chapter 8

UNCERTAIN TRIANGLES: LESBIAN DESIRE IN HONG KONG CINEMA

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PROLOGUE: BEYOND THE MARRIAGE DEBATES

DURING THE SUMMER OF 2005, SAME-SEX MARRIAGE was legalized across Canada. Despite the noisy political drama that surrounded the passing of the law, national debates on the issue have been framed from the beginning in starkly binary terms: one is either for or against same-sex marriage. There is scant media attention paid to the more complex and nuanced debates *within* queer communities while the conservative opposition has implicitly racialized the issue by mobilizing visible minorities in large numbers, vowing to protect their "traditional family values." As a queer Chinese woman living in Vancouver, I have experienced this racialized dynamic first-hand. On August 23, 2003, a large rally against same-sex marriage legislations was held in front of the Supreme Court in Vancouver. While mainstream media had been relatively low key about covering the event, various local Chinese media had, by contrast, made it headline news for over a week. Chinese church groups organized their congregations in huge numbers, providing transportation downtown for suburbanites and the elderly, many of whom had never been to a political rally before. As part of a counter-rally group showing support for the embattled queer community, I went to the Supreme Court with a group of queer Asians. We were not quite prepared for the strange situation that befell us. Despite our rainbow flags and "Queer Power" T-shirts, the police saw our Asian faces and kept redirecting us to the "other side," where the rally *against* same-sex marriage was being held. By the time

we got to the counter-rally, we were immediately pushed by other members of the group to the front, face to face with the sea of faces on the "opposite" side that was startlingly and overwhelmingly Asian. While I felt an urgency to show queer Asian visibility in such a context and was thus willing to oblige, I was also disturbed by the muted, though still audible, slogans that some White gay activists were shouting across the dividing line: "Hate is not a *Canadian* value!" and worse, the painfully familiar "Go back to where you came from!" The sad result of such racialized polarization is that queer activists had in effect ceded minority communities to the conservatives. At the same time, there was an underlying assumption that acceptance of sexual diversity is a "Western" issue, framed solely in the terms of individual human rights. And even if it looks like human rights *will* win out this time and federal legislations permitting same-sex marriage will pass, the question remains for queer activism how *not* to overlook the concerns of ethnic minorities, how to make allies rather than enemies with other socially marginalized groups, and most importantly, how not to painfully split the loyalty of queers of colour, who must confront, on the one hand, homophobia in their ethnic community and, on the other, racism in the queer community.

These questions are raised with tremendous insight in the documentary *Ke Kulana He Mahu: Remembering a Sense of Place*. Set in the U.S. context (which is much less hopeful of winning a legislative victory similar to ours in the near future), and told from the perspective of the *Kanaka mali* (indigenous Hawaiians), the film documents a long tradition of sexual and gender diversity in Hawaii's indigenous communities that was not only accepted but often even valued. Yet, when a referendum was held on whether the state constitution of Hawaii should be amended to give the courts power to "reserve marriage to opposite-sex couples" in 1998, the people of Hawaii voted in its favour. Despite their histories of acceptance and diversity, indigenous communities were surprisingly lukewarm in their response to the same-sex marriage campaign. The film explains this paradox with a cogent critique of the way the campaign was conducted. Equality for sexual minorities was explained solely within the framework of individual rights while images

of White, middle-class gay couples were used predominantly in association with those rights. As a result, indigenous communities and other communities of colour simply did not see themselves reflected in the campaign even though, as one activist in the film puts it, "everyone has a gay or transgender relative in their family."

This is a lesson that should not be overlooked in Canada, despite our relatively more tolerant social climate. In the Chinese-Canadian context, for instance, no effort was ever made to link the Canadian marriage debates to struggles for sexual diversity that have *also* been waged throughout Chinese history and in different Chinese communities. For instance, in Hong Kong during the 1980s when the outgoing British government proposed legislations to decriminalize consensual sex between men, homophobic reactions were initially couched in patriotic anti-colonial terms. Homosexuality was characterized as a "Western import" that is foreign to "Chinese tradition." In response, the queer activist Samshasha wrote the now classic *History of Homosexuality in China*, documenting in over 500 pages a long tradition of sexual diversity in premodern China. The subsequent queer movements that emerged in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, which frame their activism not only on the ground of human rights but also with reference to a historical heritage of sexual diversity, were clearly influenced by Samshasha's work. Like those in the indigenous communities in Hawaii who were not won over by images of White couples celebrating same-sex marriage but who might have responded differently to evocations of their own historical traditions of acceptance, would the Chinese-Canadian community have been less ready to protest against their own queer heritage? In a touching moment at the end of Stanley Kwan's brilliant documentary *Yin ± Yang: Gender in Chinese Cinema*, he discusses his relationship with his partner William with his mother. Instead of asking directly if she accepts homosexuality, he asks her how she feels about the Cantonese opera diva Yam Kim-Fai, whose illustrious career spanning from the 1930s to the 1960s as a cross-dressed leading man in opera and in the cinema is unmatched in popularity by any other Chinese performer of her generation. Kwan's mother answers her son's question as I imagine

most women of her generation would: "I thought she was very handsome and would have chased after her if I did not have a family!" Yam also openly lived together with another woman, her long-time onstage partner Bak Suet-Sin. When asked how she feels about that relationship, Kwan's mother slowly replies, "I thought they seem like a great-looking couple …" Kwan's strategy of linking the abstract and divisive issue of "accepting homosexuality" to his mother's personal life and a very familiar aspect of her culture is a wonderful example of what, on a larger scale, queer activism here can achieve. I wonder if as many people from minority communities would flock behind conservative social agendas if someone bothered to ask them similarly personalized questions about their own cultural traditions. How might alternative queer pasts, and different traditions of sexual diversity, be reclaimed and made relevant to current struggles? How could queer activism become more inclusive, and effect changes beyond the marriage legislations?

This article attempts a very modest step toward exploring some of these questions while opening up a framework for the discussion of queer issues with reference to Asian popular culture. I will offer an analysis of the representations of lesbian desire in mainstream Hong Kong cinema, which, despite the industry's current decline, retains enormous popular appeal among Chinese communities throughout the world. I will argue that while lesbian figures are relatively absent, there is by contrast a curiously haunting presence of lesbian desire in mainstream cinema that frequently renders heterosexuality unmanageable, vulnerable, and open to challenges. In other words, while there may be few lesbian representations as such in mainstream Hong Kong cinema, there is evidently quite a lot of anxiety about the inadequacy—at times even monstrosity—of heterosexuality among women on screen. At the same time, intense emotional and (potentially) erotic bonds between women recur amid such anxiety. This article aims to tap the queer potential of these representations.

HONG KONG CINEMA AND THE LESBIAN SUBJECT

For the past decade or so, the major preoccupation in the study of Hong Kong culture has been with the problem of representation. The poet and cultural critic Leung Ping-Kwan starts his influential study *Hong Kong Culture* with this question: "Why is it so difficult to tell the story of Hong Kong?" (1995: 4). He goes on to show, in a series of nuanced analyses of films, artwork, and architecture, that the most interesting cultural projects are not those that present a clear picture of Hong Kong, but those capable of conveying the difficulty and constraints in the process of representing Hong Kong. In her beautifully written collection of essays *Hong Kong Stories*, writer and literary historian Lu Wei-luan describes the famous view of nighttime Hong Kong from the top of Victoria Peak: "The million twinkling lights overlap in layers upon layers without end .... The view is seductive exactly because you cannot see it clearly" (1996: 4). Lu then goes on to compare this view to the "misty" character of Hong Kong culture itself. Similarly, Akbar Abbas's famous formulation of Hong Kong as "a culture of disappearance" also points to the problematic conditions of representation, suggesting that the development of a new Hong Kong subjectivity is constructed "not narcissistically, but in the very process of negotiating the mutations and permutations of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism" (1997: 11). In other words, Hong Kong culture is at its most suggestive and seductive when it is able to reveal not its "true face," but rather the uncertain, partial, and anxiety-ridden process of its own emergence, amid the disappearance of old institutions, structures, and discourses.

It is important to bear this insight in mind in a study of lesbian desire in Hong Kong cinema, where it is precisely the *problem*, rather than possibility, of rendering the lesbian subject visible that yields suggestive analysis. All sexual minorities—whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or otherwise not heterosexual—have for a long time been either invisible or reduced to stereotypes and caricatures in mainstream cinema. The film critic Liu Lan regards the release of

A Queer Story in 1996 to be a watershed moment when one can begin to speak of a gay subjectivity in Hong Kong cinema (1996: 221–222). However, Liu Lan's claim is actually only true of the gay *male* subject. No longer straitjacketed in one-dimensional and stereotypical roles but interpreted with depth and complexity by such luminous actors as Leslie Cheung, Tony Leung, Jordan Chan, and Stephan Fung, the gay male subject has indeed emerged in Hong Kong cinema in a series of critically acclaimed films such as *Happy Together* (1997), *A Queer Story* (1998), *Bishonen* (1999), and *Lanyu* (2001). This emergence, however, is not without problematic implications. While the formation of gay male subjectivity in Hong Kong society is overdetermined by a complicated web of intersecting social and political discourses (as Petula Ho has elucidated in a meticulous study, 1997), the provisional and contingent nature of these discursive processes is rarely explored in mainstream films. The gay male subject thus arrives on the screen as a new species that is born—not made—to be an absolute other to the heterosexual male. In this apartheid schema of monosexual desires, heterosexuality remains remarkably secure and intact, unassimilable and uninflected by the gay male erotic.

By contrast, in films like *Who's the Woman Who's the Man* (1996), *Love and Sex amongst the Ruins* (1996), *The Intimates* (1997), *Portland Street Blues* (1998), and *Tempting Heart* (1999), where lesbian desire plays a significant role, the plot is inevitably complicated by some forms of bisexuality. It may be tempting to dismiss these films as failed attempts by (mostly male) directors to imagine an erotic economy that excludes men entirely, but these seemingly "improper" representations of lesbian desire are actually very useful for queer theorizing. While the lesbian subject appears to be not quite imaginable in mainstream Hong Kong cinema, her absence—or, more properly speaking, inarticulable presence—on screen ironically allows lesbian desire to infiltrate the entire erotic landscape rather than be relegated to a hermetically sealed realm of otherness. In films where lesbian desire circulates without a subject—in other words, where desire between women does not originate from a species separable from the heterosexual subject—what happens to heterosexuality? The difficult

and problematic conditions under which the lesbian subject cannot quite emerge produce bisexual configurations of female erotic desire that can undermine the putative integrity and coherence of the heterosexual subject.

THEORIES OF TRIANGLES

One effective way to theorize this process is through the conundrum of the triangle. The triangle has an important place in queer theorizing. Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men* rewrites René Girard's model of the romantic triangle to show that in canonical English literature, most heterosexual unions are underwritten by intense homosocial bonds between the male rivals. Sedgwick (1985) argues that such homosocial desire is secured at the expense of women (whose traffic between men facilitate male bonds) as well as male homo*sexual* desire, which is stigmatized and vilified and rendered inimical to homosociality. Terry Castle rearticulates Sedgwick's model to account for lesbian fiction, which offers a different triangle, one in which another woman enters the picture and displaces the male homosocial relationship with a lesbian bond. Castle suggests that lesbian bonding threatens to eradicate the male term altogether, as it prevents a woman from entering into the patriarchal triad whereby she is used as a pawn to secure the bonds between men (1993: 66–91). Marjorie Garber, in turn, deconstructs both Sedgwick's and Castle's paradigms to show that their ultimate focus on the *couple* eclipses the constitutive structure of desire itself, i.e., the structure of triangularity. For Garber, "it is bisexual triangularity that provokes, explains, and encompasses both heterosexuality and homosexuality" (1995: 423–442). She goes on to suggest, through readings of numerous examples from contemporary culture, that the bisexual triangle marks certain unacknowledged ambivalence: " ... the difficulty of making a choice, ... of telling 'right' from 'wrong,' 'friend' from 'enemy,' even 'self' from 'not self' or 'other'" (1995: 431). The triangle thus signifies the constitutive site of negotiation where gendered and sexualized subjectivities become articulable. Paying attention to

its structure can help us reinscribe what heterosexuality must displace in order for it to anchor itself as a stable hegemonic ideology.

In the rest of the article, I will analyze the erotic triangles in films from three popular genres: gangster drama, romance, and thriller. These films do not mark the emergence of a new lesbian subject in Hong Kong cinema. Rather, they allow lesbian desire to modulate generic conventions and displace the centrality of the genres' long-cherished protagonist, the heterosexual woman.

HEROIC MASCULINITY AND FEMME INVISIBILITY

Portland Street Blues is one of many spinoffs to the *Young and Dangerous* series, an enormously popular series of films adapted from a comic book series about young Triad gangsters. The film tells the story of how Sister Thirteen (Sandra Ng), the famed lesbian gang leader of the Hong Hing Triad, rises to power. A curious erotic triangle is woven between Sister Thirteen, her best friend A Yun (Kristy Yeung), and Coca Cola (Alex Fong), a hit man from the rival Dong Sing Triad. Initially, the triangle appears to be a predictable male fantasy where two women, one even a known lesbian, appear to be competing for a man's affection. There are, however, two interesting plot twists that complicate the picture. First, Thirteen's tough and cool masculinity places her in the tradition of the heroic gangster and her relationship with Cola resembles the intense homosocial bonds between heroic masculine figures in action genres far more closely than it does heterosexual romance. As I have argued elsewhere, it makes much more sense in this context to read Thirteen as a *transgender* rather than lesbian figure, and her relationship with Cola a *homoerotic* bond between masculine figures rather than a re-heterosexualization of Thirteen (Leung 2005). Second, it turns out that A Yun's true object of desire is *not* Cola but rather Sister Thirteen all along. She seduces Cola in order to keep him away from Sister Thirteen. Her apparent display of heterosexual desire and sexualized femininity toward Cola—like her

many scheming acts of seduction earlier on in the film—is simply a means toward other ends. In retrospect, the early girlhood scenes when A Yun and Thirteen (then a young tomboy) are inseparable, setting traps for their lascivious night-school teacher, watching boxing matches on the street, and stealing a smoke together in bed, are so submerged in erotic undertone that A Yun's revelation of love for Thirteen at the end has been anticipated from the very beginning. Yet, most initial reviewers of the film, exemplified, for instance, by the veteran critic Sek Kei, focuses primarily on Thirteen as a lesbian figure. Sek Kei puzzles over whether Thirteen is "actually" gay or straight (1999: 39). He assumes that there is a knowable differential between gayness and straightness, only that the film fails to reveal it. Marjorie Garber has argued that this obsessive need to recognize definitively homosexuality's difference from heterosexuality is symptomatic of an anxiety about heterosexual identity itself:

> It is as though the hegemonic cultural imaginary is saying to itself: if there is a difference (between gay and straight), we want to be able to *see* it, and if we see a difference (a man in women's clothes), we want to be able to *interpret* it. In both cases, the conflation is fuelled by a desire to *tell the difference*, to guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position in question. (1993: 130)

Garber is speaking in particular about mainstream culture's tendency to conflate homosexuality and transvestism, so that homosexuality may be *marked* and explained by gender insubordination and vice versa. Sek Kei's confusion about Sister Thirteen's sexual identity is in part the result of just such a tendency. Sister Thirteen is readable to Sek Kei as a "homosexual" character because she embodies the most identifiable form of lesbian identity in mainstream culture: that of the butch—a lesbian who visibly embodies masculinity. However, Sek Kei also assumes that a "homosexual woman" by nature desires only other women. In other words, mainstream interpretation of lesbian identity relies not only on an image of gender insubordination but also a narrative of exclusionary

desire. Thus, in Sek Kei's eyes, Sister Thirteen's feelings for Cola *contradicts* her butch embodiment, rendering her sexual identity troublesomely unclear. At the same time, it does not even occur to Sek Kei to consider A Yun a "homosexual" character, despite her categorical admission toward the end of the film that she has loved and desired Sister Thirteen all along. The invisibility of A Yun's lesbian desire is a result of her femme embodiment, which is perceived as a sign of heterosexuality despite the clear (or not so clear to Sek Kei) suggestion in the film that she only ever *performs* heterosexual desire as a way to get what she wants. Sister Thirteen and A Yun are rendered unintelligible by a logic that Judith Butler describes as "the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments: if one identifies *as* a given gender, one must desire a different gender." (1993: 239). The film's erotic triangle exposes the unmanageability of this logic as it unsettles viewers' normative assumptions about the relation between gender identification and sexual identity.

Sister Thirteen's butch masculinity is both a product of and a threat to the sexist structure of the Triad world. Thirteen's own father has never been able to live up to the heroic masculinity glorified in the gangster genre. As a result, he is constantly harassed and bullied and eventually dies in brutal humiliation. In the violent Triad world, power can be accessed only through an embrace of the heroic masculinity first developed in the martial arts period films and later modernized in the gangster genre made popular by John Woo. In the *Young and Dangerous* series, this tradition of heroic masculinity is modulated and reinvented through more youthful gangster figures who are less sentimental and more cynical than John Woo's heroes. What has remained constant in this changing tradition is the figure of the feminine woman who, like A Yun, has some degree of power through manipulation of her sexuality, but always remains in the margin of the male-dominated world and is always in danger of being abused and trafficked by men. Thus, if Sister Thirteen were to avoid the feminized fate of her father and of other women in the Triad world, her only recourse is to appropriate masculinity for herself. As such, her butch embodiment in this particular context involves not only a certain style of looks and attitudes, but also by necessity a sexist relation to other women upon which the genre's heroic

masculinity is predicated. Thirteen runs a prostitution ring and is expected to treat her lovers abusively, like other men in the Triad world would. The only two potentially mutual and equal relationships in Sister Thirteen's life are with A Yun and Cola. Yet these relationships eventually remain out of her reach because they threaten the fundamental gendered structure of the Triad world. A relationship with A Yun would result in a mutual bond between women that threatens not only to eradicate the male term out of the equation (as Terry Castle's formulation suggests), but to alter the very basis of the ideology of heroic masculinity, which is predicated on its domination over feminized women. Thus, as Andrew Grossman so rightly suggests in his analysis of the film and the gangster genre, the film would have been most transgressive if it had been A Yun in all her femme power, rather than Thirteen replicating heroic masculinity, who became a Triad leader (2000: 263). Similarly, an equal relationship between Thirteen and Cola would also deviate from the sexist dynamics of heterosexual relationship in the gangster genre. Hence, the intimacy between Thirteen and Cola can only be articulated in a masculinized homosocial bond that is a generic staple. Yet, to successfully articulate that bond, as the film comes very close to doing, the genre would also have to accommodate the denaturalization of masculinity, revealing the possibility that heroic masculinity can be embodied just as effectively in *female* as in male bodies. The erotic triangle thus constantly calls forth its own unmanageability: any fulfillment of the desire that circulates within it would collapse some of the most fundamental premises governing the genre's gender and sexual norms. Ultimately, the triangle breaks up, ending in Cola's death and A Yun's departure from Hong Kong. Yet, as a central plot device, it has staged a provocative relation between power, desire, and gender identification that reveals the genre's most interesting contradictions.

ROMANCE AND ITS DISCONTENT

More ambitious than *Portland Street Blues* in its conscious attempt to transcend generic conventions, *Tempting Heart* combines a nostalgic

love story set in Hong Kong during the late 1970s with a self-reflexive look at the art of filmmaking. A filmmaker, Cheryl (played by the director Sylvia Chang herself), is in the process of making a film based on memories of her first love. As she works with her screenwriter (William So), they start to discuss not only filming methods but also Cheryl's interpretation of past events. Intercut with these scenes are sequences that double as flashbacks of Cheryl's memories and visions of the final film. They tell the story of three young people, Xiaorou (Gigi Leung), Haojun (Takeshi Kaneshiro), and Chen Li (Karen Mok), who came of age during the late 1970s. The central story of Xiaorou and Haojun recalls the plot lines of popular Cantonese romance films of the 1950s and 1960s, in which young lovers are forced to separate because of their parents' misunderstanding and disapproval. The character of Chen Li provides the only real departure from this clichéd narrative. At first, she appears to occupy the thankless role of the best friend and the go-between for the lovers. It turns out, however, that Chen Li has been in love with Xiaorou all along. Another unexpected revelation shows that she has later married Haojun, but the marriage ends in divorce when Chen Li tells him that they are "still both in love with the same woman." In the middle of the film, the initially separate storylines merge when Cheryl hears of her old friend Chen Li's death in Japan. She encounters Haojun again at the funeral, and the film ends in a nostalgic evocation of their love, which has survived the years despite the impossibility of its fulfillment.

The heterosexual love story in the film is so clichéd that it offers little real interest. The film is usually praised for its sensitive evocation of the nostalgic mood, its layered narrative structure, and its creative cinematography. What interests me most here is, of course, the character of Chen Li and the significance of her role in the erotic triangle. The film is primarily a coming-of-age story of a heterosexual couple. It documents the sexual angst of teenagers, the onset of adulthood, and renunciation of the innocence and sincerity of first love. Yet, Chen Li's lesbian desire circulates amid this familiar romantic narrative with an anxious and unresolved energy that diverts much

of the viewers' attention away from the predictable central story. How does it affect the heterosexual narrative?

Very early on in the film, Haojun, who is a guitarist, plays with a band at a party and attracts the attention of Xiaorou and Chen Li. This constitutive scene of heterosexual desire, consisting of a sequence of shot-reverse shot, reveals a telling process of displacement. The first shot in the sequence shows Chen Li and Xiaorou arm in arm together watching the guitarist, who gazes in their direction several times. Chen Li playfully says to Xiaorou, "He's looking at me again." On hearing that, Xiaorou slowly moves away from Chen Li to test if Haojun's gaze would follow her. This scene actually launches the erotic triangle between Xiaorou, Haojun, and Chen Li. The third term—the disruption or intrusion—at this point is Haojun, not Chen Li. The scene of heterosexual desire is in fact not the origin, but a rude intrusion (at least from Chen Li's point of view, and the film carefully registers her expressions of bitterness on numerous occasions) into the intimate proto-lesbian bonds between girls. As heterosexual desire gradually insinuates itself into the centre, Chen Li becomes relegated to the position of the third: marking what is extra to and in excess of the heterosexual relationship. When the lovers become estranged by their parents, Chen Li's role changes again into that of the go-between, passing on messages between Haojun and Xiaorou. Eventually, Xiaorou and Haojun break up, but encounter each other again in Japan after several years. They start to have an affair, but Chen Li also enters the picture as it turns out she is Haojun's wife. She is once again a third term, but instead of occupying the role of the jealous wife, she is shown to be making rather curious use of heterosexual marriage. She marries the lover of her beloved, perhaps as a way to keep those two separate and to maintain her own position within the triangle.

There is also a telling silence around Chen Li in the meta-filmic narrative. The filmmaker Cheryl discusses all aspects of the story with her screenwriter, but remains persistently silent about Chen Li. When the screenwriter contends that all love stories are the same, Cheryl retorts that the process of each is unique and her aim in this film is to capture this unique "difference." Is Chen Li's role not a very unique difference

(at least in the context of the romance genre) in this particular love story? Why, then, is it left out completely of the meta-filmic discourse? Cheryl goes on to say, "Look, these two people are so young ... I mean, no, these *three* people are all so young...." The hesitation about whether it is a story about two or three people, whether it is about the couple or the triangle, reveals the (fictional as well as actual) filmmaker's anxiety about Chen Li. Chen Li's desire for Xiaorou seems to be an indispensable part of the narrative (hence its persistent presence), yet its significance seems extremely difficult for the filmmaker to interpret (hence her awkward silence on the subject). One incidental scene toward the end of the film shows Chen Li with a butch-looking woman coincidentally looking into the boutique where Xiaorou works. Chen and Xiaorou meet each other's gaze briefly through the glass window and then, without acknowledging each other, Chen Li leaves with her girlfriend. The butch woman here serves no other purpose than to *signify* a lesbian presence. As I have discussed before in the context of *Portland Street Blues*, the butch woman is the most visible embodiment of lesbian desire in mainstream culture. In this scene, which originates from the perspective of Cheryl's memory and/or screenwriting, the signifier also seems to be inserted solely for Cheryl/ Xiaorou's purpose. It is as though Cheryl/ Xiaorou needs to see the butch women in order to comprehend Chen Li's desire, which appears to have been unreadable to Cheryl/ Xiaorou all along. What is Cheryl/ Xiaorou's response to this realization? Why has the (fictional and actual) film maintained such an anxious silence around her reaction? What is being covered over? The film concludes with the shot of a colourful painted landscape, depicting a sun setting over a tree under which stands a *couple*. The ending celebrates a lost moment of heterosexual love while eradicating the hitherto persistent presence of lesbian desire in the picture. The artificiality of the scene, which is perhaps meant to invoke a fairy-tale like atmosphere of lost love, also betrays the conventionality of the story's resolution. There is literally no place in this clichéd landscape for Chen Li. Her desire, which has occupied such an important place in the narrative, ultimately cannot be accounted for in this imagistic closure. She remains what is unassimilable and

unmanageable in Cheryl's as well as Sylvia Chang's film, and in the genre of the heterosexual romance.

HETEROSEXUAL HORRORS

Finally, I want to briefly draw attention to an interesting emergent trend in the thriller genre. Women have long been in the centre of this genre that, at its best, reveals the fractures and contradictions in dominant ideologies and, at its worst, projects monstrosity onto desires and bodies not tolerated by the social mainstream. More often, films in this genre do *both*: that is, they generate critical and ideological perspectives at the same time. In the psychological thrillers *Midnight Fly* (2001) and *Koma* (2004), an erotic triangle reveals the limits of heterosexual relationship, at the same time that it forges an intense connection between two women. Yet, both films stop short of exploring the lesbian potential of that connection, in one case submerging, while in another suppressing, the erotic dimension of the bond. Ultimately, both films end, as is often dictated by the demands of the genre, in bloodshed and the dissolution of the triangle. However, the unfulfilled potential between the women is *also* accompanied by the destruction of the heterosexual couple. In other words, there is no reconstitution of the normative family as, for example, in the Hollywood thriller classic *Fatal Attraction*. Rather, it is the missed opportunity of the *women's* relationship that seems to linger in both films' tragic conclusions.

In *Midnight Fly*, two lonely Asian women travel together in a tour group in the south of France. Michelle (Anita Mui), a moody, elegant, middle-aged woman from Hong Kong, is trapped in a loveless marriage, while Miki (Junna Risa), a spirited young Japanese, is involved in a hopeless affair with a married man and, unbeknown to her lover, pregnant with his child. After some initial conflict but eventually becoming very close friends, the two women end up travelling to Morocco together. There, the two accidentally discover that Miki is in fact the mistress of Michelle's husband. Just as Michelle is about to leave the country in distress, Miki is abducted by a man running a prostitution

ring. At this point, the film slides into a more conventional generic mode as it focuses on Michelle's frantic and long, arduous search for Miki. The younger woman, meanwhile, is being violently abused by her captors, has an abortion forced on her, and is prostituted against her will. Eventually, with the help of a Chinese Moroccan, Michelle finds Miki, but while the two women are on the run from Miki's captors, Michelle is fatally shot and dies in Miki's arms.

The most interesting twist in this film occurs when, after Miki's disappearance, Michelle's husband (and Miki's lover) flies over to help. When he muses over the remarkable coincidence of his wife and mistress ending up in the same tour group and becoming friends, Michelle snaps back at him sarcastically:

> What are you implying? That I killed her to lure you here? I think you've watched one too many Hitchcock films! Besides, you shouldn't have come if that's the case, as I would be sure to kill you too!

This brilliant self-reflexive moment refers to the generic rule of many similar thrillers, which pits a jealous wife against a hostile mistress. Michelle's sarcastic quip reminds the audience of this film's *difference*: the wife and mistress are no longer configured as rivals in competition over a man. Rather, they have become realigned as a couple, both remaining true to each other, while the husband/lover becomes the faithless (and ultimately irrelevant) outsider. As Michelle remains steadfast in the search for Miki, her husband soon loses patience. Feeling that they have already done their best for Miki, though to no avail, he proposes to Michelle that they should go home to "start over," since Miki is now out of the picture. Instead of seizing the chance to restore the normative family, Michelle coldly responds to her husband's proposal: "Is that as much as you can love?" Subsequently, Michelle chooses Miki over her husband, proving that *she* can love much more by staying, and employing all of her resources, including ultimately her own life, to rescue Miki. Yet, the film dares not take this realignment of the triangle beyond the ending. Michelle's

death at the end is, to say the least, contrived and melodramatic. It also marks the film's reluctance to suggest a future for the women's relationship, and express the significance of the intensity it has so successfully forged between the two characters.

Koma is more properly a thriller than *Midnight Fly*, deploying many more generic tricks of suspense and horror to advance its plot. At its centre is a very similarly constructed triangle between a man and his two rival lovers. The plot revolves around a series of attempted murders in which the killer has surgically removed one kidney from the victims' bodies, leaving them to wake up in a pile of ice and a pool of their own blood. The central protagonist Ziqing (Sinje Lee) is a rich and beautiful young woman with acute symptoms of kidney failure who, because of her rare blood type, has not been able to have a successful transplant. Ziqing accidentally encounters one of the victims while attending a wedding and is asked by the police to identify a suspect. The suspect in question, Sun Ling (Karen Lam), is a struggling former medical student who is also having an affair with Ziqing's surgeon boyfriend Wai-Man. After several dramatic twists and turns, Ziqing becomes convinced that Ling is innocent and even starts to befriend her, not realizing that her boyfriend has continued his affair with Ling. In the end, Sun Ling turns out to be the arch villain behind all the crimes. She arranges a situation, before killing herself, in which her own kidney will be transplanted into an unconscious Ziqing. In the very last scene, Ziqing wakes up, realizing in horror what Ling has done, and recalling a promise the two friends shared, during better times, that they "will never ever be separated from each other."

In spite of a relatively contrived plot, the film is, like *Midnight Fly*, most interesting in its displacement of the jealous triangle. Already, at the very beginning, Ling is *visually* placed at the margin of heterosexuality: the first scene shows her standing in her shabby clothes watching a wedding celebration from the sideline. At the same time, Ziqing, despite her privilege, is also a sexual outsider in her relationship: her sickness has left her with a sexual dysfunction that drives her boyfriend to other women for sex. Not unlike the husband in *Midnight Fly*, Wai-Man, the man in the middle of the triangle, is weak

and faithless. He appears to be more an unfortunate obstacle for the women's flourishing friendship than a prize worth competing for. The film's climactic ending also realigns the triangle in an interesting way. Sun Ling does not kill Wai-Man in a jealous rage, but coldly, as a necessity, after Wai-Man has discovered her previous crimes. More interestingly, instead of killing Ziqing, Ling sacrifices herself to *save* Ziqing (whose health has been restored by the transplant) and so that *their* promise of being together could be fulfilled. While the ending is supposed to be a chilling marker of Ling's psychosis, the horror it invokes is also a projected fear of the intensity and suppressed erotic potential between Ling and Ziqing's close friendship, which in this final act has been *literalized* as a physical union between the women, now together forever until death.

These popular genre films offer provocative examples of the ways in which actual or potential lesbian desire disrupts the naturalization of heterosexuality. The films have also exposed the many underlying anxieties that plague women's roles in heterosexual relationships. At the same time, they reveal the intense relationships between women that so frequently underwrite all forms of social relationships. It is important not to overlook the queer potential of these films for only in the ruins of the heterosexual discourse may a new form of queer female subjectivity emerge, not as the ghettoized Other of heterosexuality, but as part of a genuinely new understanding of gendered relationships and sexual desire.