

# The Right to Affordable Housing

## Organizing and Winning in Oakland Chinatown

By Chin Jurn Wor Ping (CJWP)\*

“Let the sheriffs come and drag me out.” So said Yen Hom, an elderly tenant and resident who stayed to fight evictions at the Pacific Renaissance Plaza (Pac Ren) when she and other residents of the 50 affordable housing units in Tower II of the Plaza received eviction notices. As the struggle to keep the housing intensified, Art Hom described his mother’s strategy: “In the 60s, we conducted sit-ins. Well, for the last six months, my mom has been conducting a live-in.”

In April 2003, over 150 people started moving years of belongings, memories, and hopes out of the heart of Oakland Chinatown, scattering to senior housing, market rate and other apartments in Oakland, and as far as Fremont and Los Angeles. Like Mrs. Hom, the elderly tenant who had witnessed the spectacular evictions of elderly manongs from the International Hotel nearly 30 years earlier, those who stayed became the soul of a community struggle for the right to affordable housing in an era of rampant gentrification and housing speculation.

This struggle links them, and us, to prior displacements of people of Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese descent, low-income communities of color across the nation, and to larger movements for justice, dignity, and human rights. We, Chin Jurn Wor Ping (CJWP) or “Moving Forward for Peace” in Cantonese, are a collective of people of Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwanese heritage with progressive political worldviews, working together in the Bay Area for peace and social justice.

Together with the tenants, we re-envisioned the meaning of community, and offered “staying in place” as an act of defiance to centuries of forced movement. We struggled not only against the developer Lawrence Chan, but also against and alongside the City of Oakland, and within our coalition.

What was won was a little piece of something we might call resistance to the seductions of global capitalism—imagining alternatives that reflect our com-

munities’ strongest self-image, honoring past struggles, and creating a future where human rights, justice, and dignity are valued and honored.

### Why Places Like Chinatown Matter

Chinatowns in Oakland, San Francisco, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles came into being not as the tourist attractions or bustling places of business as seen now, but as way-stations for migrant workers going to farms, ports, and railroads. They were ethnic immigrant ghettos on the outskirts of town, places of refuge for “the Chinese” from rampant anti-Asian sentiment and violence at the end of the 19th century. Thus, Chinatowns have historically been an organizing center against and refuge from racial discrimination, expulsion, relocation, cultural marginalization, forced evictions, lack of legal tenure, low affordability, and gentrification.

Although a residential community, Oakland Chinatown was categorized and zoned as a light industrial area and not subject to protections and controls for property owners’ rights and land values for most of the first half of the 20th century. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chinese business owners petitioned City Council for funds and a redevelopment plan to replace dilapidated shops with new buildings. Living in the era of the Black Panthers and the International Hotel housing struggle, Oakland Chinatown community activists fought for community benefits in the plan: affordable housing, the Asian Branch of the

Oakland Public Library, a cultural center, and the public plaza.

Working with other organizations in the Stop Chinatown Evictions Coalition (SCEC), the initial goals of the campaign were to stop the evictions and secure the right to stay for the few families who had not moved out after the eviction notice, and the right of return for those who had. With the initial stay of evictions granted in September 2003, the campaign's goals shifted—at the insistence of the tenants and their families—to keeping the 50 units at PacRen as affordable housing and the repayment of the loan forgiven under the developer's false claims.

Research revealed that (a) the history of PacRen's "community benefits" were a direct result of organizing efforts in the 1960s and 70s, and (b) the City forgave a loan to PacRen's developer, Lawrence Chan, to the tune of \$7 million, which would have been worth over \$17 million upon repayment to our cash-strapped city. The first finding challenged us to honor the work of movement predecessors. The second, offered us a legal lever to keep the 50 units as affordable housing. Through a protracted legal strategy that included three community law suits involving the City, some tenants, and several nonprofit organizations, the coalition sustained pressure on the City and the developer to successfully maintain affordable housing at PacRen.



### The Tenants

The opportunity to live at PacRen meant more than just affordable housing, it was also access to doctors and other service providers speaking their languages, proximity to friends and family, and accessibility to community churches, temples, and schools. Many tenants in the affordable units were elderly and disabled; a few were young couples with children. Most were new immigrants and non-English speakers of Mandarin, Cantonese, and Vietnamese.

Some elderly tenants fell ill immediately and died in the first few months after the evictions. Other tenants' health deteriorated rapidly. Several were forced to enter nursing homes. Over the course of the lawsuit, one tenant's diabetes became severe. He lost his eyesight and use of his legs. As we saw, and health researchers have found, the psychological and emotional toll of evictions are severe, and for seniors, may result in premature death. Senior rights' organizations advocate strongly for the right of elders to age in place.

Amidst all the local controversy, some community members and the Chinese paper portrayed the developer as a respected community leader and businessman. Chan claimed that it was his vision that turned PacRen into the epicenter of all activities in Oakland Chinatown. Tenants were portrayed as ungrateful liars, suing Chan self-interestedly to get cheaper rent. Some were sympathetic but many felt the evicted tenants had gotten lucky with a great deal and should feel fortunate for the 10 years they spent in the affordable units.

The tenants expressed not only immense stress from being displaced, but also shame. They were

Photo:

(Above) Solidarity protest for Chinatown tenants in San Francisco at Powell Street.

(Left) Cultural workers, musicians, and artists joined the coalition in struggle and celebration.

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upset about what had happened to them and even more so once they learned about the history of affordable housing in Chinatown. We struggled to talk to the tenants in our broken Chinese. They began to finally open up after six months of community meetings. Through gatherings, they began to allow themselves to feel angry, and this united them in a collective struggle.

### Lessons Learned

Volunteer organizations have a long history of active support in winning campaigns for human rights, dignity, and justice. While we could not be plaintiffs in the lawsuit, we worked on the campaign in many additional ways. At times, not being central to the lawsuit allowed us to branch out into other areas. Here are some of the things we learned along the way.

**Make tenants the locus of transformation.** Encourage tenant leadership and organizing as they are the best people to speak about their own needs. Provide opportunities for involvement and education by tenants through community meetings, rallies, and personal exchanges. This was a deep motivating factor throughout the time of our involvement, and it included not just the spaces of community organizing, but also the ones of familial bonding and obligation: dinners, banquets, Lunar New Year visits, and commemorations.

**Learn from the past.** When the word of PacRen first got out among Asian American activists, many of our movement elders immediately made the connection to the I-Hotel. Activists from that struggle participated in our events, and we learned a great deal from our predecessors. We also linked to key struggles around housing and gentrification throughout the Bay Area, and to struggles for historical preservation of a previous Chinatown.

**Benefit from diverse interests.** CJWP's members brought interests, expertise, networks, and skills that



included researchers, artists, and organizers. We encouraged each member to help out in the ways that they felt most strongly about. Our multilingual and cultural abilities allowed some of us to act as interpreters between the lawyers and the tenants while other skills, interests, and networks led us to play roles as, liaisons with other affordable housing advocates; writers and designers of press releases and pamphlets; and community outreach conductors to students and religious groups—work that staffed NGOs did not have the capacity or funding to do at the

time. In addition, our perspective on political education and movement linking led us to introduce the PacRen tenants to people in the San Francisco Chinatown Tenants Association and brought a strong cultural component to the campaign. We also accessed youth and arts organizations that the other coalition organizations did not. Similarly, our political analysis forced us to consistently advocate for coalition members to search for and take more innovative solutions than they would have otherwise, which ultimately led to a creative solution that the nonprofits, elected officials, and the City of Oakland were able to claim as their victory.

**Cultural work for memory, inspiration, strength.** CJWP members wrote and performed street theater and poetry, painted tenant's stories and Chinatown struggles on canvas and glass, created a video-poem that was widely shown, and provided documentation of years of action through photographs, audio recordings, and writing. Elders and young people alike expressed pride in the storytelling and identified with what Ching-In Chen called "the rhythm of bilingual children, singing a cross-continent creation story." At the conclusion of the campaign, we advocated for an arts and cultural component, which has been implemented through a mural for PacRen. It will serve as a visual tribute to the legacy of Oakland's Chinese communities and our struggles for self-determination.



There's a lot of freedom when you have no funding. Since we had no budget, we never had to worry about our various actions or "programs" competing for resources. In our best moments, CJWP and the more formally resourced organizations in the coalition were able to mutually support and benefit from each other.

**Issues framing.** The early part of the campaign focused on portraying tenants as victims. This was useful for mobilizing others, to support them, but was not an empowering framework for the tenants. An anti-racist and rights framing helped the tenants to see themselves as powerful, take pride in their courageous actions, and accept recognition for their historical wins.

**Sustained media presence.** We believe that a sustained presence of progressive views in the ethnic press will, over time, result in a base of knowledge that will predispose other members of our community to progressive thought. This requires building up language capacity, including challenging dominant vocabulary or reclaiming derogatory phrases. We would get together to practice—or reclaim and reinvent—words and phrases related to the specific issue.

**Staying grounded in your values.** CJWP's values included having the tenants at the center. They also included increasing housing options like land trusts and maintaining the rental housing stock. Early proposals presented by other coalition members would have resulted in the loss of the PacRen units and/or the rental status of these units. Over five years, we pushed the coalition to explore and create options that did not compromise these values and demands, eventually coming to an agreement of which we could all be proud. While the final result was not

Photos:  
(Above) Art Hom holding a picture of his mother Yen Hom, a Pac Ren tenant and resister, speaks at a 2008 press conference.

(Left) Protester holds banner reading: Chin Jurn Wor Ping (CJWP) or "Moving Forward for Peace" (in Cantonese).

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what we had been pushing for (a land trust, which through the process of research and exploration, we came to understand to be a difficult solution), the process and dialogue itself pushed all the individuals in the coalition to strive for a better result, far more than what would have been won for the community otherwise.



**Conclusion**

The story of Oakland Chinatown is being repeated across the continent: communities and neighborhoods built by working class immigrants have become sought-after places to live and playgrounds for the wealthy.

As a collective of volunteers, CJWP was able to support the campaign through community organizing, cultural work, and political education, and by consistently pushing for the realization of “unrealistic” goals.

We are already seeing the legacy of PacRen’s struggle. Both tenants and volunteer activists have become engaged in the future of this and other Chinatowns, with some CJWP activists now working on similar efforts in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Riverside, Calif. These are lessons learned over and over again and we offer our appreciation and gratitude to older generations of Bay Area activists, the brave Pac Ren tenants and all the people of SCEC. ■

**Residential Displacement in Oakland Chinatown: A Historical Timeline, Compiled by Eric Chang**

- 1880:** Oakland Chinatown located at 8th Street and Webster.
- 1906:** San Francisco earthquake spawns influx of San Francisco Chinatown refugees into Oakland Chinatown. Overcrowded housing and rising rents ensue.
- 1910-30:** Chinatown zoned as a “light industrial” area, creating a buffer between the more livable downtown area and the heavy industrial area by the waterfront.
- 1945-55:** Construction of Nimitz Freeway destroys nearly 2000 low-rent housing units along 6th Street and Castro.
- 1960:** Chinatown’s business leaders generate idea of redevelopment in their neighborhood.
- 1970s:** BART District facility displaces 50 Chinese families, who move to East Oakland.
- 1987-90:** City of Oakland chooses Lawrence Chan to develop Pacific Renaissance Plaza, with over \$30 million in public subsidies for building the Oakland Asian Cultural Center, public library, and 1500-space underground parking garage and another \$7 million construction loan. In exchange, Chan agrees to allocate 50 apartment units as affordable housing for a minimum period of 10 years.
- 1993:** Occupancy commences at 50 affordable apartments at Pac Ren.
- 1999:** Chan’s companies engineer transactions that ultimately lead to the complete forgiveness of the City’s \$7 million loan (worth nearly \$17 million with accrued interest).
- 2003:** In April, residents of PacRen’s 50 affordable housing units receive eviction notices. Tenants and community advocates organize and initiate a lawsuit. They lobby the City, which agrees to sue the developer to reclaim the \$7 million loan.
- 2008:** Litigation concludes. Settlement agreement includes the sale and management of the 50 units at Pac Ren by EBALDC, as first time home ownership units, to remain affordable for 45 years, with profits going toward building permanent affordable rental units in Chinatown. ■

Photo:

Dinners, banquets, Lunar New Year visits, and commemorations became opportunities to make tenants the “locus of transformation” in the organizing campaign.

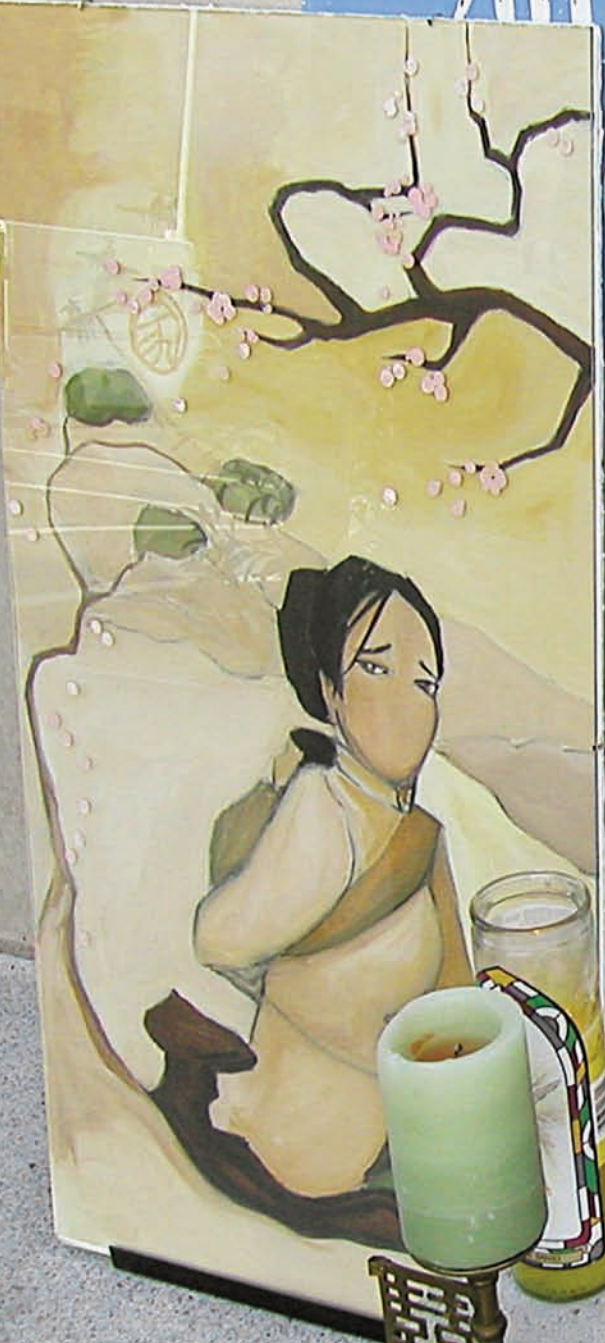
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\* This article was written primarily by Diana Pei Wu, Jen-Mei Wu, Pui Man Wong, and Stella Ng. Other members of the Chin Jurn Wor Ping Evictions Committee who were involved include Eric Chang, Emily Jie-Ming Lee, Ching-In Chen, Kenji Liu, and Xiaojing Wang. Gordon Lee, Joy Liu, Steve Louie, Darryl Dea, Le Quach, Michael Wong, Derek Chung, Francis Chang, Art Hom, and the tenants at Pac Ren were essential to the work of the committee. For more information visit [www.cjwp.org](http://www.cjwp.org).

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