

ASIAN
AMERICAN Policy
Review

Vol. 29

Harvard Kennedy School
Student Publication
2018-2019

ASIAN AMERICAN POLICY REVIEW
A Harvard Kennedy School Student Publication

Volume 29
Spring 2019

2018-2019
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FOREWORD

Twenty-nine years ago, students produced the first issue of the *Asian American Policy Review* (AAPR). In the same year, a Chinese immigrant, nail salon worker, and wife of a refugee gave birth to a daughter. Twenty-nine years later, her daughter became the editor-in-chief of the *Asian American Policy Review* to elevate the narratives that supremacies render invisible. This edition of AAPR represents our contribution to the long legacy of Asian America speaking truth to power.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Third World Liberation Front, whose victories give us language to articulate our truths and inspire contemporary struggles, and this year is marked by our communities’ continued fight for racial justice. Yet, our communities have risen up in different ways and even on different sides of the struggle.

While some Chinese Americans lined up at the gates of Harvard to threaten affirmative action, Southeast Asian Americans organized against the Trump administration’s deportation of Vietnamese refugees, and Desis prevented the displacement of poor people of color by pushing Amazon out of Queens. Our community is everywhere, though our struggle is often made invisible but for the work of our community on the ground. The 29th Edition speaks with the volume of frontline voices in service of building a solidarity politic.

The contributors to the 29th Edition demonstrate that Asian Americans are blasian, brown, queer, trans, intergenerational, organized, and resilient. Our contributors illuminated the multiplicity of Asian America, igniting dialogue about the policy solutions that our complexity demands. Contributors make the case for gender justice and transgender rights in the Pilipinx community, transformative mental health practices, transnational advocacy strategies, and pan-Asian movement building.

We lift up the wisdom and evidence of our communities to demonstrate the power of our multitudes, resist white supremacy, and advance the collective welfare of communities of color.

The 29th Edition would not be possible without the efforts of our many supporters. Our staff is grateful for the guidance, patience, and support of our publisher Martha Foley and our faculty advisor Richard Parker. We thank our Advisory Board for supporting the mission and vision of the Review. We extend gratitude to our authors for their thoughtful contributions. Finally, I must acknowledge the editorial staff of the *Asian American Policy Review*—together, we embody an energetic commitment to amplifying the voices of AAPIs in the fight for justice.

I am honored to present you the 29th Edition of the *Asian American Policy Review*.

In gratitude and solidarity,

SYDNEY FANG
Editor-in-Chief

THE BROWN ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT: ADVOCATING FOR SOUTH ASIAN, SOUTHEAST ASIAN, AND FILIPINO AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

Kevin L. Nadal

While the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1950s and early 1960s made great strides toward racial equity in the United States, it focused primarily on issues affecting Black Americans. Black activists and leaders like Rosa Parks, James Baldwin, and Martin Luther King Jr. advocated against numerous inequities that were detrimental to Black people and communities, including, but not limited to, segregation, hate crimes, and police brutality. Shortly following, the Black Power Movement emerged, emphasizing cultural integrity and pride, self-acceptance, and the celebration of historical attainments and contributions of Black people.¹ In the 1960s and 1970s, the Chicano Movement formalized, highlighting injustices affecting Mexican American people.² Community organizers from the United Farmworkers like Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta became nationally known, as they led one of the most successful labor strikes in American history. Terms like “La Raza” and “Brown Power” were introduced with the aim of uniting people of Latinx origin (e.g., Central Americans, South Americans, Caribbean Americans, etc.) and encouraging them to reclaim a pride in their ethnic identities.³

In the late 1960s, Chinese American, Japanese American, and Filipino American activists and community leaders (mostly college students) began to form coalitions to advocate for the civil rights and visibility of Asian Americans.^{4,5} As the most populous Asian ethnic groups in the United States at the time, these leaders believed that building bridges between their various

Asian ethnic groups would result in a stronger united voice and, thus, more political capital. The term “Asian American” was created as a way of combatting previous offensive labels like “Oriental” or “Mongoloid,” and the Asian American Movement formed with the mission of building a united front among Asian American ethnic groups.⁶

In response to the Black Power Movement and the Brown Power Movement, the Asian American Movement was sometimes referred to as the Yellow Power Movement. For instance, activist Amy Uyematsu (1971) stated that the movement sought “freedom from racial oppression through the power of a consolidated yellow people.”⁷ At the time, many Filipino Americans vocally protested the terminology, as they did not identify with the term “yellow” and instead identified as “brown.”⁸ Even as other Asian Americans with darker skin (e.g., Asian Indians, Vietnamese Americans) began to immigrate to the United States in larger numbers, the usage of “Yellow Power” continued. Whether intentional or not, such terminology set the tone for East Asian Americans (especially Chinese and Japanese Americans) to be centered as the dominant voice in the Asian American movement and later in Asian American studies.^{9,10,11}

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the inception of the Asian American Movement, Filipino Americans, South Asian Americans, and Southeast Asian

Americans have consistently vocalized feelings of marginalization and exclusion within the pan-ethnic group. Filipino Americans have described discrimination from other Asian Americans, including being told they are “not Asian enough,” being stereotyped as inferior or uncivilized, or being completely overlooked or excluded altogether.^{12,13} South Asian Americans have shared how they are excluded from the Asian American umbrella because of their cultural, religious, and racial/phenotypic differences, resulting in lack of representation in Asian American studies, narratives, and media representations.^{14,15} Southeast Asian Americans have reported feeling like “other Asians” and being stereotyped as being inferior to East Asian Americans.^{16,17,18} Individuals from these three subgroups describe a common narrative that “Asian” usually refers to East Asians, resulting in feelings of marginalization and invisibility within the Asian American umbrella.

In order for Asian Americans to further advance as a political voice in the

United States, it is imperative to address historical hierarchies, community dynamics, and inter-ethnic conflicts. Further, in order for Asian Americans of all ethnic groups to feel invested in advocating for a pan-Asian umbrella group, they must all feel included and must believe that their best interests are acknowledged. Thus, the purpose of this commentary is twofold. First, I will describe the history of the “Brown Asian American Movement” as a way of contextualizing historical power dynamics that have been pervasive in Asian American communities since the 1960s. Second, I will provide recommendations for how current Asian American leaders, activists, and policy makers can be mindful of ways that colorism and privilege impacts invisibility and community dynamics. In doing so, I hope community

leaders and members continue the conversations that began many decades ago but that have generally gone unaddressed or ignored on a national level.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BROWN ASIANS

In order to understand the term “Brown Asian American,” one must first recognize how the term “Asian American” came to be and whom it had historically included. As aforementioned, the term first described the largest Asian ethnic groups at the inception of the Asian American Movement in the 1960s, including Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans. These groups are also credited as being the first Asian Americans in the United States, with Filipinos first landing in 1587 and the Chinese and Japanese first arriving as laborers in the 1840s.

“Individuals from these three subgroups describe a common narrative that ‘Asian’ usually refers to East Asians, resulting in feelings of marginalization and invisibility within the Asian American umbrella.”

Despite this, the term “Asian American” did not initially include Asian Indian Americans, who had first migrated to the United States in the late 1800s. Despite

India being located in Asia, the US Census initially categorized Asian Indians as “Caucasian,” with a primary reason being that they were not considered a “discriminated minority group.”¹⁹ To fight against this, the Association of Indians in America organized in the late 1960s and lobbied that Indian Americans be labeled as Asian Americans. By the 1980 Census, the term “Asian Indian” was created, and Asian Indians were identified as a minority group under the Asian umbrella. By 2000, the Asian category was expanded to include Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and Nepalese Americans, and the term “South Asian” became popularized as an umbrella term for these ethnic groups.²⁰

Further adding to, and complicating, the Asian category was the emergence of Southeast Asian Americans (e.g.,

Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong Americans) who migrated to the United States in the mid-1970s, mostly as refugees escaping war and violence. Because of the circumstances for their migration to the United States, Southeast Asian Americans' lower socioeconomic statuses and educational attainment countered the model-minority stereotypes that had been created about the existing Asian American groups at the time.²¹ As a result, Southeast Asian Americans had straddled between positive, yet pressured, stereotypes (e.g., being expected to do well in school) to negative, harmful stereotypes like being viewed as a gangster or a delinquent.²²

The first documented usage of the term "Brown Asian" is from the early 1970s, when Brown Asian caucuses formed at various Asian American national and regional conferences. For example, a Brown Asian Caucus emerged at the inaugural National Conference on Asian American Mental Health in 1972, where Filipinos were joined by Pacific Islanders (i.e., Native Hawaiians, Samoans, and Chamorros) who also felt marginalized as part of the Asian American/ Pacific Islander (AAPI) umbrella group.²³ One of the conflicts for Filipino Americans and Pacific Islanders at this time was that they recognized that the benefit of building coalitions with other Asian Americans was the strength in numbers; however, they also learned that such coalitions may not actually benefit their best interests.²⁴ Despite this, Filipino Americans and Pacific Islanders who were involved in the earlier parts of the Asian American Movement continued to participate in pan-ethnic community organizing and advocacy, in hopes that the needs of their ethnic group would eventually be addressed.

Since then, Filipino, South Asian, and Southeast Asian Americans have spoken against feelings of invisibility or marginalization within the general Asian American community in myriad ways. For example,

when Asian American Studies was first established in the late 1960s, course content across programs often centered experiences of Chinese and Japanese Americans, with few publications and classes that examined other subgroups' histories or experiences. Author Fred Cordova described Filipinos as "Forgotten Asian Americans," citing how Asian American Studies had traditionally excluded narratives of Filipino Americans,²⁵ while Filipina American scholar Dawn Bohulano Mabalon discussed how previous descriptions of Filipino Americans by early Asian American studies scholars had been inaccurate, misrepresentative, or altogether false.²⁶

In the late 1980s, South Asian American student groups formed on college campuses, with the intention of combating religious bigotry affecting their communities while also challenging the exclusion of South Asians within pan-ethnic organizations and Asian American studies departments.²⁷ In their seminal text *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, scholars Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth highlighted how the term "Asian American" was not initially intended to include Asian Americans who were not East Asian and how South Asian Americans had continuously been excluded from Asian American studies.²⁸

Similarly, as Southeast Asian American student populations increased on campuses in the 1990s, so did advocacy efforts for inclusion within Asian American studies. For example, at San Francisco State University (where ethnic studies and Asian American studies were founded), the Asian American Studies department only offered one Southeast Asian American course from 1989 to 1996.²⁹ Students critiqued that the course was not enough, eventually pressuring the department to advocate for more Southeast Asian American courses and faculty as well as the founding of the Vietnamese American Studies Center in 1996.³⁰ Similar efforts

occurred with other Southeast Asian ethnic groups in other parts of the country, including Hmong Americans in the Midwest who had fought for more representation and inclusion in their Asian American Studies departments too.³¹

Through the years, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Filipino Americans have been vocal within, and toward, the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS), the primary national organization for Asian American studies, for their centering of East Asian American perspectives and their bias of, and discrimination toward, other Asian American groups. For instance, in analyzing AAAS conferences, scholar Peter Kiang noted that from 1995 to 2000, only 4.35 percent of a total of 2,162 presenters were Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, or Hmong (in comparison to 50 percent of presenters who were Chinese or Japanese).³² Further, in 1998, the Filipino American caucus of AAAS protested the organization when the AAAS awarded a major literary award to a Japanese American author whose novel depicted Filipino Americans in racially offensive and stereotypical ways.³³

Many Brown Asian Americans have been particularly vocal about the need for data disaggregation, as a way of understanding the unique needs of their ethnic communities and combatting false notions of a homogenous model minority. In 1988, Filipino American lobbyists advocated for California Senate Bill 1813, which required all California state personnel surveys or statistical tabulations to classify persons of Filipino ancestry as "Filipino" rather than as Asian, Pacific Islander, or Hispanic.³⁴ Because of this state law, Filipino Americans in California have since always been disaggregated from government data, allowing for policy makers and community leaders to be aware of specific issues affecting the group. Decades later, similar efforts transpired for Hmong American community leaders in Wisconsin who formed an

educational advocacy group to lobby for increased services for Hmong American students.³⁵

There is some documentation of how ethnic-specific college organizations navigate whether or not to work with or within pan-ethnic organizations, due to lack of representation or resources for their constituents. For instance, in the 1990s, leaders of South Asian American organizations at numerous Ivy League institutions (e.g., Brown, Harvard, and Penn) described the tension in working collaboratively with their campus pan-ethnic Asian American organizations or intentionally seeking their own independent voice as a South Asian community.³⁶ In 1999, Kababayan, a Filipino American organization at the University of California, Irvine, seceded from the Asian Pacific Student Association (APSA), which was one of the umbrella groups under the Cross-Cultural Center. They formed their own umbrella organization *Alyansa ng mga Kababayan* due to the lack of resources and support they received from APSA as well as their need to be viewed as a disaggregated group from Asian Americans. As an umbrella group, they received more funding and more advocacy opportunities for specific Filipino American issues at the university.

Similar to the earlier Brown Asian Caucuses at the inception of the Asian American Movement, many ethnic-specific interest groups have formed within larger pan-ethnic professional organizations. For example, within the Asian American Psychological Association (AAPA), several divisions were created as a way of uniting and uplifting certain subgroups that had been historically overlooked since the organization's founding in 1972. The Division on South Asian Americans (DoSAA) was established in 2007, and the Division on Filipino Americans (DoFA) was established in 2010. While both organizations remain part of the AAPA, there are some indications of the struggle of Brown Asians within the

organization, including that there have not been any South Asian or Southeast Asian American presidents in the 45-year history of the organization. It is important to note that while caucuses of Brown Asian ethnic groups tend to emerge within these pan-ethnic organizations, East Asian caucuses tend not to form. One hypothesis for this trend is that East Asian Americans may generally feel empowered or supported by their overall organization and therefore do not need a separate support group—a sentiment that may be similar to how White Americans may feel generally supported in White-dominated professional organizations.

“In 2018, when *Crazy Rich Asians* was released, most Asian Americans were supportive; it was a high-grossing box office hit that starred an all-Asian cast. However, some scholars and journalists critiqued . . . the idea that . . . ‘Asian’ equated ‘East Asian.’”

Across the country, other ethnic-specific organizations were formed as a way of ensuring that the needs of historically marginalized Asian American ethnic groups were addressed. For instance, the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center (SEARAC) was formed in 1979 and continues to be the only national civil rights organization devoted to uplifting Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese American communities. In 1982, historian and activist Dorothy Laigo Cordova founded the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) with the mission of preserving and promoting the history of Filipino Americans. In 1988, FANHS declared October as Filipino American History Month to ensure that Filipino American history was being highlighted across the country.³⁷ And in 2000, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) was founded as the only national South Asian organization with a social justice framework that advocates for South Asian communities; SAALT

also administers the National Coalition of South Asian Organizations, a network of 60 South Asian American organizations across the United States.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AFFECTING BROWN ASIAN AMERICANS

In recent years, Brown Asian Americans have been much more vocal about the continued invisibility of their communities within the larger Asian American community, particularly in combatting the presumption that “Asian” equates “East Asian.” In 2016, Filipino American and South Asian Americans wrote an open letter to the *New York Times*, citing ways that their communities had been erased from narratives involving Asian Americans and racial discrimination.³⁸ The letter led to a Twitter hashtag #BrownAsiansExist, which encouraged Brown Asians to advocate for more visibility within Asian American communities, particularly given that they comprise roughly 60 percent of the Asian American population. Filmmaker Marissa Aroy produced a short film entitled *Thank God, I’m Filipino* in response to this exclusion.³⁹

In 2018, when *Crazy Rich Asians* was released, most Asian Americans were supportive; it was a high-grossing box office hit that starred an all-Asian cast. However, some scholars and journalists critiqued a few aspects of the movie.⁴⁰ First, the idea that “Asians” was used in the film’s title and focused explicitly on East Asians (Chinese and Singaporeans) supported previous hypotheses that “Asian” equated “East Asian.” Second, in the film, the presence of Brown Asians was either minimal or stereotypical (e.g., Brown Asians were only portrayed as servants, and Filipino actors were cast as East Asian characters). Third, there was an expectation for the entire Asian American community to back this film because it was allegedly the first Asian American motion picture of a major

Hollywood studio. One of the difficulties with this last expectation was that there were movies from major Hollywood studios that had featured South Asian Americans (e.g., *The Namesake*) or those from the South Asian Diaspora (e.g., *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Lion*). These films were hardly labeled as “Asian” or “Asian American” films (as they did not star East Asian Americans), and there was hardly an expectation for the entire Asian American community to fully endorse or relate to these films. A similar pattern occurred in television with *Fresh off the Boat* in 2015. Touted as the second Asian American sitcom to appear on mainstream television since Margaret Cho’s *All-American Girl*, many individuals have overlooked that there have been numerous shows like *Master of None* and *The Mindy Project*, which featured South Asian lead characters (and their families).

The presumptions of a homogenous Asian American community regarding academic achievement is prevalent with the recent lawsuit against Harvard University challenging affirmative action. Led mostly by Chinese Americans (under the direction of White American legal strategist Edward Blum), the plaintiffs allege that “Asian Americans” are being discriminated against in university admissions because of their race. When the mainstream media reports on the case, they incorrectly generalize that all Asian Americans are in favor of the lawsuit; for example, a *TIME* headline reads “A Lawsuit by Asian-American Students Against Harvard Could End Affirmative Action as We Know It”.⁴¹ Such generalizations fail to recognize that a majority of Asian Americans believe in affirmative action⁴² and that many Asian Americans (particularly Southeast Asian Americans and Filipino Americans) benefit from affirmative action too.^{43,44,45}

Finally, experiences of overt discrimination and hate crimes toward Asian Americans tend to only concern the general Asian American community if they occur against

East Asian Americans. For example, when hate crimes are historically discussed in relation to Asian Americans, the case of Vincent Chin is most often referenced. Despite this, there are many historical and contemporary instances of Brown Asian Americans who had also been targeted by hate and subsequently murdered but who often are excluded in the discourse. For example, during the 1930 Watsonville Riots, in which Filipino Americans were violently assaulted by White mobs who believed Filipinos to be stealing their jobs and women, a Filipino American man Fermin Tobera was murdered. In 1999, Joseph Iletto, a Filipino American postal worker in California was killed by a White terrorist after he terrorized a synagogue. In 2012, the shootings at a Wisconsin Sikh temple resulted in the deaths of six South Asian Americans. And in 2017, Srinivas Kuchibhotla was killed by a White gunman who yelled “Get out of my country” while shooting him.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVITY AND COALITION BUILDING

Given all of these factors, I end this commentary by providing several recommendations for how current Asian American community leaders can be more mindful and inclusive of issues related to Brown Asian Americans. Not meant to be a complete list of recommendations, it is hoped that these ideas can be a starting point for continual dialogues and reflections.

1. ENCOURAGE MEANINGFUL DIVERSITY IN PAN-ETHNIC LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Some pan-ethnic organizations ensure that there are community liaisons or representatives for each major community or subgroups, in order to guarantee that people’s voices are always being heard. Others are mindful of representation when they encourage their members to run for leadership positions (i.e., intentionally

encouraging Brown Asian groups to run if those groups have not been represented). At the same time, organizations must be careful to avoid tokenization by making sure that representation is meaningful and relevant, as opposed to feeling forced or insincere or masking political undercurrents within the organization. One organization that has exemplified this meaningful representation is the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA). With their constitution including a clause that states that leadership must represent ethnic, gender, and geographic diversity, APALA has created a culture in which people of various AAPI backgrounds have consistently served in its highest leadership positions.

2. HAVE OPEN AND OVERT CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY DYNAMICS, PARTICULARLY RELATED TO ISSUES OF SKIN COLOR, PHENOTYPE, RELIGION, AND LANGUAGE

Openly acknowledge the historical context of these community dynamics as a way of ensuring that such dynamics are not repeated in conscious or unconscious ways. Consider other intersectional identities, too, including gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, generation, immigration status, size, and more. Discussing these dynamics intentionally will also allow community members to be mindful of the role of systemic oppression in perpetuating trends and experiences in the organization while creating solutions for how to instill change, justice, and equity. For example, the Asian American Psychological Association devoted their 2018 conference to discussing intersectionalities and group dynamics within their organization; through workshops and roundtable discussions, Brown Asians, LGBTQ people, and multiracial people voiced their experiences of marginalization within the organization, which prompted leaders and members to strategize ways the organization can be more inclusive and cohesive.

3. ACKNOWLEDGE THE EXTENSIVE HISTORY AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE ENTIRE ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

When teaching about Asian American studies, ensure that all aspects of the Asian American experience are being covered. For instance, when talking about the earliest presence of Asian people in the United States, make sure to include the Filipinos who landed in what is now California in 1587 or the South Asians who were present during the founding of the United States. When discussing the labor of Chinese and Japanese Americans who helped build the transcontinental railroads, also include how the Filipino American farmworkers were the first to strike against the landowners in the 1960s and how they worked together with the Chicano farmworkers to form the United Farmworkers and successfully advocate for farmworkers' rights.⁴⁶ Finally, when discussing the Asian American "story," move beyond the dominant narrative of immigrants searching for the American Dream and acknowledge that many Southeast Asians migrated as refugees who were escaping war and violence.

4. BE MINDFUL WHEN "ASIAN" OR "ASIAN AMERICAN" ARE USED AS UMBRELLA TERMS

Being intentional and using proper labels can ensure that specific needs are being addressed while still being aware of the heterogeneity of Asian American communities. For instance, when addressing common types of microaggressions affecting "Asian Americans," it is common for researchers to default to themes of being exoticized or being treated as a perpetual foreigner.⁴⁷ While many Brown Asian Americans encounter these types of microaggressions, they also encounter other microaggressions (e.g., Filipinos and Southeast Asians are often viewed as criminals or gangsters, while South Asians are often stereotyped as being terrorists). Thus, excluding these examples as common types

of microaggressions that Asian Americans face perpetuates the false notion that "Asian" equals "East Asian."

Further, there are indeed many issues negatively affecting East Asian Americans, and those issues should be addressed appropriately. Thus, when speaking specifically about East Asian American experiences, label them as such without generalizing to the entire Asian American group. For example, previous research has found that Chinese Americans are less likely than other Asian Americans to undergo cancer screenings, particularly when they have lower English proficiency.⁴⁸ Labeling this finding as a Chinese American issue instead of an Asian American issue allows for directed programming and targeted outreach toward Chinese Americans, potentially increasing awareness of the problem.

5. DISAGGREGATE DATA WHENEVER POSSIBLE

While many datasets do not account for ethnic differences, it is important to disaggregate when those data exist (and to report on the data). As discussed throughout this commentary, because the Asian American category is so diverse, research should reflect that. When collecting data on Asian Americans, ensure that the sample is as representative of the Asian American population as possible, with one-fifth consisting of Chinese Americans, one-fifth of Filipino Americans, one-fifth of South Asian Americans, one-fifth of Southeast Asian Americans, and one-fifth of other East Asian Americans. If research studies consist mostly of East Asian Americans, then it cannot be generalized to the

Asian American experience and perhaps should be labeled as a study on East Asian Americans.

6. BE CONSCIOUS OF YOUR OWN PRIVILEGE WITHIN THE ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

It is very important to acknowledge how privilege and bias operate in the Asian American community in ways that are similar in general American society. While it is clear that East Asian Americans are subject to systemic racism and discrimination within oppressive White supremacist systems, there are some ways that privilege operates in parallel ways within Asian American communities. When East Asian Americans say things like "Why can't we just all view ourselves as Asian American and not fixate on our differences?," such statements are akin to colorblind ideologies espoused by many White Americans. When East Asian Americans deny that racial or ethnic hierarchies exist within the Asian American umbrella, their sentiments are akin to the ways that White Americans deny that racism and White privilege exist. In this way, it is important for people with privileged backgrounds to listen to the perspectives of those without privilege. People with privilege within Asian American communities may have difficulty recognizing their privilege and the ways they have benefitted from such privilege—similar to the ways that White people may not see White privilege, cisgender men may not see male privilege, and heterosexual people may not see heterosexual privilege. While acknowledging that privilege may be uncomfortable, admitting to these dynamics is the first step to recognizing the problems that exist

"People with privilege within Asian American communities may have difficulty recognizing their privilege and the ways they have benefitted from such privilege. . . . While acknowledging that [confronting one's] privilege may be uncomfortable, admitting to these dynamics is the first step to recognizing the problems that exist in advocating for justice and equities within Asian American communities."

and in advocating for justice and equities within Asian American communities.

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FOR QUEER ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH WHO ARE RESILIENT AND TENACIOUS: HOW QUEER ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH AND THEIR ADVOCATES CONFRONT THE TENSIONS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

Doua Kha

INTRODUCTION

Eve Tuck cautions that to only talk about tragedies in our community is harmful and paints an image that is damage centered and deficit oriented.¹ Too often, the only times we see queer² folks on any social media websites or in the news is when tragedy strikes: the mass murder of 49 folks (with an additional 58 others wounded) at the gay Orlando nightclub; the murder of 15-year-old Lawrence “Larry” King by a fellow classmate and rumored partner; the rape and murder of Brandon Teena after acquaintances found out he was born biologically female; Sakia Gunn, a 15-year-old lesbian who was murdered after rejecting a man’s advance; the list goes on. News media do not even investigate the many murders of Black transgender women, whose deaths often go unnoticed.³

To be queer in this country is arduous, and despite a growing body of literature surrounding queer identities in recent years, these still often exclude voices of queer people of color,^{4,5,6} and the narratives of queer Asian Americans remains largely unexamined.^{7,8} Even though Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States, increasing 46 percent between 2000 and 2010, faster than any other minoritized groups,⁹ we only constitute 5.6 percent of the US population, just over 17 million people.¹⁰ Thus, we are often overlooked and invisible when it comes to political discussion, media

representation, educational research, and especially, queer discourse.¹¹ In a study conducted by the Williams Institute, an estimated 325,000 (2.8 percent) of all Asian adults who identify as LGBTQ live in the United States, the majority of whom reside in more “queer liberal” states such as California, Hawaii, and New York.¹² Nevertheless, there continues to be a lack of research regarding queer Asian American identities and even less research pertaining to queer Asian American youth—their experiences navigating schools and tensions that erupt between queer discourse and the values that shape Asian American youth.^{13,14}

Schools have long been “site[s] of social reproduction and socialization,”¹⁵ and heteronormativity and whiteness dominate the main “social reproduction” that schools breed. In recent years, the growth of gay straight alliances (GSAs),¹⁶ an after-school club for queer high school students, has resulted in spaces where queer-identifying students can conglomerate for social or political purposes—to challenge dominant “social reproduction.”¹⁷ Yet, we continue to see a lack of diversity in these spaces too, with many students of color voicing their discontent and frustration at the lack of intersectionality when it comes to queer identity representation.¹⁸ Teachers also do not engage with the topic through their curriculum, and many voiced not feeling comfortable and/or feeling unprepared to teach about queerness. Because

schools are not providing a “brave” space for queer students to develop and affirm their queer identities, research has shown that many flock to online spaces to build communities.^{19,20}

While utilizing digital spaces to affirm one’s existence and meet folks who share similar identities is important, I argue that we can create such spaces outside of the internet through community-based organizations (CBOs). CBOs that work with youth have evolved from informal gatherings to nonprofit organizations, with their own sets of mission, vision, and targeted youth. There are a diverse range of foci, from fostering leadership and team building to providing workforce preparations, while others see themselves as supplements to traditional classroom and learning.²¹ By utilizing a culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), CBOs that target youth of color have been instrumental in providing a space where youth of color can learn about themselves, their history, and their cultures, which are too often excluded in dominant school curriculums.^{22,23} Doing so allows CBO staff to create partnerships with youth of color more effectively compared with traditional classroom teachers, whom many students feel marginalize minoritized identities. Since queerness is still a taboo topic in the Asian American community,²⁴ the marginalization and invisibility of both queer and Asian American identities in schools and in their communities call for a third space where queer Asian American youth can be around young people who look like them, share their identities, and offer guidance.

CONTEXTUALIZING ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS’ POSITION IN SCHOOL

To better understand the significance of why it is crucial to create spaces centering queer Asian American identities, we first have to analyze how they are positioned within the US education system. In 2013, 15.1 million students were enrolled in

urban US public K–12 schools,²⁵ 2.2 million of whom identified as Asian American.²⁶ In 2016, Pizmony-Levy and Kosciw found that only 127,400 Asian American students identify as LGBT or queer;²⁷ therefore, while Asian American students represent a small population in our school system, queer Asian American students are even less so.

“Since queerness is still a taboo topic in the Asian American community, the marginalization and invisibility of both queer and Asian American identities in schools and in their communities call for a third space where queer Asian American youth can be around young people who look like them, share their identities, and offer guidance.”

Additionally, scholars note how Asian American students are often “invisible” from teachers and support staffs because of their status as “model minorities.”²⁸ The model-minority trope first appeared in publication in the 1966 piece by William Petersen in the *New York Times Magazine* called “Success Story: Japanese American Style.” A similar article “Success of One Minority Group in U.S.” by a US News & World Report staff also followed the same year. Both highlighted the economic and social mobility Asian Americans have attained in the United States and argued that their success is due to Asian cultural values prioritizing education.^{29,30,31} This bled into the education system, resulting in teachers and educational scholars believing that Asian American students are not “underrepresented” or “disadvantaged.”³² Many teachers feel that Asian American students do not experience discriminations, both in their personal life and at school, and they do not reach out to them to provide support in and out of the classroom.^{33,34}

In the past few decades, scholars found that the marginalization of Asian American students resulted in the dismissal of Asian American disparities in education, exclusion from students of color programs and resources, barriers to college access and retention, and lack of support from teachers and schools, consequently marking them as “invisible.”³⁵ They further argued that the assumption that Asian Americans have attained economic stability and social upward mobility created a lack of support for students who have been made invisible by the myth. This is especially heightened for Southeast Asian American students, many of whom were resettled in the United States as refugees and are predominately first generations immigrants.^{36,37,38} However, within these studies about how the model-minority trope affects Asian American students, most—if not all—of the participants were straight Asian American students.

QUEER STUDENTS (OF COLOR) AT SCHOOL

Conversations about queer students in school have predominantly revolved around their experiences with bullying in education. Queer youth experience some of the highest rates of bullying in school spaces: half of students who reported being bullied identified as queer,^{39,40} with many of these students enduring verbal harassment, physical abuse, and cyberbullying.⁴¹ Even youth who are perceived to be queer (especially “effeminate” boys) by their peers are harassed by cisgender and heterosexual boys in an effort to police their masculinities.⁴²

Compared to students who identify as part of the queer community because of their sexual orientations (lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.), transgender youth face the most hostile school climates because of their developing sexual identity and receiving⁴³ gender identity.⁴⁴ Sadowski’s research with transgender youth found

that 40 percent of them were not allowed to use their preferred names and pronouns in schools, 60 percent were required to use restrooms inconsistent with their gender identity, and a third were prevented from wearing clothes that conform with their gender identities.⁴⁵ Queer students often avoid schools altogether to avoid harassment, resulting in lower grades and impacting college aspirations. Many students choose not to report bullies to school staff because they feel their schools have failed to intervene or that staff would either not respond or make it worse.⁴⁶ Additionally, many queer youth reported that adults also participate in or perpetuate bullying by using biased language, victim blaming, minimizing bullying as “kids will be kids,” and/or outing “closet” students to their parents.^{47,48}

Yet, while queer youth experiences in schools are slowly gaining traction among scholars, queer Asian American students’ experiences in schools have yet to emerge. Studies that do include queer Asian American students (and queer students of color in general) often contradict larger queer studies. In 2012, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) *National School Climate Survey* reported that Black/African American and Asian/Pacific Islander LGBT students experienced lower levels of anti-LGBT victimization in school.⁴⁹ However, other scholars indicate that queer youth of color are more pathologized compared with their White counterparts and face more hostile environments from their peers and racial community, in and outside school. Pritchard highlighted the difference between teachers’ and media’s treatment of bullied queer White youth and their treatment of bullied queer youth of color in the case of Lawrence “Larry” King.⁵⁰ King was a 15-year-old biracial gay male student who was shot to death by White male student Brandon McInerney, after King confessed his love for McInerney. Instead of framing King as a victim of a hate crime, the media instead

blamed King for making McInerney and other students uncomfortable with his flamboyant personality. McCready also saw how the policing of masculinity is more visible and toxic among Black boys in urban schools, causing many queer Black boys to act more “straight” in attempt to fit in, maintain friendships, and avoid harassment.⁵¹ Transgender Black youth also face more physical violence.^{52,53} Peers and family members also commonly enforce strict gender roles among Asian Americans.⁵⁴ Since many communities of color also view being “gay” as synonymous with “acting white,”⁵⁵ the close policing of gender roles and lack of support and representation in larger queer discourse might be a contributor to why many queer youth of color, including Asian American students, choose to not be “out.”

To combat queerphobia in schools and among youth, the United States has seen the rise of GSAs, in- and after-school clubs where queer students come together to support one another. GSAs are often advised by a school staff, and they can range from social clubs to politically engaging spaces where queer youth can discuss policies and participate in protests. Bidell argues that in schools where GSAs are available, queer students reported feeling safer and a better sense of belonging, with an increase in attendance and involvement in the school’s culture.⁵⁶ Students also spoke of seeing more staffs intervene if there is bullying and better advocacy in general in schools where a GSA exists.

However, because lower resources are available in urban schools, queer youth of color face barriers accessing or even starting GSAs.⁵⁷ Even in urban schools where GSAs exist, they often fail to recruit and retain queer youth of color by neglecting the unique experiences that queer youth of color encompass, which scholars describe as a “tricultural experience” because they face racism due to their race, sexism due to their gender identities, and queerphobia

due to their sexual orientation.^{58,59} In his research at a diverse high school with a GSA-similar club called Project 10, McCready found that although the school was racially and ethnically diverse, Project 10 comprised entirely White, female students.⁶⁰ When he interviewed two gay Black boys and inquired why they did not attend Project 10, both were critical about how the club did not address intersectionality adequately in conversations around queer identities. Project 10’s central focus, the two students observed, predominantly catered to queer White students’ experiences, and the advisor for Project 10 admitted that they did not know how to properly address issues affecting queer students of color.

GSAs also create tensions with already established cultural beliefs that shape Asian American students, often forcing them to feel like they must choose between their Asian American identity or their queer identity when navigating these spaces.⁶¹ In her work with Asian American youth in high school, Lee found that Asian American students felt the pressure to conform to the model-minority stereotype, not only because they view education as the pathway to economic and social mobility but also because of the obligations they feel to their family.⁶² This is especially heightened for Southeast Asian (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese) students whose parents brought them to the United States as refugees to escape war-torn Southeast Asia and to achieve the American Dream.⁶³ Scholars describe this sense of obligation to one’s family as “filial piety,” which Lor explains as the “Confucian ideology that places emphasis on . . . respect for the elderly, and subordination to the father and parental care,” thereby creating “a sense of duty” in Asian American students to “assist others and to take into account the needs and wishes of the family when making decisions.”⁶⁴ In the hopes of giving back to their family for their sacrifices, Asian American students tend to focus exclusively on academics, limiting

their participation in after-school activities, such as GSAs, even if they identify as part of the community.^{65,66}

Additionally, the concept of “coming out,” the “declaration of one’s sexual orientation,”⁶⁷ that GSAs in schools often create programming around (i.e., National Coming Out Day, etc.) fails to incorporate differences in cultural values. In championing individualism, the coming out narrative contrasts with many Asian cultures that prioritize familial bonds, kinship, and community building.⁶⁸ In his research with gay Hmong men, Thao noticed that while his participants believe in the concept, most of them do *not* want to sever ties with their families like other queer folks because family is their support system. In wanting to support their families after completing school, they often renegotiate the concept

a middle-class, lesbian, African American student at an urban magnet high school, brought a lesbian love poem from the queer youth center she frequently engaged with and photos from a lesbian history book of her own to school as part of a class project.⁷² Additionally, at an all-girls public charter middle and high school in Chicago, queer girls of color started a GSA to challenge the notion that it was only for White girls. This received backlash from parents, who claimed it was immoral for young girls to associate themselves with sexual orientations. Although the GSA was eventually dismantled (though reinstated in recent years), the girls continued to be vocal about their two identities.⁷³ Similarly, transgender youth of color at a high school were at the forefront of advocating for trans-positive policy in their school.⁷⁴

“When surveying 21 pre-service English teachers from Kennesaw State University’s undergraduate and masters programs in English education and 51 middle and high school English teachers in suburban school districts near Atlanta, Mason found that 56 percent stated that teaching young adult literature with LGBT characters does not belong in the classroom.”

of coming out, with many acknowledging that they are not always “out” completely. Instead, they are out in certain spaces and with certain folks (such as friends, school, or immediate family members) while “in” in others (such as extended relatives).⁶⁹ Language barriers also hinder many Asian American youth from coming out to their parents because vocabulary such as “transgender,” “pansexual,” etc., are not always possible to interpret into their native languages.⁷⁰ Often feeling entrapped by the debt that they “owe” their parents,⁷¹ queer Asian American youth are constrained in navigating and negotiating between their families and their recognition of self.

In response, queer youth of color have risen to serve as a catalyst for change and inclusion. Hoping to diversify her classroom’s book collection, Justine,

TEACHERS’ RESISTANCE TO TEACHING ABOUT QUEER IDENTITIES

Within the classroom, teachers are resistant to incorporating LGBT topics into the curriculum,⁷⁵ and many pre-service teachers admit to feeling underprepared to address race and sexual orientation (both separately and as intersections) whether in general or through the curriculum.^{76,77} While efforts have come from teachers to incorporate LGBT literatures, these continue to only be about White queer experiences and ignore queer students of color.^{78,79}

Because English and language arts (ELA) classrooms can incorporate texts that contain queer characters and/or LGBT themes, they often more easily engage with the topic, which is why most studies have been about ELA teachers’ perspectives on

whether or not one should teach about LGBT in the classroom.⁸⁰ When surveying 21 pre-service English teachers from Kennesaw State University’s undergraduate and masters programs in English education and 51 middle and high school English teachers in suburban school districts near Atlanta, Mason found that 56 percent stated that teaching young adult literature with LGBT characters does not belong in the classroom.⁸¹ These teachers argued that discussing LGBT issues was not a part of their job,⁸² while others expressed that though they were willing to combat homophobic slurs in the hallways or call out students who are being hostile to another, they will not engage with it through the curriculum.⁸³ Some felt teaching about LGBT is synonymous with teaching about sex^{84,85} and, therefore, not appropriate for school in general.

They found similar results with 20 students enrolled in an online course for language arts teachers who taught at a variety of grade levels and who were enrolled from relatively diverse geographic regions both within and outside of the university’s home state.⁸⁶ They, too, felt teaching about LGBT equated to teaching about sex and argued that it would be more appropriate in a health class instead of ELA.⁸⁷ The belief that LGBT equates to sex, despite that many books with LGBT characters do not include sex, creates a sense of discomfort for teachers, who feel that sex is an adult topic and should not be introduced to students in school. Other ELA teachers have expressed that students should not be making discoveries about their sexual orientations in schools and feared that if they provided LGBT-themed texts, it would influence students’ sexual orientation. Some felt that the topic would force students to perceive homosexuality as better than heterosexuality and that this is just as detrimental, believing that it was “not fair” to heterosexual students to explicitly provide LGBT-themed texts when they did not provide explicit heterosexual

texts.⁸⁸ There is also the belief that they are bringing their own agenda into the classroom and would therefore indoctrinate students whose families see homosexuality as against their religion.^{89,90} When asked why a teacher did not incorporate LGBT-themed books into the curriculum or made it available on bookshelves within the classroom, one teacher stated, “If a gay student needs books with this theme, they may speak with the media specialist.”⁹¹ The concerns over backlash from parents, other teachers, and the school district are a recurring.⁹² Mason found that ELA teachers who utilized texts that focus on race and racism in the past have received backlash and felt the same will be similar if they introduced LGBT-themed books.⁹³ To avoid generating controversies, they instead avoid the topic. Another study found that despite wanting to teach about LGBT issues, some teachers felt unprepared to do so because their teacher education program (TEP) never discussed it with them.⁹⁴

There are, however, some ELA teachers who choose to incorporate LGBT-themed texts into their classrooms, arguing that LGBT issues are not controversial. One teacher stated that “one of the reasons that we have this cultural idea that this is a controversial topic is because we only talk about it when we have to, instead of talking about it just like we talk about all sorts of other things with our students—about people who don’t look like or live like or learn like others who are more familiar to us.”⁹⁵ Teachers who utilize LGBT-themed texts in the classroom believe that it is their “civic duty to help their students become critically aware and informed citizens.”⁹⁶ Not only will students be exposed to different and sometimes unknown topics, but they can also pose questions if perplexed and challenge their own assumptions about other groups in order to learn more.⁹⁷ They also felt their students were more mature than parents and administrative staffs often give students credit for.⁹⁸ By introducing diverse topics through literature, teachers also felt

that students can become more empathetic to others and be responsible for their classmates to create a safe space for one another.⁹⁹ Since “the creation of a child’s prejudicial attitudes usually occurs during a child’s early” years, introducing the topic early can minimize prejudicial bias later in life.¹⁰⁰ Teachers believed that having LGBT-themed texts available for students to read and as part of the curriculum can foster tolerance and combat homophobia in and outside of the classroom¹⁰¹ by introducing to them how discriminations still exist.¹⁰² Additionally, using texts will challenge the perceived notion of LGBT characters as “others” by centering their narratives.¹⁰³ Some ELA teachers employed literatures as a gateway to paralleling and bringing real-world issues into the classroom,¹⁰⁴ explaining that by employing multiple perspectives about LGBT, students get to understand that those who are part of the community are also just as human and diverse as heterosexual folks.¹⁰⁵

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS’ OFFER SPACES OF BELONGING

Due to the lack of support in schools and conversations from teachers, queer students tend to seek support in online spaces to build communities, learn more about themselves, and socialize with others who share their identities.^{106,107} While White queer youth predominantly see GSAs as safe and supportive physical spaces to socialize and mobilize, many queer students of color opt for CBOs. They feel that these organizations and the adults within them better address the intersectionalities they experience.¹⁰⁸ Parents of color also argue that CBOs are more supportive of their students, compared to the lack of racial-identity inclusion in schools’ curricula, disproportionate surveillance of students of color, and culture incompetence from school staffs.¹⁰⁹ Scholars found that CBOs not only addressed these issues in their environments and from their staffs

but were also able to bridge schools and communities of color.^{110,111} By implementing a CRP, CBOs “have a long history of interrupting patterns of educational inequity and continue to do so under the current educational policy climate,”¹¹² especially when partnering with youth of color. CRP is a method of teaching that integrates students’ culture, knowledge, and community experiences into the curriculum with the following guiding principles:¹¹³

1. Developing identity in youth and acknowledgement of these identities from the teacher to build student-teacher connection
2. Creating equity and excellence in the space by establishing a curriculum that is inclusive of students’ cultural experiences and setting high expectations for them
3. Incorporating relevant lessons and activities that are developmentally appropriate
4. “Teaching the whole child” by recognizing that students bring an abundance of prior knowledge and influence into the class
5. Creating authentic student-teacher relationships by checking in with students
6. Managing student emotions by acknowledging their truths and using these as educational moments for growth

When studying low-income Chinese American youth at the organization Community Youth Center (CYC), Wong noticed how many students were not engaged in school because they felt that the student-teacher relationship was inauthentic and that there was a lack of cultural and racial representation in the curricula.¹¹⁴ Additionally, Wong observed how schools often paint deficit images of parents of color to their students. Working long hours at minimum-wage jobs often restricted parents’ interactions with schools, and though

parents stressed the importance of achieving academic success to their child(ren), they were not viewed as “engaging parents” by teachers because they did not attend conferences or were actively involved in parent teacher organizations (PTOs). Wong felt the dominant school culture’s view of parents of color as “deficient” due to “lack” of involvement was responsible for some of the intergenerational conflicts between parents and children, as Chinese American students often felt their parents were not as supportive as White parents. Yull et al., who studied Black/African American families living in a predominantly White communities, also found the same disconnect and intergenerational conflict, critiquing the way White teachers view “engaging” parents.¹¹⁵

In contrast, students involved in CBOs often find them to be more racially and culturally inclusive compared with school. In CBOs, students believe that more adults care about their well-being, compared with school staffs,¹¹⁶ creating authentic student-teacher relationships.¹¹⁷ Students were also able to explore more of their interests instead of being limited to the schools’ curricula, which themselves are restricted by Common Core standards. In doing so, they found more purpose in contributing to these activities,¹¹⁸ which not only speaks to developmental appropriateness but also creates equity and excellence for students by including their interests and learning.¹¹⁹ In these spaces, students felt more pride in their heritage, especially when provided with a venue where they can speak their first language without fear of judgement.¹²⁰ Staffs were also able to mediate conversations between school personnel and teachers as well as help parents navigate these educational spaces.¹²¹ Wong also praised how staffs at CYC were able to partner with parents of students in the hopes of reversing the “deficiency” image schools have painted by portraying their parents as bearers of knowledge and encouraging students to learn more about their heritage

and history through dialogues and workshops with parents,¹²² examples of identity development where staffs strive to “teach the whole child” by bringing their culture and prior knowledge into the curriculum. Similarly, in Oakland, California, Asian American youth at the CBO AYPAL fight against institutionalized racism, especially deportation of immigrants, a project that was initiated and led by the youth with staff supervision. Asian American youth felt that they were not only learning teamwork and leadership skills but also about their history and current policies that affect their identities, which were lacking in school, an example of staffs respecting and listening to youth.¹²³

Though CBOs will not address all of the challenges that queer Asian American students face, they can become spaces where queer Asian American students can find support. The example of CYC’s culturally relevant pedagogy showcases how the organization not only provides resources for Chinese American youth to navigate school environments but also allocates support for their parents and extended families as well. CYC also advocates for families who do not understand English at school meetings and conferences. Additionally, the predominantly Asian American staff encouraged a sense of Chinese and Asian American pride in the youth, which they often lacked in traditional schools. In replicating this for queer Asian American youth, CBOs can provide a space where they can learn more about and affirm their queer and Asian American identities with support and guidance. Staffs can also answer questions about queer identities and direct students to appropriate resources. Additionally, staffs can mediate tensions between queer Asian American youth and their parents by explaining what queerness is to parents, especially in households where language barriers hinder complete understanding of queer culture. Queer Asian American students can also build community among other queer

Asian American students and youth of color in these spaces for the emotional, academic, and cultural support that is missing in schools' GSAs. They can also use these spaces to deconstruct national policies that affect their dual identities and work with adults to challenge the main discourse, like Asian American youth who partnered up with AYPAL.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While school and society have taken steps toward queer inclusion, more work needs to be done to create inclusive spaces both in and outside the classroom. We need to effectively evaluate the ways in which our teacher education programs are preparing teachers to teach diverse students and learners, who hail from unique cultures and backgrounds. It is not enough that we only offer method courses for pre-service teachers; we need to facilitate pre-service teachers to name race and sexual orientation, to critically examine how intersection plays a role in students' lives in and out of schools, and to harness these strengths in the classroom to build a better classroom culture. Otherwise, teachers' lack of response to bullying, cultural competency, and resistance to talking about queer identities will continue to push queer youth of color out of school spaces. CBOs have already done engaging and empowering work with youth of color and can definitely do more with queer Asian American youth.

Furthermore, because many ELA teachers surmised teaching about LGBT issues is only about sex and therefore not appropriate within a school context, better professional development needs to be implemented to dispel assumptions and stereotypes about the queer community. Addressing intersectionality in schools and after-school clubs will be a step forward in ensuring that diverse identities and cultures are respected and represented accurately. When we ignore students in our classrooms and fail to engage aspects

of their identities (even the ones that are not physically apparent), we erase the very foundation of what makes them unique and push them out. Students are already exploring their sexual orientation from a young age, and it is more effective if we provide guidance rather than disregard the topic. Schools can start by adopting and mirroring the culturally responsive pedagogies that CBOs are already utilizing to create a more harmonious relationship between schools and queer Asian American communities.

Additionally, more studies need to highlight queer Asian American youth voices. Queer discourse needs to include the voices and experiences of Asian American students, and Asian American discourse needs to be more inclusive of those who are queer. Many scholars researching queer Asian Americans disproportionately focus on the experiences of adult gay Asian American men or Asian American men who have sex with men. This excludes voices of women, transgender, nonconforming, and Asian American individuals and youth of other sexual orientations, whose narratives are equally important. Empirical work should also focus on the experience of queer Asian American youth's identity development in both schools and CBOs to document and validate their experiences. Furthermore, it is important to investigate the different rich and diverse ethnic communities that make up the "Asian American" category; future research should also focus on different ethnic groups and their unique experiences with queerness.

MOVING FORWARD, FUTURE QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORATION COULD INCLUDE:

1. How do CBOs that work with queer Asian American youth, such as Freedom Inc., Shades of Yellow, and Hmong Queer Suab (Hmong Queer Voices), mediate conversations between students, parents, and schools about queer identities, especially

for those who are bilingual? What kind of programming are also in place to educate Asian American families about these topics?

2. What are some strategies queer Asian American youth, specifically transgender Asian American youth, utilize when navigating and negotiating different spaces?

3. What are the experiences of bisexual and pansexual Asian American women in their communities, and what specific discriminations and/or struggles do they face? Additionally, if they are able to "pass" as heterosexual, how do they navigate these identities?

4. How do historically Asian religions (such as Hinduism, Shamanism, Shintoism, etc.) create further tension with queer identities for Asian American youth, especially in faith-based CBOs?

Only by building bridges can we connect different communities to one another for better solidarity. Let's strive for a future where intersectionalities can coexist harmoniously.

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GENDER JUSTICE AND TRANSGENDER RIGHTS IN THE PILIPINX COMMUNITY

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Sacramento Filipinx LGBTQIA is a local grassroots organization founded in 2017 that serves the Sacramento Filipinx LGBTQIA community.

The UC Davis Bulosan Center for Filipino Studies is the first Center for Filipino Studies within the University of California system. With its close proximity to the Sacramento State Capitol, the Center is a policy think tank that produces reports and community-based research on key issues affecting the Filipino community.

INTRODUCTION

On 29 September 2018, the UC Davis Bulosan Center for Filipino Studies organized its first annual Filipino Community Policy Symposium. With Filipinos being the largest Asian ethnic group in California, the event gathered over 100 policy experts, advocates, and grassroots organizations largely from the Bay Area, Sacramento, Los Angeles, and San Diego to discuss issues directly affecting the Pilipinx community, including women and LGBTQQIA+ issues. As a result of the symposium's discussions, the following brief discusses major trends affecting the LGBTQQIA+, gender nonconforming, and Filipina community across California, with a particular emphasis on those who identify as gender nonconforming and transgender. We focus on three major sections: stigmatization and lack of education, discrimination in the workplace and public spaces, and human rights. After each section, the Bulosan Center for Filipino Studies and Sacramento Filipinx LGBTQQIA+ will provide recommendations for legislation and community-based solutions to advance a vision of inclusion and gender justice.

MAJOR TRENDS IN THE LGBTQQIA+ PILIPINX COMMUNITY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

STIGMATIZATION AND LACK OF EDUCATION

Many Filipinas and LGBTQQIA+ community members are impacted by poor self-esteem, mental health issues, and exclusion from the larger Pilipinx community. According to a study in 2015, Filipino American adolescent girls have the highest rates of suicidal ideation amongst Asian American females. Additionally, Filipino Americans seek mental health services at the lowest rate of any other Asian American group. These rates are heightened among LGBTQQIA+ Pilipinx due to poor media representation, stigma, and lack of education around gender, sexuality, and mental health in the Pilipinx community. Many of these stigmas come from cultural norms based in Filipino and Filipino American culture such as shame, filial piety, and the gender binary—the belief that there are only two genders: male and female. LGBTQQIA+ people are, for example, often seen as comedic relief in Filipino media or as “unnatural” due to conservative religious attitudes (about 80 percent of the Philippine population is Catholic). In an interview with Ging Cristobal, a lesbian Filipina and project coordinator of Outright Asian International, she states, “Society thinks that you need a man’s kiss . . . for you to be ‘normal’ or heterosexual . . . And they use religion because they don’t want you to burn in hell. So, the intention is supposed to be good, because they want

to ‘save’ you. But in fact, it’s wrong.” Within the symposium’s discussions, participants noted that there is a hypersexualization of trans women in the media. If a trans Filipina actress is able to “pass,” or in other words, their gender expression fits mainstream representations of what a woman looks like, she is widely found in modeling or beauty pageants. If a trans woman does not fit mainstream norms of what a man or woman looks like, she is seen as a jester or a clown. These norms are discriminatory, leaving trans and gender nonbinary community members particularly isolated from their ethnic communities.

a balanced and healthy “future.” Over 50 participants attended Interconnections and sparked further events such as roundtable discussions on Introduction to Filipinx Queer and Trans identities, where community members share their narratives. This encouraged the local and regional Pilipinx community to engage in conversation and learn about LGBTQQIA+ responsiveness and the issues that the queer and trans Pilipinx community may face. Sacramento Filipinx LGBTQ continues to host programming to further inform the Pilipinx community and the larger public around gender justice and inclusivity of trans and nonbinary people.

“Filipino Americans seek mental health services at the lowest rate of any other Asian American group. These rates are heightened among LGBTQQIA+ Pilipinx due to poor media representation, stigma, and lack of education around gender, sexuality, and mental health in the Pilipinx community. Many of these stigmas come from cultural norms based in Filipino and Filipino American culture such as shame, filial piety, and the gender binary—the belief that there are only two genders: male and female.”

To address these stigmas, LGBTQQIA+ organizations have developed trainings, curricula, and community programs to address these harmful stereotypes. For instance, Sacramento Filipinx LGBTQIA, a grassroots organization of queer, trans, and gender nonconforming Pilipinx community members, has organized several community events that provide insight into the Pilipinx LGBTQIA perspective. One of these events include Interconnections, a symposium that addresses the individual and collective experiences of the local queer and trans Pilipinx community. The symposium consisted of three workshops: the “past,” which broadly explored the cultures and histories of the Filipino people; the “present,” which examined how the past informs the emotions and behaviors of the present; and lastly, how the community can guide this journey into

Their efforts are one of the many contributions to the statewide movement in changing culture and education around gender and sexuality. California organizations such as API Equality Northern California have led the Trans Justice Initiative, which creates intersectional curriculums that center trans and gender nonconforming voices. In September 2018, former

Governor Jerry Brown passed AB 504, which requires the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (CPOST) to develop LGBTQ-specific training for peace officers and dispatchers. Although grassroots organizations have been making strides, there is a still need for policy and educational changes to further train communities toward inclusivity.

To address stigmatization and lack of education:

- * California State Assembly: Pass a statewide bill to mandate ethnic studies as a requirement for California public high schools. The curriculum must include education around gender and LGBTQQIA+ issues and how they are seen in communities of color.

- * California State Assembly: Pass statewide legislation for a LGBTQ cultural competency training for teachers and school staff.

- * Grassroots organizations, nonprofits, and foundations: Increase funding for grassroots-led trainings in the larger Filipino community about Filipina and Pilipinx LGBTQQIA+ issues within public spaces and workplaces such as schools, community organizations, and businesses. And create leadership pipelines within the Pilipinx LGBTQQIA+ community members to increase representation in the media and in political bodies, such as health commissions.

- * Foundations: Support and fund disaggregated research in the Asian Pacific Islander community to understand gender and sexuality in the Pilipinx population.

DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE AND PUBLIC SPACES

Due to the stigmatization that LGBTQQIA+ Pilipinx and Filipina community members experience, symposium participants shared that they are more vulnerable to participating in survival sex trade, human trafficking, and sexual assault. They also more commonly experience challenges in accessing health care and employment with sufficient benefits and wages. A 2015 study shows that among the transgender community the unemployment rate among trans people of color (20 percent) was four times higher than the US unemployment rate (5 percent).

Also, in a 2015 study of the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) transgender community, 10 percent of respondents were unemployed, twice the rate of the overall US population (5 percent). Due to mistreatment and discrimination within public spaces and the workplace, such as anti-trans “bathroom bills” and job termination, trans people experience a higher risk of poverty and engagement in criminalized work. Nearly one-third (32 percent) of AANHPI respondents were living in poverty, a rate three times higher than the poverty rate of the overall US population. Of AANHPI respondents, 16 percent participated in the underground economy, including sex work and drug sales, in order to obtain income, food, and other necessities. Additionally, more than a third of AANHPI respondents experienced at least one type of mistreatment in a place of public accommodations where staff knew they were transgender. Although the study provides some insight into the transgender Pilipinx community, there is a strong need for consistently updated and disaggregated data that includes personal narratives that further humanizes community members’ experiences.

Fortunately, organizations across the country have addressed these issues of discrimination and economic oppression in various ways. The National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance have implemented nationwide surveys that identify disparities amongst AANHPI groups. Within California, the Transgender Law Center has partnered with the San Francisco LGBT Center to form the Transgender Economic Empowerment Initiative, which protects community members from job discrimination while providing employment opportunities and trainings for job seekers. Symposium members have also noted that domestic violence organizations, such as My Sister’s House have

developed service networks to support those who have experienced the survival sex trade, assault, and human trafficking, and housing rights organizations have begun to focus on pushing for inclusive shelters for LGBTQQIA+ homeless youth. Grassroots groups and community-based organizations are, thus, at the forefront of addressing issues of discrimination.

To address discrimination in the workplace and public spaces:

- * California State Assembly: Pass legislation to promote fair wages, access to comprehensive health care, and protection from discrimination for transgender and LGBTQQIA+ employees.

- * Foundations and grant-providing institutions: Increase funding for trauma-informed policies and grassroots programs for those impacted by human trafficking, survival sex work, and sexual assault.

HUMAN RIGHTS

These issues of discrimination connect to transnational human rights abuses, such as the murder of Jennifer Laude. In 2014, Jennifer Laude, a trans Filipina, was murdered by Joseph Pemberton, a US marine, in Olongapo City, Philippines. Jennifer’s death sparked outrage around the world, shedding light on human rights abuses in the Philippines and the mass murders of trans women of color. Since 2013, there have been at least 128 transgender and gender-expansive individuals killed in the United States, and in 2018 alone, about 80 percent of those who were killed were trans women of color.

Looking transnationally, the Philippines has experienced mass human rights abuses due to the historic militarization of the Asia Pacific region and interventionist US foreign policy, such as the Visiting

Forces Agreement (VFA). These violations include impunity toward US officers committing sexual abuse on military bases on Philippine soil. Jennifer Laude’s death is an example of such impunity with Pemberton’s use of the “gay and trans panic defense,” a legal defense strategy stating that a victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity is to blame for a defendant’s violent reaction, including murder. The gay and trans panic defense has been criticized as prejudiced toward LGBTQQIA+ peoples, and it was used as a method to free Pemberton of charges for murder. Pemberton was ultimately charged with homicide, not for murder, and his maximum sentence was ten years.

As a result of her death, GABRIELA, an international grassroots-based alliance dedicated to the “liberation of all oppressed Filipino women,” spearheaded the Justice for Jennifer Laude campaign. The campaign’s demands included convicting Pemberton on Philippine law, increasing protections towards LGBTQQIA+ peoples, and abolishing the Visiting Forces Agreement, which grants US officers immunity from prosecution if they commit crimes against Filipinos. In 2015, Bahaghari, a group of LGBTQQIA+ and women’s organizations, gathered hundreds of participants in Makati City in order to push for Pemberton’s conviction, to end the VFA, and to extend protections against discrimination. In conjunction with protests across the Philippines, GABRIELA chapters outside of the Philippines, such as GABRIELA Hong Kong and GABRIELA USA, brought together Filipinas and allied communities to host discussions and rallies under the Justice for Jennifer Laude banner—many of which our symposium members have led and participated in. The campaign ultimately developed an international movement toward LGBTQQIA+ justice as well as an end to state-sanctioned violence in the United States, the Philippines, and around the world.

To address human rights issues:

* US Congress members: Denounce legislation that still upholds homophobic and transphobic defenses, such as the gay panic defense or trans panic, that normalize and perpetuate violence against the LGBTQQIA+ community. Restrict taxpayer spending toward US military aid for the Philippine military and government due to mass human rights violations.

CONCLUSION

From the symposium's discussions, we identified three major areas where the Filipina and LGBTQQIA+ Pilipinx community are affected politically, socially, and economically across California. Although we shared many of the community's challenges, we have also noted that grassroots and community-based organizations have been spearheading immense efforts to create more gender-inclusive education and communities, both within the state and internationally. Currently, there have been strides in the passage of policies that will protect and serve LGBTQQIA+ people. These policies include SB 918, which will enhance support services for homeless youth, and AB 2504, which provides LGBTQ cultural competency trainings for law enforcement officers. There is still a long road to go in order to fully transform our communities toward political, economic, and cultural inclusion. Through policy change, social movements, and grassroots efforts, the vision toward gender justice will come to fruition.

"Although we shared many of the community's challenges, we have also noted that grassroots and community-based organizations have been spearheading immense efforts to create more gender-inclusive education and communities, both within the state and internationally."

KEY TERMS

* **LGBTQQIA+**: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual. The "+" refers to other sexual and gender identities not elaborated in the phrase.

* **Transgender**: A term used to describe individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth.

* **Filipina**: A person who identifies as female and is of Filipino descent.

* **Pilipinx**: A gender-inclusive alternative to "Filipino American," as it includes gender nonconforming people in the Pilipinx community. Since there is no "F" in Tagalog, "P" is used instead.

* **Gender nonconforming (aka gender fluidity)**: A term used to describe those who do not associate concretely with the gender of either man or woman.

* **Human trafficking**: Often coined as modern-day slavery, it is the use of force, fraud, and coercion to obtain labor and services.

* **Survival sex trade**: A term used to describe the practice of people engaged in sexual acts in exchange for basic needs such as food, housing, transportation, education, etc.

* **Sexual assault**: Sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the clear consent of the victim.

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INTERGENERATIONAL, MULTIETHNIC, AND TRANSNATIONAL APPROACHES TO U.S. POLICY ADVOCACY FOR THE FILIPINO AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Steven Raga

ABSTRACT

In 2019, National Federation for Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA) offers an example of how Asian American organizations are recalibrating to strengthen their policy and advocacy initiatives, promote intergenerational governance of the organization, increase national and local partnership initiatives, and establish procedures for transnational policy advocacy. This article highlights the strategic alliances, collaboration processes, and strategic restructuring that describe NaFFAA's organizational vision. The vision builds upon previous successful policy campaigns and programming while providing recommendations to consider for scaling up through the creation of partner entities and functional organizing.

INTRODUCTION

With approximately four million Filipino Americans in living in the United States in 2015,¹ the population has nearly doubled its estimate from a decade earlier. The upsurge brings forth new challenges for the community, including a proportional need for disaggregated data for AAPIs on every level of research, bridging the cultural gap with acculturated Filipino Americans and newly arrived immigrants, and increased funding for Filipino American community centers that provide direct services in largely Filipino neighborhoods, just to name a few. Locally, these vital community centers are struggling to stay open as their programs begin to get disproportionate funding in relation to other Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) centers.

Nationally, coordinated advocacies for comprehensive immigration reform, recognition for Filipino American WWII veterans, and Philippine dual-citizenship are crucial policy concerns for the Filipino community in the United States. Over the

past two decades, organizations like the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA) have elevated these issues within the public imagination, playing a vital role in the fight for temporary protective status, comprehensive immigration reform, World War II veterans' recognition, and others. Through both paid staff and volunteer boards on the national, regional, and state levels, NaFFAA employs both a professional advocacy model and a volunteer citizen advocacy model to help support a wide breadth of policy priorities.

Comprehensive immigration reform has continuously been an issue that pushes Filipino Americans to work collaboratively with other ethnic groups. As a member of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), NaFFAA has joined other national AAPI organizations in supporting issues pertinent to the pan-AAPI audience, including comprehensive immigration reform. As national chairperson, Ed Navarra encouraged all

NaFFAA chapters to write and call their federal representatives as comprehensive immigration reform "directly affects our families and our communities. Let's take this opportunity to engage our political leaders and let them know how much we care about reuniting families."² With former Maryland Delegate David Valderama, who led the delegation, NaFFAA "met with legislative aides of U.S. senators Ben Cardin and Barbara Mikulski,"³ NaFFAA continuously supports this issue by holding regular local and national policy forums to update community leaders, conducting visits with federal representatives in their districts and DC offices to articulate continued support, and encouraging their members to contact their representatives as in-district constituents.

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More recently, Filipino Americans rallied behind Pulitzer Prize-winning Jose Antonio Vargas and his Define American campaign. As Vargas gained nationwide attention as an undocumented American from the Philippines, he made it a point to work with undocumented Americans from all backgrounds. Vargas himself flew in with then-NaFFAA Vice Chairperson J.T. Mallonga to Las Vegas for the 2011 NaFFAA Strategic Planning Conference and introduced himself to the organization's national board months before his official coming out as an undocumented American was front page of the Sunday

". . . 'our aspirations for empowerment [were] tied to the struggle of our Filipino veterans. We have to raise our voices and fight for them in the halls of Congress, if we want Washington's policy makers to take us seriously as a political force.'"

New York Times. With Vargas's initiatives as a component to jumpstart other campaigns, many Filipino American organizations have become more comfortable collaborating with communities outside the pan-AAPI space to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform. Local chapters have held immigration policy forums across the country; Vargas has spoken at a number of these forums as well as the 2014 NaFFAA National Empowerment Conference. NaFFAA has unanimously and openly endorsed the passing of the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act in the US House of Representatives and Senate.⁴ Comprehensive immigration reform, along with the campaign for disaggregated AAPI data, will stay on top of NaFFAA's national and local policy efforts moving forward.

World War II veterans recognition is one of the longest-lasting federal policy issues that Filipino American advocates have been fighting for. The founding conference of NaFFAA coincided with chants of "Equity Now!" for the Filipino World War II veterans or "FilVets," during which conference delegates, including WWII veterans, marched on the White House, chained themselves to the fence, and were arrested.⁵ One of those arrested included Congressman Bob Filner of San Diego.⁶ Loida Nicolas-Lewis recalls the moment when "our aspirations for empowerment [were] tied to the struggle of our Filipino veterans. We have to raise our voices and fight for them in the halls of Congress, if we want Washington's policymakers to take us seriously as a political force."⁷ After the passage of the Rescission Act of 1946, which stripped veterans' benefits from Filipinos who fought under United States

command,⁸ advocates have struggled for six decades for Filipino WWII veterans to realize full equity, which have included petitions and, in several instances, litigation. In 2009, Filipino WWII veterans were given a lump sum of \$9,000–\$15,000, issued dependent on United States residence.⁹ However with over 41,000 claims filed, only a limited number of applicants have been found eligible.¹⁰

In January 2015, US senators Dean Heller of Nevada (R), Mazie Hirono of Hawaii (D), and Congresswoman Grace Meng of New York (D) launched a bipartisan effort to address this injustice again. On top of advocating for benefits, the recent and successful push to grant Filipino WWII veterans the Congressional Gold Medal has taken the forefront. The medal was formally awarded to Filipino American WWII veterans in 2017 because of the support and advocacy of community organizations, including NaFFAA and the Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project (FilVetRep), which is chaired by retired US Major General Tony Taguba. Through this process, NaFFAA has helped identify eligible veterans or families for the medal, extensive campaign information dissemination, and fundraising efforts for FilVetRep. Taguba is now bringing the lessons learned from FilVetRep to help Chinese WWII veterans also be honored with a Congressional Gold Medal.

Filipino Americans, like other AAPI subgroups, have been involved in transnational politics for decades. Organizations such as the Kalayaan Collective, the Movement for a Free Philippines (MFP), the National Coalition for the Restoration of Civil Liberties in the Philippines (NCRCLP), and others were heavily involved in the politics in the Philippines during the 1960s–1980s. They took on a transnational identity, whose spirit is still embodied by Filipino American activists across the country today. The *Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino*

(KDP), or the Union of Democratic Filipinos, emerged in 1973. KDP was founded on a “dual line,” which supported the “struggle for socialism in the United States and National Democracy in the Philippines.”¹¹ Its advocacy against the Marcos dictatorship as a diaspora community directly contributed in political struggle from afar and shaped “the nation-building processes of two or more nation-states”¹² via “long-distance nationalism,” the concept that activists can “live their politics long-distance.”¹³ The international perspective continued with Loida Nicolas-Lewis as chairperson for NaFFAA, through which it won dual citizenship for Filipino Americans and voting rights abroad. The successful campaign resulted in a more sensible rollout and application of the Philippines’ Dual Citizenship Act or Republic Act No. 9225: The Citizenship Retention and Reacquisition Act of 2003, which declared “that natural-born citizens of the Philippines who become citizens of another country shall be deemed not to have lost their Philippine citizenship.”¹⁴ Dual citizenship and overseas absentee voting enhance the welfare of both Filipinos and Filipino Americans. Dual citizenship offers the rights and privileges of all Filipino citizens, including “the right to travel with a Philippine passport, the right to own real property in the Philippines, the right to engage in business and commerce as a Filipino, and the right to practice one’s profession, provided that a license or permit to engage in such practice is obtained from the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC), or the Supreme Court in the case of lawyers.”¹⁵ Through a class-action lawsuit in the Philippine Supreme Court, NaFFAA also safeguarded absentee voting for Filipino dual citizens in the United States. The protection was granted after efforts to call on President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to “re-certify as urgent House Bill 10720, otherwise known as the Overseas Absentee Voting Bill.”¹⁶

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FILIPINO AMERICAN ASSOCIATIONS (NAFFAA)

The National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA) recently celebrated their 20-year anniversary in Washington, DC, in October 2017. Their gala, themed “NaFFAA 2.0: One Voice, Four Million Strong,” packed a large hall of Filipino American leaders and community partners to commemorate the milestone. NaFFAA represents a national Filipino American voice and has advocated for a range of policy initiatives over the past two decades. Most notably, NaFFAA has fought tirelessly for temporary protective status (TPS) for Filipinos affected by natural disasters in the Philippines, comprehensive immigration reform in the United States, and veterans recognition for Filipinos who served during World War II. This reflection focuses on NaFFAA’s strategy and the significance of these policy initiatives for the Filipino diaspora and Filipino Americans in the United States.

NaFFAA’s guiding policy principle focuses on building political empowerment for Filipino Americans at all levels of government to advance or protect the political, social, and economic interests of Filipino Americans. The 116th US Congress (2019–2021) demonstrates the lack of national representation among elected officials, such that only two representatives are of Filipino descent: Congressman Bobby Scott of Virginia and Congressman T.J. Scott of Nevada.

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In response to these challenges, NaFFAA is leveraging three important strategies to improve the welfare of the Filipino community in meaningful ways. First, NaFFAA and other large organizations

alike are positioned to leverage intergenerational resources via Filipino American collegiate organizations and young professional organizations in advocacy efforts, compared with other long-standing Filipino American advocacy groups. At the local level, young professionals and students partner with community organizations to assist local direct services, which vary in relation to their community partners.

Second, NaFFAA is adopting a coalitional lens for its national advocacy. During an era of burgeoning political polarization, NaFFAA leadership displays an expanded commitment to the creation and maintenance of multiethnic partnerships, especially with regard to other ethnic groups. Since Filipinos are a historically marginalized ethnic minority in the United States, NaFFAA’s approach seems to result in a more comprehensive network and inclusive partnership opportunities. Such policies prioritized with multiethnic advocacy include comprehensive immigration reform, data disaggregation, and human trafficking, which extends internationally.

Third, NaFFAA is continuing to influence international policy. The organization was founded during the post-Marcos dictatorship period, but that has not limited its advocacy to the United States alone. Initiatives have extended into the Philippines itself, working both with government agencies and organizations. In 2002, under the leadership of National Chairperson Loida Nicolas-Lewis, NaFFAA

lobbied the Philippine Government for three international programs to help Filipino citizens residing in America. These programs were concentrated on “overseas voting rights, dual citizenship, and

a Memorandum of Agreement with the Philippine Government to assist distressed Filipino nationals.”¹⁷

INTERGENERATIONAL ADVOCACY

In his 1997 keynote address to the Filipino Intercollegiate Networking Dialogue (FIND) fall dialogue at the State University in New York at Binghamton, Professor E. San Juan Jr. notes that the students he met were “more seriously engaged in exploring how to achieve ‘success’ or ‘agency’ in the trendy postmodernist lexicon”¹⁸ rather than facing advocacy issues head on. Since that speech, which coincided with NaFFAA’s founding year, there are signs that the tides are turning with a new generation of committed and capable student leaders, not just at FIND but across the country. Recent FIND National Chairperson Andrew Esmele highlights their newly launched alumni network in an effort “to connect students to over 25 years of alumni, ensuring the passage of knowledge and retention of our history not only as an organization but as a community.”¹⁹ These young working professionals have a longer turnover rate of leadership and serve as better conduits to student organizations as many of them either were once student leaders themselves or already have trusted working relationships with on-campus organizations. This relationship is imperative, as students tend to not have a long-term view with regard to community.²⁰ Additionally, a recent survey of University of California (UC) students found that Filipino Americans along with “East Indian and Pakistani American youth were identified as most likely to be Voting Involved,”²¹ compared with other AAPI students on campus. With a focus on engagement, NaFFAA has an opportunity to partner with UC for voter-registration drives and outreach to on-campus organizations. Civic engagement also extends to young workers who are also involved in Filipino American community organizations.

One example of how these alumni-student connections are forged is the work of Pilipino American Unity for Progress (UniPro), a premier Filipino American organization comprising young professionals and students. UniPro prioritizes community advocacy in addition to professional and career development. Current UniPro Board Chairman Noel Aglubat stated, “Headquartered in New York City, UniPro’s impact on young Filipino American leadership stretches across the country with chapters rising out of San Diego, Seattle, Chicago, and Houston. They’re a great example of how young professionals can partner to bridge the leadership gap between students and the baby boomer generation, and between 1st generation Americans with the 2nd generation and up.”²²

In 2014, UniPro and NaFFAA partnered to found Empowering Pilipino Youth through Collaboration (EPYC). Led by Leezel Ramos from NaFFAA and Kirklyn Escondo from UniPro, the nationwide organizing efforts resulted in a summit as the official module for young and emerging leaders at NaFFAA’s 2014 National Empowerment Conference in San Diego. Ramos recalls: “Kirklyn and I recognized that student leaders have had a long tradition of organizing on their respective campuses and among colleges across their region. We wanted to create a national space to bring these student leaders together, allow them to learn from one another, and to promote opportunities to continue their leadership beyond graduation.”²³

NaFFAA, which historically has been primarily composed of baby boomers, is further supplementing its support for the next generation of leadership by creating a day-long forum to orient students and young professionals to the Capitol Hill advocacy. NaFFAA collaborates with younger leaders on drafting a long-term execution plan to include students in national policy advocacy. This collaboration stems from

historical practices of youth leadership development in NaFFAA. Speaking about its founding in 1997, Gloria T. Caoile, also a NaFFAA co-founder, reemphasized that “our strength as a community is due in large part to the contributions of women, men, young people, and seniors who draw upon one another’s energies and resources. We’ve become a better organization because of their selfless leadership.”²⁴ As one of the few Filipino American associations with a presence in all 50 states, NaFFAA is in a position to begin establishing long-term relationship plans with its younger counterparts not just to leverage gift income contributed by organizations, find volunteers, and in-kind contributions of venue space but also to identify young community organizers who could continuously participate in advocacy for years to come.

MULTIETHNIC COALITIONS

NaFFAA National Chairman Brendan Flores explains:

It’s a fact that ethnic minorities are at a disadvantage in terms of health, poverty and education. We have an immense opportunity to come together in order to position the marginalized sectors of society at the center of the development growth. How can we come together as a community if we aren’t brave enough to have genuine conversations that are impacting our people?²⁵

On the national level, NaFFAA is striving to reach out to non-Filipino American organizations and businesses. In a recent national board summit in Houston, Texas, NaFFAA national leaders visited Self-Help for African People through Education (SHAPE) Community Center in time to develop a relationship leading up to Black History Month. Citing Professor E.J.R. David’s “We need to resist the internalization of oppression that leads us to buy into the notions of colorism and racism, which leads us to have stereotypical,

inferiorizing, and dehumanizing attitudes toward African Americans and dark-skinned individuals. Maybe learning a bit more about the ties between African Americans and Filipin@s will help us with this resistance,”²⁶ NaFFAA released a statement affirming that “because we celebrate ethnic diversity as a cornerstone of the American condition, let’s all take time out this month to reflect and honor the huge contributions of Black Americans to what we know today as the United States of America.”²⁷

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

Recent high-profile cases of human trafficking of Filipinos into the United States, through recruitment agencies and their assurance of a H-1B non-immigrant visa, include the Sentosa 27, Jacqueline Aguirre, and the Prince George Teachers. These are all underscored by the sharp community support for the traffic victims, namely from organizations such as the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns (NAFCON), GABRIELA USA, and the Migrant Heritage Commission. The Sentosa 27 case was slightly different as they had been given EB-3 status, rather than a temporary-worker visa. This highlighted how the nurses were exploited by more unusual methods: “substantial recruiter fees, debt bondage, third-party employment through ‘body shops’ or other intermediaries.”²⁸

NaFFAA is in a position to bolster its relationship with the Philippine government, and a formal partnership can be finalized with the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), Philippine Overseas Employment Association (PEOA), and the Commission of Filipinos Overseas (CFO) under the Office of the President of the Philippines. For the CFO, NaFFAA can help formally identify and recommend nominees for the Presidential Awards for Filipino Individuals and Organizations Overseas.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FILIPINO AMERICAN COMMUNITY

FEDERAL POLICY: TEMPORARY PROTECTIVE STATUS

TPS has been a hotly pressed issue for Filipino Americans since December 2013, after Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) left a reported 6,300 dead,²⁹ with an additional 65,000+ missing weeks earlier. When nations are granted TPS during times of national disaster or emergency, the citizens of that country who are currently in the United States are allowed a temporary US employment authorization and legal status for 18 months. The policy was established via the Immigration Act of 1990 (IMMACT)³⁰ and has been conferred to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake and to Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone after the Ebola outbreak in 2014. With many Filipino Americans still

“[Temporary protective status] has been a hotly pressed issue for Filipino Americans since December 2013, after Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) left a reported 6,300 dead, with an additional 65,000+ missing weeks earlier.”

tied to the Philippines and an estimated 600,000 Filipino nationals in the United States at the time,³¹ community leaders sought any and every way to help those impacted from the natural disaster. On the ground, countless community leaders, whether affiliated with NaFFAA or other organizations, focused on fundraising to help ease the day-to-day situation, while others focused on attaining TPS. During the campaign to receive TPS, NaFFAA state and regional chapters held forums to drum up additional community support, resulting in 20 senatorial representatives signing onto a letter officially endorsing TPS for Filipino nationals to the US Department of Homeland Security.³² On the national level, then-NaFFAA Chairman Eduardo Navarra appealed to the Philippine ambassador to the United States, Jose Cuisia Jr., to urge the United States to grant TPS for Filipinos.³³ The Obama administration did not grant

TPS to the Philippines, but it is still a priority issue for NaFFAA due to the frequency of natural disasters in the Philippines.

Kirstjen Nielsen, the United States secretary of Homeland Security, should be approached by NaFFAA to consider the Philippines for TPS designation, depending on the severity of the flooding experienced in the Philippines during typhoon season. Although annual storms plague the island nation regularly, some years are particularly disastrous for local Filipinos, like 2013. In severe cases like Haiyan, secretary Nielsen should consider designating the Philippines for TPS on the 12-month duration instead of longest option available of 18 months. Twelve months is advisable as it gives sufficient time to oversee the impacts of the subsequent typhoon season and to consider an automatic six-month extension if extreme weather persists.

INTERNATIONAL POLICY: HUMAN TRAFFICKING

A recent Urban Institute research study found that of those trafficked into the United States, approximately 61 percent did not know the recruiter before their recruitment meeting in the victims' country of origin. The study also found instances not only when US-based companies ignore the recruitment process for foreign workers but also when the companies “were more intimately involved in fraud and coercion during the recruitment process.”³⁴ This can possibly be prevented by the PEOA applying an even stricter policy for foreign-based recruiting centers. Aside from policies stemming from the Philippines, another component to trafficking into the United States lies in immigration law itself. Because US immigration law is often connected to employers, the law also empowers exploitative employers to “control their

immigrant workers, whose lack of familiarity with the laws and customs of the United States already render them vulnerable.”³⁵

Filipino American advocacy groups are demanding protection for the rights and welfare of trafficking victims. A partnership between these groups on the ground and Philippine government agencies could create a comprehensive oversight program to monitor high-risk recruitment agencies from Philippines to the United States as well as generate policy to address trafficking. Although intermediary organizations based in the United States already exist and deliver an additional protective tier against trafficking, NaFFAA can readily operate both locally and nationally, meeting with these agencies to determine their level of risk and provide recommendations for PEOA.

CONCLUSION

With the influx of millennial leadership in NaFFAA, most notably in the national chairperson and executive director positions, the organization is primed to build upon the successes of previous generations and energetically continue the mission. This inclusion of intergenerational board governance directly attributes to innovative dialogue and cooperation throughout the national board to the state chapter boards. To strengthen its policy advocacy, NaFFAA should identify and enter strategic alliances with the students, other ethnic groups, and the Philippine government. Also recommended are additional entities to work in tandem with the existing 501©3 entity to help scale up membership and legislative advocacy.

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TIBETAN STRATEGIES AND CHINESE COUNTER-STRATEGIES, 1986–2012

Tenzin Dorjee

ABSTRACT

This paper traces the evolution of the strategies used by the Tibetan leadership to promote the Tibetan cause and the counter-strategies used by the Chinese government to suppress the Tibet issue. It focuses on the period between 1986 and 2012, during which Dharamsala sought to internationalize the Tibet issue by mobilizing parliaments and the public in the West. An important role was played by the Tibetan American communities, who joined the Western advocacy groups in building a powerful grassroots movement whose impact reached all the way to Beijing.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1986 and 2008, the Tibetan leadership had remarkable success at driving the Tibet issue to the forefront of global public consciousness. Compared to other groups that are in conflict with Beijing, Tibetans were relatively successful in denying legitimacy to China's rule over their homeland and presenting the Tibetan plight as a political issue demanding a solution. What strategies did the Tibetan leadership, based in Dharamsala, India, pursue to thwart China's international reputation and influence? What opportunities did it seize or miss? How did the Tibetan leadership strengthen—and eventually compromise—its leverage over China?

I will examine two key strategies that helped to build Tibetan leverage over China. The first is Dharamsala's internationalization of the Tibet issue in the 1980s by aligning Tibet with the liberal West, chiefly the United States. This strategy relied on the logic that Western democracies would pressure Beijing to negotiate with the Dalai Lama. Key actors in this strategy were the small but vocal network of Tibet advocacy groups in the West and Tibetan Americans who had immigrated to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s.^{1,2,3}

The second strategy is the nonviolent grassroots mobilization of the Tibetan people and its contribution to Dharamsala's leverage over China. I will discuss how nonviolent mobilization in Tibet raised Dharamsala's bargaining power in negotiating with Beijing and address potential reasons why the Tibetan leadership has largely abstained from using this method of pressuring China. I will close with suggestions on how the Tibet movement might yet revive its political capital and reclaim a position of power in relation to China's actions, policies, and decisions.

BACKGROUND: INVASION AND EXILE

Soon after the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, China invaded Tibet. In the years that followed, Tibetans formed a volunteer resistance force known as Chushi Gangdruk. Tens of thousands of lay and monastic Tibetans enlisted in this force and engaged in battles against the Chinese troops.⁴ While the Tibetans inflicted some losses on the Chinese, they lost the war, and the remaining Chushi Gangdruk warriors retreated to a guerrilla base first in Lokha, southern Tibet, and then in Mustang, Nepal. By 1959, the tensions between the Tibetans and Chinese peaked, and there

were fears that the Chinese might abduct the Dalai Lama. In March of that year, amid the shelling of the Norbulingka summer palace, the Dalai Lama fled Lhasa, and the Tibetans of Lhasa rose up against Chinese rule in what became the first Tibetan uprising.

Upon the Dalai Lama's arrival in India, the newly established Tibetan government in exile attempted to raise the Tibet issue in the United Nations and gain support from member countries, but its efforts yielded little success. Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister of newly independent India, saw Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai as a friend, and the Sino-Indian relationship was in its honeymoon phase. Although generous with humanitarian assistance, Nehru was stingy with political support to the Tibetans. In April 1959, a delegation of Tibetans led by the former Tibetan Prime Minister Lukhangwa presented a memorandum to Nehru requesting India to sponsor the Tibetan case at the United Nations. Nehru replied that India was "not in a position to intervene and in fact would not like to take any steps which might aggravate the situation."⁵ He saw India's relationship with China as one of paramount importance and did his best to suppress international discussion of Tibet at the United Nations.⁶

In the secluded hill station of Dharamsala, the 24-year-old Dalai Lama found himself in charge of an impoverished, exiled government, with nearly 80,000 refugees in his care and little support from outside. Given the lack of political opportunity to advance the Tibetan cause globally, he concentrated his efforts on long-term survival of Tibetan identity through the establishment of cultural institutions in India. For the next two decades, the Tibetan government invested in capacity building, empowering its human capital and establishing schools, monasteries, and other institutions to preserve the traditional arts and sciences.

By the late 1970s, the Tibet issue had all but disappeared from the political arena and from global consciousness. China had consolidated its rapprochement with the United States and not only executed its re-entry into the community of nations but also secured a seat in the United Nations Security Council. On the international stage, there was no serious challenge to China's rule in Tibet.⁷

TURNING WEST: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO HUMAN RIGHTS

In 1986 and 1987, Dharamsala held a series of meetings where it strategized a new campaign aimed at internationalizing the Tibet issue.⁸ In the previous two decades, the Tibetan leadership had focused on institution building, cultural preservation, and self-strengthening initiatives by consolidating its ancillary institutions and made its refugee settlements self-sufficient. Now the time was ripe to re-enter the global political arena; Dharamsala finally turned its gaze outward.

Instead of pursuing an avenue through the United Nations, Tibetan leaders decided to leverage the citizens and the parliaments of democratic Western countries, particularly the United States, to pressure China into negotiations.⁹ "These leaders," writes Robert Barnett, "having realized in the mid-1980s that foreign governments had no strategic or political interest in raising the Tibet issue, decided instead to pressure them by mobilizing popular support among their constituents." Emphasizing the protection of human rights, culture, and environment, Dharamsala changed its discourse on the Tibet issue from one that was rooted in its history of independence and the right to self-determination to one that invoked the protection of human rights.¹⁰

The Dalai Lama, whose trips outside of India in the previous two decades had been extremely rare, embarked on a series of international trips aimed at building

political support for the Tibetan cause. Whereas the Dalai Lama barely traveled outside of India until 1985, he made over 60 international trips between 1986 and 1999. While he visited barely one country per year on average from 1959 to 1985, he visited an average of ten countries per year between 1986 and 1999.¹¹ This sharp rise in the number of international trips shows the degree to which the Tibetan leadership's new strategy was reflected in the Dalai Lama's activities.

In one of the most significant events during this period, the Dalai Lama gave a speech to the US Congressional Human Rights Caucus in September 1987, where he announced a proposal that came to be known as the Five Point Peace Plan.¹² In this proposal, the Dalai Lama promulgated his vision of Tibet as a demilitarized "zone of peace." The Chinese immediately rejected the Dalai Lama's proposal.¹³

News of the Dalai Lama speaking to American congressmen sparked unprecedented hope in Tibetans inside Tibet. Chinese state television condemned the Dalai Lama's efforts to "split the motherland," further provoking the Tibetans.¹⁴ Within days, Tibetans in Lhasa staged, for the first time since 1959, street protests expressing their support for independence and the Dalai Lama.¹⁵ The protests were brutally suppressed by the Chinese police, but not before news of China's crackdown was globally broadcast. These incidents bolstered the Dalai Lama's standing as Tibet's true representative, while leaving Beijing's image in tatters on the global stage.

The West's recognition of the Tibet issue, though, did not come without a cost. In 1988, the Dalai Lama made a crucial bargain with China: he conceded Tibet's independence in favor of "genuine autonomy," a term referring to a high degree of autonomy where Tibet could control its own internal affairs while foreign relations and military defense would remain in China's

hands. This compromise, first announced in a 1988 address in Strasbourg, along with the Dalai Lama's long-standing commitment to nonviolence earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. The Dalai Lama named his conciliatory approach of seeking autonomy for Tibet the "Middle Way," as it sought to supposedly avoid the two extremes of seeking full independence for Tibet and accepting complete integration with China.

In the eyes of the activists demanding Tibet's full independence, Dharamsala had squandered one of its most valuable bargaining chips—the historical claim to sovereignty—by preemptively surrendering independence in favor of autonomy. This unilateral concession did not extract any reciprocal change from China; instead, it fractured the unity of purpose that had sustained Tibetan public morale until then. Both camps, the advocates of independence as well as autonomy, were largely in agreement that Dharamsala could not have internationalized the Tibet issue without framing it in the context of safeguarding human rights. However, independence advocates contend that Dharamsala went beyond what was necessary by institutionalizing the Middle Way approach and by passing it through the Tibetan Parliament before securing a single concession from China. Political analyst Ellen Bork wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, "What if Tibet's claim to independence had been preserved rather than conceded? The U.S. and other countries would be in a much better position today to resist China's increasingly assertive claims of Tibet as a 'core interest' and rebut Beijing's insistence on sovereignty as a complete bar to pressure on human rights."¹⁶

Regardless of what may have occurred, Dharamsala's new strategy of internationalizing the Tibet issue did produce two distinct results that reshaped the Sino-Tibetan conflict: support from Western parliaments and the rise in international grassroots activism for Tibet.

MOBILIZING CONGRESS AND PARLIAMENTS

This support from Western governments and citizens enabled the Tibetan leadership to make inroads into parliaments around the world, most prominently the US Congress. Powerful senators and congressmen, like Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Tom Lantos, Frank Wolf, Nancy Pelosi, and Jim Sensenbrenner, from different political parties became champions of Tibet, making it a bipartisan cause. Resolutions were passed in the US Congress as well as other parliaments condemning China's occupation of Tibet.¹⁷

The European Parliament passed a resolution on 14 October 1987, "recalling that both during the early days of the Chinese occupation in the 1950s and during the Cultural Revolution the Tibetan religion and culture were brutally repressed." The US Congress passed a stronger resolution on 22 December 1987, stating that the "Chinese Communist army invaded and occupied Tibet."¹⁸ It went further to say, "Over 1,000,000 Tibetans perished from 1959 to 1979 as a direct result of the political instability, executions, imprisonment, and wide scale famine engendered by the policies of the People's Republic of China in Tibet." In total, from 1987 to 1997, the US Congress passed 20 resolutions on Tibet, and the European Parliament passed 12.¹⁹

These resolutions, symbolic in nature, did not have the coercive power to bring China to the negotiating table, but they did inflict a significant political cost on the Chinese government. For one, they represented a moral verdict in the court of global public opinion, with each resolution chipping away at China's reputation. As a result, even as China consolidated its bureaucratic and military control of Tibet, it was losing its moral and political legitimacy to rule the plateau.

Equally important, these resolutions helped facilitate Dharamsala's connection

with Tibetans in Tibet. In 1991, the US radio station Voice of America created a Tibetan service under an act of Congress, launching a daily broadcast program to listeners inside Tibet, giving Tibetans a source of news other than China's state media.²⁰ The Chinese government continually expended ever more human and financial resources to counter what it called Western attacks on its rule over Tibet, but it failed to halt the steady erosion of its influence and legitimacy.

However, as China's value as a trading partner grew in the early 1990s, the efficacy of strongly worded resolutions reached their limit. The same governments that were issuing these condemnations were also signing trade deals with China, and Dharamsala began to realize the inadequacy of mobilizing through Western governments.

This schism had in fact already been present in 1987, when the first resolutions were passed. President Reagan had expressed support of China's crackdown on Tibet, even while Congress had criticized them. The Clinton administration went further by introducing the bilateral framework for negotiations. This separated trade discussions from human rights discussions, which benefitted economic interests in both the United States and China. The European governments followed suit, leaving Dharamsala with limited political avenues to pursue under its human rights approach.

MOBILIZING THE GRASSROOTS FORCES

In addition to involving Western governments, Dharamsala's internationalization of the Tibet issue also led to an increase in international grassroots activism for Tibet. The Dalai Lama's global speaking tours and the Nobel spotlight had triggered an explosion of public awareness about the Tibetan plight. Grassroots organizations such as

the International Campaign for Tibet and Students for a Free Tibet started to form, and many Western Buddhists, such as the scholar Robert Thurman, the actor Richard Gere, and the musician Adam Yauch, began to mobilize supporters to the cause.

The landmark event that launched a nationwide grassroots force for Tibet in the United States was a series of Tibetan Freedom Concerts in New York City, San Francisco, and Washington, DC, organized by Adam Yauch of the band the Beastie Boys.²¹ At each of these shows, thousands of concertgoers signed up to join the activist group Students for a Free Tibet. Hundreds of these groups emerged in dozens of countries, mobilizing thousands of volunteers. By the mid-1990s, the international Tibet movement was running at full speed.

"For the first time in decades, the movement had dealt a concrete, visible blow to China. . . . The Tibet movement's grassroots muscle and ability to generate negative publicity for its foes posed a real threat to these companies' brands and influenced their decision-making."

The scope and strength of this grassroots movement multiplied when scores of Tibetans immigrated to North America in the 1990s, after the US Congress allowed 1,000 exiled Tibetans to resettle in the United States through the Immigration Act of 1990. The new Tibetan communities in the West, working closely with the advocacy groups, never failed to organize street protests against Chinese leaders visiting Western capitals. It became impossible for any high-profile Chinese leader to visit Washington, DC, or New York without being hounded by endless street protests.

This global grassroots constituency composed of advocacy groups and newly established Tibetan American communities accumulated a new type of political capital for Dharamsala, freeing them from

the political constraints of relying purely on congressional support. Beginning in the late 1990s, the Tibet movement waged a series of strategic campaigns against multinational institutions seeking to invest in China. The most high profile of these campaigns was launched in 1999, when China was being approved for a World Bank loan of \$160 million to resettle 58,000 Chinese farmers to eastern Tibet. Vocal opposition from Tibet advocacy groups prompted the bank to commission an independent review of the project, which found that the bank's staff had violated seven out of ten operational directives to get the loan approved.²² Following several months of continuous protest rallies and a string of media stories that slammed the bank for facilitating China's oppression in Tibet, the contentious loan was finally canceled, causing China a devastating loss of face.²³

The Tibet movement was galvanized by this unprecedented victory. For the first time in decades, the movement had dealt a concrete, visible blow to China. Journalist Sebastian Mallaby, who wrote an article in *Foreign Policy* scorning the Tibet movement and defending the World Bank, remarked with disbelief, "The Lilliputian activists had taken on the bank, and they had won the first round."²⁴

The Tibet movement's grassroots muscle and ability to generate negative publicity for its foes posed a real threat to these companies' brands and influenced their decision-making.²⁵ Some believe that the mining giant Rio Tinto's decision not to dig in Tibet a few years later was motivated by a fear of the political minefield that Tibet had become.

The distress that the pro-Tibet protesters caused Chinese leaders was evidenced in the leaked transcript of a speech delivered by Zhao Qizheng, the minister of the Information Office of the State Council, at a conference in 2000: "During every foreign visit of our leaders, last year, the Dalai clique,

with covert incitement and help from western countries as well as Tibet support groups, interfered and created disruption through protest rallies. In this way, they gained the highest-level international platform and intervention."²⁶

BEIJING'S COUNTER-STRATEGY

In late 2002, Beijing reached out to the Dalai Lama and invited his envoys for talks, creating an atmosphere of optimism in Dharamsala. Outside Dharamsala, some Tibetans suspected that Beijing's invitation was motivated less by a genuine desire to resolve the conflict than by a strategic intention to mute international criticism of its Tibet policy in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games. Their suspicions would later be reinforced when a high-level Chinese diplomat, Chen Yonglin, defected from the Chinese embassy in Australia in 2005 and described the outreach as merely a tactic of deception, that there was "no sincerity from the Chinese side."²⁷

However, due to a perceived lack of alternatives, Dharamsala agreed to proceed with the dialogue without setting any precondition. For China, simply having the dialogue was victory, as they were able to use the photograph of Chinese and Tibetan delegates sitting together to muzzle international criticism of its treatment of Tibet. Beijing's subtext to the West was that the Chinese and the Tibetans were talking directly; third parties were no longer needed.

During this period, Dharamsala became preoccupied with a policy of "creating a conducive environment" for the talks to succeed. One of Beijing's demands during the initial rounds of dialogue was that Dharamsala tone down the international protests.²⁸ Dharamsala agreed, even at the risk of alienating its own constituencies.

To reinforce this, in September 2002, Prime Minister of the Tibetan government

in exile Samdhong Rinpoche released this appeal prior to the visit of President Jiang Zemin to the United States and Mexico:

In the past Tibetans and Tibet supporters throughout the world had used the opportunity of Chinese leaders' visits to convey their feelings through peaceful rallies and demonstrations. One of the objectives of such actions was to encourage the Chinese leaders to respond to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's initiatives for a negotiated settlement of the Tibetan problem. Now that there is an indication that the Chinese leadership may be willing to start discussing with us, we could use the opportunity of President Jiang's visit to test China's response. I want to urge all Tibetans and friends of Tibet to refrain from public actions like rallies and demonstrations during President Jiang's visit to the United States and Mexico.

The prime minister's words reflected an assumption that dialogue and protests were mutually exclusive. In reality, his appeal represented a forfeiture of the one tactic that had been effective in making China see the value of dialogue in the first place. Between 2002 and 2006, Dharamsala issued a chain of controversial appeals to Tibetan advocacy groups and communities, urging them not to protest Chinese leaders.³⁰ All but a few heeded the appeals. Using Dharamsala as an unwitting tool, Beijing was able to substantially decrease the volume and frequency of the pro-Tibet protests during these five years.

This period saw a growing disconnect between Dharamsala and the Tibetan grassroots movement, the seed of which had been sown in 1988, when the Dalai Lama conceded Tibetan independence. While the Dalai Lama, and by extension Dharamsala, fully embraced the policy of seeking autonomy for Tibet within China, many disgruntled Tibetans and advocacy groups continued to advocate full independence. They saw Dharamsala's appeals

to suspend protests as an appeasement of China, further exacerbating their disenchantment with Dharamsala. The years leading up to the Beijing Olympics was when Dharamsala held its strongest bargaining position. China's desire to host a protest-free Olympics meant it would be more willing to make concessions, such as mass amnesty to political prisoners or reversal of the ban on Dalai Lama images, simply to lure the Tibetans into dialogue. Not seeing Beijing's vulnerability at the time, Tibetans rushed into the dialogue without setting strategic conditions, even though China's tactics in the dialogue, writes Warren Smith, "seemed to be to appear conciliatory while making no actual concessions."³¹ The dialogue stalled in 2008 and eventually collapsed in 2010, after nine rounds of talks. At the end, Dharamsala not only had made no gains, it was left with a diminished international grassroots movement, having lost the mission-oriented clarity of the previous decade.

SEIZING (AND MISSING) THE OLYMPIC OPPORTUNITY

Tibetans in Tibet did not fail to leverage the Olympics as an opportunity. On 10 March 2008, the anniversary of the original Tibetan uprising in 1959, protests broke out in all three provinces of historical Tibet.³² Monks from Drepung and Sera monasteries in Lhasa took part in protest marches, raising the Tibetan national flag and shouting slogans like "Freedom for Tibet," "Allow the return of the Dalai Lama," and "Independence for Tibet." Chinese authorities arrested the monks and shut down the monasteries. In the following three days, more protests occurred that were met with beatings, tear gas, and arrests.³³

Riots broke out in Lhasa on March 14. Lay Tibetans, outraged by the sight of Chinese police beating the monks, attacked the security forces with rocks. The emboldened crowd of protesters directed their wrath toward symbols of Chinese rule such as

government buildings, banks, police vehicles, and Chinese shops.³⁴ According to the Chinese government, 18 civilians and one policeman died, and 382 civilians were injured. According to the Tibetan government in exile and human rights groups, 220 Tibetans were killed, 5,600 arrested or detained, 1,294 injured, 290 sentenced, and over 1,000 disappeared in the ensuing crackdown. From the start of the uprising in March until the start of the Olympics in August, 130 instances of protest took place in Tibet.³⁵

In a series of China Daily articles and Xinhua commentaries, Beijing claimed it had "plenty of evidence" that the uprising was "organized, premeditated, masterminded and incited by the Dalai Lama clique."³⁶ Dharamsala insisted upon its innocence, stating on March 31, "The Central Tibetan Administration strongly refutes the charges. . . . China has since the beginning of the incident in Lhasa on March 10 started to blame it on His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the CTA, without any conclusive proof. . . . Central Tibetan Administration repeats its request for an independent inquiry to ascertain the truth."³⁷

The Tibetan uprising of 2008, notwithstanding China's accusations, bolstered the legitimacy of the Dalai Lama as the undisputed spokesperson of the Tibetan people. Unlike the protests of the late 1980s that were confined to Lhasa, the 2008 protests spanned all three historical provinces, exposing as farce China's incorporation of the Tibetan regions of Amdo and Kham into the Chinese provinces Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan. In fact, the vast majority of the protests occurred in Kham and Amdo. Unlike protests by Tibetan exiles in India or the West, which were much easier for Beijing to dismiss, these protests within Tibet represented a far more serious challenge to China's rule.

In the aftermath of the uprising, the international community began to speak

Map of Tibetan Protests Sites 2008



County-level areas and cities where Tibetan protests took place from March 10, 2008, through the end of April. Multiple protests took place at various locations.

Map of Tibetan Protests in 2008 Source: Uprising Archive, <http://www.uprisingarchive.org>

out against China's Tibet policy. The US House of Representatives passed a resolution expressing support for Tibetan aspirations and criticizing Chinese policies.³⁸ The European nations went further this time: Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner of France said on 18 March 2008 that the European Union should consider punishing China for its crackdown in Tibet by boycotting the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics.³⁹ By the end of the month, a number of leaders including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Czech President Vaclav Klaus, and European Parliament Speaker Hans-Gert Pottering had decided not to participate in the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics.⁴⁰ The *New York Times* wrote, "Senior European officials, including Kouchner, have ruled out an outright boycott of the Olympics, arguing that not even the Dalai Lama had demanded one. But in the latest sign that the Games remain the most powerful lever Western powers have, the foreign minister called the

idea of a more symbolic partial boycott 'interesting.'"

The idea of the opening-ceremony boycott emerged independently in the European Parliament, without any lobbying from Dharamsala. The fact that even Angela Merkel and Vaclav Klaus decided not to attend the opening ceremony shows that Western public sympathies for Tibet in the aftermath of the uprising had generated a political will to take bolder action. Western governments not only recognized the Beijing Olympics as a powerful lever to move China, as the *New York Times* article states, but some were actually willing to act. With some encouragement from the Dalai Lama, there is a strong possibility that they would have gone much further.

However, even at the height of China's clampdown on Tibetans, the Dalai Lama did not call for a boycott of the opening ceremony or any kind of sanctions against China. On the contrary, he expressed support for the Beijing Olympics. Speaking to

"The speed and fervor with which Tibetans rallied behind the call for wildlife protection speaks volumes about the Dalai Lama's unparalleled ability to mobilize Tibetans and the potential he has to escalate the political issue of Tibetan independence. . . . However, the Dalai Lama has . . . instead chosen the path of diplomatic persuasion with the Chinese leadership."

reporters in New Delhi on 23 March 2008, he said, "I have always supported that the Olympic Games should take place in China." He added, "They are the hosts. The Olympics should take place in Beijing".^{41,42} It is uncertain how a Tibetan call for a boycott would have been heeded by the world, but such a strategic offensive would have caused enormous fear and confusion in Beijing and been a strong point of leverage. Instead of going on the offensive at a moment when China was vulnerable, Dharamsala played a purely defensive game, trying to convince the Chinese leaders that it had not instigated the uprising in Tibet.⁴³

Over the years, Dharamsala has not simply passed up numerous opportunities to leverage China's interests toward its own cause but also made conciliatory gestures toward Beijing. Tragically, none of these conciliatory actions—from the concession of independence to the support of the Olympics—were contingent upon China fulfilling a measurable Tibetan demand. This leads us to examine Dharamsala's long-standing reluctance to tap into one of its greatest reserves of political influence: grassroots mobilization inside Tibet.

MOBILIZATION POTENTIAL INSIDE TIBET

The history of Tibetan mobilization is inextricably intertwined with the story of the Dalai Lama. This link is strikingly evident in the two phases of highest mobilization in contemporary Tibetan history up until 2008. In 1959, it was the Tibetans' concern for the Dalai Lama's safety that triggered

the revolt. In 1987–89, it was China's invective against the Dalai Lama that provoked the Tibetan protests.

It is therefore not surprising that China's Tibet Forum in 1994 set the goal of eradicating the Dalai Lama's influence in Tibet. Beijing set out to criminalize anyone who possessed images or audio of the Dalai Lama. In July 1998, a man named Ngawang Tsultrim was arrested and sentenced to three years of imprisonment for screening a Dalai Lama video.⁴⁴ In January 2001, a Sera monk named Jampel Gyatso was arrested for listening to recorded teachings of the Dalai Lama.⁴⁵

However, this ban barely made a dent in Tibetan devotion to their leader. In the 2008 uprising, the one slogan that was raised in every single protest incident was the call for the "return of the Dalai Lama." The Tibetan people's collective loyalty to their leader is a vast reserve of moral capital held by the Dalai Lama himself, ready to be converted into political currency. The only time that the Dalai Lama used this currency to proactively mobilize the Tibetan grassroots constituency was to advance a nonpolitical cause in 2006.

In January 2006, during the Kalachakra religious teachings in Amravati, India, the Dalai Lama made a speech⁴⁶ making a public call for the protection of wildlife and exhorting Tibetans to stop wearing fur-trimmed clothing. He directly addressed pilgrims from Tibet in the gathering: "When you go back to your respective places, remember what I had said earlier and never use, sell, or buy wild animals, their products or derivatives."⁴⁷

Within days, Tibetans in Tibet launched a boycott of animal pelts. Hundreds of Tibetans participated in public bonfires where they took off their fur-lined chubas and threw them into the fire. These bonfires were held in Ngaba, Rebkong, Labrang, Golok, Karze, and Lhasa. A Khampa trader torched his own pelt store in front of a crowd.⁴⁸ According to the Wildlife Trust of India, over 10,000 people burned three truckloads of endangered animal skins in Ngaba Prefecture alone. On February 17, a smuggled video of a fur-burning event in Ngaba was screened for the public and press in Dharamsala. Lobsang Choephel, the monk who smuggled the video out of Tibet, reported upon arriving in Dharamsala that an estimated \$75 million worth of animal pelts had already been burnt in eastern Tibet alone.⁴⁹

The speed and fervor with which Tibetans rallied behind the call for wildlife protection speaks volumes about the Dalai Lama's unparalleled ability to mobilize Tibetans and the potential he has to escalate the political issue of Tibetan independence and make it exponentially harder for Beijing to govern the plateau. This mobilization could be very effective in making China negotiate a settlement. However, the Dalai Lama has never directly called on Tibetans inside Tibet to mobilize against Chinese rule, nor has he promoted any kind of nationwide noncooperation or civil disobedience campaigns aimed at raising China's cost of occupying Tibet. He has instead chosen the path of diplomatic persuasion with the Chinese leadership.

What could explain why this ardent follower of Gandhi has not attempted to harness the power of nonviolent tactics and grassroots mobilization?

The Dalai Lama is first and foremost a man of religion, whose monastic education began at age six, shaping his identity as a progressive Buddhist monk rather than a Machiavellian political strategist.⁵⁰

Naturally, he holds deep moral reservations about the human cost that accompanies mobilizing people against an authoritarian state and in his spiritual value system, minimizing suffering trumps maximizing freedom. Moreover, working in trenches of political organizing and resistance is at odds with his stature and image as an icon of world peace. If his religious training has enabled him to transcend nationalism, his global obligations as a Nobel Laureate have forced him to transcend his nationality.

This is compounded by the fact that the long-serving prime minister of the Tibetan government in exile, Samdhong Rinpoche, was also a monk. Known for his puritanical emphasis on discipline and control, he did not disguise his aversion to the chaotic energy and unpredictable change produced by agitative actions such as street protests, hunger strikes, and boycott campaigns.⁵¹ Like the Dalai Lama, he preferred tactics of persuasion to those of coercion; he wanted to bring China to the negotiating table through diplomatic appeals and demonstrations of sincerity rather than through the force of social mobilization and political pressure.

The Dalai Lama himself, perhaps more than anyone, was aware of these constraints. On 14 March 2011, he announced his full retirement from politics and devolved his political authority to elected leaders. A few days later, on March 20, the Tibetan diaspora went to the polls and elected the first non-monastic prime minister of the Tibetan government in exile, Lobsang Sangay, a Harvard-educated legal scholar, who won with 55 percent of the votes.⁵²

HOSTAGE OF THE MIDDLE WAY APPROACH?

In the aftermath of the 2008 uprising, following the failure of the Sino-Tibetan talks and amid the wave of self-immolations that were starting to sweep the plateau,

Dharamsala felt growing pressure to devise a new strategy. Between 2008 and 2012, the Tibetan government convened what it called "special meetings" to draft a new strategy for the movement.

In November 2008, 581 Tibetan delegates from 19 countries, including key government officials, ministers, Tibetan parliamentarians, NGO leaders, and community representatives, arrived in Dharamsala for the first special meeting. The world media had descended on the hill station, heightening the anticipation. Days before the meeting started, the Dalai Lama himself declared that he had "given up" on the Middle Way policy because "there hasn't been any positive response from the Chinese side." He also added that it was now up to the Tibetan people to decide the next steps^{53,54} and stated that he would remain neutral in the upcoming discussions and opted not to participate in the meeting. Hannah Gardner of *The National* wrote, "Now, the Dalai Lama has opened up every aspect of struggle for debate."

Once the meeting began on 17 November 2008, its tone was far from neutral. In contradiction to what the Dalai Lama had announced in the media, Prime Minister Samdhong Rinpoche and the Speaker of the Parliament Karma Choephel commenced the meeting by stating that the goal of the gathering was not to imagine a new strategic direction for the Tibetan struggle but to discuss new tactics within the same framework of the Middle Way approach,⁵⁵ narrowing the scope of the discussions. The sessions turned into lengthy monologues befitting a town hall function, a far cry from the thoughtful exchange of radical ideas one might expect to see in a strategy room.⁵⁶ Any suggestion of reconsidering the Middle Way approach was interpreted as criticism of the Dalai Lama's wisdom and shut down.

On November 22, the special meeting concluded with a unanimous reaffirmation

of the Middle Way approach. The next day, speaking to the gathering of delegates, the Dalai Lama seemed crestfallen and defeated. Could it be that after two decades of promoting the Middle Way approach to the Tibetan people, they had finally embraced it to the point where the Dalai Lama was being held hostage to it even when he himself, the architect of the policy, had lost faith in it? Had he become a prisoner of his own success?⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

The strategy developed by Dharamsala in 1986–87, for all its shortcomings, must be credited for retrieving the Tibet issue from the dungeons of obscurity and propelling it onto the world stage. Unfortunately, it emphasized diplomacy to point of excluding mobilization and failed to assign a role to the Tibetan people inside Tibet. In addition, with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of China as an economic powerhouse, the geopolitical conditions within which the strategy was devised quickly changed once its execution began.

The Tibetan government in exile, now in the hands of an American-educated prime minister, stands at a crossroads. The new administration has the challenge of replacing Dharamsala's appeasement politics with a more aggressive approach. While the Dalai Lama's political authority and legitimacy have been successfully transferred to the new administration, his moral standing and global stature will be harder, if at all possible, for anyone to inherit. Without the Dalai Lama's charisma, the new administration has found its mobilizing ability and sphere of influence circumscribed not only in foreign capitals but also inside Tibet. Still, what Dharamsala has lost in charisma, it can compensate by investing in strategic planning, alliance building, the logistics of organizing, and most importantly, revitalizing the global grassroots movement for Tibet. The digital revolution of recent years has opened up game-changing

possibilities in facilitating communication among Tibetans by making what was once impossible, commonplace. Tibetans in Tibet routinely communicate with exiles, breaking through the Great Firewall with circumvention technologies rendering the geographical divide between Dharamsala and its constituency in Tibet irrelevant. The scope of trans-Himalayan mobilization has never been greater.

Furthermore, the new administration in Dharamsala has an opportunity to liberate itself from the religious worldview that shaped the vision and constrained the action of the previous administration and chart a new path firmly rooted in realpolitik. This would require them to replace their religious conceptualization of nonviolence with a more secular one, to emphasize not the avoidance of violence but the exploration of the full spectrum of strategic nonviolent weapons. To bring Beijing into real negotiations, the leadership will have to escalate the conflict through nonviolent mobilization and increase the cost to Beijing of delaying a resolution.

A centrally planned grassroots movement could limit the human cost of activism in Tibet that was seen in the 2008 uprisings by encouraging strategic, low-risk actions over spontaneous, high-risk ones.⁵⁸ By promoting tactics of dispersion (e.g., strikes, boycotts, economic and social noncooperation) over those of concentration (e.g., protest marches, public gatherings), Dharamsala can not only limit human cost but also increase the scope and sustainability of the movement⁵⁹ and make Tibet ungovernable for China. Moreover, a grassroots-oriented blueprint for escalation that assigns an important role to the Tibetan people inside Tibet may be the only way to direct them away from acts of desperation and engage them in more intentional, coordinated, and life-affirming ways of challenging Chinese rule. Only when Tibet makes itself ungovernable will Beijing come to

the negotiating table ready to make real concessions.

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DATA, COMMUNITY, AND MEANINGFUL CHANGE: MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCACY IN THE ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Mental health stigma, a lack of access to culturally competent clinicians and resources, and other factors have contributed to a concerning lack of access to quality mental health care for Asian American and Pacific Islanders. In fact, while 13.1 percent of the Asian American community reported facing mental illness, only 4.9 percent of this population used mental health services, the lowest rate among all racial and ethnic minority groups.¹ Furthermore, related psychological research has found that mental health constructs such as self-esteem, sense of belonging, and adjustment are low in Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.² To effectively address barriers to mental health care in the Asian American community, a holistic and evidence-based understanding of Asian American mental health is crucial. The following article will aim to address current psychological research, governmental programs as methods of intervention, and prescriptions for mental health advocacy for AAPIs.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Pew Research Center, the Asian population in the United States grew 72 percent between 2000 and 2015. More than 20.4 million individuals in the United States identify as being of Asian descent, and the prominence of the Asian American community is growing along with its numbers. However, understanding of mental health, especially advocacy for emotional health and wellness, remains lacking in Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. Phenomena such as the model-minority myth overgeneralize the experiences of Asian Americans as being exceptional and thus presents AAPIs as not needing support from counseling professionals.³ Furthermore, the “invisibilizing” of the wide range of struggles within the ethnic subgroups that identify as Asian American that results from focusing on a single Asian American category ignores the unique mental health needs of the members of those groups.⁴

In order to move the AAPI community forward in the effort toward health and wellness, this review seeks to inform readers on the psychological state of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, current programs and organizations addressing their mental health needs, and future recommendations for advocacy.

CURRENT PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS) reported that Asian Americans have a 17.3 percent lifetime rate and a 9.2 percent yearly rate for overall mental health disorders. Yet a study conducted by Abe-Kim and colleagues revealed that only 8.6 percent of Asian Americans sought out mental health resources compared to 18 percent of the general population nationwide.⁵ Suicide also remains the most common cause of death for Asian American Pacific Islander adolescents, the only racial

“Suicide also remains the most common cause of death for Asian American Pacific Islander adolescents, the only racial or ethnic group whose leading cause of death is suicide.”

or ethnic group whose leading cause of death is suicide.⁶

heterogeneity within Asian Americans at large.

Researchers have made strides in social science research seeking to understand mental health issues in Asian-identifying communities. For example, University of Maryland’s School of Public Health conducted focus groups with 174 participants from eight different Asian American ethnic groups and examined common sources of stress that were related to mental health. Responses included parental pressure to succeed academically, the taboo nature of discussing mental health in the Asian American community, pressure to live up to the model-minority myth, family obligations to traditional values, discrimination due to racial and cultural backgrounds, and difficulties in developing a bicultural identity.⁷

Furthermore, subgroups of Asian Americans have differing factors that contribute to their mental health. For example, immigrant status is a significant predictor of mental health across Asian American groups. Immigrant groups reported racism-related stress (e.g., having to deal with microaggressions and lack of diversity in work and academic settings) and acculturative stress (distress that occurs from the process of continued exposure to a second culture) as being significant predictors of mental health.⁸ Other scholars have found that among Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Indian immigrants, older adults had higher levels of depression when compared to non-Asian samples.⁹ On the other hand, for US-born Asian Americans, factors such as bicultural self-efficacy (ability to internalize aspects of two cultures) were found to be a significant predictor of mental health.¹⁰ The aforementioned studies and this article only scratch the surface of the complex experiences and

What then, serve as protective factors against such distress? What embodies a strengths-based approach when examining the mental health of Asian American communities? In fact, psychological research is beginning to de-prioritize the pathologizing of marginalized communities in favor of highlighting sources of strength that help protect community members. For example, bicultural adaptation is linked to protective factors such as increased social competence, high self-esteem, development of social support, and positive relationships. One study conducted a qualitative analysis of the narratives of Asian American college students who had attempted suicide. Researchers reported that social support, insight, and self-reliance were all helpful in times of crisis.¹¹ Additionally, cultural resources, such as a multidimensional ethnic identity and other-group orientation (having a positive attitude and a willingness to interact with those from other ethnic groups), served as protective factors for Asian Americans facing experiences of discrimination, depressive symptoms, and social connectedness.¹²

However, Dr. Josephine Kim, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an internationally recognized licensed certified counselor, claims that, unfortunately, those in counseling and other related helping professions have failed to identify interventions that are successful in shifting Asian Americans’ cultural, collective, and personal attitudes toward seeking psychological services.¹³ The aforementioned statistics are troubling in many ways, and the psychological research findings warrant critical thought from those of us in the health

care, public policy, and advocacy-related fields about how to best address the unmistakable mental health needs for the AAPI population.

The White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders is another program designed to address the needs of the AAPI community. As part of an executive

“However, agency and programmatic solutions must be coupled with community-based action. There must be change around the culture of mental health in the AAPI community.”

INITIATIVES

It is natural to ask then, why there has been such little improvement or action despite the millions of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans struggling with mental health issues. There is no clear answer for this yet, but several local and national initiatives have started to address these needs. In 2001, the Surgeon General’s Office recommended greater investigation of factors that take a toll on Asian American mental health.¹⁴ Since then, there has been a push to study immigration experiences, levels of English proficiency, and discrimination in Asian American psychology and related fields. This research has been translated into evidence-based practices such as the Healthy Minds Initiative (HMI), which was launched in July 2018 by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. HMI was created with two goals in mind: to increase mental health literacy broadly for Asian American and Pacific Islanders and to address stigma around mental health and cultural barriers in accessing treatment for the Asian American and Pacific Islander population. Through partnerships with the Asian Pacific American Officers Committee (APAOC) of the US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, the Montgomery County Health and Human Services’s Asian American Health Initiative, the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, and AAPI community organizations, HMI is training APAOC staff in mental health first aid. Staff are then charged with disseminating knowledge to community members. The Healthy Minds Initiative is currently being piloted in Montgomery County.

utive order signed by President Barack Obama in 2009, the initiative has also been adopted by the current administration and works to improve the quality of life and opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. However, this initiative covers broad areas of focus and does not especially target mental health needs. There have been no formal updates or reports on the effectiveness of the aforementioned programs thus far.

Outside of federal efforts, however, there is a growing body of local efforts in prioritizing mental health for the Asian American community. The Asian Women’s Health Initiative Project, for example, is a five-year study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and is directed by Boston University’s Dr. Hyeouk Chris Hahm. The Asian Women’s Action for Resilience and Empowerment (AWARE) project originated here and aims to improve the mental and sexual health of Asian American women in a culturally sensitive way. The Massachusetts General Hospital’s Psychiatry Department houses the Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness, which acts as an association for clinicians, educators, and researchers working to understand emotional wellness in minority communities. Another initiative in the Boston area is the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Let’s Talk! Conference, led by the aforementioned Dr. Josephine Kim and HGSE graduate students. Let’s Talk! is a conference exclusively focused on the development of positive social and emotional outlooks and emotional well-being for Asian Pacific Islander Americans.

Other organizations advocating for mental and emotional wellness in the AAPI community include the National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association (NAAPIMHA), I-AM-SHAKTI, the National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Use (NAPAFASA), and the A3PCON DACA Mental Health Project. These organizations serve mental health needs of the AAPI community by providing psychoeducation, training mental health professionals, organizing, creating platforms for sharing narratives, raising awareness about substance use, and creating resource lists for community members.

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR ADVOCACY

Agency and programmatic solutions must be coupled with community-based action. There must be change around the culture of mental health in the AAPI community. This can happen in several ways. The first of these is through psychoeducation. Having access to information about the biological, neurological, and physical deteriorative implications of negative mental health is the first step in having the AAPI population recognize the importance of advocating for resources. In fact, the *Asian American Journal of Psychology* published a study in 2017 that gathered qualitative data from an Asian immigrant group in California. Researchers found that community-based education that honors and preserves confidentiality and culture was found to be received favorably among subjects.¹⁵

In addition to this, there must also be increased representation of Asian Americans in the social sciences. Due to the

“Finally, and perhaps most importantly, individual and institutional conversations that aim to radically shift the culture around mental health in the AAPI community will be the greatest avenue for change.”

dearth of Asian American scholars and practitioners in fields such as psychology and counseling, the needs of the Asian American community often go unnoticed in society at large. Thus, there is a critical need for an increased number of professionals dedicated to disseminating and implementing evidence-based practices in the Asian American community.

Furthermore, community involvement through civic engagement is another important aspect of advocacy for AAPI mental health. Asian American and Pacific Islander elected officials who are aware of the distinct challenges that community members face will not only increase representation for the community but can also the advocate for policy solutions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, individual and institutional conversations that aim to radically shift the culture around mental health in the AAPI community will be the greatest avenue for change. Making space to acknowledge the unique wounds, pressures, and difficulties woven into the experiences of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans will be the first place of restoration. Recognizing factors such as stigma, linguistic barriers, and the role of shame and guilt will be powerful initial steps toward deconstructing the invisible illness that plagues many in the AAPI community.¹⁶

What is not revealed cannot heal.

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A JOURNEY OF PUBLIC STEWARDSHIP ON ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER MENTAL HEALTH: MASSACHUSETTS'S APPROACH TO ADDRESSING DISPARITIES

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ABSTRACT

Specific game-changing events, messages, blueprints, standards, and action plans have transformed mental health care for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities across the country. In 2000, the Department of Mental Health, Commonwealth of Massachusetts State Mental Health Authority, established the Office of Multicultural Affairs, which has the structural and functional responsibility as well as accountability for reducing mental health disparities among underserved, diverse populations, including the AAPI community. The office utilized these game-changers as catalysts to improve the three As of the mental health service delivery system: access, availability, and appropriateness of care—specific to the AAPI community. This article documents the outcomes, lessons learned, and strategies in AAPI mental health policy, program, and practice in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts over the past 18 years given the impact of these game-changers.

"Too many Americans who struggle with mental health illnesses are still suffering in silence rather than seeking help, and we need to see it that men and women who would never hesitate to go see a doctor if they had a broken arm or came down with the flu, that they have that same attitude when it comes to their mental health."

– President Barack Obama, *The National Conference on Mental Health 2013*¹

Mental illness and the shadow of stigma in crisis consumed a young, high-achieving Chinese American college student. He was my brother, David, who died by suicide. He suffered from depression in silence. He did not seek help until the burden of his mental illness was so severe that others took notice. His academic advisor persuaded him to seek treatment in the hospital, where the acute symptoms were resolved without addressing the deeper issues. He quickly signed himself out of inpatient care. He was too ashamed by the shadow of stigma to follow through with his care. His invisible wound of mental

illness and the shadow of stigma continued to the end.

There is no question that my brother's mental illness influenced my interest in becoming a psychologist. My migration to the United States during the Vietnam War and my formative years as an adolescent, a time when others called me "gook" or "chink," further contributed to my interest in the "American" experience and Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) mental health, later influencing my decision to take on the role of the director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs

(OMCA), Department of Mental Health, Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Fast forward 45 years later to today, where a documentary called “Looking for Luke” is screening nationwide, igniting a critical conversation about AAPI mental health. The film focuses on a bright Chinese American sophomore studying at Harvard who died by suicide. It follows his parents as they read through his journals, talk to his high school and college friends, and come to an understanding of his mental illness.² Their journey of reflection and sharing is touching as it discusses the psychological pain that Luke and those who survive him suffered. The film is raising awareness on the importance of breaking the shadow of stigma to encourage AAPIs with mental illness to seek help.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Asian Americans generally report fewer mental health concerns than White Americans do. However, when breaking down the data further by age and gender, the prevalence of depression looks very different. Nearly 19 percent of Asian American high school students reported considering suicide, versus 15.5 percent of Whites. Nearly 11 percent of Asian American high school students reported having attempted suicide, versus 6 percent of Whites. Asian American high school females are twice as likely (15 percent) to have attempted suicide than males (7 percent). Suicide death rates are 30 percent higher for 15- to 24-year-old Asian American females than they are for White females.³ Suicide death rates for Asian American females over the age of 65 are higher than they are for White females. The AAPI community must challenge the social stigma that is associated with mental illness to reduce the burden on those struggling.

In 2008, Massachusetts and other state mental health authorities participated in a national survey, “The Unclaimed Children Revisited: The Status of Children’s

Mental Health Policy in the United States.” The national survey confirmed that the top three factors creating a gap in mental health access for AAPI are stigma, language barriers, and poor provider cultural competence.⁴ Francis Lu, MD, a professor in cultural psychiatry at the University of California, Davis, has dedicated his career to teaching about cultural formulation and culturally competent care. In the training video entitled “Saving Face: Recognizing and Managing the Stigma of Mental Illness in Asian Americans,” he defines, “stigma is a complex phenomenon related to loss of status and disrupted identity, associated with labeling; negative stereotypes in the media, language, distorted expectations; and simple lack of knowledge, misunderstanding, or lack of awareness of mental illness.”⁵

Interestingly, over a century ago, persons with cancers carried the stigma of the disease that was associated with death. Doctors did not tell their patients about their diagnosis, because telling them was cruel and took away their hope. The fatalistic attitude of society set cancer patients apart in social isolation, shame, and discrimination.⁶ By the 1930s, physicians learned to remove cancerous tumors by surgery. The surgery became a game-changing innovation that offered hope to patients. With promising research, effective treatment, and active public education, cancer carries much less social stigma now than nearly a century ago.

Similarly, people with mental illness also carry the stigma of negative stereotypes that suggest they are unstable, violent, or have weak character. “Just pick yourself up by your bootstraps and you will be fine” is the frequent dismissal to individuals with mental illness. With the broader narrative of rugged individualism in this country and the lack of knowledge and misunderstanding of mental illness in the AAPI community, the illness comes with unintentional and subtle discrimination.

The Community Mental Health Act of 1963 was among the first game-changing developments in mental health, leading to patients being treated in the less restrictive setting rather than being warehoused in state hospitals. The act raised awareness of the people’s capacity to live productive lives with mental illness and helped to slowly destigmatize mental illness. Not all of the significant moments in mental health care have been new laws or medical advances. An opportunity to destigmatize mental illness came as a result of the terrorist attack on September 11 by prompting widespread conversations about trauma and mental health. In my own experience, government agencies can also play a meaningful role. Crisis counseling was established immediately across Massachusetts for anyone affected as a result of the September 11 attacks.

As the director of the OMCA, I sought to understand how many racially and ethnically diverse individuals sought crisis counseling at these mental health clinics. The informal report was “few” in comparison to Caucasians. OMCA quickly organized phone-in focus groups with diverse community gatekeepers of mental health and human services organizations to find out from their vantage point how the September 11 attacks impacted members of their communities, what barriers existed not only to seek crisis counseling but mental health services in general, and how the Department of Mental Health could meet their community mental health needs.

Out of 32 community gatekeepers who participated, 10 were directly involved in AAPI communities across the state. They all agreed that the first priority was to raise awareness of the mental health status in their communities and destigmatize mental illness. Second, it was critical to increase the accessibility and availability of services that are culturally competent. OMCA of the Massachusetts Department of Mental (DMH), which has responsibility and

accountability for reducing mental health disparities among underserved, diverse populations, organized the first AAPI community conversation about mental health. Since then, there have been other game-changing events, messages, blueprints, standards of care, and action plans that served as catalysts to reduce stigma and improve AAPI mental health care.

In this article, I use my own experiences leading the OMCA to discuss some key, game-changing moments in the struggle to improve mental health in AAPI communities, drawing on key moments that helped shape the conversation not only in Massachusetts but also across the United States. These moments can come in many different forms. Over the last few years, AAPIs with mental illness have courageously shared their stories and shifted the negative stereotypes of stigma to positive images of strength, hope, and recovery. In 2001, OMCA used a report from then-United States Surgeon General David Satcher to highlight the status of AAPI mental health and to replace a “one size fits all” mental health care system with a population-specific care-planning blueprint. OMCA also applied game-changing cultural and linguistic competence standards to the AAPI population to ensure access and availability of culturally and linguistically appropriate care. These moments have all contributed to real and lasting progress in addressing mental health challenges in the AAPI community.

GAME-CHANGING DEVELOPMENTS

On September 11, terrorists hijacked four commercial planes. Two flying from Boston crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Another hit the Pentagon, and the fourth went down in a field in Pennsylvania. The attack rocked the country’s sense of security. All Americans felt vulnerable, unsafe, and helpless as individuals. The experience of AAPIs was no different. No one who sees a disaster is

untouched by it. The September 11 attacks were a huge event in American history, but at the time they also provided mental health professionals with an unusual opportunity to reduce stigma and initiate groundbreaking conversations about mental health.

In response to the disaster, OMCA teamed up with the state Office for Refugees and Immigrants to reach out to diverse communities. “Coping with Post 9-11 Stress” brought out large groups of Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Asian Indians to converse on mental health issues in their communities. The community conversation ultimately increased awareness of mental health and lessened some of the stigma for those directly or indirectly affected by the human atrocity of September 11.

“The September 11 attacks were a huge event in American history, but at the time they also provided mental health professionals with an unusual opportunity to reduce stigma and initiate groundbreaking conversations about mental health.”

During the community conversations, people began to open up about their stresses and struggles. Hourly wage earners from Chinatown restaurants and nearby hotels reported a loss of income because fewer people were traveling and eating out. “We worked for restaurants and hospitality industries and have been laid-off after September 11,” said one. Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees were re-traumatized with a heightened sense of fear and coping strategies. They said things like “I began to stock water and food after September 11”; “I microwaved letters or didn’t open them at all”; “I stopped taking the subway”; “I imposed my own isolation at home”; “my nightmares and flashbacks of the war increased.” Indian Americans and Southeast Asian Americans reported their fear of personal safety as a result of verbal threats, harassment, and discrimination that they received due to mistaken ethnic identity: “You are the one. You are the enemy of this country”; “we felt unsafe

in our countries. Now we feel unsafe in this country.”

The shared feelings of vulnerability opened individuals to talk further about their mental and emotional distress in daily life before September 11. Parents felt concerned about their parenting, setting expectations and fear of losing control of their children. Adolescents and young adults talked about the difficulty of communicating with their parents and coping with the parents’ high expectations. Elderly people reported barriers to care due to language, culture, and affordability. Immigrants experienced language and cultural barriers, isolation, exploitation, economic hardship, and the fear of being a “foreigner” in this country. The community conversation was cathartic, knowing that they were not

alone in their experience and being heard without judgement. Many of them wanted to find ways to cope with their mental distress. The openness to talking and sharing reduced some of the social stigma of mental illness.

The event also served as an informal needs assessment of the mental health of AAPI community that led to Project Be Prepared, which trained primary care practitioners who provide care for AAPI refugees about how to work with re-traumatized patients. The informal needs assessment also led to the development of community rehabilitation programs with bilingual and bicultural workers providing support to Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees as well as residential programs for Chinese and Vietnamese. In addition, a curriculum, “Integrating Culture into Practice,” was developed for training providers who work with AAPIs.

The conversations in the wake of the September 11 attacks triggered cathartic discussions and new programs, but they were supplemented by other important programs that were helping to improve mental health in AAPI communities. In 2001, the release of the *Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity. A Supplement to Mental Health* put the consideration of history, culture, socioeconomic status, and race front and center for mental health care policies affecting Asian American and Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and American Indians and Alaskan Natives. The report was a game-changer that helped move the country from a “one size fits all” approach to mental health care to a population-specific model. Surgeon general Satcher was an early advocate of mental health support that considered culture, race, and ethnicity and tried to eliminate disparities. For the AAPI community, the report highlighted the underutilization of services compared to other racial ethnic groups and the need for more outpatient mental health services. Among AAPIs who use services, the severity of their mental illness and the length of suffering is longer. The shame and stigma of mental illness continues to be a major deterrent to seeking care. Language barriers and the lack of bilingual providers further impacted the availability of treatment for AAPIs.⁷

Not all Americans have equal access to quality mental health services. Satcher called for the elimination of racial and ethnic disparities by improving the accessibility, availability, and quality of mental health services. OMCA drew upon the findings of the report to highlight the mental health needs of AAPIs. A few years later, Surgeon General Vivek Murphy, the first Asian American surgeon general, released the *National Prevention Strategy*, which aims to shift the nation’s focus from sickness and disease to prevention and wellness.⁸ The prevention strategy takes a lifespan approach to the social determinants of

health. OMCA added a public mental health focus in designing the blueprint to address AAPI mental health disparities in Massachusetts.

Two years before the Surgeon Satcher’s report, the *Cultural Competence Standards in Managed Mental Health Care Services: Four Underserved/Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Groups*⁹ report provided guidance about providing rapidly growing racial demographics with specific standards for mental health managed care.

“Among AAPIs who use services, the severity of their mental illness and the length of suffering is longer. The shame and stigma of mental illness continues to be a major deterrent to seeking care. Language barriers and the lack of bilingual providers further impacted the availability of treatment for AAPI.”

OMCA used the language assistance and service standards from the National CLAS Standards to develop the language assistance policy, which held that all mental health care providers are responsible for providing competent language assistance for their limited English proficient (“LEP”) and deaf and hard of hearing clients. When a direct care provider and client cannot communicate clearly with each other, the quality of care is compromised. Clients must be allowed to self-identify their preferred language for verbal and written communication, even if they can speak and read English, and ask whether interpreters and translated materials are needed. OMCA considers mental health interpretation and translation a highly technical skill, and the use of language volunteers to provide interpretation is highly discouraged unless they have formal mental health interpretation training.

Both reports ultimately laid the groundwork for major improvements in mental

health care for AAPI communities. The work done in the early 2000s did not stop there. In August 2011, the Office of Minority Health of the US Department of Health and Human Services and the National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association (NAAPIMHA) brought together AAPI consumers, providers, researchers, policy makers, health information technologists, and community leaders to develop the *Integrated Care for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander Communities: A Blueprint for Action*.¹⁰ I chaired the Committee of Community-Based Participatory Research and later developed the multicultural research agenda at our Commonwealth Research Centers in Massachusetts.

The knowledge and wisdom behind past and present reports like Satcher's and the *Blueprint for Action* provided a complete framework for OMCA to improve services for the AAPI population in Massachusetts. These national blueprints focused on the role of culture, race, and ethnicity in mental health; social determinants of health and mental health; and shifting from "one size fits all" mental health care to AAPI-specific programming and practice. Eventually, all of this work in building community conversations and creating better policies behind the scenes received a huge boost from president Obama.

"Eventually, all of this work in building community conversations and creating better policies behind the scenes received a huge boost from president Obama. President Obama and vice president Biden hosted The National Conference on Mental Health in 2013 . . ."

President Obama and vice president Biden hosted The National Conference on Mental Health in 2013 at the White House as a part of the administration's effort to launch a national conversation to increase understanding and awareness about mental health. President Obama's opening remarks addressed the prevalence of mental illness in our country:

The truth is, in any given year, one in five adults experience a mental illness—one in five. Forty-five million Americans suffer from things like depression or anxiety, schizophrenia or PTSD. Young people are affected at a similar rate. So we all know somebody—a family member, a friend, a neighbor—who has struggled or will struggle with mental health issues at some point in their lives. Michelle and I have both known people who have battled severe depression over the years, people we love. And oftentimes, those who seek treatment go on to lead happy, healthy, productive lives.¹¹

He also encouraged us to talk about mental illness and reach out to those who have the illness:

The brain is a body part too; we just know less about it. And there should be no shame in discussing or seeking help for treatable illnesses that affect too many people that we love. We've got to get rid of that embarrassment; we've got to get rid of that stigma. . . . If you know somebody who is struggling, help them reach out. Remember the family members who shoulder their own burdens and need our support as well. And more than anything, let people who are suffering in silence know that recovery is possible. They're not alone. There's hope. There's possibility.

The president's message brought mental illness out of the shadows and empowered those with mental illness and families to share their stories of struggle and recovery. His message is a game-changer that brought AAPIs to talk about their fears of social stigma and share their recovery stories in many community forums in Massachusetts.

As the board president of the National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association and the director of OMCA, I had the opportunity to attend the conference. The national conference attendees included advocates, providers of care, faith leaders, members of Congress, representatives from local governments, and individuals who have struggled with mental illness. We explored how the country can work together to reduce stigma and help the millions of Americans struggling with mental health problems recognize the importance of reaching out. MentalHealth.gov was launched to provide information and resources for those suffering from mental illness and share success stories from those who have received treatment as well as a "Toolkit for Community Conversations about Mental Health" to facilitate local conversations.¹²

"The establishment of the Office of Multicultural Affairs by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH) was an important step to institutionalize cultural and linguistic competence (CLC) as a structural priority within the State Mental Health Authority."

The OMCA went to work to use the lessons from the national conference, hosting two Boston community conversations afterwards. Both conversations were also timely because of the psychological vulnerabilities that individuals and the community experienced after the Boston Marathon Bombing on 13 April 2013. Again, no one who sees a disaster is untouched by it. AAPIs were involved with the planning and implementation of the two community conversations, "Many faces of mental health: sharing our stories" and "Many faces of mental health: mind, body and spirit."

The community-driven conversations focused on the impact that race experience, social determinants of mental health, and direct and indirect trauma have on individual mental health and well-being. African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans made up the largest participants in the two-year citywide events in

Boston. Among them was a new generation of Asian American advocates with lived mental health experience. They spoke with strength, clarity, and effectiveness about their fears of social stigma and the dismissive reactions to their illness by families and friends. Their disclosure and sharing of hope and recovery were a game-changer to the reduction of stigma of mental illness. Since then, I have seen them in many community forums sharing their stories and raising awareness. We all embraced the message "Prevention works. Treatment is effective and People recover."¹³

President Obama's message and community conversations brought out new energy and commitment. I also learned that a powerful message can be lost with the passage of time when community conversations happen infrequently.

Making small grants available for community organizations to have ongoing community conversations is the most cost-effective way to reduce stigma, promote good mental health, and prevent mental illness.

GAME-CHANGING ACTIONS AT THE STATE LEVEL

Much of my work in mental health has come through the state of Massachusetts. State mental health authorities are poised to address issues in serving culturally and linguistically diverse populations; however, there are currently only a limited number of dedicated offices across the country who have taken steps to implement cultural and linguistic competence strategies with the goal of reducing mental health disparities in status and care.¹⁴

The establishment of the Office of Multicultural Affairs by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH)

was an important step to institutionalize cultural and linguistic competence as a structural priority within the State Mental Health Authority. The office also served as an integrated focal point for increasing the access, availability, and appropriateness of care for diverse populations, including the AAPI community. This was accomplished by the annual Cultural and Linguistic Competence Action Plan that operationalizes six integrated areas of focus of DMH: community partnership, leadership development, services, training and education, data collection, research and evaluation, and information dissemination. The office, for instance, has led initiatives to increase cultural competency and built analyses of mental health care disparities into the department's quality improvement activities.

What OMCA has achieved was best affirmed when a Vietnamese-Chinese resident who suffered from chronic mental illness shared his appreciation with me when he moved from his regular residential program to a specialized Asian community residential program that provides cultural activities along with Chinese and Vietnamese meals that residents and staff prepare together. He felt the wholeness of who he is rather than being defined merely by his mental illness. During Vietnamese and Cambodian New Years, clients and bilingual, bicultural staff at the specialized Asian community rehabilitation programs celebrate the holidays with a religious ceremony with invited monks, traditional music, and festive activities. Their mental health and well-being are supported by their invaluable cultural re-connection as a key part of the program. These specialized services integrate the science of treatment with culturally and linguistically appropriate recovery experience.

OMCA has continued to develop new initiatives since its founding to institutionalize cultural and linguistic competence through the Multicultural Advisory Committee of the department. The goal of

the advisory committee is to strengthen engagement and partnership with the community. Committee members include AAPI consumers who provide input into the planning and implementation of the department's Cultural and Linguistic Competence Action Plans as well as closely monitor the progress and results. Through partnering with community organizations, the OMCA has also worked to promote peer leadership and empowerment programs for AAPIs. The office developed a training curriculum to integrate the AAPI client's culture into the assessment and treatment for direct care staff. It continues to partner with the AAPI community on the annual Asian American Mental Health Forums, which bring together people with lived experiences of mental health challenges, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners as equals to learn from each other.

On the policy front, OMCA led a major data policy initiative to eliminate mental health care disparities across state children's services. The interagency team developed the standard of a uniform data collection of client's race, granular ethnicity, and language need based on federal requirements and recommendations on ethnic data collection in the Institute of Medicine report on "Race, Ethnicity and Language: Standardization for Health Care Quality Improvement."¹⁵ As a result, AAPI data today include subgroups of different ancestries or countries of origin. Altogether, the OMCA has institutionalized the applications and improvement of the national game-changing developments in mental health care in the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health.

CONCLUSION

Accountability by deliverables and not mere rhetoric is essential in moving toward equity. The public stewardship of underfunded mental health care and redistribution of already limited resources to

underserved groups is challenging. Moreover, it is even more difficult to redistribute already limited resources to underserved groups. Thus, highlighting disparities by data and stories and identifying achievable action steps are integral parts of an organization's quality improvement.

Cultural and linguistic competency is an important part of organizational development. True commitment to inclusion of staff and client diversity is a driver for change. Building the organizational scaffolding in cultural and linguistic competence policy, programming, and practice requires top-down and bottom-up employee engagement. The transformation of the mental health service delivery system is gradual.

For those who have the public stewardship role of the mental health service delivery system, the transformative change is hard work and takes a long time. We need to sustain our enthusiasm and self-care to avoid burnout. Over the past 18 years of planning and implementation, I have seen continuous improvements to the policy, program, and practice of AAPI mental health care. Local and national game-changers and the collective efforts of champions have made a difference toward the reduction of mental health status and care disparities.

The reduction of mental health disparities status and care takes the effort of many. It is difficult to acknowledge all the contributors who have done excellent work in policy, program, and practice. I want to acknowledge several colleagues with whom I worked closely for many years. With their skills and knowledge, they have made significant impact on my work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Larke Huang, director of the Office of Behavioral Health Equity Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is a must-meet person to understand

disparities, current initiatives across the country, and future ideas toward the reduction of disparities. Her office provides AAPI behavioral health and in-language resources, national survey data, and reports on federal initiatives.

The Integrated Care for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander Communities: A Blueprint for Action is the brain child of Dr. DJ Ida, who is the executive director of the National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health. She has been a true champion of improving Asian mental health care across the country for over three decades, with a current focus on AAPI women's wellness.

Elisa Choi, MD, Massachusetts chapter governor of the American College of Physicians and past chairperson of the Commonwealth of MA Asian American Commission, has always put the spotlight on the importance of AAPI mental health among other AAPI issues in Massachusetts.

Chien-Chi Huang, the executive director of Asian Women of Health and a cancer survivor, founded the Annual Asian American Mental Health Forum, an annual event founded ten years ago.

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BLASIAN VOICES ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Alani Fujii

INTRODUCTION

There is a complete absence of the voices of Black and Asian individuals on the topic of affirmative action. Black and Asian individuals are in a unique space in which their respective communities are often represented in contrast with each other. A series of "versus" comparisons between Black and Asian communities in the United States saturate the popular imagination and are carried between generations in many of our own families. Some examples include the Asian model-minority myth versus inherent Black laziness, dependence, and criminality; the implications of the 1992 L.A. riots that pitted Korean communities against Black communities; sometimes hostile Asian-owned business in Black neighborhoods; the Asian "whiz kids" versus the Black and Brown school-to-prison pipeline. Thus, this piece seeks to provide a platform for young Blasians, Blasian professionals, and older folks to voice their thoughts on affirmative action and what it means to them as folks who embody both Blackness and Asianness and/or Asian Americanness.

It is vital, now more than ever, that more people speak up about their thoughts on affirmative action, given Edward Blum's Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) lawsuit targeting affirmative action at Harvard. It is not just college admissions that are at stake; this lawsuit has the potential to legitimize the absence of people of color in positions of power in this country, in places such as judicial seats, federal clerkships,

corporate boardrooms, and other leadership positions. However, affirmative action has stakes for us all as the issue of race in America touches us all. The consideration of race in affirmative action works alongside factors like gender, disability, veteran status, and more. These considerations ensure diverse spaces in all levels of power. Affirmative action encourages diversity, though it is important to keep in mind that diversity alone—simply having more seats at the table—is not an end-all goal. It takes a lot more than just diverse faces in a space to make changes and to undo the foundational preference for White culture and Whiteness in spaces of power in the United States. However, the historical and ongoing barriers to equity, such as the school-to-prison pipeline for Black youth, economic disparities within both Black and Asian communities, Jim Crow laws, anti-refugee backlash, and sustained targeting of Black communities by the criminal justice system, are just some examples of the normalized violence and disparity that we all must live with. As folks living on land that has relied on indigenous erasure(s), our lives are intertwined with the legacies of historical violence that continue to affect all marginalized communities. Affirmative action as practiced will always fall short of its ideal, but it is a necessary mechanism that is being used now, and that acknowledges the historical barriers to access that were and are necessary for the proliferation of White supremacy in America.

"Affirmative action as practiced will always fall short of its ideal, but it is a necessary mechanism that is being used now and that acknowledges the historical barriers to access that were and are necessary for the proliferation of white supremacy in America."

Using this piece as an opportunity and platform for multiple voices to be heard, here are the thoughts of Black-Asian (Blasian) individuals about affirmative action. Let's listen, because they have some important things to say that Edward Blum and other anti-affirmative proponents probably do not want to acknowledge.

WHAT DOES AFFIRMATIVE ACTION MEAN TO YOU?

OWIE: Affirmative action has always meant systematic diversity to me. It is a way for everyone to be included but also mandatory (for good reason). Although, affirmative action makes minorities feel like they really shouldn't be there even if their test scores or work ethic would have been accepted either way (college). It is tough to apply affirmative action to post-grad life because you're not too sure how much it is applied, but thoughts on being the one diverse person in the workplace could make one feel inadequate and just a number to hit a quota.

ALI: Affirmative action just ensures that folks of equal qualifications are protected in their identities. Since the demographic standard in most quotas is usually below national average anyway (at least in schools they are), I don't really see why people are so against it. Ultimately, affirmative action isn't even the primary factor of being accepted into a position—being adequately qualified is—so honestly, my take on affirmative action is that in the context of history and social politics, it needs to exist, albeit inherently flawed.

MIEKO: Affirmative action means weighing the effects race and ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and disability have on an individual's access to privileged spaces. When it comes to race, I consider it an important part of reparations. Post-college, I think, access to higher education should also be considered. Of course, there are jobs that require a degree, but too many positions

require an expensive piece of paper when on-the-ground experience and willingness to learn would do just as well.

SHIRANTHI: Affirmative action was and continues to be an attempt at (1) acknowledging there are communities in the United States that have been left out and (2) attempting to help applicants, whether throughout education or the workforce, be able to receive prioritization. I think the idea behind affirmative action makes a lot of sense. However, I do wonder, based on each institution's acceptance or hiring metric, how far it goes. There's another part of this that comes to mind, and it's that this stand-alone policy only helps when you "get to the door." There is a misconception with affirmative action that (1) it's only about race and (2) that it actually makes it "easier" to get accepted into an educational program or get the job.

CHRIS: To me, affirmative action is, in its intentions, a form of reparations for communities of people marginalized along lines of race and/or gender. That being said, the system is flawed in the sense that it still relies on a status quo of systematically exclusionary dynamics, particularly in the way that it generally disregards internal hierarchies that divide members of the same marginalized group, such as socioeconomic status and the privilege wealth secures.

HOW HAS RACE IMPACTED YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE? DOES IT MATTER TO YOU?

OWIE: Race has a huge impact on my life especially because I am biracial (Chinese and Nigerian). You are bi-racial and part of many but at the same time unique in your own way. It's like knowing you should feel a part of a lot of things, but really you are separate because you don't entirely fit in racially to different groups. I have come to learn a lot about myself through race and finding out what is accepted or frowned

upon through being different races, but that has not really hindered me; it only made me identify myself confidently a little sooner.

ALI: Being Black has been one of the hardest things in my life, and I'm at the intersection of most identities, may I add. And I'm not even that Black according to the US Census Bureau—I'm 75 percent White (because being North African and Arab apparently equates Whiteness). Race is always changing, and those who subscribe to it a-historically and outside of social discourse really just need to stop. Please.

MIEKO: Race impacts a lot of my life. I don't think I can extricate it from my gender, but existing as a Black/Mixed woman with an unconventional name has cost me a lot: work, income, relationships, self-confidence, health, safety. . . . I hold my identities precious and wouldn't trade them for the world, but I get incredibly frustrated sometimes when I know that I'm capable but others don't see me as such.

SHIRANTHI: Throughout my life, race has meant different things to me. I think a constant theme, however, is how I'm viewed by my peers, colleagues, and generally, the rest of the world. For me, my race without context into my nationality, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class never seemed to fully portray what it meant for me to be Black and Sri Lankan. Race and ethnicity have always meant a lot to me, because it is essentially the story of who I am, how I came to be, and how I navigate spaces.

CHRIS: I would say race does impact and has impacted every aspect of my life since before I was even born. My racial and ethnic identity(s) inherently shape the way people perceive me (whether consciously or not) and shape the way I perceive others. Race certainly matters to me because as a social construct, it has been made to matter to me and those with whom I interact on a daily basis.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE SSFA LAWSUIT'S USAGE OF ASIAN AMERICAN FACES AS VICTIMS OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION?

ALI: So . . . here's my take: Yes, Asian Americans have it hard when it comes to getting into educational institutions, and I want to highlight that the major losers are Southeast Asians. But, it isn't because of other minorities in America; in fact, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous Americans are often under-represented from my observations of the stats. I would say that if Asian Americans want something to blame, it's not affirmative action, which was enacted for your protection, it's perhaps another demographic of very rich, ruling-class folk from abroad that need your attention . . .

MIEKO: It's manipulative, and I'm so pissed at the people who are falling for it. They've sold out their brothers and sisters in order to maintain their own tiny piece of the pie, not thinking about how Ed Blum actually plans to take their piece too.

SHIRANTHI: Divisive politics within communities of color is a classic tactic from White folks to be able to use separatist ploys to get what they've always wanted. Ed Blum is yet another example of this tactic. Given his track record of trying to attack civil rights protections, especially for communities of color, this is no surprise. Again, there's a misconception that race, leaning toward preference of Black folks, is the only thing affirmative action is for. I would also ask whether there are Asian Americans that see themselves as victims of affirmative action? Or is Blum taking it upon himself, as a White man, to speak for communities he doesn't belong to?

CHRIS: I think painting Asian Americans as the "victims" of affirmative action is again a failing of the system in its lack of deftness with addressing divisions within larger marginalized groups. It is also harmful and unproductive to pit one marginalized group against another, particularly given

the context of anti-Blackness that often pervades Asian American communities.

"It is also harmful and unproductive to pit one marginalized group against another, particularly given the context of anti-Blackness that often pervades Asian American communities"

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE ABSENCE OF BLACK AND ASIAN FOLKS IN HIGHER POSITIONS OF POWER (E.G., COLLEGE FACULTY, TENURED PROFESSORS, JUDGES, FEDERAL JUDICIAL CLERKS, CORPORATE EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS)?

MIKO: Their presence doesn't necessarily make an environment healthier, but their absence certainly makes it worse. Side note: I work at a college where the majority of my coworkers are Black and brown. The camaraderie at work is amazing and a much healthier than any work environment I've ever had. No stereotypes thrown my way, nobody asking to touch my hair, no personal insults or invasive questions about being who you are. I didn't realize how much I was missing it until I finally had it. It was like being able to breathe again after having smoke-clogged lungs.

SHIRANTHI: There a lot of dynamics that go into questions about lack of representation in various fields. The questions I find myself asking are:

* Do Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) see themselves (thriving) in these positions?

* What hurdles do BIPOC folks have to overcome to get a chance at filling these positions?

* When they're in said positions, does the culture of the institution/space they're in allow for retention?

When I answer these questions for myself,

it makes sense why we don't see higher representation from BIPOC communities in certain positions. On a personal note, I think there's also something to be said about whether BIPOC folks feel that these positions and spaces will help them create tangible change for their respective communities. Personally, I am in more community spaces rather than politics because I believe I can elicit more change at a grass-roots level.

OWIE: I think it is a mixed bag of thoughts and emotions. On one hand, I am outraged that there aren't biracial people in positions of power. At the same time, there are not many Black and Asian people in general, making it harder for you to come across a Black and Asian person. That being said, the first person in a higher power I have met who is Black and Asian is the CEO of my company, who I met this past year. I was 24 years old the first time I met first-hand a biracial person in a high position. There are also not many people of color in these same positions, so to find a biracial one in the mix is even harder.

CHRIS: Institutions cannot hope to achieve any semblance of truth without giving a platform to a variety of voices. A college cannot hope to teach histories of Asian or African and diaspora communities without members of those communities contributing significantly to those discussions without losing a nuanced lived connection to those topics, histories, and experiences that cannot be captured in academic reports or ethnographies. The failing of so-called liberal institutions to employ and give a platform to Black and Asian faculty only serves to reinforce the unequal power dynamics that they claim to condemn by furthering racist, colonialist ideologies without including the critiques of the very subjects and victims of those ideologies.

WE'RE NOT WHO YOU THINK WE ARE

Chenxing Han

This piece originally appeared in the spring 2016 issue of Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly.

During my undergraduate years, a budding interest in Buddhism prompted me to explore various Buddhist communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. At meditation centers where older White practitioners predominated, I regularly fielded compliments about my ability to speak the language I consider to be my native tongue: "Your English is so good; I can't detect any accent at all!" I was further stymied by the frequent follow-up question, "Where are you from?" Having lived five years in my birthplace of Shanghai, six years in Pennsylvania, and seven in Washington State, then moving to the Bay Area for college after a gap year in Australia and Asia, I struggled for a succinct answer. "I went to high school near Seattle" only triggered further questioning. Where was I really from? Cambodia? China? Japan? Korea? Thailand? Tibet?

This was hardly the first time White Americans expected me to be a recent immigrant from Asia who spoke "accented" English, though another expectation was new to me: "Your parents must be Buddhist." To the contrary: Raised by atheist parents who lived through the tumultuous Cultural Revolution, I grew up associating religion with brainwashing cults.

My Bay Area explorations also took me to Buddhist temples where the membership was primarily Asian, places where I spent much of the time listening to Mandarin and trying to decipher the Cantonese, Khmer, or Vietnamese around me. Here, nobody complimented my English, probably because many of them had children who spoke English as fluently as I did. Yet I rarely saw anyone between preschool and

middle age at the temple services. I began to wonder, *Where are all the other young adult Asian American Buddhists?*

BEYOND THE STEREOTYPING OF "TWO BUDDHISMS"

Perusing popular and academic literature about American Buddhism, it became clear that I wasn't the only person who had run into this problem. In a 2008 post on the group blog *Dharma Folk*, one of the writers remarked: "I don't want to sound like the Angry Asian Man, but I've had a hard time finding articles about Asian American Buddhists."¹ In 2009, this writer founded *Angry Asian Buddhist*, a blog examining race, culture, and privilege in American Buddhism.

According to a 2012 Pew Forum report, of the 1–1.3 percent of the US adult population who identify as Buddhist, 67–69 percent are Asian American.² Despite comprising more than two-thirds of American Buddhists, Asian American Buddhists are underrepresented—and often misrepresented—in scholarly sources and mainstream media. In an April 2014 blog post, the *Angry Asian Buddhist* lamented:

Buddhist Asian Americans are often surprised to encounter so many stereotypes about us. Worse yet is that these stereotypes are routinely cited as solid facts.

The stereotypes are generally about how different we are from "American Buddhists." These might sound familiar: We Buddhist Asian Americans are basically immigrants. We cannot speak English and carry a more supernatural bent. We focus our energies into holidays and spiritual beliefs instead

of meditative practices. . . . Some of us are Oriental monks who bring our exotic teachings to the West. The temples we attend aren't about spreading the Dharma—they're just ethnic social clubs. I could go on.³

These stereotypes are bolstered by the oft-cited "two Buddhisms" typology that distinguishes between convert, White, middle-class Western Buddhists and their non-convert, Asian, immigrant "ethnic" Buddhist counterparts. There is no room for White "cradle" Buddhists born into the religion or for Asian American converts in a schema that insists on strict separation between two seemingly distinct and mutually isolated brands of Buddhism.

Though presented as a value-neutral sociological description, the two Buddhisms model is too often used to valorize White Buddhists while denigrating Asian American Buddhists. In 1991, the editor of *Tricycle* magazine wrote that Asian American Buddhists "have not figured prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism,"⁴ implying that they are merely Buddhists in America rather than true American Buddhists. A decade later, a scholar of American Buddhism similarly disregarded Asian American Buddhists by insisting "A religion that attracts so many high-status professionals is harder to dismiss than a faith of the poor and minorities."⁵ A 2013 encyclopedia entry on "Buddhism in Asian America" contrasts "nominal cultural Buddhists" with "awakened convert Buddhists,"⁶ implying that it is White meditators who are spearheading the "enlightened" American Buddhism of the 21st century. I could go on.

These examples underscore the racist, exclusionist logic that relegates Asian Americans to perpetual foreigners within American Buddhism. The notion that Asian American Buddhists are "ethnic" Buddhists who need to shed their cultural baggage conveniently exempts White Buddhists from an examination of their own

ethnic identities and "cultural baggage." In his book *Race and Religion in American Buddhism*, Joseph Cheah asks "modernist Buddhists of the West" to "honestly acknowledge the Orientalized Buddhist baggage they have been carrying for the short time they have been around"⁷—an exhortation that seems to have largely fallen on deaf ears.

Race is a touchy subject in discussions of American Buddhism. Those who address the issue head on risk being accused of reverse racism against White Buddhists. Pointing out racism in Buddhist communities may also lead to people discrediting your religious credentials ("real Buddhists would be more compassionate") or a dismissal of your grasp of Buddhist teachings ("if only you could understand that reality is non-dual, then you wouldn't get so hung up about race"). These responses bring to mind African American writer and activist bell hooks's encounters with White Buddhists who, as she puts it, "are so attached to the image of themselves as nonracists that they refuse to see their own racism or the ways in which Buddhist communities may reflect racial hierarchies."⁸ hooks observes that she rarely sees prominent White Buddhists grappling with issues of ownership and authenticity as she does, leading her to pose the question: "Will the real Buddhist please stand up?"⁹

The more I encountered depictions of the docile Oriental monk, the more I read about Asian immigrant Buddhists whose chanting and devotional practices were deemed too superstitious for today's rational Western meditator par excellence, the more I saw the two Buddhisms model slip from sociological description to racial disparagement, the more I wanted to ask, *Will the real Asian American Buddhists please stand up?* Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie warns us that "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become

the only story."¹⁰ I was seeking an alternative to the Tale of Two Separate (and, apparently, not quite equal) Buddhisms that I kept encountering since I couldn't place myself in either category. Nor was I content to be an American convert Buddhist who just happens to be Asian—a yellow-on-the-outside-white-on-the-inside "Banana Buddhist," to borrow a provocative phrase from the Angry Asian Buddhist.¹¹

The Angry Asian Buddhist concludes his blog post on the "Stereotypology of Asian American Buddhists" with a recommendation:

If you choose to think of us as Superstitious Immigrants, you will never accept us as real Americans. If you choose to think of us as Banana Buddhists, you then trivialize the value of our heritage. The best way to uproot these stereotypes is first to stop perpetuating them, to encourage others to stop perpetuating them, and then to actually start spending some more time getting to know Buddhist Asian Americans for who we really are.¹²

This is precisely what I set out to do through my master's thesis research: get to know some young adult Asian American Buddhists.

HUGE DIVERSITY

Since I wasn't finding many young adult Asian American Buddhists in temples or meditation centers, I put out a call for participants online and by word of mouth. Several people expressed interest but worried they might not fit the parameters of the project. *Do I qualify as a young adult if I'm in my early 30s? I'm not very devout; can I still participate? A lot of times the media limits "Asian American" to East and Southeast Asians—can I participate in your project as a South Asian?* In their uncertainty, I heard echoes of bell hooks' insecurity about not counting as an "authentic" Buddhist.

Wanting to explore a range of possible meanings for the category "young adult Asian American Buddhist," I deliberately used wide parameters, inviting anyone between the ages of eighteen to thirty-nine who was of full or partial Asian heritage and living in America, and also engaged in Buddhist practice, broadly defined, to participate in an in-person interview. The interviews covered a multitude of topics, including participants' Buddhist practices, communities, and beliefs; perceptions of Buddhism in America; and opinions about the representation of Asian American Buddhists. Despite being part of what has been dubbed "the least religious generation," the millennials (and a few young-at-heart Gen Xers) I talked to had plenty to say. Our conversations ranged from 90 minutes to more than five hours. Many told me it was the first time they had reflected so extensively on their Buddhist journeys.

"Even if you just research within Asian American Buddhists, there's huge diversity," Anthuan, a Vietnamese American studying Buddhist chaplaincy, remarked during his interview.¹³ (Both real names and pseudonyms have been used in this article, according to each interviewee's preference.) Indeed, I was astounded by the diversity of the 26 young adults I interviewed. They traced their heritages to East, Southeast, South, and even Central and West Asia. They were connected to a wide range of Buddhist traditions and groups: Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese Chan, Jodo Shinshu, Korean Zen, Laotian, non-denominational Mahayana, Shambhala, Soka Gakkai, Soto Zen, Thich Nhat Hanh, Tibetan, Tzu Chi, Vietnamese, Vipassana, and more.

Though two Buddhisms would suggest otherwise, I could not simply assume that my interviewees went to temples with people who shared their same ethnic background. Knowing only Daniel's ethnic identity (Chinese/Ashkenazi), we would be hard-pressed to describe his Buddhist

community—more precisely, communities in the plural (Theravada and Mahayana groups in California, France, and Southeast Asia). Several of the young adults I spoke to were exploring forms of Buddhism different from those they had been raised in. Brian, for example, grew up as a Laotian Buddhist but now attends a Korean Buddhist temple. Others were raised nonreligious, Hindu, Christian, or with mixed traditions (Yima identified both Zoroastrian and new-age spiritual influences from his parents). Even those who saw their cultural heritage and Buddhist identity as closely connected—the Japanese American Jodo Shinshu Buddhists I spoke to, for example—had typically visited other Buddhist communities.

Through an interactive card-sorting activity, the young adult Asian Americans I interviewed revealed their familiarity with a wide range of Buddhist practices: attending ceremonies, bowing, chanting, meditation, offering donations, volunteering at a temple, and many more. The two Buddhisms model's description of Asian Americans "going to the temple, making offerings, and not meditating" fails to capture the complexity of these young adults' Buddhist practices. Indeed, all 26 interviewees had meditated before, though its salience to their Buddhist lives varied from "most important practice" to "on par with other practices" to "not at all important" (for Ratema, a Cambodian Buddhist, "meditation is different from the Buddhism I practice or my family practices").

Clearly, these young adults are not hewing to the two Buddhisms typology's standard for Asian American Buddhists. What about matters of belief? I asked for responses to 18 different statements about Buddhism and again heard a wide range of opinions. My interviewees debated whether meditation was necessary to achieve enlightenment and proposed different interpretations of rebirth. They questioned the absence of an eternal self/soul

and whether Buddhas and bodhisattvas respond to prayers. Ironically, the closest thing to an orthodox standard was the absence of a single standard, as seen by strong opposition to the statement "I should convert other people to Buddhism." The young adult Asian Americans I spoke to are both evidence and upholders of American Buddhism's multivocality.

This multivocality came as a huge relief to me. With my confusing mess of identities—1.5-generation immigrant daughter of upwardly mobile Shanghainese parents; fluent English speaker and far less fluent Mandarin learner; Chinese American interested in a spectrum of Asian and Buddhist cultures; "convert" Buddhist (it was more a gradual immersion than sudden conversion) with strong atheist roots; (post-?) modern Westerner who prefers bowing and chanting to vipassana retreats and zazen, yet sometimes feels more at home in nature than any dharma center—I never seemed to meet the criteria for either of the two Buddhisms categories. The greatest gift my fellow young adult Asian American Buddhists have given me is the permission to stop straitjacketing myself into either category.

"Asian American Buddhist": a heterogeneous category that transgresses the boundaries of "two Buddhisms." A category that forces us to question the dichotomies of immigrant/convert, modern/traditional, devotional/rational, meditative/ritualistic, ethnic/White. A category that makes room for Alyssa, who values bowing, community service, offering donations, and meditation as equally important Buddhist practices. A category that sees no contradiction with Thomas understanding "hell realms" as psychological states while believing that bodhisattvas respond to prayers. A category full of alternatives to the normative story of American Buddhism. As Kaila, who attends both a Jodo Shinshu church and her fiancé's Khmer Buddhist temple, put it: "I would like to

see Asian American Buddhists represented as we are: diverse."¹⁴

INVISIBLE TO THE MAINSTREAM AND TO EACH OTHER

"What are the best-known types of Buddhism or Buddhist organizations in America?" I asked this question at the East Bay Meditation Center to fellow participants of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) 2014 Summer Gathering. Of the 32 people who came to my workshop about Asian American Buddhists, more than a dozen identified as Asian American and/or people of color. After 26 in-person interviews, an additional round of 62 email interviews, and countless informal conversations with and about Asian American Buddhists, I was beginning to expect a common set of responses: Zen, Tibetan, Theravada/vipassana/mindfulness.

No one mentioned Jodo Shinshu (Shin) Buddhism, one of the earliest forms of Buddhism in America. From the time Shin Buddhism put down institutional roots on the West Coast in the late 1800s, it began to confront the challenges of adapting to a Christian-dominated society. By 1910, the Buddhist Mission of North America (BMNA) had switched from a lunar calendar system to weekly Sunday services. In a Japanese internment camp in 1944, the BMNA was renamed the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). Duncan Williams argues the "camp dharma" of interned Japanese Americans "had the paradoxical task during the war of simultaneously serving as a repository for Japanese cultural traditions and as a vehicle for becoming more American."¹⁵ Michael Masatsugu's research demonstrates that the boundaries between Japanese American and White convert Buddhists were remarkably fluid during the 1950s and 1960s; for instance, the BCA's *Berkeley Bussei* published Jack Kerouac's first poems in the 1950s.¹⁶ This history is largely erased from popular conceptions of American

Buddhism, showing how, for more than a century, Japanese American Buddhists have had to navigate their "perpetual foreigner" status as a group marginalized by both race and religion.

The Shin Buddhists I interviewed also acknowledged their tradition's invisibility to the Buddhist mainstream. During an interview with Kristie, a Shin Buddhist minister, I asked whether she thought of Zen as a Japanese tradition. She paused before exclaiming: "I don't! I don't think of Japanese Americans in Zen; I think of Caucasians." Pointing to a photo collage from a blog post entitled "Why Is the Under 35 Project So White?," Kristie explained, "When I think of Zen Buddhists, I think of the people pictured here."¹⁷ The collage of 20 faces was created by the Angry Asian Buddhist to critique the lack of Asian American writers featured in a Shambhala SunSpace project aimed at promoting a new generation of Buddhist voices.

Kristie's comments corroborate a trend that Jane Iwamura has called "Asian religions without Asians."¹⁸ Examining the role of the Oriental monk in popular culture in her book *Virtual Orientalism*, Iwamura argues that Asian Americans are only allowed a minor role in narratives about the development of Buddhism in America.¹⁹ She highlights how California-born Japanese American Mihoko Okamura, D.T. Suzuki's secretary from 1953 until his death in 1965, is relegated to the margins by virtue of her race and gender. Okamura "does not conform to the racial script," throwing off a writer for the *New Yorker*, who seems to have a hard time reconciling her "almond eyes and porcelain complexion" with her being "an American girl with ideas of her own."²⁰ Sadly, more than half a century later, two Buddhisms would still have us puzzling over Okamura, an Asian American for whom fluent English and a sharp mind need not be at odds with dedicated assistance and devoted discipleship.

"Who are the most famous Buddhists in America?" The BPF group shouted out names faster than I could write them down: the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh; for Buddhists living in America, Jack Kornfield, Robert Thurman, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Richard Gere, Tina Turner, Pema Chödrön, Joan Halifax. . . .

"What about famous Asian American Buddhists?" An embarrassed silence ensued, in stark contrast to the flurry of answers a moment ago. I recalled how Brian had responded to this question during our interview: "The only ones I can think of are in Asia or dead." The group finally named EBMC teachers Larry Yang and Anushka Fernandopulle. Someone mentioned Tiger Woods. I added George Takei, better known for his role in *Star Trek* than for being a Shin Buddhist.

At the end of the workshop, Lisa, who was raised with Chinese Buddhist influences, told me she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She wanted to laugh because she was happy and relieved to find her experiences and struggles shared by other Asian American Buddhists; she wanted to cry because she was saddened and angered by the rampant media misrepresentations of them. "It's like we're invisible not only to the mainstream but also to each other," she sighed, shaking her head.

"The invisibility of Asian American Buddhists is compounded by the challenge of coherently defining such a diverse group . . . there are multiple competing definitions of 'Asian American,' 'Buddhist,' and 'young adult.' Not surprisingly, combining the three creates a complicated category. Yet the very ambiguity of the identity label is also a source of creative power."

BECOMING CULTURALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISTS

It saddens me that many Asian Americans—myself included—are reluctant to "come out" as Buddhist. Sometimes this reluctance arises from a fear of being discriminated against or stereotyped. Sometimes it comes from a sense of inadequacy

and inauthenticity when comparing ourselves to the White Buddhists who seem to be doing most of the defining in American Buddhism. Yet I am also reassured by a reminder from Alyssa, an interviewee whose Buddhist journey has taken her from a college meditation group on the East Coast to a Buddhist nunnery in China to various sanghas in her native Bay Area: even if they aren't a trending topic on social media, Asian American Buddhists are everywhere.²¹

Why, then, is American Buddhism so White? In a podcast on the Secular Buddhist, Charles Prebish, a pioneering scholar in the field of American Buddhism, counters with the question "Why are Asian American Buddhists so invisible?"²² Some of my interviewees thought this latter question suggested that Asian American Buddhists are to blame for their own lack of visibility. Peter, a Taiwanese American Buddhist and LGBTQ activist, gave an impassioned reply to this viewpoint during his interview:

A bodhisattva is an ally! A bodhisattva is someone who forsakes her enlightenment for those who cannot yet attain it. An ally recognizes and forsakes his privilege for those who do not yet share it. Prebish could be an ally: he's starting to ask the right questions. It's his responsibility to take that White space, that space where White people

get to talk about Buddhism, and turn it into an ally space. Don't question why Asian American Buddhists are invisible. They are invisible because you're not looking for them!²³

The invisibility of Asian American Buddhists is compounded by the challenge of coherently defining such a diverse group.

As I discovered when recruiting interviewees, there are multiple competing definitions of "Asian American," "Buddhist," and "young adult." Not surprisingly, combining the three creates a complicated category. Yet the very ambiguity of the identity label is also a source of creative power.

The fact that there is no one face, no single voice, of Buddhist Asian America frees us to be "real Asian American Buddhists" in a multitude of ways. We can see our religious identities not as fixed labels but as ever-shifting processes. As Holly, a Buddhist chaplain of mixed Japanese and Jewish heritage, eloquently stated:

I think young Asian American Buddhists I know, including myself, face challenges in integrating and expressing multiple cultural identities—as young, American, Buddhist, and Asian. Yet I think we are all moving toward a more pluralistic world in which multiplicity of identity will be the norm. As a Buddhist, I know that the self is always inconstant and interdependent, so in a way my Buddhist practices help me be at peace in the midst of the tensions in multiplicity and diversity.²⁴

Ven. Guomin, a Mahayana Buddhist monk, shares Holly's belief that Asian American Buddhists have a unique role to play in American Buddhism:

As a group, we do a lot of "bridging." We bridge our Asian roots with our Western values, respect for traditional culture and family with American independence, etc. What interests me most is how the dharma can help alleviate the feeling of being lost and directionless that characterizes much of the young adult experience these days, especially for Asian Americans. Part of the reason, I believe, is because we are trying to "bridge" a lot—and so we find it hard to really identify who we really are.²⁵

The act of bridging—"constantly straddling cultural and spiritual worlds," as

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one interviewee put it—is possible for Buddhists of all races and ethnicities. As culturally engaged Buddhists, we must contemplate the histories and intersections of the cultural and religious traditions we have inherited/adopted. If we are to weave different narratives about American Buddhism, we must also critically examine the racism and Orientalism that shape our perceptions of Asian American Buddhists.

The young adults I interviewed recognize the harm in erasing Asian American Buddhists from representations of Buddhism in America. Whether Buddhism is the religion of their family of origin, a religion they have sought out for themselves, or both, they recognize that Asian American Buddhists are not solely responsible for their invisibility. Remedying misrepresentations of American Buddhism must be a collective effort, one that includes Asian Americans and others who have been largely absent from mainstream portrayals of American Buddhism, as well as White allies who are willing to cede control of the Buddhist mediascape in which their voices currently prevail.

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IS QUEERNESS A WHITE INVENTION?

Sarah Ngu

ABSTRACT

Many queer Asian Americans feel that to be queer is to assimilate into White American culture, leaving behind their "traditional" cultural heritage and abandoning their blood-families. Many Asian Americans and Asians actively propagate the idea that queerness is a White, Western import. But this idea blatantly goes against the historical record. Plenty of historical evidence suggests strongly that gender and sexual pluralism—that is, societal legitimization and respect for different gender and sexual behaviors, roles, and identities—was quite prevalent in Asia, specifically Southeast Asia, and it has been the advent of modernity and largely White, Christian colonialism that has undermined this pluralism.

The first password I created when I got to United States was "Malaysia." I was ten then, aware that I had a self who was Malaysian but also aware that I might lose her over time. Since I didn't want to forget my country, I chose its name as my password, hoping that the ritual of entering it over and over again would engrain it in my consciousness. Over the next 15 years, us kids would only have the chance to visit Malaysia once. Our parents couldn't afford to travel as an entire family, so what we knew of Malaysia came filtered through them.

It was they who reminded us that we were not Chinese but rather Malaysian Chinese; that "Malaysian" food was the best food in the world because it blended Chinese, Indian, Malay, and indigenous cuisines; that although there are racial and religious tensions, everyone wishes everyone "Selamat Hari Raya!" ("Happy Eid!" in Malay), "Happy Lunar New Year!," or "Happy Deepvali!" It was my mom who told us that my great-aunt was a Communist guerilla who was killed by the government. It was my dad who lectured us about why Sarawak, our home-state, was being exploited by the federal government based in West Malaysia. It was they who transmitted updates on our cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

During the first five years of moving to America, we kids weren't the least bit interested in Malaysia. But as we lost our accents, learned how to play softball and baseball, and become more integrated, we started to ask more questions. "Tell us about that great-aunt again, Mom," we asked. And although we kids only spoke English, we started becoming curious about the different sounds of Hokkien, Fuchao, Mandarin, and Bahasa Malay that came from my parents' mouths as they dialed their parents or their friends.

Now in my late 20s, I've traveled to Southeast Asia every year for the past four years. I've traveled by myself or with a friend through Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, but I've never visited Malaysia without my parents. I rely on them to take us to the right restaurants, to barter in the right language in, to translate with our grandparents, and to remind us to not wear short-shorts when entering government buildings, which are mainly staffed by Muslims. As a result, I hardly remember where anything is located, and I'm of little help to my American friends who email me for Malaysian vacation tips.

When I decided to fully come out to my parents in 2016, I knew that I was not just risking my relationship with them but

also risking my ties to my entire extended family and our home-country. If I lost my parents, I feared that I would become unmoored—a plank of wood floating in the sea of America, unattached from any tree. That fear is more imaginary than real—after all, many queer immigrants make the choice to cut off their parents and still find ways to be connected to their heritage—but nevertheless, it was a real fear to me.

The first few years were the most difficult. My parents are extremely Christian. Almost every conversation and interaction about my “decision” would spiral into intense fights, typically couched in theological language. But I knew deep down they were panicking and scrambling to answer the question, “What happened to our oldest child?”

“You know, if we didn’t move to America from Malaysia, maybe you wouldn’t have been gay.”

They never asked that question out loud. But I knew it was on their minds when my mom said to me once, quite casually, “You know, we didn’t move to America from Malaysia, maybe you wouldn’t have been gay.”

I replied, “Mom, that’s not how attraction works.”

And she said, “Yeah, you might have still felt a certain way, but you probably would not have chosen to be in a relationship with a woman. That may not even have been on your radar. You would just go along with what everyone else did.”

Her implication was simple: gayness—and all queerness—is a Western thing.

As absurd as her statement was—one does not simply step on a plane and, 24 hours later, emerge with a new sexuality—I knew what she meant. Almost all of the out, queer people in my life at

the time were White. Queer characters on television and in the media were usually White. To come out as a queer immigrant feels like stepping off a brown land into a sea of white.

During those years, I attended my first-ever LGBTQIA Christian conference hosted by Q Christian Fellowship. I was stunned to see a booth called “Free Parent Hugs!” where people would line up to receive hugs from White, American moms and dads. I teared up upon seeing this, but I couldn’t bring myself to stand in line. It felt akin to waiting in line to be adopted. Although I deeply wanted a hug, I felt that walking into their embrace would somehow only further alienate me from myself. Already, my family has been alienated and uprooted from our motherlands twice over—how could I uproot myself from a tree that has already been uprooted from its native soil?

The LGBTQIA community often speaks of “chosen family,” but for many queer people of color, finding a “family” that accepts them sometimes means finding a family whose skin does not look like theirs, whose tongues do not know their languages and whose stomachs do not share the same cravings—a family that, in fact, wields certain privileges and powers that our biological families will never have. It looks, in other words, oddly like assimilation.

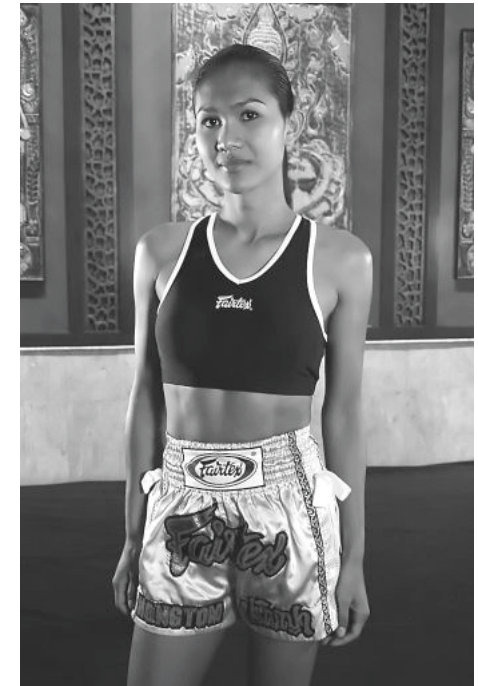
My mother’s views are not unique to her—they are indicative of mainstream views on LGBTQ issues held by many first-generation Asian Americans and Asians. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the current prime minister of Malaysia, spoke at a press conference in late 2018 in response to recommendations made by the Malaysian Human Rights Commission. He said, “While we agree with suggestions made by the [commission], we must remind them

that our value system is not the same as the West. There are certain things we cannot accept, even though they are considered human rights in the West. This includes LGBT and same-sex marriages.”¹

Yet I sensed that the truth was more complicated than what Mahathir and my mother were telling me. I reflected on how common it was for men and women to hold hands as friends while walking down the street in Malaysia, a supposedly “conservative” society. I recalled how frequently, when in a restaurant, my parents would quietly point out that the effeminate waiter serving us was a *pondan*, a derogatory word for people whom we would describe as “trans women” in American English. Last year, when I traveled to Bangkok and Chiang Mai, I was struck by how commonly accepted *kathoeyes*—a Thai word that can refer to “trans women,” “effeminate men,” or a “third gender” altogether—were. Yes, it may be currently illegal to commit sodomy in Malaysia and Thai citizens cannot legally change their gender identification, but there seemed to be a lot more freedom and range in gender expression on the streets of Southeast Asia even than in New York City, where I currently live.

So I started reading everything I could on LGBTQ history in Southeast and East Asia. My main text was Michael Peletz’s *Gender Pluralism in Southeast Asia* as well as many articles and selections from other books.³ I wanted to know whether my queerness had roots that ran deeper than my parents let on, whether I could find a lineage or history that I could attach myself to, even whether I had to skip over my immediate family.

What I found surprised me. Not only was queerness *not* White, it was arguably Whiteness that erased queerness. The historical record suggests that early modern (16th century onwards) Southeast Asia was a region that encouraged societal tolerance, even respect, of



Parinya Charoenphol, a kathoey who goes by “Nong Toom.”²

gender and sexual fluidity and that such a tolerance was eroded by the forces of modernity and European, Christian colonialism.

Southeast Asia was, and still is, a region that contains an incredible, interactive multiplicity of religions, cultures, cuisines, and languages. There is a native comfort with diversity, fluidity, and porous boundaries, as opposed to binary, categorical thinking. This is all the more true when it comes to religion.

According to Michael Peletz, early modern Southeast Asian religion did not portray “god” as a single, masculine deity.⁴ The universe consisted of polarized entities: sky and earth, mountain and sea, sun and moon, life and death, and male and female. These opposing yet complementary forces were needed to hold the cosmos together. Female gods were in charge of the underworld and the earth, and male gods were in charge of the upper world, the sky, and sun. Sometimes gods were even presented

as both male and female, as in the case of the Hindu god Shiva.

It was believed that both male and female elements exist in a person.

Moreover, people who embodied both masculinity and femininity tended to hold roles of sacred and religious authority. They were accorded such respect because they embodied the universe's purity before it was split into various different forms of life. Therefore, it was believed that they could communicate with the gods in a way that ordinary single-gendered humans could not.

In Indonesia, these "male and female" persons are called *bissus*, who are the priests of the Bugis people and continue to exist today.⁵ The *bissus* channeled divine spirits in order to bestow blessings and were stewards of sacred manuscripts.⁶ They are typically "male-bodied" individuals who dress in both masculine and feminine attire, jewelry, and makeup.⁷ Today, *bissus*' power has lessened, but they still perform blessings for people who are about to make the hajj.



Photo of contemporary *bissus* provided by Professor Sharyn Davies.⁸

Since at least the late 1800s, Thailand has had *kathoe*y dancers and spirit mediums. *Kathoe*y is a term that refers to

male-bodied individuals who appear as women, or "lady-boys," to use the English translation. In 1935, a British man commented, "There are certain number of men who habitually wear female clothing and grow their hair long. It does not seem to be thought that there is anything wrong with this. . . . In England, if a man goes about dressed as a woman he is arrested."⁹ Today, *kathoe*ys are still common in Thailand, and while they are accepted as legitimate, they are more marginalized than before.

In Borneo (a large island that contains Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei), reports from the 19th century reveal that the indigenous Iban people revered *manangs*, or shamans, who were leaders responsible for the agricultural and spiritual rhythms of their villages. There were many types of *manangs*, but the most esteemed were the *manang bali*, who were typically male-bodied individuals in female attire and took cis-men as their husbands. Although Iban society maintains strict gender roles, they permitted *manangs* to transgress them due to their divine calling.

In these three examples and many more, religion created a space of legitimacy for non-normative gender and sexual

behaviors through the role of priests, shamans, etc. But the authority that these priests wielded was tied to an agrarian, religious cosmology. Once the power of that cosmology began to be less compelling in the age of science and technology, so too declined the status of all ritual specialists, including "transgendered" folks.¹⁰

European imperialism also contributed largely to this decline. Currently, more than half of the countries in the world that penalize gay sex are former British colonies.¹¹ European colonizers were incentivized to de-legitimize or murder "transgendered" ritual specialists, as their spiritual authority competed with the authority of the Church. *Manang bali* no longer exist in part due to the Iban people's mass conversion to Christianity.

"This blurring of boundaries in all forms is what makes Southeast Asia, as a whole, 'queer.' And this is our gift that we can share with the world. For we were queer before the word existed."

Moreover, European authorities enforced patriarchal norms in how they distributed economic power and land rights, undermining the status of Southeast Asian women who held much more freedom and power than their European counterparts. This is significant because "transgendered ritual specialists" were esteemed largely because femininity itself was esteemed. It was femininity—regardless of their bodies—who occupied the highest religious roles in society. And as femininity became devalued, so was gender fluidity. Strict gender norms began to be imposed, or self-imposed, on Southeast Asian societies.

Thailand is an emblematic case study. Although for centuries, gender expression was not highly differentiated in Thailand—to the point where Europeans remarked that they had a hard time telling women

from men—the Thai monarchy began passing a series of cultural mandates in the early 1940s, stipulating that men had to wear jackets and trousers and women had to wear skirts and blouses. Women's and men's names also had to be distinct. The prime minister of Thailand felt Thailand was not respected as a civilized nation by Western powers and blamed the French reluctance to return territory to Thailand on his people's failure to dress according to Western standards. The foreign secretary of Britain observed that the cultural mandates were due to the "Thai desire to Westernize and modernize everything Thai which [is] rooted in the inferiority complex of an oriental people which has only recently succeeded in establishing its theoretical equality of status with the European Powers."¹²

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ME

When the Disney movie *Moana* came out, I felt envious. *Moana* initially leaves her community in order to set sail and pursue her desire for adventure, but her rebellious choices ends up helping her community re-discover their "voyager" roots. How convenient, I thought, that her choice between herself and her family was not a trade-off. When I heard the line from a song in the movie, "we tell the stories of our elders in the never ending chain," a part of me always winced. Have I broken the chain?

I began this research project for personal reasons; I wanted to find out whether my story could turn out like *Moana*'s. Can I claim a queer, historical lineage? To be technical about it: no. Pre-colonial queerness in Malaysia is located within indigenous and Malay communities; my family has lived in Malaysia for at least four generations, but

our roots are in China. Can I really claim these queer ancestors as my own?

I've come to realize, with the help of a few Malaysian friends, that this mode of technical parsing and categorization is not what Southeast Asians do. The attempt to pin things down into either/or categories is a fairly post-Enlightenment, Western approach—and not a very queer-friendly one at that. Particularly in Borneo, where I was born, cultural inter-mixing and inter-marrying between indigenous and Chinese communities is completely normal and does not carry the historical baggage of “cultural appropriation” that exists in America. This blurring of boundaries in all forms is what makes Southeast Asia, as a whole, “queer.” And this is our gift that we can share with the world. For we were queer before the word existed.

But North America and Western Europe have yet to confront the anti-queer legacy of White colonialism in Asia, the Americas, and Africa. Currently in Britain, Yew Fook Sam, a gay Malaysian man, is under threat of deportation by United Kingdom authorities for overstaying his visa. The fact that UK judges have denied his asylum appeal, which cites Malaysia's anti-sodomy laws, is doubly cruel in light of the fact that British colonial authorities were responsible for instituting those laws.

Here in the United States, there are an estimated 267,000 adult, undocumented immigrants—mostly Latinx, some Asian—who identify as LGBTQ.¹³ National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance (NQA-PIA) has been organizing to bring attention to the unique risks and dangers that LGBTQ immigrants face, especially South Asian and Muslim immigrants, if they are deported to their countries of origin. The United States is a Western power that has aided and directly participated in colonialism. It ought to examine its moral responsibility for the systemic reasons that cause

some LGBTQ+ people to feel unsafe in their home-countries and to seek refuge in the West. Only by honestly confronting history can we, as Americans, create a morally responsible immigration policy that queer people deserve.

“The United States . . . ought to examine its moral responsibility for the systemic reasons that cause some LGBTQ+ people to feel unsafe in their home-countries and to seek refuge in the West.”

1. Joseph Kaos Jr., “Dr M: M'sia does not accept LGBT culture, same-sex marriage,” *The Star Online*, 21 September 2018, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/09/21/msia-does-not-accept-lgbt-culture-same-sex-marriage/>.
2. Fairtex from Thailand, “Muay Thai boxer, actress and model Nong Thoom at Fairtex Gym in Bangkok,” Flickr, Wikipedia, 10 June 2006, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nongthoomfairtex.jpg>
3. A caveat: Most of the research on gender-fluid ritual specialists is conducted by White, Western professors, and almost all of their primary sources are records kept by European settlers.
4. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, as well as local indigenous Austronesian religions.
5. Sharyn Graham Davies, “The transcendent bissu,” *Aeon*, 12 June 2018, <https://aeon.co/essays/the-west-can-learn-from-southeast-asias-transgender-heritage>.
6. The Bugis actually believe in five genders: oroane, masculine men; makkunrai, effeminate women; calabai, effeminate men who have sex with men; calalai, masculine women who have sex with women; and bissu, who neither male or female. Irwan Martua Hidayana, “On gender diversity in Indonesia,” *The Conversation* (blog), 12 September 2018, <http://theconversation.com/on-gender-diversity-in-indonesia-101087>.
7. The phrases “male-bodied” and “female-bodied” are shorthand for “people with penises” and “people with vaginas.” I thought about using the terms “assigned male at birth” or “assigned female at birth,” but I decided not to because “assignment” carries medical and scientific connotations that would not be relevant to Southeast Asia's early modern history.
8. Sharyn Graham Davies, “What we can learn from an Indonesian ethnicity that recognizes five genders,” *The Conversation* (blog), 16 June 2016, <http://theconversation.com/what-we-can-learn-from-an-indonesian-ethnicity-that-recognizes-five-genders-60775>.
9. Michael Peletz, *Gender Pluralism in Southeast Asia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 78.
10. I put “transgendered” in quotes not just because it's a word foreign to the local context, but because it etymologically implies a traversal or transgression of gender boundaries. But if the boundaries are blurry or porous to begin with, is “trans” the right prefix?

11. Ben Westcott, “The homophobic legacy of the British Empire,” *CNN*, 12 September 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/11/asia/british-empire-lgbt-rights-section-377-intl/index.html>
12. Leslie Ann Jeffrey, *Sex and Borders: Gender, National Identity, and Prostitution Policy in Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002), 17.
13. Gary J. Gates, “LGBT Adult Immigrants in the United States,” *The Williams Institute: UCLA School of Law*, March 2013, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/census-lgbt-demographics-studies/us-lgbt-immigrants-mar-2013/>

WHY ARE SO MANY OF US SECRETLY DEPRESSED? EXCAVATING THE LAYERS OF ASIAN AMERICANS' STRUGGLES WITH MENTAL HEALTH

AN INTERVIEW OF J.R. KUO

Charlene Wang

Over and over again, I cannot help but notice how many Asian Americans, particularly women, suffer from isolation and poor mental health. My interest on this topic is, admittedly, personal. I've been depressed to the point where, while I wasn't actively suicidal, I wouldn't have minded a collision with a stray bus. In my intermediate family, I worry about my sister's depression and my mother's untreated depression and her unwillingness to seek out professional help. In my extended family, my cousin is being treated for bipolar disorder. And that's just within my family. I won't share too much of my friends' details as they're not mine to share, but my god, I know so many Asian Americans who are struggling though it's not apparent from the outside. I think about an Asian American acquaintance who took her life in college. And so many Asian Americans, particularly women, who have difficult, complicated relationships with their families. As I like to joke, we are living, breathing, highly functional dysfunction. And yet, I rarely see this fission being addressed in mainstream society.

After doing some research, I saw that there are data to support my experience. According to a report released by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Asian American young women ages 15–24 have the highest rate of depressive symptoms of any racial, ethnic, or gender group.¹ I reached out to J.R. Kuo at

the National Asian American and Pacific Islander Mental Health Association (NAAPIHMA), one of the few organizations that focuses on AAPI mental health, for a conversation on the state of mental health in Asian America.

CHARLENE WANG: Can you provide a general overview of the work that NA-APIHMA does?

J.R. KUO: NA-APIHMA's mission is to advocate and improve the well-being and mental health of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders by recognizing the impact of mental health on all aspects of a person's life. We were founded by Dr. D.J. Ida in 2001. We are probably the only national AAPI-focused mental health organization that has received grants from federal agencies like the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice, specifically the Office of Minority Health and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). We have worked directly with community organizations to develop mental health policies, training, and awareness and outreach programs to improve AAPI mental health.

"Asian American young women ages 15–24 have the highest rate of depressive symptoms of any racial, ethnic, or gender group."

WANG: One of NA-APIHMA's focus areas is to translate mental health resources. Is that challenging? Are there equivalent words in Asian languages?

"Mental health in Chinese is called Sen Jing, and Sen Jing Bing means illness, but it also means crazy."

KUO: As you know, Asia has many different languages, Chinese alone has over 70 different dialects. The idea and concept of mental health is still very Westernized. Historically and traditionally, Asian languages don't have mental health concepts in our vocabularies. For example, mental health in Chinese is called Sen Jing, and Sen Jing Bing means illness, but it also means crazy.

WANG: I only heard that term as an insult when my parents were arguing with each other.

KUO: The concept of mental health is just so foreign in China. We've worked with Cambodians and Khmer communities, and there is no language for mental health. Korean and Japanese have words for depression and anxiety, which are not widely used. The best equivalent is a sentence or two description. This translation project did struggle, it's a real challenge. There's not a lot of resources. First, it's hard to find the right translators, and even then, it's hard to find the concepts and words in these native tongues.

WANG: What was the approach to get around that? Did you just describe things for mental health outreach? Like "Are you feeling sad?"

KUO: Two things I've witnessed. Like what you were saying, it's explaining the feeling of struggle. The second thing is using human faces, human expressions. That's universal. Pain, happiness, joy, depression, sadness, jealousy, confusion. No matter what race you are, how Westernized, or even how "civilized" you are, all of us

have almost identical emotional facial expressions. There are studies on this. When people laugh, when they're happy; the way the muscle moves across their face

is something universal across the board no matter your cultural background. It's just incredible, right?

WANG: Some of your funding sources included the ones you mentioned earlier, as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Catholic Church Archdiocese. Has the model-minority myth prevented AAPI groups from getting funding?

KUO: It's definitely harder to get grants for AAPI-centered mental health initiatives. Often the money went to bigger or other minority organizations. Although there are about 20 million AAPI in this country; we are a relatively small population.

The challenge is representation and visibility. Jewish people in this country have the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). In African American communities, they have influential Black churches, Black national caucuses, spokespeople on TV advocating for Black rights. We just don't have that representation yet. When it comes to mental health issues, we don't have the numbers, and so we also don't have the data. On top of that, the model-minority myth has perpetuated the idea that Asian Americans are doing OK, and therefore, we don't need mental health support.

WANG: How are you able to secure funding from a mainstream organization that's not AAPI-focused? Is there a tendency for a certain type of project to get funded?

KUO: The type of past funding we get mostly focuses on physical health with

mental health as an add-on. For example, a program we were part of was the Legacy Project, which brought awareness and gathered data on Southeast Asian Americans and their struggles with diabetes, heart disease, and mental health issues.

WANG: That makes sense because physical health is so tangible.

KUO: We struggle with being vocal about our issues. For example, compared to the Jewish community after their horrible tragedy in World War II, they were able to talk about their tragedy. It's one of their ways to overcome and heal. The Jewish community has been talking about their history, advocating for their rights. Their community organizations raised significant funds, and they do a lot of amazing work. Compare this to Asian Americans. We don't like nor want to talk about it due to our historical and political past. Historically in Asia, those who voiced their suffering were likely to have their heads chopped off. Yes, there are a lot of successful Asian American families and businesses, but the needs and struggles are there. We need to start sharing our stories and issues first, otherwise the money is not going to supporting other Asian Americans.

WANG: I'm glad you bring this up. As a student going to the Kennedy School, where my classmates are going to set public policy, I took a class on Native American issues. I had this internal debate as to whether I should draw a parallel with Asian American women and how race plays a role in domestic violence. A Bureau of Justice study showed that Asian women are the only race of women that has the most violence committed against them by men of other races (this study only included White, Black, and Asian women). Asian women suffer the most violence at the hands of White men, actually.² I realized there was a parallel with Native American women because the Violence Against Women Act was passed specifically to

address crimes committed against Native women by non-native men.³ I hesitated to bring it up, and ultimately didn't, because I felt guilty for bringing up the struggles of the community. It doesn't feel like something to call attention to. You don't want people to pity you.

KUO: Exactly. I do the same thing. It's ingrained in us culturally. It's mind-boggling even for someone like myself who's been in this work for over ten years. I still feel uncomfortable. I feel guilty talking about myself because it feels self-serving. Even yesterday, we began discussing mental health, and then someone started asking questions about ethnicity and said that Asians are doing fine in this country and questioned that they need mental health support. While explaining the model-minority myth and sharing the mental health struggle that Asian Americans go through, I feel self-serving, a little bit guilty. "They don't need to know this, they probably don't care. Does it matter? Am I being selfish?" I have to catch myself and have the internal dialogue, like "J.R., let it go," because everyone at the table was White. It's important; they need to know about this.

WANG: This conversation helped me realize that that's hurtful for us collectively. Speaking up is a service for the wider Asian American community, not a selfish thing.

KUO: My advice to my students is that there are people out there who need to shut up, loud speakers who just cannot stop talking. When it comes to us Asian Americans? Don't even worry about that. No, you're not being "too loud." Cultivate that voice.

WANG: Haha, I will try. Well last time we talked, you mentioned holding a lot of mental health workshop for AAPI college students. What was the approach and focus of these workshops? What brought those students to attend these workshops? Were there common themes that you found among the students?

KUO: The mental health training program is called "Friends DO Make a Difference" and began in 2011. We've trained college students at over 30 different universities. The younger Asian Americans are fed up. They want to talk. We want to resolve this. We are sick and tired dealing with depression and sadness. They think that what they are experiencing is unique and isolated and that there's something wrong with them. I have done so many workshops, and the biggest feedback I receive is "holy s***, I'm not alone." Sorry about my language. Growing up with that idea of saving face, you don't want to talk about your personal struggles. Finally, when they started sharing, they knew what they are going through is exactly what others are going through.

WANG: I certainly identify with that theme of isolation. How do you think this kind of isolation persists within our community in the United States? Does it take on a different form when we are minorities?

KUO: The moment you talk about your vulnerability, your non-successful, non-happy experiences, your family immediately deems that disgraceful. It doesn't get interpreted as a mental health issue if your kid has depression or is suicidal.

WANG: What is it about Asian culture that makes us afraid of bringing shame to the family?

KUO: You'd have to go back 3,000 years. In another conversation, I can give you the whole Chinese history. It began with Confucianism and this mentality that you have to be "proper" and a "gentleman." You have to follow these societal rules. It's very communal, collective. There's a lot of complexity in the history.

WANG: What differences in mental health challenges do you see in first-generation immigrants and those of us who are American-born?

KUO: 1.5 or second generation face a lot of mental health challenges because of the bicultural challenge—the challenge of wanting to be American while at the same time holding onto their Asian family culture and family expectations.

WANG: The acculturation process causes mental health problems. A study found that older Asian American women have the highest suicide rate of all women age 55 and older. Do you have any thoughts on why this is?

"The younger Asian Americans are fed up. They want to talk. We want to resolve this. We are sick and tired dealing with depression and sadness. They think that what they are experiencing is unique and isolated and there's something wrong with them."

KUO: It's definitely not a good thing. I don't know why. My theory is that these older Asian American women immigrated here when they were older—they likely have a harder time learning English, so

they face social isolation, especially if their kids live in different cities or countries. Due to language barriers, they also face financial hardship.

WANG: My theory that is that in Asia, they would be living with their children. They're losing out on that because that's not as common in the United States. That might compound the isolation.

Let's move on to discuss the George Qiao piece. Do you have any thoughts or reactions to what he's saying?

George Qiao writes in "Why are Asian American Kids Killing Themselves" a critique of the dominant model of looking at the poor state of Asian American mental health as being caused by "a pressure cooker of parental expectations and cultural stigma." He says:

I am not surprised that our movement seems to embrace a model of mental illness that cuts down immigrant narratives and identifies Asian cultures as a source of weakness rather than strength. In the fight to assert ourselves, a colonial, anti-Asian ideology remains rooted in our memories of pain.

When a therapist or counselor believes that Asian Americans suffer solely because of familial pressures, they buy into the idea that Asian families are unnatural and inhuman. . . . Little wonder the follow-up rate for Asian Americans who do visit therapists is virtually nonexistent.

The idea that Asian families and Asian-ness are uniquely harmful to Asian Americans needs to be abandoned. If we refuse to examine the way that this country's prejudices condition us to be in conflict with our own parents, we will never be able to heal and thrive as a community.⁴

What's your take?

KUO: I agree a lot with what he says, but he needs to provide more data. I teach a workshop about intergenerational conflict. Asian Americans do get a lot of family pressure to succeed, and the whole immigrant experience is extremely stressful. At the same time, these Asian American youth want to be Americanized. A lot of them will sacrifice their Asian culture. And sadly, some are chasing something they can never achieve: to be White, to be completely accepted in this country.

Unfortunately, some parts of this society will never accept us. So that's one part. There are some therapists who have unconscious bias. I like his conclusion that

"Unfortunately, some parts of this society will never accept us. So that's one part. There are some therapists who have unconscious bias . . . what's equally harmful to Asian Americans is the prejudice and discrimination that we face in this country."

what's equally harmful to Asian Americans is the prejudice and discrimination that we face in this country. When I grew up in the 1990s, people would make fun of the food, like kimchi, and now kimchi is everywhere. What the f***? Unfortunately, this American culture, they will always try to crush something that's different.

Our parents, immigrants, they left the country because they wanted a better life for themselves and for their kids. They have been in survival mode. Their whole life, they don't have the luxury to talk about mental health, to talk about feelings, to talk about self-discovery. They don't have many resources, and they're trying their best and acting on what they learned from their parents, from their culture. What they are is different.

WANG: Asian cultures can produce shame, but I appreciate how Qiao addresses a larger problem of the field that ignores the discrimination that Asian Americans experience. I've never seen any mental health literature that acknowledges the history that our parents went through. It's not really known since they don't talk about much. There has been a lot of social upheaval, war, and poverty in Asia. The trauma from that gets passed on, and it's also probably what contributes to a lot of issues. That's rarely acknowledged.

KUO: No, it's not. Through my intergenerational workshops, one of the solutions that I've been sharing with my students is to ask your parents some simple questions about their history. Our parents don't really like to talk, they don't want to burden us with sad stories. Ask questions in small pieces so as not to overwhelm them.

WANG: Can you share with us your immigration story?

KUO: My family followed the trend of East Asian families sending their kids to the United States to get a better education. I'm nine years old; I get this opportunity from this boarding school in northern California that accepted me and gave me a scholarship that would pay for my room and board. My mom dropped me off and left. I did not know any English. I only knew "A, B, C, D." That's it. I was in ESL. I was there until I graduated at 18 or 19 years old. My experience at the boarding school, in a nutshell, definitely contributed a number of emotional and psychological traumas.

"Our parents, immigrants, they left the country because they want a better life for themselves and for their kids. They have been in survival mode. Their whole life they don't have the luxury to talk about mental health, to talk about feelings, to talk about self-discovery. They don't have many resources, and they're trying their best and acting on what they learned from their parents, from their culture. What they are is different."

Throughout the whole time at boarding school, I was under a student visa. In order to stay in this country, you have to constantly go to school. If the student visa is discontinued, you have to leave the country. There are only two ways to get a green card to permanently stay in this country: one is through marriage, the K1 visa, and the other is the highly specialized skilled worker visa, H1B. The only way to go from a student visa to a permanent work visa is through sponsorship from a company. It can be very challenging to get sponsored for the H1B visa. The hardest thing about having a student visa is that legally I couldn't work outside my university, and I could only work 20 hours. It was really hard financially.

WANG: How did you figure out how to stay in the United States?

KUO: I am not a citizen yet. I have my green card: permanent residency. After college,

I moved to Hawaii for work, and the company couldn't sponsor me for my work visa. I went back to graduate school. That is the only way I could continue to stay in this country. A lot of Americans don't understand how hard it is to get a green card. Even though I grew up here and am as Americanized as almost everyone, I always feel like a second-class citizen.

Immigration has a big impact in Asian communities because about 60 percent of current Asian Americans are either themselves immigrants or their direct relatives or parents are immigrants. Twenty million US Asians, and out of that 13 percent, 1.4 million, are undocumented.

Immigration and mental health are so related and so interconnected. Discrimination is also part of it, particularly for Asian Americans with accents. I heard all sorts of racial jokes; I would be particularly sensitive because of my immigrant status. "Go back to where you are from" would hit such a nerve because I'm not a citizen.

I finally got my green card in 2017. I can apply for my citizenship in four years. I will have been here 31 years before becoming a citizen. Back in the 80s and early 90s, it was easier for people, especially highly educated foreigners, to get a visa and a green card. After September 11, it has become tougher.

In 2012, in between applying for visas all my documentation, my student visa expired, so I had no legal status. I couldn't drive. I couldn't work. I couldn't get health insurance. I was like undocumented. If anything happened to me, I would be

I**ed; they could put me in an immigration detention center. I was living with so much fear and shame during this time.

What I went through pretty much could be avoided. There could be more resources to make the United States Immigration office more efficient. But there's no incentive.

WANG: At what point did you seek mental health support?

KUO: I started seeking therapy in college. I worked, studied, and partied hard, but internally I was so depressed because I was so afraid to talk about my immigration and my trauma from boarding school. I did talk to a friend or two, and it went over their heads and that hurt a lot. I began therapy at the University of Colorado at Boulder because you get eight weeks of counselling sessions for free per semester. Years later, a therapist offered to see me even though I couldn't afford to pay. Even today, I'm still seeing her regularly. After eight years I have seen myself make tremendous progress in terms of my mental wellness.

I used to have pretty severe seasonal affective disorder. Whenever fall came, I would get so depressed. The first time I experienced fall was when my mom dropped me off at boarding school. It was cold. I didn't have proper clothing. I was from Taiwan, a tropical island. I missed my mom, and I was in a foreign land. I couldn't speak the language. I didn't have any friends. I was miserable, and so I associated the changing weather with trauma.

It took me a couple of years to pinpoint the source and more to slowly overcome. When the leaves started changing in Colorado, my friend would accompany me to the mountains in Aspen to see the colors. It's beautiful. Slowly I re-educate my brain and my perception. I'm telling myself I'm in control. I have power over this. It took me a couple of years.

WANG: Congratulations. That takes a lot of effort. I always assumed that seasonal affective disorder is one of those things you can't change.

KUO: Exactly. A lot of times those conditions, they don't go away, but the recovery is how you manage these conditions. The depression is still there, but over the years I have learned healthy ways to balance that out. I am stronger, more empowered.

WANG: Thank you so much for sharing your story. That message of empowerment is meaningful.

My biggest takeaway from my conversation with J.R. is that intergenerational conflict and the silencing effect of the model-minority myth lies at the heart of so many of the mental health challenges that I see second-generation Asian Americans experiencing. J.R.'s immigration story serves as a reminder for the discrimination and struggle that our community faces. Perhaps for those of us who feel anger toward our parents can, with time, transform that into empathy and compassion once we understand and unpack the history of conflict, colonization, and militarism that we rarely study in US education—the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the civil war in Cambodia, the Secret War in Laos, the Cultural Revolution in China, the Indo-Pakistani War, the civil war in Sri Lanka, ongoing conflicts in the Philippines, and many others.

There is so much unspoken trauma and hurt that has impacted our parents' generation and is passed onto the next generation. According to the Asian American Psychological Association, two protective factors against suicide are a "strong identification with one's ethnic group" and "strong family cohesion and parental support."⁵ Unfortunately, the acculturation and assimilation process work against both these protective factors and lends insight into why our community struggles the way we do. Like

many of us, I struggle with the desire to be White, with the internalized racism that this country has taught us. To heal, let us begin unveiling the inner turmoil of our lives. Let us seek to fully understand and embrace our Asian heritage, our Asian families, and our Asian histories and remind ourselves, in the words of Sandra Oh, "It's an honor just to be Asian."⁶

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CHENXING HAN is a writer and editor whose work has appeared in *Journal of Global Buddhism*, *Buddhadharma*, *Pacific World*, and elsewhere. She holds an MA in Buddhist studies and Buddhist chaplaincy from the Graduate Theological Union and Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, California.

DOUA KHA (they/them/their, she/her/hers) is currently pursuing their master's degree in curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with an emphasis on multicultural education. Prior to earning their degree, Doua was teaching high school students for several years. Their thesis focuses on queer Asian American students' experiences in school, tensions they face, and strategies they utilize to negotiate them. Doua is also the supervisor for the Middle Childhood-Early Adolescent Content Field Cohort in the undergraduate Elementary Education Program in addition to teaching a seminar on inclusive education for undergraduates. They also work with high school students of color who are aspiring teachers, introducing educational concepts to challenge them to teach for social justice. Outside of work and education, Doua is the outreach coordinator for the Gates Millennium Scholar Association LGBTQ+ Network, which serves as a platform to advocate for queer scholars of color throughout the nation, as well as the tribal leader for Hmong Women Take On the World, a project designed to organize the first international virtual summit for Hmoob womxn. Doua has also presented workshops throughout the Midwest about queerness in the APIDA community and hopes this can be a small step toward larger queer APIDA visibility.

MIKAYLA ARUTA KONEFAŁ (they/them) is a queer Pilipinx and Polish student at UC Santa Cruz studying environmental studies and critical race and ethnic studies. They are involved with organizations such as Anakbayan Santa Cruz, Sacramento Pilipinx LGBTQIA, the UCSC Critical Race and Ethnic Studies Department, and the Asian American/Pacific Islander Resource Center.

J.R. KUO is a firm believer that everyone holds an infinite amount of space within, calling us to express our truest selves. Everyone matters! He wants to invite everyone to experience the wonder of what it means to be at ease and free to create the life you crave. J.R. is the CEO of CoffeeWithJR and a professional speaker, trainer, and coach. He is also the co-founder and program director of Friends DO Make a Difference, a mental health training program specifically designed for college students. He has facilitated and trained students at over 35 universities and conferences across the United States, including Harvard University, Stanford University, and Vanderbilt University. He has taught leadership, cultural competency, and mental health classes at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and Regis University. In addition to being a professional speaker, J.R. has seven years of experience managing NAAPIHMA, a mental health nonprofit organization, and multiple years of experience running businesses in Denver, Colorado.

HYUNJI HANNAH LEE received her BA in international studies and a minor in Asian studies from the University of Florida and her masters of education degree in prevention science and practice from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, specializing in prevention research. At Harvard, she was the 2018 Let's Talk! Conference chair and an executive board member for the Pan-Asian Coalition for Education. Hannah is now a doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology program at Georgia State University, where she is being trained as a mental health clinician

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KEVIN LEO YABUT NADAL, PH.D. is a professor of psychology at both John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the Graduate Center (GC) at the City University of New York (CUNY). He is the author of over 100 publications and nine books, including *Filipino American Psychology: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice* (Wiley, 2011); *Sage Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender* (Sage, 2017); and *Microaggressions and Traumatic Stress* (APA, 2018). He is the past president of the Asian American Psychological Association (AAPA), the former executive director of the CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies at CUNY, a trustee of the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHHS), and the founder of the LGBTQ Scholars of Color Network. A scholar-activist, he has written for *Huffington Post*, *Buzzfeed*, and the *New York Times*, and he has been featured on NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox, PBS, The Weather Channel, The History Channel, and more. Dr. Nadal received the American Psychological Association Early Career Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest in 2017, was named one of NBC's Pride 30 in 2018, and received the Richard Tewsbury Award by the Western Society of Criminology in 2019.

KATHERINE NASOL (she/they) is a community organizer and PhD student in the UC Davis Cultural Studies Graduate Group. For the past nine years, she

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SARAH NGU (pronouns flexible) was born in Borneo, Malaysia, and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. A graduate of Columbia University, Sarah is a co-founder of Church Clarity, a database that scores churches on how clearly they communicate their policies for LGBTQ+ people and women in leadership. Sarah also occasionally reports as a freelance journalist and has written for *Splinter News*, *Sojourners*, *Jacobin*, *The Slant*, and *Public Radio International* on a hunger strike in Chinatown, queer Christians, labor unions, and indigenous representation in *Crazy Rich Asians*.

STEVEN RAGA currently serves on the board of directors for the National Federation for Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA), where he was formerly the region 1 executive director and New York State chairperson. Steven is also a board member of Asian Women for Health and for Pilipino American Unity for Progress (UniPro), where he was also its founder. Steven is a recipient of the National Association of Asian Pacifics in Politics and Public Affairs (NAAPPPA) 40 Under 40 Award, New York Mets Filipino Heritage Spirit Award, the JCI Philippine-New York award for Government Affairs and Social Services, the FANHS Metro-NY Filipino American History Month 2018 Contributions to Excellence Award, the Outstanding Filipino Americans (TOFA) award for Community Service & Advocacy, the Pan-American Concerned Citizens Action League (PACCAL)'s award for Community Service, the Most Outstanding Graduate Student by Cornell University's Asian & Asian American Center (A3C), and the Youth Leadership Award by Filipinas Magazine. As a student, he was the co-president of the Society for Asian American Graduate Affairs (SAAGA) and an active member of Asian Pacific Americans for Action (APAA) at Cornell University.

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DR. ED K.S. WANG retired as the former director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Massachusetts Department of Mental Health and received the 2015 Community Hero Award of the Massachusetts Asian American Commission. He is the director of Policy and Planning, Division of Global Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital and assistant professor of

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In this 29th Edition, the AAPR team would like to acknowledge and extend our gratitude for their continued support.

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- * **Commentaries** should be 1,500–3,000 words.
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