Notes on sexual dissidence in Hong Kong and Taiwan

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

At the end of the "Across 1997" concert series in Hong Kong, which sold out all twenty-four shows to a total audience of over three hundred thousand, [Leslie Cheung], with an uncharacteristically nervous expression on his face, declared that he would like to dedicate the last song to the two most important people in his life. Predictably, the first person Cheung mentioned is his mother, whom he affectionately addressed amongst the audience. "The second person," Cheung continued, still addressing his mother, "is someone who has stood by me for more than ten years, who selflessly supported me when I was down and out, even lent me several months of his salary so I could survive. Of course you know who it is I'm talking about: it's my very good friend, your godson, Mr. Tong." There was a split second of stunned silence, as though the audience had not quite grasped what they had heard. Then the auditorium exploded in an amalgam of screams, cheers and applause, as Cheung launched into a rendition of the popular love song "The Moon Is a Symbol of My Heart." Had Leslie Cheung just come out of the closet? The moment had come and gone, but its ambivalent effect on the tongzhi community would be felt for quite a while to come. Cheung has been a superstar in Hong Kong and other parts of Asia (most notably Japan) for well over a decade. More recently, his award-winning appearances in the films of Wong Kar-Wai and Chen Kaige have spread his fame to the international arthouse film circuit. Rumours--usually viciously expressed--that Cheung is in a gay relationship with a man known simply as "Mr. Tong" has circulated in the Hong Kong entertainment press for years. Cheung has never confirmed or repudiated these rumours, preferring to keep "personal questions" out of interviews and press conferences. Yet, in the past decade or so, Cheung has consistently made professional decisions which invariably link him to queer issues. He plays high-profile roles in a string of films which explore gender dysphoria and/or homosexuality (All's Well That Ends Well, Farewell My Concubine, He's a Woman, She's a Man, Who's the Woman Who's the Man, Happy Together); appears in [Stanley Kwan]'s Yang + Yin; discusses homophobia in Hong Kong culture (though never referring to his own life) in interviews with both local and foreign journalists; and sits on a panel of judges for a high-profile award which honours the best journalistic writing on tongzhi issues in 1999 - 2000. Cheung also makes ample use of a recognizably queer aesthetic in both the "Across 1997" concert tour and the subsequent, very controversial "Passion" tour, in which Cheung's costumes, designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier, subverts gender conventions to such a degree that they infuriate the media and unleash a string of homophobic attacks. Is Cheung in or out of the closet? Is he the model spokesperson for Hong Kong's tongzhi community or its worst detractor? The ambivalent relation Leslie Cheung bears as a highly public figure to the discourse of sexual dissidence raises questions about the fierce debates around the closet. A figure like Cheung would be an ideal target for outing advocates like Michelangelo Signorile, the journalist for OutWeek and The Advocate who outed Malcolm Forbes, David Geffen, and Jodie Foster amongst others during the 1990s. Signorile and his allies regard the explicit act of coming out to be an ethical and political responsibility of gay public figures. Even activists who object to outing activism often consider the voluntary act of coming out to be a marker of "gay and lesbian morality." For instance, Urvashi Vaid argues in Virtual Equality:

FULL TEXT

An emergent discourse

In his introduction to a collection of queer writing in Taiwan, the novelist and critic Chi Ta-wei points to a productive

tension between two emergent Chinese expressions of sexual dissidence: tongzhi and kuer (Carnival 15). Tongzhi, literally "comrade" in Chinese, was coined by the Hong Kong experimental playwright Edward Lam when he launched a film festival in Taiwan introducing the New Queer Cinema in 1991 (Lin 38-43, Ho 206). The term caught on quickly in the gay and lesbian community in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and it was not long before the mainstream media picked up on its popularity. It has since become the de facto term to describe all sexual minorities. The allusion to comradeship contributes to a sense of esprit du corp amongst those marginalized by heteronormative values. Indeed, the political movement that has emerged in Hong Kong and Taiwan under the banner of tongzhi rallies on a platform of unity and equal rights. These lines from the theme song of the 1998 Chinese Tongzhi Conference in Hong Kong, which is the first organized meeting of sexual minorities from Chinese communities all over the world, sum up the movement's main agenda:

Unite as one, we start our journey together. Hand in hand, we look for our utopia. Who says there are boundaries in love? Whether gay, straight, or bi, love is the same. (Conference Program 28)

Almost exactly contemporaneous with the tongzhi movement and involving many of the same activists and writers, a body of experimental writing in Taiwan became known as kuer literature. Kuer, literally "cool child," was first used by Chi Ta-wei, Hung Ling, and Tan Tang-mo as a transliteration of "queer" in a special issue of the avant-garde literary journal Island's Edge in 1994. Even though kuer was originally inspired by queer, the term has since, as Chi characterizes it, crossbred with local meanings and acquired its own local colours (Carnival II). It has also spawned other variations and shades of meaning. For instance, Hung Ling sometimes rewrites kuer as kuyi, which reinscribes an element of queerness (yi means "strange") in the term. In a similar spirit, the critic Chang Hsiao-hung prefers the term guai'tai (literally "weirdo") in her queer rereadings of works by established authors such as Eileen Chang and Jin Yong. Writers who are associated with the kuer movement are invariably contemptuous of any identity category, including that of tongzhi. They seek to diversify in difference rather than to "unite as one." They prefer to revel in being deviant and perverse rather than be accepted "in equality" by the moral majority.

Tongzhi and kuer would thus seem at first sight to be strange, if not impossible, bedfellows. Yet, it is precisely the fierce tension between the two which has given vital force to a fledgling political and cultural movement which practices what Jonathan Dollimore calls "sexual dissidence" (21). The most audacious and thoughtful expressions of sexual dissidence in contemporary Chinese culture inhabit and negotiate the cracks and crevices between these two discursive poles. It is as yet too early to evaluate the long-term cultural and political significance or predict the future direction of these challenges to sexual conformity. What I will attempt in the rest of the article is a rather more modest task. By introducing the readers to examples of works which have not been widely translated into English or received serious critical attention outside of the Chinese context, I hope to convey a sense of the passion, diversity, as well as urgency of this emergent discourse.

The art of annihilation: Chili Miao-Chin

I took one hundred dollars out of Mengsheng's pocket and ran towards the back door. It was locked. I climbed up the brick wall in a whirlwind and cut my palm on shards of broken glass at the top of the wall. Straddling the fence, I saw a full moon. I thought of a scene in Truffaut's The Four Hundred Blows where a little boy jumped into the ocean after escaping from prison. I thought of the close-up of his expression in that final scene. Freeze-frame. (Chiu, Crocodile 282)

On June 26, 1995, a young Taiwanese novelist took her own life in a small apartment in Paris. She left behind two controversial novels and an ambivalent legacy of sexual dissidence. For the lesbian community in Taiwan, Chiu Miaochin is both a "matyr-saint" (Chi, Babylon 141) and a "terrorist" (Chang, C. 104). Her novels, Crocodile's journal and Testament From Montmartre, have become cult classics in the lesbian subculture. For many critics, they mark the emergence of a distinctive lesbian fiction in Taiwan (Chi, Carnival 137-154; Hung, Queer Journal 99-102). Yet, the novels' obsession with self-annihilation is at odds with the tenor of both tongzhi politics and kuer aesthetic. In Crocodile's Journal, the first-person account of a young lesbian Lazi's turbulent emotional involvements with other sexual outlaws is intercut with a series of tragicomic episodes recounting the dilemma of Crocodile, who does not know if it should continue to "pass" as a human or reveal its reptilian self to the world. In direct opposition to the

tongzhi movement's rhetoric of pride and liberation, the novel adamantly refuses to become a lesbian Bildungsroman. Instead of unraveling a "coming out" narrative, the novel moves towards a brutal annihilation of the outlawed self. In the words of Lazi:

This world is disintegrating by the minute, by the second. Love is disintegrating, hope is disintegrating, faith is disintegrating. Like standing at the crater of a volcano, watching everyone I have ever loved fall in one by one. A fire is igniting every cell in my body. The consciousness of pain prolongs a split second into eternity. Cries of "The hour of annihilation has arrived!" kick at my brain ... All my thoughts are urging me onto the path of annihilation, with no space for "Stop!" or "Turn back!" I am completely powerless to bring myself back. Yet, you say there is no need to seek death. How else could I endure this one second? (280)

The cartoonish figure of Crocodile, in many ways the alter ego of Lazi and of others living on the sexual margin, also exits the novel in a kind of death:

The camera cut to the seaside again. Crocodile was sitting in a wooden bucket. There was a burning torch at the bucket's rim. The little finger which had remained stationary on the screen suddenly gave the bucket a push. It sailed slowly towards the ocean. Suddenly, the whole bucket burst into flames. The camera gradually zoomed forward. A sea of fire engulfed the screen ... (284)

This impetus towards self-annihilation is even more dramatically realized in Testament From Montmartre. The novel is written as letters addressed to various lovers, interspersed with truncated journal entries, short vignettes about life in Paris, and meditations on film, art, and literature. It ends in the narrator Zoe's solemn decision to end her life. In stark contrast to the fiction of other Taiwanese lesbian writers, such as Chen Hsueh or Hung Ling, whose penchant for irony, ambiguity, and playfulness results in a style that is layered, controlled, and slightly mocking in tone, Testament From Montmartre is desperately earnest. All of the novel's energy, exploding in an avalanche of images, passion, thought, and lyricism across the pages, is spent on stripping the work down to a state of "purity":

It will not be a great work, but it will be a young person's deep, dense excavation of a small portal of her life. It will be a pure work. (108-9)

Let me put the eleventh chapter in the drawer. The details--I can no, longer, face I have pushed the limits of all that I can excavate, all the "feelings" that I can make you understand ... I will not send anything more to you. J'arrive pas! (132)

I have a passion for art, but now I long for a pastoral life, or rather the pure life of a monk. Will my passion be compatible with this purity? (136)

The novel struggles to attain such ascetic purity by muting itself at important points of the narrative: the fifteenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth chapters which are supposed to recount Zoe's life with her lover Xu are left blank, bearing nothing other than their titles. This aesthetic of purity becomes the narrator's credo of living--or, rather, dying. Yet, this death in art is not quite enough. In a manner self-consciously reminiscent of Jean Genet, Chiu's fiction cunningly conflates the autobiographical with the fictional, so that both art and life may be transformed in the process. In Testament From Montmartre, the process is taken to its extreme when the literal annihilation of the author's life launches its rebirth in/as a work of art:

I have decided to end my life. A decision made with unprecedented clarity, rationality, conviction, and ease. To end my life in a search of life's final meaning, to shoulder completely what I have understood to be the beautiful duty one person has towards another ... I am truly responsible for the meaning of my life. Even as my body dies, as life with a form ends, I do not believe my spirit will vanish, that life without form will terminate. (142)

Zoe's fictional death is consecrated by Chiu's actual death, an event which has become inseparable from the novel, as central to it as an underlying mythical structure or a central, recurrent motif. Such an extreme creation of art is certainly a far cry from the tongzhi movement's slogans, "Unite as one!" and "Let us live in health under the sun!" (Loo). It is no wonder that the lesbian activist Chang Chun-fen feels at once drawn to and repelled by Chiu's fiction, which she calls "a resource of hopelessness" (104). Clearly, Chiu's fiction does not offer a viable politics of engagement. The sexual margin in Chiu's fiction, inhabited by those who are betrayed, excluded, and pathologized by the world, is never allowed to become a path to liberation. Rather, it is preserved as a site of despair, where one

annihilates oneself to remain forever faithful to a beautifully perverse passion:

From amongst Angelopoulos' films, a scene from Alexander the Great moves me the most. Alexander had loved his mother since he was child, and eventually married her. His mother was killed while protesting against authoritarian rule. She died wearing a white bridal gown. She was the only woman Alexander had ever loved. In one scene, Alexander came home after the war. There was nothing in his room except a bed and his mother's blood-stained bridal gown hanging on the wall. As soon as Alexander entered the room, he said to the gown: 'Woman, I have returned.' Then he quietly lay down to sleep.

Just like that. I long to lie down on the shore of an azure lake and die quietly ... donate my body to the birds, leaving behind only my brow bone as a tribute to Xu .... and, like Alexander, remain faithful to an eternal love. (Chiu, Testament 192)

Out on screen: Stanley Kwan

When Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan received an invitation from the British Film Institute in 1996 to make a film for the commemorative series "The Century of Cinema," he set out to film a well-researched and informative documentary about the general history of Chinese cinema. As he immersed himself in the film archive in Shanghai, however, a queer turn of events steered the project in an entirely different direction. Kwan was struck by the strong undercurrent of homoeroticism and long tradition of transvestism in Chinese cinema. He also started to relate this discovery to his own experience as a gay man and a filmmaker. As Kwan became more and more absorbed in these issues, he abandoned his original plans for the documentary. The film that eventually emerged from these side-tracked efforts is Yang + Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema, an extraordinary cinematic "essay" which combines an exposition of sexual dissidence in Chinese cinema with Kwan's personal meditation on his sexuality, family, and art. Interviews with directors Chang Che, Tsui Hark, Ang Lee, Zhang Yuan, and actor Leshe Cheung reveal that even those who have explored queer themes in their works are often unprepared, uneasy, and a little defensive when they are asked to discuss these issues in public. Even more telling is the response of the veteran film critic Law Ka, who adamantly refuses to engage with Kwan's questions, claiming that Brigitte Lin in male drag playing a transsexual character is still "a woman" in his eyes, and that he regards the famous cross-dressed Cantonese opera diva Yam Kim-Fai to be "asexual"! Kwan graciously refrains from directly commenting on these responses. Instead, he weaves in a personal narrative about gender and sexual deviance in his own life and the intimate relation it bears to the cinema. He speaks of his ambivalent relation to his father, his early obsession with the hyper-masculinized figures of kung fu stars Bruce Lee and Wang Yu, and his later penchant for making what are regarded as quintessentially "feminine" films (such as Rouge, Full Moon in New York, and Actress). Kwan is implicitly teasing out a queer lineage which has hitherto remained obscured in Chinese cinema. He also shows that cinema serves as a conduit through which conflicting ideologies of gender, sexuality, and the Chinese family are negotiated. The concluding segment in which Kwan interviews his own mother is widely regarded to be his "coming out" moment. Yet, the segment is filmed not so much as a declaration of identity but a poignant moment of negotiation. Kwan poses three strategically ordered questions to his mother: how she feels about a son who makes "chick flicks"; what she thinks of Yam Kim-Fai and Bak Suet-Sin, the female Cantonese opera icons whose on-screen and off-screen intimacy has captured the imagination of millions; and finally, whether she has accepted her son's relation with his male lover, William. Mrs. Kwan speaks of her pride in her son's work, how she is glad he didn't change his style because others criticized it. She talks about how much she loves Yam and Bak and never really questions their relationship since they seem to be "such a perfect couple." While she looks a little unprepared to answer the last question, she quietly responds:

I guess it doesn't matter ... I wouldn't be living with you if it matters ... I just pretend you're a daughter with a husband, or a son with a wife ... When people die, they close their eyes and nothing matters anymore ... Simple, really.

The film ends in a close-up shot of Mrs. Kwan. There is a split second of slow motion which accentuates her sad, resilient, and slightly self-mocking expression before the camera settles on a freeze frame and then cuts away to the credits. Kwan's questions compel her mother to consider her son's homosexuality in relation to her responses to the cinema: to her son's films and to a pair of lesbian film icons. This subtle staging of an intimate moment of familial negotiation sums up the imperative of the whole film. By provoking a new understanding of deviant gender and

sexuality in Chinese cinema, the film is at the same time attempting to open up new possibilities for sexual minorities to negotiate the minefield of the Chinese family.

Yang + Yin is Stanley Kwan's most thoughtful and intimate film. It is also a landmark film which signals a new direction in Kwan's work. In the films he made after the documentary--most notably Hold You Tight (1998) and Island Tales (2000), the first two installments of a projected trilogy in collaboration with screenwriter Jimmy Ngai--Kwan abandons the polished style that he has developed and perfected since Rouge and opts for a more tentative and experimental approach. The result is a queer aesthetic which is unique amongst Hong Kong filmmakers. While there has been an explosion of queer-themes in Hong Kong cinema since the early 90s, most of these films are concerned with putting gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered characters on screen. Stanley Kwan remains the only director who is interested in developing a queer cinematic perspective. Kwan experiments with a cinematography which deviates from the conventional heterosexually gendered ways of organizing the gaze and the spectacle. In this way, by laying a foundation for a consciously queer cinema which will inspire new ways of seeing gender and sexuality, Kwan's recent films are true heirs to the queer lineage that he traces in Yang + Yin.

Perverse poetics: Hung Ling

One knows before entering that this is a dream. Dreams are bodies where broken petals of violets ooze out of their wounds. Floating petals drift near the entrance like quills, like feathers. (Hung, Class Cliff 173)

Hung Ling sometimes refers to herself as Lucifer Hung or even the Anti-Christ. A Satanic identification with sin, decadence and rebellion indeed infuses the work of this prolific young writer. A bibliography of Hung's work in 1997 shows that in a period of five years, she has managed to publish two novels, three collections of short stories, one translation, and four collections of critical essays. This prodigious output is equally matched by the diversity of her material. Hung's fiction traverses a great variety of genres, freely borrowing from cyperpunk, horror, Japanese manga, the New Queer cinema, the Bible, various mythological traditions and various strands of literary and philosophical thought, most notably that of the Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille, and Jean Genet. Her critical writing covers similarly extensive ground. This dazzling hybridity and disregard for generic integrity are meant to unsettle as well as provoke the reader. As Hung characterizes her own work in the preface to a collection of critical writing:

This book is a snowy mountain where strange fruits grow. Beads of mutated cherries. They may be shaped like a heptagon, or taste as bitter and smooth as coffee. For the connoisseur, they may be at their finest when one-third rotten. Just don't expect them to be normal and harmless. Wish for a tongue like poison after you have tasted them ... (Queer Journal 2)

The metaphor of the mutated cherries suggests the simultaneously erotic, deviant, and threatening aspects of Hung's writing. Hung likes to keep her readers disoriented, tense, slightly confused, and more than a little turned on. She has been called a "textual terrorist" and an "aesthetic nihilist" (Lin 2). Her fiction is dense with references which assault the reader from all directions. Even in works which have the most popular appeal, such as her science fiction (Roses of Rain on Judgment Day, Cosmic Odyssey, and numerous short fiction) and vampire stories (Tales of Deviant Vampires), allusions to contemporary philosophical and literary debates abound. For instance, in "The Story of Memory," a travel inn in a deserted part of the galaxy named Borges evokes the labyrinthian structure of Borges' writing; the incest and patricide committed by a cyberpunk alchemist Cixous against her father Baudrillard in "Regarding a Corpse's Desire and Obsession: Variation on a Space Opera" recall the debates around postmodernism and feminism; while in "Dancing On the Moon," the gender dysphoria of Dorian, who lost his twin sister Dora at birth, allude to the sexual politics surrounding both Wilde and Freud. Yet, despite Hung's penchant for weaving together a dizzying array of intertextual connections, a clear imperative is nonetheless discernible in her writing. Whatever cunning textual tricks she may be up to, Hung never strays far from her goal to pervert dominant categories, established boundaries, and authorized rules. She attempts to create through her writing an experience of otherness: to exile the reader from the normative sense of self so as to make way for a queer "self" which is not yet intelligible in discourse proper. Dorian's painful dilemma in "Dancing On the Moon" best illustrates this imperative:

As a writer, what I am seeking is a voice, a language, so my desire and identity may emerge without awkwardness. The only thing I can be certain of is that "I" am not a "man." I have never been one. Yet, as soon as I attempt to express

and expose my most honest identity, the legality of language deserts me. Whether I am engaged in theoretical debates in class, or shaping a collage of words, or expressing the tremor of my love for a woman, I cannot find an integral language system where "I" exist. In the end, because of the incongruity and rupture between signs and meaning, words are ceaselessly running amok in a textual labyrinth, like groups of lost mice failing to reach an ocean where they could jump in to kill themselves.

For a long time, I linger between my writing and my body, trying to find an appropriate narrative structure. Now, it is no longer necessary. I have discovered that the strategy to combat this disease which deprives me of a language is simply to refrain from explaining and narrating ... (Glass Cliff 75-6)

This mistrust of legitimate language compels Hung to craft a queer alternative, one which is profane, improper, and irreverent, one which does violence to the language which has deprived queer subjects of their selfhood. For instance, rebelling against the Classical Chinese tradition of erotic expression, which relies on an elaborate and layered system of allusions and metaphors while eschewing any direct representation, Hung's depictions of sexuality are aggressively graphic:

In a scene from a certain dream, I was standing still amidst the ruins of an amphitheatre with a woman cloaked in frost-white gauze. A fallen marble pillar divided us from the corpse lying on the ground.

Her finger, delicate and white as the petals of wild ginger, shot like an arrow out of her sleeves and pointed at that decrepit, sore-ridden body: "This is you!"

I was taken aback. Her threatening words directed my gaze towards the corpse. Was that me? If so, then I have two identities--that of the alive and the dead. Twin fetuses eternally remaining in dream's womb.

Her cheeks flushed red, her pupils shone like black jade: "Fuck him."

I removed the black cloth wound around his waist. There were seven bullet holes on his lower abdomen, positioned like the seven stars of the Big Dipper. The bright red scars of castration still appear fresh. Only his jet black pubic hair, shriveled up like sea weed, remained where the sausage-like penis once was.

Lying on top of his naked and defenceless body, I thrust my pale red penis, erect like a pillar of fire, into his anus. Then, a parade across the various constellations. Thick, white semen deeply infused each ruptured star, soaking his intestines in milky juice. (Class Cliffs 175)

Typical of how sexuality is rendered in Hung's fiction, a single erotic act embodies multiple forms of perversion and hence becomes a multi-front assault on normative sexuality. In this description, for instance, gay male anal intercourse is simultaneously an act of narcissism and necrophilia. The dreamer's narcissistic desire for his dead self is, of course, another evocation of Hung's favourite theme: the search for a "self" which remains outside of the realm of legitimate discourse.

Hung Ling's fiction pays homage to the perverse. Clearly influenced by Genet's poetics of inversion, Hung takes the despised scraps and dregs of conventional morality and transforms them into complex and lyrical images. In stark contrast to Chiu Miao-chin's ascetic aesthetic which yearns for the purity of complete annihilation, Hung Ling's violent, erotic language and inexhaustible layers of allusions signal a steadfast refusal of closure. For Hung Ling, the queer text must, vampire-like, feed on other texts while multiplying itself ad infinitum:

"So this is the ending you imagine for me?"

She extended a non-human arm which she placed lazily on my chest. Just as I had secretly suspected, she was one of our kind. Her smile exposed the sharp teeth which had just enjoyed a good meal. Her mutant hands gently clawed at my heart.

"No, my dear companion. just like those immortal butterflies, stories never end." (Glass Cliff 201)

Flaunting the closet: Leslie Cheung

The fact that silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing as is knowledge. (Sedgwick 5)

At the end of the "Across 1997" concert series in Hong Kong, which sold out all twenty-four shows to a total audience of over three hundred thousand, Leslie Cheung, with an uncharacteristically nervous expression on his face, declared that he would like to dedicate the last song to the two most important people in his life. Predictably, the first person

Cheung mentioned is his mother, whom he affectionately addressed amongst the audience. "The second person," Cheung continued, still addressing his mother, "is someone who has stood by me for more than ten years, who selflessly supported me when I was down and out, even lent me several months of his salary so I could survive. Of course you know who it is I'm talking about: it's my very good friend, your godson, Mr. Tong." There was a split second of stunned silence, as though the audience had not quite grasped what they had heard. Then the auditorium exploded in an amalgam of screams, cheers and applause, as Cheung launched into a rendition of the popular love song "The Moon Is a Symbol of My Heart." Had Leslie Cheung just come out of the closet? The moment had come and gone, but its ambivalent effect on the tongzhi community would be felt for quite a while to come. Cheung has been a superstar in Hong Kong and other parts of Asia (most notably Japan) for well over a decade. More recently, his award-winning appearances in the films of Wong Kar-Wai and Chen Kaige have spread his fame to the international arthouse film circuit. Rumours--usually viciously expressed--that Cheung is in a gay relationship with a man known simply as "Mr. Tong" has circulated in the Hong Kong entertainment press for years. Cheung has never confirmed or repudiated these rumours, preferring to keep "personal questions" out of interviews and press conferences. Yet, in the past decade or so, Cheung has consistently made professional decisions which invariably link him to queer issues. He plays high-profile roles in a string of films which explore gender dysphoria and/or homosexuality (All's Well That Ends Well, Farewell My Concubine, He's a Woman, She's a Man, Who's the Woman Who's the Man, Happy Together); appears in Stanley Kwan's Yang + Yin; discusses homophobia in Hong Kong culture (though never referring to his own life) in interviews with both local and foreign journalists; and sits on a panel of judges for a high-profile award which honours the best journalistic writing on tongzhi issues in 1999 - 2000. Cheung also makes ample use of a recognizably queer aesthetic in both the "Across 1997" concert tour and the subsequent, very controversial "Passion" tour, in which Cheung's costumes, designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier, subverts gender conventions to such a degree that they infuriate the media and unleash a string of homophobic attacks. Is Cheung in or out of the closet? Is he the model spokesperson for Hong Kong's tongzhi community or its worst detractor? The ambivalent relation Leslie Cheung bears as a highly public figure to the discourse of sexual dissidence raises questions about the fierce debates around the closet. A figure like Cheung would be an ideal target for outing advocates like Michelangelo Signorile, the journalist for OutWeek and The Advocate who outed Malcolm Forbes, David Geffen, and Jodie Foster amongst others during the 1990s. Signorile and his allies regard the explicit act of coming out to be an ethical and political responsibility of gay public figures. Even activists who object to outing activism often consider the voluntary act of coming out to be a marker of "gay and lesbian morality." For instance, Urvashi Vaid argues in Virtual Equality:

Coming out is a defining experience for all gay people ... Because it is about truth, coming out is an act of goodness, integrity, and is a precondition for any gay person wishing to live a moral life ... I suggest that being out of the closet may best be defined as a moral act because it moves us closer towards truth and away from falsehood, toward virtue, away from hypocrisy.

Being in the closet, therefore, ought to be viewed as immoral behavior ... unless there is such compelling justification [such as avoiding physical harm], I urge the movement to adopt a new ethic toward the closet, characterizing it as intrinsically evil. Yet while I champion the elevation of coming out to a moral imperative, I affirm my discomfort with outing as an act of force; I view it as ethically and morally indefensible. (381)

Such characterization of the closet as a kind of moral evil has caused much unease in the Chinese tongzhi community (Chau 164-175). Negotiating, rather than explicitly coming out of, the closet has been the preferred strategy of many to whom a complete break with the family is unthinkable. Li Ang's acclaimed film The Wedding Banquet is a typical response to the issue. In the film, the closet is nominally maintained in what is simultaneously a capitulation to and a negotiation with the patriarchal Chinese family. Leshe Cheung's public response provides another variation on the same theme. What is at stake in this context is not the unaccepting family but the media. Cheung's refusal to actually pronounce his sexual identity in public may, of course, be a calculated act of self-protection and professional survival. It is in strategic negotiation with a prurient media industry which is at best illiterate in queer issues and at worst unrelentingly homophobic. Cheung continues to publicly flaunt acts of gender and sexual deviance, while absolutely refusing to declare them as markers of his sexual identity. Instead of providing knowledge, he is, to paraphrase Eve

Sedgwick, "pluralizing ignorance and silence" (9). This too can be an important act of sexual dissidence because monolithic knowledge often contributes as much to homophobia as ignorance. Cheung's teasing acts confound the heteronormative imperative to know, once and for all, who is and is not gay; in other words, to differentiate the margin absolutely from the centre. Cheung is in effect refusing to allow the gender deviance in his art to be reductively "explained" (and dismissed) as an autobiographical expression of a gay man, hence irrelevant to mainstream culture. As Chiu Miao-chin's novels radically conflates life and art, Cheung just as radically keeps them teasingly separate and in so doing maintains a subversive discourse of silence.

The weapon of history: Samshasha

When the writer and activist Samshasha published the first edition of History of Homosexuality in China in 1984, homosexual acts between men under all circumstances were still illegal in Hong Kong. A series of scandals involving prominent British civil servants (most notably the MacLennan incident in 1980, in which a police officer under investigation on charges of alleged homosexuality "committed suicide" under very suspicious circumstances) prompted the colonial government to introduce legal reforms to bring about decriminalization. The actual bill which legalizes consensual homosexual acts in private was enacted only in 1991, after nearly a decade of fierce debates and hostile opposition. The discourses which structure the debates are highly complex and very influential in shaping the dynamics of the emergent tongzhi movement (HO). One of the most commonly heard objections to decriminalization--and one which was disproportionately emphasized by the media--was the charge that homosexuality is essentially a product of the West. The colonial government's attempt to legalize this alien behavior, according to this view, poses a threat to traditional Chinese values. It was in indignant response to this kind of thinking that Samshasha, a pioneer in gay activism in Hong Kong, rushed to finish the research that he started some years ago while studying in the US. The result is an immense and extensive collection of textual and anthropological evidence of homosexuality and other forms of "deviant" sexuality in pre-modern China. Samshasha's material spans thousands of years of recorded history, from the Zhou Dynasty (1122 - 500 BC) to the present day. He includes a variety of sources, from official court records, unofficial historical accounts, religious documents, legal codes, medical manuals, representations from literature, paintings, the plastic arts, and ritual artifacts, as well as accounts by foreign travellers and missionaries. Samshasha suggests that it is not so much homosexuality but homophobia which is a product of the West.

The very law against homosexual behaviour that the government was trying to repeal in the 1980s was inherited from the British laws, with no parallel in the legal code of either Republican or Communist China. This was a very powerful rebuttal at the time as most oppositional arguments, even those made from religious or moral perspectives, invoked Chinese tradition to appeal to the population's anti-colonial sentiments and indigenous cultural pride (Ho 80-2). What Samshasha has unearthed is precisely a Chinese tradition of sexual dissidence which has flourished for thousands of years alongside the Confucian order.

Aside from its important role in resisting the argument that homosexuality is a product of the West, History of Sexuality in China also represents an effort to theorize alternative paradigms for understanding sexual dissidence in non-Western contexts. In an interview with Mark McLelland for the journal Intervention, Samshasha voices the concern that modern gay movements all over the world seem to be primarily influenced by Western notions of sexuality and completely ignorant of any indigenous expressions of alternative forms of sexuality. History of Homosexuality in China is meant to provide not only evidence that homosexuality has always existed in China but also new paradigms for understanding such evidence. Indeed, the imperative to "find our own path" dominates the agenda of the first Chinese Tongzhi Conference in Hong Kong (Loo) and continues to animate subsequent tongzhi organizations and events. To this end, Samshasha's book is unfortunately more successful in raising questions than providing solutions. The way he frames and categorizes the material in the book actually reproduces rather than dislodges the Western paradigm of understanding sexuality. In the first Chinese-language study of bisexual desire, Anson Mak rightly calls into question Samshasha's inclusion of bisexual, transgendered, and Sado-maschochist practices under the problematic rubric of homosexuality (203). Indeed, Samshasha himself has pointed out that "there isn't even an exact term for 'homosexual' in Chinese history and we certainly don't have any precedent for the

concept 'gay'" (McLelland). Given this insight, Samshasha's interpretation of his fascinating material as evidence of "homosexuality" simply recuperates the paradigm that he is criticizing in the first place. How otherwise might such diverse historical evidence be interpreted and categorized? What relevance might such alternative interpretations and categories influence our present struggle against homophobia and heterocentrism? How might this weapon of history shape our discourse of sexual dissidence? These are the questions which await further hard work and exploration.

In progress

Time cannot be countered, life cannot be countered, yet the process of writing can counter all that cannot be countered. That's why the writing is still in progress. (Chu 218)

These closing lines from Chu Tien-wen's famous novel The Savage's journal provide a fitting coda for this introduction to sexual dissidence in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chu's novel about a gay man's apocalyptic visions of life in Taiwan at the end of the millennium received a prestigious literary award and stunned many critics when it was revealed that the novel, so intimately evocative of gay male life, was written by a straight woman. Ensuing debates over whether the novel is "authentic" or "representative" bring to light many of the vexed questions over identity, politics, and art which have been raised over and over again in the tongzhi and kuer movements. Who "qualifies" as a tongzhi? What constitutes identity? Who can/cannot speak? Why and why not? The novel also highlights the tension between aesthetics and politics. Chi Ta-wei, who usually takes great pains to avoid any form of binary discourse, surprisingly makes a distinction between the novel's radical aesthetic and its conservative politics (Babylon 155-179). While Chi applauds the radically open, even queer, textuality of the novel, he objects to its portrayal of an apolitical, melancholic, and decadent gay man. Indeed, the novel refuses to imagine a collective political vision. The "savage," while kuer, is certainly not a tongzhi by choice. Yet, is not this very tension, between what is possible and desirable aesthetically and what is practicable politically, constitutive of contemporary sexual dissidence itself? As the famous closing of the novel quoted at the beginning of the section suggests, "the process of writing can counter all that cannot be countered." Thus, writing--the domain of art, of thought--articulates a dimension of the impossible which cannot be translated directly into political action. A radical aesthetic, such as that advocated as kuer, cannot be good politics as such. It is precisely the antagonism and difference between the two which drive the energy of both, and which animate all of the works I discussed in this article. The writing of sexual dissidence is still in progress. As are legal, social, and political battles. The dissent has only just begun, and it has many queer faces.

Notes

A note on Romanization: while it is customary to follow the Mainland Chinese system and romanize Chinese words in pinyin, I will respect the different practices in Taiwan and Hong Kong and render names in the versions usually used by the authors, filmmakers, and artists themselves. All other Chinese names and terms are romanized in pinyin.

Samshasha is the English pseudonym of Ng Siu-Ming. His Chinese pseudonym is Xiaomingxiong.

In the revised edition of the book, Samshasha refines this argument further by differentiating between the "explicit homophobia" of the West which pathologizes and criminalizes homosexuality, and the "implicit homophobia" in pre-modern China which tolerates but marginalizes and belittles homosexuality.

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