

# Chapter Nine

## Community

Through most of human history and prehistory communities have served to extend our individual and familial capabilities, helping to provide social, physical, and emotional well being. Community and family can be seen as the two primary social units of human experience, in that all but the most unfortunate individuals had some form of each as part of their lives. Historically, formation of communities was a significant aspect of Asian American survival in often hostile social environments. During some periods, the importance of communities was further enhanced by absence of family units so that community even served to take on some of the functions of family. The continued need for community is reflected in the efforts of newer Asian American immigrants (Korean, Southeast Asian, and recent Filipino) to form organizations, social networks, religious associations, economic and political institutions, and other social bodies that may be the components of emerging communities.

However, the present is not past and the nature of modern America presents serious challenges to the social institution we know as community. Many characteristics of modern life work against maintenance of community and what Asian American communities are to be in these new settings remains uncertain, particularly as most Asian Americans today live in suburban type locations. Changing employment and residential patterns often create greater dispersion and isolation, fellow workers are rarely encountered outside the workplace, neighbors often remain strangers, children's friends and their families are often not known by parents, relatives may not live close enough for regular contact, storekeepers are seen only in the context of their stores, and goods and services are frequently purchased from companies as large and faceless as any government bureaucracy. There are often major separations between places of residence, places of work, stores, and support services. Residence may change repeatedly. Larger social and commercial structures of government and corporate origins may supply, usually at a price, many of the services previously provided by communities. On a practical basis, it is possible for an individual to survive today without any connection to communities as they previously existed.

Older forms of communities, relatively small and reinforced by face to face, interconnected residential, economic, social, and religious relationships, as well as by geographic proximity, are often impossible to create or maintain. For some Asian Americans, family is the only primary social unit of daily life, beyond which

individuals operate without reference to anything resembling community. Yet, there is still some need of a larger social structure beyond the family, which is itself under stress in these circumstances. Communities and the social relationships within them maintain a potential as an important source of economic support, potential political strength, goods and services, jobs, friends and entertainment, spiritual needs, and emotional health, all aspects of life that make it worth living, which cannot be replaced by simple material plenty. What new forms of community are evolving or could be developed to provide for these needs? Do we still need communities? Are there new forms of social structure developing that are not community but which serve similar functions?

The readings in this chapter, as well as the two that follow, do not fully address these questions but do serve as windows on different aspects of contemporary community. This chapter opens with a history of a community business. Businesses are important components of many Asian American communities. The account illustrates the development of a business within an ethnic community and economy. The owners identified an economic need in the community and built a business that exploited that niche. The operation of their business depended on creation and maintenance of both economic and *personal* relationships with others in their community. Over time, they formed networks of association throughout Chinatown and the region, these inter-connected networks are typical of many communities, particularly more traditional ones. The business was a small partnership and family business, with each generation in turn working within the enterprise, providing an example of one of the important economic strategies followed by Asian Americans. The chapter continues with descriptions of Chom and Thai American communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, providing some insight into the processes of building new communities and the variables that affect their operation and character. The chapter closes with a discussion of some trends and changes in patterns of residence for Asian Americans in the Bay Area, with speculation on the ramifications of these changes on the definition of Asian American community.

### **A Community Business** by Shirley Lai(1)

San Francisco Chinatown is an community that provides many essential needs. One particular store, operated by my family and called Jackson Co. has, for more than fifty years, been a major provider for restaurants and other Asian businesses both in Chinatown and other areas heavily populated by Asians. It's historical background is unique and interesting because it started out as a small business in 1934 and gradually expanded and diversified its products up until the present. Here is the story of how Jackson Co. started and expanded and how it contributed to the Asian community in the Bay Area.

Jackson Co. was founded in 1934 by three partners; two of them were merchants from Hong Kong and the one was an accounting graduate from Chicago. They got the idea from a produce store which sold produce goods to restaurants. The partners thought up the idea to sell paper and janitorial goods to restaurants and to the Asian community. The first location was on Jackson Street and they stored some of their products in nearby alley.

After they found a location for their business, they started to contact major companies such as Crown Zellerbach, Handikup, Veronica Oil, Pacific Coast Products, General Electric, Trojan Bags, Forster Co., and Dixie Co. They ordered napkins, paper cups, oil, food, pails, light bulbs, paper bags, plastic ware, and portion cups from these major companies. They sold these products wholesale and retail to gain a profit. Salesmen from different companies would come to the store and make a sales pitch for what they had to offer that would benefit our store's sales. As more salesmen found out about our store, we began to gain a whole new line of merchandise. We started to sell paper towels, toilet tissue, rice, liquor, candy, and janitorial products.

As the business grew, the partnership grew too. The company needed more people to support their plans and to help contribute to the Asian community. In 1942, they contacted a friend from Bakersfield, who had started his own tobacco business, to join in the partnership. We started to sell brand cigarettes, cigars, chewing tobacco, cigarette paper and rolling tobacco because of him. We sold these products wholesale and retail to satisfy the needs of the community. The partnership grew to about twelve people, and all of them in some way contributed something to the store. My father was a salesman until he passed away. Then we, his children, started to work there. Most of the bosses' children worked there, so it was traditionally a family operated business. The partnership grew largely because there were so many people contributing their time and ideas.

From the early 1930's to 1950's our customers were mostly in Chinatown. Salesmen from our store usually walked around Chinatown, socializing with friends who were businessmen and tried to sell our products to them. They walked to every store within Chinatown and asked them if they needed any kind of supplies from our store. From there they would take orders and deliver the merchandise. Delivery usually meant using a hand truck and delivering the merchandise to the stores. Some workers remember using an umbrella and a hand truck at the same time to do the deliveries. Eventually a truck was bought because the orders got larger and the deliveries more difficult. Some of the restaurants that we did business with over the years were Sun Hing Heung, Golden Dragon, Sun Wah Kue, Asia Garden, Empress of China, and Jackson Cafe. We supplied them with all kinds of paper and janitorial

supplies such as napkins place mats, food pails, plastic ware, Clorox, and Hexol. To this very day, we still do business with them because we established a friendship with them. Also, we did business with fish and meat markets, selling them plastic bags and cleaning supplies. The Chinese associations also bought party supplies from us such as paper plates and cups. During the early period, we were busy establishing friendships with the different stores so that we could build a better business. The bosses were very friendly with the customers because they thought the best way to do business was to have customers trust them. They built a foundation of trust and friendship with the customers so that we would get recommended by them to other businesses.

Because we did not advertise, our only source of business came from recommendations by friends and customers through word of mouth. We were not really well known but we were the first Asian paper supply store during that time. We had to look for the business. Eventually, we found out about other Asian businesses that were not located in Chinatown. In the 1950's we made deliveries all over the Bay Area and we decided to expand our business to Oakland because some of the partners lived in Oakland and they took over a store there. Every week, the main bosses would rotate to work in a different store. The Oakland store had a different name. They basically did the same kind of business that the store in San Francisco did except that Oakland was the major supplier of cigarettes and candies.

In the 1960's, the store in San Francisco moved from Jackson Street to Stockton Street, closer to the new heart of Chinatown. Our business then consisted of a mixture of Chinese, American, and Italian businesses. At that time the barriers between North Beach and Chinatown had vanished so we had more business than before. Some of those customers were Cafe Italia, Portofino Cafe, Panelli Brothers, Stella Pastry, and Coit Liquors. They discovered us by just walking by and were curious about what we had to sell. They started to do business with us and to establish a friendship with us that has lasted through the years. After our store was located in the new location business was much better. Now the second generation was also working in the business, they had some formal education and could relate to both the new non-Chinese customers and the old-timers.

As the Chinese community in San Francisco grew outside of Chinatown, our business also extended to wherever it went. We started to make deliveries to the Mission, the Sunset, and Richmond districts, Japantown, and we went as far as Daly City. In Oakland, we made deliveries to Berkeley and Fairfield. It was important to us to maintain good relations with the customers because they were our friends, and we would get a good reputation for our services. We tried to make a good example of our business because there were other companies that followed our

example and started their own supply stores. They would buy supplies from us and bring them up to Sacramento to sell to other restaurants.

Finally, in the 1970's, the store moved to North Beach, where it exists today. Since we moved to this location, business has been strained a little because the location is in the outskirts of Chinatown. People had to rely on our deliveries or they had to find some kind of transportation. We have many more products to offer, though. We sell more kinds of paper supplies such as drug bond and place mats. There are so many different kinds of take out boxes for food that it is hard to choose. We still take care of the same customers that we took care of in 1934. The friendships that we made through the years has lasted into the 1980's. That is an important factor in any kind of business.

For many years, a typical day at the store would start with packing the orders in the morning for the morning and afternoon deliveries. Usually, one truck went out in the morning while two trucks went out in the afternoon. The salesmen would stay in the store during the morning to answer the phones calls and to talk to the representatives from other suppliers. Then, in the afternoon, they would go to the different communities within San Francisco to receive orders. Sometimes in the morning, we would receive incoming merchandise that we ordered from our suppliers. Usually, we never had trouble unloading the trucks except when we blocked up traffic. When we were on Stockton Street we had to reserve a space for incoming trucks. It was not much of a problem because nobody complained and we kept it under control. But when we first moved to North Beach, the fancy restaurant next door complained about the trucks blocking their view. They complained about everything. They didn't like us moving next door because we always had a lot of trucks parked outside and sometimes it caused traffic problems.

Today (1988) the store's business is not been the same as it was fifty years ago. There have been many changes both positive and negative. As people are learning more about other wholesalers, we seem to be losing our customers. In the Asian community, we are still important but the Asians are getting more advanced in their lifestyle. They are more educated and knowledgeable about the community outside of Chinatown. We feel that they would rather do their business somewhere else. On the other hand, we still take care of our regular customers. The ones that I mentioned earlier still do business with us. We gained many new products over the years, and they are the first to try them.

In 1988, the operation is still run the same except that the staff has changed somewhat. Only two of the original bosses have survived and the business is mostly run by their children. Work at the store is very much laid back. The bosses are not strict because they trust our judgment. We still have two salesmen who go out to the

different districts to receive orders. They usually have set dates to go to each district. On Mondays, they go to Chinatown. On Tuesdays, it is Richmond District, and on Wednesday the Sunset district is visited. This had been a tradition in our store for many years.

We have served the Asian community for more than fifty years. We made many contributions and set examples for other businessmen. It's important to me not to forget or overlook this history because my life has revolved around the store. I live in Daly City and when I visit the store every week I learn something new about the Asian community. I always find it interesting that there are so many new restaurants and produce markets. They are small, but they seem to have the right incentive for business. Our store has provided them with most of their needs.

The future of the store look dim because they (the owners) are trying to sell the store. They are getting old and would rather end the business. While we still have many of the same customers the business is slower now. When it closes, we will still have all those friends that we made but it will not be the same.

Author's epilogue, 1993: Sadly, the store switched owners in early 1993 and the name has been changed. Although the new owners are White, they have kept most of the same staff, primarily Chinese, because of the many Asian customers. Two of the main partners passed away before the business was sold. The remaining partner's health has slowly deteriorated since mid-1992 when the decision to sell was made. He is ninety-three years old and dedicated to the store. (Editor's note 2001: The business now no longer exists.)

## **The Thai Community in the Bay Area by A. P. K(2)**

Fifteen years ago, if I were to tell someone I was Thai, they would usually say "Oh, from Taiwan" but during the past few years people have known from my name that I am Thai and speak to me about Thailand, Thai culture, and Thai food. This change seems to coincide with the growth of Thai population and visibility in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Thai community is somewhat unique for reasons stemming from its heritage, rapid growth, and the economic conditions of modern Thailand.

Thailand (Siam) has a very proud and rich history. It was never colonized by European powers and this affects how Thai people acculturate other cultures. Although there were Christian missionaries in Thailand, Thai people were never fully exposed to or bombarded by European or American languages or cultures. (3, 4) Thai people have immigrated to the United States for reasons similar and also

different from those of other Asian immigrants. Unlike other Southeast Asians in America, Thais immigrants did not come as refugees although their rise in numbers occurs in the same time period as the arrivals of refugees from other parts of Southeast Asia. Instead, they came for economic and educational reasons although there was no great economic depression. In fact, the economic success of modern Thailand has an impact on the Thai community in the Bay Area. With American college degrees looked upon with favor, the economic growth now pulls Thai people who have been in America for many years to return to their homeland.

Demographic information on the Thai population in the Bay Area is difficult to obtain before the 1990 census but national statistics show growth in immigration from 1965 onward. Between 1951 and 1960 only 458 Thai immigrants were reported but by the decade of 1981-90 the figure grew to 64,437.(5) Initially, many Thai immigrants were professionals, especially doctors and nurses, who settled in the eastern part of the United States where licensing of foreign medical professionals was less strict than in California but today most Thais are not medical professionals.(6) Instead, later immigrants include large numbers of relatives of earlier arrivals and many higher education students.

By 1990, the census reported 30, 461 Thai in California, although this figure reflects a substantial under count according to Thai community sources. In the San Francisco Bay Area, Thai population is largest in Alameda, Santa Clara, San Francisco, and San Mateo counties, with no significant concentration in any single locale. Consequently, the Thai community formed on the basis of a regional organization and connecting points rather than any particular residential locale. The regional organization is the Northern California Thai Association, a derivative organization of a statewide organization originally formed by Thai students in 1955. There is a counterpoint organization in southern California called the Southern California Thai Association.

Originally created to provide representation of the Thai population to outsiders, the association's functions primarily include cultural programs, social gatherings, Thai national celebrations, and fund raising events. The social activities bring members of the regional Thai community together for camping trips, bowling, and even an annual sporting competition with the Southern California Thai Association. National celebrations, such as Songklarn (Thai New Year) and Loi Kratong (paying respect to the rivers in Thailand) are the biggest gatherings of the Thai community with food, music, games, dancing, beauty pageants, and classical Thai dancing and performances. Thai people from all over the Bay Area come to these events, where they meet and socialize with people they would never see on a day to day basis. Thus the events become not only an occasion to be proud of and remember one's heritage

but also an opportunity to connect with other Thai people and form new relationships.

Interconnected with the association are the Thai Buddhist temples, of which there are two in the Bay Area. One is in Fremont and the other in Berkeley and they serve dual functions for the Thai community. Besides providing people with Thai Buddhist religious ceremonies, including a place of worship with weddings, funerals and birthdays, the temples are major connecting centers for Thai in the region. The temples are meeting locations for the Thai Association, which draw large crowds, and on any given Sunday at the temples one can be certain meet Thai people from all over the Bay Area who are there either for the ceremonies or to associate with friends and other community members. Because of their regional draw, the temples also serve as information resource centers regarding business and employment. The monks also serve as counselors for people with problems or conflicts.

As the Thai community has grown to include second and third generation children, the temples have also become cultural centers for families and youth. People in the community began to realize that their children might forget or never learn Thai culture and identity, so they set up Thai language schools and cultural instruction programs in Thai classical dances and arts. The Thai classical dance group, Natasimp Siam, provides some children their first organized exposure to Thai culture. Although they may practice Buddhism and speak Thai at home, the dance group provides more involvement and a sense of pride in culture and heritage.(7) After long hours of practice both children and adults are proud when the children perform and hear the audience's involvement and delight with the dance. Both the dance group and the language schools allow the children to look forward to visiting Thailand and even returning there to live.

Restaurants and businesses also provide crucial connecting points for the Thai community. From small beginnings in the early 1980s it now seems impossible to *not* find Thai restaurants in most parts of the Bay Area. These restaurants help provide an economic and social base. They provide employment and visibility for the Thai community but they do not directly provide significant goods or service to the community, although people do go to them to socialize with owners and workers. More recently, bars and small Thai night clubs have opened which serve a growing population of Thai college students and adults who go to listen to contemporary Thai music and to hang out with other people.

Another aspect of the Thai business community are the small markets and video stores. Here can be found Thai foods and snacks that may be difficult to find in other Asian markets. The stores often sell Thai traditional clothing and fabrics, as well as the names of people who may be able to provide what the store may not sell. Most



important, these small stores provide music and video tapes from Thailand that allow people to remain in touch with their homeland. the video tapes include talk shows, game shows, news reports, and especially soap opera. They can be rented on a weekly basis, at low cost, so one finds that many Thai people watch Thai shows on video rather than regular American television programs.

The Thai community faces several issues related to their growth in population here and the economic developments in Thailand. One issue revolves around returning home, although some have been in the United States for many years and are permanent residents, many are reluctant or indecisive about becoming U.S. citizens. They are also worried about the impact on their American pensions plans and retirement benefits if their were to return to Thailand.

Many families make a point of returning to to Thailand at least once a year and large numbers of the adult immigrants have made plans to retire in Thailand. These plans are complicated by their children, many of who were born here or came at very young ages. These children may have no recollection of Thailand and have been raised and educated in the United States. This is why language schools and trips back to Thailand are so important to the parents, many of whom want their children to go back to Thailand with their American educations and take advantage of the economic boom in the homeland, where American college degrees are highly respected.(8) This is where conflicts arise as some children do not wish to return and feel America to be their home yet feel the pressure from their parents expectations. Some probably will probably return but other will remain in America and return to Thailand only to visit.

Another issue is factionalism within the Thai Association, as different views on how the Association should be run leads to splits. These splits are part of the reason there are two Buddhist temples, with a third one developing in Millbrae. What will happen to community unity as it becomes divided into who belongs to which temple, who back who, and why?

In the end, the future of the community lies with the second generation, especially if large numbers of the immigrant generation returns to Thailand. At present, the Thai community is not involved with larger Asian American issues or other Asian American groups because many in the community plan to return home. But the second generation may lead the community to become more involved in these directions. The future of the community will also be affected by the already evident growth of class divisions within the community, which may lead to further fragmentation. Overall, the Thai community is relatively young and there are many more issues they will eventually face.

## **San Francisco Cham** by Hafisgoh Moly

### **Introduction**

The Kingdom of Champa, located on the Indochinese peninsula was inhabited by the Cham, a people ethnically related to the present-day of Indonesians, Malaysians, Philippines and East Indians. It came into being late in the second Century AD. "Champa" is the name of a white flower called HOA CHAMPA. The Kingdom of Champa was named after this flower. The old Chinese called it "Chiempa" or "Chiem Phu Lao", and the French called it "Ciampa." Originally located in the province of Quang Nam near Hue, Vietnam, it extended South to Camranh Bay and West into Cambodia and Laos. Champa's culture was significantly influenced by India and reflected Hindu religious and artistic ideas. The Cham religions were Hinduism, Buddhism, and finally Islam (9). About 90 percent of the Cham in Vietnam today are Muslims. This is true as well of the Cham refugees in United States and in other countries. Because of being Muslim, the Cham were forced to learn the Arabic and Malaysian languages with Arabic scripts. Thus, Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Arabic became Cham second, third, and fourth languages.

There are about 10,000 Cham in Malaysia, 10,000 in United States, 1,000 in France, 400 in Canada, 400 in Australia, and 250 in Denmark. In San Francisco, there are 45 families consisting of around 300 people. The Cham in San Francisco and in other cities of the United States have their own communities. Each of the communities were formed in the same time - early in 1983.(10)

The Cham are a very close people. We maintain a close association with other Cham communities through weddings, funerals, religious holidays, and other special occasions. Cham communities make themselves available to other Cham people in time of need. Although some government assistance is available, the Cham community provides most of the assistance to other Cham upon their arrival in their new country including transportation and shelter while the new arrivals really settle down. They are also assisted through the clinical check ups and the completion of the necessary application forms for government aid and in becoming familiarized with their new surroundings.

Our Cham community, like other ethnic communities, faces problems. These problems include: religious concerns, financial, racial discrimination, and a language barriers. The political structure of the community is as follows: The leaders are selected by consensus of the community based upon qualities including their education and background. The leaders and other men of the community meet at an

Islamic center every Friday to pray and to discuss important community issues including topics such as collecting funds to meet the needs of the less fortunate Cham people who are still in refugee camps and those who remain in Vietnam. Good and bad news is discussed at these meetings and analyzed for impact on the Cham Community. Leaders also attempt to facilitate settlement of disputes within the community. Problems within the community, including problems existing outside the immediate community - such as in Vietnam - are discussed and analyzed to determine if aid or other solutions would help.

## **Religious Concerns**

Our main concern is that our culture and religion are not compromised. We want to maintain our cultural and religious identity and not live in fear of being blended, through marriage and other means, with other cultures and religions. We attempt to overcome this problem by maintaining our close community ties, education, and trying to accept and understand the different cultures and religions that exist in the United States. We are educating our community by providing support with the following: time, money, and much energy.

Each leader takes care of different problems. For example, when someone dies in the community, the president of the community takes a day off from work to run errands. Muslim rule mandates that the dead person be buried as soon as possible, usually within 24 hours. Additionally, it is against Muslim law to mutilate the body - which is so often done in non Muslim countries. For example, in the United States, in order to determine a cause of death, a doctor may cut the body open or in some other fashion operate on the body. So, it is very difficult to follow Muslim rule when it comes to handling of the dead. The leaders and the members of the family of the person who dies always try very hard to convince the doctor not to do any examination. At the same time other leaders tried to convince hospital staff and the local registrar to approve the death certificate before they get the dead person out of the hospital. While this activity is going on, other members of the community will contact the funeral director for a the funeral permit, and use of a mortuary chapel. Other activities are taking place at the same time. For example, other religious leaders will be contacting the local Islamic Center to request permission to use the center for use in the burial ceremony, while the women of the community will be arranging for food for the gathering after the burial ceremony.

Religion is strongly emphasized to the Cham children. To ensure that religious beliefs are instilled in the younger generation, children are taught in the home during the week, and at the mosque during the weekends. Those who live far from the mosque or Islamic center, where it would be inconvenient to visit the mosque or Islamic center are taught at home, usually by a grandparent or a community

member who volunteers to teach religion in the home. In addition, parents and/or grandparents also emphasize the importance of living life as taught by the Prophet Muhammad.

## **Community Finances**

We attempt to solve the financial problem of the community by sharing funds with those in need. The Cham community does not receive much financial help from other Muslim ethnic groups (such as the Middle Eastern Arabs or Malaysians), because we are neither large nor as well recognized as other ethnic groups. Because of this difficulty, we raise our own funds within our community. For example, monthly membership in the Islamic Community is \$20.00 per family and \$10.00 per single person. There are 45 families and 43 singles. The community makes \$1,310.00 per month or \$15,720 per year. A total of \$7,200.00 goes to the rent and utilities of the Islamic Center. Of the remaining \$8,520.00, the community rents a hall for several times a year on special holidays. Such holidays as

"Roya Idilfitdari" (the ending celebration of Ramadan) and "Roya Haji" (the celebration for community members who are making their pilgrimages to Mecca each year.)

After spending money on those activities, if there is money left, the community tries to have an informal award ceremony for the children of the community who receive grade points average of 3.00 or higher. Each family makes individual contribution for the charitable purposes such as help to the less fortunate in refugee camps and other locations in Viet Nam. Funds also go toward helping repair the Mosques and assist in the education of Vietnamese Muslim children through supplementing the salaries of school professors. Because of the difficulties that I mentioned above, the community is always in need of money for emergencies, and crisis that make it difficult to accumulate any savings. In addition, it is very difficult for families to make contributions for financial matters, especially when they don't feel that the community is making progress toward the community goals. It seems like we will never have enough of money to purchase a center. (11)

## **Racial Discrimination**

Strange as it may seem, we face more racial discrimination from other Asian groups than from the majority ethnic groups like whites. For example, the Cham are not only a minority in the United States, but are a minority in South East Asian countries like Vietnam and Cambodia. We are a small group in these two countries. Our country (Champa) was conquered, and eliminated by the Vietnamese who have discriminated against the Cham ever since. We loose some of our identity because

we are forced to take a Vietnamese name if we want to get and maintain any kind of a good job. A further example of discrimination that we face from the Asian community is in the political arena in Vietnam, where we have no voice on how the country is governed.

Again, this is probably due to the fact that we are a minority within the Asian community. We attempt to overcome this problem by maintain close ties within our own community through participation in social functions such as weddings, religious festivals, and other activities.

### **Language Issues**

Last, but not least, is our problem with language hurdles. As mentioned earlier, because of our cultural background we have been required to speak several different languages. In addition to the languages mentioned earlier in this paper, because we lived in Viet Nam, and now in the United States, we have had to learn Vietnamese and English. Although, knowing how to speak these different languages is helpful at times, there are occasions when it becomes unwieldy because of the confusion and distraction of knowing how to speak, read, and write all these different languages. This is very distractive because it makes it difficult to concentrate on learning the proper English necessary do do well in school and to obtain white collar or professional jobs. The goals of the Cham community is to someday become strong and recognized so we can easily overcome the problems that we are currently facing.

### **Conclusion**

Through the research for this paper, I have learned much more about my cherished community and its problems. My love for the community has grown since I begin working on this paper. I want very much to help the community to solve its problems in any way that I can. I know that I'm only one person, who may not be able to solve all the problems we face, but I want to contribute more to my community than I have in the past. I feel that by making even small contributions (financial or non-financial), I will have accomplished something for being such a powerless person. By doing this is paper I also realize that there are other communities, not unlike the Cham, who also face an abundance of difficulties and barriers in life. Knowing that other minority communities exist, I don't feel like we are alone in our suffering and difficulties and I don't feel as hurt and sad about my community. If I can share some of my experiences with others, and help them solve their difficulties, I will feel better about myself.

## **A Meditation on Community and Changing Residential Patterns**

Prepared by Malcolm Collier

"Community" has been and remains a central concept in Asian American Studies. A basic rationale for the creation of Asian American Studies programs in the late 1960's was "the university should serve the needs of the community." There were other rationales but this one was, perhaps, the most central and it continues to shape interests, activities and rhetoric into the present. The phrase "the community" is also used outside the university by individuals and groups whose activities involve them in the social and political concerns of Asian American groups. But what is "community?" This essay explores the nature of "community" in the Asian American context through a discussion the concept of community and the different settings in which Asian Americans have lived in the past and the changes in those circumstances in the present.(12)

Organizations, agencies, and individuals are often characterized as being "of the community." Frequently being "in the community" or "from the community" is perceived as positive while lack of such identification reduces credibility and importance. But the basis of these categorizations is often unrelated to the modern reality of Asian American life. We habitually use limited conceptions of community that exclude many Asian Americans from inclusion in "community" because they no longer live in the "traditional" core locations. There are consequences to these exclusions. Individuals may come to believe that a reaffirmation of themselves as Asian Americans is possible only in the context of the traditionally defined communities and if this proves impossible they may become alienated and feel that they have no community. On a larger scale, exclusive definitions of community can lead individuals and agencies to concentrate community service efforts on the traditionally defined populations and locations, overlooking the needs of those outside these locations and groups. More seriously, insistence on defining community in old terms while ignoring the changed circumstances of Asian Americans today may hamper the development of new and appropriate forms of community in changing times.

Most of the time, our conception of community is first and foremost geographically defined, if we can't give it a location then we feel uncomfortable. Ask what comes to people's mind when you say "Chinese American Community," or "Japanese American Community" and you will inevitably get a location. Ask the same question about "Filipino American Community" or "Korean American Community" in the San Francisco Bay Area and people will pause while they try to come up with a place, if they can't they may even say "there is no community."

It is easy to understand the origin of this tendency. Many of us have an internalized concept of community that has its ultimate origins in the small, rural and village communities that were the form of community for most humans until relatively recent times. This "traditional" form of community usually had four basic characteristics:

- a) It had a distinct and exclusive geographical location.
- b) It was relatively small and most people knew of each other.
- c) It was often relatively homogeneous in socio/cultural terms.
- d) It was relatively self-sufficient, most everyday needs were met within its boundaries, although for special or exceptional requirements it might have been necessary to go elsewhere.

This form of community is either absent or difficult to maintain in an industrialized or post industrial society and *is not* the form of community for any Asian Americans today. *No identifiable Asian American community today* has more than two of the characteristic defined above and many Asian Americans lead their lives in circumstances that have none of these characteristics. If we are to arrive at an understanding of what modern communities are or may be for Asian Americans, it is necessary to examine the diversity of circumstances in which Asian Americans have lived in the past and are in found in today.(13)

### **1. Separate, self-contained communities**

These are historical rather than contemporary. Monterey's Chinatown (once located just west of the present site of the Monterey Bay Aquarium) was such a community, as was Locke, which still provides a partial example of what such a community looked like. These communities were separate in space from other communities or towns and almost exclusively Asian American in population. To a large extent their characteristics matched those of the traditional conception of community given above and none survive in the present.(14)

### **2. Self-contained communities within other communities**

These are clearly defined locations *inside* a surrounding town or city, within which the population is overwhelmingly Asian American. A good example is San Francisco Chinatown. An important characteristic of the larger communities of this type is that people can (if they wish) live in them, work in them, buy their food, do their banking, go to school, get medical attention, indeed meet most of their needs, all without having to leave the confines of the neighborhood. To some degree, people's relationships with each other may be reinforced on multiple levels of shared

residence, work contacts, casual encounters in shops and cafes or restaurants or on the street, and other face to face contacts. The larger of such communities are not small in population, however, and might better be seen as small cities within larger cities.

Both the separate, historic communities and the existing self-contained areas within larger towns and cities are readily recognized as communities, in large part because of their distinct geographic identity and, superficially, homogeneous populations. They are visible even to those with little awareness of Asian Americans. The proximity of the inhabitants and daily contacts ease the creation and maintenance of social connections among them, providing a definite potential for a sense of community. Many also serve regional populations in addition to their own residents. They are frequently trade and cultural centers for members of the ethnic group living within the region, providing jobs, goods, services, meeting places, entertainment, and a comfortable environment for non-residents as well as residents. They can be seen as small cities as well as communities and some are also international trade centers with connections to Asia.

Most of those that exist today are, however, quite different from any traditional community. Their populations are actually quite diverse in origins, social and economic status, and frequently even in languages. Increasingly, their residents leave the area for employment, for goods and services, and other needs. Many are quite large in population and their economies are closely tied to surrounding regions and are far from self-sufficient. Some, particularly those with longer histories, suffer from a variety of problems, including shortages of housing, physically run down buildings, and lack of social services for many of their residents, as well as a variety of economic pressures.(15)

### **3. Asian Americans in Small Towns and Rural Areas**

These circumstances include Asian Americans located within rural areas and small, agricultural towns or cities, as with some Japanese American, Filipino American, and (more recently) Southeast Asians in the Central Valley of California. In the past many Chinese Americans also lived in similar settings. Usually, no single location can be identified as "Asian American" but there are sufficient numbers of people within the larger area for a sense of "community" to develop. This may be reflected by ethnic churches, businesses, and association buildings, in a social sense it is manifested by a network of social relationships. Formation and maintenance of an Asian American community in these settings requires some conscious effort because the dispersed character of residence and work may not provide ready contacts among community members who, on a daily basis, may have more contact with people with other ethnic groups than within their own. Ethnic



businesses and social, community, or religious organizations are often important because they provide the opportunities for people to make and maintain contacts with each other.(16)

A related circumstance is that of Asian American families with businesses in small town and cities. Many small towns in the western United States, for example, have Asian Americans families in retail or service businesses, some of whom may have been there for several generations. These families are frequently Chinese American although this niche is increasingly filled by more recent refugees from SE Asia, often ethnic Chinese but also Vietnamese. The superficial assumption is that they are not part of any "Asian American community" but in most cases they have a network of social and business connections with other families in the region as well as with more distant Asian American centers. Such was the case with a Japanese American family that operated a laundry in a small Nebraska farm town for three generations. On one level the family was fully incorporated into the local, otherwise White town, but they also maintained social, familial, and cultural connections with other Japanese Americans in Nebraska and adjoining states.(17) Maintenance of these social relationships, however, takes great effort because they are not reinforced by regular contact and circumstance and may require extensive travel.(18)

#### **4. Asian Americans within larger Suburban and Urban Communities**

This circumstance represents the major change in Asian American residential patterns since 1965. Historically, Asian Americans lived in urban or rural areas and their ability to live in the expanding American suburbs was limited by both employment and housing discrimination. Shifting employment opportunities and the elimination of legalized housing discrimination, together with the rapid increase in Asian American population after 1965 have served to make suburban settings the most common residential circumstance for Asian Americans today.

It is in this new setting that one may see the potential for new types of Asian American communities. It is one in which large numbers of Asian Americans are in an area, often to the extent that there is some association of the area with them, but there are also many other ethnic groups present. The oldest and most developed example of this type of community is probably Gardena in southern California. As Japanese American population grew in the area during the 1950's, a complete infrastructure of churches, temples, businesses, services, and organizations developed.(19) The Richmond and Sunset districts of San Francisco, with their large Chinese American populations and Daly City with its large Filipino American population are obvious examples. Indeed the vast majority of Asian Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area live in suburban settings including places like Sunnyvale, Cupertino, Fremont, Union City, Santa Clara, San Jose, El Cerrito,

Hercules, Fairfield, and many other locales. The same pattern is to be found in Los Angeles and the metropolitan areas of the North Eastern United States.

Suburban circumstances are different from the communities discussed earlier. While the concentration of Asian Americans in these areas may be quite high, the population as a whole remains diverse. Most residents, including Asian Americans, commute to work elsewhere and there is less overlap of social, economic, religious, and familial worlds. A family may live in one area, shop for goods in several locations at some distance, attend religious services somewhere else, and work at several places, all out of the immediate area. Life is more dispersed and, as in rural and small towns, conscious effort is required to create and maintain social and community networks.(20)

Initially, the presence of a large Asian American population may not be reflected in the goods and services available in the area and Asian American residents often travel considerable distances to older, more established centers to buy foods and other culturally specific goods. However, the large numbers of Asian Americans in these areas often, with time, creates economic and social motivation for development of businesses, social and religious institutions, and ethnic organizations which provide a more visible Asian American presence and sense of community. This process can be seen occurring in the Daly City area of northern San Mateo county. Here large numbers of Filipino Americans moved in during the 1970s and on through the 1980s, along with additional numbers of Chinese Americans. Some census tracts had concentrations of close to 50% Asian American by 1980 and in 2000 Asian American comprised 53% of the city's population. However it was not until after the mid 1980s that substantial numbers of Asian American businesses and services began to be evident. In the 1990s similar processes have occurred throughout the Bay Area with the development not only of increasing numbers of Asian American business but also Asian American malls and supermarket chains.(21) Some of the older areas of this type have become trade and social centers in their own right, serving Asian Americans from other locales as well as their own residents. Clement Street in the Richmond district and Irving Street in the sunset district of San Francisco are examples of this stage of development, resulting in informally named "New Chinatowns."

Despite these commercial and social developments, people's connections with each other in these places often remains transitory and the development of a complete sense of community is often difficult. While commercial community often develop, as do religious institutions, other forms of community organizations are often limited in number. Except for a few older examples like Gardena, these locales are a relatively new type of living situation for Asian Americans and formation of community is still in an early stage. The numbers of Asian Americans in the

population and their statistical concentration would seem to make development of community possible but the dispersed nature of people's everyday lives tends to work against this process. Like most other Americans in suburbia, Asian Americans are faced with the need to define new types of community that can function in this modern setting.

## **5. Isolated Asian Americans in urban and suburban areas**

As their population becomes more dispersed Asian Americans live in urban and suburban areas in which there are few other Asian Americans. Frequently, these are well educated people with jobs in the mainstream economy who have moved in search of "better" homes, schools or because their employment required it. Their numbers are growing and when they maintain community connections it is usually through social relationships and visits, often frequent, to one or another of types of places already discussed. If enough other Asian Americans follow them, the locale can become a new center of Asian American residence. In the meantime these families and individuals remain either isolated or pioneers, depending on one's perspective.

Their challenge is how to maintain a sense of connection to other Asian Americans, *if* that is important to them. Like isolated families in small towns, such connections need to be consciously maintained, lacking which they may become alienated from their original communities without having any new one to take its place. The younger generation, in particular, may cease to have any sense of connection to a larger Asian American world.

## **6. Communities without a geographic locale**

Does "community" require a place? So far, the examples given in one manner or another are somewhat connected to a *place* or *region* and to residential patterns. But the social relationships that may lead to "community" as it operates for an individual Asian American today are often not so much a matter of place, region, or residential location so much as a set of social and functional relationships with other Asian Americans, some of whom may be quite distant from one another. Such networks are not absolutely dependent on physical proximity or localized concentrations of Asian Americans.

The nature of someone's network "community" can often be discovered by tracing the activities of individuals over periods of time and observing how, where, with whom, and from whom they obtain goods and services, socialize, and in other ways define the human contacts of their lives. Not infrequently such an investigation will reveal that the person, family, or group may have contacts over a very wide area and

that no single location defines their "functional" community. This pattern is quite common with many Filipino Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area, for example. Someone may live in Daly City, work in San Francisco, buy vegetables on Clement Street, Filipino pastries in the Serramonte area, hang out with friends at a bowling alley in Hayward, go fishing in the Sacramento delta, while having a network of relatives spread over five counties. Yet in this whole range of places and people, the individual may have almost all their social contacts with other Filipino Americans. Many Asian Americans operate in this manner, whether they live in an geographically identifiable Asian American locale or not.

These are also networks of social relationships based on shared interests or circumstances including professional interests, common backgrounds, religion, business needs, cultural activities, and so forth. In this manner one could talk of the "community" of Asian American writers or the Korean American business "community." "Community" on this level may be rather limited in its functions with their members other needs being served served by other institutions or social connections. In this sense it may be possible to conceive of people who have several "communities" with which they connect rather than just one.

## **7. Difficulties in Forming and Maintaining Community**

As has been suggested earlier, social connections and networks are easier to establish and maintain in some circumstances than others. They are formed more readily when there is considerable overlap of economic, residential, religious, and social contacts in a single locale on a daily basis. When these conditions are present, some form of community may develop almost of its own accord and when people need to come together for particular purposes the process may be relatively easy because of the preexisting informal contacts. When people are more dispersed, and their connections with each other more fleeting or specialized, such organizing is much more difficult.

The general absence of Asian American political influence in some locales is probably affected by some of these variables. For many years, Gardena (in southern California) was the only city on the mainland in which an Asian American group could be said to have real political influence and voice. It is notable that the growth of Japanese American political power in Gardena appears to have *followed* the establishment of a community infrastructure of businesses, churches, temples, and other Japanese American social and cultural organizations that connected people to one another. This contrasts to the situation of Filipino Americans in the Daly City/Serramonte area south of San Francisco where the high concentration of Filipino Americans far exceeds that of Japanese Americans in Gardena by but they still had no significant political voice in 1995. Unlike Gardena, the infrastructure of

businesses, churches, and other institutions connected with the Asian American population of Daly City is still developing and may not yet provide the necessary inter-connections. There are probably other variables as well. Daly City is an older, more established political unit than Gardena was at the time that Japanese Americans started moving in during the 1950's, so the political setting may be less fluid and more open to new groups. Asian Americans have been elected to local political positions in Hercules, Union City, as well as other relatively new suburban cities in the Bay Area, even in the relative absence of any ethnic economic or social infrastructure.(22)

Absence of ideal conditions does not, however, preclude formation of network based community, as illustrated by the situation of scattered Asian American families in small towns. The formation and maintenance of social ties in all locales often involves establishing places and institutions where people can make and continue relationships. Family associations in traditional Chinese American communities had this function in the past, as do churches, sports leagues, cultural groups, and community centers for some suburban Asian Americans today. The organizing and incorporation of Buddhist temples by recent Cambodian refugees serves a similar purpose beyond the religious, the establishment of an anchor point for formation of community. (23) Some smaller Asian American groups clearly recognize this dynamic and deliberately set out to create such connecting institutions, as illustrated by the Thai and Chom examples earlier in this chapter as well as by recent plans for development of a cultural and religious center by the Iu Mein in Oakland. (24)

## **8. Redefinition of Community**

The difficulty faced by modern Asian Americans is how to make community in a new world of dispersed and often transitory human connections. The examples presented may provide a basis for a more encompassing conception of community that involves *overlapping* networks of relationships that are regularly maintained and within which social needs for friendships, spouses, spiritual support, jobs, services, and entertainments are routinely met.

It is not necessary for any two individuals to know each directly in order to belong to the same networks. People who do not know each other may still have relationship through shared networks involving others, so that community membership can be established through identification of common networks. The reality of such networks can readily be observed when strangers meet. If they are members of the same community they will rapidly discover people, places, social activities and expectations, and past experiences that they share in common. This discovery both establishes the shared community relationships and reaffirms the

community as a whole.

Community in the modern context might best be defined then as: "*Overlapping networks* of personal, familial, and other relationships in which membership is defined through those relationships and their reaffirmation." If the members of such networks are largely Asian Americans it can be said that the community is an Asian American community. The character of such communities will vary considerably and some will be more comprehensive than others. It is also possible, even likely, for individuals to "belong" to several such communities. While the communities may often have a geographical location, place is less important than relationships and functions. This conception of community might better describe the dynamic and changing nature of Asian American communities today and allow for a more positive response to the changing needs of those communities.

#### Notes

1. The name of the business, some details of location, and any names of people have been changed at the request of the author.
2. This section is edited from a longer paper on Thai American community.
3. Interview, Somkiat Pongkanta, Northern California Thai Association.
4. Editor's note: On the other hand, Thailand has been significantly affected by Chinese migrants and culture.
5. 1992 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.
6. Interview, Somkiat Pongkanta
7. Personal communication, Moddy Wanaraksa
8. Interview, Somkiat Pongka
9. Maspero, G. 1949. "The Kingdom of Champa" in *Academic American Encyclopedia*. New York: Grolier Electronic Publishing, Inc.
10. Tran, Phuc. Interview: October, 1993
11. Tran, Phuc. Interview: October, 1993
12. This essay is an ongoing exploration of the subject of Asian American community. It is based on: a) Photographic data gathered by students in AAS 308 "Photographic Exploration of Asian America" at SFSU; b) Papers on community from other Asian American Studies courses; c) Photographic work carried out by the author between 1974 and 2002; d) Observation and participation Asian American communities.

13. Material that follows based on sources cited earlier, unless otherwise noted. Related references are provided, as appropriate, to identify additional sources of information for the reader.

14. See Lydon, Sandy, 1985, *Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region*, Capitola: Capitola Book Co. for information on Monterey Chinatown and other rural and small town Chinese communities in this region.

15. For an overview of characteristics, functions, and developments in U.S. Chinatowns see Chinn, Young, and Chin, 1990. *Chinatown USA: Planning and Development in American Chinatowns*. San Francisco: Chinatown Resource Center. See Kwong, Peter, 1987, *The New Chinatown*. New York: The Noonday Press, for an example of a detailed study of a modern Chinatown.

16. An excellent account of rural settings is Masumoto, David Mas, 1987, *Country Voices: The Oral History of a Japanese American Family Farm Community*. Del Rey, Calif.: Inaka Countryside Publications.

17. Julie N., personal communication.

18. See Chalfen, Richard, 1991, *Turning Leaves: The Photograph Collections of Two Japanese American Families*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, for accounts of Japanese American families in Gallup, New Mexico.

19. Information on Gardena is courtesy of Dr. Lane R. Hirabayashi. Please see Chapter Nine for further information on Gardena.

20. See Kendis, Kaoru Oguri, 1989, *A Matter of Comfort: Ethnic Maintenance and Ethnic Style Among Third Generation Japanese Americans*. New York: AMS Press.

21. Examples of studies of emerging communities are: Lou, Raymond, "The Vietnamese Business Community of San Jose" and Wong, Charles Choy, "Monterey Park: A Community in Transition" - both Nomura, Endo, Sumida, and Leong, eds., 1989, *Frontiers of Asian American Studies*. Pullman, Wash.: Washington State University Press.

22. Elections in 1995 and 1996 finally resulted in election of Filipino Americans to city offices in Daly City. Another older suburb in which Asian Americans have gained political power is Monterey Park, see previous note.

23. Sayonn Yim, personal communication.

24. Moug Saetern, personal communication.

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