



# Narrating the trope of abnormality: The making of closeted experiences in gay public cruising



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines gay men's cruising in public space, with specific focus on People's Park, Guangzhou, China. It argues that while sexual minorities' entry into public visibility and the building of shared social terrains can be seen as resistance to heteronormativity, queered or sexualised public space is often situated within and potentially reproduces the constructed binary between hetero- and homosexuality. Building upon insights provided by Fuss (1991), among others, it emphasises the mutually constitutive relationships between the discursive configurations of hetero- and homosexuality. Arguing that homosexuality identity is simultaneously imbricated in discourses of heterosexuality, this paper uses a case study of People's Park to demonstrate how the hegemony of heteronormativity is enacted, despite the transgressive and resistive nature of public cruising. To elucidate this point of view, this paper turns to the analysis of a trope of abnormality constructed in gay cruisers' discourses, and investigates the ways in which this trope of abnormality manifests itself in the homo-social relations and interactions between gay cruisers. Empirical research in this paper analyses and unravels three parallel aspects of gay cruisers' socio-spatial practices, namely, how they associate public visibility with shame and transgressiveness; how they feel embarrassed over the culture of promiscuity in the park and substantial lack of stable, monogamous relationships; and how they come to terms with the perceived fragility of gay communal solidarity through bemoaning the proliferation of prostitution and robbery.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines gay men's cruising in public spaces, with specific focus on People's Park, Guangzhou, China. Similar to their counterparts in the West, lesbians and gays in contemporary China are subject to the domination of hegemonic heterosexuality. During the Maoist period, stern regulation on non-normative sexual behaviours banished gay men to almost thorough invisibility, and cruising for sexual relationships took place only in a small number of highly hidden spots in cities. Since Deng Xiaoping's economic reform, limited political liberalisation has allowed publicly more visible spaces for cruising and even commercial gay venues to emerge (Wei, 2012). Pioneering works by Wei (2009, 2012), Ho (2010) and Fu (2012) have investigated the variegated configurations of gay (and to a lesser extent, lesbian) subjectivities in queered and sexualised urban spaces, and how sexual dissidents resist their invisibility and marginality in different ways and to different extents.

Extensive works in geography and related disciplines have profoundly advanced our knowledge on the ways in which cruising in

public space contributes to the formation of queer communities and identities. A widely concurred argument states that cruising is a politicised socio-spatial practice subverting dominant meanings of urban spaces, and thus contesting heteronormative orders. While the current research does not oppose this point of view, it also echoes Nash's (2006) contention that the emergence and construction of spaces inhabited by sexual dissidents are highly uncertain, fluid and contested, in tandem with diverse and shifting ideologies. In particular, the paper argues that, because the discursive configurations of hetero- and homosexuality are mutually constitutive (Fuss, 1991), homosexual identity arising from the socio-spatial landscapes of cruising inevitably invokes thinking on what is meant by the supposedly "mainstream" heterosexuality. Hence, cruising may potentially re-inscribe the constructed binary between hetero- and homosexuality, rather than dismantle it.

In People's Park, cruising can certainly be seen as a resistive and emancipatory practice. At the same time, however, gay cruisers still need to negotiate the association of homosexuality with shame and deviancy, undergirded by a powerful hetero-/homosexual binary. At the empirical level, this article investigates the social, cultural and discursive processes in which gay cruisers associate their public visibility with shame and transgressiveness, feel

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Fig. 1. The location of People's Park in Guangzhou.

embarrassed over the culture of promiscuity and paucity of monogamous relationships, and come to terms with the perceived fragility of gay communal solidarity. Overall, this study is interested in how the enactment of the homo-/heterosexual binary helps heterosexuality to discipline the extent to which queer identities can be imagined and articulated.

People's Park is located in Guangzhou's city centre, and is one of the city's oldest modern public parks. It is connected conveniently to other parts of the city via public transport. Prior to 1998, the park charged a small entrance fee to its visitors. But in 1998 the surrounding walls were demolished by the Municipal Government of Guangzhou and the entrance fee revoked. Soon after that, gay men began to gather in the park for socialising with each other and seeking sexual encounters. Gay men's cruising space is located at the west side of the park. It consists roughly of three long and parallel corridors with stone benches lined alongside them (Fig. 1). As the primary purpose of cruising, sex between consenting cruisers usually occurs in an adjacent hotel room paid for 2–3 h, and much less often, one cruiser's residence. The two public lavatories built at the two ends of the corridors are also used frequently for impromptu sex.<sup>1</sup>

The cruising space is dubbed "gay belt" by cruisers; and the rest of the park is used as a site of everyday leisure by straight park visitors. Partner-hunting in the park is carried out with the help of what Iveson (2007) calls the sex vernaculars – acts such as bench sitting, walking back and forth along the corridors, and eye contacting are all charged with meanings communicated and circulated among cruisers. The local police intervene into gay cruising in the park only in cases of law violation such as robbery, stealth and reported prostitution.

This research is based on a fieldwork conducted from August 2011 to January 2012. During that period, I worked as a HIV-AIDS prevention volunteer in the cruising space and the bulk of qualitative research was done at the same time. As a volunteer, I was informally affiliated to Chi-Heng Foundation, a local NGO specialising in homosexuality issues. Due to my identity as a heterosexual university-based scholar, this research focuses primarily on the social relations and interactions that emerged from gay men's spatial practices rather than the homo-erotic dimension of cruising.

Participant observation was carried out in the cruising site. Besides, qualitative data were collected from 35 semi-structured in-depth interviews and a number of informal interviews. Respondents to the in-depth interviews include 30 gay cruisers and 5 local NGO leaders.

## 2. Public cruising: between emancipatory possibilities and heteronormativity

Since Humphrey's (1970) groundbreaking ethnography on tea-room trade, homosexual people's use and appropriation of urban spaces have gained systematic scrutiny from various disciplines. As Aldrich (2004) has noted, "urban centres have been conducive to homosexual expression, whether integrated into or transgressive against social norms" (p. 1719). This paper interrogates one specific form of the queering and sexualising of urban spaces, namely gay men's cruising in public spaces for homoeroticism and, perhaps to a lesser extent, socialisation and communal solidarity (Ingram et al., 1997; Leap, 1999; Hubbard, 2002; Brown, 2008; Tewksbury, 2008). The works of Chauncey (1995), Turner (2003) and Houlbrook (2006), among others, have well established the view that urban spaces for cruising are social terrains central to the formation of sexual dissidents' collective cultures, and it is through lived practices in space that sexual dissidents negotiate sociocultural norms regulating moral standards as well as gendered and sexualised identities.

Turner (2003) argues that spaces of the modern city are characterised by inherent ambiguities, and cruising is precisely a practice which artfully exploits the ambivalence of modernity. This point of view echoes a widely concurred argument in geography that sexual minorities' entry into public presence and a shared social terrain can be seen as resistance to the hegemony of heteronormative social orders (Valentine, 1996; Marston, 2002; Mulligan, 2008). Especially given that cruising places are urban locations where the regulatory power of the state and the society has always-already been established (Leap, 1999), and that cruising itself is the source of considerable moral panic from the straight world (Dangerous Bedfellows, 1996), the transgressive political potentials of public sex culture warrant recognition.

The emancipatory possibilities of public cruising can be fathomed from a number of aspects. First, as various commentators have noted, public spaces in most cultures are regulated by heteronormative norms and ideologies (Valentine, 1993a,b; Brickell, 2000; Browne, 2007). It is a common assumption that behaviours in public need to demonstrate compliance with codes and rules prescribed by the normative heterosexuality, and to flaunt homosexuality in public is not encouraged (Valentine, 1993b). Therefore, public spaces inhabited by sexual dissidents transgress the hegemonic private/public divide, and challenge dominant norms and meanings (Muñoz, 2009). In some circumstances, public sex culture endows sexual dissidents with certain visibility by overtly displaying subcultural practices to outsiders and problematising the omnipresent heteronormative regulation of spaces (Tucker, 2009).

Second, gays' and lesbians' gatherings in shared social spaces also incubate communal identity, a sense of gay pride, and hence collective political agency (Ingram et al., 1997; Bérubé, 2003). As Brown (2004) has pointed out, these spaces reinforce social identities formed in specific historical and cultural conditions, and foster a sense of homoerotic communality that contributes to alternative ways of human interactions.

Finally, and more importantly, cruising provides sexual dissidents with an escape from the façade of omnipresent heterosexuality (Pollak, 1993). It enables its practitioners to dwell in alternative and non-conforming experiences and social orderings,

<sup>1</sup> In fact, sex taking place in the public toilets is also a source of moral anxiety among gay cruisers, because it is seen as an explicit display of homosexual desire which too bluntly transgresses the private/public divide.

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