

*“Same Struggle, Same Fight”:  
Yellow Seeds and the Asian American Movement  
in Philadelphia’s Chinatown*

*Yellow Seeds* was a bilingual Chinese-English community newspaper published intermittently from 1972–77 by a radical student group of the same name based in Philadelphia’s Chinatown. Several extant copies are held in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, by the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, and by former members. Additionally, digitized issues from 1972–75 are available online.<sup>1</sup> The newspaper, like the larger Asian American movement of which it was a part, provides a lens into not only the specific politics of “Save Chinatown” activism in Philadelphia in the 1970s but also the multivalent nature of Asian American identity and activism during this period, the transnational and pan-Asian consciousness of activists, and the generational concerns of young people of color working in culturally conscious ways against US racism and imperialism.

The stated purpose of the newspaper was to “inform the Asian-Americans in Chinatown, in the suburbs, and on the campuses of the prevailing problems and conditions immediately confronting them.” Both *Yellow Seeds*, the publication, and Yellow Seeds, the student-led organization, supported community protest and development as an expression of social justice and pursued these goals through coalitional politics with other organizations in their ethnic urban communities.<sup>2</sup> This politics encompassed a wide range of concerns on local and global scales, spanning Chinatown issues, pan-Asian identification, US involvements in Asia, and related struggles in African American and Latino communities.<sup>3</sup>

Yellow Seeds members followed the exhortation of C. T. Wu of Hunter College, a mentor to the New York student movement, to develop

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Yellow Seeds Newspaper Collection, accessed July 12, 2016, <http://tamaranopper.com/yellow-seeds-newspaper-collection/>; and Historical Society of Pennsylvania Digital Library, accessed Sept. 7, 2016, <http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Search/Index?search=yellow+seeds>.

<sup>2</sup> Daryl Joji Maeda discusses Yellow Seeds as part of the Asian American movement in *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York, 2011). On the movement, see Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power* (Lanham, MD, 2008); William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> On the work of the the Young Lords, Puerto Rican activists who inspired Yellow Seeds, see Carmen Whalen, *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies* (Philadelphia, 2001), 231–37.

Chinatown as a site for the amelioration of social problems and a power base for Asian American activism.<sup>4</sup> Much of the prominent space in *Yellow Seeds* was devoted to the organization's participation in the local "Save Chinatown" movement, a neighborhood fight against urban renewal projects negatively impacting and threatening to displace the historic community. The September 1973 issue was headlined by a story about a neighborhood protest action ("Community Halts Cranes"), coverage of a confrontation with Pennsylvania governor Milton Shapp, and the transcript of a May 1973 speech by founding member Mary Yee in which she stressed democratic rights of the Chinatown community, including its right to self-determination ("Save Chinatown! What Does This Mean?"). *Yellow Seeds* did not just criticize government officials and agencies; Chinatown's leaders also came under fire. In addition to expressing concerns about the Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA) and Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation ("Where are our Misleaders?" August 1975), the newspaper specifically targeted CBA leader T. T. Chang and local Chinatown developer Steven Pang in several 1975 reports, accusing them of self-promotion at the expense of the community. Other local issues covered in the newspaper included housing for the elderly (April 1972), gambling addiction (January 1975), working conditions of Chinese garment workers (February 1973), and a spate of takeout restaurant robberies in 1975. These articles provide insight into the internal differences—both generational and political—that ran through Chinatown in the 1970s and 1980s. The newspaper likewise provides information about the activities *Yellow Seeds* pursued through its center at 1006 Winter Street, where members provided to the Chinatown community such services as English lessons, immigration assistance, translation services and tutoring, health care information and referrals, income tax assistance, and draft counseling.

The purview of *Yellow Seeds*, however, extended well beyond Chinatown to reflect alliances with African American and Latino activists at home and other Asians abroad. The newspaper regularly called for Asian and "Third World Unity." "Same Struggle, Same Fight," one of the group's key slogans, referred to the shared concerns of Asians, African Americans,

<sup>4</sup>The genesis and early membership of *Yellow Seeds* is discussed in Kathryn E. Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown: Space, Place, and Struggle* (Philadelphia, 2015). Specific movement struggles in support of residents in other Asian enclave communities during this period are detailed in Estelle Habal, *San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement* (Philadelphia, 2007); Doug Chin, *Seattle's International District: The Making of a Pan-Asian American Community* (Seattle, 2001).

and Latinos. Grounded in Maoist ideology, Yellow Seeds borrowed tactics from the Black Panthers and Young Lords. News features from 1973–75 announced an upcoming march against “discrimination of the Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia”; reported on Yellow Seeds’ participation in a 1975 protest in New York’s Chinatown against police brutality; and commented on “Racism in America,” equal pay for Filipino nurses, and anti-eviction protests by Japanese Americans in San Francisco and Los Angeles. US involvement in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines also came under critical scrutiny as the paper linked racism at home with imperialism abroad.<sup>5</sup> *Yellow Seeds* also committed itself to covering events in the People’s Republic of China, reflecting a transnational Chinese identity enabled, in part, by the opening of relations with China in 1972. This singular newspaper offers historians invaluable insight into the perspectives and experiences of young Asian Americans, the struggles shaping Philadelphia’s Chinatown history, and the emergence of pan-Asian activism in the 1970s.

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<sup>5</sup> Joint critiques of racism and imperialism linked the Asian American movement to Black Power and other movements of people of color, according to Daryl Joji Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis, MN, 2009).