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The Construction of Asian American Identity in A Grain of Sand's *Music for the Struggle by Asians in America* (1973)

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Abstract

This article argues that the album *Music for the Struggle by Asians in America* (1973) by the band A Grain of Sand constructed Asian American identity as an inclusive term. Selected songs will be shown to draw from the genres of blues and folk that are associated with liberation in the United States to protest racism and imperialism through their lyrics as well as performances. As the first musical record to employ the designation "Asian American," the singers envision coalitions with other minorities in global struggles against inequality when they criticize international warfare and American popular culture. Thus, A Grain of Sand lastingly produced an image of Asian Americans as committed to revolution that stands in opposition to the stereotypical white Christian face of America that had marginalized first-generation Asian immigrants.

Keywords: Asian Americans, protest music, anti-imperialism, migration experiences, minority coalitions

Grain of Sand'in *Struggle by Asians in America* (1973) Albümünde Asyalı Amerikalı Kimliğinin İnşası

Öz

Bu makale, A Grain of Sand grubunun 1973 yılında piyasaya çıkardığı *Struggle by Asians in America* albümünün, Asyalı Amerikalı kimliğini inşa etmesini inceler. Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde özgürlük mücadelesiyle ilişkilendirilen blues ve folk müzik türlerinden ilham alan şarkılar, sözleri ve performanslarıyla ırkçılık ve emperyalizmin karşısındadır. "Asyalı Amerikalı" tanımını ilk defa kullanan grup üyeleri, uluslararası savaş halini ve Amerikan popüler kültürünü eleştirirken, eşitsizliğe karşı küresel mücadelede diğer azınlıklarla koalisyonlar kurmayı hedeflemişlerdir. Böylece, A Grain of Sand, Amerika'nın birinci nesil Asyalı göçmenleri ötekileştiren beyaz Hıristiyan yüzüne karşı duran devrimci Asyalı göçmen imajını ortaya koymuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Asyalı Amerikalı, protest müzik, anti-emperyalizm, göç, azınlık koalisyonları

This article analyzes the four songs "Wandering Chinaman," "We Are the Children," "Yellow Pearl," and "War of the Flea" from A Grain of Sand's album *Music for the Struggle by Asians in America* (1973) that constructed an inclusive Asian American identity. It will show how A Grain of Sand simultaneously emphasizes the collective and the individual through relatable images in "Yellow Pearl" and "War of the Flea" as well as in "Wandering Chinaman" and "We Are the Children" through Asian American experiences. The titles of their other songs are "Imperialism Is Another Word for Hunger," "Something about Me Today," "Jonathan Jackson," "Warrior of the Rainbow," "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountain," "Somos Asiaticos," "Divide and Conquer," and "Free the Land." Besides the Spanish-language song "Somos Asiaticos," however, none of the other titles explicitly refer to the Asian American identity. The

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lyrics of the selected songs employ the first person plural or singular in opposition to an “other,” which they equate with mainstream white America. In the context of the Asian American movement for collective inclusion and recognition, this self-positioning at the societal margins had revolutionary implications.

The Asian American movement coincided with the black Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the American Indian movement, the Chicano movement, the Women's Liberation movement, and the Gay Liberation movement. Nevertheless, while Janine Young Kim cites Harold Koh's observation that in the absence of continuity, Asian American efforts for communal rights have aligned themselves with struggles beyond the 1950s and 1960s (2385, 2401). As an example for the similarities between Asian and other racialized experiences in the United States, until the verdict of *People v. Hall* in 1854, Chinese, like African American and Native American testimonies in court were invalid (Young Kim 2394). As Kim theorized, the roots of the proximity between the Asian and the black status lay in the circumstance that Chinese labor partially filled the gap left by slave labor after the Civil War, giving birth to the persisting myth of the model minority (Young Kim 2400-1). Yet, the number of Asians in the United States increased after immigration opportunities were equalized in 1965, leading to backlash from whites (Young Kim 2409). On the one hand, the Japanese were accused of taking over American industries, and Koreans were targeted during the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles in 1992 (Young Kim 2398, 2405-6). On the other hand, Asian Americans have more recently been mobilized to oppose firstly, affirmative action for black and Latino college applicants and secondly, social services for undocumented immigrants (Young Kim 2408-9, 2411).

Against this historical backdrop of intergroup differences, A Grain of Sand's album has been termed “the first record to employ the term ‘Asian American’ to refer to its artists and audience” (Phillips). Its songs communicate minority protest through entertainment that forged a new “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson's wording (30). On the note of genre, A Grain of Sand's songs borrow from Southwestern folk and black soul, gospel, and blues traditions from the United States, while featuring vocal solos and choruses (“Historical Background”). While A Grain of Sand acoustically performs intercommunal connectedness, it rejects the atomistic “I” of Western autobiographical narratives that Frank Chin criticizes (139-

40). Because different singers always sing the choruses of the songs, the music anticipates a key aspect of Asian American studies. This field has expanded its focus to “larger and shifting coalitions, rather than the simpler Asian American coalition of old” to interrogate patterns of “American colonialism, Orientalism, and racism” worldwide (Spickard 604). To emphasize this contingency of national and international crises and white racism that *A Grain of Sand*’s songs address, this article’s two sections on identity loss and recuperation will establish that subversive power lies in their enactments of alliances.

On the one hand, “Wandering Chinaman” and “We Are the Children” follow the principle of the *mok-yu* (Wang 443) to attribute a communal crisis to a metonymic character. According to Oliver Wang, “*mok-yu*” refers to a Chinese musical tradition of more than 150 years that documents crises and suffering (Wang 443). Against the backdrop of *A Grain of Sand*’s revolutionary anti-racist politics (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2), “Wandering Chinaman” particularly matches their album’s project of criticizing the alienation of Asian immigrants whose disenfranchisement contradicts the mythic American dream.

On the other hand, “Yellow Pearl” and “War of the Flea” overlap singing and speaking voices and include instrumental dissonances in the style of jazz to envision global uprisings. As Susan Miyo Asai explained, Asian American musicians in the 1970s did not coincidentally draw from jazz pioneered by black nationalists (2005, 87). Both groups used jazz aesthetics to mobilize collective identification (Asai 2005, 87). The genre’s possibilities for improvisation appealed to minority artists who sought liberation from Eurocentric notions of harmony (Asai 2005, 94). The Black Power and the Asian American movement also advocated cultural pride beyond the West (Asai 2005, 91). Thus, Asai traced how black nationalism inspired Asian Americans to stop internalizing a Euro-American definition of themselves as Orientals (2005, 91). For example, the jazz saxophonist Fred Ho described how he grew up admiring the black nationalism of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam and deriving his label as a “yellow revolutionary nationalist” (45).

All four songs discussed in this article participate in the Asian American movement to counter stereotypes, for example, from World War II-era (1939-45) music. At that time, songwriters stoked

fear of immigration among white American audiences in the face of a savage and ungodly “Yellow Peril” and fantasized about the occupation (Moon 338-9). In this attempt to depict the Japanese as racially inferior, songwriters lumped all Asians, whether of Indian, Filipino, or Chinese origin together with the effect of severing alliances (Moon 350-1). In contrast, A Grain of Sand's Chris Kando Iijima and Joanna Nobuko Miyamoto called for “revolutionary culture” to resist hegemonic values (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2). In their “Statement,” they importantly distinguished “Asian culture in America” through the spatial preposition “in” (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2) but summarized different origins of immigrants. Despite the risk of affirming the hegemonic myth of a melting pot for all Asians in America, A Grain of Sand aimed to generate revolutionary propaganda (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2). To this end, Iijima and Miyamoto highlighted that music “can move people collectively while striking some emotion deep within an individual” (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2). Thus, they listed their goals of producing “Asian ‘identity’ or racial pride, Third World Unity, and unity with world struggles against U.S. imperialism” (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2).

As an inspiration, Iijima and Miyamoto cited the “Experimental Sound Collective of I.C.A.I.C. (Cuban Institute of Cinemagraphic [sic] Arts and Industries)” amid tensions between the United States and communist Cuba (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2). Thus, they announced that their current album expressed “a more aggressively anti-U.S. imperialist outlook in our songs and music” than ever before (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2). Possibly, the seemingly universalizing lyrics of “Yellow Pearl” and “War of the Flea” extend their counter-propagandistic power by reaching out to diverse dissenters of the American status quo.

To materially protest capitalism, A Grain of Sand preferred traditional acoustic rather than electric guitars, since the latter might enable qualitatively superior recordings, but restrict their mobility as performers (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 3). Especially the everyday sounds that introduce the “Wandering Chinaman” stage how A Grain of Sand might have walked through the urban park mentioned in the song. Here, their chosen means of production underline their understanding of “revolutionary culture” as centering marginalized voices (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2). Fittingly, Iijima and

Miyamoto define form in their “Statement,” “As the means through which politics is conveyed” rather than as their primary artistic interest (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 3). Yet, they justify their formal experimentation, “Whether a bottle contains urine or wine depends primarily on who is doing the filling” (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 3). With this comparison between “urine” and “wine,” they establish a dichotomy based on cultural value. Since A Grain of Sand valued revolutionary messaging more than ideological conformity, their implication that form equals an empty bottle could explain the band’s turn to folk and blues. Although these genres had already been commercialized during A Grain of Sand’s musical production, they subversively appropriated them for their communication.

Still, A Grain of Sand rejected marketability as a motive. They even warned of artists “keeping this system alive” through greed (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 3). They summarized their questions to art, “Who is creating it, who is performing it, is money being made, who is making money, in essence, who or what is the work serving are all very political factors which directly affect the politics of the work itself” (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 3). To emphasize their socialist position, “Charlie” Chin, Miyamoto, and Iijima did not stylize themselves as artists in their biographies or specify their different origins. Instead, Iijima is described as having “worked in various organizations in New York, including Asians in the Spirit of the Indo-Chinese (ASI), and United Asians Communities Center,” while Miyamoto, among other things, “Made a living in different forms of entertainment media and also news media,” and Chin is a “Partime [sic] musician, bartender, composer” (“Biographies” 5). Instead of curating Asian heritages for their own sake, A Grain of Sand thus prioritized uniting in protest, as the four selected songs will be shown to exemplify.

“Wandering Chinaman” and “We Are the Children” - Identity Loss and Transcultural Solidarity

This section analyzes the songs “Wandering Chinaman” sung by “Charlie” Chin and “We Are the Children” by Chin, Iijima, and Miyamoto. At first glance, both express suffering due to the “unattainability of white status which prevents full inclusion” in the

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United States (Shiu 6). The lyrics of “Wandering Chinaman” juxtapose a first-generation remembering migration, “I arrived in this country / In 1925” (Chin 1973, line 9) at the climax of the anti-Asian Immigration Act (“Asian American History Timeline”) with a second generation who solidarizes with fellow minorities during the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s, “We are the cousins of the freedom fighter, / Brothers and sisters all around the world. / We are a part of the Third World people” in “We Are the Children” (Iijima and Miyamoto “We Are the Children” 25-9).

“Wandering Chinaman” is the second track on A Grain of Sand’s 1973 album. The introductory and concluding lyrics, “Oh who will mourn the passing / Of this wandering Chinaman?” frame the narrative of an unnamed Chinese man relating his immigration experience in a lively city park to “traditional” music (Chin 1973, lines 7-8, 55-6). His narrative represents the failure to achieve the American dream as a father since he finds himself lonely and invisible. He is mourning the death of his wife (Chin 1973, lines 35-6), after America took all his three children: his oldest son became a drug addict, his daughter left home for her white lover, and his youngest son was killed in the Vietnam War (1955-75) (Chin 1973, lines 38, 42, 45-8). On the one hand, the song acts as a politicizing “song of persuasion” (Denisoff 6) which does not address any person, addressee in the second person, or solution to the narrated crisis although its tone cannot be considered “conservative and escapist” as in the case of Southwestern folk (Denisoff 18). The singer explains, “Little choice was left to me / But to go to a foreign land,” where he would have to work “A sixteen-hour day / Just to try and stay alive” only to lose “everything I had / In the crash of ‘29” and eventually give up “my dreams / Of ever reaching home” (Chin 1973, lines 5-6, 11-2, 15-6, 31-2). Since the 1840s, China had been devastated by the British Opium Wars (1839-42, 1856-60) and natural catastrophes with ensuing famines which forced many to flee. Yet, after the Wall Street Crash in 1929, the United States severed all diplomacy with the People’s Republic of China that had been formed in 1949, making transnational (re)migration near impossible (“Asian American History Timeline”).

Besides home, the “Wandering Chinaman’s” losses extend to his inner life. Thus, he does not know how to live after his wife’s death (Chin 1973, lines 35-6), or why his youngest son was killed “To protect democracy” in Vietnam and he sees “no hope” for

his oldest, drug-addicted son (Chin 1973, lines 42, 46). He implies having lost touch with his daughter, who is still alive, since he does not refer to her boyfriend by name, but only as “a red-haired man” (Chin 1973, line 38). In short, he has become isolated in a land that works for the white man alone. The vulnerability of the metonymic “Wandering Chinaman” also shapes his view of global events like the Wall Street Crash of 1929, World War II, and the Vietnam War, as he denounces patriotic narratives of the United States. Donald Pease traced the opposite, American exceptionalism to the widespread belief of American citizens in their country’s superiority due to the absence of any major socialist uprisings (108). Since the Cold War, however, the popularity of exceptionalist myths such as the American dream has helped silence criticism of disenfranchised communities of color (Pease 108). Considering the narrator’s helplessness in “Wandering Chinaman,” interludes of silence contribute to constructing him as a passive witness, allowing connections between his suffering and the historical settings that enabled it.

To understand the lamentations of the individual “Wandering Chinaman” as criticism of the United States’ inequality and interventionism, however, the listener must resist attributing his suffering to a stereotypical loss of male sexual privileges in China (Chin 2005, 134-35). Thus, the literary critic Chin criticized the canonized Chinese American authors, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, for circulating stereotypes of misogyny as intrinsic to Chinese culture (Chin 2005, 134). On the one hand, Kingston, in her seminal novel *The Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1975) relates her childhood fear of China to her family’s stories where “my parents would sell my sisters and me” (93). Yet, she also problematizes her marginalized status in the United States when she contrasts, “Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy” but “We American Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine” (Kingston 155). So, the novel invokes “otherness” to mirror it back to white Americans, either by the usage of the slur “ghosts” (Kingston 97) or the narrator’s positive reevaluation of Chinese parents’ mythical engraving of their lists of grievances upon the back of their warrior-daughter (Kingston 38) or her own parents’ lingual frenectomy enabling her to speak English (Kingston 147-9).

In contrast to the transnational positionality of *The Woman Warrior*, the pain of the “Wandering Chinaman” is exclusively situated

within the United States. The song layers “Charlie” Chin’s vocals over rhythmic guitar sounds resembling a heartbeat that blends into the noise of a city park (Iijima et al. “01-02-Wandering Chinaman” 03:09-03:40, 03:40-03:49). The juxtaposed lines, “So I sit here in this park / Until the night-time comes” (Iijima et al. “01-02-Wandering Chinaman” 03:08-03:13) to the guitar, chatter, and meowing sounds (Iijima et al. “01-02-Wandering Chinaman” 03:34-03:40) support the criticism of the singer that his death will go ignored (Chin 1973, lines 55-6). Mirroring this criticism of Asian immigrants’ invisibility in the United States, the melody finally fades into an upbeat rhythm typical for pop music which acoustically stages erasure by the melting pot as a threat (Iijima et al. “01-02-Wandering Chinaman” 03:36-03:45). In other words: the Chinese immigrant who is not remembered because he does not affirm the American dream is an unsuccessful “other” who will be forgotten even by his children. In Asian American studies, immigrants’ integration into American society has indeed been associated with racial self-hate among children (Eng and Han 683), which would risk the erasure of the legacy of a non-assimilated immigrant such as the “Wandering Chinaman.” Accordingly, he depicts his three children as permanently lost: while his daughter actively left him to live with her boyfriend, his youngest son was denied agency to refuse his military draft, and his oldest son is a slave to addiction (Chin 1973, lines 38, 42, 47-8).

To understand how A Grain of Sand imagines the continuity of the immigrant experience for United States-born Asian Americans, I will next analyze the song “We Are the Children” by Iijima, Miyamoto, and “Charlie” Chin. Reflecting how Asians were not yet defined as their race in the United States at the time (Zia 71), the singers imply their Asian origins in the opening lines by referencing working-class jobs that were typically held by their parents and grandparents. However, the line, “Who leave their stamp on Amerika” expresses pride in having working-class ancestors who did not achieve the American dream and thus represents resistance (Iijima and Miyamoto “We Are the Children” lines 31-2). In turn, by referring to the United States in the foreign spelling, “Amerika,” the singers “other” America from within. Such opposition could follow the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that the United States carried out on August 6 and 9, 1945 against Japan to end World War II. In their introductory “Statement” to their album, Iijima and Miyamoto invoke this example

of American imperialism with their usage of “bombarded” to describe “the most sophisticated propaganda mechanism the world has ever known” through radio and television (“Statement” 2). As examples of this propaganda, they later named “war movies” (Iijima and Miyamoto “We Are the Children” line 22), albeit subversively in the style of counterpropaganda which they aimed to produce (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2).

The mentioned jobs establish the singers as descendants of Central Pacific’s transcontinental railroad builders from China in the 1860s (“Asian American History Timeline;” Iijima and Miyamoto “We Are the Children” lines 5-6), Chinese waiters, or Japanese gardeners as of the Japanese-founded California Flower Growers’ Association of 1906 (“Asian American History Timeline;” Iijima and Miyamoto “We Are the Children” lines 12-3, 15-6). In addition, they identify with the Japanese internment in Department of Justice camps since Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941 until the end of World War II as the most explicit reference to oppression (“Asian American History Timeline;” Iijima and Miyamoto “We Are the Children” lines 3-4). The lines, “We are the children of the migrant worker / We are the offspring of the concentration camp / Sons and daughters of the railroad builder” connect economic with legal disenfranchisement across generations (Iijima and Miyamoto “We Are the Children” lines 1-6). In “We Are the Children,” references to the past shaping Asian American identity function similarly to how references to slavery unite black Americans around a shared history in black spirituals (Gilroy 73). Still, the singers invoke American mainstream culture, symbolized by Pepsi Cola or Wild West cinema, which omitted Asians, since historically, the Chinese had been banned from, for example, Seattle in 1886 (“Asian American History Timeline;” Iijima and Miyamoto “We Are the Children” lines 18-9, 20-4). With its intergenerational references, the song thus criticizes both, the exploitation and oppression of Asian immigrant (grand) parents as well as the risk of identity loss for their children that the psychologists David L. Eng and Shinhee Han analyzed to conclude that frequent reports of melancholia may result from limited success at assimilation (680). The expectation that Asian immigrants should conform to the stereotype of the upwardly mobile model minority but accept exclusion from cultural and political representation leads to a feeling of rejection among young Asian Americans, according to Eng and Han (677-8). This emotional conflict of being equally defined by

the past and present that "We Are the Children" expresses, aligns the song with A Grain of Sand's project of raising awareness for American imperialism, even its cultural form, through a contemporary musical record. The singers' concern could have been directed toward the future as well, since the recent military invasions of Korea (1950-3) and Vietnam led to an influx of new Asian immigrants to be "othered," exploited, and marginalized in the United States.

Meanwhile, "We Are the Children" poetically connects past suffering to the present self-identification as Asians who were born in America by exclusively employing the first-person plural as a community united by history. The singers' choice to echo stereotypes such as the "Chinese waiter" or "Japanese gardener" (Iijima and Miyamoto "We Are the Children" lines 12-3, 15-6) could represent their embrace of a racialized mask to position themselves against exploitation (Young 44). Kevin Young identified the blues genre as requiring such masks for singers to express ambivalence (44). For example, blackness became associated with jungle imagery to symbolize both, racist fantasies of primitiveness and empowering myths of lost origins (Young 50-1). Diverse artists of color similarly assumed stereotypes to implode them. Further, A Grain of Sand not only integrates their ancestors' experiences of being "othered" into their self-images but also recalls "secretly rooting for the other side" in Western films, indicating transcultural solidarity with Native Americans (Iijima and Miyamoto "We Are the Children" lines 20-4). Here, the singers distinguish their solidarity from identification by cheering, "ride, red-man, ride" to Native warriors on screen in a color-based register rather than in the first-person plural that would point to shared experiences of occupation (Iijima and Miyamoto "We Are the Children" lines 20-1). Nevertheless, the line anticipates a coalition of racialized "others" united in protest of American histories of imperialism, exploitation, and racism.

Accordingly, the singers identify as "cousins of the freedom fighter" and "Brothers and sisters all around the world" (Iijima and Miyamoto "We Are the Children" lines 25-8) when communist revolutions proliferated in Vietnam (1954, 1975), Cambodia, and Laos (1975) and mass immigration to the United States ensued ("Asian American History Timeline"). Since their familial identification is based on protest and not lineage, their association of Asian dissenters with their immigrant ancestors attributes revolutionary politics to the Asian American experience. Claiming Asian American identity thus

appears as a political statement. Since siblings and cousins are typically close in age, however, their identification with them neither matches the traditional Chinese five-generational clan nor the Western nuclear family norm (Buchanan 29). Yet, both, the multigenerational clan and the nuclear family revolve around continuity rather than the present to form identities. Instead, the singers establish their own identities in connection with their relatives. Seeking ancestral guidance, though, contradicts American atomistic individualism. So, Asian heritage is firstly, subversively ennobled in “We Are the Children” and secondly, (re) uniting with siblings and cousins comes to signify revolutionary coalition-building. The refrain further attributes revolutionary potential to the seemingly mundane act of singing by referring to the singers’ communal disenfranchisement: “Sing a song for ourselves / What have we got to lose? / Sing a song for ourselves / We got the right to choose” (Iijima and Miyamoto “We Are the Children” lines 8-11). These lines in the first-person plural could imply a dichotomy between active resistance and passive loss that the (Asian American) listener can choose from. For example, the first generation in “Wandering Chinaman” faced isolation and disillusionment with the American dream but the second generation in “We Are the Children” pursues interethnic and -national coalitions. Beyond the song, protests by students of color in San Francisco and Berkeley in 1968 and 1969 led to the establishment of ethnic studies programs for which “a song for ourselves” could also serve as a metaphor (“Asian American History Timeline”).

“Yellow Pearl” and “War of the Flea” -

Identity Recuperation and Cultural Pride

The first song on A Grain of Sand’s album is “Yellow Pearl,” performed by Iijima and Miyamoto. At first glance, “Yellow Pearl” asserts ethnic pride through its wordplay on the racist slur “yellow peril.” The song’s beginning sets the album’s tone when Iijima of A Grain of Sand speaks about an eponymous “grain, A tiny grain of sand / Landing in the belly of the monster” as a metaphor for maritime immigration (Iijima and Miyamoto “Yellow Pearl” lines 1-3). In addition, the metaphorical grain of sand might reflect the unified identity of the band members, since mirror glass is composed of many grains of sand. Individually, each ancestral origin could be overlooked

but together, they express a collective Asian identity. Meanwhile, falling into “the belly of the monster” represents arrival in the United States and an immediate loss of status for labor exploitation. However, the singer predicts that one day, the grain of sand will grow to put “In peril” first, “its” captor, and then, “our captor” by the end of the song (Iijima and Miyamoto “Yellow Pearl” lines 8, 37-40). In the preceding text, A Grain of Sand names “this corrupt, dying monster called America” (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 3). Indeed, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Koreans had first been imported to work on the transcontinental railroad, farms, and plantations but were denied citizenship with rights (“Asian American History Timeline”). Participation in American society may hence translate into resistance against such histories from repeating themselves.

At present, A Grain of Sand's introductory “Statement” still depicts the United States in exclusively negative terms as isolating and demanding that immigrants assimilate into “a hostile environment” (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2). In contrast, the lyrics of “Yellow Pearl” and “War of the Flea” do not only encourage cultural pride without assimilation but respond to “inhumane acts” perpetrated by Americans at home and abroad with a militant rhetoric (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2). As Iijima and Miyamoto explain, they must engage with politics, since “Silence sometimes is the strongest statement of all” (Iijima and Miyamoto “Statement” 2). Although the lyrics of “Yellow Pearl” do not explicate politics, however, the allegorical pearl could allude to the Chinese fairy tale of the Jade Dragon and the Golden Phoenix who shape a “bright pearl” out of crystal which is stolen by the Queen Mother of the Western Paradise in reference to the song's American context of production (Chin 2005, 138-9).

In “Yellow Pearl,” the grain of sand's growth could be a metaphor for the growth of Asians as one community, as time will tell “Only how long it takes / Layer after layer [sic] / As our beauty unfolds (Iijima and Miyamoto “Yellow Pearl” lines 34-7). Further, the singers imagine (re) discovering each other, “In the ocean oyster beds / Repose beneath the sea / Open one and you might find / Deep in one of a different mind” (Iijima and Miyamoto “Yellow Pearl” lines 12-4). This vision of finding fellow resisters addresses the spatial distance of the Pacific Ocean (“the sea”) as well as the current political passivity of Asian Americans (“Repose”). However, mobilization can occur by

metaphorically “opening” minds despite their “differences.” While Asian immigrants as recently as the “boat people” from Vietnam had to cross the Pacific to reach the United States (“Asian American History Timeline”), the American Army (siding with the British Empire) also arrived in China via the ocean during the Opium Wars (Bailey 306). The singers could refer to this imperial war when they juxtapose “invaders from the north” with the “yellow pearl,” which comprises “half the world” like the population of Asia does (Iijima and Miyamoto “Yellow Pearl” lines 19, 21-5). By associating Asians with nature as the “yellow pearl” and the invaders with “the north” in geographical register, the singers “other” imperialism while uniting all people of Asian descent. To stage dialogues between them, the song distinguishes its solo from its chorus sections using antiphonies in the style of black call-and-response spirituals under slavery (Gilroy 73, 79).

Beyond “Yellow Pearl,” such combinations of Japanese and Western musical traditions like folk and classics have already connected three generations of Japanese immigrants in the United States (Asai 1995, 429-30). As Asai speculates, traditional Japanese styles were taught in familial settings (1995, 431). Thus, the first generation called *issei* improvised work songs on Hawaiian sugar plantations and pursued integration by singing Christian hymns (Asai 1995, 431). Meanwhile, the second generation of *nisei* blended their influences until World War II made them feel ashamed of their Japanese origins and retreat into their segregated communities (Asai 1995, 432-3, 435). Nevertheless, the third generation of *sansei* successfully interwove traditional with contemporary genres, as exemplified by A Grain of Sand from New York during the Asian American movement of the 1970s (1995, 437-8). For example, Asai traces their political messaging to their study of anti-capitalist and -imperialist Marxist theory and their multicultural aesthetics to the preferred folk music of their college-age audiences (Asai 1995, 438-9). As Asai illustrates, three generations of Japanese American musicians more or less faithfully perpetuated their ancestors’ musical traditions for identity (re) negotiation and empowerment (1995, 439). In “Yellow Pearl,” such resistance means subverting stereotypes from the early twentieth century to pursue liberation for all people of color in the 1970s.

At the same time, “Yellow Pearl” could anticipate further imperialism and revenge by addressing “Roman senate chambers” or seeing “signs of myself. Come drifting in from the East” (Iijima and

Miyamoto "Yellow Pearl" lines 17-8, 32-3). The verb "drifting" refers to natural, maritime imagery and thus represents the arrival of immigrants as a natural occurrence. Since the last verse is drawn out, it could carry particular significance for the future. Indeed, every incoming "othered" Asian could represent "signs of myself" whose "hurt" is ended by their company. Here, the singers' emotional identification reflects the inclusivity of the Asian American movement (Wang 451, 457). A Grain of Sand, in particular, envisions unification through a global socialist revolution (Miyamoto and Iijima "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" introductory paragraph 6). Such a move toward socialist collectivism is syntactically indicated when a singular "myself" precedes the arrival of the plural "signs of myself."

While "Yellow Pearl" could have subtly referenced recent communist revolutions across Asia, the song "War of the Flea" by Iijima, Miyamoto, and "Charlie" Chin explicitly subverts the historical bombardment of Japan with its line, "the strongest bomb is human / Who is bursting to be free" (Iijima and Miyamoto "War of the Flea" lines 7-8). In addition, A Grain of Sand could point to war crimes during the contemporary Vietnam War or the previous Korean War "Deep inside the jungle" (Iijima and Miyamoto "War of the Flea" line 3) which conjures stereotyped obscure, exotic "otherness." Similarly, the "Great House" of slave songs draws attention to the racial hierarchy separating the white master from the captive singers (Michie 2-3). By situating himself in a jungle, the Asian American singer implies a collective impact of wars on Asians worldwide. In response, the lyrics suggest that Asian Americans can (re)claim their own space when "my heart will find a way / To sow the seeds of courage / That will blossom into day" (Iijima and Miyamoto "War of the Flea" lines 10-2). Thus, the "War of the Flea" is the modest effort of a displaced individual to transform "this cave" into a "shelter" and "the earth" into a "bed" without military occupation (Iijima and Miyamoto "War of the Flea" lines 18-9). Such a creative return to nature does not only oppose imperial expansion but challenges the dichotomy between East and West as primitive and progressive in Western popular culture ignoring legacies of exploitation (Ma 102-3). In contrast, the song represents a seemingly uncivilized lifestyle as a rational choice to survive. In this sense, the titular "Flea" could symbolize the subordinate status of Asians following wars in their ancestral countries whose landscapes they still recognize as riches not to be exploited. With its duet of a male

and a female voice, “War of the Flea” could conceive of a new world without imperialism as a home for refugees.

By announcing a “Song of the Night” containing a utopic dream, “War of the Flea” envisions an alternative to the American way of life (Iijima and Miyamoto “War of the Flea” line 1). Here, the singers embrace the mysterious “otherness” of the night in Christian cultures while their image of the earth as a bed could be an ambivalent metaphor for burial as well as resurrection (Iijima and Miyamoto “War of the Flea” line 19). Indeed, some of the first associations on American soil that Japanese (1877), Chinese (1881), Korean (1917), and Filipino (1928) immigrants founded were Christian organizations testifying to the importance of their faith for them (“Asian American History Timeline”). Furthermore, the singers’ association of waking with rising from the earth posits that territorial return is a condition for identity recuperation and attributes spiritual power to their Asian ancestral lands. The singers ennoble distant spaces stereotyped as exotic when they repeatedly draw out, “Deep inside the jungle you will find me” (Iijima et al. “01-10 War of the Flea” 00:32-00:39, 01:38-01:44, 02:41-02:47). Finally, the oscillation between local and global contexts in the songs “Wandering Chinaman,” “We Are the Children,” “Yellow Pearl,” and “War of the Flea” reveals that A Grain of Sand conceived of Asian American identity as defined against American politics towards Asians and Asian countries beyond their ancestral lands. The singers thereby derive empowerment and their political agenda from their stereotyped “otherness.”

Legacies of A Grain of Sand: Asian American Identity as Diversity United in Resistance

In this article, I analyzed how A Grain of Sand represented the two themes of Asian American identity of loss and recuperation in selected songs from their album *Music for the Struggle by Asians in America* (1973). On the one hand, any notion of Asian American identity as a “split personality” is a pseudo-scientific stereotype that silences articulations (Ma 41, 55). On the other hand, the Asian American movement to advocate a communal identity has benefitted from the notion of a shared self that immigrants have suppressed by assimilating into American culture (Ma 42). Because of such

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activism, individual expression without fear of being “othered” can improve the collective well-being of minorities. To this end, the Asian American movement promoted the decolonization of the self-image by rejecting internalized racist stereotypes (Ma 102-3). However, A Grain of Sand stood at the beginning of a movement to forge a collective identity. Accordingly, Miyamoto introduced the band as “griots” who are “spreading the news” of having lost and recuperated their Asian American identity in the singular form (qtd. in Kim 3). Paradoxically, only by identifying as “griots” who reject Western standards of art, they can claim the authority to inform “others” about the need and possibility of resistance. Meanwhile, “Charlie” Chin attributed a “young innocence” to their music (qtd. in Kim 4). In the 1970s, A Grain of Sand’s music possessed revolutionary potential because it reevaluated Asian heritages, which had been denigrated in American culture in the wake of imperialism and wars (Ma 102-3). Significantly, American military violence against Asian countries during World War II, the Korean, and the Vietnam Wars is not placed at the center of their songs, but it provides the historical backdrop of their resistance. For Asian immigrants of the first and second generation, the struggle to integrate into American society often resulted in a negative perception of their Asian heritage, as expressed by the songs “Wandering Chinaman” and “We Are the Children.” At the same time, the process of reclaiming their roots and solidarizing across borders enables protest racism and imperialism worldwide, as performed by the songs “Yellow Pearl” and “War of the Flea.”

To conclude, despite “Charlie” Chin’s summary that no revolution followed the Asian American movement (qtd. in Kim 4), he still associated pride in Asian roots with protest in contemporary Asian American music. Accordingly, this article identified that parallel to various Civil Rights movements for inclusion into the American dream, the selected songs “Wandering Chinaman” and “We Are the Children” dismantled its glamour for first- and second-generation immigrants. Meanwhile, “Yellow Pearl” and “War of the Flea” openly embraced stigmatized “otherness” to creatively subvert its disempowering intention. In other words, all songs discussed in this article have been shown to base constructions of Asian American identity in narratives with the power to challenge American cultural foundations from below.

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