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DATING, CULTURES COLLIDE

SOME ASIAN-AMERICAN YOUTHS AT ODDS WITH IMMIGRANT PARENTS' VALUES

By Nerissa Pacio
Mercury News

Wendy Gwo's parents grounded her the summer before she left for college. They caught her sneaking back into their Sunnyvale home after a forbidden date with the boyfriend she'd kept secret from them.

Katherine Chen said even broaching the subject of dating is taboo with her parents.

``We don't talk about relationship stuff," said Katherine, 15, a sophomore at Gunn High School in Palo Alto. ``It was very different when they were growing up. I don't think they understand what high school life is supposed to be like here."

While worries about young love -- along with grades, popularity, and clothes -- are common for many young people, some Asian-American teenagers often are faced with an additional pressure: immigrant parents who insist that their second-generation children adhere to the more restrictive moral values of the home country.

``Dating brings cultural conflict into sharp relief," said Judy Tso, founder of Aha Solutions Unlimited, a non-profit group that provides life coaching and consulting for Asian-Americans. ``Values of immigrant parents clash with those of Americanized young people. Children are forced to live a double life. Some are better at balancing their own needs with parents' wishes, but others choose rebellion."

Many families affected

The potential for such clashes of culture exists in thousands of households. In the Bay Area, 13 percent of all people under 21 -- about 241,000 youths -- are second-generation Asian-Americans.

The conflict takes on many forms. Some Asian-American youths deal with the expectation that they'll date only within their culture. Others aren't permitted to date at all. Young men are not kept under as close scrutiny as young women, but neither are they immune to the pressures. And sometimes communication between parents and children breaks down completely.

Although old-world traditions have always been challenged by more permissive American culture -- earlier immigrant teens were tempted by ``bad" influences such as big-band jazz or, later, rock 'n'

roll -- today's ubiquitous pop culture makes it even more difficult to hang on to the old ways.

Still, Asian culture has extraordinarily strong roots, said Derald Wing Sue, founder of the Asian American Psychological Association.

``In terms of social dating patterns, a lot of the conflict is due to the traditional Asian cultural values and the appropriate behavior with individuals in the United States," Sue said. ``American culture is much more individualistic, whereas among traditional Asians, the decisions you make reflect upon your family. As a result, family has great influence on behavior that brings honor or shame and disgrace to the family. There's a strong concern about types of relationships and behavior in relationships that's important."

Asians cannot be regarded as a monolith, since there are many countries of origin, languages and traditions. But the dating conundrum resonates with many. It's a story that's been reflected on the big screen as recently as ``Bend It Like Beckham" and on small screens in the hit series ``Gilmore Girls" and a recent MTV documentary with veejay Suchin Pak revealing her own struggles as a Korean-American dealing with the expectations of her immigrant mother.

Traditional values

It's more of an issue among young women, because of traditional values that call for women to be chaste and protected. But young men deal with the issue indirectly through experiences with their friends, sisters and significant others.

Jason Panchal, an Indo-American student at De Anza College, keeps his relationship a secret from the parents of his Indo-American girlfriend, who is forbidden to date. Panchal's parents, who moved to the United States 30 years ago, have assimilated into mainstream culture and permit dating, but many of his friends who are girls cannot. Some also have arranged marriages.

``The problem is, it's two totally different cultures, so our parents are really strict," said Panchal, 20. ``Back in the day, in India, there was no such thing as dating. It was all about arranged marriages."

Experiences, of course, vary depending on how long immigrants have been in the United States, to what degree they have assimilated, and how conservative and religious they are, Sue said. But for a number of Asian-Americans in their teens and 20s, he said, having parents who grew up in a different culture creates a predicament.

``I felt like I always had to keep things that I felt from my parents," said Gwo, 20, now a junior at the University of California-Los Angeles. ``If I felt something about a guy, I couldn't even talk about it. I would go to my girlfriends, but luckily, some of their parents were the same way."

Laura Doan, a Vietnamese-American student at Mission San Jose High School in Fremont, said her parents have slowly become more open to the idea of her Chinese-American boyfriend, Jeff Tan. However, Tan's parents are more traditional and don't completely accept her because she is not Chinese, she said.

``Many non-Asians think of us as all being part of one race," said Laura, 17. ``But it's so complicated. Asians think of it a different way. Chinese and Vietnamese are actually two very distinct cultures, with different languages and customs."

`A cultural ritual'

Dating dilemmas have become a common cultural phenomenon among young Asian-Americans, said Sunaina Maira, associate professor of Asian-American Studies at UC-Davis, especially children of first-generation parents.

``It's like a cultural ritual that second-generation youth share," Maira says. ``It's sad that that's a basis of identity rather than something more positive, but it does show how savvy they are about how they incorporate negotiation techniques in their lives."

Some parents, like Laura's, have adapted to mainstream culture.

``We had to adjust to American culture," said Nga Doan, Laura's mother, ``At first my husband and I weren't happy with her dating, but I realized kids will do what they want even if you tell them not to. It was better for me to at least know where she is and talk to her openly about everything."

Some young people come to embrace their parents' culture. Ferah Munshi, a freshman at UC-Berkeley, has accepted the rules set up by her first-generation Indian Muslim parents.

In high school, she couldn't be in social settings where boys were present, even if they were only friends. She is not permitted to date, and after she graduates, her parents plan to present men to her as options for an arranged marriage.

``For a long time I was so angry at them about not being able to date or even go out with friends when guys were there, and I'd fight with them," says Ferah, 17. ``But I realize my parents grew up that way in India and they are trying to bring me up that way. I can't imagine rebelling against them at all because I've been brought up with the cultural and religious belief that respecting your parents should be the most important thing to you."

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