Empowerment, Discrimination, and the Façade of Leadership: Asian American Political Elites' Failed Assimilationist Strategy

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I. INTRODUCTION

On November 8, 2006, the day after the midterm Congressional elections, the 2008 presidential campaign season officially began. The media began to tell and will continue to retell predetermined stories regarding the role of Black Americans as core to the Democratic Party, the rising political power of Latino voters, or the importance of certain demographics of White voters. The story that likely will not appear on the

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1. See, e.g., Diane Cardwell & Jonathan P. Hicks, On West Coast, A Lesson Plan for Ferrer Bid, N.Y. TIMES, May 20, 2005, at A1 (“The incumbent in Los Angeles, James K. Hahn, was viewed as a lackluster leader who had turned off some key constituencies, particularly black voters.”); Political Grapevine, Fox Special Report with Brit Hume (Fox News Network television broadcast Apr. 8, 2005) (Tim Roemer (D), Fmr. Indiana Representative: “Church-going African Americans . . . are starting to peel off to some degree the Democratic Party. That’s something I think the Democratic Party needs to be greatly concerned about.”); Frankie Edozien, Ferrer’s Flub a Big Time Bloc-Buster, N.Y. POST, Mar. 17, 2005, at 4 (“Ferrer’s new assertion that the police shooting wasn’t a crime will tar him with the devastating flip-flopper label and alienate a key constituency—African-Americans.”).

2. E.g., Stephen Ohlemacher, Dems Recapture a Big Part of Hispanic Vote, ASSOCIATED PRESS, Jan. 9, 2007, available at http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/politics/16415695.htm (“Latinos could be important swing voters in the 2008 presidential election.”); African-American Vote and Issues of Import to Black America (National Public Radio broadcast Oct. 28, 2004) (Juan Williams: “[T]he Latino vote is becoming more and more important, and I think you see that in the strategies of the campaigns. Lots of money expended in terms of ad buys, etc. in the Hispanic media market.”); Debra Dominguez, Kerry, in N.M., Pitches Hope, ALBUQUERQUE J., Oct. 24, 2004, at A1 (“Today, political experts are calling Hispanics the ‘New Margin of Victory’—a giant so wide awake in the 2004 U.S. presidential election that the Republican and Democratic parties have never tried harder to court it.”).

3. E.g., Mark J. Penn, Swing Is Still King at the Polls, WASH. POST, Mar. 21, 2006, at A17 (“In 1996 we identified soccer moms as the critical swing voters. Today they remain at the center of the swing vote.”); see also J. Michael Parker, Presidential Voting Also Will Be Test of Faith, SAN ANTONIO
front page of the *New York Times* or as CNN Headline News' top story of the hour is the political force of Asian Americans. Though Asian Americans are the second-fastest growing racialized population in the United States, they are not yet a key demographic in United States elections. To the contrary, the most recent foray into national politics by Asian Americans trying to claim electoral influence has been described as a "scandal," and one can question whether or not the Asian American electorate is seen as little more than as a pariah.

This situation can be blamed on leadership failures within the community. The perceived leadership, Asian American elites, has adopted an assimilationist discourse. This leads to two problems: first, it undermines the empowerment value of pan-ethnic Asian American identity, leaving Asian American communities underserved; second, it leaves all Asian Americans vulnerable to recurring and predictable discrimination. For the purposes of this paper, the "elites" of the Asian American community are individuals who are perceived to legitimately claim to represent or lead the community. This perception may be satisfied either internally or externally; though claims to leadership may be advanced through significant community recognition, elite status may also be ascribed to individuals or groups by influential or powerful outsiders. Though this definition may encompass more than one group of Asian American leaders who purport to represent the community, the Asian American elites described in this paper are entrepreneurially-minded, business-oriented individuals who took up the mantle of leadership after the dissolution of the grassroots, community-centric Asian American Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. I argue that in the case of Asian American elites, perceptions of leadership have been conferred initially by external recognition, but that the failure of Asian American community activists—primarily those former Asian American Movement veterans inhabiting influential pulpits within academia—to critique the elites as possessing no more than a façade of representative value makes these activists complicit in the elites' mistakes. By legitimizing Asian American elites, these veterans of the Asian American Movement have betrayed not
only their legacy of pan-ethnic unity, but also the motto of the Movement to "serve the people." Rather than legitimizing the façade of leadership and assimilationist discourse adopted by the elites, those concerned with Asian American empowerment should engage in issue-centric mobilization, a process wherein campaigns around "bread-and-butter" issues affecting Asian American communities are utilized to develop trust, relationships, and a stronger pan-ethnic coalition.

In Part II, this paper will describe how Asian American identity was shaped, first by external ascription and then through community self-definition. The development and history of Asian American identity explain the rise of the elites, and also serve as a backdrop against which the damage they have done to the goal of community empowerment can be measured. Elite adoption of an assimilationist discourse is analyzed, and shown to subject the Asian American community to both material harm and threats of violence. In Part III, this paper examines three routes to empowerment taken by other "outsider" groups and determines that frameworks designed by and for other groups do not provide a viable empowerment blueprint for Asian Americans. Instead, this paper proposes a program of issue-centric mobilization that addresses the specific characteristics of Asian American populations. Finally, in Part IV, this paper concludes that issue-centric mobilization can be built upon the work of Asian American legal service organizations, but that true Asian American leadership must come from the communities impacted directly by the issues that mobilization campaigns address.

II. OPPOSITION AND ASSIMILATION: A HISTORY OF ASIAN AMERICA AND THE IMPACT OF ELITISM

Given historical and contemporary barriers to the advancement of Asian Americans within institutional centers of power, it is important to distinguish the Asian American elites from individuals who wield widespread influence and control throughout the entirety of United States society, a stratum that may be called the "dominant elite." Unlike the dominant elite who wield the power to change the way millions work, eat, and live, Asian American elites possess only illusory influence over a
community that is at best a coalition of diverse ethnicities, languages, religions, classes, and political ideologies. Thus, these elites are more an image of leadership than actual representation; elite status for these individuals does not extend far beyond the general perception of mainstream American society that they speak for a unified interest, and even this perception is no more than a façade. Moreover, these elites are not representative of Asian American populations. Unlike the community-based, activist leaders of the Asian American Movement, the current elite are political entrepreneurs and business people who recognized the potential for profit from the image of pan-Asian American identity. This part analyzes the development of pan-ethnic Asian American identity and traces how current elites came to gain their status. It also traces the consequences of “assimilationist discourse,” their chosen path to recognition.

A. Impact of Immigration and Citizenship Laws on the Demographics of the Asian American Community

The extent and uniqueness of the Asian American community’s diversity is neither an accident nor an organic development. It is a result of United States policy, explicit and implicit. Through federal and state legislation, Asian Americans have been simultaneously excluded from economic and social opportunities. Concrete limits on employment and entrepreneurial options, such as laws restricting ownership of agricultural land, taxing non-White miners out of the Gold Rush, and over-regulating and bureaucratically burdening Asian American businesses all operated to limit the degree to which Asian Americans could enjoy the “American Dream.” Though overt legislative appeals against the “Yellow Peril” no longer present absolute bars on employment or ownership,
unwritten professional and corporate practices have maintained certain areas and levels of advancement that remain off-limits to Asian Americans. Related legislation prevented meaningful integration of Asian Americans with other populations of United States society; a century of bars on citizenship, marriage, and participation in the political and legal processes removed Asian Americans from consideration as "real Americans."

Not only were the lives of Asian Americans restricted in the United States, but immigration from Asia during most of the twentieth century was constricted to barely a trickle. Shifting United States interests in the post-World War II period led to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which suddenly reopened immigration from Asia. This was not unlimited immigration, however, and the new Asian immigrants have largely been


20. In re Ah Yup, 5 Savy. 155 (D. Cal. 1878); In re Saito (D. Mass. 1894); Ozawa v. United States, 260 U.S. 178 (1922); United States v. Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923) (overturning United States v. Balsara, 180 F. 694 (2d Cir. 1910), in which a federal court ruled that Indians were Aryan descendants and Caucasian). Balsara had allowed more than 70% of Indians arriving around 1910 to naturalize, but this number declined sharply until 1923, when Thind held that Indians are not White. Sanjeev Khagram et al., Seen, Rich, But Unheard?, in Asian Americans and Politics, supra note 13, at 258, 262.

21. Marriage licenses, Cal. Civ. Code § 69 (1880); Illegal marriages, Cal. Civ. Code § 60 (amended 1905); Married Women’s Citizenship Act (Cable Act), ch. 411, § 3, 42 Stat. 1021 (repealed 1934) (causing any White woman who marries “an alien ineligible to citizenship” to lose her citizenship). Despite anti-miscegenation laws, there is evidence that Asian Americans found love and family across racial lines, sometimes resulting in prosecution, but sometimes aided by the complicity of sympathetic government workers. See Roots in the Sand (PBS 2000). However, Asian Americans are now most likely to marry across racial lines, a change that may speak more to an assimilationist strategy and socialization rather than greater acceptance by other racial groups. Cf. Paul R. Spickard, What Must I Be?: Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity, in Asian American Studies: A Reader 254, 254-65 (Jean Y.S. Wu & Min Song eds., 2000).

22. As Asian Americans were barred from citizenship until 1943, they could not exercise the most basic political right of voting. See supra note 18. Moreover, Asian Americans were denied any legal voice; laws intended to bar African Americans from testifying against White defendants similarly applied to Asian American witnesses. People v. Hall, 4 Cal. 399 (1854); see also Lem Moon Sing v. United States (1895) (stripping federal district courts of jurisdiction to review habeas corpus petitions for Chinese landing in the United States).


wealthy businesspersons and highly-educated professionals.26 The Act, creating a quota of 20,000 individuals from each country in the Eastern Hemisphere, reserved 20% of this quota for “professionals, scientists, and artists of ‘exceptional ability’” and “workers in occupations with labor shortages.”27 Additionally, there was a non-preference category for immigrants able to invest $40,000 in a business in the United States.28 The result of the new law reflecting new United States interests was a dramatic upsurge in highly-educated and wealthy Asian immigrants.29 While this new “brain-drain” strategy equally applied to some other immigrant populations,30 the fact that the Asian American population was previously much smaller—only 0.5% of the total population—meant that the dramatic population influx resulting from the new immigration laws dramatically changed the demographics and occupational role of Asian Americans.31 This shift from a rule of exclusion to limited access for middle-class and professional populations effectuated the new role for Asian Americans in the United States.32

As a result of this intentional limitation and manipulation of the demographics and opportunities of the Asian American population, it can be said that Asian Americans are a “model minority” insofar as the legal, political, and economic policies of the United States have “modeled” the minority community to fit a designed role. The model minority theory asserts that Asian Americans are easily integrated into “mainstream” American society due to shared racial characteristics of hard work and family values.33 Yet, in practice, the theory both subordinates the differences within the pan-ethnic community34 and, more importantly, ignores historical and continuing strategies of racism employed to control and regulate the size and role of Asian Americans within United States society. In the earlier period of industrialization during which the United States required cheap menial labor that could undercut the wages of the resident working class, the law allowed for the importation of Chinese and

27. § 3, 79 Stat. at 913. Comparatively, the Act reserved only 6% of the quota for political refugees. Id.
28. Id.
29. According to the 2000 Census, 42.5% of immigrants from Asia had a college degree, compared to 23.1% of native-born Americans; 6.8% had an advanced degree, compared to 2.6% of native-born; and 34.3% had a “high skill occupation,” compared to 19.8% of native born. Le, supra note 26.
30. Of immigrants from Africa, 43.8% have college degrees and 8.2% have advanced degrees. Id.
31. Out of all immigrant and native-born groups, Asian immigrants have the highest number of individuals in a “high skill occupation.” Id.
32. Id.
33. Infra note 176.
34. Infra Part II.C.
other Asian laborers; once these populations no longer served the economic benefit of industrialists, they were barred from immigration. In the post-World War II period when the United States sought “high-tech coolie labor” to fill the vast new military-industrial complex, the law was changed to bring in the “occupational and educational elite.” During both periods, as well as contemporarily, official and unofficial policies have limited the degree of wealth accumulation, institutional influence, and social integration of Asian Americans. Thus, it is more accurate to describe Asian Americans not as a model minority, but as a modeled minority, a population imported and racialized to fill niche labor markets while denied the opportunity for complete integration into the nation. It is also a perpetual political minority. After being barred from immigration for the better part of a century, Asian Americans currently compose only 4.3% of the national population, and only 12.2% in California, the highest concentration outside of Hawaiʻi. Despite being the second-fastest growing racial group in the United States, the exclusion of Asian

35. There is a striking similarity to the Bracero Program, which even more clearly sought to exploit Mexican laborers for a limited period, after which they were to be expelled. Agreement of August 4, 1942, For the Temporary Migration of Mexican Agricultural Workers to the United States, as Revised on April 26, 1943 by an Exchange of Notes Between the American Embassy at Mexico City and the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at http://www.farmworkers.org/bpaccord.html. In the case of Asian laborers, expulsion was social, but equivalent; barred from citizenship, they and their physical presence in the United States were constantly at the mercy, or lack thereof, of the government. C.f., e.g., Executive Order 9066, 3 C.F.R. 1092, 1092-93 (1938-1943 Compilation).

36. WOO, supra note 19, at 11.


39. See CENSUS BUREAU, USA QUICKFACTS, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html (last revised Jan. 12, 2007) [hereinafter USA QUICKFACTS] (reflecting the total population of Asian American and Pacific Islanders). Including those who listed Asian American as well as other races, this number increases to 4.3% of the national population. Id.


41. Hawaiʻi is 50.5% Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islanders. CENSUS BUREAU, HAWAII QUICKFACTS, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/15000.html (last revised Jan. 12, 2007). This demographic is consistent with the controlled entry of Asian Americans into the United States. However, a large numbers of laborers from China, Japan and the Philippines were brought to work on the plantations of United States-based corporations. See generally RONALD TAKAKI, PAU HANA: PLANTATION LIFE AND LABOR IN HAWAI'I, 1835-1920 (1984); Library of Congress, Hawaii: Life in a Plantation Society, American Memory, http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/japanese2.html.

42. The Asian American population grew between 48% and 72% from 1990 to 2000, the former number considering only those who listed Asian as their sole race and the latter number considering those who listed Asian as any of their races. CENSUS BUREAU, THE ASIAN POPULATION: 2000 3 (Feb. 2002), http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-16.pdf.
immigrants for seventy years may have irreparably reduced the potential numerical, and thus political and social, strength of even an organized Asian American community.\(^{43}\)

Given the degree to which the entry and status of Asian Americans appears to have been stage-managed, it is not surprising that the Asian American Movement that signaled the coalescing and empowerment of the community was both one of the last as well as perhaps the least civilly disobedient identity-based civil rights movements that roiled the United States from the 1950s to the early 1980s.\(^{44}\)

**B. The Asian American Movement of the Late 1960s to Early 1980s**

In 1968, students of color at San Francisco State University engaged in a “Third World Student Strike,” the longest student strike in the history of the United States.\(^{45}\) A year later, students at Berkeley struck.\(^{46}\) These two strikes are considered the pivotal point in the Asian American Movement (hereinafter the “Movement”), the “coming out” party for Asian Americans in the United States. Although the Movement was in many ways a young movement, it was neither exclusively a youth movement nor a student movement.\(^{47}\) Nor were the seminal events of the Movement exclusively focused on Asian Americans. The strike, for example, was organized by the Third World Liberation Front, a multiracial coalition pursuing interests common to all students of color, such as establishing curricula recognizing the history and social realities of communities of color.\(^{48}\) Elements of the Movement attempted to operate in a manner parallel to that of the Black Panther Party, focusing on inner-city community development, social services such as supplementary education and drug rehabilitation, and economic nationalist efforts.\(^{49}\) Inspired by the


\(^{45}\) *Infra* Umemoto, note 64.

\(^{46}\) Id.

\(^{47}\) *See generally ASIAN AMERICANS: THE MOVEMENT AND THE MOMENT* (Steve Louie & Glenn Omatsu eds., 2001).

\(^{48}\) Umemoto, *infra* note 64.

THE FACADE OF LEADERSHIP

anti-colonialist and Black Nationalist movements, the Movement was rhetorically radical, calling for the empowerment of underserved populations and racial justice at a time when such calls strongly repudiated the status quo.\(^{50}\) However, an examination of the legacy of the Movement belies the heroic memories of Movement stalwarts.\(^{51}\) Although they were locally successful, the radical and community-centric elements of the Movement did not draw the recognition throughout large segments of the pan-ethnic community that was necessary for a lasting impression. Movement-related organizations such as the Yellow Brotherhood, Asian American Hard Core, Asian Sisters, I Wor Kuen, and the Red Guard, working within their own racially segregated, economically deprived neighborhoods, are not imbedded today within a greater Asian American consciousness. Aside from the strikes, the most memorable event of the Movement may be the failed effort by community and student activists to prevent eviction of elderly residents from, and the destruction of, the International Hotel in San Francisco’s Manilatown.\(^{52}\) Though the cooperation between students (who were simultaneously participating in the strikes) and community members is heartwarming,\(^{53}\) the inability of the coalition to stop the removal of low-income housing stands more as a testament to either the unstoppable forces of “urban redevelopment” or the impotency of Asian American political power even at the height of the Movement.\(^{54}\)

The failures of the Movement are not, however, due to the lack of commitment by community-focused activists. To the contrary, it was the external institutionalization of the Movement’s successes and the capitulation of activists to the lure of secure jobs that prevented the programs of self-sufficiency and empowerment from developing into long-

\(^{15}\) AMERASIA J., Spring 1989 at 69, 75; Gary Asamura, Unsung Heroes of the Yellow Brotherhood, 15 AMERASIA J., Spring 1989 at 156, 156-58.

\(^{50}\) See e.g., WILLIAM WEI, THE ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT 41 (“Although the antiwar movement politicized a generation of Asian Americans, the Black Power movement moved them toward the goals of racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment.”).

\(^{51}\) Mar, infra note 55. For accounts from Movement veterans in their own words, see generally ASIAN AMERICANS, supra note 47.

\(^{52}\) After the destruction of the International Hotel, Manilatown disappeared completely, giving way to the contemporary Financial District. Bobby Caina Calvan, Monument to Filipinos’ Legacy Rises in San Francisco, BOSTON GLOBE, July 7, 2005, at A3.

\(^{53}\) WEI, supra note 50, at 22.

\(^{54}\) The nationalist elements of the Movement sought to address the needs of community shopkeepers and low-income residents in the face of urban renewal schemes that dramatically affected Chinatowns, Manilatowns, and Japantowns. See MICHAEL OMI & HOWARD WINANT, RACIAL FORMATION IN THE UNITED STATES 109 (1994). Lack of reference to the parallel of these battles with encroachment by developers on the remaining Japantowns today sadly speaks to the failure of these community-driven efforts to entrench themselves in the memory of the Asian American community. See e.g., Charles Burress, Lively Rally at City Hall to Preserve Japantown; Some Fear District’s Cultural Character Will be Disrupted, S.F. CHRON., Mar. 15, 2006, at B10.
standing pillars of a continuing movement. As government funding entered the scene, the Movement’s community centers replaced the neighborhood “street kids,” whose energy had created dynamic youth programs that addressed the problems they themselves faced, with outsider “professionals.” The most often cited Movement victory, the establishment of Asian American studies courses and programs on college and university campuses across the nation, also succumbed to external pressures. Despite initial democratic decision-making and nonhierarchical pedagogy within the new ethnic studies and Asian American studies classes, the dominant university model had no long-term tolerance for this outlier from the traditional stratification of the collegiate educational dynamic. Like the Movement’s youth programs, the new discursive Third World space on college campuses was soon “professionalized,” and its rigorous adherence to the norms of higher education became the preferred path to integrating its ideologies into academia and gaining widespread intellectual respect. Though such “professionalization” of college programs and community centers ensured a certain degree of financial security and mainstream legitimacy, reliance on external, non-community sources for both support and affirmation removed the element of self-sufficiency, and an emphasis on high standards supplanted the people-powered character of these programs.

The dissolution of the Movement was not inevitable. Critiques that blame the Movement’s end on the often leftist, militant nature of the community-centric elements of the Movement substantiate the theory that the weakening of the Movement was primarily a result of a loss of ideological coherence, as such critiques are made by the beneficiaries of the external institutionalization of the Movement, rather than by Movement activists themselves. While it is true that the Asian American community lacked the racial and ethnic cohesion of a homogenous “Asian American culture” necessary to successfully execute a cultural nationalist project,

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55. Warren Mar, From Pool Halls to Building Workers’ Organizations, in ASIAN AMERICANS, supra note 47, at 33, 44-45, 47.
56. Id. at 44; Ray Tasaki, Wherever There Is Oppression, in ASIAN AMERICANS, supra note 47, at 81, 86.
58. From my personal experience as an Ethnic Studies undergraduate, critical studies-derivative fields such as ethnic studies, including Asian American, Chicana/o and Black studies, or gender studies have become some of the most difficult and intellectually rigorous courses available. This is possibly overcompensation, the new scholars’ penance for the belief of the ‘60s and ‘70s Movement scholars that education need not be top-down.
59. Hirabayashi & Alquizola, supra note 57, at 353.
60. Mar, supra note 55, at 46.
61. See Chris Iijima, Pontifications on the Distinction Between Grains of Sand and Yellow Pearls, in ASIAN AMERICA, supra note 47, at 3, 7 (Steve Louie & Glenn Omatsu eds, 2001); Hirabayashi &
the Movement was nonetheless cohesive in its progressive politics and oppositional discourse. Creating a “counter-narrative . . . to the white supremacist narrative and culture about the inferiority of people of color, and Asians in particular,” was the core unifying goal of the Movement. Unlike a cultural nationalist project where strengthening of common identity is the desired result, the creation of a pan-ethnic identity within the Movement was a means to a progressive, interethnic, and democratic repositioning of Asian Americans in relation to both other peoples of color as well as the dominant White power structures. As a rejection of their status as a modeled minority, the Movement refused the imposed role as standard bearer for status quo racial power dynamics. Thus, the moments that most shaped the Movement were not those of self-reflection, but rather those of solidarity: the alliance of Third World Liberation Front member group Philippine-American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE) with community residents and activists of Japantown in the attempt to prevent the destruction of low-income housing; Japanese American support of the 1970 Red Power Alcatraz takeover; and, of course, the participation of Asian American students in the Third World student movement and strikes.

The loss of an oppositional narrative marks the point at which Asian American studies programs became “regular” academic departments and when the Movement lost its revolutionary ethos, and with it the vibrant, independent voices that served as leadership from within the community. With much of the Movement’s former cadre now embedded in academia, government, or government-funded community service projects, the concept of a pan-ethnic Asian American identity was no longer attached to the progressive and radical political projects of the 1960s and 1970s. In this sense, the Movement’s identity-building function had backfired; the community now thought of itself as Asian American, but for no purpose other than self-racialization. This dearth of leadership and decline in the

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Alquizola, supra note 57, at 357-60. Some Movement elements nonetheless attempted a cultural nationalist project, such as the Basement Workshop in Manhattan. See, e.g., Iijima, supra, at 3-14.


63. See Iijima, supra note 62, at 7 (explaining that identity-creation within the Movement was not intended to be definitional, but rather ideological).


65. Steve Louie, When We Wanted It Done, We Did It Ourselves, in ASIAN AMERICANS, supra note 47, at xv, xix.

66. The transition of 1960s and 1970s activists to academia is not unique to members of the Movement. Similarly, members of Black Power movements such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) now continue their work through writing and teaching. For example, former BPP member Angela Davis has taught at UCLA, Harvard, and San Francisco State University; former BPP spokesperson Kathleen Neal Cleaver has served on the faculties of Emory, Cardozo, Sarah Lawrence, and Yale; former BPP Chief of Staff David Hilliard taught at the University of New Mexico; and former BPP member Jamal Joseph teaches at Columbia University.

67. See, e.g., Louie, supra note 65 at xv (noting the rise of a racist, nationalist Asian American youth culture dubbed “AzN PrYde”).
purpose of Asian American pan-ethnic identity created an opening for a
group of “elites” who sought to fill this void with the appearance of
representation. Unfortunately, Movement veterans in many ways
endorsed the elites and lent credence to their assimilationist strategy, an
error that has had detrimental material consequences for Asian American

C. Current Demographic Information and the Effects of Elitism

The legitimization of the Asian American elites is not simply an
ideological or political betrayal of the Movement; rather, it is a betrayal of
the Movement’s mission to “serve the people.” Pan-ethnic Asian
American identity was an effort to create solidarity across different class,
ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural communities. It was not an attempt
to reinforce the external racialization of these populations, but rather to
recognize the need to aid and empower all parts of the community as a
matter of social justice. The Movement’s attempt at creating a pan-ethnic
identity was a means, not an end. In attempting to create a pan-ethnic
identity, the Movement sought to utilize the power of coalition to gain
resources for the communities within the coalition, rather than establishing
unity for the sake of unity. By surrendering control of political capital and
media representation to the elites, Asian Americans suffer in substantive
ways. As the primary goal of both Beltway and business elites is access-
oriented rather than community-oriented, issues of poverty, housing, and
discrimination are either ignored or approached without reference to the
views of the affected populations. Considering that Asian Americans are
affected by these issues of social injustice as much as, or, in some areas,
more than both the population at large and other racialized groups, dire
consequences arise from the failures of the elite in representing the interests
of the community.

Contrary to the “model minority” myth, which presumes that shared
cultural values or inherent racial characteristics have brought Asian
Americans material success to be emulated by other racialized populations,
the population is slightly more likely than the population as a whole to live
in poverty. Eight of eleven Asian American ethnic groups are
substantially more likely to live in poverty than the rest of the United States

68. *Infra* Part II.D.
70. By access-oriented, I refer to the core objective of elites as one of gaining access to
craftsmakers for self-interested purposes; this is opposed to the core objective of Movement activists of
creating substantive improvements for their communities. *Infra* Part II.D.
71. *Terrence J. Reeves & Claudette E. Bennett, Census Bureau, We the People: Asians in
[hereinafter *We the People*]. According to the 2000 Census, 12.6% of all Asian Americans live in
poverty, as compared to 12.4% of the total population; in 1999, the poverty threshold for a family of
four was $17,029, not including unrelated children under the age of 15 living in the household. *Id.*
Furthermore, looking at the groups with large populations immigrating as a result of war in Southeast Asia, it becomes evident that the populations least likely represented among the Beltway and business elites are also the most impoverished. Among the most severely underprivileged Asian American ethnic groups are Southeast Asian Americans, with a poverty rate of 16% among Vietnamese Americans, 18.5% among Laotian Americans, 29.3% among Cambodian Americans, and 37.8% among Hmong Americans; also underrepresented Pacific Islanders have a poverty rate of 17.7%. As a comparison, the average poverty rate of “Hispanic” populations is 22.6%; the most impoverished ethnic groups are Dominican Americans, at 27.5%, and Puerto Ricans, at 25.8%; the black poverty rate is 24.9%; and the American Indian and Alaska Native poverty rate is 25.7%, with a rate of 38.9% for Sioux and 37% for Navajo. When elites ignore issues of poverty by blindly devoting resources and the image of Asian American support to candidates unsupportive of anti-poverty measures, and when the façade of leadership allows policymakers to look at Asian Americans as a monolith, there is a serious danger that decision makers are ignoring issues such as welfare aid and other government assistance programs that would greatly improve the quality of life of many Asian Americans. As discussed in the next section, in 1996, the elites supported the reelection of President Bill Clinton, who in

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72. Those groups are Cambodian, Chinese, Hmong, Korean, Laotian, Pakastani, Thai and Vietnamese Americans. Id. The number increases to nine when including Pacific Islanders. CENSUS BUREAU, WE THE PEOPLE: PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN THE UNITED STATES 17, available at http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/censr-26.pdf [hereinafter PACIFIC ISLANDERS]. The three groups with a lower poverty rate than the general population were Pilipino, Indian, and Japanese Americans. WE THE PEOPLE, supra note 71, at 17. I use “Pilipino” rather than the dominant “Filipino” in solidarity with West Coast students and other activists resisting the colonialism inherent in the external Romanization of Tagalog, a prevalent language used in the Philippines and by the Diaspora. There is, however, an argument that both terms are appropriate in different situations. See, e.g., Penelope v. Flores, Pilipino vs Filipino (June 2002), http://www2.seasite.niu.edu/tagalogdiscuss/_disc2/000007c3.htm.

73. See infra Part II. D; infra note 96. Six of the nine national advocacy and lobbyist organizations involved in the 1996 strategy are ethnic group-centric, none of them centered on the Southeast Asian American communities. Additionally, four of those groups purport to represent one of the three Asian American ethnic populations with poverty rates lower than the national rate. Id. Also unrepresented among this group of Beltway elites purporting to represent the “Asian American and Pacific Islander” communities are Pacific Islanders.

74. WE THE PEOPLE, supra note 71. A decade earlier, the United States Commission on Civil Rights estimated dramatically higher poverty rates for these groups, with rates of 67.2%, 65.5%, 46.9%, and 33.5% for Laotians, Hmong, Cambodians and Vietnamese, respectively. Mylihn Uy, Tax and Race: The Impact on Asian Americans, 11 ASIAN L.J. 117, 131.

75. PACIFIC ISLANDERS, supra note 72.


many dramatic ways operated against the interests of social justice for Asian Americans.\textsuperscript{79}

Complacency by elites also negatively impacts Asian Americans in the areas of education and community development. Not surprisingly, the Asian American populations most affected by poverty also suffer from lower levels of education, in some ways more so than Blacks, Latinos, and American Indians and Alaska Natives.\textsuperscript{80} When elites seek to maximize their purported influence by claiming to represent a unified or homogenous Asian America, they contribute to the myth that Asian Americans have no difficulty in securing educational options. If the pan-ethnic community is viewed as a monolith, this may be the case: 44.1% of Asian Americans attain a bachelor’s degree or higher, as compared to just 24.4% of the United States population as a whole.\textsuperscript{81} Of course, Asian Americans are not a monolith; the modeled minority strategically racialized through United States immigration policy, as discussed above, has created a population that is not just diverse, but fragmented. Middle-class, highly educated professionals and upper-class business people not only skew the statistics for the 69% of foreign-born Asian Americans,\textsuperscript{82} but the socioeconomic status and resources of “brain-drain” groups also ensure that their subsequent generations are likely to have high levels of educational attainment. Thus, though Indian Americans—who are largely from post-1965 immigrant families—have a median income nearly $21,000 greater than the national median and an incredible 64% of their population over 25 years of age has a bachelor’s degree or higher,\textsuperscript{83} Hmong Americans have a median income nearly $18,000 less than the national median and a staggering 59.6% of Hmong Americans over 25 has less than a high school education.\textsuperscript{84}

Failure by elites and policymakers to address class diversity not only between ethnic groups, but also within individual ethnic groups perpetuates inaccurate pictures of the needs of Asian American populations. For example, although the Chinese American community has a median income of $60,058, $10,000 higher than the national median, it also has a poverty rate of 13.5%, higher than the national rate.\textsuperscript{85} As is reflected in the Asian

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Infra} Part II.D.

\textsuperscript{80} See \textsc{Stacey J. Lee \& Kevin K. Kumashiro}, \textsc{National Education Association}, \textsc{A Report on the Status of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Education: Beyond the “Model Minority” Stereotype} 2 (2005), available at http://www.nea.org/teachexperience/images/aapireport.pdf (citing low educational attainment for Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian American groups and reporting that a smaller percentage of Southeast Asian Americans receive bachelor’s degrees than the other major racialized groups).

\textsuperscript{81} \textsc{We the People}, \textit{supra} note 71, at 12.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Id.} at 9.

\textsuperscript{83} \textsc{Lee \& Kumashiro}, \textit{supra} note 80.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Id.} at 3; \textsc{We the People}, \textit{supra} note 71, at 12, 16.

\textsuperscript{85} \textsc{We the People}, \textit{supra} note 71, at 16-17.
American population as a whole, class differences within the Chinese American community directly affect levels of education due to a gap in resources. While 48.1% of Chinese American have a bachelor's degree or higher, a larger percentage than the national percentage, 23% of Chinese Americans do not have a high school diploma, also greater than the national average. By perpetuating the model minority myth and presenting more privileged Asian Americans as the norm, elites cover up the dramatic internal income and education gap between Asian American communities, perpetuating media representations and policymaker beliefs that Asian Americans do not suffer from the civil rights dilemma of the undereducation of racialized populations in the United States does not apply to Asian Americans.

The dangerous effects of the elites' disengagement can also be seen in the area of community and capital development. Home ownership has long been the core of building both communities and capital in the United States. Asian Americans have a lower home ownership rate than the national average, a sad fact that applies to both the Asian American population as a whole and to each ethnic group covered by the Census. Though low home ownership rates may be due to factors such as discrimination and high immigrant populations, the lack of improvement in trends signals that policymakers are ignorant or dismissive of the problem. When Fannie Mae, the national mortgage and lending company, as well as state analogs, targeted racialized communities with down payment and loan assistance as well as programs educating realtors on how to serve these communities, the home ownership rate of people of color increased, except for that of Asian Americans. These agencies probably based their initiatives on the misleading statistic that Asian American houses had the highest average value—at $199,300—of any group in the United States, and decided that the group did not need any assistance. It would not have been difficult for committed advocates to refute this claim in light of the fact that Asian Americans are concentrated in regions of the country with the highest cost of living; 45% of Asian Americans live in Hawai‘i and

86. LEE & KUMASHIRO, supra note 80.
88. Among all occupied units (homes) in the United States, 66.2% are owned; comparatively, only 54.8% of Asian Americans own their homes, with a low of 38.7% of Hmong American homes and a high of 60.8% of Japanese American homes. WE THE PEOPLE, supra note 71, at 18. In 2002, 74.7% of Whites owned their homes. Uy, supra note 74, at 136. Though the ignorance about and perpetuation of this problem is an effect of self-serving elite, the low rate among even Japanese Americans, who have been part of the United States for over a century and have the highest percentage native-born population, is the effect of discriminatory United States policies during much of the twentieth century. WE THE PEOPLE, supra note 71, at 9; supra Part II.A.
89. Uy, supra note 74, at 137.
90. Id.
California, where the average home values are $272,700 and $211,500, respectively, the two highest average values in the country. Asian American houses are below average in value, signaling that assistance from federal and state housing agencies is still needed. It is probable that the agencies either failed to make this connection or were under no pressure to accept such an analysis. Had elites possessed both true influence and a genuine concern for community access to capital-building home ownership, it is likely that they could have successfully lobbied to include Asian Americans in the directed assistance programs. Too busy trying to present themselves in a way that maximizes the number of smoky cloakrooms into which they can gain entry, the elites’ acceptance of their role as a modeled minority has caused material injury to both the standard of living and the potential for community development of Asian Americans. These real-world implications of the assimilationist discourse are reflected in the series of events that became known as the 1996 Campaign Finance Scandal, as discussed below.

D. Who Speaks for Us?

Power, Politics, and the 1996 Fundraising “Scandal”

The Movement’s quick replacement by the elites as the voice of Asian America is surprising. By the mid-1980s, the assimilation of many of the Movement’s leaders into academia and other institutions created a dearth of leadership within the newly-formed community. To complicate matters, the Movement’s activists were no longer representative of the Asian American population. The anti-colonialist struggles in Southeast Asia of the late 1960s and the 1970s that had inspired the Movement had also brought to the United States large populations of asylum seekers and refugees. Unlike the first group of post-war period Asian immigrants brought into the United States as part of the “brain-drain,” the new populations were characterized by their status as persons displaced by war. Thus, they not only represented a more heterogeneous cross-section of their native countries than the “brain-drain” educational and business elite, but they also came to the United States with fewer financial and educational assets. Increased diversity of language, culture, and distinct histories,

91. Id. This problem is compounded by the fact that Asian Americans are eight times more likely to live in crowded housing within urban areas than Whites. See Kenyon S. Chan, U.S.-Born, Immigrant, Refugee, or Indigenous Status, in ASIAN AMERICANS AND POLITICS, supra note 13, at 212.
93. Wei, supra note 50, at 150.
politics, and conflicts converged with the fact that the new population groups were not present during the Movement, rendering Asian American academics and other former leadership unable to authentically speak for the changing community.\footnote{See supra notes 92-94; Parts II.B-C.}

These circumstances provided opportunities for politically entrepreneurial individuals. With a new Asian American identity fresh in the minds of politicians and the media, politicos began to look for ways to benefit from this perceived Asian American mobilization.\footnote{E.g., Angie Chung, Swaying a Swing Vote, \textit{Sunday Oregonian}, Oct. 24, 2004, at D01.} This view, however, rested in large part on perceptions of Asian Americans as the “model minority” who was either in pursuit of or had achieved the “American Dream.”\footnote{E.g., John Reid Blackwell, \textit{Asian-Owned Businesses Rising}, \textit{Richmond Times-Dispatch}, May 17, 2006.} Politicos were either ignorant of the radical community organizing that had characterized much of the Movement or else had no desire to replicate or encourage such activity. Moreover, this view presented Asian Americans as a monolith, the type of racial essentialism resisted and challenged by the Movement. It is not surprising, then, that those individuals who took advantage of this situation were not Movement veterans, but rather those who were comfortable perpetuating the position of Asian Americans as a modeled minority. Business-oriented individuals saw the possibilities of acting as liaisons between policymakers and the “community,” even if the community they purported to represent was a façade; the media-driven myth of an Asian American population with shared cultural norms and loyalty to their establishment leaders.\footnote{Robert G. Lee, \textit{Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture} 182-83 (1999).}

The freshly minted leadership of Asian Americans, the “business elite,” is not composed of Movement sympathizers. They are the benefactors of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, bumped to the head of waiting lists through connections and United States desire for their capital.\footnote{Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Pub. L. No. 89-236, 79 Stat. 911 (1965) (giving immigration preference to highly educated and skilled workers).} They are business owners in ethnic enclaves, members of Chambers of Commerce,\footnote{For example, Jimmy Lee, the Executive Director of the Office of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders, was also the Executive Director of the Chicago Chinatown Chamber of Commerce. \textit{The White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, About Us}, http://www.aapi.gov/aboutus.htm (last visited Mar. 24, 2007).} who were likely unhappy with Movement labor agitation because it threatened their personal financial interests.\footnote{Mar, supra note 55, at 43.} Though the elites may be occasional philanthropists,\footnote{See Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, http://www.aapip.org/about.php.} they have, by and large, rejected grassroots community organizing as a strategy for increasing the political standing of Asian Americans, most likely because increasing such
standing is of marginal concern for them. Their primary concern is increasing their own access to policymakers, and thus their own influence and ability to profit from that influence.

A key incident that serves to frame the inherent flaws of surrendering even the façade of representation to these elites is the 1996 campaign finance “scandal.” During President Bill Clinton’s reelection campaign, Democratic National Committee (DNC) leadership believed there was some aspect of the Asian American community that could be used to the campaign’s advantage. The Asian American business elite, being more comfortable with financial transactions than community empowerment, responded enthusiastically to the proposal that they serve primarily as a major fundraising network for the Democratic Party. John Huang, a former executive at an Indonesian-based multinational banking conglomerate, was chosen by Ron Brown, then the DNC Chair, to serve as the vice chair of the Finance Committee and as “the point man for ‘the Asian American outreach.’”

Thus, the façade of representation was two-fold; not only were Huang’s “outreach” efforts no more than a euphemism for fundraising, but this fundraising was not even directed at the actual Asian American community. Rather, these primarily business-oriented leaders who lacked the organizational know-how and ideological commitment to develop political participation within the community, even in the form of donations, instead turned to transnational business people to seek out huge sums of soft money.

In working towards his goal of raising $7 million for the DNC, Huang also stage-managed “Beltway elites,” national Asian American advocacy and lobbyist organizations acting under the pretext of the Movement’s ideals, but, as with other legacies of the Movement, staffed by “professionals” rather than community-based leadership.


105. Id. at 110. “Soft money” is money that can be used for a variety of purposes by a political party organization, including bolstering the campaign advertising of candidates who are bound by much stricter regulations; most soft money has been limited by the McCain-Feingold Campaign Finance Reform Act. 2 U.S.C. §§ 441i, 441k, 441a-1, 433a (2006); 56 U.S.C. § 510 (2006).

106. Wang, supra note 104, at 109. Among the groups involved in the 1996 strategy based within the Beltway of Washington, D.C. were the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), Organization of Chinese Americans (“OCA”), Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus Institute (CAPACI) (now known as the Asian American Institute for Congressional Studies (APAICS)), Filipino Civil Rights Advocates (FilCRA), National Conference of Korean American Leaders (NCKAL), Indian
Beltway elites may provide a net benefit to Asian American populations—
their participation in the 1996 strategy was to legitimize and provide cover
for Huang’s efforts to finance the reelection of a president whose neoliberal
economic program of welfare reform and punitive immigration legislation
were both antithetical to the Movement’s progressive social justice
ideology and in opposition to the interests of large segments of the Asian
American population.\footnote{107} Engagement in such behavior makes Beltway
elites no more representative of Asian American communities than the
business elites who claim the mantle of leadership.

The 1996 strategy proved disastrous for both business and Beltway
elites. In October 1996, the New York Times and Wall Street Journal
published a "series of sensational exposés on what became known
variously as 'Donorsgate,' 'Asian Donorsgate,' and the '1996 Campaign
Finance Scandal.'\footnote{108} Huang and other Asian American fundraisers were
accused of having gathered donations illegally, from foreign sources and
tax-exempt Buddhist temples.\footnote{109} Beltway elites who were at the time
already in the process of creating the public perception of widespread
support of Asian Americans for the Democratic Party and President
Clinton, were called in to defend the strategy and Huang.\footnote{110} Among these
defenders were academics and professionals from the Movement,\footnote{111} who,
while legitimately criticizing the racist and xenophobic tenor of the media
and Republican attacks,\footnote{112} failed to explain why the strategy was itself

Promotion of anti-immigrant sentiment and decrease of social benefits to the most impoverished are
both deleterious to the Asian American community, which is 69% foreign-born and includes ethnic
groups with extremely high poverty rates; for example, Hmong Americans suffer from a 37.8% poverty
rate, three times the national average. \textit{WE THE PEOPLE}, \textit{supra} note 7\textsuperscript{1}, at 9, 17.}

\footnotetext{108}{Wang, \textit{supra} note 104, at 110, 108 n.24 (citing, e.g., William Safire, \textit{The Asian Connection},
A17 (discussing the accused illegality of donations from transnational Indonesian businessman James
through the Indonesian-based multinational banking conglomerate the Lippo Group, of which Huang
was a former executive); William Safire, \textit{Huang Huang Blues}, \textit{N.Y. TIMES}, Nov. 4, 1996, at A27; Peter
Waldman, \textit{East Meets West: By Courting Clinton, Lippo Gains Stature at Home in Indonesia}, \textit{WALL


\footnotetext{110}{Wang, \textit{supra} note 104, at 111.}

\footnotetext{111}{E.g., Frank H. Wu & Francey Lim Youngberg, \textit{People from China Crossing the River: Asian
American Political Empowerment and Foreign Influence}, in \textit{ASIAN AMERICANS AND POLITICS}, \textit{supra}
note 13, at 311, 311-30.}

in \textit{ASIAN AMERICANS AND POLITICS}, \textit{supra} note 13, at 79, 93-96. In this endeavor, the academics and
Beltway elite were successful in alerting the Asian American community to the bigotry underlying
attacks by the Republicans. My father, a self-proclaimed “foreign policy Republican” for several
decades, was outraged enough by the anti-Asian rhetoric to switch his political affiliation.
acceptable to the interests of Asian American populations. Moreover, by failing to critique the obvious flaws of the strategy, namely the complete dearth of political engagement between the so-called Asian American leadership and actual Asian American communities, Movement academics and professionals painted over a strategy of disempowering Asian American populations, thereby maintaining the façade of the elites’ leadership.

E. Assimilate Our Rights Away: The Assimilationist Discourse

The 1996 strategy is an example of the dangers of an assimilationist approach to power and integration in United States society. It is also a disturbing measure of the degree to which elites have adopted an assimilationist discourse. The assimilationist discourse is a major discourse in the United States; it is the discourse that has spawned the myths of the “American Dream,” meritocracy, and most applicably, the “model minority.” Much like the leadership of elites, the discourse is a façade; instead of covering the elites’ desire for access, assimilationism covers the “dominant” elites’ interest in the perpetuation of a hierarchical status quo. As there is material injury to Asian Americans due to the complicity of their self-anointed elites, there is material benefit to dominant social groups in the maintenance of the assimilationist discourse. In the context of a system of White supremacy, the benefits of the status quo and assimilationist discourse are what George Lipsitz calls “the possessive investment in whiteness.” At its core, assimilationism enshrines the valuation of Whiteness, granting White Americans birthright capital in the color of their skin. The myth of assimilation is that persons of color operate within the same meritocratic society as Whites, and that by throwing off their self-segregating cultural beliefs, people of color will become “normal” people and progress unhindered, as “ethnic-Whites” have.

Unlike ethnic-Whites, Asian Americans are racialized “others.” An


116. I use “ethnic Whites” to refer to populations with significant populations descended from mid-nineteenth century European immigrants; though these groups, such as Irish and Italian Americans, suffered initial xenophobic and religious discrimination, they have successfully “assimilated” and become beneficiaries of Whiteness. Harris, supra note 115, at 1772-74.

117. Id. at 1791. Contra Panel, Shifting Model Minorities: Comparing the Jewish and Asian American Political Experience, Eleventh Annual National Asian Pacific American Conference on Law and Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge Massachusetts (Mar. 5, 2005) (some have argued that Asian Americans are the equivalent of an ethnic White group,
important element of the racialization of Asian Americans is the “perpetual foreigner” trope; the societal belief that Asian Americans are culturally alien and will never be “real Americans” speaks directly to the implausibility of the myth of assimilation as a means to integration. As racialization is an external phenomenon perpetuated by dominant social groups in furtherance of hierarchies of power, assimilationists’ claim that it is self-identification by people of color that blocks their own progress is ludicrous. Thus, when Asian American elites participate in assimilationist discourse, they are adopting White supremacy. Those who surrender to assimilationism are doing no less than accepting Whiteness as dominant and acceding to their perpetually inferior position within the racial hierarchy, the position of a modeled minority designed to legitimate discrimination and inequality against both Asian Americans and other racialized populations. For a racialized group that was designed to fit particular roles in United States society, Asian Americans, due to the actions of the elites, have fulfilled dominant interests brilliantly.

In creating a pan-ethnic Asian American coalition, the Movement sought to create greater political empowerment for all Asian Americans. However, the assimilationist discourse of elites has instead exacerbated community disempowerment. For example, Asian American elected officials are more likely to find electoral success in majority-White districts, or districts without substantial Asian American populations. This “deracialization” strategy, based on the fact that Asian Americans are perceived as a threat by non-Asian American populations in districts with substantial Asian American populations, benefits individual Asian American politicians in winning elections, so long as they do not seek to represent Asian Americans. Stated another way, Asian Americans are more likely to be elected where they appeal to “universal” (read: White norm) ideals, and are more likely to be elected if they choose to run where few Asian Americans live, and if they do not present themselves as representatives of Asian American issues. By buying into the “model minority” trope, elites have set the Movement’s progress backwards; actual political mobilization by substantial Asian American populations are less likely to be taken seriously when those with access to the ears of policymakers speak about community issues only in assimilationist

and, citing the high rate of intermarriage between Asian Americans and Whites, believes that Asian Americans will cease to be a racialized population in the future).

118. Ikemoto, supra note 23; William Y. Chin, Severing the Link Between International Tension and Discrimination against Asian and Arab Americans, 13 INT’L LEGAL PERSP. 8, 10 (2002).


121. Id. at 79.
The greatest harm caused by assimilationist discourse is public ignorance regarding discrimination and violence against Asian Americans. Because Asian Americans are subject to nativist racism, they are both subject to continued structural racism in domestic society and also are predictably targets of violence when the United States involves itself in foreign affairs, which it often does. Such violence and discrimination can be and has been applied by both state and individual actors. State violence against Asian Americans includes the placement of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II; domestic espionage and censorship of Chinese Americans during the Korean War; racial profiling of Chinese American scientists and the scapegoating of Dr. Wen Ho Lee in the paranoia over the rise of Chinese economic, political, and military power; and the illegal detainment and surveillance of Muslim, Arab, and South Asian Americans following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Unfortunately, violence perpetrated by individuals against Asian Americans is also common. Historically, such violence includes attacks on Chinese American railroad laborers and business owners in the late-nineteenth century; assaults on Chinese and Japanese Americans after the attack at Pearl Harbor; the 1982 Detroit, Michigan murder of Vincent Chin during the downturn in the United States auto industry due to Asian competitors; the 1999 San Fernando Valley, California murder of Pilipino American postal carrier Joseph Ileto; and the September 15, 2001 Mesa, Arizona murder of Sikh American gas station owner Balbir Singh Sodhi. These are not isolated incidents, but rather a frightening reality of life for Asian Americans in the United States—Asian Americans are more likely per capita to be victims of a hate crime than Whites, Blacks, Latinos, or Jewish Americans. Assimilationist discourse, in

122. Assimilationist terminology such as “universal,” “normal,” “regular,” and “real” are often euphemisms for “White.” See, e.g., Harris, supra note 115, at 1771.
123. Chin, supra note 118, 8-10.
124. Id. at 8-9.
defending the status quo and asking racialized populations to ignore much of the discrimination against them, weakens the defense Asian Americans have against such violence. Without a collective political will to force policymakers to address such violence and other deprivations, Asian Americans become helpless in the face of "perpetual foreigner" trope-based violence and discrimination.

III. WHO WILL SAVE OUR SOULS?: FRAMEWORKS FOR EMPOWERMENT

Assimilationist discourse is ineffective in protecting and promoting the interest of Asian Americans. It is a strategy for disempowerment, one that results in the ignoring of problems and the appearance of support for policies that are detrimental to social justice and the Movement's mission of "serving the people." It is clear that a different strategy is needed. In this Part, I examine three frameworks utilized by other racialized and ethnic groups. Using strategies within these different frameworks, other groups have been relatively successful in empowering their communities and in gaining greater political and social recognition of their concerns. However, these frameworks tend to apply specifically to the groups that have used them due to the unique characteristics of those communities. As such, this Part will also look at the inapplicability of the characteristics of Asian American populations to these frameworks. Instead, I propose that the route to empowering Asian Americans draws from the lessons of the Movement in focusing upon issues and building cross-racial alliances around those issues. There is evidence that this strategy can succeed.

A. Three Paths Used By Others

Professor L. Ling-chi Wang proposes three possible strategies for political empowerment: (1) massive mobilization of grassroots power and voters around issues of civil rights and social welfare; (2) organization of urban wards and creation of machine politics to gain government contracts and appointments; or (3) concentrated campaign contributions to key politicians in key states. 131 Different ethnic and racialized groups have used these strategies to varying success. Although Wang appears to attribute the entirety of political empowerment by these groups to their particular strategy, it should be noted that other factors, such as the possessive investment in Whiteness or cross-racial alliances, significantly impacted the political development of these diverse populations. 132 What follows is a brief examination of the paths that groups socially excluded as "others" previously, and in some cases currently, took to empowerment.

131. Wang, supra note 104, at 106.
132. See supra note 115.
1. Grassroots Mobilization: African Americans and Latinos

Active participation by large segments of the population require "clear articulation of critical issues resonating within the community" and institutions and networks able to mobilize grassroots education and registration campaigns. Both African Americans and Latino Americans possess these institutional traits in a form that Asian Americans do not. The seminal moment of grassroots mobilization in the United States was the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and the incredible unity of the African American population. The CRM was in many ways a continuation of the powerful tradition of the slavery abolitionist movement a century earlier. Likewise, the Black Power movement, including both revolutionary and cultural nationalist ideologies, grew from CRM organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Based largely out of Black churches, the CRM, like its abolitionist predecessor, utilized a common language of oppositional readings of the Bible to inspire Black communities. They used their voices and bodies to demonstrate their resistance to White supremacy and the Jim Crow hierarchy. The CRM mobilized the Black population in a way that has not been replicated by any other group. Although Blacks have not achieved proportional representation in the Congress, with only forty-two Representatives and one Senator in the last Congress, or 8% of the total members of Congress as compared to the 12.8% of the United States population that is Black, the Congressional Black Caucus is an impressively powerful and influential caucus. Perhaps more importantly, Black elected officials come primarily from districts with large, organized black communities, meaning that these leaders are directly accountable and representative of the interests of their racialized group. This is not surprising considering that Black Americans have a 60% voter turnout rate among their citizen
population; though not quite as high as the turnout rate for White Americans, it is dramatically higher than the rates for Asian Americans and Latinos.\footnote{Kelly Holder, Census Bureau, Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004 6 (2006), available at http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf.}

Although voting at lower rates than Black Americans, Latino Americans have arguably also pursued a grassroots mobilization strategy. In the 109th United States Congress, there were twenty-three Latino Congresspersons and two Latino Senators, comprising 4.7% of the total members of Congress as compared to the 14.4% of the United States population that is Latino.\footnote{John P. Schmal, Latino Congressional Representation (1965-2000), HispanicVista.com, http://www.hispanicvista.com/HVC/COLUMNIST/jschmal/080805jschmal.htm (last visited Mar. 24, 2007); USA QUICKFACTS, supra note 39.} Aside from these electoral numbers, however, Latino Americans share institutions of a common language of Spanish and a high rate of membership in the Roman Catholic Church.\footnote{BARRY A. KOSMIN ET AL., GRADUATE CENTER OF THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, AMERICAN RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION SURVEY 2001, available at http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_studies/aris.pdf (Dec. 19, 2001).} Thus, Latino Americans are able to utilize grassroots strategies with visible success. In the recent rallies in support of immigrants and against proposed immigration laws with nativist and racist overtones, Latino Americans participated in civil demonstrations in unprecedented numbers.\footnote{Rang-Gong Lin II & Arin Gencer, The Immigration Debate; Gearing Up, and Girding for, Protests, L.A. TIMES, May I, 2006, at Al.} This forced Congressional Republicans to pull the most punitive of measures from the table.\footnote{Sydney Blumenthal, The GOP Begins to Implode, SALON.COM, http://www.salon.com/opinion/blumenthal/2006/05/18/immigration_bush/index.html (May 18, 2006).} An effective strategy of grassroots mobilization requires a common, unifying language, such as the biblical metaphors used in the CRM, clear definition of common interests, and networks that can be effectively utilized for voting and other mobilization efforts. Unfortunately, Asian Americans lack all of these prerequisites. In terms of institutions and networks, Asian Americans do not share common religious networks. None of the four largest religious self-categorizations of Asian American adults exceed twenty percent of the community, and those four self-categorizations—Catholics, Agnostics/No Religion, Protestant, and Buddhist—differ dramatically in religious services, facilities, or lack thereof.\footnote{There are approximately 7,740,755 Asian American adults in the United States; in a 2001 study of Asian American adults, 1,526,190, or 19.7%, self-identified as Catholic; 1,474,050, or 19%, are either Agnostic or said they had no religion; 701,940, or 9.1%, are Protestant, including Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Episcopal, and Churches of Christ; and 660,020, or 8.5%, are Buddhist. See KOSMIN ET AL., supra note 144, at 13, 35; WE THE PEOPLE, supra note 71, at 1, 6.} A category including all self-identified Christians is still only 34.3% of the population.\footnote{There are 2,653,830 Asian Americans who identify as any kind of Christian. KOSMIN, supra note 144.} Although some Asian American communities...
have had alternative community organizations, such as Chinese "benevolent associations," participation in these groups has declined,\(^{149}\) likely in part due to assimilationist discourse. Moreover, Asian Americans, unlike Black Americans or Latino Americans, do not share a common language. In 1990, 38.4% of Asian Americans reported that they did not speak English "very well," while 24.2% reported living in linguistically-isolated households; meanwhile, there are ten different Asian languages spoken in the United States by more than 100,000 people.\(^{150}\) Unlike Latino Americans, who are in many ways a comparable pan-ethnic community with high percentages of immigrant population, Asian Americans do not share a non-English common language like Spanish across their various national origin backgrounds.

A related difficulty for Asian American populations in pursuing a grassroots mobilization strategy is the existence of barriers to finding common ground and common issues. Many Asian Americans are so-called "foreign-policy" voters; similar to the Cuban American community, they are expatriates, refugees, and exiles who care a great deal about the future of the country from which either they or their recent relatives have immigrated.\(^{151}\) Though the Movement sought to create a pan-ethnic identity that would alleviate differences in foreign-policy preferences between various Asian American groups, the continued arrival of new immigrants as well as an increase in the diversity of Asian America since the Movement have complicated and diluted successes of the Movement. It would seem that given the high percentage of immigrants in the Asian American communities, immigration would be a rallying point. However, there is a phenomenon, not exclusive to the Asian American immigrants, wherein assimilation-minded immigrants come to oppose immigration, "encouraged toward unseemly self-interest as if their own full admission is hastened by closing the door behind them."\(^{152}\) Without creative mobilization efforts, more institutional networks, and educational and community efforts to build consensus around common concerns, it does not appear likely that a grassroots empowerment framework is the best fit for Asian Americans.


Although assimilationist discourse describes the integration of ethnic White groups, for example, Irish and Italian American descendants of populations that immigrated to the United States between 1892 and 1924,


\(^{150}\) Chan, supra note 91, at 213-14; Saint Ignatius High School, Languages Spoken in the United States, http://www2.ignatius.edu/faculty/turner/langus.htm (last modified June 21, 2004).

\(^{151}\) Nakanishi, supra note 13.

\(^{152}\) FRANK H. WU, YELLOW: RACE IN AMERICA BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE 242 (2002).
as the primary example of how groups once socially excluded are now considered "normal," the reality is that these populations engaged in organized efforts to empower themselves. More importantly, the creation of a political, ward-based machine relies on characteristics of ethnic solidarity and dense, segregated enclaves. Due to discrimination, ethnic White populations lived in concentrated neighborhoods, which in turn allowed them to organize through intensive "machines," or systems of hierarchical population management for the purposes of electoral success, utilizing both coercion and benefits to entice participation.

It is clear that, as with grassroots mobilization, Asian Americans lack the community characteristics to create political machines in the fashion of nineteenth-century ethnic Whites. First, Asian Americans are the most geographically dispersed racialized group in the United States. Unlike the ethnic White populations, Asian Americans, for the most part, are no longer concentrated within dense urban ethnic ghettos. The ward and precinct captain system depends on tight-knit communities with daily personal interactions; given that 44.6% of Asian Americans work in the professional sector where they are more likely to be isolated from other workers even when neighbors work in the same facility, nominal daily face-to-face communication is difficult.

Perhaps more important than the characteristic differences between Asian Americans and ethnic Whites is the role that external perception played in the integration of ethnic Whites into White society. Machine politics were successful for ethnic Whites because of their participation in the discourse of Whiteness, a type of participation that is shut off to Asian Americans. Ethnic Whites actively engaged in racism in order to differentiate themselves from racialized populations. On the East Coast, ethnic Whites were the primary consumers of "minstrel shows" that caricatured Black Americans. On the West Coast, ethnic Whites were the founders of the Workingman's Party, a xenophobic political organization infamous for both street violence against Asian Americans and successful efforts to limit the civil rights of Asian Americans in California and across the country. Although some media representations seek to paint a similar image of Asian Americans participating in racist behavior in order to climb the ladder, such as the trope of Korean American corner store owners who

153. Harris, supra note 115.
154. See generally TAKAKI, supra note 114, at 139-65.
155. Wang, supra note 104, at 106.
156. There may be exceptions. Jason Kosareff, Festival to Celebrate Japanese Heritage, SAN GABRIEL VALLEY TRIB., Apr. 22, 2005. There are also still large Asian American communities in suburban and exurban areas, but these are few and far between. David Pierson, Dragon Roars in San Gabriel, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 31, 2006, at B1.
158. Harris, supra note 115, at 1743.
159. LEE, supra note 98, at 67-72.
profit by depriving African Americans of the entrepreneurial opportunities and scarce resources of their communities,\(^{160}\) the reality is that even if Asian Americans wanted to be overt racists, such actions would not be equally profitable. So long as Asian Americans are subjected to such tropes as the “perpetual foreigner,” discussed above, and the racial threat of a “yellow peril” of “millions of yellow men” menacing the Western World,\(^{161}\) the “master narrative” of White supremacy excludes Asian Americans from being considered “real” Americans, in spite of any betrayal of other oppressed populations.\(^{162}\) Racialized populations, unlike ethnic Whites, are unable to benefit from the Whiteness gained by distinguishing themselves from other racialized groups; machine politics that depend on a community being eventually accepted as White is a strategy unavailable to Asian Americans.

3. Fundraising Politics: Jewish Americans

Without community cohesiveness and established institutional networks, the first two frameworks do not appear to work as an empowerment strategy for Asian Americans. A third possible framework is to gain influence through strategic fundraising for and donations to candidates for elected office. By organizing so that key decisionmakers are beholden to the financial support of a group that is otherwise politically insolvent, a group can wield disproportionate political influence and ensure that their goals are met.\(^{163}\) A population seeking to utilize this framework requires: (1) some community unity; (2) substantial disposable wealth and income; and (3) a tradition of generous giving.\(^{164}\)

One theory of Jewish American political empowerment points to just such a strategy.\(^{165}\) If electoral success of candidates of the same group as the organizing community is a sign of empowerment,\(^{166}\) Jewish Americans have been dramatically successful; the 109th Congress included eleven

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161. Wu, *supra* note 152, at 13-14. The term was popularized by famous American novelist Jack London in a 1904 essay of the same name, in which he warns that the numerous Chinese under Japanese masters threatened Anglo-Saxon supremacy. *Id.*

162. The “master narrative” is “white supremacy's prescriptive, conflict-constructing power, which deploys exclusionary concepts of race and privilege in ways that maintain intergroup conflict.” Ikemoto, *supra* note 23, at 1582-84.


164. *Id.*

165. *Id.*

166. Of course, such a presumption requires many assumptions that I do not seek to prove. Some individuals or communities may have more reason than others to believe that an identity, whether personally chosen, part of a heritage, or externally ascribed, is significant enough to warrant supporting a candidate who shares that identity; other individuals or communities may disagree. My point here is only to provide a comparison between the electoral success of candidates within Professor Wang’s empowerment frameworks.
Senators and twenty-six Congresspersons, or 6.9% of the total members of Congress, as compared to approximately 1.8% of the total United States population that is Jewish. Another measurement of the support of elected officials for a community would be to look at support of key issues of the community regardless of the race, ethnicity or religion of the given policymaker. Using this measurement, the percentage of Congresspersons supportive of Jewish American interests is much higher. Jewish Americans meet the first framework requirement of community unity through religion and a widespread understanding of the history of oppression that they have faced, leading to the creation of a myriad of religious and general Jewish organizations. Yet this theory seems to be missing a step; it does not explain how a group that is historically oppressed arrives at the framework’s second and third requirements of both disposable income and a tradition of giving. It would seem that a tradition of giving also requires a cohesiveness of community concerns and goals to spur frequent and continuous giving, as well as institutional networks through which leaders could encourage and maintain levels of donations.

In 1996, Asian American elite attempted this very same strategy in what ultimately became the DNC campaign finance “scandal.” Possibly due to some combination of a desire for expediency and the lack of a tradition of giving among wealthy Asian Americans, the elites did not seek to raise funds from the community. Instead, they turned to transnational businesspeople who, understandably, were driven by their transnational business interests rather than the domestic economic and social justice concerns of Asian Americans. Thus, elites abandoned a key element of this framework; by fundraising from the community, this empowerment strategy seeks to hold elected officials accountable to their financiers, the community. When the financial dependency exists outside of the community, elected officials follow the money, not the media charade created by Beltway elites.

Elites additionally ignored the framework’s most important aspect, which is that fundraising is supposed to be targeted to key candidates. Buying into the assimilationist discourse that working for and alongside the existing holders of power will lead to substantive gains, elites ignored the fact that fundraising for the DNC was the least targeted fundraising available. The DNC, at the time a center for soft money, decides on its own which candidates to give money to; as vice chair of the DNC Finance Committee, John Huang was given a quota of $7 million to raise, and aside


from arranging photo opportunities for Beltway Asian American leaders, that was the entirety of his role.\textsuperscript{170} He was not a decisionmaker on issues of distribution of soft money. Moreover, in a presidential election year, it was assumed that a great amount of the DNC’s fundraising would be funneled towards President Clinton’s reelection campaign. President Clinton was not a key candidate within the framework; not only had he demonstrated that his interests were not the same as the most vulnerable segments of the Asian American pan-ethnic community, but he also did not depend on the fundraising of the elite. Compared to the $2.4 billion raised and $2.2 billion eventually spent in the 1996 elections, the $7 million target of John Huang was completely insignificant.\textsuperscript{171} Asian American elites, even when successfully portraying themselves as the leadership of a monolith of “Asian America,” would not have been the key supporters of the President, even if the 1996 strategy had run its course without scandal. Proper use of the framework would have entailed large donations to candidates in significant need of funds who not only would respect and advocate the needs of Asian Americans, but would prove a crucial figure in key votes.

Undoubtedly, effective fundraising and strategic financial support for political champions are important components to comprehensive social change of any kind. Moreover, the mistakes of the 1996 “scandal” do not presuppose that Asian Americans might never successfully utilize this third empowerment framework. Yet as past experience has shown, hoping that donations alone will buy social and political empowerment for the Asian American community as a whole is currently a distant dream. A community infrastructure is needed to ensure the legitimacy of targeted candidates and the responsibility of fundraisers, in addition to encouraging a tradition of giving. Without such support and oversight by representative members of a pan-ethnic Asian American coalition, indiscriminate giving to candidates often unaligned with community interests simply adds a new facet to the modeled minority role: donors to whom elected officials owe no loyalty. As this framework does not provide a route for developing such grassroots infrastructure, alternative approaches must be considered.

\textbf{B. Our Own Path: Issue-Centric Mobilization and Coalitions}

A peculiar moment in the aftermath of the Movement came when activists sought greater diversity in the way that the government classified Asian American populations. The Movement was successful; political pressure was applied so that, for purposes of gaining increased recognition and directed assistance for specific groups, Pilipino Americans, Vietnamese Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Native Hawaiians are identified separately from Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and “Other

\textsuperscript{170} Wang, \textit{supra} note 104, at 108-09.

\textsuperscript{171} Id. at 111.
This particular campaign is perhaps more understandable within the context of the Movement; although the Movement sought to create a pan-ethnic coalition and an Asian American identity, it nonetheless recognized the diversity of issues facing different ethnic populations within the coalition. The Movement was never a single organization, but a series of local, community-based operations, often ethnically-based. Organizations supported each other out of solidarity, a shared sense of social justice, and also when their interests overlapped. Primarily, the Asian American identity that the Movement sought to create was not the monolithic model minority of the assimilationist discourse, but rather an oppositional unity and the assertion that all people racialized as Asian American stood together in respect of both their heterogeneity as well as their shared commitment to “serving the people,” a pan-ethnic self-definition that rejected the status of the community as a modeled minority. Thus, if separate categories for the purposes of social services increased access and benefits to Pilipino American, Vietnamese American, Pacific Islander, and Native Hawaiian populations, the Movement supported that goal. It can be speculated that had the Southeast Asian American population been significantly established during the time of the Movement, they too would now have their own category for social service purposes. As the Movement's surprising victory shows, a strategy for empowerment must be pragmatic.

Asian Americans may not have a common language or institutional networks, but as with all racialized groups in the United States, they are all subject to the common threat of violence and discrimination. Efforts to combat this common threat, however, do not necessitate acting in unison constantly; such behavior submerges important distinctions and often subordinates the very real and specific social ills of certain populations, such as Southeast Asian Americans, for the more “universal” issues that impact more established and higher class elements of the coalition. Attempts to generalize Asian American culture and norms are ways of thinking that are irrelevant to the Asian American experience. In fact, such attempts reinforce media representations and policymaker assumptions of Asian Americans as the model minority; even the phrase “Asian culture” tends to dilute the significance of diversity within the community.
Asian Americans must forge their own path, one that recognizes the reality of external racialization while focusing on individual concerns. The lessons of the Movement seem to point towards issue-centric mobilization, a strategy of simultaneously building trust and solidarity within the pan-ethnic community while also discovering how to build cross-ethnic empathy and cohesion in the tradition of the powerful Asian American identity that the Movement sought to create. Rather than focusing exclusively on electoral influence, activists, organizers, lawyers and other concerned individuals in the Asian American community need to target specific issues of immediate impact, the so-called “bread-and-butter” issues. By organizing around maintaining or creating low-cost housing or improving working conditions and wages, for example, they can win substantive and short-term victories. Such victories will lend organizers authenticity and legitimacy in their claims to leadership that the elite have never possessed. Concurrently, they will build relationships and understanding between different communities that can be used as a platform to future campaigns. Though “bread-and-butter” campaigns are also part of the grassroots mobilization framework, there is an important difference—with grassroots mobilization, a perceived established community is organized to support a campaign, whereas with issue-centric mobilization, a campaign is organized to identify and strengthen a community. Thus, the definition of the coalition for a given issue is not predetermined, and any persons, neighborhoods, groups or communities that the issue affects directly become part of the new community.

This has implications regarding interracial alliances. At a local and personal level, issues such as access to health care and zoning of toxic facilities affects communities across racial lines. Issue-centric mobilization encourages multi-racial coalitions. The remaining pillar of the Movement, Asian American studies programs, was achieved through coalition with other students of color. A multi-racial, issue-specific coalition can win specific victories for specific racialized groups within the coalition without detriment to the others. As discussed in Part II.C, Asian American populations may share with other groups such concerns relating to “bread-

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well as the fact that other ideologies, for example Marxism and derivative communist thought, are much more influential in the post-1965 era than ancient teachings. Compare, e.g., Scott Cantrell, Chinese Pianist Strong Players in Cliburn This Year, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, May 15, 2005, at 1G (commenting on how Confucian tradition values discipline, hard work and respect for elders) with LISA LOWE, IMMIGRANT ACTS: ON ASIAN AMERICAN CULTURAL POLITICS 16 (1996) (utilizing the anti-colonialist conception of the imperial center in explaining Asian immigration patterns as a result of United States imperialism). Such rhetoric perpetuates “Orientalism,” the belief that Asian Americans are mysterious, mystical, unknown and dangerous creatures, rather than human beings. LEE, supra note 98, at 27-28, 113-17.

177. Wang, supra note 104, at 106.

and-butter" issues, among others, of home ownership, education, and poverty. Though such interracial coalitions are certain to face enhanced difficulties due to diverse experiences and communicative styles, the issue-centric nature of the alliance provides a strong unifying element. The Movement’s successful campaign of winning distinction of certain ethnic groups from Asian Americans in general demonstrates that with a concrete social justice goal in mind, a multitude of communities can unite in order to win differing benefits.

Unlike the three proposed frameworks, issue-centric mobilization is not limited by an existing coherency of the target population. Though Asian Americans are geographically dispersed, issue-centric mobilization provides the opportunity for affected persons to participate in the campaign in different ways. Direct participation can be achieved on a national scale through fundraising, pressuring of secondary targets, and media contact. Although issue-centric mobilization is a strategy that is not exclusive to Asian Americans, and may be quite useful to other racialized communities with diverse populations, it is specifically suited to revitalizing the results-motivated pan-ethnic cooperation envisioned by the Movement insofar as Asian Americans are one of the most dispersed, most institutionally and linguistically diverse, and smallest of racialized populations in the United States.

Issue-centric mobilization allows for diverse forms of involvement and fluid coalitions, but it cannot itself eliminate racialization or conflicts within racialized Asian America. Inevitably, such a strategy focused on community organizing and activism around specific issues will find some Asian Americans on the opposing side of the campaign. Just as not all Asian Americans participated in the Movement, it cannot be expected that an empowerment strategy that provides an ever-changing definition of community based on shared interests and shared history will either embrace or be embraced by all persons racialized as Asian American. An Asian American sweatshop owner, for example, may run afoul of community members allying themselves with the establishment’s Asian American workers. Similarly, Asian American abusers may feel resentful to a campaign against domestic violence that condemns their behavior. Yet issue-centric mobilization can nonetheless prove effective in bringing a purpose back to pan-ethnic Asian American identity. By building on

180. BOBO, supra note 178.
181. An organized publicity campaign of film screenings, writing letters to the editor, and other activities in order to maintain awareness of specific issues may spur further media coverage that may apply pressure to either secondary targets or the primary target of a campaign. For example, the national media coverage of the CRM created great pressure on secondary targets, policymakers outside of the South, which in turn led to eventual passage of the VRA, CRA and federal enforcement of those acts. CHARLES M. PAYNE, I'VE GOT THE LIGHT OF FREEDOM: THE ORGANIZING TRADITION AND THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM MOVEMENT (1997).
individual successes and growing common ground, those applying the model may develop a new discourse of a heterogeneous pan-ethnic Asian America organically, as opposed to externally and legislatively, united by demonstrated collective interests and increasing trust and mutual concern as communities fight and win together.

Practically speaking, such a strategy will only work if Asian American organizations with local, community legitimacy see themselves as participating in a wider empowerment project. While some Asian American organizations have applied some of these techniques and parts of the framework, there has not been an effort to step back, as the Movement did, and think about the state of Asian America in a holistic sense and then apply a theory regarding the condition of the whole to local communities and specific issues. Issue-centric mobilization is single-issue specific in individual campaigns, but mobilizes the community by utilizing campaigns to construct alliances and faith in the larger community.

IV. CONCLUSION

"Serve the people," the motto of the Movement, was to be applied not just in the most obvious way of providing social services where they were needed, but also acted as a call to action for the civil rights and dignity of all Asian Americans. The elites have not heeded this call, instead opting to serve their own perceived interests. There are some organizations, however, which appear to be following in the tradition of the Movement. Providers of direct legal services and civil rights legal outfits appear to be taking the first steps towards a true leadership; organizations like the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, although having participated in the 1996 strategy, include among its affiliates direct service groups such as the Asian Law Caucus, a hopeful sign that national advocates might be held accountable to those on the ground. Although they are not the only groups capable of issue-centric mobilization, direct service organizations, given their daily contact with members of underserved communities, are more likely to prove responsive to actual community needs, rather than those perceived from on high.

In Los Angeles, as just one example of many dedicated organizations, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC) was created to provide a hybrid of legal services, education, and civil rights support and has expanded to become a center of Asian American activism in Southern California. In determining their goals, APALC actively surveys the community, as they did in designing their Legal Services component. Thus, for sixteen years, the Legal Services Unit has served clients in domestic violence, wrongful eviction, consumer fraud, health care decision, debtor-creditor dispute, immigration, government benefit, and other poverty law-

182. NAPALC is now called the Asian American Justice Center.
related cases. Moreover, APALC has been dynamic, participating in redistricting and electoral litigation and education, as well as creating projects targeted towards the most underserved of Asian Americans, such as trafficking victims and undocumented migrant workers. In 1999, for example, APALC’s Worker’s Rights Unit was lead counsel for one hundred Thai and Latino garment workers subjected to sweatshop, slavery-like conditions, winning over $4 million in settlements; rather than rest on its laurels, however, APALC has recognized the need to accompany such litigation with public education and outreach efforts. Issue-oriented, APALC has not shied away from working in coalition with other groups, as they did in 2003 to 2004, working with other communities of color in opposing California’s Proposition 54, which sought to impose the “color-blind” mythology forcefully on state agencies in a way that would have resulted in massive public health crises and the invisibility of continued racism and discrimination against Asian Americans and other people of color. Organizations like APALC, Asian Pacific Islander Legal Outreach in San Francisco, and the Asian American Legal Defense & Education Fund in New York, are doing the incremental community development work that creates trust in the Asian American pan-ethnic identity. In both the high-publicity victories, such as the successful suit on behalf of abused workers, and the everyday aid, such as the crucial legal assistance provided to countless pro bono clients, these efforts are in many ways a model of what issue-centric mobilization work might look like.

One major difference between this work and issue-centric mobilization is that this work is professional, rather than developmental. The danger of relying solely on civil rights and legal services organizations for leadership is that these types of interactions are provider-based; that is, these organizations provide individuals services and legal assistance, rather than tools of empowerment for communities. There exists a danger in such power relations when applied to mobilization efforts. A study twenty years ago found that while legal service attorneys are more likely than business lawyers to espouse egalitarian political views, they had “substantially less egalitarian relationships with their own clients than do the business lawyers,” viewing themselves as more educated and thus more qualified to make decisions than the client. Bill Ong Hing describes a more ideal lawyer-community relationship in the context of a case where Japanese American community groups fought the San Francisco Young Women’s

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185. Supra note 183.
Christian Association (YWCA) for the rights to a building the YWCA had held in trust for Japanese immigrants restricted from ownership first by the Alien Land Laws and then by World War II internment. Attorneys participating in a community struggle should allow the community leaders to “call the shots” and respect the wishes of their clients; attorneys best serve as effective allies by supplying media savvy, government contacts, and contacts with other community allies. In the words of community lawyering guru Gerald López,

[L]awyers must know how to work with (not just on behalf of) . . . They must understand how to educate those with whom they work, particularly about law and professional lawyering, and, at the same time, they must open themselves up to being educated by all those with whom they come into contact, particularly about the traditions and experiences of life on the bottom and at the margins.

The ideal lawyers for assisting in issue-centric mobilization are those who “lawyer against subordination.” It is feasible that in some situations lawyers may develop into community leaders; for example, in the type of case described by Hing, wherein lawyers are themselves members of the affected community in a way that transcends mere shared racialization. However, all professionals must recognize the dangers in failing to acknowledge that true leadership comes from those directly affected by an issue.

To tie direct service contributions into a framework of issue-centric mobilization, and to prevent lawyers at these organizations from devolving into no more than a slightly better variation on the present-day Asian American elite, communities concerned with particular social justice issues must lead themselves. Issue-centric mobilization requires community-based leadership composed of those who are directly affected by the situation addressed in the campaign, in addition to institutional expertise and resources from strategically-minded organizations or attorneys. Though there is a role for national advocates as those who primarily support and supplement the efforts of local leaders, the true Asian American elite will be representative individuals who will arise organically with the opportunity to mobilize their community for an issue of social justice.

An important foil to any model of Asian American empowerment is the mythology of American individualism and meritocracy that stems from assimilationist discourse. Whether it is necessary to develop a pan-ethnic Asian American identity as sought by the Movement, which operates

188. Id.
189. Id. at 185.
190. Id.
191. There is a legitimate risk of such a devolution. Note that NAPALC, which is comprised of legal services organizations, participated in the 1996 strategy. Wang, supra note 104, at 109.
within a political ideology dedicated to combating social injustice depends on whether a constituency or community exists for the aggregate efforts of issue-centric mobilization. It would appear from the above discussion regarding the continuing and pervasive discrimination and racialization of Asian American populations that a community of interest exists, regardless of whether various segments of the group identify with the problems of the others. The substantive need for community empowerment did not simply vanish in the 1980s and 1990s; though it is possible that the elite “leadership” downplayed the need for progressive political projects within the community, that need has continued, as evidenced by the state of Asian American communities as discussed in this article. While the issues facing the community have changed with the dramatic demographic shifts, the underlying understanding of Movement activists remains: that pan-ethnic Asian American identity is foremost a tool for achieving social justice through empowerment. Issue-centric mobilization allows for communities to take the lead in their own empowerment while also creating an organic identity built upon the understanding that success in ending discrimination and injustice will rely on the power of shared interests.