BODIES IN MOTION:

THE FILMS OF TRANSMIGRANT QUEER
CHINESE WOMEN FILMMAKERS IN CANADA

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the representations of racialized, gendered, queer sexuality in selected films produced by four transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers in Vancouver, with a main focus on body images. Personal interviews with these filmmakers about their lives and films were collected and analyzed in-depth using feminist qualitative method informed by standpoint epistemology. The analyses are framed by discussions of what it means to be “Chinese” outside of China, in relation to what it means to be female and “queer.” Selected films were analyzed drawing on feminist film theory, postcolonial and poststructuralist theories, and transnational feminist theory. Judith Butler’s ideas on gender performance and performativity and José E. Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification,” and their application to theories of the body serve as a framework to examine the following research questions: How do these filmmakers re-present “Chineseness,” “queerness,” and “femininity” by deploying their own bodies or those of others? How do they evoke or challenge mainstream stereotypes, and what kinds of narratives and film techniques do they exploit in order to re-conceptualize the non-conforming and transmigrant queer female body? Chapter 2 provides a detailed, contextualized introduction to the filmmakers, based on the interviews, and information on the Canadian context. Chapter 3 explores how racialized, queered, and gendered bodies are presented, appropriated, or subverted in a selection of films. Chapter 4 examines three major strategies of disidentification in the
films: the appropriation of dominant stereotypical images; the use of hybrid genres and technical effects; and the reinvention of language(s). The analysis of the films and interviews shows that these filmmakers produce alternative forms of embodied knowledge based on their lived experiences, showing that there is no essential queer “Chinese” women body. Their sense of “Chineseness” is highly contextualized and intersectional, which opens up the possibility that transnational “Chineseness,” like gender and sexuality, could be cited and re-cited in ways that disclose its vulnerability and instability. These filmmakers and their films contribute to new articulation of mobile queerness in the context of transmigrant “Chineseness,” and create a temporary and transnational “utopian performative,” a safe and hopeful space for queer women viewers.
Preface

There are two publications that arose from the dissertation research. A section of the first publication was modified and placed in the Introduction of the dissertation. Several sections of the second publication were modified and placed in Chapters 3 and 4.


The set of questions for the interviews included in this dissertation went through the UBC ethical review process and was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board in 2007. Ethics Certificate Number: H06-80846.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii

Preface ............................................................................................................................................... iv

Table of Contents ......................................................................................................................... v

Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................... viii

Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 1

The First Encounter ....................................................................................................................... 3

Academic Inspiration ..................................................................................................................... 7

Addressing Race and Sexuality in the Canadian Context ................................................................. 8

Race, Sexuality, and Filmmaking in Vancouver .............................................................................. 11

The Independent Film Community In Vancouver ......................................................................... 12

Research Issues ............................................................................................................................. 15

Chapter 1 Theoretical Approach and Methodology ..................................................................... 18

Terminology Related to Displacement ......................................................................................... 19

Postcolonial/Feminist Perspectives on Transnational “Chineseness” ........................................... 23

Diasporic/Transnational Queer Theory ......................................................................................... 32

Feminist Film Theory and Chinese Films ...................................................................................... 37

Gender Performativity, “Disidentification,” and Native Informants .............................................. 41
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection of the Filmmakers and Locations</th>
<th>52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Research Methods</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 The Filmmakers’ Journeys</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Vancouver Context: the National Film Board</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studio D and NFB Funded Chinese-Canadian Women Filmmakers in Vancouver</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out On Screen</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Transmigrant Queer “Chinese” Women Filmmakers</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 Content Analysis: The Body in Question</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Theory</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmic Body Images</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar Sweet (2001): The Erotic Lesbian Body</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salty Wet (2003): the Queer Pornographic Body</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floored by Love (2005): The Performing/Performative Body</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enter the Mullet (2004): Queerly Gendered Body</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rated F… for Fart (2005): The Universal and Absent Body</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood (2004): The Hybrid, Racially Queer Body</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Girl Named Kai (2004): Transforming the Body and Public Space</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tilted (2003): The Medicalized Body</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 Content Analysis: Disidentification</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appropriation of Stereotypical Images of “Chineseness” ........................................ 168
Queering Cinematic Effects: Hybrid Forms and Genres ........................................ 184
Disidentification and the Reinvention of Genre and Language ............................ 198
Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 207

Chapter 5 Conclusion ............................................................................................. 211
Reflections on the Dissertation Process as Disidentification .............................. 211
Disidentifying the Politics of Difference: Refocusing on Similarity ...................... 219
The Contribution: Creating New Locales on Screen and in the Theatre ............... 231
Future Studies ......................................................................................................... 249

Bibliography ............................................................................................................ 258
Appendix I Filmography and Film Distribution Information ............................... 287
Appendix II Interview Questionnaire (English) ..................................................... 318
Acknowledgements

When I was writing my MA thesis in Taiwan, a male friend who was a PhD candidate told me that writing a dissertation is like giving birth to a baby; as a result of having written his dissertation he said that he now realized the intense process that all mothers go through when they give birth to a child. Years later, as I am myself finishing this process, I realize that the process of writing a dissertation is not only a process of giving birth to a research/writing project, but a rebirth experience on both a personal and an academic level: I have changed from a fearful dissertation procrastinator to a focused, grateful, and enthusiastic writer who counts her dissertation writing process as having been one of the most transformative experiences of her life. I never expected this “academic” writing process to become a journey of self-discovery. Not only has this process granted me an opportunity to see myself from an expanded perspective but through humility, resistance, surrendering, and ultimately gratitude, I have learned to find a certain balance in life that allows me to see and put things in perspective.

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I would never have imagined that this project of studying films would actually turn me into a professionally trained amateur filmmaker. Through Lee’s invitation to meet her in a young artist-initiated art workshop, I was fortunate to connect with a group of brilliant young artists of colour. This workshop developed into a book project by Gabrielle Martin and later evolved into a film/video project through Hedyeh Bozorgzadeh, The Colouring Book, funded and produced by the Canadian National
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Introduction

This study examines the representation of queer East Asian women1 in films made by some transmigrant queer “Chinese” women currently living in Vancouver. It explores how these filmmakers situate themselves in the context of transnational Chinese cinema and global capitalism. I use the word “transmigrant” rather than migrant or immigrant, following Martin Manalansan’s emphasis on the need to address “the multi-stranded relationships” (2000, 185) such mobile groups have with both their home and settlement countries.

I have chosen the title “Bodies in Motion” for several reasons. First, this research deals with body images conveyed through motion pictures. Secondly, the bodies of the filmmakers themselves are also moving between different countries at different times; their bodies are in motion in terms of time and space. In addition, I subscribe to the poststructuralist concept that the individual body, like the self, is always in the process of becoming. As Judith Butler argues:

[B]odies are not inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: aging, altering shape, altering signification ---depending on their interactions--- and

---

1 The examination mainly focuses on queer Chinese women and a few Japanese women. In some films studied in this project, the filmmakers do not specifically indicate a “Chinese” protagonist but represent a more general “East Asian” or even a “pan-Asian” character.
the web of visual, discursive, and tactile reactions that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future.

(Butler 2004, 217)

Other cultural theorists, such as Stuart Hall, point out that collective cultural identities are also always in the process of becoming (1990, 1997).

In keeping with a self-referential and self-critical approach, I am aware of the intersections between this research and my own position as a queer transmigrant “Taiwanese” woman located in Vancouver. I will therefore begin by telling the story of how this study came into life in the first place. As well as being central to feminist qualitative research in both the Humanities and the Social Sciences, telling stories is a way to construct the personal history that is missing in broader versions of history (Lionnet 1991, 1995). It is part of the self-making process. It is also a way of revisiting a past that is absent. This absent past has a presence, particularly for members of a transnational minority (be it based on race, gender, sexuality, or class). It has a presence because it is woven into the experiences of everyday life.

This study aims to convey the filmmakers’ stories through interviews and through the analysis of their films. Over the years of working on it, I realized that it is also about telling my own story. Beyond that, as Gilles Deleuze argues:

[S]tory-telling is not an impersonal myth, but neither is it a personal fiction: it is a word in act, a speech-act through which the character continually crosses the boundary which
would separate his private business from politics, and which itself produces collective utterances.

(Deleuze 1989, 222)

From this perspective, telling stories in an academic study opens up a bridge between art, academia, and activism. The filmmakers in this study also convey social or political messages by telling their own personal stories in their films.

**The First Encounter**

This story begins in August 2004. It was a sunny day, and I was sitting alone in one of the nicest movie theatres in Vancouver. I was excited and somewhat anxious as I waited to watch the film, *A Girl Named Kai* (2004) by Kai-Ling Xue. I had just moved to Vancouver about seven months before to start my PhD at UBC. I did not know many people here and I was exhausted and overwhelmed by the challenge of beginning doctoral work in Gender Studies, with little theoretical background, in English, my second language. Life was tough and home was far away. The movie theatre was already one of my shelters, a place of refuge. This was the first queer film festival in Vancouver that I had attended, and I had already watched a couple of enjoyable movies. But this one was special, because the filmmaker was also from Taiwan. It sounds silly, I know, but although multicultural experiences can be fun, when you are in a foreign city, in a program where you are one of only a few Asian students and all the others are of
different origins, there is a desire, perhaps a desperate one, to connect with someone else from the same place, someone who can understand you without linguistic and cultural barriers. Although I cannot say firmly that I always feel at home in Taipei, living in a foreign city in Canada sometimes does make me feel like an island in the middle of the sea.

It had just been announced that the screening would begin a few minutes late, but the filmmaker might be present to take questions at the end. Looking around at the faces among the audience, I felt safe as the majority appeared to be queer, but I still felt like an isolated island. At that time, I had not met any queer Taiwanese here, and had not come across any queer filmmakers from Taiwan. I knew that Kai-Ling Xue was born in Hualien, Taiwan, and had moved to Vancouver in 1997 when she was seventeen to pursue her dream of becoming a multi-media artist. I also knew that this eight-minute short was shot in four countries using digitally edited Super 8 and 16-millimetre film. It had taken her three years in the making. I was excited, and secretly hoped we would meet and she would turn out to be a person easy to get along with. Whether I was going to study her work or not, it would be nice to connect to another Taiwanese woman living here who also identified as queer.

Finally, the lights went dim. The film started. The opening music was interesting and intense. It reminded me of some Chinese music, but I did not know which type. Then I recognized the opening image as the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) in Taipei, and was stunned by my own reaction: it is a great shot but I found it hard to focus on, as I
was lost in my own nostalgic thoughts. I remember how that image triggered my 
memory, and my body felt the summer heat in Taipei and the crowdedness in the MRT 
station, even as I was sitting in the theatre in Vancouver.

The images of the film went by so fast; the colors and the music were both intense. 
It reminded me of Wong Kar-Wai’s *Chungking Express* (1994): chaos, intensity, 
displacement, constant motion, and the evocation of all sorts of desires. I felt I was 
being thrown into a fast river of fragmented pieces of experience. I am not sure how 
much I grasped from the film. The subtitles on screen seemed to be the only medium 
that anchored me.

The film ended. I heard people around me applauding, and some sobbing. I agreed 
with their reaction: it is a sad and beautiful film. I was overwhelmed by the audiovisual 
combinations and felt exhausted, as if I had also traveled through the many places 
depicted in the film. Was I just projecting my own feelings onto the film, or did I 
experience the powerful, tactile and contagious cinematic effects this film deploys? Kai-
Ling Xue plays the main character in this autobiographical film, as well as being the 
filmmaker. Sharing similar experiences of migration and identifying as queer, I thought 
I could understand her, at least her feelings. Even if I did not know her, I felt an instant 
sense of connection forged from shared experiences of displacement and isolation.

This film is about a girl who tells a story about her sexuality and the struggles of 
being an outsider both at home and in the foreign cities where she has lived. Xue’s 
utterances (and muteness) in this film resonated with a shared, multi-layered experience
of un-belonging, which led conversely but understandably to a sense of belonging as I walked out of the theatre. Recounting this personal response to the film is a way of telling my own story, and foregrounds the interweaving of the personal and academic in this study, just as the personal and the technical work together in the film. As a transnational feminist, I believe it is important to indicate and reflect on my own subject position, my privilege as well as my marginality, and my partial perspective (Haraway 1988).

Xue was the first filmmaker I met and A Girl Named Kai (2004) was the first film that drew my attention to the use of visual art, and film in particular, as a medium for social activism. By attending the Vancouver Queer Film and Video Film Festival in 2004 and 2005, I was exposed to more films and slowly met up with the other queer Chinese filmmakers who agreed to participate in this study: Desiree Lim, Donna Lee, and Debora O. Besides the inspiring nature of their work, what gained my attention was their varied backgrounds as transmigrants. I was amazed by their mobility and their capacity to cross borders. They also told me why they make films - not just because of a passion for art or visual images, but rather because it is an empowering act. Their films are tools for social activism and community building, and have the potential to effect social transformation.

In exploring the relationship between theory and social activism, Butler argues that “theory is itself transformative” (2004, 204); yet alone it is not “sufficient for social and political transformation”, and “[s]omething besides theory must take place, such as
interventions at social and political levels that involve actions” (Ibid.). For these filmmakers, who are theoretically informed, the skills involved in experimental filmmaking constitute that “something else” that can enable their message to reach a wider audience and produce change in perceptions.

**Academic Inspiration**

In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler discusses how social categories such as gender and sexuality, when they are “imposed from elsewhere, are always ‘violations’ in the sense that they are, at first and by necessity, unchosen” (2004, 214). This leads her to ask, “What kinds of bodies and sexualities will be considered real and true, and which kind will not?” She reminds us that “the embodied life of individuals has consequential effects” (Ibid.). Bodies are assessed in relation to norms, but they can “occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation” (2004, 217). This statement inspired me to pay special attention to the role and representation of the queer female East Asian body in the films of the filmmakers in this study, with a focus on how they illustrate Butler’s ideas about the mutability of the body in relation to socio-cultural norms and how these norms can be contested.

Further, in her reading of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) in the context of art as a means to social transformation, Butler argues that the source of
our capacity for social transformation, in Anzaldúa’s view, is “to be found precisely in our capacity to mediate between worlds, to engage in cultural translation, and to undergo, through the experience of language and community, the diverse set of cultural connections that make us who we are” (2004, 228). The stories of these transmigrant filmmakers who cross borders constantly, as conveyed in their work and the interviews I conducted with them, reveal specific ways in which discursive and institutional power collaborate to shape the ideologies that frame the world we live in, as well as the bodies we inhabit. Their films have a capacity for social transformation, as they are able to mediate between worlds and engage in cultural translation that opens up dialogue among queer East Asian women and between them and straight/non-Asian audiences. The fact that the filmmakers know each other and some have worked together also illustrates new models of social transformation in transnational contexts based on collaboration among transmigrants. Their films convey ways in which to “to imagine social transformation differently” (Butler 2004, 204), with a focus on the neglected and often invisible category of queer “Chinese” women living abroad.

**Addressing Race and Sexuality in the Canadian Context**

Historically, immigration has been an important element of Canadian nation-building, and it continues to shape the social structure and policy of contemporary Canada. Since the 1970s, with the changing political situation in Asia and revisions to
Canadian immigration policy, Asian immigrants, especially those with business or cultural capital, have joined the Canadian population in significant numbers (Ong and Nonini 1997; Simmons 1998; Stasiulis and Jhappan 1995). There have been two main lines of research on Asian immigrant women in Canada. The first explores questions of how race, class, and language affect the quality of immigrants’ lives, with a focus on the labour force (Estable 1986; Hanson and Pratt 1988, 1994, 1995; Kwok and Wallis. 2008; Seward and McDade 1988). The second area of inquiry investigates gender issues from the perspectives of social justice and inequality (Bakker ed. 1996; Bannerji 2000; Carty and Brand 1989; Harrison 2000; Pratt 1988, 1997, 2004; Razack 1998). One aspect that has not received much attention in these studies is the presence of queer professional East Asian women who have come to Canada seeking a multicultural and queer-friendly space. While addressing sexuality, the term “queer” also encompasses the intersection of multiple identities such as race and gender (Goldman 1996; Aaron 2004), as I will discuss in detail in subsequent chapters.

When it comes to transnationalism and the sexuality of Asian women, most research has focused on the sex trade. While this is an important area of study, an exclusive focus on this area risks (re)producing stereotypical notions about Asian immigrants and sexuality (Mohanty 1988, 1991; Razack 2000). Several studies have been conducted in recent years relating to the representation of Asian women and sexuality (Chang, 2007; Chow 1991, 1993, 1995; Hellwig, 1994; Jacob 2003; Jiwani 1992, 2006; Khoo and Metzger 2009; Lee 1996; Leung 2001, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2009;
Lim 1999; Lu 1997; Marchetti 1993; Martin 2003, Orbaugh 1996, 2003, 2007; Sang 2003; Shimizu 2007; Tang 2009; Yue 2003). However, there is little research in Chinese or English on the representation of queer East Asian women in work produced by these women themselves. Yet the last decade has seen a proliferation of cultural products created by queer East Asian transmigrants, including women. Globally, queer cultures and the representations thereof have increased in popularity. Among the various forms of cultural products, film has become one of the most widely circulated and powerful media in global markets, due to advances in, and easier access to, visual and communication technologies. Yet there is little in-depth research being done on these films and filmmakers. This dissertation addresses this gap and contributes to the expansion of the study of queer “Chinese” women filmmakers.

A study of Filipino gay immigrants to New York City, by queer anthropologist Martin Manalansan (2000), shows that immigration renders the process of negotiating queer identities even more complex. If we wish to understand more about how race, gender, and sexuality intersect in contemporary Canada, it is important to examine the representations of queer East Asian and "Chinese" women produced by transmigrant queer “Chinese” women themselves, who are living in Canada. This research will help to fill a significant gap in Canadian studies, as well as contributing to current transnational Chinese studies, Chinese cinema studies, gender studies, and queer studies.
Race, Sexuality, and Filmmaking in Vancouver

Long before the 1988 Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism in Canada, the West Coast of Canada, a nodal point of the Asia-Pacific region, was already highly multicultural, with rich First Nation cultures and waves of diverse immigrant populations. One recent wave has consisted of East Asians, dominated by people with business or cultural capital, who have immigrated to Vancouver in significant numbers since the 1980s because of the changing political situation in Asia and revisions to Canadian immigration policy (Ong and Nonini 1997; Seward and McDade 1998; Simmons 1998).

Besides being highly multicultural, Vancouver is also famous for its queer-friendliness. British Columbia became the second Canadian jurisdiction to legalize same-sex marriage as a constitutional right in 2003. With a substantial gay community in the downtown area as well as a variety of queer events and conferences (such as Pride Parade and Out on Screen), Vancouver has attracted not only numerous queer tourists every year but also queer immigrants (particularly Asians) who seek to be legitimate members of the society.

Further, the long, brutal history of colonization in British Columbia, which has impacted numerous First Nation Peoples and culturally specific communities, has not only produced tensions and conflicts but also led to a proliferation of various types of activism and built solidarities among differing groups. Vancouver, as an urbanized
coastal region (built on Coast Salish Territory) with a large East Asian population, has also become an appealing hub for queer East Asian artists/filmmakers from abroad and from other parts of Canada because it is now the third-largest commercial film production centre in North America.

Queer Asian filmmakers working in Vancouver, particularly those who are independent or video artists, have not yet received as much attention and funding support as they deserve, in spite of their amazing output both individually and collectively. This study provides an introduction to some independent transmigrant “Chinese” queer women filmmakers, who are cumulatively marginalized by falling into all of these categories: independent, transmigrant, “Chinese”, queer and women. Nevertheless, their work has been inspiring to those, like myself, who previously were not much represented in either mainstream or experimental films. They undoubtedly constitute an important part of the independent film community in Vancouver.

**The Independent Film Community In Vancouver**

Although Vancouver is the third largest commercial film production centre in North America, neither the Canadian film industry nor the government sponsored National Film Board has funded many of the independent filmmakers who are active here. Many struggle along with inadequate resources. However, most independent queer East Asian filmmakers do not aim for commercial success, but pursue political and
cultural goals that contest the mainstream. Their work is produced on a shoestring budget, forcing them to be innovative in many ways. They see short films and video production as efficient and effective tools for social activism, especially with contemporary advances in communication technologies and easier access to lightweight equipment. Rather than focusing on providing mass entertainment, they aim to draw attention to diverse issues related to race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, colonialism, and social justice, addressing audiences that will respond to their concerns. Independent filmmakers in Vancouver are often connected to other groups that espouse similar causes, and art and activism overlap in their lives.

Vancouver’s reputation as queer-friendly, multicultural (with a large East Asian population) and a colonial history that still has repercussions (as discussed above) has attracted critically minded independent filmmakers from many backgrounds, including both male and female queer East Asians. Some are professionally trained, some self-taught, some focus on one group or issue while others work across various borders such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age. Some tend to work alone, while others prefer collaboration, producing hybrid cross-cultural work. Many belong to a close-knit community that shares studio space and equipment. Their works may be co-screened, and sometimes filmmakers (or their activist friends and partners) are cast in each other’s

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2 Some examples can be found in the work of Desiree Lim, Winston Xin, Paul Wong, and Wanye Yung, to name a few. Collaboration is also very common in other forms of multi-media visual art. One example is the exhibition at Centre A, “Redress Express: Chinese Restaurants and the Head Tax Issue in Canadian Art” (2007), with Alice Ming Wai Jim as curator.
films or videos, saving the expense of hiring professional actors. Many of them have
developed creative strategies for seeking support in response to limited budgets.

The work of these independent queer East Asian filmmakers is not only a crucial
medium for local activism and social transformation, but it also provides important
material for research in areas such as immigration/globalization, media/cultural studies,
and gender/sexuality studies. Knowledge production has always been a critical issue on
the feminist agenda, especially for postcolonial and transnational feminists. Chandra
Mohanty (1991, 2003), a diasporic scholar from India, is concerned with how global
capitalism, allied with the ideologies of racism, sexism, and homophobia, influences the
production and distribution of knowledge in a way that often excludes and devalues
knowledge produced by marginalized groups. African-American feminist scholar bell
hooks (1990) believes that media representations have always played a significant role
in sustaining the production of knowledge and ideology about racialized gender and
sexuality. She suggests that the re-creation of stereotypical representations from a
different perspective can itself be a source of new knowledge. Representations of queer
East Asian experiences in the Canadian context convey the variety of such experiences,
and challenge artificially imposed, supposedly fixed and stable cultural and gender
identities. They also contribute to maintaining the counter-hegemonic space of cultural
production in Vancouver, which makes this city one of the critical locales of resistance
on the West Coast.
Research Issues

The principal goal of my research, as already stated, is to explore the representations of racialized, gendered, queer sexuality in a number of films produced by transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers working here. While many aspects of representation merit discussion, this study mainly focuses on body images, since these clearly convey elements related to race, gender, and sexuality in visual forms. As dis-placed artists, how do these women re-present “Chineseness,” “queerness,” and “femininity” by deploying their own bodies or those of others? How do they evoke or challenge stereotypes, and what kinds of alternative or experimental forms of narratives and film techniques do they deploy in order to re-conceptualize the non-conforming and transmigrant queer racialized female body? How do being (perceived as) “Chinese women” and transmitting “queerness” interact in the process of transmigration? How do these women relate to other transmigrants, from similar or different racial/ethnic backgrounds, and to other queers located in the same place? These are complex and profound questions, which will not be fully answered, but in the interviews conducted with the filmmakers, as well as my analysis of their films, I seek at least to begin considering them.

It goes without saying that the concepts “Chinese” and “Chineseness” are completely contingent. In this project, I use the terms in an ambivalent, specifically disidentifying way (which I will discuss and explain in the next chapter). Generally
speaking, “definitions” of “Chineseness” are always multifaceted. To some, it means racial, cultural, familial identity and connection. To others, it means appreciation and mastery of the “Chinese” language, philosophy, literature, aesthetics, etc. One main goal of this research is to interrogate whether and how these transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers are performing and identifying “Chineseness” or “being Chinese” in a conventional way or with a twist. In some cases, I take the terms “Chinese” and “Chineseness” directly from the filmmakers’ self-identification (which itself sometimes changed depending on the context). In other cases, these filmmakers might choose to identify themselves as “Asian,” “East Asian,” “Chinese,” or “Chinese-Canadian,” depending on the context. On other occasions, they focus on nothing other than their gender and sexual identity even though these two are always already intertwined with racial/ethnic and cultural identity. My choice to use these two terms in such an ambivalent way (often enclosed by quotations marks) is a conscious one to keep them continuously contested and questioned throughout the whole dissertation. I therefore use transmigrant queer “Chinese” women to describe the filmmakers in this research.²

² I do not always put quotation marks around the term “queer” because it is already generally considered to be a contested and questioned term. I put quotation marks around it when either I or the filmmakers intend to further interrogate its already contingent status.
The first chapter will situate my theoretical framework and describe my research methodology, before proceeding to detailed discussion of the filmmakers and their films.
Chapter 1 Theoretical Approach and Methodology

In order to situate my analysis of representations of the racialized and gendered/sexualized female body in the work of the selected filmmakers in a theoretical framework, in this chapter I will review relevant research in several intersecting areas, before describing in detail the methodology used in this study. There are three main areas concerned, all of which incorporate attention to postcolonial, diasporic or transnational dimensions, and a feminist perspective: Chinese Studies, Queer Studies, and Film Studies. Race, gender, and sexuality intersect, as do these areas of study, when “Chinese”, queer, transmigrant women are the object of analysis. Representation of the body, in theory and practice, brings them together in film.

The theoretical approach in this dissertation focuses on ideas about the body developed in poststructural feminist and queer theory, including Judith Butler’s ideas on gender performance and performativity and José E. Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification,” and their application to theories of the body in feminist film analysis. My interviews with a group of filmmakers and analyzes of their works are also framed by discussions of what it means to be “Chinese” outside of China, in relation to what it means to be female and “queer.” In all these intersecting areas of inquiry similar terms may be used in different ways. It is therefore useful to begin by clarifying my use of certain words.
Terminology Related to Displacement

Several overlapping terms referring to change of location are used in this project, including transnational, diasporic, and transmigrant. The term “transnationalism” was first used by Basch et al. in 1994 to refer to “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al. 1994, 7). Rather than referring to these mobile people as migrants or immigrants, they propose a new term, “transmigrant,” to highlight the process by which, through daily activity, they “develop and maintain multiple relationships -- familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political -- that span borders” (Ibid.). Basch et al. suggest transnationalism as a new concept, conveying a specific research strategy to analyze a large and diverse population of contemporary migrants whose experiences cannot be adequately analyzed by traditional migration theories, which view migration as either an enforced process thus making the migrants victims, or assume it is a matter of voluntary acculturation that migrants uproot themselves completely from their origin to engage in a new country without continuing their connection to the home country in this process. Global capitalism, from this perspective, is considered one of the major forces behind transnational movements, while information technology (such as the Internet and web technology) facilitates the connections migrants sustain between their countries of origin and
settlement (Basch et al 1994; Berry et al 2003; Jacob 2003; Khoo 2009; Manalansan 2000; Martin 2003; Yue 2003).

The traditional theories of migration focus on abstract concepts of globalization as liberating the flow of capital and labour. Transnationalism, on the other hand, is more concerned with ordinary people and their everyday experiences as shaped by mobility. It emphasizes the need to situate transnational movement within specific historical, social, and economic contexts. Moreover, transnational theorists assert that the nation-state remains one of the most powerful institutions influencing transmigrants’ choice of destination and access to mobility, as well as their transnational experiences once they have moved (Basch et al 1994; Ong 1999; Mitchell 1995; Razack 2000; Yue 2003). 3 Some theorists believe that transnational migration has a potential for subversion in challenging unequal social and economic structures in both home and host countries (Basch et al 1994; Portes et al 1999; Mitchell 1995; Ang 2001). Yet the self-celebratory transnational identity that arises from this analysis requires careful re-consideration. Due to the vast scope of potential research in this area, I will limit my discussion of transnational identity here to diasporic “Chineseness”. While I am aware that the terms “diaspora” and “transnational” may at times be use differently, when referring to “transnational” subjects here the term will include both diasporic subjects (forced and voluntary residents of a new country), and transmigrants such as transnational

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3 This is one of the major differences between theories of globalization and transnationalism. Theorists of globalization often see the globalizing force as a powerful source for reducing nation-states’ power and control over their citizens.
professionals and businessmen, who may perpetually come and go between countries.

The term “diaspora” was originally associated with the Old Testament and referred to the people of Israel being dispersed, scattered from one central location across the world. The more contemporary usage refers to “any body of people living outside their traditional homeland.” This definition becomes problematic in a global era. What counts as “traditional” and “homeland”? These concepts are no longer easy to define in the context of transnational experiences. In general usage the term “transnational,” according to the second edition (1989) of the Oxford English Dictionary, means “extending or having interests extending beyond national bounds or frontiers.” However, in recent postcolonial diaspora studies, these two terms have often been used interchangeably. As James Clifford theorizes it, “Diasporic subjects are distinct versions of modern, transnational, intercultural experience” (1997, 266). Stuart Hall notes that diasporic intellectuals are “transnational figures” who are “constantly translating between different languages, different worlds” (Hall and Du Gay 1996, 399). It seems that diasporic experience in the global era is always transnational. In this dissertation, I am therefore usually using these two intersecting terms in interchangeable fashion.

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4 The 1989 second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary traces the etymology of the word "diaspora" back to its Greek root and its appearance in the Old Testament (Deut. 28:25). It starts with Judaic history, mentioning only two types of dispersals: the "Jews living dispersed among the Gentiles after the Captivity" and the Jewish Christians residing outside of Palestine.

5 This is according to the 1993 edition of the shorter Oxford English Dictionary.
Diasporic Chinese feminist Ien Ang elaborates further on the relationship between these terms, claiming that:

Since diasporas are fundamentally and inevitably transnational in their scope, always linking the local and the global, the here and the there, past and present, they have the potential to unsettle static, essentialist and totalitarian conceptions of ‘national culture’ and ‘national identity’ which are firmly rooted in geography and history.

(Ang 2001, 34-35)

Whereas discussions of the links and gaps between “the global and local” mainly focus on binary categories such as “home country” and “host country,” here I will adopt the term transmigrant to designate one particular category of transnationals as described above. While the term transnational often indicates bi-directional transfers or transitions, transmigrant indicates a multiple-directional movement. According to the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), transmigrant means “a person passing through a country or region in the course of emigrating to another region” implying that there is no final destination. This seems to leave the transmigration route open-ended. In this project I therefore use transmigrant, rather than migrant or immigrant, to describe the filmmakers discussed, following Manalansan’s emphasis on the need to address “the multi-stranded relationships” (2000, 185) such mobile groups have with both their home and settlement countries, and often others in-between.
Postcolonial/Feminist Perspectives on Transnational “Chineseness”

The rise of postcolonial diasporic/transnational studies has shifted the Western view of Chinese history, which saw China in the early twentieth century as still a traditional society seeking to become modern. By the mid-twentieth century, it was increasingly clear to scholars (particularly historians) that the notion of a "changeless China" was untenable (Fairbank 1986). Recently, Western scholarship on China has been heavily influenced by postmodern and postcolonial theories seeking to challenge traditional paradigms. For example, Ien Ang examines “the particularities of the operative dynamics of ‘Chineseness’ as a racial and ethnic category” (2001, 35), and points out that the meanings of “Chineseness” are not actually “fixed and pre-given, but constantly renegotiated and rearticulated, both inside and outside China” (2001, 25). Other new paradigms of “Chineseness” include Tu Wei-ming’s (1994) concept of the “living tree” and “cultural China” in addition to Leo Lee’s (1991) notion of being

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6 This view of Chinese history has its roots in the British Orientalism of the early nineteenth century. From the Orientalist viewpoint, old societies with glorious histories such as India, China, and the Middle East had become trapped in a static past. This view provided Britain with justification for its colonialism, and the "white man's burden" was to liberate these societies from their static past and bring them into the modern world (Said 1997).

7 A new concept, popularized by historian John Fairbank was the notion of "change within tradition." This argued that although China did change in the pre-modern period, this change existed within certain cultural traditions. This notion, which implies that China has not changed fundamentally, is also questionable.

8 See Ang’s brief overview of Tu’s analysis, pp. 38-44. In brief, Tu intends to use these two concepts to redefine the periphery as the Centre (Ang 2001, 40). He is interested in the following questions: “How to
“truly on the periphery” \(^9\) (Ang 2001, 45). These paradigms, situated in different temporal and spatial contexts, challenge the centrality and permanence of the “Chineseness” that China embodies. Abandoning questions about the “authenticity” of “Chineseness”, which implies a timeless essence, transnational theorists ask rather: “What makes people Chinese? How do they know?” (Ang 2001, 38) Varieties of “Chinese” identity thus “emerge out of the continuous invention and reinvention of “Chineseness” as a product of the multiple and contradictory effects of [...] transnational subjectivities” (Ong and Nonini 1997, 327).

According to Ong and Nonini (1997), “Chinese” people do not possess and inherit an identity from their culture(s), but are constantly recreating “Chinese” subjectivities through their transnational experiences. In this context, “Chineseness” becomes an open signifier that requires constant interrogation. This new perspective on “Chineseness” often gives credit to transnationalism as subversive and liberating (from an old ideology and paradigm), and as having the potential to bring new possibilities to the negotiation of equalities across race, gender, class, and national divisions. However, transnational Chinese scholars, and feminists in particular, have pointed out that on some occasions transnational “Chinese” people collaborate with nation-states’ projects of regulating and modernize Chinese? How to Sinicize modernity?” (Ang 2001, 42). He suggests that situating oneself in a “transnational network to explore the meaning of being Chinese in a global context” (Tu 1994, 25) can help to de-centre the centrality and authority of China. However, in my view, this attempt actually just creates another new centre.

\(^9\) Lee claims that “by virtue of my self-chosen marginality I can never fully identify myself with any centre” (Lee, quoted in Ang 2001, 45).
oppressing their populations (Ang 2001; Mitchell 1995; Ong and Nonini, 1997). They may themselves become and exert a new type of hegemonic power. Feminist critiques caution us about the potential oppression and regulation of marginal groups such as women, children and migrant workers, but also acknowledge that such groups may collaborate with oppressive groups and may become part of the oppressors. One aspect missing in these debates on the collaborative relationship between transnational “Chinese” minorities and nation states is that the model is always that of a homogeneous “Chineseness” which is assumed to be heterosexual. Both the national majority and the transmigrant minority communities may regulate and oppress non-heterosexual sexuality, as the films to be discussed here reveal.

Another focal point of feminist critiques relating to diasporic or transnational “Chineseness” concerns issues of cultural identity and citizenship in a context of global restructuring. In her study of Hong Kong business immigrants to Vancouver in the 1980s, Kathryn Mitchell finds that “it is possible to be both ‘Canadian’ and ‘Chinese’ through a strategic manipulation of cultural citizenship” (1995, 308, italics added). A paradoxical meaning of “Chineseness” surfaces in this context. On the one hand, the transnational Chinese business elite essentializes “Chineseness” as something

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{10}} \text{Mitchell terms it an “unholy alliance” (1995, 284).} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{11}} \text{In her study, she draws on a program called “Meet with Success”, launched by the transnational Chinese business elite with the help of the Canadian state. The participants (potential immigrants from Hong Kong) were given an information package and shown a video called “Being Canadian.” There are several key messages in this video, including “maintain your Chinese roots, but also develop the Canadian flowers” (1995, 304).} \]
unchangeable, suggesting that one can always go back to his or her roots. On the other hand, their recourse to images of being “good Chinese,” able to adapt to a new environment, in fact reveals the flexibility of Chineseness in the transnational setting. Mitchell points out that the “framing of ‘Chineseness’ and ‘Canadianness’ promoted by the Canadian state is simultaneously reframed by wealthy Hong Kong Chinese business people” (1995, 310). Similar observations arise from Ong’s theorizing of “flexible citizenship” (1999) as dependent on the economic logistics of globalized capitalist accumulation of wealth, necessary for travel and multiple dwellings. Those living in such conditions of mobility learn to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political and economic conditions. From these findings, it is obvious that cultural identities are no longer fixed and simple self-identifications according to one’s racial, familial, and linguistic origins and connections; rather, identity becomes something one can manipulate through the resources available at particular moments in some occasions.

In other words, transnational identity is no longer built through allegiance to a locality but rather through mobility. It is mainly this mobility (the ability to travel and reside across national and regional boundaries) that helps these transnationals, particularly transmigrants, to accumulate their financial and cultural capital. This

12 It is important to point out that Mitchell addresses this ability to manipulate strategic repositioning as clearly a kind of “cosmopolitan cultural capital” (Ibid.) available only to privileged groups. In this context, both “Chineseness” and “Canadianness” are re-framed through class. I am aware of the class issue, but not able to fully explore it at this point in my research.
mobility is in fact one of the most important types of investment they make. However, the experiences recounted by transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers now in Vancouver provide another angle on mobility in relation to flexible citizenship. The desire for Canadian citizenship may actually restrict their mobility, as there are stringent residency requirements in order to be eligible for citizenship. For transmigrants, permanent residency is what ultimately allows them to be more freely mobile, yet this mobility is attained on the condition of staying put for several years. Identifying with a specific locality as well as maintaining mobility shapes the transmigrant identity, and the tension between them affects the construction of cultural identity for the filmmakers in this project.

All the above perspectives on “Chineseness” can be summarized by Ang’s statement that “Chineseness is no longer [...] a property [...] but instead can be understood only in terms of the multiplicity of ways in which ‘being Chinese’ is an inscribed relation of persons and groups to forces and processes associated with global capitalism and its modernities” (2001, 4). Thus, the relationship between “Chinese” persons and “Chineseness” is ambivalent, and may be deployed strategically in some contexts, as by the filmmakers in this study. Being “Chinese” is no longer merely about negotiating cultural, national, and ethnic identities, looking “Chinese”, or the ability to speak Mandarin. Rather, it is related to one’s mobility, the ability to transmigrate and to manage various types of capital based on the spatial and temporal contexts “where you are at” (Ang 2001) here and now.
The third focus of feminist critiques regarding transnational “Chineseness” concerns the responsibility attributed to diasporic/transnational intellectuals. In *Writing Diaspora* (1993) Rey Chow encourages these “intellectuals” (including artists such as filmmakers) to employ the “tactics of intervention” (1993, 15). Chow explains this concept, borrowed from De Certeau (1988), as “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (de Certeau and Rendall, quoted in Chow 1993, 16). Without a proper position in the centre, the diasporic intellectuals have to carefully strategize their interventions that aim to challenge dominance. As a form of tactical intervention, Chow proposes that the fields in which diasporic/transnational intellectuals work can be thought of as border areas or para-sites “that never take over a dominant field in its entirety but erode it slowly and tactically” (1993, 16, italics added).  

Mohanty (2003a) occupies a similar site (or para-site) and shares a similar vision of employing the “tactics of intervention”. As Mohanty’s position shifts from “under Western eyes” (1988) to “under and inside” hegemonic spaces (2003, 516), she is determined to “make an intervention in this space in order to create a location for the Third World, immigrants, and other marginalized scholars […] who see themselves erased or misrepresented within the dominant Euro-American feminist scholarship” (2003a, 503). The transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers in this project have already taken up this tactics of intervention in their own way; the difference is that they not only erode

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13 Ang maintains that Chow’s idea of para-sites resonates with Homi Bhabha’s (1990) idea of a “‘third space’ where cultural change can be brought about quietly, without revolutionary zeal, by ‘contaminating’ dominant narratives and dominant points of view” (2001, 2).
dominant fields slowly and tactically in Canada (as Chow suggests), but also erode the
dominant fields elsewhere, wherever their films travel.

Transnational theorists often fall back on binary systems such as East/West,
here/there, global/local, past/present (Ong and Nonini 1997; Hall 1997).
“Transnational,” in my view, is both local and global, depending on where, who, how,
and why one interrogates transnational subjects and identities. Ang reminds us to be
cautious of equating this with a “hybrid” position: “[A] critical diasporic cultural
politics should privilege neither host country nor (real or imaginary) homeland, but
precisely keep a creative tension between ‘where you’re from’ and ‘where you are at’”
(2001, 35). Yet hybridity is often the inevitable result of such splitting and merging, and
may have positive aspects.

Hybridity

Hybridity is often brought up in analyzes of diasporic and transnational identities
(Ang 2001; Bhabha 1994; Brah 1996, 2003; Clifford 1994, 1997; Ong 1999; Muñoz
1999). Ang, for example, points to the hybrid nature of being a transnational in stating
that it is “always linking the local and the global, the here and the there, past and

14 In my view, local and global cannot be seen as binary opposition for this simplifies the complexity and
dynamic nature of their interrelations.
present” (2001, 34). Transnational identities can be seen as always already hybridized. This is similar to Butler’s point that “every subject position is the site of converging relations of power that are not univocal [...] This converging and interarticulation is the contemporary fate of the subject” (1993, 229-230).

Although various anti-hybrity critiques consider this concept as a luxury exclusive to the elite (Cheah and Robbins 1998; Dirlik 1994; Friedman 1997; Shohat 1992), in my view, the most important strength of a transnational political position is precisely the unique space formed by the hybrid nature of transnationality. Homi Bhabha, perhaps most famous for his innovative analysis of hybridity, suggests that we view it as a strategy of “negotiation” rather than “negation” of the dominant. In the process of negotiation, hybridization “translates” from both “the One” and “the Other.” Since a translation, in Bhabha’s view, is always contingent and provisional, it cannot become a victim of essentialism. The provisional and ambivalent location that hybridity embodies prevents it from falling into either the valorization of “the One” or the subordination of “the Other.”

Ang notes that “for diasporic subjects who are ‘trapped in ambivalence,’ hybridity is...a necessity for survival, for it is a limited but crucial, life-sustaining tactic of everyday survival and practice” (2001, 72). Because transnationals recognize the power of nation-states, it is necessary for them to essentialize themselves strategically (in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality) in order to maximize benefit from being both inside and outside of nation-states according to the situations they are in. In
other words, this “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1987, 205) acts as a means of survival and resistance. In this view, their hybridity not only prevents them from being victims of essentialism, as Bhabha suggests, but also makes them possible agents of challenges to essentialism. In this context, various conventional essentialist notions such as gender, race, sexuality, and their intersections, become the source materials for new appropriations and performances.

In the case of notions of “Chineseness,” which often sway between “constructionist” (seeing it as an open signifier) and “essentialist” (as related to the Chinese race), the deployment of strategic essentialism may be ambivalent. In the context of debates over gender difference, in Essentially Speaking (1989) Diana Fuss posits herself as “an anti-essentialist who wants to preserve (in both senses of the term: to maintain and to embalm) the category of essence” (1989, xiv). For Fuss, what is important is not to pin down essentialism, but to investigate when and how “essentialism might play in a particular set of discourses” and situations (1989, xii). I am suggesting here that we need to investigate the purpose and function of both the essentialist and constructionist notions of “Chineseness” in particular sets of transnational discourses and hybrid contexts. The filmmakers studied in this project

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15 Spivak (1988) proposes a “strategic use of essentialism” in the service of “a scrupulously visible political interest” (1988, 206). Such use of essentialism has been found in queer and women’s movements, but it can only be effective as a context-specific strategy; otherwise, it may fall into the same exclusionary trap that originally oppressed a particular category. In my research on filmic representations of East Asian queer women, several directors use stereotypes (which are often effective tools of essentialism) of Asian women for their own appropriations and subversions.
employ and manipulate strategies (including “strategic essentialism,” parody, appropriation, and performance) that allow their films to provide a space for such investigations.

**Diasporic/Transnational Queer Theory**

Scholars in lesbian, gay and queer studies are rethinking sexuality, as global queer culture has become one of the most popular transnational discourses and commodities in the last two decades (Altman 2001; Berry et al 2003; Daniel and Jackson 2003; Manalansan 2004; Miller 1992; Sullivan and Jackson 2001). Late capitalism accelerates fast-paced technological advances and the ascendancy of transnational enterprises. This combination has complicated the relationship between individuals and global corporate forces. Even non-mainstream individual lifestyles are highly affected by diverse forms of transnational communication and cooperation. They, too, participate in the consumption of mass-marketed cultural products disseminated through information technology. Katrien Jacobs observes that although global marketing strategies have aimed to “construct a global queer subject who purchases services” (2003, 201), some transnational visual artists are able to work “in the same modes as global capital flow, to critique and subvert that order” (2003, 202). Technology and consumerism have become crucial mediating agencies in shaping an individual’s identity and subjectivity, but they also facilitate community networking
(Jacob 2003; Yue 2003) for those resisting market forces. This has been particularly important to queer transnational communities (Berry et al 2003).

Information technology has significantly enabled the expression and circulation of non-conforming sexual identities even in regions that are infamous for the regulation of both information and sexual conduct. Since the 1990s, gay and lesbian literature about Asia and Asian diasporas has emerged with titles such Experience (1996), Q & A: Queering Asian America (1998), Gay and Lesbian Asia (2001), Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora (2004), etc. Various gay, lesbian, and queer film festivals are also mushrooming in Asia and in transnational contexts. Queer theorists such as Berry, Martin, and Yue note that these cultural products and phenomena “foreground the historicity of the mediascapes of the West, Asia, and the Asian diaspora…and they form a network connected by the technology of a speed-space, producing mobile and transient cultures” (2003, 2). They observe that the fluidity and accessibility of information technology has increased with digitization and the speed and scope of the circulation of these cultures has increased, which enables the formation of “global gay and lesbian coalitions, and […] new queer cultures incorporating Asian imaginaries” (2003, 1). These queer Asian cultural imaginaries created in the transnational process require a new cultural politics to produce “another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual” (de Lauretis 1991, iv).

A brief overview of the origins and evolution of the term “queer” is useful for a conceptual understanding and discussion of the current use of the term. According to the
Oxford English Dictionary (1989, second edition), the Latin root of the word *queer* means across, coming from the Indo-Latin *torquere*, meaning “to twist.” At the time of its emergence in the English language in the sixteenth century, *queer* meant “absurd” or “worthless,” but in more modern usage it has generally conveyed “strange,” “unusual,” or “out of sorts.” Its use pertaining to homosexuality has developed from various connotations the term acquired for the LGBTQ+ community.

This shift emerged in the late 1990s in both the UK and the USA. The first and rather short-lived usage arose from a separatist approach to sexual identity, based on an aggressive essentialism related to radical “outing” and a militant style imitating “Black Power” (Seidman 1996). The second and more popular usage emerged from the waves of gay and lesbian activism in the HIV/AIDS movement to fight against the stigma of a “gay plague.” Famous examples of these activist groups are Queer Nation and ACT UP in the USA and Outrage in the UK (Seidman 1996).

In its contemporary usage, *queer* has become a more inclusive notion. Some use the term as a unifying socio-political umbrella for people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and also for those who identify themselves as transgendered or transsexual. “Queer” in this sense (depending on how broadly it is defined) is commonly used as a synonym for the acronym LGBTQ. However, currently there are further demands for inclusion from those who strongly reject traditional gender identities (such as gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight), as well as those who see themselves as oppressed by the heteronormativity of the larger dominant culture. These include people who are asexual
or autosexual (Jackson and Scott 1996, 16) as well as heterosexuals whose sexual preferences or practices are not considered mainstream (e.g. BDSM practitioners). In this context "queer" is not a synonym for LGBT. Rather, it is widely accepted by those activists whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity or gender expression do not conform to heteronormativity or other recognized categories, to distinguish themselves from less inclusive LGBT communities.

From its historical usages, it is obvious that “queer” is a radical appropriation of a term which had previously been used to connote negative meanings, and part of its radicalism lies in its resistance to straightforward and normative definitions. In this dissertation, I am using the term in conjunction with a broader consideration of race and gender, and will explore new meanings and usages of the term that emerge from the interviews conducted with transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers. My intention in this section is not only to explore diasporic/transnational queer theory, but also to examine the relationship between concepts such as transnational, queer, and hybridity, in order to shed new light on our understanding of them. My focus is on what binds these theoretical concepts together, the similarities they share.

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16 BDSM is a term, which describes several related practices of human sexual behaviours. The major sub-groupings are often seen in the abbreviation “BDSM” representing Bondage, Bondage & Discipline, Domination & Submission, and Sadism & Masochism. This information is found at www.acronymfinder.com.

17 The purpose of a review of existing studies, to my mind, is to read current theory with a new lens and seek the potential common threads that link these theoretical concepts together. Using current theories as they are reduces the potential of theories to merge and change.
Eve Sedgwick, an influential queer theorist, characterizes “queer” as indistinguishable, indefinable, and mobile: “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive - recurrent, eddying, troublant” (Sedgwick 1993, xii). Being “queer,” then, in this context of movement, exemplifies Stuart Hall’s idea of the identity and subject “in the making” and “becoming” (1989) and what black cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, in his book The Black Atlantic (1993), identifies as a theoretical emphasis on routes rather than roots. In other words, the concept of “queer” does not concern definition, fixity or stasis, but focuses rather on de-centralization and transitivity. This is evidently quite similar to the concept of transnational, which entails dispersal and mobility, as well as being relevant to discussions of cultural hybridity and the occupation of “para-sites.”

Being queer, transnational, or hybrid can be seen as inhabiting “sites where meanings do not line up tidily with each other” (Sedgwick 1993, 3). Linking these various types of in-betweenness, José E. Muñoz argues that:

[T]his moment where things do not line up is a moment of reflexivity that is informed by and through the process of queerness and hybridity….[H]ybridity is not a fixed positionality but a survival strategy that is essential for both queers and postcolonial subjects who are subject to the violence that institutional structures reproduce.

(Muñoz 1999, 119-120)

In some ways, new perceptions of transnational “Chineseness” evidently occupy similar sites as do new perceptions of gender/sexual identities. Since notions and perceptions of race, gender, sexuality, and even class vary in different cultural and national contexts, transnational identities are always fluid and contingent.
The transmigrant “Chinese” women in this study find collaboration and solidarity in their queerness, and a common means of survival in their desire to convey their own unrepresented identities and experiences through film. Their work has to be considered not only from the perspectives of racial/cultural and sexual hybridity or “para-sites”, but as crossing borders in the world of film production and distribution, contesting norms in the realm of artistic representation and political community activism.

**Feminist Film Theory and Chinese Films**

Film has been a powerful medium shaping the politics of visual representations of women as well as national narratives. It has remained a critical focus of feminist academic interest across various disciplines. Before the 1970s, film theory mostly addressed issues related to auteur studies and genre studies. The emergence of feminist film theory in the 1970s in the UK and the USA was largely influenced by women’s liberation movements (particularly the Second Wave feminist movement). American feminist film theorists adopted a sociological approach concerning positive and negative images of women, while British scholars, more influenced by psychoanalysis, addressed the need to examine filmic codes, in addition to the operation of myth and issues of realism. In general, feminist film theorists (Creed 2004; Gledhill 1978; Johnston 1973; Mulvey 1975/1989) examined the role of ideology (cinema as a signifying practice of patriarchal ideology) and screen-spectatorship (centering on female spectators and stars,
from a psychoanalytic perspective) in the production of meaning. Later various theorists began to emphasize other aspects, such as active audiences and female authorship (Ang 1991, 1996; Brooker and Jermyn 2002; Doane 1982, 1991; Mayne 1981, 1993, 1995; Stacey 1987). It was not until the 1990s that feminist film theorists began to integrate minority issues (particularly race, non-heteronormative sexuality, and their intersections) and postcolonial perspectives into film studies. Psychoanalytic approaches were extended, with a focus on how concepts such as trauma and fantasy can help to understand the impact of racism and homophobia at the psychic level. In terms of evaluating formal experimentation and aesthetic effects, the influence of postmodernism forced feminist film studies to explore new methods and analytic tools (de Lauretis 1984, 1987, 1988; Dyer 2002; Dyer and Pidduck 2003; Gaines 1988; hooks 1990, 1992, 1994; Pajaczkowska and Yang 1992; Thornman 1997; Trinh 1989, 1994; Xin and Hirabayashi 2003; Young 1996).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, with fast-paced technological advances spurring on globalization and the ascendancy of transnational enterprises, feminist film theorists have faced new challenges arising from the ways digitally-based, global/transnational film industries and markets change film production. Several theorists have shifted their focus and sought different methods and perspectives for analyzing film, with special attention paid to local contexts (Codell 2007; Kaplan 1997, 2004; Mulvey 2004; Trinh 2005). Third World cinema and transnational cinema have gained more attention from film theorists because of the new conditions of film
production they entail. Among them, “Chinese” cinemas (in the PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwan) have recently been gaining in international popularity.

There are several reasons why a growing academic interest in “Chinese” cinemas is justified. First, realities and representations of China are, more than ever before, mediated through cinematic discourses and cultural theories. Chow (1995) has pointed out the importance of investigating the notion of unmediated perceptions in relation to “Chineseness,” and revealed how narrative films reinvent China and translate cultures. Second, unlike the monolithic Hollywood representations of Asian women as either as passive and submissive—the “Lotus Blossom Baby”—or dangerous, erotic and exotic—the “Dragon Lady” (Feng 2002; Jiwani, 2006; Lee 2003; Marchetti 1993; Sha 1997; Shimizu 2007)—images of women in “Chinese” films (particularly those made in China) often project them as the embodiment of cultural, spatial and societal transitions, whether as self-empowering subjects of liberation or victims of class repression (Cornelius and Smith 2002; Cui 2003; Kaplan 1997; Lu 1997; Yue 2003; Zang 2004). The divergence of these images from those in western filmic contexts has increased feminist film theorists’ interest in exploring notions of gender and representations of “Chinese” women by comparing films produced in national and transnational contexts.

The third reason for renewed interest in “Chinese” films since the late 1990s is their relevance to the debates about the meaning of “Chineseness” discussed earlier. Its hegemonic centrality and essentiality as a signifier of identity and a racial category have
become a major focus for various diasporic and postcolonial intellectuals who reside in the space of hybridity between the West and Asia (Ang 2001; Chow 1991, 1993, 2003). They raise questions not only about how gender, sexuality, and “Chineseness” are represented and intersect in films (Cui 2003; Chow 1995; Dai 1995, 2002; Lu 1997), but also about how “Chinese” identities are depicted in ways that reaffirm or challenge national narratives (Braester 2003; Chiang 2002; Chow 1995; Lai and Huang 2003). As discussed earlier, the notion of “Chineseness” is always undergoing change and being contested in transnational contexts (Ang 2001; Chow 1991; Ong and Nonini 1997). To maintain this dynamic, it is crucial to bridge the gaps and maintain dialogue between the local and global, and localized case studies such as this dissertation can help to achieve this goal (Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Mulvey 2004).

The films selected for this project are analyzed here with several feminist film theories in mind, and I attempt to bridge several approaches, which may initially appear to have little connection to each other. The excitement of theoretical thinking lies, to my mind, in experimenting by juxtaposing what other researchers have not brought together, in order to find new perspectives and theoretical angles on current issues. As stated before, the main theoretical foundation of this research emerges from critical gender and sexuality studies, including Butler’s theorizing of gender performativity and José E. Muñoz’s conceptualization of “disidentification”; I add to these the question of “native informant” discussed by transnational feminist sociologist Sherene Razack (1998, 2000). Ultimately, the objective of weaving together this interdisciplinary
framework is to find patterns in the common threads that can creatively link the theorizing of “Chineseness” and gender to analysis of being both transmigrant and queer.

**Gender Performativity, “Disidentification,” and Native Informants**

Butler’s (1990, 1993) influential ideas on gender as performance and as performative, and her discussions of parody and “drag,” have had significant impact among feminist, gay and lesbian and queer theorists, as well as in a wide range of other fields. It is safe to say that one of Butler’s main concerns is to raise questions about how identity and subjectivity are formed. She examines the processes by which a person becomes a gendered and sexualized subject when he or she assumes the sexed/gendered/racialized attributes, which are constructed for him or her (and to a certain extent by himself or herself) within a web of pre-existing power structures.

Butler’s constant investigation of subjectivity as constructed and performed reveals not only how these processes operate but also how they dysfunction (i.e. fail to construct the subject as expected). What happens when our identities fail to conform? What possibilities and opportunities do these failures offer? Can they provide subversive reconstructions of pre-conceived identities or do they simply produce alternative identities that may be just as oppressive as the pre-existing ones? These questions are crucial for me in thinking about the identities of transmigrant queer
“Chinese” women as the focus of this research. For example, what ultimately makes one “Chinese,” for oneself or for others, and in what contexts? What does it mean to be a queer “Chinese” woman in a transnational/transmigrant context, and how do these contexts vary? What does it mean to be “queer” for transmigrant queer “Chinese” women, in relation to other women, other queers, and other “Chinese”? What happen when these women fail to identify themselves as “Chinese,” perhaps due to their gendered queer identities? Or when they fail to identify as “queer” because of their “Chineseness”? Does their transnational/transmigrant mobility contribute to the failure of their identity construction, or make it more possible? If so, how? Can they fail normative identity construction processes on purpose? To what extent can one choose how to “perform” divergent and overlapping identities? These are complex questions I intend to explore through analysis of the films and interviews in this project.

In Butler’s view, subjecthood is not pre-given, rather, it involves and evolves by endless processes of becoming. This is very similar to the discussions summarized earlier about transnational “Chinese” identities as always in the process of becoming, depending on who is where and why (Ang 2001; Chow 1993, 1997; Mitchell 1995; Ong and Nonini 1997). It is through this commonality that I would like to explore the possibility of analyzing transnational “Chineseness” through the concept of performativity usually associated with gender construction. Butler draws on Derrida’s theory of citationality in understanding the idea of performativity. In her view, performativity is not “a singular act” (1993, 2) but “the reiterative and citational
practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Ibid.). In Butler’s view, gender identity is not produced by a process representing a given, fixed essence; it is something we “do” rather than what we “are.” Gender (and sex) is thus not the causes of discourse and practices, but their effects. This means that a person does not create or cause discourse and practices, but is actually created or caused by them. In other words, Butler expands Simone de Beauvoir’s idea that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1948, 281); being a “woman” is what we “do” (perform or act out) to conform to expectations, rather than what we are born to “be.”

In Bodies that Matter (1993), Butler carefully inserts “race” into her discussion of performativity and acknowledges that gender and sex do not exist prior to race. She also emphasizes that race, gender, sex, and sexuality always work simultaneously and through one another in the complexity of dominant power structures. As she observes, “What appears within such an enumerative framework as separable categories are, rather, the conditions of articulation for each other” (1993, 117). She further asks, “How is race lived in the modality of sexuality? How is gender lived in the modality of race?” (Ibid.). While exploring what other “regimes of regulatory production contour the materiality of bodies” (17), Butler affirms that “[t]he symbolic – that register of regulatory ideality – is also and always a racial industry, indeed, the reiterated practice of racializing interpellations” (1993, 18, original emphasis). In her analysis of the novella entitled Passing (1993), by Nella Larsen, exposure of the assumptions of the primacy of whiteness and heterosexuality leads Butler to observe that racial and
heterosexual imperatives operate hand-in-hand and simultaneously. She argues that the theoretical priority of sexuality and gender must be adapted to a more complex mapping of the power matrix that places both in their specific racial and political contexts.

Inspired by these insights and questions, I am curious as to how transnational “Chineseness,” like sex, gender, and sexuality, can be cited and re-cited in ways that disclose its vulnerability and instability, and how it may challenge norms through appropriation and subversion. Butler describes her ideas in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) as “a poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialization of sex” (1993, 12). Could the word “sex” in this sentence be replaced by the word “Chineseness,” as an “interpellated performatve”? Is a “Chinese” identity something that is assigned or assumed, or something one cannot voluntarily claim or escape from? From previous discussions on transnational “Chineseness”, it seems reasonable to appropriate Beauvoir’s famous statement to say that one is not born but rather becomes “Chinese.”

Many queer theorists use the term “queer” to affirm the indeterminacy and instability of all sexed and gendered identities. I propose that “queer” can also be used to affirm the indeterminacy and instability of racial and racialized identities. This juxtaposition helps to link the discussion of queerness and transnational “Chineseness” together as cases of non-conventional performativity. Here, I would like to introduce another concept, “disidentification,” to supplement this juxtaposition. The earlier discussion of failure of identity constructions is another appropriate gateway to the
concept of “disidentification.” I am drawing this concept from José E. Muñoz’s usage, with reference to his analysis of Richard Fung’s self-performance on film as exemplifying the application of “disidentification.”

Muñoz describes disidentification as a process by which marginalized or minority groups re-deploy and transform mainstream culture by working on, with, and against it for their own cultural or political purposes (1999, 8). He argues that the practice of disidentification is not a strategy appropriate for all minoritarian subjects all of the time, rather it is more “readily available to subjects whose class privilege gives them access to systems of representation” (1999, 164). The queer transmigrant “Chinese” women studied in this research may be considered as belonging to a privileged group, since as filmmakers/media cultural workers they do have access to systems of representation. Muñoz emphasizes that “dis-identifying” is not “anti-identity.” Instead, it is a rejection of any claim to understand “identity” and calls for “an engagement with the question of identity” (Ibid.).

In “The Autobiographic Performance: Reading Richard Fung’s Queer Hybridity” (1999), Muñoz discusses the complex nature of queer hybridity in Chinese Characters (1986), an ethnographic video by gay Chinese-Trinidadian Canadian filmmaker Richard Fung. This video “builds a parallel between the Chinese legend about the search for the source of the Yellow River and contemporary Chinese-Canadian gay men's search for pleasure via their relationship to gay pornography” (1986, cited on the back cover of the video). Muñoz argues that by manipulating video
documentary techniques and “strategies such as voice-over monologues, finding familial objects such as home-movie footage, and the technique of video keying,” Fung’s work “deploys a practice of performativity that repeats and cites, with a difference” (1999, 115, italics added). Adopting a setting and plot typical of a regular gay porn film, Fung inserts a “Chinese” gay male character who is not the “bottom” (a common script in North American gay porn films) and who does not need the white male to satisfy him. Muñoz sees this as a form of disidentification which “engages and recycles popular forms with a difference” (1999, 126). In Fung’s case, this disidentification is manifested through a “performative re-citation of the stereotypical Asian bottom in porn, and the trappings of colonial culture” (Ibid.). Fung thus uses Chinese characters as a point of departure for his disidentification from colonial (North American) gay discourse, as well as from Chinese gender and sexual norms. In other words, by re-citing the racialized and colonized stereotype of Chinese men and culture (for the Yellow River is seen as the origin of the ancient Chinese civilization), Fung queers both “Chineseness” and imperialist stereotypes. From this example, we can consider disidentification as a type of performativity, with the potential to “queer” (i.e. destabilize) identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality.

Trinh T. Minh-ha argues that “otherness becomes empowerment, critical difference, when it is not given but re-created” (1997, 418). By re-presenting themselves as queer “Chinese” women through performativity and disidentification, within a Canadian context, what kind of alternative or experimental forms of discourse
can the women filmmakers studied here offer? How do they reconceptualize the body in relation to issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality? How effective can such alternative discourses be? Muñoz cautions readers that disidentification is not always efficient or effective, because the disidentifying subject is neither “a flier who escapes the atmospheric force field of ideology” nor “a trickster figure who can effortlessly come out on top every time” (1999, 161-162).

Here, I would like to go back to Chow’s idea of “para-sites” and connect it to inefficient disidentification and disidentifying subjects. In her view, para-sites “never take over a dominant field in its entirety but erode it slowly and tactically” (1993, 16). In other words, disidentifying subjects can be considered as “para-sites” as described above. They may also be viewed as “parasites,” organisms that rely on a host to survive, that do not kill the host but slowly undermine its health and well-being over time. Although the practice of “disidentification” might not shift the dominant ideology and power structure effectively, it gradually undermines its totality and fixity.

Like disidentification, performativity is not always efficient or effective, because it is both promising and problematic at the same time. As Butler asks, “How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?” (1993, 241). This ambivalence and a certain amount of uncertainty mark the risky nature of

18 According to www.dictionary.com, parasite has several meanings. In Latin, the word means the professional dinner guest who amuses the rich. In contemporary biological terms, it means an organism that grows, feeds, and is sheltered on or in a different organism while contributing nothing to the survival of its host.
subversive recitation. So the question is not about determining whether performativity is subversive or not, but what, how, and by/to whom it becomes problematic and risky. As various diasporic theorists suggest, the positions of “queer”, hybrid, and transnational subjects are not always subversive or marginal, for they may be complicit with the systems they are in even if they appear to fighting against them (Ang 2001; Ong and Nonini 1997; Mitchell 1995). Butler suggests that we need to constantly and continuously question and examine the notion of being queer. She maintains: “As much as identity terms must be used, as much as ‘outness’ is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production: For whom is ‘outness’ a historically available and affordable option” (1993, 227)?

Thus, I suggest that we see the terms “queer,” “transnational,” and “hybridity” here as tactics (in Chow’s sense) or sources of unconventional performativities, and disidentification that can be subjective interpellations. The potential of transnational, “queer”, and hybrid spaces is that they open up the possibilities of performance and

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19 “Interpellation” was first used by Louis Althusser, and the term has been adopted by various theorists. Interpellation means that one is hailed, called into being. For example, if someone calls an Asian woman “Chinese girl”, then it does not matter whether the person concerned accepts or refuses that designation. She is interpellated as a racialized and gendered subject within that specific discourse. It is important to distinguish between performance and interpellation. The former shows what one can do; therefore, there is some degree of agency. Butler believes that by queering the performance, there might be possibilities for change. In contrast, interpellation generally means what happens to someone, beyond their control (i.e. they are called into being). Thus, it is the opposite of agency, for we have no choice as to what type of interpellations we receive in everyday life. However, it can be worked through, as Butler suggests: “repeated interpellations, even if taking place outside official discourse, can become the very occasion for a re-appropriation of discursive power” (Butler, quoted in Orbaugh 2003, 17).
performativity, while producing more possibilities for future interpellations.

Additionally, it is only when we are “being hailed” (Butler 1993), and this hailing (interpellation) does not conform to what we normally think we are, that we recognize that we are being hailed (interpellated). Otherwise, we mostly take these interpellations for granted. Transnational movements that continuously involve border crossings generate more opportunities for transmigrants to encounter such (mis)-recognition (of interpellation). Interpellation requires even more re-consideration when people cross borders, as various interpellations have different connotations in different cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, mixed-race people or transsexuals might “pass” as one race or gender in some contexts but not in others where gender and race/ethnicity, or the relationship between them, might be represented and perceived very differently.

Transnational movements, then, not only open up more possibilities to re-cite unstable norms that are vulnerable to appropriation; they also have the potential to invite recognition of newly-formed interpellations, and to force us to reconsider the conventional criteria of interpellations that might have diverse meanings in different cultural and linguistic contexts.

The meanings and associations of various interpellations vary over space and time. I propose that Homi Bhabha’s (1994) idea of “temporality” may be helpful in understanding discontinuous subject positions, for transnationality can also be seen as a type of spatialized temporality. From this perspective, the subaltern position that a transnational queer hybrid subject occupies is not a permanent position but a temporary
one. She or he might have an opportunity to speak in some contexts, through this discontinuous subject position. The diasporic Chinese business elites discussed in the works of Ong and Nonini (1997) provide an example. They might become subalterns temporarily when they cross borders, due to their visible ethnicity, gender or sexuality. However, their class status allows them to speak on some occasions. At those moments of enunciation, they are no longer subalterns and may actually silence other marginalized groups by turning them into subalterns.

Finally, I would like to bring one more theoretical strand into the frame holding together the weaving of this research: transnational feminist theory (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; McCann 2003; Razack 2000). Adding this layer is necessary in examining the transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers in this project. Sherene Razack promotes a place-based feminism concerned with locations that “are linked to each other in ways that demand that we as feminists pay attention to flows of capital, labour, cultural and knowledge production between nations and regions” (2000, 40). Transnational feminist theory draws attention to the politics of specific locations. As Razack puts it, “it is a methodology that pays attention to specificity. Imperialism demands that we understand women either as victims or agents, as saviours or as saved, not as complicated subjects acting within several hegemonic systems” (2000, 50). Adrienne Rich (1984/2003) argues that this politics of location is revealed by asking “where, when and under what conditions have women acted and been acted on as women?” (2003, 31). This dissertation asks where, when, and under what conditions
“Chinese” queer women living as filmmakers in Vancouver have acted and been acted on as transmigrant queer “Chinese” women.

Further, Razack is especially concerned with the issue of “native informants” in the North, and asks how transnational intellectuals like herself can pursue responsible scholarship without becoming complicit with imperial knowledge production or suppressing the differences among women in the South. This is a valuable caution for immigrants and transmigrants, who sometimes are expected to be “native informants” regarding their country of origin. For cultural and economical survival, as well as access to more resources such as funding for their filmmaking, some of these transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers may perform themselves as “native informants” in their films and their funding applications. This might be seen as a compromise, but it could also be considered as a subversive act. In a transnational era, with highly mobile transmigrant groups, how do we define “native informant”? Who counts as one, and by what criteria? Self-consciously performing the “native informant” role actually reveals assumptions and questions regarding who is considered a “native informant.” Rich’s question can be applied here as well: where, when, and under what conditions have these “Chinese” queer women acted/performed as “native informants”? One might object that the answer would vary according to the circumstances of the filmmakers concerned, and their relationship to the person asking the question. This brings me to a discussion of the methodology adopted for this study, beginning with the selection of filmmakers.
Selection of the Filmmakers and Locations

To begin with, I did not have a very strict set of criteria in selecting a group of transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers living in Vancouver. My original intention was to focus on films by a wide range of women originally from Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and possibly Malaysia and Singapore, who speak Mandarin or Cantonese, identify themselves as queer, and reside in this highly multicultural Canadian city. However, what actually happened was quite different. Instead of my choosing the filmmakers, it was actually their works that chose me. The films of Desiree Lim, Kai-Ling Xue, Donna Lee, and Debora O not only touch me on a personal level, but I can see how their work can contribute to an academic understanding of transmigrant queer “Chinese” women. From intensely watching their films and researching their backgrounds, I discovered some of their commonalities. Not all of them fit into every single one of the initial selection criteria, but they all share the common experience of transmigration, as they travel physically or virtually (through their films). Moreover, their transmigrant experience has connected them to a broader network that links different communities across multiple national borders. These rich experiences of transmigration further complicate their already ambivalent “Chinese”

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20 For example, I could not find any filmmakers from Singapore now living in Vancouver. Donna Lee does not speak much Mandarin, unlike other filmmakers in this research. She also has not traveled back to Hong Kong or Taiwan. However, her films have been shown there and she has established a transnational connection with various queer film communities there through international queer film festivals.
identity. This is partially the reason that I chose these filmmakers from different regions, including diasporic “Chinese” minorities elsewhere. My focus is not on exploring the differences between the “Chinese” regions or communities concerned (this would require in-depth examination of their history and culture, far beyond the scope of this dissertation). Rather, I see the difference, diversity, and plurality of their “Chinese” connection as a challenge to the homogeneous representation and imagination of “Chineseness.” Jackson (1997) highlights the transnational traffic of sexual identities within various geo-political Asian regions. Bearing this in mind, it is beneficial to situate my examination of queer “Chinese” women active in one part of Canada in relation to the broader context of why and how queer “Chinese” women move to Vancouver from various Chinese-regions in the Pacific Rim.

The reason I chose Vancouver is that it is one of the most highly multicultural cities of the Pacific Rim. There have been significant numbers of migrants and immigrants flowing in from various Chinese regions for political and economic reasons since the 1970s, who may or may not interact with the Chinese-Canadian community established here for over a hundred years. Vancouver provides a rich socio-cultural space to study the diversity of “Chineseness”. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, this city has become the third largest commercial film production center in North America, after New York and Los Angeles, earning it the nickname “Hollywood North.” This reputation has attracted many filmmakers from abroad, including some of those
interviewed for this study, who interact with minority filmmakers (such as “Chinese” or queers) already established in British Columbia.

**Qualitative Research Methods**

There are two methodological aspects and stages to this research project. The first involved personal interviews with the filmmakers about their lives and their films, the second is the analysis of selected films by the women who were interviewed, bearing their comments in mind. The second part of the project draws on feminist film theory as well as the postcolonial and poststructural theories discussed earlier, which advance the idea that identities are contingent on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and geo-political locations. In order to gain a better understanding of the complexity that the experience of migration brings to these subjects’ identities, transnational feminist theory will be included as another filter of analysis (Grewal and Kaplan 1994). The main goal is an examination of how the racialized, queered, and gendered body is presented, appropriated, or subverted in these films, to ascertain whether and how they produce new imaginings of transmigrant “Chineseness”, “queerness”, “queer gender” (such as female masculinity and femme femininity), and the combination “Chinese-queer-transmigrant-women”.

In conducting the interviews, I employed a feminist qualitative research methodology, with an emphasis on standpoint epistemology. I am aware of how my
own position as a non-native speaker of English who identifies as a queer “Taiwanese” “Chinese” woman and became a permanent resident of Canada in 2008 must affect my research analysis. I took these positional elements into account, considering particularly how they might influence the dynamics of the interviews.

In “Racial Ideologies and Racial Methodologies” (2000) Twine and Warren consider the significance of race as a methodological issue and discusses how racial ideologies and positions affect research. Although various anthropological and sociological studies have supported the idea that research should be conducted by “racial insiders” (2000, 6), Twine reminds us of the potential drawbacks of such methodological “racial matching” (2000, 7). For example, she rightly points out that this “insiderness” often needs to be reframed by other sociopolitical identity markers such as age, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, region, religion, education, and accent (2000, 9). Moreover, based on her own experience of conducting ethnographical research in Brazil, she has discovered that the position of “racial insider” does not always grant her cultural “insider” status immediately; rather, acceptance is a process of serial negotiations. In my view, as a “racial and queer insider,” I hoped that exploring the negotiation processes involved in this project (through the interviews) would help me to appreciate and gain a better understanding of the diversity of “Chineseness” and the complexity of cultural and sexual identities among the interviewees.

The main reason to conduct open-ended, in-depth interviews was to consider the research subjects’ experiences and reflections from their perspective, as well as to
explore the ways in which these filmmakers see themselves as producing their own representations of Asian queer women, and the intentions they themselves perceive behind these representations. I conducted preliminary interviews (one- to two-hour tape-recorded sessions) with all four filmmakers in a relatively informal fashion in 2006 and early 2007. The purpose was to become acquainted with them and discuss the possibility of including them in the project. Then, from late 2007 to early 2008, I conducted another two to three hours of open-ended in-depth videotaped interviews with each of the filmmakers, and followed through with emails in 2008 and 2009.  

Why was it important to conduct interviews for this project? Some theorists believe that knowing about an artist’s or author’s life is not important in assessing their work. If we accept the ideas expressed in two famous essays on authorship and textuality, Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?” (1977) and Roland Barthes’ “From Work to Text” (1977), then we might be content with the idea that we do not need to know the authors/filmmakers in order to comprehend the stories we see on the screen. However, I saw personal contact as valuable and necessary in this case, for two reasons. The first is because of the centrality of issues related to sexuality. In an article entitled “Sexualities, Queer Theory, and Qualitative Research” (2003), Joshua Gamson notes that there are several arguments in favour of applying qualitative research to the study of sexualities. First, “qualitative methods, with their focus on meaning-creation and the

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21 Donna Lee was the only person who was not able to be interviewed during that time due to personal reasons. The interview questions were emailed to her and the replies were also by email.
experiences of everyday life, fit especially well with movement goals of visibility, cultural challenge, and self-determination” (2003, 542). Secondly, they bring “previously silent voices into activities” (ibid) and the “shared, lived experience of sexual minorities into the spotlight” (2003, 548). Considering that there has been almost no qualitative research on transmigrant queer “Chinese” filmmakers in Canada, the incorporation of interviews into this project will help to fill a current gap in related areas of study.

My second reason for including interviews is rooted in the study of film. In discussing film authorship, James Naremore (1999) argues that if we pay attention to the intensity with which mainstream marketing strategies focus on celebrities and star filmmakers, we have to agree that “authorship” still plays an important role in the film industry. In his opinion, “the academic de-emphasis on authors seems oddly out of key with this situation” in the current global film industry and market (1999, 21). He shares the belief that learning about the filmmakers’ experiences and the intentions behind their filmmaking can help us to better understand their films. He suggests that there are at least five reasons to rethink the importance of film authorship. First, he claims that “the author is just as real (or as illusory and fetishized) as the money and the mechanical apparatus behind the cinema” (1999, 22). Even if we accept the Foucauldian conception of the “author” as socially constructed, it does not follow that the filmmakers’ experiences are any less “real.” For Naremore, it is particularly the elements of social
construction conveyed by their experiences that justify the importance of learning about the socio-political contexts in which the filmmakers are situated.

His second reason is that since independent filmmakers tend to impose a unique style upon their films, any materialist film criticism or analysis needs to take the filmmakers’ experiences and contexts into account. Similarly, Emma Wilson (1999) has made the case for bringing the personal history of the film’s director/author into consideration in understanding film. She argues that:

The director, and the other artists with whom he works, may seek to change the forms of representations and images produced, not for the sake of innovation alone, but in respect of the creative possibilities of a particular histoire. The director’s perspective, the personal ‘take’ in the story, be it autobiographical or not, becomes of prime interest […] A director may seek to unravel or deconstruct an identity; be it artistic or personal, his own or a protagonist’s.

(Wilson 1999, 19)

Naremore’s third point is that it is useful to study the “authors” since “it enables us to differentiate films more precisely…as themselves situated differently in history” (1999, 22). Disagreeing with Foucault’s idea of the author as a fictional construction, Naremore’s fourth point is that it is critically important to know who is speaking, as well as to whom, or for whom, they are speaking, as “the viewers always decode messages by positing a source, even if only an imaginary or unconscious one, and the source has a political meaning” (Ibid.). While a film has multiple sources and the
director’s “self” is constructed, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the link between films and filmmakers.

The last reason Naremore offers is what I consider the most crucial one in the important task of learning about filmmakers or authors from marginalized groups. Like some feminist theorists, he reminds us to be aware of the position of Foucault and Barthes, since both speak as well-known male European intellectuals. Their intention to deconstruct or de-emphasize the authority of male authorship might erase the space for those marginalized artists or filmmakers, particularly women and people of color, who have not yet received recognition from mainstream critics who are still mostly white males (Mayne 2005). As Elvira Notari and Giuliana Bruno ask, “Can or should we consider as dead an author, such as the female author, who is yet to be fully established in the public sphere and theorized?” (Notari and Bruno, quoted in Naremore 1999, 22). Furthermore, the recognition of authors/filmmakers of certain marginalized groups has a heightened importance for other members of those groups, who often may shape and affirm their own identities by identifying with these authors.

A number of the earlier works of the filmmakers studied here are highly autobiographical, which ultimately justifies conducting in-depth, open-ended interviews that has allowed me to explore their unique positions as transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers. Moreover, as many of their works convey explicit political and personal agendas, the interviews provide a clearer picture of the issues they intend to raise. Finally, as cultural critic and film theorist Jackie Stacey (1987) points out,
although some directors’ work seems to be highly autobiographical, the content may derive less from their daily experiences or observations than from the realm of their fantasy. Conducting interviews has reduced the potential tendency to view these filmmakers’ fantasy constructions as equivalent to their empirical experiences.

The next chapter will provide an introduction to the filmmakers, based on the interviews, and information on the Canadian context in which they make their films. The following sections will undertake a detailed analysis of selected films by each of them, with a focus on their representation of female bodies as “Chinese” and queer, in transmigrant contexts.
Chapter 2 The Filmmakers’ Journeys

Before introducing the four filmmakers whose work will be analyzed in detail in the later chapters of this study, it is useful to review the Vancouver context in which they are all living and working at least part of the time. I will begin with a brief discussion of the role of the government-funded National Film Board in supporting the work of independent filmmakers, especially its now-defunct feminist film section, Studio D. I will also provide information on some other Vancouver-based “Chinese” filmmakers who were not interviewed, in order to situate those who were in a broader context.

The second part of this chapter gives a detailed introduction to the filmmakers who participated in this study and their films, based largely on material from the interview transcripts and email exchanges I collected over several years. I will first explore the filmmakers’ personal life stories: their cultural backgrounds, their history of transmigration and the reasons for it. I will then move on to investigate their background in filmmaking, focusing on what initiated their interest in making films, what training they had, why they make certain types of films, and what they see as the function of their films. This will lead into a discussion of their view of queerness and “Chineseness”, in relation to their locations as transmigrants, followed by an overview of their output in terms of genre, style and themes. This part concludes with a comparison, bringing out some differences among these filmmakers.
The Vancouver Context: the National Film Board\textsuperscript{22}

As mentioned earlier, Vancouver is now an important centre for commercial film production, especially for American films. It is often disguised as an American town. Films made by Canadians and with Canadian content rarely receive the same kind of financial support and market distribution. The National Film Board of Canada exists to ensure that there is a Canadian film industry, to counter the threat of American influence and dominance. From the outset, its policies have been marked by a nationalist ideology.

In 1938, The Canadian Federal government invited British documentary filmmaker John Grierson to assess the films produced under the supervision of the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau. As a result of Grierson’s suggestions, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) was founded in 1939. Its original mandate was to create a propaganda studio for the duration of World War II. During that time, the NFB produced mostly wartime documentary films. The Act was revised in the 1950s, allowing the administration of the NFB to be free from all direct governmental intervention, although as it is publically funded it must still report to Parliament through

\textsuperscript{22} The paragraphs below draw on materials from the following websites:
http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=U1ARTU0002538
the Department of Communication. After 1956, the NFB was divided into French and English sectors, both of which started to produce a diverse range of films including documentaries, full-length feature films, shorts, fictional films, and animations. Since the 1970s, many NFB films have been screened on television by the government-sponsored Canadian Broadcasting Company.

The purpose and mission of the NFB have been revised at various times. Its mandate was defined in 2000 by the then Minister of Canadian Heritage, Sheila Copps:

The overarching objective of the National Film Board is to produce and distribute audio-visual works which provoke discussion and debate on subjects of interest to Canadian audiences and foreign markets; which explore the creative potential of the audio-visual media; and which achieve recognition by Canadians and others for excellence, relevance and innovation.

(Copps 2000)

Based on this mandate, the NFB has designed various primary and secondary goals to meet its mission. The primary goals currently include: “creating programming reflecting Canada’s linguistic duality and cultural diversity, supporting innovative and experimental projects in new and interactive media, and exploring the audiovisual heritage of the NFB” (Copps 2000).

The NFB is undoubtedly extremely important for film culture and production in Canada, and it is fortunate that it has considerable autonomy from governmental intervention. Its support has encouraged talented Canadian artists in the area of audiovisual media to achieve their creative potential, and fostered the growth of the local and
foreign film industry. The NFB’s official goals reflect federal policies related to bilingualism and multiculturalism, but the output seems to be marked by a dual emphasis on English-Canadian and French-Canadian productions and audiences, rather than the broader cultural diversity of Canada. Besides the English and French-language studios and screening rooms at its Montreal headquarters, the NFB has established several other centers across Canada. These include English-language centers in Toronto, Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Halifax, and French-language centers in Quebec City and Moncton (New Brunswick). In addition to funding its own productions at these centers, the NFB provides programs to support independent filmmakers, in English through the Filmmaker Assistance Program, and in French through the Aide au cinéma indépendant - Canada (ACIC). None of the centers fund films made in other languages, in spite of the growing population of Asian, Latin-American, and Middle Eastern transmigrants.

The NFB has, however, supported work by so-called visible minorities and by First Nations filmmakers, through various multicultural initiatives. The aim of "supporting innovative and experimental projects in new and interactive media” seems encouraging, but only a very limited number of filmmakers can gain access to this support and these new interactive media. In spite of the NFB’s claims to be aiming at inclusivity, queer women filmmakers of color have still been excluded from fully participating in these programs and projects. Yet it would seem to be mutually beneficial to include more transmigrant filmmakers, especially since the NFB’s
secondary goals include reaching wider audiences by “developing and diversifying markets for NFB products,” as well as “broadcasting NFB films on national television networks and specialty services.” Supporting the films made by transmigrant women such as those in this study would have the potential to increase the global visibility of Canadian films, through transnational film festivals, as well as putting Canadian “multicultural” policy into action in a tangible way.

Greater exposure of their work within Canada would not only help these filmmakers to gain professional recognition here, but would also increase their identification with Canada, and would spread their message about what it means to be transmigrant, “Chinese”, and “queer” to other Canadians. As it stands, once they have been supported by the NFB filmmakers gain credibility, and therefore also find it easier afterwards to obtain funding from other sources. Acknowledging the success of transmigrant filmmakers as a Canadian achievement can further expand the rich potential of the vibrant multicultural society the Canadian government wishes to build. As it is, although women’s issues were addressed in many Studio D films, and women filmmakers were encouraged, the intersections of race, class, and sexuality in the experience of many Canadians of East Asian origins was and is still underrepresented.
Studio D and NFB Funded Chinese-Canadian Women Filmmakers in Vancouver

Any examination of Canadian feminist film theory and feminist activism cannot be complete without further discussion of Studio D, the world’s first and only government-sponsored feminist film studio. Studio D was created in 1974 on the recommendation of NFB employee Kathleen Shannon, who was designated as its first Executive Director. Studio D was a key player in shaping Canadian feminist culture, and produced many films that had a significant impact on the women’s movement, as well as the cultural industry in Canada, particularly during the 1970s to 1990s. Its struggles and achievements also played both positive and potentially disruptive roles in the construction of Canadian “nationhood.” The latter may have been a factor when Studio D was forced to shut down in 1996, ostensibly due to federal budget cuts. During its twenty-two years, filmmaking was seen as an important part of feminist activism, and most women supported policies that insisted on the right of ordinary women to be filmmakers, able to tell their stories themselves (Gail Vanstone 2007). Many women’s voices were recovered from Canadian history, and others preserved for posterity. However, there was also criticism, as time passed and feminism itself changed, of the control exerted by white English-speaking middle-class women, and their failure to consider the role of race and class in the experiences of other Canadian women. Attempts were made to address these concerns, but Studio D constantly struggled with
limited resources, and their requests for more ethnically inclusive staff and projects were frequently denied due to budget restrictions. The fact that Studio D was perceived by some as not adequately fulfilling the multicultural mandate of the NFB undoubtedly contributed to its demise. (Its attempts to do so are reflected in the case of some “Chinese” filmmakers in Vancouver who are not included in this study, discussed below.)

Being increasingly aware of the multicultural diversity of Canadian women filmmakers, Studio D attempted to be more inclusive in their production and programming. It played a crucial role in attempts to mend the gaps in fulfilling the NFB mandate of supporting cultural diversity, yet even as race and ethnicity became more central their intersections with class and sexuality were neglected. In 1989, as part of the celebration of Studio D’s fifteenth anniversary, feminist filmmakers across the country and other women were invited to share with Studio D their thoughts about women and feminist issues, in a series of five-minute films. Fifteen independent Canadian women filmmakers’ projects were selected and their work was compiled into one collection. These included two Chinese-Canadians, both located in Vancouver, Ann Marie Fleming and Sook-Yin Lee. Fleming’s video for this project, New Shoes (1995), is an interview about a woman telling her experience in a relationship involving male violence. Fleming examines issues of memory and trauma as well as representational violence and media sensibility. Lee’s Mr. Noodle (1995) is a semi-autobiographical comedy presented by a young second-generation Chinese-Canadian girl who recalls her
experiences of assimilation, growing up in a white suburban Vancouver neighbourhood in the 1960s. Although there are other videos in this collection about issues related to lesbian and queer sexuality, the focus of these two Chinese-Canadian women filmmakers was on heterosexual women’s experiences.

Even though Vancouver attracts a lot of filmmaking talent from various “Chinese” backgrounds, including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and diasporic “Chinese” communities in many regions, very few “Chinese” women filmmakers have become well-known or received steady funding support from local, provincial or federal government programs. Below is a brief introduction to four relatively well known “Chinese” women filmmakers living in Vancouver, beginning with Ann Marie Fleming and Sook-Yin Lee, who were mentioned above. These women will not be the focus of the present study, but their works and experiences serve as a useful point of reference and comparison. All four of them have received funding support from the NFB and other state-run agencies through different multicultural initiatives.

**Ann Marie Fleming**

Fleming has been considered one of Canada’s most talented independent female filmmakers. She has created more than twenty films, with a remarkably diverse range including feature, short, documentary, mockumentary, avant-garde, animated, and

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23 Much of this information comes from Fleming’s personal website: http://www.sleepydogfilms.com/.
personal storytelling. Born in Okinawa of Chinese and Australian parentage, Fleming grew up in Vancouver and studied at Simon Fraser University and the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Her films have distinctive characteristics, and are highly autobiographical, self-conscious, and formally self-reflexive. The story often comes from personal or family history and conveys an unusual blend of poignant pain and desire, expressed with irony or humour. Family issues are Fleming’s major concern, but her themes have also included male violence, the vulnerability of the physical body, the unpredictability of interpersonal relationships, and the paradoxical nature of personal memory. In exploring these issues, her films also ultimately look at the manipulation and distortion performed by the visual media. Her reputation was firmly established by a feature-length biography of her grandfather, who became famous in China and abroad for his circus act, entitled The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam (2003). She has since turned this gripping story into a graphic novel.

Sook-Yin Lee

Lee is the second oldest of four sisters in a Chinese-Canadian immigrant family, and grew up in a strict Roman Catholic milieu in a white Vancouver suburban

http://www.cbc.ca/dnto/about.html

http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0498271/
neighbourhood. She started her career as a musician and performing artist, and later became a popular long-time VJ for the Canadian music channel, Much Music. Her controversial performance (with explicit nudity and sex scenes) in Shortbus (2006) made her even better known.

Even though Lee never received any formal film-school training, the first feature film she directed, Year of the Carnivore (2009), premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. She also directed The Brazilian (2008), a segment of the feature entitled Toronto Stories (2008). Her subsequent films focus on romantic stories about love and heterosexual women’s sexual experiences. Her earlier work is often about the cultural clashes faced by a young second-generation Chinese-Canadian teenage girl and the everyday experience of racism. For example, one short, Hey, Kelly (1992), shows a white boy named Robert calling a little “Chinese”-looking girl, Kelly, by a racist name, resulting in a fight. Forced to work together by their school principal during a detention, they find something unexpected: they share something in common. While racism and female sexuality both figure in Lee’s films, no connection is made between the two, and although she came out as bisexual on air in 1995 she does not address issues related to being queer.
Julia Kwan

Another second-generation Chinese-Canadian, Julia Kwan is a Vancouver-based filmmaker who studied film and minored in psychology at Ryerson University in Toronto. She became known within Canada with her feature film debut, *Eve & The Fire Horse* (2005), which was based on her own Writer’s Guild of Canada award-winning script. This is the first Chinese-Canadian film to tackle the issues of religious and cultural collisions from a second-generation Chinese-Canadian little girl’s point of view.

Kwan’s focus is often on young Chinese-Canadian girls’ from poor immigrant families who face problems dealing with their parents’ traditional family and religious values that conflict with mainstream Canadian cultures. She focuses on intergenerational gender conflict and injustice within the Chinese family, rather than emphasizing the experience of racism from outside the family or dealing with the issues concerning the sexuality of Chinese-Canadian women. Her films often examine gender discrimination rooted in the old Confucian patriarchal ideology as it occurs within the family (such as the belief that girls are valueless as they will eventually marry “out” and leave home) and how gender discrimination shapes young girls’ lives and experiences.

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25 This paragraph draws materials from the following websites:
Yet she does not portray her female characters as victims of cultural clashes and patriarchal ideologies. She emphasizes the love and support among female siblings to help each other make it through difficult times, and her young heroines often show incredible strength and a wild imagination, which helps them finally come to terms with who they are.

Kwan’s respect for Chinese culture and desire to maintain it is often conveyed by bringing old Chinese folktales and mythology into her story-telling. Her famous NFB-funded short, *Three Sisters on Moon Lake* (2001) is one example. In this film, three young Chinese-Canadian sisters from a poor immigrant family living in the East end of Toronto discover a dead rat in their basement that had been poisoned by their mother. This incident, intertwined with a Chinese folktale about the “moon lake,” sets off a chain of events that lead to unexpected tragedy in the family. Kwan’s films provide unique windows on the inner emotional and psychological states of young Chinese-Canadian girls with a remarkable sensitivity to gender issues and cultural awareness.
Mina Shum  

Shum was born in Hong Kong in 1965. She immigrated to Canada with her family at the age of nine months and grew up in Vancouver. She attended the University of British Columbia, where she obtained a Bachelor of Arts (Theatre) in 1988 and a Diploma in Film and Television Studies in 1990. Later she trained to become a director at the Canadian Film Centre in Toronto.

Shum has written and directed several feature films. Her first feature-length film, *Double Happiness* (1994), was a very successful semi-autobiographical story depicting a Chinese-Canadian girl who struggles with the conflicts that arise between her family's traditional expectations and her pursuit of personal freedom and individuality, including choosing the non-Asian male partner she desires. In this film escape from the constricting traditional values of the Chinese family, and exploration of the contemporary Western world in which the heroine lives, is associated with heterosexual sexual liberation.

Shum also directed a television movie entitled *Mob Princess* (2003) for the Women’s Network, and an episode of the anthology series *Bliss* (2002) for broadcast on the Oxygen and Showcase channels. More recently she has directed *Various Miracles* (2004), one of the episodes in *The Shields Stories* (2004), a television series based on

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26 The paragraphs draw information from the following websites:  
the stories of Canadian author Carol Shields, produced in association with the Women’s Network. The main concerns of her work seem at present to be moving away from issues related to race and inter-racial sexual relations to women in general.

All four of these relatively prominent Vancouver Chinese-Canadian women filmmakers have received funding support from the NFB and other state-run agencies. In spite of the differences in age they all focus mainly on women’s issues, and as “Chinese” women who grew up in Canada they convey the generation gap, experiences of racism, and clashes of cultural values that are common elements in immigrant stories. In terms of sexuality, their films are predominantly about heterosexual women and their relationships with men. None of them directly addresses queer women’s sexuality issues in her films. In contrast, the four queer “Chinese” transmigrant women filmmakers who participated in this study often focus in their films on issues related to being queer. This may be one reason why they have never received any funding support from the NFB.

Evidently, queer sexuality is still considered marginal, and possibly potentially dangerous, especially when it intersects with issues of gendered race and ethnicity. Academic publications often can give us some hints about the prominent discourses about these issues. For example, a famous Canadian film scholar and critic, Thomas Waugh, who specializes in queer cinema in Canada and has published numerous articles and papers on queer cinemas in Canada. In *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas* (2006), he raises issues related to the linguistic and cultural divide between the predominantly French-speaking Quebec cinema and
English-speaking film from the rest of Canada, and Canada's substantial interventionist cultural policies. This certainly gives the readers a sense of his view of the mutual relationship between cinemas and nation-building. The second part of the book provides brief information of 340 filmmakers, video artists, and institutions. However, there are only two Chinese-Canadian filmmakers included, Richard Fung and Paul Wong, both of men. None of the queer “Chinese”-Canadian women filmmakers is discussed in this book.

The experience of queer transmigrant women from “Chinese” backgrounds is still conspicuously underrepresented in Canadian films. In Vancouver the only reliable opportunity to see films about queer “Chinese”-Canadian women’s issues and experiences is through “Out On Screen”, the annual Vancouver Queer Film Festival. Possibly due to the success of these screenings, in recent years, Vancouver’s well-attended Asian Film Festivals have also started to include some queer Asian-Canadian films or films related to queer Asian issues in their program.

Out On Screen

Since it was first established in 1999, Out On Screen has been a crucial promoter of queer media arts and an important force for building coalitions among various local queer communities. The festival takes place every August, and has played a significant

27 http://www.outonscreen.com/
role in maintaining and supporting independent queer Asian filmmakers, particularly emerging local young filmmakers. Its unique Out On Screen scholarship for training and equipment has made it possible for many young local first-time filmmakers (including Donna Lee and Debora O, as discussed below) to make short films to be screened at Vancouver’s Queer Film Festival. The key mission of the festival is to “involve the community in the programming process, to support local artists through exhibition, networking and/or training opportunities, to reject censorship, and to create a forum for dialogue and the exchange of information between communities.”\(^{28}\) As well as organizing the annual film festival, Out On Screen has also initiated the Out In Schools project\(^ {29}\) and the Queer History Project.\(^ {30}\) These commitments have helped to nourish local “Chinese” film communities and have created exciting exchanges across various communities.

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\(^{28}\) Quoted from the website: www.outonescreen.com

\(^{29}\) Bullying and homophobia are two serious issues that some queer youths have to face and deal with in their daily life at school. To raise awareness and understanding about the cause and impact of bullying and homophobia at school, the Out On Screen Film + Video Society began a pilot project in 2004, Out in Schools, bringing queer videos and films to local high schools, and collaborating with queer educators to facilitate discussion with students on bullying, homophobia and stereotypes. The purpose is to create a safe space to explore these issues in high schools. To find out more information, please check the website: http://www.outinschools.com/

\(^{30}\) The Queer History Project emerges from the idea that although we cannot choose the family we are born to but we can choose and create the families we want. Through film commissions, an art installation and an online conversation, this project records the history of queer people’s chosen families and our genealogies. For more information and upcoming projects, please check their website: http://www.queerfilmfestival.ca/content/QUEER_HISTORY/697.
There are two main funding sources for Out On Screen. One source of sponsorship is from state-run agencies such as the Government of British Columbia, the BC Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts, Canadian Heritage, and the City of Vancouver. The other main source of sponsorship is through private and corporate institutions (including banks, restaurants, a winery, a travel agency, a bookstore, a theatre) and fundraising events. From their advertisements, both in print and in the form of trailers before the actual screenings, it seems that Out On Screen predominantly relies on support from corporate sponsorship. To present Out on Screen’s close association with corporate culture might raise questions about their political integrity. However, they may have made a conscious decision to seek corporate support as this status has some practical advantages. Public funding tends to be inconsistent and unsustainable, as budget cuts beyond the filmmakers’ control can affect the availability of state-sponsored support. Studio D, in fact, is an obvious example. Even though accepting corporate sponsorships may risk seeming at odds with a commitment to socio-political activism, or may appear to be a sell-out to private enterprise, it is actually a mean of survival and currently a strategy that works to bring different communities together. This does remind us that film festivals, however radical they intend to be, are still commodities. The question here then is about accessibility: who are included and who are excluded in term of assumed and targeted audiences. It is also necessary to look at which filmmakers, programmers, activists, academics are invited to involve. This can give us an entry point to examine the politics of Out On Screen and help us to ask the
question of whether the festival is still progressive and inclusive, and if this inclusivity is tokenism in disguise.\footnote{I thank Dr. Lorraine Weir for her critical insights on this discussion.}

Nonetheless, Out On Screen is undoubtedly a major contributor to the success of emerging queer filmmakers of color in Vancouver. Their support is not merely in the form of funding for film production, but also training. Many transmigrant and/or queer people who are interested in making their own films never have access to any formal filmmaking training. The Out on Screen scholarship program offers intensive training in animation as well as other types of filmmaking, and the opportunity to screen the trainees’ final work at the festival. This is crucial as the exposure it helps with future distribution. All four queer “Chinese” women filmmakers in this study have been affiliated with Out On Screen. Lim and Xue have regularly shown their work at the festival and have participated in discussion panels. Lee and O were both trained by Out On Screen and their first films were screened there.\footnote{They are presented here in that order.}

At this point I will present the four filmmakers who are the focus of my project: Desiree Lim, Kai-Ling Xue, Deborah O and Donna Lee. The information provided comes mainly from the interviews I conducted with each of them.
Four Transmigrant Queer “Chinese” Women Filmmakers

Introducing Desiree Lim

The world would have been a really sad place for me if I had never come out to myself […] I am very, very grateful that I am gay. Because of the awareness of who I am, I am able to look at the world through different eyes. I don’t take things for granted. Nothing in my life I take for granted. (Lim 2007)

Desiree Lim was born in Malaysia to “Chinese” parents, and grew up there as a self-identified culturally diverse hybrid. She was an ardent Kendo player in high school and she and her family decided that it would be advantageous for her to pursue this art in Japan. After high school graduation she therefore went to Japan to train in Kendo and further her university education. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Journalism at Sophia University in Tokyo and ended up spending more than fifteen years as a young adult in Japan.

She chose not to go back to Malaysia to work in the media, because “as we know, there is no freedom of the press in Malaysia.” Instead, she produced news and

33 The quotes from the filmmakers in this chapter are from the interviews conducted from 2007 and 2008 in Vancouver.

34 Her father is Mainland “Chinese” and her mother is from Hong Kong. Her mother tongues are Mandarin and Cantonese, but she also speaks fluent Japanese and English.
Lim was already a successful TV producer and a promising amateur filmmaker in Japan before deciding, for various reasons, to immigrate to Canada. What initially motivated her to leave Japan was the distribution of her film, *Sugar Sweet* (2001), which was originally advertised as an authentic lesbian erotic film made by a lesbian filmmaker for a lesbian audience. The distribution company decided to change its target audience from lesbians to heterosexual male viewers, as lesbian erotic films had a
comparatively limited audience in Japan. The DVD cover featured two naked Japanese women posed in a way that did not appeal to lesbian viewers, and Lim was very upset about this decision. This unpleasant and disrespectful experience in Japan propelled her desire to make films in North America.

Lim became a landed immigrant in Canada in 2002, having applied through Hong Kong although she was living and working in Japan. She was curious about life in North America, having never lived here, and eager to discover a different city. Another reason for her to relocate was that she wanted to switch from TV to film. Her first feature film, *Sugar Sweet* (2001), was well received in North America, and this also encouraged her to migrate. She had heard that the queer Asian film industry was quite vibrant on the West Coast, and her first plan was to go to San Francisco, which she called “the gay Mecca.” However, it is hard to obtain any sort of work visa in the USA, and she was reluctant to stay there with only a visitor’s visa or work permit, as she had been in that situation for many years in Japan. She therefore decided to immigrate to Canada, and having visited Vancouver before and had a great experience in the city she decided to make this her base. After staying in Vancouver long enough to become eligible to apply for Canadian citizenship and travelling to various countries for her film screenings for several years, Lim is currently back in Japan. Her Canadian experience

35 The film opened to sold-out audiences in 300-600 seat theatres in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Miami, Vancouver, and other major sites of lesbian and gay film festivals.
and affiliation have earned her more opportunities for funding and the chance to participate in collaborative projects between Japan and Canada.

Lim sees the main function of her films as telling stories that would otherwise remain unheard. Her experience in Japan searching for queer women of color on screen was not her first frustration:

When I grew up, I watched Hollywood films. I watched American TV, British TV, and everything was white even though I grew up in Malaysia. So there is this deeply ingrained complex because we don’t see our own image, stories, you know […] How could you be living in one culture here and watching films with faces from Mars?

(Lim 2007)

Lim feels the need to increase the visibility of people like her, an Asian queer woman. Lack of recognition on screen results in the absence of objects for identification, and this contributes to a lack of any sense of belonging. This also explains why Lim cannot recall any role models in filmmaking. In truth, filmmakers like Lim are the pioneers who are creating role models for others, as there were no inspiring Asian queer women filmmakers for her when she first started making films.

As someone who supports political and social activism, Lim also sees her films as tools for both, and a medium to foster a stronger sense of belonging. If “the personal is the political,” then telling untold personal stories is indeed a political act. She explains that for her making “hopeful” films is a form of empowerment, as it gives the audience

36 When I asked her about what or who inspires her, she replied: “life and nature.” I asked again specifically who, but not what. She said that she cannot recall anyone.
positive impressions and a sense of hope. Making films has also been an empowering experience for Lim herself, particularly as a newcomer to Canada. The screenings gained her recognition and helped her to expand her personal network and connections. Film festivals and workshops have become a resource for personal networking: “You need to know someone to get work when you don’t have the ‘Canadian experience’ [....] People started to know about me through my films.”

For many queer filmmakers film also provides a way for them to come out, fulfilling an important personal function. Lim is one of them:

After I finished school, I went into TV… all that time I was sort of leading a double life because I couldn’t really come out at work, and in Japan the mainstream world and the underground world were really separated [....] When I made *Sugar Sweet* (2001) I totally came out as a queer filmmaker.

(Lim, OOS)  

When I asked Lim what “Chineseness” and “queerness” mean or have meant to her, both in her “home country” and since her immigration to Canada, she said: “I feel more queer than Chinese.” She added that she does not know which part of her is particularly Chinese. Being in Japan for such a long time and surrounded by mostly Japanese people, she did not feel “Chinese,” although ancient Chinese philosophy is important to her way of thinking. It was actually when she moved to Vancouver, being

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37 OOS is the abbreviation of Out On Screen. These quotes come from an interview posted on the website of Out On Screen without specified date on it. They are not from the interview from my research. I have asked permission to use them here in my dissertation.
surrounded Chinese people and Chinese restaurants, that she re-gained a sense of connection to Chineseness. Food is a big part of this connection. Lim feels that she does not lose her connection to Japanese culture in Vancouver either, as there is a large population of Japanese visitors and students in the downtown Robson Street area.

Being queer, for Lim, is obviously about sexuality, but there is more to it than that:

My perception of queer is that I am not part of the mainstream. I am an outcast, basically. In my case, a little bit like a fugitive, in some ways. It may not just be about sexuality; it is a way of life and it is the way you look at the world and how you relate to the world. To me, it is definitely out of the box. Ideally, breaking the chains of perception of gender, sexuality, and really going back to the deeper roots of who you are without all of the social expectations, you know, the imposition of who you should be cultural-wise or gender-wise. So to me, queer is about being myself, just be it. To be, it is not really so much about sexuality. It is part of it. It is to be subversive. To be who you are.

(Lim 2007)

I found the idea of being a “fugitive” very interesting: the word means a person who is fleeing from prosecution, from intolerable circumstances. Not so much as being a refugee as being elusive, avoiding being pinned down. These connotations resonate well with the idea of being queer as being indefinable, as well as designating someone who is running away from the mainstream; not hiding but moving about constantly.
Desiree Lim’s Films

Lim is prolific as an independent filmmaker. In terms of genre, she prefers comedy and realistic drama, particularly family drama. Two key characteristics, in my view, cause her work to be well received by different types of audience. First, the issues addressed are close to the everyday experiences of many people, whether they are queer or not. Secondly, humour is a key element, as Lim sees it as able to touch people across cultures and generations. She explains: “I am always in-between the states of feeling connected and disconnected […] I use humour to connect with people and with different cultures because humour is universal.”

Thematically, Lim’s films mostly focus on lesbian and queer people’s relationships, particularly their family dynamics. She added a layer of multicultural elements to her films when she moved to Vancouver. Another major focus of her work is the body politics of lesbian and queer women. Some explicit sex or nude scenes in some of her films make her work unique compared to that of other local “Chinese” queer women. Bringing sex directly into her films is very important to her, because “sex has all been made taboo, especially women’s bodies. We are made to feel ashamed of our bodies and sexuality. A lot of my work likes to challenge this notion and plays with gender and sexuality” (Lim, OOS). This brings out another interesting element in her films, the introduction of food. Lim cleverly plays with the sexual connotations and cultural meanings of food, which becomes a sexualized cultural sign in her films: “To
me food is like sex and sex is like food. It is something we desire and need. One of the purposes or themes of my work is to break the taboo on sex and sexuality, because religion and society have made sex dirty. But it is not.” Food is one way to broach forbidden topics indirectly.

Lim’s cultural backgrounds as well as her rich transmigrant experiences of living in various countries make her a multiple-lingual person. She speaks fluent Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, and English. This linguistic diversity of expression is also reflected in her films, which often make use of more than one language. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the body and language intersect in Lim’s representations of queer East Asian women.

Introducing Kai-Ling Xue

Kai-Ling Xue was born in Hualien, Taiwan, and moved to Vancouver in 1997 when she was seventeen. Both her parents are Taiwanese, and Xue speaks both Mandarin and Taiwanese fluently; she also spoke a limited amount of English before she immigrated. After finishing her education in English in Canada, Xue went to Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver in 2001 and graduated in 2007 with a BMA and BFA degree in Media Arts. She is currently an independent multi-media artist and filmmaker, and has been involved in leading workshops for the Project 8 Film Collective. This is a small group of independent filmmakers who make efforts to
provide accessible workshops and mentorship to people from various communities, particularly young children in Vancouver, by assisting and supporting their production of a short super 8mm film.\textsuperscript{38}

The decision to migrate was not initiated by Xue herself, as it was her mother’s choice, but Xue’s university education was the main reason. The high school system in Taiwan is highly competitive, as students aim for success in the entrance examination for the public universities, which are more affordable and prestigious than the private ones. Xue was in a special talent art class in high school in Taiwan, where there are few good art colleges. Xue’s mother, who was an English teacher in a local high school, thought it would be difficult for Xue to achieve a successful career related to her talent in arts if she remained in Taiwan. Xue’s family traveled to Vancouver for a visit and enjoyed the city. While in Vancouver, her mother had the idea that letting Xue stay here might offer her more options for career development. The family moved to Vancouver in 1997, except for Xue’s father who had to stay and work in Taiwan in order to support the family’s new life abroad. At first, they lived in suburban Port Coquitlam, because Xue’s mother was aware of the large Mandarin-speaking populations in Vancouver and Richmond and wanted Xue to be surrounded by a mostly white neighbourhood in order to improve her English quickly.

\textsuperscript{38} All works made in this program will be screened together in a final exhibition, usually in the summer. Information comes from http://www.myspace.com/project8info.
After one year, Xue’s mother and her younger brother and sister returned to Taiwan. Xue stayed here on her own because she was accepted by Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Xue describes this decision to live alone in Vancouver: “It was very scary but it definitely helped my personal growth […] I have a new sense of empowerment, you know, like I can do anything here in Vancouver. It feels like I have a brand new life: no one knows you, and your family is not around.” Not only did Xue feel a sense of safety in not having to worry about the judgment of her family, but her detachment from them also generated a growing sense of identity in her: “This was the first time I ever experienced cultural displacement, and it led me to think about who I am. It was from here that I started to encounter the issue or sense of identity.”

Xue has always been interested and gifted in art, but she did not have a particular interest in film until she studied in the Media and Art program at Emily Carr. As part of the requirements of the program, Xue took a filmmaking class. Her first autobiographical film, *A Girl Named Kai* (2004), was very favourably received not just locally but outside of Canada. Not only did this experience give her confidence in her filmmaking ability, it made her realize that people actually wanted to know her story. Another reason for Xue to devote herself to filmmaking came from the influence of courses on queer theory and feminist theory, which inspired her thinking about race, gender, and sexuality issues. In those classes, Xue realized that film is a very powerful medium for re-creating images and revising stereotypes of women, and it is also an efficient tool to reach the public very quickly.
Once Xue realized the power of film to question assumptions about gender, sexuality, and appearance, drawing attention to these became a key function of her films: “My work explores feminism, race, sexuality, gender and queer issues. Most often, I use myself as the focus of the subject matter […] I would like to trigger the viewer to ask questions, provoke conversation, and at the same time inspire deeper awareness.” The most recent example is her graduation project at Emily Carr, where she created a collage presenting multiple images of ambivalent gender. As the subject of the photos, Xue performs a grooming ritual commonly associated with maleness and masculinity, in order to challenge the viewers’ taken-for-granted assumptions about the character’s gender. Another function of Xue’s films, as in the work of other young Asian queer filmmakers, is that they become a tool to come out to family and friends. By inviting them to see her films, she reveals and claims her queer sexuality.

Like Lim, Xue sees her films as both personal and political. Filmmaking, conveying her process of self-discovery, can inspire viewers to go on a similar journey of self-discovery, possibly also through filmmaking: “It is through film that I know who I really am. If I don’t know who I am, I just feel uncertain. If I know who I am, then I feel I can go on to live my life.”

When I asked Xue what “Chineseness” and “queerness” meant to her before her immigration to Canada and how the experience of being a transmigrant has influenced her perceptions of these concepts, she said that she did not really think about “Chineseness” when she was in Taiwan; it was only after immigrating to Vancouver
that this became something more obvious and something she thought of more often. This is “because the cultural habitat here is very different from the cultural habitat in Taiwan, so that causes more thoughts […] because that I did not think about being Chinese per se.” “Chineseness” can be taken for granted when it means being the same as everyone else, but not when it means being different. “Queerness”, on the other hand, is never a majority position.

In terms of her self-perception of being “queer”, which is something she started to be aware of during her teenage years, Xue noticed that she was popular among female classmates; they would go to see her art shows in order to see her. She has always been a tomboy and attracted to androgynous figures rather than typical males. Pondering her teenage experience, she said:

I thought I might be transgender or lesbian at that time; it was a learning curve through time, really. It is not that I knew I was queer immediately at a certain time; rather, it is a back and forth learning and self-discovering process for me. Gender is rather fluid and it is a spectrum.

(Xue 2007)

Xue’s definition of queer includes “weird,” “out of the ordinary,” “new,” “undefined,” and “not in the normal spectrum.” She sees being queer as self-identifying as someone who does not define himself or herself as heterosexual, but there is ambiguity about that definition: the person is not right away put into another box as either gay or lesbian. In Xue’s view, a lesbian is a woman who knows she could be attracted to women in a sexual way, whereas the term queer encompasses more than homosexuality in
opposition to heterosexuality--it questions the binary, and she believes there is more acceptance of queerness among different communities.

**Kai-Ling Xue’s Films**

Xue’s films are generally experimental and autobiographical. With her professional training in filmmaking, Xue’s work is more technically complex than that of some other young independent queer women filmmakers. The style of her films is greatly influenced by technical possibilities, for example, her use of different filters creates intense color contrast or black and white effects to evoke different moods. As a student in a professional media arts program, Xue also had low-cost access to high-grade equipment and skilled technicians and even musicians to contribute to her work. This has made music and sound effects crucial aspects of her films. For example, in *A Girl Named Kai* (2004), the audio part of the film can be considered as a layer of the film’s narration. Xue has observed that the “normal” style expected of female filmmakers is usually softer. To distinguish her work from others, she has always tried to tone down the “feminine” side of a film in order to present female strength and pride, to give her audience the feeling that they are watching “an epic” or “a female journey.” The raw feeling of Xue’s films is achieved through an experimental style, with the assistance of technical complexity. This aspect of her work gives the audience an original and refreshing viewing experience.
The themes of Xue’s films generally concern the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, and how they affect the life and experience of Asian queer youth like herself living in a multicultural city. Her ideas are informed by feminism and queer theory. As for Lim, film is a means to both personal and political expression for Xue, who asks: “How could you not be political if you are Asian? If you are queer? If you are a woman”? She wants to share the experiences of people who embody all of these traits, and challenge people’s assumptions about what they see, to convey her message: “I am proud of myself being queer,” and “I have depth, it is not just on the surface that I am queer.”

Xue is also interested in language, in terms of labels and classifications of who counts as lesbian or queer. Thanks to her transmigrant experience, she is now fluent in English, but she has retained the ability to speak Mandarin and Taiwanese. Her work so far is almost exclusively in English, as she prefers to target local and global audiences who are English speakers. There are also practical differences involved in bringing different languages into a short film. Using subtitles involves time and money, which is the main reason why most independent filmmakers tend to avoid them. Nevertheless, Xue’s films convey communication across languages and cultures.
Introducing Debora O

Our family never talks about race, never. It is one of the unspoken things because to speak of race is like to divide the family […] So you always feel your family is an Island unto itself.

(O 2007)

Debora O was born in Lisbon, Portugal, to a father of “Chinese” descent from the Portuguese colony of Macau, near Hong Kong, and a Portuguese mother. In 1975 when she was five years old, her family moved from Portugal to Canada because of a threat of communist revolution. They immigrated to Toronto, where two of her mother’s brothers already lived. Her parents were hoping that both sides of the family could eventually live together in Canada. However, the political situation in Portugal resolved itself peacefully, so the rest of her mother’s extended family remained there, while her father’s family members went back to live in Macau, which was returned to China in 1999. Since living in Canada, O has lost contact with her mother’s side of family, but has spent time in Macau.

As a mixed-race person, O has experienced unique racialized and gendered dynamics within her family, between her parents and between herself and her sister. O’s father is from Macau, while her mother is from Portugal, which colonized Macau from 1887 to 1999. There were delicate gendered dynamics between her parents rooted in the colonial context. O says that most of the time when she was growing up she could pass as a white person. It was not until her university life at Queen’s University in Kingston,
Ontario, that she had her first experience of feeling herself to be a racial other. She found it particularly difficult to talk about this experience with her mother, who comes from the side of the colonizer, but says that it is challenging to talk about racism within her extended family on both sides: “Even your uncles and aunts would not understand it. Everyone wants to claim you for his or her own purpose. So my uncles and aunts on my mom’s side always see me as Portuguese and my uncles and aunts on my dad’s side always see me as Chinese, there is no in-between.”

The relationship with her sister shows another complex layer of their mixed-race family, based on the possibility of passing as white:

My sister actually has a darker skin than I do. It is all about physicality, particularly for mixed-race, I think. Sometimes I can pass as white, and sometimes I don’t. It all depends on the context. She has always been darker. She cannot pass as white. She got teased a lot when she was a kid. People always think she is South Asian or Pakistani. So they will call her names and stuff. But she never talked about this to me. She never talks about this to my family [...] It is a separation between us, and I think we know even without talking about it. We know. I think she knows.

(O 2007)

It seems each family member has different racialized experiences due to the difference in their skin color and facial features, which makes it hard to communicate as none of them can really relate to the others’ experiences. Perhaps the most difficult thing about this separation is the silence among the family members in regard to their racial experiences, when each of them has an unspoken understanding of the complicated
power dynamics of interracial marriage and mixed-race children. It almost becomes a taboo subject that could break the family apart.

O did not have much contact with the “Chinese” side of her family until her late teen years. O’s grandfather belonged to the nationalist party in Macau. In the 1960s, there was a lot of pressure in Macau for educated intellectuals to go back to China to help in national and cultural development. Her father did not want to go back because he disagreed with the communist ideology. However, her parents separated when O was fifteen years old and her father moved back to Macau. For three years, she did not have much contact with him. Then she started to visit him every summer with her younger sister. In spite of the unbearable weather, her first visit to Macau was a pleasant experience for her:

I loved it, because Macau is full of people who look like me. I had never been to any country walking down the streets and seeing people who look like me and think I am a local. Or strangers will say “hi” to me because they somehow recognize me, something in me that is similar. That does not happen here [...] that kind of intimacy with strangers. I realize that I really miss that and I never had that before.

(O 2007)

These family experiences make Debora O a writer/poet and video artist who is always interested in exploring the material and immaterial realities of living in mixed-race/queer bodies. She moved to Vancouver to study and obtained a Master’s of Arts degree from the English Department at the University of British Columbia. O has always been concerned with the issues mixed-race queers face in both academic and
activist contexts. She has worked as an education and research coordinator for the Simon Fraser University Public Interest Research Group, a student funded and directed resource centre at SFU (Burnaby, British Columbia) that supports environmental and social change through research, education and action. She is currently teaching literature and critical theory at Emily Carr University of Media and Art Design in Vancouver. Working in educational institutions, O has contributed to bridging the gap between academic activism and community activism, as well as demonstrating the role of the arts in both. O’s interest in filmmaking was originally sparked by frustration with language, which evoked her desire to pursue different forms of creative expression:

When I finished my Master’s degree here at UBC, I realized that I struggle a lot with language, linguistic language. Not because I am still learning it (yes, of course I am still learning it), but because English is my second language. Sometimes I feel, in formal contexts like essay writing or thesis writing, that what I was trying to say or express gets lost, and I have always been interested in more creative ways of writing. I started to introduce that more into my work with personal voice […] But it is a weird thing doing postcolonial studies and being postcolonial, ‘cause all of sudden you become the work […] But increasingly when I was writing my MA thesis, I just became more and more aware that language is not enough, not enough. I feel very frustrated.

(O 2007)
When O moved back to Vancouver from Hong Kong where she studied Mandarin and Cantonese in 1996, she found a group of queer and mixed-race people were involved in the Powell Street Festival in downtown Vancouver where Chinatown is located. After getting involved and volunteering for several years, O was invited to do a collaborative show about mixed-race family wedding photos, with Mike Spire. During that experience, O remembered that she had always had a very strong sense of visual vocabulary since she was young, from the influence of her father who was an amateur photographer. Realizing that images are a way to escape from language, O was eager to find opportunities to experiment with creative expression through images, and had an idea for some short video poems. In 2003, she saw a poster about an Out On Screen scholarship for making a video, and applied right away. She received the scholarship, and this experience not only started O’s career in filmmaking, but created a sense of belonging for her: “I also got to know people who worked in VIVO because there is such a sense of community and it is an art community which I really did not have connection to except for Powell Street Festival [....] I became more identified with that community.”

In 2008, the Out On Screen office contacted O and told her they would like to commission her to do a five-minute segment as a part of larger piece on queer activism.

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39 VIVO Media Art Centre is a non-profit media production, exhibition and distribution centre run by and for local artists and media/community activists. VIVO also offers workshops and film equipment rental. It was founded in 1973 and has received private funding and governmental funding including the British Columbia Arts Council, the Province of British Columbia, the City of Vancouver, and the Canada Council for the Arts, etc. For more info, please check: http://www.videoinstudios.com/.
O was surprised about the offer, for as she says: “I am not really identified as an activist so much although the work I do is about advocating for community rights. It is activism but it is not […] It is more activism through education and through training, mentoring people, and through story-telling”.

O’s work has a unique role bridging education, community, and activism. She is very aware of her target audience: “I am always thinking how this film can inspire people to question community and reflect on community, because I think the word ‘community’ is going around a lot. But it is not until you are really isolated and alienated that you really truly understand the meanings of community. Hmm, it is not really about political rights anymore or anything. But it is about not being alone.” O sees her films as less directly political than some, because she wants to connect to the audience through emotions rather than preaching:

I tend to try and appeal more to an emotion or a connection to a more subtle kind of critique or analysis. Because I don’t want to be that didactic, like I don’t want to tell people how they should think about a particular issue. But I also don’t want to be objective, like, yeah, this could be this way or could be that way. This is just the kind of person I am in the world. This is how I see things and this is how I present them. And that in itself is political.

(O 2007)

I appreciate O’s work because she consciously avoids re-presenting or re-enacting what she is against. Sometimes people object to being preached at and fight for the right to
think independently, but what they do ends up being a way to try to force others to believe what they believe. In my view, although O’s work is very personal, it shows how the personal is political, as others can identify with her. They can share her desire for public self-expression: “I think for people of color and queers, we either have shame around expressing our identities or have questions about our identities, and so we are not given space to do that.” This seems to be a common thread running through the stories of these queer independent filmmakers: by making themselves visible they create space for themselves and a community of others like them.

When I asked O what “queerness” and “Chineseness” mean to her as a mixed-race person, she said:

> [Q]ueer is that sense of being outside the mainstream, outside hetero-normativity, and I think when you are racialized, especially in North America, you are also outside that mainstream hetero-normativity [….] For me, my sense of ethnicity is very queer. I think of myself as queer on many levels, not just gender. In fact, I think I am more queer racially than gender-wise because, you know, I don’t struggle as much about my gender as some queers. But I do struggle a lot with my race, my racial identities. So I think that being in-between is being more queer.

(O 2007)

This expands the conventional view of “queer”, which is mostly associated with sexuality and/or gender. It reveals the multiple layers of “queerness”, and resonates with what was mentioned in the previous chapter about Butler’s argument on race and
heterosexuality working hand-in-hand. This view of being racially queer gives some hints of her relationship to “Chineseness”:

It is complicated for me because I am not pure Chinese. It is not just a racial thing but also cultural. I did not grow up in Asia […] My struggle with Chineseness is even one step removed from that because visibly I don’t think many people see me as Chinese. So when I hang out with other Chinese people, it is so weird, (laugh), then I am seen as Chinese. But when I am at mostly other ethnic gatherings, then nobody sees me as Chinese. So it is kind of a weird thing, and often people are shocked when I speak Chinese, or they find out that I understand them. So my sense of Chineseness is really…very…contextual. When I went to University at Queens, that is when I realized that I am really other, that is when I realized people see me, not necessarily as Chinese, but as Other. And of course, I identify my otherness with Chineseness, not with Portugueseness. That is when I started to explore what that means to me, to be a Chinese Other.

(O 2007)

As being “queer” is often described as being “other,” I can understand why O describes herself as racially queer. The feeling of being a “Chinese Other” is shared by many “Chinese” immigrants in host countries, who also end up feeling “Other” in relation to “Chineseness”. Being of a person of mixed-race brings this to the fore.
Debora O’s Films

As a poet as well as a filmmaker, O is interested in combining words and images together. This motivates her to make video poems with film footage and still photos. Her films are autobiographical and in a poetic and experimental style. She creates new materials but also draws on family photo albums and home movies as sources in her attempts to understand more about the history of her family and her communities through exploring the issues of memory. Her preference for using photos and home videos itself seems to hint a sense of loss.

O also explores mixed-race queer women’s body politics, the surface of the racialized body, the issue of passing, and racialized gender dynamics within the mixed-race family. O’s cultural background and transmigrant experiences have made her multilingual: English, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Portuguese are all part of her life, though her films so far are all in English, with the exception of one sound track in Chinese in Blood (2004) As is true for the other filmmakers, her choice of language is governed by funding opportunities as well as her intended audience.

Introducing Donna Lee

Donna Lee is a second-generation “Chinese”-Canadian living in Vancouver, where she grew up. Her grandparents originally came from Hong Kong, but both of her
parents were raised in Vancouver. Lee does not speak either Cantonese or Mandarin Chinese. Although she is not herself an immigrant, being both “Chinese” and Canadian has had a great impact on her:

Being Chinese means being part of a family collective, whether or not I knew it when I was growing up. I was surrounded by family, by rituals and traditions which I appreciated as my normal upbringing. Also, being raised in Canada meant that I was influenced by an ideology which is more about individuality and being unique. Queerness aside, these two cultures definitely clash in this regard, as I feel conflicted about collective and individual responsibilities, especially as the eldest child.

(Lee 2008)

Lee is a high school teacher, an independent filmmaker, and a long-time activist. She has been involved as a front-line worker in various local women’s and refugee non-governmental organizations in Vancouver. Her work, whether it is visual or in print, is always concerned with marginal groups, particularly women, immigrants, and refugees in Canada. She has made four shorts, including three videos and one animation. Her films are concerned with issues such as mental illness, as well as lesbian body politics and the intersections of race, gender, and class. Her most recent work explores her family history in relation to the Chinese Head Tax and how this policy affected her family, tragically separating them from each other and their roots. Lee documents how, after two generations, the descendants of those who paid the Head Tax fought successfully for redress from the government.
Before making her first short video, Lee did not realize her passion for visual art. She was more into music and writing and how to bridge them with social activism. She has played in bands that perform at political events, and as a teenager, she wrote for various newspapers as a teenager, including Little Mountain Neighbourhood House’s *Moving Time* (1985). She published in several university and college papers, such as SFU’s *The Peak*, and those put out by Langara College’s Students of Color Group, the Third World Alliance, etc.

It was almost by accident that Lee became involved in filmmaking. In 2003, she found out that Out on Screen had just started offering film-training scholarship for people who had no experience. Lee thought she would write something short and funny in one page to submit just for fun. It only took her half a day to write it, so she did not expect that the proposal would be accepted and was surprised when she got the scholarship. This experience sparked Lee’s passion for short videos. A year later, when Out On Screen offered an animation scholarship, Lee wrote a short proposal once more and won the scholarship. All her training has come from the Out On Screen scholarship programs. Lee has worked on combining her passion for music and writing into her films, and said that making beautiful films is her top priority right now: “Of course, beautiful is subjective but my goal with each piece is to tell a story, and try to make it visually appealing. I think of my film/video as a musical medium, too. I say that as a musician, where rhythm, timing and conciseness matter.”
How does Lee see the function of her films? Her response was: “I think everyone has an agenda, whether or not they admit to it. I hope that my video/films will provoke thinking from a new perspective, or give more information on an issue.” Giving more information on an issue is very crucial when there are not many representations of that issue, as Lee explains:

I have made four shorts, all of which have representations of Chineseness and/or queerness. It is important to me to have an outlet to talk about issues that I don’t see represented elsewhere. I am always excited to watch another Asian artist use and abuse Asia, addressing queer, gender, class issues as there are so few mainstream representations.

(Lee 2008)

While Lee consciously sees her films as a medium for potential social change and activism, they have had another effect that she did not expect to see: the healing that happened to her family when she made The Broken Family (2008), the story about the Chinese Head Tax. It not only helped her to understand the family history, but also gave her father a conduit for sharing his story and their family stories. Lee said this has been very therapeutic to her father and his family both in Hong Kong and in Vancouver.

Donna Lee’s Films

Perhaps Lee’s background as a non-professionally trained filmmaker gives her more space to explore options of style and ways of story-telling. She has tried different
genres including comedy, documentary, animation, and experimental style. As a second-generation Chinese-Canadian, cultural hybridity is not only her everyday life experience, but also a crucial element of style in her film. Talking about The Broken Family (2008), she said: “I am able to combine my Chinese and Canadianness in telling this very Chinese-Canadian story.”

The themes in Lee’s work range from the body to culture, family, community, race, class, sexuality, and mental illness. But one thing she always keeps in mind when she makes a film is that it should be both educational and entertaining. She is tired of watching sad and tragic queer representations on the screen. Not only can these images disengage people who just want to be entertained, but they are also very discouraging and disempowering for queer people, “as if they are doomed for being queer.” So Lee wants to make people laugh while challenging their taken-for-granted assumptions on various issues. Her intended audience is local and Anglophone, so it is not surprising that her films are in English, as is the case for the other filmmakers in most instances.

**Differences Among the Four Filmmakers**

These four women represent a wide range of experiences. The first major difference among them is their cultural backgrounds and transmigration history: Lim is a Malaysian-born “Chinese” permanent resident in Canada who lived in Japan for many years before she immigrated to Vancouver and has now moved back there because of
funding and job opportunities. Xue is a Taiwanese-born “Chinese”-Canadian who travels frequently between Canada and Taiwan. O is a Portuguese-born “Chinese”-Canadian who travels frequently between Macau, Portugal, and Canada. Lee is a second-generation Hong Kong “Chinese”-Canadian who mostly stays in Canada, but her work has travelled to Taipei, Europe, and other parts of North America.

The second major difference is their linguistic ability. Lim is multi-lingual, speaking fluent Mandarin, Japanese, Malay, English, and Cantonese. Xue is tri-lingual with fluent Mandarin, Taiwanese, and English. O is also multi-lingual, speaking fluent English and Portuguese and able to communicate in Mandarin and Cantonese. Lee is the only monolingual person among them, a native English speaker. Their linguistic ability relates closely to their transmigrant experiences. The first three filmmakers have all gone through various processes of displacement and have the sense of having lost a country whenever they leave for a new place. In contrast, Lee’s family’s experience with the Head Tax can be seen as a form of lost history, a transmigration in time rather than in space. Nonetheless, whether it is travel in space or in time, their migration history, cultural background, and linguistic ability influence their experience and sense of a racialized gender identity and queer sexuality. In each case their sense of “Chineseness” is highly contextualized and intersectional.

Another difference among them is their training backgrounds. Only Lim and Xue have professional filmmaking training, while O and Lee were trained through short intensive scholarships provided by Out On Screen. Besides that, Lim has been making
films since the late 1990s, which is much longer than Xue who started her filmmaking in early 2000 as a school project. Both Lee and O started filmmaking in 2004 through the Out On Screen scholarship program. These two factors, the amount and level of training and length of their experience in filmmaking, affect their access to the professional filmmaking community as well as to sources of funding for film production.

Moreover, there are also significant differences as well as similarities in the styles, genres, and themes of their films. Lim made several experimental shorts before she started to receive funding to make feature films, which are usually comedies and/or family dramas. Her major themes include the family dynamics experienced by queer children, gender politics between lesbians, sexual desire, and dyke visibility. Visually explicit depictions of lesbian sexual desire and pleasure distinguish Lim from the other three filmmakers in this study.

Although she has only so far made short films, Lee’s work covers diverse genres including animation, experimental video, comedy, and documentary. Her work often challenges stereotypical representations of both queer and non-queer racialized gender roles. Other major themes of her films include everyday life experiences of East Asian queer women, dyke visibility, the family history of “Chinese”-Canadian, and mental illness. Like Lim, Lee often employs humour in her films. However, there are different intentions behind their humour. For Lim, it provides comic relief in the difficult situations many queer people face in their daily life. It also conveys a universal reaction
that can connect people across many barriers. For Lee, humour is for entertainment. She believes it is important to make films about queer issues that are both radical and enjoyable.

Xue and O’s films are more about a journey of self-discovery or a search for one’s complex identity. Xue’s films are mostly experimental shorts, which allow for creative expression. The content often interrogates assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality, as well as examining the complexity of queer women’s experiences. O prefers to combine visual and linguistic elements and presents her films in the form of video poems including still photos, super 8 footage, and written text. Her main concerns are the body politics of mixed-race women, family history and memory, and the gender dynamics of an interracial family.

In the two chapters that follow, I will look more closely at their films, dividing the discussion into two parts. The first will focus on representations of the physical body and sexuality, referring back to Butler’s theories, as discussed in Chapter 1. The second will develop the concept of “disidentification” introduced by Munoz, in relation to the cultural content of their films. In both cases, film theory will inform the analysis, as form and content are ultimately inseparable.
Chapter 3 Content Analysis: The Body in Question

I will now turn to a more detailed analysis of the four filmmakers’ works, beginning in this chapter with a focus on their representations of the queer “Chinese” female body. In *Women Crossing Boundaries* (1999), a psychological study of women’s migration using personal narratives, Oliva M. Espín claims that such narratives offer the opportunity of “speaking the unspeakable” (29), from minority women’s own perspectives. In particular she argues that “gender becomes the site to claim the power denied to immigrants by racism […] Women become the means of asserting moral superiority in a racist society […] Women are often forced to embody the cultural continuity amid cultural dislocation” (1999, 7). In her view, it is the forced embodiment of “cultural continuity amid cultural dislocation” in immigrant women’s bodies that makes these bodies important and necessary sites to study. Here I will be talking about transmigrant women’s bodies that may be expected to embody conformity and continuity, but do not, since they are queer; or they may conform in some ways but not in others. These filmmakers draw attention to displaced “Chinese” queer women’s bodies in new ways.

There has been a change of emphasis among feminists in the ways in which the female body is understood and perceived. Additionally, there is increasing awareness that certain bodies have been excluded or made invisible in public representation,
particularly in mainstream films. Presenting any/body is always potentially problematic. Postmodern and poststructuralist theorists and artists have questioned the so-called natural body as a fixed given, suggesting instead a textual and culturally produced and performed corporeality that is fluid in its investments and meanings. In this view, there has never been a single human “body,” but rather multiple bodies, marked not only by one of two assigned genders but by an infinite array of differences as well—race, class, sexuality, age, size, mobility, or attractiveness, to name a few. It is crucial to point out that the marginalized body is not simply devalued because of one single factor among those mentioned, rather, these factors intersect in ways that often change, depending on where the body is situated in a particular temporal and spatial context. These contexts affect the way the body acts, reacts, and interacts. Feminist scholars were the first to expand the view of bodies in various disciplines.

The body has become the site of intense inquiry, and I am interested here in the specific contextual materiality of how the bodies of a range of transmigrant queer “Chinese” women living in Vancouver intersect in time and space through multiple fluid processes. The works of the filmmakers discussed in this study provide complex and as yet rarely explored material through which to address issues of racialized, gendered, sexualized bodies that are most often ignored or hidden, rendered invisible.
Body Theory

As explained in Chapter 1, the theoretical framework of my analysis will be based on poststructuralist approaches to the body. Michel Foucault (1976/1990; 1975/1977) has been one of the most influential theorists among those who see the body as a site on and through which discourses are enacted and contested; for Foucault, the body is constituted through discursive processes. Since discourses change in different times and spaces, the body is always subject to change and can never be regarded as “natural” for it is always historically and culturally specific. A professor of Biology and Gender Studies, Anne Fausto-Sterling, claims that “[w]e literally…and discursively construct our bodies, incorporating experience into our very flesh” (2000, 20). She adds that our “bodily experiences are brought into being by our development in particular cultural and historical periods” (Ibid.). In her view, the distinction between the physical and social body needs to be erased, and we need to see “the body as a system that simultaneously produces and is produced by social meanings” (2000, 23). In the case of the work of these transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers’ work, we need to be cautious about which intersecting social and cultural contexts generate meanings, and how.

Butler argues that what we call sexual difference (the male/female dichotomy) is not “a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’” (1993, 2). The body and sex are discursively produced through a
network of power relations. Influenced by Foucault, Butler believes that “power is productive and formative” (1993, 35), and that one of the most effective aspects of the “regime of power/discourse” (Ibid.) is the material effects produced by what is often unjustifiably marked as a primary “biological” given, which becomes a “taken-for-granted ontology” (Ibid.). Butler attempts to unmask the dialectical nature of the process of materialization as an investiture of discourse and power, as power is constitutive of materiality, including the body, while the body is itself constitutive of power and discourse. Foucault’s and Butler’s work on the body and its relationship with discourse and power are extremely useful in re-thinking what might be perceived as a natural body with “innate” characteristics. Foucault’s idea of a “docile body” (1975/1977) has provided particularly fertile ground for feminist analyzes that make clear the links between the everyday body, as it is lived especially by women, and the regime of disciplinary and regulatory practices that shape its forms and behaviours. Foucault argues that power relations are not seamless: “where there is power, there is always resistance” (Bordo 1999, 254). This is an important aspect of these filmmakers’ work, which illustrates a form of resistance which is in a working relationship with dominant mainstream ideology. However, neither Foucault nor Butler pays much consideration to race or class in discussing the discursive construction of gendered bodies, although these aspects are crucial in terms of analyzing representations of mixed-race or dis-placed bodies. The analysis in this chapter and the next will expand
on the gaps in these theoretical views, paying attention to the intersections of gender, race, and class in filmic representations of queer “Chinese” women.

The focus in this chapter will be on filmic representations of the body. Several different types of queer women’s bodies are presented in the films studied, including the erotic body, the body gendered as queer, the performative body, the pornographic body, the de-sexualized body, the absent body, and the partial body. Detailed description of some scenes will be provided to assist the analysis of these body images.

**Filmic Body Images**

As mentioned in the last chapter, Lim is the only filmmaker in this study who had already made films before immigrating to Canada. I have chosen to include Sugar Sweet (2001), which she made in Japan, in this discussion, in order to compare it to the films she later made in Canada. This film represents queer Japanese women’s bodies, and the different types of lesbian images evoked provide points of comparison with her later work.
**Sugar Sweet (2001): The Erotic Lesbian Body**

This is Lim’s first hour-long feature film, and tells the story of a Japanese lesbian filmmaker, Naomi, who struggles to negotiate between following her dream, which is to become a great lesbian filmmaker producing films for and about lesbians, while being commissioned to make a lesbian erotic film for a heterosexual pornographic production company. The story is also about Naomi’s personal love life. Despite all the challenges she faces in making the lesbian erotic film that her male producers expect, Naomi finds comfort in a sweet, innocent girl called Sugar, whom she meets through an on-line website, Lavender Heaven.

This film includes several significant representations of erotic lesbian sex, including the opening scene, a scene depicting masturbation, and one showing S & M. These scenes present several unique erotically charged racialized female bodies. The opening scene provides a rare look at lesbian intimacy, as we see one woman gently caress another woman’s bare breasts and lick her nipples, the camera moving slowly over the curves of the female body. The images are slightly out-of-focus, with soft lighting that gives them a dreamy quality. These images convey the sensitivity of female-to-female eroticism, rather than constituting a display of sexually explicit images aimed at male sexual stimulation, as is common in mainstream heterosexual erotic films. As the story progresses, we realize this scene is also being watched by two
male producers who are evaluating it as a clip from the sex film they have hired a 
lesbian director, Naomi, to make.

Both male producers are dissatisfied and tell Naomi that her work will not sell. They complain that the footage of sex scenes in her film is not even in focus enough to see the female body parts clearly. They ask her if she actually knows what the point of pornography is. They remind her that pornography is to arouse men, and they are disappointed as they expected that as a lesbian, an insider, she could explore and reveal the real erotic world of lesbian sex in an alluring way. One of the male producers even comments, “If we want to see art, we’ll go to a museum, not the theatre.” To give her some idea of what they expect, they show her a clip of another film entitled *Wet and Juicy Girls*. Although there is no man in it, this clip reproduces the patterns of conventional heterosexual pornography, focusing on close-up shots of breasts, the genital area, bottom, etc. This de-humanizes the female person into mere body parts, rather than representing her as a whole subject. The soundtrack includes little conversation between the characters, favouring fake moans evoking female orgasm. Hoping that Naomi will be inspired by this clip, they ask her to re-shoot the film.

The climax of the film lies in a variety of lesbian sex scenes, including S&M role-playing and oral sex between two actresses Miki and Azusa in Naomi’s film. We see Miki tie up Azusa and blindfold her, gently caress her, and whip her. Azusa seems to enjoy the role-playing. The wide-angle camera shot includes both Azusa and Miki on the screen, instead of a narrow focus on body parts. Then we see Miki change her
outfit, putting on a feminine, mini-skirted dress, which exposes her breasts, with a dildo under her skirt. Wielding a prop whip, Miki is obviously encoded as a dominatrix. Although we are not shown the reversal of their roles on screen, we see that later Miki becomes the receiver of sex acts, conveying a fluidity in lesbian sex role-playing.

Another version of the queer female erotic body is presented in Miki’s dance scene, where we see her put on heavy make-up, thick fake eyelashes, and a wig. She wears a bright red underwear-like outfit made of latex and silicon. Although it is almost a second skin, this outfit is not like the usual tight latex. It has particular shapes around the chest area, which make Miki look as if she has huge bare breasts, and is performing half-naked on stage. The make-up and outfit give Miki a plastic look, almost like the female animations in some male fantasy representations. She seems almost half-human and half-anime. Moreover, she dances with dramatic movements and sometimes sings (or rather shouts) with the loud music. Her exaggerated facial expressions remind the audience of typical heavy metal musicians’ performances. This mixture of East Asian anime and Western hard rock is neither a simple imitation of Western pop culture nor a reproduction of the usual Orientalist images of East Asian women. Miki’s stage persona is half-anime and half-human combination; this ambivalent image seems to mock both the Japanese and Western heterosexual male fantasy of the East Asian female body and sexuality.

In all these erotic scenes, the camera is slightly out of focus, creating a dreamy and romantic mood. The cameras are often placed at a distance, using a wide-angle lens
to show the entirety of the female body on screen (with a focus on the curves); there are very few close-up shots of body parts or faces. I see this as Lim’s way of showing multiple sexualized zones spread across the female body, instead of limiting attention to only the breasts and genital areas, as favoured in pornographic films for heterosexual male viewers. Moreover, Lim shows us a striking contrast between the opening lesbian sex scene by Naomi and the clip presented by the two male producers, revealing the challenge Naomi faces as a lesbian filmmaker working in the mainstream film industry. Ideas of the erotic still remain rooted in heterosexual male fantasy, excluding lesbian audiences and preventing the development of a lesbian film aesthetic that would appeal to them. Yet the presentation of this contrast indicates that the existence of a potential lesbian viewer is imagined, implying a non-conforming, lesbian gaze that contests the dominant male one.

The Lesbian Gaze

It is inadequate to discuss a possible lesbian gaze without referring to the concept of the “male gaze,” first introduced by Laura Mulvey in 1975. Her article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) is still cited in nearly all anthologies of film theory. Mulvey was the first film theorist to bring psychoanalytic theory (particularly Freudian theories of the Oedipus complex and castration, and Lacan’s theory of the Imaginary and the Symbolic) into the consideration of sexual difference as
a central issue in film theory. She argues that women in films are seen as “castrated others” and thus cannot be the makers but only the bearers of meaning. She claims that because of this, “unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (1989, 19), and the spectator’s position is thus always a male one. This male gaze is achieved through three basic elements of narrative film: the point of view of the camera; the ways in which editing puts us in the position of the male character (i.e. we are looking through the male characters’ eyes); and the ways in which the script (the structure of the narrative) encourages us to identify with the male hero. The woman-as-spectator can only identify with either the female character as the object of male assessment, or the male protagonist who subjects the female object of desire to his sadistic and/or fetishistic gaze. In her view, cinema provides two kinds of pleasure: voyeuristic and narcissistic, and both contribute to the binary gender imbalance, i.e. male/active/subject of the gaze/desire and female/passive/object of the gaze/desire.

Mulvey’s most remarkable contribution to feminist film theory was her reworking of psychoanalytic film theory, which was mostly developed by male theorists. Her call for the deconstruction of cinematic pleasure has inspired various reframing and reconsiderations of images of women on screen. This was groundbreaking in regard to classic Hollywood films. However, Mulvey’s work has been subject to much critique, as her theory centered on a white, heterosexual gender analysis, to the exclusion of any consideration of race and non hetero-sexuality. Several feminist and queer film scholars,
such as Mary-Ann Doane (1982), Gayatri Gopinath (2005), bell hooks (1992), Ann E. Kaplan (1997), and Chris Straayer (1996) have all questioned the centrality of the male gaze and explored “other gazes.” I see Lim’s film as an attempt to foster a lesbian viewing position throughout the film, through the utilization of camera angles and the structure of the script.

For example, Naomi is clearly presented as a stereotypical dyke, with short hair, loose t-shirt and jeans, a baseball cap, and no make-up. She is not the typical desirable object of the male gaze in heterosexual contexts. In one scene, Naomi is talking to Miki backstage about shooting the last scene. Naomi has her usual sporty dyke look, and the camera constantly focuses on her fully covered flat chest. Meanwhile, we are also shown that Miki seems to be spaced-out or distracted by something. The camera is placed so that we are looking through Miki’s eyes, as she stares at Naomi’s breasts. She is fantasizing about Naomi and cannot focus on the conversation about the film. The gaze in the heterosexual context usually fixes on a feminine character with more revealing clothes. In this scene, Lim presents the object of the desiring gaze as a boyish dyke rather than a sexy femme, inviting viewers to share a particular lesbian viewing position.

The explicit sex scenes and female nudity in this film present an ambivalent targeted audience, who could be a heterosexual male or queer woman. These images are potentially desirable to both audiences. However, the scene showing how Miki desires baby butch Naomi reveals Lim’s actual assumed audience.
**Salty Wet (2003): the Queer Pornographic Body**

This nine-minute video is the first Lim made after she immigrated to Canada. It was a joint collaboration with Vancouver artist Winston Xin, who is also a Malaysian-born “Chinese”-Canadian immigrant. The film aims to decipher (and deliberately mis-decipher) the Cantonese and English slang used by “Chinese” immigrants and “Chinese”-Canadians born here. Ten Cantonese and English speakers are asked to explain the meanings of words related to queer sexuality and to immigrants. The various terms discussed illustrate the cultural connotations linking food, sexuality, and language. The title, “Salty Wet” or “Xian-Shi” (鹹濕), demonstrates the hybrid nature of new Cantonese words, which are made up of existing traditional Chinese characters. New meanings can be constructed by putting two characters together. When “salty” and “wet” combine into one word, Salty Wet, it means someone who is “horny” or a “sex maniac,” while “salty-wet films” refers to pornography.

In this film, various pornographic scenes are shown in the background as the interviews take place. Even though they are in the background, the audio-visual combinations in these sexually explicit scenes provoke more attention than the interviews presented in front. The linguistic discussion taking place is echoed in the background scenes. For example, two gay men and two lesbian women are asked if they know the terms for lesbian sex. We are shown a red text in English, reading “grinding tofu,” at the same time. Right away all the interviewees disappear, to be replaced by a
sexually explicit scene consisting of a series of close-up face shots of a naked East Asian woman who is moaning loudly.40 This explains to the audience what “grinding tofu” means. In another sexually explicit scene, we see two naked East Asian women, one lying near the edge of a bed and the other kneeling down on the floor performing oral sex on the woman on the bed. Even though it is not a close-up shot of the genital area, the oral sex scene is vivid and we can hear loud and clear moaning sounds. Then a red text, reading “Eating Carpet” is shown on the screen, while several dykes discuss the term.

I see Lim’s choice to insert these queer pornographic bodies as provocative, rather than simply for the purpose of recruiting heterosexual male viewers. As Barbara Hammer argues, “the reidentification of a lesbian self through lesbian sexual experience” is a part of lesbian representation (1993, 71). Perhaps presenting vivid lesbian sexual experiences on screen is an opportunity in this case for lesbian and queer women viewers to re-identify their lesbian and queer female selves. Moreover, the pornographic bodies in Lim’s film can also be considered as a strategy to confront heterosexual voyeurism. Some of the characters look straight into the camera, as if telling the audience that they are neither hiding their queer sexual desire nor afraid of us watching them having sex. It is a strong visual statement, conveying the message “We are here and we are queer.” This message is not spoken through the language discussed,

40 I tentatively use East Asian here, because there is no clear indication of the “Chineseness” of the queer pornographic bodies presented in the background.
but indirectly enunciated by the pornographic bodies represented. This insertion of an erosive space on screen in a critical framework can be a way to re-claim queer erotic and sexual selves, particularly when this queer erotic space has been mostly absent on screen. Queer film scholar Chris Straayer points out that “[s]ilence and invisibility certify normative heterosexuality via both presumption (no need to elaborate because everyone knows what it is) and denial (of other sexualities)” (1996, 2). Bringing this previously absent queer erotic space back to the screen dis-certifies hetero-normative cinematic space.

Thus, such sexually explicit visual images and blunt discussion of queer sex on screen may create some difficult viewing moments for those who are troubled by norms or moral codes that suggest that one should not talk about sex or watch sex in public. The erotic or pornographic bodies in Salty Wet (2003) and Sugar Sweet (2001) might seem to impose an involuntary viewing position on some people. But if we agree with Foucault (1975), there is always a curiosity, if not a desire, to learn more about sex, whether it be straight sex or queer sex. The sexualized bodies in Lim’s films actually provide an opportunity for education and examination of mainstream cultural, moral, and sexual judgments, not only about lesbians/queers, but also about “Chinese” people.

Katrien Jacobs, in “Queer Voyeurism and the Pussy-Matrix in Shu Lea Cheang’s Japanese Pornography” (2003), discusses a film by Cheang, who is a feminist and queer artist, which contains many sexually explicit images of female bodies. In her emphasis on “pussy as matrix” Cheang’s intention is not only to de-center “phallic
sexuality” (2003, 202) and heterosexual male pleasure, but also to include female and queer viewers by accentuating female and queer (viewing) pleasure. Through the content and aesthetics of her film, Cheang pushes the boundaries of national and transnational censorship and challenges mechanisms of surveillance of the Internet, as well as queering new media cultures (2003, 203). Jacobs argues that Cheang’s work not only offers a new form of queer porno activism, formed in the global corporate context, but also draws connections between queer activists and porn consumers. Both, she believes, “experience sexual identity as indeterminate and elastic” (2003, 202). I see Lim’s work as having similar intentions and potential as Cheang’s. She also addresses practical issues facing by queer transmigrant East Asian women, as in the film Floored by Love (2005), with an emphasis on the ways in which queer identities are performed.

**Floored by Love (2005): The Performing/Performative Body**

This forty-five minute film consists of two stories, one written by Desiree Lim, the other by Karen Tulchinsky; Desiree Lim directed both stories. The stories are woven into one larger narrative, and both parts deal with reactions to homosexuality and mixed-race or cross-cultural relationships. Here I will focus on the part authored by Lim, which looks at two East Asian women of different ethnic backgrounds, both living in Vancouver, who are struggling to be recognized as a legitimate lesbian couple by
their families. Cara is a Malaysian-“Chinese”-Canadian counsellor, and Janet a Japanese-Canadian flight attendant. The conflict comes to a head when Cara’s parents visit her for her younger brother’s wedding in Vancouver. Janet has wanted to get married to Cara, and this seems to be perfect timing as British Columbia has just legalized same-sex marriage. However, Cara has not yet come out to her parents and is especially reluctant to do so by committing herself to a public gay marriage ceremony right before her younger brother’s conventional wedding.

This film exposes everyday heterosexual gender performances that are usually taken for granted, by having them acted out by queers for whom the expected behaviours are not “natural.” Cara, who is initially presented as a butch-dyke, has to pretend to be feminine for the wedding. A further level of ironic non-convergence is added by having a heterosexual actress cast in this role. Janet, on the other hand, who performs a more feminine, “femme” version of being queer, goes unnoticed: her performance is invisible.

In the scene where Cara prepares for her parents’ visit, she goes through a quick and unwilling makeover that shows us a completely different person. Her slap-dash make-up and too bright, very short, feminine dress, accompanied by black knee-high stockings, show that she has no knowledge of popular heterosexual fashion, in fact she

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41 The second story is about a middle-aged interracial heterosexual couple (a Caucasian stepfather and African-Canadian mother) dealing with their teenage son Jesse’s coming out as gay while his gay biological father comes for a visit. The dynamic between parents and children in this story focuses more on the father and son relationship. The climax emerges from Jesse’s emotion and behavior towards his straight stepfather and his gay biological father.
almost looks like a clown (or a man in drag). While this transformation adds humorous moments to the film, it also serves to emphasize the artificiality of conventional femininity and of “straightness” for this character, whose clumsy performance reveals that a different type of self-presentation has become the norm for her. As Butler explains that gender “[p]erformativity is thus not dependent on a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms” (1993, 12), to the extent that it acquires such familiarity that the performance “conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (Ibid.). Cara has failed to accumulate enough repetitions of performing heterosexual femininity, as she has not been required to practice this type of behaviour or costume during her separation from her parents, and therefore her performance is obviously an “act.”

Cara’s makeover process is not just about her own physical appearance, but also that of her apartment. When she finds out that her parents will arrive earlier than she expected, she leaves work early to prepare her space for their visit. She first goes to the kitchen and removes all the logos and magnets associated with lesbians or queers. Then she walks around the apartment taking down lesbian erotic paintings and photos, with Janet’s help. By cleaning up and taking away all the queer artefacts that personalize their decor, Cara tries to erase the queerness of the apartment and the traces of her lesbian relationship. She asks Janet to pretend to be her “roommate” in front of her parents, and even tells them that the reason there is only one bedroom and one bed is
that Janet is a busy flight attendant who is not home most of the time, and therefore sleeps on the sofa when she is home.

When Cara’s parents first arrive in the apartment, they give themselves a tour and comment on how nice and tidy the place is. Cara’s mother looks around and spots some rainbow flags that were not removed. She asks Janet if those flags are from her ancestors’ country, and comments on how colourful they are. Janet replies that her parents come from Japan. Fearing that Janet will tell her parents about the rainbow flag as a homosexual and queer symbol, Cara takes over the conversation and tells them they come from Disneyland. Whether because of denial or ignorance, Cara’s parents are obviously queer-blind and have very little knowledge of queer and lesbian subculture or symbols. Their lack of suspicion reinforces Cara’s fear of coming out to them. When Janet confronts Cara about the need to come out to her family, Cara responds that her parents would not comprehend their lesbian relationship and accept them. She points out ironically that though she, as a professional counsellor, is the therapist in the family, if they know she is a lesbian they will send her to a shrink. Cara assumes that as they are Chinese her parents are superstitious and unable to understand their relationship. She further comments that Janet’s mother, who knows about her daughter’s sexual orientation, does not really accept her as a real lesbian but sees her as going through a temporary phase in her life.

Cara is a lovable dyke character; we sympathize with her dilemma and tolerate her performance of heterosexual femininity to avoid confronting her parents with her
sexuality. When she finally comes out, we applaud her courage. Unexpectedly, I found out a surprising fact from watching the interview included in the DVD’s special features: in it, we see that Shirley Ng, who plays Cara, wears elegant makeup and has long hair. It turns out that Ng, who was wearing a wig to perform the boyish Cara, does not identify herself as a non-heterosexual and has never had a queer relationship. She comments on how challenging it was for her to perform the intimate kissing scenes with Janet. Lim makes fun of her, saying that Ng had to have a stiff drink to get ready for the shooting. Ng also talks about how wearing the wig and costume, as well as observing and imitating dyke body language and mannerisms, helped her to play the dyke character. Ng’s self-conscious performance of fake dyke queerness, in counterpart to Cara’s performing of fake straightness in the story, creates an ironic contrast. It seems to matter less whether the actress playing Janet, the feminine lesbian, is actually queer or not.

The Invisibility of Queer Feminine East Asian Women

As mentioned earlier, dominant mainstream representations of East Asian women in North American films are usually hyper-feminine. Valerie Soe’s experimental film, Picturing Oriental Girls (1992), provides a representative visual anthology of the stereotypical images of East Asian women in Hollywood films. In an article entitled “Lotus Blossoms Don’t Bleed” (1989), Renee Tajima notes that there are two prevailing
types of Asian women in such films, the first being the “Lotus Blossom Baby” (1989, 309), a category that includes shy and delicate China Dolls and Geisha Girls. The second type is the “Dragon Lady,” and includes prostitutes, devious madams, and killers. Whether they are submissive and dutiful wives/daughters or uncontrollable and seductive femmes fatales, the role of East Asian women is generally to be protected, rescued, controlled, or sometimes even slain, by heterosexual white men. In other words, these stereotypes are not merely constructed through hegemonic heterosexual discourses, but also imperial and colonial ones.

In “Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts” (1999), Creed argues that the femme lesbian has been deliberately ignored. It is easy to discursively frame the butch-dyke body as a deviant body, but the femme lesbian body, in the colonial heterosexual contexts described above:

In no way presents itself to the straight world as different or deviant. To function properly as ideological litmus paper, the lesbian body must be instantly recognizable. In one sense, the femme lesbian is potentially as threatening -- although not as immediately confronting --as the stereotyped butch, because she signifies the possibility that all women are potential lesbians.

(Creed 1999, 122)

Creed rightly points out the invisibility of the potentially threatening femme body, and why it is ignored or purposefully misinterpreted. In the East Asian, particularly “Chinese”, context lesbian bodies, specifically femme bodies, evoke intense anxiety
also because of the importance of heterosexual patriarchal transmission. Straight men
often have the secret fantasy of “conquering” or “rescuing” the femme lesbian from her
lesbian or queer relationship. Yet there is also a deep fear of failing in this quest. The
femme body is both the hidden and non-productive female body (assumed to be
infertile) that cannot continue the heteronormative familial line, and the resistant female
body that prevents straight men from demonstrating their heterosexual virility.

The portraits of Cara and Janet in Lim’s film fit the conventional stereotypical
images of a western lesbian couple, as butch-dyke and femme. Lim portrays Janet not
only as a feminine lesbian but also as someone who pays attention to her appearance.
We see her taking beauty baths, with a mud mask and cucumber over her face. Such
narcissistic attentiveness toward one’s appearance is usually associated with hyper-
femininity, and can easily be assumed to be an appeal to the heterosexual male gaze.
Cara’s father looks approvingly at Janet, and when he first meets her, he comments that
Cara is lucky to have such a beautiful roommate. He even asks jokingly, in front of his
wife, if he can move in with them. Cara’s mother also makes some remarks to Janet that
are typical of conversation between heterosexual women, and constantly refers to her
mistakenly as Jenny, a more feminine and diminutive name. Janet and Jenny do sound
similar, but they are two different names, just as queer femme-ness may look a lot like
heterosexual femininity, but they represent two very different sexual orientations and
identities. Cara finally corrects her mother, in what may be seen as an attempt to reclaim
Janet’s femme femininity from her parents’ “normalizing” heterosexual gaze.
The climax of the story occurs when Cara finally lets go of her fear to come out to her parents, in a scene that also serves as evidence of Janet’s femme invisibility to their heterosexual eyes. In this scene, it is interesting that Cara’s mother reacts much more dramatically than her father does. Like Janet’s mother, she initially fears that she and her husband may have had a lesbian child as a punishment for some previous transgression. We see her start to cry and question Cara and her father: “What is this all about? What did we do wrong in our past lives to deserve this?” Cara’s father just shrugs his shoulders. In his efforts to comfort his wife, who looks to him for answers, he finally responds: “Maybe it’s not that bad. Look at her [Janet]. She is a very pretty woman. Cara is lucky. Her partner looks like a fashion model.” Cara’s mother then asks why Cara could not find a good man instead, and turning to her daughter adds, “She is not even Chinese, Cara!” Finally, Cara asserts herself and tells them that her choice of Janet is about love, and her father tries to back Cara up by saying joyfully to his wife, “Look at it this way--at least she is not with a white woman!”

This exchange between Cara’s parents shows insight into heterosexual gender difference. Impressed by Janet’s beauty, it seems to be much easier for Cara’s father to accept Cara’s lesbian relationship, and he even acts as if he envies her. Yet his acceptance of his daughter’s lesbian relationship is an ironic one, as it is rooted in the heterosexual matrix, through a male gaze. Would he accept Cara’s relationship as easily if she were dating another dyke like herself? Janet’s feminine look makes it easier for
him to relate to Cara’s desire for this woman, whereas for the mother it is harder to acknowledge that her daughter is, from her perspective, acting like a man.

I will move now to the films of Donna Lee, which also provide some original and thought-provoking representations of racialized queer “female masculinity.”

**Enter the Mullet (2004): Queerly Gendered Body**

This film begins with a hilarious introduction of “the mullet” by a supposed “Chinese” female expert, Dr. Rini Wang. Imitating the style of conventional anthropological or educational TV shows, she introduces “the mullet” as a type of homo sapiens and a subspecies of lesbians. She goes on to offer several dictionary definitions to show the changing meanings of “mullet,” from a silly and ignorant person to a fool, before mentioning the more recent popular associations of the term within feminist and lesbian groups. Dr. Wang concludes by defining the mullet as a mark of working-class gender-benders. It is worth noting that she situates the mullet in the contexts of sexuality and class, rather than race and ethnicity. The director intends to challenge certain stereotypical images that have fixed relationships with race and ethnicity, by concentrating on other aspects. 42

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42 According to the director’s firsthand experience and observation of her immigrant community, the mullet hairstyle prevailed among immigrants due to its low maintenance and cost.
After the introduction, the show presented by Dr. Wang provides a dramatisation of conflict-resolution in a sketch entitled Enter the Mullet. This sketch begins with an encounter between two East Asian dykes in a pool hall. The first one we see appears soft and gentle, and does not have a mullet hairstyle. She wears a white t-shirt with a black vest and dark colored jeans (adopting a typical casual dyke dress code). She has short hair, cut above her ears, with some longer spikes. The second appears much more butch, with mullet hair, a bigger body frame, and a bolder look; she is playing pool when the first one walks in, and wearing a black shirt and dark pants. The toothpick in her mouth, a typical accessory in East Asian gangster films (such as John Woo’s films), prompts the viewer to read her as a tough customer. Her mullet style is one commonly found among male ice hockey players. When we see her playing pool, from behind, it is almost impossible to tell if the person is a man or a woman.

The plot then shifts to a two-fold dynamic: the first starts when the non-mullet East Asian dyke accidentally collides with the mullet East Asian butch-dyke. With the stereotypical connotations of the mullet (as belonging to someone who is ignorant and possibly irrational or violent) in mind, the non-mullet character fears physical confrontation with the mullet character. As she ponders on how to deal with a possible attack, the viewers are offered parodic instructions on “How to Survive a Mullet Attack.” The advice includes commands such as: avoid showing fear, look assertive, use

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43 I use “East Asian” to describe these two butch dyke characters rather than using "Chinese" because neither the host, Dr. Wang, nor the director Donna Lee makes their background explicit.
verbal affirmations, and so on. The comical strategies suggested provide a playful means for Lee to de-stigmatize the negative perceptions of the mullet as worn by a stupid and ignorant person, since while suggesting that mullet wearers might be physically aggressive, the instructions also assume that they will respond rationally and predictably to determined stimuli. The non-mullet East Asian dyke’s fearful reaction also shows that anti-mullet prejudice exists in the queer community of colour, as well as outside it. Later the mullet and non-mullet East Asian dykes bond together to fight off a challenge from two white women.

At the end of the film, Dr. Wang concludes her show by remarking that teamwork “is the win-win path to conflict resolution.” This raises several questions: in the context of highly multicultural West Coast Canadian queer communities, rather than ghettoizing each cultural/ethnic group, how might we find ways to team up dykes from different cultures in order to address the various conflicts queer women face in their daily lives? Lee’s representation of mullet and non-mullet East Asian dykes might be one of the starting points to engage the possibility of a more radical multiculturalism that would address and contest the hostile dynamics among different cultural groups.

Aside from this message, the film projects refreshing images of East Asian women as not only lesbians or queer, but as performing certain types of female masculinity, a variety of queerness that may be as invisible as the femme lesbian is.
Hybrid East Asian Female Masculinity

*Enter the Mullet* (2004) is designed to create and increase the visibility of East Asian dykes by introducing a timeless icon of Chinese masculinity who shares Donna Lee’s surname: Bruce Lee. The appropriation of the Bruce Lee model includes his signature style, as well as the title, theme music, and a plot that depicts a conflict marked by fearless eye-contact followed by a series of characteristic gestures: taunting the rival with the right hand, the tasting of blood, and furious kicking, among other elements. Besides evoking Bruce Lee as the manifestation of Chinese masculinity, crucial themes from Bruce Lee’s movies are inserted: martial arts transcend all races and cultures, and Lee, as a master of martial arts, is the advocate or embodiment of Justice. He is the hero who always defeats the bad guys, regardless of their ethnicity.

The Asian dyke characters in *Enter the Mullet* (2004) represent this spirit of justice and become the heroines when they punish the white dyke characters who show disrespect to others’ cultures. Donna Lee wittily reverses a common stereotypical image of western butch-dykes as lonely and tragic heroes, by introducing the more positive and empowering figure of the Kung-Fu East Asian dyke. This empowering figure serves not merely to increase queer visibility, but also to make East Asian female masculinity “plausible, credible and real” (Halberstam 1998, 19), to an Asian as well as a non-Asian audience.
The invisibility of East Asian butch-dykes is a striking feature of mainstream queer cinema. It is less surprising that there are hardly any representations of Asian lesbian women, either femme or butch, in popular western media. The dominant stereotypes are generally highly feminine, and constructed through heterosexual contexts, as discussed earlier. Butler argues that race and heterosexual imperatives often operate hand-in-hand (1993). (Bruce Lee is an exception, as a hyper-virile Chinese man). Significantly, the East (particularly East Asia) has long been portrayed in the West as feminine, which frequently results in representations of emasculated men and hyper-feminine women. Richard Fung has pointed out that East Asian women and men are often “collectively seen as undersexed” (1998, 116) in contemporary constructions of racialized sexuality. This has hindered the visibility of East Asian homosexuality, because, as Fung asks: “[I]f Asian men have no sexuality, how can we have homosexuality” (1998, 117)? In the context of this absence of sexuality and of virility, East Asian butch-dykes are as imperceptible in mainstream western representations as in “Chinese” films. Yet there is a proliferation of representations of masculine East Asian women/dykes in films made by East Asian queers for audiences of their peers.

Telling these stories is a way to reject current monolithic and monotonous screen representations of East Asian women, as well as of East Asian masculinity. The representation of queer East Asian sexualities, including female masculinity, can open up a space for alternative models of masculinity in the “Chinese” context, such as non-violent masculinity or masculinity detached from a male body. The female masculinity
of East Asian butch-dykes can help us to understand the links between (white male middle-class) masculinity, patriarchal power and privilege in the context of race and ethnicity.

Halberstam (1998) also points out that the contribution of female masculinity in shaping contemporary masculinity has not been recognized. She notes that there is a tendency to present and construct an “excessive masculinity” associated with Black or working-class bodies, while the concept of “insufficient masculinity” often focuses on Asian bodies (1998, 28). The stereotypical representations of these extremes “mark the process by which masculinity becomes dominant in the sphere of white middle-class maleness” (Ibid.). In order to break the hegemonic centrality of white heterosexual maleness, Halberstam proposes a refusal to treat it as fundamental, because doing so turns all other forms of masculinity into either imitations or perverse mutations. She argues for a concept of female masculinity that is not a perverse supplement to dominant configurations of gender, which means that it is neither “simply the opposite of female femininity” nor “a female version of male masculinity” (Ibid.). Rather, she suggests, “[this] unholy union of femaleness and masculinity can produce wildly unpredictable results” (1998, 29).

We cannot understand contemporary masculinity unless we take female masculinity into consideration. The underrecognition of female masculinity is due to mainstream societal and cultural intolerance of the gender ambiguity that masculine women embody. Disregarding the vibrant and diverse gender-bending phenomena that
have emerged, gender is still perceived as a fixed binary oppositional system in most dominant societies. As a result, gender indeterminacy is rarely acknowledged outside the realm of pathology or deviance. Racialized gender indeterminacy is barely articulated. Representations of the female masculinity that East Asian butch-dykes embody are therefore very valuable, as they contest the binary gender opposition as well as stereotypical racialized presentations of gender.

These representations challenge western models of gender conformity as well as conventional gendered notions of “Chineseness,” in Lee’s case in the context of Canadian multiculturalism. Both Lim’s and Lee’s representations of East Asian butch-dykes raise their visibility and contribute to queering masculinity and femininity, multiplying images of female homosexuality as well as blurring all the binaries. Lee has also produced a film that emphasizes the common humanity of queers, drawing attention to bodily experiences we all share.

 Rated F… for Fart (2005): The Universal and Absent Body

This film was a winner of the Digital D.I.Y. Competition at Out on Screen 2005. The rule of the competition is that all participating filmmakers have to shoot and edit their film in-camera within forty-eight hours. This film is shot in a simple documentary style with natural lighting, as no fancy lighting or special effects were available. The whole film consists of eighteen segments of interviews, involving four individuals and
one couple, from different ethnic backgrounds. Lee and her co-director, Terra Poirier, decided to investigate a taboo subject, namely farting: the secret laws of flatulence, and farting policy in lesbian relationships! This topic offers a fresh look at the lesbian body, far from presenting the usual eroticized or pornographic images of sexual and sensual female pleasure for the visual consumption of a heterosexual male audience, the queer female body is reinserted into everyday life experiences shared by everybody.

It is obvious from the interviews in the film, and from the lack of depiction of farting in Hollywood films, that we know it is not a subject that is welcome or much-talked about. In the film Dr. Lydia Kwa, who is a registered clinical psychologist, comments: “Well, I actually have not seen any Hollywood depictions of farting in terms of a prelude to sex and intimacy. So I actually wonder what kind of coverage it ever gets […] bodily emissions or body odour. Certainly, I think it is something worth investigating further.” This is nothing directly to do with gender or sexuality. It is an even more taboo subject than sex, for both heterosexual and queer filmmakers and audiences, and represents a commonality between heterosexual and queer bodies. Making farting the focus of the film makes this invisible commonality visible. Most representations of queer politics and queer theory focus on differences rather than similarities, which can actually reinforce the binary opposition between the heterosexual and non-heterosexual. Moreover, in discussing the marginalization and invisibility of certain queer bodies and images, Straayer points out that “[w]hat isn’t represented is assumed to be unrepresentable” from the mainstream generic film discourses (1996, 6).
From Dr. Kwa’s observation of Hollywood films, the lack of representation of farting body indicates that the farting body is “unrepresentable” (Ibid.) for Hollywood films. By bringing back this farting lesbian body on screen, Lee proves that these farting lesbian bodies are “indeed not only representable but also represented” (Ibid.) This is also a declaration as Straayer rightly argues “queers are not outside language but rather denied the podium” (Ibid.).

This focus on farting can also be seen as demystifying the lesbian body, which is usually either eroticized (as the femme) or asexualized (as the butch-dyke). We not only hear first-hand testimonials and confessions about personal farting experiences, we are also given useful strategies and tactics about where to go, what to do, and who to hang out with in a farting situation. For example, one interviewee suggests: “I think it is smart to hang out with smokers because they help you by providing their kind of smell that you can hide behind.” Another piece of practical advice is about what to do when you are bloated during a date: “Well, I read something once. It says if you are stuck on a date or something, and you experience pain from gas, then what you should do is go to a private room or washroom, kneel down on the floor, and put your head on the floor and your butt up in the air. This should clear your pathway and let out what is bothering you.” The expert in the film, Dr. Kwa, passes on a good strategy: “as a friend of mine says, you try to squeeze your cheeks really tight on the first date, then you just get looser after being together for a long time.” Dr. Kwa’s calm and serious manner makes this advice seem believable.
Additionally, some good questions are asked, such as, “Coming from your lover or you, is there any amount of information that is too much information?” or “So what are your tactics for muffling or concealing the evidence?” One lesbian interviewee states that she believes farting is something you just have to let go, freely. For her there is only one policy: no farting when the bedcovers are up. At this point, we see an image of a woman in pyjamas lying on her right side, waving her blanket around in an attempt to fan away the smell. Other than that, this spokeswoman considers that farting is just like anything else in a relationship. This frank exchange is both funny and practical, as no one ever teaches us much about farting on screen.

This film was made by Donna Lee and her then partner, Terra Poirier, a Caucasian woman, which may explain why the diverse interviewees include Caucasian women, “Chinese”-Canadian women, and one anonymous woman whose ethnic identity is unknown. In fact no information given about the interviewees’ backgrounds, and we can only judge them from their physical looks, unless we have insider knowledge. For example, I personally know Dr. Lydia Kwa and another participant named Laiwan. The former is a Singaporean-“Chinese” immigrant psychiatrist and writer while the latter a “Chinese”-Canadian immigrant poet and artist who lived in Zimbabwe before her family moved to Canada. Unlike the Caucasian interviewees who share their personal experiences and opinions about farting, Dr. Kwa’s interview is from a more professional, less personal perspective. Laiwan is not even physically present in the
film, we learn about her opinions on farting only through neatly typed texts shown on several slips of paper, which read as follows:

In a candid interview with Laiwan, she said: There is an art to a fart.

Rated F: On a particularly windy sleepover, how do you negotiate spooning?
Laiwan: I have never had a windy sleepover. Whoever has this must go to see a Chinese doctor. Immediately!

Laiwan clearly has opinions about farting to share, but her Chinese queer woman’s (farting) body is absent on screen. The texts replace a talking head, which is one way to prevent her body being classified and labelled. Yet her absence on screen does not mean she has no voice, as she is present through her written contribution, the texts.

While *Rated F... for Fart* (2005) juxtaposes white and East and Southeast Asian women, showing something they have in common whatever their race and whether they are queer or straight, the films of Debora O, who is of mixed-race, convey the complexity of combining different elements in one body which may be perceived as racially as well as sexually queer.
Blood (2004): The Hybrid, Racially Queer Body

This autobiographical film is an exploration of memory and family history, from the perspective of a mixed-race person. O examines how her body connects and simultaneously separates the places and histories of two families and cultures. It also looks at how migrations (through time and space) affect her experience and identity as someone who has to constantly negotiate many differences at the same time. O describes her mixed-race body as “racially queer,” expanding the “queer” label. Muñoz argues that “to perform queerness is to constantly disidentify, to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly ‘line up’. This is equally true of hybridity, another modality where meaning or identifications do not properly line up” (1999, 78). In the film, O describes her constant encounters with the questions, “What are you again?” or “Where are you from?” because her physical look does not always line up with the usual cultural inscriptions of a racialized body. The hybrid body is often disturbing because it is unidentifiable and uncategorizable.

O’s body is hybrid in an additional sense, as it also conveys gender ambivalence. Muñoz endorses the theorization of hybridity, when it “helps one understand how queer lives are fragmented into various identity bites: some of them adjacent, some of them complementary, some of them antagonistic” (1999, 114). However, he is also fully aware of the possible pitfalls of celebratory or victimized hybridity, and reminds us of Ella Shohat’s (1992) warning that “as a descriptive catchall term, ‘hybrid’ per se fails to
discriminate between diverse modalities of hybridity” (Shohat, quoted in Muñoz 1999, 113). He acknowledges also that “Queerness, too, has the capacity to flatten difference in the name of coalition” (1999, 114). To avoid these potential dangers, Muñoz suggests that we need to be careful not to too quickly posit hybridity or queerness “as universal identificatory sites of struggle” (78). In my view, the hybridity of O’s mixed-raced body is not always a site of struggle. Rather, her ability to pass as white Portuguese or consciously choose to self-identify as “Chinese” is in fact a privilege. In some circumstance, her hybridity gives her the opportunity and resources to choose between either/or or neither/nor.

In the video her racially hybrid and sexually queer body interacts with three different landscapes: Macau (her father’s place of origin), Lisbon (her mother’s), and Vancouver (where she herself now resides). From a postcolonial point of view, the interweaving images of Macau and Lisbon convey a subtle dynamic that O does not speak of aloud, but that is silently present. Since Macau used to be a colony of Portugal, O’s body bears the traces of the power conflict between colonizer and colonized, and of the complex gender dynamics embedded in the colonial context. In my interview with her, O described her family as “an island unto itself.” They are aware of these colonial dynamics, but no one wants to talk about them as it might break the family apart. However, the children’s hybrid bodies hold it together; they bridge differences. In one scene, O juxtaposes a close-up shot of her right arm (in which we can even see the blood vessels) and an image of a bridge over which we see cars moving freely. Both the
arm and the bridge connect what is separated and offer a space for fluid movement through the arteries. In other words, O’s physical presence links distant places and the past to the present. In a voice-over, O refers to the concept of a “contact zone,” saying: “She is haunted by that endlessness, those contact zones”. The mixed-race body is a contact zone, corporeally as well as discursively through the history, memory, and story-telling that O reclaims:

[Living in a queer mixed-race body means negotiating many different terrains on the surface of one’s skin. How does living in such a body affect an awareness of contact zones where movement, body, time, and memory come together in the passing through of different histories and contexts?]

(O 2004) 44

The term “contact zone” also evokes cultural translation: “Sometimes she thinks about movement. How her body translates the spaces she moves through.” How her body is translated, and translates what surrounds it, depends on the changing contexts in which it is located. There are no fixed scenarios or scripts predicting the result, only what she calls “transient scripts made of departing locales.” The vulnerable body has a transitory and fragmentary existence, but nevertheless serves as a bridging medium between places, migration histories, and multiple collective heritages in every transient moment of encounter.

44 These quotations are from O’s description of the film, as presented on the front cover of the video.
In another scene, O is walking on a white line on the road. The camera does not focus on the surroundings or the view she would see, but down onto her feet, suggesting a search for something or someone, or for a direction. This downward focus conveys a sense of disorientation. While the image is still of the white line on the road, the camera seems to zoom in and get closer and closer to the ground. Gradually the white line moves away from the center of the road, which becomes divided unevenly on the screen. There is a pause in the narration and we can hear O’s heavy breathing, as if she is struggling. The images start to become blurry and no white line exists any more on the screen. This changing perception of the white dividing line can be seen as a metaphor for O’s experience as a mixed-race woman. It might seem to be easy to label her as half Chinese and half Portuguese, just as the white line divides the road into perfectly equal halves. However, living as a mixed-race person, her racial and cultural identity is never clearly separated into two halves. We hear the voice-over: “No easy genetic equation.” Indeed, how do we, and how does O, define where her “Chineseness,” “Portugueseness,” and “Canadianness” start and end? The gradually blurred and moving images of the road as disproportionately divided convey how she feels about her experiences as a mixed-race person. The disappearance of the white dividing line may also indicate the possibility of passing as white for some mixed-race people like O, who has fair, pale skin and big round eyes, appearing more European than obviously Eurasian or “Chinese”.

145
O also discusses the generational gap in evoking the difference between what Macau means to her and to her father, through the image of a crossroad: “To him, this place is about pride. To me, it is a crossroad that lacks the continuum of unseparated paths that exist despite the fact that I have never known it, like an apparition, a forgotten memory.” The crossroad, where different roads meet and intersect, is an interesting spatial metaphor to describe the mixed-race person’s family origins. For O, going back to visit where her father was born is like standing in front of the crossroad, without knowing which way to go and where it will lead her to.

At the end of the film, O describes mixed-race children as “a new generation meant to grow up in difference but not meant to know the difference…both here and there, of the flow of capital, of people, of migration, diasporas, mixing.” The new generation, like O, grow up aware of their difference, but cannot understand that difference; and the lost memory of their mixed-race family history continues to haunt them like a ghost. The next generation, born in Vancouver, may claim British Columbia as their home and origin, but those whose parents came as immigrants remain marked by a sense of belonging elsewhere. In the case of those of mixed-race origins, their disorientation may be more profound. Identifying as queer as well as racially hybrid may facilitate the creation of a new identity for someone like O.

I will turn now to the queer, displaced “Chinese” women’s body, as represented by a Taiwanese-“Chinese” woman who settles in Canada, and seeks to reclaim her sense of embodied self through modifying her physical appearance.
A Girl Named Kai (2004): Transforming the Body and Public Space

This nine-minute autobiographical film covers various locations including several places in Taiwan, Chinatown in Vancouver, a tattoo studio in Vancouver, a public market and streets in San Francisco, and streets in South Bank in London. From the four major locations depicted, we can trace Xue’s changing identity as she transforms herself through transnational displacement and modification of her bodily appearance. At the beginning of her journey Xue is a girl who is a boy at heart, a child in Taiwan who is not really aware of racial and cultural identities although she is uncomfortable with the gender assigned to her. Unable to relate to the pictures of her future that her parents paint for her, she takes off and moves to Vancouver. It is only after the experience of living in a foreign land for seven years that Xue starts to question her identity, to ask who she is, and become aware of her racial and cultural affiliations. She begins to experiment with self-reinvention through modification of her body, shaving her head and tattooing her skin, and exposing these processes to the public. These attempts to control her bodily appearance indicate her desire to be seen and understood. Xue’s journey takes her from carrying her open secret, faced with her parents’ denial, to exposing who she really is in a foreign land. The next step involves visiting an important family member, an aunt who is also living abroad, and sharing her new secret with her. Being accepted and understood by her aunt allows Xue to pass through a barrier in her life and move on to a new stage: to actively pursue her dreams
and her love. We see another transformation, as Xue becomes comfortable in sharing an intimate moment with her girlfriend in public. At this stage in her life, she also becomes a rising young filmmaker, screening her film at a European film festival. Even though that relationship does not last, and she sustains a life-threatening ear infection as well as a broken heart, she remains courageous and keeps on moving forward toward her dreams and her next destinations. The film ends with the images of a moving MRT train in Taipei, just as it began. This seems to indicate that Xue’s journey has come full circle, but she is now a different person and is ready to embark another new journey.

According to Butler (1993), an identity (whether it is racial, gendered, or sexual) is not something we possess or something innate, rather it is something we do and act out constantly in daily life. When we faithfully cite and reiterate certain defining acts repeatedly, they become a coherent discourse of norms which construct our identity. When we do not reiterate these acts repeatedly or when we cite these norms with a twist, we create a discontinuity or incoherence in relation to the normative discourse. This not only reveals the constructed-ness of the identity concerned, but also undermines the discursive power of the norms.

Control of our body’s appearance has the potential to allow individuals to re-invent the self. Self-transformation can be achieved through conscious performances such as modifying the body’s surface. This is illustrated in the scene where Xue is getting tattooed, with close-up shots of her face and of the tattooing process. She has chosen a big artistic design of a heart as the symbol that is being etched onto her upper
The text on screen reveals the reason why Xue is getting a tattoo: “I mark my body to remember who I really am. Maybe one day they will understand and accept me the way I am.” A flash of Xue’s mother’s face is shown on screen, with the text: “I want her to be proud of me.” The tattooing scene is accompanied by texts saying “secret” or “my open secret,” implying that the external marks on her skin are a way of making public and visible what was a private and invisible secret. Through the texts on screen and the tattoo, Xue expresses the desire to open her heart so that people can see her.

There are several symbolic meanings associated with the act of tattooing. First, it is a physically painful and time-consuming process. I see this as her desire to be understood in spite of all the pain that she has to go through. It can also be seen as a rebellious statement of ownership of her body, as well as proclaiming her sexuality. Tattooing is an act of reinventing herself and her body. There is an old Chinese saying (from Confucius) that our body is given to us by our parents and we should protect it from any harm or damage. It is our obligation to take care of our body, for their sake, as an act of filial piety. The body, in this context does not belong to individual but also to the parents, the family lineage. Any intrusive treatments or modifications should be undertaken only with their permission. Piercing and tattooing has a permanent impact on the body and are not usually encouraged by some “Chinese” parents. Xue’s action in taking control of her body in a visible way can be seen as a way of re-claiming her individuality and sexuality from the family and from cultural expectations and restraints.
In addition, when the transformed or modified body appears in public, it has the potential to queer the public space. In exploring the relationship between bodies and the city, Elizabeth Grosz (1998) argues that the city is a significant context and frame for the body, and the relations between bodies and cities are more complex than may have been realized. This is a concept I wish to explore in relation to racial and sexual differences, as they are mapped in urban contexts. How do transmigrant queer “Chinese” women’s bodies resist enclosure in/by space, when that space is conceptualized as masculine? How are the way we move through the world and the social roles we take on experienced differently, according to the different spaces we occupy?

There is another major scene related to body space in this film, when Xue shaves off her hair. She does this while walking alongside a dragon dance during the Chinese New Year parade in Vancouver’s Chinatown. The texts accompanying the shaving images tell the audience some reasons for her doing it: “Shaving away the shame. Shaving away the pain.” Through the texts on screen Xue tells us that her parents have taught her to be strong and brave, and thus she decides to “rebel against my culture. Reinvent myself.” Shaving while walking with the parade creates a strong contrast to the rest of the people in the parade and crowds watching it which dramatically marks her as different. This difference is marked by what she is wearing a black shirt that gives her a boyish and westernized look. People attending the parade usually dress up in their best clothes and often choose to wear “Chinese” traditional clothes to show pride
in their cultural identity. By being at the parade, Xue claims her “Chineseness”, but through her clothes and her new baldness she is also performing identification with another cultural group, composed of queers.

Head-shaving also has particular connotations in a “Chinese” context. It often indicates an intention or desire for a new beginning, which corresponds to the cultural meaning of the Chinese New Year as representing a new beginning for the “Chinese” people. This act of shaving her head is not merely an act of reinvention of her self, but it actually discloses the gender practices and politics of a Chinese New Year parade. Gill Valentine (1996, 2002) and other scholars have observed that the heteronormativity of public spaces both conditions and disciplines gendered and sexualized practices in Western urban spaces. In the case of Chinatown in a North American city like Vancouver, a consideration of culture and ethnicity should be added to this observation. Chinatown and Chinese New Year parades are common and crucial signifiers of “Chineseness”, particularly in the context of diasporas. Both often serve to fortify and sustain “Chinese” people’s sense of identity and belonging by bringing people together. They also function as preservers of “Chinese” values and traditions. We expect to see everything “Chinese” at this event, but Xue’s shaving her hair in public is unexpected. This action not only draws attention to her queerness, allowing her to reinvent herself, but it is also a way to reinvent her culture by queering the space of Chinatown at the moment of the Chinese New Year parade. By altering her body in that parade space, she actually alters that space as well, which is no longer a space with clear gender divisions.
The dragon dance is a typical and major part of various “Chinese” festivals, and the
dancers and drummers are traditionally predominantly male. Hair is one of the symbols
of femininity in the “Chinese” context, and shaving off her hair can be seen as an act of
de-feminization, an attempt to deconstruct the conventional perception of femininity.
Inserting herself into this generally male-only space produces a sense of out-of-place-
ness which reinforces her displacement. Thus, her walking with the dragon dance
groups while shaving her head can be seen as a disruption of what Butler calls the
“practice of gender conference” (1990, 24), which sustains the fixed binary opposition
of masculinity and femininity, as well as a queering of “Chinese” gender norms.

Both shaving off the hair and tattooing are inscriptions on the surface of the body.
Donna Haraway claims that “bodies are maps of power and identity” (1990: 222). I
argue here that the surfaces of the body are highly unstable and modifiable, and provide
a space where individuals like Xue can reinvent themselves. One cannot only change
the body’s performance, but can render the body and one’s identity ambivalent and
indeterminable. Xue’s bodily transformations and their display in certain spaces
becomes a site for transcoding and contesting cultural values. While these bodily
performances can be viewed as demonstrating her courage and illustrating her own
queer aesthetics as well as taking ownership of her body, they also serve to mark the
multiple layers of her queerness, including gender, sexuality, and “Chineseness”. Xue
re-invents the usual images of young “Chinese” immigrant women by demonstrating a
non-stereotypical “Chinese” femininity, and puts the traditional and unified meaning of
“Chineseness” into question by exposing the elusive nature of queer identities in increasingly complex transnational cultures.

Xue also addresses the status, control, and destabilization of the queer body in another film entitled *Tilted* (2003), where it is medicalization rather than decoration that affects its perception.

**Tilted (2003): The Medicalized Body**

There have been a number of studies of the lesbian body in the context of pathology in the past, but there have been few visual representations available to the public depicting how the medical system impacts queer people’s lives. The treatment of queer women’s bodies is rarely discussed. In a five-minute film, Tilted (2003), Xue transforms old medical footage that she found in her back alley into an experimental look at this topic. The video explores two main issues: how queer people are (mis)treated by homophobic medical professionals, and the problems queer youth face when coming-out to their families.

With the first-person narration, the film seems to present itself in an autobiographical manner: we assume that the unnamed first-person narrator is the filmmaker herself. The film starts with this person describing the painful condition of her hands, which are “tilted.” The unendurable pain forces her to search for medical help and we see an X-ray image of tilted hands. A group of top medical specialists
gather for an emergency meeting, to diagnose the condition and find possible treatments for her. We are told that these doctors work very hard, for forty-eight hours nonstop, but all their efforts are in vain. They conclude that there is nothing they can do for her mysterious condition: they can neither cure it nor prevent it from getting worse. They believe her hands have reached the last stage of tilted-ness, and therefore suggest that she needs to inform her family about her serious condition, since there is very little medical support they can offer her. Alerted by the doctors’ advice, the filmmaker has no choice but to disclose her condition to her family. She is anxious and finds it very difficult to tell them about her condition.

She is surprised that most of her family members are quite supportive when she calls for a family meeting. She tells us the audience that her father and her siblings, Kyle and Jessica, are quite open-minded; the only exception is her mother, who is described by the narrator as angry and sad. She is silent for a long time, and finally turns to the father and comments that she thinks her daughter’s fingers are quite straight. The narrator is mad at her mother’s ignorance and denial about her tilted hands. Her siblings try to find out how the she acquired this strange condition, and her brother suspects that she may have caught some “queer germs” at the swimming pool when they had swimming lessons as young children. The narrator recalls her memories of an “overly joyful rainbow wall and extremely hot female instructor,” and strongly agrees with her brother that these factors must have contributed to her tilted-ness.
At the end of the film, she comments that during the process of dealing with the medical staff and her family, she came to a realization that the only way she can survive this condition and these challenges (from her family and the medical system) is to create a documentary about it. She states that she will use her “tilted fingers and creative mind to create a documentary” about her experience, and expresses her hope that her parents will “accept the way [she is] and people will leave [her] queer germs alone.”

This experimental short is clearly a critique of how the medical system is a part of institutions constructing and regulating “straight” sexuality as the norm, especially for young people. Being “tilted,” bent, not straight, is considered a disease, something needing to be treated or “cured.” Foucault, a queer historian, is famous for his analysis and critique of the regulation of sexuality through complex collaborations among institutions such as schools, governmental institutes, and hospitals. In *The History of Sexuality Vol. I* (1976/1990), Foucault discusses how children’s sexuality was constructed and regulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

> Doctors counselled the directors and professors of educational establishments, but they also gave their opinions to families; educators designed projects which they submitted to the authorities; schoolmasters turned to students, made recommendations to them, and drafted for their benefit books of exhortation, full of moral and medical examples.

(Foucault 1990, 28)

Foucault describes how the family plays a crucial role in the liaison between these institutions:
Inexhaustible and corrective discourses were imposed; parents and teachers were alerted, and left with the suspicion that all children were guilty, and with the fear of being themselves at fault if their suspicions were not sufficiently strong...an entire medico-sexual regime took hold of the family milieu.”

(Foucault 1990, 42).

Under the pressure of these institutions, even parents become part of the surveillance team, and children who do not fit the so-called “normal” type of sexuality often find it too painful and shameful to share their sexual preferences with their families. In the opening of the film, the filmmaker narrating the extreme pain in her fingers can be seen as actually conveying emotional pain from the fear of not being accepted by her family. It is no wonder that when she is waiting for the diagnosis of the doctors, she asks, “What is wrong with me?”

The queer body presented here is medicalized and pathologized as diseased. Her incurable queerness (tiltedness) is thus paradoxical, as it is both powerful and disempowering. First, this incurable tiltedness (queerness) cannot be “straightened” and there is nothing the medical professionals can do. This suggests that queer people exist and there is nothing the heteronormative mainstream can do about it. This reminds us of the queer slogan in the 1980s; “We’re here and we’re queer.” The mother’s denial cannot change the situation, and the daughter refuses to pretend to be straight. The queerness presented here is thus rebellious and powerful.

At the same time, this queerness is evoked as a condition people can “catch” in certain environments and with certain types of people, evoking the association of
AIDS/HIV in the 1980s in North America with gay men’s bathhouses as sites of contamination. The stigmatizing view of queerness as an infectious condition suggests that it is not something people would make a conscious decision to choose. They are passive victims of “queer germs,” conveying a belief in biological determinism. This attitude uncritically universalizes the diverse experiences of queer people, disparaging those who choose to live a queer lifestyle.

The medicalized queer body in Tilted (2003) is both a site of struggle (against being pathologized) and resistance (as incurable but not life-threatening). Medical discourse and power are enacted and resisted, and a new identity is claimed. At the end of the film, the filmmaker tells us that she will use her tilted fingers and creative mind to create a documentary film. Her non-conforming hands will be used productively and creatively to send a message to others who are tilted that they are not alone and not condemned suffering forever.

**Conclusion**

From her study of the representation of lesbian bodies in the mainstream media as well as within lesbian communities, Creed discovered that:

[T]he need to construct a sense of community, through dress and appearance, suggests quite clearly that there is no such thing as an essential lesbian body--lesbians themselves
have to create this body in order to feel they belong to the larger lesbian community, recognizable to its members not through essentialized bodily forms but through representation, gesture, and play.

(Creed 1999, 123).

Similarly, there is no essential queer “Chinese” female body. As is clear from the examples of the different bodies presented in this chapter, queer “Chinese” women constantly (re)create their bodies for their own advantage, be it personal or political.

To go back to Butler’s ideas on the body, she does not reduce it to a mere inscription of innate biological characteristics, nor does she see corporeality as an abstract category. Rather, what she is concerned with most is the ways in which bodies are materialized. She investigates carefully the political consequences of the forms that this materialization can take in terms of differential sexuality. This raises the following questions in response to Butler’s work: can we speak from a different body, one that diverges from the direction of hegemonic discourse? How can we re-conceptualize the queer body when the differences it embodies are multiple? Is it possible that if we disidentify ourselves from dominant discourses, the body might be materialized differently?

Muñoz argues that in the case of queer subjects of colour, their “different identity components occupy adjacent spaces and are not comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity. These hybridized identificatory positions are always in transit, shuttling between different identity vectors” (1999, 32). As the identities of transmigrant queer “Chinese” women are always in transit and shuttling, the ways they
participate in the process of materialization of their bodies are also always in transit and in process of becoming.

In “Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture,” Anne Balsamo (1999), states:

The relationship between material bodies and the information collected about those bodies is of central concern to people who ask the question, ‘Who counts?’ This leads to the investigation of both those who determine who counts as instances of what identities, and also those who are treated as numbers or cases in the construction of databases.

(Balsamo 1999, 286)

Although Balsamo’s analysis here concerns the Human Genome Project, it can shed light on the relationship between the racially marked body and individual identities. How much choice and agency does one have to decide one’s “Chineseness”, even if one does not look “Chinese”? I am particularly interested in this question when it comes to mixed-race individuals like Debora O, with pale skin. This also involves the politics or capacity of recognition. Even if one chooses to identify as “Chinese” and queer at the same time, do others always recognize the self-fashioning performance of this dual allegiance? Perhaps this is the reason why Muñoz reminds us that disidentification is not always efficient, since the code signalling non-conformity may not be recognized by those who conform.

These filmmakers convey many refreshing images of the racialized and queer female body through the practice of disidentification, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. In terms of “Chineseness”, its markers vary extremely among
different “Chinese” communities and in mixed-race or culturally hybrid contexts. There is no essential queer “Chinese” female body, any more than there is an essential dyke appearance. The masculinity problematically connected to dykeness in the West is even more disconcerting when the female-bodied person concerned appears East Asian, and is defying even more stereotypes about fragility and charm. Individual bodies can also change over time, and queerness may be performed in different ways by the same person, as illustrated in Xue’s autobiographical film *A Girl Named Kai* (2004).

The body images presented in the works of the queer “Chinese” women filmmakers discussed here raise critical questions: How stable and predictable are racial, gendered, or sexual identities, collectively or individually? To what extent do fashionable terms, as signifiers, create what they claim to signify? These filmmakers play with stereotypes and language, show how expectations interact with contestation and challenges to assumed meanings. These elements are central to the discussion of “disidentification” effects in these films, in the next chapter. The transmigrant status and experience of these filmmakers also reminds us that self-definition may be less about “where you come from,” and more about “where you are at,” as Ien Ang (2001) reminds us.
Chapter 4 Content Analysis: Disidentification

The last chapter focused on representations of the body in the films analyzed, with reference to Butler’s theory of gender performativity. The second half of the analysis, in this chapter, will concentrate on a less physical phenomenon, although in the case of these films it is also related to the body: Muñoz’s (1999) concept of “disidentification,” which was briefly introduced in Chapter 1. This strategy of using disidentification as a cinematic practice, in my view, is what distinguishes these films from mainstream gay and lesbian cinema and radical queer cinema. These filmmakers neither abandon the mainstream images nor privilege the queer representation of queer women in their film. These filmmakers use a range of techniques to convey their practice of “disidentification,” which I have grouped into three categories: (1) the appropriation of stereotypes related to “Chineseness” and sexuality/gender; (2) the use of hybrid and parodic film genres and unconventional combinations of sounds and images; and (3) innovative use of language. These will all be discussed here, but I will begin by reviewing in more detail Muñoz’s theory of “disidentification,” which is less well known than Butler’s theory of performativity.

I consider the films selected in this project to be a new kind of queer cinema, which not only tells its stories with a twist, but with the intention to mobilize social and political change. They are not made merely for the purpose of entertainment or solely for social and educational activism.
Muñoz’s theorization of disidentification originates from French linguist Michel Pêcheux’s discussion of how three types of subject are shaped by dominant discourses and ideological practices (1982). The first is the “good subject,” who identifies or assimilates with them. The second, the “bad subject,” refuses to identify with them and rebels against these symbolic systems by “counter-identifying” in relation to them. The danger and inefficiency of this is that the harder the bad subject resists and rebels, the more he or she, ironically, in fact validates and reinforces the dominance of those systems. The third, termed “disidenficatory”, is someone “who tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form” (Pêcheux, quoted in Muñoz 1999, 12). This recalls Chow’s idea of the “para-site” (discussed earlier, in Chapter 1), which does not take over or depart from the dominant symbolic system but rather affects or infects it, gradually re-shaping the boundaries of that system from a peripheral, tenuous but still attached, location. Foucault’s (1976/1990) discussion of the power and limits of discourse is relevant here:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines ad exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.

(Foucault 1990, 100-101)
From this perspective, disidentification is always already present in the working of discourse, and it works according to the same logic as discourse. As Muñoz puts it, “Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure or strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (1999, 11).

Muñoz also draws on insights from “The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism” (1990), an article by Norma Alarcón. Based on her arguments, Muñoz explains some of the problems of first- and second-wave feminism in relation to the three types of identification. He claims that “the first wave of feminist discourse called for a collective identification with a female subject. That female subject was never identified with any racial or class identity and was essentially a desexualized being; thus, by default, she was the middle-class straight white woman” (Muñoz 1999, 22, italics added). Alarcón critically examines Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1948/1974) and asserts that Beauvoir creates “a highly self-conscious ruling-class white Western female subject locked in a struggle to the death with ‘Man’” (Alarcón, quoted in Muñoz 1999, 22). This counter-identification with “Man” presents two problems. The first is that the only way in which one can assert oneself as a “woman” is through a fight against men, which only further confirms and strengthens their existence as “men” and their dominance. The second problem is that this counter-identification with men negates the vast differences among women in terms of race, class, and age or ability. As Alarcón points out, it also fails to account for
lesbian and queer women in general, and in particular for those of color, for whom the discursive and ideological sites of struggle are both white normativity and heteronormativity. Alarcón suggests that a more efficient and inclusive feminist view must measure and take into consideration the multi-layered intersectionality of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Furthermore, critical discussion of race is still relatively absent in various lesbian and gay studies in the Western academia, as is discussion of sexual orientation in studies of racism. Disidentification, which does not claim or aim to totally avoid either identification or counter-identification, can “contribute to an understanding of the ways in which queers of color identify with ethnos or queerness despite the phobic charges in both fields” (1999, 10). Muñoz explains the particular relevance of this concept to “minoritarian” subjects:

Disidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology. Disidentification resists the interpellation call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social. It is a third term that resists the binary of identification and counter-identification. Counter-identification often, through the very reutilized workings of its denouncement of dominant discourse, reinstates that same discourse.

(Muñoz 1999, 97)

In Bodies that Matter (1993), in response to Slavoj Žižek’s (1989) distrust of the political potential of disidentification, Butler asks, “[w]hat are the possibilities of
politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?” (1993, 219). She goes on to suggest that “it may be that affirmation of that slippage, that failure of identification, is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference” (Ibid.). Sharing a similar view, Muñoz’s confidence in the efficacy of disidentification comes from the belief that identification is neither a straightforward process nor as “seamless or unilateral as the Freudian account suggests” (1999, 12). In the context of the present study, we must ask whether disidentification opens up more space for the acknowledgement of internal differences among and within diverse “Chinese” communities. Can it explain why and how some disidentifying “Chinese” subjects, who do not conform to the stereotypes of “Chineseness”, nevertheless at some level continue to desire to be, and to be seen as being, “Chinese” (or affiliated with “Chineseness”)? They do so although they reject or disassociate themselves from some aspects of dominant perceptions of what it means to be “Chinese”. In other words, can the concept of disidentification adequately describe or convey the desire of some disidentifying “Chinese” women who want to be “Chinese” with a twist?

In discussing the process of identity formation, Michele Wallace (1993) points out that “the process may have been about problematizing and expanding one’s racial identity instead of abandoning it” (1993, 264). As Muñoz asserts, “disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this
object and invest it with new life” (1999, 12). Disidentification allows the emergence of a creative space for the formation of new images of queer East Asian and “Chinese” women, as in the bodily representations discussed in the previous chapter. Some are rarely seen in mainstream media, while others reproduce mainstream models, but with a twist; they are neither simple add-ons nor imitations of the prevailing representations of queer East Asian and “Chinese” women bodies. Rather, they disidentify in relation to dominant representations, simultaneously acknowledging and countering them.

Further questions arise from this concept: What might be the limits of disidentification? Can one consciously choose to practice disidentification, and by doing so become a disidentificatory subject, or is it the reverse that happens? Stuart Hall reminds us that the subject “who speaks and the subject who is spoken of are never identical, never exactly in the same place” (1990, 222). In the films discussed here, the disidentifying subject (the filmmaker) may be (re)presenting a subject (herself or someone else as actor) who is identifying or counter-identifying with the dominant discourse, framing the representation as critical or parodic. Can she be sure that the audience will recognize this complex relationship as constituting disidentification? To what extent does the effectiveness of such a disidentification depend on the implied or actual audience of the film?46

46 These are issues I have found crucial in understanding these filmmakers’ work. While conducting the research for this dissertation I did some preliminary work toward a reception study of these filmmakers’ works. It was not possible, however, in the time available to obtain all the information needed to complete my analysis of the films’ reception. (Please see more discussion in the next chapter.) The information I accumulated is included in the Filmography section of the appendix.
It seems to me that the function of disidentification is to trouble rather than overthrow the dominant ideology, which is resistant and in its unquestioning self-confidence may not even be aware of such challenges to its hegemony. Reaching an audience that does identify with the disidentification (such as other queer “Chinese” women) rather than its mainstream adherents is also productive, as it encourages other supposed “misfits” to come together to challenge the normativity of the dominant system. If enough people do that, the system does change, albeit almost imperceptibly. In my view, Muñoz’s view of disidentification is similar to Butler’s concept of “performativity,” in that it offers a point of departure to question and resist the current dominant ideological systems, rather than a recipe to radically change them.

The filmmakers in this study do not completely abandon stereotypical images and common scripts, but use them as a strategy to create disidentificatory visual images and to attract and provoke both queer and mainstream audiences. People cannot raise questions or make changes that challenge themselves and others if they do not first know or understand what it is that is dominating them. Abstract artistic expression and aesthetic experimentation might draw attention from academia and the film community, but it often excludes broader audiences. Therefore, these filmmakers project the dominant materials and invest them with a difference. By doing so, it becomes possible to give these materials new meanings and interpretations. In my view, the practice of disidentification is a necessary survival strategy, whether or not these filmmakers wish
to gain more publicity in mainstream cultural commodity markets. Although it might seem a slow way to shake dominant views, gradual awareness-raising can be an effective and sustainable tool for social activism. In Lim’s *Floored by Love* (2005), the mother of the femme lesbian character says that it takes time for traditional parents to accept that their child is queer. It also takes time to change the public’s normative assumptions and perceptions about people as “the same” or “different” (and therefore dangerous), but these do change as alternative representations become more numerous and accessible. I will look more closely now at how these filmmakers deploy stereotypes of “Chineseness” and of lesbian sexuality for their own goals.

**Appropriation of Stereotypical Images of “Chineseness”**

There have been many critiques about how dominant stereotypes impose identity labels on racialized individuals and shape others’ and their own perception and identity. In *Asian America through the Lens* (1998), Chinese American historian and film scholar Jun Xing (1998) argues regarding the term “Asian American” that “this externally imposed racial ‘assignment,’ however incorrect it may be, has entered into both public perceptions and self-conceptions of individuals of Asian descent living in America” (1998, 21). Postcolonial feminist scholar, Lisa Lowe (1991), however, sees this essentializing category, “Asian American,” as a potential site for productive manipulation:
[A] strategic use of a positive essentialism […] suggests that it is possible to utilize specific signifiers of ethnic identity, such as Asian American, for the purpose of contesting and disrupting the discourse that exclude Asian Americans, while simultaneously revealing the internal contradictions and slippages of Asian American so as to insure that such essentialism will not be reproduced and proliferated by the very apparatuses we seek to disempower.

(Lowe 1991, 39)

Many racialized filmmakers seem to echo Lowe’s critical insight and have adopted the appropriation of stereotypical images as a powerful tool of their filmmaking in order to disidentify with the colonial assumptions rooted in an imperialist narrative that such stereotypes convey. This strategy often creates moments of humour, as illustrated by Lim in her portrait of older “Chinese” immigrant parents. Their conservatism and homophobia are revealed by exaggerated clichés. Whether the viewers have actually experienced such reactions, identify with them, or have seen them in the popular media, these stereotypical images work to make the audience laugh. Everyone recognizes supposed “truths” about “Chinese” expectations for young women: they should preferably marry a “Chinese” (or at least Asian) man (not a same-sex partner), of appropriate age, who is good looking, well dressed, and has money and prospects. In Lim’s *Floored by Love* (2005), when Cara finally comes out to her parents her mother shows her double disappointment: Cara is dating neither a man nor a “Chinese” woman. Cara’s father takes comfort in the fact that at least Janet (who is Japanese) is not white,
and she is good-looking. Lim implies that changing reactions can be achieved, but only gradually, in stages.

Another common stereotype of older “Chinese” immigrants is that their early lives were very harsh, and economic deprivation has made them thrifty, even stingy. As a result, they suffer from the “free stuff syndrome”: they will take whatever freebies they can get, as their priority is to save for a rainy day. It does not matter if they actually need or want the free gift or not, and they are willing to do whatever it takes to save money. Cara’s parents in Floored by Love (2005) also exhibit this syndrome. In my interview with Lim, she explained that she uses these stereotypes and other clichés because they still exist even now and she sees them in her everyday surroundings. She added that queer issues could be extremely painful to face when dealing with a traditional “Chinese” family, and comic relief is therefore a way to defuse the situation, to make it possible to think about without becoming mired in pain and sorrow.47 In this film, the scenes with the parents not only keep the viewers entertained, but also force them to engage with Cara’s problem as a real one. They remain critically involved with the story and the characters, rather than being overwhelmed by the potentially heart-breaking drama that is unfolding.

These humorous stereotypical images of old “Chinese” immigrant parents can be considered as a deployment of “strategic essentialism.” The queer characters in Lim’s

47 The comic relief is also essential to keep the audience entertained and thereby engaged with the story in the film. Comedy helps to prevent audience members from feeling emotionally overwhelmed by the images or stories, which prevents them from disengaging their attention or leaving the theatre altogether.
films are often uncategorized; the audience might be able to identify them as “East Asian” due to their physical appearance, or sometimes from the language they speak, but several could be from any East Asian cultural background with no specification in the film. Lim brings in specific elements of “Chineseness” through her mocking evocation of these stereotypes. She can do so without seeming insulting because she is herself “Chinese”, and for her it is a way of re-claiming a shared “Chinese” space, on screen. It is acceptable when someone makes fun of his or her own ethnic and cultural background, but it becomes unacceptable when an outsider does the same thing. By making gentle fun of the discriminatory views of some older “Chinese” people, Lim re-claims her “Chinese-ness,” including the right to be critical.

Lim’s almost parodic representation of an older generation of “Chinese” immigrants is not the only example of the strategic use of “Chinese” stereotypes in the films discussed in the previous chapter. Her depictions of sexuality depend on the recognition of gendered and racialized expectations, including stereotypes of lesbian woman. I will focus in what follows on two aspects: the Orientalist representation of East Asian women, and butch/femme representations in relation to Eastern and Western models of masculinity. Lim’s earlier film Sugar Sweet (2001) will serve to illustrate the ways in which these depictions do not simply identify or counter-identify in relation to dominant representations, but provide examples of disidentfication.
Queering Stereotypes of the East Asian Femme Fatale and Sexuality

In this film, there are two layers of disidentification in relation to women’s bodies. The first challenges Western Orientalist stereotypical representations of erotic, exotic, and dangerous heterosexual East Asian women, who are often portrayed as highly sexualized feminine figures. The second layer of disidentification is in relation to western models of lesbian sexuality, as portrayed in pornography aimed at men. In the *Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (2007), Celine Parrenas Shimizu argues that “[b]ecause the Asian woman cannot be imagined outside of sex, her resistance is also found in sex” (2007, 97). Thus, she addresses the importance of re-investigating “the role of hypersexuality in those Hollywood parts that call for an Asian American femme fatale as a dynamic and creative production that attests to be the confounding unknowability of race, sex, and representation” (Ibid.). This stereotype is illustrated by several female characters in James Bond movies, whose prime target is heterosexual male viewers (Hannsberry, 1998; Jiwani 2006; Marchetti 1993; Shimizu 2007).

In Lim’s film Miki is a powerhouse character, with a prestigious and demanding job as a marketing manager of an international company in Japan, where it is unusual for a woman of her age to occupy such a high-ranking position. She is bossy and demands a high standard from her employees. Her strict and harsh attitude towards her male employees in particular shows that she does not allow her standards to be
compromised or her authority questioned. As she is an attractive female, her male employees hate her and fantasize about her at the same time. Lim shows us the pervasive misogyny in her workplace, but Miki is not affected by this unfriendly environment. She is a “dragon lady,” and her assertive boldness seems to castrate the misogynous male masculinity of her employees.

This dragon lady image continues to be presented in the lesbian bar scene. Naomi has gone to a lesbian bar to find a suitable actress for her film, and encounters a beautiful femme lesbian, Miki, who invites her to see her dance show. She tells Naomi the reason why she enjoys performing erotic dancing in the lesbian club because it is a welcome change from her boring daytime job. She shares with Naomi where she likes to “hunt,” both in bars and online. Some kissing scenes among the lesbian customers inside and outside the club are shown, and we also see Miki flirt with various different types of women while she is talking about her belief in open relationships and sexual freedom. Unlike the stereotypically passive and submissive femme often portrayed in popular North American mainstream lesbian films, Miki embodies one of the archetypes of the Oriental woman, the femme fatale. The name of the lesbian bar, “Killer Babe,” as well as the allusion to Miki as a hunter (even a lesbian womanizer), indicate that she is both dangerous and desirable. But she is hunting willing other women rather than male victims, and this representation of an attractive woman is designed for lesbian viewers rather than to appeal to straight men.
The second layer of disidentification embodied by Miki is situated within the dominant western lesbian butch-femme framework (Nestle 1987, 1992; Walker 1993). Even though Miki is represented as a “lipstick femme,” she is not a typical one bound by the butch-femme construction. In the S & M sex scene, she is the one who wears the dildo, who penetrates and orally pleases Azusa, the more dyke-like character. In popular western lesbian romantic narrative, the dyke character is often the one who is more aggressive, who pursues the femme, who protects her, and who brings her sexual pleasure (Nestle 1987, 1992). Miki’s ambivalent queerly gendered character disidentifies with both the feminine passive receiver role and the masculinized aggressor role often associated with conventional depictions of lesbians on screen. As a lesbian, Miki queers the colonial heterosexual dragon lady fantasy. By portraying a seemingly lipstick femme who is neither passive nor aggressive, this representation of East Asian lesbian sexuality also queers western stereotypes of lesbians as it “unsettles viewers’ normative assumptions about the relationship between gender identification and sexual identity” (Leung 2006, 194). The erotic lesbian sex scene in this film, described in the last chapter, take this disidentification even further.

In the middle of the film, as the story progresses, Lim provides a rare representation of lesbian self-pleasure. Naomi’s best friend, Azusa, tells her about her adventurous visit to a lesbian sex-toy shop with her girlfriend. To please her girlfriend and increase their sexual pleasure, she bought two sex-toys for her, but her girlfriend never uses them. Out of curiosity, Azusa decides to try the sex-toys out herself. The
camera focuses first on Azusa’s face, then slowly moves along with one of her hands as she touches her breasts and her belly, while the other hand holds the vibrator near her genital area. As described before, the image is slightly out of focus and the lighting is dim. When we start to hear Azusa moan we expect to see and hear her orgasm, as is usual in mainstream heterosexual masturbation scenes, but something unexpected happens. The sound of the vibrator stops and so does Azusa’s moaning. Instead, we hear her groan with frustration. The battery has gone dead. Azusa jokes that she should get a generator in case any electricity cuts occur at critical moments like that.

Here Lim not only gives us a rare scene of lesbian self-pleasure on screen, she also shows it with a comical twist. Images of lesbian masturbation are rare in mainstream cinema as they might threaten many straight men’s belief in their legitimate ownership of sex and pleasure from and for women. Through humour, Lim cleverly disidentifies this scene in relation to cinematic stereotypes. Lim’s appropriations here can be understood as disidentificatory, because they are “not about assimilation into the heterosexual matrix but instead a partial disavowal of that cultural form that works to restructure from within” (Muñoz 1999, 28). This illustrates one way in which cultural productions have the potential to be sites of resistance, providing alternative ways to engage the ideological and discursive hegemony. Shimizu (2007) argues that “[o]nly by an admission of the Asian/American woman as Oriental sexual phantasm can her status as sexual be rewritten as politically significant” (2007, 98). In making East Asian
lesbian sexuality visible, Lim claims cinematic as well as political spaces that have not been available and accessible to queer East Asian women.

Other aspects of lesbianism in relation to being “Chinese” are brought out by exposing stereotypes of both “Chinese” and Western working-class masculinity in Lee’s *Enter the Mullet* (2004).

**Queer Appropriation of Eastern and Western Stereotypes of Masculinity**

As illustrated by some of Lim’s female characters on screen, images of East Asian women are most often constructed in reference to hegemonic Orientalist heterosexual discourses. It is not surprising that there are so few portrayals of East Asian lesbians, let alone masculinized butch-dykes, in mainstream Western media, since the East is construed as hyper-feminine, and even Asian men are seen as emasculated, as discussed in the last chapter. In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Halberstam calls for a re-thinking of what masculinity means when it is performed by female bodies. She argues that “masculinity [...] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body” (1998, 2). I suggest that cinematic representations of Asian butch-dykes can be a productive site to examine the performance of racialized masculinity, as illustrated in *Enter the Mullet* (2004).

The whimsical hybrid masculinity represented in Lee’s film appropriates and combines a number of stereotypes: “Chinese” “Kung Fu” style, East Asian male
gangsters, and stigmatized western stereotypes of the working-class mullet hairstyle. Like Lim, Lee uses satirical humorous effects to bring home her message. The result is neither a straightforward imitation of Bruce Lee-style East Asian/"Chinese" masculinity, nor a mere subversion of white working-class masculinity, but rather an act of disidentification with both, as well as with East Asian hyper-femininity, that nevertheless includes parts of all three. If we believe that we are always marked corporeally in specific ways, this means that there are also ways in which our bodies can be un-marked as well. While East Asian female bodies have been Orientalized and hyper-feminized by hegemonic white-male-middle-class masculinity, there are possibilities to undo, or at least re-code, the representational system which produced them. The gendered body of East Asian butch-dykes in Lee’s film provides such a possibility to destabilize the representational system through appropriation and parody of existing stereotypes of both Eastern and Western masculinity.

In "Thoughts on Lesbian Genders in Contemporary Chinese Cultures" (2002), Helen Leung explores lesbian gender identification in Chinese communities through ethnographical research and queer literature in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. Departing from the western model of butch/femme, she examines a proliferation of local variations of Chinese performances and naming of queer/lesbian gender. These include TB (tomboy)/TBG (tomboy girl) in HK, T (roughly equivalent to butch)/po (roughly equivalent to femme) and Bu-Fen (neither T nor po; undistinguished by choice) in Taiwan, and new types of androgyny in China, as well as ambivalence and
fluidity among the emerging categories. As she states, the purpose of this examination is not to prove that butch/femme roles and self-presentations exist in Chinese lesbian communities, or “whether lesbian gender identification such as that of butch/femme is a ‘mystified’ (in ideological terms) reproduction of heterosexual gender roles or a matter of autonomous lesbian agency” (2002, 126). Rather, it is more productive to “explore how different discursive processes, including that of the dominant gender system as well as that of queer appropriations, are in negotiation with each other in specific contexts” (Ibid.). Leung claims that such appropriations can “bring categories that arguably originate from the West into crisis” (2002, 132). She believes such efforts are extremely crucial to the Chinese lesbian tongzhi movement, because they continuously seek to define “on its own terms, the histories, theories, aesthetics, and politics of sexual minorities in Chinese communities” (Ibid.). Leung suggests that by looking into “the process of subject formation” (2002, 125) from these “scattered ethnographies” (Ibid.), one would be able to trace a “queer genealogy” (2002, 132), “a genealogy of alternative forms of gender such as female masculinity or lesbian femininity” (2002, 131). Its importance lies in revealing the “complex relationship

48 This term, used to designate homosexuals, originated first in the First Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1989. It came from the “concern that Western labels such as gay, lesbian, and queer failed to capture the nature of Chinese same-sex desire and relationship” (Huang 2010, 211). It was popularly adopted later in Taiwan and Mainland China. In the context of the latter, it originally means “comrade,” used to address Communists in Mainland China. However, when it was “reintroduced into Mainland China [...] it has been transformed from a term that was gender-neutral with no reference to sexuality, to one that singles out people with non-mainstream, non-heterosexual sexualities” (2010, 212).
between queer gender identification and dominant ideology as well as the nuanced local variations of queer gender categories” (2002, 125).

As discussed in the last chapter, in *Enter the Mullet* (2004) the conflict between the two East Asian butch-dykes turns into solidarity when two non-mullet white butch-dykes intimidate them. This is both a race and a class conflict, as the white women are encoded as middle-class. The East Asian dykes’ teamwork and unfeminine but Asian mastery of kick boxing illustrate another phenomenon rarely seen on screen: assertive “dyke-hood,” as an alternative expression of sisterhood between East Asian dykes. Unlike earlier popular stories about lonely and tragic white butch-dykes fighting alone to protect the woman they love (sometimes even sacrificing their own life), Lee’s focus on “dyke-hood,” as masculinised homosocial bonds, can be seen as disidentifying from mainstream portraits of butch-dykes. Representations such as Miki in Lim’s *Sugar Sweet* (2001) and East Asian butch-dykes in Lee’s *Enter the Mullet* (2004) do not confirm either East Asian or Western stereotypes of queer women, and expose the need to question the conflation of gender/sexual identity in examining performances of lesbian gender identities.

The exploitation of stereotypes of “Chineseness” and gendered/queer sexuality comes together in a number of instances in the films discussed, through images related to food. A preoccupation with food and eating is yet another stereotype associated with “Chineseness” (Laura Marks 2000, 236-237). The juxtaposition or conflation of
elements associated with food consumption with those related to sexuality is another source of humour, as well as a further way to queer cultural and sexual stereotypes.

**The Body and Food/Sex: Appropriation of Conventional Cultural Symbols**

Food is often used as a cultural symbol or stereotype of ethnic groups, and there are many stereotypical images related to “Chinese” people’s relationship with food (Tuan 1993, 51-53). A common saying is that the Chinese “eat everything with four legs except the table.” Food plays an important role in many diasporic Asian filmmakers’ work. During my interview with Lim, she mentioned that food has significant cultural meanings for her. Food preparation and consumption provide a powerful medium for connecting immigrants to their “home” cultures. It is not just that the taste, smell, or texture of particular foods evoke memories of home, but food is what sustains life and builds the flesh, the physical body, which often serves as the most visible of racial/ethnic cultural signifiers. We are what we eat, literally, but the foods we choose indicate our preferences and allegiances. Body and culture are inextricably connected where food is concerned.

In Lim’s film *Salty Wet* (2002), there are many images juxtaposing food and bodies. As the expressions discussed in that film clearly show, in “Chinese” culture food is often linked to sex. One common Chinese proverb says that “food and sex constitute human nature.” However, this connotation between food and sex is very
much rooted in the dominant heterosexual context, and Lim’s film is original in revealing the predominance of food references in Chinese terms referring to non-heterosexual sexual activities as well. The associations are also a source of humour: for example, in a Cantonese context “tofu” refers to a “Chinese” lesbian, and “grinding tofu” means lesbian sex. It may be complimentary to imply that “Chinese” lesbians are light skinned, and their bodies smooth and soft, or less complimentary if it means tasteless and potentially boring, as tofu may seem to Westerners. It is certainly a food associated with Asian cultures, as is rice. Many ethnic groups have a particular food associated with them: South Asians are inseparable from curry, Latinos from corn and chilli, and North Americans may be referred to as potatoes. In the context of food-sex-body combinations, food items may be used to describe a particular preference, either for a sexual partner from a particular cultural background or a specific type of sexual activity. In this case, “You are –sexually– what/whom you consume.” For example, “sticky rice” refers to an Asian gay man who likes only other Asian men; “tofu fried rice” refers to an Asian woman who likes Asian women; “rice king” refers to a white man who is sexually attracted to Asian gay boys, while “potato queen” refers to an Asian gay man who is sexually attracted to white men. In “Shortcomings, Questions about Pornography and Pedagogy,” Fung talks about how Asian-Canadian gay men often construct their “sexual self-image in relation to the dominant representation of white masculinity” (1993, 360). This is reflected in the two terms cited here, “rice king” and “potato queen,” which are not just racialized and gendered but also rooted in a
colonial context. The white gay man is automatically referred to as a “king,” while the Asian gay man is automatically referred to as a “queen.” The Asian gay man, already femininized in the colonial context, is again assumed to be effeminate.

In *Floored by Love* (2005), Lim brings the gender aspect into this food-sex-body combination. In one scene, when Cara is trying to convince her partner Janet how hard it will be to make her parents understand that their daughter is queer, she says: “My mom is going to think she feeds me too much chilli and Sambal Belachan (Spicy Malaysian shrimp paste). Too much ‘yang’ in my system.” Janet replies: “Funny, my mom never blamed it on the tofu in her cooking.” In traditional Chinese medicine, each food has a particular disposition. Other than the taste, there are also cooling, cold, warm, and hot aspects of the food. Warming and hot food can cause too much yang in the system. Yang is often referred to as the masculine component, in opposition to yin, the complementary feminine one. In this context, food is directly associated with gendered characteristics. Another example is that meat is often associated with masculinity (in English a “meaty” man has muscles, and carnivores have to be good hunters). Since vegetarianism is correspondingly associated with weakness or delicateness, and therefore feminine, the term “vegetarian” is sometimes used to refer to lesbians both in English or Chinese.

The use of slang terms associated with food to refer to their sexual preferences can be seen as a linguistic disidentification practice for East Asian and “Chinese” queers. Muñoz describes disidentification as one of the “survival strategies the minority
subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere” (1999, 4). Sexuality is not a topic which East Asian people would normally discuss in public, even if the context is heterosexual. Being queer, and wanting to talk about it in public, is doubly transgressive. Norms set up to protect the private sphere from prying eyes, whether spoken or not, may be even more restrictive in diasporic or immigrant communities than for others in their home or host countries. In her study of the psychology of immigrant women’s sexuality, Espín (1999) finds that due to a deep sense of lack of control over their daily lives, particularly in the public domain where racialized immigrants experience discrimination, controlling women’s bodies and sexualities often become symbolic demonstrations of authority, continuity, and masculinity for the men in diasporic and immigrant communities. This type of control through peer pressure is also exerted against male homosexuals or anyone whose sexuality might be seen as not conforming to the required model. This scrutiny gives such communities “the feeling that not all traditions are lost” and they still have something that they can control (1999, 6-7). One means for the non-conforming to assert their independence from this pressure and to create a sense of solidarity among those who may disidentify with the dominant minoritarian discourse is to develop a code of their own for communication on taboo subjects such as sexuality.

This motivation is the source of many symbols or metaphors invented by and for people with “insider knowledge,” to enable them to talk about sex and sexuality among themselves. Secrecy, or camouflage, are not surprising in contexts where LGBTQT
people of color may get beaten up or verbally assaulted, by members of mainstream or minority communities, for displaying public intimacy. In some cases, talking about sex in public can be equally as dangerous as public intimacy (Bell et al 1994; Valentine 1996). Humorous euphemisms for sexual acts and orientations provide a way for queer people of color to claim the right to a public space (spatial and discursive) for queer intimacy. Lim’s exposure of such expressions in a film that non-queer spectators may also see conveys a type of disidentification through citation, in contexts that make the expressions both humorous and a weapon wielded to achieve public recognition. To attain this goal, she uses documentary techniques in original ways, conveying through the form of her films the ethnic and sexual hybridity that she represents on screen. Using conventional genres and techniques with a twist is a strategy used by all the filmmakers discussed here.

**Queering Cinematic Effects: Hybrid Forms and Genres**

The filmmakers in this dissertation present hybridity not only through the content of their stories, which introduce culturally or racially hybrid characters whose gender/sexuality is queer, but by technical combinations of different forms and mixed genres. Most conventional film scripts follow narratives that are constructed according to predictable models, corresponding to specific genres of film (such as film noir, musical, the Western, science fiction, etc). There are usually guidelines with rules that
apply to the structuring of a mainstream film. For example, film scholar Thomas Schantz (1995) argues that “[l]ike language and myth, the film genre as a textual system represents a set of rules of construction that are utilized to accomplish a specific communicative function” (1995, 96). In conventional and classic cinema, effective communication often relies on applying the rules of construction. However, in experimental contexts, art films may play with the conventions of story/script structure or cinematic techniques to create novel effects. Mixing different forms and genres can also be effective for filmmaking that has a social or political message, rather than aiming primarily to be artistically innovative. This approach is used by some of the filmmakers discussed here, whose queerness is reflected in their twisting of the usual guidelines and rules.

Lee’s *Rated F... for Fart* (2005), for example, is a film full of viewing surprises. The film starts without indicating any title, immediately plunging viewers into a conventional documentary-film style interview. The first interview is slightly misleading, as we do not yet know what topic is being discussed, what question the interviewee was asked, or who she is. We see a short-haired woman, who is sitting indoors, telling the interviewer something about a mysterious experience: “My first time is kind of scary, because you know I might be completely rejected. What if…I don’t know…It is a real test for intimacy, I guess.” Without knowing what she is referring to, it seems that she might be talking about some kind of kinky sex habit or practice. When we realize the film is about farting, through the second interview, it creates a moment of
comical surprise. This opening scene, which inserts comedy or parody into what seemed to be a serious documentary, makes the audience wonder what kind of film this is. Is it going to be mainly comic, or documentary, or possibly experimental? Is it making fun of farting, of sexuality, or of documentary films? Who are these people being “interviewed”? Are they paid actors with a script, or ordinary people spontaneously sharing their own personal experiences?

Another surprising moment appears at the end of film. We are shown a half-naked female body sitting in a bathtub, in clear water. We do not see the face of this person and are given no information about who she is or her ethnicity. From the shots of her bare legs and the half-filled tub, we assume that this person is having a bath. This scene seems like a strange insertion, having seen the rest of the film, as it is not related to an interview, and there is no music, sound or on-screen text, as in the other segments. We do not know what to expect, except that this may remind us of some steamy images of attractive female bodies in a hot bath commonly seen in movies and on TV shows. We are left wondering how this is related to the preceding interviews about lesbians farting and how it affects their relationships. Then we see some bubbles come up between her legs and we finally have some clue as to the connection. This seemingly erotic scene, which may spark the viewer’s imagination of some sexual fantasy, is actually a scene of farting in action!! This integration of what appears to be an erotic clip into the film can be seen as Lee’s disidentifying with conventional erotic images that sexualize the
female body. This half-naked farting female disrupts the viewers’ expectations, and the trace of her invisible flatulence bursts the fantasy bubble.

The third element of disidentification in this film occurs in a scene presenting one anonymous interviewee, shown only in silhouette. In some types of documentary film dealing with serious issues such as drugs, human trafficking, or sexuality, confidentiality is essential and the interviewees prefer to remain anonymous. It may be dangerous for them to be exposed. In this segment, Lee and her co-director present the anonymous interviewee in a fashion that reminds us of that type of film. In addition, in the background we see a shadow image of a person wearing a hat and a raincoat-like outfit reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes (without a pipe) or other classic detectives. No question is asked of this interviewee, but we hear her say: “I guess I like to know about everything. Just show me what you got.” This message seems mysterious. Without knowing the context, the audience suspects that the topic is something different from what was previously being discussed. The mystery is solved when the interviewee continues: “I guess maybe an overly loud public farting might make me feel uncomfortable. I have never experienced anything that made me feel uncomfortable until now.” She then shares a simple strategy to solve the problem of farting in public. With the further advice she subsequently gives on what to do on dates, the documentary model evoked shifts to that of advice or self-help shows. By appropriating different styles of interview, and choosing a topic that is taboo, but one that few can take seriously, Lee makes fun of people who might be embarrassed. As discussed in Chapter
3, she shows lesbians as being like everyone else, their bodies as primarily human. Any mystery attached to their lives and sexuality is the product of the viewers’ fantasy and the unrealistic models found in mainstream media. The humour in this case serves to demystify, and the allusions to various types of documentary that require camouflage or confidentiality make the delivery of the message parodic as well as the message itself.

This mocking style, which is often effective in short films or mock-umentaries, is deployed also in Lee’s other film, *Enter the Mullet* (2004) already discussed in Chapter 3 and earlier in this chapter. In that case the documentary form being parodied is the conventional anthropological or educational TV show, characterized by “talking heads” and hosted by an expert who introduces the subject to certify its credibility. This style is effective in establishing the “authority” of the host and the “objectivity” of the film/show maker. The information is to be taken seriously, and the effect is the contrary if the topic turns out to be farting or mullet hairstyles. The imitation of this style is Lee’s way of using cinema to critique cinematic discourse, turning representation against itself to destabilize the credibility of any representation. Various technical effects contribute to the successful ironic evocation of documentary or other models, such as the erotic films referred to in Lim’s *Sugar Sweet* (2001). In the next section, I will examine three technical areas--technique, sound, and image--to further explore the presentation of hybrid forms and mixed genres. As this study focuses on the messages conveyed by the representations of queer East Asian and “Chinese” women rather than on film technique, I will only address those aspects that relate to the effect of these
representations and demonstrate disidentification. I will begin with Lim’s *Salty Wet* (2002), where the topic is language.

**Image, Sound, and Text in *Salty Wet* (2002)**

In this film, the interviews are presented as both conventional and non-conventional. Some interviewees appear as talking-heads with no particular background, while others are shown surrounded by or in juxtaposition with sexually explicit footage of naked East Asian female and male bodies, and/or written texts on the screen. The background images usually hint at the meaning of the terms Lim discusses with the interviewees. The film can be considered as consisting of two parallel and intersecting narratives: visual and linguistic. There are also two layers of linguistic narrative, composed of speech (the spoken languages include English and Cantonese), and written texts presented mostly in traditional Chinese characters and occasionally in English as well. The interviewees are more remarkable for what they say than how they look, and the visual narrative is mostly present in the form of background images.

Some are neutral images of food, airplanes, and an airport, while others are sexually explicit pornographic scenes. For example, on the topic of airplanes, we are shown a person using a stick to hit an airplane model hanging in the air. A dyke says she has never heard about this term, “hit the airplane” (打飛機). A gay man tries to figure out what the term means but fails to give the audience an answer. Another gay
man appears on screen and explains that it means gay men wracking, masturbating. Meanwhile, we are shown a sexually explicit background image of a group masturbation, five completely naked East Asian gay men sitting together, some sitting on chairs, and others sitting on the floor, all rubbing their penises with enthusiasm. We can hear their moaning. They seem to concentrate on their individual experience, exchanging no words or glances. Interestingly, one of them actually looks directly into the camera. This direct gaze back to the camera seems to convey to the audience his unapologetic pleasure in pleasuring himself.

These sexually explicit scenes are unexpected and therefore shocking, in a documentary short that appears initially to be a serious discussion of how queer “Chinese” immigrants and “Chinese”-Canadians describe terms in Cantonese and English related to queer sub-culture. As the film progresses the topics expand to include terms describing lesbian oral sex, gay men’s masturbation, gay anal sex, etc. Lim confronts these culturally taboo topics, not only by openly talking about them, but also by providing visual aids to show what the terms refer to. Seeing these images and hearing these words in a theatre is like talking about a secret loudly in public, especially as even “normal” hetero-sex is not usually discussed publicly in “Chinese” culture. When I interviewed her, Lim said that she made the daring decision to weave these sex scenes into the film, precisely for their shock value. A confrontation with naked queer bodies and sexual acts is forced on an unsuspecting audience, making them acknowledge their existence. The fact that these bodies are seemingly “Chinese” (or, at
any rate seemingly East Asian) can also be seen as another way of challenging stereotypes or queering “Chineseness.”

By using simple film techniques to achieve an unusual combination of linguistic and visual representations, the film reflects in its form the topic under discussion. How do we talk about sex or see it, in public or private, and how do heterosexual and queer people talk differently, using specific sexual terms? How widely are some terms being used and are they understood differently within various communities? Is visibility necessarily associated with naming, as a kind of “coming out”? As in Lee’s film on farting, serious and “unspeakable” issues are broached and made relatively palatable by the use of humour and surprise effects.


Like Lim, who has formal training in filmmaking, Xue is also a professionally trained filmmaker who utilizes diverse and complex techniques to assist her storytelling in *A Girl Named Kai* (2004). In this case, the pace of the film and the background music or silence, accompanied by written texts, contributes to create the changing moods and inner emotional states of the character, Xue herself.

Xue is always in motion, and the technique of fast editing creates a strong sense of mobility in the film. The audience has the sense that she is constantly changing and reinventing herself and her identities through her experiences. This mobility conveys
transmigrants’ experience of constant change and the fluid on-going process of identity (trans)formation (Wallace 1993; Ong and Nonini 1997; Ong 1999). Throughout the film, there are many juxtapositions of images of Taiwan and Vancouver, indicating the clash of two cultures. Xue is constantly living in-between. The insertion of brief shots of her shaving her head and being tattooed in between shots of the two locations seems to indicate her re-claiming of who she wants to be, by mapping and controlling the surface of her body. The film shows that it is through a process of negotiation that Xue reinvents and transforms her various identities, which are always emerging and becoming, as she navigates between two poles, in relation to which she is a dis-placed person. As a transmigrant Chinese queer woman, she is an outsider in two ways and in two places.

As mentioned in the Introduction to this study, this film evokes some intense embodied viewing experiences for me, as I am also a transmigrant queer woman from Taiwan. The first time I saw it, it was the fast-paced movement of the images that overwhelmed me. However, after watching the film multiple times, I realized the subtle and long lasting effect of the soundscape. Paying more attention to the soundtrack has helped me to understand both the film and Xue’s experiences.

The term “soundscape” in cinematography encompasses dialogue and narration, voice-over, music, sounds, and silence. In this film, there is neither narration nor voice-over, but there are subtitle-like texts, whose effect is similar to a muted voice-over, or even a mute monologue. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a monologue is
characteristic of a highly dramatic scene where only one actor speaks, and often at
length. Its purpose is to allow the audience to go into the inner world of the character, to
share his or her unspeakable thoughts and feelings. By silently uttering her struggles,
fears, and desires to her family and the audience, Xue invites us to go into her inner
world, to see who she really is and to understand her. However, this interior monologue
is silenced by both her fear of being rejected by her family and the hetero-normative
discourses circulating in society. Nonetheless, this fear that is the source of her
muteness also motivates her to find alternatives ways to speak out. In the text, she
claims that making this film is the only way she can do so. In discussing the paradox of
“female identity enclosure,” Trinh T. Min-ha quotes some verses from Cheng-tao-ke:
“When you are silent, it speaks; when you speak, it is silent” (1989, 96). Although the
mute captions convey a space of silence in the film, we hear the voice of the person who
is silent, and her strong desire to be heard.

Why does Xue choose to be silent, and why is the text in English rather than
Chinese? Perhaps this silence is an attempt to avoid being labelled as Chinese or
Taiwanese or Canadian. There is no doubt that the use of English is crucial for
international exposure and distribution, and this choice may be utilitarian. It also makes
the film more accessible to the local queer community of other backgrounds.

The original music of the film also deserves attention, as it has its own narrative
function as a supplement contributing to the audience’s understanding of the story told
visually. For example, changes of music indicate the different places and the transitions
Xue goes through in each one. New beats or melodies are heard as she moves through different cities and stages in her life. For example, the music accompanying the image of the Golden Gate Bridge and seagulls flying in San Francisco is different from the music for a scene of Chinatown. There is a break in the sound each time she changes place. For the audience the shift in the music provides a break from the intensity of her journey. At one point there is a shift in the music while the text on the screen states: “Finally I passed through the gate,” informing us that Xue is entering into another stage of her journey. The music in the last part of the film accompanies Xue’s journey in London. It begins smoothly, evoking her new love, then becomes heavy and the images become darker, indicating that something is wrong. The film ends in Taiwan, and the final soundtrack is a stable beat, like a heartbeat, which seems to pump energy back into the film and leaves the audience feeling hopeful. It is as if we have taken a rollercoaster ride with Xue and finally arrive back on the ground. This sense of being grounded, of returning to a home base, gives us the energy to look forward with Xue to the next unknown journey.

Although this is the autobiographical story of a personal journey, it is also a political statement on many levels. This film reflects the collective struggles that many immigrant queer youth share, the feelings of a multi-positional outsider residing in a host country with a largely heterosexual-normative society. Indeed, in Xue’s speech (and muteness) in this film, I heard my own voice and silence. Her journey resonated
with a shared multi-layered experience of un-belonging, and her telling of it led to a sense of belonging as I walked out of the theatre.

While I have had similar experiences to Xue’s, as a Taiwanese queer woman transplanted to Vancouver, I am not of mixed-race like Deborah O. Nevertheless her film Blood (2004) raises comparable issues in terms of moving around and not totally belonging anywhere, and dealing with cultural issues related to queerness as well as racial difference. O also skilfully deploys cinematic effects to get her story across.

**Image and Sound in Blood (2004)**

In this film, several technical elements contribute to the storytelling and to creating the changing moods of the film. First, constant camera movement and fast-editing of shots create a sense of constantly shifting, transient and ephemeral feelings, often associated in this case with memory. This constant motion reflects O’s life and her family’s experience of travel and migration, crossing time and space.

O is the narrator of this autobiographical account, and in one scene she states: “Each frame opens up new possibilities.” This line well describes the effect of the hybrid, overlapping images used in the film. Unusual time-warping effects are created by blending O’s father’s old still photos and home videos with O’s new footage. These overlapping images serve as illustrations and metaphors for memory: the past and present overlap and may be confused, the images are fragmented, yet connected; it is
hard to define the boundaries between the beginning and the end, or to precisely locate the moments in-between. It is just like moving in water, there is no boundary and the movements do not leave permanent traces once they are completed. Perhaps this is the reason O begins the film with a swimming scene, in which we see an unidentifiable woman moving in different directions under the water.

O also utilizes various camera angles and movements to create the mood of particular scenes. For example, in the walking scenes she rotates the camera in a circular motion, creating a dizzying and disorienting feeling. She goes back to where her father was born in Macau in search of a sense of belonging, or perhaps a sense of home, only to find out that there is really no tangible and solid foundation in Macau to connect her to the traditions and history of her father’s side of the family, who came from there. The rotating and shaking visual images reflect O’s inner emotion, her sense of being lost and not knowing where she came from or where she should be going.

The soundscape also plays an important role in this film. The use of repetition in the voice-over commentary is a powerful tool contributing to the effectiveness of the storytelling. For example, in one scene we see O and her sister running on a beach, towards the camera, when they were little. Meanwhile, O’s voice lists a number of terms that describe mixed-race people, such as half-blood, half-breed, mulatto, Métis, Eurasian, hapa, Creole, and multi-heritage.\(^49\) A few scenes later, we hear her repeat the same list of terms again. The effect is like an echo: we are barely conscious of the

sounds at first, but they never cease to keep echoing back. O is echoing what others call people like her, without identifying herself with any of these categories.

Another utilization through sound aspect in the film is the concurrent dual voice-overs with different sound volumes. This well illustrates sometimes contradictory and competing multiple inner voices (Ifekwunigwe 2004). This is perhaps particularly true for a mixed-race person like O. For the audience, the concurrence of the dual voice-overs makes it hard to hear what each narrative is about. I have watched this part of the film many times but still cannot confidently claim that I hear what O wants to say. Perhaps it is presented like this purposefully to illustrate O’s inner world: these multiple voices are not always meant to be understood, they just need to be spoken and expressed. Perhaps even O herself does not fully comprehend all these competing voices inside her.

The choice of music for the soundtrack also reflects O’s view of the cultural hybridity of mixed-race people. There are two identifiable songs: one is by Icelandic female singer Björk, the other by a popular Hong Kong-“Chinese” female singer, Faye Wong. Björk sings in English, although she is originally from Iceland, while Wong sings in Mandarin although the most common spoken language in Hong Kong is Cantonese. The lyrics are mostly about searching for home and love. The linguistic foreignness of the lyrics in both songs in relation to the singer might be seen as representing mixed-race or transmigrant people’s voices. Throughout several scenes, O plays these two songs back-to-back, conveying her own hesitation between a
European/English or “Chinese” identity. These songs can be seen as projections of O’s internal hybrid voices.

As in Xue’s film, silence is also powerful in this case. Most of the images are accompanied by either music or songs in the background throughout the whole film, and therefore even a brief moment of silence becomes very audible. When O recites the different terms describing mixed-race people, the music suddenly stops as she pronounces the two last words of the sequence: “invisible,” and “anonymous.” This silent background offers a pause in the flowing movement of the film and gives the viewers an opportunity to empathize with O’s experience of feeling invisible and anonymous. Although there are photos of O on screen, she narrates in an invisible way, through voice-over.

The film is made in English, although some Chinese songs are included (with no sub-titles). Shifts in language and the need for translation are an important aspect of hybridity, but the discourses evoked in some films are not only national languages but also those of certain domains, such as medicine in Xue’s film *Tilted* (2005).

**Disidentification and the Reinvention of Genre and Language**

While all of the filmmakers in this study use hybrid or parodic forms and genres as strategies of disidentification, some try to invent a new genre. While most of them play with mixing languages, some actually create new vocabulary. In the film *Tilted*
(2005), there are two layers of reinvention in the film and I argue that both are queer acts. The first involves the reinvention of language (through appropriation), the second the parodic use of old medical film footage to make an experimental short that is a critique of medical attitudes to queers.

As discussed in Chapter 3, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the definition of “tilted” is “abruptly inclined or sloped from the erect or the horizontal position,” which has nothing to do with sexuality or queerness, except that it implies “not straight.” Xue, however, by constructing an imagined story about a filmmaker’s “tilted” hands caused by “queer” germs, makes a link between “tilted-ness” and “queerness.” Interestingly, “tilted” can also mean “overthrown.” In this case, queer youth is overthrown by the hetero-normative medical system. This act of appropriation of an old or conventional usage of a pejorative word to mean something else is not new, and obviously applies to the word “queer,” as discussed in Chapter I. However, the combination of parody of the genre of the medical documentary and Xue’s personal narration, based on an imaginary, metaphorical situation, makes this short film a productive and powerful tool to critique heterosexism in the medical context.

As explained earlier, Xue found some old film footage related to medical activity in her back alley. Without the narration, we would not know what the subject of the medical discussion is or whether the people in white gowns are really medical professionals or actors. We also have no idea what the actual conversations are that take

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place in the footage as we only hear the first-person voice-over narration. If we separate the images from the audio, it gives a better sense of how Xue gives this old and unexplained medical footage a makeover, imparting completely new meaning to the images. Below is a brief breakdown of one sequence of images that we see on screen (without reference at this point to the content of the including voice-over).

The film starts with what appears to be an X-ray image of deformed or crooked hands, followed by several microscopic images, possibly of germs. Then we see a group of doctors in white gowns discussing something, with some close-ups shots of their faces. We can tell that some of them look puzzled and frustrated on seeing the condition of the hands. Then we see a female doctor looking at the camera directly, which gives the audience the impression that she is talking directly to the filmmaker.

The scene switches to what seems to be a family meeting at the dining table, with a father, a mother, and someone we assume to be a daughter (actually the filmmaker, as we listen to the voice over), while two more young people sit on a sofa nearby. The following scene shows a swimming pool with a group of children having swimming lessons with a young female instructor on a bright sunny day. We also see a rainbow wall as a part of the surrounding of the swimming pool. Then the two young people who were on the sofa reappear, followed by a close-up shot of the daughter’s face. This piece of footage ends with a return to the images of germs and a few of the medical professionals’ faces. If we mute the sound while watching this sequence, these images seem to be quite random, with no clear connections between them. However, Xue’s
narration provides meaning and gives the audience the impression that this is an autobiographical account of this filmmaker’s experience. This queering of the medical footage, which is re-presented with a twist, exposes the vulnerability of any visual image, which can now be easily modified and appropriated with the help of advanced filmmaking technology. Xue turns this old material into a rich source of parody, and a means to get her message across.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Xue exploits the found footage to imagine a scenario where doctors declare a condition to be contagious and life-threatening, without justification, just as homosexuality was formerly considered a disease, and until relatively recently was on the list of mental illnesses. Xue also shows how female bodies in general are mis-interpreted by an ill-informed, mostly male medical establishment. These serious issues are broached indirectly through humorous parody, rather than a sermon or lecture. This re-appropriation creates a disidentifying discourse, as the premises of the medical discourse are provisionally retained, but their conclusion is finally rejected: there is both identification and counter-identification, simultaneously. This act of queering both demonstrates disidentification. Using the same visual images, the story could be interpreted in different ways, with completely different messages. Medical knowledge used to have unquestionable authority in shaping our perceptions of our bodies and our understanding of disease. It plays a crucial role in determining how we perceive our body and health. Yet the authoritative medical discourses emanating from supposed experts are often fallible. Xue troubles the top-down power relations
between the medical professions and queer “patients” by showing that the experts can be ridiculous.

The medical profession is not the only group being mocked. We, the audience, are also being deceived. The first person voice-over by Xue gives the impression that this is actually a documentary film and the filmmaker is narrating her own story. Viewers who do not know what Xue looks like might simply believe that she is the daughter in the film. However, people who are familiar with Asian accents, or who know Xue or have seen her at the Out on Screen film festival, will know that the daughter in the film is not Xue. They are aware that what she is saying or implying does not match the images; she is telling a story that is both hers and not hers. It is her own story of the challenges of coming out to her family, but it is told through a made-up parallel. An apparent autobiographical account is told obliquely rather than in a straight fashion; it is tilted, like the hands that denote queerness. The ambiguity of the disconnection between images and narration also serves as a warning, a reminder that we should always question the credibility or authority of visual representations which can be manipulated in various ways.

In his discussion of Richard Fung’s video My Mother’s Place (1991), Muñoz analyzes the unaligned relationship between sound and image in that film, explaining it as a tactic Fung uses to complicate his own film discourse. As Muñoz argues:

51 It was also famously used by Trinh T. Min-ha’s film, Surname Viêt, Given Name Nam (1989).
This moment where things do not line up is a moment of reflexivity that is informed by and through the process of queerness and hybridity. It is a moment where hybridity is not a fixed positionality but a survival strategy that is essential for both queers and postcolonial subjects who are subject to the violence that institutional structures reproduce.

(Fung 1999, 84)

In Xue’s film also, the hybrid form reflects the filmmaker’s queerness and displacement, and challenges the authority of institutional discourses such as medicine. The purpose is not only to draw attention to misconceptions of queerness and the difficulty of being accepted by one’s family, but also to expose and critique the violence and discrimination of medical institutions towards queer people. Queer bodies are vulnerable, and it may be a form of survival strategy on her part not to expose herself to the public on the screen.

O’s film Blood (2004) also uses overlapping and ambiguous images from other sources, as discussed earlier in this chapter. That film also plays with anonymity, showing face-less bodies, blurred images, or darkened faces. The only time we see O’s face is in an old home movie made by her father. In one scene the voice-over says, “Like ghosts, we walk silently, never quite visible.” Does a mixed-race person belong to a visible minority? Paradoxically, what makes O different from both Caucasians and Chinese—her mixed-up-ness—may make her able to “pass” as either, to become invisible. They are not classifiable, and therefore often ignored.
As discussed earlier, O lists the terms for mixed-race people, but she also invents new ones to convey her invisibility and anonymity. She borrows words unrelated to the usual racialized terms, words which have nothing to do with race at all but more accurately describe her emotion and experience such as invisible and anonymous. The juxtaposition of her own terms with those used across the world by non-mixed-race people, many of which are pejorative, creates a discursive tension between being labelled and self-fashioning as a unique individual. I see this as expressing O’s desire to re-claim a mixed-race voice and for mixed-race people to be disassociated from colonial contexts: they should be able to decide for themselves what it means to be of mixed-race.

Naming is a powerful act of auto/nomy, and several of the films already discussed acknowledge this. The discussion of terms to refer to queer sexuality in Lim’s _Salty Wet_ (2003) provides perhaps the most obvious examples of inventing or reinventing terms, with language being created by those excluded from it. That film not only illustrates the mixing of languages among culturally hybrid transmigrants, as has already been discussed, but destabilizes the centrality and dominance of Mandarin in “Chinese” contexts.

Languages have a long history of being used as a powerful tool to shape the mass’s perceptions and beliefs. Many have been used to create unitary national identities. There are numerous examples of how language is being used to assist in the construction of a national cinema in China. In “Historical Introduction: Chinese
Cinemas (1896-1996) and Transnational Film Studies” (1997), diasporic Chinese film scholar Sheldon Lu discusses the function of language and of a national cinema in regard to nation-building. Before the first new-wave cinema emerged in China in the 1980s, the Chinese Communist government restricted the ability of non-Mandarin speaking filmmakers to make films, and only Mandarin-language films were allowed. This policy helped to create an illusion that China consists of “one language, one people, and one nation.” In fact, there are more than fifty-five regional languages spoken in China. There is a similar situation in Taiwan, where local aboriginal and Taiwanese filmmakers were not allowed to make non-Mandarin films from 1949 to 1960, under the rule of the formerly dominant political party, the Kuomintang (KMT).

The KMT, which controlled Taiwanese politics for the longest period, (from 1919 to 2000), stipulated Mandarin as the only official language as a legitimizing mechanism for its rule for many years. As Shu-mei Shih explains: “the logic being that the Republic of China, not communist China, was the preserver of the authentic Chinese

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52 From 1901-1937, Taiwanese Cinema was strongly influenced by the Japanese. During the Japanese colonial period (1895-1945), the local filmmakers adopted many filmmaking and story-telling techniques of Japanese cinema. In 1937, the film industry was disrupted by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), and virtually no film was produced until 1945 when the KMT took over Taiwan. In 1949, film production was re-established. During the end of the Chinese Civil War (1927-1950), many filmmakers who supported the KMT immigrated to Taiwan from China and Hong Kong. During this period, only Mandarin films were produced and they mostly served as propaganda tools reproducing the political ideology and positive images of the Nationalist party.

53 It was not until the late 1990s that many local Taiwanese cultural workers and activists as well as academic scholars started to demand that Taiwanese language learning be brought into the education system. Some aboriginal communities also started to incorporate the teaching of their oral languages into their local school systems.
culture, and by that, the Chinese mainlanders in Taiwan were culturally superior to the local Taiwanese, the Hakka, and the aboriginals” (2007, 4). Mandarin was used in Taiwan not only to create an illusion of unitary and coherent cultural identity, but also to create a cultural hierarchy. In other cases, versions of written Chinese are also being used to distinguish between different national identities. There are two forms of written Chinese characters: simplified (used mainly in China) and traditional (still used in Taiwan, and in Hong Kong before its handover in 1997). In spite of the popularity and mass distribution of materials written in simplified Chinese characters, the Taiwan government does not want to adopt their use for political reasons. Using traditional Chinese characters is a way to differentiate Taiwan from China.

In Salty Wet (2003), the film exposes the fluidity and uncertainty of some of the new terms, as they mean different things to different groups of “Chinese” people. “Rice bucket” (飯桶), for example, is understood by one gay man to mean someone who eats a lot, while a lesbian argues that it means someone stupid. Both explanations are possible, depending on the context in which the characters appear or are used. This exposes a potential for problems of translation, not just from Chinese into English but also among different Mandarin-speaking communities.

The uncertain meanings or perception of these terms also exposes the idea of a unitary Chinese culture as a myth. People from the southern part of China, such as Guangdong province, and in Hong Kong mostly speak Cantonese. Local people from these Cantonese regions, as well as second-generation Cantonese-speaking Chinese-
Canadians, might all hear, or hear about, these slang expressions at some point in their lives through their families or through transnational mass media. They hear or read the same thing, but they may understand and define these terms very differently depending on the contexts they are in or the reference systems they are familiar with. However, the film provides the audience some space to associate the terms with their own sub-cultural contexts by providing the background images and texts in both English and traditional Chinese characters. In this film, language is a tool of resistance to the imposition of a unitary and coherent Chinese discourse. The discussion “queers” the Chinese language(s) by allowing gay men and lesbians to “translate” each other’s cultures, as well as Chinese speakers of different origins to learn from one another.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have focused on three aspects of the practice of disidentification in these films: the appropriation of dominant stereotypical images of “Chineseness” and of “queerness”, which are re-presented with a twist; the use of hybrid cinematic genres and unconventional technical effects; and innovative use and mixing of language(s), associated with transmigration. Using parody or satire of both stereotypes and cinematic models such as the serious documentary or pornographic erotic film, these filmmakers draw attention to the expectations built up by dominant norms in both life and the cinema. As Muñoz aptly puts it:
Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machination and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw materials for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.

(Muñoz 1999, 31)

These films give viewers the refreshing impression that they are seeing familiar images for the first time, as part of a story that is not usually told. Queer transmigrant viewers of East Asian backgrounds are delighted to finally see their own experiences conveyed, and with humour rather than anger or pathos. Non-Asian or straight viewers are challenged to think differently, as if they were “queer” or “Chinese”.

Through skilful use of technical effects, these filmmakers also challenge the relationship between visual images and knowledge. This is particularly important when dealing with cinematic representations of various “ethnic” or underprivileged groups. Western anthropological films and images conveyed colonial attitudes, denying the colonized the opportunity to represent themselves, and defining perception of Others in such a way that even the Others themselves accepted those false definitions. Feminist theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Min-ha created the experimental films Reassemblages (1982) and Surname Viêt, Given Name Nam (1989) in order to expose the visual
violence of ethnographic documentary films. The filmmakers discussed here have similar critical goals. They also challenge the idea that “seeing is believing” by their projection of ambivalent, hybrid, paradoxical and parodic representations. They simultaneously assimilate, mimic, or interrupt dominant screen images. The viewers can no longer feel certain in trusting that what they see is true or authentic as is in the case of the usually predictable and expected cultural visual references. This illustrates what Himani Bannerji so cleverly suggests in the title of one of her articles, “Now You See Us/ Now You Don’t” (1986, 40-45).

These filmmakers produce alternative forms of embodied knowledge, based on the lived experience of transmigrant queer “Chinese” women. This knowledge not only creates a bridge between abstract academic theory and tangible knowledge of everyday life, but also connects the local and global through transmigration. This alternative form of embodied knowledge may be temporary or provisional, as it is the nature of transmigration to be always on the move and in transition, performing and transforming individuals and collective assumptions that are “in the process” of becoming. In The Location of Culture (1994), Homi Bhabha argues that we are now “in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (1994, 1). Since we are now situated in various kinds of matrices and in-between spaces, the traditional view of linear and uninterrupted national and cultural histories, well-defined geographical and racial borders, and clearly established gender models, can no longer
account for transmigrant and queer identities and experiences. Bhabha suggests that these issues need to be examined from the perspective of inter-determined and interlocking systems. His concept of “the middle passage” in current culture as “a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience” (1994, 5) applies to the lives and works of these transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers.
Chapter 5 Conclusion

Reflections on the Dissertation Process as Disidentifcation

In the Introductory chapter of this project I explained my personal connections with this research topic, which motivated me to begin it. Here in the final chapter I would like to consider how far I have traveled over the long research and writing process of the past two years. Because the main research questions emerged during the process of doing the interviewing and other research for the project, in this chapter I will retrace the steps that have brought me to a new relationship to the subject matter. Ien Ang (2001) says that a transnational person should define her or himself based on “where you are at.” As a transmigrant, I will consider both where I am at now, at the end of this process, and where I have been. The first thing I notice is the similarities I share with the four filmmakers whose work I have analyzed.

I, too, am a queer transmigrant woman living in Canada, who has acquired linguistic and cultural capital from my education abroad. I also am perceived by others here in Vancouver as “Chinese,” even though I see myself as “Taiwanese”, a political and cultural identity established in opposition to “Mainland Chinese.” I have also been involved in the local queer and immigrant women’s communities, and I share the
filmmakers’ interest in how to use films, or other creative art media, as tools for social awareness-raising and activism, as well as for entertainment and cultural expression.

My feminist theoretical training led me initially to embrace the politics of difference. For this research, I read more widely in relevant areas, including the work of some critical theorists, such as Trinh. T. Min-ha (1987, 1989, 1995, 1997), Chris Straayer (1996), and Gayatri Gopinath (1996; 2005), who caution us that the politics of difference is not always necessarily productive or progressive. Trinh even argues that a concept of “[d]ifference as uniqueness or special identity is both limiting and deceiving” (1987, 15). Inspired by this warning, I began to rethink the possibilities of “similarity,” which in my view can be deployed without necessarily collapsing into universal sameness. With this new awareness, I started to see the parallels, “similarities,” between my experiences as an academic scholar undertaking this project, and these four filmmakers’ practice. To begin with, most of them mentioned that what motivated their initial filmmaking was the lack of role models. Similarly, when I started to consider doing research on transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers, I found very little mention of this particular group in queer and feminist debates, or in diasporic and transnational Chinese studies, or in research on transnational Chinese cinemas. Even in feminist qualitative Social Science research, these women have been ignored.

In the search for a theoretical frame for my study, Butler’s work (1990, 1993, 2004) immediately came to mind, because of her focus on the body and on gender identity as performative. However, although Butler herself acknowledges that a greater
concern for race and ethnicity could expand her theory, this is still an area that she has
not yet fully incorporated into her work. I then turned to feminist scholars’ work in
diasporic and transnational Chinese studies, hoping to find something about sexuality
and transmigration. Even though I refer extensively to the work of Ang (2001), Ong
really addresses issues of racialized sexuality specifically in contexts of transmigration.
There has been a proliferation of research on queer Asian cinemas, including the
emerging queer Chinese cinemas, by queer scholars such as Berry et al (2003), Khoo
and Metzger (2009), Leung (2001, 2003, 2005, 2006), and Martin (2003), to name a
few; but their focus is on representations of Asians living in Asia, rather than diasporic
or transmigrant “Chinese.” There are also numerous studies of diasporic Asian-
American sexuality to be found in collections of essays such as Asian American
Sexualities: the Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience (1996) and Q and A:
Queer in Asian America (1998). Yet somehow, these studies did not help me to
understand better the experience of these four queer transmigrant women filmmakers
living in Canada.

It was not until I discovered the work of Muñoz, who theorizes the racialized
queer sexuality of some Latino cultural workers and filmmakers in his book
Disidentification: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics (1999), that I
found a new angle from which to approach my topic. I believe the concept of
disidentification really brings all of the disparate conceptual links of this project
together. In retrospect, the lack of theoretical role models, although frustrating at the
time when I began this research, turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it opened up
a creative space to explore the possibilities of combining theories from different
disciplines. My approach developed into a hybrid and queer one, like the topic under
analysis. Looking back at the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1, I realize that
I embarked on my own disidentification practice, appropriating and remixing elements
from various disciplines. I did not completely abandon the theorization in existing
studies, but I chose to read them and use them in a new way, from a different angle, a
method described by Muñoz as working “on, with, and against” (1999) the dominant
ideology.

Another layer of disidentification emerged when I undertook detailed analysis of
the films, and encountered a challenge to my previous stance as a feminist film theorist.
This first occurred when I was writing about Lim’s Sugar Sweet (2001). As discussed
earlier, at the beginning of the film we see a gathering of Naomi’s friends, who are
talking about her agreeing to make a lesbian porn film aimed at straight men. One friend
claims that Naomi has sold out, as her project will only further stigmatize what is
already considered “perverted” lesbian sex. She sees Naomi as a traitor to the lesbian
cause, and doubts the possibility of making lesbian porn for lesbian women. Azusa,
Naomi’s best friend, is the only person who supports Naomi’s decision. She argues that
it is time for lesbians to make lesbian porn themselves, as it has always been
stereotyped and made for the consumption of straight men. She sees Naomi’s film as an
opportunity to offer a lesbian point of view on lesbian porn, and claims that she herself would love to watch it.

This discussion, over whether Naomi’s project is a sell-out to the straight male film industry or a rare opportunity to make lesbian porn from a lesbian point of view, recalls debates over the depiction of women’s bodies by women, in early feminist film theory. Coming from a sociological approach, some American feminist film theorists in the 1970s argued that there were several crucial steps to be taken, to resist the patriarchal film industry responsible for misrepresentation of women on screen. The first was to identify negative/twisted/stereotypical images of women and criticize films that generate “false consciousness” in women. They believed that once women could create positive and “real” images of women, the stereotypes would fade away. They also assumed that with more women filmmakers presenting “women as women” (Creed, 2004), women would be portrayed “as they are.” The problem with this view of “women as women” is that it is rooted in an essentialist notion that there is an innate and authentic feminine nature waiting to be presented. This essentialist view raises several concerns: who is included in this “woman”? Where is the possibility for change if we believe there is an innate feminine nature?

Applying this logic to the argument over the depiction of lesbian sex in Sugar Sweet (2001), we can ask: Is it possible to present “lesbians as lesbians” in the context of lesbian pornography? Who is this “real lesbian”? Further questions can be raised: What is lesbian porn? Is it different from lesbian eroticism? What counts as a lesbian
erotic? Who can claim to provide a “true” image of lesbians? There is a parallel relationship between Naomi, the lesbian filmmaker in the film, and Lim, the actual filmmaker in life. Naomi’s challenge is also Lim’s challenge. It is hard to determine whether Naomi and/or Lim are being complicit with or resistant to the dominant mainstream media. I argue that this ambiguity between complicity and resistance may be considered as a form of disidentification which cannot be reduced to a simple binary opposition.

At the same time that I was discovering disidentification, I was reading Xing’s work on Asian American cinema (1998). He points out that conventional filmic images produced by diasporic filmmakers tend to be “reactive.” This means that diasporic filmmakers attempt to create “positive” and “authentic” images of racialized minorities, in response to the stereotypical images produced by mainstream media. Although many great cinematic works have been produced from this paradigm, I started to wonder what counts as positive or negative images. In fact, any classification is very contestable, as judgements are contextual and depend on the viewer’s position. I was also cautioned by Fung’s concern, in relation to the representation of racial or sexual minorities for mainstream audiences:

To the extent to which positive images are a response to negative stereotypes, it is a limited strategy in that it takes its cue from what the white man or what the straight man think. Reaching out with alternative images for a mainstream audience is valuable but
we can become so obsessed with how others might interpret what we have to say that we can cast our own Asian or gay audience into passivity.

(Fung 1991, 67)

As discussed earlier, the four filmmakers I chose to focus on all employ stereotypes in their films as a means to draw critical attention to them. They all also employ disidentification practices, whether they are aware of doing so or not, as a means to avoid the danger pointed out by Fung.

Attention to Fung’s concern also convinced me of the necessity and value of conducting and including interviews with the filmmakers in this project—the results of which have formed Chapter 2.54 These interviews allowed me to understand how the filmmakers see their films and the filmmaking process, where they come from and where they situate themselves in the cinematic space. The interviews gave me a better sense of their motivation, their priorities, how they themselves assess their films, the assumed or intended audiences, and the difficult decisions they have to make to ensure production and distribution.55

My decision to focus on representations of the body in Chapter 3 arose not only from my personal enthusiasm (I was admittedly very excited to see the different types

54 One of the major challenges during the research stage and the writing process was the question of whether and how I should incorporate the interviews into the film analysis in this dissertation. At times, I thought I should just leave them out altogether. The material I collected through the interviews is sufficient to support another PhD dissertation itself. I had frequent doubts about whether I should keep the interviews in the dissertation. Now I am glad I did.

55 Knowing their intention and intended audiences make a huge difference in understanding their films. It provides me an entry point to examine if they succeed or fail in achieving their goals and why.
of bodies presented in their films), but also because issues related to depicting the body became central in all the interviews. Their sense of responsibility to a community, and desire to incorporate a message into their films, also resonated with my own position as a researcher. They strive to balance the priorities of an art form, the limitations of technology and finances, and personal and community engagement. This balancing act is similar in some ways to that performed by an academic researcher who works on topics related not only to disciplinary fields but also to one’s personal life and political commitments. In my case the questions are: how do I contribute to theory-building (an academic concern), and how do I use this theory-building to support the political work of independent filmmakers such as these women (a personal/political concern)? How can I connect their work back to academic discourse, and where should I draw the line between the academic and the personal as I write up this project?

The similar experiences and dilemmas that I share with the filmmakers, and our common adoption of disidentification practices, make me aware of how my research and writing have been affected by my personal connection to the filmmakers and their films. What I have written may affect them, as it has affected me. Although disidentification, as a concept and a practice, initially raised more questions for me during the writing process, it proved to be very productive in my own understanding of current theories and cultural products. It led me to re-acknowledge the possibilities engendered by similarity, as distinct from a politics of difference or of sameness. In
what follows, I will focus on the similarities between these filmmakers, and assess the contributions made by their films.

**Disidentifying the Politics of Difference: Refocusing on Similarity**

The films analyzed in this dissertation cover a wide range of sensitive and potentially contentious issues. These include the struggle faced by young immigrant “Chinese” queers in coming out to their parents, relationships between lesbian or queer “Chinese” and non-“Chinese” women, the confusing and disorienting process of searching for one’s own identity for individuals defined by racial or cultural hybridity, and conformity or resistance to models of East Asian femininity or female masculinity. Characters in these films cross or blur all kinds of borders, whether geographical, racial, cultural, or sexual. Some also challenge the dominance and centrality of the official Chinese language, Mandarin, by queering/hybridizing Cantonese with English. Although it might seem that the films discussed here are quite different from each other in terms of themes and styles, it is clear from the film analysis, as well as the interviews with filmmakers, that they actually share a lot in common. They all present abstract ideas about the body in an “embodied” manner, and they all examine issues from the everyday experience of queer transmigrants, in ways that make them comprehensible to a wider range of audiences (“Chinese”/non-“Chinese”, queer/non-queer). Concerns about love and desire, family relationships, conflicts of coming out, etc., are not
confined to queer “Chinese” viewers who might identify directly with the protagonists, as I did. Rather, making these issues the foci of their films is a way to address the commonalities that cut across differences of race, gender, and sexuality. At the same time, these filmmakers also refuse to be exactly the same as the mainstream, and their work cannot be considered as “mimicking” dominant representations, except when they do so for satirical or parodic effects. They privilege neither similarity nor difference, and this can be considered as disidentifying with the politics of difference that many first- and second-wave feminist theorists and minority activists relied on. In what follows I will concentrate on four aspects that their films have in common that illustrate this disidentification: autobiographical elements conveyed by distancing from the self; hybrid adaptability combining sameness and difference; merging racial and sexual “queerness”; and being “Chinese” with a difference.

**Autobiographical Elements and Distance from the Self**

Both the interviews and the films reveal that all these filmmakers see film as a form of self-expression and/or self-definition, and a way to tell their own story. Whether they focus on body politics, race, gender, sexuality, or the role of family and community, the main purpose of their films is to expose their own experience or that of others in similar situations, in the hope that their films can change perceptions and serve as a means to social change. Their films exemplify the second-wave feminist slogan that
“the personal is political,” in that they all see their personal story-telling as going beyond therapeutic confession or blaming of others. Some films may have served as a tool for coming-out to family, friends, and colleagues, as in early films by Lim and Xue, or more subtly in those of O and Lee. Yet the personal purpose served is combined with implied encouragement of others to do the same, and acknowledgement that these experiences are not unique. The aim is not only personal, but also collective, and such films produce a sense of solidarity rather than isolation. Lee, O, and Xue had been very active in the local Vancouver women’s community and queer activism before they became filmmakers, while Lim was active in the local Japanese women’s and lesbian movement before she immigrated. Film is a way to project their own experience, making it clearer to themselves and sharable with and by others.

When asked about their role models in filmmaking, they all responded that they did not have any, in terms of older filmmakers who are queer women of color. This lack of role models was in fact one of the main reasons for Lim and Lee to start making their own films. In some ways, these four filmmakers have now become role models themselves for other queer “Chinese” or East Asians. Their films have contributed to creating a community, and each screening of their work provides a potentially transformative space where people who share similar experiences can recognize themselves on screen, and those who do not can see that these queer East Asians are not so different from them.
In my view, one crucial function of these films that was not mentioned by any of these four filmmakers during the interviews is how their films form a bridge between different communities, especially among immigrant communities. There is no doubt that many images are saturated with cultural meanings, and this can lead to potential misunderstandings when the viewer does not share the same cultural code. However, images can also often transcend the language barriers which prevent people from different immigrant communities connecting with each other. These films can also help to create understanding between mainstream hetero-normative society and queer communities. This bridging also extends to challenging various communities to think outside the box, and includes pointing out prejudice within queer communities. This is crucial in bringing a deeper understanding of others, in a multicultural context like Vancouver where communities are sometimes divided from each other. As O explains:

This is the kind of multiculturalism we have here. Even within the queer community, it is like everything is so divided. Queers don’t see the value in watching films that are largely about being racially marginalized. They don’t see the connection or they cannot understand the overlap. And yet queers of colour are supposed to understand that connection, but white queers don’t need to. They don’t need to think outside the box.

(O 2007)

In “Queer Asian American Immigrants: Opening Borders and Closets” (1998), Ignatius Bau raises various issues related to immigrants’ rights within larger queer communities. These include how political connections and alliances can be built between often homophobic Asian American communities and LGBQT communities, and the fact that
the latter need to recognize that racism penetrates within their communities. Bau claims that building a coalition between these two larger communities is not only a “personal necessity as we integrate our multiple identities in our multiple communities” (1998, 59), but also reflects the need for solidarity in resistance to being the subjects of “political scapegoating and victimization” (1998, 60). Bau rightly points out that unless LGBTQ communities address multiracial and multicultural diversity, queer immigrants will remain “invisible and closeted” (1998, 61).

But prejudice goes beyond race and gender, and class differences can also reshape perceptions of race and gender. Ong and Nonini coined the term “Ethnic Chauvinism” (1997, 328) to describe prejudice toward working-class Chinese or other people of colour from wealthy Chinese immigrants. Class differences can sometimes be made less visible, and many try to “pass” into a higher class by disguising their origins or economic status, and adopting the dress code, manners, and accent of the target class. Since class is relatively easy to counterfeit, compared to race or gender, and perceptions of class difference diverge culturally and nationally, class discrimination often becomes an elusive site, difficult to pinpoint and examine critically.56

56 Although many middle-class Asian immigrants have sufficient financial resources to initiate their immigration, which itself is a costly application, they often experience a downward class movement when they move to North America or Europe. For those from Asian countries with a weak national economy, the currency exchange rate between their original country and the host country can be very disadvantageous. For example, one Canadian dollar is equal to 31 Taiwanese dollars. The only two Asian currencies that are as strong as the Canadian dollar are the South Korean won and the Singapore dollar.
This is particularly common among lesbians and queers of colour, as their dominant concerns are usually centred on race and sexuality. However, as seen in Lee’s depiction of a mullet-haired East Asian butch-dyke who is proud of being working-class, a clash between queers based on class difference may not be avoidable. This resonates with O’s observation: “Queer audiences need to be challenged about what it means to be marginal. Moreover, it is not just being queer, gender queer marginal, but racial. You can learn a lot from that. Just like people of colour need to watch more queer films so that they understand that aspect, too.” Identification with other marginalized people, recognizing similarities across differences, is a goal for all these filmmakers. They expose their own personal experience, taking a critical distance from it in order to reach out to others. Their ability to do so depends on a flexibility that grows out of their situation.

**Hybrid Adaptability**

The second characteristic they share as transmigrants is exceptionally flexible adaptability, and the ability to adopt different points of view. As Lim puts it, “I think wherever I go, I would find a new vista to create my work or a new theme to work on. I make different works for different audiences.” In speaking of her experience of being a newcomer in a foreign country, Xue says, “I always combine what works for me the most.” This quality shows not just in how they find sources and inspiration for their
films, but also in how they present themselves in their films, exhibiting what I term “flexible identities.” O elaborates on the strategic need for this: “We all have many different identities, but we all have to choose as a strategy of survival. You have to prioritize some identities over others, as if that is the only thing you care about the most.”

This is perhaps true for many people of color who live in the West and constantly need to find ways to navigate mainstream systems and institutions in order to gain access to resources from them. What this shows is that the act of prioritizing certain aspects of multiple identities is not always a personal choice or a luxury, but a strategy to find a space you can inhabit without always being questioned. In general, from my observations, the form and content of the films made by these women are not confined by their cultural and racial backgrounds or their sexual preferences. However, we can see either subtle or obvious forms of “strategic essentialism” reflected in their major themes; they may prioritize certain aspects of their identities to gain attention, or as a selling point for films for a specific target audience.

The concept of “flexible identities” is crucial in the multiple or hybrid locations that these filmmakers inhabit, whether they consciously shift their priorities and allegiances or not. The question of flexibility also brings up issues of choice, or the lack of it. They may or may not always “choose” to be primarily “Asian,” “East Asian,” “Chinese,” “queer,” “mixed-race,” or “women,” both in their personal life and in their films, but it is obvious that they do choose how to relate and react to their situation, and
how to present, represent, or transmit these identities. The deployment of “strategic essentialism” in their films is neither about self-identification nor the labels imposed on them by the mainstream. Rather, they use essentialist stereotypes as resource material for self-conscious, even parodic performances of what is expected of them during their transmigration process. Even though these filmmakers still face limited accessibility to state funding for their films (as discussed in Chapter 2), their ability to use “strategic essentialism” for their own end is evidence that these transmigrants are not “victims of structural forces [....] Rather they are human agents discovering and creating themselves anew through their ‘nomadic’ experiences” (Espín 1997, 10).

The fact that they are both transmigrants and queer means that they have a double experience of what Collins, echoing Julia Kristeva, calls being an “outsider within” (Collins 1986). They experience feeling foreign or strange on many levels: within their families, within their host countries, within heterosexual society, and even within the filmmaking community. Lim shared her experience of working with one multicultural film initiative. Although she was chosen to be part of the program, the way she was treated and the challenges she faced there made her feel like an outsider among the other Anglo- and French-Canadian filmmakers. O had a similar “outsider within” experience in her family. As a mixed-race child growing up in an interracial family facing racism, she always felt her family was “an island unto itself,” separate and not belonging to any larger unit. This sense of being isolated and on the edge recalls Chow’s concept of the “para-site,” discussed earlier. From their unseen,
unacknowledged, or shifting locations, these filmmakers can employ the “tactics of intervention” (1993, 15) to slowly shift the borders of the dominant cultures. However, while their racial and cultural hybridity may allow them to infiltrate some “multicultural” contexts, their queerness may prevent them from fitting in even there.

**Racialized Queerness**

The third element they have in common is that they all identify themselves as “queer” (as discussed in Chapter 2), in a way that exceeds gender and sexuality. Rather, it implies the intersection with racial non-conformity, and conveys a subversive desire to be non-mainstream (whatever that means to them), to think and act out of the box, etc. All of these connotations imply an intentionally adopted position of marginality, and resonate with the advantages perceived as part of being an “outsider within,” as well as the inconveniences. Choosing to become or remain marginal, or to take advantage of an enforced marginality, is to adopt a critical stance. In Hyaewool Choi’s (2006) study of female Korean-American academics, one interviewee talks about why it is crucial for her to remain marginal:

> From my marginalized position, I can critique the centre. In that way, the problems of the centre can be fleshed out more vividly, so this marginal position is always important in
my research [...]. Theory building has been dominated by Whites, and so they have not realized what they overlook or things that can be seen from the margin.

(Min, quoted in Choi 2006 86-87)57

This attitude is similar to the marginal position these filmmakers occupy, in that it reflects some degree of choice or personal autonomy. As O claims, “To me, being queer means being outside, but not just being outside like you are expelled or alienated, but that you are also partly choosing and aware of that state of being outside.” Elaine Kim (1990) argues that people whose migration status is a personally chosen subject position, rather than an involuntary imposition, often demand their “right to define their own ‘otherness’” (1990, 170).

In this view, being “queer” seems for some to be a chosen alternative life-style, rather than a sexual orientation that they discovered they had. “Choice” here may, however, depend on their personal definition of queerness, or how they choose to perform their own version of it. Moreover, various queer theorists have discussed how queer people fashion their queerness through costume or make-up. Perhaps we can expand this idea of self-fashioning queerness by manipulating physical appearance to the meanings assigned to being queer. The experiences of these transmigrant queer filmmakers show us that queers constantly reinvent themselves on their own terms. To be queer is no longer limited to the expression of specific sexual preferences. It can

57 From my observation and research, I find that the positionality of diasporic East Asian women in academia is quite similar to that of the filmmakers in this dissertation. Like most academics, these filmmakers are all well-educated intellectuals and have linguistic capital and greater mobility, compared to other immigrant or transmigrant workers.
have multiple, flexible, and adaptable meanings, corresponding to the transmigrant and culturally hybrid character of these filmmakers. It remains to be seen whether the fourth element they have in common, their supposed “Chineseness,” is less flexible or equally difficult to pin down.

Rethinking ‘Chineseness’

I found that the concept of “Chineseness”, as perceived by these four filmmakers, resonates well with Ang’s refreshing insights: “Chineseness becomes an open signifier, which acquires its peculiar form and content in a dialectical junction with the diverse local conditions in which ethnic Chinese, wherever they are, construct new, hybrid identities and communities” (2001, 35). “Chineseness” in this view “is no longer [...] a property [...] but instead can be understood only in terms of the multiplicity of ways in which ‘being Chinese’ is an inscribed relation of persons and groups to forces and processes associated with global capitalism and its modernities” (Ibid.). Being “Chinese”, then, is no longer merely about negotiating cultural, national, and ethnic identities, or the ability to speak Mandarin. Rather, it becomes about managing one’s various forms of capital, based on spatial and temporal contexts. Thus, the relation between “Chinese” persons and “Chineseness” is ambivalent, and they may be able to employ and deploy “Chineseness” strategically. Ang emphasizes “where you are at,” here and now, and this is exactly the nature of transmigrant experience. By gendering
and queering “Chineseness,” these four filmmakers show us the need to reject “submission to one’s ethnicity, such as ‘Chineseness’, as the ultimate signified,” as Ang suggests (2001, 25).

In the interviews, the filmmakers revealed the complex relationship, for them, between being queer and being “Chinese,” a combination which evokes both personal, internal or family conflict, and broader ideological and cultural incompatibility. O describes her experience as:

Almost like a paradox, because Chineseness is so connected to that sense of lineage, which is about heterosexual lineage, and Confucianism, family values, and so it is almost like, saying you are queer is like, huh, giving up your Chineseness in some ways […] So then part of being gay is having to mourn the loss of that. However, just being queer is not who you are. I know it sounds weird, of course, it is fundamental to who you are, but it is not all of who you are, just like being Chinese is not all of who you are.

(O 2007)

O’s awareness of the complex nature of racialized sexuality, as conveyed here, clearly conveys the relationship and dynamic between some degree of “choice,” the co-existence of “flexible identities,” and the performative aspects of outsider-within identities. These filmmakers’ hybrid and uncertain cultural and sexual identities may at times be played out and used as “resources” or “capital” for choice and artistic “performativity.” However, there are also times when they are hard to assume, and situations where joining with others in similar locations may be necessary tactics for survival.
The Contribution: Creating New Locales on Screen and in the Theatre

In “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism” (1991), Mohanty points out that:

Feminist struggles are waged on at least two simultaneous, interconnected levels: an ideological, discursive level which addresses questions of representation (womanhood/femininity), and a material, experiential, daily-life level which focuses on the micropolitics of work, home, family, and sexuality, etc.

(Mohanty 1991a, 21)

Mulvey (1975), too, states that women’s struggles to gain ownership over their bodies cannot be divorced from the images of those bodies that circulate. In spite of the enormous achievements of feminists over the years, these struggles are still prevalent, perhaps particularly for queer racialized women. One reason why it is important to study the films included in this dissertation is that they bring together questions of representation and the “material, experiential, daily-life” issues that transmigrant queer “Chinese” women face. Overall, I see three major contributions to these debates in these films: first, the women filmmakers seek to create and convey new imaginary representations of queer East Asian and “Chinese” women as subjects and bodies on screen; secondly, by doing so they demonstrate what Dolan (2005) called a “utopian performative”; and third, the screening of these films creates a temporary and
transnational safe space for queer East Asian and “Chinese” women to see themselves represented and to build solidarity.

**New Representations of Queer East Asian and “Chinese” Women as Subjects and Bodies**

At the beginning of this project, I asked: “By re-presenting themselves as queer “Chinese” women, what kind of alternative or experimental forms of discourse do these filmmakers offer concerning the possibility of reconceptualizing the body in relation to issues of race, gender, and sexuality?” Working with, alongside, and against a matrix of dominant mainstream cultures through disidentification practices such as those discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, these films simultaneously describe, decipher, and contest a range of prevailing stereotypes of both East Asian and “Chinese” women and queer women. These filmmakers have managed to create new images of queer East Asian and “Chinese” women’s bodies on screen, while showing that such women are not just bodies.

There are several layers to these new images. The most obvious is the reframing of stereotypes, as they present a range of un-definable queer East Asian and “Chinese” women’s bodies on screen, reiterating cultural, gendered, and sexualized norms with a difference. We see the self-conscious performance or modification of the body when Cara “acts straight” in *Floored by Love* (2005), or Xue, in *A Girl Named Kai* (2004),
transforms her bodily appearance by shaving and tattooing. According to the expectations set up by dominant Western Orientalist representations, East Asian bodies exhibiting gender indeterminacy become un-definable or undecipherable by the mainstream culture. We see the unexpected effects of female masculinity associated with East Asian butch-dykes in *Enter the Mullet* (2004). New images of queer East Asian bodies may also be evoked by what is *not* shown on screen. O, in *Blood* (2004), and Lee, in *Rated F... for Fart* (2005), both deliberately present queer Chinese women’s bodies indirectly. Visible bodies on screen are easily labelled, categorized, and racially and culturally stereotyped (Mohamed 1985; Jiwani 2006). By choosing not to present a visible body, while implying its existence, the filmmaker can invite viewers to get to know the queer East Asian and “Chinese” women in the film as people, rather than as stereotypes. These un-definable, invisible bodies are sometimes enigmatically construed as hybrid and queer, whether the indeterminacy applies to race, gender, or sexuality.

A reverse layer of innovation in representation occurs when the filmmaker, rather than concealing the body in question, exposes what is usually not shown on screen. For example, East Asian and “Chinese” female masculinity and queer femme femininity that are usually unacknowledged are made visible in *Sugar Sweet* (2001), *Enter the Mullet* (2004), and *Floored by Love* (2005). Queer/lesbian women’s bodies are often eroticized or fantasized by the heterosexual mainstream media, and it is rare that they are re-presented as non-sexualized, in their everyday element, as in *Rated F... for Fart* (2005). Conversely, we rarely see representations of queer East Asian and Chinese
women’s erotic desire on screen, for the viewing pleasure of queer East Asian and “Chinese” women, as in *Sugar Sweet* (2001), *Salty Wet* (2003), and *Floored By Love* (2005).

These images produced by and for queer “Chinese” women not only call into question previous assumptions and definitions, but propose new, self-defined alternatives. Self-naming is an important aspect of auto-nomy, and language plays an important role in reconstituting and redeploying cultural signs. In *Salty Wet* (2003), Lim de-centralizes the dominant Chinese language, Mandarin, and by queering and hybridizing Cantonese she introduces the viewers to current terms being invented to designate relationships and practices that were previously unnamed or unmentioned. The linguistic violence associated with negative labelling and name-calling is reversed, as queer East Asians describe themselves in and on their own terms.

The new representations of queer Asian women’s bodies provided by these filmmakers fulfil three functions: they force viewers to (1) rethink queerness in transmigrant contexts, (2) question “Chineseness,” and (3) consider their own location in relation to “queer Chineseness,” especially if they may be part of a potential community reclaiming both terms. I will summarize what I consider the achievements of these filmmakers under these three headings.
New Articulations of Mobile Queerness

As well as creating a form of “embodied knowledge,” as discussed in the conclusion to Chapter 4, these new images also provide “proliferating sites and strategies upon and through which new articulations of queer pleasure and desires are emerging” (Gopinath 1996, 122). The representation of queer women’s desires on screen plays a crucial role in constructing and imagining these women as “desiring subjects” (Ibid.) and negotiating a cinematic space for queer women’s intimacy. In the case of these filmmakers, their transmigrant status contributes to the originality of their experiences and perceptions. The new images they present are constructed through disidentification within and against a matrix of dominant mainstream cultures, including Western heterosexual and homosexual cultures as well as diverse “Chinese” cultures. They trouble the conventional racial landscape of gender and sexuality on screen, by inviting non-queer “Chinese”, non-“Chinese” queers, and audiences who are neither queer nor “Chinese”, to learn about who transmigrant queer “Chinese” women are.

These filmmakers show us that it is the mobility of transmigration that shapes their transnational “Chinese” identities, and that they cannot serve as “native informants” except as representatives of those who have no “authentic homeland.” The bodies they re-present are not “essentially” “queer” or “Chinese”; they are always in motion through film, discourse, and transmigration, and can never be easily pinned down. In “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” (1996), Arjun
Appadurai argues that if we wish to understand the new global cultural economy, we must not only examine questions related to “causality, contingency, and prediction” (1996, 47). Rather, it is “flow, uncertainty, and chaos” (Ibid.) that are the keys to understanding how it functions. Similarly, in the films by these women it is the “flow, uncertainty, and chaos” (Ibid.) of hybrid bodies and shifting cultural images that constitute both the originality of their work and what they have in common.

While each is unique, their trajectories are in many ways typical of the construction of new, globalized cultural identities. In “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation” (1989/2000), Stuart Hall suggests that the practice of self-representation reveals that “identity” is not the discovery of something hidden waiting to be brought to light, i.e. a revelation of “who we really are,” but “a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (2000, 704). As a product that is always in process, cultural identities are about “who we are becoming” (Ibid.), rather than where we come from. In the films in this dissertation, the cultural identities produced are hybrid products between “who you (the audience) think we are” and “who we are becoming, or would like to become.” The new identities in the making are as much about queering “Chineseness” as introducing new East Asian and “Chinese” versions of “queerness.”
Expanding Notions of “Chineseness”

Although these four filmmakers may all be considered “Chinese,” they actually have very different affiliations with Chineseness, as discussed in Chapter 2: Lim is Malaysian “Chinese” permanent resident in Canada, Lee a second-generation “Chinese”-Canadian, O a mixed-race Macau-“Chinese”-Portuguese Canadian, and Xue a Taiwanese-“Chinese”-Canadian. The specific ways in which they choose to represent “Chineseness” in their films reflect these diverse origins and perspectives. For example, Lim chooses to represent the older generation of “Chinese” immigrants in North America, while Lee introduces the East Asian butch-dyke by hybridizing symbols of “Chinese” masculinity (alluding to Bruce Lee and Hong Kong gangsters) with the mullet hairstyle associated with working-class white men. The presence/absence of “Chineseness” in O’s film is more subtle as the “Chineseness” of her father’s past in Macau is not available to her. Xue chooses to present her “Chineseness” through a diasporic celebration of Chinese New Year in Vancouver’s Chinatown, the common signifier of diasporic “Chineseness”.

The new images produced in these films raise basic questions about what “Chineseness” is, or what it means to appear, or claim, to be “Chinese.” Is “Chineseness” acquiring new connotations, in the currently prevailing belief that “China is rising”? These questions relate to the debates over essentialism and constructionism that remain contentious in Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, and Sexuality Studies.
Racial/genetic, national/political, and cultural/linguistic elements compete for attention in categorizing a person as “Chinese” or not. Who decides, ultimately, if an individual meets whatever criteria are selected? In relation to Butler’s theory of identities as performative, can “Chineseness” be produced or confirmed by interpellated performative iterations? Can transnational “Chineseness,” like the conventions of gender and sexuality, be cited and recited in ways that disclose the vulnerability and instability of the term through appropriation and subversion?

Performativity requires constant re-citation of a role, through both discourse and daily activities. In other words, it takes practice initially, and gradually, as we become good at it, we become less aware of our daily performance. We refine it over time, adjusting it to our social context without much awareness. Like learning to drive, it takes a lot of practice at first but after years of training and practice it becomes second nature. Yet we still have to sharpen our driving skills when we drive on a new road or in a new place, or encounter dangerous drivers or other obstacles around us. Performativity can be considered as a conscious or unconscious investment, undertaken in order to be accepted as part of a certain social community. Butler’s concept of gender performativity explains how people invest in appearing straight, in order to be accepted in a heteronormative society. In the films discussed, “Chineseness”, like straight sexuality and queerness, is cited and recited in contexts of appropriation and parodic framing of the performance that expose its vulnerability and instability. In other words,
it becomes underlined as something that transmigrant “Chinese” can perform with a twist, rather than an open or closed signifier of national or cultural identity.

For transmigrant queer “Chinese,” identifying with a nation of origin is perhaps less important than connecting to whatever nation hosts them. It is about building networks to increase their mobility and capacity to feel more-or-less “at home” in several places. The ability to move about is an important social capital, and likely to enhance any social investments these subjects choose to make (Doreen Massey 1994). Mobility certainly enhances, and sometimes even transforms, their performances of race, gender, and sexuality as they are exposed to various global and local contexts in transnational settings. “Chineseness,” in terms of national identity or citizenship, is no longer their major concern. Rather than simply rejecting essentialist concepts of “Chineseness,” or fully adopting a social constructionist view, these filmmakers disidentify with any one-dimensional view of queer “Chinese” female sexuality. This disidentification process and practice allow them to utilize “Chineseness” as raw material, or invest it as a multi-layered capital (combining cultural, linguistic, and visual elements) in projects that reformulate its associations.

Hall (1989/2000) suggests that “[c]ultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourse of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning” (2000, 710). I argue that various identities (such as racial, cultural, gender, and sexual) these transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers produce are a mobile positioning, sustained by
their constant negotiation between locality and mobility. It is no longer just about “where you are at,” as Ang suggests, but “where you have been” and “where you are going.” It is part of a project that can be seen as a type of “utopian performative” venture.

**The “Utopian Performative”**

In her analysis of female queer identities on screen, Jamie Stuart (2008) borrows Jill Dolan’s (2001, 2005) concept of a “utopian performative” function to theorize North American queer cinema. Although Dolan’s work focuses on live theatre performance, Stuart believes this concept is applicable to film. I agree with Stuart, as I see the relevance of the “utopian performative” to the films discussed here. In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope in Theatre* (2005), Dolan explains her concept:

> Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.  

(Dolan, quoted in Stuart 2008, 5)

Stuart argues that queer audiences long for “the desire to feel this moment of hope, of possible transformation” (2008, 208), because it enables them to think “much more positively about queer lives and queer identities” (Ibid.). It is probably not a coincidence that all the films analyzed in this dissertation have a hopeful, if not happy, ending. This
could be attributed to marketing strategy, but it may be that the filmmakers decided to make the kind of more up-beat films they themselves would like to see, after watching so many negative or tragic queer stories on screen. As Lee mentioned in Chapter 2, these disempowering images make queer people feel “as if they are doomed for being queer.” In my experience, the sense of hope and possible transformation imparted by these films is not just because we come out feeling more positive about queer identities and lives, but also because the films offer a certain amount of emotional viewing pleasure. This pleasure, in my view, is an important part of the “utopian performative” effect. In “The Politics of Gay Culture” (2002), Richard Dyer and Derek Cohen discuss different ways of receiving queer cultural products, emphasizing the important relationship between politics and pleasure:

Culture is in general pleasurable. We tend to ignore pleasure as part of the business of politics – at our peril. At a minimum pleasure clearly allied to politics keeps us going, recharges our batteries. More positively, the pleasure of culture gives us a glimpse of where we are going and helps us to enjoy the struggle of getting there.

(Dyer and Cohen 2002, 16, emphasis original)

This cinematic pleasure is essential to some queer viewers, as their everyday life is already complicated and painful enough. Why would they want to watch “realistic” films that would force them to relive their own painful experiences? This knowledge undoubtedly contributes to the use of humour in several of the films discussed, to defuse tension by creating distance from difficult situations.
In “Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America” (2006), Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin investigate different types of narrative and the types of pleasure they produce in contemporary queer films. They argue that “while some queer independent films still attempt to challenge preconceived ideas about human sexuality in multiple ways, many others are easy-to-take ‘feel good’ films told in conventional ways” (2006, 270). I see the films in this dissertation as hybridizing both these aspects; even if most of them are “feel good” films, their content is still aiming to challenge preconceived ideas about human sexuality. One of the key themes and issues of several of these films is how to come out to old-fashioned, uncomprehending Chinese parents, as in Lim’s *Floored by Love* (2005). The scene is a source of both comedy and pathos, but ultimately the filmmaker focuses on love, as the source of acceptance and understanding. This hopeful solution is based on the assumption that what all good parents most desire for their children is their happiness. It acknowledges that coming out is a difficult process for both the child and the parents, and is not a one-time done deal. Some other more overtly autobiographical films, like *A Girl Named Kai* (2004), give hope that parents will eventually come round, and not reject their queer child. This may appear to some to be a “utopian” view, but even those who have little hope of acceptance themselves may be encouraged by seeing that it can happen for others. Seeing acceptance performed on screen makes it seem possible and even probable.

Another painful theme that is given a more utopian twist in these films is the confusing process for displaced or mixed-race individuals of searching for their roots.
One example is evoked in *A Girl Named Kai* (2004), when Xue is always absent in family photos and never appears as the centre of attention in a white wedding gown, like her mother or younger sister. Through the captions, we know that Xue feels pressered by her family’s expectations: “Family traditions need to be carried on. Girls should be girls. Do I have to choose? Boys should be boys.” In Taiwan, as in other “Chinese” cultures, the eldest child is often expected to take on more family responsibility, including becoming a role model for younger siblings. Xue, as the eldest daughter, is expected to fulfill the desirable image of a proper “Chinese” girl who is feminine and obedient. Her absence in the wedding scenes can be seen as a powerful visual challenge to heterosexual norms and the structure of the nuclear family. The lighter moments of the film make her exclusion even more poignant, and her eventual self-acceptance more of a triumph. Queer “Chinese” women in the audience can identify with both her sorrow and her joy.

**Creating Safe Spaces for Queer “Chinese” Women**

In discussing the function of lesbian bars and queer theatres as part of the culture shared by queer women, Stuart (2008) argues that the latter need “[a] safe place to express queer identities and desires without a certain fear of misunderstanding or violence.” She adds that in films depicting queer women, “the performative space becomes a space where the women performing, the audiences enjoying the
performance, and sometimes both, are able to show affection for other women in a
venture that not only condones the behaviour but celebrates it” (2008, 211). I would add
that these cinematic spaces also offer the queer women filmmakers themselves a safe
space in which to express their queer identities and desires. In addition, while Stuart’s
analysis focuses on the performative space on screen and its reception by the audience
in the theatre, in my view, this safe space can be extended to real life situations beyond
the cinema. When queer women attend a queer film festival, the physical space they
occupy becomes a safe space to acknowledge and express their queer identity and
desire. It is, in fact, an ideal place to meet up with other queer women, and the contacts
made there could contribute to the creation of local and transnational queer
communities.

I want to go back to pleasure for a moment, and its capacity to connect people and
build community in particular contexts. The “utopian performative” of the films in this
dissertation, when experienced in the context of a queer film festival theatre, transforms
that space not only into a place of safety but also a site of pleasure. It seems that pain
and suffering, whether individual or collective, have long been the seeds for coalition
and solidarity building. We find this particularly in social movements and activism
related to issues regarding women, children, migrant workers, queers, etc. It seems to be
easier to connect by fighting against oppression or injustice. But we forget that pleasure
is also a powerful medium to bring people together, even if it is only transitory. We see
examples of this in Pride Parades or cultural festivals, which bring people from a
specific community together to share solidarity in pleasure. I see these films that illustrate the “utopian performative” as sowing the seeds of social activism and community-building that can in fact produce social change, beyond the time and space of their screening.

The Paradox of Cultural Products

To conclude the discussion of these films, I nevertheless need to address the limits of the paradoxical power of cultural products. Filmmaking is both the production of a cultural commodity and engagement in a political project for the filmmakers in this dissertation. As producers of a commodity that requires a market, they often face restrictions and requirements from either the funding agency or those responsible for regulating production and distribution. Sometimes the filmmakers have to modify or prioritize certain elements (such as issues about race, gender, or queerness) in their film to fit into the theme or agenda of the funding source. However radical and non-conformist they would like to be, there are limits to what can obtain financial support and circulation. In “Demand for Cultural Representation: Emerging Independent Film and Video on Lesbian Desire” (2009), Denise Tse Shang Tang aptly points out that the responsibilities of queer indie filmmakers “stretch beyond creating a cinematic piece of work” (2009, 183). They have to maintain a fine balance between being political and being marketable, and the political twists in their work often have to be camouflaged. In
my view, this should not be seen as a facile renunciation of agency on their part, but rather as a strategy they deliberately employ. Without any distribution, any political project or product will be unable to have any noticeable effect or influence.

The question nevertheless remains: to what extent, or at what point, does the capitalization of these independent filmmakers’ work become a “sell-out”? Does receiving government funding, or reaching a wider public, necessarily make them lose their potential and capacity to be weapons of cultural and political subversion? It is particularly important for newly immigrant filmmakers to build connections and affiliations with local funding agencies and organizations, be they state-run or in the private sector. Muñoz also cautions us that “[d]isidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive in a hostile public sphere” (1999, 5).

Another aspect that we need to take into consideration, in terms of using the media as tools for activism, is that rebellion actually sells. Rebels, although working against the mainstream, do have a global market. The rebellious cultural media, whose aim is to critique the mainstream, nonetheless operate in the same modes as the flow of global capital that they intend to subvert. Several queer scholars have raised concerns about Hollywood’s interventions into indie queer cinema in North America. For example, Leung (2004) points out that “the indie circuit has become a highly profitable
sector on which Hollywood is only too keen to capitalise” (2004, 156), while Michele Aaron (2004) criticizes Hollywood’s “appropriation and dilution of queer matters,” due to the “pink profit zone” (2004, 8). In my view, there is and will always be a tension between mainstreaming queer cinemas and queering mainstream cinema (whether Hollywood or Bollywood), as long as the “pink profit zone” exists.58 This tension is also precisely what motivates and inspires these indie filmmakers. It is an indication of queers’ power to consume and participate in global capitalism, as well as their capacity to market creative cultural products. A recent article in the Life section of the Canadian National Post newspaper backs up my argument here.59 In “India’s ‘Pink Economy’ is Booming” (2010), Henry Foy describes the effects of a recent court order lifting a ban on homosexual sex in India: “In New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore, trailblazing entrepreneurs are chasing the gay business” (Foy 2010). He reports that “the so-called pink economy” “in the United States alone is worth US$640-billion a year” (Ibid.). No wonder the mainstream is keen to capitalise on queer topics, to capture another market, as Leung (2004) had pointed out earlier. Foy also mentions that Azaad Bazaar in Mumbai, “India’s first gay-products store,” “has seen a year of growth, penetrating mainstream stores across the country with its merchandise” (Ibid., italics added). It is

58 I think it is important to mention Bollywood here as it has arisen as the biggest film production center in the world; Hollywood is no longer the top. Bringing Bollywood into the discussion even briefly is not only to reflect the reality of the global film market, but also to de-centralize the dominant discourses around Hollywood industry.

59 It is written by Henry Foy, Reuters, and published on Aug. 10, 2010. For the full article, please see: http://www.nationalpost.com/life/India+pink+economy+booming/3381029/story.html
hard not to notice, in these reports, that class differences among queers go without comment. No one asks who can consume and who is excluded from this booming pink economy. In this discussion queer women are also largely conspicuous by their absence or invisibility. This is why more studies focusing on female queers in transnational contexts are needed to fill in the current gaps.

Moreover, we have to keep in mind that the mobility of the filmmakers and their cultural products is closely connected to late capitalism. So the question is: can these transmigrant independent filmmakers utilize the conspicuous consumption of late capitalism to reach wider audiences, yet still remain political and speak from/for the margins? This brings us back to Chow’s idea of “para-sites,” which never fully take over the dominant field but slowly and tactically erode it. Filmmakers like those in this dissertation need to consider adopting this role of “para-site,” not only as a survival tactic but also as a long-term means to increase their influence. As Muñoz suggests, this “working on and against” has the potential to transform a cultural logic from within. Moreover, through international film festivals, these films also have the potential to transform cultural expectations in transnational contexts.

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60 I am aware that film festivals are also not accessible to everyone as the price can be as high as 10 dollars a show. However, various local film festivals such as Out On Screen do offer volunteer programs that allow people to attend the shows in exchange for their volunteer work.
Future Studies

The Role of Film Festivals

During the interviews and throughout my research for this project, the role of international film festivals repeatedly came to the fore. While indie films like these do not often get wide distribution through major networks of cinemas or mainstream video outlets, they do receive international exposure to specific interest groups through such festivals. The festivals often have themes focused on gender and/or sexuality (woman, Gay and Lesbian, or Queer), or trans-national cross-overs such as Asian-American, Asian-Canadian, Pacific-Asian, etc. These festivals not only provide publicity and exposure, enabling the films to reach wider audiences, but also play a crucial role in facilitating global networking for the filmmakers.

My own first experience of the atmosphere at such a festival was when I attended the First International Conference of Asian Queer Studies, held in Bangkok, Thailand, in July 2005. I witnessed the mingling of queer and feminist cultural workers (artists, filmmakers, writers, media workers, etc.), queer rights activists, social workers, and academics. Besides receiving incredible intellectual stimulation from attending a diverse range of panels and workshops, I also experienced a level of excitement comparable to the “high” that Gopinath described when she attended “Desh Pardesh, an annual, Toronto-based conference” which brings together progressive South Asians.
from around the globe (1996, 122). She remarked that their participation was “creating a transnational politics of affect that is proving to be remarkably malleable and resistant to state regulation” (Ibid.), and argues that this politics has a “profound influence on the ways in which we imagine ourselves and our relation to each other” (Ibid.).

My experience at the Bangkok conference indeed influenced how I imagine myself as a transmigrant queer subject in academia. I presented a paper on Lee’s *Enter the Mullet* (2004), as part of a panel of three Asians gays, chaired by Chris Berry. The programmer of the Asian Lesbian Film Festival in Taiwan, Wang Ping, a famous queer activist in Taiwan whom I knew before I came to UBC, attended this panel. She was surprised that I was studying these transmigrant queer “Chinese” women filmmakers in Vancouver, and asked me to recommend some films and filmmakers for her. Other than Lee’s film, I also recommended Xue’s *A Girl Named Kai* (2004) as well as O’s *Blood* (2004), having seen both at the Vancouver Out On Screen queer film festival. I was also connected to an editor, Choo Lip Sin, of the biggest LGBQT online community, fridae, which is based in Hong Kong. After I got back to Vancouver, I received an email from her asking me to write a film review or feature story (1500-2000 words) on two Asian lesbian films for fridae Chinese. Through these experiences I realized that as a queer transmigrant academic, I, too, participate in building up a transnational

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62 One was a South Asian lesbian film, *The Journey* (2004), and the other was *Saving Face* (2004). Both stories (written in English) were published on fridae Chinese between 2005 February to 2006 July.
network, and contribute to a sense of community. I was also able to reconnect with many queer scholars and activists I had known in my undergraduate university years in Taiwan, before I left for PhD studies in Vancouver.

The role of film festivals is related to the other broader topic that I was not able to deal with in this dissertation, that of the reception of these films by different audiences. Chris Straayer (1996), in a discussion of queer spectatorship, asks: “Does the homosexual viewer need to comply with heterosexual positioning? Do lesbians who exercise an active gaze at women in the text, and male homosexuals who direct their gaze ‘against the grain’ at images of the male body, equally occupy the male, heterosexual position?” (1996, 3) These questions led me to look more closely at how effective the disidentification practices are that the filmmakers in this dissertation employ. Can these filmmakers be sure that the audience will recognize the complex relationships they represent between race, gender, and sexuality as constituting disidentification from mainstream models? To what extent does the effectiveness of such a disidentification depend on the implied or actual audience of the film?

Reception studies

Another study increased my curiosity is about the reception of these films. Through a survey and analysis of online reviews of the film The Talented Mr. Ripley (1999), Harry Benshoff (2004) discovered a gap between the deliberately included
queer elements in the film and viewers’ reception of it; most of the viewers from his focus group did not recognize the director’s queer agenda, nor were they affected by the obviously queer representations that are part of the film. What is recognized as queer may vary according to the time and place, and, as Gopinath reminds us, “same-sex eroticism exists and signifies very differently in different diasporic contexts” (1996, 123). A reception study could help to gain a better understanding of how these films depicting queer desire and eroticism are received by film festival programmers and audiences.

Since the role of festivals in relation to the reception of queer films kept surfacing, I undertook some preliminary research to see if it would be possible to combine an investigation into these two issues. I was unable to find any references to any studies on this topic, which became increasingly relevant as I worked on Chapters 3 and 4. I began a subsidiary pilot project, examining the possibility of conducting a reception study by looking at the international film festivals that have screened these four filmmakers’ work, and designed a set of preliminary questions to send to them by email.63 To my surprise, I discovered that all four filmmakers have rarely submitted their films to film festivals on their own. Occasionally they receive invitations from film festivals to showcase their films, but usually it has been their distributing agency that submitted their work.

63 I contacted all four filmmakers in late spring 2010, with questions concerning their knowledge of film festivals, procedures for submission, reception of their films at festivals, and any problems they might have experienced.
After finding out this information, I contacted and interviewed the coordinator at Video Out, the local Vancouver non-profit organization that distributes all four filmmakers’ work. Sharon Bradley explained the procedure for submitting films to festivals, and why some submissions are rejected. Bradley also informed me that information about unsuccessful submissions is not available to the public without the producers’ consent and approval, as the filmmakers would not normally want to share that information. This is understandable; however, without examining the unsuccessful submissions and the reasons behind them, it seems impossible to have a clear overall view of how these films are selected or received at film festivals. These unexpected difficulties led me to abandon for the time being the pilot project which I had hoped to include in the present study. However, I do plan in the future to continue examining the role of film festivals in building feminist and queer transnational networks, and to

64 They have a list of film festivals they submit to, which is updated regularly as new festivals are introduced. Submission also depends on the current videos they have in active distribution. Bradley explained, “our first priority is submitting to artist fee-paying festivals that have a history of programming our work, and then fee-paying festivals we may not have screened with before, and then any non-fee-paying festivals that are high profile.” The purpose of this criterion is that they try to “bring in income for the artists and also get them exposure in Canada and internationally” (2010). Filmmakers do not pay them for this service as they only choose the non-paying festivals, which require no submission fee.

65 Bradley said that the success of submissions depends on the quality of the films and “the tastes of the programmer.” Sometimes the films they send might not fit into specific themes. Based on her experience of running film festivals at Video Out, she also reminded me that “there are many works we receive and would love to program that simply don’t fit in for one reason or another. It might be a length issue, or it doesn’t quite fit with the other works in a certain night of programming” (2010).
investigate other ways of studying the reception of these queer transmigrant “Chinese” women filmmakers’ work.

There are at least two reasons to continue this research. First, it increases the visibility of otherwise neglected or unrepresented queer bodies. As discussed earlier, queer women’s roles as participants in and contributors to the “pink economy” are rendered invisible by Foy’s article in the National Post (August 2010). Gopinath (1996) has rightly cautioned us that:

[A]s with many constructions of community and ethnic identity, however oppositional, current articulations of diaspora tend to replicate and indeed reply upon conventional ideologies of gender and sexuality; once again, certain bodies (queer and/or female) are rendered invisible or marked as other.

(Gopinath 1996, 121)

She further points out that “transnational popular practice means radically different things in different contexts […]. It is not about a one-way flow of commodities […] rather, it is about multiple and non-hierarchical sites of change, where queers and ethnicity are being contested” (1996, 124). An in-depth reception study might reduce the danger of universalizing “queerness” and “Asian-ness” that we see in the simplification and commodification of some popular transnational cultural products.

The second reason for continuing with a study of the reception of these films or others like them is that it could expand the scope of current queer film theory as well as feminist film theory. Arraon (2004), in her research on “New Queer Cinema” (NQC) explains that “[t]he queering of contemporary western culture is not about the products
alone, but about their theorisation. Dovetailing with the emergence and evolution of NQC was the proliferation of queer film theory” (2004, 10). She explains that there are three interconnected aspects contributing to this proliferation: the first is the “critical exploration of queer imagery and directors” (Ibid.), which is what this research is about; the second is the “rereading and reclaiming of classical texts” (Ibid.), which we see in some of the films discussed in this research; the third is to investigate “what these queer texts reveal about the spectator’s experience of cinema” (Ibid.), which turned out to be beyond the scope of the present study. There is certainly a need for responsible theorizing of current transnational cultural products and practices; as Gopinath rightly points out, “informal popular cultural practice exceeds the theoretical models that we have been working with so far” (1996, 124).

The transnational circulation of queer films, through festivals or other means, also raises issues of censorship. During my interview with Xue, she recounted an incident involving her film *A Girl Named Kai* (2004), which was shown in the US at the Austin International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. When the film was sent back to Canada, it was seized at the border by Canada Customs. Xue received a terse letter from the Canadian Government on September 29, 2004, which states that the film had been sent to the Senior Program Advisor in Ottawa to be evaluated for potentially “obscene” content. Xue’s film was held by the Canadian Government for seven days, before they
determined that the material is not obscene. Interestingly, this film was targeted for perusal although it has no nudity or sex scenes like those in Lim’s films.66

The Next Step

In spite of the challenges mentioned earlier in attempting to study reception by focusing on film festivals, I believe a preliminary study could be undertaken by looking at a group of regular festival pass holders.67 With on-going close collaboration and liaison with the filmmakers, festival programmers, and distributors, difficulties over the accessibility of information could be overcome, and future collaboration between academic researchers and local transmigrant queer communities could be increased.

This future study that I propose here to undertake in the near future will hopefully become the foundation for a broader project looking at how filmmakers, activists, and media workers build and extend their networks across national borders through web and digital technology, as well as local and transnational independent film festivals. The example of the four filmmakers who inspired the present study demonstrates the success of transnational queer activism, and the possibility of

66 To read more about this incident, see the article, “‘A Girl Named Kai’ Gets Nailed,” posted on October 4, 2004. Read more: [http://www.filmthreat.com/news/2150/#ixzz1DQ7wTspT](http://www.filmthreat.com/news/2150/#ixzz1DQ7wTspT)

67 This will help to provide information collected by traditional audience and reception studies, which focus on “the numbers of viewers, information about who they are (which sector of society they represent in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, class, and personal values), and learning what they make of what they see” (Miller, 2000: 339). The other purpose is to find out “who watch movies and why they do so” (ibid).
solidarity with other minority communities across the globe. Virtual and physical mobility both play a role in enabling communication across borders, and the distribution of queer cultural products. At the same time, local contacts are all important in creating a critical mass of transmigrant “Chinese” queer cinema enthusiasts here in Vancouver, of which I am happy and grateful to be a part.
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276


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Appendix I Filmography and Film Distribution Information

In this section, the major works of the four filmmakers I have discussed will be introduced. Please note that some of the filmmakers’ early works are not accessible through the Internet, from their distributors nor from the filmmakers themselves, such as Lim’s “Closet is for Clothes” (1995) and some of Xue’s school film projects that have not been screened publicly. Therefore, the filmography included here is extensive but not complete.

I also include here information regarding the reception of some of the key films discussed (in this dissertation) as well as the film festivals where they were screened. This information may aid future study of these filmmakers, and it will provide some sense of how and where these films have circulated. Please also note that for some films presented in a documentary style, information about cast members is not available.

Desiree Lim

Disposable Lez (1999)

Genre: comedy short

Director: Desiree Lim

Writer: Desiree Lim
Producer: Desiree Lim
Cast: N/A
Language: Japanese
Subtitles: None
Length: 6:30
Country: Japan
Synopsis:

**Overview:** The title is inspired by the phrase "disposable lens," referring to contact lenses. The film is a black comedy about how fast and frequently many lesbians tend to dump (dispose of) and find (recycle) girlfriends in Japan. It is Lim’s cynical attempt to reflect on the harsh reality of the art of dating in the dyke community there. Lim says that she made this film to encourage lesbians to “recycle” their dates, which according to her “amateurish anthropological observations” is a universal phenomenon that can be seen internationally.

**Plot:** Urara overhears the conversation of two high school girls talking about how convenient disposable lenses are these days. This conversation somehow reminds Urara about how frequently she has been dumped in the past. She associates the experience of “being dumped” with “being disposable.” Her frustration is expressed in the statement “we can use Disposable Lez’ anywhere, anytime.” In the second half of this film, Urara
gets "picked up" which she associates with “being recycled.” She encourages the audiences to "try to recycle and be environmentally friendly"!

_Dyke: Just Be It (1999)_

Genre: experimental short
Director: Desiree Lim
Writer: Desiree Lim
Producer: Desiree Lim
Cast: N/A
Language: Japanese
Subtitles: None
Length: 1:30
Country: Japan
Synopsis:

Overview: Lim describes this as a music video celebrating the visibility of Japanese queer women as themselves, in their element. Enacting a bit of cultural subversion, “DYKE: Just Be It,” Lim’s first experimental short, puts a queer twist on the Nike ad slogan "Nike – Just Do It." This is an empowering film conveying a
message encouraging women to be proud of being queer and to courageously show who you are in public space.

**Plot:** In this short, we see various images of Japanese dykes including biker dykes, handy dykes (such as a glass-blowing artist and a restaurant chef), political dykes, etc. By presenting these dykes in their own everyday element in public spaces, the film shows us that dykes exist everywhere in society and they are proud of who they are.

*Sugar Sweet (2001)*

Genre: Romance, comedy

Director: Desiree Lim

Writer: Desiree Lim, Carole Hisasue

Producer: Desiree Lim

Cast: Saori Kitagawa as Naomi, Saki as Azusa, Tamayo as Miki

Language: Japanese

Subtitles: English

Length: 67 min

Country: Japan
Synopsis:

Overview: Lim was approached by a production company to direct this film as they were looking for a lesbian director to make the first “authentic” lesbian erotic film. This film is a landmark for Japanese lesbian erotic films in that it was the first made by a queer woman filmmaker for a lesbian audience. It is a fun and sexy romantic comedy about three women caught in a love triangle in the urban Japanese dyke world.

Plot: Naomi is an aspiring filmmaker struggling between her desire to create art films for a lesbian audience and her need to make a living through her films. She is hired to direct some lesbian erotic films for a company that specializes in straight porn. Her boss is frustrated with her arty style and questions her ability to create “authentic” lesbian erotic films. Meanwhile, some of Naomi's friends are upset about her taking this job and see her as a traitor to the lesbian community. Only her best friend Azusa supports her project and even agrees to act in her film. Troubled by the pressure from her boss and friends, Naomi finds comfort and inspiration from a mysterious woman named Sugar whom she meets through an online chatting website. With Sugar’s encouragement and the help of Miki, a woman Naomi meets in a lesbian bar, Naomi is able to quit her project and she finally start her own films. In the end of the film, Miki, who turns out to be Sugar, also quits her job to pursue her passion: be the actress of Naomi’s films.
Reception: This feature film has been screened in various festivals in East Asia, North America, Australia, and Europe (Spain and Germany) since 2001. It was originally funded by a Japanese production company that approached Lim because they were looking for a lesbian director to make the first “authentic” lesbian erotic film. The normal target audience of this production company is not queer; their films generally target heterosexual males. The dialogue in the film is all in Japanese with English subtitles. Although the film was made for local audiences in Japan, it was also intended for international distribution. The target audience also included the significant numbers of foreigners who live and work in Japanese urban areas.

As this is a feature film funded by a non-queer production company, there may have been differences between the production company’s target audiences and those that Lim envisioned. When the film has traveled outside Japan, submitted through Lim’s two distributors (both of whom are queer friendly), it has been screened exclusively at LGBQT film festivals where it is seen as Japanese lesbian erotica. This film has proved very popular in North American LGBQT film festivals. According to Lim’s website and the interview I conducted with her, the film was a sold-out show in all of its North American film festival screenings in 2002. The success of this film was what motivated her to immigrate to Canada to further her career as a queer woman filmmaker.
Eroticism (2001)

Genre: experimental short, video poem
Director: Desiree Lim
Writer: Desiree Lim
Producer: Desiree Lim
Cast: N/A
Language: Japanese
Subtitles: English
Length: 7:30
Country: Japan
Synopsis:

This is a video poem by five women of ages ranging from 20s to 50s, expressing their erotic images of women, which are mostly presented through fruit, fire, and shells. The poem is also about lesbian love and desire. This is a unique group project representing "female eroticism" through the eyes of queer women in Japan. This was a part of the “Women Breaking Boundaries 2000” art exhibition in Tokyo. Lim also did a feature-length documentary about the mounting of this art exhibition, which was the first time a group of established women artists did a group exhibition together in Japan.
Salty Wet (2002)

Genre: comedy short, documentary short
Director: Winston Xin and Desiree Lim
Writer: Winston Xin and Desiree Lim
Producer: Winston Xin and Desiree Lim
Cast: N/A
Language: English and Cantonese
Subtitles: None, but occasionally includes texts in English and Chinese characters
Length: 8:47
Country: Canada
Synopsis:

Overview: Salty Wet was Lim’s first video work in Canada. It was a joint collaboration with Vancouver artist Winston Xin, who is also a Malaysian-Born Chinese-Canadian immigrant. Their intention was to make a video that *deciphers and mis-deciphers* the interpretations of Chinese slang terms by Chinese immigrants and Chinese-Canadians. Ten Cantonese-English speakers were asked to explain the meanings of queer neologisms in English and Cantonese. Unlike English, new Cantonese words are made up of existing Chinese characters used in new juxtapositions. Thus, the two existing words “salty” and “wet” when put together mean
someone who is “horny” or a “sex maniac.” This short explores and introduces various slang words and terms related to food, space, body (parts), queer sex, and queer sexuality.

**Reception:** This film has been screened at film festivals in East Asia, North America, and Australia. It was released in 2003 and was showcased until 2007. Generally speaking, video work has a relatively short life span, usually considered old after three or four years. It is significant, therefore, that this video was screened in a film festival five years after it was first released. It is evident that the film was well received. It was made in Vancouver and it seems to be quite popular locally as it has been widely circulated in various film festivals within British Columbia. The themes of this film--language related to Chinese and East Asian queer sexuality and Chinese immigrants--appear to accord well with film festival thematic choices, leading to its frequent selection. It has been screened not just at LGBQT film festivals but also a few Asian American and Asian Canadian film festivals. The sexually explicit background images in the film might be a reason that this film is not selected even more frequently in general-audience diasporic Asian film festivals in North America or in East Asia. The relatively strict censorship in non-queer film festivals in East Asia may also influence the decision about whether or not to screen this film there. Interestingly, although the film techniques used are relatively simple, it has also being shown in a few film festivals focusing on new or alternative media art.
This film can be seen as trilingual: Mandarin, Cantonese, and English. The dialogues and interviews in the film blend Cantonese and English, and there are written texts consist of traditional Chinese characters (Mandarin) in the background. From the filmmakers’ point of view the assumed audiences could include both queer and non-queer viewers; they particularly wanted to challenge viewers from the older generations of heterosexual immigrant Chinese communities. It is an interesting way to connect to that group of audiences.

*Out For Bubble Tea (2003)*

Genre: family drama, comedy short

Director: Desiree Lim

Writer: Winston Xin and Desiree Lim

Producer: Winston Xin and Desiree Lim

Cast: Kit Koon as Ling, Natalie Sky as Jenny, Denise Tang as May, Tammy Yik as Kim

Language: English

Subtitles: None, occasionally there are English texts when Cantonese is spoken in the film

Length: 17:00

Country: Canada
Synopsis:

**Overview:** This is Lim’s first dramatic short for Canadian TV; it was broadcast on CityTV across the country. It is a story of three women as they negotiate an entangled set of issues: coming-of-age, the tensions between new and old immigrants, and their identities as queer women of color. Their lives unfold through their tête-à-tête at the Bubble Tea House. Lim says this might be the first Asian family drama to address the issues of a Chinese lesbian coming out to her family to be broadcast on primetime Canadian television.

**Plot:** May, Kim and Ling are three Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong who like to hang out at the neighbourhood’s Bubble Tea house. May is struggling with the issue of coming out to her family as a lesbian, Kim has a crush on the waitress at the Bubble Tea house, and Ling is trying to get out of a family matchmaking arrangement.

**Some Real Fangs (2004)**

Genre: musical comedy

Director: Desiree Lim

Writer: Desiree Lim

Producer: Desiree Lim
Cast: Mutya Macatumpag as Mitch, Luvia Petesen as Leslie, Sepideh Saii as Tara, Natalie Sky as Nelly

Language: English

Subtitles: None

Length: 34:00

Country: Canada and Japan

Synopsis:

**Overview:** This was the first of Lim’s films that was a co-production with funding from Canada and Japan. It is a fantasy dance musical about a vampire wannabe’s search for her true love.

**Plot:** Tara is the heir to her family’s Vampire tradition. It is finally her time to grow her fangs. But there are two conditions: first, she has to meet her true love, and second she has to have her first fateful kiss at the time of a special lunar eclipse that only occurs once in 120 years. With only two weeks till that night, fate brings Nelly, a nurse who works at a local Blood Bank, to Tara. With the help of her best friends Mitch and Leslie, Tara overcomes her shyness to pursue Nelly, only to find out that she might already have a boyfriend. After letting go of her fear and regaining faith in herself, Tara wins the heart of Nelly and finally grows her own fangs.
*Floored By Love (2005)*

Genre: family drama, comedy

Director: Desiree Lim

Writer: Desiree Lim, Karen X. Tulchinsky

Producer: Shan Tam and Desiree Lim

Cast: Shirley Ng as Cara Chan, Natalie Sky as Janet Nakano, Grace Fatkin as Mrs. Chan, Kenneth Chen as Mr. Chan, Satoko Klippenstein as Mrs. Nakano

Language: English

Subtitles: English and French available

Length: 60:00

Country: Canada

Synopsis:

**Overview:** This drama is a part of CHUM/CityTV’s anthology series Eight Stories about Love, broadcast on Sunday nights in 2005. Its premiere was on October 16, 2005. Lim says this film is most likely the first drama on primetime Canadian television to address the issues of marriage and coming out in the context of visible minorities (i.e. non-Caucasians). It is a heart-warming family comedy about finding the courage to be who you really are in two different households in Vancouver--a Chinese-Japanese lesbian couple and an African Canadian and Jewish Canadian blended family.
Plot: Cara thinks she is happy together in a more-than-perfect relationship with her beautiful, loving partner, Janet, until the same sex marriage law is approved in BC and Janet wants to get married. All hell breaks loose for Cara, pressured to walk the aisle by her lesbian lover, whereas her traditional parents, visiting Vancouver for the wedding of Cara’s brother, want her to find a man to marry.

Norman, a mild-mannered accountant is upstaged for attention by his step-children when their biological dad, his wife's ex-husband, a trendy, hip and now gay actor, breezes into their lives after a long absence. The foundation of the family threatens to crack when their gay teenage son decides to follow his dad back to New York for a long vacation. Norman reluctantly agrees, even though the idea of his stepson moving across the continent is breaking his heart. Within the setting of two multicultural families, the characters navigate through different layers of love--for their life partners, children and parents.

Reception: This film was screened almost exclusively in North America except for one exception, in Spain. It was produced and showcased on Chum/City TV in Canada in 2005. Given the theme of the two stories—lesbian marriage and the life choices of a young gay man--it is no surprise that this film was primarily screened at LGBQT film festivals.
It is surprising that this film was screened only in 2005. One might expect that the breadth of the themes and the multicultural nature of the characters would draw attention from a broad range of audiences and film festivals. However, the ethnic diversity of the characters might also make it hard to categorize this work within cultural-specific film festivals such as Asian-Canadian or Asian-American festivals. Additionally, the length of this film—made as a 50-minute TV show—may have something to do with its short screening life. In general, a film of this length is paired up with couple of similarly-themed shorts. Given the complex multiculturalism of the stories, it may have been difficult to find suitable shorts to group together with it for a proper program.

The dialogue in the film is mostly in English. In some parts of the film, when Asian parents talk to their children, there is dialogue in Cantonese and Japanese. Subtitles are provided both in English and French. This indicates a wide range of assumed audiences in term of language accessibility.

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68 I asked the coordinator at Video Out, Sharon Bradley, if it is common for a film to be screened widely for only one year. Here is her response, “Yes, it’s common for films to only screen widely for a year or two. Most film festivals only screen films produced in the last one-two years.”
Home (2010)

Genre: documentary drama
Director: Desiree Lim
Writer: Desiree Lim and Mary Chuah
Producer: Desiree Lim and Mary Chuah
Cast: N/A
Language: Malaysian and Burmese
Subtitles: English
Length: 50:00
Country: Malaysia

Synopsis:

This is Lim’s latest film, which consists of a short drama and a documentary on human rights abuses of Burmese refugees in Malaysia. The first twenty minutes of the film is a drama about a Burmese woman who escapes from the brutal and inhuman military government in Burma and becomes a refugee in Malaysia. The second part of the film includes a series of moving and shocking interviews with several current Burmese refugees in Malaysia, telling their experiences of human rights abuses at the hands of polices and immigration officers, including random arrests, caning, emotional,
sexual and physical abuse, imprisonment, extortion, human trafficking, etc. Project Home is a collaboration between Lim and the local human right activist Chuah. The purpose of this project is to raise global awareness of this little-known situation in Malaysia and give voice to the Burmese refugees there.

**Donna Lee**

*Enter the Mullet (2004)*

Genre: Experimental comedy short

Director: Donna Lee

Writer: Donna Lee

Producer: Donna Lee

Cast: N/A

Language: English

Subtitles: None

Length: 9:00

Country: Canada

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69 Quoted from the website: http://www.projecthomemalaysia.com/.
Synopsis:

**Overview:** Lee is concerned with criticizing cultural stereotypes and appropriations of Asian queer women in this, her first short film. Having sported a mullet hairstyle herself through much of her teenage years, she has come to appreciate and understand its history in the hair timeline. Other than the introductory section of the film, which is done in the style of an educational TV show, the rest of the film is shot in the style of a Kung-Fu movie, inspired by *Enter the Dragon* (1973), starring Bruce Lee, the most recognized icon of East Asian masculinity. Donna Lee introduces viewers to a type of playful, hybrid masculinity performed by East Asian butch-dykes by combining Bruce Lee style kicks with the mullet hairstyle that is often associated with masculine white working-class men.

**Reception:** This film was mostly screened locally in Vancouver. Although it has not been screened as frequently as Lim’s films, it has traveled widely, from East and Southeast Asia to Central America. It even traveled to Taiwan and Malaysia—venues reached by none of the other films in this study. This usual distribution may be attributable to chance collaboration between film festival programming and my attendance at an academic conference. I saw the film in 2004 and presented a paper on it at the first International Asian Queer Conference in Thailand. Several important figures from queer film festivals in different Asian regions attended the conference as well, including my session. I also met an old acquaintance who worked as the film...
programmer for the Asian Lesbian Film Festival in Taiwan, and I recommend Lee’s film to her and to other programmers who came to talk to me afterward. Coincidences such as this do sometimes affect how and where a film gets to travel.

This film explores issues of class, cultural appropriation and hybridity, topics that are discussed quite frequently in academic studies. Perhaps partly for this reason the film has been screened at festivals initiated by academic groups at universities such as SFU and Berkeley. With its focus on Asian butch-dykes, it has been selected not only for LGBQT film festivals but also some Asian Canadian ones. It is quite significant that this queer East Asian butch-dyke comedy was chosen to be shown in the Chinatown Night of Film. It may be that the programmer of this event hoped to appeal to a wider range of Chinese viewers, but it might also be because there are no scenes involving obviously queer romantic issues or overtly sexual images. It could thus be a “safer” choice for the family-oriented crowd at that particular venue.

There is no dialogue in the film, just an opening monologue by a host who introduces the term, Mullet. This introduction is in English. From the subject matter of the film, we can conjecture that the assumed audience includes English-speaking queer and non-queer viewers within a broad range of cultural communities.
*Rated F ... for Fart (2005)*

Genre: Documentary short, comedy

Director: Donna Lee & Terra Poirier

Writer: Donna Lee & Terra Poirier

Producer: Donna Lee & Terra Poirier

Cast: N/A

Language: English

Subtitles: None

Length: 8:13

Country: Canada

Synopsis:

**Overview:** This short is the Winner of the 48 hour D.I.Y. Digital Competition at Out on Screen 2004, the theme of which was “rated F for….” Lee and Poirier (Lee’s then partner) felt the answer was obvious. They decided to investigate a taboo issue: the secret laws of flatulence, and farting policy, in lesbian relationships!! This bold and hilarious short won them the People’s Choice Shorts Award at Out on Screen 2005. The film mainly consists of interviews of lesbian couples from different ethnic backgrounds. It offers a fresh and necessary look at the lesbian body. Far from presenting the usual
images of the sexual and sensual feminine lesbian body for the visual consumption of a straight male audience, this film puts the lesbian body back into the context of lesbian everyday life experiences.

Reception: This film was mostly shown in North America and Europe. Despite the fact that it won awards in Vancouver, it was not a favoured choice in the international LGBTQ film festivals. It was also not shown at any Asian American or Asian Canadian film festivals in North America or at any film festivals in Asia. This may be because farting is a taboo public topic in most Asian cultures. Furthermore, as the subject matter of this film is unusual in both queer and non-queer contexts, it may have been difficult for festival programmers to find other shorts with similar themes to group into a suitable program. These may be possible reasons why the film was not circulated widely or for very long.

All the interviews in this film are in English and there are no English or French subtitles; occasionally, however, there are some texts in English shown in the screen. The assumed audiences are mostly English-speaking queer women who encounter similar situations in their relationships and for whom the interviewees’ experiences therefore resonate.
*Broken Family* (2007)

Genre: Documentary short

Director: Donna Lee

Writer: Donna Lee

Producer: Donna Lee

Cast: N/A

Language: English

Subtitles: None

Length: 8:00

Country: Canada

Synopsis:

This is Lee’s latest film. It is a documentary that explores the unspoken issues in her family-- a two-generation trauma caused by Chinese Head Tax. This film also looks at how Chinese Head Tax issues have impacted the local Chinese communities in general, and their coalitions with other marginal communities such as First Nations people. It reveals the painful history of exclusion her grandfather’s generation experienced in Canada.
Debora O


Genre: Experimental short, video poem
Director: Debora O
Writer: Debora O
Producer: Debora O
Cast: Debora O
Language: English
Subtitle: None
Length: 7:40
Country: Canada

Synopsis:

Overview: This was Debora O’s first video, which won her the 2003 Jerry Brunet award for best local short film. It is a combination of archival images shot by her father with Super 8 and new images shot by herself with a video camera. This short explores issues of fragmented memory and history, and depicts the ways her “queerly raced” (mixed-race) body connects or fails to connect to disparate places and histories. This film poses the following questions: “how does living in such a body affect an awareness
of contact zones where movement, body, time, and memory come together in the passing through of different histories and contexts”? This video engages three different landscapes that come into contact through the sensibility of one queer body—Macau, Vancouver, and Lisbon. Beautifully made, this short is like a visual poem exploring the fluid and elusive relationship between body and place in the contexts of fragmented histories and memories.

**Reception:** This film was screened almost exclusively within Canada and only in 2004. Its only international screening was at the Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in that year. The programmer of that festival is a friend of O’s. O won the best BC director of a short film/video, and the award was presented at the Out On Screen Event “The Coast is Queer” in 2004. Given this initial positive reception, it is very interesting that this film did not receive much attention from any other international LGBTQ or diasporic Asian film festivals. It explores the memory and experience of a mixed-raced woman and expands the ideas of queerness and race by proposing the concept of “racially queer” as a way of rethinking mixed-race-ness. American LGBTQ film festivals usually welcome innovative perspectives on queerness, but this film was not once screened in the U.S. This unconventional way to approach queerness, not in terms of sexuality-only, may have created ambiguity in categorizing this film in the festival circuit, and may be one of the reasons why it was not better received in

70 These are direct quotes from the synopsis on the cover of the video distributed by Video-In/Out, a major local queer media art distributor in Vancouver.
international film festivals. In fact, the innovative point of view of this film also generated some misunderstandings between a film festival programmer and Debora O. O informed me that she had some issues with the programmer of the Toronto Queer Film Inside/Out Festival around the way they programmed her film and the way they edited her description of it. O says:

They were seemingly blind to the ‘queering race’ part and just focused on the queer aspect (which was actually only a small segment of the entire film). They also made it sound like a film about a ‘queer daughter and her father,’ which was not really the focus. I was unhappy that they did not check with me first, but mostly I was annoyed that they missed the whole point of the film which was a look at identity in-between, which I believe applies to both the racial and sexual category for me.

(O 2007)

Even though it did not circulate widely at film festivals, this film has received academic attention in Vancouver, and has been screened in various classes in English and Women’s Studies at UBC and SFU. There is no dialogue in the film and the poem narration is all in English. The musical soundtrack is in English and Mandarin. The assumed audience is made up of English-speaking viewers who share the experience of being a mixed-race, as well as non-mixed-race viewers who want to learn about that experience. It is for both queer and non-queer audiences, to re-consider the consider of “racial queerness.”
Kai-Ling Xue

*A Girl Named Kai (2004)*

Genre: Experimental short
Director: Kai-Ling Xue
Writer: Kai-Ling Xue
Producer: Kai-Ling Xue
Cast: Kai-Ling Xue
Language: Silent film with English texts on screen
Subtitles: None, occasionally includes English texts on screen
Length: 9:00
Country: Canada
Synopsis:

*Overview:* Three years in the making, shot in four countries, this film is an autobiographical account, moving through three transition stages of her life, of Xue’s self discoveries regarding her passions, secrets, dreams, and relationships. Using digitally edited Super 8 and 16mm film, this nine minute experimental short takes the viewer through a true life journey from the highs of love to the lows of loss, delicately threaded together with original music. This film sets out to challenge society’s
preconception of people who are considered Outsiders, while empowering the audience to continue to examine contemporary notions of internal and external social identities. This autobiographical account can be seen as representing the collective struggles that many immigrant queer youth share as outsiders in the host country and in heteronormative societies.

Reception: This film has circulated more widely than any of the films in this study. It has been screened extensively in many cities in North America, Europe, Australia, Taiwan and China. It is also the only film in this study shown in India. This autobiographical film about a queer East Asian immigrant youth’s inner and outer journeys to discover who she is and her relationship with her family seems to generate much interest internationally in various LGBQT, women’s, women of colour, and Asian American film festivals. There have not been many films made about Asian queer youth’s experiences and their human rights so it has been in great demand among the film festival programmers. Moreover, as Xue is a professionally trained filmmaker and multi-media artist, her stylish visual images and music also led to gain some attention in some alternative/experimental media festival. There is no dialogue or monologue in this film, but there are subtitle-like texts, a silent narration, in English. It is clearly linguistically that the assumed audiences are those who can read or speak English. Demographically, this film is targeted a range of different groups of ethnicity, gender, immigrant, queer youth, etc.
Interestingly, the film about queer youth by queer youth seems to be under more strict censorship in Canada. This film was screened at the Austin International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 2004 and the film was seized by Canada Customs to be evaluated on its "obscene" content. It took the government seven days to determine that the contents were not obscene, and they did not send the film back to Xue right away. Xue got in touch with the Vancouver LGBQT bookstore, Little Sisters, for help and they drafted a press release to get public attention about this unjust treatment. In the press release, they explained that the film contains no nudity or sexually explicit content at all and is simply a poetic autobiographical narrative about Xue as a queer immigrant youth, her relationship with her family, and her sense of self.

Ironically, this unpleasant experience with Canada Customs might actually have gained more public attention for the film, allowing it to circulate widely. In 2005, it won the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Rights Award at the Media That Matter Film Festival. Media That Matter’s extensive network and their distribution of the film festival collection DVD online further expanded the circulation of Xue’s film to many more international film festivals in 2006.
**Tilted (2005)**

**Genre:** Experimental short

**Director:** Kai-Ling Xue

**Writer:** Kai-Ling Xue

**Producer:** Kai-Ling Xue

**Cast:** N/A

**Language:** English

**Subtitles:** None

**Length:** 3:23

**Country:** Canada

**Synopsis:**

**Overview:** A couple of years before 2005, Xue was on her routine walk in a back alley in her neighbourhood in downtown Vancouver. She found old 16mm footage in a pile of “free, help yourself” stuff. Out of curiosity, she took it to her school and used the equipment there to view the content. To her surprise, it was some medical footage shot in the 1970s about hygiene and bacteria. Xue cleverly turned her disturbed feelings about this footage into a critical and inspiring short video. It is presented in an experimental narrative style with an original twist as she uses dark humour to illustrate people’s homophobia and ignorant attitudes towards queer issues.
**Plot:** The story concerns a young woman with “tilted” hands, which the medical community despair of fixing. Because there is no hope of a cure, the young woman must share the news of her condition with her family. The found film Xue uses features only “non-Asian” doctors and family members, although the voiceover—ostensibly in the voice of the female protagonist—is accented, suggesting that the speaker is not a native speaker of English.

**Reception:** This film has not been widely screened locally or internationally. It travelled to Europe first and then was shown at two film festivals in Calgary and three festivals in the USA that had screened Xue’s debut film, *A Girl Named Kai* (2004). It is interesting that this film has not been selected for screening in BC or Vancouver or at any Asian Canadian or Asian American festivals at all. Perhaps the recycling of old medical footage consisting only of non-Asians on screen makes it hard to categorize the film as the coming-out story of Xue herself. Also, there have been few examples on screen of the medicalized queer youth body, might be another reason why it is hard to fit in typical festival programming.

In terms of language, the assumed audience is made up of English speakers. Both queer and non-queer viewers are addressed. As the theme of the film is about a queer youth coming out to her family and her experience with the medical profession, a wide range of audiences is possible.
Information of Distributors

These are the three main distributors that handle the work of the four filmmakers discussed in this study: Video Out Distribution 71, Vancouver (Donna Lee, Deborah O, Kai-Ling Xue, and Desiree Lim); Wolfe Releasing 72, international (which handled Lim's films before she came to Canada); and Media that Matters (Xue's A Girl Named Kai, 2004) 73. For more information on these distributors, please see the following websites.74 (And then you list the site for each distributor.

71 http://www.videoout.ca/
72 http://www.wolforeleasing.com/
73 http://www.mediatthatmattersfest.org/about
Appendix II Interview Questionnaire (English)

Interview Questionnaire: (The interviews will be tape-recorded and video-recorded.)

A. Contextualizing “Chineseness” and “Queerness”:

1. What initiated your immigration to Canada? What made you choose Vancouver?

2. What did the concepts “Chineseness” and “queerness” mean to you in your “home country” before your immigration (to Canada)? How has the experience of immigration influenced your perceptions of those concepts?

3. What does it mean to you to be (and to be seen as) a “Chinese” queer woman in the Canadian context, particularly in a highly multicultural city such as Vancouver?

4. In what ways do you employ, appropriate, or subvert stereotypical representations of “Asian women”, “Asian queer women”, or “Chinese” in general in your films? What are the ideas behind your choice of style and content?

5. In your own mind, what is the function of your work and what is your intention in making films? Do you see yourself as having a political and/or social agenda?

6. How do the “multicultural” aspects of film policy in Canada affect your filmmaking, style, or themes? Have you experienced particular barriers because of being a “woman”? An “Asian”? A “queer”?

318
B. Exploring Common Difference and Diversity Within:

1. How do you see each other’s work in terms of representations of Asian/ “Chinese” “queer” women regarding race, age, class, gender, and sexuality? Are there any aspects of the film or any characters that resonate with your own experiences and ideas?

2. What do you see as the possibilities for building solidarity through making and showing films for filmmakers and for immigrant “Asian queer women” in general? If you see possibilities for building solidarity, how does that work?