

UNRULY  
COMPARISON  
ALVIN K. WONG

QUEERNESS,  
HONG KONG,  
AND THE  
SINOPHONE



UNRULY  
COMPARISON

**BUY**

UNRULY  
COMPARISON QUEERNESS,  
HONG KONG,  
AND THE  
ALVIN K. WONG SINOPHONE

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2025

© 2025 DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞  
Project Editor: Ihsan Taylor  
Typeset in Warnock Pro by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wong, Alvin K., author.

Title: Unruly comparison : queerness, Hong Kong, and the  
Sinophone / Alvin K. Wong.

Other titles: Perverse modernities.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2025. | Series:  
Perverse modernities | Includes bibliographical references  
and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024044737 (print)

LCCN 2024044738 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478031895 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478028673 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478060888 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Queer theory—China—Hong Kong. |  
Sexual minority culture—China—Hong Kong. | Arts and  
transnationalism.

Classification: LCC HQ76.3.H85 W66 2025 (print) |

LCC HQ76.3.H85 (ebook) |

DDC 306.76095125—dc23/eng/20250120

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024044737>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024044738>

Cover art: Jes Fan, *Diagram XX*, 2023. Aqua resin, glass,  
and pigments. Courtesy of the artist and Empty Gallery.

Photograph by Pierre Le Hors.

DUKE  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

For Lisa Lowe

**DUKE**

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

## Contents

Acknowledgments :: ix

INTRODUCTION :: 1

*Queer Hong Kong across the Transpacific Sinophone*

1 :: QUEER HONG KONG AS A SINOPHONE METHOD :: 23

*An Archival Undoing*

2 :: POSTCOLONIALITY BEYOND CHINA-CENTRISM :: 41

*South-South Transnationalism and Queer Sinophone Localism  
in Hong Kong Cinema*

3 :: TRANSNATIONALIZING TRANSGENDER :: 61

*Tracey, Queer Globalities, and Sinophone Regionalism*

4 :: QUEER SINOPHONE INTIMACIES :: 87

*Visualizing Queer Migrant Domestic Workers*

5 :: TRESPASSING THE SINOPHONE BORDER :: 115

*On Fruit Chan's Prostitute Trilogy*

EPILOGUE :: 135

Notes :: 145

Filmography :: 157

Bibliography :: 159

Index :: 171

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

## Acknowledgments

For a book on the necessity of practicing unruly forms of comparison and queer Sinophone scholarship, I have many people to thank. First and foremost, I thank the unconditional love of my parents, Wong Lai Ling and Wong Chau Ngan, who believe in everything that I do. Living together with them in Hong Kong is the best thing that has happened in my life. Love and affection go to my two older brothers, Henry and David, who support me fully despite not speaking the same academic jargon. My close friends in the United States and Hong Kong remind me to take a break now and then, and here thanks go to Iris Pang, Raymond Ho, Alex Yeung, Linwood Lin, Jessie Cheng, Ci Lok, Nelson, Kenneth, Miss Lit, Betsy, Chi Chi, Vicky Wong, Benny Lu, Amber Carini, Yeleng Her, Julie Pham, and Amy Lee.

I was extremely lucky to meet my first mentor and academic diva of my life, Gayatri Gopinath, during my undergraduate years at UC Davis. Her contagious pedagogy, groundbreaking scholarship on queer diaspora, and intellectual commitment convinced me to become a queer feminist intellectual. Gayatri's impact on my own thinking on unruly comparison is obvious in the pages that follow, and I am so blessed to have her in my life. Other wonderful teachers who influenced my thinking early on include Frances E. Dolan, Suad Joseph, and Juana María Rodríguez.

Being a graduate student in the Department of Literature at UC San Diego was a life-transforming experience. It was an immense honor to study under the co-supervision of Yingjin Zhang and Lisa Lowe. Yingjin's professionalism, unparalleled productivity, intellectual impartiality, and unfailing support through different stages of my career have shaped my life more than I can describe in words. His sudden passing in June 2022 is something that I am still trying to reckon with. Though I can never approximate Yingjin's work ethic, I hope my strong commitment to mentoring undergraduate and graduate students can, in some small ways, honor his example. Ari L. Heinrich mentored me with warm collegiality and affective pedagogy during my time in San Diego, and their amazing scholarship on transnational Chinese and queer Sinophone cultures continue to influence my thinking. I am so blessed

D

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

to count Ari as my dear friend. Other teachers who shaped my thinking at UC San Diego include Patrick Anderson, the late Rosemary Marangoly George, and Lisa Yoneyama.

I was incredibly lucky to have had Shu-mei Shih as my mentor during my two years as the Andrew Mellon postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA. Together with Francoise Lionnet, Shu-mei generously trained the next generation of scholars in transnational studies. Their concepts of minor transnationalism and the creolization of theory have greatly influenced my own thinking on queer theory, Sinophone studies, and the politics of comparison. Shu-mei's inauguration of the field of Sinophone studies has forged a new path for scholars whose objects of study and research topics are often considered too marginal and "insignificant" for established fields such as China studies. Without Shu-mei's intervention and groundbreaking theory of the Sinophone, this book would not exist.

Over the years, I also benefited tremendously from a group of wonderful academic friends who support my work in countless ways. Howard Chiang's elegant scholarship on trans historiography and queer Sinophone theory is a constant source of admiration. I am so proud of our several collaborations. Within the circle of queer Sinophone studies, I deeply treasure the friendship of Lily Wong and E. K. Tan. Their generous feedback on my book improved the overall conceptualization. Shelly Chan carefully read the introduction and offered helpful advice. Inhye Han shares my joy and despair at every step of this journey, and I am so happy to count her as my dear friend. I am in awe of Jamie J. Zhao's amazing intellectual energy and productivity, and our mutual care sustains me every day. Angie Chau has been a dear friend since graduate school, and I thank her for commiserating with me during the final stages of writing this book. I am very honored to count her as my academic ally in the broader field of modern Chinese literature and culture. Jennifer Dorothy Lee is my academic homegirl. To my dear comrades Kathy Mak and Carlos Lin: thanks for enduring my daily nonsense in our Signal chat group.

Other academic friends and intellectuals who crossed paths with me and who indulged in my unruly queer scholarship are Aaron Anderson, Anjali Arondekar, Hongwei Bao, Thomas Baudinette, Brian Bernards, Michelle Bloom, Long Bui, Evans Chan, Shi-Yan Chao, Kai Hang Cheang, Fangdai Chen, Jannis Chen, Adam Chen-Dedman, Fan-Ting Cheng, Jih-Fei Cheng, Lo Kwai Cheung, Chi Ta-wei, Michelle Cho, Eileen Chow, Chow Yiu Fai, Kimberly Chung, Jason Coe, Rebecca Ehrenwirth, Harriet Evans, Donald Goellnicht, Elmo Gonzaga, Feng-Mei Heberer, Todd Henry, Ryan Heryford, Tammy Ho, Jesoon Hong, Yu-ting Huang, Calvin Hui, Celina Hung, Kit



Hung, Clara Iwasaki, Melody Jue, Lucetta Kam, Dredge Kang, Miliann Kang, Ying-Chao Kao, Lucas Klein, Robert Ku, Kedar Kulkarni, Franco Lai, Siufung Law, Klaudia Lee, Helen Hok-Sze Leung, Eva Li, Li Mei Ting, Chien-ting Lin, Wen Liu, Christopher Lupke, Yahia Ma, Joanna Mansbridge, Naveen Minai, Jackie Hoang Tan Nguyen, Laikwan Pang, Christopher Patterson, Martin Joseph Ponce, Chandan Reddy, Andrea Riemenschnitter, Stevie Ruiz, Tze-lan Sang, Leo Shin, Valerie Soe, Erin Suzuki, Tan Jia, Denise Tang, Y-Dang Troeung, Kelly Tse, Keith Wagner, David Der-wei Wang, Yiman Wang, James Welker, Mary Wong, Harry Wu, Helena Wu, Hangping Xu, Renren Yang, Esther Yau, Audrey Yue, Min-xu Zhan, Charlie Zhang, and Emma Zhang. A special shoutout to Cheng-Chai Chiang, who generously organized a virtual book manuscript workshop where I received smart feedback from graduate students at UC Berkeley who are affiliated with the journal *Critical Times*.

My first tenure-track job took me to the Underwood International College at Yonsei University, South Korea. I thank my former colleagues there, including Bradford Bow, Henry Em, Clara Hong, Astrid Lac, Helen Lee, Tomoko Seto, and Jesse Sloane. My dear colleague and friend Robert Beachy made living in Seoul a great joy. I am so blessed to be surrounded by amazingly supportive colleagues in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) since arriving in 2018. Nicole Huang chaired the department for the first four years following my arrival, and her institutional wisdom, material support, and warm collegiality mean a lot to me. Gina Marchetti's institutional savvy, academic feminist network, and generous mentorship are phenomenal. I collaborate with Daniel Elam on many projects, including the Entanglements book series at HKU Press and our co-directorship of the Center for the Study of Globalization and Cultures (CSGC). His deep intellectual engagement and commitment to social justice inspire me daily. Georgina Challen, our research assistant at CSGC, is the person who actually runs the show! For several years, I co-taught the large Common Core course on globalization and Hong Kong culture with Fiona Law, and I continue to learn from her passionate pedagogy. Winnie Yee is a dear colleague and wonderful lunch buddy, and I learn a great deal from her work on ecocriticism and Hong Kong studies. Dan Vukovich, Chair of Comparative Literature, offers helpful advice on teaching and how to thrive as a junior colleague. My new colleague Jean Ma shares overlapping research interests in film studies, visual culture, and gender and sexuality studies. I treasure her savvy advice and adore her genuine presence. I also want to thank the wonderful support of staff in the school office and in the department, including Kitty Mak, Iris Ng, Doreen Chan, Jo Tang, Tilly Wong, and Francisca Kwok.

Acknowledgments :: xi

Outside of my department at HKU, I treasure the academic wisdom and loving friendship of Pei-yin Lin and Su Yun Kim. Su was already an academic big sister to me during my graduate school years, and since my arrival she has warmly invited me into her collaboration with Pei-yin on various projects. I am energized by our research cluster on Modern East Asian Literature (MEAL). During the final stage of revision, Su, Pei-yin, Edwin Michielsen, and Nicholas Wong offered rigorous feedback that improved the overall quality of this book. Other colleagues at HKU who warmly support my research and teaching include Stephen Chu Yiu Wai, Staci Ford, Song Geng, Petula Ho, Travis Kong, Shuk Man Leung, Li Chong, Eva Ng, Daniel Poch, Vivian Sheng, Vivien Wei Yan, Dingkun Wang, and John Wong. Travis's helpful tips on book writing and his contributions to Hong Kong LGBTQ communities truly amaze me. I am always in awe of Tong King Lee's academic productivity, and he has been a lovely confidant. Alastair McClure and Devika Shankar commiserated with me during the final stage of writing this book, and I treasure their friendship a lot. Marco Wan generously shared his institutional wisdom and offers good cheers along the way. John Carroll welcomed me on my first day at work, and he has been a warm colleague ever since. I am fortunate to have supervised some very smart graduate students, including Jing Peng, Junlin Ma, Lou Rich, and Harmony Yuen. Adam Jaworski and Chris Hutton, the former and current Associate Deans of Research, have offered invaluable advice. Max Deutsch, the Head of the School of Humanities, has firmly supported all my research and teaching endeavors. The Dean of the Faculty of Arts, David Pomfret, has offered meaningful support and generously provided a funding scheme that served as book subvention.

At Duke University Press, Ken Wissoker is the most ideal editor that every first book author would love to work with. He immediately showed enthusiasm for my book project, asked the tough and necessary questions, and guided my manuscript through a rigorous and efficient review process. Ken's steadfast and loving support means a lot to me. I want to thank the three anonymous readers of the book, whose rigorous engagements and endorsements improved the book as a whole. Kate Mullen's superb editorial support brought the book into production smoothly, and Ihsan Taylor's professionalism as the project editor is beyond amazing. And I want to thank the artists, film producers, and community organizers who obtained several high-quality images for me and engaged with relevant parts of the book. They are Marrz Saludez Balaoro, Beatrix Pang, and Mimi Wong.

Since I met her eighteen years ago, Lisa Lowe has totally transformed my life. As a graduate student under her co-supervision, I witnessed her magic

of bringing together a radical and intellectually committed group of thinkers, colleagues, and students at UC San Diego. Lisa's feminist materialist approach to Asian American Studies, her concept of the intimacies of four continents, and her critical reckoning with the colonial present have deeply shaped my own intellectual trajectory. Whenever I am at a loss as to what to do, I think of what Lisa might do in a similar situation. But invariably, she has already opened the next door for me. Lisa's unfailing belief in me reaffirms that I am doing something meaningful even when I have self-doubt at times. For her deeply affective pedagogy, intellectual elegance, utterly caring mentorship, and political commitment, I am forever indebted and grateful.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

The writing of this book was supported by the GRF grant of the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong under the project code: 17613520.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

## INTRODUCTION

### *Queer Hong Kong across the Transpacific Sinophone*

Hong Kong often appears on the global horizon as a city of finance capitalism, rampant real-estate speculation, cosmopolitanism, and East-West cross-cultural encounters. However, these existing imaginaries of Hong Kong actually limit our capacity to theorize the postcolonial region, a special administrative region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since July 1, 1997. These dominant views imply that Hong Kong's global significance derives solely from its intermediary relation to geopolitical superpowers—like the UK (its former colonizer), the United States, and China—and the New Cold War among them. *Unruly Comparison: Queerness, Hong Kong, and the Sinophone* offers a new model for doing transnational and comparative work in queer theory, area studies, and Sinophone studies. It demonstrates how a globally (in)significant region like Hong Kong exemplifies an unruliness that exceeds the political forces and epistemological limits of British colonialism, China-centrism, and global capitalism. If the queerness of Hong Kong exceeds its normative geopolitical referentiality, it follows that a queer decolonial approach to Hong Kong can unbind its ties to the UK, to China, and to late capitalism by linking anti-racist, feminist, and queer political struggles in the city

D

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

to those happening elsewhere. For instance, when in May 2024 police forces violently removed the barricades of pro-Palestinian and anti-war encampments at UCLA, Columbia University, and college campuses across the United States, it immediately brought to mind state violence against protesters and the Hong Kong government's subsequent branding of protesters as "rioters" since the summer of 2019. By invoking an asymmetrical relationality that reckons with the coloniality of the present, we enter the realm of unruly comparison.

The concept of unruly comparison treats Hong Kong and similarly marginal regions of the world as sites of racial, gender, and sexual incommensurability and differences that refuse the totalizing terms of coloniality, Chinese nationalism, and global capitalism. My understanding of incommensurability expands on women of color feminism and queer of color critique, which offer "an alternative comparative method that, in its deep critique of the racialized, gendered, and sexualized devaluation of human life, gives us a blueprint for coalition around contemporary struggles."<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the insight of queer Sinophone studies that shows how "the Sinophone and the queer promise to denaturalize each other continuously,"<sup>2</sup> I suggest that Hong Kong matters to queer theory (and vice versa) beyond its local particularism, postcolonial "Chinese" differences, and capitalist exceptionality. Alternatively, queer Sinophone studies offers a nontotalizing perspective on Hong Kong itself as a site of racial, gender, sexual, and cultural incommensurability and intersectionality; in turn, this recognition of Hong Kong's queer worldliness binds it to the rest of the world and engenders unruly modes of comparison. First, let me take you, my reader, back to the summer of 2019, an interregnum that demands the wake work of unruly comparison.<sup>3</sup>

During the summer of 2019, Hong Kong was at the center of global attention. The last time people around the world had talked about the city this feverishly was during the summer of 1997, when the transfer of sovereignty over the city from the UK back to the PRC had the world second-guessing Hong Kong's—and probably the world's—future. Would the city remain a place for free-market, laissez-faire capitalism? Would it remain the intermediary for capital that had served its interests well since the mid-nineteenth century? Or would British "positive noninterventionism" and the colonial-modern standard of living see their last glory days before the impending return to China? In short, would Hong Kong remain *the* Hong Kong that we had always known?

Twenty-two years later, more than two million people would take to the streets in Hong Kong to protest the introduction of an extradition law that would send criminal offenders to Mainland China for legal adjudication.

Heavily backed by the conservative political parties of the Hong Kong Legislative Council and swiftly introduced without public consultation by Chief Executive Carrie Lam, the extradition bill ignited deep-seated dissent, demands for democracy and universal suffrage, and the largest-scale civil disobedience experienced in the city's history. For political scientist Ho-fung Hung, the 2019 social movement reveals the fluctuating status of the global city: "Hong Kong is a city constantly on the edge. It is on the edge of great powers, on the edge of being annihilated, and on the edge of breaking free."<sup>4</sup>

While Hung emphasizes that the recent social upheaval constitutes part of the longer geohistory of Hong Kong as caught between multiple colonial and capitalist powers (British colonialism, 1841–1997; Japanese imperialism, during World War II; Communist China, after 1949; and postsocialist Chinese governmentality after 1997), a feminist and queer framing of Hong Kong's colonial past and postcolonial present can open up alternative possibilities. In other words, the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement also witnessed new possibilities for political alliance across race, gender, class, and sexuality. Given the government's tokenist policy toward racial, gender, and sexual diversity and its lack of legal protection for sexual minorities based on gender expression and sexual orientation, this intersectional alliance born from the social movement demanded a new reckoning. For example, South Asian minorities and LGBT celebrities participated at rallies and organized water stations and support groups at iconic landmarks such as Chungking Mansions in Tsim Sha Tsui (figure I.1). While Chungking Mansions has historically been an ethnic enclave for African and South Asian small businesses that sparked racialized fear of criminal activities among Han Chinese Hong Kongers, during the social movement it became a symbol for the possibility of cross-racial solidarity. Most Hong Kong residents, regardless of their racial and ethnic background, expressed anger at the Hong Kong police's use of a water-cannon truck and its "accidental" blue-spraying and defacing of the Kowloon Mosques on October 20, 2019. Feminists, LGBT folks, and NGOs dedicated to queer issues also formed a new alliance when an accusation of gang rape taking place at the police station (made by Sonia Ng, a female student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong) and the later arrest of LGBT singers Anthony Wong and Denise Ho drew attention to the sections of society that most Hong Kongers had simply ignored for far too long. The shifting global preoccupation with the protest and the ongoing US-China trade war coincided with increasingly vocal demands made by gender, racial, and sexual minorities for civil liberties and rights to representation.



FIGURE 1.1. South Asians show solidarity with Cantonese Hong Kong protesters at Chungking Mansions during the 2019 protests.

*Unruly Comparison* intervenes precisely at this moment of crisis, public dissent, and political frustration by conjuring a new social imaginary. It suggests that queering Hong Kong itself could offer an unruly method of comparison that unsettles both the Eurocentrism of queer theory and the China-centrism of area studies. While the academic study of Hong Kong (itself heavily preoccupied with the 1997 postcolonial handover) emerged around the 1990s, the naming of a field called “Hong Kong studies” has happened only in the last ten years or so. But Hong Kong studies as currently institutionalized tends to be heavily skewed toward the fields of history, political science, migration studies, and sociology, and within these iterations of the field, gender and sexuality remain marginal. Situating itself at the critical conjuncture of Hong Kong studies, queer theory, and Sinophone studies, *Unruly Comparison* illuminates new ways of doing queer theory, critiques the heteronormativity of existing studies on Hong Kong and Chineseness, and expands the possibility of a queer imaginary of Hong Kong for global comparison.

The concept of unruly comparison understands Hong Kong as an unruly time-space that troubles historicist, colonial, and China-centric renderings of the city as merely a site of British colonial legacy and a “super special eco-

conomic/free-trade zone in China.”<sup>5</sup> An unruly comparative approach unravels Hong Kong as a site of incommensurability in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class. This recognition of Hong Kong as a queer region of nontotalizing differences focalizes alternative relationalities such as queer migrations across Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, which would otherwise be occluded by a myopic vision of Hong Kong as existing only between British colonialism, China-centrism, and global capitalism. In other words, the theory of unruly comparison actualizes a perverse relationality that binds Hong Kong with the world through minor transnationalism and South-South comparison across time and space.<sup>6</sup>

### Toward Unruly Comparison

One pivotal moment in the intellectual genesis of this book emerged in late January 2021, when the gallery WMA Space in Central, the unmistakable financial district of Hong Kong, held an art exhibition called *Unruly Visions*. I found out about the exhibition through a Facebook post. It was curated by Tse Ka-Man, a queer visual artist and academic based in New York City. The exhibition’s title clearly referenced queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath’s 2018 book *Unruly Visions*, and Tse opened the exhibition catalog with a quote by Gopinath: “Through a sustained engagement with queer visual aesthetic practices, we can identify alternative ways of seeing and knowing capable of challenging the scopic and sensorial regimes of colonial modernity in their current forms.”<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the conceptual indebtedness to Gopinath’s theory of queer diaspora and queer regionalism, the exhibition also cited José Esteban Muñoz’s idea of queerness as a critique of the political pragmatism of mainstream homonormativity and LGBT politics. In Muñoz’s words, “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”<sup>8</sup> Here, I am struck by Tse’s bold invitation to theorize queer Hong Kong visual culture in dialogue with queer diaspora studies and queer of color critique. In particular, I ask: How are “the scopic and sensorial regimes of colonial modernity” resurfacing in new Sinocentric authoritarian modes in post-2020 Hong Kong with the passing of the National Security Law (NSL)? On June 30, 2020, the National People’s Congress (NPC) enacted the National Security Law in Hong Kong, which aimed to ensure the “prosperity and stability” of Hong Kong’s postcolonial governance. Its sole aim was to safeguard national security by “preventing, suppressing and imposing punishment for the offences of secession, subversion, organisation and perpetration of terror-





FIGURE 1.2. “Reveal” from Rain Chan Wing Ki’s *Black* collection.

ist activities, and collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security in relation to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.”<sup>9</sup> What is missing from this new tidal wave to restore “order and prosperity” in post-2020 Hong Kong? How might queer Sinophone visuality offer a critical diagnosis that the present is indeed *not enough*?

I walked through the exhibition with these burning questions in mind and found myself queerly disoriented. In photographer Rain Chan Wing Ki’s *Black* collection, a photo called *Reveal* shows a naked young male body from a low-angle, revealing his chest while hiding his cock. The blindfolded male model is wearing a pair of white socks, with splash of red paint resembling human blood dripping from his face (figure 1.2). This bloody body may symbolize a young queer protester bleeding, a familiar sight during the frequent physical confrontations between the police and the protesters in the summer of 2019. However, the title of the work without the artist’s description simply frames it as *Reveal*.

Another creative queer photograph by the photographer and journalist Nelson Tang Chak-man traffics less in surrealism and symbolism in its rep-



FIGURE 1.3. Nelson Tang Chak-man, *Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?* (2019–20).

resentation of social upheaval, queer sexuality, and historicism. In the photograph, *Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?* (2019–20), Tang captures a cross-dresser staring back at a young male protester in mask. The transfemme cross-dresser is smiling back at the photographer, turning her gaze back at the camera. She is also dressed in a wedding gown, and the location of the photoshoot indicates that she is bidding farewell to the masked young man in Sheung Wan, one of the popular protest sites in the summer of 2019, where teargas left indelible toxic smell on the street (figure 1.3). Tang, a Baptist University student journalist, was arrested by the police on November 5, 2019, for “disorder in a public place” while covering a protest rally inside a mall.<sup>10</sup> During his arrest, he yelled sarcastically to fellow protesters and pedestrians that he is very healthy and has no suicidal intention (alluding to the possible unlawful abuses of protesters at police stations and detention centers). Tang also wrote the following artist’s statement: “As an observer, I have seen protestors use umbrellas like police with guns. I have watched a couple celebrating Christmas, while protestors demonstrated right next to them. I witnessed a protestor unknowingly escape a bullet.”<sup>11</sup>

Whereas Rain Chan Wing Ki's *Black* collection imagines the queer body as one that bears witness to historical and political violence, Tang's trans photography deviates from local journalism that tends to romanticize young protesters as defiant subjects and heterosexual lovers as torn apart by illegal activities and impending imprisonment. In staring back at us, the trans-femme subject in Tang's photo conjures what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls "the right to look." He writes, "The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity."<sup>12</sup> Tse Ka-Man's *Unruly Visions* thus proffers a queer Sinophone engagement with queer diaspora studies and queer of color critique in its insistence on queer visibility as a mode of disorientation and disidentification. It unsettles the deadening political pessimism in contemporary Hong Kong by thinking displacement, unsettlement, and political exile *within* Hong Kong. It beckons us to see Hong Kong queerly by visualizing the city as an unruly queer parasite that might not assimilate smoothly into the grand narrative of prosperity and restoration of order and capitalism in post-2020 Hong Kong.<sup>13</sup> While the *Unruly Visions* exhibition offers a visual statement on unruly comparison as a queer Sinophone methodology, it is also necessary to trace the conceptual contour of "unruly comparison" and investigate how this concept intervenes into existing debates in area studies, queer theory, and Sinophone studies.

Instead of relying heavily on "area specificity" and the fetishization of Chineseness as conventionally practiced in queer area studies scholarship, the model of unruly comparison intersects queerness, Hong Kong, and the Sinophone through friction, asymmetry, and perverse juxtapositions. As a concept, unruly comparison names three theoretical interventions that have broad implications for queer theory, Sinophone studies, and comparative literature. First, unruly comparison explodes the temporal and spatial limits for cross-cultural comparison by enabling small and marginal regions of the world (like Hong Kong) to be linked, juxtaposed, and studied in unlikely modes of affiliation and relationality. In this way, unruly comparison expands on Wai Chee Dimock's concept of deep time, which she defines as "a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric."<sup>14</sup> The deep time approach certainly informs the recent turn to "worlding" by Pheng Cheah. Cheah writes, "As an enactment of the opening of worlds by the coming of time, world literature points to something that will always exceed and disrupt capital."<sup>15</sup> *Unruly Comparison* takes up the long durational capacity of literary and other expressive cultural forms

by showing how, once we bracket the premodern, modern, the national, and the regional as standard units of temporal and spatial measurement, more unruly and queer forms of comparison come into view.

The queer worlding force of unruly comparison assembles nonequivalent queer figures from different times and spaces of Hong Kong Sinophone modernity, including a local gay mafia boss and a queer Scottish colonial officer in World War II (chapter 1), gay male cosmopolitan travelers and their neo-colonial complicity in Hong Kong cinema (chapter 2), queer migrant domestic workers who negotiate lesbian desire across Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (chapter 4), and more. As a conceptual model, it demonstrates how a small but globally significant city and region like Hong Kong can unknow itself through broader and innovative temporal and spatial comparisons, disrupting the dominant legacies of British colonialism and the late capitalism of China-centrism.

Second, unruly comparison reframes the debate of translatability and (in)commensurability in the field of comparative literature by showing how cultural productions in “a small place” like Hong Kong both exemplify immense differences and cultural incommensurability internally while entering into relational tension, collision, and alliances with the rest of the world.<sup>16</sup> Framing translational politics and comparison in a different light, Emily Apter unpacks the double bind of translatability. Apter ironically claims that “nothing is translatable” and “everything is translatable.”<sup>17</sup> Hong Kong traffics in the double bind of translatability and untranslatability in the sense that the city often appears on the global horizon as the “freest capitalist city,” an “emporium of trade,” a “global city,” and an exemplar of economic modernization—one of the four Asian tigers in its pre-1997 era. In the post-1997 era, and especially in the doomful post-2019 contemporary moment, these preexisting imaginaries of the city seem insufficient in translating Hong Kong. *Unruly Comparison* takes stock of existing postcolonial terminologies that seek to translate Hong Kong within critical theory. Building on concepts such as “disappearance,” “between colonizers,” and “lost in transition,” I argue that the queerness of Hong Kong exceeds the epistemological limits of British colonialism, China-centrism and governmentality, and late capitalism as this “three masters” analogy hampers our creative capacity to theorize a queer Sinophone Hong Kong.<sup>18</sup> Unruly comparison as a concept boldly gestures toward alternative possibilities of comparison that dig into archives of queer subjects lost to history (chapter 1), cinematic modes of queer minor transnationalism (chapter 2), trans visibility that deviates from queer liberalism (chapter 3), and more.

The framework of unruly comparison takes cultural incommensurability as a point of departure from which to theorize queer differences in a small place like Hong Kong. To compare things in unruly ways is to acknowledge what Natalie Melas calls the “incommensurability” of comparative literature and cultural forms. In her book *All the Difference in the World*, Melas argues that postcolonial theory and the comparative literary studies of empire and colonies (both literal and metaphorical) offer “a ground of comparison, but no given basis of equivalence.”<sup>19</sup> Bypassing the anxiety of debunking the Eurocentrism of comparative literature and queer theory, a queer Sinophone approach to Hong Kong shows that Hong Kong as a historical colonial city and postcolonial special administrative region under the shadow of China-centrism and global capitalism already evinces infinite possibilities for transnational comparison and worldliness. In other words, Hong Kong already embodies “all the difference in the world,” to borrow Melas’s provocative phrase again. Treating cultural incommensurability in racial, gender, sexual, and ethnic terms as both limit and possibility, unruly comparison frees cultural production and theorists within a small place in the world (to borrow from Kincaid’s again) from the anxiety of measuring up to certain implied norms within academic disciplinarity—it enables us to study the worldliness and immense differences and incommensurability within a given place while expanding that unruly scale of comparison through perverse juxtaposition and asymmetry across different temporalities, spaces, and genres. In this way, unruly comparison is akin to what Kandice Chuh calls illiberal humanisms that “facilitate the articulation and elaboration of epistemes thoroughly incommensurate with the developmental geographies and temporalities of bourgeois liberal humanism.”<sup>20</sup>

Third, unruly comparison frames queer Sinophone culture as a site for exemplifying relational comparison and decoloniality that reckons with the asymmetries of nationalism, imperialism, coloniality, settler colonialism, and late capitalism. Naming a model of relational comparison that reads slavery and the plantation arc across American, Caribbean, and Sinophone Malaysian literatures, Shu-mei Shih writes: “Comparison as relation means setting into motion historical relationalities between entities brought together for comparison, and bringing into relation terms that have traditionally been pushed apart from each other. . . . The excavation of these relationalities is . . . the ethical practice of comparison, where the workings of power are not concealed but necessarily revealed.”<sup>21</sup> Excavating an analytic of relation in their theorization of comparative global humanities, Lisa Lowe and

Kris Manjapra similarly take Édouard Glissant's poetics of Relation as one source of inspiration among other theorists of decoloniality and comparative racialization. They write, "This analytic of relation recognizes the limits of a more established comparativism that presumes analogous, discretely bounded units, yet explores instead the interdependence, relatedness, and coproduction of communities."<sup>22</sup>

Thinking queerness relationally means that I can read a queer Sinophone film like Scud's *Permanent Residence* (2009) as a cinematic narrative of a gay Mainlander Ivan, who accrues capital and wealth in Hong Kong as an engineer yet exploits Southeast Asian bodies in his sexcape to Bangkok on the way to his next destination for pinkwashing, like Tel Aviv. Queer Sinophone visuality focalizes the unruly comparison of queer bodies and desire across incommensurable geographies rooted in differently layered forms of empire and settler colonialism. Similarly, while queer female migrant domestic workers face different obstacles, immobility, and exploitation in Hong Kong and Taiwan, queer Sinophone documentary films like *Sunday Beauty Queen* (dir. Baby Ruth Villarama, 2016) and *Lesbian Factory* (dir. Susan Chen, 2010) (as I will explore in chapter 4) visualize what Neferti X. M. Tadiar terms the "remaindered life" of queer Sinophone intimacies.<sup>23</sup> These queer migrant workers practice love and intimacy as they navigate queer ways of being in the world mediated by brutal capitalist regimes of work in Sinophone sites.

Framing queer Sinophone studies as a knowledge formation for excavating queer relationality across imperialism, colonialism, and neoliberalism also puts my work into conversation with Laura Doyle's concept of inter-imperiality, which tracks the formation of literature and other expressive cultural forms amid vying empires and geopolitical forces. In other words, unruly comparison can be a queer method of tracing interimperiality, which is "a long-historical, dialectical theory of relationality and power that integrates feminist-intersectional, economic, materialist, literary, and geopolitical thought."<sup>24</sup> Each chapter of my book turns to a specific concept that has animated the fields of area studies, Hong Kong studies, and queer theory in relational terms, including the archive (chapter 1), transnationalism (chapter 2), transgender (chapter 3), intimacies (chapter 4), and borders (chapter 5). It shows how an unruly entanglement of queerness, Hong Kong, and the Sinophone puts analytical pressure on these concepts, which in turn troubles the disciplinary habits of area studies, China studies, and queer theory.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



A queer Sinophone approach that enacts an unruly comparison of Hong Kong necessarily presumes a double theoretical gesture. First, queer Sinophone theory provincializes the Eurocentrism of queer studies by expanding the implications of queer of color critique and queer diaspora studies within the racial and sexual formations of Hong Kong and its global diasporas. Second, it *queers* China studies by using the Sinophone Hong Kong optic to unsettle Chinese nationalism and the disciplinary conventions of East Asian area studies. It would be heuristically useful to trace how queer Sinophone theory has reframed debates in queer studies over the last twenty years. Queer of color critique, queer diaspora studies, and critiques on homonationalism proposed by theorists like David L. Eng, Roderick A. Ferguson, José Esteban Muñoz, Gayatri Gopinath, Martin F. Manalansan, Chandan Reddy, and Jasbir K. Puar, among others, have brought questions of racialization, intersectionality, empires and colonialism, and homonationalism to bear on gender, sexuality, and queerness.<sup>25</sup> This genealogy of transnational queer studies suggests several reorientations of the field of queer studies that have broad implications for queer Chinese studies and queer Sinophone studies. On the one hand, the critique of dominant forms of historical materialism, sociology, and US liberalism in reproducing disciplinary regimes that render nonwhite queer subjects as “deviant” exposes the racial, gender, sexual, and classed contradictions of US liberalism and nationalism, thus underlining the false promise of multiculturalism. Similarly, queer diaspora studies unsettles the queer liberalism that would assume North America as a site of the arrival of modernity for global queer subjects.

The critique of queer liberalism has generated some productive debates within queer Asian studies as well. For Ara Wilson, the queer diaspora model can at times recenter queer diasporic lives and cultural productions rooted in the Global North. Wilson argues, “But more generally, while such analyses create alternative queer narratives within the global north, diasporic queer critiques of Western hegemony still pivot on the first world. Is there a way to make queer life in the complex modernities of the non-West, third-world and global south itself the centre of transnational queer analysis?”<sup>26</sup> While Wilson is perceptive in naming the possible danger of recentering North America as a site for queer diaspora studies, her conflation of queer diaspora studies with the Western academic knowledge production called “queer theory” has the tendency to flatten out queer diasporic studies that do not center the West as

such.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Wilson's automatic turn to "queer Asia" as a site producing "complex modernities" that can debunk the Eurocentrism of queer studies might problematically assume "queer Asia" as a site of particularism, difference, and alterity. This tendency in the work of queer Asian studies reveals the persistent need and indeed anxiety to speak back to an imaginary and universalist frame of reference called "the West," in which this entity could mean both the spatial location of Euro-America and the theoretical muscle of Eurocentric queer theory itself. We are at a conundrum of area studies versus queer theory: would not a debunking of Western queer theory from locally situated perspectives of area studies and non-Western sources simply reproduce the West as a universal frame of reference?

Rey Chow has framed the problem of area studies and theory somewhat differently, using a formula wherein the very assertion of ethnic, national, and sexual differences called "X" will simply reproduce predictable resistance to "Western theory" and Eurocentrism that in the end fails to change the game. Chow asserts, "When scholars of marginalized groups and non-Western subjects rely on notions of resistance (to Western theory) in their attempts to argue the specificity of X, they are unwittingly replicating the conundrum whereby the specificity of an object of study is conceived of in terms of a differential—a differential, moreover, that has to be incorporated in the chain of signification in order to attain recognition."<sup>28</sup> In the specific case of thinking the relationality among queer theory, area studies, and Asia, we might reframe Chow's provocation in the following ways: How can we do queer theory without assuming its Eurocentrism? How can we disentangle queer theory from Eurocentrism without resorting too easily to a theory of localism and the non-West as markers of stable "difference"? What might a non-area studies framework of queer Hong Kong look like?<sup>29</sup>

One generative discussion on provincializing queer theory from the vantage point of queer Asia has been the debate on queering Chineseness within queer Chinese studies. In his book *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*, Petrus Liu offers a historical argument that sees the 1949 geopolitical division of the "two Chinas," namely the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan, as productive in the emergence of queer Marxism in the literatures and intellectual circles in both sites.<sup>30</sup> While Liu makes the disclaimer that his project "is not a Sinoophone studies book," his book is most productive in illustrating the divergent approaches in the field to queering Chineseness.<sup>31</sup> For queer Sinoophone historian Howard Chiang, Liu's "obsession with a 'Chinese materialist queer theory that sets it apart from its Euro-American counterparts' not only begs the question of whose Chineseness is at stake, but also risks reifying the



East-West binary via . . . 'self- or re-Orientalization.'"<sup>32</sup> Liu's latest book, *The Specter of Materialism*, attempts to "rework the methodologies of queer theory through a decentered perspective on the history of global capitalism."<sup>33</sup> If a queer materialist approach to the two Chinas unsettles the Eurocentric basis of queer theory and its 1990s emergence, queer Sinophone theory disrupts the referentiality of Chineseness in the first place.

In parsing this debate between queer Chinese studies and queer Sinophone studies on the reification of queer Chineseness as a nonliberal critique, I am less interested in adding fuel to the flame. Rather, the model of unruly comparison offers a productive way to reframe the debate in fresh light. A queer Sinophone approach emphasizes the fruitfulness of studying the complexity of queer desire, intimacy, and resistance across the distinctive temporality and spatiality of Sinophone modernities without homogenizing what Chineseness might signify in advance. Tracing this queer Sinophone line of inquiry and building on existing works in queer Chinese studies that deconstruct Chineseness both spatially and temporally, *Unruly Comparison* calls for a queer Hong Kong method that enacts a critique of the presumed hierarchy between an "original" China and its lesser "Sinophone" copies.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the concept of unruly comparison queers the ontology of Chineseness through the politics of unknowing Hong Kong itself. To *unknow* Hong Kong is to appreciate the city-region beyond its position as a pawn between geopolitical rivalries. Specifically, unknowing shatters the myth of Hong Kong as a middleman of global capitalism for China and the West by imagining instead the "perverse modernities" of Hong Kong. Instead of turning to Hong Kong to fetishize the global city and special administrative region through postcolonial anomaly and capitalist exceptionalism, the politic of unknowing Hong Kong frames it as a geopolitical and conceptual domain that troubles any essentialist claim to Chineseness and queerness as such. An unruly queer methodology also rethinks Hong Kong and queer Asias in their multiplicity: it forestalls the desire to turn to non-Western areas and regions to catalog differences and particularity for the sake of countering the Eurocentrism of queerness. In a more disturbing mode, unruly comparison treats Hong Kong (and other similarly marginal and interimperial regions of the world) as an immense site of differences unto itself while expanding an elastic scale of relational comparison to other regions, archives, spaces, and temporalities in the world.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

Queer Sinophone studies interrupts queer theory's universalist tendency and queer Asian studies' reassertion of difference as "X" (à la Rey Chow).<sup>35</sup> Shu-mei Shih defines the Sinophone as "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries."<sup>36</sup> Like queer theory's emphasis on discontinuity across sex, gender, and sexuality and its suspicion of essentialism, then, the concept of the Sinophone decenters the ontological and ethnonational equivalence between China as a nation-state, Chinese as language, and Chinese as identity politics. In a subsequent formulation, Shih provides a materialist and historical definition of Sinophone studies through the critique of Chinese empire and continental colonialism within the PRC, whose present-day territory largely inherits the Qing conquest of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia.

China-centrism operates through this largely ignored imperial history of Chinese empire. Deriving its strength from the myth of the homeland, it problematically ties descendants from the diasporas of Southeast Asia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the world at large to "China."<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Ien Ang's invocation of "not speaking Chinese" playfully deconstructs the politics of racial authenticity and long-distance diasporic nationalism.<sup>38</sup> Ang's solution to the perennial problem of looking Chinese but not speaking Chinese (a problem well-known to most Chinese Americans born in the United States, often referred to as "ABCs") is one of strategic and conditional refusal. Ang writes: "If I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*."<sup>39</sup>

If postcolonial and postmodern deconstruction of the dominant politics of Chineseness some twenty years ago by theorists like Ien Ang and Rey Chow sought to bracket "Chineseness" and put it productively "under erasure," Sinophone studies retains this deontological and poststructuralist emphasis by giving the critique of Chineseness a global, transnational, and materialist dimension.<sup>40</sup> It gives voices to those deemed "inauthentic" due to historical, racial, and/or gendered circumstances. Sinophone studies thus shares with queer theory two major theoretical investments—a tendency against essentialism and a politics of disidentification.<sup>41</sup> *Unruly Comparison* engages fruitfully with the theory of disidentification that originates from queer of color critique and queer diaspora studies. All these intellectual formations

demonstrate the politics of living with and transgressing dominant regimes of knowing, whether those dominant epistemologies and powers go by the name of China-centrism, heterosexism, ethnic nationalism, and/or white homonormativity.

The idea of unruly comparison expands on the theory of minor transnationalism by turning to the queer incommensurability of minor regions like Hong Kong.<sup>42</sup> Structurally, *Unruly Comparison* imagines a queer Hong Kong modernity through archival undoing (chapter 1); it maps South-South transnationalism in Hong Kong cinema (chapter 2); it transnationalizes transgender in Sinophone Hong Kong (chapter 3); it visualizes queer intimacies among migrant domestic workers (chapter 4); and it queers the Sinophone border across the PRC and Hong Kong cinematically (chapter 5). As a whole, it offers a global, transnational, and Sinophone method of comparison. I theorize comparison as a method of putting unlikely entities in relational proximity, of making Hong Kong signify strangeness and negativity unto itself, and of refusing the call of China-centrism even as Hong Kong is already geopolitically incorporated into the PRC.

*Unruly Comparison* offers a Sinophone and transpacific method of comparison insofar as China-centrism is merely one of its many objects of critique. Many cultural forms examined here, such as Hong Kong films, literature, and visual cultures—including films on queer diasporas, such as *Happy Together*, directed by Wong Kar-wai (1997), and *Permanent Residence*, directed by Scud (2009), and the queer novel *Once Upon a Time in Hong Kong*, by Ma Ka Fai (2016)—all imagine queer desire against the backdrop of global modernity, queer diasporic journeys, and interracial colonial intimacy. By linking seemingly incommensurable visibility and narratives of war, diaspora, feminism, and interracial intimacy within a comparative framework, my book also envisions queer Hong Kong as method—it frees Hong Kong from existing well-worn terminologies such as colony, region, global city, and “cultural desert” through alternative spatial and temporal resignifications. It scales up the regional and spatial specificity of Hong Kong across wider temporal, transnational, and transpacific scales of comparison. In so doing, it advances a model of unruly comparison that disrupts the disciplinary orientations of area studies (China studies, Asian studies, and to a lesser degree Hong Kong studies), comparative literature, and queer theory. *Unruly Comparison* situates Hong Kong itself as an important site of thinking queerness comparatively and works this comparative aim outward into global and transnational terrains.

Theorizing Hong Kong relationally is another way of saying that Hong Kong can be a queer method, for queer theory provides nonbinary and nondualistic

modes of thinking. My invocation of “queer Hong Kong as method” as a cognate concept with unruly comparison is obviously inspired by Kuan-Hsing Chen’s concept of “Asia as method.” Whereas Chen argues that the Cold War and the United States’ military and empire-building in Asia have prevented the possibilities of decolonization and de-imperialization, my conjoining of *queer* with *Hong Kong as method* unsettles any masculinist and heteronormative accounts of nationalism and decolonization that often underline the transitional period of Hong Kong’s 1997 return to the “motherland” that is the PRC.<sup>43</sup> Conceptually, queering Hong Kong is a multidirectional method that disrupts masculinist narrations of Hong Kong modernity and postcoloniality on the one hand while linking Hong Kong to queer temporalities and regions in the Other Asias through what Chen terms “inter-referencing strategy.”<sup>44</sup> Chapter 1 further outlines queer Hong Kong as a Sinophone method by turning to a queer unruly archive of Hong Kong modernity that ruptures masculine narratives of modernization, war, and historicism.

*Unruly Comparison* turns to transpacific and minor-to-minor forms of queer transnationalism that place Hong Kong within the narratives of global modernity, war, queer diasporas, migration, intimacies, and border-crossing femininity. The transpacific here denotes less the regional economic partnership between Southeast Asian, East Asian, and North American countries and more what Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen call “another vision of the Pacific as a contact zone” mediated by “alternate narratives of translocalism, oppositional localism, and oppositional regionalism.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, transpacific and Sinophone approaches have given rise to a more complex, worldly, and entangled imaginary of Hong Kong, one that rethinks existing methods of comparison.

## Chapter Outlines

*Unruly Comparison* treats Hong Kong as part of the broader story of global modernity, in which queer sexuality and desire transform our existing ways of seeing the city. Beyond the dominant modes of seeing Hong Kong through East-West comparisons, queering Hong Kong is also another way of framing it relationally across incommensurable but linked global histories, spatiality, and temporality. Each chapter in the book sets Hong Kong, the Sinophone, and queerness into motion and situates queer cultural formations across wider temporal, spatial, and transnational scales of comparison.

Chapter 1, “Queer Hong Kong as a Sinophone Method,” reads queer Hong Kong literature as a material force of worlding, one that provides a deep re-

flection on affect, history, and queer archive. In particular, I analyze a novel by the award-winning Hong Kong author Wong Bik-wan, whose novels and short stories narrate issues of migration, the Asia-Pacific War, criminal history, gendered violence, and the law. Specifically, Wong's 1999 feminist novel *Lienü tu* (烈女圖, Portraits of martyred women) imagines the possibility of feminist solidarity and lesbian intimacy, namely affective modes that are often overshadowed by the larger narratives of war and political leftism in 1940–70s Hong Kong.<sup>46</sup> I also place Wong's novel alongside *Zi shu* (自梳, *Intimates*, dir. Jacob Cheung, 1997), a film of lesbian eros and regionalism, and Ma Ka Fai's 2016 queer novel *Long tou feng wei* (龍頭鳳尾, Once upon a time in Hong Kong), which presents a story of colonial complicity in the affair between a Scottish officer and a local mafia boss. Beyond narrating a homoerotic tale often buried in historical accounts of the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong (1941–45), Ma's novel also serves as a self-reflexive theorization of queer archive. Overall, Wong, Cheung, and Ma's works actualize a queer Sinophone worlding of Hong Kong through deep archival illuminations and unruly juxtapositions of lesbian desire and male homoeroticism that ultimately disrupt masculinist narrations of Hong Kong modernity.

Chapter 2, "Postcoloniality beyond China-Centrism," explores Hong Kong cinema in the post-1997 period as a rich site for queer Sinophone theory, positioning Hong Kong as a geographic locale through the visual mapping of global intimacies and connections. It expands on Shu-mei Shih's insight into the Sinophone as a nonrelational approach toward Chineseness and draws upon Lisa Lowe's concept of "the intimacies of four continents." Queerness in Hong Kong cinema precisely points to modes of disorientation and transnational mobility that deviate from the geopolitics of British colonial legacy and China-centrism. I examine queer nonrelationality to Chineseness in independent filmmaker Scud's two films, *Yongjiu juliu* (永久居留, *Permanent Residence*, 2009) and *An fei ta ming* (安非他命, *Amphetamine*, 2010), that link Hong Kong with Guangzhou in China as well as with Thailand and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and that map queer desire across Australia and Hong Kong, respectively. I also examine Sinophone local and regional lesbian cinematic aesthetics in *Hudie* (蝴蝶, *Butterfly*, dir. Mak Yan Yan, 2004). Mak's film narrates the transnational and Sinophone connections of Hong Kong with an "elsewhere" (whether real or imaginary) through lesbian desire. In visualizing a model of postcoloniality beyond dominant Chineseness, queer Sinophone theory foregrounds Hong Kong cinematic transnationalism across worldly geographies and local intimacies.

Chapter 3, “Transnationalizing Transgender,” demonstrates that studying queer Hong Kong requires an alternative framework of “queer globalities.” Conceptually, queer globalities illustrate the convergent dynamics of global queer rights discourses, local geopolitics, and so-called pink capitalism within the global modernities of queer Asia. The plural emphasis of “queer globalities” points to the unevenness with which the global forces of queer liberalism and LGBT human rights discourses encounter the postcolonial modernity of Hong Kong, where the government, NGOs, activists, and cultural workers redefine queer liberalism to unpredictable ends. This concept thus moves beyond the simplistic binary of the local-global or the post-modern meshing of the *glocal* by coming to terms with the many ways of being queer *and* global. In short, it reclaims globality for queer Hong Kong. The first part of this chapter offers a critical legal analysis of queer and trans rights in Hong Kong. Next, I provide a queer transnational analysis of the film *Cui si* (翠絲, *Tracey*, dir. Jun Li, 2018) by mapping the condition of being trans through multiple queer temporalities and transnational spaces. I then contrast *Tracey* with Maisy Suen’s *Nuren jiushi nuren* (女人就是女人, *A Woman Is a Woman*, 2018), which narrates the struggle of a married trans woman named Sung Chi Yu and the life of a feminine high school boy, Chiu Ling Fung. The film maps the double life journeys of Sung and Chiu by visualizing multiple ways of being trans in Sinophone Hong Kong, where the erotic density of embodying transness spatially at school and church, and in familial spaces, challenges any essentialist notion of trans personhood. I also examine a successful series of photo exhibitions of trans subjects and public workshops inspired by the film. Overall, this chapter considers the *trans* of transgender as a prefix that highlights transnational movement, trans mobility, and trans-medial Sinophone creativity.

While migration studies of Hong Kong tend to track the outward flow of people due to political instability and postcolonial transition, they seldom connect the situations of Hong Kong’s “flexible citizens” with the migration of domestic workers into Hong Kong. Furthermore, existing sociological studies of migrant domestic workers by scholars like Rhacel Salazar Parreñas reinforce a heteronormative assumption in the model of the international division of reproductive labor.<sup>47</sup> Chapter 4, “Queer Sinophone Intimacies,” analyzes documentary films about queer migrants, beauty pageants, and activism such as Susan Chen’s *T po gong chang* (T婆工廠, *Lesbian Factory*, 2010), its sequel *Caihong ba le* (彩虹芭樂, *Rainbow Popcorn*, 2012), and Baby Ruth Villarama’s *Sunday Beauty Queen* (2016) to show how a Sinophone comparison of queer intimacies in contemporary Taiwan and Hong Kong yields a sorely needed

intersectional critique of race, migration, and queerness in Sinophone theory and Hong Kong studies.

Chapter 5, “Trespassing the Sinophone Border,” examines Fruit Chan’s three Sinophone films on the figure of the sex worker, *Liu lian piao piao* (榴槤飄飄, *Durian Durian*, 2000), *Xianggang you ge he li huo* (香港有個荷里活, *Hollywood Hong Kong*, 2001), and *San fu* (三夫, *Three Husbands*, 2018). In *Durian Durian*, the friendship between a sex worker named Yan and illegal immigrant girl named Fan in Hong Kong takes center stage, but the film’s evocation of Yan’s more peaceful life back home in Northeast China 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, a sex worker. Finally, *Three Husbands* most daringly symbolizes the geopolitical tension within Hong Kong by showing how the female protagonist, Ah Mui, and her erotic attachments to her first, second, and third husbands conjure the symbolism of Hong Kong mediated by the forces of British colonial legacy, Chinese nationalism, and global capitalism. In a deconstructive queer move, the film also undoes this masculinist positioning of Ah Mui by emphasizing her constant mobility across the human and nonhuman divide through the visibility of water, oceanic current, and spatial unbelonging. Overall, Chan’s cinematic aesthetic trespasses the Sinophone border of Mainland China and Hong Kong by queering the border of Chineseness on the Sinophone screen.

As evident in this outline of chapters, *Unruly Comparison* very much engages with a messy, unruly, and minor archive of queer visibility in the vein of what Jack Halberstam calls a queer scavenger methodology.<sup>48</sup> In framing queer Sinophone visibility as an optic for relational comparison that reads wildly across incommensurable histories, temporalities, regions, and archives, my book is further indebted to Gopinath, here to her idea of unruly visions as aesthetic practices that “allow us to see, sense, and feel the promiscuous intimacies of multiple times and spaces.”<sup>49</sup> In the epilogue, I perform a final act of unruly comparison by juxtaposing a recent film on homelessness and queer intimacies in Hong Kong following the 2019 protests, *Zhuo shui piaoliu* (濁水漂流, *Drifting*, dir. Jun Li, 2021), with Eric Yip’s queer poem “Fricatives” (2021). Both texts disorient the dark political mood of contemporary Hong Kong’s nihilism by visually conjuring a queer undercommons not based on homogeneity but incommensurability.

In sum, *Unruly Comparison* demonstrates the possibility of thinking queerness, Hong Kong, and the Sinophone relationally and comparatively. It



advances a transdisciplinary and intersectional approach for studying race, gender, sexuality, postcolonialism, and queerness in and beyond Hong Kong. By entangling Hong Kong with the broader Sinophone world, it shows how queer cultural productions “made in Hong Kong” can offer a new model of unruly comparison for queer theory, Hong Kong studies, and Sinophone studies.

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



## INTRODUCTION

- 1 Hong and Ferguson, "Introduction," 3.
- 2 Chiang, "(De)Provincializing China," 20.
- 3 On the concept of wake work, see Sharpe, *In the Wake*.
- 4 Hung, *City on the Edge*, 15.
- 5 Hung, *City on the Edge*, 14.
- 6 On the concept of minor transnationalism, see Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*.
- 7 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 7.
- 8 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
- 9 Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, "The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region."
- 10 Chan, "Hong Kong Protests."
- 11 Tang, "Where Are You Going?," 32.
- 12 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 1.
- 13 On parasite as a Sinophone concept, see Tan, "Parasite."
- 14 Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, 3–4.
- 15 Cheah, *What Is a World*, 11.
- 16 On the concept of "a small place" as a point of departure for critiquing the legacies of colonialism and the tourist gaze, see Kincaid, *A Small Place*. I am also inspired by Evelyn Blackwood's work on queer desire and locality in West Sumatra, Indonesia. See Blackwood, "Transnational Sexualities in One Place."
- 17 Apter, *Translation Zone*, xi–xii.
- 18 On the concept of disappearance, see Abbas, *Hong Kong*. On theorizing Hong Kong as caught between colonizers, see Chow, "Between Colonizers." For the phrase "lost in transition" as a framework to describe Hong Kong's postcolonial economic transition into the orbit of China's postsocialist capitalism, see Chu, *Lost in Transition*. For the provocative idea of Hong Kong serving the three masters of British colonialism, Chinese nationalism, and global capitalism, see Erni, "Like a Postcolonial Culture."
- 19 Melas, *All the Difference*, xii. Melas's emphasis on figures of incommensurability is illustrative of the broader debate about distant reading (Franco Moretti), (un)translatability (Emily Apter), planetarity (Wai Chee Dimock, Gayatri Spivak), and worlding (Pheng Cheah) in the fields of comparative literature and world literature.

While all these models aim at overcoming the field's entrenched Eurocentrism, they also perceptively emphasize the worlding aspects of literature, its longevity beyond the temporality of the nation and empire, and its rupturing of East-West comparison.

- 20 Chuh, *Difference Aesthetics Makes*, xi.
- 21 Shih, "Comparison as Relation," 79. See also Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*.
- 22 Lowe and Manjapra, "Comparative Global Humanities," 26.
- 23 See Tadiar, *Remaindered Life*.
- 24 Doyle, *Inter-imperiality*, 1.
- 25 See Eng, *Racial Castration*; Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*; Manalansan, *Global Divas*; Reddy, *Freedom with Violence*; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.
- 26 Wilson, "Queering Asia," paragraph 8.
- 27 In addition to the groundbreaking scholarship on queer diaspora by Eng, Gopinath, and Manalansan, the scholarship on Black queer diaspora also decenters Blackness through transnational and global configurations. See Allen, "Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture," 215: "To follow the routes of black/queer/diaspora is to interrogate dynamic, unsettled subjects whose bodies, desires, and texts *move*." See also Ponce, *Beyond the Nation*; and Walcott, *Queer Returns*.
- 28 Chow, *Age of the World Target*, 68.
- 29 In raising these questions, I am joining scholars who think with the tension generated between queer studies and area studies. See Arondekar and Patel, "Area Impossible."
- 30 Liu, *Queer Marxism*.
- 31 Liu, *Queer Marxism*, 5.
- 32 Chiang, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific*, 73–74.
- 33 Liu, *Specter of Materialism*, 17.
- 34 For a queer temporal approach to Chineseness, see Martin, *Backward Glances*. For spatial and transnational queer approaches that fracture the meanings of Chineseness, see Kong, *Sexuality and the Rise of China*; and D. T.-S. Tang, *Conditional Spaces*.
- 35 For foundational works in queer Sinophone studies, see Chiang and Heinrich, *Queer Sinophone Cultures*; and Chiang and Wong, *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies*.
- 36 Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, 4.
- 37 Recently, historians who study "New Qing History" have begun the work of deconstructing Han-centric notions of China. See Mullaney et al., *Critical Han Studies*; Crossley, *Translucent Mirror*; Elliott, *Manchu Way*; and Perdue, *China Marches West*.
- 38 Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*.
- 39 Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, 36. See also Tan, *Rethinking Chineseness*. Another strand of Sinophone studies questions the notion of linguistic nativity at the core of Chineseness. See Tsu, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora*.
- 40 Chow, "Introduction," 24.

- 41 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.
- 42 See Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*; see also Boutaghou and Jean-Francois, "Introduction."
- 43 See K.-H. Chen, *Asia as Method*. My concept of queer Hong Kong as method also builds on recent scholarship in queer Asian studies that explores an earlier historical formation of "global queering" that is coeval with the emergence of gay capital cities in the West, as well as comparative studies of Hong Kong and Singapore through an emphasis of disjunctive queer modernities. See Jackson, "Capitalism and Global Queering." On disjunctive queer modernities in Asia, see Yue and Leung, "Notes Towards the Queer Asian City."
- 44 K.-H. Chen, *Asia as Method*, 107.
- 45 Hoskins and Nguyen, "Introduction," 3. See also L. Wong, *Transpacific Attachments*; and Metzger, *Chinese Atlantic*.
- 46 Works originally published in Chinese will appear in pinyin first, followed by the title in Chinese with an English translation. Subsequent mentions of the same work will refer to the translated English title only.
- 47 See Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization*.
- 48 See Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 13: "A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior."
- 49 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 18.

## 1. QUEER HONG KONG AS A SINOPHONE METHOD

A large portion of chapter 1 appeared as "Queer Hong Kong as a Sinophone Method," in *Sinophone Studies across Disciplines: A Reader*, ed. Howard Chiang and Shu-mei Shih (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024): 193–208.

- 1 Ghaziani and Brim, "Queer Methods," 14.
- 2 Love, "Close Reading and Thin Description," 404.
- 3 Arondekar, *For the Record*, 4.
- 4 Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 175.
- 5 Bardoloi, "An Ecosystem of Incentives and Policies."
- 6 Meyer, *Hong Kong as a Global Metropolis*, 60.
- 7 Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 101–33. It is worth pointing out that Lowe devotes one chapter to Hong Kong as the colonial site where both the recruitment and transfer of coolies and the interracial intimacies and differentiation of European and Chinese bodies are simultaneously at work. These forms of colonial and imperial intimacies cover debates of "free" and unfree labor, vagrancy, and the unequal regulation of prostitution and venereal diseases.
- 8 For a trenchant critique of how both postcolonial theory and area studies are complicit with US empire and fail to critique racism domestically and Asian colonial modernity and imperialism abroad, see Shih, "Racializing Area Studies, Defetishizing China."