Queering Chinese Comrades!

Audrey Tse
Student Advisor: Elisabeth Kaske
Carnegie Mellon University

I. Tongzhi and Queer

In the past two decades, tongzhi (同志) culture, activism, and identity have increased its presence in mainstream China despite institutional discrimination. In contrast with the term ‘homosexuality’ (同性恋), which has a clinical connotation, tongzhi, like ‘gay and lesbian’ or ‘queer’, is used for self-identification. Tongzhi’s etymological root in the Communist and Nationalist Party struggles during the mid-twentieth century results in a term that embodies positive cultural references, gender neutrality, and desexualization while undermining the stigma of homosexuality.\(^1\) The first vernacular use of the word tongzhi, meaning comrade, to describe Chinese queer, LGBT, and non-heterosexual individuals was in 1989. It was wittingly appropriated from the Communist Party’s rhetoric for use at the first Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Hong Kong, when the playwright Edward Lam referred to the festival as the Tongzhi Film Festival.\(^2\) Since then, the term tongzhi has been widely used to signify non-normative genders and sexualities in the Chinese context, and functions similarly to the English term ‘queer’.

In this article, I will argue that the work of Cui Zi’en, a prominent activist and film director, supports a universalist application of queer theory in China that encourages a global


Questions on this article should be addressed to the student advisor Elisabeth Kaske at ekaske@andrew.cmu.edu.
queer citizenship. I will first give a brief introduction of queer theory, then I will discuss the applicability, merits, and uncertainties of using ‘Western’ queer theory as a way to understand China’s tongzhi culture within a domestic and international context. There is a wide-stretching spectrum of arguments regarding the universalism and anti-universalism of queer theory, and its conceivably colonialist connotations. While some argue that queer theory is a Western creation, based on Western concepts and structures, and therefore cannot be applied to China’s unique homosexual history, others, on the contrary, insist that queer theory is meant to fluidly mold according to national and cultural contexts whilst being hyper-conscious of hegemonic power systems.\(^3\) I make an appeal for a universalist application of queer theory that places Chinese tongzhis as queer global citizens that are not to be regarded as representatives of Western hegemony. The use of queer theory to critique the ideas of gender construction in Cui’s films will allow for a process of inquiry that both elucidates Cui’s support for queer theory in his films and literature, and supports that China and queer theory can mutually benefit from each other.

It is my hopes that the reader will part with a sense of excitement towards the possibilities of Chinese queer art, and anticipation for the path that Chinese queer art, cinema, and cultural content will take in the next few decades.

**II. Unraveling Queer Theory in China: Does China Need Queer Theory, Or Does Queer Theory Need China?**

"Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative."\(^4\)

-David Halperin (1997)

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David Halperin wrote the well-encapsulated definition, stated above, of the wide spectrum ‘queer’ encompasses in his 1997 work, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Halperin makes the point to emphasize that *queer* is innately a nebulous term in which the marginalized and underrepresented are positioned in relation to the normative. Queer theory can be defined as a backlash to centuries of heteronormativity in which ‘queer’ acts were suppressed and violently rejected. I will first discuss the ideas of queer theory, and then I will examine the anti-universalist arguments of select scholars who refuse to accept the universal application of queer theory in China because they see it purely theory based on Western constructs and history. However, I argue that queer theory should be universally applied, and that there is a growing amount of Chinese queer artists who encourage this application.

*Let’s Talk Queer Theory*

Queer theory bases itself on the fact that gender and sexuality definitions are all socially constructed, and through this lens, it aims to expand its focus to include any sexual activity and identity that fall into normative/deviant categories. The most valuable aspect of queer theory is that it recognizes the heterosexual/homosexual binary sex system as a hegemonic power regime in which rigid psychological and social boundaries inevitably give rise to systems of dominance and hierarchical organization.\(^5\) Queer theory builds categories such as gender, race and class as a multi-policy that renders identity permanently open, hybrid and fluid, which in turn supports transnational coalition-building very much *based* on a politics of difference.\(^6\) The hybridity of queer theory allows it to reconsider all the facets that create identity such as gender, race, and class, and in the process, is strengthened when applied to cultural contexts around the world.

Cultural anthropology and post-colonial studies are therefore useful tools to fully understand queer theory and modern sexual cultures in Asia. We have to take into account factors such as colonial histories, traditions and religions, the growing affluences of most Asian

\(^5\) Wenqing Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-1950 (Queer Asia)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 20.
countries, and the (de)colonization strategies of the states. All these factors play crucial roles in shaping ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality, and all possible forms of sexual expression (e.g., dating, romance, premarital sex, virginity, abortion, divorce, birth control, homosexuality, pornography, prostitution) under the whole process of globalization and decolonization. New modes of communication have given unprecedented levels of exposure to Asia’s new sexual identities, cultures, and communities that shape and reshape the social life of a particular country, and even shape the global processes of change that particular country experiences. Therefore, the discussion of whether China will, or rather, should ‘import’ and integrate queer theory into its narrative becomes a pivotal matter.

**Anti-Universalist Argument: China Does Not Need Queer Theory & Ongoing tongzhi Discussions**

Several scholars have rejected the application of queer theory for PRC China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong on the grounds that China has a unique LGBT community that cannot justifiably be associated as “queer,” which is perceived as an exclusive description of U.S.-style sexual politics. These scholars state that homosexuality and homophobia are imports from modern Western culture, and that China should follow an anti-universalist stance.

Samshasha (Xiaomingxiong 小明雄, Wu Xiaoming 吳小明), a veteran Hong Kong gay rights activist, published his Chinese-language book *History of Homosexuality in China* (Zhongguo tongxingai shilu 中国同性爱史录) in 1984 that tracks the hidden history of ‘same-sex love’ in China from the Zhou Dynasty (11th century BC to 221 BC) to the 1980s. Samshasha was the first who said that ancient China had a long tradition of ‘same-sex love’, and concluded that homosexuality existed in Chinese history but that homophobia was imported from the West, thus appealing to anti-colonial sentiments and patriotic cultural pride – a definite rejection of a universalist stance. Samshasha’s book was published as a response to Hong Kong’s debate over

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the decriminalization of homosexuality. Hong Kong was a homophobic social environment during the 1980s, and the general belief was that homosexuality was a disease and/or sin brought from the West. Samshasha’s works painted a picture of Chinese homosexuality as a distinctive culture that was ready to ‘come out’ and was determined to ‘find its own path’. This implicit essentialist conception of homosexuality partly fused into subsequent academic studies and into local gay and lesbian movements.

Chou Wah-shan, who has done a large amount of anthropological work in both Hong Kong and PRC China, supported this anti-universalist stance in his book 1997 *Houzhimin tongzhi* 后殖民同治, which translates as *The Postcolonial Tongzhi*. Chou stated that Chinese *tongzhi* are different from ‘gays and lesbians’ because these English-language concepts have no equivalent in the Chinese tradition of same-sex erotic relations, which are characterized by cultural tolerance and harmony. Tze-lan Sang, whose works focuses on the emergence of the modern lesbian in Greater China from the late Qing imperial period (1600-1911) to the Republican era (1912-1949), also argues that Western sexological writings are innately non-applicable to the “discourses of tongxing’ai [same sex love] in Republican China.”

Anti-universalists postulate the exceptionality of Chinese homosexuality and *tongzhi* culture as a way of gaining cultural independence from Western colonizers after centuries of domination. Petrus Liu states that, “the postulation of a longstanding ‘tolerance of same-sex desire’ in China promises to make it analytically impervious to the universalizing pretensions of queer theory…the idea of Chinese exceptionalism has since then come to define the field of sexuality studies in China.” However, contemporary Chinese academics and artists are increasingly opening up to queer theory and adopting it into their works for the benefit of both

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8 Mark McLelland, "Interview with Samshasha, Hong Kong’s First Gay Rights Activist and Author," Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context , no. 4 (2000), 44.


10 Ibid., 298.

11 Ibid., 300.
parties. Queer theory in China has thus resulted in a profusion of literature and art that facilitates global dialogue on queer citizenship, forcing anti-universalists to reconsider their stance.

**In Fact, Queer Theory Needs China**

The ongoing discussions of queer theory universalism come down to the question of whether China can benefit from queer theory. I argue that not only would China benefit from queer theory, but also the development of queer theoretical discourses and queer visual art in China strengthens queer theory as a counter-hegemonic school of thought that is able to persist across borders. Queer theory and *tongzhi* culture both originated as counter-hegemonic discourses. If the two should come together, the *tongzhi* movement can be used to broaden and develop queer theory rather than emphasizing Chinese exceptionalism.

Queer theory in China is being developed as ‘*ku’er lilun*,’ (酷儿理论); ‘*ku’er*’ is the Chinese phonetic word for ‘queer’, followed by ‘*lilun*’ as the translation for theory. Academics who support the universalist application of queer theory, like Petrus Liu and Lisa Rofel, advocate the complete synthesis of queer theory and China, without the separation between ‘China’ and ‘queer theory’. Practicing queer theory in Chinese contexts demonstrates that critical attention to local knowledge(s) and concerns does not immediately constitute a categorical rejection of ‘the queer’; rather it shows that what constitutes as ‘queer’ is constantly expanding, supplemented, and revised by what is ‘Chinese’.\(^\text{12}\) There have been steps towards institutionally recognizing new Asian queer studies, as proved by the first International Conference of Asian Queer Studies: Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia held in Thailand in July, 2005. The conference deliberately used the term ‘queer’ in their title to emphasize “the need to rethink queer theory in Asian contexts, simultaneously critiquing homophobic discourses and practices in Asia and questioning the eurocentrism of Western accounts of sexuality and gender,” meaning that the

\(^{12}\) Ibid. 297.
conference acknowledged Western-centrism, but also consciously took its claims on queer theory for Asia.\textsuperscript{13}

Queer theory provides more insight to Chinese homosexuality and tongzhi culture because it intrinsically builds post-colonial theory and discourses into its apparatuses against social normativity and heteronormativity. For example, Ara Wilson notes two major approaches that have emerged as what can be called ‘new Asian queer studies’. The first method is recuperative research on indigenous non-heterosexual, non-procreative sexual practices that offer important resources for framing queer in national or local ways. The second method uses a post-colonial critique as a way to decenter Western queer hegemony.\textsuperscript{14} Wilson does question whether the ‘import’ of queer culture, in all its permutations, serve to enhance or erase the indigenous, but concludes with proposing a critical ‘queer regionalism’ as a “heuristic and strategic device” to unsettle the Western dominance within and bias of queer theory and queer studies.\textsuperscript{15} The contributions of canonical queer academic theory (e.g. Eve Sedgwick, Diana Fuss, Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis), according to Steven Seidman’s Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics, also provides evidence that queer theory was \textit{is} and \textit{is meant} to be universalist, and its creators were extremely conscientious about post-colonial theory.\textsuperscript{16}

The most intriguing and expansive discussion of queer theory and China that uses post-colonial critique is Petrus Liu’s “Why Does Queer Theory Need China?” published in 2010. I will take on Liu’s call to begin the critical task of transforming the “signifier of ‘China’ into a useful set of queer tools,” because, “by showing how power produces abject bodies outside national boundaries, a queer theorist armed with an understanding of China can demonstrate that queer theory is not an empty rhetorical game, but a concrete tool,” and that, “we will need to

\textsuperscript{13} Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia: 1\textsuperscript{st} International Conference on Asian Queer Studies, Conference Programme, 7-9 July 2005, Bangkok, Thailand, 2.

\textsuperscript{14} Ara Wilson, "Intra-Asian Circuits and the Problem of Global Queer," The Ohio State University (2006).


construct models of transnational politics and social change.”

Due to the cultural and hegemonic implications between using the word ‘tongzhi’ vs. ‘queer’, I will follow the work of Travis S.K. Kong and consciously use the terms ‘homosexuality’, ‘lesbian and gay men’, ‘queer’ and ‘tongzhi’ interchangeably in order to highlight and suspend the theoretical discrepancies and political tensions among them.

**III. China’s Queer Awakening: Queer Chinese Art and Cinema in New-Millennium China**

“Devoid of market-driven tendencies to produce slick and seamless productions, these recent queer films from China strive instead for a spontaneous and participatory cinema that is honest and daring in its very imperfection...their survival depends on innovative filming and distribution strategies and, above all, on the support of the outlawed communities they set out to represent.”

- Michele Aaron (2004)

Works of visual arts have the ability to capture and convey queer theory discourses in a manner which literature cannot. In addition, visual arts are generally more available, accessible, and understandable for the general public, thus having more potential for queer activism. Prominent artists include Fan Popo (范坡坡), a filmmaker who documented her performance art piece, titled New Marriage in 2009, in which two gay couples took wedding photos on Qianmen Street at the south end of Tiananmen Square on Valentine’s Day. Chi Peng (迟鹏) created the photography series Fuck Me, a collection of photos depicting unbridled homosexual intercourse within office landscapes. Peng’s photography series questions the public’s acceptance of...
homosexuality by displaying overt sexual acts in professional backdrops where sexual acts are already considered taboo.\textsuperscript{21} The Gao Brothers (高氏兄弟) produce paintings, installation work, performances, sculpture, writing, and photography among other things. Their video piece, titled in English as \textit{Chinese Transvestites}, depicts drag shows in China.\textsuperscript{22} Visual artist Wang Zi (王子) made a collage series in 2009 titled \textit{Good Morning Comrade}, inspired by President Hu Jintao’s use of the phrase to greet the parading soldiers, that consists of repeated images of male sailors or monks all facing one way, but with two individuals amongst the crowd kissing one another.\textsuperscript{23} Multi-media writer Lucifer Hung is another example, he wrote a multivolume science fiction-fantasy saga titled "Memory Is a Chip-Tombstone" that combines, “English Gothic literature, Anglo-American science fiction and fantasy literature and film, Chinese knight errant martial-arts novels and films, Japanese anime and manga, Chinese language comics, and Internet role-playing game (RPG) narratives.”\textsuperscript{24}

It is within this scope where creative production such as film, video, photography, paintings, and other combinations of visual art become dynamic mediums in which queer theory, transnationalism, aesthetics, and a variety of other pressing issues are put literally, on screen or on walls, for inspection and further inquiry into new queer Chinese studies. One may even call this a queer artistic awakening, in which works that would have previously been perceived as singular and autonomous are now linked towards a queer commonality.

The term ‘New Queer Chinese Cinema’ traces back to the U.S. legacy of ‘New Queer Cinema’, a term that was used to describe the wave of independent queer films that came out in the early 1990s. Michele Aaran summed up U.S. new queer cinema with one word: \textit{defiance},

http://www.artlinkart.com/en/artist/wrk_sr/002atwm/7a1byBo.


levied at mainstream homophobic society but also at the ‘tasteful and tolerated’ gay culture that cohabits with it. This positionality made it so that the queerness of U.S. new queer cinema was aligned with its resistance to not only normative gender and sexual expressions, but also any tendency within gay culture to assimilate. Similar to U.S. new queer cinema that showed such indifference towards positive image, fixed identity, and mainstream acceptance, new queer Chinese cinema thrives on the ambiguity of the strange. I will discuss the formation of U.S. Queer Cinema and the death of the artistic movement, and why many film academics believe that new queer Chinese cinema picked up where U.S. queer cinema left off.

The comparison of Chinese queer films to U.S queer films is especially relevant as many believe that Chinese queer films are not only increasingly gaining clout and recognition, but are also being compared to the earlier, exciting and pioneering years of U.S. queer film when queer film was seen as an agent of change and progress. Chris Berry, a well-respected authority in Asian films, compares Cui Zi’en’s work to the aesthetics of pre-Stonewall directors Kenneth Anger and Jack Smith. Norman A. Spencer, who wrote “Ten Years of Queer Cinema in China”, points out that being in Beijing during the gay and lesbian film festival cultural events (i.e. screenings at theatres and restaurants, parties associated with the events, and other social outings) of 2001 and 2002 felt like very similar to the exciting atmosphere of life in San Francisco during the late 1960s when social change felt palpable. New queer Chinese cinema had been introduced to the film festival circuit in the late 1990s. Stanley Kwan argues in his cinematic essay, Ying ± Yang: Gender in Chinese Cinema, that while Chinese queer films aren’t new, the genre is, because “undercurrents of homoeroticism as well as overt play of cross-gender expressions have appeared frequently in Chinese-language films since the early beginning of cinema itself.”

26 Ibid., 519.
28 Helen Hok-Sze Leung, Homosexuality and Queer Aesthetics, 521.
29 Kwan, Stanley, "Yang ± Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema," DVD.
B. Ruby Rich, who coined the term ‘New Queer Cinema’ in the U.S., had documented both the development and death kneel of this cinema genre, and then proceeded to pass its torch to queer Asian cinema. Rich remarked that, “as those historical moments passed with the waning of AIDS activism in the U.S. and Hollywood’s effective co-optation of independent filmmaking, this cinematic wave [of U.S. queer cinema] also seems to have run its course,” but, “Asian cinema – along with transgender cinema, documentaries, and the visual arts – represents the most exciting current development in queer cinema.”  

While both queer cinemas exist within different contexts of production and reception, thematic repetitions, and aesthetic directions, both cinemas still question the assumed ‘normality’ of heterosexuality and confront the conventional understanding of gay sexuality and identity. The two decades of tongzhi culture now prompt self-reflection and exploration into how queers artists in China are internalizing Chinese queer film.

**IV. Cui Zi’en as Queer Artist, Filmmaker, and Activist**

“If I ever had a chance to publicize my theory, I would say that actually every single person might have a sexuality of his or her own. I’m totally against the concept of sex.”

- Cui Zi’en (2004)

Cui Zi’en is very much a creator and participator of this queer counterculture community through a multitude of crafts. His stance on gender and sexuality in his written work and films are very aligned with a queer fluidity. Cui Zi’en takes on multiple artistic platforms: he is a director, auteur, avant-garde artist, actor, film scholar, screenwriter, novelist, magazine columnist, an outspoken queer activist, a Christian, and a current researcher at the Film Research Institute of the Beijing Film Academy. Cui has also been called the *enfant terrible* of contemporary Chinese cinema, due to his experimental style and taboo subject matters within his

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films. Cui’s unique position as an established academic, cultural content creator, and activist places him as one of the main unifiers of a transnational collective queer community in China.

It is important to contextualize Cui within an emerging queer counterculture that began in the early 1990s in Chinese cities, from the cruising activity in public toilets and parks, to the multiple gay bars that became a hub for this increasingly visible population. Cui is very much a creator and participator of this queer counterculture community, particularly the screenings of his films through the Beijing Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, international film festivals, and academic screenings in the U.S. from Cornell University in New York State to Pomona College in California. Cui has combined his creative skills with his political thoughts to become the spokesperson for gay recognition and rights in China, ensuring that queers media is mostly created by self-representation, and heard in political spheres.

**Cui as Tongzhi Activist**

“...I see myself more as an organizer than a director. Forming a film crew is almost like having a party with my friends. My role is to gather people for a big twenty-day party, like a party host. Everyone brings cheese and wine. Of course in our party they bring a DV Camera, tapes and costumes.”

- Cui Zi’en (2010)

As an activist filmmaker, it would seem natural for Cui to rectify preconceived conceptions of homosexuality and other ‘deviants’ from heterosexual norms in preachy ways,

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but he is far too mischievous for that. In his films, he artfully portrays representations of his own queer ideas, and in day-to-day life, he is also a spokesperson for gay rights in China; he is a creator of communities, which he solidifies through a variety of mediums. Cui made his public appearance on Hunan Satellite TV’s show “Tell It Like It Is” in 2000 under the episode name “Approaching Gay People”, together with other LGBT activist members such as academic Li Yinhe, who wrote Their World: A Study of the Male Homosexual Community in China, the first academic work on male homosexuality in contemporary China, and lesbian artist Shi Tou, whose roots originate from the famous Yuanmingyuan artist village on the outskirts of Beijing in the 1990s. This marked the advent of gay visibility in contemporary China, not only because it was on national television, but also because it was a forum for open-discussion and exchange between the audience and the LGBT panel.36

Shortly after this, Cui collaborated with his friend and then-Peking University student Yang Yang, to organize China’s first LGBT film festival titled “Tongzhi Cultural Festival” on Peking University’s campus in 2001. The two friends and Zhang Jiangnan, a member of the Motion Picture Association of Peking University, took advantage of the relatively unknown use of the term tongzhi to successfully host the film festival. Although university officials eventually caught on that the film festival was actually not a celebration of communist party comradeship when the film festival posters were publicized and revealed otherwise, the festival was allowed to screen one film, Shanghai Panic, with university officials observing the event, with the rest of the schedule being canceled. The festival attracted 600-700 participants, packing the 300-seat auditorium to the brim. Although Zhang faced interrogations from university officials, the festival haphazardly continued in a guerrilla-style fashion at other locations and festival names for the following ten years.37

Many of Cui’s films were shown at these film festivals as well. Yang continued to direct a documentary that came out in 2011 titled: Our Story: 10-‘Years of Guerrilla’ of Beijing Queer Film Festival, that narrates the difficulties faced by the film festival organizers. In the film, it was stated that everyone involved in the film festival felt that the cultural expression they

36 Yang, Yang, "Our Story: 10-‘Years of Guerrilla’ of Beijing Queer Film Festival," DVD.
37 Yang, Yang, "Our Story: 10-‘Years of Guerrilla’ of Beijing Queer Film Festival," DVD.
celebrated in film and their intimate party was also linked the counter-cultural life that had mushroomed in the early 1990s to the avant-garde films screened in 2001 and 2002. While these are just two examples of Cui’s work in the public sphere, his position between his public presence and his art forms places him as China’s foremost gay film-maker and transnational collective queer community in China.

In an article he wrote in an International Institute for Asian Studies in 2002, Cui Zi’en is very clear on his approach towards gay activism. He discusses how the media approaches homosexuals, and how homosexual representation thus far has been from the academic ivory tower: “From the 1990s to the present, every representation of homosexuality in China has necessitated legitimatization by the ‘academic cause’,” and how “lesbian- or gay-themed book or magazine, radio or television show, etc., can [never] be allowed unless the ‘academic cause’ is brought in.” The “academic empire thus becomes a mirror of the political one,” because there is a lack of self-representation. Under these circumstances, homosexuals and homosexual culture will be continually and systematically objectified and made into ‘others’. If homosexuals want to voice their subjectivity, the process must necessarily be filtered by ‘experts’; or alternatively, homosexual people have to disguise themselves as the experts. Still now, any representation of homosexuality (in fiction, film, drama, academic research, magazines, websites, and so forth) carried out by openly homosexual people is regularly pushed underground, the only promising exception being the special issue of Modern Civilization Pictorial which contained personal stories that homosexuals themselves wrote, and internationally award-winning fiction by homosexual writers – “a most rare chance for homosexuals to exhibit their subjectivities.”

Cui wrote this article in 2002. Since then, Cui, himself a researcher at the Beijing Film Academy, has stepped out of the confines of the academic world. His cinematic work has become part of an international film circuit, especially after the creation of the annual Beijing 38 Yang, Yang, "Our Story: 10-‘Years of Guerrilla’ of Beijing Queer Film Festival," DVD.
gay and lesbian film festival. His films are easily accessible. They are shown at many locations across the globe and can even be streamed on Amazon. Cui’s global accessibility and renown confirm that there is an internationally recognized new queer Asian cinema that aims to gain artistic license over queer Asian self-representation.

**Cui Zi’en Films**

“In my films, hardcore gay sex is never what I’m interested in. That’s catering to others’ voyeuristic desires, I think. Instead, I’m more interested in discovering and revealing the relationship between gay lovers, how they deal with each other, what their sense of responsibility is, and so on.”

- Cui Zi’en (2004)

As Cui states in the quote above, his films are not meant to exotify nor objectify, but rather to portray developments of both surreal and realistic relationships between his non-heterosexual characters. I will analyze scenes from two of Cui’s films, *Enter the Clowns* (2002) and *Star Appeal* (2008). These were chosen because they encapsulate Cui’s varying styles and topics of his non-documentary films. *Enter the Clowns* (2002) is a gender-bending story split into five ‘chapters’ revolving around four main characters. *Star Appeal* (2008) is about extraterrestrial love, a topic Cui is very fond of, when a Martian is integrated into a bisexual relationship.

Cui’s gender bending topics dispel Chinese familial structures and contribute to creating a more sexually fluid China. The combinations of queerness and Chinese elements are integral components of Cui’s cinematic imagery and imagination that strengthen queer theory as a universal one. In order for queer theory to be truly universal, it should be applied to global and local contexts. Chinese ideas of filial duty, seniority, and Communist Party propaganda in Cui’s films strengthen queer theory because these quintessential themes of everyday life in China are

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seen through a queer lens and can subsequently deconstruct the normative and rebuild to construct models of social change.

**Enter the Clowns: Gender-Fucking Your Mind**

*Enter the Clowns* was released in 2002, one of Cui Zi’en’s first full-feature films. It revolves around the lives of Beijingers of all sexual orientations. It is shot in a rather disjointed manner, and the lack of background information on the minor characters, whether lovers or strangers, who engage with the four main characters disorientates the viewer and allows for an acceptable and even encouraged positive version of voyeurism into the microcosmic world because sexuality is confronted in an upfront, bluntly honest way. *Enter the Clowns* is broken up into five sections, following four characters that intermittently reappear in each other’s chapters: Xiao Bo (and his mother or father), Nana who longs after Xiao Bo and changes into a women, Ru Meng Ling who changes into a man, and finally Dong Dong who confronts his spirituality. The film was shot for under $5,000 and within five days, and is more experimental and audacious in its plot lines then the cinematography and camera work than Cui’s other films.42 I will focus on the first and third chapters of the film to explore the fluidity of gender identities against strong traditions of masculinity and femininity, both Chinese and Western.

The opening sequence of Cui Zi’en’s film, *Enter the Clowns*, reads a place card: Xiao Bo’s Mother or Father. Xiao Bo is played by actor Yu Bo, who also acts under the name Xiao Bo in multiple Cui films such as *Star Appeal* (2004). The next frame shows Xiao Bo coming into the room to kneel at his father’s deathbed. The camera stringently follows Xiao Bo, periodically zooming in and out of his face, but never revealing Xiao Bo’s father now-turned-mother. Cui Zi’en is not only the director of the film, but also the actor who plays Xiao Bo’s ‘mother’. She first asks Xiao Bo to apply lipstick onto her lips. Then she asks Xiao Bo to breastfeed from her

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chest so she can feel like a real mother. Xiao Bo acquiesces to all requests, however painfully, as a Chinese filial son would. In a final request, she asks Xiao Bo to send her off with his milk, his cum. Xiao Bo complies and proceeds to ejaculate into his mother’s mouth. After the act is completed, the camera finally shows us Cui, who is smiling, complete with lipstick and mascara. Xiao Bo sees that she has a few white hairs, and moves to the front of the bed to tenderly pull out them out from his mother’s head.

This is a typical scene in a Cui Zi’en film – an odd combination of careful camerawork that presents the audience with delicate care, while creating a space that mediates this forceful collision in which viewers are confronted to look inward and analyze their own definitions of gender, sexuality, and perhaps, even morality. Filial piety plays an intrinsic role in Chinese societal structure, and to see it manifest in such a shocking way in this opening scene abducts the viewer into a surreal space that allows tradition to be reevaluated.

The third section “Ru Meng Ling Changes into a Man” opens with three men in a room debating what title they should receive according to seniority. After some disputations over checking date of births on their ID cards, they agree that Ru Meng Ling is the oldest and should be called Eldest Brother, and the others (whose names are not mentioned) should be called Middle Brother, and Youngest Brother. The conscious decision to give a title to each acquaintance follows the Chinese concept of familial hierarchies and face within a patriarchal structure. The next scene shows Meng Ling singing communist songs in front of the mirror, and the following scene includes Ming Ling and a younger man recording a radio program called “Ladies Lavatory Anthropology”, a survey they conducted with approximately 2,000 women in Beijing about whether ladies lavatories should be adjacent to men lavatories. This includes comments that call for separate lavatory construction so men are not “aroused by female odors” and become desirous to leap over the wall.

Lavatories are a reoccurring motif in Cui’s films meant to challenge the idea of sex in a humorous way, and Cui’s use of bathroom humor in *Enter the Clowns* is not to distant from his other uses. The “Ladies Lavatory Anthropology” bathroom humor scene in this section is similar
to Cui’s *The Pros and Cons of the WC* (2001), an experimental film about a debate over whether or not male and female public toilets should be separated or integrated. Cui is without a doubt mocking the institution of gender here, and is making a reference to males who cruise for sexual exchanges with other males at public toilets. In this scene, the vernacular, pronunciation, and scientific statistical rigor of their ‘anthropology’ report is meant to be humorous, as Meng Ling says, the report results were “most fruitful like breasts.” Meng Ling says he has visited many different institutions, including the National Congress, to conduct a survey on the difficulties experienced by women citizens. They received 1,802 questionnaires back from handing out 2,000, an excellent return rate of 90.1%. When Meng Ling discussed whether women’s lavatories should be bigger than men’s, some people stated that, “in the art of toilet construction, we should not stick to equality of the sexes…it would be advantageous to social harmony, beneficence and social development,” to have bigger lavatories for women.

The listing of “harmony, beneficence and social development,” is meant to mock Communist Party rhetoric, especially because the report began with “Dear comrade viewers,” and the ‘radio’ show is called International Red Star TV. The other argument advocated adjacent lavatories so both sexes can be separated, “by the subtle division of the wall and stimulate each other’s excretory fervor,” and be akin to matrimony of a “strictly monogamous type.” Meng Ling tops of this comment with stating that it is most important that the stench from both sexes’ lavatories be matched, and the sounds paired, so that while the subtle division of the wall will separate both sexes, they can still stimulate each other’s excretory fervor. This scene uses the communist frame to shed light on the imbalances of gender relations in China, humorously stating that it is hard to imagine that there are more women than men in China because it is such a big male chauvinist country. The references to communism, such as mentioning the National Congress, also recall the appropriation of *tongzhi*. The dialogue in this scene takes a part of Chinese history, Communist radio broadcasting about increases in wheat production and other propaganda, and reappropriates it to comically voice queer ideas.

The subsequent scenes in this third chapter unfolds the tension between Meng Ling and Middle Brother – in one scene, Middle Brother screams “I love you Ru Meng Ling” on top of a playground structure, and won’t stop until Meng Ling agrees to have sex with him. Middle
Brother also successfully had intercourse with Meng Ling’s sister, Binbin. The tension between Meng Ling and Middle Brother eventually result in Middle Brother sneaking up on Meng Ling in the middle of the night to rape him, a brutal and disturbing action to watch as Middle Brother screams, “Change! Change! Change! You want to change!”, “How can you know what a real man is?”, and, “You are just a condom, a giant condom!”. Youngest Brother assists Meng Ling in revenge by getting Middle Brother drunk and then tying him up so that Ming Ling can mouth rape him. The scene is disturbing, but at this point of the film, the viewer is most likely accustomed to Cui’s aesthetic, or perhaps too desensitized to be too shocked.

Nana who turns into a woman, Ru Meng Ling who turns into a man, and Xiao Bo’s mother all take on the male gaze and subvert it by forming it into their own tools of expression and power. Meng Ling also rejects Middle Brother’s misogynistic behavior that pushed traditional feminine roles by asserting himself as a now-man in the most invasive of methods. Additionally, Xiao Bo’s mother was comfortable with her personal desires at her deathbed, and demanded that her son accept and support these desires, which he did. These characters are gender-bending, they twist the idea of gender roles to fit their new selves.

**Star Appeal: Fantasy of a New Terrain**

From the very beginning, *Star Appeal*, (2004) is strange and surreal. A naked man stands on an empty stretch of highway. Xiao Bo and his boyfriend drive down to the naked man standing along the road. Our eyes are forced to readjust to the strange colors that wash over the entire frame. When the naked man says that he is from Mars, Xiao Bo nonchalantly welcomes him to earth and decides to take care of the alien, who they have named ET, to teach him about life on earth. Xiao Bo and his boyfriend take ET to an open field to teach him about the growth and nature of plants. Xiao Bo gives ET a stuffed lamb animal as a gift, one out of many religious symbols Cui includes, which ET becomes particularly fond of as he often carries it with him in various scenes.

Xiao Bo, who is bisexual and already has a boyfriend and girlfriend, quickly becomes enchanted by ET, and enjoys teaching him about how the world works from the most mundane things such as eau de cologne to more serious matters, like expressing human emotions such as
love. ET is an open book for Xiao Bo to write in, an innocent being free of human sins who arrives on a land of sin. This is conveyed very early on, when Xiao Bo gives ET the stuffed lamb by pretending to be a lamb (his desire to be pure), and then telling ET not to touch him, because he is not a lamb. Rather, he gives the stuffed lamb to ET as a gift. While ET’s nakedness emphasizes his purity and symbolism for the naked truth and self, their shared lack of clothing represents their openness towards each other and emphasizes Xiao Bo’s fantasy of belonging to a purer world, to ET’s home in Mars, where there is no sex, gender, or race—a queer planet.

The insular relationship between Xiao Bo and ET eventually puts a stress on Xiao Bo’s bi-sexual relationship with his boyfriend and girlfriend. Just as Xiao Bo’s relationships are at a tipping point, ET loses consciousness when he is knocked to the ground during an altercation with a man in a park. ET is brought back to Xiao Bo’s home and only wakes up when he hears “We love you” being said by Xiao Bo and his girlfriend. ET only wakes up when Xiao Bo says, “I love you,” to ET in English, French, and Russian. When he wakes up, ET says that he heard something in Martian. The bridge between Mars and Earth is starting to form when ET and Xiao Bo are able to communicate in this fundamental way. The extreme discoloration as Cui’s aesthetic choice and the voice distortion in this scene highlights the surreal sensation of the situation as well as the significant moment that solidifies the relationship between Xiao Bo and ET.

ET and Xiao Bo finally become physical with each other when ET asks how humans show love other than verbally. Xiao Bo shows him by giving him a hesitant peck on the lips, but is even more careful when ET asks what is the most profound way humans express love to each other. Xiao Bo eventually responds by saying it’s through making love, and the product of this love is a child. The fact that they do not have intercourse in this scene speaks to Xiao Bo’s desire to keep ET pure of human taint because he feels so negatively about his fellow earthlings. ET also refuses to answer Xiao Bo’s question as to how Martians show love. His refusal makes us, and Xiao Bo, wonder about the possibilities of extraterrestrial love that can be extended to human possibilities of a non-gendered love, a facet of queer theory. The fact that Martian love is never revealed speaks to the unknown sexual, or lack of sexual, terrain humans have yet to inhabit, but also makes us rethink whether our social constructs around sex are superfluous, and
it certainly critiques the Chinese tradition of procreation as the most important goal in life and society. Near the end of the film, Xiao Bo and ET finally do have sex after Xiao Bo gives ET coffee. Although ET may not have realized, Xiao Bo used the coffee as an analogy for life on earth: the coffee is bitter and dark, but you can add sugar to make it sweeter, and drinkable.

ET abruptly returns back to Mars and the film ends with a black screen, and we hear a dialogue between ET and Xiao Bo. They are trying to coordinate to meet at the 7th volcano on Mars. This conversation ends with Xiao Bo repeatedly calling out ET’s name with no response. A gong goes off and vocal chanting music closes off the film – an eerie ending to Cui’s strange and disorientating experimental film. Xiao Bo is not able to meet ET on Mars even though ET promises that he will show Xiao Bo how Martians express love on their planet. ET embodies Xiao Bo’s desire for a world without the burden of social and gender constructs.

The arcs and characters in Enter the Clowns (2002) and Star Appeal (2008), from Xiao Bo to ET, fall within queer theory’s foundation that gender and sexuality is all socially constructed, and creates compelling identities that that fall into normative/deviant categories. The stories Cui weaves are meant to challenge and encourage the viewer to dismantle the heterosexual/homosexual binary system. As stated earlier, queer theory builds categories such as gender, race and class as a multi-policy that renders identity permanently open, hybrid and fluid, which in turn supports transnational coalition-building very much based on a politics of difference. Cui’s moving pictures of hybrid and fluid characters negotiating life in contemporary China further bolster that queer theory should be, and is, universalist.

The characters in Enter the Clowns (2002) live in the nation’s capital where centuries-old traditional Confucian gender roles were formed and centered, and the juxtaposition of these now-fluid gender lines within this city makes it all the more apparent that Cui is introducing a new perspective to this city and national narrative. In Star Appeal (2008), ET serves as the sacrificial body that makes fantasy present, but he remains elusive and his mystery instigates and draws out the desire in in all the characters in Star Appeal. While ET leaves his earthly counterparts more broken than they were to begin with, it is certain that their extraterrestrial experience gave them
insight into a completely genderless, fluid world. The fact that Martian love is completely different, yet never revealed, speaks to a completely queer terrain that humans have yet to inhabit. If Martians don’t have any concepts of gender, why should we?

V. Conclusions

The two films discussed in this article, Enter the Clowns (2002) and Star Appeal (2008) are useful towards arguing Cui Zi’en’s placement within queer theory, and queer Chinese artists. Cui’s films capture desire in a world where gender and sex are fluid, and thus makes them realizable in his presentation of the possibility in the impossibility. Queer theory can help us to better understand the underlying assumptions and analyze the relationships between characters in Cui’s films. At the same time, it will be beneficial for queer theory to use Cui’s films as part of its ammunition to demolish hegemonic gender and sexual categories, and also support evidence towards a universalist application of queer theory to Chinese tongzhi culture. This two way street proves that Cui’s scope of work take on Petrus Liu’s task of transforming the “signifier of ‘China’ into a useful set of queer tools,” as the characters’ actions and nuances in these two films splattered traditional Chinese concepts onto a non-gendered plane. 43

The synthesis of queer theory to critique ideas of gender construction in Cui’s activism and films support the idea that China and queer theory can benefit from each other equally. While this article aims to shed light on Cui Zi’en’s films and tongzhi culture, further research on queer Chinese cinema and the directors who contribute to this artistic movement would create a better understanding of human queerness.

Students Advisor’s Comments

Elisabeth Kaske

This paper is a condensed version of Audrey’s Senior Honors Thesis at the Dietrich College of Humanities “Queering Chinese Comrades! Through the Lens of Director Cui Zi’En” which she successfully completed in summer 1913. The thesis analyzes several movies by Chinese independent filmmaker Cui Zi’en and places them within the context of the Chinese movement for LGBT rights. At the same time, Audrey has always had a strong interest in anthropology and post-modern theory. The most important finding of her thesis and paper has been in the theoretical field. Rather than applying queer theory to understand China’s LGBT community, she argues that it is important to understand that queer theory fails to live up to its own global aspirations if it does not take Chinese queer culture into account. Thus, China does not need queer theory. Queer theory needs China. This thesis and paper make an important contribution towards a humanist view of Chinese culture that does not essentialize it as the opposite of “Western” culture, but understands it positively as a crucial part of global culture.
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