



Research of Homo-Wife' Sociosexual Issues Based on the *Dear Ex*

Sihao Pan^(✉)

China-Korea Institute of New Media, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law,
Wuhan 430073, Hubei, China
penn000@outlook.com

Abstract. With the global depathologization of homosexuality, more and more Chinese-language filmmakers are using films to speak out for gay groups and fight for their rights. However, homo-wives, as a derivative group of the gay group, are often the unseen foil in gay films. This article explores and analyzes the views on marriage and love of different groups from the perspective of movies, especially the status quo of the special social role of the homo-wife in modern society. *Dear Ex* [1], as the first Chinese gay film to set a homo-wife as its protagonist, whether its portrayal of Liu San-lian's character fully expresses the trauma of a homo-wife is what this paper attempts to explore and analyze. However, after analyzing the image of Liu San-lian, the dual identity given by the scriptwriter and the comparison with Jay, a gay male figure, the paper concludes in the negative. Although Liu San-lian as a homo-wife is finally placed in an obvious position in the film, her trauma is overshadowed by the excessive elements put on her by the screenwriter, and her growth becomes inevitable by Jay's contrast.

Keywords: Homo-wife · gay film · homosexual culture

1 Introduction

In the 1990s, with the global depathologization of “homosexuality”, Chinese homosexual films grew from nothing to something. From *Farewell My Concubine* [2], which won the Palme d'Or at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival, to *Will You Look at Me* [3], which won the Queer Palm for best short film in the 2022 La Semaine De La Critique Cannes Film Festival, there have been numerous Chinese homosexual films with both artistry and audience appeal keep popping up. As a mirror of homosexual culture's communication with the world, homosexual films not only show homosexual love, but also reflect real-life issues. In China, even though homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness, the invisible discrimination against homosexuals in the heterosexual-dominated society and the Filial piety culture's demand for male heirs have led more homosexuals to conceal their sexual orientation and choose to have children through fraudulent marriage. This reality has led to the emergence of homo-wives, a social role that has also become an undervalued marginal role in the society. It also makes them an integral but underappreciated marginal character in most gay films.

The loss of voice of homo-wives in gay films stems from the loss of voice of the homo-wife group in the real world. Homo-wives are a social identity created by gay men who choose to fraudulently marry under social oppression [4]. Unaware of their husbands' sexual orientation, homo-wives are often unable to establish a self-identity with this social identity. At the same time, because of their marginal position in society, even if they recognize their status as homo-wives, they remain silent and submissive because they are unable to resist or fail to resist. So while gay men as a subcultural group can propagate and participate in the gay liberation movement and call on society to give homosexuals equal rights, homo-wives, a subcultural group derived from a subcultural group, are not equipped to speak out for themselves. As victims of victims, positive social acceptance by mainstream society is very important for the homo-wife group.

Dear Ex tells the story of a homo-wife who takes her son to fight her husband's former gay lover for the insurance money he left behind after his death. Song Zheng-yuan is a gay man who chose to scam marriage due to social pressure. After many years of marriage, Song decided to leave his wife Liu San-lian and his son Song Cheng-xi after suffering from cancer and want to spend his last time with his former gay lover Jay. After Song's death, his wife Liu San-lian discovered that his insurance beneficiary was not herself and the son, so she took her son to denounce Jay. In the process of repeated contact, the three gradually became familiar with each other, and began to understand each other. As a gay film, *Dear Ex* shows the respective grief of gay men and homo-wife through the perspective of Liu's son. But the portrayal of Liu San-lian's image in the film is the focus of this article. Whether the characters in the film are sufficient to bring out the sufferings and demands of the homo-wives. Therefore, through the analysis of the movie characters, this paper further shows the problems of the homo-wives in society.

Through the analysis of Liu San-lian in *Dear Ex*, the description of the realistic representational image of homo-wife and the social problems it reflects can help readers establish a more objective and fair understanding of the homo-wife group and strengthen their concern and support for the homo-wife group. At the same time, this paper can also provide references and suggestions for the portrayal of homo-wives in subsequent films of the same genre.

2 The Image of Homo-Wife in the Films

2.1 History

In previous Chinese gay films, the homo-wife is neither the protagonist nor the narrative subject, but exists as a foil. It is used to highlight the deep feelings between gays or to keep the plot intact, such as Lin Jingping in *Lan Yu* [5] or Gu Weiwei in *The Wedding Banquet* [6]. In these films, the suffering of homo-wives is overshadowed by gay love, and homo-wives are completely ignored. However, in *Dear Ex*, Liu San-lian, the homo-wife, is set up as the protagonist, appearing in a different image than before.

Usually, in order to demonstrate gay men's lack of desire for women and to satisfy the aesthetic orientation of the public, most homo-wives in gay films have to meet the conditions of beauty or sexiness. But Liu San-lian is portrayed as a woman without femininity in *Dear Ex* in the traditional sense. She is not an object that carries the audience's desire for the female body and deliberately exudes femininity, but rather a

poor woman who has been fraudulently married and abandoned by her husband, a cranky and emaciated single mother. In fact, such a character is more in line with the reality of most homo-wives. Whether they are homo-wives in films or in real life, their identity as homo-wives is what really needs to be noticed and positively identified by society. The screenwriter's weakening of Liu Sanlian's femininity is a more general portrayal of the homo-wife group. After removing the "sexy/beautiful woman" label, the "homo-wife" label on Liu San-lian is more visible and clearer.

2.2 Dear Ex

At the same time, Liu San-lian is a character with her own character arc, which makes her a true protagonist rather than a foil. She has to accept the most unexpected events and deal with the most complicated emotions, including her husband being gay, her husband left her and her son behind, her husband's insurance money beneficiary is Jay, her son keeps misunderstanding her, her son runs away to live with Jay. Faced with the blows of real life, the change of character's mentality, which determined to fight in her own way, push the development of the storyline. From the resentment expressed by cursing to the final choice of reconciliation, the character has completed the digestion and absorption of emotions and self-growth.

3 Victim or Perpetrators

In presenting the current situation of homosexuality and the survival of homo-wives, homosexual films unconsciously link homosexuality to the social context in terms of theme and content, and the characters in the films are not only themselves but also represent the cultural groups they are subordinated to [7]. The identity of the cultural group of homo-wives is both victim and perpetrator. Being a homo-wives is a victim of a gay man's fraudulent marriage, and a homophobic perpetrator of heterosexual hegemony. Thus, Liu San-lian is given two group identities, victim and the perpetrator. The neutralization of the two conflicting identities would have resulted in a weakened image of both sides, but the film's different representation of the two identities brings about a different result.

At the beginning of the film, Liu San-lian's identity as a homo-wife is revealed and subsequently exists as a setting in the film. Liu San-lian's identity as a perpetrator is shaped and emphasized through her lack of understanding and insults to Jay's sexual orientation during several arguments with him. In Liu San-lian's repeated insults to Jay, her image as a perpetrator is constantly reinforced, concealing the fact that she is a victim. In fact, Liu San-lian's homophobia and her abusive behavior do not stem exclusively from the heterosexual cultural group to which she belongs. The first thing that cannot be ignored is that the social discipline of women, represented by Liu San-lian's colleagues, affects Liu San-lian's emotions and behavior all the time. When she mentioned Song Zheng-yuan's neglect of herself to her colleague, her colleague asked her to reflect on whether she was not sexy enough. When Song came out to her, she attributed the fact that Song was gay to her own lack of femininity. When she accidentally told her colleagues that Song was gay, they were embarrassed and silent. So she was unable to face the

identity of “homo-wife” calmly, and she was unable to have positive identification with gay men. In second, the oppression of homo-wives by fraudulent gays is to a certain extent caused by the persecution of gays by the heterosexual hegemony. So in essence, Liu San-lian is the victim at the bottom of the whole food chain. After Song Zheng-yuan's death, the source of Liu San-lian's suffering becomes nothingness, while her anger and grievances have nowhere to go but to vent on her perceived “interloper” Jay and her disobedient son. Liu San-lian's behavior is realistic and reasonable, but the behavior of a perpetrator invariably makes her fall into the situation of “poor person must have something mean”. Thus, after her image as a victim is weakened, the suffering she endures is also rationalized and justified.

4 The Deified Gay Man and the Hysterical Homo-Wife

Under the suppression of patriarchal society, gay men and homo-wives are both belong to the exploited and vulnerable group, and on this level, their situation is similar. In the movie, Liu San-lian and Jay are similar because they are both victims and exploited by Song Zhengyuan and the entire patriarchal society. The film's intentional blurring of the role of Song Zheng-yuan and the use of Liu San-lian's son's perspective to develop the narrative make Liu San-lian and Jay appear to be evenly matched. But their very different attitudes toward exploitation put them in different situations.

After the crime of gay men fraudulently marrying was put on Song Zheng-yuan, Jay was portrayed as a completely innocent and dedicated weakling. He chose to tolerate the discrimination of others. Even if he was hurt by Song, he still loved Song for more than ten years. He was deified as the hero who always shouted “love is the greatest”, the narrator and representative of beautiful love. At the same time, Liu San-lian is portrayed as a hysterical woman. Hysteria is a way for women to rebel against social constraints and to cry out for help when they fail to against it [8]. Through the elaboration of Liu's son, “Liu San-lian feels that the whole world has wronged her”, expressing Liu's struggle and hysteria. After the struggle failed, Liu's suffered became the reason for her indiscriminate attacks on others, including, constantly controlling her son's life and telling Jay's mother that Jay was a gay. Under the hysterical and aggressive attitude, Liu's weak identity was concealed. Therefore, when Jay is portrayed as a pure hero and the angry, Liu San-lian is naturally become the villain who sets up obstacles for the protagonist, and this villainous image exists as a foil to shape Jay's pure feelings. In this case, the more hysterical Liu San-lian is, the more innocent Jay is set up, and the more pure and beautiful Jay's feelings for Song Zheng-yuan are set up.

5 Discussion

Liu San-lian in *Dear Ex* is a representative image of homo-wives who are oppressed by the patriarchal society. Her situation in the film reflects, to a certain extent, the situation of the contemporary Chinese homo-wife group in the private sphere, and the actions she takes in the film as a result of her anger and grief are commonplace in real life and have their causes. On the one hand, homo-wives are the deluded victims of womb exploitation in sexless and loveless marriages. Influenced by the traditional Chinese

concept that marriage is for family union and reproduction, many gay men conceal their sexual orientation and marry women primarily to meet the expectations of their parents and society. In terms of reproductive status, homo-wives are completely reduced to child-bearing tools in marriage and family. Having achieved their goal, gay men who fraudulently marry often have a dramatic change in attitude toward their wives from before the marriage, leading to a life of sexual repression and love deprivation for the homo-wives. In a previous study interviewing a group of homo-wives [9], the majority of respondents, whether they had children or not, and whether they cared about their husbands' sexual orientation, were desperate or resentful of men and marriage because of their sexless and loveless marriages. On the other hand, homo-wives are also victims who are powerless to rebel against their own identity. Currently, there is no legal shelter for those who are deluded in marriage in China's Civil Code, and the homo-wife group is unable to seek relief through either annulment or divorce proceedings [10]. Also, due to the stigmatization of homo-wives, homo-wives may have a self-identity crisis and may not be able or willing to admit their identity as homo-wives, considering it "humiliating" or believing that their husbands' sexual orientation is "due to their lack of femininity".

In contrast, although homosexual marriage has not been legalized in China, the depathologization of homosexuality has gradually increased the public's attention and acceptance of homosexuality. More and more homosexual films are being made to give voice to homosexuality, while homo-wives, as a derivative group of homosexuality, are more and more easily deprived of the right to speak. Even a film like *Dear Ex*, in which a homo-wife is the protagonist, inevitably ends up with homo-wives as a foil for gay men's love. Both in society and in the production of related films, more people need to pay attention to the homo-wife group and help them get rid of the dilemma of losing their voices from the perspective of the homo-wife group. At the same time, homo-wives should also look at their own identity objectively and fairly, stop treating "being deluded into marriage" as their own crime and shackle, and strive to fight for their own rights.

6 Conclusion

This paper investigates the image of Liu San-lian as a homo-wife in *Dear Ex* and discusses the plight of the homo-wife group represented by Liu San-lian in the real world. In general, in *Dear Ex*, Liu San-lian has a complete character arc, vivid characterization, and the status of a protagonist. This realistic representation of a homo-wife has never been seen in any other Chinese gay film. To a certain extent, this film gives a voice to the homo-wife group and helps to bring the homo-wife group to the attention of society and regain its awareness. But the screenwriter placed too many elements on Liu San-lian, while having the perfect Jay for comparison, and Liu San-lian is ultimately reduced to a foil for the gay man's love. As with all homo-wives who lose their voice in society, their suffering is still dissipated and weakened. In related films in the future, creators should pay more attention to the homo-wife group, create richer characters from their perspectives, and give the homo-wife group an opportunity to speak out while waving the flag for the legalization of gay marriage.

References

1. M. Hsu and C. Hsu, *Dear Ex*. China: Warner Bros., Medialink, 2018.
2. K. Chen, L. Lee and W. Lu, *Farewell, My Concubine*. China: Miramax Films, 1993.
3. S. Huang, *Will You Look at Me*. China: Lights on, 2022.
4. Y. Zhao, "Ethical Exploration of Chinese Homosexuals Entering into Heterosexual Marriages from a Family Perspective", Master of Philosophy, Nanjing Normal University, 2014.
5. S. Kwan and J. Ngai, *Lan Yu*. China: Yongning Creative Workshop, 2001.
6. A. Lee, N. Peng and J. Schamus, *The wedding banquet*. China and United States: Central Motion Pictures Corp., Good Machine, 1993.
7. R. Ma, "A Research on The Images of Gay Wives In Contemporary Gay Films", Master of Law, Harbin Institute of Technology, 2018.
8. T. Moi, "Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's 'Dora'", *Feminist Review*, no. 9, pp. 60–74, 1981. Available: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1394915>. [Accessed 24 August 2022].
9. Y. Xue, "Social Identity Research About the Living Condition of Gay's Wife", Master of law, Harbin Institute of Technology, 2016.
10. D. Gao, "Legal predicament of the protection of the marriage rights of special subjects in the Civil Code and its solution—Taking gay-normal marriage as the analysis object", *Journal of Liaoning Public Security and Judicial Management Cadre College*, vol. 3, pp. 98–103, 2022. [Accessed 7 September 2022].

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

