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Queering the cinematic border of the PRC and Hong Kong: On Fruit Chan's prostitute trilogy

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ABSTRACT

What would it mean to unsettle the notion of Chineseness from the vantage point of Sinophone Hong Kong cinema? This article examines Fruit Chan's three films on the figure of the sex worker in his 'prostitute trilogy', namely *Durian Durian* (2000), *Hollywood Hong Kong* (2001), and *Three Husbands* (2018). While *Durian Durian* portrays the friendship between Yan the sex worker and Fan the illegal immigrant girl in Hong Kong, the portrayal of Yan's more peaceful life back home in Northeast China also subverts the stereotypical idea that Hong Kong is a more desirable city of social mobility for young Chinese women. *Hollywood Hong Kong* further queers the border of the PRC and Hong Kong through the global border-crossing travels of Hung Hung the sex worker. Finally, *Three Husbands* most daringly symbolizes the geopolitical tension within Hong Kong by showing how the female protagonist Ah Mui negotiates the power dynamic between her first, second, and third husbands, thus subtly queering the triangular relationality across British colonial legacy, Chinese nationalism, and Hong Kong Sinophone localism. Overall, Chan's cinematic aesthetic implicates the limit of what can be shown and challenges the shifting boundary of Chinese cinema through the Sinophone analytic of queering borders.

KEYWORDS

Border; Hong Kong cinema; prostitution; queer theory; Sinophone; transnationalism

In his 1997 independent and award-winning film *Made in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong filmmaker Fruit Chan narrates the marginalized working-class protagonist Autumn Moon's life through a series of misfortunes and entanglements with illegal crimes that ultimately result in his death. The film begins with Moon discovering a suicide letter written by an unknown classmate Susan, whose death results from an unconsummated affair with a married PE teacher. Ever since discovering the letter, Moon has wet dream every night while suffering from nightmares about Susan. Eventually, he falls in love with Ping, a working-class girl with a fatal kidney disease. Ping's family borrows money from the local triads, and in attempting to help Ping and her family get out of a distressing life, Moon promises to 'save' her and engage in the local triads to carry out assassination tasks. At one point, Moon also attempts to murder his father due to his extra-marital affair and abandonment of his family. Before the ultimate failed assassination that leads to his death, a campy musical score is played on the background while Moon dances half naked in torn cheap jeans. A film about a failed murder, a failed romance, disability, patricide, delinquency, and frustrated youthful sexuality, is there something queer about Fruit Chan's signature independent classic?

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I open this essay with *Made in Hong Kong* because it introduces several key issues that Fruit Chan continues to explore with his subsequent films on themes such as 1997 Hong Kong's postcolonial return to the People's Republic of China (PRC), transnationalism and border-crossing, female sexuality, marginalized working-class communities, and Hong Kong localism. Chan's cinematic overture, as I will demonstrate, intervenes into existing debates on issues of censorship, queer sexuality, and queer desire in Chinese and Sinophone cinemas. While recent scholarship in censorship in Mainland Chinese film and media studies demonstrates the blurry boundary between 'the party line' and 'the bottom line' (Zhao 1998), reveals the role of text messaging and online communities in evading state censorship (Yu 2007), and the role of grassroot LGBT and queer communities in short-circuiting an increasingly authoritarian masculinist state (Bao 2021), Sinophone Hong Kong as a postcolonial special administrative region (SAR) is often overlooked within this literature on state censorship and media studies. If queerness is a mode of disidentification (Munoz 1999), how does queer sexuality unsettle conventional understanding of censorship as a state-mechanism that is often top-down in nature? Instead of assuming that censorship of non-normative and queer sexualities operates through a purging and erasure of sensitive materials, we might do well to theorize queerness, censorship, and the cinematic through the regime of visibility. Namely, one might understand the will to visibility as an ongoing process of the subtle and the queer always verging into exposure and the threshold of the visible world.

In this essay, I foreground the following questions: What would it mean to unsettle the notion of Chineseness from the vantage point of Sinophone Hong Kong cinema? How might a rigorous study of the heterogeneous subjectivities and formations of the sex worker figure reveal the porousness and instability of the border of the Chinese nation and the regional border across Hong Kong and the Mainland? Fruit Chan has mainly been studied as a case of Hong Kong independent filmmaker with a grassroot sensibility, and his films on the plight of the border-crossing female sex worker who straddles across Mainland China and Hong Kong are often universalized as representing 'the aesthetic form of the global city', as Pheng Cheah claims (Cheah 2010). This essay departs from previous studies on Fruit Chan's films that tend to universalize the suffering of Hong Kong sex workers and marginalized working-class communities as tropes of postcolonial crisis in post-1997 Hong Kong. Likewise, nationalist articulation of Chineseness is often projected onto sexually moral and politically progressive female subjects in the history of Chinese cinema in modernist and socialist films such as *New Women* (1935, dir. Cai Chusheng) and *Song of Youth* (1959, dir. Chen Huai Ai and Cui Wei), while in contemporary Hong Kong cinema the prostitute figure in *Rouge* (1987, dir. Stanley Kwan) symbolizes the bygone glorious past of 1930s colonial Hong Kong. The prostitute/ghost Ruhua's return to Hong Kong in the 1980s epitomizes the crisis of spatial disappearance and urban postmodernity. How might queer theory and Sinophone studies disrupt this tendency to associate the prostitute figure with politics, morality, and modern nationalism? How might the female sex worker be read as 'queer' through her destabilization of the border of Chineseness?

Given the increasingly porous border between the Mainland and Hong Kong and the nationalist logic of seeing Hong Kong as part of the Greater Bay Area in both the PRC's economic infrastructure and indeed in Xi Jinping's recent speech of restoring order in post-2019 Hong Kong (namely after the chaos and depressive condition of the 2019 protest), Sinophone studies emerges as evermore important in its emphasis of multidirectional critique. Shu-mei Shih, in her original formulation, provocatively predicts that 'as Hong Kong's

integration into China is more and more thorough, Hong Kong may inevitably cease to be a Sinophone community on the margins of China and Chineseness but partake more constitutively in the imagination of new forms of Chineseness within China' (2007, 164). While Shih's diagnosis of Hong Kong's precarious condition under the shadow of China-centrism is quite perceptive, I stress that the value of queer Sinophone studies precisely lies in its critical attention to the complexity of cultural forms that defy the hegemonic formulation of Chineseness, whether in its nationalist kind or long-distanced diasporic variety. Chris Berry's concept of 'cinemas of the Sinosphere' is also instructive here, as this notion shifts from 'a language-based to a cultural-based definition of multiple cinematic ways of being Chinese…Unlike the old Sinosphere in which China was the centre of the known world, we are now experiencing a multipolar world of overlapping and competing world orders' (2021, 195). To this end, queerness is deployed here less as the Anglo-American-centric critique of identity politics, but one that troubles any fixation of Chineseness and sexual positionality.

My understanding of queerness thus draws inspiration from various strands of intersectional queer theory, which demonstrate the indispensability of analyzing interlocking systems of oppression in the regulation of women of color, racialized, working-class, and other sexually 'deviant' subjects under the normalizing governmentality of modern nation-state formations (Cohen 1997; Huang 2011). In expanding my definition of queerness to include 'deviant' and transnationally unruly subjects such as sex workers, I also build on the recent work in queer Sinophone and Transpacific studies that tracks the ever-morphing figuration of the sex worker and the queering of the geographical border across China and the US. Lily Wong writes, 'Detecting these assemblies through the affectively charged figure of the sex worker, Chineseness is deterritorialized from fixed, and often exclusionary, authenticity discourses' (2018, 6).

Using a similar approach that tracks the heterogeneous morphology of the sex worker subject as she unsettles the geographical and ideological assumptions of Chineseness through both the invocation and undoing of borders, this article examines Fruit Chan's 'prostitute trilogy', namely *Durian Durian* (2000), *Hollywood Hong Kong* (2001), and *Three Husbands* (2018). While *Durian Durian* portrays the friendship between Yan the sex worker and Fan the illegal immigrant girl in Hong Kong, the portrayal of Yan's more peaceful life back home in Northeast China also subverts the stereotypical idea that Hong Kong is a more desirable city of social mobility for young Chinese women. Yan can be read as a queer Sinophone subject who critiques the ethos of capitalist upward mobility in contemporary Hong Kong from a feminist perspective in Northeast China. *Hollywood Hong Kong* further queers the border of the PRC and Hong Kong through the global border-crossing travels of Hung Hung the sex worker. In this section, queer Sinophone studies is deployed to track the multiple power dynamics embodied by Hung Hung, who is controlled by the mysterious Hong Kong rich pimp Peter while she herself gains an upper hand over the working-class male clients in the soon demolished Tai Hom Village. The multidirectional critique of queer Sinophone studies emerges most powerfully in the last film of the trilogy. *Three Husbands* most daringly symbolizes the geopolitical tension within Hong Kong by showing how the female protagonist Ah Mui negotiates the power dynamic between her first, second, and third husbands, thus subtly queering the triangular relationality across British colonial legacy, Chinese nationalism, and Hong Kong Sinophone localism. In other words, the film shows how Ah Mui and her sexual attachments to the 'three husbands' both conjure

well-worn geopolitical metaphor of Hong Kong being sandwiched between the three masters of British colonialism, China-centrism, and global capitalism, while any easy attempt to read the figure fully is undone by the queer Sinophone fracturing of subject position. This deconstruction of border and Chineseness is visually implied through the cinematic obsession with imageries of water, ocean, sailing, and belonging to nowhere in general. Overall, Chan's cinematic aesthetic implicates the limit of what can be shown and challenges the shifting boundary of Chinese cinema through the Sinophone analytic of queering borders.

Durian Durian: Queering the fetishism of the 'Mainland prostitute'

Durian Durian unsettles and queers the spatial borders between Mainland China and Hong Kong by visualizing both the materialist dimension of Hong Kong's return to China under the doctrine of 'One Country, Two Systems', as well as the affective merging of the two spaces from the sex worker Qin Yan's state of mind. The opening begins with a panoramic long shot of the iconic Victoria Harbour from the view of Tsim Sha Tsui while a melancholic score of saxophone can be heard in the background. Soon, the voiceover narration of the female protagonist Qin Yan (often simply referred to as Yan by others) emerges. She tells the viewer: 'My hometown is right by a river. When I was a kid I used to walk by the river because the school was on the other side. In Hong Kong, there's a harbour too. People cross it every day to go to work. You can take a ferry or cars there. Not like in my hometown. In the summer, we can take the boat. But when winter comes, we can only take cars or walk'. As Yan narrates the similarity and difference between Hong Kong and her hometown Mudanjiang in southeast part of Heilongjiang province, the blue water of Victoria Harbour is turned into yellowish color, resembling the 'local color' of her hometown. Through cinematic technique of montage, fade-out, and dissolve, Victoria Harbour is visually changing into Mudangjiang. Aesthetically, this opening sequence captures the liminal status of the female sex worker as a subject of sojourner. As mandated by border and custom regime and policy of controlling 'illegal immigrants', any Mainland visitor must leave Hong Kong after three months. Any extra stay can result in deportation. While the material and governmental aspects of immigration control mandate an absolute distinction of the local vs. the foreign and legal citizen vs. illegal immigrant, the voiceover by Yan and the cinematic malleability and crossing of oceanic currents suggest that for Yan, she can find bits and pieces of Northeast China in Hong Kong and Hong Kong in Mudangjiang. In other words, the film questions the biopolitical separation of borders through a cinematic provocation and implication of queering oceanic border, for ocean indeed has no clearly demarcated border.

Beyond queering the physical border between the PRC and Hong Kong through oceanic metaphor of crossing, the film narrative also destabilizes the conventional and heteronormative fetishism of the 'Mainland prostitute'. In Hong Kong cinema and mass media, it is not uncommon to find the appearance of 'the Mainland prostitute' as this highly exoticized figure is overloaded with meanings of backwardness, hypersexuality, and greed (Shih 1998). Notably, in the first film of the *Long Arm of the Law* (1984) series directed by Johnny Mak Tong-hung, the story narrates a group of ex-People's Liberation Army (PLA) men who now become well-trained armed robbers aiming to rob banks and 'colonize' the wealth of capitalist Hong Kong just across the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border. In the film, a narrative of gender transformation is most powerfully conveyed by the bygone romance between Pa

Chung, one of the big-circle criminal robbers, and Ah Sheng, his former sweetheart in Guangzhou. Now working in the red-light district of Mongkok, Ah Sheng occasionally reminisces and savors on the nostalgic memory of past romance while finding her current status as a Hong Kong prostitute more profitable and preferable. Other sex workers in the film tend to be given less humanity and are often reduced to a state of animalistic existence whose only motivation in life are money and greed and whose only redeeming quality relies on sex appeal.

Of course, this tendency of objectifying the Chinese prostitute is historically and cinematically coproduced. Lisa Lowe's work on the gendering and racializing mechanism of Asian immigration to North America reminds us that The Page Act (1875) that banned Chinese women from entering the US often reduced all Asian women as figures of 'immoral prostitute' (Lowe 1996). In cinema, Rey Chow's notion of 'primitive passions' (Chow 1995) shows that from the golden days of Chinese cinema during the 1920-30s Shanghai modernist and left-wing cinema period, prostitutes remain gendered and sexualized figures of fetish in such films as *The Goddess* (1934, dir. Wu Yonggang) and *Street Angel* (1937, dir, Yuan Muzhi). Extending Freud's concept of the fetish and Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, Chow writes, 'If the commodity stands for the alienation of human labour in industrialized society, the prostitute, by being at once the worker and the commodity, is arguably the paradigmatic case of *a commodified fetish in human form*' (Chow 2007, 210). Chow further elaborates in her reading of Chinese cinema's fascination with the prostitute figure that the figure embodies a gender and class contradiction: 'This is the contradiction, perhaps more peculiar to the media involving visuality, of *presenting 'lowly' or debased subject matters or characters in a cultural form whose effects tend to be spectacular and glamorous*' (Chow 2007, 211). I elaborate on the cultural and cinematic history of fetishizing 'woman as sex worker' in Chinese and Sinophone cinemas because Chow's work here provides a useful point of departure to engage with Fruit Chan's 'prostitute trilogy' insofar as Chan's three films both destabilize, queer, and to some extend reproduce myths and fetishism surrounding the sex worker figure. Returning to the cinematic analysis of *Durian Durian*, we might ask: how does Yan the sex worker and her border-crossing trajectory both reproduce and queer the fetish around Chinese woman as sex worker in her singularity? If fetishism in both Freudian and Marxist conceptions hinge on glamorization and the erasure of the process of labour that goes into the production of the commodity that is sex work itself, how does Yan and her labour reveal the unglamorous and almost repetitive routines of sex work?

Durian Durian queers the cinematic fetish about prostitute by intermixing glamorous and exotic scenes of sexual intercourse with the unglamorous scenes of waiting, shitting, eating, and enduring boredom in Hong Kong. Specifically, the first scene when Yan enters into camera's frame happens spatially in the dirty alleyway that is most likely located in the Mongkok district in Kowloon, which is famous for shopping, entertainment, and the thriving red-light district. Employing conventional cinematic gaze in Mulvey's term of scopophilia and through the cinematic technique of a tracking shot, the camera focuses on the legs of Yan as she walks in front of her male pimp Yiu. Their walking through the alleyway is seen from the perspective of the illegal child labourer Fan, who lives with her family in a small flat that is often subdivided from a normal-size flat given the pricey real estate market in Hong Kong. The next sequence presents yet another objectifying gaze of Yan as the camera slowly studies Yan's body from the shoulder down to her waist from the back, revealing her red panties above the jeans. As she is eating a lunchbox, a travel commercial

is playing on the television. Simultaneously, the male pimp Yiu is using the toilet, and as he poops he finds that Yan didn't flush the toilet paper with her faeces on it. Instead, she threw the dirty toilet paper into the trash bin. Yiu then questions Yan's poor hygiene: 'It doesn't bother you? You are eating around it too!' Yan only stares at Yiu with a disapproving look. The next scene shows Yan putting on makeup in a local Hong Kong café (often called *Cha chaan teng* in Cantonese, which means tea restaurant with Hong Kong-style fast food). Yan follows the order to serve a male client at Victoria Hotel, an infamous love motel. Intriguingly, during the first moment in the film narrative leading to a sexual encounter between Yan and her male client, it skips the intercourse part by focusing on small talks between the client and Yan. While the camera shows the half-naked body of the man who is taking a shower, Yan is wrapped with a towel and counting the money received for the job. Relatively speaking, Yan's body here is fairly desexualized.

If Rey Chow demonstrates that the visual fascination with the prostitute figure in cinema tends to be contradictory in the sense that viewer's fascination derives from the lewd and debased nature of sex work, *Durian Durian* exposes this contradiction with a queer twist. Indeed, by redirecting cinematic fetish about the prostitute's body to her unglamorous preparations before any sexual intercourse takes place through acts of shitting, sleeping, resting, eating, waiting, etc., the film queers the 'will to know' and the glamorization of the prostitute figure by granting the viewer access to what is usually unpleasant and hidden behind the process that reproduces the commodity itself. These 'hidden' yet vital processes point to the human labour of sex work in its most human, corporeal, thus unglamorous forms. As Wendy Gan argues, 'Chan removes the sensationalism of Yan's job through the portrayal of sheer repetition and routine. As we see Yan meet customer after customer, we recognise the set patterns of her job—from the familiar traipse to the motel accompanied by her pimpescort to her scripted greetings and exhortations to her customers to tip her well' (Gan 2005, 49). In other words, through the cinematic aesthetic of routinization and repetition, Fruit Chan goes a long way in troubling the heteronormative male gaze towards sex worker by recognizing that sex work is indeed as repetitive and unglamorous as any other form of work in a capitalist society.

Durian Durian further queers the cinematic borders across Mainland China and Hong Kong by presenting a double narrative that disrupts the dominant view on the Mainland prostitute as a victim of trafficking in Hong Kong, which often reinforces a related assumption of Hong Kong people's moral and economic superiority over Mainland women and new immigrants in general. The film further de-fetishizes the visual investment in prostitution by hinting at the possibility of a horizontal alliance among women that is cross-generational. Specifically, one scene features Yan engaging in a small talk with fellow sex workers from the Mainland, and they all concur that their Hong Kong male clients are petty and often tip sparingly. Beyond a narrative of sisterhood among female sex workers, the film develops another narrative arc by showing the gradual development of friendship and intimacy between Yan and the illegal child labourer Fan, who is the same actress that plays the illegal child immigrant in Chan's previous film *Little Cheung* (1999). Before Yan leaves at the end of her 3-month legal stay in Hong Kong, she passes her home address in Mudangjiang to Fan. Fascinated by the pungent smell of durian that is often nicknamed as the 'King of Fruits' in the film, Fan mails a durian to Yan, who has now moved back to Northeast China. Yan shares the fruit with her high school friends despite the sorrow of a recent divorce from her husband Bai Xiaoming, who may (or may not) be directly linked

to Yan's past profession as a sex worker in Hong Kong. By playfully associating the mobile trajectory of Yan from Northeast China to Hong Kong and back to her 'hometown' with durian, the film evinces forms of queer Sinophone intimacy that she develops across the vast spatial distance of the Mainland and Hong Kong (Yue 2012). Furthermore, these minor and mobile intimacies defy the conventional framing of the sex worker as victim of sex trafficking by mapping female-to-female forms of network and solidarity beyond heteronormative desire. While lured by frequent calls from her female brothel madams in Shenzhen and Hong Kong, Yan by the end of the film decides not to return to Hong Kong by taking on her hobby of opera singing and performance instead.

Previous feminist work by Shu-mei Shih on the representation of Mainland women in Sinophone mass media shows that Taiwanese mass media tends to negatively eroticize Mainland women as mistresses of Taiwanese men (often called the 'Mainland sister'/*dalu-mei*), while the Hong Kong media in the 1990s equally exoticizes Mainland women from across the border as potential threat to Hong Kong married family. Furthermore, Hong Kong media and the commercially successful film series *Her Fatal Way* (1990–1994) also degrade another category of Mainland woman as the 'Mainland cousin', the *biaojie*, whose femininity 'tends to denote a set of mostly negative characteristics: backwardness, unfashionableness, lack of proper etiquette and culture, and an inclination to use bribery and connections' (Shih 1998, 305). While Shih's feminist intervention demonstrates how gender and geopolitics are mapped onto and often written all over the bodies of Mainland women in Sinophone public media, it is worth noting that *Durian Durian* considerably departs from this heteronormative script of gendered geopolitics. Ultimately, Chan's film visualizes the sex worker Yan as resourceful in Hong Kong, satisfied with her new life back in Heilongjiang, and reluctant to return to Hong Kong. By refusing to succumb to the lure of transnational capital in sex work and by charting out a new path for herself through horizontal feminist solidarity with other sex workers and Fan, the film ultimately maps minor-to-minor forms of mobility, solidarity, and belonging within the PRC, namely a form of minor transnationalism within China (Lionnet and Shih 2005). The next section will further probe the queer permeability of border by turning to the second film in the prostitute trilogy, *Hollywood Hong Kong* (2001).

Hollywood Hong Kong: Queering the transnational borders of sex work

Hollywood Hong Kong takes up some of the queer potential of *Durian Durian* with further implication about the queer transnational mobility of the sex worker figure. First, a brief plot summary of the film is in order. The film begins with a medium shot of the Chu family, a family of butchers including the father Mr Chu (Glen Chin), the older son Ming (Ho Sai Man), and the little boy Tiny. The chubby Chu family resembles the pigs they butcher for sale, and from the start the viewer is fully aware that the family lives in Tai Hom Village, a squatter village in Diamond Hill in Kowloon that was soon to be demolished in 2001 at the time of filming. Soon, we are introduced to the other resident of the village, Wong Chi-Keung (played by Wong You-nam of Cantopop duo Shine), who wastes his time watching porn all day while dreaming of making it big in Mongkok, the commercial district famous for prostitution. In fact, he carries his own small-size 'business' by pimping out his casual girlfriend Ah Lu. He even learns the digital skill of photoshopping by making Ah Lu looks more like a Eurasian bombshell. Soon enough, Chi-Keung comes across an online ICQ (the

most popular form of online dating software at the time) advertising of an attractive woman named 'The Angel of Shanghai' called Hung Hung (Zhou Xun). At different points in the film narrative, she also calls herself Tung Tung as a way to disguise her true identity. Chi-Keung is erotically attracted to Hung Hung, and one night asks her out to the hiking trail overseeing Diamond Hill to have outdoor sex. While Chi-Keung thought it was a date, soon enough he starts receiving legal letters stating that Hung Hung is underage, and his sexual intercourse with her constitutes a statutory crime as it is illegal to have sex with anyone below the age of 16 in Hong Kong. It turns out that the two adult men in the Chu family, Mr Chu and Ming, fall for the same scam after having sex with Tung Tung/Hung Hung, and apparently a mysterious lawyer called Peter is the mastermind behind this legal threat and blackmail. Chi-Keung refuses to pay for sex to settle the legal dispute, and soon enough he was chased after by the urban triad hired by Peter and the mysterious prostitute. By the end of the film, Hung Hung/Tung Tung leaves Hong Kong for Hollywood without facing any legal consequences and retributions from the Chu family and Chi-Keung, while Chi-Keung's arm is amputated by the mafia gang hired to 'punish' him for not paying up for sex.

Given its genre of Neo-noir, use of black humor, and themes of sex work, disability, and globalization through a sensationalist plot, it is not surprising that critics tend to read the film as paradigmatic of the underside and horror of class inequality within globalization. Specifically, Pheng Cheah argues that the film 'positions Hong Kong within the circuit of global capitalism and unflinchingly portrays the inhuman consequences of global connectivity. What makes it exemplary in a manner that goes beyond the specific case of Hong Kong, I suggest, is that it captures the aesthetic form of the global city' (Cheah 2010: 198). While the cinematic representation of the prostitute as a femme fatale figure who brings both desire and damage to the inhabitants of a poor working-class area like Tai Hom Village resonates well with an abstract idea of Hong Kong as a global city that conjures both desire and fear, in this essay I interpret the film from the perspective of queer Sinophone studies by emphasizing the border-crossing transnational flexibility of Hung Hung/Tung Tung. Indeed, the very names of Hung Hung/Tung Tung can be translated as 'red, red' and 'east, east' in Chinese. If we put the two words together, it carries multiple symbolic meanings. It can point to the very status of Hong Kong being a Special Administrative Region of the PRC, with the red color implying the national flag. 'The East is Red' (*Dongfang hong* 東方紅) is also a famous 1966 song that attributes admiration for Chairman Mao by fellow comrades during socialist China, and the double identity of Hung Hung as Tung Tung farcically conjures up this haunting revolutionary heritage with a queer twist since the savvy border-crossing sex worker looks nothing like a socialist female cadre.

The queering of border through the transnational mobility of Hung Hung is evident even during the first sexual encounter between Chi-Keung and her. Arguably, their first meeting takes place virtually as Chi-Keung encounters her information on ICQ. The advertisement of Hung Hung calls herself 'the white-haired girl' and 'the angel of Shanghai', while the causal girlfriend of Chi-Keung, Ah Lu, belittles this glamourous competitor from the Mainland as the 'Northern sister'. The term Northern sister carries the negative connotation of an unrefined prostitute from the Northern region of China who, by the late 1990s, has invaded Hong Kong media and in some cases become 'homewrecker' of local Hong Kong families (Shih 1998). From the start then, the identity of Hung Hung is multiply fractured and queerly inflected. The 'Chinese' flavor of the socialist 'white-haired girl' who has now transformed into a Shanghai girl comes into conflict with the local ideological positioning

of Mainland prostitutes as troublemakers. Crossing regional boundaries without a clear geographical origin, the identity of Hung Hung is mysterious to the extent that recalls the tactic of Yan in *Durian Durian*, who tells different clients that she is from Hunan, Xinjiang, Shanghai, or simply from Hong Kong! Beyond the ambiguity of geographical identity, Hung Hung also subverts the moral superiority of Hong Kongers over Mainland women by displaying herself as a savvy woman who is arguably more economically mobile than people like Chi-Keung, Ah Lu, and the Chu family. The representation of Hung Hung as a street-smart sex worker-cum-businesswoman marks the rise of a new class of mobile Mainland Chinese women on Hong Kong screens and public media, and 'the sexual economies that would presume Mainland women as less-than-modern than Hong Kong women are destabilized by the increasing mobility of women's economic activities across both sides of the border' (Wong 2018: 1114). Specifically, Chi-Keung first meets Hung Hung at the Diamond Hill MTR (The Mass Transit Railway, the local name for subway system) and agrees to pay her $1000 Hong Kong dollars for sex. Chi-Keung promises to give her a 'good time' but didn't really last that long. As they are having sex by the underground tunnel, Hung Hung looks up to the high-rise residential buildings in the Diamond Hill district, with the Plaza Hollywood standing as an unmistakable sign for shopping and the Hong Kong middleclass 'good life'.

After the quick sex, Hung Hung questions his masculine virility: 'Are you a tiger? A tiger's head, but a snake's tail'. The animalistic Chinese slang refers to someone whose ability and power is much less than what it appears to be. But in the film, it serves as a tell-tale sign and foreshadowing of Chi-Keung's amputated disabled body after his hand is chopped off by the mafia gang and resown by the illegal female doctor in Tai Hom Village, Dr. Lui. The conversation ends with a more condescending tone as Hung Hung belittles Chi-Keung by stating that she lives in a flat in the Hollywood high-rise and that he is worse than her, being born in such a poor place like Tai Hom Village. As she walks up the hiking trail with him after sex, she belittles him again by claiming that Shanghai is prettier than Hong Kong now. After climbing onto the top of the mountain, Hung Hung puts her five fingers in front of her view and remarks that 'Hollywood looks like Five-Finger Mountain'. Here, by spatially aligning the newly gentrified Hollywood high-rise in Diamond Hill with Five-Finger Mountain (itself an intertextual reference to *Journey to the West* in which the Money King is punished under the said mountain), Hung Hung asserts her economic and moral superiority over Chi-Keung, who is implied as the mischievous local Monkey King forever trapped in Tai Hom Village. As Cheah perceptively observes, 'Globality as symbolized by Plaza Hollywood bears heavily on the minds of those who live in Tai Hom Village as an ambivalent object of fantasy and anxiety' (Cheah 2010, 203). As an embodiment of transnational femininity, libidinal desire, and fantasy, Hung Hung's assertion of economic and moral high ground over and against Chi-Keung proves prophetic as the ending of the film shows that she has transcended the Sinophone border of Mainland China and Hong Kong by crossing the Transpacific oceanic border into Los Angeles. The final scene shows that a postcard addressed to Tiny Chu is dropped off in the Chu family's mailbox in Tai Hom Village. The sender is attributed to Hung Hung/Tung Tung, and the postal stamp indicates Los Angeles as the place of origin. The next scene shows the female protagonist now wearing a casual shirt and short skirt that makes her look like any other overseas Chinese student studying abroad in California.

While Hong Kong cinema is replete with cosmopolitan female subjects who partake in various forms of exile, travel, and mobility that defy national and regional borders (films such as *Chungking Express* (1994, dir. Wong Kar-wai) and *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996, dir. Peter Chan) come to mind), what makes *Hollywood Hong Kong* truly queer *and* Sinophone lies in the way that the film directs our critical attention to the multidirectional dynamics of power and (im)mobility at play. Hung Hung could not have travelled to Los Angeles and remade her life without accruing money through sex work, scam, and exploitation of the local working-class men in Hong Kong. Hung Hung's cosmopolitan Chineseness is likewise only conditional to the extent that she follows the scheme set out by the mysterious capitalist pimp Peter. Ultimately, unlike the Hong Kong locals who are forever trapped in Tai Hom Village that is soon to be demolished, through sex work, illegal monetary scams, and economic savviness, Hung Hung/Tung Tung has become a truly border-crossing female subject, queering the Sinophone borders that once contained her. Not quite a flexible citizen (Ong 1999), sex work has nonetheless enabled her to become a queer Sinophone subject who partakes in various forms of minor transnationalism (Lionnet and Shih 2005). Namely, her playground is no longer the Hollywood in Diamond Hill but the Hollywood in America.

Three Husbands: The geopolitics of queer Sinophone Hong Kong

If both *Durian Durian* and *Hollywood Hong Kong* visualize the Mainland female prostitute as a transnationally mobile figure that queers the national and regional borders of the PRC, Hong Kong, and the US, *Three Husbands*, the last film in the trilogy, is probably the most provocative among the three. In what follows, I show how the film both depends on well-rehearsed postcolonial theory of Hong Kong as between colonizers (Chow 1992) while unsettling any nationalist and geopolitical mapping of Hong Kong through queer Sinophone visual aesthetics. Specifically, my reading will demonstrate how the film both invokes dominant metaphorical geopolitics of Hong Kong mediated by British colonialism, China-centrism, and global capitalism while showing how a queer Sinophone lens ultimately undoes these hegemonic positions. Queer Sinophone studies offers a cleareyed analysis of the multiple layers of power dynamics and positionality in the film. First, a concise summary of the film is in order. The film opens with a scene at the Karaoke bar in Zhuhai that features hostesses/sex workers catered to mostly Hong Kong and Macau's sex tourists from across the border. Little Bro (Chan Charm-man), the male protagonist, and other Hong Kong men are greeted by prostitutes hailed from Heilongjiang, Henan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. Sau Ming, who claims to come from Guangxi and speaks Cantonese, turns out to be from Hong Kong after all. While they are singing, Little Bro breaks the cheerful noise by calling himself a descendent of Lo Ting (盧亭), the half-human and half-fish mythological figure that is said to be the original inhabitant of Hong Kong. This myth and the first mention of Lo Ting can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907) in *Records of the Unusualness in Lingnan* (*Lingbiao Yilu* 嶺表異錄) (Sala 2021). This mythological reference is mentioned in several parts of the film. No one believes in Little Bro, and suddenly the Mainland officers intrude the KTV room and arrest all the sex workers and clients. Little Bro is kind enough to bail out Sau Ming even though he needs to borrow money from his friend in Hong Kong, Fatty (Sai Man Ho, who played the character Ming Chu in *Hollywood Hong Kong*).

While back in Hong Kong, Little Bro resumes his habit of visiting prostitutes because his job as a construction worker is often deemed unmarriable and unwanted as either a husband or boyfriend. He becomes addicted to one particular sex worker Ah Mui, whose is visibly mentally impaired and manipulated by her current husband, referred to as Second Bro or Second Husband in the film. Addicted to sex, Ah Mui's mental illness is linked to her sexual insatiability in the film, and her current husband, a man almost twice her age, decides that it is a profitable idea to market her as a sex worker on the boat that they sail and live on near Gin Drinkers Bay, the waterway in Kwai Fong near Tsing Yi. Little Bro eventually falls in love with Mui and decides to marry her. While he 'bails out' Mui from a life of prostitution from her second husband with $80,000 (HKD), he is in fact very poor himself, living in a small public housing flat owned by his grandmother. Once Mui moves into the public housing estate, she remains quite melancholic as she is used to having sex on the boat instead of being 'on land'. To quench Mui's sexual insatiability, Little Bro comes up with creative ideas such as having sex on blown up floating mattress, sneaking into a moving truck while fucking on colourful plastic balls, and even sticking an eel into Mui's vagina. Unable to satisfy Mui's thirst for sex, Little Bro eventually agrees with Second Bro/Second Husband to sell Mui as a sex worker again on the boat. This is also the moment when the viewer finds out that Mui's new born baby is the offspring of her biological father, her so-called First Husband. In other words, the baby boy that Mui gave birth to before marriage with Little Bro is both the son and grandson of the First Husband. Eventually, their prostitution business was discovered by the sea patrols who mandate that they leave Gin Drinkers Bay immediately. Believing that Mui is also a descendent of Lo Ting and is in fact a demonic fish-and-human figure, the 'three husbands' decide to find out the truth in Tai O, a fishing village in the western side of Lantau Island. While there, they continue to sell Mui for sex to the local men, while the women and wives of the village are trying to hunt her down. By the end of the film, the three husbands and Mui are sailing to nowhere and approaching the newly built Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge that begins operation in October 2018.

Whereas in the two preceding films the prostitute figure often represents emergent transnational Chinese femininity through sex work by traveling and defying national and regional borders, here the prostitute's interspecies body seems to represent Hong Kong itself. The term 'interspecies' refers to 'relationships between different forms of biosocial life and their political effects. It is a capacious framing paradigm that names the articulation of human/nonhuman binaries and human/animal/plant taxonomies as interrelated even as these continue to operate in both congealed and differentiated modes' (Livingston and Puar 2011, 3–4). If one follows the predominant logic of Hong Kong postcolonialism with a queer Sinophone twist, Mui can be read as an allegorical Hong Kong subject caught between two colonizers as well as one that *queers* this dominant geopolitical trope. In Rey Chow's model of 'between colonizers' written five years before Hong Kong's 1997 return to the PRC, Hong Kong's postcoloniality marks a situation of being geopolitically and culturally mediated by two colonizers: the British and the incoming PRC (Chow 1992). Whereas British colonialism since 1842 has affected Hong Kong's economic structure through laissez-faire capitalism, free market ideals, and relative freedom in terms of the uses of Chinese and English in official language policy and social life, the return to the 'motherland' evokes for many Hong Kong locals a fear of the implementation of the socialist system and ideological 'colonization'. While the phrase 'between colonizers' might be historically inaccurate,

it is quite provocative in capturing the collective fear of a Communist China's takeover in the late 1990s. At the moment of writing this essay, Hong Kong has experienced what some cultural critics termed a 'second return' to China, and the large-scale civil disobedience, protests, and social movements in 2003, 2014, and 2019, coupled with ongoing state-mandated Covid-19 zerolization policy, mean that Hong Kong people in general are sensing the ideological, political, and cultural effect of Mainlandization more and more on a daily basis. For some then, the dominance of global and finance-capitalism coupled with the gradual incorporation of Hong Kong as a region of the PRC means that in fact Hong Kong must serve three masters. 'Inevitably, writing about Hong Kong involves a triangular articulation of Chinese nationalism, British colonialism, and globalism, which also evokes the impossibility of serving three masters' (Erni 2001, 391). Given these existing postcolonial discourses on Hong Kong postcoloniality as a subtle (or not so subtle) form of triangulated cultural-economic colonization, it might be tempting to read the prostitute figure Mui as an embodiment of Hong Kong serving the 'three masters' of Chinese nationalism, British colonialism, and global capitalism.

However, geopolitical allegory can be overtly simplistic if we map China, the UK, and globalism symbolically onto the three husbands. For what is so 'useful' about Mui is precisely her ability to generate surplus value, something that the incestuous First Bro, fisherman Second Bro, and the working-class Little Bro lack. Furthermore, none of the husbands seems to be the perfect candidate to stand in for either Chinese nationalism, British colonialism, or globalism. Beyond the rhetoric of mapping geopolitical subjectivity onto the husbands then, I suggest that the interspecies figuration of Mui as Hong Kong *via* her role as a prostitute remains logical only if we approach her multivalent subjectivity through a queer Sinophone critique. A queer Sinophone reading can highlight Mui's status as shuffling constantly in between the human and the non-human, mobility and immobility, and power and powerlessness.

The prostitute Mui's mobile subjectivity (in her status of living between sea and land), queer insatiability, and interspecies embodiment rupture the referentiality of Chineseness or Hong Kong-ness. This queer rupture leads to an understanding of Mui's queer Hong Kong liminality as a form of queer Sinophone articulation, what Shu-mei Shih terms a multidirectional critique. Shih writes, 'When routes can be roots, multidirectional critiques are not only possible but also imperative. Transcending national borders, Sinophone communities can maintain a critical position toward both the country of origin and the country of settlement' (Shih 2007, 190). This multidirectional critique is linked to Mui's hypersexuality (Shimizu 2007) and sexual insatiability in which her constant urge for sexual pleasure amid a watery and vibrational state of mind leads to the defiance and queering of multiple borders and boundaries. Specifically, when Mui moves into the small public housing flat owned by Little Bro's grandmother, they fuck in a hardcore manner almost a few times a day, with their 'private bedroom' only separated by a curtain from the dining room. Soon enough, the neighbours complain the noise, and eventually even one male neighbour is lured by Mui to engage in casual sex. This shows how Mui's fluid and vibrational sexuality and constant desire for pleasure disturbingly disregard the boundary of the public vs. the private and the normative vs. the non-normative.

If Mui emerges as a symbolic figure of Sinophone Hong Kong localism, it is a form of localism that is multidirectional in its queer orientation and desire (Ahmed 2006). For example, once Third Husband/Little Bro finds that she is not satisfied with sex at home and

being tied to living 'on land', he exploits multiple occasions for quick sex, including one of the most perverse scenes of the film in which they sneak onto a truck, have sex in the half-opened container, while the driver is driving the vehicle across the busiest street in the financial district of Central (Figure 1). Cinematically, the camera films Mui and Little Bro in a state of orgasm through an ariel view where they can see the street, pedestrians, and high-rise buildings in motion, while the people walking on street-level may only see their nudity if they happen to stand on top of a building somewhere near the truck. Aesthetically, Fruit Chan's cinematic gaze queers the masculine visuality of verticality and ariel view by displaying a mode of queer Sinophone cognitive mapping. 'Queer cognitive mapping provides a cinematic language to express how queer subjects in Sinophone films navigate time-space compression, gentrification, and the heteronormative gendered division of the public and the private' (Wong 2022, 135). *Three Husbands* pushes the multidirectional critique of queer Sinophone studies to a visual limit in the sense that any attempt to search for Mui's ancestral origin (is she a descendent of the mythical creature Lo Ting?) and 'cure' her mental disability and sexual addiction remains futile. Here, queer cognitive mapping takes on a vibrating journey, and the final sequence of the film in which Mui wears a red dress (which might be symbolic of the Communist PRC, or not) and stands at the bow of the boat alongside her 'three husbands' facing the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge articulates a powerful queer Sinophone visuality. Mui, the queer Hong Kong prostitute subject, is facing the uncertain future of Hong Kong across the oceanic currents of further economic and cultural entanglement of Hong Kong within the state-mandated 'success story' of the Greater Bay Area. Fruit Chan's ironic representation of a queer female sex worker sailing to nowhere amid the increasing economic tidal wave of Chinese capitalism and economic integration of Hong Kong into the PRC is further visualized through a minor female subject in the film, namely Sau Ming the sex worker from Hong Kong who pretends to be from Guangxi in the beginning of the film. By the end of the film, Sau Ming is seen riding on a cross-border coach bus, perhaps following the 'advice' by Xi Jinping and the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam, to open oneself to new opportunities in the Mainland.



Figure 1. Mui and Little Bro have sex on a moving truck. Stills from Three Husbands (2018).

Whether sailing across unknown seascape or embarking onto the new economic sexscapes of the PRC, both Ah Mui and Sau Ming embody protean Sinophone positions that ultimately undo any fixity and assumption of the border of Chineseness.

By considering the border-crossing queerness in the cinematic representations of the prostitute figure in Fruit Chan's prostitute trilogy, we come to full circle with the theoretical challenge and promise of Hong Kong cinema as a site of vibrant queer Sinophone critique (Chiang and Heinrich 2013; Chiang and Wong 2020). While the transnationally mobile female sex worker Yan in *Durian Durian* challenges the gendered geopolitics of denigrating and fetishizing Mainland Chinese women as 'backward', *Hollywood Hong Kong* further visualizes the flexible citizenship of the prostitute Hung Hung/Tung Tung as she crosses regional and Transpacific borders of the PRC, Hong Kong, and the US. Finally, *Three Husbands* demonstrates the extent to which any attempt to essentialize Hong Kong through dominant geopolitical allegories of 'between colonizers' and under the three masters of Chinese nationalism, British colonialism, and globalism is doomed to fail. Alternatively, one must come to terms with the multidirectional critique of queer Sinophone studies. Queer Sinophone visuality in the work of Fruit Chan unsettles our constant investment in fixating on queerness, Chineseness, and Hong Kong-ness.

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