



Sidney Gig-Jan Wong

QUEER ASIAN
IDENTITIES IN
CONTEMPORARY
AOTEAROA NEW
ZEALAND

One Foot Out of the Closet

Queer and LGBT+ Studies

Collection Editor

PATRICK THOMSEN

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Abstract

Sidney Gig-Jan Wong shares his perspectives on his own Queer identities mediated by his Cantonese heritage and upbringing in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. The aim of this book is to provide a deep dive into the identity formation process of one individual with the hope that these experiences will enable other Queer people who occupy intersecting marginalisation in society to realise their full potential. This book is intimate, cringy, and challenging, written from the perspectives of a Queer Cantonese man trying to come to terms with his emergent identities.

Key words

Queer; Rainbow; LGBTQIA+; Identity; Community; Migration; Displacement; Racialisation; Reclamation.

Acknowledgements

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Content warning

This book contains explicit references to, and descriptions of, situations which may cause distress. This includes references to and descriptions of:

- Abuse
- Body hatred and fatphobia
- Death, dying, and mass murder
- Hateful behaviour directed at religious groups
- Homophobia
- Hospitalisation
- Mental illness and ableism
- Nudity
- Racism and racial slurs
- Self-harm and suicidal thoughts, intentions, and actions
- Sexism
- Sexual assault
- Substance use and abuse
- Swear words or curse words
- Transphobia
- Violence

Every effort has been made to provide more specific content warnings before relevant chapters, but please be aware that references to potentially distressing topics occur **frequently** and **throughout** the book.

Learning objectives

1. Demonstrate an understanding of how different social, cultural, political, and environmental contexts mediate individual and societal perceptions of Queer identities.
2. Describe how transcultural and translinguistic expressions of Queerness allow for the re-emergence of Queer identities.
3. Privilege emerging traditional and indigenous understandings of Queer identities while challenging the notion of universality in Queer identity models developed within Western academic frameworks.
4. Think critically about the impacts of (multi-)marginalisation among members of the Queer community who occupy intersecting marginalisation in society.
5. Engage individual lived experiences and perspectives as a vehicle for effective allyship within and outside the Queer community.

Prologue

We were at the Taoist temple. My parents attended the services every Sunday. My brother and I were passing time in the library. We were waiting until the service was over.

“Do you know the story of The Vinegar Tasters?” an older auntie once asked me. She was a volunteer at the temple.

I cocked my head in confusion. I was still incredibly young at the time. The older auntie laughed at me. She gestured me towards her. She pointed to the painting of three old men crouching over a large earthenware pot and she began narrating her story.

Long ago, there were three old men wandering through a forest. Suddenly, a large earthenware pot appeared on the road.

The three old men peered into the pot. Inside was a thick, black liquid.

“What’s this?” asked the first old man. “It might be sauce. Why would someone leave this in the middle of a forest?”

The first old man who was the most daring. He figured the only way to uncover this mystery sauce was to taste it. He dipped his finger into the mystery liquid and placed it in his mouth.

“Ugh! This sauce is spoilt!” the first old man cried. He puckered his lips, and his face was scrunched up like a pickled plum. “How disgustingly sour!”

Not believing the first old man, the second old man also dipped his finger in the pot to taste the mystery sauce.

"Ugh! You're right!" cried the second old man. "The sauce is disgusting. The sauce is rancid! It's unbelievably bitter!"

After observing the reaction of the first two old men, the third old man pondered for a moment, and then dipped his finger in the pot to taste it.

The first two old men watched him eagerly.

The third old man swished the mystery sauce in his mouth. Left. Right. Left again.

"I see," the third old man whispered under his breath. He stroked his white beard while deep in thought.

"You're both wrong, and you're both right. It's not sour or bitter. This sauce is sweet." "How could this be?" the second old man protested.

"It's because you're both fools! This sauce isn't spoiled or rancid. It's vinegar!" the third old man stated with a childish grin. "You must learn to appreciate it in its natural state."

The third old man chuckled, and all three old men continued wandering through the forest.

"Do you understand the moral of the story, Sidney?" the auntie asked me.

I shook my head vigorously. The older auntie smiled and explained.

"The vinegar represents life. The first old man represents our Confucian values. Our life is like a wine, but without discipline it will spoil and turn into vinegar."

"The second old man represents our Buddhist beliefs. Life isn't bitter or sweet. We need to learn how to displace ourselves from this world of suffering."

"The third man represents our Taoist principles. Life is perfect in its natural state. You cannot know what is sweet without equally understand what it is bitter or sour."

"But remember, Sidney. Our values, beliefs, and principles are all important. One cannot exist without the others. Our three teachings are one."

*The first time I was bit,
I knew my life was never going to be the same.
What I knew was history.
His fangs breached my skin.
Blood was drawn,
and I wanted more.
The fear was knowing I could never turn back.*

Content warning

This chapter contains references to racism and racial slurs; homophobia; transphobia; swear words or curse words; and violence.

The chapter starts overleaf.

Introduction

Ōtepoti, Spring 2022

I was in the Student Union building at the University of Otago in Ōtepoti (Dunedin). I was sitting on a couch with a microphone in my hand.

The drapes behind me were lit with all the colours of the rainbow. I could barely see the faces of the audience in front of me – hundreds of students watched me eagerly.

The host of the night, Kevin, was sitting across from me on the couch. I felt like I was on a first date. Sarwana invited me as a guest speaker. The event was called “All in” and it was hosted by Silverline which is a student-led, student-focused mental health and well-being initiative. I had received a phone call from my high school friend Sarwana a few weeks earlier.

“Sidney!” I heard Sarwana’s excitement. “How’ve you been? It’s been ages since we’ve talked!”

“I’m good! How about you? Still at the university?” I tried to match Sarwana’s enthusiasm.

“We’re hosting a speaker night colliding race, belonging, and mental well-being,” Sarwana told me excitedly. “I want you to speak to our students. Are you keen?”

"Sure, why not?" I replied jokingly. "I don't know if you'll get much value from me as a guest speaker. My stories aren't all that interesting."

"Don't be silly, Sidney!" Sarwana laughed. "It'll be fun! You've changed so much since high school. I think our students will learn a lot from your experience."

"Well, what kind of stories would you like me to share? Do you want to hear about how my parents migrated from Hong Kong? I could talk about my experience of racism in Christchurch." "Do you want me to talk about how I first realised I was Queer? What about my first kiss?"

"Or the people I have met in New Zealand, Hong Kong, and around the world who have helped me understand my Queer identity?"

"I could share my experience of coming out to my parents, my friends, and my work. You probably don't want to hear about the abuse from my ex-partner while I was in Ōamaru." "They're students, right? I could talk to them what it's like being in the closet as a researcher and how understanding my identity has helped me build the courage to chair local and national Queer organisations."

"Thoughts?"

We continued talking on the phone. I did not think much about the event until the organisers sent through the copy of the event website:

"Sidney shares the story of his own coming out as a Queer Cantonese human, as well as the collective coming out of his

family and how he navigates what he called ‘one foot in and one foot out of the closet.’”

I could also see the list of invited speakers. They were all prominent writers, directors, actors, singer-songwriters, and choreographers.

“Oh, no,” I thought to myself. I did not consider myself as particularly creative or talented. “I hope I do not make a fool of myself.”

When it was finally time for me to speak, I tried to feel the light of my own sunshine.

“We’d like to know how your experience of being Queer has intersected with your cultural aspects of his life, like what was particularly challenging being a Queer Cantonese human?” Kevin asked me. He was poised with a list of questions.

“Now that’s a good question,” I paused for a moment to reflect. “Where should we begin?”

Racialised bodies

Te Awakairangi, Autumn 2022

I was born in Te Awakairangi (Lower Hutt) just north of the capital city. Home for me was a sleepy suburb of Taitā along Te Awakairangi (the Hutt River). I have lived in Ōtautahi (Christchurch) for the last decade. I was never meant to be away for this long.

It was a Tuesday afternoon. Dad and I were stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. He drove in from Te Awakairangi to pick me up from the office as I was in Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) for a meeting. Work offered to put me up in a hotel, but I knew my

parents would be upset if I didn't go home. Instead, I was staying with them for the night.

Dad is a quiet man, so we drove in silence. I looked out the window at the passing scenery. When we took our exit and crossed the river, we went past rows upon rows of identical state houses. These were nestled in the valley between the river and the bush. Most of them were built by returned soldiers following the Second World War.

The car scrambled up the driveway. We sped past the window paired with lime green shutters which overlooked the street. The off-white exterior walls of the house were stained brown by years of exposure to dust from the quarry across the valley. The car eventually rolled to a creaky stop.

「我返屋企啦。」 (I'm home!) I announced while I got out of the car with my luggage.

I took off my Doc Martens. As usual, I struggled with the laces before I threw them to the ever-growing pile of shoes. When I finally got through the front door, the aroma of rich sauces, fermented beans, and dried herbs assaulted my senses.

「返屋企啦，就食得飯啦。無唔記得裝香。」 (Are you home? Dinner's nearly ready. Don't forget to burn incense.) Mum instructed me from the garage.

「哦。」 (Okay.) I shouted in return.

We offered incense as a way to venerate our Ancestors. We would ask for their protection and guidance through our daily prayers. Our family altar is located in the living room. I lit three sticks of incense as I approached the altar. In the centre of the makeshift

altar is a red plaque with the words 「黃門堂上」 (Venerable Wong Ancestors.)

「黃門堂上，保佑黃家上上下下，出入平安，身體健康。」
(I pray to the venerable ancestors who reside above, protect our household, and grant us safe passage and good health.) I chanted and bowed three times before placing the incense sticks in the shrine.

“Who will remember me once I’m gone?” I wondered if my descendants would honour me this way. “What’s my legacy?”

I bowed one more time before leaving the altar. The scent of sandalwood clung to my nostrils. As the smoke drifted into the air, my eyes followed the white wisps. I closed my eyes and reflected on the legacy of my forebears and how I came to be here.

My Ancestors come from a region called Lingnan (嶺南) named after the Nanling (南嶺) mountains. This encompasses the present-day provinces of Guangdong (廣東) and Hainan (海南) and the autonomous region of Guangxi (廣西) in Mainland China; Hong Kong (香港); Macau (澳門); and the northern and central provinces of Vietnam. More specifically, I trace my ancestry to the localities of Sze Yap (四邑), Fatshan (佛山), and Tungkun (東莞).

My Ancestors, who lived in this expansive area, established a distinctive way of life known as 嶺南文化 (*ling⁵naam⁴man⁴faa³*; Lingnan culture). This culture was characterised by the admixture of Indigenous 百越 (*baak³yyut⁶*; Baiyue) and 華夏 (*waa⁴haa⁶*; Huaxia) peoples. My Huaxia Ancestors originated from the Yellow River Basin. They migrated to the Lingnan region as a result of war and famine. We can still trace the southward journey of my Ancestors by referencing the 族譜 (*zuk⁶pou²*; genealogical book)

of the 黃 (Wong) clan. These meticulously kept volumes of family history include details for over 150 generations of my clan.

Those who lived in this region popularised 飲茶 (*jam²caa⁴*; *Yumcha*), 越劇 (*jyut⁶kek⁶*; Cantonese opera), 南拳 (*naam⁴kyun⁴*; Southern-style Chinese martial arts), and 舞獅 (*mou⁵si¹*; lion dancing). Beyond these tangible aspects of Lingnan culture, the *Huaxia* also brought with them complex religious belief system combining 儒家 (*jyu⁴gaa¹*; Confucianism), 道教 (*dou⁶gaa³*; Taoism), and 佛教 (*fat⁶gaa³*; Buddhism) with folk religious beliefs.

Of the three institutionalised belief systems, Confucianism is definitely the most inflexible. Confucian thought is a complex philosophy with a focus on the five constants of 仁 (*jan⁴*; benevolence), 義 (*ji⁶*; righteousness), 禮 (*lai⁵*; propriety), 智 (*zi³*; wisdom), and 信 (*seon³*; sincerity) and the four virtues of 忠 (*zung¹*; loyalty), 孝 (*haau³*; filial piety), 節 (*zit³*; continence), and 義 (*ji⁶*; righteousness). These rites have maintained discipline and order within families and communities.

On the other end of the philosophical spectrum is Taoism which provides balance to the rigidity of Confucianism. Taoism emphasises the virtues of 無為 (*mou⁴wai⁴*; inaction) and 自然 (*zi⁶jin⁴*; naturalness). Aspects of life beyond our control could be described as 緣份 (*jyun⁴fan⁶*; predestination) or as I like to call them, fateful coincidences. Taoist practitioners also adhere to the 三寶 (*saam¹bou²*; three treasures) which include 慈 (*ci⁵*; compassion), 儉 (*gim⁶*; frugality), and 不敢為天下先 (*bat¹gam²wai⁴tin¹had⁶sin¹*; humility).

道 (*dou*⁶; *Tao*) is the fundamental in Taoism. *Tao* can be represented by the 太極圖 (*taai*³*gik*⁶*tou*⁴; *Yin Yang* symbol). This represents unification of the oppositional, yet complementary forces of 陰 (*jam*¹; *Yin*) and 陽 (*joeng*⁴; *Yang*). *Yin* can be described as the passive or negative principles in nature while *Yang* can be described as the active or positive principles in nature. The curvy line represents the non-linear divide between these cosmic energies. The contribution of each force is proportional to the other, one force cannot exist without the other.

Tao is best cultivated within the individual. Fundamentally, we are all the sum of our parts. This is known as 自道 (*zi*⁴*dou*⁶; the *Tao* of the self) or the personal way of being. The proportion of *Yin* and *Yang* will differ between individuals. Contemporary interpretations have reduced the semiotics of *Yin* and *Yang* to represent feminine and masculine energies. However, this is not entirely true. This is because within *Yin* there is *Yang* and within *Yang* there is *Yin*. *Tao* exists beyond the binary.

The last of these belief systems is Buddhism which is based on the teachings of the Siddhartha Gautama – the Buddha (the awakened). This belief system originated in present-day North India, but it has since been shaped by folk religious beliefs when it arrived in the *Huaxia* heartland. Proponents of Buddhism aim to liberate themselves from earthly attachment by attaining spiritual enlightenment. Those who fail to do so are doomed to 輪迴 (*leon*⁴*wui*⁴; *samsara*) and face the consequences of 因果 (*jan*¹*gwo*²; *karma*).

These beliefs allowed my Ancestors to live harmoniously (at times) by cultivating 自道 (*zi*⁴*dou*⁶; way of the self) and 關係 (*gwaan*¹*hai*⁶; interpersonal relationships). This syncretic belief