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M. Butterfly Meets the Great White Hope

by Daniel C. Tsang.

The current preoccupation with biological determinism and the etiology of homosexuality misses the point. Of course, sexual orientation is a combination of nature and nurture. The more interesting issues are not why we turn out to be lesbian or gay, but given our orientation, how we become attracted to certain types of people and how that attraction is manifested in our relationships.

What has always intrigued me is not why I became gay, but what influenced my attractions to particular types of males. In my youth growing up in Hong Kong, I was attracted exclusively to my peers. Attending a boys' school in my adolescence, I had sexual encounters with some of my Chinese classmates and maintained a long-term relationship with one. Although I had Caucasian and Eurasian classmates, none of them became my sex partners. Older guys were just not of interest to me at the time.

By the time I arrived in the United States at the tender age of 17, I was already a confirmed and practising homosexual. I was still attached to my boyfriend in Hong Kong, so during my undergrad days at the University of Redlands, I didn't have much sex.

Every other year, however, my long-distance boyfriend and I resumed our relationship on my return to Hong Kong for the summer. In the early 1970's, I moved to Ann Arbor for graduate school and began to attend meetings of the University of Michigan Gay Liberation Front where I met other gay males, almost none of them Asian, and had sexual encounters with some of them. Moving to the U.S. from Hong Kong, the pool of available sex partners had changed from Chinese to include others.

Contrary to popular mythology, the white guys I had relationships with were not 50-year-old men who had served in Vietnam. They were mainly fellow students.

My sexual attractions, initially toward fellow Asians, had expanded to cover others, both white and non-white. If race or color was not the major factor, age still remained a factor, although the range of ages had broadened. I was still attracted to youths in late adolescence, but now my actual experiences were with guys in their twenties or older.

Subsequently, I moved to Philadelphia, where I maintained a relationship with a young Caucasian man for many years. Since 1986, I have lived in Orange County. In my various relationships here in the U.S., I have always wondered if my lovers were "rice queens." The term's origin is unknown, but The Queen's Vernacular dates it to 1971 San Francisco usage. I suspect it was coined by white gays to describe and probably put down their fellow gays who were attracted to Asians ("rice"). A contrary view of its origin is suggested by a writer in the current issue of UCIC's gay newspaper, Triangle Times. According to Jeff Stern, a UCIC graduate student, the term was created by self-hating Asians to describe whites who were attracted to them. In any case, whatever its derivation, I came to believe that my lovers were not rice queens, because they were not attracted solely to Asians, and did not treat me in the way a stereotypical rice queen could be expected to treat me.

The archetypical rice queen is a Caucasian male, in his 40's or older, attracted only to Asians, for very stereotypical reasons. He views Asians as a class, lumping Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese etc., into one amorphous group. He is attracted to Asians for our youthfulness, our lack of body hair, and our perceived submissiveness, dependence, and dependability. He believes that we aspire to be the model minority, unquestioning and cooperative. Sometimes, he is expressly looking for a "houseboy" to serve and service him. He suspects we are desperate for white lovers and will have sex with him just because he is attracted to us. He probably saw military service in Asia.

As I grow older, I can understand an older man's continuing lust for lost youth. But I want to be treated for who I am, not because I fit some weird fantasy. The fact that I am Asian is just one of many aspects of my personality. It need not be the overwhelming one. While we may all look alike (to an outsider), we do not think alike! I for one don't want to be anyone's houseboy. And we do not all eat rice!

The "rice queen" phenomenon is rooted in the United States' imperialistic history. Hundreds of thousands of white gay soldiers have served in Asia, in the process falling in love with the Asians they were sent to "protect" or to kill. I recall one roommate in Ann Arbor. He had served in Vietnam, now slept with an axe by his bed, and boasted of all the Vietnamese boys he had seduced during the Vietnam War. Like many Vietnam veterans, he still had recurring nightmares, and the axe was there to protect him from any potential intruder. Now stateside, many gay veterans seek to relive their sensuous wartime experiences.

It is also rooted in Orientalism. Edward Said's depiction of how the West views the East. We are the exotic erotics lusted after by westerners, such as the French diplomat obsessed with his fantasy of a Chinese woman in David Hwang's Tony Award-winning M. Butterfly. As the playwright himself has observed, in rice queen relationships:

the Asian virtually always plays the role of the "woman": the Rice Queen, culturally and sexually, is the "man." This pattern of relationships had become so codified that, until recently, it was considered unnatural for gay [American] Asians to date one another. Such men would be taunted with a phrase which implied they were lesbians. -- from David Henry Hwang, "Afterword," in M. Butterfly (New York: Plume/Penguin Books, 1988), 98.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation appears in the sex tours by western gay male tourists to Thailand and the Philippines, seeking young Asians as sex partners.

As for the situation domestically, Gay Asian Canadian video artist Richard Fung has observed: "Gay society in North America, organized and commercial, is framed around the young middle-class white male. He is its customer and its product. Blacks, Asians and Latin Americans are the oysters in the meat market. At best, we're [Asians are] a quaint specialty for exotic tastes. Native people aren't even on the shelves."

As gourmet food for those with exotic tastes, Asians thus fit into a
small niche in gay society. Not surprisingly, we flock to the few bars that cater to both Asians and rice queens, knowing that we stand a better than even chance of meeting someone there. Some of us, however, seeking assimilation into the dominant culture, will act like colonized peoples, catering to every whim of our white sex partners. Too many of us hate our yellow skin and try to escape from our community into the arms of our white lovers. Ironically, for some, meeting a rice queen is our fantasy dream come true.

Again and again I have heard more and more (but not all) gay Vietnamese teenagers and young adults in Orange County tell me that they want to be as far away from Little Saigon as possible, and that they cannot have relationships with other Asians. They seek a blond knight to liberate them from their plight.

This search for the Great White Hope is perfectly understandable, if deplorable. Our ethnic communities are almost uniformly homophobic, and the dominant culture, after all, is very white identified. For an Asian lesbian or gay coming out today, it is not surprising that he or she would want to seek refuge in the white gay community (and away from the ethnic community). Yet the importance of our ethnic communities (and our families) remains. It cannot be casually dismissed. Denying the Asian part of our identity is delusional. It will not work. Hoping some white lover will sweep you off your feet at the cost of your self-esteem is fantasy indeed.

Rice queens will, of course, come to the rescue, especially if they are the only ones perceived by self-hating Asians as finding them attractive. Yet is that the kind of society we want to build here in the new land?

Rather than indulging in romantic escapist fantasies, wouldn’t a better strategy be confronting our fears and our self-hatred directly? Are we afraid no one will love us? Are we afraid we do not fit the dominant society’s definition of beauty? Individually we may not be able to do much to change the objective situation of widespread racism out there, or the domination of cultural prescriptions of beauty. But collectively, we stand a much better chance, at least of creating a supportive space for ourselves and our lovers.

I am not calling for Politically Correct sexual attractions. That would be ridiculous, and totally unenforceable even if desirable. My criticism is not that these relationships are Asian and white, but that the dynamics of a relationship involving a stereotypical rice queen and a subservient Asian are doomed to failure. I recall in Hong Kong once getting a call from a British lawyer who wanted me to interpret for his Chinese boyfriend with whom he was having an argument. The Briton couldn’t speak or understand Cantonese.

Today, I would ask: do you feel fulfilled and empowered in your relationship(s)? If so, great. If not, what do you plan to do? Further, if you are only attracted to a specific racial or ethnic type, ask yourself why. Depending on the individual, a particular erotic specialty can be limiting or illuminating. Do not get trapped in living a life based on stereotypes, like the French diplomat in M. Butterfly.

Life is a smorgasbord. Give yourself a chance to develop new tastes. Sexual attractions do change over time: I am now attracted to guys much older than the ones I had sex with in my youth. A Chinese American friend of mine was only attracted to whites until he his first sexual encounter with fellow Asian. And as more and more lesbian and gay groups include bisexuals, many gay males are beginning to wonder if we could be bisexual as well.

There are some encouraging local signs of empowerment of Asian Pacific gays as we round out the last decade of the 20th century. Here in Southern California, the first all-Vietnamese gay, family and friends group has been formed, with meetings in The Center Orange County (12832 Garden Grove Blvd., #A, Garden Grove) conducted entirely in Vietnamese, the last Sunday of each month at 2 p.m. The Center Orange County has also begun its first lesbian and gay Asian Pacific rap every second Friday of each month at 8 p.m. GAPSN is also expanding rapidly. Much more organizing needs to be done, but the central principle should continue to be the empowerment of all of us, Asian and non-Asian, not the perpetuation of neocolonial types of relationships.

We must strive beyond Orientalism. Copyright (c) Daniel C. Tsang 1992

Daniel C. Tsang works at UC Irvine Library, edited The Age Taboo (1981), and serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Homosexuality. An earlier version of this article appeared in the February 28, 1992 issue of Frontiers under the title “Green Tea and Rice Queens.” Dan can be reached at (714) 856-4978 work or (714) 751-2856 home.