

Out of the Basement: Forging Asian American Identity through the Basement Workshop

by

Christina Noelle Ong

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This thesis was presented

by

Christina Noelle Ong

It was defended on

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and approved by

Dr. Suzanne Staggenborg, Professor, Department of Sociology

Dr. Melanie Hughes, Professor, Department of Sociology

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Joshua Bloom, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology

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Christina Noelle Ong, MA

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This thesis uncovers how and to what extent the establishment and early organizing activities of Basement Workshop (1969-1972) influenced the construction of an Asian American identity in juxtaposition to members' identities that originated in their ethnic heritage. Through my research, I disrupt binary conceptions of the Asian diaspora as either a menace to white America or as bodies of docile complicity to white supremacy through an in-depth case study of Basement Workshop, the East Coast's first pan-Asian political and arts organization.

Using interviews with former members of Basement Workshop and historical discourse analysis of the organization's magazine publications, arts anthology, and organizational correspondences, I demonstrate how Basement Workshop developed an Asian American identity which encompassed ideas about anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and anti-sexism.

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1.0 Introduction

Long before “Asian American” became a census category used for monitoring racial demographics in the United States, the term “Asian American” was a political identity created in 1968 as a stark opposition to the popular racial slur, “Oriental”. How was this panethnic identity formed and what purpose did it serve for those who chose to utilize it? My research uncovers the development of Asian American identity as a uniquely anti-imperialist project through a historical case study of the first East Coast-based panethnic Asian political organization, Basement Workshop. Specifically, this thesis reveals how the establishment and early organizing activities of Basement Workshop from 1969 to 1972 influenced the construction of an Asian American identity in juxtaposition to members’ identities originating in their ethnic heritage.

Asian American Studies scholars, many of whom were the very activists present during the creation of Asian American identity, have long theorized the importance of such a panethnic identity. Yet, the reasons for why Asian American identity gained traction beyond its popularization in cross-racial student organizing on the West Coast of the United States requires further evaluation. More importantly, understanding how a racialized panethnic identity like “Asian American”, develops and transforms over time is critical for scholars to better assess how racial mobilization occurs.

While Asian Americans were and are not unique in their immigration to the United States, those who took up the Asian American identity in the late 1960s and early 1970s required a distinct negotiation between their originating, sometimes dominating, ties to ethnic heritage, and a new racialized panethnic identity. Although, the Asian American Movement heightened an intense

need to understand how such a panethnic identity could spark social change in line with existing social movements in the 1960s, this identity was not easily negotiated. I argue that during the early period of Basement Workshop's history, forging panethnic identity was not a singular process, but one that required constant back-and-forth between members of different socio-cultural and educational backgrounds. Being "Asian American" was a collective identity that could be used as a powerful tool of solidarity, but it required members to be flexible and open to understanding just what that identity would entail. Activists within the Asian American movement regularly debated with one another regarding what such an identity actually meant. The prevalence of various organizations and figureheads, alongside activism from the Black Power, Chicano, anti-war, and feminist movements of the time, unleashed different priorities for the Asian American Movement. Most of the Asian American activists on the West Coast were university students intent on forging Third World solidarities, protesting for the development of ethnic studies programming alongside Black and Latinx students. While these actions heavily influenced the overall development of Asian American identity, by the early 1970s, Asian Americans in New York who were predominantly of Chinese or Japanese descent, were contending with what organizing as "Asian Americans" could unleash in their own regions.

Broadly, this thesis explores the development of Asian American identity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and what it means to be an Asian American in the context of the existing social movements of the time. Through my research, I investigate if the origins of Basement Workshop and their ideas about Asian American identity was an assimilationist notion meant to create a sense of belonging within existing (white) American society or a more radical turn to collective identity steeped in notions of freedom and liberation for all people of color. For the purpose of this paper, I focus explicitly on the origins and early activism of Basement Workshop, from 1969 to 1972, for

a comprehensive analysis of how members developed panethnic identity and how such an identity became linked to broader ideas of anti-imperialism and transnationalism.

1.1 Literature Review

Gaining a deeper understanding of the radical roots of Asian American identity through examining the intricacies of Basement Workshop will elevate the voices, perspectives, and contributions of Asian Americans, and Asian American women in particular. As a multi-gendered organization, Basement Workshop members worked to uncover how gender impacted the process of racialization and overall development of Asian American identity. The emergence of Asian American identity of Basement Workshop members enhance broader theoretical conceptions about racial identity, feminism, and the emergence of a collective identity through group activism. As a microcosm of community organizing and an expression of a newfound Asian American identity, the members of Basement Workshop are an ideal case study to examine how the descendants of Chinese and Japanese immigrants became Asian Americans who worked to disrupt racism and sexism within their own communities and beyond. To explore this analysis, I draw on three major literatures on race, feminism, and collective identity.

1.1.1 Forming Racial and Panethnic Identities

Considering what racial and panethnic identity really is, and how racial identity works to subvert existing structures of power is instrumental to researching Asian American identity. Major arguments from Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Wendy Roth, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's

theorizations on racial identity frame how Asian American identity was forged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Additionally, Y  n L   Espiritu’s discussion of panethnic identity adds specificity to the case of Asian Americans. Using Omi and Winant’s concept of racial formation allows me to dissect how Asian American identity can be “created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” through sociohistorical processes (Omi and Winant 2015:109). The Asian American Movement created an Asian American identity informed by the struggles of other Third World peoples, yet the beginnings of Asian American identity and subsequent mobilization in New York City was not so explicitly anti-imperialist. I argue that over time, Asian American identity for Basement Workshop members became linked to anti-imperialism through various organizing activities. In line with this thinking, Omi and Winant’s notion of racial formations suggest that racial identity is not stagnant or naturally determined, but is instead transformed time and again.

Where Omi and Winant’s concept of racial formation falls short is their inability to fully grasp how “the definitions applied to racial categories in the U.S. are uniquely American constructs” (Junn and Masuoka 2008). Understanding Asian American identity formation requires an acute awareness of the fundamentally different ways new Asian immigrants understood their racialized identity compared to those who came to call themselves “Asian Americans”. Basement Workshop presents an ideal case to examine just how Asian Americans are racialized by non-Asians, but also by Asians in the United States and in the diaspora. Wendy Roth draws out this idea in explaining that “different societies have different ways of understanding race and different ways of determining what races exist...” (Roth 2012:5). I concentrate on her subcategory of “panethnic nationality schema”, which includes nationalities, ethnic groups, and panethnic groups. Because everyday people utilize nationality and ethnicity in a way that is interchangeable with race, Roth argues that these categories of nationality and ethnicity should be treated as races in their own

right. Panethnic nationality schema allows for a unifying of those from the Asian diaspora to understand the ways that they are racialized and seen as a monolithic group to outgroup members.

In Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's interpretation of race, he "acknowledges that race...is constructed but insists that it has a social reality", meaning "it produces real effects on the actors racialized as 'black' or 'white'" (2017:8). This definition focusing on a Black/white binary is limiting for the purpose of my research, but his articulation of racism as embedded in social processes and structures is helpful in considering how the racialization of Asian Americans is an imposed process and not always a personal choice. He highlights white supremacy as a totalizing system of oppression in the United States which is "ultimately maintained through social-control strategies" (2017:33). This kind of domination can be opposed by subordinate groups, but to Bonilla-Silva, the dominant framework of white supremacy impacts all other frames. With this idea, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to explain the existence of resistance to white hegemony for Black and non-Black people of color. Yet, through this work studying the members of Basement Workshop, identifying as Asian American "...affirm[ed] their own agency and represent[ed] themselves beyond the traditional disempowering images of the so called 'oppressed'" (Holvino 2010:261). In contrast to Bonilla-Silva who does not leave room for this kind of exploration, Omi and Winant urge us to examine alternate realities of racial politics which "embody self-activity [and] resistance" such as in a "resistance to colonialism, noncompliance with racial domination...and belief in racial solidarity" which are "some of the most crucial sources of insurgency..." (2015:147).

In his attempt to incorporate non-Black people of color into the hegemonic system of white supremacy, Bonilla-Silva develops a "triracial system" with whites, 'honorary whites', and 'collective black' groups (see Appendix A for full table). While it is true that ethnic groups within

panethnic groups face different issues, especially within panethnic communities (for example, Cambodian and Vietnamese groups may be at odds due to their home countries' tenuous histories, and there is much theorizing about colorism within and between South Asian, Southeast, and East Asian communities), panethnic identity is imperative for illuminating Asian American mobilization. Panethnicity unites disparate ethnic groups against widespread racial discrimination in a hegemonic system, regardless of how specific ethnic groups may identify themselves.

A prime motivation for studying the development of Asian American identity through an in-depth case study of the beginnings of Basement Workshop is to discredit the widespread model minority myth that posits how Asian Americans are a group that homogenizes into whiteness (Wu 2014). Bonilla-Silva himself perpetuates such ideologies when articulating how Japanese Americans navigated life post-internment. He writes that they “did not shift their political lenses and join in the struggle with other minorities in the sixties and seventies” and “hardly participated in the civil rights movement” (2017:199). This is in direct contrast to the reality of the Asian American movement and of those active in Basement Workshop. My examination of Basement Workshop's membership, which included vocal Japanese American activists, is at odds with his indictment of Japanese Americans and their supposed lack of involvement in political movements of the time.

Turning towards specific theories of panethnicity as it applies to Asian Americans, YẾN Lê Espiritu cites panethnicity as an imposed category that is fundamental to racism in its ability to group “diverse peoples in a single, expanded ‘ethnic’ framework” wherein individuals in said framework may not have anything “in common except that which the categorizer uses to distinguish them” (1992:6). In the new racial order, a color-blind one indicated by Bonilla-Silva, “Asian Americans continue to be defined by a distinct race”, an idea that is so ingrained in U.S.

society that “when new Asian immigrants and refugees arrive, they are automatically assigned to the Asian American collectivity” (Espiritu 1992:174). Regardless of Bonilla-Silva’s prediction that certain Asian ethnic groups will “become white”, Espiritu states, “Asian Americans cannot...do away with the notion of pan-Asian ethnicity” as this form of collective identity is “necessary if Asian Americans are to contest systems of racism and inequality in American society” (1992:175). This primacy and urgency in undertaking a collective panethnic identity is reflected by the members of Basement Workshop in their taking up of Asian American identity.

1.1.2 Critical Race Feminism and Transnational Feminist Theory

Existing theories of race from Michael Omi & Howard Winant, Wendy Roth, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and panethnicity from Y  n L   Espiritu, ground my analysis of Basement Workshop. Still, such theories do not fully address the issues pertinent to the descendants of Asian immigrants, particularly the members of Basement Workshop in how they overlook the ways that tackling traditional gender roles has been instrumental in the formation of Asian American identity. Uncovering how race and gender interact as linked systems of social stratification is critical in understanding Asian American identity. Such an identity emerged as an outgrowth of Third World liberation and activists related heavily to newly formed communist societies in Asia for their articulation of freeing the underclasses from oppression. In the eyes of these activists, communist Asian countries pushed models of gender equity, as Asian women who took up arms in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia became “hypervisible role models for women in the United States” (Wu 2017:145). It is, then, impossible to analyze Asian American identity as a racialized panethnic identity without also understanding the gendered nature of such an identity. In order to address

this gap, I bring in critical race feminism and transnational feminist theory. Critical race feminism focuses on issues of “power, oppression, and conflict”, highlighting the socially constructed nature of race, but also “addresses the complexities of race and gender with notions of multidimensionality” (Berry 2010:152). Primarily, I draw on ideas of intersectionality, a core tenet of critical race feminism. Intersectionality as a concept and as a methodology of analysis calls for a critical understanding of how oppressions are interlocking. Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree’s process-centered model of intersectionality is particularly insightful for my research. The process-centered model “can be sensitive to the issue of identities or social locations, by considering these as being constructed through, or co-constructed with, macro and meso categories and relations” (Choo and Ferree 2010:134). When thinking about identity formation of descendants of Asian immigrants, the panethnic identity of “Asian American” is both constructed by the men and women of the Asian American movement themselves, but also in response to institutions that racialized their bodies, neglecting to see nuance in their ethnic heritage. Under this type of “Asianization” which racializes Asian bodies is the idea that Asians are racialized differentially based on gender, with “Asian American women as hypersexual and submissive objects” (Museus 2013:23). In examining how those in Basement Workshop were oppressed, it is important to understand that they were institutionally oppressed not just on the basis of their racialized panethnic identity, but also on the basis of their gender. Despite the efforts of the women in Basement Workshop, the gendered status quo within community organizations was reinforced through the broader patriarchal and racist institutions in America.

To further understand the gendered nature of Basement Workshop’s organizing, I build on Benita Roth’s ideas of how Black, Chicana, and white feminists organized differently during the second wave of feminism. Roth utilizes intersectional feminist analysis in her work to explain how

“feminists of color saw themselves as belonging to a different movement than white feminists...” (Roth 2004:11). In adding the case of Asian American activists, some of whom did identify as feminists, I highlight transnational feminism as instrumental due to how Asian Americans understood their position in an imperialist world order and the U.S.’s role in the Vietnam War. The complicated and often times conflicting ways that race and gender came into play with ethnicity, imperialism, and the immigration history of Asian Americans calls for a utilization of transnational feminism in addition to critical race feminism’s use of intersectionality.

Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan broadened existing conceptualizations of what is now known as transnational feminism (also referred to in some spaces as postcolonial feminism, women of color feminism, or “Third World” feminism). They argue that Western focus on the triad of race-gender-class is particularly problematic when thinking about the racialization of women of color whose bodies stem from beyond the borders of the United States, as “other categories also enter into the issues of subject formation both within and outside the borders of the United States...” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994:19). Grewal and Kaplan explain that transnational feminism is then instrumental in “diasporic identity constructions”, but also is crucial to understanding hegemonic forms of oppression as it “compare[s] multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions” (1994:16-17). As racialized and gendered individuals, those who came to be known as “Asian American” also recognized how their diasporic identities as children of immigrants impacted their sense of self, but also how it impacted their experiences with oppression at the hands of organizations and institutions.

A development of transnational consciousness informed Asian American identity and “a comprehensive understanding of how racism impacts Asian American lives...informed by knowledge of how historical and current processes that extend beyond national borders...shape

the conditions of Asian American people and communities” (Museus 2013:24). As Asian Americans, the descendants of Chinese and Japanese immigrants in Basement Workshop developed an awareness of their positionality within the U.S. social structure, but also gained an awareness of their position in a transnational context. Asian American activists against the Vietnam War expressed that "...the war encouraged American GIs to view all Vietnamese women, and by extension all Asian women, as prostitutes” (Maeda 2016). This example of imperialist, sexist, and racialized exotification underlines the importance of understanding Asian Americans’ unique position.

1.1.3 Collective Identity: Organizing Around Panethnicity and Transnationality

Comprised of a collective of artists and organizers, Basement Workshop illuminated the complexities of developing a collective Asian American identity. The emergence of “Asian American” as identity label stems back to 1968 during the Third World student protests at San Francisco State University and UC Berkeley. If collective identity is an “interactive and shared definition...concerned with the orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place”, then how does collective identity move throughout one geographic location to another while maintaining its collectivity (Melucci 1995:44)? Specifically for the case of Asian Americans, how did Asian American identity move in the United States from one coast to another and find its way to New York City’s Chinatown in Basement Workshop? How much of Asian American identity could be shared by activists with a range of social, educational, and geographic backgrounds? Though not the originators of the label, Basement Workshop members developed Asian American identity unique to their own experiences which required “the group to revise its history and develop symbols to reinforce movement goals” (Taylor

1989:771). Though the Asian American population was not as vast or diverse as those on the West Coast, the physical presence of Basement Workshop in New York City's Chinatown strengthen[ed] collective identity by providing tangible evidence of the existence of a group" (Polletta 1999:25). In Chinatown, members bore witness to a visual representation of their strength as Asian Americans simply because there were greater numbers of Asian Americans in a Chinese ethnic enclave.

Moreover, Basement Workshop members constructed "imagined and specifically transnational collective identities among activists" through the organization's quarterly magazine, *Bridge*, and arts anthology, *Yellow Pearl* (Aunio and Staggenborg 2011:366). As the first pan-Asian political organization on the East Coast, Basement Workshop was connected to a broader imagined community of Asian Americans and Asians in the diaspora. They traveled to conferences across the U.S., mailed letters, and utilized self-published magazines to keep abreast of social issues plaguing Asian Americans and other people of color across the country. Despite seemingly rigid physical borders dividing West Coast from East Coast, the U.S. from Asia, members communicated with other Asian Americans living in different states and with diasporic Asians to build a deeper sense of transnationality within the Asian American identity label.

Despite a broad conceptualization of Asian American identity, collective identity is not all-encompassing. Basement Workshop's internal conflicts and differential organizational goals exemplify this. Stoecker argues that "a collective identity only partly reflects the various identities of its members" (1995:114). Thus, it is important to analyze the individual level shift in identity of the descendants of Chinese and Japanese immigrants. Why did individuals in Basement Workshop decide to identify themselves as "Asian American" in spite of multi-faceted issues spanning gender, assimilationism, and imperialism? Could Basement Workshop circumvent these

problems by building a flexible collective Asian American identity that could shift and “align individual identities with their collective identity” (Valocchi 2001:449)?

2.0 Data Collection

In addressing how Basement Workshop's members developed their Asian American identities, I utilized qualitative methods, namely historical interpretive approaches to oral history, directed content analysis, and critical discourse analysis. I traced the life histories and trajectories of activism before, during, and after members' involvement in Basement Workshop through narrative interviews with 29 former members living in New York, California, and other parts of the United States. A majority of these interviews were conducted in-person, with a handful conducted via phone or video call. By assessing members' life stories, I could better understand how and why these members became entrenched in Basement Workshop and how their involvement shaped identity formation processes. In contacting former members, I drew from membership lists of Basement Workshop available on the organization's Facebook page and magazine articles chronicling individual members' achievements. While in New York, I also attended community events with former members and recorded my observations during my time with them when possible.

In addition to narrative interviews, I collected and examined Basement Workshop's two publications: *Bridge*, a regularly published magazine, and *Yellow Pearl*, an arts anthology. To collect this data, I conducted fieldwork in the summer of 2018 in New York and California where I visited NYU's Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, as they house some of Basement Workshop's publications and oral history interviews which provided me with orienting information about social movement activities of the 1970s. I also frequented the Museum of Chinese in America in New York, as Basement Workshop helped give way to its establishment and it currently houses some Basement Workshop archives. Additionally, I visited Interference

Archives in Brooklyn where a majority of the *Bridge* magazine collection is stored. Individual former members who I interviewed provided me with key documents that had not been archived previously, such as meeting minutes, personal correspondences, and flyers. Many of these documents were written in real time and were not retrospective narrative accounts, providing direct knowledge about how members interpreted specific events as they were happening. Through this fieldwork, I amassed over 1,300 documents, publications, and illustrations created by Basement Workshop which had not been previously compiled and digitally archived.

Analyzing the archives of *Yellow Pearl* and *Bridge* was instrumental in piecing together how Asian American identity was developed as an outgrowth of anti-imperialism and anti-racism. What is important about Basement Workshop was not just the members themselves, but the cultural and ideological products of their participation in the organization. While I did not gain access to every former Basement Workshop member due to some passing away, I gained an in-depth understanding of how members comprehended their activism by analyzing the many archival documents made available to me.

2.1 Methodology

Throughout the entire research process, I drew from theories of intersectionality to prioritize the collecting of multilevel data (narrative interviews, observational notes when meeting Basement Workshop members, archival documents) which would capture “both the agency of individuals in making the world they inhabit and the enabling and constraining forces of the word as it has been produced” (Choo and Ferree 2010:134). In collecting the narratives of Asian American activists in Basement Workshop, I honor critical race and transnational feminist approaches to disrupt

“hegemonic, one-dimensional and essentialized identities” by collecting “differentiated stories and narratives that focus on the complexity of identity subjectivities and practices” (Holvino 2010:264).

Approaches to oral history and archival research methods were also of great importance throughout my research. Oral history allows for an understanding of the Asian American movement from the perspective of the people involved which have been “overlooked through lack of documentation or public record” (Bornat 2012). As I conducted my historical retrospective interviews with Asian American activists, oral history’s four forms were considered: “the interview; the recording of that interview; the interview’s transcription and the interpretation of the interview data” (Bornat 2012). First and foremost, as a researcher, I acknowledge how my own positionality and identity impacted every level of the oral history process, from how I phrased my questions, to how an interviewee interacted with me, to how I analyzed what was being said. Being a young Asian American woman lent a sense of familiarity with those I interviewed, as we had an unacknowledged sense of shared history and struggle. Some interviewees and I shared ancestral homelands and language, which made us feel more comfortable with one another. However, being a young woman raised in an Asian household required me to be respectful in specific ways because I and the interviewees have certain ingrained ideas about how I am allowed to speak with those categorized as my elders. All of those interviewed ranged in age from their 60s-70s. In some ways, this limited the types of questions I asked. Yet, this cultural frame was also advantageous as a sense of shared respect and understanding of cultural norms opened dialogue further when I approached questions as an Asian American activist who was genuinely curious and articulated my own experiences being a racialized minority.

In addition to considering methodologies in oral history, I used directed content analysis and historical discourse analysis, a form of critical discourse analysis, in interpreting my data. A direct approach to content analysis is guided by the importance of “extend[ing] conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005:1281). Furthermore, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was instrumental in my interpretation of the data, as it “embraces a feminist situated perspective” and also acknowledges “how scholarship is socio-politically ‘situated’ regardless of our intentions or efforts to combat it” (Smirnova n.d.:17). CDA is also a methodology that “professes strong commitments to change, empowerment, and practice-orientedness” (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000:449).

To create my interview guide, I followed direct approaches to content analysis by identifying key themes for the study and orienting questions around them. These themes addressed the forms of racism that the descendants of Asian immigrants experienced pre-activist involvement, what types of mobilizations they participated in prior to their involvement in Basement Workshop, how they came to identify as Asian American, how they were involved in Basement Workshop, and to what extent their involvement impacted their commitment to anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideologies. As in a directed approach to content analysis, these pre-constructed themes guided my initial questions, but when other key themes emerged through the interview process, I coded them into my analysis. The interview guide I utilized for conducting narrative interviews are listed in Appendix B. This is not an exhaustive list of questions, as the narrative interviews were opened with targeted questions towards the end. Every interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and emailed to the interviewees for reviewing prior to analysis.

Aside from what was vocalized from interviewees, it was equally crucial to understand “what we do not see within the transcript” because it can provide “more meaningful and insightful

explanations” (Roncaglia 2004). Due to the recorded nature of the interview, some interviewees were reluctant to be as forthcoming with information out of fear or embarrassment that what they said would be published. In order to build trust, I sent transcripts to my interviewees and allowed them to articulate what portions they were uncomfortable having published. These portions were removed from analysis, but still remained important in my background knowledge of understanding interviewees’ relationships with other members and to their development of Asian American identity.

For the archival documents analyzed, I used a critical historical discourse analysis as mentioned, to examine what main topics were written about in *Bridge* and *Yellow Pearl*, and what language was used to convey their messages. CDA provided a foundation for me to uncover “the historical power relationships that put people in their current socio-geographical space” (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000:458). The analysis of archival documents was of extreme importance to my study because of what Lara Putnam refers to as “side-glancing”, or “glancing outside the boundaries of place-based expertise” (2016:380). Examining the variety of articles in *Bridge*, even those that did not specify topics surrounding “Asian Americans” or identity allowed me to understand how a diverse array of topics discussed by Basement Workshop members were ultimately tied to how they understood Asian American identity as multifaced and relational.

3.0 Asian America: Centering New York City

In New York City's Chinatown, the descendants of Asian immigrants and Chinese international students were busy negotiating a creation of an Asian America on their own terms. Who comprised Asian America and what would it mean to claim such an identity? Did "Asian American" encompass newly arrived Asian immigrants? Where did international students fit? Could one prioritize an ethnic identity while still forging a panethnic one? While these questions lingered, action in social movements throughout the 1960s and the assassination of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy taught young Asian Americans that they could no longer wait for change to come (Chiang 1996:108). Lessons from Asian American peers living in far-off places like San Francisco and Los Angeles travelled to folks in New York who would soon comprise the first pan-Asian organization on the East Coast rooted in the arts and politics—Basement Workshop. Activists utilized student fares on airlines for inexpensive visits to their peers on opposite coasts for informal meetings and student conferences.

3.1 Into a Chinese Ghetto

Chinatown maintained tight borders. As a segregated urban ghetto, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, comprised of family associations or patriarchal organizations stemming from Chinese village relations, governed the neighborhood as a means of controlling new immigrants. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 dismantled the quota system of immigration based on national origin and opened the doors for new Asian immigration across the

United States. Prior to 1965, the number of Chinese immigrants “never exceeded 5,700”, but by “1967, it was 25,096” (Chinatown Study Group 1970:43). In New York, a majority of these new immigrants were Toisanese and Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong and Southeast parts of China (Saval 2018). While a victory for immigration activists, hardships remained for these immigrants who clamored to Chinatown in droves. Many of the newcomers lived and worked within the confines of the urban ghetto—mostly in restaurants or in the garment industry—isolated from other parts of New York due to its geography near the Lower East Side and language differences. In the midst of this social transformation, Chinatown’s economy was stable if not rising, but “so were organized crime [and] poverty” (Wong 2018). New Chinatown youth were soon recruited into gangs by Tongs, or secret networks of Chinese immigrants similar to Triads. Existing social safety nets were unable to safeguard youth from the draws of gang life.

Those who came of age in Chinatown straddled two very different realities: part Chinese, part American. Toisanese and Cantonese could be heard in every nook of Chinatown. English was a foreign language in this part of the city. In all languages though, the American-born Chinese children were reprimanded as “Jook Sing”, translated as a hollow portion of bamboo—compartmentalized and lacking roots, while Chinese immigrant youth were labeled “Jook Kak”, the joint of a bamboo plant—hard and unyielding (Lee 1998). Those with either label felt a keen sense of isolation within an already segregated existence. Across the way from Canal Street, young white boys in Little Italy dominated. The Chinese and Italian youth sometimes got along in their desegregated classrooms. But, once in the confines of their neighborhoods, racial alliances crept in. A starkly Chinese way of life was equated with an impoverished way of life. The realities of Chinatown living were a far cry from the experiences of the Hong Kong international graduate students who would soon make Chinatown their classroom.

3.1.1 Pre-Basement Workshop: What do Chinese in America Need?

1969-1970: Chinatown, New York City

In this period of time, the moniker of “Asian American” had already become a guiding term for West Coast activists. Those in Manhattan’s Chinatown were not quite sure if such an identity label would encompass their unique experiences as Chinese immigrants or were even needed to fully address the community’s issues. To many, debates over identity labels seemed a far cry from what Chinatown residents needed: social programs, education, and poverty reduction. Moreover, the influx of Chinese immigrants into Chinatown created a new socio-political environment that Chinatown residents needed to sort out. Understanding Chinese American and Chinese diasporic identity had to come first. Educated, young newcomers from China and Hong Kong attempted to take on this challenge.

Danny Yung was used to moving. He’d gone from Shanghai to Hong Kong to Oregon to California, all in the name of education. After completing his undergraduate degree in Architecture at UC Berkeley, Danny was preparing to uproot his life yet again. He was accepted into Columbia University’s Center for Urban Research and Policy to complete a Master’s degree and his older brother was already on the East Coast for his own studies. It was 1968 and the tremors of student activism of the West Coast were sure to follow Danny.

One of Danny’s younger sisters, Eleanor Yung, was in the midst of her own studies at UC Berkeley. At this time, Berkeley was a hotbed for student activism at the height of counter-cultural movements of the 1960s. Although she never participated in student demonstrations or vocalized her opinions on the number of the Civil Rights issues of the day, Eleanor kept up closely. Because her and her friends’ major concerns focused on grasping academic English, Eleanor “didn’t quite understand the racial significance [of being seen as foreign]” (Eleanor Yung, interview with

Christina Ong, July, 6 2018). However, as she and her fellow international students came to understand “American culture”, they became more sensitive to the insinuations of innate foreignness. Soon, Eleanor joined the Chinese Students Association and became a board member in the hopes of finding some sense of familiarity as an international student. In addition to her coursework and CSA responsibilities, Eleanor started a tutoring program for Chinese immigrant youth in San Francisco’s Chinatown. She felt that the influx of new Chinese immigrants to San Francisco left Chinatown youth in need of academic programming. Her time volunteering and the overall environment of activism in the Bay Area, combined with her study of sociology helped to articulate an inquiry that she longed to investigate since moving to California: what were the differences between the American-born Chinese and the overseas Chinese, like she considered herself? What concerns did the two groups have and was there anything that tied them together?

Meanwhile in New York City, Danny was taking classes and settling into his new life on the East Coast with his peers at Columbia’s Center for Urban Research and Policy. Towards the end of 1968, they obtained a grant from the Ford Foundation to produce the Chinatown Report (Corky Lee, interview with Christina Ong, July 2, 2018; Danny Yung Files). Like Eleanor, Danny was interested in uncovering the differences between US-based Chinese and overseas Chinese. The Ford Foundation grant gave Danny the freedom to explore these complexities by funding an in-depth survey on a sample of residents in Manhattan’s Chinatown—an undertaking that no one, especially not the New York government, had ever considered doing before. Forming the Chinatown Study Group, Danny and his colleagues were united by both their identities as Chinese students and their commitment to serving Chinatown. Serving this community, they thought, meant using their education in the Urban Center to uncover instrumental information about Chinatown residents and their needs. Initiated “because of the absence of ‘hard’ quantitative data

adequately describing the nature and extent of conditions in New York's Chinatown", the group wanted to use the study to launch community-based programs created and run "by Chinatown residents and community organizations" (Chinatown Study Group 1970:1).

As the Chinatown Study Group continued their planning, in the spring of 1969 Eleanor was graduating from UC Berkeley and had decided to follow the path of her brothers by also moving to the East Coast (Eleanor Yung, interview with Christina Ong, July, 6 2018). By this time, she was alone on the West Coast and was eager to reunite with at least one member of her family. Her first job as a new graduate was with a children's foster services agency. Since she studied sociology, Eleanor thought that social work would be one way to put into practice some of the things she had learned. But, several months into the job, she was tired of putting bandages on systemic problems that could not be fixed by the current approaches taken by government institutions. Depressed and overwhelmed, she left her job working with foster children and was hired by a hospital in downtown New York City because of her bilingual skills in Cantonese. However, Eleanor realized that her passion and interest did not lie with social services work. As a gifted dancer trained in classical Chinese dance and ballet, Eleanor decided to return to school for a Master's degree in Dance Education at Teachers College, a stone's throw away from where Danny was finishing his own degree. Though she was a student again, Eleanor made time to work with her brother and his colleagues on their Chinatown Report project. She quickly became one of the group's go-to coordinators, drafting correspondences with community organizations. After some adjustment, it seemed that the Yung siblings were really beginning to forge their new lives in the city.

Led by Danny, most members of the Chinatown Study Group, later renamed the Chinese Professionals' Workshop, were internationally-born Chinese graduate students. One member,

however, was an American-born Chinese undergraduate from Queens College. Corky Lee was tired of living in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. He was the only Chinese student in an predominantly white high school and despite being a record-holder on the track team, his athletic prowess only made him a target. White football players threatened him for tackling the quarterback, though wasn't that the point of the game? Leaving New Jersey to study History at the university would provide a clean slate, he thought. Maybe in the city, he would no longer be a minority.

At Queens College, Corky became the president of the Chinese Students Association. There, he was interested in uncovering the history of Chinese and Chinese Americans, though was frustrated when he found nothing in the library on Chinese railroad workers. His frustration turned to action when he and other CSA members started donating books to the college library on all things Chinese and Chinese American by requesting free sample copies of newly released academic books from publishers. During this time, Corky and his friends identified strongly with their Chinese heritage and Corky wanted to find more tangible ways to shift the minority status of Chinese in the city. As an active member of the Chinese Intercollegiate Sports community, Corky would attend weekly meetings and engage with other Chinese student members from all of the major universities throughout New York City (Corky Lee, interview with Christina Ong, June, 25 2018). Around this time, student protests for Ethnic Studies departments spread from the West Coast to universities in Manhattan, particularly at Columbia University. Members from the Chinese Intercollegiate Sports community would discuss these issues over dinner every week. It was through this network that Corky met Peter Pan, a friend of Danny and member of the Chinese Professionals' Workshop.

In April 1969, Corky was a full member of the Workshop and helped in coordinating interviews with the 565 Chinatown residents whose responses would be analyzed in the Chinatown Report.

Tapping into his network of Chinese Intercollegiate Sports members, Corky recruited a number of Cantonese and Mandarin speaking volunteers to help interview residents. Through the study, Danny, Eleanor, Corky, and the rest of those working on the Report found that over 42% of Chinatown residents surveyed were living in overcrowded apartments, compared to a national average of 11.5% in 1960 (Chinatown Study Group 1970:58). Moreover, 51.2% of Chinatown residents worked in blue collar industries and 46.1% in service industries compared to 42.4% of their non-white peers in blue collar jobs and 29.4% in service jobs, resulting in a median income of \$4,000-\$4,999 for Chinatown families and \$7,436 for other U.S. households in 1966 (Chinatown Study Group 1970:52-56).

From the report, the group recognized the detrimental effects that this isolation and poverty could cause. They too had felt the sense of isolation that being Chinese in a predominately white New York, and predominantly white America, could bring. For the Chinatown community, this isolation had tangible negative repercussions. Danny was adamant that the results from the Chinatown Report would bring about programs that could actually help alleviate the issues of poverty seen throughout the neighborhood. Though the Report was finished, Corky maintained contact with Danny, knowing that they could keep one another apprised of any future Chinatown activities they might need help with in the future.

3.1.2 Basement Workshop Origins: Creating the Basement

1970-1971: 54 Elizabeth Street, Chinatown, New York City

By this time, Asian American identity was still not largely claimed by the organization, as members still relied on their identities as people of Chinese descent. However, the incorporation of Corky Lee and other American-born Chinese members expanded the priorities of the

organization. The increased network of activists created by volunteering in community social service events allowed for a wider breadth of ideas about identity with which members could draw from. These new members, many of whom were American-born, were gradually becoming exposed to unifying rhetoric that the Asian American Movement brought.

As the Chinatown Report drew to a close and was published, the 1970 United States Census was fast-approaching. Danny, Eleanor, Corky, and the others recognized that if Chinatown residents were not counted in the census, social services funding for Chinese immigrants would decrease and their invisibility would only exacerbate the poor living conditions in overcrowded tenements. Even more problematic was that the 1970 Census would be conducted through mail-in questionnaires for the first time in U.S. history, not by door-to-door canvassing. This posed a problem for those in Chinatown wherein over 80% of households lacked a family member who had English knowledge, much less one who could fill out the Census forms (Danny Yung Files, Chinatown Census Committee Papers). As a result, the Chinatown Community Census Committee was formed “by a group of concerned community residents and Chinese college students”, headed by Danny, Corky, and Peter Pan, as a method of ensuring Chinatown residents would be educated about the upcoming Census (Danny Yung Files, Chinatown Census Committee Papers). From January until mid-April, the Chinatown Community Census Committee operated six assistance centers throughout Chinatown in collaboration with church, schools, and other community organizations including the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council. The tasks of the census committee loomed large. Eleanor was charged with coordinating volunteers and recruitment to work the assistance centers. Volunteers came from Chinese student organizations from the city’s college campuses, including Queens College, Hunter, and the City College of New York (CCNY). Translator volunteers were expressly trained not to instruct residents what to write, but explain the

significance of the census. Being Chinese immigrants or children of immigrants themselves, the committee wrote in their training handouts to “give more detailed information than usual” as new immigrants were “often suspicious” of anything remotely relating to government surveillance and control—remnants of the trauma from fleeing Chinese communist policies (Danny Yung Files, Chinatown Census Committee Papers). Aside from educating residents about the Census, the committee was intent on developing a “unifying force in Chinatown” to bring about “greater awareness of the Chinese problems”. What this meant, however, was up for debate.

As the committee continued organizing, Danny Yung kept meeting with the Chinese Professionals’ Workshop, gathering his and Eleanor’s friends for regular discussions on how to uplift and connect the Chinese in the U.S. with those overseas. People like Margaret Loke, Frank Chin, and Peter Chow regularly attended these meetings. The group that met were acutely ‘concerned about Chinatown and the people who live[d there]’ (Eleanor Yung, interview with Christina Ong, July 6, 2018). For them, Chinatown and its residents were the closest they could come to finding a home in New York. While they faced issues being considered foreigners on their college campuses, many were not bound by earlier histories of racism that American-born Chinese students like Corky Lee faced. The members of the Chinese Professionals’ Workshop were predominantly international students who came of age in Hong Kong or China. In Hong Kong, Danny and Eleanor were the majority, albeit second-class citizens under British rule. And, as a majority, there was no worry for racist pushback. The foreign-born Chinese students, Danny and Eleanor included, felt that if they wanted to do something more for their community, no one, not even a racist America, could stop them.

One afternoon in Spring 1970, Eleanor received a phone call from Danny. He told his sister to come immediately to an address in Chinatown. At this point, they were living on the Upper West

Side, and within the hour, Eleanor found her way to 54 Elizabeth Street. The address was on a small street in Chinatown. Once there, Eleanor walked down a set of narrow stairs where she found Danny beaming in the middle of a cramped basement. The room was small with a tiny back room and an even tinier bathroom. Danny looked to his sister, exclaiming the obvious, “it’s a basement!”. How could one be excited about a damp, dreary basement? Yet, viewing the excitement in her brother’s face, Eleanor emulated his enthusiasm as he explained how he decided to rent out the space so they could “do things [with the Chinatown group] here” (Eleanor Yung, interview with Christina Ong, July 6, 2018). Having a physical location for their organizing activities within the confines of Chinatown would only serve to increase the group’s China-centric focuses. The group aligned their work with the interests of the most impoverished of Chinese in New York: the residents of Chinatown.

At 54 Elizabeth Street, Danny, Eleanor, and the rest of the Chinese Professionals’ Workshop were ready to contribute to the Chinatown community in ways that moved beyond typical social services that people were used to seeing. Being comprised of predominately international students, the Workshop members knew what it was like to feel foreign in a new place. They came to understand the residents of Chinatown as “part of [their] bigger family” and wanted to become a part of the Chinatown community as opposed to simply providing services (Eleanor Yung, interview with Christina Ong, July 6, 2018). Although none of them yet resided in Chinatown, their connection to the residents felt innate, a kinship explained by shared language in a foreign place. With a physical meeting space secured, the group made long-term plans to host community service programs, establish a resource center, and create a monthly magazine. Elizabeth and others longed to bring more people into Chinatown in order to show non-Chinese people that Chinatown was more than an ethnic ghetto. They worked on projects like *Eat in Chinatown*, a booklet that

included interviews with Chinese restaurant owners which they passed out to passersby on street corners in Midtown. Ideas for new programs and projects arose on a regular basis. Formerly neglected community members were getting attention. As a part of the Workshop, Eleanor coordinated a Golden Age Club party for the elderly Chinatown residents. Members would put their full support behind one another, not just because they believed strongly in putting on programs that would benefit the community, but they also wanted to enjoy the activities they put all their time and effort into.

By now, Danny had his hands involved in a multitude of projects put out by the Workshop. He was not interested in limiting the focus of the organization and encouraged fellow members to produce projects that ranged from arts and writing to community education and social support. One of the long-term goals of the Chinese Professionals' Workshop was an established resource center for all things Chinese and Asian American – the first of its kind on the East Coast. The leader and coordinator of what came to be known as the Asian American Resource Center was Rockwell “Rocky” Chin, an ambitious Chinese American activist. Born on July 4th, Rocky's patriotism came in the form of community education. Although the center was just one of the Workshop's many initial programs, Rocky had big plans, using his spare time to garner support from other members. Building up the AARC was slow work, however. In the beginning, the center was simply a banged up metal filing cabinet in the corner of the 54 Elizabeth Street's basement, housing newspapers, magazine clippings, books, reports, and photography on all things relating to Chinese communities in New York and around the world (Danny Yung Files, Basement Workshop November Meeting Minutes).

As summer in New York drew to a close, members of the Chinese Professionals' Workshop met at one of their homes to discuss the details of a magazine they would call *Bridge*. There they

tossed around ideas for articles, ranging from giving an overview of New York's Chinatown, the Asian American movement, overseas Chinese identity, and "[white] American myths of the Chinese" (Danny Yung Files, Bridge Editorial Notes). The goal of this magazine would be to "stimulate involvement in action-oriented programs", a mission that Danny and his counterparts had already embarked on with the completion of the Chinatown Study (Danny Yung Files, Bridge Magazine Direction). In November 1970, *Bridge* finalized their editorial board, comprised of mostly foreign-born Chinese students and young professionals. They collectively decided on the trajectory for the first three issues of *Bridge*, focusing on "articles dealing with the I Wor Kuen in Chinatown, government policies towards overseas Chinese, the Taiwan Independence Movement and women's liberation from the Chinese viewpoint" (Danny Yung Files, Basement Workshop November Meeting Minutes:6). The editorial board was guided by a uniting goal to bring "a sense of awareness in being Chinese", though this goal would slowly shift over the next year (Danny Yung Files, Basement Workshop November Meeting Minutes:7).

Alongside finalizing *Bridge*'s editorial staff, the Chinese Professionals' Workshop finally settled on a new organization name, gaining non-profit status as "The Basement Workshop, Inc." in November. Despite an organizational structure with coordinators supervising different aspects of the newly defined Basement Workshop, Danny was still the mastermind behind the organization, focusing squarely on Chinese and Chinese American issues. In all their proposed activities, they worked on promoting "cultural understanding through united creative efforts" (Danny Yung Files, Basement Workshop November Meeting Minutes). With a new name and non-profit status, Danny could now approach funding sources like the New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (Robert Lee, interview with Christina Ong, June, 18 2018). His previous experience with the Ford Foundation provided him

with insight into what large-scale funders were looking for. Moreover, the 159 race riots that occurred throughout the United States over the course of the 1960s had sparked new policies regarding poverty and inequality in the inner cities. Over time, the NEA, NYSCA, and New York State Housing Yards proposed ways to pump funds into local, underserved communities like New York's Chinatown. The NYSCA's "Special Arts Services" (formerly known as "Ghetto Arts"), provided money for the arts in communities of color, though it was "really meant to quell the uproar that happened in the communities [during the riots]" (Davila 2012; Robert Lee, interview with Christina Ong, June, 18 2018). It was in this context that Danny was able to secure funding for arts and social services programming in Chinatown that would catapult Basement Workshop to new heights.

As Basement Workshop found its grounding, the group spent hours upon hours in meetings to plan their organizational activities. The majority Chinese membership found themselves to be "secure in who they [were]" and believed they knew how they were "supposed to get involved" to fix problems which would have positive "impact[s] on Chinatown" (Robert Lee and Eleanor Yung, interview with Christina Ong, July 6, 2018). This security would be short-lived as the Workshop expanded their activities and membership beyond the participants of Chinese descent.

3.1.3 Asian Americans Outside of Chinatown

1970-1971: New York City

Outside of Chinatown, Japanese Americans were organizing their own and opening up their political consciousness. Much like the Chinese members of Basement Workshop, Japanese Americans in the city wanted to mobilize to progress their own community. However, the small number of people of Japanese descent on the East Coast sometimes made it difficult to implement

big changes. Japanese Americans still made do by gathering regularly with their elders and traveling to other Japanese groups around the country.

The Japanese Buddhist Church was a common place for the small Japanese American and Japanese immigrant population in New York to gather. Japanese newcomers to New York quickly found themselves enmeshed in activist circles around the city because of the connections made there. Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto was one such newcomer who was just starting to find her footing in the Big Apple as Basement Workshop was developing. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Nobuko was a talented dancer, singer, and actress. She spent her early years performing on Broadway and in films like *The King and I* and *West Side Story* (Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, interview with author, May 22, 2018). After spending eight months singing in a Seattle nightclub, by her early thirties, Nobuko was looking for a change (Wakida n.d.).

Not particularly active in the Asian American Movement on the West Coast, Nobuko decided to jump in when she moved to New York. She had worked on a film about the Black Panthers leading to her meeting Japanese American activist and elder, Mary Yuri Kochiyama ((Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, interview with author, May 22, 2018). Yuri was a notable and revered activist, not just by the Japanese American community, but by activists of all races because she and her husband were enmeshed in radical movements for racial and economic justice. Believing in the importance of a political Asian American presence and in cross-racial solidarity, Yuri often linked Asian American issues to the struggle for Black liberation. She worked diligently to support non-Asian people of color, joining the Young Lords in their fight for Puerto Rican independence and Malcolm X's Organization for Afro-American Unity (Zinn Education Project). It was through her organizing that she developed a deep friendship with Malcolm X that lasted until the day of his assassination in 1965 at the Audubon Ballroom where Yuri and her eldest son were in attendance

(Fujino n.d.). As a Nisei (second generation Japanese American), Yuri's activism and commitment to human rights became a blueprint for Sanseis (third generation Japanese Americans) and their peers. It came as no surprise that Nobuko turned to Yuri for guidance on how to get more involved in her new home. On Yuri's recommendation, Nobuko was introduced to Asian Americans for Action, or Triple A (Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, interview with author, May 22, 2018). At her first meeting, Nobuko met Chris Iijima, a musician whose mother, Kazu Iijima, founded Triple A one year before with fellow Japanese American, Minn Matsuda. Their goal was to motivate Asian Americans into political mobilization (Iki and Maki 1998). Through the organization, Nobuko came to know Chris as a dedicated political activist (Maeda 2009).

In July 1970, Chris and Nobuko decided to escape the New York humidity and drove to Chicago for the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) conference as a contingent of Sansei Japanese Americans who wanted to make a stand against the Vietnam War (Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, interview with author, May 22, 2018). The two met with Black Panthers, Native American activists, and Young Lords, solidifying their belief in interracial solidarity and anti-assimilationism. During one evening of the conference, Chris brought out his guitar and began playing. Nobuko, unaware of his musical abilities, started to sing along. That night, the duo wrote their first song together, entitled "The People's Beat" (Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, interview with author, May 22, 2018). Encouraged by those listening in, they performed it the following day for an all-Asian audience, empowered and overwhelmed by the support. The feeling of unity was soon shaken.

The day after their performance, two young Japanese American teenagers from Modesto, California's Yellow Seeds organization were brutally attacked in their hotel room during the conference (Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, interview with author, May 22, 2018). In the midst of a

conference dinner event, 18-year-old Evelyn Obuko walked upstairs to her seventh floor hotel room to bring down a radio (NY Times 1970). After half an hour, her roommate, Ranko Carol Yamada, followed to check on her. When both girls failed to return, their third roommate followed only to find the hotel room covered in blood. Evelyn was in the bathtub, naked and passed away by the time authorities arrived. Carol's throat was slashed, her hands clutching a razor blade that she used to free herself from ties binding her ankles. For weeks, Carol was unable to speak, but wrote on napkins found in the hotel room that the attacker was a young man with an afro (NY Times 1970). Soon, Chicago news media argued that racial tensions were the motivator for the attacks on Evelyn and Carol. Evelyn had attended a discussion on race with members of the Black Panthers before her murder. Reports highlighted a Black man who had also attended as a prime suspect (Harden 2003:128). This, however, was never corroborated and no suspect was ever brought into custody. In the 1977 court opinion filed when Carol's family sued the conference hotel for negligence, the hotel's attorneys made racist arguments, claiming that Evelyn knew her killer because he was Black (Appellate Court of Illinois 1977). Young Japanese American activists like Chris and Nobuko did not believe that Evelyn's murderer was a member of the Black Panthers and were adamant that her death would not be the cause of anti-Black racism. On the contrary, memorializing Evelyn and finding justice for Carol required a renewed dedication to uplifting Asian Americans, but not at the expense of other people of color. In this environment, Chris and Nobuko tried to center the story of Evelyn while simultaneously working to bring back the feeling of unity that their performance of "The People's Beat" just days prior had created (Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, interview with author, May 22, 2018).

Despite such visceral visions of violence after Evelyn's murder, Chris and Nobuko began writing and arranging new songs upon returning to New York City. "The People's Beat" was just

the beginning. The duo agreed that Evelyn's death would motivate them in their next stage. Together, they would tour the United States and perform for primarily Asian audiences, singing songs about activism, Asian American identity, and to advocate against the Vietnam War. All proceeds, they decided, would be donated to Evelyn's organization, Yellow Seeds (Maeda 2009). To jumpstart such a tour, though, they needed money. After discussions with friends and elders, a fundraiser was organized at the Japanese Buddhist Temple, where Chris and Nobuko performed and made just enough money to purchase two plane tickets to California (Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, interview with author, May 22, 2018). Japanese and other Asian Americans attended to support Chris and Nobuko's endeavors. Throughout the course of the next several months, the duo traveled across the United States, sleeping on hosts' floors and performing at Asian student conferences. The tour was a hit, but their planned performance at Pace University in New York would change the duo's trajectory in unexpected ways.

William Charlie Chin was growing tired of the American music scene. He spent months on end touring alongside mainstream U.S. rock and roll bands for several years in the late 1960s. Since the age of 18, he had been living in Greenwich Village, playing music in both folk and rock and roll environments (Charlie Chin, interview with Christina Ong, July 29, 2018). Yet, the hard-partying lifestyle of the music scene wore him down. Moreover, as one of the only Asians in the music industry, Charlie's patience was wearing thin. He consistently faced glass ceilings in the industry, not being hired for certain jobs because he didn't have enough experience, and not gaining experience because he wouldn't be hired because he was Chinese. While figuring out his next steps, Charlie took to bartending to make ends meet (Charlie Chin, interview with Christina Ong, July 29, 2018). A self-proclaimed banana,—yellow on the outside, but white in every other

aspect of his life—Charlie thought he was content living with his white girlfriends amongst the quirky artists that also made the village their home.

It was, however, difficult to escape the onslaught of Vietnam War news coverage. Images of Vietnamese men who reminded him of his uncle being tied up and their homes being burnt down cast doubt on Charlie's seemingly assimilated existence (Charlie Chin, interview with Christina Ong, July 29, 2018). One day in 1970, a young Chinese man walked into Charlie's bar, handed him some flyers, and asked if there were any Asian musicians inside (Maeda 2009). After admitting he played a little, the man told Charlie about a conference at Pace University and suggested that he should drop by.

Charlie was single and figured he would be able to meet some women students at the conference, a change from the majority white women he was used to dating. When he arrived at Pace University, Charlie found more than someone to take to dinner. Entering the conference, Charlie was shocked to find that all the attendees were "Asians", a term he up until that point, had not been familiar with. Before now, his Asian peers had been deemed "Chinese", "Japanese", or the totalizing term, "Oriental". Peripherally involved in demonstrations led by Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, Charlie was intrigued by this conference led by Asians for Asians. Throughout the day, he decided to investigate all the organizations represented in the conference agenda, including Basement Workshop. The conference schedule was packed with seminars and panels, with the musical performances scheduled at the end of the day (Charlie Chin, interview with Christina Ong, July 29, 2018). Unfortunately, with a strict deadline set by the college for cleaning up, there was not enough time for performances from both Charlie and the other musicians, Chris and Nobuko. Upon hearing this, Charlie told Chris and Nobuko that they should take the slot, but Nobuko persuaded the newcomer to join them on stage. Never having heard one

another's music before, Charlie backed up the duo on their selected songs. As the three performed together, a shift occurred in Charlie. The beginning of the trio ignited a political and social transformation. A week after the Pace University performance, Chris and Nobuko invited Charlie to accompany them to another performance (Charlie Chin, interview with Christina Ong, July 29, 2018).

The three performed under the name "A Grain of Sand". Soon, they were traveling around the country, to perform for fellow activists on college campuses, in basements, and storefronts and only getting paid if they were lucky (Maeda 2009; Joanne Nobuko Miyamoto, interview with Christina Ong, May 22, 2018). Aside from singing, the trio was uniting members of a vast Asian American movement, delivering messages and progress reports to and from groups in various states. Charlie's time with A Grain of Sand allowed him to meet Asian American organizers who attended their shows. Early on, Charlie heard about Basement Workshop and recalls seeing the organization's name at the Pace University conference.

Back at 54 Elizabeth Street, Chinese American student, Fay Chew, was sitting on an overturned milk crate—one of many strewn about the basement. She was there to greet Charlie Chin when he arrived unexpectedly, giving him a grand tour. A manual typewriter sat resting on a nearby milk crate and a filing cabinet found in the street housed the Asian American Resource Center. The sparsely furnished basement was misleading, but Charlie soon decided that he would try to become more involved with Chinatown as a way of understanding how he could contribute further to serving the community.

Just volunteering, though, was not good enough for Charlie. He felt like he needed to do something more to fully grasp the lessons that were being talked about by the Japanese American and Chinese American activists he met through touring with A Grain of Sand. Being immersed in

an environment of Asian American activism led Charlie to the realization that he yearned for a “Chinatown experience [he] didn’t have in his youth” (Charlie Chin, interview with Christina Ong, July 29, 2018). As the son of Chinese laundry workers, Charlie’s youth was peppered with incidents of racist bullying. At age seven, he was beat up for being Chinese. Reflecting on such experiences, Charlie did not want other Chinese children to face the same problems. But, in order for him to help, he needed to really understand what it meant to be Chinese in the midst of the social and political change caused by Asian American activism. As such, Charlie decided to live within the confines of Chinatown for as long as possible. By this time, Corky Lee was also living in Chinatown on Division Street with Japanese American, Merle Motooka. Merle was newly arrived from Oahu, Hawaii and was tired of living at a local YMCA. Joining Corky in Chinatown was a wise decision for the young, bright-eyed proponent of Marxist-Leninist thought. Corky and Merle’s apartment served as a communal living space and the two needed to find someone else to cover their rent. Living, working, finding entertainment, and shopping in Chinatown without leaving its confines seemed impossible, but Charlie was able to make do when Corky and Merle became his roommates. Corky was, after all, the connector throughout the streets of Chinatown.

3.1.4 Expanding the Basement: Pan-Asian Ethnic Identity Develops

1971-September 1972: 54 Elizabeth Street, Chinatown, NYC

Despite having activities centralized in Chinatown, members of the Basement Workshop would slowly spend more time outside of the community and interact with other activists. Members developed grander ideas about how they could mobilize to benefit Chinatown. Such ideas required recruiting a larger membership base. This resulted in the incorporation of activists of Japanese descent who had already been exposed to anti-imperialist ideologies and had been

radicalized through participation in other social movements of the 1960s. These new additions to the organization pushed existing Basement Workshop members to think about Asian American identity in more radical ways. A new Asian American identity was cultivated out of the expansion of Basement Workshop membership wherein members developed of a sense of shared struggle between ethnic Japanese and Chinese.

1970 had come and gone, and 1971 would bring about the beginning of a new version of Basement Workshop. The organization was expanding their membership beyond the initial foreign-born Chinese that dominated the group (Arlan Huang Files, Basement Membership List). American-born Chinese members joined the ranks and meetings at 54 Elizabeth Street became crowded ordeals. Word spread about Basement, and soon young people were inviting their friends to join them in Chinatown. Milk crates cluttered the basement floors they were used as stools or desks for notetaking.

With new members, *Bridge* magazine was working out how to make a name for themselves within the context of the larger Basement. With a team of 24, pushing out the first issue of *Bridge* proved more difficult than the editors could have imagined. Peter Chow, the seminal issue's coordinator, wrote in January 1971, "things dragged away simply because they were not pulled together" (Chow, January 1971). Even through the coordinating issues, the team remained "as dynamic and enthusiastic as ever" because they felt that "if we dare to try, we also dare to succeed" (Chow, January 1971). By February, the team had been planning for half a year, but still were nowhere nearer to their end goal. In March, Peter reported to Basement Workshop members in their monthly newsletter that the issue would "offer an overview of the worldwide Chinese community and Chinatown in New York...touch[ing] on two of the most sensitive phenomena in Chinatown: I Wor Kuen and housing..." (Chow, March 1971). I Wor Kuen (IWK) was a young

communist organization with some members joining Basement Workshop and vice versa. IWK members looked to Mao's little red book for guidance on understanding social problems and often clashed with the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association because of CCBA's Chinese Nationalist (KMT) affiliations. As such, IWK were regular targets of Chinatown gang violence endorsed by CCBA (Merle Okada, interview with Christina Ong, July, 2 2018). These Chinatown political issues were rarely discussed publicly, but the editors of *Bridge* wanted to uncover the intricacies of problems faced by Chinese of all political backgrounds.

While Peter Chow had remained hopeful during the beginning months of 1971, June revealed *Bridge* staff's frustrations with putting together the first issue in their updates for Basement Workshop members: "too many people going in all directions. not enough going in one...not enough money. not enough people. not enough time. out of our minds?" (Danny Yung Files, Minutes of Meeting June 1971). Despite a planned release date of April 1971, the group pushed their release date to July 15.

As the issue's coordinator, Peter was well aware of the flaws in *Bridge*'s organizational composition. In a memorandum to their Executive Board, he chronicled many of the issues the team ran into throughout the nearly eleven months of planning. One of the problems that contributed greatly to the prolonged timeline was a lack of decision-making processes wherein collaborators failed to "make genuine decisions and to be aware that a decision was made" and encountered "ambiguous interpretations" of decisions (Chow, Memorandum on Bridge Problems). Moreover, communication "gaps", individualism, failure to complete designated tasks, and frustration over missteps were major problems in the beginning stages of *Bridge*. These problems rumbled throughout Basement, but *Bridge* worked for the most part, as its own entity.

After months of painstaking work garnering article submissions, calling universities and bookstores, editing, and compiling necessary components, the first issue of *Bridge* was published for July/August of 1971 with the theme “Chinese in America”. A thin black outline of the Chinese character, “橋” or “Bridge” graced the cover, highlighting the magazine’s mission to build a bridge “between Chinese and Chinese, between Chinese and the larger society” in the United States (Chow, January 1971). The press release for the first issue cites the magazine as “published by a group of young Chinese Americans” with hopes to “bridge the gap among Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans” and encourage Chinese Americans to “assume a more active role in creating their destiny and the destiny of [the U.S.] (Danny Yung Files, Bridge Press Release). By this point, *Bridge* staff maintained their focus on both U.S. and overseas Chinese issues, though a shift would occur in large part due to the increasingly pan-Asian membership of Basement.

Meanwhile for the Asian American Resource Center, regular reports to the rest of Basement Workshop throughout early 1971 indicated Rocky Chin’s progress collecting materials on Japanese in America and Asians in Hawaii, an expansion beyond the initial collection of Chinese historical materials. In February, Rocky noted the existence of three courses on Asians in America throughout New York, explaining that he could utilize information gathered from courses for the Resource Center (Danny Yung Files, Basement Workshop February Newsletter). By March, community organizations were picking up wind of the center’s collections with several women from Hunter College using the AARC’s information to produce a documentary on Chinatown. Members of Chickens Come Home to Roost also expressed interest in conducting research at the center (Chin, Basement Workshop Monthly Report March 1971).

More than a hub of information, Rocky and other volunteers believed that the AARC was a mechanism to combat inequality in the U.S. that “forced [minorities] to accept false and

stereotypical images of [them]selves” and caused “minority communities [to] become research laboratories for federally funded social scientists...who were so instrumental in policy decisions which, more often than not, were aimed at controlling our communities, not assisting them” (Chin, Asian American Resource Center Information 1971). Rocky’s vision for the Resource Center as part of Basement Workshop thus encompassed the desire to understand Asian American issues through a more holistic view of their shared histories – in essence asking “what it means to be an Asian American” by having the center focus on education, service, and culture (Asian American Resource Center Ad).

Outside of Basement Workshop’s activities, those loosely involved in the organization were working on other projects for Chinatown. Corky Lee and his friend, Thomas Tam, were coordinating logistics for a new idea to benefit the health of Chinatown residents who had limited access to hospitals, much less any with Chinese-speaking staff. The First Chinatown Health Fair sought to provide a week-long series of screenings for residents in Chinatown, a neighborhood with the highest tuberculosis rate in the city (Alan Okada, interview with Christina Ong, July 2, 2018). Slated for a week in August, Corky and Thomas approached college campus Asian student organizations for volunteers that would staff that booths on Mott Street, a major section of Chinatown. Although many of the students did not have formal healthcare expertise, they were trained by volunteer medical professionals and learned how to draw blood samples. Merle Motooka was one of the few women who did not feel queasy at the sight of blood. She happily volunteered to prick residents’ fingers for their exams. It was there where she ran into Alan Okada, a Japanese American grandson of a Buddhist minister interned during World War II. The two had met previously in April as part of the Asian Contingent to the anti-Vietnam War March on Washington. Alan was an editor for the Japanese Buddhist paper, *Collage*, and was there to help

advise folks on how to avoid the draft. Other Chinese Americans also joined the Health Fair. People like Legan Wong, Robert Bob Lee, and Alex Chin worked to build the booths lining Mott Street. At the end of every day, the volunteers would finish the last of their screenings and eat together at one of the many restaurants in Chinatown, talking over the day's activities.

When Basement Workshop members weren't working and volunteering in Chinatown, they would attend activist social gatherings in reclaimed storefronts and in the homes of fellow activists, Asian American and otherwise. A "liberated" Asian American storefront, Chickens Come Home to Roost, brought out musicians like A Grain of Sand to perform for activist audiences. These gatherings were meant to cultivate Third World solidarity as they regularly discussed Puerto Rican and Black issues and their relation to Asian American oppression. The radical nature of these events gave Basement Workshop members further inspiration as to how they could work to alleviate the exploitation of those in Chinatown. Members found that they were not alone in their wishes of freedom from oppression. The Japanese American members of Basement Workshop introduced their Chinese American friends to women like Minn Matsuda and Kazu Iijima who helped solidified their beliefs in community support for and by Asian Americans, while others like Yuri Kochiyama taught them about cross-racial solidarities.

Inspired by such political activism, new members of Basement Workshop wanted to build something from the sentiments of their elders and reflecting words they were hearing in A Grain of Sand's music. That "something" came in the form of *Yellow Pearl*, an arts anthology intended to highlight the unpublished songs of Chris, Nobuko, and Charlie that they had been performing around the country, including in spaces like Chickens Come Home to Roost and at the Japanese Buddhist Church.

A Grain of Sand were performing at yet another fundraiser in the Japanese Buddhist Church. Young Asians and Asian Americans filled the room. Arlan Huang, a Chinese American artist in his last year at Pratt Institute, had seen them perform at an Asian Coalition meeting before, but at this performance, he was approached by two unfamiliar faces. Rocky Chin and Terry Dofoo, another member of Basement Workshop, encouraged Arlan to attend a meeting at Basement to work on a new project revolving around A Grain of Sand's music (Arlan Huang, interview with Christina Ong, June 19, 2018). Feeling the strength of the anti-war movement and a sense of affinity to these Chinese Americans, Arlan attended Basement's meeting and learned quickly how his experience being raised in San Francisco was a vastly different one than his peers in Basement who were raised on the East Coast, isolated from many other Asians. Though Rocky and Terry were the original coordinators of this new book project, both unexpectedly left the city to attend school on the West Coast music (Arlan Huang, interview with Christina Ong, June 19, 2018). As a result, Arlan and another Basement Workshop member, a Japanese American, Robert Takashi Yanagida, took on the duty of co-coordinating the anthology project known as *Yellow Pearl*. Arlan's co-worker and friend, Karl Matsuda, the son of Triple A's Minn Matsuda, also joined him on the project.

Headed by Robert and Arlan, and guided by Chris, Nobuko, and Charlie, a group of over 31 members of Basement Workshop formed the staff for bringing *Yellow Pearl* to life (Yellow Pearl 1972). The group writing, illustrating, and coordinating the production of *Yellow Pearl* were all young Asian American students or young professionals, a contrast to *Bridge*'s predominately foreign-born Chinese editorial team. In the proposal for creating *Yellow Pearl*, Arlan and Takashi wrote that the anthology was "one of many attempts necessary to build a new identity and a new culture which is Asian American, and not the step-child of either" (Yellow Pearl Proposal 1971).

In order to do this, the group would hold open calls for writing and illustrations to accompany the previously unpublished works of Chris, Nobuko, and Charlie. The works selected would “reflect both the changing attitudes and creative directions of Asian American youth, and a comprehensive, sensitive picture of what it means to be Asian in America” (Yellow Pearl Proposal 1971).

Those making up Basement Workshop’s membership met for several months after work and in between college classes. For most young people, the summer of 1971 meant freedom. For the members of Basement Workshop, it meant constant meetings and planning organizational activities for hours on end in a damp Chinatown basement. *Yellow Pearl* was taking off, *Bridge* magazine’s editorial board was working on a new issue, and ideas seemed to be sprouting daily.

The group was beginning to get restless. What was intended to be an hour-long meeting for *Yellow Pearl* was extending late into the night. “This is what happens when you get artists in a room together,” Arlan thought to himself. Despite being one of the coordinators for *Yellow Pearl*, Arlan never anticipated so much work. He was still a student, after all, and this was just supposed to help him meet women. Takashi Yanagida suggested the group head home and meet again the following evening. They agreed, though they lingered and continued discussing ideas as they placed their milk crates back in their rightful places.

As days turned into weeks, Arlan found that working on *Yellow Pearl* became a “hell” where he ended up skipping classes just to hold meetings every day (Yellow Pearl Proposal 1971). At one such meeting, an unfamiliar face appeared as Arlan swept the cement to clear away water that had collected in the center of the basement from the day’s rainfall. A slender young woman with large-rimmed glasses and long black hair greeted him. She introduced herself as Fay Chiang, informing him that she had seen a flyer on a community bulletin board about an art project that

intended to cultivate Asian American perspectives, whatever that meant. He welcomed her, hoping that the dank setting of the basement would not scare her away.

Fay Chiang breathed in the damp air and closed her eyes. Seeing so many people huddled in the humid basement of 54 Elizabeth Street, she was brought back to earlier years.

Under the roof of a cramped 10-by-19-foot back room of Wing Sing laundry services in Queens, New York, a Chinese immigrant family made their home. Fay Chiang lived in that room with her parents and three younger siblings: Jeannie, Janice, and Peter, until she was nine (Sandomir 2017). Like other Chinese immigrants in the city who owned laundry services, the Chiangs were forced to make homes in neighborhoods away from other Chinese immigrants to avoid competition. As one of two Chinese families in their Jackson Heights neighborhood, the family relied on one another for support and stability. When the parents were away at the hospital preparing for Peter's birth, Fay stayed home with Jeannie and Janice who were only three and four years old at the time. At six, Fay made up her mind to sooth her siblings' worries by locking the front door and feeding her sisters M&Ms out of a metal container stowed atop the refrigerator. While life in the laundry was full of challenges, the Chiang children turned to each other for entertainment befitting the imagination of children, melting crayons on exposed heating pipes or gathering flowers for their mother on their regular walks throughout the neighborhood. And yet, the world outside of Wing Sing laundry complicated life for Fay and her siblings.

Despite being born in the United States, Fay was ostracized by classmates due to her Chinese ethnicity similarly to other descendants of Chinese immigrants. When the family finally moved out of the laundry into a home across the street, one Italian family's daughter, Donna, would visit the laundry and ask their father if "the Chinese children [could] come out to play". Their father would begrudgingly let them out, lamenting the fact that young Donna could not just call his

children, “children” (Jeannie Chiang, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). Donna, as it turns out, did not call the white children in the neighborhood by their ethnic label. Like many other first-generation Chinese immigrant youth, Fay was stuck in limbo. She was “caught between a world created at home by immigrant parents with values of the old world and the one outside made of school and friends” (Chiang 1996:109). Surrounded by Jewish, Italian, and Haitian immigrant families, Jeannie Chiang found herself defined by her Chinese-ness in ways similar to her elder sister. In aligning with their parents’ wishes to prioritize educational opportunities for economic advancement, both Fay and Jeannie attended Hunter College, made possible through the City College of New York system of free education. It was through this exposure where the Chiang sisters would shift their understanding of what it meant to be Chinese in New York City.

Arlan pulled up a rickety wooden chair, one of the few actual chairs in the basement, and listened as Fay greeted the group. She quickly settled in and asked everyone what she could do to help with the project. After some murmurs and discussion, Fay was tasked with illustrating poetry submissions. Hesitantly, she shared that she too was a writer. Unfamiliar with this type of collaboration, Fay realized that unlike with her childhood friends, “back in the Basement...I was not alone. There was an entire group of people...willing to work very hard on a volunteer basis to...organize around community issues of education, employment, housing, health, and mental health” (Chiang 1996:109).

Aside from the Basement Workshop members, Charlie, Chris, and Nobuko were also involved in the creative process. Charlie and the rest of the *Yellow Pearl* team “were all working together with late night discussions with a lot of cigarette smoke...” to ask themselves what the purpose of their art was. The discussions became intense, as they agreed “all art is political”, and if art was political, the purpose of politics was to “serve some community” (Charlie Chin, interview with

Christina Ong, July 28, 2018). What serving their community entailed and who their community was, was up for debate. Was it just Chinatown? Was it all of Asian America? These questions would continue to follow not just the *Yellow Pearl* team, but the rest of Basement Workshop.

To ensure Yellow Pearl would have the impact the group desired, the members divided up tasks and formed four committees: an editorial board, a business board, an art board, and a coordinating board (Charlie Chin, interview with Christina, July 28, 2018). These units allowed for more focused attention to complete and distribute *Yellow Pearl*, but also meant that the committees relied on one another to complete deadlines and ensure the project progressed. In a meeting note dated September 1, 1971, Arlan and Takashi urged the Editorial and Art Boards to “work under a *pressured* schedule of collecting, editing, sketching and finishing with October 6 as the deadline for Final Mock-Up...” (Huang and Yanagida 1971). They explained that “because of our interrelatedness much hinges on each job being carried out with deadlines being fulfilled. One deadline pushes the next till we finish...” (Huang and Yanagida 1971). Despite the tight deadlines, the late nights, and unending conversations about the mission of *Yellow Pearl*, the group gave artistic freedom to all its contributors. Artists were not asked to redo the pieces they worked on if they believed strongly in their merit (Tomie Arai, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). What was debated, however, were issues stemming from the group’s roots in collective action. There was heavy disagreement on whether or not artists should sign their artwork in order to attribute certain illustrations to the artists who created them (Tomie Arai, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). Those against signing cited revolutionary art from South America, Cuba, and the People’s Republic, noting that these forms of art were never signed by the artist. These things were supposed to denote shared values, collectivity, and an overall message of serving the people. Highlighting one’s own contribution would be a disservice (Tomie Arai,

interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). In the end, a handful of individual illustrations had artists' names placed in corners here or there, but John Yue, one of the group's talented caricaturists, illustrated every contributor's face for the first page of the anthology: a visual representation of their collective identity and the work they had shared in (Yellow Pearl 1972).

Aside from *Yellow Pearl*, other Basement Workshop members were working diligently on their own segments of the organization. Rocky Chin's vision for the Asian American Resource Center was expanding rapidly. He proposed setting aside portions of Basement Workshop's monthly income for purchasing materials for the center, citing the fact that "the librarian [Rocky himself] is no carpenter!" and that the incoming materials donated and purchased needed to be catalogued and kept safely for community use (Chin 1971).

By November 1971, the AARC was expanding far quicker than Basement Workshop could financially sustain. Beyond collecting information, Rocky wished to develop curriculum for use in public schools, saying that "[the center] should really should get into schools, check out what history books they're using, [and examine] what treatment is given to the Chinese..." (Chin, Asian American Resource Center Information 1971). Even though the Red Scare had formally ended, fragments of the anti-Communist attitudes from the 1950's policies lingered. Towards the end of 1971, Rocky found out he was accepted into law school in California. Moving across the country made it nearly impossible for him to continue working as closely with the AARC as he had planned, though he continued to support from afar. As a result, several Basement Workshop members stepped up to take his place and implemented a variety of other programs that Rocky was unable to for simple lack of people power and funding. Legan Wong stepped in and became a volunteer coordinator for Basement Workshop and oversaw the Resource Center. In addition to

the physical space housed in Basement Workshop's office, the AARC created an Oral History Project Bilingual Community Guidebook for new immigrants, a photo exhibition, and much more.

As *Yellow Pearl* and the Asian American Resource Center were progressing, Tomie Arai had moved back to New York with her two-year-old daughter, Masai, after parting ways with her high school sweetheart (Tomie Arai, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). The pair were living with Tomie's parents after spending the previous year living in communes around the country with Masai's father (Wong 2017). One day while looking through the Japanese Buddhist Church newsletter, Tomie came across an announcement about *Yellow Pearl*. Alan Okada was listed in the newsletter as the contact person for the project (Wong 2017). The Okada family were also members of the church and Tomie felt comfortable enough with them to stop by Basement Workshop for a visit.

By the time Tomie joined the group of young Asian Americans, *Yellow Pearl* was three-fourths of the way to completion (Tomie Arai, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). When Tomie stopped by 54 Elizabeth Street, it was a normal day at Basement. A handful of members were chatting excitedly over scraps of paper. A man in the corner diligently took notes on a grey manual typewriter. The meeting she had stumbled upon was a working meeting. With committees already established, members were steadily receiving assignments. Walking down the stairs, Tomie greeted the closest person she could see. Richard K. Wong, Legan's brother, was a member of the Business Board and helped fundraise for the project. After speaking with Tomie and learning more about her work as an artist, he led her to the Art Board. Immediately, she was assigned with illustrating some of the poetry selected for the anthology (Tomie Arai, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). The group of artists around her exchanged quick pleasantries, but soon turned back to the topic at hand—who would illustrate which portions of the anthology? After a couple

of hours, Tomie left her first meeting at Basement Workshop feeling invigorated, as if the reason she was looking for to continue making art had fallen in her lap. She recalled never before being in a group of all Asian artists and writers (Tomie Arai, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). Prior to *Yellow Pearl*, Tomie had grown up in Harlem, attending schools with predominately Black and Latinx children. As an artist from an early age, Tomie attended art school in Philadelphia for a year, but was surrounded by predominately white artists (Wong 2017). Through her involvement in the counter-culture movements of the late 1960s, Tomie was looking for alternatives to patriarchy and “the way people were forced to live in the cities” (Tomie Arai, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). Though these social experiments she participated in following her leave from art school seemed to fail, Tomie was not yet ready to give up. While living on a commune in Vermont, she attended a conference with North Vietnamese women in Canada. The Indochinese Women’s Conference in Vancouver and Toronto “politicized an entire generation of Asian American women”, and Tomie was no different (Wu 2017:147). The women from North Vietnam were political role models for Asian American women, as those from the United States and Canada understood a shared sense of racial subordination through Western imperialism and militarism. Back at the commune in Vermont, Tomie was constantly asked about the position of Asians in America, but realized she did not know what to say (Tomie Arai, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). The commune was predominately white, with the exception of a group of Young Lords who asked her what her purpose for being in the commune was. Unable to find an appropriate answer, Tomie took the advice of a prominent Asian American woman filmmaker and activist who suggested she return to New York to find out. In the city, Tomie's work in *Yellow Pearl* would not only give her an answer to the questions being posed by non-Asians about the role of Asian Americans, but also allow her to find an appropriate outlet for

the art she so desperately wanted to create. Tomie's participation in that first meeting of *Yellow Pearl* would also lead her to her future husband, Legan Wong (Wong 2017).

With the input of so many young Asian Americans, particularly Japanese Americans like Tomie Arai, with family histories of internment during World War II and previous exposure to anti-imperialist ideologies through events like the Indochinese Women's Conference, *Yellow Pearl* raised the question of anti-Asian racism involved in the wars of Southeast Asia. Chris Iijima and Nobuko Miyamoto's inclusion of lyrics for their song, "I'm Alright Jack," reflected these issues:

Strange things i'm learn-ing
A-bout the homes they're burn-ing
Is it true what they do
To peo-ple who look like me?
Far-a-way, far-a-way,
Where they know that I won't see
And so man-y things are hap-pen ing
Som
So many things are hap-pen-ing...

The works exhibited in the anthology spanned a variety of topics that mainstream art and music had failed to grasp. Asian American art was finally taking shape, and the members of Basement Workshop were far from done. Having illustrated a handful of pieces for the anthology, Tomie Arai went on to contribute her artwork for Basement's bi-monthly publication, *Bridge* magazine (Tomie Arai, interview with Christina Ong, May 24, 2018). In spite of, or perhaps because of, the completion of *Yellow Pearl*, Basement Workshop members were ready to work on new projects

they had been brainstorming as part of the organization's longer-term vision. *Yellow Pearl's* rousing success only motivated them further.

By Spring 1972, *Yellow Pearl* went into production with 2,000 copies ordered for the first printing (Yellow Pearl Proposal 1971).



Figure 1 Excerpt from *Yellow Pearl*. Illustrated by Tomie Arai. 1972.

The anthology gained notoriety across the country. Newly formed Asian American Studies programs across campuses were ordering copies for use in their classrooms. *Yellow Pearl* and its contents garnered support and generated discussion amongst Asian Americans from all walks of life. The 57 pages of poetry, prose, illustrations, photographs, and lyrics covered topics from U.S.

imperialism in Vietnam and Laos to the day-to-day lives of Chinatown residents living in poverty (Yellow Pearl 1972).



Figure 2 Page 25 of Yellow Pearl. Poem by George Chew, Illustrated by Larry Hama. 1972.

As Basement Workshop and its membership became more and more pan-Asian, the women in the organization pushed the importance of addressing issues of gender, especially as they moved to aligning themselves with anti-imperialist politics. The political nature of the time caused many members to follow Maoist rhetoric. A major concern with this was how members could or could not navigate dating one another. Folks “adopted a pseudo-communist... vocabulary” and wanted to assure themselves that they were changing social norms for the better by not “discussing things

romantically” (Charlie Chin, interview with Christina Ong, July 28, 2018). Men would refer to the female members of Basement as their comrades, and would ask one another for “work study” so they could “resolve contradictions” in communist theory. People involved in Basement would meet in informal men’s and women’s groups to discuss such issues stemming from gender roles. This excerpt from Tomi Ohta’s poem in *Yellow Pearl* is a prime example:

...a legit lay for the revolutionary!
well, let me tell you brother!
revolution must be total
and you’re in its way
yeah, yeah, I’m all sympathy
your soul and your sexuality has
been fucked over by Amerika
well, so has mine
so has ours
we chronic smilers
asian women
we of the downcast almond eyes
are seeing each other
sisters now, people now
asian women...
But I’m so damned tired
of being body first, head last
wanting to love you when all

you want is a solution to glandular discomfort...

Think about it, brothers

We are women, we are Asian

We are freeing ourselves

Join us

Try to use us

and you'll lose us

Join us

By the time production of *Yellow Pearl* was finishing, Arlan was graduating from Pratt Institute and had decided to return home to San Francisco for a year. At this time, Arlan and Fay Chiang were working on a proposal to obtain grant funding for what they called the Amerasia Creative Arts program (Arlan Huang, interview with Christina Ong, June 19, 2018). Despite having a 501c(3) status, Basement had not up to that point utilized much federal or state grant funding. This proposal was the beginning of Fay's push to raise more funds to support all of their visions for Basement. As Arlan left, the proposal that he and Fay had written was approved (Arlan Huang, interview with Christina Ong, June 19, 2018). Arlan, Fay, and the others involved in *Yellow Pearl* formed the basis for Basement Workshop's new Amerasia Creative Arts program. These folks were the American-born artists and poets of the organization who believed wholeheartedly in the transformative power of art—that the creative capacity of Asian Americans could unlock a collective consciousness previously untapped.

As work on *Yellow Pearl* wrapped, Bridge was too influenced by the increased American-born pan-Asian membership and an increasingly loud Asian American Movement. Rocky Chin was now living in California and in May 1972 wrote Danny Yung to speak about *Bridge*. Rocky

encouraged the editors to bring about “more controversial and educational articles” like those found in Yale’s *Amerasia Journal*, which was planning to put out an issue on Asian American women (Chin 1971). Others were also eager for more, with *Bridge* representatives in other parts of the United States pushing for articles that were more “innovative”, including sections on “non-Chinese things” (Danny Yung Files, Letter to Danny). Additionally, an initial reader survey sent by Danny to subscribers resulted in feedback mentioning the desire to expand contents to other Asian groups (Danny Yung Files, Bridge Readership Questionnaire). The push for a more pan-Asian focus resulted in *Bridge* adopting a new slogan – The Magazine of Asians in America.

Bridge Magazine was now utilizing the talents of some of the members who had been involved in *Yellow Pearl*. The Japanese American members like Tomie and comic illustrator Larry Hama, whose illustrations are also included *Yellow Pearl*, contributed regularly to *Bridge*. The widespread inclusion of Japanese Americans in the organization expanded understandings of Asian American identity as intimately tied to opposing US militarism for its anti-Asian racism, as these members had a different kind of exposure to racial and transnational political solidarities than foreign-born and American-born Chinese members. Nobuko and Tomie’s experiences with Third World activities, in particular, highlighted such beliefs. This type of Asian American identity was built with the idea that Third World peoples, including Asian Americans, are all oppressed by systems of imperialism and Western hegemony, albeit in differing ways. These differences were not the basis of conflict, but instead could be built on for purposes of solidarity (Hong 2018). This was in direct contrast to the type of solidarity that Danny and Eleanor believed in early on with Chinatown residents, viewing them as united because they were all members of the same Chinese family (Eleanor Yung, interview with Christina Ong, July 6, 2018). The inclusion of Japanese

American members and their gradual leadership in the organization pushed Basement Workshop to adopt an increasingly revolutionary agenda, becoming a transnational racial project.

3.1.5 Basement's Expansion: A Story to Be Continued September

1972-1986: Chinatown, NYC

When Basement Workshop's activities outgrew the tiny basement on Elizabeth Street, the organization's leaders looked into leasing a roomier space in Chinatown. Basement's eventual move to 22 Catherine Street in late 1972 also brought about an expansion of *Bridge*. In the summer of 1972, *Bridge* established a Hong Kong bureau and intended to develop a sister publication, *Bridge: The Magazine of Southeast Asians*" (Danny Yung Files, Bridge Second Newsletter:2). The publication also touted representatives across the United States in major Asian American hubs like San Francisco, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Honolulu, but also in places like Cleveland, Minneapolis, and Detroit. Basement Workshop's impending growth, both in terms of physical space and in ideology, further complicated the nature of Asian American identity and organizing. How the organization progressively provided members with a sense of revolutionary community and forced a redefining of organizational goals many times over is the focus of future research.

4.0 Conclusion

Prior to the establishment of Basement Workshop, young Chinese immigrant, Chinese American, and Japanese American activists on the East Coast were restless. Swept up in existing social movements for radical change, these young people were hungry for a way to combat oppressions facing their own communities. Through organizing and working in Basement Workshop, the descendants of Chinese and Japanese immigrants to the United States developed a panethnic collective identity that could eventually encompass the ideologies of anti-racism and anti-imperialism that they had aligned themselves with. From originating in identities based on their immigration history and their ethnic Chinese or Japanese heritage, those active in Basement Workshop shifted their individual identities to a collective Asian American one.

Members of Basement Workshop, from those in the newly established Amerasia Creative Arts, to those on the periphery, like Corky Lee, found a shared sense of purpose through their work in the basement. The eventual Asian American identity taken up by members in the early days of Basement Workshop was a form of resistance to the dominant social order in the United States. Foreign-born Chinese, Chinese American, and Japanese American members came together and demonstrated the power of collectively organizing as Asian Americans. In spite of preeminent stereotypes casting Asians as a racialized other, those involved in Basement Workshop developed power on the ground in new ways, but also demonstrated the heterogeneity of pan-Asian identity. Asian Americans were not just highly educated international students looking to do good in the new communities they resided in like Danny and Eleanor Yung. Nor were they only the first generation of children of working class families living in predominately white neighborhoods like Fay and Jeannie Chiang. Even still, Asian Americans were not just Japanese Americans whose

parents and grandparents were forcibly detained in internment camps. Asian Americans were all of these people, and more. Through activism in Basement Workshop, members were able to uncover the commonalities in such diverse upbringings and experiences growing up as Asian in America. The development of Asian American identity allowed the descendants of Chinese and Japanese immigrants to connect the differing realities they faced based on their intersecting identities as gendered beings, as children of immigrants, and as racialized minorities in the United States to their activism. Chinese foreign students and Chinese Americans who organized the Chinatown Health Fair recognized how residential segregation of Chinatown residents excluded them from adequate medical care. Japanese American artists like Tomie Arai and Larry Hama utilized their talents in *Yellow Pearl* and issues of *Bridge* to critique western imperialism in Southeast Asia. All members of Basement Workshop regularly fought against degradation based on their racialized panethnic identity through a variety of social programs and artistic endeavors. Asian American identity, then, was not an notion meant to assimilate people of Asian descent into a white social order. Instead, it was a means of support for one another and of strength against a racist system in the United States and a transnational system of imperialism. Ultimately, gaining this deeper understanding of the radical roots of Asian America through examining the intricacies of Basement Workshop's origins elevates the voices, perspectives, and contributions of Asian Americans.

Further research on Basement Workshop and other early Asian American organizations across the United States will continuously uncover the intricacies of racialized panethnic identity as tools of anti-imperialist and anti-racist resistance. Future work on the organization will delve more extensively into the shifting nature of Asian American identity as the organization made several pivotal changes in leadership that altered the ways in which the organization prioritized activities.

Further studies of Basement Workshop from 1973-1986 will uncover how the organization became a “counterpoint to the male-dominated activist scene” of the time and gave the women in the organization the ability to develop “a fierce rebuke to the usual two-dimensional exoticized caricatures of Asian femininity” as they became the predominant leaders and decision makers (Chen 2013). Although gender has always been central to the development of Asian American identity, analyzing the later years of Basement Workshop point to more explicit evidence of how panethnic identity becomes gendered.

Appendix A Preliminary Map of Triracial Order in the USA

“Whites”

- Whites
- New whites (Russians, Albanians, etc.)
- Assimilated white Latinos
- Some multiracials
- Assimilated (urban) Native Americans
- A few Asian-origin people

“Honorary Whites”

- Light-skinned Latinos
- Japanese Americans
- Korean Americans
- Asian Indians
- Chinese Americans
- Middle Eastern Americans
- Most multiracials

“Collective Black”

- Vietnamese Americans
- Filipino Americans
- Hmong Americans
- Laotian Americans
- Dark-skinned Latinos
- Blacks
- New West Indian and African immigrants
- Reservation-bound Native Americans

Preliminary Map of Triracial Order in the USA. Adapted from *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, 2017, Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

Appendix B Sample of Research Questions for Narrative Interviews with Basement Workshop Members

This questionnaire serves as a guide, rather than a rigid script. Interviews are likely to include related follow-up and clarifying questions depending on the interviewee's experiences and responses.

Background Information:

- Please introduce yourself (name, age, occupation).
- Can you talk to me a little bit about your family and/or your immigration history? When did they come to the United States and where did they settle?
- Let's talk about your childhood growing up in the United States. What are some of the experiences you remember about:
 - o Your family?
 - o Friends?
 - o School life?
- Did you grow up around other racial/ethnic minorities? Around people who were of the same race and/or ethnicity as you?
- Do you recall when you realized you were a racial minority?
 - o What was this experience like? How did it impact you?
- When you were growing up, how did other people treat you? Did you notice a difference in how you were treated because of your ethnicity? Your gender?
- Did you experience racism/sexism growing up?

Identity Formation and Development:

- How did you identify ethnically/racially before your involvement in the Asian American movement?
- Did you ever feel like you were treated differently by your friends and family because you were a girl/woman?
- When did you start calling yourself "Asian American"? What was that process like? Before this, how did you refer to yourself and others like you?

Pre-Basement Workshop Activism and Aspirations:

- How involved were you in activism and community organizing in the 1960s and 1970s?
- What kinds of causes were important to you? How were you able to advocate for these causes?
- Why did you decide to get involved in activism during this time?

Involvement in Basement Workshop:

- How did you hear about Basement Workshop?
- Why did you become involved in the organization?
- What drew you to this organization as opposed to others that were active in social justice at the time?
- Talk a little bit about Basement Workshop. What was it like to be involved in the organization?
- Did you feel connected to other Asian Americans and racial minorities more broadly because of the organization?
- What are some of the specific activities you organized as a member?

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