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Multiple Queer Asias: An Intimate Reflection from Vancouver

ABSTRACT

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RÉSUMÉ

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KEYWORDS: Queer, Asian, Vancouver, community, scholarship



Starting Over

I moved to Vancouver in 1997. At the time, I was trying to finish my PhD thesis and living as a foreign student in the United States. My passport was due to expire on June 30, 1997, and with it my status as a “British Dependent Territory Citizen.” Not that it was much of a status, since it did not even confer the right of abode in Britain, but it was the closest thing to a nationality that I had ever enjoyed. Hong Kong was about to transfer from British to Chinese sovereignty and most of us who grew up anticipating this transition felt like we were becoming *personae non gratae*. The transfer of power was officially touted as a return to the motherland but Rey Chow more accurately calls it a transition “between colonizers” (Chow 1998: 149).

Born in southern China, my parents fled to Hong Kong during the second Sino-Japanese War, ironically only to find themselves living under Japanese occupation almost immediately after their arrival. After World War II ended, they remained in Hong Kong and knew no other home for the next fifty years. It would have been unthinkable for them to leave Hong Kong, until the unthinkable happened in 1989 when the Chinese government ordered tanks into Tiananmen Square after months of student-led protests. Heartbroken about the brutal crackdown and fearful for

the city's future, my parents applied to immigrate to Canada, despite never having set foot in the country before.

Even though I was living away from home and studying in the U.S. at the time, I was young (and unemployed) enough to be counted as their dependent on the application. When I received my landing papers, I realized I would now have access to universal health care, legal employment and a pathway to proper citizenship *with* the right of abode if I moved to Canada. I dithered for a few years and stayed in the U.S. on a foreign student visa but when 1997 rolled around, I felt ready to start a new life. I packed my belongings and drove across the continent in a U-Haul truck. I arrived in Vancouver, uncertain what the future would hold. I celebrated or commiserated (it wasn't so clear then which it was) the occasion by watching *Happy Together* (Wong 1997) on repeat. In the film, two lonely gay men from Hong Kong lose themselves and each other amidst Buenos Aires' highways, love motels and tango bars, breaking up and starting over, again and again. Improbably, these queer characters became an iconic representation of that moment: of a city and a generation becoming "lost in transition" (Chu 2014: 13).



Fig. 1. Two lovers starting over in *Happy Together* (Wong 1997). DVD still.

Mahjong and Karaoke

I first encountered queer Asians in Vancouver through my high school network. While growing up in Hong Kong, I attended an Anglican girls' school where girl crushes were commonplace and tomboy athletes were worshipped by everyone. Those memories, which had dimmed during my years at university, were sparked unexpectedly by a chance meeting in Vancouver with a high school friend who took me to a karaoke bar at a dingy little strip mall in Richmond. Amidst a group

of thirty-something queer women, I reconnected with a former champion athlete from my high school who was belting out Canto-pop love songs to her girlfriend all night. I was intrigued and started hanging out with them. My long-forgotten mah-jong skills came back and I welcomed the opportunity to speak Cantonese regularly. Soon, however, this tight knit community began to feel oppressive and claustrophobic. Being closeted was a fact of life not to be questioned. Long-suffering butches courted married straight women as a matter of course. I dated a woman who, even in her thirties, had to sneak around with me behind her mother. I hated the secrecy and felt alienated amongst suburbanites who thought art was pretentious, graduate school was a waste of time, and owning real estate was the be-all and end-all of adulthood. My excited patter about the new transgender theory or the queer roots of Cantonese opera mostly fell on uninterested ears. I soon grew restless and began to search for a different social circle.

Monsoon and Lotus Roots

By chance, I saw an ad in *The Georgia Straight* about Monsoon, a social and political group for lesbian and bisexual Asian women. I nervously went to a first meeting in a small coffee shop off Commercial Drive and was greeted by a diverse group of queer Asian women with complex migration histories and from different diasporic generations. Warm and disarming, they were also buzzing with ideas and projects. I was soon drawn into a string of activities that included zine-making, poetry readings, burlesque performances, and drag shows. Most of these events were organized ad hoc by volunteers and, in the dial-up internet, pre-social media era, advertised mostly through word of mouth. I soon discovered that this model of grassroots organizing also thrived beyond Monsoon. Similar efforts culminated in Lotus Roots 2002, a three-day festival for queer Asians that include workshops, art shows, film screenings and a cabaret featuring all queer Asian performers.

I met so many queer Asians through Monsoon and Lotus Roots that I was shielded from the racialized dynamics of how queerness and homophobia were commonly perceived in the city. In 2003, when I joined queer Asian friends in a counter-protest against a demonstration organized by conservative groups to protest marriage equality legislation, the police momentarily mistook us for the (overwhelmingly Asian) anti-gay protestors and directed us to the wrong side of the protests! When we finally found our way to the counter-protest section, we were immediately dispatched to the front of the crowd to stare down a sea of hostile Asian faces. It would have been a devastating moment of contradiction had I not known years of queer Asian camaraderie to help me navigate such situations with generosity and courage.

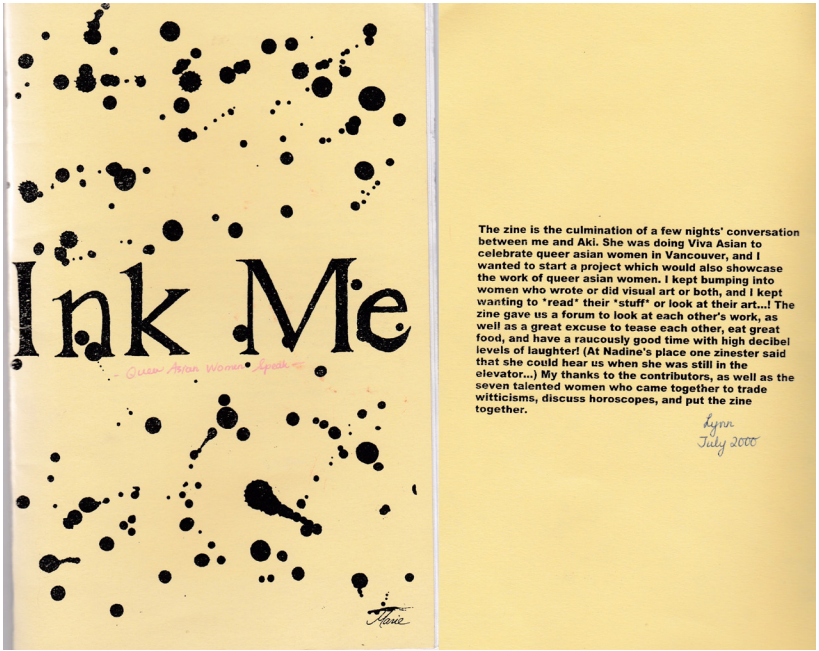


Fig. 2. *Ink Me: Queer Asian Women Speak*, a made-in-Vancouver zine, 2000.



Fig. 3. Jimmy Susheel (centre) with members of the Draggin' Angels and Brown Brother Posse. Performance at Lotus Roots: A Queer Asian Gathering, April 13, 2002, Roundhouse Community Centre, Vancouver. Photo credit: Kam Wai Kui. Used with permission.



Fig. 4. Support for marriage equality, August 23, 2003, Vancouver. Photo credit: Kam Wai Kui. Used with permission.

As with any other communities, participants come and go. Some seasoned activists have remained politically active. Many others have disappeared from the scene after an intense period of participation, having become too busy with work and family or perhaps even gone back to heteronormative lives. What stay are memories of playing together, making art, sharing secrets and teaching each other naughty and loving words in different Asian languages.

Queer Asia as Scholarship

Shortly after I moved to Vancouver, I found myself re-oriented towards the Pacific region as a scholar. Through my academic research, I met colleagues from the Asia-PacifiQueer network who were actively forging connections amongst queer scholars and activists throughout the Asia-Pacific region by assembling conference panels and collaborating on publications (Martin et al 2008). These efforts culminated in the first Queer Asian Studies conference in Bangkok in 2005 and the founding of the Queer Asia book series at Hong Kong University Press in 2008. Not unlike my participation in *Monsoon* and *Lotus Roots*, my involvement in these projects has shaped my intellectual formation as a queer studies scholar. I continue to draw inspiration and camaraderie from ongoing efforts not only to challenge and expand queer studies' North American focus but, even more importantly, to provide venues for direct dialogues, collaborations and friendships amongst Asia-based queer scholars and activists.

Suddenly Ten Years Have Passed

Chow Yiu Fai, a prominent lyricist who has authored some of Cantopop's queerest lyrics over the past three decades, recently published a Chinese-language book entitled *Suddenly Ten Years Have Passed*. As I wrote this piece, I could not shake the resonance of Chow's title in my head. It has been over a decade since I first experienced embodying and thinking "queer Asia." Now, I routinely receive manuscripts on queer Asian topics for peer review and encounter students in my queer cinema class who grew up watching *Happy Together*. The Queer Asia book series has published over fifteen titles and is now in competition with other academic publishers who would not hesitate to publish queer Asian scholarship. Monsoon still meets for dim sum from time to time but most of its activists have scattered and are continuing their work elsewhere. Young queer Asian activists are sometimes critical of organizing around the identity "Asian" and prefer to work intersectionally with other disenfranchised communities. Suddenly ten years have passed ... while scholarly and activist works continue in vibrant and unpredictable directions. I have travelled a long way from the mahjong tables and karaoke bars of Richmond. I like where I have arrived but at times I feel sad about my disconnection from those early queer friendships in Vancouver. The feeling reminds me that connecting multiple queer Asias, whether through friendship, activism or scholarship, remains as ever both a global and local endeavour.

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