

Transnational Lesbianism in a Sinopheric Context:  
Queer Asian Identity Politics in Films

by xiaolei

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts and Sciences  
Quest University Canada

and pertaining to the Question

What influence does western thought have on eastern values?

April 26, 2016

---

Fei Shi, PhD.

---

xiaolei

### **Acknowledgements:**

I would like to offer my sincere gratitude to my motivational mentor, Fei Shi for his patience with my idiosyncratic approach to research and presentation and also to Mandy for her meticulous proofreading of my initial manuscript. Further thanks to Kendra for her assistance with looking over my introductory paragraph, Vic for his motivational metaphilosophy, Ísabella and Tashi for their copious laughter, Nangsal for her mysterious smile, Ying<sup>2</sup> for the delightfulness of her existence, and to my parents for their support in allowing me to attend Quest these past four years.

## Table of Contents

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| Introduction   | 4-6   |
| Historical Background and Introduction of Films                              | 6-8   |
| Film Analysis  |       |
| I. Kong: Butterfly (蝴蝶) 2004), directed by Yanyan Mak (麦婉欣)                  | 8-13  |
| II. Chinese-American: Saving Face (面子)(2005), directed by Alice Wu (麦婉欣)     | 13-15 |
| III. Taiwan: Spider Lilies (刺青) (2008), directed by Zero Chou (周美玲)          | 15-18 |
| IV. Taiwan: Blue Gate Crossing (藍色大門) (2004), directed by Chin-Yen Yee (易智言) | 18-20 |
| Conclusion   | 21-22 |
| Resources  | 22-23 |
| Filmography  | 23    |

## Introduction

Some recent mainstream Chinese films present a butch tomboy character as a "bro" who seems to live an asexual existence with no romantic possibilities<sup>1</sup>. The lesbian characters in these films navigate a society where schoolgirl romance is moderately tolerated, but long-term romantic relationships that mirror the heteronormative nuclear family are unaccepted by older generations. As I recognized the increasing prevalence of this cultural phenomenon my interest in an emerging Chinese intersectional feminist rhetoric developed. Subsequently, I became intrigued by how the mediascape impacts marginalized queer identities in China. With these topics in mind, I did a meta-analysis of Taiwanese lesbian melodramas to explore the transnational impact of queerness in a distinctly "Chinese" context.

For the purpose of this Keystone project, I steer away from discussing in detail the complicated political status of Taiwan<sup>2</sup> and focus more specifically on representations of gendered bodies on screen in four films. It is also important to state that this paper has been filtered through my non-local perspective. A wave of excitement lapped at the shore of Taiwan recently following the January election of Tsai Ing-wen, who promised to recognize same-sex marriages and civil unions in Taiwan. At the time of this Keystone's publication, same-sex marriage is not recognized in Taiwan or any other East Asian country. Despite the increased prevalence of positive representations in media, this

---

<sup>1</sup>"Lao Zheng, typical Beijing chick. When she is around girls she is manly, when she is around guys she is manlier. She loves plaid shirts, dislikes pretty dresses. Wherever she goes a trail of screams follow." (Girls, film).

<sup>2</sup> Separate government, same cultural heritage seems to be the conclusion of least controversy for Mainlanders and Taiwanese.

remains one of the main struggles the LGBTQ community in their quest for greater acceptance.

Queer values in a Chinese and Taiwanese context often spring from transnational engagement with media from a variety of countries outside of the sinosphere. Through mobile apps, blogs, web videos, independent films, zines, academic articles, and music activism and awareness of the visibility of LGBTQ Taiwanese is becoming more prevalent than ever before. However, despite this increased exposure unfortunately many stereotypes remain consistent with previous representations.

Using a queer studies lens, this Keystone will present analyses of four films in order to reach a more clear understanding of queer identities in a sinospheric context. I will argue for the formation of a lesbian identity as one that counters heteronormative Confucian family values, subverts state control of bodies, and challenges cultural hegemony of the nuclear family, public space, and self-identity politics in Taiwan. By recognising patterns of resistance to lesbian identity via observing inter-generational conflict, nostalgia for schooltime romance, and other recurring themes through the four films, I discovered some possible communicative tools to help resolve some of these struggles and present lesbian relationships in a more varied light with a greater likelihood for a happy ending.

## **Historical Background and Introduction of Films**

Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities are bound together by a "prolific disarray" of Confucian cultural and intellectual ideologies (Yang, 6) . The regions that share a history of han chinese cultural exchange will be referred to as the sinosphere throughout this keystone. The sinosphere that I explore in this keystone is one of shared cultural tropes such as language, writing system, work ethic, focus on family values, patriarchal orientation, and food practises. While many different scholars have written about the intersectional "transnational" context of dispersed subcultures, classes, and minorities connected to Tu Wei-ming's notion of a three tiered "Cultural China," I will focus on a particular, invisibilized minority that is marginalized in society and academia.

Hong Kong is a former British Colony, described as a "culture of disappearance" due to the "lack of place and identity [in a city] that serves as a transit point for migrants from China to other places" (Yang, 18; Yang, 19). As a result of colonialism, Hong Kong prospered in business but had no political agency. Following the departure of the British in 1997, Hong Kong has entered a fifty year period of gradually being returned to Mainland China.

The popular culture of Hong Kong and Taiwan is less regulated by the local government than in Mainland China, however social attitudes towards the LGBTQ spectrum remain largely conservative. Popular films from these different spheres on the international market generally "erase Chinese male subjectivity in order to present Chinese culture as an exoticized, Orientalized, feminine other for the Western male gaze" (Martin, 116). Such films may rely on stereotypes such as the dragon lady or lotus blossom (or

China doll) (Shimizu, 14)<sup>3</sup>. (Later in this paper, I will explore Yan Yan Mak's film "Butterfly", a 2004 film that explores some of the struggles for acceptance a 30-something year old teacher faces when coming to terms with her lesbian identity to her husband and family.

Between 1948 after fleeing the civil war with China to 1987, a period of Martial Law in Taiwan severely constrained the women's movement due to censorship of publications, banned public meetings, assemblies, strikes, marches, and non-governmental organizations (Yang, 23). Additionally, the Kuomintang government patronized women's sexual-erotic services with the implicit consent of the state and collected taxes from the sex industry (Yang, 24). Following the end of martial law, there was a women struggled to obtain basic rights to work after marriage and pregnancy, inherit property, obtain fair divorce settlements, discover a voice in politics, and receive protection from being sold into prostitution. Later in this essay, I will argue for the formation of the lesbian identity as one that counters heteronormative Confucian family values, subverts state control of bodies, and challenges cultural hegemony of the nuclear family, public space, and self-identity politics in Taiwan.

In this Keystone, I explore the representation of queer identities in four films. First, I present an analyses for the film *Butterfly*, a 2004 Hong Kong film directed by Yanyan Mak. This film explores the difficulties that a teacher in her thirties faces when coming to terms with her lesbian identity to her husband and family. Following, I analyse the classic Chinese American romantic comedy *Saving Face*, a 2005 film directed by Alice Wu. Third, I will analyse two movies from Taiwan: *Spider Lilies*, a 2008 film directed by Zero Chou,

---

<sup>3</sup> Such stereotypes can briefly be described as an innocent submissive beauty (lotus blossom) or hypersexual dominatrix (dragon lady).

involving a mysterious webcam girl who falls for a tattoo artist, and *Blue Gate Crossing*, a 2004 romantic comedy film directed by Chin-Yen Yee where the heterosexual boy falls for a lesbian trying to help her friend.

## Film Analysis

### I. Hong Kong: Butterfly (蝴蝶) (2004), directed by Yanyan Mak (麦婉欣)

Over the past two decades, there has been an explosion of queer films in the sinosphere<sup>4</sup>. Films exploring taboo topics such as homosexuality<sup>5</sup> and lesbianism have entered the popular consciousness - however, in society, these lifestyle choices are not widely accepted. Pizza Ka-Yee Chow and Sheung-Tak Cheng's article on lesbian coming-out discourse guides my studies with the claim that "internalized heterosexism" leads lesbians to construct a "negative identity" encouraging a feeling of "inferior[ity] to other heterosexuals" (92, Chow). This feeling of inferiority is rooted in a feeling of not belonging, an uncomfortable otherness. This disconnection from heteronormative society is most evident in Hong Kong, where Chinese values clash with the after-effects of British imperialism. Through the lens of this article and other scholars in queer theory and sex and gender studies, such as Gopinath and Cui, I will illuminate the intersectionality of socialist politics with capitalist democracy, the social sphere of lesbianism in relation to Chinese society, and the struggle for acceptance of identity in relation to the couples portrayed in Yan Yan Mak's film *Butterfly*.

---

<sup>4</sup> Sinosphere in this instance refers to what media may call "Greater China (大中华地区): Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.

<sup>5</sup> Happy Together (春光乍泄) HK, Bishonen (美少年之戀), East Palace, West Palace (东宫西宫) are some examples.



Through Jin and Flavia's high school relationship, we see how parents pressure their children to enter heteronormative relationships contrasting with the Tian'anmen Square protest this serves as a metaphor for striving for democratic freedom (new values). In the first of the three simultaneous plot lines in the film, the rebellious political Jin (the butch lesbian) and Flavia share an apartment together. The walls of their apartment are covered with posters of rock and roll icons such as Janis Joplin. The pro-democracy movement can be viewed in parallel with the desire for liberation of lesbian relationships legal acceptance in 1991 in Hong Kong (bringing underground values above ground<sup>6</sup>). Goyatri Gopinath in her essay, *Impossible Desires*, argues "Feminist scholarship has...remained curiously silent about how alternative sexualities...challenge...patriarchal nationalism" (Gopinath, 9). Under this backdrop, through a feminist lens, *Butterfly* is a revolutionary film because it challenges the norm of heterosexuality by portraying a lesbian couple. Shortly after the soldiers move into Tian'anmen to break apart the students, Flavia's mother suddenly encounters Flavia and Jin in bed together and states "stay with her or come with me." In response to such an ultimatum, Flavia conforms to heterosexual expectations for the sake of her mother and society, while Jin becomes a nun. Jin's exile into the Macau buddhist convent highlights her rejection of heteronormative society.

Flavia and Yip<sup>7</sup>'s affair can be viewed as highlighting the challenges that lesbians deviating from the heteronormative institution of marriage face. In present day, Flavia has fallen in love with Yip, a gorgeous singer that she met in a grocery store. At home she has a husband, Ming, who is often immersed in his computer games and baby daughter, Tingting.

---

<sup>6</sup> In the film this was shown symbolically as shots focusing on streetlights and laying in bed looking up toward the sun through the skylight.

<sup>7</sup> Yip is a coffee shop singer who Flavia encounters by chance in a local grocery store.

Ming initially accepts Flavia's deviation from "Confucian filial piety" in which women are expected to give birth and carry on the family line (94, Chow). However, when he realises her affair, he threatens her to choose between her daughter or divorce - she wants both. The sex scenes with her husband are shown in darkness, whereas those with Yip are brightly lit. This serves the butterfly metaphor where heterosexual sex is a cocoon of obligations and expectations and lesbian sex is spreading wings and bursting free from restraints and rigid roles.

The third generation of lesbian couple portrayed in the film shows lesbianism disguised as a close friendship between two schoolgirls, Muriel and Samantha. Muriel is from Vancouver while Samantha is an exchange student from Macau, both of whom are studying in Hong Kong. After the relationship is exposed, Muriel is beaten by her father and Samantha has to return to Macau. Later in the film, Samantha is shown in the hospital after cutting her wrist, stating, "If people lose human rights, what is the point of being human?" The lack of sexual freedom in these scenes is reflected in policies such as the two child policy in mainland China. Constrained by the oppressive institution of school a rote, exam based education system - and society, Muriel and Samantha struggle for acceptance. The interdependent aspect of Hong Kong culture is present in their parents' handling of the relationship through separation. The self-harm and separation of the two girls can represent the relationship between Hong Kong and China, as the red blood from self-harm can portray the fine line between totalitarianism in the mainland and democracy in Hong Kong. Soon, however, the wound will heal, though the scar will remain when Hong Kong returns to China. This sub-plot appeals to Chen Xiaoming's argument "Augmented by

sexual themes, Chinese politics... become more interesting to the Western audience" (Chen, 131).

This emotionally luscious film portrayed the complexity of conflicting political ideologies of Chinese politics in relation with Hong Kong democracy, while highlighting the struggles of acceptance with a lesbian identity. Reading this through the lens of Chen and Chow, it is evidently clear that transnational politics cannot be separated from queer sexuality. There are various strategies couples use in order to adapt to either conform (eg. invisibilized heterosexuality) or deny (eg. becoming a nun) society's heteronormative pressures, however, the end of the film is hopeful where Yip and Flavia are together and raise Tingting. Such an ending can suggest that the sun is brighter for acceptance as values shift with each new generation.

*Butterfly* would become the go-to film among other lesbian filmmakers and directors, and was quoted in *Once Upon A Time With You* directed by Zhu Shu-He, a short film based on a true story of a teacher who fell in love with one of her students. In one memorable scene, they watch *Butterfly* and quote a charming poem by mainland Xi Murong titled "Regretless Youth"<sup>8</sup>:

If you fall in love while young  
Please, please treat your lover gently  
Whether short or long  
to love and be loved is flawless.  
If your love continues  
in each moment  
you share with each other  
there will be peerless perfection

---

<sup>8</sup> English translation courtesy of this essay's author.

When your love has concluded  
bid your loved one a fond farewell  
and may your heart be grateful  
for all of your precious memories.

When you become older,  
at the moment you recall all of your memories, you will realise  
Youth without resentment is free of regret  
Just as the silent moon over the hill.<sup>9</sup>

This poem speaks deeply to the lesbian experience as it is a precious moment of exquisite temporality. This film and poem further hints at the nostalgia of a fleeting schoolgirl romance. This motif will reappear in subsequent films that I analyzed, particularly in the films from Taiwan.

## II. Chinese-American : *Saving Face* (面子) (2005), directed by Alice Wu (伍思薇)

Released in 2005, *Saving Face* was Alice Wu's directorial debut. This film follows Wil, a lesbian doctor, as her pregnant middle-aged single mother moves in with her just as she is pursuing a relationship with an aspiring ballerina. This film can be considered

---

<sup>9</sup> Original Chinese text: "在年轻的时候，如果你爱上一个人，  
请你，请你一定要温柔的对待他（她）。  
不管你们相爱的时间有多长或多短，  
若你们能始终温柔的对待，那么，  
所有的时刻都将是一种无瑕的美丽。  
若不得不分离，也要好好的说声再见，  
也要在心里存着感谢，  
感谢他给了你一份记忆。  
长大了以后，你才会知道，  
在蓦然回首的刹那，  
没有怨恨的青春才会无遗憾，  
如山冈上那轮静静的满月。”

the lesbian equivalent of *The Wedding Banquet*. Both films take place in a Chinese diasporic setting and relate to traditional valued parental intrusion on queer households.

*Saving Face* is a character study on conflicting traditional Confucian Chinese values and American culture. It portrays a generational gap in values in a comedic and melodramatic fashion by highlighting how a woman's life is uprooted when her mother unexpectedly moves in with her after the mother is kicked out of her grandparent's home for getting pregnant without a husband. In this film the viewer is transported into the exclusive world of the overseas Chinese diasporic community of Flushing, New York. This is a setting where aunties gossip at the beauty parlour, packages of traditional medicines arrive sporadically by familiar strangers in a crowded public transit setting, the token non-Chinese character (a black neighbour) exists only to provide comedic relief, old men practise tai chi in the park (paying homage perhaps to a similar scene from Ang Lee's diaspora interracial romantic comedy *Pushing Hands*), older characters in the social circle try to match up the single lesbian protagonist with a potential husband at social dances, and time is measured by shared meals, watching television together, and private liaisons.

This film is a rich and rewarding melodrama in two ways. First, the plot is very multilayered littered with a lot of symbolism. Secondly, it is based upon the director's personal experience growing up as a second-generation Chinese-American. The cover advertises the film as "a romantic comedy about right, wrong and everything in between." It is more accurate to describe the film as a cinematic experience exploring different cultural modes of rightness and wrongness, and the struggle of coming to terms with a fragmented identity. This transnational film explores some of the differences

between first generation Confucian conservative Chinese and their second generation offspring who navigate different social customs depending on their positioning within the drama. Viv, the ballet dancer, fell into a childhood school-girl romance with Wil - the main protagonist - that climaxed in a kiss forgotten by Wil. Fate kindly reconnects them with each other at a social dance in the neighbourhood cultural centre hall, similar to *Spider Lilies* through their reunion from a singular intersecting point in the past.

In an essay on lesbianism as a feminist practise in Taiwan, Tze-lan Deborah Sang asserts that "Many lesbians must exile themselves from the patriarchal family in order to find the space to be themselves" (133, Sang). In *Saving Face*, this space of exile is intruded upon by an unexpected guest. Meanwhile, Wil's coming out trials contrast with her mother's predicament of being 48, single, and pregnant with an undisclosed father. Wil, the queer daughter, is looking for the optimal bachelor for her mother to get married to. Meanwhile, Vivian is torn between going to Paris to explore more opportunities as a ballerina or to remain waiting for an answer from Wil whom she loves.

The parallels between the mother searching for a suitable husband and the daughter searching for acceptance from her mother and coming to terms with her love for Vivian make for a moving romantic comedy. The theme of social disconnection is explored through the expressions exchanged in meal-sharing sequences and in the mother's private moments of watching older Chinese films on television. *Butterfly* and *Saving Face* both portray the dysfunctionality of heteronormative relationships as a counter-narrative to coming of queerness. However, in stark contrast to *Butterfly*, in *Saving Face*, the mother is

also very accepting when Wil has her coming out scene - perhaps due to the understanding of the daughter's assimilation to the tropes of the mediated American lesbianscape. *Saving Face* expands on the nuances of intergenerational familial conflict in a more lighthearted way than the other films I analyzed as it is a romantic comedy rather than a melodrama. However there are tear-jerking moments present in all four films.

### III. Taiwan: *Spider Lilies* (刺青) (2008) directed by Zero Chou (周美玲)

This was the first lesbian film<sup>10</sup> directed by Zero Chou starring the popular singer Rainie Yang as Jade, a webcam girl, along with Isabella Leong as Takeko, a tattoo artist with a troubled past who takes care of her brother who suffers from dissociative identity disorder. Jade harbours a memory of her childhood admiration and love for Takeko, who initially appeared to be an older sister figure when they encountered each other in the countryside. Now they are both living compartmentalized lives in the city. The symbolism of a spider lily, a type of flower that blossoms represents the voyeuristic quality of how Jade interacts with her faceless audience. Takeko, and a private investigator watch Jade's webcam show at night where she sings lovely songs and tries to reconnect with Takeko. There is a case of mistaken identity when Jade misreads the private investigator's text messages as messages sent by Takeko. Meanwhile, Jade hopes to pursue a tattoo from Takeko, suggesting that they have reunited in real life. Takeko cannot fully remember Jade; however, her memories of their time together return and interweave like the strands of a spider web. This is a lesbian film directed by a lesbian director that does not portray the

---

<sup>10</sup> I highly recommend her follow-up film *Drifting Flowers* (漂浪青春) as well about a butch musician in love with a deaf nightclub singer helping take care of her younger sister.

lesbian relationship as a source of perversion, deviance, or abnormality. In a mediascape dominated by heteronormative hypersexualized representations of lesbian imagery, this genuine portrayal is unique and makes for a serious drama. The romance is tender and heartfelt, the yearning caused by the multiple intersections of uprootedness transform the heart into a marionette and a rather dark feeling pervades throughout the film. The viewer may wonder if these characters will consummate their love again even as extraneous matters begin to overtake their lives.

Zero Chou is superb at using cinematography, music, lighting, and powerful characterization to create dramatic tension in her films. The poignant line between mental disability and a mundane existence are explored with few words. Takeko and Jade's text conversations through her cam-site are shown on screen, with many of their conversations following a lack of remembering details of their earlier relationship prior to a devastating natural event uprooted their lives and separated them from each other. This film explores typical Taiwanese lesbian archetypes in a queered and more humanistic dimension. Where Takeko represents a "quality sloppy tomboy" personality and fashion sense, Jade portrays a Po - or, in the words of the director, a "quality sloppy femme" role in their relationship, fashion, hairstyle, and interactions (Chou, "Making of" featurette) . Their lesbian desire is implicit through their glances, gestures, and body language. Despite what the tagline "A Daring Portrait of Forbidden Love" may lead you to expect, their desire seems secondary to the plot.



The Chinese title of the film is 刺青(Cì Qīng) which means tattoo. Isabella Leong was brought from Hong Kong because the director couldn't find a proper tomboy character among local Taiwanese actors. To account for her non-native taiwanese mandarin, she is portrayed as first generation Japanese. Prior to directing the film, Chou did some background research on tattoos in Taiwan and discovered there were more female customers than males. In a film interview, Chou stated, "Many people would think this film talks about a subculture of the younger generation, but this film actually talks about how young people are often misunderstood and how 'shallow' their behaviour may be considered. I think many adults have no idea what these kids are thinking" (Chou, film interview). This elaborates on the formation of a film that can speak to both younger and older generations and possibly serve as tool for the older generations to better understand the reality of lesbian love as a "normal" form of desire. Jade is a character who appears naive, often constructing fantasies, and talking to herself to escape from her loneliness. Her character serves as an allegory for the experience of being a lesbian in Taiwanese culture, where such behaviour is acceptable up to a certain age before there is pressure to enter a heterosexual marriage and bear children. Queer desire, in this society, is relegated to a juvenile role and is considered immature by those with beliefs deemed more traditional. She is often told how her younger memories are "unreliable" and although she takes comfort in her world, it isn't understood or accepted by outsiders. Takeko, on the other hand, is more withdrawn and suppresses her feelings within herself. Although she is also lonely, she is excellent at remaining surface-calm.

To prepare for her role as a lesbian in the film, Isabella Leong watched *Boys Don't Cry* -a biopic about transman Brandon Teena - and *Butterfly*. Rainie Yang said, "Perhaps people will pay more attention to lesbian relationships, but in my view this is a film that can reach the corner of everyone's heart [regardless of their identity]" (Chou, film interview). The relatability of the characters and the social isolation of the millennial Internet age is something many viewers can profoundly relate to. Before the scenes Rainie would feel nervous and ask herself "Why do I feel nervous if I'm not with a man?" and Isabella would respond "I also am a little nervous." (Chou, "Making of featurette") Many hours of rehearsal helped to create genuine moments for the film, and the director's expertise, attention to detail, and the closeness of the lead actresses resulted in the portrayal of a powerfully real relationship.

#### **IV. Taiwan: Blue Gate Crossing (藍色大門) (2004), directed by Chin-Yen Yee (易智言)**

In Fran Martin's seminal book *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary*, in an essay titled "No Future: Tomboy Melodrama" she describes *Blue Gate Crossing* as a film that "effectively articulates the modern Chinese schoolgirl romance narrative with postmodern Taiwanese lesbian culture...[presenting a] hybridization between the Chinese schoolgirl romance narrative and the Euro-American coming out story" (115, Martin). This transnational description of this romantic comedy summarizes the value of this film in the field of Taiwanese lesbian film studies. The film begins with a black screen where two friends, heterosexual Lin Yuezhen and tomboy lesbian Meng Kerou, discuss their future. Yuezhen describes a

husband, nice house, and children, while Kerou expresses an unknown and uncertain future. Kerou is in love with Yuezhen, but does not want to sacrifice their close friendship for her love. Yuezhen has a crush on a boy swimmer named Shihao and wants Kerou to talk to him on her behalf. Although Kerou is hurt that her love for Yuezhen is unrequited, she is faithful to her role as Yuezhen's closest and most trusted friend. True love often requires sacrifices such as these putting the lover selflessly above all else. Unfortunately, when she does, Shihao falls in love with her and much to her annoyance and disinterest tries to court her. She tries for the relationship to work with him, but ultimately does not feel right and eventually comes out as a lesbian during the arc of the narrative. At the end of the film, although Kerou doesn't find love with Yuezhen, there is the possibility that she can remain a lesbian in the future. Shihao playfully jokes, "if you realise one day you are no longer a lesbian give me a call". This film, was not wildly popular domestically in Taiwan, but found popularity at various international film festivals. As described, the film stars heterosexual actors portraying lesbian lovers. *Blue Gate Crossing* deviates from the typical lesbian narrative in its intersection of campy humour and melodramatic cinematography and production. These films were made by actors making their first big film for independent studios. In subsequent years they have attained statuses as cult films appraised for their authenticity, convincing portrayal of lesbian relationships, and "intriguing" or "enchanted" nature. These films are current enough where the portrayals of lesbian relationships are presented in a mature manner, avoiding some of the previous tropes that existed related to Confucian ideals<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Curiously enough in Mayfair Mei-hui Yang's book *Spaces of their own : women's public sphere in transnational China* Tze-lan Deborah Sang asserts that "Confucian tenets of female chastity were obsessed exclusively with female-male congress...legal codes (whether traditional or modern) did not criminalize lesbian behaviour, nor

## Conclusion

The "lesbianscape of Taiwan"<sup>12</sup> is constantly shifting as renewed discussion enters with the election of a progressive new leader Tsai Ing-wen Taiwan as well as the rest of the sinosphere will continue to shift to hopefully become more accepting and understanding of marginalized identities. Throughout these four films the common themes of interfamilial generational conflict, schoolgirl close friendships masking lesbian desire, and disconnected nostalgia bind these different cinematic portrayals together. With the rise of new media technologies, there are emerging categories of new forms of media such as web series, video blogs, zines that can be accessed on social media apps, graphic novels, literary journals, street performance art, public gatherings, conferences, and photography exhibitions where people can share their stories to new audiences. As media becomes more globally accessible via the interwebs these individual stories can reach a wider audience and expand the activist network to raise awareness to issues faced by lesbian couples in the sinosphere and beyond. Countering these positive portrayals of lesbian relationships there is a greater proportion of media created that continues portraying lesbian relationships in an exploitative hypersexual way.

---

did they mention lesbian desire in any way." (136, Sang) offering the nuance that discrimination and gender inequality were largely introduced to China from the West where the "stigmatization of lesbianism [serves as a modality] of male defence" (133, Sang). When this way of thinking emigrated to China largely via translations of sexologist Havelock Ellis' writings it lead to "a new system of sexual ethics that theorized the naturalness of heterosexuality as *sexuality* for women, that is, as women's desire, pleasure, and identity rather than as women's duty. This system cast lesbian desire as a perversity. The notion helps maintain patriarchal control over women by dividing women and punishing those who form their primary relations with women rather than men" (133, Sang). This lead to an invisibility of lesbian identities and accounts for the the lack of religious influenced discrimination that shapes a lot of the western rhetoric around feminist discourse.

<sup>12</sup> This term is borrowed from Chun-Chi Wang's fascinating dissertation "Lesbianscape of Taiwan: Media History of Taiwan's Lesbians".

In a capitalist society where bureaucracy has created labels and categories for every facet of the human experience, society should move toward a more inclusively diverse space of accepting marginalized identities. It shouldn't be a problem for a film that has Asian characters and lesbian values that the film isn't "heterosexual and white". Each of the four films showcases an aspect of lesbian identity in the sinospheric context, cohesively capturing through the splendid magic of cinema a form of activism through documented experience.

Resources

- Chow, Pizza Ka-Yee; Cheng, Sheung-Tak. "Shame, internalized heterosexism, lesbian identity, and coming out to others: A comparative study of lesbians in mainland China and Hong Kong." *Journal of Counseling Psychology (Vol. 57)*. pp. 92-104.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires*. *Duke University Press*: London. 2005.
- Ho, Loretta Wing Wah. *Gay and Lesbian Subculture in Urban China*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Martin, Fran. *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. Print.
- Sang, Deborah Tze-lan. "Feminism's Double: Lesbian Activism in the Mediated Public Sphere of Taiwan". *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere In Transnational China*. Ed. Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.1-35. Print.
- Shimizu, Celine Pareas. *The Hypersexuality of Race Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. Print.
- Tu, Wei-ming. "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center". *Daedalus*, Vol. 120, No. 2, [The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today](#). P. 1-32. JStor. Web.
- Wang, Chun-Chi. "Lesbianscape of Taiwan: Media History of Taiwan's Lesbians". University of Southern California, 2007. PhD Dissertation. Web.
- Xi, Murong. "Regretless Youth" trans. Leif Huot. Poem.
- Xiaoming, Chen, Liu Kang and Anbin Shi. "The Mysterious Other: Postpolitics in Chinese

Film". *boundary 2: Postmodernism and China* (vol. 24, no. 3). pp. 123-141. Autumn, 1997. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.

Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. "Introduction." *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere In Transnational China*. Ed. Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.1-35. Print.

### Filmography

*Blue Gate Crossing*. Dir. Chin-Yen Lee. Perf. Chen Bolin, Guey Lun-Mei, and Liang Shu-hui. Strand Releasing, 2004. Film.

*Butterfly* (蝴蝶). Dir. Yanyan Mak. Perf. Tian Yuan, Josie Ho, Eric Kot. Paramount Pictures, 2004. Film.

*Girls*. Dir. Chun-chun Wong. Perf. Ivy Chen, Fiona Sit, Wallace Chung, Vanness Wu. Huaxia Film. 2014. Film.

*The L Bang* (热拉帮). Dir. Rela app. Webseries. Web.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hi2PIS3IJU>>

*Saving Face*. Dir. Alice Wu. Perf. Joan Chen, Lynn Chen, and Michelle Krusiec. Sony Pictures Classics, 2005. Film.

*Spider Lililes*. Dir. Zero Chou. Perf. Rainie Yang and Isabella Leong. Wolfe, 2008. Film.