

THE LOCALIZED
HISTORY PROJECT
@AAARI-CUNY

EDUCATOR GUIDE

**Labor Struggles and Youth
Solidarity in 1990s Chinatown**

A NOTE FROM THE YOUTH RESEARCHER: WHY TEACH THIS HISTORY

Hi, my name is Brian!

My curriculum project shines a spotlight on Chinese immigrant labor organizing in New York City's Chinatown, focusing on garment workers, restaurant employees, and the youth activists who stood alongside them. Immigration history is often presented as a story of individual success or assimilation, with labor struggles within Asian American communities largely absent from the conversation. Even when labor movements are discussed, women workers are especially overlooked. This project responds to those omissions by showing how bustling Chinatown was a site of collective resistance and survival.

Growing up in immigrant communities, I felt a strong connection to the project as I found primary sources that document this story. By centering organizations such as the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association, this curriculum highlights how people can come together to right shared, deeply unequal grievances. Youth activism, which was seldom brought up within my K-12 education, also takes center stage in this history. Throughout the 1995 protests and hunger strike against Jing Fong, Chinese American students drew inspiration from global struggles such as the Tiananmen Square massacre and used it to fight local injustices that affected their families' daily lives.

In designing this lesson, I wanted to show Chinatown as a place where workers, particularly women and youth, fought for progress, rather than just as a popular cultural landmark. From this lesson, students will gain a better understanding of how immigration policy, labor laws, and grassroots organizing can intersect. I believe there is a real missed opportunity in history education when youth activism is overlooked, as learning about young people struggling for justice empowers students to recognize their own potential impact on the world. By uplifting these moments of solidarity and youth-catalyzed change, I hope students are inspired to view their own communities as sites of historical knowledge and to imagine themselves as participants in whatever issues they care deeply about.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share this piece of local New York City history with classrooms.

PEDAGOGICAL REVOLUTIONS

HOW TO TEACH THIS HISTORY

I'd like to offer some pedagogical activities that could supplement this lesson on immigrant labor organizing in New York City. This lesson could be incorporated into a concluding unit in any history class focused on labor or social movements, grounding students in a local story, offering a clear example of how global struggles and local issues can connect.

Engage with primary sources to understand the respective biases, different perspectives, and purpose they served in the broader message or ethos of the movement. Examining the language and tone of the media coverage, try to determine the target audience. How were protesters portrayed?



Research current basic labor protections and compare them to the conditions described in the 1970s-1990s. Why did laws go unenforced in Chinatown? What can be done to ensure labor protections are being followed?



Study different protest strategies used by CSWA and youth activists. Ask students to evaluate the risks, ethics, and effectiveness of each strategy. Then have them design strategies for hypothetical community issues.



Create a youth activism reflection about issues in students' own communities that feel urgent to them. Students can discuss the personal risks involved in activism, the importance of community support, and brainstorm ways they can organize for change today.

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RESOURCES FOR THE CLASSROOM

primary sources:



Virginia Yu, a student protester and hunger striker, on the picket line in front of Jing Fong in 1995.

caption/permissions TKT



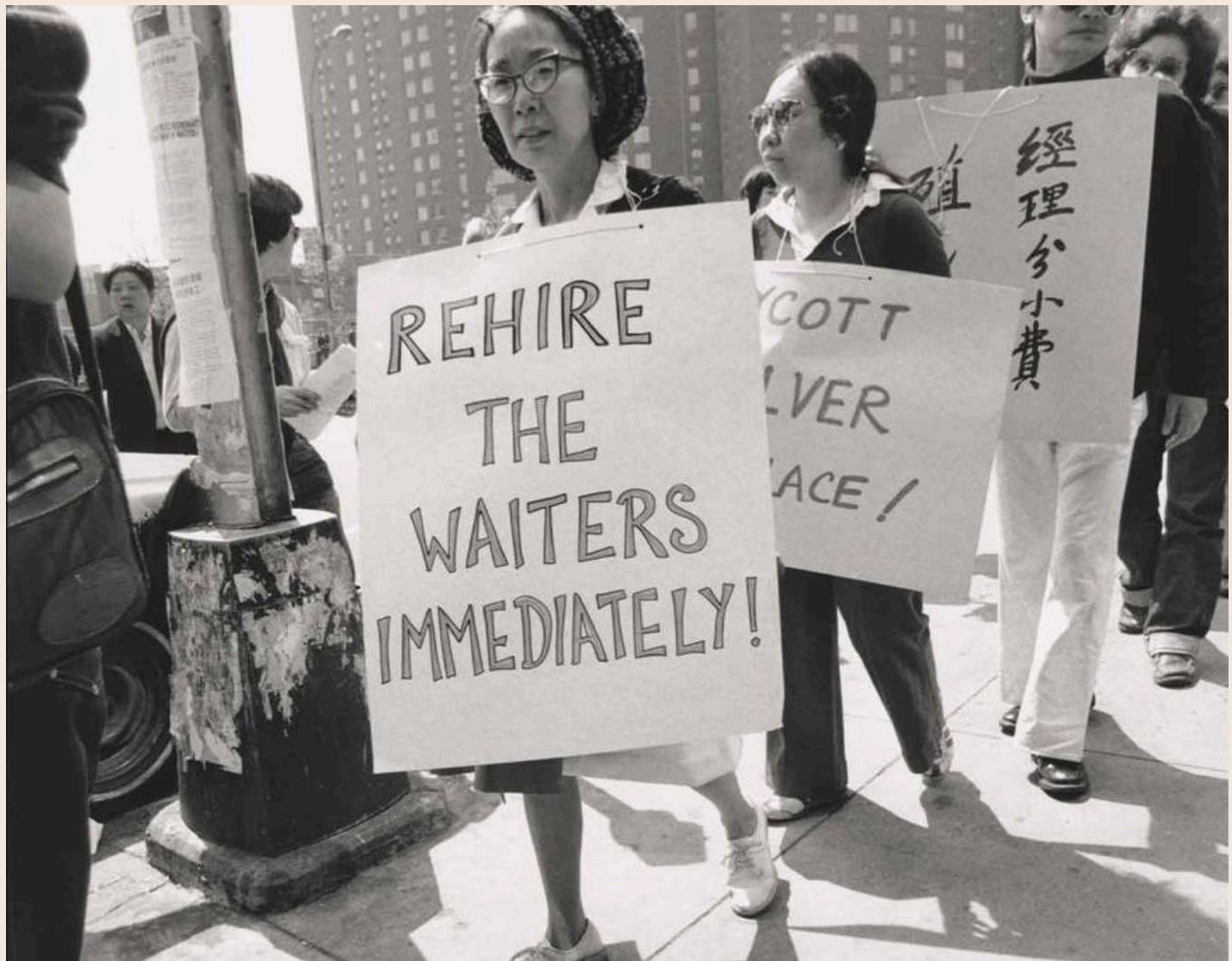
Miss April Lou, a teacher at PS 1, Manhattan, with six children who had recently arrived from Hong Kong, c. 1964.

Photograph by Fred Palumbo, published in the New York World Telegram & Sun, and accessed via the Library of Congress.



March down Mott Street, July 15, 1982.

Image courtesy of the Kheel Center ILGWU Collection at Cornell University, 6000/024 P, box 9, folder 14. Accessed through digital LaborArts exhibit, "We Are One: Honoring Immigrant Garment Workers."



Activist and organizer Yuri Kochiyama marches the picket line outside Silver Palace bearing a sign that reads "Rehire the waiters immediately!" c. 1980.

Photograph by Corky Lee, distributed via the Estate of Corky Lee, accessed through the Smithsonian Institution.



Picket line outside Silver Palace Restaurant, c. 1993.

**Photographer unknown, image courtesy of the CAAAV
Digital Archive.**

1,500 Dine, and Back Restaurant in Battle With Union

In a dramatic and unprecedented display of community solidarity against the independent union that has been trying to organize restaurant workers in Chinatown, 1,500 people packed the largest restaurant in the neighborhood Thursday night.

The event at the Jing Fong restaurant marked a rare moment of unity in politically fractious Chinatown. The participants banded together to show their opposition to Local 318 Independent Restaurant Workers Union, which represents waiters in two Chinese restaurants in Chinatown and Flushing, Queens, and has tried unsuccessfully to organize employees at Jing Fong.

Participants, including business people, workers and community leaders from anti-Communist as well as pro-mainland factions, said they hoped to send a message to the union's adviser, Wing Lam, executive director of the Chinese Staff Workers Association, that his tactics are damaging the Chinatown economy by discouraging patronage of targeted restaurants. The union

has staged mock funerals, complete with coffins, drums and dancers performing mourning dances outside Jing Fong since February.

Union advisers refused Friday to comment on the event.

During the emotionally charged evening, diners gave a 10-minute standing ovation to 140 headwaiters, waiters and kitchen workers, who marched around the restaurant.

Unions are a sensitive topic among Chinatown workers, who fear that they would lose financially under union contracts. Waiters, for example, say they fear losing salary and tips because owners would hire second shifts to avoid paying overtime. People at the dinner acknowledged that restaurant workers are often underpaid and overworked. But they said it is up to the government, not unions, to enforce labor laws.

"If there are labor problems in the restaurant, then let the government handle it," said George Hui, president of the influential Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Associa-

tion, an umbrella organization representing more than 70 family, business and area associations in Chinatown. "There is no need for Mr. Lam to haul out the coffin and hurt the Chinatown economy."

For their part, restaurant owners accept much of the blame for the problems within their workforce, but they say competition and low profit margins make it difficult to pay benefits and higher wages. They concede they do not make enough effort to understand Federal labor practices.

Thursday's turnout came as a surprise to Yai Chi Chan, president of the Chinese Restaurant Association, who said he had originally planned the event as a fundraising dinner for his 500 members. But people from the community also wanted to come. "Soon, the whole restaurant was all booked up — we had to turn people away," he said.

The union had planned its own demonstration outside Jing Fong Thursday night but no one showed up.

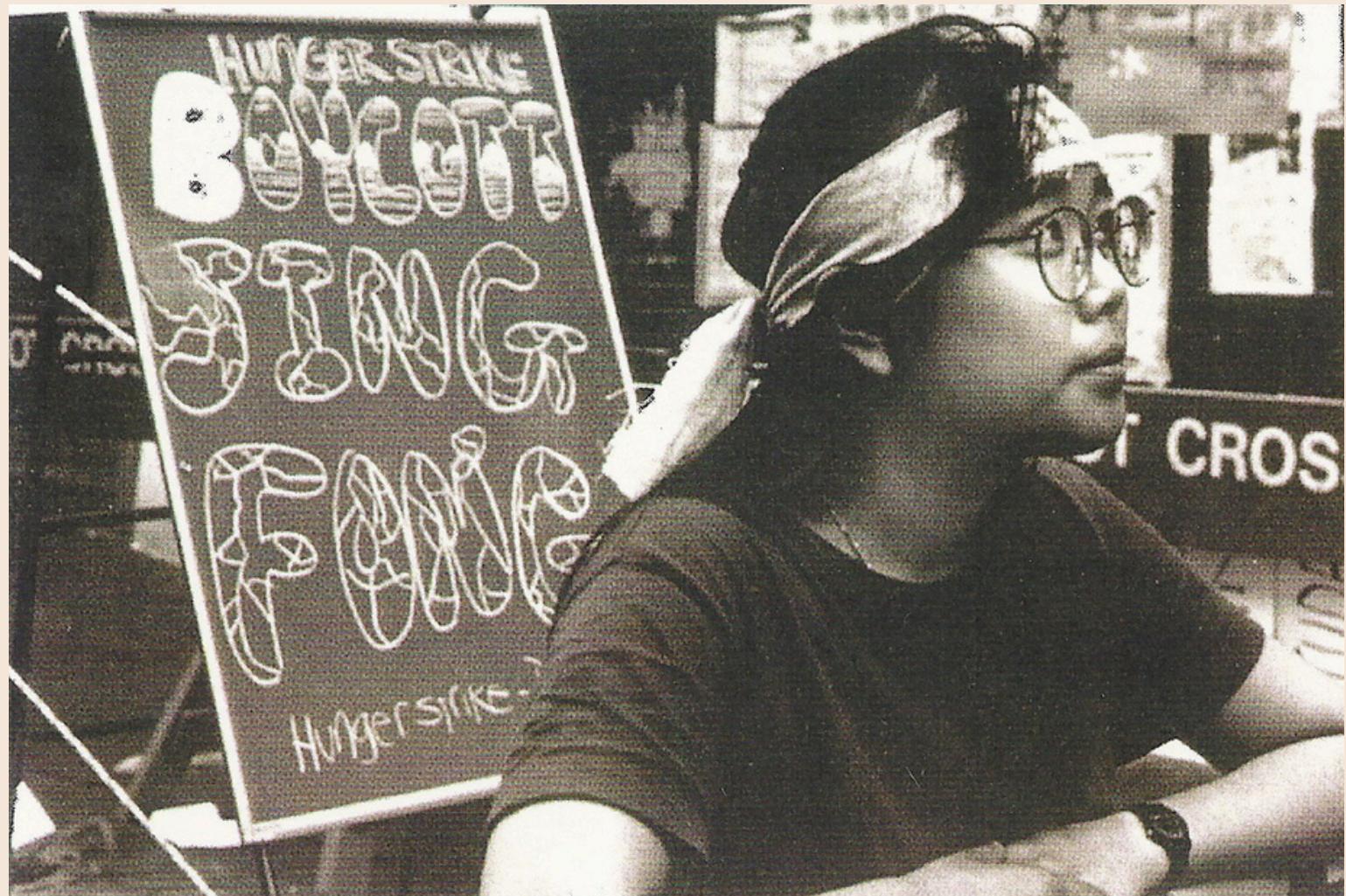
JANE H. LII



Waiters, bus boys and kitchen workers of the Jing Fong restaurant on Elizabeth Street march against a union's organizing tactics.

"1,500 Dine, and Back Restaurant in Battle with Union"

The New York Times, April 2, 1995, accessed via TimesMachine.



Virginia Yu during the 1995 student-led hunger strike in front of Jing Fong

Photographer unknown, photo permissions courtesy of the Virginia Yu Fund for Social & Economic Justice.

A Loud End to Strike

By Jeremy Quittner

STAFF WRITER

Shouting themselves hoarse atop a makeshift platform outside a Chinatown restaurant, a group of Chinese students staged a noisy demonstration yesterday to mark the end of a week-long hunger strike to protest unfair treatment of workers.

Last week, five of the students timed their hunger strike protesting working conditions at the Jing Fong restaurant on Elizabeth Street to coincide with the sixth anniversary of the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square student uprising in Beijing.

The protesters claimed that the sub-standard working conditions at Jing Fong, one of Chinatown's largest dim sum palaces, are endemic to many of the area's restaurants and garment factories.

The protesters claim that workers in the area are subjected to low wages, long hours and unsafe working conditions. They also protested what they called the collusion between restaurant

bosses, a branch of the Chinese mafia called Tong, the Chinese media and even Police Chief Thomas Chan of the Fifth Precinct — a charge that was heartily refuted.

Chan could not be reached for comment, but an officer at the scene from the Fifth Precinct, whose badge read Lyle, said: "This is an ongoing labor dispute. There's absolutely no truth about police collusion at all."

Pacing furiously in front of the Jing Fong restaurant, Larry Lui, one of the head waiters, also criticized the protesters, who he said "have just messed up the entire Chinatown community. It's not true that the management is taking money from the workers."

For their part, the protesters shouted, "Captain Chan, shame on you!" and "Boycott slave labor!"

"The students rose up to fight the government in China. We are rising up to fight the powers of this collusion," said Susana Joenarti, a 25-year-old student at Hunter College who joined the hunger strike.

"A Loud End to Strike"

**Newsday, June 12, 1995. Accessed via
newspapers.com.**



Still from *Resilience* (2001)

Directed by Betty Yu, Produced by Betty Yu (New York, NY:
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**Thank you for
reading!**

