



Conditional Spaces

Hong Kong Lesbian Desires and Everyday Life

Denise Tse-Shang Tang

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Note on Romanization and Translation

The Hanyu Pinyin system is used in this book for words in Chinese. Some names in Hong Kong Chinese differ from those in Taiwan where the first name is followed by last name then the middle name. For names without an Anglo first name, the last name is followed by the Chinese names. I translated all interview quotes in an attempt to retain a form of colloquialism in the language used during the interviews. Translations of spoken Cantonese were challenging and any mistakes are mine. Quotes from Chinese-language texts were also translated by myself unless an English version was available. Book titles, chapters and articles were checked to see if an English title existed prior to my translation. The film and video titles were provided by the film-makers and video artists, and the same titles were used and listed on Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival publicity material.

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Introduction

There is an urgency to understanding the city of Hong Kong through its spaces. A city with a population of 7 million living on only 25 percent of its developed land, the portrayal of Hong Kong as a geographic token of urban density has prompted many studies.¹ It can be perceived as a global fascination with how one city has managed to cope with limited physical land space and a dense population. The city's economy is heavily dependent on land development and property sales. If I take the state imposed policy of land scarcity as a contributing factor to the overall cultural identity of the city itself, then it is inevitable that we examine the connections between spaces and sexual identities in Hong Kong.

Previous sociological studies on marginalized sexualities in Hong Kong have been primarily identity-based or focused on human rights and legal issues in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities. I propose that in order to analyze same-sex sexualities in Hong Kong, specifically, women with lesbian desires, one needs to view them as a theoretical project encompassing cultural studies, feminism, urban sociology and queer theory. Whereas each theoretical concept can be recruited, discussed and applied to the understanding of sexualities, I contend that only through an intricate approach that takes into account the spatial element of Hong Kong as a late capitalist city and neoliberal economy, with its global effects and influences upon lesbians' articulation of desires and acts of everyday resistance, can we develop a framework that is constitutive of lesbian subjectivities. Whereas academic scholarship in the area of sexualities and spaces is abundant, this book aims to bring the notion of lesbian and spaces together in a theoretical exercise to focus on the forces that determine the conditions and possibilities for the materialization of lesbian desires and identities in Hong Kong.²

Upon returning to Hong Kong in July 2003, I went to Club 64 in Lan Kwai Fong for a meeting organized by the Women Coalition of Hong Kong SAR.³ I walked past bar tables and chairs to a well-lit backroom and met twenty or more women who were discussing issues related to coming out at work and love relationships. I felt awkward and mildly nervous; after all, I had been immersed in North American queer organizing and felt that I needed to shake myself out of a cocoon in order to reorient myself. Being upfront and direct, I introduced myself briefly as a novice on the scene and a research student. I faced questions about why I had returned and why I would be doing research on Hong Kong "les".⁴ I replied slowly, since I still had not caught up with the city's pace, giving simple reasons for my motives. I came to realize that these gatherings not only provided a social space for Hong Kong women who might not identify themselves as lesbians, bisexual women or queer to talk about their everyday lives, but also, as a physical space for women to get together. Located in Lan Kwai Fong in the middle of the financial district, where multinational businesses set up their global offices in skyscrapers, Club 64 attracted a loyal clientele of community activists by being a strong supporter of social justice causes. A countercultural site, the space essentially provides a much-needed physical space for meetings. The name of the bar itself was a memorial to the Tiananmen massacre in Beijing on 4 June 1989. As its lease agreement expired in 2004, Club 64 has since reinvented itself as Club 71, its new name in commemoration of the July 1st march organized by the Civil Human Rights Front.⁵ The reinvention of Club 71 signifies a transition in time, place and cultural identity.

I spent the summer months getting to know the scene in Hong Kong. Through a contact from my thesis adviser Travis, I came to know about a women's party held at Queen's Disco located in a 1961 building named Luk Hoi Tong Building. The party was not advertised as a lesbian or bisexual women's party. The event was publicized by leaflets, on the Internet, via word of mouth and by mobile phone text messages. I went to the party with two new friends and sat at a round table by the margins of a large space. A runway in the middle divided the entire area with lounge chairs arranged in circles. An estimated crowd of three hundred were at the party but social interactions in small groups made it difficult for me to make immediate new contacts. As I focused on the space and the people in it, I came to experience a historical moment of being in the city of Hong Kong as a lesbian, researcher and observer. I felt outside of the space almost ephemerally. The site of the party itself was a landmark in Central. The Luk Hoi Tong Building housed the historic Queen's Cinema, medical clinics, tour companies, hair salons and other businesses. As ticket sales gradually dwindled for the cinema, its

space diminished to make way for a disco in order to generate profit. Queen's Disco was well known to the local gay scene, as large-scale gay parties were held regularly at the venue. Yet, it remained less known among lesbians and bisexual women. In 2007, the Luk Hoi Tong Building was demolished and the site is currently being rebuilt as a financial complex. What is salient to me is the fact that spaces have disappeared and have been displaced in an era when public reaction against the demolition of cultural landmarks seemed to coincide with an emerging visibility of a discourse surrounding civil rights, cultural belongings and sexual identities.

The writing of this book is primarily based on ethnographic research carried out between 2003 and 2008. I have conducted participant observations, informal interviews and thirty in-depth interviews. Twenty-eight women identify themselves as biologically female with lesbian desires. I interview two transgender lesbians for the study. One interview subject is biologically male and in transition to becoming a woman. Another interview subject identifies as a female-to-male transgender person after our initial session. I am aware of the dangers and limitations in representation with tokenism at its worst; yet excluding these transgender voices would only further marginalize their existence in lesbian communities. At the very least, I do not claim to have representation of Hong Kong transgender lesbians at all for this project. Throughout the book, I use the phrase "Hong Kong women with lesbian desires" to define women who have same-sex desires, regardless of their sexual orientation, and to include women who may not identify themselves as lesbians or bisexual women but engage in same-sex relations. By situating my discussion in sexual practices and erotic desires, I intend to bring out stories that might not have been narrated by subjects who assume distinct sexual identities as a means of coming out to themselves or to others. Pseudonyms were used unless otherwise requested by informants. Some informants who are activists preferred to use their commonly used names in the media.

There are many culturally specific taxonomies in the way informants express their gender identities.⁶ A TBG (tomboy's girl) refers to a girl or woman who is usually attracted to a masculine woman, but also includes androgynous women. A TB, or tomboy, refers to a masculine or androgynous woman. A "Pure" describes a gender identity in between a TBG and a TB with multiple erotic possibilities not restricted to TB and TBG coupled relationships.⁷ The term "les" is often used to refer to a woman with same-sex desires regardless of sexual identification as a bisexual woman or a lesbian. None of the interview subjects identified as queer *per se*, although some informants had been engaged with queer politics but were reluctant to bear the label. I also view the writing of this book as contributing to a process of localizing the

essence of queerness.⁸ Tensions between the terms “*tongzhi*” and “queer” were raised among activist communities during the 1990s. The identification with *tongzhi*, a commonly used term to denote sexual minorities in Hong Kong, was only mentioned by interview subjects who aligned themselves closely with the *tongzhi* social movement. The origins of the term “*tongzhi*” can be traced back to cultural icon and film critic Edward Lam, who adopted the term from a Communist denotation of “comrade”. By calling a programme of ten films at the 1992 Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival “New Queer Cinema”, Lam suggested that the films depicted representations of homosexuality.⁹ The word itself has been rejected by activists and community members based on its exclusive use to refer to gay men in general. In the introduction to a seminal collection of Chinese essays on sexual politics, independent filmmaker and scholar of queer studies Yau Ching reiterated the challenges faced when deconstructing queer discourse and sexual identities into localized contexts, but also the critical need to have Chinese language material available and widely accessible on the subject itself (Yau, 2006).

Postcolonialism and City Spaces

Hong Kong is often defined by its colonial past, as if a precolonial history has a limited existence and, worse still, the present as a bonafide postcolonial city. It was as if the history of Hong Kong began with British colonialism and its legacy continued to linger on as a defining historical moment, thereby presenting the city with a narrative that is overshadowed by postcolonialism. Understanding postcolonialism in the city by studying the trajectories of political, social and cultural identities, resistant spaces and Hong Kong history seems logical yet also dangerous. Dangerous in the sense that the term “postcolonialism” itself is deeply embedded in contested territories. It is a term that provokes and invokes a long list of concerns about colonial histories, psychological topographies, social conditions, body politics and regulated erotic desires. Postcoloniality in Hong Kong has significantly different characteristics from other British colonies. Thomas W. P. Wong contends that the British colonial government did not have “to standardize, to neutralize or to arbitrate” conflicting racial groups or communities divided by dialects, and suggests that the geographical close proximity of Hong Kong to Mainland China has resulted in a homogenous society with cultural values aligned with those known as Chinese culture (Wong 2003, 228–29). Kwai-Cheung Lo and Laikwan Pang posit a Hong Kong person as “the hybrid, diasporic subject who stands ambivalently against nationalism as univocal discourse” yet is capable of seeing him or herself entangled in “postcolonial consciousness and

sociability" (Lo & Pang 2007, 353). They further assert that if "the moment of Hong Kong's decolonization" can be pegged with clear markers, then it is often associated with "the nationalistic discourse of 'return' (huigui)" to Chinese nationalism embedded within global capitalism (349). It is in this ambivalent era of a postcolonial past and a problematic Chinese future that I find myself *relocating to and re-familiarizing with* a society in which I was brought up and in which I have lived for fifteen years, only to come to terms that in order to theorize my lived experience, I have to strive for an intellectual enquiry on Hong Kong lesbian desires, at times ostensibly ignorant of the overall environment.

In analyzing the economic miracles of the four East Asian economies, economist Li Kui-Wai employs a paradigm of economism to trace the post-war capitalist development in the various locales. He demonstrates that economism emphasizes economic growth over any other non-economic concerns; for example, fair distribution of resources or issues of rights and equality (Li 2002, 2).¹⁰ Economic growth is the driving force behind East Asian economies which basically compromises activities that are deemed disruptive to society, for example, union mobilizations, strikes and political demonstrations. The economy depends on political stability in order to set consistent investment policies and to develop a viable financial environment. The demands for a democratic government have been put aside in order to ensure economic well-being. Li describes Hong Kong's "economic pragmatism" as a government that favours economic activities and tends to exhibit an impatient attitude towards political affairs (Li 2002, 183). I have come to understand Hong Kong and its overall environment as what Rosemary Hennessy refers to as a capitalist project in which "capitalism functions as a complex structured totality" (Hennessy 2000, 9).¹¹ I am drawn to the thought of a totalizing capitalist environment, not to simplify multiple ideological forces into economic determinism, but to highlight the less discussed connections between economics, spaces and sexualities firmly situated in the context of Hong Kong.

If we take economic stability and progress as key defining factors of what the city holds dear, then it is vital to regard land property as the most expensive commodity in Hong Kong. After the signing of the Nanking Treaty in 1842, the British colonial government announced the island as Crown Land. By 1898, the Second Convention of Beijing saw the Qing imperial dynasty relinquish the New Territories to a lease of ninety-nine years with the cessation of Kowloon peninsula being sealed in an earlier convention. In order to secure Hong Kong as a colonial trading port and to partially subsidize other British colonial conquests, an inaugural land auction swiftly took place, eventual land transactions succeeded by British companies such as Jardine Matheson & Co.,

Lindsay & Co., and a few Parsis merchants who were former employees of the British East India Company. A few Chinese merchants completed sporadic land transactions, their later generations becoming business and property tycoons in Hong Kong.¹² By the 1930s, land developers in the private sector were in control of housing (Rooney 2003). Faced with a population increase and a post-Second World War economic recovery, the colonial government was more concerned with public hygiene, safety requirements and access to labour. When immigrants began to leave Mainland China due to the rise of communism in late 1940s, they settled in squatter homes built along hillsides, in alleys or on the rooftops of buildings. The aftermath of the Shek Kip Mei fire in 1953 is widely cited as the first governmental intervention into building public housing estates for the community of 60,000 people (Rooney 2003, 22). The next event that prompted the British government to tackle the housing issue was the riots about working conditions in April 1967. The government felt an urgency to address social inequality and hence decided on housing as the key area for community development. A new Hong Kong Housing Authority was established to oversee all public housing estates and to strategize on the overall development of low-income housing. Over the next two decades, new public housing estates were built as “self-contained towns” and new towns in the New Territories began to be developed (Rooney 2003, 37). Different home ownership schemes and government loans were set up to accommodate the increasing numbers of middle-class dwellers, allowing private property developers to increase their profits (Fung 2006, 211).

After 1997, Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa pursued a long-term housing strategy that would guarantee 70 percent home ownership by 2007. The Asian economic crisis led to a collapse of property prices, among other financial catastrophes, and contributed to Tung’s eventual resignation. Even though the increased development of public housing estates helped alleviate housing problems, Chan Kam Wah points out that familial ideology was the dominant ideology affecting the development of housing (Chan 1997). It was not until 1984 that single people or two-person households were allowed to apply for public housing. The demand for these flats often outnumbered the available supply. As a result, heterosexual married couples and nuclear family units are still given the highest scores when applying for a public housing flat. The allocation of physical space has to be daring, resourceful and strategic when housing and economic resources are limited. Living space, as a basic necessity, is conditional for many individuals and families. The social and institutional process of marginalizing and excluding a person from society can often be traced back to the allocation of living space.