

ISSN 1598-2661 (Print)
ISSN 2586-0380 (Online)

SUNGKYUN JOURNAL OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES

VOL.20 No.1

APR. 2020



Academy of East Asian Studies
Sungkyunkwan University

Parochial Apolitical Formulation: Hong Kong Internetization and the Sexualizing Cyberspace of the Storytelling Channels of the Golden Forum and the LIHKG Forum

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong Internetization, free from the mission of unifying public consciousness within a politically acceptable standard and towards a socialist goal, is creating locality in virtual public space, where instantaneous gratification usually overwhelms archaeological access to profound historicity. This locality is independent of the political and high-cultural locality in the real public space that suits (post)colonial interpretation. The Storytelling Channels of the Golden Forum and the LIHKG Forum prominently comply with neither mainland Chinese progressive authoritarianism nor local political agendas, but personal desires and affection instead. The anonymous writing and reading of the Forum stories, as potential outcomes of daily stress in the knowledge-based society, offer a controllable, superficial, and sensual escape into a vulgar, vernacular, but consensual textual world. Although most of the Forum stories are highly formulaic, and erotic in an androcentric and heterosexual way, some can show authorial reflection on diverse political issues, such as transgender ambivalence.

Keywords: Internetization, Hong Kong online subculture, Golden Forum, LIHKG Forum, storytelling channel, cyberspace

Middle, an online love storyteller, was selected as a recommended writer for Hong Kong Book Fair 2018 together with Eileen Chang, leading to controversy about what is canon and what is kitsch. Though different in literary value, the writings of both Middle and Eileen Chang are similarly consumerist and depoliticized for popular consumption. The popular realm of narrative consumption appears to be resisting grand political avocation about polity, governance, diplomacy, and so on, accepting mere exploration of minor and general politics, especially those related to interpersonal relations. Francis L. F. Lee (2016) reads the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in late 2014 as a “polarizing context” that modulates digital political communication. This temporary polarization was apparent in social media with its “clashing views about the movement” (57), but was nearly absent in the anonymously written online stories during that period. Despite their latent political potential, these online stories align with an escapist popular culture in Hong Kong.

This article will first capture the characteristics of Hong Kong Internetization

and the culture of the Golden Forum (*Hoenggong goudang touleonekoi* 香港高登討論區) and the LIHKG Forum (*lindang touleonekoi* 連登討論區), and then examine the apolitical (meaning ‘not intentionally involved in grand politics’ hereafter) and consumerist sides of the stories in the two Forums (especially those predominantly related to sex). Except for a few exceptional cases (such as the author’s name and the title of a journal article published in mainland China), this article adopts Cantonese *kyutping* instead of Mandarin *pinyin* for romanization.

Foregrounding Hong Kong Internetization and the Forum subculture

Internetization, which “refers to how people, businesses, and cultures have increased their capacity to interact on multiple levels through revolutionary advances in digital technology,” (Passaris 2018, 7984) initiates a global migration of capital and human desires from the real world to a virtual community. It collaborates with globalization, which Ban Wang interprets as economically transcending the boundaries of capital-intensive metropolises towards marginal regions and politically exercising imperial domination over others (2004, 1). Through its technological removal of geographical inaccessibility and interpersonal hindrance, Internetization fosters globalization with its perfect duplication of commercial rationality and rapid spread of hegemonic culture. Through strict institutional surveillance over consumer-to-consumer (C2C) e-commerce, such as sales of the Bible, and online social networks, such as WeChat and QQ, the Chinese government has tried to maintain a pragmatic equilibrium between international connections and ideological unity while achieving the “Chinese Dream” online. Hong Kong, as the parented capitalist counterpart of China, reveals a different progress of Internetization that deserves geopolitical attention. Due to the freedom of speech protected by Article 27 of the Basic Law,¹ the Hong Kong Internet is still free from the mission of unifying public consciousness within a politically acceptable standard and towards a socialist goal. Its development (except that related to the official media controlled by the central government) does not follow mainland propaganda, but populist diversity instead.

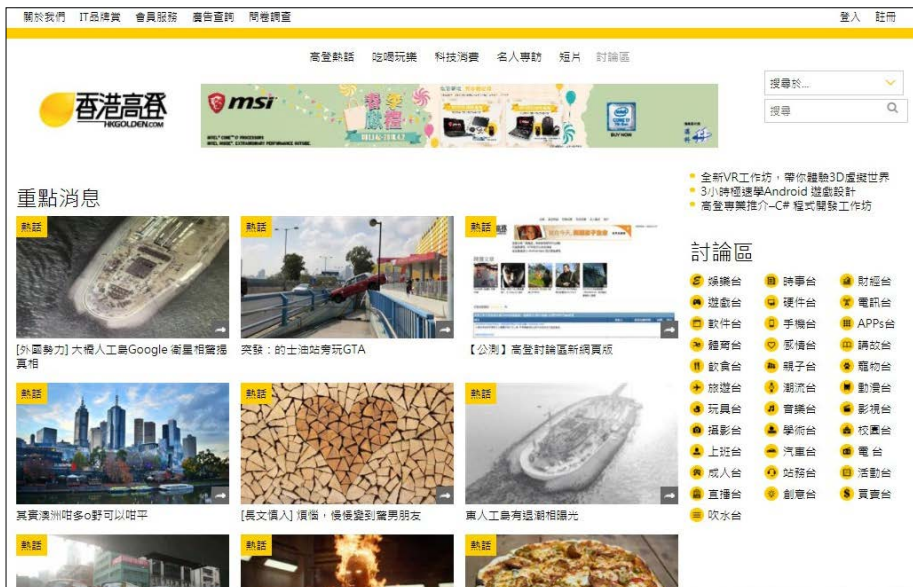
As revealed by John Nguyet Erni, who launched a netnographical study on Hong Kong Internet sex chatting, the open-access and censorship-free space of Web 2.0 in Hong Kong is creating new quotidian norms that follow a “vernacular masculine” logic (2016, 105). This logic is independent of pre-handover predictions and (post)colonial interpretations limited by political and high-cultural emphases without an Internetization assumption, such as Rey Chow’s “futurist sampling” model pointing to Hong Kong cultural practitioners’ intentional creation of discourses to give Chinese development a cutting-edge cachet (1995, 102). In general, the Hong Kong Internet, broader than the cultural field in Chow’s conceptualization, welcomes random paradoxes, tensions, divisions and arguments, which both dissolve and consolidate the gaps between the hegemonic and the

¹ According to Article 27 of the Basic Law, “Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and of demonstration; and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions, and to strike.”

marginal, the political and the quotidian, the true and the satiric, the serious and the kitsch, the public and the private, and so on. Among many online platforms, the Golden Forum and the LIHKG Forum are the most remarkable examples of the parochial postmodernity of Hong Kong at the cultural junction of post-handover daily dynamics and virtual freedom.

The Golden Forum started in 2000, three years after the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong. It was originally a platform for sharing technological information, and later divided into a computer zone and an entertainment zone. Figure 1 shows the current home page of the Golden Forum in its desktop/laptop version, which lists 34 channels on the right, next to the notice board.² The channels cover the topics of entertainment, finance, information technology, love, sports, art, campus life, sex, travel, movie, work, family, fashion, and so on. In the mid-2000s, its members' frequent "spoofs" (*ngokgaau* 惡搞) of celebrities and social issues drew the attention of Hong Kong mainstream media like *Apple Daily* and *Ming Pao* and made it a significant breeding ground for local online terminology and behaviors. The socially stereotyped geeks of the Golden Forum, termed the "Golden boys" (*goudang zai* 高登仔), created prank subcultures that require specific techniques, witty improvisation, and collective intelligence, such as the cultures of uncovering one's autobiography (*heidai manfaa* 起底文化), photoshopping images (*goitou manfaa* 改圖文化), continuing an idea by topic (*ziplung manfaa* 接龍文化),

Figure 1. The home page of the Golden Forum in its desktop/laptop version



² The posts in the channels with higher popularity would be boosted up to the front page by administrators as "hot issues" (*jitwaa* 熱話) to draw more attention. There is hence a strategy to maximize visibility through creating posts that can arouse the general public's interest, rather than meeting an intellectual standard such as that pursued by traditional print media.

and creating trendy passages (*ciuman manfaa* 潮文文化). Those extemporaneous and playful subcultures soon attracted authorship and readership beyond the male geeks, including intimately termed “brothers” (*baadaa* 巴打) and “sisters” (*sidaa* 絲打)³ from other social strata.

Hong Kong-based social science studies reveal that online reading mediates the gender differences seen in print reading (Cheung, Mak, and Sit 2013, 709), and Internet communities, especially when accessed via the mobile phone, satisfy the needs for expressing individuality and building relationships under the Confucian ideology of Hong Kong (Lee and Busiol 2016, 434). The rapid development of Hong Kong forums, which grant individuals a complementary sense of belonging through textual consumption, is dissolving power hierarchies and gender fixation in an egalitarian virtual space within a ritual-oriented urban space. The urban space is fast-paced, training its citizens to simultaneously engage in physical and mobile activities (Chan, Vogel, and Ma 2007, 79). The gradual migration of Hong Kong citizens to cyberspace (with incrementally longer stays in the world of the screen), especially the cyberspace of mobile devices, grants them a new identity as anonymous netizens (in addition to their identities as netizens connected to their real identities through virtual social networks such as Facebook and Instagram). This identity is critical and consumerist, giving birth and collective support to the LIHKG Forum due to the failures of the Golden Forum in developing its mobile platform with satisfactory performance and in guaranteeing a censorship-free operation (See Figure 2 for the design of the LIHKG forum).⁴ On November 25, 2016, Hui Yip Hang 許業珩 and Mong Yuen 望遠 started running the LIHKG forum. It soon attracted over 70,000 registered members with around 1400 posts and 70,000 replies per day.⁵ Some Golden Forum members then became stable members of the LIHKG Forum, and some regularly participated in both of them. There are also visitors, remaining unregistered, randomly or frequently reading the posts of the forums without initiating or joining discussions.⁶ According to Alexa, which offers statistical data for top websites, the Golden Forum and the LIHKG Forum were ranked as the sixteenth and seventeenth most visited sites in Hong

³ *Baadaa* and *sidaa* in Cantonese Chinese are transliterated from the English words ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ respectively.

⁴ Many users of the Golden Forum supported the newly established LIHKG Forum to protest against the CEO of the Golden Forum, Lam Cho Shun 林祖舜, who censored posts that supported the LIHKG Forum. Refer to the story on *Apply Daily* relating Lam’s censorship to the high download rate of the app of the LIHKG Forum: <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/realtime/finance/20161129/55980247> (accessed December 20, 2019).

⁵ In comparison, there were only 570 posts and 17,000 replies on the Golden Forum in the same period. Refer to “HKG V.S. LIHKG (automatically updating every hour)” *HKG V.S. LIHKG (mui siusi zidung gangsan 每小時自動更新)*: <https://blog.gaplotech.com/hkg-vs-lihkg/> (accessed April 25, 2018). For more updated data, refer to “HKG V.S. LIHKG v2 (automatically updating every hour)” *HKG V.S. LIHKG v2 (mui siusi zidung gangsa 每小時自動更新)*: <https://blog.gaplotech.com/hkg-v-s-lihkg-v2/>.

⁶ In the Hong Kong forum culture, there is a kind of netizen referred to as “CD-ROM” (Copy Download–Read Only Member), signifying those who register as members only to download resources and read forum content without posting and replying. See “CD-ROM.” *The Encyclopedia of Virtual Communities in Hong Kong*, May 4, 2013. <http://evchk.wikia.com/wiki/CD-ROM> (accessed May 7, 2018).

Kong in 2018.⁷ With similar channels covering all aspects of everyday life, they replicate reality in a mostly textual form that encourages urban *flâneurs* to observe, share, communicate, and, for some users, to develop anonymous celebrity through creative and profound ideas, or through deliberate tomfoolery (sub-culturally termed as “*paaigaau* 派膠,” which means showing off with behaviors and speech commonly recognized as nonsense). Unlike the speech in other channels that could trigger political engagements, such as Tam Hiu Fung’s 譚曉峰 call to occupy Central,⁸ the stories in the two forums’ Storytelling Channels (*gonggu toi* 講故台) prominently represent the quotidian resistance and negligence of Hong Kong people against grand politics, with paradoxically blurred and intensified binary oppositions, vernacular language games, and small narratives directed towards personal desires and affections. Most of the storytellers utilize dirty jokes and erotic depictions to earn “likes” and Internet fame, which could lead to their works being published in print.⁹

Their apolitical and ahistorical narratives, in contrast to the discourses posted in the two forum’s Current Event Channels (*sisi toi* 時事台), cater to popular demand for speedy consumption of vulgar texts, rather than authorial reflection on the contemporary specificity of Hong Kong reality.

The Postcolonial Apolitics of the Hong Kong Forums

(Post)colonial interpretation is the grand approach for reviewing Hong Kong

Figure 2. The mobile version of the front page of the LIHKG Forum, which is nearly identical to its desktop/laptop version and the mobile version of the Golden Forum



⁷ See 'Alexa - Top Sites in Hong Kong': <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/HK> (accessed December 5, 2018). Rank is calculated by combining the amount of visitors and page-views over the past month.

⁸ In 2015, Tam Hiu Fung 譚曉峰 was sentenced to 100 hours of community service due to his Golden post on October, 2014, which incited local netizens to illegally occupy a public space in Hong Kong. See <https://hk.news.yahoo.com/%E9%AB%98%E7%99%BB%E4%BB%94-%E7%85%BD%E5%8B%95%E4%BD%94%E4%B8%AD%E5%88%A4%E6%9C%8D%E5%8B%99%E4%BB%A4-023100079.html> (accessed May 15, 2018).

⁹ For instance, Idea Publication is a Hong Kong publication house that publishes well-received online writings, such as the six volumes of Shashibeiya's *Don't Look back when the Sky Turns Dark* (Tinhaak mok wuitau 天黑莫回頭) (2014–2016).

literature in both Chinese (Xu Shiyong 2017) and English (Brian Hooper 2003), film (Lo 2007), architecture (Kam 2015), fine art (Clarke 2002), and other artistic forms. Its academic genealogy consolidates its power to holistically interpret Hong Kong writings, regardless of the multifarious forms of popular representation. Methodologically, there are two realms of localities. Academics and critics are mainly concerned with the high-culture one in the real public space that suits (post)colonial analyses, whereas this article mainly illuminates the popular one represented in the virtual public space,¹⁰ where instantaneous gratification usually overwhelms archaeological assess to profound historicity.

Ackbar Abbas regards the Hong Kong culture towards the edge of the 1997 Handover as representing “reverse hallucination” (meaning “not seeing what is there”), (1997, 25) in which cultural products nostalgically grasped the disappearance of the passing colonial memories. Chu Yiu-Wai illustrates how “Hong Kong disappeared from a fixed definition through the duality of East/West and tradition/modernity” (2013, 2). Concerning post-1997 Hong Kong which, in Abbas’s view, had been moving away from “a politics of opposition and binary relations,” Chu requests a theoretical thrust to delineate the “dispersed politics” of Hong Kong (3). His request is mainly based on international juxtapositions (with China and the United Kingdom, or more globalized scenarios), which may neglect Hong Kong’s internal dynamic of non-colonial discourses. With a similar intention to challenge fixed perspectives of (post)colonial discourse, Daniel Vukovich (2012), based on his analysis of G. O. D. (a popular Hong Kong brand that sells premium homewares, fashion, and gifts), criticized the claim of China’s re-colonization of Hong Kong. He analyzed the cultural merging between Hong Kong and her re-colonizer as represented in quintessentially local products, and regarded observations of commercial and popular realms as possibly complicating the conclusions drawn from colonial discourses. China is still the grand object, but scholars like Vukovich have shifted their observations from major political events and high-cultural products to popular representation.

After 1997, there was a series of democratic movements in Hong Kong against the Communist Party of China’s increasingly authoritarian control over democratic agendas, the legal system, school curricula, and so on.¹¹ Starting from the march against the proposed codification of Hong Kong Basic Law Article 23 on July 1, 2003 with 500,000 participants, the Hong Kong public experienced political controversies over universal suffrage concerning the elections for the Chief Executive and Legislative Council seats (since 2003), resignations and by-elections

¹⁰ John O’Looney assimilates “virtual public space” into “electronic public space,” which “encompasses a host of new technologies such as online public forums, virtual public meetings, electronic rule making, Internet voting, personalized government Web portals, intergovernmental or government-with-citizen chat rooms, and virtual reality spaces and simulations” (2002, 29). This paper regards the Golden Forum and the LIHKG Forum as virtual public spaces, focusing on their identity-free communal characteristics rather than their democratic and institutional functions.

¹¹ As Wing-Wah Law observes, “Beijing has changed its political approach to Hong Kong from low-level, hidden intervention to more overt, high-level actions” (2017, 45). The central government of China turned from avoiding “meddling in Hong Kong affairs” between 1997 and 2002 to legitimizing guidelines for universal suffrage in 2014 (45–46).

in five constituencies (2010), the Umbrella Movement (2014), the imprisonment of Hong Kong democracy activists (2017), and the disqualification of six already-elected Legislative Council members due to their pro-independence stance (2017). Simultaneously, there were minor events provoked against the developmentalist and pro-Beijing SAR government, such as the campaign for the conservation of Queen's Pier (2007) and the recovery of Shang Shui from the economic activities of mainland Chinese parallel traders who disturbed the daily lives of locals (2012). Corresponding to the intensely political circumstances, a recent study shows that 85% of Hong Kong interviewees agree that Hong Kong people are best described as "fighting for democracy," "upholding honesty and preventing corruption," "fighting for freedom," and "fighting for equality" (Low, Busiol, and Lee 2016, 425). Over the same period, Sebastian Veg studied the textual public space created during Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement. He suggested that "participants repeatedly expressed a strong commitment to creating spaces for deliberation and making decisions by consensus" (2016, 691), despite finally devolving into "internal division" (699). In the space of the occupied areas during the movement, slogans and poster writings reflected the democratic and outspoken feature of Hong Kong people. However, in the space of the Storytelling Channels of the Golden Forum and the LIHKG Forum, stories revealed merely an apolitical, private, and academically invisible side of the Hong Kong public. There was no significant transfiguration of political events into autobiographical documentation or satirical imagination during and after the Umbrella Movement. Developing in the postcolonial context, Hong Kong forum storytelling assumed no responsibility to record local history and conform to the standard political features that the public recognizes; instead, it offers an increasingly subjective buffer zone to alleviate discursive tensions and daily stress.

Yang Guobin (2009) expected that the Internet, as a new cultural form, could exert social and political influence in China through responding to the human condition. He held out hope that writing in the virtual public space might be compatible with the desire for progressive democratization in reality. In the context of Hong Kong, the Storytelling Channels of the two Forums reveal that the absence of governmental censorship is not the same thing as public willingness to address local issues. There is a broader non-political background, including the daily stress from long working hours (50.1 hours per week on average),¹² promised good service (originated from Andy Lau's advertisement in 2002),¹³ skyrocketing property prices,¹⁴ limited UGC-funded university places, a utilitarian social atmosphere with high power hierarchy, and so on, all of which encourage mass

¹² See details in "Will Hong Kong's problem with long working hours ever come to an end?" *South China Morning Post*, March 10, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2136552/will-hong-kongs-problem-long-working-hours-ever-come-end> (accessed December 5, 2018).

¹³ There are commentary articles criticizing Andy Lau's advertisement as leading to a culture of complaint and consequent pressure on those who work in service industries. Examples include "Gamsi gamjat gamge fukmou taaidou. . ." 今時今日咁嘅服務態度. . . (Nowadays this kind of serving attitude. . .) *The News Lens*, February 22, 2017, <https://hk.thenewslens.com/article/62187> (accessed December 5, 2018).

¹⁴ See details in "Hong Kong home prices rise for 25th straight month as record-breaking deals keep coming." *South China Morning Post*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/property/hong-kong-china/article/2148580/hong-kong-home-prices-rise-25th-straight-month-record> (accessed December 5, 2018).

narration and consumption of consumerist stories for a continuous, superficial, and sensual escape from the real public space. Personal vicissitudes, which are hardly academically justified, move forward online development of a pragmatic formula that emphasizes instant arousal of carnal desires. In the Storytelling Channels, these potentially resist examination of the political agenda of postcolonial Hong Kong, as did *Ten Years* (2015), the controversial co-directed film that won Best Film in the 35th Hong Kong Films Awards with its dystopian speculation about Hong Kong's future.

Formulating Consumerist Forum Stories

Hong Kong Forum writing is not cybertextual writing, which Espen J. Aarseth defines as human-designed and mechanically organized textual production that requires readers to effectuate a semiotic sequence from many possible others (1997, 1–2).¹⁵ It is not multilinear and multisequential, and its interactivity is based on writer-reader conversation, instead of on the reader's continuous dominant responses to mechanically generated possibilities. It is also different from writers' cyberliterature on the Chinese Internet, such as the representative mythic-magical novels (*xuanhuan xiaoshuo* 玄幻小說) including Xiao Ding's 蕭鼎 *Jade Dynasty* (*Zhu xian* 誅仙) (2005–Present) and Maoni's 貓膩 *Dusk* (*Jiang ye* 將夜) (2011–2014), posted on online literary platforms, instead of on forums free from commentators' heteroglossic interruptions.¹⁶ In general, the Forums' stories are based mostly on the contemporary contexts related to Hong Kong daily life, attracting arbitrary, rapid, and amnesic pastiches of personal responses and satires. Extemporaneous posting beyond the reach of ideological control in Hong Kong is close to daily conversation (and even more casual due to anonymity). The storytellers likely intend to constantly evoke the forum users' desire for immediate reading and commenting, rather than to deliver sublime ideas or stimulate significant discussions. There are certain strategies that storytellers adopt to attract readership in the open-access and communication-based Storytelling Channels.¹⁷

¹⁵ Aarseth details three processes of cybertextual production that rely heavily on human-machine collaboration: "(1) preprocessing, in which the machine is programmed, configured, and loaded by the human; (2) coprocessing, in which the machine and the human produce text in tandem; and (3) postprocessing, in which the human selects some of the machine's effusions and excludes others" (135).

¹⁶ Moreover, the Hong Kong Forum stories are mostly quotidian and ahistorical, unlike the Chinese cyberliterature that Li Dongjie (2015) summarized as expounding the traditional cultural spirit. In Li's comparison between Chinese and Western literature, "the cultural information carried by the common Chinese people goes into cyberspace," and "[t]raditional cultural spirit appears and updates on the internet in the form of symbols" (422). The Forum stories, despite potentially sharing the same set of grand traditional symbols with Chinese cyberliterature, adapt to a geopolitically specific dynamic and hence represent a personal preference for the re-creation of contemporary dailiness.

¹⁷ As studies of the consumerist business models (Ren and Montgomery 2012) and VIP System (Schleep 2015) related to Chinese online literature reveal, the format of online publishing platforms influences authorial intention, emplotment, thematization of narrative, networked interaction, and the values of writing. Moreover, Erni (2016, 2017) has meticulously illustrated the gimmicky "sexed linguistic innovations" of the Golden Forum. These include the mocking use of symbols, terms, and phrases.

Figure 3. The front page of the Storytelling Channel of the Golden Forum in desktop/laptop version

題目	發起人	最後回應時間	回覆	評分
Ztore-香港人最網上士多 ztore.com 香港品牌、米醬油鹽、零食餅乾 6000+ 買滿HK\$300即日免費送貨!				
www.ztore.com 雅虎贊助網站				
【穿越、校園】今年我三十三歲,回到了1998年(6) [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8] [9] [10] [11]	蔡泥	14/4/2018 9:03	267	8
【還存書口味】黑色蒲公英(二) [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8]	樓書雲	14/4/2018 8:57	182	0
【線游記】初本終局始末釋 輪迴百世過去休 [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [19] [20] [21] [22] [23] [24]	陳四月	14/4/2018 8:54	589	59
【欲】[玄幻][靈通]要投胎,就要害七個人 [2] [3]	粗人箭卡	14/4/2018 8:23	64	1
【絕不推頭】短篇小說 [2] [3] [4]	天洛卡	14/4/2018 7:50	82	2
【馬晉連載,請Hi Hi】Lucifer [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [18] [19] [20] [21] [22] [23]	極端的年代	14/4/2018 7:42	555	22
【找續成文字游記】《火星移民官調查檔案》	麥加丹	14/4/2018 7:29	2	1
我寫女團小說強知大家有冇興趣睇 [2] [3]	樓樓主女	14/4/2018 0:24	56	0
【接力連載,請Hi Hi】通往地獄的電梯 [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8] [9] [10] [11]	極端的年代	14/4/2018 0:13	267	17
【為什麼所有人都無法忘記的做自己呢】樓樓笑小說《波瀾》	史樓去陣	14/4/2018 0:07	21	0
VTC持續專業進修-多元選擇選擇 vtc.edu.hk 為在職人士提供多元化課程,配合不同專業發展需要,助你事業更進一步				
cpe.vtc.edu.hk 雅虎贊助網站				
原本,指SP係會搵到出真愛	三個傻瓜	13/4/2018 23:26	2	-3
【堂威中史】大清亡國關我老母蛋生活2 [2]	極端的年代	13/4/2018 21:15	30	8
【讀書】《知節》	蟹虫	13/4/2018 20:36	13	1
<能飲的><打到飛起>-英雄黃龍(3) <第二部> [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8]	竹治	13/4/2018 20:02	203	10

(1) Narrative titling: For better visibility on the front pages,¹⁸ post titles are usually designed to surprise and impress the readers with an abbreviated narrative idea. Story titles, such as “I am 33 years old this year, going back to 1998” (*Gamnin ngo 33 seoi, wuidou liu 1998* 今年我33歲, 回到了1998) and “In order to reincarnate, you need to harm seven people” (*Jiu tautoi, zaujiu hoi catgojan* 要投胎, 就要害七個人) (the first and fourth posts in Figure 3), are more temporal than descriptive in expression. They foreground surrealist stories related to the time travel of a middle-aged man and a Buddhist paradox of sin and reincarnation, respectively. Their gimmick lies in foreseeable unpredictability, relying on the readers’ expectation of the potentially enchanting plots that represent a departure from daily experiences.

(2) Titling with brackets: Many storytellers on the Forums favor using brackets, such as “【】,” “[],” and “(),” to supplement information and categorize their stories. For instance, there are brackets before the title “I am 33 years old this year, going back to 1998,” revealing that the story is about time travel and campus life. In Figure 4, bracketed notes include “A story about humanity again” (*Jansing gu cungeo* 人性故重出), “The dark-robed sage” (*Haakpou jinze* 黑袍賢者), and “A slightly erotic love story” (*Timtimdei ge ngoicing gusi* 甜甜地嘅愛情故事).¹⁹ They signal the motif, chapter component, and key selling point of the unread stories, framing the pre-reading expectations about the “taleworlds” that the readers are

¹⁸ As the Forums show only the titles and posters without quoting content, designing an eye-catching title is a prerequisite for entering the narrative competition. Only posts with the most clicks, replies, and subscriptions will remain, so the foregrounding of titles with immediacy, controversy, generality, or creativity is important.

¹⁹ The literal meaning of “*timtimdei ge ngoicing gusi*” is “a slightly sweet love story”; however, *tian* (sweet) in Hong Kong subculture can implicitly refer to affairs related to sex.

Figure 4. The front page of the Storytelling Channel of the LIHKG Forum in desktop/laptop version

choosing to enter.²⁰

(3) Conversational narrating: The forum storytellers clearly noticed the importance of compromising with their readers through a linear and sequential reading and writing structure, and hence would modify narrative strategies according to readers' responses. For instance, in the story page entitled "[Very obscene (or sweet)] When there are many Goddess-like German university students surrounding me, I start writing a diary" (*[Cungtim] Dong sanbin cyundousi neoisankap dik dakgwok neoi daaihoksang, ngo hoiciliu se jatgei dik zaapgwaan* [重甜] 當身邊全都是女神級的德國女大學生，我開始了寫日記的習慣)，the storyteller Zou Daaizifaigaa 做大指揮家 (literally, "being a great conductor")²¹ first posted a short selection from his diary introducing his meeting with Sophia (Post 1). After playing with the equivocation of the word "甜," signifying "sweet" literally and "obscene" implicitly, a forum member called "KVKY" posted the vulgar comment (Post 7), "If 'very obscene/sweet' means the taste of food, you will see me in your mother's bedroom tonight" (This kind of frank comment, regardless of its rudeness, is acceptable on both

²⁰ According to Katherine Young's theory (1986), narrative composes a storyrealm different from others with its edges and indicators, implying that the story titles with narrative elements and highlights have already foregrounded thematized consequentiality. The titles act as minor narratives and the beginnings of an expected narrative development, helping match storytellers' writing intentions to readers' reading preference. They strategically connect to a further and continuous tension between authorial creativity and reader-oriented consumption.

²¹ The Hong Kong Forum members mostly pick an unusual and playful name for themselves rather than a traditional Chinese one. Examples include the names of popular forum writers Mr. Pizza and "Niu" Bathei "鳥"不起 (signifying "The Amazing," but using the word "鳥" (bird) with the same pronunciation instead of "了" for the first word).

Forums). After receiving this comment on his incomplete story, Zou Daaizifaigaa replies that he initially intended to trick his potential readers (Post 11). Realizing that someone is really reading, he would like to continue the story (Post 10). He asks if anyone would follow the story updates if he kept narrating his German campus life concerning the foreign girls without erotic plots but with their photos instead (Post 16).

(4) Use of forum-writing techniques: Storytellers generally break their stories into pieces, instead of posting them as a whole. Specifically, Zou Daaizifaigaa, like many others, frequently inserted page-size blank spaces within the text to disrupt the continuity of reading and increase expectation by forcing readers to scroll down for the punch point, such as the one followed by the narrator's shout of a Cantonese swear word that aims to fool the readers (Post 1). In addition, he utilized referential intertextuality to strengthen the discursive power of his story. Referential intertextuality signifies the supplementary information posted arbitrarily within story posts, such as photos and profiles of the foreign girls (Posts 21, 22, and 36), thereby connecting text to images, the fictional world to the real chronotope, and imagined privacy to public voyeurism. This technique arouses the readers' desire to consume the storyteller's autobiographically documented depravity and to continue bridging textual anecdotes and exotic reality.

With the use of medium-specific narrative techniques, storytellers created miscellaneous consumerist stories on the Golden Forum and LIHKG Forum. Popular themes include sports (such as *400 miles/hour* [Sicuk seibaak lei 時速四百里]), sinful humanity (such as *The Hell of Property Ownership* [Zijip deijuk 置業地獄]), murder games (such as *The Murder Game of Snow White* [Baaksyut gungzyu saaijan jauhei 白雪公主殺人遊戲]), martial arts narratives (such as *I am, second to none!* [Ngo naai, tinhaa mou soeng! 我乃, 天下無雙!]), mythic-magicism (such as *The Human Realm* [Jangaan dou 人間道]), time travel (such as *The one-night stand takes me to the world after a decade and I have become a gangland boss* [Jatjcing ling ngo cyunjyut zoheoi sapninhau ge saigaai zung singwaizo haaksewui daailou 一夜情令我穿越咗去十年後嘅世界仲成為咗黑社會大佬]), rewriting of classics (such as *Journey to the Lie* [Fongjau gei 謊遊記]²²), horror and suspense (such as *Waking up in the West-Rail train.* [Cung saitit sengloi zihau. 從西鐵醒來之後.]), and quotidian surrealism (such as *Sick Hong Kong* [Beng gong 病港]). Some of the stories combine themes for a gimmicky effect, and most of them have a massive scale for the purpose of sustaining readers' attention and potentially publishing them later as a book.²³ Like most popular Japanese serial comics, such as *Naruto* (1999–2014) and

²² This story is a rewriting of the Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記).

²³ However, there is no attempted connection or conversation with the Storytelling Channel and local printed literary journals, such as *Fleurs des Lettres*, *Hong Kong Literature*, *Hong Kong Writers*, and *Voice & Verse Magazine*. So-called "serious literature" (*jimsuk manhok* 嚴肅文學), which draws both academic and critical attention with its social engagement and technical innovation, and forum writing, which tends to amuse, excite, surprise, and sentimentally move the majority of readers regardless of literary reception, develop independently from each other.

One Piece (1997–Present), and the million-word Chinese mythic-magical novels, the non-pornographic and non-romantic consumerist Forum stories usually adopt “hysterical surrealism” settings²⁴ and fight-oriented plots to maintain creativity and dramatic tension during rapid and persistent posting. Despite being formulaic, they retain a certain degree of nativity due to the use of vernacular (Cantonese) language with slang and the projection of specific subcultural and topographical images. The occasional adaptation of textual visualizations of an imagined Hong Kong according to the East Asian formulation of cultural production and consumption features the dynamics of Glocalization in a parochial online space, calling for temporary online carnivals to celebrate immorality, meaninglessness, absurdity, and contradiction, instead of serious reflections on post-handover politics.

The Sexualizing Cyberspace

As John Nguyet Erni observes, vernacular masculinity is the most prominent feature of the Golden Forum. The stories in it and the LIHKG Forum represent the same kind of masculine pornographic preference. When my friend who is an undergraduate student and an active member of the LIHKG Forum learned about my research on the two Forums’ storytelling, he sent me a screen capture to show a phenomenon that requires no scholarly knowledge to comprehend.²⁵ In Figure 5, captured from the Storytelling Channel of the LIHKG Forum, the words circled in red by my active-member friend all connote love and sex. “Hour hotel” (sizung *zaudim* 時鐘酒店, a kind of hotel that rents out rooms by the hour for quick sex), “ordering a hen” [female prostitute] (*giu gai* 叫雞), “love” (*ngoicing* 愛情), “very very sweet” [obscene] (*dodo tim* 多多甜), “scope out a goddess” [a girl with ideal features] (*kau neoisian* 溝女神), “a bit obscene about a wife” (*jancai meitim* 人妻微甜), foreground the consumerist stories that could instantly, but provisionally, remedy the reality of failed love and sex among male readers. These stories all

Figure 5. A screen capture from the Storytelling Channel of the LIHKG Forum by an active member (sent on April 21, 2018)



²⁴ This term borrows from “hysterical realism,” which Julia Lovell defines as originally describing “bulky, zany contemporary Anglophone novels written by authors such as Thomas Pynchon” (2012, 17) In her view, the hysterical realist novels destroy the possibility of meaningful ethical utterance.”

²⁵ The active member told me in a private conversation, “I could use just one figure to explain what LIHKG literature is. You don’t need to do the research anymore.”

received more “likes” than “dislikes,”²⁶ due to their obscene narration as expected from their post titles.

Marxists have portrayed modern capitalist society as hierarchizing and exploiting laborers, commodifying products and relations for competitive consumption, alienating the self, and so on. Under the mechanism of economic modernization, which is progressive, outcome-oriented, and de-anthropocentric, individuals are supposed to live with an orientation towards reification and fetishism. One could obtain pseudo-autonomy from consuming standardized goods and services level by level, but then fall into a vicious cycle of increasing labor and rising costs. However, the internet world, despite following the same capitalist logic, diversifies free consumption and hence offers new possibilities of escape from the stress of the demands of modern life. Free entertainment and communication with hidden identities and privacy form a new lifestyle, enabling a viral spread of pornographic ideology as an increasingly prominent characteristic of Hong Kong cyberspace.

In his study of the global biopolitical order, Sheldon H. Lu examines the capitalist progression of globalization that potentially liberates the body politic and meanwhile regulates desires, bodies, affects, and sexuality (2007, 2). Derived from surplus capital, a “libidinal economy” emerges across national borders and enables geographically and financially flexible citizens to subjugate affective laborers²⁷ to “new forms of commodification, control, exploitation, and victimization” (4). The diffuse and relaxed control over the libidinal economy, with reference to Lu’s perspective on the postindustrial development of Western society,²⁸ denotes an ideological shift from modern to postmodern. This aspect of postmodernity is apparent in the Golden Forum and the LIHKG Forum with netizens being the flexible citizens. The Forum members can transcend physical boundaries and explore pornographic information to share and consume for free.²⁹ They represent Hong Kong Internetization as an egalitarian motion towards libido, sentiment, and desire, and against mechanical, homogeneous, rational, conventional, ritual, and pragmatic modernity.

One observable fact is that pornographic ideology is increasingly manipulative and penetrative in the culture of forum storytelling in Hong Kong. In 2011, Hoengsai Cyunsoeng Ceonsyu 向西村上春樹 (a name combining an implicitly vulgar concept “towards the female genitals” (*heongsai* 向西) and

²⁶ As shown in Figure 5, the score of a post is on the right next to the number of replies. It is calculated by the number of “likes” minus the number of “dislikes.”

²⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define affective labor as “immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (2001, 293).

²⁸ Based on Michel Foucault’s observation of the “less cumbersome and heavy-handed” regulation of the body in the West since the 1960s, Lu asserts that the change of body control “indicates a paradigmatic change from modernity and industrial society to postmodernity and postindustrial society in the West” (16).

²⁹ The sociological research of Daniel TL Shek and Cecilia MS Ma has revealed that the internet has been one of the most popular channels for at least Hong Kong young people to obtain sexual information due to its easy accessibility, affordability, and anonymity (2013, 157).

the sinographs for the name of the famous Japanese writer Haruki Murakami (Cyunsoeng Ceonsyu 村上春樹) posted *Dongguanese Wood* (*Dunggun dik samlam* 東莞的森林)³⁰ in the form of blank verse in the Golden Forum, drawing mass attention to local online erotic writing. This autobiographical story became popular for its combination of lyrical, satirical, and humorous narrative styles to satisfy the public desire to peep at the private experiences of visiting mainland Chinese prostitutes (Dong Guan, an industrial city where many Hong Kong entrepreneurs located their factories from the 1980s, is notorious for its sex industry). In 2012, it was first published in print and the initial run of 30,000 copies was soon sold out³¹ (Xu 2012). In the same year, this forum story was adapted to the Category III film³² *Due West: Our Sex Journey*, following the local box-office success of the erotic blockbuster *3D Sex and Zen: Extreme Ecstasy* (2011), which beat *Avatar*'s record of 2.5 million Hong Kong dollars for a one-day opening gross (Chu 2011). As the first Hong Kong film adapted from a forum story, *Due West: Our Sex Journey* represents the local film industry's observation and formulation of Hong Kong people's desires based on the online popularity of *Dongguanese Wood* and thus reveals a collective private search for corporeal intimacy and fantasy.

Titled with the bracketed note "an epic report of ordering hens" (*sisi sik giugai bougou* 史詩式叫雞報告), *Dongguanese Wood* is different from other online pornographic novels, which chiefly depict sexual exploits from beginning to end. Written in an era with a forum culture less obsessed with sex, it could present the narrator's gradual indulgence in reflective narcissism and sexual comfort. The first post is an introduction to his personal ambivalence while first traveling to Dongguan solely for sexual services. In the first stanza, Hoengsai Cyunsoeng Ceonsyu expresses himself implicitly and lyrically as follows:

"To Dongguan"
"45 RMB"
After taking a one-way train ticket from the ticket office
I feel nervous again.
Like my friend said,
After trying a Dongguan-style sauna once,
Your established values of more than twenty years
Will completely collapse
After one or two shudders.
I don't doubt him,
So I know this CRH³³ train ticket
May be an entrance ticket with no return home

³⁰ This name is adapted from Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987).

³¹ It is commonly known in the Hong Kong literary arena that the sales of the novels of the best Hong Kong literary writers are generally below 3,000 copies.

³² The Hong Kong government introduced a film ratings system in 1988. The Category III films are ones that nobody younger than 18 is permitted to rent, purchase, or watch.

³³ CRH is known as the "China Railway High-speed," signifying the high-speed trains operated by China Railway.

“Sauna” indexes a mystical scene related to sex, somewhere between known and unknown. The decision to explore it corresponds to proving the idea of the narrator’s friend about the fundamental loss of a sense of morality due to sexual satisfaction. “One to two cold shocks” signifies the swift physical reaction during orgasm, contrary to the eternal, universal, anti-carnal, and socially preferred values. “Your established values of more than twenty years / Will completely collapse After one or two shudders” briefly unveils the fragility of personal beliefs and social norms; it was widely regarded as an aphorism in the Golden Forum.

In addition, Hoengsai Cyunsoeng Ceonsyu utilized abundant scholarly allusions, such as the Japanese animation master Hayao Miyazaki’s criticism of urban youngsters’ indulgence in I pads as akin to masturbation (Chapter 1), and the experiment involving a female ape having sex with male apes for money to buy fruit in the book *SuperFreakonomics* (Chapter 2), and also utilizes metaphors based on daily observations, such as relating his first lover’s masturbation approach to the hesitant style of the football team Arsenal (Chapter 1). Such allusions and metaphors epigrammatically satirize the lonely social atmosphere in reality, which trigger the phenomenal interest in voyeurism in the first place. The local success of *Dongguanese Wood* and its filmic adaption is not simply based on the gimmicky emphasis on textual or visualized debauchery, but is more significantly based on the sarcastic reflection on sex revealing certain existential dilemmas faced by Hong Kong adults in the knowledge-based economy.

The popularity of *Dongguanese Wood* did not lead to a fashion of imitating the heuristic pornographic style, but instead to the mass production of sexually explicit narratives in forums. Towards the late 2010s, pornographic ideology has been gradually overwhelming sophisticated meditation on daily conflicts. Superficial pastiches of sex organs (concerning their size, shape, color, smell, status, and reactions) and sexual activities (masturbation, sexual intercourse, non-penetrative sex, oral sex, etc.) have become dominant and are characterized by surprising variation. Literary and satirical skills are not prerequisites for obtaining positive responses. With more “likes” than “dislikes” (560 versus 126), the story titled “(Extremely obscene) J Images? I only care about the dairy-cow grade” ((*Gikcung tim*) J tou? ngo zitai naaingau kap (極重甜) J圖?我只睇奶牛級) in the LIHKG Forum is a typical example. It is written in vernacular Cantonese with abundant use of subcultural slang. The title presupposes that the readers have prior knowledge about “J images” (female images for the purpose of masturbation) and can connect “dairy cow” to a woman with big breasts. As the story begins, the storyteller Jyunhokdaaisi Zim Waizung 玄學大師詹惟中 titillates the readers without the profound reflections and non-erotic narration that Hoengsai Cyunsoeng Ceonsyu applied throughout *Dongguanese Wood*.

As a salty-wet boy [lecher], I basically watch av [Japanese adult videos] every day. I usually just want to watch it, but then, watching and watching, can't keep myself from touching my dick, and then hit the plane [the male action of masturbation]. I am obsessed with huge boobs, av, choosing only so-called tia, Utsunomiya, Mihara-something to watch. I would not j [masturbate to] whoever doesn't have an H cup like a dairy cow and fucking waste my sperm.

This beginning foregrounds a masculine gaze fetishizing female breasts. Despite its offensive view of girls and women as objects of sexual desire in the public space of the Storytelling Channel, the story continues with the libidinal fantasy about the male protagonist's sudden metamorphosis into a big-breasted schoolgirl. The narcissistic schoolgirl performs absurd actions under the patriarchal and parochial consensus between the nick-named storyteller and his hidden readers.

On Gender Possibilities under Pornographic Ideology

The sweet/obscene and love forum stories are not homogeneously heterosexual and androcentric. There are idiosyncratic stories that address diverse sexual issues for a readership concerning sexual minority. For instance, “She and I End not Suddenly” (*Wo he ta buji erzong* 我和她 不疾而終), one of the few forum stories with a contemporary background written in standard Mandarin Chinese, is an incomplete autobiographical narrative about the heterosexual narrator's reminiscences of her lesbian lover. It questions the necessity of having a boyfriend (Post 6), the independence of women (Post 6), and gender identification through appearance (Post 7). Similarly, “The Office in Central” (*Zungwaan baangungsat* 中環辦公室), with bracketed key words “suit men,” “hehe” (man-man love), and “slightly obscene,” focuses on a gay team leader who has a rather feminine body (5 feet 6 inches, 110 pounds, thin without distinct pectoral muscles, and white skin, Post 3). The frequent narrative interchange between routine office tasks and unexpected sexual excitement explores the private space for homosexual sex, the libidinal disintegration of power hierarchy, and the individualism of the gay biopolitic.

Zandik Zoengdaai Liu 真的長大鳥, claiming to be “a straight man” (Post 16), wrote a more dramatically and literarily complicated story entitled “[Slightly obscene, not an obscene story] [In order to change my gender, I can only be a prostitute.]” ([*Siutim, feitimgu*] [Waizo binsing, ngo waijau zougai.] [少甜, 非甜故] [為左變性, 我唯有做雞.]). Despite receiving only 156 “likes” (and 4 “dislikes”), this story deserves more analysis. It fictionally constitutes an intersectional storyrealm, neither autobiographically retelling personal experiences nor monolithically displaying sexual organs and actions. The storyrealm, described as not focusing on obscenity, profoundly exposes a bundle of correlated gender issues, such as prostitution, homosexual and bisexual love, transgender impulses, and medical ethics concerning sex reassignment surgery and doctor-patient relationships. Like Hoengsai Cyunsoeng Ceonyu, Zandik Zoengdaai Liu proactively delivers his own perspectives through the first-person protagonist's lyrical reflections. His story begins with the female protagonist Lam Janji's selling of sex to a rich man due to her urgent need for money for sex reassignment surgery (Posts 1 and 2). After her uncaring lovemaking, the sight of many couples on the street leads her to reflect on the Movement for Gender Equality, and relate this to her tragic past (Post 4):

In recent years, society increasingly accepts homosexual love. Singers, artists, and a Legislative Council member have come out of the closet one by one. The Movement for

Gender Equality has earned more and more rainbows.

To build a rainbow bridge, surely we need rain. Now the great rainbow bridge can support so many comrades, revealing how cruel the previous storms were.

[. . .]

At the beginning, you said drizzle was romantic. When the rain grew heavier, you said each of us getting half-wet [under an umbrella] didn't matter. Why, until a storm attacked, did you coldly leave me alone, running towards the shelter a man prepared for you, and leaving me in the heavy rain?

Janji is ambivalent about the gradual success of the Movement and her own personal failure in maintaining her homosexual relationship. She sentimentally expresses her feebleness in her encounter with volatile gender norms, shifting sexual orientations, and the personal choice of her lover. In the rest of the story, this weakness is a fluidly changing subject in the male storyteller's plots: medical ethics estranges Janji from a male surgeon when she suddenly wants heterosexual romance (Post 339); Janji has to accept that her female lover, for whom she decides to urgently change her biological sex, truly wants a heterosexual marriage (Post 436); the hormone replacement therapy reduces the femininity of Janji, causing a loss of the identity that connects her to the straight male surgeon (Post 456). The whole story is shaded with a melancholic tone to lament the plight of the sexual minority. The beautiful young lesbian female protagonist needs to face the uncertainty of interpersonal affection and social discrimination until she becomes one of the sexual majority, suspending her transgender plans and beginning to love the male surgeon (Posts 579 and 580).

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous called for women's binary-opposite writing against masculine conventions. She urged women to "write through their bodies" and "invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations, and codes" to "win back" the authority of their own bodies (1976, 886). Zhende Zhangda Niao's story focuses on a lesbian woman, who aims to transcend the fixed binary opposition between sexes through becoming the opposite other. Her body is a mixture of men's fetish, private commodity, medical object, and autonomous subjectivity. It represents the author's diverse imagination and literary innovation concerning a woman with a specifically fabricated identity. However, as the author is a man and wrote under a consumerist forum culture, the female protagonist could not represent the female voice that Cixous demands, but instead a male and public voice. She is a subaltern woman due to her socially despised occupation and sidestream sexual orientation. The only emancipation for her is to obey the discipline of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls "epistemic violence" (2010, 2115), relinquishing her insincere transgender attempt and the bonding with her ex-girlfriend. "Epistemic violence" illustrates the Western intelligence's hegemonic constitution of the colonial subject as Other, which shadows the voice of subaltern women. In the case of storytelling in the two Hong Kong Forums, the source of "epistemic violence" is the populist cultural capitalism that unifies perspectives according to the preferences of the local majority. Zandik Zoengdaai Liu holds the

authority to narrate the fictive female character within the tension between the Western discourse of gender emancipation and the local demand for heterosexual romanticism. He, like other Hong Kong storytellers on the two Forums, is a postcolonial other, internalizing and representing the tension. Janji, as a subaltern character configured and narrated by the postcolonial other, cannot speak for herself because the compromise between the storyteller, readers, and mainstream perspectives has predetermined what she should say. Though not pornographically depicting fetishization, she meticulously complies with publicly recognized minor erotic and romantic requirements.

Stories like these that explore gender issues are rare in the two Forums. Although the (post)colonial analytic paradigm is sometimes valid for conceptualizing Hong Kong's connections to exterior cultural dynamics, most of the stories simply create defamiliarized scenes for formulaic plots that match the tastes of the forum users. Some minor voices of resistance, emancipation, empowerment, and progression can be detected in the Forum stories as "political" (albeit not in a grand political sense), but the overall tendency is towards easy entertainment, with additional pornographic narrative being most welcome.

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