

Performing Heteronormality: Rethinking Queer Precarity through the Everyday, the Banal, and the Spatial in *Suk Suk*

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Abstract

This article analyzes Ray Yeung's 2019 film *Suk Suk* to examine what it means to live in modern-day Hong Kong, where overt homophobic violence is rare, but the experience of precarity is acutely felt. The film follows two elderly gay men in Hong Kong who find romantic solace in each other but are forced to part ways due to family obligations. Focusing on the film's emphasis on the everyday minutiae and its use of banality as an aesthetic and narrative strategy, I contend that the absence of explicit anti-queer aggression in *Suk Suk* reveals a culturally specific form of queer precarity articulated through sexual minorities' compulsory performance of heteronormativity. Drawing on the literature on homophobia in East and South-East Asia, queer film studies, queer theories, and the theory of utterance, I posit the concept of "heteronormality" to highlight the banal aesthetics and everyday temporality of heteronormativity that naturalize this state of repression as a quotidian experience. Furthermore, I analyze *Suk Suk's* spatial representation of this particular form of heteronormativity by examining the urban experience of Pak and Hoi. Attending to Hong Kong's hybrid global-local status, I argue that while this hybridization has afforded Hong Kong's urban space new forms of queer sociality and cultures, it has also intensified and created novel kinds of queer precarity that further the marginalization of the already vulnerable individuals like Pak and Hoi.

본 논문은 공공연한 동성애 혐오는 드물지만, 그에 대한 불안을 선명히 경험하는 현대 홍콩에서의 삶과 의미에 대해 2019년 레이 영 감독의 영화 <아저씨X아저씨>를 중심으로 살펴본다. 영화는 홍콩에 사는 두 명의 노년 동성애 남성들에 관한 이야기로, 서로에게 로맨틱한 위안을 받지만, 가족에 대한 의무로 헤어져야 하는 내용을 다룬다. 본 논문은 영화가 미학적, 서사적 전략으로 사소한 일상과 평범함에 중점을 두고 있다는 점에 주목한다. 반-퀴어 폭력이 선명하게 드러나지 않음은 오히려 성소수자들에게 부여된 이성애중심 주의적 행동양식의 강요를 통해 발현된 특정 형태의 퀴어적 불안정함이라 볼 수 있다. 본 논문은 동아시아와 동남아시아의 동성애 혐오, 퀴어 영화 연구, 퀴어 이론, 발화 이론을 바탕으로 억압 상태를 일상적인 경험처럼 당연하게 만드는 '이성애규범성'(heteronormativity)

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을 제시하고 이 개념이 강조하는 평범함의 미학과 일상적 시간성을 강조한다. 또한 영화 속에 등장하는 특정 형태의 이성애중심주의 공간을 파악하기 위해 주인공인 박(Pak)과 호이(Hoi)의 도시 경험을 분석한다. 본 논문은 글로벌과 로컬이 혼종하는 홍콩의 도시 공간이 새로운 형태의 퀴어 사회와 문화를 제공하는 반면, 박과 호이와 같이 이미 취약한 개인들을 더욱 주변화하고 새로운 종류의 퀴어적 불안정을 만들어 낸다고 주장한다.

Keywords

Heteronormality, Hong Kong, Queer Asian Film, Queer Studies, Queer Space, Queer Sinophone Studies, Reticence.

Introduction

Ray Yeung's 2019 film *Suk Suk* (meaning "uncle, uncle") recounts the gently melancholic story of Pak (Tai Bo) and Hoi (Ben Yuan), two gay men in their twilight years, who fall in love and eventually lose each other in the city of modern-day Hong Kong.¹ In comparison to Yeung's previous filmographic work, such as the short *Yellow Fever* (1998) and *Cut Sleeve Boys* (2006), which explores themes of transatlantic queer encounters, *Suk Suk* attends to a more localized geopolitical latitude, zooming in on a slew of mundane spaces where the two men go about their everyday life.² Despite its weighty subject matter—namely, same-sex relationships and aging in a heterosexist and ageist society—the cinematography of *Suk Suk* retreats to a space of utter banality. Yeung's camera focuses on the ordinary minutiae of quotidian life—from cooking a home meal to sharing supper at a sauna house to bargaining at a rumpus wet market over the price of green onion—that normally do not inspire the kind of subversive perversity associated with queerness. Penetrated by this searing everyday mundaneness, *Suk Suk* appears to have rendered queer people's quotidian struggle against heteronormative pressure a point of ambivalence, with Pak and Hoi appearing relatively insouciant to the threat of homophobic aggression. Nevertheless, it is precisely this sense of uncertainty and ambiguity that allows *Suk Suk* to posit a trenchant remark on the invisible pressure queer elders like Pak and Hoi undergo against society's veiled aggression towards non-normative desires.

From earlier work by cultural critics of Hong Kong to the more recent study on its postcolonial experience, ambivalence has occupied a central position in their intellectual forays into the city's cultural imagery. Writing in anticipation of Hong Kong's "homecoming" to the People's Republic of China in 1997, Ackbar Abbas characterizes this transitory moment as caught in a space of disappearance, or *déjà disparu*, in which "what is new and unique about the situation is already gone, and we are left holding a handful of cliché, or a cluster of memories of what has never been."³ Evoking a similar language of ambivalence, Ray Chow, in her classic essay "Between Colonizers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing

in the 1990s” (1992), characterizes postcolonial Hong Kong as existing in a “third space between the colonizer and the dominant native culture that cannot simply be collapsed into the latter even as resistance to the former remains foremost.”⁴ Hopeful of Hong Kong’s in-betweenness, Chow contends that it is precisely Hong Kong’s uncertain positionality that bears the potential to make it a paradigm of modernity for its self-claimed motherland, mainland China.⁵ Chow’s aspirational attitude is subsequently challenged by Hong Kong-based scholars such as Ip Iam-chong, who maintains that her celebratory formation of in-betweenness rehearses the clichéd image of Hong Kong as an innocent victim of imperial and neo-colonialism, a caricature that risks “omitting all the complicated colonial relationships” in which Hong Kong might also be complicitly implicated.⁶

Despite their differences, these earlier intellectual discussions cultivated an expansive repertoire of hermeneutics and theories around the notion of “ambivalence,” whereby the culture of postcolonial Hong Kong is explored, articulated, and expanded. Their insistence on thinking beyond the binary rooted in the assumed opposition between East-West, colonizer-colonized, as well as diaspora-homeland consequently anticipated and prepared the groundwork for the now-burgeoning field of queer Sinophone studies. Formally introduced in 2014, queer Sinophone studies re-examines Hong Kong’s mercurial postcoloniality through the lens of queer gender, sexuality, and alternative kinship structures to, as Ari Larissa Heinrich puts poetically in the field’s inaugural volume (2014), “transcend familiar disciplinary boundaries in a way that can nourish, and create, all sides.”⁷

At the same time, these aforementioned discourses have tended to overlook what Helen Leung calls the “ideological limits and potentially injurious effects of ambivalent representations.”⁸ In her monograph *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong* (2009), Leung draws on Hong Kong filmmaker and critic Yau Ching’s comment on overseas and local scholars’ contrasting attitudes towards queer issues to point out the former’s tendency to underestimate the “veiled homophobia of ambivalent representations.”⁹ Reflecting on her own diasporic gaze and the pressure to follow the “global gay” narrative, Leung urges her fellow scholars to take seriously queer work that might come across as “backward, pre-identitarian expressions that are still playing catch-up with the West.”¹⁰ Echoing Leung, Ling Song in “Straightly Chinese: The Emergence of Systemic Homophobia in Chin” (2021) points out “the tendency of optimism” in scholarship on queer Chinese media studies, which privileges studying the political potential of individual queer agency over exploring the systemic but veiled homophobic violence administered at the level of the state and the resultant experience of precarity.¹¹ Taking cues from these scholars, I examine *Suk Suk*’s apparent absence of homophobic aggression and its portrayal of everyday banality to think about what it means to live in modern-day Hong Kong where overt homophobic violence is rare, but the experience of precarity is acutely felt. In doing so, I explore the following questions around the fraught relationship between queerness

and its ambivalent cultural representation: How does ambivalence operate as a mode of queer regulation? What novel form of heteronormativity does it give rise to? Moreover, what particular forms of injuries, coercion, and marginalization does it inflict upon aging queers?

In addition, the scholarly writing on the queer culture and sociality in postcolonial Hong Kong has also systematically sidestepped the queer elders, who are part of the city's most marginalized population. A missing puzzle in the city's local queer history already on the brink of disappearance, this particular generation has received far less attention in academic and popular discourses than their young counterparts. As Travis Kong puts in *Oral Histories of Older Gay Men in Hong Kong* (2019), on which *Suk Suk* is based:

International research also shows that there is an acute research gap in our understanding of older gay men and lesbians (as well as other sexual minorities). They are under-researched in academic scholarship, under-represented in mainstream and queer popular cultures, invisible in social policy and social services, and marginalized even within the LGBTQ community. In short, they are an 'unseen minority' (Berger 1982) or 'a minority within a minority' (Joes and Pugh 2005).¹²

As a result, much knowledge about queer history and culture, as well as conceptualizations about homophobia, heteronormativity, and various modes of sexual governance, have been formulated after the experience and from the perspective of younger queers. It is in light of this lacuna that *Suk Suk* comes out as a timely addition and poignant critique of the latent ageism in Asian queer studies at large that explores precisely the otherwise latent quotidian pressure queer elders in modern-day Hong Kong live under. It needs to be remarked that *Suk Suk* is not the only cinematic piece tapping into the issue of queer aging in recent years. For instance, Jun Li's inaugural film *Tracey* (2018), which came out one year before *Suk Suk*, also attends to the struggle of queer people in their twilight years. However, *Suk Suk*'s tender, almost languidly banal delineation of the topic stands in stark contrast to *Tracey*'s rambunctious display of emotional anguish and bodily exhaustion. Without diminishing the cultural significance of *Tracey*, I offer up *Suk Suk*'s restrained and empathetic depiction of queer elders as a more nuanced and resonating cultural mediation of postcolonial Hong Kong's heteronormative regime and the lived experience of ordinary, older queers who hold means to escape from it.

Conflicts of the Self and Queer Ambivalence: The Critical Banality of *Suk Suk*

One of the most poignant sequences in *Suk Suk* featuring its queer protagonists' powerlessness under the pressure of heteronormativity shows

Hoi's refusal to move into a gay nursing house. "How would I face my son? If I have to go to a nursing home, I'd rather go to a normal one. I really don't want him to know the truth about me." Hoi's divulgence is indicative of *Suk Suk*'s core conflict, which lies in the utter incompatibility between its protagonists' queer self and the social position they occupy in the family matrix. This tension captures a typical theme in queer Asian films, which, as Chris Berry articulates in "Asian Values, Family Values" (2001), represents queer identity as "a problem within the network of kinship obligations that constitute the family and bind the individual into it."¹³ According to Berry, what is understood and portrayed as queerness in queer Asian films is not so much the performance of sexual behaviors per se but the dissolution of the family unit they brought forth. This framing, then, defines queerness as a drive towards a certain relational collapse between the queer and family self rather than an ontologically static and stable substance. As such, Berry brings queerness into the discourse of Hong Kong postcoloniality by reimagining it as an ambivalent relationality between two split selfhoods, one of which congeals around one's responsibility prescribed by Chinese kinship values, and the other as "a set of psychological traits."¹⁴

This ambivalent mode of queer embodiment is articulated through the depiction of Pak and Hoi as always already an internally split subject without recourse to reconciliation. Take the film's characterization of Hoi, for instance. On the one hand, Hoi is described as a family man par excellence, always assuming the utmost caring posture towards his granddaughter, son, and daughter-in-law. We also come to learn about Hoi's failed marriage, after which he assumed the full responsibility to raise his son as a single parent. These instances illustrate the centrality of blood kinship in shaping Hoi's sense of self, something he is unable to relinquish for his queer desires. On the other hand, however, Hoi also embraces his non-normative sexuality as an essential and constitutive part of his being, referring to it as "my truth." His enthusiastic involvement in LGBTQ social work and familiarity with local cruising scenes further suggests the thoroughness with which he is at home with his queerness. Yet, Hoi, and similarly Pak, appears unable to find a point of fulcrum between the two selfhoods, a failure that would eventually result in the dissolution of their relationship.

Unlike queer Asian films such as *Happy Together* (1997), *Broken Branches* (1995), and *Permanent Residence* (2009), which tend to contextualize the conflict of queer identities mentioned above within a global or transnational context, *Suk Suk* grounds the exploration of this tension at the level of a heightened geographic and cultural locality, deliberately eschewing what Alvin Wong calls "the visibility of queer Sinophone transnationalism" characterized by themes of transnational mobility and exchange.¹⁵ In making this comparison, I do not suggest that Yeung is unaware of the influence of globalization or transnational connections on the local queer experience in Hong Kong. Nor do I contend that *Suk Suk*

exists outside the registry of an expanding queer culture of globality. After all, Hong Kong, in real life, is not short of bustling scenes of queer consumerism. My point is to emphasize that Yeung's meticulous examination of the humdrum of everyday life offers a less-worn path to examine the invisible forms of queer precarity that emerged from Hong Kong's postcolonial condition, in which one's quotidian experience is conditioned by the complex relationship between their sexual identity, gender, class position, and social mobility. This turn to the banal and unspectacular echoes Lauren Berlant's advocacy in *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022) for social theory and cultural criticism to "attend to the difficulty of being with the ordinary," an epistemological shift that reveals "the material effects of inequality's persistent force" and the "pressures that pervade the ordinary's exercises and disciplines."¹⁶ In other words, without pitting the ordinary against the systemic, I posit the ordinary as the accommodating ground and driving vehicle for the systemic distribution of queer trauma and subordination in trivialized, therefore undetectable, formats.

By turning away from the direct portrayal of homophobic aggression, *Suk Suk* reveals heteronormativity in its spectral form that lurks behind the fabric of everyday life. Rather than eliminating queer desires and practices, this particular mode of heteronormativity, which is only visible through the imperceptible yet intense tension between Pak, Hoi, and their families, prioritizes the naturalization of what I call 'heteronormality' as an assumed, common-sensical ways of being. Here, in lieu of the more commonly used term 'heteronormativity,' I opt for heteronormality to emphasize the aesthetic, temporal, and relational aspects of what it means to occupy a normalized position in the institution of blood kinship. This mode of biopolitical governance of queerness is less about establishing heteronormativity as what David Halperin calls "an obvious fact and a form of personal life" but more about the repression of queerness as a culturally and politically unintelligible subjectivity.¹⁷ What exactly, then, is the mechanism through which heteronormality regulates queer people? How is this mode of control complicated by aging? What kind of queer precarity does it produce? And how is this precarity related to queer unintelligibility? These are the inquiries that underscore my theorization of heteronormality in the following section.

Queer Unintelligibility and the Performance of Heteronormality

In *Suk Suk*, violence is keenly felt in its effect of repression, yet its point of origination looms diffused and elusive; one cannot trace it precisely back to the tip of a blade, as in the case of *Spring Fever* (2009), or the beleaguering mouth of a homophobic coworker, as in the case of *Okoge* (1992). Here the articulation of pain and displeasure is largely symbolic and atmospheric rather than instrumental and visceral; it is characterized by what Gail Mason in *The Spectacle of Violence* (2004) calls "an awareness of their (as in queer people) vulnerability," operating

as “a sign of the potential danger.”¹⁸ The qualifier “potential” is critical in Mason’s assertion, as it connotes the temporal and auric nature of the particular brand of repression felt by Pak and Hoi, an experience characterized by their constant anticipation, rather than certainty, of the potential calamity their queer identity might wrought to their families. Consequently, this discrepancy in time produces novel iterations of violation, trauma, and vulnerability. The operation of the repressive management of queer sexualities without any explicit exercise of violence is emblematic of the regulatory mechanism of what Tom Boellstorff calls “heterosexism.” Boellstorff distinguishes heterosexism from homophobia precisely in their different aesthetic and formal relationship to instrumental violence. Whereas homophobia stems from an emotive level conducive of spectacular acts of aggression and subordination, heterosexism “employs a Gramscian problematic to locate antipathy in hegemony.”¹⁹ This latter mode of governance, according to Boellstorff, lacks the guttural intensity homophobia has and replaces it with bureaucratic impersonality. As such, heterosexism indexes more appropriately the latent discriminatory and harmful disposition of the misrecognized culture of tolerance in which the spectacle of anti-queer aggression and injury remains relatively unknown.²⁰

Within the geopolitical context of Greater China, scholars such as the author duo Nafei Ding and Jiepeng Liu (2005), and Lin Song (2021) echo Boellstorff’s theorization of heterosexism with an added emphasis on the disciplinary role of family kinship at the center of the “power mechanism in regulating sexualities in Chinese culture.”²¹ They delineate a peculiar kind of disciplinary model whose regulatory effects upon queer people are articulated through what Ding and Liu term “the politics of reticence,” defined as a disciplinary and rhetorical force based on coerced and volunteered silence.²² The goal of “the politics of reticence” is less about foregrounding the centrality of heteronormativity in the public consciousness than to “sustain the notion of an untouched, unsullied, harmonious whole” in which queerness appears as something outlandish, unthinkable, and impossible.²³ Following Ding and Liu, I argue that it is this sense of unintelligibility that conditions and perpetuates Pak and Hoi’s repressive experience, defined by a suspended state of in-betweenness that lacks the necessary vocabularies to articulate its own predicament or to name the working of the power that regulates it. By “unintelligibility,” I refer to the concept of intelligibility introduced in Judith Butler’s canonic work *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler considers intelligibility, particularly gender intelligibility, as the result of a given subject’s articulation and maintenance of “relations of coherence among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.”²⁴ Conversely, to be unintelligible means occupying a set of incoherent and disarticulated relations that fall out of the relational model of heteronormativity. Butler maintains that intelligibility has been systematically, albeit also begrudgingly, distributed by the regime of heteronormativity to both heterosexuality and non-normative sexualities to render legible the sexual hierarchy between them. She contends that “for heterosexuality to remain intact as a distinct

social form, it requires an intelligible concept of homosexuality and also requires the prohibition of that conception in rendering it culturally intelligible.”²⁵ It is Butler’s emphasis on heteronormativity’s perversely parasitical dependence upon the intelligibility of queer sexualities that I wish to complicate and expand on through what I term “the performance of hetero-normality.”

If the Butlerian notion of heteronormativity requires queerness to be sufficiently (although not fully) intelligible to lend legibility to the structure of sexual hierarchy as its apparent abject, then *Suk Suk* seems to present a different mode of sexual governance that endeavors to disavow queer intelligibility *completely*. As the film makes clear, not only do Pak and Hoi actively seek to make their queer identities unintelligible to their families, but the latter are also complicit in this endeavor. On several occasions, Yeung intimates to the audience that Pak’s wife and Hoi’s son are suspicious, if not fully aware, of their queer identities, yet their reaction to the secrecy is not direct confrontation but feigned ignorance. In this light, the kind of heteronormativity depicted in *Suk Suk*—in the form of family and kinship institution—appears to actively produce and endorse the cultivation of queer unintelligibility, which takes queer praxis and desire as external, irrelevant, and inconceivable to the actuality of everyday life. What is at stake in Pak and Hoi’s self-reticence and their family’s pretended unknowingness has thus less to do with upholding “the assemblage of norms,” as Butler contends, but with the day-to-day performance of a surficial normalcy where, as Ding and Liu articulates, “nothing as it should be has been changed or disturbed; at least not on the surface.”²⁶

For this reason, I turn to the term ‘heteronormality’ to highlight the temporal and actant dimension of queer unintelligibility as an enduring process that actively sustains what Adorno calls “the smooth façade of everyday life.”²⁷ In other words, I consider the unintelligibility of queerness as both a condition of time and an act of performative non-utterance. In *How to Do Things with Words*, the British philosopher J.L. Austin coined the concept of “performative utterance,” which describes words that, in being spoken, also fulfill the function of deeds. Austin maintains that certain utterances, such as “I bet,” “I name,” and “I do,” fulfill not only a descriptive but also performative function; in saying “I do,” one not only describes the action but also commit the act.²⁸ My framing of “non-utterance” makes a queering adjustment to Austin’s concept to mean the performativity of silence. That is, some expressions and confessions, in being withheld indefinitely, also act as deeds. In *Suk Suk*, it is precisely this non-utterance of queerness that is being performed carefully and ceaselessly by Pak and Hoi in order to sustain the surface normalcy so essential for the stability of their family unit.

Suk Suk’s careful tracking of Pak and Hoi’s everyday life brings to relief the taken-for-granted minor gestures they perform in order to *act out* this façade of normality. Upon becoming friends, Pak offered a ride to Hoi to bring him home, for which Hoi sent a thank you note via

text later that day. This trivial gesture of gratitude will later prove to be an act of transgression. Moments before Pak receives Hoi's message, we see him sitting in the living room watching TV while his wife (Patra Au), Ching, attends to house chores in a separate room. The door frame in the middle divides the screen into three unequal sections, Ching occupying the middle part and Pak on the right side. The spatial arrangement suggests the uneasy proximity and simultaneous estrangement between Pak and Ching, who is constantly irked by her husband's seeming antipathy towards familial matters. However, despite implying certain dissonance in Pak and his wife's relationship, this sequence—with its fixed camera and rigid spatial framing—also alludes to a certain stability of their marital status in that it presents itself as a recurrent event in an imperfect but “good enough” marriage. Here, I am transposing Berlant's description of “good enough” sex to describe the spousal relationship between Pak and his wife as something “ordinary” that “stays around as the possible source of future repetition.”²⁹ Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine the scene as part of the everyday routine of Pak and his wife, which has been reproduced repeatedly for decades. The sequence is suddenly interrupted by a not-so-discrete notification sound from Pak's phone triggered by Hoi's message, at which moment the camera pans to Ching (still framed by the door), who slows down the chore, slightly raising her eyes while keeping still her overall bodily posture. In this regard, the thank-you message from Hoi constitutes a queer wrinkle that creases the surface of heteronormality, a point of disarticulation that brings the running of domestic temporality to a halt as well as alerts the audience about Ching's suspicion of her husband's queer sexuality and her complicity in its concealment. Pak puts the phone back on the table, maintaining an air of nonchalance, then heads towards the door, informing his wife that he needs to go out and buy something. Following this sequence, the camera cuts to Pak walking to an empty sidewalk, where he calls back Hoi in an agitated voice, asking him not to contact him at night. Hoi responds apologetically and rushes to end the call upon the return of his son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter.

The sequence concludes with Hoi and Pak returning to perform their familial roles. What transpires in this scene is the illustration of the rapidity and decisiveness with which the two men manages the unintelligibility of their queerness when it threatens to spoil the façade of normality that kinship-based heteronormativity upholds. In adlibbing at the drop of a hat, a complex choreography of pretending the irrelevancy of the text, making up an excuse to exit the room, and leaving the house sufficiently far enough before contacting Hoi, Pak's performance reveals the intense physical and psychological labor invested in the non-action of compartmentalizing his queer identity. This sequence also makes explicit Pak's epistemological mastery of queerness's public perception and its accordant management—what behaviors might be perceived as sufficiently suspicious for a married man, where to contact a queer fellow, and how to act in

the face of imminent exposure. To paraphrase Sarah Ahmed's description of how she moves as a lesbian in a straight world, each movement, speech, and slice of silence done by Pak in upholding heteronormality are "not out of habit, but out of implicit knowledge."³⁰ To consider Pak's practice of self-reticence as a form of labor and knowledge, then, is to address his self-silencing as work, and in particular, coerced work to *care about and for* the harmony of his family and the social body at large. This labor of care, however, tends to be underrepresented in queer Asian films precisely because it exists on the brink of unintelligibility. In their book on care theories (2021), Estelle Ferrarese and Steven Corcoran assert that while care "ensures the everyday functioning of the world,"³¹ it is also perceived as "small nothings: ordinary gestures whose importance comes to light when lacking."³² When considering the minor endeavors of Pak and Hoi through Ferrarese and Corcoran's theorization of the unintelligibility of care, one begins to see the importance of the two men's small-nothing gestures beyond their perceived passivity, questioning whether "passivity" constitutes a mismatched framework of critique for understanding the quietude of gay elders like Pak and Hoi. As Berlant puts it in commenting on the difficulty of co-existence, a state of being aptly descriptive of Pak and his family, "When it comes to living in proximity, there is no such thing as passivity."³³ In the case of *Suk Suk's* two protagonists, what comes across as non-action, static, and political languidness is, in fact, unrecognized labor of care that upholds the unity of the family structure and, consequently, the façade of heteronormality.

While queer elders like Pak and Hoi are often forced to care for the wholeness of social and familial harmony, there are spaces of respite where care is practiced as a reparative method for queer people to compensate for their lack of proper social intelligibility. Halfway through the film, as Hoi and Pak's relationship deepens, Hoi brings Pak to a local sauna house. The sequence opens with a close shot of an aquarium, which is a subtle reference to the nature of the sauna as a queer space where gay men come to "fish" (meaning cruising in queer Cantonese slang). Yeung's camera then follows Hoi and Pak wading through a dimly lit hallway flanked by young and old bodies; the tracking shot captures a web of gazes projected from the sauna patrons, some of whom look at Pak and Hoi with an air of interest, the others an expression of nonchalance. Finally, Hoi and Pak arrive at a dark room where their relationship reaches carnal consummation. However, the significance of this sequence extends beyond this sexual encounter, culminating in the sauna's least erotic quarter—the dining room. The *mise-en-scene* of this sequence is staged around an elongated table along which the space is arranged in a symmetrical composition, with Pak occupying the top central position and Hoi on his right. Here, the matrix of gazes that underpins the erotic atmosphere of the previous sequence is replaced by a confluence of sound and smell emanating from the sauna patrons' chitchating, gossiping, bantering, and the delicious food they joyously share. The camera pans to each patron,

revealing the content of their conversation: One man cautions the other about his gout and urges him to seek remedies in traditional Chinese herbs. Another playfully admonishes a friend about his gambling habit. Against the somber dining room, Yeung captures something bright in the seemingly mundane exchange between the queer men; that is, an alternative, underground system of queer care that brings the socially abjectified queer people together as intelligible subjects. In this regard, the sauna can be understood as an unintelligible space beneath the city's façade of heteronormality that provides queer people a moment of respite from their role of caretaker and becomes, momentarily, the cared subject.

In this section, I have argued that the everyday heteronormality and the small-nothing gesture of care practiced by queer people come into being in and through each other. *Suk Suk* places this constituent proximity within the personal life of queer elders, bringing to relief an alternative form of queer struggle rooted in non-representability, non-articulation, and the minor. I have discussed the film's representation of queer repression at the level of conflictual selfhood and offer up the sauna as a queer space of mutual care. In what follows, I continue this line of analysis on space to examine how Hong Kong's neoliberal postcoloniality participates in perpetuating Pak and Hoi's coerced performance of heteronormality and, consequently, their precarious social position.

Queer Precarity in Hong Kong: Space of Freedom, Space of Marginalization

The first clue about Pak's same-sex desire given to the audience comes with the depiction of that queer space *par excellence* in gay cultures, the public bathroom. We witness Pak, after performing the routine of cleaning his taxi, entering a public bathroom located in a discreet alleyway, which, as the film soon reveals, is attached to another Mecca of queer sociality, a cruising park. Pak steps into the smooth interior of the bathroom clad with white and blue tiles, whose plasticity constitutes a material foreshadowing of what Laud Humphreys calls "impersonal sex" (1975) that Pak seeks.³⁴ We then follow Pak to a urinal, next to which another man, slightly shorter and younger than Pak, is in the process of discharging himself. What ensues on the part of Pak is a series of subtle communicative performances in almost perfect re-iteration of the "non-coercive and noncommittal special ritual of tearoom."³⁵ By positioning himself next to a fellow bathroom user, Pak makes an intentional somatic movement that suggests, with the utmost delicacy, his ulterior intention for sexual interaction. Pak then tilts his head towards the man next to him, again with an almost imperceptible motion followed by a slight dipping of his gaze towards the lower region of his neighbor. In the words of Humphreys, Pak has, by means of his bodily movements, drafted up a contract for sexual interaction and proposed "the terms of

the forth-coming sexual exchange and the expression of mutual consent.”³⁶ However, the recipient of this contract does not reciprocate the offer. Visibly startled by Pak, the man zips up and beetles off immediately.

This sequence displays Pak’s queer desire and praxis as conditioned by and emerging from the intersection of locality and modernity. The fact that Pak’s bodily movements conform to “the patterns of collective action” surveyed in Humphrey’s observation of cruising gay men in America suggests a certain coincidence of cultural permeation.³⁷ That the spacious bathroom with wall-mounted urinals belongs to an imported modern spatial typology suggests the embedded modernity in the local act of cruising. My point is not to use these similarities to prove what Dennis Altman considers “the emergence of a Western-style politicized homosexuality in Asia.”³⁸ Such a view of queer universalism with an original story in the West has been convincingly criticized by scholars such as Lisa Rofel, Petrus Liu, and David Eng for its generalizing assumption of a “different sex/gender orders in Asia on a continuum from tradition to modernity.”³⁹ Instead, I wish to draw attention to the entanglement of global and local queer cultures at the level of everyday life in urban spaces that transforms the landscape of everyday life into a terrain of mixed opportunities and precarities. After all, the built environment, even as trivial as a public bathroom, is the result of a series of decisions adjudicated by a plethora of parties of interest, ranging from the local government of Hong Kong, the PRC, to the global neoliberal capitalist market. Space, in this regard, functions as an embodied and material environment where various values and ideologies of modernity and tradition encounter each other in aligned and contradictory forms.

In this section, I continue the previous analysis of heteronormality’s arresting effects on the queer body by analyzing the way queer spaces in Hong Kong receive and reject Pak and Hoi. This investigation examines the ambivalent relationship between queer people and the hybridizing encounter between modernity and tradition. Such ambivalence is created via *Suk Suk*’s allegorical juxtaposition of urban space and the queer bodies of Pak and Hoi. An example of this can be seen in the film’s emotional denouement, where Pak and Hoi are confronted by the utter incompatibility between their family duties and queer desire. The two men meet at the waterfront of Sham Chun River, the natural landmark that separates Hong Kong from mainland China. In this scene, we witness a distraught Pak, whose habitual presentation of stoicism is belied by an unusual burst of loquacity with which he reminisces his earlier life as a refugee fleeing from mainland China. As he recounts his younger years, Pak turns to Hoi and confesses: “I am lucky. I came to Hong Kong with nothing. Now I have a family and a home. I have no regrets.” Pak’s confession betrays a certain perverse irony in that a gay man is professing his contentment for having led a successful traditional life to his same-sex lover, whom he has to make the mournful decision to leave behind.

Nothing but the urban landscape bears witness to this sorrowful moment. Framed by the landscape of Sham Chun River's roaring water and the protruding skyline, the urban mise-en-scene encapsulates the particular historical juncture between modernity and tradition in which Hong Kong is situated. Pak and Hoi's queerness operates as an expressive medium of their uneasy relationship with the aftermath of the momentous transference of Hong Kong's territorial sovereignty from British colonialism to the PRC government. The dissolution of Pak and Hoi's relationship further underscores the indifference and inability of this conflated temporality to alleviate the precarity of queer people: neither the liberatory ideologies of modern humanism nor the homophilic tolerance of Chinese tradition can afford a viable pathway forward for queer people like Pak and Hoi, who remains ensnared by the coerced performance of heteronormality. Looming on the other side of the Sham Chun River, the skyscrapers operate as the architectural embodiment of Hong Kong's now appended role to mainland China as its special economic zone and liaison to the increasingly globalized world. Yet the myriads of opportunities offered by China's economic reformation, in which Hong Kong features as a critical part, have little to afford two gay men longing for intimacy. The disposability of queer desire is dramatized by the contrast between the dwarfed figures of Pak and Hoi and the overwhelming height of the towering skyscrapers and the weighty postsocialist Chinese history reflected in their gleaming facades. Here both traditions, as embodied in Pak's confession, and modernity, as manifested through the skyscrapers, remain silent to and complicit in the displacement of queer affect and intimacy. Against the enduring landscape of Shum Chun River and the shimmering towers, a farewell was bid, and life continues.

The peripheral position queerness occupies in relation to modernity and tradition is further reflected in the ambivalent way urban spaces receive the aging queer population represented by Pak and Hoi. Take the park scene where Pak and Hoi first met, for example, which occurs immediately after Pak's unsuccessful cruising in the public bathroom. There is a certain inevitability that the two men's initiative *tete-a-tete* occurred in a park, as historically, this particular locale has served as such a key site for queer sociality across various cultures that its name has become synonymous with cruising.⁴⁰ As an urban device first imported to Qing China in the late nineteenth century via the administration of the Shanghai International Settlement, the park introduced a new kind of spatiality and form of public life that had an enduring effect on the urban formation of queer sociality.⁴¹ In modern-day China, the park emerges as a prominent ground for studying the spatial politics of minoritarian sexualities. In his ethnographic study of the homosexual community at the People's Park in Guang Dong, Junxi Qian describes the site as "a site of emancipation" that "undermines and subverts hegemonic sexual norms and consolidates an unruly space in which people with same-sex desire can build up both homosocial and homoerotic connections."⁴² In

Suk Suk, Yeung depicts a similaremancipatory spatiality through his application of particular cinematic aesthetics and camera work. Captured through a full shot, the sequence at the park places Pak and Hoi in a verdant vastness saturated with rank and garrulous foliage, the capacious spatiality of which emerges as an allegory for the air of freedom the two men momentarily breathe.

At the same time, the hopefulness of this holding environment is disrupted by repeated shots of nameless gay elders Yeung captures in a moment of stillness, whose lonesomeness is accentuated by the largess of the surrounding space.⁴³ In this conjunction, queerness runs into its contrapuntal company, aging. While queerness and aging represent two intertwined marginalities, they do not always exist in complementary terms. As Kong observes in his study of Hong Kong gay men's usage of spaces, agism tends to be a major social factor that gatekeeps gay elders from entering certain gay-friendly or -exclusive venues.⁴⁴ While infra-discrimination within LGBTQ communities also occurs in other cultural quarters, Kong contends that the exclusionary policies of Hong Kong's localized queer spaces demonstrate particularly a "hierarchy of queer identities and places" that intersects with cultural citizenships. Kong observes that this hierarchy positions gay men of transnational status on top, local-born gay men in the middle, and migrant gay men at the bottom.⁴⁵ Of course, this stratification is further organized along other sociocultural and political axes, but the citizenship model already suggests that Pak's choice to go to the park is perhaps a mixture of voluntarism and diminished urban mobility due to his migrant working-class status. Viewed in this light, the park sequence captures the paradoxical concurrency of freedom and displacement—that is, the park acts both as a sanctuary for unruly desires *and* a camp for undesired aging bodies. This duality gestures towards the larger sociocultural context saturated with hierarchical categories such as age, class, and bodily physics that undermine one's mobility through space. In this regard, the absence of gay bars in *Suk Suk* emerges as a subtle remark on the limited class, economic, and social mobility of Pak, Hoi, and queer elders alike, whose access to highly commercialized neoliberal queer spaces is always already foreclosed. In attending to the ordinary places where queer elders go about their everyday life, *Suk Suk* thus posits a tender critique of the novel forms of injuries, deficiencies, trappings, and displacements wrought by Hong Kong's postcolonial condition, which exist not only in the psychic conflicts of selfhoods, as I previously argued, but also in material and spatial forms, as *Suk Suk*'s portrayal of urban spaces makes explicit.

Conclusion

In his interview with the film magazine *Junkee* (2021), Yeung was asked about his inspiration behind the creation of *Suk Suk*, to which the director responded with a story from the original oral history:

It was eye-opening, particularly in one story--Travis asked a guy who has been married for many years and had kids if he's had any regrets because he's lived in the closet. And he said, 'No, because I came from China as a refugee to Hong Kong. I had nothing when I first arrived and now after 40 years, I have a wife. Every night when I go home, she makes dinner for me. At the end of the month, my kids give me a monthly allowance. From nothing, I became this person with a family, I own my own apartment. I am a success story, I have no regrets.' I thought that was just such an interesting way of seeing it, because I grew up in the West [where] we believe coming out is very important—and if you don't, then your life is almost like a sham. But who are we to judge him?⁴⁶

The gay man in this story appears to be the person on which Pak is based, as evidenced by the striking similarity between their life stories. But more importantly, the way this older gay man regards his closeted status with utter pride functions as an emotive clue for understanding the defining difference between *Suk Suk* and queer films modeled after the liberatory post-Stonewall narrative. Indeed, Yeung's film offers an alternative model for articulating and understanding the conditions of queer displacement, marginalization, and dispossession that eludes the interpretive model of the Western closet. These conditions, as I have argued above, regulate queer people not by threatening them with homophobic violence but by subtly coercing them into a perpetuated practice of non-articulation. In doing so, the film reveals queer repression in a minor form shaped by the pull of normality emanating from everyday life without underrepresenting its intensity. Rather than dismissing its gay protagonists' closeted status as political passivity, *Suk Suk* urges us to assume a more reparative posture of interpretation that attends to the tremendous psychological and physical labor they invest in maintaining the uneasy equilibrium between their family and queer selfhoods. Lastly, *Suk Suk* extends the metaphoric spatiality of the closet to the urban landscape. In showing how Pak and Hoi navigate the various queer spaces in Hong Kong, *Suk Suk* reveals the inextricable relationship between queerness, space, cultural citizenship, age, and the plethora of hierarchical categories that constitute the limits of the closet.

While *Suk Suk* acknowledges the fundamental distinction between what it means to keep one's queer identity a secret in Hong Kong and Anglo-American societies, it also recognizes that across different queer cultures, there exists a certain affinity in the shared intensity of queer

repression and struggle for belonging. This recognition constitutes a note of hopefulness—a faint one, to be sure—manifesting through a hypothetical gay nursing home proposed by the social worker from the NGO for gay elders, of which Hoi is a member. The social worker describes it as a place “where you (the gay elders) can be yourself, where you are among kindred spirits. Wouldn’t you be a lot happier?” The nursing home emerges from this utopian imagination as a post-closet space championed by Anglo-American queer politics, yet at the same time, its claim to happiness as a universally desirous affect shows certain continuity across queer cultures. This proposal was rejected by Hoi due to his concern that his enrollment into the facility would expose his queer identity, thereby causing irrevocable damage to his son’s family. Nevertheless, we do see Hoi’s queer comrades—those who live a life of singlehood and are therefore less bound by the shackle of kinship—take up the task of advocating for the nursing home at the city council meeting. It remains elusive to which extent the film bends towards hope or tragedy, and perhaps this is Yeung’s point: in refraining from prescribing a destination to Pak and Hoi, the film makes every slice of their experience an intense articulation of what it means to be queer in one’s twilight years.

Notes

1. *Suk Suk*, dir. Ray Yeung (New Voice Film Production, 2019).
2. See *Yellow Fever*, dir. Ray Yeung, 1998. *Cut Sleeve Boys*, dir. Ray Yeung, 2006. In both films, the protagonists are diasporic Chinese living abroad and entangled in cross-racial relationships.
3. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 25.
4. Rey Chow, "Between Colonizers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* vol. 2, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 158.
5. Ibid.
6. Ip Iam-chong, "The Specters of Marginality and Hybridity," *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (April 1, 1998): 57.
7. Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich, eds., *Queer Sinophone Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 4.
8. Helen Hok-Sze Leung, *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong* (UBC Press, 2009), 4.
9. Ibid., 3.
10. Ibid., 4.
11. Lin Song, "Straightly Chinese: The Emergence of Systemic Homophobia in China," in *Contesting Chineseness*, edited by CY Hoom and YK Chan (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 307.
12. Travis S.K. Kong, *Oral Histories of Older Gay Men in Hong Kong: Unspoken but Unforgotten* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2019), 2.
13. Chris Berry, "Asian Values, Family Values," *Journal of Homosexuality* 40, no. 3–4 (May 21, 2001): 213.
14. Ibid., 217.
15. Alvin K. Wong, "Postcoloniality—Postcoloniality beyond China-Centrism: Queer Sinophone Transnationalism in Hong Kong Cinema," in *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies*, edited by Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020), 62.
16. Lauren Gail Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 8.
17. See David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 35. Halperin, echoing Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, presents us with one key characterization of heteronormative discourses underscored by "a claim to a superior knowingness about sexual matters, a knowingness... [that] is actually a form of ignorance." Halperin, 35. Together with Sedgwick, Halperin thus bases the mechanism of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and heterocentrism, along with their various homophobic effects and convictions, on a matter of epistemology. What I propose here is an examination of the same troubled power dynamic via not the epistemological category of knowledge but the performance of that knowledge (as a kind of feigned or genuine ignorance/unknowingness) in and through everyday life as an aesthetic and temporal experience, hence my proposal to apply the suffix "-normality."
18. Gail Mason, *The Spectacle of Violence: Homophobia, Gender and Knowledge*

(London, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 84-85.

19. Tom Boellstorff, *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia* (Duke University Press, 2007), 168.

20. *Ibid.*, 169.

21. Song, "Straightly Chinese: The Emergence of Systemic Homophobia in China," 313.

22. Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei, "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* volume 6, no. 1 (March 2005): 33.

23. *Ibid.*, 49.

24. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 23.

25. *Ibid.*, 98.

26. Liu and Ding, "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics," 49.

27. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 99.

28. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 5-6.

29. Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 39

30. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 87.

31. Estelle Ferrarese and Steven Corcoran, *The Fragility of Concern for Others: Adorno and the Ethics of Care* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 28.

32. *Ibid.*, 18. By "small nothingness," Ferrarese and Corcoran refer to Pascale Molinier's argument on the role the service of care provided in a home for retirees: "Pascale Molinier highlights the role played in the care provided in a retirement home by so-called small nothings: ordinary gestures whose importance comes to light when lacking, and which take effect thanks to the sensitive knowledge possessed by carers of their patients in their singularity—a gesture cannot be distinguished from the particular attention that gives it its meaning."

33. Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 9.

34. Humphreys describes impersonal sex as "a normative response to the demand for privacy without involvement, a rule that has been developed and taught." See Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 1975), 14.

35. *Ibid.*, 60.

36. *Ibid.*, 66.

37. *Ibid.*, 59-80. Humphery breaks down the "pattern of collective actions" into the following procedural steps: approaching, positioning, signaling, maneuvering, contracting, foreplay, the payoff, and clearing the field.

38. Dennis Altman, "Global Gaze/Global Gays," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (May 1, 1997): 417.

39. Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 90. Also see Eng's critique of the "grander tale of enlightened neoliberal progress" that considers mainland China as playing a catch-up game with Western modernity in David L. Eng, "The Queer Space

of China: Expressive Desire in Stanley Kwan's Lan Yu," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* volume 18, no. 2 (2010), 466-469. Also see Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2015), 21-22.

40. There is an extensive body of literature from queer urban history and cultural geography illustrating the important role public parks play in cultivating and sustaining queer sociality. See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2020); and David Higgs, *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories since 1600* (London: Routledge, 1999). It needs to be remarked that a considerable portion of this literature pertains to Western metropolitan cities. In comparison, considerably less work has been done with regard to cities and rural areas outside Anglo-American culture. For non-Western queer space and urban history studies, see Andrew Tucker, *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town* (Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell Press, 2009). Wei Wei, *Going Public: The Emergence and Transformation of Contemporary Tongzhi Space in Chengdu* (Shanghai: Sanlian Press, 2012). Denise Tse-Shang Tang, *Conditional Spaces: Hong Kong Lesbian Desires and Everyday Life* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012).

41. Zhen Lin, *Gongyuan Beijing: Wenhua Shengchan Yu Wenxue Xiangxiang (1860-1937)* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2022), 10-11.

42. Junxi Qian, "Beyond Heteronormativity? Gay Cruising, Closeted Experiences and Self-Disciplining Subject in People's Park, Guangzhou," *Urban Geography* volume 38, no. 5 (May 28, 2017): 780.

43. While the film does not give explicit indication that these anonymous men are gay, I argue that given that first, the sequence was shot at Kowloon Park, a well-known cruising site in Hong Kong, and second, Kowloon Park was explicitly referred to as a queer space by Kong in the original book, it is reasonable to assume that Yeung is making a subtle implication of their queer sexuality in this sequence. See Kong, *Oral Histories of Older Gay Men in Hong Kong*, 18.

44. Travis SK Kong, "A Fading Tongzhi Heterotopia: Hong Kong Older Gay Men's Use of Spaces," *Sexualities* volume 15, no. 8 (December 1, 2012): 908-909.

45. Ibid.

46. Interview excerpt from "Who Are We To Judge?": Ray Yeung On The Closeted Older Men Who Inspired 'Suk Suk,' February 26, 2021, <https://junkee.com/ray-yeung-suk-suk-interview-twilight-kiss/288826>.

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