Asian Film

by Andrew Grossman

With the proliferation of international film festivals and a growing dissatisfaction with Hollywood hegemony coinciding with film renaissances in Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and Korea, Asian films have recently enjoyed an unprecedented popularity with English-language audiences. This popularity has allowed Western audiences a glimpse of Asian gay and lesbian identities through high-profile queer films such as Nakajima Takahiro's *Okoge* (1992) and Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1997), not to mention a constant stream of gender ambiguities in Japanese animation and Hong Kong martial arts fantasies.

Yet while many of the queer Asian films we see in the West have come from Japan and Hong Kong--probably because these are the most cosmopolitan film industries in Asia--queer films have both struggled and succeeded in countries throughout Asia, countries whose distinct cultures and histories inform their queer images.

We should, however, always keep in mind that many of the most noted Asian queer films, such as Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), and Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), were made by professedly heterosexual directors and are films that arguably use homosexuality not as a subject matter in itself, but as an allegorical tool to critique political oppressions.

Mainland China and Taiwan

Although images of strong, masculinized women were an integral part of mainland Chinese propaganda films and revolutionary operas in the 1950s and 1960s, these images trapped women within a masculinist idea of gender, and pathologized any hints of lesbianism. Explicit homosexuality had, of course, been suppressed in a communist China where homosexuality was demonized as a sign of decadence, either Western or dynastic.

Mainland China's first "gay" film was director Chen Kaige's highly publicized Chinese opera tale *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), a somewhat whitewashed version of Lillian Lee's source novel. Although the director himself admitted that *Farewell* was basically a mainstream pageant that used homosexuality as a commercial selling point, the film is actually frustratingly shy about its gayness.

The film was banned nonetheless, a fate that also awaited China's first modern-day gay film, Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (1996), whose bleak story of homoerotic tension between a gay prisoner and his interrogator serves as a metaphor for the master-slave dichotomy that underpins politically repressive regimes. But more recently, China has witnessed a mild trend of gay and lesbian comedies such as Liu Bingjian's *Men and Women* (1999) and Li Yu's *Fish and Elephant* (2001), possibly pointing to a tentative liberalization of gay and lesbian subjects.

Only in the past fifteen or so years have Taiwanese films explicitly explored queer themes, and then it has been in singular or auteurist films, as Taiwan's film industry is, at the risk of oversimplification, neither populist nor large enough to support the kind of generic gender play that informs Hong Kong cinema. Seven

years before the international distribution of Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) allowed Westerners a glimpse of transnational gay Taiwanese identity, Yu Kan-ping directed *The Outcasts* (1986), the first gay film to receive approval from the Taiwanese government.

Taiwan has also delivered some very sensitive lesbian melodramas: Huang Yu-shan's *The Twin Bracelets* (1990) tells the rural love story between two young women who must choose between succumbing to patriarchal oppression and pursuing forbidden desires, and Cheng Sheng-fu's *The Silent Thrush* (1992) presents a classical Chinese opera setting as the backdrop to lesbian romance.

It is Tsai Ming-liang, however, who has emerged as Taiwan's foremost exponent of queer cinema. Both his juvenile delinquency tale *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992) and his minimalist character piece *Vive L'Amour* (1994) are shot through with (male) homoerotic undercurrents; and *The River* (1997) provides a devastating critique of sexual and familial alienation, presenting a modern family so distant that father and son unwittingly sleep with one another when one night the closeted father goes cruising in a darkened bathhouse.

Gay themes have also found a place in cosmopolitan Taiwanese films such as Wang Tsai-sheng's *A Cha-Cha for the Fugitive* (1997) and Edward Yang's transnationally-themed *Mahjong* (1996), whose central setting of a gay bar suggests that an inclusion of gay identities (albeit stereotypical ones) is necessary in a consideration of East-West desires.

South Korea

South Korean films have often suffered from a stifling legacy of imported, family-centered Confucianism. If the controversy surrounding Jang Sun-Woo's *Lies* (1999) is any example, Korean cinema is still coming to terms with heterosexual erotica, so homosexual portrayals remain very controversial. Nevertheless, there are a few films that queer Korean audiences have claimed for themselves.

Ha Kil-jong's *The Pollen of Flowers* (1972), for example, is recognized as a subtle variation on Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968). Kim Su-hyeong's *Ascetic: Woman and Woman* (1976) is considered Korea's first lesbian film. It is a tragic protofeminist drama about two troubled women who erotically bond when one of them is abused by her husband.

In the 1990s, Park Jae-ho's *Broken Branches* (1995) emerged as a landmark in Korean cinema, an intergenerational gay romance, with moderately revealing sex scenes, whose intergenerational relationship becomes a metaphor for a new Korea reconciling its tenuous relationship with its conservative elders.

In 1997, the Seoul Queer Film and Video Festival was both founded and quickly banned by the government, attracting worldwide attention. Reinstated the following year with some success, it provides an overdue forum for queer films in Korea. However, most of the festival's films are not actually Korean. Moreover, the spotlighted feature of the proposed 1997 fest was in fact Wong Kar-wai's Hong Kong import *Happy Together* (1997). Meanwhile, the most recent development in indigenous queer film has been Kim Tae-yong and Min Kyu-dong's commercially successful adolescent lesbian ghost story *Memento Mori* (1999).

The Philippines and Thailand

Unlike Confucianist China and Korea, many Southeast Asian cultures have more open traditions of alternative sexuality. However, it should be noted that the sexual "openness" the West often perceives in Thailand and the Philippines is often based on prostitutional economies and class exploitation.

The most internationally recognized director of Philippine films, the late Lino Brocka, was also the one most associated with gay films. Brocka's *Manila in the Claws of Light* (1975) tells of a poor fisherman who turns to male prostitution in the big city, and *My Mother, My Father* (1978) is concerned with a transvestite

father toiling under the class stratifications of the Marcos regime. The most influential gay Philippine film is certainly Brocka's *Macho Dancer* (1988), an engagingly lurid exploration of Manila's male sex trade that combines equal elements of neorealism, soft pornography, and Philippine melodrama.

Brocka's associate, Mel Chionglo (who scripted Brocka's 1979 *Mother, Sister, Daughter*) later turned the "macho dancer" melodrama into its own veritable subgenre with *Midnight Dancers* (1994) and *Burlesk King* (1999).

While Chionglo's glossy films tend to romanticize the sex trade while simultaneously critiquing the poverty that produces it, independent director Nick Deocampo's lower-budgeted *Oliver* (1983), *Children of the Regime* (1985), and *Revolutions Happen Like Refrains in a Song* (1987) take more critical looks at the socioeconomic links between male prostitution and class exploitation during and immediately after the Marcos era.

In Thailand, a gay melodramatic aesthetic, perhaps comparable to that of the Philippines, informs M. L. Bhandevanop Devakul's *I Am a Man* (1986), sort of a Thai *Boys in the Band*, as well as Pisan Akarasainee's *The Last Song* (1986) and *Anguished Love* (1987), a two-part series about the loves and losses among a star-crossed intersection of gays, lesbians, transvestites, and, yes, heterosexuals.

Recently, Youngyooth Thongkonthun's comedy *Satree Lex* (U.S. title, *Iron Ladies* [1999]), based on the remarkable true story of a champion Thai volleyball team comprised of gays and transsexuals, proved something of a breakthrough in Thai cinema, becoming one of the biggest box office hits in Thai history.

Nevertheless, the film's popularity in Thailand may be attributed to the camp spectacle of its subject matter, as Thailand's kathoey (transgender) population, though far more visible than transsexuals in the West, is still marginalized and objectified. We might compare Thongkonthun's treatment of the subject with that of gay Hong Kong director Yonfan in his Singaporean film *Bugis Street* (1995), whose steamy images of transgendered desire make no concessions to straight audiences.

India

While openly politicized homosexuality in India is a recent, Westernized phenomenon, popular Indian cinema has long offered glimpses of alternative sexualities, though sometimes not in the most positive terms.

We might go back as far as Fearless Nadia (real name Mary Evans), the exotic, mannish Australian actress who starred in Homi Wadia's *Hunterwali* (1935) and other Hindi films as a kind of whip-wielding, "Perils of Pauline"-style heroine, and whose campy, gender-bending career is explored in Riyad Wadia's documentary *Fearless: The Hunterwali Story* (1993).

In the 1970s, the male buddy films of Hindi superstar Amitabh Bachchan, such as Ramesh Sippy's landmark *Sholay* (1975) and Raj Khosla's *Dostana* (1981), often featured homoerotic undercurrents that eclipse those of Hollywood's male buddy films. *Sholay* is, in fact, known for song sequences that valorize male Platonic love.

Bollywood cinema is, however, also known for its caricatures of gays and lesbians, and there are countless films featuring swishy men, such as the effeminate biker who lusts after the macho hero of Vikram Bhatt's *Ghulam* (1998), or sexless butch women, such as the cruel prison warden who punishes her lesbian charges in Jabbar Patel's *Subhah* (1981).

Hijras (transsexuals, eunuchs, or gender-ambiguous persons) and transvestites are also a fixture of Hindi cinema, yet usually as objects of derisive comedy or disgust, as in Rahul Rawail's *Mast Kalandar* (1991), Mahesh Bhatt's *Sadak* (1991), or Darmesh Darshan's popular *Raja Hindustani* (1996). While a film such as

Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995) may briefly provide a sympathetic hijra, the continuing persecution of hijra communities remains a critical social problem throughout India.

In the 1990s, a number of independent, liberal, English-language queer Indian films emerged to challenge conventional Bollywood morality, the best-known of which is Deepa Mehta's Canadian-produced *Fire* (1996). The feminist lesbianism of the film provoked outrage among the Hindu patriarchy and fundamentalists; and the film lived up to its name when arson and bombings rocked Indian theaters that dared show it.

Fire was immediately preceded, however, by Riyad Wadia's *BOMgaY* (1996), a short experimental film based on the verse of gay Indian poet Raj Rao, which celebrates gay Indian life while critiquing the government's homophobic anti-sodomy statutes. Though *BOMgaY* (which was shot on video) did not receive any public screenings, its existence spread quickly through the Indian press, and became an immediate topic of controversy.

Recently, feature length films such as Kaizad Gustad's *Bombay Boys* (1998) and Dev Benegal's *Split Wide Open* (1999) have continued to address the politics of Indian gay identity. Admittedly, however, these films are considered semi-commercial in India and are not aimed at a populist Hindi demographic.

Bombay Boys, the story of three overseas, Anglicized Indians who come to Bombay in search of their political, familial, and sexual identities, particularly draws connections between transnational identity and a burgeoning Indian gayness. This may be a sign that, as Asian films are increasingly products of transnational distribution, the politics and sexualities they engage may necessarily and inevitably become caught between imported ideas of Western queerness and the struggle to maintain an Eastern, autonomous self-identity.

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About the Author

Andrew Grossman is the editor of *Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade,* the first full-length anthology of writing about gay, lesbian, and transgender Asian films. His writings on film and queer issues have also appeared in *Bright Lights Film Journal, Scope: The Film Journal of the University of Nottingham*, *Senses of the Cinema, American Book Review,* and elsewhere.