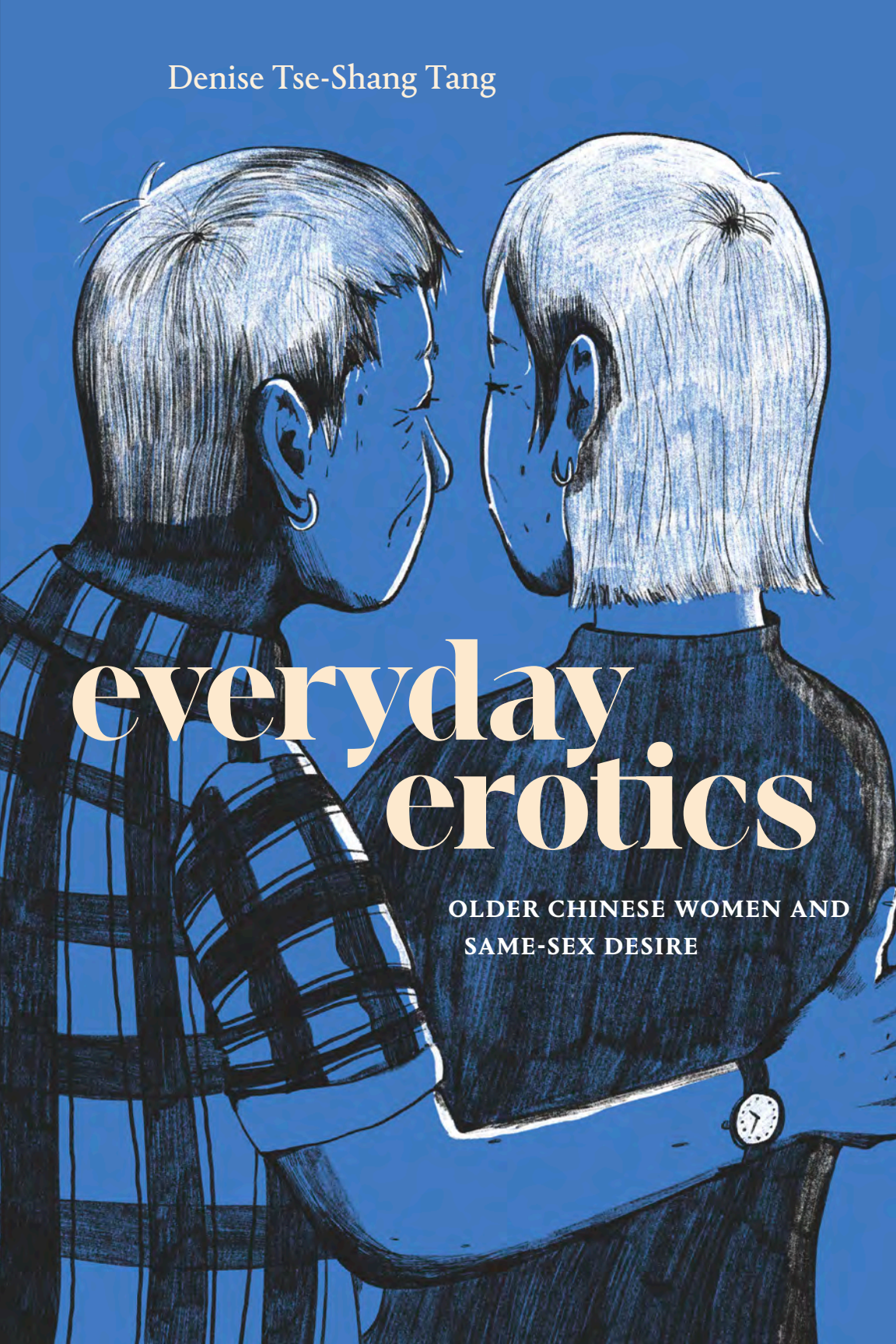
Denise Tse-Shang Tang



everyday erotics

OLDER CHINESE WOMEN AND SAME-SEX DESIRE

Everyday Erotics

EVERYDAY EROTICS

Older Chinese Women and Same-Sex Desire

Denise Tse-Shang Tang

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For all the informants who shared their life stories with me
May our love and desires always be heard in this world

Contents

Note on Romanization

All non-English terms in this book are Chinese and appear in italics. There is no standard romanization of the Cantonese language. I chose to follow the Sidney Lau system for romanization of Cantonese terms. As a native Cantonese speaker, I find that the Sidney Lau system is more attuned to the everyday usage of Cantonese in Hong Kong than the *jyutping* system. The pinyin system is used for romanization of Mandarin terms.

See the glossary for Chinese terms (Cantonese and Mandarin) that appear frequently in this text or have special importance.

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Introduction

I have long had an impulse to approach a woman in my neighborhood whom I regularly see standing on the side of the street, leaning on the metal pedestrian railing, smoking a cigarette, and eyeing everyone who walks down the street. She has what I would call a butch razor haircut, cleanly shaved on the sides with short spikes on top, and is wearing a Hawaiian shirt whenever I see her around the neighborhood. One time she noticed that I was walking with a limp and called out, "Walk slowly, and watch your steps. Take care!" I live in Yuen Long in the New Territories in an area where modern high-rises abut small indigenous villages. I often see this woman walking out of one of those villages with confident strides that seem to announce her departure from tradition and arrival at modernity. This is not to say, however, that she is leaving behind clan relations and the centuries-old form of patriarchal lineage that seeks to disavow her membership in the village clan because she is a woman. Rather, she appears to be taking up a position in the interstices between gender expressions, pulling her weight as a masculine woman; she is both rooted in Chinese traditions and marching forward to claim her spot in an urban space characterized by fast-paced development, huge profit gains, immense social inequalities, and political uncertainties. When she arrives, she stands alone, catching my eye. I cannot help but notice her, which brings to mind parts of myself that I dare to think are similar to what she symbolizes for me. I cannot take my eyes off her, yet we have

never spoken directly to each other—only exchanging nods and a shout-out about my walking appeared to be of interest to her.

This book presents the life stories of older Chinese women with same-sex desires (born in the late 1930s to 1960s) in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan; it is an interdisciplinary ethnography combining fieldwork and cultural analysis of inter-Asian mediations of femininities and masculinities. Starting in Hong Kong, a city located "at the edge of the Chinese and British empires," I seek in this book to unpack the social, cultural, and historical meanings of being a woman interested in same-sex erotic relationships in an attempt to build a genealogy of sexualities and an archive of queer women's lives. I provide original empirical data on and critical analysis of older Chinese women with same-sex desires in interconnected and inter-related Asian societies in order to address a research gap in women's history and queer history. This book investigates the embodied meanings and experiences of becoming a woman with same-sex desires through tales of love and longing, sexual intimacy, family obligations, and personal respectability. My aim is to trace how same-sex desires among women travel through their experiences of social worlds and the strata of their cultural life. Rather than focusing on experiences of discrimination and healthcare needs, the narrative accounts and analysis presented in this book are aimed at complicating cultural notions of love, romance, and intimacies within the interstices of connected histories, gender roles, and marginalized sexual subjectivities. The informants have lived in an era when stigmatization was a more significant threat to sexual behavior among lesbians than criminalization was; their decisions about romantic relationships, friendships, community building, and career choices have been based on wider societal attitudes toward Chinese women and women with same-sex desires. The three study sites were selected to explore inter-Asian cultural flows and connected histories. Treading carefully around a highly stigmatized subject, I encountered women who shared their lived experiences and cultural imaginations of being different while surviving as a Chinese woman with lesbian desires.

This book is based on original qualitative ethnographic research conducted in Hong Kong as the primary site, with fieldwork extending to the secondary sites of Taiwan and Singapore. Hong Kong, given its past as a British colony, has arguably developed a hybridized cultural identity, with the notion of "Hongkongese" emerging in the 1970s.[1] Under British law, homosexuality constituted the crime of buggery in Hong Kong until 1990. Legislative reform decriminalized sodomy in 1991. Taiwan was

a Japanese colony from 1895 to 1945. Later, under Kuomintang (KMT) rule, postwar Taiwanese society was characterized by remnants of Japanese modernization and the KMT's nationalizing project of Chineseness.[2] Taiwanese law protects the rights of LGBTQ people in the workplace and in schools, with same-sex marriage legalized in 2019.[3] Singapore was a British colony from 1819 to 1959, finally becoming an independent state in 1965. In this multiethnic immigrant society within a Malay environment, Singapore's cultural identity was constructed aggressively against a backdrop of economic utilitarianism and an unrelenting work ethic.[4] Singapore is the only one of the three research sites in which homosexuality remained illegal until Section 377A of the Penal Code was officially repealed in 2022. In terms of LGBTQ visibility, however, all three sites have emerged as queer Asian cities, with a particular nod toward Taipei.[5] Taipei hosts the region's largest annual Pride parade, with the twenty-second Taiwan LGBTQ Pride in 2024 attracting more than 180,000 attendees.[6] Pride events have also expanded to Kaohsiung, Taichung, and eastern Taiwan, drawing crowds ranging between the low thousands and more than forty thousand between 2020 and 2023. In 2017, Singapore's Pink Dot event attracted twenty thousand participants, whereas Hong Kong's parallel event attracted around 6,500 in 2019. Thousands, including politicians and Members of Parliament, continued to attend the Singapore Pink Dot rally in 2024 even though a pro-family group released a scorecard assessing the moral values of Singaporean politicians.[7] In Hong Kong, Pride parades relocated indoors to become rainbow markets.[8] Hong Kong's Pink Dot carnival event was still held outdoors in West Kowloon Park as recently as 2024.

This book is an attempt to bridge the past of becoming aware of lesbian desires with the present era of plural rights and LGBTQ identity-based claims. Even if one did not participate in parades or specific LGBTQ events, public discussions on human rights or same-sex marriage rights were widespread on news media platforms, leading me to explore the everyday understandings of lesbian desires among participants in this study.

But who is the older Chinese woman with lesbian desires? After years of research on the connection between urban space and Hong Kong lesbians, where I have perhaps arrived is at the tracing of the Chinese lesbian. Is there a way to describe the qualities, characteristics, and behavior of one? Is there a particular look, sensibility, or trait that would allow me to locate this woman in the past? Do I have that look? Do you have that look? Is the term *lesbian* an identifier to be known or discovered, desired

or loathed, used or abandoned? What are the connections to the larger debates on gender, Chinese modernities, rapid industrialization processes, rights-based discourses, and connected neoliberal societies?

"Being butch gets us seen," my informant Ko Sing proclaimed at a private gathering for five held in a small studio apartment. We were talking about the looks of people like us.[9] Margaret looked at Ko Sing with piercing eyes and loudly said, "Yes, if you're not butch, we don't know who is and who isn't!" Margaret herself is more feminine in both attire and gender expression. Ko Sing then looked at me and said, "It's like you. I'm sure students know you're one just from the way you look." We all laughed, but I had to point out that "many of us don't look this way." Margaret then asked with curiosity, "Then how can people tell? I mean, how can I tell?" Margaret has been in a relationship with her partner, Ah Ben, for fifty-five years and has never been with anyone else. As our conversation unfolded, other friends chimed in with their opinions on the pros and cons of being masculine in expression and putting female masculinity in historical context. Of the five of us, I would describe two as being butch and wearing typically masculine attire. Ko Sing, sixty-eight, wore adjustable suspenders with exquisite leather tabs over a khaki-colored shirt and black chino pants. Chains of different shapes and sizes adorned her belt, with one linked to her wallet, another to a set of keys, and yet another for embellishment. Ko Sing is a stocky butch in the Feinbergian sense.[10] Ms. Lee, eighty-seven, wore a men's blue gingham shirt under a black cotton V-neck sweater, light khaki cotton pants, and a dark blue knee-length windbreaker. Margaret, seventy-three, wore a soft-looking gray sweater with a classy pink floral pattern and light blue jeans. She is agile on her feet, and during the gathering was always jumping up from the sofa to make coffee and tea for everyone and put different kinds of snacks on the table. A research assistant for the project, Ah Yan, thirty-two, who has long, bleached-blond hair with dark roots, wore a white T-shirt decorated with cats and a stylish cropped suit top. I am fifty, and my attire for the evening was a worn-out gray sweatshirt and blue cargo joggers. It was a cross-generational conversation, with topics that cut across age and time, queried categories of butchness and visibility, and discussed finding love and romance.[11] Ms. Lee had been Margaret's secondary school teacher, teaching physical education and geography. Because Margaret entered secondary school very late in life, the age gap between her and Ms. Lee is small. At one point in our conversation, Ms. Lee boldly asked me and Ah Yan, "Are there many who are like us?" We both nodded and

enthusiastically answered, "Yes!" Ms. Lee continued, "Actually, I felt uncomfortable when I saw you two walking in. I have always felt uncomfortable seeing couples or people like us. I feel it's unnatural." We were both taken aback, with Ah Yan taking a noticeable step backward, while I attempted to regain my composure as a not-so-easily-shocked longtime researcher on lesbian sexualities. This theme of feeling uncomfortable or feeling that same-sex relationships are unnatural crops up throughout this book. It emerged at different moments in conversations across oceans and over seven years of ethnographic fieldwork, unexpectedly at times, disrupting banter unrelated to lesbian identities or desires, or as part of an emotional outburst while we were talking specifically about same-sex relationships.

TRACING THE CHINESE LESBIAN

The process of articulating same-sex love and erotic relations between Chinese women inevitably calls up the major debates on the currency of Euro-American-based sexual identities and LGBTQ social movements in gay and lesbian studies. As discussed by notable scholars across disciplines, adoption of the term *lesbian* to describe one's sexual desires can easily point to an individualistic account of sexual identity premised on Euro-American-based identity politics and the women's movement.[12] The burden of the term's use lies in the universalizing of female same-sex love relations and experiences, on the one hand, and in the assumption of lesbian-based subcultural identification and politics, on the other.[13]

In tracing the emergence of the lesbian figure in modern China, Tze-lan D. Sang found that Chinese reformers in the early 1910s selectively used "modern science" to position same-sex love between women as sexually and psychologically perverse, citing Western sexological theories. Historically, the Chinese lesbian emerges out of popular fiction, literature, and autobiographical writings.[14] The Chinese lesbian has never been celebrated or accorded public status worthy of sustained interest. Sang meticulously draws out "female-female eroticism," first from trivial mentions in early-twentieth-century elite and popular literature depicting sexual intimacy between women as "sisterhood," "harmless," or "inferior."[15] She then traces how a public sphere comprising male intellectuals in the May Fourth era, and their fascination with European sexologists and Japanese interpretations, controlled the discourse expounding on love between women as *nuzi tongxing lianai* (female homosexuality), *qingyu zhi*

dindao (sexual inversion), *yichang* (abnormality) and *biantai* (perversion) in the 1910s and 1920s.[16] One of Sang's most astute observations is the absence of descriptions, associations, and depictions of "female-female lust" in literary representations authored by both men and women during the May Fourth New Culture Movement in the 1920s. That absence partially explains why love and intimacy between women were often perceived as "either aesthetic, platonic unions or vacuous, depraved lust," or as "an undercurrent of sensuality and physical longing."[17] Discussion of male homosexuality or "female-female love" was marginalized in, if not obliterated from, public discourse from the 1930s onward.[18] It was not until the opening up of China in the 1980s that explorations of sexualities reemerged in society. Sang explains her usage of "lesbianism" to describe "a category of eroticism" and says it is "the equivalent of [the terms] *female same-sex love*, *female same-sex desire*, *female homosexuality*, and *female homoeroticism*."[19]

Although this study is not situated within the same China-specific historical trajectory, I write about this trajectory at length here because the informants' immediate and extended families lived through and survived these tremendous upheavals in modern Chinese history, influencing how the informants were raised during their childhood and how gender roles were scripted. Family genealogies may have been fragmented. Family and kinship do not always follow configurations characterized by blood connections. I am always looking at the crevices within historical narratives, contemporary everyday accounts, and anything in between. Sang's tracing and theorization of "Chinese female-female relations" as embedded in multiple creative forms and in radical/activist practices from premodern China and Republican China to post-Mao China and post-martial-law Taiwan provide a much-needed road map for understanding the development of patriarchy, female gender, and lesbian desires and the close linkages between them. The informants in my own study, most of whom were born in the 1940s and 1950s, with one informant born in 1938 and a few born in the 1960s, often described love and intimacy between women as "invisible," "nonthreatening to society," "intensely close friendships," or "more companionship than sexual" during our initial meetings. Using the notion of sisterhood to describe their lesbian relationships was actually a tactic for minimizing them, an erasure of their existence leading to lifelong nonrecognition. Sexual intimacy between women appeared to be absent from their discussions of sisterly affection and friendship. As I got to know them better over the

years, talking about sex became slightly easier but could never be taken for granted during the interviews. In time, their descriptions of having same-sex desires slowly evolved into descriptions of feelings, with terms such as "rejection" and descriptions of feeling "different," "strange," or "uncomfortable" frequently cropping up.

As Chinese women gained social and economic status as individuals not entirely attached to or belonging to patriarchal male households and names, the concept of the Modern Girl also arose. For Sang, this concept refers to a "person with integrity"; for Tani Barlow, it refers to any subject that "not only continues the enlightenment but raises it to greater levels of human/universal potentiality" within the economic and social conditions of Chinese modernity.[20] Taking cues from the Modern Girl Around the World Research Group project, I follow the group's line of questioning—"How was the Modern Girl global? What made her so?"—while reframing the inquiry: "What makes a Chinese woman lesbian? How does it happen?" Although Alys Eve Weinbaum and colleagues focus on the global phenomenon of the Modern Girl in the 1920s and 1930s, their contribution to pulling together "multifaceted linkages—ideological, aesthetic, and material" has informed my thinking about how Chinese women of the postwar generation with same-sex desires can be both similar and different at the same time, recognizable yet missed.[21]

The Modern Girl, as portrayed in the aforementioned project, was cutting-edge in both her attitude toward the gender roles and sexual norms of her time and her taste in dress. The research group arrived at a methodological understanding and analytical framework whereby the Modern Girl becomes a "heuristic device" through "connective comparison."[22] She functions as a heuristic device through her visual emergence in commercial advertisements, literary fiction, films, popular magazines, and newspapers across continents and oceans. By employing the connective comparison method, the group examines each materialized and mediated appearance, knowing well that each context delivers a different read on and iteration of the Modern Girl. The image conveyed is of someone who is alternative and independent, smart and provocative. Visual elements of fashion and bodily type may have helped to identify the Modern Girl, but they also standardized the clues by which one sought and located her. The Modern Girl did not exist without controversies. Diversions and crossings of heteronormativity and racial boundaries in marriage and family put the Modern Girl at risk of having her loyalty to nations and states questioned. Although heterosexuality dominates in

tracing the Modern Girl across the globe, there is recognition of the potentiality of an androgynous, and perhaps even lesbian, Modern Girl.[23]

ARTICULATING THE TERM ITSELF

My task in writing this book thus seemed clear. I sought nuanced gender expressions that might offer hints of sexual transgressions—specifically, filaments of immoral same-sex desires. Soon enough I hit a wall, and I realized that an identitarian drive directed at locating obvious signs of lesbian sexuality would get me nowhere. My own academic training in Third World feminism and 1990s Euro-American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies put considerable emphasis on sexual identity in locating the Chinese lesbian. However, my tracing and mapping of same-sex intimacies among older Chinese women across the three research sites in this study required first finding informants for in-depth interviews and then further empirical data analysis using both conventional and exploratory methods. The figure of the Chinese lesbian can be both real and imagined in historical narratives and contemporary social worlds. Rather than defining her as a woman who self-identifies as a lesbian, in this book I position the Chinese lesbian as a woman with same-sex desires who has developed significant romantic and sexual relations with another woman. I was mindful of avoiding use of the term *lesbian* during ethnographic fieldwork, and I struggled to not let the term become a usual slippage on my part during our conversations.

Fran Martin's encapsulating term "female homoerotic" perhaps comes closest to elucidating the densities and intricacies of female same-sex desires in the Chinese context. Martin uses the term to denote "anything pertaining to sexual, erotic, or romantic love and desire between women" and to avoid the "inevitable implication of self-conscious, minoritizing, Western-style lesbian identity."[24] She is extremely careful in expanding the framing of contemporary Chinese lesbian cultural representations, using "female homoeroticism" to highlight a "nonidentitarian approach" to understanding specific schoolgirl romances. Martin asserts that contemporary representations of Chinese women's homoeroticism are implicit in cultivating "the impossibility of lesbian futures" through the telling of female homoeroticism as memory or—to use her apt phrase—"backward formations."[25] Martin's work reminds me to focus on the erotics of female same-sex desires. I attempt in this book to pull together interdisciplinary scholarship on Chinese female same-sex desires and provide a new reading

of Chinese lesbian subjectivities as inter-Asian in making and grounded in local erotic practices.

This book is indebted to the aforementioned authors' interrogation of the term *lesbian* and identification of the implications of using culturally specific terms in describing same-sex eroticism and romantic relationships between women. The informants in this study rarely used sexual identifiers positively in the interviews. After all, the terms that they most often heard during their early lives were at best vague descriptions of their desires and relationships and at worst negative and derogatory descriptors. The younger cohort, interviewed in their mid- to late fifties, used several terms to describe themselves, including "les," "TB," *po* or *por* (friend), and *tongzhi* in Hong Kong; *nüitongxingliang*, *nüitongzhi*, *lala*, *lazi*, and "T" in Taiwan; and "L," "butch," and "100 percent" in Singapore. In understanding same-sex intimacies formed by and between the informants, I find it crucial to first do away with the usual suspects in defining, affirming, and substantiating female same-sex desires. By shedding the limitations of the contemporary discourse on sexual identities, the paradigm for understanding same-sex desires and intimacy among women expands, and it fills in an important gap in the literature on older and elderly lesbian sexualities.[26]

The category of lesbian may not suffice to represent the nuances between Chinese women, and it is often at risk of misuse or being problematically applied across cultural contexts. It has also become a problem of translation, whether translation from one language to another or from one cultural context to another. In sum, the term *lesbian* will always be inadequate when applied to non-Euro-American contexts. What gives the term such force in defining love between women is the dominance of Euro-American scholarship, first in gay and lesbian studies and later in queer theory. *Lesbian* is not only a category of analysis; it also can be full of instability in its meanings, in its always incomplete/inchoate/unclear translations, with limited "social intelligibility."[27] My aim in this book is to pay heed to transnational flows in the category of lesbian without falling into the trap of assuming the meanings, usage, and identity-driven social movements embedded in the English term.

By confessing to the inadequacy of the term *lesbian* to describe same-sex desires among my informants, while recognizing its overarching generalization and widespread adoption in academic scholarship, I also struggled with the usage of the term to describe informants in my study. I posit the notion of "becoming aware of same-sex desires" as a recognition of lesbian

desires and adoption of same-sex sexual practices manifested in what I call everyday erotics. "Lesbian desires" here is used interchangeably with "same-sex desires," but not as a sexual identifier of the informants' self-descriptions. In other words, by not using *lesbian* as a term to describe the informants, I am trying to amplify our understanding of sexual desires and to deemphasize the identity-laden term itself. The life narratives of older Chinese women with same-sex desires in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan demonstrate how these complex processes are materialized. It is in the everyday erotics of density, movements, and conformity and its digressions stretching over fifty years that we can understand the social construction of same-sex desires and subjectivities within an inter-Asian context. We know relatively little about the life stories of older women with same-sex desires outside the Euro-American context. I have sought out older Chinese women with same-sex desires who have been rendered invisible in the genealogies of gender and sexualities.

NAMING EVERYDAY EROTICS

Erotics come in myriad forms and descriptions. For example, in studying public representations of erotic images in television programs and commodities in 1990s India, Purnima Mankekar describes erotics as "sexualized longings and pleasures constructed at the intersection of the psychic and the structural."[28] The optics of which everyday erotics can be expressed and recognized also requires a deeper investigation of the structures that provide or restrict such expression/recognition. Similarly, the psychic dimension of how erotics are created, felt, and played out speaks to the longitude of sexual subjectivity emanating from within. The erotic is also social. Reading "the self-making practice" among Cuban gay men, Jafari Allen posits the erotic as "a catalyst for the creation of community," thereby treating the self/subjectivity as social in relations and as capable of building collectivity.[29] Allen expands on Audre Lorde's emphasis on erotics as playing a key role in defining all perspectives on life. He locates the "erotic self-making" practice of black Cubans living in postsocialist Cuba and being influenced by flashbacks to what Cuban culture was and what it now is in the contemporary moment. He draws politics into his analysis of subaltern personhood and argues for an understanding of black Cuban "erotic subjectivity" that is macro and structural at the same time that it is everyday and intimate.[30] Similarly, I locate erotics first within the self, extending to the social and impacting communities.

This book charts the development of older Chinese women's same-sex erotic subjectivities in relation to place, gender, social class, and culture. Moreover, I am invested in excavating the connections between places, the meanings of gender expressions, and the impact of social class and culture across Chinese societies steeped in Confucian ideology. This book makes a simple argument: When the Chinese woman with same-sex desires disrupts heteronormative sexual scripts and gender codes, be they major or minor ruptures, she is bound to be scrutinized if recognized and dismissed if invisible. But the self never acts alone.[31] Different from the identifiable visual aesthetics of the Modern Girl, this book asserts, the Chinese woman with same-sex desires operates in disguise, being simultaneously conformative in certain gender roles and expressions and unruly and rebellious in others. Drawing on current debates and theories across the fields of gender and sexualities, inter-Asian cultural studies, queer theory, and Asian studies, this book shows that the figure of the Chinese woman with same-sex desires is an embodied site in inter-Asian flows and movements, a transitory space of Chinese modernities where coloniality, culture, religion, and history collide to produce moments of rupture. I claim everyday erotics as an analytical lens for understanding the emergence of women's same-sex subjectivities across time and space, and I explain the need to study embodied meanings of place and engage with changing social worlds in Asia in light of "discrepant genealogies, temporalities, and histories."[32]

This book explores how older Chinese women imagine and act on their same-sex desires, which often requires the restructuring of frames and modification of the gender roles imposed on them by their families, schools, churches, and workplaces. Despite the power and rhetoric of culture and institutions that circulate and dominate, the Chinese woman with same-sex desires is able to see through the cracks, stake a claim to multiple spaces, and assert her presence in environments that diminish women's agency and subjectivity. The becoming of a Chinese woman with same-sex desires is often entangled with deviations from the traditional gender roles of Chinese women. These deviations—or disruptions—pull us back in time to examine the question of what makes a Chinese woman different, what makes her be perceived as a lesbian. Here, I do not take Chineseness or becoming lesbian as unified concepts. Rather, it is the complexity of Chineseness and becoming seen or taken as lesbian embedded within descriptions of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexualities in different Chinese-dominant societies across time that enrich our un-

derstanding of inter-Asian knowledge production. Being Chinese is a constructed and burdened concept that has long been contested, scrutinized, and debated by scholars across disciplines. Recent scholarly interest in Sinophone studies attests to the ongoing problematization of the term "Chinese." Shih Shu-Mei aptly positions Sinophone studies "as the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions."[33] Ari Larissa Heinrich builds on Shih's concept and raises a critical proposition: that Sinophone studies "is an inherently queer project" based on situated postcoloniality within the field itself and its potential for wide application, similar to the intervention of queer studies across humanities and social sciences.[34] Howard Chiang, having worked on queering the Sinophone project in the last decade, reinstated Sinophone studies as "an unruly 'queer' (a, *ku'er*) progeny of Chinese studies."[35]

Comparative research often gives rise to the question of reference points. Simply put, the purpose of comparing one research site to another is to find similarities and distinguish differences. However, the underlying assumptions of and premises for conducting comparative research are more complicated. Working along the lines of Lisa Lowe's interrogation of intimacies and empires, this book attempts to organize colonial histories and their interrelations and interdependencies through the study of same-sex intimacy among older women with same-sex desires in three closely linked societies.[36] Here, I must reiterate the need to establish inter-Asian referencing in knowledge production.[37] Koichi Iwabuchi asserts that inter-Asian referencing, in terms of being attendant to academic scholarship produced in neighboring Asian countries, is key to generating "innovative knowledge production."[38] Eschewing a narrow form of regionalism, he argues that inter-Asian referencing forces us to interrogate "deep-seated western inflections" within the context of specific Asian modernization processes in relation to colonialism, postcolonialism, and cultural imperialism.[39] In his seminal book *Asia as Method*, Kuan-Hsing Chen expands on Takeuchi Yoshimi's 1960 "Asia as method" concept, and further suggests using Asia as "an imaginary anchoring point" from which to understand sociocultural subjectivities across histories.[40] Building on the scholarship of both "Asia as method" and Yue's "queer Asia as method," everyday erotics expands on their theoretical lineaments and employs an intersectional approach in conjunction with inter-Asian referencing.[41]

LESBIAN STUDIES IN EAST ASIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

The past two decades have witnessed the burgeoning of queer Asian studies and a more concerted effort to bring together activism and scholarship in an inter-Asian context. The culmination of such efforts was the inaugural International Conference of Asian Queer Studies, entitled "Sexualities, Gender and Rights in Asia," held in Bangkok July 7–9, 2005. As widely documented in numerous publications, the conference gathered over five hundred scholars, including established faculty members, graduate students, longtime activists, and community organizers, from twenty-two countries. Academically, it was an event whose widespread impact helped to establish queer Asian studies as a vibrant area of scholarship encompassing a diverse array of cultures, languages, and histories that often permeate and intersect one another. It was through the queer inter-Asian spirit it instilled that many young scholars, such as myself at the time, were able to substantiate their reasons for pursing queer Asian scholarship across disciplines and within various university departments scattered across Asia. Along with the excitement over the future of queer Asian scholarship in the region, tensions and debates were also present concerning the complex issues of indigeneity versus imported identity and whether to publish queer scholarship in local vernacular-language journals versus European and North American journals. Sadly, the multiplicity of languages and shades of skin, along with the queer vibe and its ubiquitous casualness, were not to be repeated in subsequent conferences, and in the years since I have attended many conferences and served on many panels in the hope of finding the same feeling. Holding that initial conference in Bangkok rather than in, say, Hong Kong or Singapore also facilitated the participation of attendees living in less-developed economies or countries.

As queer Asian studies has gained a foothold academically, studies on lesbian identities and women with same-sex desires and on-the-ground community-academic intersections of feminism and les/bi activism have also surfaced over the years. The publication of *"Lesbians" in East Asia: Diversity, Identities, and Resistance* (2008), coedited by Diana Khor and Saori Kamano, stemmed from "a special responsibility in presenting, and hence also representing, 'Asia Lesbian/Queer Studies' to the West and also to Asia."[42] On the performativity of "tombois" in West Sumatra, Indonesia, Evelyn Blackwood shows that tomboy identity is "a bricolage" of local,

national, and transnational cultural forces.[43] Megan Sinnott reminds us that gender and cultural differences are more significant issues than sexual identification for Thailand's "toms" and "dees."[44]

In Taiwan, the establishment of the Crooked/Bent/Perverse Reading Group in 1989 saw Western feminism discussed alongside female sexualities, same-sex desires, and gender differences. Led by a group of researchers and students who had returned from studying abroad in the United States and the United Kingdom, the reading group was an incubator for the future generations of activists and scholars who have played a key role in nongovernmental organizations advocating on feminist issues and sexual rights. Ding Naifei and Wang Ping, for example, became the founders of the Gender Sexuality Rights Association of Taiwan. Ding is also a well-established scholar on the ancient Chinese classic *Jin Ping Mei* and a core member of the Center for the Study of Sexuality and Difference at National Central University in Chung-Li, Taiwan.[45] In terms of lesbian research, Antonia Chao's longitudinal study on a group of *lao* T (older tomboy/butch lesbians) and *po* (femmes) gave us an anthropological first glimpse of a close-knit community dealing with issues of debt, intimacy, and care for others in illness and death.[46] Chao's work has influenced many younger researchers to focus not only on lesbian identities and community formation, as in Hu Yu-Ying's work on female masculinity and gender neutrality in transnational Taiwan, but also on cross-generational understandings of Taiwanese families, intimacies, and sexual identities, as in Amy Brainer's work.[47] Conducted in the same era as Chao's work, Fran Martin's work on film and media representations, popular music, comics, and queer literature also firmly established the significance of Taiwanese lesbian studies during the 2000s.[48] The particular intellectual environment of Taiwan coincided with the emergence of a civil society capable of engaging in productive dialogues on social justice, women's issues, sexual and labor rights, environmental concerns, and, to a lesser extent, aboriginal issues. Taiwan's prolific academic scholarship written in Chinese and diverse genres of literature pertaining to gender and sexualities have put LGBTQ issues on the map in predominantly Chinese-speaking societies.

In Hong Kong and Singapore, the development of lesbian studies has been slightly different. Both geographically small in comparison with Taiwan, Hong Kong is a city and Singapore is a nation. They have a shared colonial history, including the adoption of British legislation against homosexuality. Both locales have a vibrant gay consumer scene, with Hong

Kong's gay bar scene emerging in the 1980s and Singapore hosting large-scale LGBTQ public parties beginning in the 2000s.[49] Both have also seen prolific queer cultural representations since the 1980s, in film productions in Hong Kong and in theatrical productions in Singapore.[50] Sexuality and the visibility of lesbians and bisexual and queer women in the women's movement have been contested issues in both Singapore and Taiwan, resulting in heated public debate and the firing and resignation of core staff members at Singapore's Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and Taiwan's Awakening Foundation.[51] In Hong Kong, in contrast, the Association for the Advancement of Feminism (AAF), Hong Kong Women Christian Council, and Hong Kong Christian Institute have at times been led by lesbians and bisexual women who have had a strong presence in services, programs, and advocacy activities since the 1990s. Gumgum (or Mary Ann King Pui-Wai, as she is more formally known) has played a leadership role in many community projects and organizations over the years. A former district councilor in Wanchai, she has also been a Radio Television Hong Kong host, an arts administrator, a singer-songwriter, and a lecturer in gender studies and social and cultural innovation. Lily Lau, or Lau Lee Lee, an internationally renowned comic artist, started drawing the comic strip *Lily's Comix* for alternative media publications and mainstream newspapers in 1998. Over the years, she has also been a vocal critic of sexism in the media and an advocate on feminism and race/ethnicity issues through her involvement with AAF. Since the 1980s, independent female artists in Hong Kong have been active in producing art installations and performances, short videos, and indie films and in writing literary and film criticism in the mainstream news media and alternative publications on gender and sexualities. The self-taught video artist Ellen Pau cofounded the pioneering new media art organization Videotage. Yau Ching has crossed borders and disciplines as a film and video artist, poet and essayist, and academic and community organizer. Artist, filmmaker, and scholar Anson Mak has written and edited multiple volumes on sexual politics, bisexuality, and Hong Kong's *tongzhi* movement, and most recently established a digital archive of Hong Kong LGBTQ print publications before the internet era.[52] Although not all of these women have positioned themselves as lesbian/bisexual/queer writers or artists, they constitute an influential group of Hong Kong–based public intellectuals and socially engaged women, and their writings and artworks have significantly enriched the field of Hong Kong lesbian and bisexual studies.

During the early 2000s in Singapore, gay tourism in the form of parties had the "pink economy" flourishing despite the criminalization of sodomy under Section 377A of the Penal Code. Audrey Yue theorizes queer Singapore through "the logic of illiberal pragmatism" in her "critical introduction" to her coedited book *Queer Singapore*.[53] Outlining the cultural and social history of queer Singapore, Yue argues that distinct LGBTQ cultures have been able to emerge and survive through the "disjunctive acceleration" of cultural and economic developments instead of state "recognition of rights and liberation."[54] To date, Shawna Tang remains the only author to have published a monograph on postcolonial lesbian identities in Singapore. Based on rich ethnographic research, Tang asserts that Singaporean lesbian subjectivities have emerged out of "a contradictory, complicit and contingent negotiation of the local and global."[55] Roy Tan, an LGBTQ historian, has conducted extensive research on gay and lesbian venues in Singapore, collecting newspaper articles and online data and interviewing activists.[56] His collection of news materials dates back to the 1970s. He produced a page on Singapore lesbian history for the online portals Fridae, SiGNeL, and Yawning Bread based on interviews with prominent community organizers and activists Jean Chong and Sylvia Tan and cultural historian Jun Zubillaga-Pow, along with archival news research. For this book, I have also relied on edited collections of the personal stories of and poetry by LGBTQ individuals, many published by Math Paper Press, a small imprint of the now closed independent bookstore Books Actually.

THE CANE METHODOLOGY

Throughout the research process, I have been constantly aware of my role as an ethnographer. Tejaswini Niranjana reminds us of the function of an ethnographer in her work on musicians and migration between India and Trinidad: "The ethnographer functions like a translator."[57] Power dynamics loom in the background when the ethnographer takes up the role of explaining terms, ideas, and meanings to informants, "determining the direction and nature of translation, often simplifying."[58] Locating participants for research on older and elderly sexual subjectivities in Chinese societies is exceptionally challenging.[59] Unlike researchers working in places with government policies on protecting LGBTQ rights, I had no national surveys or population or census statistics specifically focusing on LGBTQ populations to draw on for data or macro-analysis. There are

also no baseline data provided by nongovernmental organizations that reach a level of rigor suitable for academic research. Each of the research sites discussed in this book has its own unique history of LGBTQ social movement and feminist movement, even though local awareness of these social movements is often not shared among the informants.

In terms of sampling and representation, I have encountered the same issue faced constantly by many ethnographers conducting research on "hard-to-reach" and "marginalized populations." D'Lane R. Compton asked the crucial question, "How many (queer) cases do I need?"[60] I have faced this question throughout my academic career as a qualitative ethnographer specializing in Chinese lesbians as a group. Researchers like us don't get the "positivist triple crown" in sociology, as Compton cogently points out, referring to "random sampling or assignment, replicability, and generalizability." Representativeness of a group is not achieved through small studies. But in smallness we excel. We pay attention to each informant, drawing out every vein of her narrative, connecting particular accounts with segments in history and fractures in social structures. We listen to the eagerness and hesitation in an informant's tone and pay attention to the careful selection of words and to bodily movements as minute as turning one's head, running fingers through one's hair, crossing one's legs, or sitting back on a chair. I have also learned to become attuned to the emotional and physical toll associated with getting older, as I have met some of the informants at intervals over the last six to ten years.

I relied on in-depth interviews as a valuable tool for gaining deeper knowledge of an informant's lived experience. In this study, open-ended questions were asked on a wide range of topics, including family, peer relations, sexual and romantic relationships, marriage, sexual identity, work history, religion, housing, education, health, financial resources, and discrimination. But one's life cannot be told through just interviews. I also carried out participant observation, which involves "living in the community, taking part in usual and unusual activities," with the purpose of collecting data.[61] In Hong Kong, I joined in the daily activities of participants, including community and family outings, grocery shopping, and doctors' appointments. In the end, I had extensive informal conversations with many women who fit the research criteria, but very few agreed to participate in formal recorded in-depth interviews. Instead, most preferred to speak to me casually at social events.

The participants in this study all identified as women with same-sex sexual or romantic desire and had lived in Hong Kong, Singapore, or Tai-

wan for an extended period of time. Same-sex romantic and sexual experience, rather than sexual identification as lesbian or bisexual, was used as a participation criterion. I chose to collect data in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore because I wanted to investigate if connected histories, "Asian tiger" economies, and common Confucian values and Christian beliefs affect the way in which older lesbians and bisexual women form sexual and romantic relations within a wider comparative societal context of family, peers, and the public.

For the first round of interviews, from 2016 onward I primarily relied on a non-probability snowball sampling method to solicit potential informants through community gatekeepers, LGBTQ organizations, social media platforms, and personal networks. My previous studies on Hong Kong lesbian and bisexual women's communities allowed me to develop sufficient trust and rapport with gatekeepers for them to feel comfortable referring informants to this study.[62] As I am based in Hong Kong, I first immersed myself in community events and private gatherings in the city in the hope of presenting my research project to lesbian and gay communities, connecting with interested individuals and stakeholders. I relied heavily on two gatekeepers to introduce participants for interviews. The first was a sixty-four-year-old bisexual woman who is well known to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities and has extensive networks within these communities. Already a public figure and a strong advocate of LGBTQ rights in Hong Kong, Rachel introduced me to longtime friends and work acquaintances who she knew had significant romantic relationships with women and who she thought would be open to participating in a study. I reached out to all of them, but to her surprise, some were very reluctant to be formally interviewed. That is when Rachel and myself embarked together on this ethnographic undertaking to comprehend the strains and tensions in talking about sexuality, intimacy, family and peer relations, illness, death and dying among older women, even with close friends. I frequently consulted her on how to approach Hong Kong informants with care. The other gatekeeper, Phi Phi, introduced me to her partner's former work colleagues, who have all retired from civil service. Phi Phi's partner works in the disciplinary forces and has come to be acquainted with a number of older lesbians.[63] Phi Phi's generosity in sharing her contacts was instrumental to understanding the lives of older lesbians from working-class families, illuminating the intersecting factors of class and sexuality in colonial Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, I was extremely privileged to be invited to social gatherings

through my gatekeepers. Casual conversations were abundant in these events. Just by attending the birthday party of one informant year after year, I witnessed the making of a care community. It took me five years to obtain a formal interview with this informant. Casual sharing about everyday life was frequent, but my invitations to have formal in-depth interviews were often graciously turned down. By that point I knew that this research would have to be conducted through recruiting a smaller number of informants for repeated formal in-depth interviews over the years, while devoting a significant amount of time to observe others in social gatherings as field data. Referrals from community groups such as the Women's Coalition of Hong Kong SAR and Big Love Alliance, as well as previous contacts from my earlier ethnographic work on Hong Kong lesbians, were also utilized to seek potential participants. I read transcripts and listened to audio files repeatedly, employing grounded theory to code data as themes emerging with each round of coding, and continuously compared data so as to inform the next round of interviews.[64]

In Taiwan, I solicited the assistance of Amy Lin, a staff member from the Tongzhi Hotline Association, to help me recruit and interview informants, owing to my inability to speak the local Hokkien/Min-nan language. I also relied on one informant and longtime volunteer of the Hotline Association, Gin, to conduct interviews with me in Taipei and Tainan. Chen Yi-Jun also joined the team as a transcriber for the interviews. We were only able to formally record five informants for the purpose of comparative research. Three informants lived in Taipei, one lived in Tainan, and one lived in Kaohsiung. In 2019 and early 2020 (pre-COVID), I made regular visits to Taiwan and met up with Gin. She updated me on her life and *tongzhi* activism, and I updated her on the progress of my research. More available in Taiwan was academic literature on older and elderly lesbians, including the works of Antonia Chao (mentioned earlier), Hui-chen Huang's *Wo he wo de T mama* (The priestess walks alone), and the recent publication *Ama de nu pengyou: Caihong shu nu de duocai qingchun* (Grandma's girlfriends: The splendid youth of elder lesbians) by the Taiwan Tongzhi [LGBTQ+] Hotline Association.[65]

In Singapore, it was exceedingly arduous to locate informants for this study. I was fortunate to have met Madeleine Lim in my early years of activism with queer Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities along the West Coast of North America in Vancouver, Seattle, and San Francisco. Her pioneering film *Sambal Belacan in San Francisco* (1996) is regularly screened at queer Asian and API film festivals. I also had met a few

Singaporean lesbian and trans friends during my activist days and was aware that they had all left Singapore because of fear of state persecution and/or because of family estrangement. After I returned to Hong Kong for my PhD studies, being inside Asia gave me a different picture. I relied on a research collaborator to organize meetings with local individuals who might have leads on how to approach older lesbians and bisexual women in Singapore. Shawna Tang, who has published widely on identity, family, and motherhood issues concerning Singaporean lesbians, is key to this part of my research. We had to lower our age range to from sixty years of age to mid-fifties in order to locate subjects who were willing to participate in this study. One major reason could be the entrenched criminalization and illegality of homosexuality in the country that resulted from retaining British legislation after independence in 1965. Shawna conducted five interviews on her own, and we conducted another two as a team in 2018. The interviews were conducted in a mix of local dialects and languages, including Singlish, Hokkien, Cantonese, and Mandarin, with Japanese terms occasionally thrown in. I then returned to Singapore in 2022 and conducted three more interviews on my own. As with my research on Taiwan, I have also relied on publications for further understanding of the circumstances surrounding LGBTQ lives in Singapore. Rather than aiming for any form of generalization or claim of representation, I observe how three separate but interconnected Asian societies have shaped the social conditions of a small sample of older Chinese women with same-sex desires in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan.

In writing this book, I draw on twenty-four formal interviews: twelve in Hong Kong, five in Taiwan, and seven in Singapore. In Hong Kong, all of the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, and they were audiotaped if permission was granted. The interview participants were assured of confidentiality and signed consent forms. Pseudonyms are used throughout the book, some of them chosen by the informants themselves. Each primary interview lasted between one and three hours, and subsequent follow-up interviews were conducted with informants in settings of their choice, whether individually or in social gatherings. Follow-up interviews often lasted much longer than the initial ones, with some taking up almost the whole day. Recordings were done intermittently in these long sessions, and I wrote up my field notes after I returned home. The interview recordings were transcribed in Cantonese, and later translated into English, with careful attention paid to the translation of specific local terms. Signing a consent form was a foreign concept to most, and the

prospect of an audiotaped interview daunting. Casual chats with a few notes jotted down seemed a more acceptable approach. Informal conversations and observations at social gatherings and unexpected events lasted throughout the 2016–23 research period, a time that encompassed both social unrest in Hong Kong and a global pandemic.

After I found informants willing to be interviewed, I had to learn how to talk with them. I have never thought that a part of my body would become the key to building trust and rapport with my informants, but in this case it often turned out to be my knee, not necessarily my queerness or my obvious TB (tomboy) look, that immediately guaranteed camaraderie or trust. It was the combination of identifying as a lesbian and having an imperfectly functioning right knee (I had five anterior cruciate ligament repairs between 1989 and 2018, and I know knee-related terminology well in both Chinese and English) that helped me to situate my embodied self as an ethnographer. I also had an object with me: The walking cane visible at my side further helped me to establish commonalities with informants who had various orthopedic concerns. We shared our experiences of surgeries, physiotherapy, alternative treatment plans, and vitamin supplements, often elaborating on the pros and cons of Western medicine and Chinese traditional medicine. We talked about our anxieties regarding daily mobility issues, which frequently extended to conversations about aging and mobility (I call my methodological approach the "cane methodology"). My knee problem became a lifesaver in my research with older lesbians and bisexual women.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book continues the line of scholarship and queries on lesbian sexualities. The book is divided into this introduction plus five chapters. In this introductory chapter I lay out my overarching theoretical framework by putting forth key guiding questions on what makes a postwar-generation Chinese woman lesbian and how women's same-sex desires have emerged within three predominantly Chinese societies. I introduce the background of the research and draw on current debates and theories across the fields of gender and sexualities, inter-Asian cultural studies, queer theory, and Asian studies. I lay out my argument that the figure of the Chinese woman with same-sex desires is an embodied site within inter-Asian flows and movements, a transitory space of Chinese modernity wherein coloniality and history collide to produce moments of rupture.

I present the term "everyday erotics" as a framework for mapping and tracing the nuanced meanings of older Chinese women's same-sex erotic subjectivities to inform us of the cultural and sexual politics within the larger East Asian region. For what we cannot locate in official records, we need to expand our search and look for obscure encounters among Chinese women with same-sex desires. This is where making linkages is crucial to this project.

Chapter 1 begins with extensive accounts of growing-up experiences among the informants. By tracing their childhood memories and family encounters, I highlight their narrative accounts of early experiences of feeling different from others, their awareness of becoming attracted to other women (in English, "becoming lesbian"), and their journeys in gender expressions. I describe and analyze the meanings of being butch and masculine in relation to the embodied selves and the social worlds surrounding them. In particular, I illustrate the convolutions of butchness as a concept that built one's lesbian identity in youth yet also attracted attacks and resulted in often traumatic experiences for the informants as they transitioned from youth to adulthood. Being butch has different variations across these three Chinese-dominant societies. In the final section of the chapter, I highlight work and employment as a vital site where the assertion of Chinese womanhood as independent and modern intersected with rapid industrialization and social transformation, which led to culturally specific spatial practices in locating lesbian desires, such as having primary careers in the military and disciplinary forces, the civil service, or multinational companies.

In chapter 2, I elaborate on a singular moment of longing and waiting in order to redefine modern notions of love and intimacy across time and space. I asked a simple question: Where is love found? I explore the chase with vivid and adventurous accounts of dating and courtship, passion and sex, to illustrate the fashioning and refashioning of oneself to seek spaces for erotic desires. As each informant's process of scripting unfolds to form a new version of herself, I explore the intersecting meanings of romance and friendships made legible through her own spoken words in the exercise of being interviewed. I argue that it was not heteronormativity that constrained their scripts; rather, it showed them a path that they did not want to follow. Being aware of their sexual desires gave the informants a counterscript that is defiant of heteronormative gender roles and engagement in heteronormative institutions. Lifelong friendships and companionship were key to survival for many informants in this study.

In chapter 3 I embark on a conjectural exercise to reorganize the spaces and scenarios engaged in, created, or found to allow for the manifestation of their same-sex sexualities. How is everyday life defined through their self-awareness of same-sex desires and becoming lesbian? Because exclusively lesbian- or bisexual-identified social spaces were rare for the informants from their teenage years to young adulthood, and even in later life for some, I asked informants to identify the social worlds that brought their lesbian desiring selves into being. I then discuss a methodological episode wherein inter-Asian referencing intersects with Chinese modernities to illustrate how gender and sexuality meet, intersect, and influence each other in the cultural imagination and eventual materialization of women's same-sex desires. As I demonstrate later in this chapter, the social worlds of the informants are agential creations for some, fortuitous makings or sacred spaces for others. The scripting processes that began early in the informants' life course were continually revised to produce new transformative versions of themselves.

I open chapter 4 with an intergenerational encounter where one informant met with younger lesbians and bisexual, queer, and nonbinary persons to exchange views on pop culture, social media, relationships, and LGBTQ visibility. In many conversations with the informants, I found that issues of coming out, discrimination, and same-sex marriage were comprehended at multiple levels, crossing boundaries between the self and others and naming experiences or desires that had previously gone unnamed. For some, these were seemingly remote matters with minimal personal impact, although they understood them to be contemporary issues affecting younger generations; naming discrimination as injustice is not a vernacular known to them. Others welcomed recent developments and expressed the hope that we are marching toward a more inclusive society. Expanding on the notion of *zoujan/zuoren* as a key characteristic of a form of Chinese personhood (see the glossary for these terms), this chapter explores the cultural meanings of being visible and out as a woman with same-sex desires, or a lesbian or bisexual woman. It discusses the impact of women's movements, LGBTQ movements, Christianity, and the fight for marriage equality on this particular generation of women.

Chapter 5 looks at conceptions of futures wherein old expectations and new understandings crisscross to make sense of what the future holds for older Chinese women with same-sex desires. The idea of old expectations points to past ideas about lesbian futures, whereas new understandings of the future can be informed by life expectations over time. A

large portion of my interview data is focused on the recollection of past experiences and the process of becoming aware of one's same-sex desires. Talking about the future was a sensitive topic for some of the informants but a necessary one in discussions of arrangements ranging from care and medical directives to finances and funeral services. In this chapter, I approach the question of the future as a space beyond linear concepts of time or progression toward an end (in this case, often the end of one's lifetime). My aim is to understand lesbian futures through intersecting moments of the old and the new, the wounds and the prayers, that have woven together the realities of what has come about and imaginations of what is still to come.

OPENING UP

Once I began this research in 2016, stories kept coming—in bits and pieces, in recollections of a person, an act, or an event. Sometimes the stories were sparked by an object—a photograph, a pair of spectacles, a coffee mug, a box of matches, a T-shirt. Other times the spark was moving images and sounds—a film, an old tune, a verse in Cantonese opera. It is in the sharing of what brought them back to younger days, the experiences of going to school, going to the cinema or the theater, being outdoors or at a particular party, that would highlight the generational differences between me and my informants. They joked about me being "too young to know," "too sheltered to understand." During tea with Theo, she said to me, "You have no idea what it meant to be restricted, to be stripped of your freedom, to not know if there are others like you." She looked away when she uttered those words. Theo was describing her growing-up years, when adults would not allow her to go out on her own outside of school hours, controlling her movements in the name of protection. She was hoping to meet others like her, if only she could venture out on her own to attend school activities or social events. Theo explained her need to be always surrounded by friends in her adult life as a result of her restrictive upbringing. She has always been the most cheerful and sociable one among the cohort of informants. Theo is larger than life itself. Her love of life and her generosity in sharing home, food, and wine was well known in many circles of friends. But I will always remember how I looked at the back of her head, my eyes focused on her razor-cut short hair, wondering why she turned away to say those words to me. Suddenly I felt that there was a world between us.

Nowadays younger lesbians and bisexual women do not often perceive themselves as a group of marginalized and stigmatized subjects. But experiences of growing up, family and friends' acceptance, and workplace inclusivity varied among my informants, often depending on how social recognition of same-sex relationships appeared in conventional media outlets and on popular social media platforms, and as legal recognition of same-sex marriage began to surface in certain countries. Today queer women are also sharing their own lives on Instagram, Facebook, Threads, WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, TikTok, Her, LesPark, Butterfly, Zoe, and the L and creating their own podcasts, reels, and stories on platforms that contain abundant LGBTQ content. Easy-to-use social media apps and the availability of cheaper smartphones and mobile data plans have narrowed social class gaps in showcasing one's life as a woman with same-sex desires. Availability of gender identity identifiers such as "trans" and "nonbinary" have also allowed for more freedom in gender expression and identification. But race and ethnicity matter, as do class and privilege. I write this book as a Hong Konger, an Asian Canadian, a lesbian who has often wondered what life would have been like if nonbinary and transgender language and social media had been more available in the 1990s.

It is in between the times and across the generations that I hope to unfold parts of becoming what we have now known to be a lesbian or a bisexual woman in this book. I also firmly believe that experiences of loneliness and isolation will continue to resonate for many, regardless of how long one has spent in this life. As much as we can be alone in our worlds, by choice or by force, we are social beings at the best and worst points of our lives. It is with this sentiment that I find my informants most resilient and persistent in telling their stories to me.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Mathews, Ma, and Lui, *Hong Kong, China*, 11.

2. Chun, *Forget Chineseness*, 41.

3. Sanders, "Sex and Gender Diversity in Southeast Asia," 365. I use *LGBTQ* to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer throughout, except in specific contexts such as the use of *LGBT* in newspapers or promotional materials used by community groups and nonprofit organizations.

4. Chua and Kuo, "Making of a New Nation," 36–37.

5. Yue and Leung, "Notes Towards the Queer Asian City," 750.

6. See Wu Po-hsuan, Wu Liang-yi, and Jonathan Chin, "More than 180,000 March in Taipei Pride Parade," *Taipei Times*, October 27, 2024, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2024/10/27/2003825925.

7. Loraine Lee, "Politicians Show Up for Pink Dot Despite Scorecard Grading Their 'Family Values,' Say It's Important to Engage Different Groups," CNA, June 29, 2024, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/pink-dot-sg-lgbtq-community-hong-lim-park-politicians-4445501.

8. Sammy Heung, "Hong Kong's LGBTQ Community Won't Be Hitting Streets for Annual Pride Event Although 'Journey with Rainbow GPS' Exhibition Adds Some Colour," *South China Morning Post*, November 18, 2023, https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3242028/hong-kongs-lgbtq-community-wont-be-hitting-streets-annual-pride-event-although-journey-rainbow-gps#:~:text=Hong%20Kong's%20LGBTQ%20community%20will,efforts%20might%20take%20a%20hit.

9. I am borrowing the term "people like us" from the 1993 Singaporean LGBTQ support and lobbying group People Like Us (PLU). PLU was founded by Joseph Lo and later helmed by Russell Heng and Alex Au to address systemic oppression under Section 377A of the Penal Code. PLU has been repeatedly denied registration as a proper society with the government but its influence in both Singapore and Malaysia has seen the term "people like us" used by LGBTQ communities in both countries.

10. Leslie Feinberg (1949–2014), who self-identified as an "antiracist, white, secular Jewish, working-class, transgender, butch lesbian female," was a pioneering activist in transgender liberation. Hir 1993 first novel, *Stone Butch Blues*, is widely considered a groundbreaking work that captures the alienation and resistance of butch lesbians in postwar America during the 1960s and 1970s.

11. The gathering was held on March 15, 2023.

12. Pioneering scholars such as Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa use the term "same-sex relations" to denote "female eroticism" and "same-sex desires" among women in non-Western societies. See Blackwood and Wieringa, *Female Desires*.

13. Martin, *Backward Glances*, 16.

14. See Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*.

15. Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, 21.

16. Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, 24. The May Fourth Movement (1917–21) was an intellectual and sociopolitical reform movement in China that emerged after the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. In response to Japanese aggression and perceived national weakness, young intellectuals advocated for the reform and strengthening of Chinese society. Inspired by the vernacular literature movement proposed by the magazine *Xinqingnian* (New youth) and marked by student protests on May 4, 1919, against China's compromising stance at the Paris Peace Conference, it gained momentum and eventually became part of the broader New Culture Movement, which abandoned Confucian values and literary traditions in favor of Western scientific and democratic ideas, utilizing vernacular publishing to disseminate these new thoughts widely among the Chinese populace.

17. Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, 26.

18. The following decades saw warfare between nations, as the Sino-Japanese War and then World War II broke out, followed by civil war between the Communists and Nationalists in China. The People's Republic of China was founded on October 1, 1949, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, and the Communist victory led to the major overhaul of farming practices and the collectivization of agriculture during the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1962. In 1966, the Cultural Revolution was launched, lasting ten years, although its ideological Maoist drive and sweeping societal impact were felt for decades.

19. Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, 34.

20. Sang, *Emerging Lesbian*, 24; Barlow, *Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 281.

21. Weinbaum et al., "Modern Girl as Heuristic Device," 7.

22. Weinbaum et al., "Modern Girl as Heuristic Device," 2.

23. Weinbaum et al., "Modern Girl as Heuristic Device," 16.

24. Martin, *Backward Glances*, 16.

25. Martin, *Backward Glances*, 6.

26. The emerging field of gay and lesbian gerontology tends to focus on the clinical and social issues surrounding aging and aging bodies. In an extensive literature review spanning twenty-five years, Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen and Anna

Muraco highlight earlier research's focus on giving voice to older lesbians and gay men as "navigating a stigmatized identity through crisis competence," with later research speaking to evolving LGBTQ identity-driven social movements and the role that sexual identities play in the life experiences of older LGBTQ adults. See Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco, "Aging and Sexual Orientation," 379. Current studies on LGBTQ-specific health needs and services, social support networks, and families tend to gain more traction in influencing policy initiatives in countries where LGBTQ issues are approaching mainstream visibility. However, such research remains limited in scope and geographical span. Bisexual men and women and transgender and intersex persons remain understudied members of aging populations. There is also a lack of empirical data on older LGBTQ persons in societies where same-sex relationships or same-sex sexualities have not attained social or legal recognition. As a result, it is difficult to trace and locate older LGBTQ persons among community-based health and social service organizations serving the elderly.

27. Barlow, "Epilogue," 679.

28. Mankekar, "Dangerous Desires," 173.

29. Allen, *Venceremos?*, 3, 97.

30. Allen, *Venceremos?*, 14.

31. As elaborated by Chen's concept of "critical syncretism," the self as subjectivity is embedded within a web of social relations that involve processes of "self-critique, self-negation, and self-discovery" imbricated in histories of colonialism, nationalism, and Cold War politics. Chen, *Asia as Method*, 3, 72.

32. Mankekar and Schein, "Mediations and Transmediations," 3.

33. Shih, "Concept of the Sinophone," 710.

34. Heinrich, "'A Volatile Alliance,'" 21.

35. Chiang, "Stonewall Aside," 68.

36. Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 17.

37. Roy and Ong, *Worlding Cities*, 5; Iwabuchi, "De-Westernisation, Inter-Asian Referencing and Beyond," 47.

38. Iwabuchi, "De-Westernisation, Inter-Asian Referencing and Beyond," 47.

39. Iwabuchi, "De-Westernisation, Inter-Asian Referencing and Beyond," 47.

40. Chen, *Asia as Method*, xv.

41. Yue, "Trans-Singapore," 21.

42. Khor and Kamano, *"Lesbians" in East Asia*, 3.

43. Blackwood and Wieringa, *Female Desires*, 199.

44. Sinnott, *Toms and Dees*, 110.

45. *Jin Ping Mei* is a Chinese novel that narrates the rise and fall of a merchant-military family in the late Song dynasty. Notorious for its explicit erotic content, especially its depiction of licentious women (*yin-fu*), the novel was banned yet continued to be popular well into the twentieth century. It has received two major English translations: Clement Egerton's *The Golden Lotus* (1939), the first extensive translation, which introduced the novel to European audiences, and David Tod Roy's *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (1993–2013), which firmly anchors the

novel in its Ming cultural context. Ding, in *Obscene Things*, views *Jin Ping Mei* as a site for shifting negotiations of gender and social power, examining its historical interpretations and proposing a "counter-ethical feminist reading position" to challenge the narrative's disciplinary gender and sexual configurations.

46. For Chao's longitudinal study on a group of *lao* T (older tomboy/butch lesbians), see her works "Global Metaphors and Local Strategies in the Construction of Taiwan's Lesbian Identities"; "Lao T banjia"; "Wangsheng songsi"; "Bu ke jiliang de qinmi guanxi"; "Yu zhi gong lao de kuer qinggan lunli shizuo."

47. See Hu, "Mainstreaming Female Masculinity, Signifying Lesbian Visibility"; Brainer, "New Identities or New Intimacies?"

48. For Fran Martin's work on Taiwanese lesbian studies during this period, see "The Perfect Lie"; *Situating Sexualities*; "Stigmatic Bodies"; "That Global Feeling"; "Feminist Girls, Lesbian Comrades"; *Backward Glances*; "Utopian Yearning"; "Transnational Queer Sinophone Cultures."

49. For insights into the gay nightlife landscape in Hong Kong, see Cheng, "Consuming Places in Hong Kong"; also Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities*. Between 2001 and 2005, Singapore hosted large-scale LGBTQ public parties, most notably the Snowball and NATION events organized by the gay web portal Fridae.com. These private open-air gay megaparties faced official bans and consequently were relocated to other countries. Despite these challenges, their scale and popularity continue to attract thousands of participants and significant media attention.

50. On queer cinema in 1960s–1990s and postcolonial Hong Kong, see Yau, *Sexing Shadows*, and Leung, *Undercurrents*. Also see Peterson, "Queering the Stage," on the politics of queer theater in Singapore.

51. In Taiwan, three lesbian-identified employees were fired by the board of the leading feminist group Awakening Foundation over their vocal support of sex workers' rights in 1997. Prominent feminist scholars Josephine Ho and Ding Naifei also withdrew their support from the group and later formed another group, Gender/Sexuality Rights Association. This incident has often been referred to as a family rupture within Taiwan's then close-knitted feminist community. In Singapore, the conflicts about sexuality issues trace back to conservative Christian beliefs among feminists. On March 28, 2009, a group of Christian women, primarily from the Anglican Church of Our Saviour, took control of AWARE. This unexpected takeover led to the resignation of the newly elected president and sparked concerns about the new executive committee's conservative views on homosexuality and abortion. Tensions escalated when a senior lawyer, claiming to be the new executive committee's "feminist mentor," accused AWARE of promoting homosexuality in its sex education programs. Public and media debates intensified, with online petitions supporting the old guard, religious leaders cautioning against church involvement, and attention from government officials. The saga culminated in an extraordinary general meeting on May 2, 2009, where nearly three thousand members attended and passed a motion of no confidence in the new executive committee, leading to their resignation. See Chong, *The AWARE Saga*, 1–6; and Tang, "Chinese Racialization and Technologies of Mothering."

52. The archive, 前互聯網時代香港同志印刷品 (Hong Kong gay printed materials before the internet) is at https://www.hklgbtqarchive.com/zh.

53. Yue, "Queer Singapore," 2.

54. Yue, "Queer Singapore," 18.

55. Tang, *Postcolonial Lesbian Identities in Singapore*, 84.

56. See Tan, "Photo Essay."

57. Niranjana, *Mobilizing India*, 10.

58. Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," 158, quoted in Niranjana, *Mobilizing India*, 10.

59. Similar challenges are depicted in Chao's works on older and elderly lesbians in Taiwan (previously mentioned), as well as in research on postmenopausal women, elderly gay individuals, and the sexuality of older Chinese people. See Ling, Wong, and Ho, "Are Post-Menopausal Women 'Half-a-Man'?"; Kong, *Oral Histories of Older Gay Men in Hong Kong*; Yan et al., "Older Chinese Men and Women's Experiences and Understanding of Sexuality."

60. Compton, "How Many (Queer) Cases Do I Need?," 2.

61. DeWalt and DeWalt, *Participant Observation*, 4.

62. For my 2003–8 doctoral study on Hong Kong lesbians and bisexual women and urban spaces, the age range of the informants was eighteen to fifty. Informants in that study had largely heard of the English terms *lesbian* and *bisexual* and were more accepting of its usage as a sexual identity claim.

63. In Hong Kong, *disciplinary forces* refers to civil servants and officers working in the police force, correctional services, customs and immigration office, fire services, Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), and the government's flying service for search and rescue.

64. On grounded theory and coding procedures for qualitative research, see Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 12–14.

65. Huang, *Wo he wo de T mama*. Antonia Chao was another research collaborator involved in the early stages, providing feedback on the grant proposal and engaging in discussions about the research topic. No interview data from her present or past projects were provided for this project.

CHAPTER 1. HONG KONG IS WHERE I BEGIN

A portion of chapter 1 appeared in "Everyday Erotics in Urban Density: An Ethnography of Older Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Hong Kong," *Gender, Place and Culture* 28, no. 11 (2020): 1649–68. In addition, portions of the chapter appeared in a different form in Denise Tse-Shang Tang and Ng Wing-Yan, 同聲同氣：香港年長女同志口述史 [Oral histories of older Chinese women with same-sex desires in Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Typesetter, 2024).

1. Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong is a densely packed unregulated area of 6.5 acres (2.6 hectares) with 350 buildings and over 33,000 residents. Its maze-like structure has encompassed missionary schools, homes, factories, illegal gambling and drug dens, brothels, and unlicensed dental and medical clinics. The walled