

Asian, American, and Queer

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In the United States, the twentieth century gave rise to numerous social movements which inevitably intertwined with one another. During the Vietnam War, both Asian and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Americans mobilized to protest warfare and imperialism. Gay liberation groups were inspired by anti-war organizations, and anti-war organizations drew influence from these LGBT groups. The two minority groups combatted the labeling of their communities as sexually deviant and challenged the notion that being gay or Asian was inherently un-American. This paper addresses these overlooked movements between the Asian and LGBT communities, and it provides insight into their complex and interwoven histories. In instances where the importance of race or sexual orientation were forgotten, these movements found conflict. Overall, while their interactions have not followed a rigid protocol of unity or disunity, the two movements have gained social and political power from their intersectionality.



Queers and people of color alike must recognize that homophobia, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, discrimination based on physical ability, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and other discriminatory isms all have the same roots. The same social dynamic created them all: the mainstream population's ability to isolate particular groups and characterize them as unequal, apart, and unworthy.¹

In 1982, a Chinese American man named Vincent Chin was murdered because of his race. Vincent Chin was perceived to be Japanese by the perpetrator – an employee of the automobile industry who saw Japanese autoworkers as a threat. Chin's

death was a rallying moment against anti-Asian rhetoric in the U.S., and was a catalyst for a broader Asian American movement at the time.² Years before his demise, a unified Asian identity was already brewing in the U.S. from the elongated war: anti-war activists mobilized to protest the war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. While both the Vietnam War and Vincent Chin mobilized the community into action, there was another unique phenomenon that shaped Asian American identity in the twentieth century. This paper will argue that it was the Asian American community's alignment with other minority groups facing human and civil rights struggles – specifically lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans

¹ Craig J. Fong, "Building Alliances: The Case of the Japanese American Citizens League Endorsement of Same-Sex Marriage," in *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies that Work*, ed. James Sears and Walter L. Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 378.

² Frank H. Wu, "Embracing Mistaken Identity: How the Vincent Chin Case Unified Asian Americans," *Harvard Journal of Asian American Policy Review* 19 (2010): 17-22.

– that caused a more modern and comprehensive label of what it meant to be Asian American. Interceding moments between these two groups were complex and lacked strict hegemony, but it was in their unity and divergence that a complex and novel understanding of Asian identity emerged in the second half of the twentieth century.

Since the initial wave of Asian immigration to the United States in the 1830s understandings of racial identity have shifted dramatically. Originally, communities tended to define themselves based on ethnicity, culture, language, and civic associations. “Asian” was never used as a distinct term of self-identity, in contrast to black and whites communities in the U.S. In fact, the term “Asian American” as a racial category was not invented until 1968, when prominent historian and civil rights activist Yuji Ichioka attempted to broadly unify the community for political activism.³

In modernity, the classification of “Asian American” is unique. One of the most astounding aspects about this racial category is that it was actively chosen, formulated and utilized to advance human and civil rights in the twentieth century. To be “Asian American” was to recognize a shared immigrant (and often discriminatory) experience with other Asian ethnicities in the United States, and to unify with this identity to gain social and political power.⁴ The “Asian American” label was constructed by social conditions, and naturally the racial identifier has a diverse and often conflicting history. One aspect of this history that is often neglected is the connection between pro-gay and anti-war sentiments of the sixties. The Asian and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities shared experiences with marginalization in the United States, and naturally the two groups interwove in their rallies for

equality and representation. A rich history of intersectionality exists between the two groups, but it has not existed without conflict and animosity.

In an early example of paralleled discrimination, Asian Americans’ relationships and marriages were constructed into a “Sexualized Yellow Peril,” according to one Asian American law scholar, Stewart Chong. In the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese men were employed by railroad companies to assist in construction of the transcontinental railroad. The work was often dangerous, so railroad companies would hire young, single Chinese men; without families, they were perfect candidates for the job.⁵ For example, the Central Pacific Railroad hired over 12,000 Chinese workers – approximately 80% of their workforce.⁶ After the railroad’s completion, a population of Chinese men were left unemployed. Furthermore, the ratio of Chinese women to men was abysmal.⁷ These factors instilled fear in white Americans, who saw their presence threatening to their economic and job security.

In response, the country halted further Chinese immigration. Chinese Americans were labeled as “prostitutes” and as a public safety concern. Because of their “moral and sexual differences,” they were portrayed as unassimilable to American society.⁸ For instance, several media reports claimed that Chinese women were inherently prostitutes because of their cultural, religious, and educational upbringing. The same report implied that Chinese men do not have proper wives and children, and that they are incapable of wanting families.⁹ These reports also stated that Chinese women were harshly mistreated by

⁵ Stewart Chong, “Is Gay the New Asian?: Marriage Equality and the Dawn of a New Model Minority,” *Asian American Law Journal* 23 (2016): 11-12.

⁶ Kathleen R. Arnold, *Anti-Immigration in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 110.

⁷ Chong, “Is Gay the New Asian?,” 12-13.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 25.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Kelsey Inouye, “Asian Americans: Identity and the Stance on Affirmative Action,” *Asian American Law Journal* 23 (2016): 149.

Chinese men and that their culture was inherently misogynistic. This disgust of sexism was supposed to contrast a perceived treatment of white American women, which was proper and just. These perceptions were institutionalized when President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Page Act of 1875, which prevented contract laborers and “prostitutes” from Asia from immigrating to the U.S.¹⁰

This anti-Chinese (and consequently, anti-perversion) hysteria would only end after World War II. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, and federal government allowed thousands of Chinese women to immigrate to the U.S. through the War Brides Act (1945) and the Alien Wives Act (1946).¹¹ Ironically, the individuals who within the last century were prostitutes and deviants became respectable wives of American soldiers returning from war. An already marginalized target was selected to bear the brunt of sexualization and aberration: the LGBT community. As discrimination against other communities was normalized, as seen with the Asian American community, the mistreatment of LGBT people was enhanced alongside it. Since gay men and lesbian women lacked social respectability, they carried on the label of promiscuity from Asian Americans. Respectability, as defined by Joshi Yuvraj, “is constituted by performative acts that align one’s behaviors with social norms that are gendered, white, middle-class and heterosexual.”¹²

In the 1950s, the Lavender Scare and Second Red Scare coincided. The dislike of both gay and communist individuals enhanced each movement and their respective public figures. For example, Senator Joseph McCarthy’s popularity was not only from his anti-communist hysteria but also his anti-gay rhetoric. Many supporters saw his movement

as addressing two intertwined social issues: political treason and social perversion. McCarthy’s 1954 campaign matchbook demonstrated this paralleled concern: “I am with Joe McCarthy in his fight against treason and dishonor.”¹³ Similarly, the two ideas interceded when communists were depicted as homosexuals and vice versa. Advertisements suggested that gay individuals were blackmailed by the Russian government into becoming undercover communist agents. One newspaper described two gay defectors as “fruity fellows,” “pansies,” and “homos,” and claimed that communists were systematically using homosexual men to spy on the U.S.; this sentiment was echoed throughout the federal government, which tried to expel both gay and communist Americans from its daily functions and operations.¹⁴

In 1950, member of Congress Arthur L. Miller (R-Nev.) said on the floor of the House of Representatives, “It is a known fact that homosexuality goes back to the Orientals, long before the time of Confucius; that the Russians are strong believers in homosexuality... Perhaps if all the facts were known these same homosexuals have been used by the Communists.”¹⁵ Miller was a physician, and he appropriated his medical background to appear to be a credible source on sexual orientation.¹⁶ Notably, Miller chose the two most powerful communist nations in the twentieth century and likened them both to homosexuality.¹⁷ The relationship between the two scares is more evident in their natural comparison by supporters, but further

¹⁰ Arnold, *Anti-Immigration in the United States*, 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹² Joshi Yuvraj, “Respectable Queerness,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 43, no. 2 (2012): 419.

¹³ David K. Johnston, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 35-36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37; Aaron Lecklider, “Two Witch-Hunts: On (Not) Seeing Red in LGBT History,” *American Communist History* 14, no. 3 (2016): 244.

¹⁵ 81 Cong. Rec. 4527-8 (daily ed. March 31, 1950).

¹⁶ Kyle A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 53-4.

¹⁷ Johnston, *The Lavender Scare*, 36.

analysis is necessary to consider race alongside sexual orientation and political theory. Miller's usage of "Oriental," although still commonly used in the fifties, is racially charged and xenophobic. In claiming that "Orientals" were familiar with homosexuality, he intended to portray Asian ethnicities as perverted and immoral, even Asian Americans. During the Lavender and Second Red Scare, similar speech was prominent to disparage both gay people and communist countries, who were often Asian. This rhetoric was successful in alienating not only political and sexual minorities, but racial groups as well.

In addition, opposition to the Vietnam War was often conflated with pro-gay politics because the warfare intensified homophobic policies in the military.¹⁸ To enter service, men were required to not have homosexual tendencies, and individuals who admitted to being gay or appeared 'effeminate' were deferred. A movement existed for men to embrace their sexual identities in order to avoid the draft. In one man's experience with dealing with the draft board, Sparrow Robinson claimed, "In order to come to terms with the draft ... I had to come to terms with [being] gay."¹⁹ Proponents of gay military inclusion were quick to mention that homosexual men and women had served in all of America's wars, even when they were unwelcomed. They also equated the government's homophobic legislation with racist, sexist, and classist legislation; proponents saw through divisive tactics as elements of larger institutional oppression.²⁰

While some gay men saw the Vietnam War as a means to equality, such as gaining equal access to military employment and federal service, most youth "associated the military exclusively with

senseless deaths in Vietnam."²¹ This solidarity is evident in numerous LGBT organizations concentrated on the East and West Coasts. For instance, in the autumn succeeding the Stonewall Riots, a group called the Gay Liberation Theater performed their original play, "No Vietnamese Ever Called Me a Queer" at University of California, Berkeley. The play elicited a strong response in comparing the mistreatment of homosexual Americans and the suppression of "Third World revolutions." For many radical homosexuals, embracing a taboo sexual identity also meant rebelling against the homophobic and imperialist system which fought innocents abroad in Vietnam.²²

Several LGBT organizations sprang up during the Vietnam War to seek justice for victims of homophobia, cissexism, racism, and imperialism. One gay liberation group, The Red Butterfly, sought an end to oppression for the LGBT community, but also for its allied members of other marginalized classes. One of their advertised leaflets read: "The Red Butterfly supports the peoples of Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America—all oppressed people everywhere in their battles against imperialism and for socialism."²³ Another organization, The Gay Liberation Front (GLF), became the country's first organization for gay liberation in the U.S. The institution's name was inspired by the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, a group which sought an end to the country's involvement in Vietnam. This decision was a clear move to unite individuals against imperialism, and it was also successful in creating solidarity between the Asian and gay American communities. According to one GLF flyer, this idea of inclusion is stated explicitly: the U.S. systems of oppression denies gay people civil rights in the same way it denies it to other minorities, such as blacks

¹⁸ Justin David Suran, "Coming Out Against the War: Antimilitarism and the Politicization of Homosexuality in the Era of Vietnam," *American Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (2001): 458-461.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 463.

²⁰ Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants: How Gay Liberation Began in America, 1969-1971* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 90-91.

²¹ Suran, "Coming Out Against the War," 465.

²² *Ibid.*, 458, 469.

²³ Teal, *The Gay Militants*, 85.

and women. As a result, gay liberation is naturally tied to the liberation of other peoples.²⁴ According to one scholar, the group “sought, in their very name, to claim some sort of tie to the Vietnamese enemy while the war was still raging.”²⁵

In one South Californian study, several Asian Americans claimed that onlookers saw their Asian and sexual identities as two distinct concepts without a relationship. Two gay men of Asian ancestry, Steven Shum and Diep Tran, recounted that their work for the Asian LGBT community was seen as simply a “working relationship.” For example, rather than being seen as a gay Asian man, Shum is perceived as an “open-minded” Asian man who simply works alongside gay people.²⁶ Similarly, one woman from the Philippines named Shella Aguilar found that she was characterized by her race and gender, meanwhile her gay identity was denoted and invisible to others.²⁷ In reference to the marginalization of LGBT Asian Americans, Eric Wat claimed that:

Students don’t expect a gay man to speak about the API [Asian and Pacific Islander] community and an API man to talk about the gay community. They assume gay men are not part of the API community, but that [only heterosexual] men are part of the community.²⁸

In his experience, his visibility as a gay Asian man is an effective method to combat heterosexism and homophobia. It is also effective in dismantling the separation of racial identity and sexual orientation.

The mislabeling of gay Asian identities in the twentieth century is evident in the tragic murder of

Loc Minh Truong. In Laguna Beach, a notably gay area of Orange County, California, a Vietnamese American, Loc Minh Truong, was found lifeless. According to one witness, the man accused of attempted murder called Truong a “fag” before savagely beating him into unconsciousness.²⁹ The incident is widely known as a homophobic (and possibly racist) hate crime. Just four years earlier, Truong escaped from Vietnam for the U.S. with his wife and daughter.³⁰

Jeff Michael Raines, Truong’s main attacker, previously proclaimed a desire to “beat up” homosexual people, and he clearly perceived Truong to be gay. Meanwhile, Truong’s family claimed that he was not gay.³¹ This contrasts court records of Truong engaging in relations with other men. For example, in 1987, Truong pleaded guilty to “lewd conduct with another man” on the same exact beach. He certainly had interactions and relationships within the LGBT community, although there is little information on self-proclaimed gay identity.³²

Interestingly, the family characterized the attack racially charged. About the incident, Truong’s nephew said: “Everyone is using the fact that he was in Laguna Beach at the time to accuse him of being gay. I think it had to do with his being Asian.”³³ Truong’s wife claimed the perpetrators were blinded by their hatred for his race. It is possible that both homophobia and racism motivated his attackers, but instead, almost all media reports described the attack as either homophobic or racist. Truong was not portrayed as a gay Asian man; rather, he was

²⁴ Terence Kissack, “Gay Liberation Front,” in *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered History in America*, ed. Marc Stein (Detroit: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2004), 439.

²⁵ Henry Abelove, “How Stonewall Obscures the Real History of Gay Liberation,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 61, no. 40 (2015), B14+.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁹ “A Shocking Hate Crime,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 12, 1993.

³⁰ Lily Dizon, “Victim of Beating Mystified by Pain Aftermath: Grieving Family Watches Over Loc Minh Truong,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 1993.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Gregory Crouch, “2 More Arrested in Laguna Beach Beating,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1993.

³³ Lily Dizon and Len Hall, “Victim’s Family Believes Pummeling Was Racially Motivated,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1993.

either not gay and his attackers racially motivated, or gay and his race invisible.

In response to sexual hysteria, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community allied with several Asian American groups. Large Asian organizations took a positive stance on the controversial topic of same-sex marriage. For instance, in 1988, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) amended its constitution to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation. Hawaii's JACL then became the first chapter to officially support same-sex marriage.³⁴ Asian people from California "rallied to the call from their brothers and sisters" and created a mutual understanding between Asian Americans and LGBT Americans, even though they did not have a high-profile leader to guide the movement.³⁵

In November 1994, California passed Proposition 187. This act denied certain social services to undocumented immigrants, such as public education and health care. Its passage alarmed the LGBT community because the proposition rang with similarities to anti-gay legislation. Political solidarity formed between the groups who saw a common enemy: right-wing politicians who proposed legislation to harm their respective communities. One social response to Proposition 187 was a bumper sticker that read, "Who's next?"³⁶ It was short, yet its message effective: a movement to restrict anyone's civil liberties could come to restrict everyone's.

Asian American scholar Ignatius Bau contended that "coalition building" was a lesson to be learned in the wake of Proposition 187.³⁷ If peo-

ple of color built these "coalitions," or unified for political and social tact, the bill probably would not have passed because of increased public awareness and education. To take this idea further, Asian Americans could have reached out to other identities, such as women's groups and religious organizations, to accumulate opposition. Most importantly, Bau stated that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals could have been reached more successfully by the Asian American community who were against the bill.³⁸

In contrast, one moment of conflict between the two movements was centered around the 1991 Broadway play *Miss Saigon*. The musical is an adaptation of the infamous *Madame Butterfly*, but is set in Vietnam and focuses on the relationship between an American G.I. and a Vietnamese woman working at a brothel. When introduced to Broadway, there was an overwhelming negative response from the Asian American community. The musical was seen as sexist, Orientalist, and representing "a white man's wet dream."³⁹ This is because of the stereotypic depiction of the Asian female character, Kim. She is cast as a virgin-turned-prostitute who falls in love with an American G.I., only to commit suicide because of her undying love for the G.I. The storyline was considered by some as "the same, sick love affair" Asian women were always cast into.⁴⁰ This is not to mention that the musical also features language that describes Vietnamese people as "slits" and "greasy Chinks."⁴¹

The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, which champions LGBT rights, used the performance of *Miss Saigon* in one of their fundraising

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Yoko Yoshikawa, "The Heat Is On *Miss Saigon* Coalition: Organizing Across Race and Sexuality," in *Queer in Asian America*, ed. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 45.

⁴⁰ Mary Suh, "The Many Sins of 'Miss Saigon,'" *Ms. Magazine*, November 1990.

⁴¹ Yoshikawa, "The Heat Is On *Miss Saigon* Coalition," 47.

³⁴ Fong, "Building Alliances," 371-3.

³⁵ Ibid., 375.

³⁶ Ignatius Bau, "Queer Asian American Immigrants: Opening Borders and Closets," in *Queer in Asian America*, ed. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 57-60.

³⁷ Ibid., 59.

events in 1991. Outside the fundraiser, nearly five hundred people of color protested the racist musical. The implication was that Miss Saigon would cost Lambda far more than a loss in revenue. Asian and Pacific Islanders (an integral part of the LGBT community) would be stereotyped, sexualized, and demeaned; they would potentially no longer be allies of Lambda.

Audre Lorde was an African American lesbian writer who rejected Lambda's Liberty Award because of their usage of Miss Saigon. She claimed that it was an insensitive act that demonstrated a rift between white LGBT communities and communities of color. She suggested that in the future Lambda, alongside other organizations, should always ask marginalized groups: What do you think of this? Some critics of Lorde and the demonstrators went as far as to call them homophobic (since Lambda was being targeted), even though the protesters were largely gay and transgender people of color.⁴²

The Asian and Pacific Islander activists claimed they were "no longer willing to accept the political leadership of white male dominated organizations" when those leaderships chose to ignore intersectional issues of race and gender. By Lambda using Miss Saigon, hundreds of people in the LGBT community had to mask parts of themselves that were integral to their identity, most notably, their Asian heritage.⁴³ This moment certainly provided a rift between two groups who could have used solidarity to enhance anti-racist and anti-homophobic ethics.

It is important to note that between moments of peace, racism and homophobia continued to exist in the gay and Asian community, respectively. Asian Americans have and do face structural racism

from the LGBT community. Utilizing stock stories, scholar Chong-suk Han demonstrated this pervasive issue. While the cover of gay magazines portray a diverse cast of black, Latino, and native gay and transgender men and women, there are underlying anti-Asian attitudes.⁴⁴ One Asian man detailed his experiences with others in the gay community in detail: "First, there is overt belligerence: the drunk queens who shout in my face, 'Go back to your own country'; the tag line at the end of gay personal classifieds – 'No Fats, Femmes, or Asians'; the guy who hissed at me in the back room 'I'm not into Asians.'"⁴⁵

The subtleties of racism perpetuated by the gay community are explained by critical race theory (CRT). In this scenario, the requirement of "No Asians" is an example of the framework of racism, and the ability to pass racism off as a sexual or romantic preference is an example of individual action which perpetuates racism. Han's study also documented the responses of white gay men to racist accusations. Generally, they were dismissive; others explained in detail their outright disapproval for the feminine appearance of all Asian men. CRT states that different systems of oppression, those other than racism, influence Asian Americans and effect their identities and experiences. Generally, scholars deny that one system of oppression is more impactful than another.⁴⁶ Heterosexism and heteronormativity are two examples of these forms of subordination which influence how Asian Americans interact and identify within society; that is, Asian Americans who are gay or transgender have a different relationship to their racial identity because of their LGBT identity.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴³ Beth Richie, Suzanne Pharr, Val Kanuha, Helen Zia, Rebecca Cole, Kelly Kuwabara, Sally Cooper and Constance Scott, "Miss Saigon Fundraiser Racist, Sexist," *Off Our Backs* 21, no. 5 (1991): 34-35.

⁴⁴ Chong-suk Hong, "Not Fats, Femmes or Asians: The Utility of Critical Race Theory in Examining the Role of Gay Stock Stories in the Marginalization of Gay Asian Men," *Contemporary Justice Review* 11, no. 2 (2008): 14-16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁶ Samuel Museus and Jon Ifitkar, "Asian Critical Theory," in *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Mary Y. Danico, 96. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014.

These movements, although separated by intensely diverse communities, have merged throughout the twentieth century during key political moments. At the same time, these moments have complicated the relationship among Asian and LGBT American communities when the complexity of their interwoven histories was forgotten. Gay organizations do not always appreciate the impact of

race, and likewise, Asian organizations have at times ignored the impact of gender identity and sexual orientation. When these histories are embraced, a comprehensive and powerful movement is possible – but this is only achievable when Asian and queer Americans recognize the prevailing institutions that oppress them both.

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