

**Queering Chinese Comrades!
Through the Lens of Director Cui Zi'En**

从导演崔子恩的镜头里看中国同志的酷儿化

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Many thanks to...

my advisor, Elisabeth Kaske. Without you, this truly would not have materialized!

& my family, but especially uncle Alan, who always brought back a plethora of cassettes, VCDs, DVDs, etc. from Hong Kong for my sister and me. I'm pretty sure my love for film originates from those many hours spent together in the living room, all of us captivated in front of the screen.

I. Subversive Subjects

Xiao Bo: Dad, drink some water.

Xiao Bo's Mother or Father: Call me mom.

Xiao Bo: Take a drink, dad...mom.

- Enter the Clowns (2002)¹

The opening sequence of Cui Zi'en's film, *Enter the Clowns*, reads a place card: Xiao Bo's Mother or Father. 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 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. The moment abruptly ends as we jump cut to the next scene.

Such 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. These scenes in Cui's cinematically created worlds serve as examples for exploration into gender identities by one of China's first independent queer filmmakers.

¹ Cui, Zi, "Enter the Clowns," DVD.

Cui's queer films and written discourses, beginning from the early 1990s, serve as a dynamic repertoire in which queer Chinese culture can be deconstructed to compose a more cohesive representation of contemporary Chinese sexuality. This thesis will analyze three of Cui Zi'en's films, *Enter the Clowns* (2002), *Withered in a Blooming Season* (2005), and *Star Appeal* (2008), all of which have varying themes from extraterrestrial fantasy to gender-bending.

I will first give a brief introduction of queer theory development in the United States during the 1990s. Then, I will discuss the applicability, merits, and uncertainties of using 'western' queer theory as a way to understand China's *tongzhi* (a now-mainstream term for Chinese gays and lesbians) 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 the conceivably colonialist connotations of this application to non-Western societies; I make an appeal for a universalist application of queer theory that places Chinese *tongzhis* as unique queer global citizens, and members of a not-necessarily imperialistic movement.

My argument is that Cui's works prove that he supports a universalist application of queer theory to China and through his activism and deliberate international film circulation, promotes citizenship towards a global queer community. Some scholars of homosexuality in China, as I will elaborate later on, argue towards an anti-universalist stance, stating that queer theory is a Western creation based on Western concepts and structures, and therefore cannot be applied to China's unique homosexual history. On the contrary, queer theory is *meant* to fluidly mold according to national and cultural contexts whilst being hyper-conscious of hegemonic power systems. Evidence that Cui's films support a specific Chinese queer narrative will be addressed through the use of two feminist film theorists: Laura Mulvey's work on visual pleasure and Elizabeth Cowie's work that develops concepts of fantasy as the *mise-en-scène* of desire. The synthesis of queer theory into psychoanalytical and film discourses – to critique the ideas of gender construction and fantasia 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 benefit from each other equally.

Cui is a cutting-edge director who basically does as he pleases; he films whatever he wants, he casts whoever he likes, and he discusses whatever taboo topics he desires. Cui even stated in an interview: “So when I make a film, I only have myself and people around me in mind,” also including, “I always see each of my audience as myself.”² Cui’s independency and headstrong dedication to capturing the purest form of his artistic vision is quite extraordinary considering how commercialized the film industry is, and Cui’s success shows that there is demand, or at the very least, an audience, for queer Chinese film. How, one may ask, did China go from just relatively recently decriminalizing homosexuality in 1997, to a country with an emerging queer cinema, especially with regulation and censorship laws? It would be important to lay down foundational framework in which we can contextualize Cui as a queer Chinese filmmaker, within various, often overlapping, spheres: queer theory, *tongzhi* (an indigenous term for Chinese gays and lesbians) culture, new Asian queer studies, queer film, new queer Chinese cinema, and film theory. It is my hopes that the reader will part with a sense of excitement towards the possibilities of Chinese queer cinema, and anticipation for tracking the path Chinese queer cinema 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.”³

-David Halperin (1997)

² Cui Zi'en, (Filmmaker), interview by Jane Zhang, translation by Yuqian Yan, Beijing Apple Store "Meet the Filmmakers" SeriesPodcast Video, 02 2010, December 12, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-3JHQI5ayw>.

³ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.

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. In this chapter, I will first discuss the origins of queer theory, and what the creators of queer theory actually meant it to be used for. Then I will examine the anti-universalist arguments of select scholars of Chinese homosexuality who refuse to accept the universal application of queer theory in China because they see it purely as a Western 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 arose from post-structuralist critical theory, which allowed for a less rigid approach to human sciences during the early 1990s; it is a field that resides at the intersection of queer studies and women’s studies. Queer theory was pioneered by the likes of Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Gayle S. Rubin, among many others, and is distinctly separate from gay and lesbian studies, which focuses more on inquiries regarding the definitions of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ behavior. Queer theory bases itself on the fact that gender and sexuality definitions are all socially constructed, and in this way, it aims to expand its focus to include any sexual activity and/or identity that falls into normative/deviant categories. The beauty of queer theory is that it creates an infrastructure that theorizes its own ‘queerness’, it challenges the idea that gender is part of the essential self while redefining what gender is, along with the constructions and restrictions this term has brought onto our ideas of sexuality.⁴

The most valuable aspect of queer theory is that it recognizes that the heterosexual/homosexual binary sex system is a hegemonic power regime in which rigid psychological and social boundaries inevitably give rise to systems of dominance and

⁴ William B, Turner. *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 106-107.

hierarchical organization.⁵ This recognition of a hegemonic power regime commands that sexual identity be understood in terms of this ‘politics of difference’ in order to avoid suppressing the multiple ways of experiencing homosexual desires in all manifestations and cultural settings. 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 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.⁶ 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

In the past two decades, *tongzhi* culture, activism, and identity have increased its presence in mainstream China despite institutional discrimination, such as venues and cultural institutions refusing to host gay and lesbian events, and lack of funding for LGBT hotlines and HIV/AIDS organizations. The first vernacular use of the word *tongzhi*, meaning comrade, to describe Chinese queer, gay, LGBT, and non-heterosexual individuals was in 1989. 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 contrast with the term

⁵ Wenqing Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-1950 (Queer Asia)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 20.

⁶ Travis S. K. Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy* (London: Volume 52 of Routledge Contemporary China Series, 2010), 22.

‘homosexuality’ (*tongxinglian*), which has a clinical connotation, *tongzhi*, like ‘gay and lesbian’ or ‘queer’, is used for self-identification. 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.⁷ *Tongzhi* has since been used in all regions of China as a word separate from Anglo-Saxon constructions of homosexuality, and the word’s origins in the Communist and Nationalist Party struggles in the middle of the twentieth century results in a word that embodies positive cultural references, gender neutrality, and desexualization within the stigma of homosexuality. *Tongzhi* thus becomes an indigenous cultural identity that has been embraced from the 1990s onward, particularly after China decriminalized homosexuality in 1997 and removed it as a mental illness in 2002.⁸ 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.⁹

Some 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. There have also been many scholars who state that homosexuality and homophobia are imports from modern Western culture, and that China should follow an anti-universalist stance. In 1984, Samshasha, a veteran Hong Kong gay rights activist, published his Chinese-language book *History of Homosexuality in China* 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’s work was published and released into the discussion when the social climate was ready for new dialogues, as it was a response to Hong Kong’s debate over the decriminalization of homosexuality. Hong Kong had a homophobic social environment at that time, and the general belief was that homosexuality was a disease and/or sin brought from the West. Samshasha was the first who said

⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁸ Hinsch, Brett, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990)

⁹ Travis, S. K. Kong, *Chinese Male Homosexualities: Memba, Tongzhi and Golden Boy*.

that ancient China had a long and celebrated 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 later changed his argument, in the second edition in 1997, and conceded that homosexuality did exist in Chinese culture, but that it functioned more implicitly than he previously asserted. What is most noticeably was his eager desire to unfold a hidden history of Chinese homoerotic tradition. 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’.¹⁰ This implicit essentialist conception of homosexuality partly fused into later studies and also into the local gay and lesbian movements. His argument still stands as anti-universalist, as he advocates for localized definitions of gay life.

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*, which translates to *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.¹¹ 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), argues that the consolidation of Western sexological writings into the “discourses of tongxing’ai [same sex love] in Republican China,” is essentially, and innately, non-translatable.¹² Chou and Sang are also just among others who do not believe queer theory can apply to China.

There is a yet another third argument regarding queer theory that states there are parts of *tongzhi* culture that can neither align itself to the anti-universalist thoughts Samshasha, Chou,

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Petrus Liu, and Lisa Rofel, *Beyond the strai(gh)ts : transnationalism and queer Chinese politics* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2010), 296.

¹² *Ibid.*, 298.

and Sang support, nor fit into universalist assertions other LGBT scholars support. Fran Martin, a television, film, and literature researcher of transnational China at the University of Melbourne, identified a wide array of discursive practices (*tongzhi*, *tongxinglian*, *ti/po'*, *xianshen*, *tongzhi wenxue*) in Taiwan that she believes can neither be constituted under the cultural homogeneity of the West nor celebrated as culturally discrete. Martin emphasizes the overlapping of these 'glocal' discourses through analyzing power dynamic relations that are simultaneously regional and indigenous, but she is more interested in using these discourses to undo the cultural imperialism and dominance of U.S. LGBT culture and queer theory. She suggests, for example, that the 'closet' is a highly Eurocentric notion and non-normative Taiwanese sexualities exemplify a practice of 'masking' that is distinct from its American or European counterpart.¹³

Chou, Sang, and Martin are in concordance in their belief that *tongzhi* is untranslatable. 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."¹⁴ However, more recently Chinese academics and artists are increasingly opening up to queer theory and adopting it into their works for the benefit of both parties.

In Fact, Queer Theory Needs China

The ongoing discussions of queer theory universalism inevitably boil down to the question of whether China can benefit from and contribute to queer theory. In fact, not only would China benefit from queer theory, but also the development of queer theoretical discourses in China would strengthen queer theory as an anti-hegemonic school of thought that is able to persist across borders. Queer theory in China is being developed as '*ku'er lilun*,'; 'ku'er' is the

¹³ Ibid., 297.

¹⁴ Ibid., 300.

Chinese phonetic word for ‘queer’, followed by ‘*lilun*’ as the translation for theory. Academics who support the universalist application of queer theory support the complete synthesis of queer theory and China, without the separation between ‘China’ and ‘queer theory’. There should be no “Chinese queer theory”, as the grammatical act of separating and conjoining “China” and “queer theory” brings attention to the intellectual division of labor between the gathering of raw materials in area studies – “China”, and the production of universal paradigms in “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’.¹⁵

It may appear that because queer theory work has developed within Western structures, definitions, and gender roles, it is innately anti-universalist – but the fact that queer theory structures itself to constantly question its own actions and applicability, supports its universalist use. The anti-universalist argument underlying the protracted academic disputes between universalism and anti-universalism is the very legacy and contribution of U.S. queer theory, rather than a manifestation of postcolonial resistance to U.S. theory. In the 1980s, queer theory developed out of ‘gay and lesbian studies’ and distinguished itself from the latter by offering, precisely, a critique of cultural universalism. In her 1990 *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler characterizes the application of ‘women’ and ‘patriarchy’ to non-Western cultures as a ‘colonizing epistemology.’ *Gender Trouble*, which is the authoritative work in early queer theory, actually derives a surprisingly large amount of ammunition from an argument about the nonidentity between Eastern and Western cultures. Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet* says that homosociality and homosexuality structures are culturally policed, but this can only be applied to the social terrain of the “modern West.”¹⁶ 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* that provides evidence that

¹⁵ Petrus Liu, and Lisa Rofel, *Beyond the strai(gh)ts : transnationalism and queer Chinese politics* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2010), 297.

¹⁶ Kang Wenqing, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-1950 (Queer Asia)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 19.

queer theory was *is* and *is meant* to be universalist, and its creators were extremely conscientious about post-colonial theory.¹⁷

As mentioned above, queer theory will also benefit from having China in its lexicon, and will also provide more insight to Chinese homosexuality and *tongzhi* culture because it intrinsically builds post-colonial theory and discourses into its apparatuses against social normativity and heteronormative. For example, Ara Wilson notes two major approaches that have emerged as what can be called ‘new Asian queer studies’, one of which uses a post-colonial critique as a way to decenter Western queer hegemony.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Queer theory builds categories such as gender, race and class as a multiplicity that renders identity permanently open, hybrid and fluid, which in turn supports transnational coalition-building very much *based* on a politics of difference.²⁰ 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, allows for both gaping and nuanced cultural differences. 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

¹⁷ Steven Seidman, and Linda Nicholson, *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 123-31.

¹⁸ Ara Wilson, "Intra-Asian Circuits and the Problem of Global Queer," *The Ohio State University* (2006).

¹⁹ Ara Wilson, "Queering Asia," *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, no. 14 (2006), <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html>

²⁰ Kang Wenqing, *Obsession*, 19.

that the conference acknowledged Western-centrism, but also consciously took its claims on queer theory for Asia.²¹

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 construct models of transnational politics and social change."²² While the development of queer theory literature is pivotal, I would like to highlight the a contemporary wave of artists from different fields, such as film, photography, sculpture, and experimental performance who are applying queer theory in their artworks produced in non-Western cultures and contexts.

New Queer Art

Visual arts have the ability to capture and convey queer theory discourses in a manner which literature cannot. In addition, the visual arts are generally more available, accessible, and understandable for the general public, thus having more potential for queer activism. Fan Popo is 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. Cheeky artist Chi Peng created the photography series *Fuck Me*, a series 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. The Gao Brothers produce paintings, installation work, performances, sculpture, writing, and photography among other things. Their video piece, titled in English as *Chinese Transvestites*, depicts drag shows in

²¹ Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia: 1st International Conference on Asian Queer Studies, Conference Programme, 7-9 July 2005, Bangkok, Thailand, 2.

²² Petrus Liu, and Lisa Rofel, *Beyond the strai(gh)ts : transnationalism and queer Chinese politics*, (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2010), 316.

China. Visual artist Wang Zi made a collage series in 2009 titled *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. 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."²³ It is within this scope where creative production such as film, video, photography, paintings, and other combination of visual arts 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.

III. China's Queer Awakening: Queer Chinese 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)²⁴

²³ Amie Parry, and Jen-peng Liu, "The Politics of Schadenfreude: Violence and Queer Cultural Critique in Lucifer Hung's Science Fiction," *Positions*, 18, no. 2 (2010): 352,

²⁴ Michele Aaron, *New queer cinema: a critical reader*, (Rutgers University Press, 2004), 166.

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: *defiance*, levied at mainstream homophobic society but also at the ‘tasteful and tolerated’ gay culture that cohabits with it.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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. In this short chapter, 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.²⁷ New queer Chinese cinema had been introduced to the film festival circuit in the late 1990s.²⁸ 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

²⁵ Helen Hok-Sze Leung, *Homosexuality and Queer Aesthetics*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2012).

²⁶ *Ibid.*.519.

²⁷ Norman A. Spencer, “Ten Years of Queer Cinema in China.” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 20:1 (2012): 373–383.

²⁸ Helen Hok-Sze Leung, *Homosexuality and Queer Aesthetics*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2012).

expressions have appeared frequently in Chinese-language films since the early beginning of cinema itself.”²⁹

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.”³⁰ 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) ³¹

Cui Zi’en is very much a creator and participator of this queer counterculture community through a multitude of crafts. Cui Zi’en is *a lot of things*: 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

²⁹ Kwan, Stanley, "Yang ± Yin: Gender in Chinese Cinema," DVD.

³⁰ B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema, The Director's Cut*, (Durham and London : Duke University Press, 2013).

³¹ Qi Wang, and Cui Zi’en, *The Ruin is Already a New Outcome* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2004), 184.

his experimental style and taboo subject matters within his films.³² This chapter provides background information on Cui, along with Cui's filmography, activist work, and film production process.

While I am focusing on Cui's films in this thesis, it is important to contextualize him 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 State³³ to Pomona College in California.³⁴ 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's Background

"This is also my own trajectory, from the so-called avant-garde and experimental, to narrative films, and then documentary. My works cover all these different fields."

- Cui Zi'en (2010)

Cui was born in 1958 in Harbin, Heilongjiang, China, into a Catholic family whose religious influences at a young age, along with fantastical extraterrestrial life, have become

³² Qi Wang, *Writing Against Oblivion: Personal Filmmaking from the Forsaken Generation in Post-Socialist China*, UCLA 2008, 274.

³³ "Cui Zi'en: Screening and Q&A session of his latest work, *Queer China*, a documentary," *East Asia Program, Cornell University* (blog), 10 26, 2012, <http://eap.einaudi.cornell.edu/node/10005>.

³⁴ "Cui Zi'en's *Queer China*, Screening of the film followed by a conversation with Jonathan M Hall Berenice Reynaud," *Media Studies, Pomona College* (blog), 3 3, 2011, <http://mediastudies.pomona.edu/2011/queer-china/>.

recurring motifs in his films. He received his Masters of Art degree in Literature in 1987 at the Chinese Academy of Social Science. He currently works and lives in Beijing, as a research fellow at the Film Research Institute of the Beijing Film Academy after being demoted from professor status when he declared his sexuality. He says that before his “coming out, [he] was someone – because [he] was a writer, a filmmaker and a teacher. From the moment [he] revealed [his] homosexuality, there was repression.”³⁵ He has published nine novels in China and Hong Kong. *Jiujiu de renjian yahuo/Uncle’s Past*, won the 2001 Radio Literature Award in Germany. He is also the author of six books on criticism and theory, as well as a columnist for four magazines. In 2002, Cui received a Felipa Award by the International gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and a California State Assembly Award in the USA. This goes to contribute to his international recognition and presence.³⁶ Simultaneously, Cui bases himself in China as a queer auteur, and one of the most avant-garde DV makers in Chinese underground cinema. He coexists in the global queer sphere and the hyper-local queer sphere. Cui is also relatively accessible, and I can see him becoming canonized in the queer Chinese narrative in the future.

For such a cultural dissident, Cui was actually a good student at school when he was a child – he did well on exams, and was the little red cadre in the schools he attended. It was in the late seventies when he had an awakening from his mainstream experience, when he suddenly realized how his childhood had ended: “he looked back and felt everything in the past looked so pale. Empty of any content, that kind of feeling, very empty, very very empty, really with nothing at all. Nothing.”³⁷ The feeling of emptiness can be linked to one of the reasons why as an artist Cui supports the formation of multiple identities that allow for fluidity and freedom.

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,

³⁵ “Cui Zi’en Interview at 4th Beijing International Queer Film Festival,” *dGenerate Films* (blog), 11 20, 2009, <http://dgeneratefilms.com/critical-essays/cui-zien-interview-at-4th-beijing-international-queer-film-festival>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

³⁷ Cited from: *Ibid.*, 60.

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)³⁸

As an activist filmmaker, it would seem natural for Cui to vocalize about rectifying preconceived conceptions of homosexuality and other ‘deviants’ from heterosexual norms in preachy ways, but he is far too cheeky 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. In 2000, 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 Yuanming 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.³⁹

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*’, meaning comrade, for Chinese gays and lesbians, 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

³⁸ Zi'en Cui, (Filmmaker), interview by Jane Zhang, translation by Yuqian Yan, Beijing Apple Store "Meet the Filmmakers" SeriesPodcast Video, 02 2010, December 12, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-3JHQI5ayw>.

³⁹ Source for this?

festival attracted 600-700 participants who more than filled the 300-seat auditorium. Although Zhang had some-what frightening repercussions afterwards that involved an institutional follow-up and a forceful drinking of a lot of alcohol, the festival haphazardly continued in a guerrilla-style fashion at other locations and festival names for the following ten years.⁴⁰

Many of Cui's films have been 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 that was involved in the film festival felt that the cultural expression they 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 2002.⁴¹ 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 one of the main unifiers of a transnational collective queer community in China.⁴²

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 legitimization 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

⁴⁰ Yang, Yang, "Our Story: 10- 'Years of Guerrilla' of Beijing Queer Film Festival," DVD.

⁴¹ Yang, Yang, "Our Story: 10- 'Years of Guerrilla' of Beijing Queer Film Festival," DVD.

⁴² Audrey Yue, "Mobile intimacies in the queer Sinophone films of Cui Zi'en," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 6, no. 1 (2012), pp.

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.”⁴³

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 gay and lesbian film festival. His films are easily accessible. They are shown at many locations across the globe and can even be streamed from Amazon. This confirms that he is also a part of an internationally recognized new queer Asian cinema that aims to gain artistic license over queer Asian self-representation.

Cui's Film Aesthetics & Production Style

“I want to preserve the natural and rough quality of DV camera, which better presents the scene of China's development today. I want to show the dust of Beijing Station, not a perfect visual experience made up with artificial light.”

- Cui Zi'en (2010)

Cui's extensive array of films share the same natural and rough quality described in the quote above. His work is very much defined by the arrival of cheaper digital video (DV) production that has also instigated an entirely new generation of grittier, low-budget independents sometimes referred to as the “Sixth Generation”, or “Urban Generation” of filmmakers. Sheldon Lu has suggested that the DV cinema movement of the Sixth Generation of Chinese film-makers

⁴³ Zi'en Cui, "Filtered Voices: Representing Gay People in Today's China," *International Institute for Asian Studies*, no. 29 (2002),

can be considered as part of the subaltern challenge to official Chinese modernity.⁴⁴ Chinese DV films have produced unofficial public film cultures that have destabilized the state film industry and its centralized forms of exhibition and distribution. Cui belongs to this generation that has not only created an alternative independent public film culture; his films are integral to the emergent lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) social movement in China.⁴⁵

As part in this generation of filmmakers, making use of the availability of new technologies and the international gay and lesbian film and video festival circuit, Cui is an experimental filmmaker who is very much the product of his time. Cui has the liberty to “make whatever film [he likes] without any concern for box office or success,” which alleviates him from the economic pressure, as most of his films are funded by either himself, or other small funders such as the Jeonju International Film Festival in Korea.⁴⁶ In an interview, ironically conducted in an artist series lecture at Apple’s Beijing Store, Cui says that he doesn’t think there is a “distinction between the so-called mainstream and alternative,” no “mainstream or small branch,” but rather everything is part of a big wave.

Cui’s films are low-budget. He mixes professional and nonprofessional actors and actresses, and uses minimal lighting and makeup because it is also low-cost. Cui’s aesthetic is therefore free of box-office restraints. For, example Cui is known to shoot long takes that would not be tolerated in box-office movies. Cui’s long takes make the viewer suspend time and space, and dwell on the narratives, or sometimes, a stitching of random scenes that create a . This combination of space continuum lapse and imaginative storylines forces the viewer to believe, if even for a short while, this fabricated world so independent of the one he/she lives in. One of Cui’s earliest video works, *Gongce zhengfang fanfang/The Pros and Cons of the WC* (2001), is shot in one long take, and made to have the structure and aesthetic of a performance piece. It is a

⁴⁴ Sheldon Hsia-Peng Lu, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, (University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 101.

⁴⁵ Yue, Audrey, Mobile intimacies in the queer Sinophone films of Cui Zi'en. (*Journal of Chinese Cinemas*; 2012, Vol. 6 Issue 1), 97

⁴⁶ Zi'en Cui, (Filmmaker), interview by Jane Zhang, translation by Yuqian Yan, Beijing Apple Store "Meet the Filmmakers" SeriesPodcast Video, 02 2010, December 12, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-3JHQI5ayw>.

scripted comical debate between two sides over questions like whether or not male and female public toilets should be separated or integrated. While Cui's style is natural, his actual film content is really the world of his imagination. Cui uses a limited number of real world locations and often uses studio spaces to achieve these landscapes, which can be described, using the term developed by Elizabeth Cowie as landscapes of "fantasia".

V. Cui Zi'en's Fantasia: Using Psychoanalytical Film Theory to Analyze Cui Zi'en's Work

"The concept of fantasy also allows us to understand cinema as an institution of desire and as a scenario for identification...the linear progression of narrative is disturbed and re-ordered by the drive of fantasy, disrupting the possibility of a coherent or unified enunciating position."

- Elizabeth Cowie ⁴⁷

Fantasy is a dynamic subject that many have neglected in the past, it has been dismissed simply because fantasy is traditionally defined as *unreal* – fantasies do not matter because they aren't real and we *know* that they aren't real. However, psychoanalytical understanding of fantasy goes beyond the spectrum of the real, into the imagined, which indefinitely occupies the space for more stimulating possibilities. Just as in queer theory, from which Cowie's concept of "fantasia" is derived, identity and positionality in fantasy is never fixed for the subject.

This fluidity allows fantasy to become a tool for understanding cinema and recognizing locations of desire that are useful for identify formation on, and off, screen. Cui Zi'en concocts imaginary worlds of fantasia in his films to take advantage of fantasy's inflicted disturbances on ordered positionalities, allowing the characters and their fantasies' mise-en-scène of desires to reorient viewers' preconceived notions of gender and sexuality. Cui's films thus fit very neatly into Cowie's concepts of fantasy. Likewise, the characters that identify as female in Cui's films

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing The Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1996), 164.

support Laura Mulvey's developed conception of scopophilia and the male gaze. A closer juxtaposition with psychoanalytical film theory and Cui's films highlights the fact that these characters that exist in a PRC Chinese framework are stretching and exploring into new boundaries with these concepts that evolved from queer theory. My argument is, therefore, that Cui's works fit into Cowie's and Mulvey's analysis of desire, but Cui's characters discover and explore new terrain within psychoanalytical film theories to subvert concepts of gender and sexuality. They may thus serve as a proof that queer theory needs China in order to keep true to its fundamental asseveration to be constantly morphing and expanding across national borders and sexual landscapes.

Mulvey's Visual Pleasure

Mulvey wrote her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) before queer theory was coined and developed in the early 1990s, but queer theorists and those who were to become queer theorists, such as film academic Richard Dyer who discusses the projections gay men place on female stars like Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Doris Day (*Stars* 1979), have grounded their work in Mulvey's then-groundbreaking thoughts on gender-based visual pleasure. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" introduces the political use of psychoanalysis to discuss the objectivity of women in classical Hollywood films – films that we have been told to enjoy because the unchallenged mainstream industry has manipulated the language of visual pleasure. Although Mulvey's work calls for a stronger awareness of the male gaze and other objectification of the *female* body, her work can be applied to Cui's films as his characters are gender-fucks; a term used to describe individuals who consciously reject society's gender binary. Mulvey's analysis of scopophilia, meaning the pleasure of looking, as a main attraction of films, can be applied to the characters in Cui's films who identify as female, or undergo a sex-change to become female. At the same time, since Cui's characters range all across the sexual-spectrum – heterosexual, gay and lesbian, transsexual, transgender, gender-fucks, and even sex-less – they push Mulvey's thoughts on hegemonic desire, the pleasure of looking, and the woman as image/man as bearer of this gaze into new sexual, regional, and generational fields.

While Mulvey critiques heterosexual patriarchy by bringing attention to the multiplicities of the male gaze, Cui's characters actually adopt and embrace the male gaze as a testimony to their agency. Cui's characters and inter-character relations contort the gaze in a novel manner. His films actually take on a subverting nature, allowing for new planes of analysis within the folds of Mulvey's concepts. Mulvey states that because the female represents castration, the male can only regain his dominancy and ease his castration anxiety by 1) fetishizing the female object of desire in attempts to understand her (demystify her mystery) by either punishing her via voyeuristic probing or by 'saving' her (often seen in film noir), and 2) completely fetishistic scopophilia to solely focus on the physical beauty of the object and thus transforming scopophilia into something satisfying in of itself. Within Mulvey's argument, she asserts that women forfeit their agency, or simply have no agency, to intervene in this one-way relationship where only the man can be the agent of desire.⁴⁸ However, while Cui's characters fit into scopophilia, they also reclaim their agency in an empowering way such that Mulvey's ideas are both confirmed, but also expanded upon.

Mulvey also argues that "the alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring the break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire."⁴⁹ Cui's films does this exactly – Cui creates a new language of desire(s) with characters who merge the imagination with the reality, and in the process go through sex-changes or sexual awakenings. Thus, notions of gender are completely subverted. For Mulvey, the fascination with film originates from pre-existing patterns already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him. Cinema has voyeuristic potential, of realizing some sort of preexisting phantasy. One could say then, that the public screening of films is an infringement on the public/private sphere, where collective viewing unites individuals who are otherwise strangers to each other. Mulvey's idea that cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego (you feel alone and more free in a dark theatre or screening room)

⁴⁸ Laura, Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 840.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*. 835.

while simultaneously reinforcing the ego (you automatically try your hardest to identify with the film and its characters), allows for the sense of forgetting the world as the ego has subsequently come to perceive it.⁵⁰ This is important in Cui's work. The individuals who watch his films are mostly in-the-know of *tongzhi* life.⁵¹ Audiences are thus able to watch the films and reflect upon either their queer identity, or thoughts on gender construction.

Elizabeth Cowie's Fantasia and Mise-en-Scène of Desire

Elizabeth Cowie's work on fantasia as the mise-en-scène of desire continues where Mulvey concluded – that film possesses this fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego – but introduces new extensions on the language of desire.⁵² Cowie's concept that films have the capacity to represent our fantasies and desires is what she terms, the mise-en-scène of desire. The word mise-en-scène is the French word for “placing on stage” and is used to describe carefully curated imagery in which everything in the frame – the actors/actresses, props, furniture, lighting, costume – are arranged in a certain composition to achieve the director's vision. Mise-en-scène and cinematography, which includes the camera angles, movement, and lightening, also go hand-in-hand in creating an aesthetic in which the film functions within. The aesthetic, mise-en-scène, and cinematography must be considered with much weight when analyzing film because the mood, atmosphere, or underhand connotations of the scene, and of the film itself, is dependent on these elements. Everything in a frame is there for a reason and must be carefully measured – this is especially apparent in Cui's films, since the dialogue is often succinct, the scenes are inside closed rooms or small domestic spaces, and the camera shots are lengthy without much action.

Cowie focuses on drawing connections and distinctions between the concept of fantasy, and feminist debates, psychoanalytic theory and the analysis of films. They are interconnected by the fact that fantasy is a political problem, and that psychoanalysis conceptualizes fantasy, and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 836

⁵¹ Ibid., 833.

⁵² Elizabeth Cowie's work on fantasia as the mise-en-scène of desire is published in two books, *The Woman in Question: m/f* (1992), edited by Parveen Adams and Cowie, and in *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (1996), written by Cowie.

that film hosts a safe space where the representation of fantasy is exceedingly vivid and fully capsulized within a screen. Cowie basically argues that fantasy is a structure, a structuring of the diverse contents, wishes, scenarios of wishing, and she uses psychoanalysis on this description of fantasy.⁵³

Cowie breaks down fantasy into two positions that feminists took sides on: the first position is moralistic, viewing fantasy as invariably using another person as an object, and thus condemning it as dehumanizing, and insisting that it can be changed and stopped by will. The second position accepts fantasy as intrinsic to human nature, and while it is inevitable intertwined with sexuality in a way we have not fully fathom, and understood, fantasy is something to be embraced. This position has led one feminist academic, Pat Califia, to defend S/M relationships as egalitarian because they are consensual, individuals mutually agree to play a certain role that best satisfies and expresses their sexual needs, and it is hardly a result of institutionalized injustice, because at least in S/M relationships, you can switch roles upon need, but you cannot do that in your biological sex or socio-economics status.⁵⁴

Cowie focuses her work on the public forms of fantasy in relation to sexuality in film. While the most publically sanctioned, and acceptable if not encouraged, form of fantasy lies in creative writing, film also is a medium in which desires are literally screened for public viewing. Our day-dreams and fantasies are usually kept private, and upon discovery by an outside agent: there is a certain amount of shame or embarrassment for having them, in fear of appearing childish (according to Freud), and also for the wishes being wished. However, these fantasies are made acceptable if they are projected onto a medium between the private, and the public.⁵⁵ Queer film thus has unlimited possibilities to *not only* convey innermost desires, but to also analyze racial, socio-economical, and sexual aspects specific films are shaped by (a rich topography for anthropological studies) and are trying to underscore.

⁵³ Elizabeth Cowie, and Parveen Adams, *The Woman In Question: m/f*, (The MIT Press, 1992).

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1996), 125.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 137-143.

Cowie's concept of "Fantasia" (1992) and her deconstruction of fantasy in psychology and cinema can be applied to Cui's construction of fantasy in his films. Cui films embrace fantasy as a fundamental property of human life. At the same time, however, it is through this process of construction and deconstruction of gender that one can see how Cui stitches a world parallel to Cowie's, yet existing on a different, and more gender subversive, plane. If Cowie's mise-en-scène of desire places a microscope upon fantasy, Cui's films are the petri dish for queer inquiry. Cui's mise-en-scènes of desires are often dark, and perverse, yet they capture a world where gender and sex become fluid or even trivial, and it is this world where we can study new queer terrain.

Mulvey and Cowie both assume that the heteronormative narrative always controls images, erotic ways of looking, and spectacle. But what happens when Cui's characters in his films have undergone a sex change, or are homosexual without any specific preference? How do you explain this sort of male gaze when the lines of sexuality become ambiguous? In that way, Cui's characters that identify as female, or have a sex change to turn into female, become dynamic characters in which psychoanalytical film theory, which derives from film theory, can be applied to. Cowie's work is useful to analyze Cui because she sets the framework for desire, which all of Cui's characters are driven by – whether it is sexual desire or desire for the innocent and pure. Cowie's work will be used in this manner: I will use selected scenes and interpersonal relationships in Cui's films, *Enter the Clowns* (2002), *Withered in a Blooming Season* (2005), and *Star Appeal* (2008) to discuss these themes.

VI. 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."

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. The three Cui Zi'en's films I will analyze, *Enter the Clowns* (2002), *Withered in a Blooming Season* (2005), and *Star Appeal* (2008) were chosen because they encapsulate Cui's varying styles and content topics of his non-documentary films. *Enter the Clowns* (2002) is a gender-bending story split into five 'chapters' revolving around four main characters. *Withered in a Blooming Season* (2005) is mostly confined within the domestic sphere and focuses on a set of twins' relationship. *Star Appeal* (2008) is about extraterrestrial love, a topic Cui is very fond of, when a Martian is integrated into a bisexual relationship. By applying psychoanalytical film theory that both formed (Mulvey, *pleasure of looking*) and originated from (Cowie, *fantasia*) queer theory onto Cui's films I argue that it is beneficial for both queer theory and China to place Cui within the progression and dialogue of queer theory, as his works both support and contribute to this ongoing ambition towards a more fluid societal structure.

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 context of the minor characters, whether lovers or strangers, who engage with the four main characters disorients 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. The characters in the film 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 location and national narrative. The film was shot for under \$5,000 and within five days, and is more experimental and audacious in its plot lines than

⁵⁶ Qi Qiang, and Cui Zi'en, *The Ruin is Already a New Outcome* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2004), 184.

the cinematography and camera work than Cui's other films.⁵⁷ *Enter the Clowns* is broken up to five sections, following four characters who intermittently reappear in each other's chapters: Xiao Bo (and his mother or father) whom we already met in the beginning of this paper, Nana who changes into a woman, Ru Meng Ling who changes into a man, and finally Dong Dong. The film explores the fluidity of gender identities against strong traditions of masculinity and femininity, both Chinese and Western.

Male Hegemony in a Transgender Plane

In the film's second section of the film "Nana Changes Into a Woman", the main character Xiao Bo meets up with his childhood friend who has undergone a sex change to become a woman, Nana. She has done everything in her power, from cleaning toilets to petty stealing, to become a woman because she says Xiao Bo told her they could be together if she changed sex: "That night, Christmas night. Cui Zi was there, so was Yuan Bo. We went to a bar. They went to sing and you said to me if I had the operation you'd stay with me forever." (Here we see a nod to the director Cui, and actor Yuan Bo) Xiao Bo insists that he never said that, even though he admits to a stranger at the end of the film that he did tell Nana that, but didn't know himself whether he could keep to his promise and accept his childhood friend as a lover.

After a rejection and a series of hurtful words from Xiao Bo, she vows that she will let many men fall in love with her, but that she will never love them back. Nana then becomes a performer at a bar even though her singing is jarring on the ears, thanks to her fierce flirting with the bar owner's younger brother who also works at the bar as a dancer. She continues on a series of sexual liaisons with a variety of men to follow out her vow to become a heartbreaker. Although many people question Nana's sex, she has completely embraced her new sex *and* gender, and it appears as though she's enjoying her life with a collection of men at her fingertips.

⁵⁷ Foundas, Scott. "Enter the Clowns." *Variety* 2 Dec. 2002: 29. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 12 Nov. 2012.

http://go.galegroup.com/pitt.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA95262963&v=2.1&u=upitt_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w

This section ends with a frame of Nana in the bar she performs at, laying comfortably and swinging on the bench-seats, looking out into the distance.

Nana is by far the most memorable character in *Enter the Clowns*, and her strong assertion of womanhood can be best understood within feminist queer theorist Laura Mulvey's work on desire. In the scene where Nana and Xiao Bo meet for the first time after Nana turns into a woman, Nana actually *wants* Xiao Bo to gaze upon her femininity that she acquired for him – she *desires scopophilia*, she wants to be watched. Nana goes on a quest to prove her femininity by first demanding Xiao Bo treat her like a woman through her actions. They are talking in a living room; Nana is wearing a short form-fitting dress, turning and spinning around so Xiao Bo can admire her slim body (20 inch waist, and C80 bra size, as she proudly states) that one would typically define as beautiful. She refuses the beer Xiao Bo offers her, saying that she cannot drink anymore, now that she is a lady. Nana also begins to play with her hair, telling Xiao Bo, “It must have been two years since we've met. Look at my hair, it has grown. I have kept it for you. Do you like my lips? Do you like the blue shadows?” as she points to her done-up eyes. When Xiao Bo rejects all her attempts to attract him and get physically closer to him, she gets angry and confronts him about his sexuality, and the promises he made to her.

Xiao Bo's rejection of Nana can be seen through Mulvey's assertion that because the female represents castration, and in this case it is especially obvious because Nana literally symbolizes the loss of a phallus by going through castration to become a woman, Xiao Bo is somehow threatened of his own manhood. He insists to Nana that he likes woman, not men, when Nana confronts him about his sexual preference. As stated earlier in this paper's section V., Mulvey says that there are two options for males to regain his dominancy and ease his castration anxiety: 1) fetishizing the female object of desire by either punishing her via voyeuristic probing or by 'saving' her, or 2) completely fetishistic scopophilia. Xiao Bo follows the first route, by punishing Nana through voyeuristic probing, critiquing her, and not accepting her new identity. If anything, he is turned-off by Nana as he physically distances himself whenever she tries to sit close to him, and reminds her of her past gender identity as a male to agitate her.

The interactions between Xiao Bo and Nana is a power tango, and the film viewers keep a close eye on Nana simply because her actions are so intriguing and her ‘femininity’, whatever connotations that word implies *and* means idiosyncratically, is so heavily put on, we in turn engage in a sort of scopophilia of our own because watching her becomes pleasurable – her overt performance makes us reconsider and internalize our own concepts of femininity and masculinity. When Xiao Bo says he remembers when they went out singing with Cui Zi and Yuan Bo, Nana sings the song they both sang that night: “Shiny head, got no hair, when the sun is out. It shines and shines,” then stating, “I also sang a very feminine song,” which she proceeds to sing, ending it with a “Now you remember?” Xiao Bo indicates that he remembers, but soon afterward says, “Can you have children?” to regain his ground. Nana punches him and tells him to piss off, and this is when Xiao Bo appeases a bit and gives her a cigarette to smoke. Nana reclaims a bit of her femininity by positioning the cigarette for Xiao Bo to light, and Xiao Bo obliges. They eventually come to the conclusion that Xiao Bo will never accept her, and thus Nana’s goal to make men fall in love with her is another method of asserting her womanhood.

In the following scene, Nana is literally performing femininity on a stage, when she auditions for a singer position at a bar she used to frequent when she was a man. The boss remembers her from the same outfit she wore when going to that club in the past, and he tells her to not cause make a nuisance and to leave because they do not want any drag queens. But Nana insists that it wasn’t her, but her twin brother that wore her clothes to the club. She charms the boss’ brother who takes a liking to her, and he helps her receive an audition, and coaches her on what song to sing. The first song is turned down – he says to do another song or else the boss will reject her. The second song is chosen but he says that Nana sings it like a man, and that she should try using more emotion. Nana responds by using a high-pitched voice to sing, to which the brother claps and exclaims that Nana is excellent and that the boss must hire her. In this scene, the stage lighting is focused on Nana as she switches herself to whatever is needed, or wanted at the moment. The fact that the boss’ brother is so direct in his instruction, and Nana is so willing to adapt herself accordingly makes gendered appearances apparent. The clothing, or lack there of, in this scene also contributes to the hyperawareness of gender; Nana is on a small stage wearing a halter-top shirt, while the younger brother instructing her is shirtless. By the end of the audition, the boss agrees to hire her for a trial run.

In Mulvey's argument, women forfeit their agency, or simply have no agency, to intervene in this one-way relationship where only the man can be the agent of desire. In contrast, Nana willingly steps into the spotlight and actually desires the gaze, and uses it to her advantage to get what she wants. In another scene after the audition, Nana expresses to a male lover that she cannot be with him like before (when she was a man) because she "didn't like it that way" and she prefers the way she is now. She is laid out on the floor, completely comfortable with herself, while he is standing up gazing upon her. She says: "I am a woman now, what is wrong with that." She has fully taken on her role, and has become the agent of desire herself. This is an example of Nana manipulating her position as the object of desire by making herself the agent of desire. She appropriates the very weapon used against women to keep them down, as a weapon of her own. Nana thus affirms Mulvey's concept that the male gaze exists, but debunks the fact that is the deciding factor of gender dynamics. Gender lines then become blurred and rendered obsolete in her romantic relationships, and in this particular scene, she tells that lover: "Men, there are no good ones among them. Men who want men are still men. You like men but you are still a man." When he responds by saying he is different, Nana rebuffs: "How? You can go for your men. Go on, go on." When he is told to leave, he says that he cannot, and asks whether he can stay. He then lowers himself to the floor, so that they are equals. In this scene, we see not only see actions driven by desire regardless of gender or sex, but also Nana challenging the assumptions Mulvey makes on women as helpless objects of desire.

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 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. 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 lavatory ‘anthropology’ includes comments that call for separate lavatory construction so men are not “aroused by female odors” and become desirous to leap over the wall.

A culmination of scenes display 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.

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 of 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 poke fun at the institution of gender, and 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 others’ 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 undermine 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 cheekiness appropriation of *tongzhi* as an indigenous Chinese term.

The interactions between Meng Ling and Middle Brother seem minute at the opening scene of this section, but contention steadily arises in their relationship as the story progresses. Shortly after the opening scene, all the brothers are in someone’s home when Meng Ling’s sister, Binbin, comes over. The Middle Brother flirts with Binbin and shuffles her into a locked bedroom away from everyone else in the living room. Meng Ling is infuriated, and he and Younger Brother enter the room through the outdoor balcony. In a later scene, we see a seemingly drunk Middle Brother walking into Binbin’s house, and admitting his feelings toward Meng Ling before having intercourse with Binbin: “Ever since your sister’s sex change, don’t you know what I am saying? I have problems I cannot talk about...I am really angry.” Similar to Xiao Bo, Middle Brother feels threatened by Meng Ling’s infringement into manhood and masculinity, heightened by the fact that Meng Ling was able to attain “Eldest Brother” status in this section’s opening scene, and he takes on Mulvey’s second route of castration anxiety by fetishizing Meng Ling. Middle Brother tries to seduce Meng Ling while they are at a school campus, by first proclaiming his love for him, and then using more than appropriate amount of force to remove Meng Ling’s shirt. Meng Ling refuses to have sex with Middle Brother because they are on school campus grounds, and Middle Brother angrily broods away.

The horrific rape scene is the culmination of Middle Brother’s insecurities, and the words he yells to Meng Ling while raping him are representative of those insecurities: “Change! Change! Change! Change! You want to change!”, and, “How can you know what a real man is?”

Youngest Brother extolls Middle Brother for a being true man following the rape scene (“I think you are a real man. I worship you.”), and they get drunk together. Youngest Brother then ties Middle Brother’s hands and feet to a bedpost, and lets Meng Ling into the room so he can reciprocate what Middle Brother did to him. There is also a panel of mirrors in this room, and for a portion of the scene, the camera is angled towards the mirror to perhaps emphasize that the viewer is a third-party bystander. It is unknown whether Youngest Brother and Meng Ling conferred to plan this, but either way the traditional paradigm of the male dominance, in this case, the ‘original’ male, is perplexing, since it exists in a new plane in which gender is far from simply dichotomous.

Mothers, Fathers, and Redemption

In the forth section “Dong Dong Stays Overnight at a Man’s House”. Dong Dong, a young man in his mid 20s, goes into a foreigner’s house party that Nana and one of her boyfriends is also at. The foreigner, whose ethnic background remains ambiguous, is interested in having Dong Dong as a lover – he invites him to take a shower, to which he attempts to sneak into multiple times. Later on, the host makes an emotional and a cash offer to Dong Dong, but he brushes both offers off, and states that he wants someone like his mother who can change completely for the sake of another person. This makes the viewer wonder: what roles do mothers play in Chinese society, especially since this conversation is between two men who belong to different ethnic groups? Are Chinese mothers more self-sacrificing? What is Dong Dong asking for exactly in a male partner? Either way, nothing is truly resolved in this vignette, but it serves as a good precursor for the last section.

As I already stated in my introduction, the film opens with Xiao Bo and his father-turned-mother, in the section “Xiao Bo’s Mother or Father”. Cui often uses the actor Yu Bo, who acts under the name Xiao Bo in multiple Cui films, such as in *Star Appeal* (2004). Xiao Bo is taking care of his father-turned-mother who is on her deathbed. A scene of borderline incest occurs, as the mother, played by Cui Zi’en himself, asks Xiao Bo to apply makeup on her, drink milk from her breasts, and eventually asks him to ejaculate in her mouth so she can be sent off with his

'milk'. Xiao Bo acquiesces to all her requests. Femininity is an ongoing theme in this scene. Xiao Bo's father now turned mother insists that she be given the typical attributes of womanhood, such as the ability to give and take this 'milk', i.e. provide breast milk and receive semen.

The fifth, and last section, is "Xiao Bo after his Mother or Father's Death", and has Xiao Bo conducting several rituals for his father's remains inside a Catholic church. He then goes out into the graveyard with a bouquet of flowers, and Nana comes to pay her respects as well. They are sitting next to Xiao Bo's mother or father's tombstone, and while reminiscing about the deceased, Nana admits to Xiao Bo that she wants to settle down with a decent man rather than loveless messing around with a lot of male sexual partners. Nana tells Xiao Bo that she "only discovered today, that [their] destiny is not in a young man's embrace nor in [his] embrace, but in this place," referring to the ultimate end. Xiao Bo expresses to Nana that he has accepted that his father is also his mother. Both of them seem more comfortably aware of their positions in life while they sit underneath a tree next to the gravestone. This last section of the film has the most outdoor scenes, and it feels as though there's a renewal of freshness, as though all the darkness from the previous sections has been aired out into the public where things appear to be more *real*, rather than imagined in the back room of someone's mind. Xiao Bo's mother and Nana both achieved their redemption through acting out Cowie's idea of *mise-en-scènes* of desire between each other. Xiao Bo's mother achieved her acceptance and completion of self when Xiao Bo ceremoniously saw his mother off with his milk. Nana came to terms with Xiao Bo at the cemetery, after her experiences of declaring agency over her femininity.

In the following scene, Xiao Bo is at an outdoor café where he approaches a stranger who is busy reading a magazine and asks if he can talk to him. The stranger says he will charge Xiao Bo for the exchange, to which Xiao Bo agrees and spills out everything that has been preoccupying him to a man, who hardly looks up at Xiao Bo's innermost feelings. Xiao Bo says that he used to think he could cope with anything, and that he was an angel who could accept people and carry them to heaven. To this, the man says something about beating West Asia in the next football tournament. Xiao Bo then talks about how he could not handle Nana, saying that he thought he could accept her as a woman, but that he never promised her anything. Xiao Bo says:

“I used to feel I was an angel, but now I seem closer and closer to Satan. I am becoming evil. Why cannot I take it now? Have I been tempted by Satan and become evil?” Religion and Catholicism are reoccurring themes in Cui’s films, and although they are somewhat understated in this film, the portrayal of religion is seem as redemptive, and a healing tool. The man tells Xiao Bo not to worry, and he warms up to him, eventually inviting him to hear his band’s gig that night. Xiao Bo is receptive, and takes him up on the offer. This scene is an example of Xiao Bo acting out his desire to be free of his burdens in fantasy *mise-en-scène*; he releases all his burdens onto a stranger, who serves as a neutral ground free of judgment. The stranger hardly internalizes Xiao Bo’s comments about his mother’s death and border-line incest farewell, and welcomes Xiao Bo to new beginnings.

In the next scene, Xiao Bo attends church, where he meets Dong Dong, who pushes a wooden crucifix to Xiao Bo’s chest. The camera lighting is intentionally over-exposed, and bodies seem to be washed with a pure whiteness. The frame also pans around the church’s stained glass windows, and the viewer receives an ethereal feeling. Xiao Bo and Dong Dong see each other outside the church, and they exchange smiles, and the scene fades to the ending scene of Xiao Bo reading, completely naked, some of Cui’s poetry from a book. We see the pajamas he wore in the opening scene hung up on a bedpost. Xiao Bo reads: “I see a pair of wings growing out from below his ribs. The feathers are soft and white.” The film ends right as Xiao Bo finishes the poem. The references to religion, angels, and acceptance after the characters can be seen as Cui’s director’s choice to conclude that the characters, Xiao Bo, Nana, Meng Ling, and Dong Dong, have received some sort of resolution and are now more receptive to their sexuality and general self.

Xiao Bo and Dong Dong also receive their own redemption by acting out their desires, through Cowie’s thoughts on *fantasia*, and they experience relief and gratitude for their new healings. Unlike Cowie’s assumption that subjects want their *mise-en-scènes* of desire to be ongoing, Xiao Bo and Dong Dong end their scenes of desire so that they can heal, and move on.

Nana, Ru Meng Ling, and Xiao Bo’s mother all take on Mulvey’s idea of femininity and the gaze and subvert it by forming it into their own tools of expression and power. Nana is not

only satisfied by her sex change, but fully embraces Mulvey's pronouncements on femininity to the point where she is the complete owner of herself, her image, and her representation. She is fully aware of what she wants after her journey between Xiao Bo, and her male lovers. 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 does. These characters are gender-bending, and while they embrace Mulvey's ideas of femininity, they also employ it, and twist it around to fit their new selves. This allows for new rejections of Mulvey's assumptions of femininity as the inclusive end-all be-all of women's positionality within the context of the male gaze.

Withered in a Blooming Season: Twin Obsession

Withered in a Blooming Season (2005) is about a set of twins, Feng and Wen, living in Beijing and experiencing their individual coming-of-age processes after growing up together in the same room as close-knit brother and sister. Feng is gay and has a borderline obsession with Wen, which manifests in questionable and uncomfortable ways throughout the film. When Wen begins to feel too old for Feng's affections and begins to date, he tries to control her life by enlisting his best friend Le Le, who is also gay, to become her boyfriend and quasi-stalker. The fact that Feng is still a high school student and that Wen will be going to college in the coming semester places further stress on their relationship, as Feng feels Wen is slipping further and further away from his life. The film shows their initial separation, and their reconciliation after their divorced mother heartlessly steals Wen's boyfriend. *Withered in a Blooming Season* is one of Cui's films that allows us to explore Cowie's idea of *fantasia*.

The film opens with the twins playing basketball with neighborhood kids in a park nearby their house. While walking home from the park, a store owner mistakes them for a couple, and Wen is automatically conscious of her identity as a woman, who is no longer a girl who can spend time with her brother in the carefree manner as they used to. Immediately upon returning home from the park, she is cold to Feng, telling him to clothe himself and to leave the room so

she can change her clothes. The next day, Feng's best friend Le Le sees a college student, Xiao Jun, seducing Wen on the track field in the neighborhood park. Le Le calls Feng, who comes to the field to confront Xiao Jun. The further the romance progresses between Wen and Xiao Jun, the more furious and obsessive Feng becomes. In the meantime, Wen makes Feng sleep on the bench outside of their room. Wen then visits their mother at the restaurant the mother owns, to request her own room, but her mother berates her for being spoiled. Wen eventually moves into her mother's vacant room, without her mother's permission. The viewer can now collect enough information to realize that the parents are divorced, and that is why the twins live in the house by themselves. The dysfunctionality of the Chinese nuclear family is emphasized by the mother's distant and resentful rearing.

As Feng becomes more possessive of Wen, he coerces Le Le to become Wen's boyfriend – which doesn't end well because everyone knows Le Le is gay. When the pretend-boyfriend act does not work, Feng audaciously commands Le Le to rape his sister. Feng becomes upset at Le Le's objections, and decides to ditch him as a friend. Feng's obsession with Wen runs into deep murky waters that bridge on incest. One night after Wen relocates Feng to the couch, he sneaks into the room and lights a candle to watch his sister sleep. He then lies on his old bed with the candle held out to her face before he attempts to cuddle with her.

Because Feng cannot contain Wen and get her affection, Feng's uses fantasy as a mise-en-scène of his desire. Desire itself comes into existence in the representation of lack. It can be seen, then, that fantasy is not the object of desire, but its setting. As a result, "the subject does not pursue the object or its sign, but he becomes more preoccupied by the sequence of images related to the object."⁵⁸ Sibling tensions escalate to the point where Feng reports to their mother. We then see that Xiao Jun works at their mother's restaurant, but there are hints that their relationship goes beyond the professional realm. The mother is furious that Wen has moved into her room, even though she no longer lives in that house. Much to Feng's happiness, their mother gives Feng permission to keep Wen in confinement, under his own terms.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing The Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1996), 164.

Cui's deconstruction of *fantasia* becomes most vivid when the film then shifts to the domestic sphere, as Feng and Wen are contained within house walls. Feng is given the power to keep Wen under house-arrest, and he can finally realize his fantasies of possessing her through controlling her surroundings. As Cowie states, fantasy involves not the achievement of the desired object, but the arranging of, a setting out of, desire: a veritable *mise-en-scène* of desire. Now that Feng is completely autonomous of controlling Wen's conditions, and relishes his ability to determine her locations and her actions, especially after failing to use Le Le to control her in this way. Immediately after their mother allows Feng to monitor Wen, Feng smugly tells Wen: "Mom wanted me to put you in confinement," with his emphasis is the act of confinement rather than actually owning Wen.

Wen initially uses her femininity to gain agency over Feng whilst she is in confinement, but eventually rejects it when she throws a tantrum during the height of Feng's jeering, she rips up tissues and throws her nail varnishes to the floor, and decides to go on a hunger strike. Feng tries everything to get Wen to eat, and the hunger strike gets up to the point where Wen is too weak to leave her bed. Wen feeds milk by pouring it from his mouth to her mouth while she is sleeping. This scene is visually striking, we see Feng methodically ripping the milk carton, pouring the milk into a small bowl, in-taking the milk, and then placing his lips to Wen's, he releases the milk onto her lips and it streams down her chin and neck. This feeding is the ultimate acting out of desire; he constructs this *mise-en-scène* of desire in which his fantasy of control has even extended to giving Wen nutrition to live. However, the confinement soon ends without giving the audience a clue about the reasons.

The next scene shows Wen singing at the bar Xiao Jun works in during the evenings as a singer. Feng resorts to his previous means of control. Le Le successfully regains Feng's favors by stalking Wen, and the two also become romantically involved. The next scene shows Wen walking to a local doctor's office with Le Le secretly trailing her. Le Le reports back to Feng, who in return confronts Wen about her doctor visit. Wen tells Feng she is pregnant, and twistedly tells him that he is the father. This is the moment that Wen decides to engage with Feng's ongoing fantasy to control her life, and this is her approach to undermining the temple he has built. Feng goes off in a tirade, and tries to beat up all the guys who were even slightly

romantically involved with Wen. At the same time, Le Le finds out that the mother has a sexual relationship with Xiao Jun, without knowing he was doubling on her and her daughter. Le Le breaks the news to Wen that her boyfriend is romantically involved with her mother, but Wen does not react well and tells him to stop being jealous of what she has. Still though, Wen gives Xiao Jun a call to ask whether his boss is a man or a woman. Xiao Jun lies and says his boss is a man. The mother decides to make Xiao Jun break up with Wen over the phone, which causes Wen to retreat back into her brother's open arms.

While initially, Feng is the half who creates the fantasy of control, Wen eventually concedes to play the other half when she gives in to Feng's desire. Wen and Feng are in their once-again shared room, now with Le Le as an addition. Wen and Feng are even wearing the same shirts they wore while playing basketball in the opening scene before all the strife happened. Le Le introduces himself and Feng as the Moonlight Youths band, and they continue to sing a melancholic song to Wen about eternal love. After the song ends, Feng tells Wen that their relationship is analogous to a master throwing away his pair of shoes when just one shoe is worn out, they will be together forever no matter what. Then Le Le says that their three-way relationship as the petals of a pansy, none of the petals are dispensable, and asks Wen to accept him. Wen is touched by both of their love and care, and more or less forgives him for his previous behavior.; she breaks down and cries while they share a group hug. The final scene shows all three of them walking along train tracks. The ending of *Withered in a Blooming Season* is somewhat bittersweet, with the twins' mother choosing herself over her childrens' wellbeing, and the twins deciding to stick together. In this film, it is the heterosexual relationship between the mother and Xiao Jun that seem unhealthy, and not the gay relationship between Feng and Le Le. The demolishing of the mise-en-scène of desire that builds up for at least two thirds of the film is refreshing, but in the end we are left to conclude that Feng's success in forcing his own fantasy upon his sister has resulted in a positive end. Cowie states that fantasy is the fundamental object of psychoanalysis, and the central material for the 'talking cure' and for the unconsciousness.⁵⁹ This is actually a case in which the fantasy has been played out in its

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing The Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1996), 165.

completion, which debunks Cowie's assumption that *mise-en-scènes* are meant to be prolonged as long as possible by the subject. Feng also tells Wen during her captivity that he would release her under the condition that she promise she would be with him. In the end, Feng's *mise-en-scène* of desire resolved through a psychoanalytical cure, and resulted in a far healthier sibling relationship. The fact that Feng and Wen ended that cycle of desire reveals that Cowie's *fantasia* is useful in understanding desire, but Cui's decision to have the twins resolve their issues opens new discussion on expanding *fantasia*.

Star Appeal: *Fantasy in 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 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. 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. Throughout the film, Xiao Bo works out his fantasy of pureness with ET in *mise-en-scènes* of desire. These scenes are amplified by Cui's decision to have the majority of Xiao Bo/ET interactions in small, contained rooms that appear vacuumed off from the world due to the usually dark lighting, and absence of objects besides the stuffed lamb, and whatever item Xiao Bo is teaching ET about. In these scenes, ET is usually completely naked, and Xiao Bo is either naked or wearing minimal clothing as well. 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. The two truly create a relationship independent of others, and the outside world, which also reflects Xiao Bo acting out his desire for purity through these *mise-en-scènes*.

The insular relationship between Xiao Bo and ET eventually puts a stress on Xiao Bo's bi-sexual relationship with his boyfriend and girlfriend. ET becomes a symbol of desire from the very first opening scene of *Star Appeal*, when Xiao Bo literally picks him up as an object he wants. The boyfriend goes as far to suggest that ET must have been a shepherd but tripped on a rock and lost consciousness and that's why he thinks he is a Martian. Xiao Bo's girlfriend, Wen Wen, expresses her discontent towards Xiao Bo in rather 'typical' feminine ways. In one scene, she is whining about how Xiao Bo doesn't say that he loves her. In another scene, she dresses as an 'alien' with colorful face makeup and plastic balls and claims that she is from Jupiter. Xiao Bo doesn't believe her but humors her, eventually stating, "I do believe you, isn't that enough?" when Wen Wen says: "I want to be cherished more than humans and aliens!" Wen Wen is attempting to insert herself in Xiao Bo's *mise-en-scène* of desire because she feels neglected, but her assertions that she too, can represent purity and innocence, is as inauthenticity as her costume. Perhaps she would have been more convincing if she walked around naked like ET.

Just as Xiao Bo's relationships are becoming increasingly tenuous, ET loses consciousness when he is knocked to the ground during an altercation with a man in a park. Xiao Bo and the boyfriend bring him back home, and place him almost sacrificially on a table with his stuffed lamb animal on top of him. ET only stirs when he hears "We love you" being said by Xiao Bo and Wen Wen, but only fully reacts and 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.

The following scene is somewhat of a rarity, as Xiao Bo and ET are outside in a public space rather than caved up in a room. They are walking along the train tracks; the background has high-rise apartment buildings that have been edited to appear distorted with inverted colors. ET says to Xiao Bo: “Maybe you don’t know that for us Martians. Earth is ideal because it is replete with love and warmth. But after I came here, I found you Earthlings have your own ideal place.” ET realizes at this point that while his desire may have been earth, earthlings’ desires were elsewhere. To Xiao Bo, earth is not replete with love and warmth, as his response that earthlings consider Mars to be the ideal place proves true. This interaction confirms that ET is a manifestation of Cui’s ideas against the concept of sex: “[E]very single person might have a sexuality of his or her own. I’m totally against the concept of sex. This can be seen in my science fiction series: Earthlings travel to a moon of Jupiter: they are required to present their passports and visas. The beings there discover to their surprise that the earthlings have a section called ‘sex’ on their passport. The distinction between male and female is totally beyond their comprehension.”⁶⁰ Cui, like Xiao Bo, believe that earth is marred by ideas of sex and gender, and they both use *fantasia* to create mise-en-scènes of a desire towards another world, free of these detrimental conceptions that betray the purity of human-beings that could otherwise exist. Cui states that he wants the biological concept of male and female to be completely wiped away from our vernacular, just as it is in his fantasies on extraterrestrial terrains.

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

⁶⁰ Qi Wang, “The Ruin Is Already a New Outcome,” 276; Cui Zi’en, *Wei kehuan gushi* (Pseudo-Science Fiction Stories, Zhuhai: Zhuhai chubanshe, 2003). Or Qi Qiang, and Cui Zi’en, *The Ruin is Already a New Outcome* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2004), 276.

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. Xiao Bo teaching ET how to make love is his way of breaking his *mise-en-scène* of desire in order to find some sort of cure to his discontent with earth's restrictions.

The ending sequences of the film Later, Xiao Bo, his boyfriend, and Wen Wen are shown in a room reading a poem written by Cui Zi'en:

The windows are not there

Outside red maples bathe in the sun of blue

No widows, not here

But all I have to do is look at my bed

The blanket, designed with the sun, – moons and stars, is my window

Into space

It might be the sea that my blanket stole

Or was it the last shooting star that fell into ice land for the first time

This poem is a written expression of Xiao Bo's language of desire. It has been made clear that Xiao Bo prefers ET's world up in Mars, away from what he considers, earth's bitterness. The references to losing this blanket with the moons and the stars – is a reference Xiao Bo's thoughts of a new terrain free of earth's mistakes. Shortly after, ET is shown flapping his arms, and it appears as though ET has flown back to Mars, but we see him again on the same stretch of highway where Xiao Bo first picked him up. A man drives by and tells him that they could go to Mars together, to which ET obliges. The screen becomes black, and we hear a dialogue between ET and Xiao Bo, both of them trying to coordinate meeting 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.

The relationship between ET and Xiao Bo plays out Cowie's ideas of fantasy from the beginning to end, but also extends it to new conclusions. The word fantasy originates through Latin from the Greek term meaning to 'make visible', but fantasy has come to mean the act of making visible, *the making present*, of what isn't there, of what can never directly be seen.⁶¹ ET embodies this fantasy in Xiao Bo's eyes; ET made Xiao Bo's fantasies visible in ways that his two other romantic earthly partners could not, but in just a flash, ET abruptly left Xiao Bo with no response. The black screen Cui uses during the film's closing dialogue feels like an empty abyss that Xiao Bo has been left in. Xiao Bo's *mise-en-scènes* of desire are shattered by ET in the end, when ET leaves him for home on Mars after taking Xiao Bo's love. 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*, but he leaves them more broken than they were to begin with. The film's concluding scene is the antithesis of Cowie's assertion that *fantasia* is a method of concluding one's desire, as 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. *Star Appeal* serves as an example where Cowie's *fantasia* needs further expansions on the language of desire.

VII. Conclusions

Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytical work on visual pleasure laid down the groundwork for queer theory, upon which Elizabeth Cowie has built her concept of *fantasia* to describe the *mise-en-scène* of desire that has become part of queer theory. The theories Mulvey and Cowie developed converge with Cui Zi'en's films, but it is evident that Cui's gender-bending characters require extensions of these theories into new spheres of knowledge.

⁶¹ Ibid., 127.

Elizabeth Cowie concludes her article *Fantasia* with the assertion that *fantasia*, “not only involves the satisfaction of wishes that are unrealizable in reality, but also and perhaps more importantly, public forms of fantasy involve the representation of the impossibility of the wish but which, of course, also makes possible the very scene of the wish.”⁶² She is establishing that because films publically display representations of the impossibility of fantastical wishes, the sheer representation also makes the very scene of the wish possible. This is the fundamental and most beneficial take-away of Cowie’s argument: it is through the acting out of desire in fantasy that we can understand how to grow away from fantasy, into reality, to create a more flexible world where homosexual or queer stigma is not a detriment to human progress.

The three films discussed in this thesis, *Enter the Clowns* (2002), *Withered in a Blooming Season* (2005), 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. The synthesis of queer theory and psychoanalytical theory to critique the ideas of gender construction and *fantasia* in Cui’s films supports the idea that China and queer theory can benefit from each other equally. This thesis uses just one film director supporting evidence for this symbiotic relationship. More research still needs to be done on queer Chinese cinema and the directors who contribute to this artistic and socio-theoretical movement.

⁶² Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1996), 125.

VIII. Cui Zi'en Filmography

Year	English Title	Chinese Titles	Role
1991	Breaking Myths, Not the Appearance of Young Heroes	破碎的神话与未出场的少年 主人公	writer
	Passionate Love	烈火恩怨	writer
1992	Train Train, Hurry (TV series)	火车火车你快开	writer
1994	Years	岁月	writer
1995	First Love	关于初恋	writer
1997	The Naked Political (drama series)	裸体政治	writer
1999	Men Men Woman Woman	男男女女	writer
2002	Enter the Clowns	丑角登场	writer, director, actor
	The Old Testament	旧约	writer, director
	Welcome to Destination Shanghai	目的地，上海	actor
2003	Feeding Boys Ayaya	哎呀呀，去哺乳	writer, director, actor, producer
	Keep Cool and Don't Blush	脸不变色心不跳	writer, director
	Night Scene	夜景	writer, director
2004	An Interior View of Death	死亡的內景	writer, director
	The Narrow Path	雾语	writer, director
	Pirated Copy	蔓延	writer
	Shitou and That Nana	石头和那个娜娜	writer, director
	Star Appeal	星星相吸惜	writer, director
2005	My Fair Son	我如花似玉的儿子	director
	WC	呼呼哈嘿	writer, director
	Duan Ju	短句	director
	Withered in a Blooming Season	少年花草黄	writer, director
2006	Empty Town	水墨青春	writer
	Refrain	副歌	writer, director
2007	We are the...of Communism	我们是共产主义省略号	director

	Only Son, Upward Downward Left Right Forward Backward	独生子 , 向上向下向左向右 向前向后	writer, director
2008	Er Dong Queer China, 'Comrade' China	二冬 志同志	producer writer, director
2010	The Old Donkey Wild Strawberries	老驴头 野草莓	producer writer
2011	Mountains and Seas	山海经	director
2012	Last Days	最后的日子	writer, director

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