

A Personal and Social Transformation

UC Berkeley and the Third World Strike of 1969

ABSTRACT The author reflects on his life growing up as an Asian American in California, his experiences during the 1960s, and his involvement in the 1969 Third World Strike at UC Berkeley, as well as the transformative role these experiences played in his life. **KEYWORDS** Asian American Political Alliance, Third World Strike, UC Berkeley

INTRODUCTION

My parents were born in Guangdong Province, China, and raised in San Francisco's Chinatown and the Sacramento River Delta; I was born in sunny Ventura, California. My parents believed in the American dream of upward mobility through hard work and education, and my father worked nearly forty-five years as a manager for National Dollar Stores, a Chinese-owned dry goods retailer, which catered to working class and people of color like Walmart and Target do today.

Because of my father's series of promotions to bigger and better stores, my sister and I grew up in multiple California cities: Visalia, Richmond, and San Jose. My family raised us away from the typical Chinatowns and instead in neighborhoods with largely black, brown, and yellow populations. As a child, I learned to navigate multi-ethnic schools, usually as a minority within a majority of minorities, and not of whites.

San Jose High School, from which I graduated in 1966, fostered its own multicultural myth. I participated in student government, ran for student body president, joined the Model UN club, and was a speaker at graduation. Students kept in ethnic lanes of A Hall and B Hall, and the racial divisions were primarily Latino and everyone else. We crossed these invisible barriers only in Orchestra/Band and Physical Education classes, but I made friends from various groups and lifestyles.

A few months before graduation, my faux high school fiction began to unravel. The police arrested several Latino students, including a saxophone-playing classmate from the school band, for the brutal murder of a Catholic priest and warehouseman picked up at St. James Park, a known rendezvous for gay sex. A few weeks later, at a graduation house party for college-bound nerdy types, we listened to a recording of the "Bridey Murphy" story. This was a 1950s phenomenon where an American housewife, under hypnosis, recalled in vivid detail her previous incarnation in Dublin, Ireland, a sensationalized case of false memory. The evening revealed teen disappointment and triggered more than

a few confessions, as we edged toward that pre-adult world of college, emptying a nest of friendships we had woven.

Fifty years later, I attended our high school reunion. I learned of the hypocrisy of the Dean of Girls who had called in the parents of a white classmate with a Japanese American boyfriend, only to inform them that the school forbade interracial dating. I discovered too that the Japanese American family who hosted our graduation party had been relocated during WWII to one of America's concentration camps!

UC BERKELEY

UC Berkeley drew me, I think, because of its radical reputation, which Mario Savio and 1964's Free Speech Movement reinforced. Many knew UC Berkeley as a home of civil rights organizing and anti-Vietnam war activity. But in the days after my parents dropped me off at Ehrman Hall (or Unit 2) dormitory for my freshman year, I became estranged and disillusioned with the 90-percent-white, middle-class student body, so different from my pre-college education experience. I was a typical first generation college student, floating around with an undeclared major, liberal-studies oriented, but with no connection to the Eurocentric traditions fostered by UC Berkeley's academic elite. *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland* were not the myths of people I could relate to, and "bonehead" remedial English was difficult to slog through. I was shocked when my grades fell far below what I had received in high school, and I had neither the resiliency nor tools to bounce back. So, I dropped out in the spring of 1968, after a year and a half at UC Berkeley.

After dropping out, I gravitated toward stoner hippie friends from high school days, and occupied myself with the only thing I could relate to in American popular culture: writing songs and playing guitar. I went to rock concerts at the Fillmore, Avalon Ballroom, and Winterland, and saw many musical greats: Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, Donovan, and B.B. King. Months later, when the Freight & Salvage Coffee House first opened its doors on San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley, I played at "Hootenanny Night," harmonizing on a cover of The Band's "The Weight." But this scene too was designed for someone like me to fail, as I wandered through the mostly white crowds of young buckskin-fringed pseudo-cowboys and feather-wearing fake Indian maidens at concerts, myself invisible to them in a cloak of brown skin.

Behind all of this, I had been classified by the Selective Service System as 1-A for the military draft, which ended in the fall of 1969 when a lottery system kicked in. I was available for the United States Army to draft me because I had refused to apply for a student deferment. I did this out of solidarity for my high school classmates who hadn't attended college and thus the military drafted, four of whom were already dead in Vietnam: Scott DiBari, Tony Nastor, John Cavallini, and another. In addition, others were still fighting there and would be wounded. The draft hung over my head like Damocles' sword, so I applied for "conscientious objector" status on moral, and not religious, grounds. I received support from John E. Thorne, a San Jose draft-resisters attorney, and my conservative high school English teacher Saxton Pope III, whose outdoorsman father swam with Ishi, "the last" American Indian of the Yahi tribe, in the cold streams of Modoc County.

The Selective Service denied my petition because it was not of a religious nature. In the fall of 1968, the government ordered me to appear for my pre-induction physical at the Oakland Army Induction Center. But, before receiving the bad news that the United States Army would draft me, and after the emptiness of coffee houses and failed musical fantasies, I decided to return to UC Berkeley and continue my studies, all to my parents' great relief.

That fall quarter of 1968, students and faculty at UC Berkeley invited Black Panther Party Minister of Education Eldridge Cleaver to team-teach *Social Analysis 139X: Dehumanization and Regeneration of the American Social Order* and lecture on racism in America. I was one of two students of color (both Asian American) out of about one hundred who enrolled in the class, meeting in a Dwinelle Hall lecture auditorium. The "Cleaver Course" stirred up a political firestorm. Then, Governor Ronald Reagan declared that the class should be shut down immediately, to which Cleaver responded on the steps of Sproul Hall by leading a chant of "Fuck Reagan."

The course lasted but six weeks before the university did shut it down, despite full support from UC Berkeley's Academic Senate. The university stripped any credits for the class from enrolled students, leaving a hole in our course workload. But before the administration interrupted the course and Cleaver fled to Cuba to avoid trial for the attempted murder of two Oakland police officers, he asked the class on a Tuesday afternoon for two volunteers to play a game of "man-in-the-moon," an agitprop version of a space alien visit to the United States. In the game, Cleaver charged the earthling to explain the logic of American racism to the naïve visitor. I immediately volunteered and bounded down the aisle and up to the stage where Cleaver paired my acting skills with those of a white classmate.

As the alien (of course), I asked my classmate, "What is slavery?" She replied with a description of a political economic system based on the ownership of Black people by whites. I then asked, "What is a Black person?" and she said something about melanin and pigmentation. I continued, "What is melanin?" Then the conversation quickly devolved into a nonsensical logic of skin color and its use to assign power, resources, and privilege. But, not before Cleaver and the entire class (including my acting partner-in-crime), had a good laugh at the preposterousness of it all.

Yet, there was something that happened to me as a thespian-alien standing on a stage before nearly a hundred sympathetic white students that I had never experienced before. There was power in the truth we stated and that, once aired in the spaciousness of a UC Berkeley lecture hall, uncorked by the Minister of Education genie, no one else could stuff it back into its bottle again. It was not the power of play-acting but the reveal of a truth once denied that freed me.

THE ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICAL ALLIANCE

In the fall of 1969, when I received a letter ordering me to report for my pre-induction physical in Oakland, I was intent on being a "draft resister." Unlike other friends, I planned not to drink a gallon of soy sauce to elevate my blood pressure or to sneak

through woods or cross a river into Ontario, Canada, but would purposefully refuse military service. This would mean incarceration of some sort, which was sobering in the least, especially for a nineteen-year-old junior. One afternoon after a draft resisters meeting on campus, John Chang, who introduced himself as a member of the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), a group very interested in the plight of Asian American draft resisters, handed me a flyer and invited me to a meeting.

At this first meeting, I was shocked to find a group of other like-minded, socially aware Asian American students who were also anti-war, anti-racism, and pro-empowerment of people of color. But most of all, they supported my draft-resisting stance. On the morning of my physical, with words of encouragement from AAPA members, I reported alone to the induction center in Oakland. Somehow, I had worked myself up into an angry and depressed state, almost catatonic, obsessing about my high school classmates killed in Vietnam.

In a group of about twenty to thirty boys, all in our late teens and early twenties, I wandered from one testing station to the next, standing in my civvies, while the army medical tech grabbed my testicles and had me cough to test for hernia. Molasses slow in a mental haze, I heard an African American sergeant yell at me, "Hurry up, Chinaman!" When I reached the vision testing station, I removed my glasses and peered one eye at a time into a monocular lens, trying to discern a jumble of blurry letters and numbers. Later I would learn that my right eye correction of 8.25 diopters had barely exceeded the 8.0 diopters maximum, thereby granting me I-Y status automatically, a temporary deferment until the US Army had taken all available I-A draftees.

As I rejoined my new Asian American peers in AAPA, I learned that students of color at San Francisco State College (SFSC) had formed a coalition called the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) to coordinate a strike for Black Studies and a Third World College. Their campus shutdown evolved into the longest student strike in American history. One morning with other UC Berkeley AAPA members, I crossed the Bay Bridge to march with our brothers and sisters at SFSC and witnessed mounted police officers chase down and flail their batons at fleeing strikers. It was my initial introduction to the atmosphere of violence of the 1960s, not in a Southeast Asian war zone, but here in my own Bay Area backyard.

As students of color, we envisioned a Third World College as the means to discover our true histories, long hidden by the lies and omissions of the American educational system. Suppressed facts included the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Japanese American concentration camps during WWII, Filipino farmworker strikes, and the building of the western half of the Transcontinental Railroad by Chinese workers. This burning desire to learn about our pasts fueled efforts to establish Ethnic Studies, not for purely academic research purposes but as tools for personal and community empowerment.

That fall, AAPA decided to develop its own student-initiated course called *Asian Studies 100X: Evolution of the Asian American*. With Alan Fong, a graduate student, I drafted the syllabus and proposal that the university approved for winter quarter 1969. Since the TWLF strike started in the winter of 1969, we taught this course off campus in the dining commons of Barrington Hall, part of University Co-Op housing.

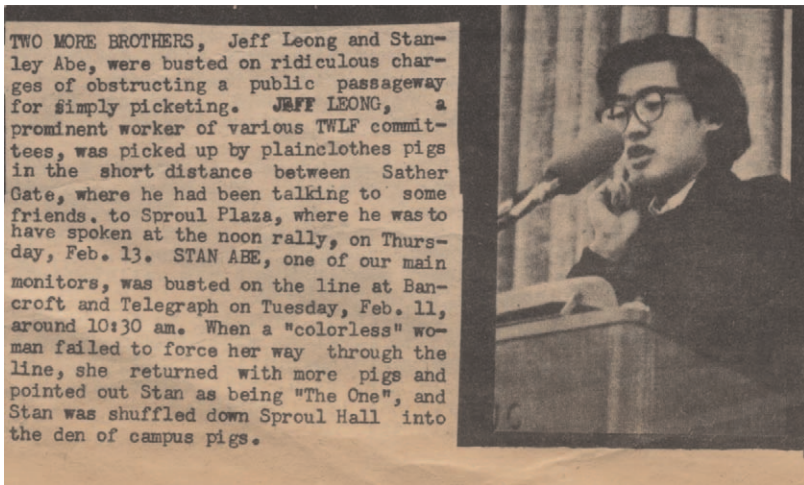


FIGURE 1. Jeff Leong, Asian American Political Alliance Newspaper, vol. 1, Nov-Dec 1968, UC Berkeley Ethnic Studies Library.

THE THIRD WORLD STRIKE AT UC BERKELEY

Heavily influenced by the Third World Strike at SFSC and frustrated by the lack of progress in negotiations for a Black Studies program at UC Berkeley, the Afro-American Students Union (AASU) invited other students of color groups to form a new coalition to demand a Third World College. AAPA accepted and together with the Mexican American Student Confederation (MASC) and Native American Students Union (NASU), we established our own TWLF at UC Berkeley.

Days later, Richard Aoki, AAPA member and also a founding member and supporter of the Black Panther Party, asked whether I would read the TWLF's demands at the initial press conference of the strike. This took place on Wednesday, January 22, 1969, in the Associated Students of the University of California (ASUC) Senate Chambers at Eshleman Hall (see figure 1). Richard stated that he was too visible with the Oakland police to risk doing so himself (a declaration that was subsequently complicated by allegations of his ambiguous status as an FBI informant). I agreed to read the demands.

That morning of the press conference, I sat next to Ysidro Macías of MASC and Charles Jackson of AASU, a team so much like my high school demographics, to announce our demands while the local TV news cameras rolled. I channeled angry memories: a white rancher's wife caused a car accident that injured and brain-damaged my maternal aunt who was unable to sue because Chinese could not testify in California courts; a real estate agent refused to show my parents nicer homes in the blonde hills of El Cerrito. Falling back upon dramatic skills I acquired in a high school speech class, I made sure as I read the demands to enunciate each word clearly and with emphasis for a "Third World College." Never thinking of the occasion's significance, I focused upon a task I knew how to do and do well: to launch the drama of the strike for the days to come.

For the cold and wet weeks of winter quarter of 1969, we impassioned students of the TWLF improvised a strategy of striking to shut down the UC Berkeley campus. We

employed an entire range of tactics and activities during the strike, including informational picketing (both stationary and in “moving” snake style); make and circulate flyers and leaflets for sympathizers and non-strikers; distribute and display political posters by Malaquias Montoya; organize symposiums, teach-ins, and speaker bureaus; forge valuable alliances with white radical students and unionize teaching assistants; lead fundraising campaigns; post bail for the arrested; work with attorneys for court appearances; bravely face down the Alameda County Sheriffs (or “Blue Meanies”) in a strong but largely peaceful manner; and negotiate with university administrators.

I served on the initial iteration of the TWLF Strike Central Committee, with its rotating leadership that represented all four ethnic groups, and stood down internal squabbles between African American and Latino leaders made safe only by checking guns at the front door. Just days into the strike, Wheeler Auditorium burned to the ground; the next day’s headlines blamed the strikers. But, when people informed us of the fire by telephone, we were shocked and frantically scattered in separate cars into Oakland that night. Richard Aoki muttered something about “crazy white radicals,” though the fire could have been an accident. Later that night and on until dawn, I tag-teamed with my first girlfriend Susan to watch Richard’s driveway for fear of an ambush by angry Oakland police.

I was introduced into the violence of the strike from my perch as a would-be conscientious objector, a nice boy and second-generation son of Chinese immigrants, a childhood attendee of conservative Southern Baptist churches. It was confusing and disorienting to be nineteen years old and discover that people could use some forms of violence for the protection of others or consider it self-defense and appropriate. Further troubling, even as we supported the National Liberation Front (NLF) in Vietnam, was thinking of my own high school friends on the American side who had died fighting for an uncertain cause.

The specter of violence reared its ugly head toward the end of the strike when Governor Reagan, in all his posturing rage, called the National Guard to the UC Berkeley campus to enforce calm. (Later that spring the government called the National Guard again for the People’s Park confrontations where protestor James Rector was shot and killed on the rooftop of a friend’s apartment building). Using consensus decision-making, AAPA members debated all night on the correct strategy to face down the National Guard stationed across from University Hall. I was one of what Aoki labeled as “hardliners” as I advocated for direct confrontation. But, finally, just hours before the next day’s demonstrations, cooler heads prevailed and no violence ensued. We had avoided the scenario that played out just a year later at Kent State University, where Ohio’s National Guard killed four students and injured eleven others during an anti-war demonstration.

After the UC Berkeley TWLF strike ended (officially held as “suspended”) and the university established the Department of Ethnic Studies, I began to complete my junior and senior undergraduate years as an Individual Major in Asian American Studies. As I prepared for life as a community organizer, I took a plethora of classes from the burgeoning Asian American Studies program, including conversational Cantonese, San

Francisco Chinatown fieldwork, and the history and politics of modern China. I worked as a teaching assistant for the Asian American Studies English composition class with Elaine Kim. Later, as a teaching credential graduate student, I developed and led an “Asians and Education” course, focusing on several issues, including Ethnic Studies, bilingual education, and student busing.

CONCLUSION

I believe that my participation as a nineteen-year-old in the UC Berkeley Third World Strike was my trial by fire into young adulthood, where I learned to speak publicly and advocate for my beliefs in an incredibly violent and hostile environment. Those real-world skills I acquired—to argue, negotiate, and persuade—brought success with my comrades and authorities, and continued to serve me well in my careers in education, public health, and the law.

Participating in the strike was a way to connect with my parents too, to honor their sacrifice by uncovering their true histories. Any self without a past has no future, and I discovered that symbiotic relationship between myself as an individual and the collective whole, something my ancestors already knew, but which now lent me purpose and direction.

And central to that experience was founding and implementing Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, both as an idea representing cultural pride and historical awareness, but also as a training ground for practical skill-building, elements essential for students of color to achieve and give back to their communities. In today’s racist and anti-immigrant political climate, it seems that the gains of the last fifty years are under attack and subject to reversal, including Ethnic Studies programs at the university and public school levels.

But, what can’t be taken away, unless we become complacent with our newfound successes, is the idea of self-determination. People have the right to decide their fates free from external exploitation and material want and to build families and communities in safety and peace, and ultimately as human beings, to thrive for all their days on this earth. ■

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