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Queer Asia and the Dynamics of Film Festivals: Representation in Film
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**Queer Asia and the Dynamics of Film Festivals:
Representation in Film**

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Introduction

“I identify as queer: ‘queer’ in my rejection of respectability, ‘queer’ because my identity doesn’t fit within simple boxes like ‘gay’ or ‘man’, ‘queer’ because I fall somewhere in that umbrella of non-heterosexual non-cisgender identities. I would tell a stranger I’m a ‘gay man’ because I assume they’re unprepared to understand that I’m neither” (Cheves, 2023). This quote by Jason Orne, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Dextel University, shows how complex identifying with the concept queer is, not only for the individual but also due to societal influences. Historically the word has been used as a slur or insult. However, since the late 20th century, queer people have reclaimed the word with a positive meaning. It now has become a word charged with many meanings and emotions, seemingly representing many people. The use of queer as an umbrella term provides no single definition and thus allows individuals to experience their unique identities. However, this way of using the word also flattens the group creating ‘queernormativity’. This makes the idea that there is a ‘right’ way of being queer which paradoxically goes against what queer stands for.

This idea of there being a ‘right’ way of being queer is quite problematic, because it is not just an identification marker. Being queer is also a way of doing which stems from “people’s nonnormative labour, practices, relationships and lived experiences” (Ho, 2022, 2). Assuming that a queer individual in The Netherlands has the same experiences and emotions as a queer individual in Japan is too restricting, as queerness as the ways of being and doing can be specific to the local context. However, scholars argue that due to the increasing effects of globalisation, information and knowledge are now being exchanged between queer communities worldwide, and a trend of ‘global queerness’ has formed (E-Internal Relations, 2022). Another problem arises because this exchange is often a not horizontal, and the knowledge exchanged is dominated by Western knowledge. Shimizu Askiko (2007), for example, argues that there was no native understanding of queer identities in Japan until

during the ‘LGBT Boom’ of the 1980s when they could use the newly introduced Western framework to (re)define their subjective experiences and identities. However, Michello Ho (2021) shows that some ‘queer’ Japanese individuals do not feel comfortable identifying with Western Japanese established ‘queer’ identities such as daisho or transgender.

Within academics/academia, a clear dominance of Euro-American queer models is still present. Most research presumes Euro-American cultures to be primarily creating dominant cultural models which contain essentialist assumptions about gender and sex norms and behaviours (Yue, 2014, 145; Ho, 2022, 1). From 2010 onwards, a new trend has started to shift research away from this perspective. They do this, for example, by using inter-referencing practices and categories across Asia while conducting research (Ho, 2022, 1-2). Using the combination of Asian studies and queer studies helps both fields to overcome Euro-American metropolitanism because “Queer, like Asia, works against essential determinism and analytical closure. Both terms are caught in endless chains of signification without fixed referents and predetermined signifiers thus demanding new historical and geopolitical realignment and assemblage.”(Chiang & Wong, 2017, 122).

To better understand both these concepts, focusing on public cultures, such as art and film, can provide new and better insights. Bao (2022), for example, argues that “art and curatorial practices have a productive role, they raise critical questions pertinent to our times and open up new possibilities.”(315). Throughout the past twenty years, the consumption of films and other popular culture between the countries within East Asia has become more mainstream. Technological developments such as cable and satellite television and (illegal) streaming have facilitated the culture flows and connections of East Asian popular culture transcending national borders. In recent years coproductions with international industries have increased, targeting international audiences (Iwabuchi, 2016, 29). As a result, there is no longer a one-way flow of Western media content, according to Shim (2016, 34), which is best

demonstrated by trends such as the Korean Wave, Hong Kong cinema and Japanimation. Grossman (2000), argues that within these films “the visibility of queer subjects ... has been relatively more radical and less apologetic than in their mainstream Western counterparts” (2). Martin (2016, 199) also shows that within popular East Asian media from the late 20th century, a queer media niche market emerged. Up until this point, queer audiences had to be satisfied with the extensive subtextual resources of other popular genres. But now, media is intentionally produced with queer viewers in mind featuring stories centring non-straight protagonists and their points of view. Sometimes, it is made by openly queer artists and producers (Martin, 2016, 192).

The number of film festivals has rapidly increased over the past three decades, becoming a global phenomenon. Since the late 1990s, East Asian cinema began emerging at Western international film festivals (Ahn, 2016, 267). Film festivals have been necessary as “sites of intersecting discourses and practices” (de Valck & Loist, 2009, 179), but they are now also beginning to play a new role in the global film industry. Film festivals are actively financing productions and engaging in the exhibition and distribution processes of the films (Ahn, 2016, 269). On the one hand, film festivals are spaces created from the bottom-up screening of alternative cinema, allowing, for example, the queer community to create queer counter-public spaces. On the other hand, film festivals are also commercial to a certain extent and rely on the general audience to sustain themselves through ticket sales. In addition, during these events, film festivals often screen films from many different parts of the world, which they introduce and place in competition with each other, which creates an environment which gives rise to the reessentialization of national culture as well as exclusive ideas of national cultural ownership and belonging (Iwabuchi, 2016b, 279).

Therefore another essential factor of film festivals is the curation done by the curators. The goal of a curator is not only to represent their themes properly, such as a country or a

community but also to be critical. This is much needed as Iwabuchi (2016b) states that much of the “media texts that the culture industries in East Asia promote and circulate throughout the region are for the most part commercially and ideologically hegemonic ones and thus tend to neglect socioculturally marginalised voices within the nation” (277). In addition, when films are produced with the international market in mind, the film can be altered to fit the global market’s taste. This can be problematic when it plays into stereotypes or orientalist ideas, which are still present in the West. For example there is an emphasis on Western civilisational superiority over the East concerning the scale of hypothesised acceptance of its LGBT population (Binnie and Klesse, 2018, 5).

Queer film is not a “fixed entity or belonging to a predetermined category of genre” but made through various interactions of sociocultural elements such as audience members, directors, narrative, distribution and curation (Kim, 2007, 629-630). That is why this research focuses on understanding how queer Asia is represented in film at European film festivals. The research consists of an extensive literature review which locates the most important elements and concepts which will be the foundation for the film analyses. The analyses of a range of different queer films and online reviews were done to better understand how queer Asia is represented in film. To understand the ecosystem of European film festivals in regards to queer Asian film ethnographic research by attending film festivals in the Netherlands and interviews with multiple curators from different film festivals were collected. Through these methods, we will better understand what types of understanding are promoted, whose voices are heard and which issues are being addressed. In this way this research will try to answer the research question of how queer Asia is represented in films at European film festivals.

Literature Review

This chapter will address the previously done research to further understand the mechanisms of how film festivals work in their distribution, curation and community building. In addition, we will focus on trying to understand how queerness is perceived in an Asian context and how this is being represented in a global context through the media of film.

The Development of Queer Film

According to Damiens (2018), “*the concept of ‘gay and lesbian cinema’ is largely invented, operating at the juncture of various folk cultures, each shaped by their peculiar history and obeying specific regimes of cultural value.*” (25). In Europe and America, gay and lesbian cinema intersects European art cinema, pornographic genres, the avant-garde genre and politically and socially engaged documentaries (Damiens, 2018, 26). In response to the fact that LGBTQ+ film directors did not have much opportunity to create and screen their work, the first LGBTQ+ film festivals were founded in America. They functioned as grassroots organisations (Dhaenens, 2002, 836). These first festivals, in the 1960s and 1970s, were often organised at adult theatres due to the censorship legislation of these films being considered too obscene for regular movie theatres. For adult theatres organising these film festivals is a helpful marketing tool in trying to gain more patrons. Similar developments are found in European countries such as France. Gay and lesbian films were limited to a specialised market and were secluded to theatres that specialised in so-called adult gay cinema. Film festivals did not require the censorship commission’s approval easing some of the difficulty for film directors trying to screen their films (Damiens, 2018, 27).

During the 1980s, gay and lesbian cinema became even more visible through the ‘indie boom’ and the popularisation of video. In addition, film festivals worked with cinephilia, creating opportunities for directors to create more work. A new type of cinema

arose from these conditions, the New Queer Cinema (Damiens 2018, 28). These films were independent films with a wide variety of themes and styles which were often politically and aesthetically challenging, straying away from established norms such as the demand for positive queer imagery. These queer films were now no longer just screened at queer film festivals but also at A-list film festivals (Damiens, 2018, 28; Dawson, 2015, 186).

In Asia Japan dominated the cinema industry with the Japanese New Wave until the 1970s. The films during this period occasionally did contain homosexual themes, but they were used to symbolise the position of radical leftism (Grossman, 2000, 2). From the 1980s and 1990s, significant changes can be seen due to the spread of decriminalisation of homosexuality in several (East) Asian countries. These changes allowed for new media and cinematic practices to present alternative models differentiating from the “rights-and-recognition” discourse of the West (Nornes, 2013, 182). At the same time, grassroots LGBT social movements started to blossom in Asia, which intersected with urbanisation, new infrastructure and the development of creative industries, which contributed to the rapid growth of film screenings in various venues (Tan, 2019, 206). During this time, Asian cinema also became more prominent. However, the scene was still materially and imaginatively dominated by the cinematic city-states of Tokyo, Hong Kong and Beijing (Nornes, 2013, 182). The 2000s and 2010s saw an increasing number of queer film festivals, which coincided with the rapid growth of grassroots activism and provided a platform for the screening of a wide variety of queer films. The development of digital technologies also stimulated community-based media production and circulation, creating more value for film festivals and allowing queer Asian cinema to grow even further (Yue, 2014, 146-147; Tan, 2019, 206).

Queer Asian film

The queer Asian movies that were created around the 20th century were, according to Grossman (2000, 2-3), intended to attract the general audience and be popular. However, they still portrayed political stories about queerness as the main subject. These films were known under the name of 'Asia Queer Cinema'. Famous examples contain *Okoge* (1992) from Japan, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) from Taiwan and *Broken Branches* (1994) from South Korea, depicting the everyday pressures faced by Asian gays and lesbians to marry (Cho, 2009, 407). Before these films, queer audiences had to make do with the comprehensive subtextual resources of other mainstream genres containing heterosexual cultural representations (Martin, 2016, 192; Kim, 2007, 618). Tan (2019), however, argues that the films created in the last couple of decades contain themes and styles which roughly "cater to the taste and criteria of the international film festival network with an emphasis on ... distinctive art cinema aesthetics" (207). In addition the international taste still contains Orientalist ideas which portrays non-Western cultures as primitive, exotic and authoritarian. This perspective portrays the Other as "passive and feminine, or erotic and perverse" (Bao, 2022, 320). When talking about the queer Other, the repressive hypothesis. This hypothesis argues that the queer Other is living and suffering under authoritarian regimes, which, for example, reinforces "the idea of love which is forbidden by a heteronormative and tightly controlled Chinese society" (Bao, 2022, 321). This raises the question of what type of queerness is represented in these films.

Binnie and Klesse (2018) state that "the meanings attached to queer can change as it travels across different cultural and political terrains" (4), and scholars have noted the appearance of "erotic cultures and sexual movements around the world whose political rhetoric and tactics seemed to mimic or reproduce Euro-American forms of sexual identity" but simultaneously "challenge fundamental Western notions" (Cho, 2009, 403-404). The impacts of globalisation are essential to address as it influences the understanding of the complicated

process of how queer identities come to be. In addition, these global interactions and flows of knowledge and discourses are never “coeval, convergent, isomorphic, or spatially consistent” (Appaduari, 2001, 5). Scholars on this topic can be put into two different groups, the ones arguing for queer hybridity and the ones arguing for global queering. Global queering argues for the idea that queer practices are becoming homogenised globally. On the other hand, scholars acknowledge local practices but recognise the intermingling between those and global practices leading to concepts such as queer hybridity and queer space (Yue, 2014, 149). Research does show that globalisation has an impact on queer Asians. For example, queer Asian individuals have started to experience pressure to separate their identities due to globalisation influences because there is often no clear distinction between an individual’s sexual and gender identity in Asia (Ho, 2022, 4; Chiang et al., 2018). According to Berry (2001, 212-213), the gay Asian representation is a hybrid formation adopted from Western culture but hybridised out of necessity when transported into local Asian cultures. Shin (2013, 92), however, argues that Berry’s binary model fails to accommodate the diverse forms of gay representation found in mainstream films because it only focuses on the global-local link leaving out intraregional cultural interaction (Shin, 2013, 91-92).

“Films do not necessarily tell us about the empirical realities of gay lives in East Asian communities, but they do tell us something of what it means to be gay in East Asian cultures” (Berry, 2001, 212). The alternative models, which started in the 1990s, created a mixed economy of commercial and art-house film, but it also allowed for new textual narratives. These films showed different queer experiences, such as a “hybrid model of both coming out of the closet and ‘staying in’ the biological family” (Yue, 2014, p146). Being gay in these films is represented as a family problem because gayness as a sexual and social identity is seen to interfere with the ability to perform one’s role in the family. This trope is dominantly found in feature films aimed at a Mainstream market. These films generally use

the genre of family melodrama or comedy (Berry, 2001, 213-215; Cho, 2009, 402). Examples of these types of films are *Okoge* and *The Wedding Banquet*. Other dominant themes in these types of films are an older partner married to a younger love interest who has not yet come out to his family. The films strive towards reconciliation between the individuals' sexual orientation and the family duties, how constrained they may seem (Berry, 2001, 215-218). Shin (2013) shows with their research on the Korean film *The King and the Clown* (2005) that even if these mainstream films contain prominent queer themes, they use other strategies to undermine these narratives. The main story of this film is about a love triangle between three men which revolves around the effeminate character with the other two male characters being represented as more masculine. In addition, the film does not contain any explicit erotic scenes, which creates the image where the original same-sex relationship is being described in a heterosexual mode. The presentation of the feminine-looking character creates a romanticised and stereotypical portrayal of South Korean men, which does not resonate with their complex realities. The masculine male characters are presented as the story's heroes, making them more identifiable for heterosexual male viewers who would otherwise be unable to identify with a gay character such as the effeminate male character. In addition, the film contains enough subtexts which can distract the viewers from the gay theme (Shin, 2013, 96-105).

A shift can also be seen in films focusing on discrimination and the emphasisation of homosexuality as a social issue in implicit ways to directly portray homosexuality as an individual sexual practice (Kim, 2007, 620). This can be found in festivals and art house films such as *Happy Together* (1997) (Berry, 2001, 214). In the independent and experimental films, a central theme of finding "other spaces within which to represent gayness" (Berry, 2001, 220). These other spaces, however, are often not found in the gay community. Instead, the additional space is "marked as marginal, elusive, tactic, and even invisible to outsiders",

(Berry, 2001, 220-223). This represents being gay as socially alienated and sad, showing that this space outside the family and its roles is “dystopic and anomic rather than liberating” (Shin, 2013, 91). These tropes show that even when specific plots and influences of a film can be obviously identified as Western or Eastern, “their resolutions invite the opposite suggests neither cultural worlds is mutually exclusive” (Grossman, 2000, 6). To understand this intertextuality in modern film, we need to use bipolar reading (Yue, 2014, 147). As Kim (2007, 624) notice there is a lack of relationship between queer culture and queer film in Korea. However, as these queer communities have been growing and becoming more established, the queer community might become a space of alternative community presented in film (Berry, 2001, 226). These films are presumably primarily made for their local cultures; however, they are globally circulated through networks such as streaming services and film festivals. So not only do these films participate in the construction of queer culture locally and represent queer Asians globally but also the globalised queer culture, which has been “dominated by the post-Stonewall Anglo-American model” (Berry, 2001, 223).

The Film Festival Ecosystem

The modern film festival we know today has gone through several development stages. During the first stage, from the 1930s to the 1960s, the film festival became more defined and spread globally. In the second stage, during the 1960s and 1970s, the film festival model became influenced by social issues and activist movements such as second-wave feminism and civil rights movements. This prompted the film festivals to emphasise program curation by expert festival directors with themes about these social issues. As a result, the film festival model gradually became more professionalised from the 1980s, allowing for more coordination between distributors, institutions, and other networks, increasing the diversity of the films (Dawson & Loist, 2018, 1-8). They are multi-layered events as they consist of “an exhibition space, an event, and an institution with links to civil society, cinema

culture, the film industry and other festivals”, emerging from cultural activity and activism shaped by both local contexts as transnational processes and contacts (Binnie and Klesse, 2019, 12). Film festivals act like cultural gatekeepers and legitimating institutions. They help to define cinematic genres as curating institutions, and they attribute cultural capital to films as legitimating institutions (Damiens, 2018, 30-31). These functions of the film festival model are identifiable through a couple of primary elements: the distribution and circulation of films and the curation.

Distribution

“LGBT films often circulate simultaneously in various circuits, queer and nonqueer” (Damiens, 2018, 25). Therefore focusing on the distribution of these films demonstrates the regimes of taste and cultural contexts through which LGBT cinema and festivals are grasped. Understanding these regimes is crucial in understanding how audiences perceive the films but also the strategies used by film professionals (Damiens, 2018, 25-26). Because LGBT films operate at “the intersection of various circuits, each with their own regimes of cultural valuation and cultural imaginary”, it is impossible to fit these movies in a single legitimised regime of taste. (Damiens, 2018, 30).

From the 2000s, big productions were favoured by distributors of media conglomerates, and independent companies increasingly were without access to theatrical releases. As the tolerance and acceptance of queer people worldwide increases, films dealing with these identities have less difficulty screening at film festivals. This leads to film festivals losing their grassroots elements and turning towards “a more creative industry logic”, leading to the commercialisation of queer cinema (Dhaenens, 2022, 838-839). Film festivals started to rely on commercial features whose success would help finance the screening of more experimental films. Because of these developments, distributors changed to using flexible

strategies and prioritising niche markets (Damiens, 2018, 26). In addition, the declining DVD sales and cable royalties and the rise of the internet complicated the work of LGBT companies pushing them to go global. “Specialised distributors are increasingly buying international rights, which enables them to both capitalise on worldwide festival screenings and to resell a film in secondary markets” (Damiens, 2018, 29). However, according to Grossman (2000, 3), the political economy of global distribution forces films from East Asia to be marketed as ‘Asian’ rather than ‘Japanese’, for example, to be more successful overseas. In this way, the label simplifies the film’s content to give it more international market opportunities. Here we find a type of orientalism, cinematic orientalism, where films are identified as ‘foreign’ to make them more exportable to the West (Yue, 2014, 147).

Thus focusing on the circuit of the distribution of films shows the cultural value of the film. De Valck (2016) proposes three ways we can understand the symbolic economy of cinema. The first is restricted production, best summed up by the statement art for art’s sake. The value of the film is determined through its relative position-taking vis-a-vis the collection of films in this field. The second way is production at large. The main goal for these films is economic capital made with an audience in mind, such as blockbusters. The last way is a mix of the two earlier-mentioned films. Film directors of these types of films want to focus on creating art but still want to distribute their films as widely as possible. The value of the film depends on cultural institutions and the film’s circulation within legitimate networks such as film festivals. Damiens (2018, 30-32), however, proposes that the ecosystem of queer cinema is more complex than only the play between commerce and art as it should also take into account identity and community. She proposes two systems. The first one is similar to the earlier mentioned general restricted field as it focuses on creating art. However, this “queer pole of restricted production” contains community-based identity politics. Through film, producers make self-referential art which aims to challenge aesthetic and sexual conventions.

The theme of queerness in these films is turned into a symbolic capital to emphasise political elements. The second system is a subset of the earlier-mentioned production at large. These films are targeted directly toward the queer community and can be found in the queer niche market. These films aim to gain profits and the theme of queerness is seen as economic capital which does not challenge the audience (Damiens, 30-33). Within both of these circulation systems, the films identify explicitly with their queer themes. However, some directors keep a distance from the queer production field out of fear of negative capital to strengthen the legitimacy of their films through already legitimised cultural institutions. Lisa Henderson, however, argues with her concept of queer relay that even these films that try to stray away from queer films flow back into the queer films the same way how queer films flow into the mainstream (Damiens, 2018, 35). “LGBT cinema thus lies at the intersection of various cultural fields that are never only queer” (Damiens, 2018, 25).

Curation

“How queerness and Chineseness interact and how they are expressed in artistic forms is as much the work of artists as it is the work of curators” (Bao, 2022, 314). The way people understand the world is based on fixed identity categories which complicate the work of curators. Through queer curating, curators can challenge these fixed identity categories and more. It can thus make the audience think differently as it challenges set ideas and concepts and opens up discussion (Bao, 2022, 313-319). In addition, Curtin's (2018) research shows that Asian and queer Asian art has the potential to generate alternative, decolonised and non-Eurocentric modes of knowledge. When the curator curating the art is also queer and from the culture represented, it could help “liberate the exhibition from the voyeuristic and objectified gaze often cast on marginalized social subjects from non-western cultures” (Bao, 2022, 317).

Queer film festivals can often be found in between the two systems earlier mentioned by Damiens (2018), resulting in curators having to curate with different types of audiences in mind (Damiens, 2018, 33). These film festivals use, according to Loist (2012), ‘addictive’ programming strategies to make use of the heterogeneous nature of queer cinema to provide a program containing a diverse range of films whose only common points might be their topics. In addition, European film festivals, for example, are often affiliated with cinephile institutions resulting in these festivals attempting to provide for a broader constituency instead of just queer people (Damiens, 2018, 26). Tascon (2015) shows that although most film festivals screen films from all over the world, they mainly attract audiences from within the locality. Stringer (2008) also indicates that even when a festival aims to seek ‘specialist’ audiences around ‘minority tastes’, they still engage in marketing strategies that appeal to the general public. This, however, might not be entirely a problem. When engaging with artwork Rita Felski (2020) identifies the ways of identification by the audience; alignment, allegiance, recognition and empathy. She argues that one can identify with something even when it is not identical. Identification is a complex negotiation process that can expand and enrich the prior self. “Perhaps we glimpse aspects of ourselves in a character, but in a way that causes us to revise our sense of who we are.”(Felski, 2020, 82-83).

Nonetheless curators need to be careful when curating a diverse range of films because comparison is a complex terrain as it is often influenced by biases, racist reasoning and orientalism (Binnie and Klesse, 2018, p6). Ward (2010) argues for a relational approach to comparison to understand the relations. A careful and thorough study of the contexts helps limit the risk of cultural essentialism. In addition, inter-referencing has also drawn a lot of scholarly attention as a critique of Euro-America centrism in knowledge production (Tan, 2019, 204). Within this field, Chen Kuan-Hsing (2010, xv) proposed ‘Asia as a Method’, which asks for using “Asia as an imaginary anchoring point” so that Asian societies can use

each other as reference points, transforming the understanding of the self and rebuilding subjectivity. Aihwa Ong (2011, 17) sees inter-referencing Asia as a wide range of “practices of citation, allusion, aspiration, comparison and competition”. Chua Beng Huat (2015) identifies inter-Asian referencing with the rising trend among scholars to compare Asian regions. This inter-referencing uses comparison which, according to Boellstorff (2007, 183), is inherently queer because it is a “transcendent form of critique” that disturbs “established horizons of interchange”. “This epistemic shift de-westernizes knowledge production and disrupts the temporally hierarchal Asia-Euro-American comparison” (Tan, 2019, 205).

This way, film festivals are transnational arenas which form alternative cultural spaces and construct counter-discourse through films (Kim, 2007, 617). Within these spaces, “individual experiences can be transformed into a collective spectatorship”, creating a meaning of community. In addition, the film festival can be an essential reference point to find categories to explain their identity with. The interviews with queer audience members at the Seoul Film Festival by Kim (2007, 627) for example shows that they picked films which dealt with the everyday lives of queer subjects, which did not differ from the daily lives of straight people, as the best films. In addition, films which corrected prejudices in society about queer subjects were also preferred. Bao (2022, 316) also argues that queer Asian film festivals in the West “create an opportunity for non-Western queer people and cultures to speak to each other without taking the West as the necessary reference point; it also challenges the discursive construction of Asia itself”. When a film festival fails to be a space of actively producing discourses, it is reduced to being merely a chance for “movie films to see some ‘rare’ films (Kim, 2007, 625-626).

Film Analysis

This chapter focuses on analysing five films. Four out of five films have been chosen from film festivals the researcher attended in the Netherlands. These films and the 5th film have also been screened at other European film festivals. The films are all from the region of East Asia (Taiwan, Japan and South Korea), and the stories take place in the 21st century. The analysis will focus on the film's storylines and how the queer characters are treated. In addition, attention will be paid to see if there are connections between the films and earlier research and themes that stood out to the curators. The analysis will also focus on reviews on platforms such as Letterboxd to understand better how the audience perceived the films. The first part of the chapter concentrates on female-to-female love relationships and is structured in three parts focussing on ambiguity, subtext and negative representation. The second half focuses on gay relationships with the theme of alternative families. Throughout the chapter a couple of film screenshots of scenes relevant to the analysis are added to give extra visual understanding of what the analysis says.

Ambiguous Representation

Curator A mentioned that it is difficult to find Asian lesbian films where the two female leads end up together. The trope in most of these films is that the two female leads are interested in each other when they are younger. However, one of them always ends up in a heterosexual relationship. In 2022 CameraJapan screened the Japanese film *Eternally Younger Than Those Idiots* (2021). The film's description tells the story of Horigai, who is about the graduate and get a job as a social worker when she meets Inogi, a girl with a tragic childhood. "They get along in their own weird way, adrift and bored as they are" (CAMERA JAPAN, 2022). Other sites' descriptions of the film also include the relationship between Inogi and Horigai as being "an unlikely bond" and a "friendship" (Pvhaecke, 2022; Thayne, 2022). The descriptions mainly focus on the role the male character's, Homine, death has on

the story. From these descriptions the audience gets no indication that the film contains any queer themes .

At the start of the film, when Horigai meets Homine, it is made clear Horigai is interested in him. However, their interaction is brief, and we are quickly introduced to the new character, Inogi, with whom she developed a bond. The romance plotline is not very prominent as it emphasises how these characters deal with topics such as death, grief, friendship and adulthood. As a queer audience member, you will likely read the subtext while watching the ‘friendship’ between Horigai and Inogi because this relationship has the main focus. In addition, there is a scene where Horigai is cutting out pictures of half-naked women and creating a collage on her bedroom wall. This could be interpreted as her being interested in the same sex; however, it can also be construed as Horigai doing it out of boredom, as her voice-over says that she has time to waste this summer while cutting the pictures.



Figure 1: Horigai cutting out pictures of girls in bikinis

The film provides only subtext until we see Horigai, while tipsy, confess her love for Inogi over the phone, which Inogi reciprocates. There is even a kissing scene. The rest of the film focuses on them overcoming their struggles together. Even though it seemed like they would part ways after Horigai leaves the town to start her new job, them not having much contact. The film ends with Horigai returning to visit Inogi. Again over the phone, Horigai confesses that she misses all her friends from university. However, she cares for Inogi the most. She admits that she is experiencing something she has never experienced before. Even though

throughout the film, there were a couple of explicit scenes making the queer narratives shown, the film provides more subtext. Even the ending is quite ambiguous, leading to different interpretations of the film.



Figure 2: Horigai and Inogi kissing

The comments on sites such as Letterboxd show that the audience interprets this film differently. Some viewers clearly observe queer narrative as showcased by comments such as “those girls are so gay love that for them”¹ and “this is such a mundane lesbian movie. So tranquil and lonely”². Other comments also showed that the queer narrative was not advertised or very noticeable initially. “I screamed ‘LESBIANS??!’ when they kissed”³. “This was so much gayer than I expected wtf like I thought it was about friendship ... did I straightbait myself?”⁴. It is sensible that viewers expected to see a film about friendship because most descriptions about this film describe the relationship between the two girls as friendship. But because of the little explicit queer narrative, some viewers interpret the relationship as just friends, as Emma Fogarty’s review noted, “there’s something infinitely

¹ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Eternally Younger Than Those Idiots.” Accessed May 11, 2023. <https://letterboxd.com/film/eternally-younger-than-those-idiots/reviews/>.

² Letterboxd. “Reviews of Eternally Younger Than Those Idiots.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/eternally-younger-than-those-idiots/reviews/>.

³ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Eternally Younger Than Those Idiots.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/eternally-younger-than-those-idiots/reviews/>.

⁴ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Eternally Younger Than Those Idiots.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/eternally-younger-than-those-idiots/reviews/>.

watchable about how this film shows female friendships”⁵. Overall this film doesn’t directly misrepresent queerness. The film does not show any stereotypes or other tropes, and the film suggests that the two girls end up together. However, how the film plays with the queer narrative from subtext to more explicit in vague terms can lead to misunderstandings among the general viewer. This ambiguity makes it seem the film was produced to appeal to as many people to make a profit instead of challenging its viewers.

Queer subtext

As noted in the literature review, queer audiences are used to reading the subtext in films to be able to get their queer themes. In contrast to *Eternally Younger Than Those Idiots*, the film *Return to Seoul* (2022), which was screened at Cinemasia in 2023, however, contains only subtexts. *Return to Seoul* is a movie focused on a French Korean adoptee coming to South Korea and her journey with (re)connecting with her Korean side and family. The film is not promoted as a queer film, as there is no clear intention that is known so far by the director or actors that there are queer themes present. However, from the opening scene, a queer subtext can be detected. In the opening scene, we see a Korean girl listening to music when she looks up and says hello in Korean to the person that walks in. While correcting herself and saying hello in English, Freddie comes into the frame. In English, she asks if she can listen to the music and the Korean girl, Tena hands her the headphones. Then we get a relatively lengthy scene where both girls look each other in the eye while we hear the music. This scene can be interpreted as highlighting the diasporic experience which is the film’s main focus, as Freddie gets addressed at first in Korean because of her looks but then in English because she is identified as not Korean. However, from this scene onwards, Freddie and the Tena immediately create a very close relationship which can be read as a friendship,

⁵ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Eternally Younger Than Those Idiots.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/eternally-younger-than-those-idiots/reviews/>.

but the closeness and intensity can also be interpreted as something more, a possible queer relationship.



Figure 3: Freddie lying on Tena's lap

Throughout the film, Freddie mainly interacts with male love interests. In one scene, she tries to kiss Tena; however, she gets rejected. This can be interpreted as Tena not reciprocating the same feelings or that she is not queer. However, the scene itself is after Freddie had a not-so-good meeting with her biological dad, and what has been shown throughout the film is when Freddie struggles with feelings, she acts out and tries to hurt other people. In this particular scene, she had already, on purpose, hurt the Korean guy she slept with and started flirting with the Korean DJ playing in the bar. Trying to kiss Tena can be seen as Freddie acting out, so Tena might have rejected it. After this scene, Tena disappears from the story.

The rest of the film contains time jumps where we see Freddie being in Korea, sleeping with older French guys and having a Korean boyfriend in her 20s to the last time jump where she visits Korea in her 30s with her long-term boyfriend. She introduces her boyfriend to her biological family. Freddie herself, in this scene, looks much more mature and also says she can not drink alcohol, possibly indicating she is pregnant. The family meeting, however, does not end very well and out of frustration, Freddie takes it out on her

boyfriend. The final scene is Freddie looking different in another country with her backpack checking in at a hotel. She emails her biological mother saying she is happy now and hoping her biological mother is as well. These developments throughout the movie can be interpreted as queer. The film never points out or explicitly tells the viewer about Freddie's sexual orientation. Still, the subtext is evident enough for people as noted by some commentators, to interpret that Freddie might be bi-sexual, as she was also interested in the Korean girl. In addition, the way Freddie went through her life can also be interpreted as queer. As a younger adult, she was living a non-normative life, she drinks, does drugs, parties, and sleeps with other men while in a relationship. Then when she gets older, we see her in a role which is expected from a woman in her 30s, with a stable job a long-term boyfriend and suggesting that they are planning on having a family. However, the film ends with her having a different look, in another country, by herself, and she seems happy. This way, it could be interpreted that you can also be happy when you do not live a normative way of life. So in this way, it is not queer in the aspect of sexual or gender identity but in a non-normative way in society.

Negative Representation

Similarly like the first film, *A Girl at My Door*, was not directly promoted as a queer film, nor was it mentioned in the film's description. The film is about a police chief, Lee Young-Nam, who is stationed in a rural town where she meets an abused girl, Do-Hee. The first part of the film focuses on the police officer settling into town, discovering that Do-Hee is abused by her non-biological father, Yong-Ha and how he runs a human trafficking scheme which fuels the economy of the town, which is the reason why nobody helps Do-Hee. Chief Lee takes Do-Hee in to allow her to stay away from her father. This all changes when the ex-girlfriend of Chief Lee comes to town, and Yong-Ha sees them kissing. He accuses Chief Lee of sexually molesting Do-Hee, and Chief Lee is immediately arrested, interrogated and exposed to verbal abuse from her colleagues. Do-Hee realising she can no longer be together

with Chief Lee stages a scenario where it looks like her father is sexually abusing her. After this, Chief Lee is released. Chief Lee realises what Do-Hee has done; however, she asks her if she wants to leave the town with her, which is how the film ends.

This film tackles many themes, such as abuse, human trafficking and homosexuality. Having this many themes in one film makes it difficult for any film to tackle every theme properly. A lot of the comments on the film also pointed this out: “The result is that most things are just pointed out as an issue and another layer in the mystery without saying anything about them”⁶. Not focussing properly on the themes can lead to possible misrepresentation. In the case of the abuse, the film is very explicit. However, when it comes to the queer theme, it is not clear. During the first half of the film, the sexual orientation of Chief Lee is not mentioned. It is only revealed when the ex-girlfriend comes around, and we get a kissing scene. From this point, the sexual orientation of Chief Lee is used as the plot twist, as the story ultimately escalates when she is accused of sexually molesting Do-Hee. From here onwards, the story’s plot heavily relies on the queer theme. Before this scene, the relationship between Chief Lee and Do-Hee could be interpreted as an abused girl who finally gets the love and attention of an adult. However, there is a lot of ambiguity during the scenes between the two female characters. As already mentioned earlier, there is never anything explicit between them. Still, Chief Lee’s choices are questionable, and scenes like them sharing a bath fuel this ambiguity. The ambiguity, however opens the door for the stereotype of the connection between homosexuality and paedophilia. Some commentators notice this:

“But the director, Jyly Jung, seems to want there to be suspense about the uncomfortable question of sexual tension between the two – long stares, awkward situations, unfortunate lies. The relationship is

⁶ Letterboxd. “Reviews of A Girl at My Door.” Accessed May 16, 2023. <https://letterboxd.com/film/a-girl-at-my-door/reviews/>.

ostensibly filial, but Jung at the actors' performances, leaves room for other interpretations. It gives too much credence to the idea that 'homosexuals are pedophiles' and [...] and other similar gross ideas.[...] *A Girl at My Door* is in an uncomfortable middle space that it really shouldn't be in".⁷

However, the connection between paedophilia and homosexuals was not as evident for most commentators. But many commentators still view the film negatively, focusing on the treatment the police officer receives: "presents questions and complex issues and complicates them further negatively. No attempt for resolution and introspection, just additional harm. Awkwardly endorsing instead of properly critiquing"⁸.



Figure 4: Chief Lee and Do-Hee bathing together

The way these commentators talk about the negative representation comes down to the fact that the director tackled too many complex themes in the film, leaving no room to address them adequately. However, most commentators think this was done with no harm by the director. Other commentators felt similarly and gave different arguments, such as it being the director's debut film and why they believe it was done on needed. Another main argument is that the film is morally grey on purpose. In a sense, they argue that it is the film's point to make the viewer feel uncomfortable. One commentator mentioned, "I think this movie is quite an example of how differently people interpret one thing. There's a lot of condemnation

⁷ Letterboxd. "Reviews of A Girl at My Door." <https://letterboxd.com/film/a-girl-at-my-door/reviews/>

⁸ Letterboxd. "Reviews of A Girl at My Door." <https://letterboxd.com/film/a-girl-at-my-door/reviews/>.

about its morality and message regarding homosexuality but I do think that that's the point of the movie"⁹. Another commentator noticed, "also, any viewers who feel the film doesn't adequately criticise or critique the homophobia of certain characters need a basic lesson in media literacy. A message does not need to be spelt out in flashing lights to be communicated"¹⁰. This quote suggests that the viewer should read between the lines. It seems the director wanted to challenge the audience. However, the problem with this is that the way the queer themes are handled in the film is too ambiguous. Commentators, therefore, can take the film at face value and interpret it as representing the queer experience in the said country where the film is produced.

Compared to the other two earlier mentioned films, surprisingly, many commentators connected what they saw in the film to how they expected or now thought how queer experience is in Korea.

A very problematic film, the more I think about it the more I kind of hate it... It turns out Inspector Lee is gay, which was apparently why she was forcibly relocated to this new department in the first place (There's no explanation to this, apparently you can be transferred simply for being gay in South Korea?) ... All lesbians are pedophiles in South Korea, apparently ... I'm not advocating for all films that focus on LGBT+ issues to have some sort of didactic finale, but it would have been nice to see at least one character end the film with some sort of understanding that their accusations earlier were completely heinous, and that their bigotry needs to be sorted out ... This film has its heart in the right place and while it was probably a landmark film for the South Korean LGBT+ community, its execution doesn't help the conversation at all, and possibly worsens it.¹¹

This quote shows how the events in the film cause overly negative developments in the queer story. This translates into the fact that the viewers interpret the film's events as a reality in

⁹ Letterboxd. "Reviews of A Girl at My Door." <https://letterboxd.com/film/a-girl-at-my-door/reviews/>.

¹⁰ Letterboxd. "Reviews of A Girl at My Door." <https://letterboxd.com/film/a-girl-at-my-door/reviews/>.

¹¹ Letterboxd. "Reviews of A Girl at My Door." <https://letterboxd.com/film/a-girl-at-my-door/reviews/>.

South Korea and represent South Korea. Some commentators are aware of cultural differences and that they should not judge a country based on cinematic narrative. Some viewers, however, already come to the film with these assumptions. “I think that ppl forget that things in south korea are different than in the rest of the world, the homophobia in this country is horrible at the point that they would transfer a police agent just for being gay”¹². However, just like this quote mentions, there is factual evidence that South Korean society dislikes films containing queer narratives. Another commentator commented: “After I watched it, I looked up LGBTQ rights in South Korea. We have a lot of work to do all over the world about that”¹³. Another commentator spoke about her own experience in Korea, “as a bisexual in Korea, I still do get treated like an outcast at times as if it’s still abnormal to be attracted to the same sex”¹⁴. This gives some reason to believe that what a lot of the viewer’s beliefs to perceive about South Korean culture and the treatment of queer people might not be far off from reality. And thus does not fall immediately under the orientalism mentioned in the literature review. However, because this connection between paedophilia en queer people is present in the film’s narrative, this film can be an unpleasant viewing for queer people. In addition, when viewed by the general public, this can reinsure the negative beliefs of viewers about queer people.

Queer Melodrama

Dear Ex (2018) and *Dear Tenant* (2020) are films produced in a country with a lot of LGBTQ+ history and seen as one of the most progressive country in Asia, Taiwan. Both films are promoted as queer because the queer elements are essential in the storylines. *Dear Ex*, screened at Cinemasia in 2019, is about an ex-husband who dies and leaves the insurance money with his lover, Jay. The ex-wife, Liu Sanlian, does not like this and tries to get the

¹² Letterboxd. “Reviews of A Girl at My Door.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/a-girl-at-my-door/reviews/>.

¹³ Letterboxd. “Reviews of A Girl at My Door.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/a-girl-at-my-door/reviews/>.

¹⁴ Letterboxd. “Reviews of A Girl at My Door.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/a-girl-at-my-door/reviews/>.

money for their son, Chengxi. *Dear Tenant*, screened at Cinemasia in 2022, is about the dad who died and his mom being sick, leaving the lover, Lin, to care for the ill mother-in-law and the son, Yo-Yu of the deceased lover. The mother-in-law eventually dies, and Lin gets accused of adopting Yo-Yu to get the house. Both films fall into the tropes mentioned in the first chapter. They are melodrama, have an older married lover who first chose to lead a ‘normal’ life and the struggles of the family dynamic.

Dear Tenant starts with introducing the ‘alternative’ family. While Lin is taking care of the grandma, she accuses him of being the reason why her son is dead. They both also hide that he is the lover of You-Yu’s dad because they believe he is not ready to know. Even though this sketches a quite homophobic environment, what we see on screen comes across as a pretty well-functioning family. The uncle, grandmother and son all, in their own sense, accept Lin as a part of their lives.



Figure 5: You-Yu, the grandma and Lin taking a family photo

The viewers interpret this as well: “but what stands in the centre is a unique family unit who truly love each other, betrayed by how different they are from the ‘average’ world”¹⁵. The

¹⁵ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Tenant.” Accessed May 26, 2023. [https://letterboxd.com/film/dear](https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-tenant/reviews/)

acceptance of the 'alternative' family, however, changes when the grandmother dies, and the uncle, Li-Wei, discovers that the house is in Yo-Yu's name, Li-Wei accuses Lin of killing the grandma to get the house, and Lin gets detained by the police. The police have a clear bias against the fact that he was the lover and why he would ever adopt his gay lover's son. Lin also addresses this by asking: "If I were a woman, would you still ask this question?". Even though there are discriminatory tendencies, this film differs from *A Girl At My Door* because the police do not accuse Lin solely for him being gay, they have actual evidence that the grandma died because of foul play and that Lin had access to the drugs used. Another difference with the film is that the characters who show their negative biases are being addressed on their behavior. This was also noted by many commentators: "for what it's worth, ... there's a fine balance established between the fact that the police institution is inherently biased against Lin because he is gay and the existing evidence that points to the grandmother dying of unnatural causes"¹⁶. Towards the end of the film we learn that it was not Lin who killed the grandma but Yo-Yu who accidentally gave the grandma too much of what he thought was medicine but was actually an illegal drug. The movie ends with Lin returning to his workplace and Yo-Yu going with his uncle to China.

The film is a melodrama which means that the characters experience drama. In the case, some of the drama the queer character receives is because of their queer identity, for example, the discrimination from the police. However, the commentators also noted that the story itself did not solely rely on the drama to result from the fact that the character is queer as most the focus is on trying to find the murderer of the grandma. One commentator noted: "in fact, they didn't even turn it into a plot device and go 'what if gay?' in every situation. I

¹⁶ Letterboxd. "Reviews of Dear Tenant." <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-tenant/reviews/>.

had the feeling that they treated the story with much more importance and that it just happened to revolve around a gay man”¹⁷.



Figure 6: Lin is being interrogated by the police

Even though all the drama of the film does not all necessarily happen because Jin is gay, the film contains a lot of drama that is connected to the fact that he is gay. Some of the commentators interpret the drama that Jin experiences as showcasing reality. Amyisbeautiful noted: “It’s a very serious account of a real tragedy that can happen in life, but the hero carries all the sadness to the end to tell the story”¹⁸ (translated by DeepL¹⁹). However other commentators argue that the film is unrealistic. They were disappointed because they anticipated the similar presentation of realism like the work of the Japanese director Kore-eda. JL noted: “The first half of the film does work very hard to sell its Kore-eda-ness, but that turns out to be a mere facade for tired gay tragedy and classic melodrama that tries a bit too hard. There’s nothing wrong with melodrama or even gay tragedy per se; it’s that too many terrible events happen to these characters in succession, stretching the boundaries of realism”²⁰. Just like this commentator says this film is a classic example of gay tragedy.

¹⁷ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Tenant.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-tenant/reviews/>.

¹⁸ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Tenant.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-tenant/reviews/>.

¹⁹ 很沈重的敘述了一個人生中真的會發生的悲劇，只是這個男主角背負了所有悲傷的結局去敘述了這個故事。

These types of films were also mentioned by curator B and C as being films that they rather not see. Films that focus on only the negative sides of being queer are tiring to watch, reinforcing the idea that being queer is not a positive matter. On the other hand there were commentators who actually liked the unrealistic overdramatic storyline because that was what they expected from Taiwanese melodrama films. One comment mentioned: “this is Taiwanese melodrama done right, in that it still has all of the trappings of its industry (emotional excess, a sappy score, a plot that’s too tragic to be true), but they are diluted enough, and the narrative is well written enough”²¹. This however does not automatically mean that a good Taiwanese melodrama film properly represents queer Asian characters. As mentioned, this film is better than *A Girl At My Door* by using the character’s queerness as a plot device as it addresses the wrongdoings instead of leaving it in the air. But similarly like *A Girl At My Door*, the film according to some commentators tries to tackle too many themes. They argue that the film actually should just have focused solely on the workings of the ‘alternative’ family. “The story flows smoothly but leaves a lot of gaps or implausibilities, and it feels as if it is rushing towards a politically correct benchmark, using the murder case as a method, without considering the frustrations and tensions that inevitably accompany the process of entering a family and forming a family with multiple genders – these issues are actually glossed over in the film”²² (translated by DeepL²³). Completely focussing on just that aspect in the film could help to better the queer representation as it can erase any ambiguity and fully confront the characters’ negative behavior. This way the audience can see that the way the characters like the police officers are not good. However the film than would become

²¹ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Tenant.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-tenant/reviews/>

²² Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Tenant.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-tenant/reviews/>

²³ 否則，故事流暢歸流暢，但留了許多空白或不合理的地方，感覺就是一股腦地往一個政治正確的標竿衝去，用兇殺案作為方法，卻沒有思考伴隨多元性別進入家庭、組織家庭的這個過程必然伴隨的挫折與拉扯——這些在電影裡其實是被輕輕帶過的，

a ‘gay film’, because the focus will just be on the fact that the character is gay. That is why a couple commentators actually enjoyed this film because it was not just a ‘gay film’.

Instead of gladly embracing the accolade of ‘opening up a new horizon for Chinese gay cinema’, director Zheng Youjie seriously questions the definition of a gay film: Why do we call a heterosexual love film a ‘love film’ and not a ‘heterosexual film’, but a homosexual love film a ‘gay film’? In the film Lin Jianyi is a gay man, a piano teacher, a father and a son. His different identities have shaped him, and homosexuality is just part of him, his sexuality. But people often use his sexuality to represent him, ignoring the loneliness and desolation behind the tip of the iceberg, his dedication and struggle.²⁴
(translated by DeepL²⁵)

All the curators and some from the panel discussions also mentioned that they rather screen films which are just good films where it turns out to be a queer character. However as curator C mentioned, these queer story focused films are still necessary to showcase the realities of queer people.

Dear Ex is also a Taiwanese melodrama film screened at CinemAsia in 2019 with a similar story to *Dear Tenant* but it portrays it differently. Even though the film’s description promises a dramatic story from the opening scene, we see that the film’s aesthetic overall has very bright colours with occasional doodles seen on the screen when we see Chengxi’s perspective. The story is dramatic as the film starts with a confrontation between the wife Sanlian and the male lover Jay, where the acting of Sanlian comes across as hysterical, and Jay’s quite nonchalant. However, slowly we discover more about the two characters throughout the film as they are forced to interact more when Chengxi leaves home to stay at

²⁴ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Tenant.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-tenant/reviews/>

²⁵ 「為什麼異性戀的愛情電影我們說是『愛情片』，不叫『異性戀片』，同性戀的愛情電影我們就叫它『同志片』？」片中的林健一，是同志，是鋼琴老師，是父親，是兒子。不同的身份形塑了這個人，而同性戀恰恰只是他的一部分，他的性傾向。但是人們卻常常只拿他的性傾向代表他，而罔顧冰山一角背後，他的孤獨與落寞，他的付出與掙扎。

Jay's place. . Chengxi, who first tries to hate Jay for taking his father away, quickly realises that Jay is not a bad person. Sanlian has a more difficult time. In every interaction between her and Jay, she screams and calls him bad names. However, she also takes care of Jay's place to create a cleaner environment for her son. It seems like Sanlian is now also opening up to Jay, but then she meets Jay's mother and decides to out him to this mother. Because of one of the flashbacks the viewer knows Jay is not out to his mother because Spark Chen convinces him not to do to not sadden his mother. Before the act, she confesses at a temple that she will do something terrible, indicating that she knows it is wrong what she is doing. This shows that Sanlian is aware of her actions and she comes to regret this decision. The film ends with the play Jay was desperate to perform during which Sanlian realises that her ex-husband and Jay met there. She realises that Jay is not a bad guy but someone who loved her ex-husband and helped him while he was sick before dying. After this positive turn, the film ends on a happy note. The mom accepts Jay, and all three characters resolve their issues and can live their own lives.



Figure 7: Sanlian and Chengxi bring Jay to the play

The film thus revolves around the fact that the gay lover got the insurance money and how the family deals with this. It is heavily depended on the queer story. The focus of the

film is on the acceptance of the queer character but also on how the three characters deal with their grief. “the film is slow at times, but i loved how the story unfolded to be a tragic yet comforting narrative, at first, you’re still trying to choose sides but as you learn the context of each character, you would understand where they’re coming from, and sometimes it’s just how life is”²⁶. Because of this, commentators also perceive the film as a positive representation: “highly recommended to anyone and everyone, especially for those who think all homosexuals are perverts, love is love bro, with or without pressure”²⁷. Some commentators argued that this is because of Taiwan’s political and social developments in recent years. “The open-mindedness of Taiwan’s current leanings towards progressive societal trends is clearly portrayed in this film”²⁸. However, other commentators also highlight that even though Taiwan is more accepting, it is not entirely accepting, resulting in some aspects of the film which they see as not representative. “Dear Ex, with its focus on emotional dynamics and romance rather than overt gay sex scenes, is unlikely to be too much of a challenge for the regional audience”²⁹. This comments on the lack of explicit gay sex scenes in the film. This is a complicated discussion as having no sex scenes in a film might be done to please the general audience. In contrast, in other cases, explicit sex scenes might not be well presented, resulting in the audience interpreting it as queer people being seen as weird. In the case of this film, I would argue that for the storyline, a sex scene would not add anything to the storyline. We get enough scenes to see the love between the two male characters and even some kissing scenes.

Another commentator commented on the behaviour of the mother and son as evidence: “It is obvious that Dear Ex is a film coming from a country that isn’t fully

²⁶ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Ex.” Accessed May 10, 2023. <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-ex/reviews/>.

²⁷ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Ex.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-ex/reviews/>.

²⁸ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Ex.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-ex/reviews/>.

²⁹Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Ex.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-ex/reviews/>.

accepting of homosexuality, as seen by how Liu Sanlian is almost cartoonishly homophobic, accusing Jay of stealing her husband and, subsequently the insurance money. I just am not interested in ‘omg I am hurting because of the gays, and I am straight’ type film. I was mostly bored and I was waiting for something interesting to happen (other than the straight whining) and it never came”³⁰. Even though it is true that both characters, especially the mom, show homophobic behaviour towards the gay lover. However, some commentators likely perceive Sanlian’s behaviour as cartoonishly and whining because of their own biases, as noted by another commentator. “There’s entirely too much sociohistorical baggage rooted in the patriarchal oppression of women surrounding the idea that ‘women are crazy’ to parse it all here, but what can be said is that it’s virtually always bullshit for men to dismiss the behaviour of women as simply being ‘crazy’. Many view Liu Sanlian as crazy. She isn’t, of course. Despite her ‘madness’ being well-meaning (albeit a bit overbearing), justifiable and even righteous, her passion for doing what she believes is best drives a wedge between her and her son”³¹. This, of course, should not mean that the behaviour of Liu Sanlian at first towards the lover is to be accepted. However, our journey during the film and the ending shows that Sanlian realised her mistakes and accepted him. The fact that the gay lover is not

³⁰ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Ex.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-ex/reviews/>.

³¹ Letterboxd. “Reviews of Dear Ex.” <https://letterboxd.com/film/dear-ex/reviews/>.

accepted from the start is to be expected because even though there has been much progress in accepting queer people worldwide, there is still a lot of progress to make.

Figure 8: Jay gets angry at Sanlian for being in his home

This chapter shows that for these particular films overall do not have a bad representation expect for *Girl at my Door*. However for the films like *Dear Ex* and *Dear Tenant* shows that people disagree on how well the representation is. This is because viewers come with different expectations, as for some it is more important that there is a good melodrama while for others the queer storyline is more important. It was also clear that viewers did not mind the not too good representation as much because of their assumptions that queer realities in Asia are not good, so any mildly positive representation is a win.



However these negative representation with often a lot of ambiguity can lead to viewers creating assumptions about Asia which are not true. As it is not possible to know for all of the commentators if they are queer themselves, these comments showcase more how the general public would interpret these films. This shows that seeing these queer Asian films without or with other guidance bad representation is likely to happen. Therefore film festivals and there curators are very important to straighten out this representations.

Curators

The film analysis showed that the opinions of viewers can differ a lot. This is expected as films operate through various circuits with their regimes of cultural valuation and cultural imaginary. It affects not only how the audience perceives the films but also how curators choose films and how film festivals operate. But there are also other factors influencing the curators decision. This chapter will focus on the three interviews done with three curators from the film festivals in the Netherlands, CinemAsia, Camera Japan and The International Film Festival Rotterdam. For the anonymity of the curators their names have been replaced with letters when referencing them in this chapter. To add on to the information online panel discussion of different film festivals in Europe and Asia with other curators have been used. With these materials this chapter will identify the most important factors that curators noticed which influence queer Asian representation.

The Organisation of Film Festivals

The interviews and panel discussions showed that the various film festivals have different ambitions and targets. CinemAsia (The Netherlands), for example, focuses on creating a space to nurture filmmakers from Asia so that the voice from Asia can be shown (IIAS, 2023). Film Festivals in Asia, such as Busan Film Festival (South Korea), have similar goals. These film festivals go even further to open more slots for Asian cinema to create more opportunities for young filmmakers (Singapore International Film Festival, 2021). The problem remains that Asia is a big continent which is non-definable, making it difficult to screen films from all Asian countries properly. Because of this, film festivals in Europe that specify in Asian films often focus on a region or a specific country (IIAS, 2023). Examples are CinemAsia and QueerEast (The United Kingdom), which focus on East and Southeast Asia and Camera Japan (The Netherlands), which focuses on Japan. It is, however, still challenging to screen Asian films. There used to be a prejudice within the film critics' minds

that Asian cinema is slow and difficult to understand. This sentiment has slowly changed significantly after the prominent South Korean hit *Parasite* (2019). Distributors started picking up more Asian films, however, this halted because of COVID. But the curators did notice that European film festivals now have more room for Asian cinema (Singapore International Film Festival, 2021). The problem remains that most European film festivals are being programmed by Europeans. Only some of these film festivals have a Asian delegate responsible for screening the Asian films and then needs to present them to the team of the festival. This means that some films make it through, which are not necessarily a good representation of Asia but a film catered to Europe (Singapore International Film Festival, 2021). In addition, some curators also noticed that Asian representation in Europe is still very stereotypical. This is why film festivals like CinemAsia are needed to change perspectives (Montage, 2021; IIAS, 2023). However, things are changing. Curators notice that some film festivals let multiple curators watch the films from the different countries to create a more diverse selection (Singapore International Film Festival, 2021). Camera Japan, for example, has a great database of films because they get sent a lot of films by directors each year. They try to get every curator to see the same film and then debate which films they will screen. This method is, however, not possible for a lot of smaller film festivals, such as CinemAsia, who do not have the staffing to do an open call for new films every year. These film festivals rely on collaborations and approaching film directors themselves. Because the film festival industry is so interconnected, this is made possible as many curators often also work at other film festivals (IIAS, 2023).

Queer Curating

The way the curators select films depends on the room they have for a specific genre or type of film within the film festival. Most film festivals, like the International Film Festival Rotterdam, do not work with genre sections. Still, more broad sections where films

get selected based on, for example, the background of the film directors or if it is a feature film or a short film. Camera Japan is similar in the sense that they only create sections for the different types of films, such as animation, children's films and short films. Some years if they have a focus, such as a director or a specific theme, they create a section for that. CinemAsia is similar to both these festivals, but they have extra sections for their collaboration program with other film festivals, their queer program and their section called panorama, which is used to showcase a mix of genre films to show different aspects of Asia (IIAS, 2023). Most other general film festivals do not have a separate section for queer cinema. Curator A, for example, said they liked the idea of not having the separation between queer and non-queer films. Because separating the two would solidify the idea that queer films are not 'normal' films. Curator B, also said they would love to be able not to separate the films. However, they noted that there is still too much prejudice and misconceptions towards queer people. Therefore a separate section of queer films is needed to be able to represent queer stories properly.

The three curators interviewed were also queer, and some of their stories also showed how essential it is to film festivals which is not a specific queer film festival, to have a queer curator on their team. There have been occurrences where when queer curators could not be present for all the selection of films, films were selected which afterwards were identified by the queer curators as problematic queer representations. However, this is even more complicated when discussing queer Asian films. As mentioned earlier, most curators for European film festivals are European. In addition, from the interviews and panel discussions, it turns out that many curators who curate for Asian (queer) films do not have a background in Asian cinema. They often are either specialised because of their expertise in a certain genre, or they started working in this field due to their interest in Asian (queer) films. As most curators noted, their primary criteria for choosing a film is based on what is interesting. This

is subjective to the curator, but the main idea behind it is to find films that say something about cinema, and that can surprise the audience. It then depends on the curator how (queer) Asia is represented at film festivals which can be problematic when the curator is not intentionally focused on the representation of Asia. Because as we have seen with the film analysis, what viewers see in these films is how they imagine those countries to be, or if they already have preconceptions, films can further develop them. This does not mean that some film festivals and curators try their best to represent (queer) Asia truthfully. Camera Japan, for example, has a team of Japanologists and Japanese people who help them ensure they represent Japan well. CinemAsia and QueerEast are exemplary film festivals that make an effort to provide the best representation. They hire queer Asian curators to create programs for their film festivals. In addition to collaborating with other (queer) Asian film festivals in Europe and Asia. They also focus on stimulating the work of Asian filmmakers. In addition, there are not many queer Asian films being produced every year. And not all of these films are authentic queer stories, making the role of queer Asian curators even more critical. Curators thus can be gatekeepers but also supporters (Singapore International Film Festival, 2021). However, the curators are not the only factor that influences how well (queer) Asia is being represented at (European) film festivals.

The Film Festival Ecosystem

Acquiring Asian films is more expensive, making European and American films more attractive to acquire because the film festivals also already know they will do well. However, as mentioned at the start of this chapter, film distributors have started showing more interest in Asian films in the last couple of years, especially East Asian films. This is not too unexpected as the East Asian film industries have a solid history of becoming big industries within Asia. Especially with the new interest in East Asian cultures through K-pop and Anime, film festivals also know that they have an audience to show these movies to

(Singapore International Film Festival, 2021). However, when talking about queer Asian films, the story is different because not many queer Asian films are produced yearly (Taiwan Film Festival, 3032). Therefore curators often depend on films from the East Asian region since they produce more films which creates an imbalanced representation of queer Asia. However, film festivals like Cinemasia also try to highlight Queer Asian films from regions and countries which are often underrepresented. But another problem that plays a role here is that some films are reserved for their European premieres, often at more established film festivals. Smaller film festivals, therefore, often need to wait before they can screen certain films.

Some curators also noticed that instead of focusing on feature films, it is more interesting to screen short films. Feature films are often not directed by queer directors and, therefore, risk representing queer stories negatively. However, this does not immediately mean there are no good queer films. Curator C mentions that as long as the intentions are positive, and the film does not represent stereotypical and hurtful queer narratives. These films can be screened. However, short films provide the opportunity for more authentic queer stories as queer film directors often do not have the funds to create feature films. However, curators cannot only show these types of films because they are not as profitable for film festivals as feature films. As noted in the literature review, film festivals have developed into more commercialised models. All the curators also noticed they had to balance programming more popular films with the more niche films creating a profitable event. This has led to some film festivals losing sight of showcasing proper representation. A curator noted that this might also be because some established queer film festivals, for example, do not focus on adequately representing the queerness of other cultures as they are only interested in what comes across as interesting (Independent Cinema Office, 2020). In the Netherlands, an interesting trend can be noticed of new more niche film festivals popping up, such as

TranScreen and Queer Sex Worker Film Festival. The reason for these new film festivals is often because they find that their particular group/niche is not well represented at these more significant commercialised film festivals. In a sense, these smaller and niche film festivals can be seen as how earlier film festivals used to be, from the ground up and community-based and fuelled. However, the risk of these overly diversifying film festivals is that the viewers receive a one-sided view on these topics. This is not immediately fixed by things such as introductions to the films and panel discussions. Still, all the curators agreed that it is necessary to give some information as you are presenting something often unfamiliar to the audience.

The Audience

The audience of a film festival consists mainly of the cinephile community. They are interested in film and are often more open-minded and politically correct (Montage, 2021). However, background information still needs to be provided about the films as the audience members are often unfamiliar with the content. This way, it is also possible to counter the possible expectations the audience members have on what type of film it will be or other presumptions (Taiwan Film Festival, 2021). To what extent the films get introduced differs per film festival as well as the curator. At Camera Japan, for example, most curators try to keep it shorter to not inconvenience the audience too much. They are also limited with time because of the tight screening schedule. The content of the introduction depends on what speaks to the audience. This can depend on the country. One curator, for example, noticed in France that the audience found it more interesting when the introduction was focused on the narrative connecting it to themes such as freedom fighting. In this way, the curator can find common ground where the French audience might be able to understand the Asian film better (Taiwan Film Festival, 2021). It remains, however, that there will always be audience members who still will not understand. An extra way film festivals can try to educate the

viewer is through panel discussions. Curators can decide that for some films they screen, more discussion or information is needed. An example of this is the screening of *Midnight Swan* (2020) at CinemAsia in 2022. Due to circumstances, this Japanese film was decided to be screened. However, it was concluded that the film is not an excellent queer representation, so the film festival decided to pair the screening with a panel discussion. This panel discussion contained experts who critically discussed the inadequate representation and opened the conversation with the audience. Curator C, however, noted that constantly having to explain the cultural differences further solidifies the distance between the European audience and the (queer) Asian community because you keep highlighting that there is another who is different. However, they did admit that as long as racism and discrimination within European society are still prevalent, these film festivals are needed to educate and provide positive representation.

Interestingly the curators did notice that European audience members were able to identify with the (queer) Asian films. Films are an escape and can introduce the viewer to new worlds. Watching (queer) Asian films allows the audience to reimagine the world without the dominant Western discourse. Curator A noticed at the Slovak Queer Film Festival that queer Asian films brought light to different sets of problems that queer people face in their own countries through other stories and genres. These films also provided new perspectives on how to be queer. Thus even though there are cultural differences, the element of the audience being queer and the queer characters in the film is often enough for the audience to identify. There is a shared element or understanding of being considered different. The curiosity of these audience members is often stronger than their prejudice or their sacredness of not understanding the film due to cultural differences. This does not mean every audience member can connect with what they see on screen.

Conclusion

The research started with the research question: How is Queer Asia represented in film at European Film Festivals? Through the analysis of the films, this research showed this is a complex understanding as the majority of the analysed films did not necessarily directly negatively represent queer Asia. Through the comments by the viewers, it can be concluded that misrepresentation is often caused due to not correctly addressing the queer themes within the films. The misrepresentation can lead the viewer to interpret it as representing how it is to be queer in Asia. These results highlighted how important it is for film festivals and curators to create the proper environment to showcase positive representations and educate and challenge the viewers on their preconceptions. The interviews and panel discussions with the curators showed that the curators have their own ways on finding the films they want to screen at their film festivals. However the materials also made clear that the curators are restricted by multiple outside factors such as limited produced work, expensive international licencing rights and the film festival's profitability. This leads to curators having to balance programming big feature films, which will attract viewers and smaller, unknown films which, might provide a new and interesting insight into the topic of queer Asia.

The five films analysed cannot represent all the films screened at European film festivals. However, they did provide some understanding of what sort of films are being screened now. The only film with a clear negative representation, with the connection between paedophilia and queer people, was *A Girl at My Door*, which was only screened at Cannes. The other four films, which provided a more mixed but not necessarily bad representation, were screened at multiple film festivals throughout Europe, notably at film festivals which focus on (queer) Asian film. This correlation could suggest that smaller film festivals such as CinemAsia and QueerEast have better tools, people and possibly motivation to focus on better representation than big, established and traditional film festivals like

Cannes. Similar thoughts were shared by some of the curators, however, due to the limited scope of this research, this could not be studied further. Further research should explore this to give more insights into the power dynamics and discourse creation within the film festival ecosystem.

Another limitation of this research is that the understanding of queer Asia in this research was limited to an extensive literature review. This gives a good broad understanding however, as mentioned before, the understanding of what queer is can differ per country, per region, per city. Further research should focus on queer Asian people to better understand what it means to be queer for them, which might show new aspects which could not be found in the film analysis for this research. Overall the research provided a comprehensive perspective on the workings of film festivals in Europe and the films screened. This research has added to the literature with new and more recent information on which further research can be built on.

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Appendix

Filmography

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