President's Column

My mother was born and raised in the southern province of South Vietnam farm country. She was pursuing a college degree in law when she finally consented to marry my father at the old age (for her time) of twenty four. Shortly after their wedding, my father was drafted into the Southern Vietnamese armed forces. While she was pregnant with me, she advocated tirelessly and successfully to help get my father into a civilian position to ensure the presence of a father for her children. During the chaotic and terrifying end of the Vietnam war, she made the decision to leave her mother, sisters, friends, and relatives to follow my father on a daunting and uncertain journey. Her priority was to ensure a safe and free future for her five children. During our early years as refugees in the United States, she somehow managed to help her children grow and thrive on food stamps and government aid. Even though my mother’s ambition was to become a journalist, she became a wife and a mother. There was no doubt she did not fit into the traditional mold of “feminism” as defined in the Western world. But for me, a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American woman, my mother was my very first role model of feminism. The determination, strength, and love with which she made a life for herself and her children out of a chaotic and oppressive environment showed me that the possibilities are countless when one stands and fights for what is meaningful in one’s life.

In her own loving and resilient way, my mother taught me as a child to confront inequalities, to stand up for my own values and beliefs, and to be aware of my own privileges and issues of social justice. However, it has been an ongoing challenge for me in the process of defining my feminist identity in the face of stereotypes about APIA women and sexism that exists both in Asian and Western cultures. For many Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) women, feminism is often an unnamed and unexplored territory. What is feminism? How does it look for APIA women?

At the 2007 Asian American Psychological Association (AAPA) convention, Debra Kawahara and I explored these questions and others with twenty or so APIA sisters during an engaging and dynamic interactive session. At that time, Division 35 (Society for the Psychology of Women or SPW) of the American Psychological Association (APA) has been in existence for almost 35 years. Yet, the voices of APIA women and feminist issues relevant to the lives of APIA women have not been formally brought to the table with our feminist sisters. The energy, commitment, openness, and challenges that connected us during

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I am grateful for the guidance and support of other APIA women (Sonya Austria, Jean Chin, Jeannette Hsu, Edna Esnili) who persisted in SPW and doing the work to keep us at the table over the years. The generosity and experiences of other feminists (Nancy Baker, Marsha Banks, and other SPW EC members) were invaluable as we took the steps necessary to bring our voices forward. Section V, the Psychology of Asian Pacific American women, was formalized as a section of SPW in August, 2008 as a result of a grassroots effort of our collective resolve.

Since the inception of the section in August 2008, we have accomplished much. Last year, at the 2009 APA convention in Toronto, for the first time in the 35-year history of SPW, APIA women contributed two programming hours as a formal section of SPW. At the 2010 APA convention, we will be sponsoring two fantastic sessions as part of Division 35. We are working with the Division of Women (DoW) within APA to collaborate on issues and events that are important to Section V and DoW. I am so fortunate to have a group of dedicated, energetic, and creative women who are passionate about issues relevant to our intersecting identities as we work together on growing our section. Our EC group, Diane Hayashino, Khanh Dinh, Ivy Ho, Susana Lowe, Yuying Tsong, Catherine Hsieh, Dhara Thakar, has been “meeting” on a monthly basis to brainstorm ways for us to secure funding and recruit new members. We are in the process of planning collaborative projects with the Division of Women (DoW) within the Asian American Psychological Association (AAPA). It is exciting to have the opportunity to collaborate on issues and events that reflect the missions of Section V and DoW.

There is much to anticipate for the future of Section V. Though there is a lot of work to do ahead of us, we are excited about moving forward and growing together as we explore APIA feminism. We need your energy and commitment as we advance on this very exciting journey. We want to hear from each of you about your own experience, questions, ideas, and passion for APIA feminist issues. Please feel free to contact me at le_philoan@sac.edu or anyone of us on the EC for more information (www.apa.org/divisions/div35/).