

7 “Support All Oppressed Peoples”

The Birth of the Asian American Political Alliance

Here I am at Berkeley, sitting in the campus dining commons, when a woman approaches me and asks, out of the clear blue sky, if I’m politically inclined. Emma Gee and her husband, Yuji Ichioka, were working with the Peace and Freedom Party on the forthcoming elections and wanted to gather together politically conscious Orientals for a meeting at their place.¹ The first thing I thought was, Yuji Ichioka, that’s Japanese; Emma Gee, Chinese. It may sound surprising that the existence of an interethnic couple was unusual in the sixties, but it was. So I went to their apartment to see what’s happening. Yuji was presiding over the meeting and Emma’s a gracious host.² There were a half dozen other Asian Americans at that meeting, mostly students from UC Berkeley. This small group went on to form the Asian American Political Alliance, one of the most important Asian American political groups to come out of the sixties.

Let me enumerate AAPA’s contributions. First, the very term “Asian American” was coined in AAPA. Second, they were explicitly political—antiwar, pro-Black Panther Party, and one of the earliest groups of the Asian American Movement. Third, its membership was student and community and that was unusual. Fourth, AAPA represented the Asians during the Third World strike and helped form the Asian American Studies program at UC Berkeley. Now I have a bone to pick. In all the books on Asian American history and the AAM, I have found that AAPA

has been neglected, overlooked, or distorted.³

Prior to the strike in winter '69, there probably weren't more than two dozen of us in AAPA. We were racially mixed—about 40 percent Chinese American, 40 percent Japanese American, and 20 percent Filipino American. Most were students, including Harvey Dong, Vicci Wong, and Lillian Fabros. Lillian was a firebrand in the struggle for farmworkers' rights and important in linking up with Latinos because of their grape boycott with the University of California. Community people like Emma Gee and Bob Rita joined as well. Bob Rita was Filipino Chinese from Hawaii and had been among the first to organize Filipino farmworkers along with Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz. I met Bob during my first year at Berkeley when he was manning a table for the farmworkers and we struck up a conversation. I got Bob into the meetings. Then Bob brought in Nicky Arai, a movement photographer, and Andy Higashi, a working-class kid from San Pedro who worked as a printer. There were hardly any Koreans in AAPA because the Korean population in Berkeley and in the United States was very small. It wasn't until the strike that Korean Americans appeared, including graduate students Elaine Kim and Jerry Suhr. Both became faculty members of Berkeley's Asian American Studies program.⁴

Before AAPA, I had never interacted on a militant basis with all Asians. In fact, my view was that the Asian Americans were politically backward. At Merritt College, I had checked out an Oriental fraternity, but all they wanted to do was party. I just shook my head and walked away. So I was astounded at that AAPA meeting to see so many political Asians. Don't forget, up to this time, there was no such thing as an AAM and only a few

known Asian American radicals, and just about all of them had worked in the Black movement. Yuri Kochiyama was in New York, working with Malcolm X, Robert F. Williams, the Republic of New Africa, and the Asian Americans for Action, when it formed. Shoshana Arai was in Chicago working with SNCC. Grace Lee Boggs was in Detroit working in the Black movement. We were what Miriam Ching Louie called the “bumblebees.”⁵ Then there were a half dozen Japanese Americans in the Communist Party, but I sure as hell was not going to interact with that group.⁶ Was I looking for Asian American camaraderie? I didn’t have time to think about it. But I did feel comfortable with AAPA because we were all Asians and political like I couldn’t believe.

The initial struggle in AAPA centered on the issue of identity. It was almost *déjà vu* to me since I had already been through it with African Americans and could see the same issues coming up: Where are we from? What are we doing here? Where are we going? Who are we in relationship to the dominant White culture? In the past I didn’t think the identity issue was that important, but I realize that unless you have your identity, you can’t go to the political level. So I patiently sat through it to see how that would resolve itself. The discussion went real fast primarily because the group was already at a higher political level than most Orientals at the time. Once the identity issue was settled, then boom!—the group started coalescing behind AAPA’s program and getting involved in activities affecting our own communities and connecting with African American issues, like the Free Huey Campaign. If you were more advanced, you also talked about class struggle. But the issue of identity had to be dealt with. Out

of this, the term “Asian American” came into being. Yuji Ichioka chaired the meetings where the group struggled with this concept and consensually adopted the term “Asian American”—Asian for our cultural heritage, American because of our nationality or citizenship.⁷ It’s similar to what African Americans went through as they changed from Negro to Black and rejected the label foisted on them by White dominant culture. Up to that point, we had been called Orientals. Oriental was a rug that everyone steps on, so we ain’t no Orientals. We were Asian American. That was so revolutionary I shudder to think of how quickly that process of the consciousness-raising brought the group to another level.

So we came up with the name Asian American Political Alliance. We also created a logo for AAPA. The Black Panthers have their black panther logo. What are we going to have? Crossed chopsticks? That actually came up. Yuji impressed everybody with his scholarly and sage, but cynical, advice. I believe it was Yuji who came up with our logo, the Chinese character for east. In kanji [the Chinese-influenced Japanese language system], it’s also east or *higashi*. Now what do we stand for? James Brown said, “Say it loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud.” What are we supposed to say, “I’m Yellow and I’m mellow.” Hell no! The Black Panthers’ had a political program. We had to have a political program. One of the first things was our position on the Vietnam War. That was easy. Everybody was against the war. Then, where do we stand on the BPP? Had I gotten up there at the beginning of the meeting and said, “I’m Richard Aoki. Everybody here knows me. I’ve been coming to the meetings like everybody else. I’m a member here. I’m also a Black Panther, branch captain, occasionally I could be the minister of education.” It wouldn’t have washed. So I just kept my mouth shut about my

membership and my rank in the BPP. I may have revealed it to a few, but I wasn't about to jump overboard saying this. However, support for the BPP was unanimous. Oh, happy day.

From early on, we figured out which other Asian clubs were on campus. There was the Nisei Student Club for the Japanese Americans, the Chinese Students Club for the American-born Chinese, and the Chinese Student Association for the foreign-born Chinese.⁸ But these were essentially social clubs and were not political in nature, nor were they intended to be. We started raiding the other groups, meaning we started attending their meetings, talking to their people, and inviting them to our meetings. Lo and behold, we started attracting not only their rank-and-file members, but also their leaders. Wai-Kit Quon comes in from the Tri-Con and the foreign students group—this is where my connections helped. Bing Wing Thom, another graduate student, also came in. Then the presidents and past presidents of the Nisei Student Club, the Chinese Students Club, and the Chinese Student Association all started attending our meetings. I hadn't seen this many Asians get together, talk politics, and agree on a program that I could live with and that had Huey's blessing because I was making sure Huey was aware of the work I was doing. I said to him, "Man, you're not going to believe this. I'm running into a bunch of Orientals who are political!"

AAPA's Political Program and Activities

After we handed out our political program, we sponsored an event on July 28, 1968, at UC Berkeley. Why we did it during summertime, I don't know. This also created a minor problem because who would give the presentation for AAPA? We had

hammered out our four-point program. We got Dwinelle, one of the biggest halls on the campus. We invited all these other people to join us to celebrate the emergence of a new political organization called the Asian American Political Alliance. So we had this meeting. Everybody in the room looked at Yuji, make the speech, Yuji; Yuji declined. Emma, make the speech; Emma declined. Now comes a minor crisis. We got the organization. We got the program. Who's going to step forward and be the official spokesperson for this event coming up? Somebody said Richard. I said, "Say what?" I was a little apprehensive for two reasons. First, I was reluctant to step up and say I'm the spokesperson because we've seen too many spokespersons killed. Second, I'm more in the extreme Left. Richard already in trouble with the Tri-Con thing. I don't need this. All I wanted to do was to complete my studies at Berkeley and keep the party going, but AAPA got in my face and overran me.⁹

In light of the fact that nobody else was willing to do it, I said, "If you want me to do it, I'll do it. But I want to put it to a vote of confidence. If there's a sizable opposition, somebody else can do it." I mean, what does it take to go over a four-point program? So that's how I was elected to be AAPA's spokesperson. Now I've always been good at representing organizations I belong to because I know the program and stick to it. So even though I was in the left wing of AAPA, I wasn't about to give my personal line; I represented the group.¹⁰

At AAPA's public debut, I presented its four-point political program. Little did we know that we were making history. Here's the gist of my speech:

Number one, we Asian Americans believe that American society has been and

still is fundamentally a racist society and that historically we have accommodated ourselves to this society in order to survive. (In other words, we have been and still are victims of white racism.) Point number two, we Asian Americans believe that heretofore we have been relating to white standards of acceptability and affirm the right of self-determination.... We're tired of hearing the racist chant, "If you are white, you're all right." This has wreaked havoc upon our cultural identity. We see, for example, in the Japanese American community, the effort to surgically change the shape of the eyes. This is similar to the hair straighter and bleaching cream syndrome in the African American community. Prospective members have been saying, "What are the white people going to say about our group and the Oriental community?" This revealed how brainwashed some people are.

Point number three, we Asian Americans support all non-White liberation movements and believe that all minorities in order to be truly liberated must have complete control over the political, economic, and educational institutions within their respective communities. (Now I was being very neutral in my presentation in a sense I'm not banging it up and down but just explaining the program.) We unconditionally support the struggles of the Afro-American peoples, the Chicanos and the American Indians in their efforts to obtain freedom, justice and equality. Point number four, we Asian Americans oppose the imperialist policies being pursued by the American government. (I mentioned in particular "being unconditionally against the war in Vietnam period.") In conclusion I would like to add that the Asian American Political Alliance is ... an action-oriented group and we will not just restrict our activities to merely ethnic issues, but to all issues that are of fundamental importance pertaining to the building of a new and better world.¹¹

I saw this as our coming out, the introduction of AAPA and our new program. So though AAPA had already done a number of activities, like the Free Huey rallies and the McCarren Act protests, to me, July 28 marked the official debut of AAPA into the arena of realpolitik.

My speech introduced AAPA's program, called "AAPA Perspectives." It begins: "We Asian Americans believe that we must develop an American Society which is just, humane, equal and gives the people the right to control their own lives before we

can begin to end the oppression and inequality that exists in this nation.”¹² The other four points were the ones I mentioned in my July 28 speech: America is a racist society that oppresses Asian Americans; we denounce racism and affirm the right to self-determination; we supported all oppressed peoples in their struggles for liberation; and we oppose U.S. imperialist policies. I was a little stunned by the advanced nature of AAPA’s politics. It dawns on me that Tri-Con was responsible in a way for the AAPA political program primarily due to the influence of Wai-Kit Quon. In keeping with the BPP’s Ten-Point Program, we included the program in every issue of AAPA’s newspaper.¹³ Unlike academic publications, there’s no listing of the editorial board or staff in AAPA’s newspaper. It was about the collective and very democratically run.

About this time, the term “Asia, Africa, and Latin America” began to transmute itself into the phrase “Third World.” AAPA was quick in picking up that concept not only in the international arena but also around domestic Third World issues. One issue of AAPA’s newspaper had Bobby Seale on the front cover and an article on Robert F. Williams by Mary [Yuri] Kochiyama.¹⁴ On the cover of another issue was the headline “Third World Power” and another had the article “Third World Roots: Bandung,” so that people could understand the origins of Third World consciousness.¹⁵ Number one to me, of course, were the rallies for Huey Newton and the BPP. From early on, AAPA attended the Free Huey rallies. There’s that famous picture of two Asians holding the sign, “Yellow Peril Supports Black Power”; they’re both AAPA people.¹⁶ That photo is one of the best examples of solidarity between ethnic groups that you could think of and it

contained a powerful message. It was in your face.

Then during the Huey Newton trial, there was an Oakland City Council meeting and AAPA decided to put in an appearance to demand justice for Huey. In fact, there were two Orientals on the city council at the time—one Chinese American, one Japanese American. We said, “Wow, two of our people are on the city council. Let’s go down and see what we can do.” When we got down there to do the protest, all we saw was a solid row of cops. We looked at the city council members up on their little platform, along with the mayor and the police chief, and we demanded speaking time. I believe we were denied. So we caucused briefly to figure out what to do. My position was confrontation. But it was a minority position in our caucus. One look was enough to convince the others in the delegation that it was not going to be a win-win situation. We’re going to get hurt. We’re going off to jail. We’re going to be joining Huey. At the time I didn’t feel like retreating, but I’m a team player and if the rest of the team says, “Let’s pick up our marbles and go back to Berkeley,” I went along. In a way, this reflected the political consciousness of the group—that there are times when you bust them up and there are times when it’s better to retreat, even though you’ve got the moral high ground. You could appeal to the two Orientals to listen, but our group got a lesson in the difference between Orientals and Asian Americans.¹⁷

Though we agreed on our positions, there were also internal political divisions within AAPA. On one extreme, there was the left wing that was Maoist, Black Panther, Black liberation struggle. On the other end were the moderates—the pacifists, liberals, social democrats, reformists. In the middle was a centrist

grouping. They were the largest grouping and left leaning, but as in a lot of organizations, the centrists go whichever way the argument sounded the best. I place myself in the left wing. I've always been clear about where I stand, though I wouldn't jab my politics down anybody's throat. My recruitment method was to logically lay out my position, to struggle with the question. If it's done correctly, then the person will have a heightened sense of awareness and political consciousness.

AAPA didn't have formal political education classes. But we had self-defense classes, which were divided into two categories: martial arts and small arms. I was amazed to discover the hidden talents of our AAPA membership. I've never seen so many black belts in my life. Bob Rita got up and showed us Hawai'ian Kembo. Wow! Bryant Fong was the man with the Tai Chi. Whoa! I think Harvey Dong was studying White Crane at that time. After those internal training sessions, I had no doubts that Asians could hold their own.¹⁸ About the small arms, I'm back at the range again. This time instead of having Black Panthers, I had AAPA people. The Red Guards didn't make any bones about their self-defense activities. But in AAPA, we tried to keep it discreet being UC Berkeley students. I said to myself, I've got to be careful. In the training, I stuck to technique. I found there was no need to teach any philosophy of armed struggle because they wouldn't have gone to the small arms classes if they didn't already believe in it. It went like, "I'm going up to the country next weekend. Anybody that wants to come has to go through this little safety thing first." I was religious about safety. "Okay, gang, at ten o'clock, we'll meet over at Sproul Plaza. Who's got a car?" We would spend the whole day doing what we needed to do. The important thing was gaining confidence. It was a political tool to

me too because this would sift out those who were serious from those who weren't. While AAPA didn't profess any pacifist orientation, I was sensitive that there were differences. If you look at attitudes, I would say 90 percent said armed struggle is the way to go.¹⁹ But when you look at those who would train and acquire equipment, the numbers dropped. But still, a significant number of the group went along with the training. I was a little surprised when the women started going, but after my experiences in the BPP, I wasn't about to question anything. Now we didn't organize any formal security within AAPA. It was more like, since I had the most experience and was the only veteran in the group, if we thought there might be trouble, I would usually volunteer to be point person.

Japanese American Struggles

With its large Japanese American membership, AAPA was concerned with issues affecting this community. In 1968, Spiro Agnew, the vice presidential running mate to Richard Nixon, uttered that infamous "fat Jap" remark to a reporter.²⁰ AAPA was incensed over it and we decided to bust up a "Speak to Nixon-Agnew" meeting being held in town. The deal is that Senator William Knowland, whose family published the *Oakland Tribune*, hosted the Republican event in Berkeley of all places. Who would be the person to represent AAPA and take the lead in such a bold move? Hands don't go up and I'm saying, "Well, if I do this, I could go to jail." But I volunteer. We get inside. I raise my hand and read from AAPA's press release into the whirling tape recorder, presumably for Nixon and Agnew to hear. I stated, in part, "The Asian American Political Alliance vigorously protests

the racist epithet, 'fat Jap,' recently uttered by Agnew. We must reluctantly concur with the Kerner Commission's finding that 'white racism' is the fundamental cause of civil disorders, and that 'white racism' seems to have infected a person running for the second highest political office of this country." I politely ended with, "If the Republican Party is victorious in November, we would humbly suggest to Nixon that he would refrain from sending Agnew on goodwill missions to the rest of the world with the exception of either Rhodesia or the Union of South Africa."²¹

What happens next is a bunch of AAPA people bust up the gathering. Internal security jumps up and then AAPA jumps up and all of sudden, they realize they've got something on their hands. The next day, the *Hokubei Mainichi* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* jump up: "Asian American Political Alliance Walks Out of Nixon-Agnew Meeting in Berkeley."²² Ray Okamura of the JACL also spoke at that meeting. I was stunned that Ray wrote me a note afterward because that wasn't his style. If Ray had been at the AAPA meeting prior to the speak-out, he might have said, "Well, that's being a little too radical to disrupt a meeting like that." But after the meeting, he sent me a note: "That was a great turn-out by the AAPA last night. The dramatic walk-out was effective and you gave an excellent statement."²³

Though we differed with the JACL politically on many issues, we did work with them to repeal the McCarran Act. This was primarily because of Ray Okamura, who headed JACL's struggle in that area. Ray's a real nice guy and he and I got along personally. So I avoided any harsh criticism of the JACL when working with Ray because I thought it was more important that we got along and could work on the McCarren Act campaign.

AAPA's newspaper featured Yuji Ichioka's article on the McCarran Act, or Title II of the 1950 Internal Security Act: "The most crucial feature ... [is] its recommendation for the usage of 'detention centers,' in the case of a national emergency, presumably when guerrilla violence has reached uncontrollable proportions." If that wasn't bad enough, the government wouldn't even have to show evidence of any subversive activity. This blatant violation of due process echoed what happened to the Japanese Americans during World War II. But this time, the government was targeting militant activists. So AAPA got involved, along with other Japanese Americans on both coasts, and we won. The McCarran Act was repealed.²⁴

Another important issue was the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which was an effort on the part of Japan and the United States to shore up their interests in the Far East during the Vietnam War by signing a military agreement.²⁵

Then there was "Japan Week" in San Francisco that we protested. It was billed as a festive week of flower arranging, dancing, and martial arts. But we knew that business interests and conservative politicians backed the week, that the Japanese destroyer *Amatsukaze* was to arrive in the San Francisco Bay, and that there would be a banquet to honor Spiro Agnew. So AAPA, with other groups, protested with slogans like "Death to the Security Pact" and "End the Asian War."²⁶ One of those events was quite lively because we tangled, literally, with another group that was for the signing of the mutual military pact. What happened is that there was a meeting of diplomats from the United States and Japan to discuss the renewal of the treaty. So we picketed the front of the posh hotel where they were meeting.

AAPA was still small at the time; maybe only twelve to fifteen people were out there, but we were a determined bunch. Out of the clear blue sky, a group that supported the treaty showed up across the street from us. What was even more surprising was the police allowed our group and their group to converge at one point. It looked like we were being set up. However, in the minor melee that took place, we got the better of the other group and they retreated. I was amazed to see the talent unveil itself as we were pushing and shoving. That was a first time that AAPA saw some street fighting, which was minor, but it demonstrated that AAPA would follow through on their commitment to the cause.

AAPA had a clear international focus. We were against Japanese imperialism. We supported the national liberation front struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, particularly Vietnam. These ideas were incorporated directly into the AAPA program: "We Asian Americans support all oppressed people and their struggles for Liberation" and "We Asian Americans oppose the imperialist policies being pursued by the American Government."²⁷ In AAPA's newspaper, we stated our support for the NLF [South Vietnamese National Liberation Front].²⁸ When there were antiwar demonstrations, AAPA participated. We started receiving communiqués from other organizations who looked to AAPA as the organization that represented the militant segment of the emerging AAM. Having official spokespersons allowed us to link up with the other radical progressive groups and I became bombarded with going out speaking for the group. One example is the Students for a Democratic Society regional conference in the Bay Area. The SDS conference was big time and AAPA was invited to speak. This happened a little before

Japan Week, so I blasted U.S. and Japanese imperialism, especially their aggression in Vietnam, their neo-colonial expansion into Asia and Africa, and the Mutual Security Pact. I ended with a glimmer of hope, namely, that Asian American activists were organizing protests and that SDS and AAPA could work together.²⁹

Bay Area Asian American Radicalism: AAPA and the Red Guards

Unbeknownst to us, a journalist by the name of Tom Wolfe wrote a sensationalist article for *Esquire* magazine. "The New Yellow Peril" mentioned both AAPA and the Red Guards as being dangerous organizations. I don't regularly read *Esquire*, but someone said, "Richard, you got to read this." On one hand, I felt good that AAPA and the Red Guard made national news. On the other hand, what he had written about us, it might have been better if we hadn't. The Red Guards in Chinatown accused AAPA of running gun-training sessions. When I read that article, I almost had a heart attack. I locked all the doors, closed all the windows, took my guns out, and said, "They're coming for me."³⁰

So there's a fraternal relationship between AAPA and the Red Guards all the way through. If they got into a fight, we'd back them up and when we got into a fight, they'd back us up. There were differences between AAPA and the Red Guard, but there was no conflict. Red Guard was more Maoist than the average AAPA person, but the left wing of AAPA was also Maoist. There were also class differences. The Berkeley people in AAPA were more middle class and the Red Guard had semi-lumpen elements.

There's always personality conflicts that come up, but I try to avoid them because they don't count for anything in the long run. The important thing was the political similarities of the two groups. I had even thought of a merger for the groups, but it would have required a lot of work. Plus, I feared that with a merger, the two groups might be destroyed by internal conflict. I've seen that happen. It was better to have AAPA do its thing at Berkeley and the Red Guards do its thing in San Francisco. AAPA was close to the Oakland Panthers and the Red Guard to the San Francisco Panthers.

Women in the Struggle

You asked about the role of women in AAPA. AAPA underscored the fact that "women hold up half the world." The membership was maybe fifty-fifty, or maybe two to one in favor of males. This was significant because at that time, most of the groups I belonged to politically, including the BPP, had few females as members and women leaders were virtually nonexistent. Not only that but AAPA's newspaper had an article on women's liberation.³¹ So AAPA was one of the first ethnic groups and radical groups to bring up this subject.

The thing I recall the most was that the AAPA female was bolder and more assertive than the average Asian American female. The political stances they adopted they held on to and they worked hard to see that the mission was completed. It's hard for me to pinpoint female leadership in AAPA, but when people talked about AAPA they would talk about different females in the group as being committed when it came down to the nuts and the bolts and assuming responsibilities. At that point in AAPA it

wasn't that important but when the strike came, that's when it became important and these strong females begin to develop. There are a few of women that stand out. Vicci Wong was noted for her political clarity and sharpness. Lillian Fabros was mild mannered, but you could sense there was strength in her and her commitment to the struggle of farmworkers. Emma Gee has been overlooked, but I give her a lot of credit for the initial formations of AAPA, because of her being such a gracious hostess to the group at our meetings, which were held at her and Yuji's apartment.³²

First Asian American Studies Class: Asian Studies 100X

The Asian American Political Alliance, as part of its protracted program, instituted the first Asian American Studies class at UC Berkeley. This idea came up primarily because of the controversy behind the 139X class taught by Eldridge Cleaver. The logic was that African Americans wanted their classes. The Latinos through the Mexican American Student Confederation wanted their classes. Why not have an introductory class on Asian Americans? Through our initial explorations, we were told that if we raise some money from the community, the university might donate in kind. So I thought that it was worth pursuing. Around spring or summer of 1968, Yuji Ichioka and I, representing AAPA, and James Hirabayashi, an anthropology professor at San Francisco State University, who is also the brother of Gordon Hirabayashi, drove down to San José to attend the JACL regional conference and make a presentation to the group and request some funding.³³

As I recall we received a nominal amount.³⁴ I didn't think anything big would come out of a little class, but AAPA was excited by it. We were using a mechanism where students would initiate courses, though a professor would be in charge. We had a few sympathetic professors who were willing to risk their reputations to support our request. The key was the hiring of the teaching assistants. That was the hook: the teaching assistants would have the freedom to develop the content and delivery.³⁵

Professor Paul Takagi sponsored the course and gave the first orientation. But after that a series of guest speakers came in. They could only teach one class each because after the Eldridge Cleaver controversy, UC Berkeley set a new policy limiting speakers to a single appearance. The syllabus shows that guest lecturers included UC Berkeley professors like Frederic Wakeman speaking on China and George De Vos on the Nisei personality. We also invited community people to speak, like Yori Wada on the Japanese American community, Karl Yoneda on the Issei labor movement, and George Woo on radicalism. There was also a panel on the concentration camps. But the real teaching took place in the sections run by the four teaching assistants: Alan Fong, Wai-Kit Quon, Ling-chi Wang, and Richard Aoki. We all agreed on that. The AAPA newspaper stated, "The course is structured in such a way that the discussion section will be the pivotal point of the course, aiding both the coordination of the lecture materials and the gathering of other materials for further research and interpretation."³⁶

The Third World strike came along that quarter. We weren't going to cross the picket line, so we moved our classes off campus. Besides, classes that were held on campus were getting

disrupted by strikers. We did a last-minute scurrying around to find places to meet. Barrington Hall, a cooperative student center, is where we conducted most of the lectures because they had a conference room that was big enough to hold the whole class. It was easier to find places for the smaller sections because we could use apartments and we did.

In my sections, I was going to talk about immigration, settlement patterns of Japanese Americans, and so forth. But now we're in the middle of the strike. The timing was good and bad. Bad in that I don't think any of us did much teaching. We were all focused on the strike. We'll cancel class today because from twelve to one we're going to close down Sather Gate. But it was also good in that we had this captive audience who were generally interested. Also, they knew who the significant Asian figures were—the TAs because the TAs were all AAPA people. That's how we got picked to be TAs. The TAs were also in the leadership of the strike. The only places students could go to for reliable information on the strike was to come to class.

You asked how the students, even those who would take an experimental course, responded to the strike and to classes being canceled. There were those drawn to AAPA because of the strike. Remember at the beginning of the strike, there weren't more than two dozen AAPA members. But AAPA membership increased exponentially when the strike came because if you're Asian and sympathetic to the strike, this was the organization to join. We had a program, a track record of activity, a publication, regular meetings, and there are members you could talk with. Then, there was a group for whom this was all new. At a wedding I recently attended I ran into a guy who had no connections with AAPA, but

signed up for the course to take a class with his friend, who was in AAPA. It turns out that this guy's and his buddy's fathers were ex-442nd [the racially segregated Japanese American army combat team during World War II, representing, to Aoki, more conservative politics]. So he signs up for the course fresh from Southern California, bright eyed and bushy tailed. He said he was stunned when he met me. He said, "You blew my mind and then somebody whispered in the class, he's a Black Panther too." The guy said, "Oh my," but he hung in with the program. The good news is that we hadn't seen each other in thirty-odd years since he was in that class and then he helped to build Asian American Studies at UC Berkeley. But when I ran into him at this wedding, I found out that he's quite active in the Los Angeles section of Not In Our Name [an organization opposing the war in Iraq]. Then too there were those that came in and said, "What the hell is this all about." They didn't stay too long. As far as I was concerned, if you don't like it, you can leave.

But I would say that most became politically aware and involved through that class, if they weren't already involved in AAPA. And AAPA went on to provide major leadership for the TWLF strike that developed that quarter.

FOUNDING THE ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICAL ALLIANCE

On AAPA and Aoki's Leadership

Richard Aoki's statement that AAPA was "one of the most important Asian American political groups to come out of the

sixties,” yet almost entirely ignored by history, was indeed correct. The very introduction of the term “Asian American,” credited to Berkeley’s AAPA, transformed the social consciousness of a racialized people and of American society at large. Asian Americans moved from seeing themselves as politically passive Orientals—the opposite of and inferior to Occidentals—to gaining racial pride and the power to contest racism. AAPA was one of the first organizations to promote pan-Asian unity in its program and membership. This signified nothing short of a new racial identity for groups whose previous self-definitions were in “ethnic disidentification” from one another. Yen Le Espiritu referred to disidentification as “the act of distancing one’s group from another group so as not to be mistaken and suffer the blame for the presumed misdeed of that group.”³⁷ Relations within the global political economy often shaped the images of Otherness. During World War II, for example, “I’m Chinese,” “I am Korean,” and “I am Filipino” buttons were worn to create distance from the fierce anti-Japanese hostility and to protest Japan’s occupation of their homelands. But as Cold War imperatives marked Chinese Americans as suspect and the demilitarized and emasculated Japan became a U.S. ally, interethnic relations shifted once again. Espiritu correctly contends that social and demographic changes enabled pan-Asian formation to occur in the 1960s, but not earlier. Third- and fourth-generation Chinese, Japanese, and Pilipino Americans shared a common youth culture and language and came together on college campuses.³⁸ Beyond demographics, war, colonialism, and social movements shaped the development of Asian American pan-ethnicity. Notably, the Asian American Movement emerged in the shadow of Bandung. The Non-Aligned Movement connected

Asia, Africa, and Latin America in a common struggle against colonialism and racism. This global movement helps explain why the pan-Asianism that developed in the Asian American Movement was intricately linked to Third Worldism.³⁹ Thus, AAPA's coining of the term "Asian American" helped launch a new social movement, the Asian American Movement (AAM), and a new identity based on political resistance, racial pride, and alliance building across ethnic (pan-Asian unity) and racial borders (Third World solidarity).

Berkeley's AAPA helped launch the AAM, not only through its pan-Asian formation, but also by creating AAPA groups at numerous college campuses throughout the nation. In an unprecedented gathering, the Asian Experience/Yellow Identity symposium, held at UC Berkeley on January 11-12, 1969, brought together Asian American student organizations from more than a dozen college campuses throughout California and beyond. The participants decided spontaneously to establish themselves as AAPA chapters. At San Francisco State College, AAPA played an instrumental role in establishing the first School of Ethnic Studies in the nation. At Yale University, AAPA helped create the first journal in Asian American Studies, *Amerasia Journal*. And at Columbia University, AAPA helped found the first national Asian American revolutionary organization, I Wor Kuen. Together, this loosely based alliance of AAPA groups, inspired by Berkeley's AAPA, helped spark the emergence of the nationwide AAM.⁴⁰

Aoki played a significant role in the development of Berkeley's AAPA. An original member, he served as the second chair of AAPA during the TWLF strike as well as AAPA's

treasurer and a regular spokesperson for the organization.⁴¹ He further influenced AAPA's ideological development through his socialist politics and political associations with Black radicalism. Aoki did not need to announce his BPP membership—and for the most part, didn't—to be seen as a model of militant manhood. With his army jacket, his sunglasses worn even at night, his cigarette in hand or dangling from his mouth, his Black oratorical style, and the militancy of his words, he was an image of “bad ass” masculinity.⁴² At a time when, popularized as model minority success stories, Asian American men were represented as nerdy, academically minded, obedient sons, many Asian American youth, both men and women, gained racial pride and empowerment through Aoki's example.⁴³ Bryant Fong recalled his first encounter with Aoki at an AAPA event at UC Berkeley in 1968. After experiencing a boyhood in South Berkeley filled with racial teasing and physical fights with both Black and White kids, Fong was shocked when a complete stranger, a Black teen, defended him against the racial taunts of White peers. This Black youth also taught Fong to play football and, in what was previously unprecedented, regularly picked a Chinese American (Fong) as quarterback on his high school intramural team. To Fong, the Black freedom struggles and Third World unity encircling him in the mid-1960s dramatically transformed Afro-Asian relations. So when Fong heard Aoki speaking in his Black street style about Japanese American incarceration, a topic he knew nothing about, Fong was surprised and impressed. Aoki's boldness and militancy inspired a racial pride in Fong, not unlike Malcolm X's impact on Black Americans. Fong went on to become the third and final chair of AAPA.⁴⁴

Aoki's unapologetic audacity and radical critique were also seen in his writings. Identified as R.A., Aoki wrote an article for AAPA's newspaper titled "Running Dogs Meet Their Master." Using Marxist analysis and provocative language, Aoki contended that the real purpose of Japan Week in San Francisco was "to further cement the relations between U.S. imperialism and Japanese neo-colonialism." He charged the Japanese government with being "a running dog of the U.S. aggression in Vietnam," arguing that Japan "profits from the war in exchange for its political support."⁴⁵ Aoki further served AAPA as a steady organizer and as an example of courageous and principled opposition to oppression.

Aoki's age (a decade older than most AAPA members), political experience, radical ideology, and links with Black militancy all contributed to his being sought after for AAPA leadership. But Aoki differed from most AAPA members in one significant way, one that partially limited his leadership. AAPA as an organization consistently stressed the participatory democracy and collective leadership promoted by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the New Left, and many in the AAM. An early AAPA internal document maintained that "leadership must be redefined and democracy must be used as often as possible. Leadership, as we understand it, is *effective action*; it is *not* making good speeches, rallying people, or having charisma per se. It is leadership when those qualities lead to effective action."⁴⁶ In the first issue of its newspaper, AAPA opposed "rigid, traditional levels of structure in which a few make the decisions, present them to the body, and allow it to vote yes or no."⁴⁷ Instead, "non-structure is highly emphasized," with

members organized into six-person "US Groups," each to work on a distinct project.⁴⁸ AAPA emphasized "task work groups," in this case focusing on "Chinatown, Black Liberation, China Policy, McCarran Act, and Peace and Freedom."⁴⁹ A year after AAPA's demise, its third chair reflected on the group's structure. AAPA began, noted Bryant Fong, without any formal structure because such a structure would have felt too confining and would have impeded building trust among its members. Later, through necessity, representatives were elected by the entire body and given decision-making powers, but not without first consulting everyone. Votes on matters would take place in mass meetings.⁵⁰ AAPA was following the advice of Ella Baker, renowned for her sharp criticism of the charismatic leader model. Baker asserted that such hero worship reinforced the dominant society's emphasis on individualism and narcissism (usually personified by the male body) and, most significantly, diminished ordinary people's belief in their own power to effect change. Baker insisted, "Strong people don't need strong leaders."⁵¹

By contrast, Aoki articulated a top-down leadership structure for AAPA, at least during the TWLF strike. In a 1970 graduate student paper, he wrote, "During the TWLF strike at UCB the structure was tightened overnight to meet the crisis, and the chairman ran AAPA like a military organization complete with a ranked chain of command. In fact, he accepted the chairmanship on the condition that he be given unlimited authority for the duration of the strike."⁵² Here we see Aoki's belief in leadership models that promote well-defined roles, official titles, and a clearly demarcated chain of command. These were his leadership models in the U.S. Army, the Socialist Workers Party, and the

Black Panther Party. To him, official and even hierarchical roles, if not abused, resulted in increased efficiency. He was, in fact, rather impatient with what he viewed as AAPA's ultrademocratic style, including time-consuming meetings and the consensus process. He regularly left AAPA meetings after a couple of hours, rather than stay until the conclusion of process-oriented, four-hour meetings.⁵³ Still, Aoki firmly supported democratic structures and processes. When speaking as an AAPA spokesperson, he represented AAPA's position, even when his own views differed. He believed in discussion and the participation of many in the creation of change. So his emphasis on top-down leadership was primarily in service to establishing clearly delineated roles and responsibilities and in instances when quick decision making was needed. Rather than viewing collective and hierarchical leadership in oppositional ways, community organizers discuss the need to match organizational structure to goals, constituencies, and contexts.⁵⁴ Aoki functioned well as AAPA's chair during the TWLF strike owing to his organizational abilities and respect for the collective leadership of AAPA and the TWLF.

On Women's Liberation

Aoki's views on women in the movement warrant some discussion. In the late 1960s, the AAM and the overall U.S. Third World movement focused primarily on racial, class, and national oppression. There was no statement opposing sexism in the BPP's Ten-Point Platform and Program, nor in the programs of most of the Third World Left groups patterned after the BPP, with the notable exceptions of I Wor Kuen and the Young Lords Party.⁵⁵ AAPA was no exception.⁵⁶ At the same time, activist struggles

created a heightened consciousness that fostered a critical examination of other forms of oppression, and U.S. Third World women developed ideas of double and triple oppression. These efforts expressed themselves in anthologies like *Black Women* edited by Toni Cade (1970) and matured into sophisticated analyses like the “Combahee River Collective Statement” (1977). AAPA, like the Panthers, offered unprecedented opportunities for women to see themselves as capable and effective leaders, to engage in social justice organizing, and to develop a racialized, gendered consciousness.⁵⁷

By summer 1969, AAPA’s newspaper included a lengthy article, “Notes on Women’s Liberation,” which together with drawings of a Vietnamese woman holding an assault rifle juxtaposed to a “Miss Chinatown USA” beauty pageant queen, covered two full pages of the eight-page newspaper.⁵⁸ Through these images, AAPA promoted a different role for women, one that opposed the traditional focus on appearance and instead embodied the most militant expressions of resistance. The author revealed contradictions in the popular views promoting linear progress in gender equality: “More women are going to colleges and graduate schools.... [But] the percentage of women in college in proportion to men is about 10 percent lower than in the 1920s.... [S]he now has the freedom to work. She can get a clerical job with poverty-level pay or a skilled job with 60 percent of man’s pay.”⁵⁹ Still, the article did not identify root causes of women’s oppression; later, the Com-bahee River Collective would promote a feminist, antiracist socialism as an alternative. AAPA’s article did not offer any prescriptive solutions other than the nebulous needs to prioritize women’s issues and to develop a

unity between sisters and brothers: "The realization of women's liberation will require the efforts of both men and women.... It is freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody."⁶⁰ This idea of struggling against sexism within anti-racist movements was common among Asian American and Third World women activists, who felt alienated from the mainstream women's movement by its inattention to racism and class inequality.⁶¹

Aoki's views on women developed in this contradictory context that fostered both attention and inattention to sexism. He treated women with respect and supported the leadership of AAPA women. But he also embodied a macho masculinity, one that emphasized combat strategies and the physicality of events, and struggled to see how women fit into such actions. In addition, Aoki, like so many others, adopted a leadership model that minimized women's leadership. His main reference to Emma Gee, AAPA's cofounder, was as "a gracious host." Such an assessment ignored her other contributions. Gee taught some of the earliest Asian American Studies classes at UC Berkeley and UCLA and further helped to build the field through her editing and writing. The most important Asian women's anthology in that period, *Asian Women*, developed from a course she taught at UC Berkeley. She also edited an influential anthology, *Counterpoint*, that not only produced knowledge but also sought to critique the methodologies and theories of the nascent field of Asian American Studies.⁶² By contrast to Aoki's framing, Karen Sacks uses the term "centerwomen" to argue that work such as hosting dinners and building social networks, often performed by women, are crucial aspects of organizing and ought to be viewed as leadership.⁶³

As AAPA and other groups devoted greater attention to gender equality, Aoki's activist work and consciousness were challenged. He was surprised when, early in the BPP's formation, Huey Newton allowed women into the organization. To Aoki, a group like the Panthers that relied so heavily on military strategies, including their famous police patrols, would require men's participation. But he deferred to Newton's leadership. A couple of years later, Aoki noted about AAPA, "a significant number of the group went along with the [weapons] training. I was a little surprised when the women started going, but after my experiences in the BBP, I wasn't about to question anything." The experience of witnessing women's dedication and leadership helped modify Aoki's views. While he emphasized men's leadership, he also opposed gender oppression, readily identified women as AAPA leaders, and, significantly for him, was willing to work with and train women on internal security matters. Indeed, the Third World social movements contained a transformative capacity that moved Aoki and many other activists in the direction of greater gender equality.

