

Book Review

Maid to Queer: Asian Labor Migration and Female Same-Sex Desires

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Maid to Queer: Asian labor migration and female same-sex desires is an ethnographic study of the economic, social and sexual complexities underpinning the making of female same-sex relationships among Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong. The author, Francisca Yuenki Lai, contends that the uniqueness of Indonesian women's subject positions as *tomboy* (the Indonesian term for 'tomboy,' male-looking females) and *cewek* ('girls,' especially girlfriends of *tomboy*) must be understood in terms of the contingencies of their situation as migrant workers living outside of Indonesia. As a disciple of the anthropologist Evelyn Blackwood whose work on *tomboy* subjectivity in West Sumatra has inspired many in sex/gender studies, Lai carries on Blackwood's interest in the distinctiveness of Indonesian same-sex female identities and complicates them further by focusing on the case of migrant workers. Given the fact that many of the migrant workers shifted their sexual orientation from heterosexual to 'lesbians', this work amounts to a striking departure from the common heteronormative narrative of the 'chain of care' or transnational motherhood that has long surrounded female migrant workers.

To research for this book, Dr Lai engaged in 21 months of fieldwork in Hong Kong, immersing herself in the Sunday life of Indonesian migrant workers in parks (especially Victoria Park and Kowloon Park), beaches, malls, food venues, and monthly rental rooms. Revealing her own *tomboy* subjectivity helped her gain acceptance into the community. Other than participant observation, Lai also conducted structured interviews with her informants regarding their aspirations, relationships, work conditions, and future plans.

Chapter One introduces the risk of being homosexual in Indonesia amid the rising tide of Islamic populism before covering the LGBT movements in Hong Kong, both local and migrant-based. Chapter Two explores the cultivation of the subject positions of *tomboy* and *cewek* respectively. For the former, the chapter reveals the ways in which some became aware of their interest in women in the training centres where they prepared to become migrant workers. In other words, the life change of migration provided them an opportunity to reevaluate their sexual desires. For the latter, Yuenki identifies the key concepts of *manja* (pampering someone) and *dimanja* (being pampered by someone) in the relationship, which is a romantic and trusting one that they believe is not available with biological men, Indonesian, South Asian, and Hongkongner. It is not uncommon that migrant workers' husbands in Indonesia often cheat on them or squander the disproportionately high income they make. Meanwhile, racial prejudice and a lack of trust also prevented migrant workers from seeking serious relationships with South Asian and Hong Kong men. In a nutshell, in Hong Kong where life is only temporary, Indonesian women in this study perceive *tomboy* to be 'better lovers' than men (p. 76).

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In Chapter Three, Lai discusses how religion, class, and race influence Indonesian workers' lives. An important discovery that is consistent with previous work such as that of Tom Boellstorff (1999) is that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not an either/or proposition. Many of the subjects believe that their lesbian lives could only be possible in Hong Kong, and not Indonesia. Lai's argument that migration makes religious piety negotiable, however, should be further examined, given the fact that even within Indonesia piety is almost always changing, contested and negotiable, rather than a fixed thing (see Chao, 2017; Hefner, 2014; Bowen, 1993). First of all, to depict a Muslim woman as an independent daughter prior to marriage (p. 79) hardly applies to Indonesia, as female autonomy in the economic and political realms varies greatly in different historical periods, and women are often seen as free and even 'coarse' in the market. Also, to see dog saliva instead of the entire dog as unclean is a common notion in Java, and hence not some 'new interpretation' (p. 81) or 'personal interpretation' that was invented in Hong Kong. Likewise, touching or even eating pork under circumstances beyond one's control would be forgiven by God, and this has a solid endorsement from the *Qur'an*. Hence this is also perhaps not the best example of negotiated piety.

As an anthropologist of religion, I find it fascinating that same-sex female couples in Hong Kong keep the religious habitus they have acquired in Indonesia whilst living in Hong Kong, such as having a prayer at the beginning of every event, be it a birthday party or a celebration. In fact, that is exactly what people do all the time in Indonesia, namely saying a prayer to start literally every event, religious or not. Saying a prayer together at home or in a non-religious place is also quite typical. Hence what Dr Lai found as something novel (pp. 85-86) was actually a strong continuation of the style of social life in Indonesia, even among homosexual couples. I would even imagine that precisely because they shift their sexual subject position, there could be some incentives to emphasise what is *not* lost in the adoption of a homosexual identity, such as Robin's insistence on entering the mosque through the men's entrance, showing her masculine piety. While transgender individuals' piety is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia (a famous example is a transgender *pesantren* or Islamic boarding school in Yogyakarta), the possibility of a Muslim's heightening piety in non-Muslim lands should be kept in mind. For example, eating halal food often only becomes problematic when a Muslim leaves her Muslim-majority homeland. At the same time, researchers too often are biased by their own secularist assumptions and assume that Muslims lose their piety once living in secular places. The reality, however, could be the other way around, depending on the case in question.

Towards the end of Chapter Three, Lai is insightful to point out that her informants do not see their religion of Islam as oppressive at all, but instead they draw strength from their religious activities, even describing the risky journey to work abroad as a religious trial given by Allah. Nevertheless, the obvious conflict between the common disapproval of their relationships by other Muslims (although female same-sex relationships can be easily covered up as displays of affectionate sisterhood) and female-to-female desires still looms large, whether the disapproval comes from the Islamic shelter, mosques, or the inner voices within these women.

The last chapter shows us that most couples end (or imagine they would end) their relationships upon returning to Indonesia. However, a few of them feel that they could continue their lifestyles. This is illuminating, as Gayatri Gopinah (2005) has reminded us in the queer South Asian diasporic context that home should not always be imagined to be a place left behind or 'to be escaped' by queer people (pp. 14-15). Home can be queered, remade, homoerotic, and even homoromantic.

Finally, the title of this book 'Maid to Queer' did not fail to catch my eyes. I once heard Dr Lai explain in person that the pun was about the process of being 'made to queer'. But I could not help but to think of the masterpiece *Maid to Order* authored by Nicole Constable (1997). The title could be a homage, but also a transformation. With Lai's welcome contribution, it will be remembered that female migrant workers can be, have been, and presumably will continue to be - non-heteronormative.

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