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IMAGINING QUEERNESS: SEXUALITIES IN UNDERGROUND FILMS IN THE CONTEMPORARY P. R. CHINA

By

JIN ZHAO

Under the Direction of Leonard R. Teel

ABSTRACT

In response to the globalizing queerness argument and the cultural specificity argument in queer cultural studies, this thesis examines the emerging modern queer identity and culture in the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC) in an intercultural context. Recognizing Chinese queer culture as an unstable, transforming and complex collection of congruent and/or contesting meanings, not only originated in China but also traveling across cultures, this thesis aims to exorcise the reified images of Chinese queers, or *tongzhi*, to contribute to the understanding of a dynamic construction of Chinese queerness at the turn of a new century, and to lend insight on the complicity of the elements at play in this construction by analyzing the underground films with queer content made in the PRC.

INDEX WORDS: Index: China, PRC, Queer, Tongzhi, Underground film, Globalization, Culture, Identity

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by

JIN ZHAO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

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Jin Zhao

2010

IMAGINING QUEERNESS: SEXUALITIES IN UNDERGROUND FILMS IN THE COMTEMPORARY P. R. CHINA

by

JIN ZHAO

Electronic Version Approved:

Committee Chair: Leonard R. Teel

Committee: Jeff Bennett
Hongmei Li

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
December 2010

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, my brother, his wife and their beautiful baby boy Derek.

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This thesis is a milestone that marked the end of a chapter in my life after a long journey that was full of challenges, surprises, and rewards. Upon the completion of this thesis, I want to express my gratitude to many who have helped and supported me throughout this journey.

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Outside the academic circle, I would like to thank my mother, my father, my brother and his family for their unconditional love and support. I thank them for being my backbones wherever I go in whatever I aspire to achieve.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, the inception of postcolonial studies as one of the responses to the multitude phenomena that the world had been experiencing in almost all aspects of human lives, what is understood by many as "globalization," accompanied by the urgency of global HIV/AIDS prevention, compelled queer studies to take a global turn. As in many other discourses dealing with globalization, a tension between the globalizing impulse and the local response has existed in transnational queer studies. On one side is the narrative of a "global gay" who enjoys the transnational existence; on the other side is the critical counter-arguments that recognize the cultural specificities that "continue to matter for the practice and conceptualization of diverse sexualities, even in a world more than ever transnationally connected."[1]

Informed by postcolonial studies, scholars who are critical of the global queer narrative not only repudiate the assumption persistent in mainstream public discourse that a global queerness constructed in Western historical and cultural contexts and predicated on the ideas of civil rights, individualism, sexual freedom, and democracy etc. is *desirable* and *liberating* across the world, but also question the very *existence* of this "global gay" by exposing the concept as a discursive construction instead of a given reality. In other words, the project of post-colonial queer studies aims to deconstruct the "global queerness" perpetuated by Western

[1] Fran Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 2003), 28.

values and ideologies, to destabilize the central status of the West in global queer cultural flow, and to valorize alternative queer lives that exist outside the West.

In order to decentralize queer studies, many postcolonial scholars seek to provide evidence of culturally specific sexualities found in non-Western cultural contexts that are *different* from the Western queerness. Since the 1990s, scholars have set out all over the world to collect the evidence of the existing and, in many cases, thriving queer cultures, which has amounted to an enormous body of literature. However, in seeking the indigenous, the genuine, and the different in non-Western cultures, these scholars risk the pitfall of Orientalizing, caricaturizing, tokenizing, and reifying local queerness, confusing denial as resistance. This pitfall leads to discourse that not only truncates, misrepresents, or misunderstands these non-Western cultures, but also involuntarily compromises and complies with the homophobic, patriarchal, and other oppressive forces in these cultures that are considered traditional and/or indigenous and thus more desirable than the Western queer lifestyle and politics.

This tendency is seen in the studies of queer identity and culture in the People's Republic of China that is often regarded as "opposite" to the West, a culture regarded by some to stress the relational aspect of sexual identities, family values, and non-articulate style of resistance. This tendency leads some scholars to turn away from recognizing the complex and evolving nature of the construct of Chinese queerness in a societal/cultural context in a post-socialist China shifting from the state-planned economy and socialism to the market economy and neo-liberalism in

the course of its modernization at the turn of the century. At the same time, as exemplified by Chou Wah-shan's conceptualization of *tongzhi* identity and politics, these scholars turn towards an impulse to essentialize a sexual identity that decidedly "Chinese," and to promote a politics that embraces queer subjects' harmonious and private resistance while repudiating confrontational and public protests. Surely the cultural specificities are essential for any serious and responsible student in understanding Chinese queerness, but the overemphasis on the "Chineseness" of queer identities and politics may lead to a certain degree of denial of Western influence on how Chinese understand and construct sexual identities, as well as what lifestyles and political and societal environment Chinese queer subjects desire, and at same time may comply, though involuntarily, with the oppressive status quo based on traditional values. In other words, Chinese queerness must be understood in the complex and dynamic political and cultural context where complementary and/or contesting powers, such as the influence of Western modern/postmodern thoughts, China's feudal and predominantly Confucian cultural traditions and its communist puritan cultural ideology, coexist and interplay.

In the mid and late 1990s, underground films dealing with alternative sexualities started to emerge in mainland China,[2] after decades of such subject's absence in public discourse. At once reflecting and reconstructing reality, these films

[2] "Mainland China" is used by Chinese from different Chinese societies to refer to People's Republic of China before the returning of Hang Kong in 1997 and Macao in 1999. After these territories' return back to China, this term is kept to refer to the same area of China that has been under the rule of the Communist Party of China since 1949.

provide us a channel to understand how queer identities and cultures have come to be constructed in the mainland China. In this thesis, by analyzing the representation of queer lives in three underground films made by Chinese filmmakers in mainland China at the turn of the century and the cultural and social conditions under which these films were produced, I aim to offer insights in understanding the rising of modern identities for sexual minorities in the postsocialist China and their constructions in public discourse. I argue that through the work of Chinese liberal intellectuals and filmmakers with considerable Western influence, the first representations of Chinese sexual minorities as subjects in public discourses reflect Chinese sexual minorities' quest of sexual freedom, identification, and recognition. As the conditions for Chinese sexual minorities have changed over the years, the constructions, appropriation and reappropriation of queer identities, especially the adaptation and appropriation *tongzhi* identity, reflect the complex interplay of cultural forces that is difficult to be understood in terms of the global and local dichotomy.

The Global Queerness and Cultural Specificity Critique

Globalization is probably one of the most pervasive yet elusive terms on which prolific academic and public discourses addressing almost all aspects of the social life have been generated in the last three decades. Although viewed as a given by many around the world in the beginning of the 21st century, globalization is still a contentious topic that provokes disparate views and even protests, many of which

concern the persistent tension and complex interplay between the global and the local.[3] Many who work in various fields of studies engage in the critique of the hegemonizing impulse of globalization and seek the site of local resistance.[4] On the other hand, others complicate the problem of globalization, contending that, rather than a process that "homogenize[s] the world," globalization should be viewed as "a process of fragmentation and recomposition" that "reorders differences and inequalities without eliminating them."[5]

With the exigency of the threatening global spreading of HIV/AIDS, sexuality is imagined increasingly as a global problem in the Western academy, attracting attention from scholars in the field of public health and quickly extended to those who study sexual culture, identities, and politics. Dennis Altman's 1997 essay

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[3] P. L. Berger and S. P. Huntington, *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[4] For instances, M. Castells, in a serious of books published in the 1990s, examines the social conditions in a globalizing economy that produces new problems and contradictions in union struggles, addressing the relationship between the national and the global, as well as the static and the mobile in class struggle. See Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), ———, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. I, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture (1996), and ———, *The Power of Identity*, vol. II, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture (1997). J. Downey and N. Fenton analyze the rhetoric of union movement in the UK in response to the "offshoring" of call centre work, which "places unions in a contradictory position with respect to their internationalist objectives." See John Downey and Natalie Fenton, "Global Capital, Local Resistence?: Trade Unions, National Newspapers and the Symbolic Contestation of 'Offshoring' in the Uk," *Current Sociology*, no. 55 (2005): 651. In cultural studies, the tension resides on the winning out of capitalism on a global scale and the possibilities of resistance, and the contesting and complimentary relationship between the effort of sameness and difference. See Herbert Schiller, "Not yet the Post-Imperialist Era," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, ed. Durham and Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), Manfred Steger, *Globalism: The New Market Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), and Arjun Appadurai, "Disjucture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2, no. 2 (1990).

[5] Nastor Garcia Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, trans. George Yudice (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3.

"Global Gaze/Global Gays" is one of the early influential essays on transnationality in gay and lesbian studies. Mostly based on his observation of Asian gay men, Altman argued that globalization has created "an identifiable group of self-identified homosexuals… who see themselves as part of a global community, whose commonalities override but do not deny those of race and nationality."[6] In his project, Altman sought to interpret queer expressions in non-Western cultures as phenomena in terms of global gayness, and supported the thesis of the global diffusion of Western queerness.

Almost as soon as the discourse of the globalization/Westernization emerged in the field of queer studies, with an urge to resist the "global" narrative of queer identities and cultures that positions the West in the center, scholars from various backgrounds carried out research to discover non-Western queer experiences, cultures, histories across the world, such as *tongzhi* in China and *bakala* in the Philippines.[7] These scholars are concerned with providing evidence to show that different forms of non-heterosexual cultures exist outside of the West, and with questioning the universal characteristics of Western queer identities and practices. What they look for, therefore, are "new categories of gayness" that substantiate the claim that "'other' queers are not merely localized derivatives of the universalized

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[6] Dennis Altman, "Global Gaze/Global Gays," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 3, no. 2-3 (1997), and ———, "Global Gaze/Global Gays," in *Postcolonial and Queer Theories*, ed. John C. Hawley (Westport, CO; London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 7.

[7] For examples, see a series of articles on transnational sexualities in China, Indonesia, Puerto Rico, Brazil, South Africa, and Taiwan in *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999), Mark J. McLelland, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan: Cultural Myths and Social Realities* (Abingdon, OX: Routledge Curzon, 2000), Mark McLelland, "Is There a Japanese 'Gay Identity'?," *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 2 (2000), and Alison Murray, "Let Them Take Ecstasy: Class and Jakarta Lesbian," *Journal of Homosexuality* 40 (2001).

Western Queer."[8] Through their studies of non-Western sexualities, they aim to destabilize the West as the center of queer culture flow, and to draw academic attention to non-Western queerness and cultural specific sexual identities.

Cultural specific queer studies is a well-intended project that aims to offer a necessary critique of cultural colonialism. However, with the burden to provide evidence of queer cultures *other than* the Western, these researchers could fall into the pitfall of involuntarily repeating the Orientalist project, romanticizing, characterizing, reifying, and tokenizing these non-West cultures as resistance to "globalization." As Oswin criticizes:

> Recuperated as unique and autonomous, non-Western queerness is trapped in a local sphere that can at best only mitigate the effects of an imposing Western queerness that looms globally as a threatening cultural force. Innovations in non-Western contexts are overemphasized and romanticized as resistant while the global queerness that they are purportedly resisting the imposition of is rendered in only ambiguous, though strong, terms.

In other words, if we view non-Western queerness only as a reaction to the global imposition of Western queerness, we may tend to amplify differences among cultures in terms of both quantity and quality and thus distort our perception of these cultures. In this case, non-Western queerness will be cited only to deny rather than resist the Western imposition at the local site. Further, the dichotomic opposition between the "West" and the "non-West," by setting a unified "non-West"

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[8] Natalie Oswin, "Decentering Queer Globalization: Diffusion and the 'Global Gay'," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006): 781.

against an essentialized "West," tends to obscure the differences within these categories.

This reifying and romanticizing tendency manifests in Chinese queer studies, as the aspects of contemporary China that are too similar to the West are rejected systematically as "Westernization" in the preference for differences and particularity, the prejudice against commonalities, and, consequently, the "desperate search" for "otherness" and "authenticity."[9] This is, ironically, the same assumption that the discourse of the "global gay," which the cultural specificity discourse seeks to refute, is based on—the similar phenomena observed across cultures are automatically the "same" as the "Western," and thus "global."

With the impulse to be "different," some cultural specificity studies involuntarily present a reified and colored picture of the contemporary Chinese queerness that may mislead our understanding of it and the societal and cultural contexts where it is constructed. What is more, the efforts of the scholars in search for an "authentic" Chinese queer culture can comply involuntarily with the local oppressive forces that pose as "authentic" and "traditional" Chinese, ignoring and dismissing Chinese sexual minorities' request for changes in society which are deems to be the results of "Westernization."

Indeed, the Western academy seems to be exceptionally ready to welcome discourse that accounts for an "authentic" Chinese sexual identity that is based on the traditional Confucian values. One example is the Western reception of the

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[9] Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 10-11.

account of the *tongzhi* identity in Chinese societies by a Hong Kong scholar and gay and lesbian rights activist Chou Wah-shan. The *tongzhi* identity, as Chou describes it, has been cited conveniently and indiscriminately as an example of cultural specific sexuality in transnational/transcultural literature.[10] To some extent, the *tongzhi* politics has been tokenized by some postcolonial scholars as an indigenous strategy for the local sexual minorities to resist both the oppressive forces they encounter at the local sites and the imposition of a globalizing gayness by the West. However, it seems that the thrill of discovering yet another "authentic" "non-Western" sexual culture, identity, or politics that may be collected in the antique shop of sexualities of the "other" cultures has enticed these scholars to hastily buy into Chou's account of *tongzhi* identity and display it as one of the treasures they found around the world without further examination and critical inquiry. However, a closer examination will suggest that the *tongzhi* identity and politics as advocated by Chou in his writing are not without problem.

To begin with a brief history of the Chinese term, *tongzhi*, or "同志" in Chinese, literally means "(the ones who have) the same aspirations," and usually translated into "comrade" in English. It was adopted by the Nationalist revolutionaries in the late 19th century and early 20th century from Japanese, who invented the word. Later it is continued to be used by the members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as "comrade" to address each other during the civil wars as well as after the founding

[10] See Vanessa Baird, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Sexual Diversity* (Oxford, UK: New International Publications Ltd., 2001), McLelland, *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan*, and Elisa Glick, et al., "New Directions in Multiethnic, Racial, and Global Queer Studies," *GLQ* 10, no. 1 (2003).

of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the mainland China, after 1949, the term had been widely used in both official and personal contexts to address almost any adult – except the "reactionaries" or "people's enemies" – without gender distinctions until the last two decades of the 20th century, when the term gradually lost its popularity as a default form of address. In the late 1980s, *tongzhi* was appropriated by Hong Kong gay activists to denote gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and has rallied under its flag the *Tongzhi* Movement, advocating equal rights for this group of sexual minorities. Later, it was circulated widely in the mainland China and Taiwan but with a certain degree of variation in its usage as a result of local adaptation. Therefore, although *tongzhi* was initially adapted by Hong Kong activists for activism, in the course of its traveling, *tongzhi* has become a more inclusive and fluid term used by sexual minorities in different communities across Chinese societies.

What Chou advocates, however, is a *tongzhi* identity very much in line with the politics of the Hong Kong *Tongzhi* Movement, Chou's *tongzhi* discourse is based on the rationale stated in the manifesto issued at the conclusion of the First Chinese *Tongzhi* Conference held in Hong Kong in 1996:

> The les-bi-gay movement in many Western societies is largely built upon the notion of individualism, confrontational politics, and the discourse of individual rights. Certain characteristics of confrontational politics, such as through coming out and mass protest and parades may not be the best way

> of achieving *tongzhi* liberation in the family-centred, community-oriented Chinese societies which stress the importance of social harmony.[11]

This radical disparity between the West and Chinese societies that the manifesto assumes – the Western stresses confrontation and the Chinese stresses harmony – has been a "cornerstone" of the *Tongzhi* Movement in Hong Kong, according to Andrew D. Wong.[12] Therefore, in the context of Hong Kong, Wong suggests, "[*t*]*ongzhi* is not only a symbol that stands for 'sexual minorities,' but it is also an index that points to the speaker's alignment with the *tongzhi* movement and a salient aspect of this or her identity – namely, 'Chineseness.'"[13]

Following this line, Chou proposes a *tongzhi* politics unique to Chinese societies that "need not reproduce the Anglo-American experiences and strategies of lesbigay liberation."[14] Chou further explains the uniqueness of *tongzhi* politics as it "achieves a similar political contribution as 'queer politics' does, but whereas queer politics confronts the mainstream by appropriating a formerly derogatory label, *tongzhi* harmonizes social relationships by taking the most sacred title from the mainstream culture."[15]

Several interrelated aspects of the *tongzhi* identity in Chou's argument are considered distinctively "Chinese." First, by rewriting a history of sexuality in

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[11] Wah-shan Chou, *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (New York; London; Oxford: Ghe Haworth Press, 2000), 278.
[12] Andrew D. Wong, "Language, Cultural Authenticity, and the *Tongzhi* Movement," *Texas Linguistic Forum* 48 (2005): 211.
[13] Ibid.: 212.
[14] Chou, *Tongzhi*, 1.
[15] Wah-shan Chou, "Homosexuality and the Cultural Politics of *Tongzhi* in Chinese Societies," *Journal of Homosexuality* 40, no. 3/4 (2001): 28.

China, Chou argues that the "traditional" Chinese culture was not conscious of sexual orientation and did not recognize the categories thereon based.[16] Traditionally, Chou suggests, Chinese identities were not based on their sexualities but social relations,[17] and "[t]he most distinctive features of homosexuality in Chinese history are ironically neither homophobia nor homoeroticism but classism, sexism, and ageism, which permeate and construct both homosexual relationships and mainstream culture."[18] *Tongzhi* identity, Chou contends, is "an attempt to resist the imposition of homo-hetero duality upon the Chinese relational and fluid conception of sexuality."[19]

Among the social relations that define Chinese identities, according to Chou, centered the familial relation because family is the "most basic and profound social institution" in the Confucian social construct.[20] As opposed to the Anglo-American "queer politics," Chou insists, *tongzhi* politics is an "indigenous strategy of proclaiming one's sexual identity by appropriating rather than denying one's familial-cultural identity."[21] Based on these conditions, Chou suggests that Chinese society is one that "denounces confrontational politics."[22] He contends that "[f]or *tongzhi*, the most beloved ones are exactly those who oppress them most. It is this intricacy that renders confrontational politics inappropriate for most *tongzhi*, whose

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[16] Chou, *Tongzhi*, 13.
[17] Ibid., 253.
[18] Ibid., 27.
[19] Ibid., 5.
[20] Ibid., 253.
[21] ———, "Homosexuality and the Cultural Politics of *Tongzhi* in Chinese Societies," 28.
[22] ———, *Tongzhi*, 7.

main enemy is not some impersonal system called religious fundamentalism, the state apparatus, or the capitalist work system."[23] To Chou, the *tongzhi* politics embraces a non-confrontational and harmonizing impulse and thus is more appropriate for sexual minorities in Chinese societies.

These characteristics of *tongzhi* identity and the politics Chou proposes is based on the evidence he carefully collected in Chinese societies and must be taken seriously. However, Chinese culture is by no means one self-contained and fixed entity, and its sexual cultures are a set of phenomena constructed in complex historical, societal and political contexts. Contrary to Chou's claim of the fluidity of *tongzhi* identity, the term by his definition is rigidly bound to an essentialized Chineseness constructed in very specific ways that make it different from the "Western queerness." Consequently, it cannot account for the ever-changing and increasingly diversified and dynamic reality in China, which is not recognizable as simply pure "Chinese." More importantly, under the canopy of "Chineseness" in Chou's *tongzhi* discourse, oppressive forces are allowed to pass without check. In this way, Chou's *tongzhi* inadvertently becomes a compliant with the patriarchal, sexist, and silent/silencing homophobic system taken as the components of an essentialized Chinese culture.

Following this line, Chou's *tongzhi* discourse downplays the "reticent and shadowy homophobic forces" in Chinese societies as termed by Liu Jen-peng and

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[23] Ibid., 281.

Ding Naifei in their criticism,[24] and over-emphasizes the tolerance towards same-sex eroticism and "harmony" in Chinese societies. Chou claims that the Chinese culture as a whole is one where "same-sex eroticism is not seen as the private property of a minority population, but a practice that *everyone* can potentially engage in," so in this culture, "we can perhaps emphasize *everyone*'s need and rights for intimacy irrespective of gender."[25] This benign argument, by dismissing Chinese queer subjects' quest for sexual rights based on the "un-Chinese" or "Western" ideas of individuality and subjectivity, can "easily slip toward the interests that include the very forces that […] kill homosexual teenagers by forcing them to commit suicide – alone, in pairs, in threesome" as Liu and Ding have warned us.[26]

Chou's cultural specific/cultural purity claims position the conflict between the two sides of the dichotomy of the Chinese/local and the Western/global over the conflict between hetero-normative/homophobic forces, which often appear as traditions, and Chinese sexual minorities' request for sexual freedom and respect from society. In other words, it seems that cultural specificity/cultural purity perspective requires sexual minorities to surrender their sexual identities and sexual freedom to their national/cultural identities in the name of local resistance to the "globalizing" or Westernizing forces. Based on the same prejudice, Chou's discourse tends to deemphasize the sexual aspect but to stress the national aspect of one's identity in Chinese societies. Therefore, this "Chineseness" that *tongzhi* claims –

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[24] Jen-peng Liu and Naifei Ding, "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 32. Italic added.

[25] Chou, *Tongzhi*, 281.

[26] Liu and Ding, "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics," 35-36.

essentially pansexual and therefore, in a paradoxical manner, asexual – reduces alternative sexualities in China to a category that "cannot but be arbitrary and limiting, fictive and occluding,"[27] and thus fails to address the cultural complexity and dynamics where the *tongzhi* identity and culture has emerged.[28]

Tongzhi is the most widely used term by Chinese sexual minorities, and has provided a useful terminology when we discuss sexual identities in contemporary China. However, it is important to keep in mind that *tongzhi* is by no means the only term that used by these communities in China. Many terms adapted from English are increasingly being used. For instances, "*kuer*," or "酷儿," a phonetic Chinese translation of "queer," and "*lala*" or "拉拉," a term adapted from "lesbian." Some terms are used in certain regions or to refer to particular groups, such as "*piaopiao*" or "漂漂"used in Chengdu, Sichuan Province to refer to male homosexuals and bisexuals, "*eryizi*" or "二椅子" used in Beijing to refer to effeminate males, or "*shaoye*" or "少爷"that refers to male prostitutes in many parts of China. Even the term *tongzhi* itself travels intra-culturally across Chinese societies, and is adapted by local *tongzhi* communities according to their local conditions. Thus, to claim an essence of Chineseness in *tongzhi* is necessarily problematic, and to understand how Chinese queer sexuality is constructed we have to first unlearn precisely its Chineseness represented, to many in the West, by an essentialized *tongzhi* identity.

Research Questions

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[27] Oswin, "Decentering Queer Globalization," 784.

[28] Lisa Rofel, "Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China," *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999): 453.

In response to the global gay argument and the cultural specificity argument in Chinese queer cultural studies and recognizing the complexities of the interplay of different cultural influences, I offer an account in this thesis to answer these questions: How do the elements in Western cultures and Chinese cultural traditions, and historical and contemporary social conditions of China affect the constructions of queer lives in the mainland China at the turn of the new century? What are the concerns, difficulties, and requests of Chinese minorities and how they are shaped and affected by the cultural constraints in this context?

Film as Discourse and a Medium for Cultural Translation

Film, as a social discourse, is an important text that provides a means to understanding society and culture, which it connects to in for it is related to in many complex ways. In their 1978 essay "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': A Social Value Model of Criticism," one of the first works in the field of public communication that deal with film, Hocker and Frentz point out the relationship between film and "societal values":

> First, film and society reciprocally influence one another. By projecting collective images of a culture, by serving as symptoms of cultural needs, and by symbolizing trends, dramatic media both reflect and create societal events. Second, socio-political processes, like film, are structured and perceived as

essentially dramatic. Film is clearly a potent vehicle for symbolizing socio-political change.[29]

This view of the "reciprocal" relationship between film and culture – film constructs and reflects culture – is based on the theory in public communication that explains the relationship between discourse and reality. In *Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt suggests that reality is constructed in the public sphere, where the "things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy" are brought out to be seen and heard by the others, and thus "assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have had before."[30] The medium that brings these things out in the public is, as modern semiotics explains, language, or discourse, which can be, according to Roland Barthes, all systems, in which elements can be selected and combine to construct meaning in order to communicate.[31]

Film, with its "signifying systems" – the camera, lighting, sound, mise-en-scène, and editing – is essentially a "language" that, both reflects and constructs reality. As pointed out by Graeme Turner, film "constructs and 're-presents' its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths, and ideologies of its culture as well

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[29] Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz, "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': A Social Value Model of Criticism," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 42 (1978). The author published a follow up of this first essay dealing with Rocky in the same year. See Thomas S. Frentz and Janice Hocker Rushing, "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': Part Two," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 42, no. 4 (1978). Also see other rhetorical critical studies that deal with film by the same authors: Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz, "'the Deer Hunter': Rhetoric of the Warrior," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980), and Thomas S. Frentz and Janice Hocker Rushing, "Integrating Ideology and Archetype in Rhetorical Criticism, Part II: A Case Study of *Jaws*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993).

[30] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958; reprint, 1969), 50.

[31] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Cameron & Tayleur, 1973).

as by way of the specific signifying practices of the medium."[32] This significance in constructing the reality is enhanced by the medium's ability to reach a larger audience in a more direct way than its processors. Film, as Andrew Tudor suggests, is an art for the mass that can "reach people directly, without mediation by the over-intellectualising tendencies of much modern art."[33] That leads Tudor to conclude that "[w]ith the coming of film, for the first time there was a widespread common articulation of the beliefs, aspirations, antagonisms, and doubts of the huge populations of modern societies."[34]

On the other hand, the filmmaker's agency in producing film as a cultural artifact must be considered. As John Belton writes, "[i]f films and filmmakers produce culture, they are also produced by it. Thus it is impossible to separate films and filmmakers from the society within which they exist."[35] Turner also writes that "[j]ust as film works *on* the meaning system of culture – to renew, reproduce, or review them – it is also produced *by* those meaning systems. The film-maker, like the novelist or the story-teller, is a *bricoleur* – a sort of handyman who does the best s/he can with the materials at hand."[36] In other words, film is rhetorical – it is a product of a certain historical moment and particular ideologies, and at the same time it interacts with its historical context in meaning making, and utilizes rhetorical

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[32] Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 152.
[33] Andrew Tudor, *Image and Influence: Studies in the Sociology of Film* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 15.
[34] Ibid., 13.
[35] John Belton, "Introduction," in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 1.
[36] Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 152.

strategies to communicate these meanings.[37] To study film rhetorically, therefore, means to inquire into an artist's choices of topics, of artistic elements in structuring the film, of emphasis on certain characteristics of the medium, as well as her purpose behind these choices and her consideration of audience.[38]

With these theoretical bases, film, both nonfiction and fiction, has been studied by communication scholars as a social/rhetorical text to understand society – its history, culture, and ideological struggles, where film is created,[39] to argue for theoretical models in rhetorical studies and cultural criticism,[40] and/or to understand how the structural elements in film function to shape society, in other words, the rhetorical strategies used in film.[41]

Moreover, produced in and by a culture, film is a medium that is especially useful in transcultural cultural studies. As Ray Chow suggests, film "as a kind of postmodern self-writing or autoethnography, is nonetheless also a form of

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[37] Gerald A. Powell, *A Rhetoric of Symbolic Identity: An Analysis of Spike Lee's X and Bamboozled* (Lanham, ML: University Press of America, Inc., 2004), 1.

[38] Martin Medhurst and Thomas Benson, *Rhetorical Dimentions in Media: A Critical Casebook* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1984), x.

[39] For examples, see Powell, *A Rhetoric of Symbolic Identity: An Analysis of Spike Lee's X and Bamboozled*, Kamal Abdel-Malek, *The Rhetoric of Violence: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Contemporary Palestinian Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Susan Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero and the Perennial Jouney Home in American Film* (Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), and Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality: The Rhehtoric of Disney Animated Film* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).

[40] For examples, see Rushing and Frentz, "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': A Social Value Model of Criticism.", Frentz and Rushing, "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': Part Two.", and ———, "Ideology and Archetype."

[41] For examples, see Thomas Benson, "The Rhetorical Structure of Frederick Wiseman's High School," *Communication Monographs* 47, no. 4 (1980), Rushing and Frentz, "'the Deer Hunter'.", Carl R. Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, Cambridge Studies in Film (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

intercultural translation in the postcolonial age."[42] Therefore, in the project to understand the queer culture as well as its construction in a contemporary Chinese context in the English-speaking academy, film and the meanings mediated by film will serve as dynamic multi-faced texts through which we can gain understanding that ethnographical work is not able to give.

Underground Queer Films in the Contemporary Mainland China

Although queer Asian cinema has increasingly interested film and queer studies scholars in the West, the mainland China has received less attention than some other regions such as Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan. While the literature on queer cinema in these regions abound, that on the mainland is comparatively scares. Except for the mainland-Hong Kong co-produced Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993), and Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan's *Lan Yu* (2001) that are well-known to the international audience, other queer films produced in China almost never appear in the English-speaking academy.[43] That is not surprising considering that films with queer content are almost impossible to be approved by the Chinese government to go into production or for public screening.

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[42] Ray Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), xi.

[43] See Sean Metzger, "Farewell My Fantasy," in *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade*, ed. Andrew Grossman (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2000), E. Ann Kaplan, "Reading Formations and Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Conbubine*," in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), Wendy Larson, "The Concubine and the Figure of History: Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*," in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), and Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, "*Farewell My Concubine*: History, Melodrama, and Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (Autumn 1995).

However, oddly enough, although it is almost impossible to produce and distribute a queer film legally in the PRC, there is a considerably safe space for underground filmmakers to make quasi illegal queer films. The opening of this space is partly owing to the fact that these films normally have small circulation, and are consumed by a relatively small audience in private or semi private settings: banned in all theatres open to the public, they are consumed on DVD, online, or in semi-private film clubs. In other words, the space where these films are produced and consumed is a gray area between private and public, and thus they are less likely to be targeted by homophobic forces that are still present in the culture.

Another factor is that some "cultural liberals" in the CCP and the state favor a *laissez-faire* attitude towards underground filmmaking, which they deem to be a "useful pressure release mechanism" to the government and a society concerned with underlying social crises.[44] Strangely enough, the quasi illegality of the queer films has given the filmmakers more freedom to express and articulate their queer imagination – at least with respect to the government censorship. In this sense, underground films are more direct and fearless than the mainstream media when addressing queer topics.

Consequently, since the later half of the 1990s, there emerged a number of underground queer films. These films are mostly made with low-budget and lack artistic and technical sophistication, but since they are already "outlaws," which

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[44] Paul G. Pickowicz, "Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China," in *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, ed. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 7.

means they do not concern about censorship and box-office earning as much as officially approved films, they provide a much freer space for artistic exploration as well as political advocacy.

Although these films are not allowed in theatres in the mainland China, and enjoy a smaller audience than major state productions, Hong Kong or Taiwan-mainland (co)productions, and imported Hollywood blockbusters, the emergence of semi-private film clubs in big cities in China has provided screening opportunities for them.[45] Besides, most of these films are accessible to the viewers on the underground DVD market, which is in a sense as prosperous as, if not more than, the official legal market. In fact, one can even buy some of these films on the allegedly biggest Chinese online book store dangdang.com, a legally operating business. Few would take the legality of these films seriously, and the fact that they are "banned" is often used as a selling point advertised by the business. In addition, the rampant websites for illegal downloading in the mainland China provide another channel for the dissemination of these films.

Text

The films selected for analysis in this study span about a decade. They are *East Palace, West Palace* (1996) by Zhang Yuan, *Fish and Elephant* (2001) by Li Yu, and *Tongzhi* (2004) by Han Tao. The selection of the texts is based on significance,

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[45] Seio Nakajima, "Film Clubs in Beijing: The Cultural Consumption of Chinese Independent Films," in *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, ed. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006).

representativeness, and availability. Their significance is evidenced by their being the best known and most available underground films with characters of alternative sexualities to Chinese audiences. Therefore, they can claim more social significance than other underground films. *East Palace, West Palace* is considered the first gay film made in China, and its director, Zhang Yuan, is among the first underground filmmakers in China. Both the film and the director are well-known among both the queer audience but the general public, and are frequently cited \ when the topic of Chinese queer cinema is discussed. *Fish and Elephant* is regarded as the first lesbian film made in the mainland China, and Li Yu has since become one of the best known female directors in China. The director of *Tongzhi*, Han Tao is more obscure than the other two filmmakers. Being a visual artist, Han is not a professional filmmaker, which exemplifies a characteristic of underground filmmaking. Nevertheless, *Tongzhi* is widely available on DVD in online bookstores and other sources. It also claims to be the first documentary in mainland China which represents individuals who are *tongzhi* identified in real life, and for this reason it claims to reveal the "real" *tongzhi* circle.

By "representativeness," I mean the films selected are able to represent a range of themes, genders, and genres as wide as the scope of this thesis allows. For instances, of the three films, two mainly center on male subjects, and other one focuses on female-female relationships. This ratio reflects the gender difference in queer representation in underground films. In fact, *Fish and Elephant* is the only film made in the mainland China I am aware of that deals with female-female

relationships, although there are a few very recent Hong Kong productions that center on lesbian characters. In terms of genre, two of the films studied are fiction (*East Palace, West Palace* and *Fish and Elephant*), and one is documentary (*Tongzhi*). The themes include policing public sex, lesbian relationship, male prostitution, and provincial gay life and so on. The diversity of choice of text will allow me to offer an eclectic landscape of queer lives imagined and constructed in public discourses, although highly expressive and idiosyncratic work by avant-garde filmmakers and independent films that do not enjoy a certain circulation are excluded in this study.

This "representativeness" of these films, however, does not entail the assumption of a "typical" Chinese queer life or identity. Such a "typical" Chinese queer life should not be assumed for although these films reflect the reality to an extent in various ways, it is almost impossible to offer a "typical" account of queer identities and cultures in China, not only because of the limited number and range of these films, but also because of the fluid nature of sexual identities and cultures. To claim to offer an account of "typical" Chinese sexual minorities is to reproduce another essentialized and reified image of this community. Therefore, I do not claim that this study is an extensive and comprehensive mapping of Chinese queer culture. Future studies are needed to further the understanding of the complex of the cultures and identities of Chinese sexual minorities.

CHAPTER 2

UNDERGROUND GAY SOCIETY AND THE QUEST FOR SEXUAL FREEDOM IN *EAST* PALACE, *WEST PALACE*

Although China has a long history of same-sex eroticism recorded in historical documents and literature in pre-modern times, homosexuality, or *tongxinglian*, as a sexual category was imported from the West in the late 19th and early 20th century along with Western modernity.[46] When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, homosexual behavior was claimed by the Chinese Communist Party to have been "eradicated" along with the old "dregs" of the feudal society, and it was not until the 1980s when homosexuality was given serious thought by Chinese medical scholars, psychologists and sociologists.[47] The government's denial of the existence of homosexuals in China forbade any discussion of homosexuality in public space. Although homosexual behavior existed and homosexuals interacted with each other

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[46] Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 119, Chou, *Tongzhi*, Jin Wu Ma, "From "*Long Yang*" And "*Dui Shi*" To Tongzhi: Homosexuality in China," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotheropy* 7, no. 1/2 (2003), Cuncun Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (New York; London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), Martin W. Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), and Yinhe Li, "Regulating Male Same-Sex Relationships in the People's Republic of China," in *Sex and Sexuality in China*, ed. Elaine Jeffreys (Abingdon, OX; New York: Routledge, 2006).

[47] Dalin Liu and Longguang Lu, *A Study of Homosexuality in China (Zhongguo Tongxinglian Yanjiu)* (Beijing: China Sociology Press (zhongguo shehui chubanshe), 2004), 33-43.

within a certain community and locations, these activities remained underground and usually anonymous.[48]

Unlike in the West, where a distinct gay and lesbian community and its sub-culture became visible to the mainstream public in the gay liberation movement after the Stonewall riots in the U.S. in 1969, China's gay and lesbian community was made visible in the public domain through the work of straight-identified intellectuals and artists, who were very often exposed and attracted to Western liberalism and who were sympathetic to and, curiously, more or less identified with sexual minorities in the postsocialist China of the last two decades of the 20th century.[49] These

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[48] Yinhe Li and Xiaobo Wang, "Their World: A Perspective on Male Homosexual Communities in China (*Tamen De Shijie: Zhongguo Nanxing Tongxinglian Qunluo Toushi*)," in *East Palace, West Palace: Selected Research Reports and Unfinished Works (Donggong, Xigong -- Diaocha Baogao Yu Weijinggao Jingpinji)*, ed. Zhou Hong (Xi'an, Shaanxi: Shaanxi Normal University Press (Shaanxi shifan daxue chubanshe), 2006).

[49] Many of these intellectuals and artists have experience of studying or researching overseas. For instance, sociologist Liu Dalin, the co-editor of *A Study of Homosexuality in China*, wrote in the second foreword of the book about his overseas experience and its impact on his view on homosexuality:

> Since the late 1980s until today, I have visited abroad for several times, and have had contact with the Western phenomenon of homosexuality and had some understanding [about it], and my feelings have been very complicated. On the one hand, I feel sickened by that kind of images of same-sex sex in films, on television or in magazines and I feel not being able to accept [them]; on the other hand, I got to know some Western scholars and experts, some of whom became my good friends later. I think they are honest, candid, learned, with high status, and of good moral standing (*renpin*) and civilities (*zuofeng*), but they are homosexuals. This made me think over and over again: are homosexuals all "freaks" (*guaiwu*), or they are all "hooligans" (*liumang fenzi*)? Several of my relatives and good friends who have lived overseas for a long time told me, "In the past, [I] thought homosexuals are very ugly, ridiculous, and hard to understand. But after having a deeper relationship with them, [I] feel that this is not what I thought before." We Chinese are used to seeing things simplistically in terms of morality; [we are] often used to "binary thinking," all things are either good or bad, beautiful or ugly; and [we are] used to disapproving what we do not understand – now, [we] should be liberated from these unscientific ways of thinking.

See Liu and Lu, *A Study of Homosexuality in China*, 3-4.

intellectuals and artists, with their more or less elite ethos, were able to bring alternative sexualities into public discussion through their work, and they helped construct queer identities in the public consciousness. These constructions did not necessarily stress familial relationships and the private aspect of sexuality regarded by many as distinctive "Chinese" characteristics. These constructions did express the quests for sexual freedom, recognition, visibility, and social acceptance, consistent with what many sexual minorities struggle to achieve in the GLBT movement in the West. To these liberal intellectuals and artists, the construction of Chinese queer identities that entail individuals' sexual freedom and visibility, as perceived in the Western construct of queer identities, was a necessary component of China's postsocialist liberal reform that meant a departure from both its extreme leftist past and Confucian traditions. In other words, the emerging Chinese queer identities at this time were closely linked to the Chinese liberals' imagination of Western queer identities.

These characteristics of the emergence of modern queer identities in postsocialist China will be illustrated in this chapter by the first gay film made by Chinese filmmakers in mainland China. The film *East Palace, West Palace* (1996) is based on a novella by Wang Xiaobo, one of the most celebrated Chinese writers of the 1990s. Wang, together with director Zhan Yuan, adapted the novelette into a screenplay. Set in a park in Beijing frequented by gay men, , the film tells a story of the evolving erotic relationship between a gay captive, Ah Lan, and a closeted policeman, Xiao Shi.

Palace depicts a scenario of cruising and policing in a public park, and articulates the marginalized queer subjects' quest for sexual freedom. The representation of gay characters in the film and the construction of the protagonist Ah Lan indicate that the filmmakers, influenced by their imagination of Western queerness, regarded visibility as directly linked to power, and "coming out" as a desirable strategy of resistance and a necessity for freedom. At the same time, the sadomasochist theme in the film complicates the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, and reveals, to a certain extent, the ambivalence and uncertainty of the marginalized about the relationship between them as rebels and the dominant culture and traditions. While resisting these dominant forces, the marginalized, be it queers or liberal intellectuals, seemed to still retain a certain degree of "love" and loyalty to the same forces. The marginalized rebels were compelled to negotiate their sexual and cultural identity and their national identity caught between the Western-Chinese opposition perpetuated by the government propaganda and nationalism.

A drama focusing mainly on the two protagonists, *Palace* does not offer a panoramic landscape of the existence of Chinese queers in the 1990s, nor does it offer an account for a "typical" gay life in China during this time. It is a drama set in a particular location that concentrates, in an extremely focused, close-up manner, on the two protagonists Ah Lan and Xiao Shi, as well as the erotic tension and power interplay between them. However, the film—its gay characters and the conditions of their existence and the intimate relationship between its creators and Liberalism—evidences that the initial cultural construction of homosexuality in the public

consciousness in contemporary China was part of Chinese liberal intellectuals' project to transform China into a liberal society. Therefore, instead of a close textual analysis of the film, in this chapter, I offer an analysis of the text and the context of the making of the film to argue that the emerging constructions of the modern Chinese queerness in the late 20th-century China were not without Western influences if not direct influences from traveling queer cultures.

Invisible Gay Public in China

Palace's instant international fame and its important status in Chinese underground queer cinema are more or less tied to the images of an invisible queer public in China revealed by the film to the Chinese public, perhaps the world, for the first time. Indeed, the media and critics from Japan to Argentina showed tremendous interest in *Palace's* representation of a gay community, which representation invoked its banning in China by the government, which "refuse[d] to acknowledge that homosexuality is part of the national culture."[50] This international interest was dramatically manifested by the seat kept at the film's screening at the Cannes Film Festival for the absent director Zhang Yuan, whose passport had been confiscated by the Chinese government to prevent him from attending the festival. The reserved chair was to show the festival's determination to "defend freedom," according to the festival director-general Gilles Jacob.[51] Regardless the nature of the

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[50] Phillip Altbeker, "Pc Prince Bereft of Life or Spirit," *Business Day*, 24 March 1999 1999.
[51] "China Confiscates Film Director Zhang Yuan's Passport," *Agence France Presse -- English*, 22 April 1997.

Western reaction to the film, the gay scene that *Palace* depicts was a direct challenge to the government's denial of the existence of homosexuals in contemporary China and was one of the first attempts of Chinese filmmakers to bring the invisible gay societies into the daylight.[52]

In *East Palace, West Palace,* the invisibility of the gay community and the oppression this invisibility implies is a constant backdrop for the two protagonists' personal drama, where the gay cruising theme is presented on the screen. Through its cinematography and narrative, the film depicts a dark, eerie oppressive environment in the park that represents the overall oppressive and silencing social environment for Chinese sexual minorities. As vividly described by a viewer in his article on a BBS forum, "No manner in the novelette or in the film, the same feeling is dark and depressive: in the darkness, a group of vague shadows, that, it seems, would dissolve at the first beam of daylight."[53] Set in nighttime for the most part – the night feels almost endless – the film has a dark tone saturated with images of wondering shadows, dark woods, overcast skies, dim alleys, wet pavements, and poorly lit rooms with dark corners, further accentuated by the dilapidated walls of old houses, deserted construction sites and buildings, or shabby public bathrooms

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[52] It needs to be noted that there has been a jetlag between the film's coming into the "international" daylight and the "Chinese daylight" since the film was first shown in China at the First Homosexual Film Festival held by Beijing University Film Club in 2002, five years later than the time when it was released globally, and still remains underground in China, although it is probably the best known gay film in China.

[53] lssky0747, "Is Wang Xiaobo Gay -- Wang Xiaobo's Tongzhi Sentiment in *East Palace, West Palace* (*Wang Xiaobo Shi Tongxinglian Ma? -- Cong Wang Xiaobo Xiaoshuo* Donggong Xigong *Kan Wang Xiaobo Tongzhi Qingjie*)," Sina.com, http://bbs.eladies.sina.com.cn/treeforum/App/view.php?fid=184163&tbid=8104&bbsid=9&subid=0.

with dripping faucets. It is in this oppressive and hidden environment that gay men have found their world.

The depiction of the invisible gay world in the film is mostly based on the reality. The coauthor of *Their World*, Wang Xiaobo, was also the co-writer of the screenplay for *Palace*, and the characters and the stories in *Palace* are believed to be largely based on Wang's informants and the stories they told him in his research. The park where most of the film takes place, for instance, is based on a pubic park in Beijing frequented by gay men because it was free, and gay men could come and go without being noticed.[54] The film itself is named after the dubbed names of two public restrooms at the two ends of the Forbidden City in Beijing, "East Palace" ("*Donggong*") and "West Palace" ("*Xigong*"), which, according to Li and Wang, was "an activity center for gay men" for a certain period of time.[55]

What the film has depicted is some aspects of the underground queer societies in China in the 1990s. *Palace* came out at a time when homosexuality had been discussed in public discourse for only a little more than ten years and almost only in journals in medicine, psychology, or sociology, often associated with mental diseases, STDs, pornography, and crimes. The gay and lesbian community was largely invisible to the general public, which is pointed out by Li Yinhe: "[t]he sexually abnormal is much less in the public domain – less talked about, less visible,

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[54] Li and Wang, "Their World," 120.

[55] Ibid.

less researched, less accessible to the researcher – than anything related to marital heterogenitality."[56]

Despite their invisibility, and perhaps strategically taking make use of this invisibility as protection, Chinese sexual minorities developed a society of their own. As portrayed in *Palace*, under the disguise of the bushes and the night, gay men have formed a underground world of their own, where they seek pleasure and express their sexuality. This underground world, or a "society," of homosexuals operated in particular spaces, and consisted of a relatively stable group of people, who shared a certain "culture" among them.

In *Palace*, the underground gay society is materialized in the park, which provides a space for the primordial gay "community" to take form. In the film, during the interrogation, Ah Lan tells Xiao Shi:

> I'm *tongxinglian*. I come to this park to find friends […] because *zanme* (we, including the addressee), no, *women* (we, excluding the addressee) all come here to hang out. […] It's easy to get together here.

To the gay men who come here to cruise, the public park is something more than a park: It is a regular space where this gay society exists under the cover of the shadow and the darkness of the night. This world is in a sense similar to what political activist Harry Hay describes in the documentary *Before Stonewall* as "the gay society, or the gay world, the world of the demimonde, the world of twilight, the

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[56] Joanna McMillan, *Sex, Science and Morality in China*, Routledge Contemporary China Series (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 91.

world of the night" in the 1920s and '30s in Western societies such as the U.S. and the U.K.[57] Even the visual elements used in the film such as the darkness, shadows, overcast skies, and dilapidation are consistent with the metaphors of "demimonde," "twilight," and "night" used by Hay to describe the world of homosexuals.

Through Ah Lan, the viewer is shown a glimpse of how this gay society functions. In the beginning of the film Ah Lan is wondering in the park, exchanging suggestive glances with men who are wondering by themselves just like him looking for sex partners. According to Ah Lan's "confession," after these men cruise each other in the park, they will find a "deserted spot" to have sex, such as a building under construction as we see in the film.

The communication between gay men is understood among the members of this society. During the interrogation in the police station, Ah Lan talks about his sexual encounter with a teacher who he has picked up in the street:

> Ah Lan: As I watched him walk by, I knew he liked me, too.
>
> Xiao Shi: You were perfect strangers. How did you know he was just like you?
>
> Ah Lan: From his eyes. I could tell right away.

The look in the eyes as that Ah Lan talks about, and other little things become rituals performed by the gay men coming to the park for social interaction and sex, and

[57] Greta Schiller, "Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community," (USA: First Run Features, 2005).

form a certain cruising "culture," which reminds us of the pre-Stonewall "Bohemian culture" in the U.S.[58]

"Society" in *Palace* also means the somewhat stable body of members who frequent the park in search of sex or companionship. Most of these people cruising in the park are regulars, and so they are not completely strangers to each other. They have a certain connection although this connection usually does not extent beyond this secret society. During the interrogation, Ah Lan tells Xiao Shi that he has "lots of friends." Ah Lan then lists their nicknames such as "the Stud, Dandy, [and] Lily." These people Ah Lan knows by their nicknames form a network within the society. However, their identities, recognizable only through their nicknames, are only meaningful within this context of the "secret" society. The use of nicknames not only provides identifications these gay men need to interact with each other in their society, but protects their identities in the straight world from being damaged because of their sexuality.

What portrayed in the film is based on what was learned from pioneering research on gay population in China in the 1990s. In one of the most influential books studying homosexuals and their subculture in contemporary Chinese society, *Their World*, the authors Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo, the latter the coauthor of the screenplay for *Palace*, uncovered an "invisible" underground gay society in Beijing, operating in streets, public restrooms, parks, neighborhood parks, public bath

[58] Ibid.

houses and other public places.[59] This gay society was compelled to be invisible to the straight public, and so little was known about this community by the general public that when Wang and Li, both straight, saw with their own eyes during their fieldwork so many gay men frequenting a public park in Beijing,, they could not conceal their amazement: "here is indeed another world. Although most people in society do not see them, 'their world' does truly exist."[60]

This world was called "society" ("*shehui*") by gay men, where they carried identities that could be recognized by only the members of this society. Certain "codes" were used to recognize and interact among the members of the "society," and these codes included a certain look or a kind of special attention to potential "friends," as Li and Wang's informants revealed. Similar codes – "language, dress, mannerisms, specific interests" – were also used by homosexuals in the U.S. especially before the Stonewall Riots. These signals "existed on a thin line: obvious enough to be read by gay people, but sufficiently obscure to remain invisible to straights," as explained by Michael Bronski.[61] This similarity indicates that although the oppression sexual minorities are faced with might be different in different societies, the cultures emerged from their respective conditions do share certain commonalities.

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[59] Li and Wang, "Their World," 119.
[60] Ibid., 120.
[61] Michael Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 55.

Policing Sex

Probably as depressive as the dark tone in the film is *Palace*'s direct depiction of police violence toward homosexuals in the park. The viewer sees several scenes in the beginning of the film when police carry out their night raids in the park, flashing lights on gay men, under the disguise of the dark woods, engaged in sexual and nonsexual activities. The police are shown shouting at the men, chasing them, arresting them, sometimes inflicting on them physical violence. Once the police detain their men, the detainees are grouped together and lined up. Not only the police will humiliate them by calling their names such as "hooligans," "freaks", "dregs of society," and "loonies," or threaten to inform their working unit of their "disgusting" conduct, but sometimes physical abuse is also involved, also not serious.

The policing of gay men represented in the film is also based on reality. In fact the scenes of police raids in the park were directly inspired by a news story the director Zhuang Yuan read in a newspaper about police arresting homosexuals in a park to help an AIDS research institute with their study. After being arrested, the detained homosexuals were forced to fill out questionnaires prepared by the institute.[62] The police's action in the similar incidences and their representations in *Palace* show a gray area in China's legal regulation of homosexuality, which is very different from the historical explicit illegalization of homosexuality in Western societies.

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[62] Chris Berrg, "Interview with Director Zhang Yuan (*Daoyan Zhang Yuan Caifanglu*)," *Music & Performance* 2 (2000): 43.

Before homosexuality was decriminalized in the PRC in 1997, homosexuals in China could be arrested and charged for "hooliganism."[63] "Hooliganism" is a derogatory and vague term associated with low moral standing, triviality, ignobility, and shame, was used to punish misconduct ranging from extramarital sex to exposing oneself in public. Under the charge of hooliganism, gay men were often harassed by police in public gathering places such as bars or parks. According to Li and Wang, one of the reasons gay men in Beijing chose places such as public bathrooms or parks to meet each other was because there was no "openly gay bar or bath house" in Beijing because any attempt to create such an establishment would be interfered by the police. In some other big cities, there were secret bars that provided "this type of service," meaning places for gay men to meet, and these bars often attracted "police interference."[64]

This situation was similar to that in the pre-Stonewall U.S. where homosexuals were arrested on grounds of crimes such as "loitering" or being in an unlicensed bar. In the U.S., sodomy was a crime in most States until 2003 when the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of Lawrence v. Texas, struck down a Texas law that criminalized consensual sex between adults of the same gender.[65] Nevertheless, it was difficult for the police to prove the crime unless the individuals concerned were caught in the act. Citing these other crimes enabled the police to arrest and to incriminate homosexuals under other charges without having to make a case of sodomy. As an

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[63] McMillan, *Sex, Science and Morality in China*, 93.
[64] Li and Wang, "Their World," 119.
[65] Nayan Shah, "Policing Privacy, Migrants, and the Limits of Freedom," *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (2005): 273.

interviewee says in a documentary *Before Stonewall*, "They [the police] would use any excuse to arrest you as long as they knew you were gay." [66]

Apparently, there are difference between the pre-stone wall U.S. and China in the 1990s. In China, homosexual behavior, especially public homosexual behavior, was a form of "hooliganism" and was punishable by law even if the individuals charged were not involved in any other criminal activity. Despite that, in both the cases, by charging homosexual conduct or relationships as "hooliganism" or "loitering", the police, the courts, and the media could avoid mentioning the terms "homosexual" or "sodomy" and thus exclude the question of homosexuality from public discussion while still keeping homosexuals under institutional surveillance along with other morally corrupted and sexually deviant "criminals."

The use of the degrading term "hooliganism" to criminalize homosexual behavior, besides keeping homosexuals invisible, also implies the trivialization of homosexual conduct. This is believed to be linked to the privilege and importance that Chinese culture has historically assigned to reproductive sexual activities. As Wang and Li rightly explain, any non-reproductive sexual activities are considered trivial and unimportant in Chinese culture, legitimate or not.[67] Homosexual conduct, although illegitimate, is not considered important because its purpose is physical and mental pleasure rather than reproduction. [68] (For this reason, illegitimate reproductive sexual conducts such as extramarital heterosexual activities or

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[66] Schiller, "Before Stonewall."

[67] Li and Wang, "Their World," 117-18.

[68] Ibid.

illegitimate reproduction are considered worse moral misconducts than same-sex sexual conducts in China, and following the same line, non-reproductive or recreational heterosexual activities within a marriage are considered legitimate but unimportant.[69]) The trivialization of homosexual conducts also explains the "freedom" Chinese sexual deviants had historically as observed by many scholars, for as long as the conduct did not violate other more "essential" social orders, such as that of class, gender or age that had constructed the imperial Confucian Chinese society, and as long as they were kept unseen, they were tolerated.

This ambiguity in the law and the trivialization of homosexuals are reflected in the film through two scenes where Ah Lan is questioned by a police officer and a park security respectively in the public restroom. In the first scene, after Ah Lan uses the urinal, a police officer, who is washing his hands in the restroom, stops him, and asks questions such as "Where do you live?" "Where do you work?" The policeman asks for the address of Ah Lan's workplace. After Ah Lan answers all these questions, the police office asks about the bike outside the bathroom, and asks for Ah Lan's bike permit. Ah Lan hands it to him, and after a few moments of scrutiny of the permit and Ah Lan, he hands back the permit and says, "That's all. You can go." Ah Lan is let go, but as he walks out, the police officer's suspicious gaze follows him all the way out. In the second restroom scene, Ah Lan is stopped by an undercover civilian park security, who insists that Ah Lan has "peeped" at him when they are taking a leak side by side. When Ah Lan denies, he says, "Don't try to

[69] Ibid.

play your dirty tricks with me." However, unable to pin down anything concreter than the "peep" he accuses Ah Lan of, he has to let Ah Lan go, with a threat though: "I'll let you off the hook today, but you'd better watch out," and later, "Little prick, you didn't pay up. Next time I'll nail you. I won't forget."

From these scenes, the view can tell that these authorities figures, the police officer and the park security, know that the restroom in the park is used by gay men for cruising, but because of the absence of explicit language in the law to incriminate homosexuals, they can only suggestively hint on what they are suspect Ah Lan of. With their suggestive probing gaze and elusive but intimidating questions, such as where Ah Lan works, they send the message to Ah Lan that he is under surveillance and should not conduct any "hooligan" acts.

These two scenes illustrate the elusive and ambiguous jurisdiction concerning homosexuals in the PRC in the 1990s. This ambiguity sometimes could work to the advantage of the gay community, since it was very hard to pin down what crime homosexuals committed and provide evidence to support the accusation. In *Palace*, for instance, the gay men arrested by the police are usually let go with a warning, after the police officers have "enjoyed" humiliating them. However, at other times, it also put gay people in a more vulnerable position because the law enforcement could cook up any accusation other than homosexuality to punish gays. The ambiguous in-between point where homosexuals stood between crime and innocence also resulted in mostly administrative punishment of gay people rather than jail time in the PRC. "Informing the workplace" could cause very serious

consequences to homosexuals if they are caught, because it could result in their losing jobs, a record in their files, or a ruined career if the people in question are government officials or if they occupied important positions in their workplace. Thus, the administrative punishment was no less serious than legal prosecution, and it was often used to threat homosexuals to "behave" to police. In addition, the semi-legal nature of administrative punishment also means that homosexuals could be deprived of the right to a trial, or even a hearing, which rendered homosexuals more vulnerable. In *Palace*, when Xiao Shi threatens to inform an elderly gay man's workplace of his homosexual conduct, the captive pleads him not to do so and promises that he will never come here again.

Shame and the Defiant Gay Voice

One of the underlining reasons of the ambiguity in the law regarding homosexuals in China is the sense of shame regarding homosexuality as rooted in the Confucian culture. In society in general—as manifested in the law and other public discourses—this shame prevents people talking about homosexuality. For individuals, this sense of shame makes it very difficult for Chinese sexual minorities to recognize and embrace their sex desires. Through its protagonists, *Palace* asserts the individual's sex freedom in defiance of the traditional Confucian values.

The shame associated with "deviant" sexual conduct is deeply rooted in the Confucian understanding of "private" and "public," and the relationship between the public good and personal responsibilities and self-cultivation. China's long

history and the plurality of the ideologies that have impacted its culture have made a full understanding of what "private" and "public" mean in the contemporary China remarkably difficult. The ideas of "private" and "public" in ancient Chinese philosophy vary across different schools. Many Chinese ancient thinkers recognized the distinction between "private" and "public."[70] As the dominant philosophy and ideology in ancient China, however, Confucian thought is believed not to entail the division of the public and the private realms in a person's life.[71] According to Cho, "personal cultivation" in Confucian thought is "based in an individual's integration into society."[72] In other words, in a society that retains strong Confucian beliefs, to cultivate virtue in a person does not only entail personal preference; it entails the requirement of a good citizen from the society and the responsibilities the individual shoulders for the public good.

Since personal virtue is an essential indication of a good citizen, the boundary between "private" and "public" is blurred in a Confucian society. In other words, public and private converge at the body of the individual. The convergence of private and public in the individual in a Confucian society takes away the "self"

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[70] For instances, Cai Jie, a mystical sage who has supposedly created the Chinese script, already made a distinction between "private" and "public" when he created these characters that are opposed to each other. Han Feizi, one of the major pre-Qin period thinkers, also made distinction between "private" and "public" and believed in the public law for the good of society. See P. J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2005), and JeeLoo Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy : From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006). For more instances, see Dainian Zhang and Edmund Ryden, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, Culture & Civilization of China (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).

[71] Hyunyi Cho, "Public Opinion as Personal Cultivation: A Normative Notion and a Source of Social Control in Traditional China," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 12, no. 3 (2000): 301.

[72] Ibid.: 302.

from the individual, for the individual is defined at once by the family and the society, and without them, the self does not exist, whereas in a Christian society, the individual has a direct relationship with God, and the "self" exists as the antithesis of God.

This obliteration of the individual self in a Confucian society explains why shame, the mindful perception of others' reaction to one's behavior, instead of guilt, the awareness of one's wrongfully breaching of law (of God), functions dominantly to regulate individuals' behavior.[73] The most serious shame in a Confucian society is that an individual brings to his/her family resulted from the public perception of the individual's inappropriate deeds or deviant character. Because of the blurry distinction between the individual and the family, the individual does not feel shameful within the family, and one does not lose "face," or "the public self image that every member wants to claim for himself,"[74] to one's family members either, for the individual and the family are one. Shame occurs only when the individual's misbehavior is perceived by the public outside the family. Therefore, when Cho points out that the Chinese government's denial of "homosexuals and promiscuity in China" and its effective characterization of AIDS "as a foreign disease" were to "save face,"[75] it is implied that the "face" the Chinese government tried to save was

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[73] Ibid.: 308. There definition of "guilt" here, however, is my interpretation instead of Cho's original, "an outcome of breaking the law," which I find quite vague and inaccurate.

[74] P. Bronwn and S. Levinson, *Politeness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 66, quoted in Cho, "Public Opinion as Personal Cultivation," 310.

[75] Cho, "Public Opinion as Personal Cultivation," 310.

the "face" facing the international public, instead of the face of its "family," the Chinese people.

The individual's relative position within and between the family and the society and the inadequate self in relationship to the family and the society also explains the dominance of the other extreme ideologies during certain periods of China's history such as nationalism and communism, which advocate the complete subduing of the individual to the national or the state interest (the public interest) while discarding or repudiating his/her family responsibility (the private responsibility).

Weintraub uses the criteria "visibility" and "collectivity" to draw a contrast between "private" and "public."[76] These concepts provide useful resources to interpret "private" and "public" in the context of China, although at the same time we must be aware of the limitation of using these criteria often used in Western context to understand Chinese experience. Weintraub stresses the importance of "collectivity," i.e., what "affects the interests of a collectivity of individuals," to determine something as "public." What is "visible," i.e., "open, revealed, or accessible," is not necessarily "public."[77] However, the distinction between "visibility" and "collectivity" is blurred in a Confucian society, precisely because of the convergence of personal cultivation and public responsibility and the importance the society assigns to public perception in regulate one's behavior.

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[76] Jeff Alan Weintraub, "The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction," in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*, ed. Jeff Alan Weintraub and Krishan Kumar, *Morality and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.
[77] Ibid.

It is useful to take a moment to revisit Chou's argument regarding Chinese *tongzhi*'s preference of their sexual orientation as a "private matter" and of the strategy of "coming home" instead of "coming out." Chou states that the reason that many *tongzhi* do not want to "come out" to the public is because they think that their sexual orientations do not have anything to do with others, which essentially is to argue that sexual orientations are not "collective" but individual and thus they should not be a public matter. This argument, if we put it into a Confucian context, is problematic, because sexual orientations, as part of one's virtue, have everything to do with others, but as long as they are not visible to the public, they are not threats to one's "face."

This unspoken concern is consistent with Chou's other argument about "coming home." Chou writes, as many *tongzhi* would agree, that as long as they do not verbally "come out" to their family, their family will accept their sexual orientation and their same-sex partners. The reason is that as a medium of communication, the act of speech means visibility in public, or being accessible for others outside the family. It betrays "family secrets" that can be *known* without verbal communication within the family.[78] The discussion of family and privacy will be further discussed in the following chapters.

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[78] The concerns of family and visibility in a Confucian culture share many similarities with other non-Western cultures, such as that of the diasporic Russian-American culture, as discussed in Diana Fisher, "Immigrant Closets: Tactical-Micro-Practices-in-the-Hyphen," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2/3/4 (2003). However, differences between these cultures in dealing with the issue of sexual identities exist. In addition, the case of Russian-Americans is further complicated by its diasporic nature. These concerns deserve a thorough discussion that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

The two protagonists in *Palace* represent the defiant gay voice that defies the traditional Confucian values of social responsibilities and personal elevation, and asserts the "shameful" homosexuality as legitimate personal choice for individuals. At the same time, the film also shows the struggle of gay men in dealing with shame and self-denial through the character of Xiao Shi. Therefore, while Ah Lan is the assertive gay who voice aloud the quest for sexual freedom, Xiao Shi is a more subtle representation of Chinese gay men. The film thus is essentially a coming out story of Xiao Shi.

Ah Lan is a character who rejects the idea of staying safe by being silent and invisible. The life story he tells Xiao Shi during the interrogation informs the viewer that his position has been gained through years of humiliation, despair, and self-hatred. In a sense, the Ah Lan cruising in the park is one who desperately needs to express his desire and long for freedom, despite the danger associated with this expression. His rejection to denial is best expressed in his declaration to Xiao Shi, "I'm not despicable (*jian*). I'm gay (*tongxinglian*)!" This statement is a rejection to the "shame" of being gay according to Confucian values, and his acceptance of the idea of "pride" of who he is.

Xiao Shi, on the other hand, represents those who are closeted in denial of their homosexuality. In the interaction between the two progresses throughout the night, Xiaoshi's heterosexual identity is questioned, and towards the end of the film, Xiao Shi is compelled to recognize his homosexual desire and to "come out" to himself.

In the beginning of *Palace*, Xiao Shi, being "straight," masculine and a member of the law enforcement, is a symbol of power. Throughout the film until the very last few sequences, Xiao Shi is contemptuous and hostile to homosexuals. As a member of the law enforcement, he takes part in the police's night raids in the park. He holds a flashlight, flashing at gay men in the dark woods, and when he catches them, he pushes them around and shouts at them violently. When the gay men arrested by the police are gathered together, he reproaches them with absolute authority. He orders his detainees to slap their faces, insults them as being "disgusting," and threatens to call this their offices and report their "hooliganism" to their workplaces.

Xiao Shi does not hesitate to show his contempt and resentment to Ah Lan either. The first time when they meet, Ah Lan is a captive of the police. Because Ah Lan is a new face, Xiao Shi asks him if he is passing by. When Ah Lan boldly denies, Xiao Shi changes his soft voice into his "police" voice, saying, "You should be ashamed of yourself." During the interrogation, Xiao Shi repeatedly calls Alan "*jian*," or despicable, and Ah Lan's being gay "stinking habits."

Xiao Shi's hostility towards gay men, as later shown in the film, is in fact towards his own homosexual desire. His judgment of these gay men being *jian* is rooted in the shame he has towards himself. Being the interrogator, he is ostensibly powerful in his relationship with Ah Lan, but the actual power relation is reverted. Ah Lan acts as a "mentor" who guides Xiao Shi to confront his own homosexual desire, and Xiao Shi is a closeted gay man in denial who is struggling for an identity.

Xiao Shi's latent homosexual desires are revealed through his interest in Ah Lan. After the first encounter with Ah Lan, the second time when he arrests Ah Lan, he admits unintentionally that he has been looking for Ah Lan. When Ah Lan asks why Xiao Shi has been looking for him, Xiao Shi seems to be surprised by Ah Lan's question, and then shortly after, he puts on an amused look as if he does not care, while avoiding directly answering Ah Lan's question. The interrogation of Ah Lan itself is more of a voyeuristic pleasure to Xiao Shi than a serious police action. When Ah Lan starts to talk about his life, Xiao Shi sits down and starts to take notes. However, he is soon distracted by Alan's stories from his note taking, and is completely absorbed in Ah Lan's story. Throughout the night, he keeps asking Ah Lan to "talk," as if he wants to know what it is like to be Ah Lan.

However, during the night when being with Ah Lan, Xiao Shi is also trying hard to deny how he feels about Ah Lan and his own homosexual desire. On the one hand, his interest in Ah Lan and his gay life can be an indicator of his own confusion about his own sexual desires. On the other hand, he is afraid to confront with the part of him that is attracted to men and also afraid that Ah Lan will look through him and recognize who he really is. This uncertainty and anxiety in Xiao Shi is exemplified in the scene where Ah Lan talks about how he can see in the eyes of another man if he is "one of them." When Ah Lan says that to Xiao Shi, he looks into Xiao Shi's eyes intensely, and Xiao Shi, after a pregnant pause, looks away from Ah Lan and walks off. At this moment, Xiao Shi is not only confronted with Ah Lan's

piercing look and recognition the he is one of them, but also his own recognition, which makes him uncomfortable.

Xiao Shi's uneasiness and inner struggle with his desire is presented in the film by the hesitation, aversion, and even anger Xiao Shi shows when he has intimate contact with Ah Lan. Once when Ah Lan asks him to unbutton Ah Lan's shirt to look at the cigarette burns he has gotten from a sadistic gay man, Xiao Shi hesitates for a few moment before he does what Ah Lan tells him. When Ah Lan lays his head on Xiao Shi's shoulder when Xiao Shi comes back to the police station at the dawn, Xiao Shi shakes his body as if he is electrified, and shows a contemptuous look as if he is trying to pull away from Ah Lan. At the end of the film, Xiao Shi gives in to Ah Lan's seduction, but at the same time, his passion and anger are so strong that he becomes almost violent to Ah Lan. His relationship with Ah Lan becomes a love-hate relationship – he is at once attracted to and repelled by Ah Lan, for Ah Lan represents at once the object of his desire, and his repressed sexual identity. Therefore, Xiao Shi's resentment towards Ah Lan is an expression of his struggle between his denial and his desire.

At the end of the film, Ah Lan further puts doubts and confusion in Xiao Shi's mind, asking him "You asked me a lot of questions. Now why not ask yourself?" That is a question that Xiao Shi fears to ask, but is compelled to ask. He does not say anything, but walks slowly out to the roof of the building in the morning light.

While Ah Lan asserts his gay identity and explicitly rejects the shame that is imposed on him by the traditional Confucian values, Xiao Shi is more representative

of those sexual minorities in China who are in need of an identity that will allow them to recognize their sexuality without the burden of shame and self-hatred.

Between Sex and Politics

The gay theme in *Palace* can also be seen as the political expression of the Western influenced Chinese liberal intellects and artists who see the issue of sexuality minorities in China as part of their cultural project to liberate China. Like gays and lesbians, the filmmaker and the writer also consider themselves as marginalized as the gay community in China. Liberal intellectuals and artists in the 1990s such as Wang and Zhang identified themselves with the sexual minorities as marginalized groups whose voices were dissonant with the mainstream culture and ideology and who were consequently silenced. This identification has drawn the attention of both Zhang and Wang to the gay community in China, and has enabled them to empathize with the desire of gay men to be accepted into the daylight by their oppressors whom they at once hold a grudge against and love. At the same time, the gay community relied on these straight intellectuals to speak for them, because they themselves were discredited for their "deviant character" and were forced to stay in the private realm.

Zhang's interest in the gay theme for his film is by no means irrelevant to his identification with gay men. Underground films, in a similar manner as homosexuality, were largely absent from the mainstream discourses in the last century. Although a considerable number of underground films were made in the

1990s, none of them had made it into public discourse until 2000 when Cui Zi'en, a professor from Beijing Film Academy and underground filmmaker himself, opened a column "Chinese Underground Films" ("*Zhongguo dixia dianying*") in a newly published magazine *Music and Performance* (*yingyue yu biaoyan*) hosted by Nanjing Art Academy (*Nanjing yishu xueyuan*).[79] Underground films, as the name indicates, were largely absent from the daylight of public space.

This absence of underground films from public discourse is mainly due to the Chinese government's strict control over film production in the country. In the interview by Berrg, Zhang pointed out the obstacles for filmmakers in China to produce films:

> The production of Chinese films has to follow a regulated process, in which you have to receive approval for the project before you shoot the film, after that the script has to be censored, and only after it gets approved can you start shooting. Faced with the film censorship, I often found myself a very naïve child, because you are not faced with only one person, nor a so-called film institution, but a very specific system of censorship.[80]

Under this strict control, many film projects would never be approved to be put into production. Those which do get approved would have to wait for a long time for the approval to go through, and many of them would have to modify the scripts to get

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[79] Aiyuan Yu, "Cultural Analysis of Chinese 'Underground Films' (*Guanyu Zhongguo "Dixia Dianying" De Wenhua Jiexi*)," (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002).

[80] Shaoyi Sun and Xun Li, "Interests in the Utmost Social Tolerance and the Concept of Equality -- an Interview with Young Director Zhang Yuan (*Dui Zuida De Shehui Guanrongdu He Dui Pingdeng De Gainian Ganxingqu -- Qingnian Daoyan Zhang Yuan Fangtan*)," *Journal of Hangzhou Teachers College (Social Science Edition) (Hangzhou shifan xueyuan xuebao shehuixue ban)* 4 (2006): 70.

the final approval. In order to be able to make films they want to make, many filmmakers choose to shoot their films without the approval from the government, which makes their films technically illegal and thus underground.

Sometimes the government even gets tougher on underground filmmakers and takes active measures to restrict these filmmakers' activities. Being the first underground filmmaker in China, Zhang himself has had a tense relationship with the government. In 1994, Zhang and a group of directors participated in the Rotterdam International Film Festival without the permission from the government. Consequently, the Ministry of Radio and Television of China (the former State Administration of Radio, Film and Television) issued "A Notice to Prohibit Supporting or Assisting Zhang Yuan et al. in Shooting and/or Post-Production of Films and/or Television Plays" (*guanyu bude zhichi, xiezhu Zhang Yuan dengren paishe yingshi ji houqi jiagong de tongzhi*) as a punishment.[81] The ban was not lifted until 1999. In 1997, when *East Palace, West Palace* entered the Cannes International Film Festival, Zhang's passport was confiscated by the Chinese government to prevent Zhang from attending the festival. Zhang's citizenship was taken away from him because of his "deviant" behavior.

In a similar case, Wang Xiaobo believed that Chinese intellectuals who did not agree with the government's propaganda line were marginalized, and considered himself one of them. In his well-known article "The Silent Majority" (*chengmo de*

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[81] Yu, "Cultural Analysis of Chinese 'Underground Films' (*Guanyu Zhongguo "Dixia Dianying" De Wenhua Jiexi*)."

daduoshu), he drew clearly the parallel between intellectuals and marginalized groups such as the gay community:

> Several years ago, I participated in some studies in sociology, and contacted some 'marginalized groups' (*ruoshi qunti*), among whom the most special was homosexuals. After these studies, I suddenly realized that the so-called 'marginalized groups' were those who couldn't say all they wanted to say. Because they have been silenced, many people think that they do not exist or live in great distance. […] Then I also suddenly realized that I myself also belonged to the largest marginalized group in the history, and they are the silent majority. These people keep silence because of many reasons; some of them do not have the ability, or do not have the opportunity to speak up; some of them have inconvenient reasons; also some of them, because of different reasons, have a kind of aversion towards the world of voices. I belong to the last kind.[82]

Like the silenced gay community, for a long period of time at the early stage of his career as a writer, Wang struggled to find publishers for his works. It was after he won an award from a Taiwanese newspaper *The Union* (*lianhe bao*) that he started to be accepted by publishers in mainland China.[83]

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[82] Xiaobo Wang, "The Silent Majority (*Chenmo De Daduoshu*)," in *Selected Works of Wang Xiaobo (Wang Xiaobo Wenji)* (Beijing: China Youth Press (*Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe*), 1999), 16-17, quoted in Zhizhong Zhang, "Three Coverings in Chaos -- Writings by Yu Dafu and Wang Xiaobo and Perversion and Sadomasochism (*Zhongsheng Xuanhua Zhong De Sancheng Zhebi -- Cong Yu Dafu, Wang Xiaobo Bixia De Nielian He Nuelian Tanqi*)," *Journal of Han Nan Normal University (Social Science) (Hainan shifan xueyuan xuebao, shehui kexue ban)* 19 (2006): 34.

[83] Zhang, "Three Coverings in Chaos," 34.

The marginalization by the mainstream culture became a common ground for the groups to work in "coalition," in Bronski's words when he describes somewhat similar situation during the gay liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S.[84] In the case of *Palace*, the marginalized liberal intellectuals used their ethos to advocate for sexual minorities' civil rights, a task very difficult for sexual minorities to carry out themselves. This probably is a characteristic of Chinese gay rights advocacy that is quite unique to a culture that respects intellectuals.

Conclusion

The depiction of the underground gay world in *East Palace, West Palace*, reveals many aspects of the lives of sexual minorities in China in the 1990s. The conditions for sexual minorities at this time had some similarities with those in pre-Stonewall U.S., where homosexual and other sexual deviants were largely invisible from the public, but at the same time formed their own underground societies. The members of this underground queer society in China and those in pre-Stonewall U.S. were both subject to legal sanctions and police harassment. Despite these similarities, the difficulties Chinese sexual minorities encountered at this time were associated with the traditional Confucian understanding of personal values, which trivialized non-heterosexual persons, and imposed tremendous sense of shame to individuals. As a result, Chinese sexual minorities were subject to different forms of oppression, which, although not necessarily legal, were serious and could have very harmful

[84] Michael Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 67.

consequences to their lives. With this sense of shame, it is also very difficult for Chinese sexual minorities to recognize their non-heterosexual desires. Through its protagonists, *Palace* voices the quest for sexual freedom, and a need of sexual identity for sexual minorities in China that does not have to bear the burden of shame.

In addition, the film also exemplifies the influence of Western liberal thought in the construction of Chinese queer identities as well as the activism for sexual freedom in China. The issue of sexual minorities in China, therefore, can never be understood isolated from the big picture of China's increasing exposure to Western cultures.

CHAPTER 3

SEX, VIOLENCE, AND FAMILY: LESBIANS IN *FISH AND ELEPHANT*

Fish and Elephant (Jinnian Xiatian)[85] is acclaimed to be the first lesbian film in mainland China, although it has never been officially released in the country.[86] Made in 2001 by independent filmmaker Li Yu, the film is one of the most widely known gay and lesbian films to Chinese and international audiences, acclaimed among the members of the queer communities and critics.[87] Although it has never been officially shown in Chinese movie theatres, it has been one of the most shown gay and lesbian films in small arthouse screenings and independent film festivals in China. Ironically, *Fish and Elephant* was released internationally, which however is not uncommon for Chinese independent films, and entered the Venice International Film Festival in 2001, where it won the Elvira Notari Prize. In 2002, the Film was awarded the Best Asian Film Prize at Forum of New Cinema at the Berlin International Film Festival.[88] These recognitions are partly due to its novel and daring treatment of a subject that had never been seen in Chinese cinema at the time. The film thus offers a valuable social text that informs the understanding of the

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[85] Yu Li, "Fish and Elephant (*Jinnian Xiatian*)," (China2001).

[86] *Fish and Elephant* is an underground film that has not been approved by the Ministry of Radio and Television. Because of this, Li Yu was on the "black list" of the Ministry for some time and was not allowed to make official films. See Weiping Cui, "Interview with Li Yu: Film -- It Makes Your Heart Less Cold (*Li Yu Fangtan: Dianying -- Ta Shi Nide Xin Meiyou Name Bingleng*)," *China Arts Criticism (Zhongguo yishu piping)*(9 May 2007), http://www.zgyspp.com/Article/y5/y54/200705/6287.htm.

[87] Liang Shi, "Beginning a New Discourse: The First Chinese Lesbian *Film Fish and Elephant*," *Film Criticism* 28, no. 3 (2004).

[88] Nan Li, "Love and Sadness of the First "Lesbian" Movie (*Diyibu "Nütongzhi" Dianying De Ai Yu Aichou*)," *News Weekly (xinwen zhoukan)*, September 9 2002, 62.

lesbian identity in the social context of the People's Republic of China at the turn of the 21st century. How lesbians are portrayed in the film is informed by Western feminist thinking, and the film reveals that Chinese lesbian identity is negotiated in a society where traditional Confucian values is still prominent and the patriarchal remnants still exist in the culture.

Chinese Lesbians and *Fish and Elephant*

Although female-female sexual relationships have been well documented in Chinese history,[89] the concept of modern female homosexuality was first imported in China in the late 19th and the early 20th century as the ancient empire was forced to open its door to the West, and lesbian relationships were a favored subject in urban bourgeois women's magazines and fictions by progressive feminist women writers. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the representation of lesbians and the concept of female same-sex sexuality were absent from the public for more than three decades as heterosexual marriage as the "single uniform sexuality" produced by dominant official discourse on sex.[90]

It was in the 1980s that the representation of lesbians reemerged in the public consciousness as the country broke from its extreme leftist past and increasingly participated in global economy. Indeed, in the last two decades of the 20th century, China saw an increasing interest in homosexuality in the fields of

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[89] H. Laura Wu, "Through the Prism of Male Writing: Representation of Lesbian Love in Ming-Qing Literature," *Nan N*□ 4, no. 1 (2002), and Chou, *Tongzhi*.

[90] Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

psychology/psychiatry and sociology,[91] the appearance of organized lesbian activities and activism,[92] and the revival of feminism and feminist writing of lesbian

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[91] Since the 1980s, articles that dealt with the subject of homosexuality have appeared in academic and popular medical journals such as *International Journal of Biologicals* (guoji shengwuzhipinxue zazhi), *International Journal of Dermatology and Venereology* (guoji pufuxingbingxue zazhi), *International Journal of Medical Parasitic Diseases* (guoji yixue jishengchongbing zazhi), *China Journal of Immunology* (zhongguo mianyixue zazhi), *International Journal of Immunology* (guoji mianyixue zazhi), *International Journal of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery* (guoji erbihoutoujing waige zazhi), and *Chinese Journal of Frontier Health and Quarantine* (zhongguo guojing weisheng jianyi zazhi). However, most of these articles published in the 1980s and 1990s treated homosexuality as a mental disease, and thus many studies focused on the "cure" of homosexuals. In sociology, professor Liu Da lin from Shanghai University was among the first sociologists whose work focused on homosexuals. He conducted a research on the sex culture in China from 1989-1990, which included the first report on college students' attitude towards homosexuality in China. See Dalin Liu, *Sexual Cultures in Contemporary China: A Report of a Study on Twenty Thousand Cases (Zhongguo Dangdai Xingwenhua -- Zhongguo Liangwanli "Xingmenming" Diaocha Baogao)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 1992). Sociologist Li Yinhe and humanist and writer Wang Xiaobo were also among the first who studied homosexuals in China. Their first study was conducted from 1989-1991, which remains one of the founding studies in gays and lesbians studies in China. See Li and Wang, "Their World." However, the focus of these sociological studies was on male homosexuality, and thus lesbians remained largely uncharted in this area at this time. In *The Emerging Lesbian*, Sang argues that this absence of lesbian subjects in the public journalistic and sociological discourses in China after the Cultural Revolution compared to the accounts of male homosexual subjects is certain, but the cause of this absence remains disputable among scholars and critics. For instance, as Sang points out, Tamara Chin argues that the absence is because lesbian culture in China, unlike male homosexual culture, is unrecognizable to the West. Aaron K. H. Ho takes a step further and argues that the "Chinese lesbian" does not exist because of a linguistic lack of "lesbian" in Chinese, which provides a unstable space for identification. See Aaron K. H. Ho, "The Lack of Chinese Lesbians: Double Crossing in *Blue Gate Crossing*," *Genders*, no. 49 (2009), http://www.genders.org/g49/g49_ho.html.

[92] A few activists, some of them from Western countries, started organizing activities in the early 1990s, but it took them a few years to build organizations for lesbians such as a women and men's homosexual Pager Hotline (*BB ji rexian*) in 1997 and the Queer Women Group (*nütongzhi xiaozu*) in 1998. These lesbian organizations, with the support from Hong Kong lesbian organizations, pushed the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing 1995 to have a panel of lesbians for the first time in his history. See Xiaopei He, "Chinese Women *Tongzhi* Organizing in the 1990s," *Inter-Asia Culture Studies* 3, no. 3 (2002). One of the lead actor in *Fish and Elephant*, Shitou, an artist living in Beijing, was also an avid activist and organizer of lesbian community activities—a "young cosmopolitan lesbian" as called by Sang. See Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 171.

subjects.[93] These factors, among others, have contributed one way or the other to the emergence of the lesbian identity and consciousness and the increasing visibility of lesbian communities in big cities.

As the first film representation of lesbians in the PRC, *Fish and Elephant* reflects this increasing visibility of lesbians in public discourses. In an interview where Li talked about her choice of lesbian subjects in *Fish and Elephant*, she shared her experience of the "coming out" of Chinese lesbians and its effect on her:

> In fact, I did not know much about homosexuals. Then it was in 2000, I suddenly realized that many people around me were like that. I didn't know why I didn't find out earlier. Fact is, it's not because there were few homosexuals in the past, but in 2000 suddenly everybody was coming out, and it was not surprising that many around you [came out]. I thought this was interesting, so I began to get to know them.[94]

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[93] Since the 1980s, Chinese feminists were increasingly influenced by Western postmodern thoughts that have drawn their concerns towards women's subjectivity and sexual/gender identity. For instance, Dai Jinhua, a film critic, cinema historian, and literary critic, was heavily influenced by French feminism as well as European avant-garde critical theory, especially by Lacan and Althusser. See Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 302. Another acclaimed scholar among this group is sociologist and sexologist Li Yihe, who was trained in the University of Pittsburg and has been influenced by post-modern theorists, especially by Foucault. She is also among the first who introduced queer theory into China and an active activist for Chinese sexual minority's equal rights. In literature, lesbian subjects appeared in the fictions of women writers such as Zhang Jie, Liu Suola, and Wang Anyi in the 1980s. In the 1990s, Chen Ran and Lin Bai rose among the most acclaimed women writers with the depiction of female homoeroticism and consciousness in their fictions and, in Chen's case, theoretical work that has been informed by Western postmodernist feminism. See Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 173, and Lydia H. Liu, "The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature: Negotiating Feminisms across East/West Boundaries," *Gender*, no. 12 (1991).

[94] Cui, "Interview with Li Yu: Film -- It Makes Your Heart Less Cold (*Li Yu Fangtan: Dianying -- Ta Shi Nide Xin Meiyou Name Bingleng*)."

According to Li, the story of *Fish and Elephant*, "a mixture of true story and fiction," is based on a lesbian couple, Shitou and Pan Yi, who later also became the lead actors in the film.[95] In fact, the film was originally a documentary—before making independent films, Li was an awarding winning documentarian working for the state-owned television station, China Central Television (CCTV). Li eventually abandoned the idea and decided to make a fiction film because she felt that she was "hurting" the people involved, for the film was going to be shown to "other people."[96] This certainly does not mean that the film is a mirror image of the reality—even if it were a documentary—but it does mean that "a potential vehicle for symbolizing socio-political change,"[97] *Fish and Elephant* provides us a glimpse into the lives of lesbians and what it means for a woman to love a woman in contemporary PRC.

Set in metropolitan Beijing in the juncture of the 20th and the 21st century, *Fish and Elephant* tells a story that revolves around the lives of one lesbian couple, Ling (played by Shitou) and Qun (played by Pan Yi). Ling and Qun are immigrants from Southern provinces. The two women meet at Ling's clothing booth in a shopping mall and fall in love with each other. After they move in and live together, their relationship is soon tested by Qun's visiting mother from the province, who has been

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[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Rushing and Frentz, "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': A Social Value Model of Criticism." The author published a follow up of this first essay dealing with Rocky in the same year. See Frentz and Rushing, "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': Part Two." Also see other rhetorical critical studies that deal with film by the same authors: Rushing and Frentz, "'the Deer Hunter'.", and Frentz and Rushing, "Ideology and Archetype."

pressuring Qun to get married. Their lives were then further complicated by the return of Qun's ex-girlfriend Junjun, who is wanted by the police for robbery. The story ends with the reconciliation between Qun and Ling.

Although its plots are quite simple, *Fish and Elephant* explores the complex personal relationships among four women—the romantic relationship between two lesbian women, Qun and Ling, the friendship between two female ex-lovers, Qun and Junjun, and the family relationship between a lesbian daughter Qun and her mother—and their relationships with the male members in society. This first representation of the newly emerging Chinese lesbians at the turn of the 21st century is influenced by the post-Mao feminist consciousness which has been informed by the Western feminist thought as China increasingly involved in globalization at that time. At the same time, what it means for a woman to love another woman is constrained by the Confucian traditions of familial duties and the patriarchal remnants in the culture, and Chinese lesbians have to negotiate their identities strategically in this context.

The Invisible Lesbians

The representation of the society in *Fish and Elephant* where the protagonists' stories take place shows that Chinese lesbians are largely absent from the public eye. At the turn of the 21st century, an increasing number of Chinese women who are sexually attracted to those of the same sex identified themselves as lesbians, of whom some coming out to people around them as the director of Li has noticed.

However, the concept of lesbian was still unheard of to many Chinese since lesbians were largely absent from the public discourse. In fact, lesbians were even less visible than male homosexuals in the public eye. This invisibility is reflected in the film through supporting characters' reaction towards the protagonists and the documentary style cinematography.

In *Fish and Elephant*, one of the protagonists, Qun, goes on blind dates set up by her cousin and her mother. When Qun says to them that she likes women, they cannot even understand what this means. During on of the meetings, Qun's date's reaction to her sexual orientation is "What? That's impossible! Very few people are like this. I don't think I've ever come across this type before." Later, he still persistently suggests them keep seeing each other:

> Well, it's proper for men [and] women to love each other, but not people of the same sex. How can this happen? You think I am not the right one for you or is it something else? It's okay. Although this is our first meeting, you can go ahead with your opinion of me. It's okay…why didn't your cousin tell me? Never mind. OK then. I think we'd better just talk, just get along for a while. I bet [it's] because of your personality. You don't see boys often, do you?… You work at a zoo, and see a lot of animals, right? You don't see people, right?

This man tries to find an explanation for Qun's preference of women to the extreme that it makes it almost comical. What he cannot conceive is the idea of same-sex attraction between women.

In the film, when Qun talks to her mother and reveals her sexual orientation, her mother simply cannot understand: "What do you mean? I'm confused… What're you trying to say? It sounds like… Don't scare me. I just don't understand. What are you talking about?" When Qun tells her mother that she loves Ling, her mother is more confused: "Ling? Aren't you friends? What are you saying? Don't you say you were friends? And that you take care of each other? What are you talking about?"

What is more interesting is that the character's reaction in the film to the idea of lesbian was actually their true reaction. In an interview, Li reviews that the actors in the film were all amateurs, and during filming of the scenes when they heard Qun say "actually I live women," many of them were shock speechless.[98] This further shows that the idea of lesbian was still very foreign to most of Chinese at that time.

In addition, the cinematography in the film also shows the invisibility of lesbians in society. Most of the outdoor shots in the film are medium shots that present the scenes of the environment where the characters blend in. In many cases, one can hardly detect the protagonists in the shots among people and cars in the busy streets of Beijing. This style implies that lesbians who live among people are at the same time invisible from their vision.

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[98] Jun Li, "Interview with Director of *Apple* Li Yu: 'I Can Make Women's Movies for All My Life' (*Zhuanfang* Pingguo *Daoyan Li Yu: 'Wo Keyi Yibeizi Pai Nüren'*)," *The Bund*, no. 262 (2007), http://www.bundpic.com/link.php?linkid=1734.

Sex, Violence, and Bodies

In a society where their legitimate existence is denied and where patriarchal power that oppresses women exists especially in sexuality and family relationships, the lesbians in *Fish and Elephant*, choose to make themselves seen and heard through their bodies, which is an idea that is mostly likely informed by Western feminist thought. The film's title suggests two forms of resistance through bodies, sex and violence. In a talk after a screening in 2003, Li talked about her choice of the English title "Fish and Elephant"[99]:

> Fish and elephant are both symbolic. Fish is a girl like Ling, being appreciated (*bei guanshang*), being slaughtered (*bei zaisha*), and it also symbolizes homosexuals (*tongzinglian*).[100] And elephant is a girl like Junjun, who uses violence to fight against violence. The elephant is an enraged big elephant, and she wants to break through the prison of spirit.[101]

Both animals symbolize women, although in different ways. Fish symbolizes the desiring woman, who is represented by Qun and Ling though their sexual and emotional relationship that is expressed, for the most part, through their bodies.

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[99] *Fish and Elephant* is titled "*Jinnian Xiatian*" (This Summer) in Chinese. According to Li Yu, originally, the Chinese title was "*Yu yu Daxiang*," or literally "Fish and Elephant." While they were shooting the film in a mall, the security came and asked what they were shooting, in order to avoid trouble—because the film was not approved by any authority—she spontaneously said "*Jinnian Xiatian*," a title that "couldn't be more boring, and more meaningless." Thus in a strange way, the translated English title more accurately represents Li's original intention than the Chinese title. See Li, "Love and Sadness of the First "Lesbian" Movie (*Diyibu "Nütongzhi" Dianying De Ai Yu Aichou*)," 62.

[100] "*Tongxinglian*" literally means "same-sex love," and is an official translation of both "homosexuality," the concept, and "homosexual," the subject. Li's use of the word is ambiguous here.

[101] Qiqi Su, "A True Story of Two Lesbians: *Fish and Elephant* (*Liangge Nutongxinglian De Zhenshi Gushi:* Jinnian Xiatian)," HSW (*Huashang Wang*), http://fun.hsw.cn/2003-08/29/content_719924.htm.

Qun's aquarium and her goldfish in her apartment, one of the most salient motifs of film, "witnesses" each crucial moment in the development of Qun and Ling's relationship throughout the film. The first time when Ling is invited to Qun's place, fish is what helps them to break the ice and show affection for each other. Sitting side by side with Qun in Qun's apartment, Ling seems to be waiting for Qun to initiate some action, but Qun is too shy to do anything. When Qun's alarm goes off, she explains to Ling that it is time for her to feed the fish. Ling then remarks that it is said that people who love fish love sex too. Encouraged by Ling, still shy, Qun reaches out to hold Ling's hand, and then kisses her lightly on her lips. The camera then cuts to the pedestrians and bikers going about their business in a street under the scorching summer sun of Beijing. A few seconds later, the camera cuts back to Qun's small apartment, to their private space, and shows the two women lying facing one another in bed, their arms around each other's naked body, sleeping in quiet satisfaction. When the relationship goes sour because of Junjun's return, Ling poisons Qun's fish in jealousy. When Ling finally comes back to Qun, their love is rekindled and they populate Qun's aquarium with new goldfish. In the end, after passionate love making, Qun and Ling, once again, lie side by side with each other, back to their quiet and peaceful satisfaction. In the foreground, the camera shows goldfish quietly swim in the aquarium.

This special attention to and candid depiction of sex between females is indeed very rare in Chinese cinema, for sex in general and nudity are not allowed in visual media to this day in China. However, it does remind us of the "bodily writing" of

women writers in the 1990s such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai, who "focused on the female body," and "purely depicted sex stripped off of the meanings of traditional societal morality attached to it."[102] Like these writers, Li recognizes and, indeed, asserts women's desiring subjectivity through the naked female bodies entangled in ecstasy and the satisfaction and tranquility afterwards.

This assertion of female subjectivity is where the film breaks away from the Confucian, progressive nationalist, and communist traditions that have been dominant in the mainland Chinese culture. It should not need much lengthy explanation that in a traditional patriarchal Confucian society, women were regarded as property of men and the patriarchal family. Progressive feminists in the May Fourth era[103] criticized the feudal ideas of women's "three obediences and four virtues" and "the absence of talent in a woman is a virtue"[104] and advocated that women's equal rights to men in society. The national crisis of foreign invasions during the 19th and the 20th century also compelled Chinese intellectuals to recognize

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[102] Xiaoping Ran, "From Writing Bodies to Bodily Writing: A Critique of Writings by New Generation Women Writers in the 1990s (*Cong Shuxie Shenti Dao Shenti Shuxie: 90 Niandai Xinshengdai Nüzuojia Chuangzuo Mantan*)," *Journal of Peking University (Beijing daxie xuebao)*, no. S1 (2003): 129.

[103] The May Fourth era refers to the decade of two around the time of the May Fourth Movement (1919), initiated by the members of the New Cultural Movement (1915-1921). This was a time when Chinese progressive intellectuals and students sought Western science and democracy as the means to salvage the country from foreign invasions. The May Fourth Movement was a protest instigated by the new culturalists' against the Peace Treaty of Versailles signed at the end of World War I, and against the Beiyang government, a government of warlords in power then. For more on the May Fourth era, see R. Keith Schoppa, *Revolution and Its Past: Identities and Change in Modern Chinese History* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), and Peter Gue Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

[104] "Three obediences" required a woman had to obey her farther before marriage, to obey her husband after marriage, and to obey her son after her husband died. "Four virtues" refers to woman's fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech and proficiency at needle work. See Chenyang Li, ed. *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender* (Chicago and LaSalle, IL: Open Court,2000).

the potential of women in strengthening the nation and resist foreign powers. The anti-Confucian and national discourses combined thus gave rise to a feminist discourse that advocated women's role in public sphere, where women identified themselves as citizens who contributed to society, rather than just daughters, wives, or mothers. With the breakout of the Sino-Japanese war in 1939, as Zhai points out, "the force of women's reflective perception started to diminish; women no longer perceived reflection on their subjectivity as the main goal of their pursuit, but shifted their focus to society, and increasingly identified with their societal roles."[105] The nationalist discourse thus discouraged romantic love in general, including heterosexual love, which was considered by patriotic youth as secondary to their responsibilities to the nation, and "personal love had to serve the cause of emancipating the masses."[106]

The May Fourth view on women was inherited by the communist government after the founding of the PRC. Situated in the ideological dialect of Chinese Marxism and Maoism, Chinese women's personal identity was replaced by class identity and state resources.[107] Even when a more "reflective" consciousness returned to women

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[105] Ruiqing Zhai, "Development Orbit of the Chinese Women's Subjective Consciousness in the 20th Century (*Ershi Shiji Zhongguo Nüxing Zhuti Yishi De Yanbian Guiji*)," *Journal of Shandong Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)* 51, no. 5 (2006): 83.

[106] Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 157.

[107] After the founding of the PRC, the CCP pronounced the complete liberation of Chinese women. Women's rights were ensured legally by Constitution and the Marriage Law of 1954. However, being essentially state resources, women's role in society was determined by the national interests. When there was a labor shortage, women were mobilized to enter the labor force, which indeed elevated their economic and social status. However, when the labor force outgrew the economy, women were urged by the government to go back home and be a revolutionary housewife. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a time dominated by leftist extremity, gender differences were eliminated in

in the 1980s, this privilege of the political over the person still affected how women saw themselves in China. At this time, even the writing of female writers such as Zhang Jie, Liu Suola, and Wang Anyi who depicted the bonding among females and their challenge to heteronormality and marriage,[108] emphasized on the assurance of the independent female subjects from the male socially and economically more than the actual realization of sexual conduct.[109]

Fish and Elephant, however, depicts women differently—their priority in the film is not resuming their social roles, but taking care of the sexual and emotional needs. For most part, the characters are constructed in enclosed, private environment, separate fro the world outside. Like the fish in the aquarium, Qun and Ling develop their relationship and express their love mostly in Qun's little apartment. Although the viewer is shown constantly the Qun and Ling in the noisy and busy city streets, they are almost always by themselves, with very little deep and meaningful interaction with the rest of the world. Although both of them have professions, they both have an aloof attitude towards people around them. Ling has few words with her customers at her clothing stand, and many times she seems to not want to be bothered by her customers. Qun almost does not interact with her coworker at the zoo. When she goes to blind dates, she never shows any interest to connect to these

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the culture. See Hongmei Shen, "All-China Women's Federation: A Party Representative or Feminist Organization?," in *International Communication Association 2007 Annual Meeting* (2007), 7, 8, Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 167.

[108] Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, 173. Also see Lydia H. Liu, "The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature: Negotiating Feminisms across East/West Boundaries," *Gender*, no. 12 (1991).

[109] Xiangming Sha, "Feminism and the Sex Themes in Comteporary Chinese Fictions (*Nüquan Zhuyi Yu Zhongguo Dangdai Xiaoshuo Chuangzuozhong De Xing Zhuti*)," *Fujian Tribune* 4 (1995): 48.

men she meets. Neither of them shows any sense of responsibility to society in general or self-bettering ambition. The film's depiction of sex and female bodies reminds us of the "aloof and proud"[110] style of lesbian writing in the 1990s described by Chen and Min:

> To them (Chen Ran and Lin Bai), women had existed for long as the other/object, and no matter in the patriarchal societal cultural system, or in the heterosexual family characterized strongly with the ideology of gender discrimination, women had to decide what to desire and what to forego in their lives according to the male value standards. In order to open a clear space, they chose to write with their back to society, history and the crowd, scrutinize in solitude the female inner world, and attempt to find and construct subjectivity in the emotional and sexual connection with same-sex friends."[111]

Like these writers, the characters in *Fish and Elephant* also turn their back to "society, history and the crowd," and seek their pleasure through their bodies.

Parallel with fish appearing in the title, elephant, another salient motif in the film, symbolizes the angry revenging woman that embodied in the character of Junjun. Like an enraged elephant, Junjun chooses violence in response to male aggression. Junjun appears in the film when Qun and Ling's relationship is going steady. The viewer learns that Junjun left Qun two years ago without a word, and

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[110] Jiaohua Chen and Yihong Min, "An Attempt to Discuss Lesbian Writing of Chinese Female Writers in the 20th Century (*Shilun 20 Shiji Zhongguo Nüzuojia Bixiade Nütongxinglian Shuxie*)," *Journal of Huainan Teachers College* 9, no. 41 (2007): 13.
[111] Ibid.

comes back to Qun because she claims to have robbed a bank and is wanted by the police. Hiding Junjun in her workplace in the zoo, Qun later finds out from a police officer that Junjun is wanted not because she has robbed a bank as she claims, but because she has killed her father. Later, in Qun's dorm room, Junjun shows a gun to Qun and tells her story:

> I stole the gun from a policeman after I slept with him. I always wished my father dead. He raped me when I was young. My mother pretended not to know about it. I know she did it for the family. She was still pretending when she died of illness. I've been dying to kill him since I was 10. I'm not lying to you. I'm lying to myself. I don't like to recall those things. I'd rather come to you because I robbed a bank. See what I mean? My first thought when I had this gun in my hand was to come find you. I betrayed you, but you're the only one who can help me.

Through her violent revenge, Junjun becomes a heroic rebel who defies the patriarchal institutions of family and the state. Silenced by the patriarchal power—her mother's denial and betrayal of her "for the family"—Junjun is left with violence as her only option. Her body then becomes a means to her revenge—she uses her body to obtain a gun as she steals it from a police officer after sex with him. In fact, her body itself has become a weapon, with which she ends the violence with physical violence, revenges blood with blood.

At the same time, Junjun is a tragic heroine. To Junjun, her family, which her mother has defended by sacrificing her own daughter, is a prison, a place of

violence, a crime scene of her father's repeated aggression. By killing her father, Junjun frees herself from the confinement of the family, but at the same time, subjects herself to the confinement of the law. Even the enclosure of Qun's dorm room is at once a shelter and a confinement to Junjun, like the cage that confines the elephant Qun takes care of, which she is bound to break through.

It is not difficult to see the connection between sex and violence in *Fish and Elephant*. In the last scene, Junjun final confronts the police force as Qun and Ling make love in their enclosed and safe space. When Junjun holds the chief police officer at gun point and fires an empty shot, the camera cuts back to Qun's apartment, where Qun and Ling hold each other after in satisfaction. The intersecting shots from the two different scenes indicate that sex and violence, both expression of the body, are two forms of resistance.

It is precisely through their bodies, the lesbian protagonists in *Fish and Elephant* make themselves heard. Indeed, the dialogues in the film are very succinct and scarce. The characters express themselves mainly through their body language, and the film constructs the story through its cinematography. Words, in the case of *Fish and Elephant*, seem to be a secondary vehicle of communication. This silence reflects the silence of women, especially those who are directly oppressed and violated by the male dominant society. As a documentarian, Li has met many of these women during her career at CCTV. She told her audience at Peking University's film festival when she talks about Junjun's character:

> I've made many documentaries, no matter it was in the countryside or in cities, I think [girls raped by their fathers] are large in number, but they are not seen by others. We can't broadcast this type of things, but they are not uncommon, and have a large percentage, which is very disturbing.[112]

These women, who are violated and oppressed into silence in Li's documentaries, are given a voice through Junjun's body and her violence. When Junjun fires her gun, the cry of elephant in the background is the cry of rage, of resistance, a non-verbal hysterical cry, like that of a mad woman.

Surely we do not know if Li has been directly influenced by Western feminists, but the effects of cultural exchange in the context of globalization are messy but present in interesting ways. In fact, after a screening of *Fish and Elephant* at a film festival on the campus of Peking University, Li talked about her choice of the lesbian theme for the film when she said, "Somebody said: 'Feminism is the idea and lesbianism is the practice.' I wanted to know what this practice looked like."[113] Her reference to the radical feminist Ti-Grace Atlinson's Chicago Women's Liberation Union pamphlet was clearly casual, and we are not even sure if she had known where the quotation was from, but this does not mean that the connection between the Chinese lesbian film and Western feminist discourse is accidental. It is precisely

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[112] Shitou, "Every Summer Is Beijing Summer -- the Story of *Fish and Elepant* (Meige Xiatian Doushi Beijing Xiatian -- *Beijing Xiatian* De Gushi)."
[113] Ibid.

through these ambiguous references that we detect the global influence on how lesbians are imagined in China at the turn of the century.

Family Matters

Bearing this Western feminist imprint, *Fish and Elephant*, however, is not disconnected to the Chinese context, where the traditional Confucian values such as filial duties and familial integrity and harmony are still prevailing. These values, instead of being positioned in an opposing position to the lesbian identity, are represented in the film as part of the lesbian identity through the character of Qun and her relationship with her mother. Although the duties as a daughter initially seem to be at conflict with her lesbian identity, Qun resolves this conflict by relying on the bond between the mother and the daughter, a bond based on not only blood ties, but also the shared understanding between two women. It is through the character of the mother and the relationship between her and her daughter Qun that the character of Qun is complicated by her dual identity as a filial daughter and a lesbian.

Through her relationship with her mother, Qun is represented as an exemplary filial daughter. She never has argument with her mother, always obeying her even if Qun is reluctant. She never complains she her mother comes to stay with her without notifying her, which will most likely be considered intrusive in some other cultures that emphasize more on individual space.

Qun's problem arises precisely from the conflict between her dual identity as both a filial daughter and a lesbian, which seem to be incompatible. It is important here to understand that the problem of Qun's mother with her lifestyle has less to do with her being a lesbian than with her not being married, a characteristic issue to sexual minorities in China. A thirty-year old single woman, Qun is considered a problem by "normal" standards in society, and certainly by her mother, her cousin, and the men she meets at the meetings arranged for her as well. In the beginning of the film, Qun's cousin lectures her before an arranged date, "women should get married and have babies at your age. It's the proper thing to do." Therefore, Qun's life as a single woman of 30 is "improper," illegitimate, and, essentially, unintelligible. Like Qun's cousin, Qun's mother clearly thinks that it is an urgent matter that Qun should get married. Although she does not live in Beijing with Qun, she asks Qun's cousin to arrange to set up Qun with single men and constantly calls Qun and pressures her to go on these blind dates with potential candidates for a husband.

Although Qun is reluctant to date men, in order to make her mother happy, she obeys her mother and meets her dates according to her mother's arrangements, which, as we see it the film, has become a constant burden for Qun. On the one hand, we see these almost comical yet tiring meeting scenes one after another, where Qun is always disinterested and impatient. On the other hand, Qun has to comfort her mother after each failed date, such as in this phone conversation between the

mother and daughter after the first date in the film where Qun and her date end up getting drunk together like two good friends:

> Qun: Sorry mom. He doesn't like me. He just wants to be friends.
>
> Mom: You've seen so many men already. I don't believe the right one isn't out there.
>
> Xiaoqun: It's no use to rush this. Just take it easy! Don't worry, Mom!
>
> Mom: What do you mean by "just take it easy?" How can I take it easy if you are still single?

In other cases, when she tries to get out of going to a blind date her mother has arranged, Qun has to reassure her worrying mother that she is indeed trying to find someone to get married: "Mom, I don't want to go… No, why should I like to stay single since I'm already 30? ... Mom, don't cry… Okay. Don't blame me if it doesn't work."

To Qun, this prolonged negotiation with her mother is indeed a constant struggle that seems to have occupied a significant part of her life. However, this struggle is not an explicit but reticent one, for Qun has never blamed her mother for pushing her too hard, nor has she had any direct conflict or even argument with her mother. Instead, Qun patiently obeys her mother when she asks her to meet men and tries her best to appease and please her as any filial daughter would do. In a manner that almost makes this imperative of obedience even more necessary, the film reveals to the audience that Qun's father deserted his family when Qun was young and her only brother died in a car accident a year before. Her mother's

misfortune thus compels Qun to fulfill her duty of the only daughter to take good care of her mother and make her happy.

Qun carefully maintains a good relationship with her mother by withholding her lesbian identity from her and pretending that she is single only because she has not found a good candidate for marriage. In this way, Qun manages to avoid direct conflict with her mother. However, this "harmony" between mother and daughter is contingent on her mother's ignorance of her sexual orientation, or the separation of Qun's two conflicting identities. Thus when Qun's mother decides to come to Beijing and stays with her for a while, this "harmony" is threatened. As a filial daughter, Qun's does not have the option to reject her mother, but at the time, Qun is living with Ling as a couple. With her mother's visit, Qun's two worlds and two identities are about to collapse on each other. "Coming out" to her mother has become unavoidable if not the most desirable option to Qun.

The potential conflict between the mother and daughter, however, never happens in the film. The couple lies to Qun's mother upon her arrival that they are good friends living as roommates. "Everything's so expensive," says Qun to her mother. The mother believes them and even thinks it a great idea because the girls can take care of each other. She even asks to stay in the guest bedroom because she is not used to sleep with other people. Qun's mother's naivety about lesbians in a way allows Qun some space and time to

Qun's mother thinks it very reasonable. She even asks to stay in the guest bedroom in the small two-bedroom apartment because she is not use to sleeping

with others. Although that leaves the two women sleeping in the same bedroom, it does not bother her at all for the idea of her daughter being a lesbian has never occurred to her. While Qun's mother stays with them, she cooks her family dishes for them, taking care of Qun and Ling, regarding Ling almost as her own daughter—"Your friend is my daughter," as she once remarks. She even asks Ling about her personal life, worried about her marriage as well. In this way, the film turns the mother from an "intruder" into a domestic caretaker, and prepares Qun a harmonious environment to resolve her problem.

The resolve of Qun's problem is also facilitated with her mother's remarrying to another man. This incidence brings the mother and daughter closer, because remarrying is considered infidelity traditionally. Qun's mother's remarrying thus serves as a common ground from the mother and daughter to understand each other. In this sense, *Fish and Elephant* still moves within the perimeter of the traditional "Chinese" family values, and preserves the family intact.

Fish and Elephant's focus is almost fixed on its female characters, and the male characters are not given much attention. However, one still cannot help noticing the significance of the father figure in the film. Although the fathers of the protagonists are all absent – Qun's left her and her mother for another woman when Qun was young, Lin's father never mentioned, and Junjun's farther who is already dead at the time when the events in the film happen – they are always lurking in the background, especially Qun's and Junjun's fathers, and their absent existence has shown remarkable impact on their daughters' lives. Further, two other "fathers" are

indeed present in the film, the one who ends up dating Qun's mother and the police officer who arrests Junjun.

The first father plays an indispensable role in Qun and her mother's reconciliation. He is the one who persuades Qun's mother, when she is distressed by Qun's revelation of her sexual orientation, to understand her daughter and love her as she is because "she's your daughter; she can't be wrong." Thus, Qun's deviance has to be approved by a father figure – who actually becomes her stepfather – for her mother to accept it.

On a different note, the second father figure, the police officer, also represents the state. Junjun's resistance ends in her arrest by the police – when she fires her gun at him, for reasons unknown to the audience, the gun has no bullet in it. It seems that Junjun's resistance is defeated in front of a father and representative of the father state. Her unfulfilled rebel will end in imprisonment and her anger is echoed by the elephant's shrill cry the audience hears in the background. In a sense, Junjun's failure is indeed a failure to the patriarchal power.

The treatment of family and father figures in *Fish and Elephant* does imply the difficulty Chinese lesbians encounter when they express their sexual identity in a cultural context where the familial system is still quite formidable and the patriarch power is still at play on various levels and in different forms. This ambivalent attitude towards the Confucian tradition is perhaps sets what means to be a lesbian in China apart from what we understand in the Western context.

Conclusion

The formation of the Chinese lesbian identity in public discourse has been linked to the West-influenced Chinese feminism throughout China's modern history to contemporary times. As the first lesbian film that shows the image of Chinese lesbians, *Fish and Elephant* shows the influence of the contemporary Western feminism in a complex way. The emphasis on the female body as a site of resistance reminds us of Western postmodern feminist thought.

On the other hand, the issues and difficulties the lesbians in *Fish and Elephant* encounter are very often rooted in the traditional Chinese culture. The invisibility of lesbians in China is linked to the traditional trivialization of female sexuality and the tradition to define women only in family relationship. Family relationship is thus one of the most centered themes in the film, whether between mother and daughter, among women who treat each other as family, or between an abusive father and a revengeful daughter. The film shows how the constraint of the cultural context of contemporary China such as the traditional Confucian family values poses problems as well as opportunities when Chinese lesbians try to negotiate their sexual identity while conforming to the cultural norms.

CHAPTER 4

TONGZHI IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN *TONGZHI*

Since the 1990s, especially since the turn of the new century, with the availability of digital video (DV) cameras on the Chinese market, an emerging "flourishing DV culture" has been nurtured by a body of amateur filmmakers and a growing audience in the PRC.[114] The accessibility to consumer media technology and an emerging underground market for underground media products have given Chinese the means and channels to express themselves with the freedom they had never enjoyed before. Cun Zi'en, an avid DV filmmaker, gay rights activist, and allegedly the first openly gay public figure in China, talked about this newly gained freedom associated with DV media in an interview, "Before DV, it was needless to say that the creation of moving images was restricted by the system and capital. I believe, DV is a weapon that is most closely connected to the times, and it has brought me freedom."[115] As part of the DV culture, independent films by and/or of Chinese sexual minorities are made increasingly on DV, in a manner not unlike the gay and lesbian documentarians made in the U.S. from the 1970s to the early 1980s as part of the projects of self-declaration in the gays and lesbians liberation

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[114] Yiman Wang, "The Amateur's Lighting Rod: DV Documentary in Postsocialist China," *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2005): 18.

[115] Qiqi Su, "I Object: Interview with Cui Zi'en (*Wo Fandui: Cui Zi'en Fangtan*)," filmsea.com.cn, http://www.filmsea.com.cn/geren/article/200402180025.htm.

movement.[116] These films are sold online, passed around among indie movie cult followers, and screened in small theatres, art houses, galleries, and film festivals in urban areas,[117] representing queer lives and constructing identities and communities for Chinese sexual minorities.

Tongzhi, a documentary made between 2002 and 2004, is the first DV film that documents and represents sexual minorities in China. The documentary follows lives of a group of sexual minorities who call themselves *tongzhi* in Ji'nan, the capital city of Shandong province in North China. Although the documentary is directed by Han Tao, a straight filmmaker who was trained in oil paining, it claims to represent the "real" *tongzhi* and actually includes a good amount of footage shot by the central figure Baobao on his DV. Although representation and reality should not be conflated, this documentary provides us a glimpse into the lives of *tongzhi* in an "average" Northern city in China and thus better understanding of *tongzhi* subculture in China in the beginning of the 21st century, especially when the public and academic attention from the world has mainly focused on a few cosmopolitan centers such as Beijing and Shanghai.[118]

In *Tongzhi*. the title itself refers to the identity originated in Hong Kong's *Tongzhi* Movement and adopted by a group of sexual minorities in Ji'nan city. Unlike

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[116] Waugh Thomas, "Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post-Stonewall Period 1969-1984," in *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, and Gay Documentary*, ed. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), and Lisa Ades and Lesli Klainberg, "Fabulous!: The Story of Queer Cinema," (United States: IFC; Netlix, 2006).
[117] Kirk Semple and Jing Zhang, "Indie Filmmakers: China's New Guerilla," *The New York Times*, 27 September 2009, Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, eds., *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.,2006).
[118]

the shadows wondering in the public park searching for anonymous sex in *East Palace, West Palace*, Ji'nan *tongzhi* in the documentary interact with each other on various meaningful levels, sustain more complex and deeper relationships with each other, and have formed a community of their own.

An analysis of the documentary *Tongzhi* shows that Ji'nan *tongzhi* have adopted and performed the *tongzhi* identity in response to their local cultural and economic conditions. It also shows that the *tongzhi* identity does not always respond to the idea of a global queer culture as "*tongzhi*" initially entailed in the context of *Tongzhi* Movement. The social and economic changes in China, such as increasing mobilization of the population, the loosening of family ties, and the growing urban areas, have provided new conditions for *tongzhi* to perform their identity with increasing freedom, which allow them to build communities based on *tongzhi*'s relationships with each other and a certain degree of separation from the "straight" world.. On the other hand, *tongzhi* are still compelled to negotiate this identity with reticent yet powerful forces of Confucian traditions that remain central in the culture especially outside the few cosmopolises.

"Tongzhi"

On the cover of the DVD version of *Tongzhi*, it is claimed that the documentary is "the first self-exposed and self-identified *tongzhi* movie in China."[119] Apart from its marketing function, the claim points out an important aspect of the documentary.

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[119] Tao Han, "Tongzhi," (China: Beijing Film Academy Recording and Video Company, 2004).

Unlike the characters in the two films discussed in the previous two chapters, sexual minorities represented in *Tongzhi* identify themselves as *tongzhi*, an identity that has been adopted by homosexuals and bisexuals across China since at least the late 1990s.[120]

The significance of *tongzhi* identity for Chinese sexual minorities has been widely acknowledged in both popular and academic discourses. Prior to the wide use of the term *tongzhi* to denote non-heterosexual, terms, such as "cutting sleeve" ("*duanxiu*") and "sharing the peach" ("*fentao*"), were used to describe same-sex sentiment and behaviors in historical documents and literature in China. However, many have argued that these terms have never functioned to construct identities.[121] With the same logic, some argue that slangs used in certain regions in China to refer to non-heterosexual people such as "pie" (*bingzi*) or "button" (*kouzi*) in Wuhan, or "addicted" (*pijing*) in Shanghai are used to refer to same-sex activities instead of identities.[122] Although none of these terms has functioned to construct identities for Chinese sexual minorities, one must make distinctions between the identities associated with these terms and "homosexual identities," for the construction of these identities has often involved conditions beyond sexual orientation, such as

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[120] Wei Wei, "'Wandering Men' No Longer Wander Around: The Production and Transformation of Local Homosexual Identities in Contemporary Chengdu, China," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 4 (2007).

[121] For instance, Chou, *Tongzhi*, Dikötter, *Sex, Culture and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period*, Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, Yinhe Li, "A Comparison between the Eastern and the Western Sexualities," in *Li Yinhe's Comments on Sex* (Harbin, China: Beifang Wenyi Chubanshe, 2006), Ma, "Homosexuality in China.", Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian*, and Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China*.

[122] Wei, "Local Homosexual Identities in Contemporary Chengdu," 574.

class, gender, education, social circles, etc.[123] The terms used in particular regions, although have functioned to construct identities that are perhaps close to homosexual identities, often have negative connotations and regional or dialectal limitations.[124] *Tongzhi*, unlike these other terms for identities or "quasi-identities" in Wei's term, is the most widely accepted term for sexual minorities in contemporary China, "regardless of their geographic locations, social status, educational level, and marriage status," use to call themselves.[125]

Originally used in Hong Kong's *Tongzhi* Movement in the 1990s to denote gays and lesbians, *tongzhi* has been adopted widely by sexual minorities across Chinese societies. The term functions as what Jones calls a semiotic "cultural tool,"[126] which has been appropriated by sexual minorities from a larger sociocultural context into their specific or immediate context in identity construction. This function of *tongzhi* is noted by Ma Jin Wu:

> Ancient terms like *long yang* and *duan xiu*… were unknown to young people. The technical term, "*tong xing lian*," is too formal and carries negative, even shameful connotations; it had been widely used by psychiatrists to describe

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[123] In Qing dynasty, *nanfeng*, was mostly associated with the literati, and male *dan* (male actors playing female roles) often involved in sexual relationships with influential patrons, see Wu, *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China.*

[124] A traditional indigenous identity *piao piao* adopted by homosexual men in Chengdu prior to the emergence of *tongzhi* has had negative connotations not accepted by many homosexual or bisexual men, see Wei, "Local Homosexual Identities in Contemporary Chengdu." Another example is "*eryizi*" (meaning "two chairs"), which is used in Beijing area to denote homosexual or bisexual men and is an extremely derogatory identity imposed on these people.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Rodney H. Jones, "Imagined Comrades and Imaginary Protections: Identity, Community and Sexual Risk among Men Who Have Sex with Men in China," *Journal of Homosexuality* 53, no. 3 (2007): 87.

> a mental disorder, so the gay and lesbian community did not want to use it. *Tongzhi* filled in a blank.[127]

This "blank," however, should not be understood as a preexisting identity void that has to be filled prior to the emergence of *tongzhi* identity. To some extent, this "blank," or put more accurately, this semiotic "blank," is similar to what Rofel calls the "space of identification" opened up by Western homosexual and, more recently, queer identities.[128] In other words, the need to acquire a "homosexual" identity has been constructed through China's rather ambivalent relationship with Western societies since the late 19th century. Thus, *tongzhi*'s function in filling the "blank" of an indigenous queer identity is itself problematic.

It is clear that the emergence and adoption of *tongzhi* identity have been linked to the postcolonial conditions (especially in Hong Kong's case) and globalization. However, it is not enough to conceive *tongzhi* in terms of the binary of an essentialized "West" and a unified "China," or the "global" and the "local." In other words, one should not understand *tongzhi* either simply as a local response to globalization or as "localized appropriation of the western gay identity," as opposed to more "indigenous" (quasi-)identities.[129] Although the initial adoption of *tongzhi* as an identity by Hong Kong gays and lesbians liberation activists was part of their resistance to the colonial product of homosexuality,[130] the wide acceptance of it in various Chinese societies is not necessarily as a response to the imposition of Western

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[127] Ma, "Homosexuality in China," 130-31.
[128] Rofel, "Qualities of Desire."
[129] Wei, "Local Homosexual Identities in Contemporary Chengdu," 574.
[130] Wong, "Language, Cultural Authenticity, and the *Tongzhi* Movement."

homosexual identities or globalization. Therefore, while we recognize the "cultural belonging" that *tongzhi* claim, we also must speak of the "cultural belonging" in broader terms rather than only in terms of Western-Chinese opposition. In other words, to understand the meanings of *tongzhi*, one must recognize the complexity of cultural exchanges not only between China and those outside China, but also among Chinese societies whose varied modern histories account as much as the shared cultural heritage from ancient China, or intra-cultural exchange.

When discussing *tongzhi*'s function in identity construction, Jones rightly warns us to avoid "the individualistic bias of Western scholarship and the emotional and political overtones imposed on the term by Western activists."[131] What Jones has failed to address, however, is to also avoid the bias from Hong Kong activists, who *Tongzhi* was born at once under the influence of gays and lesbians' political activism in Western societies and Hong Kong sexual minorities' desire to construct their cultural citizenship in resistance to the globalizing or colonial imposition of queer identity and culture. Therefore, from its emergence, there has been a political overtone to *tongzhi* although ironically the private or apolitical aspect of *tongzhi* has been emphasized by Hong Kong activists as a characteristic of *tongzhi* that is fundamentally different from the Western queer identity. Since *tongzhi* traveled to the Mainland China, however, it has been appropriated and re-appropriated by local communities under different sets of conditions. Therefore, we need to guard against

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[131] Jones, "Imagined Comrades and Imaginary Protections: Identity, Community and Sexual Risk among Men Who Have Sex with Men in China," 86.

both the Western impulse to "globalize" *tongzhi* and the post-colonial impulse to "de-globalize" *tongzhi* as its first priority.

The communal *Tongzhi* identity in Ji'nan

As the documentary *Tongzhi* shows, although the term "*tongzhi*" has provided sexual minorities in Ji'nan a discursive resource for identification as it has for those in other parts of China, the *tongzhi* identity represented in the movie is constructed, or invented (by non-*tongzhi*) and imagined (by *tongzhi*),[132] within the context of Ji'nan. Unlike post-colonial Hong Kong or cosmopolitan Chinese cities such as Beijing, Ji'nan, a medium Northeastern city, is perhaps less in direct contact with the "global" gay scene, although with China's increasing integration into the global market, Ji'nan is not exempt from direct and indirect contact with other cultures outside China. The localized use of *tongzhi* in Ji'nan does not entail conscious resistance to globalization as the term was originally used by Hong Kong activists, and at the same time there is an absence of political activism in *tongzhi* circles in Ji'nan.

The meaning of being *tongzhi* as represented in the documentary stresses the individual's sense of belonging and membership in the *tongzhi* community. In other words, the *tongzhi* identity to Ji'nan *tongzhi* in the documentary has a strong linkage to the individual's relationship with the community and other community members, and a life style that is constructed based on the social interactions among *tongzhi*. The

[132] Here I am using the distinctions between the ways non-members and members construct community identity cited by Jones. Ibid.

tongzhi identity thus emerges from the communal experience of Ji'nan bi and homosexuals.

The documentary suggests that individual becomes a *tongzhi* when he/she "involves" in the *tongzhi* community and becomes its member by establishing relationships with other members. The *tongzhi* community is called the "*tongzhi* circle" ("*tongzhi quan*") by the central character Baobao and his *tongzhi* friends. To be a member of this circle, one's sexual orientation does not seem to be the only "qualifying" character. Therefore, the introduction of the individual *tongzhi* to the tongzhi circle and its other member through social interactions, instead of the self-realization of one's sexual orientation, is seen by many *tongzhi* as the moment of identification. That is why many *tongzhi* would have a very clear idea of how long they have been *tongzhi*, or in some cases, whom and how they were introduced into the circle. In other words, they usually do not considered themselves born *tongzhi*, although they may have been sexually attracted to people of their own sex or engaged in same-sex sexual activities long before they become *tongzhi*. In Baobao's case, as he tells us in the film, although he had same-sex experience in his home village at an early, he became *tongzhi* circle after he moved to Ji'nan. In his own words, he has been "involved" in the *tongzhi* circle for four years.

While many *tongzhi*'s families of origin may not know about their sexual identity, *tongzhi* address each other using the terms that denote family members. For instance, at Baobao's birthday party in the beginning of the film, we meet "Little Brother" and "Auntie." Later, in Baobao's teahouse, we meet "Big Sister." Using

these terms to address people outside the family is not uncommon in China and some other Confucian societies such as Korea and Japan, in which ageism and family relationships are important references in defining relationships. Using the terms for family members in social interactions outside the family usually shows mutual respect, intimacy, and affection. In many cases, it also shows close connection between the addresser and the addressee. These functions also true in the case of *tongzhi*. Calling each other brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles, is a way for *tongzhi* to connect to each other and to build a "family" where their *tongzhi* identity is accepted and celebrated.

At the same time, these terms originally for family members also index a sort of order in the *tongzhi* community based on *tongzhi*'s seniority in the community as members, i.e., their membership. For instance, from the interviews in *Tongzhi*, we know that "Big Sister" is not only older than Baobao and Meiling, but he has been in the community for a longer time than the two of them. To them, "Big Sister" is almost like a mentor whom they respect and turn to for advice dealing with issues and problems in their lives.

The *tongzhi* community represented in the documentary differs from the underground gay society portrayed in *East Palace, West Palace* in that members of the *tongzhi* community build deeper and more complex relationships with each other than the members of the underground gay society in the public park. *Tongzhi* interact with each other not only for sex, but more often also for social and emotional needs. We see many scenes of social gathering in *Tongzhi*, and these social

gatherings, unlike the cruising in *East Palace, West Palace*, are more like friends or family get-togethers. In the first scene in *Tongzhi*, for instance, we see Baobao celebrate his birthday with his *tongzhi* friends in the restaurant he owns. During the dinner party, they exchange the latest news in the *tongzhi* circle—a *tongzhi* got arrested for fraud, and another underwent a sex-change surgery. When a couple of *tongzhi* seem to be upset about their lives, others would comfort them and cheer them up. It is through these interactions that a *tongzhi* community is built based on the shared experience and knowledge beyond sexual activities.

Built on close personal connections, the *tongzhi* community therefore is able to provide its members a safe place for emotional sharing and support. *Tongzhi* in the circle are able to share their love life, feelings, and problems in life with their friends who are able to empathize with them perhaps better than many others outside the circle. In the documentary, *tongzhi* in the circle are concerned about each other's life. When Baobao and his *tongzhi* friends spend time together, they chat about not only their dating experience, but also some other more serious matters. For instance, from a conversation between Baobao and a younger *tongzhi*, we learn that the young man left the police force because being *tongzhi* was not acceptable in a police officer and he was tired of hiding his sexual orientation from everybody else in the workplace.

In one of the most interesting scenes when Baobao visits his parents in the countryside, he takes a *tongzhi* friend with him, although his parents are not aware of their son's sexual orientation. The filmmaker does not accentuate the conflict between Baobao's traditional rural family and his urban *tongzhi* identity, but it is

obvious that Baobao is compelled to hide his *tongzhi* identity from his parents. In this case, Baobao's *tongzhi* friend who goes home with him thus becomes a source of support and at the same time provides him a link to or a reminder of his community by choice in the city while he stays with his rural family. Because many *tongzhi* if not share at least understand the difficulty in such situations, they are able to console and support their friends when they are faced with the difficulty with families. Baobao's *tongzhi* friend in the film clearly understands Baobao's situation and has Baobao's trust. Therefore, his being there witnessing Baobao's performance of a heterosexual filial son while concealing his *tongzhi* identity does not cause anxiety or discomfort to Baobao, but further provides him invaluable support and companionship when he is dealing with perhaps one of the most difficult relationships in many *tongzhi*'s lives.

These scenes above show that members of the *tongzhi* circle enjoy deeper personal relationships with each other than the members of the earlier gay society in *East Palace, West Palace*. These relationships have nurtured a community functioning for its members as a source of friendship, love, and support. Further, the individual's *tongzhi* identity is constructed in their interactions within this community, which operates on a local level that affects its members' daily lives—their day-to-day happiness and problems. In other words, the film shows that the construction of *tongzhi* identity relies and emphasizes on the communal experience perhaps more than anything else.

Separation and integration

Although the *tongzhi* community operates on the communal relationships among *tongzhi*, it does not mean that *tongzhi* is less of a sexual identity. For many reasons not all people of same-sex sexual orientation or people who have same-sex sexual experience identify themselves as *tongzhi* or a member of the *tongzhi* community. However, tongzhi is an identity that exclude heterosexual As the term "circle" connotes demarcation and a certain degree of exclusiveness, "*tongzhi* circle" also bears this exclusiveness which implies a demarcation between the "insiders" and the "outsiders." In the title sequence of *Tongzhi*, a proclamation reads: "This is a story of the mysterious *tongzhi* circle. This is a little-known real inside story of homosexuals." This proclamation certainly is part of the marketing package where terms such as "mysterious" or "real inside story" are used to appeal to the audience's curiosity. At the same time, however, it points out the separation between the *tongzhi* circle and the society at large, and the fact that *tongzhi*'s lives, unknown to the majority of people in the world "outside," are far from being integrated into society at large.

This separation is reflected in the documentary which has very little representation of the interaction between *tongzhi* and the society outside their circle. Baobao and his *tongzhi* friends celebrate his birthday in his restaurant and a karaoke bar, party and perform in Baobao's teahouse, and spend time in various places. However, only a few scenes offer the audience glimpses of how *tongzhi* often as a group interact with people outside the circle – venders in the streets or markets,

entertainers at a fair, or Baobao's family in the countryside. No scene shows how *tongzhi* deal with their employers, the government, or their "straight" friends in the documentary. If *tongzhi* is an identity that the members of this circle carry outside the community, the documentary has not provided much evidence to show how this identity operates outside the circle for the individuals.

The film does not seem to aim to address conflicts and dilemmas *tongzhi* encounter at workplaces, discrimination projected on *tongzhi* by society at large, legal injustice, or other "issues" often seen in many Western representation of queer lives. However, the difficulty and hostility *tongzhi* encounter from the outside "normal" world are hinted in many a moments in the film. In the video footage Baobao took on his birthday, for instance, Baobao suggests the difficulty his then boyfriend had from being a *tongzhi* while keeping a "normal" job. A young *tongzhi*'s experience with the police force also shows the social pressure and discrimination are not foreign in *tongzhi*'s lives.

The pressure and discrimination *tongzhi* encounter or potentially encounter make it difficult for them to carry their *tongzhi* identity into the world outside the circle. There are, however, distinctions among *tongzhi* who work in different social sectors and among *tongzhi* of different social status. Small business owners or self-employed *tongzhi* like Baobao, have more space to perform their *tongzhi* identity partly because they work in a peripheral social sector where performing an alternative sexual identity is not seen as transgressive as it is in the central sectors such as the public sector—bureaucracy, state-run institutions and enterprises—or

big private corporations. For *tongzhi* who work in these central sectors, carrying the identity outside their *tongzhi* circle is very difficult. In the case of the young former police officer who is a *tongzhi*, his *tongzhi* identity was incompatible with his identity as a member of the law enforcement, and therefore, between the two, he had to choose one. In the case of Baobao's ex-boyfriend who has a "normal" job, he chose to perform his *tongzhi* identity only within the *tongzhi* circle, which is probably what most *tongzhi* do.

In his study of young *tongzhi* in Hefei, Anhui province, Pierre Miège found that:

> The Internet, a few outings to the only gay bar in Hefei, and sporting and cultural activities organised by the homosexual associations: these are the few spaces in which one can exist with one's difference, but they remain relatively confined, always under threat and are kept completely sealed off from the rest of society.[133]

Similar to what Miège has observed, what we see in *Tongzhi* are mostly the activities carried out among *tongzhi* without much meaningful interaction with the rest of society, but these activities cannot satisfy *tongzhi*'s wish to be accepted as equal members in society, as Baobao has expressed: "I'm *tongxinglian* in this life, and in the next life, I'll still be *tongxinglian*. I feel that it's nice to be with boys. That's not something that's up to you. Even though we're wild when we party, we know

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[133] Pierre Miège, ""In My Opinion, Most *Tongzhi* Are Dutiful Sons!" Community, Social Norms, and Construction of Identity among Young Homosexuals in Hefei, Anhui Province," *China Perspectives* 2009, no. 1 (2009): 53.

clearly the misery in our heart." If we take a look at the documentary itself, the fact that none of the characters in the documentary except for Baobao, who is self-employed, have revealed their identities in the world outside the *tongzhi* circle also indicates that the *tongzhi* identity is still not quite accepted by society at large and it operates very often within the limited the *tongzhi* circle.

Relationships

As shown in the documentary, the relationships among *tongzhi* are diverse. Promiscuity is a common practice among *tongzhi*, but many of them also want to have a long-term partner, someone who is special to them. However, the film shows quite an ambivalent and uncertain attitude many *tongzhi* hold to the prevalent promiscuous culture in the community and the wish to have committed relationships, which sometimes cause them much stress and unhappiness.

From a conversation between Baobao and his friend Meiling in his teahouse, we can see Meiling's ambivalence and perhaps confusion as well. Meiling seems to have quite conflicting views about "love," relationship and his emotional autonomy and sexual freedom. On the one hand, he seems to believe that "true love" hardly exists in the *tongzhi* circle, and the only "realistic" option is promiscuity, which will allow him to satisfy his sexual needs while maintaining emotional autonomy. When Baobao asks him if he would be willing to live with a man who likes him, he answers:

> I wouldn't. (Why?) Because he wouldn't have feelings and wouldn't be reliable. I think when I want to satisfy my sexual needs, I can casually find a man to play with, but I won't give myself in because of my feelings. Nor will I confine myself to these feelings. That's because the love between tongzhi is not realistic. No matter what happens, two men always end up breaking up.

However, on the other hand, he still expresses his belief that there is "destined" true love between two men, although he himself is not sure what this "true love" means:

> Actually sometimes when two men are together, let me put it this way, I mean, two men truly stay together… I mean, if they are destined to be together, they will meet even if they are thousands of miles away, and if they are not destined to be together, they won't even hold hand even if they are face to face to each other. What is true love? I don't know what to say. Now my mood is terrible. Is there true love between *tongzhi*?

When asked what he thinks of life, he expresses idealistically the hope of meeting someone special and building a serious relationship with him:

> My view of life is to love the present. People are this realistic, and they can do anything for money, but I can't. If I met a good man—maybe you would think what I have said is nonsense, but even if you think I'm talking nonsense, if I really love someone one day, I really will support him. I'm the kind of man who gives without taking.

Although Meiling's ambivalence about love and relationship is not unique to the *tongzhi* community, it seems that under the more intense social pressure, it is more difficult for *tongzhi* to choose the lives they want and nurture the relationships they desire. From Baobao's monologue below, we can sense Baobao's unhappiness resulting from the difficulty to build trusting and long-term romantic relationships in the *tongzhi* circle:

> I feel okay tonight staying here by myself, without anybody. Indeed it's very stressful to be in this circle of friends. I don't know if this video will be seen by people in this circle. I don't know either what this video will do to them. I just hope that those who are not *tongzhi* won't involve in this circle. It's too stressful to be in it. A lot of times I can't even figure out why it's like this. All the tears, all the misery, all the hardship in this circle always bring me unhappiness. Perhaps I shouldn't have filmed these things today, but I wish to show my real life. I will stop now because I don't know what to say. Actually I really like this feeling at night, nothing but yourself. I don't expect anything emotional. In fact love can't be expected.

Baobao filmed this sequence of himself talking to the camera on his own DV camera at midnight. As he talks, he weeps and wipes his eyes occasionally. The audience cannot help feeling for his pain and loneliness. However, while blaming other *tongzhi* in the circle for being responsible for his unhappiness, Baobao, at other times in the film, seems to enjoy his promiscuous life and takes his relationship with Xinyue, his ex-boyfriend who has lived with him for two years, quite lightly. This

contradiction reflects, to a certain extent, the conflict between different values that coexist in the *tongzhi* culture. On one side is the pursuit of individual sexual freedom, and on the other, conformity with the "traditional" Confucian values of commitment and abstinence based on the patriarchic heterosexual family model that condemns promiscuity as degrading and immoral. Therefore, although some *tongzhi* lead a promiscuous life and "live for the present" as Meiling claims, the guilt and anxiety this life causes them should not be underestimated at any rate. Baobao, who once almost proudly tells us that he sometimes has three or four partners in a day, expresses his remorse and guilt while going to a gay teahouse where *tongzhi* find sexual partners:

> This is me. Sometimes I might be hypocritical, but I can't always control my thoughts. And occasionally I can't help coming to his place. I really shouldn't have come here because I don't belong here at all. This is a place I can't pull myself from. It is this little place that many can't pull themselves from. It is in this little house that many vicissitudes of life is revealed.

Baobao claims that this cruising place is not where he should go, and separates himself from others who are there by denying that he belongs there. At the same time, he admits that he is not in control of his behavior, betraying a sense of guilt and self-hatred. Again, Baobao does not only blame his unhappiness on himself, but also on the *tongzhi* circle, saying that he is "tired of dealing with relationships between men." We see here a sort of self-loathe both towards himself and towards the *tongzhi* community as a whole.

Relationship with family

Many have argued that for *tongzhi*, familial relationships are the most important, delicate, and difficult relationships to handle. According to Chou, Familial duties valued by Chinese, among which the most important are to marry and have children, are the crucial reasons why the "coming out" strategy does not apply to *tongzhi*. Thus, Chou proposes the strategy of "coming home," meaning negotiating *tongzhi* identity with the family members, especially the parents, in a non-confrontational manner to receive their acquiescence instead of explicit approval of *tongzhi*'s same-sex relationships. The family relationships of *tongzhi* represented in the documentary, however, shows that *tongzhi* can have a diversity of relationships with their family, although most of them still struggle with being a *tongzhi* and a dutiful son or daughter.

Not everyone in the film has a rocky or tense family relationship, or keeps themselves in the closet from their families. Big Sister is one of the fortunate ones. Being in the *tongzhi* circle for almost a decade, Big Sister has a candid and good relationship with his son. He gladly tells his friends that his son does not mind his being *tongzhi* or taking part of the activities among his *tongzhi* friends such as performing drag fashion shows as we see in the film. However, it has to be noted that Big Sister has been married before and does has a son. He has not mentioned his parents either. Therefore, having fulfilled his obligation of being a filial son, he is

probably facing less pressure and is able to enjoy a relaxing relationship with his son, which is perhaps the most important familial relationship to him.

Others are not so lucky. To Meiling, for instance, letting his family know about his *tongzhi* identity is unthinkable:

> If my family knew that I was a *tongzhi*, they absolutely wouldn't understand me… Because I grew up in an environment where it wouldn't allow me to be a *tongzhi*. My neighbors could tell that I acted like a girl, feminine, affected. But the point is, although I look like a girl, I will be accepted in such a diverse society. It shouldn't matter. There are all kinds of people. However, if I say that I'm a *tongzhi*, and love to have deviant relationship with men, I think nobody will accept me. Think about it. Two men stay together. If my family knew my sexual privacy, what do you think they would think about me?

Similarly, Baobao's parents are not aware of their son's sexual orientation and expect him to get married. However, many *tongzhi* do not have to deal with the issue of family on a day to day basis, for many of them do not live with their family as in the past as a result of the economic reforms and the increasing mobility of the population in China.

The structural economic reforms in China that started in the early 1980s created a labor surplus in rural areas and a huge demand for cheap labor in urban development. As a result, millions of rural workers began to migrate into major

cities throughout China.[134] With the demand for labor restructure in for economic development, the Chinese government also has loosened its control over the residents, and the whole nation has become unprecedentedly mobile. The jobs provided increasingly by private enterprises have enabled individual workers to move among cities across China (although mostly from smaller cities to larger ones) without having to deal with the official residence change that was required by the government strictly for employment up until the early 1990s.

This increasing mobility of Chinese people across the country has disassembled traditional families where generations live together. To Chinese sexual minorities, especially the younger generation, the opportunities and desire of moving out of their original family have greatly increased mostly because of economic reasons. This detachment to their original family, however, makes it possible for non-heterosexual people to perform their alternative sexual identities without having to confront family members who do not approve of them.

The central character in *Tongzhi* Baobao exemplifies *tongzhi* who have left their families of origin, very often in the countryside, to live and work in a city by themselves. Baobao's parents live in an old house in a village outside Ji'nan, working as farmers and leading a very moderate life without much material means. Baobao left this village home and has lived in Ji'nan for more than four years, where he has established his own business—first a small restaurant and later a teahouse. The distance between his family of origin and his life provides him a space to be

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[134] F. Y. Wong et al., "HIV Risks among Gay- and Non-Gay-Identified Migrant Money Boys in Shanghai, China," *AIDS Care* 20, no. 2 (2008): 170.

tongzhi—even to live with a boyfriend for two years—without having to encounter the potential conflicts among family members resulted from his sexual orientation and life style on a day to day basis.

In addition, cities are where *tongzhi* can find others who are like themselves, whom they can identify with. In other words, cities are where *tongzhi* go to find an identity. This has some commonality with Western societies, where mobility played an important role in the formation of queer identities. In his article on race and queer culture in the U.S., Hiram Perez writes:

> Being gay always involves, to some extent, being someplace else. […] Identification as 'gay' is premised on mobility. Whether it is the South Seas of William Stoddard's Victorian travel writing or New York City's Chelsea or anywhere other than the heteronormative confines of the traditionally defined 'home' and 'family,' being 'gay' requires some kind of travel, actual or imagined.[135]

Many historical studies have linked the formation of Western queer identity to urban life.[136] Kath Weston calls the migration of a great number of gays and lesbians pouring into big cities across the United States in the 1970s and 1980s "the Great Gay Migration" and San Francisco has become a destination for gay "pilgrimages." [137] Baobao's background and experience may remind us of John D'Emilio's argument

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[135] Hiram Perez, "You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!," *Social Text* 23, no. 3/4 (2005): 177.
[136] Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Neil Badmington and Julia Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2008), Robert Aldrich, "Homosexuality and the City: An Historical Overview," *Urban Studies* 41, no. 9 (2004).
[137] Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," *GLQ* 2, no. 3 (1995): 257.

that the gay identity emerged in the West with capitalism and the consequent urbanization.[138] Originally moving to the city for economic prosperity, Baobao finds himself not only a means to live that is different from that of his rural family, but also a community of *tongzhi* whom he can identify with as well as a different way of living.

To many sexual minorities in the West, migration is of particular importance in their lives. Moving to a big city is the first step for "sexual dissidents" to "survive – to produce an identity,"[139] although some would point out that "out there" in the rural areas, queer lives exist and flourish,[140] rejecting the urban-rural opposition in imagining queer identities. This phenomenon can also be seen in China, where *tongzhi* as a modern identity flourishes in urban environments. In Baobao's case, his first same-sexual experience was in the village where he grew up. He tells the camera that when he was a teenager, he was seduced by an older man after an outdoor movie event in the village, and after that he was only attracted to men. He had a relationship with a schoolmate before he moved to Ji'nan city, which resulted in heartbreak because his boyfriend was not as assertive about his sexuality as Baobao was. It was until Baobao moved to Ji'nan when he started to call himself *tongzhi* and build relationships with other members in the community. To Baobao,

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[138] John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharan Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).
[139] Jon Binnie, *The Globalization of Sexuality* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE, 2004), 89.
[140] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

therefore, the city of Ji'nan has become his "urban homeland," his "gay space," where many others like him have come to form a community.[141]

Although migration to cities means opportunities to build "families" of choice for many *tongzhi*, it is not a panacea for *tongzhi* to resolve all the conflicts within the family of origin. To many Chinese sexual minorities, like Baobao and his *tongzhi* friends, familial responsibilities are still among the most important responsibilities they must shoulder. Although economic responsibilities for their parents have always been among the most significant responsibilities, the duty to continue the family blood has been equally, if not more important. Although away from home, many *tongzhi* can live a life style more or less free of interference from their family of origin, and with "families"—partners and friends—of their choice, they are still under the "chronicle" pressure of getting married. Of course, negotiating identities and resolving conflicts with families are by no means a unique challenge to Chinese *tongzhi*. However, in a Confucian society, the intensity of the sense of responsibility and the guilt resulting from the failure to fulfill this responsibility that *tongzhi* has to bear is perhaps unmatched by that of any other problem in their lives. That is why many *tongzhi* are still faced with the dilemma of marriage and sexual freedom.

Big Sister had been marriage and had a son. The fact that he has fulfilled his family duty has relieved him from many pressures. However, other younger *tongzhi* such as Baobao and his *nutongzhi* or lesbian friend Xiaotian are still under the pressure to get married. When Baobao visits his parents in the village, his mother

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[141] Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City," 257.

keeps asking him when he will get married. He replies to her "soon," saying that he has a girlfriend and they plan to get married. It is not clear if Baobao is lying to his mother or he really has a "girlfriend," for cases of marriages between *tongzhi* and heterosexuals and fake marriages between male and female *tongzhi* are not rare in China. In fact, although the pressure often comes explicitly from parents, it is in many cases internalized by *tongzhi*. In other words, many *tongzhi* themselves think that getting married is the right and even the natural thing to do despite of their sexual orientation. The following interview with Baobao reveals the confusion and dilemma he has about marriage and sex:

> Really. I want to get married. Sometimes I want to get married too, to have a wife, even if just to have a baby so that I'll be responsible to my parents. But sometimes I wonder, if I got married, what would I do at night? Of course, I know how to do it, but I can't accept it mentally. If you are talking about pornography, those videos are not real. I've seen those, right? But that feeling is weird. I've asked those two employees what it feels like to get married. It's embarrassing to talk about this. In fact, I have a lot of opportunities to have sex with girls. Those girls approach me, but it feels weird. When people like us dance together, we like to hold each other tight, but I can tell you it feels weird when a girl's private part touches me. But I tell you that if it's a boy's private part touching me, it feels great.

Although Baobao seems to think that heterosexual marriage is the responsible thing do to, it is obvious that it is at the same time the strangest thing to him. He

denies that the possibility of homosexuality being a choice to him, and asserts that his choice is to fulfill the responsibilities to his family. In order to do so, he even has "researched" on how to practice heterosexual marriage, although his research does not seem to help much.

Similarly, Baobao's *nutongzhi* friend Xiaotian has a mixed feelings towards family responsibilities and sexual freedom. On the one hand, she believes, ideally, that same-sex relationships are nothing less than heterosexual relationships:

> [*Tongzhi* are] very normal. I feel that no matter if a person likes boys or girls, and no matter what gender this person is, it is quite normal. Because true feelings should not have gender distinctions. That's my view.

On the other hand, she believes marriage is the proper thing to do. Although, according to herself, she has always liked girls, Xiaotian is dating a man when Baobao chats with her in the documentary. When Baobao brings up her heterosexual relationship, she explains matter-of-factly, "of course. I must get married sooner or later." To her, it seems that heterosexual marriage is the only possibility available to her.

In both of Baobao's and Xiaotian's cases, we see compliance and even internalization of the imposition of heterosexual marriage on them. Since the ideology of *xiao*, or filial obedience is not only sustained within the family, the problem of *tongzhi* with their family responsibilities cannot be resolved within the family. Miège concludes in his study on *tongzhi* in Hefei:

> Presenting themselves as dutiful sons (*xiao*), they (*tongzhi*) do not want to disappoint or cause suffering to their parents by refusing to marry. It is in fact not so much homosexuality as the question of marriage that arises, inside the family of course, but also in the face of the rest of society.[142]

Under the pressure coming from both family and society at large, many *tongzhi* are faced with the dilemma of compliance and resistance, even if they do not have to confront their families on a daily basis. Sometimes *tongzhi*'s consideration of heterosexual marriage seems "voluntary"—"I must get marriage sooner or later"—but in reality, it is a cultural imperative that family and society imposed upon them.

Conclusion

Jones points out that the formation of identity and community is "contingent on the cultural resources available and the sets of power relations operative in those settings," and the studies of these subjects should not only focus on the "collective macro-political level" but also on the "micro-political level of individual social (and sexual) interaction."[143] While we consider these "specificities" of cultural resources and their effects in identify and community formation, we should be guarded from automatically conceiving them in the framework of the opposition between globalization and local resistance. The very specific details of *tongzhi*'s life in the micro world of Ji'nan represented in documentary *Tongzhi* form a picture that is

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[142] Miège, ""In My Opinion"," 41.

[143] Jones, "Imagined Comrades and Imaginary Protections: Identity, Community and Sexual Risk among Men Who Have Sex with Men in China," 86.

understood in terms of globalization and local resistance as originally the term "*tongzhi*" entails. The *tongzhi* community is a communal community and the *tongzhi* identity is not simply a sexual identity either. *Tongzhi* identity, therefore, has to be understood in relational terms. The disintegration of families with the economic and social changes in China has provided *tongzhi* new conditions to perform their *tongzhi* identity, which may share many commonalities with sexual minorities in the West. However, the traditional Confucian culture still has a powerful influence on *tongzhi*'s lives.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This study has traced some aspects of Chinese queer identities and cultures represented in three Chinese underground films made in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The analyses of these films indicate that Chinese queer identities and cultures are shaped in contexts where heterogeneous forces interplay. These forces may be cultural, legal, or economic, they may have originated in China or elsewhere, they may be considered traditional or untraditional, and sometimes they may be difficult to define. In the contexts where these forces are at work, variegated experiences of sexual minorities in China cannot be reduced to either a "global gay" narrative or an essentialized *tongzhi* discourse, both of which tend to discount the complexities and heterogeneity of these experiences one way or the other. The dichotomy of global/local, or Western/Chinese in this case, therefore, is not adequate to account for how Chinese sexual minorities live their lives, how they think of themselves and negotiate their identities, how they deal with the difficulties and pleasure that are associated to their sexualities, or what they desire, aspire, and request for their happiness. Queer identities and cultures represented in these films are certainly not only a product of the "Chinese" culture, but these identities and cultures are not simply Chinese adaptations of Western queer identities either as the "global gay" narrative may assume. On the other hand, the Chineseness the *tongzhi* discourse

asserts is not a stable essence of sexual identities in China that is different from the Western queer identities.

One of the forces that have helped shape Chinese queer identities and cultures is Western cultural influence that came into China since the late 1970s and early 1980s when China started to undergo economic reform and opening to the global market. China's modernization and its increasing participation in the global economy provided an important condition for the reemergence of sexual identities in China. As China has involved more deeply and extensively in the global market, the economic exchange with the West, it also had increasing contact with Western liberal thinking. The reemergence of sexual identities, or, to be specific, the emergence of homosexuality as a sex category in China starting from the 1980s was part of the cultural modernization some progressive Chinese who were informed by Western liberal ideas hoped to bring to China along with the economic modernization.

The production and distribution of the two earlier films examined in the study benefited from the increasing economic and cultural exchange between China and the West. Both *East Palace, West Palace* and *Fish and Elephant* were distributed internationally, although they are still officially banned. *East Palace, West Palace* was directly funded by a French studio with participation of the French Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[144] The cost of the production of *Fish and Elephant* was compensated with film's international distribution. The films' screening and awards received at international film festivals elevated their celebrity

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[144] Derek Elley, "East Palace, West Palace (Dong Gong Xi Gong)," *Variety*, 12 May - 18 May 1997.

in China, which brought them a steady audience throughout the years. These films, including the third film Tongzhi, are often the must shown films at gays and lesbians film festivals and small screening events in Chinese cities.

The "global" support helped the writers and directors of these films, who have been interested in Western liberal ideas, make the underground queer societies in Chinese urban centers visible to the Chinese public. *East Palace, West Palace* has shown the Chinese audience – and the international audience in this matter – the images of gay men in mainland China for the first time in the history of the PRC. Through this film, Chinese sexual minorities announced their existence ("I am a homosexual!") and expressed their quest for sexual freedom. *Fish and Elephant* showcases that the construction of modern lesbian identity in China, as in many Western societies, is connected to the development of feminist thoughts and works that are, in turn, heavily influenced by feminisms developed in the West. The Western cultural influences such as liberalism and feminisms reflected in the films are not necessarily directly linked to the (stereo)typical "global queer culture" or activism, but their influence in mainland China have contributed to the emergence of these independently made films which have taken interest in a group of people who were silenced and invisible for three decades or so in the history of the PRC. With these films, Chinese gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities in the 1990s started to regain consciousness and to reemerge in the public eye in a China that was more open, connected to, and, perhaps, attracted to the West.

However, this does not mean that Chinese queer identities are solely copies or adaptation of those imported from the West, which often poses as the "global." In these films, it seems not difficult to see phenomena that share certain similarities with those found elsewhere. The underground gay society in the late 1990s in China portrayed in *East Palace, West Palace* resembled the demimonde of gay communities pre-Stonewall era in the U.S., both were subject to hostile police harassment and legal sanction. The secret cruising in *East Palace, West Palace* and the teahouse as a cruising place in *Tongzhi* are not strange scenes to a Western audience. Even the fact that the lesbian couple in *Fish and Elephant* is the only ones in a long term relationship and none of the gay men in the other two films is fits the stereotypical images of the committed lesbians and promiscuous gay men in the West. One can also see that all the three films are set in urban areas, where are often considered the "home" of queer communities in many societies. As to many gays and lesbians in the U.S. who leave rural homes to seek their communities in the cities, migration from villages to cities is also often common among Chinese sexual minorities.

Despite these similarities, Chinese queer cultures should be conflated with Western queer cultures which often pose as "global" queer cultures, for these phenomena that we cited do not have the same history or bare the same meanings in different cultures. The oppression gay men were subject to as portrayed in *East Palace, West Palace* was not based on an explicit legal ground but a very vague legal terms. Unlike the criminalization of homosexuality in the Western legal system before homosexuality was legalized, the Chinese' oppression of homosexuals was

more of trivialization which has been a tradition in ancient Chinese societies. In addition, although male promiscuity is stigmatized as moral degradation in Western Christian tradition, in China, it has more to do with the communist puritan morality promoted by the state. Although the Confucianist tradition strictly forbids women to be promiscuous, men have always been outside this moral constraint. The trivialization of homosexuals deeply rooted in the culture and the stigma attached to promiscuity from the communist tradition help to explain why in both *West Palace, East Palace*, and *Tongzhi* gay men who go cruising in the park or in a teahouse will often feel deep remorse and shame. In the case of migration, that going to a (bigger) city for Chinese sexual minorities means leaving their parents and extended family, which can relieve them from much pressure. Although the disintegration of extended families in West societies in the process of industrialization and urbanization was also a factor in the formation of queer communities in urban areas, it seems to me that this bears a lot more weight to sexual minorities in China than those in the West because their family responsibilities are one of the most concerned issues to Chinese sexual minorities.

This leads us to the second force, the Confucian traditions, which have helped shape queer identities in China. Family as a core Confucian value, is often cited in the *tongzhi* discourse as a major concern in *tongzhi*'s negotiation of identity. Except for *East Palace, West Palace*, family is an important theme in the other two films. Coming out to their parents is a major conflict for the gay and lesbian characters in these films. In *Fish and Elephant*, the conflict is resolved through the mutual

understanding between the mother and daughter, but in *Tongzhi*, by the time when the film ends, the main character still has not come out to his parent. All these characters, lesbian Qun in *Fish and Elephant*, and gay men Baobao and lesbian Xiaotian in *Tongzhi* are all pressured to get married by their parents, which is common among Chinese sexual minorities because Confucian traditions regard childlessness a sin to the ancestors, especially in the case of male heirs. Although sexual minorities in Western societies also experience difficulties negotiating their identities in the family, and it is not easy for them to come out to their families, some would argue that for Chinese gay men and lesbians, this difficulty may be harder to overcome. This is why Chou argues that coming out to their parents should not be an imperative to *tongzhi* in China.

Chou's argument is plausible in the sense that it recognizes the real difficulties for Chinese sexual minorities to assert their identities. However, the problem with this seemingly cultural specific *tongzhi* discourse is that by essentializing these difficulties as "Chinese" without taking account the possibility of changes it may discourage sexual minorities in China to fight for the sexual freedom they might actually want and impede society's changes towards more understanding and tolerance. In other words, what the *tongzhi* discourse does is to conflate Confucianism with "Chineseness" in a way, but in fact, "Chineseness" has always been changing, and Confucian traditions are only part of it. Beside, the issue of family is not unique in Confucian societies. In some cultures such as that of the

Russian diasporas in the U.S., gays and lesbians are also under great pressure not to come out to their family or to the community.[145]

Confucian traditions are also linked to the issue of visibility. Many activists and queer studies scholars in the West regard visibility as a privilege of heterosexuality. Increasing the visibility is seen by Western activists as a means for members of the queer community to gain equal rights to heterosexuals, although many also contest the idea. In the *tongzhi* discourse, however, Chou argues that many Chinese *tongzhi* regard their sexualities as a private matter, which is another characteristic in a Confucian culture, and thus choose not to come out publicly. It follows that *tongzhi* do not need to adopt the confrontational strategies of the Western GLBT activism. Again, individuals should not be subjected to a certain strategy of resistance, but to essentialize this choice of invisibility as a character to the Chinese *tongzhi* identity can discourage *tongzhi*'s activism and encourage homophobia, whether explicit or silent. Contrary to what Chou claims, the films have shown us some Chinese sexual minorities' tremendous desire to be visible, and to be recognized by society. Ah Lan's cry "I'm homosexual!" in *East Palace, West Palace* is also the cry of many Chinese sexual minorities. The actors and individuals in *Fish and Elephant* and *Tongzhi* are real life sexual dissidents who want to be seen by the public. One of them, Shitou, is actually an activist who has been actively participating in activism for sexual minorities in China. The problem is that there is a fine line between traditions and oppressive forces, and between one's choice of being invisible and the

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cultural imperative of being invisible. Perhaps Chinese sexual minorities' not willing to be visible should be considered as an effect other than the cause for a society where sexual minorities are still largely invisible.

Although the films examined represent a certain range of queer cultures in China, these representations are still very limited. The themes are surrounding personal relationships and family. The viewer does not see how these queer characters carry their identities outside the small circle of lovers, friends, and families. The viewer is not clear how or if these characters carry their queer identities outside their circles, for instance, in the workplace. One would wonder how these characters negotiate their identities outside these small circles. This absence of representation further indicates that sexual minorities are still largely invisible in public. Indeed, there has no law that protects sexual minorities from discrimination for employment, education, or other rights, although there have been bills proposed by congress men and women for same-sex marriage in China. This further indicates that in China, the issue of sexualities still remains mostly in the private sphere. If this status quo is regarded as essentially "Chinese" as the *tongzhi* discourse presumes, changes will be difficult to come.

The economic development is another force that plays in shaping queer identities and communities as reflected in the films. China's industrialization as a result of its economic reform has brought millions of rural population to the urban environment. The emerging and growing cities during this process of urbanization have provided sexual minorities a space to build their communities. With the

growing of a market economy, Chinese are also more and more mobile, unlike in the earlier years of the PRC when Chinese were forced to stay in one place through administrative measures. The urbanization and formation of queer communities in cities are very similar to what the U.S. has been experienced after the World War II. In China's context, however, the mobility of sexual minorities also has provided a way for them to leave their families of origin, which gives them more freedom to perform their sexualities. Most queer characters in all three films, except perhaps the policeman Xiao Shi in *East Palace, West Palace*, are all migrants of a sort. Perhaps that is why Xiao Shi is also the only closeted main character in these films.

Finally, when we talk about the forces that shape Chinese queer identities, we must take into consideration of the heterogeneity of the Chinese cultures, which is not accounted for in terms of the Western/Chinese dichotomy. The cultural differences among mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other societies that share the traditional Chinese culture with Confucianism as the core ideology are not the focus of this study. However, even within mainland China, the disparities between local cultures of different regions, or between areas of different degrees of urbanization or economic and social development further complicate the study of Chinese queer identities and cultures. Of the three films, the two made by professional filmmakers from Beijing, *East Palace, West Palace* and *Fish and Elephant*, have more traces of the liberal influence. On the other hand, *Tongzhi*, made by an amateur filmmaker about the *tongzhi* community in Ji'nan, a smaller and peripheral city compared to Beijing, shows us more of the dynamics of the gay life in a

Northern Chinese town, as well as some glimpse into the country life and the gay son's interaction with his rural parents. Therefore, an account for a Chinese *tongzhi* identity that transcends these differences is impossible and undesirable.

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