

Sexuality and politics:

‘Coming out’ in German and Chinese queer films

Hongwei Bao

(The University of Nottingham)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1905-7926>

Abstract:

This chapter analyses the ‘coming out’ narratives represented in two queer films from different cultural contexts: *Coming Out* (dir. Heiner Carow, GDR, 1989) and *Lan Yu* (dir. Stanley Kwan, China, 2001). Both films feature gay men’s ‘coming out’ experiences around the year 1989. In mainstream political propaganda, queer sexualities and the year 1989 have also been used to justify the current neoliberal consensus and to celebrate the demise of socialist alternatives. Through a careful reading of the film texts, in tandem with an analysis of their historical and social contexts, this chapter argues that, by exploring the possibility of queer existence under socialism and by challenging the queer complicity with neoliberalism, these two films articulate socialist longings and belongings in the context of postsocialism. This chapter therefore offers a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between sexuality, mainstream politics, and political propaganda.

Keywords:

gay, sexuality, politics, 1989, *Coming Out*, *Lan Yu*

When thinking of non-normative sexualities and politics, most people have in mind the term ‘queer politics’; that is, how Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people devise strategies to fight for gender and sexual equality as well as social justice.¹ The relationship between queer and government-led mainstream politics (or sometimes known as the Politics) is often under-examined, apart from the occasional mention of a few LGBTQ identified, friendly, or hostile politicians’ names. The term ‘political propaganda’, similarly, is often placed outside the realm of sexuality, except when the term is used negatively and against LGBTQ people. For example, during World War II, there was the Nazi propaganda of homosexuals and other social groups being ‘degenerate’ and thus deserving extermination (Plant 2011); or in Vladimir Putin’s Russia, the ‘gay propaganda law’ is used to prosecute sexual minorities on the grounds of child protection and heterosexual family values (Mole 2019). In other words, political propaganda seems un-queer and anti-queer: it is everything that queer is not.

Such a narrow understanding of the relationship between sexuality and politics is understandable, as we bear in mind the long history of stigmatisation and persecution for sexual minorities, together with the long and arduous struggle for gender and sexual equality and justice worldwide. This chapter, however, takes a different approach to sexuality and mainstream politics. I suggest that we should also think about the complicity of queerness with mainstream politics in order to yield a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between sexuality and power. After all, sexuality is not outside politics; and politics often relies on gender and sexuality to function more effectively. For example, the US government has used Islam’s intolerance of homosexuality to justify its military intervention in the

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Middle East; this is often labelled as ‘homonationalism’ — a sense of national pride based on the assumed tolerance of sexual minorities in a country, to such an extent that such a pride justifies the sacrifice of other nations (Puar 2007). Another example: the Israeli government has been sending queer-friendly messages to the world to shift international attention from its military occupation of land in Palestine, and this is often known as ‘pink washing’ (Puar 2013). These examples reveal the successful incorporation of sexual minorities in national or transnational political imaginaries, and in mainstream politics. The relationship between queer and mainstream politics is thus complicated and requires critical reflection.

In this chapter, I examine the vexed relationship between queerness and post-Cold War politics by looking at two queer films — one from the German Democratic Republic (GDR), otherwise known as the former East Germany, and the other from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), often referred to as China. Seeing both films as situated in complex geopolitical contexts and thus politically and ideologically complex, I hope to reveal the ‘political unconscious’ (Jameson 1981) embedded within these cultural productions. I suggest that both films, along with the non-normative sexualities they represent, have participated in shaping a post-Cold War world order dominated by liberal and neoliberal values. As I identify possible queer complicities in neoliberal capitalism represented in the two films, I also unravel latent socialist impulses and queer resistances to queer liberalism and neoliberal globalisation. I argue that, by exploring the possibility of queer existence under socialism and by challenging queer complicity with neoliberalism, these two films contest the dominant ideologies and political propaganda that only capitalism can liberate sexual minorities.

Postsocialism and cultural politics

The world has changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War, and this change has had a tremendous impact on people’s subjectivities, desires and lived experiences. Individual and

collective experiences are often intertwined with national and even global histories; personal desires and intimate spheres frequently reflect political and social upheavals. Against this historical backdrop, gender, sexuality and desire are often cited as perfect examples that testify to the change. After all, if we were to ask sexual minorities around the world about their lives before and after 1989, there is nothing better than their own testimony to demonstrate which world they would prefer to live in, and which political system is superior to the other, as gay man and ex-GDR citizen Mario Röllig in German filmmaker Jochen Hick's 2016 documentary *The GDR Complex (Der Ost-Komplex)* would testify. In this sense, gay identity has become a 'postsocialist allegory of modernity' (Rofel 1999) that attests to the inevitability of socialism's demise and capitalism's triumph.

The term 'postsocialism' is key to understanding the historical experience of China and many other countries in the world. Scholars disagree on the political and ideological nature of contemporary China: some see it as 'socialism from afar' (Zhang and Ong 2008) and others diagnose it as 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics' (Harvey 2005). 'Postsocialism' represents one of the most popular — albeit also with great controversy — understandings of China's historical condition among scholars working in Western academia (Dirlik 1989; Rofel 1999, 2007; Litzinger 2002; Lu 2007; Kipnis 2008; McGrath 2008; Zhang 2008; Rojas and Litzinger 2016). The term 'postsocialism' offers valuable insights into the understanding of contemporary Chinese society. According to Arif Dirlik (1989: 231), postsocialism describes

a historical situation where (a) socialism has lost its coherence as a metahistory of politics because of the attenuation of the socialist vision in its historical unfolding. . . ; (b) the articulation of socialism to capitalism is conditioned by the structure of 'actually existing socialism' in any given historical context which is the historical premise of all such

articulations; and (c) this premise stands guard over the process of articulation to ensure that it does not result in the restoration of capitalism. Postsocialism is of necessity also postcapitalist, not in the classical Marxist sense of socialism as a phase in historical development that is anterior to capitalism, but in the sense of a socialism that represents a response to the experience of capitalism and an attempt to overcome the deficiencies of capitalist development. Its own deficiencies and efforts to correct them by resorting to capitalist methods of development are conditioned by this awareness of the deficiencies of capitalism in history.

For Dirlik, postsocialism represents an alternative to capitalism. It is a global condition in late modernity and is thus not unique to China. From today's perspective, his view seems over-optimistic, especially when the incorporation of China into global neoliberal capitalism does not seem to represent a genuine alternative. However, if we recognise the continuing existence of socialist ideas, experiences and aspirations in contemporary Chinese society, China can still be seen as neither entirely socialist nor capitalist; rather, it is characterised by the simultaneous non-contemporaneity of hybrid economies and politics, which can be described as 'postsocialist'. Indeed, although China has adopted state-led capitalism, and neoliberalism has exerted a powerful influence on Chinese society, the state still owns a large part of its major industries and infrastructures, which still nominally fall under the ownership of all the people in China. What is more, socialist histories, memories and experiences still linger on in today's China and they structure people's lives, embodiments and emotions in significant ways. They provide legitimacy and support for citizen's rights and grassroots activism. After all, socialist modes of 'comrade' subjectivity and politics still inspire postsocialist queer identity formation and

LGBTQ social movements (Bao 2018a). It is therefore important to recognise the socialist traces, memories and aspirations in the postsocialist era to articulate modes of resistance to global neoliberalism.

Culture is an important arena for ideas and ideologies to function in a society and to establish their own hegemony. Neoliberalism has taken a strong hold worldwide precisely because of its close links to media and popular culture. It has also produced its unique understanding of gender and sexuality, primarily based on a heightened sense of individualism and consumerism as well as a competitive and meritocratic mode of self-actualisation (Ong 2006; Rofel 2007; Lewis, Martin and Sun 2016). Lisa Duggan argues for the importance of cultural politics in contesting the contemporary neoliberal hegemony:

Neoliberalism was constructed in and through cultural and identity politics and cannot be undone by a movement without constituencies and analyses that respond directly to that fact. Nor will it be possible to build a new social movement that might be strong, creative, and diverse enough to engage the work of reinventing global politics for the new millennium as long as cultural and identity issues are separated, analytically and organisationally, from the political economy in which they are embedded. (2003: 3)

It is therefore crucial to look at cultural productions, including film, literature and art, in a society at a particular time to tease out the ideologies and discourses embedded within, and to discover their internal contradictions and ambivalences, as well as possible ways of

contestation. The purpose of such a cultural analysis is to open up alternative political imaginaries beyond the current neoliberal hegemony.

Berlin and Beijing: narratives of 'coming out' in 1989

Having lived in Beijing and Berlin myself, two cities that have witnessed dramatic transformations in the aftermath of the Cold War, I have learned to appreciate a transnational perspective in queer historiography and the concept of postsocialism. There are many reasons to compare and contrast the queer lives and representations in the two cities. Despite their obvious geographical and cultural differences, both cities have a socialist history; and their cityscapes are inevitably marked by distinct imaginations of modernity — from imperial to socialist, and from modernist to postmodernist (Dutton 2010; Ladd 2018). To a great extent, the contemporary skylines of the two cities were shaped by 1989, a year that symbolically marked the end of the Cold War and the division between socialism and postsocialism. Francis Fukuyama (1992) celebrates the 'end of history'. In his writing, 1989 marked the triumph of liberal democracy as the ultimate form of government for all nations, and, for Fukuyama, there can be no progression from liberal democracy to an alternative system. In advocating free market liberalism, which morphed into neoliberalism since the 1980s, Fukuyama essentially defends capitalism against other social formations and imaginaries. Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis is characterised by Mark Fisher (2009) as 'capitalist realism'; that is, 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it' (p. 2). Is an alternative possible?

Films are often seen as 'representations' of society, meaning that they record and reflect historical events and social lives. What if we also see them as polysemic, ambivalent and ideologically loaded in the messages they convey? What if they also take part in historical processes and shape societies in which they are situated? Here I use two queer films

— one from the GDR and the other one from China — to demonstrate how visual cultures document and shape history and articulate postsocialist ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 1961).

In the history of world cinema, two queer films are closely associated with 1989: *Coming Out* (dir. Heiner Carow, GDR, 1989) and *Lan Yu* (dir. Stanley Kwan, China, 2001). Both feature ‘coming out’ — short for ‘coming out of the closet’ — narratives; that is, gay people come to terms with their own sexual identities and subsequently disclose their identities to others. The ‘coming out’ narrative is one of the most common narratives in queer cinema and for queer life. ‘Coming out’ used to be associated with shame and now increasingly with pride; it requires the construction of alternative narratives — narratives that run contrary to the negative stereotypes and circulating the mainstream society (Coon 2018). ‘Coming out’ suggests possibilities of hope but also conjures up feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. While one may expect to enter into a ‘brave new world’ with endless possibilities following the act of ‘coming out’, many are faced with a world of precariousness, discrimination and risk. When, where and how one should come out is a question fraught with politics, especially when it overlaps or coincides with national and transnational histories. ‘Coming out’ also presumes the coherence and authenticity of the self; it creates a sense of temporary coherence and authenticity out of fragmented, contradictory and transient identities (Pullen 2009). Ken Plummer (1995) identifies different levels over which ‘coming out’ stories evolve, moving from the personal to the cultural and historical, which concerns ‘the moment at which a story enters public discourse — the moment of public reception’ (p. 35). In other words, ‘coming out’ is not simply an individual and personal experience; it can be mediated and even intertwined with national and transnational experiences, thus assuming a historical significance. Notably, the ‘coming out’ moments in both films are associated with dramatic, and traumatic, historical changes in 1989, thus

making ‘coming out’ a political act. Sexual identities, in this context, cease to exist as individual identities and intimate practices; they become national and even transnational ‘allegories’ (Jameson 1986) that remind people of the continuities and ruptures in history, national identity and political ideologies.

This chapter primarily focuses on film texts, but it also pays attention to the intertextuality between cinematic representations and the contexts of the films. While looking at cinematic representations, I also examine film scripts — sometimes a novel on which a film is based — in order to interrogate what gets represented on screen and why this is the case. Moreover, I situate the films in their historical, social, cultural and industry contexts, considering how they are framed by filmmakers, interpreted by the audience, and at the same time shaped by multiple discourses circulating in a society at a particular time. Reading the films ‘conjuncturally’ (Hall 1988); that is, in their historical and social contexts, I aim to highlight the ideological ambivalences — as well as openness — of the films in order to contest dominant ideologies and political propaganda of neoliberalism. If neoliberalism sees socialism as passé and even antithetic to gay identities and queer desires, these two films suggest otherwise, as they explore the possibilities of queer spaces within a socialist imaginary.

Reimagining socialism in *Coming Out*

Coming Out is a 1989 film directed by German film director and screenwriter Heiner Carow (1929-1997) and produced by GDR’s state film studio DEFA in its final years. The film centres around a high school teacher’s ‘coming out’ experience in the GDR. The lead character, a handsome Philipp Klarmann (Matthias Freihof), tries to reconcile his own sexuality while he is mediating his relationships with his girlfriend Tanja (Dagmar Manzel) and his gay male lover Matthias (Dirk Kummer). Despite being named Klarmann (literally ‘a

clear man’), Philipp is not clear about his own sexuality at all. Because of his indecision, he eventually hurts both people. Matthias and Tanja leave Philipp one after the other. At the end of the film, when the school headmaster calls ‘*Kollege Klarmann*’ (colleague Klarmann) during an unexpected class visit, he answers ‘*Ja*’ (Yes), symbolising his eventual acceptance of the gay self (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Philippe comes out to his students and colleagues (film still from *Coming Out*)

According to Kyle Frackman (2018), this ambiguous ‘coming out’ scene at the end of the film was a significantly cut version from its original script, which features Philipp’s speech in front of his students and the colleagues sitting at the back of the classroom. The deleted words are:

Ich habe in den letzten Monaten und Wochen begriffen, daß ich homosexuell bin. Ich habe deshalb ein Leben voll von Lügen ... Verstecken und ... und Angst gelebt. [...] Ich weiß, es

ist ein Risiko, daß ich [das] alles zu Ihnen sage. Aber es gibt für mich keinen Ausweg. Ich bin also schwul, wie man so sagt. Ich kann anders nicht leben und ich will es auch nicht.

(cited in Frackman 2018: 470)

In recent months and weeks, I have realised that I am homosexual. That is to say, I have been leading a life full of lies ... concealment ... and fear [...] I know it's a risk to tell you about everything, but I have no way out. So I'm gay, as they say. I can't live differently and I don't want to do this either. (my translation)

Despite the removal of this speech in the final cut of the film, Philipp's answer 'Ja' can still be seen as a confirmation of his gay identity, something that he has been denying and hiding throughout the film until the last minute.

It is, however, the film's debut that inscribed *Coming Out* firmly into the German history. The film was premiered at the Kino International on Karl-Marx-Allee in East Berlin on the night of 9 November 1989, the night when the Berlin Wall fell. Jim Morton described the event as follows:

By the end of the evening, the borders of East Berlin were swarming with people trying to visit the West. The border guards frantically called every official they could find but the people who could actually make a decision seemed to be in short supply that night.

According to folklore, the reason none of these officials could be found that night is because they were all at a screening of Heiner Carow's controversial new movie, *Coming Out*, which just happened to be premiering the same night as the wall fell. (Morton 2011)

Regardless of what exactly happened during the film screening that night, the fact that the premiere of GDR's allegedly first — and also last — gay film coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall gives the film a historical significance; it also lends the film an allegorical reading: the late GDR government's recognition of its sexual minorities — and by extension, the liberal values this represents — brought the socialist state to its demise.

However, the relationship between gay identity and state socialism is far more complicated than the above liberal reading would allow. Katrin Sieg (2007) sees the film as reflecting different ways of life in the GDR society at the time: some people endorsed heteronormative lifestyles and values; others experimented on different ways of living and thinking. In other words, there was a great sense of openness in terms of lifestyles and political imaginaries at the time; Sexuality lay at the centre of these different imaginations of society and good life. 'Sexuality became a central site for the articulation of a critique of a "real existent" socialism, [...] a site from which the gap between revolutionary theory and praxis became painfully visible' (1995: 98). David Dennis (2012) sees this film as representing an effort by GDR cultural workers — including the director Heiner Carow and the script writer Wolfram Witt — to look for the 'third way' between capitalist individualism and socialist ideals. Dennis points out that *Coming Out* should be seen as a part of — and representing a particular strand in — the lesbian and gay movement in the GDR:

[B]oth *Coming Out* and the movement shared a common vision of *Schwulsein* [being gay] in the GDR as a 'third way' between political commitment to socialism and the individual self-determination. Carow was interested in a socialist humanism that did not give up notions of 'class struggle' but rather complicated them, equating class oppression with sexual and racial oppressions. (Dennis 2012: 69)

It is important to note that the protagonist Philipp is committed to socialism and anti-fascist struggles, in the context that GDR gained its political legitimacy through the discourse of socialism and anti-fascism. The film anchors fascism in the country's Nazi past and attributes anti-Semitism, racism and homophobia to the lingering effect of Nazism in a socialist society. In the film, Philipp and Tanja attend an anti-fascist concert in an unnamed Jewish ghetto where Philipp's gay student sings a 'song from the ghetto' to express solidarity. On their way home, when three neo-Nazi skinheads attack a black person in a train carriage, Philipp leads his students to drive the skinheads out of the train at the next station. The train station happens to be named 'Marx-Engels Platz', symbolising the power of Marx and Engels' ideas in uniting oppressed people against social evils and injustices. In both scenes, gay people and straight people form an alliance to fight against fascistic practices such as anti-Semitism and racism.

After losing both Matthias and Tanja, Philipp goes back to the gay bar where he first met Matthias. Walter, an old gay man and a regular customer at the bar, tries to calm him down when Philipp makes trouble and risks being thrown out of the bar. Walter tells Philipp of his own life story of being persecuted as a homosexual in a Nazi concentration camp, and later becoming a committed communist after World War II. Walter reiterates his socialist beliefs and remarks on the current situation in the GDR: 'We worked like crazy. We stopped mankind's exploitation by mankind, now it does not matter if the person you work with is a Jew or whatever. Except the gays. We forget them somehow.' These comments effectively serve as a critique to the GDR's Socialist Unity Party (SED) policies, which turned a blind eye to the rights of sexual minorities and therefore failed to deliver its democratic and egalitarian promises to all people. However, this critique should be seen as an internal and constructive critique aimed at improving the socialist state instead of dismantling it. As Kyle

Frackman glosses the scene: ‘Walter’s monologue continues the film’s project of gesturing towards a potential future while deploying elements of the past and present’ (2018: 469); and this future is a socialist one in which sexual minorities play a part.

The film’s history of reception among GDR intellectuals also illustrates the moderate and constructive attitude in its critique of state socialism and its imagination of solidarity among oppressed groups. As Dennis points out:

During the years of the *Wende* [‘the turning point’, referring to the historical period around German reunification in 1989] and beyond, *Coming Out* became part of the broader conversation about *Lesben-und Schwulsein* [being lesbian and gay] in the GDR as activists sought to record their memories of the movement and scholars began to reconsider the significance of East German lesbian and gay life and politics. Almost invariably, activists cite the film as an important moment in the movement’s history. (2012: 75)

In this sense, *Coming Out* ceases to be merely a work of artistic representation; it participates in the formation of gay and lesbian identities, communities and politics under and in the aftermath of socialism. It reimagines the relationship between queer sexualities and socialism, seeing them as compatible instead of mutually exclusive. Seen in this light, Philipp’s positive answer ‘*ja*’ to the school headmaster’s interpellation can be read as an affirmation of his socialist identity and belief, to which gay people can also lay claim. In other words, as the moment epitomises Philipp’s ‘coming out’ as a gay man, it also symbolically marks the lesbian and gay movement’s claim to legitimacy and demands for recognition under GDR’s state socialism. It imagines a utopian future for sexual minorities under socialism. Indeed, gay identity is not antithetic to socialism; it should be seen as a part

of the newly configured and imagined socialist imaginary, in which gender, sexuality, race and other intersected identities all constitute part of the socialist struggle for equality and social justice.

Articulating socialist aspiration in *Lan Yu*

Adapted from a popular gay romance published online in the early 1990s and directed by the renowned Hong Kong queer director Stanley Kwan (1957-), *Lan Yu* tells one of the best-known queer stories in the Chinese-speaking world. The film narrates the ten-year love story between Lan Yu (Liu Ye) and Chen Handong (Hu Jun). At the beginning of the story, Lan Yu, a poor student from a working-class background, comes to Beijing to attend university where he meets Handong, a rich businessman from a well-connected communist cadre family. Their one-night stand soon evolves into a more regular sexual relationship, although Handong still sees other men and women at the same time. It is not until the Tian'anmen incident on the early morning of 4 June 1989 that Handong begins to acknowledge his feeling for Lan Yu as true love, thus coming out as gay himself (Figure 2). As Handong narrates in the story:

With the fear of death behind us, our bodies came together, each man taking the other's flesh as proof that he was alive. I loved Lan Yu's body. I loved holding him, feeling him next to me, his warmth. He was so full of life. I pressed my lips against his neck and held my cheek against his chest and listened to his heartbeat. He was mine! He was there! [...]

'I love you!' My heart pounded in my chest [...] I couldn't believe I said it, but at the same time it felt so natural coming out. It was the only thing I felt at the moment, the only thing I could think of to say.

I love you, I had said. And it was love. It wasn't just sex. Whatever other people might have thought, whoever other people thought we were, I knew we were in love. (Bei 2016: 121)



Figure 2. Handong and Lan Yu reunite on the night of 4 June 1989 (film still from *Lan Yu*)

This juxtaposition of sex and love marks the boundary between sexual behaviour and sexual identity in the Foucauldian (1998) sense. Having sex with men does not necessarily constitute gay identities, whereas loving men certainly does in contemporary society. In the novel's cinematic adaptation, this explicit sex scene and passionate moment of sex and confession are turned into Lan Yu's crying in the middle of the night, as if to recover from the unspeakable shock, followed by the fragment of a radio broadcast reminding the audience of the time of the historical moment. In this way, Handong comes out to himself as gay on the same night when the government crackdown of protests takes place. In other words, gay identity becomes a consequence — and an overcoming — of contemporary China's historical trauma.

There are numerous accounts of Tian'anmen in 1989, most of which are informed by a liberalist interpretative framework, seeing student protests as requesting the end of China's socialism and the start of a Western type of liberal democracy. However, according to

historian Wang Hui (2009), demonstrating students at Tian'anmen were in fact demanding the state to address problems brought about by global capitalism, including corruption, profiteering, economic-centrism, class disparity as well as other forms of social inequality and injustice. Seen in this light, the student protests were in effect demands for reforms within the framework of state socialism and demands for the state to genuinely deliver its socialist promises of egalitarianism, democracy and social justice. Wang makes distinctions between two types of socialism: the 'socialism' of old state ideology, characterised by the system of state monopoly; and the socialism for movements for social security, social democracy and against monopoly. This distinction is unfortunately lost in most commentaries about Tian'anmen:

In the post-Cold War global context, and in the context of re-evaluating socialist practice, the 1989 movement for social security — with its deeply concealed internal social contradictions, its opposition to monopoly and special privileges, and its intention to promote democracy — remains poorly understood. (Wang 2009: 22)

Bearing in mind the overdetermined meanings of Tian'anmen, the story of *Lan Yu* can be read in multiple ways. Howard Chiang (2014) reads the story as reflecting the complex relationship between China and the Sinophone world in queer cultural formation. Drawing on Lisa Rofel (2007)'s 'desiring China' thesis, David Eng (2010) reads the story as an allegory of the postsocialist Chinese modernity, where neoliberalism produces entrepreneurial citizenship with desires. Michael Berry (2008) reads the story allegorically: Lan Yu as symbolising socialism and Handong as representing capitalism. Their political and ideological confrontation is even manifested in their choice of means of transport: Lan Yu

insists on taking the public bus instead of taxis and private cars because the bus represents socialist values. Glossing Lan Yu's death in a car accident when he eventually takes a taxi at the end of the story, Berry comments:

Lan Yu's struggle against so much of what Chen Handong stands for takes on new meaning as he dies not amid the violence of Tian'anmen Square but years later, amid the rampant development overtaking China. Implied sacrifice for *democratic* freedom is transmuted, devolving into a random consequence of taking advantage of new forms of *capitalist* freedom. But was this not precisely the unspoken deal that the Chinese leadership made with its people in the wake of the crackdown, trading the people's political agency for new economic opportunity and capitalist freedoms? (Berry 2008: 318, emphasis in original)

Such ideological struggles are often played out dramatically in the story. The author of the story and the film director seem to stand on Lan Yu's side. In the film, Lan Yu refuses to be corrupted by money and bribed by material gains; and he believes in true and non-materialistic love without conditions. Lan Yu strikes a strong contrast to Lin Jinping (Su Jin), Handong's wife, a selfish, greedy and materialistic woman. Gay love is thus juxtaposed with heterosexual love and is imagined as pure, unconditional and non-materialistic. As Handong reflects:

And that, I think, is the difference between men and women. When a woman has sex with you, it's because of something you have — genius, money, or whatever — or because they want to find someone who will let them be a parasite forever. After they get what they

want, they use sex as a way of rewarding men. But when men have sex there's no rhyme or reason. They're just satisfying a primitive need. (Bei 2016: 70)

As Petrus Liu points out aptly, this story 'articulates a cultural fantasy about the separability of love and money in human relations' (2016: 375). Situated at the historical juncture of the 1980s, and during China's transition from a socialist society to a capitalistic society, such a cultural fantasy articulates a socialist longing and against the reification of social relations under capitalism. This sentiment is best manifested in Lan Yu's account of his family story. The family lived a happy — albeit poor — life under socialism in the early years of the Reform Era (1978-present). With China's economic reform, the father went into business and made a lot of money. Wealth changed him into a different person; he subsequently had an extramarital affair and deserted his family. The mother committed suicide out of despair. Lan Yu recalls:

Before she did it, she wrote a long letter to me and my dad. She said she hated money — that money can make people cold, selfish, unfeeling. She said the truly precious things in life weren't silver or gold, but passion, conviction. (Bei 2016: 105)

It was this personal experience — in the context of China's social transformation from socialism to capitalism — that shaped Lan Yu's attitude towards money and capitalism. The protagonists in the story often express a strong longing for socialism. The song they sing — 'The Internationale' — reminds people of a bygone era, forgotten and marginalised in contemporary historiography. If Lan Yu's name — literally 'blue universe' — conjures up a sense of internationalism and cosmopolitanism, Handong's name — literally 'defending the

Mao Zedong thought' — points to the cultural specificity of China's socialism. By conjuring up the 'spectres of Marx' (Derrida 1994; Rojas and Litzinger 2016) and by highlighting the issue of class in shaping Chinese society in the postsocialist era, gay identities in China will be constantly haunted by these historical memories and utopian longings (Bao 2018b).

Conclusion

Although both films centre their 'coming out' narratives around 1989, *Coming Out* and *Lan Yu* tell different stories. In *Coming Out*, Philipp has always been gay, and he even had homoerotic encounters in his school days. It only takes an emotional entanglement with a man and a woman at the same time to force him 'out' and be 'clear' about his own sexuality and socialist beliefs. For the director Heiner Carow and other like-minded cultural workers in the GDR, homosexuality has always been, and should always be, a part of socialism: the state should recognise gay people's rights, and gay people should also have faith in a reformed and more humanistic state socialism. It was the historical contingency on the night of 9 November 1989 that changed the trajectory of history, but this should not change gay people's belief in and commitment to the socialist cause.

Lan Yu faced different historical and cultural circumstances all together. Written in the early 1990s and made into a film in 2001, the story was narrated at a historical juncture when socialism was slowly giving way to capitalism, and China was gradually adopting neoliberal market principles in many areas of the political, economic and social life. The year 1989 becomes a watershed moment for China and for the protagonists in *Lan Yu*. Admittedly, neither Lan Yu nor Handong are gay identified at the beginning of the story; they have sex out of financial necessity and physical pleasure. They only become gay later on, when they start to make distinctions between sex and love. They seem aware of China's homoerotic traditions; they also acknowledge the compatibility between Chinese culture and

homosexuality, as the story makes references to literary tropes of homoeroticism in premodern China. However, it is the egalitarian, non-materialistic and utopian nature of the love between men that renders homosexuality compatible with socialist values. A story about ‘becoming gay’ is thus heavily imbued with socialist longings.

Contrary to the popular belief that globalisation brings gay identities across the world, and only neoliberal capitalism can provide spaces for queer existence (Altman 1996), both *Coming Out* and *Lan Yu* seem to suggest that being gay is compatible with socialism, and socialist ideals are things that queer people should adhere to instead of rejecting altogether. After all, as the Chinese term for queer — *tongzhi* (literally ‘comrade’) — suggests, comrades can be queer, and queer can also be comrades (Bao 2018a).

In summary, this chapter has conducted a transcultural and comparative analysis of the ‘coming out’ narratives in two queer films, *Coming Out* and *Lan Yu*. Reading the two films conjuncturally in the post-Cold War context, this chapter recovers an optimistic historical moment in which queer identities were articulated with a socialist imagination of society, and queer people’s ‘coming out’ marked a less dogmatic and more liberal version of state socialism without rejecting core socialist values. This moment was temporary, fleeting and contingent. With the accelerated expansion of neoliberalism worldwide, such a moment soon dissipated in the ‘end of history’ choruses. Reassessing these two films in our own times helps us appreciate the historical moment and re-access its embedded socialist legacies and aspirations. It also serves as a timely reminder of the ambivalent political ideologies and imaginaries surrounding sexual identities and practices, as well as the complex relationship between sexuality, power and political propaganda.

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