

**From *Enter the Dragon* to *Enter the Mullet*---Exploring Filmic Representations of
East Asian Butch Dykes by Asian Queer Women Filmmakers in Contemporary
Canada**

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This paper is like a pilot project for my doctoral research and it is very much a work in progress. In my doctoral research I am looking at the filmic representations of the transmigrant East Asian queer women in contemporary Canada. While addressing sexuality, the term “queer” also encompasses the intersection of multiple identities such as race and gender. I use the word, “transmigrant” rather than migrant or immigrant, as Martin Manalansan suggests, to address “the multi-stranded relationships” (Manalansan 2000: 185) such mobile groups have with both their home and settlement countries. I especially want to focus on two aspects of this research. The first is an examination of how the racialised, queered, and gendered body is presented, appropriated, or subverted in films about and by Asian queer women. Secondly, I want to look at the “monolithic” representation of Asian women in much Western discourse and how differences are delineated by Asian queer women from their own perceptions and interpretations. I will mainly look at the work of transmigrant queer women filmmakers from Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong who identify themselves as non-heterosexual, and who live or stay in two highly multicultural Canadian cities: Vancouver and Toronto.

My interest in presenting this paper originated when I began work on my dissertation research and noticed the huge gap that exists between academic awareness of film productions by transmigrant Asian queer filmmakers and the actual number of film productions. I often heard faculty members who are working on queer issues in relation to immigration or on Asian female filmmakers, say that they cannot find Asian queer interviewees or asking why there are so few Asian queer films by Asian queer women. But at the same time, whenever I go to queer or Asian film festivals, I often

meet independent queer filmmakers who are either transmigrants or second generation immigrants who tell me that there is a “vibe” of Asian queer women’s films in Vancouver.

Where are these women and how do they show their films? So far, I have seen movies by some young independent Asian queer women filmmakers, including Kai Ling Xue, a Taiwanese-Canadian, who made *A Girl Name Kai* (2004), a personal story about coming out to her family, Desiree Lim, a Chinese-Malaysian, whose famous films including *Sugar Sweet* (2002), and *Floored by Love* (2005), and Vanessa Kwan, a Chinese-Canadian who made the film, *Cake* (2002) which is about the sweetness of first love, and Donna Lee who made her first film *Enter the Mullet* (2004), which will be shortly discussed in this paper. Through my research, I found out that many of these women are not only independent filmmakers but also work at other jobs to support their film-making. They tend to make videos rather than making films because of limited budgets and funding. It is also due to limited budgets that they have formed a unique network to share resources. Other than a sharing studio or co-screening, sometimes filmmakers are cast in each other’s work because it is too expensive to hire professional actresses or actors. Non-mainstream screening such as Vancouver Asian and Vancouver Queer Film Festivals are usually the venues through which they show their works. Not many people are aware of these festivals and it is very easy to miss out on such screenings. These transmigrant Asian Queer filmmakers share something interesting in common: first, they claim that they make films for themselves because there is nothing to re-present them or people like them. Second, they often challenge or make fun of the

mainstream stereotypes of Asians, Asian women, and Asian queer women. Third, making films or videos is a subtle way of coming out to their family or community; since immigrant communities often try intensely to preserve cultural traditions in the face of massive cultural transformations. Hence, it is not only difficult for the community to address the presence of lesbians among them, but many queer women find it hard to come out to their community. Fourth, making films is one way of making connections: some of them mentioned the feeling of disconnection, which comes from the sense of being outsiders. This outsider feeling comes partially from being transmigrant in the new country, and partially from being queer. In her interviews with lesbian immigrants, Oliva Espin found that although lesbian immigrants do share some similar experiences with queer women in the host country of being queer, but they still have to learn how to be lesbian in the new cultural context (Espin 1999, 156-7).

The dominant stereotypes of East Asian women in the North American media are usually highly feminine. Valerie Soe's film, *Picturing Oriental Girls* (1992), provides a great visual collection of these stereotypical images of Asian women in Hollywood films. According to Renee Tajima, there are two basic types of representation of Asian women: the first one is the "Lotus Blossom Baby" (Tajima 1989, 139), including shy and delicate China Dolls and Geisha Girls; the second type is the "Dragon Lady" (Tajima 1989, 139), often prostitutes and devious madams or even killers. The "Lotus Blossom Baby" (Tajima 1989, 139), a sexual-romantic object, has been the prominent type throughout the years. These stereotypes are often constructed through hegemonic heterosexual discourses. One can hardly find any representations of

Asian queer women, either femme or butch. It has been noted that many Orientalist discourses portray the East as feminine, with the men emasculated and the women hyperfeminized. Thus, masculine Asian butch dykes are especially invisible in various mainstream representations. Judith Halberstam mentions in her article, “Between Butches,” that “not only have we not heard enough about butches, but that we know barely enough about female masculinity to locate its specific relationship to lesbianism” (Halberstam 1998, 58). I would add that this is particularly important when it comes to racialised female masculinity.

A particular example that this paper draws on is *Enter the Mullet* (2004), a five-minute colour English film. This film is made by Donna Lee, who is a second-generation Chinese Canadian. Lee is also an activist, a high school educator, a musician, and an independent filmmaker. While sporting a mullet hairstyle through most of her teenage years, she has come to appreciate and understand its finer history, which is what motivated her to make this movie. There are two reasons why I have chosen to write about this film. First, we rarely see filmic representations of East Asian butch dykes, especially in mainstream cinema. Second, Donna is both an independent and diasporic filmmaker, and she imparts a playful hybrid masculinity to Asian butch dykes, drawing on Western and Oriental cultural connections and appropriations in her film. I use the term, diaspora, to refer second or third generation immigrants.

The film begins with a hilarious introduction of the mullet in the context of working-class lesbians by a supposed Chinese female expert, Rini Wang, as a premise for the film and its title. The plot then shifts to a two-fold dynamic. The first dynamic

starts when the non-mullet-head Asian butch dyke character accidentally collides with the mullet-head Asian butch dyke character in the pool room. However, this conflict between the two Asian dyke characters turns into solidarity simultaneously, when the two non-coloured butch dyke characters in the room intimidate them with disrespect and physical assaults. The conflict is solved by the teamwork of Asian butch dyke characters and their powerful Bruce-Lee style kicks. The movie ends with Dr. Rini Wang's questioning of the taken-for-granted cultural appropriations produced mainly through commodification facilitated by globalization. We can see the examples of ignorance toward the significant meanings of dreadlocks, tattoos of First Nations symbols, and other cultural representations, along with the two non-coloured butch dyke characters in the movie.

The movie is shot in a Kung-Fu movie style, inspired by Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (1973). Both Bruce Lee (who also sports a mullet hairstyle in all of his films) and his films can be seen as timeless icon of Asian masculinity. *Enter the Mullet* (2004), the title, theme music, and a plot that includes fearless eye-contact followed by kicking, tasting the blood, and furiously fighting back all evoke Bruce Lee's style. Allusions to his masculine representations are apparent throughout the film. Both of the Asian butch dyke characters in the film embody this Asian masculinity in a playful manner. Besides manifesting Asian masculinity, crucial themes of Bruce Lee's movies are invoked: martial arts transcend all races and cultures, and Lee as a master of martial arts is the advocate or embodiment of Justice. He is "the Hero" who always defeats the bad guys, regardless of their ethnicity. The Asian butch dyke characters in *Enter the Mullet* (2004)

represent this spirit of justice when they punish the non-coloured butch dyke characters who take others' culture for granted. Donna Lee combines mockery of stigmatized stereotypes of the mullets, often associated with the masculine white working class, to introduce a playful hybrid masculinity represented by diasporic Asian butch dykes.

There are some weak parts in the film: for example, the implicit link between class and sexuality is not clear through the plot. Nevertheless, not only does it offer a different way to see Asian queer female masculinity but also contributes to the visibility of Asian butch dykes. As Shane Phelan argues regarding the importance of "butch visibility" (Phelan 1998, 193), it provides opportunities to examine the role of gender in homophobia as well as class divisions among lesbians. The visibility of Asian butch dykes will add another filter, "race", to the examination of the role of gender and sexual orientation in Western Orientalist representations.

Whether it is the mullet-head lesbian or the masculine Asian butch dyke, what Donna Lee presents in her film is the image of "Others" from the mainstream's perspective. However, this way of presenting "otherness" can be seen as a kind of agency. Trinh Minh-ha maintains, "otherness becomes empowerment, critical difference, when it is not given but re-created" (Trinh 1997: 418). By re-presenting or re-creating images of Asian butch dykes, Lee playfully reverses a common stereotypical image of western butch dykes as lonely and tragic heroes by introducing a more positive and empowering figure of the Kung-Fu Asian butch dyke. I need to address this empowerment on a more theoretical level, but it is more like a fantasy in real life. Being a butch dyke means taking a certain amount of risk of physical danger in the queer-

unfriendly public space. Femme and feminine Asian women are also the targets of physical danger, but the one that butch dykes encounter are different. In my previous research on the relationship between body experiences and public space in North America, several of my interviewees who are dykes or transsexuals mentioned the threatening situations they encountered because they are seen as Asian gay men but not Asian queer women.

At the end of the film, Dr. Rini Wang says: “Teamwork is the win-win path to conflict resolution.” I want to end this paper by asking a question: In the highly multicultural queer communities, how could we team up butch dykes from different cultures to address the various conflicts queer women face in their daily lives and in academic discourse?

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