Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia

Schein, Louisa, Mankekar, Purnima

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When the Taiwan–Hong Kong production *Shuang zhuo (The Twin Bracelets)* (1990) reached the United States, it was shown in two kinds of settings: gay and lesbian film festivals and Asian film series, particularly those focused on issues of gender and sexuality. The only mainstream review of the film published in the United States appeared in the movie trade journal *Variety*, where the reviewer proclaimed *The Twin Bracelets* “the first lesbian film shot in mainland China.” The guide to the San Francisco International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, where the movie was first screened in 1992, introduced it as “a lesbian version of [Zhang Yimou’s] *Raise the Red Lantern*” and described its setting as “a fishing village where people have no concept of human rights, women’s liberation, lesbian love, or even divorce” (San Francisco 1992). Viewer response to *The Twin Bracelets* at the San Francisco festival was so positive that it was awarded best feature film by the audience.

When the film aired at the International Festival of Lesbian and Gay Films in 1992 in New York, however, one reviewer questioned how far this particular reading might travel. Acknowledging *The Twin Bracelets’* lesbian overtones, he nonetheless mused aloud that “it’s worth wondering whether audiences in China would see its central relationship as sexual or ur-political” (Cheshire 1992, 20). Among the multiple voices clamoring to claim *The Twin Bracelets* as a reflection of a neophyte lesbian identity in China, Cheshire’s review stands out for asking readers to consider “the cultural relativism of gender preferences” (although, interestingly enough, not sexual preferences)
His cautionary tone encourages us to step back and reconsider what messages different audiences might see in the film.

In this chapter I examine the reception of The Twin Bracelets in China, Taiwan, and the United States by asking how individuals and communities generate diverse understandings of eroticism, sexuality, and intimacy through the process of viewing and interpreting film. The Twin Bracelets chronicles the coming-of-age experiences of two young women from a village in southeastern China who pledge their love and commitment to one another as “sister-husband and sister-wife” (jiemei fuqi), only to find their bond threatened by their families’ decision to marry them to men they have never met. When I first watched The Twin Bracelets in 1993 in the United States, I was skeptical of its being marketed as a lesbian film. After several years of fieldwork in eastern Hui’an County, a coastal region of southeast China, where the story ostensibly takes place, I became more convinced that the film was being misread in the United States, in large part due to the tendency to subsume same-sex intimacy under sexual identity. I had little understanding, however, of how different Chinese audiences would interpret the relationship between the two female protagonists that drives the film’s narrative.

Through showing the film to groups both in China and Taiwan, I came to see how viewers’ responses were shaped as much by their emplacement in national and regional communities as by their reading of the two women’s bond. Whereas reviewers in the United States were more inclined to interpret the protagonists’ relationship through the lens of same-sex eroticism, audiences in eastern Hui’an questioned the authenticity of a sexual reading, given their own localized experiences of intimate same-sex ties. Taiwanese viewers, by contrast, responded to the film with an eye to the contentious relationship between Taiwan and mainland China and to the global reach of Western discourses of sexual subjectivity. By drawing attention to connections between emplacement and film reception, I show how film provides both a referent and a setting for debates that seek to situate intimacy, erotics, sexual subjectivity, and modernity in their proper time and place.

Cross-cultural sexuality studies have increasingly questioned a taken-for-granted relationship between sexual acts on the one hand and sexual identities on the other, in part by striving to understand indigenous subject positions in relation to local and global discourses and practices (Berry, Martin, and Yue 2003b; Blackwood 2008; Boellstorff 2003a, 2005, 2007; Chao 2000; Cruz and Manalansan 2002; Elliston 1995; Jackson 2001; Johnson, Jackson, and Herdt 2000; Leung 2008; Liu and Rofel 2010; Martin 2003;
This chapter builds on such scholarship, shifting its focus slightly to examine a broader range of same-sex intimacies (not all of them sexual) in order to assess how viewers from disparate backgrounds negotiate the relationship between practice and identity. Whereas many analyses of same-sex relations and sexuality in Chinese societies have focused on literature or medical discourses (Dikötter 1995; Hinsch 1990; Liu and Rofel 2010, part 1; Martin 2003, 2010; Sang 2003; Sieber 2001; Wu 2002), I turn to film as a powerful medium for bringing into relief tensions between affective intimacy and erotic desires. Moreover, I approach film not only as a text to be read (Berry 2001; Eng 2010; Leung 2008; Martin 2003, 2010; Silvio 2008) but also as an experience of viewing that produces responses both narrative and embodied. I suggest that visual images encourage viewers to engage in processes of identification and disavowal that inspire memories and even experiences of desire and intimacy. These, in turn, fuel ontological debates about sexual and national identities that are at once a step removed from the embodied experience of film viewing and intimately associated with it.

I am ultimately concerned with how erotic desires are interwoven with both sexual and nonsexual forms of identity and how those identities are produced through and in conjunction with film viewing. This approach requires what Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein describe in their introduction to this volume as a “transnational analytics.” The production, distribution, and consumption of The Twin Bracelets transcend national boundaries, drawing attention to the global circuits in which films move and to the diverse political, social, and sexual frameworks through which they are made and received. The Twin Bracelets is part of a growing body of “Greater China” cinema: the product of collaboration between a Taiwanese director and a Hong Kong production company, shot on location in China with a Hong Kong and Taiwanese cast, and distributed to Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking audiences across Asia (except for China) and selectively in Europe and North America. In other words, the film was made with a specifically nonnational viewership in mind and its circulation reflects the appeal of films produced on the margins of global media centers for both regional and transregional audiences.

Although in the United States The Twin Bracelets was seen predominantly as a lesbian film, its reception in Taiwan, in Hong Kong, and among the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia was more varied. The distribution company in Taiwan billed the film using the catchy but ambiguous phrase “another kind of love” (ai de ling yi zhong). The slogan’s appeal rests on its unspoken
referent, a “kind of love” from which the “other kind,” portrayed in the film, ostensibly diverges. Without explicitly naming this love as sexual, the slogan evokes the widest range of possible meanings by pivoting on the single character “another” (ling), a term that encodes the possibility of multiple desires and intimacies. Heterosexuality is not fully erased by this phrase, but is constituted as the absent norm, constantly hovering in the background by virtue of its dominant relation to “other” intimate bonds (Elliston 1995, 862; Halley 1993).

The circulation of The Twin Bracelets within Greater China and between Asia and the West thus unsettles our ability to locate intimacy and desire socially, spatially, and temporally. It raises questions similar to those asked by Elizabeth Povinelli and George Chauncey in their reflections on the “transnational turn” in queer studies, such as “where are the intimate and proximate spaces in which persons become subjects of embodied practices and times of desire?” (1999, 443). Cinematic portrayals force viewers to struggle
with categories that easily spill into one another: affective love, erotic desire, friendship, and mutual obligation and support. At the same time, images of intimate acts also inspire debates over the proper context of film interpretation and the proper conditions for identifying intimate behaviors with specific subjective orientations. These contexts and conditions reflect geographical and cultural locations that both exist prior to the moment of film viewing and are produced through the cinematic experience itself. Why do some visual images of emotional intensity and physical closeness become intelligible to certain audiences through sexual ontologies? In attributing to *The Twin Bracelets*’ protagonists a “lesbian” relationship, do film critics and audiences in the United States appeal to a sexual identity that precedes their viewing of the film, one that they read into the embraces and intimate secrets shared between the two women? How is this process different from the reactions of gay- and lesbian-identified (*tongzhi*) communities in Taiwan or the responses of viewing groups in China who associated the characters’ relationship with same-sex bonds common in eastern Hui’an? These debates over the representation of female intimacy and sexuality in *The Twin Bracelets* take place in the context of ongoing struggles over the status of acts and identities that define gender and sexuality in terms at once global, local, and regional.

**Methodological Note**

The methods I used to study *The Twin Bracelets* emerged from my efforts to understand how audiences constituted themselves and others as gendered, sexual, ethnic, and national subjects through the process of film viewing (see also S. Friedman 2006b). This research emerged from a broader project on identity construction in China that examined, among other issues, how media portrayals struggled to resolve ambiguous ethnic statuses that did not fit clearly into state-sanctioned identity categories (S. Friedman 2006a). In the end I did not include *The Twin Bracelets* in that study because I felt I needed to hear the voices of viewers themselves in order to understand the complex productive power of media. Given that the film was released in 1990, I was not able to observe its life as a social text in its original context. To overcome this obstacle, I reintroduced *The Twin Bracelets* to diverse communities in the summer of 2002, in some cases showing it to groups who would not have had the opportunity to view it when it was first released. Many Taiwanese audience members had heard of the movie but only a few had actually seen it in 1990. Because *The Twin Bracelets* never aired in China, audiences there were encountering it for the first time, although Hui’an vil-
lagers were familiar with other films of a similar genre and some urban viewers had read the short story on which it is based.

In both locales, my viewing groups were determined by the kind of social ties that often structure informal audience communities, such as gender, kinship, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and classmate, workplace, and residential bonds. In China, I showed the film to five groups in the eastern Hui’an village of Shanlin (a pseudonym), where I have conducted research since the mid-1990s, and to one group in the nearby city of Xiamen, two members of which originally hailed from Hui’an. Within Shanlin, viewing groups of two to ten individuals were organized around kinship and neighborhood ties, as well as widespread same-sex relationships known in Minnan dialect as *dui pnua*, roughly translated as “companion” (S. Friedman 2009). Women represented the majority of group members and they ranged in age from their teens through their seventies, with most in the twenty-to-fifty age group.

Whereas I knew many of the Shanlin viewers personally, in Taiwan I worked through introductions from friends and colleagues to create audiences more reflective of the island’s population. The seven groups who watched *The Twin Bracelets* with me included urban and rural residents; professionals, students, civil servants, and low-level office workers; women and men in their teens through middle-age and with educational levels from high school through graduate degrees; those who espoused traditional ideas about family and gender roles and those who identified as ardent feminists; and viewers who expressed a preference for same-sex sexual partners as well as those for whom heterosexuality remained the unquestioned norm. Audiences varied from gatherings of four or five individuals to as many as twenty at one public screening. Whereas viewing sessions in Shanlin and Xiamen took place in the more intimate spaces of family homes, Taiwanese viewers watched the film in settings ranging from office conference rooms and apartment living rooms to public sites, such as a bookstore and a village street.

One key difference between audiences in Hui’an and Taiwan lay in their efforts to establish the film’s authenticity as a reflection of social reality. In Hui’an, viewers engaged in an ongoing discussion while watching the film in which they strove to locate the story in its “real” time and place. Through discussing the authenticity of the female characters’ attire and headscarves, and through debating where particular scenes were filmed (almost all were filmed in Hui’an, although in different locations), viewers endeavored to determine precisely when in the past the story took place and whether it accu-
rately reflected their own experiences of local marriage customs and close same-sex bonds. Viewers in Shanlin read authenticity through the bodies and actions of the female characters. Did they dress and adorn themselves as local women did? Were some characters’ behaviors more authentic than others? How closely did the film’s portrayal of marriage customs hew to community norms and expectations? By working to establish the provenance of *The Twin Bracelets* (locally accurate as opposed to outsider’s representation), viewing groups simultaneously produced “local culture” and established the proper context for their cinematic interpretation. By defining a sense of place through film spectatorship, in other words, viewers constituted “the local” as an active, dynamic process rather than a fixed, static entity. This act of generating local culture subsequently informed how audiences interpreted the film. If *The Twin Bracelets* was deemed relatively true to “local” life, then the relationship between the two female protagonists could easily be assimilated into the category of dui pnua and any sexual readings disavowed.

Unlike audiences at screenings in Shanlin, Taiwanese viewers generally remained quiet while watching the movie and engaged in discussion only after it had ended, with some groups initiating lively debates and others looking to me for specific questions. In most of the viewings, discussion sessions typically began with audience members asking me about the veracity of the marriage practices and dress styles depicted in the film, and their questions invariably led them to compare these customs with the arranged marriages and gender inequalities characteristic of much of Taiwanese and Chinese history. Locating such similarities safely in the past enabled viewers to reaffirm the modernity and progressiveness of contemporary Taiwanese society; in so doing, it also allowed some respondents to disavow any sense that the film was about them. As a schoolteacher in her late thirties who viewed the film at a public screening at a feminist organization argued, “If it was my grandparents or parents, [members of] that generation who were watching the film, perhaps they would feel that it was quite normal because their marriages were pretty much this way. It’s because today we have a lot of ‘information’ that we respond ‘Wow! How could it be like this?’” This kind of disavowal did not deny a history of close ties between Taiwan and China (and, in fact, many Taiwanese viewers noted that the absence of politics in the film made the scenes feel more familiar), but it did claim Taiwan as a more progressive society with regard to marriage practices and gender roles, implicitly reversing an internationally recognized hierarchy that privileged China over Taiwan as the dominant global power (see also Shih 1995).6
By integrating published reviews from *The Twin Bracelets’* original release with responses from viewing groups and my own cinematic reading, I have sought to balance semiotic analyses based on written and visual texts with ethnographic insights derived from my participation in film screenings and broader discussions about cinematic representation and same-sex intimacy. In the end, however, my analysis draws most heavily on viewers’ spoken responses to the film, placing them in dialogue with one another. This method resonates with what Louisa Schein (2004, 436) terms an “ethnotextual” approach, one closely attuned to my own cinematic reading practices and those of the people I work with, as well as to the intertextual contexts that situate both *The Twin Bracelets* and audience responses in a wider field of cultural production. I acknowledge that analyzing the desires and intimacies produced through cinematic representation is a difficult endeavor, particularly because eroticism itself emerges most powerfully from viewers’ experience of watching a film and from their responses to that experience (which may or may not be accessible to the ethnographer). Taking seriously the inchoate nature of reading and reception practices requires acknowledging both the limits to one’s interpretive abilities and the effects that film has on one’s own subjective orientation (see also the introduction to this volume). Therefore, throughout this chapter I place my own reading and location in dialogue with those of other viewers, neither privileging my interpretations with anthropological authority nor theirs with native authenticity. It is my hope that this approach offers some insights into what viewers experienced as they watched images of same-sex intimacy on the screen and how they related those images to sexual and national identities embedded in both local and global contexts.

**From Text to Celluloid**

*Shuang zuo* originated as a short story of the same title, written by the Chinese author Lu Zhaohuan and published in the Chinese literary journal *Fujian wenxue* in 1986 (Lu 1986b). Based in the 1980s, it tells the story of Huihua and Xiugu, two young women from eastern Hui’an County whose close relationship is suddenly put to the test as they reach maturity and are forced by their families to submit to arranged marriages. Xiugu is married to a poor but gentle stone-carver who eventually wins her heart, whereas the younger Huihua finds herself paired with a wealthy womanizer who treats her with violence rather than care. As Xiugu grows more attached to her husband, Huihua becomes increasingly desperate to preserve their bond as “sister-husband and sister-wife.” When Xiugu becomes pregnant and leaves
the village to join her husband, however, Huihua, finding no other means of escape from her abusive marriage, decides to take her own life.

In a postscript to his short story, Lu Zhaohuan proclaims that as a native of Hui’an County, he had always been disturbed by what he described as the oppressive marriage customs and repressed desires of local women. Bemoaning the predominance of child betrothals and long customary periods of postmarital separation between spouses, Lu briefly outlined what he saw as a twisted form of female morality in which sexual repression and self-denial constituted the epitome of chastity and integrity. “I have a responsibility to describe [women’s] misfortune and suffering,” Lu wrote, “[and] I seek to illuminate the imprisoned world of the female psyche” (Lu 1986a, 18). In an interview I conducted with him in 2002, Lu elaborated on the teleology underlying his model of women’s liberation, pointing to feudal influences, long-standing gender inequalities, and a powerful dialectic of heterosexual desire and fear as forces that needed to be overturned in order to put an end to women’s oppression. Lu’s commentary on his literary inspirations reflects what we might call, following Foucault (1978), a tendency to locate the truth of women’s being in their sexuality, thereby linking the freeing of women’s heterosexual desires to the modernizing urges of male Chinese elites.

As the short story was republished in literary journals in Taiwan and Hong Kong, however, critics and editors focused on what they saw as the compelling homosexual relationship between the story’s two female protagonists. In an introduction to a collection of mainland Chinese stories in the prestigious Taiwanese literary monthly Lianhe wenxue, the editors claimed that “Lu Zhaohuan’s ‘Shuang Zhuo’ [Twin bracelets] . . . is the only Mainland work of fiction of the last thirty plus years to take female homosexuality as its subject matter” (Editorial Office 1987, 89). Lu later responded to such characterizations of his work by asserting that there was no part of the story in which there was “homosexuality in the true sense [of the term]” (Lu 1992, 243). He effectively rejected interpretations of a lesbian subplot by defining homosexuality as a form of sexual inversion that arises only when an individual wearies of heterosexual desire. The absence of “normal” heterosexual relations in Hui’an marriages, in Lu’s view, made a homosexual reading of the story virtually impossible, because for him there was no independent same-sex eroticism, only that which resulted from frustrated heterosexual desire.

Similar conflicts over same-sex eroticism erupted when The Twin Bracelets was released as a film in 1990. The project was conceived by one of Taiwan’s few female directors, Huang Yushan, who attributed her motiva-
tions for making the film to a profound sympathy with the plight of Hui’an women. In an article in a Taiwanese women’s magazine, Huang recalled how she was so moved by Lu Zhaohuan’s short story that she made a special trip to China to meet the author and secure film rights to the story. She felt an intense desire to capture Hui’an women’s suffering on film, so as to promote awareness of the gender oppression they faced. These inequalities were all the more shocking for her, given global demands for women’s equal rights and sexual liberation in the 1980s. Because Hui’an women “still can not lead normal marital lives,” Huang (1990, 135) concluded, they have no choice but to turn to the emotional intricacies of same-sex “sisterhood,” and ultimately suicide, as their only means of escape.

In accounts in the Taiwan press published shortly after The Twin Bracelets was released, Huang made it clear that she was not explicitly concerned with questions of female sexuality, except insofar as women’s sexual desires had been repressed by abnormal marital relations and oppressive societal norms. At a roundtable discussion that coincided with the film’s initial screening in southern Taiwan, Huang argued that while “we” in Taiwan might “consider” Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship to be homosexual, her point in making the film was not to explore their sexuality but to show how they had been oppressed by a closed society that imposed high costs on women’s acts of resistance: “The same-sex love between the two young women in the film is produced by the behavioral patterns [that result] from escaping the traditional Confucian code. Their oath to become sister-husband and sister-wife develops from observing their elders kneel and worship during the wedding ceremony. Because they do not have a high level of education, they don’t even know what homosexuality is” (D. Sun 1990; see also H. Chen 1990).

Here Huang emphasizes the inability of Hui’an women to comprehend homosexuality, due to their low levels of education. Just as the protagonists mirror their same-sex bond on heterosexual marriage, so, Huang assumes, they must be taught how to perform nonheterosexual erotic acts and identities—a point that was raised in some of my Taiwanese viewing groups, as well. Other reviews published in the aftermath of the film’s release also underscored its message of traditional Confucian gender inequalities and downplayed signs of homosexual awakening. A review in the mainstream Taiwan newspaper Lianhe bao drew attention to the tragedy of female suffering that suffused the plot by characterizing the film as a “lament over the abuse of women.” Asserting that “there is no need to rigidly distinguish whether Huihua is a lesbian or a feminist,” the reviewer concluded that the value of The Twin Bracelets lay in its complex portrayal of patriarchal op-
pression that enabled Taiwanese viewers to identify with the film’s mainland Chinese setting.  

When I met with Huang Yushan in 2002 to discuss the film, she was more willing to reflect on the sexual nuances in *The Twin Bracelets* and its impact on her own work and that of other directors. Although originally she had not intended to make a film about female sexuality, during the editing process she began to question how the relationship between Huihua and Xiugu would appear to audiences. The Hong Kong production company Cosmopolitan took a firm stance on the issue, however, arguing that the film had to be clear that the young women were not lesbians, otherwise ambiguity would undermine its cinematic effect. At the time, Huang felt that although the characters supported one another emotionally, they did not have a sexual bond.

Yet as soon as *The Twin Bracelets* was released in Taiwan, Huang found that friends and students began to confide in her their own “homosexual stories.” “I was increasingly shocked,” she confessed, particularly as people openly questioned her own heterosexuality by associating her with the characters in the film. Huang also noted that the Taiwanese distributor’s decision to market the film under the slogan “another kind of love” intensified its ambiguity and potentially encouraged audiences to see it as a tale of lesbian love. This sense of ambiguity persisted among the Taiwanese who watched the film with me in 2002. One young woman who viewed it at the office of a feminist organization admitted that she was confused about whether the director intended to portray a homosexual relationship between Huihua and Xiugu. In the end, she concluded that the director merely sought to emphasize the inequalities in traditional heterosexual marriage, a conclusion that paralleled Huang’s own association of *The Twin Bracelets* with a series of films produced in the 1990s that focused on women’s suffering under Chinese patriarchy.

**Cinematic and Everyday Forms of Same-Sex Intimacy**

As the bond between Huihua and Xiugu intensifies over the first few scenes of *The Twin Bracelets*, they swear an oath before a statue of the goddess Mazu: “We pledge marriage as sister-husband and sister-wife / To live together and die together / You are within me, I am within you / We will never part / You will not fail me, I will not fail you.” They repeat this oath two more times during the movie, once when Xiugu reaffirms their bond just prior to her wedding and again at the very end of the film, when a distraught Huihua prepares to murder Xiugu and then take her own life so that they may at
least fulfill their pledge to die together. The oath weaves same-sex commitments into a web of intimacy that mirrors relationships based on patrilineal kinship and heterosexual marriage. It joins Huihua and Xiugu as one body, each literally internal to the other, and yet its fulfillment remains just beyond their reach. By becoming pregnant soon after her marriage, Xiugu prevents Huihua from consummating their relationship through a shared death (for Huihua is unwilling to murder Xiugu’s unborn child). As the oath frames same-sex bonds in the language of marriage through the awkward phrase, “sister-husband and sister-wife,” it injects a tension between intimacy and sexuality into the very heart of the narrative.

Viewing groups in Shanlin easily identified Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship with the local category of dui pnua bonds. Dui pnua are non-kin, same-sex, same-age cohort ties formed among both young men and women in eastern Hui’an villages. In their youth and young adulthood, dui pnua engage in a number of shared activities, from working and eating together to sleeping together at night, sharing clothing, or confiding intimate thoughts and concerns. They also perform important ritual functions at weddings, funerals, and birth celebrations. For young women in the past, dui pnua provided a source of comfort and support when faced with arranged marriages and the difficulties of living among strange in-laws. During the period of postmarital separation, when young wives remained in their natal communities, the familiarity and solace of dui pnua ties often gave women the strength to refuse requests for conjugal visits in order to delay becoming pregnant and moving to their husband’s home. Female dui pnua networks cross-cut patrilineal kinship ties forged through birth or marriage, extending beyond village borders to link women in an extended web of homosocial bonds (S. Friedman 2006a, 2009).

Viewing groups in Shanlin responded excitedly to the scenes in The Twin Bracelets that portray a developing intensity in the relationship between Huihua and Xiugu: when the two bathe together and renew their vow never to forget each other, embracing naked in the tub; when Huihua intentionally injures herself in a final effort to prevent Xiugu from visiting her husband at the mid-autumn festival; or shortly after when Huihua hobbles in the dark to Xiugu’s husband’s home, only to interrupt sounds of passionate lovemaking that fade into silence when Huihua calls out for Xiugu. All of these scenes provoked a running commentary among viewers in which they compared Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship to those of dui pnua in the past. The scenes made the film authentic to audiences in Shanlin, by creating af-
finities between the characters’ actions on the screen and viewers’ own experiences of intense affective ties between women.

Such scenes prompted outcries of “that’s really how it was” or “yes, in the past people really were like that” among a group of viewers in Shanlin, including Lei’a, her sister, several of Lei’a’s dui pnua, and her older female relative, as we watched the film in the recently remodeled living room of Lei’a’s new conjugal home. Thirty-one-year-old Lei’a had remarried only a year earlier, following a divorce, and was already the mother of a three-month-old son. We nibbled on fresh fruit as *The Twin Bracelets* played on the brand new video compact disc (VCD) player and television set that Lei’a had brought as part of her dowry. Watching the scene in which Huihua and Xiugu embrace while standing in the tub—their naked, entwined bodies obscured by the steam rising from the bathwater—these married women in their twenties, thirties, and forties offered a chorus of comments on how girls slept three or four to a bed in the past and were very close. As Lei’a balanced film viewing with answering the telephone and infant feedings, she proclaimed with assurance: “It was really like that in those days. In the past [girls] slept together in the same bed. There weren’t enough places to sleep. So everyone slept in the same bed. Their feelings for one another ran deep.” So deep, one of Lei’a’s dui pnua added, that “whoever among them liked going [to visit her husband] would be cursed by the others.”

As Huihua struggles desperately to deflect Xiugu’s growing feelings for her husband and reaffirm their own bond, she engages in behavior that was immediately comprehensible to Shanlin viewers familiar with the tensions between dui pnua intimacy and conjugal obligations. At another viewing that included members of an extended family and neighborhood women, thirty-two-year-old Leiden reacted strongly to the scene in which Huihua seeks to prevent Xiugu from setting out on the expected visit to her husband at the mid-autumn festival. As another young wife berates Xiugu for making her wait for hours at their appointed meeting place, Huihua lies in the other room, groaning in exaggerated pain from the injury she has inflicted on herself in an effort to forestall Xiugu’s departure. “People in the past were like that,” Leiden commented as the scene progressed. “Women who married into the same village called for one another [when they had to make conjugal visits]. A dui pnua would help her run away, didn’t want to let her go, [would say] ‘don’t go!’ But if the dui pnua was kind, she would advise her to go. Otherwise she would say that she didn’t have to go, that there was no reason to go.”
The women at Lei’a’s viewing responded to these scenes with tales of specific couples in which one woman had refused marriage in order to remain with her fellow dui pnua. As it becomes clear that Huihua has failed to prevent Xiugu from leaving to visit her husband, the voice of Lei’a’s older relative rang out across the room: “She [Xiugu] wants to go and the other one won’t let her. It was really like that.” A Hong, Lei’a’s classmate from Chongwu, the nearby township seat, followed with her own bit of local specificity: “In Chongwu we have a couple like this. If [one woman’s] husband comes home, the other woman won’t let her sleep with him.” After the film ended, A Hong described the two women for us in greater detail. Although they had been quite close in their youth, both had acquiesced to arranged marriages. One woman did not get along with her husband, however, and in the end she divorced him and went to live with her dui pnua, whose husband was rarely at home, since he worked in the provincial capital. Whenever he returned to Chongwu, however, this woman tried to prevent him from having sex with his wife. She would call out for the wife in the middle of the night (not unlike Huihua in the film) or send the couple’s adopted daughter to sleep with them. A Hong’s colorful description of these two women’s shared life together reminded Lei’a of the “aunt” of another young woman they knew in the village. This so-called aunt had been the dui pnua of their friend’s mother, and when the mother married into Shanlin, the aunt simply came with her.13

These tales of women “in the past” or older women in the present who placed dui pnua ties above conjugal ones, in some cases refusing to marry altogether, emerged in response to Huihua’s cinematic efforts to reclaim Xiugu from her matrimonial obligations. Generated in the excitement of watching scenes that resembled, if not always accurately, their own sense of community history, Shanlin viewers reaffirmed the existence of a powerful web of same-sex intimacy that interlaced emotional intensity with physical closeness (as seen in the common refrain, girls used to sleep three or four to a bed). In telling these stories, however, viewers notably distanced themselves from forms of same-sex intimacy that they depicted as things of the past. When discussing other matters of cultural authenticity in the film—such as clothing styles, marriage practices, or customary expectations—they were more likely to relate cinematic events to their own experiences of weddings, relationships with new husbands, and labor requests from conjugal kin. Although all viewers were themselves participants in dui pnua circles, they nonetheless failed (or refused) to see themselves in the bond between Huihua and Xiugu or in Huihua’s attempts to shore up that relationship.
when faced with the threat of marriage. Their responses underscored the exceptionality of women who pursued ties with other women over or against heterosexual marriage; although strong affective bonds were recognized and condoned in the community, they generally were not acknowledged by Shanlin audiences as a socially accepted alternative to marriage (a point I return to in the last section). Instead, viewers either located similar examples of same-sex intimacy safely in the past or attributed them to older women in their communities who had managed to preserve dui pnua ties by incorporating them into existing marital imperatives.

**Is Same-Sex Intimacy Simply a Youthful Phase?**

Responses from Taiwan audiences after watching *The Twin Bracelets* differed significantly from those of Shanlin viewers. In seeking common ground with the unfamiliar experiences of Huihua and Xiugu, male and female viewers from a range of class and ethnic backgrounds identified them with same-sex bonds forged during their school years or while serving in the military. Middle-aged men recalled friendships from their youth or military service, when pairs or groups spent all of their time together, even bathing together or sleeping in the same bed. Among women in their thirties and forties, watching Huihua’s and Xiugu’s burgeoning relationship brought back memories of schoolgirl intimacies modeled on marriage or other heterosexual ties. Many had attended all-girls schools where couples publicly pledged their commitment to one another or where one especially popular (and often more masculine looking) classmate might have several “wives” (*lao po*). When one member of the relationship strayed in her affections or attention, the other, beset with jealousy, would “break up” with her.¹⁴

Xiao Ling was the organizer of an all-female tongzhi group that had gathered to watch *The Twin Bracelets* at the upscale apartment of a Taipei television producer.¹⁵ I had been introduced to Xiao Ling through a mutual friend, and when I proposed a film screening to her, she invited me to take advantage of an upcoming meeting where the group would be organizing a fundraiser to support their participation in the Gay Games in Australia. The nine women present, all in their twenties and thirties, had come of age during a period when same-sex sexuality was becoming a source of self-identification and political activism in Taiwan. The first lesbian organization, Women zhi Jian (Between Us), was formed in 1990, when the oldest members of the group were recent college graduates. Since then, a number of different organizations representing women who varied in age, class, and linguistic and ethnic background had come into being, some oriented toward
political activism and others focused on community-building and support. In the more open social and political environment of post-martial law Taiwan, gay and lesbian media and consumer culture gradually expanded, as well; and over the course of the 1990s and into the new millennium, both female and male same-sex sexuality and identity became recognizable and often sensationalized topics of public discourse on television and in print media. These changes have not meant that openly declaring one’s sexual identity or preferences is without consequence, however, and both gays and lesbians continue to face social pressures to marry and the very real threat of discrimination if they acknowledge their same-sex desires and relationships (Chao 1996; Fishel 1994; Hu 2011; Martin 2003; Sang 2003, ch. 9; Zhuang 2002).16

As the group lounged on cushions and low stools in the austere, modern apartment high above the bustling street below, Xiao Ling regaled us with the tale of a childhood relationship that she argued was founded on principles of oath-swearing and mutual commitment similar to those shared by Huihua and Xiugu. She and A Cao had been primary school classmates. They had knelt down on the ground, plucked three blades of grass, and sworn an oath to remain together for their entire lives. According to Xiao Ling, however, A Cao had not taken the oath seriously; instead, she had begun to like other girls (as Xiao Ling later added, A Cao had seven “wives” from their class alone). Although Xiao Ling claimed that she had not been in love with A Cao, she simply could not bear A Cao’s cavalier attitude toward their relationship.

As other group members began to analyze Xiao Ling’s bond with A Cao, they agreed that it was not the result of love (aiqing) but perhaps of Xiao Ling’s deeply felt need for a person she could depend on in her life. Like Huihua, moreover, she had seized on a particular individual to fulfill that role for her. Xiao Ling added that although she and A Cao had repeatedly sworn oaths to one another, in the end she had made the difficult decision to break off their relationship. All of these events took place before Xiao Ling completed her secondary schooling. After high school and throughout college Xiao Ling did not speak with A Cao, and it was only many years later that she contacted her again. Xiao Ling described their current relationship as one of mutual support and dependency in times of need: she had taken care of A Cao for six months when A Cao fell seriously ill, and the two had spoken about becoming companions and caring for one another in their old age. When I asked Xiao Ling how that kind of companionship would compare
with Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship, she replied, “It’s very similar. I see it as a kind of luck or fate [yunqi].” When a younger member of the group added, “It’s like dui pnua,” Xiao Ling agreed.

These same-sex intimacies—whether dui pnua, schoolgirl, or military bonds—speak to a long history of homosociality in Chinese societies premised on gender-specific social and spatial worlds. That such ties were at various points in history and in disparate contexts sanctioned or, at a minimum, simply tolerated, reflects their relatively normative status. Perhaps the most frequently mentioned example of female intimacy is the sisterhoods that developed among women in the Pearl River Delta region of southern Guangdong, a region historically known for customs of delayed postmarital cohabitation similar to those practiced in eastern Hui’an (Sankar 1978; Siu 1990; Stockard 1989; Topley 1975). Unlike dui pnua groups, these sisterhoods had physical spaces of their own, girls’ houses where young women slept and socialized after reaching puberty. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, some delta women went so far as to take vows of spinsterhood (zishu) by which they declared themselves adults outside of marriage. Although it is certainly possible that women in these relationships developed and acted on same-sex erotic desires (Sankar 1985), it was the sisterhood’s role as a deterrent to marriage that made it potentially threatening to elite observers and government reformers (FSGGCK 1930; Sankar 1978; see the S. Friedman [2006a] study on eastern Hui’an).

The Twin Bracelets enacted this long-standing conflict between same-sex intimacies and conjugal obligations in ways that resonated with Shanlin women enmeshed in similar affective networks, many of whom had also experienced the emotional hardships of arranged marriages. By contrast, most Taiwanese viewers identified Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship with same-sex bonds that they subsequently grew out of once they developed a “proper” orientation to the opposite sex. And yet for some audiences, such as the women who watched the film with Xiao Ling, the film’s portrayal of women’s intimate ties inspired them to wrestle with the differences between close affective bonds and erotic desires for other women. Xiao Ling was quite explicit that she and A Cao had never developed a sexual relationship when they were young, even though both now identified as “lesbians” (she used the English term). For her (and, she claimed, for A Cao as well), their bond was more lasting and ultimately more dependable than their sexual relationships with other women. What, then, made a sexual reading of the film possible for some viewers but not for others?
“Lesbians Are Made and Not Born”

The scenes discussed by Shanlin and Taiwanese viewers as they compared Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship to more familiar forms of homosocial intimacy were also the scenes most frequently captured in still shots on marketing materials. These images of the two protagonists swearing their lifelong commitment to one another, embracing in the tub, lying face-to-face in bed, or posing for a male tourist, Huihua’s arm draped over Xiugu’s shoulder, have been reproduced in film reviews, advertisements, and on video tape and vCD covers. For reviewers in the United States, these shots confirmed that *The Twin Bracelets* was, as Fred Lombardi of *Variety* asserted, a “lesbian film” (1992, 59). Reviewers in the United States also emphasized the oppressive nature of local marriage customs in order to shore up assertions of the two women’s budding lesbian relationship. Lombardi argues that the film portrays “a situation in which lesbians are made and not born,” the deciding force being the “cruel patriarchal traditions” that transform the young women’s “usual bonding” into a “ritualized sanctuary against marital oppression” (1992, 59). The San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival Guide similarly describes “the daily oppression of the ancient [marriage] traditions” as motivating Huihua to “[seek] love and escape in the arms of her childhood buddy” (San Francisco 1992). In this struggle against an oppressive marriage system, American reviewers find the powerful roots of a lesbian relationship.

To evaluate this assertion of emergent lesbianism, however, we must return to the question with which I began this chapter. How do we know that what audiences see in Huihua’s and Xiugu’s oaths, expressions of affection, embraces, and even playful frolicking is in fact lesbianism, as opposed to dui pnua or other forms of same-sex intimacy? Why do some viewers interpret these behaviors as explicitly sexual, whereas others do not? The act of naming in response to films that circulate transnationally is by no means innocent, for as Martin Manalansan reminds us, global gay and lesbian politics are all too often predicated on a politics of visibility that recognizes the Western sexual subject as modern and liberated, a status to which the non-Western subject can only aspire. “*Gay* gains meaning according to a developmental narrative that begins with an unliberated, ‘prepolitical’ homosexual practice,” Manalansan argues, “and that culminates in a liberated, ‘out,’ politicized, ‘modern,’ ‘gay’ subjectivity” (1997, 487; for an example, see Altman’s [1997] study). When viewers in China and Taiwan responded to scenes in *The Twin Bracelets* that suggested heightened physical intimacy
between Huihua and Xiugu, they often experimented with a language of sexual subjectivity that reflected the power and reach of this global gay-visibility discourse. As certain viewers debated the validity of a presumed correspondence between behavior and identity, they also evaluated the relevance of “homosexuality” to their own communities and intimate bonds.

Because The Twin Bracelets was never released in China, audiences in eastern Hui’an had no previous exposure to the debates about women’s oppression and sexuality that the film had inspired in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Of the five groups that viewed the film with me, only in three was there any mention of homosexuality, and in each instance it was quite abbreviated. All references were to the term dongsingluan, a Minnan dialect rendering of the Mandarin tongxinglian, literally “same-sex (or same-nature) love,” but most often translated as “homosexuality.” Unlike tongzhi—the popular term encompassing gay, lesbian, and sometimes queer identity—tongxinglian is rarely a term of self-identification or empowerment; instead, like its English referent, it has a history of connoting the inferior antithesis of heterosexuality (yixinglian), together with medical and behavioral pathologization.19

The expression “sister-husband and sister-wife,” invoked by Huihua and Xiugu in their oath to one another, sparked confusion and questioning among Shanlin viewers. When Lei’a first heard the term, she queried, “What is this ‘sister-husband and sister-wife’? What does it mean? I don’t understand!” As she watched Huihua and Xiugu bathe together and embrace in the tub, however, Lei’a began to question whether theirs was in fact a homosexual relationship. At the time, she concluded that it was not homosexuality (dongsingluan), but a relationship based on a form of mutual affection that was not limited to sexual or conjugal bonds (en ai in Mandarin). Several scenes later, on the night before Xiugu’s wedding, Huihua and Xiugu lie down in bed fully clothed, with their arms wrapped around one another. Observing the women stretched out, facing one another, Lei’a’s older female relative picked up this narrative thread, commenting: “Oh, she’s like that. I don’t understand. Homosexuality, so that’s homosexuality.” The older woman’s confused commentary prompted Lei’a to revise her previous assessment: “It’s true, filming it this way it’s more realistic.” One of Lei’a’s dui pnuu then echoed Lei’a’s conclusion: “Homosexuality, by filming it like this it seems that way.”

In these comments, homosexuality emerges as something that is not intrinsic to the women’s relationship, but is a product of the way certain scenes are filmed. A shot of two women sleeping in the same bed was not strange for viewers accustomed to shared sleeping arrangements. What sparked
notice was how they were sleeping—face to face with their arms around one another—their positions serving as a culturally specific signifier of sexuality for Shanlin women. In a similar vein, the lead up to the one heterosexual sex scene in the movie titillated viewers in several groups because it showed Xiugu and her husband lying with their heads at the same end of the bed, a sure sign of impending sexual intercourse, viewers contended, when compared with typical head-to-foot sleeping arrangements in those days. Initially, I was nervous about showing this scene to Shanlin audiences because of its relative sexual explicitness (which was quite mild, in fact, when compared to Hollywood or Hong Kong movies). Some of my own discomfort was relieved when viewers laughed at Xiugu’s new husband’s faked snores and clumsy attempts to touch his wife. In response to his awkward gestures, members of the group at Lei’a’s house drew different conclusions about how the scene would progress. A Hong predicted that “something would happen” between Xiugu and her husband that night, while another viewer declared that Xiugu would become angry and leave to sleep elsewhere. As the scene develops with growing sexual intensity, the group marked each step with comments such as “they’re nervous” or “terrified,” clearly drawing on their own marital experiences even as they underscored differences between the film’s portrayal of the couple’s sexual desire and their understanding of new wives in the past who typically refused to have sex with their husbands.

Watching Xiugu in bed with her new husband inspired knowing laughter and perhaps even pleasure among the viewers at Lei’a’s house, the majority of whom were at most only a few years removed from their first marital sexual experiences. By contrast, reflections on scenes that suggested “homosexuality” were not characterized by a sense of implicit familiarity or even nervous humor. Instead, these depictions of physical intimacy forced viewers to struggle with the proper semantic domain of the term “dongsingluan” itself (for example, Lei’a’s older relative did not “understand” the scene with Huihua and Xiugu in bed, nor did Lei’a comprehend the expression “sister-husband and sister-wife”). At the same time, however, they briefly entertained the possibility that homosexuality accurately named these portrayals of the two women’s growing intimacy.

In another viewing session at a teacher’s dorm in a local middle school not far from Shanlin, twenty-six-year-old A Ping explained the expression “sister-husband and sister-wife” by referring to recent changes in local discourse. “Only now do people use this term ‘homosexuality,’” A Ping argued, lowering her voice to a whisper as she uttered “dongsingluan.” “People in the past didn’t understand what that was, they couldn’t absorb it [tia
the term "bbue kui." [They would have thought that] Huihua didn’t want to let Xiugu marry.” In other words, A Ping suggested that although the term was relatively new in local parlance, the behaviors it described were comprehensible to older residents steeped in a long history of conflicts between same-sex intimacy and heterosexual marriage.

There is a gap in A Ping’s explanation, however, created by the erasure of erotic desires and sexual acts. A Ping implicitly (although perhaps not intentionally) acknowledged that gap as she went on to tell me and the other friend watching the film about an aunt of hers who had abandoned her husband and two children to live with a woman in the township seat. A Ping struggled to find words to describe her aunt’s new relationship, moving from an initial, rather awkward, depiction of her as “being homosexual” with the woman to using a metaphor from the spirit world that characterized their relationship as fated and pure, rather than sexually consummated and thus polluting in the manner of a conjugal bond. A Ping’s attempt to turn homosexuality into a verb through the construction “being homosexual” underscored her concern with specific acts as opposed to identity, for it was her aunt’s decision to leave her husband and children for a woman that forced A Ping to wrestle with whether her aunt’s motivations were sexual or emotional (yet strikingly not both).21 Although A Ping’s use of an other-worldly metaphor appeared to favor a non-sexual basis for the women’s relationship, her ultimate abandonment of the story left open the question of the two women’s sexual intimacy and whether homosexuality properly named their bond.

These examples suggest that for some Shanlin viewers, the film occasionally portrayed behaviors that they considered to be potentially homosexual. By viewing The Twin Bracelets as a somewhat accurate reflection of past life in their community, however, they ultimately concluded that such performances took place in a referential domain (authentic “local culture”) that made a homosexual reading meaningless or, at minimum, confusing. In some cases, as when Lei’a’s group emphasized the visual impact of the way scenes were filmed, homosexuality was attributed simply to cinematic effect, something that several Taiwanese viewers noted as well. At other moments, homosexuality was clearly defined as a concept introduced from outside (although from where precisely was not made clear), one that viewers such as A Ping suggested was incomprehensible to older villagers and that she herself struggled to understand in relation to marital and parental obligations and historical patterns of same-sex intimacy. As Lisa Rofel (2007b) notes, even the growing community of urban Chinese gays and lesbians wrestle with ar-
articulating a mode of being gay that affirms “Chinese culture” (itself a subject of debate) and a social self defined through family, all without denying their sexual orientation or the way it links them to people with same-sex erotic desires in other parts of the world. The Twin Bracelets similarly prompted Shanlin viewers to grapple with different frames for reading same-sex intimacy, while the film’s apparent “realness” established the grounds on which they denied the accuracy of readings premised on sexual identity or same-sex eroticism.

Debating Erotic Acts and Sexual Subjectivity

Among audiences in Taiwan, the association of homosexuality with sexual desires and behaviors inspired viewers to debate whether the female protagonists were, in fact, homosexual. As a senior journalist for a prominent Taipei media company argued at a lunchtime screening for journalists and editors, homosexuality required attention to the issue of sexual love. “I think that homosexuality should suggest a kind of self-awareness or consciousness,” she contended, adding that, in her view, this included not only self-understanding but also sexual needs (xing de xuqiu). For members of the female tongzhi group organized by Xiao Ling, sexual desires and acts were critical to evaluating the status of Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship. The group argued back and forth over whether Huihua’s and Xiugu’s interactions in bed were “intimate movements” (qinmi de dongzuo), ultimately concluding that neither woman “knew how to do it.” But were sexual desires something that one had to learn how to express and satisfy, as Huang Yushan had suggested? While the group laughed aloud at Xiao Ling’s quick retort that the two women certainly would have sex if they only knew how, they also grappled with the question of whether, as viewers, they could see in Huihua’s demands to bathe with Xiugu, to see her naked body, or to kiss her the signs of a nascent homosexual desire. Could their relationship be homosexual if it was one-sided, if only Huihua expressed those desires? Were Huihua’s desires themselves the product of homosexual inclinations, or were they simply the result of her ill-fated match with the wrong man? Did the exchange of bracelets, highly valued items for both women, forge a bond between them similar to the marital tie produced by the exchange of wedding rings?

As Taiwanese viewers debated the significance of Huihua’s commitment to Xiugu, they too asked under what conditions the performance of certain acts could be interpreted as a sign of homosexuality. Deborah Elliston argues that “separating sexual practices from sexual identities leaves unex-
a mined the core problem of what will constitute ‘sex’ or ‘the sexual’ in either category” (1995, 849). Yet The Twin Bracelets clearly encouraged viewers to define the boundaries of “the sexual” by contrasting affective ties with erotic desires—although, to be fair, they offered few details as to what precisely constituted eroticism.23 Several audience groups in Taiwan distinguished between having feelings (ganqing) for another person and being in a homosexual relationship. A group of office workers at a software company in an industrial district on the outskirts of Taipei concluded that Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship was one of “sisterly affection” (jiemei ganqing) or “close friendship” (hen hao de pengyou) and was not motivated by the physical needs (shen shang de xuyao) that for them constituted homosexuality. At a screening in a rural community in the mountains surrounding Xinzhu, Taiwan’s high-tech center, a working-class Hakka man in his early fifties argued that the bond between the two protagonists was one of affection (ganqing) and he resisted describing their physical interactions as sexual in nature. He then rhetorically asked the group who had gathered on the village street to watch the film in the cool night air: “If feelings are very strong, can they attain that level?” By positing homosexuality as a scale encompassing both feelings and erotic acts, this former worker intimated that sentiment alone might be sufficient to constitute a homosexual relationship, whereas not all forms of physical contact were necessarily sexual.

A viewer in Xiamen, a major urban center a few hours from Hui’an, had presented a similar picture of a homosexual scale, yet one that privileged erotic desires. After the film ended, this university professor returned to the issue of homosexuality that she had raised when watching the scene of Huihua and Xiugu bathing together. Whereas at the time she had suggested that the two characters were homosexual, she later described their bond as one of pure feeling or affection (ganqing chunpu de). Unlike urban relationships that were more clear-cut, she argued theirs “had not reached the level of true homosexuality” (meiyou da dao zhen zhen tongxinglian de cengci). For her, their relationship had to be either erotic or affectionate; there was no ontological position that encompassed both possibilities within the scope of homosexuality.

This concept of “true homosexuality,” premised on erotic desires and sexual acts, also indexed behaviors and subjective identifications that Taiwanese audiences struggled to define in relation to a Western eroticization of same-sex intimacy and its connection to modern technologies of representation. A young community organizer who participated in the rural screening outside of Xinzhu attributed The Twin Bracelets’ message of homosexuality
to its medium: “I myself feel that it isn’t homosexuality. The film’s technique [shoufa] makes it seem very ambiguous.” She later continued with specific reference to the role of mass media: “Taiwan television talks very openly about homosexuality. So we can recognize that they are homosexual. It’s the influence of the media that makes us feel they are homosexual. But [the film] lacks any middle ground [to confirm this connection]. . . . There’s no strong connection to sex.” This woman’s reactions paralleled those of Lei’a and her dui pnu, who also saw the film’s homosexual potential as a product of cinematic effect rather than narrative content.

Scenes like the one of Huihua and Xiugu in the bathtub employ techniques that signified romantic and even sexual tension for these viewers, using close-up shots that frame the two characters looking deeply into one another’s eyes or an extended long shot of them standing in a naked embrace, the tension enhanced by dramatic background music. An erotic reading of this particular scene is reinforced by its intratextual mirroring of a Hong Kong romance that Huihua and Xiugu have just watched in the village movie theater, a film that intersperses scenes of sexual play and passionate embraces with shots of the male lead professing undying love for his female counterpart and pleading with her to marry him.24

More salient for Taiwanese viewers, however, was the association of homosexuality with modernity and Western sexual identities. Mingyong, the community activist who had organized the rural viewing outside of Xin-zhu, was reluctant to define Huihua’s and Xiugu’s bond as homosexual. He saw signs of same-sex intimacy as natural behaviors, but cautioned against using the term “homosexuality” to describe them. In Taiwan, he argued, it was still common to see men or women holding hands, whereas based on his experience in the United States, people there assumed that such couples had to be homosexual. A Rong, an employee of a gay and lesbian bookstore in Taipei where I showed The Twin Bracelets one hot July afternoon, offered a more subtle analysis of the impact of Western sexual discourses in Taiwan. In earlier times, his parents’ generation, for instance, it was common for groups of men to socialize together, even to touch one another, while women gathered separately. No one questioned whether participants in same-sex socializing had homosexual desires. With the influence of Western concepts of homosexuality, however, physical contact between members of the same sex was no longer seen so innocently. In the last ten years or so, A Rong argued, in part due to the impact of the tongzhi movement, there had been two significant changes in Taiwanese society. On the one hand, gay and lesbian couples felt empowered to engage in acts of public affection as a
statement of their love for one another. On the other hand, all expressions of same-sex affection were now often assumed to be erotic, making groups of men or women self-conscious about walking hand-in-hand or arm-in-arm. Although A Rong himself was committed to tongzhi activism, he concluded that the influence of Western sexual discourses had limited the expression of diverse desires and passions (*qingyu*), replacing a polymorphous physicality with a more narrow and rigid identity politics.25

A Rong’s poignant reflections on the simultaneously empowering and restrictive impact of the gay and lesbian movement reflect the uneasy relationship of many Taiwanese to Western notions of sexual subjectivity. In A Rong’s and Mingyong’s comments, we sense nostalgia for a time when acts and expressions of same-sex intimacy became meaningful in an environment that did not automatically eroticize such behaviors or label them as markers of sexual identity. *The Twin Bracelets* evoked these feelings of nostalgia, while at the same time it inspired many viewers to reaffirm their own modern, progressive status by displaying a familiarity with sexual-identity politics and an (at least surface) acceptance of homosexuality as a topic of public discourse. Scenes of same-sex intimacy in the film could be read as pure and innocent *in those times*, precisely because people *in those days* were not familiar with the concept of homosexuality. In this sense, Taiwanese audiences used a discourse of sexual and national modernity to distinguish themselves both from mainland Chinese they assumed were more sexually conservative and from Westerners they perceived as too quick to reduce intimate acts to sexual identity.

**Nostalgia and Identification**

Distances of time and place clearly shaped viewers’ reactions to *The Twin Bracelets* and their experience of the film as a cinematic event, none more powerfully than the twelve-year span separating the film’s original release from my screenings in 2002. Two examples highlight the tension between nostalgia and identification produced by this temporal gap and its impact on how differently situated viewers interpreted the relationship between Huihua and Xiugu. Meilin, a Taiwanese viewer who had seen *The Twin Bracelets* when it was released in 1990, watched it again with Xiao Ling’s female tongzhi group. Now in her mid-thirties, Meilin worked in Taiwan’s film and media industry and had been active in the tongzhi community since the early 1990s.

What struck me about Meilin’s response to the film was her open acknowledgment of how dramatically her reading of it had changed over time.
When she first watched *The Twin Bracelets* in 1990, she was only a few years out of college. She recalled:

In those days, there were very few female tongzhi films, very few. When the film was promoted it was made into [a tongzhi film], at the time we felt that we were going to see a homosexual film. I think that when I was watching it, I was extending its meaning [yinshen] to parts that weren’t being acted. . . . For instance, I would extrapolate [yinzao] from the film to my own life. When I had a girlfriend in college, we could only be so intimate in public. But when we were alone of course we did much more. So I imagined that although the film had already showed you so much, nevertheless there must be much more that wasn’t filmed. It had to be similar to our situation. . . . I took my own experience [with my girlfriend] and added it to the film, filled it out. Therefore, at the time, for me it was certainly a tongzhi film, a film that spoke to me.

When Meilin viewed *The Twin Bracelets* in 2002, however, she had a very different reaction: “This time I’m more realistic, so I don’t see them as really being homosexual. Actually today I don’t feel that they are homosexual at all.”

It was precisely women such as Meilin who had approached Huang Yu-shan, after *The Twin Bracelets* was released in Taiwan, to share with her how the film resonated with their own same-sex relationships and erotic desires. What had changed over the decade to erase that identification? To a certain degree, we can see in Meilin’s recollections a sense of nostalgia for an era when even films like *The Twin Bracelets* could be mined for potential homo-erotic messages. By 2002, however, a range of films with more complex depictions of same-sex emotional and sexual intimacy had been released, recontouring the cinematic landscape so that *The Twin Bracelets* now seemed a mere shadow of the possibilities offered by Chinese-language cinema. The Hong Kong production *Zishu (Intimates)* (1997) was one such film, a moving, early twentieth-century portrayal of two women from southern China who find love and companionship with one another only to be separated by war and upheaval. Loosely based on the practice of sworn spinsterhood found in the Pearl River Delta region, *Intimates* offers a window onto same-sex intimacy in 1940s China through the eyes of a late twentieth-century Hong Kong woman successful in her career but a failure at heterosexual love. The members of the all-female tongzhi group who watched *The Twin Bracelets* with Meilin had also seen *Intimates*, and for them, the latter presented a range of choices for women that were not available to Huihua and Xiugu. Whereas in 1990 *The Twin Bracelets* had moved some viewers to consider
its homosexual subplot, by 2002 the emergence of tongzhi subjectivity and politics had diminished its potential for cinematic engagement and self-recognition. Instead, films such as *Intimates* inspired identification with an earlier form of same-sex love in China that resonated more closely with tongzhi viewers’ own erotic experiences and desires.

Perhaps more surprising to me than Meilin’s dramatic reversal was the lack of identification in the reactions of a same-sex couple from Shanlin. Soehua and Bbilei were both in their late thirties and had been together for almost ten years. Villagers often mentioned them in viewing groups and everyday conversations when discussing the subject of women who refused to marry. Although both women had originally submitted to arranged marriages, they had divorced their husbands soon after and had never remarried. They were respected in the community for being hardworking and honest, supporting themselves through a range of business ventures. In terms of the daily demands of making a living and a life together, their relationship closely resembled that of a married couple.

Familiar as I was with Soehua’s and Bbilei’s situation, I was eager to show them *The Twin Bracelets* and to learn whether they saw their own lives reflected in Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship. One evening Soehua closed her shop early and escorted me back to the newly built home she shared with Bbilei, so that we could watch the film in their spacious living room. After the movie ended, our conversation turned almost immediately to the topic of marriage and divorce. Both Soehua and Bbilei interpreted *The Twin Bracelets* as a tale of two dui pnua, in which one finds herself in an ill-fated marriage. Like other Shanlin viewers, they identified the story with a past era in which marriages were arranged, wives generally avoided their husbands, and divorce was rarely an option. In the present, they were quick to point out, things were quite different. Young people now found their own spouses, women were often pregnant before they married, and divorce was increasingly common. At no point in our discussion, however, did Soehua or Bbilei relate Huihua’s plight to their own experiences of marriage, divorce, or same-sex intimacy.

A few days later I visited Soehua in her shop, to discuss the film further. When I asked her to compare the relationship between Huihua and Xiugu to her bond with Bbilei, Soehua was adamant that they were quite different: “For them, one wants to marry and one doesn’t. So they don’t get along [in the end]. We get along because we’re both unmarried. It’s not the same.” Soehua went on to point out that because women in the past were unable to support themselves, they had few choices outside of marriage. When I
repeated what other village women had told me, that the only option for an unmarried woman was to become a Buddhist, vegetarian nun, Soehua retorted that becoming a nun was very constraining because you had to submit to the bidding of a senior nun, much as a married woman was under the thumb of her mother-in-law. She and Bbilei, by contrast, were free to do as they pleased, including traveling for pleasure, as they had done on a recent trip to Beijing.

Although Soehua’s emphasis on independence and freedom might have been part of an effort to normalize a relationship that was still far from common in Shanlin, she clearly saw little in Huihua’s and Xiugu’s bond that resonated with her own experiences. Whereas U.S. or even Taiwanese viewers may have found striking parallels in their living situations and mutual commitments, Soehua and Bbilei saw an earlier era in which women did not have the choice to divorce their husbands and lacked the resources to refuse marriage altogether. Their lack of identification with the film reflected their own investment in a particular understanding of gender roles in Hui’an society and how those roles had changed over time; at the same time, their responses also reaffirmed the cultural specificity of a sexual reading of Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship. In my eagerness to show the film to Soehua and Bbilei, and admittedly in my disappointment that they did not see themselves in its characters’ lives, I too perhaps was succumbing to the desire to know the sexual “truth” about their relationship, using *The Twin Bracelets* as a tool that would reveal that truth to me. Our encounter instead confirmed that portrayals of same-sex intimacy were not necessarily intelligible to all audiences in sexual terms. Rather, differently situated viewers saw very different forms of intimacy on the screen, not all of which were easily encapsulated by an ontology of sexual desires or identities.

**Conclusion**

Long before I began to study audience responses to *The Twin Bracelets*, I had a memorable encounter with a senior professor in China who had also done research in eastern Hui’an. As we sat in his study, conversing about his work and the current state of affairs in the region, he suddenly leaned toward me and asked eagerly whether Hui’an women were in fact homosexual. Taken aback by the question, I hesitated, stumbled uncomfortably over my words, and eventually muttered that it depended on how one defined homosexuality. My study of *The Twin Bracelets* is in many ways a response to the professor’s probing question (which itself had nothing to do with the film) and my dissatisfaction with my reply at the time. It is not a search to “un-
cover homosexuality” in eastern Hui’an (a desire for knowledge rooted in what we might term erotic imperialism), but instead represents an effort to understand same-sex intimacy as more diffuse and complex than a simple heterosexual-homosexual binary allows.

A chapter organized around the desire for interpretive closure would be motivated by the desire to unveil, to make visible and known the sexual status of Huihua’s and Xiugu’s relationship. I have resisted satisfying this desire (assuming that I ever could), for it denies the multiple meanings produced by and embedded in cinematic images and viewers’ interpretive practices. Such efforts to reduce the cinematic text to a singular meaning also do violence to the diverse modes through which individuals experience and conceptualize different forms of intimacy. Even among those who forge communities based on same-sex erotic desires, sexual subjectivities assume such strikingly different forms across cultural contexts that they are irreducible to an ostensibly unitary “gay” identity. Fran Martin has lucidly shown how some kinds of tongzhi discourse and activism in Taiwan are predicated not on emergence from the closet, itself a form of “ontological exposure,” but instead on a mask that “dissimulates a social surface,” that “privilege[s] situated enactment” (2000, 68; see also Hu 2011). The desire to make visible assumes a knowable sexual subject that Martin argues is missing from these Taiwanese tongzhi discourses that emphasize the social effects of contingent interactions over a true or false ontological status.26 While not all tongzhi-identified men and women in Taiwan subscribe to this construction, it does offer them a different basis for sexual subjectivity, one that acknowledges the pleasures and dangers of same-sex intimacies (some physical and others not) without necessarily naming such encounters through sexual ontologies. Viewing films such as The Twin Bracelets enables diverse groups to reflect openly on the status of emotional attachments and erotic desires that are worried over in public discourse. In the process, such viewers establish their own bases for understanding the significance of same-sex intimacies and sexual pleasures.

Ultimately, it is more important to understand the range of responses to the film by different communities than it is to provide a definitive authorial reading. Those responses are themselves the product of specific cultural settings, sociohistorical moments, and national and global politics: the standing of Taiwan and China vis-à-vis one another, the eroticization of Asia in the West, and the global impact of a specifically Western construction of sexual identity and subjectivity. If, as Louisa Schein suggests, “the way people understand who they are and how they belong is never anterior to, indeed is
inseparable from, the kinds of media they consume” (2002, 230), then ethnographic studies of media and film consumption assume even greater importance in our efforts to comprehend the diverse ways that people continuously remake their constructions of themselves and salient others through their intimate and erotic lives. As meaning is produced and struggled over at various points in the life and circulation of The Twin Bracelets, the film producers and consumers engaged in that struggle define their own intimate and sexual selves and distinguish them from those of others. Their efforts reflect the hybrid and internally discontinuous modes of experiencing and understanding sex and intimacy across and between Greater China and the West.

Notes
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1. In addition to the San Francisco festival appearance in 1992, The Twin Bracelets was shown at the Chicago Lesbian and Gay International Film Festival and the International Festival of Lesbian and Gay Films in New York, both held in 1992. In St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1998 it aired at the Chinese Film Showcase focused on the theme “Sexuality in Chinese movies.” The film was also screened at Cornell University in 1993 and the University of Michigan in 1997.


3. By contrast, the depiction of The Twin Bracelets as “a lesbian version of Raise the Red Lantern” by organizers of the San Francisco festival was widely reproduced on English-language gay and lesbian websites and in advertisements for campus Asian film series. See the blurb for the film in the Cornell University Cinema guide (Cornell Cinema Flik Sheet, February 1993). The Twin Bracelets is currently housed in the Outfest Legacy Collection at the UCLA Film and Television Archive.

4. This approach assumes that the production of meaning is not static, forged at one particular moment, but instead is an ongoing process—a “hermeneutic circle” to bor-
row Michaels’s term—that takes place at multiple stages of film conception, production, transmission, and reception (Michaels 1990; see also Ganti 2002).

5. I use the term “Greater China” to refer to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia.

6. By contrast, Tom Boellstorff finds that Indonesian lesbi and gay subjectivities are constituted through mass media by a process of self-recognition that “places the self in a dialogic relationship with a distant but familiar other” (2003a, 232). One could argue that Taiwanese viewers also constituted themselves dialogically in relation to the Chinese characters portrayed in The Twin Bracelets, but that process was premised not on deictic recognition (“That’s me!”) but instead on disavowal (“That’s not me!”). For a more detailed discussion of disavowed identification in viewers’ responses to The Twin Bracelets, see S. Friedman’s (2006b) study.

7. These responses also reflect how viewers integrated The Twin Bracelets semiotically and pragmatically into their lives and social worlds. In other words, audiences used the film as a platform for telling stories about themselves and their communities that positioned audience members in relation to prevailing social and sexual norms, identity categories, and claims to national modernity (S. Friedman 2006b; Michaels 1990). These stories enabled me to trace the connections between interpersonal and collective intimacies and to show how desires and pleasures that link individuals to larger communities are articulated through film spectatorship.

8. The villages in eastern Hui’an are known for a form of marriage described in the scholarly literature as “extended natalocal residence” (chang zhu niangjia). Instead of residing immediately with her husband and conjugal kin as is typical in rural Han China, a new wife remains in her natal home after her wedding, visiting her husband only when summoned by a mother-in-law or sister-in-law. This period of postmarital separation comes to an end when a woman bears her first child. Beginning in the mid-1990s, however, the separation period grew increasingly shorter as young people started to choose their own spouses and to marry at a later age (see S. Friedman 2006a).

9. See also the review of Lu’s work in the Hong Kong journal Guang jiao jing (Wide angle), in which the reviewer suggests that Lu attributes women’s individual and collective suicides not only to the sexual repression and restraint produced by feudal marriages but also to “abnormal sexual relations,” which the author identifies as homosexuality (Ren 1989, 64). Since this time, a more varied array of fiction has emerged in China that openly engages female same-sex desires and intimacies (Sang 2003; Martin 2010). For an excellent discussion of the portrayal of love and eroticism between women in earlier Ming-Qing literature, see Wu’s (2002) study.


11. Huang listed Xiamen xinniang (Xiamen bride), a joint Taiwan-China television serial made by Wang Benhu in the early 1990s (see S. Friedman 2006a, 209–10); Wijge
nüzi he yi gen shengzi (Five women and a rope) (1990), a joint Taiwan-Hong Kong production filmed in China; and Nü shu (Women’s script), a Chinese film directed by Yang Yueqing. Other films in this genre include Wang Jin’s Chinese production Guafu cun (The village of widows), which is also based on a short story by Lu Zhaohuan.

12. With the exception of the director and short-story author, all personal names used in this article are pseudonyms.

13. These tales bear striking similarities to some late imperial fiction in which female intimacy is portrayed as compatible with polygamous marriages (Sang 2003, 49–52; Wu 2002). Late imperial portrayals of “utopian polygamy” were generally written from a male perspective; however, Shanlin viewers’ responses reflected the power of female same-sex intimacy to deflect marital challenges and even deny husbands sexual access to their wives.

14. There is an extensive literature on same-sex intimacy in single-sex school environments, one that I do not have the space to review here. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese intellectuals engaged in heated debates about the benefits and dangers of such relationships. Their debates were influenced as much by traditional notions of homosociality as by theories introduced by Western sexologists whose works were being translated into Chinese (Sang 2003, ch. 4; Sieber 2001, 12–14). See the work of Hu (2001) and Martin (2010) for contemporary analyses of schoolgirl romances, and that of Silvio (2008) for a critique of environmental lesbianism.

15. “Tongzhi” is a term of self-identification used by the Chinese in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan who identify broadly as “gay and lesbian” or “queer.” For a discussion of the history of the term and its use as a positive form of identification among groups in contemporary Chinese societies, see the work of Chou (2000) and Martin (2000; 2003). Some lesbians in Taiwan and China also identify with the term lala or lazi. See Lim’s (2008) study on the adoption of the term ku’er (queer) in Taiwan.

16. For examples of the rapidly growing Chinese-language literature on this subject, see the work of Chao (2001), He (2001, 2009), Zheng (1997), and Zhuang (1990, 2002).

17. It is also likely that Xiao Ling was unable to imagine a sexual relationship with A Cao because both of them identified as “T,” which is short for “tomboy.” The distinction between Ts and pos (from laopo, a colloquial term for “wife”) structures the female tongzhi community in Taiwan by creating gendered role divisions and a culturally specific logic of desire (irreducible to the butch-femme binary). Although not all women identify themselves this way, for those who do, the thought of one T desiring another T is difficult to imagine (Chao 1996, 2000; Fishel 1994; Hu 2011).

18. In her review of Deepa Mehta’s film Fire, Gayatri Gopinath contends that the film’s portrayal of an erotic relationship between two sisters-in-law both questions and re-affirms this developmental narrative of sexual identity. Fire “interrogates the notion that the proper location of lesbianism is within a politics of visibility in the public sphere,” Gopinath argues, while at the same time the film becomes legible to its diasporic audiences within a Euroamerican discourse that faults Indians for lacking the very language to articulate lesbianism and thus make it visible (1998, 631, 633). See Leung’s (2008, 1) study for another example of this teleological narrative.
19. For a history of the terminology used to indicate same-sex love in twentieth-century China, see Kang’s (2010) work on male same-sex relations and Sang’s (2003, ch. 4) work on female same-sex bonds. Sang argues that the coinage “same-sex love” (tongxing ai) entered Chinese from Japanese in the early twentieth century and expanded into variants such as tongxing lian’ai and tongxinglian (all combinations of the words for “same,” “sex,” and “love”).

20. Sociologist Li Yinhe argues in her preface to a book of interviews with self-identified gay men in contemporary China, “Although homosexual subculture is not [part of] mainstream culture in China, it is entering into mainstream discourse” (Chen Liyong 2003, n.p.). My discussions with viewing groups in Shanlin affirmed this discursive dissemination, especially among the younger generation. I should emphasize, however, that a discursive presence does not necessarily imply social acceptance, as A Ping’s subsequent comments revealed.

21. Chris Berry finds a similar tension between behavior and identity in East Asian films centered on gay characters and their family relationships. He concludes that “what is a problem for the family in these films is not sexual behavior in itself but an exclusive sexual orientation whose development into an exclusive sexual and social identity in turn interferes with the ability to perform one’s role in the family” (2001, 215). Although it is not clear from A Ping’s story whether her aunt had developed “an exclusive sexual orientation,” it is certainly the aunt’s decision to abandon her roles as wife and mother that A Ping found particularly unsettling.

22. For other writings on male and female tongzhi communities in urban China, see the work of Engebretsen (2009), He and Rofel (2010), Y. Li (1998a; 1998b, 207–24), Rofel (2007a, 2010), and Sang (2003, 169–73).

23. This tension between qing (feeling or sentiment) and yu (desire) figures prominently in Chinese literary representations of women’s same-sex relationships (Sang 2003; Wu 2002).

24. This film, Qing cheng zhi lian (Love in a fallen city), released in 1984, stars Chow Yun-fat and Cora Miao in a romantic drama based on a novel by Eileen Chang. In the wake of the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and Hong Kong, Chow woos a previously divorced Miao and rescues her from familial and social ostracism.

25. By contrast, through her analysis of the film Silent Thrush, Silvio (2008) argues that lesbian desire may be seen as a foundational component of local ethnonationalist nostalgia in Taiwan.

26. Tze-lan Sang similarly argues that when Western sexological writings were translated into Chinese in the early twentieth century, the notion of a sexual identity was often omitted and replaced by an understanding of same-sex love as embedded in relationships and situations: “Republican Chinese intellectuals’ focus on the relational and situational qualities of same-sex attraction may reflect a different but equally valid imagination about human subjectivity—one that sees it as dependent on context rather than as essential and unchanging” (2003, 123).