

**Constructing Power in Confucius Plaza:
How Reforms to Equal Employment Revolutionized Chinese American Activism in New
York City**

Nicole Chan

**Senior Division
Historical Paper**

**Historical Paper: 2470 words
Process Paper: 480 words**

Process Paper

I decided to research and write about New York's Confucius Plaza after discussing potential topics with one of my previous history teachers. My teacher mentioned the brief history of the plaza, which left me to reminisce about all the times I passed by the building complex. It was just 20 minutes from my school, a sign I'd entered Chinatown, and yet I knew practically nothing about its story. After asking around, I realized almost no one else understood its significance, and I was compelled to share it.

When I first started my research, I struggled to find effective and relevant sources, until I found *Grapes Of Wrath* (1974) on JSTOR. Though the actual article on my topic was brief, it influenced how I wanted to structure my paper. It gave me the idea of connecting the Confucius Plaza to the overall Civil Rights Movement happening within the same time. With a plan in mind, I then branched out to research both its connection to other social movements and how it affected Chinese Americans' identities themselves.

Towards the middle of my research, I'd hit a wall, struggling to find primary sources with distinct perspectives. I visited Chinatown's Museum of Chinese in America, hoping to find items or images to use. While I didn't find the sources I initially came for, the museum provided insight on possible directions I could go for both background and effects.

I chose to organize my paper the way that it is after filling out graphic organizers. Like the organizers, I split my paper into 3 main sections excluding the introduction and conclusion: the background and build up, the heart of the story, and the short term/reaction and long term/reform effects of the Confucius Plaza protests.

I chose Confucius Plaza for this year's theme of *Revolution, Reaction, and Reform* as it encapsulates both the "revolution" and "reform" aspect of the theme. While not a widely known

movement, Confucius Plaza reformed New York City's approach to equal employment through means of disruptive and joint demonstrations with local Black and Hispanic communities. It proved to be revolutionary as it established a unified community that included both Chinatown and other New York minorities.

Likewise, my topic is important as it was one of the first accounts of Chinese Americans uniting not only within their own community but also with other groups of people. It was a short but revolutionary event in NYC Chinatown that challenged preconceived notions about the level of involvement Chinese Americans had. While interviewing Lydia Tom, a participant in the protests, she described how important it is for people to learn about minorities' histories. Her thoughts resonated with me and I want to bring attention to its effects that can still be seen today where residents of Manhattan Chinatown as well as smaller Chinatown communities still continue to advocate for the preservation of their communities.

Since 1975, Confucius Plaza has stood as a defining landmark of New York City's Chinatown beside the Manhattan Bridge. Built under the City's Mitchell-Lama program, a city-subsidized housing initiative designed to provide affordable apartments for moderate- and low-income families, Confucius Plaza was the first major publicly funded housing project built almost exclusively for Chinatown's Chinese Americans. However, despite its purpose to serve the local community, Confucius Plaza contractor DeMatteis Corporation refused to hire or even consult local Asian laborers, igniting outrage among residents and community organizers.¹ These frustrations erupted into large-scale protests that captured citywide attention and exposed deeper struggles over political identity and economic rights, particularly as city officials defended DeMatteis's hiring practices. In 1974, protests in New York City's Chinatown against the exclusion of Chinese American laborers from the construction of Confucius Plaza revolutionized Chinese American political activism in New York, reshaping perceptions of the community's political identity. By provoking citywide reactions and forging alliances with other minority groups of New York City, the movement pushed the City towards reforms by creating minority-employment policies and dismantling stereotypes that portrayed Chinese Americans as politically passive.

The 1960s marked a significant shift in America's treatment of minority rights. Across the country, the Civil Rights Movement demanded the nation's "consciousness around issues of racial equality" with liberation movements like Fight Back that protested for economic opportunities.² Growing national pressure for legal and social equality compelled Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, guaranteeing "the full and equal enjoyment of the goods,

¹ "44 Years Ago Today, We Made a Stand," Asian Americans for Equality, last modified May 2018, <https://www.aafe.org/44-years-ago-today-we-made-a-stand/>.

² Joyce A. Ladner, "A New Civil Rights Agenda," *The Brookings Review* 18, no. 2 (2000): 26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20080906>; "Fight for Jobs," *Fight Back News*, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/fight-back-news/fight-back-news-nd1.pdf>.

services, facilities, and privileges, advantages, and accommodations” regardless of race.³ The legislation ushered in the “redefining [of] race by embracing their ethnic and racial diversity and its broader societal implications,” but its effects were inconsistent and incomplete.⁴ For example, the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission found “discriminatory patterns in overall level of employment” for Asian and Pacific Americans.⁵ Similarly, ASIAN, Inc. reported that Asian Americans were underrepresented in major manufacturing industries and largely confined to low-level clerical and labor positions.⁶ The Civil Rights Act of 1964, while a significant legislative achievement, did not eliminate racial inequality nor systematic barriers.

While the Civil Rights Act addressed racial inequality, immigration reforms further reshaped the demographic landscape of New York City. As a response to domestic demands and Cold War concerns over international reputation, the United States passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The act abolished the national-origin quotas and immigration restrictions, which led to a surge in Chinese settlement.⁷ Immigration previously limited to 880 people per year reached over 800,000 by 1980.⁸ As thousands settled into the City, Chinatown

³ Civil Rights Act, H.R. 7152 (July 2, 1964). <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act>.

⁴ Ladner, "A New Civil," 27.

⁵ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, comp., *Civil Rights Issue of Asian and Pacific Americans* (Washington, D.C., 1979), 389, <https://www.usccr.gov/files/historical/1979/79-006.pdf>.

⁶ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Civil Rights*, 390.

⁷ "Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965," History, Art and Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1951-2000/Immigration-and-Nationality-Act-of-1965/>; David S. Fitzgerald and David Cook-Martín, "The Geopolitical Origins of the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965," Migration Policy Institute, last modified February 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/geopolitical-origins-us-immigration-act-1965>.

⁸ Guillermo Cantor, "Fifty Years Later, the Immigration Act That Transformed America," American Immigration Council, last modified October 5, 2015, [https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/immigration-and-nationality-act-50-years-later/#:~:text=In%20his%201964%20State%20of,not%20to%20be%20the%20case](https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/immigration-and-nationality-act-50-years-later/#:~:text=In%20his%201964%20State%20of,not%20to%20be%20the%20case;); "No. 104.--Immigration Quotas Allotted and Quota Aliens Admitted, by Country of Birth: Years Ended June 30, 1925 to 1938," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/files/docs/publications/stat_abstract/pages/52753_1935-1939.pdf; Cindy C. Fan, *Chinese Americans: Immigration, Settlement, and Social Geography*, 263, <https://geog.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/users/fan/205.pdf>.

evolved into an immigration enclave, developing the social and economic conditions that would fuel political activism in the 1970s.

As Chinatown's population grew, pressure on housing and urban development intensified. City construction projects like Seward Park Urban Renewal Area (1967) that catered to tourists and wealthy families and displaced "2,000 working-class families out of their homes." This left Chinatown less affordable and pushed many residents to outer boroughs.⁹ Lily Shum, who grew up next to the Manhattan Bridge, recalled growing up in "an old railroad style tenement building" with no elevator and a "bathtub in the kitchen."¹⁰ With the introduction of luxury buildings, gentrification intensified housing insecurity in Chinatown and heightened anxieties over residential stability and economic opportunities.¹¹

The growing concerns over housing and employment prompted city officials to address inequalities in employment access. In an attempt to abide by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the New York Building and Construction Industry Board of Urban Affairs developed the New York Plan (1970), which aimed to train and hire "minority-group members as skilled construction workers."¹² However, the Plan fell short, offering ineffective training and few job opportunities and defunding effective programs.¹³ For instance, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), despite having increased funding compared to similar previous programs, allocated

⁹ Peter Kwong and Samuel Stein, *Preserve and Protect Chinatown*, 2, February 2015, https://www.roosevelthouse.hunter.cuny.edu/devdev/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Kwong_Stein_Issue_Brief-Chinatown2-5-15.pdf; Jan Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 108; Margaret Chin, "2008.040.017 Oral History Interview with Margaret Chin," audio, 88:18, Museum of Chinese in America, March 6, 2008, https://ohms.mocanyc.org/viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=2008_040_017_1630076860.xml.

¹⁰ Lily Shum, interview by the author, Brooklyn, NY, February 1, 2026.

¹¹ Kwong and Stein, *Preserve and Protect*; Chin, "2008.040.017 Oral," audio.

¹² Damon Stetson, "Builders and Unions Here Offer Minorities Training," *The New York Times*, March 22, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/03/22/archives/builders-and-unions-here-offer-minorities-training-builders-and.html>.

¹³ William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Temple University Press, 1993), 177; Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, *The War on Poverty: a New Grassroots History, 1964-1980* (University of Georgia Press, 2011), 21.

less money per participant and was “designed to place people in jobs rather than increase their skills.”¹⁴ Rather than improving conditions, these shortcomings heightened tensions between minority groups like Chinatown’s Asian Americans and white employers.

In 1973, Mayor John Lindsay unveiled a new construction project south of the Manhattan Bridge that “promised to become the new focal point of Chinatown.” The \$45-million Confucius Plaza was designed to serve as a school, residential complex, and landmark.¹⁵ The project was intended to offer a solution to the housing and displacement issue, but many residents were wary of its potential gentrification and effects on their economic opportunities. The City gave the project to the DeMatteis Corp. to oversee the construction. Despite the Housing and Development Administration claiming that “the DeMatteis company is in compliance with minority-hiring regulations,” the company refused to provide relevant information on their workers’ races, checkerboarding by selectively importing workers from outside the community.¹⁶ Construction unions were “restrictive and racist,” making it harder for Chinese Americans to challenge DeMatteis’ employment practices.¹⁷ The company’s reticence provoked cascading effects that sparked a growing desire for reform. Amid differing views, Chinatown residents mobilized to challenge both DeMatteis and the City for turning a blind eye to DeMatteis’ failure to hire minorities.

¹⁴ John Mullin, "The Many Lives of Federal Job Training," Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, last modified 2022, https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/econ_focus/2022/q1_economic_history#:~:text=Special%20programs%20were%20created%20for,than%20to%20increase%20their%20skills.

¹⁵ "Ground Is Broken for Huge Project Serving Chinatown," *New York Times*, September 12, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/09/12/archives/ground-is-broken-for-huge-project-serving-chinatown.html#:~:text=Sept.,alter%2C%20edit%20or%20update%20them>.

¹⁶ Paul L. Montgomery, "Asians Picket Building Site, Charging Bias," *The New York Times*, June 1, 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/01/archives/asians-picket-building-site-charging-bias-city-sees-compliance.html>.

¹⁷ "Bridge: Asian American Perspectives," *Bridge: Asian American Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (1975): 48, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.39537787>; Peter Kwong, *Chinatown, New York : Labor and Politics, 1930-1950*, rev. ed ed. (New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2001), 155.

In 1974, former members of the Workers Viewpoint Organization, a Marxist-Leninist group previously known as the Asian Study Group, established the Asian Americans for Equal Employment (AAFEE) in response to the inadequate job opportunities and rising gentrification problem. The AAFEE was a group of “Asian American construction workers long denied their rightful opportunities,” and many of the members participated in prior protests at City College of New York.¹⁸ Executive director Thomas Yu described the organization as a “civil rights movement not just for Asian Americans, but for all people.”¹⁹ The organization utilized petitions in March 1974 for the immediate hiring of Chinese American workers, their goal of having “a meeting with the general contractors.”²⁰ Chinatown media and organizations like the Chinatown Golden Age Club publicly supported the AAFEE.²¹ These initial efforts marked the beginning of the AAFEE’s organized push for labor equality, and laid the groundwork for the larger protests that would erupt later in the spring.

Previous negotiations collapsed after the token hiring of two Asian Americans, and on May 16, 1974, the AAFEE led marches through Chinatown in protest, carrying picket signs reading, “The Asians built the railroad; Why not Confucius Plaza” and “DeMatteis, you are a big racist.”²² (*See Appendix A, B, and C*). Flyers describing the effects of inadequate employment opportunities urged not only Chinese American residents but also other groups to join the

¹⁸ Ryan Lee Wong, “Closed to Protest Police Brutality,” *Hyphen- Asian America Unabridged* (blog), January 8, 2018, <https://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2017/01/closed-protest-police-brutality>; Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown*, 130; “Our History,” Asian Americans for Equality, <https://www.aafe.org/our-history/>; “Bridge: Asian,” 48.

¹⁹ From Immigrant Roots to Community Leadership: AAFE’s Story,” video, YouTube, posted by Aafe, June 12, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6lZgsE9x8o>.

²⁰ “Bridge: Asian,” 49.

²¹ Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown*, 134.

²² Montgomery, “Asians Picket”; Melissa Young, “Rare Photos Capture ’70s Asian Am Movement in New Book,” *AsAmNews*, last modified January 2021, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://asamnews.com/2021/01/11/book-features-more-than-400-photographs-covering-events-of-the-asian-american-movement-from-1969-to-1974>; Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown*, 134; Asian Americans for Equal Employment, Posters for Participating in Protests, photograph.

protests.²³ The protests occurred over the next two and a half weeks, leading to 57 arrests for obstructing the construction project.²⁴ People stood to block bulldozers, and others trespassed into the sites.²⁵ The marches reached a climax on May 31, where 500 protesters from both Chinatown and surrounding neighborhoods pushed New York to release an advertisement promising no racist hiring within the construction industry.²⁶ Organizing and participating in neighborhood-wide demonstrations was relatively rare for Chinese Americans, yet the community understood the importance of mobilizing against the housing crisis and the City's neglect of Chinatown.²⁷ Chinese Americans made themselves heard through disruptive, attention-demanding means, a revolutionary shift that far confounded DeMatteis' expectations.

As the demonstrations intensified, AAFEE extended their message beyond Chinatown to neighboring communities and newspapers. Like the AAFEE, Harlem construction workers in the 1970s united together to form Fight Back, challenging the discriminatory practices within New York City's construction industry.²⁸ Lydia Tom, a protester, recalled intentionally seeking out support from Black and Puerto Rican Fight Back members, whose demands for better housing and landlords resonated with Chinese Americans. Tom described how the members taught the protesters to deliberately be disruptive and stop work to be taken seriously, attributing their advice to showing "there was broader support."²⁹ Fight Back joined hands with the AAFEE in

²³ *Flyer regarding Asian Americans for Equal Employment Demonstration* (Asian Americans for Equal Employment, 1974; *Special Bulletin on Asian Americans for Equal Employment* (Asian Americans For Equal Employment, 1974), <https://museumofprotest.org/portfolio/the-struggle-for-fair-hiring-in-new-york-citys-chinatown-1974/>.

²⁴ "Bridge: Asian," 50.

²⁵ "44 Years," Asian Americans for Equality; Montgomery, "Asians Picket"

²⁶ "The Guardian," *The Guardian* 26, no. 36 (1974,06,19): 5, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.38320051>; "44 Years," Asian Americans for Equality.

²⁷ Montgomery, "Asians Picket"; Chin, "2008.040.017 Oral," audio.

²⁸ Damaso Reyes, "Harlem Organization Helped Change the Face of Construction," editorial, *Amsterdam News*, April 27, 2023, <https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2023/04/27/we-say-fight-back-how-a-harlem-community-organization-helped-change-the-face-of-nyc-construction/>

²⁹ Lydia Tom, interview by the author, Manhattan, NY, May 5, 2026.

Chinatown's May 31 mass protest for fairer job opportunities.³⁰ Margaret Chin, a founder of AAFEE, described the march as a "group of people [that] was really diverse... not just Chinese."³¹ This solidarity reflected the broader cross-minority cooperation in New York City activism. The inclusion of Fight Back members assisted in the dismantling of a "foreign" identity and challenged prevailing stereotypes of politically isolated Chinese Americans.

As the issue persisted and New York City continued to attract foreigners, mixed reactions regarding Confucius Plaza circulated amongst freshly immigrated communities. Choi Ying Liu, settling in Brooklyn from rural China in late 1973 with her younger brother, found herself right in the middle of conflict between Chinatown and DeMatteis. She described her time as, "messy [with] too much moving around. 人山人海 [a sea of people]." Her brother, looking for work, found himself strongly aligned with the protesters. She recalled a "determined boy," who told her, "那我们呢? [What about us, then?]" While Liu remained skeptical, she chose to side with the protests as well, not by marching, but rather passing out meals to her brother and his friends.³² These actions demonstrated that activism in Chinatown extended beyond picket lines. Ultimately, the movement's strength lay in its inclusivity. Chinatown's hunger for reform reshaped its ability to collaborate with other communities, but also directed individual mindsets toward political action.

Despite signs of unity, the protesters faced resistance from both the City and other groups. The DeMatteis Corp. did not see AAFEE as a representative of Chinatown, but rather a "bunch of gangs." Seventy police officers were deployed for the May 31 demonstration

³⁰ Shouyue Zhang, "'Learned from Black Friends': The Asian-American Struggle for Housing and Equal Employment in New York City, 1969 – 1974" (master's thesis, University at Albany, 2020), 44-45, <https://doi.org/10.54014/HEQA-NMDB>; Young, "Rare Photos," AsAmNews; "Labor on the Move," *Grapes of Wrath* (Norfolk), July 1, 1974, 8, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.28037530>.

³¹ Chin, "2008.040.017 Oral," audio.

³² Choi Ying Liu, interview by the author, Brooklyn, NY, January 6, 2026.

alongside DeMatteis-hired thugs to obstruct and assault marchers.³³ The company believed the building complex was a benefit and a privilege and dismissed residents' struggles as immature barbarism. The City's use of law enforcement and the willful ignorance of DeMatteis further inflamed tensions. Likewise, neighboring Italian Americans felt threatened by the expansion of Chinatown.³⁴ While not directly opposing the protests, many Italian Americans opposed further development. The Chinatown residents persisted with their demonstrations, determined to challenge the dismissive and violent reactions of developers and other New Yorkers.

Not all Chinese organizations supported the AAFEE either. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) approved of the AAFEE's stance, but not their tactics, criticizing the use of confrontational protest methods, telling protesters like Tom they "just had to talk nice."³⁵ The CCBA favored a more peaceful approach, but still wanted equal employment and opportunities. They aided in the negotiations, choosing M. B. Lee to represent the organization at the June 14th City Council Meeting.³⁶ Chinese Americans were not a monolithic group and the divide in factions hindered a true united front. Nevertheless, the collaboration of diverse approaches enabled the movement to achieve tangible reforms.

In response to the ongoing protests, on May 21, the newly elected Mayor Abraham Beame had passed Executive Order No. 14 to fix the issues with the previous New York Plan. It detailed the development of the "City Equal Employment Opportunity Program... designed to remove impediments to the employment of and increase employment opportunities and

³³ "Bridge: Asian," 50-51

³⁴ Frank J. Prial, "Little Italy Is Restive as Chinatown Expands," *The New York Times*, April 26, 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/04/26/archives/little-italy-is-restive-as-chinatown-expands.html>.

³⁵ Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown*, 134; Montgomery, "Asians Picket," Tom, interview by the author.

³⁶ "Bridge: Asian," 51.

advancement in employment.”³⁷ The Mayor’s Plan reformed the position of the previous administration, and, in turn, inched closer to the AAFEE’s goals through new equal employment charters and rulings. Shortly after, the District Court announced a ruling criticizing the prior New York Plan for its blatant discriminatory practices, and instead supported the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Plans.³⁸ On July 10th, a resolution between the Housing and Development Administration and the AAFEE led DeMatteis to hire 27 minority workers.³⁹ Chinatown received both tangible results and broader reforms to employment practices, achieving its goals for better opportunities for New York minorities as a whole.

The Equal Employment Practice Commission (EEOC) carried out the Mayor’s Plan’s legacy. The organization was created in 1989, and is still in operation today, through an amendment to the New York City Charter to “audit and evaluate... the employment practices and programs... and their efforts to ensure equal employment opportunity.”⁴⁰ Alongside the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the EEOC remains firm in its goal to uphold the former Mayor’s Plan’s original goal of preventing discrimination in all industries against any minority group. Community reactions to Confucius Plaza’s underlying problems in Chinatown ultimately evolved into the Mayor’s Plan and subsequent associations that function as a lasting reform against discrimination rather than a momentary response.

Following the protests, Confucius Plaza became a beacon of progress for Chinese Americans. Shum moved into the housing complex shortly after its opening. She recalled the

³⁷ New York City, *Executive Order No. 14, Equal Employment Opportunity in City Government Employment*, issued by Mayor Abraham D. Beame, May 21, 1974, New York City Mayor’s Office, https://www.nyc.gov/assets/records/pdf/executive_orders/1974EO014.PDF

³⁸ City of New York v. Diamond, 379 F. Supp. (Nov. 27, 1974). <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/379/503/1377949/>.

³⁹ "Bridge: Asian," 51; "Our History," Asian Americans for Equality.

⁴⁰ City of New York, "History of EEOC," NYC.gov, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/eepc/news/35-th-year-celebration.page>.

stark contrast between her old tenement and her new apartment, noting that it was “one of the very few newer buildings,” and allowed for “poor and working families to have a more comfortable life” in Chinatown.⁴¹ For families like Shum, it provided better housing and improved living conditions in the City. Additionally, Chinatown residents became more involved in the management of Confucius Plaza. Allan Eng-Achson, an original Board of Directors of Chinatown Apartment Inc., served as the building’s first manager and helped name the building as a “reminder to abide by the precepts and principles of Confucius,” a prominent figure in Chinese history.⁴² Confucius Plaza provided residents with improved housing and a platform for participating in the management of Chinatown. The impact of the protests extended beyond labor rights, reshaping housing opportunities and community involvement in Chinatown.

Chinatown continues to serve as a hallmark of Chinese Americans’ ability to organize against forms of discrimination and injustice. In 2021, Chinatown again mobilized against rising anti-Asian violence following COVID-19, urging others to “Speak up! Do something!”⁴³ echoing the protests 47 years earlier. During COVID-19, residents and city workers handed out flyers promoting unity and calling for an end to Asian American hate.⁴⁴ Similarly, the AAFEE, now known as Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE), persists in advocating for labor equality and improved housing. Now, the AAFE focuses on affordable housing, preserving rental apartments and strengthening local community engagement.⁴⁵ Chinatown’s history of advocacy and activism

⁴¹ Shum, interview by the author.

⁴² Aaron Eng-Achson, "Allan Eng-Achson," New York Historical Society, <https://chineseamerican.nyhistory.org/allan-eng-achson/>.

⁴³ Arun Venugopal, "Demonstrators, Elected Officials Rally after Surge in Anti-Asian Hate and Violence," Gothamist, last modified February 27, 2021, <https://gothamist.com/news/demonstrators-elected-officials-rally-after-surge-anti-asian-hate-and-violence>.

⁴⁴ New York State, *Hate Has No Place in New York*, image.

⁴⁵ "Our History," Asian Americans for Equality; Asian Americans for Equality, Inc., *Distinct Places, Shared Opportunity: A Neighborhood-based Analysis of Asian Americans in NYC*, 11, February 2011, https://www.nyc.gov/html/dc/downloads/pdf/asian_americans_for_equality_report.pdf?.

reflects the AAFEE's enduring commitment to community action and the fight against inequality.

The 1974 protests at Confucius Plaza marked more than a labor dispute; they revolutionized Chinese American activism. What began as a challenge to discriminatory hiring practices evolved into a revolutionary catalyst for redefining Chinese American political identity in New York City. The movement's ability to provoke citywide attention and forge alliances with Black and Puerto Rican activists revealed a community no longer willing to remain passive to racial discrimination. In demanding a voice within their own neighborhood, protesters confronted both housing and employment inequities and the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype that had long restricted Chinese Americans to limited political representation. Their success in pressuring the City to reform minority-employment policies demonstrated the power of collective action and reshaped expectations of Chinese Americans' civic participation. The movement transformed the boundaries of representation and laid a foundation for future generations of Chinese American political engagement in New York City.

Appendix A



Figure 1: Demonstrations through Manhattan's Chinatown, May 31, 1974

Melissa Young, "Rare Photos Capture '70s Asian Am Movement in New Book," AsAmNews,

January, 2021

<https://asamnews.com/2021/01/11/book-features-more-than-400-photographs-covering-events-of-the-asian-american-movement-from-1969-to-1974>. Accessed December 3, 2025,

Appendix B

UNITE! DEMONSTRATE FOR JOBS AT CONFUCIUS PLAZA



De Matteis has refused to stop its racist hiring policies by not hiring Asians. Last May 8 at a press conference, Asian Americans For Equal Employment again tried to set up negotiations for the hiring of Asian workers. De Matteis' refusal to even accept a petition signed by over 8,000 Chinatown community people who support the hiring of Asian workers is a blatant example of racism in the construction industry. This is a humiliation! This is an insult of our strength and determination.

We have been prevented from earning a decent living throughout our history in the U.S. by being excluded from the economic mainstream and restricted to the lowest paying industries. Garment, laundry, and restaurants cannot even offer job security.

The only possibility for a decent living is to break into industries such as construction—Confucius Plaza is a beginning.

Throughout the past five months, De Matteis has refused to even sit down with us to negotiate about the hiring of Asians. De Matteis' position is that he and his sub-contractors do not have the power to hire workers until they are in unions. This is a lie. Because the law states that the employers could hire 50% non-union workers who then would join the unions. De Matteis' hiring of two token Asian laborers because of community demands is proof that De Matteis is continuing his racist policies. This is only his tactic to attempt to pacify us.

What has the government done to enforce its own laws against racism at Confucius Plaza?

Asian Americans For Equal Employment has contacted over 200 public and private agencies at all levels who are responsible for enforcing these laws. For example, Housing and Development Corporation, Board of Urban Affairs, Recruitment Training Programs, Civil Rights Commission, building trade unions,—the list is endless. All these meetings have produced **NOTHING**.

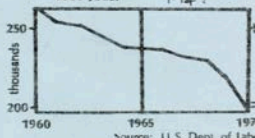
What has the government done? They have hired the head of the racist construction industry, Peter Brennan, as the U. S. Labor secretary.

HOW CAN WE GET JOBS?

The history of Blacks and Puerto Ricans has proven that the oppressed must organize and fight for our rights. Their most recent action took place at the public housing project at 105th Street and Fifth Avenue. Their threats to stop construction by demonstrating was the reason for minorities being hired.

We must learn from their experience and unite with them around our common interest. At Confucius Plaza, we must begin to demonstrate because direct action is the only means

GARMENT WORKERS 衣厂工人
CONTINUE TO LOSE JOBS! 数字不断下降!



by which we can get decent jobs. We need to take action now, otherwise by the time Confucius Plaza is finished, we would still be kept out of the door.

COME JOIN US MAY 16 AT ELEVEN A.M. AT CHATHAM SQUARE TO DEMONSTRATE FOR EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OF CHINESE AT CONFUCIUS PLAZA. THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING!

UNITE! DEMONSTRATE!
FIGHT DISCRIMINATION!
BREAK INTO THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY!
DEMAND JOBS AT CONFUCIUS PLAZA!

Asian Americans for Equal Employment
50 Madison St.
349-3724

Figure 2: Asian Americans for Equal Employment protest flyers

Flyer regarding Asian Americans for Equal Employment Demonstration (Asian Americans for Equal Employment, 1974), Accessed Dec. 3, 2025



Asian Americans for Equal Employment, Posters for Participating in Protests, photograph.

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The posters are from AAFEE directly and show the different means of gathering support for protests. As such, they are an important source to help visualize the efforts put in.

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Museum of Chinese in America, March 6, 2008.

https://ohms.mocanyc.org/viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=2008_040_017_1630076860.xml

The audio clip is a recording of Margaret's interview of the 1970s and her role in AAFE, or Asian Americans For Equality, and the rise in gentrification in Chinatown. As such, the source is important to my project since it provides a first hand account to some of the many forgotten issues of Chinatown, like possible eviction and a rise in tourism.

City of New York v. Diamond, 379 F. Supp. (Nov. 27, 1974).

<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/379/503/1377949/>.

This primary source is a court case between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the City of New York about the federal funding for minority hiring in construction. As such, I used the document to show the long term reforms, as the court case has not been overruled, and continuing to have equal employment opportunities.

Civil Rights Act, H.R. 7152 (July 2, 1964).

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act>.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a key turning point in American civil rights history, being the most extensive civil rights act since the end of the Civil War, as well as ending the Jim Crow Laws. The legislation heavily influenced the Chinatown protests as well as helped connect New York City's African American and Hispanic communities with the Chinese American community.

Fight Back News. "Fight for Jobs."

<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/fight-back-news/fight-back-news-nd1.pdf>.

This newspaper describes the goals of the Fight Back movement. It connects back to the background of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the unity between the AAFEE and other New York City minorities.

Flyer regarding Asian Americans for Equal Employment Demonstration. Asian Americans for Equal Employment, 1974.

The flyers were used to promote the protests against DeMatteis and their hiring practices. It helped me understand their fears of losing jobs and in turn being pushed out of their homes in Chinatown.

Grapes of Wrath (Norfolk). "Labor on the Move." July 1, 1974, 9-10.

<https://jstor.org/stable/community.28037530>.

The article describes Asian American workers' fight for equal employment opportunities in Chinatown, NY, as well as the broader struggles of other minority groups against labor oppression and inequality across the United States. The article is important as it not only highlights the protests in Chinatown, but also describes the support Asian Americans received from other minority groups in New York City and connects the Chinatown protests to a country wide movement for fair labor rights.

"The Guardian." *The Guardian* 26, no. 36 (1974,06,19).

<https://jstor.org/stable/community.38320051>.

The newspaper article describes the overall, general protests, and the title is about how the construction industry itself has blocked Asians. While the paper may be a bit biased in favor of the workers, it provides an accurate recounting of the events.

Liu, Choi Ying. Interview by the author. Brooklyn, NY. January 6, 2026.

Choi Liu provides a firsthand account of how it felt to enter New York City at the height of the Asian American protests. This interview describes the effects of the protests on not only New York City residents, but also immigrants coming into the city.

Montgomery, Paul L. "Asians Picket Building Site, Charging Bias." *The New York Times*, June 1, 1974.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/01/archives/asians-picket-building-site-charging-bias-city-sees-compliance.html>.

The New York Times article describes the protests and their demands as well as how the city defended the DeMatteis Corp. In turn, the newspaper article provides a new perspective that somewhat supports DeMatteis as well.

New York City. *Executive Order No. 14, Equal Employment Opportunity in City Government Employment*. Issued by Mayor Abraham D. Beame, May 21, 1974. New York City Mayor's Office.

https://www.nyc.gov/assets/records/pdf/executive_orders/1974EO014.PDF

The Mayor's Plan's main purpose was to establish responsibilities within City agencies to promote and maintain equal employment opportunities. As such, it marked a turning point in New York City's employment, encouraging and enforcing minority hiring in multiple different fields.

New York State. *Hate Has No Place in New York*. Image.

The flyers show how the City changed its stance on Asian American discrimination. It shows how the City is now actively engaged in stopping discrimination and hate compared to how it used to dismiss the protests.

New York Times. "Ground Is Broken for a Huge Project Serving Chinatown." September 12, 1973.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/09/12/archives/ground-is-broken-for-huge-project-serving-chinatown.html#:~:text=Sept.,alter%2C%20edit%20or%20update%20them>.

The newspaper article describes the optimistic approach to the reveal of the Confucius Plaza. It contradicts the actual problems of Chinatown and instead adds onto it with the steep rent.

"No. 104.—IMMIGRATION QUOTAS ALLOTTED AND QUOTA ALIENS ADMITTED, BY COUNTRY OF BIRTH: YEARS ENDED JUNE 30, 1925 TO 1938." Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.
https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/files/docs/publications/stat_abstract/pages/52753_1935-1939.pdf.

The immigration report lists out the quotas for separate ethnic groups across the years. It is an important document, as it shows the disparity between Asians and other European nations.

Prial, Frank J. "Little Italy Is Restive as Chinatown Expands." *The New York Times*, April 26, 1974.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1974/04/26/archives/little-italy-is-restive-as-chinatown-expands.html>.

This newspaper article explains Italian Americans' stance on the expansion of Chinatown. It offers another perspective on Chinatown as a whole.

Shum, Lily. Interview by the author. Brooklyn, NY. February 1, 2026.

Lily Shum lived in Confucius Plaza during the 1970s, and has family who still live in the building today. While she was too young to recall moments from the actual protests, she offers insights to the aftermath and effects of the Plaza construction.

Special Bulletin on Asian Americans for Equal Employment. Asian Americans For Equal Employment, 1974.
<https://museumofprotest.org/portfolio/the-struggle-for-fair-hiring-in-new-york-citys-chinatown-1974/>.

The pamphlet shows the reach the AAFEE achieved, through posting bulletins and flyers in both Chinese and English. It further shows the impact of the AAFEE on Chinese activism.

Stetson, Damon. "Builders and Unions Here Offer Minorities Training." *The New York Times*, March 22, 1970.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1970/03/22/archives/builders-and-unions-here-offer-minorities-training-builders-and.html>.

This article reports on a 1970 initiative in which building-trade unions and construction companies in New York City offered job-training opportunities to minority workers. The New York Times is somewhat biased, favoring and believing the plan will only be beneficial.

Tom, Lydia. Interview by the author. Manhattan, NY. May 5, 2026.

This interview provides a first hand account to the protesters' thoughts on the Fight Back members. It supports my claim of solidarity between Chinatown and other local minorities who shared a similar goal.

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, comp. *Civil Rights Issue of Asian and Pacific Americans*. Washington, D.C, 1979. <https://www.usccr.gov/files/historical/1979/79-006.pdf>. The document details the issues Asian and Pacific Americans faced even after the Civil Rights Movement, describing problems with employment and social services. The source is important to my topic as it points out how the issue of employment was still a problem for AAPI.

Venugopal, Arun. "Demonstrators, Elected Officials Rally after Surge in Anti-Asian Hate and Violence." *Gothamist*. Last modified February 27, 2021. <https://gothamist.com/news/demonstrators-elected-officials-rally-after-surge-anti-asian-hate-and-violence>. This article describes the "Rise Up Against Asian Hate" rally in Chinatown, protesting the increase in hate crimes against Asian Americans. It shows a continuity, as Asian Americans continue to organize together to fight against forms of injustice.

Secondary Sources

"44 Years Ago Today, We Made a Stand." Asian Americans for Equality. Last modified May 2018. <https://www.aafe.org/44-years-ago-today-we-made-a-stand/>. This website provides a basic overview of the Confucius Plaza protests, highlighting the role AAIE played. As such, the secondary source is limited in the perspectives it offers, and instead solely focuses on the protesters themselves.

Asian Americans for Equality, Inc. *Distinct Places, Shared Opportunity: A Neighborhood-based Analysis of Asian Americans in NYC*. February 2011. https://www.nyc.gov/html/dc/downloads/pdf/asian_americans_for_equality_report.pdf? The report, written by Asian Americans for Equality, analyzes different demographics and economic characteristics of Asian American neighborhoods. The report highlights the goals of the AAFE through their recommendations.

"Bridge: Asian American Perspectives." *Bridge: Asian American Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (1975). <https://jstor.org/stable/community.39537787>. The newspaper article, a secondary source, describes the different approaches Chinese Americans took to protest the racist employment tactics, from boycotts to gaining sponsors to join their cause. The article supports my project as well, as it outlines the overall events of the movement, allowing me to further organize my ideas.

Cantor, Guillermo. "Fifty Years Later, the Immigration Act That Transformed America." American Immigration Council. Last modified October 5, 2015. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/immigration-and-nationality-act-50-years-later/#:~:text=In%20his%201964%20State%20of,not%20to%20be%20the%20case.> The web page provides nuance on the effects of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, like the unintended diversity of immigrants. As such, it helps show the biases of the

administration when they passed the act, as well as how it affected Chinese populations in America.

City of New York. "History of EEPCC." NYC.gov.

<https://www.nyc.gov/site/eeppc/news/35-th-year-celebration.page>.

The webpage describes the brief history of the EEPCC and how it continues to develop. I used the page as a way to show the effects and continuity of the Mayor's Plan and the EEPCC.

Eng-Achson, Aaron. "Allan Eng-Achson." New York Historical Society.

<https://chineseamerican.nyhistory.org/allan-eng-achson/>.

This web page is a dedication to Allan Eng-Achson, who was heavily involved with the construction of Confucius Plaza. Eng-Achson was the first landlord of Confucius Plaza and the web page offers a brief, but biased, history of his achievements.

Fan, Cindy C. *Chinese Americans: Immigration, Settlement, and Social Geography*.

<https://geog.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/users/fan/205.pdf>.

The report includes data charts comparing Chinese immigration to other minorities and time periods. As such, it helps showcase the effects of the Immigration Act on Chinese American populations.

FitzGerald, David S., and David Cook-Martín. "The Geopolitical Origins of the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965." Migration Policy Institute. Last modified February 2015.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/geopolitical-origins-us-immigration-act-1965>.

The article is an analysis on the origins and reasons for the Immigration and Nationality Act, considering the foreign pressures on America as well as the internal desire for reform.

"From Immigrant Roots to Community Leadership: AAFE's Story." Video. YouTube. Posted by Aafe, June 12, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6lZgsE9x8o>.

This video provides interviews from AAFE's leaders and their stance on Chinatown. It helps provide more insight on the goals and beliefs of the organization.

"Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965." History, Art and Archives, U.S. House of Representatives.

<https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1951-2000/Immigration-and-Nationality-Act-of-1965/>.

The source provides a brief description of the Immigration Act, recounting how the act was passed. The secondary source is mostly unbiased, and helped serve as an introduction to the nuance of the act.

Kwong, Peter. *Chinatown, New York : Labor and Politics, 1930-1950*. Rev. ed ed. New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2001.

The secondary source goes into depth about the political aspects of Chinatown. As such, I used it as reference to draw a connection between the protests and the political outcome.

- Kwong, Peter, and Samuel Stein. *Preserve and Protect Chinatown*. February 2015.
https://www.roosevelthouse.hunter.cuny.edu/devdev/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Kwong_Stein_Issue_Brief-Chinatown2-5-15.pdf.
 The report discusses the gentrification problem that is still ongoing in Chinatown. It also urges readers to put more effort into preserving the neighborhood to counteract the gentrification.
- Ladner, Joyce A. "A New Civil Rights Agenda." *The Brookings Review* 18, no. 2 (2000): 26-28.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/20080906>.
 The journal article accounts the goals of the civil rights movement that Americans continued to fight for in the 1950s to 1960s. The source highlighted goals similar to the topic of my paper, helping connect the two movements.
- Lin, Jan. *Reconstructing Chinatown : Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
 Lin argues that Chinatown should not be seen as a static "ethnic enclave," but rather as a dynamic social and political entity. As such, the book analyzes how minority communities resist inequalities.
- Mullin, John. "The Many Lives of Federal Job Training." Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. Last modified 2022.
https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/econ_focus/2022/q1_economic_history#:~:text=Special%20programs%20were%20created%20for,then%20to%20increase%20their%20skills.
 The webpage outlines the history, including the failures, of the U.S.'s job training programs. As such, I was able to use this source to further explain the rising issues for Chinese Americans and other minorities.
- Orleck, Annelise, and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian. *The War on Poverty : a New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*. University of Georgia Press, 2011.
 Orleck and Hazirjian collected essays documenting how the War on Poverty sparked activism movements across America. The volume emphasizes how poor and working-class communities, including many minority neighborhoods, united to create community programs.
- "Our History." Asian Americans for Equality. <https://www.aafe.org/our-history/>.
 This webpage provides a brief history of the Asian Americans for Equality and their goals. As such, it offers a better transition into the revolutionary aspect of the Confucius Plaza protests.
- Reyes, Damaso. "Harlem Organization Helped Change the Face of Construction." Editorial. *Amsterdam News*, April 27, 2023.
<https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2023/04/27/we-say-fight-back-how-a-harlem-community-organization-helped-change-the-face-of-nyc-construction/>.
 The newsletter provides background to the Fight Back movement. As such, I used the article as a stepping stone to show how the Fight Back movement relates to AAFEE.

Wei, William. *The Asian American Movement*. Temple University Press, 1993.

The book argues that the Asian American movement drew inspiration from the civil rights and Black Power eras as well as for inclusion. As such, it provides insight to the social factors to the Confucius Plaza protests.

Wong, Ryan Lee. "Closed to Protest Police Brutality." *Hyphen- Asian America Unabridged* (blog), January 8, 2018.

<https://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2017/01/closed-protest-police-brutality>.

While this source is a blog and has some bias, it offers a detailed history of the AAFEE's past. As such, I used the source to help explain how the organization formed and their beliefs.

Young, Melissa. "Rare Photos Capture '70s Asian Am Movement in New Book." AsAmNews. Last modified January 2021. Accessed December 3, 2025.

<https://asamnews.com/2021/01/11/book-features-more-than-400-photographs-covering-events-of-the-asian-american-movement-from-1969-to-1974>.

The webpage provides images of the Confucius Plaza protests to promote Mary Uyematsu Kao's book. While the webpage is not the most reliable, it still provides images that help showcase the solidarity between multiple minority groups during the protests.

Zhang, Shouyue. "'Learned from Black Friends': The Asian-American Struggle for Housing and Equal Employment in New York City, 1969 – 1974." Master's thesis, University at Albany, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.54014/HEQA-NMDB>.

The paper examines the relationship of Black Americans and Asian Americans as Asian Americans took a stand against discrimination. The paper provides more nuance and insights to the role Black Americans had in the Confucius Plaza protests.