

Basement Workshop

The Genesis of New York's
Asian American
Resistance Culture

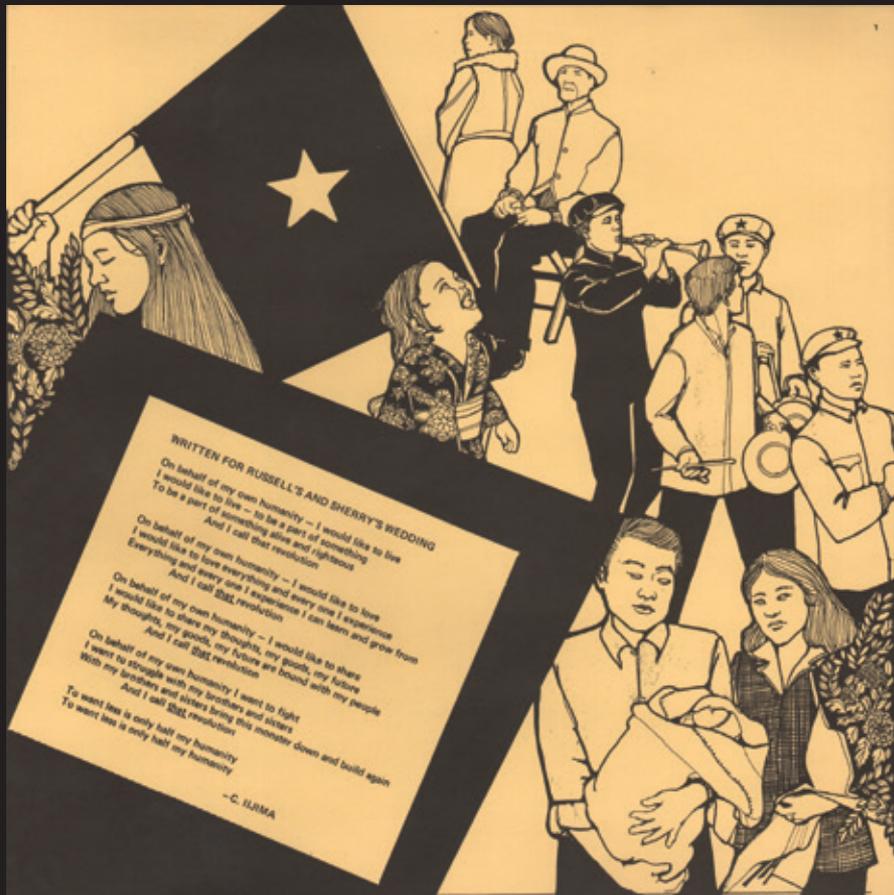
Ryan Lee Wong

“...we have shared ten months of relating—emotionally, politically and artistically. In the process we made efforts to re-examine our own perspectives; and we grew. In trying to project a view of ourselves as Asians in America, we found this best expressed through a clear statement against basic philosophies of exploitation and oppression—of individuals as well as nations.”



This plain passage introduces *Yellow Pearl*, an experimental publication collectively produced by members of Basement Workshop in 1972. Despite its understated tone, this third person plural manifesto put into words a radical experiment. It expressed three lessons that still resonate with arts collectives today: art is a social production, making art demands collective self-examination, and identity can be defined through political stances rather than cultural markers.

Yellow Pearl remains a unique object. Some forty-something offset sheets of paper sit together in a box approximately the size of a 12” record. The folios are printed in black ink on several shades of yellow paper, a visual nod to the idea of different racial groups coming together under “Yellow” or “Asian American”—a relatively new concept at the time. It mixes amateur and professional art and poetry; some contributors would go on to make art their whole lives, while others stepped away into other fields. The folios include one of the first Asian American feminist poems, sheet music by Chris Iijima and Nobuko Miyamoto, original arabesques, a comic illustration of a ribs recipe, and images of third world women holding machine guns.



This page spread: Two illustrated sheets from *Yellow Pearl* (Basement Workshop, 1972); previous page: Box cover of *Yellow Pearl*; background pattern taken from a page of *Yellow Pearl*; page 26: Peter Pan, Corky Lee and Arlene Wong during a Basement meeting break, 1973, photograph by Henry Chu.

Such an eclectic object could only have been produced by an experimental, collective, non-hierarchical group of artists and organizers. Basement Workshop sat at the intersection of both New York countercultural spaces of the 1970s and the Asian American political movement. Now that we are in a situation where federal funding for the arts is in question, where Asian American identity is being remade rapidly by racial politics and immigration patterns, and where new generations of arts collectives are forming, it is worth examining Basement Workshop. The organization is an exceptional case study in collective organizing, art production, and identity formation developed without precedent by young people coming into their own through that work.

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“Asian American” wasn’t coined as an identity until 1968, when the Third World student strikes at San Francisco State University and UC Berkeley galvanized students of color

to adopt a united front. Asian students—until then separated along national lines—decided to form a coalitional identity in order to join the other coalitions of Chicano, Native American, and Black students. The idea quickly caught fire, spreading through college campuses and community centers. New York, with its large concentration of Asian Americans, especially in Chinatown, and strong lineages of activism and art, became a natural focal point of this Asian American Movement.

Chinatown, meanwhile, was witnessing an explosion in population from the newly-open policies of the 1965 Immigration Act. Chinatown’s economy was booming, but so were organized crime, poverty, and a need for social services. In 1969, the Ford Foundation commissioned a young urban planning student, Danny N.T. Yung, to produce a report on this transformation. At the conclusion of the project, Yung and others he had worked with recognized the need to preserve the research they had done, and rented a musty basement space on 22 Catherine Street

A Grain of Sand performing in NYC, 1973, photograph by Henry Chu; Chinatown Street Fair (art: Bob Lee), offset printed poster, 1971.



INTERNATIONAL WORKING WOMEN'S DAY CHINATOWN CELEBRATION!!!



DATE: SATURDAY MARCH 6, 1976
PLACE: J.H.S. 65 AUD. 52 FORSYTH STREET
TIME: 1-EXHIBITS 2-5 CULTURAL PROGRAM
DONATION: \$1-ADULTS 50¢-CHILDREN
DAYCARE PROVIDED
 SPONSORED BY THE CHINATOWN COALITION:
 ASIAN AMERICANS FOR EQUAL EMPLOYMENT, COMMUNITY
 PLANNING WORKSHOP, DAYCARE COMMITTEE AGAINST BUDGET
 CUTS AND STUDENT RIGHTS ORGANIZATION

Two screenprint posters created at Basement Workshop, mid-1970s.

to store their boxes. Inspired by the activism happening in the neighborhood—including the first-ever Chinatown Health Fair—they started to meet in that basement to talk over identity, politics, and art. This was the start of Basement Workshop, and *Yellow Pearl* was their first large undertaking.

By 1974, Basement had grown into a large volunteer force with several distinct areas. *Bridge: The Magazine of Asians in America* was a quarterly blend of criticism, political commentary, poetry, and fiction. The Asian American Resource Center gathered into a small library and archive all the resources available—not many at the time—on Asian American histories, as well as on other organizations from around the country doing similar work. Members of Amerasia Creative Arts produced visual art and performances, and offered art workshops for the community. They mounted exhibitions, silk-screened posters for demonstrations, and held acting classes. Finally, Basement offered ESL



education for adults and youth summer programs for high schools students. At its peak, Basement Workshop spread over four rented spaces, including a large loft at 199 Lafayette Street.

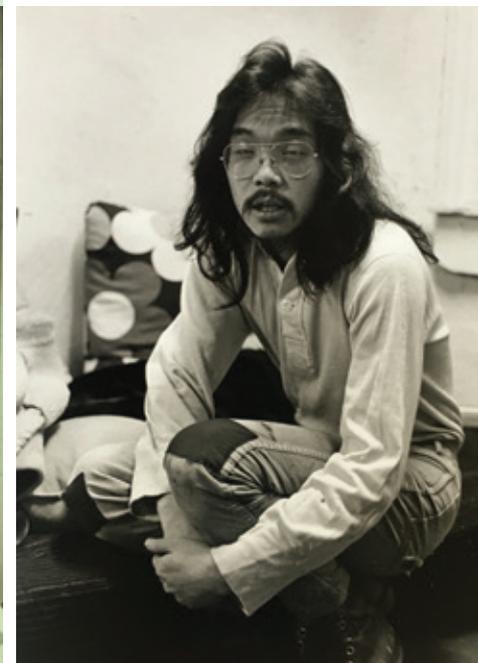
In the 1986 *Basement Workshop Yearbook*, Fay Chiang—for many years the Executive Director of Basement—states that funding mostly came from government grants: after *Yellow Pearl* was published, the National Endowment for the Arts offered a seed grant, followed by a New York State grant for the arts programming, and



Members of Basement Workshop at work, early 1970s, photographs by Henry Chu.

an National Endowment for the Humanities grant to conduct oral histories. Some revenue came from sales of *Yellow Pearl* and *Bridge* magazine. Basement also became a founding member of Seven Loaves, a coalition of Lower East Side organizations (including Charas, The Lower East Side Print Shop, and Cityarts), which provided needed connections and fundraising opportunities. As Basement acquired grant funding, it also had to professionalize: in the mid-seventies, it formed a board of directors and offered a salary to Chiang for her role (much of which she paid back to keep the organization afloat, while working other jobs).

With a few exceptions, Basement Workshop was never a job. Members would work day jobs or part-time and head there afterwards and on weekends. Never a full cooperative (unlike, for example, East Wind in Los Angeles), several Basement members were roommates in Chinatown, or would rotate apartments and



jobs as needed.

During the mid-seventies, inspired both domestic groups like the Black Panthers, and global movements like the Cultural Revolution in China and the revolution in Vietnam, many segments of the Asian American Movement turned to Maoism. Believing that that revolution was the only way forward, and that trained cadre had to struggle within the community towards the right party line, a variety of groups—such as I Wor Kuen (“Righteous Fists”) and Wei Min She (“Organization of the People”)—brought their interpretation of Maoism to the streets of Chinatown. Around 1974-5, members of one of these groups, Workers’ Viewpoint Organization, criticized Basement Workshop for receiving federal funding and demanded that it focus on revolutionary activity rather than culture. After heated debates, position papers, and physical threats against Chiang, Worker’s Viewpoint forced Basement to give up half of its spaces. Basement held on to the loft space and 22 Catherine Street

and focused its energy on the Amerasia Creative Arts and Resource Center. Members of Worker’s Viewpoint went on to found Asian Americans for Equality, an organization with mass appeal twchich eventually became a non-profit with major influence in Chinatown housing and politics.

In the late seventies and early 1980s, Basement faltered financially and organizationally: there was a dispute with the IRS, an accountant went missing, and it was thousands of dollars in debt. Chiang took a couple of medical leaves, between which the leadership changed. In 1986, the members of Basement felt its work had been done and decided to close doors.

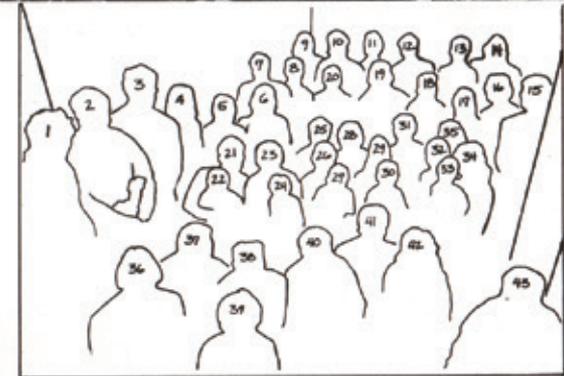
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The full activity of Basement Workshop’s fifteen-year span, with its many programs and offshoots, is impossible to capture here. Fifteen years is no short life cycle for non-profits and arts collectives. Not only did the early members of Basement come of age during this time, but the

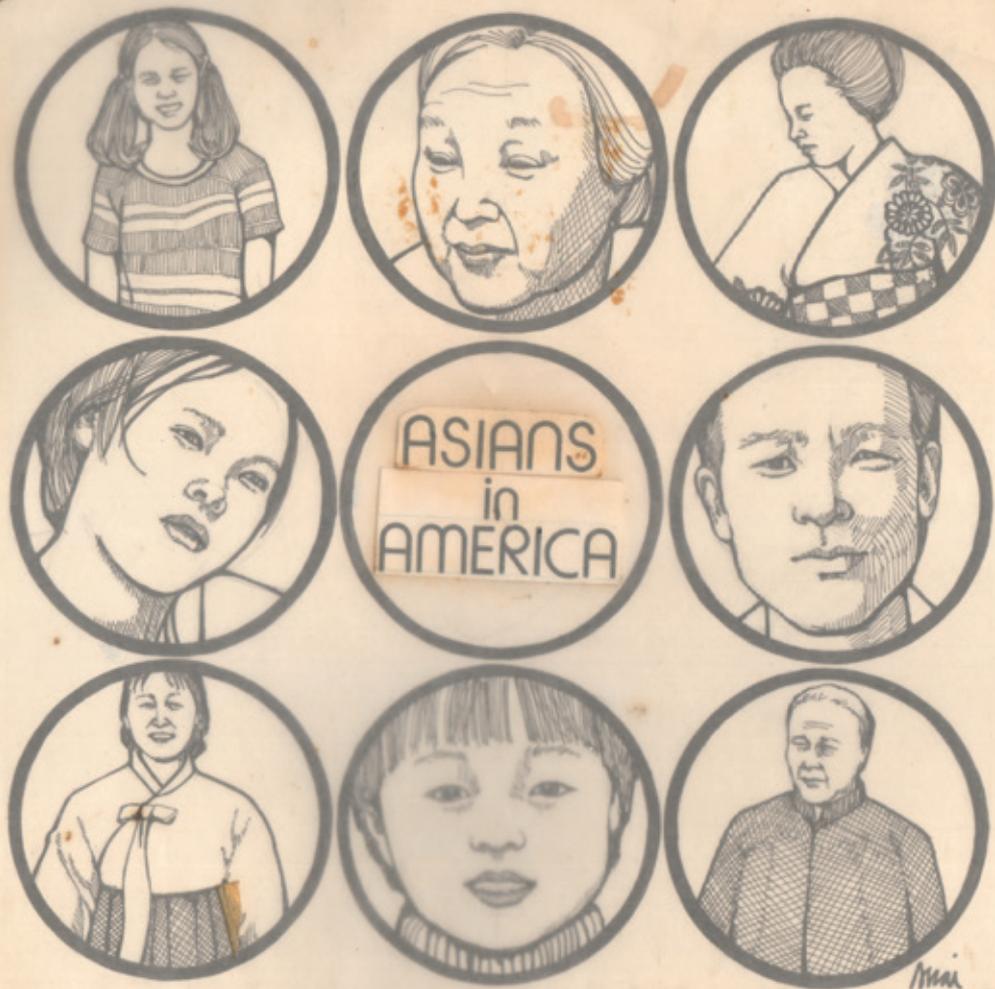


1986

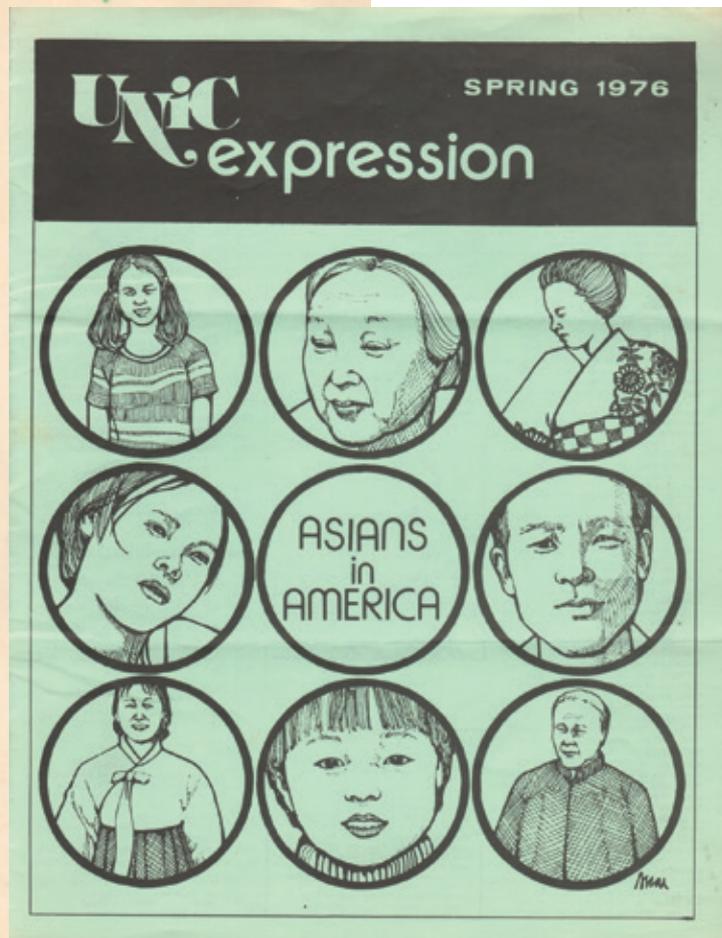
1. Jean Chiang
2. Gene Moy
3. John Allen
4. Lei-Sanne Doo
5. Mine Okubo
6. Margo Machida
7. Andrew Edwards
8. Bennett Ram
9. Kathleen Foster
10. Mary Lum
11. Jason Huang
12. Charlie Chin
13. Charles Yuen
14. Christian Frey
15. George Leong
16. Ming Fay
17. Tomie Arai
18. Larry Hama
19. Chino Garcia
20. Harvey Wang
21. Arlan Huang
22. Ray Huang
23. Lillian Ling Huang
24. Joey Huang
25. Jessica Hagedorn



26. Fay Chew Matsuda
27. Amy Matsuda
28. Laurie Carlos
29. Janice Chiang
30. Calvin Louie
31. Deborah Artman
32. Henry Chu
33. Stevie Chu
34. Pat Chu
35. Sheila Hamanaka
36. Fay Chiang
37. Kari Matsuda
38. Jim Whiting
39. Theodora Yoshikami
40. William Jung
41. Colin Lee
42. Kiyo Matsumoto
43. Alex Chin

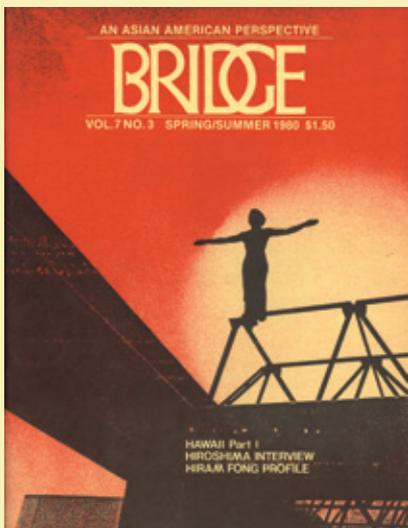


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S/S



Original artwork and finished cover by Tomie Arai for *UNiC Expression*, Spring 1976.

7½" x 7½"



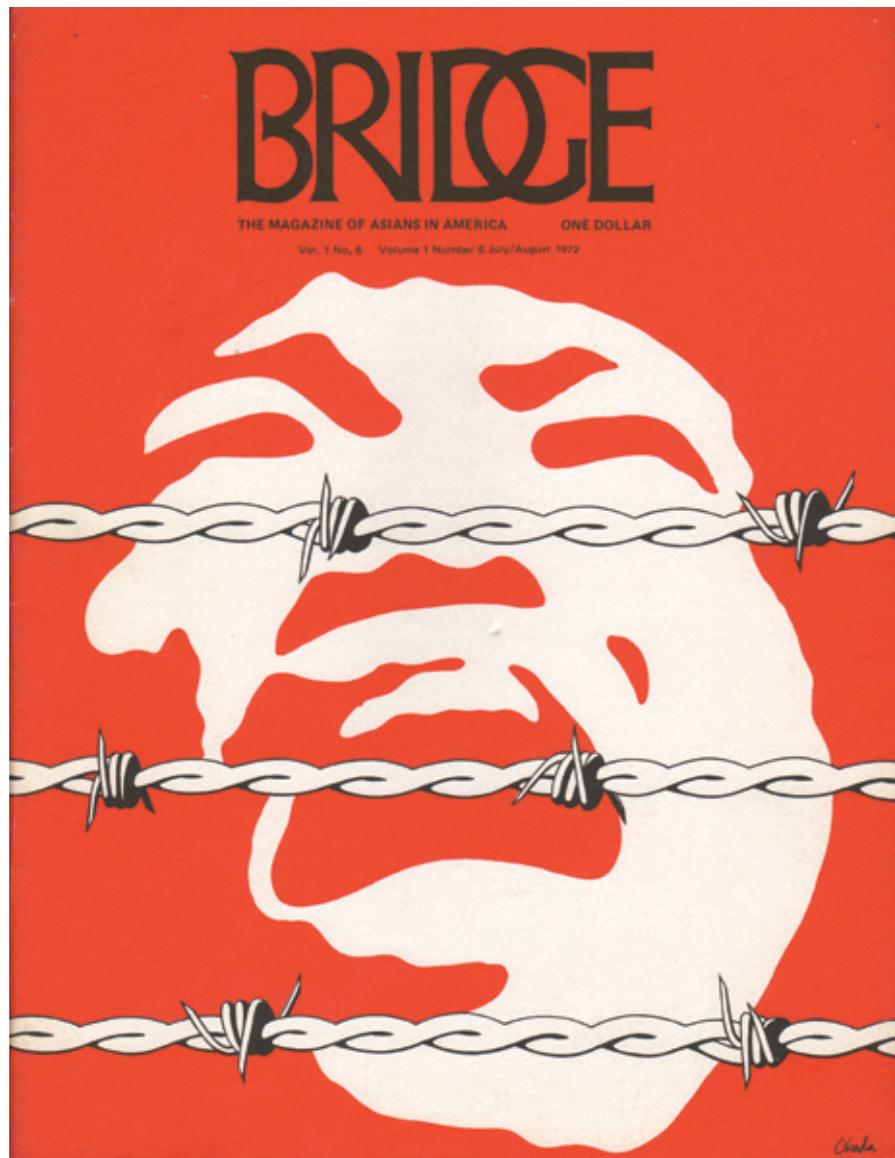
This page: *Bridge Magazine*, v7n3, 1980; opposing page: *Bridge Magazine*, v1n6, 1972, cover art by Frank Okada.

very nature of Asian American activism went from small, radical, grassroots movements to a national network of organizations and organizers that could mount sophisticated protests (e.g. the justice for Vincent Chin campaign in 1982). A few examples of *Basement's* activities will help to outline this evolution.

The early days were very much concerned with articulating an Asian American identity. This is apparent in one of the first issues of *Bridge* (volume 1, number 6, 1972), edited by Frank Ching and Margaret Loke. An opinion piece in that issue asks,

“Where is the slopehead Huey Newton?”; in other words, why hadn’t Asian America produced a revolutionary icon? The author wrote, “by being groovy you could transcend the horizontal prejudice and get to be Somebody. . . . The real trouble for Asian-Americans is that they have yet to egest an archetypal hero that fits into the American Myth.” Though the author’s “Somebody” appears to rely upon dominant notions of success, the piece is a humorous and energetic expression of the desire to create a mythology and radical styling for Asian America.

In the following pages of the same issue, a review of Frank Chin’s play *Chickencoop Chinaman*—a deconstructed telling of The Lone Ranger—called it “the first play by an Asian-American that is fashioned out of uniquely Asian-American sensibilities.”¹ Chin would coedit the first anthology of Asian American writing, *Aiiieeee!*, a couple years later. He is infamous for his critiques of Maxine Hong Kingston and others for their interpretations





Panels from the offset printed poster reproduction of *Images from a Neglected Past*.

of Chinese myth, and would later criticize *Bridge* itself for a cycle of kung fu stories they published, excoriating the editors to find more authentically Asian American stories. Chin believed those authors' reliance on a mythical Chinese past was misguided and retrograde. Looking back, though Chin's take seems dogmatic, the exchange shows how vital *Bridge* was for such debates, and the hunger of those younger writers to engage in cultural politics.

In the late 1970s, Jack Tchen, Susan Yung, John Woo, Don Kao, Gin Woo, and the members of the Asian American Resource Center took a more historical approach to identity. They sought to find a lineage that would make sense of Asian America's contemporary political situation. Rather than write a scholarly paper, they applied their research to an exhibition, *Images from a Neglected Past: The Work and Culture of Chinese in America*. Along with several didactic panels, they painted a monumental, wall-sized mural showing critical scenes from Chinese American history such

as the mass lynching of Chinese in Los Angeles in 1871, the detention center at Angel Island, and McCarthyism's targeting of Chinatowns. Tellingly, the mural ends with a banner supporting the International Hotel in San Francisco, a multi-year, coalitional effort to preserve affordable housing and Asian American cultural spaces that was not just Chinese-focused. The mural traveled around several community venues in New York and Boston, and was reproduced as a poster promoting the piece. With this historical lens, members of the Resource Center connected the struggles of the Asian American Movement to a history of racialized policies and resistance.

The Basement Literature Program, co-coordinated by Jessica Hagedorn, ran from 1980 until Basement's closing. Organized by a younger generation, the literature program focused not only on Asian American writers but "writers of color, women, and progressive writers"; as Hagedorn explains in the *Basement Yearbook*, they "sought to encompass a broad

Women Working Together (art: Tomie Arai), screen-print poster, 1973.

spectrum of other important and often neglected aspects of contemporary American writing.” This turn reflects the new thinking around identity in the 1980s, which shows in the selection of invited artists. In addition to multi-genre workshops—performance with Ping Chong, playwriting with David Henry Hwang, dance and poetry with Ntozake Shange—the literature program hosted book parties for June Jordan and Thulani Davis; other notable readers include Amiri Baraka, Shawn Wong, Audre Lorde, Ai, and Kimiko Hahn.

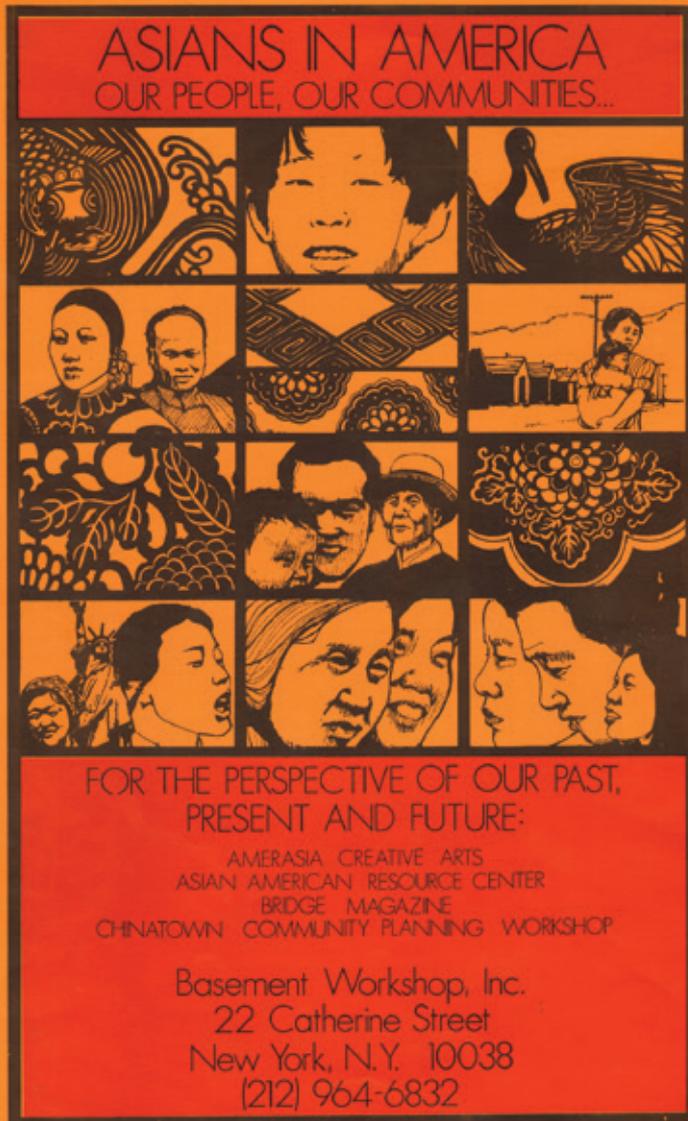
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The most visible legacies of Basement Workshop are the organizations it spawned. The Asian American Resource Center was the seed for the New York Chinatown History Project, which later expanded into the Museum of Chinese in America—a museum with a full staff that presents art and historical exhibitions. Participants in the dance workshops and Amerasia Creative Arts spun

off into the Asian American Dance Theater/Asian American Arts Centre, one of the first spaces dedicated to exhibiting Asian American artists. *Bridge Magazine* was acquired by Asian Cinevision, a film organization founded by Basement alumni that hosts film workshops and an annual festival.

Second, one can point to individual career paths that were fostered, boosted, or encouraged by Basement. *Yellow Pearl* began as an attempt to document the music of Chris Iijima, Nobuko (“Joanne”) Miyamoto, and Charlie Chin, who would go on to record *Grain of Sand* in 1973—considered the first Asian American full-length album [released on Paredon Records, see *Signal:03*]. Visual artists Tomie Arai, Arlan Huang, Larry Hama, Alan Okada, Ming Fay, and Corky Lee, writers Jessica Hagedorn, Henry Chang, and David Henry Hwang, curator Margo Machida, actors Tzi Ma and Mako, choreographers Teddy Yoshikami and Ping Chong, and so many others organized, performed, and exhibited at Basement Workshop.





Asians in America (art: Tomie Arai), offset printed poster, 1970s.

The hardest legacy to measure is how needed Basement Workshop was to so many at that moment in history. To have a collectively organized, open, inviting, and accessible place to experiment with Asian diasporic culture and politics was unthinkable a few years before. It was a space of imagination and experimentation. It is for this reason that so many of those hundreds who went through Basement still recall it fondly.

Basement produced the strongest kind of bonds: when people work not for authorship or prestige, but towards a new understanding of collective selves. Many lifelong friendships developed, and for a few years the Asian/Pacific/American institute at NYU (led by Jack Tchen, a Basement alumnus) hosted reunions. Quite a few of the former members married each other. The life of the artist, and the organizer, is a hard one. Basement offered a reminder that one is not alone in that task, and that creating culture not only changes society but also oneself.

The closing of Basement Workshop thirty years ago can be read, depending on who you ask, as bittersweet, inevitable, or brought on by mismanagement and ego. The advantage of it closing, in retrospect, is that it gives us a fuller ability to examine the institution's history, to tread a careful line between romanticizing and criticizing. As they said in the introduction to *Yellow Pearl*, "we made efforts to re-examine our own perspectives; and we grew." The seemingly contradictory facets of Basement—cultural politics and historical stewardship, volunteer labor and grant fundraising, collectivism and individual artists—offer us a mirror and model for the work needed today, a precedent to help us re-examine and grow. **S**