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Travelling conversations: cross-cultural collaboration and the globalization of sexuality studies

Journal:	<i>SEXUALITIES</i>
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Keywords:	Colonialism, western theoretical hegemony, Asia, Hong Kong, globalizing sexuality studies
Abstract:	In this short article we draw on our personal experience as sexuality scholars to consider what is at stake in attempting to globalize sexuality studies. In so doing we reflect on what we have learnt from collaborating across cultures and discuss some of the barriers to correcting the western/northern dominance of this and other fields, from western theoretical hegemony to the constraints of working within authoritarian regimes. We also suggest some possible ways forward, while recognising that these represent only a very limited beginning given the challenges we face.

Travelling conversations: cross-cultural collaboration and the globalization of sexuality studies

We write as long term collaborators from different parts of the world, brought together by our engagement with the field of sexuality studies and the journal *Sexualities*. Through our collaboration, we have thought a great deal about sexuality in diverse cultural contexts and the challenges of globalizing studies of sexuality. We met in 2005 at a conference on heteronormativity in Trondheim at a key moment in each of our individual intellectual trajectories. Stevi's work had previously been confined by a western parochial frame of reference but she was beginning to see the limitations of this and also the privileges that her location in the 'West' had afforded her. She had just begun to reach out to scholars from elsewhere, particularly in East Asia, via networks created through her East Asian research students. Sik Ying, coming from Hong Kong, was already aware of the theoretical hegemony of western scholarship and the difficulty of having voices from the global periphery, including her own, heard in what counted as the academic mainstream – the journals and publishing houses controlled largely by the western, and specifically Anglophone, world. The meeting was fortuitous and marked the beginning of our collaboration across continents, working together on sexuality and on intimacy more broadly.

For both of us, in our separate locations, the launching of *Sexualities* in 1998 represented a landmark, creating an outlet for the kinds of research that interested us and place where we could publish. In the UK context, publishing on sexuality had, by that time, become much easier than it was when Stevi began to work in the field in the 1970s. Sik Ying, however, was based in Hong Kong where the study of sexuality was much more marginal. For her the journal was a lifeline, a sign that sexuality was a reputable field as well as somewhere she could place her work. For both of us, however, it was important to have a journal about sexuality firmly grounded in social science and cultural studies. Moreover, at a time when queer theory was represented as the cutting edge of sexuality studies, an interdisciplinary journal that welcomed contributions from other perspectives and published empirical articles on everyday sexual lives was a major advantage. We have always been interested in the everyday, the ways in which sexuality is interwoven with other areas of life, how sexuality is constituted within particular socio-cultural and political contexts and how individuals make sense of their sexuality in those contexts.

Working collaboratively across cultures has broadened our understanding of the complexity of the everyday and sensitised us to the importance of thinking not only about cultural differences but the material socio-economic conditions and political circumstances in which sexual lives are lived. In conducting research in and on Hong Kong and also comparative work across Hong Kong and the UK we have found that sex pops up in all manner of contexts and conversely other aspects of the social are referred to when individuals talk about their sexual choices and desires. For example, Hong Kong men interviewed about their sexual choices often refer to political events and figures when justifying their sexual misdemeanours – such as having extra marital affairs. They may admit that they have

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3 behaved badly but could construct themselves as good enough men when compared with
4 corrupt politicians or property developers. Financial considerations also factored in their
5 sexual choices: cross-border affairs had become a less attractive option once the RMB (the
6 Chinese currency) became much stronger relative to the Hong Kong dollar. As a result the
7 keeping of a second wife (*bao ernai*) in China has now become the preserve of wealthy
8 businessmen where once it had been affordable to the average truck driver. Politics and
9 money, then, may have more of an impact on everyday sexual lives than is commonly
10 acknowledged.
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14 Collaborative working across cultures has also sensitised us to local specificities, leading
15 each of us to question what we take for granted and make our own familiar strange – as when
16 we find we have to explain aspects of our local cultures and conditions to each other. This has
17 also come to the fore in our comparative research on two generations of women in Hong
18 Kong and the UK. Almost accidentally in conducting focus groups with young Hong Kong
19 and British women, we developed a technique we have called cross-cultural data feedback
20 (Jackson, Ho and Na in press). This involved using some of our emergent findings from one
21 location, illustrated with data, as stimulus materials in the other location, enabling Hong
22 Kong women to comment on British women's accounts and vice-versa. Not only did this
23 provoke discussion of and insights into perceptions of cultural differences and similarities,
24 but it also brought into the open everyday assumptions about 'the way things are' in each
25 setting that would otherwise not have been made explicit. For example, the young Hong
26 Kong women gave lively accounts of the way in which their mothers exercised surveillance
27 over their sexual conduct and sought to preserve their virginity. When we shared this
28 discussion with British women they made explicit what had only been implicit in the
29 interviews we had conducted with them – the extent to which pre-marital sexual activity,
30 from girls' mid-teens onward, has become normalized in the UK. This technique also raised
31 issues about material constraints on sexual lives. Young Hong Kong women were astonished
32 to find that many of their British counterparts were able to sleep with boyfriends overnight
33 in the parental home, not only because of differences in morality but because having sufficient
34 private space to make this possible, thus highlighting the small apartments in which most
35 Hong Kong families live in the city with the world's most unaffordable housing (see Jackson
36 and Ho 2014; Jackson Ho and Na, in press).
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44 Attending to local specificities has also prompted us to think critically about the
45 methodological and conceptual choices involved in doing comparative research. In particular
46 it is vital to do comparison symmetrically, not taking 'the west' as the benchmark against
47 which others' sexual mores and practices are evaluated. We should certainly not assume that
48 there is a universal trajectory of 'progress' that all are travelling along with some lagging
49 behind. We should avoid thinking of 'them' and 'us', the all too easy 'othering' of places
50 outside the metropole. In making comparisons and accounting for differences across the
51 world we should not simply attribute such differences to culture or tradition, but also take
52 account of wider social, economic and political conditions through which cultural continuity
53 and change are mediated.
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3 Working in and from a place that was subject to British colonialism has also sensitised us to
4 the need to take account of interconnected histories, to be aware of the ways in which Asian
5 technologies and trade routes contributed to Western modernity (Bhambra 2007) as well as
6 how Western colonialism impacted on Asia. Hong Kong life, including its sexual mores and
7 practices, still bears the marks of British colonialism. Colonialism here, as elsewhere, brought
8 with it Christianity and its associated ideas of sin and imposed laws and prejudices deriving
9 from British cultural traditions upon its Chinese populace. Yet in governing Hong Kong
10 citizens' intimate lives the colonial administration was somewhat contradictory. While
11 introducing colonial laws against homosexuality, which was not partially decriminalized until
12 1991, at the same time the government's policies maintained patriarchal social institutions 'in
13 the name of respecting the social customs and practices of Chinese society'. (Lee 2003: 4).
14 For example, polygyny was not outlawed until 1971. The effect was to ossify patriarchal
15 practices, which had become obsolete in Mainland China and Taiwan, as immutable tradition.
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21 One lasting legacy of the colonial era is, of course, the conceptual and theoretical hegemony
22 of the West, the metropole or the global North. As Raewyn Connell points out, in 'the era of
23 neoliberal globalization, the metropole continues to be the main site of theoretical processing'
24 affecting how scholars the world over do their work, so that the metropole's theoretical
25 hegemony has become 'the normal functioning of this economy of knowledge' (Connell
26 2015: 51). Issues of language and the conceptual possibilities it enables and delimits are part
27 of this. In working together on Cantonese language data, as respectively native English and
28 Cantonese speakers writing for an international audience, we are constantly trying to capture
29 the nuances of expression in a Chinese language and make them intelligible to an
30 Anglophone audience. We then, if we seek to satisfy the reviewers from British or US based
31 journals, must effect further translation into the conceptual language of Euro-American
32 scholarly convention. While the sociological potential of Chinese concepts has long been
33 recognised by some (see, e.g. Qi 2014), for the most part we are constrained by what already
34 counts as an 'appropriate' (i.e. Western) conceptual or theoretical framework.
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39 These issues – material socio-economic contexts, colonial legacies, western conceptual and
40 Anglophone linguistic hegemony – need to be addressed if we are to think of genuinely
41 globalizing the study of sexualities.
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46 **Globalizing sexuality studies and *Sexualities***

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48 The content of *Sexualities* has certainly become more diverse in terms of global coverage
49 than it was at the beginning. At the start this was perhaps not even a priority. It was a time
50 when few western scholars began to think outside the confines of their own cultural comfort
51 zones. Although 'the globalization of sexualities' was listed among the issues to be covered
52 in Ken Plummer's introduction to the first issue, the extent to which its global content was
53 envisaged was somewhat circumscribed. The journal was to be 'international in scope,
54 though with an emphasis on English-speaking cultures' (Plummer 1998: 5). This has
55 gradually changed with the increasing awareness of the problems of western theoretical
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3 hegemony and the emergence of critical perspectives from the global South. Now the
4 journal's aspirations are to be far more inclusive of work from beyond the west. This was
5 evident in Plummer's 'farewell' editorial in which he notes that, despite these worthy aims
6 'the centre of the journal is still undoubtedly the North and the West – and primarily the UK
7 and the USA' (2013: 761). He goes on to discuss the challenges of 'trying to go global'
8 given the global dominance of western traditions of thought. This is not a problem unique to
9 sexuality studies or to this journal, but bedevils social and cultural analysis across a wide
10 range of fields.
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14 The problems are not easy to resolve and even the terminology is tricky. We have been
15 referring to 'the west', not as a geographical location but to denote the Eurocentric world,
16 those parts of the world whose dominant population is of European origin.. For us the
17 language of Global North and Global South is problematic – where do the rich East Asian
18 nations/territories fit? They are certainly not part of the South if that is envisaged as the poor
19 world, but they are still located as peripheral to the metropole even if some of their
20 universities are in the top tier of the world rankings. These terminological issues aside, where
21 do we begin? We would like to offer some suggestions, deriving from our own experience,
22 while recognising their limitations.
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26 Making an effort to publish more work from outside the metropole is a start – and this effort
27 is already being made by this and some other journals. A more inclusive approach might be
28 enhanced by encouraging the submission of short pieces about current events, issues and
29 campaigns around sexuality from around the world. This could increase international
30 coverage, enable those who do not yet have the confidence to submit full articles to
31 contribute and make readers more aware of global issues. Knowing more about what goes on
32 elsewhere is a first step, but an additive approach is not enough: it will not dislodge the
33 theoretical hegemony of the metropole. There is a need for dialogue across different regions
34 of the world that includes questioning the knowledge claims made by western scholars. Such
35 a dialogue would require readers of and authors for this journal (and others) to be open to
36 views from elsewhere and this, we know, is a struggle. We cannot even begin if alternative
37 perspectives from beyond the metropole are not published or, in the effort to be published,
38 they are expected to defer to western preoccupations.
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44 As many authors before us have noted (see Connell 2015; Bhambra and Santos 2017), there
45 is a profound asymmetry between theory and research generated from the 'West' or the
46 metropole and that generated elsewhere. Scholars from outside the metropole are obliged to
47 reference western work while much less citation occurs in the opposite direction. Western
48 writers are expected only to know about their own privileged part of the world and are
49 allowed to be unreflexively parochial, whereas scholars from elsewhere, if they want to see
50 their work published, must know and cite the western literature in addition to that on their
51 own countries/regions and therefore face an additional burden. They are also frequently asked
52 by reviewers to justify writing about 'elsewhere', as we have been, very recently, by a
53 reviewer for a journal that has an explicit pro-diversity policy. Such demands are rarely made
54 of researchers working on western societies.
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3 Journal editors are caught between a rock and a hard place in this respect. If they publish
4 work that is not seen as engaging with ‘appropriate’ (usually western) academic traditions,
5 that work will be judged as substandard, which will threaten the academic standing of the
6 journal. Certainly we would not want to see *Sexualities* publishing weak work, but there are
7 steps that could be taken to encourage greater awareness of the world outside the metropole
8 and where this journal might take the lead. This could begin through the review process,
9 whereby reviewers are encouraged to suspend some of the assumptions they routinely make.
10 They could, for example, not automatically assume that it is necessary to cite the western
11 literature in the field unless it is directly relevant to the argument being made in the paper.
12 This is not easily accomplished. Reviewers, ourselves included, are apt to read articles they
13 are sent through their own frames of reference. Obviously it helps to have reviewers from
14 appropriate regions of the world, but this will have limited effect if they have been
15 thoroughly inculcated into western ways of knowing. Further, western researchers could be
16 encouraged to acknowledge their parochial location and to aim to cite work from outside the
17 metropole.
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23 Editors have a part to play too, overseeing reviews to make sure that they are not making
24 outrageously ethnocentric comments – for example demanding that authors justify writing
25 about places outside the metropole. Remind authors that addressing reviewers’ concerns does
26 not necessarily mean doing everything they ask you to do even if it is inappropriate. This
27 issue has come to light through our collaboration. Sik Ying has been surprised and somewhat
28 alarmed by Stevi’s strategy of challenging some reviewers’ comments on our joint
29 publications. It would never have occurred to her to do this, even if a comment was clearly
30 inappropriate and ethnocentric, she had always tried to comply with everything each reviewer
31 suggests. She feels that this is common among researchers from Asia – they simply do not
32 dare to question reviewer feedback. This problem is exacerbated by institutions in many parts
33 of the periphery insisting on publication in high impact international journals. In recognising
34 and seeking to remedy such problems we can, perhaps, begin to create a more open
35 environment for global exchanges of knowledge.
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42 **Creating dialogue and confronting political realities**

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44 From our own experience we have learnt the value of genuine dialogue and collaboration
45 across cultures. Working between the UK and the periphery of the periphery – Hong Kong as
46 peripheral to both the West and China – has opened up bigger questions about patterns of
47 domination in the world, how authoritarian rule impacts on sexual life as well as on social life
48 in general. We cannot but be aware of Asian economic ascendancy, ‘the seemingly
49 irreversible shift to the East, particularly to Asia, of the dynamism of global capitalism’
50 (Bhambra and Santos 2017: 4). Not only has this laid to rest orientalist views of the East as
51 mired in unchanging tradition, but also casts doubt of the claims made about the
52 consequences of modernity for our sexual and intimate lives such as those of Giddens and
53 Weeks. In fact it was through challenging such perspectives, exploring the social conditions
54 shaping intimacy in East Asia, that we began to collaborate. Asian economic ascendancy
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3 does have consequences for the ordering of sexual lives, but these are not mere reflections of
4 western trends and vary from one country to another. Economic growth has also resulted in
5 some cultural practices that seem specific to East and South East Asia – for example the ways
6 in which commercial sex is inextricably interwoven with business negotiations within and
7 across Asian countries (Hoang 2015; Osburg 2013). In China it has been seen as both an
8 essential element of business practices and integral to the health of the Chinese economy
9 (Zurndorfer 2016; Osburg 2013; 2016), though it runs counter to the official ‘socialist
10 morality.’
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14 While western-based scholars working on China are free to expose the links between
15 commercialized sex and corruption in political and economic life, Chinese scholars need to
16 be far more circumspect. In an authoritarian regime with little academic freedom and with
17 publications subject to censorship, Chinese sexuality researchers face particular problems.
18 While there are a number of established and less established scholars working on sexuality in
19 China, they are facing growing restrictions with the recent tightening of the regime’s control
20 on what can be said and written. This is a problem they share with those in other
21 authoritarian regimes and is a further barrier to internationalizing the study of sexuality.
22 China, however, is a very specific case given the size of its economy and its global influence.
23 We are struck, however, by the lack of interest in and knowledge of China among western
24 scholars and apparent indifference to China’s power in the world – which is felt very acutely
25 in Hong Kong. Ignorance has its dangers. Who knows, perhaps in a century’s time, western
26 scholars will be complaining that they cannot get their work published because they do not
27 write in Chinese and are unfamiliar with Chinese academic concepts!
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