

Maid to Queer: Asian Labor Migration and Female Same-Sex Desires. Francisca Yuenki Lai, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press. 2020. 148 pp

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Since the mid-2000s, queer migration scholarship has increasingly analyzed global capitalism as a process of not only racialized class production but also gender and sexual subject-making (Manalansan IV, 2006; Luibhéid, 2008). These studies have made critical interventions in heteronormative assumptions about family, marriage, and reproduction in the transnational migration literature that have marginalized the lives of queer migrants. Francisca Yuenki Lai's *Maid to Queer: Asian Labor Migration and Female Same-Sex Desires* is the first ethnographic monograph to examine sexual desire and community-making among Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong. While issues of migrant domestic labor and gendered relations in the Asian region have been well researched by scholars such as Nicole Constable (1997) and Pei-Cha Lan (2006), Lai challenges both the notion of kin-making, which centers around heterosexual family and marriage, and the assumption of female migrants' "losses" in the migration process. Lai focuses on Indonesian female same-sex desire as a way to show how migrant women negotiate sexual ideologies across multiple hegemonies—border and state policing, religious ideology, and racialized and gendered prejudice in the Chinese household—to craft alternative sexual and gender practices.

Through the intersectional framework of queer migration, *Maid to Queer* contests the reductionist logic that holds female same-sex desire as exclusively produced through the predominance of gender-segregated spaces that has emerged with the feminization of labor migration. Lai's ethnography instead highlights the instability of heterosexuality itself and the possibility of same-sex desire from the structural positions of both "maid" and "queer." The book opens on Lai's fieldwork with an Indonesian migrant women's Sunday pop dance group called Champion that meets at Kowloon Park and Victoria Park. Lai shows how Champion, a site of kin-making in Indonesian migrant communities, exists beyond the temporal and spatial limits of "Sundays at the park." Champion functions as a family unit where "kin

relations were maintained and embodied by kin labor instead of the physical space of a home" (48). The dance group members are largely comprised of *tomboi* and *cewek* couples—the former more masculine presenting and the latter more feminine presenting; both terms are also used as “fashion contest” categories. Framing Champion as a broader network of a “kin world” is crucial to understanding that migrant women’s desire is not confined to an individualistic concept of “sexuality” or even “sexual identity.” Here desire takes the form of kin labor that occurs in dance groups, which provide kinship structure (i.e., the roles of mother, father, sisters, and brothers), social support, and intimacy for Indonesian migrant women in Hong Kong (48-50). In this sense, same-sex relationships between women are considered desirable, since they create family roles for the women within the migrants’ kin world.

Besides its focus on alternative kinship, another critical intervention of the book concerns temporal subject-making vis-à-vis sexuality. Conceptualizing labor migration as a transitory process, these migrant women do not conform to a stable notion of gender and sexual desire. Lai points out that while having intimate partnerships with *tomboi* in Hong Kong, some unmarried *cewek* are upfront about their desire for cis-men and their eagerness to get married in the future when they return to Indonesia. Most *tomboi* lovers are well aware of their decision and agree to separate when the *cewek* partner goes home. The transience of same-sex relations, however, does not make the desire any less real or authentic. Lai shows these women to be sexual agents who actively make and remake notions of family to justify their sexual preferences across the duration of their migration. For instance, Indonesian men at home and South Asian men in Hong Kong are constructed as relatively undesirable compared to *tomboi* partners because of the former’s lower income level and the latter’s tendency toward sexual infidelity. In this sense, Lai teases out how same-sex desire is possible not simply due to women moving from a sexually repressive place in Indonesia to a relatively liberal place like Hong Kong, but rather is contingent upon the complex entanglements of race, class, and sexuality in these women’s lives.

To challenge Eurocentric forms of sexual liberalism and epistemologies of sexual identity, the book shows Hong Kong to also be a site of sexual repression, especially for racialized Others. Indonesian migrant women’s same-sex desire is in fact contingent to other cultural and material conditions. For these women, sexuality is policed from the moment they enter mandated training centers. *Tomboi* are picked out by the trainers and disproportionately surveilled to prevent them from initiating same-sex relationships. Interestingly, although heterosexual encounters and unwanted pregnancies are meant to be the key prohibitions at these single-

sex training centers, the policing of sex and gender makes the *tomboy* into a distinct figure of desire among the women. In other words, in a Foucauldian sense, their very interrogation and marking by the trainers gives *tomboy* more visibility and legitimacy as a sexual and gender category. Lai's analysis of how these cultural and material conditions produce a certain kind of same-sex desire disproves the misconception that migrant women leave their "traditional values" behind and come to Hong Kong to become "lesbians" in a relatively Westernized society. In fact, they cultivate and negotiate their own sense of sexual agency in response to the migrant labor experience in Hong Kong.

One of the most intriguing details of how Indonesian migrant women negotiate between their sexual practices and their Islamic beliefs is their adoption of the notion *cuma di sini* ("only here") in their overseas life. Since Chinese families in Hong Kong regularly consume pork and house dogs as pets, both of which are taboos in Islam, employment agents explicitly instruct them how to convert to the Chinese lifestyle without compromising religious principles, such as touching pork but not eating it, or touching a dog's coat but not its saliva. The common discourse of reassurance comes from the claim that "Allah will understand" (82). These widely adopted claims have allowed the migrant women to justify their same-sex relationships through this same principle, which places a temporal and spatial limit to their sexuality as migrants. Embracing same-sex desire does not mean the women change their beliefs about the negative religious value of same-sex relationships, but by segregating those relationship as "only here," clearly apart from their families in Indonesia, they save themselves from offending their own religiosity and family honor.

From the subcultural practices of pop dance groups to institutionalized spaces such as the aforementioned training centers, *Maid to Queer* provides a nuanced analysis of sexual subject-making vis-à-vis inter-Asia labor migration. On one hand, rejecting heteronormative logic, the feminization of labor migration allows Indonesian migrant women to cultivate alternative kin communities and sexual desire in the liminal space of their lives in Hong Kong; and on the other hand, that same scenario confronts the liberal Western misconception that they become queer by coming to a freer society and abandoning religious belief. Both assumptions reduce the sexual agency of migrant women. Instead of falling into the essentialist trap of identifying the "roots" of same-sex desire within a fixed identity-based framework, Lai's ethnographic study shows how these migrant women are dynamic agents who transform and shape the very definitions of sexuality, family, and religion.

References

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