

The Equality Society

**A Preliminary Archival Reconstruction of The Chinese American Anarchist
Movement**

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“Anarchism is still the most beautiful ideal, and I think someday it will come,” wrote Lau Chung-Si (Ray Jones) from a small apartment in San Francisco. At the time he put these words to paper in 1974, he was a relic of another time. Jones was a Chinese man who, in 1909, immigrated to the United States and quickly became enamoured with the ideas of anarchism. He was involved in a collective of Chinese American anarchists in San Francisco named Pingsheh (Equality Society). He also attended meetings held by other anarchist organisations, as well as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). To date, not much has been written about the Chinese anarchists in America, but what has been written has focused on Ray Jones and the Equality Society. While acknowledging and continuing to use the Equality Society as a focal point, I am putting forward a preliminary analysis of the beliefs and praxis of Chinese American anarchists and their international connections as a part of a broader project of conceptualising Asian anarchism.

Information regarding Chinese American anarchists in America is fractured and spread far and wide. Most of the information analysed here was sourced from the Ray Jones Papers and the Him Mark Lai Collection at the UC Berkeley Ethnic Studies library. By cross-referencing of multiple sources, including first-hand accounts by the Chinese immigrants, newspapers distributed by the Chinese anarchist collectives, the writings of contemporaneous socialists and IWW members, and other miscellaneous materials, it is possible to reconstruct an image of the Chinese American anarchist movement, its involvement in the revolutionary struggle for anarchy, and their relationships to other political groups.

Racism & Radicalization

The Chinese American anarchist movement was born from the unique condition of being Asian immigrants who were exploited by American capitalists and unfairly excluded from unions by Marxists and reactionary trade unions such as the American Federation of Labor. It was the IWW’s acceptance of Chinese immigrants that ultimately led them to the philosophy of anarchism. These Chinese Americans deeply held anti-State and anti-capitalist principles and were in favour of anarchist communism, under which they engaged in the praxis of direct action. These Chinese American anarchists worked with groups within the larger anarchist movement on local, national, and international levels. Their adherence to anarchist principles and collaboration with other groups led to struggles locally with capitalist and State repression along with alienation from their homeland due to hostility from the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) and the Chinese Communist Party.

Chinese immigrants failed in their attempts to join labour unions to combat the abysmal material conditions and exploitation that they faced under capitalism. A dogmatic belief in perverted formulation of Marx’s theories led many Marxists and like-minded socialists to exclude the Chinese immigrant proletariat from socialist labour unions and movements. In the 1900s, the Socialist Party of America was one of the largest socialist organisations in the United States. Their stance on Asian labourers was made clear by the “Summary of the Majority Report” at the 1910 Socialist Conference, which advocated for the:

‘...unconditional exclusion of Chinese, Japanese, Koreans [sic] and Hindus, not as races per se, not as peoples with definite physiological characteristics—but for the evident reason that these peoples occupy definite portions of the earth which are so far behind the general modern development of industry, psychologically as well

as economically, that they constitute a drawback, an obstacle and menace to the progress of the most aggressive, militant and intelligent elements of our working class population.’

This is indicative of how many Marxists and adjacent socialists grouped Asian labourers as impediments to the revolution due to some perceived underdeveloped psychological and economic conditions. This line of thinking can largely be attributed to their understanding of Marx’s theory of historical materialism, which posits that a society needed to reach a certain stage of capitalist development before widespread class consciousness and revolutionary potential is possible. Since Marxists did not see Asian countries as having already reached that state of capitalism, they viewed the incorporation of Asian labourers as “fruitless and reactionary” and against the interest of the American working class as it would only hamper their revolutionary potential. However, the refusal to accept Asian labourers into unions cannot solely be attributed to racist revisions to Marx’s theories.

White supremacy was extremely prevalent in America which allowed those influenced by racism and xenophobia to add to the ongoing exclusion of Asian labourers. At the Socialist Conference, “Comrade Untermann ... claimed that it was impossible to get the Asiatic laborers to understand the principles of labor organisation, much less of socialism.” This attitude demonstrates a belief of the racial inferiority of the Asian workers in comparison to their counterparts. While this supremacist view was common at the time, other socialists at the Socialist Conference challenged this thinking for being inherently racist — but to no avail. The anti-racist advocates were a minority at the Conference.

Despite anti-Asian biases being quite common amongst the American proletariat and socialist organisations, the heavily anarcho-syndicalist-adjacent IWW staunchly rejected any such sentiment as untrue and instead welcomed Asian labourers. The IWW’s view was articulated in the *Industrial Union Bulletin’s* coverage of The Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention’s “Resolution on Anti-Asiatic Persecution”:

‘In the past year several riots have occurred on the Pacific Coast directed against Asiatics on the ground that they are cheap labor ... These Asiatics have, whenever an attempt has been made, shown their ability to organize, better their conditions and to stand true to their class ... The interests of the working class are the same no matter what their race, creed and color and are diametrically opposed to the interests of the capitalist class, and ... these outbreaks but serve to further divide the workers where they should be united, and therefore serve the interest of the master class, therefore, be it resolved ... that we condemn the A.F. of L. [American Federation of Labor] as well as other so-called labor organizations who have in this respect aided the masters.’

The treatment of Chinese labourers as “cheap labor” by the bourgeoisie served as a means to cause conflict within the proletariat. By paying the Chinese little and engaging them primarily for physical labour, the bourgeoisie encouraged white workers to see them as inferior yet simultaneously as a threat to their economic position. This, in turn, caused division within the proletariat on racial lines which only benefited the capitalist class. The discrimination against Asian workers manifested in their exclusion from unions such as the American Federation of

Labor and was countered in part by the IWW's condemnation of labour unions that excluded Asian labourers.

The IWW accepted Chinese immigrants into its ranks and was "the only organisation that [had] ever done any organising among the Japanese and Chinese in [America]." The Asian labourers acted as other proletarians and had effectively organised for better conditions as described in the *Industrial Union Bulletins (IUB)*:

'None of the Japanese or Chinese who become members fail to realise their duty as to paying their dues and keeping in good standing. This cannot be said, truthfully, of all the "whites." The Japanese and Chinese can be organised as rapidly as any other nationality. and when once pledged to stand with you, no fear or doubt needs to be entertained as to them, during labour trouble.'

The *IUB* emphasised that Asian labourers were just as effective and trustworthy as the white labourers, and were easily organised. Their actions showed that Marxist analysis of the revolutionary potential of the Asian immigrant proletariat was false and that the IWW's recognition that the proletariat should be united by class against capital, regardless of race, was correct. Acceptance of Asian immigrants by the IWW led to the immigrants not only joining the IWW, but also adopting anarchist ideals in their own union called the Unionist Guild of America in order to focus on struggles more specific to their material conditions.

Praxis & Principles

The principle at the core of anarchism is that all hierarchies are inherently oppressive and must be abolished. While the Chinese American anarchists fought for the deconstruction of all hierarchies, they placed an emphasis on critiquing the interconnected systemic oppression caused by the hierarchical structures of the State and capital. In their publication, *Anarcho-Communist Monthly (ACM)*, they wrote:

'[The private property system (Capitalism)] is when capitalists monopolise all production tools and production items, use the monetary system, and force us workers to be their wage slaves. We workers were forced by hunger and cold, so we sold our precious labour to them to do everything for them. We workers make everything in factories and cultivate various plants on farmland. However, everything we produce is owned by the capitalists.'

They viewed capitalism as a form of slavery under which they rented out their bodies in exchange for monetary compensation. Despite the workers labouring tirelessly to manufacture and farm goods, in actuality, they owned none of what they produced. Instead, their labour was stolen by the capitalist system under which both themselves and their labour were owned. However, besides capital, they acknowledged another hierarchical structure that contributed to the disparity between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie: the State.

The Chinese American anarchists acknowledged that the State was a tool wielded by the bourgeoisie to oppress the proletariat. In *ACM*, they wrote that:

‘Capitalists have occupied all production machines, not making them available to society, and depriving workers of their blood, sweat and lives ... however, the government continues to defend the capitalists; if the workers have some demands on the capitalists, the government will immediately do its best to suppress our workers, intimidation, and even killing ... the government must be overthrown and cannot be allowed to continue!’

Their analysis of society continued to critique the private ownership of the means of production by the bourgeoisie as it made the workers’ lives significantly worse. Furthermore, they added that the State always defended the interests of the ruling class. As the proletariat agitated through strikes and unionisation for better working conditions, the State would suppress the workers through tactics ranging anywhere from intimidation to full on massacres. Hence, the hierarchical structures of capital and the State were intertwined, and so, the Chinese American anarchists advocated the abolition of both.

The Chinese American anarchists desired to see a world antithetical to the current one with the State and capital replaced by anarchy and communism. In opposition to both the current system and their authoritarian counterparts on the left, they advocated for “free communism.” The Chinese anarchists described free communism as following the principle of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” and how it could manifest in society:

‘That returns all property ... to the common people, and the land to farmers. The villagers’ and peasants’ associations plan production, and the factories belong to the workers. The labor unions organized by the workers plan production, and distribution ... Everyone works, everyone participates in all life decisions, there is no ruler, everyone freely enjoys the common products, and makes the best use of their talents and abilities.’

This conception of society aligns with the anarchist communism described by their primary inspiration, Pytor Kropotkin, as well as other classical anarchists while implementing elements of anarcho-syndicalism that were likely picked up from their work with the IWW. They wanted well-being for all, meaning that all needs would be fulfilled and work would be enjoyable. Additionally, these Chinese American anarchists wanted horizontal organisations in which each person had a say in the decisions made by their communities. This typically took the form of federated council structures that would elect a secretary to represent them for a limited time; these secretaries would advocate for their council’s position in larger district, provincial, and national gatherings. They believed that this could only be achieved through a society in which the proletariat owned the means of production with relationships characterised by free association.

As anarchism is a philosophy of praxis, the Chinese American anarchists’ means of abolishing hierarchies were intrinsically unified with their ends. They aimed for social revolution through the spreading of class consciousness and by using direct action to work toward their goals in a material way. The Equality Society published two newspapers: *ACM* and *Equality*. The purpose of these newspapers was to be the Chinese American anarchists’ “cry, [their] flag, and the sound of a bell that [aroused their] comrades” that “[promoted] anarchism and [recorded] news about the anarchist movement ... [and] paid attention to the situation of Chinese workers in Europe and the United States.” The distribution of this literature was used to foster class consciousness within

the Chinese immigrant proletariat by means of education. The content of a typical issue of either publication ranged from informative essays on the injustices of hierarchies of State and capital, to explanations of the ideas of anarchist communism, to critiques of Marxist-Leninist ideology, and to discussions on current events within their community and the broader anarchist movement. However, the “small monthly publication with black characters printed on white paper [was] not [their] main job, nor [was] it [their] only weapon.”

The primary form of direct action that the Equality Society took to fight against the State and capital was aiding unions and strikes. They distributed notices with support for the 1934 West Coast Waterfront Strike and the The National Dollar Stores Strike, among others. While the Chinese American anarchists critiqued the strikes on issues like “the capitalist collaboration with the union leaders” and were “not yet satisfied with the limits of their demands,” they were otherwise extremely supportive of these strikes, “viewing them as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for [the] Chinese workers to liberate themselves.” Additionally, they viewed strikes as a way to:

‘...spread [their] own ideals among the working class. In order to promote the class consciousness of workers, consolidate partial strikes into general strikes, and transform the general strike mechanism into an armed revolution of the working class against capitalism and the state! This is the solution!’

For them, strikes held a two-fold purpose, the first and more obvious one being to agitate for better working conditions and the second being for the further spread of class consciousness. The Chinese American anarchists viewed strikes in individual industries as a path to a general strike federated between all industries which would give rise to the proletariat’s revolutionary potential. The revolutionary potential could then be harnessed by the proletariat to enact a social revolution to dismantle the oppressive systems of the State and capital, which they viewed as the solution to oppression.

Comrades & Connections

However, for any revolutionary movement to exist, there needs to be more than a single group working toward it. While the Equality Society was certainly the largest group of Chinese American anarchists, there was another notable collective based on the other coast. The New York-based Jue She (Awakeness Society) was established by:

‘...[t]he Chinese in New York [that] have always expressed sympathy for the anarchist communists. Recently ... some of the hard-working elements among them established the Awakeness Society in order to study knowledge, increase their knowledge, explore the truth, and transform society.’

These Chinese American anarchists from New York performed essentially the same tasks as that of the Equality Society, their primary difference being geographic location. Interestingly, according to the historian Paul Avrich, “Its main figures were Yat Tone and Eddie Wong, who had come to New York from the Equality Group in San Francisco.” While there were other notable members, such as Gray Wu, who were not part of the Equality Society, the Chinese American anarchists in New York drew much of their inspiration and praxis from the experiences of the

Equality Society in San Francisco. This established transcontinental connections between the Chinese American anarchists on both coasts, though their reach went well beyond just these two groups.

The Chinese American anarchists embraced proletarian unity and worked with a variety of different groups to achieve their revolutionary ends. The Equality Society most frequently worked with the IWW and local anarchist groups, primarily from immigrant communities. As noted in *Equality*:

‘The city’s Jewish, Russian, Italian, and Chinese anarchist comrades ... picnic meeting on the 23rd of last month in this city ... In addition to speeches, there were also music and ball games to add to the fun. It was also suggested by a Russian comrade that the four groups should unite in the future and hold a regular meeting every Saturday night to facilitate communication.’

The collaboration with other immigrant groups allowed for the Chinese American anarchists to create solidarity within their area through meetings. The purpose of these meetings was to foster bonds between the groups in order to build community rather than wholly being focused on their revolutionary project. Meanwhile, the Awakeness Society had a cooperative restaurant called Jade Mountain that “[raised] money for The Road to Freedom.” Connections with other anarchist groups allowed for solidarity and organisation in their communities. However, these networks spanned far beyond just locally.

The Chinese American anarchists were also connected to anarchists abroad. For example, they were in correspondence with Emma Goldman and the *Equality* publication was “co-organized by our comrades who live in Europe and the United States.” Additionally, the Equality Society was in frequent contact with the noted anarchist translator and writer Ba Jin and the mainland Chinese anarchists, as well as anarchists in Japan. Jones in particular corresponded with Ba Jin on current events in China and the publication of the *Equality* in Shanghai, as well. Meanwhile, analyses and overviews of the material conditions and revolutionary movements in China and Japan were frequently published in *Equality* and *ACM*, such as “Chinese Anarchism and Organizational Issues” and “The Anarcho-Syndicalist Movement in Japan.” Yet while these transnational connections allowed for communication and solidarity with the wider anarchist movement, it also came with consequences.

Opposition & Obstruction

Chinese American anarchist activities in China led to oppression as their anti-hierarchical beliefs put them in opposition to both the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese American anarchists described their position in *Equality*:

‘In the past, the Communist Party and the Kuomintang both wanted to help [people]. Now, although the Communist Party is still active everywhere and the Kuomintang is still in dictatorship ... and the general public have nothing but resentment and resistance towards them.’

The Chinese populace viewed both the Kuomintang and Communist Party as having abandoned the people, instead prioritising their party’s political revolution to gain power. This led not

only anarchists but also the general public to resent both parties instead of siding with either. In the ensuing clash with the Kuomintang, various anarchist operations were crushed by the party. Work on the aforementioned Shanghai-based edition of *Equality* was put to an end after “[their] distributing site [was] discovered by the Kuomintang.” The Chinese State decided to target these anarchists because they presented a threat to the status quo.

Chinese American anarchists’ principles also led them to trouble within the community of Chinese Americans in the United States. During the Sino-Japanese War, Ray Jones stuck to the anarchist principle of being anti-war as “the army, navy, air force ... are all used to fight for the property of the country’s [bourgeoisie], and to ... kill ... the people.” As the anarchists deviated from the nationalistic tendencies harboured by their fellow immigrants, they faced consequences. Jones’ adherence to his beliefs led to him being physically assaulted at the San Francisco branch of Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association due to his refusal to contribute to the war fund.

Due to the Chinese American anarchists’ spread of libertarian ideas that opposed State and capital, they faced repression at the hands of the United States government. In many cases there was collaboration between the State and capital as Chinatown “employers ... turned to the headquarters of the persecution for assistance, which was, of course, cheerfully rendered.” In this, the Chinese American anarchists’ analysis of the State as a protector of bourgeoisie class interests was shown to be true. The actions against the Equality Society mostly took the form of police raids upon their headquarters and arrests of their members. In a 1928 issue of *Chung Sai Yat Po*, a local news publication, it was reported that:

Two Chinese people were arrested: they were brought to the precinct. The prosecution’s case against them accused them of illegally distributing leaflets ... The Immigration Bureau sent translators to translate the “May Day Special Issue” and “Equality” pamphlets. Many of them were printed by the Equality Society ... The group is suspected of spreading anarchism.

The United States government targeted the Chinese American anarchists for raising class consciousness through the distribution of literature. This was indicative that the United States government was somewhat threatened by the Chinese American anarchists’ efforts to educate the proletariat on the ideas of anarchism, pushing for an understanding that would endanger its monopoly of violence. Yet despite the arrests of the Equality Society’s members and confiscation of their literature by the police, they were “still determined to work hard on [their] work as usual.” The Chinese American anarchists were unyielding in their pursuit of the anarchist cause.

Conclusions

Though these hopeful revolutionaries made meaningful change and supported the proletariat to the best of their ability, the Chinese American anarchist movement died out following World War II. It was likely that this happened due to a combination of factors: continued repression by the State and capital, the Chinese immigrant proletariat embracing rising Maoist currents, and the general decline of the international anarchist movement.

The Chinese American anarchist movement was one that was uniquely formed from the exclusion of the Chinese immigrants from the wider American Left. Once they had adopted anarchism, they were steadfast in their anti-hierarchical beliefs, demonstrated through their at-

tempts to move closer toward equality by the use of direct action. The international connections of the Chinese American anarchists allowed for them to communicate with the wider anarchist movement, although this sometimes resulted in additional state repression both in China and the United States. The work of the Chinese American anarchists remains relevant to this day, demonstrating that while the revolution may not come tomorrow, it is essential to continue grassroots efforts to organise and educate communities on the oppressive nature of hierarchies and how to combat them, both individually and collectively. Those who strive toward a more egalitarian world must not give up hope. In the words of Jones, “In this dark world ... I seek brightness.”

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