

VIGNETTES FROM HONG KONG: ON QUEER DRIFTS ACROSS BORDERS

HELEN HOK-SZE LEUNG

In Hong Kong, *queer* had never really caught on, not as a descriptive term, or an identity, and even less a politics. Sexual minorities are more commonly described as *tongzhi* (comrades) or by a plethora of ever-changing lively slang terms that arise out of lived experience and self-identification. None of these terms, however, carries the same valence as *queer*, which not only connotes “strangeness” but reflects an injurious history of insult and the resistant movement that turns such insult into power. The absence of *queer* in the language, however, does not mean the absence of similar kinds of critical and resistant endeavors. This essay takes a look at the not always visible efforts of those who, quite literally, go about looking for queer things. They illuminate phenomena that are rendered strange by the dictates of normality. In the process, it also becomes clear that markers of queerness are transmuted when they move across languages, legal systems, and cultures. Such movement can often be understood as “transnational,” but not always. After all, Hong Kong is not a nation, yet it retains borders of its own. Born out of colonial history, these borders are reiterated as the boundary of a Special Administrative Region of China. These are actual, defended borders erected by laws. As a result, they also produce metaphorical borders across which social, cultural, and linguistic differences thrive. The following vignettes are about cultural producers from Hong Kong who creatively perform queer drifts across these borders. Their writings exemplify different modes of “trans” engagement with queer phenomena.

I. Simply Forget

In October, 2010, a Hong Kong court ruled against a transsexual woman’s request to marry her boyfriend. Even though her identity card designates her legal gender as “female,” her sex at birth on her birth certificate remains “male,” a status that could not be changed under existent laws. The judge ruled that a marriage must be between a “man” and a “woman,” as determined by birth certificates. Unwittingly, this ruling opens the door for a gay transsexual man, who would be deemed female by birth, to marry his boyfriend. If indeed such a case presents itself, it would challenge not only the gender status of transsexuals in marriage laws, but the status of same-sex marriage as well. In this context, the defence of gender norms in marriage actually exposes the incoherence of those norms.

What should we make of this queer state of affairs? Lyricist, writer, and scholar Yiu Fai Chow offers an intriguing answer from a transnational perspective. Moreover, he makes his case by invoking an East/West comparison but *without* replicating a hierarchical narrative of progress. As a lyricist, Chow is well known for his daring and playful disruption of gender and sexual boundaries. Some of the hits he wrote for the group Tat Ming Pair during the 1980s were amongst the first ever iterations of queer lives in Canto-pop music: “Love in the Time of the Plague” (*aizai wenyi manyan shi*) evokes the early AIDS era, while “Forget He is She” (*wanji ta shi ta*) expresses desire that thwarts gendered expectations. More recent songs such as “Eva Eva” (*xiawa xiawa*) (about two women who are attracted to each other’s sameness), “Hermaphrodite” (*cixiong tongti*) (about a desire to embody the gender of one’s lover), and “Dark Room” (*heifang*) (about an intensely pleasurable anonymous sexual encounter in a dark room) continue to portray aspects of queer lives that have never even been expressed publicly, let alone in such profound vividness, in Cantonese popular culture.

While Chow continues to write lyrics for some of the most popular musicians in Hong Kong, he has resided for more than a decade in Amsterdam, a city known for its embrace of gay and transgender rights. In an article titled “Things Can Be Very Simple,” Chow comments on the court ruling through a consideration of the two cities he calls home. He recounts that as early as 1986, the Dutch courts had allowed transsexuals to marry as their post-transition gender, something the transsexual woman in the news in Hong Kong is currently fighting for.¹ Yet, even after the ruling, and even after the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2001 in the Netherlands, legal challenges continue to appear, such as in a case when a person wants the right to not identify as either male or female in marriage. It appears that *as long as* marriage continues to be defined in gendered terms, one or another combination of sexual orientation and gender embodiment would misfit the terms of the law, and a case would arise to challenge its inclusiveness.

As law courts in Hong Kong explore whether they can rule in favor of the transsexual woman’s appeal, Chow suggests that it would save the system future conundrums (as has been experienced by law courts in the Netherlands) if gendered wordings in marriage laws are erased altogether. In other words, forget transsexuality and marriage, forget even same-sex marriage, simply let marriage be between two consenting adults. Chow concludes with a reference to a line in his own song: “Forget she is he is she is he . . .”² While he wishes his song had outlived its relevance, Chow laments that unfortunately it’s the laws—not only that of Hong Kong, but *also* those in the Netherlands—that have outlived theirs.

Chow’s outrageously “simple” solution is unlikely to be adopted any time soon in Hong Kong, where homophobia and transphobia remain rampant in public discourse. Yet what is most significant about Chow’s piece is his deployment of a transnational perspective that does not contrast Hong Kong and Amsterdam in hierarchical terms of conservative/progressive, backward/forward or east/west. He does not hold up the Netherlands as a shining example of what Hong Kong should aspire to become. Rather, he shows that the fail-

ures and limitations of the Netherlands can be tapped as a source of creativity for Hong Kong activists, and that queer ideas that have long been circulating in popular culture can provide inspiration for political advocacy.

II. Bent Straight Through

Broadcaster and writer Brian Leung recently published a book of essays called *Straightly-Gay*.³ The Chinese title literally means “Bent All the Way”: the word for “bent,” *luen*, is a Cantonese word that has no equivalent in Mandarin, while the expression “all the way” (*yizhi*) literally means “straight through.” The closest literal translation would thus be “Bent Straight Through.” This efficient and economic deconstruction of the supposed opposition between “bent” and “straight” is typical of Leung’s word play in the book, and in his speaking and writing style in general. A true pioneer in queer media, Leung ran the Internet site *Gay Station* throughout the 1990s and currently hosts *We Are Family*, the only radio show in mainstream broadcast that is dedicated to the discussion of queer issues. Leung’s is one of the very few loudly out voices in Hong Kong. As he writes in his book, living in a “glass closet”—i.e., living queer lives as an open secret, without ever coming out in public—is the preferred path for most artists and public figures in Hong Kong. Many do so to avoid being misrepresented in degrading ways or being slotted into rigid categories. That Leung manages to be out while eschewing those all too likely traps is a testament to his perseverance and courage. Also due some credit is his unrelentingly clever use of language. Quite simply, the speed and wit with which he bends day to day language with translinguistic and transcultural innuendo likely defeat any potential detractors’ attempts to mangle his queer viewpoints.

In his foreword to the book, filmmaker Kit Hung observes that Leung’s many pop cultural references throughout the book are exclusively Western, such as: Oscar Wilde, *Will And Grace*, Jodie Foster, Barbie, Stonewall, Proposition 8, Dan Savage, and *Sex and the City*.⁴ One may well get the impression from reading the book that Leung has been living in North America, not Hong Kong. Hung concludes with chagrin that Leung must have found Hong Kong to be a queer cultural desert, with no significant local examples worth citing. I would like to think that when these “foreign” references roll off Leung’s rollicking prose in an endless play on innuendo comprehensible only to Cantonese speakers, he is no longer only citing Western popular culture but actively transmuted it into something local. For example, in an essay titled “A Life In Pink,” Leung offers a riff on “pink”: he recounts a “Pink Dot Day” event that celebrates International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) and an anti-bullying project “Sea Of Pink” in a British high school. These events prompt Leung to remember a celebratory event in 1997 in Hong Kong where Grace Jones sang “La Vie En Rose.” Recalling the haunting image of a “thin, familiar figure, in dark glasses and pink sweater, dancing in a life that is his and ours . . . a life in pink,” Leung ends with this lament: “Danny, wish you were here.”⁵ Leung does not provide any context or explanation for this concluding reference: he takes for granted a local knowledge of Hong Kong popular culture, without which the ending makes little sense. Danny Chan, whose cover of “La Vie En Rose” was one of the

biggest hits in Hong Kong during the 1980s, was a wildly popular Canto-pop singer who straddled a delicate balance between his heterosexual teen idol image in the mainstream and widely known presence as a gay man in queer circles. To this day, almost two decades after his death from an overdose in 1993 at the young age of 35, he is still being buried in this glass closet, fiercely guarded by his estate that allows no public acknowledgment of his gay identity. While Leung's essay is ostensibly about pink themed international events against homophobia, its free association with the color pink ends in an oblique but deeply local expression of sadness towards the city's persistently closeted public culture.

Leung's penchant for blending transcultural references through inferences and innuendo is best exemplified by the glossary he compiles for the book: the queer related vocabulary that appears in his writing includes terms in English and Chinese, Cantonese slang, Taiwanese slang, usage from Japanese *manga*, and, in one instance, a slang term from Szechuan dialect. Furthermore, some terms involve bilingual and cross-cultural punning. An example:

O Le: Short for "old lesbian," generally refers to queer women over the age of 30. What is its etymology? Some queer women claim: after this age, one needs "Olay"! [referring to the Oil of Olay line of beauty products].⁶

Leung's book should not be taken as merely a citation of Western queer culture. The trans-cultural and translinguistic *mélange* which Leung so spiritedly captures and which he so gleefully creates in his book solicits an appetite that is poised to consume, absorb, and ultimately reconstitute global popular culture as a tasty and distinctly local dish.

III. Forever Migrant

Also A Hong Konger: Memoirs of 70s New Immigrants is a collection of essays penned by those who, as children, migrated from mainland China to Hong Kong after 1970. The book includes an essay by Yip-Lo Lucetta Kam, a writer, activist, and scholar who has been creating, collecting, and documenting stories about queer women in Chinese communities for over a decade.⁷ Amongst her many solo and collaborative works are *Lunar Desires*, a book of "first love stories" amongst women, an oral history project on women who love women in Hong Kong, an ethnographic study of queer women in Shanghai, as well as organizational work for the La-La Alliance which supports lesbian communities in different Chinese cities. Kam's efforts are instrumental in giving thoughtful and diverse exposure to the hitherto barely visible lives of queer women in Chinese societies. Kam's essay in *Also A Hong Konger* only hints obliquely at her queer work towards the end. However, the story that she *does* tell at length, of her experience navigating life in Hong Kong during the last thirty years, speaks volumes about another kind of queerness. Kam's memoir documents the various stages of her life in Hong Kong: as an alienated school child who barely spoke Cantonese and was insultingly dubbed a "Mainland girl" by her classmates; a high school student who received the first taste of a collective consciousness when the city showed its intense identification with the demonstrators during the months before the military crack-down in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989; a university student who witnessed the nas-

cent emergence of new social movements, the city's tortuous struggle with democratization and political reforms, and the collective search for history and identity in the period leading up to sovereignty transfer in 1997; and now, an adult with a complex sense of identity who must navigate new political realities and a new discourse of patriotism. Kam concludes with a quiet declaration that wherever she goes, she will, as echoed by the title of the essay, "forever be a migrant." From the alienation she felt as a "mainland migrant" in the 1980s to the alienation she feels now from the discourse of "patriotic love," Kam writes of the "common reality" between all forms of marginal experience, whether it stems from class, ethnicity, or sexual and gender identity: "After I experienced an earth-shattering realization about my own issues with sexuality, I finally understood the common fate that befalls all those who live on the margin. I also realized how quickly one's relation to centre and margin can shift."⁸ What Kam's moving memoir shows us is that movement across borders, however these borders are constituted, is essentially a *queer* experience. Accepting one's status as "forever migrant" can also be a queer act of defiance, a way to live dynamically one's relation to those borders, rather than being defined and alienated by them.

These vignettes highlight the perspectives of three writers who, in unique ways, are significant and longtime contributors to queer culture, not only in Hong Kong but across multiple Chinese-speaking contexts. Their border crossing outlooks exemplify different forms of "trans" engagements with queerness: Chow offers a transnational comparison of legal treatment of transsexuality and marriage without replicating a hierarchical narrative of progress; Leung draws on globalized popular culture while using humor, innuendo, and language play to produce a distinctly local queer expression; Kam articulates the queerness of being internally displaced from *within* the boundaries of a nation and draw parallels between different experiences of marginalization. While they may all be thought of as part of a "queer Chinese" culture, even as individuals they already embody a plethora of distinct experiences across the many social, cultural, linguistic, and political borders within and across Chinese-speaking regions. Thus, if we care to look closely enough, we will find that the formulation "transnational Chinese queer" is always already a tautology, because neither "Chineseness" nor "queerness" can or should be understood within national boundaries. Illuminating this insight may well be the single most worthwhile endeavor for transnational queer Chinese studies.

Helen Hok-Sze Leung
Simon Fraser University

NOTES

¹ Yiu Fai Chow, "Things Can Be Very Simple" (*shiqing keyi hen jiandang*), *Ming Pao* (Mingbao), October 10, 2010, <http://ol.mingpao.com/cfm/style5.cfm?File=20101010/sta13/vze2.txt>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Brian Leung, *Straightly Gay* (Hong Kong: Kubrick, 2009).

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Ibid., 212.

⁶ Ibid., 232.

⁷ Yip-Lo Lucetta Kam, "Forever Migrant (*yongyuan de yimin*)" *Also A Hong Konger (Yeshi Xianggang ren)*, ed. Yiyi Cheng (Hong Kong: Step Forward Multimedia, 2009), 154–74.

⁸ Ibid., 174.