
Asian American Activism for Environmental Justice

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By foregrounding race as a central analytic category, the Asian immigrant and Asian Pacific American (APA) environmental justice movement is distinct from the mainstream environmental movement in several ways. The former considers itself more ideologically inclusive than the latter because it integrates social and ecological concerns. It treats and links social oppression, exploitation, and injustice as inseparable from environmental degradation of the natural world. The concept of environmental justice defines the environment to include public and human health concerns, such as the exposure of farmworkers to pesticides and lead, in addition to natural resources such as air, land and water. This expansive view of what constitutes the “environment” repudiates the elitist, racist and classist wilderness/preservationist dichotomy, which sees the environment as being equal to “nature.” Environmental justice (EJ) also utilizes a “holistic methodology” and worldview that see the environment as a site where people (in particular people of color) “live, work and play.”

If we see the environment as sites where people live, work and play, this view can help explain the wide diversity of environmental justice activism in low-income Asian immigrant and Asian American communities in the United States. A wide range of issues are linked to the complex diversity within the community, in terms of income, experiences and national origin. For example, almost half of the Asian Pacific Islander population has lived in the United States for 20 years or less. This group includes large populations of Southeast Asians, such as the Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians and Hmong. Environmentally, Asian Pacific American communities face many of the same hazards affecting other communities of color and low-income communities throughout the United States. For example, according to the 1987 United Church of Christ report *Toxic Wastes and Race*, half of all Asians, Pacific Islanders and Native Americans and three out of five African Americans and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites. Urban Asian immigrant populations, like other poor communities of color, often live in substandard housing, are exposed to high levels of lead and enjoy fewer environmental amenities such as parks and playgrounds. At the same time, some of their issues are unique.

Asian immigrant communities have been crucial in expanding definitions of environmentalism and in advancing the legal and community-based activist approaches for environmental justice. In particular, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network has been crucial in alleviating the environmental and health

problems of Asian immigrant communities in the San Francisco Bay Area through their community-based organizing strategy. And yet, Asian Pacific Islander (API) contributions to EJ have not been well documented in the literature, or well recognized by the wider environmental justice community. Thus, the first goal of this essay is to be simply a documentary project. It introduces the environmental justice movement, and the role of Asian immigrant and Asian American communities in furthering the agenda for environmental justice. I introduce the major environmental issues facing Asian immigrant communities. In particular, I'll focus on those examples in which there has been significant organizing around these issues as environmental and environmental justice concerns. This framing leaves out those issues that have an environmental component but which have been constructed in another way.

For example, the military pollution of Native Pacific Islander land in Hawaii is constructed by activists primarily as a land sovereignty issue, and not an environmental justice concern. Thus, the API EJ issues I'll address are: occupational health activism in the garment and semiconductor manufacturing industries, urban redevelopment issues (including housing and gentrification) and food consumption and production issues (health hazards from contaminated fish, and the greening of ethnic restaurants). Of these issues, there are some that are unique to particular Asian immigrant communities and their historical and cultural trajectory (that is, the consumption of contaminated fish by immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos) while others are shared with other communities of color (urban redevelopment and occupational health concerns).

Second, this essay considers the contributions made by the Asian immigrant and Asian American environmental justice movement, and by the activism of African American, Latino and Native American communities. The essay offers further insights about the possibilities and also the limits of constructing multiracial, progressive EJ activism.

The environmental justice movement emerged in the 1980s in the United States when community-based activities began to dovetail with the growing documentation of environmental racism. According to Bullard, the environmental justice movement contends that race correlates to environmental hazards as an independent factor not reducible to class and poverty. The term "environmental racism" came to national prominence after reports from the United States General Accounting Office, the United Church of Christ and the *National Law Journal* documented that people of color in the United States suffer disproportionately from environmental pollution and from unequal protection from this pollution by the state. According to the seminal report *Toxic Wastes and Race*, race proved to be the most significant among the variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. According to the *National Law Journal* report, which looked at penalties for environmental pollution, the disparity in penalties for pollution under the toxic waste laws ran along racial lines and not income. Lavelle and Coy report that penalties at sites having the greatest white population were 500 percent higher than penalties with the greatest minority population, suggesting that regulatory agencies prioritize the concerns of white communities more than non-white ones, even when the non-white community is composed of higher-income residents.

The environmental justice movement has several key start dates. It's typically held to have been the 1982 protests in Warren County, North Carolina, against the building of a facility to hold polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contaminated landfill in a poor, predominantly black community. Polychlorinated biphenyls are highly toxic chemicals known to disrupt hormone function and are linked to cancer. They were used to manufacture electrical equipment as well as a host of other industrial and consumer products that have been banned since the 1970s. These protests represent the first time people went to jail to stop the building of a toxic waste landfill and are also important because the direct action nature of the protests suggests linkages with the civil rights and anti-nuclear movements.

Another landmark date was the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. Over 600 delegates met and passed the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice. According to Hofrichter, the preamble reads,

We, the people of color, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to insure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice.

By beginning with "We, the people of color," the Summit preamble enshrined the concept that members of this movement were linked through the pollution and harm they experience as a result of racism.

The practical implication of constructing the movement in this way is that it links diverse communities across races, whether they be urban or rural, from different regions of the country, or immigrant or native-born. The main limit of this construction is that it can collapse differences between different communities of color, may ignore class differences, can fail to recognize the unique contributions of particular racial/ethnic groups, and may perhaps deny the very diversity at the base of the movement. The environmental communities of Latino, Asian, Native and African American problems are numerous and often distinct from one another, varying locally from community to community. These issues also vary based on specific historical, geographical and cultural trajectories. But the issues and the activism from Asian American and Asian immigrant communities is shared the most with Latino immigrant communities, primarily on occupational health issues and the injustices associated with being limited-English-speaking populations and immigrant populations.

Since the Summit, an increasing number of organizations have identified with the environmental justice movement. A few Asian American organizations and key individuals were present at the Summit, although they were not represented in large numbers. Young Hi Shin of the Asian Immigrant Workers Advocates (AIWA) and Pam Tau Lee of the University of California at Berkeley Labor Occupational Health Program presented seminal papers at the 1991 Summit. It

is not surprising that Shin and Lee presented papers on occupational issues, since this is the main way Asian immigrant organizations have defined their issues as environmental justice concerns.

Over half of all textile and apparel workers in the United States are Asian women. Garment workers in sweatshops face increased exposure to fiber particles, dyes, formaldehydes and arsenic, leading to high rates of respiratory illness. Tai points out that more than 70 percent of production workers in Silicon Valley are Asian or Latino immigrant women who hold jobs where occupational illness rates are more than three times those of any other basic industry.

Sociologists David Pellow and Lisa Park document the occupational health hazards computer production-line workers in Silicon Valley, California face, and the fact that most of these laborers are non-unionized, low-income Asian and Latina immigrant women workers. The health and environmental effects of computer production-line labor are numerous, and particularly destructive to reproductive and nervous systems (such as triggering miscarriages). Activist organizations such as the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition (SVTC) are on the front lines in the fight to clean up the computer production line. Asian immigrant organizers are a central component of SVTC's education and organizing programs, because of the demographics of the production line. In the past, SVTC's Family and Community Environmental School (FACES) education and organizing project has worked with Cambodian, Vietnamese and Filipino populations. Asian populations are targeted as part of a wider multilingual, multiracial and multiethnic organizing program.

In both the San Francisco Bay Area and the East Coast of the United States, there has been substantial Asian immigrant environmental justice organizing around housing and urban redevelopment issues. These include organizing in coalitions against particular sites and facilities, as well as sustained organizational efforts on a broader range of issues. In terms of single campaigns, there have been at least three examples of environmental justice organizing in three East Coast Chinatowns: Boston, Philadelphia and New York City. All three were successful in fighting development projects and used the language of environmental racism and the discourse of the environmental justice movement as parts of its rationale against each facility.

Boston's Chinatown is squeezed between two medical institutions, which have swallowed up one-third of the surrounding land in the last few decades. One of these institutions made an offer to Boston in early 1993 to acquire a small plot of land in Chinatown called "Parcel C" in order to build a large parking garage. The Chinatown neighborhood council, an old guard alliance of Chinatown business interests, approved a deal for the site for U.S.\$1.8 million. Other community residents were angered at this deal and organized rallies, petitions and community meetings. The opposition was formalized into the Coalition to Protect Parcel C. The Coalition persuaded the state environmental agency to mandate a full environmental review. The state ordered the hospital to study the impact the building would have on air pollution, traffic, open space and recreation issues. The coalition also sponsored a referendum on the garage, in which the community voted overwhelmingly against it. After an intense year and

a half of community mobilization and protest, the proposal was withdrawn. The mayor signed an agreement with the older Chinatown development interests to preserve the parcel for housing and forbid institutional use. The Coalition has since transformed into the Campaign to Protect Chinatown, which, according to Leong, has become a center for environmental projects in the community.

In early 2000, Philadelphia Mayor John Street announced a plan to build a new Major League baseball stadium in Chinatown. In immediate response, the Stadium Out of Chinatown Coalition formed. The Coalition argued that their neighborhood would be destroyed from the traffic congestion and air pollution as well as from the noise and disruption caused by construction. As in Boston, Philadelphia's Chinatown has been ravaged by urban renewal and highway projects. The Coalition requested the City's findings on stadium financing, economic impact, environmental impact, planning studies and community development. The Coalition did its own feasibility study, threatening to take legal means to block the stadium, through environmental and civil rights lawsuits. As reported by *Asian Week*, ultimately, on November 13, 2000, Mayor Street abandoned plans for the stadium in part due to community pressure, as well as major concerns over the financing.

Lastly, in the early 1990s, a multiracial, multiethnic organizing campaign took place in Sunset Park, Brooklyn against a proposed sludge treatment plant. Environmental justice themes acted as a bridge issue for Asians and Latinos in the neighborhood. According to prominent community leaders, Sunset Park is divided along ethnic, linguistic, geographic and other lines, such as citizenship and political culture. It was all the more remarkable, then, for the deeply fractured Latino and Asian community to have worked as a single coalition in response to the sludge treatment plant proposal (sludge is the solid byproduct of waste and wastewater treatment). The main argument made by the Sunset Park community against this particular facility concerned the health risks and increased air pollution emissions. This rationale holds true for the primarily Latino population immediately adjacent to the proposed facility, as well as for the Chinese community, which is farther from the waterfront. The coalition that formed against the facility highlighted the contradiction between Mayor David Dinkin's election as the first non-white mayor in New York City—centered on the image of a “gorgeous mosaic”—and his policies that, opponents argued, contributed to environmental racism. The Sunset Park sludge treatment plan proposal was withdrawn in February 1993 in large part due to community pressure.

Besides these single-site campaigns against particular facilities, other organizations have focused on direct organizing on a wide range of issues that affect low-income Asian immigrant urban populations, including lack of open space, housing and gentrification. Most prominent is the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) and its Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) in the Bay Area. The APEN is the only organization in the United States that focuses exclusively on Asian environmental justice issues. The Laotian Organizing Project emphasizes direct organizing and youth mobilization within the Laotian community in Richmond, California. This population, primarily refugees who entered the United States after the 1970s, is predominantly low-income. Richmond, a city in Contra Costa County in northern California, is home to the Chevron/Texaco

oil refinery and over 350 industrial facilities, including chemical plants and chemical and petroleum-based industries. Some of the facilities have suffered major industrial accidents over the past 30 years. The Chevron refinery, the largest oil refinery in the western United States, has been a major source of pollution, toxic releases and industrial accidents that have threatened the health and safety of workers and community members.

The LOP was formed in 1995 to work on community empowerment through direct organizing on issues of community concern. One concrete result of the LOP was a victory of a multilingual warning system for toxic releases, whereas previously the warning system was only in English. The LOP was successful in emphasizing the community's unique cultural and linguistic resources and needs as well as because it worked for years developing community-based leadership, especially among Laotian youth. The LOP has organized on many issues over the years, as Tai points out, such as citizenship drives, education issues and building political clout to fight incineration facilities.

Housing and gentrification are other urban issues that progressive Asian immigrant communities have organized around. The APEN is a key member of the Stop Chinatown Evictions Committee, which formed in 2003 to halt the evictions of elderly and low-income residents in Oakland's Chinatown. Housing and gentrification are also organizing issues in New York City's Chinatown. According to the Chinatown Justice Project of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV), Organizing Asian Communities in New York City, housing is a basic environmental issue because poor housing and substandard living conditions in tenement buildings, including lead paint and vermin, negatively affect the health of residents. CAA AV cleverly defined community organizing centered on issues of housing as an environmental justice issue, as Geron argues, in direct response to the discourse of "improving the environment" as used by more affluent non-Chinese residents to move out Chinese businesses and residents in order to gentrify areas bordering Chinatown.

Food consumption and production issues are another area of environmental and environmental justice concern for Asian immigrant communities. Many Southeast Asian refugee communities suffer from elevated exposure to toxins in their food, often as a result of subsistence fishing. For example, Laotian refugee families in the Richmond area as well as Vietnamese communities in the southeastern United States, fish regularly due to their low income levels and their cultural practices. Unfortunately, due to high pollution levels, there are high levels of mercury and other contaminants in the fish, which when consumed cause severe negative health effects, particularly for pregnant women and children. In addition to the pollution, warning signs for the pollutants are not adequately posted in non-English languages. Making these warning signs intelligible to affected communities is another example of how APEN and the LOP work on linguistic issues as a pathway to improving environmental health and achieving greater community justice.

Another way that food is an environmental issue can be seen in the work of an organization named Thimmakka, also based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Thimmakka has developed an innovative program called "Greening South Asian Restaurants" (GSAR). The program conducts outreach to Afghani, Burmese, Persian, Indian, Pakistani, Vietnamese, Thai and Ethiopian restaurants in 20

languages, to communicate environmental and consumption issues such as pollution prevention, solid waste reduction, and water and energy conservation generated through their food preparation activities. Restaurants benefit by saving money through their waste reduction efforts.

Although the environmental justice movement has made great strides in the past two decades, the leadership and the base of the movement still struggle with how to put into practice the lofty principles adopted in 1991. There is a constant struggle at national gatherings and conferences to ensure class, cultural and linguistic diversity among participants. Many times, the mantra of environmental justice as a multiracial, multiethnic progressive movement is belied by practices and beliefs, whether conscious or unconscious, of the movement's leaders and membership. For example, at the Second People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 2002, the lack of language translation was raised by Spanish-speaking attendees. The logistics and costs of translation are often given as a reason for the absence of these services, but organizations such as APEN prioritize linguistic equity as a precondition for full and equal participation for Asian immigrant communities.

The perception of Asian immigrant community activism within the environmental justice movement is another example of the gap that still exists between rhetoric and reality. While virtually all of the people and organizations that identify with the environmental justice movement recognize that EJ should be multiracial and multiethnic, far fewer would be able to cite examples of Asian immigrant environmental justice activism. This illuminates the problem of Asian invisibility in progressive multiracial activism, which this essay hopes to squarely repudiate. In reality, Asian immigrant communities are taking the mantle of community activism and of the EJ issues that affect them in their own localities. These range from urban issues to occupational concerns, but in general they are linked through the prism of exclusion based on race, culture, language and citizenship issues, all of which affect the ability of Asian immigrant communities to fully participate and achieve full justice.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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