



千里之行，始于足下

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”

-Lao Tzu

Forging Identity and Fighting Against Injustice: **the** 1960's Chinese Fight for Freedom

Olivia Liu
4/15/24
Christopher Barry
AP American History

For well over a hundred years, Chinese immigrants have experienced discrimination and hate in the United States. It was not until the 1960s, when the Chinese found a unifying voice as Asian Americans, that they began to fight back effectively.

In the 1850s, many Chinese left their homeland to come to the United States. China was in a period of economic hardship and oppression after the British defeated them in the Opium Wars. Chinese men turned towards America with hopes of sending money back to their families (Luo). The employers in the United States liked the Chinese as they represented cheap labor; however, once jobs became scarce, hostility and resentment grew toward the foreigners. Unjust laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, attempted to curtail Chinese immigration to the United States. Almost a century passed before the courts lifted the immigration restrictions, but even then, mistreatment and negative sentiments toward the Chinese prevailed.

The Roots of Anti-Asian Racism in the United States

Discrimination against Asian immigrants began almost as soon as they entered the United States in the middle of the 19th century.

Chinese in the California Gold Rush

Many Chinese immigrants saw the California gold rush as a golden mountain of opportunity, but their experiences were the opposite. In 1852, the government imposed a high monthly tax on all foreign miners, including the Chinese miners. Even with the high taxes, Chinese laborers received meager wages and were violently persecuted without help from the government (Grigg). In one such instance in 1853, a white miner named George Hall murdered a Chinese miner. Several Chinese witnesses testified against Hall, and he was found guilty and

sentenced to be hung. However, in a subsequent ruling, the California Supreme Court decided that the testimony of Chinese people could not be used against white people. Hall was set free, and the precedent was set for there to be no proper legal protection for the Chinese.

Chinese in the Building of the Transcontinental Railroad

Thousands of Chinese workers were critical in building the Central and Union Pacific Railroad. They were discriminated against for their small appearance yet proved their value through their efficient work, strength, and reliability. Chinese workers often took jobs that no one else wanted such as in the Sierra Mountains, where granite tunnels frequently fell on them. Workers were crushed by landslides and explosions and were attacked by other workers. In addition, Chinese railroad workers were paid 30% less than their white counterparts. Chinese workers were mentioned as an entirety in papers; however, individual names of workers were omitted therefore marginalizing them (NPS).

Discriminatory Legislation

By 1870, 20% of California's labor force was Chinese despite only constituting 0.002% of the entire United States population (Asia Society). Due to this high concentration, white workers felt that the Chinese were to blame for stealing their jobs, which caused animosity, violence, and anti-Chinese legislation. There were concentrated efforts to limit the ability of Chinese immigrants through laws and unjust limitations.

The government imposed several discriminatory laws and regulations targeted at the Chinese. The Foreign Miners License tax forced a 20-dollar fee for Chinese workers to mine. The Sidewalk Ordinance of 1870 banned the right to carry vegetables and laundry on a pole, and

the Queue Ordinance of 1873 outlawed long braids, both of which were important Chinese customs. Additionally, Chinese immigrants were prohibited from working in the government and could not educate their children in school. There were also laws that prevented the Chinese from fighting for themselves in court. To make matters worse, because of the economic depression in the 1870s, many blamed the Chinese for low wages and high employment rates (LOC).

In 1882, the United States first attempted to restrict immigration of a particular race by creating the Chinese Exclusion Act. The Chinese Exclusion Act was a 10-year ban on Chinese immigration. The ban only allowed entry of non-laborers to ensure that the Chinese were not "taking" job opportunities from native-born Americans. Therefore, very few Chinese could come to the United States, and Chinese Americans could no longer visit their families in China due to the strict limitations of the immigration ban. The Geary Act of 1902 extended the Chinese Exclusion Act, and eventually, the Immigration Act of 1924 defined the exact limitation of immigrants. Chinese were allowed only 105 new entry visas per year (LOC).

There has been hate, violence, and unjust laws against Chinese Americans since the 1850s. This deep-rooted discrimination continued with vigor until the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Subsequently, Chinese Americans began uniting in the fight for their rights as American citizens through the Asian American Movement.

1960s Chinese Fight for Rights - The Asian American Movement

Before the 1960s, Chinese activism was fragmented, the scope was limited, and the base was small. This changed with the Asian American Movement. Chinese found a unified voice and identity with their Pan-Asian brethren, who were joined by their opposition to the Vietnam War and emboldened by the civil rights movement of the previous decade. "By watching Black

people expose institutional racism and government hypocrisy, Asian Americans began to identify how they, too, had faced discrimination in the United States" (Nittle).

Asian American Identity

In May of 1968, at the University of California, Berkeley, graduate students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka formed the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA). The creation of this alliance signaled a new era of thinking and empowerment for Chinese and other Asians. Energized by their joint objection to the Vietnam War and invigorated by the civil rights movement, Asian Americans united around parallel experiences of discrimination and marginalization (Zheng).

Through the AAPA, Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka coined the phrase "Asian Americans," which worked to counter the derogatory and colonialist term "Orientals" and give Pan-Asians a unified voice. Prior to this new Asian American identity, Asians would classify themselves by their ethnic subgroup. Now, Asians had a single banner to rally around. "But 'Asian American' wasn't just a handy umbrella term: by uniting those subgroups linguistically, it also helped unite activists in their fight for greater equality" (Kambhampaty).

AAPA quickly gained ground as other chapters opened throughout the country. Its popularity also expanded through its newsletter, *Gidra*. These monthly newsletters discussed topics such as ethnic studies on college campuses and rising activism in Asian American communities. Touching on topics from the past, present, and future, *Gidra* gained interest on publication sites. Eventually, *Gidra* found itself in prominent Asian-run newspapers. Described as the catalyst of change, it was passed from person to person, impacting many Asian American communities (Niiya).

Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) Strikes

In November of 1968, at San Francisco State University, boiling over from the need for equal educational opportunities and ethnic studies, the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) was formed, classrooms were emptied, and a strike began. TWLF, consisting of the AAPA, the Black Student Union, and other student groups, fought against the administration and police, creating the longest student strike in U.S. history (Wallace). Belvin Louie, a Chinese-born American, joined the protest. His friends tried to convince him to stop, saying it would ruin his future. He said, "Well, if it's a future that you want to make, you have to be part of it" (Ishizuka 86).

Two months later, in January of 1969, the TWLF strikes began at the University of California, Berkeley. Eventually, the TWLF at both universities successfully negotiated results that led to the first School of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University and an Ethnic Studies department at the University of California, Berkeley. The strike helped kickstart ethnic studies in America, and by 1978, it directly resulted in U.S. universities establishing at least 14 ethnic studies programs (Hewang 4).

Artist Collectives

As the Chinese gained political identity through the 1960s, they also experienced a unique cultural awakening. Artist collectives, such as the Basement Workshop, were formed, combining cultural and social activism. These spaces allowed explorations of Asian American identity, political commentary, and community engagement (Hewang 12).

In 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act was signed into effect. The act stopped immigration quotas and helped to reunite families from foreign nations. Removing that limitation

doubled the Chinese American population in the U.S. within ten years (Le). This growth created crowded living conditions and related housing issues. In 1969, Danny Yung created a team of fellow Columbia graduate students to survey Chinatown, New York. Only then had anyone ever studied this part of New York. Chinatowns were seen as impoverished ghettos bounded by language and cultural differences. Danny led his team from door to door to interview residents and do building surveys and inspections. They compiled their results into the Chinatown Study, illuminating its residents' harsh living conditions and everyday struggles.

Danny Yung then created the Basement Workshop in Chinatown welcoming all to his venue to create and interact. Here, politics blended with art, and programs for the community were created. "These educational, social service, and artistic programming at one time served more than 200 individuals" (Yung). In addition, the Basement Workshop published Yellow Pearl, a quintessential collection of Asian music, art, and literature, and Bridge Magazine – an Asian American Perspective. Bridge Magazine aimed "to build bridges between communities by cultivating a national network, disseminating information to all, and facilitating programs of concern to the communities" (Yung).

Life After the Asian American Movement

After the Asian American Movement, the influx of immigrants, mainly from Taiwan and Hong Kong, provided exposure to urban fashion and music (LOC). This allowed Chinese Americans to interconnect their culture with social norms and increased expectations of social mobility. Chinese Americans started spreading themselves throughout America, blending in with the American population. However, this did not come easily. Discrimination was and continues to be very much prevalent.

Immigrant Experience

Kathy Liu, a successful Chinese immigrant and mother, came to the United States in 1969 with little money. Ms. Liu, like many other Chinese immigrants at the time, did not make much money, but she was adept at saving. Instead of eating at restaurants or going out, she stayed home and cooked meals. Ms. Liu explained that, as first-generation immigrants, there was no fallback option.

Ms. Liu also shared how difficult it was to purchase a home. In 1974, after saving for several years, she went to New Jersey to visit home listings but was turned down by the agent who claimed he did not sell to non-whites. On another occasion, while visiting Westchester, New York, Ms. Liu was told that certain areas were only for white people. Ms. Liu explained how she felt powerless, but her only recourse was to find another agent or to look for homes in other areas. It was not just Ms. Liu who experienced this; her friends shared similar experiences. Today, Ms. Liu is retired and a leader at WACA (Westchester Association of Chinese Americans). She is also president of the Greenburgh Evergreen Club and helps many older adults in the Westchester community. Despite the discrimination she faced after the civil rights movement, she is a quintessential example of Chinese immigrant success.

From the time the Chinese first immigrated to the United States in the 1850s until the 1900s, Chinese Americans faced intense discrimination and anti-Chinese sentiment. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned Chinese laborers from coming to the United States, but it was not repealed until 1943. Even then, immigration was still limited to 105 new entry visas, and the Chinese faced bans against owning property and businesses. This oppression limited the Chinese to a reality of dangerous jobs, low salaries, violent surroundings, and a pervasive lack of

government support. The tide began to change when different Asian ethnicities, including the Chinese, banded together as Asian Americans to fight for justice. The Asian American Movement of the 1960s, led by university students, united Asians through strikes, protests, and influential newsletters to gain more rights. Through their resiliency, Chinese Americans forged their identity, seeking and claiming the justice they deserved as American citizens.

Works Cited

- Asia Society . “Asian Americans Then and Now.” *Asia Society*, 2019,
asiasociety.org/education/asian-americans-then-and-now.
- Grigg, Cindy. “Chinese Immigrants and the California Gold Rush.” *Hickmanmills.org*, 2023,
www.hickmanmills.org/cms/lib3/mo01001730/centricity/domain/794/chinese%20immigrants%20and%20the%20california%20gold%20rush.htm#:~:text=In%201852%2C%20California%20placed%20a.
- Hewang, Olivia . “Building Identity and Solidarity: Asian American Activism of the 1960s and ‘70s. A Library of Congress Resource/User Guide .” *LOC.gov*, LOC, 2023,
www.loc.gov/static/programs/of-the-people/represent/junior-fellows/documents/CCDI-Guide-Olivia-Hewang.pdf. Accessed 15 Apr. 2024.
- Ishizuka, Karen. *Serve the People - Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*. Verso Books, 2018.
- Kambhampaty, Anna Purna. “In 1968, These Activists Coined the Term “Asian American”—and Helped Shape Decades of Advocacy.” *Time*, 22 May 2020,
time.com/5837805/asian-american-history/.
- Le, C.E. “The 1965 Immigration Act : Asian-Nation :: Asian American History, Demographics, & Issues.” *Www.asian-Nation.org*, 2024,
www.asian-nation.org/1965-immigration-act.shtml.
- Library of Congress. “Searching for the Gold Mountain | Chinese | Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History | Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress.” *Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA*,

www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/chinese/searching-for-the-gold-mountain/

Liu, Kathy . *Chinese Immigration Story: The Struggle* . 1 Apr. 2024.

Luo, Leo. "The History of Chinese Immigration to the U.S." *Www2.Hawaii.edu*, 2005,

www2.hawaii.edu/~sford/alternatv/s05/articles/leo_history.html.

National Parks Service (NPS). "Chinese Labor and the Iron Road - Golden Spike National

Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service)." *Www.nps.gov*, 13 Aug. 2023,

www.nps.gov/gosp/learn/historyculture/chinese-labor-and-the-iron-road.htm#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20a%20wage.

Niiya, Brian. "Gidra: Now Available Online." *Densho: Japanese American Incarceration and*

Japanese Internment, 17 Dec. 2015, densho.org/catalyst/gidra-now-available-online/.

Nittle, Nadra Kareem. "History of the Asian American Civil Rights Movement." *ThoughtCo*, 3

Mar. 2021, www.thoughtco.com/asian-american-civil-rights-movement-history-2834596.

Wallace, Nina. "Yellow Power: The Origins of Asian America." *Densho*, 8 May 2017,

densho.org/catalyst/asian-american-movement/.

Yung, Eleanor . "Asian American Arts Centre - Basement Workshop 1969-1974." *Artspiral.org*,

artspiral.org/basementworkshop.php.

Zheng, Lily. "To Dismantle Anti-Asian Racism, We Must Understand Its Roots." *Harvard*

Business Review, 27 May 2021,

hbr.org/2021/05/to-dismantle-anti-asian-racism-we-must-understand-its-roots.