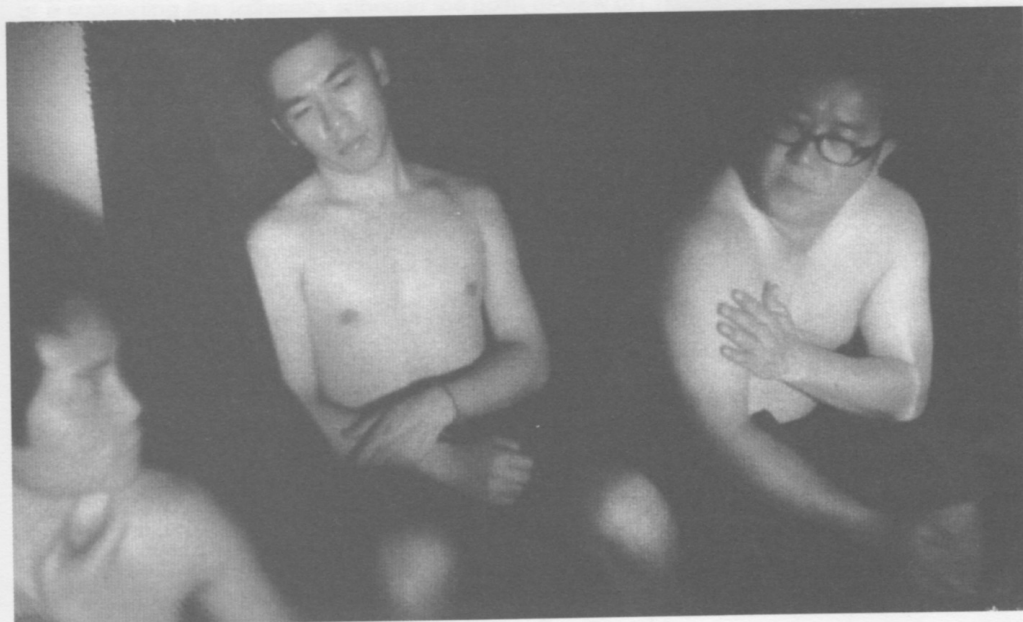


# Duality, Mutability and Radicality of Various Sexualities in *Hold You Tight*



Yau Ching

Why are there two characters played by Chingmy Yau in *Hold You Tight*? Yau is not the only character who reveals a certain duality. Tang (Eric Tsang) first appears in a gay bathhouse, among naked bodies checking each other out. We see Tang cruised by Wai, then they have sex and part. In the scene that immediately follows, Tang is then seen formally dressed up in black suit and tie, with spectacles on; his hand quickly wipes across his face. Just in this split second of self-reflection, Tang seems to have literally wiped away his private sexual identity to take on his social identity -- a Hong Kong yuppie. He then quickly leaves the scene, and joins the crowd in the Central district of Hong Kong. Through the use of wide angle lens and the use of Tsang's short figure, Tang actually "disappears" into the dominant mass of Hong Kong yuppies, also assumed to have a sexual identity no different than any other. His colleague presumes that since Tang does not have a girlfriend, he has nowhere to go during the weekend, and therefore his car is available. This colleague also seeks to bond with Tang through homophobic jokes:

What's so special of me wanting your car? You should freak out if what I wanted was you instead!

Whatever Tang is presumed as, he knows what he is. While his colleague babbles nonstop on his gender-based heterosexual relationship with his girlfriend, what truly

captures Tang's attention is the argument of the gay couple opposite them in the MTR. Tang swiftly adjusts, monitors and manages his various identities while he weaves between the private and public spheres. The complexity of Tang's character could also be witnessed in his ability to juxtapose different and even conflicting identities within the same sphere.

Just during the film's first ten minutes, we have followed Tang's journey through the bathhouse, MTR, own home, cafe and Wai's home. We have also witnessed Tang's adjustment in his tone, facial gesture, body language, and self-positioning vis-a-vis his related other while he traverses these various contexts. His passive friendliness with an unchanged ironic smile towards his straight colleague, contrasts starkly with the caring and relaxed offering he makes to his gay friends over the phone, for example. Tang could be seen as a character who traverses freely in and out of the closet. He has the privilege to negotiate, take on and perform the most comfortable part of his selfhood in different contexts, rendering this selfhood a non-unitary but unified whole, self-contradictory perhaps but nonetheless coherent. This flexibility, hybridity, and complementarity renders his gay identity an undeniable part of his selfhood, even at times when this part of himself might not be dominant, like in the above-mentioned scene on the MTR. With one like Tang, who embraces his queerness as an



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integral part of his most "normal" being, one could argue that the issue of (coming out or not from) the closet (almost) becomes a non-issue. He seems to have accepted the variability and diversity of his identity, rendering his queerness its most "normal" component.



In contrast to Tang, Wai is a more ambiguous character. His ambiguity also comes from his duality. It is Wai who seduces Tang to start with; he also gives Tang his phone number after they have sex. But after that encounter, he seems to have erased Tang completely from his memory. It is Tang who signals implicitly that he recognizes him, and then makes an effort to chat him up at the cafe. In their conversation thereafter, Wai becomes exclusively a widowed heterosexual. All of his memories and sadness seem to be related to his lost wife, and it is through such that his heterosexual identity seems to be safely anchored. According to Judith Butler, the queerness of heterosexual identity comes exactly from its need to repetitively perform its straightness, reiterate its normality in public, and constantly register its exclusivity to delegitimize its gay other. As demonstrated by Tang's colleague on the MTR, the heterosexual imperative entails its need to constantly remind others of one's identity as husband, wife, father, mother, boy/girlfriend, etc. in order to secure one's privileged position in the patriarchal hierarchy. But the more this identity relies on rituals to register one's normality, the more it performs its queerness. Wai's straight identity in many ways relies on his denial of his sexual and erotic relationship with Tang, therefore outlawing the gay component within his identity. Although both characters of Wai and Zhe shows actively their same-sex attraction, behavior, and/or imagination, there is nowhere to be found in their discourse any traits of a gay vernacular.

The relationship between Tang and Wai, a main thread throughout the film, reveals Wai's ambiguity in particular. As in *Happy Together* (Wong Kar-Wai, 1997), and unlike mainstream depictions of sex in Hong Kong cinema, sex is not the climax of their relationship, but just the prelude. The film opens with their casual sex, and follows them gradually

becoming buddies, through a confession of desires on the beach, and ends with their point-of-view shots of crossing the Tsing Ma bridge. Their friendship starts with Tang's recognizing Wai; he turns his head watching Wai on the MTR platform, and then expresses his familiarity again to Wai at the cafe. This step of "recognizing" acts like a form of "naming"; it scans for a piece of mutually shared history among an anonymous, unsexed mass. It secretly formulates a contractual bond between two individuals via their shared difference from the rest of the group.

While the film text gradually constructs both characters' multi-layered identities outside the bathhouse, their prior encounter has never left their relationship. Rather, it submerges into the subtext of their friendship, which is then full of sexual connotations and tensions. After their "reunion" at the cafe, Tang follows Wai home. Their dialogues are as follows:

Wai: (speaking of waiting in line to buy the flat) I pulled two all-nighters-- have never stood in line for so long.

Tang: It's better to try all the things you've never done. Life's short.

Tang smiles, looking at Wai. Seconds of silence between the two.

The erotic implications of "you should try everything" resurface in the scene when Tang invites Wai to his place for dinner:

Wai: Wow (commenting so many courses)! Do you take me as a pig, feeding me like this for slaughtering later?

Tang (laughs): Right! Come, let's drink to our pig's scheme!

What's their "pig's scheme"? This exchange is one of the few places where Wai responds actively to Tang's flirtations, as if they have suddenly reached a level of communication as never before, when it has always been a one-way street with Tang consoling Wai's tragedy and Wai indulging in his own memories. Yet, even when Tang is able to reply to a gay vocabulary, his sexual identity is still relatively fixed, perhaps not too comfortable but definitely safe and stable. If heterosexual identity partly relies on othering all non-heterosexual desires, then the meaning of Tang's presence in the heterosexual discourse of the film comes primarily from its convenience. To Wai, Tang has been a convenient sex buddy in the beginning, a similarly convenient emotional buddy throughout, but he would never become Wai's real object of desire. The multiplicity and adjustability of Tang's character together with the normalization of his queerness could have rendered him a potential threat to the heterosexual

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presumption established by all the other characters, yet his representation as a Mr. Nice Guy with a not-too-commonly desirable body figure significantly tones down such potential. His *lack* of desirability is supplemented and legitimized by his "kindness", both of which relegates him to the position of a supporting act. Ironically, although the point-of-view of Tang weaves through the film from beginning to end--he remains a passive character to be acted upon throughout. In other words, he is securely positioned as a supporting act for the film and its sexual discourse.

I am by no means suggesting that the sexual discourse in *Hold You Tight* as homogenous or unitary. On the one hand, it presents characters like Tang, who are able to swiftly negotiate and manage one's various identities within the framework as a social being, and concurrently enjoys one's most natural sexual identity in one's self-determined support system. On the other hand, it also gives a lot of empathy and in fact most of the dominant space to characters like Wai and Zhe, those who might have same sex desires or behavior but would always identify as "straight." In portraying these various orientations and sometimes contradictory identifications, the film also carefully carves out a relatively safe space for them to respect each other's differences. Tang, for example, has never questioned Wai's homosexual behavior; rather it strengthens their foundation for friendship. In other words, Wai's ambiguity as well as stubbornness have not constituted obstacles for their relationship but served only to enhance their intimacy. Tang has not restricted his own flirtations with Wai due to Wai's identification. Flirtation is no longer a signifier for sexual foreplay, climaxing necessarily in a sex act. It becomes an expression of intimacy among many.



In attempting to represent heterosexuality in alternative ways, *Hold You Tight* also seeks to subvert the inevitability of the heterosexist patriarchal paradigm. This is the first Hong Kong film I've seen that shows explicitly, for example, lovers putting on condoms for each other. Whether it is Mun having extra-marital sex with Zhe on the beach or with Wai on the privileged marital bed, it invariably shows Mun in control of and assuming responsibility of her body. In bravely breaking

the taboo of showing the act of putting on condoms in Hong Kong mainstream cinema, and making it into an integral part of the sex act, *Hold You Tight* reclaims some social responsibility long overlooked by Hong Kong cinema.

The film in general reveals a consciousness of sexual politics quite unsurpassed in Hong Kong cinema. Zhe begins making love to Mun in the elevator by caressing Mun's clit with his face. Mun is seen on top in their love scene on the beach, and they seem to have come respectively. Although played by an actress with an established bombshell image, Mun is outspoken, genuine, strong-minded, career-oriented and undomestic. The only cooking scene in the film is when Wai offers to make instant noodles for Mun, when she has to pull an all-nighter for her job. Not only does the film seek to construct images of female sexual pleasure, to offer an alternative to penetration-oriented, man-top-woman-bottom missionary pose which dominates the popular imaginary, it also tries to subvert patriarchal gender roles and articulates more flexible heterosexual power relations.

Implicit subversion rings true even for sidekick characters who apparently function as counterparts more "normal" than the protagonists, in order to highlight the protagonists' particularity. The representation of the character Ching Long the laserdisk store owner, played by Sandra Ng, would inevitably be read as full of cynical implications by the Hong Kong audience. Within the first few seconds of the first scene when Mun walks into her store, Ching Long spells out fluently the boredom and predicament of heterosexual marriage:

Newly wed? Just moved here? Of course it's better to watch a laserdisk. Watching a laserdisk, you don't need to talk to each other. A night goes by just like that!

The casting of Sandra Ng frames this extraordinary blend of sharp irony, keen observation and grassroots honesty. During the past few years, Ng has established herself as an actress who actively favors transgender roles and/or characters with various sexual orientations. She has not only self-financed the independent film *Faces of Eve*, in which she plays characters of variable genders and class backgrounds, she is also well-known for her bitchy talk shows as well as her award-winning performance recently as a lesbian gang leader in commercial film *Portland Street Blues*. Not unlike some other extraordinary female stars historically, Marlene Dietrich for example, Ng's special charisma comes primarily from her strong agency in establishing and reclaiming her image, to the extent that it aggressively challenges and sometimes even redefines the rules of patriarchal and heterosexist cinema. In many cases, the total

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textual body of her star image far exceeds any individual filmic text of mainstream cinema, and forms an intertext with the film roles she plays. The collective memory of Sandra Ng the star for Hong Kong audiences inevitably enhances the satirical implications of the pregnant woman who stresses how she lovingly lets her husband take control over things, including finding out about the gender of the baby and hiding the findings from her.

This character of Ching Long, as a signifier of the nuclear family system, exposes exactly the queerness within the apparent normality of the heterosexual paradigm. Her duties, for example, includes working in the shop during pregnancy where her husband never appears, as well as handling phone enquiries from horny guys who look for porn movies but dare only ask for "art ones", on top of dealing with all kinds of man-made or natural "accidents", like sudden power failures or bad attitudes from electricians. In this sense, Ching Long's characterization is not unlike that of other characters. Wai finds himself suddenly facing the loss of his wife; Tang seeks ways to support a friend whose partner has died of AIDS; the strength of these characters are most visible when suddenly plunged into some sort of irresolvable crisis or unreasonable situations. The absurdity and unpredictability of modern daily life, the confusion and mutability of desires and emotions, none of which spare anyone, whatever your gender or orientation happens to be.



*Hold You Tight* is full of inexplicable diegetic puzzles. Mun died in the plane crash right after the first scene of narrative time. Rosa, however, manages to survive because her maid has misplaced her passport. For a split moment we, as audience, following Zhe's journey in Taiwan, are led to believe that Mun might have relived a second life through Rosa's appearance. But then we soon discover that Rosa might not be related to Mun at all, besides the fact that they happen to look exactly the same. Zhe seems to be interested in Wai at the very beginning of the story when Zhe watched him at the swimming pool but he chose to pick up Mun instead. How and why does he do that? The film has not offered any explanation for this sudden transition. Mun's

death also seems to have strengthened Zhe's desire for Wai. Is Zhe using Mun to stand in for Wai, therefore hiding his homosexual tendencies, or is he using Wai to stand in for Mun after her death? Is Zhe's cruising Rosa an attempt to extend, however elusively, his truncated relationship with Mun, or is it another substitute for his deeply suppressed feelings for Wai? In the scene where Rosa and Zhe cross paths with Tony Rayns in the disco, Rayns voices his frustration with the young boy he has been eyeing all night: "If he calls himself straight, what does he think he's doing *here*?" One likewise can't help but wonder how Zhe and Rosa would end up in a gay disco. If these inexplicable coincidences in the film appear too unlikely, one should perhaps be reminded that they are yet another radical departure from commercial Hong Kong cinema.

### Notes

- ① It was brought to my attention that some people might not have read the character that had sex with Tang as Wai, since his face was blocked in the mise-en-scene. After watching the film three times, I have just taken Wai's first appearance for granted. In terms of storytelling, this sexual encounter explains to me Tang's return gaze at Wai on the MTR platform, the awkwardness between the two at the caf and Tang's familiarity with Wai mixed with strangeness at Wai's home. But just as my conclusion suggests, the film's plot is full of various unresolved puzzles and this might have been just one of them. Needless to say, my reading throughout is inevitably informed by my sexual subjectivity, as queer as could be.
- ② MTR (Mass Transit Railway) is Hong Kong's subway system.

### References

- ① Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York and London: Routledge, 1998.
- ② *Hong Kong Panorama*. Hong Kong Urban Council, 1998 : 97-98

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