Chapter Eleven

Advocacy Agencies and Politics

by Malcolm Collier (© 2009)

Historically, the dominant characteristic of Asian American involvement in electoral politics has been its absence; this was largely the product of restrictions on citizenship and other forms of discrimination which served to discourage participation. After 1965, changing immigration laws and the reaffirmation of minority civil rights led a huge increase in Asia American population and the removal of legal barriers to political activity. Following these changes, participation in electoral politics by Asian Americans had increased substantially. An important component of this new activity was the development of "advocacy politics," beginning in the late 1960s.

This essay explores the connection between the development of modern advocacy-oriented agencies and the development of modern Asian American involvement in local politics. It is proposed that the development of modern advocacy agencies in Asian American communities between 1960 and the early 1990s had an important role in providing a political voice for those communities and in laying the foundation for the movement of Asian Americans into electoral political activity and offices. Most examples used come from the context the Chinese American communities of San Francisco, California but similar patterns are found in other Asian American communities as well.(1)

Nature of Advocacy Politics

"Advocacy politics" is the use of social service agencies, programs, and community organizations as bases from which to publicly advocate the interests of communities and constituencies before governmental commissions, agencies, administrators, and elected bodies or officials. The goal of such advocacy is to affect government on both administrative and policy levels. Subjects addressed in the advocacy process can range from details of local permit application processes to the character of federal legislation on immigration. Zoning, schools, transportation, health, housing, employment, law enforcement, appointments to boards and commissions, funding of programs, selection of judges, and all forms of local, state, and federal legislation are subject to political influence through such advocacy activities. Involvement in advocacy leads to increased public contact with government officials, politicians, and, ultimately, with electoral politics.

The development of modern Asian American advocacy work can be illustrated by examples from the Chinese American communities in San Francisco. Here, the late 1960s and 1970s saw the formation of a number of new organizations that often

provided specific services to clients but which also saw vigorous public advancement of Chinese American needs as a primary activity. Self Help for the Elderly, Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA), On Lok, Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Resource Center (CNIRC, later called Chinatown Resource Center or CRC, and now called the Chinatown Community Development Center or CCDC), Asian Inc., and The Association of Chinese Teachers (TACT) are examples of such agencies or organizations and this list is far from complete. Individuals from these groups, most especially the directors or chief officers, were and sometimes still are expected to spend a major part of their time asserting the views of the organization before public officials and bodies. The scope of such activity varies; those with a heavy service emphasis like Self Help may focus more directly on immediate needs of their clients, while other groups, CRC (CCDC) and CAA being good examples, have been more diverse in the range of their advocacy. Over time, older, more traditional organizations in the community have also come to occasionally engage in similar public advocacy. A major focus of efforts is often on a city level, as this is the political entity that most directly affects the Chinese American communities, but most groups have lobbied and testified on state and federal levels as well.

Advocacy takes a variety of forms. One is direct testimony and comment to governm ental bodies, such as that connected with the development of new zoning and planning regulations for Chinatown in the middle 1980s. Representatives from the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, CRC, and Chinese Six Companies (a traditional organization dating from the mid-19th century), and other Chinatown organizations all testified at Planning Department and Commission hearings, presented data, and suggested plans of their own to support their various positions on the subject. Another form of activity involves the use of the press as a means of political pressure, as when Henry Der, executive director of CAA, used a February 1986 press release to charge insensitivity and discrimination in appointive actions by the mayor. The press release was backed up with a research report that detailed the lack of representation of Asian Americans in policy and administrative positions in San Francisco City government. Although the charges were denied by city officials, the press coverage was shortly followed by a number of appointments of Asians to city commissions and administrative positions.

Advocacy work can also involve legal action, as in challenges (since dropped) of San Francisco City and County civil service practices by Filipino American community groups or the successful efforts of CAA in the landmark US Supreme Court case Lau vs Nichols. Advocacy also occurs on a state and national level, as in the activities of the Asian Law Caucus and the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA) with regard to proposed changes in immigration laws that led to new immigration legislation in 1990, or the work of various Japanese American organizations on the issues of redress and reparations for Japanese Americans held in concentration camps during World War II.

It is possible for individuals to perform advocacy roles apart from any formal program or organization but people most believe that advocacy is more effective when associated with an organization or program. Sometimes this leads to the formation

of organizations solely for the purpose of creating an illusion of a formal entity. An example was the short-lived Chinatown Improvement Association (CIA). Tom Hsieh, Sr. (later a San Francisco City supervisor), in presenting a pro-development position regarding a planned tower on Stockton Street to city agencies, claimed to speak as representative of this organization. Although the organization was quickly enveloped in controversy and disappeared when some of the alleged members told the press they knew nothing about its existence, the important point is the need to present the image of advocating for a formal group in order to have more impact.

The Origins of Modern Advocacy

The modern development of advocacy politics in Asian American communities was the product of a particular social and political context. Three federal legislative actions are particularly important: the Civil Rights Act, the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, and the War on Poverty. The Civil Rights Act, and the Civil Rights Movement that produced it, affirmed the right of minority Americans to a political voice and provided models for the advocacy of minority concerns. The Immigration Reform Act for the first time provided for equal immigration from Asia and by 1968-69 there was a rapid increase in Asian American immigrant populations. It was soon evident that existing community organizations and public social service agencies did not have the capacity to properly provide for the needs of this growing population. Individuals and groups within Asian American communities became concerned about the growing gap between needs and services. Concurrently, the Johnson administration had started what was called the "War on Poverty," encompassing a large range of federally funded programs intended to "end" social and economic poverty in America. An important characteristic of many of these programs was guidelines that mandated formation of community advisory and/or governing boards, and encouraged projects that involved advocating for the clientele whom the programs served. Many of the organizations listed earlier were initially funded by such federal programs and incorporated both community boards and advocacy roles.

Actually, the participation of some Asian American communities in War on Poverty programs and funding was itself a product of advocacy. In the case of San Francisco Chinatown, the community was initially not included in Federal War on Poverty plans for San Francisco. It took the concerted effort of Alan S. Wong, Rev. Larry Jack Wong, and Rev. T.T. Tam, including a demonstration and a guided tour of Chinatown for the federal officials, for the community to be included into eligibility for funds and programs.(2)

Another factor shaping these new organizations was that they were generally formed and staffed by a younger generation of Asian Americans, both immigrant and American born. Better educated and raised in environments that promised more rights and freedoms than the periods of extreme discrimination and hostility experienced by the older generation, they were more willing to openly challenge and criticize the social and political structure within their own communities and at large.

It might be noted that, historically, many older and traditional community organizations engaged in vigorous advocacy to protect the rights of Asian Americans. Notable examples in the Chinese American communities are the many court challenges of restrictive laws by Chinese Americans in the 19th century. Some older organizations, like the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA), were formed primarily as advocacy organizations, later became dormant, and have recently become more active again. However, this earlier advocacy took place in a different social and political context than that which exists today; the communities were much smaller due to immigration restrictions, while Asians had little possibility for a real political voice because of restrictions on citizenship and other forms of discrimination. Consequently, earlier forms of advocacy had little potential for leading to further electoral political participation and by the 1950s many older organizations used private rather than public contacts with officials and politicians as a means of influencing the political process, although they encouraged members to exercise their voting rights in elections. The perceptions of the younger generation in the 1960s were that these older approaches were no longer capable of promoting the interests and needs of Asian American communities. Many also felt that the "traditional" groups no longer represented the true interests of the communities and did not allow for participation from new and younger groups.(3)

Political Products of Advocacy

While advocacy had important immediate results in the creation of new services for Asian American communities, it also produced significant long-term political consequences. Advocacy work led to increased political sophistication and activity because as people engaged in advocacy, they had to become more familiar with government, regulations, politicians, and political processes. Development of contacts and knowledge provides advance information on issues affecting communities and is an important basis for successful advocacy. Advocacy often depends on the political education of agency clients, staff, and governing boards. These people have to be informed about the advocacy work; they may be needed for assistance, and their approval is generally needed if the advocacy work is to continue. Consequently, most agencies and organizations engage in forms of political organizing and education, both formal and informal. These activities have led to a gradual increase in awareness of political processes and issues, which is a necessity if the largely immigrant populations of many Asian American communities are to have a significant political voice.

On a practical level, the agencies and organizations had to use advocacy to compensate for the lack of elected representation of Asian American communities in elected and policy-making positions in government. This placed and continues to place a heavy load on Asian American community agencies and individuals because they have to carry out a larger range of political responsibilities than is necessary in many other communities. Even the best advocacy work cannot, however, make up for lack of people in political positions, whether elected or appointed, as it is such people that ultimately make the political decisions as well as provide much of the information needed for groups to be able to present strong, informed views to other politicians and government entities.

This reality helps promote a belief within advocacy agencies that if Asian Americans are to have impact on political decisions they need to get themselves involved in elections, either to help determine who is elected or to obligate politicians. Because most organizations engaged in advocacy are nonprofit organizations with legal restrictions on partisan electoral politics, it is often necessary for agency staff to act as individuals or to join overtly political organizations or other organizations that can openly participate in political elections. In this manner many members of Chinese American advocacy organizations in San Francisco became active in the membership or political work of the Chinese American Democratic Club (CADC), an organization formed in the 1950s but which became much more active with the arrival of advocacy-based members. Other advocacy-based individuals attempted to start a political group called the Chinese American Political Association (CAPA) when they felt that their political views were not being represented by CADC. CAPA did not survive and some of the individuals involved later developed connections with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Other people have been involved with the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA), itself a hybrid political/advocacy/service organization. Political and business organizations can raise money for candidates, endorse people for political office, and engage in the full range of partisan politics.

Similar patterns are found in other Asian American communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Both the Japanese Community Youth Council (JCYC) and Kimochi Kai, which are social service agencies with advocacy roles, have had individuals active in the Japanese American Democratic Club. There are related connections between political clubs in the Filipino community and Filipino American community agencies. In San Francisco such activity usually focuses on the Democratic Party because, as Jeff Mori (a former director of JCYC) puts it, "in this city, politics is the Democratic Party," although more recently there has been some movement of people into Green Party political circles.

The combination of advocacy and political activity makes politicians and government officials more familiar with individual Asian Americans and gradually more sensitive to the long-range potential political clout of a growing Asian American population. This occurs because they find they may be publicly called to account for their actions which affect Asian American communities. In a few extreme cases officials have lost their positions, as was the case with Thomas Kearny, a former Registrar of Voters for San Francisco (an appointed political position), who lost his position after making unacceptable remarks about Asians.

The character of leadership in advocacy organizations has tremendous impact on the degree to which they are politically active and effective. Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) was very active for many years while under the directorship of Henry Der, but when he left for other employment the organization became much less active and similar evolutions have occurred at other organizations with changes in leadership. Often, as organizations become more institutionalized they lose their political edge as newer leadership often has been trained in the context of running an organization

rather than in political action. Some organizations never become strong advocacy voices because the lack of strong leadership.

The tendency toward reduced advocacy activity over time has been aggravated by increased dependence on private corporate funding. Direct services usually provide good public images and are not as controversial while advocacy, if vigorous, is certain to upset someone. Few foundations directly fund advocacy but many do fund direct services. Consequently, fiscal pressure leads organizations to put more emphasis on direct services and less on advocacy, with concurrent changes in who is hired for staff and who is appointed to boards of directors. Increasingly, boards of directors become composed of people perceived as able to assist in fundraising rather than being drawn from the ranks of community activists, as was previously more common.

Advocacy Activity and Appointive Politics

Another product of advocacy is an increase in the selection of Asian Americans for appointive political positions such as public boards, commissions, governmental committees, and judgeships. Appointments to such positions are made by elected officials. The decisions of these appointed individuals and commissions often have the most direct impact on Asian American communities. Advocacy activity by Asian American community groups affects political appointments on several levels. First, advocacy activity is often used to inform politicians as to community needs that require representation on boards and commissions. Second, advocacy can also be used to put direct pressure on politicians to respond to those needs through appointments. Third, advocacy activities put people in regular contact with politicians, making politicians more familiar with the pool of individuals available for appointments. Finally, the involvement of individuals associated with the advocacy agencies in overt political activity begins to obligate the politicians to them, which can also lead to political appointments.

Most of the Asian Americans appointed to city boards and commissions in San Francisco during the 1980s and 1990s had connections with advocacy organizations and the political clubs. Chinese American political appointments by former San Francisco Mayor Agnos during the late 1980s illustrate this point. Of some twenty Chinese American appointments to city commissions, boards, committees and political positions, nine had direct connections to advocacy organizations and at least seventeen had connections to either advocacy agencies and/or associated political organizations. Some examples: Deputy Mayor James Ho was president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and a board member of CRC; Lonnie Chin (Library Commission) was a long time member of TACT and a board member for CRC; Wayne Hu (Planning Commission) was a board member for On Lok Senior Health Services and a member of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce; Gordon Chin (Public Utilities Commission) was director of CRC. The activity of these individuals in advocacy organizations provided visibility and credibility, so their appointments were clearly the result of the political aspects of

advocacy, both formal and informal. Asian Americans remain, however, under represented in appointed political positions in most areas with large Asian American populations.

There are, however, serious constraints on the appointment of people from advocacy agencies to political positions due to conflict of interest laws. Unless the political position is unrelated to the area of policy interest of the agency, appointees usually have to sever their connections with the agency. This reality is one of the reasons why many political appointees come from agency boards of directors (who can readily resign if there are conflict of interest problems) rather than from among advocacy agency staff or directors who might have to give up their jobs if appointed to a board or commission directly related to the area of activity of the agency.

Electoral Politics

Activity in appointed positions can provide the larger political visibility and connections necessary for running for elected offices. This is why an increase in numbers of Asian Americans in appointed political positions is an important step in the direction of increased numbers of elected officials. The function of appointive positions as a "stepping stone" to elected political office is illustrated by the case of former SF Board of Education member Richard Cerbatos. An important member of the Filipino American Democratic Club, Cerbatos was appointed to the San Francisco Board of Permit Appeals and subsequently became an elected member of the Board of Education. Some individuals with political ambitions seek such appointments and then use them to help add political credibility, as with former Police Commissioner Tom Hsieh, who later became a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in the 1980s. More recently, the Chinese Progressive Association has been a starting point for the political careers of Mabel Teng (elected SF Board of Supervisors as well as other elected positions) and Eric Mar (SF Board of Education and now on the Board of Supervisors).

The role of advocacy agencies and activities in this process is important, particularly to the extent that these have led to increased numbers of Asian Americans in appointed positions. However, while some individuals in key advocacy roles as staff of agencies are found on advisory committees and smaller boards, few have made any signs of running for elected office, in large part because this would mean abandoning their jobs or because they feel that it would undermine their credibility as advocates.
What has occurred, as election to political offices became a real possibility, is that individuals with ambitions for political office or influence associated themselves with community advocacy agencies as board members or important donors in order to enhance their political connections and influence, rather than simply out of interest in the goals of the agencies. This strategy helped speed the election of Asian Americans to political offices but it also raises questions of motivations and responsibility toward the communities.

The impact of advocacy political processes on the political activities of Asian Americans is perhaps confirmed by an examination of who in the Asian American communities engages in public advocacy politics. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s public advocacy in the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American communities of San Francisco was largely the territory of the more "liberal/progressive" elements of these communities. By the 1990s, almost all political sectors of Asian American communities attempted to engage in advocacy, in recognition of the importance of advocacy in political relationships between community and the surrounding society. To some people's dismay, this can produce an image of lack of unity, but such diversity of voices probably is a sign of a growing political awareness that was absent in times past when the communities put forth a facade of unity.

Final Note, 2009

Recent years have seen a surge in the number of Asian Americans running for political offices and in the number actually getting elected. In San Francisco, Mabel Teng became the first Asian American to be elected to the Board of Supervisors in a citywide election without being appointed to the board first, and the fall 1996 elections resulted in the board having three elected Asian Americans. In Daly City, Filipino Americans have finally been elected to city offices Americans have been successful in elections elsewhere in the Bay Area. On a broader scale, a recent listing of elected Asian Pacific American officials totals 892 individuals nationally, a figure that would have been unimaginable thirty years ago.(4)

The number of elected Asian Americans in San Francisco dropped significantly in elections after 2000 for a variety of reasons but the fall 2008 elections reversed that decline, with the election of three Chinese American members, Carmen Chu, David Chiu, and Eric Mar. Carmen Chu, originally appointed to the Board by the Mayor, has no connections to advocacy organizations but Mar and Chiu have roots in advocacy organization. Mar, a former Board of Education member, came into politics following earlier activity with the Chinese Progressive Association and Chiu has been a member and chairman of the governing board for the Chinatown Community Development Center. When the new San Francisco Board of Supoervisors was sworn in in January 2009, David Chiu was elected Board President, the first time a Chinese American has held this position, the second most powerful position in San Francisco City and County government.

The political role of advocacy agencies described in this essay operated through the 1980s and into the 1990s, but is now in a state of change. As individuals with electoral political ambitions become more numerous in the communities, political activity has begun to shift to more individually oriented agendas. Advocacy agencies continue to provide communities with a political voice in areas associated with their clientele and goals but their broader political role remains to be seen. One of the developing roles for community advocacy agencies will be to remind these new Asian American officials of their roots while also assisting them in attending to community needs. This new role is

a product of the reality that people often lose their effectiveness as advocates when they attain political or policy making positions. Community advocacy organizations will have to watch and push Asian American officials with the same vigor as they addressed earlier non-Asian politicians. The degree to which this may be possible is, of course, dependent on their leadership, both collective and individual.

Notes

1) This essay is based on personal experience in and with advocacy agencies in both San Francisco and other locales. An earlier version was published in Malcolm Collier, ed., Asians in America: A Reader (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishers, 1993).

2) Alan S. Wong, personal interview, 18 May 2008.

3) For examples of such earlier community advocacy, see various articles in Sucheng Chan, ed., Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943 (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991).

4)Don T. Nakanishi and James S. Lai, eds., 2007-08 National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, UCLA, 2008).

Return to Table of Contents