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**To cite this article:** Fan Yang (28 Dec 2023): The matrices of female bonding and lesbian sexuality: female homoerotic cinema in Mainland China, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2023.2297164](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2297164)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2297164>



Published online: 28 Dec 2023.



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# The matrices of female bonding and lesbian sexuality: female homoerotic cinema in Mainland China

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## ABSTRACT

The mis-representation of female homoeroticism in China and misunderstanding of films in this regard leads to the question: What explanatory frameworks should we adopt to analyze Chinese female homo-erotic films in the way that respects the local historical and cultural context? After studying the local history of women's separatism and formation of lesbian identity under Western influences, I suggest two frameworks, namely, the matrix of female bonding and the matrix of lesbian sexuality. Adopting these two frameworks, respectively, I conduct close analysis of *Sweet Eighteen* (甜蜜18岁, 2012) and *Fish and Elephant* (今年夏天, 2001), to locate the "Chinese lesbianism" in these not very lesbian films in the eyes of American audience. I will argue that the narrative of homosexual-maternal transferability in the former resonates with Chinese women's literature, while the narrative of homosexual normality and a coming-home rather than coming-out strategy in the latter film speak to the local specificity of lesbian discourse since the 1990s.



## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 December 2022  
Revised 13 November 2023  
Accepted 12 December 2023

## KEYWORDS

Lesbianism; Homoerotic cinema; Mainland China

The multiple-award-winning film at the Montréal World Film Festival *The Chinese Botanist's Daughters* (植物学家的女儿, 2006) was made by Dai Sijie, a Chinese male director who moved to France in his thirties, narrating a lesbian story set around 1990 in southern China. The main narrative focuses on two women who fall in love with each other in a botanical garden, make love in the greenhouse and settle into a stable relationship, under intense paternalist pressure from a dictatorial father and male violence from a soldier brother. Catering to a Western audience, Dai applied self-orientalizing strategies to present China as pure nature on the one hand, by setting the film in the hazy and humid garden and mountains (shot in Vietnam), and as an exotic space on the other hand, with anachronistic collages of socialist slogans and costumes against the 1990s commercial background. More importantly, Dai unabashedly evoked a China where homosexuality is criminalized, for the sympathetic gaze of those from more "liberated" Western countries where homosexuals have been gaining legal rights and social visibility. The film ends with a verdict of homosexual crime against the two women, who are sentenced to death. Such an ending betrays the sociopolitical reality, since homosexuality has never been included in the criminal law of China, except for the lumping together of sodomy

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with street brawls and sexual assault as hooliganism in the 1979 penal code (Ying Xie and Minggang Peng 2018). Projecting a China that criminalizes homosexuality actually transplants certain stage of Western history into Chinese context, as generally the Christian civilization itself has undertaken criminalization, de-criminalization and legalization of homosexuality. For China, the trajectory basically starts from homosexuality as normal sexual behavior, shifts to certain level of pathologization due to the introduction of Western psychology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and settles in the ambiguous status quo: not pathologized yet not fully legal (in terms of gay marriage).

Shooting a Chinese film with Western history of homosexuality in mind like Dai did manipulates Chinese reality; likewise, applying Western theories of sexual identity politics based on Western context risks of distorting Chinese film text. An illustrative example is Chris Berry's reading of *Big Road* (大路, 1934), a silent film that portrayed female intimacy through scenes depicting young women touching, caressing, and kissing. Half a century after the release of *Big Road*, Chris Berry read this film as an equivalent to Western lesbian pornography shot for male pleasure (Chris Berry 1988), which was strongly objected to by Zhang Yingjin. He found Berry's mistranslation of Chinese dialogue and ignorance of the cultural codes interpreted by Chinese audience in the 1930s extremely problematic (Yingjin Zhang 1994). According to Zhang, Berry's transplantation of lesbian identity in the Western sense to the Republic of China, where girls' intimate gestures were commonly practiced, serves as "a case of domination of Western interpretive authority in cross-cultural analysis" (1994, 47).

The mis-representation of female homoeroticism in China and misunderstanding of films in this regard leads to the question: What explanatory frameworks should we adopt to analyze Chinese female homo-erotic films in the way that respects the local historical and cultural context? After studying the local history of women's separatism and formation of lesbian identity under Western influences, I suggest two frameworks, namely, the matrix of female bonding and the matrix of lesbian sexuality. The matrix of female bonding refers to feminist separatism and female-female affection practiced in local history and represented in women's literature; while the matrix of sexuality speaks to largely Western concepts such as lesbianism, sexual minority and gay rights,<sup>1</sup> yet emphasizing the local distinctions of selfhood and strategy. Overlapping in female love and eroticism though, the two frameworks distinguish each other in terms of its cultural origins and inherited logics, based on which, a close-to-context decoding of film could only be possible. Adopting these two frameworks, respectively, I conduct close analysis of *Sweet Eighteen* (甜蜜18岁, 2012) and *Fish and Elephant* (今年夏天, 2001), to locate the "Chinese lesbianism" in these not very lesbian films in the eyes of American audience (Fran Martin 2010, 165). I will argue that the poetic symbolism and the narrative of homosexual-maternal transferability in the former resonates with Chinese women's literature and historical practice, while the narratives of homosexual normality and a coming-home rather than coming-out strategy in the latter film speak to the local specificity of lesbian discourse since the 1990s.

### **The matrix of female bonding: separatism and female intimacy**

Women's separatism was a historical practice specific to certain regions in both the dynastic and republic eras (1912–1949). In Guangdong women's separatism was enabled

by wage-earning spinsters, in Hunan by a female-exclusive discursive space demarcated by a female language, and at women's schools and colleges nationwide by highly educated female students and intellectuals (Shi Kai 1925; Shipeng Li 2017). Concentrated and harbored in a specific physical space, women's homoerotic desire was associated with, and arose from, a female-female network of care and bonding. I will contend, rooted in the local history, the matrix of female bonding refers to women's separatist practice and literary imaginations, exploring sisterhood, feminist alliance, and intimacy contract/institution that include physical intimacy, without hiving off sexuality as distinctive signifier though. Female-female sexuality is simply a natural extension of love, rather than constituting a political identity, as in the concept of lesbian as a sexual orientation.

Zi Shu (自梳), literally meaning self-combing, that is, coiling up one's hair at the back of the head like a married woman, yet without a real marriage. This custom of marriage-resistance dated back to the 18th century and only receded in the 1930s and 1940s, when silk factories that employed women were shut down due to the war. In its peak time, the number of Zi Shu women amounted to tens of thousands, and even in 1909, "not a single woman was married" in Pan Yu village (Zaizhou Zhang 2001, 757). This separatist institution was maintained through strict rules, including celibacy, a "friends" contract between two women (similar to the marital contract) and punishment for sexual involvement with men (Zhang 2001). Notably, it is women's financial independence, anti-marriage, and separatism that disrupt the patriarchal marital institution, rather than lesbian sexuality. Moreover, the separatism did not lead to the hetero/homo segregation, only the different categories of Zi Shu women and others.

Nü Shu (女书) was a language created by and only used among women in Hunan province, which no man was permitted to learn. It served as an exclusively female space and medium, in the form of rhythmic poems, for communication between women about grudges against patriarchal oppression and emotional bonding between sisters (Lijuan Tian 2004, 25). Nü Shu granted women discursive power free from men's voyeurism, surveillance, and discipline. Besides mastering Nü Shu, Xing Ke signed love contract and some of them maintained celibacy. Likewise, it is women's language and love contract that transgress the traditional patriarchy to certain extent, not lesbian sexuality, although some Xing Ke practiced genital sex (Zhebing Gong 2003, 39).

同性爱, literally meaning same-sex love, was widely practiced by "new women" in the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century, e.g., female students, teachers, and professionals, thanks to women's access to higher education and professions (Li 2017; Tze-lan Sang 2003). The collapse of polygamy and the rise of free love liberated women's desire, which was substantially directed to the same sex, as the equality eulogized in the free love ideals could be more easily fulfilled between women. In the same vein, it is same-sex love, female-female alternative marriage (Kai 1925, 728) and female financial network that constituted anti-patriarchal power, instead of lesbian sexuality. Public discussions on female-female sex rose on magazines, resulting in nothing close to sexual identity. Even commercial mirror-rubbing show (female-female sex show) appeared in Shanghai, merely to the pleasure of men's voyeurism (Boji Chen 2000).

When feminist celibacy, women's language and the wave of same-sex love disappear at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, women's separatist practices stay on in literary fantasy. In Dai Jinhua's analysis of Chen Ran's literature, the novel *Split* (破开) stands as a manifesto for

a sisters' state, in which a binary opposition between "we-women" and "you-men" is declared (Jinhua Dai 1996, 55–56). Sharing an intellectual and spiritual connection, the two female protagonists kiss each other and decide to move in together to confront the patriarchal world (Ran Chen 1995). Her utopian imaginations were relayed among female writers, e.g., Zhang Jie, Wang Anyi, Xu Kun, and Yang Yingchuan, although such a utopia sometimes ends in collapse due to patriarchal intervention or internal conflicts (Yanli Jiang 2009). Utopia, separatism and female homoeroticism have created anti-patriarchal imaginaries since the 1990s, while the imported concept of lesbianism encountered certain resistance. Declining to have her writing categorized as belonging to the lesbian genre or her own identity as lesbian, Chen termed her writing about female-female intimacy as "gender-transcendent love" or "gender-transcendent consciousness" (Ran Chen 2002, 1994). According to her, gender-transcendent consciousness means "true love regardless of gender" (Chen 1994, 106). It is idealized by Chen as a pleasure that escapes the heterosexual utilitarianism of reproduction and financial security to stretch deep into the soul (Chen 1994). Lesbian sexuality is downplayed as natural result of love, with no political significance of anti-heterosexual hegemony attached.

### **The matrix of lesbian sexuality: sense of normality and coming-home strategy**

The transition to the framework of homosexuality in the Western sense occurred in the late 1990s, although this was not a natural or smooth process. When the concept of lesbianism as a sexual identity was introduced in mainland China in the 1990s, Chinese women had to homosexualize themselves before they could adopt such an identity. In the process, I will argue, the previous cultural practices of women's separatism and intimacy influenced the self-formulation of Chinese women as lesbian. Their prevalent feeling of being "normal", that is, not distinguishable from ordinary people because of their love preference, does not align with the homo/heterosexual division. Consequently, this sense of normality shapes lesbians' aspirations to be accepted into the familial kinship formation, rather than to engage in confrontational politics of coming out as sexual deviants.

The 1990s witnessed the liberal turn in the Chinese feminist landscape to do with the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW). The historical understanding of anti-marriage alliances, same-sex intimacy, and alternative partnership in a broadly feminist framework gradually gave way to the Western framework of sexual identity, which was disseminated through knowledge-production and activism as well as popular culture in mainland China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This shift in framework also caused a shift in lesbian alliances and subjectivities, from earlier feminist subjects in a women's community to rights-bearing homosexual subjects aligned with gay men.

The introduction of homosexual identity from the US, which presumes a white, middle-class, urban American subject (Karma Chávez 2013), found fertile soil but was largely dislocated from the Chinese context in the late 1990s. The Stonewall riot in the US was celebrated as a "birthday" for Chinese homosexuals at the hallmark gathering of homosexuals in Beijing in 1996 (Hongwei Bao 2018), despite the fact that this required a cross-national and a-historical empathy to integrate it into the local context. Regardless of the lack of persecution of homosexuals by or confrontations with the Chinese state apparatus, Chinese homosexual subjects were

interpellated by the US model along with the westernization of knowledge production on the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Creating terms such as comrade (同志) and Lala (拉拉) for self-identification, Chinese gays and lesbians started to homosexualize themselves by producing a lesbian magazine and organizing a pride parade, queer film festivals, and LGBTQ+ NGOs. Their rights-bearing homosexual subjectivity was gradually built and consolidated through conflicts with a government that acted more like an adversary than a partner, particularly concerning the legalization of gay marriage (Bao 2018).

In this process of homosexualization, the globalized homosexuality based in “the United States as the dominant cultural model for the rest of the world” (Dennis Altman 2001, 87) was barely questioned. The two-layered parameter of freedom for gay citizens: rainbow parade and anti-discrimination legislation (Katherine Franke 2012; Jasbir Puar 2013) were used to gauge whether Chinese culture is modern and progressive. Despite the standardized parameter, some specific understandings and pertaining to Chinese lesbians’ lived reality and political appeals practices can nonetheless be distinguished. The sense of being normal has, for instance, remained “a defining and powerful marker of lala selfhood” as well as a “central aspiration for same-sex desires and life strategies” (Elisabeth Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen 2013, 13), quite distinctive from the resistance to normativity rooted in the Euro-American context (Ching Yau 2010). Beyond the Western grid of assimilation/transgression, feeling “normal” for women could stem from the local concept of gender-transcendent love and practices that foreground the freedom to love rather than sexual desire. Celebrating the “normal” function of love as a way of finding sameness within difference, women’s love does not reify the hetero-homosexual binary as in identity politics.

The sense of normality leads to aspirations to be integrated into familial relations in a non-confrontational manner. The mainstream narrative of coming out, almost “a form of peer pressure,” has not been favored in Chinese queer life, given the fact that only “6% of lesbian and bisexual women are totally out” according to one online survey (Shuzhen Huang and Daniel Brouwer 2018). The low percentage of “out” people should not, however, be interpreted as repression of one’s homosexual identity. On the one hand, the concept of sexual identity, irrespective of the introduction of queer politics in the 1990s, is not given as much importance in China as in the Western context. “The idea that sexuality is a core element of self-identity that must be confessed and integrated into all domains of life to be ontologically valid” (Tom Boellstorff 2005, 213) is mostly alien to Chinese people. Sexuality usually stands as just one element among “multiple, fractal” and “dividual” subjectivities (Boellstorff 2005, 210). On the other hand, it is not primarily homosexual conduct but rather the failure of the filial obligation to bear children that counts as the sexual deviance in the Chinese family structure (Huang and Brouwer 2018, 104). Homosexual behavior in Chinese history tended to be met with tolerance rather than homophobia, as in the West; however, the social pressure to pass down one’s bloodline has forced gays and lesbians to constantly engage with their biogenetic families, a task far more demanding than that of their Euro-American counterparts (Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen 2008). The challenge lies in finding appropriate strategies of negotiating one’s sexuality into the kinship, that is coming-home, rather than coming-out (Huang and Brouwer 2018; Wah-Shan Chou 2001). The coming-home strategy refers to the tactic that “integrat[es] one’s partner into the daily life of the family without

highlighting homoeroticism in a confrontational way as the singular marker of acceptance” (Chou 2001, 36).

## Female homoerotic cinema

The cinematic depictions of women’s affection for other women, whether aligned with the realm of female bonding or lesbian sexuality, fall under the category of female homoerotic cinema for the purpose of this article. Various influences, most notably censorship by the China Film Administration (CFA), cultural imperialism, and the rainbow economy, intersect with both local and global queer culture, creating a complex, episodic, and divided landscape for female homoerotic cinema.

Censorship regulations introduced since 2008 categorize the representation of homosexuality in films as obscenity and perversion, prohibiting the release of openly lesbian films with explicit markers of homosexual identity and sexual content in mainland China during the 21st century. For instance, *Fish and Elephant* marketed as mainland China’s first lesbian film, was released at the Venice Film Festival without official approval. Furthermore, the scope for on-screen physical intimacy between women has been steadily diminishing. The previously hidden facets of same-sex eroticism are now recognized and censored as homosexuality, reflecting increased awareness and sensitivity to lesbianism in recent decades. An example of this can be seen in *Big Road* mentioned before. It has been rediscovered and reinterpreted as a lesbian film, thanks to a misreading by Christ Berry in 1988 and today’s audiences, who fail to view it through the cultural lens of the 1930s when such intimate bonds between women were relatively commonplace.

The practice of censorship often results in a peculiar outcome for certain Chinese lesbian films showcased internationally. In some cases, these films receive acclaim, overshadowing the underlying issue of cultural imperialism within their narratives. Take, for example, *The Chinese Botanist’s Daughters* which employs a self-orientalizing approach to shed light on criminalized Chinese lesbian relationships for Western liberal audiences. This approach inadvertently perpetuates a simplistic hierarchy, depicting China as regressive and the West as progressive, a dynamic also evident in the film *A Dog Barking at the Moon*. When *A Dog Barking at the Moon* received the Teddy Award at the Berlin Film Festival for its LGBTQ-themed content, director Xiang Zi used her acceptance speech as a platform to shed light on China’s oppression of the LGBTQ+ community, thus revealing her resistance to the cinematic censorship enforced by the Chinese Film Administration (CFA) to the Western media (Qiang Xiao 2019). In the film, the daughter’s progressive outlook is attributed to her education in the United States, the consistent presence of her American husband (whose role is peripheral to the narrative), and, most significantly, her vocal support for gay rights, exemplified by her participation in a Gay Pride parade in the US. The political correctness of gay rights also grants moral high ground to the father, who is cheating on his wife with a man, thereby turning the classical narrative paradigm of the morally repugnant cheater into a sympathetic narrative of cheating for true love. With both the daughter and father firmly advocating for gay rights, the blame is primarily placed on the closeted mother. Redemption is offered to the mother only towards the end when the daughter confronts her about her affection for a female friend and pushes her to confess her lesbian identity. Nevertheless, the real-life lesbian experience in mainland

China is considerably more intricate and multifaceted than the film's overtly out-and-proud stance might suggest. Dividing queer geopolitics into a binary framework of gay-friendly progressivism and gay-oppressive backwardness oversimplifies the diverse local nuances and peculiarities within the Chinese LGBTQ+ community.

Homoerotic films released in mainland China often steer clear of queer politics and tend to overlook lesbian identity and sexuality. These films, often set in periods predating the conceptualization of homosexuality in China, align with the matrix of female bonding. For instance, movies like *Intimates* (自梳, 1997) and *Snow Flower and Secret Fan* (雪花密扇, 2011) delve into the historical practices of women's separatism, specifically Zi Shu and Nü Shu. In contemporary dramas, there is a noticeable reluctance to embrace the label of lesbianism. Directors often shun this classification both to smooth the approval process and to avoid the constraints associated with the genre. When director Wang Junzheng was questioned about the lesbian undertones in her film *Women Taxi Women* (女人Taxi女人, 1991), she denied their presence when addressing an Austrian audience. Her reasoning was twofold: she didn't want to jeopardize the film's chances of receiving screening permission, and she emphasized that her film primarily explores the intense emotions shared between women, portraying a subtle and beautiful female friendship that transcends mere lesbian love (Junzheng Wang 1997, 70). Similarly, films like *Taekwondo* (跆拳道, 2004) and *Sweet Eighteen* do not aim to sexualize the intimacy between women. Instead, they focus on other aspects of their relationships and connections.

The realm of theatrically released female homoerotic cinema remains relatively small when compared to the proliferation of shorts, documentaries, and low-budget feature films showcased at queer film festivals, video platforms, and offline film screenings. The emergence of the rainbow economy gained momentum in the 2010s, leading media companies, lesbian dating apps (such as Lesdo and Rela), and lesbian websites to invest in lesbian-themed web series, web shorts, and low-budget features. Commercial lesbian shorts, including titles like *Girl's Love* (错了性别不错爱, 2016), *Touch* (触碰, 2016), and *Gelin & Xiamo* (格林和夏末, 2017), often included lesbian sex scenes and stereotypes of butch/femme roles, targeting lesbians, especially those using lesbian dating apps. However, the production of commercial lesbian dramas, driven by the rainbow economy, faced setbacks in 2017 due to increased censorship and the replacement of platforms' self-regulation policies with Cyber Video and Audio Regulation rules, tightening governmental regulations. The ban on representations of homosexuality, as stipulated in these rules, sparked strong resistance, including a lawsuit filed against its discriminatory impact on homosexual communities. As a result, there was a decline in the production of commercial lesbian shorts by lesbian dating apps after 2017, leading to a shift towards more discreet strategies that de-sexualized and downplayed lesbian identification.

The landscape of queer representation is divided, with restrictions on homosexuality on one side and a thriving queer fandom on the other. Following the peak of BL (boys' love) web series in 2015 and 2016, significant rainbow capital flowed into these homoromantic web series, bringing this genre into the mainstream and accumulating billions of views (Sheng Zou 2022). Examples include *Guardian* (镇魂, 2018) and *The Untamed* (陈情令, 2019). Playfully navigating around state censorship, fans of *Guardian* coined the term "socialist brotherhood" to allude to the male-male romance in the web series, which was understood by fans but only subtly depicted due to censorship



rules (“Socialist Brotherhood” n.d). In contrast to the prevalence of BL web series among (heterosexual) women and the gay community, GL (girls’ love) novels and web series have traditionally been more confined to queer women. Despite a limited market, GL web series have garnered increased investment due to the trending queer subculture, growing feminism, and stricter regulations on BL adaptations imposed by official authorities.

The online television series *Double Mirror* (双镜, 2021), a drama featuring two leading ladies, introduces a new narrative paradigm centered on women’s mutual support and emotional entanglement. Notably, this new paradigm deviates from the more common clichés of female competition and powerful women seeking self-fulfillment. This narrative, humorously referred to by audiences as “socialist sisterhood” due to its homoerotic ambiguities, stands out in contrast to female-female intimacies in women’s writing and cinema, as discussed earlier. It particularly differs in terms of spectatorship and cultural context. “socialist sisterhood” web series primarily target lesbians and feminists who are mindful of identity politics. At promotion of this series, the female leads kissed and cuddled as they engage with fans, presenting their relationship in the show as girlfriends and wives. In comparison to the earlier context, which lacked awareness of homosexuality, this new context fosters a homoromantic subculture. This development is a consequence of the mainstreamed BL (boys’ love) fandom that capitalizes on women’s erotic consumption of male beauty and male-male sexual relationships (Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li 2020). The ambiguities in “socialist sisterhood” web series are strategic choices made by producers, and without censorship constraints, the narrative would likely shift towards an explicitly lesbian storyline.

Queer films featured at the Beijing Queer Film Festival, Shanghai Pride Film Festival, non-mainstream video platforms, as well as in bars, clubs, and universities, are not subject to the same regulations imposed on cinematic releases and web series. However, it’s important to note that film festivals were occasionally canceled or relocated depending on the local political climate. Organizers of the Beijing Queer Film Festival employed a guerrilla strategy by selecting multiple screening venues and adjusting their screening plans to ensure its success (Bao 2018, 142). The Shanghai Pride Film Festival faced fewer disruptions from the local government, partly due to the flourishing rainbow economy in the cosmopolitan city, which includes the growth of queer clubbing and drag balls (Jamie Zhao 2020). Most queer movies showcased at these two major film festivals were shorts and documentaries, often independently produced and possibly sponsored by overseas funding. Covering a wide range of topics, including lesbian activism, identity anxieties, familial relationships, lesbian love, and sexuality, many lesbian films presented in queer spaces have contributed to the visual representation diversity of female homoerotic desire in mainland China. However, their limited circulation can be attributed to debatable quality and low-profile promotions.

Having sketched the landscape of female homoerotic cinema that engages various powers and cultural logistics, I focus on feature films, considering their wider audience, easier accessibility, and their resultant larger influence. This focus will include an exploration of how their narratives interact with local and globalized queer culture to offer a close-to-context reading. To represent the respective female bonding and lesbian sexuality matrices, I have selected *Sweet Eighteen* and *Fish and Elephant*, to analyse their codifications of female eroticism in the contemporary context. I argue that *Sweet Eighteen*

speaks to women's separatism through a narrative of homosexual-maternal transferability and the ambiguity of female-female desire. *Fish and Elephant* engages lesbian identity and sex, focusing on the narrative of homosexual normality and the coming-home strategy.

### Female homoerotic symbolism and homosexual-maternal transferability

The film *Sweet Eighteen*, nominated for Best Film at both the Shanghai International Film Festival and the FIRST International Film Festival, tells the story of He Na, a high-school student who meets Xia Hong at a nightclub while investigating her mother's boyfriend. Their friendship gradually blossoms into an intimate romance, even though Xia eventually departs. The conclusion of the film hints that their romance may rekindle when He becomes a high-school teacher and Xia achieves self-reliance as a factory worker. *Sweet Eighteen* has not garnered much academic attention, possibly due to its lack of explicit lesbian identification and a clear homosexual political agenda. While the director mentioned homosexuality during the film's promotion to refute claims that the same-sex ambiguities were mere queerbaiting, she did not frame homosexuality as a distinct sexual identity. Instead, she characterized homosexual emotions as one of the many ways to express youth (Luo Pan 2013), positioning it within the broader spectrum of love as a normal emotional choice that isn't overly laden with queer politics.

This a-identity narrative introduces ambiguities, resulting in various reviews offering interpretations ranging from female friendship, a woman's bisexual tendencies, lesbianism, not being lesbian enough, a cliché involving two women and one man, to narratives about closeted women ("*Sweet Eighteen*"). Some members of the audience who dismissed the film's lesbian theme expressed dissatisfaction with the film's perceived lack of passionate sexual encounters or a rebellion against heterosexual hegemony. Informed by the globalized subculture of LGBTQ+ film and television, today's Chinese audience has developed expectations for what constitutes typical lesbian portrayals, despite the limited production and release of lesbian films in Chinese cinemas. The a-identity and asexuality portrayed in the film, failing to firmly confirm homo-/heterosexual binaries, may be seen as a compromise, particularly given the stringent regulatory policies against queer representations in mainland China. This censorship amplifies spectators' desire to expose queer elements in films, even though it may not be necessary to force "out" female homoerotic films, equalizing "the less potentially controversial arena of ambiguous lesbian representation" to "closeting the lesbian content" (Karen Hollinger 1998, 140). By not conforming to the ostensibly universal standard of openly lesbian films, the ambiguities in *Sweet Eighteen* reflect specific local realities and literary traditions.

The poetic symbolism in the film accurately unearths the innate homoerotic desire of a teenage girl living in a small town where the knowledge of homosexual identity is almost nonexistent. Not being aware of the closet, the girl pursues pure and sweet love without hesitating. The symbol of two seagulls and the ocean, which appears in the film several times, is an allegory of the love between the two girls. In one scene, He gazes fondly at the seagull tattoo that Xia has on her shoulder. This tattoo leads to a love fantasy, with the overexposure of this sequence indicating that this is a dream. In the dream Xia takes He's hand and with eyes locked on one another, they run down the beach

towards the sea. To materialize this fantasy, He carves the same seagull on the inside of her thigh, a private part of her body holding her secret desire.

Moreover, the homosexual-maternal transferability imbedded in the ambiguities of this film resonate with contemporary Chinese women's literature offering an intriguing case for cross-text comparison. The mother-daughter relationship in *Sweet Eighteen* recalls psychoanalytical theories of the pre-Oedipus complex, in which the attachment young girls have to their mothers is used to explain female homosexuality and their tendency to bisexuality (Sigmund Freud 1932; Sue Thornham 1997; Nancy Chodorow 1999). Maintaining a close bond with her mother, He bears strong hostility toward her mother's boyfriend Lin. Their rivalry stems from desiring the same woman. This is depicted in the crosscutting of the scene of the mother, acting the part of an abandoned woman in a traditional Chinese opera, being the object of Lin's gaze, and the scene of a photo of the mother performing in her youth being the object of He's gaze. Their rivalry escalates when Lin seems to gain the upper hand by having sex with the mother, leaving He peeking in at the door. He's subsequently smashing of a chair over Lin's head successfully scaring him away, although she is unable to rebuild her bond with her heart-broken mother.

The pre-Oedipus narrative is occasionally regarded as a tactic employed to mitigate the controversy surrounding lesbian films within the prevailing patriarchal value system. This approach is based on the notion that the narcissistic attachment between mother and daughter, is somewhat comprehensible (Linda Williams 1986). However, it is also believed that the pre-Oedipal stage is expected to naturally transition as girls enter adulthood and ultimately give way to heterosexual marriages. This transition has been a recurring theme, notably depicted in the schoolgirl romantic tragedies found in Chinese women's literature during the early 20th century. *Sweet Eighteen* deviates from the conventional schoolgirl tragedy narrative by extending the girls' affection into adulthood. Towards the conclusion of the film, as the two female characters achieve financial independence, their love symbol resurfaces. A crosscut scene features a letter from Xia containing a photo of the sea, with an image of He gazing at her seagull tattoo. This is paired with a distant seagull flying in the sky beneath a rainbow (literally the meaning of Xia's name). This narrative departure from the typical schoolgirl memory transforming into the present and future reinforces the idea of the transferability of immature maternal bonding to a fully developed lesbian relationship.

This transferability concept also aligns with women's literature from the 1990s. In Chen's literature, Dai Jinhua notes an interchangeability between the mother-daughter relationship and that of girlfriends. When confined within a domestic space, the mother assumes the role of a close girlfriend to the female protagonist. Yet, the intimacy seen in the scenes involving girlfriends seems to serve as both a replacement and extension of the mother-daughter bond (Dai 1996, 54). In *Sweet Eighteen*, Xia enters He's life after He's mother ends up in a vegetative state due to a fall, effectively replacing the maternal bond. When Xia departs, the maternal bond resurfaces in He's hallucination as a means to restore the lost female-female love. He is depicted lying on the bed with her mother caressing her face and holding her hand tightly. The profound significance of the interchangeable dynamics between maternal and lesbian bonds lies in its capacity to envision a utopian sisterhood. In this utopian vision, the mother symbolizes both maternal origin and a collective of women. Within the narrative of women's utopian literature, the mother

figuratively represents the source of all daughters, thereby upholding the diversity and unity of an all-female community.

While the aspiration for women's separatism may not be as explicit as in women's literature, the film also lends itself to a feminist separatist interpretation. A segregation from fathers creates a female space, as evidenced by Xia locating her father in a southern city where he lives alone and impoverished in a boathouse. Furthermore, in a scene where the two girls share their sadness at being fatherless, Xia's father is portrayed as a tiny figure rowing a boat in the distance—visible yet unreachable, existing yet dysfunctional as a father figure. Similarly, male lovers are banished from the female space. Two examples illustrating this point are when Lin is kicked out, and when a male character who is romantically pursuing He turns out to be her half-brother, rendering a romantic relationship taboo.

### Homosexual normality and the coming-home strategy

Unlike the homoerotic ambiguities in *Sweet Eighteen*, *Fish and Elephant* was straightforwardly acclaimed as the first lesbian film in mainland China, aided by international film festival recognition when it won the Elvira Notari prize at the Venice Film Festival. This 16 mm feature was independently made by Li Yu, an inexperienced director who had no idea when making the film that CFA's approval would be required for both theatrical release and attending international film festivals (Jinyue Wang 2013). The overseas distribution, online accessibility, and DVD domestic piracy earned this film a large following beyond its limited screenings at universities. Listing this film as banned by CFA thus may not be so accurate, but it is true that no lesbian-identified film has obtained release approval in mainland China. *Fish and Elephant* tells the story of Xiao Qun, a lesbian-identified woman, who convinces her mother of her choice to settle down with her girlfriend rather than entering a heterosexual marriage. The narrative develops according to marital norms, starting from marriage pressure and blind dates, and ending with the mother's remarriage and acceptance of her daughter's deviance. The accompanying narrative of lesbian romance is functional yet not closely explored, borrowing instead from the clichés of the heterosexual love story: love at the first sight, sex, suspicion of an affair, and settling into a stable relationship. The narrative commitment to the marital norms and the obscured narrative of lesbian romance led some American queer audiences to complain that the film was not lesbian enough (Martin 2010, 165).

*Fish and Elephant* is unquestionably lesbian because of its use of the highly visible markers of lesbian identification and sex. Liang Shi is right in pointing out its unambiguous declaration of lesbianism, as distinct from other films about female intimacy. However, Liang's celebration of this film as a groundbreaking discovery of the homosexual women who have existed in China throughout its history yet been deprived of a voice is problematic (Shi Liang 2014). As discussed earlier, self-homosexualization occurred on the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but women's desire for women was not new in historical reality; rather, what was new was their sexual minority identity. *Fish and Elephant*, made in 2001, corresponds to a period when the Western concept of homosexuality was being introduced and localized in mainland China, at a time when the director Li Yu sensed more gays and lesbians emerging in her friend circle (Ou Yang and He Jiang 2018). The essentialization of homosexuality as transnational and trans-historical

prevailed in some film scholars' analysis of *Fish and Elephant*, leading to a yoking together of Western theory and the Chinese film text (Martin 2010; Shuqin Cui 2011; Liang 2014). Cui Shuqin insightfully concludes that the representation of homosexuality in the film is situated "within rather than against heterosexual normality" (Cui 2011, 219), but throughout her chapter, she enthusiastically pursues the confrontation between homo- and heterosexuality. Her distinction between lesbian space as domestic and heterosexual space as public and thus legitimate ignores certain sequences, such as the two leads walking in the street hand-in-hand and the fact that all three of Xiao Qun's declarations of her preference for women occur in a public space. The framework familiar from global queer politics of transgressing heteronormativity, which Cui applies, results in certain kind of dislocation between her analysis and the film text.

Attempts to modify the Western framework of lesbian representation exemplified by Cui's research were initiated by Fran Martin, who addressed the temporal structure of presentism in *Fish and Elephant* beyond the hetero/homosexual divide. Here, presentism consists of "foreground[ing] the unmistakable textures, sounds, and sensory density of everyday life in early-twenty-first-century Beijing," which is in contrast to the memorialism in most Taiwanese lesbian films (Martin 2010). However, due to the geopolitical difference, the presentism in *Fish and Elephant* cannot constitute a "resistant response to persistent memorialism" (Martin 2010, 174), if there is little tradition of representing past-tense school-girl crush in mainland China region. Keeping in mind the cultural and historical specificity of the context, I will argue that *Fish and Elephant* speaks to the lived reality of lesbians in mainland China in terms of their experience of homosexual normality and their use of the coming-home strategy. Both of these formations draw attention to the intersection of sexual identity and familial kinship, which is what renders this film typically Chinese, even if "not lesbian enough" in the eyes of American spectators.

Homosexual normality is articulated on two occasions in the film when the female protagonist uses the rhetoric of "we are the same" as a means of indicating human empathy. On the first occasion, empathy is built with a man through a shared preference for women, which collapses the distinction between sexual orientations on the basis of a shared object. On a blind date, Xiao Qun thus tells her date straightforwardly that she loves women, not men. To solve his bewilderment over the meaning of this articulation, she seeks to normalize her position by likening it to his own: "I like women just like you do. We are the same." The boundary between homosexual and heterosexual identity is blurred and replaced by the grouping of straight man and lesbian on the same ground of being attracted to women. On the second occasion, human empathy is rationalized through the common pursuit of happiness in the life of both the mother and the daughter. In a restaurant scene where the mother reveals her plan to re-marry with some hesitation due to concern about her daughter's reaction, Xiao Qun instead shows her full support by saying, "I want happiness for you." Aligned by this universal longing, the pursuit of happiness is used by Xiao Qun afterwards to confess to her mother her own version of bliss: spending her life with her female lover. The difference between each of their deviations from marital orthodoxy, remarriage for the mother's generation and a homosexual relationship for the younger generation, is brushed aside. Homosexual difference is thus dissolved into a shareable position, since everyone embraces some deviance in navigating their own life toward happiness. Homosexuality is not distinguished from other deviances as long as it is on the right track to happiness, so there is

no need here for a proud confession of sexual identification to segregate oneself as a sexual minority.

The sense of homosexual normality in this way leads to a narrative drive toward coming-home rather than coming-out in *Fish and Elephant*. Homosexuality remains largely a private matter, since the visibility and confrontational politics of the queer community is absent due to social ignorance and a lack of homophobia. The closet does not exist to strictly demarcate inside and outside; rather, there is a gray area between hiding one's sexual orientation and confessing. Xiao Qun and her girlfriend live under the same roof and hang out hand-in-hand like any heterosexual couple does. She even does not intend to hide their intimacy when her mother arrives on a visit from her distant hometown. The social ignorance of lesbianism actually creates space for the expression of women's desire for women that is similar to the heterosexual relationship, except for marriage. In *Fish and Elephant*, moreover, this social ignorance does not necessarily lead to homophobia, but rather to tolerant understanding when people are informed. After hearing Xiao Qun's confession of preferring women, the male date, surprised and confused, asks her about her blood type. Apparently, lesbianism is not understood by the man even as a sexual preference. After his suspicion that Xiao Qun is using the woman as an excuse to avoid him is cleared up, he proposes to be just friends, a gesture of recognizing her difference without intrusion or discrimination.

A more cautious "coming-home strategy" was adopted later, emphasizing on the partner's compatibility with the family, rather than the deviance of her homosexual identity. Before a final confession, Xiao Qun's girlfriend has already obtained her mother's trust and favor as Xiao's best friend and also as an indispensable figure in their family life. The transition to the real family member afterwards is thus smoothed out. Successful integration into familial kinship brings a happy resolution for the female protagonists, which is celebrated with passionate love-making in the end. The ending, which intercuts the mother's a wedding ceremony with Xiao Qun experiencing sexual pleasure on a bed, is the best illustration that everyone deserves a piece of happiness in their own way. The daughter's absence from the mother's wedding ceremony, instead of hinting at potential rifts in the near future, allows the simultaneous celebration of one's joy in marriage and the other's joy in sexual intimacy. If, on the contrary, the film were to end with the two female leads attending the mother's wedding, then this would draw attention to the glaring legal absence of gay marriage, a political issue which lies beyond the film's interest in lesbians coming home.

## Conclusion

Female homoerotic cinema in mainland China serves as a complex intersection where various factors such as censorship, cultural imperialism, the rainbow economy, local women's history, and globalized queer politics interact. These films, whether aligned with female bonding, responsive to women's separatist history, or subject to cinematic censorship, give rise to intended ambiguities or narratives of socialist sisterhood. Some lesbian films engage with both the local tradition of women's intimacy and globalized queer politics, creating narratives of homosexual normalcy and coming-home strategies. However, when cultural imperialism enters the picture, local complexities can be oversimplified into black-and-white narratives of anti-gay China persecuting homosexuals. It is

crucial not to neglect local history and the nuanced complexities that exist within it. To better analyze these local specificities, it is advisable to return the cultural context to film texts and employ explanatory frameworks that identify historical trajectories and inherited cultural logics.

Theoretical frameworks like reciprocal gaze structure, hetero/homo transgression, and resistance to homonormativity, which may be useful in analyzing lesbian films in the West, may not seamlessly apply when studying female homoerotic cinema in China. Similarly, concepts such as homosexual-maternal transferability, homosexual normality, and coming-home strategy aligned with two matrices, as proposed in this article, may not agree with Western notions of progressiveness or what is considered “lesbian enough.” The assumption of a universally applicable parameter for lesbianism should be reconsidered, giving way to a recognition of the diverse frameworks that can better encompass the local nuances and intricacies of this phenomenon.

## Note

1. Here, lesbian as sexual identity is understood as the typical Western concept, not to simplify the heterogeneity and complexity of the social change of such an understanding in the Western context. Concepts such as “lesbian continuum” in Rich’s term challenge and broaden such sexual-orientation-based understanding. But, homosexuality as sexual identity is the most important concept that has influenced China since the 1990s. Therefore, it is used as the typical Western framework here in this article.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Misha Kavka for her invaluable suggestions, continued support, and encouragement. I also thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback on this manuscript

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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