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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5q0849m9>

**Journal**

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 7(2)

**ISSN**

1545-0317

**Author**

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**Publication Date**

2009

**DOI**

10.36650/nexus7.2\_1-32\_Wang

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Peer reviewed

Practioner's Essay

# “Not in Your Backyard!”: A Community Struggle for the Rights of Immigrant Adult Education in San Francisco’s Chinatown

L. Ling-chi Wang

## Abstract

This article is a case study of a protracted struggle to establish a branch campus of the San Francisco Community College in Chinatown for thousands of immigrants and working-class adults, focusing mostly on the period since 1997 when the community was slowly politicized and mobilized to fight for their educational rights. Although educational researchers continue to pay close attention to Asian American fights against discriminatory admission policies among the nation’s top colleges and universities, an urgent need to pay more scholarly and political attention to the neediest, poorest, and powerless among Asian Americans clearly exists. To this segment of the Asian American population, access to community college education is a matter of acquiring tools of survival in America. The study illustrates the equal significance of race and class in understanding the development of Asian American communities, how each can be used to obfuscate or disguise the other, and how both can be easily obscured by other issues, especially “progressive” issues or organizations. Asian American community activists and scholars need to pay more attention to class and class conflict within the communities and between the communities and the mainstream society.

## Introduction

November 1, 2008 was not a typical Saturday for Chinatown, San Francisco. On a typical Saturday, Chinatown streets would be filled with weekend shoppers, lunch crowds, wedding or birthday partygoers, and curious tourists from everywhere. This Saturday

was chilly, windy, and rainy. The weather conditions obviously had deterred the usual weekend crowd; streets were not particularly congested with pedestrians and traffic. But at the northeast corner vacant lot at Kearny and Washington streets (City Block 195), in the shadow of the newly resurrected International Hotel (I-Hotel) for poor elderly people on the same city block, diagonally across historic Portsmouth Square on Kearny, and directly across the street from the twenty-seven-story Hilton Hotel on Washington, the scene was jubilant, carnival-like: some two hundred persons from all walks of life braved the unpleasant weather and jammed into the vacant lot with their colorful umbrellas, eagerly waiting for the groundbreaking ceremony for the long-awaited Chinatown campus of the City College of San Francisco (CCSF) or the Community College District of San Francisco (Lee, 2009; Q. Wang, 11-2-2008). When completed, the \$140-million, fourteen-story campus with a four-story satellite building halfway down the block will serve the educational needs of 6,500 immigrant and working-class adults living and working in and around Chinatown each year. The historic Chinatown, not unlike other Chinatowns in major U.S. cities, is surrounded to the south and southeast by the downtown/financial district (the landmark, pyramid-shape Transamerica Pyramid [TAP] is half a block away), and to the west, northwest, north, and northeast, respectively, by Nob Hill, Russian Hill, Telegraph Hill, and Jackson Square, residential areas representing wealth, power, and prestige in San Francisco. It was in fighting against these powerful external interests encircling Chinatown since 1997 that the people of Chinatown waged the uphill war to win the right to build the campus within its neighborhood.

No one appreciated the significance of the groundbreaking better than the broad community coalition represented in the crowd. To them, it marked the end of a protracted struggle that began more than thirty years ago and culminated in several rounds of intense political and legal battles during the last twelve years. They did not want to miss the opportunity to tell the world that they were not as “powerless” and “irrelevant” as their opponents, most notably, Michael Yaki, a close Asian American ally of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and a hired attorney and spokesman of the Hilton Hotel, had dismissively characterized them to be. They did so with pride and jubilation in pouring rain with noisy cheers, shouts, firecrackers, and lion dances. It was a knockout victory for

the newly empowered community and a celebration to be long remembered. The struggle raised the political consciousness and power of the community to new heights and exposed the true color of an opportunistic alliance of downtown corporate interests, and the so-called liberal Democratic establishment of San Francisco politics, famously known as the Burton machine, lined up to kill the much-needed facility. To camouflage their not-so-subtle racist and class opposition to the project, they raised preservationist and environmental concerns and hired a few politically ambitious Chinese American leaders and elected officials, like state Senator Leland Yee and Assemblywoman Fiona Ma, to take the lead in attacking the project and spreading poison and discord within the community and to silent community organizations with financial ties and interests linked to City Hall (Hua, 2007; K. Liu, 2007a; Ma, 2007a; Wu, 2007b; Yee, 2007a, 2007b; Yee and Ma, 2007a). Arrogance of power and wealth coupled with their contempt for both the democratic process and the needs and interests of the Chinese American community characterized the attitude and tactics of the opposition from the beginning. Against all odds, community solidarity and persistence prevailed in the end.

This article is a case study of this struggle, focusing mostly on the period since 1997 when the community was slowly politicized and mobilized to fight for their educational rights. Through this study, I hope to highlight three points. First, the importance of political mobilization in the community struggle for racial equality and economic justice. Second, the urgent need to pay more scholarly and political attention to the educational needs and interests of Asian immigrant and working adults at the community college level in major metropolitan areas across the United States. The national obsession with Asian Americans as the so-called model minority and their perennial vigilance against discriminatory policies, overt and covert, aimed at reducing Asian Americans' disproportional presence in the most select research universities and elite private liberal art colleges, has caused Asian Americans and the public at large to divert the public's attention from the neediest and the poorest among them. To this segment of the Asian American population, access to community college education is a matter of acquiring tools and skills of survival in America. Third, the study illustrates the equal significance of race and class in understanding the development of Asian American communities, how

each can be used to obfuscate or disguise the other, and how both can be easily obscured by other issues, especially “progressive” issues or organizations. As Asian American communities become more complex and the United States becomes more open and accessible to racial minorities and women, Asian American community activists and scholars need to pay more attention to class and class conflict with the communities and between the communities and the mainstream society.

### Asian Americans in Community Colleges

Higher education in the United States is highly segmented by race, class, and gender (Bowl and Gintis, 1976). It is also very hierarchical. At the top of more than four thousand institutions of higher education in the United States are a few hundred highly selective private and public research universities and elite, private, small liberal arts colleges. At the bottom are about three thousand two-year public community colleges and private vocational schools attended by millions of immigrants, minorities, and working-class people. In between is a vast network of about a thousand large state universities and private colleges that provide a four-year college education and master’s degree professional training programs (Smelser, 1974).

Today, community colleges offer a very limited opportunity for transfer to four-year institutions (Brint and Karabel, 1989; Pincus, 1980). Instead, they provide vocational and continuing education for mostly working-class adults. Added to these two objectives is a role not anticipated by the founders of the community college movement: English-language and citizenship education for millions of immigrants from non-English-speaking Third World countries, especially from Latin America and Asia. The 1965 immigration massively shifted the type of immigrants coming to the United States from Europe to the Third World, most of whom found employment in the expanding service and operative industries in major metropolitan areas across the United States, including San Francisco. To these immigrant adults, English-language, citizenship, and vocational classes in community colleges are their tickets into mainstream America.

Nowhere is this added role reflected more dramatically than in the enrollment of Asian Americans in community colleges. The public may have the impression that all Asian American college stu-

dents are concentrated in the Ivy League and top research universities across the United States. The untold and hidden story is the rapid enrollment increase of Asian Americans in community colleges. According to statistics compiled by Robert Teranishi, there were 358,889 Asian American undergraduates enrolled in public four-year institutions in 2005 and 136,099 in private four-year institutions (Teranishi, forthcoming). There were 389,641 Asian Americans enrolled in public community colleges, such as CCSF, and another 10,500 in private two-year institutions. Between 1980 and 2005, Asian American enrollment in community colleges increased by 370 percent. In California, some 220,000 Asian Americans were enrolled in two-year community colleges in 2005 or about 60 percent of all Asian Americans enrolled in colleges in the state. Teranishi observes similar rapid enrollment growth in the South and Midwest and to a lesser degree, in the East and the West. At CCSF, some forty thousand Asian Americans are routinely enrolled in its various programs, a number larger than the combined enrollment of all Asian American students in the Ivy League universities. This article looks at the politics of building a Chinatown branch of CCSF for some 6,500 students living and working in the northeast sector of the city.

### Establishing the Chinatown Branch of CCSF

Founded in 1935, CCSF now has a total enrollment of slightly more than one hundred thousand students, taking credit and non-credit classes in more than fifty academic programs and more than one hundred occupational disciplines in more than one hundred fifty neighborhood sites on nine campuses across the city. Among the students are 6.6 percent African American, 39.4 percent Asian American, 19.5 percent Hispanic/Latino, 19.6 percent non-Hispanic white, 0.4 percent Native American, 1.9 percent other nonwhite, and 12.5 percent unknown. Reflecting the dispersion of the Asian American population throughout the city, typically about six thousand to seven thousand part-time students, or one-fifth of Asian American students, most of whom are working-class Chinese immigrants, are enrolled in the Chinatown-North Beach campus in English as a Second Language classes; others are enrolled in citizenship classes and occupational training programs, including culinary training, home health care, multimedia technology, trade skills, and janitorial service (CCSF, 2001). Instead of preparing college-age students for transfer to four-year liberal arts schools, the Chinatown

campus has become a center mostly for teaching basic English-language and job skills to poor and immigrant adults. Classes are held mostly, and unfortunately, in an inappropriate, dilapidated former elementary school, Hancock Grammar School, and in a dozen or so woefully inadequate rented rooms in churches and community services organizations throughout the Chinatown area (CCSF, 1997; CCSF, 2006d; CCSF, 2007a).

In late 1977, the elected seven-member board of trustees of the CCSF voted to make its classes more convenient and accessible to neighborhoods throughout the city by establishing branch campuses, including one in the northeast quadrant of the city, popularly known as the Chinatown-North Beach area. In 1981, it signed a twenty-year lease with the San Francisco Unified School District for the Hancock School, a few blocks to the north of Chinatown, for classrooms and administrative offices at approximately \$500,000 per year. Enrollment rose rapidly because the influx of immigrants from Asian countries persisted, so additional temporary facilities had to be rented across Chinatown, most of which were not designed for adult teaching purposes, were seismically unsafe, and had inadequate bathrooms, storage rooms for teaching equipment and technology, and rooms for student support services (Lee, 2007b). Even worse, state funds could not be used to renovate leased property, and such rented facilities were vulnerable to space reduction or worse, such as eviction by owners, making planning and scheduling difficult, if not impossible.

Because the Chinese American community was historically disenfranchised and considered politically impotent, not surprisingly, the chronic problems in these rented and leased facilities were routinely ignored by the elected trustees and CCSF administration (Wang, 1996). Besides, the high population density and unusually high cost of real estate in the Chinatown area provided a legitimate excuse for not finding or building an adequate high-rise facility in the vicinity. However, as Asian Americans became politically more aware and involved, teachers and administrators in the area began to push for a better campus for themselves and the students living and working within the area. Chancellor Del M. Anderson, a quiet but committed African American leader, saw this need and retained Beverly Prior Architects to prepare a comprehensive "Needs Assessment Study and Schematic Building Program" (CCSF, 1997) for a new Chinatown-North Beach Campus in order to consolidate its

activities on twelve different sites in the area. This study became a blueprint for curricular planning and site search for the Chinatown campus. Chancellor Anderson also decided to include the construction of a new Chinatown campus in the 1997 “CCSF District Construction Plan” and successfully worked with Superintendent Bill Rojas of the public schools to pass a major school bond for acquiring land and improving educational facilities for the public schools and CCSF in 1997. The bond provided CCSF \$50 million for acquiring land for campuses in Chinatown and in the Mission District. However, it was Chancellor Phil R. Day, Jr. who made building new facilities for CCSF throughout the city his top priority in 1998 and aggressively pushed for additional funds for school construction through city and state bonds. He was a man of vision and ideas, restless and aggressive, always ready to make decisions and cut deals, forgetting, at times, that he must work with a seven-member elected board of trustees and a public ready to support him but also ready to hold him accountable. Under his leadership, CCSF built several new and modern facilities, but in the process, he also antagonized some politically ambitious trustees and provoked unexpected backlash from the “liberal” political class of San Francisco.

### Search for a Campus Site in Chinatown

From day one, Chancellor Day understood the urgent needs in Chinatown and was determined to look for a permanent campus in the Chinatown area. But, looking for a site or facility in the high-price vicinity of Chinatown that would be sufficiently large and suitable to meet the diverse educational needs of its students was like looking for an expensive needle in a haystack. Very few vacant lots were available for building a new campus and existing buildings had limitations, such as height, bulk, and density. Historical preservation and environmental impact also added complications to any real estate transaction or new construction. Identifying such a site required special search, determination, political skills, and luck. The first step was to set up an *ad hoc* Chinatown Campus Facility Committee, made up of concerned teachers and administrators, to comb Chinatown and the surrounding area for a campus site.

Miraculously, the *ad hoc* committee, under the leadership of Dean Joanne Low (Cantrell, 2008), quickly stumbled upon the two-story, run-down Colombo Building in City Block 195 at the

northwest corner of Columbus Avenue and Washington Street, diagonally across the street from TAP, the most visible landmark of downtown San Francisco, and directly across the street from the Montgomery-Washington Tower (MWT), an office and residential high-rise (CCSF, 1998a). The former is 853 feet high with forty-eight floors of office and retail space, and the latter is 300 feet high with twenty-six stories of office and luxury residential condos on the top six stories. TAP and MWT occupy the historic Chinatown-Manilatown district, an area that was bound by Montgomery and Kearny streets between Pine and Broadway streets before World War II. After the war, the city embarked upon an aggressive “urban renewal” program led by the city’s Redevelopment Agency to transform the downtown area and part of Chinatown-Manilatown into the expanding Financial District of the West.

That “renewal” program accelerated land speculation and caused steady encroachment into the Chinatown-Manilatown area throughout 1960s and 1970s, evicting and demolishing two- and three-story buildings, like the Colombo Building, for single and elderly Chinese and Filipinos and replacing them with buildings like TAP and MWT with disastrous results for the poor and powerless in the area. The encroachment was finally halted at what became the community’s last stand, the I-Hotel, at the northeast corner of Kearny and Jackson streets, where for several years the Chinese and Filipino communities stood solidly behind the heroic but ultimately failed struggle against the historic eviction of nearly two hundred elderly Chinese and Filipino on the night of August 4, 1977, and the I-Hotel’s eventual demolition in September 1979 (Habal, 2009).

### “Not in *Your Backyard*”: The First Setback

To build a Chinatown campus at the Colombo site amounted to a reclaiming of a piece of lost territory of Chinatown-Manilatown, an anathema and challenge to corporate and white liberal interests. CCSF administrators should have anticipated a tough political fight requiring broad community support. Incredibly, without much consulting and involving the Chinese American community and other constituent groups in the planning process, the college quickly and quietly took steps to acquire the Colombo Building (Lot 4) from the Pan Magna Group for \$3.89 million in July 1998; the Fong Building (Lot 12), a small, family-owned three-story apartment building next door, to the north for \$1.9 million; and a small

vacant lot (Lot 5) to the west (CCSF, 1999a). Based on its “Needs Assessment Study and Schematic Building Program,” which called for a facility with ninety-eight thousand assignable square feet, it hired EHDD, an architecture firm, to draw up a new two-building campus for the location: an eight-story building to replace the Colombo building and a seven-story building on the Fong site (CCSF, 2003, 2005a). On April 23, 1998, it published the draft “Environmental Impact Report” (EIR), based on the plans and designs drawn up by EHDD. After receiving mostly favorable comments and spoken testimonies in poorly publicized public hearings, the CCSF trustees, in accordance with state laws and city regulations, certified the final EIR on July 21, 1998 (CCSF, 1998b). For a brief moment, it looked as if Chinatown was finally going to get the branch campus it dreamed of for more than two decades, and the plan would encounter no organized opposition (CCSF, 2005b).

Unfortunately, CCSF was wrong: it underestimated its opponents and failed to enlist community support for the proposed project. Even before the purchase of the Colombo was concluded, the proposed project instantly drew strong opposition not from the “Not in My Backyard People” (NIMBies), but from unexpected outsiders who, in effect, told the Chinese community and CCSF that the proposed campus could “not (be built) in *your* backyard” (NIYBies). The failure of CCSF to involve the Chinese community for which the campus was to be built left the trustees and administration politically alone and vulnerable without a viable defense against the legal, financial, and political assaults led by the determined outsiders, NIYBies, driven by greed, self-interest, racism, and political opportunism. The assault proved costly in terms of public money lost and the years of delay in the construction of the new campus in Chinatown.

Soon after the board of trustees certified the EIR, two external groups, the Friends of Colombo Building (FCB) and the owners of MWT, filed a joint lawsuit in the state Superior Court on August 21, 1998, in order to stop the project. The former, an unincorporated *ad hoc* group, was organized by Aaron Peskin, the president of the Telegraph Hill Dwellers (THD). The two groups challenged the legality of the certified final EIR under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which required the college to take feasible measures to avoid or minimize any significant environmental impacts that could result from the project.

To put it bluntly, the NIYBies simply did not want these new educational and housing facilities built in Chinatown, even though they had no direct interest in the housing and educational well-being of the community, and the buildings they represented across the street from these projects were almost two times taller than the proposed buildings. After a series of secret negotiations and with the help of politically ambitious Supervisor Leland Yee, then the chair of the finance committee of the board of supervisors responsible for authorizing the use of the city's bond money to complete the purchase of the Colombo before the legally binding closing date, the college, on June 4, 1999, was forced to make concessions and entered into a settlement with the FCB and MWT in which it promised to keep the Colombo, dip into its funds to seismically retrofit it at a cost of \$10 million, and reimburse the plaintiffs \$115,000 in attorney's fee (CCSF, 1999b). The settlement prompted Rodel Rodis, a Filipino American trustee and chair of the facility committee, to call Yee's demand "a political blackmail" (Liu, K., 2007c; Rodis, 2007). It further required the college to "preserve, restore and rehabilitate the Colombo Building" as part of the Chinatown campus and to make certain it "qualified" for the National Register of Historic Places, the California Register of Historical Resources, and the designation of a historical landmark under the city's Planning Code. Based on the agreement, CCSF trustees approved a new project plan for classrooms and ancillary educational spaces for the Chinatown district (CCSF, 2003). The college later agreed to hire a FCB-approved historic preservation architect "to participate in all aspects of the design and construction process," a process still ongoing as of this publication (Carey and Co., 2004). Moreover, it agreed to limit the height of the Colombo Building to no more than 50 feet, Lot 5 to no more than 78 feet, and the Fong Building to no more than 102 feet, and to let representatives of the FCB to participate in the reviews of other college buildings in Block 195. In subsequent negotiations, the college made further concessions to the FCB and WMT (CCSF, 2005b), and with the help of Asian, Inc., a community-based, nonprofit business and housing consulting organization, agreed to cover replacement housing for the tenants in the Fong Building at an estimated cost of \$4 million in a Chinatown YMCA low-cost housing project (Day, 2003). However, on December 15, 2003, the tenants unexpectedly filed a lawsuit against CCSF for failing to meet their demands (Asian Law Caucus, 2003).

In spite of these costly concessions at taxpayers' expense and extensive planning, in 2005 CCSF decided to abandon the modified project and put the buildings up for sale, according to Chancellor Day, "due to development restrictions, litigation, and excessive construction costs" associated with these agreements and to begin anew the arduous task of looking for another site. With good intention, CCSF administration came close to helping Chinatown fulfill its dream of a convenient, centralized, and modern campus for thousands of immigrants and working residents in the area. But in the end, the project was quietly killed behind closed doors by legal and political maneuverings engineered by white, liberal, and wealthy environmentalists and downtown corporate interests. Race and class played decisive roles in the demise of the first proposed project.

#### Community Needs vs. Liberals and Corporate Interests

It was back to the drawing board again for CCSF. Soon after, in 2005, the college identified a street-level parking lot, Lots 9 and 10, in the same Block 195 at the northeast corner of Kearny and Washington streets as a possible location. The college determined that the site, directly across the street from the Hilton Hotel, was suitable for a high-rise that could accommodate the programmatic needs and the site-selection criteria for the new campus. Moreover, the maximum height limit for Block 195 was two hundred feet with a conditional-use approval. Immediately, it began negotiations for their acquisition and initiated the planning process.

While negotiations for the purchase were going on, Peskin, by then an elected supervisor for the Chinatown-North Beach District and without regard to his Chinatown constituency, quietly introduced and pushed through a legislation to lower the height limit for Block 195 from two hundred to sixty-five feet, a measure clearly intended to preemptively devalue the lots and prevent any future development for the entire block, including the CCSF plan. CCSF protested to no avail (Goldstein, 2005).

Nevertheless, on October 24, 2005, CCSF naively and confidently announced its intention to build a new campus on Lots 9 and 10 that would consolidate all its Chinatown area classes into one location (Zhang, 2005). The campus would have 83,325 assignable square feet of space, eighteen classrooms, twenty-four laboratories, a multipurpose room, a student center, a culinary program, library,

and administration and faculty offices. In May 2006, EHDD Architecture released the schematic design for the Chinatown-North Beach campus, proposing to build a sixteen-story building on the two lots (CCSF, 2006a) and announcing on October 6, 2006, its plan to prepare a new EIR, as required under CEQA guidelines (CCSF, 2006b, 2006c). Two public scoping meetings on the EIR were duly held on November 27 and December 6, 2006. The plan was to complete and publish the EIR draft by May 2007 for public comments and to hold hearings between May 16 and July 16, 2007, including an additional bilingual hearing in May and a public hearing on June 28, 2007, at the insistence of community groups (CCSF, 2007b, 2007d). Based on these hearings, a revised plan and design would emerge and be presented to the trustees for approval (CCSF, 2007c).

Incredibly, even before the EIR process got underway, two separate actions taken by the project's opponents foreshadowed the upcoming clash between the educational needs and interests of the Chinatown-North Beach community and the interests of environmentalists and corporate downtown. First, Bob McCarthy, a well-connected lawyer best known for representing big development interests in downtown San Francisco and political fundraising, sent a letter on October 13, 2006, on behalf of the Hilton Hotel located in the Financial District, to CCSF, requesting "access to and copies of all records available as public records. . . . pertaining to the development, review, consideration" of the new campus plan. It was a warning and a prelude to suing the college to stop the proposed project (McCarthy, 2006). Two months later, on December 20, Peskin published a statement in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, a weekly, left-wing newspaper, in which he sharply criticized CCSF for failing "to reach out to the community," violating the sixty-five-foot limit for the block that he had earlier quietly enacted into city ordinance, and presenting the community with what he characterized as "a 17-story, 238-foot glass monstrosity" (Peskin, 2006; Xiao, 2006). At the heart of their objection was the height of the proposed campus or, to put it bluntly, the city view of the hotel guests and the THDs (Russell, 2007).

With these two opening salvos, it was clear that the proposed campus was once again about to be killed by largely invisible but powerful external forces unless the community could be mobilized to openly fight back the onslaught and to actively work with and hold accountable both the gun-shy CCSF executives and politically

ambitious elected trustees. As we shall see, the face-off in 2007 was a clash between David and Goliath, pitting the awakening and often weak and fragmented Chinese American community in San Francisco against an unprecedented elite coalition of downtown corporate interests, the liberal Democratic establishment, wealthy environmentalists on hilltops, and a small handful of “progressive” Chinese American leaders and organizations whose interests were inextricably tied to the opposing interests outside of Chinatown. Once the EIR process was completed (Lei, 2007a; Liu, H., 2007a), it became the focus of the clash (Huang, 2007c; Yaki, 2007). But as soon as the EIR was certified and the trustees approved the project, the focus moved to the legitimacy of the EIR process (Yaki, 2007) and the design adopted by the trustees in 2008 (Huang, 2008a; King, 2008; Lei, 2007b). In the next two years, they clashed at hearings conducted during the EIR process, at the planning commission hearings, at the design review committee meeting, at the monthly meetings of CCSF board of trustees, and in four separate lawsuits filed by the opposition (Cai, 2008; Hua, 2007; Schevitz, 2007a; Winegarner, 2008).

The opposition lineup could not be more impressive and powerful. At the core of the formidable coalition was the convergence of two major groups: the downtown corporate interests represented by the Hilton Hotel, Justice Investors, and the MWT (what I collectively call “Corporate HJM”) and the liberal antigrowth, anti-high-rise environmentalists and preservationists represented by Peskin and his wife Nancy Shanahan, both of the THD and the FCB, and the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, the mouthpiece of radical environmentalists and various “progressive” and counterculture causes in San Francisco since the 1960s (Russell, 2007).

Immediately surrounding these two powerful core groups were the individuals and organizations they hired or formed close alliances with in order to overtly and covertly oppose the proposed campus. In the language of urban renewal battles, they are called “hired guns.” They were hired to shield the core from political exposure and attacks and to expand the circle or network of opposition across the city along racial and class lines. With their deep pockets, the Corporate HJM hired three powerful law firms (McCarthy and Schwartz; Jeffer, Mangels, Butler, and Marmaro; and Morgan Lewis and Bockius), two public-relations organizations (GCA Strategies and Singers and Associates), and one high-profile architecture firm (Heller Manus Architects) to lobby the elected members of the college

board of trustees, board of supervisors, and appointed members of the planning commission against every step taken by the CCSF in the review and approval process, and to pressure elected San Francisco representatives to the board of supervisors, state legislature, and the U.S. Congress either to act on their behalf or to take no position on the project (Russell, 2007). These hired guns were notorious for their bare-knuckle and take-no-prisoner approach in their dealings with the elected officials. They had the ability to make generous political donations to compliant politicians and were a credible threat to unseat noncompliant politicians. They also generated negative publicity and editorials against the proposal (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 2007a) and targeted trustees and elected and appointed officials with political ambition to throw roadblocks at every move by the college.

These hired guns also spared no expense in enlarging their sphere of influence by enlisting Chinese American politicians, such as Senator Yee and Assemblywoman Ma, to speak out frequently against and threaten the project in the Chinese-language media (Liu, K., 2007a, 2007g; Ma, 2007; *Ming Pao*, 2007b; Yee, 2007a; Yee and Ma, 2007a, 2007c) and in the state legislature, such as, by threatening to cut state funding (Wu, 2007b) and initiate a state audit of the college (Cui, 2007; Day, 2007; Huang, 2007f; Ma, 2007b; Williams, 2007); placing full-page attack ads (Yee, 2007b); and conducting biased opinion surveys in the Chinese-language media (Guan, 2007a; Huang, 2007f; *Sing Tao Daily*, 2007; Wu, 2007c; Zhang, 2007); retaining services of former speaker of the state assembly and mayor Willie Brown and former senate president pro-tem John Burton to twist arms behind the scene; and financing an *ad hoc* group in Chinatown called Education Coalition for Responsible Development (ECRD) to forcefully oppose the proposed project (ECRD, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d; Liu, K., 2007d; Russell, 2007) and, more importantly, to give a public impression that the Chinese community was deeply divided on the proposed project (Hua, 2007; Schevitz, 2007a). Listed as part of the ECRD coalition in late 2006 were organizations such as the Community Tenants Association (CTA), Chinatown Merchants Association (CMA), and names of some prominent leaders such as Albert Cheng, co-chair of the Chinese Culture Foundation, David Chiu of the Small Business Commission, attorney Douglas Chan, Andrew Sun, Francisco Hsieh, and his daughter, Francis Hsieh (ECRD, 2007a, 2007b).

Conspicuously missing throughout the public debates over the merits and benefits for the project in the 2007 EIR process and

the 2008 design deliberation were leading Chinatown planning and housing stakeholders, such as, the Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC), Asian Neighborhood Design (AND), Asian Law Caucus (ALC), and Chinese Chamber of Commerce (CCC), all of which received funds, directly or indirectly, from the city for various housing, economic, and community development projects and had close ties with Peskin, the president of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. The last time these groups publicly participated in the process was during the scoping meetings in late 2006 for the EIR process, and their public positions were essentially similar to the position advanced by the two core groups (Chin, 2006). These groups supported the idea of a Chinatown campus, but they also agreed with the objections raised by the two core groups (HJM and THD/FCB) and chose to stay out of the EIR process, leading to the final approval of the project by the trustees. Their conspicuous absence and silence throughout the critical struggle for the campus in 2007 left the Friends of Educational Opportunity in Chinatown (FEOC) and the community wondering which side they were on and for what reasons they chose to either sit on the sideline or, worse, to work with the opposition behind the scene.

Through the preservationist and environmentalist core, the opponents also actively solicited support from external neighborhood and environmental groups across the city, such as the North Beach Merchants Association, San Francisco Tomorrow, Sierra Club, Coalition for San Francisco Neighborhoods, San Francisco Neighborhood Park Council, San Francisco Tree Council, and Sunset Community Democratic Club, all of which normally had little or nothing to do with the Chinatown neighborhood (ECRD, 2007a). Nevertheless, these NIYBies were eager to tell the Chinatown area that it could not build the needed branch campus in its own neighborhood, even though the majority of the CCSF board of trustees had repeatedly determined such a facility necessary and the voters of San Francisco had approved, not just once or twice, but three times, bond money for the project. The color and class lines could not have been drawn any clearer against the Chinatown project.

### Community Mobilization

In spite of such formidable opposition, the people in the Chinese American community saw through what was happening and decided to draw their own bottom line and assert their rights. After

a series of meetings and consultations, the FEOC was established in late 2006 for the sole purpose of mobilizing the entire community behind the proposal, whether CCSF administration wanted its support or not, and to protect the interests of the community (FEOC, 2007b). “Enough was enough,” the group agreed: the educational rights, necessity, and convenience of the community should no longer be left to just CCSF administrators and their opponents, and the proposal should not be compromised or, even worse, killed by external interest groups (*Ming Pao*, 2007a). It openly called on the Hilton Hotel to “bud out” (Lee, 2007a; Ye, 2007a). A number of broadly representative FEOC co-chairs were carefully selected and a core working group expanded and emerged in January and February 2007 (FEOC, 2007c). The outcome was a new FEOC representing not only the old and young (e.g., Chinese Christian Union, [CCU], and Youth Service Center) but also the right and the left (e.g., the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association [CCBA] and the Chinese American Association of Commerce [CAAC]) and civil rights organizations and elected officials (e.g., Chinese for Affirmative Action [CAA], Eric Mar and Norman Yee of the board of education, and City Assessor Phil Ting.) It became the driving force in the push to build the Chinatown campus.

The primary strategies of the group were to mobilize community organizations behind the proposal (*Asian Week*, 2007; Huang, 2007b, 2007e; Liu, K., 2007f; Wu, 2007e) and involve the Chinese American community at every stage of CCSF campus planning in the Chinatown–North Beach area, including but not limited to the new EIR process, approval of the project, design review, construction, curriculum planning, and community access, and to mobilize community support for the project within and outside the community. Meeting weekly, the group held frequent press conferences, circulated petitions (Huang, 2007a), mobilized hundreds to attend public hearings and meetings of the board of trustees, sponsored public rallies and protests (Liu, H., 2007b; Liu, K., 2007e), lobbied the trustees individually and frequently, and tried to line up support from all elected officials (Huang, 2007a, 2007d; Vigil, 2007). In addition, the group wanted CCSF administration and trustees to conduct all its business publicly rather than secretly, as it had done repeatedly in the past, and be accountable to the community and the public at large.

In return, the FEOC pledged to expose and fight back all attempts to undermine, roll back, delay, or even kill the project and to

expose a campaign of deception, coercion, collusion, frivolous and obstructionist litigation, and political dirty tricks. Toward these ends, the FEOC conducted extensive community outreach and education through its contacts and networks across the community and mobilized large numbers of people, Chinese and non-Chinese, to take part in all meetings in which the campus was on the agenda. It also established contacts and working relations with community-based and civic and professional organizations across the city, including unions, teachers, students, professional groups, and community college organizations from other minority communities.

No challenge to FEOC was greater and more difficult than the way opponents positioned or, even better, camouflaged themselves as supporters of the Chinatown campus. They routinely and piously expressed their strong support of building a Chinatown campus “in principle” and then turned around and repeatedly raised, one after another, spurious arguments against the proposal that included one or more of the following reasons: (1) the proposed project was in violation of several planning codes of the city, particularly height and shadows on a public park; (2) it was too costly; (3) it was too bulky and unsightly; (4) it was in the wrong location; (5) there was insufficient public and timely input in the planning process; (6) more studies were needed; (7) there was misuse of state and local bond funds; (8) more concessions to and compromises with opponents were needed; (9) there was no parking facility; (10) there were insufficient reviews and oversight by the planning commission, board of supervisors, and state legislature; and (11) there had been inadequate notification of stakeholders in the planning process. Most of these happened to be the same arguments advanced by the Corporate HJM and the THD/FCB group. The opponents, using their political and financial power, demanded frequent private meetings with the CCSF chancellor, select trustees, lawyers, architects, and managers behind closed doors during which they intimidated and threatened them and quite frequently succeeded in coercing them to bend here and give there in order to advance their contrarian agenda and delay or undermine the project. Invariably, the outcomes of such meetings surfaced sooner or later, causing further adjustments and delays. Needless to say, they compelled the FEOC to be vigilant and added more work and more meetings for the FEOC.

To counteract this strategy of deception, the FEOC repeatedly called on the board and the chancellor to end such secret meetings

with hired guns or, as an alternative, to include FEOC representatives in these meetings. In retrospect, the FEOC failed to halt the special treatments accorded the powerful opponents and to prevent their private meetings with individual members of the board of trustees and administration on demand. For example, CCSF held frequent private meetings with them and allowed the lawyers and architects hired by Hilton to submit several alternative plans long after the EIR process ended (Heller Manus Architects, 2007; Hu, 2007b). Up to a week before the October 18 vote, according to the *World Journal* (October 12, 2007), the Hilton presented, through two trustees, blueprints for two lower buildings for last-minute consideration. Pending lawsuits also allowed both sides to hold private meetings and negotiations, including an executive session of the board of trustees, on the ground of attorney-client privileges. The FEOC was excluded and kept in the dark while deals were struck. Nevertheless, the FEOC vigilance and Chinese-language media scrutiny did keep the CCSF in line and prevent the project from being torpedoed again.

By raising objections at every turn, offering alternative but inadequate plans and designs one after another, and threatening and eventually filing lawsuits, the opponents had only one objective: to delay and ultimately to kill the project (Guan, 2007b; Xiao, 2007b, 2007c; Shanahan, 2007). From the point of view of the community, these opponents were trying to cause the college to miss the legal deadlines for applying for and receiving local and state bond funds for the project and raising the construction costs, which was increasing at the rate of approximately \$500,000 per month before the late 2008 recession sank in. For example, at the time when CCSF decided to build a branch campus in Chinatown in 1997, the estimated cost was \$20 million. By the time the college decided to abandon the Colombo Building plan and signed the multimillion-dollar settlement agreement with the opponents in 1999, the cost estimate for the campus had gone up to \$40 million. When the college acquired Lots 9 and 10 and proposed a sixteen-story campus in 2006, the cost was put at \$120 million. Finally, when the trustees approved the final two-building design in December 2008, they had to appropriate an additional \$20 million to cover the shortfall (Huang, 2008c).

It is, therefore, not difficult to see the opposition's delaying strategy and ultimate objective in killing the project. They used political, professional, procedural, and legal means either to compel

the college to grant more concessions or to kill the project by causing the college to miss the deadline or to precipitate a budget short fall for the construction of the campus. Politicians in San Francisco, such as Yee, Ma, and Peskin, wanted the public to see them as liberals on social issues, like defending the environment, promoting gay rights, controlling rent, and supporting the poor and the disadvantaged, but to see them as conservatives regarding fiscal matters, like cutting government fat, bureaucracy, waste, and corruption. But on the Chinatown campus, they seemed to have no concern about the excessive waste of public funds caused by their delay stratagems and generous transfers of public funds to opponents of the project by reaching deeper and deeper into what they must consider a bottomless pit in the CCSF treasury. Worst of all, contrary to their “progressive” stands, they were indifferent and hostile to the needs of immigrants and working-class Chinese. In short, racial difference and class conflict converged in this Chinatown project.

The backbone behind the FEOC was CAA, a community-based civil rights organization founded in 1969. It provided space and staff support for the organization and coordinated media relations with Chinese-language and mainstream media. In return, the FEOC raised \$15,000 from the community to cover the supplies and expenses; a coordinated petition campaign in support of the sixteen-story campus during the summer of 2007 yielded twenty-five thousand signatures and a postcard campaign yielded fifteen thousand signatures shortly before the trustees voted for the project (Wu, 2007d). In addition, the CAAC helped raise money for placing full-page advertisements in five Chinese-language media on June 1 and September 16, 2007, listing more than seventy organizations supporting the sixteen-story campus and criticizing Yee and Ma for betraying community interests (Liu, K., 2007h; Ye, 2007b). It also printed thousands of flyers for mass distribution and posters for demonstrations at Portsmouth Square on June 3 and at various public hearings.

Beyond the Chinatown coalition, a broad coalition of multi-racial CCSF teachers and staff from throughout the city and minority caucuses formed a group called “We Shall Not Be Moved” in order to mobilize labor, teacher organizations, and minority communities across the city to support the Chinatown campus. Several unions throughout the city, including the American Federation of Teachers (AFT 2121), all building trades unions, the culinary workers union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and

the AFL-CIO of San Francisco, led by its former secretary-treasurer, Walter L. Johnson, lined up solidly behind the project.

The Chinatown campus issue obviously touched the raw nerve of the community across language, national origin, partisanship, and class lines. For example, when the FEOC called the first press conference to expose the role of the Hilton Hotel and Justice Investors in Chinatown's front yard, the outrage immediately reverberated across the community, prompting many to call for picketing of the hotel and others to write protest letters to Stephen F. Bollenbach, CEO of the Hilton Hotels Corporation (Pan, Wang, and Der, 2007). When Senator Yee, a major beneficiary of the Hilton Hotel's generous political donation, and Assemblywoman Ma, a protégé of former state senate president pro-tem Burton, publicly denounced the campus proposal and threatened to use their power to deny state funds for the construction of the campus, they were soundly denounced not only by various spokespersons of the FEOC (Ye, 2007b) but also in editorials in various Chinese-language newspapers (*World Journal*, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e, 2007f, 2007g, 2007h, 2007i, 2007j; Wu, 2007a; Xiao, 2007a). Callers flooded both Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese-language TV and radio talk shows to sharply criticize the two politicians and to call on the Chinese community never to contribute money to or vote for them (Hu, 2007a). Such public anger also erupted among the Chinese communities in the South Bay and East Bay, prompting Chinese American political leaders in these two areas to publicly question their reasons and motives and to warn the politicians that they would no longer donate money to their campaigns (Wang, 2007). Such public anger and outburst had never happened in the Chinese American community in which Chinese American politicians were invariably treated with racial pride and support. But, in this case, Yee and Ma were described frequently as traitors of community interests in editorials and op-ed pieces.

### The Victory: October 18, 2007 Vote

Throughout the yearlong EIR process, which began in the fall of 2006 and concluded on October 18, 2007, no one could predict the fate of the project until the day the trustees voted for the project. Only the seven elected trustees of the CCSF board had the final say. Everyone was intensely lobbied by both sides for one year.

To comply with both state and local laws, the board of trustees of CCSF, as a state agency, had to vote on three separate resolutions

placed on the October 18 agenda by Chancellor Day: (1) certify the final EIR report; (2) exempt the campus project from the city's planning code; and (3) approve the construction of two proposed buildings on Lots 9 and 10 in Block 195 (CCSF, 2007e). Because the proposed buildings were, respectively, 192 feet and 65 feet high (both exceeded the sixty-five-foot height limit for Block 195), the board must approve the second resolution by a two-third majority, meaning no less than 5 to 2, in order to exempt itself from the city's zoning ordinances, as mandated by the California Government Code Section 53094. The third resolution must authorize the administration to proceed with the construction of the proposed campus. The first and third resolutions needed only a simple majority.

Needless to say, the lobbying effort on both sides intensified as the day of reckoning drew near. Weeks before the trustees met, the FEOC launched a sustained campaign with full-page advertisements in the Chinese media (Committee in Support of 16-story CCSF Chinatown Branch Campus, 2007; FEOC, 2007a). A week before the vote, the FEOC presented the petition signed by twenty-five thousand people who supported the proposed project in Chinatown while the Hilton Hotel submitted yet another alternative plan that would lower the height and reduce the capacity of the campus (Huang, 2007g; King, 2007). Separately, the FEOC also submitted fifteen thousand postcards to the trustees with names and addresses of San Franciscans who wanted the board to know that they would be watching their vote on October 18, 2007. The opposition did likewise. On October 13, Assemblywoman Ma told the Chinese-language press that she continued to oppose the proposed plan. Her opposition was quickly drowned out by two last-minute, dramatic developments: an unexpected editorial endorsement of the project by the *San Francisco Chronicle* (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 2007b) and Mayor Gavin Newsom's resounding support at a press conference held across the street from the Hilton Hotel one day before the vote (Lee, 2007c; Liu, K., 2007j; Xiao, 2007d).

On October 18, long before the trustees' meeting at 6 p.m., hundreds jammed into the auditorium in the Hancock School and hundreds, mostly CCSF students, noisily demonstrated with picket signs at the entrance to the school. They far outnumbered and drowned out the opposition. Throughout the evening, dozens went up to the podium to urge the board to support all three resolutions. After listening for hours to the testimonies and discussing

the three resolutions among them, the trustees voted on the three resolutions (Lagos and Fulbright, 2007; Lee, Huang, and Guan, 2007). The EIR certification passed by a vote of 6 to 1 with Milton Marks dissenting. The vote on exemption was unanimous, and the vote approving the project was 6 to 1 with John Rizzo opposing. The marathon meeting ended with jubilation at 1:30 a.m. That was how the thirty-year dream finally became a reality. It was a bitter sweet victory for education and for Chinatown.

### Conclusions: Implications for Asian Americans in Higher Education

The October 18 decisions were a vote for the community and for the education of future generations of immigrant students and working people living and working in the Chinatown–North Beach area. It was a milestone in the history of Chinatown because it was the largest single public investment in the community, \$140 million, since it was first established during the Gold Rush and an investment in community educational and cultural resource that will continue to benefit the residents and businesses. It was also a solid proof of and a model for what determined powerless people, in solidarity with other powerless people, can accomplish, even in the face of the most powerful economic and duplicitous political forces in San Francisco: the “progressive” Democratic machine. The environmental fig leaf failed to cover their naked racism and class bias. This wealthy and powerful class also failed to kill the project by creating division within the Chinese American community with their hired guns and paid agents. The community leaders and organizations it enlisted were exposed and duly discredited in the community.

However, it would be a mistake to think the fight was over after the decisive October 18 vote. The opponents of the project were powerful and resourceful, and they would continue to find ways to obstruct, delay, or even kill the project. They tried and are still trying as of this publication. Even though Hilton threatened to sue CCSF before the vote, it wisely decided to give up the fight. With that, it also extinguished the ECRD, a pseudo-community organization funded by public-relations firms hired by the Hilton to spread poison and create dissension in the community and put an end to the divisive and destructive activities of the small handful of so-called Chinese American leaders and organizations. However, that decision did not deter other opponents from using litigation

(Lee, 2008) and design review processes to obstruct and alter the project plan for another year (Huang, 2008a; King, 2008). It took nearly another year of heavy lobbying by the FEOC and its allies to finalize the design review process and even longer to remove the last legal obstacle put in place by the opponents.

For example, five weeks after the trustees approved the project, the Montgomery-Washington Homeowners Association (MWHHA), allegedly representing the thirty-one owners of multimillion condos atop the MWT, together with a newly invented organization, Neighbors for Preservation, Land Use, and Community Education (PLACE), filed a lawsuit against CCSF for “recklessly” exempting itself from the city planning process and ignoring potential adverse environmental impacts on its neighbors and the city (Morgan Lewis and Bockius, 2007; Schevitz, 2007b; Xiao, 2007e). The plaintiffs, represented by Morgan and Lewis, claimed that the project would have “significant, adverse environmental impacts on the residents and businesses not only of the Chinatown, North Beach, and Jackson Square neighborhoods, but on the community fabric and urban planning integrity of the City as a whole” (Morgan Lewis and Bockius, 2007). Representing the MWHHA in the lawsuit was multimillionaire Jon Rubinstein, chair and CEO of Palm, Inc., who told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that

it is a huge project in a very, very crowded neighborhood. . . . We are really dismayed and disappointed that City College would flagrantly disregard the city’s planning rules. The board members are not planners. They are not qualified to make a decision that has such a huge impact on San Francisco (Schevitz, 2007a).

Fortunately for CCSF, Rubinstein unilaterally and falsely represented the MWHHA in filing a lawsuit never authorized by the home owners. The condo owners only found out when they were asked to share the rising costs of litigation. They promptly voted and forced the mighty Rubinstein and the law firm to drop the suit. With that, the fictitious fly-by-night PLACE also dropped out of existence. This incidence demonstrated the distance the rich and the powerful, such as the MWT and the Palm’s CEO, were willing to travel to prevent a campus for the poor and the powerless from being built.

In a separate lawsuit, the MWT owners filed a lawsuit to challenge the process and basis of the decision by the trustees and

seek a preliminary injunction that would halt the construction of the campus. Fortunately, after a series of pretrial maneuvers, on October 16, 2008, a year after the trustees approved the project, San Francisco Superior Court Judge Paul Alvarado turned down the MWT owners' demand and correctly noted that the college "is likely to incur millions of dollars in losses if an injunction is granted" (Lee, 2008). With this setback, the MWT decided to settle the lawsuit with the CCSF. According to CCSF, construction documents for the campus must be approved by the Division of State Architect (DSA) by May 30, 2008, and funding approved by the State Finance Office by June 30, 2008. Failure to do so would jeopardize the state's guaranteed funding for the project. To avoid a drawn out litigation and further delay, the trustees voted to pay the plaintiff's \$75,000 attorney fee in order to settle the lawsuit, clearing the way for the removal of the last legal obstacle. The fact that the groundbreaking ceremony did not take place until November 1, 2008, attests to the opponents continuing determination to invalidate the trustees' decision or delay the construction and cause the college to miss the deadlines and lose millions.

This study also demonstrates the urgent need to pay more attention to the educational needs of the immigrants and working-class Asian Americans in community colleges. Educational researchers have long refused to admit that not all Asian Americans fit into the stereotype of the "model minority" and that not all Asian Americans attend the top research universities and small private liberal arts colleges. The majority of the Asian American working class and immigrants do need access to affordable and convenient education through community colleges in all major cities across the United States. The protracted struggle of immigrant adults for access to English-language and citizenship classes and job-skill training programs in the San Francisco Chinatown area clearly demonstrates how the educational needs of this segment of the Asian American population (about 40,000) has been neglected and how their struggle to gain access to education can be stifled and beaten down on account of their perceived political powerlessness. Their experience in winning the fight deserves to be documented and available to Asian American communities in other cities across the country.

Finally, community college education is the most neglected area of higher education. Even though it was originally conceived

as a stepping stone for the less affluent to gain access to a four-year liberal arts education, the mission of community college was transformed by the political class and education elite into an essentially vocational training place for the poor and the working class. As a result, community college education has been treated as a poor stepchild in the hierarchy of higher education in the United States, as many education researchers have correctly pointed out since the 1960s. This study, however, highlights the importance of community colleges for immigrant adults and the working poor, originally not conceived and included in their mission. Community colleges in major ports of entry for immigrants from the Third World have become the sole hope and necessary stepping stone, not for transfers to four-year colleges but for gaining English-language mastery, citizenship, and access to jobs and the mainstream of America. This role should not to be overlooked and looked down upon. It should be taken seriously, given proper attention, and provided with adequate resource and facility, as the people of Chinatown in San Francisco sought to do for more than thirty years. Hopefully, Asian Americans in other cities will not have to wait and fight for thirty years to get what should be their rights.

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