

# Inventing Asian America

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“Asian American” is a recent idea. Asian people have, of course, been present in the Americas for hundreds of years. But only with the turn to the internationalist and leftist politics of the late 1960s, combined with the influx of immigrants under the 1965 Immigration act, did a critical mass of activists, students, historians, and artists form the idea of a coalitional, political Asian American identity.

Asian Arts Initiative’s twenty-five years, then, is a significant span in the short but dense period of contemporary Asian America. It’s important, too, to note that this is a long lifespan for any arts nonprofit, especially one dedicated to the intersections of art, community, and organizing. AAI has become an important laboratory and anchor within Philadelphia’s community and the larger conversation about the direction of Asian America—a conversation across books and songs, museum exhibitions and public art, community forums and panels and teach-ins.

My own path into the arts would have been impossible without this history of movements and institutions. I worked as an educator and later assistant curator at the Museum of Chinese in America in New York, founded by alumni of the seminal Basement Workshop. I later worked at The Asian American Writer’s Workshop and Kundiman, and curated two exhibitions on the history of the Asian American Movement.

I mention this personal history in order to underscore that those jobs have been more than jobs for me—they have opened up a more profound understanding of my personal history and politics, and through them, I have met many of my closest friends. This personal history also informs my larger goal in this essay: to situate the Asian Arts Initiative within a) the arts and activist organizations of the Asian American Movement, b) the new conversations around Asian America post-1992, and c) the Asian American communities of Philadelphia, and in particular Chinatown, which AAI calls home. This essay seeks to illuminate the context and stakes of the Asian Arts Initiative, none of which would be possible without the real human labor and connections that built the institution.

## **Basement, Loft, Street: Forerunners**

One could reconstruct a history of Asian American cultural politics that begins well before 1968: Chinese detainees carving charged poetry into the walls of Angel Island, or the photographs and water colors produced by Japanese Americans during incarceration. But it was only with the population influx of the 1965 Immigration Act, and a generation

politicized by the Civil Rights, Black Power, Women's Liberation, and Third World movements, that an intentional, coalitional Asian American culture began.

Meanwhile, an accompanying cultural renaissance both gave shape to this new identity through art, literature, theater, and music, and often drew its content from the movement's politics. Across the nation, cultural organizations began to form, and artists asked fundamental questions about the Asian American experience: what did it mean to be Asian American (other terms they tried out included "Amerasian" and "Asians in Amerika")? What histories, traumas, cultural traits, dreams, and ideas of liberation did they share? What were the appropriate artistic forms to tackle these questions?

Artist-activists gathered to debate these questions, and from 1965 to 1975, the first generation of Asian American cultural organizations blossomed. In Los Angeles, the East West Players developed playwrights, directors, and actors focused on Asian American stories, and Visual Communications produced the first Asian American films and trained directors and oral historians. In San Francisco, Kearny Street Workshop became a cross-genre cultural hub originally located in the famed I Hotel, while the J-Town Collective silkscreened posters in historic Nihonmachi. In New York, Basement Workshop acted as an umbrella organization that included an arts workshop, an historical center, and a quarterly magazine, *Bridge*. Out of Basement Workshop grew the Asian American Arts Centre and Dance Theatre, one of the first organizations to curate exhibitions of Asian American artists.

The first years at Asian Arts Initiative read almost like a sampler of the artistic luminaries from the Asian American Movement. In 1994, AAI featured Janice Mirikitani, a poet, activist, and editor at Third World Communications in San Francisco. Shawn Wong, one of the co-editors of the 1974 *Aiiieeeee!*, the first anthology of Asian American literature, read from his first novel *American Knees* in 1995. Nobuko Miyamoto, a member of the trio that produced the seminal album *A Grain of Sand*, performed from that body of work in 1996. Kimiko Hahn, a poet and former member of Basement Workshop, read in 1997. The artist Tomie Arai, a pioneer in using oral histories in public installation and prints, was one of the first artists to show in AAI's gallery space in 2001.

Other notable performers AAI featured in its early years include the poet and art critic John Yau, the poet and memoirist David Mura reading with writer Alexis Pate, and the novelist R. Zamora Linmark. Though these artists were less directly associated with the Asian American Movement, scholar Daryl Maeda argues in *Chains of Babylon* that "cultural workers who explored the theme of Asian American identity may be properly thought of as part of the Asian American movement, regardless of whether they actually joined movement organizations or participated in extraliterary movement activities, because they self-consciously explored theoretical issues underpinning the movement" (129).

Many of the artists engaged in the restless examination of identity, history, and social questions throughout the 1970s and 80s had come of age by the time AAI began programming in the 1990s. The early years of AAI drew from this lineage of early Asian America, those fertile years in which the identity was being articulated through art.

## **Black-Asian Relations and Anti-Asian Violence**

The early 1990s were a volatile time that became a turning point for Asian America as well as so-called multiculturalism. In 1990, a Haitian woman reported being assaulted

by a Korean American shopkeeper at Family Red Apple, a grocery store in Flatbush, Brooklyn, sparking a multi-month boycott. On March 16, 1991, the Los Angeles storekeeper Soon Ja Du killed Latasha Harlins, and in April 29, 1992, Rodney King's LAPD abusers were acquitted. During the three days that followed, Los Angeles erupted into violence. Korean Americans were caught in the national spotlight for the first time, forcing a new and difficult conversation on Asian American racial politics. It was a far cry from the internationalist Third World Solidarity that characterized the generation before.

Post-1965 immigration saw new waves of Asian immigrants—often fleeing war or traumatic political situations—attempting to attain and hold on to material security through small businesses. In Philadelphia, as in those other cities, Asian Americans owned stores in predominantly African American neighborhoods. In Philadelphia there was also a large refugee population, mostly Hmong, living in public housing alongside African Americans. The language, cultural, and historical divides between those communities prompted a group of African American artists to approach the Painted Bride Art Center, an artist-centered alternative space, to begin a conversation with the Asian American community. The Painted Bride, in turn, convened a group of artists and activists. That group quickly recognized that in order to be effective partners in racial healing, they would have to also understand and articulate an Asian American cultural voice for themselves. They began to organize cultural programs at Painted Bride under the title Asian Arts Initiative.

It's telling, with this background, that AAI's first program featured the musician and composer Fred Ho and his Afro-Asian Ensemble. Ho, born in 1957, came into his political consciousness at the end of that first wave of Asian American Movement. He was a self-described revolutionary whose ideology was formed by the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist politics of I Wor Kuen, an Asian American Movement leftist group that was initially modeled closely after the Black Panthers. Ho dedicated his life to fusing black and Asian culture and communities. He formed musical ensembles, composed operas drawing upon Chinese mythology and African American music, and wrote books on his political and aesthetic theories. The next year, the "Colors of Desire" reading with David Mura, who is Japanese American sansei, and Alexis Pate, who is African American from Philadelphia, explored sexuality and masculinity in men of color.

This dedication to bridging and sparking dialogue between black and Asian communities has been a running theme in AAI's programming. In 2017, guest curator Jaishri Abichandani organized the multi-media group exhibition *Loving Blackness*, featuring Asian and/or black artists exploring histories and representations of both solidarity and tension. The programming around the exhibition included a community discussion featuring Asian mothers of African American and Latinx children. AAI recently commissioned the project *River Sols* with artists Dipankar Mukherjee and Carlton Turner, who are exploring and documenting life along the Ganges River and Mississippi Delta, respectively.

The 80s and 90s in Philadelphia and across the nation were marked by a rise in anti-Asian violence, as well as organizations forming to combat it. Perhaps the highest profile case, and the most pivotal for Asian America, was the murder of Vincent Chin by white autoworkers yelling racial slurs in Detroit in 1982. Chin, a Chinese American,

was mistaken for Japanese and conflated with the nation supposedly stealing American jobs—a sobering reminder of the need for an Asian American coalitional politics that would address violence against all members.

In a startlingly similar case in Philadelphia in 1989, Heng Lim, a Cambodian American, was beaten to death in front of his family by a group of white people yelling racial slurs. When the police arrived on the scene, instead of arresting the murderer, they detained Lim’s family. During this time, Lim died from his injuries. The campaign in response became one of the first for Asian Americans United (AAU), founded in Philadelphia in 1985. AAU, a frequent collaborator with AAI, has developed youth leaders as a way to sustain movement work beyond those flashpoints.

In the wake of 9/11, AAI hosted a number of discussions and readings around the wave of violence against South Asian, Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim communities, including “Excavating Memories, Exploring Myths” with Saladin Ahmed, Hayan Charara, Suheir Hammad, and Annemarie Jacir, and, in the summer of 2002, it launched “Listen Up!”, a series of video public service announcements on anti-Asian violence.

The Vincent Chin case continues to be a touchstone for AAI. On the 20th anniversary of the killing, AAI commissioned new work discussing anti-Asian violence for an exhibition. Recently, the Chin case inspired musicians Byron Au Yong and Aaron Jafferis to begin compiling interviews in the community on social justice. The project grew into the *Activist Songbook*, a Theater of the Oppressed-inspired series of pop-up performances, which debuted during AAI’s 25th Anniversary weekend in May 2018.

## Philadelphia Chinatown and the New Asian America

Like other Chinatowns on the East Coast, Philadelphia’s was established by a mixture of merchants and laborers fleeing the racial terror on the West Coast in the late 19th Century. Chinatowns on the East Coast remained relatively secluded “bachelor societies” until the end of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, and the 1965 Immigration Act, which finally lifted racialized quotas.

City governments, though, were ill-equipped for the post-65 immigrants, and did little to care for the aging seniors who had survived the Exclusion era. During the Asian American Movement, the group Yellow Seeds formed in Philadelphia. Like Movement activists in other Chinatowns, the group was made up of mostly younger, highly politicized activists concerned with the conditions of the elderly and the lack of government or community support.

The front page of their first newsletter, published in April 1972, featured an article titled “This Is Where Mr. Lao Lives.” The report (authored anonymously, like the rest of the paper) details Mr. Lao’s inability to care for himself, describing his cramped and unsafe apartment— when the article’s authors found him, he was freezing on the street. A later edition of the newsletter reports that he passed away in September of that year, and offers a political analysis of Mr. Lao’s life: being forced out of China by feudalism and warlords, only to arrive in a racist society that did not care for him, even after decades of his service to the country’s economy.

Poverty, language barriers, and lack of political power left Chinatowns nationwide vulnerable to redevelopment and urban renewal. This became the second major focus of Asian American activism in Philadelphia’s Chinatown. In May 1973, Yellow Seeds

ran a front-page article proclaiming “Save Chinatown!” The article details a string of community protests against proposals to build a Vine Street Expressway through the heart of Chinatown, which would demolish the Holy Redeemer Church, an important community space. It was one of the many so-called urban renewal projects nationally that targeted vulnerable populations in the service of traffic circulation. The fight against the freeway also gave rise, in the late sixties, to the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, commissioned to represent the neighborhood through studies and neighborhood plans.

In 1997, Asian Arts Initiative moved out of its home at the Painted Bride Art Center into the historic Gilbert Building at 1315 Cherry Street in Chinatown. It soon began to address these dual strands: caring for the vulnerable populations of Chinatown while ensuring that development served the community.

In 2000, the city announced plans to construct a \$685 million stadium at 12th and Vine in Chinatown without any prior consultation with Chinatown residents. The stadium would have destroyed many of its historic buildings, fundamentally altering the neighborhood’s character. Community organizers amassed marches on city hall and organized a one-day strike of businesses in Chinatown. AAI joined one of the coalitions opposing the stadium’s construction there, but more importantly, took on the role of framing the context and conversation around the stadium fight. It organized an exhibition on Chinatowns around the world—*Chinatown and Resistance*—and hosted a shadow puppet workshop and presentation about the effects of stadium construction. AAI also trained a group of youth to produce a mini-documentary on the stadium fight called *Invasion*. After a multi-year campaign, the plan was defeated.

AAI next launched an oral history project in Chinatown, for which a mostly volunteer group interviewed the working-class residents of the community. Their stories were compiled into a book: *Chinatown Live(s)*. Next, AAI gathered artists and curators to discuss creating a series of site-specific installations in the neighborhood. In 2005, seven public installations under the title *Chinatown In/flux* opened, making use of empty storefronts in Chinatown—a fairly common public art practice now, but an unusual one at the time. *In/flux* marked a shift in AAI’s programming—not only preserving stories of the community, but reinterpreting them through art, and collaborating with a national roster of Asian American artists and curators. AAI itself was forced to relocate when the Pennsylvania Convention Center expanded in 2006. It now resides at 1219 Vine Street in North Chinatown—a building that would have been destroyed to make way for the proposed stadium’s parking lot.

National debates over power and preservation, culture and change, continue into the present. A recent report by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) examines how gentrification has rapidly affected Philadelphia, New York, and Boston Chinatowns. It notes that the formerly industrial areas north of Vine Street in Philadelphia have been converted into galleries and luxury condominiums, and that the white population of Chinatown increased greatly from 2000 to 2010, though it decreased in the city overall. AAI saw the need to interrogate this trend, and so launched a Social Practice Lab in 2012, commissioning artist projects on changes in the neighborhood, and the Pearl Street Project in 2013, beautifying the alleyway behind their current building and activating it with public programming. In 2016-17, AAI initiated a yearlong cultural planning process, *People: Power: Place*, which included public workshops, interviews,

and mapping. The process recognized the need to survey the neighborhood and the rapid changes that have come to Chinatown North/Callowhill. In a recent strategic plan, AAI laid out a vision to both recommit to the Chinatown community as well as include other geographic areas and Asian groups, such as Mifflin Park in South Philadelphia, which marks Cambodia Town and a Laotian community, and is also home to more recent Indonesian, Nepalese, and Burmese populations.

With these new populations and changes to the shape of Asian American Philly have also come a host of new organizations. In addition to longstanding organizations like AAU and SEAMAAC (originally the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Coalition), Philadelphia has seen the rise of: I Love Movement, a grassroots policy campaign focusing on the Cambodian deportation crisis; VietLead, focused on developing Vietnamese and Southeast Asian leaders; Laos in the House, which takes its name from a poem and uses the arts to give voice to the diaspora of the “Secret War”; and the Bhutanese and Cambodian Associations of Philadelphia. Since 2000, a new generation of Asian American arts groups has also emerged, including Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival, The Mustard Seed Film Festival, Twelve Gates Arts, and Philadelphia Asian Performing Artists (PAPA). In this context, AAI is no longer a “young” institution, but itself a forerunner to these organizations addressing the new diversity of Asian American Philadelphia.

### **“Then and Now”: 25 Years**

In May of 2018, AAI celebrated its 25th Anniversary with a weekend of programming: public installations, readings, and performances. AAI launched the exhibition *Then and Now*, curated by Alexandra Chang, featuring an intergenerational group of artists including Yong Soon Min, Dinh Q. Lê, Anida Yoeu Ali, and Saya Woolfalk. One common thread throughout the weekend, according to Executive Director Gayle Isa, was artists reminiscing on the importance of AAI. People would say, for example, “I saw [the performance poetry group] I Was Born With Two Tongues when I was sixteen, and it made me want to be a poet,” or “I was part of the Artists and Communities training program, and it made me rethink what I could do as an artist.”

The encounters at AAI are not clinical, objective art judgments or esoteric exercises in “art for art’s sake.” They are meant to form face-to-face connections, to change perspectives. AAI began with a mandate to address fraught, potentially violent community tensions. The results are impossible to quantify, but also, when they appear, immensely rewarding. And because Asian American arts grew in tandem with a collective political awakening, it only makes sense that the arts, like activism, is fundamentally about expanding the possible. This might take the form of teaching a child of diaspora that they can become a poet, or addressing systemic racism through music, or repainting an alleyway in Chinatown. In another ten years it might take on a totally new form, because Asian America itself is in a state of perpetual, dynamic change. But the arts will do more than reflect those changes: as in its inception fifty years ago, Asian American arts will give shape to the very meaning of Asian America.