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Gender as Spatial Identity
Gender strategizing in postcolonial and neocolonial Hong Kong

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A photo essay exploring the how gender identity is deliberately constructed through social positioning within the urban landscape of Hong Kong. Hong Kong has always had a binary identity, which continues through from the postcolonial to the neocolonial. This creates layers of additional complexity around gender identity, which is explored in terms of performativity and authenticity through both the heterosexual fluidity of foreign domestic workers and through homosexual tactics of local men, within a public park in Hong Kong. By rejecting the past through a politics of disappearance, previous boundaries around fluidity, repression, and suppression continue to influence the present in a volatile neocolonial context opening questions around what is an authentic performance of self.

#hong kong
#postcolonial
#neocolonial
#performativity
#authenticity

This photo essay explores the manner in which gender identity is constructed as deliberate instances of spatial positioning in the dense urban landscape of Hong Kong. The images are drawn from a collection, *Do You Know Where the Birds Are* (2018), created by Liao Jiaming (*廖 家 明*), the City University of Hong Kong. Both text and images elaborate on the complexity of contemporary gender practices, in both the postcolonial[1] – British derived – and, what can be termed a neocolonial, Chinese aligned (Zheng 2010) urban space.

Historically, as a territory itself, Hong Kong's inherent identity has always been binary. Hong Kong's 'Special Administrative Region' spatial identity has always differentiated its territorial character based on its geopolitical alignment as being both 'part of' and 'separated from' British-Sino urbanisation processes. The specific constructs associated with the territoriality of a City State, versus the fluid and incremental territorialities of its dwellers, attest to Ravi Sundaram's (2010) concepts of Pirate Modernity, as parallel worlds of existence within the well-intended planning that aims at goals of becoming modern.

Kowloon Park, née Whitfield Barracks, came into existence around 1970 (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). Strategically located in the heart of Hong Kong, originally to defend against invading naval forces, it will be argued that it continues as a symbol of resistance against invading ideologies.

The top-down patriarchal model of urban planning for Whitfield Barracks (Lin 2018) was one of many steps taken towards postcolonialism as the political relationship between Hong Kong, China and the UK changed. The Barracks itself can be interpreted as a masculine space: it had an aggressive stance, was strategic in posture, and predominantly populated by men. The shift from a military role to a public park would have been conceived, at the time, as a liberalising, and unusually (for Hong Kong) non-commercial venture. In general, the city park is not conceived as belonging to either gender, although it could be postulated that as a relatively inclusive (family) space, and a space more orientated to tactical interaction than strategic, it is more feminine than masculine. And in this vein, it can be claimed the shift from barracks to park is, on one level, a shift along the continuum from masculinity towards femininity. However, something more complex is exposed when taking a relational approach to this modern space of participation.

Fifty years into the life of the park, two remarkable and regular activities have developed in Kowloon Park. Sunday is the agreed day[2] of rest for Hong Kong's foreign domestic workers and many of them congregate in the park. The second point of interest occurs most evenings, with gay men using the park for cruising and sex. What ties these two activities together is a very explicit performativity, as per Judith Butler's work (1990): not an expression of what one is, rather as something that one does, and does repeatedly. Butler outlines modes of "self-making" through which subjects become socially intelligible and hence advocates against positions that see a social imposition on a gender-neutral body. In this framework, and according to Butler's theory, homosexuality and heterosexuality are not fixed categories. What is argued for here is the illumination, so to say, of a genesis of gender association that overrides the intentionality of design, and in these instances, neutrally accepted elements of the city, parks, benches, walkways and flyover railings. Spaces may be designed with or without gender in mind, but the final gendering of the space will be socio-culturally imbued, fluidly, over spatiotemporal dimensions by those inside the space and (differently) by those outside the space.

We trace 'Heterosexual Fluidity' in the foreign domestic workers of Hong Kong and their gender identities within Hong's Kong's public spaces. This fluidity is in opposition to the containment of binary

logic which establishes a boundary delineating genders, so that while male still exists in opposition to female, a shifting performativity means an individual need not hold a fixed position. Instead there is an openness, a fluidity or flux, that breaks with discourse of desire following from gender and gender following from sex.

Importing foreign domestic workers to Hong Kong began in the 1970s (Labour Department - The Government of the Hong Kong SAR 2017) in response to labour shortages stemming from the changing relationship between Hong Kong and China. The beginning of the postcolonial journey created a significant boost to Hong Kong's economy that resulted in a labour shortage that attracted many women into the workforce and subsequently increased the demand for domestic workers (a breakdown by nationality and sex can be found in Table 1).

Most foreign domestic workers have Sunday as their rest day[2] and they congregate in public spaces around Hong Kong's central business district. For the remainder of the week, the business district is dominated by power dressing workers from the finance sector: the hegemonic class. On Sundays this hegemonic class who are used to being served, is replaced by those who serve; Hong Kong's foreign domestic workers return each Sunday to the same, known and to some extent controlled, spaces. It not only makes it easier for friends to find each other, but it also makes it easier for Hong Kong locals to avoid these spaces which become unmistakably demarcated by temporary cardboard structures (Cenzatti 2008) – an ongoing segregation of classes, with a temporal relaxation of access to elite spaces in the city.

The foreign domestic workers become simultaneously seen and hidden, or more simply: hidden in plain sight (see fig. 3: Hong Kong locals walk down the centre of a pedestrian bridge, whilst not seeing the foreign domestic workers who are huddled along the edges). The line between public and private is blurred: living in the employer's residence (as per Hong Kong legislation) results in a lack of privacy, which is compensated for by creating semi-private zones in public areas around the city (Cenzatti 2008).

On a surface level, the foreign domestic workers congregate in the park as friends, to share each other's company, food, (religious) study and entertainment (fig. 5 and fig. 9). In some instances, the sharing is contained within a perimeter of a 500 mm high temporary cardboard box. In other instances the exchange is transparent, visible for all to see. However, on a deeper level, they are undergoing a process of self-making, in which their physical acts are used to define a space of being, producing a space of consumption (De Certeau 1984), through who they are and their formation tactics. Living and working in a foreign country, confronted by a culture shock, it becomes easy to feel that one's self-identity is threatened (Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001), especially when working within a system of oppressive trade-offs. Sunday is a time for foreign domestic workers to speak their own languages, eat food from their home countries, and engage in cultural activities that remind them of home; this is a time to define themselves as not in Hong Kong and not a domestic worker,[3] and to engage in the performativity of their native region.

These actions are repeated weekly, as a community, and it is only through repetition or recitation that this discourse is imbued with power. This is not identical re-enactment; although each recitation is different from previous acts, it still reiterates the norms of the group. Over and above any personal enjoyment, these actions are also undertaken to be seen by others. At its core, this default set of activities and their spatialisation is a performativity that wants to be seen and acknowledged by others from the same community and in this manner mechanises visibility to exert power to define a

social and gender norm within a foreign context. This is not Maurice Halbwach's (1950) constructing of new collective memories in a new place, but an always imperfect reconstruction from the past in the form of reminiscing about a previous time and place. Hong Kong is an interstitial space for foreign domestic workers, a stepping stone to somewhere else, and not somewhere they can establish roots of their own.[4]

Located within the same space, 'Homosexual Tactics,' construct other identities. In 1967, England and Wales decriminalised homosexual acts in private for males aged 21 or above. At the time, this caused a lot of discussion in Hong Kong, as it did in many of the UK's other colonies, but a similar law to decriminalise private homosexual acts in Hong Kong wasn't enacted until 1991. During the mid-1960s the Anglican Church campaigned for Hong Kong to follow the UK's lead; however, the Hong Kong government declined in the face of survey results which indicated that most of the local population5 harboured "strong feelings of disgust" for homosexuality[6] (Vittachi 2016, para. 9).

Not feeling comfortable in private spaces (for example the home[7]), many gay men in Hong Kong seek solace in public spaces. Kowloon Park offers an anonymous space with sufficient plausible deniability for gay men to meet. Some of them fear using online dating applications, as it is advertising a (non-fluid) version of themselves, which could be used to destructively out them publicly (supported by local lore). Being seen entering, or exiting, a known gay bar or nightclub, within the dense city of Hong Kong, is problematic for gay men wanting to stay in the closet.

Juggling multiple selves and yet operating in opposition within the same heteronormative space as the foreign domestic workers, homosexual performativity alters the very conditions of temporality and space (Halberstam 2005). Reverting back to Moya Lloyd's (1999) notion, a person is merely in a condition of "doing straightness" or "doing queerness". Gay men avoid the pressure of heteronormativity found within private spaces by using public spaces, like Kowloon Park. Spaces, public or private, attest to a continuous gender challenge against colonial as well as neocolonial, and in this instance heteronormative, behaviour, narratives and patterns.

Kowloon Park at night is appropriated, through the mix of both anonymity and visibility, to initiate contact. The importance of being visible and hidden, operating on the literal shadow line of the spaces, becomes the performativity of gender within the context of 'planned' or zoned space, to subvert cultural beliefs of the Orient and its heteronormative systems. The brightness of the security lighting creates shadowy spaces to meet in; the actors move between showing themselves, displaying themselves, to hiding away from the public gaze.

Men come back regularly to repeat not only their own performance of homosexuality, but to observe others: this set of activities and spatialisation is a performativity that wants to be seen and acknowledged by others from the same community, and in this manner mechanises visibility to exert power to define a social and gender norm within a context that feels foreign.

Concluding Thoughts

Domestic workers and slavery both have a long history in China. A foreign domestic worker is referred to in Cantonese as 'amah', which may have come via the much earlier Portuguese colonisation of the area. Due to the impacts of globalisation, many of them see Hong Kong as a first and temporary arrangement; rather than planning to return home, they contemplate working in other countries[4] around the world. During this time, female domestic workers give up their immediate roles as wife and

mother: the performativity of these roles shifts into cyberspace. For some, the shift is so significant that it creates changes in the physical realm, as their performativity slides between traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity. At its most fluid, some choose to become tomboy lesbians[8] while in Hong Kong without giving up their original identity.

Masculinity in China is historically talked of as having two qualities: *wen* (文) and *wu* (武). *Wen* encompasses scholarly pursuits, calligraphy, poetry and music. *Wu*, on the other hand, encompasses more physical pursuits, brute force and conquest. This sounds like the Western concept of brains and brawn, except that *wen* stretches much further than the intellect to include grooming, the use of makeup, fashion and elegant conduct. This can result in a straight man wearing makeup, without identifying as effeminate, to express that he is more *wen* than *wu*. *Wen* and *wu* are not fixed as opposites and are without clear boundaries. These concepts shape the performativity of being male, whether subjects identify as homosexual or not.

With the complexities of postcolonial contexts, the overarching concerns remain the balance between the colonial and the process of decolonialisation (a seemingly never-ending shift through postcolonial and neocolonial phases). Boundaries around fluidity, repression and suppression all have histories that started before colonialism in Hong Kong and have survived into the neocolonial. Rejection of the past, and what to keep and what to remove remain a key concern for those who dwell within the specific restraints of territories, which leads to questions of authenticity in gender performativity in a highly volatile neocolonial context.

In conclusion, with the city read as process and product, gender and the urban merges, repositioning a binary urban framework within a perspective of performativity. In the dense setting of Hong Kong, identity and space remain ever entwined, with constantly shifting fluid boundaries. Urban space becomes social space in which the performativity of gender occurs, as a condition through which deliberate instances transform the layering of the urban, breaking the smooth continuity with the denaturalisation of hegemonic space and creating sites of critical agency.[9]

Acknowledgements

This photo essay draws heavily on a collection of images created by Liao Jiaming (廖家明) from his collection entitled *Do You Know Where the Birds Are* (2018). Liao is currently completing an MFA in creative media at the City University of Hong Kong.

Table 1: Foreign Domestic workers by nationality and sex, 2017 (The Government of Hong Kong SAR, 2018)

Nationality	*Sex*	*Numbers of persons*	*Percentage*	*Religion*
Philippines	Female	196,619	53.19%	85% Roman Catholic
	Male	4,471	1.21%	
Indonesia	Female	159,355	43.11%	87% Muslim
	Male	258	0.07%	
Thailand	Female	2,435	0.66%	94% Buddhist
	Male	33	0.01%	
Other	Female	5,628	1.52%	
	Male	852	0.23%	
Total	Female	364,037	98.48%	
	Male	5,614	1.52%	

Notes

1. This article won't get involved in the debate around assigning dates for these periods. Hong Kong was technically handed over from the British to China in 1997, which could be argued as the technical line between colonial and postcolonial. The problem with this approach is that the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which announced the intention to hand Hong Kong back to China, was made at the end of 1984. The shift from colonial to postcolonial would have occurred after 1984 but well before 1997, with some theorists using the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989 as the turning point with its associated rise in emigration from Hong Kong.

2. Hong Kong's foreign domestic workers need to follow several additional rules over and above those applying to foreign workers, two of which are of interest here: they must live in their employer's place of residence, and they have the right to one continuous 24-hour period of rest every week. There is no specification as to which day of the week is the rest day, but by practice it is usually Sunday, and most likely aligns with (Christian) religious traditions.

3. Most foreign domestic workers from the Philippines and Indonesia were not employed as domestic workers in their home countries. They have taken on these roles in foreign countries because of the relatively low earning power in their home countries – a choice driven by precarity. As such, they don't define their identities as domestic workers, but rather see themselves as financially empowering their family (back at home) or as a stepping stone to further education in a foreign country.

4. It is illegal for foreign domestic workers to become permanent residents in Hong Kong, except for through the path of marriage to a Hong Kong local. Many of the workers report planning to move to Canada or Brazil, where they are eligible for permanent residence.

5. At the time of the survey the local population was 90 percent ethnically Chinese and non-Christian.

6. It's worth noting that polygyny was legal in Hong Kong until 1971, although the practise has been allowed to continue for Hong Kong's billionaires.

7. Hong Kong has prohibitively high property prices combined with a low minimum wage, that results in many children living with their parents well past their twenties. Homes are often open plan, lacking privacy. Moving out can also mean living in a group house with four or more people sharing a single bedroom. Thirty percent of the population live in public housing estates, which are not available for gay couples.

8. This is a shift in gender roles rather than a shift in sexuality. The majority of workers accepting a "lesbian" role (masculine or feminine) after arriving in Hong Kong, report they have no intention of leaving their husbands or families. It's a short-term, pragmatic approach, which can be confusing when seen through a binary lens.

9. This is not to imply that subjects are making active choices; performativity requires recitation of previously established norms which precede and constrain the performer.

Figure 1: Kowloon Park with the Whitfield Barracks, 1968. Source: Lin 2018.

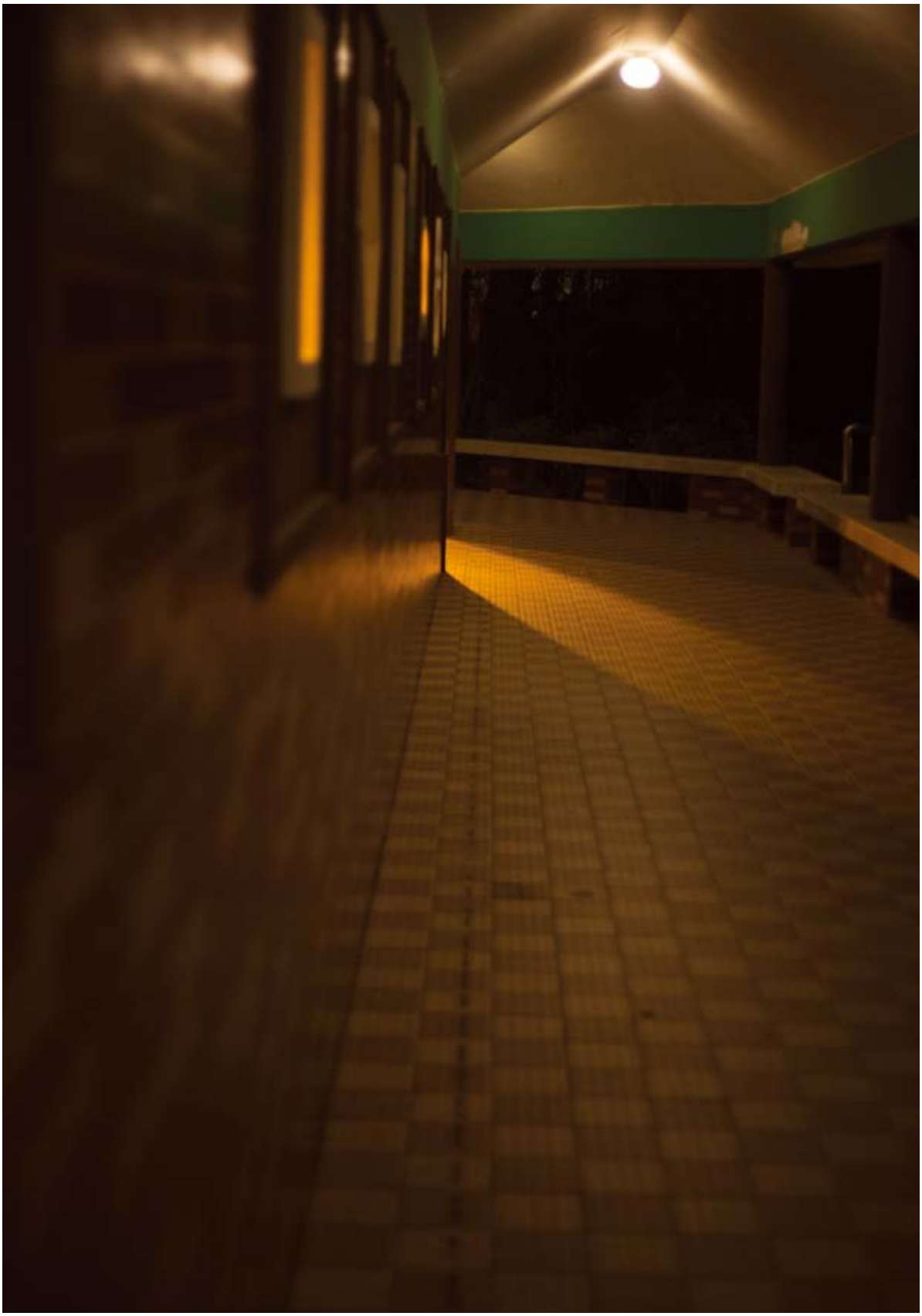
Figure 2: (opposite page) Kowloon Park. Source: Google 2018.

Figure 3: Pedestrian bridge, Mong Kok. Source: Tim Tang 2018.

Figure 4 (opposite page): High as a vantage point, Kowloon Park. Source: Liao Jiaming 2018.

Figure 5: Studying the Quran, Kowloon Park Source: Tim Tang 2018.

Figure 6 (opposite page): The same space at night, Kowloon Park. Source: Liao Jiaming 2018.



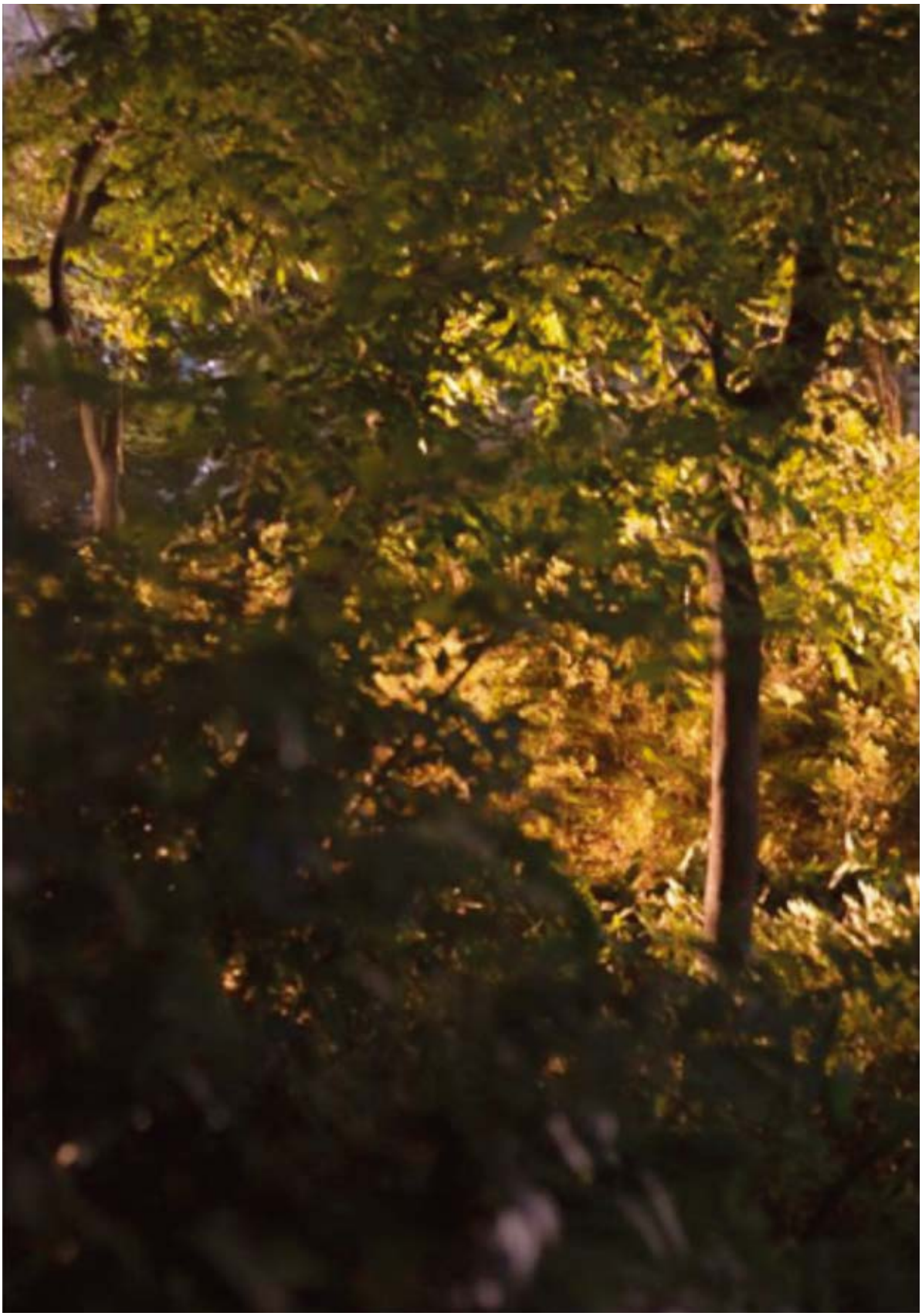


Figure 7 (page 112, top): Tunnels, Kowloon Park. Source: Liao Jiaming 2018.

Figure 8 (page 112 bottom): Bamboo, Kowloon Park. Source: Liao Jiaming 2018.

Figure 9 (page 113, top): Sitting for religious study, Kowloon Park. Source: Tim Tang 2018.

Figure 10 (page 113, bottom): Sitting and waiting, Kowloon Park. Source: Liao Jiaming 2018.

Figure 11 (page 114): City lights create shadowy spaces, Kowloon Park. Source: Liao Jiaming 2018.

Figure 12 (page 115): Hiding in shadows from the light, Kowloon Park. Source: Liao Jiaming 2018.

Figure 13 (right): Walking among the light and the dark, Kowloon Park. Source: Liao Jiaming 2018.

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Bio

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