

BAGMAL Newsletter

JANUARY 1988

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Staff for this Issue

S. H. Chua, Jin Gui, Andrew Li

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Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians
c/o Glad Day Bookshop

Please Note our New Address:
673 Boylston Street
Boston, Mass. 02116
(617) 267-3010
Opposite the Boston Public Library

The BAGMAL Newsletter is published monthly except during the summer, when a bi-monthly schedule may be in effect. A subscription is \$5 per year. One free sample issue will be sent upon request, after which payment is expected. Subscriptions will be exchanged with other organizations. The Newsletter staff encourages submissions from its readers. Unused submissions will be returned if a self-addressed stamped envelope is provided.

Interview

TIMMY PHAM: ON DRESSING UP

by S. H. Chua



A San Francisco Wedding : 1985

Timmy has been an active host and supporter of BAGMAL activities since we started getting more active more than a year ago. During a party at Timmy's house I was fascinated by some of his photographs from California especially the ones of him in drag. In this interview we talk of his experiences with drag in Vietnam, California and in Boston. Some of Timmy's photos are also reproduced here. I thank him for sharing his memories and his photographs with our readers

When did you first come to this country?

1979. First I lived in

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CALENDAR

Feb 6 Saturday 1 p.m.

DISCUSSION/RAP MEETING.

Topic: Cultural Conflicts - Living with the East and the West in us.
Place: Gay and Lesbian Counseling Service. 6 Hamilton Place 3rd Floor. Boston (opp. Park St. subway next to Orpheum Theater. Please call Jack Lo (569-9650 or 547-8647) to confirm place and time.

FEB 28 Sunday 7 p.m.

CHINESE/VIETNAMESE (TET) NEW YEAR BANQUET

At *Royal East Restaurant* 782-792 Main Street Cambridge MA 02139. (661-1660). \$25 + Cash bar (beer and wine). Time: Feb 28 (Sunday) 7 p.m. (reception) 7:30 p.m. (dinner). For more information call Jack Lo 569-9650 (day) 547-8647 (evening). [Menu is 9 courses with 1 soup + fruit dessert: menu items include lobster, scallops, shrimp, duck, chicken]. Checks must be mailed before Feb 12 to Jack Lo 101 Union St. Brighton MA 02135. Make checks payable to BAGMAL.

CLASSIFIEDS

HELP WANTED

Person needed for simple accounting work on tax forms. Part time flexible hours. Call Dean. 787-8838.

MESSAGE FROM CO-CHAIR JACK LO

BAGMAL's 1988 Planning Meeting was held at Vicki's. Participants included Jennifer Matias and Nadia Savage, Vicki Lew, Arthur Carbonel, John Lai, SH Chua and Jack Lo. The following is a brief report:

1. Policy and Objectives

BAGMAL will be focussing on supporting and sharing experiences of Asian lesbians and gay men. In order to ensure our focus to work on Asian gay and lesbian issues, and to secure a place for our own growth participation at agenda planning and discussion/rap groups will be limited to Asian members only. Open discussions and social functions welcome Asian, non-Asian members and general public participation.

2. Direction

We want to correct BAGMAL's image as an exclusively male organization. We are emphasizing Asian lesbian issues and to attract more Asian lesbian members. We are also concerned about Asian gay men and lesbian visibility in our living. We will continue serving our support function through discussion/rap groups and social functions.

3. Positions

Because of personal commitments in the next 6 months Andrew Li is resigning as treasurer. Our new treasurer is Nadia

Savage. Our new social coordinator is Arthur Carbonel. He will coordinate our monthly social events.

Jennifer Matias is an addition to our agenda planning committee and discussion/rap coordinating group. She will also be coordinating meetings and activities for Asian lesbians.

4. Action

Discussion/rap groups (Asian members only) are to create an outlet to air our experiences and to gain support among ourselves. We also will use the rap groups as a channel to discover our social awareness. Next rap group meeting will be announced.

We are planning a BAGMAL open house to formally introduce ourselves to the gay and lesbian community. We are also planning to submit articles about ourselves to the gay press as well as to the straight press. We are to address Asian lesbian and gay men's roles in our communities.

Agenda planning meetings will be held quarterly. All Asian members are encouraged to attend.

Asian lesbian issues will be addressed through meetings and possibly

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other activities.

Social events will be coordinated by Arthur. With all your participation, we are going to have a lot of fun and interesting events monthly.

5. Our Name

BAGMAL is considering renaming ourselves. We want the name to be more appealing and recognizable. We are holding a contest to rename BAGMAL. We will use our new name on our organization name card which is for future recruitment purposes.

6. Evaluation

We are going to increase newsletter circulation. Our newsletter will be sold at *Glad Day Bookstore* and possibly *New Words* and *Redbook*. To centralise our incoming correspondence distribution, mail will be picked up by Jack Lo only. All correspondence will be circulated at BAGMAL discussion/rap groups or social events. After that, material will go to the newsletter editor to be archived.

Enthusiasm and aggressiveness inject energy into BAGMAL for 1988. We hope all of you will share with us your experience, talent, input, participation and support. BAGMAL wishes you all a wonderful 1988.

P. S. Best of luck Andrew. We appreciate your contributions to BAGMAL and await your active involvement once again.

BOOK REVIEW

Between the Lines, editors C. Chung, A. Kim and A.K. Lemeshefsky
Published by *Dancing Bird Press* 1987 \$4.95
Available at *Glad Day* and women's bookstores

Between the Lines is an anthology of shared, cultural experiences among Pacific/Asian lesbians. Prodigiously written, the editors, C. Chung, A. Kim and A.K. Lemeshefsky examine the critical issues of lesbian identity, mixed cultures and coming out. It seeks to illuminate the problems faced by Asian lesbians within a feminist and lesbian context. Drawing upon their own experiences, the writers tell movingly and in lyrical terms of coming to terms with being "women-identified".

The struggle for identity is well-illustrated in *Sexuality, Lesbianism and South Asian Feminism* by Anu in the anthology. While South Asian lesbians can identify with other lesbians, their cultural backgrounds do not allow for immediate acceptance. The culture hinders many from freely expressing their sexuality. Some many choose to be "closeted".

In *Silence* by C. Chung and *Like A Chameleon* by A. Kim, the poems speak of having the courage to be heard. It is not akin to changing one's beliefs or choosing to be "seen but not

BETWEEN THE LINES

by Yin Moy

editors
C. Chung, A. Kim, A. K. Lemeshefsky



heard" in the company of others. Indeed in a homophobic society it is all too easy to blend in.

In *Living Between the Lines* A. Lemeshefsky speaks of her journey to her hometown, South Dakota and of a culture that did not accept her mixed heritage. Similarly *Facing Both Ways* by the same author relates the experiences of Japanese lesbians versus the demands of their culture. "Coming out" in Japan is risky as there is limited community support. This underscores even more importantly the need to form a supportive network.

This anthology is a tribute to all lesbians of Asian descent. It is a shared voice that is both courageous and insightful.

BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE

Reading many articles in BAGMAL complaining about racism, I am wondering whether we (asians) are barking up the wrong tree. Essentially what we are complaining about is, the white are not attracted to us sexually and even when they are the attraction is condescending. But I am wondering why should the white be attracted to asians when we are not attracted to ourselves. We have all gone to the bars before and seen most, if not all, of us jockeying and tripping over each other grabbing for the white, and once we catch one we parade him around and show him off like a trophy, implying to the white that we are part of their community and to the other asians that we are better than them. Some of us even publicly say that we don't like asians (maybe we are just more honest than others). And now we are turning around accusing the white of racism and condescension.

Many of these articles also put down asian culture of not making waves (having sex on a water bed?), being conciliatory (imploing our lovers to come back after being dumped?), and being submissive (being fuckee, not fucker?). Whether this culture is good or bad is relative to personal values and to the environment where it is applied. We have a highly individualistic and competitive society here and aggressiveness probably is the only way to survive (otherwise how do we get the highest per capita number of lawyers in the world). In Japan, individualism and aggressiveness are frowned upon and would be the sure way to end one's career.

(I don't imply that they have only fuckees and no fuckers.) In Chinese culture, one is supposed to be aggressive in defending his family, but submissive within his family (though not sexually). This is how the family is held together harmoniously (just look at how the siblings here fight for the inheritance). From these observations I cannot see any basis from which one can claim that american values are better than asian ones.

As to perception of beauty I have always wondered how we asians learn to think that the white are more desirable than asian. Can it be the bath houses where we find that the whites have bigger ones? I can understand and sympathize with (but not respect) many of the native-born asians. For years they went through schools feeling shameful to look asian and to speak asian languages, conditioned by peers to lust for the blond and the jocks, and bombarded by the media with the pictures of the most desirable all-american boy. But the foreign born must have so quickly learned to hunger for the white in some other ways. No matter how we, native and foreign born, learn to desire for the white, the motivations seem to be the same: survival (we want to be assimilated into the majority race), prestige (it is prestigious to be seen with a white boy), inferiority complex (it is ego-boosting to be loved by and to love a white boy).

So, is there anything wrong for us to like the white sexually? I think not. But I do find it repugnant to particularly adore them and I do

feel deeply sad that many of us have to push down, consciously or subconsciously, our fellow asian to raise our own ego. When we tell other asian that we are sexually attracted to the white, not to them, not because we discriminate against them but because the white are our types - the white are better looking, hunkier, bigger and hairy chested, we are lying to them and to ourselves. We don't have the courage or the intelligence to tell them that the reason is, we are conditioned to and unable to free ourselves from perceiving the white and their characteristics as more desirable.

I also wonder why some of the white can free themselves of the same conditioning that we go through and learn to like asians. Some say that only the old, the fat, and the undesirable caucasian who are unable to pick up cute young white descend on asian. I think to some degree that is true. But I think it is more complicated than that and it is unfair to paint it that black and white. I believe that before we blame the white for all our sufferings, we should clean up our own acts.

By the way, it is interesting to read in an Asian newsletter a complaint by an Asian that he's more bothered by being pursued by an Asian than anything else in the Washington party. I wonder if he would complain at all if the pursuer were white. I dare also bet that when he looks into the mirror every morning (or evening) he sees an all-American white boy face, with a faint yellowish hue from the lamp of course.

K.Lin

A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF RACISM

by Andrew Li

Part of the last sentence of my article ["March on Washington: another viewpoint," November 1987] was lost in production. The whole sentence should have read: "This is the silver lining."

Reaction to my article has been better than I hoped. Racism, despite its importance, is discussed only vaguely, if indeed it is discussed at all, so it is most satisfying to have stimulated some thought on this subject.

I am especially pleased to have received a letter from Johnny Low of Brookline [December 1987] disagreeing with me. His letter is important because his views are widely held. Ken Lin of Santa Monica, Calif., has written us a letter (which I have not seen yet), which is reprinted elsewhere in this issue. *Washington Bridge Newsletter* [December 1987] reprinted my article along with an unattributed reply from Carlo Kendrick. His article needs no response from me, but I wish to applaud honesty. I agree that progress is impossible as long as forced politeness prevents communication.

I reply here to Mr. Low's letter, first by correcting one statement therein. He attributes to me a "desire to exclude 'non-Asians' from many of the gay Asian social functions." This is untrue. BAGMAL's steering committee decided by consensus to have discussion meetings for Asians only and social events for all interested persons. As a member of the steering committee, I participated in and fully support all its deci-

sions. Of course, signed articles reflect only my personal views and are neither endorsed nor repudiated by the steering committee.

Mr. Low's views have the appeal of reasonableness and moderation, but I will show that the assumption that permits his attractive conclusions is severely flawed. I will then state my premise and its inevitable conclusions, which lead to the views that I have presented in previous articles.

Consider the following statements.

"Unless *we* reach out to the general population and remove the roots of the biases and misconceptions, *we* will never succeed in achieving equality." [Emphasis added.]

"The lack of tolerance is the underlying root of racism." [By the context it is clear that he means lack of tolerance on the part of offended Asians.]

"I hope *we* can overcome the prejudices [that] gay Asians experience...." [Emphasis added.]

For Mr. Low, it is up to Asians, not whites, to end prejudice. He blames its victims, not its perpetrators. His sympathy lies instead with "the poor white folks" who can't seem to please me. How can this be? What assumption underlies his claim that the victims of prejudice must make the effort to eliminate it?

Mr. Low's assumption is that Asians are second-class citizens and must therefore earn equal treatment by the majority. Am I going too far? Look again at what he writes.

"I hope we can overcome the prejudices [that] gay Asians experience by showing the gay community the positives in us and not by our anger and resentment of them." That is, we will "achieve equality" more readily by being positive than by being negative. Or, put another way, we must prove to the gay community that we deserve equal treatment.

This is where Mr. Low is wrong. Equality is a right, not a privilege. It is inherent; it is not earned. If we have to prove or earn our "equality," then we are not really equal. Why should gay Asians be positive toward the gay community? We *are* the gay community. Why shouldn't we be angry? We don't need to justify ourselves to anyone.

At this point, I must digress slightly, back to the *gomennasai* incident, in which a white man in a bar in Washington, D.C., used Japanese instead of English to apologize for bumping into me. I want to examine it carefully, because many people cannot understand my angry reaction to what they see as an honest mistake. It is certainly a small incident, but it too rests on the same fundamental assumption of inequality

Would that man have said "gomennasai" to a white person? Of course not. What was it that made him say "gomennasai" to me, then? My face, obviously. He can only have assumed that I was Japanese and could speak Japanese. He may even have thought that it would make me feel good. What was wrong with his assump-

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RACISM *continued from page 5*

tion? But first, like Ronald Reagan, I am reminded of a story.

I knew a Swiss in China who was annoyed because Chinese always expected him to be able to speak English. In fact, he spoke excellent English, but what bothered him was that people assumed that all whites were American and therefore spoke English.

This is an almost exactly analogous situation. The white man in the bar assumed that I, an Asian man, spoke better Japanese than English. Was this an honest mistake? No. It shows a racist attitude. It is racist to assume in the U.S. that a black person was born in Africa and speaks Swahili because it denies the black person's right to exist here. Why should it be otherwise to assume that an Asian person in the U.S. was born in Asia and speaks Japanese? My family has been in North America for almost a hundred years, and yet people are surprised that I speak perfect English. Governor Dukakis's family has been here two generations less than mine, but nobody is surprised by his English. Why? Because he is white and I am Asian.

People assume that the Asian must be a foreigner. Asians have been here a long time and in great numbers. Like members of any other ethnic group, they have a rightful place in this country. To suggest, however unintentionally or indirectly, that the Asian belongs elsewhere is a racist insult. We have been here too long to excuse it as an honest mistake.

This is not to say that one should never speak to an Asian in Japanese. The circumstances dictate. If

we had been, say, at a party for a Japanese language class, it would have been reasonable to assume that I could speak Japanese. In Taipei, a white American (to judge by his accent) once asked me in Mandarin for directions. Of all the people on the street he could have asked, he picked the one whose first language was the same as his. But he had made a perfectly reasonable assumption, which is that a person on a Taipei street who looks Asian speaks Mandarin. It just so happens that I can speak Mandarin. Nor am I upset when someone in Hongkong or Tokyo addresses me in Cantonese or Japanese, even though I can speak neither language.

This begs a question. What assumptions can be made on the basis of how someone looks? The answer is: very few.

Why, you ask, all this emphasis on how people look? Aren't we all the same inside? Mr. Low accuses me of rejecting white people in political activities because they do not *look* like me. He has found the crux of the issue. It is precisely because I *look* Asian that I suffer discrimination.

Why are people surprised at my English? Because I *look* Asian and must therefore be a foreigner. Why am I verbally harrassed by punks on the street where I live? Because I *look* Asian. Why was Vincent Chin beaten to death? Because he *looked* Asian. (Actually, his murderers thought he was Japanese. They couldn't tell the difference.)

This is part of what it is to be Asian in America in 1988. This is why it is important to me to be

with Asians. They look Asian, so they understand my experience. They know what it feels like. Whites, because they do not look Asian, have not had these experiences. They have not *felt* prejudice. They may deplore it, but they do not suffer it. They can pass, safe and unnoticed, through the mainstream of society. In fact, if anyone ought to prove him- or herself, it is the white person to the person of color. The white person, no matter how anti-racist he or she claims to be, can always avoid being the object of racial prejudice. The person of color can never avoid it.

The white person who wants to demonstrate support for Asians must do so on our terms. Anyone who is unwilling or unable to accept this does not understand the nature of racism. ■

ANNOUNCEMENT

RENAMING BAGMAL

The Steering Committee is seeking suggestions for a new name for the group in place of *Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians (BAGMAL)*. Innovative and creative people are encouraged to send their suggestions to our mailing address no later than March 1. The name that is sought should reflect the group's purpose and convey a sense of pride in being gay or lesbian and Asian. (Bridge or Friends in the name will tend to be less appropriate, for e.g.) A winning entry will be picked by the Steering Committee and the originator of the name will receive a year's subscription to the Newsletter as a prize.

TIMMY continued from Page 1

San Diego then Los Angeles then I move to San Francisco.

You came by yourself?

Just myself. The rest of my family still in Vietnam.

Why did you move from San Diego to LA and then San Francisco?

I had lots of friends there in San Francisco so I wanted to move up there.

Were you gay in Vietnam?

Yes.

How old were you when you came out?

Fourteen. I live in Saigon.

What do gay people do in Saigon? Where are the meeting places?

A lot of gay people meet in the movies. In the movie house.

How do people meet there? Do they meet inside the cinema when the movie is going on?

And during break time. People like people.. they....cruising.

People don't do anything there in the cinema though. You meet there then go home.

Yes.

When you were fourteen you found this place? Or did people tell you about it.

When I was fourteen, I just meet people outside. Like shopping and go home with them. When I was sixteen then I know where to meet people. Then I know about the movie theater.

Were these all Vietnamese? Were there Americans too?

No. Vietnamese and Chinese.

Did you have a lover?

I had a lover when I was eighteen for I think about a year, something like that.

Did you do drag in Vietnam?

Yes. Everyday. When I was young until I was eighteen.

Did you think of yourself as a woman.

Yes.

You wanted to have an operation?

Yes.

But then you changed your mind. Why did you change your mind?

I change my mind when I move to California.

By that time you were not wearing drag anymore. You stopped at eighteen. Why did you stop?

When I was 14 years old until 18 I was in dress but when the Communists come in we stop do that because they don't like it.

What did your family think about this?

They don't say anything about that. They told me I do everything I feel happy and do it. They accept it.

A lot of families would not.

My family's very understanding about that.

But the guy keep asking me - marry with me. He pushed me, make me change my mind. Then I marry with him. About 2 years.

When you applied to come to the U.S. you weren't doing drag. You know that in the United States they might not accept you if you wear drag. Did you know this?

No. When I come over here I don't know the people. I don't know the freedom in this country. Then I move out to Los Angeles I had lots of friends. They told me you doing drag it doesn't matter. So I think about it. I put on dress, makeup. From Los Angeles I move to San Francisco. I still keep to do drag again, think about the operation. After that my uncle from Vietnam come here. They stop me. They told me I can keep in dress everyday if I want but don't take operation because when I change my mind it's too late. But I keep thinking about it. So I said, ok, maybe I don't do it but I still keep in dress.

So in Los Angeles you were still wearing drag and also in San Francisco. Did you take any hormone treatments?

No.

Let's talk a bit about your marriage.

When I get in dress not almost everyday but when I feel like it. I get in dress and go out. And after

that my friend had a dinner party. So I go to dinner party and I meet the guy I marry with. The first time I don't think I get marry with the Asian people because I had this ex-lover in Vietnam. I don't think I can have Vietnamese lover - not anymore.

Why? Because of your lover in Vietnam?

Because he loved me very much but his family tell him to get married. Then I think if I do like that it will happen same as before. So I just stopped thinking about it. But the guy keep asking me - marry with me. He pushed me, make me change my mind. Then I marry with him. About 2 years. Then his family forced him to get married like in Vietnam before. It hurt my feelings so I break up with him. That's why I move to Boston.

That's very sad. You must have loved him very much.

Yes. I still love him till now.

Do you still keep in touch with him?

No.

When he met you he knew you were in drag - he knew you were a man. And you did not live with him in drag. You lived together as men.

Yes.

How can he switch back and forth like that?

Now he has a son. Because he was one child in the family. So his family want children so he get married and now he get a handsome boy. He told me, he said if I want to come back with you he can divorce his wife, break it up, something like that. But I don't want it.

So now he has his son his duty is over. You went through a whole marriage ceremony. Whose idea was that?

My idea. All the friends in there are my friends. He doesn't have friends because he's straight.

This man - you think is basically straight?

For myself I think he is straight but he wants to be in gay life because he thinks gay life is easy, fun something like that.

Did he have experiences with other people?

continue on next page

TIMMY (continued from page 7)

I was the first person. Now I think he is bi now.

In San Francisco you had a group of gay Vietnamese friends?

I go to the bar and meet them.

You didn't know them from Vietnam?

No.

Which bars did you go to in San Francisco?

The *Endup*, *Busby* and the *In Touch*. Lots of bars where Asians go to.

Did you go in drag?

Sometimes. If you have a special party, holiday.

Tell us about this drag competition you won?

This was in Seattle. I have friends in Seattle - Vietnamese friends. I meet them in San Francisco when they vacation. They invite me come over there for the contest.

You made your own costumes?

Yes. We take a long time to do that.

Who organized this contest?

A gay bar. The name of the gay bar is *the Neighbor*. It was Halloween contest. This was three years ago.

You won first prize?

Second prize. We won second prize for the group of three people.

Since coming to Boston - you did drag this Halloween. You said you went down to Chinatown in drag.

I did. We went to *Lucky Dragon* restaurant.

What was their reaction?

They think we real woman. It was me, Vincent and Jeffrey and Terry. Terry dress like gentleman. Jeffrey wear Japanese costume. Vincent and I in dress. Two men and two women.

In Boston do you know a lot of straight Vietnamese people.

All the people I know work with me. I work at Digital. In the South End.

You think a lot of people know you are gay.

Yes. In Chinatown all the restaurant owners know me.

Do you feel they react badly towards you?

find out some children are gay they will hate it.

There are a lot of Vietnamese gay people here in Boston.

But their families don't know.

How did you meet your gay Vietnamese friends here?

Some people I know from my friends. Some people I just meet by myself. Some people I meet in a bar. But I'm always in a group

when I go anywhere.

Many gay Vietnamese seem to be coming to Boston.

I know some people - they like to go out. But they are young. They cannot go to bar that's why you don't meet them. But now I know two Vietnamese about 17. They love to go out but I cannot bring them go to bar.

How did you meet them?

I meet them from my friends. Straight people. The straight people - they go to school they know they're gay and then they introduce to me. This straight guy he work with me so he knows I'm gay. Last week he introduce to me two people - one from Dorchester is 17 years old and one from Quincy - but he moved to San Francisco yesterday already. But the guy from Dorchester still

here. I just meet him 2 weeks until now. He like me very much. He ask me: want to be his boyfriend. I told me I don't know. Let me think about it.

Do you have a steady boyfriend now?

No. Not yet. Some of my friends - every weekend they have a new boyfriend.

What do you feel about BAGMAL - the gay Asian group we have here?

I think it is great. I think we meet more people we can make the group bigger. It will be good. ■



A Seattle Ball: 1986

No. I think they like me. They know about me but they don't care.

Do you think this is a common attitude among Vietnamese people?

It's very hard to tell with some people. They understand they don't care. But some people they don't like it.

What about a Vietnamese mother if she finds out her son is gay. She probably will not like it. She wants him to marry.

I don't know. My family know but they understand. It's OK. But some family very difficult. They