
Undercurrents

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Undercurrents
Queer Culture and Postcolonial
Hong Kong



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I fear tragedy will recur
I am fated in my fate
To be out of touch with what's beautiful
History repeats itself
In this bustling city
It is not possible
To love without undercurrents
What use is there for me to go on cherishing you?
If I hold you tight this time
Will it not be another empty embrace?
Still quietly waiting
For you to say I'm too sensitive
I have a sense of foreboding about everything
And then I cannot open my eyes to see fate arrive
And then clouds gather around the skies

– Lin Xi, "Undercurrents"

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Ho Check Chong at Ko Shing Theatre

Preface

The seed of this book was likely sown a long time ago, by an old photograph in my mother's haphazardly arranged and endlessly fascinating family album. Taken in 1955, the photograph shows my late grandfather playing the role of Princess Ping Yeung at a charity performance of the Cantonese opera *The Dream Encounter between Emperor Wu of Han and Lady Wai*. Although he died when I was only four, my grandfather had remained a legendary figure in my imagination. His bold but short-lived career in theatre and in film – first as an actor and later as a producer – was invariably considered a failure by the family, but his *joie de vivre*, generosity, and creativity left lasting impressions on my young mind. I have always felt inexplicably drawn to that photograph – to my grandfather's evident pleasure in cross-gender performance and to the mysterious world of theatre and film where this pleasure could be freely indulged. It was not until much, much later that I connected my affinity with the photograph to other snippets of gossip that drew my empathy: my grandmother's tales about the “self-combed” women who loved each other; the news of a great-aunt's daughter who transitioned from female to male during the 1980s; my mother's whispers about a young cousin's curiously frequent visits to the public bathhouse. I would later come to appreciate these drifting fragments of family lore as a form of queer knowledge, one that – unlike in adult life – was acquired not from theory, activism, or subcultural participation but unknowingly from stories half-heard and dimly remembered that circulate in the nooks and crannies of daily life. What follows is inspired by this knowledge.

Acknowledgments

This book grew out of a project initially undertaken during my tenure as a Killam Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of British Columbia (UBC) from 1999 to 2001. I gratefully acknowledge the Killam Trusts for the valuable opportunity to develop a new research project in relative peace and with ample resources. An Endowed Research Fellowship and a President's Research Grant from Simon Fraser University (SFU) provided subsequent funding for the project.

A big thank you goes to Emily Andrew, my editor at UBC Press, who pursued this project with enthusiasm and facilitated the entire process with more efficiency and grace than I could have imagined possible. My appreciation also to Ann Macklem, who handled all the production details with care. I am indebted to the two anonymous readers for UBC Press, whose perceptive comments helped me improve the manuscript. Thanks also to Lee Ka-sing for generously allowing me to reproduce an image from his impressive project *Dot Hong Kong* for the book cover.

The collegial environment at both UBC and SFU has greatly benefitted my work. Kate Swatek was my postdoctoral supervisor and the first to warmly embrace the idea of the book. Numerous colleagues at the Department of Asian Studies and the Institute of Asian Research at UBC provided a regular source of friendly banter and intellectual exchange. I am grateful to my past and present colleagues at the Department of Women's Studies at SFU for their day-to-day support and camaraderie, especially Lara Campbell for our lively conversations in the car and Cindy Patton for intellectual and personal guidance. Peter Dickinson generously shared professional advice that was invaluable for a first-time author.

I learned a great deal from all the students I have had the pleasure to work with over the years, especially Anisha Abdulla, Usamah Ansari, Leah Allen, Sam Bradd, Jillian Deri, Cole Dodsley, Trish Garner, Emma Kesler, Marie-Geneviève Lane, Byron Lee, Colin Medhurst, and Tara Robertson. I am deeply

grateful for their questions, insights, and the generous interest they took in my work.

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The vibrant queer Asian community in Vancouver is a source of strength for both my work and my well-being. My thanks go to everyone I met through Monsoon and worked with closely during Lotus Roots 2002, especially Eleanor Cheung, Ritz Chow, Yuuki Hirano, Eileen Kage, Shahaa Kakar, Sook Kong, Laiwan, Desiree Lim, Cynthia Lowe, Debora O, and Rita Wong for their friendship and queer solidarity.

I have been spoiled by the hospitality of friends who filled my travels with excellent food and conversation: Chow Yiu-Fai and Jeroen de Kloet in Amsterdam; Karin Ann, Lusina Ho, Joe Lau, and Yau Ching in Hong Kong; Susan Stryker in San Francisco; Kiko Benitez and Chandan Reddy in Seattle; Nuzhat Abbas in Toronto; and Leung Ping-Kwan in whichever city we happen to find ourselves. James Keefer lent me his eye for detail by proofreading parts of the manuscript. Jeff Shalan remains my best friend and best interlocutor. My teacher Mary Layoun continues to be a source of inspiration even from afar.

I can never thank my parents enough for their affection and unwavering support. My father encouraged me from an early age to be a diligent learner and an independent thinker. My mother never stops sharing her love of movies with me, and my fondest memory while growing up remains our many, many trips to the cinema together. Finally, my love and thanks always to Kam Wai Kui for sharing all of life's joys with me.

Portions of this book have previously been published. An earlier draft of one section in Chapter 1 appeared as "Let's Love Hong Kong: A Queer Look at Cosmopatriotism," in *Cosmopatriots: On Distant Longings and Close Encounters*, ed. Jeroen de Kloet and Edward Jurriens (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 21-40. A short version of Chapter 3 appeared as "Unsung Heroes: Reading Transgender Subjectivities in Hong Kong Action Cinema," in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Laikwan Pang and Day Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 81-98. The "Undercurrents" lyric quoted on p. v is used with permission, © 1997 EMI Music Publishing Hong Kong/Go East Music Publishing Co Ltd, music by Chan Fai Young, lyric by Lin Xi.

Note on Romanization

This book uses the Hanyu Pinyin system of Romanization for Chinese words, names, and phrases, except in instances when a preferred alternative spelling exists (for example, most Hong Kong and Taiwanese personal names). The Pinyin and Chinese equivalents of these exceptions are given in the bibliography, filmography, and appendices. All transliterated Chinese names are ordered first by surname, followed by first name.

In Hong Kong films the characters' Chinese names are often rendered in English forms in the subtitles. For the sake of clarity, I refer to the English versions in the book and list their Pinyin and Chinese equivalents in the Glossary. Names that do not appear in the Glossary are originally rendered in English in the films. Hong Kong films also have official English titles that are not literal translations of their Chinese titles. I refer to the English versions in the book and include the Chinese titles in the filmography.

All English translations from Chinese material that appear in this book are mine unless noted otherwise.

Undercurrents

Introduction

This book began as an examination of gay and lesbian images in contemporary Hong Kong cinema but quickly became a very different kind of study. I was struck early on by the restrictive nature of “gay and lesbian” as a category of analysis. Its association with specific trajectories of identity formations, coupled with the political dynamics of the gay and lesbian movement in the West, means that its “application” to Hong Kong culture would in effect “disqualify” many representations as simply not gay or lesbian *enough*. When I was interviewed at the 2001 Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in San Francisco after speaking at a panel on Asian films, the interviewer asked me how gay and lesbian Hong Kong filmmakers would feel about San Francisco. “They see us as a model of their own future, don’t they?” he added confidently. The interviewer’s unknowingly condescending attitude derives not only from his pride in San Francisco’s liberated self-image but also from a belief in the universality and linear progression of gay and lesbian liberation. San Francisco represents an ideal to which more “backward” societies must aspire. Frustrated by the inability of my original framework to challenge such attitudes, I duly abandoned “gay and lesbian” as a rubric in my study. At the same time, I became fascinated by everything that did not “fit” into the project before: all the representations that seemed too closeted, too ambiguous, or too understated now appeared to me in all their nuance and complexity. In stories of illicit sexual encounters, nebulous relationships, and magically sex-changed bodies, I found undercurrents of anxiety over identity crisis, family conflict, and the failed heterosexual promise. I saw forms of desire that resist the bounds of sexual orientation and saw relational bonds that escape categorization. My interest in the cinema also led me down related but distinct paths of cultural inquiry to explore cinema’s relation to urban space, literary and operatic traditions, stardom and iconicity, and community-driven subcultural practices.

As I am interested in the ways that these works resist assimilation into the representational logic of heterosexuality *and* homosexuality, my inquiry

demands a reading practice that is attuned to what is not quite intelligible in normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. Grounded in a body of theoretical works that challenge dominant sexual and gender norms, “queer” provides me with an analytical framework to look for what denaturalizes, disrupts, or resignifies the relation conventionally drawn between gendered embodiments, erotic desire, and sexual identities. In Michele Aaron’s discussion of the New Queer Cinema movement during the 1990s, she draws particular attention to this critical aspiration of “queer”: “Queer represents the resistance to, primarily, the normative codes of gender and sexual expression – that masculine men sleep with feminine women – but also to the restrictive potential of gay and lesbian sexuality – that only men sleep with men, and women sleep with women. In this way, queer, as a critical concept, encompasses the non-fixity of gender expression and the non-fixity of both straight and gay sexuality.”¹

While the practitioners of New Queer Cinema deploy this anti-normative tactic to produce consciously queer films, the same critical intention and political commitment are not always present in the works that I discuss in this book. Furthermore, the sexual identity of the filmmaker/author, the actual content of the work, and the work’s reception among queer audiences are not necessarily aligned. In other words, while New Queer Cinema may be characterized as films with a queer aesthetic that were made by queer artists for a queer audience, what I refer to as “queer culture” in this book rarely meets all of the above criteria. Rather, these works fall somewhere within the range of what Henry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, in their study of queer film history in Hollywood, have suggested as possible definitions of a queer work: works that contain queer characters and that engage with queer issues in some meaningful ways; works made by queer artists that are inflected with a queer sensibility; works viewed from a queer spectatorial position, sometimes against the grain of the text; genres that may be considered queer forms; and finally, the inherent queer potential of spectatorship (i.e., of the process of identifying with and desiring characters).² Ultimately, what I have come to name “queer” in the book should best be thought of as an *effect* of my queer reading. These texts are queer not because they represent certain sexual minorities or particular sexual practices (although some do just that); rather, they have a potential to enable a queer critique of sexual and gender normativity that queer reading practices realize.

There is, however, a tension between the anti-normative aspiration of “queer” and the common usage of the term outside of theoretical discourse as a shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities. Queer critiques of the normalization of gay and lesbian politics have not always resulted in a challenge to identitarian formations but instead in a proliferation of minority identities. In film festivals, campus student

organizations, and community centres, “queer” more often functions as an umbrella term for sexual minorities: an open-ended category for a rainbow coalition of (currently known and future potential) identities. In this sense, “queer” bears an affinity to the Chinese term *tongzhi*. Literally meaning “comrade,” *tongzhi* was coined by Hong Kong playwright Edward Lam in the late 1980s when he used it in the Chinese title of the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Hong Kong. The term became popularized when Lam used it as a translation of “New Queer Cinema” for a film festival in Taiwan in 1992. Thereafter, *tongzhi* caught on quickly in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, first as a preferred term of self-identification that replaces the more clinical term *tongxinglian* (homosexuals) and later as a widely accepted umbrella term of reference to sexual minorities. In its original conception, *tongzhi* shares the appropriative and irreverent spirit of “queer”: it is a superbly ironic rearticulation of the serious political address of “comrade” used in recent history by both Nationalist Party and Communist Party members. At the same time, the term’s invocation of unity and solidarity implies a coalitional approach to sexual identity. In Taiwan another term, *ku’er* (literally “cool child”), came into circulation in the 1990s among a group of writers who adopted it as a transliteration – and local mutation – of “queer.”³ *Ku’er* was conceptualized in explicit contrast to *tongzhi*: while the former approximates the theoretical and deconstructive stance of “queer,” the latter is associated with LGBT identity politics. In some ways, the bifurcation of *ku’er* and *tongzhi* in Taiwan serves to resolve the tension within “queer”: the theoretical sense is disentangled from the identitarian sense. By contrast, because *ku’er* never caught on in Hong Kong, the tension in “queer” – between deconstructive critique and coalitional identity politics – is retained in the notion of *tongzhi*. In this book I use *tongzhi* and “queer” in this “tense” way – to theorize what escapes, exceeds, and resists normative formations while acknowledging the very real lure of identity politics conceived in plural and coalitional terms.

Working and writing in Vancouver, a city with a large diasporic population from Hong Kong and ready access to many aspects of Hong Kong culture, I sometimes find it easy to forget that I am *not* located in Hong Kong and am in fact writing from the perspective of an outsider, albeit an involved outsider with various ties to the city. In her book *Sexing Shadows*, Hong Kong filmmaker and critic Yau Ching observes a contrast between the attitudes of overseas and local critics in writings on queer issues. Yau notes that while overseas scholars often read against the grain of ambivalent representations to mine their radical potential, Hong Kong-based scholars seem more invested in exposing their ideological limits and veiled homophobia.⁴ As a reflection on my own reading practice, which certainly bears affinity to the position Yau attributes to overseas scholars, I am led to examine the different pressures that produce these critical positions. As a diasporic critic,

I often come under the pressure of the “global gay” narrative that assimilates non-Western queer expressions into its own trajectory and image (exemplified by the attitude of my interviewer in San Francisco). Many of the works analyzed in this book, for instance, would appear in this trajectory to be backward, pre-identitarian expressions that are still playing catch-up with the West. The imperative of the diasporic critic to resist such a model of analysis leads to reading practices that look for textual openings to tap a different kind of queer potential than what is anticipated by the “global gay” imperative. For the queer critic working in Hong Kong, the day-to-day struggle against heteronormative pressures in the city at large and in the culture industry in particular gives rise to a far more cautionary attitude toward the ideological limits and potentially injurious effects of ambivalent representations.

Furthermore, the distinction that Yau observes may also reveal an internal tension within Hong Kong’s cultural space that solicits two distinct modes of interpretive inquiry: a generally hostile atmosphere for *tongzhi* social activism, on the one hand, and a long cultural tradition that accepts or at least comfortably accommodates gender and sexual variance, on the other. The social and political activist movement organized under the banner of *tongzhi* has had a predominant focus on legal reform – from efforts to decriminalize consensual homosexual acts in the late 1980s to the successful recent attempt to challenge the age of consent for sodomy as well as ongoing efforts to include sexual orientation in anti-discrimination laws.⁵ These activist efforts are often met with vocal mainstream opposition and receive very little political support even from the most progressive politicians. In contrast to what Chu Wei-cheng has called a “civic turn” in Taiwan, where mainstream political parties competed (if ultimately only perfunctorily) to appear *tongzhi*-friendly in a bid to cultivate an image of political enlightenment,⁶ Hong Kong politicians – including those who are in fact *tongzhi*-friendly in their political platforms – often compete to appear *less* so.⁷ Against such an inhospitable political atmosphere, it may be surprising to *also* find a long tradition of culturally visible forms of gender and sexual variance – from the numerous instances that Stanley Kwan documents in his film *Yin ± Yang: Gender in Chinese Cinema* (see Chapter 3) to mainstream icons like Yam Kim-Fai in the 1960s and Leslie Cheung in the 1990s (see Chapter 4). It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that non-normative gender embodiments and homeorotic desire have long been mainstays in Hong Kong’s cultural imaginary despite the lack of social and political support. This curious ambivalence between hostility and acceptance is explored throughout the book.

If, like a film, a book can have a theme song, then Faye Wong’s 1997 hit “Undercurrents” – an excerpt of which serves as the book’s epigraph – would

be playing through a good part of this work. The titular image illuminates not only the song's theme but intriguingly also the process of its circulation and reappropriation. Ostensibly an uncertain expression of love (the speaker desires to "hold tight" a lover but fears what may turn out to be an "empty embrace"), the song deftly entwines this personal anxiety with the political uncertainty of the city's postcolonial transition ("history" – both individual and collective – repeats itself in this "bustling city"). A year after the song's initial release, it was covered by Anthony Wong in a version rearranged by Keith Leung and used on the soundtrack of the film *Hold You Tight* (Stanley Kwan, 1998). The sexually ambivalent character of both Wong's music (see Chapter 4) and Kwan's film (see Chapter 1) unmoors the song from its initial context while trailing other undercurrents: the political subtext has now acquired a sexual undertone (the uncertainty of national belonging parallels the unpredictability of desire). Echoing the song, this book makes an implicit proposal that contemporary queer culture in Hong Kong is paradigmatic of the city's postcolonial experience. In contrast to the typical course of other postcolonial narratives, the putative "end" of colonialism in Hong Kong has not led to national independence but rather to a "hand-over" from one power to another without any process of self-determination among the people most directly affected. The handover is justified by a nationalist discourse of "return" (*huigui*) that leaves very little room for challenge or dissent. The dictum of Hong Kong's postcolonial governance – "One Country, Two Systems" – and the promise of "Fifty Years of No Change" have fuelled the city's collective aspiration for regional autonomy, political democratization, and continuation of its cultural distinctiveness. Yet, as President Hu Jintao quipped on the Tenth Anniversary of Hong Kong's handover/return: "Two systems must never be allowed to override one country."⁸ The challenge for Hong Kong society to remain as such thus involves a struggle for intelligibility in a discursive regime that gives credence to its difference only on condition that such difference does not disrupt national "harmony." This sense of "difference" can never be reproduced as a counter-narrative of nationalism (as Taiwanese or Tibetan nationalism have more controversially attempted to do). Devoid of any political possibility of an alternative nationalist claim, Hong Kong's self-narrative of difference is far more nebulous: it is often perceptible only as an undertow of unease that refuses to allow the surface calm to settle. It is no wonder that the preoccupation with representation (or more precisely, with the unrepresentable) has remained a powerful critical current in Hong Kong cultural studies. At the beginning of his study of Hong Kong culture during the 1980s and 1990s, poet and critic Leung Ping-Kwan asks this question:

Why is the story of Hong Kong so difficult to tell? Many people have tried. Some have told it through a fishing harbour, a junk, skyscrapers, and the

neon lights. Others tell it through the mist at Lei Yu Mun, or the bars at Lan Kwei Fong. The more you tell the story, the simpler it seems to get, but then again it also starts to look more complex. Every time you tell the story of Hong Kong, it becomes the story of some place else. Every time you tell a story about some place else, it becomes the story of Hong Kong. The story becomes longer and more chaotic as it gets told. How ultimately should we tell the story of Hong Kong?⁹

The story that cannot quite get told is also a queer story – a tale of “difference” that is palpable only as an undercurrent. It resists the logic of the norm and risks oblivion under its representational pressure. As I will explore in the rest of the book, it is perhaps no coincidence that some of the most creative tales about the postcolonial city, and the most visionary stories of survival under its crisis-ridden milieu, are told through a queer lens.

Another undercurrent that runs throughout this book is a conscious effort to weave insights from major theoretical works in English seamlessly into Hong Kong’s local Chinese-language debates. In contrast to the practice in Taiwan, Chinese-language publications do not “count” professionally as much as their English counterparts within the current academic structure in Hong Kong. As a result, there is no Chinese-language academic scene that is comparable to that in Taiwan. Yet, many of Hong Kong’s most thoughtful writers on gender and sexuality still prefer to write in Chinese. Most often, these works are disseminated through nonacademic venues (such as newspaper columns, nonacademic publishers, Internet sites) and adapted to the stylistic demands of these media. While not always written in orthodox academic formats, many of these writings advance sophisticated theoretical positions and are in implicit or explicit conversation with major formal academic works in the field. Writers like Anson Mak and Yau Ching, among others, often occupy multiple positions as creative artist, community activist, and academic. Their multivalent experiences and multiple perspectives are frequently reflected in the richness of their works. Too often in the past, critical works on Hong Kong culture written in English have glossed over or completely ignored local discussions, giving the false impression that they are merely derivative of the theoretical debates in the West. In this book I try to return some of the spotlight to these discussions, which are themselves a kind of undercurrent in the global critical scene.

The book is organized around five themes with numerous interconnections between them. Chapter 1 examines Hong Kong’s urban culture and the relation between queer and postcolonial space through a detailed analysis of six films that imbricate queer themes with specific locales of the postcolonial city. I show how these cinematic representations of sexual and

erotic relations privilege everyday experiences of the city's "small places" over those mapped by the grand narrative of nation and identity. Chapter 2 examines a tradition of erotic culture between girls that frequently appears in modern Chinese literature. I trace the fragmented recurrence of this tradition in recent Hong Kong cinema and examine the impact that such lingering traces of queer girlhood may have on our understanding of temporality and adulthood. Chapter 3 examines the recent emergence of transgender studies in Hong Kong and its lack of theoretical and cultural inquiries. As an alternative to the predominantly identitarian conception of transgender in current work in Hong Kong, I propose an approach to transgender as "bodily effects" and as "a term of relationality" in analyses of cultural texts. I examine two films that have hitherto been interpreted as failed representations of homosexuality and show how signifying transgender in these films complicates our understanding of gender and sexual formations. I also make a case for why cultural work should matter to activism and social research. Chapter 4 looks back at the career of late singer and actor Leslie Cheung and suggests that the current narrative of his legacy elides the extremely ambivalent relation that he cultivated with *tongzhi* communities over the course of his long career. I track and analyze key moments of paradox in Cheung's life and career to argue for a more complex way of remembering this queer icon. Chapter 5 explores several recent "do-it-yourself" projects of queer self-writing and examines how each negotiates the boundaries between global and local, private and public, and individual and collective discourses of identity. I argue for the importance of marking and sustaining these ephemeral forms of queer self-inscription.

1

Sex and the Postcolonial City

City Views: From the Peak to the Rooftop

Victoria Peak at night is the most celebrated viewpoint in Hong Kong. Once touted by the Tourism Board as a “multi-million-dollar light show,” what runs dangerously close to becoming a tourist cliché is transformed, in the words of literary historian Lu Wei-Luan, into a metaphor for a way of seeing the city, its people, and its culture. Recalling the sudden sensation that she experiences when the Peak Tram starts to move along the precipitous slope and the vertiginous vision of the city unfolds before her as the tram slides slowly upward, Lu writes:

The scenery of Hong Kong at night is most enigmatic. The glistening lights transform into infinite layers, overlapping and varying in depth. I love looking with half-closed eyes at the lights gleaming all over the hills, so much like an intricate piece of embroidery. It's seductive precisely because you cannot see it too clearly. Visitors don't have to give it too much thought. Keep this scene in mind and it's enough to remember Hong Kong by.

I always tell friends from abroad that Hong Kong is an opaque city and those who inhabit it also inherit this quality ... Love in a fallen city: a love that is opaque and entangled. This is the story of Hong Kong and its people.¹

Forgoing the vocabulary customarily used to describe the famous view (“dazzling,” “glittering,” “splendid”), Lu remarks on the “opaqueness” of the scenery and of the city's character. For Lu, it is not so much the beauty of what is seen but the incompleteness of the vision – the inability for anyone to *really* see the city clearly from here – that defines the perspective as one belonging quintessentially to Hong Kong. The fleeting reference to Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*, a novella published in 1943 and set in Hong Kong around the time of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, subtly explains the sentiment behind this opaque vision. In the novella, the protagonist Liu Fanyuan utters this famous line to his lover Bai

Liusu while they are standing in front of a wall: "If one day civilization has been destroyed ... and everything is finished: burnt, bombed, fallen, perhaps with only this wall standing. Liusu, if we meet each other then, at the foundation of this wall ... Liusu, perhaps you will feel something real for me and I will feel something real for you."² Subsequently in the story, after the city has indeed fallen to war and devastation, the two fall in love and marry each other. The irony lies, of course, in the knowledge that "true love" itself is only a by-product of calamity, contingent on the vicissitude of the fallen city. The sentiment of love that is triggered by Lu's view of Hong Kong from the Peak is also intimately linked to the fate of a fallen city. It owes its fate not to the destruction of war but to the many crises precipitated by the postcolonial moment: the conflict-ridden political transition, rapid mutation of the city's economic role in the region, incessant urban development, and constant pressure from the Chinese state to value "harmony" over democratic aspirations.

Understood in this way, the view from the Peak provides a metaphor for a way of (not quite) seeing Hong Kong that bears close resemblance to a particular *cinematic* perspective on the city. In their introduction to *Between Home and World*, an anthology of critical essays on Hong Kong cinema that attempt to "give the cinema a name," Esther M.K. Cheung and Chu Yiu-wai argue that Hong Kong cinema is best understood as a "crisis cinema." Rather than locating Hong Kong cinema as part of a "national cinema," which runs the danger of glossing over Hong Kong culture's numerous points of disidentification with Mainland China, the notion of crisis more specifically "takes into account the complexity of the various kinds of mutation that Hong Kong is caught up with."³ One crisis illustrated in the anthology stems from the *urban* character of Hong Kong cinema and its negotiation between a perpetual sense of dislocation and a desire to "re-enchant a sense of belonging."⁴ As demonstrated in the works of several prominent cultural critics writing on Hong Kong cinema, the lens through which a city in crisis is most interestingly viewed tends to be self-reflexively opaque. Leung Ping-Kwan's historical study of urban representations in Hong Kong cinema from the 1950s to the 1990s traces the mutation of the city on screen over a half-century – from the dichotomized image of the urban as a polar opposite to the rural in the 1950s, to the Westernized depiction of a government-designed city of modernity in the 1960s, and finally to the increasingly complex formation since the 1970s of an urban space that cannot be apprehended in any singular, straightforward fashion but is rendered by a new generation of filmmakers through contradictions, irony, multiple perspectives, and continual experimentation with visuality.⁵ Ackbar Abbas's study of Hong Kong cinema suggests even more explicitly that the most prominent cinematic perspective on the city during the transitional period in the 1980s and 1990s approaches visuality as a *problem*. Abbas's formulation of

the *déjà disparu*, or the “space of disappearance,” understands the self-aware visual complexity of Hong Kong cinema to be a result of the time-space compression that David Harvey has famously argued to be characteristic of the postmodern city.⁶ More important, it also represents the “(negative) experience of an invisible order of things, always just teetering on the brink of consciousness.”⁷ This “opaque” perspective on what is barely seen can thus signify what is not intelligible – in other words, what eludes the normative logic of seeing.

The studies cited above focus on issues of visibility and deal primarily with films made in the period leading up to the handover in 1997. More recently, discussion about the “post-97” sensibility in Hong Kong cinema has drawn critical attention to issues of *temporality*. The very notion of “post-97” is fraught with irony, as it is in effect a *pre-1997* formulation and, as such, remains a part of the teleological narrative of 1997. In *Post-97 and Hong Kong Cinema*, film critic Longtin discusses this contradiction: “‘Post-97’ expresses a hope to move beyond ‘97,’ a hope to begin again from zero. Yet, that is merely what it says and not how it functions. The more we are intent on ending an era, the more we are extending that self-same era.”⁸ Longtin coins the deliberately awkward term “post-post-97” to describe a moment when Hong Kong has truly moved *beyond* the political transition – that is, when it is no longer possible to hold out for any of the hopes or fears of what Hong Kong will become after 1997. In 2003, at the time of Longtin’s writing, the future looked particularly bleak: the persistent economic downturn, the ineffectual postcolonial government, the constant stalling of political reforms in a thoroughly politicized society that seems poised for full democracy, the traumatic experience of SARS (Sudden Acquired Respiratory Syndrome) all seem to signify an interminable present time when dates and periodization do not carry any real meaning. “Post-post-1997” Hong Kong is a city fallen not to invasion or attacks but to its own inability to define what it will become or to control when it will no longer be recognized as itself. This sensibility finds a powerful outlet in the hugely successful *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (Andrew Lau and Mak Siu-Fai, 2002-03). The Chinese title of the trilogy literally means “the interminable hell” (*Wujian dao*), a dimension in Buddhist cosmology where everything, from time to space to suffering, is interminable. The theme of being undercover runs through all three films: almost all the major characters are living with secret identities ostensibly for the good of a collective (be it the Hong Kong police force or a Triad gang), but in effect each character is irreparably split between multiple demands of loyalty and betrayal. The titular “interminable hell” refers to the burden of this double identity. Longtin ends his discussion of “post-97” with a provocative image from the first film: the rooftop. The protagonist, Chan Wing-Yan, a cop who has been working undercover as a Triad gang member for seven years, regularly meets his boss, Lieutenant Wong, on the

rooftop. During the course of the film, Chan gradually becomes aware that fewer and fewer people actually know of his undercover status. Eventually, Wong is the only one left with the knowledge. Since the rooftop is the only place where they meet, it has become the only place where Chan's "real" (or "past," as it soon turns out) identity is intelligible. The glorious height of the rooftop provides a panoramic view of the city but also heralds danger. Wong has cautioned, "Don't screw around here; people can die." These turn out to be prophetic words as Wong is subsequently pushed off the rooftop by enemies and falls to his death, leaving Chan stranded interminably with his "false" (or at this point, "new") identity. Longtin states: "*The rooftop provides secret meetings that acknowledge the ambivalence of identity. A secretive action conducted in broad daylight. There is darkness in light, and the secret mission is supposed to be a light in darkness. Yet, the audience will be tempted to ask: Which really is light? And which is darkness? At the same time, if the only person who knows your real identity will soon die, doesn't that 'real' identity cease to exist?*"⁹ The rooftop signifies for Longtin a frightening apprehension of the speed of mutation as it starts to overtake one's sense of historical memory and identity. Moreover, as the prequel *Infernal Affairs 2* reveals, Chan is in fact the illegitimate son of a Triad boss and was assigned an undercover assignment in the Triad for this very reason: to betray his own blood family. What renders an identity "real" thus seems to be contingent on its relation to the moment and to an interminably layered *process* of identity formations. Much like Victoria Peak, the rooftop seemingly offers a bird's-eye view of the city, but its actual vantage point is far more complicated and tenuous. While the Peak provides a safe viewpoint from which to apprehend the beauty of the city shrouded in mist and layers of lights, the rooftop affords a perspective of the city that simultaneously involves an acute awareness of one's own ambivalent and precarious location in it – threatened with forgetfulness, burdened with life-or-death decisions, and with few viable exits in sight. The time at the rooftop is moreover interminable: one begins to lose track of when it all began or when it will end.

This Way Out: Postcolonial Space as Queer Space

The *Infernal Affairs* trilogy has struck such a chord in the popular imagination that references to the films are now commonplace in Hong Kong's political lexicon. While the metaphor of the rooftop may seem an unduly pessimistic way of apprehending the city's predicament, the films also offer other, less obvious, ways out of the problem of identity crisis in postcolonial Hong Kong. Of particular interest from a queer perspective is the theme of being undercover and its significance for the controversial politics of "passing" and of "coming out." At the height of the "outing activism" in the United States during the 1990s, high-profile public figures were "outed" by

activists like Michelangelo Signorile, who argues throughout his book *Queers in America* that it should be the “responsibility” of queer public figures not to pass themselves off as straight.¹⁰ Even those who reject outing activism, like Urvaishi Vaid, explicitly describe being in the closet as “immoral behavior.”¹¹ The moralistic overtone of the narrative of “coming out” implies that passing (i.e., not continually marking oneself as visibly and knowably different from heterosexuals) is an act of betrayal. More recently, the categorical certainty that “being out” is an ethical necessity and existential possibility is challenged by renewed considerations of bisexuality,¹² transsexuality,¹³ queer femininity,¹⁴ and sexual practices outside of the West,¹⁵ all of which initiate a rather different set of debates regarding passing. In myriad ways these works and the debates that ensue in their wake show that the teleological narrative of “coming out” can remain blind not only to sexual and gender difference that is not reducible to homosexuality but also to the instability of identity itself. Coming out embraces a previously repudiated identity and in effect concedes that the identity now fully articulates who and what one is. Such reassurance forecloses a sense of what Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* terms being “beside oneself.”¹⁶ In a discussion of the role of “rights” discourse in the LGBT movement, Butler cautions against the language that understands minorities entitled to rights as “bounded beings, distinct, recognizable, delineated subjects before the law.” While such language bestows legal legitimacy, it fails to do justice to “passion, grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, and implicate us in lives that are not our own.”¹⁷ It is rather the vulnerability – the “dispossession” of one’s sense of self through feeling desire or grief – that, for Butler, yields transformational possibilities. In a similar way, the *knowledge* of passing, which in the *Infernal Affairs* films is an anxiety-ridden form of “unknowing” oneself, exposes the fundamental uncertainty of identity. The tense build-up of suspicion throughout the films climaxes in the final sequel, where virtually every character is revealed to be, or to have been, working undercover, often for more than one side. Suspiciously, identity itself appears to entail another form of passing.

This paradoxical relation between identity and passing provides an intriguing premise for filmmaker Stanley Kwan to explore the connection between queer and postcolonial contexts. *Still Love You after All These* (Stanley Kwan, 1997), a short film made during the months leading up to the handover in 1997, splices together a performance piece that Kwan did for the experimental theatre group Zuni Icosahedron, clips from his early films *Love unto Waste*, *Rouge*, and *Full Moon in New York*, and Kwan’s meditation on his childhood, the city, and the impending political change. Kwan describes Hong Kong people’s identification in this way: “In Hong Kong, we know that we are ‘Chinese’ but also that we are distinctly different from

Chinese in other places.” Kwan recalls how neither the Cantonese nor English folk tunes that were taught to him in schools give him a sense of belonging. The closest approximation of “folk music” for his generation, Kwan suggests, is the “blurry but intense connection with Cantonese opera.” In particular, a scene from one of the most popular operas, *Princess Cheung Ping*, resonates for Kwan:

“Encounter at the Nunnery” takes place after Princess Cheung Ping has gone into hiding in a Daoist nunnery. When her husband comes to look for her, she initially dares not reveal her identity to him. In the lyrics, there is a classic line: “Deny, deny ... yet in the end there is no more denial.” This single line of lyric was like a constant mirror for me when I was growing up, especially in relation to my sexual orientation. Now, after changes upon changes, the line has come to be connected to this moment, and to Hong Kong people’s identification. This line, and the identity crisis with which it is entangled, seem to have caught up with me again, twice in half my life.

Kwan seems to be implying that it is time for Hong Kong people to stop denying their Chinese identity, just as he had to stop denying being gay in the past. Yet, paradoxically, what Kwan lovingly evokes in the film is *not* his “liberation” from denial and the reassurance of coming into identity, be it sexual or national. Rather, Kwan seems to cherish precisely *the experience of denial*. Why is there such a palpable sense of loss in the film? Is Kwan mourning for the closet and the colonial era? To understand this apparently “treacherous” (at least in the eyes of nationalists and outing activists) response, we must pay attention to the sentiment of *place* that is also a crucial part of *Still Love You*. In the film, Kwan mentions the colonial flavour of many of Hong Kong’s street names: Nathan Road, King’s Road, Princess Margaret Road. Yet, as Kwan goes on to say, there are also streets that “very casually borrow names from other places for their own use.” An example is Tonkin Street, where Kwan grew up. Tonkin Street is literally “Tokyo Street” (*Dongjing jie*) in Chinese: a random borrowing of the name of another place for local usage, with a casual disregard for the “accuracy” of its origin, hence the nonstandard (mis)spelling of its name in English. Tonkin Street, like so much of Hong Kong itself, results from the hybrid forces of globalized influences, on the one hand, and from local (mis)appropriation, on the other. Kwan films Tonkin Street as a unique site where place and memory intersect. The camera lingers on images such as the water drainage that Kwan grew up thinking was a “river,” the list of shops and neighbourhood personalities that he “could recite with his eyes closed,” and the men’s washroom in the cinema outside his bedroom window, where he first witnessed shadowy scenes of illicit sexual activities. These are the neighbourhood sights, smells,

and sounds of a closeted boy's experience in a colonial city. *Still Love You* expresses an affection for this time-space, which the advent of a nationalist narrative of "return" – much like the "coming out" narrative of identity – claims to *supersede* and consequently renders irrelevant.

What comes across as queer in *Still Love You* is thus not Kwan's certainty of being gay (or Chinese) but his loving evocation of a disappearing time-space that is not bound to such reassurance. Queer space, in such a context, is not an integral and distinct zone of difference. Rather, as exemplified in Gordon Brent Ingram's understanding of "queerscape," queer space is better understood as a "locality of contests" between normative constitutions of identity and less acceptable forms of identification, desire, and contact. Ingraham understands queerscapes to be "larger than a closet" but smaller and more locality-specific than communities.¹⁸ Ingram's emphasis on locality draws particular attention to local uses of space, to social transactions and interactions at the level of neighbourhood, and to erotic and affective relations to locales and a city's "small places." In *Still Love You*, Kwan attempts to map, through his camera, this queerscape as Hong Kong's postcolonial space – the hybrid everyday locales, caught up with speedy changes and traces of half-remembered histories, that contribute to their inhabitants' sense of being somehow "distinctly different" from people whose identity they otherwise share. Kwan pointedly narrates the entire film in Mandarin, the decreed national dialect, rather than in his native Cantonese. He is "passing" linguistically as "Chinese" while ironically evoking the emotional particularity of his experience of growing up in Hong Kong, which can never be completely encapsulated in the distinctly "foreign" dialect in which it is articulated.

The film's reference to passing practices and to the overlap of queer space with heteronormative space in an *urban* setting like Hong Kong goes against the grain of the theoretical tendency that associates such ambivalence with nonmetropolitan areas. Judith Halberstam has self-critically addressed queer theorists' (including her own) tendency to project the city as a liberated place that is more conducive to the formation of queer identities, thus resulting in a "metronormative" narrative that equates "the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey of closet case to out and proud."¹⁹ To critique metronormativity, Halberstam calls for cross-cultural studies of queer lives in nonmetropolitan areas. She suggests that there may be similarities between alternative sexual communities in North American small towns or rural areas and those in non-Western regions, such as practices of "distinct gender roles, active/passive sexual positioning, and passing," and notes their "proximity to, rather than ... distinction from, heterosexualities."²⁰ Such a critical direction should not, however, lead us to concede that there is a distinctive "metropolitan" sexuality to which the above characteristics are no longer relevant. It is important to remember

that metronormative delineation of gay space not only projects a devalued and homogenized picture of rural communities but *also* glosses over vital differences in urban formations, especially those outside of the West. Many of the world's teeming cities are, after all, both metropolitan *and* non-Western (or variously Westernized in different and complicated ways). Although the queer spaces of these cities have been influenced by a plethora of global forces, they often bear little resemblance to presumed "global gay" models like San Francisco and Amsterdam. Just as the globalization of sexuality results not in homogenization but in intricate processes of transcultural exchanges, translations, and appropriations, urban queer spaces that are produced by a confluence of global and local forces do not necessarily replicate a predictable metropolitan sexuality but more likely result in hybrid spaces that retain varying degrees of local traces.

The character of Hong Kong's urban space is tied both to the administrative reach of its colonial boundaries and to the pressure of globalization on these boundaries. The rigorously regulated border between Hong Kong and Mainland China has delimited the finite territorial reach of the city in order to allow for its administrative distinction as previously a British Crown Colony and, now, a Special Administrative Region of China. At the same time, the city's aspiration to be a cosmopolitan "world city" that reaps the spoils of globalization demands an incessant circulation of capital, enabled by ceaseless urbanization, large-scale infrastructural transformations, and the congregation of both an elite group of high-paid professionals and large numbers of low-paid labourers imported from beyond the territory (like the domestic workers from South East Asia). As a result of these conditions, Huang Tsung-Yi suggests, the living space available in Hong Kong has become "more and more congested, expansive and limited."²¹ Huang describes Hong Kong as a "dual city" where "the cramped living conditions in pigeon-hole high-rise residential buildings articulate local hyper-densities against the backdrop of an arresting global capitalist showcase."²² The "expansion" of the city is thus more accurately experienced as an implosion that sustains the social and aesthetic "values" of the financial districts through the functionalist destruction of old neighbourhoods to maximize profitable land use. Ackbar Abbas has characterized Hong Kong's urban development as a form of "self-replication": "new districts repeat the structures of the city centre, producing not suburbia (spaces designed to be different) but exurbia (which is a repetition of the same)."²³ Abbas goes on to observe that Hong Kong's city space is not planned "like a work of art."²⁴ Rather, planning is susceptible to unpredictable outcomes, and the "zoning" of difference is often overridden by squeezed boundaries and overlapping regions. It is no coincidence that some of the most interesting cinematic representations of the city's oldest and oft-rebuilt neighbourhoods in the Western District (Hong Kong's earliest area of development) appear in ghost films, most famously

in *Rouge* (Stanley Kwan, 1987) and, more recently, in *Visible Secrets* (Ann Hui, 2001). The city is inevitably haunted by itself: what becomes contracted, squeezed, destroyed, and erased by the ceaseless rebuilding and consolidation of space can remain or return only spectrally as barely perceived vestiges of what is half-remembered and vaguely felt. In distinction from the “gay ghetto” in some cosmopolitan cities, which has become a way of masking class-specific consumption of space, Hong Kong’s queer space can be understood as a part of this spectral dimension of the city. Animated by illicit desire and unacknowledged relations that remain temporary, fluid, and susceptible to instant annihilation, this spectral space does not exist on its own and must, as Jean-Ulrick Désert describes, be activated and “made proprietary by the occupant.”²⁵ It comes and goes during transitory moments of spontaneity and haunts a space that is always already in use as something else by someone else.

Whether from the Peak or from the rooftop, the nebulous view of the postcolonial city is its most enduring face. What remains unseen and not immediately perceptible is as much a part of the city as what dominates the glittering skyline. What follows is an exploration of these elusive and textured spaces as they (dis)appear on screen.

The City in Secret: Cruising and Community

Cruising as a way of erotically inhabiting and imagining the city has a long lineage in urban culture. While women’s cruising has remained either virtually undocumented, except in fleeting fictional fragments, or mired in controversy over its range and meanings,²⁶ gay males’ cruising has left enough social and cultural traces to inspire more than a handful of studies on its history, geography, and representations in culture. In his study of cruising on the streets of New York and London, Mark Turner suggests that the gay cruiser succeeds the nineteenth-century figure of the *flâneur* as the emblem of the ephemeral, alienating experience of urban modernity.²⁷ One of the most documented cruising sites in Chinese communities is Taipei’s New Park (now renamed the 228 Peace Park), a cruising ground of immense historical importance to Taipei’s gay male community.²⁸ New Park has also been etched in broader cultural memory by its iconic depiction in Bai Xianyong’s 1983 novel *Niezi* (Crystal Boys) and by the many subsequent literary, cinematic, and television works that it has influenced or inspired. Like other public sexual spaces facing prospects of redevelopment, New Park served as an ideological battlefield between competing visions of citizenship, modernity, and what constitutes “appropriate” sexual subjects during the 1990s, while other cruising venues in Taipei proliferated in its stead.²⁹ Across the strait in Mainland China, gay cruising spaces have been only scantily documented.³⁰ More vivid depictions can be glimpsed *fictionally* in films like *East Palace West Palace* (Zhang Yuan, 1996), which portrays the

public toilets behind the Forbidden City as a cruising area, or in Cui Zi'en's underground films, which offer idiosyncratic portrayals of queer subcultural lives in Beijing.³¹ Explorations into Hong Kong's gay-cruising grounds are just as few and far between. In a study of Hong Kong's urban style, the writer and architect Mathias Woo recalls how a graduate student who proposed a project to research the history of cruising in Hong Kong was turned down by professors in Hong Kong University's Department of Architecture.³² In Woo's own chapter on saunas and bathhouses, he makes no mention of the existence of a queer clientele.³³ Cao Minwei's popular history of Hong Kong's erotic culture devotes only one page and a brief allusion to gay cruising out of nearly two hundred pages of documentation of heterosexual sexual practices and erotic sites in Hong Kong.³⁴ The cinema, once again, provides a fictional lens through which these underdocumented spaces may be imagined. In his study of gay masculinity in Hong Kong cinema, Travis Kong categorizes three types of cinematic representation of gay cruising: as something done "out of pain," or "out of curiosity," or simply as a "fact of life."³⁵ Kong puts *Bishonen* (Yonfan, 1998) and *Hold You Tight* (Stanley Kwan, 1998), two films that came out immediately after the handover, in the latter category. The signature melodramatic excess of Yonfan cannot be more different in style from Kwan's subtle and distancing approach. Even so, their films share one thing in common: each of their intricate plots is instigated by a scene of cruising during the first five minutes of the film. How does this "fact of life" unfold, and what does it reveal about community, conflict, and specific locales in the city?

Inspired by the Japanese *shojo manga* tradition, which portrays relationships between beautiful boys, *Bishonen* tells a sentimental tale about a group of young men, their experience of sex work, and their relationship with each other.³⁶ Most of the story is set in a neighbourhood in Central. Even though Central is Hong Kong's downtown core and houses the financial district and the Legislative Council, its official and glamorous quarters blend almost seamlessly into more complex, colourful, and hybrid spaces. One such space is Lan Kwei Fong, the name of a single street that has now become synonymous with an extended area of gay bars, dance clubs, and hip restaurants. This idiosyncratic neighbourhood with long, narrow streets is flanked in the north by the towering, harbour-side skyscrapers, slopes uphill in the south toward the luxury residential area of Mid-Levels, and winds westward toward the old areas of Sheung Wan and the Western District. Farther west, passing the "world's longest outdoor escalator system" (used most memorably as the neighbourhood's signature in Wong Kar-Wai's *Chungking Express*, 1994), antique shops and art galleries mingle with family-run print shops, traditional rice dealers, and street stalls selling everything from preserved shrimps and dried vegetables to used clothing and antique trinkets. The neighbourhood is a place where genuine historical

traces overlap with fabricated “antiquity,” while local consumption of quasi-Western goods cheerfully blends with touristy faux-Chinese ostentation. The character of the inhabitants also undergoes a daily makeover, as the white-collar suit-clad set during the day gives way to the young, the transient, and the queer at night.

This neighbourhood is revealed in the opening sequence of *Bishonen* to be a latent erotic zone where queer desire is always lurking just beneath the surface. The camera follows the young and confident Jet as he saunters along the narrow streets and alleys with a narcissistic air of self-admiration. He soon senses that he is being cruised and, with a knowing smirk on his face, takes his prey on a leisurely chase around the block. A series of shots stages their mutual awareness of each other: the camera fixes on Jet’s knowing pause, showing a view of his back, cuts to the older man’s hungry, intent look, and then cuts back to Jet as he turns and glances back at the man. The mutual recognition is then translated into a playful movement across the neighbourhood: a repeated sequence depicts Jet leisurely walking along the street, while the older man enters the frame seconds later in hurried pursuit. Finally, a tracking shot follows Jet through a winding alley and into the public toilet, with the camera dramatically freezing on a close-up of the gender sign indicating the men’s washroom. The older man then takes Jet home, and the sequence ends with a close-up of Jet looking directly into the camera, admonishing his client to pay “cash on delivery.” The focus of these scenes is the coded exchange of glances and the spontaneous, stealthy, and sure-footed movement of the cruising men rather than their actual sexual act, which is not shown on screen at all. As Turner emphasizes, cruising is a “*process* of walking, gazing, and engaging another (or others)” that affords pleasure in and of itself, whether or not it ends in sex.³⁷ In these opening sequences, the pleasurable and elaborate movement of the cruising men activates the latent queer space of the neighbourhood and, right there in broad daylight and amid everyday activities, transforms it into a sexual playground and a site of erotic and financial transaction.

The film then goes on to unravel more layers in this eroticized space. As Jet resumes his laidback saunter through the narrow streets after his profitable sexual encounter, a *second* exchange of glances takes place, this time between Jet and a seemingly heterosexual couple. Jet first notices them when he is admiring his reflection in the window of an art gallery but finds himself confronted by the couple’s cheerful, teasing look. As Jet walks away, embarrassed, he also becomes more and more intrigued. In contrast to the previous sequence, Jet is no longer being pursued but has himself become a pursuer of sorts: he is shown walking into the camera frame, curiously searching the street corners and alleys for another glimpse of the couple. Later, as Jet walks through the bustling streets, he sees the couple again at an outdoor café beckoning him to join them. Looking unsure, Jet nods in



Jet's "backward glance," in
Bishonen (Yonfan, 1998)

recognition but walks away pensively as he heads toward the bar-brothel where he works. In contrast to the opening sequences, which stage the exchange of glances and physical movement within the recognizable codes of cruising, the significance of this second exchange is ambivalent. Jet at first appears to belong in a separate universe from the couple, inhabiting mutually exclusive aspects of the neighbourhood. Yet, this seeming discrepancy between heterosexual couplehood and queer cruiser, between open-air romance and underground sexual transaction, will later be dramatically overturned. Much like the quotidian hustle and bustle of the neighbourhood, which veils its latent eroticism, the apparent normalcy of the "couple," later revealed to be Sam and Kana, hides their activities in the queer underbelly of the neighbourhood.

When Sam appears again, he is in police uniform, apparently an upstanding citizen and a dutiful son to his family. His "back story" is revealed only step by step in a series of flashbacks, the first of which is initiated by an incidental scene. Two young policemen are "walking the beat" in the neighbourhood, gleefully exercising their authority by issuing parking tickets. Through their chit-chat, we find out that easy money can be earned if young policemen are willing to pose for erotic pictures at the home of a man named Gucci. After a photo shoot with these young men, Gucci calls Jet's employer and asks him to find him some new boys while reminiscing about the "cool" young man who once posed for him, who was willing to do anything while never changing his fiercely proud demeanour. As Gucci's nostalgic voice trails off, the camera cuts to a medium shot of Sam in a police uniform. As the camera pulls away, revealing Gucci's studio setting, the police uniform – previously associated with order and authority – is now transformed into the fetishized object of a lecherous gaze. This slyly staged sequence pokes fun at the authoritative veneer of the police force at the same time that it reveals another layer of the neighbourhood's secret spaces. Beneath the façade

of the well-ordered city are hidden enclaves where illicit erotic transactions are happily carried out by the enforcers of the law.

While Sam turns out to be rather more complicated than he has initially appeared, so does his companion Kana, although her “back story” is only fleetingly suggested in a short bar scene. This brief spotlight on Kana’s sexual foray is important not only because it belies her apparent heterosexuality but *also* because it disrupts what, by this point in the film, is emerging as an exclusively gay male sexual landscape. Kana reasserts, at least momentarily, a queer female presence that suggests the existence of an erotic terrain beyond gay male space. On a night when Jet has failed to score any clients, he goes to a bar to see whether he can restore his self-confidence. There, standing and smoking nonchalantly in the middle of the bar, is a stunningly attractive and androgynously dressed Kana. Jet catches her eyes but does not recognize her to be half of the seemingly heterosexual couple he has previously encountered. The editing stages a triangular relay of gazes between Kana, Jet, and a good-looking butch sitting on the other side of the bar. Unlike the opening sequence, where the series of gazes within the cruising game succeed one another without uncertainty or interruption, the triangular game of seduction here remains more tantalizingly uncertain. Who is looking at whom, and why? In her reworking of Eve Sedgwick’s “epistemology of the closet” from bisexual perspectives, Maria Prammagiore theorizes “epistemologies of the fence” as “ways of apprehending, organizing, and intervening in the world that refuse one-to-one correspondences between sex acts and identity, between erotic objects and sexualities, between identification and desire.”³⁸ In cinematic terms, Prammagiore illustrates her notion with examples of films that present a “spectatorial difficulty of clearly distinguishing between wanting to ‘be’ a character ... and wanting to ‘have’ a character” and where “any character is a potential ego-ideal as well as a sexual object for other characters and for spectators.”³⁹ In this scene the

Kana in a relay of gazes, in *Bishonen* (Yonfan, 1998)



traditional shot/reverse shot that was used to code the certain and seamless exchange between the cruising men on the street is replaced by a triangular structure of looks that deliberately confounds monosexual expectations. Up to this point in the film Jet has shown sexual interest only in men, while Kana has appeared to be in an apparently heterosexual couple. In this scene Kana's androgynous appearance replicates the boyish beauty accentuated in the film's title. She may be attractive to Jet because she is "like" him, much as Jet's male lovers outside of his trade also tend to be young and boyish like himself, as opposed to the older men he services. At the same time, Kana's elegant androgyny would signify "femme" under the butch gaze, forming an attraction that is based on difference rather than identification. The bisexual spectatorship produced in this relay of gazes suggests that there are more complicated sexual topographies amid the film's predominantly gay male space. Moreover, it shows that queer female desire exists in a wide and often unpredictable range of gendered configurations. Eventually, Jet goes over to Kana and whispers into her ear, asking whether he has "seen her before" and whether she "wants to fuck." Kana answers both questions with a coy "I'll think about it" and then cheerfully goes off with the butch, who has by now also made her way over, leaving Jet bemused and a little crestfallen. Kana's rejection of Jet is at the same time only a deferral (she'll "think about it") – a coy play on the fence that keeps the spectators (and Jet) wondering what erotic possibilities exist between her and Jet. It also leads, in retrospect, to a much more suggestive interpretation of Kana's relation to Sam in the initial scene when they appear as a couple. In contrast to the more common portrayal of the desexualization of women in their intimate relation with gay men, Kana's relation to Jet and Sam – which is both erotic and decidedly not heterosexual – proves far more intriguing.

Bishonen is most interesting when it uncovers latent queer spaces of the neighbourhood and shows in unexpected ways how they become activated by sexually adventurous inhabitants. The film's dénouement, however, opposes these queer spaces absolutely and tragically to the domain of the family. After Jet befriends Sam he often visits him at his home and, in time, strikes up a close relationship with Sam's parents, who remain oblivious to the sexual attraction between the two young men. Scenes of domestic intimacy in the stable, enclosed space of the home are contrasted with the spontaneous, uncertain, and layered existence on the streets and in the bars. At the end of the film, Sam kills himself in shame after his father accidentally walks in on him having sex with Jet at home, collapsing the hitherto neatly separated worlds. The way the suicide is shot calls particular attention to the dying man's perspective rather than to the physical violence of his death. Sam is shown crying on the rooftop of a building with a splendid view of the financial district's towering skyscrapers. The camera

does not show Sam jumping but tracks his falling perspective in slow motion with a vertiginous, downward-moving shot of the skyscrapers. As an emblem of the tragedy that is taking place, the shot suggests that the veneer of the city's worldliness and modernity collapses under the weight of its own contradiction. In this way, *Bishonen* recontains the city's queerscape in a space of perpetual conflict – where the streets are always opposed to the domestic interior and where the spontaneity of cruising runs counter to the stable structure of the family.

In contrast to *Bishonen's* ultimately pessimistic resolution, *Hold You Tight* more radically imagines the postcolonial city as a kind of queer space. In this film familial or domestic relations do not exist within an unchanging structure that remains in conflict with queer sexuality. Rather, relational structure itself is subject to various kinds of queering and mutation. The film tells an intricate story about five people who are haphazardly linked together by random events: a gay real estate agent, Tong, befriends a computer programmer, Fung Wai, whose wife, Moon, has recently died abroad. Before her death Moon had an affair with a young Taiwanese lifeguard, Xiao Zhe. When Xiao Zhe returns to Taipei in grief over Moon's death, he meets a divorced boutique owner, Rosa, a Hong Kong woman with an uncanny resemblance to Moon. After listening to his story, Rosa prompts Xiao Zhe to think about whether his attraction to Moon is not in part a displaced attraction to her husband. Prior to sleeping with Rosa, Xiao Zhe makes a long-distance phone call to Wai. Eventually Wai hears Xiao Zhe's (off-screen) "confession" on his answering machine, and the film ends in an intimate conversation between Wai and Tong on a beach facing the Chinese border.

A cruising scene also takes place very early on in the film, when Tong has an enjoyable sexual encounter with a stranger in a sauna. In a study of the emergence of queer spaces in European and American cities during the twentieth century, Aaron Betsky characterizes the space of cruising in this way: "It was a space that could not be seen, had no contours, and never endured beyond the sexual act. Its order was and is that of gestures. What makes this space of cruising so important is that it shows that you don't have to make spaces to contain and encourage relations between people, because they will just appear exactly at the moment where they are least expected – or wanted. These spaces, moreover, have a sudden sensuality that belies that anonymous emptiness of the modern city."⁴⁰ The sauna scene, which is followed by a shot of Tong smilingly throwing away a piece of paper (presumably a phone number) as he makes his way out into the street, is staged very much in the spirit of Betsky's formulation – as a place where connections are made and terminated spontaneously, a place that is contained within and yet belies the loneliness of the city. Sandwiched between scenes set in two of Hong Kong's most important sites of transit, Tong's cruising

activities also take on particular significance. The preceding scene, which opens the film, takes place in Kai-Tak Airport on the eve of its closure just prior to the handover in 1997. A group of Japanese tourists are taking pictures of the airport “for the last time,” as the new Chek Lap Kok Airport, the last large-scale infrastructural transformation overseen by the British colonial administration, will open imminently. The camera cuts from Moon, as she unwittingly embarks on her last journey, to Rosa, whose life will soon intersect Moon’s via a relation with Moon’s lover, although at this juncture the two women (played by the same actress) remain totally unaware of each other. While the old airport signals a space caught up in the flux of change and the passage of a departing era, it also provides the anonymous ground on which perfect strangers are open to unexpected forms of future connection. Immediately following the sauna scene, the film moves from the old airport to the Mass Transit Railway (MTR). Completed in 1979, the MTR remains one of Hong Kong’s most identifiable symbols of colonial modernity. Its construction has radically remapped how the city’s time-space is experienced by its inhabitants, facilitating direct links between previously unconnected areas and expanding reachable spaces in ever-shortening amounts of time. In this scene the trains provide the alibi for a fragmenting city life as well as new possibilities of connection. While Tong rides on the MTR, the camera follows his random, wandering gaze. He first notices two men, obviously lovers, quarrelling. The well-dressed, middle-class man talks about his plans to emigrate to Vancouver, while his younger, materially less privileged lover bitterly reproaches the older man for abandoning him. Then Tong listens to the conversation between two women who sit next to him, apparently either mother and daughter or mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The old woman, who has recently moved from Mainland China, sits in stone-faced silence while the middle-aged woman incessantly complains in acrimonious anger that the old woman has effectively ruined her life by coming to Hong Kong. These two incidental shots effectively convey the stressful and disintegrating effects on families and relationships caused by large-scale emigration out of Hong Kong (to cities like Vancouver) and immigration into Hong Kong (from Mainland China). At the same time, as Tong’s train passes through a station, Wai is standing on the train platform while Xiao Zhe watches him in the background. Unbeknown to the three characters, as well as to the spectators at this time, all three people will soon become involved in each other’s lives in unforeseeable ways.

Juxtaposed with these scenes, Tong’s cruising is both metonymically a part of the postcolonial cityscape and metaphorically *like* this cityscape. Much like the space of cruising, the alienating and rapidly changing space of the postcolonial city reflects a loneliness that prompts unanticipated intimacies. The relationships that unfold in the rest of the film erupt, like

spontaneous sexual encounters, out of unexpected and contingent spaces, weaving queer connections amid anxiety and crisis. These relations are further mapped onto the city's urban development. If the old airport and the MTR are indisputable markers of the colonial city, then the newly built bridges and highways, linking the urban core to the new airport and the numerous "new towns" that have been developed in outlying areas, are clear landmarks of the postcolonial city. The film quite pointedly conjures up this cityscape by locating Wai and Moon's new home in Tin Shui-Wai, a newly developed area close to the border with Mainland China. In his study of urban cinema, Leung Ping-Kwan specifically points out this detail as an example of filmmakers' attempts to explore "marginal and alternative spaces of Hong Kong."⁴¹ This plot detail motivates the cinematography's movement through the city via its newly mapped trajectories. In particular, as Tong's friendship with Wai flourishes, he is frequently shown to be driving Wai home and moving across the new bridges and highways, signalling that this movement across newly linked spaces parallels the emotional and erotic intrigue of the film.

New and often unexpected emotional connections, often arising from a previous loss, are woven between all the characters. Fung Wai and Xiao Zhe both mourn the loss of Moon, and their grief propels them toward a desire for new intimacies. In turn, the people who take care of them have also mourned the loss of loved ones and desire new connections. In a touchingly understated scene, Tong sits forlorn in his apartment after receiving a fax with the news that the current partner of his former boyfriend has recently died in London. Tong immediately makes arrangements to send help anonymously to his former lover. This incidental scene reveals a community that maintains care and connection beyond the bounds of a committed sexual relationship but, at the same time, also depicts the emptiness in Tong's immediate life despite such a community. Another incidental scene illustrates Rosa's painful decision to give up custody of her only daughter when she leaves Hong Kong for Taiwan after her divorce. Tong's and Rosa's respective acts of kindness and generosity toward Wai and Xiao Zhe are thus ways of redeeming their own lives from loneliness.

The erotic connections between the characters are similarly intricate. When Xiao Zhe is seducing Moon before her death, he gives her a bottle of his favourite cologne because he wishes to "smell himself on the person he loves." One night after Moon's death, Wai becomes very drunk and has to be driven home by Tong, and Xiao Zhe offers to help Wai to his bedroom. Alone with Wai in the apartment, Xiao Zhe finds the cologne that he gave Moon in the bathroom and sprays it on the unconscious Wai before leaving. When Wai wakes up in the morning, he mistakenly believes that it was Tong who sprayed the fragrance on him, and the thought pleases him. Later,

after hearing Xiao Zhe's shocking "confession," presumably both about his affair with Moon and his attraction to Wai, he turns to Tong for advice and solace. As the two friends sit talking on a beach directly facing Mainland China, they negotiate the not quite clearly established borders of their friendship/relationship. The ambivalence of the relationship between Xiao Zhe and Wai as well as between Tong and Wai does not necessarily suggest the film's timidity in imagining a full-blown sexual relationship between men. In fact, these (as yet) unconsummated relationships unhinge what is arguably a heterocentric fixation that categorically demarcates sexual from nonsexual relationships. Like the fragrance that wafts in the air heedless of boundaries, eroticism permeates these characters' lives, crossing the boundaries conventionally drawn between friendship, sexuality, love, jealousy, and guilt while fostering new modalities of intimacy in a world where strangers (always possibly becoming friends) need to, and do, take care of each other.

The film's last scene, which shows Tong and Wai in a car crossing one of the spectacular new bridges that link outlying new towns to the city core, offers a parable about change through an implicit reference to the film *Days of Being Wild* (Wong Kar-Wai, 1990). Although less well known internationally than Wong's later films, *Days of Being Wild* is, for many Hong Kong film critics, the most influential Chinese-language film of the 1990s.⁴² In the film's opening the protagonist, Yuddy, asks the woman he is seducing to watch the clock for a minute, after which he delivers what has now become a classic line in Hong Kong cinema: "One minute before 3 p.m., on April 16, 1960. We have now been friends for one minute. Because of you, I will always remember this minute." The film's obsession with time, dates, and memory – a theme that recurs in all of Wong's subsequent films – mirrors a collective fixation in Hong Kong during the time leading up to the handover. Almost parodying Yuddy, Tong asks Wai whether he remembers what he was doing on 16 September 1984. In pointed contrast to Wong's film, in which Yuddy *does* remember the significance of the date even at the time of his death (although he would like others to think he has forgotten), Wai remarks on the absurdity of the question and simply claims that he does not have much memory associated with the date. Tong, who likewise cannot remember, tells this story in response: "It's strange. We lose and gain things for no apparent reasons. It's like waking up in the morning and find that a burglar has taken away all your belongings, and replaced them entirely with new things." Incidentally, 1984 was the year in which the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which formally established the fact and timeline of Hong Kong's sovereignty transfer, was signed. Tong's ad hoc parable suggests that the predicament of forgetfulness need not be crippling, while loss may paradoxically be an enabling condition. The film ends in a series of shots following the car's movement on the spectacular bridge in the faint

light of daybreak. The passage into an uncertain future may be anxiety-ridden, but it also makes possible a new survival tactic, whereby the longing to “hold tight” or to “never forget” gives way to resilience in the face of change.

The City Otherwise: Cosmopolitan Allegories

Compared to Central or even the new towns, Lamma Island may at first appear to be *least* representative of Hong Kong’s urban space. Located a half-hour by ferry southwest of Hong Kong’s main island, Lamma was once a fishing village, and it remains one of the least developed areas in the territory. The small island’s relative isolation, sparse population (less than six thousand over an area of around thirteen square kilometres), and lack of amenities (there are no roads and consequently no cars) result in attractively low property values that, over the years, have lured political dissidents from Mainland China, expatriates, students, artists, and environmentalists to make their home on Lamma. The writer and film critic Bono Lee even describes Lamma Island as a combination of Berkeley in California and the Santorini Islands in Greece.⁴³ Lee’s flight of fancy may not be entirely accurate, but his comparison highlights Lamma’s progressive and laidback atmosphere, a quality not so easily found in other parts of Hong Kong. Lamma is also associated with erotic freedom and experimentation. Lee mentions an urban legend that describes the last ferry to Lamma as a free-sex zone,⁴⁴ while the 1996 film *Love and Sex amongst the Ruins* (Cheung Chi-Sing, 1996) portrays Lamma Island as a bisexual playground where an impotent man relearns his sexual parameters. This air of alterity, combined with the island’s hybrid makeshift community, renders Lamma a particularly powerful setting for imagining Hong Kong *otherwise*. In a widely circulated critique of Hong Kong’s urban policies, Taiwanese scholar Long Yingtai has pointed out that the incessant drive of Hong Kong’s urbanization persistently imposes the aesthetic and values of the middle class throughout the city.⁴⁵ Hong Kong’s much touted aspiration to be “Asia’s world city” has thus served as a justification for a class-specific form of urban development, ceaselessly pursued at the expense of neighbourhood preservation, environmental protection, and historical memory. In *Island Tales* (Stanley Kwan, 2000) and *The Map of Sex and Love* (Evans Chan, 2001), Lamma Island is imagined as a queer space where a different kind of cosmopolitanism may flourish.

Filmed entirely on location on Lamma Island, *Island Tales* tells the story of one day in the lives of seven people who find themselves quarantined on the fictional Mayfly Island when the rumour of a deadly plague breaks out. The photographer, Marion, has come to try out her new digital camera, accompanied by her close friend Sharon. The young porn star, Hon, has escaped to the island for a day of relaxation. Haruki writes for a Tokyo literary journal and has been recuperating from tuberculosis on the island. The

Taiwanese woman, Mei-Ling, is waiting for her lover – an English bar-owner whom she has met at a party the night before – to return. Aunt Mei is the Englishman's business partner, while the lonely gay man, Bo, owns the boarding house where Hon is staying. During the course of the night, Marion dies of a heart attack, while these strangers drift across the island and encounter each other, finally ending the evening in a spontaneous dance party at the bar. The quarantine is lifted the next day.

Showing an uncanny prescience about the epidemic occasioned by SARS, which, three years after the film's release, did turn Hong Kong into a city under siege by a plague, the film uses the allegorical situation to explore the dynamics of a society where mobility is prized. Early on in the film, the writer, Haruki, imagines a triangular relationship between three elements: "Boat, island, people ... none exists independently of the other two. Together, they form an unbreakable triangle." This "unbreakable" relationship is momentarily broken when the quarantine is declared and the boat – the means of escape as well as return – is eliminated from the equation. Much has been written about Hong Kong's historical role as a port city and about the sense of transience that this role inspires in the city's inhabitants:

Hong Kong has up to quite recently been a city of transients. Much of the population was made up of refugees or expatriates who thought of Hong Kong as a temporary stop, no matter how long they stayed. The sense of the temporary is very strong, even if it can be entirely counterfactual. The city is not so much a place as a space of transit. It has always been, and will perhaps always be, a port in the most literal sense – a doorway, a point in between – even though the nature of the port has changed.⁴⁶

Anxieties over the 1997 handover prompted a significant new wave of emigration out of Hong Kong during the late 1980s and early 1990s, creating a sizable class of what Aihwa Ong calls "flexible citizens"⁴⁷ who shuttle back and forth between Hong Kong and cities like Vancouver, Toronto, and Sydney. What distinguishes this new breed of emigrants from their predecessors is their privilege of mobility: they demand an escape route out of Hong Kong but retain the right to return. This mentality is best illustrated by the logic behind the Hong Kong government's encouraging attitude during the decade prior to the handover toward various immigration schemes proposed by countries like the United Kingdom and Singapore, which grant the right of abode without demanding that the applicant take up residency immediately. In a study of this migration system, Ronald Skeldon describes the logic in this way: "The logic of these schemes was that, if people knew they had a fallback position and right of abode in another place, this would discourage them from emigrating now in search of foreign passports. These schemes were, in effect, *de facto* anti-immigration policies."⁴⁸ In other words,

people will not stay unless they know that they can leave some time in the future. From another perspective, it also means that people who move abroad to acquire foreign passports do so with the prospect of returning in mind. Indeed, many who emigrated in the 1980s did return with their foreign passports in hand during the 1990s while maintaining close family and business ties in their destination countries.

By taking away the element of the boat, *Island Tales* asks an intriguing question of Hong Kong's cosmopolitans: what if one is not able to leave for unexpected reasons? As Marion remarks to Sharon when Sharon worries about missing the ferry: "The boat, the boat! There'll always be another boat!" Yet, unbeknown to her at the time, there will not be another boat for Marion, who will die of a heart attack shortly after making this remark. The film does not return to the pre-1997 obsession with the search for "belonging" or for some definite sense of a "Hong Kong identity." The motley crew on Mayfly Island comprises strangers who, in Haruki's words, "have accidentally drifted into each other's territories." Once the option of leaving has been taken away, there is little else for the characters to do than to give in to spontaneous and accidental encounters. The philosophy behind such an impetus offers an alternative perspective on Hong Kong as a community. It does not presuppose the familiar ideologies of shared history, culture, language, and so forth. It simply honours a principle of mutual service at a time of need. On that one chaotic evening on Mayfly Island, the characters have abandoned themselves to what the political theorist William Corlett, in his formulation of a "community without unity," has theorized as "gift-giving": "To give ourselves to a practice with such intensity that our subjectivity becomes a function of the practice (instead of the other way around), is to give a gift. During gift-giving something mysterious takes over, the practice seems to determine the identities of the giver and the receiver. The gift charts its own destination ... The gift is accidental, cannot be calculated, comes and goes, multiplies differences."⁴⁹ Corlett's study attempts to bridge a deconstructive critique of identity, on the one hand, and a communitarian understanding of ethics and mutual service, on the other. His notion of an "accidental" community, forged by relations that are not predicated on a predetermined discourse of identity that would inevitably demand a suppression of difference, approximates the fable of community in *Island Tales*. The fable proposes that those always thinking about leaving give in to the community at hand – *not* because they are bound to it by blood and patriotism but because survival may depend on the unpredictable relations they forge with the strangers they chance to encounter.

There is one important aspect of the various encounters in *Island Tales* that is not explicitly accounted for in Corlett's notion of community: eroticism. Yet, the erotic is surely one of the most appropriate expressions of gift giving. In her study of bisexual eroticism, Marjorie Garber draws attention

to the ways eroticism cannot be predicted or controlled according to the dictates of sexual identity.⁵⁰ Eroticism is accidental, spontaneous, extravagant, and without reassurance. It comes and goes without warning; it traverses unexpected terrain and crosses unlikely borders. There is not a single sex scene in *Island Tales*, but the camera draws attention to an erotic energy that traverses the screen in unexpected ways. Viewers are trained by heteronormativity to decode the trajectory of a character's gaze according to their sexual orientation, and mainstream cinema usually encourages such a habit, leaving little room for erotic ambiguity except in instances of comic misunderstanding. In *Island Tales* such erotic "reassurance" is absent in a very striking way. Most of the important encounters that take place on the island – between Haruki and Hon, Sharon and Marion, Mei-Ling and Hon, and finally, Haruki and Marion – are erotically charged. For instance, in the seaside scene where Haruki encounters Hon for the first time, the camera directs Haruki's gaze to the muscular body of Hon while showing Hon's body moving confidently into intimate proximity with Haruki. In a scene after Marion's death, Sharon confesses that she wishes Marion had been her lover. This scene is filmed in blue filter and (literally and figuratively) shows Sharon in a rare light. When the erotic erupts between a man and a woman, it is *also* steered in a queer direction. For instance, when the two most sexualized characters – Mei-Ling and Hon – lie together on the beach, thus creating some expectation of heterosexual intimacy, Mei-Ling touches Hon's face and gently addresses him as her dead brother, thus permeating their sexuality with an incestuous dimension. In the penultimate scene, where Haruki lies down next to Marion's corpse, a touch of necrophilic eroticism passes between Haruki and the serene body of the dead.

The film also projects a queer time where linear chronology is partially abandoned in favour of a temporality that loops back and forth, recalling events not in the order that they take place but as they would appear in imperfect memory – augmented by delayed knowledge and unexpected discoveries. In the opening sequence of *Island Tales* shots of a helicopter flying, cameras flashing, journalists speaking into microphones, and crowds milling about the pier create the atmosphere of an aftermath. The unexplained image of a dead body recalls the typical opening of the detective story and heralds a retrospective narrative that will eventually come full-circle back to the scene of the aftermath while disclosing its full significance. Yet, the rest of the film is edited in a way that detracts from this narrative expectation. The frequent insertion of anachronistic events creates a radical disjuncture between story time and narration time. Scenes are often edited together because of their *emotional* proximity to each other. For instance, after Haruki bids Hon good-bye at his house before either learns about the quarantine, a shot of Hon running freely toward the ocean in the early morning light is inserted. In story time, this scene does not take place

until much later. The insertion of the scene at this point stalls rather than advances the plot, but it illustrates the precise qualities in Hon that both attract and repel Haruki at this moment. Similarly, the scene of Marion's death is broken up into several pivotal moments that are placed separately at various revelatory points of the narrative. Instead of representing the physical event of Marion's death, which takes place in one scene, the film tracks its delayed and disseminated impact on other characters. Most effectively, the film ends with an incidental scene that occurs very early on in story time: Marion accidentally runs into Haruki at a fruit stand and whispers to him, "What a nice day!" Ending the film with this apparently trivial scene skews the entire narrative away from the supposedly central allegory (the plague, the quarantine, the media attention) and toward a spontaneous, haphazard encounter between two strangers. The film points us to what Haruki calls "the other side of reality." Instead of the elaborate, sumptuous, and sorrowful look backward that is typical of nostalgic narratives, the ending of *Island Tales* proposes a quiet *sidelong* glance at trivial, accidental, and spontaneous moments that can nonetheless become sites of revelation.

The most important of these moments occurs almost exactly half-way through the film when the photographer, Marion, who is about to die suddenly of a heart attack, recites in her native Japanese a long passage from the Bible to her friend Sharon. The passage from *Deuteronomy*, which speaks of a temporal order whereby everything occurs at a proper time, appears to Marion curiously similar to certain parts of the *I-Ching*. Sharon, who understands only Chinese and English, affectionately tells her friend that she has no idea what she's talking about. The camera lingers on this pivotal moment, filming in slow motion Sharon's tender caress on her friend's face as Marion recites the long catalogue of human activities – laughing, crying, dancing, mourning, and dying, among others – that will take place in their own proper order. The scene portrays a moment of exchange and a fleeting passage across cultural, emotional, and erotic borders. In her effort to comfort Sharon (who tries to maintain control even in the face of an uncontrollable crisis), Marion has forged a surprising link between two radically different belief systems. Unwittingly, she also reveals a flash of prescience about her own impending death, which will have unforeseen significance for other characters. Marion's effort has also sparked a rare emotional response from the habitually cold and rational Sharon, whose sudden display of physical affection betrays a hint of the erotic attachment that we later learn she has to Marion. Yet, Sharon does not actually understand the significance of Marion's recitation. The shifts between mutually unintelligible languages – which occur with pointed frequency in a film that alternates between Cantonese, Mandarin, English, and Japanese – serve here as a reminder that crossing borders is not an easy or immediate matter. It does not happen through sheer acts of will. When its seeds are sown (as in this scene

of exchange between Marion and Sharon), flowers will bloom and fruits will be borne in their own proper time. *Island Tales* offers an allegory of postcolonial Hong Kong that rewrites the city's dominant conception of time-space. The film imagines a communal space that is structured through spontaneous care giving rather than charted by identity bonds. It displaces the linear narrative of progress and nostalgia with detours through the accidental and trivial, which the film shows can be moments of unexpected importance.

While *Mayfly Island* offers an imaginary projection of what the city could be otherwise, *The Map of Sex and Love* (hereafter *Map*) understands the island space as a respite from the city and a place to recuperate memory. Also filmed on Lamma Island, the film tells the story of three young people who drift into each other's path. Wei-Ming is a filmmaker who, after his mother's death and his father's confinement to a nursing home in Macau, has returned from New York to his family's first home on the island. Larry is a dancer who harbours secret guilt about an act of revenge that he thinks he inflicted on a high school teacher who tried to "cure" him of his homosexuality. Mimi is looking after a friend's crafts shop and hides her traumatic experience of mental illness. It is on the island that Wei-Ming recalls how his mother used to burn incense on the ancestral altar, and Mimi attempts a time-consuming recipe of a fish dish her mother used to cook for her, while Larry choreographs ballet to Cantonese opera music. Recalling the past, as all three characters will find out, propels them toward a surprising discovery of transnational interconnections, overlapping oppression, and intersecting complicity. Furthermore, as the title suggests, the film tries to "map" this journey of discovery across the terrain of sex and love. As the three friends negotiate their desire and affection for each other, they also negotiate their desire and affection for their city, its trauma, and its future.

In the film's opening sequence Wei-Ming takes the airport express into the city. The scenery courses across the screen as it would outside the moving train, giving us a glimpse of the passages from the outlying Lantau Island (where the airport is located) into the city. The new airport that opened in 1997, along with the Tsing-Ma Bridge, through which the airport express travels, are the most prominent architectural markers of Hong Kong's postcolonial era. As Wei-Ming films himself talking into the camera, he asks: "People say this is the postcolonial era. How do we love this postcolonial Hong Kong? How do we protect its democracy and its laws?" Then, turning to the subject of new immigrants from Mainland China, Wei-Ming suddenly points his camera at what he calls "the most popular new immigrant in the future," and the image cuts to Mickey Mouse, sitting on the train and waving playfully. Much later in the film, this shot of Mickey will take on different significance when a newsreel announces the Disney theme park project underway on Lantau Island. As Wei-Ming watches the news, we

Wei-Ming asking Mickey how we should love Hong Kong, in *The Map of Sex and Love* (Evans Chan, 2001)



catch in the background snippets of an activist angrily asking how many jobs one-tenth of the budget of the Disney project would create if it were used instead on environmental preservation of Lantau Island. Thus, already in the short opening sequence and captured in Wei-Ming's film project, we are introduced to the twin forces of change in Hong Kong's postcolonial era: the city's rapid integration into the Chinese state and economy, symbolized by the daily influx of new immigrants from Mainland China, and Hong Kong's own complete integration into the global capitalist economy, symbolized by projects like the Disney theme park that threaten to urbanize the last of Hong Kong's remaining countryside. What does it mean to love Hong Kong in such times? This is the question that Wei-Ming ponders and that the film attempts to answer.

Wei-Ming's film project is also intertwined with his own sexual landscape, which is precariously perched between his New York boyfriend, linked to him throughout the film only by phone and becoming increasingly distant, and Larry, whom he encounters by chance at a pier and later sleeps with in the sauna that Larry frequents. Unlike the films discussed in the previous section, where cruising can evoke spontaneous connections and an eruption of intensity, *Map* associates cruising with the city, an environment that is fraught with distance and deception (Larry is in the habit of giving out fake phone numbers, and Wei-Ming runs out before conversations get too personal). It is only on Lamma Island – where Wei-Ming and Larry meet again, this time in the company of Mimi – that their relationship, both erotic and emotional, is able to flourish. As the three become closer, their traumatic memories also begin to intersect in interesting ways. In his youth Larry confessed his homosexual impulse to a high school teacher whose response was to give him a bunch of rubber bands so that he could put them on his wrist and inflict pain every time he felt such desire. Mimi



Wei-Ming, Mimi,
and Larry on Lamma
Island, in *The Map
of Sex and Love*
(Evans Chan, 2001)

has a history of mental problems and had a recent breakdown while traveling in Belgrade. While researching for a film project, Wei-Ming has come across rumours concerning the laundering of Nazi gold through Macau, and he begins to question whether his father, who worked as a goldsmith in Macau after the Second World War, might have handled such gold. In Ann Cvetkovich's study of trauma culture, she examines the interconnections between "private" traumas such as sexual abuse and "national" or "public" traumas such as experiences of war and catastrophe. More important, Cvetkovich suggests that trauma need not be understood in shaming and pathologized terms as something to "get over." Rather, trauma can be recognized as the creative ground on which many forms of queer culture are forged. Furthermore, such cultural formations, in bringing trauma to the public sphere, are in effect transforming our very understanding of the "public."⁵¹ By interweaving these three friends' memories, *Map* intersects personal with historical trauma: Mimi's very private breakdown takes place in a city recently scarred by war; Wei-Ming's historical inquiry forces him to confront his personal relations to his father; Larry's painful encounter with homophobia reminds Wei-Ming of the parallel fates of homosexuals and Jews during the Holocaust. As the friends' search for answers takes them from Hong Kong to Macau, they also become aware of the parallels between the two former colonies. Recalling and telling their memories of trauma thus results in creating unexpected connections between the private and the public, between Europe and Asia, between sexual and racial oppressions. Woven together, the three friends' pasts become a kind of cosmopolitan memory that sustains attachment through a knowledge of *interconnections* between places, peoples, and histories. Their intensified love for each other also exemplifies a cosmopolitan form of rootedness, one borne not of detachment from places but of entangled roots that spring from multiple

locations and temporalities. It is this kind of love that the film advocates for postcolonial Hong Kong and as an answer to its initial questions.

There is, however, one blind spot in the film's complex vision of relationality. Evans Chan, the film's writer and director, has acknowledged in an interview that feminist critics have found Mimi's relationship with the two men somewhat problematic, especially toward the end when she is "spurred on" by the men to befriend a Malay Chinese performance artist, as though the triangle is becoming too unbalanced.⁵² Referring to the film's last shot, which shows Larry with a new companion and Mimi by herself while viewing a video that Wei-Ming has sent from New York, Chan says he intended the scene to "suggest that [Mimi's] new-found relationship, which we saw earlier, may or may not be a stable one."⁵³ Chan's explanation tries to ameliorate feminist objections to Mimi becoming an emotional transaction between men. From a queer perspective, however, the problem lies elsewhere. The triangular friendship could have had enormous erotic potential, yet the film seems able to imagine only Mimi as a sexual outsider in the trio. In a scene where Mimi comes close to having a breakdown, she forces herself to witness her friends having sex with each other and then runs out of the room in pain, while wondering on the voiceover how these two bodies whom she loves can lose themselves in each other with such abandon. Yet why is Mimi allowed to apprehend gay desire only as an outsider and with so much pathos? If the friends' emotions and memories can intersect in such provocative ways, why can't their bodies and their desires? As my earlier discussion of the character Kana in *Bishonen* illustrates, the intimacy between women and gay men can be far more complex and erotically challenging. The desexualization of Mimi may be symptomatic of a tendency in queer cinema to eroticize only gay male bodies. It is thus fitting that one year after *Map's* release, another independent feature, *Ho Yuk: Let's Love Hong Kong* (Yau Ching, 2002), returned the queer spotlight to women and explored questions about the postcolonial city through their erotic connections.

Our City of Nowhere: Surviving the Future

Ho Yuk: Let's Love Hong Kong (hereafter *Ho Yuk*) is set in the not-too-distant future when overurbanization has shrunk and cluttered Hong Kong's cityscape while turning it into a hostile and lonely living environment. In this imaginary future, cosmopolitan Hong Kong, "Asia's world city," has become an urban wasteland with no more potential for "development" except into cyberspace. The frequent use of cramped, staged, indoor sets gives the feeling that the city's "locales" have shrunk into claustrophobic artificiality. The film's plot revolves around three women: Chan Kwok-Chan, a melancholic cyberporn actress; Zero, a Jill-of-all-trades who hustles numerous odd jobs; and Nicole, an executive who conducts a global business but spends her free time worrying about the *feng shui* of her abode. It is uncertain

whether these women are actively moving through the city's hyper-density or simply being carried along by its unrelenting rhythm of change. This ambivalence is already resonant in the film's title. *Yuk* (*yu*) – a verb in Cantonese meaning “to move” – is here colloquially used as an adjective to describe a perception of movement. The verb, which signifies an active will to move across space, is displaced by the adjective, which signifies a passive perception of movement around one's stagnant, nonmoving self. Chan Kwok-Chan expresses this anxiety when she complains to her mother after feeling an earthquake that is imperceptible except to those who stay perfectly still: “Why is it that I feel movement around me and yet I stay still, unmoving?” Such anxiety, however, is itself displaced by another, less explicit, shade of meaning in the title. The adverb *ho* (*hao*), meaning “very,” can also be understood as an adjective meaning “fond of.” The anxious perception of movement can be playfully transformed, by a mere change of tone in pronouncing the first character, into a fondness for movement. Thus, in contrast to Chan Kwok-Chan, Zero actively pursues her desire and livelihood with humour and enthusiasm. She does not feel the anxiety of movement around her but becomes herself a subject pleurably on the move. Finally, the title echoes one other important element in the film. One of the opening shots draws our attention to the character *yuk* (*yu*), which is made up of two parts, each of which forms a character on its own: *nui* (*nu*) and *dzi* (*zi*). *Nui dzi* (*nuzi*) put together signifies “women.” *Ho Yuk* is about women's space – where women desire each other across the extremely difficult emotional and physical terrain of Hong Kong's urban life.

Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated cities in the world, and living space is one of the most hyper-inflated commodities in the city.⁵⁴ Owning a flat of one's own is the quintessential Hong Kong dream. While intense real estate speculation over the years has made millionaires of many middle-class homeowners, the collapse of the housing market after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 has left just as many in dire straits, and their recovery has depended on the vagaries of government policies and the global economic climate. For other more disenfranchised groups, home ownership remains a distant and elusive goal. *Ho Yuk* takes a poignant, satirical look at this predicament. Zero is a squatter in an abandoned movie theatre, where she tries to maintain the illusion of a home, complete with house decorations and two cats, all in the space of a single theatre seat. Chan Kwok-Chan lives with her parents in a one-room flat in a housing estate, where the family shares the same space for everything from cooking, eating, and watching television to sleeping. Chan's dream is to earn enough money in the next decade to move into a bigger house with her mother. Her regular forays into the rental market highlight the squalid conditions of the city's living space. In the sugar-coated speech of the slick rental agent, any window that looks outside has a “view,” while crumbling old buildings offer



Zero makes her home in an abandoned theatre, in *Ho Yuk: Let's Love Hong Kong* (Yau Ching, 2002)

the most “feel” (a Cantonese use of English that means “atmosphere”). Yet, there is also a massive gap between the privileged and the disenfranchised. The foreign-educated young professional Nicole lives in a beautiful and spacious home, exactly the kind that Zero and Chan Kwok-Chan desire. Yet, Nicole abuses her living environment (at least in the eyes of the sleazy *feng shui* master) by enclosing a corner of her house in artificial obscurity, where she loses herself in cyberporn every night. She escapes into the same extended living space where many of Zero’s fellow squatters seek pleasure. Thus, even though Nicole already occupies the commodified living space that Chan Kwok-Chan and Zero long for, she needs habitat of a different kind. Cyberspace becomes another sort of real estate where exchange relations determine how and which bodies occupy what space.

Ironically, despite everyone’s fervent longing for space, intimacy between people seems possible only when space is *closed up*. Nicole enjoys Chan Kwok-Chan’s body every night across the distance of cyberspace. Chan Kwok-Chan would not allow herself to sleep with her favourite prostitute “for free” because she needs to be able to “own” her, and ownership is not possible without an exchange relation and an emotional distance. Time and again, Zero and Chan Kwok-Chan find themselves looking at each other across a distance, never connecting. Intimacy seems to demand a closing of physical space, such as the time when Zero slides across the seat on the MTR to get close to Chan Kwok-Chan, or when Chan Kwok-Chan climbs down the bunk bed and crowds into the tiny lower bed to sleep closely next to her mother. The film thus projects a complicated and at times contradictory relationship between the longing for commodified space and the need



Chan Kwok-Chan rolling up her turtleneck, in *Ho Yuk: Let's Love Hong Kong* (Yau Ching, 2002)

for sexual and emotional intimacy. The footage of the giraffes, which always cross-cuts with scenes of suspended desire circulating between the three women, marks a mock-utopian place that transcends such contradictions. When the first giraffe sequence appears, the voiceover jokingly explains: “Do you know why giraffes reach up so high for food? It’s because the less evolved low-lives cannot reach up there to compete with them!” There is an interesting combination of self-mocking pathos and utopian longing in this simultaneously silly and romantic use of the images of the giraffes. They seem to imply that the problems of post-1997 Hong Kong have turned its inhabitants into less evolved low-lives who are unable or unwilling to reach high for a different kind of space and a different kind of human relation. In an attempt to make a connection with Chan Kwok-Chan, Zero flirtatiously compliments her on her exquisite long neck, which reminds Zero of a giraffe. Yet, at the end of the film, Chan Kwok-Chan rolls up the collar of her turtle-neck sweater to cover her neck in front of Zero, still refusing to close up the distance between them. The longed-for but ultimately unfulfilled union between the two women may be explained by the allegorical significance of their names. “Kwok-Chan” (*guochan*) literally denotes “national product,” a name burdened with the demands and responsibilities of nationalist belonging and filiation. By contrast, the minimalist “Zero” signifies a kind of freedom in which relations may be imagined without prior restraints. Through its exploration of the social consequence of overdevelopment, *Ho Yuk* crystallizes the need for an alternative kind of living space that is not primarily defined by consumption, that facilitates rather than obstructs emotional and erotic connections. The imperative of its subtitle – “Let’s

Love Hong Kong!" – also suggests with some urgency that the survival of the city may well depend on it.

On These Streets

To love a city, one must begin by loving a street.

–Lu Wei-Luan, "Scenes on the Boulevard"

Hong Kong becomes one type of
heartburn on a map
called home

–Yau Ching, "New Year Resolution"

Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us.

–Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*

The word "patriotic" in Chinese literally means "loving the country" (*aiguo*). Facilitated by this linguistic convenience, the discourse of love is ubiquitous in Chinese nationalism. In Hong Kong the "pro-establishment" politicians (*baohuang dang*) like to self-identify as "ones who love the country and love Hong Kong" (*aiguo aigang renshi*), and they brand dissident views as statements against such love. As Sara Ahmed has shown in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, an appeal to collectivity "in the name of love" – whether in the right-wing fascist rhetoric of hate-groups or in the apparently more benevolent politics of multiculturalism – inevitably involves the positing of an ideal that requires some (those who do not live up to the ideal) to fail while masking its own interested stake in reproducing the script of this idealization.⁵⁵ The litmus test of national love, as scripted in the patriotic discourse in Hong Kong, is whether the city as an object of love matches the ideal image of its harmonious place in the nation. Claiming to love a *different* Hong Kong, one that would appear dissonant and out of place in this script, is a sentiment not recognized as love. When read against this nationalist discourse, Lu Wei-Luan's admonishment to love a city by first loving a *street* provides us with a means to rescript emotions abstracted for an immutable ideal (the country) into an attachment to the fragmentary and ever-changing particulars (the streets). The quotation is taken from a series of essays entitled "Walking on the Streets," in which Lu, from the

perspective of a thoughtful pedestrian, details traces of the city that she finds to be changing day by day. Referring to a group of artists' efforts in Taipei to document minute changes of three of the city's main streets over an extended period of time, Lu describes the project as an expression of love for Taipei. She characterizes this love as a willingness to "read each street carefully and with feelings."⁵⁶ The project is not about recording things as they are but about perceiving and feeling everyday locales as they mutate. For Lu, love for the city involves not only an attachment to these familiar and fragile streets but also the capacity to apprehend their ever-changing contour and texture. In a similar way, the films I analyze in this chapter pay loving attention to the haunting, layered, and not immediately perceptible details of Hong Kong's locales. Through the twists and turns of lives on these streets, the films map ways of living in the city that honour intense feelings of attachment while heeding the gut-wrenching discomfort – the "heartburn" in Yau Ching's poem – that often accompanies such feelings. This entangled sense of intensity and discomfort, manifest in the films through queer lives, may be thought in relation to what Sara Ahmed calls "queer feelings."⁵⁷ Heteronormativity, Ahmed suggests, functions as "a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape."⁵⁸ While queer lives resist the reproduction of this shape, they do not suspend the feelings and attachments that are crucial to the reproduction. Rather, queer lives continually work to fit into spaces that do not comfortably reproduce their contours.⁵⁹ At the same time, the efforts involved in the "fitting" put pressure on the shape of normativity itself, bringing about a transformational possibility that is cause for excitement.⁶⁰ The films discussed in this chapter show how queer relationality strains to (mis)fit the cityscape and, in so doing, reveals the city's secret nooks and crannies, its margins and borders, its unreality and its possibilities. Only on *these* streets could one locate the postcolonial city's clamorously queer place in the national order and experience feelings for Hong Kong that are as intense as love – and as uncomfortable as heartburn.