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## IN FOCUS

# Queering Asian Media

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# In Focus Introduction: Queering Asian Media

It has been nearly a decade since the publication of *Cinema Journal's* 2014 In Focus dossier on “Queer Approaches to Film, Television, and Digital Media.”<sup>1</sup> The dossier powerfully demonstrated an essential scholarly refocus from “a US-based politics of ‘coming out’” to more diverse queer deconstructions, non-confrontational queer practices, negotiative queer productions in media and cultural studies.<sup>2</sup> This shift was largely inspired by the late queer media scholar Alexander Doty’s “contra-straight” theorization of the seemingly hetero-normative mainstream media text and context.<sup>3</sup> Following this model, in combination with Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, recent scholarship has understood *queer* as not only minority identities but also disruptive positions, sentiments, styles, and practices that productively reorient normative imaginations, regulations, and sociopolitical identities in global media studies.<sup>4</sup> In par-

1 Patty Ahn, Julia Himberg, and Damon R. Young, introduction to “In Focus: Queer Approaches to Film, Television, and Digital Media,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 117–121, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43653571>.

2 Ahn, Himberg, and Young, 117, 119.

3 Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 83.

4 Exemplary scholarship includes Shi-Yan Chao, *Queer Representations in Chinese-Language Film and the Cultural Landscape* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2020); Todd A. Henry, ed., *Queer Korea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); and Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). Also see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

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Jamie J. Zhao and Yiman Wang, “In Focus Introduction: Queering Asian Media,” *JCMS* 62, no. 3 (Winter 2023): 154–158.

ticular, a growing body of scholarship has queried and reoriented commercial media that often target straight audiences and have benefited from globalization, migration, urbanization, social stratification, and the rapidly developing digital technologies. Findings from such research have shown that not only binarism-disruptive gender and sexual knowledge but also new forms of identity- and desire-based binarism, essentialism, and homonormative assimilation are produced in queer media production, circulation, and consumption.<sup>5</sup>

The early 2000s have also witnessed “a queering of Asian studies” amid crisscrossing processes of localization, transnationalization, and globalization. Here *queering* works as a critical perspective, highlighting “the new worlds of queer Asian media cultures created through the globalization” of gender and sexual politics while also problematizing “the binary between the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’” in conceptualizing queer Asian media.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the two frameworks of queer Asian studies mapped out by Audrey Yue—“queer hybridity” and “critical regionalism”—have been widely adopted in a range of academic disciplines to challenge imperialism, (neo-)colonialism, ethno-nationalism, heteronormativity, homonormativity, and Orientalism and Occidentalism in scholarly discourses as well as cultural productions.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, most of the existing scholarship in queer Asian media studies has focused on the queer promises and struggles in media representation, performance, and reception, such as queer Asian star and fan studies. What has remained understudied is the potential of queering Asian media’s production technologies, distribution venues, political-ideological institutions, and narrative strategies, with an eye to tease out nonconforming feelings, subjectivities, and relationalities.

Contemporaneously with the expanding queer turn in media studies and area studies, queer Asian media has broken through into the mainstream and globalized media industries. This breakthrough encompasses the boom of androgynous K-pop idols; the inter-Asian and global popularity of Japanese Boys’ Love (BL) and Girls’ Love (GL) cultures; the surge of Thai and

- 5 Eve Ng, “A ‘Post-Gay’ Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 6, no. 2 (2013): 258–283, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ccc.12013>; Audrey Yue and Helen Hok-Sze Leung, “Notes towards the Queer Asian City: Singapore and Hong Kong,” *Urban Studies* 54, no. 3 (2017): 747–764, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015602996>; and Joseph Brennan, ed., *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans through Homoerotic Possibilities* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019).
- 6 Audrey Yue, “Queer Asian Cinema and Media Studies: From Hybridity to Critical Regionality,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014): 147–149, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43653576>. See also Lisa Rofel, “Queer positions, Queering Asian Studies,” *positions* 20, no. 1 (2012): 187, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1471438>; Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong, “Queering the Transnational Turn: Regionalism and Queer Asias,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 23, no. 11 (2016): 1643–1656, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1136811>; Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong, “Asia Is Burning: Queer Asia as Critique,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 121–126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2017.1294839>; Fran Martin, Mark McLelland, Peter A. Jackson, and Audrey Yue, eds., *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Gender and Sexualities* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008); and Mark McLelland, “From Queer Studies on Asia to Asian Queer Studies,” *Sexualities* 21, no. 8 (2018): 1271–1275, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718770448>.
- 7 Audrey Yue, “Critical Regionalities in Inter-Asia and the Queer Diaspora,” *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 132–133, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.537042>; and Yue, “Queer Asian Cinema.”

mainland Chinese homoerotic TV dramas and their popularity in the Anglophone world; queer and transgender film and TV stardom in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand; and Asian-based lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) live-streaming channels and online celebrities.<sup>8</sup> The proliferation of *both* LGBTQ content, characters, and celebrities *and* norm-defying media and pop cultural forms, formats, platforms, and spaces in contemporary Asia offers us an exciting opportunity to bring queer Asian media and the method of *queering* to bear upon each other and to examine how this might reshape queer approaches to Asian media studies.

Our In Focus dossier, “Queering Asian Media,” showcases six essays that examine a variety of Asian media forms and genres through a queering critical lens, with special attention to East Asian and Southeast Asian media cultures spanning the past five decades. The authors in this dossier mobilize *queering* as both an analytical tool and an often neglected characteristic of Asian media culture to unpack the contested and morphing modes of knowledge production surrounding gender and sexuality, geopolitics, and histories that have been made possible by Asian media production, circulation, and consumption in an increasingly inter-Asian, globalizing world. Collectively, these essays articulate a spectrum of queer affective politics across spaces, time, ideologies, media forms, and media technologies.

Our dossier raises the following questions. Acknowledging *queering* as an established and powerful practice in media production, distribution, and reception, how might we identify the queering potential in and surrounding Asian media as cultural processes and products that are situated in heteronormative media industries and sociocultural environments? In what ways do queer representations in, and queer readings of, media work contribute to resisting normative imperatives in Asian societies and their increasingly globalized media industries? How can we productively navigate the dilemma that Asian media industries both capitalize on and contribute to the increased visibility of, as well as the hierarchies (associated with gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, geopolitics, and digital literacy) within, queer feelings, stardom, and fandom? And, finally, how can queering as a methodology reframe and expand Asian media studies to engage with not only representation but also shifting media technologies, screening venues, and off-screen practices (such as spectators’ and fans’ relation-making with media works and with each other)?

Our dossier begins with two essays that delve into one of the most successful queer media genres in Asia—BL—and strive to understand how the cross-regional circulation, production, adaptation, and consumption of

8 See Michelle H. S. Ho and Evelyn Blackwood, “Queer Asias: Genders and Sexualities across Borders and Boundaries,” *Sexualities* (May 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607221092153>; Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinity and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011); James Welker, ed., *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2022); James Welker, “Introduction: Queer(ing) Japanese Popular Culture,” *Mechademia* 13, no. 1 (2020): 1–5, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/772387>; and Jamie J. Zhao, “Introduction: Global Queer Fandoms of Asian Media and Celebrities,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 6 (2021): 1028–1032, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1959374>.

queer media in Asia reflect, contribute to, and further complicate the gender and sexual politics and imaginaries closely associated with specific Asian geopolitical locations.<sup>9</sup> Alvin K. Wong's essay, "Queer Sinophone Media across Asian Regionalism," analyzes Hong Kong transnational TV adaptations of Japanese BL series and the global success of a Taiwan BL film and explores the ways in which queer media produced in, consumed by, and circulated across Sinophone societies negotiate with location-specific sociocultural and political circumstances. Charlie Yi Zhang's essay, "The Megacity of Bangkok Rescaled through Queerness," explores how Thai BL TV and its related celebrity-fan economy have emerged in the entertainment industry by appropriating both Japanese and Korean gender and sexual cultures while queerly romanticizing Bangkok for transnational fandom and tourism. The next two essays deploy Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology to probe the expansive sexual-erotic and sociopolitical queer feelings in the cinematic child—a figure too often disavowed as non-queer, if not outright de-gendered and de-sexualized. Celine Parreñas Shimizu's "Queer Childhood Sexuality in *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros*" draws on psychoanalytic object relations theory to study the child's queer desire in *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (*The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*, Auraeus Solito, 2005), highlighting the child's genderqueerness in intersection with a broader set of sociopolitical feelings and economic experiences in the Global South. Yiman Wang brings queer studies, feminist cyborg theory, and Indigenous kinscape discourses to bear on the high-profile Chinese animated feature *Nezha naohai* (*Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King*, Wang Shuchen, Xu Jingda, and Yan Dingxian, 1979) to queer the socialist child hero Nezha, dismantle the Confucian and socialist heteropatriarchy, and gesture toward an eco-erotic kinscape. The last two essays explore two severely underexamined topics in queer Asian media during the digital age of globalization. Jamie J. Zhao's essay, "Global TV Formats Queer Contemporary China," understands global TV formats as an actively queering and queered platform that negotiates marital-familial ideals in China's heteropatriarchal spaces. Finally, Ungsan Kim contemplates South Korean media, specifically the epistemological shift entailed by the migration or cruising of queer experimental media works (such as those of Im Cheol-min) from theaters and film festivals to art museums in the digital age.

Together, the essays in our dossier demonstrate that Asian media's complex longitudinal formation and transformation in relation to shifting local, national, and global geopolitics have given rise to queer fantasy spaces, which are in turn shaped by real-world struggles for nonnormative and

9 For example, Fran Martin's 2012 research on Taiwanese transnational fandom of Japanese BL has revealed that this form of trans-Asian circulated and consumed queer media helps create an unrealistically homoeroticized Japanese setting for Taiwanese fans to situate their queer fantasies that have been stigmatized and silenced in their local realities. Yet the creation of this imaginative fantasy space, heavily drawing on Japanese gender and sexual politics and Taiwan's colonial history, ultimately aims to enable a safe space to reflect on Taiwanese LGBTQ issues, instead of uncritically valorizing and worshipping the queer and feminist progresses of Japan. See Fran Martin, "Girls Who Love Boys' Love: Japanese Homoerotic Manga as Trans-national Taiwan Culture," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2012): 365–383, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2012.689707>.

anti-hegemonic desire-voicing and relation-building. By highlighting the too often underexplored multifaceted media imaginary of nonnormative affect and practices, our dossier intervenes in and enriches scholars' understandings of queer media genres, formats, aesthetics, technologies, and their historical shifts in Asia and beyond. While it is by no means comprehensive, we hope that this collection will inspire further critical debates surrounding the theories, methodologies, and ramifications of queer(ing) Asian media studies as the field keeps growing and changing.

We would like to thank the *JCMS* In Focus dossier team for offering us this platform and for their meticulous editing and helpful suggestions. Any errors that might still remain are our sole responsibility.

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Alvin K. Wong

# Queer Sinophone Media across Asian Regionalism

In March 2022, in the midst of a fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong that generated more than 10,000 new cases per day, two colleagues invited me to take a short weekend trip to Tai O, a fishing village located on the western side of Lantau Island. At first, I was not very excited about the trip: I had already been to Tai O several times, and in recent years the fishing village has been overtaken by tourists. It's just another village that is commodified for its traditional and exotic appeal, I thought. My colleagues soon proved me wrong by taking us on a hiking trail that overlooks the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge. While pleasantly rejuvenated by the breathtaking view, I was also struck by how regionally integrated Hong Kong is with the rest of mainland China within the spatial imaginary of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. After the hike, we decided to take a rest at a local café. Our server was a talkative, middle-aged, sporty-looking woman who gave off queer vibes. Once she found out that one colleague was from Taiwan, she shared her own experiences of working in Taipei and how much she missed Taiwan. On our way out, I spotted a postcard of Anson Lo and Edan Lui, the protagonists of the latest hit Boys' Love (BL) television series *Ossan's Love* (ViuTV, 2021), which is adapted from the highly successful 2018 Japanese BL television drama of the same name. As we passed by the Tai O Heritage Hotel, another lesbian butch-femme couple passed us by. I half-jokingly told my friends, "Tai O is becoming a gay Mecca of Hong Kong!"

I recount my trip to Tai O to focus three ideas that might not appear related to one another at first glance: queer media, the Sinophone, and

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Alvin K. Wong, "Queer Sinophone Media across Asian Regionalism," *JCMS* 62, no. 3 (Spring 2023): 159–163.

regionalism. What kind of regional imaginary comes into view when we name Tai O as the new gay Mecca of Hong Kong? How does the critical framework of queer regionalism disrupt the conventional narrative of Hong Kong as a capitalist Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC)? To tackle these questions, I deploy *queer Sinophone media* as a critical concept that tracks the circulation and mediation of queerness within both Sinitic-language communities in the Sinophone worlds and across regional connections in Asia. In recent years, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have revived the concept of regionalism for different ends. Prasenjit Duara perceptively distinguishes several historical formations of regionalism, including the imperial regionalism of the British Empire in the nineteenth century; anti-imperial regional blocs of the early twentieth century among advocates of Asianism; economic regionalism and securitization via entities such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); and, finally, the economic polarity of regional migration resulting in the large flow of both professional expats and underpaid workers to the capitalist cities of Shanghai, Seoul, Tokyo, and Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> While Duara mentions that “there is increased sojourning by women employed as domestic workers, nurses, entertainers, and prostitutes,” issues of women and feminism seem like an afterthought to his theorization of regionalism.<sup>2</sup>

If dominant frameworks of Asian regionalism marginalize women, sexuality, and queerness, recent work in transnational queer studies offers some promising directions. For instance, queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath has coined the term *queer regional imaginary* to demonstrate “the possibility of tracing lines of connection and commonality, a kind of South–South relationality, between seemingly discrete regional spaces that in fact bypass the nation.”<sup>3</sup> Expanding on Gopinath’s theory of queer regionalism through Sinophone studies, which is defined as “the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions,” in this short essay I invoke the term *queer Sinophone media* to show how queer medial forms produced in Sinophone locations are inflected through regional formations.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, I first examine how the Hong Kong media enterprise ViuTV’s adaptation of the Japanese TV series *Ossan zu Rabu* (*Ossan’s Love*, TV Asahi, 2018) gains popularity amid a more expansive queer Asian regionalism of BL televisual modernity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, I show how the global success of the 2020 Taiwan queer arthouse film *Ke zai ni xindi de mingzi* (*Your Name Engraved Herein*, Patrick Kuang-Hui Liu), mediated by the increasing consumption of Netflix, taps into existing popularity of BL across Asia while also expanding the material circulations and reception of queer Sinophone cinema. As a critical concept, queer Sinophone regionalism points to existing media flows, fandom, and

1 I am summarizing the main points on regionalism raised by Duara. See Prasenjit Duara, “Asia Redux: Conceptualizing a Region for Our Times,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4 (2010): 963–983, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40929275>.

2 Duara, 980.

3 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.

4 Shu-mei Shih, “The Concept of the Sinophone,” *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 710, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41414144>.



reception across East and Southeast Asia while also gesturing toward worldly imagination and desire in its global vision.

*Ossan's Love* exemplifies a form of queer Sinophone media that is trafficked within multiple regional scales. The original Japanese series follows Soichi Haruta (Kei Tanaka), a clumsy, humble, and hardworking real estate agent who finds himself straddled between the romantic pursuits of his boss, Musashi Kurosawa (Kôtarô Yoshida), and co-worker Ryota Maki (Kento Hayashi), who later on also becomes his roommate. The series won numerous national awards and became the biggest hit that year in Japan. It was also warmly received in East Asia. Notably, ViuTV, the company that produces the Hong Kong remake, also founded the popular boy band Mirror, whose members were recruited from its star-making reality show *Good Night Show—King Maker* (2018–). Some members of the twelve-person boy band, such as Edan Lui and Anson Lo, are among the most bankable stars in Hong Kong. Ideologically, the choice of casting Lui and Lo as the leading actors in *Ossan's Love* bespeaks a certain queer Sinophone localism. While detective stories and melodramas that appear on Hong Kong's oldest running channel, Television Broadcasts Limited, tend to depict gay men, lesbians, and transgenders as “mentally ill,” femme fatales, and murderous criminals through a narrative of “unruly death,” *Ossan's Love* is rather groundbreaking as the first Hong Kong TV drama that depicts the realistic aspects of working, living, and loving in the city as two gay men.<sup>5</sup>

*Ossan's Love* maps the queer regionalism of Hong Kong through visualizing multiple scales of regional connections and spatial imaginaries. The main protagonists, Tin (Edan Lui) and Muk (Anson Lo), assume the roles of Soichi and Ryota. The romance begins when Muk starts working at Tin's workplace, Q Realty. Muk also needs to look for a new apartment to live in, and Tin gladly invites him to cohabit after learning that Muk is a very good cook. However, their love and bromance are not without obstacles as Tin is very messy and often tosses his undergarments all over the flat. A love rival also emerges when it turns out that Tin and Muk's boss, KK (Kenny Wong), loves Tin just as much as Muk.

Obviously, the *Ossan's Love* adaptation thematically reflects the status of Hong Kong as a global city of the PRC where housing costs often rival those of New York City, Singapore, and Tokyo. Conceptually, it exemplifies queer Sinophone media by mapping the queer regionalism of Hong Kong and Taiwan through a narrative of career advancement and relocation to Taipei. In our theorization of queer regionalism, Howard Chiang and I suggest that “a queer regional model signals greater attention to less orderly, bilateral, and horizontal intra-regional traffics of queerness across different countries and regions in Asia.”<sup>6</sup> *Ossan's Love* offers a queer regional framing through a narrative of queer romance disrupted by temporary separation across Hong Kong and Taiwan. Specifically, during the thirteenth episode, Muk decides to

5 Denise Tse-Shang Tang, “An Unruly Death: Queer Media in Hong Kong,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 4 (2012): 597–614, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/485849>.

6 Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong, “Queering the Transnational Turn: Regionalism and Queer Asias,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 23, no. 11 (2016): 1645, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1136811>.

break up with Tin because he knows that Tin has a strong desire to have children. Their gay relationship can never result in a conventional marriage or heterosexual reproduction. Heartbroken, Tin is encouraged by KK to come to Taipei with him to launch a Taiwanese branch of Q Realty. While in Taipei, the two men cohabit happily for one year. When KK proposes marriage to Tin, Tin is unsure at first, but he still accepts KK's proposal out of kindness. KK and Tin return to Hong Kong to host their wedding. During their vows, KK makes Tin confront his true feelings, and Tin rushes all the way to the remote fishing island of Tai O to propose to Muk. The iconic scene of the series shows the two kissing on the red bridge of Tai O, a local landmark.

While the symbolic role of Taiwan as a regional gay mecca is unmistakable in *Ossan's Love*, the regional mapping of queerness through Tai O is less clear and perhaps even more provocative. If Tai O is often seen as more traditional and geographically remote than the rest of Hong Kong, the fact that Tin can propose to Muk with subtle support from Muk's parents in Tai O challenges the binary thinking of tradition versus modernity that typically underlines narratives of queer liberalism.<sup>7</sup> And if Taiwan symbolizes the more obvious force of queer regional aspiration in the series, Tai O also emerges as a possible queer region in Hong Kong that is slowly emerging into the horizon, if one knows where to look.

It is worth noting the economic and infrastructural platforms through which BL media commodities travel and gain popularity globally. Specifically, during the early phase of the global pandemic, the Thai BL series *Phro Rao Khu Kan* (*2gether: The Series*, GMMTV, 2020) became a major hit across Asian countries. The success of Thai BL series and related media products both regionally and globally has arguably paved the way for other BL series and films. The Japanese BL series *Cherry Magic! Thirty Years of Virginity Can Make You a Wizard?!* (TV Tokyo) became another successful hit among online viewers when it began airing in October 2020, and it won't be a surprise if any Hong Kong or Taiwan media corporation considers a local remake in the future given its portable narrative of office romance and existing fandom in Asia. The recent comeback of queer Taiwan cinema via the success of *Ke zai ni xindi de mingzi* must be understood within this economic circuit of queer regionalism during the pandemic—that is, as riding the global success of BL cultural commodities through online streaming sites and Netflix. What sets Liu's film apart from other BL series and films is that it is based on Liu's own adolescent experience of loving a fellow high school gay classmate during the initial lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987.<sup>8</sup>

The film narrates the ambivalent tension around love and friendship between Chang Jia-Han (Edward Chen), nicknamed A-Han, and another equally handsome boy, Birdy (Jing-Hua Tseng). Birdy is the mischievous one in the pair and often runs into trouble at school. A-Han belongs to a group of boys who take pleasure in bullying the obvious “weirdos” and

7 For a critique on queer liberalism, see David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

8 Tom Ue, “The Making of *Your Name Engraved Herein*: A Conversation with Patrick Liu,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 31, no. 2 (2022): 274–279, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1890004>.

gender-nonconforming boys at school, and Birdy, though quite masculine in mannerism, is rumored to be queer. The two young men go on a day trip to Taipei, but soon enough Birdy intentionally distances himself from A-Han by pretending to date a girl named Ban-Ban (Mimi Shao). During an emotional outburst after he is disciplined by the school principal, Birdy goes to A-Han's home. There, A-Han confronts the boy about their repressed love for each other in front of his parents. After an emotional trip wandering on a beach, they finally kiss. After that day, though, they are separated for more than thirty years. It isn't until the death of Father Oliver (Fabio Grangeon), their high school music teacher, that the two run into each other in Montréal. The film ends on a scenic moment as the camera pans to a street scene that dreamily depicts the two middle-aged men's younger selves playing basketball while singing along to the film's theme song, "Your Name Engraved Herein."

Although the popularity of Netflix and other European and North American streaming sites propelled the film to the highest grossing LGBTQ film in the history of Taiwan cinema, I suggest that *Ke zai ni xindi de mingzi* offers a more provocative (though subtle) illumination of queer regionalism and queer Sinophone media.<sup>9</sup> Through much of the film narrative, Father Oliver listens to A-Han's frustrated love for Birdy, and at one point the teacher confesses to A-Han that it was Montréal's political instability in 1960 that brought him to Taiwan, only to find himself entangled in another important moment of Taiwan's history, the lifting of the martial law era of repression almost thirty years later. It wasn't until another three decades had passed that the filmmaker Patrick Liu decided to make a film largely based on his unconsumed queer love. What does it mean for A-Han and Birdy to reunite not in Taiwan but in Montréal? How are 1960s Montréal, 1987 Taiwan, and post-same-sex marriage Taiwan in 2020 mediated by both regional differences and similarities? The film's ending—in which A-Han and Birdy reminisce on missing out on love due to homophobia and sexual repression—dwells not so much on queer nostalgia but on a more ambivalent sense of national belonging within present-day Taiwan. In a post-same-sex marriage world where young LGBT and queer Taiwan subjects rejoice in queer liberalism, is there a place for them as aging gay men? Ultimately, the film is as much a queer Sinophone illumination of the past, present, and future of Taiwan as it is about the queer regionalism of Taiwan, Montréal, and the world.

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9 Kat Moon, "The Real Events That Inspired *Your Name Engraved Herein*, Taiwan's Highest-Grossing LGBTQ Film of All Time," *Time*, December 18, 2020, <https://time.com/5922735/your-name-engraved-herein-true-story/>.

Charlie Yi Zhang

# The Megacity of Bangkok Rescaled through Queerness

On March 15, 2021, the organizers of Thailand Festival, an annual event sponsored by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, announced that they would collaborate with the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Osaka, Japan, to bring the grand celebration online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Featuring Thai actors Singto (Prachaya Ruangroj) and Krist (Perawat Sangpotirat), this event was designed to introduce an array of tourist spots to Japanese people through a staged “dating” trip of these two young men across Bangkok, who have risen to international stardom through their performance in the Boys’ Love (BL) drama *SOTUS: The Series* (GMM One, 2016–2017).<sup>1</sup> Since the 2014 debut of the TV show *Love Sick: The Series* (Channel 9, 2014–2015), Thailand has emerged as a prominent player in the global BL market, and its influence has now circled back to Japan, where BL originated.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Thai BL has built a solid fan base by integrating the hyperromanticized queerness popularized by Japanese BL and the androgynous masculinity characterizing K-pop culture into its unique sociocultural milieu. Thailand’s contextual specificity as a rainbow mecca has attracted myriad

1 “Live with Krist Singto,” Amazing Thailand JP, May 24, 2021, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rhud-glqdrw>.

2 Thomas Baudinette, “*Lovesick, the Series*: Adapting Japanese ‘Boys Love’ to Thailand and the Creation of a New Genre of Queer Media,” *South East Asia Research* 27, no. 2 (2019): 115–132.

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Charlie Yi Zhang, “The Megacity of Bangkok Rescaled through Queerness,” *JCMS* 62, no. 3 (Spring 2023): 164–169.

LGBTQ visitors from around the world.<sup>3</sup> The capital city Bangkok, in particular, is known for its surfeit of party circuits, celebrity DJ networks, muscular tourists populating bars and nightclubs, and fictional sites and characters defining its so-called gay-friendly history. This megacity is part of what Bobby Benedicto calls “gay globality” that combines both real and virtual into “an imaginative planetary geography” to pique and retain the curiosity and excitement of travelers.<sup>4</sup> I visited Thailand from January to April 2022 as the country went through its most severe COVID wave to date. Drawing on this experience, I will explore how the fantasized homoromanticism cultivated through BL media culture spatializes the urbanity of Bangkok in ways to reposition the city for the emerging challenges and opportunities in the wake of the pandemic by appealing to the growing international fan group of Thai BL dramas. These drama-created scenes of queerness do not reference concrete materialities of erotic and exotic urban life that Bangkok’s LGBTQ visitors can actually partake in, however. Rather, they suggest a cluster of fantasies, aspirations, and tendencies that are both transgressive and complicit, plastering a pristine image of Thai urbanity while tucking away escalating confrontations underneath mesmerizing queer sceneries.

### **AN OUTWARD URBAN LOOK STEERED THROUGH BL EYES**

On a sunny afternoon in February 2022, after I walked out of Siam Skytrain station and stepped into Centerpoint, a fashion and lifestyle shopping center located in central Bangkok, I was immediately greeted by the images of Zee (Pruk Panich) and NuNew (Chawarin Perdpiyawong), two Thai actors whose BL series *Cutie Pie* (Workpoint TV, 2022) had just started to gain momentum. As the beauty ambassadors of a Korean cosmetic brand, these young men try to improve the reputation of their patrons using the fame bestowed by their queer TV personas. This job previously was almost exclusively reserved for K-pop stars.

These young Thais, however, fully realize the aesthetical standard set up by previous Korean idols and further increase their popularity by personifying fictional BL characters. Almost identical with a lanky figure, stylish and often dyed hair, almond-shaped eyes with double eyelids, and pronounced nasal bridges on light skin perfected by makeup, they are attractive enough to embody the ethereally beautiful fictional BL characters. To attract fans’ attention and maximize the sales number, they need only to strike a pose and stage intimacy with each other to approximate a real dating relationship. This, and just this, would suffice to enable them to fulfill an otherwise daunting task of meeting and exceeding the queer reading and fantasizing desires of captious BL followers, a group that is composed of mostly well-educated young women with good jobs. Fran Martin notes that, for this form of queer fandom, BL creates a participatory space replete “with immense imaginative

3 See Charlie Yi Zhang and Adam K. Dedman, “Hyperreal Homoerotic Love in a Monarchized Military Conjunction: A Situated View of the Thai Boys’ Love Industry,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 6 (2021): 1039–1043, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1959370>.

4 Bobby Benedicto, “The Haunting of Gay Manila: Global Space-Time and the Specter of *Kabaklaan*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2–3 (2008): 319, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-035>.

energy and generative of great pleasure and intellectual as well as affective engagement.”<sup>5</sup> Borrowing Sara Ahmed’s insight on affect, one might also say that the televised queerness does not index anything real and concrete and instead serves as an anchor of affective energies that are accumulated through the representation and circulation of the queering desires centered on BL characters.<sup>6</sup> The beautiful Thai men trained to stage performative intimacy to fuel the queer fantasies held by those who are mostly self-identified as heterosexual provide the best footnote of such a mirage-like BL world.

Its phantasmatic nature notwithstanding, BL-informed queerness plays a vital role in rescaling the cityscape of Bangkok by remapping the objects, people, and relationships represented in TV dramas onto the megacity’s sprawling ambience. The Centerpoint, as its name suggests, is the symbolic and physical nexus of Siam Square, one of the most popular destinations for international tourists. Using the slogan of “One Siam,” the Thai government is seeking to reconstruct this area into a landmark to redefine Thai identity as the country emerges out of the devastating pandemic and tries to reopen its doors to the world. With a wide swath of high-end shopping malls and affordable convenience stores, restaurants, and eateries catering to different niche markets, residential neighborhoods and royal compounds, and Buddhist temples and Hindu shrines, Siam Square needs to be unified into one area with defined boundaries by identifying its core part. Tracing BL cues scattered around Siam Square, I was struck by the ways in which queerness dominates and connects this vastly differentiated space, especially as these queer traces had not been present during my last visit in 2019. At one end of Siam Square is Central World, a commercial complex that has long symbolized the Thai business network.<sup>7</sup> When I visited in 2022, the giant screen on its external façade was repeating the wedding ceremony of Mew (Suppasit Jongcheveevat) and Gulf (Kanawut Traipipattanapong), an award-winning BL celebrity couple who are especially popular in the overseas market. At the other end of the square is another shopping mall called MBK Center that competes for visitors’ attention by highlighting other BL celebrities on its outer giant screens. By appealing to BL-oriented queer eyes, this boundless space generates profuse affective energies to construct a self-image that can be seen as a coherent “One.”

On a more stretched and sparser scale, BL-cultivated queerness, through the popular TV dramas, is being projected onto the neon-decorated urban space of the city and thereby redefining what it means to be a Bangkokian. The number of COVID-19 infections was noted to spike in early 2022. The Thai BL industry also entered its prime with record production levels during the same period. In March 2022 alone, there were roughly twenty BL dramas shown on TV or online platforms, which focus predominantly on urban

5 Fran Martin, “Girls Who Love Boys’ Love: Japanese Homoerotic Manga as Transnational Taiwan Culture,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2012): 365, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2012.689707>.

6 Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 117–139, [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2\\_79-117](https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117).

7 Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

life in Bangkok. A mélange of dramatic scenarios, moments of intimate exchanges, and different scenes of studying, working, and living is integrated into the diversely narrated stories of hyper-romanticized same-sex love. Through these storylines, the ordinary life of Bangkokians is normalized as one of living in fancy penthouses, eating and shopping leisurely in high-end malls, and being preoccupied with finding a lifelong intimate partner on college campus—not worrying about real issues, such as marriage inequality, social discrimination, and the systematic abuse of transgender prisoners that plague members of LGBTQ groups in Thailand.<sup>8</sup>

Apparently, the new profile of Bangkok that is represented by BL media is an outward-looking one that moves toward somewhere, elsewhere, or nowhere. Compared with my last visit to Bangkok, BL-mediated queerness has become an integral part of the city's visual culture. Integrated into the public transportation system, it fuses seamlessly into the veins and tissues of urban life. Images and videos of BL idols can be spotted at airports and Skytrain stations, by major roads and expressways, on taxis and even *tuk-tuks*, the auto rickshaws tourists love to ride in Thailand. Following the trafficking and shifting of BL-themed queerness, the city takes an enticing outlook blessed by same-sex love oriented toward an open end that can be defined and redefined with proliferating BL spectacles and registers the fantasies, aspirations, and despairs held by numerous anxious outsiders who view the BL world as their last hope for true love.<sup>9</sup> As Thomas Baudinette's ethnographic work about the Thai BL fandom shows, these cultural productions provide important sources of affective support for viewers who are struggling with their intimate life.<sup>10</sup>

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CITY SEDIMENTED AROUND QUEER ABSENCE

ZHANG • THE MEGACITY OF BANGKOK RESCALED THROUGH QUEERNESS

On the other side—or the downside—of Bangkok's BL-mediated image is an inward look that settles down with the absence of mediated queerness. To develop a holistic view of this expansive metropolis, I made a point of visiting the places that tourists normally avoid or never hear of, such as industrial parks, rundown neighborhoods, and slums. One day while I strolled through an overpass that links Rama IV Road and Ratchadaphiset Road in the Klong Toey district, my attention was grabbed by a billboard that sits underneath the overpass. It showed a Pepsi commercial featuring a BL celebrity couple, Ohm (Pawat Chittsawangdee) and Nannon (Korapat Kirdpan), whose series *Bad Buddy* (GMM 25, 2021–2022) was an immediate global hit upon its release at the end of 2021. At the corner on one side of this billboard stands

8 See Jutathorn Pravattiyagul, "Transgender Prisoners in Thailand: Gender Identity, Vulnerabilities, Lives behind Bars, and Prison Policies," in *Gender, Criminalization, Imprisonment and Human Rights in Southeast Asia*, ed. Andrew M. Jefferson and Samantha Jeffries (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2022), 109–124; also see Timo T. Ojanen et al., "Intersections of LGBTI Exclusion and Discrimination in Thailand: The Role of Socio-Economic Status," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 16 (2019): 529–542, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-018-0361-x>.

9 Charlie Yi Zhang, *Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

10 Thomas Baudinette, *Boys Love Media in Thailand: Celebrity, Fans, and Transnational Asian Queer Popular Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

Modena by Fraser Bangkok, a fancy hotel surrounded by upscale restaurants, expat bars, bespoke tailors, and glitzy malls. On the other side of the billboard where the commercial is not visible is Bangkok's largest slum, Klong Toey, which suffered terribly from the COVID-19 pandemic. Slums like Klong Toey "are a particularly conspicuous reflection of inequality in Bangkok and its surrounding urban region."<sup>11</sup>

For me, this billboard stands out as a marker dividing the city into two halves, indexed by the presence and absence of BL-informed queerness. The proliferating outreach of BL visual culture stops here, together with the posh life associated with the part oriented toward tourists. Sitting on the land owned by the Port Authority of Thailand is Klong Toey, the core of the other half. In contrast to the open air and appealing feelings that characterize Siam Square, space must be squeezed and cramped in Klong Toey, which contains 100,000 inhabitants within approximately 1.5 square kilometers. Narrow walkways and roads zigzag through the neighborhood with odorous, putrefying garbage piled up on the sides. Many tiny homes are built upon stilts over stagnant, polluted water. Some elderly residents sit in front of their makeshift tin shacks, watching alertly over strangers like me. In Klong Toey, "an average household earns only around half of the national average and only around one-third of the income [of] an average Bangkok household."<sup>12</sup> As Apiwat Ratanawaraha notes, "Bangkok's urban and economic development policies have benefited those with wealth and power while simultaneously limiting the development options of the poor."<sup>13</sup> With the lives and jobs lost to the coronavirus as well as the deteriorating living conditions in its wake, residents here bear the major brunt of the pandemic and struggle with soaring living costs.

Absent of BL-related queer personalities, this side of Bangkok is marked by danger, disenfranchisement, and death and grounded in and sedimented through queerness's heteropatriarchal other that is symbolized by the omnipresent Thai monarch. You will find no images of BL actors here; instead, images of the country's hetero-monarchical paragon—the late King Rama IX, Bhumibol Adulyadej (often featured with his wife)—permeate this area, shoring up an outlook of the city that faces inwardly with local residents as its main target group. In the official narrative, the country of Thailand is held together through the unification of religion, monarchy, and the nation. If, as Peter A. Jackson suggests, Buddhism deifies Rama King IX as a semi-god overseeing this land and the people residing in this triangular relationship, then I would add that gender and sexuality remake the *devaraja* (god-king) into a human being of blood and flesh to whom commoners are expected to relate.<sup>14</sup> By presenting himself "as a benevolent and monogamous

11 Marc Askew, *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2002), 140.

12 "Bangkok's Klong Toey Slum," *BORGEN Magazine*, accessed April 28, 2014, <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/bangkoks-klong-toey-slum/>.

13 Apiwat Ratanawaraha, "Thailand: Bangkok," in *Asian and Pacific Cities: Development Patterns*, ed. Ian Shirley and Carol Neill (London: Routledge, 2013), 51.

14 Peter A. Jackson, "Queer Bangkok after the Millennium: Beyond Twentieth-Century Paradigms," in *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, ed. Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 1–14.



fatherly figure, Bhumibol amassed unquestionable deference” among his subjects through heteropatriarchal power.<sup>15</sup> This power is designated to be transferred to Bhumibol’s heir, King Rama X Maha Vajiralongkorn, via Vajiralongkorn’s omnipresent images, which often accompany Bhumibol’s. They consolidate King Rama X’s rule, which has been challenged by his reputation for womanizing, scandals about sexual improprieties, and extended residence in Germany, in addition to the skyrocketing social inequalities as a result of the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> On this account, through the strategic deployment of the BL-related queerness, Bangkok is divided into two parts—one for international fan/tourist groups drawn by homoromantic fantasies fueled by media spectacles and one for struggling subaltern Thais hoping to be saved by the monarchical power.

In mid-2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic started to take a toll in Thailand, protests led by students and LGBTQ groups erupted across Bangkok.<sup>17</sup> As Serhat Ünalı suggests, in the past “urban protests took place in the old part of Bangkok along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, a street that increasingly resembles an outdoor museum.”<sup>18</sup> However, the recent wave of demonstrations has shifted to the Ratchaprasong intersection directly across the street from Central World at the core of the bustling Siam Square. Yet when I revisited this area in April 2022 to find traces of the bloody confrontations between protesters and the police, the wounds and scars left by water cannons and rubber bullets seemed to be covered over by glamorous queer images. Under the giant screens that feature the beaming faces of handsome Thai BL actors, the city has retrieved its tenuous tranquility in preparation for new visitors.

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15 Zhang and Dedman, “Hyperreal Homoerotic Love,” 1040.

16 Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand’s Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 238–256.

17 Wichuta Teeratanabodee, “Feminism and the Pro-Democracy Cause in Thailand,” *ISEAS Perspective*, July 16, 2021, <http://hdl.handle.net/11540/13882>.

18 Serhat Ünalı, “Politics and the City: Protest, Memory, and Contested Space in Bangkok,” in *Contemporary Socio-Cultural and Political Perspectives in Thailand*, ed. Pranee Liamputtong (London: Springer, 2014), 209–222.

# Queer Childhood Sexuality in *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros*

Global circulations of cinema produce intimate attachments to subjects located elsewhere, whose different lives across the distance come into proximity. The English title of the Philippine indie film *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (Auraeus Solito, 2005), *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*, is quite beautiful yet imprecise in its translation of the original Tagalog in the worldwide release. *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* literally converts to “the blossoming young womanhood of Maximo Oliveros.” The original Tagalog title is gendered: the word *dalaga* means young woman and the conjugation of *pagdadalaga* indicates becoming. To translate growing womanhood as *blossoming* in the sense of *flowering* goes beyond developing as an adult woman in the community. *Flowering* can also be read as a vaginal reference in the sense of burgeoning labia.<sup>1</sup> The film is thus so much richer than its English title suggests in its representation of the adolescent child’s sexual development and how it is situated in a larger constellation of gendered identities, a complexity that I will parse for this film that circulates widely in Filipinx and queer diasporas today.

1 For a famous reference to flowers as vaginas that the painter Georgia O’Keeffe found frustrating, see Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “Flowers or Vaginas? Georgia O’Keeffe Tate Show to Challenge Sexual Clichés,” *The Guardian*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/mar/01/georgia-okeeffe-show-at-tate-modern-to-challenge-outdated-views-of-artist>.

*Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* concerns a young genderqueer Filipino youth named Maximo, or Maxie (Nathan Lopez), who may be an effeminate boy, a boyish girl, or someone in-between. At twelve years old, the adolescent may express themselves in an aggressive effeminacy that troubles the spectator's categories, but in their neighborhood slums of Manila, no one is confused or discomfited by their defiance of gender boundaries. There are other children like Maxie, so their gender expression is normalized as one available option among many. That is, they are not alone as genderqueer in this film, so they do not represent a singular anomaly or embody an individual perception of perversity.

While Maxie's gender obscurity makes them vulnerable to harassment outside the home, especially after dark, their family is composed of a kind and doting father named Paco and two protective older brothers, the quietly intense Boy (Neil Ryan Sese) and the lighthearted and flirtatious Bogs (Ping Medina). All are locally known criminals—petty thieves working in the underground economy—selling stolen cell phones or running the numbers. The Oliveros clan, in their cisgendered macho countenance, loves and protects Maxie, who has taken on the feminine role of cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the household since the death of their matriarch. But when Maxie develops an interest in the rookie policeman Victor Perez (J. R. Valentin), who eventually seeks to arrest their family after a local murder, their affection and care for this man of the law threatens to fragment the family. This film is extraordinary for the way it privileges the child's perspective, including the full-blown vulnerability in their desire for another, but it is not a coming out narrative. Maxie's queer sexuality remains ambiguous.

Because *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* is not a film about coming out, Maxie's sexuality is not the primary social category of experience in their development. Indeed, Maxie's sexuality is situated within a larger set of formative feelings and experiences, specifically mourning, grief, and poverty. Maxie seems to be heading in the direction of criminality. Their future aspiration to sell pirated DVDs is unlawful. The film does not present this path as something to which they are intrinsically prone but as the most viable, as it is exemplified and encouraged by the adults in their life. Maxie's limited choice is contextualized by the family's extreme lack of resources as poor people in the Global South. While Maxie's pursuit of a different life may be seen as a sexual one, due to the primacy of sex in defining queer identities, this film presents different kinds of queer desire that, while not denying erotic attachment, provide a broader map. In looking at the film through the lens of object relations theory—a branch of psychoanalysis focused on relations with others and their representative inanimate objects—we can see how the child's feelings exceed sexual instincts and include romance, loyalty, and grief. This allows us to examine the interpersonal relationship for how it constructs the protagonist and how we construct them as spectators. Object relations theory helps us to understand the stakes and vulnerabilities Maxie faces when expressing what I consider to be their pre-Oedipal love for the adult policeman Victor.

I analyze the act of affection toward an external love object asserted by Maxie within the context of a loving, accepting, and caring family in which

every member is grieving the loss of a wife or mother. I argue that Maxie's creative confidence is not only an expression of their sexuality but also a direct result of fully mourning their mother and of being accepted as gender-queer within their family and community. Their adolescent expression of love for the police officer, though non-genital in its developmental stage and perhaps the pursuit of a replacement for the mother, could have been dangerous if met by a predator. Its adult recipient, however, is kind and affirming like Maxie's family. This allows for a relationship that expands beyond sexuality to the search for different forms of adulthood that are not immersed in criminality and grief. Yet the relationship between Maxie and Victor does not preclude the possibility of eroticism and sensuousness that, as I will explore through psychoanalysis, is like and not like the maternal.

As *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* is set outside the United States, it counters the moralism in American Hollywood cinema and its myopic understanding of representations of childhood sexuality as a thing to be feared rather than assuming the innocence of the child outside the adult's imposition of genital sexuality. In this way, Maxie's differently queer sexuality transgresses the imperial boundaries of the Philippines and the United States, where queer liberation is assumed to be located in the West, questioning how the concept of queerness travels across borders. Moreover, situating Maxie's sexual self-sovereignty within poverty, grief, and mourning illuminates the richness of contextual relationships that shape us as we grow up and those we experience in movies. Through a love object that cannot be limited to sexual desire, this movie meaningfully depicts a queer childhood enmeshed in playful creativity and directly linked to mourning a mother and in the development of self-sovereignty.

By allowing Maxie to elide sexual categorization, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* reveals the limits of how we understand queerness. Queerness is not only about same-sex attraction or trans identity that does not conform to the gender binary. Queerness is a critique that centrally lambastes compulsory heterosexuality, explodes the gender binary, and frames the world askew, or what Sara Ahmed calls the "oblique," which expands our existing structures of existence, including race and class denigration in relation to gender and sex.<sup>2</sup> This film explores sexuality not as an instinct that needs to be fed or an aim that needs to be expressed, but as a simmering, percolating, and existing desire for bodily pleasure as well as psychic connections with another. It includes the erotics of the visual in evaluating the beauty and desirability of the self and another. As the film illustrates, the erotics of the visual do not always emanate from or result in genital sex but might instead fill in the contours of the missing mother with a mother-like figure.

Sex—in all of its allurements—can distract from this multipronged, multifaceted view of queerness. And *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* certainly presents twists and turns of queer youth—sexual desire, erotic attachment, mourning the mother, and navigating poverty—to show how multiple

2 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 162.

factors upend the life of a character in flux. The queerness of the film is not confined to representing certain kinds of desire, even prohibited desire. Rather, it emerges in how the film attempts to formally represent the gaps that exist in the developing child's life. *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* may be about a child in the pre-Oedipal cusp of coming into their own sexuality. The desire for an adult significantly older than themselves exists within the diegesis, but depicting it is not the end goal of the film. The film does not set out to make prohibitive desire materialize in a sexual or conjugal way but rather seeks to explore what kind of life one can ideally forge as one embarks on adolescence and young adulthood. Throughout this film, the genderqueer child constructed within the film asks, Can I be the woman or person I want to be? This question is part of a larger cultural quest to materialize one's queerness and establish a different sense of belonging and fashion the self as non-normative.

Maxie's personality is established in the film by their hips, which energetically move side to side as if modeling on a runway or competing in a beauty pageant. Their physical expression is accompanied by a ferocious confidence that *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* establishes immediately, along with the poverty of their situation. The film opens with a montage of Maxie's environs: a small white mass in green water is revealed to be part of a gargantuan and monstrous pile of colorful floating garbage. The garbage pile is so high that it almost reaches the street, which bustles with people reflected in the water. A hand picks an orchid from the wretched, wet pile of muck. We hear the dense sounds of urbanity: crowds of people talking, cars honking, and children playing with old bottles in the gutter. A song referring to love for the country of the Philippines plays as Jeepneys (World War II vehicles repurposed as community buses) drive by. A girl's pink dress hangs among tattered, brown men's clothes above the street. A shot of Maxie with the orchid tucked behind their ear appears murkily on-screen, providing our first glimpse of the titular character. In this manner, the film quickly establishes gender play within the situation of poverty in the Global South.

The next shot of Maxie shows them moving through the narrow walkways of their neighborhood, past clusters of men. The men tease them by sexualizing their femininity and asking, "Who are you flirting with today?" Such comments sexualize dressing up in feminine clothes of a young girl, which is actually a gendered act. Maxie responds by spurning the men's laughter with a growl. In a close-up shot, they cackle and lunge forward toward the men without care or fear. To behold Maxie on the street is to recognize their self-consciousness and self-confidence in the face of recurring hostility.

Because of scenes like these, the earliest reviews of *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* anticipated a hostile reception of the film's matter-of-fact presentation of childhood sexuality. As critic Keith Uhlich noted, "What's often lost in this swirl of knee-jerk 'adult' protectiveness are the feelings of the child, which—raw though they may be—deserve to be included in the discussion rather than subsumed by argumentation."<sup>3</sup> As the film circulated the

3 Keith Uhlich, "Review: *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*," *Slant*, March 8, 2006, <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/the-blossoming-of-maximo-oliveros/>.

globe, however, the tone of the reviews changed from fear of pedophilia to something else, a kind of queer positivity. Nathan Lee's *New York Times* review captures how *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* "charmed film festival audiences from Sundance to Jerusalem with its refreshingly blasé handling of homosexuality, its amiable actors and its delicacy of milieu."<sup>4</sup> Lee essentially concurs with Uhlich that there is a nonchalant matter-of-factness to the film's representation of child queerness. That is, it is unclear to him whether Maxie's "homosexuality" is located in the adolescent's bodily performances of queerness or in their relationships with others. Other reviews likewise capture the worldwide phenomenon of the film's glowing reception, proving earlier trepidations wrong.

Indeed, in a pre-genital world of desire, Maxie may be within a much wider range of queer sexuality. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud writes, "It is an instructive fact that under the influence of seduction children can become polymorphously perverse, and can be led into all possible kinds of sexual irregularities."<sup>5</sup> Here, Freud asserts that the seduction of children by adults can shape the expression and form of their instincts, especially when they are not yet formed by the external forces of shame, disgust, and morality in the classification of their sexual aims.

To understand *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* beyond tropes about the dangers of expressing childhood sexuality is to expand our understanding of childhood development and the role of relations with others and to learn from others' contexts. The film reminds us that we need to measure what is happening in childhood rather than make assumptions about it. Are children learning how to be strong, how to be free and represent their organic sexuality, or are they becoming distorted due to adult impositions and deprivation of that self-sovereignty? Thus, I read this film as exploring both Maxie's creativity and sexuality as a form of grief and how they are forging their adult life in the context of poverty. In understanding the expression of child development as pre-Oedipal, a non-genital desire is part of a larger constellation of relationships forged on the path to adulthood—one of health and strength that unquestionably maintains queerness.

To be clear, I do not disavow the nascent homoerotic stirrings that must be acknowledged even in the search for a lost mother, or in what the critic Michael D. Klemm identifies as Victor's paternal treatment of Maxie.<sup>6</sup> But for the spectator, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* enables a larger view of childhood development in which sexuality is just a part. Maxie forges performance and play as part of their normal development that only becomes sexual with the adult imposition of genital sex. My approach to this film thus fleshes out a claim that child development exceeds sexual drives of

4 Nathan Lee, "Floating above the Slums of Manila on a Current of Love," *New York Times*, September 22, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/22/movies/22blos.html>.

5 Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VII (1901–1905): A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality, and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2011), 191.

6 Michael D. Klemm, "Secret Worlds," *CinemaQueer*, March 2009, <https://cinemaqueer.com/review/pages/2/blossoming/aleon.html>.

pleasure fulfillment or genital love without disavowing queer sexuality. *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* expands our understanding of sexuality and queerness by situating Maxie's quest for identity in mourning and poverty. Object relations theory can illuminate how Maxie pursues the opportunity to construct herself in a world with limited options, because it moves away from biological drives and instincts of aggression and sexuality to emphasize relationships that address life's crises of the self—whether loneliness, family, death, love, or growing up. Like global attachments in cinema, intimate attachments can be distorted in a singular manner toward a limited definition of genital sex, which prevents an expanded understanding of childhood sexuality in not only other contexts but also our own. Childhood sexuality demands representation, pre-Oedipal and innocent, moving away from the premature adultification too frequently befalling Filipinx youth in industries of sex and representation.

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# Reanimating the Socialist Child—Queerly: The Sideways of a Chinese Animation *Nezha naohai*

## IN THE BEGINNING—IS SUICIDE,

with a sword, by a child, in an animation, in one of my earliest movie memories.

I was shocked, captivated, obsessed. Four decades later, merely mentally picturing the scene still arrests my heart, undams my tears.

This scene remains so overwhelming because it ambushed me. Growing up in socialist China, going to block-booked movies was a student's obligation. With no trailer, no spoiler, not even offered a poster, I had no interest in a film called *Nezha naohai* (*Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King*, Wang Shuchen, Xu Jingda, Yan Dingxian, 1979). Who is Nezha anyway—a difficult name, sounding odd, barely even sensible as a name. Why should I care about someone with a nonsensical name doing something nonsensical like churning up the sea (the literal meaning of the Chinese title)? Little did I know that this pivotal scene of the child's suicide and subsequent rebirth would become a portal for my appreciation of the queering power within a patently individualistic child hero animated feature.

In the theater, I remained unengaged despite all the spectacular scenes of Nezha fighting and defeating the dragons and other anthropomorphized aquatic animals—until the scene of suicide. The freeze-frame extreme close-up of Nezha's large enraged eyes filling the screen drove into my heart the unbearable intensity of memories, despair, defiance, letting go, and grief, even as life is drifting away from Nezha's body.

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Yiman Wang, "Reanimating the Socialist Child—Queerly: The Sideways of a Chinese Animation *Nezha naohai*," *JCMS* 62, no. 3 (Spring 2023): 176–182.



Along with that shocking image, also ingrained in my sensorium are Nezha's parting words to General Li: "Daddy, I return to you your flesh and bones. You shall not be responsible for what I have done!" This is followed by Nezha crying out into the universe "Shifu!" (Master!) in a wide-angle long shot. In concert with torrential rain, cracking lightning, and rolling thunder, the child unleashes utmost despair and rebels against the blood lineage that locks everybody into relationships of indebtedness, relationships that demand conformity based on one's status as a descendant. To slash this trap, which conceptualizes one's corporeal body as the evidence of one's debt to progenitors, Nezha turns their back on their father, the audience, and the camera and slits their throat, a scene that ends in a freeze-frame.

With this finite cut and cut-off, time stops, raindrops hangs still, Nezha's companion deer and human family members are all caught suspended in motion, mouth agape in shock. The rushing background orchestration crescendos, then abruptly falls silent as if in mourning—and anticipation. A child has relinquished their "flesh and bones" to the parent and summarily canceled the debt.

Breaking the cosmic silence is a pluck of a Chinese pipa string instrument that cascades into agitated musical notes, as the human-born Nezha gazes at this world one last time. Those mortal eyes fill the screen (in the shot that opens this essay), their one tear congealing rage and grief, electrifying the screen. As the rushing pipa notes give way to mournful violins, Nezha's unrelenting gaze lap dissolves into the companion deer galloping midair in slow motion, followed by a shot of the child's hands groping, oneiric, for *huntianling* (a long red sash that sweeps the heaven topsy-turvy) and *qiankunquan* (a gold ring that unsettles the cosmos)—a pair of magic weapons given to them by Shifu. With one last tear rolling down their cheek, Nezha's eyes close. The child-shaped flesh and bones now lie flat, gently licked by the deer who has arrived with the weapons, too late. These magic weapons have enabled Nezha to defeat the dragons and have subsequently been confiscated by their father to forestall more troubles. This scene ends with a lap dissolve, and the child's body is gone, leaving behind a shining bead to be carried by a crane to Shifu.

#### WHAT COULD A CHILD HAVE DONE—

that requires a life for atonement, or rather, to save the father from being implicated? Per the film's narrative, Nezha has, with their powerful magic weapons, enraged the children-devouring dragon family by killing the junior, humiliating the senior who then convenes his three brothers to exact revenge by raising all four seas to flood Nezha's hometown and jeopardize all the townspeople's lives. They do all this to force General Li (the father) to kill Nezha (the culprit). Facing the pandemonium that uncannily foreshadows today's climate crisis, pained by his people being swept into the watery grave, unable to kill his own "flesh and bones," and yet also unwilling to return the weapons to Nezha, General Li is petrified. He fails to protect his child, for he sees the child's challenge to the tyrannical dragon family as nothing but monstrosity.

This narrative per se does not interest me, however. What has captivated me since my childhood encounter with the film is the burst of unfamiliar yet irresistible energy that animates the pivotal scenes of Nezha's suicide and subsequent rebirth. I am not alone in feeling awestruck by those scenes. In fact, *Nezha naohai* not only has remained popular with children but has also been considered the acme of the Shanghai Animation Studio's productions since the Cultural Revolution. It was released in 1979 as the first widescreen animation feature in celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China; it was also the first Chinese animation selected for the Cannes Film Festival (in 1980). The film pools the resources of the entire studio and boasts a formidable directorial trio (Wang Shuchen, Xu Jingda, and Yan Dingxian) and a top-notch crew of animation designers, musicians, and voice actors. An anamorphic film camera was adapted to do the filming. The music effect produced by the over-two-thousand-year-old *bianzhong*, the sixty-five-bell chime, excavated in Hubei province a year prior was incorporated into the film's score.<sup>1</sup> The all-out efforts were described by the crew as their struggle to break out of the repression they had suffered during the ten-year Cultural Revolution that had just ended in 1976.<sup>2</sup> In this spirit, *Nezha* has been allegorically interpreted as a hero who speaks truth and fights for the masses in the face of dictatorship. *Nezha's* suicide is correspondingly glossed over as a heroic gesture of self-sacrifice.

Such an allegorical reading celebrates individualistic heroism yet fails to address the queering power of *Nezha's* decision to renounce the blood bondage and to cancel the debt of "flesh and bones." Clearly, the production crew worked in an era when the word *queer* (*ku'er* in Chinese) was unheard of and same-sex relationships were a strict taboo. My seemingly anachronistic reading of *Nezha's* queering power resonates with Kathryn Bond Stockton's critical imperative "to horizontalize History by *putting texts outside of it by its side*."<sup>3</sup> According to Stockton, History "grows sideways and outside itself," prompting her to put "reading-in-desire beside the histories that have no place for it, as of yet."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, I reconsider how this high-profile animated feature potentially branches away from straight socialist discourse. My goal is to showcase "queering" as a twofold practice of reorientation: for *Nezha* in dismantling heteronormative patriarchal kinship and for me in reckoning

I wish to thank the JCMS In Focus team for their meticulous editing and most helpful suggestions. Any errors that might still remain are my sole responsibility

- 1 The cinematographer Duan Xiaoxuan recalled the arduous process of adapting an anamorphic film camera for making this animation. See Fu Guangchao, "Jinshang tianhua kao houqi: jingdian donghua *Nezha naohai* muhou jiemi (8)" [Post-production as the finishing touch: Behind the scenes of *Nezha naohai* 8], November 7, 2017, <https://www.bilibili.com/read/cv61528>. For the incorporation of *bianzhong* music into the score, see Fu Guangchao, "Yuyin raoliang you bujue: jingdian donghua *Nezha naohai* muhou jiemi (6)" [The music goes on: Behind the scenes of *Nezha naohai* 6], October 12, 2017, <https://www.bilibili.com/read/cv32683>.
- 2 See Fu Guangchao, "Baigujing xiamai hualai *Nezha chongsheng*: jingdian donghua *Nezha naohai* muhou jiemi (2)" [Down goes "The Tale of the White-boned Demon," up goes *Nezha naohai*: Behind the scenes of *Nezha naohai* 2], September 5, 2017, <https://www.bilibili.com/read/cv8688>.
- 3 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 9 (emphasis mine).
- 4 Stockton, 9, 10.

with the film's affective impact on myself and others of my generation. Ultimately, I reinflect the film to propose an eco-erotic queer kinscape.

My intervention draws on Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, according to which queer reorientations "move between sexual and social registers, without flattening them or reducing them to a single line."<sup>5</sup> Thus, *queering* is simultaneously a sexual-erotic practice and a socio-political intervention. This understanding enables me to probe the unruly child as a queer force that reorients the heteronormative temporal-spatial orders and harbingers an eco-erotic and non-blood-bound recomposition as a whole new form of vital transfiguration.

### RENOUNCING A MALE PARENT'S "FLESH AND BONES"

is profoundly devastating to a social bedrock rooted in the Confucian teaching of filial piety: "Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety."<sup>6</sup> Self-annihilation not only dismantles the social hierarchy premised on the Confucian doctrine of filial piety but also destroys the corporeal basis for heteronormative reproduction. In *Nezha nao-hai*, this disruption is particularly poignant, for Nezha's birth is marked, from the outset, as corporeally monstrous. Responding to General Li's question "Is it a boy or a girl?" a servant stutters hesitatingly, "I don't know what it is." The "it" Li subsequently confronts appears to be an inert fleshy ball. (Nezha's mother is conspicuously absent throughout the entire film.) Thinking to himself, "This thing coming out of three and half years' pregnancy? It cannot be auspicious," Li promptly chops the flesh ball with his sword. With a sharp metallic sound, the ball bursts open, literally animated into three layers of glowing lotus petals surrounding a raised seedpod on which a tiny naked human baby comes alive and instantly pulls off a lotus petal, which turns into a red bodice covering their torso down to their genitals.

Nezha's birth is riddled with ambivalences from the outset. Do they come from a heterosexual human couple? Is this little human male or female? Or, rather, are they even human, or perhaps a plant or proto-organism? These questions pop up only to be tucked away, or naturalized, in the remaining narrative. Adapted from a sixteenth-century classic fantasy novel, *Fengshen yanyi* (*The Investiture of Deities*), the film operates from the premise that there is nothing unusual about regular communion or contention between deities (e.g., the immortal Shifu), mortals (e.g., General Li), companion animal spirits (e.g., Nezha's deer and Shifu's crane), and evil animal spirits (e.g., the dragon family). In this cosmology, Nezha's mystery birth, adoption, and empowerment by Shifu with superhuman power are all presented as wondrous but expected due to constant more-than-human interventions.

Such category-confounding interactions, I suggest, should not be naturalized as befitting the fantasy genre but rather be understood as exactly what they are: means of messing up the underlying logic of demarcations.

5 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 161.

6 James Legge, trans., *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), 466.

Nezha's affective queering power consists precisely in their uncategorizable dwelling between gender norms and between the human and the more-than-human. Instead of fitting Nezha into the straight discourse of heroism, I stress their decision to grow "sideways" (à la Stockton) and to frustrate what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism"—that is, a prescribed teleological future predicated on heteronormative reproduction.<sup>7</sup> By renouncing their father's "flesh and bones," Nezha redoubles the sideways growth by first resisting the heteropatriarchal expectations and then rejecting anthropocentric biologism altogether.

### ECO-EROTIC RECOMPOSITION

signals Nezha's rebirth into an alternative future after exiting from the heteropatriarchal "reproductive futurism." Instead of being reborn *in* a lotus flower—as is their first birth, where the flower is just a vessel akin to the absent mother's womb—Nezha is now recomposed *as* a lotus plant that is then literally animated, or brought to life, as a human-lotus cyborg. Following their suicide, their body gives way to the essence, a shining bead, that is carried away by the crane to Shifu. There, in the unearthly serene realm of mountains and waterways, the bead is planted into a pink lotus flower onto which Shifu brings a glittering shower, evoking a womb being inseminated. Yet the subsequent series of superimposition shots shows that the gestation is a process of compositing a body of lotus roots clothed within green lotus leaves and pink lotus petals (see Figure 1). Instead of a body governed by human biology, then, Nezha reborn is a "transbiological" cyborg that, similar to the Pixar animations studied by Jack Halberstam, "refuse[s] the idea of human exceptionalism and place[s] the human firmly within a universe of multiple modes of being."<sup>8</sup>

Specifically, Nezha's transcorporeality with the lotus plant makes them an eco-erotic cyborg in the Harawayan tradition. For Donna Haraway, the concept of cyborg emphasizes the process of compositing disparate elements into an entity that defies purist anthropocentric biology and lineage and encompasses surprising combinations and the category-confounding connections.<sup>9</sup> The eco-erotic dimension suggests a cosmic creative energy superseding anthropocentric heteropatriarchy, reorienting and queering the sexual-social dual order.

Importantly, Nezha's recomposed revival is materialized by the animation design and techniques that transform still cel drawings into motion, breathing life into discrete objects and cohering them into a newly arranged organism. Following the effervescent superimposition shots that show how the lotus roots and leaves morph into Nezha's body and clothing, another set of superimposed keyframe shots depicts Nezha striking different poses with

7 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

8 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 33.

9 Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181.



Figure 1. A superimposition shot of the lotus roots transforming into Nezha's recomposed body in *Nezha naohai* (*Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King*, Shanghai Animation Studio, 1979).

their eyes closed, until Shifu calls their name, prompting them to wake up. This time, Shifu enhances Nezha's power by giving them a spear and a pair of fiery wheels that enable them to glide through air at lightning speed. They also acquire the magical ability to metamorphose into a three-headed and six-armed complex composite to better fight the dragon family.

The iconography in this sequence draws on the portrayal of Buddhist deities, yet the effect of animation goes beyond simple appropriation of Buddhist aesthetics to visualize the vital flow between variegated life-forms and elements (including water, air, and light). A comparison of the storyboard and the finished film suggests that the emphasis on Nezha's step-by-step recomposition out of the more-than-human environment is a conscious decision on the part of the film's chief animation designer Lin Wenxiao. She was also responsible for designing portions of scenes with Shifu (along with another female animation designer, Lu Qing). In the storyboard, Nezha simply has the head and clothing composited from the lotus plant and doesn't undergo the keyframe animation.<sup>10</sup> Lin's design fully avails the medium of animation to strengthen Nezha's transbiological rebirth.

### FROM THE HETEROPATRIARCHAL DEBT TO THE ECO-EROTIC "KINSCAPE"

charts out how I queer the transformational scenes of Nezha's suicide and rebirth, rubbing against the dominant discourse of individualistic heroism to reveal the film's potential of "growing sideways and outside itself." Indigenous scholars such as Brenda Macdougall and Daniel Heath Justice have

10 The storyboard along with the detailed work process can be found in Fu Guangchao, "Donghua shejishi yong huabi yanchu de yishujia: donghua dianying *Nezha naohai* muhou jiemi (7)" [Animation designers artists who act with paint brushes: Behind the scenes of *Nezha naohai* 7], October 27, 2017, <https://www.bilibili.com/read/cv48485>.

theorized kinscape as relationality beyond blood lineage and rooted in land.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, I see Nezha's kinscape as amalgamating plants, air, water, and fire—what Haraway would call the “oddkin” that emerges from “unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles.”<sup>12</sup> Emphasizing Nezha's eco-erotic recomposition and kinscape, in the face of the pandemonium of the dragon family's rampant flooding, I not only show that the sixteenth-century child demi-deity Nezha is reborn as a socialist child hero through animation, but, more importantly, I take this animation outside its straight self to propose a queer environmental affective politics.

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11 Brenda Macdougall, “Wahkootowin as Methodology: How Archival Records Reveal a Métis Kinscape,” in “Daniels Conference Panel 6: Métis Registries,” - rcmr, January 28, 2017, YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OswhPdRwJIM&ab\\_channel=-rcmr](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OswhPdRwJIM&ab_channel=-rcmr); and Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018).

12 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 4.

Jamie J. Zhao

# Global TV Formats Queer Contemporary China<sup>1</sup>

TV formats are sets of transferable ideas, principles, and procedures to produce and remake television programs.<sup>2</sup> They “are designed to ‘travel well’ across national boundaries” and are adaptable to various domestic markets.<sup>3</sup> While the transnational exchange of TV formats was considered “an Anglo-phone development,”<sup>4</sup> the rapid integration of television production, circulation, and consumption into a global trade system since the 1990s has created many popular global TV formats that have become profitable media franchises and been widely (re)made in different parts of world.<sup>5</sup> A case in point is the Dutch reality television franchise *Big Brother* (Veronica, 1999–) that has been adapted in more than sixty regions worldwide as of August 2021.<sup>6</sup> Since the late 1990s, the television industry of the People’s Republic of China has also started to creatively appropriate standardized global media and cultural formulas to produce content compatible with local political-ideological

1 The work described in this paper was fully supported by a Start-up Grant for New Faculty from City University of Hong Kong (Project No. 9610632)

2 Albert Moran, *Copycat TV: Globalisation, Program Formats and Cultural Identity* (Luton, UK: University of Luton Press, 1998), 23.

3 Silvio Waisbord, “McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats,” *Television & New Media* 5, no. 4 (2004): 368, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476404268922>.

4 Albert Moran, “Global Television Formats: Genesis and Growth,” *Critical Studies in Television* 8, no. 2 (2013): 2, <https://doi.org/10.7227/CST.8.2.2>.

5 Moran, 11.

6 Maddy Reda, “Culture Pick: Reality TV Gauntlet ‘Big Brother’ Is a Television Gem, but Isn’t Exempt from Ignorant Pitfalls,” *Crimson White*, August 31, 2022, <https://thecrimsonwhite.com/99859/culture/big-brother-diversity/>.

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Jamie J. Zhao, “Global TV Formats Queer Contemporary China,” *JCMS* 62, no. 3 (Spring 2023): 183–190.

projects. Toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a few highly popular TV formats originally developed in Euro-America, such as *Idol* and *Survivor*, were employed as efficient catalysts of the party-state's strategic goals of media marketization and cultural globalization.<sup>7</sup> Global TV formats have thus played an indispensable role in the economic, cultural, and social-political transformations of contemporary Chinese media landscapes.<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, gender and sexual television images that subvert local heteronormative ideals have proliferated in entertainment TV shows made, distributed, and consumed in contemporary China. Most of these productions are variety or reality TV shows adapted from global TV formats. Notable beneficiaries of these productions include numerous tomboyish (meaning young, masculine) female singers who have risen to stardom in *Idol*-style reality singing competitions and effeminate, beautiful male stars who have enjoyed wide popularity for their appearances in the trans-Asian idol group training programs.<sup>9</sup> In both cases, the nonbinary personae of these celebrities and their television performances are socioculturally legitimized in the Chinese context. These adapted Chinese shows do not present the stars' nonconforming images as visual signs for more politically sensitive and censorable lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identities and sexualities.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the shows subtly depoliticize and explain their gender-nonconformity as expressions of Chinese-specific individualism, feminism, cosmopolitanism, or fashion styles that synthesize characteristics of local and global public and pop cultures.<sup>11</sup> Such dissociation and depoliticization also result from these television stars' frequent cultural references to premodern and modern Chinese gender norms and paradigms, their incorporation of inter-Asian and cosmopolitan gender aesthetics, and their promotion of official ideologies.

Existing scholarship has considered local adaptations of global TV formats as "gendered and gendering" venues that both circulate and reconfigure various patriarchal elements transnationally.<sup>12</sup> For example, dating show formats, such as *The Bachelor* (ABC, 2002–), often feature a highly hetero-

7 Michael Keane, "A Revolution in Television and a Great Leap Forward for Innovation? China in the Global Television Format Business," in *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television across Borders*, ed. Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf (New York: Routledge, 2012), 90.

8 Albert Moran and Justin Malbon, *Understanding the Global TV Format* (Portland, OR: Intellect Books, 2006), 7.

9 See Jamie J. Zhao, "Queer, Yet Never Lesbian: A Ten-Year Look Back at the Reality TV Singing Competition Show *Super Voice Girl*," *Celebrity Studies* 9, no. 4 (2018): 470–486, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2018.1508957>; and Geng Song, "'Little Fresh Meat': The Politics of Sissiness and Sissyphobia in Contemporary China," *Men and Masculinities* 25, no. 1 (2022): 68–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X211014939>.

10 China decriminalized and de-pathologized homosexuality in 1997 and 2001, respectively. Yet the government often categorizes explicit homosexual content as vulgar or pornographic and thus bans it. See also Hongwei Bao, *Queer Media in China* (London: Routledge, 2021).

11 Jing Jamie Zhao, "A Splendid Chinese Queer TV? 'Crafting' Non-normative Masculinities in Formatted Chinese Reality TV Shows," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 164–168, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1120486>; and Zhao, "Queer, Yet Never Lesbian," 470–486.

12 Misha Kavka and Brenda R. Weber, "Introduction: Transnational Gender Cultures and Reality TV," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549416640555>.



centric setting and mobilize “culturally specific gender tropes” to reproduce and promote various forms of misogyny and hegemonic male masculinity in their local adaptations.<sup>13</sup> Yet I take a different approach, conceptualizing certain global TV formats, such as those featuring intensive homosocial bonding and settings (e.g., the reality singing competitions shows with an all-female cast) or those promoting heteropatriarchal ideals (e.g., heterosexual match-making shows), as inherently queer-enacting, queer-structured, and queer-scripted. These queer-inflected formats and their localization speak volumes about the coexistence and mutual implications of queer and heterosexual sentiments in normative Chinese societies.

Specifically, I employ a queering lens to analyze the formats of and dramatic moments in several popular reality shows in contemporary China. I pay particular attention to the long-running popular dating show *Feicheng wurao* (*If You Are the One*, JSTV, 2010–) and unfold the ways in which heterocentric TV formats might *queer* and *be queered* despite predominantly heteronormative media and public discourses. I see *queer* as a critical, analytical practice to interrogate “nonnormative ways of being, doing, desiring, and imagining in and cross various forms of traditionally defined boundaries.”<sup>14</sup> My discussion explores the queer-enabling potential and queered adaptations of global TV formats and unravels the nonnormative meanings and connotations flowing in and through contemporary China’s televisual spaces. I also demonstrate that local Chinese heteropatriarchal familial and marital ideals are simultaneously revitalized and de-naturalized by the post-2010 convergence of global gender and sexual cultures and the queerness of global TV formats.

## QUEER-ENABLING SETTINGS

One of the most sensational *Idol*-formatted Chinese singing competitions, *Chaoji nüsheng* (*Super Voice Girls*, HTV, 2004–2016), incorporated televisual elements from Euro-American-originated reality programs, such as *Fame Academy* (BBC One, 2002–2003) and *Big Brother*, to create a self-secluded, female homosocial setting (often featuring fairy tale–like, non-Chinese, voyeuristic visual designs). In particular, *Chaoji nüsheng*’s tomboyish participants were encouraged to form close bonds and act intimately with hyperfeminine participants. The show’s hybridized reality TV and academy-training styles helped capture and highlight the process in which one tomboyish participant was always coupled with a traditionally feminine participant to live and train together within a secluded space for months. During the course of the cruel competition, the two became best friends, performing romantic songs and plays written for heterosexual couples, saving each other from being eliminated in the earlier stage of the competition but eventually being forced to compete against each other fiercely to win the show. In this sense, *Chaoji nüsheng*’s format adaptation and hybridization produced a female homo-

13 Kavka and Weber, 6; and Sarah Sahagian, “Patriarchy, Pop Culture, and the Taboo of Adult Male Virginity,” *The Establishment*, January 30, 2019, <https://theestablishment.co/patriarchy-pop-culture-and-the-taboo-of-adult-male-virginity/index.html>.

14 Jamie J. Zhao and Hongwei Bao, “‘Queer/ing China’: Theorizing Chinese Genders and Sexualities through a Transnational Lens,” *criticalasianstudies.org*, Commentary Board, April 5, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.52698/KLCE9376>.

erotic wonderland with dramatic scenes, which intensified the queer ambience surrounding some of its high-profiled participants who were rumored to be real-life lesbians on social media and in their queer fandom.<sup>15</sup> Its girlish, fantastical visual aesthetics and fierce battling style also allowed the show to metaphorically distance queer fantasies and readings from China's heteronormative reality, as they helped frame the show as fictional media and public fantasies about intimate sisterhood. This queer (or rather, queering) strategy, realized through the show's hybrid format, thus evaded official censorship of explicitly homosexual content.

Similarly, the celebrity parenting reality show *Baba qū na'er* (*Where Are We Going, Dad?*, HTV, 2013–2019) was adapted from a South Korean format, in which a group of male celebrities with stable hetero-marital and familial relationships were asked to live together and take care of their children in unfamiliar sociocultural environments without help of adult female family members. The seemingly progressive gender politics enabled the male celebrities to learn parenting skills essential to their heterosexual family lives and to share the domestic labor usually shouldered by women. Yet they were also positioned in a male homosocial context in which they lived together and helped one another become good, caring, and responsible fathers to their children. This format's queer subtlety became particularly apparent when the third season of the show included two married, masculine Chinese actors, Hu Jun and Liu Ye, who once played a same-sex couple in the well-known gay film *Lan Yu* (Stanley Kwan, 2001). On the show, the celebrities were often expected to perform a revised form of Chinese hegemonic male masculinity that included acting tough and rational when facing challenges and constructing intimate brotherhood with one another as well as being considerate and gentle to their family members. In this and other ways, the show's ultimate appeal becomes its queer reworking of the gendered and sexual dimensions of the celebrity participants' lives and experiences on reality TV. That appeal further hinges on its dual representations of the participants' on-screen homoerotic tension and their real-life heterosexual marriage and family.

In addition to TV formats featuring homosocial and homoerotic environments, a variety of shows adapted in recent years have centered on cross-gender imitations, gender parodies, and queer theatrical performances onstage. These queer-coded formats and representations have largely avoided official censorship, as they can be culturally legitimized as artistic expressions, vocal talents, and performance styles, including operatic traditions. Take, for example, the celebrity impersonation show *Baibian daka xiu* (*Your Face Sounds Familiar*, Mango TV, 2012–2014, 2021), which was adapted from the Spanish show *Tu cara me suena* (Endemol/Antena 3, 2011–). Drawing on East Asian cosplay aesthetics, the history of cross-dressing in traditional Chinese operas, global gay cultures, and televisual elements from the American

15 See Jim Yardley, "The Chinese Get the Vote, if Only for 'Super Girl,'" *New York Times*, September 4, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/04/weekinreview/the-chinese-get-the-vote-if-only-for-super-girl.html>; and Ling Yang and Hongwei Bao, "Queerly Intimate: Friends, Fans and Affective Communication in a Super Girl Fan Fiction Community," *Cultural Studies* 26, no. 6 (2012): 842–871, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.679286>.

drag competition *RuPaul's Drag Race* (VH1, 2009–), *Baibian daka xiu* invited many Asian and Euro-American celebrities to perform bold and transgressive impersonations of iconic figures of the opposite sex. Thus, it gradually became a televised stage for local drag and campy scenes. Particularly, on the 2021 season of *Baibian daka xiu*, the British singer Jessie J was invited to impersonate the legendary gay icon Freddie Mercury in her rendition of the song “We Will Rock You.” While the song has been a popular item in global drag culture, the airing network and many Chinese audiences, who may not have adequate global queer knowledge to recognize the show’s drag essence or intentionally avoided highlighting the queerness of the performance to help it evade censorship, promoted and appreciated Jessie J’s drag performance as a sensational manifestation of her vocal skills and stage confidence.<sup>16</sup>

### THE HETEROSEXUAL CONTOURS OF QUEERNESS

Unlike the above-mentioned queer-charged formatted programs, *Feicheng wurao* is a heterosexual matchmaking show, largely based on the Australian dating game *Taken Out* (Network Ten, 2008–2009). Each episode of *Feicheng wurao* features twenty-four single women standing on the stage, waiting for a bachelor to walk onto the stage and select his “love at first sight.” Then, during several rounds of dialogue and debate among the bachelor, female guests, host, and celebrity marriage specialists, each female guest can turn off a light on her own podium if she loses interest in the bachelor. If the bachelor has any lights left for him at the end, he will have the chance to persuade a female guest to date him. The female guest is also allowed to reject his advances.

Since its premiere, *Feicheng wurao* has received much scholarly attention due to its innovative navigation of a heterocentric televisual discourse.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, what is missing from this recent scholarship is a careful consideration of how nonnormative gender and sexual identities have contributed to its success. Similar to *Chaoji nüsheng*, *Feicheng wurao* has over the years unexpectedly promoted a number of tomboyish female guests, who were labeled “most handsome female no. 1” by audiences, as they were often arranged as the first female guest of the twenty-four onstage. These tomboyish women consistently emphasized that their ideal partner is a man who is more handsome and masculine than they are. Some tomboyish guests also explained their gender deviance as an indicator of their immature, personal style or a result of past unpleasant experiences, which could yet be changed for their true (heterosexual) love.

For example, one of the most famous tomboyish guests, Li Huanyi, first appeared on *Feicheng wurao* in June 2014 with short hair and wearing androgynous clothes, which distinguished her from the other hyperfeminine

16 See Beilei Yule, “Daka xiu mowang jingshi ta?” [Your Face Sounds Familiar’s winner is her?], *Sohu*, April 20, 2021, [https://www.sohu.com/a/461946204\\_120498945](https://www.sohu.com/a/461946204_120498945).

17 See Luzhou Li, “If You Are the One: Dating Shows and Feminist Politics in Contemporary China,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 5 (2015): 519–535, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877914538906>; and Pan Wang, “Inventing Traditions: Television Dating Shows in the People’s Republic of China,” *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2017): 504–519, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716648493>.

guests. On the show and during public interviews, she repeatedly stated that her androgyny resulted from the divorce of her parents and the absence of a father figure in her childhood.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Li often referred to a traditional Chinese saying that emerged during the Warring States period (476–221 BC)—“a woman grooms for her lover” (*nv wei yueji zhe rong*)—and claimed that for the man whom she truly loved, she would be willing to grow her hair longer. Li was on the show for four months and eventually left on October 11, 2014, with a hypermasculine bachelor who was a fitness trainer and had only participated in *Feicheng wurao* to court her. The bachelor told Li that he hoped that she would accept his love and looked forward to seeing her transformation into a cute, feminine girl for him. Before Li left the studio, every other guest onstage burst into tears for her.

This was not the first time the show presented such a sensational match-making scene involving a tomboyish guest. In its first season in 2010, Xie Jia, who was only twenty-two years old at the time, stayed on the show for four months before she found a match. During her appearance on the show, Xie frequently explained her tomboyism as a reflection of her immaturity, especially relative to other hyperfeminine guests who, according to Xie, were already mature women and knew how to present their femininity well in public.<sup>19</sup> In February 2010, after Xie had been a regular guest on the show for several weeks, a rumor about her alleged lesbianism erupted; it was caused by the widespread circulation in Chinese cyberspace of old, intimate pictures of her with female friends in college.<sup>20</sup> On the show, Xie responded to the rumor by acknowledging her previous out lesbian identity and “lesbian past.” Despite this scandal, a number of bachelors courted Xie. Eventually, on the June 12, 2010, episode, an effeminate bachelor from Hong Kong claimed that he liked tomboyish girls and told Xie that he knew about her past and did not care. Xie responded that she had no reason to reject true love and thus accepted the bachelor’s overture.

These two tomboyish guests’ experiences share important similarities. While both guests successfully obtained male matches on the show, both couples soon broke up.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the self-framing and reconfiguration of their sexualities and female masculinities drew on local gendered traditions. For instance, Li used the saying “a woman grooms for her lover” to convince the audience of her heterosexual desire. Xie also frequently argued that tomboyish girls’ gender expressions reflect Chinese forms of feminism and individualism.

Moreover, the sensational scenes of tomboyish guests leaving the stage with their male matches, accompanied by the crying of the hyperfeminine

18 See NetEase Entertainment, “‘Feicheng’ Li Huanyi bei cheng ‘zuimei nv yihao’” [*If You Are the One*’s Li Huanyi is titled “the most beautiful female guest”], 163.com, June 10, 2014, <https://www.163.com/ent/article/9UCKBD1200031GVS.html>.

19 See NetEase Entertainment, “*Feicheng wurao*’s Xie Jia qianshou chenggong” [*If You Are the One*’s Xie Jia found a match], 163.com, June 13, 2010, <https://www.163.com/ent/article/69169T8K00034B9A.html>.

20 See Chinese Entertainment Net, “Wangyou bao *Feicheng wurao*’s neimu” [Netizens revealed the insider story of *If You Are the One*], *shcaoan.com*, May 16, 2010, <http://www.shcaoan.com/wy/Jsa/12853.html>.

21 See Sina Entertainment, “*Feicheng wurao*’s Xie Jia” [*If You Are the One*’s Xie Jia], *Sina*, June 25, 2010, <https://ent.sina.com.cn/v/2010-06-25/18402998237.shtml>.

guests onstage, ironically presented a queer allegory on Chinese TV. They portrayed a cruel reality in which tomboyish girls painfully merge themselves into heteronormative culture by becoming traditionally feminine and dating men (which the show represented metaphorically by having these guests walk downstage and into the real world off-screen). These televisual representations of defiant, attractive girls eventually entering heterosexual romances aimed to promote mainstream expectations for young women. However, they also visualize a “queer backwardness” in the heteronormative environment of contemporary China.<sup>22</sup> *Feicheng wurao*’s conversational, confessional reality TV format, as well as its presentation of gender-nonconforming young women’s feminine transformations, suggest a queer, nostalgic longing for the premature, tomboyish past and made “visible the damage that [adult women] live with in the present.”<sup>23</sup> In this sense, this matchmaking show became a caricature of “a history of suffering, stigma, and violence” experienced by queer Chinese women in order to survive in an adult, heteropatriarchal world.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, the very process of showing young gender-nonconforming women as desirable within a heterosexual marriage culture, as attracting a number of self-proclaimed heterosexual male suitors, not only reveals the fluidity and performativity of gender and sexuality but also disrupts the naturalized coherence of gender, sexuality, and desire.<sup>25</sup> The localized matchmaking format thus provides ambivalent spaces for queer women to actively negotiate commercial media and heteronormative society, even if it also pushes them back into heteronormative familial and marital systems and cashes in on the past romantic experiences of gender and sexual minorities.

## CODA

Although China remains a heteronormative, strictly policed society, where unambiguous media portrayals of homosexuality and LGBTQ politics are frequently silenced and demonized, queer-coded media fantasies and personalities have become ascendant within its contemporary television culture. Many global TV formats popular in China feature nonnormative televisual and cultural elements, styles, and aesthetics. Such formats facilitate flows of global queer cultures and hold great potential in queering and being queered by Chinese gender-nonconforming and LGBTQ cultures without triggering the official media censors’ alarm. Albert Moran dubs the TV format “an economic and cultural technology” that partakes in local and global encounters and exchanges.<sup>26</sup> I would add that creative adaptation, appropriation, and deployment by contemporary Chinese media professionals, celebrities, performers, participants, and audiences make global TV formats an emerging queer technology that produces powerful, continuing interventions

22 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 8–9.

23 Love, 149, 29.

24 Love, 27.

25 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22–23.

26 Albert Moran, “Television Formats in the World/the World of Television Formats,” in *Television across Asia: TV Industries, Programme Formats and Globalisation*, ed. Albert Moran and Michael Keane (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 6.

into China's heteronormative, patriarchal ideals. These formats thus provide promising detours for defiant voices, allegorical narratives, and unconventional personas and life stories.

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# Cruising the Art Museum: On the Migration of Queer Experimental Cinema in South Korea

Despite the shrinking space for independent cinema during the COVID-19 pandemic, several queer Korean films have found screening opportunities in both local and global over-the-top (OTT) video streaming services, including Netflix, Wavve, Watcha, and GagaOOLala. Following the favorable reception of *Ke zai ni xindi de mingzi* (*Your Name Engraved Herein*, Liu Kuang-Hui, 2020), global OTT video streaming services included more queer Asian contents, many of which are Boys' Love (BL) films and dramas. Numerous queer Korean films and TV shows also achieved commercial success during the pandemic. The popularity of *Shimaent'ik erō* (*Semantic Error*, Kim Soo-jung, 2022), Watcha's first original series, offers a particularly compelling example of the reciprocal relations between queer digital media and OTT streaming platforms, as the series not only formed a huge fandom but also helped the OTT company's market share in South Korea.<sup>1</sup>

The optimism around the OTT streaming services that include more and more queer content evokes the memory of the optimistic outlook in the early twenty-first century, when digital formats outmoded conventional celluloid film. Indeed, the increasing prevalence of digital technology has

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<sup>1</sup> The drama was ranked as the most watched TV show on Watcha for eight weeks.

arguably offered more opportunities to queer filmmakers and media art practitioners. Along with the rapid penetration of the internet and mobile communications in the following decades, digital video enabled practically anyone to create, edit, and appreciate audio-visual media. For queer visual artists and independent filmmakers who rarely received institutional support or distributional privilege, this democratization of media access and utilization represented more than a reduction in production costs; it granted queer artists more freedom to articulate their artistic visions.<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that a new generation of innovative queer media creators emerged in this transitional period, which included siren eun young jung, Kim Dujin, and Kim Kyung-mook.

However, the oligopolistic streaming market accelerates the marginalization of independent queer cinema, more specifically queer experimental cinema, that resists commodification.<sup>3</sup> Netflix, the most popular OTT service platform in South Korea, for instance, curates about thirty queer Asian works as of September 2022. Out of the thirty titles, eighteen are popular BL films and shows, while only one film is documentary. Considering the relative dearth of queer films in general, the primacy of mainstream popular cinema among streaming oligopolists is more daunting than exhilarating, as it urgently threatens the sustainability of queer experimental cinema. It is thus an irony that the digital turn and technological advancement that not only helped queer filmmakers create and circulate their works in the past but also contributed to the expansion of queer communities through what several scholars call “networked intimacy” now dismiss alternative types of queer film and media works disproportionately in favor of commercially profitable modes of production.<sup>4</sup> Hence, one might ask how non-commercial, non-narrative, and abstract queer cinema, which often rejects capitalist metrics, can survive OTT culture and its market logic. In the following sections, I will discuss the resilience of queer experimental cinema by deliberating on its migration to art museums, including the negotiation tactics of recent works by Im Cheol-min.

## REPURPOSING AND ARCHIVING AS QUEER PRACTICES

In April 2019, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), Korea hosted a film series titled *Dear Cinema: Difference and*

- 2 For discussions on the robust queer filmmaking prompted by the digital turn in the early twenty-first century, see Gina Marchetti, “Asian Film and Digital Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Film and Media Studies*, ed. Robert Kolker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 414–422.
- 3 *Experimental cinema* is a capacious term, often understood differently by scholars and media practitioners. By it I mean film and video productions with a strong emphasis on mediatic forms that consciously depart from commercial appeal and are strongly driven by filmmakers’ artistic visions and politico-cultural attitudes. For a succinct and useful definition of experimental cinema, see Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman, “Introduction: Experimental Filmmaking and Women’s Subjectivity,” in *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, ed. Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 1–17.
- 4 See Deborah Chambers, “Networked Intimacy: Algorithmic Friendship and Scalable Sociality,” *European Journal of Communication* 32, no. 1 (2017): 26–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323116682792>; and Lik Sam Chan, “Ambivalence in Networked Intimacy: Observations from Gay Men Using Mobile Dating Apps,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 7 (2018): 2566–2581, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817727156>.



*Repetition.* Among the invited films were Im Cheol-min's experimental films *Pingbing* (*B-ing B-ing*, 2016) and *Yagwang* (*Glow Job*, 2018). The screening of Im's works at the MMCA deserves special attention, as the artistic conceits and motifs of his films explicitly reflect vernacular queer history of Seoul as well as what can be termed queer aesthetics. Im already screened his experimental feature *P'ūrijūma* (*PRISMA*, 2013) at the MMCA in 2014. *P'ūrijūma* uses a montage of many different meaningless shots or shots made by mistake that would be deemed useless under ordinary circumstances. For instance, viewers see a series of multiple takes of the same scene, in which the camera records Im spending a tedious amount of time lying down, getting up, and continuously calling "cut" while facing the camera. This repurposing of useless shots that are destined to be "cut" exemplifies what Karl Schoonover calls the politics of "wasted lives," which may potentially defy the "notions of utility [that] conspire against queer temporality."<sup>5</sup> The value of utility is negated in the presumably non-productive practices of the film's queer subjects, practices that heteronormative society associates with "wasted lives," as well as in the equally non-productive practices of editing and repurposing disposable or "useless" takes. Im precisely understands this queer economy of "wasted lives" and eventually made *P'ūrijūma* an open access film following several failed attempts to submit his films to the increasingly institutionalized and homogenizing queer film festival circuits. This self-reflexive deliberation on the marginalized mode of queer cinema and media circulation suggests that queer Korean cinema, or at least some of its sub-entities, is slowly outgrowing its previous objectives of pride and self-recognition to become a radically political and aesthetic mode of production that challenges and critically reshapes normative media practices.

Another outstanding conceit in Im's works is archiving. *Yagwang*, for instance, is an experimental, multimodal project that documents gay cruising movie theaters of the 1980s and 1990s. The film endeavors to archive non-archivable sites, as most of the theaters have already disappeared. In the piece's climactic sequence, we see a film-within-a-film titled *Nagwŏn*. *Nagwŏn* is the name of a neighborhood in the Jongno district in Seoul frequented by gay males. The film-within-a-film is composed of 3D images of an imaginary paradise followed by normal maps of the images (see Figure 1). The normal map constitutes the basic framework of a 3D image. *Normal mapping* refers to a process of modifying and dissecting either a plane figure or an imaginary object by using only red, green, and blue, so that the three colors combined signify the depth of a complete 3D image. In a 3D rendering process, a normal map always precedes a 3D image, and the film reverts its procedural order. Thus, Im creates normal maps of both former cruising sites and the imaginary gay paradise by purposefully suspending the 3D mapping process. This film-within-a-film is followed by footage of the then only survived cruis-

5 Karl Schoonover, "Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 53, no. 1 (2012): 65–78, 74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41552300>. For further discussion of the queer defiance of the normative idea of utility values, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 173.

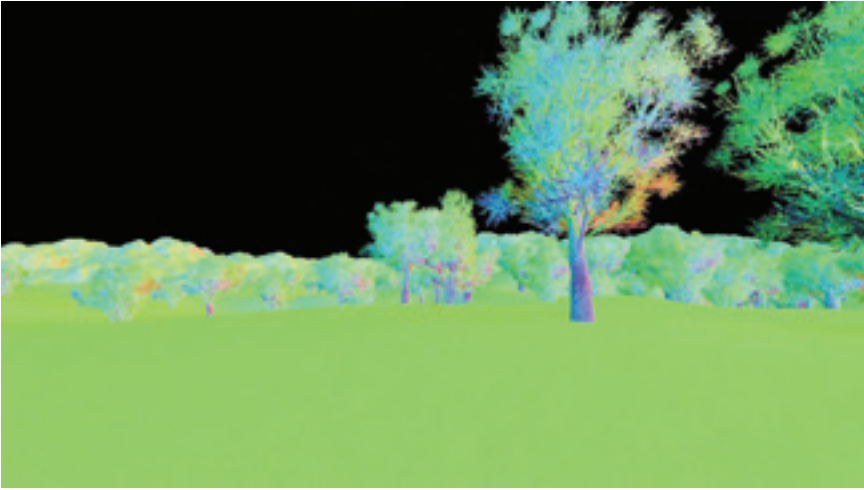


Figure 1. A normal map image in *Yagwang* (*Glow Job*, Im Cheol-min, 2018).

ing theater that stopped operating several years ago. In this manner, *Yagwang* faces the disappearance of the physical evidence of vernacular queer history by technically suspending the flow of time and crystallizing the very cruising site in the form of a digital archive.

The idea of archiving the non-archivable operates perversely across desires to retain the past and start over. This ambivalent attitude vis-à-vis queer temporality resonates with what Jacques Derrida calls “archive fever,” which cannot come into being “without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression.”<sup>6</sup> It also resonates with Ann Cvetkovich’s concept of a “queer archive” that is “composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science.”<sup>7</sup> This affective and compulsory oscillation—between archival desire and deconstructive inception that reveals the desire to start over—not only visualizes vernacular queer history but also demonstrates the precarious conditions queer experimental cinema faces in South Korea.

### CRUISING THE ART MUSEUM

It is symptomatic of the commercialization and homogenization of queer film festivals that Im’s films were not considered as entries at any of the two queer film festivals currently operating in South Korea. As of 2022, South Korea hosts both the Korea Queer Film Festival and the Seoul International Pride Film Festival. *Yagwang* was instead invited to the Seoul International Women’s Film Festival.<sup>8</sup> In an informal conversation with me in 2019, Im

6 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 19.

7 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 268.

8 Other queer experimental films also find screening opportunities either at art

expressed frustration about South Korea's two queer film festivals' lack of investment in experimental and arthouse films.<sup>9</sup> His discontent about film festivals' curatorial practices poignantly mirrors the current condition of queer experimental cinema in South Korea, where the distribution and screening of such films are increasingly dissociated from both conventional movie theaters and queer film festival circuits. Given that *Yagwang* is a cinematic exploration of the enduring queerness at Seoul's various former cruising sites and that *cruising* as a cultural practice refers to sexual minorities' itinerant movement in search of transient intimacies, the film's screening in the most representative art museum in South Korea demonstrates that the film actually cruises different exhibitory spaces. The provisional migration, or cruising, of queer experimental cinema was prompted by a larger trend in which screening films, especially experimental films, has become a part of the curatorial practices of South Korean contemporary art museums since the 2010s.<sup>10</sup> Pieces by Im Heung-soon, Jang Min-seung, Jung Yoon-seok, Kim Soyoung, Park Chan-kyong, and Kelvin Kyung Kun Park have all been either screened in museum auditoria or exhibited as part of curatorial programs in art museums and performance centers. This exhibitory migration offers an important prospect for the circulation of queer experimental cinema in South Korea, as these films are typically neither distributed in theaters nor released on DVDs or Blu-ray discs nor licensed to OTT streaming services.

Indeed, a growing number of queer films are included in regular or ad hoc programs at South Korean art museums. Films and video works by queer and feminist media practitioners siren eun young jung, Kang Sang-woo, Kangyu Garam, Kim Dujin, Kim Il-ran, and Lee Young were screened in different art museums across the country. For instance, Kang Sang-woo's *K'ullin mi* (*Clean Me*, 2014), a queer short that examines the social isolation and economic precarity of two ex-convicts, was screened at different art museums and is currently archived in the permanent collection of the Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art. Kim Dujin, who explores queer potential of digital media arts and is arguably one of South Korea's most representative queer artists, has two works archived in the Korea Digital Archives for the Arts. These are Kim's early digital media pieces, *Chimmanhan kot ün öpta* (*No Place Like Home*, 2002) and *Tangshin kyöt ül maemdomnida* (*Like a Ghost Around You*, 2003), which question and restructure the heteronormative temporality through technical manipulation such as reverse-editing and repetitions. And in 2021, Kim Kyung-mook, who made the acclaimed queer arthouse film *Chul'aktongshi* (*Stateless Things*, 2011), held an exhibition at an art gallery to

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museums or at alternative film festivals such as the Experimental Film & Video Festival in Seoul or the Seoul International ALT Cinema & Media Festival.

9 Im Cheol-min (film director), in conversation with the author, Seoul, South Korea, October 2019.

10 Film screenings in a film auditorium in US art museums date to the early 1900s, but the MMCA Film and Video auditorium was founded in 2013. For the valorization of film cultures through the incorporation of films in art museums, see Thomas Elsaesser, "The Loop of Belatedness: Cinema after Film in the Contemporary Art Gallery," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 86 (2018), <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2018/cinema-and-the-museum/cinema-contemporary-art-gallery/>.

introduce virtual reality videos and installation works inspired by his incarceration as a conscientious objector to compulsory military conscription.

The success of queer video artists in art spaces does not necessarily mean that queer films and videos are bifurcated into mainstream popular films favored by the OTT streaming platforms and abstract or conceptual works, however. Although the general audience in South Korea often rejects abstract films and sometimes even contemptuously labels them as elitist cinema that appeal only to a small number of sophisticated audiences, these works remain small in number and their artists thus may not expect commercial exhibitory opportunities. It is thus meaningful that queer South Korean experimental and arthouse filmmakers do collaborate with art museums to cut through institutional adversity while still refusing to meet with the general audience's penchant for popular and more intelligible modes of queer cinema. Through stylistic innovations, self-reflections, and mediatic resilience—and specifically through their investment in queer practices of archiving and repurposing—these filmmakers negotiate a doubly marginalized position as their productions are often shunned by both queer and general film audiences. Their migration to museum exhibition spaces is not only a mediatic migration but also an epistemological migration, as their cruising, albeit provisionally, resists the normalizing power of the profitable mainstream popular queer media encouraged by what Dal Yong Jin aptly calls “platform imperialism” of the OTT streaming services.<sup>11</sup> In South Korea, the artistic mode called queer cinema is no longer associated with particular screening venues such as movie theaters and film festivals or with the mass audience. Moreover, their migration potentially reterritorializes art museums, as their “queer use” of museum space “deviate[s] from the straight path, the right path” of art museums, considering the predominantly heteronormative, thus straight-oriented, social climate and the still fine art-centered art scenes in South Korea.<sup>12</sup> What this slow but meaningful migration, or cruising, of queer experimental cinema in South Korea in times of the OTT turn and commercially driven queer films suggests is that queer cinema is not a homogeneous entity regulated by spatio-temporal indices and identitarian confinements. Moreover, queer films never cease to be “queered” from the very media they are dealing with. Hence, their cruising continues.

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11 Dal Yong Jin, “Netflix’s Corporate Sphere in Asia in the Digital Platform Era,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Media and Globalization*, ed. Dal Yong Jin (New York: Routledge, 2021), 167–175.

12 Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 201.