
Culture/Community/Race: Chinese Gay Men and the Politics of Identity

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Abstract: "Culture/Community/Race" is an ethnographic account of the development of gay identities and correlative collective practices among a group of Chinese men in Toronto in the 1980s. The cultural and racial politics of these identities/practices are explored through an examination of the role of Chinese "culture" in their development and through a discussion of the sexual politics of race among gay men. This latter material addresses the sexual meanings of racial difference and the politicization of these meanings among Chinese gay men.

Résumé: Cet article est une description ethnographique du développement des identités gaies dans un groupe de Chinois à Toronto pendant les années 1980 et des pratiques collectives qui y ont été associées. Les dimensions politiques des aspects culturels et sociaux de ces identités/pratiques sont explorées au moyen de l'examen du rôle de la «culture» chinoise dans leur développement et de l'analyse de certaines dimensions raciales des politiques sexuelles chez les gais. Ce dernier aspect approfondit les significations sexuelles des différences raciales et la politisation de ces significations chez les gais chinois.

Contemporary interest in the cultural construction of gender and sexuality has in recent years produced a growing, largely anthropological literature on the historical emergence and globalization of gay male identities (Herdt, 1997; Lancaster, 1997; Manalansan IV, 1997; Parker, 1985; Weston, 1993). In his discussion of emergent gay identities in Asia, Altman (1997: 423) argues that such definitions of the self and the correlative development of discourses of group identity—a gay peoplehood—are recent historical developments within Asian countries, products of "modernity." These modern subjectivities, of personhood defined through a sexual orientation and involvement in homogender relationships, may coexist with or define themselves in opposition to older, indigenous organizations of same-sex sexuality (where these exist). Such older forms are usually organized through alternative constructions of gender and various forms of gender-crossing behaviours.

Co-existing with an identification with a global gay "peoplehood" is the simultaneous process of asserting localized, culturally specific forms of identity (Friedman, 1990: 311), a process Appadurai (1990: 295) describes as the "indigenization of modernity." In Altman's work (1997), this is expressed by his Asian informants' desire to assert a specifically Asian gay identity in contrast to Western constructs and meanings. Attention to such differentiations is paralleled in recent deconstructions of the unitary homosexual subject, to analyses of the multiplicity of same-sex sexualities and ways of "being gay." This article explores some of these processes among a group of Chinese gay men.

The global emergence of a Chinese gay male social movement dates to the late 1970s and early 1980s. One measure of its development is the expansion in the number of gay Chinese groups or organizations both in Asia and throughout the Chinese diaspora from that period to the present. In 1981 there were a total of four predominantly Chinese gay organizations, one in Hong Kong and three in North America. By 1995, there were approxi-

mately 35 such groups distributed through eastern Asia, Australia, Europe and North America. These groups vary in their objectives and activities and are linked in a number of ways, particularly through the transnational movement of individuals and through the development of a now global gay Chinese media. In Europe, Australia and North America, these groups commonly identify themselves as "gay Asian" organizations. "Gay Asian" has come to be a widespread label of self-identification for men from a diversity of eastern Asian national and ethnic origins although men of Chinese descent numerically dominate this category.

I conducted ethnographic field work with one such gay Asian organization and its constituent networks of Chinese men in Toronto, Canada in the mid-1980s.¹ This group, one of the first such Chinese groups to develop globally, had formed in 1980 and was still active in 1997. At the time of my field work, group networks were largely comprised of Chinese male immigrants from Hong Kong and Malaysia. Few lesbian women were associated with these networks and for this reason the following material focuses on male experience. I have argued at length elsewhere (Kapac, 1992) that these cohorts of men, generally aged in their 20s and early 30s, were among the "first generation" of gay-identified Chinese men and that such identities are fairly recent historical developments within Chinese populations, dating generally to the latter half of the 20th century. My research explored both the development of gay subjectivities among this group of men and the associated development of collective or "community" identities and practices. My informants commonly though not invariably identified themselves as "gay Asians," a label whose meanings are discussed below.

In the following discussion of processes of identity formation among my informants, I have approached subjectivity as "positionality within a context" (Alcoff, 1988: 435), meanings of the self being constructed through a subject position/location within multiple and shifting fields of social relations and discursive configurations. Among my informants, self and identity were understood, negotiated and expressed through a number of such discursive configurations—"culture," "race," "community" and "minority." Shared subjective experience as Chinese/Asian gay men was constituted through shared perceptions of simultaneous sameness and difference in relation to other social groups and categories—in relations with heterosexual Chinese/Asians, in relations to the "gay community" (primarily White gay men) and in relations of solidarity and sometimes conflict among gay Chinese/Asian men themselves. The most commonly

expressed perception of the self was that of being a "minority within a minority," of being Chinese/Asian within a largely White gay sexual minority. This perceived positionality simultaneously invoked both cultural and racial difference from other gay men. Identities, however, are multiple, strategic and situational. In certain contexts my informants would assert a unitary identity of gay peoplehood, a set of shared interests transcending difference—a minority *within* a minority. At other times the articulation of racial and cultural difference—a *minority* within a minority—was more pronounced. It is this latter positionality of difference in the identification of the self that forms the basis of the following discussion.

The development of racial subjectivities as markers of difference were central to my informants' self-definitions as gay Chinese/Asian men. Ethnographically oriented approaches to the analysis of racial categories and racial subjectivities stress the necessity of situating the definitions, meanings and significance of perceived racial difference in specific social contexts. Harrison (1995), for example, directs attention to the social situatedness of racial identities, to examining the processes through which "racially" distinct groups emerge. Omi and Winant (1986: 61) suggest the term "racial formation" to describe the dialectical process through which social forces construct the meanings and significance of racial categories and how these forces are simultaneously shaped by existing racial meanings. Hall (1980: 336-337) cautions against racial analysis predicated upon unitary and transhistorical concepts of "racism," arguing that historically specific racisms occur within specific historical locations. The meanings or symbolic attributes of perceived racial difference will thus be variably conceptualized, politicized and contested dependent upon specific social context.

My discussion of the development of subjectivities among Chinese gay men is divided into two related sections. In the first, I describe the origins and development of the local gay Asian organization, the meanings of the label "gay Asian," and how discourses of culture and cultural difference are complicit in the construction of these identities. In the second section, I examine some features of racial subjectivities among my informants with a particular focus on the sexual meanings and sexual politics of race among gay men. The racialization of sexuality (or the sexualization of race) was a significant issue during my field work. Here I address the meanings, problematization and politicization of racial difference and the significance of these issues in my informants' self-perceptions and collective practices.

The material presented here is drawn primarily from the 1980s. The concept "race" is used in the sense articulated by my informants, as perceived physical/bodily differences characterizing populations of different geographic origins. I have retained the labels used by informants to describe these categories—"Asian," "Chinese," "White" and "Caucasian." I will also note the qualitative, perhaps anecdotal nature of the data and its presentation. My field work situation was unsuited to survey/statistical methodologies and my research interest in meanings/subjectivity problematized such research strategies. I would characterize this material as a fine-grained, localized and historically situated exploration of the complexities and specificities in the development of subjectivities/identities rather than an attempt to generate statistical generalizations.

Community and Culture

As I have noted, the term "gay Asian" has become a widespread label of self-identification and designation of collective organizing throughout North America, Australia and Europe. As a pan-ethnic category, the label groups together individuals of diverse national/ethnic/cultural origins, religious affiliations, class positions and immigrant vs. native-born statuses. "Gay Asian" has also become a term of identification signifying local gay and lesbian organizing in Asian countries themselves (Altman, 1997: 418).² Leong (1996a) provides a discussion of the genesis of the category "gay Asian" in the United States in his edited collection *Asian American Sexualities* (1996b), a genesis seemingly influenced by intellectual links between many gay Asian-American activists and Asian-American Studies programs at American universities. The dissemination of the label can be seen in its reproduction in academic discourse—the entry "Asian-Americans" in *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (Chua, 1990), for example, and in discussions of "Gay Asian American Literature" as a literary category (Eng and Fujikane, 1995; Hom and Ma, 1993).

At the time of my field work, the social networks constituting the local gay Asian group were comprised largely of Chinese immigrant men from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. Smaller numbers of Caribbean- or Canadian-born men of Chinese descent, Japanese, Filipino and Vietnamese men were also involved. The use of self-identifying terms among my predominantly Chinese informants were multiple and situational. "Gay Asian" and "gay Chinese" were often used interchangeably or used in defining a perceived positionality in relation to other social categories and groups. Self-identification as "gay Chinese" was most commonly

articulated in comparing/contrasting the self to heterosexual Chinese (families, ethnic "communities," nation-states). Self-reference as "gay Asian" was most commonly expressed in self-positioning as a racial/cultural "minority within a minority," that is in relation to gay White men and the larger gay "community."

The origins and development of the Toronto gay Asian organization are illustrative of the localized constitution of the category "gay Asian." The Toronto organization, one of the first such groups to develop globally, was founded in 1980 by a man of Caribbean-Chinese origins whom I will call Phillip. The group's origins and the general emergence of a North American gay Asian movement were rooted in gay American racial politics of the late 1970s. Phillip had attended the First National Third World Lesbian/Gay Conference, convened in Washington, DC in 1979. This conference was sponsored by the National Coalition of Black Gays and held in conjunction with the First National Gay Rights March. The conference brought together 500 Asian, Native American, Hispanic and African-American gay men and lesbian women. The Lesbian and Gay Asian Collective, a small group of predominantly male activists developed out of these meetings, their political goal being the mobilization and organizing of gay Asians as a collective entity.

Inspired by his conference experience, Phillip returned to Toronto and placed ads in the local gay media seeking other gay Asian men. The first meeting of the Toronto Gay Asians attracted a core founding membership of four men from a diversity of backgrounds—Filipino, East Indian, Caribbean-Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese. The men met informally to discuss issues affecting them as gay Asian men, a positionality experienced as a site of alienation and conflict; simultaneously a stigmatization or denial of the existence of gay Asian men and lesbian women by heterosexual Asians and the experience of racial alienation from gay White men. The groups's envisioned purpose was to create a space for the integration of "being Asian" and "being gay," to challenge the stereotype that being gay meant being White and to stimulate collective organizing among Asian men.

Over the next few years, group membership and networks expanded rapidly, coming to be numerically dominated by immigrant Chinese men, the prevailing situation during my field work. The label "gay Asian" may denote multiple sites of potential self-identification both racial and cultural. As a racial category/identity, it may encompass men of divergent origins and backgrounds who nonetheless come to share a racial subjectivity based on shared physical characteristics. The development of such racial subjectivities was commonly

constituted through shared erotic experience, a process discussed in the following section of the paper. As a cultural category or identity grounded in shared cultural experience, the meanings of "gay Asian" were more problematic. As the local group became predominantly Chinese in orientation smaller numbers of Vietnamese, Japanese and Filipino men became marginalized in group activities, expressing ambivalence about identification with the label "gay Asian."³ Tensions also existed between immigrant and Canadian born Chinese men concerning language use and cultural orientation. In an attempt to resolve some of these problems, the Gay Asian organization established English as the language of group activities, a language shared by most men. In addition to acquiring a Chinese orientation, the organization's goals became somewhat modified from its original inception. There was little interest in challenging or engaging homophobia among heterosexual Chinese/Asians, many men finding this threatening. Rather, the focus of organizing and collective practices was the development of a gay Asian "community" as a strategy of empowerment. One activist in this period commented that once such communalization processes had been established, gay Asian men could politically align themselves with the larger, White gay "community" as a unitary gay people.

My informants frequently evoked the category "Chinese culture" in articulating their self-perceptions, in defining themselves both in relation to Chinese heterosexuals and to "Western" White gay men. Stigmatization by heterosexual Chinese was interpreted as representing the homophobia of Chinese "culture." Among the immigrant Chinese men whose life history narratives I elicited (material dating from the 1970s and early 1980s), a profound cultural alienation and fragmentation of consciousness were frequently expressed, a felt need to reject their "Chineseness" as being incompatible with the development of a gay identity. This cultural alienation was sometimes cited as motivating immigration to North America. A man from Hong Kong expressed the need when first coming out to "seek a different environment, different people from my Chinese childhood and teenage years." Another Chinese man from Malaysia commented "I felt a strong need to reject Chinese things. I had to open a new door and be clean of my past as a Chinese man in order to understand and be a part of gay culture." For many men, a gay Chinese or gay Asian consciousness developed only after several years experience of cultural and racial marginalization among White/Western gay men. Involvement with the local gay Asian organization was instrumental in developing and affirming such identities.

Among my informants, cultural alienation was compounded through exposure to Chinese nationalist discourses of cultural authenticity, to arguments that homosexuality was a Western/White practice alien to Chinese "culture" and "tradition." Within such discourses, sexual practice is identified as a symbolic marker or boundary of cultural (and racial) difference, in this case signifying Western corruption and cultural imperialism. The relations between gender meanings and cultural authenticity in nationalist discourses are the subjects of a growing body of scholarship (Bernal, 1994; Chatterjee, 1989; Sapiro, 1993). The relations between sexual practice and authenticity in such discourses have, however, received little systematic attention (but see Parker et al., 1992).

A Chinese example of such discourses of cultural authenticity was generated by public debates through the 1980s on the decriminalization of homosexuality in the then British colony of Hong Kong. These debates were followed with keen interest by many of my Chinese informants. The law criminalizing male homosexual activity (lesbian sexual activity was not illegal) was itself a product of the British colonial government, adopted in 1865. At the beginning of the 1980s, the colonial government expressed an interest in decriminalizing consenting homosexual activity between men over the age of 21, to align Hong Kong law with British law (which had decriminalized consenting homosexual activity in 1967). A Law Reform Commission was instituted to gauge public opinion. In 1983, the Commission published its findings in the *Report on Laws Governing Homosexual Conduct*, a 266-page document summarizing public submissions and surveys concerning the proposed decriminalization collected over a three-year period. A 1982 survey of 2 000 Hong Kong residents revealed that 65% of respondents were opposed to decriminalization. Many of the submissions published in the *Report* argued that homosexuality was foreign to Chinese "culture" and "tradition" and that its existence in Hong Kong was a product of Western influence. The public debate which followed the publication of the *Report* was of several years duration and largely structured around the issue of cultural authenticity. Opponents of decriminalization argued that the proposal was both an example of British cultural imperialism (exacerbated by the fact that the most visible advocates of decriminalization were British expatriates) and a threat to "Chinese values" and the "Chinese family." Ironically, the retention of a colonial law was viewed as a means of protecting Chinese culture. These discourses of authenticity shaped the political strategies of the small number of local gay Chinese activists, who argued that homosexuality was not a foreign imposition but had

existed throughout Chinese history. In 1984, Sam Shasha (the pseudonym of a local gay activist) published *Zhongguo Tongxing'ai Shilu (A History of Homosexuality in China)*, a collection of Chinese historical and literary sources documenting 2000 years of same-sex eroticism with this intention. Homosexuality in Hong Kong was decriminalized in 1991.

The marking of homosexuality as Western/non-Chinese in these debates parallels Carrier's discussion (1992) of mutually constituting Orientalisms and Occidentalisms, the discursive construction and articulation of reified cultural difference. Carrier comments:

Seeing Orientalism as a dialectical process helps us to recognize that it is not merely a Western imposition of a reified identity on some alien set of people. It is also the imposition of an identity created in dialectical opposition to another identity, one likely to be equally reified, that of the West. Westerners, then, define the Other in terms of the West, but so Others define themselves in terms of the West, just as each defines the West in terms of the Other. Thus, we can expect to see something analogous to Orientalism in a set of inter-related understandings that people have of themselves and of others. (p. 197)

Carrier (p. 198) identifies "ethno-Orientalism" as culturalist, essentialist renderings of "non-Western" societies by the members themselves, a process Ong (1997: 195) terms "self-Orientalization." The correlative process of "ethno-Occidentalism" involves culturalist, essentialist definitions of the West and Western culture by "the Other." Definitions of contrasting cultural difference are generated dialectically, the opposing spheres being mutually constituting, taking their meanings from each other. Chatterjee's (1989) historical analysis of Indian (Hindu) cultural nationalism is an empirical example of these processes; here, an Indian cultural identity is defined as essentially "spiritual" in contrast to the "materialist" West. The rendering of types of sexual practice (homosexuality) as signifying Western culture in opposition to an authentic "Chinese culture" can be considered part of this process of cultural differentiation.

A similar dynamic of defining homosexuality as a racial/cultural marker of Whiteness and thus signifying racial/cultural inauthenticity or betrayal can be identified in various forms of North American racial/cultural nationalisms. Such discourses generate specific political and organizational problems for minority group gay men and lesbian women. Moraga (1986) addresses portrayals of homosexuality as a "White disease" in some expressions of Hispanic-American nationalism. West (1993:

21-27) and White (1992) provide similar discussions of such portrayals in some African-American nationalist texts. Hom and Ma (1993: 41) argue that among heterosexual Asian Americans, homosexuality is commonly perceived as a "White problem" and that its existence among Asian Americans represents a loss of "Asian values." This perception of heterosexual Chinese opinion was frequently expressed by my informants. Harrison (1995: 51) suggests that the identification of behaviours as racially specific represents a potential ideological device for the reconfiguration and reification of "race" as an organizing principle in various identity movements.

A major source for the hostility to homosexuality in these discourses of identity is seemingly its perceived threat to the stability of "the family." Moraga (1986: 181) has argued that the preservation of the family is "ardently protected" as a survival strategy by oppressed peoples. My Chinese informants, both immigrant and Canadian-born, frequently evoked the centrality of marriage and the family as a Chinese or Asian value which differentiated them culturally from Western/White gay men. In such discourses of difference/identity, reified "Asian" values were opposed to "Western" values and perceptions of culturally specific problems for Chinese gay men were articulated. Families were often perceived as being of less significance for White gay men and this presumed, more rootless individualism facilitated the adoption of a gay social identity. These processes of articulating cultural difference through opposing cultural "values" can perhaps be located as part of the ethno-Orientalism/Occidentalism dynamic previously described.⁴ My informants in fact came from a variety of family backgrounds and were involved in a diversity of family relationships. For these reasons, and in light of critical discussions of "the family" in discourses of cultural difference, I am reluctant to reproduce (Handler, 1985) positivist characterizations of a typically "Chinese" or "Asian" family.⁵ Rather, I would suggest that a diversity of family relationships are identified as characteristically "Chinese" or "Asian" and that the privatized family, whatever its form, has become a symbolic locus of cultural identity. The adoption of a gay social identity and potential family alienation thus comes to represent one avenue through which cultural alienation is experienced.

As I have noted, the primary political activity of the Toronto gay Asian organization was to facilitate the development of a gay Asian community or collective identity, a strategy of empowerment shared by the majority of gay Asian organizations that began to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This process of collectivization was constituted through the development of social net-

works, collective cultural/symbolic production and through expressions of political agency—through the creation of a contemporary culture of Chinese/Asian homosexuality. As the local organization expanded through the 1980s, a number of collaborative practices were instituted, simultaneously signifying and constituting “community.” Although most of the men involved were of Chinese descent, the term “Asian” was retained in identifying these practices. Space limitations here preclude an extended discussion of these activities. Several important sites of cultural production can only be briefly described.

One major collaborative activity was the creation of *CelebrAsian* magazine in 1983. By 1990, 18 issues had been published (an account of the emergence of a gay Asian press in North America is given in Tsang, 1993). The magazine published a range of materials including fiction, personal narratives, news and commentary (the previously described decriminalization debates in Hong Kong received much coverage), profiles of gay Asian activists and other gay Asian organizations, information on gay organizing in Asian countries and occasionally Chinese translations of English-language gay liberation literature. The magazine achieved an international distribution in the 1980s and was an important site for the exchange of information on the development of gay Asian/Chinese organizations globally. A second major collaborative effort was the annual production of the *CelebrAsian* show, begun in the early 1980s and continuing into the 1990s. By the mid-1980s the productions were fairly elaborate, involving dozens of people as performers, writers and technicians in months of preparation. The primarily gay audiences generally numbered 300-400 people. The content of the show varied from year to year but usually included performance pieces (music and dance) and short skits/plays addressing cultural/sexual identities, gay Asian experience and racial issues among gay men. The *CelebrAsian* productions were viewed by their creators/participants as particularly significant for both the dissemination of gay Asian experience to broader gay audiences and as sites for the production of gay Chinese/Asian symbols of cultural identity. A common strategy of such symbolic production in the performance pieces was to recontextualize and thus alter the meanings of various Chinese/Asian cultural products, both “traditional” and popular. Pop Asian heterosexual love songs, sung in Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Tagalog and Japanese, acquired new meanings of same-sex romance in these performance contexts. Similarly, folk dances originally involving men and women were danced by all male troupes; the presentation of extracts from Chinese opera also acquired these meanings in this

performance context (some features of these performances are discussed in the following section of this article). The 1990 *CelebrAsian* production included an awards presentation to 10 local gay Asian activists in recognition of their contributions to local community development.

Additional group activities included the organization and hosting of several political conferences through the 1980s. In 1985 the Toronto group hosted the Gay Asian/Third World Caucus of the Seventh International Gay Association Conference. In 1988, in collaboration with a local South Asian gay organization, it co-hosted the First Unity Among Asians Conference. Workshops and discussion groups at these conferences explored strategies of political organizing, issues of cultural identity and the politics of race among gay men. In 1987 the gay Asian group created a peer counselling telephone line for gay men of Asian backgrounds and in 1990 instituted the Gay Asians AIDS Project in collaboration with a local AIDS organization. This project developed culturally sensitive and gay relevant materials on AIDS prevention and treatment, trained volunteers for the support of HIV-seropositive and AIDS affected Asian individuals and organized various support/discussion groups. Seventy volunteers donated their services for project activities.

Race and Desire: The Sexual Politics of Race

In the previous section I discussed the development of “gay Asian” as a term of collective identity, as a shared positionality articulated through the state of being “a minority within a minority.” The following material examines in more detail the racial dimensions of this minority status, those processes significant in the constitution of “Asian” or “Chinese” racial subjectivities as categories of physical difference. As I have noted, the label “gay Asian” is a site of multiple potential identifications/mobilizations, both cultural and racial. As a self-identifying term of racial identity, the label is more inclusive than identities based on cultural or national affiliation, encompassing men who primarily share a racial identity; Canadian-born men of Chinese descent identified themselves in this way. Among my informants, shared racial subjectivities were significantly shaped by shared sexual/erotic experience, through relations with other gay men.

Hall (cited in Back, 1994: 178) argues that understandings of racial meanings and correlative racisms must be conceptually linked to questions of sexual meanings, to the understanding of race as a sexual symbol. Analyses of such meanings have focused upon essential-

ist constructions of racial sexualities (particularly black sexualities) both as forms of symbolic domination and, through selective appropriation, as strategies of resistance to domination (Back, 1994; Harrison, 1995; West, 1993: 83-91; White, 1992). These analyses situate the sexual meanings of racial categories and their correlative contestation and politicization within specific social contexts/locations. The focus of the following discussion is an exploration of the sexual meanings of race among gay men—the racialization of sexuality or the sexualization of race—and how such meanings and practices were significant in the constitution of racial subjectivities among my informants. This examination of the sexual politics of race among gay men will address how these meanings are conceptualized, problematized and politicized among gay Asian men.

Among gay Asian men, discourses of race and racism were usually linked with questions of interracial desire or racialized erotic preferences, with Asian men's sexual preference for White gay men. This "eroticization of Whiteness" was both a common topic of conversation among my informants and an issue frequently addressed in the writings of gay Asian/Chinese activists. In an essay originally published in 1991, Fung (1996: 198) argues from personal observation that a majority of gay Asian men in North America hold White men as their ideal sexual partners. Hom and Ma (1993: 38-39) come to the same conclusion, identifying this racialized preference as a form of "sexual colonialism," an internalization of White dominance and therefore a product of racism.

A dynamic of Chinese preference for White men was certainly present in my 1980s field situation. One informant, a Chinese Malaysian immigrant with an exclusive sexual interest in other Chinese men, expressed his frustration in finding Chinese partners in the early 1980s. He labeled himself "the only Chinese man around" sexually interested in other Chinese men. Through the 1980s a racialized erotic preference for White partners was widespread, perhaps at times a majority preference. But this statement must be qualified. Over time, Chinese/Chinese relationships increased in numbers and visibility. Many Chinese men, upon first coming out, sought out relationships with White men and finding these unsatisfactory for various reasons, developed a preference for other Chinese men. This was facilitated by the social networks and collective activities of the gay Asian organization; some men were attracted to the organization for the purpose of finding a Chinese lover. For many Asian men, same-race relationships became political symbols of gay Asian cultural identity and autonomy, a process addressed in my concluding remarks.

Gay Asian activists frequently argued that an erotic preference for White men signified not only an internalization of White dominance but created an obstacle to collective organizing among gay Asian men. Sexual competition for White men and consequent hostilities and avoidance between Asian men impeded the development of a communal identification. I would suggest that such racial preferences had more complex and contradictory effects, creating tensions that simultaneously drew men together and drove them apart. The unsuccessful sexual pursuit of White men frequently shaped a consciousness of exclusion and marginality based on Asian/Chinese physical characteristics. Sexual marginalization was for some men a formative experience in the development of an "Asian" racial consciousness; these racial subjectivities often developed only after several years experience with White gay men. These men subsequently sought out the social support of other gay Asian men as friends and "sisters." "Sister" connotes an intimate but asexual relationship between two gay men; a camp inversion of "brother," it conveys the meanings of solidarity but also sexual avoidance. However, sexual competition for White men could create conflicts which generated a vacillation between seeking out other Asian men and avoiding them.

The eroticization of Whiteness was problematized and politicized in diverse ways, with varying interpretations advanced for its sources and consequences. In the beginning stages of discussion of the issue in the early 1980s, some men attributed this preference to the scarcity of visible gay-identified Chinese men. One Chinese informant commented that upon coming out in the late 1970s, he encountered only two other Chinese gay men, discovering that both were only interested in Caucasian men. Another interpretation attributed this preference to general racism in North America, a position articulated at a well-attended panel discussion on interracial relationships organized by the 1985 Gay Asian/Third World Caucus. A Chinese speaker argued that having a Caucasian lover in a racist society facilitated assimilation into the largely White gay world; the stigmatization of homosexuality by heterosexual Chinese encouraged this strategy of mobility. In the public discussion that followed the speakers, the "racism" of racially specific eroticisms and the autonomy of sexual desire were debated by several men present. It was argued that sexual preferences were not a matter of conscious choice or individual deliberation; if such desires were racially selective, was it politically useful to describe them as "racist"? Another participant, responding to comments that White men's general sexual disinterest in Asian men

was grounded in racism and could be overcome by the adoption of "non-racist" attitudes, argued that such a politics had dangerous implications for gay men and lesbian women. It paralleled religious fundamentalist arguments that gay men and lesbian women could change the nature and direction of their sexual desire by choice and become heterosexual through an act of will.

The nature of racial representation in gay male erotica (largely American produced) and its incitement of racially directed desire was often suggested as a source of racialized sexual preferences. In this perspective, the dominance of White images of male beauty and desirability were internalized among gay men, resulting in both an Asian preference for White men and White sexual rejection of Asians. The scarcity of Asian, African-American and Hispanic erotic representations contributed to their asexualization and consequent marginalization among gay men (Hom and Ma, 1993). In his critical analysis of Asian racial imagery in gay male erotica, Fung (1996) argues that gay pornography is a potentially critical source for the development of gay male subjectivities. Pornography may represent the only available affirmation of closeted men's imaginings of same-sex eroticism. The content of gay erotica is therefore potentially constitutive of the meanings of "being gay"; for gay Asian (particularly immigrant) men, the hegemony of White imagery is internalized, shaping a consciousness that being gay means desiring White men. A Canadian-born Chinese informant expressed a parallel interpretation. He was of the opinion that most Chinese immigrant men sought out White partners, attributing this to Western pornography's role in inciting "Orientalist" fantasies of White sexuality, imaginings which also contributed to sexual alienation among gay Asian men:

There's a lot of myths among gay Asian men about White men's sexuality. That they're all hung like horses. Gay fiction and erotica tend to perpetuate that. A lot of gay Asians, those with little sexual experience, can't differentiate fantasy from reality and find it very frustrating. You take a recent immigrant from Hong Kong who didn't have the opportunity to come out there. Where is he going to learn about gay sexuality? He buys gay porn magazines, sees pictures of White guys very well endowed, reads the fiction where everything goes. And he thinks he has to live up to that. For many gay Asian men, who generally I think have less sexual experience than gay White men, there's this self-comparison to the "hung horse of the West" to "Supergay."

In this perspective, erotic imaginings of White hypersexuality/hypermasculinity ("Supergay"), based on genital size and sexual athleticism, are simultaneously sources of racialized fantasies of masculinity and sources of sexual marginalization.

Fung (1996) also addresses the gendering of Asian racial imagery in gay erotica. In the comparatively few films involving Asian men, Asians are "feminized" through consistent representations of being anally penetrated by more "masculine" White men. Fung argues (p. 184) that such "feminization" is a coding for asexuality and passivity and that the great majority of consumers of these films are White men; he estimates that gay Asian men constitute perhaps 10% of this market.⁷ This low figure, he argues, signifies Asian men's negative reactions to such imaging. It may also perhaps indicate a widespread lack of interest among gay Asian men in Asian sexual imagery. (In the 1980s, Japan was the only Asian country with a developed same-sex erotica industry and some of my informants with an erotic preference for other Asian men were keen consumers of Japanese pornography.) The racial politics of erotic representation was a frequent topic of discussion during my field work period. In 1985, for example, the gay Asian group organized a series of discussion sessions for its members with the session entitled "Pornography and Sexual Stereotyping" drawing by far the most participants. A consensus emerged from those present that expanding the production of Asian erotic imagery was a positive political strategy and that the representation of Asian men as sexual subjects rather than objects of White fantasy was a form of empowerment for gay Asian men.

The gendering of racial difference was not restricted to the content of gay erotica. The mapping of masculine and feminine meanings onto racial physical difference was often expressed by Chinese men with an erotic preference for White men. White men were perceived as more "masculine" than Chinese/Asian men and thus more sexually attractive. These gendered meanings were derived from such general physical characteristics as the larger body size of Caucasian men and greater amounts of body/facial hair. In contrast, generally smaller Asian body builds and lesser amounts of body/facial hair were interpreted as "feminine" characteristics and therefore less sexually desirable.⁸

Anxieties about these gendered meanings of racial difference were expressed through varying responses to gay Asian/Chinese public representations, particularly cross-dressing practices. The annual *Celebrasian* production usually featured cross-dressing performances, sometimes in extracts from Chinese opera (where historically

young men had played women's roles) and more frequently in "glamour" drag acts—exaggerated portrayals of femininity created through wigs, makeup and clothing. Among some Chinese men, Chinese opera was interpreted as a symbol of Chinese gay culture largely because of its perceived sexual ambiguities. Other Chinese men did not interpret opera in this manner, finding it merely exotic or of little interest. "Glamour" drag was used by a group of eight Chinese men (primarily Hong Kong immigrants) known as "The Wong Sisters," who frequently performed in local gay clubs (and occasionally in the *CelebrAsian* production) through the first half of the 1980s. Their show, known as *The Oriental Express*, featured Cantonese, Mandarin and English pop love songs. One of the group's members commented in a *CelebrAsian* magazine interview that the "feminine" physical features of Asian men influenced the nature of the drag presentation. "The Wong Sisters" were regarded as community heroes by some Chinese men, as a pioneering Chinese/Asian presence in local gay cultural production, symbolizing an assertion of gay Chinese cultural identity. Other Chinese men contested these meanings, expressing ambivalence or hostility to these public presentations. They interpreted such practices as reproducing racial stereotypes about Asian "femininity" and contributing to Asian desexualization among gay men.⁹ Manalansan IV (1996) discusses similar conflicts over gender representation and cross-dressing among gay Filipino men in New York City. For some of his informants, cross-dressing practices are interpreted as a symbolic assertion of Filipino gay cultural identity because of their perceived links to the *bakla* status in the Philippines, an indigenous expression of same-sex sexuality characterized by gender-crossing behaviours. Men involved in cross-dressing accuse more masculine and disapproving gay Filipino men of cultural inauthenticity, of mimicking the masculine style of American/Western gay culture.

The problematization of eroticizing Whiteness and its politicization as "sexual colonialism" were largely expressed through reference to mechanisms of White racism. I would suggest that such analyses are incomplete, that a significant dynamic in the development of racialized preferences was what some informants termed "incest avoidance" or sexual avoidance between Chinese men. A sexual preference (sometimes temporary) for White men seemed to be linked to the internalization of Chinese stigmatization of homosexuality and to consequent guilt about involvement in homosexual relationships. For some men, this guilt was resolved through a kind of Orientalizing strategy. White men were defined

and sought out as sexual "Others," their perceived racial/cultural difference symbolizing both sexual/gender difference from Asian men as well as individual disassociation from Chinese "culture."

Several men identified this seeking of the Other to mitigate guilt about homosexual relationships as part of their own interpretations of the eroticizing of Whiteness. One Chinese man expressed the opinion that Chinese/Chinese relationships were "too close" for some men, "that being gay is so different from his upbringing in an Asian culture that being involved with a Caucasian separates him in part from his culture."¹⁰ A similar interpretation was advanced by a White man who had been involved in frequent relationships with Chinese men:

Some Asians, I think, prefer Caucasians because it's less threatening to their whole concept of homosexuality, because it's a different kind of people. Having sex with your own kind is more incestuous. Caucasians present the image of less congruence. The less congruent the partner, the less homosexual it is.

Parallel comments were offered by an immigrant informant from Hong Kong, a man who had come to identify himself as gay in Canada:

If you start to develop your gay experience in North America, you more or less consider sexually that you are a Canadian. So for a lot of Chinese men who only come out as gay in North America, it's really difficult for them to get over the barrier that two Chinese men can actually have a physical relationship. It's totally a psychological thing, like you consider yourself as "brothers" or "sisters" with another Chinese man but you don't have sex inside the family. Sexual relations between Chinese men make some gay Chinese men very uncomfortable.

Life history narratives elicited from immigrant Chinese men (Hong Kong, Malaysia), material dating from the 1970s and 1980s, suggest that for some men an eroticizing of Whiteness was constituted in part through an "imagining of the West" in the development of individual subjectivities. This process merits extended discussion but can only be briefly addressed here. By this "imagining" I am referring to the symboling of the West as a site of homosexual freedom and the correlative coding of a related series of meanings: gay = West = sexual freedom/pleasure = White. There are thus parallels with the previously described process of ethno-Occidentalism. The perceived homosexual freedom of the Western countries in contrast to local/Asian practices was, as I have noted, frequently cited as motivating immigration.

Through these imaginings, Whiteness may become eroticized (perhaps temporarily) both as a site of sexual freedom and pleasure and as an alternative to Chinese cultural practices/identity.

I have argued that my cohorts of informants were among the “first generation” of gay-identified Chinese men. These life history narratives thus perhaps document a particular historical moment in the development of gay male identities within Chinese populations. In these 1970s and 1980s narratives, various forms of both Asian and Western media associating homosexuality with Western countries were particularly significant sources for these imaginings or “imagined lives” (Appadurai, 1990: 294)—perceptions of lives lived elsewhere and potential sources of “scripts” for expressions of the self. A variety of homoerotic American and European films from the late 1960s and 1970s (with a later release date in Asian countries) were often cited by informants as sites of emotional identification in their alienated adolescence and young adulthood. A Chinese Malaysian informant described the impact of such films in the 1970s:

The first thing about homosexuality that I remember making an impact on me was the movie *Midnight Cowboy*. It made me more confused than ever. I didn't speak English and trying to read the subtitles in Chinese, I didn't know what was going on. It was very badly edited for Chinese audiences. I remember particularly the scene of the young guy vomiting in the washroom (after picking up the hustler/hero). I don't know what he did, but I had a sense there was something involving homosexuality I was interested in men that I would find manly, romantically as well as sexually. I would watch James Bond movies and start falling in love with him. I had no role models. Where do I fit in, who are my peers? It was during this period that I began to feel that the Western world was more more free. Maybe the movies gave me that feeling. Like James Bond, he wasn't married, didn't have kids. So there were other ways of living, not like those Chinese family/children, children/family movies. Western films were more erotic, whereas in Chinese movies people were dressed right up to the neck. I knew that I had to get out, that I was born in the wrong culture, in the wrong place. I had to find my peers. I persuaded my parents to let me leave the country. I just told them I was very unhappy.

Films cited in these various narratives as sources of self-affirmation included *Women in Love*, *The Music Lovers*, *The Damned* and *Death in Venice*.

For many gay Chinese men, the politics of racial desire have become manifest in the politicization of

Chinese/Chinese relationships. Same-race eroticism has increasingly become a powerful symbol in narratives of modern, autonomous and specifically Chinese gay identities. The multiple meanings of such eroticism can be viewed as political responses to gay Chinese men's positionality in relation to both gay White men and to Chinese heterosexuals. For some men, same-race eroticism has come to represent a rejection of the internalization of White standards of male beauty and the hierarchical meanings of racial difference often encountered in relations with White men. Simultaneously, it has also come to represent a rejection of desiring Whiteness as a strategy of assimilation into a gay social world. Finally, such eroticism can be read as a type of resistance to the common assumption that gay identities are “un-Chinese,” products of White/Western influence or corruption. The existence of Chinese/Chinese relationships is often interpreted as a marker of autonomy from the White gay world, symbolizing both an assertion of Chinese cultural authenticity and a culturally specific form of identity. In my fieldsite, Chinese/Chinese relationships have become increasingly common since the early and mid-1980s. In this earlier period, such relationships were sometimes interpreted as “role models” for other Chinese men and profiled as such in the *Celebrasian* magazine. The magazine was also active in promoting Asian erotic imagery, a conscious strategy to “sexualize” gay Asian men. Similarly, Asian/Asian relationships were always depicted in the annual *Celebrasian* dramatic performances. In his parallel discussion of racial meanings and gay identities in contemporary south-east Asia, Altman (1997: 428-431) comments that Asian/Asian relationships have become increasingly interpreted as symbols of modern gay identities, that in gay discussion groups from Malaysia to the Philippines there is talk of Asian men learning to eroticize each other. These processes represent a rejection by some men of older local practices, of seeking out White gay men (usually older expatriates or tourists) as a strategy of assimilation into a homosexual social world. The continuing development of local Asian gay social worlds will perhaps mark such strategies of mobility as increasingly superfluous.

As symbol and practice, same-race eroticism can be considered as one expression of empowerment strategies among gay Chinese men. Such strategies have been primarily expressed through the development of discourses and practices constituting gay Chinese communities and a contemporary culture of Chinese homosexuality, through the desire to create specifically Chinese gay social identities. As such identities and collectivities continue their historical development, as subjectivities and meanings of

the self change, the meanings and politics of culture, community and race will no doubt be transformed.

Notes

- 1 This research was made possible by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the 1984-1986 period of field work.
- 2 For example, the first gay political conference held in an Asian country (Tokyo, Japan, 1986) was entitled the First Asia Gay Conference, with participants from Japan, South Korea, Macao, Malaysia, Europe and Canada. The First Asian Lesbian Conference was convened in Thailand in 1990.
- 3 In his discussion of gay Filipino men in New York City, Manalansan IV (1996) comments that his informants felt no strong identification with the label "Asian," associating the term with East Asians—Japanese or Chinese. He discusses conflicts between Filipino gay men and local Asian American activists, both gay and heterosexual, over the meanings of the musical *Miss Saigon*. Asian-American activists criticized the play as racist and picketed the production. For his informants and for many heterosexual Filipino Americans, the play was interpreted as an allegory of Filipino mobility in the United States and came to symbolize Filipino cultural pride. Ambiguities in Filipino American self-acceptance of the term "Asian" are also described in Harrison (1995: 59).
- 4 Markers of Asian cultural/racial difference from White gay men were sometimes conflated with class in activist texts, creating the category "White middle class" to describe mainstream gay White experience and practice, a category against which gay Asian experience was contrasted. For example, gay urban culture is described as "White middle class" (Chua, 1985) and therefore excludes Asian participation. Similarly it is argued that "Asian values" of family intimacy conflict with a "White middle-class" model of coming out, predicated upon less significant family ties and greater individualism (Chung et al., 1996: 98-99). The meanings of "middle class" as a class category are not articulated in such texts nor are class divisions among Asians addressed. These discourses of difference are perhaps influenced by the academic discipline of Asian-American studies. In her critical discussion of Asian-American studies, anthropologist Sylvia Yanagisako (1995) argues that discipline narratives elide class differences among Asian Americans in the creation of a unitary subject.
- 5 Discourses of family type as signifying cultural/ethnic difference or specificity in the United States are discussed in Waters (1990: 129-146) and Di Leonardo (1984). Waters' study on perceptions of cultural difference among a diversity of ethnically-identified Americans found that "family closeness" was the most commonly invoked marker of cultural distinctiveness among all the ethnic groups in her sample. The centrality of "the family" as a cultural norm or value was conceptually opposed to American "mainstream culture" and thus constitutive of difference. Though her informants were all of European descent, the processes she describes parallel the conceptualization of "Asian values" or an Asian emphasis on the family. In her ethnography of Italian-American ethnicity, Di Leonardo provides a critical discussion of her informants' use of "the family" as a marker of cultural distinctiveness. Many of her informants identified and extrapolated their own, varying family characteristics as "typically Italian." In addition, many informants argued that a "typical Italian family" existed but disagreed on its defining characteristics. Critical discussions on discourses of "Asian values" contrasted to "Western values" can be found in Ong (1997) and Blanc (1997). Abu-Lughod (1991) examines the reifying and essentializing premises of the "culture" concept as a method of narrating difference.
- 6 See Herdt (1992) for a collection of ethnographic accounts on the creation of community symbols among American gay men.
- 7 According to Fung (1996: 187), the first American gay pornography video portraying an Asian man anally penetrating a non-Asian man was produced in 1986 and marketed as such.
- 8 Back (1994) provides an ethnographic account of the gendered meanings of racial difference among a group of young White working-class men in London, England. He argues that his heterosexual informants position Black and Asian youth as a set of gendered oppositions. The valued quality of masculinity is associated with Black cultural styles and in White fantasy, Black masculinity is evaluated positively as a symbol of sexual potency. In contrast, young Asian men (Vietnamese) are devalued as feeble and effeminate and are excluded from peer activities.
- 9 Debates on the "feminization" of Asian men were also generated by the play *M. Butterfly* written by the gay Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang. The play is based on an historical incident in which a European diplomat stationed in China becomes involved in a 20-year relationship with a male Chinese opera performer specializing in female roles, assuming him to be a woman. In their survey of Chinese American literature, Chan et al. (1991: xiii) dismiss the play in hostile terms: "The good Chinaman . . . is the fulfillment of White male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass." Kondo (1990: 27) briefly describes an "impassioned" panel session at the 1989 Asian American Studies Association debating the meanings of the play's critical and popular success. The play was heatedly criticized by heterosexual Asian American men attending the session for promoting stereotypes of Asian male effeminacy. Kondo's article explores the play's anti-essentialist critique of fixed and unitary gender and racial identities. See Yanagisako (1995: 295) for a discussion of debates on gender representation in Asian-American studies.
- 10 The gay Asian newsletter, *Asianews* (Sydney, Australia), published a conversation with a gay Thai man in 1985 (no. 3: 8), in which he discusses a local gay bar popular with Asian men: "(A Thai man frequents the bar) because he likes the bar and enjoys being with other Asians. While almost no gay Asians he knows on the scene are interested in other Asians, he hopes that stigma will someday end. He added 'When I go back to Bangkok, I'm always so attracted to the gay Thai men . . . but they are only after the foreigners. In Sydney, I never even imagine going with another Asian, it is somehow incestuous.' But there is a true brotherly feeling in the gay Asian community. An older Chinese Malaysian gay man commented 'When I was young, I al-

ways dreamed of having an Asian lover but it never seemed quite possible. Because of my strong family ties, it was and is extremely threatening for me to be involved with another Asian'."

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