

New Cities, Old Troubles





Changes in urban cultures and
queer aesthetics across the Sinosphere
by Francesca Tarocco

ABOVE & OPPOSITE
Wong Kar-wai,
Happy Together, 1997,
film stills. Courtesy:
the artist and Alamy



TOP
Samson Young,
Muted Situation #5: Muted Chorus, 2014, video still.
Courtesy: the artist and
Edouard Malingue
Gallery, Hong Kong;
photograph: Dennis Man
Wing Leung

MIDDLE
Samson Young,
Muted Situation #7: Muted Boxing Match, 2014, video still. Courtesy: the artist, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong, and the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

BOTTOM
Samson Young,
Muted Situation #2: Lion Dance, 2014, video still.
Courtesy: the artist and Edouard Malingue
Gallery, Hong Kong;
photograph: Dennis
Man Wing Leung

IN THE UK AND ELSEWHERE, 2017 is a year of queer anniversaries. It may also mark a significant breakthrough in the lives of queer communities in Taiwan, which, following a constitutional court ruling in May, is poised to become the first Asian polity to legalize same-sex partnerships. Yet, the visual cultures of the queer Sinosphere¹ have largely skirted the identity politics and 'coming out stories' typical of Euro-American visual activism. From the harrowing, erotically charged and deeply meditative films of Malaysia-born, Taiwan-based Tsai Ming-liang to the more recent androgynous avatars of Beijing-based Gao Yuan and her partner and collaborator Anita Pan, artists have instead frequently situated queerness in relation to the city and the urban landscape. The queer spaces imagined by artists who live in Taipei, Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai and other large cities point us to the construction of a parallel world of self-making and possibility.

In September, four months after Taiwan's landmark ruling, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei inaugurated the exhibition 'Spectrosynthesis: Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now'. The first survey of its kind at a major museum in East Asia, the show features 51 works by 22 artists, among them the queer composer and sonic artist Samson Young, this year's representative for Hong Kong at the Venice Biennale. Young's 'Muted Situations' (2014) are attuned to the socio-political context of the harbour city: a metropolis with a culture and history distinct from those of other East Asian cities. *Muted Situation #5: Muted Chorus* is a video installation featuring a choral composition in which the singers hush their voices, whisper, inhale, shift their feet and rustle around music scores. Every element of the performance is there apart from the singing. The piece subtly addresses current concerns with control, censorship and participation in public life in Hong Kong and elsewhere in the Sinosphere – felt particularly acutely by people of non-normative sexualities.

Similarly restrained, the Chinese video artist Tao Hui's *Talk about Body* (2013) stages, with devastating intimacy, the double burden of gender and of what anthropologist Louisa Schein has termed China's 'internal orientalism'.² In this absorbing piece, the artist impersonates a youth dressed modestly in black to resemble a Chinese Muslim woman. Sitting on the edge of a bed in a sparsely furnished room, s/he meticulously describes her/his body to a group of observers using the pseudoscientific language of racial classification and anthropometry. The work alludes to the ways in which the Han-dominated Chinese state portrays minority nationalities – such as the Muslim Hui – as socially backward and 'feminine', in need of 'masculine' Han guidance.

Twenty years ago, the Taiwanese writer and scholar Chi Ta-wei transmuted 'queer' into the homophone *ku'er*. Literally meaning 'cool kid', this neologism can be disconnected from its earlier meaning in English – 'odd, peculiar' – and from its pejorative late-19th-century use in critiques of homosexual practices. While it echoes the later re-appropriation of 'queer' as a positive self-identifier for the LGBT community, it is a broader and more inclusive term.³

In 1997, the year Hong Kong stopped being a British colony, one of the quintessential queer films of the Sinosphere, *Happy Together* by Wong Kar-wai, was released. Watching it today from the standpoint of our own moment of triumphant nationalisms and tribalistic populisms, that nocturnal cosmopolitan world of urban intimacy appears almost utopian. As the camera gazes longingly at the entwined bodies of Ho Po-wing (Leslie Cheung) and Lai Yiu-fai (Tony Chiu-wai Leung), we follow the two men into the bars, clubs and late-night fast-food joints of Buenos Aires. These are the same places and spaces that they would inhabit in the Hong Kong of Wong's

other films – Christopher Doyle, the cinematographer and Wong’s frequent collaborator speaks in terms of *déjà vu* – and the effect is very powerful. The city is ours, at night, to be had.

Homosexuality was decriminalized in China in 1997 and finally removed from the official list of psychiatric disorders in 2001. Yet, there is still no legal framework for the recognition of same-sex partnerships, despite numerous appeals from figures such as the scholar and public intellectual Li Yinhe. When the queer female pop star Li Yuchun (aka Chris Lee) won the Chinese singing contest *Super Girl* in 2005 and attracted a huge female following, she remarked that ‘Chris Lee fever’ was a sign of the victorious liberation of Chinese women from traditional gender regulation.⁴ The same year saw the emergence of an increasingly self-confident lesbian identity and nocturnal subculture in Shanghai. Social and parental pressures, however, still engender complex domestic arrangements including marriages between lesbians and gay men. Yuan Yuan and He Xiaopei’s documentary film *Our Marriages: Lesbians Marry Gay Men* (2013) addresses these issues as it follows, over the course of two years, the intimate lives of four lesbians, their complex negotiations and choreographed wedding ceremonies.

Having gathered considerable support, Li Yinhe’s arguments have been countered more recently by a decidedly conservative official discourse that has brought about a ban on the portrayal of homosexual romance on national television (in 2016) and the internet (earlier this year). Even more ominous is an apparently systematic downsizing of spaces of queer sociality, both physical and online, over the past two years. Relat, the country’s most popular lesbian

social-media platform, with more than five million users, was recently shut down. This may have been related to an incident at the so-called ‘marriage market’ in Shanghai’s People’s Park, where anxious parents advertise their offspring on handwritten posters, trying to match them with suitable mates. Relat supported mothers attempting to raise awareness of LGBT rights by advertising their single, gay sons and daughters but were forced to leave after a heated confrontation with other parents and security personnel. In fact, Relat was not merely a dating app but a more complex project that had also circulated a number of lesbian-themed short films, live-stream events and even a sitcom since its launch in 2012.

Yet, positive changes have taken place in China’s major urban centres where local communities have made strategic attempts to claim their rights to the city. These include the annual Shanghai Pride festival (2009–ongoing) and a queer film festival whose first edition, titled ‘We Are Here’, took place in September. With the ‘reform and opening-up’ period under Deng Xiaoping, a booming sex industry – what anthropologist Lisa Rofel calls ‘desiring China’ – and a vibrant youth culture returned to the city.⁵ By the late 1970s, queer cruising spots started to appear in public toilets and parks. These included the famous ‘Golden Triangle’ that comprised part of the historical Bund and the banks of Suzhou River. Self-identified gay bars and clubs appeared in the early 1990s; perhaps the longest-lived ones in Shanghai were Eddy’s Bar and Shanghai Studio, which stood at the opposite corners of what many international residents came to eventually describe as the city’s ‘gaybourhood’.

“Queer spaces imagined by Sinosphere artists suggest a parallel world of self-making and possibility.”



LEFT
Gao Yuan, *Lunar Dial*,
2016, film still.
Courtesy: the artist and
Capsule, Shanghai



“A sense of this loss of place – the disappearing dance spaces and youthful utopias of China’s nightclubs – pervades the work of Chen Wei.”

Until its recent closure, Studio was an especially mesmerizing space. Hosted in a former underground shelter, it was both claustrophobic and wondrous with its dark corridors and sweaty, labyrinthine interiors. It hosted memorable parties, riotous performances, art exhibitions and one of the most diverse and gleeful clientele of any nightclub I have ever been to. In 2009, the LGBT portal Utopia Asia described Shanghai as Hong Kong's rival as 'the gay centre of China, as the winds of freedom continue to blow'. The city's nightlife was then celebrated alongside other elements of its rediscovered, re-invented cosmopolitanism.

A sense of this loss of place – the disappearing dance spaces and youthful utopias of China's nightclubs – pervades the series 'In the Waves' (2013) by lens-based artist Chen Wei. His sweaty clubbers remain solitary and disconnected, beautifully bathed in light in a muted, ghostly clubscape. In 'New City', a more recent series of photographs and installations first shown earlier this year, the artist explicitly mentions his wish to 'highlight the gap between people's imagination of the city and the reality [...] The gap is one of the tragic elements'. The city, he seems to suggest, has been lost as a place of creative self-making.

Since the first decades of the 20th century, Shanghai itself has often been gendered and sexualized in popular cultural and visual representations. Born in Singapore to Chinese parents, the Berlin-based artist Ming Wong is drawn to Shanghai as both palimpsest and panopticon for the complicated identities and identifications of contemporary, postcolonial, queer Asian cosmopolitanism. *Mingnian / Next Year / L'Année Prochaine* (2015) was filmed in a bohemian cafe named after Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) and other locations around the former French Concession in Shanghai (which roughly corresponds to today's gay neighbourhood). In it, Wong performs both female and male roles in fragments taken from the film, his face dissolving into those of the original protagonists. In the continuous juxtaposition of people, scenes and places, notions of subjectivity, temporality and geography are destabilized.

Perhaps, as José Esteban Muñoz mused in *Cruising Utopia* (2009), 'queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future'.⁶ As with the dreamlike, shifting cityscapes of Gao Yuan's *Lunar Dial* (2016), the visual cultures of today's queer Sinosphere point us to a city both lost and yet to come ●

1 I refer here to so-called 'Greater China' and to Petrus Liu's definition of the Sinosphere as 'a critical regionalism, a minority discourse and a political movement that has both capitalist and anticapitalist implications'. Petrus Liu, 'Why Does Queer Theory Need China?', *Positions*, 2010, p. 315

2 Louisa Schein, 'Gender and Internal Orientalism in China', *Modern China*, 1997, pp. 69–96

3 Chi Ta-wei, ed., *Queer Archipelago: A Reader of Queer Discourse in Taiwan*, Yuanzun Wenhua, Taipei, 1997

4 Yan Lieshan, 'Sociologist Li Yinhe: Super Girl Is a Cross-gender Victory', *Southern Weekend*, 25 August 2005. See also: Eva Cheuk-Yin Li, 'Approaching Transnational Queer Stardom as Zhongxing ("neutral sex/gender") Sensibility', *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2015

5 Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality and Public Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007

6 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, 2009

FRANCESCA TAROCCO is a writer, critic and associate professor at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy, and NYU Shanghai, China.

OPPOSITE
Chen Wei,
In the Waves #1, 2013,
archival inkjet print,
1.5 × 1.8 m.
Courtesy: the artist
and Leo Xu Projects,
Shanghai

BELOW
Ming Wong,
*Mingnian / Next Year /
L'Année Prochaine*, 2015,
digital video stills.
Courtesy: the artist,
Vitamin Creative Space,
Guangzhou and earlier |
gebauer, Berlin

