



CORKY LEE

PHOTO ESSAY

Corky Lee's Chinatown

Since 1970, a Chinese-American photojournalist has been capturing images of street life in New York's Chinatown. Here are twelve of them, from protest to pandemic.

CORKY LEE — APRIL 18, 2024

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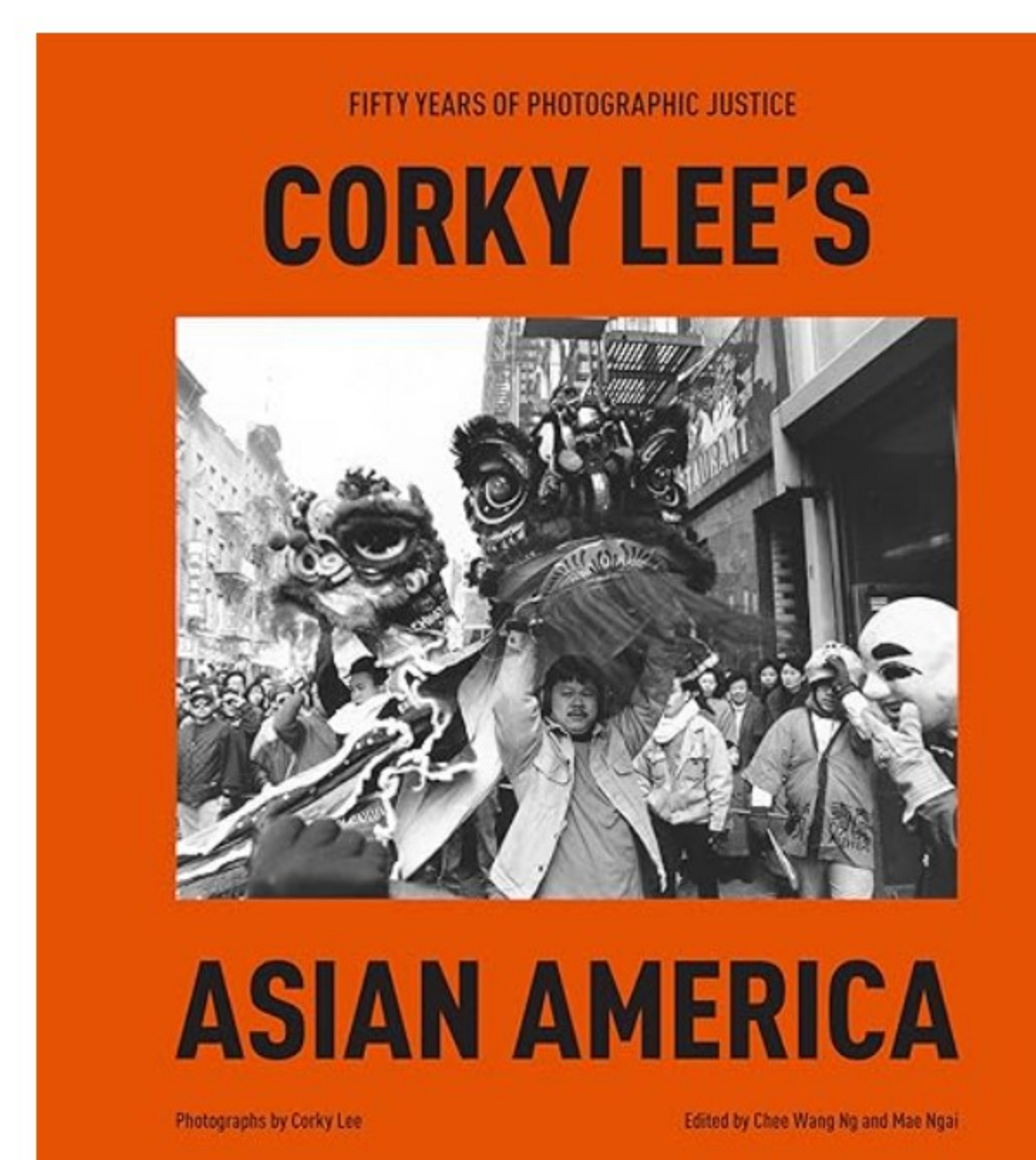


Corky Lee (李扬国) was a Chinese-American activist, community organizer, photographer and journalist, who over the last five decades since the 1970s was an unofficial Photographer Laureate of Asian American communities, especially New York's Chinatown. Born in 1947 in Queens, New York City, the son of two first generation immigrants from China, Lee called himself an “ABC from NYC ... wielding a camera to slay injustices against APAs [Asian Pacific Americans].”

His work chronicled the diversity of Asian American culture, and documented key events in its political history, including 1975 protests at the [beating of Peter Yew](#), and 1982 protests after the [murder of Vincent Chin](#). As Han Zhang [wrote](#) in *The New Yorker*, “Lee was to Chinatown what Bill Cunningham was to the sartorialists of Manhattan ... his photographic sensibility became the lens through which generations of Asian-Americans saw themselves as part of the larger American resistance.” Lee died in January 2021 during the Covid pandemic, but the work remains.

In [Corky Lee's Asian America: Fifty Years of Photographic Justice](#), published last week and launching with an event [tonight](#) at Asia Society in New York, Lee's photographs are collected and presented chronologically, with glosses and commentary from those who knew his work best. In their introduction, John J. Lee, Chee Wang Ng and Mae Ngai write:

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With each photograph he took, Corky Lee aimed to break the stereotype of Asian Americans as docile, passive, and above all, foreign to the United States. He insisted that Asian Americans are Americans, that they were, and are, part of this country, of its history and the ongoing project of its making. As he wrote after 9/11, “Do not let anyone tell you to go back to the country of your ancestors. You belong here. Immigrants built America. It was created for you and me.”

”

We’re delighted to present a dozen of Lee’s hundred-plus images from the book below, with a soft focus on his documenting of life — and protest — in New York’s Chinatown, as well as other communities, over the decades.

— *The Editors*



The 1971 health fair on Mott Street included Ping-Pong at twenty-five cents a game to raise money for the fair. (*New York, 1971*)





Leaders of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association at the Chinatown Lunar New Year parade, with the flag of the Republic of China and the Nationalist Party (KMT). (New York, early 1970s)



Chinatown residents [protest](#) Yves Saint Laurent's Opium perfume as offensive to Chinese people. (New York, 1979)



In April 1975 [Peter Yew](#) was arrested and beaten by police at the Fifth Precinct in Chinatown after he protested police treatment of a bystander in a traffic dispute. On May 12, several thousands marched to demand justice for Peter Yew, in a protest called by Asian Americans for Equal Employment, and a week later, on May 17, more than twenty thousand marched again, when the Chinese

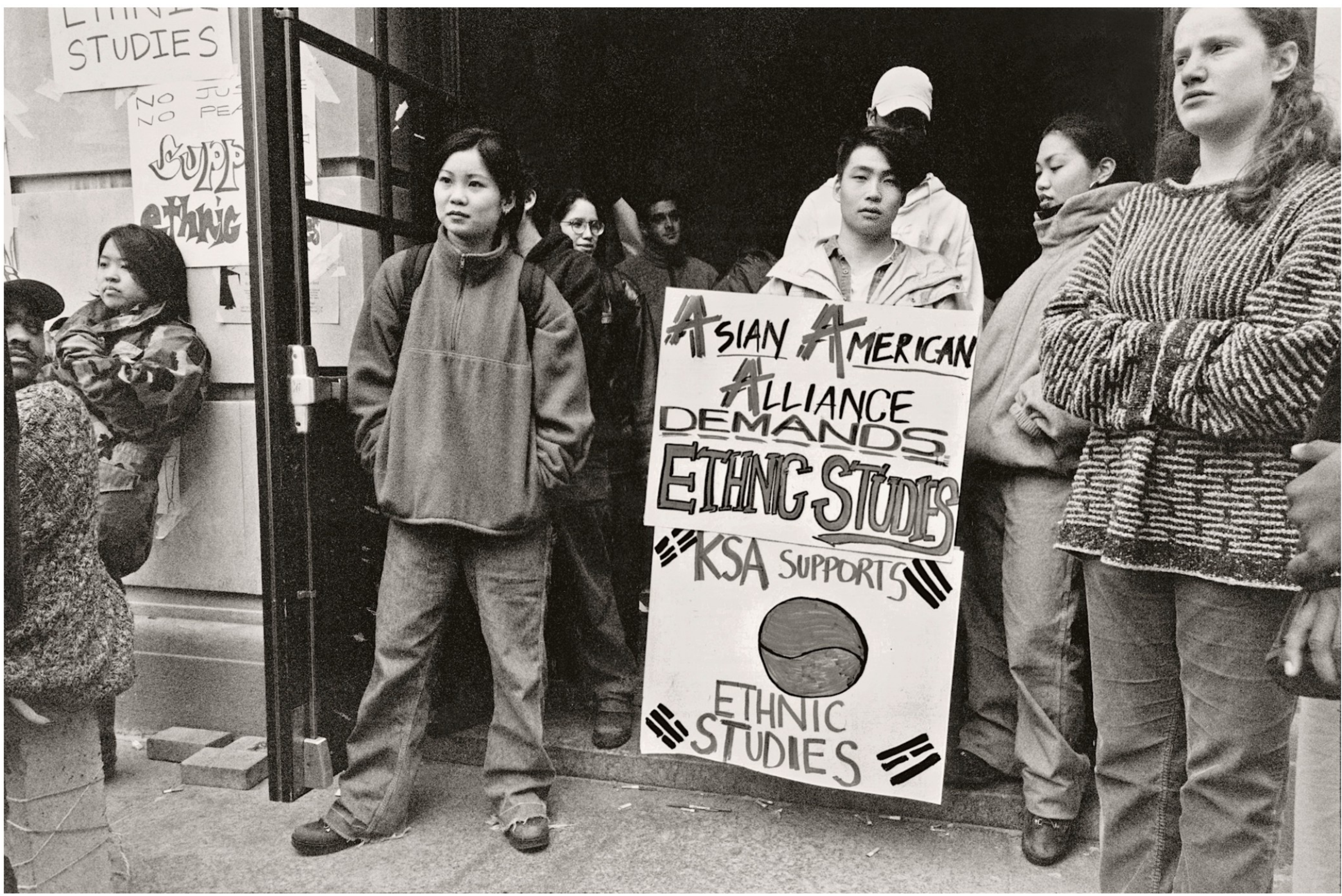
Consolidated Benevolent Association called for a community-wide protest that shut down shops and workplaces. Corky Lee captured a melee with police at city hall, which resulted in beatings and arrests. A protester pictured here was among those beaten. The photograph was published on the front page of the *New York Post* that day. (*New York, 1975*)



An elderly couple in their Mott Street apartment in Chinatown. The man, a cousin of Corky's mother, was barred from the United States by the Exclusion Act, so immigrated as a young man to Cuba. In the late 1970s he immigrated to the United States and brought his wife from Hong Kong. (*New York, 1981*)



American Citizens for Justice led a mass protest when the court sentenced [Vincent Chin](#)'s killers, two white unemployed autoworkers who beat him to death in a racially-motivated attack in Michigan, and pleaded guilty to manslaughter, to probation and a fine. (*Detroit, 1983*)



In 1996 students at Columbia University demanded the creation of an ethnic studies program, including Asian American and Latino studies. Some students went on a hunger strike and occupied a building. The campaign led to the formation in 1998 of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race. *(New York, 1996)*



Lunar New Year parade in Chinatown. *(New York, 1996)*



In October 2013 the late-night TV host Jimmy Kimmel aired a pre-taped segment in which he asked schoolchildren for ideas about how to deal with China's rise as a global economic power. A ten-year-old boy said, "Kill everyone in China," to which Kimmel replied, "That's an interesting idea." Public outrage forced Kimmel to apologize, both on-air and in writing. More than 100,000 people signed a petition to President Barack Obama demanding that the show be cut. The White House issued a statement noting the apologies and affirming that the United States welcomed China's "peaceful rise," but saying it could not force ABC to remove the show, on First Amendment grounds. (New York, 2013)



Asian Americans were crazy about NBA basketball star Jeremy Lin. Lois Lee of the Chinatown Planning Council (left), with Ruth Lee (right) and children Grant Lee and Elyssa Lee. (New York, 2013)



Andrew Yang's bid for mayor of New York received support from many, but not all, Asian Americans. Yang's campaign played on stereotypes of Asians being good at math. (Flushing, New York, 2020)



Asian Americans protest racist attacks during the coronavirus pandemic. (New York, 2020)

Header image: "Greetings from Chinatown," old postcard and contemporary scene. (New York, 1989)

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