In September 1970, a group of unusual squatters occupied fifty apartments in Manhattan’s Chinatown. These twenty-four Chinese families did not break the door locks, as squatters usually did, for one reason: these apartments were their previous homes. When patrols came and attempted to remove one squatter who had been evicted with his family and was living in temporary housing, he howled, “I do not care if they jail me. I refuse to live thirteen people in three rooms any longer.” The squatters’ situations had become desperate and they were determined to fight.

In the 1960s, Manhattan’s Chinatown was suffering not only from racism, but from a serious housing shortage. In the face of these struggles, Chinese Americans broke their long-time silence in the fall of 1970 and undertook the first Chinese tenants’ struggle in the history of New York City. They learned from African American activists’ experience, taking cues from the Black Power movement’s demand for “decent housing,” and established a successful paradigm for subsequent struggles.

Evictions Planned
In 1969, the New York Bell Telephone Company bought several buildings in Manhattan’s Chinatown. According to the records of the New York City Department of Buildings, these buildings were built in 1900, 1910, and 1920. New York Bell planned to demolish these well-established dwellings with the ultimate goal of using the property for a new telephone switching station. As I Wor Kuen (IWK), an Asian American Marxist organization, explained at the time in their party organ *Getting*...
Together, 296 Chinese and Italian families were going to be evicted. Getting Together criticized the telephone company as “an impersonal, crumbling, self-destructive system.” Irritated by the telephone company’s arbitrary attitude, the rest of the residents refused to move and joined the “We Won’t Move” Tenant Committee initiated by the Metropolitan Council on Housing (MCH).

MCH is a New York City tenants’ rights membership organization established in 1959. According to Maggie Schreiner, an archivist at the Brooklyn Historical Society, in the 1960s, MCH “utilized rent strikes, pickets, vigils, and occupations to fight for the needs of tenants.”

On May 6, 1969, under the pressure of being “emptied and demolished for public and private construction,” fifty tenant leaders organized the We Won’t Move Committee to aid all New York City tenants who were in a similar situation. They reminded tenants: “stipends never compensate the loss of your home and never pay for the exorbitant rent in your new quarters.” The We Won’t Move Committee mobilized Manhattan’s Chinatown tenants in 1970. That year, a member of the Committee, Arthur Dong, a Chinese American, led the effort that would become the first Chinese American tenant struggle in the history of the city.

Two Demonstrations
The We Won’t Move Committee organized two demonstrations: a small-scale one at the downtown office of New York Bell and a large-scale one with several hundred protesters on Market Street. About seventy protesters came to the first demonstration, but seemed to have little influence. Afterward, Getting Together appealed to people to join a protest on Saturday, July 18, 1970. Several hundred people and two politicians, Bella Abzug and Louis DeSalvio who were running for congressional and assembly election respectively in November 1970, attended this demonstration and declared their support for tenants. The New York Times reported that a famous feminist “stood atop on a huge red telephone company cable reel” to show her strong support to her constituents. Arthur Dong told The New York Times, “We’d like to get a little more action out of [Mayor] Lindsay’s office … I’ve lived here all my life, and the breaking up of community dignity is hard to take.”

Despite these demonstrations, the telephone company did not allow the displaced tenants to return from July to September. Thus, on the morning of September 25, twenty-four Chinese families unlocked the apartments vacated by New York Bell, armed with
screwdrivers and crowbars, with the assistance of IWK and a community service organization named the Two Bridge Neighborhood Council. In response, New York Bell hired a relocation company and wreckers to break windows and to remove the plumbing. However, the demolition did not prevent the tenants from returning.

An interracial coalition helped propel the Chinese American cause forward. Of the second demonstration, *The New York Times* reported that “several hundred Chinese, Italian, Puerto Rican, Black, and Jewish” residents had participated.

Although Chinese and Italian tenants had had limited interactions when they had lived together, they collaborated to protect their housing. There were coalitions among Chinese American, African American, and Puerto Rican political organizations as well. Scholars have noted the collaboration between African American and Puerto Rican activists, but have overlooked the role of Asian American activists in this interracial coalition.

Chinese American, African American, and Puerto Rican activists have historically had common aims, such as racial equality and anti-imperialism. In the early 1960s, many Asian American university students participated collectively in the anti-Vietnam War movements. Those students grew into followers of other racial activist groups, forging friendships across racial lines and adopting New Left ideas. For example, the Asian American Political Alliance at Columbia University sponsored several forums and invited speakers from the Black Workers Congress and Puerto Rican civil rights organization the Young Lords from 1970 to 1971.

African American, Puerto Rican, and Chinese political organizations had many shared left ideologies. Party platforms of the Black Panther Party (released in 1966), IWK (1969) and Young Lords (1970) had similar wording. All three parties demanded self-determination of their minority communities, true education in world and US history, and exemption from military service. In addition, they criticized the “racist” US government and capitalism, arguing that minority residents had not received fair treatment. Both the Black Panthers and IWK demanded decent housing and censured landlords. Moreover, IWK saw enough similarity with Chinese experience in the colonial history of the Puerto Rican and African American struggles for civil rights that they covered these topics in *Getting Together*. In addition, IWK encouraged Chinese participation in a Black Panthers demonstration on April 4, 1970. Thereafter, Black Panthers and Young Lords activists were frequent attendees at Chinese tenants’ demonstrations.

**Mock Trial**

The Young Lords, Black Panthers, and IWK not only attended each other’s demonstrations but held a mock trial together at Columbia University on the issue of the displacement of poor people in housing in December 1970.
According to *The New York Times*, more than 1,000 people attended this trial. The Chair of MCH, who acted as the chief judge, claimed that Mayor John Lindsay, his housing aides, landlords, and bankers “gobble up housing in the ghetto and other areas to exacerbate racial and ethnic tension.” Chinatown tenants who were evicted by the telephone company attended the trial as witnesses. The indictment emphasized that landlords violated building, fire, maintenance, health, and administrative codes of the city. In addition, it charged landlords with using “fraud, deceit and trickery” by providing insufficient fundamental services to Puerto Rican and Chinese tenants who might not understand English. Black Panther members were extremely disappointed by city officers and landlords. They described landlords as “criminal” and city officers as forming a “conspiracy.” No city officers attended this trial and it had no practical effects. Nevertheless, it brought public attention to the struggle. Finally, judges sentenced defendants to death to create an effect like “a revolutionary bang.” After this event, the inequity in housing among minority communities, especially for Chinatown, became well-known citywide.

The first Chinese American tenant struggle in New York City eventually ended in the victory of tenants. The Two Bridge Neighborhood Council’s social worker organized tenants to negotiate with the telephone company for several months. Another Chinese community activist, Harold Lui, a peaceful “reformist” who did not criticize capitalism and city officers, contributed to this negotiation as well, adding a moderate voice that helped assure success. In 1971, an impaired corporate image and sustained pressure from the mayor caused the telephone company to finally sign an agreement to give tenants ten-year leases and find an alternative site for the switching station. The buildings remain dwellings to the present day.

The tenants’ movement forever changed New Yorkers’ impression of Asian American activism. Getting Together summarized the struggle: “This is an unprecedented event in the history of Chinatown. For the first time, the Chinese people are waging a struggle against a white corporation by throwing off the stigma of the ‘timid’ Chinese and fighting for their homes.” The Puerto Rican community publication, *Panante*, said IWK had combated the racist stereotype images of Chinese people: “model Chinese never protest and are happy with their plight in the United States.”

Asian American activists identified and successfully avoided eviction by using wise strategies. The younger generation’s commitment and interracial coalitions were keys to their success.

Interracial coalitions continued to be used throughout the decade, as when Asian Americans worked with the Black Panthers and Young Lords again in the successful struggle for hiring Asian construction workers for building Confucius Plaza in 1974. In addition, Asian Americans in New York engaged with other Asian American groups across the United States. From Honolulu to Boston and Philadelphia, Asian Americans saved their communities by fighting against deconstructions of Chinatowns during the 1970s. In the process, they established a paradigm for subsequent housing struggles in the 1980s and sowed the seeds of the self-determination of Asian American communities in the United States.