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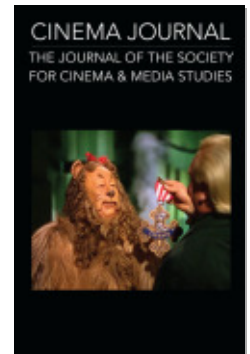
## Queer Asian Cinema and Media Studies: From Hybridity to Critical Regionality

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# Queer Asian Cinema and Media Studies: From Hybridity to Critical Regionality

by AUDREY YUE

**B**etween 2000 and 2008, I, together with Peter Jackson, Mark McLelland, and Fran Martin, co-convoked the AsiaPacifiQueer (APQ) Network, an Australasian-wide collective of scholars writing in the field of queer and Asian studies. The APQ Network was aimed at facilitating intraregional linkages that arose with the marginalization of Asia-focused queer studies in the academy. It was also related to persistent anxieties about the place of queer studies, geopolitically and academically. In particular, it was aimed at addressing the real academic consequences of the US-centric nature of North American queer studies. As our now-defunct website noted:

When the world's most richly funded research institutions, the most influential university presses, and the biggest market for English-language publications in the humanities and social sciences are all located within a single nation, a certain skewing of perspectives is probably inevitable. . . . It is possible for North American queer studies scholars to build successful careers while remaining almost completely ignorant of the global diversity of non-Western (and also non-American Western) queer cultures and histories. North American sexual cultures—from subcultural scenes to media products; from gay and lesbian activism to everyday sexual and gendered practices—are presumed to be primary and general while non-American sexual cultures, both Western and non-Western, are framed as particular and secondary.<sup>1</sup>

The APQ Network brought together a growing group of scholars working on sexuality studies in the Asia-Pacific region to challenge this unequal distribution of scholarly and cultural capital by consolidating

1 Asia Pacific Queer Network Website, now defunct, <http://apq.anu.edu.au> (accessed February 15, 2007). An account of this movement can also be found in the introduction to the coedited collection by the co-convokers Fran Martin, Mark McLelland, Peter Jackson, and Audrey Yue, eds., *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 1–27.

a distinct intellectual movement. Its aim was to strategically confront these multiple exclusions in collective attempts to inscribe queer studies within Asian studies and to locate Asia, and the non-West, within cultural and media studies. We used a variety of approaches. To build networks among often-isolated queer Asian studies researchers, we organized dedicated APQ conferences and convened APQ streams of panels within Asian studies, cultural studies, and Western queer studies conferences. These were held in Brisbane (2001), Melbourne (2002), Singapore (2003), London (2004), Bangkok (2005), Sydney (2007), and Shanghai (2008). In 2008, these interventions resulted in and coincided with the inception of the *Queer Asian* series by Hong Kong University Press (with Jackson one its four editors). My essay here critically surveys the distinct intellectual traditions of this movement and considers their impacts on the emergent field of queer Asian cinema and media studies.

In the past decade, queer Asian cinema and media studies have emerged in and through the intersections of multiple social, cultural, and intellectual forces. The rise of social movements organized around emancipatory rights and queer film festivals, the new infrastructures of the creative industries that have inadvertently incubated queer media business and sexual cultures, and the arrival of a new generation of media scholars who are equally well versed in Western and non-Western queer theories have contributed to the development of this distinct field.

In this piece, I examine key scholars, paradigms, and sites of inquiry to draw out two overlapping (and not entirely exclusive) research traditions. The first is more textually oriented, focuses on queer hybridity, and aims to de-Westernize, historicize, and archive queer cinema and media cultures; the second takes on a critical regional focus, is more institutionally and empirically oriented, highlights critiques of transnationalism and governmentality, and concerns the tasks of exposing neoliberal complicity and new structures of assimilation. My aim is to critically survey exemplary methods that show the responses of the field to the past decade's development of queer Asian media cultures as they emerge and move from the margins to the mainstream.

With the exceptions of Japan, where homosexuality has been legal since 1880, Taiwan since 1896, and Thailand since 1956, the 1990s saw the spread of the decriminalization of homosexuality in East and South Asia. In 1991, homosexuality was legalized in Hong Kong; by 2001 it was removed as a mental illness in China, and in 2009, it was decriminalized in India. These sexual law reforms heralded new media and cinematic practices that present alternative models to the rights-and-recognition discourse of the West. As I show here, these alternative models are evident in the institutional form (e.g., a mixed economy of commercial and art-house films) and textual narratives (e.g., a hybrid model of both coming out of the closet and "staying in" the biological family). Where queer cinema in the West has its roots in the liberationist movement of emancipation—as well as leftist, avant-garde, and experimental traditions of independent filmmaking—queer Asian cinema rose to prominence in the 1990s with the Japanese gay film festival boom of *Okoge* (Takehiro Nakajima, 1992), the box-office success of Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), and the critical acclaim

of Wong Kar-wai's Palme d'Or-winning *Happy Together* (1997).<sup>2</sup> Featuring "the visibility of queer subjects," the popularity of these films among queer and mainstream straight audiences in the West and across Asia marks the "very suddenness of Asian film-making's about-face when it comes to homosexual positivity" and "has been arguably more startling than elsewhere in the world."<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, this period saw the rise of gay, lesbian, and women's film festivals in Japan (1992), Taiwan (1993), and Hong Kong (1989) and coincided with the arrival of HIV/AIDS nongovernmental organizations, which created a fertile arena for developing queer cultural productions, especially in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, where homosexuality remains illegal.

In 2000, the collection *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade* was published as one of the first attempts to capture this zeitgeist. Although editor Andrew Grossman does not attempt to define "Asia" and uses it as "a temporary term of convenience," he points to how the political economy of global distribution has enabled this group of films to be more successfully marketed as "Asian" rather than as "Indian" or "Japanese." He highlights the paradox of "cinematic orientalism" as a process that identifies these films as "foreign" so they can be exportable to the West.<sup>4</sup> Using examples such as Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and Shu Kei's *A Queer Story* (1997), he is careful to differentiate between Eurocentric criticism and traditionalist interpretations, and he proposes that these films cannot be situated as either following the narratives of gay liberation or solely rooted in nativist traditions. His method of "bipolar reading" suggests how, despite the fact that plots and influences can be superficially Western or Eastern, these films invite resolutions that are not exclusive either to a universally Western or to a nativist Eastern imagination.<sup>5</sup> Bipolar reading, a critical reading practice that mobilizes the double consciousness of Western and Eastern perspectives, promotes an "internationality/intertextuality" that is key to the modern film medium and global cinema literacy.<sup>6</sup> Grossman's collection canvasses Japan (film censorship, mainstream gay television, 1960s pink films, and 1990s trans cinema), Hong Kong (homosexuality in popular gangster films and cross-dressing in 1940s Cantonese melodrama), China (film consumption of fifth-generation cinema), Korea (emergent queer films), and the Philippines (transvestism). Together the essays examine both the texts and the contexts of their production, as well as the intralocal and cross-cultural circuits of reception, and provide a template for an emergent critical framework and a cinematic archive. This collection not only problematizes the binary between the

2 Ruby B. Rich, "New Queer Cinema," *Sight and Sound*, September 2, 1992, 30–35; Rich, "Collision, Catastrophe, Celebration: The Relationship between Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals and Their Public," *GLQ* 5, no. 1 (1999): 79–84. There is no English-language title to the Japanese film *Okoge*. The Japanese title, おこげ, when translated, refers to "scorched." *Okoge* generally means "food," and the term is also slang for "fag hag."

3 Andrew Grossman, "'Beautiful Publicity': An Introduction to Queer Asian Film," in *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade*, ed. Andrew Grossman (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

4 *Ibid.*, 4.

5 *Ibid.*, 5.

6 *Ibid.*, 6.

“West” and the “rest”; the critical perspectives introduced here also seek to decenter sexualities by accounting for the “material and metaphorical geographies of sexualities” in nonmetropolitan spaces that are linked by complex and diverse relationships of differences, power structures, and histories.<sup>7</sup> Significant here is also the critique of dominant modes of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

*The Wedding Banquet* became a palimpsest text for what can be described as “the Wedding Banquet effect” to refer to a new theoretical framework for an alternative sexual identity model that does not follow the post-Stonewall narrative of coming out and leaving the blood family.<sup>8</sup> The film’s plot of not initially fully disclosing one’s homosexuality and then slowly negotiating it within the blood family provides a different trajectory for the articulation and recognition of same-sex identity. Chris Berry, in *A Bit on the Side*, discerns a practice in which “coming out” is also accompanied by the process of joining in the blood family.<sup>9</sup> Rather than a homosexual identity development model in which the speech act of coming out marks the transition of homosexual identity from confusion to clarity, this practice, characterized instead by reticence and constant negotiation, has come to distinguish one key tenet of queer Asian media studies in which narrative plots of homosexual identity disclosure are always accompanied by critical analyses that also evaluate transformations to the biological family.<sup>10</sup> Auteur studies demonstrating this approach include scholarship by Fran Martin, Song Hwee Lim, David Eng, Helen Leung, and myself, on the queer Taiwanese cinema of Tsai Ming-liang, popular Hong Kong films including the work of Wong Kar-wai and Stanley Kwan, and the independent and experimental queer films of Chinese sixth-generation filmmaker Cui Zi’en.<sup>11</sup>

The theoretical optic of rereading tropes of coming out and reconfiguring the family has also prompted queer Asian media scholars to coin the concept of “queerscape.” Appropriating Appadurai’s influential discussion of scapes to describe the cultural imaginary of disjunctive globalization, the Asian queerscape is an attempt to delineate a regional culture as well as outline a critical regionality framework. As a regional

7 Richard Philips and Diane Watt, introduction to *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations beyond the Metropolis*, ed. Richard Philips, Diane Watt, and David Shuttleton (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

8 The post-Stonewall identity-as-ethnicity model of coming out is discussed by Alan Sinfield in “Diaspora and Hybridity: Queer Identities and the Ethnicity Model,” *Textual Practice* 10, no. 2 (1996): 271–293.

9 Chris Berry, *A Bit on the Side: East-West Topographies of Desire* (Sydney: Empress Publishing, 1994). On this alternative model of coming out, see also Chou Wah-Shan, “Homosexuality and the Cultural Politics of Tongzhi in Chinese Societies,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 40, nos. 3–4 (2001): 27–46; Chou Wah-Shan, *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 2000).

10 Jen-peng Liu and Ding Naifei, “Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 30–55.

11 Fran Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003); Helen Hok-Sze Leung, *Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008); David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Chris Berry, “The Sacred, the Profane, and the Domestic in Cui Zi’en’s Cinema,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 12, no. 1 (2004): 195–201; Song Hwee Lim, *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006); Audrey Yue, “Mobile Intimacies in the Queer Sinophone Films of Cui Zi’en,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no. 1 (2012): 95–108; Yue, “What’s So Queer about Happy Together? aka Queer (N)Asian: Interface, Mobility, Belonging,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Journal* 1, no. 2 (2000), 251–264.

culture, the Asian queerscape is a new spatial culture across Asia and its Asian diasporas that have emerged as a result of the multidirectional flows of queer globalization. As critical regionality, the Asian queerscape is a research practice that has emerged as a result of challenging the US-centrism of queer studies and the boundedness of “area” studies. Destabilizing dominant cinematic gender and sexual norms, it draws together two research approaches: (1) the new worlds of queer Asian media cultures created through the globalization of LGBT cultures and (2) the oblique spaces of non-heteronormativity reclaimed and reinvented on the margins of straight (mainstream, official, colonial) spaces.<sup>12</sup>

The former coalesces around a cluster of writings characterized by queer hybridity, a term used loosely to refer to how syncretic practices are produced as a result of the intermingling of nativist and global forces that have come to impact the production of local LGBT cultures. Most manifest here is the introduction of digital media technologies and their capacity to inform new self and group identities. *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, a coedited collection by Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and myself, explores how sites and practices such as the Internet, mobile phones, and the translation technology of dubbing have produced new convergences of local sexual identities.<sup>13</sup> Rather than follow the global queering thesis that suggests the homogenizing sameness of LGBT practices and extending the localization thesis of de-Westernizing media studies, queer hybridity recognizes the third space of incommensurability that has ensued as a result of the East-West cultural mix.<sup>14</sup>

The latter can be said to mobilize “disidentification” as a critical practice for undoing encoded meanings and recoding them for minority empowerment through exposing dominant constructions of heteronormativity, gender, and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> It is most notable in Chinese cultural critiques framed by the concepts of *tongzhi* and the Sino-phone. Originally referring to “comrades” in communist China, the term *tongzhi* has been appropriated as a self-identity category to refer to LGBT communities in China and Hong Kong and has become a theoretical engine for generating a prolific body of scholarship on filmic representations of Chinese homosexualities, including the non-heteronormative publics of postcolonial Hong Kong cinema, the queering of Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong media histories, Internet-mediated lesbian communities

12 On the former, see Mark J. McLelland, “Japanese Queerscapes: Global/Local Intersections on the Internet,” in *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, ed. Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 52–69; on the latter, see Helen Hok-sze Leung, “Queerscapes in Contemporary Hong Kong Cinema,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9, no. 2 (2001): 423–447.

13 Berry, Martin, and Yue, *Mobile Cultures*.

14 On global queering, see Dennis Altman, “On Global Queering,” *Australian Humanities Review* 2 (1996), <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/altman.html>; on de-Westernizing media studies, see James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, eds., *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000); on more theorizations and examples of queer hybridity, see Martin et al., *AsiaPacifiQueer*.

15 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

in Shanghai, and the queer sociality of transnational Chinese popular culture.<sup>16</sup> More recently, the identity politics of *tongzhi* has given way to the critical traction of the Sinophone, a term to refer to a multiaccented visual culture created by geographic regions on the periphery of China.<sup>17</sup> Queer Sinophone cinemas are, as I have previously argued, “[l]ocated in the margins of Chinese heteronormativity . . . and [question] the ontology of kinship and new queer subjectivities that are produced by the global reordering of Chinese modernity.”<sup>18</sup> A recent collection by Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich, *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, examines not only the queer cinema of Tsai Ming-liang but also the Sino-centric and heteronormative challenges of Malay, Cantonese, and Singaporean films.<sup>19</sup>

This scholarship covers a range of methods, beginning with formalist film theory, discourse analysis, and semiotic deconstruction, and combining these practices with the cultural materialism of area and queer race studies. It now traverses a multidisciplinary terrain, moving from the textual to the more empirical—including psychoanalysis, affect studies, historiography, audience reception studies, media sociology, and online ethnography. Key to the formation of Asian queerscapes is the force of “minor transnationalism.” Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet coined the term *minor transnationalism* to differentiate it from the top-down, usually West-East and one-way centrifugal hegemony of major transnationalism; for them, minor transnationalism refers to the multidirectional, bottom-up forces that have created new spaces of global exchange and participation without the mediation of the center.<sup>20</sup> The regional homoerotic imaginary of inter-Asian Chinese lesbian films and the impact of homosexual media on diasporic and South Asian public cultures exemplify how minor transnationalism not only has destabilized colonial, neocolonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative forces but also has constituted alternative regions of desires.<sup>21</sup> The Queer Asia book series by Hong Kong University Press, established in 2008, demonstrates the emergent strength of this “intellectual traffic.”<sup>22</sup> Not only has transnationalism opened up a new historically rigorous approach to imagine queer media cultures and politics that challenge the borders of the nation-states; it has also decentered the West as a geographical region as well as a dominant vantage point for legitimating cinematic practices and

16 Lim, *Celluloid Comrades*; Leung, *Undercurrents*; Yau Ching, ed., *As Normal as Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Lucetta Y. L. Kam, *Shanghai Lolas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012); Hongwei Bao, “‘Queer Comrades’: Transnational Popular Culture, Queer Sociality, and Socialist Legacy,” *English Language Notes* 49, no. 1 (2011): 131–138.

17 Shu-mei Shih, *Visibility and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

18 Yue, “Mobile Intimacies,” 95.

19 Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich, eds., *Queer Sinophone Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2014).

20 On minor transnationalism, see Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

21 Fran Martin, *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

22 Travis Kong, cited in “The Queer Asia Book Series Press Release,” June 25, 2008, <http://www.hkupress.org/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=71&Pid=4&Version=0&Cid=13&Charset=iso-8859-1>.

ideologies.<sup>23</sup> Significant here is also a critique of the new structures of governance that have arisen as a result of the reterritorializing force of transnationalism.

For queer Asian cinema and media studies, new structures of cultural governance are evident not only in the supranational regional mediascapes of coproduction and consumption but also in capitalist imaginaries that have reconstituted media markets and sexual identities. While some caution against the neoliberal assimilation of East Asian queers into the global governance of nongovernmental organization affiliations, others attempt to map and unravel the complicity between gay media and commerce.<sup>24</sup> Peter Jackson's 2011 study on queer Bangkok shows how a vernacular queer culture has emerged alongside a rising urban middle class and the mainstreaming of gay and transsexual representations on popular television and in art-house cinema.<sup>25</sup> In Singapore, where homosexuality continues to be criminalized, the government has fetishized the cool industries of gay bohemia as part of the cultural liberalization of the creative economy. From state-funded pan-Asian gay films such as *Rice Rhapsody* (Kenneth Bi, 2004) and the regional success of gay Asian Internet portals such as Fridae to the rise of a subsidized queer art-house genre, an institutionalized queer media culture has arisen.<sup>26</sup> For queer Asian countries such as Thailand and Singapore, transnational capitalism has also resulted in new governing structures of renationalization. Like the trend in recent queer theory, rather than celebrating the emancipatory impulse of queer politics, queer Asian media and cinema studies have also begun to interrogate new regimes of governance that are conditioning the shaping of media institutions and sexual futures.

Significant shifts, both academic and political, have taken place in the decade or so between the publication of *De-Centring Sexualities* (2000) and *De-Westernizing Film Studies* (2012), and these shifts have been reflected and enacted in key scholarly trends and critical practices.<sup>27</sup> While neither collection explicitly addresses "Asia," both point to conceptual distinctions reflected in the field of queer Asian media and cinema studies. From inscribing and archiving the subcultural media histories and place-based specificities of alternative sexual identities to engaging and exposing the globality and governmentality of transnational cinemas and sexualities, this interdisciplinary field has complicated local and national flows and has challenged essentialized Eurocentric traditions in the study of media cultures as aesthetic forms and social practices. Its tools of queer hybridity and critical regionality, and their challenges to kinship structures and neoliberal capitalism, offer a platform for a media future that continues to confront the mainstream assimilation of LGBT cultures and the rise of Asia. \*

23 These aims are also succinctly positioned in Saër Maty Bâ and Will Higbee, eds., *De-Westernizing Film Studies* (London: Routledge, 2012).

24 See, e.g., Josephine Ho, "Is Global Governance Bad for East Asian Queers?," *GLQ* 14, no. 4 (2008): 457–479.

25 Peter Jackson, ed., *Queer Bangkok: Twenty-First Century Markets, Media, and Rights* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).

26 Audrey Yue, "Queer Singapore: A Critical Introduction," in *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures*, ed. Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 1–25. Fridae's website can be found at <http://www.fridae.asia>.

27 Philips, Watt, and Shuttleton, *De-Centring Sexualities*; Bâ and Higbee, *De-Westernizing Film Studies*.