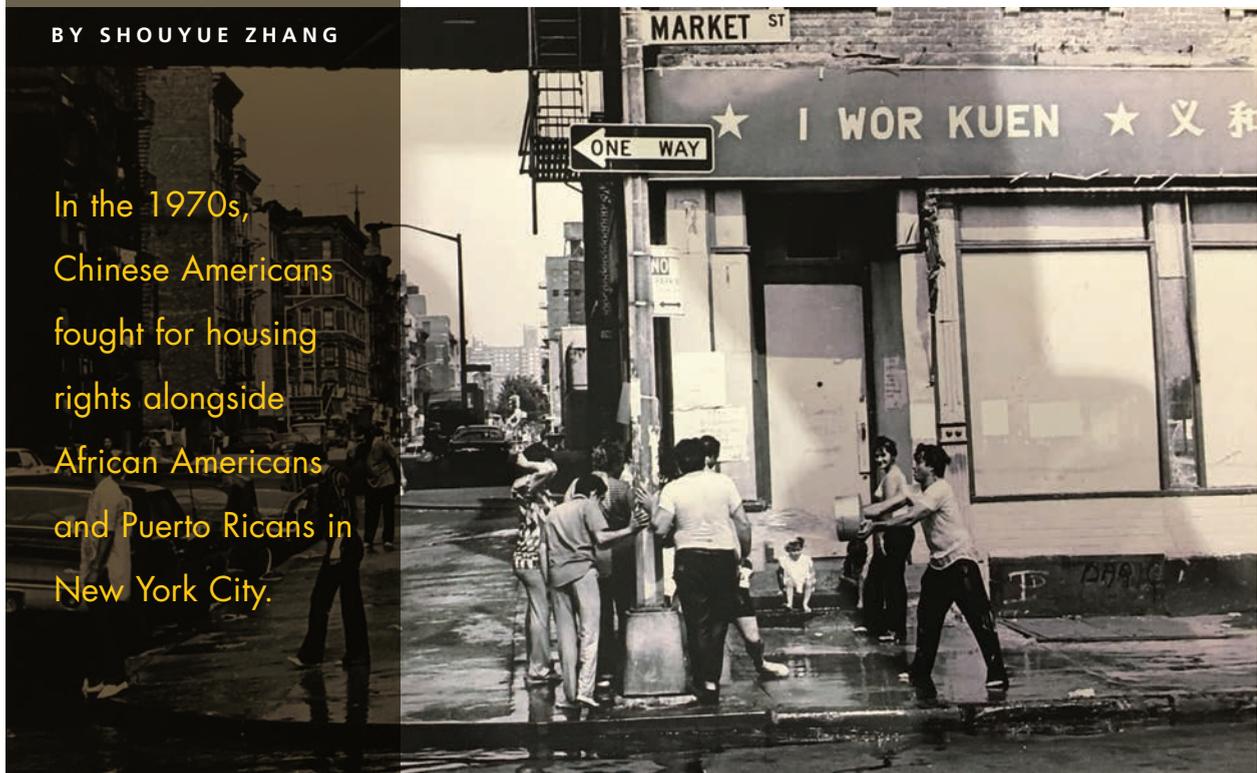


WE WON'T MOVE

BY SHOUYUE ZHANG

In the 1970s,
Chinese Americans
fought for housing
rights alongside
African Americans
and Puerto Ricans in
New York City.



MUSEUM OF CHINESE IN AMERICA

I Wor Kuen, an Asian American Marxist organization, was involved in a tenants' rights movement

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*

DA Probing 'Sabotage' of Struck Apts.

By TED FOSTON and VINCENT B. ALVISE
 Investigation for Bronx District Attorney Ruberti were reported today for having onto theories that some struck apartment buildings in the borough are being sabotaged during the current dispute between the Bronx Realty Advisors Board and Local 252 of the Building Service Union.

A woman owner of a 32-family apartment building owned by Ruberti's office that has been claiming to belong to "the union" had listed her and demanded that she sign a contract to rent the building in her building.

When she refused to do so, she said the men went to the building's basement and damaged the boiler which furnishes hot water for the tenants.

The case came up earlier this week when Leonard Rivino, attorney for the realty group, went before Bronx Superior Court Justice Thomas Chivers in an effort to expel the city from taking over struck buildings and having strikers to operate them.

Rivino said the report that the landlords were trying to maintain essential services for the tenants, but "parties unknown" had tampered with the boilers.

"Why don't you lock up the owners?" Chivers asked Rivino said "Parties have been destroyed."

Landlord Said
 "Why don't you put guards" the court asked "It would be a horrendous expense" he lawyer replied.

Asked about reports that other landlords had complained that they were being threatened and killed and that equipment was being destroyed on their property, Riverti said:

"We are investigating several complaints and that's all I will say about it."

Meanwhile Bronx State Superior Court Justice Thomas Chivers ordered dozens yesterday in a landmark case to lock city policemen on behalf of the apartment house workers.

The judge pronounced injunctions that he would render a decision by next Tuesday.

The decision followed arguments by Rivino and the city.



Landlords' men clean up apartments on Henry St. so that families may move in. The building is owned by New York Telephone Co., which plans to tear it down by the end of the year.

Chinese Squatters Downtown

By PAMELA HOWARD
 The handsome Chinese youth stood on the fifth-floor fire escape at 54 Monroe St. when the address was clear he threw over an old tin cup board, a battered outdoor and finally some faded sheet metal—the kind used to cover windows in buildings waiting for demolition, under urbanization programs.

He was joined by a family of squatters, one of 34 Chinese families who decided last night to occupy the vacant storefront on Madison, Market and Henry Sts. which have recently been vacated by the New York Telephone Co.

The quest, orderly "sign" in legal proceeding meeting when a group of young Chinese people armed with work clothes and crew-hair leopards opening up 56 apartments.

"This is the most densely populated area in the city," said the young man who was wearing a Yale T-shirt and steel-rimmed glasses.

"The need was there and so we decided to move in."

The squat is part of a continuing protest lodged by the Chinese and Italian residents of the Lower East Side last November when the New York Telephone Co. bought up three-fourths of a block to build a new switching station. The tenants in the area have been fighting against since then.

"We want a definite policy statement from the Telephone Co. saying they won't take the site and will do everything they can to let the families who occupied the apartments today stay there," said Jeffrey Mason, a VISTA worker with the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council on Madison St., who helped organize the squatting action.

Mason and others gathered in a small storefront at 50 Madison St., where a large hand-painted banner said: "Welcome to the grand opening of apartments in Henry St., Market St., and Madison St." was hoisted over the window.

"We took the families into the apartments by breaking the locks on the doors and around the backs of apartments left windowless and broken by the wrecking boom," he replied.

"We will be negotiating with the responsible people there. We don't have any evidence of 24 families or any families actually living in. If squatters have moved in overnight we'll probably take steps."

Few Speak English
 Most of the Chinese people spoke no English. They were helped by young men and women who were part of the community organization called the "I Wee Kwan." Many of them wore red and black buttons with the insignia under a yellow clinched fist.

Speaking through a young Chinese-American girl named Lorraine, a guest at one of the already occupied apartments at 54 Monroe St., Mason said that a young Chinese woman and some of her family were moving in. She had come to the city three years ago.

The demonstrators handed out monographed leaflets saying: "We asked the Phone Co. for permission to open the apartments but they were unwilling to cooperate. They said they were going to displace us and destroy our homes in order to construct a commercial building. Their executives don't have to live like animals when they go home at night so they find it

was easy to overlook the horrible conditions they helped to create."

The New York Telephone Co. was surprised when a reporter called to inquire about its reaction to the squatters. "All we know about is the vandalism," replied a spokesman.

When a reporter told the spokesman there had been no vandalism except for breaking the locks on the doors and that the Chinese youths had actually been breaking up their debris after the apartments left windowless and broken by the wrecking boom, he replied:

"We will be negotiating with the responsible people there. We don't have any evidence of 24 families or any families actually living in. If squatters have moved in overnight we'll probably take steps."

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.

Natural Causes Ruled Out In Death of Cops' Prisoner

By MIKE PERAZI
 An autopsy has ruled out "natural causes" in the mysterious death of a 38-year-old Manhattan man hours after his arrest for interfering with police on Aug. 31.

Source close to a grand jury investigation of the incident said today a medical examiner's autopsy showed that the victim, Kou Arlevia, 25 W. 136th St., had been "traumatized" by police consistent with being beaten.

Dr. Michael Rubin, who performed the autopsy, declined to comment on his findings while the case was under investigation.

Beat Suspect
 At least a dozen policemen and officers will be subpoenaed early next week to appear before the grand jury.

Although Manhattan DA Hogan's office would comment on the case, the Post has learned that Arlevia, a 200-pound, 5'6-inch-tall, had been taken into custody after he tried to stop police from arresting another person.

After a brief scuffle, he was subdued and taken to the 14th Precinct on W. 36th St. by members of a special police unit on the night of Aug. 31. At the stationhouse reportedly there was assault or altercation.

Arlevia died the following morning at St. Clare's Hospital.

One investigator said the aim of the investigation was to "determine whether unnecessary force might have caused the death of the victim."

Evidence will be presented to the grand jury by Assistant DA Anthony Bonopetti and Allen Sullivan, who have interviewed at least six policemen and others who were at the 14th Precinct where Arlevia was brought in.

Calley Loses On Civil Trial

WASHINGTON (AP)—A federal judge has dismissed Lt. William L. Calley Jr.'s suit contending he is entitled to a civilian trial on charges of killing Vietnamese civilians at My Lai.

Judge Arthur C. Robinson rejected Calley's request for a three-judge civilian panel to hear his contention that a trial under the Uniform Code of Military Justice would violate his constitutional rights.

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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, and so 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

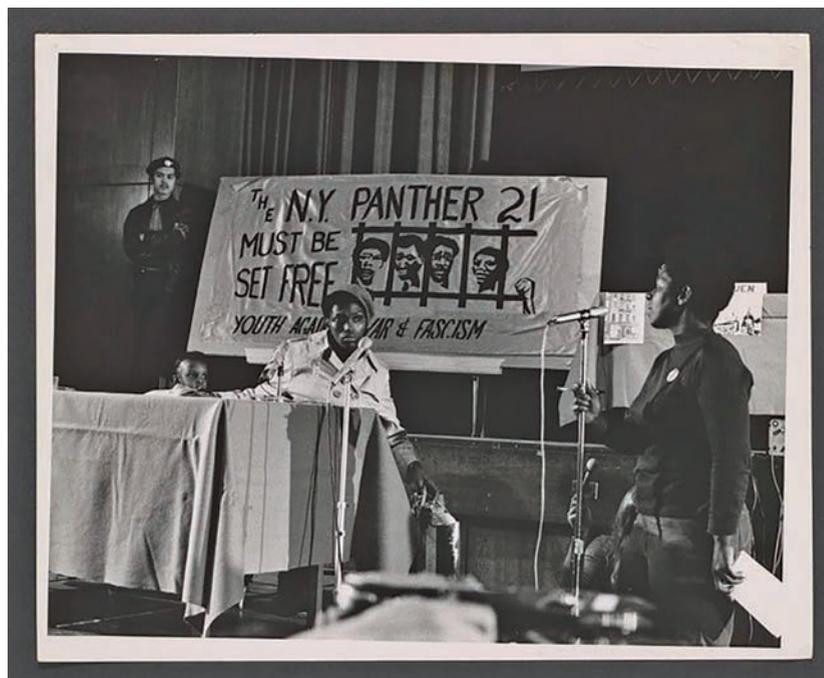
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screwdrivers and crowbars, with the assistance of IWK and a community service organization named the Two Bridge Neighborhood Council. In response, New York Bell hired a relocation company and wreckers to break windows and to remove the plumbing. However, 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



I Wor Kuen, The Young Lords, and the Black Panthers participated in a mock trial at Columbia University on the issue of displacement of poor people in housing in December 1970.

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, *Palante*, 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. ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Archival sources for this article include: The Chinatown Study Group, *The Chinatown Report 1969*, Henry Birnbaum Library, Pace University; *The Black Panther* (newspapers in microfilm), The Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, New York Public Library; *Panante* (newspapers in microfilm), Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College; *The Metropolitan Council on Housing Records*, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, New York University; *Getting Together* (newspapers), *Chinese Progressive Association Tenth Anniversary Celebration*, Museum of Chinese in America, New York City; *University Protest and Activism Collection*, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries; *Bella Abzug Papers, 1970-1976*, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



This article is the winning graduate entry of our inaugural year of the *New York Archives Essay Competition*, developed to promote excellence in archival research at the collegiate level. For more information, visit www.nysarchivestrust.org/new-york-archives-magazine/essay-competition