

Excerpt from “The Emergence of Yellow Power in America”

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Asian Americans can no longer afford to watch the black-and-white struggle from the sidelines. They have their own cause to fight, since they are also victims—with less visible scars—of the white institutionalized racism. A yellow movement has been set into motion by the black power movement. Addressing itself to the unique problems of Asian Americans, this “yellow power” movement is relevant to the black power movement in that both are part of the Third World struggle to liberate all colored people.

Part 1: Mistaken Identity

The Yellow Power movement has been motivated largely by the problem of self-identity in Asian Americans. The psychological focus of this movement is vital, for Asian Americans suffer the critical mental crises of having “integrated” into American society—

No person can be healthy, complete, and mature if he must deny a part of himself;
this is what “integration” has required so far.

—Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton

The Asian Americans’ current position in America is not viewed as a social problem. Having achieved middle-class incomes while presenting no real threat in numbers to the white majority, the main body of Asian Americans (namely, the Japanese and the Chinese) have received the token acceptance of white America.

Precisely because Asian Americans have become economically secure, do they face serious identity problems. Fully committed to a system that subordinates them on the basis of non-whiteness, Asian Americans still try to gain complete acceptance by denying their yellowness. They have become white in every respect but color.

However, the subtle but prevailing racial prejudice that “yellows” experience restricts them to the margins of the white world. Asian Americans have assumed white identities, that is, the values and attitudes of the majority of Americans. Now they are beginning to realize that this nation is a “White democracy” and that yellow people have a mistaken identity.

Within the past two years, the “Yellow Power” movement has developed as a direct outgrowth of the “Black Power” movement. The “Black Power” movement caused many Asian Americans to question themselves. “Yellow Power” is just now at the stage of an articulated mood rather than a program—disillusionment and alienation from white America and independence, race pride, and self-respect. Yellow consciousness is the immediate goal of concerned Asian Americans.

In the process of Americanization, Asians have tried to transform themselves into white men—both mentally and physically. Mentally, they have adjusted to the white man’s culture by giving up their own languages, customs, histories, and cultural values. They have adopted the “American way of life” only to discover that this is not enough. Next, they have rejected their physical heritages, resulting in extreme self-hatred. Yellow people share with the blacks the

desire to look white. Just as blacks wish to be light-complected with thin lips and unkinky hair, “yellows” want to be tall with long legs and large eyes. The self-hatred is also evident in the yellow male’s obsession with unobtainable white women, and in the yellow female’s attempt to gain male approval by aping white beauty standards....

SELF-ACCEPTANCE FIRST STEP

The “Black is Beautiful” cry among black Americans has instilled a new awareness in Asian Americans to be proud of their physical and cultural heritages. Yellow Power advocates self-acceptance as the first step toward strengthening the personalities of Asian Americans.

Since the Yellow Power movement is thus far made up of students and young adults, it is working for Asian-American ethnic studies centers on college campuses such as Cal and U.C.L.A. The re-establishment of ethnic identity through education is being pursued in classes like U.C.L.A.’s “Orientals in America.” As one student in the course relates:

I want to take this course for a 20–20 realization, and not a passive glance in the ill-reflecting mirror; the image I see is W.A.S.P., but the yellow skin is not lily white . . . I want to find out what my voluntarily or subconsciously suppressed Oriental self is like; also what the thousands of other suppressed Oriental selves are like in a much larger mind and body—America . . . I want to establish my ethnic identity not merely for the sake of such roots, but for the inherent value that such a background merits.

The problem of self-identity in Asian Americans also requires the removal of stereotypes. The yellow people in America seem to be silent citizens. They are stereotyped as being passive, accommodating, and un-emotional. Unfortunately, this description is fairly accurate, for Asian Americans have accepted these stereotypes and are becoming true to them....

SILENT, PASSIVE IMAGE

This uneasiness in admitting and expressing natural human feelings has been a factor in the negligible number of Asian Americans in the theater, drama, and literary arts. Not discounting the race prejudice and competition in these fields, yellow Americans cannot express themselves honestly, or in the works of Chinese-American actor James Hong, they cannot feel “from the gut level.”

The silent, passive image of Asian Americans is understood not only in terms of their cultural backgrounds, but by the fact that they are scared. The earliest Asians in America were Chinese immigrants who began settling in large numbers on the West Coast from 1850 through 1880. They were subjected to extreme white racism, ranging from economic subordination, to the denial of rights of naturalization, to physical violence. During the height of anti-Chinese mob action of the 1880s, whites were “stoning the Chinese in the streets, cutting off their queues, wrecking their shops and laundries.” The worst outbreak took place in Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885, when twenty-eight Chinese residents were murdered. Perhaps, surviving Asians learned to live in silence, for even if “the victims of such attacks tried to go to court to win protection, they could not hope to get a hearing. The phrase, ‘not a Chinaman’s chance’ had a grim and bitter reality.”

ASIAN AMERICANS ARE STILL SCARED

Racist treatment of “yellows” still existed during World War II, with the unjustifiable internment of 110,000 Japanese into detention camps. When Japanese Americans were ordered to leave their homes and possessions behind within short notice, they co-operated with resignation and did not even voice opposition. According to Frank Chumann, one-time president of the Japanese American Citizens League, they “used the principle of *shikataganai*—realistic resignation—and evacuated without protest.”

Today the Asian Americans are still scared. Their passive behavior serves to keep national attention on the black people. By being as inconspicuous as possible, they keep pressure off of themselves at the expense of the blacks. Asian Americans have formed an uneasy alliance with white Americans to keep the blacks down. They close their eyes to the latent white racism toward them which has never changed.

Frightened “yellows” allow the white public to use the “silent Oriental” stereotype against the black protest. The presence of twenty million blacks in America poses an actual physical threat to the white system. Fearful whites tell militant blacks that the acceptable criterion for behavior is exemplified in the quiet, passive Asian American.

The Yellow Power movement envisages a new role for Asian Americans: It is a rejection of the passive oriental stereotype and symbolizes the birth of a new Asian—one who will recognize and deal with injustices. The shout of Yellow Power, symbolic of our new direction, is reverberating in the quiet corridors of the Asian community.

FALSE PRIDE IN OWN ECONOMIC PROGRESS

As expressed in the Black Power writings, Yellow Power also says that “When we begin to define our own image, the stereotypes—that is, lies—that our oppressor has developed will begin in the white community and end there.” Another obstacle to the creation of yellow consciousness is the well-incorporated white racist attitudes which are present in Asian Americans. They take much false pride in their own economic progress and feel that blacks could succeed similarly if they only followed the Protestant ethic of hard work and education...But the fact is that the white power structure allowed Asian Americans to succeed through their own efforts while the same institutions persist in denying these opportunities to black Americans....

Asian Americans are perpetuating white racism in the United States as they allow white America to hold up the “successful” Oriental image before other minority groups as the model to emulate. White America justifies the blacks’ position by showing that other non-whites—yellow people—have been able to “adapt” to the system. The truth underlying both the yellows’ history and that of the blacks has been distorted. In addition, the claim that black citizens must “prove their rights to equality” is fundamentally racist....