

## **Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity through Performing Blackness, 1969-1972**

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On March 22, 1969, in Portsmouth Square, a public gathering place in San Francisco's Chinatown, a group of young Chinese Americans calling themselves the Red Guard Party held a rally to unveil their "10 Point Program." Clad in berets and armbands, they announced a Free Breakfast program for children at the Commodore Stockton school, denounced the planned destruction of the Chinese Playground, and called for the "removal of colonialist police from Chinatown." The Red Guard Party's style, language, and politics clearly recalled those of the Black Panther Party, with whom they had significant contact and by whom they were profoundly influenced (*AAPA Newspaper* March 1969 1; Lyman 20-52). At the rally, the Red Guards performed an Asian American version of black nationalism by adopting the Panthers' garb, confrontational manner, and emphasis on self-determination.

Many years later, the Asian American playwright and critic Frank Chin dismissed the Red Guards' rally as a "yellow minstrel show" (Terkel 310). But while Chin rejected the Red Guards' performance as a vain attempt to imitate blackness, in 1971, just two years after the rally, he offered his own dramatic take on the interplay between Asian Americans and blacks in his play *The Chickencoop Chinaman*. Widely acknowledged as a germinal work of Asian American literature, Chin's play explores the relationship between Asian American identity and blackness by featuring Chinese American and Japanese American protagonists who associate with, claim sympathy for, and exhibit speech and dress patterns most commonly associated with African Americans. Set in the late 1960s, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* chronicles the adventures of Tam Lum, a fast-talking Chinese American, and his Japanese American sidekick, Kenji, as they attempt to produce a film about the career of their childhood hero, the African American boxer

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Ovaltine Jack Dancer and his putative father, Charley Popcorn. As a story about the search for heroes, fathers, and a usable past, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* provides a powerful meditation on the relationship between masculinity, race, and Asian American identity.

Both the Red Guard Party and Frank Chin were key players in the Asian American political and cultural mobilization of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Red Guards were among the first radicals to arise from Asian American communities and in their later incarnation as I Wor Kuen (IWK) constituted one of the two pre-eminent Asian American leftist organizations (Wei 207-17). They built community programs, organized Asian American workers, fought for better living conditions, protested against the Vietnam War, and became integrally entwined in the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist left. Chin was highly influential in his own right as a writer, critic, and activist. His play *The Chickencoop Chinaman* marked his emergence as a major figure. It won the 1971 playwriting contest sponsored by the East West Players, the prominent Los Angeles-based Asian American theater company, and became the first Asian American play to be produced off-Broadway (Chin *Chickencoop Chinaman* xiv). Chin published numerous works of searing criticism, fiction, and nonfiction, cofounded the Asian American Theater Workshop in San Francisco, one of the most important venues for Asian American dramatic productions, coedited *AIIEEEEE!*, a foundational anthology of Asian American literature, and organized the first Day of Remembrance to commemorate the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II (Shimakawa 61-62; Chin et al.).

Yet Chin is also a controversial figure who has leveled highly gendered criticism at authors—most notably Maxine Hong Kingston—whom he believes to peddle “fake” depictions of Asian American culture for white consumption (Chin, “Come All Ye”). Critics charge that his attempts to create a heroic Asian American tradition inevitably “reassert male authority over the cultural domain by subordinating feminism to nationalist terms” (Kim 75-79). It is not my intent here to rehash these critiques, but instead to point out that critical perspectives on Chin have thus far failed to locate his rehearsals of Asian American masculinity in the historical context of the Black Power period. Reading *The Chickencoop Chinaman* through a racial lens reveals the play’s linkages of Asian American identity to blackness.

The Red Guard Party and Frank Chin engaged in divergent modes of performance. While rallies on the street and drama on stage constitute different genres, both were scripted with intentionality and visually constructed and displayed the politics and identities of their participants. Furthermore, the Red Guards and Chin exemplify the two distinct ideologies most commonly understood to have motivated the construction of Asian American identity: Third World internationalist radicalism and domestic U.S. cultural nationalism. Comparatively examining the performances of radicals and cultural workers thus provides a valuable register of competing visions of Asian America.

The Red Guards and Chin intervened in an Asian America that had not yet been constituted. Through the mid-twentieth century, despite scattered instances of interethnic solidarity, most organizing among Asians in the mainland United States proceeded along ethnic or national lines. Indeed, at times, Asian ethnic groups strategically distanced themselves from each other (Espiritu 20-24). In the late 1960s, however, a loosely organized social movement known as the Asian American movement arose to protest anti-Asian racism and exploitation. While the Asian American movement comprised a variety of organizations and individuals with competing ideologies, all agreed with two fundamental premises: first, that Asians of all ethnicities in the United States shared a common racial oppression, and second, that building a multiethnic, racially based coalition would provide an effective basis for resisting racism.<sup>1</sup> The process of creating the “Asian American” constituted an instance of racial formation, which the highly influential theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant define as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (55).

Performances of blackness catalyzed the formation of Asian American identity. Far from being mere mimics, however, Asian Americans who began to consider their own racial positioning through contemplations of blackness went on to forge a distinct identity of their own. The Red Guards adopted the Black Panthers’ language and style—two key elements of the Panther mystique—as a political statement that underlined their espousal of the Panthers’ racial politics. Thus, they inserted Asian Americans into a racial paradigm, arguing that Asian Americans constituted a racialized bloc subject to the same racism that afflicted blacks. Chin also scripted performances that pointed to blackness as a model of racial resistance and identity. But importantly for him, emulating blackness provided a way to recuperate Asian American masculinity.

Understanding the construction of Asian American identity through its performance of blackness has three major implications for scholars of race and the 1960s. First, the extent to which Asian American identity was enacted through performances of blackness indicates the thorough imbrication of multiple processes of racial formation. It is by now widely accepted that racial formations proceed in parallel fashion; for instance, much of the literature on the social construction of whiteness argues that whiteness came to be defined in opposition to non-whiteness (most often, blackness) (Roediger). But the construction of Asian American identity through performing blackness demonstrates the interdependence of racial formations strictly among people of color.

Second, understanding the rise of Asian American identity in response to blackness answers charges that in the late 1960s, the New Left betrayed the promise of the early 1960s by descending into narrowly divisive identity politics. Historian David Burner excoriates Black Power for engendering a “narcissistic absorption in the group content of self-identity” and “solipsistic examination” of the self, and former sixties’ activist Todd Gitlin mourns the left’s

putative decline into parochialism (Burner 50, 81; Gitlin 99-100). However, Asian American mobilization powerfully refutes this narrative of declension. Asian American adaptations of Black Power's emphasis on race and racial identity not only contributed to the construction of Asian American identity, but also provided points of conjunction around which African Americans and Asian Americans could connect political and cultural movements.

Finally, highlighting the importance of performances of blackness to the construction of Asian American identity helps to broach divergent histories of the category itself. The Red Guards and Chin offered dramatically different prescriptions for what ailed Asian America, as demonstrated in one striking skirmish. Chin recalls teaching a class in which he directed Asian American students to act out some anti-Asian stereotypes, when a group of Red Guards took exception to the repetition of the offensive imagery. The Red Guard leader knocked Chin to the ground, yelling, "Identify with China!" Chin countered, "We're in America. This is where we are, where we live, and where we're going to die" (Terkel 311). The exchange highlights a fundamental cleavage in understandings of Asian American identity. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, groups such as the Red Guard Party (later I Wor Kuen), Wei Min She, Asian Americans for Action, and the Asian American Political Alliance adopted frameworks that connected anti-Asian racism in the United States to Western imperialism in Asia. Meanwhile, Chin and his cohorts argued that Asian Americans were bound by a common culture that was born and bred strictly within U.S. national borders (Chin et al., *Aiiieeeee!* xxi-xlvi).

Discrepant genealogies of the origin of Asian American identity reproduce this tension: social histories and documentary collections of Asian American activism in the 1960s and 1970s tend to locate Third World internationalism as its central ideology, while literary and cultural histories generally privilege domestic U.S. nationalism (Louie and Omatsu; Ho et al.; Tachiki et al.; Eng 8, 20-21; Palumbo-Liu 303-8, 317; S. Wong; Dirlik 5; Lowe 22-26).<sup>2</sup> That both the Red Guards and Chin turned to blackness suggests the power of mimesis to produce new subjectivities and identifications across ideological boundaries. It also suggests that these strange bedfellows were engaged in the shared project of racial formation, and that neither anti-imperialist internationalism nor domestic nationalism alone can adequately account for the multifarious beginnings of Asian American identity. Indeed, as Lingyan Yang has perceptively shown, uncritically constructing a stark dichotomy between cultural nationalist and diasporic perspectives has plagued Asian American studies from the 1960s to the present (142-62).

### **Asian Americans and Assimilation**

Asian American radicals and cultural workers turned to blackness as a model for Asian American identity as a way to resist assimilation into whiteness. At the Red Guards' initial rally in Portsmouth

Square, David Hilliard, chairman of the Black Panther Party, castigated the audience for its lack of militance and called Chinese Americans the "Uncle Toms of the non-white people of the U.S." He went on to assert, "If you can't relate to China then you can't relate to the Panthers" (*AAPA Newspaper*, March 1969, 4). Hilliard's appeal for the Red Guards to relate to China was in part a call for political radicalism and commitment to the ideology of Mao Zedong, but paired with an accusation of Uncle Tom-ism, it was also an admonition against assimilation. Locating Chinese Americans as insufficiently Chinese, Hilliard charged that they needed to reinvigorate themselves by renewing their relationship to Asia.

Hilliard's claim that Chinese Americans were overassimilated could not have been made prior to the 1960s. From the beginning of large-scale migrations to the United States in the mid-1800s through the beginning of World War II, Asians faced legal barriers to assimilation in the form of immigration restrictions, bars to naturalization, and antimiscegenation laws. In addition, the Yellow Peril discourse positioned Asians as inherently inassimilable perpetual foreigners (Daniels 65-78; RG Lee 106-44; Okihiro 129-38). In the postwar era, however, U.S. responses to cold war imperatives opened the possibility of Asian American assimilation. Between 1952 and 1967, Asian Americans gained rights to naturalization, immigration, and interracial marriage. These legal changes accompanied a social shift that suggested the possibility of Asian American assimilation in the form of a discourse that has come to be known as the "model minority myth."

Discussions of Asian American integration in the postwar era inevitably credited their putative assimilation to their status as a model minority (Simpson 171-85). In 1966, *New York Times Magazine* claimed that Japanese Americans were following the steps of white ethnics who initially suffered discrimination but "climbed out of the slums" to enter the mainstream. It praised Japanese Americans for their dedication to education, low crime rates, and strong family values (Petersen 21, 33, 36, 38, 40, 41, 43). *U.S. News and World Report* extended the claim of assimilability to Chinese Americans, who were "winning wealth and respect" through "hard work," lack of juvenile delinquency, focus on education, and eschewal of welfare. Both articles compared Asian Americans favorably to blacks, arguing that unlike "Negroes," Asian Americans had overcome racial discrimination and were on the verge of achieving assimilation ("Success Story" *passim*; Okihiro 139-40).

At this moment when Asian American assimilation seemed possible for the first time, the Red Guard Party's performance of black radicalism constituted an emphatic rejection of it. While Black Power encompassed a variety of ideologies, its advocates generally adopted discourses emphasizing power and self-determination over integration and equal inclusion (Van Deburg 112-91). Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton explained in 1967 that blacks needed to "redefine themselves," "reclaim their history, their culture," and "create their own sense of community and togetherness." They

deemed “assimilated” and “integrated” blacks to be co-opted by whites and hence ineligible to participate in creating this new black community and identity (37, 11, 29-31).

For Asian Americans, adopting Black Power’s antipathy toward assimilation marked a significant departure from previous modes of political mobilization. In contrast to prior assimilationists such as the Japanese American Citizens League, Asian American activists viewed racial oppression as a systemic, rather than aberrant, feature of American society (Kurashige 58-85; Ichioka 49-81). They believed that the racial oppression of Asian Americans stemmed from and served to justify their economic exploitation, and sought to build Asian American power and culture autonomous of white approval.

The Red Guard Party’s programs generally sought to build and strengthen Chinatown’s community institutions rather than to insert Chinese Americans into mainstream programs. To that end, they started the Free Breakfast program, put on cultural programs and movie nights, published the *Red Guard Community Newspaper*, and confronted the police. As minister of information Alex Hing expressed, “We’re going to attain power, so we don’t have to beg anymore” (Lyman 185).

Like the Red Guard Party, Frank Chin rejected assimilation as a palliative to racism. *The Chickencoop Chinaman* features an assimilationist Chinese American character, Tom, whose very name positions him as the Uncle Tom that Hilliard had posited. He provides an unambiguous expression of the model minority discourse when he says, “We used to be kicked around, but that’s history, brother. Today we have good jobs, good pay, and we’re lucky. Americans are proud to say we send more of our kids to college than any other race. We’re accepted. We worked hard for it” (59).

In contrast to Tom’s assimilationism, the protagonists, Tam and Kenji, struggle against whiteness. The Lone Ranger (described in the dramatic personae as “a legendary white racist”) appears in a fantasy scene and proclaims Asian Americans to be “honorary white” (3). When Tam and Kenji protest, he insists that this bestowal is not a blessing, but a curse that they cannot refuse. The curse of whiteness mandates that Asian Americans refrain from vocal protest and remain “legendary passive.” They must acknowledge their place in the racial hierarchy, as the Lone Ranger orders them to “kiss” his “ass” and “know [. . .] that it be white.” And they must abandon attempts to create an independent Asian American culture, symbolized by the Lone Ranger shooting the writer Tam through the hand (32, 37-8). Tam and Kenji understand the Lone Ranger’s curse as an attempt to buy Asian American compliance with a white-dominated social order; their refusal indicates the play’s explicit rejection of assimilation via playing the model minority. Elsewhere, Chin has stated that aside from being “a strategy for white acceptance,” the model minority discourse is dangerous because it encourages Asian Americans to “denigrate” blacks and see them as deserving of their oppression (Terkel 313).

### Asian Americans and Blacks in Common Struggle

Cross-identifications between Asians and blacks arose at various moments during the twentieth century. At times, African Americans drew inspiration from Asian resistance to Western imperialism. During the 1930s, tens of thousands of blacks flocked to the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World, which proclaimed Japan to be the “champion” of the “dark and colored races” (Allen 38-55). During World War II, Malcolm X proclaimed his eagerness to join the Japanese army, mostly to avoid being drafted, but also echoing a strand of black sentiment that overly romanticized Japan as a militarily powerful, non-white nation opposed to Euro-American imperialism, while ignoring the brutality of Japanese militarism (Lipsitz 184-98; Deutsch 194-8).

Asia also figured prominently in the black imagination during the 1960s and 1970s. After fleeing the United States, the militant Robert F. Williams spent three years exiled in China (Tyson). Black Panther political education prominently included Mao’s Red Book. Indeed, Mao’s writings were central to the ideologies and practices of an entire generation of black revolutionaries, some of whom went so far as to adopt Chinese peasant-style dress and aesthetics to signal their radicalism (Elbaum 67; Kelley and Esch 6-41). When Muhammad Ali refused his induction in 1967, his declaration, “Man, I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong,” reflected the anti-war stance of black nationalists ranging from the Nation of Islam (in Ali’s case) to the Black Panther Party (Deutsch 193-4). Indeed, BPP chairman David Hilliard suggested the necessity for Asian/black solidarity when he declared to National Liberation Front representatives in Vietnam, “You’re Yellow Panthers, we’re Black Panthers” (Hilliard and Cole 247). As these examples show, black identifications with Asians focused primarily across the Pacific rather than with Asians in the United States.

While Asian American and African American identifications were mutual, it would be an overstatement to deem them reciprocal. The Black Power Movement’s “rearticulation of racial ideology” in the 1960s clearly opened spaces for new subjectivities to emerge (Omi and Winant 88-91). Within these spaces, Asian Americans performing blackness and African Americans admiring Asian radicalism shared in creating what Vijay Prashad has aptly called the “multicolored Left” (136), a hybridized multiracial social movement with both Asian and black inflections.

Asian Americans and blacks crossed paths daily, especially in West Coast cities such as Seattle, San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles. During World War II, many African Americans migrating westward settled in areas vacated by the Japanese Americans who had been imprisoned in concentration camps. Upon returning, Japanese Americans found their former neighborhoods transformed. Maya Angelou sensed the changes in San Francisco’s Nihonmachi in the air: “Where the odors of tempura, raw fish and *cha* had dominated, the aroma of chitlings, greens and ham hocks now prevailed” (qtd. in Taylor, *In Search* 273). These wartime demographic

shifts meant that urban Asian Americans and blacks increasingly rubbed elbows in the postwar period.

Frank Chin grew up in the mixed-race context of Oakland. He recalls, "In the sixties, [black culture] became a force in Asian-America. It always had a large presence in Oakland. I grew up with rhythm-and-blues, jazz." However, it was not just proximity, but also politics that inspired Asian American adoptions. Chin credits the "sixties and the civil-rights movement" with making Asian Americans "aware that we had no presence, no image in American culture as men, as people. [. . .] So a bunch of us began to appropriate 'blackness.' We'd wear the clothes, we'd affect the walk and we began to talk black. We'd call our selves 'Bro' and began talking Southern: 'Hey, man'" (Terkel 310). Chin's recollection highlights masculine modes of bodily comportment—clothing, gait, and speech as the means of racial identification.

Asian Americans also encountered blackness intellectually. Historian Gary Okihiro recalls that many Asian Americans "found our identity by reading Franz Fanon and Malcolm X, Cheikh Anta Diop and W. E. B. Du Bois, Leopold Senghor and Langston Hughes" (Okihiro 60). Indeed, the debt that the field of Asian American studies owes to black intellectual figures cannot be overstated. Steve Louie, a veteran of the Asian American movement, believes that it "owes a huge political debt to the Black Power Movement." He points to Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and the Black Panthers as visionaries "who laid the groundwork that really brought [. . .] the Asian American movement out" (Louie, "Interview").

Some Asian American individuals participated directly in black social movements. Prior to the heyday of Black Power, the Chinese American political activist Grace Lee Boggs enjoyed a long association with C. L. R. James and worked closely with her husband, James Boggs (Boggs xi, 45-74, 118; Choi 18-40). Yuri Kochiyama, a nisei (second-generation Japanese American) woman living in Harlem, was a friend of Malcolm X and famously cradled his head as he lay dying in the Audubon Ballroom; she was also associated with the black radicals Kwame Toure (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and H. Rap Brown (Fujino). A few Asian American individuals even joined the Black Panthers (Wong, "Yellow Panther"; Wong, "Panther Brotherhood").

When Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party, they turned to an Asian American to obtain the first of the weapons that would eventually make them famous. As Seale recalls in his memoir, *Seize the Time*:

Late in November 1966, we went to a Third World brother we knew, a Japanese radical cat. He had guns for a motherfucker: .357 Magnums, 22's, 9mm's, what have you. We told him that we wanted these guns to begin to institutionalize and let black people know that we have to defend ourselves as Malcolm X said we must. [. . .] So he gave us an M-1 and a 9mm. (Seale 72-73; Pearson 112)



The “Japanese radical” was actually a Japanese American named Richard Aoki who had grown up in West Oakland with the families of Seale and Newton and “hooked up with Bobby and Huey at [Merritt] College.” Aoki went on to become a field marshal in the Black Panther Party and in 1968 cofounded the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) in Berkeley (Seale 79; Pearson 113; Wong, “Berkeley and Beyond”; Aoki).

Steve Louie joined the black liberation movement in part because he could relate to discrimination in personal terms. In 1960, his Chinese American family had been unable to purchase a home in La Cañada, a wealthy suburb of Los Angeles. Convinced that he “had more in common with black people” than anyone else in the United States, Louie began volunteering in 1967 at a storefront operation in Watts, where he mimeographed materials, leafleted, passed out fliers, and did other odd jobs. Although he did not fully understand the politics of the group sponsoring the storefront (which he later found out was backed by Ron Karenga’s U.S. organization), Louie felt it important to aid in organizing the black community because he had personally experienced racial discrimination (Louie, “Interview”).

### **Political Theater on the Street**

While Asian Americans encountered blackness socially and intellectually, and through direct participation in black struggles, it was the actual performance of blackness that was critical to articulations of multiethnic Asian American racial identity. The “political theater” of rallies, marches, proclamations, and social programs—along with literary and cultural productions—produced a novel form of Asian American subjectivity by highlighting parallels between the common racialization affecting African Americans and Asian Americans of various ethnicities.

AAPA’s support for the Free Huey movement provides an excellent example of the power of performance to consolidate multiethnic ties. The movement sought Huey Newton’s release from jail on charges of killing a police officer. At a large rally for Huey’s birthday, AAPA members hoisted “posters with ‘Free Huey’ inscribed in Mandarin, Japanese, Tagalog, and English” (Pearson 167; “Why I’m Marching to Free Huey” and “Free Huey, Free Huey—An Awesome Outburst”). Asian American support for Newton was not in itself surprising, as radicals of all races were influenced by the Black Panther Party as the premier vanguard organization of the late 1960s. Puerto Ricans in the Young Lords Party and Chicanos in the Brown Berets adopted the language and style of Black Power, the American Indian Movement was initially inspired by Panthers, and progressive whites supported and praised them (Young Lords Party; Melendez; Chavez; Smith and Warrior). Even white socialites sought the “radical chic” of associating with Black Panthers (Wolfe). However, adopting and adapting the ideology of Black Power had a particular effect for Asian Americans: it enabled them to construct Asian American identity as a new

subjectivity that rejected assimilation and consolidated multiple Asian ethnicities under the rubric of race.

The significance of AAPA's participation in the Free Huey movement can thus be found in the manner in which the organization displayed its presence. Carrying posters written in Asian languages was an important statement for a group composed chiefly of native-born Asian Americans whose primary language was almost assuredly English. The posters suggested that Asian American support for Newton derived from their own identities as racialized people. Furthermore, pointing to the racialization of Asian Americans drew an implicit parallel between the travails of blacks and Asian Americans. Finally, AAPA's posters visually represented the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the organization and of the San Francisco Bay area's Asian communities. Seeking justice for Huey in this forum thus brought together Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos as Asian Americans.

Many other Asian Americans drew inspiration from the Black Panther Party's vision of militant blackness. Steve Louie recalls that he reveled in watching the televised spectacle of the Panthers marching into the California Statehouse armed with shotguns:

I thought that was so great! Not because I thought that they needed to go and shoot somebody, but just the attitude. They're basically saying, 'Fuck you!' up in your face. We're not taking this crap anymore, we're going to defend ourselves and we're going to do it by any means necessary [. . .] I just thought that kind of militance was just fantastic. (Louie, "Interview")

Louie found inspiration not only in the Panthers' self-reliance, but also in their theatrically staged performance of militance: in short, he admired their political style.

The Red Guard Party was the Asian American group most directly and heavily influenced by the Black Panthers. It consisted primarily of disaffected American-born Chinatown youth who had been the subject of "some not too secret proselytization by Panther leaders" (Lyman 31). The Red Guards drew their membership from the crowd surrounding a nonprofit community agency called Legitimate Ways (Leway). Leway was founded in 1967 to provide the youth of Chinatown—who faced substandard housing, poor schools, overcrowding, and endemic poverty—with alternatives to street life and petty crime. It provided job placement assistance and recreational activities, the most popular of which was a pool hall. The Leway pool hall became a gathering place for young people, often attracting crowds of up to two hundred. However, it also became a focus of police harassment ("History of the Red Guard Party" 81-83).

Alex Hing, minister of information for the Red Guard Party, attributes the initial connection between the Leway youth and the Panthers to Chinese American women who were dating Panther men. When a core of about ten Leway members discussed forming an organization similar to the Black Panther Party, these "sisters" who

were already “really politicized” invited the Panthers to visit Leway. Bobby Seale and David Hilliard did so in late 1967 or early 1968 and found a surprising scene: “When they went into Leway, it was like a black thing that they saw pretty much. The music that was played out of Leway was jazz, soul music, that was the kind [of] ambience it had. People wore dark clothes, field jackets, sunglasses in the middle of the night, shooting pool, smoking cigarettes” (Hing 284). The music at Leway echoed the preference of most Asian American urban youth of the time, who primarily grooved to rhythm and blues and soul music, rather than rock and roll, which tended to be associated with whites, hippies, and college students.

The Panthers urged the radical core of Leway to build a revolutionary organization and invited them to weekly study sessions on revolutionary theory held at the Panthers’ San Francisco headquarters on Fillmore Street, at their national headquarters in Oakland, and at Eldridge Cleaver’s house. This core group returned to Leway armed with an ideological framework derived from reading Mao Tse-Tung, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro and began recruiting members. While forming, the new group stayed underground for several months and “took pretty much our directions from the Panthers” (Hing 285). Bobby Seale even named the new organization. While the Leway group wanted to call themselves the Red Dragons, in the manner of a street gang, Seale appreciated the value of the “Red Guard Party”—after Mao’s youth brigade—as a “more political” and provocative name (Hing 296).

The influence of the Panthers on the Red Guard Party was unmistakable. The Red Guards adopted the militant rhetoric and style of their mentors across the Bay. They wore berets and armbands at rallies, called police “pigs” and whites “honkies,” used slogans like “All Power to the People” and “Fuck the Pigs,” and appointed “ministers” of defense and information à la the Panthers (“History of the Red Guard Party” 81; Lyman 32; Wong, “Red Star”; *Red Guard Community Newspaper*, 25 June 1969, 1). The *Red Guard Community Newspaper* publicized numerous incidents of the “brutal harassment” of Chinatown residents by “the racist pig structure” (12 March 1969, 1). The Red Guards’ attention to police harassment belied the idyllic image of a quaint Chinatown, and instead cast Chinatown as a ghetto under siege from “pigs.” In focusing on police brutality, the Red Guards reproduced one of the Panthers’ most successful strategies. At the Panthers’ behest the Red Guards also instituted a Free Breakfast program for Chinatown kids (Hing 288).

The Red Guard Party adopted its 10 Point Program explicitly from the Panthers’ program, even borrowing its “What We Want, What We Believe” format (*Red Guard Community Newspaper*, 25 June 1969, 3). Indeed, many of the Red Guard points echo verbatim points from the Black Panther program, simply substituting the word “yellow” for “black” throughout. The main points of the Red Guard program that follow the Black Panther program include demands for “freedom” for “yellow people,” decent housing, education, exemption from military service, an end to police brutality, release of all “yellow

men" from prisons and jails, trial by jury of peers from the "yellow communities" for every "yellow defendant," and full employment (*Red Guard Community Newspaper*, 12 March 1969, 6-9; qtd. in Foner 2-6).

The translation of "black" to "yellow" in the program was highly significant for two reasons. First, it suggested a racial parallel between Asian Americans and African Americans by locating Asian Americans within a paradigm focusing on power and self-determination. It argued that racial oppression was a constitutive feature of American society and that Asians, like blacks, were racialized subjects. Second, it signaled that Asians of all ethnicities shared this relationship of subordination. Instead of demanding freedom only for Chinese or Chinese Americans, the program demanded freedom for Asians of all ethnicities under the rubric of "yellow people." Re-rendering the Panthers' program in yellow thus not only emphasized the racial nature of being Asian American, but also the multiethnic nature of that category as well.

Asian Americans also performed their racial radicalism by displaying "the symbols of Asian resistance to imperialism, particularly those of the Cultural Revolution—the Mao jackets, the Red Book, the slogans" (Prashad 139-40). Red Guard rallies melded stylistic elements borrowed from the Panthers with Asian elements alluding to Red China. While they wore berets and armbands in Panther fashion, they also donned Mao jackets and waved Chinese flags as ways to highlight their racial linkage to the Asian leader.

In retrospect, Alex Hing describes the Red Guards' rallies as "political theater." His description of an event on May 4, 1969, shows the aptness of that label: "We came in blasting the 'East Is Red,' marching in. We had these hand-made Chinese flags and these handmade Red Guard armbands. We all wore field jackets. [ . . . ] We marched in and it looked like we took over the rally but it was actually agreed upon" (Hing 286-7). The Red Guards had planned the rally in conjunction with Chinese foreign students who wanted to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the May 4th movement, but the American-born Red Guards instead wanted to emphasize the current-day problems of poverty and racism in Chinatown. The spectacle of the Red Guards in military attire, marching to martial music and appearing to seize control of the rally, visually displayed the militance they sought to convey.

Though obviously influenced and indebted to the Panthers, the Red Guard Party was not a mindless replication of the Black Panther Party. Instead, the Red Guards sought to apply the lessons of Black Power to the specific needs of Asian Americans. When they found that few children were participating in their Free Breakfast program, the Red Guards turned their attention to aiding Chinatown elders, instituting a Free Sunday Brunch program. Every Sunday at 1:00 p.m., the Red Guards would provide free food to the seniors who congregated in the public gathering space of Portsmouth Square. At its peak, the program fed more than three hundred people per week. The Red Guards' shift in focus from schoolchildren to seniors demonstrated the application

of the principle of Black Power to the specific needs of Chinatown, in which many elderly men lacked familial support networks because of decades of gendered immigration restrictions. Like the rallies, the brunch program can be read as a kind of performance, as it enacted the “true spirit of practicing socialism” by providing, in especially public and visible ways, free food to those who needed it (*Red Guard Community Newspaper*, 8 September 1969, 2). In addition to the Free Sunday Brunch program, the Red Guards developed an array of community service programs that included a legal clinic, a child-care center, and a women’s health clinic (Hing 292).

The Red Guards also performed their radicalism by holding community events such as movie nights. They screened the film *East Is Red*, which extolled the virtues of the People’s Republic of China. Although the Red Guards had planned only a single showing, the community demand was so great that they “showed it three nights in a row to a packed house” (Hing 287). The screening of this pro-Chinese movie positioned the Red Guards on the left and highlighted their presence as a political force in Chinatown. The high profile manner in which they conducted their political, social, and cultural programs was deliberately performative and intended to draw attention to their organization.

The tenth plank of the Red Guard Party’s 10 Point Program stands out as distinct from any appearing on the Black Panthers Party’s program: it demands that “the United States government recognize the People’s Republic of China” and asserts that “Mao Tse-Tung is the true leader of the Chinese people: not Chiang Kai Shek” (*Red Guard Community Newspaper*, 12 March 1969, 7). Locating Mao as their ideological leader, the Red Guards “openly advocate[d] patriotism to the People’s Republic of China” and studied his writings assiduously. To demonstrate their avowed communism, the Red Guards unfurled the five-starred Chinese flag at their rallies in Portsmouth Square (“History of the Red Guard Party” 84). While radicals of all races studied and admired Mao, the Red Guards related to him specifically as an Asian proponent of the worldwide movement against Western imperialism.

Declaring allegiance to the People’s Republic of China and support for the Black Panther Party were courageous acts in a Chinatown dominated by the Consolidated Chinese Benevolent Associations (CCBA), an organization of conservative business elites with close ties to the nationalist Kuomintang Party (KMT) (Lai 175, 181-83, 196). The Chinese American left had nearly disappeared during the 1950s, hounded by violence, harassment, and black-listing from the CCBA, as well as McCarthyism (Nee and Nee 146-151; Yu). Thus, it was audacious for the Red Guards to unfurl the five-starred Chinese flag in 1969, as such an act invited serious and possibly violent repercussions. By openly performing their radicalism, the Red Guards (who advocated armed self-defense) presented a countervailing force to the KMT and its allies. In fact, the foreign students who cosponsored the May 4, 1969, rally invited the Red Guards to participate because they could provide a security force to prevent a feared KMT attempt to shut down the event (Hing 286-7).

According to Alex Hing and Harvey Dong, the major impact of these performances of Asian American radicalism was that they “opened up Chinatown to politics” by loosening the “KMT’s grip” (Hing 289; Dong 202).

While the Panthers clearly provided inspiration and guidance to the Red Guards, they did not create Asian American radicalism *de novo*. Before joining the Black Panthers, Richard Aoki had developed an oppositional stance to the war in Vietnam during his service in the army and after his discharge had participated in the Vietnam Day Committee (Aoki 323). Similarly, Alex Hing was no political naïf. By the time he arrived at the Leway pool hall he had already racked up significant encounters with the New Left, including participating in Stop the Draft Week and demonstrating for free speech at San Francisco City College. Eventually he returned “back to Chinatown” to “hang out with my old gang, my old crowd and to try to politicize them.” At Leway, however, he discovered that some of the people there (particularly the “sisters” who had been associating with Panthers) were already “miles ahead” of him politically (Hing 282-4). Hence, while the Panthers’ influence on the Leway youth is undeniable, a core of Asian Americans had already begun to radicalize and merely needed a framework within which to articulate their discontent with society.

#### **“A Yellow Minstrel Show”?**

Asian Americans performing blackness raises the fascinating possibility of yellow minstrelsy. Like the Irish of the nineteenth century, whom David Roediger argues sought to resolve their ambivalent relationship to whiteness in part through practicing blackface minstrelsy, Asian Americans in the 1960s suffered from discrimination expressed in racial terms, yet occupied a higher socioeconomic position than did blacks (100-120). Furthermore, the Red Guards and Chin clearly explored Asian American identity by “playing in the dark” (Morrison). Finally, they invested black male bodies with divergent types of potency: political, for the Red Guards, versus sexual, for Chin.

Frank Chin charged that the Red Guard Party’s performances of blackness constituted “a yellow minstrel show.” To him, it was the inauthenticity of the Red Guard Party’s Panther-inspired rap of “brothers and sisters,” “power to the people,” and “fight the pig” that marked the Red Guards as minstrels. While acknowledging that blackness provided a lens through which to perceive the racial positioning of “yellows,” Chin distinguished between the experiences of Asian Americans and African Americans: “We started talking about the sisters in the street and the brothers in the joint. I’d been in the joint and I didn’t see any yellows there. I didn’t see so many of our sisters walking the streets. That wasn’t our thing” (Terkel 310). Chin’s comment reflects a suspicion of Asian American radicals who overly romanticized the revolutionary potential of the lumpen, a hallmark of Panther ideology.

While charging the Red Guards with inauthentic performances of blackness, Chin specifically denies that his characters in

*The Chickencoop Chinaman* practice minstrelsy. Lee, the main woman in the play, accuses Tam and Kenji of deriding blacks by the way they walk and talk (13). Kenji had earned the nickname “Blackjap Kenji” during high school in postwar Oakland because of his full-fledged adoption of black style, fashion, and language. As an adult, he continues to identify with blacks, saying, “I live with ‘em, I talk like ‘em, I dress [. . .] maybe even eat what they eat.” Although he is a dentist, he lives in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh, “right in the heart of the black ghetto,” because it feels “just like home” (3, 20, 21, 9). Like Kenji, Tam adopts black speech patterns to the extent that when Charley Popcorn first meets Tam, he cannot believe that the black-sounding voice he had heard on the telephone belongs to the Chinese American standing before him (40). Tam and Kenji deny being minstrels, because their performances express an identity that feels genuine and appropriate to them. “Maybe we act black,” Kenji insists, “but it’s not fake” (19). This emphasis on verisimilitude takes on additional significance, given Chin’s later distinction between the real and the fake as an analytical tool for Asian American cultural criticism.

Chin thus distinguished between a generative adoption of blackness—which highlighted Asian Americans as a racialized group, spoke directly to conditions in Asian American communities, and emerged from organic relations between Asian Americans and blacks—and a nongenerative, vulgar, and overly romantic imitation of blackness. The critical distinction for Chin was *political*. The Red Guard Party’s rap constituted yellow minstrelsy to Chin because he rejected its emphasis on the Panther’s version of revolutionary nationalism as a way to “organize” and “get together” (Terkel 310).

Asian American 1960s performances of blackness can be seen in contrast to the earlier minstrel performances of probationary whites in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, when blackface provided a means by which the Irish could earn the “wages of whiteness” and Jews established a “conjunction between blackface and Americanization” in motion pictures (Roediger; Rogin 13). If the essence of minstrelsy was whites and soon-to-be whites performing blackness in order to partake in, while simultaneously disavowing, the pleasures thought to reside in unrestrained blackness, then one could argue that Asian American performances of blackness did not constitute minstrelsy. Asian Americans fit only half of Eric Lott’s definition of blackface minstrelsy as ambivalent—both desirous and anxious (50-52). Covetous of black radicalism and masculinity, but not fearful of being stained by blackness, they sought to connect Asian Americans to African Americans. The Red Guards sought political unity with blacks through radicalism, and in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* Chin covets the supposed (indeed, stereotypical) virility of black men, but neither distanced Asian Americans from blacks. Rather than pursuing whiteness, these performances were intended to locate Asian Americans as a racialized group alongside blacks. The Red Guards and Chin argued that Asian Americans should share an affinity with African Americans based on their common subjugated racial position, and that Asian

Americans should consider the problems and possibilities—first explored by blacks—involved in mobilizing around a racial identity. Their performances of blackness thus signaled an explicit rejection of rather than an assimilation into whiteness.

Asian American mimesis was neither minstrelsy nor parody. Instead, following Homi Bhabha's suggestion that mimicry is always ambivalent, I argue that these performances of blackness produced a "subject of difference" that was "almost the same, but not quite" (86). Instead of reproducing blackness, they constructed a new form of Asian American subjectivity, one organized around racial commonality among Asians.

### **Blackness and Asian American Masculinity**

Both the Red Guard Party and Frank Chin enacted performances that articulated a black-inspired vision of Asian American masculinity as a form of resistance to racism. But whereas the Red Guards admired the radical politics enacted by black men, Chin sought the sexual potency that they embodied.

As Tracye Matthews has argued, the Panthers' early actions and statements created a "self-consciously masculine, 'lumpen' public identity for the Party" that equated resisting racism with black men regaining their masculinity" (278-82). Over time, however, women in the Black Panther Party became increasingly visible, not only in the rank and file, but also in leadership positions. Eldridge Cleaver's 1969 repudiation of "male chauvinism" in his statement of support for Erica Huggins reflected a new official ideology that sought the "liberation of women" (qtd. in Foner 98-99). Of course, this shift was hardly seamless, as women in the party continued to struggle with sexism and barriers to leadership (Matthews 285-92).

The Red Guard's initial adoption of the Panther's style and strategies reflected the Black Panthers' first phase of hypermasculinity in several ways. Donning berets and armbands, and marching into rallies in formation, cast the Guards as a paramilitary organization. Using confrontational language and terminology—such as "pigs" and "honkies"—also demonstrated a certain swaggering machismo. Finally, calling attention to police brutality as a main concern not only replicated a key Panther strategy, but also framed the problems of Chinatown in primarily male-centered ways.

Although performances of masculinity were key to the Red Guard Party's initial phase, some evidence points to an uneven evolution in the gender ideologies and practices of its members. When the Red Guard Party disbanded in 1971, one faction merged with I Wor Kuen, a radical group based in New York City, to form National I Wor Kuen (IWK) (Wei 212-14; "A History of the Red Guard Party" 86-87). IWK explicitly advocated equality for women: its "12 Program and Platform" included a plank that demanded "an end to male chauvinism and sexual exploitation" and declared unequivocally, "Sisters and brothers are equals fighting



for our people" (I Wor Kuen). Women such as Carmen Chow played prominent, perhaps even preeminent, roles as leaders (Wei 215, 226). Furthermore, IWK (along with other Asian American organizations including Wei Min She) struggled for higher wages, better working conditions, and unionization for female garment workers and stressed the necessity of women's liberation as integral to national liberation ("Political Summation of the Jung Sai Strike" 1975). Finally, IWK repudiated the Red Guards' prior "ultra-military line"—which advocated "armed struggle" and "violence"—as being "narrow and incorrect" to the extent that it neglected building class consciousness among workers ("History of the Red Guard Party" 81, 86-7; League of Revolutionary Struggle 42).

This shift in rhetorical focus from militarism to community organization indicates a reordering of the archetypal roles within RGP/IWK's imaginary. The badass Chinatown cat, which could be played only by a man, was eclipsed by the dedicated community worker, which a woman could play just as well as a man. Thus, the transformation from the Red Guard Party (hypermasculine, militarist, male-led) to IWK (egalitarian in principle, vanguardist, female-led) suggests that ideologies and practices of gender among Asian American revolutionaries were contested and dynamic.

While the Red Guards initially performed masculinist blackness to express their political radicalism, Frank Chin turned to black masculinity to recover the lost virility of Asian American men. *The Chickencoop Chinaman* has been the subject of extensive literary criticism. But remarkably little attention has been paid to its racial dynamics, and literary critics have generally failed to properly historicize the play as a product of the Black Power period. Reading the play within this context opens it to interpretations of its delicate intertwining of race, gender, and sexuality.

Finding Asian American masculinity lacking, Tam and Kenji turn toward black men as role models. In particular, they idolize a boxing champion named Ovaltine Jack Dancer. Chin links Asian American men to black men specifically through their penises. At one point, Tam and Kenji fondly remember how they had once been driving with Ovaltine, when all three of them had stepped outside the car and begun "pissing in the bushes." Amid this reflection, Kenji recalls the previous time he had urinated with a black man. While visiting New Orleans, he couldn't decide whether to use the segregated white or black facilities. A "black dishwasher," seeing his "plight," guided him to the black restroom and they had stood together pissing into adjacent urinals (20). The dishwasher resolved Asian American racial indeterminacy by directing Kenji away from whiteness and toward blackness.

Later, when Lee, the only Asian American woman in the play, insists that she's "just one of the boys," Kenji facetiously suggests that she "go out by the car and piss in the bushes" (25). Lee's inability to do so further emphasizes the phallic link between Tam and Kenji and the various African American men. Furthermore, Lee, who is only part Chinese and can pass for white, is thus granted only partial status as an Asian American.

Tam initially travels to Pittsburgh to track down Charley Popcorn, whom the boxer Ovaltine claims as his father, in order to make a movie exploring how this “mighty Daddy” made his son into a great fighter (14). Ovaltine maintains that he was inspired to be a fighter when he saw his father’s “mighty back ripplin [*sic*] with muscles” and covered with “whiplash scars.” According to this genealogy, Ovaltine derived his own masculinity from his father’s manliness, which was stymied by racial oppression, as even Popcorn’s rippling muscles had not exempted him from the Jim Crow humiliation of whipping. Ovaltine goes on to assert that as an adolescent, he had physically beaten a white boy, an act that symbolically redressed his father’s degradation. Fearing the consequences, Ovaltine and Popcorn had fled in their automobile. When clear of danger, they had stopped, stepped out of the car, and stood “pissin [*sic*] by the roadside” (48). By partaking in the ceremonial urination, Popcorn had bestowed upon Ovaltine his masculinity—signified by his phallus and redeemed by his son’s transgressive resistance—and Ovaltine does likewise with Tam and Kenji. Popcorn begets Ovaltine. Ovaltine begets Tam and Kenji. Masculinity and racial pride flow from the Adamic black father to his figurative Asian American sons.

This tidy story of masculine descent disintegrates almost immediately. Upon hearing Tam relate Ovaltine’s story, Popcorn first denies that he is Ovaltine’s father, then pulls up his shirt to reveal a smooth, scarless back (48-9). Charley Popcorn, bearing no whiplash marks and being “nobody’s father,” fails to be the virile progenitor Tam seeks (63). The revelation that Ovaltine’s past is fictitious suggests Chin’s ambivalence toward Asian American romanticization of blackness. Though acknowledging that performances of blackness played an instrumental role in galvanizing Asian American considerations of their racial positioning, Chin indicates that blind imitation will ultimately prove insufficient. Tam and Kenji begin by performing blackness to recuperate their masculinity, but ultimately find blackness to be an unsatisfactory model for Asian American identity.

His dreams of masculine descent from blackness crushed, Tam turns to Asian American history as a source of manly endeavors. Earlier, Lee had expressed disapproval of people trying to “make it on the backs of blacks,” a metaphor that Chin enacts literally (20). In a soliloquy between scenes, Tam sits astride Popcorn’s back as he recalls the day his white wife left him, a story emphasizing his emasculation at the hands of a white woman. He concludes with the Chickencoop Chinaman’s lament, “Buck Buck Bagaw,” the phrase recalling Chinese American male impotence (51-2). At his lowest point, weak and humiliated by a white woman, Tam relies on a black man to hold him up. However, in the next scene the men reverse positions: Tam hoists Popcorn onto his back. As he carries Popcorn upstairs, Tam shouts, “We built the fuckin [*sic*] railroad. Moved a whole Sierra Nevada over” (53). This reversal signals Chin’s departure from the model of black masculinity and a turn—expressed more fully in later works—toward excavating Asian

American heroism in historical acts like building the railroad (Chin, *Chinaman Pacific*; Chin, *Donald Duk*).

In the play's final scene, Kenji announces that he and Lee are expecting a baby (64). Impending fatherhood marks the end of his impotence, which is achieved only through establishing a phallic connection to black men, first in New Orleans with the dishwasher and later on the roadside beside Oualtine. In *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Asian American men regain their masculinity by taking hold of their phalluses, alongside black men doing similarly.

### Conclusion

Despite their divergent politics, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, both the Red Guard Party and Frank Chin performed blackness as a way to conceptualize Asian American identity, resist assimilation, and build multiethnic solidarity. However, both the Red Guards and Chin founded their versions of racial solidarity on problematic notions of masculinity.

Performances of black masculinity by the Red Guard Party and Frank Chin did not exhaust the range of possibilities for Asian American subjectivities. Instead, their late 1960s versions of Asian American power, which tended to marginalize women and homosexuals, required substantial revisions. Women in the Asian American movement commonly confronted sexism, within both organizations and personal relationships. Like others in the New Left, some Asian American women were relegated to performing menial tasks, struggled to be heard on matters of ideology and strategy, and faced opposition when they sought leadership positions (Wei 75-76; "Asian Women as Leaders" 297-98). Asian American women also confronted men who sought control over the sexuality of "their" women and saw them simply as "legit lay[s] for the revolutionary" men (Wei 76-77; Tanaka 109). But the Asian American women's movement was not separatist, and instead sought to make women's liberation central to the larger Asian American movement (Ling 51-67). Indeed, the Asian American women's and antiwar movements opened new spaces for Asian American women to develop "sisterhood" with each other and develop leadership skills (Geron and Lee). Women like Pat Sumi, Evelyn Yoshimura, and Carmen Chow performed key, visible leadership roles within the Asian American movement. Asian American feminism was perhaps the most important development of this period (Chow 284-99; Lim 570-95; Yang 162-172; R.C. Lee 8-11; Lowe 33-34).

During the early 1970s, the gender ideologies and practices of the Asian American left underwent dramatic contestation. *Gidra*, the premiere movement periodical, published a special issue on women and men in 1972. IWK and its chief rival, Wei Min She, organized female sweatshop workers in 1974 and 1975 ("Political Summation of the Jung Sai Strike"; "Who Dares to Make Waves?"; Wei 210-11). By 1975, declarations linking women's oppression to U.S. imperialism and capitalism were obligatory. However, these

changes in the Asian American left were not mirrored by Frank Chin, whose convictions about gender and sexuality remained steadfast.

As the Asian American women's movement demonstrates, the Red Guards and Chin were by no means solely responsible for shaping the category "Asian American." Activism by Filipino, Korean, and Japanese Americans, which I have not discussed here, contributed vitally to its formation. Since 1965, new migrants have radically altered its ethnic composition and immigrant status, and technological innovations have made its national boundaries more porous. Yet the challenge to twenty-first-century Asian American identity remains the same as it was in 1969: how to make sense of a landscape marked by fissures of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, and how to build political solidarities that bridge these rifts (Lowe 60-83). At the birth of Asian America, the Red Guard Party and Frank Chin demonstrated through their performances of blackness both the power and limitations of organizing around racial identity.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Espiritu labels this solidarity "Asian American panethnicity." I propose instead the admittedly somewhat unwieldy term "multiethnic Asian American racial identity," because it underlines the process of racialization that binds Asian ethnic groups together.

<sup>2</sup> Although Wong, Dirlík, and Lowe allow for complexities in the origins of Asian American identity, they tend to argue that American nationalism formed its basis.

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