

## A Personal Note (Part of the Introduction chapter of *Sex & Desire in Hong Kong*<sup>i</sup>)

A. Ka Tat Tsang, Ph.D.  
University of Toronto  
2012<sup>ii</sup>

Writing about sexuality has always been both difficult and enjoyable.

First, the language of sexuality was not part of the language world I grew up in. I grew up in colonial Hong Kong, and we spoke Cantonese at home. The current Chinese translation of the word sex was rarely used in everyday discourse until the 1980s; and up till now scholars and translators do not know how to translate the word sexuality, although I did attempt to offer a translation back in 1990 – as 性本質 (Man, Tsang, & Ng, 1990). I was perhaps among those who helped to popularize the use of the Chinese word for sex in Hong Kong in the 1980s through my extensive involvement in public debates, advocacy, and media exposure, including a TV sex education docudrama series. Readers will see how the issue of language and translation coming up all the time in this collection. Sik Ying has already referred to this in her introduction.

The language game among Hong Kong people who are bilingual is a phenomenon worthy of sociolinguistic inquiry in its own right. It is not uncommon for us to speak in Cantonese and substitute key words in English. This hybrid language is an amazing colonial product, and provides a substratum for our discourses. This is the language Sik Ying and I use when we are not presenting at conferences or teaching academic courses. It is important to note that the majority of Hong Kong people do not speak English fluently, and this tendency to insert English keywords is somehow directly proportional to the speaker's fluency in the English language. When Sik Ying and I discussed such issues, we have played with different Chinese words such as *yu* (慾 desire) and *qing* (情), which can be loosely translated as passion, but goes beyond it (Tsang, 1986). Words like *eros* and the *erotic*, which are difficult to translate into Chinese, have been useful in some contexts. We are aware of the fact that just in the English language, the lexicon of sexuality and desire has been drawn from multiple etymological sources. It was amusing for us to read Van Gulik's (1961/2002) class text on ancient Chinese sexual life and note how he switched into Latin in his narratives when he found the content too explicit.

This exploration into the language used for things sexual or erotic drew my attention to the realm of the unspeakable. To the extent that much of people's lived experience related to the sexual or the erotic is not spoken about, speaking and writing are always limited. I have

spoken and written on the topic in different languages and genres, and such articulations serve different personal and social purposes. I must first admit that being able to enjoy sex, however understood, is often at the centre of my concern; and I do not think that everything has to be speakable in order to be enjoyed. I do, however, appreciate how being unable to speak can compromise people's sexual or erotic well-being. Projects on talking and writing about sexuality are, therefore, often attended with ambivalence. Like Sik Ying, I have been asked the question why I am so interested in, or when people do not care to be polite, obsessed with sex.

If we have to be obsessed with something, I think sex is a pretty good choice. An active and gratifying sex life is associated with health and well-being, well into old age. My interest and obsession started with my own struggles with sexual desire when I was younger, then regulated by perverse missionary religions, which had co-opted and appropriated the authority of Chinese tradition (Man, Tsang, & Ng, 1990; Tsang 1986). As mentioned above, sex was not part of everyday discourse when I grew up. My education and family upbringing combined the conservatism of both missionary Christianity and the patriarchal culture typical of rural communities in South China. I only got to learn about the exciting ideas and practices that had been brewing in the major urban centres such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin since 1900 when I was a student in the 1970s.

I had firsthand experience living in an environment when sex was not talked about directly, but was constantly referred to indirectly, almost always cast in a negative frame. Sexual interest was associated with moral inferiority and negative aesthetic value. I am thankful that both my grandmother and my father did violate some widely held social norms in their times. This experience has allowed me to understand the almost inevitable discrepancy between what people say and what people do in the area of eros or desire. What most of us consider hypocrisy may well be an effective strategy of sexual being.

Growing up subscribing to conservative sexual values was a pain. When intense sexual or erotic drives were suppressed, the result was an estranged and distorted self, not to mention the frustration and agony of deprivation. My own liberation came with the study of clinical psychology; and the clients I saw in psychotherapy were my best mentors. Their struggle with disciplinary practices *a la* Foucault, and their resilience, honesty, and courage have helped me tremendously in my own journey towards understanding my own sexual or erotic being, and how I was once trapped in many unquestioned or taken-for-granted notions. On numerous occasions, I was humbled by their diverse adventures and candid reflections.

The journey I have taken with these individuals has fostered a sense of skepticism. While some of the clients I work with are highly educated, many of them have not been exposed to the social theories, or the feminist and queer articulation that have become a convention

of academic discourse in the social sciences and humanities. They have nonetheless overcome major barriers and debilitating circumstances in becoming who they are. I have always questioned the role and the value of academic knowledge in the lives of these people; and I am conscious of how knowledge production in academia interfaces with the lived experience of everyday life.

When I got into university in 1973 in Hong Kong, less than 2% of the people in my age bracket had access to university education. The elite educational policy reinforced the highly hierarchical colonial order. As a beneficiary of that system, it took me a while to come to realize how my social position conditioned my thinking and practice in this area. I first gained a public voice as a clinical psychologist in the late 1970s, when there were only less than 20 of us for a population of 6 million. That special status allowed me to start advocating for gay rights as an authoritative mental health professional. A few years later I started teaching at the University of Hong Kong, the most prestigious institute of higher education in the colony. It was easy to have multiple platforms for my views, and to gain media exposure when I wanted to. In the 1980s, I was embroiled in multiple public controversies related to feminist standpoint, gay rights, trans issues, pornography, alternative lifestyle later referred to as polyamory, sex education, and so on. I had a “voice,” but was not fully aware of how it was constructed and positioned. Mr. Lam Hon Kin, better known as Uncle Kin, the office assistant at the University of Hong Kong’s Department of Social Work and Social Administration, used to say to me, “when you read or watch pornography, it is research; and when you say something related to sex, it is academic. When I do the same thing, it is just lewd” (鹹濕 in Cantonese).” Uncle Kin’s comment is one of the most sobering reminders of the need to negotiate the interface between elite discourse and everyday life.

My academic work in the area of sexuality is part of my life, and intimately tied to how I manage my sexual or erotic life and being. In a way I am seeking a more open space for myself and people I know or care about. I critique the desexualizing discourses found in everyday life, and the various forms of social regulation and discipline. Academic writing is a form of discipline, and academic disciplines are called precisely that. Writing with or within such discipline is limiting. I am glad that both Sik Ying and I have found other platforms to express our views and share our experiences.

I am thankful for the kind of life I live, with all its sexual or erotic content. Even when I was going through the tough transition of being a new immigrant in Canada, when I was stripped of the privileges I had once had, I celebrated my desire, eros, or sexuality. Life would have been much more miserable otherwise. I am conscious of the fact that I am among the privileged few in this regard. I have been trying hard to address the issue of erotic justice and equity. In my view, people should be able to enjoy sex as part of life, and part of being human. Depriving people of the opportunity to enjoy sex and be who they are

sexually is a most horrific form of oppression. My own involvement in human service, social work, and psychotherapy is grounded on this view.

The publication of this collection gives me tremendous pleasure despite its limitations, in that we are able to engage with a broader audience, and set the agenda anew. Being able to publish in English and Chinese at the same time will hopefully allow some of our ideas to be shared, questioned, and critiqued by people with a much more diverse range of views and experiences. Our specific viewpoints and articulations have changed over the years, and it is wonderful to be able to write relatively freely, without having to worry too much what our reviewer colleagues might think. Having the opportunity to write this introductory note, which Sik Ying considers confessional, is a real treat. I am going to write something different for the Chinese version of this collection. I hope readers will enjoy this edition as much as I do.

#### References:

- Man, S.W., Tsang, K.T., & Ng, M.L. (1990). *Sexuality and moral education*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing. *(Published in Chinese)*
- Tsang, A. (1986). Sexuality: the Chinese and the Judeo-Christian traditions in Hong Kong. *Bulletin of the Hong Kong Psychological Society*, 19/20, 19-28.
- Van Gulik, R. H. (1961/2002). *Sexual life in Ancient China: A preliminary survey of Chinese sex and society from ca. 1500 B.C. till 1644 A.D.* Boston, MA: Brill

---

<sup>i</sup> Ho, P.S.Y., & Tsang, A. K.T. (Eds). (2012). *Sex and desire in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

<sup>ii</sup> The introduction was written in 2010, the book was published in August 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> The editor changed “lewd” to “perverted” in the printed version.