

An Invisible Conundrum: Visualizing “Queer Immobility” in the Contemporary PRC

by

Qionglin Lou

Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
Duke University

Date: _____
Approved: _____

Carlos Rojas, Supervisor

Guo-juin Hong

Leo Ching

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Critical Asian Humanities in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Until the end of the 20th century, with the deepening of the Opening-up and Reform movement under the context of globalization and advancement of communication methods, both culture and economy in the PRC have achieved unprecedented success. Due to this mobilized improvement, the queer community in the PRC seems to have gained more and more visibility at the same time. In this case, the increasing queer activities in the PRC may be associated with a Westernized sense of “queer mobility”, which indicates an expanding space of recognition, identification, and presence for queer individuals. However, regarding the specific post-socialist context in the contemporary PRC, the economic, cultural, or social mobility may directly result in the phenomenon of “queer mobility”, since such progression in other aspects may potentially neglect or conceal the marginalized backwardness that has been embedded in the process of development. In other words, the sense of queer mobility cannot fully represent the intricate reality of queer subjects in the PRC.

Thus, this thesis will primarily focus on the concept of “queer immobility” as an alternative to interpret the queerness in the contemporary PRC. Specifically, this queer immobility may not be understood as negative or an outright opposition to the sense of queer mobility; instead, the stress of “immobility” may offer us a novel lens to re-investigate the underlying circulation of loss and continuous melancholy structured by the spatial and psychological constraints within Chinese queer subjects. Also, the intervention of “immobility” may tentatively break the illusion of queer activism

structured by the economic, cultural, or political prosperity. To visualize such queer immobility, the thesis will focus on four films in the contemporary PRC. Through the analysis of the immobilized psychological and geographical space, the thesis intends to reveal the multifaceted conundrum of Chinese queer subjects, who struggle between the mobilized illusions and uncompromising restrictions.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Revisit “Queer”

In *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, Bret Hinsch analyzes the social and sexual history in ancient China from Zhou to Qing dynasty. As the term “Cut Sleeve” (in Chinese “duanxiu”) in the title indicates, Hinsch’s book primarily focuses on the same-sex desire in ancient China, presenting the evidence of such desire’s existence and elaborating on it through the social, cultural, and literary aspects. According to Hinsch, this book intends to “reconstruct Chinese homosexual tradition”, because “homosexuality provides us with the most convenient entrée into one of the most intimate, hence central, aspects of existence for the peoples of dynastic China” (Hinsch 1990). As a historian, Hinsch’s move undeniably reveals and systematizes the consistently neglected existence of same-sex eroticism in Chinese history; however, the term “homosexuality” he uses in the book is criticized to be problematic in ancient Chinese context due to its incompatible modern implication.

Initially constructed in the late 19th century, the term “homosexuality” has been created as a social, historical, cultural, and even political vocabulary, signifying or labeling the sexual orientation in psychological and clinical perspective. As a response to the modern notice of the emerging variations within gender and sexuality in 19th century, the invention of homosexuality and heterosexuality is mainly a Westernized theoretical framework in examining and researching medical discourse in terms of the state’s concern of the growing population (Greenberg 1988). Following this connotation, the term *tongxinglian* (Chinese translation of homosexuality) was introduced to China during

the late 19th century by the modern Chinese activists who were keen on importing Westernized thoughts in order to rival with the feudal traditions and deeply-rooted Confucianism. In this sense, as an imported terminology, the initial implication of *tongxinglian* is generally structured outside Chinese context, sprouting in the sociopolitical context which is predominantly different from China. This term, with its multifaceted connotations, has the tendency to reshape the supposedly eclectic construction of the genders and sexualities in China, where people were not taught or assigned the essentialism in gender/sex difference as well as the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy. Thus, Hinsch's discussion of the history of same-sex desire in ancient China through the use and elaboration of the term "homosexuality" may seem to be incongruous with the ancient Chinese situation. The Westernized, socially-constructed, and medically-related term homosexuality in the description of ancient Chinese same-sex desire forcibly imposes modernized mode of categorization on people who may not fully develop an awareness of the identification process in gender and sexuality by unconsciously juxtaposing the temporal and spatial ideology between distinctive realities.

Despite the broad application of the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality, the increasing visibility of gay and lesbian subjects urges the development of more terminologies regarding the gender and sexual identities, since the construction of the dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality may not meet the need for describing the existing identities. More and more theories, philosophy, and literary works emerge, however, though the terminologies seemed to be upgraded in this process, the incongruity in Hinsch's book still remains in dealing with the identities outside the homo-

hetero structure. In contemporary era, starting from the West, the term “queer” has been used to transform the duality of identities and desires in “homosexuality” which is based on the naturalized gender binary. As Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that sexuality varies across time and space (Foucault 1976), the connotation of queer has also experienced profound alternations throughout history, from a slur or offensive reference to gay people to a neutral but more complicated term regarding people who do not fall within the heterosexual modes of identification. Despite these changes and seeming progress within the use of “queer”, this term is still unwittingly intertwined with uncertainty and contradiction in contemporary time.

Instead of a clear-cut signification, the contemporary connotation of queer is mainly swaying between two aspects of interpretation. On the one hand, being generally dragged out of the previous association with degradation and extended beyond the homosexual identification, queer is designated to specific identities, which are inconsistent with heterosexuality. In other words, such use of the term is particularly equivalent to the “Q” in the “LGBTQ” community, as an identity which functions in align with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, implying an inconformity towards the heteronormative domination. On the other hand, given the possibility that “ ‘Q’ in LGBTQ could stand for either ‘queer’ or ‘questioning’ ” (Perlman 2019), queer can be also interpreted through a more ambiguous manner compared with a specific identity. It may adopt a broader implication, which serves as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ community. In this sense, this term transcends the monolithic identification connotation, and suggests fluid, non-binary, and metamorphic state not only relating to the gender and sexual identity, but also

indicating an unconventional ideology or logic outside the dichotomous or hegemonic discourse. Though queer is structured more flexible in contemporary context, criticism still remains towards this situation. For example, the possible desexualization within the term may diminish the distinctiveness of the gay, lesbian, or trans community, rendering them more marginalized under the homogenized usage of the term (Halperin, 1995). Also, the ambiguous extension of the term may blur the existing boundaries, causing the inclusion of identities that are incompatible with normality but unrelated to the gender expressions, including sado-masochism or pedophilia (Zalta, 2020). Thus, the internal divergence embedded in “queer” within linguistic connotation may correspondingly add complexity to the existence and development of queer subjects and the evolvement of queerness; the newly produced and different layers of the interpretation towards the term may hint the difficulty and obstacles in spreading and receiving “queer” across the world.

The popularization of queer theory in the West has gradually pervaded to People’s Republic of China (PRC) during the early 21st century. Li Yinhe’s (2002) essay “An Introduction to Queer Theory” provides a almost complete picture of queer theory development in the West with people in the PRC, she discusses the meaning of “queer”, the rise of queer theory, and the viewpoints of famous queer theorists comprehensively. Since then, transliterated as “ku’er (酷儿)” in Chinese, “queer” has mainly become a new vocabulary to describe non-heterosexual identities in the PRC, apart from *tongxinglian* (同性恋) or *tongzhi* (同志). However, different from the term “queer” in English, which shares a double-layered implication, the connotation of ku’er differs from the original context of queer, but primarily revolves around identity-based interpretation of “Q” in

“LGBTQ”. Such linguistic difference between “ku’er” and “queer” reaffirms the variation of queer existence regarding the spatial separation and potentially implies the distinctive development process of gender and sexuality in the PRC. To distinguish the underlying nuances within the connotation, in the following text, ku’er will mainly refer to a specific identity, while queer will serve as an umbrella term, suggesting a broader state.

The popularization of the terms queer and ku’er in the PRC in recent years has reconstructed the supposedly naturalized discourse in gender and sexuality. In *Excitable Speech: A politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler (1997) expands the doubleness of name to the tendency of vulnerability. For her, name signifies the “social existence of a person” (2). To be called a name is tantamount to a state of being recognized, which involves the formation of subjectivity. Hence, the appearance of the terms “ku’er” and “queer” in the PRC provides a chance to confirm the existence of people who are outside the mainstream heterosexual standard in a linguistic sense, but also enables their self and social recognition. On the other hand, Rey Chow (2014) points out the the violence of naming, which relates to the “secularized perspective on community formation” (3). In her discussion, name is associated with a collective hypothesis, in which name is the catalysis of similarity. To be more specific, a name signifies the boundary of a possible group or community, which is distinctive from one another. Rupture and distinction are made conspicuous through naming, which may embody “hate speech,” including discrimination, classification, or stereotyping through verbal assault. Additionally, in terms of such “community formation,” Chow warns about the relationship between the

namer and name and how it may impact our derivation of knowledge from the world. Through the commonality that the naming process initiates, people may confer upon a particular identity they do not otherwise have when using the term “our” (Chow 2014).

Chow’s viewpoints generate two perspective to interpret the “ku’er” and “queer” term: Firstly, before the existence of these terms, the non-heterosexual subjects in the PRC are associated with insulting and degrading designation because of lack of a neutral terminology, including “Ji Lao” (faggot), and this humiliating pronoun intensifies the vulnerability and marginalization of their existence simultaneously. Thus, the novel naming system offers the people who are endangered by their identities a justifying presence under the hegemonic heterosexual discourse. However, such newly-produced naming process establishes a stigmatized community, which is marked by clear-cut boundary; in other words, the limitation is imposed on the subjects’ identity through this compulsory categorization, despite the increasing visibility brought by the upgrading of language. Such categorization legitimizes the diversity and variations of the identities, but also jeopardizes and constrains these existing identities. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault emphasizes the connection between power, oppression, and, sexuality; to structure his argument, he puts forward three questions: “Is sexual repression truly an established historical fact?”, “Do the workings of power, and in particular those mechanisms that are brought into play in societies such as ours, really belong primarily to the category of repression?”, “Did the critical discourse that addresses itself to repression come to act as a roadblock to a power mechanism that had operated unchallenged up to that point, or is it not in fact part of the same historical

network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it ‘repression’ ?” (10). Such questions hint the gradual process, in which “sexuality” is reiterated through novel connotation as a naturalized discourse under the manipulation of power production. Hence, “queer” as a juncture of intertwined and unstable relations regarding to sexuality in a linguistic sense, it is unconsciously forced to function in align with the repressive mechanisms of power domination. In other words, the construction and application of ku’er and queer in daily and academic life is inevitably oppressive as they are constantly operated within the power circulation. Thus, from its linguistic construction to the social and ideological spectrum, this essay will apply Foucault’s sense of “category of repression” on “sexuality” to the discussion of “queer” in the PRC.

1.2 Traces of Chinese Queerness

The application of both ku’er and queer enables increasing visibility of the non-heterosexual group in the PRC in the past decades, converting the ambiguous expression of identities outside the mainstream discourse into tangible existence that can be witnessed, described, and analyzed. Admittedly, before the appearance of the words ku’er, queer, or even homosexuality, given the normalized oriental interpretation of Chinese conservative and highly-restrictive socialist background, the ku’er population is considered to be covered under the hegemonic heterosexuality in terms of the political regulations. However, the queer elements have pervaded especially in Chinese literary and visual fields before they can be recognized as “queer”.

Academics have scrutinized the non-heteronormative expression of emotions and

identities outside the mainstream cultures from ancient China to contemporary times. As mentioned above, Bret Hinsch has discovered the underestimated ancient “Cut Sleeve” history in Chinese social, political, and cultural path of development, as well as how such tradition is tolerated or even espoused by the society. Dramatically, entering the modern time, the non-heteronormative issues seem to be associated with more complexity. In Tze-lan D. Sang’s pioneering work *The Emerging Lesbian*, she disagrees with Hinsch’s arguments of Chinese tolerance of same-sex desire before the import of Westernized ideology of homosexuality and homophobia, but rather suggests that such ideas from the West have grounded the independence of gay and lesbian identity from the heterosexuality, and formed a growing consolidated resistance to the male-dominated heterosexual hegemony (Sang 2003). Based on this viewpoint, Sang traces the modern history of lesbian in China from the photos of women’s intimacy in a 1914 Chinese literary magazine to the classic literature questioning the gender identity in the post-Mao era. Sang’s work outlines the chronological development of queerness in the PRC. Apart from Sang’s transcultural evaluation towards the classic literary representation, in *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary*, Fran Martin manages to offer a mode of analysis distinctively based on Chinese historical and cultural contexts, instead of trapping in the comparison between Western forms of development in gender and sexuality theories. To synthesize this research method, instead of thoroughly focusing on the literary works as Sang does, Martin predominantly turns to the visualized forms of popular culture, including television melodramas, pulp fictions, and popular films. Though Martin’s book includes the same-sex desire and identities in mainland

China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong simultaneously, the connections and difference in these three places may provide a more comprehensive interpretation towards the non-normative identification process in China.

While Martin's book evaluates the female homoerotic desire in some Chinese visual productions, Song Hwee Lim (2006) extends this visual representation to the discussion of male homosexuality in the book *Celluloid comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. To primarily counter the claim of "a monolithic and essentialized construction of Chineseness" (2), Lim reconsiders the notion of Chinese national cinema, and regards male homosexuality in Chinese cinema as "polyphonic and multifarious" (2). Following Lim's approaches to the visual works, Bao Hongwei (2020) further elaborates on the non-heteronormative desire and identities in the contemporary PRC by assessing various forms of queer visualized cultural production. Instead of depicting the oppressive images of queerness under the socialist background, Bao intends to convey a queer sense of "postsocialist metamorphosis" (23) in the PRC. By comparing and theorizing the complex power relations several queer productions in mainland China, Bao challenges "the Euro-centric idea that there is no queer activism in China – understood in the sense of pride parades and LGBTQ political right" (36).

Indeed, till the end of 20th century and the beginning of 21st century, the spread of linguistic signification "queer" in the PRC may proceed to generalize the marginalized and incoherent construction of desire and identity outside the category of heterosexuality. The publication of some pioneering queer theories by Wang Fengzhen and Li Yinhe in 2000 marks the spread of intellectual queer theory and increasing visibility towards ku'er

in the PRC (Bao 2021). At this time, despite the previous winding path of development, Chinese queerness has gradually broken away from the shadow of the dominated heterosexual paradigms, according to Bao Hongwei (2020), “although lesbian and gay people are still fighting marginalisation, discrimination, media censorship and heteronormative social norms, a vibrant queer culture, in tandem with a visible queer movement, has undoubtedly transformed the lives of gender and sexual minorities in major Chinese cities. Queer literature, film, art and performance have mushroomed in this process” (6). Specifically, the sprout of queerness has pervaded to various aspects of representations, for example, Beijing Queer Film Festival, founded in 2001, continues to provide a platform for ku’er to express and reflect on the self-identities through the visual presentations; as well as Shanghai Pride, which operated through 2009 to 2020, enables ku’er to gain more public recognition by reinforcing the carnivalization of quasi queer rituals. Additionally, in terms of the progressing of media and Internet, an increasing number of queer fan fictions, Internet novels, and ku’er influencers are existent in Chinese cyber world, forming a seemingly prosperous surface of queerness in China.

1.3 Immobility within Mobility

Although hegemonic political discourse formerly disguised any representation of queer lives in the PRC, this new visibility starting from the end of 20th century is indicative that ku’er is managing to establish an existence between the progression and compression of social changes. Over the past years, many scholars have expressed positive attitudes towards such visibility, as it is indicative of an element of reconciliation between queer

individuals that were perceived as “deviant” and the rigid socialist path of development. Lisa Rofel (2012) regarded such movements as “grassroots activism,” which enables increased awareness among the general public of such marginalized groups. Travis Kong (2012) noted a liberalization of identities in these growing movements, which creates “new social and sexual spaces” within which to construct the queer self. Furthermore, Hongwei Bao (2020) views these queer movements as a as an “ongoing process of cultural translation, pointing to unpredictable direction” (37) in China, which intervene the stablized identity formation designated to the Chinese society and instead signifies the “resilience, defiance, and modes of creative existence (of queer people)” (38).

While in the West, queer studies have, in recent years, explored the concept of “mobility”, particularly with the development of global transportation and technological mediation. On the one hand, this mobility reorders the expression of gender and sexualities by shaping the urban and rural landscapes and constructing queer communities including gay neighborhoods, through geographical transformations. On the other hand, with the improvement of media and Internet communications as well as theoretical formations, this queer mobility can be interpreted through social and identification process, in which queerness gradually evolves into a more multifaceted and diversified construction. Thus, both physically and conceptually, queer mobility indicates an expanding space of recognition, identification, and presence for queer individuals. Whilst increasing mobility and visibility are largely positive within this community, they also expose and create new challenges for how queer individuals are perceived and exist within modern society. Despite the positive attitude towards “mobility”, however, the

queer identities might be reevaluated through this process since the realm of accessibility to mobility unconsciously marks the boundary within the queer group based on “normative parameters of consumption practices” (Puar 2002). The tension within mobility indicates that queer mobility may not be completely positive, which requires the potential constraints in the process of being mobile.

When considering the contemporary PRC, queer mobility is not necessarily associated with Chinese context; queer individuals are instead faced with a sense of compromise, containing internal restrictions and segregation and a failure to directly tackle the original political, social, and cultural order. Such compromise in queer activism in the era of mass growth and advancement can be theorized as “queer immobility.” Given the rising visibility of queerness, in Chinese context, “queer immobility” is not an outright reversal of “queer mobility”; instead, it reveals the limitations within the process of physical and conceptual mobility. The sense of queer immobility in the PRC can be divided into two aspects: the static basis for the generation of mobility and the internalized inflexibility under the larger mobilized context. On the one hand, like the tracks for the moving of trains, the Chinese queerness is rooted under the tolerance of the socialist context. Fail to fully evolve into a subversive power against conservative socialism, the queer representation instead falls as a supplementary subculture within the realm of socialist discourse. On the other hand, the “internalized inflexibility” may suggest a contradiction in the contemporary era, when neoliberal capitalism is intertwined with post-socialist constructions in the PRC. At present, the seemingly mobilized information activism, social movement, and modes of representation do not result in the

flexible visibility and identification of queer individuals. Instead, these elements seem to create novel ways in which to constrain queer mobility. Thus, the PRC may be not fully prepared to uphold the ideas of fluidity, boundary-crossing, and uncertainty that the connotation of “queer” maintains. As the most popularly accepted meaning of “queer”: ku'er indicates, it stresses the difference from the hegemonic homosexuality, and is still trapped in the compulsory categorization of identities. Thus, based on this categorization, despite the rising vernacularized queer campaigns and activities, significant unevenness regarding the binaries and ruptures in conceptual and spatial perspective may not be discarded during these processes.

Therefore, the interpretation of “queer mobility” and “queer immobility” may not be thoroughly monolithic, both of them contain contradictory significations. In the contemporary PRC context, instead of a thorough opposition to mobility, the structure of queer immobility may offer a more comprehensive perspective to analyze the dynamic and unstable queer situations under the illusion of mobilized economic, cultural, and social development.

Multifaceted interventions contribute to the construction of such queer immobility, with sociopolitical formations being fundamental. Globalization in the PRC has brought about considerable changes; the Reform and Opening-up movement, in conjunction with becoming a member of the WTO, have prompted China to adopt new modes to join global discourses. At the beginning of the 21st century, neoliberalism has gradually spread transnationally, prompting the emergence of novel identities worldwide. As a post-socialist state, the PRC has transformed the sense of neoliberalism in its convoluted

context, resulting in stratification of desire (Rofel 2007). Though the entanglement of post-socialism and neoliberalism has cultivated more conspicuous queer representation in the PRC, the entanglement has not achieved the establishment of a consolidated Chinese queer identity which functions independently from the heterosexuality. Given many theoretical perspectives surrounding this, one perspective is that the lack of consolidation could be attributed to the arrival of “homonormativity.” Lisa Duggan effectively summarizes this theoretical position, stating: “it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 2002). In this case, homonormativity is a movement of inclusion and assimilation, rather than an equality-based construction (Ferry 2012). The de-pathologization of “homosexuality,” the removal of “hooligan crime,” and the rise of a cosmopolitan economy in the PRC (Rofel 2012) indeed positively contribute to the mobilization of queer existence. A number of queer recreational activities have emerged among middle-class queer individuals, including the Voguing Ball and drag competition in Shanghai, which facilitate the queer identity being gradually recognized by the mainstream culture. Nevertheless, it might be questionable that if the PRC truly has the ground for “normalizing homosexuality.”

Given these seemingly homonormative phenomena, Petrus Liu questions, “Is neoliberalism truly the dominant cultural logic of contemporary queer Chinese cultures? Are queer cultural expressions always complicit with neoliberal globalization and the politics of gay normalization? Is there a critical, dissident, and, indeed, queer Chinese

culture anymore?” (Liu 2015). Although queer visibility in the PRC is improving, queer identity has not yet gone through a systematic formation process and is largely still in its infancy. Due to this, it is arguably not possible to theorize the growth of queerness in public discourse as normative. Therefore, many of the debates, discussions, and theories around queer identity may demonstrate the inevitable contradiction that structures queer immobility in China. This contradiction is the queer community longing for recognition, acceptance, and normalization, however being situated under the compression of a lagging foundation for existence and increasingly liberalized interaction from western ideology.

Though not thoroughly, the global tendency towards neoliberalism and privatization contributes to an element of transformation within contemporary Chinese society. Queer liberalism has, in many Western countries, given rise to a sense of homonormativity. In China, the combination of select factors, namely the boost in economy, rapid urbanization, and evolution of culture, make it more likely that queer “metronormativity,” will be a common perspective. Metronormativity naturalizes the connection between queer movement and urbanism (Halberstam 2005), essentially communicating that the queer identity is inseparable from urban life. Undeniably, the rise of metropolis in China, including Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, nourishes queer activism with their open atmosphere, solid economic basis, and increasing international communication. This does, however, create a connotation between queerness and urbanization, subsequently establishing a geopolitical boundary in which queerness is only accepted in urbanized areas, with rural queer existence essentially neglected. Scott Herring argues that the

urban/rural contention not only naturalizes or even exaggerates the fact that distinction of queer representation is based on economic, political, or class structure; but also unconsciously forms a static and binary mode of interpretation, which stigmatizes or regulates the potentially fluid way of queer production (Herring 2010). “Queer anti-urbanism”, has sprung up in the past decades in Western queer theory, suggesting that this perception is being challenged. In China, however, such challenge has yet to occur, with queer individuals in rural areas being unrecognized. In *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture under Postsocialism*, a queer folk artist from a rural area of China shared that even he failed to recognize his own queer identity and instead perceived himself to be a “hooligan”. It was only when he was invited to the Queer Art Festival in Beijing that his perspective about himself changed, as he met people who resembled him and supported his identity (Bao 2020). Hence, though the geographical distinction can provide a materialistic base for queer studies, it may also contribute towards subversive tension. Despite the physical mobility, it constrains the interpretation of queer communities by dichotomizing the differences of regions, causing queer immobility in a social and conceptual sense.

In conjunction with the geopolitical separation that contributes to queer immobility, the visibility of queerness in Chinese society could also be impacted by ideological suppression. Margret Hillenbrand explores the sense of “public secrecy” in China, arguing that “whose not-saying is a convention most conspire to maintain—is an overlooked structuring force in Chinese sociopolitical life today” (Hillenbrand 2019). Unlike the robust forces on the publication of certain literary and visual works, including

governmental censorship, “public secrecy” is an internalized hauntology embedded in the state’s narrative as a potent mechanism in dealing with the memories and subjectivity. Under public secrecy, the queer existence, as a deviance in Chinese heteronormative national history, is made invisible and unarticulated. Such unreportedness naturally drives the queer subjects out of the public discourse for decades, strengthening the ghostliness within the queer existence by forcing the process of forgetting. Also, this queer secrecy is aggravated by the inevitable fetishization on queer subjects structured by public and official discourse, when they are reduced to “spectacles” correlated with the connotation of depravity, lust, and loss. In this sense, queer subjects’ private desire, identity, and ideology are pulled out of the individualistic realm and analyzed under the nation’s political scale. The public secrecy seems to rationalize the blur between queer identity and Chinese national image, normalizing a sense of “homonationalism” (Puar 2017).

1.4 Decoding Queer Immobility

The thesis intends to revisit the queer subjects in the PRC, and trace the sense of immobility in terms of their desire and identities. However, in align with the subjects who are suppressed by the hegemonic discourse, the proper and legitimate representation of such queerness may face potential conundrum. In her essay “‘Human, Woman, Demon’: A Woman’s Predicament”, Dai Jinhua (2002) analyzes the controversy in representing the image of women in visual art, which may also indicate the difficulties in the representation of queer identities:

In terms of expression, a woman’s “reality” does not exist: for the reality of women

cannot be narrated through male, phallogentric, and logocentric discourse: and female reality cannot be an essence, normative and pure. The predicament of women originates in the prison of language and the prison of norms, in the difficulty of self-recognition, in besiegement and the perplexity of these multiple mirrored images. Female existence is often a kind of mirrored existence (153).

“The mirrored existence” in Dai’s context, which precisely points out the limitation in expressing women’s identity under the hegemonic paradigms structured by neutralized phallogentric discourse, can be also applied to the queer existence under the mainstream heterosexuality. Usually understood as the flip-side of heterosexuality, the representation of queerness is mediated by the stigmatized gender and sexuality roles, which is inevitably associated with underlying interrogation or fetishization. In this case, except tracing and depicting the functionality of queer immobility in the PRC, this essay also manages to reevaluate the modes of representation towards queerness and stress the consolidating agency of it.

Independent queer cinemas will be this essay’s main focus. With their intrinsic contradictions, Independent films might resonate with the quandary in representation of queerness more explicitly. Being independent opens up more possibilities of representation at the sacrifice of wider distribution in the PRC, according to Jenn Marie Nunes (2018), “This independent mode of filmmaking has allowed directors in mainland China to sidestep state intervention, avoid censorship mandates and gain greater control over their own work, although in this way, it is likely that they will not have access to standard distribution channels and would often find their films banned” (76). As the

association of “independent” within these films antecedently marks the existence of illegitimacy and undergroundness as well as further implicates the limitation and constraints in Chinese film production, it reaffirms the sense of immobility the essay intends to discuss. In addition, given the fact that the independent films directed by Cui Zi'en, Fan Popo, or Shi Tou in contemporary China have offered a novel perspective alienated from Chinese official discourse, the sense of “independent” may provide the queer subjects with a legitimate mode of representation, which breaks away from the mainstream heteronormative gaze.

In order to effectively capture the contradictory essence of queer immobility, the selected independent films will be analyzed under a mobilized structure. Thus, two pairs of films, with about ten years' span between each film respectively, will be analyzed in the following chapters. Chapter 1 will center on Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant* (2001) and *Qiu Jiongjiong's Madame* (2010), which primarily revolves around the psychological space of the queer characters, by assessing the continuing circulation of psychic loss pervaded among the characters despite the change of time. Chapter 2 will move from the internal to the external spatial structure through the discussion of Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (1996) and Fan Popo and David Cheng's *New Beijing, New Marriage* (2009). In these two films, the immobilized queer situation is signified and intensified by the power produced by the physical space, which is intertwined with inevitable fetishization. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to break the illusion of queer progress and activism shaped by the Western ideologies, the compulsory urbanization, and the increasing consumerism in the contemporary PRC, and to reveal the inevitable

loop the queer subjects might be trapped in through the visual representations.

2. Queer Immobility from a Psychological Perspective

Despite the rise of queer advocacy and activities in recent decades, no celebrity or government official has openly disclosed his or her queer identity in the PRC. This phenomenon marks the compulsory secrecy of Chinese queerness, and this underground existence, which is usually denied in the Chinese collective narrative, is rendered as error or deviation under the so-called hegemonic system. Specifically, this system, within China, can be interpreted as what Gramsci (1971) terms “common sense”, which contains the “diffuse, uncoordinated features of a general form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment” (331). Jack Halberstam (2011) theorizes Gramsci’s notion of “common sense” as a dependence on the “production of norms”. In China, heterosexuality is regarded as a consensual norm, hence, “Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter- hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anti-capitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique” (89). Thus, the underrepresented queer existence is hypothetically associated with failure and loss under these common-sense norms. Nonetheless, such a discourse of negativity, according to Halberstam (2011), may deconstruct the dominant power by providing alternative interpretations, while also revealing the “unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (p. 88).

In this case, instead of tracing or structuring the presumably promising queer

visibility and activism in contemporary China, this chapter intends to present the failure of queerness, in order to provide a counter-narrative to the hegemonic discourse and to exploit the stasis within Chinese queer existence. Two independent films of different time will be evaluated in this chapter, namely, *Fish and Elephant* (2001) and *Madame* (2010). Within this comparison, the similarities of the protagonists, despite the nearly ten-year time difference between the two films, consistently convey the immobilized situation of Ku'er and queerness in a Chinese context. The queer characters' psychological immobility under several forms of repressive force, which may signify the pervading condition of loss within queerness in the PRC, will be the main focus of evaluation. Thus, to explicitly associate the internal world with the outer relations, psychoanalysis and its related metaphorical constructions, despite the supposed deficiencies (reflected in its dichotomous conceptions of gender and sex), and with their capacity to link physical or biological construction and psychic formation in an interaction with queer theory, might offer useful insights in examining the conundrum of identity in such films.

2.1 Fish and Elephant

Li Yu's 2001 film *Fish and Elephant* sheds light on the type of lesbian love that has been constantly driven out of mainstream discourse. As this was the first Chinese film to feature lesbian relationships, the opening of *Fish and Elephant* prompted the audience to reflect on the lived predicament of Ku'er, as well as females more generally, under the dual repression of heteronormativity and patriarchy. The film largely revolves around

four women: Xiaoqun, Xiaoling (Xiaoqun's current girlfriend), Junjun (Xiaoqun's ex-girlfriend), and Xiaoqun's mother. With her life centred on these three women, the elephant keeper Xiaoqun is facing pressure from her mother to get married as soon as possible. She has been conducting an underground romance with Xiaoling, while secretly offering help to Junjun, who is being pursued by the police. The intricate relationships between the characters in the plot partially represent the quandary of the queer subjects in their daily lives, as they are trapped in a circle within which the conflict between well-established social norms and the deflection of queer desire cannot be reconciled. Aside from such contradictions, the film also touches, through multiple metaphors, on the mental and internal immobilities of Ku'er, overshadowed by the power of traditional kinship discourse.

2.1.1 Lesbian as "Infertile" Woman

The film begins with a conversation between Xiaoqun and her brother in a restaurant. In this conversation, her brother anxiously describes how worried their mother is, since Xiaoqun still refuses to get married at the age of thirty. In this scene, Xiaoqun's brother may represent the most commonly seen heteronormative attitude in China, i.e., that a heterosexual marriage is indispensable for young people, and especially for young women. This commonly held attitude has shaped the quandary of Xiaoqun's life, and in the rest of the film, Xiaoqun fights the contradiction between the traditionally valued heterosexual marriage and her homosexual attraction to women. In this sense, marriage is

related to the “family-as-a-virtue” discourse that has been passed down through Chinese civilization, since marriage (with its function in rationalizing the need for reproduction) underpins the complexity and stability of the family and its existence. The pressure around Xiaoqun’s potential marriage and the cherishing of the collective sense of “family”, as maintained in both traditional and contemporary China, relate to the theoretical and psychoanalytic examination of “kinship”, which in turn may explain Xiaoqun’s conundrum within the wider heterosexual culture.

As a system of social organization based on the structure of family ties, kinship is a human phenomenon. It is also based on cultural production, and it is valued in both “primitive” and modern societies (Janet, 2012). The continuing importance of kinship lies in its collective structure, as Rey Chow (2007) states: “The kinship family stands as the inviolable basic social unit—what one might further specify as a kind of inalienable property or evidence of (self-)ownership—that rationalizes human relations (p. 171). In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss connects the “reciprocal” nature of kinship with the exchanging role of woman to illustrate the formation and function of kinship. In terms of the ideology of reciprocity and the taboo of incest, he regards women’s fertility as the basis of reproduction, which renders women as “gifts”, and kinship itself is maintained by the reciprocal exchange of women (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). Lévi-Strauss’ interpretation of kinship indicates how patriarchal domination has been imposed on women, and this can partially serve to explain the nature of queer identity in the film. Moreover, such an interpretation implicates the immobilized conundrum of Xiaoqun, as an alienated queer subject in heterosexual discourse. Her reproductive

female body can be viewed as a bond with the future, which is compulsorily embedded in the ideology of retaining and extending familial bloodlines, and in the life and survival of her family. Constrained by this kinship discourse, Xiaoqun is forced to take on multiple roles; in other words, the kinship family creates a burden in the development of Xiaoqun's psychic recognition, while also intensifying the contradictory "doubleness" of Xiaoqun's identity.

In the film, Xiaoqun leads two distinct lives, as she is effectively divided into two different characters: a daughter and a lover. As a daughter, Xiaoqun has initially concealed her queer identity to her mother and accepted several blind dates with men, introduced to her by her mother in order to "help" her get married soon. The daughter, Xiaoqun, is trapped under the domination of patrilineal kinship, which demands the reproductivity of the female body under the regulation of heterosexuality. The naturalized power of fetishism, via the kinship discourse, is imposed on Xiaoqun in the name of marriage, which supposes the necessity of procreation for the female population and stymies the multifaceted expression of female identity. The role of woman, and the functionality of kinship, represent a set of intersecting questions regarding social, cultural, and political systems. Specifically, the position of woman in kinship relations may embody the tension between "private" and "public." In this sense, the intention behind marriage, i.e., to construct the domestic kinship family, might naturally contribute to a broader acceptance of an uncritical male-led discourse (Tsing & Yanagisako 1983). Xiaoqun's participation in blind dates, and her initial pretence of being heterosexual, not only expose the fixation on woman's role brought about by the regulation of kinship, but

also represent the inevitable imbalance within public and private power relations, since the burdens or obstacles structured and maintained by empowered public discourse will inevitably result in psychological immobility for a powerless queer woman.

Ironically, despite Xiaoqun's mother's stress on the maintenance of kinship, she has failed to provide Xiaoqun with an intact family: Xiaoqun's father is almost absent from Xiaoqun's life as a daughter. In a Freudian sense, the role of father is significant in both the "pre-Oedipal and Oedipal phases" of child development. Freud assumes that the father may be regarded as both a competitor and a prohibitor of incestuous sexual impulses by his children, especially boys, and this may potentially affect the identity development of the child (Jones 2007). Carl Jung expands this theory to the psychosexual development of girls and defines it as the "Electra Complex", to describe the daughter's quasi-sexual desire for her father that competes with her mother (Gillette 2022). In this case, Xiaoqun's parents' early divorce marks the failure of a heterosexual marriage within her immediate cognition, and the absence of her father may provide a clue to the formation of queer identity, since she is spared from a possible fixation on the male figure within her family. The desire of sexual fantasy triggered by a seemingly powerful figure, in a psychoanalytic sense, does not appear to exist in Xiaoqun's life. On the contrary, it is unconsciously erased in her memories, and even replaced by feelings of resentment structured by her father's betrayal of the family. On the other hand, Xiaoqun's father's absence may signify the incompleteness of a kinship family, and this incompleteness seems to contradict the inflexible requirement for Xiaoqun to establish an intact heterosexual family. Such a rupture between the traumatic reality Xiaoqun has

experienced, and the demanding urgency for her to fall into the regulation of kinship, serves to intensify her alienation and suspicion towards heteronormative ideology, as well as generating a sense of psychological loss shaped by the pressure and compression of dialectical tension.

As a lover, Xiaoqun simultaneously gravitates between two women: Xiaoling and Junjun. In contrast to her passivity on blind dates with men, Xiaoqun is more proactive in her relationship with Xiaoling. She enthusiastically asks Xiaoling for a date after their first encounter in the clothing shop. Similarly, she is empowered when staying with Junjun, an escaped prisoner, who shot her father because of rape. Xiaoqun helps Junjun avoid arrest by the police by courageously hiding her in the zoo and lying to the police. The distinction between Xiaoqun's passive pretence and her proactive participation in different forms of relationship may represent the intricacy and uncertainty involved in realizing female desire under the domination of heterosexuality and patriarchal regulation. Hiding her real self under this dual oppression may serve to create a physically and psychologically safe space to sustain underlying queer desire.

Additionally, Xiaoqun's proactiveness in lesbian relationships is accompanied by unpredictability and precariousness, as it is constantly destabilized by heterosexual intervention. The latter includes Xiaoqun's mother's unannounced visit to the apartment where Xiaoqun and Xiaoling live, and the police surveillance of Junjun and Xiaoling. In this sense, Xiaoqun's mother and the police both represent unpredictable risk, and the general predicament inherent in realizing queer desire. They also represent the

irreversible empowerment of heteronormativity within the expression of queer identity. The duality of Xiaoqun's life is ended by her final coming-out to her mother, after Xiaoling tries to break up with her. Although this behaviour offers the possibility of balancing the existence of queer identity and heterosexual regulation, it still circles around the will to be recognized by heterosexual kinship lines, while revealing the restrictions involved in articulating female desire. As Fran Martin (2010) maintains: "*Fish and Elephant* offers a critique of the existing sex-gender system's limitation of women's sexual and affective choices that echoes and amplifies a comparable critique in earlier narratives of female same-sex love" (177).

2.1.2 Continuity, Discontinuity

Compared with the metaphorical English title "Fish and Elephant", the film's Chinese title "This Summer (今年夏天 Jinnian Xiatian)" reflects the incorporation of time and space in the narrative. Fran Martin (2010) designates such temporal incorporation in the film as "lesbian presentism". She invokes an observation from Cui Zi'en: "The film is particularly notable for its efforts to situate women's same-sex love not in some distant past moment but instead firmly within the here and now of the present [...] In addition to the film's title, Cui's comment refers to the overt localism and presentism of the film's *mise-en-scène* and sound track, which consistently foreground the unmistakable textures, sounds, and sensory density of everyday life in early-twenty-first-century Beijing" (169). In fact, with abundant use of long take and the inclusion of city scenes in Beijing, the

director Li Yu cautiously creates a sense of continuity in the film. Following the characters' wanderings in the city, from the restaurant to the clothing store, then to the zoo, the film's constant long-shots construct the possible synchronicity embedded within temporal and spatial intersection. Hence, Beijing is presented as a consistent space, containing and connecting the multiple desires that simultaneously exist. This continuity, apart from its stress on cohesion within time and space, is also expanded to the conceptual structure that the film intends to generate.

Jenn Marie Nunes (2018) has analysed the pervasive "queer female invisibility" in *Fish and Elephant*. Specifically, she defines this phenomenon as "disruptive invisibility," which "reveals a queer female discourse that functions beyond and through the normative framework of being, hailing the parts of ourselves able to see beyond what the dominant culture chooses to make visible" (88). Nunes' discussion rigorously connects continuous physical invisibility in the film with the conceptual implications of the characters' psychological identity, while offering an interpretation within a broader theoretical framework. For Nunes, a sense of continuity can be also seen in the construction of psychology and identity within the film's female characters. The protagonist Xiaoqun displays the most explicit and consistent path of gradually awakening identity, from the concealment of her queerness to the "confession" to her mother. In this process, an increasingly consolidated queer identity, which may be recognized and may even resist the repression of heterosexual kinship domination, is demonstrated.

Xiaoqun's girlfriend, Xiaoling, undergoes a similar path of establishing an identity

outside male interrogation. Before the encounter with Xiaoqun, Xiaoling is restricted within a toxic environment, where male sexual harassment towards females is frequently seen. Her love for Xiaoqun represents an empowered female independence, which tentatively subverts the stabilized heterosexual discourse structured by dominant masculinity, consciously breaking through the eroticized male gaze imposed on her. Moreover, Xiaoqun's ex-girlfriend, Junjun, demonstrates the awakening of female and queer identity more unequivocally, as she kills her father, the crystallized symbol of patriarchy, after being raped by him for years. In this sense, these three female characters all display psychological coherence in building up their queer identity outside the surveillance or control of normative forces: they establish a continuous narrative of subversion and increasing agency.

Despite the temporal and spatial continuity in the structuring of "lesbian presentism" (Martin, 2010), however, and the psychological continuity in developing subversive queer female identity, these processes are not stabilized or guaranteed. They are inevitably accompanied by uncertainty and disruption, especially in the representation and consolidation of female queerness. To demonstrate the unavoidable rupture in the continuous narrative that the film seems to convey, the female intimacy scenes, which directly express the delicacy of the female body, will be analysed and assessed with relation to fragility within queer identity. The first intimate scene takes place during Xiaoling's first visit to Xiaoqun's apartment. After sitting on the bed for a while, the two women tentatively start to kiss each other, and this is followed by a sudden shift to a street scene in Beijing. The shot then cuts back to the naked female couple lying quietly

on the bed. The abrupt interposition of the irrelevant city scene dramatically interrupts the continuing representation of the eroticized queer female desire; it creates a sense of alienation, through which the direct expression of intensive queerness is intentionally omitted and hidden. On the other hand, the immediate change of space, from a comparatively closed and private area to the open and public space, may trigger a sense of insecurity, which reflects the constraints of fulfilling private queer desire under the pressure of the public gaze. The second scene of female intimacy is set in the living room of Xiaoqun's apartment, when Xiaoqun and Xiaoling's intended consummation of sexual desire is disrupted by a phone call from Junjun, and this phone call also marks the intensifying contradiction within Xiaoqun and Xiaoling's relationship. The discontinuity in this scene represents the vulnerability inside the queer community, which is inevitably accompanied by suspicion and jealousy. After this, the furious Xiaoling, who is irritated by Xiaoqun and Junjun's relationship, chooses to have sex with a male stranger she meets in a bar. Xiaoling's behaviour reflects the precariousness within queer relationships by demonstrating how fragile such relationships are within the heteronormative paradigm.

The last, but comparatively least-interrupted female sexual scene is presented near the end of the film, after Xiaoqun has finally "come out" to her mother. Despite the scene's completeness, the film also, and simultaneously, shows Junjun surrounded by a group of police officers at the zoo. Like the two examples cited above, the continuity of this sexual scene is maintained against several heterosexual interventions, which may render this scene *discontinuous* in a conceptual sense. On the one hand, Xiaoqun's mother's acceptance can be regarded as the basis for the presentation of desire, as it

spares Xiaoqun from the endless circle of striking a balance between familial and queer desire. Nonetheless, such acceptance may also be viewed as a form of recognition from mainstream heterosexuality, which predominantly regards the manifestation of queer identity as a deviating discourse under its powerful interrogation. The sexual scene ends with a shot outside the window, creating a scopophilic gaze towards the queer body, which echoes the surveillance and interrogation of heterosexual power. On the other hand, Junjun's fight with the police during the sexual scene reinforces the heteronormative constraints imposed on the queer subjects. The struggle with the police metaphorically conveys the unavoidable uncertainty and precarity within the existence of queerness.



Figure 1: the shot outside the window

Instead of fully representing the coherent “decentred male gaze” and “subversive queer female agency” in Nunes’ (2018) analysis, the film, with its deployment of interruptions in scenes of female intimacy, conveys a more complicated queer ambivalence, specifically through the interposition of discontinuity in the continuing

structure of narrative. Compared with the putative “subversive power” of queer sexuality, this ambivalence may more effectively reflect the queer situation under the interwoven social, cultural, and political structures in the PRC. In this sense, the emergence and consolidation of queer agency may be trapped in a cognitive loop, under intensively multifaceted interrogations, which are combined with the repression from normalized discourse and the internalized suspicion within the community.

2.2 Madame

With the similar inclusion of duality and contradictions as *Fish and Elephant*, the documentary *Madame*, directed by Qiu Jiongjiong in 2010, centers on a Chinese Ku'er named Fan Qihui, who has a double personality. “Tailor” is the comparatively masculine version of Fan, seeking intense sexual fulfillment with men in different kinds of gay venue. At night, by contrast, Fan is Madame Bilan de Linphel, a wild drag singer at a bar, pleasing the audience with her husky voice. The black-and-white film is comprised of interviews with Tailor and the performance scenes of Bilan. Eloquent, dynamic, but pessimistic, Tailor traces his life history, his encounters with different men, and his boundless desire for sex and money during the interview. As a man who has been labelled with multiple identities, Tailor shares his own philosophy towards the rupture, uncertainty, and precariousness he experiences when he battles with these so-called positions in society. Between each interview scene with Tailor, we see Bilan standing on stage with high heels and exaggerated curly wig, singing melodramatic love songs from the 1940s to

the present day. Compared with Tailor, Bilan seems to be more fragile and sensitive, despite cursing or flirting with the audience during the performance; Bilan emotionally bursts into tears every time she sings. The documentary's sense of tragedy and pessimism was reflected in real life, as the protagonist Fan committed suicide shortly after the film was completed.

Through these interviews and performances, the documentary offers a direct way to enter into the protagonist's psychological world. Rather than being recognized as transgender, Fan enjoys swaying between male and female. His double personality is more likely an externalization of his psychic dissociation, whereby he simultaneously wishes to assume a psychologically feminized role who can be loved and treated gently by the male, and a physically masculine role who dominates in a same-sex sexual relationship. Compared with transgender, which primarily revolves around mental identification, dissociation seems to be more closely related with the interaction between external and internal forces. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the discussion of dissociation originated with Freud's, and Pierre Janet's, analyses of hysteria in the mid-1890s. The similarities between hysteria and psychological trauma indicate that, "unbearable emotional reactions to traumatic events produced an altered state of consciousness" as a disguise to deal with reality, which Pierre Janet defines as "dissociation" (Herman, 2015, p.12). In the film, both Tailor and Bilan display different levels of pessimism towards self, life, and society, since they are naturally deprived of the queer mode of interpretation regarding their bodies and identities, living as they do under the regulation of heteronormativity. Such erasure of queer existence constantly

formulates a repression, which functions invisibly but profoundly within daily discourse, creating a gradual erasure of the recognition and analysis of queerness outside the logic of heterosexuality. Thus, Fan's dual personality can be viewed as an embodiment of this repression, as a double-layered failure of the consistency between self-identity and social norms. Ironically, despite the emergence of more and more fashionable modes of representation and the expansion of queer sites, Fan, as well as other groups of Ku'er, are still trapped in a loop of marginality and oppression, desperately searching for the rationality of their physical and psychological existence through drastic contradictions in a *seemingly* rapidly developing and increasingly inclusive era. The following paragraphs will evaluate the connections between several metaphors in the film and psychological formation, in order to trace the causes and implications of this dissociation, and to explore conceptual immobility regarding queer identity within modernizing progress.

2.2.1 Two Stages

Madame is intentionally structured as a drama, with a prologue, an epilogue, and eight scenes. Together with the title "Madame", this application of dramatic elements to the film creatively links this contemporary work to the classic play *M. Butterfly*, written by David Henry Hwang in 1998. With a similar focus on the anxiety of queerness under the heterosexual matrix, *M. Butterfly* questions stabilized gender orientation while undermining normative relations (male-masculinity, female-femininity) within the heterosexual discourse, through the cross-dressing of the Chinese protagonist Madame

Butterfly and his romantic relationship with a male French diplomat. As an opera performer, Madame Butterfly in Hwang's play resembles the singer Madame Bilan in Qiu's documentary. Madame Butterfly is constrained by the intersecting powers of gender, race, and politics, while Madame Bilan is labelled, measured and evaluated under societal norms. The conflicts within the external forces imposed on the recognition of their bodies and identities construct the inner fragility and precariousness within their charmingly hyper-feminized physical disguises and potent personalities. Beyond temporality, this connection extends the interpretation and analysis of Bilan and Fan's psychological conundrum regarding identity, while juxtaposing visual (cinematic) and physical stages in order to underline the psychic formation and simulation within Fan's behaviour.

The incorporation of dramatic techniques within the film seems to convert the documentary into a performance or a play: the film is a stage itself, while Fan is the protagonist. This contradicts the traditional template of documentary filmmaking, whereby dramatic elements presumably reduce the surface objectivity of a film. This contradiction between realism and fiction, within the film and its production, may offer a hint regarding Fan's physical behaviour and psychological formation. Throughout the interview with "Tailor", the latter demonstrates an alienation from reality, since he unconsciously indulges in memories. He describes his attraction to males at every age since his childhood, and he overtly memorizes the pain and pleasure he gained from countless examples of intercourse with different males through the past decades. Nonetheless, unlike straight individuals who can "do their hunting, fishing, or even net casting wherever they want" (Qiu, 2010), for Tailor, only regarding himself as a

“prostitute” gives him the opportunity to satisfy his desires. The emphasis on memory might add uncertainty to the authenticity of the documentary, since memories can be fabricated or tidied up to become disciplinary mechanisms, a phenomenon that Jack Halberstam (2011) theorizes as “suspect memorialization” (p. 15) in *The Queer Art of Failure*. For Taylor, structured as a potentially unreliable narrator in this case, the incorporation of his memories may function in parallel with the dramatic techniques in the film, in order to challenge the standardized values of realness and truthfulness that have been espoused in the normalized scale of knowledge. This challenge can be also extended to the broader discussion of institutionalized knowledge and power, as Taylor’s description demonstrates a queer memory that functions outside hegemonic heterosexual regulation; the conundrum he has been faced with will not be experienced by the heterosexual group. This discursive practice may resonate with Foucault’s notion of “counter-memory”, which provides a resistance to the “regime of truth” by disrupting heterosexual continuity in the mainstream narrative (Foucault, 1977). For Taylor, as a representative of people who are deprived of voices under historical “truthfulness” in Chinese society, his memories are tantamount to the memories of the marginalized, which interrupt regulative gender roles. Nevertheless, the tension between the narratives of resistance and repression may stymie the consolidated construction of queer identity, given the ruptures, uncertainties, and ambivalence within this process. Fan’s double-faceted life may be an indication of psychic immobility under the pressure of contradictory discourses



Figure 2: Madame Bilan on the stage

On the other hand, the interplay between “the film as a stage itself”, and the physical stage where Madame Bilan gives her performances, may reveal a more profound interpretation of Fan’s psychological activity. The documentary opens with Bilan standing on the stage, holding a cigarette, singing a romantic folk song. Until the end of her performance, she talks to the audience with self-mockery: “Some people in the audience just came for the last line I sang... ‘No one cares, where you are from, whether you are a SHE with a cock’” (Qiu, 2010). The stage where Bilan performs may be related to Fan’s psychic formulations, as it can be regarded as both an open and a constrained space in terms of the physical and conceptual order. Undoubtedly, the stage, which creates a distance from reality and suspends social norms, provides a comparatively safe and tolerant space for Fan to cross-dress as a female. It requires the existence of deflection from compulsory heteronormativity, and it facilitates the visibility of such supposedly marginalized subjects. Nevertheless, the tolerance and visibility formulated

by the stage can be also interpreted as restrictive power. Specifically, the tolerance of the stage is limited regarding the intrinsic connection between stage and performance, since the stage naturally sets up a gap between audience and performer by strengthening the “act” of performance. In other words, the deviating performer can be tolerated only when he/she is placed in the discourse of an “act” on the stage.

In addition, the visibility given to Bilan by the stage is at the expense of inevitable fetishization. When performing on stage, Bilan is obliged to be interrogated via a double-layered gaze, comprising both the gaze from the audience at the bar and the invisible gaze of the audience watching this documentary. In this process, Bilan is reduced to a passive spectacle, who may be deprived of agency by the empowered gaze of hegemonic heterosexuality. Thus, the juxtaposition of the physical stage *in* the film and the visual stage *of* the film as a whole reveals the power of restriction and fetishism over Fan’s queer identity. It articulates the power relations within heterosexual knowledge production, and it embodies Fan’s psychic conundrum under the surface of his double-sided personality.

On the stage near the bar, Bilan’s performance is accomplished through the act of drag. Fan is not alone in this style of performance, due to the increasing number of drag shows in contemporary Chinese gay bars. Drag, though transgressive in terms of gender and sexuality, contains intrinsic contradictions. On the one hand, it may reinforce dominant assumptions about the dichotomous nature of gender presentation and sexual desire, by exaggerating stereotypes of gender via a sense of hyper-femininity during its

shows. On the other hand, drag performances destabilize gender and sexual categories, as well as the regime of gender difference, by presenting the social basis of femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, while also presenting minoritized genders and sexualities (Rupp *et al.*, 2010). Nevertheless, for Fan, in terms of his internalization of the drag role of “Bilan”, his drag behaviour is not only circumscribed within the physical dimension; it also infiltrates the field of psychological identification. The identity of Bilan may be seen as a reconciliation between body and desire, assumed in order to rationalize homosexual desire under the power of heterosexuality. Apart from addressing gender and sexuality, Bilan, as feminized self-recognition, embodies the suspension of desire under conditions of phallic stress, as structured by heteronormativity.

2.2.2 Therapy

The discussion of body and mentality has been generalized and analysed via multifaceted perspectives in recent decades, providing effective knowledge to help investigate and theorize connections between the mutation of the body and the formation of identity. In *Dostoevsky and Parricide* (1928), Freud’s psychoanalytic diagnosis of the illness and personality of Dostoevsky illustrates the interrelated dynamism between psychology and neurosis. By bringing Dostoevsky’s medical condition, epilepsy, into his evaluation of the Oedipus Complex in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Freud diagnoses Dostoevsky as an “instinctual character”, and defines “affective epilepsy”, which is a reflection of Dostoevsky’s psychological construction and a relational form of hysteria. To further

stress the interconnection between neurosis and psychological structure, Freud emphasizes the murder of Dostoevsky's father and claims that, "from the standpoint of psychoanalysis [...] we are tempted to regard Dostoevsky's reaction to it as the turning point of his neurosis." In terms of the association between Dostoevsky's excessive desire for masturbation and his later gambling mania, Freud clarifies: "We shall not be surprised to find that it occupied such a large space in Dostoevsky's life. After all, we find no cases of severe neurosis in which the auto-erotic satisfaction of early childhood and of puberty has not played a part" (p. 184). Thus, Freud's investigation offers an alternative entry point to the evaluation of Fan's psychological formation, based on the metaphorical interpretation of disease. In the film, disease is presented as both a virtual metaphor for reality and an actual, steadily increasing threat to Fan's body. According to Fan, "People have thought I'm a hardcore homo, but to me, you guys are all patients with heterosexual syndrome" (Qiu 2010). The disease, in this sense, is intertwined with ideological interpretations of gender and identity.

Freud's analysis provides an aetiological basis for the investigation of mental and psychological construction, including the construction of identity and personality. In *Madame*, both physical and mental diseases are made explicit throughout the interview with Tailor. They might metaphorically relate to, signify, or even intervene in Fan's identification and self-recognition, based on a therapeutic perspective. Fan candidly expresses his excessive sexual addiction in the film. Due to a lack of care from his parents, Fan was forced to explore his body during the childhood; by treating his body as a toy, Fan learned to satisfy himself through primary sexual desire. When he grew up,

such compulsive masturbation no longer fully satisfied his desires. As he admits, he began to search for more intensive intercourse with different, anonymous males across the country. The connection between sexuality and satisfaction can be tenuous in a neurotic sense, as research shows: “From the phase of searching until the actual sexual activity, the subjects concerned may feel some benefits: reassurance, well-being, an almost manic excitement, a narcissistic shoring-up, and sensations of pleasure. But as soon as the sexual act has taken place, certain subjects can be gripped by sadness and remorse, as well as by feelings of shame, and guilt” (Estellon *et al.* 2012). Although the libido triggered in this process may bring pleasure that rationalizes the obsession towards sexuality, the unpredictably negative reactions implicated in repetitive sex may signify the splitting of Fan’s identity in a medical and psychoanalytical context.

Unwanted feelings after intensive sexual activity, including guilt and remorse, may have unexpectedly emerged from Fan’s initial search for pleasure. Moreover, this conflict is worsened by obsessive desire, as unwanted feelings are unconsciously duplicated within this process. Such psychic accumulation might construct a vicious circle, aggravating the sense of marginalization and loss of recognition associated with sexuality. Specifically, Fan’s addiction to sex may originate from two layers of deprivation: the lack of attention from his parents, forcing him to amuse himself through his body; and the lack of social recognition because of his queerness. In this case, sex is converted to a substitute to fill physical and psychological lacunae through its ostensibly intensive stimulation. Nonetheless, given the biological and psychological complexity within sexual activity, the accumulation of unwanted feelings and the expanding desire to satisfy

Fan's self may lead to a continuous deprivation in terms of his identification. To reconcile with such deprivation, Fan develops two different personalities, Tailor and Bilan. The former is more masculine and dominant in sexual relationships, while the latter is sexually attractive because of her hyper-femininity. The contrast between these two personalities reflects the rupture between Fan's self-recognition and the reality he is forced to face. Hence, a double personality may indicate an unsuccessful attempt to deal with multifaceted desire, as well as an alienation from normalized regulation.

A diagnosis of syphilis after having sex with a stranger intensified the aetiological tension between Fan's body and psychology. In the interview, Tailor memorizes the painful treatment of syphilis; the extreme pain brought by the injection of penicillin forced him to reflect on his behaviour through the preceding years. The particular connotations of syphilis, as well as the deterioration of the body it brings, may generate further interpretations regarding the dynamism between one's body and psychological state. In *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), Susan Sontag proposes the discourse of "plague as punishment" around sexually related diseases. For AIDS, as she argues, "The sexual transmission of this illness, considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means, especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity" (p.26). Sontag further connects this implication with a broader consensus in society: "Plagues are invariably regarded as judgments on society, and the metaphoric inflation of AIDS into such a judgment also accustoms people to the inevitability of global spread. This is a traditional use of sexually transmitted diseases: to be described as punishments not just of individuals but of a group

(‘general licentiousness’). Not only venereal diseases have been used in this way, to identify transgressing or vicious populations” (p.54).

Transmitted sexually, like AIDS, syphilis is made to carry similar connotations to that disease; and such connotations, as well as sexual addiction itself, seem to jeopardize Fan’s queer identity. While not as lethal as AIDS, the “punishment” of syphilis may generate further psychological interpretations. In the late 1920s, for some writers and artists, syphilis was related to creativity, hyper-productivity, and originality; such neurosyphilis might imply an interconnection between physical destruction and one’s psychological state (Sontag, 1989). For Fan, the painful experience with syphilis, and the social pressure brought by this disease, further problematize his self-recognition. In this sense, calling himself a “prostitute” might strike a balance between the physical pain and the psychological inadequacy postulated by the “punishment” discourse.

Fan’s self-recognition as a prostitute may illustrate a tension between body and identity, as well as the internal relations between Tailor and Bilan. According to Rey Chow (2013), the connotations of the prostitute from the Marxist and Freudian perspective can be theorized as a “commodity-fetish in human form”, since the prostitute provides herself as goods for the market or society (491). For Fan, regarding himself as a prostitute is tantamount to a process of self-fetishization, which is accompanied by multifaceted elements. Freud attributes the cause of fetishism to the castration complex: “The fetish is a substitute for a woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in, and for reasons that are familiar to us, does not want to give up” (Freud,

1927). The factor Freud cites here is the anxiety or panic the little boy may experience regarding his own penis when he experiences the perceived “castration” of his mother. Given such a relationship between the sexualized organs, anxiety, and fetishism, the existence of the identity of “Bilan” can be viewed as an externalization of Fan’s distorting fetishization towards his own body. On the one hand, Bilan embodies Fan’s imagination of the prostitute as a libertine and a sexual figure, and this serves to placate Fan’s unattainable and narcissistic desire for excessive but irrational homosexual intercourse under the structure of heterosexuality. On the other hand, Bilan demonstrates a reversal of Freud’s ideology of fetishism by being “a SHE with a dick”. This reversal partially breaks up the traditional discourse of castration and absence, as conveyed by the analysis of fetishism and the interpretation of gender roles. The actual “addition” of a phallus on a feminized body is a sense of empowerment, in contrast with the powerlessness, constraint, and marginalization that Fan as a queer subject confronted in reality.

Given their dramatic cinematic representations, metaphors, and focus on identity formation, *Fish and Elephant* and *Madame* both open a broader view towards the construction and sustainability of queerness in the PRC. The queer characters in these two films are perplexed by the tension between the expanding visibility of queer desire and the country’s deep-rooted heterosexual paradigm. They thus demonstrate a sense of psychological “duality”, which is accompanied by a contradictory cycle that traps the queer subjects, albeit unconsciously. This duality or “doubleness,” as a symbolization of queer subjects’ psychic loss and immobility, is a complicated embodiment of the conflicts between involuntary marginalization in Chinese society and the visualized inclusion of

fantasies of queerness. Moreover, the ten-year temporal gap between the two films would seem to make these similarities more ironic. It emphasizes the immobilization of queer-identity formation within rapidly changing, neo-liberal Chinese society. After ten years, social and economic development in the PRC has not effectively permeated down to the perspective of identity, and queer subjects seem to face the same quandary as they did a decade earlier.

3. Mapping Queer Immobility

Chapter 1 discusses the immobilized circulation of queer loss and ambivalence within identity formation through the analysis of psychological similarities among different characters under the rapidly changing era. This chapter intends to expand on the continuing ideology of queer loss and ambivalence throughout the social transformations, and explore this melancholic circulation from a different angle in order to offer a more comprehensive viewpoint towards the forces of queer immobility in the contemporary PRC. In this case, the notion of immobility may deflect from the interiorities to the exteriorities, centering on the tension within physical and geographical order of space. The understanding of space can be extended to multifaceted perspective, intertwining with the production of power. Henri Lefebvre (1991) has expanded on such intrinsic order of space by offering the discussion of “social space.” According to Lefebvre, social space contains “the social relations of reproduction (personal and sexual relations, family, reproduction of labor power)” and “the relations of production” (32), which “underpins the reproduction of production relations and property relations” (85). Based on Lefebvre’s viewpoints, the geographical or physical space evaluated in this chapter is no longer a static entity, which contains certain subjects or objects; on the contrary, this chapter will mainly regard such space as a conjunction, to explore the relations of reproduction and production within the space, which may signify, distort, or even hinder the representation and expression of identities and desire.

In this chapter, the theory of “social space” in Lefebvre’s sense will be applied to the construction, appropriation, and transformation of “queer space.” The intervention of

“queer” may bring more convoluted contradictions to the original discourse of “social space.” To elaborate on the interrelations between such contradictions and the space’s power of production, this chapter will also rely on the configurations of visual code. Two films produced in different time, *East Palace, West Palace* and *New Beijing, New Marriage* will be analyzed through the perspective of immobilized queer identity produced and signified by the space under the seemingly mobilized temporal structure. Within this intersection, queerness seems to be embodied as a sense of displacement and confinement in terms of the spatial structure in daily life, which involves both a physical dislocation and a psychological constraint.

3.1 East Palace, West Palace: Public Intimacy

Released in 1996, and directed by Zhang Yuan, *East Palace, West Palace* was the first film to feature gay desire in mainland China. As such, it has attracted numerous discussions and analyses, and significant critical attention, both domestically and abroad. The title refers to the two public toilets on either side of the Forbidden Palace (on the north edge of Tiananmen Square), near an inner-city park; the area is a well-known gay cruising zone in Beijing (Berry, 1998). The main protagonists of the story are a gay writer, Ah Lan, and one of the park guards, Xiaoshi. Despite the general prejudice towards queer people under the still-prevalent heterosexual hegemony, certain inner-city parks are a comparatively safe and accessible place for the accommodation of gay desire in Beijing. Numerous gay men, including individuals such as Ah Lan, frequent the park in question, in search of erotic satisfaction or love. By contrast, Xiaoshi and his colleagues are

determined to prevent this form of “hooligan” behavior; they patrol the park each evening and every night, to prevent “crimes” being committed. On one such night, Ah Lan is caught by Xiaoshi and taken to the police station for further questioning. During the interrogation process in this confined space, an ambiguous eroticism pervades the police station. This stems from Ah Lan’s seemingly seductive manifestation of his sexual identity, and the recounting of his sexual experiences with different males. With the continuation and deepening of Ah Lan’s personal narrative, he is forced by Xiaoshi to take off his (outer) male clothing, revealing a dress underneath. Since then, a sense of illicit sexual desire has pervaded in the police station.

The film is adapted from Wang Xiaobo’s short story *Soft as Water* (*似水柔情 Si Shui Rou Qing*), albeit with several changes to the original plot. In Wang’s version, Ah Lan vacillates melancholically around his ambiguous sexual identity; as he is portrayed as bisexual, irresistibly attracted both to Xiaoshi and his wife. He has a convoluted relationship with the wife (“Bus”), a girl stigmatized as a “slut” since high school, largely because of her beauty. Ironically, Bus’s exaggerated heterosexuality and Ah Lan’s unreconciled queerness cause both to be marginalized within wider, heteronormative society, and their relationship is a sexualized distortion. In contrast to his obedient and ingratiating demeanor with Xiaoshi, Ah Lan is manipulative and violent in his sexual interactions with Bus. This narrative further complicates the depiction of the struggles of deviant queer identity under the restrictions of public visibility. The film may not evince the complexity, ambiguity, and distortions of the original story. Nonetheless, it still demonstrates the quandary of queer existence in terms of negotiating between self, public

ideology and body, through visualizations both of the dominant construction of the public sphere and the marginalized queer space.

3.1.1 Queering Public Space

The formation and the mutation of space in the film complicate the representation of queer desire and identity. Gay romantic intimacy and intercourse are mainly situated in the public sphere: the park, toilet, and police station. Indeed, tension is created by this juxtaposition of public locale and private desire. In turn, this signifies the displacement of queer identity and desire under the distortion and limitation of “queer space”.

Architecture helps create a proportioned and morally significant environment to indicate identity and class distinction in this space. Nevertheless, the appearance of “queer space” is a utopian and corporeal escape for those queer subjects who manage to avoid the strictures of traditional discourse (Betsky, 1997).

The inner-city park, as depicted in the film, is a scene of leisure, both urban and public, it also functions within a framework of heteronormative regulation. As a prominent visual aspect of the film, the design of the park architecture is conspicuously eclectic – an amalgamated design. Modern horticultural trappings and security cameras exist alongside Chinese pavilions of an ancient style. Such a heterogeneous architectural paradigm, which transcends time and space, reflects complexity in the expression of ideology in the park arena, creating a combination of historical nostalgia and urbanized fantasy. The nostalgia may relate to the inheritance of Chinese traditional values, especially Confucian patriarchy. Through a hyper-masculine model, this standardizes

both the embodiment of self-agency, and gender roles as such. For example, the male security guards wandering in the park deliberately establish boundaries, constraints and “manipulations” against any potential anomaly in conflict with the rigidly evoked historical values. Meanwhile, the modern accouterments refer to the interruptions of post-socialist urbanization and the disruption of traditional norms. This disruption, indeed, is integral to the presence, and behavior, of the subjects in the park, as they pursue their respective desires.

The visibility of gay romanticism is achieved via the urbanized version of park-related forms, as neoliberal queerness destabilizes the traditional park’s strict heteronormative and patriarchal control. In this case, the tension between private gay sexuality and the public park space takes on two layers of interpretation. On the one hand, this symbolizes the destruction of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity through the intervention of desiring subjects in a regulated public sphere. Gay intimacy, which chimes with and reflects the modernized elements in the park, generates a deflection of the long-inherited traditional ideology, forming the possibility of acceptance and inclusion in public discourse. Conversely, the pursuit of private erotic satisfaction within the public arena might signify an erosion of consolidated queer identity. It might, indeed, reflect the dispossession of the expression of queer desire under the compression of traditional hegemonic discourse and neoliberalism in post-socialist China.

The presence of gay sex in the park, which is ordinarily considered a place of public leisure and relaxation in the urban area, may demonstrate the deprivation of legitimate space for the queer community in the city. The park has transformed privatized queer

sexuality into a voyeuristic spectacle under the public gaze of heteronormativity. Moreover, what if the public denormalization of queer desire renders the position of queer subjects even more uncertain and precarious? The film opens with a guard's interrogation of Ah Lan, the protagonist, in one of the park's public toilets. As a relatively enclosed space within the park, the toilet affords queer visitors a modest sense of security. Nonetheless, the intrusion of the guard shatters this protection, implying a naturalized heterosexual skepticism towards queer presence. The public toilet is a space entangled with private and public connotations, as well as biological and social needs. As Dara Blumenthal (2014) points out: "Negotiating the space between public and private usually comes with a toll of personal (1) fear, (2) anxiety, (3) shame, and/or (4) embarrassment directed at one's bodily self. As bodies and selves are interconnected to public toilet space, the intrinsic segregation and binary signification within this space may impose violence on the existence of bodies and formation of self."

Indeed, the gendered segregation that public toilets usually entail has further implications. It evinces, "a classical causal relationship of the body being reduced to mere biological materiality - a thing - onto which gender is erected to create a subject. These dialectical relationships, binary sex, and its social elaboration into binary genders via the active mind over the passive body, are constructed according to heteronormativity" (Blumenthal, 2014). Toilets, as both public and private space, interrogate and reaffirm identities on the basis of gendered heteronormativity. Thus, the toilet in the park is essentially structured as a threat to the queer subjects, whose experience of gender is non-normative. Given the precariousness of queer subjects within

such heteronormative spaces, the film's depiction of the intrusion of the guard into the public toilet may indicate the threat, from institutionalized heterosexual discourse, towards the vulnerable existence of marginalized identity. That is to say, the "privateness" of the toilet is very publicly dominated by its more "public" manifestation. The sharing of "publicness" in the toilet enables the guard's intrusion into the intimate scene of gay desire, lending anxiety or even shame to the identification of queer subjects. The deprivation of gay intimacy signifies the passivity within queer identity under the gaze of the empowered heterosexual male. Such interventions of publicness, and the loss of privacy, stigmatize the possible presence of gay intimacy, demonstrating the displacement of queer desire, despite the emergence of overt queer existence in the contemporary era.

3.1.2 Beyond the "Privateness"

The story reaches a climax in the space of the police station, where Xiaoshi and Ah Lan manifest ambiguous erotic desire throughout the interrogation. Compared with the open park and semi-open public toilet, the police station is the most private and closed space, which may contain an intricate power structure, combined, simultaneously, with extreme repression and autonomy. In this police station, as an interior space (to quote Walter Benjamin), the "phantasmagoria of interior" can be regarded as "the expression of personality" (Benjamin, 1969). Indeed, the complex relationship between Ah Lan, Xiaoshi and the station itself corresponds to Benjamin's putative intertwining of mental state and material construction. Initially, this space is a constraint for Ah Lan, since he has been arrested by Xiaoshi for his "irregularity." The sense of constraint is increased by

the high angle shot towards the squatting Ah Lan. This serves to accentuate, not only the limited confines of the room, but the emotional pressure on the protagonist, almost as if the latter were the victim of a conspiracy in which the very space itself were a participant. The compression of space aligns with the dissociation of self when Ah Lan's queer identity is continuously reinterpreted, problematized, and interrogated.

The mirror in the police station is not only a reflection, but also a signification of transformation. For Xiaoshi, the mirror enables him to recognize his empowerment as a heterosexual male. Decades ago, Lacan referenced the powerful roles of external images in the formation of selfhood, in the so-called "mirror stage" (Lacan, 1949). At the beginning of the interrogation, Xiaoshi, who stands in front of Ah Lan, repeatedly looks into the mirror, as if seeking to emphasize his unassailable authority over the "irregular" subject. Perhaps he also seeks to reaffirm his own (evidently) fragile heterosexuality. The mirror naturally assigns positions to both of the characters and strengthens these positions through its constant reflection. Xiaoshi and Ah Lan, in any case, are trapped in this process of recognition and signification, reinforcing gender roles under the heterosexual matrix.



Figure 3: the mirror in the police station

Nevertheless, when Ah Lan refuses to look in the mirror, a certain transformation is catalyzed; the naturalized sense of balance within the process of recognition is disrupted. In other words, Ah Lan refuses to accept the identity assigned by the heteronormative power structure. Subsequently, queer identity is no longer suppressed by Xiaoshi's institutionalized masculinity; on the contrary, such empowered queer identity even forces Xiaoshi to reflect on, and question, his supposedly normalized existence as a heterosexual male. In this context, the mirror represents a form of doubling of the interior space itself: this expansion of physical space, however illusory, accompanies the extension of the imagination, bringing Ah Lan's "memory flashbacks" to the fore. The juxtaposition of the imagined Peking Opera stage and the banal furnishings of the police station creates a space of performance, in which the act of transvestism in traditional Chinese opera, and in Ah Lan's imagination, transcends the circumscription of time, providing the possibility of queer transgression over the stigmatized expressions of gender roles and the institutionalization of heterosexual desire.

This transgression, however, is fundamentally restricted, since transvestism as such fails fully to expose the “imitative structures” at the heart of gender (Butler, 1995). Rather, as Siu Leung Li points out: “The transvestite actors (in Chinese opera) were essentialists in that they believed in the essence of a biological sex as given. In capturing the essence/psyche of the female sex, a male transvestite can be transformed into a ‘woman’ that everyone takes as ‘real’” (Li, 2003). The limitations of transvestism in Chinese opera hinder the independent existence of a fully developed gay identity. The concomitant loss of identity serves and intensifies the heteronormative regulation of transgressive gay identity, its mobility and its expression.

The park, the public toilet, and the police station indicate a combination or interaction between “privateness” and “publicness”. Within their cinematic depiction, these are not merely sites (respectively) for leisure, the discharge of bodily functions or the investigation of crimes. Rather, they carry the possibility of the expression of marginalized desire among the queer community. Nonetheless, such desire must exist, destabilized, under the heteronormative gaze, which is embedded in the very fabric of these sites. The continued existence of queer identity requires the involvement of intimate desire in the public discourse of investigation, and such displacement of desire and identity may signify the immobility of queer subjects in the urban arena. Such subjects may seek out love, in a courageous attempt to assert their own agency. Even in doing so, however, they remain marginalized, still within the seemingly ineluctable control of the dominant heterosexual matrix.

3.2 New Beijing, New Marriage

Compared with *East Palace, West Palace*, from 1996 to 2009, the focus of queer subjects in the documentary *New Beijing, New Marriage* has shifted from the inner city park to Qianmen Avenue, another outdoor urban space in Beijing. Directed by queer activist Fan Popo and David Cheng, this documentary centers on a lesbian and a gay couples' weddings in Beijing on Valentine's Day 2009. The directors trace the couples from the make-up session and photo-shooting scene inside the apartment to the outdoor wedding in the crowded Qianmen Avenue, where shares a long history as a classic traditional architecture and a prosperous shopping and tourist district at present. Wandering and taking wedding photos in the avenue, the queer couples' intimacy attracts numerous attention from the pedestrians, some are curious, while some are indifferent. In order to call for the visibility of queer community as well as advocate for same-sex marriage, the couples keep distributing roses to the crowd while being strangely gazed by them; at the same time, the directors also give a mutual gaze to the crowd by asking them about their views towards Ku'er or same-sex marriage in the PRC. The film ends with the montage of the couples' wedding photos in the avenue, and an advocacy for the recognition and acceptance of queer community in the PRC.

Instead of placing the queer subjects in a pre-settled and fixed space, through the demonstration of the queer bodies wandering in the daily-life sphere, the documentary opens a novel possibility to interperllate the Chinese queerness via the sense of commonality. In this case, the representation of queer space in this film is deprived of the

mediation of metaphor, on the contrary, it tends to rely more on the sense of authenticity and improvisation in everyday activities. However, such daily liveness may bring more uncertainty to the discussion of “privateness” and “publicness” of queer desire and body regarding the discourse of spatial order, as the changing urban space and the switch of indoor and outdoor sphere might trigger more complicated interpretations towards the tension between spectatorship, agency, and queer space.

3.2.1 Beijing at present

Tracking the steps of the couples and directly recording the reaction of the crowd with a DV, *New Beijing, New marriage* successfully conveys a sense of realness, which emphasizes the presentism of time and space. By the early 1990s, the independent documentary directors in China were trying to explore more modes of representations outside the confinement of cinematic studios, and it was at this time that *xianchang* begins to gain attention from the film producers. According to Luke Robinson (2013), *xianchang* is literally “‘the scene’ or site of a film, but also the act of filming on location,” he further states that “Central to this project was a certain spontaneous quality understood as inherent to such filmmaking, for since what happened on the physical space of ‘the scene’ was beyond the control of the filmmaker, *xianchang* as a practice was considered to be intrinsically open-ended and indeterminate” (p.5). Based on Robinson’s argument, *xianchang* strengthens the realness and authenticity of the film by capturing the unpredictability and contingency of everyday life, and this contingency may, as J.P. Sniadecki (2014) comments on his *xianchang* documentary *Demolition*, “evoke a

sensorial experience of ‘being there’” (p. 27).

The sense of being, liveness, or “on the scene” in *New Beijing, New Marriage* can be regarded as an entry point to analyze the intertwined relationship between the corporeal queer body and the structure of the urban space. The aesthetics of “happening” in the film creates an integral and tangible image of queerness, which can be recognized, experienced, and reflected on. Such incorporation of *xianchang* avoids the orthodox representation of fetishizing the queer subjects as an alienated or deviant spectacles interrogating by the heterosexual paradigm, in other words, it potentially erases the conceptual distance and gap between the queer existence and mainstream fantasy. From this perspective, due to the emphasis on commonality, the depiction of queerness is spare from the inevitable passivity, but rather blends into the daily discourse; in Robinson’s (2013) interpretation, “the queer body is no longer a metonym for more general social anxieties, or a spectacle for objectification by the camera. Instead, it has become a site for the active production of new sexual identities” (p.126). However, by structuring the promptness of the space and liveliness of time, *xianchang* in the documentary removes the potentially fabricated imaginations that may be attributed to the production, and presents a more remarkable set of tensions between the body and space directly. The continuing urbanity in Beijing demonstrated in the film, which combines the contradiction between tradition, modernity, and underlying rurality, may probably destabilize the empowered queer body.

The film opens with an observatory shot towards Qianmen Avenue. Through the depiction of the noisy crowds and the tram crossing the tourist attractions, an urbanized

and modern image of “new” is constructed in these scenes. As a traditional architecture, whose history can be dated back to Ming dynasty, Qianmen Avenue has witnessed the vicissitude of Beijing through the past hundred years. As the film displays, despite the pseudo-traditional decorations, the Qianmen avenue at present is a commercial area full of shopping malls and iconic buildings. The change of the Qianmen Avenue may partially imply the metropolitan transformation of Beijing as a whole. Compared with the dark, quiet, and stereotypically traditional representation of Beijing in *East Palace, West Palace*, *New Beijing*, *New Marriage* provides a more crowded, brighter, and commercialized image of Beijing after ten years’ development under the rising neoliberal consumerism.



Figure 4: the overview of Qianmen Avenue

Upon these depictions, the film intentionally constructs an inclusive field, which seems to hint the connection between urban prosperity and the growing visibility of queer desire in the later part. The currently commercialized city, as a representation in the visual work, is given its significance as a “configuration of time and space” by

revitalizing rhetorical implications. When Beijing, as a textual existence, is inscribed in the film, it may trigger “cognitive, perceptual, and conceptual apparatuses that are operative in the process of inscribing the city in and through the text” (Zhang 1996, 16). In this case, the increasingly commercialized Beijing, together with the description of “new” in the film’s title, may suggest a possibility of novel ideology, which connects the expression of queer subjectivity. Beijing’s chronological and geographical mapping may dramatically push or hinder the development of emotions, situations, and identification of the residents inside the city. In *Shanghai Modern*, Lee Oufan borrows Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the “public sphere” to illustrate how the construction of a modern city fits into the discourse of national identity. The development of cultural products, media technology, and consumeristic behavior may forge an imagination of national identity (Lee, 1999). New Beijing, with its commercialized modernity in the film’s demonstration, opens up novel horizons to imagine and interpellate the queer identities, which might be neglected before.

However, this seeming ideologically open space structured by the urban prosperity may convey an illusion of acceptance, which might lead to an uncanny connection between the metropolitan constructions and progression in identity recognition. In the evaluation of the perceptive body as a channel to interact with the externalized capitalistic constructions under Chinese post-socialist conditions, Erin Huang (2020) theorizes the tension between the sensorial body and the industrialization of space, and regards the urban constructions as: “spatial imaginaries of global neoliberalism, where the body is subject to the colonizing forces of consumerism” (73). Such forces of

consumerism, in *New Beijing, New Marriage* context, presumably admit the the normalized connection between urbanization and queerness, which may unconsciously enhance the sense of metronormativity in the manifestation and interpretation of queer body and identity. This metronormativity, according to Jack Halberstam, “reveals the conflation of ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities. Such narratives tell of closeted subjects who ‘come out’ into an urban setting, which in turn, supposedly allows for the full expression of the sexual self in relation to a community of other gays/lesbians/queers” (36). The urban city is designated as suspended and inclosed space, which is believed to gain the only possibility to produce and cultivate the identities outside the normative heterosexual discourse. Thus, the novel urbanity in Beijing presented in the documentary both signifies the growing acceptance of the possible existence of queer body in the mainstream ideology, while crystallizes the contradiction of queerness and neoliberal prosperity simultaneously.

3.2.2 “Coming in, Coming out”

Under the broader regulation of the metropolitan Beijing, the documentary specifically revolves around two space. Apart from the overview of Qianmen Avenue in the first few minutes, the first half of the film mainly centers on the indoor scene in one of the apartments in Beijing, where the brides and bridegrooms are preparing for the weddings. The latter half of the film switches to the outside, as the couples are shown wearing wedding dresses and suits, passing through the crowded shopping districts and taking photos with the passers-by. Based on Lefebvre’s (2003) interpretation of space that: “the

concept of space links the mental and the cultural, the social and the historical” (209), the indoor and outdoor space may be both maintained as a sequence of relations, which keeps producing the interwoven power of signification and regulation. Given the supposed different connotations of interiority and exteriority, this power may function differently in terms of queerness and identification. Thus, the tension within the change of space in the film might imply a more convoluted quandary regarding the signification and interpretation of queer body.

From the representation of the decorations and furniture, the audience may have a clue that the indoor scene where the brides and bridegrooms are prepared for the wedding probably takes place in a staff’s apartment, which is now filled with busy and euphoric people. This apartment, with its sense of interiority, compared with the outdoor avenue in the following part, is not only a dwelling space, but also has the possibility to transform its physical function to a signification or maintenance of the interrelations of multifaceted identities and desires, as Benjamin’s (1978) example of a private drawing room: “The private person who squares his accounts with reality in his office demands that the interior be maintained in his illusions. This need is all the more pressing since he has no intention of extending his commercial considerations into social ones. In shaping his private environment he represses both. From this spring the phantasmagorias of the interior. For the private individual the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theater” (154). In Erin Huang’s (2020) interpretation, such private room is a “process of of boundary making and reterritorialization” (77). From this perspective, under the time of

deterritorialization given the rising of heterosexual urbanization in the PRC, the apartment, with the uninterrupted privacy, maintains as a field of recognition of queerness, which may intend to shape or even consolidate a sense of queer community.

Chatting, joking, and laughing while preparing for the brides' make-up, people, despite their different gender or sexual orientations, have created a harmonious atmosphere inside the apartment, thus further converting the apartment into a seemingly utopian queer space. Free from the interrogation of heteronormative guidelines, it can be claimed as a safe space, where the expression of queerness can be recognized and supported. Here, the structure of apartment may be metaphorically interpreted as a sense of "shelter" by hiding and maintaining the queerness in a closed and unknown space, which is intentionally alienated from the gaze of normative paradigm. Therefore, the harmony presented in the comparably safe and isolated space may mark the complicated "undergroundness" of the queer subjectivity in the PRC, and the tension of "inside" and "outside" has haunted the queer community. The indoor space seems to be intractable privacy, which maintains and constrains the sprout and development of queer identity at the same time.

The tension intensified when the couples enter the public space. In this process, the spatial change of the queer bodies may signify a psychological path of "coming out", through which the queer couples are driven out of the safe and harmonious queer utopian space and placed under the examination of the heterosexual majority. This courageous move, which reclaims the physical and ideological reterritorialization, partially breaks the consistent "unreportedness" and "undergroundness" that embedded in the marginalized

queer community, and mobilizes the visibility and recognition of queerness within the hegemonic heterosexual discourse. Accompanied by the uncertainty and spontaneity in the present avenue, according to Luke Robinson (2013), the couples under this context are “identifiably queer,” who “exists not simply at the margins of society, but as an integral part of it” (124). In this case, compared with the queer subject, who is represented through a set of deviating metaphors and the signification of cross-dressing in *East Palace, West Palace*, the queer body in Qianmen Avenue seems to break away from the fetishization, and obtain the agency in the representation.



Figure 5: queer couple facing the cameras

However, such queer mobilization between “privateness” and “publicness” may not be as much promising as Robinson’s perspective, despite the visualization of empowered queer self through the de-fetishizing cinematic techniques. The direct gaze and explicit interrogation imposed on the queer couples from the mass crowd prominently indicate the predicament of revealing the queer identity in the public. When the two couples are taking wedding photos with their own photographers, they have gained excessive attention than other heterosexual couples. At this time, the voyeuristic gaze implicated on

the queer bodies is intensified through the lens of cameras. The crowd's complex curiosity, together with their desire to "capture" the queer couples as objects or spectacles, have formed into a double-layered heterosexual gaze, imposing unbound fetishizing power towards the queer bodies. Compared with the scrutiny on the rhetorically performative cross-dressing queer body in East Palace, *West Palace*, the gaze embedded in daily life may be more cruel in demonstrating the proximity and realness of Ku'er's quandary in the heterosexually dominated society.

Moreover, apart from the gaze, the couples have received numerous comments in the avenue, which fit accordingly to the power of compression from the public sphere. One of them from the pedestrian towards the two couples seems to further ossify the spectatorship. When being asked about his opinions about "homosexuality", one responds that: "I don't have a problem with lesbians. Men should love women. It's OK for women to love women, too. I don't like it when men like men" (Fan et al 2009). This comment towards Ku'er, which seems to uphold the queer identity on the surface is common in China. By juxtaposing the masculinity and regulative heteronormativity, such point of view intersects the power of patriarchy and heterosexuality and objectifies the sense of queerness through the deflection of gender contradiction. This ideological divergence created by the heterosexual gaze seems to trigger more multifaceted contentions on different queer bodies, as the documentary shows, the lesbian couples are surrounded by more people (especially male) than the gay couple. The vocal and visual gaze embedded in the public sphere seems to weave a sense of inevitable fetishism towards the existence of queer body under the domination of heterosexuality.

Under the mobilized temporal structure from 1996 to 2009 and the continuing tension between the spatial order and queer bodies throughout these years, the films *East Palace*, *West Palace* and *New Beijing*, *New Marriage* seems to convey a double-layered narrative of queer immobility. On the one hand, the different mappings of Beijing presented in the films imply a rapidly-changing and highly-flexible social, cultural, and economic background in the PRC. The images of the city, as the films show, have transformed from a traditionally-decorated sphere to the consumeristic metropolis. Such urbanized transformation may potentially shape the conditions of queerness, however, on the other hand, the queer bodies in the films are still trapped in a constrained state. In this sense, the general configuration of Beijing can be viewed from several fragments. The park, police station, apartment, and avenue jointly shape the discourse of “privateness” and “publicness”, interiority and exteriority within the representation of queerness. Following the controversial ideology of “coming out,” the power production in gender roles and identities in such space may constantly intensify the sense of fetishization, alienation, and spectatorship imposed on the queer bodies. Thus, given such convoluted structure within the discourse of space, the signification and construction of queerness in the PRC are inevitably intertwined with or even stymied by multifaceted controversies.

4. Conclusion

In the contemporary PRC, the rapid development of economy and technology may create a generally mobilized atmosphere, which is specifically structured by the flexible transportation, the changing landscapes, and boosting cultural products. However, this mobilized prosperity in the PRC seems to intentionally hinder the unwanted backwardness and stasis existing in the process of development. Hence, this contemporary mobility in several aspects might not be completely positive, as it predominantly weaves an illusion of activism, and stymies the representation and reflection of the underrepresented and marginalized identities, which are left out in the picture of postsocialist progression. To be more specific, although the queer subjects in the contemporary PRC have gained an increasing visibility under the mobilized communication technologies, they are still recognized, interpellated, and manipulated through the lens of heterosexual paradigm. In other words, instead of outlining the complete pictures of ku'er in contemporary era, the sense of "queer mobility" is constructed by the ostensible growth in other aspects of society, which may not fully coordinate with the conundrum in the representation and expression of identity and desire. Therefore, for the contemporary PRC, "queer mobility" might not be a thoroughly positive phenomenon, as it tentatively strengthens the illusion of progress that has been designated to the Chinese society and potentially omits the winding and complicated reality of loss and failure in queer communities.

The emphasis of "queer immobility" in this thesis may not be espoused as the

outward opposition to the discussion of “queer mobility” in the PRC, instead, this immobility can be regarded as a supplement to the seeming mobilized phenomenon, which intends to reveal and reverse the sense of secrecy and unreportedness imposed on the marginalized queer groups embedded in the advocacy of queer mobility. Thus, the sense of queer immobility is internally intertwined with the circulation of loss and fixed melancholy, which indicates the compulsory continuum of being left out or neglected by the mainstream discourse of production. The discussion of queer immobility in this thesis is aimed to not only break the illusive bubble of economical, cultural, and social success associated with the mobilized situations; but also provide a more comprehensive and objective picture towards the queer subjects in reality through the reordering of geographical space and psychology, including how the queerness is represented, engaged, and negotiated in the postsocialist context. Though exposing the inevitable loss and backwardness in the rapidly-developing society, queer immobility may not be understood as completely negative; instead, it urges us to reflect on the fixation or fetishization towards queer communities as well as stresses the internal complexity and metamorphosis within the queer situations in the contemporary PRC, which can not be analyzed monolithically.

The films discussed in chapter 1 and chapter 2 represent the psychological and spatial queer immobility in the contemporary PRC respectively. Although each pair of films has almost 10-year time gap, they still display a lingering queer immobility. *Fish and Elephant* and *Madame* in chapter 1 both center on a sense of psychic loss, which is embodied as the compulsory doubleness imposed on the internal construction of the

queer characters. *East Palace*, *West Palace* and *New Beijing*, *New Marriage* mainly turns to the spatial and geographical construction of queer immobility, following the representation of urban space in each film, the indoor and outdoor as well as compressed and expanded space may signify the inevitable limitation produced by the power relations in such space within the queer identities.

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