

Chapter Eight

Family Dynamics and Change

This chapter examines family communication and relationships, gender roles, and out marriage. As with other groups, there are tensions in Asian American families associated with relationships between generations, men and women, and among siblings and other stresses associated with immigration and minority cultural status. Some problems are produced by the circumstances in which families operate and are essentially external in origin. Others may result from widespread changes in values and expectations between generations. Gender roles, dating, and marriage are recurrent subjects of potential conflict.

These tensions may become magnified when there are inter-ethnic relationships and marriages as Asian Americans are not without prejudices regarding non-Asians as well as each other. It is equally true that some non-Asians harbor prejudices toward Asian Americans. The effects of these attitudes on inter-group relationships are not extensively covered here but two of the accounts that follow touch on out-marriage. There is no particular mystery about increasing out marriage among Asian Americans. Social history demonstrates that when young people from different groups associate on a regular basis, inter-marriage is not uncommon. The increasing numbers of inter-ethnic marriages and families pose important questions of cultural conflicts, cultural maintenance, and the definition of ethnic identities.

The essay and accounts in this chapter are simply introductions to some of these issues. The chapter opens with an exploration of circumstantial variables that can hurt communication in Asian Americans families and continues with accounts of family that touch on changes in gender roles, out marriage, and mixed race children. It concludes with a brief discussion of the dynamics of change in family cultures, practices, roles, and relationships.

External Factors in Asian American Family Communication

Communication is essential to family relationships, if absent, the functioning of family is weakened or destroyed. Asian Americans, like other peoples, may experience difficulties in family communication. Naturally, there is considerable variation, some families relationships are typified by regular and intense communication, while others encounter more problems. The causes of such difficulties are also varied but there is a popular tendency to explain the problems as the product of traditional Asian values and structure internal to the family and

its culture. The message of such explanations is that the problems Asian Americans encounter would cease if only they adopted more "modern, American" practices.

This is nonsense. Difficulties in family communication are common in many other groups in the society and there is no evidence to suggest that Asian Americans encounter greater difficulties than other people. Moreover, while cultural changes and conflict between generations may, indeed, be the focus of family tensions and the immediate triggers of disputes, the causes of difficulty in communication are often primarily the product of external factors.(1)

Internal factors are those variables that are produced by the cultural patterns of the family and the individual personalities of its members. External factors are variables that originate outside the family itself, which are the product of the circumstances in which the family is found. Any family may encounter communication problems among its members and it is important to be able to identify the causes of these difficulties if they are to be solved. Even when there are internal causes of communication difficulty in Asian American families, these are usually aggravated by external, circumstantial factors. It is crucial to recognize the impact of external forces on Asian American families because one of the consequences of improperly blaming communication difficulties on cultural values can be rejection of one's cultural identity or a negative attitude about that cultural identity and the relatives associated with it.

A distinction is made here between the causes of disputes and the causes of communication problems. Disputes usually are about particular issues, events, behavior, or desires. The resolution of such disputes is often dependent on the ability of family members to communicate well with each other. In the Asian American context, while family disputes are often triggered by cultural factors, the resolution of these disputes may be hampered by communication gaps that are the product of external variables not directly the product of family culture. For example, a common source of friction between parents and children are differences in expectations regarding dating, particularly by teenage daughters. The daughter may wish to date and "go out" while the parents may try to insist that she stay home and see dating as somewhat immoral. Arguments and resentment may result. Such a dispute reflects differences in cultural expectations and could rightly be described as originating from internal cultural tensions. Resolution of the issue, on the other hand, might be difficult in any case but if the work and school schedules of parents and daughter provide little opportunity for sustained communication or if daughter and parents have difficulty talking to each other due to lack of shared language, then the dispute would be aggravated by a communication gap that has external origins.

Many external factors affecting communication for Asian Americans are related to being immigrants or members of cultural minorities in a society dominated by Euro-American cultural patterns and norms. Other factors are the product of living in a modern industrial or post-industrial society and are shared with families in many other groups within American society and throughout the modern world. This discussion starts with a communication gap that is a direct product of the immigrant status of many Asian Americans.

Language

Language gaps between generations are a major source of communication difficulties and it is amazing how often this cause of difficulty is overlooked. In many families, different generations share little language in common. The children may speak only a little of the parent's language and the parents may speak only a limited amount of English. The language gap between grandparents and grandchildren is often even greater, with no shared language at all. More commonly, although there is a limited degree of common language that allows for minimal discussion of everyday topics, discussion of more complex issues is difficult or impossible. Family members may be able to discuss food purchases or general plans for the day but find it quite frustrating to attempt explanations of feelings, politics, worries about the future, or the reasons for choosing a marriage partner. These topics are then avoided or become frustrating subjects of arguments and misunderstandings. The impact of a language gap on family communication should not be underestimated. Frustrations from lack of mutual comprehension aggravate disputes and create unintentional arguments and tension, so that even routine, everyday topics may be avoided as people develop resentment and distrust. In these circumstances it is not surprising that real communication becomes rare.

Language gaps are directly the product of Asian Americans being immigrants or members of cultural minorities in the United States. It is to be expected that the younger generation will usually have a better control of English than the older but the younger generation is also exposed to societal pressures to avoid and abandon use of the home language. Objectively, the ability to speak two languages should be seen as positive but the reality of the American setting is that language minority children are criticized, teased, and even punished for use of languages other than English. Meanwhile, the older generation's ability to learn English is hampered not only by age but also by the necessity to work and support the family, which leads many into employment within the ethnic community, where command of English is not required and little opportunity to acquire it is found. In such circumstances, the ability to discuss emotional feelings, career plans, or choices of marriage partners is going to be minimal.

If family members cannot understand each other due to lack of common language, how can they have good communication on the many issues that inevitably arise in the family context? Family relationships will almost always suffer and the cause will not be their cultural values or individual personalities. To the extent that there also are internal cultural or personality difficulties, the ability of the family to deal with these will be limited by the language gap and associated frustrations.

Schedules

Good family communication requires that family members have time to be with each other. A reality of Asian American family circumstances is that family members often have such conflicting schedules that they rarely have contact with each other for more than brief moments. Many parents and young adults have jobs that extend into evenings while school age children are in school from early in the morning until mid-afternoon. Their contact with each other may be limited to late evenings and possibly weekends, although it is not uncommon to find people working on weekends as well.

A common example would be a Chinese American family in which the parents work in a restaurant as cooks or waiters. They may start work late in the morning and return home at nine or even later in the evening. Their children will start school early in the morning and be home in the mid to late afternoon. The only time the family will have together will be late in the evening, when the children will probably be doing homework. Very young school children may be up until eleven because that is the only time they see their parents, to the horror of their teachers, who will then criticize the parents for keeping the kids up late. Another example is one of a Filipino American man who was being questioned for inclusion on a jury in a civil case. He worked night shift as a janitor and the wife worked during the day as a personnel officer. The lawyers were concerned that he might discuss personnel issues with his wife. He insisted that they did not but the lawyers persisted in questioning him on the point. Finally, with some irritation, he said "I work nights, my wife works days, we never see each other except on weekends. The last thing we want to talk about is work!"

Family relationships need time to be maintained. Without routine contact, the ability of family to deal with crisis is diminished and the sense of love and relationship among family members is weakened. Family communication is not a process to be turned on and off on demand like a water tap, it must be flowing all the time.

Economic Necessities and Strategies

Schedules separate many families in the United States but are a particular source of problems in the Asian American context because the economic options and strategies available to many Asian Americans make the problem more severe. Employment in service and restaurant jobs often require night work, the necessity for dual wage earning parents removes both from the home, involvement in small businesses often entails extra hours and evening work, and some Asian American groups have a high level of participation in these types of employment.

Even when economic activity may involve family working together, the net effect may be one of separation or tensions. An example involves the case of a Vietnamese American family that owned and operated a small restaurant and cafe which opened at seven in the morning and closed at eleven at night. The whole family was involved in the operation of the business and as one member put it, "We only see each other at work and when we are there all we have time to talk about is the work. When we get home we are so tired, all we want to do is sleep. My family is falling apart." Resentment resulting from family work requirements may also serve to create distance and poor communication among family members although sometimes such a family operation can also tend to strengthen family relationships and communication when the demands of the business are not so overwhelming.

Many Asian American families depend on multiple wage earners in order to make ends meet and move ahead economically. Both parents will work, as will older children. This necessity is a product of the relatively low wages earned and the high cost of living in many regions. For example, in the mid 1980's Asian Americans in the Bay Area earned less per worker than Blacks and only the large number of workers per family brought family incomes up to a higher level.⁽³⁾ The demands of multiple jobs not only make it difficult for family members to have time together, the jobs may also tend to draw people away from the family in terms of interests and social contacts. This type of dispersion becomes particularly common for Asian American families that have moved into newer suburban areas. Many Filipino Americans who have moved into areas like Serramonte and Hercules in the S.F. Bay Area follow this pattern of employment. Sometimes parents attempt to make up for lack of sustained contact with their children by giving them material goods; toys, electronics, spending money, but these cannot substitute for a more regular contact within the family. Later, when a crisis occurs, the foundation of good communication is lacking and problems may be difficult to solve.

Truncated Families

Problems of language, schedules, and economic necessities may be further aggravated by truncation of family units, meaning that the people who comprise family here in the United States may represent only a portion of those that would, traditionally, be part of family. For example, a family here may be primarily a nuclear family of parents and children while family in the past may have included extended family in or near the same household. Such truncation may be a routine result of immigration in which some members of a larger family come to the United States while other remain behind in Asia or it may be the result of residential dispersion of extended family in the United States. In more extreme cases, the family unit may be further fragmented and include only a portion of the nuclear family. These more extreme cases are usually associated with refugee families in which key members may have been lost, killed, or had to be abandoned during flight or families may have deliberately sent only a few members out of the country of origin. In the past, a common Chinese American family form was the "split family," in which the family was truncated by discriminatory immigration regulations which forced wives and children to remain in Asia.

Truncated families may experience communication difficulties when members have expectations for resolution of frictions based using a wider network of relatives as intermediaries. Communication between children and parents is particularly affected. Both parents and their children may feel considerable reluctance in bringing up sensitive or upsetting subjects because the possibility of disagreements is a threat to the relationship. As an alternative to initiating discussion of such subjects directly there can be a pattern of going to other relatives first, who then can give advice or serve as conduits of communication.

An example of this process is the case of a Southeast Asian student who had been in an automobile accident while driving the father's car without the father's knowledge. Initially, the accident was kept secret but subsequent developments involving insurance companies made it necessary for the father to be told. The son was in a delicate position. Not only had he taken the car without permission but he had kept the accident secret from the father for several months. To tell the father directly was to risk a major explosion. Ultimately, he discussed the problem with his sister, who then talked to the mother, who was then the one who first told the father. Only later, after anger had cooled and solutions had been suggested, did father and son discuss the accident directly.

This example involved members of the nuclear family as intermediaries but it is quite common that relatives from the extended family fill these roles. Individual family members may have favorite aunts, uncles, cousins, or other relatives with

whom they can discuss any problem or issue, can give advice, and who can intercede when problems arise. Lacking people who can fill such a function, family members often simply avoid difficult topics with each other and problems fester or remain unsolved, ultimately creating distance in family relationships. Truncation of family is usually the product of external factors resulting from immigration, flight, or residential dispersal.

Conclusion

There is no particular reason to believe that Asian American families experience any greater degree of communication problems than families in other groups in the United States. The fact that family members may not relate to each other in the same style as the perfect t.v. family is not evidence of poor communication skills any more than the use of a language other than English is evidence that people do not talk. Many families have good communication despite the numerous subjects and cultural tensions that could easily create a breakdown in relationships. When communication is poor, the reasons for difficulties are often circumstantial and external to the family.

Cambodian American Family and Women's Roles by Sayonn Sok(4)

My parents left home (in Cambodia) about six months after I went to the refugee camp in Thailand. I kept writing lying letters to them. You know, like how life is great in the camps and how people can get out of the camps to a third country, United States, Australia, France, where ever and then they have great life over there, so you better leave. My parents didn't want to leave even when they got that letter. The last letter that I wrote to my parents was so mean! They should have felt angry about it, but they should feel good by now. In that letter I said "you are too old to leave the country. There's nothing much in a third country for you, but if you two don't leave you still have three single children under your responsibility. If you don't leave the country you will kill their future. (What I meant was they would be bad parents!) If you think about your children you will leave. I don't care if you want to leave or you don't want to leave, but I care about the younger generation. They still want to still continue their studies, they still want to build up their life. If you stay (in Cambodia) you kill everything." -- AND THEN my mother, my mother was the one that made the decision, not my father!

You know, back there in the Cambodian community, lady has nothing much to say, lady never make decision. Most decisions are made by men. You know there's a lot of things I want to talk about how females feel. I carry my own feelings until now,

I don't hate men, but sometimes there's something there that I attack all the time... okay, let's finish about my mother.

My mother made the decision and she said to the family, "If you don't leave, if nobody wants to leave, just take me to the border and leave me there and you can come back home." That made the family think and my sister, not my two brothers, said "Right! We go. If they don't want to leave we both just go." Then the whole family decided to leave. So they followed me after six months. Also, my husband joined me three months after I went to the camps. He was involved with politics, he always want to fight to get the country back. This is what most Cambodian men think, that they can do a lot of things. But what I thought was different. As mother I had responsibility for my kids, and I didn't care if he stayed there or fought to get the country back, that's a good idea but I was not involved with it. I needed to leave, I wanted to do something on my own, for me first, before I did something for my country. That's what I decided from the beginning.

Okay! Lets talk about about female feelings. I was raised in a very strict family. I always heard the word "wrong" when I did things. When I ran down stairs, they said "don't do that! You know you're a girl, you're not supposed to do that!" That's one "wrong." I played the games that were right for the boys. I wasn't supposed to play boys' games but, you know, I wanted to play. I saw the boys running around. I want to do that too. That's two "wrong." I couldn't do that, but I did anyway! And you can not talk back to the old people, that's in general. You can not talk to boys, because whatever you and the boy talk it looks bad, its not right. After ten years of age, you could not talk to boys. Then, we had certain ways to sit. If you sit wrong, you're wrong. I always heard the word "wrong."

I was not satisfied and I thought "why was I not born as a boy? I don't want be a girl." I start to notice the people around me when I was a teenager, I always thought about when husband and wife argue and I paid attention. Women could talk, right, but if it ever got to the point that husband beat her she had to shut up and no matter how many time that she got beat up she had to stay, because the culture said divorce is not good. You have to stay with the same person and you have certain roles to do. Stay home, watch the kids, take care the house, prepare the food. Those are the big roles for the women back there. Very few women decide what kind of business they should be in, what kind of job they should take, what kind of family they want to have. It's up to her husband. Sometimes there are families in which a women was very bright, but she couldn't do much because the environment didn't allow her to and she would not have good reputation because people would say that she was not giving respect to her husband. You just had to stay what you were.

I decided not to get married before I got a job. Back there if you stay single older than 20 you don't have good reputation. Everybody thinks that nobody wants you, that that's why you stay stay single after 20. Most girls were forced to marry before 18 by their parents. My aunt tried to arrange my marriage when I was 16. But I was a very bright student, I was the top student for the whole high school. I never had the idea to get married, I wanted a job before I got married. My auntie said, "you don't want to stay unmarried that late, you're getting old." I said, "I don't care how old I am as long as I can survive." Not many people thought that way because they accepted they way they were taught. Even my friend, who had almost finished high school, jumped to marry. That's why I was left alone in school and my uncle said, "you do this wrong, you know better - read this book. It book says that girl supposed to do this or not supposed to do that." I said, "book written by men, when I know how to write a book I can change it!" You know, books are created by people, laws are created by people, things are created by people. Like I said earlier, right and wrong depends on what you give value to.

I always had a feeling against men all the time, inside. I don't fight with men, but for my whole life, you know, I feel like men dominate. They control the whole world, no matter what country they control everything. I still have this feeling, back and forth.

This is also about adjusting to the new society in America. When I'm among American society I kind of feel different. I feel good about some things. I can say what I want to say, if I want to run a business I can run a business. I can have a career as much as I want. But when I am in the Cambodian community I start to feel different. So when two societies are together I feel two different ways. In one I feel strong, in one I feel weak. So I don't know, I myself haven't adjusted real good yet.

What I did when I was a teenager was not bad. I got married late, I was 24 when I got married. At 25 I had a kid. Compared to Cambodians I was late, compared to Americans I was early. If I had jumped to marriage when I was young I wouldn't have finished high school and I would not have gone to the university. Because of that, I think my life's different now. I think I was born that way, too, so I kind of jump right away to what ever I want. Maybe that doesn't look good to my community. Some people say that I should be proud of myself because I have been very active in the community, and I own a business and I helped people a lot, but I don't know. From my community's point of view, they think that I didn't do things right. From the American point of view, they give me more credit than the Cambodian. I'm kind of different now, different from the majority of Cambodian women. I'm not too shy, maybe sometime I get nervous, but most of the time I try not to. I'm an out going person, I try to make and contact as many friends as I can to learn. Not just to go out

and eat but to learn from them and for them to learn from me. I try to improve my life, I don't know how much I can but I just try.

(A question about how Sayonn was raising her own daughter produced the following comments.)

My daughter was raised starting in Cambodia. When I was in Cambodia I had bad feelings about the way that my parents raised me. They didn't do anything wrong, the culture required me to be raised that way, but I found something hurt deeply inside. You know, I felt low self esteem. Most people were taught to lie, you know, without knowing they were taught to lie, to be lies. But I felt that my children should not be raised that way, that they should not be raised to feel tight all the time. My daughter was raised by me but she feels free to talk to me, friendly, which is very different from every family back there. Nobody taught their kid to say everything that they want. I did not allow my kid to say everything that they want either but more than among other Cambodian families she had a chance to talk to me. For example, when a kid cut herself the parent, instead of finding out what's going on, just hit. Just slap, one slap, without knowing they are doing it. The next time the kid cut herself or something, they just try to hide it. One thing hidden, that's one lie already, right?

So I raised my kid kind of different, I tried to find out the problems, I told her, "please be sure to talk to me." So even back there she's had a different background. Now that we are here, she's very very friendly to me, close to me. She can talk to me about whatever she wants. You know, even things..., like she's 18 right now, 17, going to be 18. You know that age, she knows new people, people around her have boyfriends and she wants to find out what should she do and she told me about her feeling towards this person and that person, so I had more opportunity to tell her to know what's going on. It's not that I tell her what to do, but help her to compare different decisions, like which one she should go with. So I haven't found a problem about my kid yet. Maybe later, I don't know...

Cultural Traditions from One Generation Can Hurt the Next Generation by T. N.(5)

There are only two people in my family, my mother and myself. My family has always been on the culturally traditional side, both in the present and in the past. My mother has always expected me to remember my roots, my ancestors, and to follow the patterns that they set out. I must grow up and finish school with a degree and while my mother supports me in school I must obey and follow family traditions. Marriage is not supposed to come until after I have a career and it must be kept

within my ethnic group. My mother must approve the marriage. These are some of the expectations she has of me.

For many generations in my family, the women have never had to live with their in-laws after marriage. Instead, after marriage the husband would live with the bride's family. This habit shows that keeping family close is one of my family's traditions.

All the generations before me followed family tradition but not me. I agree that a career before marriage is good but on marriage within my own ethnic group and the requirement for family approval I disagree. The truth is that my mother and I have disagreements all the time on different subjects, unlike many mother and daughter relationships where many things are shared and they get along with each other.

There are many ways that I am different from my mother. One of them is neatness. She is very neat and keeps things clean all the time while I am the opposite. I let my junk, books, clothes, all pile up in my room for weeks before I clean them up. She like to talk to me about the past and I hate that. I think if something is in the past, let it stay in the past. Why bring it up time after time? She likes spicy foods and I can't stand them. We have different tastes in clothes. She could never buy clothes for me and I could never buy for her. Fame and fortune are important to her while love and happiness are important to me. She is an optimistic person while I am considered a pessimistic one. In many ways we are never alike.

One of the major disagreements that I have with her now is about my boyfriend. A year ago I meet my boyfriend, James Lee, who came from China. The problems started when I mentioned to my mother that I was seeing someone who was not Vietnamese. My mother was and is not happy about my relationship with James. She constantly reminds me at dinner, before I leave the house, and when I come home from a date with him, "Just be friends with him because I want you to know different types of men but do not become seriously involved with him." She expects me to marry a Vietnamese guy who can talk to her in her language. She expects my husband to play a male role in the family, to be supportive and take care of the family. It bothers me and hurts me when she compares our situation to that of other families. She has close friend with two daughters. She keeps telling me about how their boyfriends are always at their home and doing favors for the mother whenever she wants them to. She keeps telling me that her friend is fortunate but that she (my mother) is not. She makes me feel like an object, like bait. Men who want her daughter must be at her service or bring goods to trade for me. I want her to realize, somehow, that I am not an object but a human being, old enough to have my own opinions and old enough to make my own decisions.

Because of these difficulties, I lie to and disobey my mother many times, which makes me feel bad. I lie to her when she asks, "Do you like your boyfriend?" I tell her we are just friends but the truth is we are not just friends. I never disobeyed or talked back to my mother before, only on this subject. Whenever we talk about my marriage and my boyfriend we end up fighting. I always take my boyfriend's side. She always says that James has not done anything to help my family, that he is never around when we need him. Again I feel cheap. James must do something for my mother for him to take me out.

Sometimes I understand how she feels and that she wants to protect me. Since there are only two of us, she does not want to lose me and does not want me to lose my tradition and culture, but sometimes she goes too far. She forgets that I have feelings too. My mother even arranges dates for me but every time I go out with Vietnamese guys I find it difficult to communicate with them.

My relationship with my boyfriend creates problems on his side too. His parents came from Kwangtung, China and are also very traditional. Unfortunately, James is the only boy among four children and that makes it harder for our relationship. His parents expect him to marry someone of their own background. We have been going with each other for a year but my background remains pretty much unknown to his parents. They know he is dating someone but he is afraid they would disapprove of me, just like my mother disapproves of him. Since he is the only boy he carries a lot of responsibility. He does not want to hurt or disobey his parents because he respects them but on the other hand he thinks that they are too traditional and narrow-minded. He had another girl friend before who was Chinese Vietnamese and he disobeyed his parents to date her. She turned out to be a bad person and because of this his parents do not like any Vietnamese girls. Because they made so much trouble for him that time, James is afraid to introduce me to his parents.

These parental pressures cause tensions between us. We fight with each other because we also want to please our parents. To see each other or to talk on the phone is difficult. We each try to leave good impressions for both parents. We can't spend much time with each other because of this. Sometimes I want to give up the relationship because there is so much pressure from parents on both sides. The more I think of our relationship the more problems it seems to create. Take communication for example. I do not speak his parent's language and they do not speak English. How can we communicate? I can't leave my mother after I marry but the Chinese custom is for the bride to live with the groom's family and especially since James is the only son. We do not know how this relationship will end up but we hope that time will change our parents' minds.

While I do not know how my relationship with James will turn out I know one thing for sure, that the relationship between my mother and myself has changed due to this issue. We can share and talk on any subject as long as it has nothing to do with James. Sometimes I feel that she is the cause of the problems in my relationship with James. I do not feel secure in sharing my problems or thoughts with her anymore. For my mother's part, she does not trust me any more. She also feels that our mother and daughter relationship is drifting apart day by day and she feels that James is to blame. I feel that until my relationship is approved I will have many problems. I feel that the cultural traditions from one generation can hurt the next generation.

Asian and Black American by Mayumi Stroy(6)

Mayumi

Some say that Mayumi is a nice person, others say that I am a moody grouch. I can't deny either of these observations, not that I am modest, just that I have heard both comments before.

My mother and father met and were married in Japan. I am the youngest of two and was born in Puerto Rico. My family moved to the States when I was four. We first lived on the Alameda Navy base for a year and then we moved to San Leandro for five years and then to Pleasanton where my family now resides.

I was never real comfortable with my ethnic background until recently. I grew up in a suburban, WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) community for most of my life. There were about ten ethnic minorities in my entire school during high school. All of my friends except family friends and relatives were white. I started to see myself as the exceptional minority when I was in the fifth grade. I was ashamed that my mother talked with an accent and that my father, although a light skinned black, talked with a Southern accent and had nappy hair.

I can identify two occasions when I was young of not having a clear perception of who I was. The first was when I was about five years old. Although I don't remember, my father recalls that the family went on vacation to visit a friend of his who happened to be Black. My sister and I went out to the park to play with his children and we came back immediately. My sister and I asked where all the children were. My father, rather amazed, said "the children are at the park." "Those are black kids," my sister retorted, "We mean all the other kids." Another time, when I was in the seventh grade, I was watching a documentary on South Africa and the apartheid

system. I thought to myself that I would be able to go to South Africa and vacation with all the British because I was not black.

My mother is a very dominant figure in our household. We were brought up on Japanese foods, Japanese customs, and Japanese morals and values. Although we did not speak Japanese fluently in the house we would always watch Japanese t.v. and speak Japanese phrases in the house. We also went to many cultural events in Japantown and would always go to the Cherry Blossom festival every year.

Most of my father's family lived in South Carolina but he did have his sister and her family out here in California. My cousins used to make fun of us all the time. They called us "ching chong Chinaman" and made buck tooth face expressions and try to mimic my mother. I was also ashamed of my cousins. I thought they were stupid and poor. Whenever they came to visit I would tell my friend that my cousins were my friends rather than my relatives.

I used to think that the only thing that I didn't have going for me was that I was not White like all my friends. I always felt like I had to prove myself to my friends. I would bring lots of candy to school and give it all away just so that the kids would like me. When I got older I would beg my mother to buy me the most fashionable and most expensive clothes so that I could prove to all the other kids that I was just as good as them. I never told my parents how I felt about my ethnic background. It was a painful subject for me to talk about. I would tell people that I was Japanese instead of saying that I was half Black also. I would often dream that my real parents were a rich white couple who were searching desperately for me. One day they would find me and I would rejoin my white brothers and sisters and live in our mansion.

My parents had friends of all different backgrounds. The closest family friends were those in interracial marriages. I grew up knowing about twelve families in which the husband was Black and the wives were Japanese. We all got along good because we had known each other for a long time. When I was with them I felt the most comfortable and the most accepted. I would feel sort of a bond to them like they knew what I was going through. But when I got into middle school I felt a strain in the relationship I had with these kids. Instead of being friends we were like competitors to see who could be the most Japanese, who could be the Whitest or who can be the Blackest.

When I was a senior in high school I began to have a different view of the world and myself. I began to think that White people were not always the best and that many of them in fact ate weird food and had strange customs. They didn't eat grits, sushi, pig feet, or fish roe. They didn't eat mochi on New Year's and never had a

Black person besides myself in their house. The White world I had tried so hard to copy and become a part of was strange and cold to me. At the same time I was noticing these things, Asian American friends, the three others in my high school graduating class, were noticing the same things. Out of this realization we formed an informal group called T.A.P. (The Asian Persuasion). We used to joke with each other about which Asian group was superior to others or something on the line of that. We were letting out our frustrations and were acknowledging each other. We were frustrated with the lack of tolerance that others had of our cultural background. We were tired of the insensitivity and ignorance that the other kids displayed toward us.

When I got to S.F.S.U. I spent my first year in culture shock. I had jumped from a school in which you could count all the ethnic minorities on your hands to a school in which the Caucasian people were the minority. I didn't like school here. I complained to my parents that I wanted to go to Long Beach State or Humboldt. But then I met a group of friends in the dorms. For the first time in my life I told people about my ethnic background. I told them I was half Black and half Japanese and held my breath to wait for their reaction. To my surprise they didn't snicker at me or give me a superior look. Instead they were sincerely interested. They thought that I was exotic and was very lucky to have practiced cultural maintenance. At the end of the semester I decided to stay.

Shortly thereafter, a friend suggested that I take some Asian American classes. I thought I might as well since I had not taken a lot of General Education courses yet. When I took my first class I was amazed at all the history that had been excluded from my education in school before that time. I felt for the first time a passion for something I never had before. I wanted to study as much as I could about Asian Americans. Now I have come to accept my ethnic background with pride and happiness. I couldn't imagine myself as a White person like I used to. All my best friends are still White but now I have friends from every type of ethnic background. And the most important thing that I have learned that the color of your skin does not matter but in the great words of Doctor Martin Luther King "But in the content of your character."

When I think of marriage and the person I will marry I don't think in terms of race at all. Rather I think of someone I can have a reciprocal loving relationship. Whoever I shall marry, and when I do have children, I want them to know all about their ethnic background.

Akiko

When I first asked Akiko if I could interview her she was very open and friendly to the idea. Over the phone I could feel her warm and energetic personality come through and I was looking forward to meeting her.

Akiko's mother met Akiko's father, a Black civil engineer for the army, in Osaka, Japan. After Akiko was born, they lived in Japan for five years. Her father was transferred to the States and her family moved to Oakland, California. Akiko did not speak English when she came to the States. When she first arrived here she went to a school in Oakland near her house and attended a bilingual Spanish class. But since she didn't speak Spanish the class did not help very much so she had to go to a bilingual Japanese school in San Francisco. Akiko had to commute to school every day, but didn't mind it very much because she liked school and liked her new friends.

Shortly after her family arrived her father was diagnosed with a stroke. Her mother, who also did not speak English, had to get a job to support the family. Akiko and her mother watched as her father struggled with the disease, but he died five years later. Akiko remembers her father as being a strict disciplinarian type of person. He always told her to work hard, and to act respectable. He did not allow her to watch the cartoon show Fat Albert because he felt it was a bad representation of Black people. She doesn't remember much else about her father because he was always in bed resting or in the hospital.

Akiko continued to attend school in San Francisco. After elementary school she attended an accelerated middle school for gifted children. At this school Akiko began to meet more friends and become active in extra curricular activities. She wanted to attend high school in Oakland so she would not have to commute anymore. But at the end of the middle school she had made lots of new friends and did not want to leave them. So she attended high school in San Francisco and continued her academic excellence as well as her involvement in school politics and extra circular activities.

Because Akiko was in an environment in which there were people from many ethnic backgrounds she did not have any troubles accepting herself. Once, though, she asked her mother if she was adopted. She did not think she looked like her mother and she did not think she looked like her father. Her mother laughed at the idea and reassured her that she was not adopted. "I always had a sense of who I was" recalled Akiko about her childhood. "I spoke and still speak Japanese at home and I went to J.C.Y.C. (Japanese Community Youth Council). "Some of my fondest memories of growing up took place in Japantown. It's one of my favorite place to be.

A place where I feel comfortable and accepted and I have a lot of friends there. As for the Black community I still keep in touch with my half brothers and sisters from my father's first marriage. That's the extent of my connection with the Black community."

Akiko is an optimist and tries not to let anything get her down but sometimes there are situations in which she has had to deal with people who can't accept her ethnic background. An example was when Akiko had to meet her boyfriend's mother. Her boyfriend did not want to introduce her to his mother because he knew that she would not accept her but one day she was rudely forced into meeting his mother. His mother not only demanded that her son break up with her but also gave her a lecture of the reasons she was not good enough to go out with her son. According to this woman, Akiko was not good enough to go out with her son because she was half nigger, a slut, and not pure Asian. Akiko, of course, was stunned and shocked at the abusive words. She was even more shocked when her boyfriend followed his mother's orders and broke up with her. At first she was angry but then she began to feel sorry for people who are prejudiced. She saw them as a product of a society which told them that things that were different were bad. She wasn't trying to make an excuse for them but rather she was trying to understand, instead of hate, because she knew that she would probably meet up with people like them again.

The one thing that gets Akiko most angry are forms that insist that you fill out your ethnic background. The first time she had to deal with it was in the sixth grade. The teacher had passed out forms in which one of the questions asked what was her ethnic background. One of her friends said as a joke, "Kiko you just don't fit ." Akiko felt hurt at first because it was true and there was no space to write in what her ethnic background was. "I guess I left it blank " said Akiko. "I don't remember what I did, just that I was upset."

When Akiko applied to Lowell High School she had to face the question again. This time she consciously left it blank but the application came back stamped incomplete. Akiko was not going to send it back but her counselor wanted her to send it in. "But what should I put?" Akiko thought, "I can only choose one. I am closer to my Japanese heritage. I was raised by a Japanese woman, in a Japanese home, and speak Japanese as well. But the law says if you are one third black you are technically Black. But I am not either Black or Japanese. I am clearly both."(7)

Akiko's counselor told her to choose Asian and she did and sent the form back. She did not get into Lowell but it was just as well because she liked her high school very much. "If I would have chosen Black I probably would have gotten in," remarked Akiko. "I hate those forms! I hate it when people make you choose one or the other when you really are not one or the other. If I had to change those forms I would not

include a question about your ethnic background because it should not matter. But if I had to I would just let people fill it in."

When Akiko came to San Francisco State she did not find it much of a change from her high school except it was larger and you were able to do what you wanted. She did, however, want to explore her Black heritage. She joined the Black Students Union. Akiko found the group to have a separatist mentality. "They were always saying that Blacks should stay with Blacks, that Blacks should only marry Blacks to preserve the race, that the Whites would never be able to accept Blacks equal to them and that other ethnic groups were only concerned with their own well being." Akiko did not ascribe to this point of view, because she had White friends and many other friends from different ethnic backgrounds. Also she was half Japanese. A member told Akiko she had to pick to be either Black or Japanese and that she could not walk on the line in between.

Akiko has been fairly well accepted by both the Black and Japanese community. Her mother's relatives did not approve at first but after they got to know her father they accepted the marriage. As for her father's side, besides her half brothers and sisters she has never met any of her other relatives. She has maintained a relationship with them over the years and they have always been able to accept her.

When Akiko thinks of marriage she does not have an ideal mate in mind. She likes Asian men and has dated mostly Asian men. But she doesn't let that stop her from going out with anybody else from a different ethnic background.

Laura

When I first tried to get hold of Laura to ask her if I could interview her I found it very hard to catch her at home. "Oh Laura is out at the store," her mother told me the first time. The next time she was at work, then she was out with her friends or out with her boyfriend. Finally I just left my name and phone number hoping that she would call me, although she did not know who I was. To my surprise, Laura did call me back and I finally did get to interview her. When I mentioned the difficulty of getting hold of her she blushed and apologized. I could sense she had a very active social life because Laura was very friendly and had lots of friends who wanted to be with her all of the time.

Laura's father, a Black combat soldier, met Laura's mother in Korea. At first Laura's mother did not like him but after her father had learned Korean with the help of a young friend, she was able to get to know him and later married him. Laura was born in Korea and lived there for two years. Her father was sent back to the States and her family moved to San Francisco. Laura's father was never able to see

his youngest daughter Cindy because he was sent back to Asia and was killed. Laura's mother was left in a strange land not being able to speak the language, with one daughter and a baby on the way.

Laura's mother had made friends through her husband with other Korean women who had also married American soldiers. These people became like her family after her husband died. They helped her learn English, understand the new customs and strange ways of a new country, and, most of all, they were always at her side whenever she needed them.

Laura first started school at Golden Gate elementary school. Most of the children were either Black or Asian. Laura didn't like going to school there very much although she loved going to school in general. "The Black kids would think I was Asian and would call me names and the Asian kids would make fun of me, because they thought I was Black" recalled Laura.

When Laura was having trouble with the other children at school she was not able to tell her mother because of the language barrier. Laura's mother did not speak much English and Laura did not speak much Korean. Although they were not able to communicate well with each other Laura's mother was able to sense that something was upsetting her. "One day my mother said to me, it's okay don't worry about it, it will be all right. I think my mother knew what I was going through because she was going through a similar process herself. She had to get used to a new environment and I was just finding out who I was."

Laura's mother moved to a larger apartment on Larkin street. The neighborhood was better and it allowed Cindy and Laura to go to a better school. Laura then went to Francis Scott Key in the Sunset district. There she was better received. Most of the students were white and the rest of the student body was Asian, with a few other ethnic groups represented. Laura mostly hung around the Asian groups but also had friends from other groups.

Laura did not go through any major identity crisis. She always knew that she was half Black and Korean and accepted it. There were times when she feels different from her friends. Sometimes her friends made Black jokes and totally disregard her feelings. She would be upset but then would forget about it because she was proud of her background. Laura grew up with some other children who were half Black and Korean. Their family is very close to her family and she feels a special bond with them. When she visits with them she is able to be part of the Black community because her friend's father would be there and perhaps some of his friends. Otherwise, Laura would have no contact with the Black community. She does not know her father's family and has never met them because they live in

Alabama. Laura associates more with being Asian because she was raised by her mother and because most of her friends are Asian. She has a boyfriend that is Chinese. His parents like Laura as their son's friend but not as his girl friend or potential wife.

Laura went to Lowell High School. She was faced with the dilemma of whether to put Black or Korean as her ethnic background. Laura decided to put Black because she heard that if you are certain percent Black you are technically Black. Laura thinks that she got into Lowell because she put Black. She didn't want to fill out just Black rather she wanted to put both because she was clearly both. If she could change the ethnic part of any form she would put down every major category and also have a space allowing people to write in what they were.

When Laura came to San Francisco State she liked the diverse student ethnic background. She went through the only minor identity crisis in her life. When she was filling out application forms to get into State she was asked again to fill out her ethnic background. It made her feel confused about who she really was but after awhile she began to not think of it and just accepted who she was. "I think I am really easy going. I don't let things really get to me. I just accept that things are what they are and things are more easy to handle that way."

The Dynamics of Family Change and Diversity

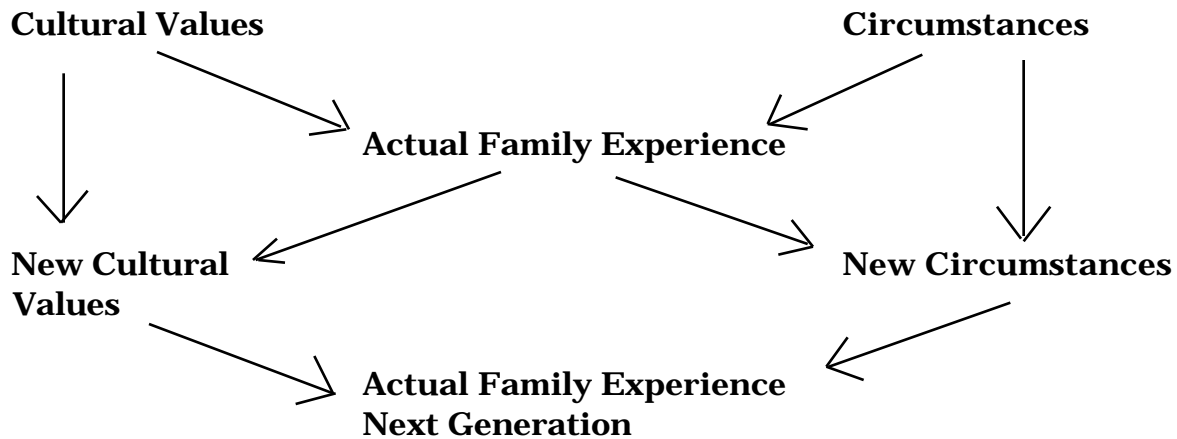
prepared by Malcolm Collier

The case can be made that no aspect of Asian American experience is as diverse as that of the details of family life and experience yet at the same time there are widely recognized commonalities among families, even among different Asian American groups. This would appear to be a contradiction but, as will be argued here, it is not. Both the diversity and the commonalities result from the dynamics of family experience and operations over time.

On a basic level it is possible to understand an actual, real family at any moment as reflecting an interaction between the cultural values of family members and the circumstance in which they find themselves at that moment. Cultural values are seen as those ideas and desires that family members have about *how* families are supposed to be, including the ideal roles and behavior of different members and the preferred ongoing activities and customs of daily life. Circumstance are seen as all the elements of the time, place, and context of their lives at that time, these include the locale, the other people around them, their means of employment, the gender and age mix of the family, the moment in history,

indeed all of the aspects of the surrounding world that may place constraints or create opportunities for their actions.

This whole process can be diagrammed as a simple model of dynamic relationships and change between two generations in which the arrows indicate the direction of influences and interactions:



The actual operations of real families never exactly match their cultural expectations because they have to modify their operations to fit the limitations or realities of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Two simple examples may illustrate this concept:

a) A family or individuals within it, may hold the role expectation that wife/mother is suppose to cook the main evening meal. However, if wife/mom works at hours that prevent her from filling that role then someone else will have to take on that activity;

b) Prior roles, values may dictate that the senior members of the family have the most important decision making responsibilities and are the people who represent the family in dealings with the outside world. However, in the context of immigration the older generation make lack the English language skills to adequately deal with many aspects of the larger American society, consequently younger people, sometimes even children may find themselves in the positions of representing the family or individuals within to institutions, officials, doctors, layers, real estate officers, and so forth.

Even in the presence of widely shared values no two families are ever exactly the same because the circumstances to which they adjust are different to greater or lesser degree. Variability becomes greater as the circumstances become more diverse, as is commonly the case in the Asian American context. If we start with

several families from the same locale in Asia who immigrate to the United State it is likely that they will become increasingly different from each other other time due to minor or major modifications in their operations to accommodate the details of the new circumstance. One might life in a large city, another in a suburb. Their employment is likely to be different, their children will have different peer groups, they will encounter different aspects of the new society. So it is not surprising that their ways will diverge.

On the other hand they may also encounter certain circumstances in common to which they arrive at similar solutions creating a sensation of shared patterns and experience. The language gap between generations, for example, creates a rather widely shared communication gap between generations in many Asian American immigrant families. Likewise the related dependency of older generation on younger for translation may lead to similar changes in roles and relationships in families. Moreover, families are rarely totally isolated from other families with shared culture and circumstances and this may also lead to shared solutions to the challenges of new circumstances, as in many of the common alterations in Lunar New Year practice in Chinese and Vietnamese American families.

Consequently, it can be seen that at any particular moment there will be both considerable diversity and significant commonality. What may not be so obvious it the impact of this dynamic relationship between cultural values and circumstance on family culture and practice over time.

We acquire our cultural expectations about family primarily in the process of growing up in a family with secondary influences from the larger culture and society around us. That means that our cultural values about family are significantly shaped by the reality of the family in which we are raised, which is the product of that interaction between culture and circumstance already described Consequently, family values are dynamic and always changing to some degree from generation to generation.

For example, a child raised in a family in which a father often cooked supper because of the mother's work schedule will have expectations about the roles of fathers relative to cooking that are different than those of a child raised in a family in which the mother does all the cooking. A person raised in family who had the flexibility of time to practice elaborate ceremonial activities at the New Year will different knowledge and expectations regarding that event than someone whose family circumstances did not permit the same degree of ceremonial activity.

As time passes that reality of experience serves to significantly shape both the values and the circumstance of the next generation as children grow up in the family

and the family makes decisions that may change their circumstances. At the same time, the new cultural values are may be affected affected by influences outside the family. Future circumstances are also affected by larger events and society. In totality then, the actual family experience a generation later reflects not only influences from the past but a new set of dynamic interactions and variables leading to a new set of family experiences.

As the details of this process are different for each family, this produces significant individual variability in the the actual experience with family for Asian Americans as well as others in the United States. This variability is somewhat modified by shared aspects of larger circumstances and culture but the entire process is dynamic and ever changing. In this manner it is possible to see the experience of any single Asian American family as both unique and also reflective of larger shared patterns among many families.

Notes

1. This discussion is based on information in numerous student papers from Asian American Studies courses as well as on conversations and direct observation.
2. The case is actual but some changes have been made in details to protect the privacy of individuals. Similar changes have been made in other examples.
3. Association of Bay Area Governments study quoted in *Asian Week* July 26, 1989, pp 13. Previously reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, date not available.
4. This account is edited from a talk given by Sayonn Sok to and Asian American Studies class in 1987. Another portion of her talk is found in Chapter Four.
5. Names have been changed at the request of the author.
6. This account has been edited from a larger, on-going study by Mayumi Stroy. Except in the case of Mayumi herself, names have been changed and some identifying details altered. The title was chosen by the editor.
7. There is no such law. However, social practice in the United States often supported the concept of "one drop" of "black blood" made a person "black."
8. This discussion is prepared by Malcolm Collier based on long standing lecture and discussions in classes.

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