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Maid to Queer

Asian Labor Migration and Female
Same-Sex Desires

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Introduction

I attended the Hong Kong Sex Cultural Festival in 2012. One of the themes was the sexuality of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, including migrant domestic workers who have same-sex relationships. During open floor, a Hong Kong man asked, "Given that these migrant women have a husband in the Philippines or would get married after they return home, can we consider that they are real lesbians?" His question reflects a heteronormative assumption about migrant domestic workers: there should be a reason that migrant workers change their sexual preference while they are in Hong Kong. This way of thinking parallels the gay liberation model, which assumes sexuality is fixed. That is, when a woman changes her sexuality from heterosexual to gay, a possible explanation is that her same-sex desire was suppressed in her earlier years. The lesbian is expected to uphold her lesbian identity for the rest of her life after coming out. This model is incapable of addressing the cultural contexts of migrant domestic workers, not to mention the problem of neglecting the diverse meanings of same-sex relationships to them.

This ethnographic study of Indonesian domestic workers who develop same-sex relationships in Hong Kong therefore aims to create a dialogue between Asian labor migration and lesbian and queer studies. On the one hand, Asian labor migration studies has a strong focus on how the global trends in the feminization of labor migration have shaped the meaning and practices of transnational family and motherhood. However, the research themes on family and motherhood have markedly neglected lesbian workers and other alternative family forms and relations. On the other hand, queer studies often ignores the situations of low-skilled migrant workers who develop same-sex relationships during their stay in their host country. This book examines and inquires about the struggles and concerns of migrant workers and their changing notions of family and marriage in migratory processes. How do these ideas shape the gender and sexual subjectivities of Indonesian women in Hong Kong?

The Indonesian women in this book do not articulate a desire for same-sex relationships before migrating. My work contrasts the Indonesian migrant experiences of same-sex relationships in Hong Kong with the discourse of western sexual identity, which assumes that individuals have a strong sense of sexual identification prior to migration. For example, in the work of two prominent scholars, Martin Manalansan (2003) and Lionel Cantú (2009), the migrants have already identified themselves as gay or sexually interested in men before they migrated to the United States. Their fear of coming out and experiences of marginalization in their home country partly constitute their motivations for moving to the States. This notion unintentionally implies that there is a “real” sexual orientation to pursue. By examining the Asian female migrant experience with same-sex relationships, I argue that same-sex desires are not necessarily realized before migration and pursued by leaving home; instead, the migratory processes *enable* individuals to articulate a desire for same-sex relationships and engage in them.

The book enriches queer migration studies by offering a gender perspective and elucidating how female live-in domestic workers develop same-sex relationships even though they are deprived of the right of mobility at night and are subjected to gendered moral expectations. Queer migration studies have shown that gay male migrants can navigate space in the city despite sometimes feeling racially marginalized. Their male identity grants them mobility to go to cruising areas at night. My work is directed at the unquestioned male privilege of gay migrants by examining the spatial significance of how migrant same-sex relationships are developed under the gendered moral expectations and constraints of female live-in domestic workers.

Labor Migration and Sexuality

Among the studies that focus on the sexuality of migrant women during their stay in their host country, migrant women present themselves as “good women” in an attempt to make sense of their sexual behaviors that deviate from heteronormative expectations. Johan Lindquist studied how some of the Indonesian women who migrated to Batam, an Indonesian island near Singapore, end up as sex workers after losing their job in the factories. The women feel obligated to fulfill the cultural expectation of returning home with money; therefore, they turn to sex work (Lindquist 2009a). Ford and Lyons (2008) also studied how Indonesian women use sex work as a means of class mobility. These women maintain their identities at home as “good mothers” and “dutiful daughters” by sending home money to their children and parents. Yet ironically, their notions of home and strong family bonds have compelled them to engage in sex work for quick money. Although they have violated sexual norms, they still see themselves as moral people and good women because they strive to make money (albeit illicitly) to fulfill the expectations of daughters and mothers. Their notion

of a “good woman” is ambiguous and cannot be defined simply by legitimate sexual behavior; rather, they consider more crucial whether their distant home and family members perceive them as dutiful daughters or good mothers.

The above studies clearly demonstrate the agency and intentionality of migrant women workers when they deviate from sexual norms. However, their pleasure and romance have been neglected when sexuality is portrayed as a means of reaping monetary rewards. Amy Sim (2009) calls for academic attention to the nonwork experiences of migrant domestic workers and their response to the need for sex and love. How do migrant women workers manage to develop romantic relationships and obtain pleasure in their host cities?

Lan Anh Hoang and Brenda Yeoh (2015), in their study of Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan, documented the complexities and ambivalence that characterized the love and sexual lives of the Vietnamese migrant women. Fulfillment of love and sexual desire is usually accompanied by economic considerations, whether migrant women decided to enter an extramarital relationship or not. Nicole Constable observed in her monograph that despite warnings, some migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong have relationships with men or develop same-sex relationships. Constable (2014) pointed out that Hong Kong is a liminal space to these migrant workers: there are sexual norms that migrant workers are supposed to follow, but the fact is, there are no immediate consequences if they do not. Therefore, migrant workers have more freedom to act on temptation and desires while struggling with notions of being good women, especially in relation to their seemingly conflicting roles as wife and mother.

In her study on Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, Amy Sim (2009) offered multiple reasons for *why* these women change their sexual preference from men to women in the migratory process. The women are lonely and need an emotion outlet when they find out that their husband is involved in an affair; they know that lesbianism would not result in pregnancy and therefore can protect their moral universe. While Sim attempts to explain why heterosexual women would engage in a same-sex relationship in Hong Kong, her explanation falls short of contextualizing the stories of the women, particularly how they change their notions of gender and sexuality, including how they ascribe meaning to same-sex relationships and their perceptions of lesbianism shift from anomaly to normalcy and from impossible to possible.

As noted by scholars in both transnational feminism and queer migration studies, migration is an active process of creating subjectivities. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (2001) noted that contacts and transactions of travel are part of the knowledge production that constitutes and creates new subjects. Hector Carillo (2004) coined the term “sexual migration,” which suggests that transnational movement enables queer practices, identities, and subjectivities. In his study on gay men in the United States, Nathaniel Lewis proposed the notion of “migration prompting personal reassessment” to understand the role of

migration in shaping the expression of sexual identity. He argues that migration gives gay men the opportunity to distance themselves from heterosexual relationships and realize the possibility of a different life. The gay men in his study had long been aware of their sexual interest in men, but did not consider disclosing their gay identity until given the opportunity to relocate. The adoption of a gay identity is an accretive process in which these gay men reconsider their sexuality along with their marriage, career path, and family during the several alternating trips between their current home and potential queer home. That is, the process is not a one-time undertaking but a gradual and accretive process (Lewis 2012).

The idea of migration shaping sexuality is very useful for analyzing the sexual subjectivity of Indonesian migrant women. My work not only examines how Indonesian women negotiate the sexual ideologies of Indonesia and Hong Kong but also how migrant labor policies and the practices of Hong Kong people unintentionally produce alternative sexualities and desires.

Maid, Queer, and Heteronormativity

Maid to Queer aims to highlight the changes of subject positions of Indonesian women from live-in maid to a nonnormative position in the gender/sexuality system. This book addresses the conflicting discourses about the moral standards of Indonesian women and the many social processes that enable them to experience sexual fluidity and perceive themselves *otherwise*—different from what they think about themselves before leaving home. I use “queer” as a subject position, a nonnormative position in which these Indonesian women negotiate heteronormativity while drawing meaning from it to live on. Queer is not used as an identity in the book because the Indonesian women in this study do not identify themselves as queer people.

It is important to clarify that “sexual fluidity” is not a synonym for “bisexuality.” In her study of female sexual fluidity, Lisa Diamond (2008) interviewed more than one hundred middle-class women from both urban and rural sites in the United States. She argued that women possess a capacity for fluidity in addition to their sexual orientation. While “sexual orientation” refers to the gender of the people one is mainly attracted to, “sexual fluidity” refers to sexual attraction that is not aligned with a person’s sexual orientation. This sexual attraction can be triggered by relationships and situations; for example, an intense emotional relationship with either a man or a woman or moving to a place that provides positive experiences with same-sex relationships. Diamond’s notion of sexual fluidity enables us to understand that sexual attraction is not merely determined by sexual orientation. She also reminds us that sexual attraction and fluidity is *not* a matter of choice. Some women in her study reported that they actively resisted the changes but in vain. Following Diamond, my study does not take sexuality as a kind of fixity; instead, I ask how sexual desires are produced and

sustained in relation to their subject positions and the contexts the Indonesian women find themselves in.

There are debates as to whether a queer perspective is suitable for analyzing sexual subjectivities that do not publicly denounce heteronormativity and that are outside Euro-American locations (see also Boellstorff 2007; Lewin 2016). In a retrospective paper, Margot Weiss (2016) challenged queerness as a prescriptive project, as it assumes that queer objects are antinormative. Saskia Wieringa (2015) also criticized queer studies for uncritically assuming all people who live a nonheteronormative life are queer. Both question the reinforcement of “simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything queer” (Weiss 2016, 632). Furthermore, queer studies has been taken to task for overlooking the diversity among queer people of different races, genders, religions, and social classes. Feminist critics have long called queer studies to account for prioritizing the experience of white, middle-class gay men in Euro-American urban locations and overlooking the specificities of contexts in which lesbians, bisexual, and transgender people are situated (Wieringa, Bhaiya, and Katjasungkana 2015).

Responding to these criticisms, queer scholars strive to produce new works that are attentive to the power dimensions of race, class, and gender that shape queer lives; the paradox of the regulatory regimes that shape both marginalization and resistance; and the complex negotiations of normativity (Engebretsen 2014). Martin Manalansan argues for a “new queer studies” (2003, 7) that is mindful of the politics of location brought by colonization, postcolonization, and transnational migration. His approach aims to illuminate “the different ways in which queer subjects located in and moving in between specific national locations establish and negotiate complex relationships to each other and to the state” (2003, 8). Lisa Duggan’s idea of homonormativity (2002) also expanded the discussion of normativity in queer studies by seeing how normativity works with neoliberalism. People in nonheterosexual relationships are not inherently subversive; they become “normal” by complying with neoliberal values, such as commitment to monogamous relationships and stable jobs.

A queer analytic approach is still very useful for analyzing transgression and normativity, for examining sexual subjectivities in a transnational migratory context. I use a queer lens to highlight (1) the heteronormative policies and practices in labor migration and the structured inequalities imposed on queer migrants (Cantú 2009), (2) the instability and subversion of heteronormativity when individuals resist and negotiate these norms and regulations (Blackwood and Johnson 2012), and (3) the “productive possibilities” of queerness and norm—queerness is not about heroic distancing from the normative but rather how the two constantly intersect and reconstitute, because norm and queer are not easily separable (Manalansan 2018, 1288). The notion of productive possibilities is powerful for rethinking how queer people construct their norms without isolating themselves from the mainstream, heteronormative world out of which

they also draw social meanings to live on. My work examines the linkages between heteronormativity, racialization, Islamic regulations, and the specificity of domestic work to understand the reconstitution of normativity by Indonesian women in a migratory context.

Heteronormativity is not equivalent to heterosexuality but refers to a wide range of practices and institutions that inform the normative daily life; it shapes the lives of members of society and produces effects upon those who comply with these expectations as well as those who fall outside of its norms (Jackson 2006; Wieringa 2015). Heteronormativity is not monolithic but always negotiable and productive of shifting meanings and diverse effects upon different individuals. For instance, gay is becoming “normal” as gay men openly show their willing commitment to heteronormative ideals, such as maintaining a monogamous relationship. Since heteronormativity is by no means absolute but negotiable, Wieringa (2015) argues for an intersectional lens to examine how the dimensions of gender, race, class, and religion shape these negotiation processes, which are filled with dilemmas of choosing between acceptance and resistance, and to investigate the diverse effects of heteronormativity on individual bodies. Adopting an intersectional lens, this book takes on two different subject positions, *maid* and *queer*, to examine how Indonesian women negotiate heteronormativity and reconstitute it in relation to gender, race, religion, and the specificity of domestic work.

Migrant Community and Same-Sex Desires

Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa have written extensively on queer female bodies in Indonesia since the publication of their edited anthology *Female Desires* in 1999. Not only do they provide a thick description of how female queer bodies negotiate heteronormative gender ideology and marriage pressure in Indonesia; both scholars also address the globalization of LGBT identities and its effects on queer individuals in Asia, such as obscuring sexual meanings outside the LGBT model (Blackwood and Wieringa 2007). In her study on *tomboi* (the Indonesian term for “tomboy”) in Padang, in the West Sumatra Province of Indonesia, Blackwood notes the intersection of global LGBT knowledge and identity-based communities in Indonesia, particularly how the erratic circulation of queer discourses between the capital city (Jakarta) and less developed regional cities (Padang in her study) shape the sexual subjectivities of the working-class *tomboi* and their girlfriends. She uses the “asymmetries of queer knowledge” to explain the uniqueness of *tomboi* subjectivity, which differs from the lesbian subjectivity embodied by the activists who are living in Jakarta (Blackwood 2010: 205).

My research, which is inspired by Blackwood’s study on the distinctiveness of *tomboi* subjectivity, examines group-based interactions in the migrant community and investigates the ways these daily interactions shape and influence

how Indonesian women perceive masculinity, femininity, and same-sex relationships. I am also inspired by Marlon Bailey (2013), who conducted research on butch queens and ballroom culture among the black community in Detroit in the United States. Close friends form ballroom houses that produce competitive live performance events. These houses are reconstitutions of the homes that rejected these queer people as they transform friendships into kin relations of parents and children. Fictive kin terms are commonly used among this community. Therefore, acts of creating kin and kin labor provide social support and offer a safe haven from homophobic violence. While I am aware that there is no direct cultural connection between the ballroom houses in Detroit and the social groups formed by Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong, Bailey's notion of kin labor is useful for examining the fictive family networks these migrant workers establish among themselves in Hong Kong, as well as how their fictive home and kin relations shape their gender and sexual subjectivities.

Intersectionality and Negotiating Social Positions

Queer migration scholarship flourished in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and one of its academic accomplishments is having enriched the concept of sexuality by accounting for the intersectionality of race and noncitizenship and the ways that the social position of queer migrants affects their sexuality (Cantú 2009; Manalansan 2003; Luibhéid 2008). It also addressed the role of geographical space, the movement across borders, and navigating the spaces of migrant communities or the home of the employer in producing identity and subjectivity (Valentine 2007). Queer migrants face structural inequality that may produce experiences and lifestyles that differ from those of lesbian and gay citizens. In his study of Filipino gay men in New York City, Manalansan (2003) addresses how racism there shaped their lived experiences. For example, they refrained from cruising in white areas, even though public cruising is supposed to be a democratic practice. In response, gay migrants from Asia and South America found their own cruising area. However, Filipino gay men still feel vulnerable there because public sex acts expose them to arrest and deportation. While police seldom arrest gay citizens for public sex acts, this is not true of gay migrants. Therefore, their racial identity and noncitizenship eclipse their gay identity in the United States. The idea of public cruising as a democratic practice does not apply to gay migrants at all.

The gender identity of queer migrants may outweigh their sexual identity when the patriarchal context is taken into consideration. Oliva Espín addresses the intersectionality of gender and sexuality in her study of Latina lesbians in the United States. In a patriarchal context, the sexuality of daughters represents the honor of her family. Espín notes that the struggle of immigrant families to acculturate frequently centers on the sexual behavior of daughters, as many immigrant

communities perceive “to be Americanized” as almost synonymous with sexual promiscuity. Among immigrant communities, girls and women are expected to continue living as though they were still in the old country, but young men are encouraged to develop a new identity (Espín 1996). Espín’s work sheds light on the constraints, particularly familial surveillance, that lesbian migrants encounter in a new country. Her argument highlights the need for special attention to the gender position of lesbian migrants and the moral expectations imposed upon women.

The intersectionality of race, class, and gender is salient to live-in domestic workers who usually have no coworkers or support in addressing issues with their employer. Previous studies of migrant domestic workers have pointed out their marginalized position in the employer’s home, which is a place of racial, class, and gender oppression (Constable 1997; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Yeoh and Huang 2010). Nicole Constable (1997) delineated how Hong Kong employers controlled the gender appearance of migrant domestic workers with the underlying assumption that their youth and beauty constitute a sexual threat. Household rules included a prohibition on tight clothing, dresses, or makeup being worn at home. For example, one of the interviewed Filipino domestic workers was very upset when her employer cut her shoulder-length hair in a short man’s style without her consent.

Departing from Constable’s study, my research takes the forced haircut as the starting point of investigation and not the end. Would a migrant domestic worker reconsider her sexuality after a significant change of gender appearance? I ask this question because Indonesian migrant domestic workers are not isolated from the migrant community. A man’s haircut could mean something desirable or mark its wearer as a lesbian in the migrant community. Therefore, I explore how Indonesian migrant domestic workers modify their gender appearance in accordance with the gendered expectations in the home of their employer while drawing on the meaning of female masculinity in the migrant community. The home of the employer is not merely about race and class oppression but might become a space for producing an alternative masculinity and sexuality.

Another way to consider the social position of women workers in the migratory process is the intersectionality of religion, class, and sexuality. Previous studies on migrant domestic workers and Islam have addressed how the perceived low status of live-in maids has become an excuse for employers to violate their religious rights, including forcing Muslim workers to consume pork, which is forbidden in Islamic law, and denying them the right to pray (for an obligatory five times a day) or wear a *jilbab* (headscarf), which is a symbolic part of female Islamic dress that demonstrates modesty.¹

1. There is a wide spectrum of Islamic clothing for women in Indonesia. It ranges from the nearly all-black, Saudi-associated styles with face coverings, to colorful and often fitted styles with a headscarf called a *jilbab* (Jones 2007).

Instead of viewing this type of treatment as merely another form of class oppression and discrimination, both Paul O'Connor (2012) and Nicole Constable (2011) point out that the involuntary violation of the Islamic principles provide migrant women a break from and opportunity to reflect on their religious beliefs. An Indonesian informant told O'Connor that she decided to "dress sexy" when she found it difficult to follow Islamic rules because her employer did not allow her to pray at home or wear a *jilbab*. The worker also noted that Indonesian women should not be faulted for failing to observe Islamic rules in Hong Kong, as "it is the circumstances that they find themselves in" (O'Connor 2012, 50). Constable (2011) also noted that migrant women use "oppressive employer" as an excuse to disregard religious expectations, such as consuming pork or not praying.

The space and freedom in Hong Kong allow migrant women to reflect on their religion and expectations imposed on women. Constable (2011) notes that her Indonesian Muslim informants become more critical of their faith after leaving Indonesia. However, being critical of Islam does not necessarily mean abandoning Islam. Eni Lestari, one of her informants, noted the growth of conservative Islam in Hong Kong since 2004. Eni became aware of the infiltration of conservative Islam into the Indonesian migrant community in Hong Kong through the emergence of "moral police" who condemned women who spoke up or engaged in a lesbian relationship. Eni established Gabungan Migran Muslim Indonesia (Indonesian Migrant Muslim Alliance, GAMMI) to encourage Indonesian women to dialogue and become leaders by recasting the roots of Islam as liberating and revolutionary. To Eni and the GAMMI members, the weight of Muslim identity has not been reduced but is salient in the migratory process.

The above shows the transformation of religious subjectivity in the process of migration. The Muslim identity might become less important or more salient, depending on the migratory experiences and the situations that these women find themselves in. I will examine how the Indonesian women perceive their Muslim identity and religious faith when they are unable to follow the religious rules in Hong Kong. With a changing and negotiable definition of religious piety, how do they reconcile their same-sex desires with Muslim identity?

Asian Family and Queer Imaginings of Home

Lesbian and queer studies seek to destabilize the notion of home and domesticity and explore the formation of a plurality of identities and subjective experiences (Pilkey, Scicluna, and Gorman-Murray 2015). Previous studies have illustrated the plurality of queer subjectivity by demonstrating how queer individuals negotiate heteronormative expectations and the pressure to marry and simultaneously improvise strategies to maintain their same-sex sexuality and relationships. Manalansan (2003) documents how Filipino gay men use silence

as a strategy when they reveal their gay identity to their parents, which contrasts Asian queer subjectivity with the Western discourse of “coming out” to their family members. Studies on Indonesian lesbians by Saskia Wieringa (2007) and Evelyn Blackwood (2010) also show that Indonesian lesbians do not expect their family members or neighbors to acknowledge their same-sex relationships even though they might have their suspicions. Tom Boellstorff (1999) argues that the Indonesian gay men in his study do not necessarily perceive heterosexuality and homosexuality as an “either/or” proposition, as defined in the gay liberation model, since they balance both heterosexual marriage and a gay relationship at the same time.

Unlike their LGBT counterparts in the above studies, the Indonesian women in this book are physically distant from their home. Therefore, they are less often subjected to confrontations with their parents over their potential same-sex sexuality. Nevertheless, these studies are still relevant to the discussion on the sexual subjectivity of the migrant workers in terms of the notion of home, especially how they manage their relationship with their parents, who would normally expect their daughters to return home and marry before they become “too old.” Although the women are physically distant from their parents, they are still expected to fulfill the role of a “dutiful daughter” by calling their parents regularly. They are also supposed to return to Indonesia to visit their parents during the two-week leave between old and new contracts. While the heteronormative surveillance is at a physical remove, the women still face pressure when they speak to their parents on the phone or return home during holidays.

Martin Manalansan calls for extending migration studies beyond normative and universalized family patterns. Manalansan (2006) is critical of the dominant focus of the “chain of care” in labor migration studies on transnational motherhood with excessive emphasis on the heterosexual family. He points out that stories of single women and lesbians are often sidelined in favor of those of migrant mothers. Echoing Manalansan, my work infuses the traditional definition of family and home in migration studies with a new perspective. I do not perceive family and home as mere physical entities; instead, I expand family and home to include their imaginings of home. I examine how these imaginings shape the meanings of their same-sex relationships and their sexual subjectivity in a transnational context.

Arjun Appadurai (1996) notes that imagination has acquired a new power in a transnational world and considers its implications for doing ethnography:

Ethnographers can no longer simply be content with the thickness they bring to the local. . . . For what is real about ordinary lives is now real in many ways that range from the sheer contingency of individual lives . . . to the realisms that individuals are exposed to and draw on their daily lives. These complex, partly imagined lives must now form the bedrock of ethnography. . . . [E]thnography must redefine itself as that practice of representation that

illuminates the power of large-scale, imagined life possibilities over specific life trajectories. (1996, 54–55)

Appadurai emphasizes that ethnographers must attend to projected imaginations because they encourage the pursuit of certain lifestyles and contribute to new life meanings. Appadurai (2002) also states that imagination is not mere fantasy but a form of social practice and negotiation. That is, people negotiate their current state of affairs and their imagined future life. Rather than viewing imagination as constraint-free and completely boundless, Appadurai argues for a focus on specific life trajectories, because they are the essence of meaningful imaginations. Following Appadurai, I examine the imagined life possibilities of the Indonesian women in relation to their life trajectories and gender expectations in Indonesia.

The imaginings of home are crucial for understanding the sexual subjectivity of migrant domestic workers as they alternate between the pleasure they obtain from same-sex relationships in Hong Kong and the social constraints imposed on them, and the negotiations between Indonesian migrant women and the larger society in Indonesia. Negotiation does not mean that the Indonesian women abandon their family back home. I examine how memories of home and migratory experiences both within and outside of Indonesia constitute their imaginings of home and consider how their same-sex desires and compliance with heteronormative expectations intertwine in these imaginings.

Research Questions

This book examines the migratory experiences and sexual subjectivity of Indonesian migrant workers during the many transnational processes of (1) leaving their home in Indonesia and maintaining physical distance to evade the gaze of their parents, (2) establishing a migrant community with other Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong, (3) adapting to a racist and heterosexist environment in Hong Kong, and (4) projecting their imaginings of home in Indonesia. The following questions will be addressed in this book:

- What are the gender and sexual subjectivities (including thoughts, struggles, and actions) of Indonesian migrant workers who have developed same-sex relationships in Hong Kong?
- What gender and sexual knowledge has been produced by the migrant community in Hong Kong that enables its members to engage in same-sex relationships?
- How do their imaginings of home produce meaning in their same-sex relationships in Hong Kong despite their inevitable return to Indonesia?

Field Methods

To understand the formation of sexual subjectivity and how migrant workers make sense of their same-sex relationships in Hong Kong, I adopted a qualitative and ethnographic approach, which relies on conversations, participant observation, and formal interviews to collect the stories of migrant workers, including their views of migration and home, as well as the meanings of same-sex relationships to them. Their stories are crucially important to this research because ordinary people (like the average migrant worker in this study) make sense of their life and realize the world through their daily experiences (Parreñas 2001). Sexual subjectivity can be observed in daily life practices through gender expression, dating style and practices, and behaviors that reproduce or negotiate gender and sexual regimes (Blackwood and Wieringa 2007).

As an ethnographer, I immersed myself in the Sunday life of Indonesian women where they socialized: parks, beaches, malls, food venues, a learning center operated by a Christian church, and monthly rental rooms from October 2010 to July 2012. I observed how individuals and couples presented themselves in a group setting, including their clothing, hairstyle, and accessories, and their interactions through conversations, body movement, and division of labor between the masculine and feminine genders. I also went shopping and had dinner with individual women and couples. Spending time with them individually allowed casual and personal conversations about their life back in Indonesia and now in Hong Kong, such as where they shopped for clothes, as well as where they felt comfortable enough to spend their holidays with their girlfriend.

In addition, I participated in their formal activities, for example, a fashion show organized by the migrant workers themselves. In doing so, I was categorized according to their binary gender system as a *tomboi*. A detailed discussion of this will follow in Chapter 2. I also maintained contact with these migrant workers through SMS and Facebook on the weekdays when they had to work. Facebook served as an additional channel for observing their social networking and uploaded photos.

Apart from joining their Sunday activities, I also accompanied some of the migrant workers to employment agencies and the Labour Department office to settle their labor disputes on the weekdays. This wide range of experiences provided a holistic view to place their gender and sexuality stories within a broader social context, particularly how migrant policy and class and race hierarchies shape the sexual subjectivities of women.

Structured interviews were carried out when a trusting relationship had been established with individual migrant workers. The following topics were incorporated into the in-depth interviews: (1) their thoughts, aspirations, and ideal life paths in terms of family, career, and relationships, including both heterosexual and same-sex relationships; (2) their life in Indonesia, including all

gender-related experiences at home and school, in the workplace, and at the training center; (3) their relationships with their Hong Kong employers and the gendered expectations of them as live-in domestic workers; (4) their motivations for joining the pop dance group and their thoughts about the gendered costumes and performances; (5) their knowledge of a homosocial romantic discourse in popular culture and the sexual rights movement in Indonesia and Hong Kong; and (6) the ways that they deal with the pressure to marry and conflicts with religious beliefs.

While I was carrying out my research, I was also aware of my privilege in the field—I sat with these Indonesian women and documented their lives and stories. Therefore, I also sought opportunities to contribute to their activities, including taking and photofinishing pictures of their birthday parties, mixing songs for their dance practice sessions with computer software, teaching English classes at Victoria Park, and helping them with English or Cantonese communication with other parties.

Entering the Community

In August 2010, I contacted a labor union formed by Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. I told them about my research topic on same-sex relationships among Indonesian migrant women. Through their network, I was introduced to a *moderen* (modern) dance group, a name they used to emphasize their difference from Indonesian traditional dancing. They mixed dance-pop, hip-hop, and break-dance moves. To avoid confusing them with the genre of modern dance, I refer them as pop dance groups in the rest of the book. I was first introduced to a pop dance group, Champion (a pseudonym), in October 2010. I was fascinated by the visibility of female same-sex relationships among the members. Champion has thirty active members, and the number of *tomboi* and *cewek* (girls) are about the same. I instinctively knew that Champion would be an ideal group for my research purpose, as my focus was on their same-sex relationships.

I disclosed both my research purpose as well as my lesbian identity when I first met the Indonesian labor union and then the pop dance group. My coming-out decision to the informants was supported by previous field projects in lesbian, gay, and queer studies, in which the ethnographers found that revealing their sexual identity to their informants greatly facilitated their admission into the community, as the informants were relieved to share a common sexual identity with the researchers (Blackwood 2010; Kong 2010; Lewin and Leap 1996). My overtness in disclosing my dual identities as both a researcher and a lesbian greatly eased my entry into the migrant community despite our differences in race and class. My informants were generally willing to talk to me about their same-sex relationships based on our shared identity.

After spending two consecutive Sundays with Champion, I asked the leader for permission to conduct research with her group. She was receptive, and I became an official member of Champion after two months. My membership card, T-shirt uniform printed with Champion and my first name, and monthly payment officially marked my membership, although I did not dance as vigorously as the other members. Through Champion, I became acquainted with more Indonesian migrant women and members of other dance groups.

I met with the Champion members mostly at Kowloon Park or Victoria Park. Their official meeting time was from 2:00 in the afternoon to 5:00 in the evening. They held various activities during those three hours apart from dancing, for example, participating in formal performance events, meeting with labor unions, or holding internal meetings. I also spent time with them before and after their official meetings. My first in-depth interview did not occur until July 2011. Since I could meet with them only once a week, on Sundays, nine months lapsed before I established sufficient trust to commence in-depth interviews.

Indonesian is my third language, after Chinese and English. I attended two intensive language courses, one in the United States (at the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute, held at the University of Wisconsin–Madison) and one in Indonesia (Alam Bahasa, a private language school in Yogyakarta) in the summers of 2010 and 2011, respectively. During my fieldwork and in-depth interviews, I used Indonesian to communicate with the Indonesian women. I also used Cantonese (a Chinese dialect spoken in Hong Kong and southern China) and English when I did not know how to express certain ideas in Indonesian. My informants could speak either Cantonese or English or both. However, their spoken Cantonese or English was not as fluent as that of native speakers. During our conversations, we switched between the three languages whenever we thought that we could communicate more effectively in that language.

Researcher's Sexuality in the Field

I was in my early thirties when I started this fieldwork. New acquaintances often mistake me for a man based on my gender appearance: I have short hair around the ears and wear men's clothing. I came out to my informants as a lesbian and told them that I was in a stable relationship with a Hong Kong woman. They asked me for pictures of my girlfriend, whose feminine appearance reinforced their assumption of my gender position as a *tomboi* because a *tomboi* pairs up with a feminine woman. My presence in the field reinforced the construction of the same-sex culture of the Indonesian migrant community, in which a *tomboi* is paired with a feminine woman. My girlfriend met my informants only a few times. Over two years of fieldwork, I was on my own, without her. I spent time with the Indonesian women, I ate with them, and I learned and spoke the same language. I wanted to be a part of their community and be treated the same.

Same-sex attractions and romantic relationships are important dimensions of the lives of these community members. Inevitably, I was also seen as an object of desire there.

In December 2010, I began to mingle with the members of Champion every Sunday in the park. One of the members was Ria, a twenty-year-old with a feminine appearance and shoulder-length hair. She liked to spend time with me and talk, because I was the only friend with whom she can practice her English. She helped translate Indonesian to English at times when I did not fully understand the conversations of the group members. Her willingness to act as my translator made my presence in the migrant community less awkward and more engaging. Although I equipped myself with basic Indonesian before beginning my fieldwork, my language skills were still insufficient for understanding everyday dialogue spoken at a normal speed. Ria facilitated my engagement in their social circles. When we spent time alone, Ria shared many of her own stories and the gossip of other Champion members, for example, rumored couples.

About a month later, I went to meet with the group as I usually did in the park. I saw Ria from a distance, and as I walked toward her, she suddenly hid behind another person, looking embarrassed. I was confused about her reaction. Her friend told me, "She likes you." At that moment, it dawned on me that I was positioned as not only a researcher but also an object of desire in the field. As noted by Evelyn Blackwood, researchers "occupy multiple positions and identities that transform over time, forcing us constantly to reconstruct who we are in relation to the people we study" (1995, 55).

One day, Ria told me that many of her friends thought that we were in a relationship. She said that she did not mind because she did not want to be viewed as a single woman but someone with a *tomboi* partner. She said the Champion members would gossip about her whenever she was close to a *tomboi*, even if there was not any romantic connotation. Now that there were rumors that Ria and I were in a relationship, Ria used this misconception to her advantage, to prevent gossip when she formed a closer relationship with other *tomboi* in Champion. Ria showed no intention of clarifying our relationship to the Champion members. My response to Ria was that the Champion members should already know that I had a girlfriend. About three months later, Ria told me that she fell in love with a *tomboi* and showed me their pictures. I was relieved because I was not her object of desire anymore.

Unlike most other anthropologists conducting fieldwork in a foreign country, I lived with my girlfriend in my hometown. I was very sure that I did not want a romantic relationship with Ria. I was not attracted to her sexually. But I liked spending time with her, as she was a happy, energetic, chatty young woman. I liked Ria being close to me because her presence could facilitate my communication with other Indonesian women in the research process. Yet I was vigilant about negotiating the two identities of a researcher and a *tomboi*. As a researcher,

I spent time with Ria because she always had stories to share with me. Through our conversations, I learned how these Indonesian women made sense of their gender and same-sex relationships. As a *tomboi*, I was aware of Ria's interest in me and I also enjoyed spending time with her. While I reminded myself that I should avoid any conversation that would lead Ria to think that I was attracted to her, I did not avoid spending time with Ria alone; for instance, I still asked Ria to have lunch or dinner with me.

I recalled a methodology graduate seminar that I attended in early 2000s about insiders conducting fieldwork. It considered how an insider identity might ease entry into a community when the informants found a common identity with the ethnographer. However, how ethnographers should handle their own romantic or sexual relationships in the field was not fully addressed. My experience in graduate school was not unique. Don Kulick (1995) noted that anthropologists remain very tight lipped about their own sexuality despite decades of concern with the sex lives of others. Kulick urged anthropologists to recognize and reflect on their desire and erotic subjectivity as the reflexive process would help them critically examine their privileged positions in the field (i.e., recording the romantic and sex stories of others without sharing their own) and reveal their self-protective motive behind remaining celibate: to protect their academic career rather than their informants. Anthropologists who have sexual relations with informants risk being stamped as "unethical" for taking advantage of their informants; it might endanger their professional identity and academic career (Kulick 1995; Wekker 2006).

In reflecting on how I negotiated the two identities of researcher and *tomboi*, I confess that I feared a romantic relationship with Ria (or any member of the migrant community) because it would threaten my professional identity. At the same time, I also feared losing our close friendship that eased my presence in the community. For me, not indulging in a romantic relationship with any member of the migrant community was not a matter of ethics but more a matter of professional consequences. As noted by Jill Dubisch, "We 'use' them to further our goals, writing and speaking in public contexts about personal and even intimate aspects of their lives, appropriating these lives for our own professional purposes. Could a sexual relationship be any more intimate, committing, or exploitative than our normal relations with the 'natives'? Or is it really ourselves we are trying to protect?" (1995, 31). As a matter of ethics, I should consider Ria's feelings and maintain a professional distance, at least not asking her to lunch or dinner alone. Reflecting on Dubisch's question, I confess that I weighted my professional career over Ria's feelings.

But it is an oversimplification to assume that I had power over Ria. In delineating her sexual relationship with her informant in Suriname, Wekker (2006) found that she did not have more power over her informant lover despite her middle-class status (i.e., being a PhD candidate) and lighter skin color. Instead, culture

and age matter more in the working-class Surinamese context. Informants are also active agents and can have equal or even more power than anthropologists in the field. In reviewing my relationship with Ria, she had some control over rumors about us because she did not clarify our relationship to others but instead took the advantage of the rumors to counter gossip directed at her. I found that my position in Champion, as a rumored lover of Ria, was out of my control.

Profile of the Indonesian Women

I collected life stories from forty-three Indonesian women in Hong Kong. They include that of nineteen *cewek* and twenty-four *tomboi* between the ages of twenty and thirty-nine. The median age was twenty-seven. All were from the island of Java, except two from the islands of Sulawesi and Sumbawa. In terms of education level, two had completed primary school (*sekolah dasar*); twenty-two had completed middle school (*sekolah menengah pertama*), eighteen had completed high school (*sekolah menengah atas*), and one had completed college and received her degree (*stratum satu*). All were Muslim except for two Christians. One of the Christians was from Sulawesi.

Fifteen of the forty-three women were or had been married. Among the fifteen married women, one was a widow and two were divorced. The remaining twelve indicated problems with their husband, although they did not divorce. The most common problem was that their husband in Indonesia was having affairs while they were working in Hong Kong. One woman specifically admitted that her husband physically abused her before she came to work in Hong Kong. Seven women were mothers. Two of the seven said that their husband was taking care of the children. The other five said that their own parents were caring for the children. Twenty-eight of the women were unmarried. Three of the twenty-eight unmarried women had been engaged to men in Indonesia; however, all three had problems with their fiancé when they were working in Hong Kong and cancelled their engagement. The other twenty-five did not have any concrete plans around marriage yet. Their views on marriage, including the different views held by the unmarried *cewek* and *tomboi*, are discussed in detail in the book.

The *tomboi* and *cewek* in my study used names, whether in Indonesian or English, other than their official names when they socialized with Indonesian migrant women in Hong Kong. The *tomboi* had male names and the *cewek* had female names. To protect their identity, I replaced their names with pseudonyms based on the language and gender of the name that they used in Hong Kong.

Overview of the Book

Chapter 1 establishes the context of the book by providing a wider perspective on both Indonesia and Hong Kong. The first part addresses the changing discourses

of home and marriage given the large number of women nationals who have left home to work abroad. The second part discusses the shift in the stance of the Indonesian government toward LGBT individuals and issues. The third part focuses on Hong Kong, particularly on the development of LGBT movements and the emergence of migrant LGBT organizations in the city. Lastly, the changing attitudes of Hong Kong employers toward lesbian migrant workers since the mid-1990s is discussed.

Chapter 2 discusses the formation of gender and sexual subjectivity in the migrant community, particularly the pop dance groups who gather in Victoria Park and Kowloon Park. The first part of the chapter examines the characteristics of the Indonesian migrant community and the gender knowledge produced by their activities. Then, a discussion follows on the sexual ideologies that circulated in the pop dance groups. The discussion includes (1) the formation of a kin world among the pop dance groups, (2) the changing meanings of *tomboi* from its original reference to boyish girls to a sexual identity, (3) how migrant women evaluate biological men, and (4) the meanings of same-sex relationships in the community.

The focus of Chapter 3 is on the intersecting identities of these Indonesian women and how they negotiate an existence subject to the many rules imposed by religion, employers, business owners of karaoke boxes, and landlords of rental rooms. The first part mainly discusses how the women negotiated and reconciled the perceived conflicts between Islam and their same-sex relationships. The second part examines the interactions between Hong Kong people and these Indonesian women in different places, including the home of employer, the karaoke box, and rental rooms. The ways that the Indonesian women responded to gendered expectations in these different spaces is addressed.

The final chapter investigates the sexual subjectivity of these Indonesian women by studying their projected imaginings of home. Since their return to Indonesia is compulsory, I unravel how these women reconciled their future and their desires with family expectations. The first part of the chapter examines their views and emotions toward their actual home in Indonesia. These are significant because they influence the imaginings of home. The second part discusses how the contacts and transactions of travel enable these women to imagine a future home with their female lover. The third part investigates how the imaginaries transform the space of home by *queering* it. The final part turns to those who have decided to return to a heterosexual path in Indonesia. Special attention is placed on understanding how they make sense of their same-sex practices in Hong Kong when they foresee quitting the relationship one day.

4

Imaginings of Home

The Hong Kong immigration ordinance stipulates that migrant domestic workers are allowed to legally reside in Hong Kong only based on employment. A worker must leave the territory of Hong Kong immediately if she fails to secure employment within two weeks of the completion of a contract. In addition, Indonesian ideology assumes that migrant workers will return home eventually because labor migration is only a temporary stint. The Indonesian women in this study therefore expected to return home permanently when they no longer wanted to work as migrant domestic workers.

These Indonesian women imagined their future home to be in Indonesia, not Hong Kong. In this chapter, the focus of investigation will be on these Indonesian women's imagined home. Home has been imperative for understanding the power dynamics and negotiations between heteronormative family expectations and the desires of female or queer subjects in feminist and LGBT studies (see Fortier 2001; Mohanty and Martin 2003). By examining the imagined home of the migrant women, I unravel how Indonesian women reconciled their future and their desires with family expectations. Did they imagine a new home with their same-sex lover? Did they think that it was even possible to have a home with their same-sex lover in Indonesia? As Arjun Appadurai said, imagination is no longer mere fantasy or simple escape but has become "an organized field of social practices" and a form of negotiation between individuals and the fields of possibility (2002, 49). These women's imaginings of home matter because imagination can direct people to create new meanings in life.

I suggest taking a transnational perspective to examine the intertwining relationship between the present and the future; that is, the desires and practices of the Indonesian women that took place in Hong Kong and their imagined home in Indonesia. Situating Indonesian women in a transnational frame complicates the meaning of sexuality by taking into consideration gendered expectations, the cultural specificities of particular locales, and political economies of the family, as well as the refigurations of identities and imaginaries (Povinelli and Chauncey

1999; F. Y. Lai 2018b). A transnational frame also recognizes contacts and transactions of travel as part of the knowledge production that constitutes and creates new subjects (Grewal and Kaplan 2001). The contacts and knowledge that the Indonesian women had and made and obtained in Hong Kong enabled them to constitute imaginaries of their future life; these imaginaries informed and shaped the women's desires.

Previous studies have shown that there is a tendency among researchers to represent home as a universal patriarchy—a heteronormative locale in which female and queer subjects are oppressed or which they are forced to leave in order to achieve liberation (Gopinath 2005; Manalansan 2002; Mohanty and Martin 2003). The problem with this representation is its disregard for the cultural specificities of particular locales as well as the imaginaries created by female and queer subjects in a migratory context. I find that "remaking the space of home from within" by Gayatri Gopinath (2005, 14) to be very useful in the analysis of the imagined home of these migrant women. Gopinath argued that queer people might stay in an oppressive home and at the same time denounce heteronormative logic, as shown in her analysis of *Fire*, a film by Deepa Mehta, in which two sisters-in-law become lovers (14–15). Thus, as Gopinath puts it, home should not be considered a place that has been left behind by queer people but as a space they remake by cultivating homoerotic relationships there.

Sexuality cannot be viewed as a simple binary of "normative heterosexuality versus nonnormative homosexuality." Asian queer subjectivities are complex and cannot be confined to this simple binary, as they constantly negotiate family responsibilities and are expected to maintain close ties with their parents. In Indonesia, it is very common for parents to pressure their single adult daughters to marry. While I look at the movement and agency of these migrant women, I also heed the boundaries that cannot be crossed because of cultural constraints (Grewal and Kaplan 2001). I examine how these Indonesian women improvised ways to negotiate with their families in the process of imagining their future and how heteronormative expectations and their same-sex desires were intertwined in their imaginings of home.

This chapter examines the sexual subjectivity of these Indonesian women by studying their projected imaginings of home. Situated in a migratory context, how did their contacts and transactions of travel enable them to imagine a future home with their same-sex lover? How did these imaginaries transform the space of home by *queering* the space, that is, by subverting the heteronormative logic of home? How did those who decided to refrain from crossing the boundaries of heteronormativity after returning to Indonesia fulfill their same-sex desires and make sense of their same-sex practices in Hong Kong?

Home and Heteronormativity

In Indonesia, the concept of home is highly connected to marital status. Young unmarried adults, both men and women, reside with their parents (Nobles and Buttenheim 2008). Therefore, the home of unmarried women is that of their parents. Women who are in their early twenties are expected to marry and form a separate household with their husband and children (Naafs 2013). The home of married women is the household that they share with their husband and children (Nilan 2008).

Although women's living arrangements (i.e., location and cohabitants) are tightly regulated, some are able to negotiate these expectations and live with their female partner as long as the couple remains silent about their same-sex relationship and does not demand formal or public recognition of any kind. Saskia Wieringa studied a female same-sex community in Jakarta (the capital of Indonesia), which comprised several hundred lower-class women, who were mostly first-generation immigrants from other islands. The couples lived together, and their living arrangements were accepted by their neighbors. The neighbors called the masculine partners "uncle"; the feminine partners were regarded as normal women and participated in the women's neighborhood activities. Several of the couples mutually cared for children from earlier marriages. Although neighbors may well have understood that these living arrangements were unusual, there was no condemnation as long as the couples did not speak out about their same-sex relationships. Wieringa (2007) showed that different definitions and levels of normality were at play in Indonesian society.

Urbanization and the increasing participation of women in economic life through work contribute to the formation of female same-sex communities. In part, this is because labor migration to cities like Jakarta provides a valid reason for women to live outside the parental home (Wieringa 2007). However, it remains unlikely that same-sex desiring women living in the parental home will establish a separate household with a same-sex partner. In her study on female same-sex relationships in Padang, a metropolitan area in Sumatra, Blackwood (2010) found that only two couples, out of her twenty-two informants, lived together. Although the couples were cohabiting, other kin members were also living with them. The couples concealed their relationship and refrained from any intimate behavior in front of their kin. The couples were not suspected to be lesbians because of the prevalent homosocial activities in the larger Southeast Asian context, where two women sharing a bed is generally associated with sisterhood (Blackwood 2010; Sinnott 2004). The concept of home is heteronormatively structured around the social tradition of marriage and childbearing; this is naturalized to the extent that same-sex relationships may go undetected.

Conclusion

Bridging Asian Labor Migration with Queer Studies

When I first started this research project in 2008, I received some discouraging feedback. One criticism was that focus of the research project was overly narrow, that I was addressing the sexuality of only migrant domestic workers. The niche may be small and appear insignificant; however, it can have significant implications, as it renders two distinctively different areas of studies mutually relevant, bridging Asian labor migration studies and lesbian and queer studies. Using an ethnographic approach, I delved into the struggles and concerns of these Indonesian women and examined their changing notions of gender, sexuality, family, and marriage in the migratory process.

My study of the same-sex desires and practices of these Indonesian women has broadened and enriched the scholarship of Asian labor migration, creating representation for migrant workers who are not satisfied with confinement to the roles of wife and mother. My work responds to the call of Martin Manalansan (2006) to go beyond the heteronormative assumptions evident in the scholarship of transnational family and motherhood. The Indonesian women in this study do not necessarily abandon their traditional roles, because some of them claim that they are prepared to marry after returning to Indonesia. Nevertheless, they show their intentionality and become sexual agents during their stay in Hong Kong. They produce gender/sexual knowledge by circulating stories about *tomboi* and love-making scenes at the training centers, as well as depicting biological men as greedy and unfaithful. They participate in daily interactions, Sunday activities, and celebration rituals that make same-sex relationships between Indonesian women legitimate and desirable.

This ethnographic study of the same-sex desires of Indonesian women expands the academic discussion of queer people in Asia. The book has vividly shown how these women evaluate their same-sex relationships in Hong Kong in relation to Indonesian ideologies and the political economy of family. Possessing

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