

Surveying Notions of Queer Asian
American Community through
Literature: 1972–1998

Thesis by
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ABSTRACT

The history of queer Asian America has, to date, largely been studied as a history of organizations. This has lent a particular tilt to both the preservation and the study of queer Asian America: the activism of the late 20th century has been archivally and academically preserved, while records of everyday queer Asian American experiences—of the ways individuals discovered their identities, formed communities, found loves, and filled their days—have been more rarely preserved and written of. This thesis seeks to fill that gap by analyzing the history of queer Asian American literature. Specifically, the thesis offers a broad survey of queer Asian American writing from the 1970s through the 90s. It then uses methods of literary and historical analysis to shed light on how individuals have grappled with the question of what it means to be queer and Asian American. Ultimately, the thesis turns to the queer Asian American community and asks, “Who are ‘we’?”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Illustrations and/or Tables.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
<i>Eating Artichokes</i>	3
<i>Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire</i>	5
<i>Phoenix Rising</i>	8
Asian and Queer Identities	10
Tokenization	13
Community Activity	15
Exclusion from Community	18
Reflections on <i>Phoenix Rising</i>	19
<i>Q & A: Queer in Asian America</i>	21
Asian and Queer Identities	22
Tokenization	24
Community Activism	27
Queer Critique	29
Exclusion from Community	32
Reflections on <i>Q & A</i>	35
Conclusion	36
Bibliography	43

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS AND/OR TABLES

<i>Number</i>	<i>Page</i>
1. Front cover of <i>Eating Artichokes</i> by Willyce Kim	44
2. Front cover of <i>The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire</i> by Kitty Tsui	45
3. Header of the fourteenth edition of the <i>Phoenix Rising</i> magazine.	46
4. Front cover of <i>Q & A: Queer in Asian America</i> , edited by David Eng and Alice Hom	47

INTRODUCTION

Historians of Asian America have traced the establishment of small, queer Asian American enclaves in coastal cities, namely San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York, back to the late 1960s and early 70s. The formation of these enclaves in turn encouraged the formation of local, queer Asian American activist organizations, which served as spaces for socializing and community building, as well as networks for coordinating advocacy and activist efforts. Many of these groups documented their own histories through meeting records, membership lists, event flyers, and regular newsletters. Such records have been increasingly incorporated into archival collections focused on queer histories, such as at the ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

Previous works on the history of queer Asian Americans have been built on this archival record and have thus tended to examine the organization of queer Asian American activist and support groups.¹²³ This has lent a particular tilt to both the preservation and the study of queer Asian America: the activism of the late 20th century has been both archivally and academically preserved, while records of everyday queer Asian American experiences—life outside of activism—have been more rarely preserved and written of. Speaking to these missing historical records, sociologist Dana Takagi noted in 1994 that “what we do know about Asian American gays and lesbians must be gleaned from personal narratives, literature, poetry, short stories, and essays.”⁴ The sentiment remains largely accurate today. To begin to perceive “queer Asian America” in its countless local, provisional forms, it is first necessary to understand the individuals and communities that have chosen to identify as such.

To navigate conceptions of queer Asian American identity and community in writing, this thesis examines four publications from the 1970s to 90s: *Eating Artichokes* (1972) by Willyce Kim,

¹ Minemura, “Asian Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women in North America,” 1.

² Masequesmay, “Emergence of Queer Vietnamese America,” 118.

³ Sueyoshi, “Breathing Fire: Remembering Asian Pacific American Activism in Queer History,” 11-3.

⁴ Takagi, “Maiden Voyage: Excursion into Sexuality and Identity Politics in Asian America,” 12.

Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire (1983) by Kitty Tsui, the *Phoenix Rising* newsletter (1984–1994), and the anthology *Q & A: Queer in Asian American* (1998), edited by David Eng and Alice Hom. Of these four pieces, three—*Eating Artichokes*, *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire*, and *Phoenix Risings*—represent small press and self-published works, an area of particular interest, as the authors had the opportunity to be exceedingly earnest and uncensored in their works. These works will be employed to explore how queer Asian American individuals have questioned their identity and how communities have been formed and changed throughout time.

Within these works, themes of isolation and experiences of tokenization are some of the most frequently discussed topics. It follows that records of the formation of queer Asian American communities are discussed at similar frequency. These works have foregrounded the gathering of queer Asian American communities as crucial to survival, in both physical and emotional aspects. Through their depictions of their perceptions of queer Asian America, the authors also have the opportunity to influence future discourses around the community. While most write about their communities positively, some highlight aspects of the community that require improvement.

Studying these themes, this thesis seeks to understand the ways that people have grappled with the question of what it means to be queer and Asian American in countless spatiotemporal settings, bringing visibility towards the various conceptions of community that have existed throughout history.

EATING ARTICHOKEs

The first broadly known record of queer Asian American writing was Willyce Kim's poetry book *Eating Artichokes* (1972), published by the Women's Press Collective in Oakland, CA.⁵ Kim's poems are full of raw feelings. Some are sensual, such as the title poem, *Eating Artichokes*, which compares the very act of eating artichokes to a "very heavy sexual fantasy."⁶ Others are lonely. Some describe her rage and desire for queer liberation, including a written challenge to possible voyeuristic readers who expect her poetry to fit the genre of the angry feminist: "You want an angry poem. Alright. Strip us both down and compare. The scars on my body are laced along the front. The scars on your body are found running across your back. Did you see the enemy and run, coward."⁷ The book, though fiercely feminist and queer, is noticeably silent on Kim's Asian American identity.

The work, a landmark piece given that it is the first known published queer Asian American writing piece, also astounds as it originated in a time where little record of queer Asian American communities existed. Furthermore, the book emerges in the middle of an Asian American writing period known as the "cultural nationalist"⁸ movement, where the focus of writing was often to prove the masculinity and heterosexuality of Asian American men, while suppressing the agency and power of Asian American women by diminishing them to passive roles within a nuclear family. Kim and the very existence of the Asian American lesbian challenge the idea of a strictly heterosexual, patriarchal Asian American society.

Several years after the publication of *Eating Artichokes*, in the late 70s, queer Asian Americans began organizing themselves in social and support groups. These organization were built

⁵ Sueyoshi, "Breathing Fire: Remembering Asian Pacific American Activism in Queer History," 11-21.

⁶ Kim, *Eating Artichokes*, 1.

⁷ Kim, *Eating Artichokes*, 14.

⁸ Wong and Santa Ana, "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature," 189.

amidst the wider Gay Liberation Movement, which began in 1969, and the second wave feminist movement, which began in the 60s. As queer Asian Americans found that most queer organizations predominantly included white members, and Asian American lesbians considered broader Asian American groups “very male,”⁹ queer Asian American specific groups began to emerge. In California, this included the Gay Asian Association in UC Berkeley (late 70s), the Gay Asian Information Network in San Francisco (1977), Asian Women in San Francisco (1978), the Association of Lesbian and Gay Asians in Los Angeles (1981), Asian Pacific Lesbians/Gays in Los Angeles (1981), and Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Friends (1983). On the East Coast, organizations formed in Boston and New York City, including Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians (1979) and Asian Lesbians of the East Coast (1983).¹⁰¹¹

Also notable was the first Asian American women’s performing arts group, Unbound Feet. The six-woman group was co-founded in 1979 in Oakland, California by Nellie Wong and Merle Woo. The two were soon joined by Nancy Hom, Genny Lim, Canyon Sam, and Kitty Tsui. Three of the six members, Woo, Sam, and Tsui were out as lesbians, and the program “explicitly stated their sexuality.”¹² The group found quick success, drawing a “significant Asian lesbian following”¹³ from the surrounding area in which Asian American gays and lesbians were increasingly open with their identities. The group continued to perform for two years.

It was in this environment of an increasingly visible queer Asian American presence in the San Francisco Bay Area that Kitty Tsui eventually wrote her first book.

⁹ Sueyoshi, “Breathing Fire: Remembering Asian Pacific American Activism in Queer History,” 11-13.

¹⁰ Minemura, “Asian Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women in North America,” 7–11.

¹¹ Eng and Hom, “Introduction,” 2.

¹² Sueyoshi, “Breathing Fire: Remembering Asian Pacific American Activism in Queer History,” 11-17.

¹³ Sueyoshi, “Breathing Fire: Remembering Asian Pacific American Activism in Queer History,” 11-18.

THE WORDS OF A WOMAN WHO BREATHES FIRE

In her 1983 poetry book, *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire*, published by Spinsters, Ink, Kitty Tsui confronts many of the themes that would later characterize queer Asian American writing. In one of the first poems of the book, “It’s In the Name,”¹⁴ Tsui recounts the various times that Asian American lesbians have been mistaken for each other. The mistaken identity Tsui describes is an example of the tokenization or invisibility often cited in queer Asian American writing through anecdotes of the failure of broader queer communities to recognize or even consider queerness in Asian American individuals.

Family features heavily in Tsui’s work as well, exemplified through her love and respect for her grandmother, as well as her strained relationship with her mother. In “Kwan Ying Lin: Kwan Yuen Sheung,” Tsui presents her grandmother’s struggle as an immigrant in the United States in the 1940s, writing “my grandmother, you have endured eighty years of work and struggle”¹⁵ before chronicling her talent and strength.

However, while Tsui demonstrates her respect for her grandmother, it appears in contrast to her unfulfilled desire for acceptance of her queerness from her family, and especially her mother. In “A Chinese Banquet,” Tsui writes of the very clear, visible disable differences between her and other women in her family who “wore long gowns and a corsage, except for [her].”¹⁶ She goes on to highlight the difference in priorities between her and her family as well during the banquet where “they talk about buying a house and taking a two week vacation in Beijing.”¹⁷ In contrast, Tsui recalls

¹⁴ Tsui, *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire*, 1.

¹⁵ Tsui, *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire*, 4.

¹⁶ Tsui, *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire*, 12.

¹⁷ Ibid.

sucking “on shrimp and squab, dreaming of the cloudscape in [her partner’s] eyes.”¹⁸ Her partner, who Tsui was unable to get married to, was not invited to the banquet.

As a desperate effort to bridge the boundaries in their relationship, Tsui describes telling her mother that she is gay, and rather than acceptance, “she sits across from me, emotions invading her face. her eyes are wet but she will not let tears fall.”¹⁹

However, regardless of the strain in her relationship with her nuclear family, Tsui proudly claims her Chinese American heritage, while reiterating the jeopardy of living in the United States as part of a minority. In “A Celebration of Who I Am,” Tsui writes that she is “not afraid of talking back to those who presume to know who i am... i am afraid only of forgetting the chinese exclusion act of 1882 ... executive order 9066/ tule lake.”²⁰

Tsui’s book was well-received within the queer Asian American community and caught the attention of the broader queer community as well.²¹ In fact, her descriptions of simultaneous love for her family and confidence in her Asian American identity, the deep conflict she experienced with her mother as a result of her sexuality, and her experiences of tokenization were thematically echoed by other Oakland and San Francisco writers of the same decade. In the following years as queer Asian American enclaves formed in various cities, writing about the queer Asian American experience proliferated. Perhaps the desire to record previously unwritten histories, or simply the desire to verbalize and share previously repressed feelings to a newly apparent community catalyzed this growth.

Notably, the majority of the writing that emerged from the 1980s was authored by queer women. The occurrence can be understood through the landscape of Asian American writing at the time, documented by ethnic studies scholars Sau-Ling Wong and Jeffrey Santa Ana in “Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature.” The 1980s were preceded by both the “androcentric

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Tsui, *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire*, 13.

²⁰ Tsui, *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire*, 62.

²¹ Minemura, “Asian Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women in North America,” 17.

cultural nationalist' period,"²² a two-decade period characterized by male writers who employed "misogyny and homophobia... to delineate and construct a (hetero)normative Asian American manhood,"²³ and a more newly emerging feminist writing movement that "declared a new image: tough, powerful, resourceful, independent, and courageous, neither 'lotus blossom' nor 'dragon lady.'"²⁴ As a result, while lesbian writing was not always actively encouraged or acknowledged,²⁵ Asian American women's writing did not actively suppress depictions of homosexuality, appearing "more comfortable with fluidity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy of both origin and identity."²⁶

One significant undertaking was the *Phoenix Rising* newsletter, created by Asian/Pacifica Sisters in 1984 and published until 1995.

²² Wong and Santa Ana, "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature," 189.

²³ Wong and Santa Ana, "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature," 190.

²⁴ Wong and Santa Ana, "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature," 194.

²⁵ Aguilar-San Juan, "Landmarks in Literature by Asian American Lesbians," 939.

²⁶ Wong and Santa Ana, "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature," 196

PHOENIX RISING

The first edition of *Phoenix Rising*, initially titled the *Asian Lesbian Newsletter*, was published in May 1984, several years after the first queer Asian American groups began to form. The newsletter emerged from one such community, the then year-old San Francisco-based lesbian group “Asian Women.” Deciding that a newsletter would be “an excellent focus for the group,”²⁷ five members—Pam Nishikawa, Lori Lai, M. Lee, Susan Lee, and Doreena Wong—came together to serve as the initial editorial staff and, later, as frequent writers and contributors. The five positioned the newsletter as a site of community building, declared in their opening issue that *Phoenix Rising* was “an opportunity for Asian lesbians to network, communicate and share experiences with one another.”²⁸ True to this declaration, the initial publication publicized the location and time of the next Asian Women meeting.

By 1988, the Asian Women group had renamed itself “Asian/Pacifica Sisters.” The group then used the space created by *Phoenix Rising* to formally re-introduce themselves to their community, publishing a statement of purpose which announced their goals of “creating awareness and education by and for Asian/Pacifica lesbians and bisexual women,” “establishing a safe and supportive environment/community,” “creat[ing] and promot[ing] a positive visible presence, provid[ing] role models, increas[ing] visibility and voice,” and “provid[ing] a progressive forum... to address social, political and cultural concerns through a democratic process,” and “establish[ing] communication and network with other groups who share our concerns.”²⁹ The renaming of the organizing and restatement of their goals likely accompanied the increase in the size of the group. At its inception, the group had 10 founding members, and at the peak of the organization’s existence, there were over 550 members.

²⁷ Wong, “Discover A New Direction,” 1.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Asian/Pacifica Sisters Statement of Purpose,” 8.

The Asian/Pacifica Sisters seemed to have achieved their goals for *Phoenix Rising*, which included coverage of and advertisement for community events. Within the newsletter, content was aimed to keep subscribers in the loop with the community, matching the stated goal of broadening the queer Asian Pacific network. Most of the content remained socially focused throughout the newsletters' lifespan, although *Phoenix Rising* did occasionally include articles spreading awareness of other certain groups working within the Asian community, such as Asian Lesbians of the East Coast (ALOEC)³⁰³¹ and of individual queer Asian activists such as Ana C. and Nancy Otto who worked to help parents accept their queer children.³² In certain cases, the newsletter also covered notable activist events, including the 1989 First Asian/Pacifica Lesbian Retreat where South Asian lesbians called attention to their tokenization within the APL community,³³ and a 1991 campaign against the use of the musical *Miss Saigon* in two LGBTQ institutions' annual fundraisers.³⁴

By 1993, *Phoenix Rising* began to struggle with funding.³⁵ Ultimately unable to secure money to fund further printing, the final edition of the newsletter was published in 1994. Over its decade of existence, the newsletter published 44 editions, with contributions from frequent writers (Willy Wilkinson, Kitty Tsui, Trinita Ordoña, Margaret Wu, Kim Compoc, and many more), and many submissions from writers who contributed single articles.

Even prior to Tsui's contributions to the newsletter, themes presented in Tsui's book reverberated through the articles in the newsletter. Writers shared personal narratives of the difficulties of navigating relationships with family and communities, reminiscent of Tsui's account of the separation she felt from her family during a family dinner. Many also recalled dealing with experiences of stereotyping and tokenization from the Asian American or queer communities.

³⁰ Lai, "Asian Lesbians of the East Coast Unite," 2.

³¹ Sam, "East Meets West," 1.

³² C. and Otto, "Helping Our Parents Come Out," 4.

³³ Aruna, "South Asian Lesbians Stop Process at APL Retreat," 1.

³⁴ Hom and Sheu. "Two Letters About 'Miss Saigon,'" 6–7.

³⁵ *Phoenix Rising* Staff, "Could This Be the Last Issue of *Phoenix Rising*?" 1.

While these narratives mostly corroborate Tsui's depiction of the queer Asian American experience, some expand past her experience. Over the decade of the newsletter's publication, the writers recorded the functions of Asian/Pacifica Sisters, which included a range of activities—holding banquets, helping to organize for protests, making international connections, and providing support for lesbian and bisexual women. However, the community was hardly perfect, and some writers reported instances or patterns of discrimination within the community.

Together, these topics stand for a significant portion of the writing in *Phoenix Rising*. The next several sections will be dedicated towards exploring these main themes within the articles in the newsletter: “Asian and queer identities,” “tokenization,” “community activity,” and “exclusion from the community.”

Asian and Queer Identities

Much of the writing in *Phoenix Rising* explores the feelings of isolation in queer or Asian American specific groups, perceiving a necessity to choose between identities, and whether living openly as a queer Asian American individual, not just a queer person or Asian American, was possible. Many shared that their exposure to queer identities arose from white representations, and for some Asian Americans, this resulted in more difficulty in accepting or even recognizing their queer identities. Certain pieces wondered whether queerness is intrinsically incompatible with, or in some way undermines “Asian-ness.”

Scholars and writers have attributed this belief to heterosexism within Asian American communities: among some, there is the belief that homosexuality is a “Western phenomenon,”³⁶ making it harder to perceive Asian Americans within the community as queer. Furthermore, cultural nationalist efforts to portray Asian Americans as heterosexual likely contributed further towards creating an environment in which most were unfamiliar with queerness, or unlikely to accept it.

Thus, many of the writers in *Phoenix Rising* started to explore their queer identities among queer, but not Asian organizations. Some queer Asian Americans have reported attempting to find

³⁶ Lee, “Toward a Queer History,” 193.

community within queer communities and organizations but have felt like something has been missing in these interactions. In the 1990 personal narrative “I Finally Was Home,” contributor Theresita “Tacy” Erfe Mejia Urian wrote about her involvement with the gay and lesbian community. “It was at this time that I felt like I belonged, however, there was something always missing... it occurred to me that I should go back to the Filipino community.”³⁷

However, for Urian and others, a reluctance to embrace Asian American identities in childhood, as a result of cultural conflicts between Asian immigrant parents or due to American influences in school and society, was a contributing factor towards their drift away from the Asian American community. Urian wrote that early in life, “I didn’t want to be Filipino—I wanted to be American,” and that her parents were “very strict, overbearing and controlling (very Filipino).”³⁸ Such sentiments have been reiterated in later works by queer Asian American authors, as well. Alice Hom, for one, expressed a similar sentiment in her 1990 article, “You Name It,” that as a teenager, she had rebelled against “anything considered remotely Asian because I wanted to be ‘American.’”³⁹ Hom attributes her “identity crisis” to the “propensity of images... which consistently portray the white [queer] experience,”⁴⁰ that cause people of color to suppress their identities.

Thus while queer Asian Americans expressed an inability to find their community in both queer and Asian spaces, unifying a queer and Asian American identity proved difficult for those who feared openly expressing their queer identities in front of family and ethnic communities. In a 1990 interview first printed in *Hokubei Mainichi*, then reprinted to *Phoenix Rising*, community member Claire Nakasue described that while “there is not a stronger taboo against homosexuality among Asians than in any other communities... there may be cultural barriers to coming out... ‘Asians have a harder time coming out because they are so family-involved... you’ve got your family, and if you alienate them, then you’re kind of out there by yourself. It’s harder to come out for fear of losing that

³⁷ Urian, “I Finally Was Home,” 4.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Hom, “You Name It,” 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

connection.”⁴¹ Her partner Christine Liang offered a similar sentiment, that “some people of color don’t come out because they ‘don’t want to get cut from their community.’”⁴²

In an interview several years later in 1993, activist Helen Zia also suggested a view analogous to that expressed by Nakasue and Liang, that “for us Asian lesbians... it’s ‘if you [come out], you will lose your community’ ... [I had fears of] losing my family support and, once I became very involved in the Asian community (which is really just an extension of one’s family) and of losing the community support that I had.”⁴³

The root of these fears may arise from their family’s lack of understanding or even awareness of queerness. In 1990 article “Cousin to Cousin,” *Phoenix Rising* contributor A.M. Wong expanded on this bluntly, writing that “lesbians are viewed by Asian society as white degenerates.”⁴⁴ Nonetheless, for those who want to “emerge from family isolation, from family denial of our existence,” Wong advocated to “hold our families’ hands and take care of their feelings and lead the way for them.”⁴⁵ This would require enormous effort, Wong acknowledged, but concluded it to be better than the alternative, in which “shame and guilt”⁴⁶ would be imposed on both Asian American lesbians and their families.

Beyond shame and guilt, in their 1990 piece “Helping Our Parents Come Out,” activists Ana C. and Nancy Otto outlined even more drastic consequences that some Asian/Pacific Islander lesbian and gay men faced after coming out to their parents: “some parents disowned us, some refused to acknowledge our lifestyle, some threatened suicide.”⁴⁷ With the awareness of the fear of losing ties to family and community after coming out in mind, Ana C. and Otto attempted to help parents become more accepting of their childrens’ identities. Just as queer Asian American children have

⁴¹ Yamamoto, “The Chemistry Was Right,” 6.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Wu, “A Conversation With Helen Zia,” 3.

⁴⁴ Wong, “Cousin to Cousin,” 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ C. and Otto, “Helping Our Parents Come Out,” 4.

faced isolation as a result of their identity, Ana C. and Otto asserted that parents “suffer from isolation upon learning of their child’s homosexuality.”⁴⁸

The only national organization of the time, PFLAG—Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—offered no services geared towards individuals who speak English as a second language, and Ana C. and Otto desired an alternative solution. They began to host small gatherings for parents, with “hope that meeting other parents in similar situations will help relieve them of their sense of isolation.”⁴⁹ Ana C. and Otto’s approach was one step towards challenging parental assumptions that queerness is incompatible with “Asian-ness.”

Tokenization

For some *Phoenix Rising* contributors, attempts to consolidate Asian and queer identities were made more difficult due to the sheer unfamiliarity that many appeared to have with queer Asian Americans. Some of the earliest contributors to *Phoenix Rising* expressed frustrations with the stereotyping that they faced as Asian American women, or specifically as Asian American lesbians.

In “Discover a New Direction,” in which Doreena Wong wrote for the Asian Women editorial board, the board expressed the desire to create an open forum so that readers “do not feel isolated and used as tokens in other women’s or Third World groups.”⁵⁰ The organization also wished to not “represent any one particular ideology but rather to reflect a broad spectrum of differing viewpoints,” which they considered more important to building a “strong, supportive Asian lesbian community,” than pushing a single ideology.⁵¹ The continued calls for submissions over the years demonstrated the group’s commitment to the principle.

Some submissions mention the stereotypes that Asian women would face on a daily basis. M. Lee, for example, began her 1984 article “Firebirds Score!!” about an Asian women’s basketball

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Wong, “Discover A New Direction,” 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

team challenging the stereotype that “Asian women are too short to play basketball.”⁵² Meanwhile, in 1984 piece “From ‘Oriental Treasures’ to Independent Woman,” Willy Wilkinson challenged the stereotype of passivity that Asian American women faced in the United States. By this means of queering history, Wilkinson reminded her readers that there were more options than simply accepting roles as “oriental treasures.”⁵³

However, while these writers interrogated the broad stereotypes that Asian women faced, they battled a separate issue as Asian lesbians: invisibility, rather than stereotyping. In A.M. Wong’s article, she called attention to the challenge of invisibility that Asian lesbians faced not only in white society, but within their own family as well. She wrote, “neither of my parents seemed to pick up on the girlfriends... even after they told us that one of them moved across the country to ‘be with’ the other... even though they live together... even though they wear silver bands on their ring fingers.”⁵⁴ A.M. Wong concluded by asking frankly, “Asian lesbianism is invisible enough in our white ‘het’ society, how could I expect them to detect it in our own family?”⁵⁵

However, while Wong’s article asserted that lesbianism was more visible in “white ‘het’ society” than in Asian American families, other Asian American lesbian writers called attention to the limited confines in which lesbianism was expected and accepted. In 1985 submission “Leather and Rice: An Asian S/M Dyke Speaks Out,” for example, C. Chew wrote about her refusal to conform to others’ beliefs about lesbian respectability. She shared about her experiences in S/M, or sadism and masochism, specifically recounting her experience marching in a Pride parade while led on a leash by a “butch white woman.”⁵⁶ She recalled that the majority of negative reactions she received were from white women, who patronized her in a “‘don’t-you-know-you’re-being-oppressed’ vein.”⁵⁷

⁵² Lee, “Firebirds Score!!” 3.

⁵³ Wilkinson, “From ‘Oriental Treasures’ to Independent Woman,” 1.

⁵⁴ Wong, “Cousin to Cousin,” 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Chew, “Leather and Rice: An Asian S/M Dyke Speaks Out,” 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

However, she detailed the extensive thought process that had gone into her choice to march as part of Lesbians Operating Under Intense Sexual Excitement (LOUISE), stating that “openly being into S/M forces people to accept that Asian lesbians are not all alike.”⁵⁸ Chew thus framed her decision to march with LOUISE to be a political choice, an act meant to counter the desire of certain oppressed groups to “present an ‘acceptable’ image of lesbianism for the straight folks.”⁵⁹

Given these experiences, one would hope that Asian American lesbians would be able to enjoy recognition from other queer Asian Americans, who might already be sensitized towards issues of tokenization. However, in 1986 article “Asians and Gays: An Emerging Majority in San Francisco,” Lori Lai described the feeling of invisibility she experienced at a panel discussion on “Asians and Gays,” sponsored by a lesbian and gay club in San Francisco. As the only Asian American lesbian in the meeting room, Lai noted that the only Asian American woman on the panel, a Filipino activist, “carefully avoided talking about Filipino gay people, i.e. all those Filipino women at A Little More,”⁶⁰ while the gay Asian American activists only talked about gay-specific issues. Lai despaired, “there you have it, my fellow women, a panel discussion on Gays and Asians and scarcely a word mentioned about us. Do we exist in the minds of our two communities, Gay and Asian? Or are we ‘Invisible Shrinking Women?’”⁶¹

Community Activity

Such questions filled the early pages of *Phoenix Rising*. Within the first article of the first edition, “Discover a New Direction,” the editors cited the “need to provide a forum for the discussion of ideas in order to form an organizational network with each other so that we do not feel isolated or used as tokens in other women’s or Third World groups.”⁶² Throughout its time as a publication, the newsletter held true to its goal of providing a forum and accepted submissions from its readers. Its format as a newsletter allowed *Phoenix Rising* to easily facilitate community interaction; the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Lai, “Asians and Gays: An Emerging Majority in San Francisco,” 2.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Wong, “Discover A New Direction,” 1.

Announcements section of the newsletters provided a space for advertising workshops and events, calls for volunteers, housing postings, and even recruiting for the predominantly Asian American women's softball teams, the Firebirds and The Year of the OX.⁶³

The newsletter also served as a record of the group's community activities. In the newsletter's sixth edition, for example, Z. Wong describes a 1985 Year of the Ox banquet attended by thirty-two lesbian women and coordinated by *Phoenix Rising* staff member Tammy Yee.⁶⁴ Several years later, in 1993, the newsletter reported a Lunar New Year banquet was attended by over 100 lesbian women—an indicator of the community's significant growth.⁶⁵

In a time where queer Asian American enclaves were beginning to form in San Francisco, a written newsletter provided a way of reaching a wider audience than just those who lived in close proximity to the area, and of keeping women who might have not been able to attend all of the group's meetings in the know.

The newsletter provided even broader connections as organizations from across the country reached out to the Asian/Pacifica Sisters organization and were subsequently featured in *Phoenix Rising*. Asian American lesbian groups from across the United States including ALOEC, and Asians & Friends, a Chicago based organization, connected with *Phoenix Rising* and Asian/Pacifica Sisters at various points during the publication's lifespan.⁶⁶⁶⁷ South Asian queer organizations such as Trikone⁶⁸ were also featured in the newsletter.⁶⁹

The newsletter also offered opportunities to make international connections. In the few short years since the formation of Asian/Pacifica Sisters, the group went from initial limited exposure to

⁶³ "The Year of the Ox," 7.

⁶⁴ Wong, "Chow Down!" 1.

⁶⁵ "Editor's Corner," 2.

⁶⁶ Sam, "East Meets West," 1.

⁶⁷ Chan, "Letters to the Editor," 6.

⁶⁸ "Patna, India Group Plans National Newsletter," 6.

⁶⁹ Lai, "Growing Up Gay in Japan," 2.

a single other group (the US-based Asian Lesbians of the East Coast) to having connections to lesbian women and women's groups in Canada, Japan, and China. Stories such as "Growing Up Gay in Japan," a 1986 article in which Lori Lai summarized a conversation with Japanese artist Kazuko, offered perspective into a queer Japanese woman's life, and a post under the Open Forum section offered to "provide phone numbers and addresses of places to visit" in Japan.⁷⁰ Two members of *Phoenix Rising*, Trinity Ordoña and Desiree Thompson, even hosted three Japanese women during San Francisco's 1992 Gay Pride Week, whom they met at the 2nd Asian Lesbian Network Conference in Tokyo. The newsletter featured a story, "Japanese Lesbians Visit San Francisco's Gay and Lesbian Community," about three women, Toshiko Sekiguchi, Kazuko Kudo, and Mamiko Sekiya, who were "leaders in the Tokyo-based youth group, OCCUR (Association for Lesbian and Gay Movement)," and OCCUR's lawsuit against Tokyo City Hall for gay discrimination.⁷¹ Sekiguchi had written to Ordoña and Thompson with "a simple request to meet [them] and learn about lesbian life in S.F.," and learn "whatever they could [about gay politics and organizing] to take back home."⁷²

While the main focus of many groups was social, many also retained explicitly political goals. The editors of *Phoenix Rising* wanted to provide the community with awareness of "activities of interest to Asian feminists."⁷³ This manifested in the form of interviews of activists, documentation of early Chinese American women's history, and coverage of protests. Notably, the newsletter helped highlighted a group of Asian American lesbians from the Asian Pacifica Lesbian Network who were planning on attending the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, a protest now remembered as one of the largest in US history.⁷⁴

Some *Phoenix Rising* contributors also wrote about their personal journeys of discovering queer communities or the role these communities played in helping them embrace their own

⁷⁰ Hanawa, "Open Forum: Networking," 5.

⁷¹ Ordoña, "Japanese Lesbians Visit San Francisco's Gay and Lesbian Community," 1.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Wong, "Discover a New Direction," 1.

⁷⁴ Bay Area APLN, "Asian Pacifica Lesbian Network: April 25, 1993 March On Washington & 1994 Retreat," 2.

identities. In her final editorial in *Phoenix Rising* in 1990, Kolika O. shared her journey to accept her sexuality, starting from years of “living the life of a ‘straight woman,’ sure that there was no alternative,” to eventually coming out after two years of discussing her “feelings, fears, and concerns” with another Asian Pacifica lesbian.⁷⁵ She shared that she had met many “intelligent, warm, articulate, creative and supportive Asian/Pacificas lesbians,” and to her, “they are more than my friends, they are my family.”⁷⁶ These sorts of bonds could be observed throughout various editorials, in which many wrote about just how important finding a supportive and empathetic community had been.

Exclusion From Community

However, even as many discovered supportive environments and found families within queer organizations and the broader queer community, others confronted exclusion, particularly on the basis of ethnicity. These undercurrents of in-community exclusion were brought to the foreground in 1989: the Dynamics of Color conference, and again at the First Asian/Pacificas Lesbian Retreat.

In “Hey Girlfriends,” a 1990 piece reflecting on the 1989 Dynamics of Color conference, Wilkinson criticized some of the queer Asian American attendees’ reactions towards issues of racism within the community: ““what about our issues? I’m a victim too.””⁷⁷ The Asian women in question were part of what Wilkinson referred to as the “dominant Asian American population,” those “who most easily fit into the ‘Asian’ category without having to do any explaining.” The women, Wilkinson criticized, were not inclusive towards South Asian, Pacific Islander, and mixed heritage people, and were not excused from being racist simply by being Asian.

The issue continued to occur, and in “South Asian Lesbians Stop Process at APL Retreat,” a 1990 article reprinted from *Shamakami*, V.K. Aruna described the 1989 First Asian/Pacificas Lesbian Retreat at Santa Cruz, where South Asian lesbians similarly confronted retreat organizers and participants to render South Asian lesbians invisible. She had attended the retreat, and was

⁷⁵ O. “Editor’s Note,” 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Wilkinson, “Hey Girlfriends,” 3.

disappointed to find that a presentation titled “Asian/Pacific Lesbians: Coming Out/Coming Together,” offered little South Asian representation, even after Aruna had previously spoken with the producer about this deficit. All ten of the South Asian lesbians who were present at the event joined on stage to speak about the issue of South Asian representation in the Asian American community, to mixed reactions from the audience. While some were apologetic, others criticized the women for disrupting the solidarity, arguing that they could not change what larger society thought and that they, as fellow Asian American lesbians, were not the real problem. In spite of these reactions, Aruna wrote that “the action that we, as South Asian Lesbians, took at the retreat was imperative for our own political existence and personal empowerment. None of us had ever before joined with other South Asians to unapologetically claim our right to be seen heard and acknowledge as South Asians. None of us had felt the power of such joining together.”⁷⁸

Reflections on *Phoenix Rising*

The articles in *Phoenix Rising* illustrated the stresses that the writers had gone through as they discovered their identities; the roles fulfilled by the communities they were now part of; and the conflicts that occurred within those communities. The newsletter showcased the support the queer Asian American community could provide from conflicts with singularly Asian or singularly queer groups, but also did not shy from revealing the imperfect realities within the queer Asian American community.

In doing so, *Phoenix Rising* tells the story of a relatively localized community in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 80s. While writers within the newsletter made connections to others across the country or even internationally, most articles focused on the lives of people within a few cities. It was created by a group of women from a single organization, and members of the editorial board remained some of the newsletter’s foremost contributors over the years.

The next text, the 1998 academic anthology *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*, represents writing from individuals who were part of queer Asian American communities from around the

⁷⁸ Aruna, “South Asian Lesbians Stop Process at APL Retreat,” 5.

country, rather than localized to a single area. The nature of the anthology required writers to submit a single piece of work, instead of allowing for multiple submissions over a longer period of time, and the majority of the pieces included in *Q & A* were significantly longer than the submissions to *Phoenix Rising*. This allowed the ideas within each article to be developed more fully than what was permitted by the short newsletter format of *Phoenix Rising*. Furthermore, the pieces within *Q & A* were largely academic pieces, written in the register of a scholar and more highly theoretical, as opposed to the colloquial, personal styles found in *Phoenix Rising*.

Q & A

The 90s saw the emergence of more academic writing on queer Asian America. Small press and self-published works could still be found in the 90s, but Asian American studies had been expanding ever since its inception during the late 60s and the topic of queerness was finally beginning to be academically explored.⁷⁹

Q & A represents this emergent form of academic writing on the experience of being queer in Asian America. In the introduction to the anthology, editors David Eng and Alice Hom cited that as a result of “the cross-disciplinary work and the proliferation of theoretical scholarship on race, gender, and (homo)sexuality in the 1980s, we can assert that the state of Asian American studies in the late 1990s has expanded... to include hitherto unimaginable intellectual perspectives, scholarly angles, and progressive politics.”⁸⁰

The density and variety of articles within *Q & A* corroborates this claim. Eng and Hom had aimed to gather a good quantity of writing from diverse sources to depict the community, while aware that the submissions going into the anthology could not be fully representative as “multiple political agendas and competing theories of sexual identification came to inform our sense of Asian American racial formation and identity.”⁸¹ As such, the anthology contains a range of works, including political essays, personal narratives, series of photographs, and transcripts of interviews and discussions.

This shift in genre could be related to the relatively established positions of queer Asian American communities: in the 80s and early 90s, people had already written about their experiences

⁷⁹ Sueyoshi, “Queer Asian American Historiography,” 267.

⁸⁰ Eng and Hom, “Introduction,” 8.

⁸¹ Eng and Hom, “Introduction,” 7.

of searching for and finding communities and by the late 90s, the authors in *Q & A* had the opportunity to discuss both those individual experiences and the communities they pointed to.

The writing discussed in the following sections, “Asian and Queer Identities,” and “Tokenization,” parallel the works found earlier in *Phoenix Rising*, but include additional nuances. Writers still wrote about their isolation from queer or Asian American communities, but with further awareness of the intersectional and political nature of their identities.

While themes of Asian and queer identity and tokenization continued to be discussed in *Q & A*, the anthology contained very few accounts of specific community activities. This seems reasonable given that the contributors were all part of different communities, rather than part of a single community or organization. Instead, some writers wrote about the activism that they were participating in, a broader issue that more readers across the country might find compelling. These issues are organized into the section “Community Activism.”

Furthermore, writers in *Q & A* wrote in a more explicitly critical fashion towards certain trends within their communities. The criticism of essentialization of queer Asian identities by queer Asian American individuals is studied in “Queer Critique,” and gender-based divisions and trans-exclusion is discussed in “Exclusion from Community.”

Asian and Queer Identities

In the first article of *Q & A*, “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” Karin Aguilar-San Juan analyzed the alienation often experienced by queer Asian Americans, in which homophobia is felt “most intense[ly] at home, wherever we construe that to be, because home matters the most.”⁸² She argued that “for many Asian Americans, home is a place where ‘Asianness’ originates,”⁸³ perceiving what is perhaps the heart of the reason why many queer

⁸² Aguilar-San Juan, “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” 25.

⁸³ Ibid.

Asian Americans had previously expressed feeling pressured to choose one identity or another: if queerness is rejected at home, does “Asianness” have to be given up as well?

By the 90s, queer Asian social and political organizations had also become more concretely established and provided support towards those who wished to embrace their queer Asian identities. Many writers had begun to address the intersectional nature of Asian and queer identities, with a somewhat more explicit awareness of the reductionist nature of the terms “Asian American” and “queer.” Thus, while authors from the 90s faced many of the same struggles as the writers of *Phoenix Rising*, including separation from both queer and Asian communities, some were also able to better leverage the intersectionality of the “Asian American” identity to guide their perceptions of the queer Asian American identity.

Just as Urian had written about the feeling of excitement, and eventual lacking, from interacting with queer organizations, Richard Fung asserted in that for queer people of color, the “mainstream gay movement, can be a place of freedom and sexual identity. But it is also a site of racial, cultural, and sexual alienation.”⁸⁴ Fung also referred to the “cultural schizophrenia in which I related, on one hand, to a heterosexual family that affirmed my ethnic culture and, on the other hand, to a gay community that was predominantly white.”⁸⁵ For him, the existence of a “gay Asian community” (the “ever-growing organizations of lesbians and gays”) and the knowledge that support was available helped him deal with his own feelings of “cultural schizophrenia”⁸⁶ and to ultimately come out to his family. Fung’s essay helps to locate the queer individuals at this point—organized, in cities—and reaffirms the established importance of communities in queer Asian Americans’ lives for surviving as “out” individuals.

Like Fung, Vera Miao described in her essay, “Coalition Politics: (Re)turning the Century,” a similar experience by Asian American lesbians and bisexual women, in which the narratives of rejection they often faced, “whose exclusion is caused by the homophobia within the larger racial

⁸⁴ Fung, “Looking For My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” 125.

⁸⁵ Fung, “Looking For My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” 118.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

and ethnic communities and the racism of predominantly white queer populations” were viewed as “only a few painful interventions in prevailing definitions of ‘home’ and ‘community.’”⁸⁷ In a choice very disparate from Aguilar-San Juan’s, who had centered “home” as the actual home of each individual, Miao defined “home” and “community” relative to the larger ethnic and queer populations that Asian American lesbians and bisexuals were unable to fit into. In this vein, Vera Miao referred to the “Borderlands” that Asian American lesbians occupy; for women, people of color, and queers “existing simultaneously within several spheres of experience and oppression,” there is no traditional “home.”⁸⁸ However, this did not mean to Miao that the holders of these identities were powerless.

Miao explicitly addressed the political nature of asserting an Asian or queer identity, writing “the assertion of my identity is based in a rich history of affirming, and indeed essentializing, the different facets of myself along the axes of race, gender, and sexuality”; emphasizing that essentialism is a “tactic” used in political struggle.⁸⁹ One paradox arises as a consequence of both spotlighting the uniqueness of an experience based on race, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity as a tactic to defy easy categorization, and joining in coalitional entities on the basis of sharing certain identities. While the hyperspecificity of each experience lends itself toward strong bonds between those who share the experiences, Miao noted that differences were equally useful towards building coalitions and through “using the differences that fracture both the self and us from each other as the stepping stone for new alliances... political agendas can be accomplished without sacrificing differences.”⁹⁰

Tokenization

Writers in Q & A examined the ways that the normative experience of queerness (white, increasingly middle class) undercut the potential for acknowledgment of queer Asian Americans.

⁸⁷ Miao, “Coalition Politics: (Re)turning the Century,” 70.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Miao, “Coalition Politics: (Re)turning the Century,” 71.

⁹⁰ Miao, “Coalition Politics: (Re)turning the Century,” 72.

Men tended to be viewed as asexual “male siss[ies],”⁹¹ while women were seen as hyper-heterosexual, as either the “Lotus Blossom” or “Dragon Lady,”⁹² while the Asian American lesbian remains invisible.

The continued lack of acknowledgment of queer Asian Americans was highlighted in Yoko Yoshikawa’s recount of the 1991 protest in “The Heat Is On *Miss Saigon*” over the use of the musical *Miss Saigon* in a fundraising event held by Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, a national law organization that champions gay and lesbian rights, and New York City’s Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. The protestors criticized the organizations for choosing *Miss Saigon* and perpetuating the stereotypes of Western cultural supremacy and the “self-effacing geisha girl,” using Vietnam as an “exotic backdrop.”⁹³ However, while the protest had been organized by two queer groups, ALOEC and Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY), news outlets that later covered the events made no mention of the groups’ queer origins. Instead, it was the “Asian community, monolithic”⁹⁴ that was protesting. At one point, a TV reporter even asked, ““what do lesbians and gay men have to do with protesting *Miss Saigon*?””⁹⁵ The link was entirely forgotten.

Even among queer news sources, the message became distorted. The protest had drawn sharp racial divides: the protesters “yellow and brown-skinned, kept at bay by the cops” confronted “Lambda’s well-dressed, overwhelmingly white, mainly male donors.”⁹⁶ The resulting publication in a queer newspaper reduced the protest to “more-p.c.-than-thou gay-bashing.”⁹⁷ Yoshikawa expressed disturbance at the indication that “when lesbian and gay people of color criticize the white gay male establishment, they are gay-bashing,” an overall reflection of the unequal power distribution within the queer community. The choice of *Miss Saigon* for the fundraiser reflects the

⁹¹ Eng and Hom, “Introduction,” 12.

⁹² Wong and Santa Ana, “Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature,” 194.

⁹³ Yoshikawa, “The Heat Is On *Miss Saigon*,” 45.

⁹⁴ Yoshikawa, “The Heat Is On *Miss Saigon*,” 54.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Yoshikawa, “The Heat Is On *Miss Saigon*,” 40.

⁹⁷ Yoshikawa, “The Heat Is On *Miss Saigon*,” 50.

distribution as well: “as they do in mainstream society, white men hold a disproportionate amount of institutional power in the queer community.”⁹⁸

Queer Asian American activists attempted to call attention to this trend, as Richard Fung recounted in “Looking for My Penis.” Early demands of Asian gay and lesbian movements called for visibility, with the aim of securing the community a greater voice. But while those demands were superficially met by including Asian Americans on panels and boards via “tokenistic integration”⁹⁹ as minority representatives, they failed to truly address the imbalance of power.

In another, very different approach to antiracist efforts of visibility, Fung also scrutinized Asian appearances in Western pornography. Gay Asian men appeared almost solely for the white gaze and cater to the “house boy”¹⁰⁰ fantasy, in which a gay Asian male is submissive to a white male. Furthermore, Fung noted that in a rare instance in which two Asian men were depicted together, it was in the context that the two men were unable to have intercourse with each other, reinforcing their internalized homophobia, and only validating queerness in Asians through the context of providing pleasure to white individuals/further cementing racialized ideas of sexuality.

While Fung studied the appearance of queer Asians within queer media, Aguilar San-Juan examined the dynamics of queer Asian appearances within Asian American media. Aguilar San-Juan referred to the “appeal to an authentic experience”¹⁰¹ that could be achieved through visibility, and therefore self-representation. However, she also questioned the ways by which simply increasing visibility would fail to “reveal the reasons for that silencing in the first place.”¹⁰²

Aguilar-San Juan also questioned the heteronormative ideas of ethnicity perpetuated within the Asian American, and specifically Filipino American, community. She had been invited to contribute to a Filipino American anthology as a lesbian voice. While the intention was well

⁹⁸ Yoshikawa, “The Heat Is On *Miss Saigon*,” 51.

⁹⁹ Fung, “Looking For My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” 118.

¹⁰⁰ Fung, “Looking For My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” 123.

¹⁰¹ Aguilar-San Juan, “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” 31.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

received, she reflected on the consequence: “simply incorporating a “marginalized perspective in a larger work that does not ask why certain perspectives are marginalized... lends itself to cooptation by the status quo.”¹⁰³ Examining her relationship to the “center” and “margin,” Aguilar San-Juan noted that on the premise of being included as the sole lesbian voice, the anthology locates her “naturally” at the margin, continuing to reinforce established ideas of where the demographic exists within society, rather than questioning how and why the center and margin were established.¹⁰⁴ Further, she also remarked that queer Asian American activists unintentionally reinforced norms of white heterosexuality by labeling women and lesbians of color “‘doubl[y]’ and ‘tripl[y]’ oppress[ed],” maintaining that these women are marginal to regular society.¹⁰⁵

Community Activism

The organization-focused articles in Q & A featured records of activism. Notably, most of the efforts were coalitional, in which queer Asian Americans worked with other minority activism groups as well.

In “Coalition Politics,” Miao spoke about the successful coalitional efforts in protests around funding cuts for “public health care and AIDS-related issues,” the “public education budget,” and “funding for housing and the homeless.”¹⁰⁶ Four groups, including the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAV), which was “overwhelmingly Asian,” with many members “female and a few queer,”¹⁰⁷ organized four distinct protests with the overall objective of achieving social justice. The Miss Saigon protest that Yoshikawa described had also been organized between multiple groups, including individuals who were not queer Asian Americans.

In “Queer Asian American Immigrants: Opening Borders and Closets,” Ignatius Bau analyzed the political importance of coalitions between Asian American communities and queer

¹⁰³ Aguilar-San Juan, “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” 31.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Miao, “Coalition Politics: (Re)turning the Century,” 68.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

communities, and the ability for queer Asian Americans to organize within both in the aftermath of the failure to stop Proposition 187, a bill that “denies education, health care, and social services to individuals suspected of being undocumented immigrants by California government officials.”¹⁰⁸ The vote was racially polarized, and Bao argued that “if we had been successful in educating, organizing, and mobilizing voters in communities of color,” the odds of defeating the Proposition would have greatly increased. Furthermore, the effort could have been more successful if the campaigns had reached more white voters through different constituent identities, such as queer identities. Bao argued that for future campaigns, it would be useful to “integrate our multiple identities in our multiple communities,” accentuating certain parts of the identity within individual communities in order to diversify the communities that they could reach, a strategy similar to Miao’s proposed use of essentialized identities as a political tactic. Bao further argued that “until the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/queer communities acknowledge the multiracial and multicultural diversity of our communities, queer immigrants will continue to be invisible and closeted... those of us who are queers of color who are now U.S. citizens or have legal immigration status can afford to speak out about immigrant rights,” urging them to do so.¹⁰⁹

However, even while there was extensive organizing, queer organizations were far from unanimous in their activism. In a transcribed panel discussion, “Queer API Men in Los Angeles: A Roundtable on History and Political Organizing,” edited by Eric Wat and Steven Shum, panel members established that while there were many more openly gay people in the 90s, this was not equivalent to more community involved. One panelist Gil Mangaoang compared the environment of the 90s to the 70s, where “you could not help but become politicized.”¹¹⁰ Mangaoang described that the 70s were a period of rapid change, while the situation of the 90s, where the economy was “very unstable” and jobs were a “critical issue,” was not as conducive towards radical community work.¹¹¹ However, Wat described “the pervasiveness of conservatism” in the 90s as creating a

¹⁰⁸ Bao, “Queer Asian American Immigrants: Opening Borders and Closets,” 59.

¹⁰⁹ Bao, “Queer Asian American Immigrants: Opening Borders and Closets,” 61.

¹¹⁰ Wat and Shum (ed.), “Queer API Men in Los Angeles: A Roundtable,” 181.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

“very different political climate,” but unlike Mangaoang, Wat had more optimism that outreach would allow the organizations to connect to people.¹¹²

Members of another queer organization, Mahu, held similarly mixed opinions of steering the group to engage in activism. Jennifer Tseng shared survey results from the group in “Mahu: The Gender Imbalance,” and found that some members wanted the group to become more involved in political action, while others wanted the group to remain purely social. Group members expressed doubt over whether the group could fulfill both roles, and some individuals expressed discomfort with the idea of conducting outreach, equating recruiting to ““Christan Fellowship people,”” a perspective that Tseng speculated arose out of “internalization of the homophobic fear that all homosexuals are trying to recruit straight people.”¹¹³ From the interviews, Tseng concluded that “the struggle to articulate the existence of or need for a political agenda was evident.”¹¹⁴ The Mahu members’ divide over whether to engage in activism or not reflects the opinions stated in the “Queer API Men” roundtable— that simply holding a queer identity did not innately endear an individual to political causes or political organizing.

Queer Critique

While Phoenix Rising, as a periodic publication that focused mainly on one organization and area, focused mostly on community activities, Q & A featured articles with a broader approach to the community. Some essays involved inward reflection towards the attitudes of individuals within the community and others presented more outright critique.

Just as A.M. Wong noted in *Phoenix Rising*, Nayan Shah commented in “Sexuality, Identity, and the Uses of History” that South Asian heterosexists often labeled homosexuality as a “white disease,” and called attention to the more recent attempts of individuals to trace homosexuality to their earlier generations in South Asia.¹¹⁵ Some, seeking to reconcile their queer

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Tseng, “Mahu: The Gender Imbalance.” 249.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Shah, “Sexuality, Identity, and the Uses of History,” 149.

and Asian identities, began to search for queerness within their own ancestry. These attempts showcase in-community attempts to pull together a concrete argument about the coexistence of queer and Asian identities. The link appeared especially desirable when “many self-identified South Asian lesbians and gay men have struggled for representation in both dominant South Asian worlds and dominant white queer worlds,”¹¹⁶ and could indeed be important and affirming. However, this also led to its own problems.

In the struggle of representation in both “dominant South Asian worlds and dominant white queer worlds... they have enlisted history—personal, archeological, and social—to attain visibility and voice.”¹¹⁷ While Shah himself did not make attempts towards locating queerness in history, he commented on the goals and the results of such efforts. Shah agreed that finding these histories could be powerful towards asserting the existence of similar or alternative forms of queerness in past society, but “gay identities and relationships” as modern gay and lesbian communities understand them are a “relatively new idea.”¹¹⁸ Shah warned against falling into “in the need of a history to sanction our existence.”¹¹⁹ Shah’s perspective aligns with Hom and Eng’s introduction and the increased awareness within texts of this decade that justifying queer existence was perhaps unnecessary. Such arguments suggested that the act of defining queer existence is inherently reductive.

In another essay within the anthology, “Toward a Queer History,” Jeeyun Lee also brought up critique of “cultural authenticity” that queer individuals faced from their “diasporic communities and communities of people of color in the West.”¹²⁰ Lee quotes Shah in that “heterosexists unquestioningly accept the historically ‘Western’ notion that heterosexuality is natural, normal, and biologically correct and that homosexuality is unnatural and perverse,” while

¹¹⁶ Shah, “Sexuality, Identity, and the Uses of History,” 142.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Shah, “Sexuality, Identity, and the Uses of History,” 149.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Lee, “Toward a Queer History,” 193.

in reality, queer people of color defy “heterosexist conceptualizations of culture and authenticity.”¹²¹

Lee claims that to address the seemingly disparate queer and Asian identities, some made “efforts to read queers into the homeland.”¹²² However, in the process of doing so, these people often failed “to problematize other aspects of homeland politics” that would act as barriers to queer life in the “homeland” itself.¹²³ Lee thus spoke to a concern shared by Shah— that present-day conceptions of queer behavior and identity are ahistorical and cannot be used to define past individuals. She warned against locating all queers under a single block erases historical and spatial complexities in an “arrogantly imperialist” manner.¹²⁴

In her chapter, Aguilar-San Juan elaborated on this point through an anecdote of a benefit party she had attended in 1994. The event was held to help fund legal support for two lesbians in the Philippines, who were fired from their jobs in a human rights agency, Arellano, after “intra-office gossip” cost them their privacy.¹²⁵ Upon reflection on the event, Aguilar-San Juan shared that “certain choice phrases [from Arellano’s letter] had been taken out of context, allowing Arellano—and the Philippines in general—to be portrayed as culturally repressive and backward. The way we had jumped scale from the relatively small personal interaction... to protect ‘lesbian rights in Asia’ made [her] nervous.”¹²⁶ Some even had “colonial impulse[s]” of extending the freedoms of lesbians in the US to the Philippines, viewing the Philippines as a place that denied lesbian rights, and the US as the more progressive site.¹²⁷ The implication of a global, US-influenced understanding of queer freedom brings up the very problems that Lee outlined: erasure of culturally based variation within queer identity itself.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Lee, “Toward a Queer History,” 196.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Lee, “Toward a Queer History,” 193.

¹²⁵ Aguilar-San Juan, “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” 27.

¹²⁶ Aguilar-San Juan, “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” 28.

¹²⁷ Aguilar-San Juan, “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” 29.

Exclusion From Community

The community that *Q & A* depicts is complicated and imperfect. While some found their homes within queer Asian America, *Q & A* also described how those communities of choice could still manifest the tensions present in broader American society. Many of these tensions reflected issues of gender equity—queer women reported issues with queer men, while transgender individuals criticized exclusionary practices of queer groups that focused on sexuality.

In the “Queer API Men” roundtable, editors Eric Wat and Steven Shum argued that “as a result of the sexism in our community, women have found the need to create their own spaces, such as the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Islander Sisters and the Vietnamese Bisexual, Lesbian, and Transgender Group O Mõi.”¹²⁸ This aligns with previously recorded patterns in *Phoenix Rising*, where lesbian writers had also stated the necessity of creating separate queer organizations based on gender.

As shared in “Mahu: The Gender Imbalance,” Jennifer Tseng discovered another clear example of the gender divide within the community in Mahu. As a newer member of the group, Tseng had initially intended on speaking to the women of Mahu to discuss the invisibility that queer Asian women experience. However, she discovered that the organization had a long-standing gender imbalance that traced back to 1993, two years after the group’s inception. The group generally only had two or three women, out of ten to twelve core members, at any given time. This sparked Tseng’s decision to survey the entire group instead, to help her “uncover the causes of the gender disparity but also gain insight into queer API women’s invisibility in general.”¹²⁹

Of those who agreed to her survey, participants skewed Chinese American and openly queer. There were no non-Mahu member female participants, and Tseng noted the irony that for a project in which the invisibility of queer API women is a central facet, the voices of the main subjects of her essay are barely represented.

¹²⁸ Wat and Shum (ed.), “Queer API Men in Los Angeles: A Roundtable,” 166.

¹²⁹ Tseng, “Mahu: The Gender Imbalance,” 245.

As an organization, Mahu provided a site for “forming a positive queer identity and forming positive queer and Asian identity,” often helping people through the process of coming out, “validating a queer Asian identity,” and then “becoming a facilitator” to help others through the same process.¹³⁰ While male interviewees were “enthusiastic about Mahu’s success as a [support] group,”¹³¹ women more commonly left the group to find validation for their queer Asian identity among lesbian-specific groups.

While a female member hypothesized that the imbalance was due to the socialization of Asian women to not “be in touch with [their] sexuality,” Tseng argued that neither Asian men or women have been socialized in such a way, writing “Asian men are portrayed as asexual... and Asian women’s sexuality is usually defined in terms of someone else’s desire.”¹³² Two male members suggested that the female members would enter relationships with each other, and “drop the group.”¹³³ Tseng countered this idea with the information that out of her survey of Mahu participants, the only participant “who mentioned finding a partner through Mahu was, in fact, male.”¹³⁴

Respondents to Tseng’s survey also noted an issue of women’s comfort-level in coed groups. One woman stated that she “couldn’t really relate... ‘cause guys were talking,”¹³⁵ while another said she would rather “be in a woman’s environment again,” rather than a coed one.¹³⁶

Female groups had their own issues of inclusivity. Notably, most of the queer organizations discussed within this thesis have names that broadcast their gay or lesbian affiliation and lack acknowledgment of transgender individuals within the groups. Aguilar-San Juan spoke to issues of classism and transphobia, specifically within the lesbian organization LAAPIS, in “Going Home:

¹³⁰ Tseng, “Mahu: The Gender Imbalance,” 247.

¹³¹ Tseng, “Mahu: The Gender Imbalance,” 246.

¹³² Tseng, “Mahu: The Gender Imbalance,” 249.

¹³³ Tseng, “Mahu: The Gender Imbalance,” 250.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Tseng, “Mahu: The Gender Imbalance,” 251.

Enacting Justice.” Aguilar-San Juan noted a “social distance between residents of Los Angeles and Orange County [which] appears to be mutually reinforced for economic, political, racial, and cultural reasons.¹³⁷ While LAAPIS wanted to attract women from Orange County to their events, they failed to consider the “class issues associated with car ownership,” and that many of the working-class Asian residents of Orange County “may find Los Angeles physically inaccessible.”¹³⁸

Furthermore, the group debated whether “transgendered people” should or should not be included within the organization. LAAPIS ultimately decided to include only “male-to-female TGs, their argument being that the organization is for women or, presumably, people who want to live as women.”¹³⁹ The implication that trans-identifying people are defined by a desire for wanting to live as a certain gender, troublingly, parallels transphobic rhetoric. Another organization, O Mõi chose to include people based on “a love for women,” which was an imperfect solution as well, as Aguilar-San Juan described tension within the group.¹⁴⁰

In a transcript of “Transgender/Transsexual Roundtable,” one participant shared that when he attended O Mõi events, “a lot of the members thought [he] was a lesbian,” even though the group “says it’s for lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders.”¹⁴¹ He also said that members would tend to change their attitudes towards him once they learned that he was transgender, and many members, despite O Mõi’s claim that it was inclusive towards transgender individuals, had to ask what transgender means. Another man also said that many of the members of the group wanted a “space for women,” but not trans men, despite having experienced similar lived experiences prior to transitioning.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Aguilar-San Juan, “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” 35.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Aguilar-San Juan, “Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America,” 36.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Tran, Diep Khac, Bryan, and Rhode. “Transgender/Transsexual Roundtable,” 242.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Reflections on *Q & A*

Q & A is a manifestation of the new representation of “queer sexuality in new Asian American scholarship.” With writers who were positioned within their own queer Asian American pockets throughout the country and building on over a decade of conversations about identity and community, the book was able to refine some of the earlier discourse. It was able to pay greater attention to a multiplicity of the factors—including but not limited to ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and citizenship— that affect the formation of individuals’ queer Asian American identities. Some writers talked about coalitional organization with different non-queer Asian American specific groups that shared some characteristics or experiences with queer Asian Americans and the power of emphasizing certain parts of one’s identity in activism. Others offered criticism towards certain trends developing within the queer community, noting that not everyone has equal access to the community.

CONCLUSION

The question of resolving queer Asian American identity has endured to the present day, though appearing in somewhat different forms. With the widespread use of the Internet in the twenty-first century, much of the writing in this recent period can be found on personal blogs and community organizations' websites, including API Equality LA, North Carolina Asian Americans Together, Storytime @ Cal (University of California, Berkeley) Q & A, and *rice & spice magazine*. This use of the Internet has allowed for greater accessibility to resources, information, and connections in the form of digital forums. However, certain issues become exacerbated in online spaces—certain writers attributed the domination of certain Asian American or queer narratives, spread widely through digital communities, to their difficulties in recognizing their own queerness. As was the case from the 1970s to 90s, dominant narratives of queerness continued to stem from mainstream, and often white, experiences. Even within the twenty-first century, queer Asian American writers have written about the effect of these narratives in impeding self-recognition.

One digital writer, Ruby, shared in her 2021 article “Coming out as an Asian American” that she had “questioned [her] sexuality for a long time because [as an Asian American, she] never felt like [her] experience would fit the mold of the typical white queer American.”¹⁴³ Her views of queerness were shaped by films such as *Love, Simon* and *But I’m a Cheerleader*, which also focus on coming out as a quintessential part of being queer. This expectation, coupled with the fear of rejection from her parents, became a great burden to her. It was not until watching *Saving Face*, a lesbian film featuring Asian American leads, that she was able to dismantle her “underlying belief that being lesbian somehow undermined [her] Asianness.” Similarly in 2021, Jarea Fang expressed a similar sentiment in *rice & spice magazine* article “The Chasm Between Us,” saying: “my

¹⁴³ Ruby, “Coming out as an Asian American.”

biggest fear as a queer Asian-American person is the idea that my [queer] authenticity comes at the price of my family, my ethnicity, and my heritage.”¹⁴⁴

Digital publications have also lent greater voice to those who exist outside of small, city-based communities, people who were not necessarily represented in writing from the 70s to 90s, when access to queer Asian American publications seemed predominantly dependent on connections to queer Asian populations within coastal cities. The resurgence of the publication of personal narratives and writers’ desire to maintain their familial connections could also be related to the lack of access to supportive queer Asian American communities, and thus, maintaining other connections become even more necessary.

Regardless of the reason, narrative works similar to those in *Phoenix Rising* sharing experiences—of coming out and being accepted—and offering a “source of comfort”¹⁴⁵ to other queer Asian Americans have begun to reappear. In blog posts from API Equality LA, NCAAT, and Storytime @ Cal, writers revealed their experiences of frustration, loneliness, and ultimately, finding acceptance. The increased accessibility of all of these stories through digital spaces has now allowed readers, even those without access to a physical community, to find sources expressing solidarity and support.

What can we learn from this study of the different representations of queer Asian America? In an almost obvious statement of fact, the priorities for the people who have made up these communities vary dramatically depending on their circumstances and relationships to the communities that they most strongly identify and engage with.

The boundaries of who is a “queer Asian American” are thus no more clearly defined today than they had been in 1998, when *Q & A* was published, or even in the 1970s, when queer Asian American communities and organizations, such as Asian/Pacifica Sisters, first came together and discussed their identities. Writers across all the last have century have pondered the relationships that queer Asian Americans have with their families, the larger queer community, and the Asian

¹⁴⁴ Fang, “The Chasm Between Us.”

¹⁴⁵ Sapphic Writers, “Feature Friday: In Conversation With Jarea Fang.”

American community, at large. The observations and conclusions that these writers have reached varied widely based on their individual circumstances, particularly based on their different forms of access to different types of communities.

This thesis' survey of several decades of queer Asian American writing highlights the countless ways queer Asian Americans have conceived of their identity – as relative to their perceptions of queer or Asian American identities; as relative to others' impressions, or lack thereof, of what queer Asian American should look like; and as a part of their desired communities, or outside of them. The different incarnations of queer Asian America are not simply indicative of a diverse and changing community, but of the diverse and changing individuals within it.

I conclude this thesis by returning to David Eng's and Alice Hom's initial question, "who are 'we?'"¹⁴⁶ While Kim, Tsui, and the writers of *Phoenix Rising* and *Q & A* each offered their own definitions of the different ethnicities, genders, sexualities, religions, and other axes of identity that marked the community from the 1970s to 90s, I argue that the very question of "what is queer Asian America" cannot have a single answer. Instead, I suggest that we follow what decades of queer Asian Americans have done before—that we turn to the words of our fellow queer Asian Americans, to their writings on identity and community, as orienting points of comparison to help think through our unique, individual experiences. And then, I suggest, we write our own answers.

¹⁴⁶ Eng and Hom, "Introduction," 9.

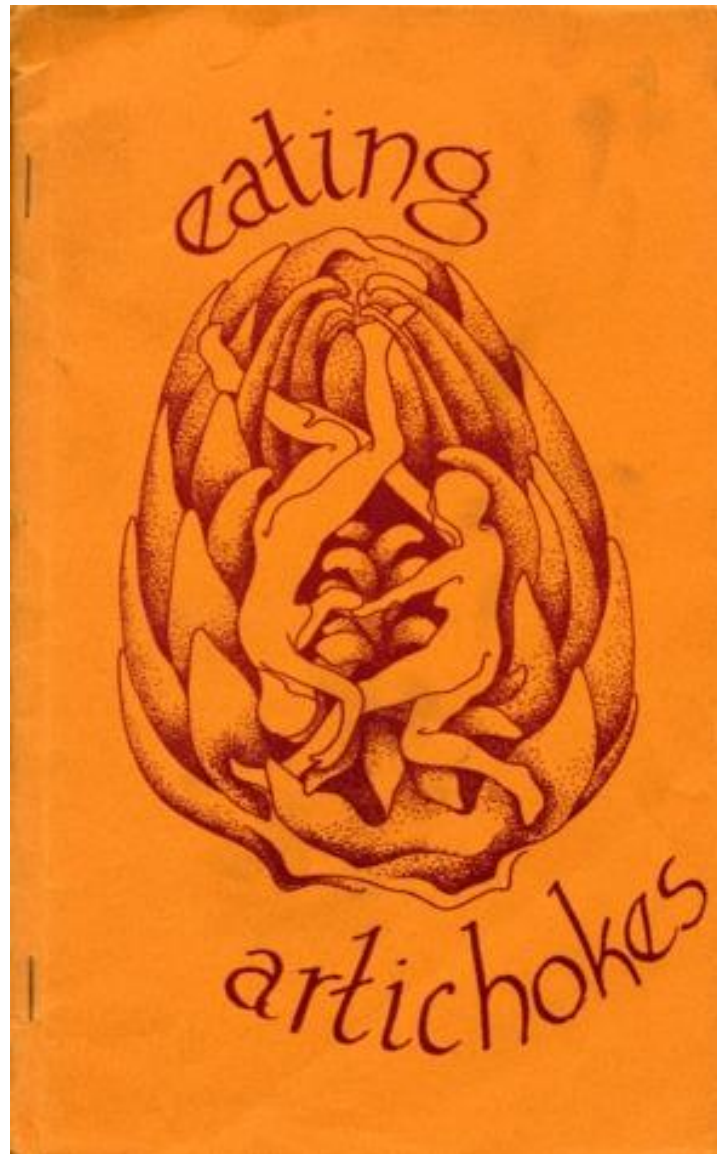


Figure 1. Front cover of *Eating Artichokes* by Willyce Kim.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Goodreads, *Eating Artichokes*.

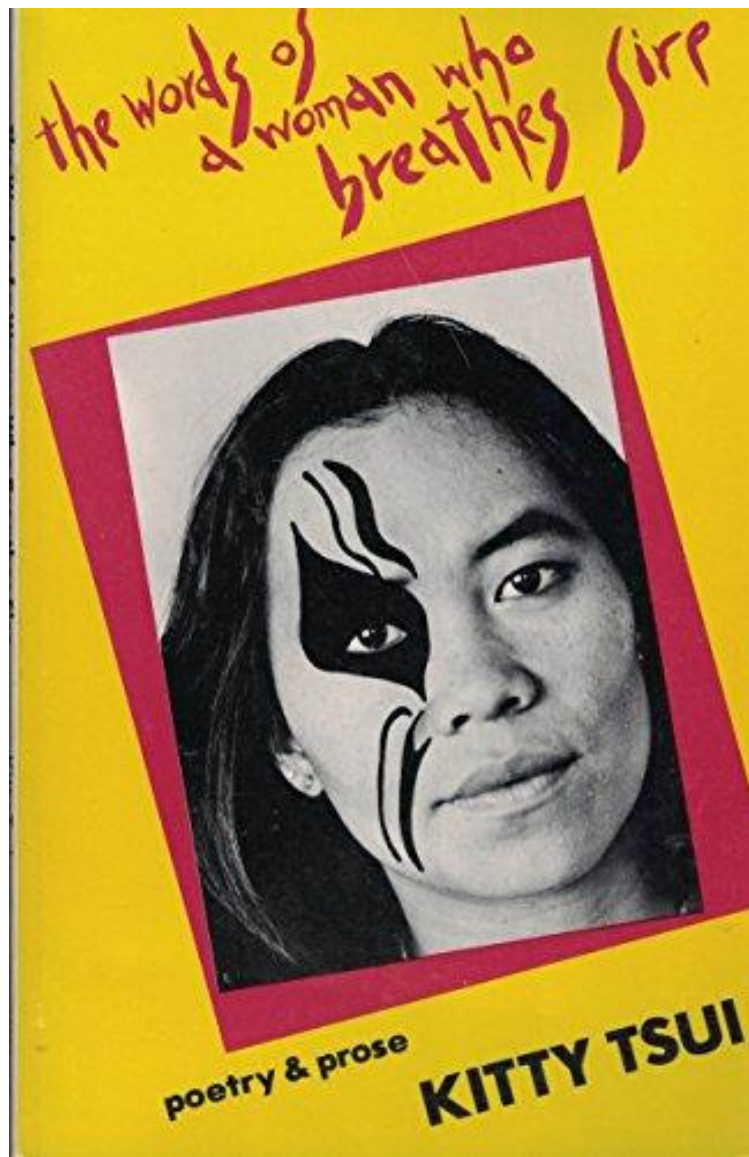


Figure 2. Front cover of *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire* by Kitty Tsui.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Discover Books, "The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire."

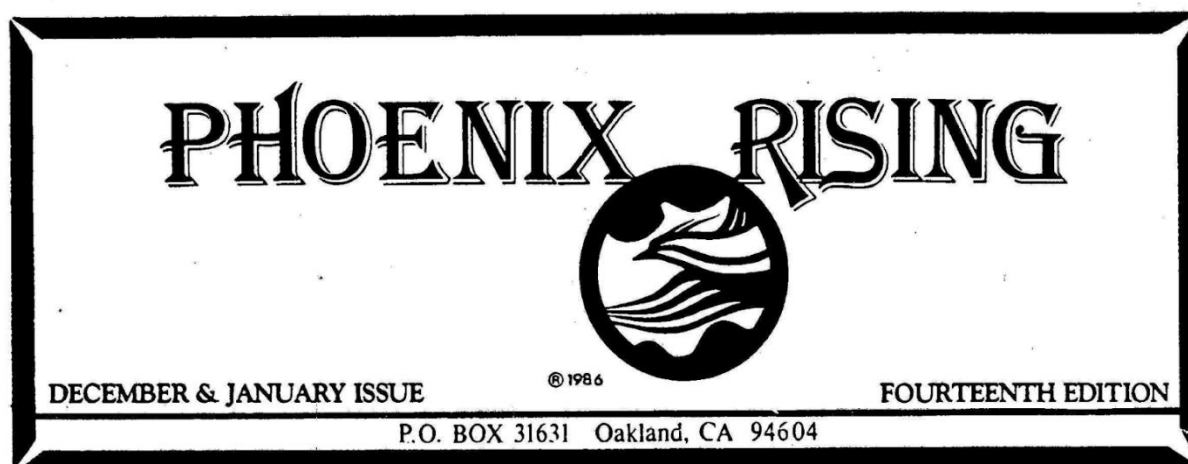


Figure 3. Header of the fourteenth edition of the *Phoenix Rising* magazine.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ *Phoenix Rising*, ed. 14.

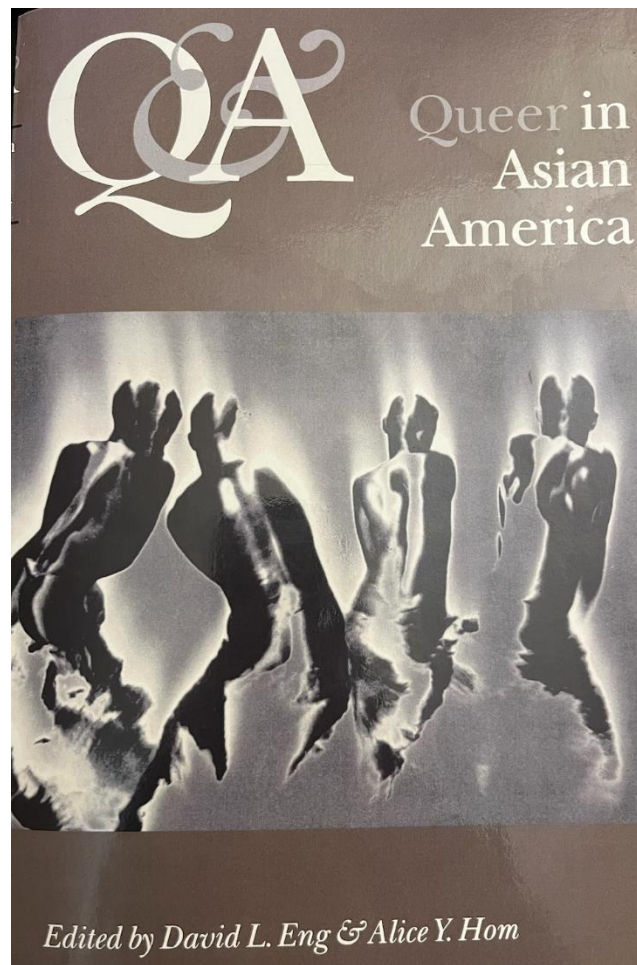


Figure 4. Front cover of *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*, anthology edited by David Eng and Alice Hom.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Du, "Q & A book cover."

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