2
Between Girls

Schooled In Passion: The Queer Time of Girlhood

> Inside the school, there was a sea of white tunics. Aside from a carpenter and two science teachers, there were no other men. A single-coloured image. A single melody of sounds. Years later, when I recall my time at the school, I still feel as though I was in a dream, as though this was a whole other plane of existence. Curiously, although there was only one sex in this existence, it made up a unique and complete world of its own.
>
> –Ng Kit-Fen, "A Pure World"

Thus begins one of the most affecting stories – the only one about female desire penned by an author from Hong Kong – collected in *His-His Her-Her Stories,* an anthology of fiction on same-sex desire by Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland Chinese authors. Narrated from the point of view of "a seventeen-year-old girl who came from an outside world where gender difference exists,"[1] the story's apparently sexually innocent setting – an elite all-girls high school – is gradually revealed to this outsider's eyes to be an alternative universe, with a unique code of relations between girls that is fraught with desire and jealousy, intensity and excess. In the story's afterword, the author attributes her source of inspiration to an incident from her own high school years: "A girl slit her wrist in the bathroom after losing her girlfriend to a rival. Blood splattered onto the high, moss-grown wall. She even wrote her girlfriend's name on the door, and then ran around the building while still dripping with blood."[2] This melodramatic event, which finds its way into the story's conclusion, reminds me of a tragic news story from my own high school years in Hong Kong during the 1980s: two teenage girls from St. Stephen's Girls' College jumped to their deaths together from a high-rise building. I recall a detail that was neither confirmed nor

denied in reports but spread like wildfire among students claiming to be "in the know": the dead girls' hands were apparently bound together by a red ribbon. The detail signalled a special bond between the girls that was immediately understood among those of us in the same age group and attending similar institutions. Yet such an intimation would never be explicitly acknowledged in the adult world of parents, principals, and teachers. The intense and erotically charged relation between girls in these strict and solemn halls of education was ironically both invisible and commonplace – willfully unacknowledged by the adult world but freely let be as long as it did not disrupt the day-to-day business of our education.

This erotic culture among school girls exists beyond one short story and my anecdotal recollection. In fact, it has a long and distinguished literary lineage. In her introduction to *Red Is Not the Only Color,* a collection of stories on same-sex love between women in China, Patricia Sieber discusses the significance of the "new style, single-sex education" that was launched in China in the 1910s and 1920s. The establishment of missionary, private, and public girls' schools located in large cities and provincial capitals provided opportunities for girls to be educated away from home and to form "passionate and enduring" relations with nonkin women.[3] Sieber finds numerous examples of prominent Republican-era women writers who portray "same-sex intimacies with homoerotic overtones" flourishing in these new social spaces.[4] Seiber goes on to show, however, that the Communist victory in 1949 brought about a break in this thematic tradition in Mainland China.[5] The Communist state's emphasis on the reproductive nuclear family as the foundation of socialist revolution was accompanied by the systematic degendering of social life, including dress codes, terms of address, and the organization of workplace and educational units. Under these conditions, the specific erotic culture (and its literary expressions) that arose from single-sexed settings like girls' schools inevitably declined, although scattered expressions of same-sex eroticism recurred throughout the Maoist era in other, less obvious contexts, such as workers committees and collective farms.[6] Meanwhile, under vastly different historical conditions, the setting of schools as an erotic site between girls has not diminished but thrived in various forms of cultural expression in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the essay "Alternative Classics," written as an introduction to *Selections of Tongzhi Fiction from Taiwan,* Chu Wei-cheng discusses the prevalence of the genre of "campus fiction" in Taiwanese literature:

> There are obvious reasons for, as well as a long tradition of, using schools as a setting for stories about same-sex desire between girls. This is particularly prevalent in Chinese-language/Taiwanese literature. During the Republican era in China, virtually all the works that have anything at all to do with same-sex desire between women were written in this genre of "campus

> fiction" *[xiaoyuan xiaoshuo]* ... The same is true of the much-celebrated Taiwanese fiction that came after, such as Cao Lijun's "The Maiden's Dance" ["Tongnu zhi wu"] in this collection. Last year, the publication of a story written by Eileen Chang during the late 1970s, about female friendship in Shanghai's missionary schools during the 1930s and 1940s, has delightfully enriched the depth of this classic lineage.[7]

Chu's objective in the article is to offer a history of the development of *tongzhi* fiction in Taiwan. His account of the vicissitude of the "campus fiction" genre in this history illustrates the impact of social movements on cultural expressions. Chu characterizes the early depictions of female intimacies in "school fiction" as "unintentional" *(wuxin)* lesbian writing. Chu notes, however, that since "such innocence could not continue forever," many authors who previously wrote implicitly about homoerotic friendship between girls began to write explicitly on homosexuality from the late 1980s on.[8] This development is in part a result of Taiwan's democratization and the attendant rise of social movements on the island after the end of martial law in 1987.[9] Ambivalent depictions of same-sex intimacy and desire *without* an attendant narrative of sexual identity became almost unimaginable in an era when the *tongzhi* movement had already gained significant visibility in the social and political spheres. The concomitant rise of "queer" *(ku'er)* as a critical and aesthetic category in intellectual and artistic circles also means that lesbian and/or queer female subject positions are not only intelligible but also virtually inevitable in the aesthetic expression or critical understanding of any narrative of same-sex desire between women.

While there is no comparable literary development in Hong Kong that matches Taiwanese literature's richness in queer expressions, the cultural medium that has seen an explosion in queer representations is of course the cinema. Yet, with regards to representations of intimacies between women, the trajectory in Hong Kong cinema has not paralleled the one that Chu maps out for Taiwanese fiction. In her survey of lesbian representations in Hong Kong cinema during the past two decades, Yau Ching lists the following five major trends: the "bent becoming straight" genre, in which queer women inevitably "become" heterosexual by the end of the film; period drama, in which lesbian desire is imaginable or possible only in the distant past; the violent-gangster genre, in which queer women (usually butch) are "objects of fear, contempt, or pity"; soft-porn films, in which lesbian sexuality provides a titillating spectacle for a straight male audience; and the "temporary transvestite" film, in which cross-dressing plots temporarily facilitate moments of lesbian desire but heterosexuality is "restored" when the disguise is abandoned.[10] It is evident from Yau's analysis that the recent history of Hong Kong cinema illustrates a *failure* in lesbian subject formations. In contrast to the trend that Chu observes in Taiwanese fiction, where

a long lineage of implicit references to intimacies between girls gives way to explicit representations of self-conscious lesbian desire and self-identified lesbian subjects, Hong Kong cinema has continued to sustain highly ambivalent narratives on this theme. Does this trend reflect only a relatively inhospitable climate for lesbian representations? What other concerns may be illuminated by these films? In this chapter, I examine a body of films that show thematic continuity with the tradition of "campus fiction" in their exploration of the complex and erotically charged relations among adolescent girls and young women. While only one of these films project adult lesbian identity as the *telos* of such relations, all of them reveal ambivalence about adult heterosexuality as an inevitable and desirable "outcome" of girlhood. Why is there such a persistent return to the scene of girlhood intimacies? What kind of tension do such returns reveal about adult (hetero)sexuality? And even if these films fail to project a trajectory of lesbian subject formations, do they not *also* cast doubt on the inevitability of heterosexual subject formations?

One way to approach these questions is through a consideration of identity and temporality. In her study of girls' friendship and self-identity in Hong Kong, Ng Ka Man observes that a salient means of self-identification among girls is ironically their *disidentification* with the category of "woman."[11] Ng's analysis draws on the study of Tuula Gordon and Elina Lahelma, which tracks the myriad ways that girls in Finland try to "protract their transitions and remain girls," a process that the researchers colourfully dub "the art of not becoming women."[12] Adult womanhood is typically scripted as a temporal progress, to which girlhood is simply a precursor, a stage to be outgrown. To approach girlhood as a form of disidentification – indeed, as "an art of not becoming women" – means to understand it not as a stage in a temporal progress but as an identity located in a different *kind* of temporality that defies the gendered expectations and responsibilities arising from the normative narrative of maturity. Judith Halberstam characterizes normative time in this way:

> The time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples. Obviously, not all people who have children keep or even are able to keep reproductive time, but many and possibly most people believe that the scheduling of repro-time is natural and desirable. Family time refers to the normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) that accompanies the practice of child rearing. The time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability.[13]

Halberstam goes on to study queer subculture as a modality of "queer time": a way of living a "stretched out adolescence" in defiance of the temporal logic of bourgeois reproduction.[14] Living such an extended adolescence does not signify a reluctance to grow up. More radically, it rejects the linear narrative of adulthood that equates maturity and responsibility with the heterosexual prerogative of marriage and childrearing. In what follows, I approach the recurrent cinematic returns to girlhood sexuality as flashes of queer time – figures of alternative life-paths whose values and goals are not mappable within the temporal framework of adult heterosexuality.

Snap/Shot: A Time to Kill

> I will never love boys, ever. Not in this life.
>
> –Jiney to Jas, *Ab-Normal Beauty*

> Photography is the medium in which we unconsciously encounter the dead.
>
> –Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room*

The spectre of male betrayal, whether experienced as abuse, infidelity, or deception, is one of the most frequently expressed anxieties over heterosexual womanhood. A recent trend in Hong Kong cinema dramatizes this anxiety with an intriguing twist: the endurance of intimate bonds (eroticized to varying degree) between women is pitched against the inevitability of male betrayal as a reverse mirror of contrast. Examples from a variety of genres, including the melodrama *The Intimates* (Jacob Cheung, 1997), the suspense drama *Midnight Fly* (Jacob Cheung, 2001), the black comedy *Beyond Our Ken* (Pang Ho-Cheung, 2004) and the horror thriller *Koma* (Law Chi-Leung, 2004), all exemplify a version of this trend. *Ab-Normal Beauty* (Oxide Pang, 2004) offers a psychologically complex variation on this theme and pushes its implications for queer female subject formation further than most of its predecessors. Directed by Oxide Pang and co-produced by his brother Danny, the film continues the Pang brothers' penchant for exploring horror from a female protagonist's perspective, *literally*. Their two previous films, the hugely popular *The Eye* (Danny Pang and Oxide Pang, 2002) and *The Eye 2* (Danny Pang and Oxide Pang, 2004), deal with women's capacity to *see* ghosts. More provocatively, *Ab-Normal Beauty* dramatizes the role of young women in the creative production of visual horror. More so than the English title, the Chinese title of the film, *Siwang xiezheng* (literally "death photography"), draws attention to the relation between visual media and the production of horror. Photography, video, and painting play

roles in the film that are as significant as those of the principal characters.

The plot revolves around Jiney and Jas, two students in their late teens who share a love for photography. After witnessing a fatal car accident, Jiney becomes fascinated with images of death. She obsessively turns her camera on dead and dying animals, while reading voraciously about photographers who attempt to capture death on film. After an unsettling evening when she turns her camera on her secret admirer, Anson (who has been secretly stalking and filming her with his video camera), and nearly harms him in the process, Jiney fears she is heading toward a nervous breakdown. She confesses to Jas about being sexually abused by a cousin when she was a child and later witnessing the cousin falling to his death on a flight of stairs. She promises Jas, who has earlier revealed her love for her, that because of the abuse, she will "never love boys." Together they destroy Jiney's photographs of dead animals and victims of accidents and suicides. Just as the girls' lives seem to settle down into domestic happiness, Jiney receives a copy of what appears to be a snuff film. After a failed attempt to identify the sender, Jiney receives a similar tape and, to her horror, sees Jas being violently beaten on video. Shortly afterward, Jiney herself is kidnapped and brought to the set, restrained in chains, and surrounded by flashing cameras. Through cunning manipulation, Jas convinces the killer (who turns out to be a bookstore salesman who notices Jiney's obsession with photography books on death) that she both identifies with and desires him. Having lured him into a vulnerable position, she manages to kill him and escape. At the end of the film, we see Jiney painting an image of a woman in a pastel-coloured drawing. On the voiceover, she confesses that it was she who pushed her abusive cousin to his death many years ago.

Influenced by Laura Mulvey's seminal work in the 1970s, early feminist studies on the horror genre are primarily concerned with the lack of women's identification both within the film text and among spectators. Linda Williams likens the female protagonist to the female spectator, both of whom are punished when adopting an active gaze.[15] Barbara Creed's well-known formulation of the "monstrous-feminine" associates the abjected monster with femininity and suggests that viewing pleasure is derived from an expulsion and renunciation of the feminine.[16] This gendered paradigm is subsequently complicated as critical focus shifts either to the perspective of the female viewer who experiences pleasure (as Williams does in a revision of her earlier study)[17] or to the possibility of a cross-gendered spectatorial identification (as exemplified by Carol Clover's famous study of slasher films).[18] In *Ab-Normal Beauty* the gendered structure of the gaze is complicated by several additional elements: the capacity of women to be the creative *producer* of horror through visual media; the egalitarian potential of a relationship between girls; and the gender dynamics involved in different forms of visual production.

In the film Jiney initially appears to be a stock victim figure, vulnerable to a predatory male gaze. The opening sequence cuts from a photography exhibition in which Jiney has received the top prize to a drawing class in which Jiney and her classmates are painting a nude. The editing shows a seemingly predictable relay: Jiney looking at the female model, while a male classmate, Anson, gazes at her, showing sexual interest. However, immediately after this sequence, the film signals a twist in the expectant development of a boy-girl relationship. When Anson asks Jiney out on a date after class, Jiney refuses and points into the camera, which immediately cuts to a shot of Jas. A rapid shot/reverse shot sequence shows a close-up of Anson's quizzical look, Jas flipping him the bird, Anson's still-confused look, and finally a long shot of the two girls' backs as they nonchalantly walk away from the camera (and Anson's gaze). Already in the opening sequence, Jiney is established as a creative visual artist (a photographer and a painter) who will not be easily captured by the heterosexual male gaze. The boy-meets-girl set-up is also interrupted by the framing of two young women as a couple, something that is not assimilated by the male gaze with pleasure (as signalled by Anson's humiliated and confused expression). Later, when Jiney discovers Anson stalking and videotaping her at her house, she reverses the gendered hierarchy of looks by pretending to seduce him and then overpowering and immobilizing him on the floor. Afterward, she simulates a scene of death by splashing him with red paint and turns him into the monstrous object of *her* camera.

The film also contrasts Jiney's photography with the killer's penchant for snuff films. In *Light in the Dark Room,* a meditative study of the photographic reflections of four major writers on the medium, Jay Prosser characterizes photography as a realization of loss and a reminder of death:

> Photographs contain a realization of loss in the fundamental sense that every photograph represents a past real moment that actually happened but is no longer. It is a myth that photographs bring back memories. Photographs show not the presence of the past but the pastness of the present. They show the irreversible passing of time ... For [our most lyrical writers on photography], photography is a melancholic object. Not an aide-mémoire, a form for preserving memory, it is a memento mori.[19]

Jiney's obsession with photographing death can be understood as a *literalization* of the essential function of photography. If every photograph (whatever its content) is a reminder of death, a mark of what is no more, then literally photographing death is a means to lay bare this very function. Like a *mise-en-abyme,* Jiney's photographs of death become photographs of photography itself. It is, however, not this contemplative dimension of Jiney's project that attracts the killer's attention. Rather, it is the aggressive – what

Susan Sontag in *On Photography* famously and rather plaintively calls the "imperial" and "acquisitive" – nature of the photographic act that the killer identifies with and attempts to reproduce in his snuff movies.[20] When Jiney and Jas watch the first tape of violence together, Jas questions its veracity: "Look at the editing and the soundtrack ... Isn't this just some experimental film?" Jas is drawing attention to the video's reliance on narrative and sound to generate meaning, in contrast to the silent stillness of the photographic image. Photography captures death by evoking a sense of loss, what Prosser calls "the pastness of the present," thus representing death precisely by what *cannot be made visible* in photography: the "life" behind the image. By contrast, the killer's snuff movies aspire to the *opposite:* the violent and forced visualization of death. In Linda Williams's study of "snuff" films – both the original film *Snuff* as well as the entire genre subsequently named after it, denoting films where actual acts of killing are supposed to take place on screen – she analyzes violent horror by distinguishing it categorically from sadomasochist pornography through the former's concern with visibility.[21] For Williams, the violence in putative snuff films aspires to a new order of the "frenzy of the visible": it reflects a desire to view the visible pain of death as "a perverse substitute for the invisible involuntary spasm of orgasm that is so hard to see in the body of a woman."[22] In Williams's formulation, the violent horror exemplified by the snuff genre is primarily concerned not with the representation of death (there is, after all, no real evidence to date of actual snuff films existing) but with the visual fetishization of an otherwise visually elusive (in sexual terms) female body. Furthermore, this obsession with sexual visibility relies on a *staged* narrative of death. Mikita Brottman's study of *Snuff* shows that spectatorial fascination with the film stems far more from moral panic than from any claim that it may make about the verisimilitude of its representation of death, which was in fact quite obviously and clumsily simulated.[23] In the same way, just as Jas has observed, the killer's videos, regardless of whether he captures an actual act of killing on screen, relies on the *staging* of death to violently fetishize a female body. Not at all concerned with the contemplation of death-as-absence, the videos bear only a false and facile resemblance to Jiney's project.

Another dimension of Jiney's photography is the therapeutic relief it provides for her childhood sexual trauma. Prosser draws our attention to Freud's comparison between trauma and photography: "Freud himself compared the unconscious to a camera, at the beginnings of psychoanalysis and not far along in the history of photography ... Freud later described trauma as a photograph. The child receives impressions like 'a photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture.'"[24] In the film Jiney is unable to talk about, or even to properly remember, her sexual abuse until her photography triggers these traumatic

memories. Scenes of her abuse are inserted into the film as rapid flashbacks that are not edited together as a coherent narrative. We never see the actual sequence of events, nor are we shown the motives and reactions of the people involved. Rather, we see rapid shots of disjointed black-and-white images flash like a series of still photographs. Jiney's pleasure in photography thus serves a function unbeknown to her: it provides her with a way to cope with her trauma not by "remembering" it as a verbal narrative but by *repeating* it in its essential form – like a photograph.

Jiney also copes with her sexual trauma through another avenue, one that the film implies may be a more fulfilling alternative to her photographic obsession: by "never loving boys." From this perspective, sexual trauma at the hand of her abusive cousin has become the foundation of Jiney's queer subjectivity. While many queer activists and theorists are wary of linkage between queer identities and sexual abuse, Ann Cvetkovich makes a provocative and convincing case for just such linkage in *Archives of Feelings*. Cvetkovich argues that delinking sexual abuse categorically from the formation of queer identification may not be the best response to the injurious history whereby sexual abuse is used as a means to stigmatize queer identities. Instead, she wonders why the narrative cannot be turned on its head to *affirm* queerness instead:

> But why can't saying that "sexual abuse causes homosexuality" just as easily be based on the assumption that there's something right, rather than something wrong, with being lesbian or gay? As someone who would go so far as to claim lesbianism as one of the *welcome* effects of sexual abuse, I am happy to contemplate the therapeutic process by which sexual abuse turns girls queer. I introduce the word *queer* to suggest the unpredictable connections between sexual abuse and its effects, to name a connection while refusing determination or causality.[25]

Cvetkovich's suggestion refuses two untenable either-or options: either attribute sexual abuse as a cause of homosexuality and something to "get over" *or* dissociate homosexuality categorically from *any* form of sexual abuse. By acknowledging a connection between sexual trauma and queer identities, without presuming the former to be necessarily a *cause* of the latter, Cvetkovich is carving out a new space in which queer subject formations and sexual trauma can be understood in complex relation to, and without stigmatizing, one another.

Jiney's intimate relationship with Jas is portrayed in the film as a potential site of recovery from her history of abuse. While there is a long tradition in the cinema, and in the horror genre in particular, of associating queerness with menace and montrosity – what Henry Benshoff theorizes as the "monster queer"[26] – the relationship between Jiney and Jas veers away from

this tradition to represent everything that is *not* monstrous in the film. Their relationship *reverses* the cinematic trope that Anneke Smelik dubs "murderous girls in love."[27] In contrast to films like *Heavenly Creatures* and *Butterfly Kiss,* where the intense excess of queer bonds between girls inevitably turn murderous, Jiney is *saved* from her potentially murderous excess by her relationship with Jas. In a film that is predominantly lit in muted, grey colours to create a menacing and claustrophobic atmosphere, one scene stands out as a dramatic exception. After a choppily edited and visually disorienting sequence during which Jiney and Jas spend a long night after Jiney's breakdown getting rid of the remnants of Jiney's lurid project, the camera settles into a still shot of a spacious kitchen bathed in morning light. It then cuts to a smiling Jiney cooking breakfast for Jas. The scene is brightly lit, showing a spacious room suffused with the morning sun. The image of the girls laughing and enjoying breakfast together provides a relief from the kinetic frenzy of the night before, signalling a turning point at which the nightmare seems to be momentarily lifted. In this scene, the loving, domestic relationship between the girls is emotionally and visually located *apart from* the film's scenes of horror. It signals a space of safety where Jiney can recover from her traumatized past and self-destructive tendencies. Jiney does not have to "get over" her sexual trauma to be reintegrated into heterosexual adulthood. Here, her queer girlhood is the cure, *not* the symptom. Furthermore, the girls' relationship as fellow photographers frees them from a gendered hierarchy of looks: as creative equals, neither is the object of the other's gaze, in contrast to Anson and the killer, both of whom want to turn Jiney into their visual object.

This scene of domestic happiness between girls, however, does not last: in the end, neither creative photography nor a lesbian relationship is allowed to provide the theraputic closure to Jiney's trauma. The young queer photographer is punished by the killer, who not only harms Jas but also attempts to turn Jiney back into the female victim and thus into an object of his camera rather than his creative equal. Even though Jiney successfully fights back, her potential future with Jas has already been destroyed. The concluding scene of the film also signals Jiney's abandonment of photography as her creative medium. Her return to painting seems to concede that Jiney's photography indeed comes *too close* to the horrific medium of snuff film because the killer (or even Jiney herself) cannot tell the difference between the two. Jiney's confession on the voiceover that she too was a killer in the past implies that her trauma is rooted not only in her abuse by the cousin but also in her violent response to it. It is unclear whom Jiney is painting: Is it Jas, Jiney herself, or an idealized image of a "happy ending" that Jiney is unable to attain? This unnamed female figure stands in for what the film seems unable to resolve, thus remaining elusive, abstract, and resistant to photographic (and filmic) representation.

Girl, Interrupted: Time without Future

> In the future, we'll show them.
>
> –Jo Jo to Mimi, *Hu-Du-Men*

> I used to tell a story about the colour blue. It felt really good. Every time I told my friends about it, they would ask me, "And then what?" I would say, "And then nothing!" And the story would be over.
>
> –Xiao Jie, *20-30-40*

> Future? What future?
>
> –Cookie, *Spacked Out*

It has frequently been noted in both film history and critical studies of queer cinema that sexual minorities suffer from virtual invisibility. In the few instances when queer characters are on screen, they largely occupy marginal roles – as neighbour, best friend, victim, or killer – and (until quite recently) are rarely the protagonists. In a historical study of queer images in American cinema, Henry Benshoff and Sean Griffin have documented the scores of by turns silly and villaneous minor characters that have appeared in Hollywood films throughout the decades. Not surprisingly, there is a similar history in Hong Kong cinema, especially during the late 1980s and into the 1990s, when minor queer roles recur as ridiculous, loathsome, or confused characters.[28] In the past few years, however, queer characters in supporting roles have been portrayed in a far more interesting light: they are no longer one-dimensional villains or figures of comic relief but complex characters in their own right whose impact on the main plot is significant. In this section, I examine films with subplots that portray girls in intimate relations with each other: they are daughters, neighbours, or best friends of the main characters. While their sexual intimacy often remains underdeveloped or left unresolved, their very presence significantly troubles the main plots, especially in relation to adult heterosexuality.

A Different Kind of Mother: *Hu-Du-Men*

Set just prior to the handover in the late transitional period, during which many middle-class families that had not yet secured foreign citizenship were preparing for immigration out of Hong Kong, *Hu-Du-Men* (Shu Kei, 1996) gives a comic portrayal of the trials and tribulations of one family getting ready for its impending move to Australia. Lang Kim-Sum, a charismatic

Cantonese opera performer who specializes in male roles, finds herself in a whirlwind of chaos on the eve of her retirement: she has to take English classes in preparation for immigration, mediate a conflict within her opera troupe when a Chinese American director attempts to introduce reforms, and confront the sudden appearance of her son, whom she has long ago given up for adoption in order to pursue her stage career. Furthermore, Kim-Sum's teenage stepdaughter, Mimi, is rousing suspicion from her father as her intimacy with a classmate, Jo Jo, seems to go far beyond mere friendship. Frustrated with his wife's nonchalance toward the situation, Kim-Sum's husband accuses her of treating her stepdaughter not as a mother should but "with loyalty, like a friend" *(gou yiqi, gou pengyou)*. The word he uses for "loyalty" is *yiqi,* the highest form of masculine ideal in the classical tradition, a trait that most of Kim-Sum's opera roles personify.[29] The film's title, *Hu-Du-Men (hudumen),* refers to the imaginary "threshold" through which a Cantonese opera performer crosses to "become" a character. Kim-Sum's putative failure to "be a proper mother" (implicit in her husband's accusation) thus stems from her inability – or refusal – to maintain this threshold between the stage and her real life. Yet it is precisely this "confusion" that allows Kim-Sum an unusual insight not only into her stepdaughter's relationship but also into the queer complexity of gender identification and sexual attraction *in her own life*. The intricate process by which Kim-Sum comes to her self-understanding unfolds, to perfect comedic timing, in the scene where Kim-Sum confronts Jo Jo in a bar. Kim-Sum enters the establishment, clearly feeling out of place but curious enough to pause and observe the other patrons, especially a couple of young women kissing. As Kim-Sum accepts a joint from a friendly customer at the bar, Jo Jo appears:

Jo Jo: (approaching Kim-Sum) Hi, Uncle ... I mean, Auntie.
Kim-Sum: (inhaling) Wow, this stuff is strong ... Do you come here often?
Jo Jo: Often enough. My sister owns the bar.
Kim-Sum: Have you ever tried wearing a skirt? You would look good in a skirt, with your long legs ...
Jo Jo: Auntie, why don't you just say what's on your mind.
Kim-Sum: All right. Are you in love with Mimi?
Jo Jo: (shrugs) I enjoy the feeling when we're together. Mimi feels that too.
Kim-Sum: But you're both girls ...
Jo Jo: There's no rule that says a girl can't chase after another girl.
Kim-Sum: Then why are you always dressed like a boy?
Jo Jo: Well, you dress like a man too.
Kim-Sum: No, I only play a man on stage. Off stage, I am all woman. 100% woman. Lots of men chase after me.
Jo Jo: How do you know those men are not gay?

Kim-Sum: (surprised) Gay? Gay men would find me attractive ...?
Jo Jo: To be honest, Auntie, you are so much more cool on stage than you are right now.

Despite Kim-Sum's evident curiosity, even enjoyment, of the bohemian environment of the bar, she immediately tries to "normalize" Jo Jo by questioning her butch gender presentation ("Why don't you try wearing skirts?") and her sexual choice ("But you're both girls!"). However, Jo Jo unexpectedly rebuffs Kim-Sum by suggesting that the older woman *shares* these queer traits, an observation that makes an immediate impact on Kim-Sum. Following the bar scene, Kim-Sum has lunch with her best male friend from the opera troupe, whom she suspects has had a crush on her for years. Awkwardly dressed in hyper-feminine clothes, Kim-Sum asks her friend whether he likes her because he is gay. While the scene exploits Kim-Sum's insecurity for comedic effect, it also denaturalizes both her gender presentation and sexual attractiveness, precisely in accordance with Jo Jo's observations. Kim-Sum's hilarious efforts to dress feminine only accentuate how much "more cool" she *does* look as a man on stage, evidenced by her legions of devoted female fans. In a deliberate play for ambiguity, Kim-Sum's friend neither affirms nor denies her question about whether he is gay. He merely looks bemused, as though pondering the myriad implications of the question. It is through this strangely convoluted and indirect avenue of identification (with both a masculine embodiment and a homoerotic attraction) that Kim-Sum finds an empathetic connection with the girls. Instead of adopting the "proper maternal role" as her husband wishes, Kim-Sum accepts Jo Jo's self-image as well as the image that Jo Jo attributes to *her*. Toward the end of the bar scene, it is Jo Jo's turn to be surprised:

Jo Jo: (defiantly) Auntie, if you try to separate us, you will fail.
Kim-Sum: All right, then, I'll let you take care of Mimi. (Takes paperwork out of her bag.) Fill in these application forms and if you get into the university, you can join Mimi in Australia.
Jo Jo: (shocked) ... But I'll never get in ...
Kim-Sum: You must work hard and try. Silly boy ... silly child, you have to prove your love to Mimi.

Throughout the evening, both Jo Jo and Kim-Sum address each other in masculine terms before correcting themselves ("Uncle ... I mean, Auntie"; "Silly boy ... silly child"). Instinctively, they are already addressing each other as masculine figures but hesitate, as such an address would completely transform their respective roles within the familial setting. Eventually, however, Kim-Sum realizes that it is precisely by stepping out of her prescribed role as a concerned mother (a role she has been accused of not inhabiting

properly) that she will be able to handle the situation at hand. Reprising the roles that she is so used to playing on stage, Kim Sum speaks to Jo Jo as masculine equals admonishing one another to protect their beloved. It is unclear in the end whether Jo Jo will actually make it to Australia or whether the girls will sustain their relationship: we hear only their vows to each other that they will "show them" (the adults) in the future. What may be ironic is that they have *already* "shown them." The girls' relationship begins, for the adults, as a pesky problem but ends up showing Kim-Sum that her own experience of gender and sexuality may have been a little queer all along. Even the father seems to have softened his attitude near the end of the film, when he unquestioningly includes Jo Jo in a family photograph. Through Kim-Sum's improvised role as a not-quite-mother who treats the girls with masculine "loyalty," the film has presented an unusually optimistic portrayal both of a nonviolent parental response to love between school girls and of the possibility that "improper" roles and relations can harmoniously function within the familial unit.

Innocence and Innuendo: *20-30-40*

With their focus on emotional intensity, external threats, or family obstacles, the love stories between girls that I have examined so far have shied away from one obvious question: how do girls come into sexual awareness of each other? *20-30-40* (Sylvia Chang, 2004) sheds some light on this theme in a subplot where two teenage girls half-knowingly seduce each other but without any sexual outcomes. Director Sylvia Chang seems particularly fond of inserting minor queer roles into her films. In her previous film, *Tempting Heart* (Sylvia Chang, 1999), a conventional love story is complicated by the lovers' go-between, a young woman who turns out to have been in love with the female protagonist – her best friend in school – all along. However, her story is not given much exposition, as she dies rather abruptly in the middle of the film. Perhaps as a way of revisiting this theme, Chang inserts another subplot involving girls' attraction for each other into *20-30-40,* this time developed in greater depth. Set in Taipei, *20-30-40* consists of three loosely linked vignettes, penned by three different female screenwriters from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Two of the three stories deal with adult women's relationship problems: a middle-aged florist copes with her recent divorce as she rediscovers a new sex life, while a thirty-something airline stewardess with a predilection for married men struggles with her fear of commitment. The third story concerns a trio of outsiders: two girls in their late teens, Xiao Jie from Malaysia and A Tong from Hong Kong, have come to Taipei to record with Brother Shi, a down-and-out record producer who is also originally from Hong Kong. The girls never even come close to making a record but have a good time nonetheless: they are depicted in most of their initial scenes as giddy, fun-loving girlfriends playing, joking, shopping, and

exploring the city together. The tone of their intimacy starts to shift when sexual innuendo seeps into their jovial conversations. In a sequence that starts with a close-up of Xiao Jie putting makeup on A Tong – a shot that visually frames the girls in a breathless intimacy – their conversation takes a suggestive turn:

Xiao Jie: Have you ever kissed a girl?
A Tong: No, have you?
Xiao Jie: No ... But in my school, lots of girls like other girls.
A Tong: In my school too! (Naughtily) And do all Malaysian girls sleep with their bra on?

A fight ensues in which they playfully try to tear their bras off of each other. The camera stays still, as the mock-fight moves hysterically within the frame, until suddenly the girls stop and fall into a hug in front of a mirror. The film then cuts to the reflection: an image of the girls framed as a *couple*. We see them look at themselves for a few seconds, then playfully begin to dance together. No words have been exchanged, but the brief look of sexual recognition in the girls' self-reflection will, from this point onward, punctuate all of their jovial interactions. Just as their sexual awareness stays unspoken, their physical intimacy also remains one step removed from full consummation. In the scene following the dance in front of the mirror, we see another tightly framed close-up of the girls lying in bed together. While Xiao Jie softly sings while drifting off to sleep, A Tong stealthily puts a small sound recorder close to Xiao Jie's shoulder. The next shot shows the girls sleeping peacefully in each other's arms, with the sound recorder in the foreground of the shot, lodged between their bodies. The recording device, used so tenderly here as a gesture of intimacy, becomes exemplary of the girls' mode of sexual communication, which is always conveyed by acts or expressions of seeming sexual innocence but is rife with innuendo that neither girl seems able to acknowledge or ignore. For instance, during a playful conversation in which they expose the most daring things they have done, A Tong suddenly asks Xiao Jie whether she dares to sleep with her. Without waiting for an answer, A Tong runs into a washroom and begins to inspect each toilet stall, giving each a rating for cleanliness while a nervous Xiao Jie looks on, laughing uncontrollably. There is a relay of close-ups of each girl's expression: A Tong's changes from expectation to displeausre (perhaps interpreting the laughter as a sign of rejection), while Xiao Jie's, with her eyes closed for a second (perhaps waiting to be kissed), clouds with mounting disappointment when she opens her eyes to find A Tong already gone.

This tantalizingly unacknowledged desire between the girls is eventually exteriorized through a third term – a boy – and with him the "threat" of heterosexuality. After the washroom scene, A Tong starts to hang out with a

school boy, plunging Xiao Jie into such jealousy and despair that she begins to break her silence and vocalize her anger to A Tong. A heteronormative narrative (like, for instance, that of *Tempting Heart*) usually begins with the sexually innocent intimacy of two girls, which then becomes interrupted when sexual awareness brings a boy into the picture who will eventually supplant one of the girls in the pair. By contrast, the boy in *20-30-40* serves to intensify, rather than displace, the intimacy of the girls. He becomes the vehicle through which the girls gradually come to grips with their budding sexuality and desire for each other. At the very end of the film, when both girls have run out of money and are forced to return home, a scene in the airport finally lifts the thin veil of suggestion to expose real passion underneath, although only for a brief moment. As A Tong gives Xiao Jie a video recording of their first day together in Taipei, Xiao Jie suddenly pulls her close and kisses her passionately on the lips. Then, as A Tong speechlessly looks on, Xiao Jie turns and walks away with a smile. The scene concludes the vignette, leaving the future development of the girls' relationship open. Xiao Jie's enigmatic voiceover preceding this scene summarizes the dynamics of the girls' tentative dance of seduction: it "felt really good," but before one can ask "and then?" the story is already over. Yet, despite this maddening reticence, the vignette has illuminated, in subtle emotional details, the difficulty, tension, and hesitation, as well as the incredible excitement, that girls experience as they become sexually aware of each other.

Furthermore, the girls' story is structured in a provocative and ambivalent relation to the other two vignettes. The film highlights the spatial and temporal simultaneity of the three otherwise unconnected stories. Characters from different subplots often occupy the same space but remain unaware of each other, such as when Brother Shi and the divorced florist sit next to each other at a noodle bar, or when Xiao Jie, in her jealous despondency, stops at the florist's shop to stare at the flowers. The three vignettes occur within the same time span (during the weeks following an earthquake in Taipei), but the title, *20-30-40,* also suggests three transitional stages in women's lives: from adolescence to adulthood, on the cusp of middle age, and in mid-life. The situations in all three stories skew the narrative of "reprotime," as they represent glitches, struggles, or detours in the timeline of marriage and reproduction: the forty year old is rediscovering an active sex life after her divorce, the thirty-something stewardess is struggling with her pattern of noncommital relationships outside the stricture of marriage, while the almost twenty year olds are falling in love with each other. The temporal relation between the three stories can be read in different ways: as literally occurring at the same time (denoting distinctly different life-paths for women) or as symbolic points on a linear narrative (denoting three stages succeeding one another in a woman's life). The latter can also be read backward or forward (the girls' stories as an early "phase" to be eventually

outgrown in the adult women's situations or as a *new* generational possibility that eluded the older women in their pasts). However we choose to read the relation between the three vignettes, the inclusion of Xiao Jie and A Tong's story in the film has one important implication: sexual attraction between girls is here rendered as a life experience that is as significant and common as the trauma of divorce or the sexual dilemma of single women.

Friends Forever: *Spacked Out*

In the films examined so far, sexual intrigue has occurred only between girls from middle-class families and elite schools. By contrast, *Spacked Out* (Lawrence Lau, 2000) portrays a youth subculture, with various forms of sexual and emotional attachment between girls, that sets itself completely outside of middle-class society. Set in Tuen Mun, an old coastal market town in the north-western part of New Territories that has now become one of the most developed "new towns" on the city's outskirt, the film gives a slice-of-life view of four girls in their early teens – Cookie, Bananna, Sissy, and Bean Curd – whose daily routines involve drug traffiking, casual on- and offline sex, gang fights, stealing, and the occasional abortion. The Chinese title, *Wuren jiashi,* meaning "auto-pilot" (literally "without driver"), signals the directionless but perpetual motion of the girls' impetuous lives. Tuen Mun's geographical isolation from the city centre is visually accentuated in the film. The opening sequence consists of a slow tracking shot from a moving car in a tunnel – a blurred vision that only slowly and gradually emerges into focus and into a view of Tuen Mun. Later on, a sequence showing the girls on a long bus trip into Mongkok (a bustling commercial area in the centre of Kowloon) lasts well over two minutes, intercutting images of the bus's interor with wide shots of the endlessly sprawling highway and the spectacular new bridges that connect the city centre with its outlying areas. When Cookie visits her lover in Mongkok, he mocks her by asking what "special occasion" brings her "all the way out here." It is arguably this physical distance from the urban centres that gives rise to Tuen Mun's distinct character and to the dynamics of its youth subcultures. Tuen Mun and its sprawling public-housing estates are portrayed in the film as a relatively comfortable and livable communal space, removed from the extreme population density, haphazard overdevelopment, and haunted histories of the older urban areas. Daytime location shots uniformly depict a brightly lit environment, with a library, playground, and swimming pool where the girls like to hang out. Most indoor shots are of shopping malls, karaoke suites, and game parlours, where the girls make (legal and illegal) transactions, spar with rivals, and have fun with friends. The neighbourhood provides the girls with a sense of belonging and evident ease of mobility. In stark contrast to this environment is, ironically, the girls' homes, which are depicted over and over again as sites of isolation, neglect, and abuse. Cookie

is frequently left on her own because her mother has left and her father is never home. Bananna's parents are divorced, and her father is living an affluent life elsewhere with his new wife and son. The closest he ever gets to his daughter is handing her money through the window of his car. Bean Curd's mother works in a bank but is too ashamed to even acknowledge Bean Curd as her daughter at her workplace. A drug-induced flashback gives a brief glimpse of a younger Bean Curd enduring sexual abuse at her own home. The girls' listless dissatisfaction and loneliness thus result from the dysfunction of their families, supposedly the bourgeois haven of safety and protection. Instead, the girls are (emotionally and financially) exiled from this home space and abandoned to fend for themselves and for each other.

The failure of familial bonds paradoxically creates the conditions for the formation of an alternative social universe, with its own code of loyalty and camaraderie. In her study of Fruit Chan's films, which are famous for their depictions of Hong Kong's public-housing estates, Esther Cheung notes this paradoxical deformation and counter-formation of communal relationships:

> The term "community" often connotes stability, regularity, and security; it also signifies the desire to have a sense of shared space, orderly and respectful of personal space. The sense of "community" has to a great extent broken down in public housing estates. Neighbourhoods are paradoxical spaces where proximity does not reciprocate intimacy but at the same time the biggest irony is that when familial relationships are shattered, hence new alliances and solidarities, for example those among gangsters, are established.[30]

Unlike the predominantly heterosexual youth-gangster culture depicted in the films Cheung discusses, the girls' alliance in *Spacked Out* often blurs the boundaries between sexual intimacy and friendship. Bean Curd, a self-identified lesbian, is a tough-talking butch with a jealous streak, while Sissy plays up the role of a sassy femme who constantly tries to push Bean Curd's buttons by flirting with other men but remains primarily attached to Bean Curd. Bananna habitually uses her sexuality to get what she can out of any man who falls for it but stays fiercely loyal to her girlfriends. Cookie, the film's narrator and its most finely drawn character, seems to embody the complex sexual and emotional dynamics of the other three characters. Having been thoroughly disappointed with heterosexual relationships (upon discovering that Cookie is pregnant, her lover's only response is: "Go abort the damn thing!"), Cookie acknowledges that her emotional centre has always been her best girlfriend, Mosquito, who unfortunately has been sent away to reform school for misconduct. Later, Cookie is befriended by an older girl, Fengyi, whose uncynical enthusiasm and sincerity provide Cookie with a glimpse into another way to live. The sexual and emotional

connections between the girls are thus not easily disentangled, although what is common to them all is a knowing rejection of societal expectations of propriety and the path toward familial responsibility. In a drug-addled conversation, one of Bananna's friends laments: "We're all going down the same road: you move in with a man, you get married, you have kids." Bean Curd and Sissy immediately reply, "No way! *We* won't!" At the friend's protest, they gesture at themselves and say proudly, "How would *we* ever have kids?" Notwithstandng the possibility of lesbian motherhood, what is important here is that the "inability" to replicate repro-time is flaunted by the girls as a triumphant trophy, *not* as an inadequacy or loss. As the girls' own home life and experience of heterosexual love have shown, the "respectable" path to love and marriage seldom provides fulfilment. When Cookie wonders on the voiceover about what the "future" holds for her, the question also signals an anxiety about the future outcome of the girls' universe, which above all else (certainly above their families and their relationships with boys) has provided them with a degree of security and happiness. By the end of the film, however, Bean Curd and Sissy have broken up, while Mosquito, since going away to reform school, seems to have abandoned Cookie. The closing scene in the film deliberately foregrounds a disjuncture between soundtrack and image. On the voiceover, Cookie cautiously notes that Fengyi has gone off to Japan but hopes that she will not turn out to be the "third person to betray" her. The film's closing image, however, shows Fengyi, Cookie, and Bananna laughing and playing around in the swimming pool. The disconnection between sound and image here also signals the disconnection between the present and its potential future. The friendship, intimacy, and solidarity between the girls, as well as the independent universe that they sustain, are precarious and vulnerable to change. The queer time of girlhood has no sanctioned counterpart in the adult world: its "future" remains merely an improbable possibility, hardly ever a certainty.

Becoming a Butterfly: A Time to Love

> She said, if you can't fly, then you're not a butterfly.
>
> –Chen Xue, *Mark of a Butterfly*

Adapted from a novella by Taiwanese author Chen Xue, *Butterfly* (Yan Yan Mak, 2004) is, in one respect, unlike all the other portrayals of girls in love discussed in this chapter: the queer time of girlhood is allowed to develop into a narrative of adult lesbian identity. It is, however, a complex narrative that is haunted by histories of violence and trauma as well as framed within a very specific and localized interpretation of sexual identity. Thus, while *Butterfly* overtly delineates a lesbian "coming out" narrative, it does

so without exactly reproducing the "global gay" formation. In other words, *Butterfly* is a "lesbian" narrative with a highly local twist.

A plot summary does not do *Butterfly* justice because its simplicity belies the film's visual exuberance and daring editing, which are elements that give the simple story its emotional complexity. Flavia, a teacher in an all-girls high school, leads a seemingly uncomplicated and contented life with her husband, Ming, and their infant daughter. The picture-perfect bourgeois life falters when Flavia encounters Xiao Ye, a vagabond singer from Wuhan, in a supermarket. Flavia cannot get Xiao Ye out of her mind, and fragments of her past begin to haunt her. In her youth she was involved in an intense sexual relationship with a high school classmate, Jin. Their relationship continued into their university years but started to show strain when Jin became actively involved in student activism, while Flavia had to deal with family problems as well as parental disapproval of her same-sex relationship. The girls eventually broke up, and Flavia finds out many years later that Jin has become a Buddhist nun and now works in an old people's home in Macau. As Flavia becomes more and more emotionally and sexually involved with Xiao Ye, she realizes that she has never come to terms with her past. Several subplots complicate the central story: the divorce of Flavia's parents, the tragic fate of two of Flavia's female students, who are broken up by their unsympathetic families, and Ming's conflicted response to Flavia's infidelity. At the end of the film Flavia chooses Xiao Ye over her marriage despite the risk that she may lose custody of her baby daughter.

Chen Xue is a major figure on Taiwan's queer literary scene, and her fiction is known for its frank portrayal of sexuality and its daring evocation of queer, often incestuous, relationality.[31] Chen's early fiction has sometimes been criticized for its hermetically sealed universe and seeming divorce from social reality.[32] Fellow queer author and critic Chi Ta-wei has defended Chen's wilful departure from social realism as an alternative form of idealism, a way to imagine a "wishful landscape."[33] The film respects the integrity of this "wishful landscape" while subtly framing (but not subsuming) it within the historically and culturally specific context of Hong Kong during postcolonial transition. The novella's minimal references to external social events are "filled in" with oblique references to Hong Kong's history of radical activism during the 1980s, an extraordinary period in which many students and artists became politicized by the incomprehensible tragedy of the 1989 massacre in Beijing. For instance, whereas the novella describes Zheng Zheng (Jin in the film) simply as "a student involved in labour activism," the film gives a much more extensive documentation of Jin's activist work with the Hong Kong Federation of Students (Xuelian) during 1989, culminating in the scene during the early hours of 4 June, when Jin returns home after days of continuous protests and tearfully watches the crackdown on television. Years later, in the scene when Flavia finally comes out to her

Flavia and her husband talking while the television broadcasts a protest, in *Butterfly* (Yan Yan Mak, 2004)

husband, a wide shot of the sitting room in which the couple's painful conversation takes place gives equal screen space to the couple talking on the left and to a television on the right broadcasting a news segment about a protest while an activist explains how their work now is not dissimilar to what they were doing in 1989. The sound is edited to make sure the broadcast is audible above the conversation. This shot deliberately splits our attention and, in so doing, forges an unspoken connection between Flavia's personal struggle to come to terms with her sexuality and a larger, continuous struggle for social justice.

Unlike the novella, which narrates the past in the voice of A Die (Flavia in the film), the film slides events back and forth between different temporalities without establishing any one of them to be the time of narration. The most distant temporal past consists only of one sequence: Flavia as a little girl with her mother on the beach. It looks as though the mother may want to commit suicide with the girl but changes her mind in the end. The second temporality depicts the time when Flavia and Jin are teenagers: scenes portraying their high school life, the blossoming of their sexual relationship, their university life, and the slow disintegration of their relationship. The third temporality denotes the time when the adult Flavia encounters and falls in love with Xiao Ye. When the narrational time shifts, there is no voiceover or a shot of one character in the act of remembering to establish the temporal shift as a flashback. Furthermore, as different actors play the child, teenage, and adult Flavia, the narrative relation between the three time frames is further weakened. The film refrains from anchoring a narrating agency in any one of the loosely connected time frames: the temporal

fragments are thus "cut loose" from each other and do not add up to one linear overall event. One particularly effective stylistic manoeuvre to this end is the insertion of footage shot in 8 mm, which shows a discontinuity in colour, texture, and lighting from footage shot in 35 mm. At first, the 8 mm footage predominates in sequences of the "past," seemingly producing a nostalgic visual cliché. As the film goes on, however, the 8 mm footage also appears in the "present" diegesis, often at points of emotional or erotic intensity. For instance, during the first dinner date between Flavia and Xiao Ye, when Flavia sees Xiao Ye after missing her for many days, a close-up of Xiao Ye from the perspective of Flavia suddenly cuts to exactly the same image shot in 8 mm. The 8 mm footage is also implicitly associated with Jin, who is frequently shooting with an 8 mm camera during her university years. One scene shows Flavia watching old 8 mm movies, presumably made by Jin. The 8 mm footage can thus be seen as an intrusion of a "past" perspective that recurrently haunts the "present," its affect not moored in a particular time frame but rather recurring across temporalities. As we will see later, this visual emphasis of affective recurrence also finds thematic echo in the girls' own interpretation of their lives.

A linear retelling of Flavia's life, made up of a past in which she denies her love for Jin and a present in which she embraces her sexual identity, would reproduce what Biddy Martin has critiqued in discourses on lesbian autobiography as the standard "coming out" narrative. For Martin, the oversimplified movement from a repressive past into a liberated identity has become a generic convention not only in the writing but also in the reading framework of lesbian lives.[34] The film's visual deformation of the story's narrative linearity, which already undermines such generic conventions, is further reinforced by a thematic interruption of the "coming out" narrative. The first mention of Flavia's lesbian identification occurs in the scene when, after months of tension, she finally admits to her husband that she loves a woman:

Flavia: I have fallen in love with a woman.
Ming: I know, she was your high school classmate ... I know something happened in your past, but you have recovered now. It's not a problem anymore. Right?
Flavia: I did not "recover." I am a *lesbian*. I have never changed.

Flavia does not use *tongzhi* or other local slang terms but says "lesbian" in English, as though only this globally intelligible term is weighty enough to convince her husband of who she is. However, when Flavia talks to her lovers, past or present, a somewhat different understanding of their sexuality emerges. When young Flavia and Jin escape to Macao for some privacy, the young lovers refer to a haunting feeling they have about their lives:

Young Flavia and Jin in Macan talking about their lives, in 35 mm and 8 mm, in *Butterfly* (Yan Yan Mak, 2004)

Jin: Sometimes I feel as though I am not me, as though everything has been confused and mismatched ... I feel as though I have seen this image before. In fact, it's like everything has already happened ... everything's been scripted.
Flavia: Scripted?
Jin: Some people are always trying to change themselves ... But no matter what, their lives have been scripted already. Their choices and the outcomes ... We should call all this ... premeditation.

Later on, after a love scene, the girls resume this theme in their conversation:

Jin: How long will you love me?
Flavia: (laughs)
Jin: What are you laughing at?
Flavia: I thought it's all been scripted!
Jin: Right! Aren't we smart ... at least we know it's all a conspiracy *(yinmou)*.
Flavia: Conspiracy? You mean premeditation *(yumou)*!
Jin: (laughs) Yes, premeditation!

It is common among students in colonial Hong Kong, who are formally educated in English but communicate in Chinese in their everyday lives, to be orally fluent in Cantonese but to lack conceptual and intellectual vocabulary, which they tend to acquire in English. In these scenes the girls struggle to articulate philosophical notions of predestination and causality in relation to their life experiences. Lacking knowledge of the formal terms, they comically borrow words familiar to them from TV crime drama: "premeditation" and "conspiracy," struggling even to distinguish between these terms! These funny and moving conversations between the girls, so evocative of an adolescent experience that is singularly specific to a time-space in

Hong Kong, are not found in the original novella. However, they may be read as a dramatization of the novella's opening line: "I knew right from the beginning, that what must happen *will* happen."[35]

When framed within this notion of "scriptedness" or inevitability, Flavia's story appears not as a unique, one-off life experience but as a recurrently run script that has been happening over and over again. In one subplot in the film, two of Flavia's students, Murial and Sammi, who share an intense love relationship, are forcibly and violently separated by Murial's parents. *Their* story in the film is yet another reenactment of the same script. Yet the questions remain: *What* is the script? How is it *supposed* to run? Are the tragic outcomes of these forced separations inevitable? The film offers a different reading through an enigmatic statement that Xiao Ye makes to Flavia, which also appears in the novella: "If you can't fly, then you are not a butterfly." If the script is the butterfly's becoming, then stopping the butterfly from flying – from realizing its truest self – is the disruption, rather than the outcome, of "what must happen." Even when what is already scripted appears to outsider eyes as aberrant, wilful, unnatural (like the school girls' love for each other or Flavia's pursuit of Xiao Ye at the expense of her roles as wife and mother), it will nonetheless recur, no matter what obstacles are thrown in its way. Thus it is the violent interruption of the script, not the script itself, that is aberrant, wilful, and unnatural. Framed in these terms, *Butterfly*'s understanding of sexual identity is remarkably different in spirit from that of the "coming out" genre. It does not pitch individual sexual freedom against social conformity but rather tries to resolve the two through a local, bastardized (thus thoroughly Hong Kong) understanding of the precepts of predestination. In the film the intense love developed during queer girlhood is the inevitable, recurrent script that must be enabled. Violent suppression and interruption do not halt its (always already scripted) recurrence but instead breed endless cycles of trauma. Flavia's choice at the end of the film is thus represented not as a form of liberation but, strangely, as a queer sort of conformity to what *must* happen, despite her attempts at denial. She has not so much come out as come *back* to herself.

Let the Moon Quiver: Story Time

> And if they told me they had forgotten everything, I would say, Make it up, girls. Give yourself a story that you need – even if it's confounding, contradictory. Imagine a love so fierce it brings thunder to its knees. I would tell them life is a balance of finding who we once were and filling in the gaps with dreams and longing and the imagination of a child.
>
> –Anna Camilleri, "Girls Run Circle"

Anna Camilleri's beautiful injunction to girls illustrates the importance of stories as a means to recreate one's past. Storytelling becomes a form of remembering when it deals with a past that has repeatedly been written out, suspended, or denied. In this chapter I have tried to uncover threads and fragments of queer girlhood sexuality wherever I can find them. These stories, while often truncated and unfinished, are traces of what has been obscured, overshadowed, or bleached out of existence in the inexorable narrative of heterosexual womanhood. In the absence of systemic studies or official history, stockpiling these traces – however confounding and contradictory they may appear – can provide points of identification, flashes of fantasy, or echoes of memories that provisionally fill in the gaps of what we cannot yet remember.

Recently, in the wake of successful oral-history projects that aim explicitly to challenge the dominance of official history with "small stories" from the margin,[36] there have also been efforts to recreate and recover stories of queer girlhood. In 2000 Lucetta Kam issued a call for stories on first love between girls, which resulted two years later in the self-published anthology *Lunar Desires: Her Same-Sex Love, In Her Own Words*.[37] The Chinese title, literally *The Quiver of the Moon,* refers to the frisson, anxiety, and turmoil that these audacious stories – about a love and an eroticism so rarely acknowledged – may rouse in their readers. Two years after the publication of *Lunar Desires,* an oral-history project on same-sex desire between women was launched, with one section specifically devoted to the experience of school girls. Both of these projects insist that queer girlhood desire is not unique to lesbian-identified adults. Kam's anthology explicitly cautions readers not to "crudely attribute only one sexual identity to the stories' authors."[38] Day Wong, who documents the making of the oral-history project, also argues that the stories collected do not all constitute a rejection of heterosexuality; some, in fact, are culled from heterosexually identified women.[39] Wong uses the amusing metaphor of "7-11" (the convenience-store chain that is omnipresent in Hong Kong) to describe the equally omnipresent experience of female same-sex desire: "there must be one on every corner."[40] These disclaimers reflect a refusal to dissociate queer girlhood sexuality from *any* form of adult womanhood. These two projects invite (or perhaps dare) us to see the queer traces in everyday life. Indeed, if we look closely enough, we will see that the queer time of girlhood lingers, recurs, and sometimes never ends.