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Book Reviews

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Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong

HELEN HOK-SZE LEUNG

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008

166 pages ISBN 9789622099500

The recent emergence of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) cultures in Asia has made visible sexual minorities in the region. In the affirmation politics and lifestyle cultures of pride marches, film festivals, nightclubs, queer entrepreneurships and web portals, GLBT groups and communities have not only actively clamoured for the right to be recognised but also carved out new spaces of support above and below state governance. Despite disparate genealogies, common to the region is that same-sex desires and practices have produced new critical vocabularies and theoretical frameworks that are different to the West. *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong*, the first book in the new Queer Asia series by Hong Kong University Press, is an exemplary attempt to capture this zeitgeist.

The theoretical motivation behind the Queer Asia series is the desire to promote new critical frameworks that seek to better understand the specificities of GLBT cultures in the region. Key here are two theoretical departures: first, the departure from the global queer perspective that views the internationalisation of GLBT identities and practices as an effect of the sexual Westernisation of the rest; second, the departure from nativist claims that view indigenous same-sex desires and

practices as inherently untainted by global flows and resoundingly local. The Queer Asia thesis considers how local queer cultures have emerged in conjunction with both the globalisation and indigenisation of same-sex desires, identities and practices.

This book provides a sophisticated reading of how queer cultures in Hong Kong are paradigmatic of Hong Kong's own postcolonial predicament. It takes its title from a popular Chinese song to illuminate how personal anxieties about love are also political anxieties about Hong Kong's postcolonial condition. When Britain returned Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 under the landmark 'one country two systems' rule, Hong Kong would retain its capitalist system for the next 50 years of transition. This rule of exception has marked Hong Kong's postcolonial predicament where "the uncertainty of national belonging parallels the unpredictability of desire" (5). The metaphor, 'undercurrent', refers implicitly to this period of postcolonial transition, and explicitly to the subterranean of sexual minorities. Further showing how the song has also taken on its own undercurrents through appropriations, quotations and reformulations, the author suggests it has become a site for articulating sexual and political ambiguity. This theoretical pivot marks the book's framework of queer as a mode of critique and a story of difference that reworks and twists the heteronormative forces of the colonial, domestic and global. It also marks the 'texts' examined in the book: songs, films, filmmakers and celebrities.

The book consists of five chapters that use Hong Kong cinema as entry points to explore queer urban space, erotic girlhood cultures, transgender embodiments, gay stardom and lesbian self-writing. The use of cinematic texts in this way is not at all arbitrary. While Hong Kong GLBT cultures may have been less spectacular than its counterparts in Bangkok or Taipei, the same cannot be said for queer expressions in the cinema. During its most prolific period in the 1990s, the cinema has consistently created sexually ambiguous characters and queer plots to convey political anxiety. From cult favourites like *Naked Killer* (Clarence Fok, 1992) and *The East is Red* (Ching Siu-tung, 1993) to gay classics such as *Happy Together* (Wong Kar-wai, 1997) and *Lan Yu* (Stanley Kwan, 1999), it has become a force of innovation that has conditioned new sexual cultures not only in Hong Kong, but also in the region and across its diaspora. This is the first sustained book to bring together the distinction of this important film culture while inflecting the complexity of queer theories with indigenous voices from activism and history. The result is a renewed reading of the cinema and an engaged inscription of local queer culture.

The first chapter examines three types of postcolonial spaces as exemplary queer spaces: the iconic Hong Kong skyline, cruising sites and peripheral islands. These spaces require an "opaque" vision that "eludes the normative logic of seeing" (10). Non-normative vision, reflecting Hong Kong's postcolonial inability to control or recognise itself, is also itself a queer space. Using the concept of queerscape to suggest the space as a contestation between normative vision and less acceptable forms of identification and desires, Leung extends Hong Kong's postcolonial logic with a spatiality about the "sentiment of *place*" (13). Queerscapes produce new intimacies that disrupt normative communities, desires and memories. This chapter offers a new

perspective to approach the city cultures of the cinema: by queering the chronotope of the city, Leung shows how postcolonial spaces are materialised through intimation, attachment and affect. Films examined include action cinema, art house and independent lesbian productions.

The second chapter continues the queer disruption of time by focusing on erotic girl cultures. Leung discusses same-sex erotic attraction in single-sex education in Chinese fiction and demonstrates this continuity in contemporary Hong Kong cinema. She explores queer girlhood cultures in genres as diverse as horror, contemporary opera and women's films. A "life experience" (56) as common as divorce or singlehood, girlhood intimacies disidentify with the teleology of womanhood and disrupt adult heterosexuality. This chapter brings a set of disparate films under the rubric of girlhood cinema and provides a new genre distinction to approach them.

The third chapter examines transgender representations to consider the specificity of gender variance. Representations such as transsexual martial artists and transgender butches appear regularly in swordplay and action films. Leung analyses these figures to highlight the embodied difference of transsexuality rather than the films' apparent transphobic incorporation by heterosexuality. Rendering these films with fresh perspectives from transgender studies, and relating cinematic discourse to the embodiment of transgender self-fashioning, Leung inscribes the specificity of transgender desire and identity, and localises the materiality of transgender activism.

The fourth chapter provides one of the most original analyses of the gay iconicity of the late Cantopop singer and actor Leslie Cheung. It uses gossip, interviews and the history of Chinese male friendships to examine how Cheung is a queer icon precisely because of, and not in spite of, his sexual ambivalence. Leung shows how Cheung cultivates sexual ambiguity through bisexuality, performing the closet and appropriating the family kinship structure in his life and throughout his career. This chapter pays homage to the gay icon by compelling us to remember Cheung for what he was as well as for the homosexuality he had wilfully not disclosed.

The last chapter examines queer self-writing in short fiction, short films and Internet radio. Framed by feminist autobiographical studies, this chapter shows how lesbian self-writing embodies a quotidian dailiness that functions more as "a city's autobiography's of queer female love" (112) rather than a series of self-representations about female erotic love. This chapter brings to the fore the diversity of queer activism in Hong Kong and its myriad cultural practices that have fashioned its queer cultures.

At the heart of this book is a love affair with a city that has intoxicated many with its images and myths. Leung adds a new sensory dimension by taking a detour into the city's side alleys to uncover its affective turns and emotive ties. Each chapter bears the yearning of this love by unendingly disrupting straight time, space, memory and the body while also endearingly archiving its own genealogy of queer intimacies, desires, kinships and identities. Writing from Canada as an "involved outsider with various ties to the city" (3), this kind of sentiment, as both longing and attachment,

shares common ground with the homesickness experienced in the diaspora. Although the book takes the cinema as its queer starting point and makes the city of Hong Kong its protagonist, the stories it tells are as much about the difference as they are the singularity of love.

Leung writes as an organic intellectual, devoting equal commitment to the GLBT grassroots and queer studies from the West and Asia. Each case study returns to Chinese film and cultural history to consider how local queer cultures are also shaped by the legacies of cinema, literature and everyday life. This kind of trans-disciplinarity is an excellent example of a dynamic methodology that attends equally to the scholarship of the subject matter and the ethics of the subjects. Rigorous and readable, this passionate book will be a valuable key reference for students, postgraduates and researchers in the areas of cultural studies, film studies, gender studies and Asian studies.

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The New Politics of Conflict Resolution: Responding to Difference

MORGAN BRIGG

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

224 pages ISBN 9780230547100

Given the centrality of war and peace to International Relations Studies in the nuclear age, well highlighted by Kissinger long ago, Conflict Resolution, as a sub-field of International Relations, continues to occupy a position of great significance. Disarmament/Arms Control being in the doldrums (notwithstanding the Obama–Medvedev nuclear arms reduction discourse in London on 2 April 2009, on the sidelines of the London summit of G-20 countries), conflict resolution, conflict management peace mongering, peace studies, etc. could be marshalled to anticipate, de-escalate and avoid conflicts and wars. Early on, cognizant of devastation and anguish caused by wars in general and nuclear war in particular, Eisenhower (“There is no alternative to peace”) and Khrushchev (“Atom bomb knows no class principle”) favoured peaceful coexistence, but conflicts, big and small, continued to smear the face of earth, heavy human and material costs notwithstanding. After the First World War, causes for conflicts were systematically ascertained and mechanisms to avoid conflicts through negotiations, mediations, adjudications and arbitrations, confidence-building measures, etc. were all tried.

Earlier approaches to conflict resolution, like that of John Burton, were universalist, need based, common to all people “regardless of culture” (8). Integrative solutions beyond difference were proffered (8). While there was awareness about culture as a significant variable, Huntington’s and others’ vigorous pursuit of cultural