



## When Fish Falls in Love with Elephant or Vice Versa: Sexual Representation in Mainland China's Lesbian Film

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### Abstract

Taking the movie *Fish and Elephant* as a case, the thesis analyzes, through a close-reading of the case movie, the different-from-western-style sexual representations in Mainland China's lesbian film, with focus on sexuality desires, relationships, identities, as well as the cinematic narrative skills employed in the film.

**Keywords:** Sexual representation, Desire, Relationship, Sexual identity

I don't mean to offend anybody, particular those diligent filmmakers, but if you ask me about the status quo of Mainland China's lesbian films production, I would say out my opinion straight and put it *better than nothing*, it's not all the filmmakers fault though. But, meanwhile, there're some shining moments and sparkling ideas in these better-than-nothing films too.

In traditional Chinese painting, there is a commonly adopted technique named "space-leaving", which means to leave certain space, i.e. to keep it blank or empty in the picture for the spectator, rather than filling the whole canvas in like the western oil painting, so that to inspire the spectators imagination and let them fulfill the production through their own inner creation. Some critics interpret this kind of state as *moment before the climax*, which I think very appropriate but would be more vivid if we substitute climax for orgasm. If you watch Mainland China's lesbian films, you will find out no matter in the documentaries *The Box* (I haven't got the chance to watch it yet, but I did read and hear about it), *Girls That Way*, *The Happy Moments of Duoduo and Jing*, *Melancholy Flower*, in the digital video production *Lost in You*, or in the feature film *Fish and Elephant*, there is, with no exception, too much space-leaving with respect to the dimension of direct sexual representation. For instance, there are very few sequences or scenarios with direct sexual desire expressions, except a rather reserved kissing-love, not making-love, scene plus a masturbation sequence in *Fish and Elephant*. As I described above, space-leaving itself is an advisable, sometimes even necessary, technique in artistic creation, but here in the films, if there's too much space-leaving, which feels very much like de Lauretis' notion of *space-off* that refers to things exist off the screen but you cannot see on it, the spectator would no doubt feel emotionally frustrated and unsatisfied. Because what they have seen is too much lower than, and thus could not meet, their expectation horizon. Saying this of course doesn't mean that the filmmakers must put bunches of bed scenes in their films or make their films sort of porn to attract the spectator's eyeballs or feed their appetite for voyeurism, but they do need to figure out ways to express it.

But, if we reverse our perspective on this maybe-too-much-space-leaving, we probably couldn't deny that it does leave us enough potentialities to make our own cinematic imagination at the same time. Thus, in spite of the somehow space-leaving "discontent", I would rather talk more in this thesis about the non-hetero or pretty queer (in the meaning of queer theory) sexual representations in *Fish and Elephant*.

In the first place, there's no male drag, which de Lauretis referred to as "an old and venerable trope of lesbian subculture and self-representation" (Lauretis, 1994, p.102), in this film, on the contrary, the fairly neutral and more womanly way Xiao Qun (whom I would associate with elephant) and Xiao Ling (whom I would associate with fish) dress, even including Xiao Qun's ex girlfriend Jun Jun's behavior, as well as the very "natural" (or "queer") way Xiao Qun and Xiao Ling falls in love with each other, made the film distance itself from the western style and thus sort of Chinese manner. In this sense, *Fish and Elephant* is not a masquerade which is never successful, but rather a real sequence cut out from our daily life, with the plot of Jun Jun's killing her father a bit theatrical or cliché though. But even the most theatrical part of this film reflected in fact the real violence and oppression imposed upon female body or desire by the patriarchal and heterosexual society. Say, Jun Jun's father's constantly raping her since she was a kid and Jun Jun's mother's pretending not knowing anything even till she died of illness. And it is this strong wish to kill her father, or to resist this patriarchal heterosexual society, that made Jun Jun betray Xiao Qun and sleep with a man, a policeman, so that to steal his gun and use this man's tool or weapon to get rid of another man's harassment. We cannot tell hundred-percent from the film how much Jun Jun loves Xiao Qun and to what extent Jun Jun desires woman, but

we can see definitely the intimacy and trust Jun Jun puts in Xiao Qun as well as Jun Jun's need of a woman's, absolutely not a mother's, embrace. Moreover, when Jun Jun's hand touches Xiao Qun's hand as they were playing the rock-checkers in front of Sakuan, the female elephant Xiao Qun looks after, we couldn't deny this scene is so sexy and full of meaning. In addition, Jun Jun's masturbation in Xiao Qun's job-place bed in the zoo during that long and restless summer noon also implies more than a self-dependent female way to release her libido. Maybe, the autoeroticism here could be deemed as both a punishment and revenge. Who knows?

Anyway, the story told in *Fish and Elephant* is merely a story of three girly girls with no conspicuously dressing transgression, but of course with internal sexual transgression though, and it is this that makes the story itself very close to ordinary people's ordinary life.

Despite there is no male drag lesbian scenario, the lesbian and/or queer desires are still got across strongly and clearly indeed in *Fish and Elephant*. In the rest of this thesis, I'll focus mainly on the representation and expression of such desires by analyzing the two protagonists, Xiao Qun and Xiao Ling, in *Fish and Elephant*.

Xiao Qun's trouble, which derives from her desire, is highlighted in front of the spectators from the very beginning of the movie. She is thirty years old, but she doesn't want to get married which "naturally" means to marry a man to all those "straight minds" (Butler, 2006, p.47). This fact irritates her family members very much, particularly her mum and cousin. "...women should get married and have babies at your age. It's the proper thing to do...Look at you, you're a pretty girl, an absolutely normal person, how could you have no interest in men? What's the fuck going in you head?...It'll be a joke if it's known. You don't care, but you mother cares!" and "...How can I take it easy if you are still single...One should get married and have a baby!" are what repeatedly emphasized by Xiao Qun's cousin and mum. But (UN) fortunately, Xiao Qun doesn't give in. Instead of being talked in, she insists all along her personal "taste": she identifies herself as a woman who desires woman, and what she needs is not a traditional *spouse*, but rather a *lover*. Thus, the tension between individual "twisted" desire and large-scale heteronormative regime is spotlighted in the movie, with the latter always spares no effort to straighten out the former through discursive power (moral suasion, for example). What's worth mentioning here is such structural tension in the movie doesn't get solved by one party meeting the other one's expectation, but rather stay limbo there and get soften little by little through sort of negotiation in between. And this certainly implies some political tendency or potentiality.

Now, let's get down to the relationship between Xiao Quinn and Xiao Ling. When she first met Xiao Ling in Xiao Ling's boutique, her desire to get closer to Xiao Ling was barred by the showing up of Xiao Ling's boyfriend. The second time she wanted to invite Xiao Ling for dinner was interrupted by the phone call from Xiao Ling's boyfriend again, even though she did invite Xiao Ling to the zoo and have fun with her feeding Sakuan, the female elephant, together. But she got Xiao Ling's phone number written in her hand the second time, and it was definitely an enjoyable and sexy moment for Xiao Qun while Xiao Ling was writing in her hand. The third time, Xiao Qun invited, without further ado, Xiao Ling to the same teahouse, where she was meeting another man arranged by her go-between cousin, and sit at a table close by, so that the latter could hear clearly her telling the man that she had no interest in man and what she loved was woman. And when she and Xiao Ling finally got the chance to sit side by side in a sexually meaningful place, her bed at home, they talked about the fish she raised, sequent, while Xiao Ling was teasing her "I heard that those who like fish are horny", she said nothing but taking Xiao Ling's hand in her own after a little bit hesitation.

As far as Xiao Ling, her desire for woman was sort of *aroused* by Xiao Qun's turning up in her life. But this aroused desire in Xiao Ling is nothing but natural, pleasurable, and irresistible. Thus, once she got Xiao Qun's signification, she just said goodbye to her former state of life, leaving all the property to her boyfriend, and moved to Xiao Qun's place with no hesitation. So far, the representation of Xiao Ling's desire for woman is actually full of fluidity and instability. But what Xiao Ling did was just to take the change and follow the internal call of her factual feeling.

As we could see in the movie, the relationship between Xiao Qun and Xiao Ling is exactly what Giddens referred to as "pure relationship" (Giddens, 2001, Chapter 4), which means a relationship of sexual and emotional equality between the two parties. Even when Xiao Ling left Xiao Qun due to misunderstanding the intimacy between Xiao Qun and her former girlfriend Jun Jun, her turning back to her former boyfriend was clearly because of the hurt she got from a girl, but the stereotype, argued over seventy years ago by Havelock Ellis and still believed by many people now, that it was the emotional trauma from man that made a woman turn to desire same-sex love and thus become lesbian. And before Xiao Ling's (temporary) leaving, what she poisoned to death was not Xiao Qun's fish, but her painful and jealous self. Obviously, her love and/or desire for Xiao Qun at the moment were too exclusive to tolerate any other intruder.

One more thing I want to point out here is the sexual identity of Xiao Ling. You can not simply label her heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual here in the movie. She loves woman and enjoys sharing her life with a woman rather than a man, and that's it. To certain extent, maybe to name her, if you must do so, a queer is more suitable. And speaking of bisexual, in the documentary *Girls That Way*, the main story teller, Paddy, once said, "I accept homosexuals and I feel alright with heterosexuals, but as to bisexuals, I've to say I detest them." The reason Paddy explained for such a

comment was because of her girlfriend, who borrowed money and asked for help from Paddy just for cohabiting with her boyfriend. With such an emotional background, it's understandable that Paddy dislikes or even hates the way her so-called bisexual girlfriend practiced, but it's obviously arbitrary to slap such a label upon bisexuals as a category. Differently, the identification idea represented in *Fish and Elephant* is much maturer and queerer.

Another factor represented in *Fish and Elephant* that's worth mentioning is the change of desire styles within heteronormativity, say, the de-traditionalization of marriage and family, which suggests that there is underway a **shift** in heterosexual relationships. For instance, Xiao Qun's cousin was a divorced man, Xiao Qun's mother was a divorced woman who remarried the man that was introduced to Xiao Qun (Xiao Qun's Mother was persuading Xiao Qun to accept this man as her husband-to-be initially), and this man's frank attitude towards an ideal wife also reflected the change of the social and cultural valorizing upon sexuality. Furthermore, the policeman whom Xiao Qun was introduced to was also a single father with a son, this man seemed enjoyed his life, but his younger-than-teenage son was urging him to find a partner. And another boy Xiao Qun once met was someone who acknowledged his Oedipal Complex and even expressed to Xiao Qun his strange desire for some woman who would be tougher to him in contrast to his mother's tenderness. All these signs in the movie signify an important tendency of de-centralization and de-stabilization of the traditional mores of heterosexual relationships. And it is this tendency that opens up new possibilities and expectations of differences in interpersonal relationships.

To sum up, the sexual representations and narrative skills in *Fish and Elephant* are something less "modernist" than "post-modernist". According to Ken Plummer, the basic "modernist" plots in sexual stories consist of 1, "the journey"; 2, "enduring suffering"; 3, "engaging in a contest"; 4, "pursuing consummation"; 5, "establishing a home", and during the unfolding and folding of the story, i.e. the beginning, the middle, and the ending, "a voyage of discovery to be true to their inner self" (Plummer, 1995, pp.54-56) is the fundamental clue of the whole story. While in Mainland China's lesbian film productions, particularly in *Lost in You*, *Melancholy Flower*, as well as *Fish and Elephant*, you do not expect see such linear and somewhat unified narration but rather stories with more potentialities and, what's more important, a more open narrative structure. Often a little bit too pessimistic (what is closer to the social reality) though.

At last, I want to say something about the discursive paradox set in the title of the movie *Fish and Elephant*. In the light of Freud's theory, the fish living in water is no doubt a trope of vulvae, while the elephant with a proboscis is conspicuously a signifier of phallus. In addition, according to the *Yin and Yang* conception in Chinese philosophical and cultural tradition, those comparatively small-sized animals, such as fish, frog, rat and so on, belong to the category of *Yin*, which refers to feminine, while those comparatively large-sized animals, such as tiger, lion, bear (and elephant of course) and so on, belong to the category of *Yang*, which refers to masculine. Forasmuch, in respect of the "lingual prison" we are all confined in, the naming of this lesbian film got trapped again in the ubiquitous presence of heterosexual and patriarchal symbolic system which has already penetrated the whole process and practice of our daily life, as well as the media, language, art, science, literature, etc (Lauretis, 1994, p101). In other word, it encountered once again the inevitable "being captured in escape" (a notion coined by Chinese feminist scholar, and filmist, Jinhua Dai). But, again, let's reverse our perspective, who can allege that there's no sexual difference among fish or elephant (Sakuan is a very example of feminine elephant), let alone, what's more important, there could be more than sexual differences amongst them indeed. Therefore, fish can certainly falls in love with elephant and/or vice versa! Furthermore, either fish or elephant could absolutely jump out of the restriction of heterosexual norms.

Now, I'd like to end up this paper with a poem concerning a neo-psychoanalytic interpretation to the frequently seen image of cigarettes in Mainland China's lesbian films (*Lost in You*, for example).

Cigarettes  
 Little tiny pillars  
 Like building blocks  
 They set up cozy nests  
 Where you can always doze in

Whisper you what:  
 If Freud were a woman  
 Cigarettes would probably  
 Not be associated with  
 Penis  
 But more with nipples

When two lips touch those butts  
That's how you're kissing the fingertips or nipples  
Of the woman you love  
When two fingers  
Hold the slender stick  
That's the way you and your love are  
Hand in hand  
Harmoniously and softly

Take a deep inbreath  
Breathe then out  
Slowly  
Taste the swirl scent with the tip of your tongue and  
Feel the friction come-and-go  
With your heart and soul

Someone once joked:  
Save the anal to gay  
Leave the genital to hetero  
As far as the petal-like oral  
That's lesbian's symbol

Don't let smoke get in your eyes  
Amigo  
To embrace her  
Is to embrace your self  
In that long-lost heaven

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