COMRADE CHINA ON THE BIG SCREEN:
CHINESE CULTURE, HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY, AND HOMOSEXUAL FILMS IN
MAINLAND CHINA

By

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To my beloved parents and friends
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  HISTORY OF CHINESE HOMOSEXUALITY</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY AND DEVELOPMENT MODEL</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  CHINESE CULTURAL VALUES AND HOMOSEXUALITY</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  CHINESE FILM INDUSTRY AND HOMOSEXUAL FILMS</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  CASE STUDY OF CHINESE HOMOSEXUAL FILMS</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  DISCUSSION</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF REFERENCES .................................................................................................................. 72
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ........................................................................................................... 78
Homosexuality has always been an ambiguous topic in Chinese culture, and even a taboo one after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Meanwhile, the film industry has been a particularly censored field by the Chinese government, and all cinematic content relevant to homosexuality is banned in mainland China. Hence, this paper probes into this underground subject, Chinese homosexuality, by qualitatively analyzing three Chinese homosexual films. Especially from an intercultural perspective, the present paper focuses on the production of Chinese homosexual films, the impact of Chinese cultural values on homosexuality, and the cinematic presentation of homosexual identity in mainland China.

The three selected films are Lan Yu (gay love), Fish and Elephant (lesbian love), and Queer China, Comrade China (comprehensive queer documentary). According to the comparison and discussion of the three films, homosexual films are still in underground state in mainland China. International film festivals as well as pirated products are the most popular channels to exhibit homosexual films. Familial reproduction and marital obligation in traditional Chinese values place critical obstacles
in Chinese homosexual life, and public ignorance of homosexuality results in misunderstanding of homosexual identity. Queer studies and sexual identity models need their local adaptation in China. Homosexual films and LGBT movements are in need of more social concerns and supports to make progress in mainland China.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Since the implementation of the Reform and Opening Policy in 1979, tremendous transformations have taken place in the People’s Republic of China, including the promotion of a market economy, the move toward privatization, the rise of consumerism, and the contamination of traditional culture, etc. (Rofel, 1999; Cui & Liu, 2010). Those transformations in China have been boosting hopes, desires, and frustrations. Scholars in relevant fields refer to characteristics of this era in China as Neoliberalism (Wang, 2003; Rofel, 2007; Duncan, 2008).

Rofel (2010) argues that while neoliberal economic policies have brought Chinese citizens new notions such as possessive individualism and consumerism, they have also offered the public multiple new approaches to express their passions, interests, and desires. Namely, in a historically contingent heterogeneous state, Neoliberalism in China particularly appears in the production of desire.

Among these discussions of consequences brought by the era of Neoliberalism, sexuality emerged as a critical notion. Traditionally in China, gender dichotomies were not independent of, but were “discursively constituted by the kin-class relations” (Chou, 2000, p.283) in society, and so, there was no definite idea about sexuality and sexual identity. Hence, arguments involving feminism and queer studies have been put forward, along with ideas about concern on homosexual identity (Duncan, 2008). It is recognized that the homosexual identity must be viewed in the social political and culturally specific context that gives it its name and form (Houston, 2007). Accordingly, Rofel (2007) believes that gay identity in China emerges in relation to specific desires.
for cultural citizenship within China, and the articulation of gay identity is tied to a national and cultural context, connected to transnational networks of gays and lesbians.

Consequently, in the process of modernization, it is important for China, a developing country, to broaden its citizens’ understanding of gender and sex (Altman, 1996; Kang, 2010). Also, the evolution of Chinese public perceptions about sexuality, particularly homosexual identity, is a rational index for evaluating the progress of Chinese socialist modernism. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the impact of Chinese cultural traits on Chinese homosexual identity.

According to historical records, the subject of homosexuality has appeared in Chinese literary works, Peking Opera, paintings, and other art works since ancient times (Dynes & Donaldson, 1992; Hinsch, 1992; Chou, 2001; Zhang, 2008; Kang, 2010). Through the vicissitudes of different dynasties and different ruling parties in historical sessions, homosexuals have been treated in various ways. Among these different attitudes, cultural tolerance is the main feature for same-sex eroticism, which left homosexuals in an awkward grey zone. The following phrase best summarizes the ancient Chinese public's attitudes towards homosexuality: unnatural but tolerable.

Ever since the socialism and communism became the ideal goals of the Chinese government after 1949, homosexuality was completely negatively treated then, by being defined as a disease imported from capitalistic Western countries. Governmental prohibitions and censorship targeting homosexuals and the discussion of homosexuality became the official policy. Especially in media representation, topics relevant to homosexuality were banned as a taboo.
Among these mass media venues, the cinema (hereafter referred to as film) in mainland China has been most strictly censored. All films have to be sent to the Beijing Film Bureau for inspection during their production process, including script contents and a complete work. Until a film is vetted through a prior review process, it cannot be officially distributed within mainland China. Basically, no film, either domestic or foreign, with a banned subject (e.g., politics, sexuality) or with characters acting relevant to taboo topics (e.g., homosexuality) can be licensed for exhibition in a Chinese public theater. As a result of the censorship policy, no image of homosexuals was presented in the Chinese cinema from 1949 until the late 1980s (Cui & Liu, 2010). For example, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), directed by Chinese American director Ang Lee, nominated and acclaimed internationally (including several prizes from the 2005 Academy Awards), was not accessible through an official channel in mainland China due to its gay-love theme; *Peacock* (2004), directed by Gu Changwei, won the Jury Grand Prix-Silver Bear at the 2005 Berlin International Film Festival. When the movie was officially released in mainland China, the sequence about a homosexual relationship between a schoolboy and his teacher was deleted.

Filmmakers in mainland China never give up making trials run and challenging the system in power. In treating homosexuality, Chinese filmmakers have to choose an underground venue. The first mainland China homosexual feature film, *East Palace*, *West Palace* (1996), directed by Zhang Yuan, was smuggled to France for post-production, and premiered at the Mar del Plata Film Festival in Argentina; The screening of the first female-love feature film, *Fish and Elephant* (2001), was distributed
through international film festivals, and was shown for only one time in mainland China at an LGBT film festival in 2001 (Cui & Liu, 2010).

With the slow yet steady development of Chinese homosexual films, there began to emerge studies focusing on this genre of film. For instance, Tambling (2003) put Wong Kar-wai’s film *Happy Together* (1997), a film about two Hong Kong gay men in Buenos Aires, into its particular historical political background, and deconstructed its cinematic representations of masculinity, identity, and homosexuality. Tambling thought the homosexual relationship depicted in this film may be allegorical, indicating ways of rethinking gender and sexuality. In another study, Chao (2010) compared two China’s lesbian documentaries, *The Box* (2001) and *Dyke March* (2004), and analyzed identity politics and lesbianism in the films. *The Box* is the first lesbian documentary from mainland China, individually produced by Ying Weiwei, depicting the life of a lesbian couple. *Dyke March* is collaboratively made by a lesbian couple, Shi Tou and Ming Ming, and it recorded their participation in a gay and lesbian parade in San Francisco in U.S.

It is acknowledged that the mass media are a reflection of social reality, as well as an index for social changes (Becker & Roberts, 1992; McQuail, 2005). Likewise, what are depicted in films can be taken as an artistically polished reflection of the situation of Chinese homosexuals. Therefore, based on the above facts and studies, I have chosen to focus on the subject of film, to probe into the situation of Chinese homosexuality. By analyzing three homosexual films made in mainland China, two feature films and one documentary, I intend to identify some characteristics of Chinese homosexual film production, and determine how Chinese cultural values and homosexual identity
development are exhibited in the films. After discussion about the backgrounds and contents of the sample films, I hope to present my personal interpretations to the following questions: What is the current state of the production and distribution of homosexual films in mainland China? How do traditional cultural values and political circumstances affect the Chinese cinematic treatment of homosexuality? And how is Chinese homosexual identity portrayed in Chinese films?

This paper is presented in the following manner: Chapter 2, divided into three periods, ancient history, modern development, and the contemporary situation, will trace the history of Chinese homosexuality. The theoretical framework is reviewed in chapter 3, with consideration of homosexual identity and a representative model of its development, the CASS model. Chapter 4 will discuss the potential traditions and cultural values that have impacted the Chinese people’s comprehension of and actions towards homosexual behaviors and activities. Chapter 5 will review the development of the film industry in China and provide more historical and political background about the conditions that films and filmmakers face when they attempt to address the issue of homosexuality. In Chapter 6 and 7, three sample films, Lan Yu (2001), Fish and Elephant (2001), and Queer China, Comrade China (2008) will be analyzed in terms of their production background and the manner in which they portray homosexuality. Particular emphasis will be given to the conflicting cultural values presented in the films and to homosexual films identity. The last chapter, Chapter 8, will present conclusions and suggestions for further research.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORY OF CHINESE HOMOSEXUALITY

According to the most commonly held view of Chinese history, the milestone that marked China as a modern contemporary nation is the First Opium War in 1840. After that war, China was no longer a feudal state, and was followed by the semi-colonial semi-feudal era, the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, and finally, the People’s Republic of China in 1949. It is intriguing to note how different the issue of homosexuality has been treated from the ancient history to the present.

Ancient History of Chinese Homosexuality

There exists a long archived history about homosexuality throughout ancient China. Documentation of male homosexual behavior was first found in the Eastern Zhou dynasty (722-221 B.C.), when Chinese people considered homosexual and bisexual behavior common and normal (Dynes & Donaldson, 1992). Recorded official documents demonstrate that many ancient Chinese emperors had homosexual inclinations, for there are well-known stories of these emperors favoring male attendants or male artists (Hinsch, 1992). For example, in the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – A.D. 24), seven of the eleven emperors indicated their sexual preference for males (Zhang, 2008).

The term “pi,” which suggests a pathological mental state in Chinese meaning, was used to refer to same-sex love in the ancient literature. And phrases out of stories, such as Cut Sleeve, the Bitten Peach, Male Trend, Contract Brothers, etc., were used to imply male-to-male relationship. The origin of Cut Sleeve is about one of the emperors in the Western Han Dynasty, Han Aidi, and his favorite male attendant Dong Xian. As the story is told, they usually slept together and one day, when Han Aidi awoke first, he found that Dong Xian was sleeping on part of his sleeve. Afraid of disturbing his lover's
dream, Han Aidi considerately cut off his sleeve to make sure that he could go without waking up Dong Xian (Chou, 2001; Hinsch, 1992; Zhang, 2008).

Additionally, homosexuality was depicted in ancient Chinese literature all through history, ranging from the first ancient Chinese poem collection, *The Book of Songs*, to the Ming Qing dynasty’s (1368 – 1912), *Four Classics*. Traced back in *The Book of Songs*, ambiguous affections between the generals and their attendants or among male soldiers are expressed. And in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, one of the China’s Four Classics, there are some quite bold descriptions about male homosexual behaviors. According to this novel, it seems acceptable for male masters to not only have friendship with their male attendants, actors, or classmates, but to also practice sexually-oriented fantasy or actual sexual activities. Although not declaimed explicitly, the protagonist in this novel, Jia Baoyu, is actually a bisexual person, who is engaged in both same-sex and opposite-sex acts (Hinsch, 1992; Zhang, 2008).

It has been claimed that most ancient Chinese homosexual figures are indeed bisexual, and male bisexuality is dominant (Zhang, 2008). The reason is that ancient China had a rigid system of social stratum with a strict patriarchal rule. Thus, it was very common for people in the higher levels of the hierarchy to receive benefits from those in the lower ones, including trading male or female attendants. Plus, it was acceptable for a family to acquiesce in this marriage-cheating behavior since women had no say about what their men did.

Since a more distinct patriarchal societal system was observed in ancient China in which males were the critical gender role for society, it is understandable that almost all of the archived materials are about male homosexuality. Men were the recorders, as
well as the main characters. Female homosexuality is relatively missing in ancient Chinese history. Nevertheless, some clues about Chinese lesbians during this time period can be tracked.

The earliest record relevant to female homosexuality is in the Han dynasty (B.C.202 – A.C. 9), in *Story of Han Wudi*. The story is about Han Wudi’s empress who fell out of her husband’s favor and then had a relationship with a witch who promised to help her get her husband back (Zhang, 2008). In fact, most of the stories about female homosexual relationships in ancient China, involve wives, concubines, and female attendants, who failed to obtain or never got enough attention from their husbands or male masters. Because of women’s societal status and familial hierarchy, female homosexual behaviors are much less spontaneous compared to the male ones. In some cases recorded in the late Qing dynasty (A.C. 1644 -1912), female homosexual behaviors were considered to be a way to protest their unfair marital life and social treatment.

Meanwhile, there were certainly countervailing views against homosexual or bisexual behaviors, and generally those views demonstrated concerns in three aspects. The first aspect was in terms of political power. It was typical that the male attendants that were favored by the emperors were more accessible to the higher power, and relied on the trust of the emperors to collect personal property. Secondly, there was resistance to their lives in society. Although there were no obvious terms to describe homosexuals as perverts or abnormal, homosexuality has inevitably been despised by people as a behavior that deviates from the mainstream culture. Whenever entering a period of history where homosexuality was too openly tolerated, that occasion would be
considered as a moral degeneration of the whole society. Finally, concern was shown in
the familial system. Even though it was acceptable to have multiple partners after
marriage in ancient China, indulging in same-sex eroticism might have led the man to
neglect his obligatory family responsibilities for his wife and children, which in turn would
de-consolidate the supposed family system (Zhang, 2008).

**Modern History of Chinese Homosexuality**

Starting in the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644), with the advancement of maritime
technology, communication between Western countries and China became more
convenient and frequent. Along with commercial trades, cultural exchange took an
important role in this international communication process, including new concepts and
ideas brought by Western religion, such as Catholicism (Zhang, 2008).

With the introduction of Catholicism to China, opposition to homosexuals began to
spread. Early Westerners who came to China were surprised to find open and relatively
free homosexual relationships, and Catholics got the impression that the Chinese
people needed to be saved by religion from their “disgusting habits” (Hinsch, 1992,
p.141).

There emerged relevant laws and regulations concerning homosexuals in the Qing
dynasty (1644 – 1911). With revisions through different periods, there were even
various categories corresponding to different conditions, such as different treatments
about homosexual rape involving children, attempted homosexual rape, special groups
of people’s punishments, etc. This fact indicated that the Qing government and policy
makers were clearly aware of the issue of homosexual crime, and took it as a serious
social problem. Sexual orientation was not a hidden topic for people in that time.
With the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, China terminated its feudalistic past, and began to develop as a democratic nation. Under the intensive influence of the importation of modern Western culture, Chinese intellectuals began to study homosexuality from a socio-cultural perspective, which included sexology, Christian homophobia, and the medical categorization of homosexuality (Chou, 2000).

Though subjects imported from the West that are relevant to homo-hetero duality had never been popular in China, notions about homosexuality were adopted by Chinese scholars. What is interesting is that, rather than adopting Christian homophobic attitudes, the sexologist’s pathological definition or description of homosexuality was selectively accepted by some Chinese intellectuals. This strategic preference may have been affected by Confucian marital institution, which focuses on a reproductive marital system yet is never homophobic per se (Chou, 2000).

Hence, influenced by Western scientific discourse, homosexuality was viewed as “gender perversity,” a temporary aberration, or mental disease. Mostly, homosexuality was discussed in aspects such as psychosexual essence that required specific medical-psychological treatment. Magnus Hirschfeld wrote a book, Men and Women – the World Journey of a Sexologist (1931), to record his observations of female and male homosexuality in China in 1931. From his typical Western sexologist concern of that time, homosexuals in China featured a stigmatized minority that required investigation of homosexuality’s causes and prevention.

Contemporary History of Chinese Homosexuality

After 1949, the newly established People’s Republic of China began to instill communist social and moral orders, and China’s long history of cultural tolerance of same-sex eroticism was abandoned. Chinese laws after 1949 made no specific mention
of homosexuality, yet sodomy was included in some Criminal Law articles, and those were used as a legal basis for government and police prosecution of homosexuals. Homosexuals were regarded as hooligans in China, and homosexual people were discriminated against by others once their sexuality was revealed. There are post-1949 records of homosexual people who were arrested, sent to labor reform camp, prison, or a clinic for electric therapy, and even in some extreme cases (e.g., during 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution), homosexual people were executed (Chou, 2000; Cui, 2008). Only after 1997 was the hooliganism in the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China abolished.

Besides legal restrictions, the government also censored the media and education on topics or information related to sexuality. Thus, until the 1990s, the majority of Chinese in the mainland were basically unaware and unconcerned about the issue of homosexuality and sexual orientation in general. According to Liu’s (1992) study, in the 1990s one out of three peasants had no clue of what homosexuality was. If someone talked about his or her sexual orientation towards the same sex, others (especially the parents) would condemn them as being crazy, and just ask them to not think about it anymore. Rarely do ordinary Chinese people have any concept of sexual identity, not to mention the notion of homosexuality.

The life of homosexuals in China was pretty much covert until the late 1990s, as there were not many established associations or media outlets for homosexuals, and individuals usually dared not or didn’t know how to reach out for help. In 1997, after the first Chinese LGBT hotline was opened in Beijing, more and more events relevant to the homosexual movement occurred in China, such as the first lesbian conference held in
1998; the first gay bar, LaLa Bar, opened in 1999; the first homosexual website, Aibai, built in 1999; etc. The emergence of dozens of public homosexual communities implies the awakening of Chinese homosexuals’ determination to establish their group identity.

The situation for Chinese homosexuals was greatly improved in 2001, when homosexuality was removed from the mental disorders list in *Chinese Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders*. This alteration implicitly indicated the government’s modification of its attitude towards homosexuals, as homosexuality finally came to be regarded as non-pathological. This change brought hope for activists to better promote homosexual movements in a more public and healthy-related platform. Since then, media exposures about topics related to homosexuality began to emerge on more public platforms, and some information about Chinese homosexuals has been made visible even through radio and television (Cui & Liu, 2010).

A national phone survey conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in 2007 indicated the level of public acceptance of homosexuality in mainland China (China Daily, 2007). According to the survey, the Chinese society on the whole is tolerant of homosexuals despite some misunderstandings and confusions. Li (2007) pointed out that it is understandable that people are not critical of homosexuality as long as homosexuals don’t do any harms. Chinese people, because of their confidence in traditional culture and their belief that traditional culture cannot be easily contaminated, have a kind of indifference toward or even tolerance for non-mainstream practices such as homosexuality.

There are at least three main objectives for Chinese homosexuals to strive for in terms of their rights: the sexual one to legitimize same-sex love, the political one to
enjoy the same treatment as heterosexuals, and the cultural one about identity. In 2003, the well-known sociologist of Chinese homosexual subculture, Li Yinhe, proposed same-sex marriage legalization to the National People’s Congress. Although this proposal has yet to be approved, the endeavor itself indicates the growing concern for homosexual marriage. Meanwhile, the Tongzhi community is growing and spreading in China, even in some remote places. Hotlines, magazines, film festivals, and conferences for homosexuals in China are becoming more organized and popular. For example, the activity of flying the rainbow kite is recognized as a symbol for Tongzhi to express their feelings and identities, and this activity has been organized in a number of cities in China (Cui, 2008). Chinese homosexuals are seeking more space with regard to rights and respects, and they are hoping to create a new culture that is distinguishable from the heterosexual one.
Queer Theory and Ku’er Lilun

Introduced in 1990, queer theory intends to shed lights on the relationship between gender and sexuality from an unusual perspective. On the basis of feminism and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) studies, queer theory examines the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities, and expands the former inquiries on the nature of homosexual behavior to the changeable feature of one’s identity. It states a refusal of the common conflation of sexual identity, which categorizes sexuality as either heterosexual or homosexual, and makes the heterosexual binary the normal dominant one (Butler, 1990). In contrast to the dominant concept of hegemonic masculinity, queer theory calls for the deconstruction of the heterosexual/homosexual binaries, challenges the mainstream power of the heterosexual binary, and rethinks the relationship among sex, gender, sexuality, and the gay identity (Connell, & James, 2005; Valocchi, 2005).

Queer theorists believed that one’s sexual orientation is not exclusively based on object attraction, but also on the gendered meanings created in sexual and romantic interaction. It is deemed that gender and sexuality are culturally constructed and politically invested (Geng, 2004). Hence, an individual’s perception of sexuality, either for heterosexuals or homosexuals, is pretty much culturally and socially constructed (Butler, 1990; De Cecco & Shively, 2009; Dozier, 2005).

Therefore, in order to provide a framework for comprehending Chinese homosexuality, it is necessary to understand the general cultural and social circumstances in which Chinese homosexuality exists in China and how queer theory
accounts for that existence. Chinese sexologists and socialists imported queer theory as “ku’er lilun,” which literally means “queer theory” in Chinese, and tried to place queer theory in Chinese contexts (Cui, 2008; Liu, 2010). Basically, ku’er lilun theorists, such as Li Yinhe and Pan Suiming, applied this western theory as a reference to study the situation of Chinese homosexuals (Cui, 2008), echoed the predication of internationalized queer identity (Altman, 1996), and promoted its political consequences in contexts such as the discourse of LGBT human rights (Liu, 2010).

Inspired by “ku’er lilun,” active sociologists conducted studies about Chinese homosexuals. In 1992, Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo published Their World: Perspectives on Chinese Gay Community, which presented findings about the living conditions of Chinese gay people. And later in 1998, Li Yinhe published Subculture of Homosexuality to further investigate the homosexual culture in mainland China (Cui, 2008). In recent years, studies on more specific aspects of Chinese homosexuality have begun to emerge: He and Rofel (2010) conducted a qualitative survey about people infected with HIV/AIDS in China; Kang (2010) studied same-sex relations in modern China, by exploring the language, media representation, and law from a sociological perspective.

Meanwhile, there were doubts about whether queer theory really applies to China. It is argued that China has a unique tongzhi community that is distinct from the Western idea of queer (Liu, 2010), and the Chinese tradition of same-sex erotic relations has no equivalent in English-language concepts (Chou, 1997). All in all, whether queer theory is completely applicable to Chinese tongzhi or not, China’s cultural and local political contexts are deemed as pivotal factors in studying Chinese homosexuality.
Homosexual Identity and Tongzhi Identity

Identity is akin to the idea of self, indicating the way in which individuals define and express themselves (Martin & Nakayama, 2007; Minton & McDonald, 1984). There are discussions on identity in various areas, such as racial identity, ethnic, cultural identity, etc. (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Ponterotto & Park-Taylor, 2007). Likewise, an individual's sexual identity is regarded as a core ingredient of spirit, body, mind, personality, or social relations (De Cecco & Shively, 1984). The concept of sexual identity was first formulated within the homosexual context in the nineteenth century, and it assumes three general forms: biological (male-female partern), psychological (physical appearance, mental characteristics, and object choice), and socio-culture (socially constructed under forces and circumstances) (De Cecco & Shively, 1984).

Based on the three forms, scholars attempted to study homosexual identity from different perspectives. For instance, Richardson (1984) summarized the essences of being homosexual, taking homosexuality as a state of “being,” a state of “a sexual being,” and a state of “personal identification.” Minton & McDonald (1984) defined homosexual identity as a “life-span, developmental process that is part of the general maturational process of achieving personal acceptance of a positive gay self-image” and “a coherent personal identity” (p. 91). And Cass (1984) proposed the concern that homosexual identity is actually a concept in need of definition, because of inadequate explanations about ambiguous issues involved in this field (e.g., the distinction between identity and behavior, the homosexual group identity, identity construction, etc.).

In China’s case, even though historical records demonstrate that homosexuals have existed throughout Chinese history, the term “sexuality” (whether sexual consciousness or sexual orientation in Chinese interpretation) rarely received important
consideration among the Chinese population or in scholarly discourse (Chou, 2000). Same-sex eroticism was ignored rather than discriminated against by the local culture.

In the early 1920s, the Chinese translation of the Western term “homosexuality” emerged as an attempt to introduce Western sexological thoughts in China, as well as to provide an alternative term for expression of Chinese same-sex relations. This Chinese translation “Tongxing’ai,” which literally means “same gender love,” is a neutral implication with no intention of discrimination or bias.

In 1989, the word “tongzhi” was firstly appropriated by a Hong Kong gay activist for the first Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Hong Kong, and later it was accepted widely by Chinese gay people, lesbians, and bisexuals. “tongzhi,” which means “Comrade,” is a term originally used to refer to a Soviet communist. The word “Tong” in Chinese literally means “same/homo,” and “Zhi” for “goal, spirit, or orientation.” Now it signifies both “a desire to indigenize sexual politics and to reclaim homosexual cultural identity” (Chou, 2000, p3) in the Chinese homosexual community, though it was referring to the revolutionaries who shared a comradeship when first imported to China in the 20th century.

In a qualitative study of 30 qualified participants, Sun, Farrer, & Choi (2006) examined how Chinese male homosexuals define and manage their sexual identity.

They found that a variety of terms were preferred by gay people in China to identify themselves, including “gay” (spoken directly in English), “tongxing lian” (homosexual), “quannei ren” (person in the circle), and “tongzhi” (comrade). Among these terms, “tongzhi” is the most commonly used one.
Chou’s (2000) found that the reasons “tongzhi” became the most popular term for Chinese homosexuals were that it was not defined by gender, did not include sex in its definition, and was borrowed from the mainstream culture which, ever since the communist takeover in 1949, includes the practice of citizens addressing one another as “comrade.” This self-proclaimed identity contributed to the awakening of people’s “queer politics” in their consciousness, and to integrating the sexual into the social and cultural context.

**Model of Homosexual Identity Development**

Another approach to understanding homosexual identity stems from analyzing homosexual identity formation. Rather than trying to explain sexual orientation, this method aims to investigate the developmental process wherein individuals construct and maintain a particular sexual identity such as a homosexual identity (Richardson, 1984), and focuses on the resolution of internal conflict related to identification (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Many researchers have proposed models that include sequential stages of homosexual identity development. And these models generally share a three-stage process in common: egocentric interpretation, internalization of the normative assumptions, and achievement of a positive recognition (Minton & McDonald, 1984).

Among these models, the CASS model of homosexual identity acquisition (Cass, 1979) is the earliest yet most widely acknowledged one (Liu & Zhang, 2009). Cass (1984) asserts that the concept of identity consists of a personal aspect, the representation of the self to the self, and a social aspect, the presentation of the self to others. In an attempt to interpret “how people come to adopt a homosexual identity” (Cass, 1984, p.143), Cass proposed a four-stage model of homosexual identity.
formation. The four stages are Identity confusion and Identity comparison, Identity
tolerance and Identity acceptance, Identity pride, and Identity synthesis.

The first stage, Identity confusion and Identity comparison, involves questioning
assumptions about one’s sexual orientation, and feelings of isolation and alienation from
interaction with others; The second stage, Identity tolerance and Identity acceptance,
involves tolerating a homosexual identity and adopting strategies to manage it; The third
stage Identity pride, involves immersion in homosexual subculture and confrontation
with heterosexual hegemony; and the fourth stage, Identity synthesis, occurs when one
has integrated his or her own homosexual identity with other aspects of identities (Cass,
1984).

This CASS model generally illustrates a typical process of homosexual identity
development, and originally it was built based in the Western social and cultural
background. Chinese scholars recently began to inquire how Western homosexual
identity model would be applicable to the Chinese context, since China has its
distinctive cultural traditions and social environment (Liu & Zhang, 2007). For instance,
familial relations are more complicated for homosexuals, and studies on sexuality was
not encouraged and commonly advised in China (Wong & Tang, 2004). Moreover, Liu
and Zhang (2007) proposed that because help groups and supportive organizations for
homosexuals are rare in mainland China, it is hard for Chinese homosexuals to
experience the third stage, Identity pride, in the CASS model, as they don’t have the
source of culture and encouragement to be hostile towards heterosexuality. In an
attempt to provide a media perspective on this issue, I will take the CASS model as a
means to look at how homosexual characters are depicted in Chinese homosexual films.

In addition to the CASS model, I would like to introduce another concept of homosexual identity, latent homosexuality. This concept implies that some individuals may be unaware of their homosexual desires, and come to recognize them only after certain encounters and incidences (Richardson, 1984). Latent homosexuals usually don’t have any knowledge or life experience about homosexuality before they become aware of their homosexual orientation, and it takes longer for them to accept their own sexual identity. I assume that this case may be common in the modern Chinese homosexual context, since the social and political circumstances do not provide sufficient information for people to realize their sexual orientation.
CHAPTER 4
CHINESE CULTURAL VALUES AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Cultural values function as a fundamental index for people to engage in social interaction and interpret their daily lives (Chang, 1957; Wei, 1947). While Chinese culture has been evolving for centuries, respect for traditional cultural values has been a hallmark of that evolution. Hence, examining Chinese values relevant to homosexuality would provide some understanding of why the Chinese view homosexuality as they do.

Traditional Chinese Cultural Basis on Sexuality

Confucianism is the most dominant philosophical doctrine in China that embodies Chinese culture (Zhang, 2008). The main moral characters as “virtue of perfect humanity” (Wei, 1947, p. 73) prized by Confucianism are benevolence, faithfulness, reciprocity, righteousness, and loyalty. In a word, the ultimate achievement of Confucianism is central harmony, which is perceived as a perfect state of appropriateness (Li, 2009). Regarding harmony in Chinese culture, it embodies the supreme ideal condition that "All things are nurtured together without injuring one another; all courses are pursued together without collision" (Fung, 2007, p.286). Therefore, Confucianism never gave completely negative connotation to any issue including homosexuality. Neither did other schools in ancient China express a public objection towards homosexuality (Zhang, 2008).

Therefore, it is reasonable that people are inclined to take a neutral attitude towards homosexuality in China, because they have no tradition to be hostile toward homosexuality, and they tend to ignore or tolerate some social phenomena to ensure their ideal harmonious environment. In the ancient China, same-sex would not result in the disruption of the traditional patriline of generations, and according to the principle of
harmony, things exist for a reason and it is better to let them go on the condition that they do not impair others’ benefits or conflict with public order. Hence, social tolerance towards same-sex eroticism finds its roots in ancient cultural philosophy. Because of this historical and philosophical underpinning, homosexuality in ancient China was not considered evil nor was it included in any legal framework.

Regarding the male-female relationship, in Chinese cultural concepts, it can be seen as the Yin-Yang philosophy (feminine- masculine philosophy). This Yin-Yang philosophy suggests that everything in the earth has its gender attribute, either Yin (feminine) or Yang (masculine), and the counterpart is opposite yet complementary. For example, the sun is yang, while the moon is yin; the sky is yang, while the earth is yin; the male is yang, while the female is yin. This philosophy seems extremely contradictory to homosexuality, since there is only a single gender involved. But Pan Suiming, one renowned researcher and scholar on sexuality in China, gives an intriguing explanation about this special incompatibility:

Another reason is China’s yin-yang philosophy. This is shared by Confucianism and Taoism. Everything about gender and sexuality originates from it. As the terms suggest, such cosmology excludes homosexuality. There are only yin and yang, no in-between. An important yin-yang principle is mutual transformation. They can transform into each other. A man can become a woman, and a woman can also become a man. Though it is not universal, it is probable (Cui, 2008).

In Pan’s interpretation, the Yin-Yang relation can still be balanced in a homosexual relationship, with the circumstance that one person in the relationship is treated as the opposite gender. Although it is a same-sex relationship, one has to give up the natural gender attribute for transforming to the other side, in order to keep the Yin-Yang balance. So the homosexual relationship is viewed as partially heterosexual by this philosophy. However, some key values of Chinese traditional culture have been
presenting crucial obstacles for Chinese homosexuals, the most prominent one the familial obligation.

**Familial Obligation and Marital Pressure**

According to Confucianism, begetting children is the primary duty of a person, and engaging only in same-sex love is considered as irresponsible for one’s familial prosperity (Hinsch, 1992). A well-known phrase proposed by one representative Confucianist, Meng Zi, is that “In the three ways of being unfilial, not generating off-springs is the worst.” Under the deep influence of this traditional perception, homosexuals have been dealing with enormous pressure from their family and society. There was much less stress for homosexual people in ancient China when polygamy was common and legally approved. So as long as one fulfills the obligation for producing off-springs, it is acceptable to have a same-sex lover, especially for those rich men in higher social status (Zhang, 2008). But the situation is difficult for homosexuals in contemporary China, where only male-female monogamy is legally permitted. Wong & Tang (2004) argued that it may be particularly difficult for homosexuals in Chinese society to identify and disclose their homosexuality because of patriarchal family norms associated with Confucianism.

Strong pressure to marry is deemed as the main difference between Western and Chinese homosexuals (Sun, Farrer, & Choi, 2006). Many homosexuals report that they fear going back home to meet their family, especially on some occasions such as a family reunion during Chinese New Year (Cui, 2008). In order to preserve harmony in the family and avoid questions about marital status, questions that often arise during family get-togethers, Chinese gay people often choose to stay in the closet. Sometimes this means subjecting themselves to blind dates arranged by unsuspecting parents.
The majority of Chinese people are used to living within the social network that is based on family relationships, hence a quite high percentage of gay people are involved in heterosexual marriage to cover their real sexual orientation to avoid embarrassing or humiliating their family, and to fulfill their familial obligation within a traditional social structure (Liu, Bai, & Ding, 2007).

In fact, male homosexuals in China assume more familial pressure of marriage than female ones. One of the reasons for this is that in the traditional Chinese concept, the male is superior to the female in the social hierarchical level. The social patriarchal convention functions significantly in familial reproduction, and male hegemony in China suggests that children inherit the surname from the husband’s family side after marriage, which means that the generation on the male’s side gets maintained. To maintain a healthy marriage with children is considered one of the most important criteria of being filial to parents, as well as being contributive to the family and society. Thus, a daughter in a family is less stressed in producing her own family’s next generation, and that is also one of the reasons why some conservative Chinese people prefer boys to girls.

Furthermore, the reproduction goal of old-fashioned marriage in ancient China is another factor that secured homosexuals in a heterosexual marriage then. In ancient Chinese marriage, the husband-wife relationship was more dedicated to maintaining a family kinship system rather than an individual’s romanticism and sexual orientation (Chou, 2001). In Chou’s (2001) understanding, the basis of Chinese identity is the family kinship system, rather than any erotic purpose. Thus, the same-sex eroticism could co-exist with normal marriage, since couples were not expecting completely
spiritual or physical commitment from their heterosexual marriage. This co-existence of heterosexual and homosexual relationship could also be interpreted as the consequence of the harmony doctrine.
CHAPTER 5
CHINESE FILM INDUSTRY AND HOMOSEXUAL FILMS

Chinese Film Aesthetics and New Film Movement

As a product of modern Western science and technology, film was introduced to China in the 1920s (film with sound in the early 1930s), and its development in China was constrained by and filtered through the social realities and culture (Semsel, Hong, & Hou, 1990). For instance, in Chinese film theory, the shadow play aesthetics as an ideology lead the concept of film and filmmaking in China for a long time. Shadow play, which originally refers to an ancient Chinese form of performance started in the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD), is the earliest and most profound aesthetic concept about Chinese film. By using an opaque backdrop and articulated figures to tell dramatic versions of traditional fairy tales and myths, the shadow play tradition emphasizes the feature of performing drama.

Consequently, until the late 1970s, Chinese film was neither the direct recording of reality, nor the art of shooting and editing, but simply a drama on the screen (Semsel, Hong, & Hou, 1990). This situation was also attributed to Chinese mainstream film theory then, which emphasized the practical aspect of film. Thus, the major story-telling function of the early Chinese films was social education, such as depicting community life and educating the public. Later, that education extended to include political education.

It was concluded that there were two distinct features of the early Chinese film history (Semsel, Hong, & Hou, 1990), (1) Chinese film had no independent development at all, but was closely related to the traditions of theater; (2) all films in practice were for political issues, without serious aesthetic concern. This condition extremely impeded the
progress of the Chinese film industry to develop as a format of art and for themes related to humanity.

Since 1979, when the policies of reformation and open-door started, politics was no longer the central winding vine that directed the development of Chinese film, but rather the social function of film was explored on a full scale with attention to issues like literature, nature, humanity, realism, modernism, etc. Meanwhile, Western film culture and theory began to seep into mainland China, bringing some vitality and liberation of thought into the industry. A New Era of Chinese film began.

Two main trends emerged in the New Era: the awakening of the self-consciousness of human beings, and the awakening of self-consciousness of film. These trends indicated that film productions were less restricted from direct political control, and were left with more space to recognize, establish itself, and to restore the value of humanity.

Representative films such as The Legend of Tianyun Mountain and Shao’ou in the 1980 reflect the adjustments of film theory during the New Era, when filmmakers began to try to surpass the level of technical devices to explore new themes, philosophical ideas, and cultures. The level of the style of redemption was also popular in discussion (Semsel, Hong, & Hou, 1990). Furthermore, pushed by the radically changed social environment, particularly the fact that China’s agrarian economy had started to become a commercial market economy, the film industry was developed with an eye toward commercialization, accompanied by goals such as entertainment and the development of genre films.
During the 1980s, after the change of policy, independent thought and speculation on the past flourished. Enlightened by a Western production model, independent film production debuted in China. A group of Chinese documentary filmmakers launched a wave of documentary filmmaking, which was commonly referred as the Chinese New Documentary Movement. One common characteristic of documentaries in this movement was that their rebellion against the old aspects of Maoist utopianism and established communist political ideologies. Usually, this kind of documentary attempted to present “reality” and raise concern about social issues that had surfaced as a result of economic and policy reform, such as the lower-class’ struggles, social upheaval of people in rural areas contrasted with rapid development in urban areas, the rights of minority groups, etc.

Homosexual Films in China

Today, film is one of the most popular and influential medium in China. According to the statistics from the China Film Association, there were about 500 domestic films produced in China in 2010, with about $4 billion box offices receipts. However, because of the restricted political milieu, homosexuality has been a taboo topic in cinemas in mainland China. Nevertheless, despite heavy-handed censorship, some current filmmakers have been using film as a powerful weapon to express their observations and experiences about Chinese homosexual groups and to call for more attentions to this issue.

In the West, gay and lesbian characters have existed in film since the earliest days of the industry, but they usually are presented in a negative manner: sad and suicidal, unstable and psychopathic, or as objects of derision (Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2010; Sony Pictures Classics, 2011). The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies
a documentary film based on Vito Russo’s (1987) book, looks at how homosexual characters in Hollywood films have been portrayed historically and concludes that homosexual characters were mostly relegated to marginal and secondary supporting roles, and were characterized in a quite stiff and stereotypical way. In the 1990s, queer characters and issues began to appear much more frequently in the mass media, and films depicting homosexuals started to reveal diverse angles of perspectives. For example, Swoon (1992) and The Living End (1992) involve gay identity and criminal cases; Go Fish (1994) focuses on lesbian romance; Stonewall (1995) dramatizes the story that leaded to the Stonewall riots; and After Stonewall (1999) records the 30 years of the gay rights movement; etc. (Davies, & Smith, 2000).

Accordingly in mainland China, several fiction films attempted to address issues related to homosexuality in the 1990s. Farewell My Concubine (1993) was the first feature movies that implied an ambiguous relationship between two males. This male-male bond was represented in an obscure approach, and the leading characters held special positions as Peking opera singers. Though it is the first Chinese movie that won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, Farewell My Concubine was initially banned in China because it featured a male-to-male sexual orientation and covered the period of the Cultural Revolution (Lim, 2002).

The first Chinese feature movie that directly dealt with gay love is East Palace, West Palace (1995), directed by Zhang Yuan, one of the originators of the Chinese New Documentary Movement. Zhang Yuan was blacklisted as a film director in mainland China during 1994 to 1998, for making independent films outside the state studio
system. Most of his works made during that period are still not permitted to be publicly screened in mainland China.

Later, there emerged more feature films concerning the life of gay people in China, such as Happy Together (1997), Men and Women (1999), and Lan Yu (2001). These films tell the stories about gay people's lives and loves, and present the topic of homosexuality to the audience in a relatively objective manner. And without exception, these films are not allowed to be distributed officially within mainland China.

Concern for lesbians was also dealt with Chinese filmmakers. A representative example is The Box, which was mentioned in the introductory chapter, demonstrates the poetry in a lesbian couple’s emotional existence, and makes their lives appear normal by showing their beauty (Chao, 2010).

Since there is no official channel to show films related to homosexuality, the film festival has become a practical option. In 2001, the first Chinese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival was held at Beijing University, and a series of independent films were shown to the public (Cui, 2008). Though there were pressures exerted by school, government officials, and the police, and the first film festival was cut from one week to three days, this tradition was preserved. In 2005 and 2007, the second and third Chinese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival occurred. The festival has since changed its name to the Queer Film Forum.
CHAPTER 6  
CASE STUDY OF CHINESE HOMOSEXUAL FILMS

In this chapter, I am going to analyze the production backgrounds and contents of three sample films, two feature films plus one documentary film. The reasons for my choosing these films are, (1) they are all internationally acknowledged; (2) the two feature films were released in the same year 2001, the year when homosexuality was removed from the mental disease list; (3) the two feature films respectively deal with same-sex male love and same-sex female love; and (4) the documentary film is the first Chinese one with a homosexual-theme and provides a frame of reference for assessing the representation of social reality in the fiction films.

Lan Yu: Love without Gender

Known as one of the earliest homosexual feature films in China, Lan Yu (2001) tells of a ten-year romance between two men, Chen Handong and Lan Yu. Directed by Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan, this film has won several film awards throughout Hong Kong and Taiwan, and was also shown at many major film festivals, including Sundance and the 2001 Cannes Film Festival (Festival de Cannes: Lan Yu). However, this film is not permitted to be officially distributed within mainland China due to the production procedure, its historical reference of the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the theme of gay love. The film was shot in Beijing without permission from the government. This act alone determined its fate of being banned on the mainland Chinese film list.

The plot of Lan Yu is adapted from a popular anonymous 1998 online novel called Beijing Story, and the story is set in Beijing from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. In this film, Lan Yu, a country college student who is in need of money, sold his body as a
virgin to Chen Handong, a business man and son of a senior government bureaucrat. Months later after another unexpected encounter, the two men fall in love with each other. While Lan Yu is completely committed to their relationship, Handong is looking for other playmates and wants to follow the social ritual of marrying a girl. They break up and make up four times, going through Handong’s cheating on Lan Yu, Handong’s father’s death, the Tiananmen Square massacre, Handong’s marriage and divorce, and Handong’s imprisonment for smuggling and illegal fund-raising. After Lan Yu bails Handong out by giving up his entire savings, they make up their minds to be together no matter what happens. But the relationship lasts only a few happy days, when Handong is informed of Lan Yu’s death in a car accident.

The film is narrated from Handong’s point of view, and begins and ends with Handong’s monologue about his memory of Lan Yu’s death. Applying this first person’s angle of narration is effective, as it quickly establishes the reminiscent mood of the film. As in their relationship, Handong is always the dominant and masculine one. From the start, he takes control of their relationship along with his richer businessman status, while Lan Yu is treated as the submissive vulnerable role. The director Stanley Kwan admitted that he had in mind his own romance history in this movie. He mentioned in an interview once that he “really found something similar to the relationship with… [his] boyfriend of the last 12 years” (The Gully, 2002).

Stanley Kwan established his reputation in the Hong Kong film industry with his first directed film *Women* in 1985, and now is recognized as one of the top Hong Kong feature film directors with well-known works such as *Rouge* (1987), *Full Moon in New York* (1989), and *Lan Yu* (2001). In most of his films, Stanley Kwan usually focuses on
women’s and homosexuals’ plight and struggle in love and life, which strongly reveals his feminist standpoint. In 1996, Stanley Kwan confessed his gay identity in his documentary *Yang and Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema*, and in this documentary he talks frankly about his memory about his childhood gender cognition, and the history of how Chinese-language films featured gender roles and sexuality (Jia, 2002). After that, Stanley Kwan filmed *Lan Yu*, in which he expressed more openly his gay identity and hoped audiences would accept him as well as the message of his film. Stanley Kwan is one of the few openly gay film directors, whose works deal directly with gay themes (The Gully, 2002).

In spite of this, Stanley Kwan himself doesn’t consider *Lan Yu* as a gay film, as he argued that he was comfortable with his sexuality then and was using common sentiments to make the film. In Stanley’s opinion, *Lan Yu* is about “two individuals having a relationship. . . It showed how relationships form and evolve. How ordinary couples argue and make up.” (The Gully, 2002) Thus this film is more about human emotion and love. In my opinion, the director intended to emphasize that pure love exists either between heterosexuals or homosexuals, and there is no difference between heterosexual lovers and homosexual ones. For this film, the audience can tell that if the protagonist Lan Yu is replaced with a female instead of a male, the story still holds up. Lan Yu actually symbolizes an ideal character in a relationship, as he is trustworthy, loyal, and willing at all times to sacrifice himself to save his lover.

On the other hand, Handong’s attitude towards Lan Yu often implies his concern and resistance for being homosexual. In the beginning, Handong is a playboy who is aware of his homo-sexual orientation. He flirts with younger males and tries to solicit
good-looking men --- that’s how he met Lan Yu. In their second reunion, Handong realizes his affection for the unsophisticated college boy, but warns Lan Yu (as well as himself) that “we were destined to meet, but it won’t be for a life time.” They break up soon when Lan Yu discovers that Handong is cheating on him with another athletic boy. In their third reunion after the Tiananmen Square event, just as a man might treats his mistress, Handong buys Lan Yu a car and a villa as a graduation gift, and they live together for a while. Still, Handong is unwilling to face his homosexual identity. He tells Lan Yu “when a man grows up he should marry and have a child, and I have always thought so.” As a son of an upper class family with a wealthy social status, Handong is also deeply influenced by traditional heterosexual family values, and he is prepared to follow the routine of marrying a woman, regardless of the fact that he can’t avoid his true sexual orientation. It may be considered a stigma for a mature man in Handong’s position and with his personality to be unmarried. As indicated in an earlier chapter, it is pretty common for Chinese homosexuals to stay in the closet and maintain a fake heterosexual marriage.

Relating the film to its historical economic background, David Eng (2010) analyzes Lan Yu as a “melodrama of neoliberalism.” He quoted Lisa Rofel’s observation that the Chinese gay and lesbian movement is under the impact of current societal, political, and economic environment, and inevitably will merge into the cosmopolitan globalized world. Thus, he thinks Lan Yu places “the emergence of homosexual subjectivity, agency and desire squarely within a theory of human transformation, a gendered developmentalism, and the politics of Chinese modernity.” In the film’s description, Handong’s most prosperous years were during the early stage of China’s Reform and Opening Policy,
when capitalism first blended into China’s socialist planned economy, together with Western values and lifestyles. Some details such as businessmen’s suits, Handong’s conception of consumption, and his value on fashion, and so on, clearly reflect this phenomenon. Handong and Lan Yu’s relationship, as depicted in the film, to some extent mirrors the early Chinese modern thoughts about the liberal individual, human natural desire, and free-market capitalism. For example, Handong has taken his relationship with Lan Yu in the modern language of sugar daddy-son, and interprets human affection as a token of exchange. When he was irritated after being caught cheating on Lan Yu, he blamed Lan Yu, saying that he doesn’t appreciate goodies in hand, and challenged him to find another “client as generous as me.”

Another characteristic and subtle expression in this film are the two family dinner scenes, which exhibit Handong’s family’s view and attitude towards his relationship with Lan Yu. The first time Handong brought Lan Yu back home for dinner is after their second reunion in winter, and he introduces Lan Yu to his family as his colleague’s little brother who is alone in Beijing for the Spring Festival. Together at the table are Handong’s mother, sister and brother, who all treat Lan Yu as an ordinary family guest in a kind manner. For his part, Lan Yu seems like the ideal guest. He sits at the table quietly, speaks only when spoken to, and is polite in every respect. Like so many homosexual couples, Handong and Lan Yu keep their relationship secret in the presence of others, especially family members.

The second family dinner scene comes after Lan Yu successfully bails Han Dong from prison, and they get together for a celebration. Handong’s mother is not present, but Handong’s sister and brother, his brother-in-law and sister-in-law, are there. This is
more like a family couple dinner, and it is interesting to observe that those young people treat Handong and Lan Yu like a couple without really pointing out anything. At this time, Lan Yu acts much less nervous and more active. He helps out in the kitchen and with setting up the table with other women while the other men are chatting in the living room. He talks very a little, but he becomes more interactive with Handong’s family, and the whole atmosphere is merry and relaxed. Handong’s sister even suggests a place for Handong and Lan Yu to take a vacation. It seems that though their homosexual relationship is not officially public, what Lan Yu has done for Handong makes it less a secret, and the young family members are fine with this open yet secret relationship.

Concerning the overview of the film, from a perspective of homosexual love, I agree with the director Stanley Kwan’s opinion, that this film emphasizes a belief that love exists without gender. The romantic love of the story makes sense regardless of gender. *Lan Yu* is a film that talks about gays in mainland China, yet it ingeniously shifts the focus to love in the relationship itself, instead of stressing the taboo topic of non-straight people. This film deals with homosexual love in a positive upright manner, with the promotion of the idea that homosexual love is nothing different from heterosexual love.

*Fish and Elephant: Love is the Home*

Distinguished from *Lan Yu*, *Fish and Elephant* (2001) tells a story of a lesbian couple, and this film is the first feature film that tackles the lesbian issue in mainland China. Suffering the same fate as other homosexual films, the production and release of *Fish and Elephant* was in underground status within mainland China, and it was screened through international film festivals. This film was the winner of the Elvira Notari
Prize in the 2001 Venice Film Festival, and also the Best Asian Film Prize at Forum of New Cinema in the 2002 Berlin International Film Festival.

Li Yu, a former documentary filmmaker, directed *Fish and Elephant*. This film is her debut feature film, and it is narrated in a fairly documentary fashion: a rare close-up or change of angle, using a majority of still mid-shots and full-shots. In fact, the director was preparing to shoot a documentary film on this subject at first, but changed her mind to make a feature film during shooting. That is why this film has an intense documentary style. One of the advantages of the film’s documentary style is that it is easier to depict lesbian life in a more authentic and reliable way, as the camera records how the two characters go about their routine daily lives, making the audience feel that lesbians are as ordinary as anyone else. Even though *Fish and Elephant* places lesbian love as its core plot, the director Li Yu comments that what she wants to express is “true sufferings and helplessness of women.” Li Yu explains one of the leading characters, Xiao Qun’s situation, “In her eyes, the society is like a wall, blocks all her aspirations and desires. And her silence brings her more sufferings and stress.” (Southern Metropolis Daily, 2003)

The English name, *Fish and Elephant*, illustrates Li Yu’s feeling about this film. In this film, Xiao Qun works as a zoo keeper, and her job is to take care of a female Asian Elephant. Thus the only elephant in the film is shown as a kept animal in the zoo, and she eats and sleeps at her own will, but has no chance for freedom. In her rented place, Xiao Qun keeps a glass aquarium of fish, of which she also takes good care. Here I think that the fish symbolizes Xiao Qun’s love relationship, while the elephant refers to her life. The living space of the zoo elephant is restricted, but at least the elephant is
exposed outside in the air, hard to hide. This is similar to Xiao Qun’s life: whether she likes men or women, she has to live in the same society as everyone else. As for her love metaphor, the fish are protected in the water, and they would die once they get out of the tank and were exposed to the air. One scene that supports this assumption occurs when Xiao Qun’s lover, Xiao Ling, finds out about Xiao Qun’s reconnection with her ex-girlfriend. She leaves the house and all the fish die; when they make up later, they buy new fish and put them in the tank of clear water.

The film starts with Xiao Qun’s blind date with a friend of her cousin’s. Xiao Qun is almost 30, yet doesn’t have a boyfriend, which makes her mother extremely nervous. Xiao Qun’s mother has no clue about her daughter’s sexuality and repeatedly arranges for blind dates in hopes of helping Xiao Qun find a suitor. Xiao Qun falls in love with Xiao Ling, a girl who makes a living by selling clothes she designs. During a blind date, and at a time when Xiao is present, Xiao Qun confesses her sexuality. Shortly thereafter, in order to be with Xiao Qun, Xiao Ling breaks up with her boyfriend and she and Xiao Qun move in together. Despite a series of misunderstandings and pressure from family and friends, the lesbian couple finally wins the blessing of Xiao Qun’s mother.

One of the storylines in Fish and Elephant is Xiao Qun’s blind dates with different men. Their conversations reveal Xiao Qun’s value and comprehension about sexuality and heterosexual marriage as a lesbian, as well as heterosexual people’s reactions towards homosexuals at that time in mainland China. There are two scenes of Xiao Qun confessing her sexual orientation, and it is interesting to see how people react to her words.
The first coming out is set at the beginning of the film, when Xiao Qun is having a conversation with her cousin before a date. She says that she has no feelings for men at all and it is a waste of time for her family trying to set her up with a man. In response to Xiao Qun’s words, Xiao Qun’s cousin shows his incomprehension of the idea that a woman may be attracted to another woman. He tells Xiao Qun that a normal woman must get married and have children, and to do anything else is foolish. He says a family would be humiliated if a girl remained single after the age of 30 or if a girl suggested that she had no interest in men.

The second time Xiao Qun confesses her sexuality is when she meets her date for the first time. Her date is astonished and doesn’t believe it. In his experience, he hasn’t come across this situation yet, and he thinks it is impossible for a female to have feelings for another female, because the unalterable universal principle is that “the different sexes attract each other, and on the contrary, the same sex repels each other.” The astonished man admits his crush on Xiao Qun for her “good-looking and nice talks,” and insists that there is possibility that it might work out between them if they spend more time together to know each other better.

Among those respondents about Xiao Qun’s sexual orientation, Xiao Qun’s mother is the most representative. Xiao Qun’s mother is the most enthusiastic and anxious person about her daughter’s marriage. Xiao Qun’s mother is a traditional Chinese woman who after her husband’s death has raised Xiao Qun all by herself, and has as her only hope that her daughter will marry and have an ordinary life. She sets up dozens of blind dates for Xiao Qun, trying to arrange her daughter’s marriage as soon as possible. In her opinion, a girl’s lifetime of happiness is built on a good marriage, and
the older the girl is, the harder it is for her to find someone to get married. In their first phone conversation in the film, Xiao Qun’s mother tries to convince Xiao Qun that “an adult should get married and then have children,” and in another phone conversation, Xiao Qun’s mother beg Xiao Qun to agree to another blind date. Xiao Qun actually understands her mother’s expectations, yet she is unwilling to go against her own nature. Coming out to her mother or continuing find excuses for turning down male dates, are the only two options for Xiao Qun.

At the time Xiao Qun’s mother comes to Xiao Qun’s place, Xiao Qun and Xiao Ling have established their relationship and have been living together for a while. When they first meet the mother, Xiao Ling expresses concern about disclosing their lesbian relationship. Xiao Qun consoles her by saying, “How can someone like her possibly understand what is going on between us?” Xiao Qun’s remark is telling. Because homosexuality is so uncommon and rarely if ever talked about, Xiao Qun’s mother has no frame of reference other than a traditional one for judging the behavior of her daughter and Xiao Ling. Another reason is, as a Chinese custom, it is completely acceptable for females to display a certain amount of intimacy in public, such as holding hands, holding each other’s shoulders, have simple body contact, etc. Thus, in public lesbians have better cover than gay lovers. In Fish and Elephant, when Xiao Qun’s mother sees her daughter holding hands with another girl, she understands this behavior to mean they are simply roommates and good friends.

One of the best scenes in Fish and Elephant occurs when Xiao Qun’s mother has dinner with Xiao Qun and Xiao Ling. Xiao Qun’s mother is nagging her as usual, as she talks frankly about her worries for Xiao Qun’s marriage in front of the couple, and even
asks Xiao Ling to help out. In keeping with what may Chinese senior citizens do when they meet someone of a younger generation, the mother then starts to question Xiao Ling about her personal life and is surprised that Xiao Ling is also single. When Xiao Qun’s mother turns around, the screen cuts to Xiao Qun and Xiao Ling holding hands under the table. Being silent and supporting each other in secret is all they can do before an unwitting parent.

Eventually, when informed that her mother is remarrying, Xiao Qun comes out of the closet. Xiao Qun’s mother is totally lost after her daughter’s confession: she pauses several times, trying to understand her daughter’s words. Seemingly confused, Xiao Qun’s mother says repeatedly “I don’t understand it” and “What are you talking about, Xiao Qun?” She tells her daughter about her concept for “home,” that is “Each adult needs to make their own home, and a real home consists of a man and a woman. Otherwise, things go wrong.” In response, Xiao Qun expresses her point of view that everyone needs love, a lover, no matter what gender. She says “When you truly feel happiness, you feel love. Love is the home, and it doesn’t matter who they are as long as they love each other.” Xiao Qun’s feelings represent the majority of Chinese homosexual people’s feelings, that if they are in love, they don’t care about the gender issue, and they are in need of a home according to their own (Cui, 2008). Although this coming out of Xiao Qun ends without any result, at the end of the film, Xiao Qun’s mother gives her support and blessing for her daughter’s decision.

The cast members of *Fish and Elephant* are all unprofessional actors and actresses, and the two leading actresses Pan Yi (Xiao Qun) and Shi Tou (Xiao Ling) were actually a lesbian couple during the production. Shi Tou is one of the most noted
lesbian activists in China (Liu & Rofel, 2010). She is the first lesbian who came out to discuss same-sex relationships on Chinese national TV, and she is the organizer and host of the first Chinese Lesbian and Gay Conference and the first Chinese Convention of Lesbians in mainland China. As a female artist, Shi Tou’s creations include paintings, photographs, and films. She hopes her works can “express a modern person’s intimate, embodied experiences in social situations”, and “respond to contemporary social issues as well as a timeless theme, which is the coexistence of man and nature” (Liu & Rofel, 2010).

Shi Tou sees her starring in *Fish and Elephant* as another work of art. She agrees that the film tells “a story about love between two women and the problems they encounter in society.” (Liu & Rofel, 2010), and fills in a blank space in Chinese cinema about queer female same-sex love. This film draws public discussion and attention from the mainstream culture to queer subculture, and also helps remind homosexual people of their existence.

**Queer China, Comrade China: A 30-year Chronicles**

*Queer China, Comrade China* (2008), an independent Chinese documentary, directed by Cui Zi’en, examines China’s LGBT culture and history through various viewpoints, including cultural, historical, legal, political, and psychological ones. This film looks at Chinese society in a state of continual evolution, and covers almost every aspect of homosexuality in China, from governmental control and political rights to health problems and safe sex, gay identity and gay marriage, etc.

*Queer China, Comrade China* demonstrates characteristics of Chinese homosexuality, as well as the impact of Chinese culture and societal features on the development of homosexuality. Consisting mainly of direct interviews and early film
clips, *Queer China, Comrade China* presents the general situation of homosexuals in mainland China chronologically in nine sections.

The first section, “From Pitch Black to Light Grey,” reviews the general social attitude towards homosexuals in China. It mentions that before 1998, homosexual activities were considered as “hooliganism” according to the Chinese government. Even after decriminalizing homosexuality, the mainstream society was still in such an awkward state that no acknowledgement of homosexuality could be traced. Also, familial obligation shows its significance in homosexual life. The fact that most homosexuals are unwilling to go back home during Chinese New Year is discussed in this section. Big family get-togethers usually take place as a tradition in Chinese New Year, and it is common for people to ask their younger relatives about their dating situation or put pressure on them to marry. This kind of moment is considered extremely embarrassing to Chinese homosexuals, since they don’t like lying yet they don’t want to ruin the harmony of the family by admitting their true sexuality.

The second section, “From Parks to Grassroots,” talks about the changes of locations where homosexuals choose to have activists. Lisa Rofel, as an interviewee in this section, explains her understanding of the relation between capital commercialization and the communist anti-material principle. The communist government requires people to restrain their desire, either materialistic or in sexual expression. Thus people are guided to live a simple life, and their mindsets follow more traditional heterosexual relationships. However, since the Opening Policy, capitalism and commercialism have been gradually accepted by Chinese people. One byproduct of this acceptance has been greater awareness and interest in sexuality. Inevitably,
people then begin realize the importance of exploring and establishing their sexual identity, and how to manage it.

The third section, “From Knowing to Knowledge,” traces how homosexuality became a regular term in contemporary Chinese culture. The fourth one, “From Printing to Broadcasting,” reviews how homosexual topics appeared in the media, paperback fiction, newspapers, magazines, satellite TV, and film. The fifth one, “From In to Out of the Classroom,” records reformations on courses about gay and lesbian studies in Chinese universities. The sixth one, “From Others to the Self,” discusses the issue of AIDS. The seventh one, “From Transvestism to Transsexuality,” tells the life stories of some Chinese transgender people, and presents the problems they are facing.

In the eighth section, one of the interviewees tells about the governmental control she encountered during the first and second Chinese gay and lesbian film festival. The first Chinese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival was held at Beijing University, the earliest Chinese university to advocate liberalism and humanism, and was reduced from a seven-day festival to a three-day one for no apparent reason. The second Chinese Gay and Lesbian Film Festival was held in 2005 in a pub in Beijing. The festival had been scheduled to take place on the campus of Beijing University, but the organizers were removed from campus by school guards and polices before the festival began.

In the last section of the film, the issue of legalizing same-sex marriage is mentioned. Li Yinhe points out as an interviewee that even though it is hard to get the government to pass legislation to acknowledge gay rights, there is hope for the future. She thinks that the development of China’s Opening Policy of economic reform and progress has given Chinese homosexuals more space with limited rights and respects,
and it is possible to look forward to the day of more open tolerance and better treatment of homosexuality in China.

Also, a promising future for the development of homosexual community in China is presented in the last section. It is indicated that increasing social concerns and public events for homosexuality are emerging. For example, the rainbow kite has become a symbol for Chinese homosexuals, and flying the rainbow kite together with others is considered a means of expressing one's pride in being homosexual. This symbolic get-together has been organized in a lot of cities in China, and has received numerous amounts of positive feedback. The booming state of the homosexual community indicates, especially for those who have come out, participated, and supported the community, that there has been a development of homosexual identity in China. These individuals have realized their natural sexuality, and have a strong sense of their own group identity. They are confident and comfortable with their identity, have the desire to eliminate all forms of injustices and prejudices, and are willing to struggle openly against oppression.

The director of *Queer China, Comrade China* is Cui Zi'en, a film director, film scholar, screenwriter, novelist, and gay activist. Cui Zi'en wrote the first gay novel in modern China, *Peach Lips*, which is banned within mainland China due to its gay theme. He wrote several novels and articles about Chinese homosexuals. In Cui's works, he integrated his Christian religious roots with his own experience as a homosexual, tried to associate queer studies with feminism studies, criticized the tough social environment for homosexuals in China, and reported on the struggles and endeavors of Chinese homosexual filmmakers (Berry, 2004; Cui, 2004; Cui & Liu, 2010;
Wang, 2004). He is also one of the most avant-garde Chinese underground filmmakers: his internationally renowned film works are *Enter the Clown* (2002) and *The Old Testament* (2002) (Wang, 2004). And his *Queer China, Comrade China* (2008) is regarded as the first documentary to deal with Chinese homosexuality.

Cui Zi’en is the first gay filmmaker coming out in mainland China via public media. In 2000, he participated in a talk show on a Chinese local satellite television, together with Li Yinhe and Shi Tou, and openly talked about his homosexuality (Wang, 2004). In fact, Cui Zi’en never tried to hide his sexuality. When he was working in the Beijing Film Academy in 1987 as a literature instructor, his friends already knew he was gay. The school then dismissed his certificate and position, sent him to a hospital in hopes that he would accept being diagnosed as “incompetent.” But Cui Zi’en refused to acknowledge to the school that his gay nature is mental illness. He comes out through his writing and filmmaking, and publishes his gay-themed novels outside mainland China.

As an underground filmmaker whose works concentrate on a government-banned topic, Cui Zi’en expects few people to view his films (Wang, 2004). He explained that he will feel insulted and angry if he finds that those who do see them are unfit to understand, either because they are homophobic or because all they want to do is gawk at unusual gay sex scenes. Cui Zi’en intends to explore “profoundity” in his films, which in his definition means “a truthful reflection of his own philosophy” (Wang, 2004). He also challenges traditional filmmaking both technically and artistically.

Chris Berry’s (2004) analyzed Cui Zi’en’s feature film, *Men and Women* (1999), and viewed the film’s “cheeky pastiche and perverse appropriations” similar to pre-
Stonewall underground fashion. And he also concluded that because no historical incident like Stonewall Riot has happened in China, there is no breakthrough force for the public to acknowledge the presence of the gay community and gay rights. The difference between the Western pre-Stonewall films and Chinese ones, is that Chinese homosexual films take the advantage of modern technology in this new era, such as digital video for production, and the availability of international film festivals for circulation.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION

Features of Chinese Homosexual Film Production

Because of the sensitive nature of homosexuality in China, no film dealing with homosexuality has ever been approved by the Chinese Communist Party for movie production, nor has any non-Chinese movie involving homosexual issues been imported. Under the restriction of the Chinese cinema system and censorship, homosexual films are not permitted to be officially produced nor distributed within mainland China. Filmmakers do not necessarily like to make banned films, but censorship of homosexuality has forced filmmakers who want to deal with the issue to go underground. Take the three sample films *Lan Yu, Fish and Elephant,* and *Queer China, Comrade China.* All of them were shot without governmental permission and are banned in mainland China. Also, because filmmakers are denied access to funding, most of these homosexual films made in China are low-budget productions that rarely see commercial gain. In Limbacher’s (1983) definition, underground film is “a small-budget independent personal film made by a filmmaker more interested in the film itself than making money”(p.36). Accordingly, under China’s current social and political circumstance, underground style is the most popular and only pattern for Chinese filmmakers to produce homosexual films.

Despite being banned in mainland China, Chinese homosexual films have found other means of distribution and exhibition, such as being featured in various international festivals. *Lan Yu* was shown in the 2001 Cannes Film Festival; *Fish and Elephant* won prizes at the 2001 Venice Film Festival and the 2002 Berlin International Film Festival; *Queer China, Comrade China* was shown at the Pusan International Film
Festival, the Vancouver International Film Festival, and other international and domestic film festivals. Participating in international film contests or obtaining screening opportunities in international film festivals has turned out to be a favorable approach for Chinese underground filmmakers to exhibit their works. Because of current Chinese policies, it is impossible for homosexual films to be screened before a large public audience, not to mention functioning as a way to raise concern about homosexual groups. According to the narration in the eighth section of *Queer China, Comrade China*, we can see that there are still numerous barriers to overcome before Chinese gay and lesbian film festivals can be officially held, and audience can feel free to come and join in an open discussion about the issue.

Even though it is difficult to promote homosexual films via film festivals in China in current environment, there are several other channels used to publicize homosexual films. Films can be screened before small groups in private pubs and cultural centers where the films are less likely to draw governmental attention. For example, *The Box* was only shown in small-group meetings with the director. Another way to access to homosexual films is through websites for homosexuals and video websites, such as *Aibai.com* and *shuangtv.com*. Despite on-going copyright issues currently being debated by Chinese media, thousands of pirated copies of films are free to watch online. Also, pirated DVD copies of banned films such as *Lan Yu* and *Brokeback Mountain* and other films dealing with homosexuality are sometimes available in video shops and stands. Thus, through unofficial means of circulation, homosexual films are accessible to people in China.
Another common characteristic of the three sample Chinese homosexual films is that someone with an openly gay identity is on the production team. For *Lan Yu* and *Queer China, Comrade China*, both of the male directors have come out of the closet, and for *Fish and Elephant*, the two female leading actresses were a lesbian couple in real life. Usually, those public openly gay figures in China are activists, who dare to identify themselves as minority group representatives and endeavor to promote gay rights and other relevant human rights. For example, Shitou (Xiao Ling) in *Fish and Elephant*, and Cui Zi’en (director) in *Queer China, Comrade China*, are both well-known in China’s queer community.

The pressure of censorship makes filmmakers in China hesitant to produce films dealing with homosexuality. There is almost no chance for monetary gain but a very real chance of government reprisal. Only avant-garde activists, many of whom are homosexual, are willing to take the risk of making homosexual films. They understand the significance of gay rights movement; they know more about the real life and pain of Chinese homosexuals; and they are anxious to create a more public tolerance for homosexuals throughout China.

Interestingly, perhaps, neither of the directors admits the films are purely homosexual films, and they directors interpret their use of homosexual love as a way to express other core themes. *Lan Yu*’s director Stanley Kwan wants to emphasize how love develops and manifests itself in an ordinary relationship. Likewise, *Fish and Elephant*’s Director Li Yu explains her film as an expression of the condition of women’s helplessness and depression. Still, both of the directors have dealt with homosexual love in an impartial manner, treating it like ordinary relationship, which reveals their
affirmative attitude towards homosexuality. Nevertheless, these two films are considered representative of Chinese homosexual films. The directors recognize the special difficulties homosexuals face, and they construct a screen social reality that is both believable and representative of the real-world experiences of Chinese homosexuals.

**Features of Cultural Values in Chinese Homosexual Films**

Chinese traditional cultural values have a remarkable impact on shaping Chinese comprehension of sexuality, including people’s attitude towards homosexuality and heterosexual marital relationship. In the sample films, some of these cultural features are reflected, such as people’s ignorance of homosexuality, familial marital pressure, and different treatments received by gays and lesbians.

As recorded in *Queer China, Comrade China*, in 2001, one Chinese local satellite television talk show invited two openly homosexual people, Cui Zi’en and Shitou, to talk about their life experience. It was the first public show that talked openly about homosexuality and prompted a great deal of reactions. The majority of the audience said they couldn’t understand the existence of homosexual in China and some found the show “disgusting.” Another interviewee in *Queer China, Comrade China* says that in the 1960s, people around him had no idea of what homosexuality was and how it could exist. These two excerpts from the documentary film demonstrate how woefully ignorant Chinese citizens were about homosexuality.

In the two sample feature films, the word “homosexuality” or “tongzhi” are never uttered. Likewise, the main characters never identify themselves as “homosexual.” In *Fish and Elephant*, when Xiao Qun confesses her sexuality to others, and does so several times, the statement she makes is that she is only interested in women instead
of men. People’s reactions to her real sexuality varies in details, yet one common reaction is that none of them understands how it is possible for a female not to be attracted to a male: namely, they have no clue about the existence of homosexuals. The confusion about sexuality described in the film clearly demonstrates that when it comes to homosexuality, the Chinese people are ignorant and understandably so. The government has failed to include homosexuality or even sexuality in its public education.

Likewise, no specific term referring to homosexuals appears in *Lan Yu*. None of the main characters openly confesses his interest in same-sex activity. The film doesn’t include a scene of the two protagonists confessing their feelings toward each other, nor any discussions about their sexuality. Their relationship is in an unidentified state, vague enough to not prompt the other’s suspicion. Though Lan Yu is known to Handong’s family, at the beginning he is taken as an ordinary friend, and after a series of incidents, he is received by Handong’s family in an ambiguous manner (they acquiesce in this uncommon relationship without ever talking about it). This plot reflects the common way for traditional Chinese families to manage homosexuality: they are not aware of the existence of one family member being a homosexual, and when a certain incident reveals the fact, they tend to tolerate it while at the same time concealing it within a small circle.

Referring to marital pressure, in *Lan Yu*, Handong is the loyal adherent to the traditional heterosexual marriage at first, and abandons his male lover to pursue it. However, he divorces his wife because she is not prepared to have children. In *Fish and Elephant*, Xiao Qun is pushed by her mother to go continually on blind dates in order to
find a man for marriage, and her mother’s reason is that a woman should be married after a certain age. Otherwise, it would bring shame to the family.

Of course, the familial pressure on a homosexual is lessened if there are sisters and brothers in the family. For instance, Handong in Lan Yu has a straight married sister and brother, thus he is not pressured so urgently by his parents to marry. Unfortunately for Xiao Qun, in Fish and Elephant, her brother’s early death leaves her the only child in her family, so she has to bear all the expectations her mother has since transferred to her. In 1979, however, China issued the “One-Child Policy” to control the booming population. Besides many side effects of this policy (an increasing rate of abortion, gender imbalance, aging population, etc.), another effect is that the majority of homosexuals (born after 1979) in mainland China are the sole children in their households and have to assume familial obligations in the traditional style.

Another factor that affects gays more than lesbians, as analyzed in Queer China, Comrade China, is the increasing population of those infected with AIDS. In 2007, the Ministry of Health reported that HIV/AIDS infection among gay men was 1.35% in China, which is 20 times higher than the general population’s infection rate. Publicity on safe sex for gay people is strongly urged by activists for homosexuals. They likewise demand more social attention for the group of infected people. Thus, in order to promote a more comprehensive knowledge about HIV/AIDS, the public has to be informed of the existence of HIV/AIDS infected homosexual males. By comparison, female homosexuals have less chance of spreading the disease.

Features of Homosexual Identity in Chinese Homosexual Films

For homosexual individual identity development, Handong in Lan Yu is a representative case to study. Applying the CASS model of homosexual identity
acquisition (Cass, 1984), we can summarize the process of Handong adopting his homosexual identity. As mentioned in chapter 3, the CASS model consists of four stages: Identity confusion and Identity comparison, Identity tolerance and Identity acceptance, Identity pride, and Identity synthesis. In different stages, the individuals have different responses and needs according to their attitudes towards sexual identity.

In Lan Yu, Handong has experienced most of the stages suggested in the CASS model. At the beginning, Handong is in the phase of Identity confusion and Identity comparison. He is aware of his sexual orientation, but keeps his relationship with males only for fun and sexual contacts. He is not certain what he wants for real, and regards his experience with males as a young lifestyle adventure. When Handong realizes his feelings for Lan Yu, he still tries to cling to his “heterosexual” identity and deny his homosexual one, telling himself and his partner that their male-to-male life is only temporary.

After a series of incidents and a failed marriage, Handong learns to tolerate and accept his homosexual identity, which corresponds to the stage of Identity tolerance and Identity acceptance. At this time, Handong is content with his life with a male partner, and is willing to commit to their future life together. The possible responses of the identity acceptance stage described in the CASS model are “attempts to fit in and not make waves within the gay and lesbian community; more comfortable being seen with groups of men or women that are identified as gay” (Cass, 1979). Though the film doesn’t include a scene of Handong and Lan Yu hanging out with other gay people, or their attempts to reach out to the gay community, there are scenes of the couple dining...
comfortably together with Handong’s family members, which can also be considered as
the sign of their acceptance of being homosexuals.

According to Handong’s monologue at the end of the film, it can be inferred that
after Lan Yu’s death, Handong has adjusted himself to the stages of Identity synthesis.
He has developed a holistic view of his sexuality, and is completely comfortable with
people knowing his story, as he is able to share the story in a calm and peaceful
manner. Herein, homosexual identity to Handong is only an aspect of his self-identity,
integrated with his other social identities as well.

In the other feature film, *Fish and Elephant*, the story of the lesbian couple Xiao
Ling and Xiao Qun reveals their different levels in the process of homosexual identity
development. Xiao Ling has been back and forth between her boyfriend and her lesbian
partner, so she was in the early stage of Identity comparison, and then achieved Identity
acceptance after she determined she was a lesbian after all. In comparison, Xiao Qun
has shown her confidence and comfortable attitude with her lesbian identity, and she
even frankly tells others her sexual orientation. It seems she has a fairly positive self
image, thus, she is in the later stage of homosexual identity development, Identity
acceptance or even Identity synthesis.

According to the above analysis, we can see that CASS model is roughly
applicable for the homosexual characters --- though to varying degree --- presented in
the two films. Although the CASS model is based on homosexual samples in the U.S., it
can be inferred that Chinese homosexuals also experience the basic process of self-
identification as people in the West do, even though they are in different cultural and
social circumstances. This indicates that the general process of achieving homosexual identity is universal.

However, the implications for the characters in the Identity pride stage of the CASS model are not as sufficient as for other stages. According to Cass's (1984) definition, homosexuals in this stage have to deal with incongruent views of heterosexuals, and usually avoid involvement with heterosexual community in order to better immerse themselves in gay and lesbian culture. Both the two sample feature films focus on only one gay or lesbian couple to develop the storyline, with no indication of any organizations or groups for homosexuals. And the main characters are depicted as low-key and unsocial people, with their social connections only involving limited colleagues and family members. Thus, it is hard to determine whether they have truly experienced the stage of Identity pride, since there is no obvious indication of their bond with homosexual community, nor strong against mood toward heterosexual norms.

As an example of people's reaction to homosexuality, the manner in which Xiao Qun’s mother in Fish and Elephant deals with the homosexuality of her daughter is a typical one. Xiao Qun’s mother doesn’t understand the concept of homosexuality at the beginning, and it is a total shock to her when she discovers that Xiao Qun’s sexuality is the reason she doesn’t want to get married. After further communication with Xiao Qun, Xiao Qun’s mother in the end shows her supportive attitude to her daughter. Xiao Qun’s mother’s changing attitudes about her daughter’s sexuality is what the director hopes will happen to all Chinese people as they change from being ignorant of homosexuality, to accepting homosexuals for who they are.
The demonstrations of homosexual identification in the two feature films are also notable. In *Lan Yu*, both of the male characters have an ambiguous definition of their sexuality at first. Handong is planning to have a heterosexual marriage, and Lan Yu never shows his objection to it. It is the same with Xiao Ling in *Fish and Elephant*: Before she meets Xiao Qun, she is in an impassionate relationship with her boyfriend, and when she has a fight with Xiao Qun, for a while she returns to him. It is interesting to notice that in Chinese homosexual films, usually there is at least one character that is uncertain about his or her sexual orientation, and goes back and forth between being heterosexuals and homosexuals. We may attribute this characterization to directors’ intention of emphasizing love or other subjects besides homosexuality. But we may also infer it as a reflection of the real status of Chinese homosexuals: that due to lacking of affirmative knowledge about homosexuality and pressure from familial obligations, latent homosexuals are common in mainland China and are forced to endure a lifetime of internal dissonance. If Richardson’s (1984) description mentioned in Chapter 3 is correct, that latent homosexuals may not be able to identify their homosexual orientation until they encounter particular situations (e.g., meet a persistent homosexual-lover), then we can see that Handong and Xiao Ling fit this special category of homosexuality.

Neither of the films, however, expresses the possibility of homosexuality being congenital. Xiao Qun, in *Fish and Elephant*, is the only character in the two films who is consistent with her homosexual identity, yet the plot of her recalling her childhood memory with Xiao Ling implies that she was not a born lesbian. Xiao Qun tells Xiao Ling that when she was a little girl, her elder brother always treated her like a boy and shared with her his fantasy about ideal girls. So after her brother died in an accident, Xiao Qun
makes up her mind to live for her brother and realize his dream by having relationships with girls. This explanation could be a cop out. It appears the director doesn’t want to present a born-homosexual character, so she makes up an implausible story to illustrate the character’s motivation for becoming a homosexual. Even in the documentary *Queer China, Comrade China*, the natural formation of homosexuality is not explicitly talked about. But the director Cui Zi’en himself reveals in his articles and interviews several times that his homosexual identity is formed naturally from childhood.

The representations of homosexual identity in the three sample films are indicative of the real life experiences of Chinese homosexuals in the 1990s, as well as the public attitude about homosexuality. As presented in the films, the homosexual characters develop their homosexual identity through the commonly acknowledged process (e.g., CASS model).
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE

According to the historical records of ancient China, homosexuals have existed throughout the history and have been treated differently in different eras. Due to the contemporary political characteristics in China, sexuality has been a heavily sensitively censored topic in public communications, with homosexuality as a banned subject in mass media. However, homosexual people and activists in mainland China have been struggling hard to create a tolerant environment for Chinese homosexuals, and have tried through mass media (e.g., print media, the Internet, films) to publicize knowledge about homosexuality, expand the influence of the gay and lesbian community, and raise social consciousness.

In the present study, I chose to focus on film, the most restricted form of media in mainland China, as a way to explore the current state of Chinese homosexuality. Looking at homosexuality from a cultural perspective, I used qualitative case study to analyze three films, Lan Yu, Fish and Elephant, and Queer China, Comrade China. I described these films within the confines of cultural values and traditions which dictate the manner in which homosexuality perceived and experienced in China, and within the context of theoretical notions about Chinese homosexual identity.

Currently in mainland China, all films involving homosexual issues, whether Chinese or non-Chinese, are either partially edited or wholly banned, and local productions of homosexual films are operated underground. There is no official channel to distribute homosexual films within mainland China, and participating in international film festival is a preferred means for directors to reach to audience. Plus, small private film screening events, online pirated film websites, and pirated DVDs also provide a way
for Chinese audience to learn something about homosexuality. Usually there are homosexual people participate in the production of homosexual films, and basically what is presented in the films is an accurate reflection the homosexuals situation in China today.

In the cultural aspect, the content of the three films suggest that familial obligation and marital pressures are two of the biggest sources of stress for Chinese homosexuals. Chinese traditional culture emphasizes the significance of reproduction to sustain a family’s prosperity. Thus getting married and having children at a suitable age are considered obligation for young people. This traditional perception poses obvious problems for Chinese homosexuals, precludes many of them from coming out to their parents as well as to society. What’s more, the general public in mainland China lacks even rudimentary awareness of or knowledge about homosexuality, which can only add to the frustration of the homosexual community as it attempts to gain acceptance. The stories of characters and interviewees in the sample films mirrored this social phenomenon, by depicting the public’s misunderstanding, marital pressure, and individual struggle.

Based on the CASS model of homosexual identity development, I analyzed how the main characters in the two feature films developed their homosexual identity. According to the stories narrated in the films, the CASS model is feasible to Chinese homosexuals in most stages, since the features of them are performed correspondingly by the homosexual characters. But due to China’s particular circumstance, new models that are more exactly applicable to Chinese homosexual identity development are in demand. And with the increasing enlightenment on people’s perception on sexual
identity, the establishment and expanding of help groups and supportive organizations for LGBT people are more and more encouraged. Also, I pointed out a typical public attitude towards homosexuality described in the sample films: though are indifferent and ignorant to homosexuality before being informed, Chinese people are incline to tolerate and accept the fact if they are informed of the existence of homosexuals in their life.

Since my study is based on a qualitative case study of only three films, there are obvious limitations, such as the selection of the sample films (source, range, content, etc.), the theoretical framework applied to analysis (media-culture perspective, queer theory, and identity development model), and the methodology (qualitative case study). Hence, here are some suggestions for future study relevant to this field.

First, a larger number of sample films will no doubt result in greater validity and reliability. Also, if the sample is larger enough, it is possible to divide feature films and documentary films into two areas of studies, if the sample numbers is enough. It might also be worthwhile to compare gay films and lesbian films, to compare the different treatments gays and lesbians receive in mainland China.

Due to historical reasons, there are some special regions like Hong Kong and Taiwan, regions that are also profoundly influenced by Chinese traditional culture, but implement different political systems rather than socialism in mainland China. In fact, productions and distributions of homosexual films are permitted in these areas have existed for years since the 1900’s (Leung, 2001; Ho, 2010). Some of the films include Ann Lee’s Wedding Banquet, Peter Chan’s He’s a Woman, She’s a Man (1994), Wong Kar-wai’s Happy Together, and so on (Tambling, 2003). Hence, it may be fruitful to
study homosexual films made in these distinctive regions and compare them to the ones emerging in mainland China.

Second, other theoretical frameworks or different perspectives can be applied. Theories involving sociology, sexual psychology, feminism, and other fields overlapping with homosexuality should be considered. For the current Chinese academy, research on homosexuality is rare, thus where it does exist, it leaves a great deal to be desired. For instance, lesbianism was portrayed in scattered reportage, and was represented as incomprehensible or compensatory to failed heterosexual contact (Hershatter, 2004; Lai, 1995). Thus, any scientific studies on homosexuality in China would be a welcome addition to the literature. (Sang, 2003). Also, independent filmology study about Chinese homosexual films would be contributive, since the characteristics of Chinese underground filmmaking are worthy investigation.

Third, different research methods may yield greater insights into Chinese homosexuality. If there are a sufficient number of films, quantitative methods such as content analysis would be appropriate. And audience analysis would be a fruitful way to study the public’s perception of knowledge about homosexual issues. Likewise, surveys targeting Chinese homosexuals could determine the extent to which the gays and lesbians communities believes Chinese society and authority are becoming more tolerant of homosexuality.

Fourth, comparison with Western counterparts regarding content and film censorship system would be valuable. Despite ups and downs, LGBT movements have been developed in Western countries for more than a century. These movements aim for social acceptance of sexual and gender minorities and other LGBT rights. The
history and experience of Western LGBT movements can be taken as a vertical reference for the development of a Chinese one. Finally, the history of film censorship in the United States (1915-1966) (The Picture Show Man, 2007), particularly with regard to the portrayal of homosexuality, (Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2010) might have implications for the evolution of the portrayal of homosexuality in Chinese films and the treatment of homosexuals. In the United States, the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a more tolerant society, one that dealt more openly with minorities and non-traditional lifestyles—both in public and in the media. With the enormous economic changes in the People’s Republic of China in the past few decades, it will be interesting to see whether China travels a similar path on the road to social change.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Xingyi Tang was born in Chongqing, China, in 1986. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English from Communication University of China in 2009, and then went to the University of Florida for graduate study. Tang studied in the College of Journalism and Communications, and her areas of interest included intercultural communication and social impact on social changes. During her college time, she interned at local non-profit organization as Alternative Media Liaison and worked on campus as a Student Assistant at the International Center. Tang graduated with a Master of Arts in Mass Communication in December 2011.