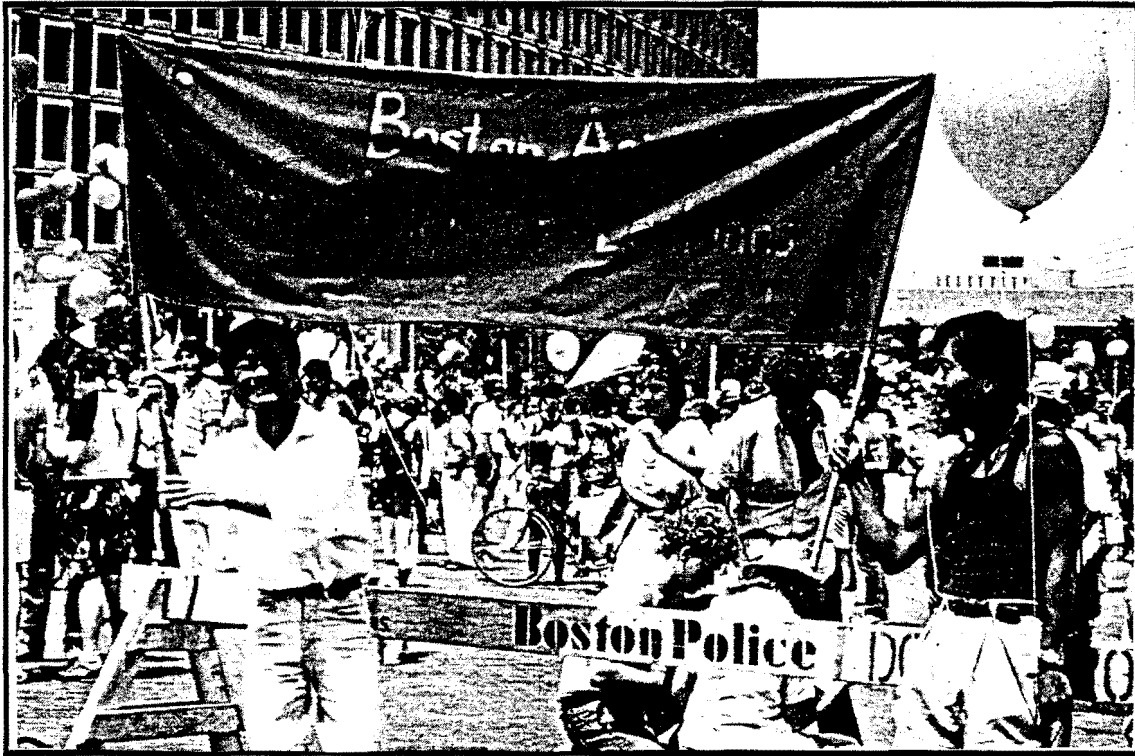


# BAGMAL NEWSLETTER

June/July 1987



Jin Gui and Takeo unfurl BAGMAL's banner at Government Center joining 35,000 other gay people in Boston's Gay Pride March, June 13, 1987. (Photo: Andrew Li)

## CALENDAR

**Friday 3 July 7 p.m.** Dinner in Chinatown. Meet in front of Jordan Marsh at downtown crossing (Winter and Washington St.) and walk to Chinatown at 7 p.m. Restaurant to be negotiated. All members and friends welcome.

**Sunday 12 July 1 p.m.** Potluck and Discussion Meeting: "Meeting People" at Tony Shum's (62 Boylston St. Apt. 6M Boston at the corner of the Common. 542-8514.) Asian members only.

**Saturday 18 July.** Day Trip to Provincetown. We will take the Ferry which leaves from Commonwealth Pier at

9:30 a.m. The return trip leaves at 3:30 p.m. and arrives at Boston at 6:30 p.m. This gives us about 3 hours in Provincetown. Round trip fare is \$18. Meet at Commonwealth Pier at 9:00 a.m. All members and friends welcome. Call Bay State (723-7800) to reserve your seat.

**Tuesday 21 July. 7 p.m.** Business meeting at Andrew's (32 Lincoln Parkway Apt 3 Somerville 623-1129). Evaluation of July activities and planning of August activities.

**Sunday 2 August 1 p.m.** Pot-luck and discussion meeting. Place and topic to be announced.

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Staff: Siong-huat Chua, Jin Gui, Ray Wong. Calendar compiled by Andrew Li

BAGMAL is Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians. c/o Glad Day Bookshop 43 Winter St. Boston Ma 02108. (617)-542-0144.

BAGMAL newsletter June/July 1987 Page 1

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CALENDAR.....	Page 1
Feeling "Too Different" by Jack Lo .....	Page 2
Profile of Vickie Lew by S.H. ....	Page 3
Gay Pride Celebrations by Jin Gui .....	Page 4
Book Review by S.H. ....	Page 4

### Feeling "Too Different"

by Jack Lo

*(Jack who is BAGMAL's co-chair is also a member of the People of Color Task Force of the National March on Washington in October this year. The task force was organized to fight the bigotry of racism and homophobia. This article was first published in Gay Community News June 21-27 1987.)*

Sometimes I wonder how much the gay community knows about gay Asians? How much do they want to know about our culture? Do they care about our feelings? Are we an integral part of the community? Is our voice being represented? Do they ever think of our existence?

When I first came out, I was a Buddies regular. I often wandered around the bar by myself feeling uncomfortable about meeting other gay people. My physical appearance was very different and I spoke English with a very pronounced Chinese accent. As a gay Asian I did not know if others found me attractive. When I saw other gay Asians we would look at each other, but we never talked. Other gay Asians told me that there was often a sense of competing with each other for the attention of white gay Americans. My isolation from gay Asians changed when I met a member of the Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians. I was so glad that I was able to meet other gay Asians from whom I could get support.

Over the years I have been able to build close friendships with other gay Asians. Many of my Asian friends feel it is difficult to meet a gay American. They feel that they are indeed a minority within a minority. BAGMAL newsletter June/July 1987 Page 2

Some of us try to assimilate and become more like gay Americans keeping up with the American way of dressing, dancing and speaking. It appears as though some of the more "modern gay Asians" are more likely to meet other gay Americans. Perhaps the feelings of being "too different" are reduced.

No matter how American we become though, we can never ignore our Asian background and culture. Gay white Americans are quite ignorant of us. It is not uncommon to hear, "Where are you really from? Are you a Chinese or a Japanese? You must be going to MIT. I love Chinese food." I wonder how would they feel if I told them I loved hamburger? Sometimes it seems as though gay Americans only see us as good candidates for mathematicians, cooks or houseboys. Other times we feel that we are being used as toys or as passive partners in our relationships. Many gay Americans cannot relate to our feelings and needs. They cannot relate to our need to keep in close contact with our families or with our feelings towards relationships. Gay Asians are more traditionally inclined to have monogamous, spiritual and solid relationships than our sexually liberated gay American counterparts.

The ignorance of Asian culture in general and of gay Asians in particular, along with the stereotypes that exist, serve only to increase our segregation from the rest of the gay community. Even in the progressive, anti-racist literature I read, gay Asians are rarely even mentioned. Our voice needs to be represented in all gay movements. I have participated in many political

meetings in this community and I feel that the decision-making processes are structured to the disadvantage of the gay Asian. In many of the white progressive groups to which I belong, Asians and other minorities are left powerless when it comes to having a voice in the decision-making process.

The Asian population in Boston has increased dramatically in recent years. In order to survive and adjust to a world that is different from our origin and cultures, we must correct misconceptions and stereotypes, and increase our visibility at the same time. Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians has been instrumental in increasing our support and visibility. It is our role to speak out for gay Asians and to educate the community about our culture. Among ourselves we must be constantly on guard against ignorance, stereotypes, insulting attitudes and insensitive remarks. We are proud to be gay and we are proud to be Asian. It is important to gain recognition as an integral part of the community.

The October National March on Washington is an opportunity to proclaim our existence, our rights and our power. We need the support of everyone else regardless of race. Let us unite to gain power and to achieve harmony.

*(The next event of the People of Color Task Force is a dance at Emmanuel Church 15 Newbury St. Boston Saturday July 25 9 p.m. - 2 a.m. Tickets are \$4 in advance, \$5 at the door. Call Jack at 884-8102(work) or 547-8647 (home) for tickets and information.)*

## PROFILE OF VICKIE LEW Steering Committee Member

by S.H.

Vickie is a member of the steering committee of BAGMAL as well as its co-chair. She grew up in San Francisco but moved away in 1970 "to see the world". "I did not want to be ruled by my family's goings on. I wanted to be an independent woman," she says. Vickie's father was American-born while her mother immigrated to the US from China at the age of 12. Vickie has one sister and one brother. She moved away from home when she was 17 and came to Boston soon after.

Vickie first came out in 1977 when she was enrolled in a CETA program on non-traditional occupations for women. In the program were about a dozen or so "strong, independent women" who were lesbians. "I saw that I could be what I wanted to be, that nothing was taboo". Up to that point she had felt that her relationships with men "were not quite right." She had had one of those "discover yourself" relationships with a man which was "satisfying in terms of pure sexuality" but as far as having "someone to be really be there for you" there was something lacking. Other hetero affairs were equally dissatisfying. After her experience in the CETA program she began to think that being a lesbian was a "grand idea". "I started telling people I was a lesbian. Being a lesbian was a powerful thing. It was not having to be femme, not having to be a traditional pattern, not having to look a certain way in order to look for a man. I can enjoy women without being competitive. I can be attracted to them aesthetically, liking how they look, how they feel."

Vickie worked in construction 7 years until a repeated physical injury forced her to change her

career. At her construction jobs she worked as a carpenter. Vickie said that she often encountered racism and sexism and discrimination based on her small size. "They were hard to separate out," she recalls. "Sexism was definitely on top and size was also a factor too and it was also unusual for an Asian woman to be doing the job. Asian women are after all supposed to be classically feminine." Vickie now works as a pre-school entry-level teacher. She recently came out at work to a woman who is an anarchist. Most other women at work are married or "are really intense about relationships with men." Because of her contact with children she feels this is the first job where she cannot be fully open.

BAGMAL is Vickie's main political activity now, the one she invests most energy in. Vickie however has been involved in many political groupings. She was a founding member of Asian Sisters in Action (A.S.I.A.) and Women of Color United. She was also treasurer in the political campaign of a woman running for city councillor. She has been active in the Food Coop movement and is on the contact list of various Asian organizations. At one time she was involved with the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA). At a lecture sponsored by the CPA Vickie had confronted the speaker, a West Coast Asian Liberation activist who had condemned gay men for being bourgeois decadent. "I told her I belonged to the Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians and worked actively with gay men. I told her what she said was a lie." This confrontation represented her coming out in Chinatown. "I felt a definite change", she said.

"Some allies tried to talk to me about it and admired me for coming out but others faded into the sunset." She felt that ever since she has not been "as invited to events". Many of the Chinatown activists were newer immigrants and "very heterosexual chasing each other around all the time." "But they do good work," she says, "bringing their skills as professionals to help the working people of the community".

Vickie has given up A.S.I.A. to put her energies in BAGMAL. She was the last of a group of lesbians and more radical feminists to drop out of A.S.I.A. Vickie was also involved in the short-lived Asian Lesbians of New England which she described as more a mailing list group. They met once or twice, but she felt they lacked an agenda and a purpose and hence there was no cohesion and no commitment. She feels that the positive aspect of BAGMAL is that "we have begun to know each other, to trust each other and want to get close to one another". She finds the experience fulfilling because "I get to be Asian and get to be a lesbian too." Although she is the only active woman member of BAGMAL now Vickie does not feel isolated because she feels that there are other long-time lesbian members in the background. They probably don't want to start something new again. I forget how long it takes to get things going again."

One of the things that Vickie likes about BAGMAL is that "we don't attack one another although we are such a diverse group". Also unlike other groups like the CPA, Vickie finds BAGMAL less hierarchical. "There isn't the

(continued on Page 4)

## GAY PRIDE CELEBRATIONS 1987

Report by Jin Gui



Vickie and Andrew hold banner while Jack holds soda. In the back Loi, Victor and Timmy wait for the March to begin. (photo: Andrew Li)

What a raucous day! The gay parade on June 13 '87 was a day of celebration (or as they say in Toronto, celebrAsian) and gaiety. BAGMAL had a strong showing, about 15 members, and along the march route many more members and supporters meandered in and out and cheered us on.

The celebration had many highlights. The group was graced by the presence of Jing Achacoso's mother, Ming, who proudly marched with us. We were also one of the most verbal groups, chanting lustily along parts of the journey. Three cheers for BAGMAL.

There was a small flare-up of temper when a marcher started replying the heckles of a

homophobic mother-and-son team. The march moved along before trouble could start. (Incidentally, the number of heckling incidents this year directed at the parade has increased substantially. There was also a straight-bashing incident at the monument at the Common during the afternoon's rally).

The social gathering that evening attracted a large participation. Many long-standing members returned for the party of show their support for the group. drinks and refreshments were served. The party ended at around 1:00 a.m.

All in all Gay/Lesbian Pride Day was a roaring success.

*VICKIE* (continued from Page 3)

separation between the group of people doing the work and another doing the strategizing."

Vickie is not in a relationship now but it is not something that causes her anxiety. "A relationship is not the goal of my life. It would be nice but BAGMAL newsletter June/July 1987 Page 4

more like a luxury now. I enjoy my work, my involvement.... The bottom line really is that I see men and women working together again. That I feel is really important."

*SMEDLEY* (continued from Page 6)  
prolong no blood-lines and propagate no genetic strains. We choose our partners and relationships based solely

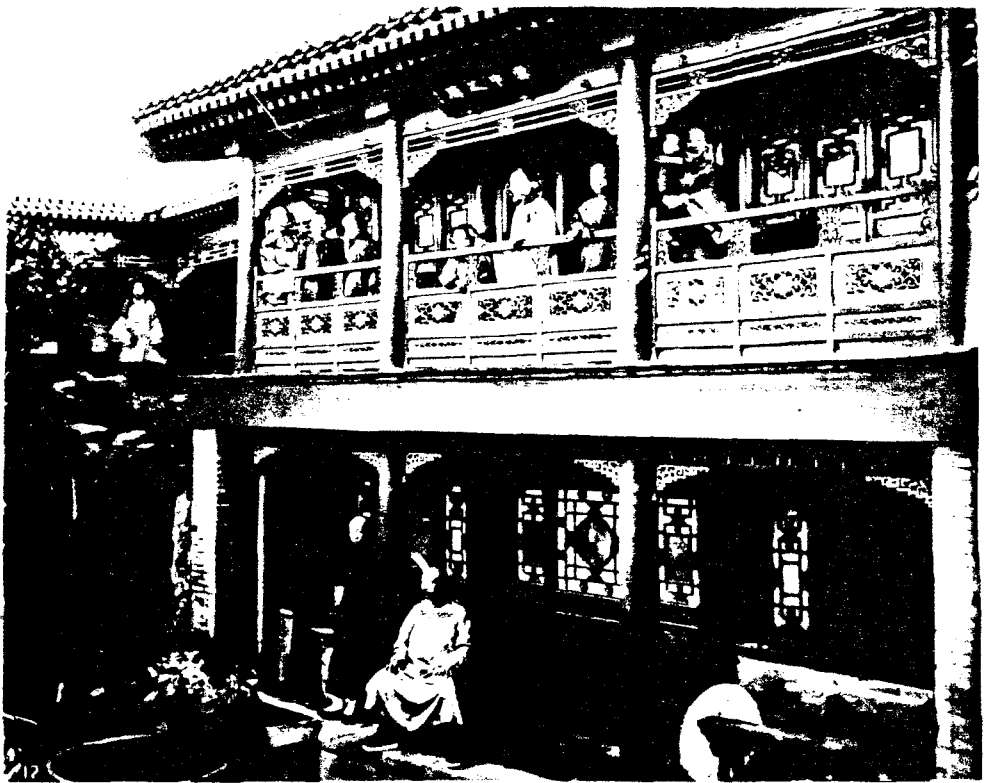
on individual desire, on personal need outside of the demands of tribe, family and clan. It is this right to be an autonomous individual outside of restrictive and traditional family roles that we still struggle to attain. "Portraits..." reminds us of the early roots of this fight. In this light it is both enlightening as well as inspiring.

## BOOK REVIEW: "Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution" by Agnes Smedley

(edited by Jan and Steve MacKinnon) published by the Feminist Press 1976.

This collection of reports and short stories by American writer Agnes Smedley covers the turbulent years of Chinese history in the 1920's and 30's, a time when the contradictions produced by China's out-moded social system were rapidly coming to a head. The Republican revolution of 1911-12 had brought about the demise of the last dynasty, the Ching, but had failed to consolidate power. The country was left open for exploitation by Western and Japanese imperialist interests often in alliance with local militarists and warlords. The resultant social turmoil and increased exploitation inadvertently exacerbated centuries-old social inequalities and class hatred. Peasant upheavals and uprisings by urban workers erupted adding to the polarization between those who saw the need for fundamental social change and traditionalists who sought to maintain the status quo. This polarization eventually coalesced after 1927 into the two political groupings - the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang - who were engaged in a bloody civil war until 1936 when the threat of Japanese invasion forced a temporary alliance.

Smedley, a journalist and later an organizer of medical services for the anti-Japanese resistance, reports first hand on the lives of the men and women caught in this period of tumultuous social change. Smedley's focus in these stories is on the women who as a group bore the brunt of China's harsh and restrictive family system. The life of a traditional Chinese woman of this period begins under the threat of infanticide, is rapidly followed by the cruelty of foot-binding and leads inevitably to an arranged marriage to a husband who may later "put her away" in favor of concubines and "sing song" girls.



After marriage her duty remains solely the upkeep of her husband's extended household under an often exacting mother-in-law and the never-ending procreation of many male children to carry on his family line.

Smedley's subjects are both the victims of this system as well as the women who have rebelled seeking personal liberation through involvement in the larger struggles for social and political change. In "Five Women of Mukden" for example Smedley describes her hostess in that Manchurian city, an uneducated older woman who after a life-time of continuous childbearing (12 in all) now faced helplessly her husband's decision to take a 16 year-old concubine. In "Hsu Mei Ling" the woman of the title becomes estranged from her Westernized husband because he finds her old-fashioned and dull. In the traditional way of a good wife she attempts to please her husband by pathetically learning jazz dancing on her crippled feet which had once been bound. Among the rebels, Smedley

*A Mandarin's House, Peking c 1860*

describes peasant women as well as those from the upper-class who have freed themselves from traditional roles. Chang Siao-Hung of the "Dedicated" who came from a wealthy family has never had her feet bound and was fortunate to attend the first co-educational school in Hong Kong.

On leaving home she quickly graduated from student agitation to involvement in the Communist Party organizing peasants and workers. In "Shan Fei, Communist", the protagonist is protected by her mother working behind the scenes to liberate her daughter from the stifling constraints of family life. Shan Fei's mother struggles with her husband to educate her daughter, she unbinds Shan Fei's feet as soon as her husband dies, and protects her from the rich land-owning family to whom she has been promised by her father at a young age. Shan Fei later marries a man of her own choosing, a peasant leader with whom she was organizing poor peasants in the Communist Party. Mother Tsai in "Women Take a Hand"

*Portraits (Continued from Page 5)*

is sixty-eight but rises to the leadership of the Women's Association in her village, "guarding the rear" of the anti-Japanese guerilla army. Not all women chose change and progress of course. Hsi-chen, the wife of a militarist featured in the story "The Living Dead" takes time off from her rounds of mah-jong and parties to spy on old school pals suspected of retaining revolutionary sympathies. And in a startling episode described in "The Dedicated" the protagonist observes a blood-chilling scene after the violent suppression of the Canton Commune in 1927 when upper-class women would "go through the streets, bend over wounded and dying workingmen, and beat out their brains with chunks of stone or wood."

A story that is well-known in gay circles is the charming "Silk Workers". Here Smedley records a visit to the silk producing region of Kwantung Province in south China where the spinners were all young women and rumored to be Lesbians. "They're too rich - that's the root of the trouble", Smedley's guide, a man, tells her. And indeed as Smedley observes it was their independent source of income that afforded these workers many choices unheard of for other Chinese women .

They refused to marry, and if their families forced them, they merely bribed their husbands with a part of their wages and induced them to take concubines. The most such a married girl would do was bear one son; then she would return to the factory, refusing to live with her husband any longer. The Government had just issued a decree forbidding women to escape from marriage by bribery, but the women ignored it.

The silk workers had also struck for shorter hours and higher pay and were accused of forming Secret Societies. As for the charges of Lesbianism Smedley neither refutes nor confirms

them but observes that the silk growing regions

were the only places in the whole country where the birth of a baby girl was an occasion for joy, for here girls were the main support of their families. .... I began to understand the charges that they were Lesbians. They could not but compare the dignity of their positions with the low position of married women. Their independence seemed a personal affront to officialdom.

In these vivid accounts, Smedley brings to light the human face of revolution and social change. The people she writes about were involved not just in a clash of ideas or a debate about opposing ideologies but were caught up in fierce personal conflicts that profoundly affected all aspects of their lives. For the Chinese, men and women, these personal conflicts inadvertently revolved around the traditional Confucian family, that fundamental unit of both their private and social existence. To rebel was first to break the bonds of restrictive family roles and in so doing bring about extreme generational conflict.

Smedley remarks in writing of a modern student who opposes his father's decision to take a concubine

They say that Chinese sons love their fathers. Not the sons I have known. Never have I seen more hatred in the eyes of a man than in those of this eldest son of my hostess.

And as the protagonist of "The Story of Kwei Chu" laments after his father had destroyed him financially and spiritually because of his refusal of an arranged marriage:

"Our families are a great load dragging all of us youth down to the bottom of the sea. I know so many young men ruined in this way. You may say we deserve it, or we would rebel.. In my native village

they do not even know how to rebel; it is not we who are to blame - it is the system."

The system though did not wait passively to be destroyed and rebellion even a personal one against one's own family involved severe personal risks. With the advent of the White Terror in 1927 organized by militarists, landowners and gentry families to preserve the "old ways" rebellious peasants, workers and students with "dangerous thoughts" were not the only elements hunted down. Women with closely-cropped hair and unbound feet, symbols of rebellion and non-conformity, were also singled out for persecution and often execution.

Asian gay men and lesbians will find a lot to identify with in these stories. Many of us who struggle with coming out to our families and who seek ways to maintain autonomous lives with partners of our own choosing also face many of the same restrictive family structures recounted in "Portraits..." The equation has changed somewhat of course in the intervening 50-60 years. But it is sobering to reflect that as late as the 1930's a Chinese heterosexual who marries a partner of his/her choice was committing a radical act. In the centuries-old Confucian family individual desire, even hetero ones were irrelevant to the marital bond. The autonomy of the individual man and woman was something that had to be fought for. As Smedley writes of a young Chinese student in Moscow in the mid 1920's.

...she studied a lesson that most Chinese women, have yet to learn - that a woman, like a man, is an independent personality, a productive force destined to choose her own way regardless of family, father, husband.

Asian gay people still struggle with these obstacles to being "an independent personality". Many of us face pressures to marry; our relationships are denounced because they do not result in procreation; they

*(continued on Page 4)*