

Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong

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Ever since the emergence of the field of queer studies in North America in the 1980s, scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds have debated the appropriateness of applying the concept of “queer” to the study of non-Western cultures and societies. Central to these debates is the concern over the implicit theoretical priorities and methodological presumptions embedded in a frame of analysis that grew out of American gay and lesbian studies specifically, and cultural studies more generally. In this regard, *Undercurrents* is a bold and courageous attempt to demonstrate that the field of queer studies can be, or ought to be, deepened by paying a greater measure of scholarly attention to the complex cultural productions of gender and sexual variance in such regions of the world as East Asia. Helen Leung’s geographical focus on Hong Kong is also a timely intervention, because it was only until fairly recently (1997 to be more exact) that the city’s post-colonial transition returned its territorial sovereignty back to the hands of the Chinese government. Given that this particular historical moment also marked the juncture of what many scholars have identified as the fall of 20th-century American neo-colonialism/imperialism and the rise of a new age of China, Leung’s book argues an important thesis that will be invaluable even to Sinologists and other scholars working outside queer studies: that contemporary queer culture in Hong Kong is emblematic of the city’s uneasy geopolitical experience in the transitioning from an age of British colonialism to an era of Chinese post-colonialism.

Leung’s emphasis on this unique experience of a handover of cultural governance from the West to the East within the same local “geobody” wisely reflects the broader significance of her scholarly attempt to expand the epistemological contours of queer studies. Throughout the book, Leung moves swiftly between theoretical frameworks and empirical support, demonstrating that norms and counter-norms of gender and sexuality have played a central role in the historical shaping of Hong Kong’s geopolitical conditionality. This intimate relation between cultural vitality and political transformations is carefully probed in five core chapters. Each chapter demonstrates an effect of queer reading that brings into sharper focus the “potential to enable a queer critique of gender and sexual normativity,” which goes beyond mere representations of certain sexual minorities or practices (p. 2). From the queer relationality that sustains the formation of cityscapes (chapter one) to female same-sex intimacy’s troubling effect on the mode of temporality defined around adult heterosexuality (chapter two), from the tactics of transgender fashioning not fully intelligible in hetero- or homonormative understandings (chapter three) to the cultural functioning of queer iconicity as understood through the career of the actor and singer Leslie Cheung (chapter four), and from the recognition of the legitimacy of academic archival enterprises to the juxtaposition of their limitations against the discursive critique enabled by queer quotidian self-writing practises (chapter five), Leung’s topical heterogeneity paints a thriving picture of post-colonial Hong Kong full of queer possibilities that otherwise would be left under-appreciated.

A minor shortcoming of the book concerns her chapter on the queer legacy of Cheung. Although Leung’s review of the varying positions taken by cultural critics on this topic is lucid, her own perspective suggests that she has probably given too much unintended agency to Cheung, especially in her analysis of the relationship

between his public self-representations and their implied cultural significance. To be sure, as a scholar, Leung is first and foremost preoccupied with assigning meanings to the cultural data she studies. Still, in my view, her theoretical tendency to “glorify” Cheung’s queer legacy appears too strong in light of the potential analytic slippages and oversights such move may entail. To give a quick example here, with respect to Cheung’s acknowledgement of his long-time same-sex partner in a concert as a “very good friend” and a “bond-son,” Leung interprets this recognition as an exemplary articulation of queer kinship in Hong Kong: “Cheung’s manoeuvre in the concert should prompt us to ask *not* how gay marriage could render his putatively ‘closeted’ relations legitimate but how such creative kinship arrangements may facilitate aspects of queer lives that are *not* reducible to marriage and spousal relations” (p. 101, emphasis original). What Leung does not address, however, is a fundamental question that logically follows this reading: namely, was Cheung really aware of the kind of sophisticated cultural labour that, according to Leung, his public acknowledgement of his partner supposedly instantiated?

Despite this minor shortcoming, *Undercurrents* is the first monograph-length study in English that brings together the theoretical apparatus of cultural studies and a wide range of source materials from contemporary Hong Kong popular culture in pioneering the newly emergent field of “Queer Asian Studies.” Given its innovativeness, this book will definitely stimulate more productive debates and conversations in this important yet understudied area of scholarly inquiry.