



Non-conformist Visions of Chinese Female Queers: Locating Emotional Appealing in Chinese Lesbian Movies *Small Talk* (2016) and *Intimates* (1997)

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Abstract. Lesbian group is an important topic in minority research. This paper mainly discusses how the film reveals lesbian identity, empowers lesbian feminism, and improves the popularity of LGBTQ culture. This paper reviews the social and cultural background of Chinese lesbians and the development of Chinese gay films. Based on queer theory and feminist theory, this study discusses four themes for the empowerment of Chinese lesbians in Chinese lesbian films *Intimates* (1997) and *Small Talk* (2016) through text analysis. This paper finds that both films portray lesbians as independent, capable and strong individuals who try to break social restrictions and pursue non-traditional ways of making a living. Both films fully demonstrate queer feminism and the reconstruction of women's subjectivity. This paper holds that films can use emotional appeal to attract audiences from different cultural backgrounds and empower sexual minorities. This paper will be beneficial to provide new perspectives and cases for LGBTQ research.

Keywords: Female Queers · Lesbian Movies · Text analysis

1 Introduction

Homosexuality had always been a dramatically sensitive topic, even a taboo, in traditional China. Tracking the historical evolution, homosexuality was accused as an embodiment of Western capitalism during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution. In the next decade, people who disclosed homosexual identities would suffer persecution in jail in the name of the government's punishing hooliganism [1]. Despite that the situation has changed when the state decriminalized same-sex love in 1997 and removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in 2001, the relationships of LGBTQ communities are still in tension. In 2016, Qiu Bai, a Chinese university student, once found that the textbook she used still defined homosexuality as a mental disorder. In the following five years, she initiated four lawsuits against the Chinese Ministry of Education, the publisher of this homophobic textbook [2]. And this case suggests that the public, even the official, still embraces low tolerance and recognition towards sexual minorities in contemporary China.

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Z. Zhan et al. (Eds.): SEAA 2022, ASSEHR 675, pp. 693–701, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-05-3_84

Li Yinhe, a Chinese prominent female sociologist, sexologist, and activist for LGBT rights in China, admits the problems existing in people's perception of LGBTQ minorities, especially lesbians. And she suggests, a lack of public understanding, traditional patriarchy ideology, and ignorance from higher-level officials exacerbate the invisibility of Chinese lesbians [3]. And since LGBTQ activities are oppressed underground and in the closet, there need more visible voices to proclaim the equal rights of the Chinese lesbian community in contemporary.

This paper will use the rhetorical research method to analyze two Chinese lesbian movies *Intimate* (1997) and *Small Talk* (2016), which the movies highlight the tragic experience of lesbian characters, and advocates female queer's non-conformist lifestyle to appeal to the audience's empathy about the dilemma faced by Chinese lesbians. Its aim is to detect how Chinese lesbian movies disclose the lesbian identity, empower queer feminist activism, and enhance the visibility of LGBTQ culture in China. The analysis will help track the power dynamic and interaction between Chinese LGBTQ movie artists, other LGBTQ peers, and the public of China.

2 Literature Review

Previous related studies mainly include the following aspects. Firstly, several investigations overview the current situation and problematic dilemmas confronted by Chinese LGBT communities. Overall, these people are conserved underground and obtain little societal recognition of their identity. By launching in-depth interviews with 34 Chinese lesbians and gay men, Ning and Poon reaffirm, heteronormativity in China is institutionalized, and normalized by the states' regulation is perpetuated through daily interaction, which constructs structural violence on sexual minorities [4]. More specifically, heterosexism dominance is embodied via state employment, entitlements tied to marriage, and homosexuality exclusion via state media. In that condition, Chinese sexual minorities will risk social ostracization and hard to disclose their identities. To highlight the shriveled and suppressed environment for sexual minorities surviving, Li concedes, LGBT phenomenon is never recognized as a part of subcultures in China [3]. And given the ignorance by the state government, LGBT people would never enter social understanding and discussion. In addition, although the Chinese Society of Psychiatry has stopped categorizing homosexuality as a mental disorder since 2001, Williams suggests, most LGBT people are struggling to gain the acceptance of close family members, especially those with traditional expectations [5]. Meanwhile, Williams adds, there have been some domestic commercials that advocate LGBT rights, but most of them are inherently inducing LGBT customers into a "consumer trap" and extracting interests from gay people [5]. Therefore, it does not comply with the mission of "joyful commitment" [6]. Then, Lo points out, due to socio-political, gendered, familial, cultural constraints imposed on lesbians, female-led same-sex marriage challenges the heterosexual male-breadwinner structure, social norms, and Chinese parental authority [7]. So, Chinese lesbians embrace extremely rare free will when it comes to directly coming out and the family forming process. However, some positive signs reveal in the urban families. After reviewing three coming-out discourses, Wang argue, based on equally respectful communication, rethinking the extended meanings of sexuality and gender, it is becoming prevalent that

some “out” lesbians can construct liberalistic parent-child relationships and gain certain tolerance. And it is more possible in urban, middle-class families [8].

Secondly, some Chinese films and TV dramas that portray the vulnerable and marginalized natures of lesbians proactively empower queer feminism and draw public attention to the dilemma faced by Chinese lesbians. Bao argues that Shitou’s 2006 film, *Women Fifty Minutes*, celebrates queers’ non-conformist lifestyle and women’s subjectivity reconstruction [9]. This kind of rebellious queer spirit points out women’s free will against compulsory marriage in traditional China, which translates and contextualizes western queer theory in China. Moreover, queer interventions must be considered when carrying out inclusive feminist politics in China. That is, the necessity of combining queerness with feminism for building and empowering both communities. Except for films, some queer activism also reveals clues in some TV dramas. By analyzing media texts of *Yes or No* and *Girls Love*, Fung argues, some sexual desires are ingrained while some are situational and temporary [10]. In that case, lesbians will be hurt and encounter cheating if their partners are latent straight. Therefore, people are expected to identify their authentic sexual orientations before pre-assigning those temporary sexual feelings a label, which is respectful for all sexual minorities. Then, Cheng reviewed the same web drama but a different episode, *Yes or No 2.5*. And the author claims, hegemony and hierarchy exist in the Taiwan queer communities, where butch is the priority lesbian agent while femme is recognized as an adjected traitor, meaning that misogyny embodies in queer culture [11]. Therefore, sexism, masculine privilege, and patriarchal rationality make femme lesbians marginalized both by queer communities and heterosexual communities. Furthermore, Xiaopei et al. render an enlightened foreground of Chinese films in promoting the voices of sexual minorities. That is, a wave of “new queer Chinese cinema” led by a group of young independent filmmakers has emerged, which created new possibilities for the Chinese queer communities to thrive [12]. And some of those directors, also enacting as queer activists, establish NGOs like Pink Space to strive for the welfare of stigmatized people, such as wives of gay men, lesbians, sex workers, HIV-positive women, and bisexual women. Taken together, despite those media artifacts about queer cultures, especially those about lesbians, are very rare in mainland China. Somehow, these films create new possibilities for challenging heteronormativity dominance, also get the public to understand queer cultures, and build up a more inclusive queer community.

Thirdly, regarding the relationships between lesbian activism and social media, most scholars affirm the positive effects of social media in mobilizing people to recognize, accept, and disseminate the visibility of sexual minorities in China. With extensive flexibility in information circulation, social media in China, like Weibo and WeChat, weak the authoritarian power of the state in monopolizing information dissemination. And sexual minorities’ capacity of bargaining with rigid censorship is becoming more resilient as social media intrigues extended discussion and continually puts pressure on the government. In other words, social media empowerment promotes the autonomy, independence, and publicity of Chinese LGBTQ communities in the long run. What’s more, compared with traditional media, some scholars emphasize the positive function of social media in exposing sexual minorities’ viewpoints. Hu and Li suggest, social media exemplifies public tolerance for homosexuality [13]. However, people’s constant

exposure to traditional media that echoes gender role beliefs in traditional China will mitigate the liberalization of homosexuality. Hence, traditional media outlets are expected to challenge public perception of LGBTQ culture by discouraging more diverse perspectives towards sexuality and breaking through gender constraints.

In conclusion, Chinese lesbians face a problematic situation framed by traditional gender role assumptions, nevertheless, the Chinese film industry makes efforts in promoting the visibility of lesbian communities, also, young queer activists utilize social media to expose LGBTQ culture, purposefully, they endeavor to challenge outdated gender norm and empower inhibited sexual minorities in China. But it still needs more consistent dedication, which must hold political risk and challenges to Confucianism value, to strive for LGBTQ rights in future China.

3 Methods

The methodological orientation selected for this study is Rhetorical Analysis. Rhetoric strategically manipulates everyday language use, which refers to the methods of argumentation and argumentative process, aiming to convince and persuade the general audience to accept certain viewpoints or to do something [14]. Originated from Ancient Greece, rhetoric addresses the audience through three kinds of appeal in persuasive discourses: pathos, ethos, and logos [15]. This study mainly focus on appeals to the emotion, pathos, used in these two movies and to see in which way those variable emotional expressions embodied in homosexual relationships attract people of different sexualities, ages, and genders. What's more, since the audience is the center of rhetorical analysis, as Crines claims, it is essential to consider how representation in movies "reflects their expectations" [16]. Therefore, this study will evaluate how the audience would resonate with the character's experiences in the movies or recall similar memories and moods. The purpose is to examine the influence of emotional appeals on reconstructing audience's perception of homosexuality.

Small Talk (2016) and *Intimates* (1997). First, the contexts of these two movies are settled in two different periods of China. The story of *Intimates* happened in the 1940s when Japan-China War is impending in Guangzhou, while *Small Talk* records a conversation between a Lesbian mum and her daughter in contemporary Taiwan. These two contexts embracing unique cultural practices in different periods could get more people of different ages to resonate with the story. For instance, *Combed Sister* could attract the attention of the elderly unmarried females in Shunde city. Second, characters in these two movies somehow have miserable experiences of "arranged marriage" which is the legacy of feudal China. And they are particularly traumatized by that. Although this outdated custom has been illegalized in the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China since the 1990s, the embedded ideology of gender role belief and obedience to parental authority was passed on. Since most Chinese elderly people were not permitted to freely fall in love at their ages. So, the tragedy derived by "arranged marriage" that happened to lesbians can trigger the empathy of the elderly generation, especially those living in rural China. Third, there are characters in these two films who gave birth to children from their heterosexual marriage, and they independently raise children. On one hand, these lesbians show superb motherhood. On the other hand, lesbian mothers struggled to make

money and provide great life quality for their daughters without financial support. The representation of females' subjectivity reconstruction empowers contemporary female adults to create the life they want on their own.

To systematically analyze these two movies, this study extracts four rough common grounds: a. representation of homosexual relations and identity; b. the heterosexual marriage/relationships and homosexual relationships that the characters experienced, different obstacles they faced in different sociocultural contexts; c. the representation of motherhood in homosexual relationships; d. the embodiment of female queers' subjectivity reconstruction. This study designed 10 questions distributed in four categories and 2 extra questions in the account of shooting techniques used in movies, and then selected relevant text and visual evidence to answer the 12 questions, analyzing their locational, illocutionary, perlocutionary meanings. The aim is to explore how these two movies use Pathos in rhetorical research to appeal to audiences of different ages, sexualities, and genders by inducing their empathy to any of these four themes.

4 Results

After examining and coding two Chinese lesbian movies, *Intimates* (1997) and *Small Talk* (2016) through the rhetorical analysis approach, several common grounds about queer feminism empowerment are exemplified in both movies.

First, these two movies convey the love between two women in a subtle way, which portrays the same-sex relationship as mutual understanding and support, empathy, thoughtful consideration, and intimate company. In the movie *Intimate*, the emotional triggers between Foon and Wan arose in the conditions they help each other get out of the predicament. For instance, when Foon was compelled to marry a strange man under arranged marriage contract, Wan gave that man a lot of money in exchange for Foon's freedom. When Wan was sold to a warlord, Foon kept waiting outside the warlord's house alone for three days. Similar depictions also remain in the movie *Small Talk*, A-nu's ex-girlfriend recalled the most bright and wonderful time throughout her life as the time spent with A-nu. Despite that they were poor at that time, they supported each other, and both work very hard. Also, most relatives, friends, and other bystanders in both movies show tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality. That is to say, interdependence and strong emotional bonds between same-sex individuals are the main themes both movies highlight.

Second, a sharp contrast between characters' miserable heterosexual marriages/relationships and satisfying homosexual relationships are exemplified in the movies. In the movie *Intimates*, Wan's husband granted her decent social status, while she was exchanged as an object for teasing different businessmen. What's more, Foon's boyfriend left Foon who has got pregnant without committing any obligation. In the movie *Small Talk*, A-nu suffered the torture of domestic violence from her abusive ex-husband for many years, even her daughter got sexual harassment from A-nu's ex-husband. Lesbians are commonly traumatized by those experiences. However, one common cause of these chaotic experiences originates from "arranged marriage", a legacy of feudal China, which discloses a specific cultural practice in traditional China.

Third, all lesbian characters in the two movies, somehow, take on the role of mother and independently adopt kids merely without any support from heterosexual partners,

revealing superb motherhood. Given the condition that both Wan and A-nu did not remarry even after they separate from their homosexual partners. However, lesbian characters have less tendency to disclose sexuality and inner thoughts to their children, which leads to a lack of mutual conversation, trust, and understanding between lesbian mothers and their children. For instance, the movie *Small Talk* utilize either symmetrical composition or monologue of Huang to indicate Huang used to her perceive her mother, A-nu, has never loved her since she was a trauma that A-nu would never recall. Then, Huang generates a mindset of self-hatred and self-loathing, which accentuates this isolation from A-nu.

Forth, lesbian characters in both movies reveal strong free wills towards marriage and a non-conformist spirit. A-nu perceives marriage as not necessary in her life despite it being tough for her to earn a living with the absence of household registration. Similarly, Foon used to be a combed sister who committed to never marry. Also, Foon and Wan ran a dumpling restaurant in the context where most women rely on males' property to make a life.

5 Discussion

It is explicit that lesbian characters in both movies not only experience several failed, miserable heterosexual relationships but also, they have a relatively pessimistic outcome at the end of the story. For instance, Foon and Wan were separated due to the warfare between China and Japan in the 1940s. Also, the isolation between A-nu and her daughter does not completely resolve at the end of the film since A-nu still reserved her authentic feelings in front of her daughter. Therefore, the overall tragic experience imposed on lesbian characters discloses film maker's intention of appealing to audiences to resonate with Chinese lesbians who are inhibited underground and seriously marginalized. And without social recognition and identity inclusion, it will construct a grievous future where more Chinese lesbians will suffer disappointment and have a heterosexual marriage which is contrary to their wills.

To evaluate the causes of why these two films use "arranged marriage" to highlight the tragedy that happened to characters, it could partly attribute to the cultural factors, that is, gender role assumption and obedience to parental authority. In China, parents' expectation is always the most crucial tenet for people to obey in the process of working and living. As Chen suggests, the conception of "self" is initially defined by one's familial relations and parents, thus, filial piety is important for being a person [17]. However, within the perception of most Chinese parents owning female kids, their daughter is expected to marry a reliable male. And this kind of family norm defines heterosexuality as proper and normal, which also values the heterosexual family and female's reproduction mission as the foundation for social and regime stability [18]. Under this ideology, arranged marriage emerged. This cultural practice has representation in both movies: A-nu and Foon both are victims of arranged marriage. Such representation implicitly suggests that traditional cultural practice has a substantial on public perception and ideology.

Although arranged marriage was illegalized in China, heteronormativity and family-oriented conventions have been passed on. In that case, LGBT individuals are hard to

confess their sexuality to parents since the constraint of norms, parental aspiration, and prescription. Moreover, it is explicit that filmmakers of both movies hold a relatively pessimistic attitude to the social acceptance and recognition of Chinese lesbians at least in the near future. That is because, the resolution of outdated, conservative perceptions needs a long time for proceeding, and the Chinese media environment is restricted where LGBTQ content is banned due to rigid censorship. In such circumstances, filmmakers utilize tragic plots and reflections on Chinese traditional cultural practices, appealing to the audience's sympathy about the trauma of lesbian characters in the film. Then, it induces the audience, especially those with the same experience of arranged marriage, to pay attention to the well-being of sexual minorities.

Moreover, two movies portray lesbians as independent, empowered, strong individuals with a rebellious spirit to oppose heterosexism. These female queers tried to break social constraints not only by disclosing their unique sexuality but also by pursuing an unconventional way of earning life. And it shows queer feminism which celebrates queers' non-conformist lifestyle and women's subjectivity reconstruction and strong freewill [9]. In that case, the necessity of combining queerness with feminism for building and empowering both communities. Therefore, the representation of females' subjectivity reconstruction in the films attracts contemporary young female audiences and empowers them to create the life they want on their own.

6 Conclusion

This paper used rhetorical research method to explore how Chinese lesbian movies disclose lesbian identity, empower queer feminism, and enhance the visibility of LGBTQ culture in China. It's found that the movies use emotional appeals to attract audience of different cultural contexts and empower sexual minorities. The movies highlight the tragedy derived by traditional gender role belief and indicate female queer's non-conformist lifestyle, to appeal to people's sympathy and empathy to the victims of arranged marriage.

Homosexuality has always been a traditionally sensitive topic, even a taboo, in contemporary China. Under rigid media censorship, public denial, and illegalization of gay marriage (mainland of China), the LGBTQ + community could not feel free to come out and strive for equality. And Chinese lesbian communities are still extremely marginalized, due to ingrained patriarchal ideology, as well as traditional Chinese parenthood's navigation for their female kids, which refers to the expectation that girls are supposed to marry a dependent-worthy male. For further research, there needs more exploration of the ways through which Chinese queer activists could arise the attention of upper institutions, extend the influence of online queer activism to empower the Chinese LGBTQ community.

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