

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

For Asian-Americans, Political Power Can Lead to Harsh Scrutiny

By JAMES STERNGOLD

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 2 — For years, when Asian-American leaders discussed their frustrating struggle to gain political influence, they often used idealistic terms like "empowerment," but when a small group of Asian-American business executives met over breakfast in Washington last spring to plot a strategy for this election year, the talks turned on a new phrase: "bundling."

Although Asian-Americans had been big campaign contributors in recent years — it is estimated that they gave more than \$10 million during the Presidential campaigns in 1988 and 1992, second only to Jews among ethnic groups — the money had given them precious little sway over the issues that concerned them, like immigration or bilingual education. The money had come in the form of thousands of small donations, and thus carried little clout.

The key person at the Washington breakfast in the spring was John Huang, a major fund-raiser for the Democratic Party. He agreed with the businessmen at the breakfast that if they wanted to have a greater impact they should use a technique long employed by unions, wealthy ethnic groups and others: collecting the money in small amounts and then handing it over in large sums, or bundles, so that it would send a stronger message.

Just days before the election, Asian-American groups have, indeed, bundled some of their substantial donations, and a handful of Asian-American politicians seem headed for important victories. But various community organizations, which are struggling to create a national Asian-American political iden-

tity from diverse ethnic groups, have also learned some sobering lessons about the rough-and-tumble of the political process and the rude welcome it can offer outsiders.

Mr. Huang was suspended recently from his job as a senior finance official with the Democratic Party and pilloried by the Republicans for soliciting questionable contributions from a South Korean company, some wealthy Indonesians and guests at an event at a Buddhist temple here.

As a result, Asian-American fund-raisers are facing harsh scrutiny and suspicion, in part, some people say, merely because they have Asian-sounding surnames. That has stirred tremendous resentment and cries of racism. Some Asian-Americans have complained that they feel they are being treated like foreigners.

"It's like walking out the door on the first day of a new job and getting hit by a car," said John Young, executive director of the Committee of One Hundred, a organization of influential Asian-Americans, based in New York.

Added Angela Oh, a Korean-American lawyer from Los Angeles and a participant at the Washington breakfast: "What I resent bitterly is that the media and some politicians deliberately failed to distinguish between Asians and Asian-Americans in this scandal. No matter how I succeed, or try, because I have almond eyes, high cheekbones and dark hair, I'm always seen as a foreigner. You know it's there."

Some people have also expressed anger at Mr. Huang, saying he was more interested in buying influence in Washington than in focusing on the needs of Asian-Americans.

L. Ling-chi Wang, a professor at the University of California at

Berkeley, wrote in an essay distributed on the Internet: "Instead of feeling sorry for John Huang and depicting him as a victim of Republican and media racism, Asian-Americans should be angry with him for using Asian-Americans as a cover to channel foreign money for purposes other than advancing the rights and welfare of Asian-Americans."

This campaign has, in short, been a bitter experience for many Asian-Americans as they seek ways to channel their growing influence.

"For me, this is part of our coming of age, and the fact that people were caught doing something that might have been wrong shows our inexperience," said S.B. Woo, a physics professor at the University of Delaware. His successful campaign for lieutenant governor of Delaware in 1984 was one of the first in which an Asian-American candidate raised large sums from Asian-Americans in other cities. "The inexperienced ones are the ones who get caught in this system," he said.

And many of the lessons have been about the strengths and dangers of big money in politics.

"We'd been sending the softest of soft money before because it wasn't bundled and we were afraid to ask for anything in return," said Thomas Chan, a Los Angeles lawyer and chairman of Chinese Americans Unite for Self Empowerment, or CAUSE. "There were no strings attached and so nobody would listen to us, which is what you're seeing today. Now, many of us want to make the contributions work better."

David Lang, a professional fundraiser in Los Angeles who works mostly with Asian-Americans, said the effort to use political donations more effectively began after the 1992

election, when he talked with Jewish groups about their fund-raising methods and then discussed the ideas with other Asian-Americans. The result was a decision to bundle more donations and to build a series of political action committees.

"Nothing happens unless we're organized," Mr. Lang said.

As frustrated as many Asian-Americans have been this year, there are striking reasons for long-term optimism.

The number of Asian-Americans doubled during the 1970's, and then doubled again during the 1980's. The 1990 census counted 7.2 million Asian-Americans, 2.9 percent of the population. It is estimated that the total will reach 12 million in 2000 and almost 20 million by 2020.

The growth has largely been a product of immigration, and as a result, only 45 percent of Asian immigrants had become citizens by 1994, the lowest percentage among ethnic groups, according to figures collected by Don T. Nakanishi, director of the Center for Asian American Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles. Sixty-five percent of Asian-Americans were foreign born, compared with 38 percent of Hispanics.

But Asians have the highest naturalization rate of any immigrant group, Mr. Nakanishi said, and various civic groups are hastening their efforts to register these new citizens as voters.

California presents a painful example of how those numbers have failed, so far at least, to generate political clout. Although Asian-Americans make up about 1 in 10 Californians, they account for only 1 in 20 registered voters and only 3 of every 100 votes actually cast.

There is but a single Asian-American in the 120-person State Legislature in California, a state that is home to 40 percent of Asian-Americans. Mike Honda, a candidate for the State Assembly from San Jose, is likely to become the second Asian-American in the body. He said that among the issues he wanted to tackle first was redistricting to give Asian-Americans a better chance in State Assembly races.

The development of a more organized political structure begs the more fundamental question of whether there is, in fact, an Asian-American community. Within East Asia, people identify with their nationality or ethnic group and generally find the idea of a pan-Asian identity elusive, if not ludicrous.

In the United States, the efforts to find common ground among the different Asian-American groups has been gaining ground, mostly among younger people, but there is still resistance.

"These communities are very much separate in philosophy and thinking, and I think they always will be," said Tony Lam, who was the first Vietnamese-American elected to public office four years ago when he won a seat on the City Council of Westminster, in Orange County.

But many leaders in the movement see such misgivings, and even the suspicions they have encountered this year because of Mr. Huang's activities, as just part of the process of maturing.

"The core of what we are saying to ourselves is that we're latecomers, and this is part of our development politically as a community, of becoming more sophisticated," Ms. Oh said. "It has been painful, but I don't think anyone can stop us."