

**“I LOVE YOU, WHY DON’T YOU LOVE ME?:” READING UTOPIA IN
CHINESE QUEER FEATURES**

by

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Abstract

This paper discusses queer utopianism in Chinese narrative films *Farewell My Concubine* (1993, dir. Chen Kaige), *East Palace, West Palace* (1996, dir. Zhang Yuan) and *Lan Yu* (2001, dir. Stanley Kwan). While they are stories about trauma and loss, there are ways to read them optimistically. And this kind of utopian reading, as Dina Georgis examines in her book *The Better Story*, allows for a better collective survival (Georgis 13). Using these films as examples and the scholarly works by Jose Muñoz and Petrus Liu as methods, I exhibit three different ways to explore the utopian qualities within each film and argue that they each provide gateways to an imagined queer future. For *Farewell*, I discuss how the film invites a queer spectator and looks at moments in film that are utopic for a queer audience. For *East Palace, West Palace*, I argue that the film stages a queer utopia with the portrayal of the main character A Lan and Xiao Shi, and that the film challenges the heteropatriarchal social structure and imagines an expansive queer future. For *Lan Yu*, I argue that director Stanley Kwan's adaptation of the film from literature illustrate a brighter, more idealized space for queer people. My readings of the films show that they secure an access to the queer memories and spaces that are lost in mainstream history, and they help managing the loss to anticipate a better future.

Keywords: queer utopia, imagination, theater, disidentification, queer Marxism

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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to Dina Georgis in her book *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East*, stories are emotional resources for a politically better future (Georgis 1). While Georgis mainly uses examples from the Middle East, her method of reading stories optimistically is applicable to Queer Chinese narrative cinema. Queer people in China bear immense pressure from heteropatriarchal society, and there is a lack of available cinema for them because of the restrictive censorship system. The limited number of queer-themed narrative films from China mostly if not all embody the themes of trauma, loss and struggle. In a country where queer people are already suppressed, the stories generated and globalized about them are often interpreted to symbolize negativity. But is there a better way to read these stories? I propose to not discount the possibilities embedded in these aesthetic productions. As Dina Georgis suggests, narrative allows us to see ourselves in the formation of collective imagination, history and identities (Georgis 2). Stories, despite being about traumatic history and loss, grant us access to the queer memories and spaces that mainstream history disregards (Georgis 11). A different, more optimistic reading to these stories then directs us closer to a better collective survival (Georgis 13). In this essay I intend to provide ways to read queer Chinese narrative films in an optimistic way as a collective survival technique. In order to exhibit such reading practices, I use three narrative Chinese queer films released in the 1990s and early 2000s as examples. I argue that there is a utopian quality to these films. Through the acting and directing the films transmit more than just a sad queer story, instead they anticipate a better future.

The era of 1990s is a significant time for Chinese queer culture.¹ According to Bao Hongwei in his book *Queer Media in China*, it was a time when queer communities

¹ The term ‘queer’ is used as an umbrella term for the non-normative gender or sexuality. Even though it is a modern invention, it is a good substitute for the diverse practices of non-normative sexuality in history and nowadays in China. It is generally used and accepted in the field and could avoid clinical terms like ‘homosexuality.’

in China began to publicly emerge and when LGBTQ issues entered the public discourse (Bao 36). In this time, many Chinese-language queer feature films such as *Farewell My Concubine* (1993, dir. Chen Kaige) and *East Palace, West Palace* (1996, dir. Zhang Yuan) were watched locally and globally. It was also a time of transnationalism and cultural exchange, which led to a higher level of receptivity with queer sexuality and a hybridity in media representations of sexuality (Bao 36; Berry, Martin & Yue 2). In the West, the 1990s celebrated the rise of New Queer Cinema, which, as B. Ruby Rich famously describes, is a time when independent queer-related filmmaking was beginning to flourish (Rich 53). New Queer Cinema was and continues to be an influential school of queer films in the West now (such as *The Watermelon Woman*, 1996, dir. Cheryl Dunye, and *Paris is Burning*, 1990, dir. Jennie Livingston). However, the filmmaking at the same time in China, despite being recognized as a golden age and an important era for queer studies, is still overlooked by the academy. Some scholars have written about the period and about the internationally acclaimed films. However, there is predominantly more attention given to the outcast, alienated factor in the queer characters than to the potentiality embedded in their practices. For example, Chris Berry identifies the “sad young man” trope in East Asian gay films in his essay “Happy Alone? Sad Young Man in East Asian Gay Cinema” (Berry 188). Ultimately Chinese queer feature films are often read to present a negative image of queer people and the queer characters as an allegory for marginalized communities, especially in works of Western scholars. In this essay I wish to reevaluate this impression of supposedly sad Chinese queer films while bringing in works by other Asian scholars to challenge this idea. The films, despite being about trauma and loss, bear affection and pride from/for Asian and queer communities.

The films I selected for this project are *Farewell My Concubine* (1993, dir. Chen Kaige), *East Palace West Palace* (1996, dir. Zhang Yuan), and *Lan Yu* (2001, dir. Stanley Kwan). These three films, despite enduring hardship in the production process, have all attracted national and global attention. *Farewell* was exceptionally acclaimed and won the Palme d’Or at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival. There are many other queer-themed films of the same period that this essay does not include. For example, I did not include any documentaries produced by queer artists for and about queer communities (for example, *Queer China*, ‘Comrade’ *China* directed by Cui Zi’en in 2009), because I wish

to focus on feature narrative cinema for this project. Narrative films have an imaginative quality that can potentially open new possibilities of interpretation. It is the *potentiality* of queer being that I am mainly looking for in such narrative features. Although these films are globalized commodities that are intended for a mainstream audience, the ways of queer being shown in the films have values for a queer spectator. Due to the scale of this project, I have chosen three feature films that have had the most global attention. Though they are all narrative films about queer men made by male directors, the films represent a globalized idea of queerness in China. Therefore I choose them as a starting point to read the better story in queer Chinese feature films.

The representation of gay and queer men² by male directors is not to be read as a self-portrayal of gay men. Chen Kaige, the director of *Farewell*, and Zhang Yuan, the director of *East Palace, West Palace*, are both straight. As Dina Georgis suggests, the optimistic reading of queer aesthetic texts exceeds the intention of artists (Georgis 17). The representations serve to speak for marginalized groups, and at the same time blend their concerns and troubles into the prominent, mainstream anxiety. They offer a glimpse to a past that was missing out in the mainstream collective memories. By reading the stories optimistically, we are able to perceive a queer presence in history and cope with the loss and despair in our own survival stories.

There are notable similarities among the three films, such as: 1) they involve queer people in the production; 2) they are adaptations from literature³; and 3) the stories are set in Beijing.⁴ They are all Chinese-language queer-themed films that involve the participation of queer artists either as actors or the director. Firstly, there are autobiographical qualities of queerness in these films amplified through the presence of

² In this paper I use the term ‘gay’ and ‘queer’ differently. When I use ‘gay’ I am specifically referring to a male same-sex relationship. When I use ‘queer’ I mean a broader form of non-normative sexual and/or gender practices that is against determination (as mentioned in the Chiang and Wong paper, cited later in the essay).

³ Lilian Lee, the author of novel *Ba Wang Bie Ji (Farewell My Concubine, 1985)* and Wang Xiaobo, the author of *Si Shui Rou Qing (Sentiments Like Water, 1998)* that was adapted to *East Palace, West Palace (1996, dir. Zhang Yuan)* each was the script writer for the film.

⁴ The localization of these films in Beijing assures that the representation focuses on queer communities and practices in Mainland China, though the message extends beyond that because of the collaboration with Hong Kong and Taiwan.

queer artists. In *Farewell* the queer character is played by Leslie Cheung, a Hong Kong actor who was publicly out as bisexual in 1992 before this film. The director of *Lan Yu* Stanley Kwan was also publicly out as gay by the time he made this film. Si Han, the leading actor of *East Palace West Palace*, was a gay person working in the film's crew before he was officially selected to play the leading role. The involvement of queer people in the films is significant because they evoke a sense of unity from a queer spectator. In this project I examine their contribution to acting and directing in relation to the overall message transmitted by the films. Secondly, all three films are adapted from literature, which is important to note because the literature they are based on already received positive acclaim publicly before their film adaptations. The choice to adapt informs some of my analysis, and it is prominent in the case of *Lan Yu*. The original literature is prominently more sexually explicit than the portrayals on screen. The films, despite being strained by censorship and thus not being able to show sexually explicit content, manage to compensate the story by altering narrative structures and adding aesthetic elements. In my analysis of *Lan Yu*, for example I address how the adapting choices give the film more hope and utopian quality. Lastly, the setting of Beijing is of key importance to both the narrative quality and my selection of films because I wish to limit this essay to studies of queer films in one region. Since all three stories take place in Beijing, the political and historical context is similar among the three films, therefore the scope is more consistent.

My methodology in this essay is influenced by the field of Asian queer studies, such that I focus on the aspect of decolonization. In Asian queer studies, there has been an ongoing debate over the local/global binary for the methodology of studying Asian queer cultures. Scholars like Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncey, and Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler explore the possibility of eliminating the concept of 'region' and focusing on the global flow of cultures (Povinelli and Chauncey 445; Patton and Sánchez-Eppler, 3). As such, they argue that there is a need to deconstruct Western authority in studying about queerness in non-Western cultures. Similarly, scholars like Chris Berry, Fran Martin and Audrey Yue raised questions over the notion of 'the global queer' because queerness is experienced differently in non-Western regions (Berry, Martin & Yue, 7). For example, the practices and forms of queerness in China are

different from the post-Stonewall activism experienced in the West. Therefore, scholarly works should recognize these differences when writing about queerness and sexuality in non-Western regions to stay sensitive of the colonial histories. Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong suggest that queer Asia studies should focus more on smaller regions rather than mediating through Western epistemes (Chiang & Wong 123). They view queer Asia as both a critique to Eurocentric queer studies and a combination of two highly transformative fields 'queer' and 'Asia.' The notion of queerness is, like the concept of Asia, against determination (Chiang & Wong 122). Since queerness is transformative, it is then anticipatory because there is a sense of incompleteness. Overall speaking, these scholars inform me with their critiques to the Western authoritarian epistemes in queer studies and help me with my methodology, which is to properly contextualize queer practices and eliminate viewing these sources as local illustration of Western theories.

That said, my main theoretical sources include Jose Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* as well as *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, and Petrus Liu's *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*.⁵ I will examine the sense of hope in these films using Muñoz's argument while bringing queer Marxist scholarly works in a Chinese context in conversation with Muñoz. Muñoz's writing is situated in an American framework and is informed by his experience living as a queer person of colour in the United States of America. Especially in *Disidentification*, he situates himself within the perspective of queer people of colour communities, which is a concept not applicable to the Chinese social landscape. There are ethnic minorities in China and their relations to the hegemonic Han nation are not to be conflated with that of the US racial categories. When applying Muñoz's ideas to Chinese films, I wish to include some Chinese theorists to remain sensitive to histories of colonization and imperialism. Queer Marxist scholars in China develop their own epistemology of thinking about queer China in relation to Marxism, which is directed related to my selected films. For example, the author of the *Lan Yu* novel identifies as Beijing Tongzhi (Beijing Comrades); *tongzhi* (comrade) is an idiom for homosexuality and is a word used

⁵ Both authors write the books in a US context. However, Petrus Liu's work situates from a Chinese perspective and engage with queer texts in a Chinese context.

among socialists to refer to each other. Since the word connotes Mao's revolutions, it is a reminder of how queerness is related to Marxism (Liu 41). Liu states that queer Marxists in a Chinese context aim to examine the achievements and failures of socialist democracy in relation to labour and struggle experienced by queer people, and I extend this also to the cinema since it is an important source of expression for queer communities (Liu 9). Both *Farewell* and *Lan Yu* exemplify this with the depiction of the large social movements including Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and Tiananmen Square Incident (1989). Muñoz, though mainly using Ernst Bloch's theory of utopia in *Cruising Utopia*, references Marx in his essay "Sex, race and the incommensurate" and recognizes the value of communism in studying queerness, suggesting that communism provides a gateway to "a living in common" and "non-equivalent, incommensurable, and incalculable" queerness (Muñoz 203). Queer Marxism in China as described by Petrus Liu has some interesting overlap with Muñoz's theory. For example, for queer Marxists, queerness signifies the relation between people to an unequal power structure, and the ability to recognize the richness of genders and sexual expression that are not able to put into fixed categories (Liu 40). Muñoz also speaks against this kind of totality, though emphasizing the anticipatory futurity. The concept of Marxism conveyed by queer Marxism is not to be confused with that of the PRC Communist party. As Liu suggests, Marxism serves as a methodology of living for queer lives in China and that queer writers find their ways fusing Marxism with gender and sexuality (Liu 4). In his books Muñoz stages, by revisiting inspirational moments from the past, a queer utopian future that to some extent contains what queer Marxism imagines. By pairing the two theorists in my framework of analysis, I look for the utopia embedded in the films with an awareness of the socio-political landscape of queer studies in Mainland China contextualized with Marxist influences.

The analysis of my project features three case studies, each for one film. For *Farewell*, I argue that the queer utopia is transmitted through the Beijing Opera stage and that the performance by Leslie Cheung shows a utopian performativity. Rather than reading the artist's intention like many scholars including Leung and Xu, I focus on the reception of a queer spectator. For *East Palace West Palace*, I read the character A Lan as disidentificatory and argue that the film challenges the state's ideology and anticipates

a queer system. For *Lan Yu*, I argue that Stanley Kwan's adaptation of the novel is embedded with hope and optimism and that the film calls for a queer collectivity.

Chapter 2

Context

I will begin with contextualizing the landscape of queer media in China. China has a rich, established history of queer culture in premodern times, but nowadays Chinese queer communities and cultures are often oppressed, silenced or invisibilized. The attitude of the administration to queer communities is ambiguous. The government adopts the unofficial policy of “no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion.” This policy allows for inconsistent treatment of the subjects across organizations, social media, propaganda, etc. (Bao 33). Discrimination towards queer people exists but is not necessarily penalized or criticized by moral standards among the public. This means any representations of queerness or queer people on screen would bear to some extent the risks of public critiques. The political propaganda and ideology in Mainland China embody heteropatriarchy, and the idea of homosexuality or queerness is against the heterosexual family-oriented values that contribute to a supposedly fortified and prosperous nation state. Therefore, representations of queer people and queerness in general are often regarded as threats to the governing power (Bao 6). Currently queer content actively circulates in social media platforms such as Weibo and Douyin (TikTok), though there is a high risk of being censored. For example, in July 2021 WeChat deleted all accounts of university-based LGBT organizations, claiming they had “bad influences” (Yiu). As Bao addresses, the media censorship in China, despite prominently controlling the production industry, is controversial in itself (Bao 35). The representation of queerness or queer people is not regarded as a primary concern for the government and the ambiguous attitude of the central leading force would often be misinterpreted by its associated administration and social media companies. In regards, all three of the films I study in this essay were once banned by the media censorship in China.

Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) was originally issued to be banned completely from release in China at first because of the scene about the Cultural Revolution. After it won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, it was released in a small scale in Mainland China. Since it was listed as a Mainland film, it was not able to enter any

contests in neither Taiwan nor Hong Kong at the time. In short, the film was denied critical acclaim in Chinese-speaking regions. Related to Chen Kaige's film is Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (1996). The post-production of *East Palace, West Palace* (1996) was done in France. Zhang Yuan the director was invited to Cannes for this film but was not able to attend because Chinese authorities took his passport (Berry). The film was banned in the Mainland just like Zhang Yuan's many other films about social minority groups in China. Similarly, *Lan Yu* (2001) was shot in Beijing while the crew told the authorities they were shooting a hotel commercial. The film was smuggled to Thailand for post-production. Since the film includes a scene of Tiananmen Square Incident it was not able to be publicized in Mainland, because the government forbids any representation or reference to this incident. Among the three films, only *Farewell* is currently on legal streaming services; a free, uncut version of the film is available on many Chinese online legal streaming platforms including Bilibili and Tencent Video. The DVD version of *Farewell* is also available for purchase on shopping platforms such as Taobao (a common online vendor). On the other hand, *East Palace, West Palace* and *Lan Yu* have neither legal streaming nor DVDs available to the public. However, they are sometimes shown in universities to students in media studies for educational purposes. Ultimately, queer-themed films were and continue to struggle with reception because of media censorship. It is common for Mainland audiences to only be able to find banned queer films on illegal streaming websites.⁶

Although the films were banned and there is a lack of official accessibility, it does not mean they are absent. They have been and continue to be well-known across the nation for their representation of queer life and queer people. All three films are registered on Douban, a social networking application where users can record information related to film, books, music and social activities. Namely, *Farewell* is on the Douban "Top 250 films" list and remains in the top three positions. *East Palace, West Palace* and *Lan Yu* are both included in many queer- or gay-related film catalogues

⁶ All three books that the films are based on are available to purchase both digitally and physically. As film director Zhang Yimou mentioned in an interview, the censorship for film and literature is drastically different (Zhang 43).

created by users. In short, the films are prominent in the discourse of sex and queerness despite being repressed by the authority.

Chapter 3

Queer Spectatorship in *Farewell My Concubine* (1993)

Farewell My Concubine (1993, dir. Chen Kaige) is adapted from a novel written by its Hong Kong author Lilian Lee under the same title (*Ba Wang Bie Ji*, 1985). The film is set around the Beijing Opera theater and narrates a story between two opera performers from 1924 to 1977 in China. While the literature of Lilian Lee is strongly queer-themed, the film adaptation by director Chen Kaige is known to be obscure and reticent toward queer topics such as same-sex intimacy. He has received many critiques in media for being homophobic and because of this his intention in adapting *Farewell* is often criticized by queer film scholars (Berry 20; Mcdougall 47). The film has been criticized for exploiting and commodifying a queer character because it was highly advertised around the ideas of ‘Chineseness’ and the ‘queer story’ when being released abroad. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau in her essay “Farewell My Concubine: History, Melodrama, and Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema” expresses concern over the self-exoticization and commodification of Chinese cultural identities in this film (Lau 19). Chih-Yun Chiang and Ben Xu argue that more attention should be given to the cultural production itself rather than the authenticity of Chineseness, because the notion of culture itself is already subject to translation (Chiang 103; Xu 156). As Leung and Ben Xu both indicate, there is a trend of faulting *Farewell* for its failure to criticize nationalism (Leung 46; Xu 155). Song Hwee Lim has carefully discussed this issue and suggested that there are many assumptions made in such a trend of critiques (Lim, 85). For example, Bonnie S. Mcdougall notably in her 1994 essay “Cross-Dressing and the Disappearing Woman in Modern Chinese Fiction, Drama and Film: Reflections on Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*” claims the film portrays homosexuality as “unnatural and perverted” (Mcdougall 47). In fact, the main character Dieyi is not homosexual, because at that moment in history such terminology had not yet existed. Therefore, it should not be studied as a gay film because the sexuality in the film is more complex. Instead, the erotic energy of his character comes from his occupation as an opera performer, which I further address in the analysis. In terms of visual aesthetics, there are

many long shots with intricate settings that are meant to be evocative and nostalgic. As Ben Xu discloses, a film like this invites the audience to actively participate with their own social and private experiences (Xu, 163). When a Chinese queer audience approaches this film, they would bring in their own subjectivity. I will analyze the queer spectatorship with this sense of subjectivity in mind. Whether director Chen Kaige has intended to express or support queerness with this film is not my main concern. Instead, I will analyze how the film invites a queer spectator and look for moments in film that are utopic for a queer audience.

The film begins with Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou walking into an empty theater for a Beijing Opera rehearsal. It is revealed that this was their first reunion after eleven years of parting because of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). When the theater light turns on, the film cuts to the title, followed by the childhood memories of Dieyi. Xiao Douzi (Xiao, which means little, is used as a nickname), who would later identify as Cheng Dieyi, is brought to a Beijing Opera master by his sex worker mother. He starts living as a Beijing Opera trainee with Xiao Shitou, who is friendly and brotherly to him. Eventually, the two of them grow up to be stars of Beijing Opera. Duan Xiaolou (Xiao Shitou) plays Xiang Yu and Cheng Dieyi (Xiao Douzi) plays his Concubine Yu in the traditional Beijing Opera *Farewell My Concubine*.⁷ Duan Xiaolou intends to marry Juxian, a sex worker he meets regularly and rescues from assaulters. Dieyi expresses his emotional connection to Duan Xiaolou and his disapproval of this marriage, but regardless, the two get married anyhow on the night Japan invades Beijing. Since his relationship with Xiaolou falls apart, Dieyi seeks comfort from his opera admirer Yuan Shiqing. His relationship with Duan Xiaolou and Juxian gradually repairs, while at the same time the Communist party comes to power. However, both of them are fiercely assaulted during the Cultural Revolution. They end up accusing each other and Juxian during the parade, leading to her suicide. The film cuts back to their reunion on stage after eleven years, where Dieyi commits suicide during the rehearsal.

⁷ Puxu (*Qingyi Jushi*) adapted the tale about Xiang Yu and Concubine Yu based on *Qianjinji* and *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian)* to a Beijing Opera play. It was first performed by Yang Xiaolou and Shang Xiaoyun in 1918. In 1922 Yang Xiaolou and Mei Lanfang co-performed in the play. Qi Rushan and Wu Zhenxiu edited a part of the play and renamed it to *Ba Wang Bie Ji (Farewell My Concubine)*.

In this film, the stage space is charged with hope and potentiality. Although the film ends with Dieyi's suicide and there is a feeling of loss and despair across the narration of historical trauma, I argue that the film's portrayal of the stage and of Dieyi still offer a glimpse of queer utopia. I argue that the queer utopia is on the Beijing Opera stage, and that it serves as a utopian illumination for Dieyi and for a queer spectator. I emphasize on the narrative structure, the queer futurity anchored through stage space, and the sexuality of Dieyi.

The narrative structure of the film is in flashbacks and orients around the reunion rehearsal, situating the majority of the film's plot as on a stage that stands for the past. The idea of rehearsal, as Jill Dolan unwraps in her essay "Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,'" is already a utopian concept because it is a practice to revise for the final idealized result (Dolan 458). By presenting the past as on stage within the rehearsal, the story unveils from a personal and almost memoir-like perspective, and the film invites the audience to think of it as merely one pathway to the past. The film begins with the two protagonists, Dieyi and Xiaolou, walking in a long hallway in their full opera costumes and makeup. The camera tracks them stepping into an empty stadium. Just when an intimidating voice rises questioning their presence, the film cuts to a long shot of the stadium interior, where the two are standing at the middle of the frame. A beam of light comes from the door and casts two long shadows of the two figures, so they seem small compared to the huge stadium. This shot amplifies the loneliness and their lack of power in the situation. Since they both dress up in opera costumes, the film introduces the two characters as their stage personas before we see their faces. After learning their identities, the previously intimidating male voice turns into admiration. When he goes to turn on lighting for rehearsal, the stadium door shuts off the light from outside, then a beam of a spotlight slowly moves to shine directly above their heads. As the opera instrumental music rises and intensifies, the film fades to darkness then cuts to an ink painting of *Farewell My Concubine* (Ba Wang Bie Ji) with the film title above. Since the flashback begins after the stage lighting turns on, the film implies that the rest of the story carries on the performance. As Muñoz describes in his book *Cruising Utopia*, when viewers see the stage before an actual performance, they experience a moment of hope and transformation (Muñoz 103). This treatment of the opening emphasizes the temporality of

the past, and reminds the audience that this film is, like a theater space, an artistic invention that detaches from the present. The rest of the film then allows for a queer imagination of another time and space on this stage.

In the early phase of the story, the stage signifies hope and potentiality, and performance serves as a survival technique. Ever since Dieyi was a child, he has suffered through pain and struggle just to be able to perform. His mother chops off the extra finger on his hand so he would be admitted to the opera training crew, and when he stumbles with the line “I am by nature a girl, not a boy,” Shitou stabs an opium pipe in his mouth so he would remember. Not to mention the bodily transformation he is forced to go through to be able to perform a dan⁸ role, as Wu and Stevenson discuss in their essay “Male Love Lost the Fate of Male Same-Sex Prostitution in Beijing in The Late Nineteenth And Early Twentieth Centuries” (Wu and Stevenson 46). All the pain and suffering is tied to the stage space where he performs. His motivation to be an opera star comes from a play he watched as a child; for him, there is a notion of possibility and potentiality within the opera practices. When we view the actual performance later in his adulthood with this lens, the stage space is full of love and joy as a reward for his previous misery. There is a certain significance about the portrayal of hardship he has been through as a queer person to receive appreciation and attention on stage. Through this discourse, the film is able to embed hope and potentiality within the everyday struggle that any audience could also experience. As Muñoz indicates, the power of utopian performativity lies in the way it triggers a mode of recognition and belonging from the audience (Muñoz 99). The film has such a power as well by its representation of stage as a utopian space that rewards Dieyi for his hardship.

The film is nuanced when it comes to the portrayal of sexual desire, in contrast to the original novel by Lilian Lee. However, there are many homoerotic moments in film that are manifested through gaze, both in and out of the stage. I argue that the sexual tension in the performance leads to an imagination of a queer future, and this is transmitted to us audience especially through the acting of Leslie Cheung and the

⁸ It used to specifically refer to the group of young boys who trained at an early age to perform female roles. But now as women play operas as well, it is generalized to all performers who play young female characters on stage.

structure of a theater spectatorship. Dieyi performs on stage as a female character, while other men in the film and the audience are drawn to his male body. This chain of looking validates the utopian performativity in this film, when there is a sense of potentiality that surpasses time and space in his performance. Before the performance begins, the film dedicates a long time to Dieyi with everyday clothing getting ready for the show. This along with the constant shots of the eager audience sets up a feeling of anticipation toward his first appearance on stage after adulthood. When he finally shows up on stage, his character appears glamorously with delicate makeup and costumes. His jewelry shines illusively under the stage light. When he sings as Concubine Yu about her difficult experience in war, his eyes flip rhythmically along with graceful hand gestures. The film, after a medium shot featuring him singing, cuts to a carefully lit shot of Yuan in the opera box, in which only his eyes are visible. The figure of Dieyi on stage becomes in the eyes of Yuan and the audience an object of beauty and desire. In another shot of Yuan, with a blurry figure of Dieyi performing in the background, Na Kun asked Yuan if he thinks Dieyi is 'at a realm of actor and impersonation, male and female coexisting.' This line suggestively emphasizes the fluidity of gender and signifies a potential in Dieyi's male body. When the film cuts back to him on stage, his impersonation now submissively welcomes her king Xiang Yu. The sense of fortitude that was in his eyes when he sings about her struggle is now replaced with a tenderness and sacrificial love to Xiaolou's Xiang Yu. In this scene, Dieyi actualizes what Na Kun says about the coexisting male and female identities, which embeds him with a strong sexual energy under the spectator's perspective. Although such spectator is assumed by the film to be the male elites who come to enjoy the performance, his queer potentiality still transmits through the utopian performativity to a queer audience. The theater space blends in with his queerness and potentiality.

It is worth elaborating Dieyi's identity as a dan Beijing Opera performer. There is a utopian performativity in his character as such and in the theater space. Dan is an opera term for those who perform young female characters. It is safe to say they represent a queer way of being allowed through theater space. The theater to Dieyi is a space of illumination because the stage is where his relationship with Xiaolou is executed and justified. In contrast, he does not have this relationship off stage, therefore seeking

comfort from his patron and admirer Yuan. This kind of performer-patron sexual relationship is called *xianggong*, like Wu and Stevenson extract from historical materials (Wu and Stevenson 45). Although it is a men-with-men sexual relationship, it cannot be simply defined as homosexuality. As Leung explains, Dieyi represents an undefined queerness that is not simply gay or transgender, because he was in a war-torn time before the formation of concepts like homosexuality or transgender (Leung 95). And according to Wu and Stevenson such groups of queer people did not make into the twentieth century because the practice fell behind modernity (Wu & Stevenson 57). In this film, however, we see Leslie Cheung as Dieyi represent the history that diminishes their existence. The theater space then becomes a time capsule for a queer spectator to admire ancestral queerness and queer ways of being. As Muñoz suggests, the past that fuels this performativity generates a utopian imagination of another time and space, in this film anchored by the theater (Muñoz 106). The film then enables a utopian lens for viewing the past.

In conclusion, the film reclaims the queer practices in the past through the character of Dieyi. Through the performance by Leslie Cheung the character embeds a feeling of fortitude towards the struggle he endures. This emphasizes the labour a queer character conducts in a daily basis. Viewing the film through Muñoz's idea of queer utopia, the stage portrayed by the film serves as an actualization of a utopian imagination because it embeds a sense of hope and potentiality for Dieyi. The portrayal of stage in this film also enables homoerotic moments through theater spectatorship and presents the potentiality in the body of Dieyi. As a result of his crossdressing, the film facilitates the utopian performativity on stage and invites a queer spectator. The dan performers in Beijing Opera belong to an old, derelict practice that did not make to the history, but through this film it enders the eyes of mainstream and of a queer spectator as a reminder of the collective queer memories. With the performativity the past then pushes the story forward and fuels a utopic illumination.

Chapter 4

Queering the System in *East Palace, West Palace* (1996)

Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (1996) is often regarded as the first Mainland Chinese feature film that is explicitly gay-themed. It is also known to be a bold critique against the government, namely through its portrayal of a police officer. The film makes comments directly to the crime of 'hooliganism' (*liumang zui*) that was not eliminated until 1997, a year before the release of this film. The law vaguely forbade private homosexual conduct, then became a common excuse for police to assault and stigmatize gay people (Chiang 240; Bao 2). *East Palace, West Palace* presents a story between a policeman and a gay man he interrogates, thus positioning its narrative structure as highly political. Through this film, Zhang Yuan questions national ideologies that suppresses sexual minorities. It is common among many Asian queer features that the queer characters, like those in *East Palace, West Palace*, are read as an allegory of marginalized social groups that struggle to gain public visibility (Bao). Chris Berry, for example, in his 1998 essay "East Palace, West Palace: Staging gay life in China," argues that this film is more about striving for public discourse than portraying a positive queer representation (Berry). As I argue, this kind of reading diminishes the bold attempt of the film to anticipate and experiment with sexuality. In my analysis, I address the potentiality embedded in the queer characters A Lan and the policeman Xiao Shi and examine the utopian messages transmitted by their relationship.

The film is adapted from a novella written by Wang Xiaobo titled *Si Shui Rou Qing* (*Sentiments Like Water*, 1998). The story begins at a park near the Forbidden Palace of Beijing, a well-known and historic cruising spot for gay men. The film focuses on A Lan (played by Si Han), a gay writer, when he was arrested by a young policeman named Shi Xiaojun (played by Hu Jun) for passionately kissing another man in the park. During the night of interrogation, A Lan recounts his past and life experiences as a homosexual man to Shi. Xiao Shi, although appearing to be disgusted, develops feelings for A Lan as their encounter continues. When A Lan describes a cross-dressing person in the park, Xiao Shi pulls out the women's clothing he confiscated. Xiao Shi forces A-Lan to wear

the dress and wig, and the two start to kiss each other fiercely. The film ends after Shi walking away under the sunrise while A Lan watches him.⁹

I argue that the film stages a queer utopia with the disidentificatory performance in A Lan played by Si Han. The film challenges the heteropatriarchal social structure and imagines a breakdown of sexual law and order through the portrayal of the policeman Shi. The artistic style of the film of narrative interspersed with memories and imagination, helps build a watching experience that is full of potentiality.

In the film, the theme of homosexuality and queer identification is prominent. Unlike in *Farewell*, it includes the word “homosexuality” in its dialogue. The plot is driven by the conversation between A Lan and Xiao Shi about his queer desire. A Lan, played by Si Han, is what Muñoz would classify as a disidentificatory subject because he works on and against the dominant ideology and the stereotype society places on him (Muñoz 12). This is articulated through the phases of his confession. When Shi catches him making out with a man in the park and takes him back for interrogation, the first sentence he confesses is “I am homosexual (wo shi tongxinglian).” For Shi, this would be a confession for the ‘crime’ he committed earlier in the park, as he starts to record on notebook. A Lan continues speaking about his friends and sexual partners who he meets at the park, and he talks in a tranquil way without shame or guilt. He subverts the lower position in society that Shi perceives him to be part of. Later he talks about his first sexual experience with a man and admits that he persuaded him to have sex by saying “I am a woman.” This identification with femininity, as Mei-Hsuan Chiang discusses, signifies his rebellion against the heterosexual ideal that the authority instills (Chiang 246). His identification with femininity and womanhood denies the homophobic act and speech from Shi, because he embraces the perception of homosexual men as weak and feminine and uses this to acquire sexual pleasure.

The character of A Lan, through his erotization of Shi as a policeman, embeds disidentification and futurity. After being handcuffed by Shi, A Lan speaks of his

⁹ In the last scene there are representations of a transgender person and violence against A Lan while he is cross-dressing. The scene might convey transphobic messages. Chiang Mei-Hsuan argues that A Lan identifies as female in her essay “Policing Sexuality: Confession, Power, and the Heterosexist Authority in *East Palace, West Palace*” (Chiang 245).

childhood fantasy of a tall, strong policeman coming to catch him. The desire for a policeman roots from his admiration for authority and masculinity. In the story his mother tells, policemen are a sign of strength and power that a child cannot acquire. Therefore, instead of fearing them, he wishes to be caught. Chiang labels this with his masochistic desire (Chiang 247). He uses the masculinity that the system presents itself to have and fantasizes accordingly, therefore diffusing the homophobic ideology. Liu describes queerness in a queer Marxist sense as signifying a relation to unequal system of power (Liu 40). By working within this system and against its ideology, A Lan presents a potentially of queerness therefore encodes a form of futurity.

The film, by queering the process of interrogation and confession, stages a utopian futurity. During the communication between A Lan and Shi, the once considered phobic object of homosexual man through A Lan's performance and storytelling becomes a seductive object to Shi. When A Lan speaks about his traumatic past and humiliation received from heterosexual mainstream, he is managing this past and using it to present a seductive self in front of Shi. After he tells Shi about the experience of being beaten up after sex, he turns toward Shi and says, "what is life if not this?" Shi stands by the window smoking. Maybe out of sympathy, he passes the cigarette to A Lan. The action of sharing cigarette is strongly charged with sexual energy. Since Shi as a policeman now embeds a sexual desire, his ideological status is altered by A Lan. In this scene, A Lan makes use of the violence he received from the mainstream and against the dominant ideology represented by Shi. This would fall into what Muñoz defines as disidentification, because he works on and against the dominant ideology (Muñoz 12). As Muñoz suggests, such mode of disidentification directs to a queer future because it helps to imagine an expansive queer world (Muñoz 34). As the interrogation continues, the sexual tension between the two intensifies. Chiang analyses the interrogation using psychoanalysis. She argues that the interrogation develops to a sadomasochistic relationship between A Lan and Shi because of A Lan's discursive use of language (Chiang 247). As Shi gradually takes the role of a sadistic policeman according to A Lan's fantasy, his authoritarian power dissolves. This signifies and stages a change in

power relations between the state and sexual minorities and helps imagining a transfigured world for queerness and queer people.

The film by the character of Shi shows a failure of the government on the subject of homosexuality and presents a potentially for queer subjectivity. Throughout the film we see the change of personal ideology in Shi. He at first acts curious and treats A Lan with contempt. As the film progresses, he is gradually drawn to him. However, there is an opposing force of ideology deeply embedded in him that criminalizes homosexual acts. His struggle with this ideology is articulated in the film by his often hesitant and conflicted behaviours. At the near end of the film, Shi holds the hand of A Lan after he puts on a wig and a dress and leads him out of the police station. A Lan asks where he is taking him, to which Shi answers “to cure you.” A Lan replies, “I am not sick. My illness is that I love you.” Shi abusively drags A Lan to the ground, but when they get up, he initiates a long kiss with him. In this scene he appears to struggle with his own sexuality. The police belong to what Louis Althusser would call the Repressive State Apparatuses in his theory of ideology (Althusser 92). In other words, they are the executioner of the state ideology. Shi, however, fails to do so because he realizes his own sexual attraction to A Lan, a man. He then belongs to the subject of repression under his own authoritarian power. By presenting this contradiction, the film criticizes the homophobic ideology and boldly implies a futurity of a queer system that challenges this ideology.

The style of the film indulges in a utopian quality because it makes a thin boundary between fantasy and reality. The interrogation is cut in between dream-like memories and imagination, and therefore emphasizes an ambiguous yet pleasurable viewing experience that is charged with illumination. Chris Berry relates this dramatization of a gay story to the need for public visibility (Berry). I read a sense of potentiality in them. In the original novella, the story is organized in flashbacks after Shi receives the book A Lan has written, when the two have already parted after a long affair. The film, however, makes the timeline obscure as if the interrogation happens after he receives the book. This explains the complex, ambiguous structure of the presented interrogation, because it could be a mixture of memories from the actual night of interrogation and stories written in the book. In the film, there are many clips of A Lan’s

sexual experiences paired with his monologue about memories. Those clips, though they could be about his previous encounters with other men, do not show the face of his partners. This enables an imagination of his sexual experience with Shi. Especially in one clip, his partner gently taps on his face like Shi does after their kiss. Muñoz compares queerness to the concept of ephemera and describes the “lost” quality of queerness (Muñoz 72). Since queer memories were lost in a space of heterosexual dominancy, queerness often cannot be materialized, but it is the traces that matter for us and for a queer future (Muñoz 81). Though the memories can be somewhat illegible narratively, they piece together to anchor a queer potentiality.

Aside from memories, there are many scenes of imagination in the film that display a utopian quality. When A-Lan talked about a female thief and a jailkeeper, and a convict and her executioner, each story from his book, the film shows two women in traditional opera costumes walking in snow. They keep reoccurring to signify an imagination based on the fictions A Lan narrates. When A Lan begins to talk about the thief and her jailkeeper, the film cuts from a shot of him and Shi in the police station, to a high angle long-shot of the dark exterior of ancient buildings, where A Lan walks by the wall continuing talking and Shi follows him. The shot tracks them walking closer to the camera, then turns to show A Lan’s back when he walks into a bright, snowy forest. The juxtaposition of the dark alley and the bright forest creates a contrast between reality and imagination, presenting the imagined space as illuminated. In the background, two women dressing up with opera costumes perform the story A Lan is narrating. The character in purple, the jailkeeper, drags the other character in red, the thief, to the ground and pretends to beat her with a sword. If the audience looks closely, they can see some staff in the background handling a snowmaker. As the camera settles down, we see there is a piece of veil between A Lan and the snowy forest. When A Lan touches the veil, a casted shadow of his hand appears on the veil. This scene is paired with ethereal and desolate opera music. This scene along with many other similar scenarios appear as parts of the performance A Lan stages for Shi. The film actualizes his imagination, while at the same time sets a boundary between him and the stage, suggesting its non-authenticity.

In conclusion, *East Palace, West Palace* has a fiction quality because the main plot is often interrupted by memories and fantasies. This adapting choice of blending

fictions with the interrogation helps build to a utopian performance. The stage that the film visualizes from A Lan's fantasies serves as an allegoric space that invites a queer spectator to eroticize and reimagine. The character of A Lan is a disidentifactory subject because he reworks the stereotypical perception of the homosexual man as effeminate and against the dominant ideology that diminishes his sexuality. He seizes agency in the relationship with the policeman Shi and eroticize this figure that represents authority. Since Shi transforms in the scope of the film to a queer being, the film invites an imagination of a queer system and anticipate for a queer future.

Chapter 5

A Chinese Queer Utopia in *Lan Yu* (2001)

Lan Yu, as a 2001 Chinese gay-themed film, has a sense of optimism that is generally lacking in other queer films of its time. By reading *Lan Yu* through Muñoz's theory of queer utopia, I aim to examine the sense of hope embedded in this film. *Lan Yu* is based on a novel called *Beijing Stories* written by Beijing Tongzhi (Beijing Comrades). Since the director Stanley Kwan is openly gay, *Lan Yu* is seen as a queer-made feature-length film about homosexuality. It was commercially successful and was internationally acclaimed. *Lan Yu* is especially tied with the political and economic rush in 1980s China. The film features two men named Chen Handong and Lan Yu. Lan Yu is a poor university student who has turned to sex work. He was introduced to Chen Handong, a successful businessman who lives a supposedly 'promiscuous' lifestyle. Chen at first treated their sexual relationship as a fling, but soon developed love for Lan Yu. He was scared by the possibility of being gay, so he decided to break up with Lan Yu and marry a woman. Later, he got divorced and went back to him. When Chen's company was accused of smuggling and money-laundering, and Chen became imprisoned, Lan Yu saved him with all the savings he had. When the two finally were able to get together, the story ends tragically with Lan Yu dying in a car accident.

Despite the tragic ending of *Lan Yu*, director Stanley Kwan is well celebrated for his choice of making a normalized love story between two men. However, scholars including Lan Dong and Tena L. Helton are critical of the adaptation's choices, arguing that by de-emphasizing the cultural and political context, the film reduces the complexity of gay-related politics and social circumstances in China (Dong & Helton 139). However, Kwan's gesture of centering the film around the relationship and romance should not be overlooked. Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* helps me identify the value of the film as a utopian work. Kwan's adaptation to some extent detaches the film from the reality depicted by the novel and illuminates a brighter, more independent space for queer people. Muñoz's theory helps me read the implied queer futurity and potentiality in *Lan Yu*. I discuss mainly from three aspects: the film adaption of the family relation, the film's treatment of

Chen's heterosexual marriage, and the portrayal of Tiananmen Square Incident. Each of these three aspects demonstrates Muñoz's argument about queer utopia and embodies hope and queer futurity.

The representation of families in the film helps normalize gay relationship and calls for an anticipation of an alternative family and relational dynamics. The space depicted by the film surpasses the homophobic environment in both the novel and real life in China, creating a sense of hope. The original book focuses on homophobia and family pressure, both of which the film adaptation does not show. The major conflict in the book came from the family disapproval of Chen having a boyfriend. Chen's fiancé Lin Jingping, mother and sisters secretly report to Lan Yu's company about his homosexuality, forcing him to resign. The book portrays its women characters as the villains who orchestrate the failure of the tongzhi relationship. The film, however, depicts Chen's family as caring and understanding, leaving out the misogynistic representation of women in the book. Since the element of homophobia, which prominently exist in real life in China, were minimal in the film, it offers an escape from family conflicts that queer people suffer from. The idealistic environment portrayed by the film, although leaving out the social issues as Dong and Helton point out, serves as a reminder of "queerness is not here yet" (Muñoz 1). I read the normalization of gay relationship as an imagination of a queer future. Through the anticipatory illumination, audience is invited to picture a queer utopia within the space of this cinematic representation.

When Lan Yu visited Chen's family for the first time, he was welcomed by the family members. Chen's brother let Lan Yu listened to his music and hummed the theme song of *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, a 1983 Japanese queer-coded war film. The reference to *Mr. Lawrence* would be an easter egg for any audience who are familiar with this film. When discussing the political agenda for the LGBT activism in North America, Muñoz specifically examines the word "we" in "we want a new society" (Muñoz 19). He argues that the "we" in this sentence refers to not simply queer communities for an identification purpose, but rather it speaks for the notion of futurity, anticipating a space where gender, race, and sexual preferences are no longer at state (Muñoz 20). In the calling of "we," Muñoz finds a utopian possibility that different kinds of belongings gather to form one collective belonging (Muñoz 20). In the experience of watching *Lan*

Yu, we feel the similar kind of potentiality detected by Muñoz. The reference to *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* in *Lan Yu* helps to queer the story. The melody connotes a hidden, oppressed queer desire that *Lan Yu* directs for a queer audience. Since the music comes from Chen's brother in this traditional family, the barrier of sexuality between Lan Yu and Chen's family dissolves. The film creates a space in which queer people are able to find belonging with traditional families.

Lan Yu criticizes the social norm of gay men marrying heterosexual women and embeds a rejection of heteronormativity. The film disregards the depiction of homophobic family and portrays Chen as deciding to get married by himself. Chen at first treats his relationship with Lan Yu as a detour toward his heterosexual marriage. *Lan Yu* criticizes the social norm of seeing marriage and children as the destination of life. This parallels Muñoz's critique over heteronormativity. Muñoz specifies that we need to shift our perception of future away from 'future is for children,' because this idea relies heavily heterosexual reproduction (Muñoz 49). The film spends limited amount of time on Chen's heterosexual marriage, in contrast to the novel. Their conflicts within the marriage are summarized into a few sentences in Chen's dialogue with Lan Yu. In Chen's case, his heterosexual relationship turns out to be temporal and toxic, and eventually drives him back to Lan Yu. Through this plot the film displays resistance to the heterosexual future. According to Liu, the concept of marriage roots in the sustainability of private wealth (Liu 74). Heterosexual reproduction embeds the notion of passing on fortunes from one generation to another, therefore ties with materialism. In the near end of the film Chen faces a large amount of financial penalty and imprisonment. It was Lan Yu who bails him out. The film connotes the temporality of material.

Furthermore, the film removes the plot from the novel about Chen's life after Lan Yu's death. In the original novel, Chen immigrates to Canada and eventually marries a Christian woman in Vancouver. At the end of the novel, he devotes to Christianity and prays for Lan Yu's afterlife. The film cuts down his second marriage completely, romanticizing the tongzhi relationship. This adaption choice embodies what Muñoz would call an "anticipatory illumination of a queer space," because it subverts and transcends the heteronormative ideology in the present (Muñoz 56). Although in the novel there is more richness to Chen's sexuality, because it never defines both of their

sexuality, his heterosexual marriage in the novel embeds his character with more complexity to his sexual identity. The film, on the other hand, refuses to end the narrative with a heterosexual marriage. The queerness presented by the film is normalized, romanticized, and continuous.

The film portrays Tiananmen Square Incident affectively and blends the queer struggle with a national political outcry, provoking a sense of collectivity. The inclusion of the Tiananmen Square incident was subtle on screen but bold, considering the topic is seen as taboo nationally. As Dong and Helton describe, the Chinese government barely allows any direct depiction of the incident (Dong and Helton 143). The film is not able to include some overt dialogues between Chen and Lan Yu around their experience. However, the subtle presentation of the incident has its own effects. There are multiple visual and dialogue cues to set up this event. For a Chinese audience, the parades outside Chen's office and the dialogues around student groups are adequate for sensing what to anticipate. The film builds a sense of anxiety and seriousness before the event. After Chen hears "it is happening tonight," he struggles in his room worrying about Lan Yu. The film depicts the Tiananmen Square incident subtly without visually presenting the massacre, but rather it deploys an almost experimental approach. When Chen drives to Lan Yu's university at night, the camera shows from Chen's perspective the blurry figures on bicycles around his car. The sound of gunfire afar is mixed with slow, sad traditional music. The shot of Chen looking is followed by a rapid montage of riding bicycles. Then the film cuts to a slow-motion of a flatbed trailer. This scene provokes a sense of anxiety and danger. Lan Yu finally appears near Chen's car; the audience feels relief because he is still alive. Lan Yu's back is briefly in the frame, and we see a large amount of blood on his white shirt. The film cuts from the two of them hugging to a medium shot of them lying in bed. Lan Yu sobs in great despair and Chen embraces him. This scene contains no sexual desire but only grief and trauma.

Muñoz writes about 'gay riot' and states that although governments suppress utopian performances easily, the activist anger towards the repressive present stays with us and in our anticipation for a queer future (Muñoz 64). *Lan Yu* identifies the existence of queer people in Tiananmen Square Incident and infiltrates a similar kind of activist anger in Lan Yu's affective crying. As David L. Eng points out in his essay "The queer

space of China: expressive desire in Stanley Kwan's *Lan Yu*," the film presents Tiananmen Square Incident through Lan Yu's affective reaction, and the film configures the affective and the spatial through this history of Tiananmen (Eng 464). Such an event belongs to what Liu would describe as "distorted use" of Marxism by the bureaucratic government of PRC (Liu 95). Liu discusses the compatibility of Marxism and sexuality and claims that both include rethinking about human connection, intimacy, and alliance (Liu 97). Queerness in a Marxist point of view then serves as a tool for emancipating from the fixed power structure and categorizations of sexuality. The affective representation of Tiananmen through the eyes of a queer couple perpetuates the structural failure in socialist China in the 80s and shifts focus to one's relation to larger political outcry in this intimate setting.

The reference to Tiananmen Square Incident provokes sympathetic feeling within the queer characters and instills a sense of collectivity. Munoz in his essay "Sex, race, and the incommensurate" briefly mentions communism and states that communism emphasizes on collectivity that surpasses individual subject (Muñoz 204). This sense of collectivity manifests in *Lan Yu* when the film visually depicts Chen and Lan Yu going through national trauma just as anyone else did. When facing a national repression, we are all at the same place of the movie characters now, and we as audience would feel the sense of solidarity that already exists among queer people in China.

In conclusion, the film *Lan Yu* functions differently from the original novel. The novel complies a queer failure trope and displays the life of queer people in discrete realism. The homophobic family in the novel is meant to reflect behaviours of real-life Chinese families. The novel depicts both characters as in the phase of exploring their sexuality, therefore their love in the novel is not as pure and loyal as the film presents. Chen Handong in the novel is far more promiscuous than he is presented in the film. Except for Lan Yu he kept sexual relationship with an abundance of men and women. The novel highly emphasizes on his two heterosexual relationships: the first marriage with a Chinese woman Lin Jingping, and second marriage with a Christian woman in Canada. The film, on the other hand, focuses on his relationship with Lan Yu; there is very minimal visual portrayal of his marriage with Lin and his later immigration and marriage is removed completely.

Kwan's adaptation of the novel presents an idealized and romanticized queer relationship in a staged, utopian space. Using Muñoz's theory, we are able to see how this film is optimistic about a queer future. The film disregards Chen's conflicts with family; in contrast, the family in the film provides a sense of belonging and connection for Lan Yu. The film treats heterosexual marriages in a different way from the novel. It is hypercritical of Chen's marriage and emphasizes a lot on the materialistic aspects of heterosexual relationship, in contrast to the love Chen eventually develops with Lan Yu. The portrayal of the Tiananmen Square Incident in the film is also different from the novel. The film focuses on the affective behaviour of the characters, projecting the intimate feeling against the political outcry and provoking a sense of collectivity.

Although the film removes some plot about Christianity and Chen's immigration, it inherits some occidental beliefs and ideas from the novel. Throughout the film there are several dialogues around going abroad. There is a scene when Lan Yu watches TV that reports about economic freedom in the United States. At the near end of the film, Chen, knowing of his business failure, wants to send Lan Yu abroad to study. Like in the novel, the film associates going abroad with freedom and presents it as an escape, perceiving the West as a utopian world for intellectuals and queer people. However, because it removes the immigration plot, going abroad remains in conversation and is never achieved. *Lan Yu* seems to be rebellious against the idea that travelling abroad is the only option for Chinese queer future. From the queer Marxists' perspective, the attempt in *Lan Yu* of keeping the story within the national border of China might be an interesting topic in relation to decolonization in Asia.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Through putting queer Marxism in conversation with Muñoz, there seems to be many interesting overlaps. Both Muñoz and queer Marxists oppose to heteronormativity in the present and to the identity-based theories about queerness. According to Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxists in China* develops their own epistemology of queer theories that differentiate themselves from the Western scope of queer studies (Liu 6). They especially shift away from the North American paradigms of identity categories (Liu 7). He argues that Chinese queer theories emphasize the relation between sexual freedom and structural power (Liu 7). Muñoz, though stating “queerness is an identity,” anticipates for a queer space in the horizon that it is less about categorizations but more about belongings (Muñoz 20). For Muñoz queerness is awaited in the horizon and queer people depend on utopianism to live because our presence is still seen as a riot (Muñoz 64). For Liu, Marxism becomes a methodology queer writers employ on their political stance aside from the PRC bureaucracy (Liu 9).

With already a limited number of queer-related productions, it doesn't seem fair to only read the representation as traumatic and negative. Living as a queer person in China, it might be difficult to access or know of narrative queer films from the 1990s apart from the most well-known ones. Although there are more community-based queer media now and the social landscape for queer communities is more complete with the support of social media contemporarily, it is important to reclaim the history for queer people that the mainstream dismisses. These films represent queer practices in history, and they show the relationship between queer people and the government in the past. They bear the private experience from their queer audience. Therefore it is important to recognize the possibilities embedded in these films.

In this essay I provide ways to read narratives optimistically so that we are directing to a queer future. In that sense, what does a Queer China look like in terms of cinema? A Queer China will ensure a space for queer people for expression and reception. There is currently a dilemma with the reception of queer Chinese narrative

films. Because of the censorship many queer-related or queer-themed films are not permitted with publicity or promotion. In contrast to the international audience, Mainland audience rely heavily on illegal streaming, especially with contemporary queer texts including films and televisions. Queer China should be a space to play with love, pleasure and queer desire. A utopian reading of narrative films can direct us there because it allows us to manage and reconcile queer loss.

This conversation could extend to other Mainland queer narrative films such as *Men and Women* (1999, dir. Liu Bingjian) and *Star Appeals* (2004, dir. Cui Zi'en). There are many queer-themed Hong Kong films in the 1990s including gay-themed film *Happy Together* (1997, dir. Wong Kar-Wai), and lesbian films such as *Intimates* (1997, dir. Cheung Chi-Leung) and *Green Snake* (1997, dir. Tsui Hark). There are Taiwanese queer-themed narrative films such as *The Wedding Banquet* (1993, dir. Ang Lee) and *Blue Gate Crossing* (2002, dir. Yee Chih-yen). These films all deserve recognition, though might need a different approach and context from what I have.

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