



Francisca Yuenki Lai

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

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reviewed by [Safa Mir](#)

Francisca Yuenki Lai's *Maid to Queer: Asian Labor Migration and Female Same-Sex Desires* makes a thoughtful contribution to the ethnographic study of homosexual couples in Indonesia and Asian queer studies. It seeks to provide a collaboration between the feminisations of Asian labour migration which Lai describes as having 'possibilities of queerness and normativity' and the female sexual fluidity which she describes as a 'contingency of gender expression especially in the context of migration' (4, 124). This collaboration is significant and needed as it highlights the relevance of Asian labour migration studies and queer studies. Lai views non-normative genders and sexualities in Indonesia and Hong Kong from an anthropological perspective. She explains how, in the process of migration, the females identifying themselves as *tomboy* and *cewek* become vulnerable to same sex desires and engage in relationships. Lai questions the male gay privilege of mobility to meet their partners by examining how lesbian domestic workers' relationships in Hong Kong are developed under gendered moral expectations.

After the resignation of Suharto in 1988, this brought a significant political and economic downfall in Indonesia. Lai's *Maid to Queer* actively contributes to the anthropology of Indonesia by analysing how Muslim Indonesian lesbians respond to cultural, political, economic and religious challenges. She stresses the significance of the ethnographic study of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong aiming to highlight the connection between Asian labour migration and queer studies. Lai questions the lacunae of queer and Asian labour migration studies by explaining the practices and situations of low-skilled migrant workers who develop same-sex relationships in their communities. She proposes the notion of enriching queer studies with the engagement of anthropology. To reinforce the idea, she evaluates same-sex desires in Indonesian female domestic workers in Hong Kong in connection to the socio-political, cultural and economic environment of Indonesia. Under the umbrella of a defined gender system, such women are subjected to choosing a specific gender role: '*tomboy* or *cewek*.'

While contrasting the LGBT movements between Indonesia and Hong Kong, Lai explains the history of homosexuality in Indonesia, where sexual intimacy between female partners is accepted normally under the guise of sisterhood. There is zero tolerance for public displays of homosexuality in Indonesia as it is strictly forbidden in Islam. Hong Kong in comparison has the tendency of tolerating LGBT movements, protests and rallies under the influence of British colonial governance. But Lai exposes how employers and apartment lenders in Hong Kong show

disgust towards the lesbian domestic workers and refuse to offer jobs and apartments to homosexual couples.^[1]

Maid to Queer is based on Lai's fieldwork of two years. Unlike most other anthropologists conducting fieldwork, during her time in the field Lai became part of the Indonesian migrant domestic workers' community. She lived with one of the girls and learned and spoke their languages. She conducted her research by contributing actively to their daily activities including English teaching, photographing their birthday parties, and making mash up songs for their dance practices. Each chapter builds a critique of the formation of the sexual subjectivity of Indonesian migrant women. The author analyses the change in their sexual ideologies in accordance with migrant labour policies and the treatment of Indonesian migrants in Hong Kong.

Chapter one provides the socio-political contexts of Indonesian and Hong Kong societies and their tolerance towards same-sex relationships. It focuses on the economic, cultural and political impact on LGBT movements in Hong Kong and Indonesia. Chapter two focuses on the formation of a specific gender role through Richard Moore's concept of 'intersubjectivity' where interrelations of individuals determine their positions as tomboys or *cewek*.^[2] Their sexual preference is a role they have to perform in their particular community. The negotiation over the formation of sexual subjectivities ensures the intelligibility of a relationship. Chapter three discusses the challenges faced by Indonesian migrant workers in religious and cultural contexts. Indonesian homosexual couples are subjected to discrimination in everyday life which includes rules imposed by employers, apartment lenders and religion. Lai addresses the struggles of these couples and demonstrates how Indonesian women show a tendency to have patience with discrimination based on sexual orientation. These women articulate their own interpretations of the Islamic faith against the backdrop of homosexuality. The final chapter addresses the struggle of Indonesian domestic workers in redefining their gender roles (*tomboy* or *cewek*) in a family household. In order to meet the standards of heteronormativity, the couples change their homoerotic desires into the idea (constructed by patriarchy) of having a home with a specific gender role and practising a set of specific activities.^[3] The idea of imagining a home with their female partner changes their sexual subjectivity under the influence of this family culture. But, they try to enjoy their same sex relationship during their time in Hong Kong.

By exploring the intersections of Indonesian migrants, domestic workers, culture, religion and economy on the formation of sexual subjectivity, this book's author enriches the fields of anthropology and queer studies. This interdisciplinary work not only endorses gender and sexual diversity in contemporary Hong Kong under the influence of colonial governance but also contributes to multiple academic fields including cultural studies, queer studies, gender and sexuality studies, and Asia and Global South studies.

Notes

^[1] Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson, *Gay and Lesbian Asia Culture, Identity, Community*, New York, NY: Oxford, 2001.

^[2] Richard Moore, *The Creation of Reality in Psychoanalysis: A View of the Contributions of Donald Spence, Roy Schafer, Robert Stolorow, Irwin Z. Hoofman, and Beyond*, Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1999.

^[3] Edelman, Lee, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

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