Queer screens with Chinese characteristics?:

Reimagining queer Chinese screen studies in the twenty-first century

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Abstract

This introductory essay briefly reviews existing academic understandings and sociocultural imbrications of queer representations in contemporary Chinese-language media and culture. We propose to conceptualize 'queer Chinese screen studies' as a critical field of inquiry to interrogate the limitations of identity-politics-based and media-text-focused Chinese cinema studies and queer cinema studies. We emphasize the proliferating forms and intersections of queerness, Chineseness, and screen cultures situated in specific historical, social, cultural, and industry contexts in the twenty-first century. The seven articles included in this special issue uncover the multiple forms of presence, interconnection, and significance concerning identity-norm-contesting practices, performances, embodiments, and desires, made possible through the production, distribution, regulation, adaptation, mediation, and convergence of queer Chinese screens in the new millennium. These articles make a strong case for a queer Chinese screen studies that acknowledges the complexities and ambivalences of contemporary Chinese screen cultures as constantly oscillating between and negotiating with both queerness and normativities.

Keywords

Queer Screens with Chinese characteristics?

The first two decades in the twenty-first century was a period when lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) cultures and subject positions emerged and proliferated in Mainland China's public spaces in the immediate aftermath of the decriminalization (in 1997) and depathologization (in 2001) of homosexuality. We have so far observed the paradoxical in/visibility of a 'queerness with Chinese characteristics' in media, popular culture, and art spaces within and beyond the People's Republic of China (PRC). On the one hand, the representations of identitarian, openly 'out' nonheterosexual figures and relationships continue to be heavily censored and even banned on mainstream media and in commercial entertainment industries (Bao 2020b, 2021; Zhao 2018, 2023). On the other, queer entertainment, popular culture, and art productions can be found everywhere for those in the know and with a queer eye: from effeminate male and androgynous female characters to unhappily married couples in commercial films and TV programs; from underground bootleg DVDs to illegal downloading and fandubbing of international queer film and television programs; from independently made queer documentaries shown at local and international film festivals and film clubs to underground drag performances in urban art spaces; from 'coming out' microfilms to Boys' Love web dramas circulating online (e.g., Bao 2021, 2022; Bao, Mergenthaler, and Zhao 2023; Lavin, Yang, and Zhao 2017; Zhao 2023). Some of these indie, community-based, and digital productions have contributed to local and transnational social-political activism, despite the constant disruptions caused by the government's injunctions concerning the production and exhibition of queer content (Bao 2018; Shaw and Zhang 2018; Wang and Bao 2023).

The aforementioned transformation coincided with the 'plurality of [Chinese] screens [that] reflects broader trends of cultural pluralization and individualization, which are in turn implicated in global flows of capital' (Chen 2016, 28; also see, Johnson et al. 2014). Scholars note a 'digital turn' in Chinese visual studies: 'images are rapidly produced, digested, commented on and recombined to form new images' (Wagner, Yu, and Vulpiani 2014, 13). Today's Chinese screen cultures also vest socioculturally marginalized groups, especially gender and sexually nonconforming people, to present, produce, imagine, reconfigure, and hybridize 'nontraditional' forms of desire, longing, belonging, and subjectivity.

In this special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, we do not limit our understanding and use of 'screen' to denote 'large screens' (Yue 2013), 'small screens' (Voci 2010), public screens (Berry, Harbord, and Moore 2013; Berry and Yu 2014), televisual screens for community or family viewings (Neves 2011; Zhu and Berry 2009), or digital, personalized screens (Yu 2018; Zhang and Zito 2015). Instead, we understand 'screen' as encompassing a wide range of technology-enabled spaces, communicative and performative vehicles, human-technology assemblages, mediated environments and ecologies, as well as situated social and cultural practices that open up fresh, exciting opportunities to challenge authoritarian regulations and to contest intersected normative imaginaries about gender, sexuality, and geopolitics. Queer Chinese screen cultures encompass but are larger than media texts and queer representations. They also include people, technologies, spaces, events, relations, affects and various forms of human-nonhuman interactions and intimate entanglements. They therefore call for interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary modes of analysis and methodological innovations. It is thus important to go beyond the traditional method of

textual analysis popular in cinema studies and incorporate methods in media and cultural studies, science and technology studies, sociology and anthropology, art history and visual studies, creative and cultural industries studies, feminist, queer and decolonial epistemologies, among others.

Various forms, formats, venues, and platforms of contemporary queer Chinese screen that have mushroomed in recent years are not neatly separate from each other. Their simultaneous emergence, co-existence, interdependence, and even synthetization, have been shaped by complex processes of globalization and digitization. These representations, spaces, and practices challenge what is conventionally known as gender and sexual minorities or the LGBTQ people who are often defined as a minoritarian social group with a clear political consciousness and rights entitlement in a liberal democratic context. They also invite scholarly discussions on how norm-defying representations, (re)circulations, and (re)interpretations can potentially go beyond visible and clearly defined LGBTQ identities and communities, powerfully contest local, transnational, and global gender and sexual politics and thus play a vital role in transnational film markets and global creative and cultural industries. In addition, the diverse digital tools, platforms, and venues have made these 'unconventional' screens and cultural imaginaries available and accessible in sociocultural environments in which LGBTQ identities and movements remain politically sensitive or morally suspicious. These emerging, innovative ways of production, circulation, and consumption offer concrete evidence to challenge the limited understanding of Chinese media regulations and censorship systems as linear, top-down, 'straightforward', and 'repressive' regimes (Zhao 2023, 24). Along with intermittent official crackdowns on LGBTQ film festivals and cyber communication pertinent to queer and feminist activism, as well as the

government's curtailment on the media and public visibility of gay characters and trans public figures, an interesting media and cultural convergence centering around a desire-driven, quasi-neoliberal, consumerist market has been on the rise through the imagination and articulation of 'Chineseness' (Martin 2016).

Indeed, the question of how 'queerness' and 'Chineseness' can mutually construct and reconfigure each other in contemporary world cinema and global media studies has been explored in a rich and continually growing body of scholarship (see, for example, Berry, Martin, and Yue 2003; Chiang and Heinrich 2014; Chiang and Wong 2020; Leung 2008; Lim 2006; Liu 2015; Martin 2010; Martin et al. 2008). Over a decade ago, Chris Berry pointed out a 'transnational turn' in Chinese cinema studies, highlighting the differences and interlinkage of diverse queer media landscapes that 'could be called Chinese' (2010; 2012, 497). Queer scholars have also (re)invented various critical concepts including 'Chinese-language' and 'Sinophone', to recognize both the regionalism (the Chinese 'roots') that 'problematizes Sino-centrism as a force that constitutes Chinese identity and representation' and the transnationalism (the Chinese 'routes') that 'confronts the flows that affect the political economy of' queer Chinese cinema and media cultures in the 2010s (e.g., Yue 2012, 97; also see, Chiang and Wong 2020, 10; Martin 2014, 36). A few seminal works have elucidated on the transnational and translingual travels and mutations of the two terms, 'queer' (*ku'er*; a generation of being cool) and *tongzhi* ('comrade'; the Chinese phrase for gay or queer, depending on the context) across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China through the trans-geocultural circulation of queer Chinese-language cinema which has started since the 1990s (Bao 2018; Lim 2006). This mutual shaping of the meanings of 'queerness' and 'Chineseness' through intra-regional and global media and cultural flows has captured

much scholarly attention in the past three years. Recent scholarly publications—including Hongwei Bao's 2020 monograph *Queer China* and 2021 monograph *Queer Media in China,* Shi-yan Chao's 2020 monograph *Queer Representations in Chinese-Language Film and the Cultural Landscape*, and Jia Tan's 2023 monograph *Digital Masquerade*, as well as Jamie J. Zhao 2023 edited collection *Queer TV China*—remind us of the richness of the queer media and film heritage in and beyond the PRC and the exciting research opportunities this offers us.

Queer Chinese screen studies in the 2020s

Although queer Chinese-language cinema has been well studied in the past two decades, the focus has been predominantly on queer cinema produced outside Mainland China and in contexts with greater degrees of political and cultural permissibility. Even when Mainland Chinese queer media is discussed, what happens inside the PRC is often automatically and uncritically seen as 'major', hegemonic, and repressive; censorship is often seen as an *a priori* that erases rather than generates queerness, as well as being the one and only factor that shapes queerness. This often, as we argue, reduces the complexity of 'Chineseness' as well as 'queerness'.

Now it is time for Chinese queer and film studies scholars to take stock of and reflect on what happened in the last two decades and what this means for the study of queer Chinese screens. Entwined with the increasingly intricate, uneven processes of global economy within and beyond a transnational Chinese cultural world, these burgeoning queer screen cultures demand more sophisticated critical analyses. For example, in response to the new challenges and opportunities in the context of China's (self-)globalization in the 2010s, Berry proposed a critical concept, 'cinemas of the

Sinosphere' to capture the post-2010 film cultures that 'are part of a Chinese cultural sphere but not in a Sinitic language' and 'the cinema of the People's Republic of China under the conditions of the Belt and Road Initiative [*Yidai yilu*] and the non-Chinese cinemas that respond to it' (2021, 183). In this special issue, we concur with Berry's emphasis on the 'Two Globalizations' in the contemporary era, which refers to 'two transnational projects of wealth accumulation based on market capitalism' (2021, 188) grounded in the United States and the PRC. We hope to challenge the multiple and scattered forms of hegemonies and the dominant modes of global processes, including but not limited to 'Chineseness', US cultural imperialism and market capitalism.

The primary purpose of this special issue is not to construct a comprehensive and exhaustive queer screen archive in the PRC—such an endeavor would have been impossible within a single issue—but to generate novel ways of thinking about Chineseness, queerness, cinema, and other forms of media and visual cultures, together with their varied (re)configurations in heterosexual-dominated mainstream spaces, hierarchical sociocultural contexts, and globalist industries driven by both market and political-ideological forces on local, transnational, and global scales. The special issue is, therefore, a critical interrogation of the 'genealogies' (Foucault 1991) of the present rather than an archaeological excavation of the past. We present contemporary and critical dialogues with current scholarship in Chinese screen studies and queer screen studies. The purpose is *both* to 'queer' (used as a verb) the traditionally heteronormative Chinese film and screen studies *and* to internationalize and decolonize the often Euro-American-centric queer film and screen studies (Zhao and Bao 2022). The concept, 'queer Chinese screen', is broadly understood in our project as encompassing different configurations and contestations of queerness, Chineseness, and screen cultures. While

cautioning against a China-centric, essentialist understanding of Chineseness, we propose to see 'queer' as *both* a form of nonheterosexual identity and subjectivity *and* as an analytical lens and an interpretive position to make critical interventions in contemporary Chinese cinema, media, visual, and screen studies in a digitized, globalized, and indeed a norm-negotiating and boundary-transgressing era.

Accordingly, the idea of 'queer Chinese screen' envisioned in this project encompasses complex terrains of production, circulation, consumption, adaptation, and censorship of queer-themed (and even queerly read) film, television, digital media, and screening within and about the heteronormatively structured (both underground and commercial; both analogue and digital) media and cultural landscapes of the PRC in the new millennium. In other words, rather than contending a 'queerness with Chinese characteristics', we advocate a queer China-focused screen studies approach that acknowledges the complexities and ambivalences of Chinese screen cultures as inherently both queer and (hetero)normative.

More specifically, we assess what has been produced on queer Chinese screens and related spaces, and inspect how the specific political, economic, social, cultural, and industrial situations and transformations in Mainland China and the world at large may have generated particular expressions of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, visuality, genre, aesthetics, and politics. Our contributors present queer analyses of Chinese and Sinophone cinema, web series and transnational adaptations, as well as ethnic, feminist, and trans visual productions. In so doing, we reflect on the question of what 'queer Chinese screen' may mean in the 2020s, especially for the mainstream, still largely heteronormative, audiences in the PRC. We explore a series of critical questions

that further reveal the imbrications and complexities of queerness, Chineseness, and screens in the contemporary era for the intersections of queer studies, LGBTQ and feminist studies, transnational cinema studies, global media studies, and Chinese and Sinophone studies:

Do non-ethnic-Chinese or straight-identified filmmakers' productions or imaginaries about queer life in the PRC count as a form of 'queer Chinese screen culture'? What about mainstream, commercial media and arts with queer connotations? Can cinematic representations of (and by) nonheterosexual-identified foreigners in the PRC become part of the Chinese queer media? In what ways do images of ethnic and class-based minorities within the PRC further interrogate the binarist 'positive' and 'negative' public narratives of LGBTQ groups in mainstream society? How do the cross-geopolitical queer media and cultural imaginations between Mainland China and the Sinophone world complicate the too-often entangled queer and Chinese identities in and across diverse Chinese-speaking societies around the world? In what ways do web dramas, independent documentaries, and visual art works featuring queer and trans characters and narratives negotiate the normative reality, queer fantasies, and LGBTQ politics of the PRC? Can public media spaces, such as local and international film festivals, contribute to the emergence of contemporary queer Chinese screen cultures? If so, how? These are some of the complex questions we ask in this special issue. We do not strive to provide definitive answers—such an endeavor is bound to be futile and even unwelcome—but to showcase the diversity of voices, perspectives and positionalities that enrich our critical lexicon and broaden our intellectual horizons.

Article contributions

For this special issue, we have specifically curated seven original research articles from both established and rising scholars actively working in the field, discussing queer commercialization, mainstreaming, place-making, imaginaries, authorship, cross-cultural and transnational communication, visual documentation, and grassroots activism through various forms of screen. Our authors seek to (re)define the emerging ways to conceive queer Chinese cinema, media, and arts. We also highlight the creative means and venues through which these queer Chinese screen cultures circumvent censorship to reach a wider audience within and beyond Mainland China. Moreover, the project entails critical explorations of understudied queer Chinese screen cultures, such as queer independent documentaries screened at both domestic and international film festivals, transnational and cross-racial production and distribution of queer Chinese-language films, trans Chinese cinema and web TV series, queer video-mediated community activism, and lesbian filmmakers' visual documentation and oral narration of artist villages. The authors employ a diverse set of methodologies, including textual, intertextual, and paratextual analysis, archival research, ethnography (including autoethnography), oral history, industry analysis, and participatory action research.

The project starts with three articles addressing the issue of 'queering Chineseness' on the screen media. Hongwei Bao examines queer Chinese filmmaker Fan Popo's fiction films and curatorial practices in Berlin. He offers a critical insight into how the queer Asian diaspora subject position can be used as a critical method to articulate a transnational, decolonial queer politics that both challenges and expands the imagination of 'Chineseness'. Drawing on the notion of 'Sinosphere' to contest the conceptual limits of 'queer Sinophone cinema', Zoran Lee Pecic explores how the Chinese film *Looking for Rohmer* (dir. Wang Chao, 2018) creatively navigates the

PRC's nationalistic imaginary of global Chineseness and positions Mainland China as part of the global queer cultural circuit. Alvin K. Wong's study of Sinophone Hong Kong film director Fruit Chan's prostitute trilogy showcases the various ways through which the geo-cultural borders between Hong Kong and Mainland China, as well as the distinctive identities of postcolonial Hong Kong and Communist China, are queerly imagined and desired by Chinese-speaking gender and sexual minorities in cinema.

The next four articles focus on 'screening queerness'. They offer critical discussions on new forms of queer screen cultures and representations within Mainland China and present investigations of diverse, innovative ways to imagine LGBTQ identities, communities, and affects on Chinese screens. Heshen Xie's research considers Beijing International Short Film Festival as an alternative, less-censored venue within mainstream media and public spaces for the circulation of queer shorts in Mainland China. Xie's research pays meticulous attention to the industry contexts by pinpointing the 'stakeholder configurations' that shape the conditions of queer representations. Xie's article brings queer screen culture from production and representation into realms of exhibition, audience, and media events; it also challenges the popular argument about the state's blanket ban on queer filmsa. Jinyan Zeng's article captures ethnic-minority Chinese lesbian filmmakers' visual documentation of the artist villages in Mainland China. Zeng's situates Chinese queer cinema in the broad social ecology of Chinese visual culture and art production to tease out the transmedia elements of Chinese queer screen. It highlights the affect of visuality as a movement toward the organic organization of daily life that enables community-making without the commercialization or monetization of resources, labor and way of life, thereby rejecting the ideologies of the authoritarian state and the empire-driven logic of globalization in

imagining and constructing a queer community. Victor Fan surveys two recent Chinese trans films directed by cis-identified filmmakers which have been well received globally. Fan's analysis unpacks different filmmaking strategies to enable trans characters and actors to actively participate in the filmmaking process and thus allow them to avoid being imagined through a transphobic, cisgender gaze, and to forge a form of care and kinship and a potential space for knowledge coproduction between cis and trans creators and activists. In both Zeng's and Fan's accounts, the term 'queer' does not simply denote nonnormative genders and sexualities; it also indexes new, innovative and indeed 'minor' modes of being, feeling, and relating to the self, other people and the world. Here queer is no longer individualistic and identarian and it does not necessarily have to speak directly to the state, the rights discourse, or even 'Chineseness'; queer becomes something more constructive, generative, and life-affirming. Finally, Carlos Rojas takes issue with the trans and homoerotic representations in the 2015 sensational online Chinese TV drama, *Go Princess Go* (LeTV). Rojas analyses how the series offers a queer perspective on issues of gender and sexuality, and asks how this perspective may complicate more general issues such as media, identity, and political formations, as well as transnational televisual-cultural adaptation. Rojas' chapter highlights the importance of paratextual elements, arguing that the issues of identity formation that the series explores with respect to individuals also pertain to the questions of cultural production and community structure raised by paratextual concerns.

Together, the articles included in this special issue offer interdisciplinary research that challenges the often narrowly theorized and simplistically understood queer Chinese cinema, media, and visuality. Through a diverse set of cutting-edge research, we

(re)conceptualize 'queer Chinese screen' and employ it as a critical entry point to encourage scholarly inquiry about the fascinating ways in which queer communities, cultures, and spaces situated in supposedly heteronormative, mainstream environments can be practically manufactured, creatively imagined, and theoretically analyzed in the contemporary era. We hope the publication of this issue can encourage future research that considers how 'Chineseness' can be (re)defined and contested through queer screens, what are the novel screens have been created or employed for imagining queer Chineseness and Chinese queerness, and what kinds of queer voices, gazes, compromises, resistances, and potentialities have been ignited through these pioneering screen cultures.

Acknowledgements

Notes on Contributor

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Hongwei Bao is Associate Professor in Media Studies at the University of Nottingham, UK, where he directs the Centre for Critical Theory and Cultural Studies. Bao holds a PhD in Gender and Cultural Studies from the University of Sydney, Australia. He is the author of four research monographs on queer Chinese history and culture: *Queer Comrades*, *Queer China*, *Queer Media in China* and *Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance*. Bao co-edits *Routledge Handbook for Chinese Gender and Sexuality*, Bloomsbury book series *Queering China: Transnational Genders and Sexualities*, and de Gruyter book series *Oyster: Feminist and Queer Approaches to Arts, Cultures and Genders*. His co-edited book *Contemporary Queer Chinese Queer Art* was published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2023. Bao writes and edits the Queer Lens column for the Chinese Independent Film Archive.

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