Shaping a New Identity: Increasing Visibility of Lesbian Desire in Chinese Cinemas

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In recent years there has been a noticeable increase in Chinese-language films about lesbian romances. Many of these films have found commercial and critical success in Chinese markets such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as honors at international film festivals.In order to analyzes how these films reflect and shape Chinese lesbian identity, this thesis considers how a range of contemporary Chinese-language films produced in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and abroad deploys the figure of the lesbian. In particular, this study examines the production of such films by Chinese cultures outside of Mainland China as a means of promoting an alternative, inclusive Chinese identity in opposition to Mainland censorship.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Images of female same-sex romance in recent Chinese-language films are part of the increasingly transnational nature of Chinese cinema. Transnationalism is present in Chinese cinema at many levels, which Sheldon Lu outlines in the introduction to the volume *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*:

> First, the split of China into several geopolitical entities since the nineteenth century-- the Mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong-- and consequently the triangulation of competing national/local 'Chinese cinemas,' especially after 1949; second, the globalization of the production, marketing, and consumption of Chinese film in the age of transnational capitalism in the 1990s; third, the representation and questioning of 'China' and 'Chineseness' in filmic discourse itself, namely, the cross-examination of the national, cultural, political, ethnic, and gender identity of individuals and communities in the Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora; and fourth, a re-viewing and revisiting of the history of Chinese 'national cinemas,' as if to read the 'prehistory' of transnational filmic discourse backwards (3).

The films chosen for this thesis reflect work done by directors outside the stream of Mainland Chinese "national" cinema, including directors from Taiwan (Tsao Jui-yuan and Zero Chou) and Hong Kong (Mak Yan Yan) as well as a member of the Chinese diaspora (French/Chinese Dai Sijie) and a German filmmaker working in Taiwan (Monika Treut). These artists are all members of the Chinese "periphery," or, to use Tu Wei-ming's terminology, "Cultural China." According to Tu, Cultural China is the product of interaction among three "symbolic universes:" the culturally and ethnically Chinese societies of Mainland China (PRC), Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore; members of the Chinese diaspora; and non-Chinese who "try to understand China intellectually and bring their conceptions of China to their own linguistic communities" (13). Because she is a traditionally marginal figure, the foregrounding of the Chinese lesbian in these films represents a re-centering of Chinese culture in an increasingly globalized era. Yet she does not fit into Tu's notion of Cultural China as Confucian China, which privileges the male scholar.

Rather, she participates in the breaking down of distinct boundaries between East and West, neither reinforcing (all) Confucian values nor representing wholesale Westernization. In *Woman and Chinese Modernity* Rey Chow argues that "because women are the fundamental support of the familial social structure, the epochal changes that historians document are most readily perceived through the changing status of Chinese women" (53). The careful analysis of these films provides insight into the current formulation of Chinese identity across increasingly fluid national and cultural boundaries. Mainland Chinese national cinema uses the body of the heterosexual woman as an allegory for the nation, particularly in the work of Zhang Yimou (which has been extensively analyzed by scholars such as Rey Chow). By adopting the figure of the lesbian as their "body," peripheral cinemas lay claim to an alternate "Chinese" history and formulate a seemingly new, more humanist and inclusive Chinese identity. However, this peripheral status, especially in the case of members of the diaspora and non-Chinese cultures, raises questions as to the authenticity of this identity for Chinese audiences. Within Tu's three symbolic universes of the Chinese cultural periphery, I progress outward from films produced in the first sphere of Taiwan and Hong Kong, through a film made by a member of the Chinese diaspora, to a film made by a Westerner made with the support of Taiwan. For each of these films I examine how the positioning of the films within their respective spheres allows them to shape Chinese lesbian identity.

Women, especially lesbians, are traditionally some of the most oppressed individuals in Chinese patriarchal society. Since for many centuries a woman's status depended on marriage and giving birth to sons, women who refused to marry had little opportunity for survival. The May Fourth intellectuals, primarily men, were inspired by Western feminist writing arguing for the equality of the sexes and supported education and equal rights for women at home and in the workplace. Arranged marriage was denounced as detrimental to both parties, and the freedom to choose a partner for love was demanded by youth. While heterosexual women were gaining status, lesbians, previously ignored or trivialized in society, were declared sexually pathological based on European psychology and medicine of the time. Unlike heterosexual woman, they posed a threat to patriarchal society by refusing men for romance.[1] In recent years a divide

[1] For more information on the shifting status of Chinese lesbians during the modern period, see Sang "Feminism's Double: Lesbian Activism in the Mediated Public Sphere of Taiwan" (137).

continues between the struggles for women's and lesbian's rights in modern Taiwan, a democratic society which allows for public expressions of politics and social issues.[2]

Like Taiwan, Hong Kong enjoys a higher degree of freedom from censorship than mainland China. Chinese lesbian voices and portrayals of lesbians have found a market in literature in these places, which has translated into filmic adaptations in recent years. The films *Love's Lone Flower (Gu lian hua)* (Tsao Jui-Yuan, 2005), edited from a television drama, and *Butterfly (Hu Die)* (Mak Yan Yan, 2004) are two such adaptations from Taiwanese stories. Both of these films use parallel editing to link the diegetic past with the diegetic present, illustrating changes in politics related to human rights and the status of women in society. In *Backward Glances*, Fran Martin describes the significance of the "memorial mode" which dominates Chinese cinema about lesbians: "The markedly mournful cast of these stories' remembrance of same-sex love as a kind of paradise lost implies a critique of the social imposition of hetero-marital relations upon young women as a condition of feminine adulthood" (7). *Love's Lone Flower*, set in Shanghai during the late 1940s and Taipei during the late 1950s, follows Yuenfang (Anita Yuen), a woman exiled by the Communist takeover of mainland China. *Butterfly* centers on the life of Flavia (Josie Ho), a schoolteacher in modern Hong Kong who has vivid memories of a college love affair during the late 1980s. The fates of these women reflect the time periods in which they live, linking the lesbian to an ongoing Chinese history.

[2] See Sang *The Emerging Lesbian* (236-7). Taiwan, influenced by American models, is a developed capitalist nation. The activists there take cues from their American counterparts, but they adapt to cultural customs. For example, "coming out" is a collective, anonymous political statement rather than a personal one to protect one's identity from one's family. Also, Gay and Lesbian Coming Out Day (GLAD) is linked to *Duanwujie*, the Dragon Boat Festival, which commemorates the death of the poet Qu Yuan. Qu Yuan's writing has recently been reinterpreted for its homoeroticism.

2.0 *LOVE'S LONE FLOWER*: RE-IMAGINING THE PAST

Love's Lone Flower originates as a story in Pai Hsien-yung's *Taipei People*. The author, a rare "out" Chinese man, links the stories in his collection through the characters' memories of the mainland and atmospheric touches of the period. The film's cinematography, sets, and costume design beautifully convey historic Shanghai and Taipei, evoking a romanticized time in modern Chinese history popular as a setting for dramas. Yuenfang, a dance hall worker in Shanghai and a wine hall hostess later in Taipei, falls in love with two singers. In Shanghai her lover is Wubao (Angelica Lee), a girl who stays with Yuenfang after she rescues her from gangsters who would sell her into prostitution. Wubao also falls for San-Lang (Chung Hua Tou), a composer enchanted by her talent. San-Lang tries to take Wubao with him to Taiwan during the Communist takeover, but Yuenfang and Wubao vow to stay together. When the two women flee the mainland later, Wubao dies of illness on the way. In Taiwan, Yuenfang becomes "the General" at the wine hall, protecting the other girls and bringing gifts, but wields no actual authority. Juan Juan (Shu-shen Hsiao), a young singer at the bar with a self-destructive attitude, reminds her of Wubao. She tries to protect Juan Juan, but the girl unwillingly becomes the mistress of a dangerous gangster, Ko. Yuenfang cannot rescue her, but Juan Juan saves herself by beating Ko to death with an iron during an assault. Later, after they have parted ways, Juan Juan marries and Yuenfang remains alone. Because the film was edited from television, most of the events are shown briefly.

In the case of *Love's Lone Flower*, the exile of the Kuomintang (KMT) Nationalists acts as a marker of history to establish a link between Taiwanese identity and mainland memories. For a modern Taiwanese audience, this tie to mainland history and the longing of Yuenfang for her past in Shanghai reminds even Taiwanese-born youth of their Chinese heritage. Setting the film in 1950s Taiwan during the first decade of Nationalist rule after Japanese colonialism emphasizes a sense of national and cultural displacement. However, Yuenfang's sexuality complicates this nationalist reading. She is complicit with the head of the wine hall, who wears geisha outfits given to her by Yuenfang to please Japanese customers, although Yuenfang herself

continues to wear the traditional *qipao* that emphasizes her Chinese identity. More than the location of Shanghai, she longs for her dead lover Wubao. Other characters, notably patrons of the wine hall, complain that Shanghai is much better than Taiwan, but Yuenfang does not seem so certain. Unable to make lasting personal connections, she is ultimately out of place in both worlds.

Yuenfang is equally marginalized by society in both Shanghai and Taiwan for being a single woman in a career associated with prostitution. The gangsters in Shanghai who intend to sell Wubao to a brothel back down only because Yuenfang insinuates that she is in the favor of their boss. In Taiwan, her housewife neighbors insult her and accuse her of seducing their husbands, causing her to move to escape their criticism. However, since she avoids undesired male attention at work and saves her money, she can afford to buy her own home and support Juan Juan, a measure of independence that those women find enviable. Even at work, she has risen above the average hostess to a more respected position. Unlike young Juan Juan, she does not necessarily have to follow the orders of the patrons. Since she does not make ties with men, she avoids having her freedom restricted, though in doing so she alienates herself from normal society.

Wubao and Juan Juan are linked through combinations of sound and image throughout the film. When Yuenfang first hears singing coming from a room in the wine hall, she flashes back to memories of Wubao performing (Figures 1-3). Juan Juan's voice carries over the vision of Wubao singing. Song transcends time in the film, both as invoked in Yuenfang's memories and through the radio performances of San-Lang's songs in Taiwan, after which Yuenfang always feels comfortable talking to the deceased Wubao's ashes in the present as though she were still alive. Later, Juan Juan finds the red *qipao* that Yuenfang gave to Wubao earlier in the film. Significantly, she wears this dress on the day of the Ghost Festival and joins Yuenfang in giving an offering to Wubao's spirit. Both women are depicted wearing this dress and looking in a mirror with someone else behind them. Wubao is shown in the mirror with Yuenfang, who acts lovingly towards her (Figure 4). Juan Juan is shown with Ko, who sexually assaults her as he talks about the girl he had killed before his prison time and Wubao (Figure 5). She frightens him by talking and acting "like a ghost." Even as she identifies with the ghost of Wubao, the

floodgates of her memory burst and she seeks to escape Ko, running to the bathroom and scrubbing herself in the tub while still wearing the *qipao*. Ko becomes her stepfather in her mind as she remembers her rape and later public humiliation for "getting knocked up," the source of her attitude that she is fated to be unhappy. Killing Ko in a violent, passionate act seems to be an exorcism for her.

Figure 1. Yuenfang gazing at Juan Juan. Digital Still.

Figure 2. Juan Juan singing. Digital Still.

Figure 3. The image of Wubao cut into the above sequence with Juan Juan's voice. Digital Still.

Figure 4. Wubao in the mirror with Yuenfang in her new dress. Digital Still.

Figure 5. Juan Juan gazing at herself in the mirror while being raped by Ko and identifying with the dead Wubao, whose dress she wears. Digital Still.

Juan Juan and Wubao are parallel figures, both given the choice between Yuenfang or men for romance. Yuenfang offers them protection and "sisterhood;" she never presses them for romance, though she does kiss them during her confessions of her feelings. In Wubao's case, San-Lang offers her a path to potential stardom as a singer and seems to genuinely care for her. She goes on dates with him, kept secret from Yuenfang, to advance herself. Yuenfang unhappily accepts Wubao's actions and seems to respect San-Lang, but she is pleased when Wubao returns to her. In her last moments during their crossing, Wubao expresses regret for the way she treated San-Lang. Juan Juan, on the other hand, does not care enough about herself to fight Ko. Despite his abuse, she tolerates him by drinking heavily and taking opiates.

The men in *Love's Lone Flower* are both Yuenfang's rivals, but otherwise they differ from each other significantly. San-Lang is a kind man interested in Wubao for her talent and beauty. He wants her to have career opportunities alongside his own and he gives her a measure of independence. His flaw is the same as Yuenfang's; he wants to protect Wubao and pressures her to go to Taiwan with him. He represents the positive traits of modern Chinese masculinity; though some of his attitudes are paternalistic, he wants Wubao to be his partner. Ko is the opposite: he wants a slave. He controls Juan Juan through violence and heroin; she becomes too

frightened and apathetic to fight him. Ko is a member of the criminal underworld. He and the other gangsters are the worst type of man, aggressive and selfish. Yuenfang falls somewhere between the two men. She cares for the girls, but she is also a societal deviant. Interestingly, the embrace between Wubao and Yuenfang featured on the promotional material for the film (Figure 6) is echoed in an image of Juan Juan with Ko (Figure 7), seemingly implying that Yuenfang, who sees Juan Juan with Ko, is no better than him. In this image as well as the previous mirror images, Yuenfang is visually doubled by Ko as Wubao and Juan Juan are doubled. Wubao's contented smile seems ambiguous in relation to Juan Juan's drugged and apathetic gaze, marking them both as submissive figures dominated by others.

Only Wubao becomes romantically involved with Yuenfang. Juan Juan, after killing Ko, marries a man who crossed from the mainland with her, since only he can relate to her. Running into Yuenfang years later, she tries to reinitiate contact, but Yuenfang insists on being forgotten. Juan Juan's marriage reaffirms the primacy of the heterosexual couple in society. Happy in her marriage to a government employee, she no longer has to pursue a line of work which she despises. The mention of her shared relocation from the village with her husband implies that the mutual longing for home and struggle to adjust in exile transcends the abuses she suffered at the hands of her stepfather and Ko. Lesbianism was never a true alternative for her; Yuenfang was simply her "sister."[3] Yuenfang acknowledges her marginalization by leading a solitary life and intentionally separating herself from Juan Juan. Even before Juan Juan, she parts with Wubao's ashes, leaving them to San-Lang after a concert which he dedicates to Wubao. Though sad, she feels that she has fulfilled Wubao's final wish to be with San-Lang. The ending of the film allows Yuenfang to continue her life but enforces a hierarchy of heterosexual romance over her desires. In doing so, it also establishes itself as in line with Chinese tradition but allows for some modification to support human rights, a reflection of modern Taiwanese society.

[3] Both Wubao and Juan Juan call Yuenfang "sister" (*ahjie* 阿姐). The word is used to refer to an older sister, perhaps because she acts as a guardian.

Figure 6. Wubao in Yuenfang's embrace after she returns from the train station. Digital Still.

Figure 7. Juan Juan during sex with Ko. Digital Still.

3.0 *BUTTERFLY*: RE-THINKING THE PRESENT

Butterfly offers a new possibility for its lesbian characters. After a school romance with her tomboy friend Jin (Stephanie Che) is discovered by her mother, Flavia (Josie Ho) marries a man to please her family. At first glance, her marriage is ideal. She and her husband both hold jobs and share household and childcare responsibilities. Ming (Eric Kot) is often busy, but he does love his wife and child. However, when Flavia meets Yip (Yuan Tian) she must choose between her marriage and her attraction to the younger woman. She confronts her past with Jin as she tries to make sense of her feelings. The director, Yan Yan Mak, and the novelist Chen Xue[4] (*The Mark of the Butterfly)* are both women, a significant difference from *Love's Lone Flower* that positions the film more firmly within feminist and queer discourses.

The landmark political event of *Butterfly* is the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, in which Jin takes part from Hong Kong. The protests emphasize human rights, a central concern to feminist and queer activists around the world. Unlike the exile of the KMT, this event still has global resonance. Particularly for individuals like Jin and Flavia, who enjoy a degree of personal freedom to express themselves in public, the censorship of the protestors provoked anxiety over the impending reunification of Hong Kong and mainland China. The film emphasizes the concern of Jin and the other students by positioning Flavia as an observer. Through watching old footage of Flavia and Jin, filmed by them within the diegesis, we are invited to watch them impartially at first, then later from Flavia's perspective as the story lines cross in her emotions. Adult Flavia and young Flavia (Isabel Chan) are not immediately recognizable as the same character; unlike in *Love's Lone Flower,* the parallel plot lines only come together once Flavia is shown watching her old film reels. While *Love's Lone Flower* presents a stylized version of the past, *Butterfly* raises questions of spectatorship and voyeurism.

The "home footage" of the girls and the regular film footage are often intertwined: images of Yip momentarily have the same faded quality of Flavia's footage and many scenes of

[4] Chen Xue is a popular author among lesbian audiences in Taiwan. Her works explore relationships and sexuality between women in a way that challenges tradition and actively engages in queer discourses.

Flavia and Jin in their youth are from the "objective" perspective of the director's camera, including the scene in which they buy their own camera. Fran Martin's discussion of *Butterfly* in *Backward Glances* focuses on the Super-8 film and its intrusion into the present narrative of Flavia and Yip, as well as the use of 35mm film at moments to show the past. She argues that this alternation and inconsistency "enables not only a memorializing of the present—a predictable enough move in contemporary Chinese lesbian-themed text(...)—but also, and more radically, a '*present-ing*' of the past" (161). I would add that in this film new technology has changed the potential for expression and memory, especially because it documents events and can hold individuals accountable for them. When Jin watches news footage of the rioting at Tiananmen she participates in the events vicariously, but her tearful reaction is a genuine experience. Flavia is able to ignore her lesbian history until meeting Yip and revisiting her memories. Her desires are not "real" to her until she confronts them through film. Only after reviewing the film and visiting Jin one last time at the Buddhist monastery where she has become a nun, making the past corporeal in the present, can Flavia make a decision regarding her marriage.

Flavia's decision to divorce her husband parallels her mother's desire to divorce her father, reaching back further into her memory to produce images of her mother's depression. After her mother finally chooses to leave her unhappy marriage, Flavia no longer needs to maintain a "normal" family. She left Jin to please her parents, but with their adulterous affairs revealed she no longer feels accountable to their standard. The bond of *xiao* is broken because the parents fail to maintain a traditional family model.[5] She continues to meet with them and support them through the divorce even as she demands a divorce from Ming.

Ming, like San-Lang, is a sympathetic male figure. A victim of Flavia's masquerade of heterosexuality, he does not fully understand the reasons for her divorce request. Though he has fits of anger and confusion and tries to disprove her lesbianism, he does so because he is hurt that his "happy" marriage is falling apart. By claiming Ting Ting, their child, he secures what family he has left. In his fear of losing face, he even offers to let her continue her affair just so long as

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[5] *Xiao*, or filial piety, requires that children support their parents emotionally and financially. Often, homosexuality is considered *bu xiao* because it disrupts the traditional family model and may prevent heirs. For elaboration see Martin "Chen Xue's Queer Tactics" (73-74).

she does not divorce him. He clings to a traditional model, but Flavia explores new opportunities.

Flavia moves in with Yip; the younger woman gets a job and an apartment so that they can live together comfortably, though not at the same level of luxury as Flavia's husband's apartment. His career is never specified, but it is certainly better than either Flavia's schoolteacher job or Yip's gig singing at a local bar. Despite the relatively lower quality of life financially, Flavia lives happily with Yip. The women have financial and social freedom; no one in the film questions their relationship other than Ming, and they are not isolated from a larger lesbian community. Both have contact with female ex-lovers, and a young couple of students whom Flavia attempts to help indicate that schoolgirl romances are common. These aspects of the film separate it from many "coming out" stories, both in China and in the West.[6]

Flavia, Yip, and Yuenfang all appear to be femme lesbians, or *po* within the Taiwanese T (tomboy)-*po* binary, but this reading is complicated by changing ideas about what constitutes T and *po*. In conversation about *Love's Lone Flower*, some of Fran Martin's Taiwanese lesbian friends concluded that, "despite her stylish feminine costumes, Yun Fang [sic] should properly be interpreted as a tomboy (T), given her protective and chivalrous behavior towards her sweethearts, her competence in the masculine world of business, the general poise and dignity of her bearing, and her clear romantic preference for women over men" (*Backward Glances* 182-3). Although Wubao and Juan Juan are clearly *po,* if they can be said to be lesbian at all, Yuenfang represents a mainstreaming of a more ambiguous gender identity. In Yuenfang's case it could be argued that she performs femininity as a part of her role as a companion at the tea house, as well as in general, "both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (Joan Riviere, qtd. in Doane 138), a straightforward case of feminine masquerade, yet one that would seem to negate the possibility of reading her as a T. Flavia and Yip also present a challenge. They do not seem to "perform" a certain identity; unlike Yuenfang, who is never undone even during intimate moments, Flavia and Yip inhabit femininity with ease even when they are alone. Yet, like Yuenfang, they possess certain "masculine" or T

[6] For a consideration of the "coming out" genre, see Straayer (36).

traits such as success in the workplace and active romantic preference towards women.[7] The notion of the T as it has evolved in modern usage now includes a blend of outward "feminine" traits and inner "masculine" traits, confusing the T-*po* binary and making such attributions increasingly difficult.[8] Interestingly, the sympathetic T character Jin, who had been paired with Flavia's *po*, travels to Europe and becomes a Buddhist nun after she returns to Macau. The T is transformed and neutralized by a greater understanding of the world, transcending gender in the guise of the asexual and androgynous nun, thus also dissolving Flavia's role as a *po*. Flavia must meet with Jin before she feels comfortable making a decision between her marriage and her affair, and Jin's wisdom and forgiveness leads her to choose love over societal expectations of gender and sexuality. As a couple, Flavia and Yip are recognized as lesbian only by their attraction to each other, and not by outwardly "queer" traits. They are not deviant; rather, they represent a mainstreaming of lesbian identity in that they pass within their society as normal individuals even when their sexual orientation is known.

The personal freedom of Flavia, Jin, and Yip compared to Yuenfang result from generational differences. More significantly, Flavia, Jin, and Yip have access to American popular culture and ideals. Just as modern Taiwanese activists take cues from the West, the film shows young Hong Kong residents adapting "hippy" artists of the 1960s and Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" to fit their own identification with revolution. Yip sings her songs in English, identifying herself with the West and "modernity." By performing and recording film, the women record their own history. Yuenfang and many other women of her time were restricted by a lack of widespread education during a period when alternative discourses were reserved for scholars and students. Film acts as an egalitarian medium in *Butterfly*; with the film's international premieres in the Venice Film Festival (2004) and San Jose's Cinequest Film Festival (2005), its message of individual freedom becomes even more potent, crossing boundaries of language and culture.

The experimental elements of *Butterfly*, particularly the "aged" footage and the parallel story lines that converge unexpectedly, contrast with the more formulaic drama *Love's Lone*

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[7] "T" is a term used in Chinese with a similar meaning to "butch" as part of a T-*po* (butch/femme) dichotomy.

[8] The T-*po* distinction seems to be falling out of fashion in favor of the more encompassing term *lala* (拉拉)

Flower. Though both use parallel plots, *Butterfly* challenges the viewer to connect them while *Love's Lone Flower* uses images of Wubao and the past for melodramatic effect. The films' styles reflect their market: *Butterfly* is an art-house film meant for local and international festivals, while *Love's Lone Flower* seems to have been recut for a wide release as an afterthought based on its wide domestic popularity as a serial drama. *Butterfly* depicts open-minded youth living in the information age, while *Love's Lone Flower* nostalgically shows the fading of the previous era. Both films document, both diegetically and extra-diegetically, the increasingly visible lesbian presence in Chinese society and media. However, the director of *Love's Lone Flower* uses lesbianism as a touch of exoticism in a visually rich setting and avoids *Butterfly*'s more radical stance. Where *Love's Lone Flower* upholds tradition, *Butterfly* overturns it.

4.0 *SPIDER LILIES*: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY

Although *Love's Lone Flower* relies on nostalgia for an imagined past for its success, Taiwan is also a site of shaping current lesbian identity. Lesbian filmmaker Zero Chou's second feature length film, *Spider Lilies*, was a local box office success as well as the winner of the Teddy Award for best gay or lesbian film at the Berlin International Film Festival 2007. The film was released across Asia, including Chinese-language markets such as Hong Kong and Singapore as well as Korea and Thailand, and abroad in various film festivals. The film's success lies in its appeal to both the lesbian and gay minority as well as the mass market, in part due to the celebrity of Taiwanese pop star Rainie Yang, starring as Jade, and Hong Kong actress Isabella Leong as Takeko. Especially in light of its popularity, the film raises important questions about the body in cinema, in particular the lesbian body and its role in shaping cultural identity.

In the film, Jade, a webcam girl, seeks a tattoo from her childhood crush Takeko, a tattoo artist. At first, her motive seems to be superficial: to attract an audience for her webcam show. But after she sees Takeko she decides to recapture her feelings of love through her tattoo and seeks to make Takeko remember her. As a lonely child abandoned by her mother, Jade looked up to the older girl Takeko and developed a crush on her as they spent time together in the rural village where they lived. Takeko resists memories of the past and new feelings for Jade; she has devoted herself to caring for her brother Ching (John Shen), who developed dissociative disorder and memory loss after an earthquake killed their father. Because she was with her high school girlfriend the night of the accident, she feels guilty for leaving her brother alone at the accident site until morning and stifles her own desires in penance. Her only friend is Ah-Dong (Jay Shih), a frequent customer who hangs around the tattoo parlor. Jade's social life is also limited; offline, she only spends time with her grandmother until she meets Takeko again. Online, only the anonymous police officer whom she mistakes for Takeko is a regular participant in meaningful conversation.

Jade makes her money through internet stripteases, and the film allows viewers a voyeuristic peek into this practice, privileging the image of the female body. In the casting of

Rainie Yang, known for her innocent pop image, the film offers additional titillation. However, even as the film provides voyeuristic pleasures it questions the border between reality and fantasy through Jade's interactions with the other characters online and offline. Her childhood memories of love are dismissed as unreliable by both Takeko, the object of her affection, and the undercover police officer who chats with her through her webcam show. Yet both these characters are shown to be in denial; Takeko believes that her tattoo, copied from her father's body, can somehow restore her brother's memory, and the officer falls in love with Jade, believing that he knows her intimately through their online chats. The film also grapples with issues of the private and public; the tattoos which form a central motif act as public displays of inner secrets in much the same way Jade's website reveals her inner thoughts along with her body and her bedroom, typically private spaces. Through tattoos, the characters inscribe their (desired) identities into their flesh, much as these films act to shape the perception of the cultures which produce them.

Although the English title refers to Takeko's tattoo indirectly, the Chinese title for the film *Ci qing*（刺青) is in fact a word for "tattoo" which literally means "piercing and making dark." In choosing this term over one of the many other terms for tattoo in Chinese culture, particularly the more common *wen shen* (紋身, patterning the body),[9] the film draws attention to the act of piercing the skin. This distinction goes beyond the surface image, evoking the pain and emotion inherent in the actual process of tattooing as well as the indelible mark itself. Within the film, the distinction between appearance and reality is a key issue bought out by the tattoos.

The tattoos in the film are gendered; women choose to tattoo themselves as an expression of memory, while men use tattoos to create the illusion of strength. In characterizing the tattoo choices of her clients, tattoo artist Justina Kervel of Vancouver states that "whereas men tend to get tattoos to change the way society sees them, women tend to get tattoos to mark a change in the way they see themselves" (Keinlein 26). Although she is speaking from experience with Western clients, similar distinctions exist in Chinese literary and performance tradition regarding tattoos. Daphne P. Lei outlines these distinctions, noting that tattoos on men are used to mark

[9] Translations by Lei (103).

criminals and heroes, highlighting both barbarism and virtue in various instances (102-105), whereas female tattoos are used to show virtue only in extreme cases and are usually replaced by other forms of body modification such as the cutting of one's hair (109-114). In particular, the virtue of the woman is faithfulness in love or marriage to a husband rather than to a country as is the case with a warrior. For example, in *Biographies of Female Exemplars* (*Lienü zhuan*, 列女傳) compiled during the Han Dynasty, Miss Shi of Liyang is forced by her father to marry after her betrothed dies. In protest, she tattoos the words "a faithful heart does not change" (*zhong xin bu gai*, 忠心不改) onto her face, which allows her to remain unmarried and celibate (110). Jade's description of her own tattoo of jasmine flowers as a "love tattoo" (*aiqing ciqing,* 爱情刺青) evokes this tale as she equates the permanence of her tattoo with her enduring love from childhood. In contrast to Jade's semi-private back tattoo, Ah-Dong seeks flashy arm and chest tattoos depicting knives and demons because, in Takeko's words, he is "chicken-hearted" and "needs tattoos to give him strength," further reinforcing the difference between the genders in tattooing, After each new tattoo, he is shown bullying other young men on the street, taking on the guise of a rough gangster though he does not actually seem to have any such affiliations. Posing as a gangster catches up to him, however, when his arms are cut off, presumably because he bullies someone with genuine criminal ties.

Takeko's tattoo breaks from traditional Chinese notions of gendered tattooing. Born in Japan but raised since childhood in Taiwan, the most markedly "Japanese" aspects of her character are related to her profession as a tattooist. Although she speaks Mandarin Chinese through most of the film, she is shown speaking Japanese with her sensei, who trained her in the art of tattooing after her father's death, and tells the tale of the golden spider lily to her brother in Japanese. She is marked as outside of Chinese tradition in respect to her profession.[10] Her tattoo also sets her apart in respect to her gender identity. Although a flower like jasmine, the spider lily is not a feminine design. According to the film, it grows on the path to Hell and is associated with death and memory loss from its poison. Its position on her arm, not a part of the female

[10] However, she is not marked as "other" because of her sexuality. Like Min in *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*, Takeko is not fully Chinese in her heritage, but her acceptance within Taiwanese society demonstrates a more progressive, inclusive culture in Taiwan compared to Dai's portrayal of the PRC.

body considered "'appropriate' for tattoos, such as the hips...or the shoulder" (MacCormack 68), as well as its masculine design, indicates that Takeko is not a typical girl and aligns her with a tomboy (T) identity in contrast to Jade's femininity. Most significantly, it is the exact tattoo that her father had on his own arm and the only thing that Takeko's brother recalls from before the earthquake. Thus Takeko believes that by getting the tattoo herself she can replace her father to better take care of her brother and restore his memory.

The spider lily tattoo is the only feature of Takeko's father shown in the film, showing that a tattoo can embody an entire person or memory. As a challenge to prove to her sensei that she can be taught how to tattoo and receive the same design as her father even though she is a girl, Takeko is asked to remove her father's tattoo from his dead body. As she approaches the corpse to do so, the tattoo momentarily seems to spring to life with petals reaching out like tentacles towards the camera. Although the bearer of the tattoo has died, it becomes its own entity. This tattoo is the only one shown to possess a sort of supernatural aura, and it endures both on the preserved skin of Takeko's father, which hangs framed on the wall of her tattoo parlor, as well as on her living flesh. It marks Takeko as "cursed" due to the spider lily's associations with death and trauma in Japanese legend as well as in Takeko's own memory.

The spider lily design is also relevant to the relationship between Jade and Takeko. Although Jade initially desires the same spider lily tattoo as Takeko, which she sees on the wall of the parlor, she is primarily trying to make Takeko remember her by forcing Takeko to reveal her own past. She does not know the history of the tattoo, and seems troubled when Ah Dong claims that it is real skin in the frame, but she remembers Takeko's tattoo from her childhood. Unwilling to give Jade the same "cursed" tattoo, Takeko draws a beautiful, delicate design of jasmine flowers. In creating the jasmine tattoo Takeko reveals that she has indeed been paying attention to Jade, even though she denies any deeper meaning to the design, claiming that it is "just a tattoo." As a performance of her memory, Jade sings the song "Little Jasmine," (written for the film by Zero Chou) on her web show in which a lover begs "Little Jasmine" not to forget their love. It is the same song she remembers from riding on the back of teenage Takeko's bicycle. Jade takes the tattoo as a confession of love in acknowledgement of the song and memory, and the act of tattooing leads to an erotic embrace between the women.

Eroticism and tattoos are also linked in Yoichi Takabayashi's *Irezumi* (1982). Comparison of the two films reveals some of the ways in which *Spider Lilies* challenges heterosexual eroticism and fetishism. Although the film is Japanese, its attitudes towards women are not very different from traditional Chinese attitudes which also subjugate women to male power. In *Irezumi*, the main character Akane (Masayo Utsunomiya) decides to get a full-back tattoo to appease her lover. Over many weekly tattoo sessions, the master tattooist Kyogoro Yamato (Tomisaburo Wakayama) completes a painting of Lady Tachibana using his own unique method. He uses traditional hand-tapped needles to carve the image into her back as his assistant Haratsune (Masaki Kyo) makes love to Akane. Lucy Fischer points out the "decidedly phallic cast" to the method of penetration with the needle, which is further reinforced by intercourse with Haratsune (Fischer 17). She writes that "the film insistently presents the heterosexual dynamic (of tattooing or lovemaking) as laced with sadism for the male and masochism for the female--the culturally 'standard' paradigm" (17). The tattoo becomes a site of erotic ritual and fetishism.

Unlike *Irezumi*, *Spider Lilies* avoids association between the tattoo and sadism and masochism. Although Ah-Dong warns Jade that the tattoo will hurt, Takeko tells her that "boys are usually more afraid of pain than girls." The association of the tattoo with pain is a means for Ah-Dong to express his masculinity for having gone through the process, but in practice Jade does not seem to experience any unpleasantness. Only Ah-Dong, with his false machismo, flinches during his tattoo session. The tattoo machine, with many tiny needles that move quickly, further cancels out any idea of the needle as a sadistic, phallic penetration. With Jade, Takeko even shows tenderness during the process, laying her hand on the girl's back as she tattoos her. It is this gentleness, rather than the violence of the tattoo, which leads to sexual intimacy between the woman.

Unlike Akane, whose body is "inscribed (or etched) by men" (Fischer 17), Jade is an active seeker of the tattoo. Her tattoo also has meaning that she has assigned to it, as opposed to the soul of the (male) tattoo artist that must be released by a "final cut" as in *Irezumi*. By having a tattoo to represent her love for another woman done by that woman's hand, Jade and Takeko reclaim the notion of "writing the female body" as ironically used by Fischer. The concept of

writing the female body originates from French feminist theorists, who "invoke the configuration of the female body as a model for feminine writing," in opposition to male-authored established literature (17). In her personal essay "Tattoo Me," Catherine Lundoff describes tattoos as a way to reclaim one's body:

> In a world where you're an outsider, where someone always seems to want to control your body and what you're doing with it, a tattoo or piercing is a way to take it back... It's also a permanent thing, in general, being both difficult and expensive to remove; you're broadcasting to anybody who can see it that you're different... It's a rite of passage: you know that you're strong enough to go through with it, and, by extension, strong enough to take on the rest of the world with its homophobic, sexist, racist crap (Lundoff 127).

Although Jade's motives for getting a tattoo are at first superficial, the collaborative process of the tattoo, including waiting to see Takeko's sketches and approving them, ultimately turns the tattoo into an embodied symbol of their relationship. The tattoo process gives the women the strength to face their pasts. Takeko finally reveals her tattoo's history and asks Jade whether her mother ever returned; Jade admits to her that her mother did not. When Takeko asks Jade why she remembers all things, Jade asks Takeko if she chooses to forget. The tattoo makes the memory of their time together physical and unforgettable. It lasts even after Takeko breaks off the relationship suddenly, leading Jade to send her the message "so all your tenderness is fake, but the incomplete tattoo is real." Jade is then forced to reconcile the physical mark with her "virtual world."

Eroticism in the film is a main site of complication between reality and fantasy. Jade's online performances are the main form of sexuality in the film; customers pay to watch an online striptease from the anonymous comfort of their homes. Michael Ross describes the internet as "an intermediate step between private fantasy and actual behavior" (Ross 344), which applies to Jade's customers but is complicated in her case. As a performer she is a sex worker and shows no love for her profession. A young woman from the countryside with little or no education who

must care for her elderly grandmother, Jade does not have many career options in the city. Her attitude towards the sex show is not one of shame, however. She tells the undercover police officer in a private chat that "things on the net are fake" and that she can log on and off whenever she "feels like it." Even her boss is "fake," because Jade has never met her in person and only communicates with her over the phone. The doll that Jade uses as her image in the catalogue of girls on the website illustrates this attitude. Rather than using a photograph of herself like the other webcam girls, she outfits a doll to match her with wigs and dresses, and places it in front of the camera during breaks in her performance. When she does not want to speak to customers, she places tape over the doll's mouth and leaves it in view. By using a stand-in she highlights the commodification of her own body and image, which may break the fantasy of a willing sex partner for customers and explain why she has the lowest ratings on the site.

An exhibitionist of her thoughts as well as her body, Jade further destroys the fantasy of a willing, sexy, young girl for her customers through her confessional stories. In between stripteases, particularly for one "special show" that she hopes Takeko will watch, she tells her audience details from her personal life, such as the story of her childhood love. Although the men expect an explicit story about how she lost her virginity, she tells them instead about a crush she experienced at the age of ten. Their criticism of her, particularly calling her "just a whore," hurts her even though they are anonymous and, in her own words, "fake." Her webcam show along with her accompanying web journal make her personally vulnerable by revealing her secrets. She is exposed to the audience, yet they are hidden from her.

The police officer, logged on as "Silence," exploits his anonymity, both professionally and personally. As part of a police sting on online prostitution, he is assigned to record the shows and entrap the women into agreeing to meet for other sexual services, at which point they can be arrested. In his study of internet sexuality, Ross writes that "cybersexuality may also function as an opportunity to compensate for social or physical disability" (Ross 348). As a man with a pronounced stutter, the officer is ridiculed by his fellow officers and relegated to online work. This role leads him to discover that online he can communicate with Jade without the barrier of his disability, leading him to feel intimately connected with her even though they do not actually know each other. Because he falls in love with Jade, he protects her from the police

raid on her website to the best of his ability. His feelings are delusional. Because of his unwillingness to show himself or speak in video chat, Jade assumes that he is Takeko hiding her identity.

This case of mistaken identity emphasizes another feature of online sexuality: gender is not always known. Because of the possibility of posing as a different gender, the internet opens up new realms of fantasy and role-play (Ross 345) beyond the physical confines of the body. For gay and lesbian individuals, it also "provides the possibility of an additional stage" in the "coming out process: lurking on the internet (or even posing on the internet) to watch the interactions, learn some of the language, and gain an understanding of what being gay is all about" (Ross 348). Takeko's behavior, hiding in the online chat as "J" and observing Jade, seems to fit this model, allowing her to gauge her own level of attraction to the other woman. But she does so in a markedly heterosexual online space, that of the webcam sex show. In Taiwan, internet communities dedicated to lesbian, gay, and queer interests exist, but the "vast majority of 'l/g/q space' on Taiwan's Net" is "based on university, rather than commercial, servers" due to "the general nonregulation by Taiwan university administrations of students' homosexual behaviors" (Berry and Martin 101). Takeko and Jade would not have knowledge of such sites because they are neither students nor active members of a wider queer community. Instead, they carve out a space for themselves within their already marginalized worlds.

Although an open queer community arose in Taiwan by the late 1990s, including commercial meeting spaces for gays and lesbians such as bars, even in small towns (Simon 76), Takeko and Jade are isolated from this community. Whether or not they self-identify as lesbian is questionable, and joining public "out" spaces, or even dedicated internet communities, would signify a political and social identity with which they may be uncomfortable. Ah Dong guesses that Takeko is attracted to girls based on her reluctance to talk about romantic interests, and Jade and Ah Dong joke together that Takeko is a T, but neither Takeko nor Jade openly acknowledge a queer identity. *Spider Lilies* is not a "coming out" story, despite sharing some of the traits of the genre. According to Chris Straayer, the typical "coming out" romance focuses on "a lone lesbian couple within heterosexual society" who "will be in defiance of otherwise accepted norms" (Straayer 23, 24). Within these films, "falling in love subsumes the function of coming

out as an initiation rite of a continually developing sexual persuasion and avoids the sociopolitical ramifications of homosexual desire that constitute gay identity" (Straayer 23). Takeko and Jade are a lone lesbian couple, and their romance does indeed avoid sociopolitical ramifications. Yet they are not visibly in defiance of norms within their limited world. Ah Dong, the only other person besides Jade aware of Takeko's attraction to women, immediately accepts her and adopts her as a "sister" since he cannot flirt with her. Perhaps because Takeko and Jade already occupy a marginal space in society and seem disconnected from the mainstream, there is no sense of "shared oppression" nor "realization of strength in numbers" to promote their adoption of a lesbian political identity (Straayer 27). Chou herself states that the film does not push a gay agenda:

> I do not want to represent one community, I just want to make films that appeal to a broad section of people. But of course, as a lesbian myself this is a subject that interests me. There have been many films about homosexuality, but very few about lesbian relationships. But I don't want to be categorized as a gay film director. In fact, one of my upcoming projects has nothing to do with that subject. (Chou, quoted in Kolesnikov-Jessop)

In this quote, she simultaneously denies and affirms that *Spider Lilies* is a lesbian film; although she is not trying to represent a political or social community, she is still representing a lesbian relationship. This move avoids the entanglement of trying to represent an identity that is not clearly defined. Judith Butler describes this problem of delineating the lesbian identity:

> It is always unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier, since its signification is always to some degree out of one's control, but also because its specificity can only be demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its claim to coherence. What, if anything, can lesbians be said to share? And who will decide this question, in the name of whom?" (Butler 181)

In Taiwan, where "homosexuality has become one of the most trendy and best-selling topics" (Sang 248), the lesbian and gay identity has been shown to be compatible with capitalism as a unifying trait. The premier issue of *G&L*, the first commercial glossy magazine for gays and lesbians in Taiwan, argues that "gays and lesbians are, like everyone else, just a part of the highly

capitalized society of Taiwan" (Sang 251). This phenomenon raises the question of whether this commercialization is "because gays and lesbians have become such a distinctive and powerful consumer group that their emotional needs and erotic interests must be catered to or because lesbian/gay sexualities have been domesticated and turned into curiosities that an audience that considers itself to be normal will find entertaining" (Sang 248-249). Sang argues that these explanations are compatible, and *Spider Lilies*' success seems to show her to be correct.

Zero Chou manages to capture the excitement of lesbian romance as a "curiosity" to be exploited alongside scandalous practices such as tattooing and sex work, yet she also resists the mainstream tendency to dissolve the lesbian couple, as is the case in *Love's Lone Flower*. According to Straayer, "in a diegesis with only two lesbians, dissolution of the couple is tantamount to the elimination of (lesbian) sex" (Straayer 24). Fran Martin states that within mainstream Chinese film and television, "loving relations between women have been represented as temporally anterior to the narrative present and available principally through memory's mediation" (*Backward Glances* 6). The couple is dissolved but not forgotten; Martin also points out that "the attempt by the dominant culture of marital hetero-sexuality to de-realize lesbian possibility by memorializing it is, in a strict sense, doomed to failure" because "memory and its narration take place, by definition, in the present" (15). By constructing women's same-sex romances as "an insistently memorable paradise lost," (15) these films also show a tendency to "simultaneously naturalize adult heterosexuality and to foreground the tragedy of its imposition" (16), opening up these films to critical discourse. *Spider Lilies* plays on the dominance of the memorial mode in Chinese lesbian cinema with its themes of memory and amnesia, but it overturns the relegation of the lesbian romance to the past. The remembered schoolgirl romance between Takeko and a classmate is secondary to Jade's memory of her crush on Takeko. It is this memory, however dubious according to Takeko and others, that blossoms into romance and leads Takeko to change her lifestyle.

Takeko's memory of her high school sweetheart is linked inextricably to her father's death and her brother's memory loss. She does not idealize the memory because it is too strongly associated with her guilt over leaving her brother alone to be with her girlfriend. Instead, she chooses to forget the past, with only her tattoo as a reminder of that period.

Interestingly, her high school sweetheart is associated with American pop cultural icons, as her clothing and bedroom decorations feature Superman and Winnie the Pooh, possibly signaling the global commodification of identity for youth in general. Takeko's rejection of her girlfriend therefore also constitutes a rejection of mainstream identity, which is maintained through her self-isolation. The house and garden she shares with her brother outside the city becomes a sort of sanctuary; other than at the tattoo parlor, she does not spend time in the city interacting with other people.

However, Jade forces her to remember her desires and connect with another person by bringing memories into Takeko's spaces. First, she begins to hang around the tattoo parlor as the sole female presence besides Takeko. Next, she enters Takeko's sanctuary through the internet, giving Takeko a window into her own room. Both her physical and digital presence affects Takeko profoundly despite the latter's resistance. Takeko is able to dismiss Jade's memory as mistaken until Jade's "unreliable" childhood memory becomes a reality in the form of a green wig. The wig, which Jade wore as a child the first time she met Takeko, becomes a living relic in the same way as the spider lily tattoo. By digging it out of storage and wearing it again, Jade turns the synthetic hair into a sign of her love which also marks her as outside the mainstream. She wears it both during her visits to the tattoo shop and on her online show as a reminder for Takeko.

Jade's online performance and Takeko's spectatorship raise questions about the heterosexual gaze in the film. Both in advertising and the opening of the film, the striptease is foregrounded as an attraction. The film conforms to the model of cinematic spectatorship described by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." depicting Jade "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (20). Her performances do indeed arrest the narrative through spectacle and satisfy the scopophilic desires of her audiences, both diegetic and extra-diegetic. Another policeman describes "girls like her" to the undercover officer as "nothing but vain inside," emphasizing the surface of the woman. The officer's words reveal his own castration anxiety as well as the misogyny and sadism of a legal system that seeks to punish the webcam girls rather than their customers. He is mistaking the fantasy appearance of the woman as a sex object for reality,

going so far as to say that the "girls need to be disciplined" for entrapping men, recapitulating the first of the two escape routes for the male unconscious described by Mulvey: the "re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman...), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object" (22). The undercover officer's interaction with Jade counters this idea of webcam girl as *femme fatale,* but he also exhibits castration anxiety in wanting to save her. Jade actively resist this narrative resolution. When he asks her why she is "wasting her body" by showing it to strangers, she points out the hypocrisy of looking down on her while "wasting his money" to watch her. His drive to rescue her eventually reveals his identification with her as another lonely person, and is not ultimately a function of attributing guilt to Jade. His castration anxiety comes to the surface when he accepts that he too might be "fake" like everyone else Jade meets on the internet, even though Jade asserts that this is not the case if they remember each other. The film does not accept woman solely as the object of the gaze since it proves self-consciously critical of the "*to-be-looked-at-ness"* of the female body (Mulvey 19).

Jade performs with the hope that Takeko will see her, giving her performances a romantic agency beyond exhibitionism. As director of her own show, she is anything but passive most of the time, going so far as to cut the audience off if they make her angry. By filming herself she "begins to break down the barriers between spectators, filmmaker, and image upon which voyeurism relies" (Weiss 144), a feature of Western lesbian and feminist avant-garde cinema's attempt to correct the dominance of the patriarchal gaze in the 1970s and 1980s. She controls both her own look and that of the camera; only her invisible audience has the potential for a male gaze. This potential for a male or masculine gaze is not realized in the diegesis. Although the undercover officer purchases one-on-one shows, which generally feature full nudity, he asks her to keep her clothes on and talk during the show. The audience's knowledge that Jade is performing for Takeko codes the performance as queer despite the fact that it appears to be a normal heterosexual striptease. Lisa Duggan writes that "when lesbians sponsor strip shows, or other fem erotic performances, it is very difficult to 'code' it as lesbian" (Duggan 64), but the film overcomes this obstacle without resorting to showing her in "the frame of vision *as* or *with* a lesbian in male body drag" (de Lauretis 71). Through both diegetic information (Jade

wonders out loud whether Takeko will see her "special show') and the extra-diegetic knowledge that the director of the film is openly lesbian, the film encourages a queer gaze. Takeko also buys a show, but takes off her glasses and looks away, disavowing both trans-sex "active" masculine identification (Mulvey "Afterthoughts..." 34-35) and the narcissism of the female look which "demands a becoming" and leads to feminine masquerade (Doane 135). Both Takeko and the audience only see the end of the striptease, which leaves Jade huddled naked on the floor with her knees against her chest, hiding what is supposed to be revealed for the price of admission. She has put on the green wig and sings the song "Little Jasmine." This scene of vulnerability touches Takeko and shows the audience the extent to which Jade's cheery sexuality is an act. It also reveals a regression to childhood, the source of her memories of Takeko.

Jade attempts to masquerade femininity for gain, but she fails to achieve the necessary distance between herself and her image. Although her show should be a means to use her body for gain through "hyperbolisation of the accoutrements of femininity" (Doane 139), she strips off both her clothes and the "mask" of womanliness to reveal her own insecurity instead. Unlike the schoolgirl uniform, which she wears because it "looks good," her nudity provides no opportunity for role-play. The wig is not used as an accessory for beauty; it signifies an intimate memory, further identifying herself with (rather than distancing her from) her own image. Her naked body ultimately reveals the truth about her: she is a lonely girl "living in a dream," in the words of the undercover officer.

In response to the idea that Jade lives in a fantasy world, the camera shifts to her first person point of view as she lays on her bed. The shot reveals the corners of her room hidden from her webcam; they are dingy and poorly maintained, revealing poverty and emptiness in comparison to her richly decorated bed with its beaded curtain and colorful sheets. This reality (usually just outside the frame), combined with the flashback sequences which reveal that her mother abandoned her by taking her brother and leaving for the city, reveals the pain in her life beneath the surface image of sexuality and cheerfulness that she projects.

Images of harsh reality also interrupt scenes of the women together. The sex scene between the two women after the tattooing session is intercut with shots of the outside world, including Ah-Dong bullying the boys and the police officer searching for Jade online, which

discourages an idealized viewing of the women together, and reduces the visual pleasure of lesbian lovemaking for the audience. A shot of the night sky shows an apocalyptic red moon crashing into Earth and becoming the sunrise, breaking Takeko's early-morning reverie as she holds Jade in her arms. The women's night together is linked with disaster: Ah-Dong is found slumped against the door of the tattoo parlor with his tattooed forearms severed and missing, and Takeko's brother is in a comatose state at the hospital, having been picked up from a field of spider lilies by the road. After finding her brother, Takeko's guilt manifests itself in a hallucinatory sequence. She wanders into the same field as her brother and is confronted by ghost images of Ah-Dong, her brother, and her father, accusing her of failing to care for them and producing "fake" tattoos. Ah-Dong's tattoo is fake because it does not actually make him stronger or braver; instead, it gets him into trouble. Takeko's tattoo is also fake because it does not actually help her brother remember the earthquake or anything else. This crisis culminates in her message to Jade that she "can't do tattoos anymore," which breaks off their relationship. Jade is also crushed to find out that the person who confessed love to her through email was an undercover police officer and not Takeko.

Despite the rapid turn towards disaster, however, the film ends on a positive note. Takeko begins to crush the spider lilies in the field as her brother wakes up in the hospital and seems to have regained an understanding of the world. As Jade sleeps in her bedroom, the camera pulls out through the window into the outside world, signaling a departure from her encapsulated virtual space into reality. A shot of Takeko and Jade in bed, repeating the questions about memory and forgetting is followed by Takeko's apology to Jade. Takeko is no longer "choosing to forget," and the spider lily flower, shown to be less menacing by the light of day, is juxtaposed against the framed tattoo on the wall of the tattoo parlor, which seems to decay. Jade, once again in the wig, goes to the studio to meet Takeko.

Spider Lilies demonstrates the complications between what is "real" and "fake" through the subjective experiences and memories of Jade and Takeko and the doubtful reactions of others. By giving these subjective experiences physical embodiments such as the tattoos and Jade's wig, the film makes them a part of material reality. Through this embodiment, the bearers must navigate the discrepancies between memory, fantasy, and reality.

These embodiments also serve to individualize those whose experiences they represent. Through this individualization, the film manages to set Jade and Takeko apart from others as lesbians without creating a political or social identity for them. Like Ah-Dong and the undercover police officer, they simply have certain obstacles to overcome in order to be comfortable with themselves. Thus the film offers a broad appeal beyond sexual politics to any individual who does not seem to fit in the normal mainstream, which could explain its success across both social and international boundaries.

5.0 *THE CHINESE BOTANIST'S DAUGHTERS*: CONSIDERING THE CENTER FROM THE PERIPHERY

More than any other director mentioned in this project, Dai Sijie sets himself in opposition to Mainland China, but he does so in a way that reinforces the Mainland's cultural dominance of the Chinese sphere. Rather than the nostalgia of the Taiwanese exile for an increasingly distant and mythologized past in *Love's Lone Flower*, he writes as an exile who knows "what it feels like to not be able to be who you are in your own country" (Dai, qtd. in Keiser 2). Unlike the many Taiwanese who claim an alternate continuity within Chinese culture, he faces the additional dilemma of reconciling his Chinese origin and experience of the Cultural Revolution with his life in France. Although his films are in Mandarin Chinese, he writes his novels in French. He does not abandon his Chinese past, but his identity is a mixture that he does not seem to link to ongoing Chinese culture.

Dai's *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* (France/Canada 2006) is set in 1980s China, the period of China's *gaige kaifang* (Reform and Open Up) economic policy. However, the isolated island garden the botanist and his students inhabit has a timeless quality. Like Dai, the protagonist of the film, Min (French-Chinese Mylène Jampanoï), is caught between two worlds. She is a half-Chinese, half-Russian orphan. Both her foreign heritage and her disconnect from family lineage isolate her from Chinese tradition, particularly fromcg9 Confucianism due to her lack of filial bonds. Unlike Takeko, she does not even have a brother. She is offered an apprenticeship with a botanist, Mr. Chen (Ling Dong Fu), which allows her to leave the orphanage, a transition that essentially amounts to an adoption as she moves in with him and becomes a part of his household. At first ill at ease in her new environment, she grows close to An (Xiao Ran Li), Mr. Chen's daughter. Their bond springs in part from their isolation from peers; although there are other students of Mr. Chen on the island, they do not spend time with the two daughters. The girls' relationship progresses from friendship to romance, but is interrupted by the return of An's brother Dan (Wei-chang Wang), a soldier. Mr. Chen decides to marry Min to his son Dan; though she is at first heartbroken and opposed to the marriage, An

eventually supports the idea so that the women can be together after her brother returns to military service. Unfortunately for Min, Dan is an abusive husband, though his absence provides some respite and autonomy for the lesbian couple. With Dan away, the two women become increasingly bold in challenging Mr. Chen's authority. Mr. Chen, noting that Min has yet to produce children, seeks to push her out of the household, but An stands up for her by threatening to leave as well. Cowed, Mr. Chen no longer has a means to assert himself within the household. One night, Mr. Chen experiences heart trouble and seeks out An to give him his medicine. Finding the two women having sex in the greenhouse, he attacks them in one final effort to control his family. Min hits him with a gardening tool and the two women flee. Returning moments later, An finds her father dead from a heart attack. The two women are taken by the military and executed for murder after a trial.

The tale in *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*, based on a "true story" (Dai, qtd. in Keiser 2)[11] but also "purely an artistic endeavor," (Dai, qtd. in Keiser 1) has parallels to Pu Songling's *Liaozhai* story "San Fengniang." Tze-lan D. Sang describes this story as a rare depiction of same-sex female romance outside of pornography during the Qing dynasty. In both stories, an outsider to normal Chinese society (a fox spirit and a half Russian, half Chinese orphan) meets and falls in love with a Chinese girl. In order to be together, the Chinese girl insists that the outsider should marry a man in her life (husband or brother, respectively). Despite this solution, the girls cannot be together, because in the *Liaozhai* she is not human, while in the film both girls are executed after the Chinese botanist dies of a heart attack, ostensibly due to the discovery of his daughter's affair. This link to a pre-Revolutionary, pre-Modern story questions whether women have advanced in China at all and contributes to the mythology of China's unified timeline. This unified timeline claims that Chinese civilization began in the Yellow River valley and has been carried on by the Han Chinese throughout periods of political disunity.

A major difference between the fox spirit and half-Russian Min is the source of their "otherness." The fox spirit, although strange, is a common figure in Chinese stories and, although not Han Chinese, may still pass. With her blue eyes, Min is markedly foreign. In an early scene, we learn that she may not be able to read characters when she is harshly scolded for

[11] The original article describing the true event involves pathologization of the lesbian by the reporter-- Dai removes this interpretation from his version of the story, which is only loosely based on the actual event.

fetching the wrong herb. Yet her past is marked by a distinctly Chinese disaster, the deadly Tangshan earthquake of 1976 that killed her parents. So, like the fox spirit, she can traverse the boundary between "Chinese" and "other." This traversing of boundaries is a marked transgression within both stories, made more apparent by their aberrant sexualities.[12]

In his critique of Tu Wei-Ming's formulation of "Cultural China," W.A. Callahan points out that other cultural traditions, including Daoism and Buddhism, are overlooked in favor of Confucianism (71). *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* presents an alternative in Buddhism, which shelters the lesbian couple in life and honors their desire to be together in death. This use of Buddhism as an escape from the oppression of Confucian society is present even in earlier Chinese literature such as Pu Songling's *Liaozhai.* In both "San Fengniang" and *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* the Buddhist temple plays a role as a safe haven for the women. It is a space outside the regular confines of society. In her analysis of "San Fengniang" in *The Emerging Lesbian,* Sang compares the Buddhist nunnery during the Zhongyuan festival to an "all-female, or simply lesbian, bar." As a rare public locale for women from the gentry class to meet other women, it is a "women's cruising ground" (73). Min and An also visit a Buddhist temple together, and it is there that An flees to overcome her heartbreak over Min's wedding and where Min finds her for a reunion. The Buddhist monk helps them affirm their love for each other through a bird-releasing ritual, and, as a sympathetic mourner, he returns to that location to spread their ashes after their deaths as criminals. As an institution separate from both Chinese Confucianism and Chinese government, the temple is a tolerant place which allows for alternate desires.[13] Buddhism is also an international/transcultural institution, which links it to current transnational debates regarding presumedly universal ideals such as the freedom to love whomever one chooses. It is generally perceived as a neutral religion in political and social debate, but the stationing of Min's abusive soldier-husband in Tibet hints at current humanitarian concerns regarding the PRC's control of Tibet. Unlike Taiwan and Hong Kong, Tibet is outside the periphery of Cultural China in that it does not claim to be a site of continuous (Confucian,

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[12] Comparison between the stories raises a question of seduction: who seduces whom? An seems to seduce Min, a reversal of the seductive yet chaste fox spirit. Sexual desire is generally absent from the *Liaozhai* story and must be read through hints of their extremely close friendship.

[13] Although in *Butterfly* Jin's turn to Buddhism seems to signal a negation of her own desire, she still is able to facilitate Flavia's relationship with Yip.

Han) Chinese culture. However, the PRC does claim Tibet as a part of China's historical territory. In invoking Tibet, a site of resistance against the dominating forces of both the Chinese Communist Party and Confucian culture, Dai links the women to other oppressed groups and further condemns Mainland Chinese social policy.

The Chinese Botanist's Daughters martyrs its female protagonists as victims of both Chinese patriarchy and government oppression. Scenes with the botanist recall Chinese Fifth Generation images of the patriarch of the house commanding his wives and concubines. Both girls are shown washing and grooming his feet, a clear sign of his dominance over them. Yet this dominance is overturned rather than reinforced after Min marries his son. The brutality inflicted upon her by her soldier husband upon finding out she is not a virgin gives the women a reason to rebel against the family hierarchy, especially after he is redeployed and they are left alone with An's father. No longer content with what they imagined to be a perfect arrangement to be together, they undermine the botanist's authority through small actions such as no longer cooking his favorite dish, duck feet, and pricking him while trimming his toenails. Forced to go to restaurants for his favorite food and to perform his own daily tasks such as purchasing the newspaper, he grows increasingly indignant. Interestingly, it is a hallucination of Min's Russian mother which convinces Min to start acting out against the botanist; she remembers her childhood name "Vera" and her roots outside of the Chinese patriarchal tradition. The botanist's attempt to oust Min from his family is unsuccessful because An, the only other family member at home, threatens to leave with her. With his son in the military, he is reliant on the filial piety of his daughter (she is both assistant and companion to him) and he cannot afford to lose her. He is in some ways as much a victim as they, and even though an international (or even modern Chinese) audience would be unlikely to sympathize with his desire to rule the household,[14] he has no other support system. He is not malicious towards the girls, but he is concerned about the stability of his household and the poor marriage situation between his son and his wife that seems unlikely to produce any grandsons to carry on his legacy. His death, a combination of violent outburst and heart trouble, is triggered by seeing the two women being physically

[14] Consider the marriage arrangement between Min and his son: he takes advantage of her as an orphan with little choice, but is mostly looking out for his family. He is aware of the difficulty in finding a wife for a soldier in an isolated area, and she has already become part of his household as an apprentice.

intimate, so it is unknown whether he would have been able to eventually accept their relationship. Instead, the state (represented by the military) takes over the case. The women are tried for causing the death of a valuable member of society, and their homosexuality is emphasized over his existing heart condition as a factor.

The Chinese Botanist's Daughters shares some characteristics with Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou* (1990). In *Ju Dou* the titular character, played by Gong Li, moves from an abusive husband to an "incestuous" affair with his adopted son Tianqing (Li Baotian) in an allegory set in traditional Confucian China. Like Ju Dou, Min is treated brutally by her husband and turns to an affair with another family member for support. Dan's absence, like Ju Dou's husband Yang Jinshan's (Li Wei) paralysis, allows the couple to live in happiness for a while and overturn patriarchal power. But even within this happiness, the women must hide their affairs. After her husband is paralyzed from the waist down, Ju Dou cannot allow herself to become pregnant and confirm public suspicion of her affair. The abuse of her body shifts from her husband's hands to her own as she destroys her womb with chili powder and vinegar. Unwilling to repress her sexuality, she punishes herself for her pleasure. Although Min and An do not punish themselves, they share some of the same concern over discovery, which leads them to conduct their affair in the greenhouse rather than in the home. All three transgressive women are ultimately punished by society, Ju Dou by her son (fathered by Tianqing), a new agent of Confucian patriarchy, and Min and An by the military.

The failure of the father figure in *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* demonstrates the shortcomings of humanist Confucianism. The botanist is not sadistic like Jinshan, but neither is he sympathetic to his daughters. Because Confucianism relies on rigid hierarchies, it subjugates women and other outsiders even when the ruling class attempts to act benevolently. This film straddles the line between "radical" and "remedial" protest, to use Perry Link's terms as interpreted by Rey Chow. A radical protest seeks change, whereas a remedial protest "often signifies not the attempt to overthrow the Confucian value system itself, but a criticism from below of the abusers of power, who should be treating the abused with fairness within what is basically 'the same value system'" (*Woman and Modernity* 49). Dai's film proposes a radical protest through the protagonists' actions, yet at the same time punishes them and upholds the

existing system. Communism and Confucianism are conflated into an overwhelming nation-patriarchy which does not allow these women to be together except in secret, and even then only with significant concessions to the system, such as marriage. The impossibility of their relationship within China extends even to the marketing of the film.

Given that the director was denied access to shoot in China and instead filmed in Vietnam, *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* has a pan-Asian quality enhanced by extensive Japanese rather than Chinese language marketing. [15] Also, neither its French nor Chinese release title, *Les Filles du Botaniste* and 植物园 (Botanical Garden), explicitly mentions China. The international marketing of the film repeatedly mentioned the Chinese censorship of the film, with Dai claiming that such a film would be impossible to make in China due to its "taboo" subject matter (Keiser 1).[16] Such publicity seems to preclude the possibility of it being received as a "Chinese" lesbian film. This marketing strategy, much like the plot of the film itself, explicitly obliterates the possibility of the lesbian in mainland China; the film also seems to overlook potential Chinese audiences in Taiwan and Hong Kong through a lack of Chinese-language marketing. It also blatantly ignores the underground Mainland film *Fish and Elephant* (Li Yu, 2001), "[Mainland] China's first lesbian-themed film" which found success on the international festival market and paved the way for potential mainland lesbian narratives despite its low budget and lack of PRC support (DeGroat).

The film has been criticized by Chinese bloggers for its unrealistically harsh punishment of the main characters, down to the charging of the two women the cost of the bullets used to execute them.[17] Although *Fish and Elephant* also features a lesbian character who has killed her father (Junjun, played by Qiangian Zhang), and who engages in a shootout with police, she is not the main character, only an ex-lover. Her violence towards her father (in retaliation for years of sexual abuse, a reason for her instability) is punished, not her sexuality. The film reflects the

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[15] Many of my resources on this film, including the Tokyo Wrestling interview with Dai, are Japanese. Also, a Japanese website for the film remains active at http://www.astaire.co.jp/shokubutsu/.

[16] A video from the French website describing Chinese censorship of the film, "La Censure Chinoise" may also be found at http://www.europacorp.com/dossiers/botaniste/.

[17] For an example of a critical blog entry against the film, see 黄小邪's entry at http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_47642494010007gc.html.

general invisibility of the lesbian in Chinese society, but does not negate their presence in the way that military power does in *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* by having them executed. As Liang Shi points out, in China "no information about homosexuality is available in official literature or media, and therefore in the domain of public awareness homosexuality virtually does not exist" (24). Director Li Yu's intention in *Fish and Elephant* is to show lesbians *within* Chinese society and to demonstrate that "their love is not otherness" (29), so the main characters Xiaoqun (Pan Yi) and Xiaoling (Shi Tou) are presented as otherwise normal. These actresses were an actual lesbian couple at the time, adding a thin layer of documentary interest to the film. Dai, on the other hand, paints the lesbian as exotic and forbidden and may be criticized for orientalizing the narrative for Western audiences.

Zhang Yimou faced similar criticism for his early films. Rey Chow describes these films in relation to "cross-cultural commodity fetishism:"

> Precisely because ethnic practices are theatricalized as arcane and archaic, Zhang is showing a 'China' that is at once subalternized and exoticized by the West. The 'ethnicity' of his films amounts to an exhibitionism that returns the gaze of orientalist surveillance, a gaze that demands of non-Western peoples mythical pictures and stories to which convenient labels of otherness such as 'China.' 'India,' 'Africa,' and so forth can be affixed (*Primitive Passions* 170-171).

She goes on to say that this "Oriental's orientalism" "turns the remnants of orientalism into elements of a new ethnography" (171) which critiques orientalism by parodying its style of visuality. Does Dai Sijie participate in this "Oriental's orientalism," or is he too much of an outsider due to his identification with France as well as China? If the moment when Ju Dou turns and reveals her battered body to both the voyeuristic Tianqing and the audience marks the point at which display becomes exhibitionist and self-conscious, is there a similar moment in *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*? If both stories are marketed as tales of forbidden passion to the West (see Miramax's poster for *Ju Dou*, Figure 8), does exoticism overshadow "ethnography"?

One of the most sensual scenes of *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* occurs early in the film when Min goes to the greenhouse and finds An naked on a steaming bed of leaves. The camera pans across An's body, which is posed in a way to accentuate her beauty (Figure 9). Min approaches An, calling out her name, but An remains in a drug-induced trance. The steam rising from the leaves and the string music heighten the exoticism of the scene. The atmosphere is

unabashedly idealized and erotic, unlike the bathing scene in *Ju Dou* that shows the harsh reality of the eroticism of Ju Dou's body through her bruises and facial expression. Both Min's and the audience's voyeurism is never challenged as An is completely unaware of the gaze upon her, though the stereo producing the music hints that this moment's exoticism is constructed by An herself. Min is even able to reach out and touch her without disturbing her, a negation of her potential to be active in the scene (Figure 10). Her obliviousness serves to uphold her fetishization as a sort of mystical beauty.

The film is carefully constructed to revel in the beauty of these two women and their relationship rather than their depth as characters. In fact, their romance is constructed more through voyeuristic images of them bathing together than through dialogue. A scene of the two girls washing off mud after a trip to gather herbs (Figure 11) transitions to a reversal of the earlier scene in which Min walks in on a naked An. An approaches Min as she bathes in a small tub and touches her (Figure 12). Min reacts hesitantly as An moves away, facing the camera but with her back to An. Min stands up and calls to An, revealing herself to the audience and An turns and disrobes at the invitation. As the two women face each other the audience is treated to both frontal and rear nudity (Figure 13) followed by a sensual embrace between the two women. Unlike in *Ju Dou*, the promise of visual and erotic pleasure is readily fulfilled. The film delivers on a promise of exotic sensuality without criticizing its own orientalism.

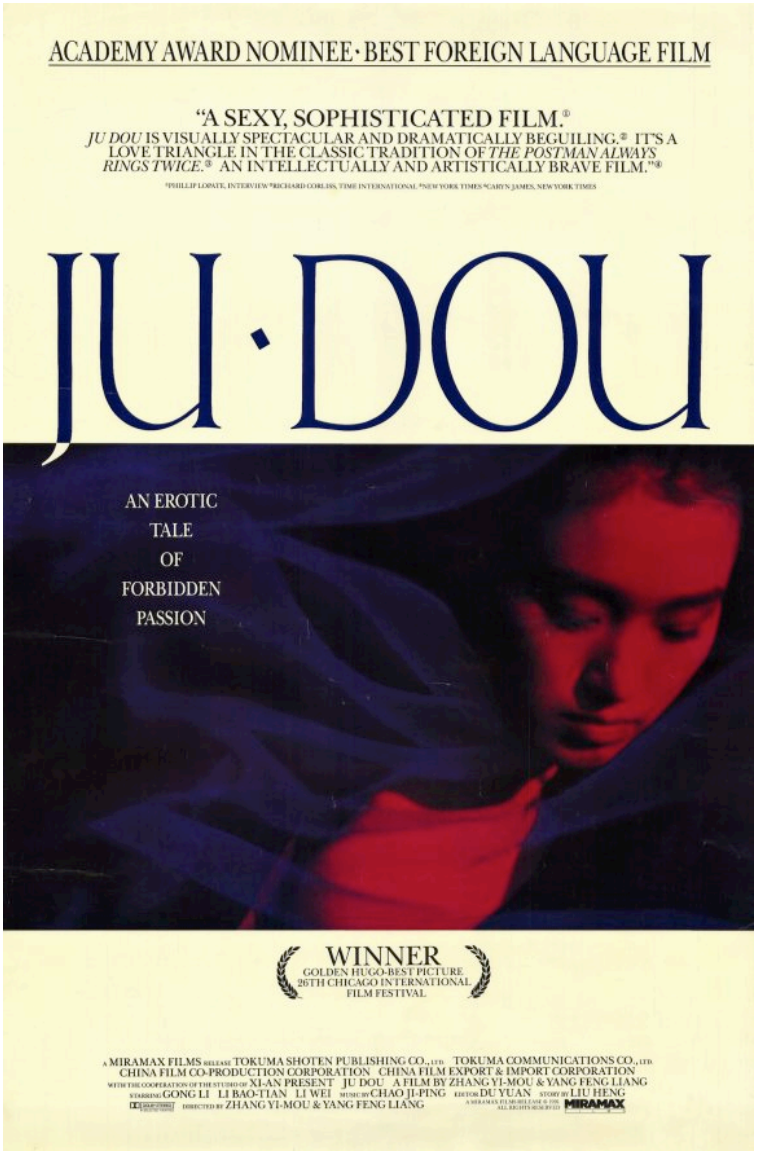

Figure 8. Miramax's poster for the American release of Ju Dou, "An Erotic Tale of Forbidden Passion".

Publicity Poster.

Figure 9. The camera pans across An's body while she remains in a trance. The curves of her waists and breasts are accentuated by her pose. Digital Still.

Figure 10. Min reaches out to wake An, but it unable to rouse her. Note the stereo in the background. Digital Still.

Figure 11. The camera observes the two women bathing together outdoors from a safe voyeuristic distance.

Figure 12. An walks in on Min, who reacts to An's touch. Digital Still.

Figure 13. The two women face each other, posed so that their bodies are visible to the camera. Digital Still.

Dai's status as a French-Chinese director working in Vietnam further complicates the potential colonial overtones of this type of exotic, mythical narrative. Unlike Zhang Yimou, whose films were initially banned in China, he has not been reclaimed as a director who shapes the vision of Chinese culture. Although he has Chinese heritage, he is not authenticated by the Chinese government or even by Chinese audience response (although the audience is limited by the film's lack of release and Chinese language-marketing). Even Queer Comrades, a leading source of web-based information on queer media in Mainland China, lists *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* as a "Chinese-language lesbian film" rather than as an "Asian Chinese-language lesbian film" in their video list of the "Top 10 Asian Chinese-Language Lesbian Films." They group it with Alice Wu's *Saving Face* (2004), a story about Chinese-American lesbians, and even call it by a literal translation of the English title, not the Chinese title on the poster. This distinction reveals the way in which Dai's film is viewed as one with an outside perspective, unlike Taiwanese and Hong Kong films such as *Spider Lilies*, the most commercially successful of the films on Queer Comrade's list. Interestingly, though it is referenced visually, *Love's Lone Flower* is not mentioned on this list, possibly because of its Taiwanese nationalist content. As a group organizing a queer movement in the fashion of Western gay rights groups, Queer Comrades is an active participant in shaping a potential "queer Chinese" group identity in the PRC. Although they are inclusive of media from Hong Kong and Taiwan, they only partially

claim Dai's film as one representative of the Chinese lesbian experience, possibly because the film's exoticism prevents identification with the narrative among Chinese lesbian audiences.

6.0 *GHOSTED*: INTERNATIONAL CO-PRODUCTION OF IDENTITY

Monika Treut's *Ghosted* (2009) is the only film directed by a person of non-Chinese origin is discussed in this thesis. However, as a foreigner attempting to understand and bring Chinese culture to both her native Germany and the world at large, Treut participates in shaping Cultural China as a member of Tu Wei-Ming's third sphere. *Ghosted* is the first German-Taiwanese co-production a fictional film. Although Treut is not Taiwanese, she is certainly part of the mission to bring Taiwanese culture to the world. The backing from Public Television Service, Taiwan (PTS) makes this goal explicit; their website states that "one of the missions of PTS is to promote cultural exchange through international co-production" and that "PTS has always stressed the importance of incorporating elements of Taiwan in all international co-production projects" ("CoProduction"). Backing from the Government Information Office Taiwan, which has been making efforts to promote Taiwan in film for tourism, as well as for diplomatic and cultural purposes,[18] reinforces these goals. Treut herself is no stranger to Taiwan; she previously worked with PTS to produce two television documentaries, *Made in Taiwan* (2005) and *Tigerwomen Grow Wings* (2005), both of which emphasize Taiwan as a youthful democracy. These documentaries have certainly functioned as global PR for Taiwan in relation to the PRC, especially in their focus on democracy and the changing lives of Taiwanese women. Although it is a fictional romance with no explicit political content, *Ghosted* participates in the attempt to portray Taiwan as a society welcoming to global culture and, through the film's use of lesbian characters, a society tolerant of alternate sexualities. However, even with the film's openness, Treut seems to be mapping lesbianism onto Taiwan rather than revealing an existing community.

The film opens with Taiwanese Ai-Ling (Huan-Ru Ke) asking her mother to allow her to visit her uncle in Germany. She believes that her uncle might be able to tell her about her father, who has died. Although reluctant, her mother allows her to leave and she begins her journey. However, the film then switches to the perspective of Sophie (Inga Busch), who is in Taiwan

[18] For a recent article titled "Marketing Taiwan and Its Cities" about this effort see http://www.taiwantoday.tw/ct.asp?xItem=95503&CtNode=436.

presenting her installation work "Remembrance," honoring her dead lover Ai-Ling. This flash-forward structure destabilizes Ai-Ling as a character; knowing her fate, we may only watch for her missteps as her narrative progresses. It also ties her to Mei-Li (Ting Ting Hu), a reporter at Sophie's premiere who instantly becomes smitten and seems to be the ghost of Ai-Ling. Essentially, there are two paths of cross-cultural exchange in the film: Ai-Ling and Mei-Li travel to Hamburg, and Sophie travels to Taiwan. Each of these women seeks closure through her travels, but only Sophie achieves it. Taiwan becomes a center of culture, history and identity for both Chinese and foreigners, but travel away from this homeland results in disaster.

Ai-Ling's search for her own roots is what leads her to Germany to find her uncle (Chen Fu, played by Jack Kao), a restaurant owner who left after a fight with his brother, which Ai-Ling suspects was caused by her own birth as a product of an affair between her mother and uncle. In Germany, she is limited to Chen Fu's network of overseas Taiwanese until she meets Sophie. As a Taiwanese abroad, she is completely unable to assimilate. Even at her uncle's restaurant, she notices that German customers stare at her and her family when they eat, which her uncle says is because "their food looks different." She meets Sophie at a screening of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Three Times* (2005), a symbol of the international success of a Taiwanese auteur and the cultural exchange of international art cinema. Yet the success of this film is mediated by its depicted German audience; besides Sophie, they all appear to be Chinese. At the theatre, Ai-Ling is essentially passed from the son of her uncle's chef, Patrick (Kevin Chen), to Sophie, who offers to help Ai-Ling get home after the film when her escort has to leave on business. Sophie's interest in Ai-Ling is both romantic and, in a sense, ethnographic, as demonstrated by her obsessive filming of Ai-Ling.[19] Through Ai-Ling, as through cinema, she can experience a foreign culture as an observer.

In her analysis of Treut's earlier films in *Queer German Cinema*, Alice Kuzniar observes a tendency towards "queer nationhood." In films such as *My Father is Coming* (1991), the characters' "search for identity [in a foreign land] leads neither back to one's cultural roots nor to adaption and assimilation but to an allegiance to queerness, which is to say, to the productive dissonances in to cross-identifications that compose one's personality" (169). However, in

[19] The use of the webcam in *Spider Lilies* and Sophie's filming of Ai-Ling in *Ghosted* raise issues of spectatorship and voyeurism similar to those raised by the "home footage" of *Butterfly.*

Ghosted cultural roots loom heavily over Sophie's relationship to Ai-Ling. If Germany has "a lack of a postwar German national identity, or resistance to such an identity" (159) which allows for the embrace of a queer identity for German directors, does Chinese culture and Taiwanese nationalism disallow this kind of transnational, transcultural identity for Taiwanese? Why does Ai-Ling go abroad only to seek her own roots, and why is Sophie so obsessed with Ai-Ling as a *Taiwanese* woman?

Through Sophie's lens, Ai-Ling is reduced to an image. Watching an outtake from the her filming (a screening which Sophie pauses when Mei-Li drops by her studio, though the ghost appears and plays for the audience after her exit) reveals the way in which Ai-Ling's otherness is constructed out of her natural mannerisms by the intensification of Sophie's obsession. Ai-Ling stands on a rooftop practicing Tai Chi (Figure 14). She stops and asks to take a break, saying that she is too hungry to continue, but Sophie pressures her into one more take. In re-watching this piece of footage, even after the project is done, Sophie demonstrates her inability to let go of Ai-Ling as a subject as well as a lover, noting that she only realized how much she loved Ai-Ling after she was gone when only film footage and photographs remained.[20] In *Transcultural Cinema*, David MacDougall describes the grief of a documentarian reviewing his footage:

> There are, as we know, those moments in life when we see with terrible clarity what we are about to lose, and understand its importance. Such moments are spread throughout the process of filmmaking. The sense of intimacy, of drawing closer to the grain of one's subjects, develops in the very same structure as the loss of contact with them. The film footage becomes an emblem of this contradiction-- an object of magical properties (34).

Sophie's footage literally does take on magical properties in the presence of Ai-Ling's ghost embodied in Mei-Li. As the figure on the screen turns, she becomes Mei-Li (Figure 15). The film makes it clear that they are doubles from Mei-Li's introduction at Sophie's installation opening, even though Sophie resists Mei-Li's advances. Mei-Li watches Sophie from a distance as Ai-Ling's enlarged face is projected across Mei-Li's body (Figure 16). Describing the importance of the image of the Taiwanese woman as opposed to her presence, Kuzniar writes in "Uncanny Doublings and Asian Rituals in Recent Films by Treut, Dörrie, and Ottinger" that "it

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[20] Flavia expresses a similar sentiment in *Butterfly*, crying over her loss of youthful love as she watches footage of herself with Jin.

seems therefore that death and, for that matter, love are less affective than photography for the European filmmaker and her audience, a displacement facilitated via the aestheticization and exoticization of the Asian female waif" (4-5). Just as the documentary subject may be "betrayed by character" (40), to use MacDougall's phrase, the Taiwanese women in this film are betrayed by the desire to mark them as both special and commonplace, which may not accurately reflect actual lesbian status in Chinese society.

Kuzniar observes in "Uncanny Doublings" that *Ghosted* "takes place in an ostensibly post-queer world, which says volumes about how lesbian love has become more visible and acceptable world-wide since the time Monika Treut made *The Virgin Machine* and *My Father is Coming*"(7). Ai-Ling's mother's acceptance of Sophie as her daughter's lover, and the lack of coming-out narrative in general seem to reinforce this idea. Yet the acceptance of Ai-Ling's sexuality is limited. Ai-Ling still uses the euphemism "my landlord" to introduce Sophie to her uncle's community in Germany and even to her mother over the phone, a sign that everyone is not readily accepting of her sexuality. Although the women are not condemned for public displays of affection, the discomfort and stares of surrounding people including Patrick, bely the limitations of "tolerance" within Chinese culture, even in relatively open Taiwanese and diaspora communities.

Figure 14. Footage of Ai-Ling practicing Tai Chi as seen on Sophie's laptop. Digital Still.

Figure 15. After a moment of static on the laptop screen, the figure finishes a turn to reveal that Ai-Ling has become Mei-Li. Digital Still.

Figure 16. Ai-Ling's enlarged face is projected across Mei-Li at Sophie's installation opening. Digital Still.

The relationship between Sophie and Ai-Ling reveals a severe power imbalance besides that of filmmaker and subject. Their common language is English, in which Sophie seems more fluent, giving her the upper hand in communication. As the one with a home and a career, Sophie becomes weary of Ai-Ling's dependence on her. In fact, Ai-Ling only chooses to move in with Sophie out of dependence; she overstays her welcome with her uncle's Taiwanese associates and must leave their home. Although Ai-Ling works at her uncle's restaurant, she has little money and her social life is entirely based around her family and Sophie. Sophie, on the other hand, is free to move in both German and Taiwanese circles in Hamburg. To Ai-Ling's dismay, she seems to flirt with a young Taiwanese filmmaker whom she interviews for her current project and leaves with her for a business trip the same weekend that the couple was supposed to go on a holiday together. In her jealousy, Ai-Ling decides to go out on her own to a lesbian bar, where she is approached by a drunk, pushy German woman. On their way back to Sophie's apartment together, Sophie calls and leaves a message explaining that she is sorry and is coming home early so that they can still take their trip together. Guilty and ashamed, Ai-Ling pulls away from the clingy, angry drunk woman and is killed by an oncoming car in the street.

Ai-Ling's death may be read as a punishment of sorts, both for leaving her home country and for her infidelity to her partner. The penalty for Taiwanese abroad extends to Chen Fu, who is forced out of his business by the Vietnamese, Mainland Chinese, and Koreans in Hamburg and must return to Taiwan. Only the ghost Mei-Li finds success through her investigation of Ai-Ling's death, but even the end goal seems to be to bring Sophie back to Taiwan so that both she and the ghost might have closure. This closure comes in the form of a reunited family conducting a ritual for the deceased. Ai-Ling's uncle/father and mother are together, and they have welcomed Sophie in shared remembrance of Ai-Ling. Through the flames, Sophie sees both Ai-Ling and Mei-Li as they leave her in peace.

As an outsider to Chinese culture, Treut perhaps cannot help but exoticize local ritual and superstition. She is clearly more comfortable with Sophie's narrative, as evidenced by the strange ambiguities surrounding the Taiwanese characters' identities and places in the world. But her mythologization of Taiwan takes place with the support of Taiwan itself, showing some of the same motivations as Zhang Yimou's "Oriental's orientalism;" in this case, making use of Taiwanese superstition as a point of interest for cultural tourism. Just as Mei-Li shows Sophie "a Taipei you won't find in any travel books," complete with a tour of odd street cuisine, the film extends an invitation to foreign audiences as well as Taiwanese abroad to *return* to Taiwan for better understanding of oneself.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Unlike any other group within the Chinese cultural sphere, Taiwan has seemingly claimed the figure of the Chinese lesbian at the national level. In *Love's Lone Flower* the audience follows her from Shanghai to Taiwan to reinforce Taiwan's claim to the Chinese cultural center through continuous history with the Mainland. By supporting Treut's use of the lesbian ghost as a sort of world ambassador in *Ghosted*, Taiwan also seeks to promote itself as a center of both Chinese tradition and to extend itself into the world as a society that upholds international humanitarian values such as the freedom to love whom one chooses. The domestic success of films such as *Love's Lone Flower* and *Spider Lilies* indicates a relatively broad acceptance of the lesbian as protagonist in Taiwan at both the national and audience levels, especially when compared to Mainland China's censorship of both its own lesbian-themed film *Fish and Elephant* and *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters*. The lesbian becomes a figure representing the possibilities of democracy and humanism in Chinese society, which is the image Taiwan is currently promoting in its ideological struggle with the PRC.

However, the fluidity of the Chinese cultural sphere allows the Taiwanese lesbian figure to represent queer populations in the PRC and in Hong Kong as well, as demonstrated by the filming of *Butterfly*, based on a Taiwanese story, in Hong Kong and Queer Comrade's promotion of mostly Taiwanese lesbian films within the PRC. The "Taiwanese lesbian" easily transforms in the more universal "Chinese lesbian" when political boundaries are overlooked in favor of shared cultural heritage. She shifts from a marginal figure in traditional Chinese society to an increasingly central symbol of humanism within current Chinese culture, just as Taiwan and Hong Kong become sites where this Chinese humanism can seemingly flourish and thus position themselves at the center of discourse on the future of Chinese society in relation to global society.

The Chinese lesbian is a progressive figure in films produced within the first Chinese cultural universe, even in *Fish and Elephant*. In contrast, *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* depicts her as cruelly oppressed within the PRC and in *Ghosted* she is unable to survive away

from her links to Taiwan. In these films, her struggles suggest the *inability* of humanist ideals to extend into China and of Chinese citizens to participate in these ideals abroad. Yet these films participate in the second and third cultural universes, respectively, and are further distanced from shifts within the innermost cultural universe of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the PRC. As outside perspectives, these narratives may not accommodate identification by Chinese lesbian populations who do not feel that their own lives are reflected in these narratives. Thus, despite the influence of the West on the emergence of queer theory and politics worldwide, the move towards progressive images of Chinese lesbians is being initiated within the first cultural universe rather than being imposed from the outside.

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