

I am a visionary who creates

blood and courage soaked stories
of countless *ah goongs* and *ah poas*.³

i link arms with women, with men to fight
the diseases of a patriarchal past.

i am a warrior who grapples with three

many-headed demons: racism, sexism, homophobia;

a twenty-four hour worker;

a writer with the will to change

the age-old inheritance of inequality.

i am a warrior, a worker, a writer,

my grandmother's youngest daughter,

a feminist who does not believe in silence.

i am a woman who loves women,

i am a woman who loves myself.

Source: Kitty Tsui, *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire* (Argyle, N.Y.: Spinsters, Ink, 1983), pp. 12-13, 51-52. Reprinted by permission of the author.

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3. *Ah goongs* means grandfathers, and *ah poas* mean grandmothers.

Anti-Asian Violence and the Vincent Chin Case

In the 1980s, as the United States deindustrialized and sank into a recession in response to rapid changes in the global economy, hate crimes against Asian Americans erupted. It was not a coincidence that the first outbreak occurred in Detroit, Michigan, where the auto industry, unable to compete with foreign imports, had all but collapsed. In 1982 unemployed workers and the mass media were blaming Japanese imports for the depressed economy when Vincent Chin, a twenty-seven-year-old Chinese American, was brutally killed in a barroom brawl by two white auto workers. During the fistfight that preceded the murder, one of the men was heard saying, "It's because of you motherfuckers that we're out of work." They had obviously mistaken Chin for a Japanese as well as unfairly blamed all Asian people for the economic problems of the country.

THE NEW VIOLENCE (1984)

Helen Y. Zia

Helen Zia was working as a journalist for the Detroit Metro Times and Metropolitan Detroit when she heard the shocking news about Vincent Chin. Inspired by the antiwar and Asian American movements while an undergraduate at Princeton University, she had moved to Detroit in 1976 to do grassroots organizing. For two years she had worked as a large-press operator at a Chrysler plant before being laid off. Although she could understand the underlying causes behind the Vincent Chin murder, she could not believe or accept the lenient sentences that the judge meted out to the two killers; nor could she the Asian American community. Helen Zia ended up leading a national campaign to seek justice for Vincent Chin. The following article, one of many that she wrote on behalf of American Citizens for Justice (ACJ), was published in *Bridge*, a leading national Asian American magazine, in 1984.

In 1982, in America, a Chinese American named Vincent Chin was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two men—after being accused by them of causing the unemployment of U.S. autoworkers. His killers were each fined \$3,000 and given three years' probation.

When news spread of the lenient sentences given for the crime of brutally taking a life, there were storms of protest.

The Vincent Chin case has come to mean far more to Asian Americans than a failure of the criminal justice system, though this aspect of the case serves as a lesson to all. This case has come to represent the racial hatred, scapegoating and very real discrimination that Asian Americans of all our diverse nationalities have been forced to endure since our forebears set foot on this land. To the extent that what happened to Vincent Chin could happen to any one of us, all Asian Americans are in jeopardy.

The Chin case is also a mandate to those of us who are fortunate enough not to have suffered Vincent's fate. The nationwide response to it symbolizes what can—and must—be achieved by Asian Americans acting together on behalf of our common need to live in our nation free from the threat of racial violence and innuendo. This case has proven that Americans from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, India and other Asian heritages can make a powerful impact by working together for our mutual interests.

On the night of his slaying, Vincent Chin was 27 years old and his future was promising. He was doing well at work in computer graphics, was well liked, and was looking to buy a new home for his wife and his widowed mother. In fact, Vincent's story typified the experiences of many Asian American immigrants: his father, Chin Wing Hing, came from Guangdong Province to America in search of a new life, which he found in the laundries and restaurants of Detroit. When World War II began, he enlisted, and after serving honorably in the U.S. Army, became eligible for citizenship. As a reward of citizenship, Mr. Chin was permitted to bring his wife, Lily, to this country. There were no children, and a few years later, the couple adopted a five-year-old boy from Guangdong, whom they named Vincent.

Friends and teachers say Vincent was a fun-loving, happy kid. His mother says he could have studied harder, but that he was a good boy, the kind who would help others. When he was nine, he began working in local Chinese restaurants, bussing tables. He had two passions: fishing and reading. "Whenever he had a chance, Vince would try to get to a lake and drop a line—it was his way of relaxing," remembers boyhood friend Gary Koivu, who was with Vincent the night he died.

And Vincent had a sensitive side to his personality—he often wrote poetry to his fiancée, Vikki Wong. She is trying to renew her life and is reluctant to talk publicly about Vincent, but some memories stand out, such as a Valentine's Day poem that Vincent placed in a classified section of a local paper:

There is no life without you
There is no joy or laughter
There is no brightness, no warmth
All the mornings after.

So stay with me
And we'll face the tomorrows
To find if our love
Can overcome the sorrows.

Though Vincent began college studying architecture, he later changed his mind, thinking that it might not be a secure profession. "Vince said he did not want to work his whole life in laundries and restaurants like his father did," Vikki recalls. So he later studied computer operations at a local trade school, and graduated with honors. He found a job at an engineering firm, combining his drafting and computing skills in computer-aided design work. To help save money for a house, Vincent also worked on weekends as a waiter.

Like many a "red-blooded American male," Vincent enjoyed going out on the town with his buddies. But unlike those other Americans, Vincent had an Asian face. On that warm Saturday night, Vincent and three friends decided to celebrate his upcoming wedding by going to a nude go-go joint that Vincent frequented during his carefree bachelorhood. Though his mother told him he shouldn't go out so close to the wedding date, he laughed and reassured her that "it would be his last night out with the guys." That night, Vincent was the target of a racial attack, and he died four days later as a result of that assault.

The bar that Vincent and his friends—two white and one Asian—went to was a seedy strip joint where women dance by the dollar: one dollar buys a few gyrations right in front of the customer—the more dollars, the more gyrations. Vincent and his friends had gone to have a good time, bringing plenty of dollar bills. But the more time the dancers spent with the free-spending Asian American, the more provoked two other patrons became.

Ronald Ebens, a tall, heavy-set white man, then 43 years old, and his stepson Michael Nitz, a tall, slim 22-year-old, were seated across from Vincent. Dancers from the bar say that Ebens, perhaps resentful that an Asian man should be receiving so much attention while he was not, began calling Vincent racially offensive names, needling Vincent, suggesting that he wasn't a man, talking about what he could do with his mother. One dancer heard Ebens say explicitly, "It's because of you motherfuckers that we're out of work."

A good-natured Vincent uncharacteristically stood up to them as the epithets continued, and a scuffle ensued. Vincent and his friends left the club, followed closely behind by Ebens and Nitz. Outside, in the parking lot, Vincent went straight to the trunk of his car and pulled out a baseball bat. Vincent ran, chased by Ebens and Nitz. When the two larger men were outdistanced

by Vincent, they returned to the lot, where Vincent's two white friends and Jimmy Choi were standing—and they homed in on Jimmy, who had been involved in their assaults against Vincent. But Jimmy also had an Asian face, and the two began chasing Jimmy, Ebens still wielding his bat. "I ran for my dear life," shudders Jimmy.

Intent on their purpose, Ebens and Nitz embarked on a search-and-destroy mission. For the next 20 minutes, they drove through streets and alleys searching for Vincent and Jimmy. They hired a third man to "help them get the chinks," as that man, Jimmy Perry, freely admits today. And they found the two Asian Americans waiting outside of a fast-food restaurant for a bus or a car or anything to get them away from their assailants. Ebens, Nitz and Perry crept up behind the two unsuspecting Asians, who noticed their attackers too late. Nitz grabbed Vincent in a bear hug, and his stepfather pummeled Vincent's legs, arms, body—and finally, sent four grand-slam swings into the back of Vincent's skull.

Two off-duty police officers stopped the carnage at gunpoint. "I ordered halt twice; if I hadn't stopped him, he would have gone for another 20 blows," recounts one officer. But for Vincent, it was over. Doctors operated on his battered head all night; surgeons said it looked like someone had beaten an animal. Vincent was placed on life support systems—his brain was already dead. Four days later, on June 23, 1982, his grieving fiancée and his stricken mother consented to turning off the life supports. Instead of attending Vincent's wedding, his friends went to his funeral.

What might have been just another senseless tragedy then turned into a carnival of bungling and sheer incompetence—the product of an insensitive, overburdened system where there is often no justice—just another case. And Vincent Chin was treated as just another case. No one went to the bar to find out what had initiated the murderous hunt. No one even thought to ask if race might have been a factor. A dough-faced detective (from what is reported to be one of the state's most inadequate police departments) says the killing was no big deal and that he is sure there was nothing racial about it—even though he acknowledges he made no effort to find out. Two defense lawyers managed to get the case moved from courtroom to courtroom within Wayne County, and found one judge to set the charges at second-degree murder, prompting another judge to comment on the record, "I am of the opinion that the defendants were undercharged. The elements of first-degree murder are here."

Finally the case went before Judge Charles Kaufman, who overlooked a probation officer's recommendations of incarceration and a psychiatric report warning that Ebens was an "extremely hostile and explosive individual . . . with a potential for uncontrollable hostility and explosive acting out." While the prosecutors didn't even bother to show up at the plea-bargained manslaughter sentencing, Kaufman ignored the previous courtroom testi-

mony and listened to the killers' lawyers say that Vincent provoked his own death while Ebens and Nitz were innocent bystanders. Judge Kaufman took ten minutes to consider the charges, and sentenced Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz each to \$3,000 in fines and \$780 in court costs, payable at \$125 per month with no interest, and three years' probation.

That was the total value placed on the life of 27-year-old Vincent Chin, whose only crime was having an Asian face at a time when anti-Japanese and anti-Asian sentiments were rampant.

In rendering his now-infamous sentence, Kaufman offered several rationalizations: "These aren't the kind of men you send to jail . . . We're talking here about a man who's held down a responsible job for 17 or 18 years, and his son is employed and is a part-time student. You don't make the punishment fit the crime, you make the punishment fit the criminal."

News of the killers' sentences and the judge's opinion drew an immediate response from a shocked and disbelieving Chinese community. A grief-stricken Mrs. Chin, friends and members of the community struggled to understand what had happened and to discover what might be done about the clearly flawed judicial decision. There were emotional meetings of hundreds of Asians and others who had never before come together, suddenly talking about the pain, humiliation and suffering that we had endured silently for generations. We knew that what happened to Vincent Chin endangered all of us, and we knew that we could no longer stand in silence.

March 31, 1983, stands out in the history of Asians in America, for it was the night that individuals and representatives of local and national Asian organizations came together in Michigan and recognized that our fate and indeed our lives depended on our willingness to work in cooperation and in coalition with one another. In the drafty hall of the Detroit Chinese Welfare Council,¹ there was a joining of liberals and conservatives, youths and seniors, scientists, businessmen, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos and Koreans, Christians and Buddhists, Cantonese- and Mandarin-speakers, American-born and immigrants—all of us put aside the differences that kept us apart and agreed that night to form a new organization to protect our rights as Americans of Asian ancestry, and we named it "American Citizens for Justice."

In the ensuing days, weeks and months, the many volunteers of ACJ donated money, time, effort, and whatever else was needed to discover what caused this miscarriage of justice. We engaged an attorney to look into legal recourse. (Our small force of Asian American attorneys in the Detroit area could not support a sustained *pro bono* effort, unlike some larger com-

1. Affiliated with the long established Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and On Leong Merchants Association, the Detroit Chinese Welfare Council represented the interests of Chinatown to the city and at political functions. Vincent Chin was one of its younger members.

munities.) Obtaining court records and reconstructing the events of that tragic evening took much hard work and persistence in a system that seemed all too eager to cover up the mistakes made. The more established civil rights organizations of Detroit recognized our concerns and helped us open doors in an unwieldy bureaucracy. Bit by bit, we were able to reconstruct what happened to Vincent and what happened in the courts.

The more we learned about the case, the more evident it became that a grievous wrong had occurred. ACJ deliberately avoided making accusations of racism against the judge and did not call the killing a racial attack—until statements of additional eyewitnesses, who had never been questioned by police, prosecutors or anyone else from the criminal justice system, forced an inescapable conclusion: that the crime of violating Vincent Chin's civil rights on the basis of his race had taken place, and that it was time for a governmental body to review the evidence that this fledgling civil rights organization had uncovered. In May 1983, an FBI investigation was initiated by the Justice Department; in September, a grand jury probe was announced, and in November, 23 grand jurors returned indictments against Ebens and Nitz for the violation of Vincent Chin's civil rights.

During that long summer of 1983, as the news of what happened in Detroit spread throughout the U.S. and across the globe, Asians began to respond to what many had recognized long ago: the knowledge that the welfare and livelihood of each of us, regardless of national origin, depends on our ability to work together. Even our personal safety is at risk, subject to bigotry and scapegoating for economic or foreign policy problems since we "all look alike." Demonstrations and support activities took place in San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago, Toronto, New York, and a huge demonstration was held in Detroit. Mrs. Chin and ACJ were invited to address groups all over the country as new organizations formed in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago. We were able to bring our concerns about anti-Asian sentiments to the nation for the first time, whereas previously Asians were usually featured as the "national threat" or the "national super-minority." Mrs. Chin and ACJ representatives appeared on national television—all three news networks, *The Donahue Show*, NBC's *First Camera*, and local TV documentaries in Detroit—and Sacramento ACJ addressed the founding meeting of the Democratic Party's Asian Pacific American Caucus. In Japan, coverage by newspapers and TV prompted Japanese to question visiting American businessmen and government officials who were soliciting Asian business whether Asians are safe in the U.S. and whether Asians can get equal treatment here. The example of cooperative effort set by the Detroit groups was taken up nationally by the Japanese American Citizens League, the Organization of Chinese Americans, and the National Chinese Welfare Association, among others.

While many minority and civil rights groups greeted the Asian American

presence in the civil rights arena as a long overdue event, others instead questioned the right of Asians to join the civil rights coalition. ACJ representatives were at times treated to tedious and absurd arguments that Asians are not truly a minority in America, and to the equally absurd question of whether racial slurs make a racial incident. Indeed ACJ was advised by some constitutional lawyers that Asians are not protected under the federal civil rights statutes and that it would be ill advised to consider a civil rights violation. Some legal organizations wrote tortuous essays on the dangers of double jeopardy for the killers—often a specter in civil rights crimes—while other liberal legal groups were either strangely and unusually silent or eager to jump to fellow liberal Kaufman's defense. Conservatives, meanwhile, were quick to jump on the case as a law-and-order issue, but completely ignored its racial aspects. Mostly, though, the response of legal professionals was one of alarming indifference to injustice, which, they say, happens all the time. Partly, it seems, because of their total unwillingness to do anything about it.

There were the usual difficulties encountered when organizations learn to work with one another. Still, support for the efforts of the ACJ and the growing Asian American civil rights network continues. We are living in a depressed economic period that makes it all too easy and convenient to direct frustrations and anger at us. What happened to Vincent Chin was not an aberration or an isolated quirk of fate. The list of assaults and killings of Asians since the Chin case, maintained through an informal network, continues to grow.²

- A 17-year-old Vietnamese student was stabbed to death in his Davis, Calif., high school after weeks of racial harassment by a group calling itself the "White Student Union."
- A gun was pulled on a Chinese American telecommunications marketing professional working in Texas.
- A Vietnamese man was stabbed to death in Dorchester, Mass., reportedly in a racial incident.
- A Buddhist temple in Greenview, Mass., was blown up by Vietnam War veterans who said they wanted to get even for what happened to them in Vietnam, even though the temple has no Asian members.
- A Vietnamese family was forced from its farm in West Virginia after several cross-burnings.
- The words "Nips Go Home" were spray painted on the store of a Korean family in Davis, Calif.

2. The National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, an organization of legal and civil rights organizations formed in 1993 as a result of the Vincent Chin case, is committed to documenting, monitoring, and educating the public about hate violence. Its *Audit of Violence against Asian Pacific Americans* in 2001, the year of the 9/11 terrorist attack, reported 507 incidents of anti-Asian violence.

The word "Chink" appeared on the cover of *National Review* magazine, a conservative publication. Its editors say they didn't think it would be offensive.

A 19-year-old pregnant Chinese woman was decapitated by a train when she was pushed in front of it at a New York subway stop by a man whose lawyer says the murderer was "overcome by a fear of Asians."

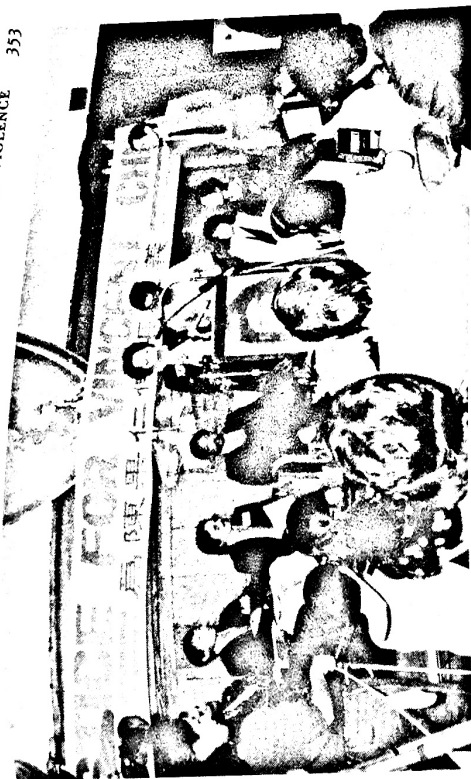
A Chinese graduate student, also in Davis, was stabbed to death and police have not ruled out a racial motivation in his killing. Every day of the week, countless Asian Americans are insulted, intimidated, threatened, cursed at and told to "go back home" by total strangers, for no reason other than because we look Asian. How many of these insults will turn into senseless racist murders?

The flurry of Asian American activism throughout the country that followed the shocking sentence by Kaufman may seem strange to some observers, but it is a natural result of two centuries of oppression and the final straw for many who've suffered a lifetime of indignities. For many of us, the killing of Vincent Chin and the sentences of probation for his murderers shattered the illusion that Asians are being treated as equals of other Americans. Instead we learned that little has changed: in 1873 a rancher could kill his Chinese servant and be fined \$20; in 1982 two men could beat a Chinese American to death and be fined \$3,000. No matter how long we stay in this country, and no matter how "accent-free" our children learn to speak English, we are still regarded as foreigners, and as "foreigners" we are suspect as an enemy from overseas.

For us, the price of personal safety in the U.S. is eternal vigilance and involvement. While we, like other Americans, cherish our heritages, we cannot afford the luxury of being silent or isolated from other groups. Our ability to demand the protection of our constitutional rights depends on our willingness to work together and maintain the fragile network that has been woven as a result of the Vincent Chin tragedy. It is to the credit of thousands of Asian Americans who sacrificed their time, money and effort to make sure we did not turn our backs on this life-threatening issue. In doing so, we have written another page in our history. But until the day groups like ACJ can disband because their work is done, we all still have much to do, to try to ensure there will be no more Vincent Chin cases.

SOURCE: *Bridge* 9, no. 2 (1984): 18-23.

A LETTER FROM LILY CHIN (1983)
Lily Chin was the moral backbone behind ACJ's national crusade for justice. A Chinese immigrant woman of great courage and fortitude, she never gave up in her quest



Lily Chin speaking at a rally for Vincent Chin, with Jesse Jackson (left of podium) and Helen Zia (right of podium) in attendance. (Courtesy of Renee Tajima-Pena)

for justice and the hope that no other mother would ever have to lose a child to hate and prejudice again. Her presence and active participation in the national campaign helped to galvanize broad-base support for the first Asian American civil rights case against hate crime. In 1983, after Judge Charles Kaufman sentenced Ebens and Nitz each to \$3,000 in fines and three years' probation for the killing of Vincent Chin, Lily Chin wrote the following letter in Chinese to the Detroit Chinese Welfare Council:

I, King Fong Yu (wife of Bing Heng Chin), grieve my son, Vincent Chin, who was brutally beaten to death by two assailants with a baseball bat. The two killers were apprehended by police and prosecuted in court. During the court proceedings, I, because I am widowed and poor, with no money in my bed, could not retain legal counsel to press the case for my deceased son. As a result, the murderers' attorney had the say. Yesterday, I read in the newspaper, the sentence was only a fine and probation; and the killers were set free. There was also no compensation for the victim's family. This is injustice to the gross extreme. My son's blood had been shed, how unjust can it be? I grieve in my heart and shed tears in blood. Yes, my son cannot be brought back; and I can only wait to die. It is just that my deceased son, Vincent Chin, Please let the Chinese American community know, so they can help me raise funds and hire legal counsel to appeal. You must put the killers in prison so

my son can rest his soul; and my grief vindicated. This old woman will be forever grateful.

I, King Fong Yu, respectfully submit this letter of appeal.

March 18, 1983

SOURCE: Courtesy of Helen Zia.

In 1984, the U.S. District Court sentenced Ebens to twenty-five years in jail for violating Chin's civil rights and acquitted Nitz. But the victory was short-lived. Ebens's attorney succeeded in appealing the decision on a technicality and getting a retrial in the conservative city of Cincinnati, Ohio, where the jury returned a verdict of not guilty on May 1, 1987. Ebens was acquitted of all charges. Although Vincent Chin's mother, Lily Chin, later won a \$1.5 million civil suit against Ebens and Nitz for the loss of Vincent's life, no money was ever paid; nor did Ebens or Nitz ever serve a day in jail for the murder of Vincent Chin. Grief-torn and bitter over her son's murder and the miscarriage of justice, Lily Chin moved back to China to live out the remainder of her days. She returned to Detroit after a long illness and died on June 9, 2002, at the age of eighty-two.

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A Journey of Bitterness (1999)

Lily Wang

In 1989, Lily Wang (pseudonym) was one of 50,000 Chinese that year to be smuggled into the United States from the Fuzhou area in southeast China. In the next decade, approximately 150,000 others would follow her, almost all seeking better economic opportunities in New York City. Lacking a legitimate way to immigrate to the United States as sponsored relatives or skilled and technical workers, many Fuzhouese fell prey to a human smuggling syndicate that profited handsomely in arranging for their clandestine passage into the United States. More often than not, the journey proved difficult and dangerous, forcing immigrants to risk their lives, endure physical discomforts and abuse, and incur enormous debts before ever reaching their destination. Then began the difficult task of toiling for years as undocumented workers in the underground economy—at construction sites, restaurants, garment shops, and factories—in order to pay off their smuggling fees, estimated to be \$30,000 in the early 1990s.

The following story by Lily Wang came out of a survey of three hundred Chinese illegals in New York City conducted by criminologist Ko-lin Chin for his book *Smuggled Chinese: Clandestine Immigration to the United States*. The majority of his subjects were men, and although many of them had harrowing stories to tell about their hazardous journey and harsh lives in America, in some ways, as shown by Wang's story, it was worse for the women.

I left China mainly for non-financial reasons. When I was in China, I met an overseas man in a barbershop where I was working, and we developed a very close relationship. Later, he went back to America. When he was about to leave, he promised he would return in a year to marry me and bring me to America. However, I did not hear from him again. I believed he looked down on me. Later, through a flashy guy who came frequently [human smuggler] from Tingjiang. I made contact with a snakehead [human smuggler] from Tingjiang. I heard say that he was really cool and very good at what he was doing.