

Asian lesbians and gays struggle to bridge cultural and sexual selves



PHOTO BY CATHERINE STAUFFER

When Larry, a university student in Portland, came out to his family one sister brought up God, another "Loving from the parents" and a brother said "I'm not a human being."

by Anndee Hochman

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In March 1990, Chee finally decided to act on an idea he'd had for a long time—starting a Portland group for lesbians and gay men like himself. Even though he worked with such community endeavors as the AIDS Hotline and the PAL program, he sometimes felt invisible in white gay culture. Once, at the Embers, Chee met an Asian lesbian, and the two talked for hours about family, ethnicity, sexual orientation and how those issues swirled together.

About the same time, Lynn Nakamoto, an attorney who missed the diversity of New York City, where she had attended law school, placed an ad in *Just Out* for an Asian gay and lesbian potluck at her house.

Lim, an Indonesian who was raised in Hong Kong, had heard of a group for gay and lesbian Asians in Seattle. The same month that Nakamoto's ad ran, he placed an ad seeking people who were interested in starting a similar group here.

A year and a half later, Asian/Pacific Islander Lesbians and Gays claims about two dozen people on its mailing list, although more have attended the gatherings. Members span a wide range, from recently-arrived students struggling with English to fourth-generation Asian-Americans with roots in Japan, China, Korea, Hawaii, Malaysia, India and Indonesia.

Steps toward visibility

On a smaller scale, the Portland group mirrors a similar push nationally among Asian lesbians and gays weary of being overlooked by a community that often flaunts its values of diversity and inclusion.

"Unity," said Scot Nakagawa, "is not just about walking down the street together in a march, holding hands. When people of color say [to lesbians and gay men] that we need to deal with the problem of racism, people say we're being divisive."

Last October, several members of ACT UP in New York decided to form an Asian-Pacific Islander caucus, catalyzed by such issues as the lack of services and education for Asian people with AIDS.

Gay and lesbian Asian activists also responded angrily to the plans of two New York queer organizations for benefit performances of *Miss Saigon*, a Broadway play that drew fire from Asians when Jonathan Pryce, a white actor, was cast as a Eurasian.

In Portland, according to a number of Asian

and Pacific Islander lesbians and gay men, discrimination comes in both blatant and more subtle forms.

When Nakagawa conducted door-to-door surveys in rural areas like Philomath, people would caution him that "If you move out here, you could get hurt," he recalled. When he walked down fraternity row at Oregon State University, students lobbed beer bottles at him.

"When I moved up to Portland I expected things to be significantly better, and they're not," Nakagawa said. "The anti-Asian movement has affected every part of the United States."

Even in progressive communities that pride themselves on tolerance, subtle anti-Asian messages persist. Forums and discussions dealing with ethnic minorities may omit Asians. Cultural stereotypes—even those involving such positive qualities as diligence, intelligence and self-sufficiency—may work against Asians, leading others to ignore or dismiss their interests.

Nakagawa and others said people frequently group all those of Asian descent together, failing to distinguish between, for instance, a 23-year-old Chinese student here on a temporary visa and a third-generation Korean-American raised in the Bay Area.

In the gay community, Asians may suffer a particular stereotype of sexual mystique. "I feel very uncomfortable about men who have a specific preference for Asians. It makes me feel like some kind of exotic trophy," said Chee.

And there are other, everyday irritations. Chee says some friends assume all Asians are undemonstrative and may be reluctant to hug him. Larry, who moved here from Hong Kong three and a half years ago, is often ignored in restaurants until he flags a waiter and asks for help.

"More than anything, Asians get overlooked," said Nakamoto, who is 31. "It's that myth of the 'model' Asian minority."

Coming out of cultural bounds

Few gay men and lesbians have an easy time telling parents and other relatives about their sexual orientation. But the coming-out process may be particularly traumatic for Asian men and women whose cultures tend to be intensely private about sexual and emotional matters.

Nearly all those interviewed—whether their parents were accepting or horrified by news about their offspring's sexual orientation—said part of the resolution is a tacit agreement not to discuss the matter further.

Karen Fong, whose father is Chinese and

whose mother is American, said her parents may have been more accepting of her lesbianism because their own mixed marriage challenged cultural norms. She is certain her father knows of her sexual orientation, although she has never told him directly.

"He's stayed here with us," she said. "He came in one day and asked me where [my lover] slept. I said, 'In here. With me.' My mother didn't want me to tell him."

Nakamoto, a Japanese-American raised in California's Orange County, said her mother was "pretty upset" when she learned that her daughter was a lesbian. "She didn't talk to me for quite a while. It's still not something we talk about. My parents are quite traditional even though they were both born here."

That traditionalism persists, even among the siblings of gay men and lesbians. Larry, 23, is a mechanical engineering student at Portland State University. He came out to his sisters and brothers just seven months ago, when a new relationship made it intolerable to hide his sexuality.

"One of my sisters brought up God; another brought up loving from the parents. One brother said I'm not a human being," he recalled. At the recent wedding of Larry's sister, his aunt approached him with tears in her eyes and asked to have a private meeting with him; he assumes the subject will be his sexuality.

"I've been trying to find a reason why I told them," he said. "I have a very naive reason. If my sister can bring her boyfriend to the house, why can't I? I can't lie to myself. I have to tell them in order to free myself."

A language barrier—sometimes standing between Asian-born parents and their more assimilated children—can further block the communication process.

Lim, born in Indonesia and raised in Hong Kong, said his language doesn't even have sufficient words to describe the concepts of same-

lesbian] was seen as something tremendously stupid and disappointing to the family."

Chee and others find themselves hindered on all sides by secrecy and stereotypes—Asians' myths about gays, gay and lesbian misunderstandings about Asians. Because gay culture so often seems synonymous with white culture, a gay son or lesbian daughter may be regarded as a traitor, someone actively flouting ethnic heritage as well as parental expectations.

And cultural pressures to marry and raise children bear down even on those whose parents live far away. Lim and Kim, both 27, said they hesitate to get too involved in Portland's Asian community because they would be questioned about their unmarried status and pressured to find a wife or husband.

Torn between identities

Many of those interviewed said they felt ambivalent about their Asian roots, unsure what aspects of their heritage to claim, not certain whether they really belong.

Karen Fong, who was raised in El Paso and attended a high school that was 50 percent Hispanic, said she sometimes squirms when the subject of identity politics comes up. "I'm uncomfortable when there's discussion about minority groups. I'm not sure whether I am one or not."

Kim, adopted at the age of nine months, remembers stepping off the plane on her first visit to Korea several years ago. She felt at home among hundreds of people whose features resembled hers. But they scoffed at her when she tried a few tentative phrases in Korean or fumbled with her chopsticks.

"I find myself not dealing enough with Asians," said Chee. "I separated myself from the Asian community for a long time. I feel embarrassed that I still have this internalized racism."

But he and others are trying to mend those



Karen Fong and Lynn Nakamoto.

PHOTO BY CATHERINE STAUFFER

sex love and partnership. "It's doubly hard to come out to your parents when you don't have a word for it," he said.

Family ties hold firm

The primacy of family in Asian cultures affects, to some degree, all the gay men and lesbians interviewed. Many preferred to use only first names in this article, for a variety of reasons. Some feared their U.S. visas could be threatened. Others were concerned that parents or relatives in the area would find out. Chee worries that his efforts to work in the Asian community on issues such as HIV education might be hindered if he were fully, publicly out.

"There's still a measure of lack of safety," he said. "A lot of it has to do with family honor, saving face for the family."

"Japanese American families put a lot of pressure on their children to excel, to succeed in this society," said Nakamoto. "There's a lot of emphasis on loyalty. So [my coming out as a

inner wounds, knit their identities as Asians and Pacific-Islanders, gays and lesbians, into a whole. The A/PILG group is one attempt to create a place where it is safe to be all of who they are.

And there are other efforts. Scot Nakagawa, through work with the Coalition for Human Dignity and the Asian-Pacific American Alliance, tries to teach people how racism and homophobia coincide.

Karen Fong studies tai chi and discovered, through a course in Chinese philosophy, that she has traits distinctive to her heritage, such as a strong work ethic and strict sense of family loyalty.

Others will keep talking, pressing past the stereotypes that surround them, because the price of silence is too high.

"I would really like to have my family know I'm involved in a gay community and doing things productively," said Larry. "I have no intention to hide my enjoyment."