

# Contesting Celluloid Closets: Representing Male Homosexuality in Chinese Cinemas

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the politics of representing male homosexuality in Chinese cinemas. With such recent, high profile Chinese films as *The Wedding Banquet* and *Farewell My Concubine* featuring male homosexuality, scholars and critics have raised issues relating to the cultural politics of representing homosexuality, including the contestation of stereotypes, the politics of coming out, the politics of sexuality, race, gender, and class. This paper stresses the importance of reading films in their specific historical and cultural contexts and not blindly imposing western concepts and practices on the discussion of Chinese cinemas. Finally, drawing comparisons with the experiences and political struggles of other minority groups and subalterns in relation to cultural representation, it calls for a recognition of identity as invariably multi-faceted and for greater inter-representation between different groups, minority or otherwise.

## KEY WORDS

homosexuality  
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stereotypes  
the closet  
gender  
class

cinema  
representation  
coming out  
identity politics  
race  
hybridity



The representation of male homosexuality in Asian cinema is a fairly recent phenomenon. Of particular note, over the past decade, a number of films from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong featuring male homosexuality—films from high profile directors—have won numerous international film awards and gained worldwide recognition.<sup>1</sup> This paper explores the politics of representing male homosexuality in Chinese cinemas and adopts a comparative approach in examining continuities between the experiences and political struggles of homosexuals and those of other marginalized or subaltern groups, especially in relation to the issue of cultural representation.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Struggle over the Meaning of Representation**

Writing on black filmmaking in British cinema, Stuart Hall notes a shift in the cultural politics of representation over the years. According to Hall, the initial phase in black filmmaking was concerned with the “relations of representation,” focusing on access to representation by black filmmakers and contesting the stereotypical quality and fetishized nature of images of blacks through the counter-positioning of positive ones. The next phase marked “the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject” by recognizing that “‘black’ is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category.” More importantly, the heterogeneity of interests and identities within the black community could no longer be ignored, and “the question of the black subject [could] not be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity.” This, for Hall, became a new phase of “the politics of representation” (442–44; emphasis in original).

Hall’s account summarizes the experiences of many minority groups in their struggle over the meaning of representation. For minor-

ity groups with little or no access to what Hall calls “the dominant regimes of representation,” it is undeniable that many historical representations have been stereotypical and negative. Such representations perpetuated over time can have constitutive effects on the groups concerned, especially when they become internalized (Taylor 36). It is therefore understandable that minority groups are first and foremost concerned with the contestation of negative representations and are also concerned in turn with the construction of positive ones.

However, insofar as the concern here is with truth and accuracy in cinematic mimesis or representation, the overly simplistic, value-laden dichotomy of negative/positive need also be interrogated. Cornel West argues that attempts to challenge negative representations by the modern black diaspora fail to reflect upon themselves in two ways. Firstly, the counter-production of positive representations is carried out in “*an assimilationist manner*” that seeks the approval of the dominant culture; secondly, it is premised upon “*a homogenizing impulse*” that subsumes other differences within the black community (27; emphasis in original). Extending West’s argument to other minority groups, the former pitfall is marked by an eagerness to be integrated into dominant culture by obliterating differences between blacks and whites, women and men, homosexuals and heterosexuals in the quest for a common humanity. The latter pitfall risks essentializing minority group identities by defining group members solely by their race, gender, or sexuality in each instance, rather than seeing all groups, minority or otherwise, as similarly raced, gendered, sexualized, and classed. As a result, the contestation of negative representations can be used to affirm one aspect of group identity (e.g., ethnicity) while suppressing other aspects of identity within that community (e.g., class, gender, and sexuality).<sup>3</sup>

The struggle over the control of representation by minority groups is a historical process that can be traced back at least to the different forms of civil rights movements in the United States in the 1960s. Subsequent socio-political movements of identity politics, multiculturalism, and political correctness can be seen as manifestations of what West has termed the “new cultural politics of difference.” While these socio-political movements have certainly given a platform to previ-

ously marginalized groups to voice their concerns, these new political voices are also inescapably implicated in the pitfalls of this cultural politics of difference. On political correctness (PC), Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write that: “[w]hile the laudatory goal behind PC is to stimulate respect and mutual answerability in a reciprocity that takes past oppressions into account, in practice it often degenerates into the sadomasochistic self-flagellations of guilty liberals and a competition for oppressed status among minority groups and their members—victimhood and ‘one-downs-personship’ as cultural capital in a fluctuating identity stock market” (341).<sup>4</sup>

As I will show below, Chinese films and societies have not been immune to the cultural politics of difference and the effects of political correctness. The theoretical framework laid out above will serve as a background for the following discussion of the politics of representing male homosexuality in Chinese cinemas.

### The Contestation of Stereotypes

As suggested by Stuart Hall, the initial phase of the struggle over the meaning of representation is the contestation of negative stereotypes and the counter-production of positive representations. The representation of male homosexuality in Chinese cinemas has led many scholars and critics to undertake similar tasks. A film that has come under particularly strong criticism is Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bie ji*, 1993), whose homosexual characters—an actor who plays female roles in Peking opera (Cheng Dieyi) and his patron (Yuan Siye)—are seen as negative stereotypes. A comment by E. Ann Kaplan, a feminist scholar, exemplifies such criticism, while also qualifying it:

Perhaps the film needs to be criticized from a gay/queer-studies perspective for perpetuating such negative gay stereotypes as the effete, seductive, and narcissistic opera patron, and for apparently utilizing an underlying traditional psychoanalytic understanding of queerness as a result of overidentification with the mother [referring to Dieyi]. On

the other hand, Chinese cinema has only just begun to deal with gay sexualities, so Chen's introduction of these should be recognized as progress. (270–71)<sup>5</sup>

Kaplan is not alone in criticizing *Farewell My Concubine* for perpetuating negative gay stereotypes. Some have argued that the portrayal of Dieyi as a "hysterical faggot" is reminiscent of the traditional "type" of the hysterical woman, suggesting that the director is both homophobic and misogynistic (Berry, "At What Price" 21; Liang 360; Liao 203–204). The "othering" of the homosexual as the aesthete (Liao 204, 208) and the suggestions that Dieyi's homosexuality is a result of gender inversion (Shu 19) and of victimization (Liang 360) have also come under attack. Taiwanese scholar Zhu Weicheng's comment seems to sum up the sentiments shared by the film's critics: While acknowledging that one cannot demand too much of any single text, Zhu argues that Chen's film overlaps too closely with the heterosexual imagination of homosexuality, making it impossible to challenge and question its portrayal within the film's narrative structure (145).

However, by regarding such representations as negative, these critics have also discounted the possibility that they could be perceived as positive. What if *some* homosexuals do not find these representations offensive but, on the contrary, celebrate Cheng Dieyi and Yuan Siye as their role models? If the contestation of these representations is premised on the notion that they are negative, stereotypical, and therefore *misrepresentations*, do they become positive and non-stereotypical if some homosexuals choose to embrace them? As Cornel West has noted, the contestation of so-called negative stereotypes belies a homogenizing impulse that may lead to the denial of certain types of representation. There is indeed "a thin line between refusing the constriction of the stereotype and denying difference," as Toronto videomaker and activist Richard Fung has pointed out (127).

Moreover, in challenging negative stereotypes, these critics make the same assumptions about an essentialized and homogenized *group* when homosexuals are in fact heterogeneous *individuals*. In claiming to defend the interests of a minority group, such contestation may simul-

taneously censor certain individuals and subgroups within that umbrella group. How does one determine—indeed, who determines—the political efficacy of any representation, if it would do more harm than good, and to whom? How does one balance the restriction of the potential damaging effects of negative representations with the championship of free speech? As K. Anthony Appiah argues in his response to Charles Taylor's essay on multiculturalism, "[t]he politics of recognition [of differences] requires that one's skin color, one's sexual body, should be acknowledged politically in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self" and it is at this juncture that "someone who takes autonomy seriously will ask whether we have not replaced one kind of tyranny with another" (162–63).<sup>6</sup>

Returning to *Farewell My Concubine*, critics seem to have also overlooked the context of the film, which is set in the cultural milieu of Peking opera in the early Republican era. As Alan Sinfield shows in his study *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, effeminacy can become the dominant expression of homosexuality in a historical period because of the availability, or the lack thereof, of tropes for sexual imagination. Whilst effeminacy (and transvestism) may be eschewed as a negative trait in contemporary gay culture, in the case of Wilde (and Dieyi), it could well have been a celebrated norm for the time.<sup>7</sup> Even though the film's portrayal coincides with present-day prejudice against effeminacy in homosexuality, this does not disqualify its representation when taken *on its own terms*. On the contrary, to take these representations of effeminate homosexuals out of their narrative and historical contexts is to submit the film to both critical anachronism and the new tyranny of political correctness.<sup>8</sup>

I therefore argue for a strategy of reading cinema that first and foremost attempts to appreciate textual meanings fully in their contextual specificities, rather than simply jumping on the bandwagon of the identity politics of any minority group for the purpose of political expediency. The focus in reading films should not be just on "whether [the films'] representations [are] 'positive' or 'negative' to a contemporary audience but on investigating the films' social context as a way

of understanding their representations historically" (Arroyo 72–73). Indeed, those who see the representation of homosexuality in *Farewell My Concubine* as negative participate, as Sang Zilan argues, in contemporary male homosexuals' perception of (gay) femininity as something shameful and a social myth to be eradicated (58).<sup>9</sup>

As the recent appropriation of the term "queer" by activists has shown, a previously pejorative term can be recuperated, reclaimed, and reinterpreted for one's affirmative action. Likewise, representations with historically negative connotations may be better appreciated as not being intrinsically positive or negative; rather, they can potentially be mobilized toward positive or negative ends. In the contestation of stereotypes, it is precisely the dichotomy of stereotypical/non-stereotypical, negative/positive, distortion/accuracy, and falsehood/truth that must be interrogated in order to facilitate a rethinking of the politics of representation.

### **Coming Out and the Rhetoric of Gay Liberation**

The logical corollary to the contestation of negative representations is the demand for positive ones. For homosexuality in cinema, this often means the creation of openly gay characters, as the rhetoric of gay liberation dictates that to remain in the closet is a sign of self-loathing whereas to come out is an affirmative act of pride. Over the decades, the act of coming out has acquired such an unquestioned and sometimes unquestionable status that to not come out is seen as an unfathomable form of behavior. As Sally Munt argues:

For lesbians and gays this temptation, to see our sexuality as the truth of our identity because it is perceived as the most oppressed part of us, belies an enduring fiction. To "come out" as lesbian and gay is to speak the truth of that oppression. [. . .] Michel Foucault saw the link between the confessional and the Christian religious ritual as endemic to Western practices of sexuality, and the confession is also structurally associated with testimony and witness, processes which evangelize experience as transcendentally

meaningful. What is clear from this conjunction is the way feelings become performative: they materialize and metamorphose into states of being and legitimation. (187)

To borrow a Cartesian formation, the rhetoric of gay liberation beseeches the homosexual to declare, "I come out, therefore I am." As the waves of gay activism arrive on Chinese shores, it has also become more commonplace to regard coming out as the rite of passage for homosexuals and the penultimate acknowledgement of one's sexuality by oneself and others. As with their Western counterparts, homosexuals in contemporary Chinese societies increasingly perceive their sexuality as an integral part of their identity, selfhood, and subjectivity. The search for positive homosexual representations in Chinese cinemas has also led film critics to champion the representation of the highly performative act of coming out for its presumed power of legitimation and its revolt against the oppression of homosexuality in Chinese societies.

In Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (*Xiyan*, 1993), the homosexual protagonist, Wai-Tung, is arguably halfway out of the closet because he has come out to his mother but not to his father. Even though the father realizes that his son is homosexual and tacitly acknowledges it, the film's failure to stage a coming out scene between the father and son remains problematic for some critics. Lin Yihua, a Hong Kong film critic who is openly gay, questions, "Why would (male) homosexuals of the 90s still be willing to stay in the closet?" (70). Lin accuses the film of discouraging homosexuals from coming out by showing that even clean-cut, amiable gays only find happiness in the closet (72). This line of argument raises several questions. Who decides if homosexuals should come out? Does the act of coming out necessarily promote understanding and acceptance of homosexuality? Does it imply that homosexuality is already acceptable? If coming out is chiefly linked to Western epistemologies and practices—bringing everything "into the light"—as argued by Munt *via* Foucault, should it be regarded as universal and imposed indiscriminately on other cultures?

To begin with, I suggest that there is no inherent moral high



ground in coming out, the rhetoric of gay liberation notwithstanding. Demands on homosexuals to come out, whether in reel life or real life, often reflect the need of gay activists and critics for greater visibility, alliance and support for their political cause. Moreover, who would have to bear the consequences of coming out? In her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that when gay people come out to parents, it is "with the consciousness of a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in both directions." Particularly in a homophobic society, the gay person's coming out may in turn plunge the parents "into the closet of [their] conservative community" (80). Questions of ethics, responsibility, emotion, and family ties are so intricately intertwined that the rhetoric of oppression and liberation seems simplistic and naïve by comparison. It is highly possible that the complications and consequences of coming out may, for both the homosexual and the family, be so constricting as to make the closet a relatively liberating place to inhabit.

Indeed, coming out cannot necessarily be presumed to achieve the dual goals of liberating the homosexual from the suffocating closet and gaining the understanding of those to whom the homosexual comes out. As the coming-out scene in *The Wedding Banquet* shows, getting the message across is not always easy. After Wai-Tung comes out to his mother, she questions him: Did Simon (Wai-Tung's boyfriend) lead you astray? How can you be so confused? Didn't you have girlfriends in college?<sup>10</sup> The ironic twist of the film is that the father, from whom all the other family members conspire to keep Wai-Tung's homosexual identity, seems to accept his son's sexuality more easily than his wife does. Rather than seeing this as a "flagrant implausibility" and "a wish-fulfilment fantasy" (Rayns 208), I would argue that the film has made a forceful case for the danger in equating the act of coming out with an increased acceptance of homosexuality.

Finally, considering their roots in Western epistemologies and practices, should not the very notions of the closet and coming out be interrogated rather than deployed indiscriminately across cultures? As Martin F. Manalansan IV argues, while paying lip service to cultural diversity, the tendency in popular and scholarly literature to impose a

modern, Eurocentric and universal subjectivity and “to deploy monolithic construction of gayness and gay liberation is quite marked.” For example, the “presumptions behind the labelling of silence and secrecy as ‘closeted’ and the tracing of the absence of explicitly gay-identified people in public arenas to ‘homophobia’ are not interrogated” (429). Even though the rhetoric of gay liberation and the experiences of gay activism in the West have found their way into contemporary Chinese societies, the terms for understanding and negotiating homosexuality should not be assumed to be necessarily the same.

The imagery of coming out of the closet, though visually compelling, cannot be taken as a universal framework for defining the varied experiences of homosexuals throughout the world. In any case, the closet is not a single space, and neither is coming out a single and simple act, as Sedgwick demonstrates:

[T]he deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that [. . .] people find new walls springing up around them even as they drowse: every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure. (68)

In *The Wedding Banquet*, does the mother’s failure to comprehend her son’s sexuality (“Maybe it’s just a phase,” she wonders later) shut the closet door back on Wai-Tung? Does the father’s tacit acknowledgement of his son’s homosexuality leave the closet door half opened? Rather than employing the metaphor of the closet, I will argue that homosexuality in the Chinese context is better understood through the index of the family. As Bret Hinsch points out, the Chinese “see the self-identified homosexual, who forgoes heterosexual marriage and the raising of children, as a grave enemy of the family structure, which still forms the foundation of Chinese society” (171). Chris Berry also argues in his discussion of *The Wedding Banquet* and two other “fake

wedding films" from Japan that "the possibility of a satisfactory life outside the family is not even considered; instead, the problem is how to reconcile gay identity with a position inside the Confucian family" ("Sexual DisOrientations" 172). It is in this context that we can understand why Wai-Tung's homosexuality eventually becomes less problematic for his parents because a grandchild has been accidentally created in the paper marriage, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the family name.

### Sexuality, Race, Gender, Class

Identity politics have tended to focus on only one given aspect of identity in relation to the minority group concerned. However, as identity is multi-faceted, any discussion of (homo)sexuality should not exclude matrices such as race, gender, and class. On the contrary, the cross-examination of these matrices and their intertwining relationship with sexuality often debunks the myth that homosexuality is a monolithic construction premised solely on the index of sexuality. Moving beyond the contestation of negative representations and the counter-positioning of positive ones to the recognition of the homosexual subject as simultaneously raced, gendered, and classed is a shift to what Stuart Hall terms the new phase of the "politics of representation."

The issue of race is most salient in *The Wedding Banquet*, in which the gay couple is interracial: Wai-Tung is Taiwanese/Chinese and Simon is white. The association of homosexuality with the West and the white race is a myth that continues to be perpetuated in Chinese societies.<sup>11</sup> While acknowledging that Wai-Tung "problematizes the myth that homosexuality is an exclusively 'white thing,'" Ling-yen Chua argues that the film still reinforces the association of homosexuality with whiteness, as "all the other homosexual characters in the film are white."

By the same token, all the white characters in the film are also homosexual or at least pro-gay and involved in some form of gay activist work. There are no other Asian or non-white homosexuals. All of Wei Tung's Asian friends, as

seen at the wedding [banquet], appear to be heterosexuals. Therefore, despite the groundbreaking and sympathetic representation of Wei Tung as an Asian homosexual, *The Wedding Banquet* still seems to suggest that being gay is predominately a white thing. By depicting all Wei Tung's gay friends as white and his Asian friends as heterosexual, the film colludes with the popular stereotype that to be gay is to become "more white," or to be submerged into white culture. (105-06)<sup>12</sup>

Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung make a similar observation on the wedding banquet scene: "Significantly, all the Chinese people appear to be heterosexual while the white male couples upon which the camera quite often focuses appear to be gay" (206). Like the critics of *Farewell My Concubine*, Chua and Dariotis and Fung seem to have overlooked the setting of the film in New York, which makes it inevitable if not more "accurate" to portray Wai-Tung's identity as an Asian gay man as a minority if not an anomaly amongst the predominantly white gay community. In fact, unlike Simon, Wai-Tung does not participate in gay activism, and all of the other white homosexuals and gay-friendly characters are not Wai-Tung's friends, but Simon's.

Moreover, if all of the white characters in *The Wedding Banquet* seem to be out and proud gays whereas the Asian guests *appear* to be heterosexuals, it is perhaps because the sub-cultural signification of gayness among Asian homosexuals, in the film at least, is less pronounced. Unlike Simon, who usually wears an earring and whose mannerisms are more effeminate, Wai-Tung, like his Asian guests, appears and easily passes as straight, which is precisely why he could stage a fake marriage without arousing suspicions about his sexuality on the part of either his parents or his guests. This interracial difference in the sub-cultural significations of gayness demonstrates that it is misguided to judge a person's sexuality by his/her appearance.

Contrary to these critics' arguments, I suggest that beyond signifying gayness differently for the Asian and the white race, the film even attempts to reverse the Orientalist stereotyping of masculine white men

and feminine Asian men.<sup>13</sup> In terms of gender, Simon is effeminate, temperamental, and a good housekeeper whereas Wai-Tung works out at the gym and is invested with the masculine trait of an entrepreneurial spirit. The film's reversal of gender goes so far as to portray Wei-Wei, the biological woman who becomes Wai-Tung's wife in the marriage of convenience, as totally inept at cooking, in contrast to Simon, the stereotypical "woman" who excels at it. The issue of class is also highlighted and assumptions of white economic power undermined, as Wai-Tung is clearly the more able breadwinner who plans to take Simon on a holiday. Wai-Tung's masculinity and financial stability in combination thus reverse the double Orientalist hierarchization of gender and economic power.

### **Towards Inter-Representation**

In the two phases of the cultural politics of representation described by Stuart Hall, minority groups have tended to differentiate between representational works by members of their communities and by those outside of them. While there may have been historical reasons for such a distinction, I suggest that a new phase in which the distinction between the two is dissolved should be ushered in. That is to say, minority groups should no longer regard representations by those outside their communities as necessarily negative or assume that self-representations are always more authentic. While the ubiquitous question "Can the subaltern speak?" raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak remains relevant, one should not assume that only subalterns can or should speak for themselves, and reject any well-intentioned championship of minority rights by members of other groups, mainstream or otherwise. Indeed, an obsession with the subaltern position may lead to the temptation of what Rey Chow calls in a different context "self-subalternization" (13), and perpetuate a "victim mentality," an unwillingness to venture beyond the ghetto.

If the position of the subaltern is inextricably bound to a binarism, that is, to the subaltern's opposition to the mainstream, it may be politically more expedient for subalterns to re-envision that relationship as one that is not antagonistic but collaborative. In this new con-

figuration, not only can mainstream culture participate in the representation of subalterns, but subalterns can equally seek to represent mainstream culture. Moreover, greater cooperation can be forged among subaltern groups so that they can speak up for one another. In this respect, self-representation can be reconfigured as inter-representation.

The significance of this new configuration is manifold. Firstly, it will eliminate the victim mentality of subalterns and their tendency toward self-ghettoization. Secondly, it means an openness to (not a rejection of) those segments of the mainstream society who speak for subalterns that still may lack access to channels of self-representation. Thirdly, it encourages cross-cultural and inter-group understanding not only among different subaltern groups, but also between subaltern groups and mainstream culture. This is particularly important because some subaltern groups have an antagonistic relationship not just with the mainstream but also with other subaltern groups. To perceive each other as comrades rather than enemies promotes cooperation and understanding among subaltern groups, which will markedly increase their collective power in negotiating with the mainstream.

If the new configuration of inter-representation sounds utopian, the example of Ang Lee may illustrate its potential. For Lee and especially for his co-writer Feng Guangyuan, the making of *The Wedding Banquet* was almost a personal crusade inasmuch as the film was inspired by the real life experiences of a gay friend of Feng (Li and Feng 14). The published Chinese screenplay includes articles on gay activism in the United States in the hope of promoting equal rights for homosexuals in Taiwan. Feng also initiated a petition protesting the exploitative portrayal of homosexuals on Taiwanese television (279–83). During the filming of *The Wedding Banquet*, Ang Lee attended the Gay Pride March in New York City with the leading members of his cast (244). According to a report in the Taiwanese paper *Lianhe bao*, several gay organizations in the United States presented Lee with awards for the film's contribution to the community ("You yi tongxinglian tuanti" 22). Moreover, Ang Lee has shown that cross-cultural collaboration is more viable than one might have imagined. After his first three feature films in Chinese (*Pushing Hands*; 1991; *The Wedding Banquet*, 1993;

and *Eat Drink Man Woman*, 1994), Lec has proceeded to make English language films as diverse as a Regency period drama (*Sense and Sensibility*, 1995), a film set in the United States of the 1970s (*The Ice Storm*, 1997), and a Civil War drama (*Ride with the Devil*, 1999), all to great critical acclaim.

I therefore propose that the notion of a multiple first person—the hybrid “I”—should be inaugurated to transcend the narrow essentialism still predominant in many forms of identity politics. As Allen Chun argues, “The polarization invoked both by subaltern studies and post-Orientalist studies, albeit from different directions, has galvanized ‘identities’ to such an extent that all writing invariably begins in the first person” (132–33). This invoked first person, however, is usually premised only on one aspect of identity, be it sexuality, race, class, gender, or nationality—hence the separate forms of identity politics. For Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, the appreciation of the self as “a matrix of multiple discursive forms and identifications [. . .] is in no way to deny realities of race, class, gender, nation but only to complicate and dialecticize them” (344). While there will always be contexts that demand one to speak from a certain position of identity, the deployment of the hybrid “I” should highlight the multiplicity of identity as well as debunk the myth of essentialism which bases the definition of the “self” on a single facet of identity. While it may not be possible to totally obliterate the distinction between self and other, one should begin to realize how much of one’s self is in fact invested in the other and *vice versa*, and how one is always implicated in the other.

In this day and age, when the cultural economy of cinema can no longer be defined as national but has clearly become transnational and international, when cultural flows and the public sphere for their discursive exchange are invariably global, identities are also inescapably multiple, hybrid, and cross-cultural. Separatism and ghettoization, whether by nation, race, gender, class, or sexuality, should continue to be dismantled; and in tandem with this, communication between groups should be promoted. To these ends, inter-representation must increasingly be seen not just as a possibility but a necessity. The representation of male homosexuality in Chinese cinemas, therefore, should

be of concern not only to homosexuals in Chinese societies but to all who believe in combating prejudices of all kinds. On the other hand, these representations should not just focus on the issue of sexuality, but should be cross-examined in relation to issues such as race, class, gender, and nation so that homosexuality is also complicated and hybridized.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To list just a few prominent examples, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1993, Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* bagged the Golden Bear at Berlin in 1993, Tsai Ming-Liang's *Vive L'amour* shared the Golden Lion at Venice in 1994 while his *The River* received the Silver Bear at Berlin in 1997, and Wong Kar-wai was awarded the Best Director at Cannes in 1997 for *Happy Together*.

<sup>2</sup> I will use the plural form of "Chinese cinemas" throughout this paper. This is in part to acknowledge the historical and political reality that, for a good part of the twentieth century, there existed three different Chinese societies in the form of the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong. More importantly, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong each has its own distinctive, and arguably "national," cinematic history and tradition which cannot be subsumed under a singular "Chinese cinema."

<sup>3</sup> As many homosexuals of minority ethnic origins will attest, one can be doubly discriminated against by encountering racism in the homosexual community and homophobia in the ethnic minority community.

<sup>4</sup> Shohat and Stam's account underlines the paradoxical phenomenon of victimhood as empowerment. It is noteworthy that what is known as "affirmative action" in the United States is called "positive discrimination" in the United Kingdom. The latter term unwittingly highlights the true nature of such practices, which remain a form of discrimination yet one which reinforces the minority groups' right to redress historical imbalances.



<sup>5</sup> Kaplan's comment also belies a linear and developmental discourse in cultural politics which works this way: as homosexuality remains a taboo subject in Chinese societies, its cinematic representation has been largely denied until the 1990s. Compared to a history of "whitewashing," any representations—even negative ones—must be seen as "progress." According to this logic, just as the linear development from no representation to negative representation is progress, so negative representation will one day lead to positive representation and the mission will be accomplished. Such a narrative betrays a myth that perhaps finds its roots in social Darwinism.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Sinfield argues that cross-class liaison between the effete gent and the "manly" lower-class boy no longer seems the obvious choice for gay men nowadays, which may be a result of the "tyrannical confinement of the potential in modern gay relations" (149–51). The same could be said of the present disappearance in Chinese societies of cross-class same-sex relations prevalent in pre-modern times.

<sup>7</sup> Dieyi's transvestism, in particular, can be understood as manifesting an institutionalized practice in Chinese theatre, which is in part a legacy of a 1772 Qing law prohibiting women from performing on stage (Vitiello 359).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Liao Binghui charges the film for not giving homosexuals the status they deserve and for not facing up to sexual politics and new social realities (196, 208). Certainly it is not the film's obligation to promote gay rights or to deal with a socio-political condition that is temporally beyond its context.

<sup>9</sup> Sang even goes as far as to suggest that by returning to search for and to imagine a cultural milieu suppressed by the present Chinese official orthodoxy, the film can be seen as attempting to create and concretize images of homosexual pioneers (66).

<sup>10</sup> As Sedgwick has also argued, "In the processes of gay self-disclosure, [. . .] questions of authority and evidence [e.g., 'How do you know you're really gay?'] can be the first to arise" (79).

<sup>11</sup> Chris Berry cites two examples to illustrate the perpetuation of the association of homosexuality with the West by those representing orthodox ideologies in Chinese societies. One such example involves

the Singaporean Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng, who, at the 1993 United Nations World Human Rights Conference in Vienna, declared that “[h]omosexual rights are a Western issue, and are not relevant to this conference.” The other is a reported claim by a film critic from the People’s Republic of China at the 1993 Berlin Film Festival that the film *The Wedding Banquet* was a lie because there was no homosexuality in Chinese culture. He argued that if there was any truth at all to the film, it was that it represented the corruption of Chinese manhood by Western decadence. See “Sexual DisOrientations” 158–59.

<sup>12</sup> Chua’s transliteration of the protagonist’s name is slightly different from that which appears in the film’s subtitles and in the published script.

<sup>13</sup> For a classic example of such Orientalist stereotyping, see David Henry Hwang’s play, *M. Butterfly*, which is inspired by Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly*. Hwang’s play was adapted into an eponymous film directed by David Cronenberg in 1993. For a discussion of the play, see Garber chap. 10.

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