Title
Vanguards of Modernity: David Eng Considers the Queer Space of Stanley Kwan's Lan Yu

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On November 5, David L. Eng, Professor of English, Comparative Literature and Asian American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, gave his audience a glimpse of his fascinating new project entitled “The Queer Space of China” in the Center for the Study of Women’s Faculty Curator Series on “The Color of LGBT: Race in Sexuality.” The timing of the talk was doubly relevant, arriving on the eve of postmodern China’s emergent status as nascent world power and coming just after the passing of California’s hotly debated Proposition 8, a ballot measure that eliminated gay marriage in the state. Exploring the stakes underlying our so-called “colorblind moment,” Eng argued for a (re)consideration of gay and lesbian identity in Chinese society as a uniquely modern, and potentially reparative, confrontation with the totalitarian nation-state.

Drawing on some of his previous work on Chinese film and queerness, such as “Queer Diasporas/Psychic Diasporas: Space and the World of Wong Kar-Wai” (2002), Eng reframed questions of queer identity on a global scale, considering the “discourse of development” underwriting much of modern Chinese society, seen most saliently in the recent Beijing Olympics. Suggesting that homosexuality had the opportunity to create a “set of discrepant modernities,” not simply identities, Eng brought his work in conversation with Lisa Rofel’s recent monograph, Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture (Duke, 2007), in which Rofel considers the role of sexual, material, and affective desires out of which neoliberal Chinese subjectivities have been borne. Eng expanded this consideration in his talk by focusing on the intertwinement of public and private space in China since the
Contextualizing Kwan among a number of Hong Kong filmmakers in the 1980s and 1990s who considered the role of sexual and national subjects and struggled with the trauma of colonization and the recent British handover of Hong Kong back to the Chinese, Eng suggested that Kwan’s film offered the opportunity to understand expressive desire, which “speaks as much as it is spoken.” Showcasing several clips in which Lan Yu, a student in architecture, and Chen Handong, a capitalist businessman in Beijing, are reunited after long absences, Eng revealed the power of public and private space in determining appropriate forms of gay desire. One scene demonstrated the bringing together of “impossible spaces,” that of the domestic and the capitalistic, through the use of mirrors, windows, and camera angles. Such scenes, suggested Eng, allow for the presentation of a *discrepant* modernity in space and time, a critical tool for evaluating non-normative sexual identities while still keeping historical continuities and irruptions in tension. This impossible, paradoxical space of reunion between the two men captures the disappearance of public space, relocated and displaced onto the private space of affect. The emotionally explosive scenes between Lan Yu and Handong suggest the multiplicity of agonies and desires which ultimately forge the modern Chinese Cultural Revolution, noting that a flurry of recent neoliberal reforms have struggled to reinstate the boundaries between public and private space, thus creating the opportunity for individual desire on the intimate level of “home life,” strongly divided from the space of labor.

Such questions led Eng to his primary object of study, *Lan Yu*, the 2001 film by Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan. A dark and tortured study of the tumultuous relationship between two gay Chinese men around the time of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, Eng used the provocative film to ask, “How are gay and lesbian Chinese specifically able to express individual desire,” and in doing so, become unique “vanguards of modernity”? Pointing to a number of recent studies on the role of affect and subject formation in China, Eng noted that Chinese citizens seem to engage in material desire—in the form of consumerism—as a way to demonstrate their cosmopolitan and (trans)national savvy. Transitioning from material to sexual desire, according to Eng, makes gay and lesbian identity in China an exemplary subject of capitalism, in which forms of desire, consumption, and ownership are considered uniquely modern and Western. The translation of this “new language” of sexuality, which mediates between the public and private Chinese spheres, was Eng’s purpose in considering the role of space in *Lan Yu*.

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subjectivity; the film’s moral, Eng suggested, was a type of “parable of renewed enlightenment,” for which the centering of gay desire, rather than its marginalization, is crucial.

Eng was quick to point out that the purpose of such films is not, however, a defense of homosexuality. It is a rethinking of the symbolic positioning of gay men, who “rather than representing perversion…are leading the way” for modern China; rather than an “affirmation or recognition of sexual identities, love, legal rights,” Chinese society has understood gay identity as part of the much larger movement of the unfolding of what Eng called “the political horizon of becoming” which has characterized Chinese development in the last few decades. By situating Chinese progress in terms of liberal notions of individuality, Chinese gay subjects seemed to be the final breakdown of the trauma of the “subject-in-waiting” that Western imperialism had rendered all Chinese; instead, they became the “harbinger of a new [type of] humanity.”

The competing socialist and capitalist models of modernity which Eng sees as converging on the site of the neoliberal subject are not without their difficulties, however. Citing the “overdetermined” character of Lan Yu as “the elusive political form to which expressive desire points”—the country bumpkin who refuses the circulation of all commodities, including his own sexualized body—Eng expressed the need for a new vocabulary which extends beyond “old/modern” and “rural/urban,” binaries which fail to adequately capture the nuances of this desire. Lan Yu’s eventual death was, for Eng, the revelation of the self-destructive drive emerging from the tension between affect and space, between the emotional excess that simultaneously represents modernity and homosexual identity. Rather than simply hailing queer identity as the harbinger of progress, Eng concluded his provocative presentation by suggesting that the formal problem of space and time needed to be considered alongside political economies in China before we can truly understand the complexity of its project of development.

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