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## Dreaming of Normal While Sleeping with Impossible: Introduction

Yau Ching

Issues related to sexuality have emerged in China and Hong Kong<sup>1</sup> in unprecedented ways in the past several years. The growth of religious fundamentalisms and global gay discourses, heightened media attention linking the rising AIDS figures primarily to the gay community, *tongzhi*<sup>2</sup> activist movements, struggles and public demands of sex workers, have all contributed to this new visibility. In Hong Kong, tensions are rapidly rising within the growing impact of the religious neo-liberal front fueled with reclaimed (reimagined) post-1997 Chinese moralism *vis-à-vis* glocalised movements of sexual rights. Normative institutions for the regulation of sexuality including faith-based organizations and megachurches in Hong Kong and to a less successful degree in China, and government bureaucracies across the region, have adopted activist strategies to act in unprecedented unison, and with great speed, triggering waves of moral panic<sup>3</sup> in their campaigns against sexual minorities and representations including but not limited to LGBTIQ and sex workers' movements, pornography and queer mainstreaming, in order to restabilize their stronghold and perpetuate their privileges. As a result, non-normative sexual subjects and communities have been brought centre stage and often stigmatized *together* due to their "abnormal/shameful" gender identities, object choices and/or sexual practices, while *tongzhi* activists—often in alliance with other pro-sexual rights groups—are striving to fight back. There is a very urgent need for intellectual work to more acutely articulate, understand and analyze the complexity of the issues raised, the subject formations concerned, and the ways in which different norms line up and become synonymous with one another. This work will contribute to building situated knowledges that will strengthen the discursive power of non-normative sexual-subjects-in-alliance, enabling them to fight against the stigmatization and facilitate more visibility of variance and differences.<sup>4</sup>

This book showcases the work of emerging and established scholars — working mostly outside Euro-America—on contemporary *tongzhi* studies. As one of the first sustained collections of writings on non-normative sexual subjectivities and sexual politics in Hong Kong and China post-1997 published in English, many of the writers included here are uniquely first-generation. Unlike the Euro-American academia where gender (umbrella word including sexuality) and queer studies have been rapidly proliferating at the risk of becoming normalized, these fields are still marked in Mainland China and Hong Kong as territories for the impossible and unthinkable, inhabited by stigma, silence, risk and frustration. In most universities in China and almost all universities in Hong Kong, postgraduate students are guided away from working on topics concerning queer studies *and/or* sexuality; scholars are discouraged from pursuing or publishing research in these fields. As a result, queer studies scholars have produced relatively little scholarship outside the contexts of Europe, North America and Australia. Scholars based in Asia have had remarkably little opportunity and freedom to access the resources needed to conduct and publish studies regarding LGBTIQ communities and non-normative sexual practices, in our own languages even, not to mention in English. Both of these histories have contributed to a systemic suppression of sexuality and a perpetuation of varieties of hybrid heteronormativities (that also need study) in the formulation and institutionalization of knowledge. In this light, most of the research presented here is *primary* research, literally—most of the topics and/or communities studied here have not been studied before. All the authors here conducted their research primarily in a language other than English. Subjects previously unthinkable in the societies they live in *and* in English are be(com)ing named, spoken, articulated, and communicated through this project. This book could therefore be seen, by its writers as well as its readers, as an act of disclosure. Like most acts of disclosure, a certain strategic essentialism would be considered historically necessary by writers in this book while the collection as a whole resists the normalizing logic of the modernized privileged queer agent.<sup>5</sup> As a project of “continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics”, the Euro-American critique of queer studies “disallows any positing of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent” (Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz 3). However, in many parts of the rest of the world today, identity politics have not made their way into a core part (“heart”) of our culture as most subjects could not afford to politicize one’s identity. The Chinese translation of “queer” has also been largely unable to go beyond academic circles in China and Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> With *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* widely consumed on Hong Kong mainstream television (entitled in Chinese as *Fentong jiu bing*, literally meaning *The Pink Rescue Team*, thus

avoiding the untranslatability of “queer” and the potential confrontation in the suggested opposition/separation between queer and straight) and on YouTube, queer consumerism has popularized itself as one of the coolest parts of Western globalization. By rechanneling expressions of seemingly non-normative desires *only* into commodity culture this form of queerness helps to serve rather than challenge the hegemonic hierarchies of sexualities.

Resistance to the (queer) normativity seemingly offered by the American-centric (subjectless) agent, as summarized by Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz, also needs to be problematized. In this age of globalized “queer liberalism”, not only does that normativity need to be foregrounded and interrogated as “variegated, striated, contradictory” (Villarejo), it is also important to remember that normativity as a relative ideal might not be accessible for many people in most parts of the world. As a performative façade fraught with fission, consumed and upheld with ongoing-but-never-to-be-exposed sacrifices and sweat, it is practically impossible and thus always desirable. I began to learn this from the following experience. Undergraduates in Cultural Studies at the school where I teach are required to work on an article-length thesis under supervision in their final year. Last year one of my students, K., wanted his thesis to be on “Straight-boy Complexes of Hong Kong Gays”. Mainly based on his self-inquiry, his personal observations of friends around him, interviews and focus group discussions with friends and acquaintances, his project tried to understand how and why Hong Kong gay boys—especially “sissies” like himself—seemed to have an unyielding fixation on straight-looking guys in spite of repeated hurt, rejection and shaming. In the second tutorial, in my most gentle and understanding voice, I asked him if he had considered these “complexes” as constituted at least partly by self-loathing homophobia. Much to my surprise, with a big nodding smile he responded he had certainly asked himself *this*. He didn’t tell me what his answer was. Later in his paper, he concluded by suggesting that these fantasies to date or *have* straight boys might be closely akin to a naturalized/socialized desire to access normativity—to be as close to being normal as possible because it is through sleeping with straight boys that one can imagine *being close to* getting married, having children and building families. Thus the moment of being closest to normativity is also the moment of confirming the impossibility of one’s desire is also the moment of knowing one’s queerness. It is only upon acknowledgement of one’s not being straight that one needs to put one’s finger on straightness in other ways, including in ways apparently impossible. In other words, my simplistic and presumptuous question had failed to register the complex processes of construction of and negotiation with normativity *within* subjects who are deprived of the right or the option or resist to be normal to start with. With “As Normal As Possible”—

the title of this collection—the emphasis is on the two “as”es; how its meanings change *naasssss* it moves along the conditions that define it. In what ways does normativity produce (im)possibilities for our sexualities; how do we stretch and resist the hegemony of normativity *and* survive to redefine, make productive and/or transform its violence and tensions in our be(come)ings? When it is given that certain forms of sexuality could not be “normal” period, the challenges for the continual and thriving existence of non-normative sexual subjects reside between the operations of at least these two levels (among others) *simultaneously*: accessing “normal” as a possibility *and* transforming “normal” into “possible”.

### Different Normativities

As what is considered “queer” might vary from context to context, what is constructed, desired and/or resisted as normative also varies across different bodies and communities. This collection seeks to highlight the context-specificity of normativity and the ways in which different individuals’/communities’ love-and-hate relationships with normativity are also manifested and negotiated differently at different historical moments, fine-tuned according to the different power structures of each context and making different meanings. For male sex workers who serve primarily men (in local parlance “money boys”) in contemporary Mainland China, the neo-liberal ideology of achieving upward class mobility and adopting a cosmopolitan lifestyle signifies more normativity than concerns regarding sexual identity or health. For Indonesian domestic helpers in Hong Kong, the prescribed feminine role of getting married, serving one’s husband and having kids at home exerts tremendous pressure on the migrant workers’ lives, thus informing and configuring their choices of migrancy, transgenderism and exploration of same-sex desires and practices. Compared to female migrant workers in Hong Kong and lesbians in Shanghai, Hong Kong lesbians are less confronted with the pressure to get married, but they suffer nonetheless from the expectations of their being straight-behaving, income-aspiring or income-earning hard-working girls at school, at work and at home. Their need for lesbian-only spaces expresses a desire for a buffer and comfort zone to work out and manage the stress that comes with their non-normative identities and to gain more bargaining power within a highly condensed capitalist normativity. In desiring to access this normativity, the women in Tang’s study identify—not without contradictions—with a visible queer consumerism, and an affirmative discourse on lesbian sexuality as (close-to-)normal possibilities. In Shanghai *lalas*’ (a Chinese term for women with same-sex desires) experimentation with “fake marriage” in order to act “normal”, they have created new forms of intimacy and familial relations in

the interstices between heterosexual and same-sex relationships. A reading of some pornographic period dramas made in 1970s–1990s Hong Kong suggests that the assumed normative ideal of monogamous marriage based on romantic equalitarian love between opposite genders is a very recent invention and might not be quite universalized or even desirable in contemporary Chinese imaginaries that retain memories of our literary past. Yet, for an openly queer icon Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing (who starred in films including *Rouge*, *Farewell My Concubine* and *Happy Together*, among others) operating in an increasingly or more overtly homophobic post-1997 Hong Kong, he found himself exhausting all his energies and creativity in negotiating with the limits of masculine- and hetero-normativity. In films representing transgender subjects in China today, realism, essentialized genders and assumed mutual exclusivity of homosexuality and heterosexuality are explored and critiqued as sites of normativity, whereas for transsexuals who are inevitably subject to the violence of Hong Kong’s medical system, a stable and changed gender offers simultaneously the promise for normativity as well as the means for self-invention.

### Different Chinese

In providing grounded and original fieldwork, as well as critical applications from the wider fields of sociological studies, public health, cultural and film studies, this interdisciplinary collection taps on the one hand, the denaturalizing of disciplinary boundaries and assumptions in Euro-American queer studies, and on the other, demonstrates the study of Chinese sexuality as an emergent field currently emanating from multiple disciplines. This book will hopefully help to just begin queering and re-sexualizing established academic disciplines, anthropology, sociology and cinema studies, to name a few, in putting together a long overdue initial knowledge base on sexuality and queer politics in China, including Hong Kong. Using a variety of methodologies ranging from ethnographic studies, documentation of activist happenings, to institution and textual analysis, it builds on existing scholarship to further diversify the study of sexuality as well as produce differences within the study of “Chinese” sexualities. As it is impossible to study sexuality in Hong Kong as a subject in isolation without studying its embeddedness in other domains such as class, educational backgrounds, religion, gender, ethnicity, and various relationships to westernization-cum-modernization, nationalism and colonialism, I envision this collection as potentially posing new and exciting challenges to queer studies pioneered but also now still somewhat shadowed by the Euro-North American axis.