



LABOR STRUGGLES and YOUTH SOLIDARITY

In 1990s
Chinatown

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RESTAURANT

Organized Labor in Chinatown

1965's Immigration and Nationality Act,

For much of the 20th century, Chinese and Japanese immigrants faced laws built on racial exclusion.

This act ended the quota system that limited visas based on race and national origin. It also removed barriers that had restricted immigrants from owning property and businesses, and made it possible for whole families to immigrate together!

International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
I L G W U!

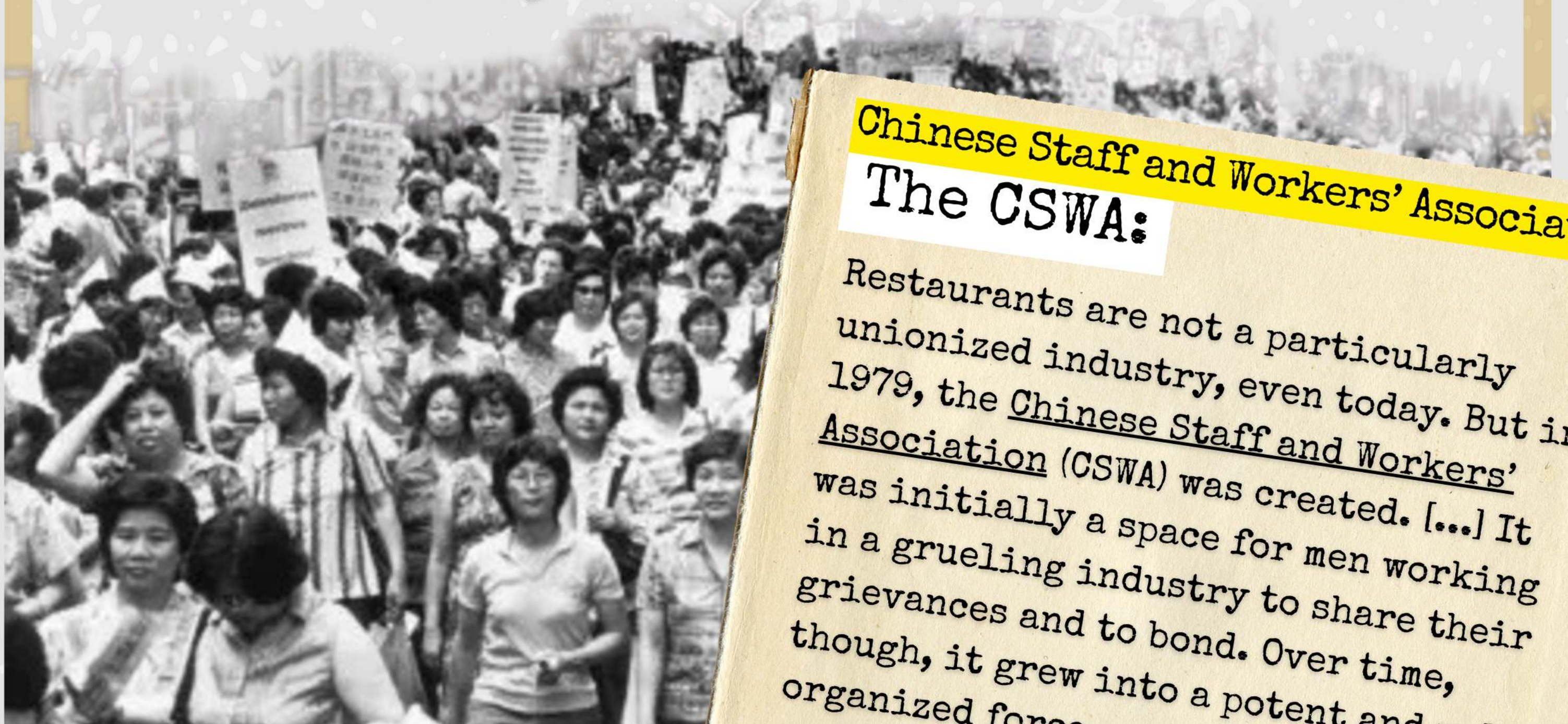
Many Chinese women working in the garment industry joined unionized — or soon-to-be-unionized — shops under the ILGWU banner. While this was the first experience with labor organizing for many, union organizers and community activists built real power under difficult conditions. Their efforts culminated in the successful Chinatown garment workers' strike of 1982, in which 20,000 strikers — almost all women — marched through Chinatown with union buttons and picket signs, demanding ratified union contracts and their rights as workers.

because of this Act,

Chinese communities
move to the
Lower East Side!

[By] 1980, 25,000 Chinese women were employed in the garment factories lining Canal Street. The shops paid poorly and were rife with workplace hazards, but they had no language or minimum education requirements.

But they weren't on their own...



March down Mott Street, July 15, 1982.

Chinese Staff and Workers' Association The CSWA:

Restaurants are not a particularly unionized industry, even today. But in 1979, the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association (CSWA) was created. [...] It was initially a space for men working in a grueling industry to share their grievances and to bond. Over time, though, it grew into a potent and well-organized force.

Restaurant Work and the CSWA

Exploitation!

Exploitation in the restaurant industry can include everything from wage theft to grueling long hours and unsafe working conditions. It was — and still is — rampant, particularly when workers are undocumented or have other reasons to fear an authority's intervention. In the 1970s and 1980s in Chinatown, local political corruption, the influence of local gangs, and a lack of state oversight over restaurants combined to form an environment where abuses of power within restaurants went unchecked.

The Fight Against Silver Palace:



Yuri Kochiyama on the picket line outside Silver Palace, c. 1980.

CSWA Wins!

Members of CSWA, many who worked at Silver Palace or other neighborhood restaurants, picketed outside daily. Eventually, their campaign of public pressure worked. The fired employees were rehired, and Silver Palace workers formed an independent restaurant workers' union. Their work hours were standardized, and they even received a rare benefit: healthcare.

Low, low pay...
Jimmy Ong, one of the founders of CSWA, noted in a 2007 interview with amNY that at this time, the average restaurant worker was paid around \$300/monthly for a 70-hour work week.

In February of 1980, the newly-formed CSWA faced its biggest test yet. Silver Palace, one of Chinatown's largest banquet halls, was accused of stealing tips from its employees. Anyone who raised the issue to management was then summarily fired.

CSWA became known for strong advocacy beyond labor. They took on gentrification, sweatshop conditions, and public safety.

Resturaunt Work and the CSWA



A New York Times article discussing the controversial protest tactics of CSWA utilized in the struggle against Jing Fong management, April 2, 1995.

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

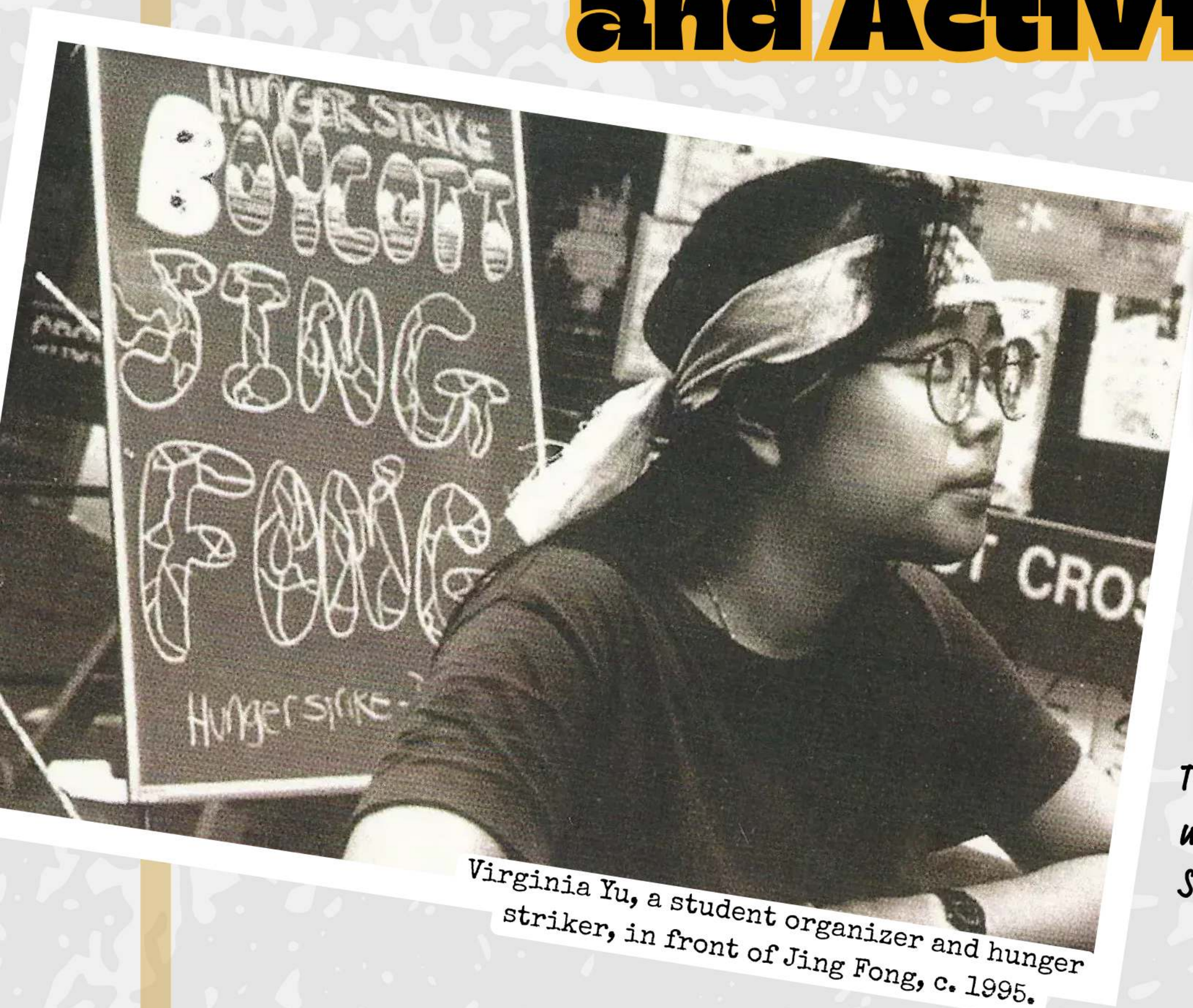
Pushback!

The Fight continues: Jing Fong

In 1995, fresh off another battle with Silver Palace, CSWA picketed against Jing Fong, Chinatown's largest banquet hall/restaurant at the time. Jing Fong management had violated labor laws by stealing workers' tips — the same practice that had landed Silver Palace in hot water — and had fired a waiter for reporting it. Some Jing Fong workers opposed CSWA's protests, worrying that declining profits and negative attention on the restaurant would lead to them losing their own jobs.

But the protests only grew larger — and more theatrical. It also upset many older Chinatown residents and restaurant owners when CSWA picketers paraded a fake coffin in front of Jing Fong, and even more when they staged mock funerals for the business. Whether out of a sense of propriety or discomfort with a symbol of death being invoked in this context, many felt that it was not right for an intra-community struggle to be aired out so publicly in the streets. Others, led by CSWA organizers and Chinese American students, embraced a diversity of tactics as the best chance they had of winning this fight.

Youth Solidarity and Activism



Virginia Yu, a student organizer and hunger striker, in front of Jing Fong, c. 1995.

While prior labor struggles in Chinatown, including the 1982 garment workers' strike and the 1980 Golden Palace protests, had been led by adult workers, radical youth were at the heart of 1995's protest against Jing Fong management.

These young people were inspired to mobilize by footage of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

For youth with parents working in the garment factories or the banquet halls, the labor violations were not just a matter of political principle, but the very foundations of their lives. [...] The students on hunger strike were instrumental in bringing attention to the fight for the Jing Fong staff's rights. Their strike lasted seven days, and by its conclusion, news cameras and reporters were on the ground to document it.

Victory Again!

Just as with Silver Palace, Jing Fong was eventually found guilty of various labor violations and required by the State Attorney General's Office to pay a \$1.1 million settlement to the striking workers. The brave, visible actions of the student hunger strikers and the CSWA protestors almost certainly moved this particular story toward a resolution. *And this work still continues today!*

A Loud End to Strike

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.

An article detailing the efforts of the student hunger strikers and their protest of Jing Fong's labor practices, c. 1995.

Betty Yu's Documentary

[Betty Yu], a documentary filmmaker who was also on the ground protesting, later turned her footage from her experience into a short documentary film, *Resilience* (2001).

"For 18 years, I've watched my parents, ever since they've come to America, they've had to come to this (indistinct) of being treated like second class citizens. And after watching them, I know I had to fight for my own people."

-Virginia Yu



Watch the documentary here, at
<https://localizedhistoryproject.org/>
Focus especially on 07:56-10:59.

Yu's film explores her mother, a garment worker, fighting against sweatshop conditions. It also provides a firsthand account of her and her sister, Virginia Yu, leading and participating in the 1995 hunger strike. The film draws a strong connection between the sisters' grounding in their mother's labor activism and the development of their own political principles as youth activists.

Questions to consider:

- How did the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre influence these student protesters? Why do you think they invoked that historical moment?
- Virginia Yu said, "But I think without the support of the community... it would be way too dangerous." What does this tell us about the importance of collective action?
- What personal risks were the student hunger strikers taking? Would you have joined them? Why or why not?

Endnotes

Organized Labor in Chinatown

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Betty Yu's Documentary

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飯店

中國廣東粵劇團

KAN WAI
GARDEN
URANT

全球最大民辦華文報 中國時報 即將在美發行

MUNDO

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