

Joy Yue-Zi Cheng

Book Review:

Song Hwee Lim, *Celluloid Comrades. Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas*

University of Hawaii Press, 2006

As a professor at the University of Exeter in film studies, Lim has dedicated his studies to the issue of transnational Chinese cinema, a phenomenon which has been raising world-wide attention, especially with the release of publications such as *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film* (Wallflower, 2006) and the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*.

Celluloid Comrades, a monograph developed from the author's PhD dissertation, focuses on the cinematic re-presentations of male homosexuality in contemporary Chinese communities, at the same time dealing with the polyphonic and multifarious debates surrounding this subject. The book challenges the monolithic dominance of essentialized "Chineseness" and "homosexuality" and problematizes the latent hegemony of male gay discourses within identity politics. These arguments, circulated among reviews and critiques, have rendered this book a prominent text in this field; however, I suggest there is more nuanced specificity to this book than the aforementioned reviews suggest. I am interested in exploring the unchecked facets in the book's thematic scope,

its predominant ideological operation, and how its ideology permeates the logic of the whole discourse.

Lim begins from a delimitation of concepts such as "Chineseness," "homosexuality," and the temporal-spatial historical juncture situated mainly in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong of the 1990s. As the book's title suggests, "celluloid" refers to cinema, and "comrades" denotes a hybridity of translingual and cultural constructs. It is during the 1990s that appropriation of *tongzhi*—whose origin dates back to the founding father of Republican China in his dying words—gained popularity as an alternative term for same-sex sexuality. In other words, "comrades," translated from *tongzhi*, stands for male homosexuals in Chinese-speaking societies. A clear demarcation is manifested in Lim's awareness of the issues he aims to tackle, and the author manipulates his argumentation accordingly, a tactic probably used to circumvent polemic bashing. First, Lim expounds on the formation of the title and attempts to elucidate his ideas with six main films, which seems to contrast, if not contradict, what he claims later: "I generally

avoid designating any film I discuss as gay, queer, or tongzhi” (181).

Likewise, in the introduction, Lim suggests that examining the nature of “Chinese” and “homosexual” is not to subsume them to categories or specify the definiteness of each, a position that contrasts with his concern about the “defects” in Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu’s *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (University of Hawaii, 1997) and Yueh-yu Yeh’s *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (University of Hawaii, 2004). Lim aligns himself with deconstructionist practitioners, which, it seems to me, indicates that he himself bypasses issues of the conceptual framework, and at the same time, dodges the dilemma between the constitution of a category to assure identity on the one hand, and the subsequently dominant discourse constituted within the newly-established category on the other, coupled with a hierarchical order being reinstated and formulated. In configuration of Lim’s mindset in this regard, Damm comments on “the cinematic representation of homosexuality” to be “understood as part of a deconstruction project.”¹

In view of Lim’s emphasis on the examination of “the legitimizing discourse underlying” each construct (181), we can discern that Lim champions cultural studies and cultural materialism, as proposed by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Cornell University Press, 1994). This school of thought seeks to expose the hidden tactics maneuvered by contemporary power structures in order to disseminate ideology. Comprised of four features—historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis – cultural materialism serves as a theoretical device to analyze four monumental Chinese films, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), and *Happy Together* (1997), followed by auteur studies of Tsai Ming-liang’s and Stanley Kwan’s oeuvres, respectively, in Chapters 2 and 6. Although Lim underscores the importance of the “interplay and check between the four elements,” “textual analysis” and “theoretical discussion” are tailored in a way to serve specific historical-political perspectives. Lim’s practice of the strategies is slanted towards political reading and

interpretation, especially in terms of the shadow of the 1997 Hong Kong handover as well as the infliction of China’s cultural totalitarianism: from Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*, through Zhang Yuan’s *East Palace, West Palace*, to Wong Kar-wai’s *Happy Together* and Stanley Kwan’s *Hold You Tight* (1998), these four films, out of the six selected in this book, are treated as political allegories. Geng, in terms of “this enthusiasm for political reading,” questions whether Lim has oversimplified the “complicated issues of cinematic representation and subjectivity.”² In Chapter 4, “Traveling Sexualities,” Lim’s use of Helen Leung’s arguments, in response to Chow’s refusal of a geopolitical realist approach to reading *Happy Together*, in effect provides a cogent rebuttal that reminds us that deliberate abstraction of the film text from the historical context would be still untenable and no less problematic than geopolitical analysis; nevertheless, it is how Lim strategically chooses and arranges evidence to cater to his contingent needs that makes his arguments less effective. In order to fortify the linkage of “geopolitical context of 1997” and *Happy Together*, he cites an authorial desire for a “real gay film” to buttress his stance: “Wong reportedly said he was making *Happy Together* because Hong Kong needed a ‘real gay film’ before 1997” (101). A contradiction emerges very soon when readers encounter this paraphrase, “Wong Kar-wai does not like *Happy Together* to be seen as a gay film...” (182). I am as skeptical about the inconsistency of Wong’s attitudes as I am about what Lim’s quotations are predicated on and to what extent that could prevent his readers from thinking of him as an opportunist.

Of the four characteristics, “political commitment” identifies possibilities for the marginalized to subvert and obscure the boundaries between them and the hegemonic forces. Lim calls into question identity politics which, he contends, are very likely to be another regulatory regime. That is, while debunking the mythical modes of representation of the male homosexuality in Chinese cinema, Lim maintains a critical distance from gay liberationist rhetoric. He foregrounds the potential crisis by saying that identity politics is the “discourse that precludes the possibilities of other forms of sexual intimacies, especially

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forms that bear similarities with those of the heterosexual counterpart” (120). Homonormativity is no less hegemonic than heteronormativity. Gay liberationist rhetoric, Lim notes, dictates the property of a homosexual’s coming out, which is appraised as “an affirmative act of pride” whereas the opposite is labeled as “a sign of self-loathing” (50). Rather than brooding over the exact correctness of how a homosexual ought to manifest himself, Lim raises several questions: “Who decides if homosexuals should come out?” “Does the act of coming out necessarily promote understanding and acceptance of homosexuality?” Why must there be an either-or dichotomy that keeps homosexuals fettered and prohibited from access to an alternative? Lim does make an incisive comment on the equal repression inflicted by heteronormativity-as-homonormativity. Still, however, Sang detects the fallacy of Lim’s simplification of the variety of beliefs and his liquidation of “the minority within LGBTQ studies.”³ Sang argues that by overlooking the differences, Lim traps himself into the pitfalls of reinforcing another hegemony which he resolves to avoid.

Cultural materialism is the methodology Lim adopts to undertake his reading and analysis of the film texts, yet the underpinnings of his argumentation chime with the trajectory of deconstruction. Driven by deconstructionist beliefs, Lim unceasingly asks the readers to give a second thought, if not outright mistrust, to any “surface phenomena.”⁴ To be skeptical about the surface is a gesture which, if properly exerted in film interpretation, will render the mask unveiled and lay bare what is hidden behind. What is of concern here is how filmic representations of male homosexuality—“not only the spectacle but [also] the very way vision is organized”—are saturated by ideology.⁵ Lim does not think, in particular, that a minority group (ex., gay liberationists), no matter how subversive to the majority (ex., heteronormativity), has the privilege of resisting

questioning as another hegemony. Lim’s writing is demonstrative of his discursive self-reflexivity, embedded in the mode of forever questioning, which, I assume, has set a model of skepticism in this area of study.

In view of this style of critical enquiry, I would rather not regard the book as a text book with a comprehensive coverage of cinematic representations of male homosexuality in the contemporary Chinese-speaking context. But rather, it is Lim’s constant interrogation that illuminates and involves the readers in critical questioning of preexistent categories and notions that have been taken for granted. I would rather say Lim’s book helps to stimulate questioning and critique than deem it an exhaustive study. Instead of prescribing the only one formula, then, Lim always suggests other possibilities. In addition, *Celluloid Comrades* serves as an innovative writing manual that demonstrates how cultural materialism is used to intervene in, negotiate, and theorize texts.

That said, Lim’s choice of such films as *The Wedding Banquet*, *Farewell My Concubine*, *East Palace*, *West Palace*, and *Happy Together*, has been criticized as deliberately pandering to Westerners’ tastes. Lim’s treatment of most of these films as “political allegories” induces the readers to be suspicious of one thing: is he selling oriental exoticism to a Western audience? Rey Chow, in her *Primitive Passions*, uses Roland Barthes’ “mythologies” to suggest that the ethnic details of these films, in Westerners’ eyes, fail to manifest themselves in what they mean originally; instead, they are in service of “a second order articulation,” the activity of myth.⁶ In Chapter 1, “Screening Homosexuality,” Lim consents to the necessity of forsaking the baggage of “the paradigm of national cinema” and “the reading of films primarily as national allegories” (19); however, there exists an incongruity between what he says and what he actually does. I suggest that Lim provide reasons for this paradoxical deadlock so that our queries can be explained away.

Joy Yue-zi Cheng is a second year English Literature M.A. in National Taiwan Normal University. Her current area of interest involves exploring the ethical possibilities in dealing with the question of the other.

End Notes

- 1 Jens Damm, "Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas (review)," *China Review International* 14.1 (Spring 2007), 166.
- 2 Song Geng, "Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas, by Song Hwee Lim," *China Journal* 60 (July 2008), 215.
- 3 Tze-lan D. Sang, "Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas, by Song Hwee Lim," *Bulletin of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy* 31 Sept. 2007, 281.
- 4 Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 164.
- 5 Ibid., 180.
- 6 Ibid., 144-145.