

Sentiments like Water: Unsettling Pathologies of Homosexual and Sodomasochistic Desire

Derek Hird

East Palace West Palace (*Donggong Xigong* 东宫西宫), made in 1996, was the first explicitly gay film produced in the People's Republic of China. It examines the fluidity of desire, power, and sexual and gendered identities through the figures of A Lan 阿兰, a writer and night-time gay cruising regular in a central Beijing park, and Xiao Shi 小史, a policeman who arrests and interrogates him.¹ The film speaks to key concerns of the medical humanities, such as formations of gender and sexual identities, patient narratives, power dynamics between authority figures and ordinary people, and cultural histories of medical discourse. The film's director, Zhang Yuan 张元 (1963–), is a chronicler of alienated, subaltern groups: his films prior to *East Palace West Palace* explored the sensitive topics of mental illness, delinquency, and alcoholism, which led the authorities to ban him from film-making (Zhang 2002: 418). Zhang co-wrote the screenplay with Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952–1995), a pioneering writer and academic who wrote extensively on power and sexuality (Zhang and Sommer 2007: vii–xiv). Wang's short story 'Sentiments like Water' (*Si shui rouqing* 似水柔情) formed the basis of the screenplay. The stars of the film include amateur actor Si Han 司汗 (A Lan), and the now very famous professional actors Hu Jun 胡军 (Xiao Shi) and Zhao Wei 赵薇 ('Public Bus'). Produced by a French company, the film was financed by a grant of 900,000 francs from the French government and a 200,000 RMB grant from the Rotterdam International Film Festival (Lim 2006: 32, 192 n.19).

The story is rooted in early 1990s' China, when the authorities took an overtly oppressive stance towards gay practices in public areas. At the centre of the plot is A Lan, a young gay man who frequently hangs out in the park with other gay men, looking for sex and companionship. One evening, he is arrested by Xiao Shi, a handsome, strapping police officer, who takes him to the park's police post for questioning. During the interrogation, which takes place over one whole night, A Lan 'confesses' his homosexuality to Xiao Shi. A Lan provides accounts of his sexual experiences with other men; these began in middle school, where he was also fascinated by a beautiful girl in his class, 'Public Bus'. Through these vivid recollections, A Lan's predilection for masochistic sex emerges. Xiao Shi condemns A Lan as sick and despicable (*jian* 贱), but A Lan refutes this, claiming that it is pure love that leads him to try to please his lovers. A Lan tells Xiao Shi the story of a female thief in ancient times who fell in love with her captor because she had no other choice: this story is depicted in the film through *kunqu* 昆曲 opera scenes. A Lan also reveals a childhood fantasy of being arrested by a towering policeman. Xiao Shi demands that A Lan show his 'real face' by dressing as a woman. A Lan does not wish to, since he conceives of his gay identity as distinct from cross-dressing. However, to please Xiao Shi, he dons women's clothes (confiscated by Xiao Shi from a cross-dressing park regular) and entrancingly enacts femininity. Through his stories and actions, A Lan spins a web of desire and seduction, drawing Xiao Shi ever closer, eventually succeeding—perhaps—in unsettling Xiao Shi's understanding of his own sexuality.

The title of the film can be read at several levels. Taken from Beijing gay slang, it refers to the public toilets in the Workers' Cultural Centre and Zhongshan Park to the west and east of Tian'anmen Square and the Forbidden City (Bao 2011: 115). More formally, the East Palace was historically the term for the residence of the crown prince. The West Palace was

associated with the emperor's concubines, thus bearing a sexual connotation even before its use in gay slang. The title also hints at the developing mix of 'East' and 'West' in 1990s' China. A Lan himself embodies 'Western' and 'Eastern' ideas and practices. On the one hand, he performs a gay identity; on the other hand, his wearing down of Xiao Shi's rigid ideas about sexuality equates to the role of water in Daoist philosophy, as the title of Wang Xiaobo's short story suggests. The *Daodejing (Tao Te Ching)* famously tells how the soft and the yielding can overcome the hard and the strong, just as water wears away rock (Lao-tzu 1993: 97).

Thematically, the film covers homosexuality, sadomasochism, cross-dressing, male femininity and power relations between the rulers and the ruled. Uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence are central to the film's depictions of sexuality. At the outset, the film pits two contrasting views against each other: A Lan holds that a man's love and desire for another man is justifiable and natural; Xiao Shi, representing the stance of the authorities, deems homosexuality morally despicable and a mental disorder. However, Xiao Shi's stance becomes progressively blurred during the film. The depictions of sadomasochistic practices present an ambiguous interplay of desire and punishment by showing that the hands that beat are also the hands that caress. Xiao Shi's view of cross-dressing proves ambivalent, moving between condemning and condoning it.

Xiao Shi's eventual desire to see A Lan as a beautiful woman, when considered alongside the *kunqu* opera scenes, is suggestive of late-imperial era opera patrons' desire for female-impersonating boy actors (*dan* 旦).² The feminisation of the younger male within same-sex erotic relationships locates same-sex desire within an overarching framework of *nannü* 男女 (literally 'man woman') relations, one of the foundational mechanisms through which power

relations have been constructed in China, regardless of the ‘sex’ of the bodies involved (Liu *et al.* 2013). The historically influential *yin-yang* 阴阳 paradigm works together with the *nannü* framework. The disempowered man in Confucian superior-subordinate relations was labelled *yin*, enabling him to enact wifely virtue without being considered less of a man (Huang 2006: 2). The *yin-yang* paradigm helped legitimise same-sex relationships by placing them within the larger social order (Song 2004: 16–17). The *dan* boy actors took up feminine and subordinate *yin* positionings in their social and erotic relations with wealthy opera patrons.

The film’s sympathetic portrayals of homosexuality, cross-dressing, and sadomasochism challenged their pathologisation in the 1990s. More than twenty years later, there has been progress in this direction. Nevertheless, widespread promulgation of conservative ‘family values’ still frequently results in the demonisation, and pathologisation of identities and practices associated with these categories. In Xi Jinping’s China, normative ‘family values’ promote universal marriage, and official media regulations define homosexual relations as abnormal, prohibiting their portrayal on television and in online audiovisual content; also banned is the depiction of any sexuality outside marriage (Zhang 2018). Gay venues and organisations remain relatively few in number, and the authorities keep them under close watch. Huge numbers of men and women conceal their sexual orientations and marry opposite-sex partners, often causing much distress and divorce further down the line (Jeffreys and Yu 2015: 88–9). Given the precarious environment in which sexual minorities find themselves, there is a pressing need to critique normative understandings of gender and sexuality. *East Palace West Palace* does this by illuminating the potential of queer identities and practices to undermine taken-for-granted gender and sexual norms and the power relations through which they are constructed.

From a masculinities studies perspective, the film shows the intertwining of historical and contemporary constructions of male sexuality and can be read as a contribution to discussions about what it means to be a man in contemporary China. Following the next section's discussion of the film's critical reception, I outline a brief genealogy of modern Chinese male sexuality, place the film in the context of late twentieth-century Chinese cinema, and use concepts from Chinese masculinities studies to examine the gender and sexual identities of the two main characters. Finally, I look at relevant examples of performance art in the wider context of cultural production in the 1990s. The chapter shows how notions of gender and sexuality make key contributions to debates about modernity in contemporary China.

Critical Contexts

A Lan's masochistic love for his interrogator Xiao Shi, and the corresponding story he tells about the female thief's love for her jailer, suggest an allegory of the relationship between the Chinese state and people, or perhaps more specifically intellectuals. For some critics the film points towards the abject position of ordinary Chinese people and intellectuals vis-à-vis their rulers; for others, the film portrays the people's complicity in their own oppression and willingness to be disciplined. Still others emphasise the film's depiction of political struggle at a micro-level, in which power is not possessed and deployed coercively by one party alone, but is relatively diffuse, fluid, and open to manipulation, allowing for transformation of subjectivities and subversion of hierarchies.

Allegorical interpretations abound in the critical literature. For Chris Berry, the park is a 'heterotopic representation' of China, and A Lan's enjoyment of Xiao Shi's bullying implies that 'in a police state masochism is the only surefire road to fulfillment' (Berry 2000: 193). A

heterotopic reading of the park also suggests the past haunting the present: the park design brings to mind the imperial pleasure gardens of the Summer Palace, or the fictional gardens of *Dream of Red Mansions*, which are marked by sexual desire and power (Yi 2004: 88). Berry (1998) also suggests that A Lan's articulation of a gay identity highlights a growing contest for access to public space and discourse in postsocialist China. For Song Hwee Lim (2006: 69–73, 89), A Lan's performance of femininity within the context of the *kunqu* opera scenes represents the Chinese state's structural feminisation of intellectuals and artists. Similarly, Shannon May (2003: 159) argues that Xiao Shi's forcing A Lan to dress as a woman is a symbolic castration that points to the Chinese state's emasculation of creative figures such as Zhang Yuan himself.³

But allegorical readings are not without drawbacks. Dai Jinhua 戴锦华 (1998, discussed in Shernuk 2012: 29–30) cautions that they may diminish the story's focus on the manipulability of power between individuals. More specifically, some commentators argue that interpreting A Lan's public 'confession' as an attempt to achieve public recognition for gay sexuality presupposes an already formed, yet constricted, Chinese gay subject, whose full realisation depends on him achieving more public visibility in the manner of his Western counterparts (Bao 2011: 117; Shernuk 2012). Duane Shernuk (2012: 58–63) points out that applying a Euro-American form of gay identity politics to a Chinese population for whom it is not wholly appropriate crowds out differently configured sexualities. Nevertheless, Shernuk (*ibid.*: 62) acknowledges that the film's Western-influenced sexual identities play to the values of its intended transnational audiences at international, independent film festivals. As such, the film partly panders to the notion of a 'global gay' identity premised on a Western model, popularised in Dennis Altman's (1997) portrayal of emerging gay Asian identities. Furthermore, metaphorical readings of the film run the danger of positioning the

state as ‘inherently normative’ and artists as ‘inherently queer’ (Shernuk 2012: 30). A more nuanced perspective recognises the co-existence of queerness and normativity within the everyday practices of both the state and its citizens. Shernuk argues that the film (and the short story more so) reveals the state’s complicity in enabling A Lan’s masochistic pleasures; depicts the ease with which A Lan incorporates marriage, homosexuality, and cross-dressing into his gendered and sexual subjectivity; and shows the latent queerness in Xiao Shi’s sexuality (ibid.: 40–55). To better illuminate the different strands of the lead characters’ sexualities, I will now briefly outline the attempts to construct a ‘modern’ Chinese male sexuality.

Constructing ‘Modern’ Chinese Male Sexuality

Homosexual relations in premodern China were widespread and even celebrated (Hinsch 1990; Wu 2004). They were largely shaped by age, social status, and gender enactment. Older, higher-status, men took the masculine penetrating role in relationships with younger, lower-status, and usually more feminine-looking and -acting men (Hinsch 1990: 9–13; Huang 2006: 149; Song 2004: 134). *Yin* and *yang* served to mark these unequal subject positions. Upon public exposure of the relationships, stigma, and the severest legal punishment, attached to the penetrated male, not the penetrant (Sommer 1997 & 2000: 148–54; Song 2004: 134). The lively late Qing culture of homoerotic relationships between opera clientele (officials, literati, and merchants) and *dan* produced ornately composed ‘flower guides’ (*huapu* 花谱), in which the qualities of leading *dan* were discussed (Wu 2004: 16–17).

By contrast, ideas about gender and sexuality arriving in China from Europe in the late nineteenth century condemned homosexuality as immoral, effeminate and sapping the vigour of a modern nation state. Thus, as national pride and male honour were at stake, ‘to pursue

modernity in China under the self-conscious semi-colonial gaze meant to abolish same-sex relations' (Kang 2009: 146). A 1912 Beijing police bulletin complained that the prostitution of young *dan* opera performers to wealthy patrons attracted 'the derision of foreign nations' (Kang 2009: 115–16; Wu and Stevenson 2006: 51–2). In the decades that followed, leading intellectuals such as literary reformer Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962) and sexologist Pan Guangdan 潘光旦 (1898–1967) condemned the 'abnormality' and immorality of *dan* actors, characterising homosexuality as a nation-weakening 'disease' that had to be eliminated (Chiang 2010: 648; Wu and Stevenson 2006: 53–4).

In this environment of open hostility towards homosexuality, the international opera icon Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 (1894–1961) refashioned *dan* costumes so that they concealed the male body underneath. Mei generated 'a sartorially neutral, historically abstract, and politically uncompromised male body' that had nothing to do with femininity, unlike the seductively feminised and sexualised bodies of *dan* actors in the Qing theatre world (Zou 2006: 88). The de-feminised male bodies of Republican-era *dan* were premised on Western biomedical discourses of gender and sexuality. Howard Chiang argues that the reenvisioned *dan* can be seen as a prototype of the 'modern homosexual' (Chiang 2010: 648). The pathologisation of homosexuality continued into the socialist era. Sex education pamphlets from the late 1940s and 1950s described homosexuality as a pathological disorder—a viral infection in the brain—curable by heterosexual marriage (ibid.: 649–50). Although there was no specific law forbidding homosexuality, homosexual acts were often punished through the offence of hooliganism, with sentences sometimes extending to many years (Ma 2003: 124–5).

The state began to retreat from micro-controlling citizens' lives in the late 1970s, but it was not until the 1990s that more wide-ranging debates on homosexuality became nationally

prominent. Increasing consumerism and participation in the global economy, coupled with the lessening of state interest in policing personal sexuality, facilitated the expression of non-normative sexual desires. Gay identity emerged in the context of postsocialist China's grand modernising project to imagine and build the new identities and practices suitable for China's entrance on the late twentieth-century global capitalist stage (Bao 2011: 133–4). Yet in the 1990s' medical field, homosexuality was still largely constructed as deviant and/or an illness, alongside other forms of 'deviance' such as cross-dressing and transgender/transsexual identities (Bao 2011: 78). Books by medical scholars and physicians laid out taxonomies of homosexuality, and advocated psychological counselling, herbal medicine, and aversion therapy as 'cures' (ibid.: 78–9). In this discriminatory climate, prior to the revision of the penal code in 1997 that removed the offence of hooliganism, the police frequently raided gay cruising areas and bars (Ma 2003: 127). The opening scenes of *East Palace West Palace* depict such a raid on a park near the Forbidden City during a 1991 public health campaign. The film therefore serves as an important reminder of the hard-handed methods employed by the authorities at that time. Homosexuality continued to be classified as a psychiatric disorder in the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* until 2001. The film also attests to the persistence of older patterns of discrimination: A Lan is beaten up and stigmatised as the insertee in same-sex relations, echoing attitudes expressed in premodern Chinese legal cases.

Late Twentieth-Century Chinese Cinema

Contextualising *East Palace West Palace* also requires locating it within transformations in post-Mao Chinese cinema. Visual and literary culture shifted its focus from rural to urban and national to transnational in the last two decades of the twentieth century. By the 1990s, in the context of huge rural to urban migration and rapid urban development, the city, as a creator of new forms of hybrid identities, 'had become a subject in its own right' (Visser 2010: 9). In

Zhang Yimou's 张艺谋 *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang* 红高粱 1987), for example, the countryside was the locus for the exploration of gender and sexuality. Films exploring sexualities from the 1990s, such as *East Palace West Palace*, Liu Bingjian's 刘冰鉴 *Men and Women* (*Nannan nünnü* 男男女女 1999) and Stanley Kwan's (Guan Jinpeng 关锦鹏) *Lan Yu* (蓝宇 2001), depict urban Beijing as a generator of emerging gay lifestyles and communities. Such films have played a role in building gay identities and cultures in China (Bao 2011: 113). And whereas 1980s' New Chinese Cinema was an experimental national cinema of 'cultural critique' un beholden to the market economy, 1990s' Chinese cinema became enmeshed in commercially driven 'transnational production, exhibition, distribution, and consumption in the world market' (Lu 1997a: 8–9; Lu 1997b: 130).

The shifts from rural to urban and national to transnational are often categorised in terms of film-making generations. Fifth generation directors such as Zhang Yimou (b. 1951), Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 (b. 1952) and Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮 (b. 1952), who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, moved beyond socialist realism but did not completely let go of its themes, moral framework, and rural settings (Larson 2011: 113). Their early films were typically set in stark locations that put landscape and peasants together in a quest for the 'roots' of Chinese culture as a response to China's opening to the world (Cornelius and Smith 2002: 35–7). The marketisation process that Deng Xiaoping accelerated after the 1989 Tian'anmen protests increased economic liberalisation and urbanisation, but did not erode CCP dominance. Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 and other sixth-generation directors who came to prominence in this climate were often part-funded from abroad (Cornelius and Smith 2002: 107–8). They generally eschewed their predecessors' predilection for Chinese culture, national allegory, literary allusions and social morality to

focus on young people's perspectives of their own experiences in urban environments (Cornelius and Smith 2002: 108; Larson 2011: 113, 116).

While *East Palace West Palace* in many ways exemplifies this shift of attention to the lives of ordinary urban citizens, it also lends itself to allegorical interpretations, as discussed above. A Lan's question to Xiao Shi—'We love you; why don't you love us?'—to the backing of *kunqu* opera music, is suggestive of a cultural critique of Chinese state-society relations through the perspective of ordinary urbanites. The film thus points to the persistence of a sexualised and gendered power relationship between the governing and the governed in China. It therefore offers a political and cultural critique at the national level, yet at the same time explores the newly forming sexual subjectivities of postsocialist China's urban modernity. I will examine how this plays out in the figures of A Lan and Xiao Shi below, but first present an overview of relevant concepts from Chinese masculinities research.

Chinese Masculinities

The *wen* 文 (cultural accomplishment) and *wu* 武 (martial prowess) dyad set out by Kam Louie and Louise Edwards is central to understanding the historical development of Chinese masculinities (Louie and Edwards: 1994; Louie 2002 & 2014). *Wen* qualities include excellence in poetry and calligraphy; *wu* qualities include physical strength and military acumen (Louie 2002: 14). Both *wen* and *wu* were regarded as masculine attributes. Men of standing possessed either or both, although *wen* generally enjoyed primacy over *wu* (Louie 2002: 11–12). Influential premodern literary models of masculinity include the *wen*-identified *caizi* 才子 (talented scholar) and *junzi* 君子 (cultivated gentleman). The *caizi* was the romantic male protagonist in *caizi-jiaren* 才子佳人 (scholar-beauty) romances. Femininely beautiful, frail, and emotionally vulnerable, the *caizi* was nonetheless seen as the ideal male

lover (Song 2004: vii). The *junzi*, by contrast, was a model of emotional self-control, including containment of sexual passion (Louie 2015: 113; McMahon 1988: 50). The *junzi*'s status derived from his embodiment of Confucian virtue, observance of the rites, high level of learning, and political service to the nation (Louie 2002: 44–5; Song 2004: 88–97).

In the Confucian worldview, only men were free to aspire to full moral personhood by attaining a harmonious range of dispositions. This could be achieved through a relatively androgynous personality in which *yin* and *yang* circulated (Furth 1999: 46; Hall and Ames 1998: 81). Relatively 'ungendered' Confucian moral personhood enabled subordinate men to take up the subject position of wife or concubine in relation to their superiors to demonstrate their virtue (Huang 2006: 2; Song 2004: 12). In these instances, *yin* and *yang* marked positionality in particular instantiations of power relationships, not fixed gender identities (Song 2004: 13). The relatively androgynous male body also enabled ideal male beauty to be described in feminine terms (Huang 2006: 135–54).

The concept of *nannü*, in like manner, serves to mark power positionings, and is not limited to sexed bodies per se. During the Han dynasty, Confucian scholars mapped a cosmological theory of 'yang-high and yin-low' onto conjugal relations (Liu *et al.*: 128 n. 27). Since then, in patriarchal and elitist fashion, *nannü* has been interwoven with *yin-yang* in classical Confucian scholarship, commentarial traditions, laws, rituals and everyday practices between men, women, and men and women (*ibid.*: 19–20). As a marker and producer of hierarchical power, *nannü* is as relevant to the exploitation of non-elite boys as it is to the exploitation of non-elite women and young girls. He-Yin Zhen 何殷震 (c.1884–c.1920), an early twentieth-century feminist, was the first to use *nannü* as an analytical tool to deconstruct patriarchal power relations and show how the concept organised and policed the value put on the work

done in domestic and public domains (ibid.: 11–22).

The Male Sexualities of A Lan and Xiao Shi

Wen-wu and *yin-yang* traces are manifest in A Lan's relationship with Xiao Shi. As a writer, A Lan is associated with *wen*, and is clearly talented with words, for his 'confession' vividly weaves together narratives about his past and present. A Lan can be viewed in this light as a surrogate for China's literary and creative intellectuals such as Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaobo. As a slender, young, attractive man (desired by women as well as men), A Lan also echoes the historic figure of the *caizi*. His relatively androgynous appearance recalls the premodern body in which *yin* and *yang* circulate. His demonstration of feminine virtue as womanly supplicant to Xiao Shi rehearses the subordinate male role in historical Confucian relationships. And while he may not reflect the full panoply of *junzi*-type moral cultivations that Bao (2018) perceives in the character of Lan Yu (including humanity, righteousness, knowledge, integrity, loyalty, honesty, kindness and forgiveness), many of these qualities could be applied to A Lan.

A Lan's *yin* positioning towards Xiao Shi is further reflected in the film's frequent association of him with Daoist notions of water. The *Daodejing* recommends that by not contending or contesting, the weak—like water wearing down the hardest stone—can overcome the strong (Allan 1997: 47–8). A Lan's masochism, in which he yields, like water, empowers him, as his desire and ability to be punished undermines and ultimately defeats attempts to make him conform to heteronormative expectations (Shernuk 2012: 42). The trope of water thus represents sexual power as diffuse, fluid and constitutive of subjects and subjectivities, enabling subversion and transformation of power relations. For example, A Lan recounts enjoying his emetic when undergoing gay cure therapy in hospital, and when he

is slapped by Xiao Shi he remembers being filled with pleasure when one of his sexual partners slapped him in a bath-tub (symbolically overflowing with water). In the final scenes, water is again flowing everywhere, implying that A Lan is succeeding in undermining Xiao Shi's authority and rendering his sexuality more fluid. In the *Daodejing*'s metaphorical depiction, all streams ultimately flow into a river, which, like a woman during coitus, takes a lower position; but the river—and therefore the female—ultimately subsumes and conquers all (Allan 1997: 45–6). From a Foucauldian perspective, power flows like water, diverts when meeting resistance; this in turn gives rise to further diversions and resistances (Lo and Barrett 2012: 25). As such, A Lan's masochism begins to undo the power hierarchy instantiated by the *nannü* framework.

A Lan's expansive view of sexuality includes but cannot be reduced to gay identity. He learnt from his wife, 'Public Bus', that everyone is born *jian* (despicable, base, cheap), yet as Shernuk (2012: 36) points out, Hongling Zhang and Jason Sommer's translation of *jian* as 'easy' in their English version of Wang's (2007) short story raises the possibility of positive and pleasurable associations. A Lan's 'aesthetic of beauty', which determines his choice of sexual partners, exceeds conventional hetero-homo divisions (Shernuk 2012: 14). The short story brings out very clearly the love and indeed sexual desire A Lan feels for his wife, thereby blurring his sexuality. A Lan's eventual transformation into a seductive, feminine 'woman', albeit at first reluctantly in the film, also shows an openness towards reconfiguring his gender identity. His belief that love can justify anything leads A Lan to accept the demands and cruel treatment of Xiao Shi and others. In this, A Lan is drawing on reform-era discourses that place love at the centre of the modern subject, which has helped legitimise gay relationships that are presented in terms of romantic love (Bao 2011: 103). The state (e.g. in the form of Xiao Shi) may not recognise same-sex love as 'proper love', but gay-

identifying people such as A Lan appropriate the discourse of love to articulate their identity and empower themselves (ibid.). A Lan's 'easy' view of sexuality places him at odds with Xiao Shi's restrictive notion of appropriate sexual desire.

Echoes of historical masculine subjectivities can also be found in Xiao Shi. As a physically tough, uniformed policeman, he manifests *wu* qualities, and he also takes up an empowered *yang* positioning vis-à-vis A Lan's feminine *yin*. In the context of the film's *kunqu* opera theme, his insistence on routing his sexual desire for A Lan through the latter's feminine cross-dressing echoes the format of same-sex erotic relationships in the late Qing theatre world, which legitimised homosexuality through the feminine performance of the *dan* (Lim 2006: 72). In this sense, Xiao Shi aligns himself with the *nannü* paradigm and the normative, hierarchised, Confucian social order. The salience of the operatic scenes and music emphasise the ghosts of historic same-sex erotic relationships, although Xiao Shi's sexuality can also be interpreted through the lens of 'Western' heteronormativity.

At the start of the film, Xiao Shi is presented as straight-identifying. He is disgusted by the 'despicable' sexual practices of A Lan, although his decision to interrogate A Lan overnight belies a curiosity in non-normative sexuality. Yet by the final scenes of the film, Xiao Shi's previous containment of his sexual desires, whether interpreted as heteronormative or *junzi*-like, has broken down. He appears to be on the verge of making love with A Lan and is transfixed when A Lan caresses him. In the short story, Xiao Shi's sexuality is transformed much more: he makes love with A Lan several times, comes to understand himself as gay, and is identified as such by his co-workers. As Shernuk and Dai both argue, this undermines the allegorical reading of intellectuals as queer and the state as non-queer, and shows the manipulation and fluidity of power and desire between individuals. 'It is hard to tell whether

the policeman victimises the gay man, or whether the gay man corrupts the policeman' (Bao 2011: 128).

Gender and Sexuality in 1990s' Performance Art

1990s' performance art offers another context of cultural production in which to analyse the feminine and/or suffering, masochistic male body. Performance art, like homosexuality, came to prominence in the 1990s. At this time, there was increasing circulation of Chinese and foreign artists and art literature in and out of China. The transgression of gender boundaries and the disciplining of the body in the formation of the postsocialist Chinese subject are the preoccupation of some works in this period (Lu 2007: 17). In particular, performance artists Ma Liuming 马六明 (b. 1969) and Zhang Huan 张洵 (b. 1965) engaged with themes that Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaobo raised through the figure of A Lan.

Ma Liuming used his naked male body to express femininity, thus transgressing and challenging conventional gender boundaries. His performances 'defy the biopolitics of traditional patriarchal authority by opening up the questions of gender-bending, cross-dressing, and sexual ambiguity' (Lu 2007: 71). For doing so, Ma was detained by the state for two months. In the early 1990s, Ma created the persona of Fen-Ma Liuming 芬•马六明. Fen means 'fragrant' and carries feminine associations. Ma's purpose was to question and make ambiguous existing gender boundaries through a persona that was 'neither homosexual, hermaphrodite, transvestite, nor androgyne' (Ivanova 1999: 203). In Wang Xiaobo's short story especially, A Lan's capacious sexuality and feminine performance resonate with Ma's category-defying stance.

Through an effeminate face, flowing long hair, but an anatomically male body, sometimes

naked, sometimes cross-dressed, Ma's work challenges the 'disciplinary regime' that monitors and regulates bodies, desires, and sexuality (Lu 2007: 76). Ma's 1998 performance, *Fen-Ma Liuming Walks on the Great Wall*, in which he walks naked along deserted sections of the most salient symbol of the Chinese nation, enacts a lonely yet stark challenge to deeply embedded ideas about masculinity, patriarchy, and authority (ibid.: 77–8). In doing so, Ma blurs not just gender boundaries, but also those between the creative intellectual and the state. His anatomically male body marks his belonging to the privileged gender in Chinese cultural tradition; yet by baring his body, and displaying a feminine face and hair, Ma raises questions about queerness and concealed desires inherent in the Chinese state. The inherent queerness of the state also manifests in Xiao Shi's growing awareness of his complicity in satisfying A Lan's masochism and his growing sexual desire for A Lan.

Whereas Ma's work transgresses conventional gender identity, Zhang Huan's art emphasises bodily suffering, endurance, cruelty, masochism, self-torture, and self-mortification: this renders it allegorical of the 'living condition of the artist-citizen in China' (Lu 2007: 72). Through three works in 1994 and 1995, Zhang exposed his naked male body to pain and torment. In *12 Square Meters* (Beijing East Village, 1994), he sits naked covered in honey in a filthy public toilet, while insects crawl over his body and bite him. In *65 Kilograms* (Beijing East Village, 1994), he is suspended from the ceiling in iron chains; a doctor draws blood from his body that drops onto a heated plate, releasing an acrid smell. In *25 mm Threading Steel* (Beijing, 1995), he lies naked in front of a threading machine that shoots hot sparks onto his body, causing him to shake with pain (Lu 2007: 79). Zhang's immobilised and soundless bare body symbolises the silent endurance of artists, intellectuals, and the wider populace in the face of political oppression. Yet his very decision to torture his body in this way also suggests the possibility of masochistic pleasure. In sadomasochistic game-

playing, the discipliner and the disciplined are engaged in a fluid dance of desires, which the apparently oppressed party can manipulate to shift the balance of power. In *East Palace West Palace*, A Lan's sexual masochism draws out Xiao Shi's own queer desires, and suggests the possibility of a different tomorrow.

Conclusion

East Palace West Palace's unravelling of normative notions of gender, sexuality and desire reveals the fluid construction of power hierarchies, subjects and subjectivities. It highlights conflicting visions of what it means to be a modern Chinese man, and, most subversively, it lays open the inherent queerness of the state. Xiao Shi's dilemma is that if he accepts the legitimacy of A Lan's sexual desires, he also has to recognise himself as a queer subject. In the film, this is particularly hard for him to do; in the short story, he does admit to himself that he is gay, although that very admission plunges him into despair.

The film explores the Chinese state's response to the emergence of expressions of gay sexuality. On the one hand, the state/Xiao Shi seems almost seduced by a notion of modern male sexuality that includes same-sex desires; yet on the other hand, it/he denies the legitimacy of same-sex desire by preventing its representation. The state decriminalised homosexuality in 1997, stopped viewing it as a mental illness in 2001 (Mountford 2010), and allowed a circumscribed flourishing of gay cultures for more than a decade. Since 2015, the state's bans on portraying gay relationships in the media and its labelling of homosexuality as abnormal point to the struggle within the state about the kind of male sexuality it believes is suitable for a modern China (Zhang 2018). Informing this struggle are the historical spectres of the hierarchical *nannü* framework, the *yin* positioning of intellectuals vis-à-vis the state, and elite desires for the feminine beauty of androgynous young men.

Xiao Shi's pledge to 'teach A Lan a lesson' in the final scenes is saturated with deep sexual desire for A Lan. Xiao Shi's hands dispense both love and punishment. Normativity and queerness, like *yin* and *yang*, are shown to be co-existing, embodied components both within Xiao Shi and A Lan and within the metaphorical bodies of the state and the intellectual class. The seductive masochism and transgressive sexuality of the film and contemporaneous performance art pose a question to the state that is as pertinent today as it was over twenty years ago: At what point will you (the state) acknowledge your own inherent queerness? For only when the Chinese state accepts that it too can be queer, feminine, masochistic or 'easy' will it fully endorse and legitimise queer Chinese sexualities. Only then will it become possible for *nannü* hierarchies to become undone.

¹ China-born Pai Hsien-yung's 白先勇 1983 groundbreaking Taiwanese gay novel *Crystal Boys* (*Niezi* 孽子), also located in and around a city centre park, explores homosexuality in the context of 1970s Taiwan. It was adapted as a film in Taiwan in 1986, and to great acclaim as a television series in 2003 (Huang 2010: 391).

² In Jie Guo's (2011: 1059) reading of Pai Hsien-yung's *Crystal Boys*, the image of its gay characters is evocative of late imperial era *dan* actors and boy prostitutes.

³ Situated in a different sociopolitical context, Pai Hsien-yung's *Crystal Boys* is also suggestive of allegorical readings on the theme of power, most commonly discussed in terms of a fraught father-son relationship between a paternal China and its rebellious Taiwanese offspring (Guo 2011: 1056). Another interesting point of comparison is its metaphorical depiction of central Taipei's New Park as a kingdom of boy prostitutes and nation of motley citizens that possesses its own unorthodox histories and legends (*ibid.*: 1061–3). A 'site of flowing desire' (Huang 2010: 390), Pai's New Park is, in its own way, a sexualised, heterotopic representation of Taiwan.