



Clever love: Dislocated intimacies among youth[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we consider the sexual and affective life of youth in order to explore the social space of emotions as understood from youth's friendship relations. Our broad aim is to develop a cultural understanding of how youth negotiate a framework and a set of practices for establishing and experiencing their sexual and affective life. We focus on the context of Hong Kong, where there is a prevailing conservative sexual culture on one hand, and an open, hyperactive ecology of consumption of sexual imageries on the other. We ask, firstly, how youth negotiate a space of relatively unregulated nature outside of the disciplinary apparatus, so as to deal with matters of sex and romantic interest, but also paradoxically face their own acquiescence to a visible degree of sexual restraint many of them believe to be proper to their pre-marital sexual period of life. We argue that the discourses and practices of sex and love within youth culture in such contexts as Hong Kong tend to flourish within, and "dislocate" into, the codes of friendship embedded in a socially-oriented consumption environment. We started out researching youth sex, but find ourselves drawn toward a theorization of "friendship" and its many meanings and structures as forms of intimacy among young people.

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1. Introduction

At a house party in an early autumn night, a teenage boy named Ho-jun, only 19, fiddled with his guitar while knowing that he was being watched. Two best friends, Chen Li and Sheo-rou, both 17, tried to manage their restless crush on the boy but all they could do was to lock their gaze on him from a distance. They had both seen him earlier around school and in a guitar shop. Displaying a mix of erotic excitement and girlish reticence, the two teenage girls stood across the living room from where the boy band was getting ready to perform.

The band's center of musical talent as well as sexual attractiveness was, noticeably, the boy with his guitar. In a sweet moment of teenage flirtation, the boy traded his pre-masculine cool for a more recognizable gentlemanly return of the gaze. The girls were elated. But there is a problem: which of the two was he really flirting with? Before there was time to sort that out, Chen Li whispered gleefully to her best friend standing to her side, "See, he is looking at me. For the fifth time!" He looked up again for the second time across the room,

and Chen re-announced, victoriously, her claiming of the prize. Yet this time, her friend Sheo-rou's disappointment was much more visible than a moment before. Unwilling to be defeated, Sheo-rou moved slightly away and back in order to create a clear enough distance from Chen. One always wants to be clear about distinguishing the signal of a returned crush from an unrequited one! By the third time he looked up, we see a satisfying and triumphant smile on *both* girls' faces. At this point, the drama of a misplaced desire was given a fuller shape, for all along Ho-jun was only interested in Sheo-rou and not Chen Li.

This crucial scene of teenage sexual flirtation is but a thin outline of a germinal love affair between Ho-jun and Sheo-rou. Yet as the story unfolded, Chen Li was never quite peripheral in her role as a "friend" of Ho-jun and Sheo-rou. In subsequent events, the psychic and emotional contortion in Chen's role of "friendship" with Ho-jun and Sheo-rou surfaced slowly and painfully, the revelation of which was manifested through her unusual neediness toward Sheo-rou, her undue anger at Ho-jun, and her strange enthusiasm to play go-between in order to maintain a watchful eye on the development of the affair. At the party, Chen's masked lesbian love for her best friend had driven her to hope for Sheo-rou's disappointment, when the latter was led to believe Ho-jun was not interested in her. Later in Chen's life, a fake marriage with Ho-jun would permanently deny a possible union between him and Sheo-rou. Teenage love among the three friends unraveled into a story of dislocated intimacies. In the end, it would take some

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twenty years for the complex erotic charge in that teenage autumn night to be agonizingly recognized and eventually resolved.

In this paper, we consider the sexual and affective life of the youth in Hong Kong in order to explore the social space of emotion as understood from the youth's friendship relations. Our broad aim is to develop a cultural understanding of how youth negotiate a framework and a set of practices for establishing and experiencing their sexual and affective life within the context of Hong Kong, where there is a prevailing conservative sexual culture on one hand, and an open, hyperactive ecology of consumption of sexual imageries on the other. Based on our field observation and a diary study in which ten subjects were given portable notebooks to record their feelings, attitude, and daily episodes that might be connected to the general theme of love and affection for a period of at least three months.¹ We located these subjects through our interpersonal network, screened them by their level of interest and their willingness to frankly disclose personal thoughts, and selected five male and five female students from both government-subsided and international schools.² In this paper, we hope to lay out what we think is a useful new framework for working and thinking through the subtle qualities of intimacy that we believe our youth subjects formulate for themselves regarding matters of sex and romance.

At the beginning of this paper, we extracted the scene from *Tempting Heart* (1997), an ordinary Hong Kong film, in order to help us lay out a set of questions regarding love, sex, and consumption in Hong Kong's youth culture that are to be substantiated by the narratives in the diaries concerned. Such a scene helps us to frame two sets of questions. First, we want to understand youth's attitudes and definitions of intimacy, affection, passion, trust, risk, shame, affiliation, having a crush on someone, caring for someone, physical attraction, romance, and sexual contact, from their *own* everyday context. How do they negotiate a space that is relatively unregulated and outside the disciplinary apparatus, so as to not only deal with matters of sex and romantic interest, but paradoxically also face their own acquiescence to a visible degree of sexual restraint that many of them believe to be proper to their pre-adult, sexually germinating, pre-marital sexual period of life? Because of the pull between the urges of sexual exploration and the equally powerful need for sexual self-restraint, how is their interest in sex and love re-configured, ambiguated, deferred, if not masked? The second set of questions has to do with youth's consumption culture. How does their development of sexual understanding intersect with the consumption environment of popular culture circulating in Hong Kong? What forms of relatedness are available to them in their everyday consumption activities, given the necessary ambiguities that mark the youth's interest in sex and love?

We put "sex" and "consumption" together as two fields of sociality among Hong Kong youth in order to move away from the normative, orthodox forms of knowledge about youth sexuality produced by social scientific research of youth culture in Hong Kong. The convergence of sex and consumption as fields of sociality in fact present an aspect of youth culture that has been profoundly neglected in youth research: that of "friendship culture" among youth. We believe that youth research has by and large over-invested in the *objects and practices found in youth culture* – whether it is articulated into "style," "subculture" and "identity politics" made famous in cultural studies, or "youth's socialization" in social psychology, or even "youth sexuality" in clinical and administrative types of discourses – while at the same time under-emphasized the very material *scene* of youth social life. "Friendship life" is by far the

most well-developed facet of youth culture as we know it, the most prominent form of sociality recognized by young people themselves, and most importantly, is the domain which is least attended to or regulated by the authorities. A profound neglect of it has contributed to a radically decontextualized and under-theorized understanding of youth. Moreover, we suggest that the lack of understanding of the complex shades of meanings of "intimacy" within the friendship framework in youth culture has resulted in the denial of powerful forms of sexual relatedness present among youth. In a more polemical way, we want to say that *the discourses and practices of sex and love within youth culture in such contexts as Hong Kong can only flourish, and subsist, within the codes of friendship embedded in a socially-oriented consumption environment*. In other words, salient forms of sexual and affective relatedness find expression in terms of the intimacy that is not only ever-present, but also *permitted*, in "friendship." Friendship is the natural context, the instrument, the embodiment, and the logic all at once for having a sexual discourse among youth. We started out researching youth sex; but we have arrived at a point where we now propose a rigorous theorization of "friendship" and its many forms, meanings, and structures embedded in youth's consumption culture. "Sexing friendship," as it were, becomes the means for opening up the many scenarios of sexual possibilities available to young people, who are caught in the paradox between sexual curiosity and sexual self-restraint, in a society in which an autonomous, auto-referencing, open, or socially affirming discourse about youth sex is largely absent (cf. [Fok and Tung-Cheung, 2002](#); [Ng, 1994](#)). Before we delve further into our reformulation, it would be instructive to take a brief survey of the historical discourse about youth sex in Hong Kong society.

2. "Youth sex" in Hong Kong: a brief background

Suffice it to say, official discussion of sex has by and large been absent in Hong Kong's public domain. Public statements about youth sex have been often linked to socially deviant behaviors³ and the specter of sex crime. Before the 1990s, a discourse on sexual victimization and abortion was already underway.⁴ Besides, the entire "youth problem" was constructed by a rather uniform discourse in the pro-establishment media and government, including the Family Planning Association of Hong Kong (FPAHK) (see [Tse, 2002](#)).⁵

In the 1990s, a notable point of relevance can be located in the FPAHK's public campaign, in which sex was increasingly plainly and directly approached. What remained unchanged was that popular

³ During the 1960s and 1970s, two revolutions transformed youth life in Hong Kong, one policy and one commercial. As a result, a preliminary social understanding of youth's sexuality in Hong Kong could for the first time be glimpsed. The occurrence of the disturbances in 1966 and 1967 and the emergence of the heated discussion of a juvenile crime wave since the mid-1970s forced the habitually reluctant colonial administration to adopt a proactive governmental role to examine – and construct – "youth problems" for the first time (see [Tse, 2002](#)).

⁴ Seeing that it was no longer possible to avoid direct and active involvement in the provision of youth services, the colonial administration began to attempt to explain "youthful deviance" by constructing a biological developmental model whereby an inherent, hormone-driven "subjectivity" was attributed to Hong Kong youth. It was believed that this bio-psychological nature of youth was the determining factor of youth problems. Further, the colonial government attributed family and the school system as the sites of failure in effectively controlling youthful urges that was believed to lead to destructive anti-social behavior. Youth policy, if it has ever existed, is just a fairly loose and informal rubric under which the government operated, thus emphasized time and space management designed to keep the bodies of young persons occupied.

⁵ FPAHK was the organization that conducted the first territory-wide survey on "Family Planning Knowledge, Attitude and Practice" in 1967. Another landmark in the 1970s was the success of the ubiquitous "Two is Enough" campaign which basically served to curb the exorbitant growth of local population and hence social problems in Hong Kong. Culturally, it could be said that the success of the famous birth control campaign lifted Hong Kong off to true modernity, for it managed to reverse centuries of Chinese traditionalism about prosperity gained through a plenitude of offsprings.

¹ In the study, we paid each subject HK\$500 (around US\$60) monthly as incentive.

² In Hong Kong, there is 9-year compulsory education. Thus, our subjects were all in their schooling ages.

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