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Sexuality in Cultural Studies: Doing Queer Research in Asia Transnationally

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Beginnings and Breadth of Queer Asia

What does it mean to do queer research in Asia? I want to begin with Yau Ching's observation that queer studies in the region, or specifically in her case, Hong Kong and Mainland China, 'are still marked as territories for the impossible and the unthinkable, inhabited by stigma, silence, risk and frustration'¹. Yau Ching was, at the time of writing, faculty at the Department of Cultural Studies at Lingnan University, and now a celebrated filmmaker in Hong Kong. I foreground Yau's observation, published over eight years ago in her edited collection *As Normal As Possible*, to work through why I find her remarks uncomfortably resonant and removed from my own experience doing queer research in the present moment.

Yau's *As Normal As Possible* is one of three inaugural titles in the *Queer Asia* series of the Hong Kong University Press.² Started in 2008, the *Queer Asia* series emerged from a longer genealogy of academic activism and scholarship that can be traced to the founding of the AsiaPacifiQueer (APQ) Network in 2000, by a group of scholars who have been working in disciplinary silos researching same-sex and transgender histories and cultures in Asia since the 1990s. Facing a kind of double erasure first from established Asian Studies Departments in the region which were 'often unsympathetic if not hostile' to the study of non-normative sexualities in the Asia³; and, second from US-based queer studies, which were dismissive or ignorant of theoretical and ethnographic developments in Asia, the APQ developed out of a common sense of these issues felt by a pioneer group of scholars, including Shimizu Akiko, Chris Berry, Sharyn Graham Davies, Peter Jackson, Helen Leung, Mark McLelland, Fran

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Martin, Audrey Yue who are today internationally established intellectuals. Collectively, they have built the field of Asian queer studies through emphasising local theorisations, through deploying specific methodologies, through engaging intra-regional dialogues with various stakeholders in conferences, in edited collections and in the setup of the *Queer Asia* series, among other efforts.

Building on this model of academic activism, the queer Asian framework has expanded and articulated into contemporary theoretical and institutional projects. Yue⁴ envisions ‘queer Asia’ as a method to de-essentialise Asia as an ‘area’ and instead re-theorise ‘queer Asia’ as a ‘critical paradigm’⁵ capturing inter-Asia flows⁶ that de-centre Anglo-American queer knowledges while making the study of queer Asia central rather than peripheral to our understanding of the region. Recent setups include the Society for Queer Asian Studies, which sponsors queer Asia panels at the annual Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conferences, and the Queer Asia collective of early career researchers, doctoral researchers, and activists, housed at SOAS, University of London, whose work is to ‘challenge dominant ideas, forms, and representations of gender and sexuality’⁷ by focusing on the specificity of LGBTI people in Asia and the queer Asian diaspora. Ever since hundreds of participants showed up at the 2005 Bangkok conference titled *Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia*, organised jointly by the APQ and the Office of Human Rights Studies at Mahidol University, the coming together of academics and activists has defined the queer Asia project, and made it a very exciting development combining increasingly sure-footed activist strategisation and increasingly sophisticated scholarly discourse, fuelling the rise of queer Asia.

It is within this historical trajectory of queer Asia that I locate Yau Ching’s quote as both a starting point and a point of departure to think about my own experiences doing queer research in Asia. The ‘territories for the impossible and the unthinkable’ and that ‘silence risk and frustration’ she wrote about in 2010 stayed with me and stirred me, at the same time as I bear witness to, and participate in, the phenomenal growth of queer Asia as a field. Thus, I locate myself in this contradictory moment to reflect on what this means for one queer Asianist committed to academic activism. How did this contradictory dynamic play out for me in practical terms?

‘Transnational’ Underpinnings and Practical Experiences

I am going to base my reflections on a ‘transnational’ perspective seeing as I have travelled back and forth, geographically and metaphorically, between academic positions in Singapore and Sydney, carrying and conceptualising my queer Asia endeavours across these borders. Whether that tacking back and forth contributed anything significant to career development remains to be seen but it has no doubt shaped my research projects and aspirations. Theoretically, my transnational perspective is one informed by the ‘transnational turn’ in sexuality studies, and its long tradition of paying attention to interconnections, relations, and interplays on the one hand, and to inequalities, contradictions and tensions within and across borders on the other. The aim of understanding these complexities was to disrupt or transcend boundaries. Moving within and between Singapore and Sydney required, in my experience, the crossing of several of these. Apart from geographical crossings, moving my research between different contexts and different disciplines also meant I was crossing academic disciplines and methodological conventions. I am therefore thinking of the ‘transnational’ not just as spatial crossings of national borders, but the ‘transnational’ as transcending or, indeed, transgressing or going beyond conventions of the ‘proper’ as signified by the ‘national’, in ‘trans-national’. It is in these broad sense of the ‘transnational’: one, of moving across geographical and disciplinary

borders, encountering connections and contradictions within and across borders; and two, of trying to go beyond what is considered 'proper' that will be central to my reflections on doing queer research in Asia. This transnational approach foregrounds I think the sense of possibility emergent with queer Asia as a field as well as that sense of impossibility and unthinkability, 'silence, risk and frustration' that Yau writes about. I want to stay in this tension and interplay as I give an account of my attempts to do queer research between Asia and Australia.

After completing my PhD in Sociology at the University of Sydney, I went back to Singapore in 2013 for a postdoctoral position at the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore. I was full of optimism about the Cultural Studies cluster at ARI, where I would carry out my research. After all, ARI is a state-funded institute at NUS and I felt no small delight in a heteronormative institution implicitly supporting my very queer, very lesbian-themed research proposal. As the first scholar hired at ARI doing local queer studies as bread and butter research, and not as a side project, I had a lot of professional aspirations and commitment to contributing to the development of a field that occupied a very marginal, if non-existent, place in the Singaporean academy. I also had heroic fantasies, or maybe a saviour mentality, about emancipating Singaporean queer subjects from oppressive gender and sexuality laws and norms in a country where being gay is illegal, where various forms of discriminations are allowed to exist because of the illegality of homosexuality, and where there exists official media guidelines cautioning against positive portrayals of homosexuality that 'justify...such lifestyles'.⁸ As a young, queer person growing up in Singapore in the 80s and 90s, when I was realising my sexual and gender difference, I've only ever seen on television dubious gay characters who are criminals, who are pathological or who are people who break up families. My commitment to queer research stemmed from professional and personal motivations, perhaps not unlike the academic activism of other queer Asia scholars. Thus, with my PhD in queer studies from Australia, I made my foray into an established Asia Research Institute, where I thought for two years I would write my lesbian book, colonise the institution with my queerness, and start new queer projects. The possibilities I was imagining!

Indeed, there were possibilities. Being institutionally-embedded enabled several of my academic projects. My first project was to publish the research that came out of my doctoral dissertation into a book titled *Postcolonial Lesbian Identities in Singapore*. Briefly in this work, I use postcolonial and transnational feminist theories to interrogate the modernist thesis implied in the trajectory of gay lives, and the linear teleological and one-directional cartographic export-import logics that condition how we understand queer lives in an Anglo-American frame. It was a largely theoretical project, substantiated by empirical data on the ways in which lesbians in Singapore identify and don't identify with universalising, global ideas of what it means to be gay.

A second project had also emerged from new material that was developing out of my doctoral research. Some of my respondents went on to start families and become lesbian parents. Since I was based in Singapore and would meet with some of my respondents who have become friends, I began work on lesbian mothering and non-normative families in Singapore. A few publications have emerged out of this project, in which I track how at every stage of the lifecourse of Singaporean lesbian families, it is fraught with difficulties. The women, for example, have to travel out of the country to conceive because artificial reproductive technologies are denied to women who are not married; lesbian mothers have trouble signing up for pre-natal courses; they have trouble getting into the delivery ward as a couple; no administrative pathways exist for both women to register themselves as their child's

mother, so only the biological mother can register herself as a single parent. Once classified as 'single parent household', lesbian mothers qualify for minimal social support because the state takes a punitive approach towards those who deviate from the heteronormative model of the married nuclear family. These projects were largely empirical, evidence-based ones.

Moving from Australia to Singapore shifted my research focus quite profoundly. While I was quite content grappling with theory in my first project on *Postcolonial Lesbian Identities*⁹ that was my PhD research in Sydney, in Singapore I found myself moving towards translating the academic work into more policy-driven research through a methodology of collecting empirical evidence. This was partly because I felt an urgency to make known the experiences of lesbian families that have been rendered invisible, erased and omitted from mainstream discourses and administrative systems, and being idealistic, I wanted the research to enable an imagination of the existence of diverse familial kinships in the highly heteronormative context of Singapore. At ARI, I was also watching numerous scholars at the local level engaging with policy makers. Being co-located with other research institutes—such as the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and the Institute of Policy Studies—and observing how research was explicitly done in service of public policy changed the ways in which I wanted to do queer research. There is something to be said about the affective conditions of physically being in a place that produced me as an academic subject: it ignited in me a sense of possibility, however far-fetched and deluded, that if policy makers were engaged with other researchers, they too might be engaged with my queer research. Within ARI itself, I was observing too the close links between family studies scholars and local policy makers. I had a close-up view of this through my partner who was a postdoc at the Family studies cluster. When her 'radical' non-heteronormative project on divorced families won a significant research grant from the government, I saw her on the phone, on email and on first name basis with civil servants. Observing her did nothing to tame my misguided enthusiasm that I too can get government and policy makers' attention.

It isn't just idealism; it is also pragmatism. My survivability to do the work I am committed to depends on the availability of state research funding. In the state's self-definition of Singapore as a nation bereft of natural resources, such as land and water, people or human capital has been valorised as the only resource Singapore possesses; state resources and funding flow generously to the knowledge economy, into research and knowledge production activities, for the development of human capital. But these flows of funding are directed towards 'proper' research objects. The family, as the basic unit of reproduction and resource generation defined in heteronormative terms, constitutes a 'proper' research object. Thus, family research attracts a lot state interest and support. But queer research, in the context of the illegality of homosexuality in Singapore, is not a 'proper' research object. I tried to transcend these borders of the 'proper' by steering my research on lesbian mothers into the field of family studies in Singapore. This would be where my queer research would meet the boundaries of academic disciplinary and methodological conventions. Whenever I raised the possibility of situating my research within Singapore family studies, I was often met with the question 'how big is your sample size?' This was a question I would never be able to meaningfully address; there is no census data on the LGBT community in Singapore, projections cannot be made, and I am a qualitative researcher working with small groups of people. The question functioned as a border policing mechanism, marking out what would 'properly' belong to research and what would not. Queer families and queer research transgressing the 'proper' at these multiple levels of the state, academic disciplines and methodologies would, in this sense, be 'marked

as territories for the impossible and the unthinkable’, to return to Yau’s words, and I most certainly was feeling the kind of silencing, risk and frustration, she writes about.

Not one to be deterred, I began publishing my research alongside divorced mothers, the topic my partner works on. My tactic was to slip in my research on gay women with research on straight women to get policy makers’ attention. Together, we explored the interrelations and interplays between heterosexuality and queerness under the condition of heteronormativity, which we argue impacts all constituencies whether gay or straight. In this work we wanted to open up possibilities for different solidarities to be imagined.¹⁰ But it was not without obstacles. An earlier version of this paper titled ‘Divorced and never married mothers in Singapore’ originated as a presentation at a significant local conference, with policy makers and politicians in attendance reflecting on transformations in the Singaporean family. The phenomena of lesbian couples conceiving and giving birth through artificial insemination are relatively recent transformations in Singaporean families; I thought the conference seemed like a good place to present what I thought would be cutting-edge research in terms of family scholarship in Singapore. My strategy was to co-write a paper, putting together the experiences of divorced mothers alongside the experiences of lesbian mothers, which had to be folded into the category of ‘never married mothers’ for the purpose of the presentation.

Whether my commitment to making queer research and queer lives intelligible in Singapore contributed anything to the development of local queer studies is doubtful. But my efforts at attending meetings with family scholars, signing up for family conferences, trying to slip in my research with straight divorced women did eventually have some payoffs. Two years after I left Singapore for Sydney, I eventually managed to publish my own chapter titled ‘Same-sex Partnering and Same-sex Parented Families in Singapore’¹¹ in a Singapore family studies collection; this will be the first account of LGBT families within what has been a very conservative and heteronormative Singapore family studies domain. I mention this because I want to move away from this sense it was all risk and frustration.

For me, the experience proved more importantly to be an object lesson in the protean meanings of national borders, of the ‘transnational’, of transgressing a ‘proper’ that is itself liminal. Initially there was resistance to include lesbian research in the Singaporean family scholarship; eventually I was invited to contribute to a significant family studies collection. Presenting my work in major public forums, where policy makers will be in attendance required some creativity; but publishing in an academic book within a family studies literature that will most certainly be read by policy makers concerned about the Singaporean family was acceptable. It seems to me that borders exist, but impermeability is not its fixed feature.

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