychologically and physically abused her when she spoke up within the organization. The writer, taking on the collective voice of IWK, asked rhetorically:

A brother who cannot deal with his male chauvinism by calling his sisters crazy and beating on women to prove his manliness, who picks up the gun and points it at his brother and not at the enemy, and a person who steals money from the people for himself...is this person a brother or a pig? All power to the sisters and brothers who love the people and fight the real enemy.⁹⁵

While organizations like the Red Guard and the Panthers often touted a masculine, militaristic mode of operation that frequently overlooked the efforts of the organization’s women, IWK was from its inception led by women and thus grounded their notion of the Asian American identity in feminist principles. They put their principles into practice, focusing their community organizing on women’s issues as well as holding members responsible for upholding the organization’s integrity. Legal scholar Ian F. Hanley-Lopéz has argued that the social construction of race is part of the “whole social fabric” that also includes the relations of gender and class.⁹⁶ IWK’s convergence of the three to create the Asia American identity reinforces this claim. They continued to prioritize both women’s rights and Asian women’s rights when they became the first national Asian American political organization, thus establishing the Asian American identity as not just a political power but an intersectional racial construction informed

⁹⁵ “Who’s Our Friend and Who’s Our Enemy?,” *Getting Together*, October 1971, Volume 1 Number 5 edition, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley.

⁹⁶ Ian Haney Lopez, “The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 29, no. 1 (1994): 28.

by the realities of working-class women of Chinatown and exploited women of the Asian Third World.

Community Engagement

Once the foundational values and demands were established, and members adopted a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology, IWK engaged in a combination of revolutionary action and reflection. In New York they hosted small study groups and discussions on Marx and Mao's *Red Book* and incorporated non-Western revolutionary readings like the *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. All members were required to read a core set of literature that ensured organizational unity. Studying theoretical foundations and complementing them with regular discussions prevented issues of internal fracturing or ideological fission, which, like its feminist principles, also made IWK unique for its time.⁹⁷ In San Francisco, national IWK formally established itself by opening a storefront in the basement of the International Hotel (I-Hotel) on Kearney Street. They painted the front door yellow to attract potential members and neighborhood visitors and held a grand opening on Saturday, August 21, 1971.⁹⁸ Within the storefront, IWK ran several "serve the people" programs such as Asian Legal Services, which began as a partnership between the UC Berkeley Asian Studies Program and the Red Guard. IWK provided legal aid for Chinatown youth who often faced conflicts with the police and the controlling CBAs and could not afford legal defense. Another branch of Asian Legal Services was their war draft counseling, in which members were trained to assist Asian Americans in evading the Selective Service System by providing recommendations that would deem one unfit for military service.

Getting Together which started in 1970 operated out of the storefront basement as well, and although it only ran for five years, it was distributed nationally to hundreds of subscribers

⁹⁷ Morozumi, Interview with Greg Morozumi.

⁹⁸ "San Francisco Opening," *Getting Together*, October 1971, Volume 2 Number 7 edition.

and Chinatown residents monthly. William Wei has called the newspaper “quite conventional,” but I argue that it was a potent form of political activism in itself.⁹⁹ Most articles were written in the style of opinions and often concluded with mobilizing statements such as “ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE!”¹⁰⁰ *Getting Together* was also the most direct evidence of IWK’s engagement with Third Worldism because members wrote about the revolutionary events that were happening around the world and connected the organization to them. As a bilingual newspaper, the latter half of each issue contained handwritten articles often relaying information about the Chinese Cultural Revolution or daily happenings within the PRC, appealing to a wider audience in Chinatowns for readers who sympathized with the PRC but were apprehensive about being as politically vocal as the young members. The newspaper best represented the aims, actions, and advocacy of the organization. Its publication of columns, correspondences, art, photography, and even advertisements show the diversity of mediums that members used to exercise their activism.

Lastly, the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) formed out of the storefront on December 1972 and continues to operate branches nationwide, making it IWK’s most concrete legacy in Chinatown today. CPA was a mass community organization started by elders who had been active in the Old Left from the 1930s and 40s. “We do not command power in society. Our forces are scant. The only thing we have is determination,” one CPA member writes in *Getting Together*.¹⁰¹ Post-Cold War rectification of U.S. China-Relations brought elders out from the shadows of McCarthyism. They saw parallels between their earlier work and that of IWK, and wanted to continue supporting working class Chinese families while also creating a public space for dialogue on community and political issues. Their main goal was to extend IWK’s political

⁹⁹ Wei, *The Asian American Movement : A Social History*, 1993, 214.

¹⁰⁰ “Getting Together.”

¹⁰¹ “CPA Proclamation,” *Getting Together*, January 6, 1973, East Side Arts Alliance & Cultural Center Archive.

activity and views in Chinatown, and secondly, to provide social services for the community.¹⁰² They operated out of the I-Hotel storefront as a more accessible extension of IWK that was receptive to even the most hesitant community members.¹⁰³ It was there that IWK's study groups took place so that community members could learn about revolutionary ideas and literature in a casual setting. The FBI deemed the CPA a "front" for IWK's pro-Communist political organizing. Today, CPA continues to be the leader in Chinatown community organizing, with campaigns that support low-income immigrant workers and families, and has played a key role in many organizations within the Asian American movement over time.¹⁰⁴

Critiques of IWK

Because IWK mostly consisted of Chinese and a few Japanese American-born youth, their identification with the term Asian American contributed to a perception of the identity as one for people of East Asian descent, a connotation that omitted peoples of South, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander diasporas in the U.S. Yet, IWK's close ties to other Asian American contemporary groups also complicates this perception. For example, members mentioned their support of Katipunan Ng Mga Demokratikong Pilipino (KDP), a revolutionary Filipino organization whose anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist stances and unique stance in opposing martial law also shaped the radical politics of the Asian American identity.¹⁰⁵ And while in some ways IWK contributed to the implications of homogenizing the term *Asian American*, it defied

¹⁰² Wei, *The Asian American Movement: A Social History*, 1993.

¹⁰³ Kaori Tsukada, "The Interaction Between Service and Organizing: Two Housing Campaigns By the Chinese Progressive Association" (Stanford University, 2009), 21, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/nem-1a/iwk-cpa.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ "About CPA | Chinese Progressive Association," accessed February 9, 2018, <http://www.cpasf.org/about>.

¹⁰⁵ "Revolutionary Filipino Organization in America: Katipunan Ng Mga Demokratikong Pilipino (KDP)," *Ang Katipunan*, September 22, 1974, Volume 1 Number 12 edition, Ethnic Studies Archives, UC Berkeley. Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 20. Interviewees also spoke in vague terms about having ties to KDP.

the Asian American monolith in others, as its members represented the diverse experiences of working-class immigrant families.

Both in New York and San Francisco, IWK alienated Chinatown's elderly with their idealism and their tactics. One person was reported as saying that he stayed away from the storefront because "They have their own ideas, and they don't like anyone interfering."¹⁰⁶ While IWK was able to "hit a nerve" with many residents who believed in their mission, most did not participate in its radical leftist organizing.¹⁰⁷ IWK reached out to older generations through social service programming but its core group was mostly young adults. One student said of his participation, "Nobody in Chinatown has the guts to speak out. I joined IWK to show I'm proud as a Chinese, I'm not stupid, I want my human rights and am equal. We're not afraid because we want to die for our people and for our rights."¹⁰⁸ A generational gap existed between the immigrants and their American-born children: the earlier generations were primarily focused on survival, working in laundromats and grocery stores to provide for their families, while the latter possessed a youthful idealism that sometimes espoused militaristic self-defense against institutional authority. Much of this older generation feared the effects of the Cultural Revolution in China and were sympathetic to the KMT; they rarely defied the authority of its Chinatown arm, the CBAs. Yet IWK resonated with the many others in the community who feared political suppression for communist sympathies, validated their beliefs and offered a form of protection.

While IWK was, overall, an organization run by Chinese American and Japanese American men and women, and headquartered in Chinatown, they never confined their scope solely to Chinese America. Rather, they rejected that narrow identity in favor of the concept of a

¹⁰⁶ Michael Pousner and Frank Faso, "News? Same Old Chinatown Rehash," *Chinese American Times*, March 1971.

¹⁰⁷ Leong, Interview with Lorraine Leong.

¹⁰⁸ Bell Chevigny, "IWK Rocks the Boat/The Harmonious Fist of Radical Chinatown," *Chinese American Times*, October 1970.

panethnic Asian America because it established a racial identity with which they could garner political power for all who identified with it. Their Pan-Asian identity existed in solidarity with Blacks and Latinxs, and by focusing on working class-consciousness and operating under strong female leadership, IWK not only forged the Asian American identity but complicated it by intersecting class and gender structures. This newfound power of contestation gave Asian Americans a stake in shaping the American racial landscape in a way they never had before.

Epilogue

IWK disbanded in 1978 and merged with the Rainbow Coalition, which was a joint effort with the Panthers, the Young Lords, the American Indian Movement, and several other radical Marxist and Third World organizations. These groups no longer used racialization as a form of resistance and evolved to adopt a singular, interracial revolutionary platform. In IWK's aftermath, they left a trail of legacies across Chinatown and radical minority groups across the country. Their most visible legacy is the CPA, whose social-justice orientation yet lack of revolutionary structure proves a different ending for IWK than the original members had hoped. Morozumi said that he and others radicals like Baraka "had a true expectation that there was going to be a revolution in [our] lifetime. Our generation actually believed that, because there was that moment..."¹⁰⁹ While they failed to create a revolution in the end, IWK's wielding of the Asian American political identity changed the economic, political, and social status quo.

Even long after it disbanded, members furthered its legacy as they continued to engage in progressive activism. After organizing with IWK, Karen Wing joined the US Postal Service Workers and was elected Vice President of the national union, where she played an instrumental role in organizing the women and fighting for programs like overnight childcare for working

¹⁰⁹ Morozumi, Interview with Greg Morozumi.

mothers. Karen's story exemplifies how IWK instilled lifelong activism in many of its members who continued its momentum in their future careers. Greg Morozumi later founded the East Side Arts Alliance and Cultural Center in Oakland, which continues the Black, Asian, and Latinx radical traditions of using art and culture in community organizing to drive revolution. The center's advisory board consists of nearly every leader of the radical colored Left that is still alive today, including Angela Davis and Bobby Seale. In New York starting in the late 1970s, numerous Asian American political organizations arose in the aftermath of IWK's dissolution. Each one of them, such as Asian Americans for Equal Employment, the Basement Workshop, and the Asian American Resource Center, was founded by an individual who had been first involved in IWK. Albeit sometimes unknowingly, IWK incubated the next generation of Asian American political organizing. Some members returned to normal lives and gave up organizing altogether, and started new careers and families. But for many others, for the rest of their lives, the foundation of radical Asian American organizing and ideology informed their interactions with the world.

From a dusty pool hall to a bright yellow door, IWK's evolution reveals the historical process by which the earliest "Asian Americans" came to define the term. Legal structures and institutions have tried to ascribe a racial category on Asian Americans since the earliest days of Pacific immigration in the mid-19th century. Exactly fifty years ago, in 1968, Asian Americans for the first time fashioned a racial identity of their own, one that conformed to racial categories yet defied structures of racial oppression. In the beginning with the Leways, Chinese American gang youth legitimated their life paths of delinquency, rejecting White America's attempt to integrate Asians and posit them as the model minority for other communities of color. IWK adopted the beliefs and practices of the Black Panthers and rooted the early conception of Asian

American in the Marxist, militant, and self-determined values of Black radicalism. In New York the Puerto Rican Young Lords' on-the-ground organizing inspired IWK to link the struggles of Asians and Latinx communities as well in a way that further complicated the Black and White binary of racial perceptions. IWK's linkages to Mao's cultural revolution and other anti-colonial struggles of socialist Asia informed their attempts to revolutionize the U.S. The establishment of the first national Asian American political organization crystallized a racial identity made not of institutions, legal structures, and state-formations, but of the unification of grassroots movements across the country and their Third World ties.

IWK responded to hegemonic political, racial, and economic powers that oppressed Asians in America by creating a self-determined Asian American identity of resistance. American Studies scholar George Lipsitz has said that "Power is not something that only dominant groups possess. Oppositional movements do not simply struggle *against* hegemony; they struggle *for* hegemony. Discipline, determination, solidarity, and struggle produce power."¹¹⁰ Racial hegemony takes a different form in any given historical moment, and so too, does its corresponding form of racial resistance. In the 1960s and 1970s, Asians in America were galvanized by such a severe inequality of power between their working-class minority communities and the structures of authority, both at home and around the world, that they constructed an Asian American identity to undergo social upheaval and redistribute the power to themselves.

From then on Asian Americans would champion their political identity in moments of social injustice in ways reminiscent of the first radical usages of the term. In the words of

¹¹⁰ Moon-Ho Jung, *The Rising Tide of Color: Race, State Violence, and Radical Movements across the Pacific*, Emil and Kathleen Sick Series in Western History and Biography (Seattle: Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest in association with University of Washington Press, 2014), 40.

Historian Barbara Fields, “race became the ideological medium through which people posed and apprehended basic questions of power and dominance, sovereignty and citizenship, justice and right.”¹¹¹ With each new circumstance, Asian Americans renegotiated the identity to generate a specific political power that fit their demands in the moment. In aftermath of Vincent Chin’s murder in 1982, they mobilized the identity to demand criminal justice and decry White violence. Today, Asian Americans have allied themselves with the Black Lives Matter movement in demonstration of racial solidarity, and used their political power to condemn police brutality against Blacks. Other contemporary political groups include Asian Americans for Affirmative Action; not only have they demanded affirmative action to redress the educational achievement gap among certain minorities as a result of structural and institutionalized racism, but also they have asserted their racial identity as Asian Americans to delegitimize the meritocracy and model minority myths which people use to thwart affirmative action measures. The differences between the historical conditions of the past and present will only widen as time continues. In the future, so long as race continues to materialize and color peoples’ experience with the world, future Asian Americans will continue to face conditions of racial injustice and undertake new and historically grounded forms of racial resistance. The story of IWK gives credence to the agency of those who claim the identity, who are the driving force behind racial formation and its political power. Asian American has never been a static notion, rather, it was and continues to be shaped by the communities that claim it.

¹¹¹ Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” 162.

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