

Younger Asian Americans navigate something new to their generation: Taking up space

By **Deepti Hajela**
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The chairs stay occupied at 12 Pell. Client after client, they come through the tiny barbershop on a narrow side street in Manhattan’s Chinatown. They come for the cuts, sure. But really, they’re coming for the cool.

From New York City, from the metro area, from many states away, they’re coming for what they see on 12 Pell’s lively social media accounts, where the young, predominantly Asian American barbers offer advice to teens and men of all ages and ethnicities with humor, quips, confidence, and ease — and not a hint of hesitation.

Karho Leung, 34, embodies that. A son of Chinatown and one of the founders of 12 Pell, he wanted to start a business that reflected him — his creativity, his longstanding interest in fashion and style, his desire for “building the world that I want to live in ... not asking for permission.”

About as American an idea as it gets, right? The hunger to make your own path, to find your own way, make your voice heard? In some ways, Leung is a case study for the latest incarnation of this. A look at social media and pop culture shows plenty of other Asian Americans of his and younger generations doing the same — in business, in politics, in content creation, in entertainment, in life.

If the space isn’t already there, they’re determined to create it.

This hasn’t always been the reality for many Americans

Any look at the country’s past shows that such an American reality hasn’t always belonged to everyone, including previous generations of Asian Americans. That American notion of having the freedom to stake out your own space? Oftentimes, that has meant less space for others.

Earlier generations of Asian Americans, some whose ancestors have been here for well over a century and others whose roots trace to recent decades, have lived in Americas where their immigrant-origin communities were smaller and regarded as intrinsically, unceasingly foreign. Americas where there was little mainstream familiarity with the countries Asians and Asian Americans traced their ancestries to, where there was no internet or social media culture that encouraged people to define their own lives.

Instead, there were stereotypes that persist to this day — of otherness, of broken-English speaking, and passiveness, at times sneaky or suspicious, often eating some kind of strange, pungent food. Other iterations included nerds and geeks who could be assumed to ace the math test more readily than score the winning point in the game or being fashionable enough to offer style guidance.



But even as those stereotypes still do harm, they don’t have the same power in a country and time when many Americans now eat from a global plate; where yoga studios and henna tattoos, temples and cultural festivals are everywhere; where Asian American creators have some room to tell their own stories; and where the size, variety, and geography of Asian American communities have increased dramatically in the last 20 years even as they remain a small part of the overall whole.

Those stereotypes don’t touch Leung — born in Maine and raised since childhood in Chinatown — the same way they impacted generations before him.

“It’s funny because even though I watched this type of stereotype and portrayal happen growing up, it never really resonated or hit me that that was what I was up against,” he says. “There’s a stigma that existed, but I always drove in my own lane.”

To claim space requires moving past old assumptions

Just ask Jeff Yang, 56, a writer who has spent decades chronicling Asian American communities and culture. When he’s asked if the cultural space that Leung inhabits and makes his own sounds like the world of Yang’s childhood, he laughs.

“I grew up in a world where I felt like everything about me was projected on me by other people,” Yang says. “The stories that were being told were all told by non-Asians about what I could do, who I could be, what I could look like.”

It’s not as if that world doesn’t still exist. Simran Anand, 27, was still part of just one of three South Asian families in Reading, Pennsylvania, growing up in the 2000s. She can relate, she says, to the sense earlier generations had of feeling culturally isolated in her day-to-day life when she stepped out of the family home.

But she had something they lacked — large-scale South Asian communities, like in Edison, New Jersey, where her parents went at least quarterly. A Sikh gurdwara about an hour away where she could learn

about her faith. And the option, when she got to college, of choosing a school where she could join thriving South Asian student groups.

For her, it’s both-and, not either-or, a sensibility she takes to her jewelry company, BySimran, which she started a couple of years ago to create pieces that drew inspiration from South Asian designs but have been adapted to fit her sensibilities as a young American woman as well.

“I am American, but I’m also South Asian,” she says. “And I don’t have to be one or the other.”

Demetri Manabat, 23, agrees. Born and raised in Las Vegas to a Filipino father and Mexican mother, the spoken word artist readily acknowledges “it sounds like a different world” to hear his parents’ experiences growing up.

They didn’t teach him or his brothers Tagalog, one of the languages of the Philippines, or Spanish because “they grew up in a time where that was kind of frowned upon to be speaking a different language. And so they were under the assumption that that kind of perception would continue throughout my years, which it didn’t.”

“I always used to get so mad at my parents like, ‘Why don’t you teach me a language?’ And it wasn’t until recently that I was finally kind of able to grasp, it was nothing like it is now.”

A new generation emerges, with less self-consciousness

Alex Paik remembers. The 43-year-old Korean American artist came of age in a predominantly white suburb outside of Philadelphia and now lives in Los Angeles. “When I was growing up, it was like I either was not Korean enough or too Korean” — caught between his immigrant parents’ standards and the America around him, he says. “I felt like I was trying to measure up to these always moving goalposts.”

Today, he’s intrigued watching his 11-year-old daughter. “She loves to read, and there’s so many stories now that are

REDEFINING REALITY. Karho Leung, one of the founders of 12 Pell, a local barbershop, stands for a portrait on Pell Street in Manhattan’s Chinatown neighborhood in New York. Anchored in the Chinatown community and equally at home elsewhere in the city, Leung says he’s “building the world that I want to live in ... not asking for permission.” (AP Photo/John Minchillo, File)

written by Asian American women that center Asian and Asian American girls as protagonists and I think that’s so cool,” he says. “I don’t know how it would affect your sense of self, but it must affect it somehow, so I’m really curious to see how she grows up ... It’s just normal for her.”

He, Yang, and others point to multiple factors that have impacted the lives of Asian Americans over time, including the demographic reality that there are more, and bigger, communities across the country largely due to the 1965 reform of immigration laws. Globalization has played a hand as well, introducing cultures to each other as the world has gotten smaller. And there’s no overstating the role of the internet and technology.

Of course, there have always been those in America’s communities of Asian descent willing to be the groundbreakers, the pioneers in politics, protest, business, entertainment, and art. DJ Rekha is among them. In 1997, Rekha started Basement Bhangra, a monthly party at a Manhattan club that would last for 20 years and was the introduction for many to the beats and rhythm of Bhangra, a musical style originating in the Indian subcontinent.

“What I was thinking is not dissimilar from what anyone else who’s trying to create something is,” Rekha says. “You want to hopefully do things that feel authentic to you, that have an audience who connects with it.”

Paik thinks some of what he’s seeing in younger generations is also the natural outpouring that comes from a connection to the country that looks different to those born here than it does for immigrants.

“When you start with the assumption that you belong in a space, I feel like that changes how you approach things,” he says. “Whether or not that space actually wants you is kind of beside the point. There’s an attitude you carry, like, yeah, of course this is my house, this is my country. I grew up here.”

And that last statement — “I grew up here” — is the operative engine as new generations of Asian Americans rise and claim their own space — even if the assumptions they make about what’s possible for them could be a bit unsettling for other generations.

“Previous generations, of course, they’re going to have that kind of like ‘what is going on’ moment,” Manabat says. “I do think that is the goal, to kind of have that moment of ‘This is insane,’ but it’s everything that you kind of hoped would happen.”

In short: building the world they want to live in. And not asking for permission.



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