



Asian/Pacific Islander Americans

by Stephen O. Murray

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The category "Asian/Pacific Islander" has only slightly more specific cultural content than "people of color," "non-white," or "the Other." Chinese or Indian or Filipino each encompass immense, linguistically and culturally variegated populations with long histories. However, the white American majority in North America uses blunt categories and, through indiscriminate lumping of "them," promotes some solidarity, sometimes overcoming deeply rooted antipathies for those from peoples historically antagonistic to each other, such as Koreans and Japanese.

Even some who take on the identity of unspecified "Asian" may regret being cut off from their particular ethnic backgrounds. For instance, Song Cho observes that "To internalize 'Asian' as my identity is to see myself as an outsider would see me, where the rich cultural and historical specificity of my Korean culture is homogenized and erased, while permitting the oppressor to dwell in his cultural ignorance."

Immigration Patterns

Chinese males were recruited to work on the western end of the transcontinental railroad after the American Civil War. During the late nineteenth century, enclaves formed of mostly male Chinese and Filipinos and of more balanced sex ratios of Japanese, none of whom could become U. S. citizens.

Immigration was cut off by a series of Oriental Exclusion laws that were repealed only following the U. S. alliance with China against Japan during World War II (during which Japanese Americans living on the West Coast were forced into concentration camps away from the coast).

Immigration increased substantially with the 1965 overhaul of immigration laws. The 2000 United States Census found that most U. S. residents who classified themselves as Asian or Pacific Islander were foreign-born (61 percent) or the children of one or two foreign-born parents (27 percent). Thus, there are APIs with ancestries in North America of more than a century, along with numerous post-1965 immigrants and American-born children of those immigrants and post-1975 refugees from Southeast Asia.

Difference and Diversity

There is a considerable range in the amount of education of the immigrants and a lesser but still substantial difference between that of American-born descendants of different groups of Asia/Pacific Islander emigrants. Tolerance for homosexuality also varies among APIs from group to group.

While there are Chinese ethnic enclaves in various Chinatowns such as Flushing, New York and Monterey Park, California; a substantial Filipino population in Daly City, California (just south of San Francisco); and some "little Saigons" large enough to make networks of gay Vietnamese, gay Filipinos or gay Chinese possible, the relatively small numbers and geographical dispersion of others (for example, Sinhalese, Taiwanese, Guamanian) makes the consolidation of an intra-ethnic glbtq organization and/or identity unlikely.

Glbtc people from such smaller immigrant pools and those with more than one Asian/Pacific Islander derivation would seem to be more likely than glbtq Chinese and Filipinos to socialize with and identify as Gay Asian/Pacific Islanders (GAPI). Not knowing what the denominators (the total numbers of gay persons for each ethnicity) are, however, comparison of rates of self-identification is impossible.

Eric Wat's history of early GAPI organizing in Los Angeles suggests that those who sought exclusively "Asian" groups and racially endogamous relationships (that is, relationships with other members of their group) were mostly born in the United States or mostly educated in English, whereas those born and raised in Asia or on Pacific Islands were more likely to seek biracial organizations and racially exogamous relationships, primarily with white gay males.

American-born GAPIs have longer experience of being lumped together as "Asians," and many do not speak the languages of their ancestors. That is, they share speaking English with American-born persons of other ethnic backgrounds.

GAPIs raised in North America have also been more concerned about appearing conventionally masculine than some immigrants, who embarrass the American-born with flamboyant effeminacy that seems to the American-born to reinforce the popular stereotype of "Asian" unmasculinity and servility.

GAPI Pan-ethnicity in America

There is very little written about GAPI pan-ethnicity in America, and practically no social science research. Hom and Ma and Richard Fung assert that GAPI men mostly pair with Anglos, GAPI women mostly pair with other women of color.

Attestation of comfort in "coming home" to partners who "really understand where I'm coming from," along with some of the same skepticism about whether there is any acceptance at home--among whatever "my people" is--parallel lesbian and gay African-Americans and Latinos.

Differences, including racial ones, are often eroticized--even fetishized--while smooth domestic relationships are facilitated by shared cultural assumptions and language. Relatedly, while some GAPIs market "exotic" differences (which range from delicate flowers to hyper-macho warriors), others (especially those who grew up in North America) are horrified to be considered "exotic."

Given the general ignorance about the history of homosexualities in ancient Asian, medieval Japanese, and traditional Pacific Island (or African) cultures, American ethnic community activists and parents of glbtq individuals often consider homosexuality "a Western concept, a product of losing touch with one's Asian [or Pacific] heritage, of becoming too assimilated," report Hom and Ma. Not only elders, but ethnically similar peers retain such notions.

This attitude probably accounts for Chan's finding that of 19 lesbians and 16 gay men belonging to gay/lesbian Asian organizations, 27 reported it harder to come out to other Asian-Americans, in contrast to four who found it easier. A majority reported greater comfort and identification with gay or lesbian than with Asian-American (20% were unwilling to divide themselves).

Duazo's survey of 28 mostly Chinese-American gay men (16 of whom were born in the United States, 19 raised in the United States; 11 of whom felt completely, 12 highly, and 5 somewhat acculturated) found 9 in frequent contact with their families, 12 in moderate contact, 6 in low contact, with one having no contact. Ten had not come out to family members.

In interviews with a very unrandom sample of eleven Japanese-, Filipina-, and Chinese-American mothers; one Japanese-American father and one Chinese-American father of glbtq children, Hom elicited a number of recollections of daughters and sons that the parents knew to be homosexual (usually by gender deviance)

when they were growing up. These parents did not blame assimilation or Anglo/American culture for their children's sexual orientation, but were concerned about "face" and the contempt of other family members and neighbors for their queer offspring.

Wat noted that "the perceived conservatism of Asian communities has often led queer Asians to turn their backs on their ethnic and cultural 'identities.'" Of his own case, he remarked, "My parents' paradox--they hate queers, but they love me, even though I am gay--can be achieved by separating my gayness from my other identities. . . . This is easily done, since, for most Asian parents, being Asian and being gay are mutually exclusive. . . . There is not a need to talk about 'it' because it is only a problem for white people: 'it' is a white disease."

Joel Tan, a Filipino emigrant, observed, "I was not only invisible to others but also to myself," a feeling expressed by many of those who came out before there were GAPI organizations. Nicholas Shi recalled that before going to college in the United States, "I knew I was Chinese and I knew I was gay, but not having any contact with other gay people, I never had a chance to explore the implications of being a minority within a minority."

Takagi generalized that glbtq Asian-Americans strive to keep their glbtq world separate from their family and natal/ethnic community more than do other kinds of gay and lesbian Americans. This is one explanation for a later age of first homosexual sexual experiences for male GAPIs than for African-, Anglo-, or Latino-American males.

More GAPI men than men of other ancestries recall that they knew they were gay long before they had any sexual experience. Once they stopped holding back from the same-sex sex that they had desired for a long time, however, these men moved quickly to coming out, so that GAPI males came out on the average at an earlier age than African or Anglo Americans.

Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian lesbians and gay men seem to endeavor to compartmentalize gay and family worlds more than Anglos, while Austronesians (notably Filipinos) try to bring everyone they love together, coming out sooner to parents and celebrating holidays with their gay and natal families mixed together. This leaves Southeast Asians somewhere in between.

Studies of Gay Men of Particular Ethnicities

Although there is little research focused on gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered Asian/Pacific Islander Americans, there are a few studies of particular API ethnicities.

Wooden, Kawasaki, and Mayeda asked thirteen Los Angeles-area gay Japanese-American men about their "double minority" experiences. They reported widespread belief in the Japanese-American community that gay Japanese-Americans do not exist. Although one thought that "as long as nothing is said, there is no problem," another expressed the majority view from this sample: "The Japanese-American community tolerates homosexuality in other communities, but in their own community? No way! It is looked upon as being dishonorable and disgraceful."

The most interesting finding in the Wooden, Kawasaki, and Mayeda study was that "five of the seven who were 'out' to family members were somewhat involved in Asian political activity, compared to none of those who were not open about their homosexuality." Similarly, 57 percent of those who were out to family members (mostly, sisters) were "involved in the gay community" in contrast to only 17 percent of those who were not out to family. Readers are left to guess whether the same individuals were active in both.

Manalansan reported that gay Filipino-American men in New York do not identify as Asian or even Pacific Islander. He sees little likelihood of pan-ethnicity becoming salient. Filipinos who are socialized into gay culture in the United States tend to reject idioms of effeminacy (traditional, gender-stratified *baklai*

homosexuality) as archaic and/or lower class, while those whose early homosexual experience was in the Philippines tend to retain it. He also found class and language differences to be less salient to gay Filipinos in the United States than in the Philippines.

Carrier, Nguyen, and Su located Vietnamese gay networks in Southern California and learned something about Vietnamese men who have sex with men but are not integrated into those social and sexual networks.

They found "one 'large' network of recently arrived homosexual Vietnamese men who socialize in a cafe located in the major Little Saigon mall" in Garden Grove. Information for newcomers about the homosexual world of Little Saigon and about relatively well-off older Vietnamese men who prefer younger Vietnamese men as sex partners moved through this network. Such "patrons" throw parties and may provide jobs that are contingent on sexual complaisance.

In addition to this scene, Carrier et al. found two groups of "moderately acculturated young men," one gathering at the central Los Angeles house of a gay couple in their late 20s, the other gathering at the house in southern Orange County of a Vietnamese gay man in his late 40s.

Most of those in these networks arrived in the United States before or around puberty. Most of their sexual partners have been (and continue to be) Anglo or Latino, though they gather to socialize where they can speak Vietnamese with gay Vietnamese friends. Some spoke of moving from a "White phase" to a "Vietnamese phase" in their sexual relationships, but the network "is more social in its orientation than sexual."

There are also ethnic "loners" who have Anglo male sexual partners but who do not participate in friendship circles or institutions of the gay world or of the Vietnamese-American enclave in Orange County.

The gay Vietnamese interviewed by Carrier et al. reported the Vietnamese-American community is unable to conceive that a Vietnamese could be gay and also as believing that Vietnamese men could be involved in homosexual activity only if seduced by white perverts or if they are *lai cai* (half-man, half-woman). Formation of a Vietnamese chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) in 1991 and its subsequent visibility at the annual Tet Fairs in Little Saigon have begun to challenge this invisibility, however.

Conclusion

The ratio of what is known to what is unknown about GAPIs is even lower than for glbtq of other American ethnicities. A great deal more research is needed to sort out differences among GAPI ethnicities, between immigrant and American-born GAPIs, between GAPIs in West Coast cities with large API populations and those located where there are small API populations, and between GAPIs and other glbtq Americans.

Those who are glbtq of every ethnic group overestimate the ease of acceptance of living and loving the same sex in other groups. The fear of losing families is general, though it has a special edge for those working in family businesses and/or in ethnic enclaves. Because of the small size and likely unrepresentativeness of GAPI samples in research published so far, none of the generalizations discussed herein should be considered well-established facts, even about GAPI men, about whom more has been written than about GAPI women.

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Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

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Stephen O. Murray earned a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Toronto. Since completing a postdoctoral stint in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, he has worked in public health. His books include *American Gay*, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, and *Homosexualities*.