

Stories from the Homefront

Perspectives of Asian American Parents with Lesbian Daughters and Gay Sons

Alice Y. Hom

Having been a classroom teacher since 1963, I have new knowledge that ten percent of all the students who came through my classroom have grown up and are gay and lesbian.... Because I cannot undo the past, I want to teach people the truth about homosexuality so people will not abandon these children.¹

These are stories from the homefront; the emotions, responses, and attitudes of Asian American parents regarding their lesbian daughters or gay sons.² The stories attempt to shed some light on parents' attitudes, and inform lesbians and gay men about the various ways that parents may react and respond to their coming out.

I focus on four themes that illustrate important concepts around understanding Asian American parents and their views on homosexuality. These themes emerged from the interviews: 1) the attitudes of parents before disclosure/discovery; 2) the attitudes and reactions of parents after disclosure/discovery; 3) disclosure to friends and their communities; and 4) advice for other parents.

Sexuality is an issue rarely or never discussed amongst Asian families, yet it remains a vital aspect of one's life. What are the implications of alternative sexualities in family situations? Coming out stories and experiences of Asian American lesbians and gay men have had some exposure and publication,³ however the voices of the parents are rarely presented or known.

I found the majority of interviewees through personal contacts with individuals in organizations such as Asian Pacifica Sisters in San Francisco, Mahu Sisters and Brothers Alliance at UCLA, and Gay Asian Pacific Alliance Community HIV Project in San Francisco. I met one set of parents through the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays group in Los Angeles. Obviously this select group of people, who were willing to talk about their child, might represent only certain perspectives. Nonetheless, I managed to pool a diverse set of parents despite the small size in terms of disclosing time and time lapse— some parents have known for years and a few have recently found out. I did receive some “no” answers to my request. I also offered complete anonymity in the interviews; most preferred pseudonyms. Names with an asterisk sign denote pseudonyms.

I interviewed thirteen parents altogether, all mothers except for two fathers.⁴ The interviewee pool consisted of four single mothers by divorce, a widower, two couples, and four married mothers. The ethnicities included four Chinese, four Japanese, three Pilipinas, one Vietnamese, and one Korean. Most live in California with one in Portland and another in Hawaii. All of the interviews occurred in English with the exception of one interview conducted in Japanese with the lesbian daughter as translator. Ten out of the thirteen interviewees are first generation immigrants. The other three are third generation Japanese American. I interviewed four mothers of gay sons including one mother with two gay sons. The rest had lesbian daughters including one mother with two lesbian daughters. Six were told and seven inadvertently discovered about their childrens sexual orientation.⁵

Most books on the topic of parents of lesbian and gay children report mainly on white middle-class families.⁶ *Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk about Their Experiences*, by Carolyn W. Griffin, Marian J. Wirth, and Arthur G. Wirth, discusses the experiences of twenty-three white middle-class parents from a Midwestern metropolitan city involved with Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).⁷ Another book titled, *Parents Matter: Parents' Relationships with Lesbian Daughters and Gay Sons*, by Ann Muller, relates the perspectives of lesbian and gay children with a few stories by the parents. Seventeen percent of the seventy-one people interviewed were black.⁸ These examples present mainly an Anglo picture and fail to account for the diversity of lesbian and gay communities as well as different experiences of parents of color.

Attitudes of Parents towards Gays and Lesbians Pre-disclosure

The knowledge of lesbians and gay men in their native countries and in their communities in the United States serves as an important factor in dismantling the oft-used phrase that a son or daughter is gay or lesbian because of assimilation and acculturation in a western context. The parents interviewed did not utter "it's a white disease," a phrase often heard and used when discussing coming out in an Asian American community and context. Connie S. Chan in her essay, "Issues of Identity Development among Asian American Lesbians and Gay Men," found in her study that nine out of ninety-five respondents were out to their parents. Chan suggested that this low number might be related to, "specific cultural values defining the traditional roles, which help to explain the reluctance of Asian-American lesbians

and gay men to come out' to their parents and families."⁹

Nonetheless, the parents interviewed recounted incidents of being aware of lesbians and or gays while they were growing up and did not blame assimilation and Anglo American culture for their childrens sexual orientation. One quote by Lucy Nguyen⁸, a fifty-three year old Vietnamese immigrant who has two gay sons, does however, imply that the environment and attitudes of the United States allowed for her sons to express their gay identity. She stated:

In an environment like this—with all the gay activities—I think I'm lesbian. You know, I'll be honest. When I was young in Vietnam society was so strict. Yet, I had a really close friend, I loved her. That was just a friendship nothing else. In my mind now, I say, well this country is freer. There's no restraints, so that's why I accept it, whatever they [my sons] are.¹⁰

This revealing remark assumes that an open environment allows for freedom of sexual expression. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily suggest lesbians and gay men exist solely because of a nurturing environment. Rather lesbians and gay men must live and survive in different ways and/or make choices depending on the climate of the society at the time.

Midori Asakura⁸, a sixty-three-year-old Japanese immigrant with a lesbian daughter, related an example of lesbianism in Japan. She remembered, while studying to be a nurse, talk in the dorm rooms about "S," which denotes women who had really close friendships with one another.¹¹ She recalled,

One day you'd see one woman with a certain blouse and the next day, you'd see the other woman with the same blouse. They would always sit together, they went everywhere together. There was talk that they were having sex, but I didn't think they were.... People used to say they felt each other out. I thought, 'Nah, they're not having sex, why would they?' Everyone thought it was strange but no one really got into it.¹²

When asked what she thought of the “S” women, Midori replied, “I didn’t think much of it, although I thought one was man-like, Kato-san, and the other, Fukuchi-san, who was very beautiful and sharp-minded was the woman.”¹³

Another parent, George Tanaka*, a fifty-three-year-old Japanese American who grew up in Hawaii and has a lesbian daughter, remembers a particular person known as mahu.¹⁴ Toni Barraquiel, a fifty-four-year-old Pilipina single mother with a gay son, commented on gay men in Manila because of their effeminacy and admission of being gay. Toni asserted these men would be in certain careers such as manicurists and hairdressers. When asked of the people’s attitudes towards them she replied,

that they look down on those gays and lesbians, they make fun of them.... It seems as if it is an abnormal thing. The lesbian is not as prominent as the gays. They call her a tomboy because she’s very athletic and well built.¹⁵

Maria Santos*, a fifty-four-year-old Pilipina immigrant with two lesbian daughters, spoke of gays and lesbians in Luzon. She said, “There were negative attitudes about them. ‘Baklci and ‘Tomboy’—it was gay-bashing in words not in physical terms. There was name-calling that I did not participate in.”¹⁶

Lucy Nguyen* had lesbian classmates in her all-girls high school. She said, “They were looked down upon, because this isn’t normal. They were called ‘homo’.”¹⁷ A common thread throughout the observations of the parents about gays and lesbians lies in stereotypical gender role associations. For example, Margaret Tsang*, a sixty-year-old Chinese single parent who has a gay son, recalled a family member who might possibly be gay, although there was not a name for it. She observed, “He was slanted towards nail polish and make-ups and all kinds of things. And he liked Chinese opera. He behaved in a very feminine fashion.”¹⁸

Similarly, Liz Lee, a forty-two-year old Korean single parent with a lesbian daughter, clearly remembered lesbians in Seoul.

"My mother's friend was always dressed like man in suit. She always had mousse or grease on her hair and she dressed like a man. She had five or six girlfriends always come over."¹⁹ Liz related that she did not think anything about it and said they were respected.²⁰ When asked of people's attitudes toward these women, Liz responded, "They say nature made a mistake. They didn't think it was anybody's choice or anybody's preference."²¹

For the most part the interviewees, aware of gays and lesbians during their growing up years, associated gender role reversals with gays and lesbians. The men were feminine and the women looked male or tomboy with the women couples in a butch-femme type relationship. The belief and experiences with lesbians and gay men who dress and act in opposite gender roles serve as the backdrop of what to compare their children with when faced with their coming out. Most of what these parents see is a part of homosexuality, the dress or behavior. They have not seen the whole range of affectional, emotional, intellectual, and sexual components of a person. Although I asked the interviewees if they had any thoughts or attitudes about lesbians or gay men, most said they did not think about them and did not participate in the name calling or bashing. This might not be necessarily true because they were able to relate quite a few incidents of homophobic opinions which might have been internalized. Moreover, once they know they have a lesbian or gay child, that distance or non-judgmental attitude radically changes. As one mother remarked, "the fire is on the other side of the river bank. The matter is taking place somewhere else, its not your problem."²²

Disclosure or Discovery

For the most part, parents experience a wide range of emotions, feelings, and attitudes when they find out they have a lesbian

daughter or gay son. Parents find out through a variety of ways, ranging from a direct disclosure by the child themselves, discovering the fact from a journal, confronting the child because of suspicions, or by walking in on them.

For example, Liz Lee, who walked in on her daughter Sandy, said, “[it was] the end of the world. Still today I can’t relate to anything that’s going on with my daughter, but I’m accepting.”²³ She found out in 1990 and said,

I was hoping it was a stage she’s going through and that she could change. I didn’t accept for a long time. I didn’t think she would come out in the open like this. I thought she would just keep it and later on get married. That’s what I thought but she’s really out and open.... I said to myself I accept it because she is going to live that way.²⁴

Because Sandy serves as the co-chair of the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Association at school, her mother sees Sandy as happy and politically fulfilled from this position, which assists her process in accepting Sandy’s sexual orientation. However, like many of the parents interviewed, she initially thought she had done something wrong. “I didn’t lead a normal life at the time either. But Sandy always accept me as I was and she was always happy when I was happy and I think that’s love. As long as Sandy’s happy.”²⁵

Toni Barraquiel responded differently when Joel told her at an early age of thirteen or fourteen that he was gay back in the mid 1980s. She plainly asked him if he felt happy, and he replied affirmatively. Thus her response, “Well, if you’re happy I’ll support you, I’ll be happy for you.”²⁶ Their relationship as a single mother and only child has always been one of closeness and open communication so problems did not arise in terms of disclosing his sexual orientation. Toni Barraquiel experienced confusion because at the time Joel had girlfriends and she did not think of him as a typical feminine gay man, since he looked macho. She also wondered if her single mother role had anything to do with Joels

gay orientation:

Maybe because I raised him by myself, it was a matriarchal thing. I have read now that these gays, there is something in the anatomy of their bodies that affect the way they are. So it is not because I raised him alone, maybe it's in the anatomy of the body. Even if I think that because I raised him alone as a mother, even if he came out to be gay, he was raised as a good person. No matter what I would say I'm still lucky he came out to be like that.²⁷

In the end she accepted Joel no matter what caused his sexual orientation.

Katherine Tanaka*, a fifty-three-year-old Japanese American from Hawaii, found out about Melissa's lesbianism through an indirect family conversation. George Tanaka* brought up the issue of sexuality and asked Melissa* if she was a lesbian. He suspected after reading her work on the computer. Katherine* remembered her own response:

I was in a state of shock. I didn't expect it, so I didn't know how to react. It was the thing of disbelief, horror and shame and the whole thing. I guess I felt, the Asian values I was taught surface in the sense that something was wrong. That she didn't turn out the way we had raised her to be.²⁸

George Tanaka* recalled, "After we hugged, she went off to her bedroom. As she was walking away from us, all of a sudden I felt like she was a stranger. I thought I knew [her]. Here was a very important part of her and I didn't know anything about it."²⁹ The idea of not knowing one's children anymore after discovering their sexual orientation remains a common initial response from the interviewees. Because of this one aspect, parents believe their child has changed and is no longer the person they thought they knew. For example, one parent said:

The grieving process took a long time. Especially the thing about not being a bride. Not having her be a bride was a very devastating

change of plans for her life. I thought I was in her life and it made me feel when she said she was a lesbian that there was no place for me in her life. I didn't know how I could fit into her life because I didn't know how to be the mother of a lesbian.³⁰

Upon finding out, the parents interviewed spoke of common responses and questions they had. What did I do wrong? Was I responsible for my child's lesbian or gay identity? What will others think? How do I relate to my child? What role do I have now that I know my child is a lesbian or gay man? The emotions a parent has ranged from the loss of a dream they had for their child to a fear of what is in store for them as a gay or lesbian person in this society.

Nancy Shigekawa*, a third-generation Japanese American born and residing in Hawaii, recalled her reaction:

I had come home one night and they were in the bedroom. Then I knew it wasn't just being in the room. My reaction was outrage, to say the least. I was so angry. I told them to come out...and I said [to her girlfriend] "I'm going to kill you if you ever come back." That's how I was feeling. I look back now and think I must have been like a crazy lady.³¹

Maria Santos* remembered her discovery.

I found out through a phone call from the parents of [her] best friend. They [Cecilia* and her friend] were trying to sneak out and they had a relationship. I thought it would go away. Let her see a psychiatrist. But she fooled me. In her second year at college she told me she was a lesbian. It broke my heart. That was the first time I heard the word lesbian, but I knew what it meant. Like the tomboy.³²

She also had a feeling about her youngest daughter, Paulette*:

At Cecilia's graduation I saw them talking secretly and I saw the pink triangle on her backpack. I can't explain it. It's a mother's instinct. I prayed that it would not be so [starts to cry]. Paulette told me in a letter that she was a lesbian and that Cecilia had nothing to do with it.

I wanted it to change. I had the dream, that kids go to college, get married and have kids.³³

Maria Santos^{*} did not talk to anyone about her daughters. She grew up having to face the world on her own without talking to others. However, she said, "But I read books, articles all about gays and lesbians as members of the community. They are normal people. I did not read negative things about them."³⁴

In this sense parents also have a coming out process that they go through. They must deal with internalized homophobia and reevaluate their beliefs and feelings about lesbians and gay men. One method in this process includes reading about and listening to gay men and lesbians talk about their lives. Having personal contact or at least information on lesbian and gay life takes the mystery out of the stereotypes and misconceptions that parents might have of lesbian and gay people. What helped some women was the personal interaction and reading about lesbian and gay men's lives. They had more information with which to contrast, contradict, and support their previous notions of lesbians and gay men.

Yet sometimes some parents interviewed have not yet read or do not seek outside help or information. Some of the parents did not talk to others and have remained alone in their thinking. This does not necessarily have negative effects. Liz Lee said, "Still today I don't think I can discuss with her this matter because I can't relate.... I cant handle it. I wouldn't know how to talk to her about this subject. I just let her be happy."³⁵

MG Espiritu^{*}, a sixty-year-old Pilipina immigrant, believes her daughter's lesbianism stems from environmental causes such as being with other lesbians. Nonetheless, less than a couple of years after finding out about her daughter Michelle, she went with her daughter to an Asian Pacific lesbian Lunar New Year banquet. MG^{*} did so because her daughter wanted it and she wanted to please her. When asked how she felt at the event, MG^{*} replied,

“Oh, it’s normal. It’s just like my little girls’ parties that they go to.”³⁶ She speaks of little by little trying to accept Michelle’s lesbianism.

Parents, Friends, and their Ethnic Communities

For some parents having a lesbian or gay child brings up the issue of their status and reputation in the community and family network. Questions such as: What is society going to think of me? Will the neighbors know, and what will it reflect upon us? Did we raise a bad child?

I told her we would have to move away from this house. I felt strongly neighbors and friends in the community would not want to associate with us if they knew we had a child who had chosen to be homosexual.³⁷

The above quote reflected one parent’s original reaction. Now she feels differently but is still not quite out to her family in Hawaii.

Some parents have told their siblings or friends. Others do not talk to relatives or friends at all because of fear they will not understand.

The following quote highlighted a typical anxiety of parents:

I was ashamed. I felt I had a lot to do with it too. In my mind I’m not stupid, I’m telling myself, I know I didn’t do it to her. I don’t know if it’s only because I’m Japanese...that’s the way I saw it. I felt a sense of shame, that something was wrong with my family. I would look at Debbie and just feel so guilty that I have these thoughts that something’s wrong with her. But mostly I was selfish. I felt more for myself, what I am going to say? How am I going to react to people when they find out?³⁸

Despite her apprehension in the beginning, she did disclose Debbie's lesbianism to a close friend:

I have a dear friend who I finally told because she was telling me about these different friends who had gay children. I couldn't stand it, I said, "You know, Bea, I have to tell you my daughter is gay." She was dumfounded. I'm starting to cheer her up and all that. That was a big step for me to come out.

Nancy Shigekawa's^{*} quote emphasizes the complexity of feelings that parents have when adjusting to their children's sexual orientation.

If parents are not close to their immediate family, they might not have told them. Others have not spoken because they do not care whether or not their family knows. Some parents do not disclose the fact of their gay son or lesbian daughter to protect them from facing unnecessary problems.

When asked how their respective ethnic communities feel about lesbians and gay men, some parents responded with firm conviction. Liz Lee, who spoke about the Korean community, said, "As long as they're not in their house, not in their life, they accept it perfectly."³⁹ She mentioned her daughter's lesbianism to a nephew but not to others in her family. "I'm sure in the future I have to tell them, but right now nobody has asked me and I don't particularly like to volunteer."⁴⁰ Jack Chan^{*}, a sixty-one-year-old Chinese immigrant claimed, "Shame, that's a big factor. Shame brought upon the family. You have to remember the Chinese, the name, the face of the family is everything. I don't know how to overcome that."⁴¹

Lucy Nguyen^{*} gave this answer about the Vietnamese community, "They won't accept it. Because for a long, long time they say they [gays and lesbians] are not good people, that's why."⁴² Lucy felt that by talking about it, it would help teach the community to open their minds. The frankness and openness of speaking out about gays and lesbians will inform people of our

existence and force the issue in the open. In this way having parents come out will make others understand their experiences and allow for their validation and affirmation as well.

Although most of these parents have negative views about the acceptance level of friends and particularly with ethnic communities, some have taken steps to confide in people. One must also realize their opinion reflects their current situation and opinions which might change over time. Three of the parents have participated in panels and discussions on Asian American parents with lesbian and gay kids.

Advice to Other Parents

The mere fact these parents agreed to the interview has much to say about their feelings or attitudes towards lesbian and gay sexuality and their children. Although some parents might feel some unease and reservations, they had enough courage to speak to me and voice their opinions. Many of the parents did so out of love and concern for their children. A few thought that they did not have anything to say but agreed to talk to me. In the process of these interviews, some parents expressed appreciation and comfort in talking to someone about their experiences. Their struggle of coming to terms with their lesbian daughters and gay sons merits notice.

One of my last questions related to helping other parents. While some did not have an answer to the question, "What advice do you have for other parents with lesbian and gay kids?" a few responded with the following suggestions. For example,

Love them like a normal individual. Give all the compassion and understanding. Don't treat your child differently because the person is gay, because this is an individual. ... I cannot understand why it is so hard for these parents to accept their child is gay. What makes them

so different, because they are gay? The more you should support your kid, because as it is in society, it has not been accepted one hundred percent.⁴³

I cannot throw them out. I love them so much. Even more now because they are more of a minority. They are American Asian, women and lesbian. Triple minority. I have to help fight for them.... Accept them as they are. Love them more. They will encounter problems. It will take years and years to overcome homophobia. Make them ambitious, well-educated, better than others so they can succeed.⁴⁴

Tina Chan*, a fifty-eight-year-old Chinese immigrant, offers similar advice. Other parents concurred:

My advice is to accept them. They haven't changed at all. They're still the same person. The only thing different is their sexual orientation. They should really have the support from the family, so they would not have this battle like they're not even being accepted in the family. They should look at them like they have not changed. Parents can't do it. They think the whole person has changed and I think that's terrible because they haven't. I mean it's so stupid.⁴⁵

Jack Chan* also leaves us with advice to take to heart:

Don't feel depressed that their parent [is] coming around so slow or not coming around at all. Remember when you come out to them, the parent generally go[es] into the closet themselves. However long it take you to come out, it'll probably take them longer to accept. It's a slow process. Don't give up.⁴⁶

Concluding Remarks

George Tanaka* relates an incident where he and his wife told their coming out process in front of ten Asian American gay men and in the end found some of the men crying. "The tears surprised

me.... We were representing the sadness that there could not be loving parents. Representing some hope their parents would likewise be able to become loving about it.”⁴⁶ The belief that parents can change and go through a process where eventual acceptance and supportiveness appear to have a basis in reality, although a happy ending might not always be the case.

From these interviews one can sense some of the thoughts, actions, and experiences of Asian American parents. These stories are not the last word but signal the beginning of a more informed dialogue.

What would the stories of their daughters and sons look like against their parents’ perceptions? It would be helpful to have the stories side by side to evaluate the differences. Moreover, gay and lesbian children might have perspectives that inform parents. Other issues such as socialization processes, religious, language and cultural issues, and spouses’ opinions need further exploration. I did not include a discussion on the origins of lesbian and gay sexual identity. I hope these stories from the homefront can serve as an initial mapping of a complex sexual territory that is part of Asian American family dynamics.

Notes

* These names have been changed.

1. Interview with Katherine Tanaka. Los Angeles, California, February 21, 1993.
2. The desire to work on this project came after listening to two Japanese American parents, George and Katherine Tanaka, talk about their lesbian daughter. They revealed a painful process of going through their own coming out while grappling with their daughters sexual identity and their own values and beliefs. As members of Parents and