

The Negotiation of Political Identities: Being Queer and an Asian Pacific Islander

Mingzhao Xu

Writer's comment: When Professor Maira asked each of us to conduct a study of an Asian American subculture, I was at a loss. Sororities, fraternities, sports clubs, and culture-based organizations were the most prominent subcultures, but students has already claimed them. I wanted to study something unique. I wanted my research to reflect the challenges, aspirations, and hopes of an almost invisible and marginalized community. But where would I find this community? I reflected on my interactions and I realized that some of the most interesting and compassionate people I've met were APIQs (Asian Pacific Islander queers). Out of respect for the APIQ community, intellectual curiosity, and a desire to bring to light the struggles of APIQs, I decided to research the APIQ subculture. While completing this assignment, I have made new friends, explored queer theories from radical Asian American scholars, and come away with a richer college experience. I hope that this essay will inspire people to sympathize with the struggles of APIQs and appreciate the complexity of their experience.

– *Mingzhao Xu*

Instructor's comment: Mingzhao's essay was written for a course on Asian American Popular Culture for which I asked students to do a research paper on an Asian American subculture based on an interview or field work. Her essay far exceeded the expectations for this assignment in the astute theoretical insights and interpretive sensitivity she was able to bring to the interview with a queer Vietnamese American woman. What is perhaps most impressive about this paper is how it moves deftly between the interview and research on Asian American queers, using quotes from the interview to support and also rethink theoretical positions on sexuality, race, and culture. Mingzhao explores the idea of multiple marginalities in a way that attends to the subtlety of identity while being empathetic to the experiences of Asian American queers. Her argument is lucid, precise, and politically passionate. In expressing a committed political imagination, Mingzhao understands the stakes of academic writing.

– *Sunaina Maira, Asian American Studies*

The Asian Pacific Islander Queer (APIQ) association is a unique subculture on campus that is mainly composed of Asian Americans. It provides a forum and community for queer Asian Americans who face issues that are different from the larger Asian American or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) communities. Some queer Asian Americans cannot identify wholly with the Asian communities, which may refuse to accept homosexuality, nor can they submerge into the larger LGBT culture, which they may perceive as racist and insensitive toward the needs of Asian American queers. Drawing on an interview with a Vietnamese American lesbian and critical texts, this paper addresses two questions. How do queer Asian Americans negotiate their desire to express their sexuality and maintain their meaningful relationship with their Asian families and communities? How do they balance and affirm their marginalized status in a heterosexist and racist society? While Asian parents perceive homosexuality as a threat to their attitude toward sexuality, family, and gender, reconciliation between Asian American queers and their families is possible. The APIQ subculture and the way its members acknowledge the complexity of their identities are reactions to racism in the mainstream and LGBT culture.

As a first generation Vietnamese American, my interviewee recognized that one of the main differences between the APIQ subculture and the mainstream, mainly white, LGBT community lies in the unique struggles of its members. She says, APIQs are “more focused on family, so it’s harder to come out” (interview). Many first generation Asian parents did not approve of their children’s queer identities. The silence surrounding sexuality in the home, parents’ expectations for their children, and the importance placed on traditional gender roles make it difficult for Asian Americans to find full acceptance of their homosexuality. The marginalization of APIQs may differ in quality and severity from that of their white counterparts.

Because “sexuality is an issue rarely or never discussed” in Asian families (Hom 561), it is no wonder that homosexuality itself would be considered a forbidden topic. In Alice Hom’s study, the Asian parents’ recollections of their encounter with gays/lesbians in their communities while growing up highlight the silence surrounding homosexuality and the voicelessness of the queers themselves. For example, a Japanese immigrant mother recalls that lesbians were designated as “S” in her college, while Pilipina mothers described their communities’ name-

calling against gays/lesbians (563). These statements testify to the silence surrounding lesbian relationships and vocal opposition to those who identified as queer, while the voices of the queers themselves are absent. The Asian American's decision to come out transgresses the silence surrounding sexuality in Asian families, making tangible the taboo topic of homosexuality.

Asian parents also have difficulty accepting homosexual children because of the value they attach to the notion of a proper family, which they believe can only be organized according to heterosexual gender roles. My interviewee explains Asian parents' discomfort with homosexuality in their children; she argues, "Asian culture is a lot about tradition . . . [The parents] just care about culture, the [reproduction of the] family line. . . . If you're gay, you're not doing that. That's why that's not acceptable" (interview). Parents equate their tradition or culture with reproduction within a hetero-normative space and assume that queers cannot form families. The interviewee says, "Since APIQs cannot marry, it's like opposing their tradition" (interview). Parents often feel that gays/lesbian relationships betray their idea of a family, which they believe must be heterosexual and an inherent part of Asian culture.

Since children are expected to continue the family line, traditional gender roles are also strongly underscored. According to my interviewee, "I dress, behave the way I want to, not very feminine. Not what you expect from a typical Asian girl—the female Asian girl who is expected to get married, get a husband and be subordinate to him" (interview). My interviewee not only rejects this construction of Asian femininity, but she is also fascinated by butch, "male-identified" Asian lesbians, who perform masculinity through their appearance and behavior (email). The fact that gays/lesbians do not necessarily assume gender identities based on sex is disconcerting to some Asian parents, who were taught to equate the defiance of assigned gender roles with immorality (Hom 563). The parents in Hom's study grew up in communities that "associated gender-role reversals with gays and lesbians" (Hom 564). These role reversals were seen as aberrations and served as the basis of the communities' harassment of "tomboys" or "feminine" Asian men—a form of homophobia parents may have "internalized" (Hom 563). By affirming their queer identities, queer Asian Americans, like my interviewee and the children in Hom's study, seem to transgress their parents' norms regarding culture, family and gender. This perceived transgression shatters the culturally accepted silence regarding sexuality and de-stabilizes the heterosexist definition of the Asian family and traditional gender roles. Silence regarding

sexuality, the social constructions of family and gender constitute the main barriers to the acceptance of Asian American queers by the Asian community. APIQ members must struggle collectively with these issues.

For APIQ members who come out to their parents, the threat of alienation from their families is real. My interviewee expressed this fear of alienation when she describes how butch Asian lesbians, unable to pass as heterosexuals, would be "ostracized by their family" and forced to turn to the LGBT community for a sense of belonging (email). She says, "So in essence, the butch Asian gives up her Asian identity to embrace her sexual identity. This is also a concerning issue to me" (email). My interviewee equates being alienated from the family with losing one's Asian identity; for people in APIQ, membership within the family is synonymous with belonging to an ethnic community, which validates a person's ethnic identity. Alienation from one's Asian parents would undermine the coherency of their being Asian *and* queer.

Although coming out to the family entails the possibility of ostracism, the process may lead to reconciliation and acceptance. Dana Y. Takagi, a social critic, believes that "These disparate worlds [of Asia American and gay American] occasionally collide through individuals who manage to move . . . between these spaces. But it is the act of deliberately bringing these worlds closer together that seems unthinkable" (551). However, the actions of Hom's subjects contradict this sentiment; Asian parents spoke to a gathering of gay Asian American men about their son's coming-out story, which led some men to cry (569). The parents were motivated by love for their children to bridge the gap between these "disparate worlds" and their physical and emotional presence in the APIQ community represents the collapse of the boundaries between Asia American and gay America. Similarly, my interviewee anticipated that in the future, parents would be more accepting (interview). APIQs who come out risk being alienated from their ethnic communities, which threatens the integrity of their identities. However, the process allows the potential reconciliation between parents and their children based on acceptance.

APIQ is significant because it is a haven for the gay and lesbian Asian Americans who believe that racism in mainstream society has filtered into the larger, LGBT culture. The lack of adequate representation of APIQs in the media leads to racists, misperceptions of APIQs, such as stereotyping APIQ males as "exotic" or "emasculated." The lack of representation is evident in the fact that even texts that attempt to provide a diverse picture of queers fail to mention APIQs and their struggles with family acceptance (Hom 562) and that one of APIQ's main goals is to "make themselves more visible" (interview) to society.

The sexual identities of Asian Americans have been circumscribed by a variety of oppressive stereotypes, which has informed white gay men's attitude toward gay Asian American men. For example, my interviewee feels that some gay Asian American men "feel exoticized by white men" and must confront the stereotype that they are effeminate (interview). The lack of any tolerable APIQ representation can turn the LGBT community, a potentially safe space, into an oppressive one. Despite accusations from the LGBT community of being "exclusive," (interview) which only demonstrates insensitivity toward the wants of Asian American queers, APIQs exist as a form of resistance against the racism directed toward Asian Americans and a response to their need for a safe space.

APIQ provides a space for self-definition—an environment where queer Asian Americans can fully claim both their Asian and gay identities. Yet APIQs must constantly contend with ideas that threaten to polarize their identities. For example, APIQs feel the need to counteract the attitude that homosexuality is synonymous with acculturation, which is compounded by the mainstream's idea that "Asians can't be gay" (interview). My interviewee expressed her parents' fear that homosexuality is mutually exclusive from Asian culture; she says, "My parents thought that Asian people can't be gay and that being gay is a white culture thing. They're afraid that I'll lose my culture" (interview). Not all parents believe this myth, especially those who have been exposed to homosexuals in their native countries (Hom 563). The myth that queerness is a sign of assimilation implicitly forces APIQs to assert their loyalty to either the Asian family *or* homosexuality, as if a person's ethnic identity can be dissociated from his/her sexual identity. The absence of APIQs in the mainstream only affirms this myth. This conflict, like the Asian parent's negative attitude toward their children's homosexuality, may subside in the future as more Asian Americans come out and force their parents and communities to confront previous prejudices regarding homosexuality. As APIQs gain more recognition as a part of American society in the future, the representation of APIQs in the mainstream may improve. By offering a space where queer Asian Americans can affirm both their homosexuality and ethnic heritage, APIQ is an important catalyst for creating a society that affirms a comprehensive queer Asian American identity.

The APIQ members experience marginality in a unique way; they recognize that they may occupy a multitude of oppressed spaces simultaneously and this recognition is a source of empowerment. When speaking about APIQ women's motivation for entering politics, my interviewee explains that it is "because we're a triple minority . . . we're

Asian, women, and gay" (interview). Although Takagi rejects the "triple jeopardy" approach to understanding queer Asian American identity because she does not believe oppression can be separated into discrete categories (548), my interviewee does see herself as a "triple minority" based on race, gender, and orientation. This reflects her recognition that different forms of oppression exist on *one* body rather than the belief that these oppressions are separate. This integration of spaces is empowering and serves as the basis of an alliance with other people of color. My interviewee says, "As APIQ women, they identify with women of color who are feminists and very active in getting those civil rights" (interview). As marginalized beings whose race, gender, and orientation may be marked as subordinate, APIQ men and women can utilize their viewpoints and experiences to fight for political freedom.

APIQ draws its members from, and shares commonalities with, the larger LGBT and Asian American communities. APIQ is similar to LGBT in that its members may share common language and codes, such as using "butch" and "femme" to denote masculine or feminine lesbians, respectively. APIQ is composed of Asian Americans who engage with other aspects of Asian or Asian American popular culture through dress, behavior, attitude, or aspirations. However, APIQs are unique and different from these overarching communities in that they share the struggle to gain acceptance within the Asian family and community as queers and in the mainstream as Asian Americans. APIQs must cope with the notion that homosexuality threatens Asian culture and family, the possibility of losing ties to their ethnic communities, and racism within society and the LGBT community. APIQ acknowledges these issues and its members constantly work to balance multiple identities, which, when done successfully, can be a source of empowerment.

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