

Intersections and Divergences

Contemporary Asian American Communities



Edited by Linda Trinh Võ and Rick Bonus

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E200912

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TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PHILADELPHIA

Temple University Press, Philadelphia 19122
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Published 2002
Printed in the United States of America

⊗ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Contemporary Asian American communities : intersections and divergences /
edited by Linda Trinh Võ and Rick Bonus.

p. cm. — (Asian American history and culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56639-937-8 (alk. paper) : ISBN 1-56639-938-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Asian Americans—Social conditions. 2. Asian Americans—Ethnic identity.
3. Ethnic neighborhoods—United States. 4. Asia—Emigration and immigration—
Social aspects. 5. United States—Emigration and immigration—Social aspects.
I. Võ, Linda Trinh, 1964– II. Bonus, Rick, 1962– III. Series.

E184.O6 C666 2002

305.895073—dc21

ISBN 978-1-56639-938-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

2001052506

Contemporary Asian American Communities

To my supportive parents, Thuy Hanlon and Robert Joseph Hanlon.
And to my loving partner Bill Ross and our marvelous children Aisha
and Kian. —LTV

To my mother, Miren, for her love.
And to my families here and abroad, for their sustenance. —RB

We also dedicate this book to Asian American community workers
whose passionate devotion and tireless efforts have benefited us all.

Acknowledgments

Our collaboration on this book has been a journey. One of us was born in Vietnam, the other in the Philippines. Our working as co-editors of this collection with these personal beginnings speaks to the dynamic and growing field of Asian American studies. Our migrations eventually brought us to the University of California, San Diego, where as graduate students we shared mentors and taught in the Summer Bridge Program and Ethnic Studies Department. In particular, we thank Yen Le Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and George Lipsitz for sharing their intellectual passion with us. We were allowed to nurture our interest in Asian American studies, and this fostered a friendship that has been strengthened while working on this endeavor.

Our journey spans several other institutions of which we have been part: Oberlin College; the University of California, Berkeley; the University of California, Irvine; the University of Washington; and Washington State University. We are thankful to the College of Liberal Arts at Washington State University for providing an Initiation/Completion Grant that gave us the opportunity to review the proposals. Our appreciation also goes to Susan Jeffords, divisional dean of social sciences in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington, for making available valuable funding support for the completion of the book. We thank the numerous students, staff, faculty, and administrators at these institutions for their collegiality, encouragement, and guidance. Along the way, we have been engaged in community formations inside and outside of the academy and have learned many enduring lessons about building communities in these environments. We thank all those who were patient and generous enough to teach us and would like to believe that we have come away wiser.

Some of the essays in this anthology were contributed by scholars who participated in a Contemporary Asian Pacific American Communities Conference at the University of Southern California on 11 April 1998. The conference was designed specifically to discuss the themes and issues we present. We thank our institutional sponsors, the Center for Multiethnic and Transnational Studies, the Department of Sociology, and the Asian American Studies Program—all based at the University of Southern California—and our generous co-organizer, Edward Park, for making that

conference possible. We also acknowledge the presenters and senior discussants—Shirley Hune, Russell Leong, John Liu, and Paul Spickard—for their important participation and rigorous analysis. Mariam Beevi, Shilpa Davé, Antoinette Charfauros McDaniel, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Okiyoshi Takeda also deserve acknowledgment for their contribution to the conference.

We deeply appreciate Janet Francendese of Temple University Press and Michael Omi, a series coeditor, for their confidence in and support of our project, and we are grateful to our anonymous reviewer for providing us with important critiques of our manuscript. We thank Michael Tuncap, David G. Palaita, and Caroline Tamayo for their valuable research assistance. We are the auspicious beneficiaries of Martin Manalansan's wisdom about traversing the sometimes harrowing world of editing an anthology. We have also been privileged to work with superb contributors who have made this volume finer than we ever imagined.

Along our journey, we have been fortunate to have the support of our devoted families and we dedicate this book to them. Thank you all for sustaining us.

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INTRODUCTION

Rick Bonus and Linda Trinh Võ

On Intersections and Divergences

During a recent conference of the Association for Asian American Studies, we attended a dinner banquet at a restaurant in the Chinatown section of Philadelphia. When our server came, he gave chopsticks to all but one person, who is half Japanese, a quarter Danish, and a quarter Czech, and has reddish hair and freckles. To her, he gave a fork. When she pointed this out, we laughed and decided that, in solidarity, we would all ask for forks. When we did, the server was puzzled. He looked at our friend and said, "She's American, isn't she?" We understood what he meant, but somehow the implication that the rest of us were not "American," an all-too-common experience for many, had a peculiar sting, even if it was expressed by someone of Chinese ancestry.¹

Our friend is Yonsei, a fourth-generation Japanese American. This "American" studied Japanese in college; attended summer school in Tokyo; and traveled in rural Japan. Ironically, a person sitting next to her was also a Yonsei but had never been to Japan; spoke only English but was learning Spanish; and had spent a couple of years hitchhiking around Europe. Our group varied in ethnic origin. We lived in different parts of the country. Some were immigrants. Some were monolingual, while others were multilingual. The list of common and varying attributes is long. And over dinner, this one small and seemingly inconsequential gesture mushroomed into discussions and debates about who Asian Americans are, how we define ourselves, what others think about us, and, perhaps more provocative, what others still do not know about us. On the surface, it seems amusing that people can make assumptions about tableware preferences based on one's physical features. But more seriously, this is yet another instance of the persistence of racial stereotypes in which assumptions about who counts as "Asian," what "Asians" use to eat, and what "Asian American" means are brought into question. The year before this conference was held, questions about the status and quality of Filipino American presence within the association's institutional arrangements and political practices had been heatedly debated. And in several communities

within and outside academe, parallel questions are constantly being raised: Who are the *Iu Mien*? What does “1.5” generation mean? Should we count as Asian American those who spend more time outside the United States than in it? What about those who are multiracial, the *hapas*? Can we form a group on the Internet and call it an Asian American community? Which strategies are most effective for collectively challenging the model-minority myth that affects most, if not all, Asian American groups?

The impetus for this “community” collection originally came from questions derived during our graduate-student days, when we were both doing ethnographic research projects on Asian American groups in Southern California.² Our aim is to advance the practice of applying multidisciplinary approaches to similar objects of study in order to open a broader, more complex, and richer set of conversations among scholars from different fields, such as history, literature, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, urban studies, and legal studies.³ The contributors to this collection grapple with ideas and practices of community formation from empirical, literary, and theoretical perspectives, exploring, revealing, and expanding the themes of both shared histories and diverse experiences of Asian American communities.

This anthology presents a collection of original essays on the dynamics of contemporary Asian American communities; taken as a whole, the volume engages the intersections and divergences of community formations and considers whether these formative elements persist or are transformed. Most of the available sources on this subject emphasize the historical development of these communities (e.g., Chan 1991; Daniels 1988; Okihiro 1994; Takaki 1989). With the influx of post-1965 immigrants and refugees and the generational growth and spread of pre-1965 communities, Asian Americans are transforming the demographics of the American population, and Asian American communities are altering the nature of the American landscape (Barkan 1992; Chan 1991; Hing 1993; Kitano and Daniels 1995; Ong et al. 1994; Zia 2000). In addition, the historical legacies and unique present-day environments created by globalization and transnational movements have complicated individual and collective Asian American identities in ways that connect the local with the regional and the global.⁴ These conditions call for new ways to analyze how we think about Asian Americans, how we think about Americans, and how we think about “community” formations.⁵

Asian Americans, because of the increasing heterogeneity of their subpopulation groups, raise questions not only about the assumed stability of such a categorical identification but also about the persistent articulation of U.S. race relations solely through a black-white framework. Viewed through the local and global contexts of their influx and presence in the United States more than through their sheer numbers, Asian Americans also prompt a critical rethinking of social norms regarding nationhood, visibility, and power. Who can be considered American? Who can belong? And on whose and what terms? Likewise, the need to understand race as a central social and political force in Asian Americans’ lives and as a category of experience that interlocks with gender, class, and sexuality suggests new questions about how Asian Americans perceive themselves, interact with others, and locate themselves in various contexts. We address these issues by considering the centrality of ideas and practices of “community” as they are formed and transformed within Asian America.

In the parts that follow, we will provide such explanatory contexts and identify each of our authors' contributions to the discussions of specific themes in this collection. We focus on three themes:

Communities in Transition: Spaces and Practices discusses the concepts and processes of forging aggregations that relate to physical settlements, situational spaces, and social sites.

Communities in Transformation: Identities and Generations examines elements of change within Asian American community identities, specifically in light of their generational composition and the way these compositions intersect with ethnic and racial factors, class configurations, and gender distribution.

Communities of Alternatives: Representations and Politics highlights nontraditional modes of evoking "community" with respect to cultural representation and activist political organizing.

By no means do we argue that these three themes exhaust all the formations of community that can be identified as Asian American. Rather, we employ these thematic perspectives to make explicit the contours and complexities of contemporary Asian American community configurations. The essays in this collection demonstrate how, over the past twenty years or more, Asian American social spaces and practices have been in transition; internal group compositions and identities have been undergoing transformations; and group initiatives have been positing alternative constructions of cultural representations and political interests. Hence, we can consider these works as proposals that offer multiple avenues for understanding "community." Although we assigned each of the chapters to only one theme, we wish to make it clear that the thematic groupings do not disallow overlaps and cross-connections. The themes we have laid out are more fluid and intersecting than they appear to be. For these reasons, our discussion of the parts will include not only the primary essays grouped under the themes but also other essays in the volume that may be relevant.

We begin our scrutiny of these changing configurations by locating such population transformations within local and global historical contexts of capitalism, immigration legislation, and race relations as they affect Asian American group identification. These histories—some of them shared, some of them inherited—continue to impinge significantly on fundamental sociopolitical issues: in the ways we think about American society and its communities as fraught with consensus and contestation; in the continuation, emergence, or reformulation of communities that are not bound solely by geography, ethnicity, or racial identification; and in the recognition of the heterogeneous composition and multiple identifications of Asian American communities that include, among others, youths, mixed-race people, sexually marginalized groups, and transnationals. Our collective perspective therefore envisions communities as both territorial sites or geographically delineated formations *and* socially constructed entities; as such, these communities are based on relations of similarities and differences and on relations that extend to multiple networks *across* locations and interests. Taken together, the essays in this collection address how Asian Americans are reconceiving and reshaping their own communities, and examines the representations, expressions,

practices, and cultures of Asian Americans located within and beyond homes, families, and formal organizations.

Capitalism, Immigration, and Race

Transnational capitalism, historically and currently, exerts direct influence on the Asian American experience as one of labor. Before 1965, Asian Americans, particularly in the West Coast states and in Hawai'i, were used as a cheap labor source in the service of American expansionism and internationalization (Cheng and Bonacich 1984). Asians were recruited as contract laborers to build and maintain the national infrastructure, to develop and sustain massive agricultural production, and to assist in domestic work. As a result of the 1965 Immigration Act, Asians have been able to come to the United States mainly through the act's family-reunification and employment-specific provisions. Immigrants from diverse backgrounds have entered low-end service-sector jobs by working as cooks, janitors, or maids, or have taken low end manufacturing jobs as factory assemblers or seamstresses in the garment industry. Others have entered high-end sectors as well-educated, skilled professionals (Barkan 1992; Kitano and Daniels 1995).

Many from these immigrant populations still provide the low-income labor that is crucial to local industrial production and manufacturing (Lowe 1996; Ong et al. 1994). After 1975, refugees and immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos came to the United States to escape the chaos created by the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Although they did not initially enter as a laboring class, they, too, have been used to fulfill U.S. industrial and service-sector employment needs (Gold 1992; Kibria 1993). Thus, Asian immigrants and refugees and those who are American-born of Asian descent are fulfilling the demands of the dual labor market that requires both workers who are highly educated and skilled and workers who are unskilled or semi-skilled with minimal formal education (Espiritu 1997; Lowe 1996). The global restructuring of capitalism, whose expansion and contraction require and depend on different forms of exploitation, benefits from more liberalized policies of immigration to perpetuate the recruiting of Asian labor.

Today, about half of all immigrants to the United States come from Asia. As a result, the Asian American population has increased dramatically, becoming significantly more foreign-born as well as more ethnically, economically, politically, and socially diverse. For example, past legislation ensured that Asian immigrants were mainly single men in their prime working years with limited formal schooling (Chan 1991). Now, the immigration of multi-generational families, women and children, highly skilled and unskilled individuals, and refugees is changing the internal composition of this population. Moreover, many of these individuals are twice or thrice immigrants. Some migrated internally within their homelands, and others resided briefly, or for generations, in neighboring Asian countries or in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, or Canada prior to their arrival in America (Kitano and Daniels 1995). These paths of migration to the United States, facilitated largely by immigra-

tion legislation, U.S. participation in the global restructuring of capitalism, political and economic crises in Asia, and the ideological persistence of the so-called American dream fueled by the U.S. presence abroad, have influenced the ways in which Asian Americans are reconceiving and reshaping their communities.

Finally, and most important, the history of U.S. race relations has fundamentally shaped the course of Asian American experience over the years. U.S. imperialism in Asia in the form of militarization, colonialization, and "democratizing" projects shapes the lives of Asians even before they arrive in America. Upon their arrival, Asians have been subjected to both *de jure* and *de facto* discriminatory treatment. As a racialized group, they have been singled out in immigration-exclusion acts, barred from citizenship and property ownership, interned in concentration camps during a period of war, exploited on the job, and greatly disfranchised in civil society. Many suffered violence and dehumanization borne out of racial and gender prejudice that was expressed openly as the "Yellow Peril" and other forms of Orientalism. Yet many of them have found ways to circumvent barriers or escape hostility by forming self-sufficient, semi-autonomous enclaves; by appealing to the local or national justice system; or by forging political alliances among themselves and with other groups (Aguilar-San Juan 1994; Chan 1991). Asian American groups that participated in the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-imperialist movements of the late 1960s provide evidence of this history of struggle and proactive engagement against racial injustice (Espiritu 1997; Wei 1993).

One cannot conclude, however, that antidiscrimination legislation passed during and in the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Asian American movements has erased all forms of racism. We contend, rather, that both pre-1965 and post-1965 Asian Americans currently experience racism in more complex ways. Sometimes this racism is expressed overtly in the form of hate crimes, but often it is covert and subtle, taking the form of "glass ceilings" and other hidden barriers to positions of power or of persistent stereotyping as exemplified by the chopsticks incident mentioned earlier and even "model minority" characterizations. Even as new Asian groups inherit a long legacy of Orientalized stereotyping, new forms of racism arise in the name of fairness for all individuals. Those who argue against affirmative action programs often articulate an opposition to "group preferential treatment." They portray white groups also as victims of discrimination because they assume all groups are similarly situated, disregarding uneven forms of access and power. Oppositionists regard antiracist programs as unnecessary even in the face of persistent underrepresentation of particular Asian American groups in the educational system (Hirabayashi 1998; Wang 1993).

Communities in Transition: Spaces and Practices

The term "community" has several definitions. The most conventional and prevalent one refers to a collection of people situated in a geographical space and grouped together out of shared histories, experiences, and values (Marshall 1994). Traditionally, the

word is used to denote territorial units, as in ethnic communities or villages, ethnic neighborhoods, ethnic pockets, or ethnic enclaves (Breton 1964). In contrast, a community does not necessarily have to be a spatially defined territory; rather, it may be based on an array of interpersonal networks defined (although not exclusively) out of a sense of belonging, a body of shared values, a system of social organization or interdependency (Webber et al. 1964: 108–9; Wellman 1979). An example might be a community of doctors, a religious community, a working-class community, or a community of women.

Disputes have arisen in the social sciences about adequate and appropriate definitions and understandings of community, but certain models and constructs have persisted. They include the conceptualizing of community as constitutive of a “set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common—usually, a common sense of identity” (Marshall 1994). More broadly speaking, communities can be conceived of as social groups in which an aggregate of individuals interact with one another. Models for types or kinds of community, as elaborated by Ferdinand Tönnies (1963 [1922]), include *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (intimate communal and large-scale associative social relations) and, in the scholarship of Emile Durkheim (1915), mechanical versus organic solidarities. In many community studies, these models enable specific descriptive and analytical perspectives that explain ideal-typical societies as well as external factors that cause change in the nature and extent of community life.

In this book, we do not intend to dispute these definitions and models per se. Rather, we have gathered essays together to propose a less territory-centered orientation of community sites, a more unstable or fluid rendition of the nature and scope of communities, and an understanding of communities that goes beyond the dualisms dictated by traditional scholarship. Although the principal theories do not address Asian American communities explicitly, we can think about them as foundational constructs whose meanings persist or change according to context, and from which we can draw larger questions about community, given particular material conditions and literary productions associated with Asian Americans. As with other groups of color, Asian Americans’ experiences of group formation cannot simply be generalized as instances of ideal-typical societal arrangements. Their experiences may be far more complex and nuanced than, and qualitatively different from, the experiences of more dominant groups to fit neatly into any of the specific binary categories. In this instance, we agree with Gary Okihiro’s contention that “a simpleminded assertion of race or ethnicity [as a central phenomenon of Asian American communities] is no longer adequate, nor will an ‘instinctual’ basis for ethnic solidarity and identity suffice” (1988: 181).

We also do not intend to reconceptualize mainstream notions of community in order to substitute arbitrary definitions or even to do away with any definition of community. Instead, we aim to propose definitions of communities of Asian Americans that are grounded in specific conditions that are both external and internal to these communities. Challenging mainstream definitions of “community” opens new avenues of thinking beyond the strictures of distinct territories and closed boundaries; at the same time, there is risk in moving too far from such definitions (so that they

seem totally disconnected and unrecognizable) or appearing random or arbitrary (as in, "anything goes"). We do recognize these dangers, and we offer this collection of essays as a testament to the ways in which we test, grapple with, and navigate through such challenges. Indeed, we claim that in examining new and alternative perspectives regarding Asian American communities, we also recognize that there are connections and continuities across definitions and formations. These are, as we discussed earlier, the shared historical and contemporary experiences of capitalist, immigrant, and racialized processes among Asian Americans.

In regard to particular Asian American communities as communities in transition, we propose to illustrate connections as well as disconnections between the traditional enclave-defined incarnations of community and the changes associated with broader conceptions of communities as "sites." Territorially defined communities are usually understood to have been formed by structural forces. Restrictive U.S. immigration policies limited the number of Asians, particularly women and children, and initially deterred the formation of permanent settlements. Naturalization laws prohibited Asians from obtaining citizenship; as "aliens ineligible for citizenship," they were prevented from purchasing property, which was later reinforced by restrictive covenants on housing. These and other discriminatory policies led to the segregation of Asian Americans in ethnic enclaves in urban areas and in clusters in rural settings. Hysteria against Asian Americans, led by the white working class, who targeted them as economic competitors, resulted in anti-Asian riots that included the murdering of Asian Americans and the firebombing and destruction of their physical communities. Threats of violence kept Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Asian Indians from establishing more stable and permanent roots. The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II shattered the spatial communities they had occupied in urban and rural areas. But while these factors curbed the development of their early residential and business communities, they did not prevent them altogether.⁶

Asian American ethnic concentrations were once perceived as unsavory slums marked by vice, disease, degradation, co-ethnic exploitation, and disorganization. As a result, these areas by the late 1960s were prime targets for replacement through gentrification projects. Community studies focused on how ethnic and racial communities have, will, or should assimilate economically, politically, and socially into the American mainstream, leading to the dissipation of ethnic communities (Bonacich and Modell 1980). Although some locations became extinct because of residential dispersion or evictions; others survived because their residents struggled to preserve them. More important, the influx of Asian newcomers after 1965 rejuvenated dwindling ethnic enclaves and helped to create new ethnic communities; it also brought an infusion of domestic and international financial investment that led to a revitalization of urban spaces and a re-energizing of local economies (Fong 1998; Horton 1995; Saito 1998). Although some Asian American communities are still condemned for their insalubrious components, others are celebrated for their positive contributions to American society.

Chain migration and occupational opportunities are still the primary reasons that Asian Americans choose to settle in particular areas and help to explain the dispersal of Asians across the nation, even though many of them are still concentrated in

urban and suburban locations. In the chain-migration process, Asian immigrants tend to settle in areas with established ethnic communities where they can rely on the resources and support of relatives and friends. Some groups do not use social networks as extensively as others when selecting a settlement site, because occupational considerations are primary elements in their limited choices. As a result of their association with the military, for example, Filipinos tend to choose locations near military bases, where many remain even after retirement (Bonus 2000; Espiritu 1995). Asian professionals who immigrated using the occupational provisions of the 1965 legislation found work at hospitals, universities, and research companies, many of which were located in the Midwest or South or on the East Coast. This explains the growth of this group in these regions in the post-1965 period.

Given such patterns of spatial concentration, Asian American communities have been historically studied as ethnic enclaves that display common elements: mostly homogeneous, self-sufficient, and isolated from the rest of society. Regarding them as such produced works that have depicted enclaves as places where collective immigrant narratives of success (or failure) are played out.⁷ In recent years, however, scholars have questioned the presumed accuracy of mainstream definitions of community as having fixed borders. They have instead introduced alternative perspectives of communities that are more porous, interdependent, and transspatial.⁸ The work of Tarry Hum in Chapter 1 is emblematic of this scholarship. Using a case study of the neighborhood of Sunset Park in Brooklyn, Hum demonstrates how traditional perspectives on immigrant communities fail to account for contemporary communities that are directly linked to global assembly lines, racially diverse, and transnationally configured. This work is crucial not only because it gives us a better understanding of global interconnections within which Asian American communities play critical roles (whether as centers of capital or as providers of labor), but also because it provides us with expansive tools that can situate contemporary Asian American realities beyond the isolationist and internally self-sufficient models of community formations.

Since Asian Americans were denied U.S. citizenship, they had an incentive to remain in close contact with their homelands. With most of their family still in Asia, many were involved in homeland politics, with some assisting abroad in the nationalist and anticolonialist movements in their home countries. Since World War II and afterward, when U.S. citizenship became available to them, Asians were able to choose the kinds of connections they wanted to maintain with their homelands. With the ease of air travel today, those who can afford to can shuttle between countries and maintain residences and businesses in both or multiple continents. Connections to "homelands" and ethnic cultures vary depending on when one immigrated and, particularly, where one was socialized into adulthood. The tension and uncertainty that might accompany these connections are the central theme of Eileen Chia-Ching Fung's essay (Chapter 2). Fung analyzes the works of the filmmakers Ang Lee and Nien-Jen Wu, showing how the histories of Taiwan, China, and the United States find their way into the complex conditions faced by Taiwanese Chinese Americans; these conditions, in turn, inform filmic narratives of fragmentation, colonialism, and "homelessness" that may well characterize transnational and diasporic elements of this par-