Queer Asia

The Queer Asia series opens a space for monographs and anthologies in all disciplines focusing on nonnormative sexuality and gender cultures, identities, and practices across all regions of Asia. Queer studies, queer theory, and transgender studies originated in, and remain dominated by, North American and European academic circles. Yet the separation between sexual orientation and gender identity, while relevant in the West, does not neatly apply to all Asian contexts, which are themselves complex and diverse. A growing number of scholars inside and beyond Asia are producing exciting and challenging work that studies Asian histories and cultures of trans and queer phenomena. The Queer Asia series—the first of its kind in publishing—provides a valuable opportunity to develop and sustain these initiatives.

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Queer TV China

Televisual and Fannish Imaginaries of Gender, Sexuality, and Chineseness

Edited by Jamie J. Zhao

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Introduction

Making "TV China" Perfectly Queer

Jamie J. Zhao

As noted in *TV China*, one of the first and most comprehensive academic books dedicated to Chinese-language TV studies, television has become "a global phenomenon" in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and has been "fully established as the dominant medium among all Chinese populations" since the new millennium (Zhu and Berry 2009, 3). At the same time, at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, the mainstream society of mainland China remains largely authoritarian, patriarchal, and heteronormative. Against this backdrop, in a beguiling yet highly ambivalent way, the Chinese-language televisual world, with its related celebrity-fan economy, has become increasingly accessible and relevant to gender, sexual, and sociocultural minorities. Alongside an escalation in official media censorship of what is considered "vulgar," "immoral," "irrational," and "negative" content (Bai and Song 2015; Jia and Zhou 2015; Shaw and Zhang 2018; L. Yang 2022) and the party-state's misogynistic and homophobic policies (Bao 2021; Xiao 2014, 2020), an unexpectedly burgeoning queer media and cultural landscape—what I call "queer TV China" in this edited volume—has been discursively produced and filled with nonnormatively gendered, sexualized, or eroticized narratives, personas, affects, and sentiments (Song 2022a; Yang and Bao 2012; J. Zhao 2016, 2018b).

Particularly during the past decade (2010–2020), the TV screens of the PRC have presented more and more norm-transgressive images and subjectivities, made available to audiences through online and digital media platforms. These queer televisual scenes include, but are not limited to, masculine female and effeminate male celebrities, who have proliferated and been promoted on various provincial station-produced reality TV shows; homosociality and homoeroticism (especially between cis males) in many TV dramas; transgender personalities, same-sex intimacies, participants who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) featured on Chinese-language talk shows; and even explicitly gay-themed stories and topics in online TV programs (see, for example, Kam 2014; Ng and Li 2020; Song 2022a; A. Wong 2020; Zhao,

Yang, and Lavin 2017; J. Zhao 2016, 2018b, 2020a). This boom in post-2010 queer TV China has been appealing to a broad range of local and international audiences and fans with diverse gender, sexual, and cultural interests, linguistic preferences, and geopolitical identities.

The simultaneous mainstreaming, capitalization, and globalization of queer TV China, along with the wide use of the internet and digital media in the twenty-first century, has been further complemented by numerous cross-geo-linguistically connected cyber queer fan communities and an increasing number of mainland China-based queer fan sites and practices dedicated to Euro-American, East Asian, and Southeast Asian TV programs and stars (Hu 2016; Zhao 2017b). Yet these seemingly progressive TV productions and fan cultures have been constantly contested by, and even subjected to, multilayered capitalist, sociocultural, and political-ideological forces and interests on local, transnational, and global levels. A recent sensational case is the large-scale global queer fandom, as well as the local government's endorsement, of *The Untamed* (陈情令; Tencent, 2019), the story of which is set in a fantasy immortal world (also known as the *xianxia*/仙侠 genre). *The Untamed* is a mainland China-produced TV drama in the genre of boys' love (BL; a kind of East Asian popular genre featuring male same-sex romance, which originated in Japan and is also known in China as *danmei*/耽美). As Jun Lei opines in Chapter 5 of this edited volume, the drama's unanticipated success "in domestic and overseas markets exemplifies it as a model that aligns with the official ideology to establish cultural confidence, spread positive values, and erect Chinese heroic characters" to both local and international audiences. Using a different approach, Alvin K. Wong, the author of Chapter 6, reads its global popularity as a result of the "unhistorical queerness" of many mainland Chinese BL dramas, which eventually renders "gay male homoeroticism . . . easily consumable as commodity."

This prosperous queer TV culture within, originating from, or associated with a (hetero-) normative-structured nation-state (the PRC, which this edited volume is directed toward) raises some pertinent questions that call for urgent academic consideration. For instance, what are the relationships between this queer TV scene, mainland media regulatory policies and national projects, and the reality of Chinese-speaking gender and sexual minorities in the off-screen world? What dynamics play out between these queer televisual representations and their related star personas and fan practices inside and outside the PRC? What roles have local and transnational Chinese feminist movements and queer identity politics played in the emergence and development of this queer TV culture in the past decade? How do explorations of queer TV in the Chinese-speaking context depart from the already flourishing Euro-American queer TV studies (see, for example, Davis and Needham 2009; Hart 2016; Straayer and Waugh 2005; Villarejo 2014)? Finally, how do queer Chinese TV cultures and studies open up new empirical and analytical possibilities for post-2020 inter-Asian,

transnational, and global TV studies, as well as for global queer studies, in a world that may be undergoing a difficult restructuring of the old global order during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, if not a simultaneous process of deglobalization, transnationalization, and "deterritorialization" (Iwabuchi 2002, 2004; Iwabuchi, Tsai, and Berry 2017; Martin et al. 2020; Zhao 2021c)?

Queer TV China: Televisual and Fannish Imaginaries of Gender, Sexuality, and Chineseness (*QTC* hereafter) recognizes the intricacy of these questions and their implications for TV studies, queer media studies, global gender and sexuality studies, and China and Sinophone studies. To advance the scholarly treatment of the above-described queer pop cultural phenomenon in a highly normative, strictly surveilled social setting as an interdisciplinary field of critical inquiry, this anthology proposes an analytical framework of "queer/ing TV China." Employing the term "queer" as a verb, an adjective, and/or a noun in various case studies, *QTC*'s contributors work together to highlight the nonnormative potential, nature, and denotations and connotations of TV and its celebrity and fan cultures in the PRC and the Chinese-speaking world at large.

As I will elaborate on in other sections of this introduction, LGBTQ images, narratives, and celebrities in the televisual landscape of the PRC—mainly produced, circulated, and consumed in a heterosexual-dominated society and a heteronormative-structured nation-state—have been assumed by many media scholars and critics around the world to be made invisible, marginal, or stereotypical. This subsequently led to a relative scarcity of research about queer TV culture within the context of mainland China until the recent rise of local BL TV and related fan cultures (see, for example, Lavin, Yang, and Zhao 2017; Ng and Li 2020; A. Wong 2020; Yang and Xu 2017; Zhao 2020a; Zhao and Wong 2020). Even when mainland Chinese queer TV and fan cultures are discussed in most of the existing queer TV and fan scholarship, scholars often consider media regulatory and censorial practices a major repressive force that closes rather than proliferates the possibilities of nonnormative embodiment and imaginary on and through TV screens. To challenge the widespread "repressive hypothesis" (Foucault 1978) rooted in existing queer Chinese TV studies, *QTC* takes as its primary focus emerging queer televisual and fannish discourses that have been contested and reworked within the PRC.

Meanwhile, the approach of "queer/ing TV China" acknowledges the interconnection and mutual implications of the two overly essentialized and forcibly disassociated notions, *Chineseness* and *queerness*, in the televisual and fannish imaginaries examined throughout this book. Previous scholarship has powerfully showcased the importance of decolonializing and denationalizing both terms, the imaginations of which cannot be based on a monolithic categorization of identities and subjectivities (Ang 2001; Chun 1996; Leung 2008; Liu and Rofel 2010; Martin 2014). For example, some global queer studies scholars have noted that "neither 'Chineseness' nor 'queerness' can or should be understood within

national boundaries" (Leung 2008, 129) because both formulations "are 'always already' transnational" in nature (Martin 2014, 35; see also Liu and Rofel 2010). As Fran Martin brilliantly states,

> Chineseness is conceptualized as multiple, contradictory and fragmented: not the expression of a timeless national essence but instead the produce of disjunctive regimes of cultural regulation across the multiple transnational contexts where claims to various forms of Chineseness are made. (Martin 2014, 35)

Although concurring with the call to juxtapose and examine "the margins of gender and sexuality with the margins of China and Chineseness" that have been made by many queer Sinophone scholars (Heinrich 2014; see also Chiang and Heinrich 2014; Chiang and Wong 2020a), Martin also emphasizes the necessity of including queer cultures and subjects "located inside the territorial borders of the PRC" in queer Sinophone and queer Asian studies as well as part of global queer flows in general (2014, 43). As she further elaborates,

> Mainland China is more and more interlinked into the transnational networks of Sinophone cultural flows, both of broader popular culture and specifically of queer texts, practices and identities. Hence, in a practical sense, it becomes harder than ever to conceive of mainland Chinese queer cultural life as sealed off from that of Sinophone queer communities outside China. Analysis of material exchanges between queer peripheral Sinophone sites and queer mainland Chinese sites can surely be made while continuing to avoid the uncritical China-centrism of which the Sinophone studies project is so suspicious. (Martin 2014, 43)

QTC takes Martin's cue and further pushes the limits of existing queer China and queer Sinophone studies by inspecting queer Chinese TV and fan cultures on local, transcultural, and global scales. Some of the contributors explore Chinese-language TV phenomena which have been (re)configured across the borders of various Chinese-speaking societies and communities (as seen in Chapters 6, 7, and 8), while others explore issues concerning the transnational fandom of mainland Chinese BL-adapted TV (Chapters 4 and 5); the Chinese queer fandom of Thai BL TV stars (Chapter 9); gender- and sexually nonnormative foreign stars in mainland reality programs and Chinese cyberspace (Chapters 1 and 2); and the domestication of cosmopolitanism in queer representations of and self-performances by male reality sport TV stars (Chapter 3). By so doing, *QTC* reveals some prominent, yet severely underexamined, means through which queer TV in and beyond the geocultural borders of the PRC *not only* participates in and links to *but also* directs and reshapes global queer-centered flows, knowledge production, and subject formation and remaking.

In the remainder of this introduction, I first situate the studies of queer TV China within existing scholarship and conceptualize the notion of "queer/ing" in

this field of inquiry. I then discuss the sociopolitical contexts and transformations that have contributed to the rise of nonnormative representations on Chinese TV in the twenty-first century. My discussion also challenges the assumption that queer TV culture did not come into existence in the PRC until the late 2000s by unpacking the queer nature and contours of Chinese TV. This queer deconstruction highlights the theoretical and methodological contributions of this edited volume. By drawing multiple connections among the chapters included in this project, I emphasize the importance of unsettling the dichotomous, categorical logics often employed to understand meanings associated with various TV genres and formats and televisual imaginings of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity/race, nationality, and age. I conclude this introduction by suggesting promising directions and areas for future research through the critical lens of "queer/ing TV China."

Situating "Queer/ing TV China" in the Twenty-First Century

Queer TV studies, especially in the Anglophone context, is no longer a nascent scholarly field. Research on the "queering" or queer readings of Euro-American public TV images and narratives can be traced back to the 1980s (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Penley 1997; Russ 1985). The years since the 1990s have seen the "mainstreaming" of LGBTQ characters in Euro-American commercial media, especially through the makeover TV and advertising industries (Sender 2004; see also Campbell 2005; Chasin 2000; Gross 2001). Following from this, a body of scholarship on Western queer TV studies has been flourishing since the early 2000s (Davis and Needham 2009; Day and Christian 2017; Hart 2016; Joyrich 2014; Kohnen 2016; Lewis 2007; Lovelock 2019; Malici 2014; McCarthy 2001; McIntyre 2016; Miller 2014, 2019; Ng 2008, 2013; Peele 2007; Straayer and Waugh 2005; Villarejo 2014). Scholarly interest in racial, class-based, and cross-geocultural representations and interpretations of Anglophone queer TV has also grown (Bradley 2012; Christian 2016; Day and Christian 2017; Horvat 2020; Martin 2021; Ng 2021; Peters 2011).

This body of research often draws on classic scholarly definitions of "queer" in Anglophone queer theory and queer cinema studies, such as that offered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her 1993 monograph *Tendencies*. According to Sedgwick, queer is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (1993, 8). In another influential and widely cited work published in 1993, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, queer media scholar Alexander Doty also extended the uses of "queer" and "queer theory" in his study of nontraditional "positions, pleasures, and readings of" the media audience (xviii). Adopting a poststructuralist perspective, Ki Namaste (1994) summarized Doty's theoretical remaking of

queerness as the powerful proposition that *queer* can be a practice, a spectatorial position, a temporary desiring moment, a media device, or a nonheterosexual connotation without explicit self-identification or representational denotation, all of which are "different strategies for interpreting mass culture" produced and consumed in "supposedly 'straight' settings" (225). Nevertheless, with more and more LGBTQ images, narratives, and celebrities represented and commodified on Western TV, queer TV scholar Lynne Joyrich also reminds us that

> some televisual forms may be becoming, in a sense, more queered doesn't necessarily mean that more queers appear in them—that *queering* as a verb (the process of playing, transforming, and making strange) lines up with *queer* as a noun (identifying people who are "recognizably" LGBT). (Joyrich 2014, 135)

Moreover, the past two decades have seen the publication of a number of scholarly books dedicated to Asian and Chinese TV cultures, mostly by media and cultural studies scholars based in Hong Kong, North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Bai 2015b; Bai and Song 2015; Cai 2016; French and Richards 2000; Gorfinkel 2018; Iwabuchi 2004; Keane 2015; Keane, Fung, and Moran 2007; Lewis, Martin, and Sun 2016; Moran and Keane 2004; Song 2022b; Tay and Turner 2015; Wen 2014; Zhong 2010; Zhu 2008, 2012; Zhu and Berry 2009; Zhu, Keane, and Bai 2008). Some studies have addressed gendered aspects of Chinese TV, such as its representations of women's familial, romantic, and marital lives and various forms of racialized and class-based masculinities portrayed in Chinese TV series (for example, Gong and Yang 2018; Hird and Song 2018; Louie 2016; Song 2022b; Xiao 2014). However, research on the ethnic, industrial, sociopolitical, and geolinguistic intricacies of the increasing number of queer TV phenomena emerging from predominantly authoritarian, heteropatriarchal Chinese-speaking societies and communities, especially with regard to queer theory and LGBTQ cultures in the Chinese and Sinophone contexts, remains rare.

In contrast, in recent years, scholarly surveys of Asian queer TV and its fan cultures, especially those of Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and Singapore, have proliferated and succeeded in directing attention to the diversities of gender, sexuality, identity, and subjectivity mediated through televisual representations and imaginaries (Baudinette 2019; Chao 2021; Jung 2011; Lavin 2015; Liew and Ismail 2018; Liew, Manokara, and T'a'at 2016; Martin 2010a; Miller 2000; Yuen 2011; Zhang and Dedman 2021). While some of these explorations have focused on the queer-enacting characteristics of televisual narratives, styles, genres, formats, and industries in diverse Asian contexts, the discussions have predominantly focused on either inter-Asian media and information flows or local media productions about gender and sexual minorities in cosmopolitan, queer-friendly contexts.

In the post-2010 years, an exciting surge of scholarly publications in the fields of queer Chinese and queer Sinophone media and cultural studies has occurred (Bao 2018, 2020, 2021; Chiang and Heinrich 2014; Chiang and Wong 2020b; Engebretsen and Schroeder 2015; Liu 2015; Zhao 2020a; Zhao and Wong 2020). These works indicate the growing academic interest in the mutually implicative relationship between *queerness* and *Chineseness* in queer media cultures in the Chinese and Sinophone worlds. Among the most prolific endeavors of this scholarship is the underscoring of the cross-geocultural traveling and local appropriation of the Anglophone term *queer* "as a powerful, generative tool in the political, cultural and scholarly dimensions of diverse Chinese-speaking contexts" (Zhao and Wong 2020, 477).

In particular, the queer Asian scholar Petrus Liu famously stated,

> The possibility of practicing queer theory in Chinese contexts demonstrates that critical attention to local knowledges and concerns does not immediately constitute a categorical rejection of "the queer;" rather it shows that what is "queer" is constantly expanded, supplemented, and revised by what is "Chinese." (Liu 2015, 297)

Furthermore, following Chinese-language film scholar Song Hwee Lim's (2006) recording of local renderings of "queer" as *ku'er* (酷儿; literally meaning "cool kid" or "a generation of being cool") or *guaitai* (怪胎; literally meaning "strange fetus") in mid-1990s Taiwan, Hongwei Bao (2018) has also emphasized the elitism- and cosmopolitanism-charged adoption of "queer" and "queer theory" in mainland Chinese scholarly publications, media spaces, and political activism since the early 2000s. Bao (2018) underlines the significant political and activist potential of the word *ku'er* in mainland China in evading the government's censorship of homosexuality and in working as a practical strategy for subjects who live on the social margins to negotiate with the mainstream, normative social policing of behaviors, desire, and identities.

This has been paralleled by queer Sinophone research that has relied heavily on and developed Shu-mei Shih's problematization of China-centrism rooted in area and Chinese diasporic studies, which encourages "the study of Sinitic-language cultures on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions" (2011, 710). Queer Sinophone scholars have strived to "deconstruct what the category of China itself might mean in a nonnormative sense—that is, to queer China from the outside in" (Chiang 2014b, 365). More recent queer Chinese-language media studies have also addressed this theoretical advancement of, and the implicative linkage between, the queer essence of Chineseness and the indispensable inclusion of queerness as a key, constitutive element in mainstream Chinese (especially mainland Chinese) culture and society. Some research has specifically examined "the world-making potential

Chinese commercial and entertainment media industries, televisual aesthetics and digital communication, sociocultural developments, and political-ideological regulations.

Chapter Breakdowns

This volume is divided into three sections, each of which includes three original studies dedicated to the most attention-grabbing “queer/ing” issues in the field. The first section is titled “Queer/ing Genders and Sexualities through Reality Competition Shows.” As mentioned above, reality TV is one of the queerest TV genres, often characterized by easily adaptive formats and performativity in representing “reality,” gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity (Zhao 2018b; see also Gater and MacDonald 2015; Hill 2005; Skeggs and Wood 2012). Set in heteronormative societies, these features of reality competitions can offer and intensify ambiguous, yet ubiquitous, homosocial settings and same-sex erotic tensions (Zhao 2018b). Meanwhile, research has attributed the state-backed popularity of reality TV in the twenty-first-century PRC to the genre’s ideological-propagandistic function in promoting “positive” and “happy” voices to the audience (Yang 2014) and articulating the government’s ethno-nationalistic projects, such as “China Dream” and “root-seeking,” in sonic or visual representations (Jiang and Gonzalez 2021; Song 2022b; Xiao 2020; Zhao 2020b). These also partly explain why reality TV is intrinsically both queer and hegemonic, as well as both ideologically orthodoxic and commercially successfully, in the PRC.

Chapter 1, “Growing up with ‘Tomboy Power’: Starring Liu Yuxin on Post-2010 Chinese Reality TV,” captures this self-contradictoriness of reality TV and elaborates on the nuances of how gender-norm-defying girls and young women have been framed by and are actively navigating through reality TV’s dual function. Jamie J. Zhao explores this queerly gendered televisual phenomenon by examining a particular form of female masculinity, “tomboyism,” which is embodied by one of the most successful girl pop stars in the post-2010 era: Liu Yuxin, who rose to stardom in the most recent girl band-manufacturing reality program, *Youth With You 2* (青春有你2; iQIYI, 2020). Zhao presents a critical televisual analysis of Liu’s tomboyism as presented on mainland Chinese reality TV between 2012 and 2020. Her analysis unpacks the intricate relationship between televised Chinese tomboyism and the local Chinese term signifying a young, butch lesbian, “T.” She demonstrates how, along with the drastic changes in local queer and feminist cultures over the past decade, the constantly self-fashioning format and televisuality of reality TV subjectivize tomboyish stars who cite local, transnational, and global pop cultural discourses on youth, androgynous beauty, girl power, and neoliberalism to validate their gender and potentially sexual non-normativities while, either voluntarily or unwillingly, being fabricated into

the official imaginary of China as a globalized, modernized nation-state that appreciates female gender diversity, feminist expressions, and self-cultivation.

Chapter 2, "When '*Jiquan*' Fandom Meets 'Big Sisters': The Ambivalence between Female Queer (In)Visibility and Popular Feminist Rhetoric in *Sisters Who Make Waves*," looks at queer female images and same-sex intimacies in, as well as the queer fandom of, another extremely successful girl group-manufacturing reality show in the Mainland in 2020, *Sisters Who Make Waves* (乘风破浪的姐姐; Mango TV). Diverging from the first chapter's focus on norm-defying girls and young women, Jia Guo and Shaojun Kong examine how a show featuring female celebrity participants over the age of thirty successfully devises a "big sister" persona by incorporating popular feminism. These images of mature, independent, and brave "big sisters" coincide with the preference of *jiquan* (姬圈; literally meaning "lesbian circle") fandom, a queer female fan culture that has been emerging in post-2010 Chinese cyberspace. The authors explore the ambivalent relations between queer female visibility and popular feminist rhetoric on TV through *jiquan* fans' queer readings of the show. They find that, on the one hand, the popular feminist rhetoric of the show creates a viable space for *jiquan* fans to project their queer desires onto female celebrities and foster their understanding of female homoeroticism. On the other hand, *jiquan* fandom marginalizes masculine queer women and promotes elitism and lookism in lesbian culture.

While the preceding two chapters are dedicated to queer female images on reality TV, Chapter 3, "A Dildonic Assemblage: The Paradoxes of Queer Masculinities and Desire on the Chinese Sports Variety Show *Let's Exercise, Boys*," turns to norm-negotiating male gender and sexual representations on the 2020 sports reality show *Let's Exercise, Boys* (运动吧少年; Hunan TV). Wangtaolue Guo and Jennifer Quist present textual and paratextual analyses and explore the dynamics between contestants on the show, male bodies in the mediascape, and the making of spornosexuals under Chinese censorship and in a postsocialist society. Guo and Quist also add to this analytical approach the concept of the "dildonic assemblage," applying it to the show's spornosexuality as it is read through the female gaze and through latent queer erotics. By doing so, they uncover the show's representations of male masculinity, desire, and queerness through a polysystematic lens. The authors argue that, despite the ambivalent attitudes toward homoeroticism, commodification, and the ironic queering of male bodies in Chinese media, *Let's Exercise, Boys* subverts and complicates the discourses that would suppress this new spornosexual iteration of Chinese male masculinity.

The second section, "Queer/ing TV Dramas through Media Regulations," focuses on the transnational, cross-linguistic circulation and consumption of queer TV dramas in and beyond the Chinese-speaking world that have always been under the government's cultural surveillance, economic exploitation, and political manipulation. This section contains three chapters that, from different

perspectives, emphasize the queer-enabling power of the seemingly repressive official media policies and the negotiative potential of contemporary queer Chinese televisual production, distribution, and consumption.

Chapter 4, "*Addicted* to Melancholia: Negotiating Queerness and Homoeroticism in a Banned Chinese BL Drama," spotlights the transgressive potential of queer Chinese TV under erasure. Aobo Dong examines the affect and plot in *Addicted*, an immensely popular BL web series that was abruptly banned by state censors in 2017. Focusing on the dynamics between two same-sex lovers, he explores the critical themes of performativity, melancholia, and identification underlying the plot and reception of the series. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1995, 1997) theory of gender melancholia and José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) vision for a queer utopia, Dong illustrates the role of grief in enabling their same-sex love and argues that overcoming their shared grief and precariousness threatens the heterosexual symbolic in the Chinese and Confucian social orders. Dong's analysis also shows that *Addicted* is an attempt to construct a utopian parallel reality in which same-sex love trumps same-sex rivalry, class difference, and compulsory filial piety. Because the narrative of *Addicted* never attaches a gay identity to the characters, the series frees same-sex love from the constraints of LGBTQ identity politics and disguises it as other forms of same-sex intimacy—making it both ubiquitous and dangerous to the hegemonic gendered matrix in contemporary Chinese society.

Chapter 5, "Taming *The Untamed*: Politics and Gender in BL-Adapted Web Dramas," by Jun Lei, looks at one of the most widely discussed and debated Chinese BL dramas of the digital TV era. The author proposes "BL-adapted" (耽改) as a genre related to, but differentiated from, BL, because media industry infiltration and state regulations have depleted the BL-adapted sexual and homoerotic content and converted it into "bromance." As Lei shows, the two queer media genres differ in narrative modes, fan objects, fan participation patterns, cultural function, and ideological positioning to dominant political and commercial forces. Lei reassesses optimistic scholarly claims about fans' digital dexterity, initiative, and capacity to be a subversive force of heteronormativity and state ideology. Her analysis also reveals contention and compliance between audience, industry, and state censors in "taming" BL-adapted dramas. She unravels controversies revolving around the lead actors of *The Untamed* to situate the BL-adapted genre as part of the Chinese entertainment industry's "pan-rotten" strategy of clickbaiting for profitmaking. Her examination extrapolates how the ideological expressions of BL-adapted dramas are shaped by state regulatory strategies. As Lei finds, while gesturing toward new possibilities of queer representations and fantasies and public agencies for female fans and viewers, the current form of BL-adapted dramas actually bespeaks a heteronormative conservatism and can distract attention from politically sensitive and often severely censored LGBTQ media in China.

The hypermasculinist and heteronormative geopolitics of the PRC in the Xi Jinping era are often framed as less progressive in the domains of gay marriage, anti-discrimination laws, and LGBTQ public cultures in comparison to post-Martial Law Taiwan, as well as less friendly than the queer-supportive environment of postcolonial Hong Kong. In response, Alvin K. Wong, in Chapter 6, "Disjunctive Temporalities: Queer Sinophone Visuality across Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan," examines the textual and contextual disjunctions of BL cultural productions in the three major Chinese-speaking societies. The author finds that while *The Untamed*, produced in the PRC, captures a form of "unhistorical queerness" whose queer appeal lies precisely in its portrayals of bromance and queer desire in a non-historical world of *jianghu* (rivers and lakes of the heroic world), recent queer dramas and films in postcolonial Hong Kong are by contrast more concerned with social issues such as aging, HIV prevention, and familial conflicts. The HIV-related online film *For Love, We Can* (愛，不難; dir. Chi-Lung Lam, 2014) and the recent hit TV drama *Ossan's Love* (大叔的愛; ViuTV, HK, 2021) visualize queer Hong Kong through what Wong describes as "queer presentism." Finally, the legalization of gay marriage in Taiwan in 2019 has significantly impacted the queer imaginary of BL in films and media. In lighthearted films and TV dramas such as *Formula 17* (2004) and *Because of You* (因為愛你; LINE TV, TW, 2020), a world in which gay men no longer need to come out and can simply be as ordinary as any other Taiwanese citizen is highlighted. Wong conceptualizes this as a certain "postliberal temporality" that emerges in post-2019 Taiwan. By delineating the three modalities of "unhistorical queerness" in mainland BL dramas, "queer presentism" in postcolonial Hong Kong BL media, and "postliberal temporality" in contemporary Taiwanese BL productions, he theorizes the overall disjunctive temporalities across queer Sinophone visuality and mediascapes.

The last section, "Queer/ing Celebrities across Geocultural Boundaries," shifts the focus to issues concerning post-2010 queer Chinese-language TV star and fan cultures with a transcultural dimension. As noted earlier, queer Chinese TV stardom and fandom in the first decade of the twenty-first century were largely shaped by inter-Asian and global queer media, such as Japanese BL media and Western LGBTQ pop cultures (Lavin, Yang, and Zhao 2017; Li 2015; Zhao 2017a). Post-2010 global TV market and transnational TV flows have allowed further queer dynamics and possibilities, which have been mobilized by Chinese-speaking queer stars and fans. Therefore, the last three chapters of *QTC* examine these queer/ing phenomena in the Chinese glocalization of and participation in transnational and global TV, celebrity, and fan cultures. They provide cross-cultural, comparative perspectives for studying the intricacies of queer TV stardom and fandom in different Chinese-speaking societies as well as across geopolitical borders and linguistic boundaries.

Linshan Jiang's essay, "Queer Vocals and Stardom on Chinese TV: Case Studies of Wu Tsing-Fong and Zhou Shen," offers a critical reading of gendered representations of and self-performances by Wu Tsing-Fong (吴青峰) from Taiwan and Zhou Shen (周深) from mainland China—two Chinese-speaking pop singers—on TV. Both Wu and Zhou possess "androgynous" voices as male singers. Although their appearances and personalities correspond to popular inter-Asian imageries of "soft masculinity," Jiang argues that their vocal queerness further destabilizes the mainstream's assumed univocal masculinity and adds to the diversity of male gender subject positions. Her examination focuses on the two singers' negotiations with the state and the market based on their queer masculinities within the dissimilar social-political environments and gendered histories of mainland China and Taiwan. She argues that Wu and Zhou continue to seek room for existence between sissyphobia, homophobia, transphobia, and voyeurism on Chinese-language TV. As they gain popularity and find a broad audience in the Chinese-language mainstream media and public spaces, Wu and Zhou not only maintain queer voices and personae but also form affective bonds with audiences to elicit queer sociocultural transformation.

While Jiang's study unpacks how vocal queerness works in Chinese-language media industries, Oscar Tianyang Zhou's research in Chapter 8, "Gay Men in/and *Kangsi Coming*," analyzes the ways in which gay men are (mis)represented on Chinese-language entertainment TV. Zhou interrogates two dominant gay types represented in two top-rated Mandarin talk shows—*Kangsi Coming* (康熙来了; CTi Variety, Taiwan, 2004–2016) and *U Can U Bibi* (奇葩说; iQIYI, China, 2014–present)—namely, the "sissy" and the "macho," which both signify a gay male subject and object of desire. He suggests that media representations play a crucial role in establishing cultural understanding of what it means to be gay in Taiwan and mainland China today. Zhou points out that the televised gay representations in question promise to enhance the visibility of gay men in the Chinese-speaking world. Yet, when gay visibility and cultural practices become good business prospects in a digital age, they also create and sustain disappointing stereotypes and hierarchies in TV representations.

The last chapter of *QTC*, "Queer Motherly Fantasy: The Sinophone Mom Fandom of Saint Suppapong Udomkaewkanjana" by Pang Ka Wei, presents a sophisticated investigation of an emerging yet understudied topic—"mom fans" (妈妈粉)—in transnational Chinese queer fandom of Thai BL TV. As Pang opines, when the Thai BL TV series boom meets the burgeoning mom fandom, the two synergize transnational queer motherly fantasies of fans that go beyond parasociality and heteronormativity. Focusing on the Sinophone mom fandom of Saint Suppapong Udomkaewkanjana (Saintsup hereafter), a Sino-Thai BL actor, Pang looks into how the family metaphor is at work among mom fans. She observes that in viewing BL TV series along with Saintsup's words and deeds, fans acquire a motherly position framed in the heteropatriarchal envisioning of

the family. As Pang finds, Saintsup's *ke'ai* (being cute and lovable) fosters fans' infantilization of the idol, the star's diverse masculinities defy the toxic patriarchal masculinity, and his Chinese descent nurtures kindred feelings among the mainland Chinese fans. Pang argues that Saintsup's Sinophone mom fandom illustrates how "Chineseness" is homogenized and essentialized, as well as how the fan-as-mother/idol-as-child positioning complicates and transforms the inelastic kinship in the Sinophone setting. As desiring subjects, these mom fans form an affective alliance that opens up possibilities for multifarious queer fantasies to be played out.

Taken together, through a "queer/ing TV China" lens, the essays in *QTC* explore the various TV narratives, temporalities, genres, formats, censorial practices and policies, celebrity images, and fan practices over the past decade. The authors highlight the ubiquitous existence and negotiative power of queerness in identity formation and desire voicing within a largely authoritarian, heteropatriarchal society. They also shed light on the intricate ways in which official political-ideological manipulations inside and outside of the PRC, mainstream commercial forces, digital technological affordances, and defiant desires intersect, compete, and collaborate through transnational, cross-media TV adaptation, production, and consumption. Overall, *QTC* presents a rich, fecund inspection of how these intersections manifest in and complicate the queer manufacturing and queering potential of TV images and stars and contribute to the interests of and conflicts among their fan communities.

The Future of Queer TV China

Delving into the deeply interwoven queer and normative dimensions of Chinese-language televisual screens, stardom, and fandom, *QTC* details how queer TV China, as a vital part of global TV and queer studies, carefully positions itself in relation to other more politically sensitive, less commercially profitable, and thus often censored LGBTQ cultural productions in Chinese media and digital spaces. Analytically, *QTC* radically redefines "queer" as a televisual-cultural-industrial-fannish position that is diacritically opposed to the normative ideals and expectations in the public and popular discourses surrounding gender, sexual, geocultural, and sociopolitical identities in the highly authoritarian, heteropatriarchal, and predominantly Chinese-speaking world. Through the idea of "queer/ing," the contributors have worked together to highlight the interdigitated meanings and implications of queer/*ku'er* in Chinese and Sinophone studies as a self-identification point for gender and sexual minorities, a media practice to push forward social-political changes, a response to different queer politics and censorship systems in diverse Chinese-speaking communities, a media industry's production and marketing strategy for profit making and gimmick creating, and/or an alternative representation or interpretation of

nonnormative genders and sexualities that are not necessarily self-identified as nonheterosexual.

The studies included in the volume exemplify the usefulness of the lens of "queer/ing TV China" in spotlighting queerness as an indispensable, constitutive element to the media-cultural discourses surrounding TV—the seemingly "most ordinary, everyday, and commonplace of our media forms" (Joyrich 2014, 134)—and Chineseness, especially the too-often assumed most heteronormative mainstream Chinese spaces and identities in the PRC. Rather than reiterating that the political edge of queer Chinese TV and fan cultures is simply erased or de-radicalized by the converging forces of economic neoliberalization and state surveillance, *QTC* takes a step further to offer a complex understanding of today's mainstream, commercial Chinese-language media and cultural landscapes. It conceives contemporary cultures, industries, creativities, and policies concerning queer TV China as being constituted and continually remade by multiple forces and factors (including historical and contemporary values, as well as local, transcultural, and global information flows, cultural hybridization, and social-political contestations), while persistently negotiating with both queer and normative elements to sustain the official imaginaries of both a neoliberal-heteropatriarchal China and a geopolitically essentialized and self-centered Chineseness, domestically, transnationally, and globally.

Through critical reflections on various emerging queer TV and fannish phenomena and deconstructive analyses of specific sensational cases, *QTC* also challenges the dichotomy of "positive" and "negative" representations of gender and sexual minorities and cautions against the simplistic, generalizing view of Chinese media regulatory and censorial practices as straightforward "repressive" regimes. In doing so, the volume's essays suggest new and exciting approaches and perspectives to the multilayered constructedness and performativity of identity and desire, such as those of tomboyism, adult womanhood, male homosociality and homoeroticism, mother-son relationships, and Chineseness and Sinophonicity, in the televisual-cultural productions of gender, sexual, ethnic, and geolinguistic identities and subjectivities. The contributors not only demonstrate that TV is queer in essence and has enormous queering potential, but also expose the queer problems and nuances that have mushroomed through contemporary Chinese-language media and creative productions. More importantly, the empirical discussions offered in the book showcase the cultural agency of insubordinate genders, sexualities, bodies, relationalities, and subjectivities mediated through the transnational, cross-racial, digital dimensions of contemporary Chinese-language screens and fan practices. By emphasizing the queer characteristics and promises of certain trans-local and transnational TV phenomena, *QTC* expands the existing Western-centered and Japanese- and South Korean-focused scholarship on queer media, celebrity, and fan studies to

include up-to-date investigations of queer TV production, distribution, circulation, and consumption in and beyond the PRC.

QTC aims to inspire sophisticated scholarly endeavors to inspect queer TV China and related subjects. As noted earlier in this Introduction, a growing number of academic works devoted to examinations of queer Chinese fan cultures (especially centering around BL TV) have been published in recent years in both English and Chinese languages. Yet most of the works tend to cluster around ethnographical approaches to specific fan sites (Zhao, Yang, and Lavin 2017, xiii). Even today, critical analyses that can meaningfully fuse Euro-American queer TV theories with Chinese media studies to inspect queer-natured Chinese TV formats, adaptations, and cross-media and cross-cultural flows and to produce a "more global synthesis" (Chiang 2014b, 355) remain sporadic. Further, the research methods and topics of some *QTC* chapters, such as the non-participant observation used in Chapter 2 to explore online queer gossip surrounding female TV stars, have often been marginalized in existing media scholarship, if not negatively feminized and trivialized in both social-scientific-centric communication studies and heteropatriarchal societies. The diversity and novelty of the methodologies employed by the contributors, therefore, can be seen as a particular strength of this volume.

Acknowledging the importance and fruitfulness of scholarly publications on LGBTQ lives in contemporary China (see, for example, Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2013; Bao 2018, 2021), *QTC* is one of the first English-language scholarly projects that strives to establish queer Chinese-language TV studies as a critical field of inquiry and look at queer lives, politics, voices, and struggles through entertainment media and pop cultural imaginaries. Far from narrowly focusing on a dashing, cosmopolitan, middle-class-oriented urban scene and a Euro-American-centric celebrity-fan economy, *QTC* has an emphasis on queer cultural-televisual landscapes and takes pains to join more social scientific, political-economic analysis-endorsed, and ethnographic approach-based queer research. This book showcases that boundary-transgressing, norm-contesting subjects, knowledge, and voices have been made and remade omnipresent in mainstream media and cyber spaces, despite the plural, unpredictable censorial practices from both commercial and political sectors. It ultimately problematizes and deconstructs the cosmopolitan, neoliberal bubble of queer Chinese media cultures from the inside out.

In addition, the past decade has witnessed both an enhanced visibility of ethnic-Chinese or foreign lesbian celebrities, leftover women, divorced women, women with immense political-economic power, or female sex workers (who are often positioned in highly homosocial scenarios in women-centered Chinese dramas) on TV and a growing number of cyber-TV programs that are produced by and for Chinese lesbians, such as online talk shows and sitcoms. Nevertheless, research dedicated to such topics remains particularly rare. To

fill the gap in studies of queer women’s TV images and fandom in the existing scholarship, *QTC* contains a number of chapters scrutinizing queer TV representations of and queer fannish imaginations about women. Some other promising directions for future research that can be generated from the discussions in the book include Anglophone, especially English-speaking, fandom of Chinese BL and other queer TV productions; the queer-initiating potential of TV genres and formats, such as sports TV and factual TV, that have previously been assumed to be hypermasculine, nationalistic, hegemonic, heterosexual-oriented, or under strict official surveillance; the norm-defying power of too-often femininized TV genres and means of communications, such as talk shows and gossip; and the nonnormative imaginaries of ethnic-minority Chinese nationals on mainstream TV that often frame Han-centered, Confucian gender and sexual norms as the ultimate ideals in the Chinese-specific heterosexual matrix. Of course, along with the drastic transformation in sociocultural contexts, global flows, and transnational relations with regard to Chinese feminist and LGBTQ rights and queer media productions in the post-2020 years, these will become only a few among numerous emerging queer Chinese pop scenes, for which *QTC* hopes to stir up scholarly attention and critical conversations.

1
Growing Up with "Tomboy Power"

Starring Liu Yuxin on Post-2010 Chinese Reality TV

Jamie J. Zhao

Introduction

On May 30, 2020, a twenty-three-year-old boyish girl, Liu Yuxin (刘雨昕), from Guizhou province in Southwest China, won first place in the hit girl-group cultivation reality show *Youth With You 2* (青春有你2; iQIYI; *YWY2* hereafter) with over seventeen million audience votes. Taking the "center position" (C 位; meaning the most important all-around member) in the group, Liu formed the new Chinese girl band THE9 with the eight other girls who received the most votes in the competition. Over the past fifteen years, mainland China has seen several waves of reality singing competitions (Keane and Zhang 2017; Yang 2014), starting with the female-only *Idol*-style singing contest *Super Voice Girl* (超级女声; Hunan TV, 2004–2006, 2009, 2011, 2016; *SVG* hereafter) and followed by *The Voice of China* (中国好声音; Zhejiang TV, 2012–2021), which was adapted from a format originating in the Netherlands, the celebrity singing competition show *I Am a Singer* (我是歌手; Hunan TV, 2013–2020), the rap competition *The Rap of China* (中国有嘻哈; iQIYI, 2017–2020), and the music-group manufacturing show *Produce 101* (创造101; Tencent Video, 2018–2021).

Reality talent shows have been credited with the emergence and popularity of young Chinese female idols with masculine personas or cross-dressing looks (Huang 2013; Xiao 2012; Yang and Bao 2012; Yue and Yu 2008; J. Zhao 2016, 2018b, 2019b; Zhao, Yang, and Lavin 2017). A classic example that has been frequently discussed in existing scholarship is Li Yuchun (李宇春; also known as Chris Lee), who rose to fame after unexpectedly winning the 2005 season of *SVG* with her androgynous onstage persona and unconventional singing style (Meng 2009; Xiao 2012, 2020; Yang 2009; Yue and Yu 2008). Following Li's sudden success, there was a boom of gender-nonnormative female reality TV stars, especially in singing and dancing competition shows produced between 2005 and 2016 (Zhao 2018b, 2019b). This androgynous TV hype was often interpreted as part and parcel of a new wave of contemporary Chinese feminism and the democratic

potential of the post-2000 Chinese pop cultural landscape (Meng 2009; Yue and Yu 2008).

In the late 2010s, the local Chinese entertainment industry witnessed the rise of feminine girl pop, which was marked by East Asian hyperfeminine beauty norms featuring "white, skinny, young, and innocent" women (白、瘦、幼; Ma 2018; see also Jung 2018; Xiao 2020, 146). For instance, the girl group Rocket Girls (火箭女孩), formed during the 2018 season of *Produce 101*, was emblematic of this rejuvenated sexualization and commodification of young women's bodies in the Mainland. This girl group culture has been naturalized through a neoliberal discourse of "girl power" (Hains 2012), which has been commonly deployed in the mainstream commercialization of young women's sexual empowerment in the Euro-American and South Korean music and idol industries. Within the East Asian context, this discourse projects a desirable girlhood "within the entangling discourses of feminism, neoliberalism and conventional femininity" (Jackson and Westrupp 2010, 348) and thus perpetuates "the neo-cultural imperialist convergence between patriarchal nationalism, nationalistic ambition for global competition, and corporate interests in the maximization of economic profits from the governance of young femininity" (Kim 2011, 336). Although some "feminist" voices and "unconventional" personas of young women are identified in the recent wave of Chinese girl pop (Xiao 2020, 148),[1] this form of women's agency replicates a "pseudo-feminist" rhetoric in a neoliberal, consumerist China that emphasizes "self-expression and self-actualization" (Peng 2020, 67). Marshaled by the "neoliberal globalization" of Chinese entertainment and digital media (Xiao 2020, 130), the retrieving and marketing of traditional female gender and sexual ideals through the televisual manufacturing of young Chinese girl idols have been simultaneously encouraged by East Asian *kawaii* (cuteness), girl-group cultures, and the state's gender policies, as well as the multivalent feminist and queer thoughts glocalized and proliferating in mainstream Chinese society in more recent years.

Since the late 2000s, in response to the increasing gender imbalance of the Chinese population and the growing number of "leftover women" (referring to groups of educated, single, urban women who are over twenty-seven years old), the government has employed its mass media and cyberspace "to concertedly push young women to marry at all costs, including foregoing their careers and entitlement to marital property" (Wu and Dong 2019, 478; see also Hong Fincher 2014). Furthermore, on January 1, 2016, the government ended its one-child rule,

1. For instance, one of the most popular participants of the show *Produce 101* in 2018, Wang Ju (王菊), was said to be "China's Beyoncé" for her tanned skin tone and curvy figure, as well as for "her candid personality, independence and ambition" (RADII China 2018; Zhang 2018). Wang also received massive support from Chinese feminist and queer groups during the competition (Xiao 2020, 148). Yet, she was eventually eliminated and did not make it to the top eleven finalists who formed the Rocket Girls band.

which had been in effect since 1979 (Coonan 2016). Instead, a two-child policy, which encouraged married couples to have two children, was enacted.[2] These changes to the local family-planning system aimed to "ease demographic pressures," remedy the "labor shortage," and "boost the birth rate," especially in urban areas of mainland China (BBC 2021; Coonan 2016). Since 2018, the growing popularity of Chinese effeminate male stars in the past decade, which was influenced by the inter-Asian androgynous beauty cultures circulated to mainland China in the late 1990s, has generated further nationalistic-masculinist anxieties over the "national virility" and led to an official "sissyphobic discourse" that denigrates and even censors gender-nonnormative male representations on TV (Song 2022a, 70). In the meantime, socioeconomic situations, the government's political agenda, and the "rekindled patriarchal values" of mainland China in the late 2010s have all aligned to produce public and official backlashes against the hitherto-booming Chinese feminist cultures and practices (Wu and Dong 2019, 478). These intertwining social-political, cultural, and economic factors and forces have, in turn, reinvigorated certain heteropatriarchal-endorsed gender norms and expectations, especially manifesting through China's TV representations of young women.

It is also worth noting that the highly gender-norm-deviating televisual phenomenon mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is emblematic of an intriguing "youth"-focused political rhetoric revived by the contemporary government. Rather than serving as "a category of biological age or a transitional stage of human development," the word *youth* (青年) was used in modern Chinese culture to signify the dual projects of "self-reformation" and "national rejuvenation" (Xiao 2020, 2; see also Song 2015, 3). Nevertheless, in postsocialist, neoliberal China, its political edge has mostly evaporated. Instead, social-political imaginaries and aspirations associated with the idea of youth or of being youthful have often been revamped in gendered narratives and spaces to perpetrate a market-oriented, consumerist economy (Xiao 2020, 20). For instance, the youthful and nonnormatively gendered discourses surrounding Li Yuchun's TV stardom and fandom have largely contributed to a "marketable diversity" pursued and favored by the Chinese entertainment industry (Xiao 2020). Li's queer persona, in this sense, becomes part of "an all-inclusive . . . post-Fordist cultural industry" that can "attest to the mainstream neoliberal discourse of self-sufficiency and individual fulfillment, and attac[h] a more liberal and more individualized humane face to the grand discourse of China Dream" (Xiao 2020, 156).

Against this background, this chapter explores the (nonnormatively) gendered televisual phenomenon exemplified through Liu Yuxin's rise to fame during the

2. Later, in May 2021, the government announced that married couples are allowed to have up to three children (BBC 2021).

first half of 2020. Liu's career as a girl pop idol started with her participation in the reality show *Up Young!* (向上吧！少年; Hunan TV, 2012). After that, she participated in several high-profile reality singing and dancing shows. This study looks at Liu's nonconforming persona as it was performed, revised, and eventually mainstreamed and celebrated on reality TV between 2012 and 2020. Methodologically, I employ a queer televisual discourse analysis. TV itself is "an, if not *the*, agent of forms of queer life" (Villarejo 2014, 55). Nonnormatively defined forms of life and televisual temporalities have been in symbiotic relationships and have mutually contributed to one another's development (Villarejo 2014, 15). As Richard Dyer eloquently stated, "How social groups are treated in cultural representations is part and parcel of how they are treated in life" (1993, 1). This is particularly true for gender-norm-defying young women featured on contemporary Chinese reality TV.

Michael Lovelock (2019) once elaborated on the complexities of queer images on Western reality TV in this way:

> *reality television itself*—its generic conventions, thematic norms and network contexts—functions as the discursive matter which brings LGBTQ (short for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer") identities into being through representations. These televisual factors form the conditions of possibility for these very identities. (Lovelock 2019, 23)

In this vein, a critical reading of Liu's reality TV appearances between 2012 and 2020 reveals how her embodiment of "tomboyism" (denoting a Chinese-specific form of a young, masculine female persona) was manufactured, rejected, evaluated, modified, and commercialized alongside the development of reality TV formats in post-2010 China. This televisual queer-feminist analysis also captures the ways in which contemporary Chinese gender/sexual minority identities and cultures have been actively negotiating with, yet also inevitably subjugated by, local gender traditions, market forces, official policies, and transnational pop-cultural flows.

In the rest of this chapter, I first explain my use of the term "tomboyism" and its connotative (dis)association with lesbianism in the Chinese-speaking context. I also briefly trace a social-political trajectory of female gender and sexuality in mainland China that has heavily shaped today's Chinese tomboyish subjectivities. Then, I explore Liu's reality TV performances and career development. My analysis pays special attention to Liu's gendered, youthful persona in *YWY2* to understand how the show produced "tomboy" stars and legitimized the prescribed sociocultural non-normativities associated with tomboyism. I reveal that with constantly revised formats, reality talent shows afford a queer platform for subject making in contemporary China.

My discussion is situated within the post-2010 postsocialist Chinese feminist context in which "a market-individual discourse" is appropriated in the official

and public patriarchal backlash against "the socialist feminist legacy" (Zhu and Xiao 2021, 12), while glocalized postfeminist thoughts emphasizing "the formation of an expressive personal lifestyle and the ability to select the right commodities to attain it" are promoted (Negra 2008, 4). To some extent, *YWY2* neutralized tomboyism to an innocuous and ubiquitous gendering process for girls and young women in a heterosexual-dominated, Chinese-specific, party-state-endorsed feminist context that does not necessarily threaten heteronormative expectations for adult women. This manufacturing of young adult "tomboy" idols contributes to the imagining of China as an open-minded, globalized, inclusive society that appreciates the form of "tomboy power," selling the seemingly progressive ideas of female gender diversity and fluidity, female empowerment, and self-cultivation. Ultimately, I argue that the televisual representation (and documenting) of Liu's growing-up as a "tomboy" onscreen over the years demonstrates how Chinese entertainment media crops and regulates desiring queer female subjects in intertwined discourses of neoliberal reform, "feminisms with Chinese characteristics" (Zhu and Xiao 2021), and gender and sexual globalization. Diverging from the scholarship concerning the "crisis" of authenticity on reality TV (Banet-Weiser 2012; van Leeuwen 2001), my critical analysis demystifies this televisual discourse as an "authentic" elegy of younger generations of queer women in mainland China. The historicization of gendered local Chinese reality TV culture in this chapter poignantly and vividly records the social pressure, traumas, compromises, and sacrifices adolescent girls and young women of nonnormative gender and/or sexual identities are forced to face, experience, and cope with in real life.

Embracing Tomboyism in Mainland China

To unpack the unique subject-making and -negotiating processes revolving around tomboyism (rather than exclusively on identitarian lesbianism) in this study,[3] I use the terms "androgynous," "tomboyish," and "masculine" to describe norm-disruptive gendered personas and performances of young female stars on post-2010 Chinese reality TV and in mainland Chinese public and pop-cultural discourses generally. While the notion of androgyny usually describes people who "combine masculine and feminine or male or female traits or a person whose gender or sex is difficult to determine" (Califia 2004, 58), the word "tomboy" is used in this chapter to denote masculine or androgynous women who are widely believed by the public to be nonheterosexual, yet who may not be explicitly self-identified as such. Additionally, it is worth noting that most

3. The striving of nonnormatively gendered groups for sociocultural recognition and identity categorization can sometimes "resolve into new and counter-productive forms of identitarianism" (Halberstam 2012, 337).

4

Addicted to Melancholia

Negotiating Queerness and Homoeroticism in a Banned Chinese BL Drama

Aobo Dong

Introduction

In 2017, official media censors in mainland China abruptly took down *Addicted* (上瘾; iQIYI, China, 2016), a highly popular gay web series, from its Chinese streaming platforms before it could air the remaining episodes of its first (and only) season (Lin and Chen 2016). But despite the web series' ephemeral legal life span, it had received more than 100 million views in less than a month of streaming (BBC 2016), attracted millions of loyal fans, and enjoyed its afterlife abroad. The abrupt nature of the ban, coupled with harsher censorship guidelines targeting homosexual content released in the following year, indicate the government's anxiety and paranoia over the growing influence of queer-themed TV like *Addicted*.[1] Having passed the initial censors, *Addicted*, with its own self-sanitizing efforts that preemptively cut down the graphic sex scenes that were ubiquitous in its original literary version, carried an insidious threat to the social order that only manifested itself to state officials after it had reached millions.

In the age of a partitioned internet and omnipresent state censors, it is an impressive feat for any homosexual content to be broadcasted to millions of viewers in China, even for just a brief period. To stand a chance, queer TV must deploy a series of strategies for negotiating a form of TV aesthetics tolerable to the normative state standards and the public's moral palate. Under this power relation between queer TV and the heteronormatively structured state, queerness escapes total erasure if it appears in its abject, tragic form, deprived of a viable, threatening futurity. A generic coming-out story that fractures a previously

1. In this chapter, I use the terms gay and homosexual to denote explicitly homosexual or homoerotic referents. My use of "queer" as an adjective is inclusive of all LGBTQ concepts and beyond (including certain forms of homosociality). I also occasionally use "queer" as a verb to refer to the act of rendering the familiar strange in the general sense, and "queerness" as an ambiguous, abjected positionality outside of normative social meanings.

harmonious Chinese family may be more tolerable, for its narrative further coheres straight time—affirming the impossibility of gay life under a hegemonic symbolic order.[2] In the case of *Addicted*, the exact reasons for the ban may never be fully known, but the particular queer threat that prompted an expansion of heteronormative state censorship policy can be analyzed and theorized from the TV drama itself. Focusing on the desires of the two main characters, this chapter demonstrates how *Addicted* offers a radical queer utopianism that escapes the normative trappings of Chinese filial obsessions and prohibitions. Instead of replicating a more familiar narrative of the clash between homosexuality and Chinese kinship, the banned drama succeeded in circumventing and deferring this queer fatalism—an achievement that was ironically made possible by the very abrupt ban at the hands of state censors. Building on Judith Butler's (1995, 1997) notion of gender melancholia and José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) work on queer utopia, this chapter argues that the state ban has inadvertently created a form of public mourning that performatively reenacts the melancholic structure of desire that is both at the heart of the *Addicted* world and at the margins of straight temporality.

For Muñoz, "Utopia is an idealist mode of critique that reminds us that there is something missing, that the present and presence (and its opposite number, absence) is not enough" (2009, 100). This utopian mode of critique conforms neither to the homophobic violence of the present nor to the pragmatic goals of queer politics. Rather than obsessing over the problems and solutions in the here and now, Muñoz looks forward to what the future might bring by means of queer performances that challenge straight time. As a TV series without any explicit references to queer political goals or even homophobia in China, *Addicted* is playfully oblivious to the serious tensions between queer Chinese children, their families, and the homophobic state, at least in its aired episodes. This strategic innocence/ignorance can be thought of as a rejection of the homophobic present and an invitation to alternative queer imaginations in the future. However, to move beyond the present requires a foreclosure of what is familiar, including ideas such as homosexual orientation and queer abjection, which I will argue are both disavowed and censored by the plot and the state censors alike.

Building on the tropes of melancholia and utopian futurity, my theorization of a queer utopianism in *Addicted* consists of three key elements. First, a refusal to name the forbidden homosexual desires explicitly, thereby bypassing a sexual

2. I use the "symbolic order" to refer to various hegemonic systems of language, law, and norms that govern conscious day-to-day life under a heteronormative society. This Lacanian psychoanalytic concept is commonly used by queer theorists like Judith Butler (1995, 1997) and Lee Edelman (2004) to theorize gender and queerness. Without subscribing to a universal theory of the symbolic, I aim to illustrate how multiple hegemonic systems (including norms of filial piety) work in tandem in the fictional world of *Addicted* and the larger Chinese society.

binarism underlying the structure of conflict between the queer community in China and the normative Chinese society. Second, a rejection of the abject status quo that most LGBTQ people in China must live with in everyday life through a phantasmatic reimagining of kinship and queer romance in the fictive world. Third, a deferral of catharsis, a satisfying ending/resolution, or victory in conventional queer politics, thanks to the state ban, that ironically keeps queer alternatives and desires alive through a structure of mourning. In reaching these theorizations, I rely primarily on plot analysis that critically juxtaposes its fantasy structures with the lived reality outside the *Addicted* world, and speculates on what symbolic terms the plot resignifies and why the series was so "addictive" to viewers. To substantiate the third element pertaining to public mourning, I turn to a discourse analysis of viewers' online discussions of the series (and its ban) in major social media platforms, including Zhihu (知乎), Baidu Forums (百度论坛), and YouTube. This analysis of hundreds of viewer reactions took place multiple times between 2017 to 2021, as the popular series continued to attract new viewers during the pandemic. This prolonged melancholic public attachment to the series years after its ban further strengthens my hypothesis that state censorship unintentionally helped make the series even more addictive and powerful as a blueprint for queer desires on the horizon.

Following the termination of the *Addicted* web series, the Chinese government rolled out new media regulations in June 2017, targeting several issues of high sensitivity, including religious and sexual expressions. In the official statement, homosexuality is listed among a range of "abnormal sexual relations and behaviors," ranging from incest to sexual violence (CNSA 2017). This hardline position from the party-state and the ban of *Addicted* spurred a public outcry that reverberated across social media sites in China and beyond (Sonmez 2016). From a mainstream LGBTQ activist perspective, the omnibus regulation unfairly groups homosexuality with incest, rape, and unauthorized religious content—a backward step that fails to recognize members of the Chinese LGBTQ community as good citizens of the state, deserving of respect and normalization. Alternatively, however, the comprehensive ban can be interpreted as an effect of state panic and paranoia: how can homosexuality or homoeroticism be effectively banned if it never appears under the sign of LGBTQ, but disguises itself under an umbrella of unspeakable desires and vices? As the name *Addicted* suggests, the web drama is no stranger to many other banned themes, such as drugs and violence, under the new censorship policy. The title "Addicted" (*shangyin*; 上瘾) directly refers to addiction, and combining the first names of the two main characters (Gu Hai; 顾海 and Bai Luoyin; 白洛因) constitutes "heroin" (*hai-luoyin*; 海洛因) in Chinese. Besides signaling the addictive nature of this fictive gay relationship, the name also suggests the series' addictive potential, evident in the

60 million views it attracted shortly after Valentine's Day.[3] Besides the implied reference to illicit drugs, *Addicted* also depicts domestic violence, rape, battery, bribery, and abuses of power as productive forces behind the spotlighted gay relationship.

Belonging to the boys' love (BL hereafter) or *yaoi* genre historically created for a predominately female audience in Japan, *Addicted* was directed and produced by Chai Jidan (柴鸡蛋), a heterosexual Chinese female author who wrote the original novel published online. Far from being an activism-oriented project, *Addicted* focuses on the fantasized romance between men and its commodifiable pleasures, and its cast members and directors never publicly acknowledged any affiliation with LGBTQ groups or had any prior experience with other gay-themed projects. These conditions are drastically different from those of a gay film produced in the West or other Asian countries with more queer-friendly social atmospheres. Filmed in the streets of Beijing and in a society where homosexuality remains a tabooed discursive subject, *Addicted*'s BL elements are met with unique challenges, unintended consequences, and unpredictability. In analyzing the plot below, I will explain how the series' genre and the online media censors worked together to allow a queer utopianism to take place against a dystopian societal backdrop. I will also examine the critical themes of performativity, melancholia, and identification underlying the plot and reception of the series. Focusing on the relationship between the two main characters, this chapter also illustrates the role of grief in enabling their same-sex love and argues that the overcoming of their shared grief and precariousness works to threaten the heterosexual symbolic by resignifying norms of kinship and sexuality.

Genre, Censorship, and Queer Escapism

Taking place in contemporary Beijing, the story of *Addicted* revolves around the relationship of two high school students—Bai Luoyin and Gu Hai. Luoyin lives in a poor region of town and attends a low-performing high school, which suggests a bleak future because of China's infamous college entrance system. He lives with his caring but often careless dad, who works at a construction site. Luoyin's mom left them when he was little and, at the beginning of the plot, is about to marry again to a powerful and affluent military general who happens to be the father of Hai, whose first wife passed away due to a tragic accident when Hai was little. From the start, Hai expresses his strong discontent with the marriage arrangement and with the possibility that his stepmom would bring her own son (Luoyin) into the house. He dramatically rebelled and

3. See more at https://www.zhihu.com/question/40087662 and https://www.zhihu.com/question/40087662/answer/85421934.

9

Queer Motherly Fantasy

The Sinophone Mom Fandom of Saint Suppapong Udomkaewkanjana

Pang Ka Wei

> "My baby boy, be bold and take wing. Mama will always back you up. Be yourself and stay happy." (Luna, 24 years old, Shandong, mainland China)
>
> "Don't drain yourself out. Take enough rest. Mama loves you. [blow a kiss]" (Guoguo, 20 years old, Jiangsu, mainland China)
>
> "Really wanna spank him for staying up late! Not going to bed, huh!" (Hami, 33 years old, Guangdong, mainland China)

This baby boy who always stays up late is Suppapong Udomkaewkanjana, more widely known by his nickname Saint (hereafter, Saintsup). Saintsup is no baby boy, but—at the time—a twenty-two-year-old Thai actor, singer and entrepreneur that has gained popularity worldwide. In an Instagram live session in 2019, he pouted, saying that he was afraid of his moms not loving him. The moms he referred to are in fact his fans. Like the above quotes, many of his fans see Saintsup as "son," "hijo," ("son" in Spanish) or "zaizai" ("son" in Chinese)[1] while calling themselves mom. They are the mom fans, stanning for their darling boy Saintsup, who gained his fame playing leading roles in Thai boys' love (BL) TV series.

In two years, Saintsup attracted more than 2 million followers on Instagram and 1 million on Weibo (as of September 5, 2020). He named his fandom MingEr and often addresses his fans as moms. With his smiling cherubic face, Saintsup delights his mom fans with his occasional childlike behavior. His Chinese descent also appeals to the Sinophone fans, especially those in mainland China. Despite the geo-blocking, state censorship of homoerotic works and language barrier, mainland Chinese fans continue to support Saintsup by all means. For many months in 2020, Saintsup was voted one of the top ten celebrities in the

1. It happens that the pronunciation of the words "崽崽" in Mandarin, as well as "囝囝" and "仔仔" in Cantonese, can all be Romanized as *zaizai* despite their different Romanization systems and characters.

Asia-Pacific superstar chart on Weibo. In reciprocity, Saintsup also publicly acknowledges his "Chinese moms" for their tremendous support, and increasingly gears towards the mainland China market.

This imaginary kinship between fans and idols, as Qing Yan and Fan Yang (2021) term it in their exploration of the parakin fans of "cultivated idols" in mainland China, is a parakin relationship that is distinctive from the nonreciprocal parasocial ones. Parakin fans of "cultivated idols" are keen on "co-creating" their idols, as if they are playing "raising sims." Analyzing social media posts and interviews, Yan and Yang (2021) classify the motivations of the parakin fans into a dual (self-oriented and idol-oriented) motivation model. Their proposition, to a large extent, is based on a heterosexist family imagination and presumes that fans establish such a parakin relationship out of the lack of or discontent at their own family relationship, arguing that mainland Chinese fans become mother fans because of escapism and compensation. It is on this that the transnational Sinophone mom fandom of "non-cultivated" BL actor Saintsup could offer a more sophisticated picture.

As the mom fan has become a growing fandom of young Asian idols, this chapter looks more closely into how the family metaphor is at work among the trans-Asian Sinophone mom fans of Saintsup by means of survey and in-depth interviews: how they negotiate their identity with respect to sexuality, fantasy and desire, age, national/ethnic identity, East Asian/Southeast Asian imaginations, as well as the fan-idol relationship. If we see the transnational fandom as "a product (and a further trigger) of overseas fan communities' voluntary and purposeful cultural and linguistic mediation" (Lee 2014, 198), I argue that this motherly fan identity is derived from the heteropatriarchal family structure as a result of a negotiation of their desire and fantasy towards a young male queer subject.

Sinophone Fandom and Queer Fantasies

This chapter approaches the term Sinophone in both its denotative and connotative senses. Since most fandoms, and transnational ones in particular, are largely online communities, fans of different linguistic backgrounds communicate with each other online in a certain lingua franca. In Saintsup's fandom, English, Chinese, and Spanish are the three major linguae francae besides Thai. Here, the term "Sinophone" is seen as a counterpart of Anglophone and Hispanophone. The Sinophone is used denotatively to refer to the fans who primarily communicate with written Chinese—or, to be more precise, Sinitic scripts. Owing to the unpromising quality of machine and amateur translations, the language barrier leaves much room for interpretation and contestation, as well as imagination and fantasy.

Meanwhile, this Sinophone fandom is comprised of Chinese-speaking/writing fans whose heterogeneity is oftentimes rendered invisible in the multicultural fandom. In Saintsup's fandom, for example, they are collectively known as "Chinese moms." It is in this sense that it is necessary to bring in the notion of the Sinophone as an interrogation of China-centrism in understanding the "Chinese" fandom. In understanding the concept of "Sinophone," there are two main approaches: one is by Shu-mei Shih and another by David Der-wei Wang. Seeing Chineseness as an ethnicized reductive Han-centric construction, Shih (2011) employs "the Sinophone," the polyphonic and polyscriptic notion, as a critique of it. While I share this use of the Sinophone as a critical framework that interrogates the hegemonic call for an essentialist, monolingual, and Han-centric Chineseness, I hope to differ on the use of the term by a majority of queer Sinophone studies scholars that adopt Shih's (2007) definition of the Sinophone as only Chinese-speakers outside mainland China. Unlike literary studies in which writers, may they be Chinese settlers, diasporic, or exilic subjects, could more easily be categorized as outside China proper based on their place of residence, the online fannish subjects are far more hybrid. In order to adequately address and engage with the heterogeneous body of the Sinophone fandom, I would follow Wang's (2017) usage of the term to include not only the geopolitically peripheral subjects but also those within China proper. To put it more clearly, in this chapter, the Sinophone mom fans include Chinese-speaking/writing ethnic Chinese both outside and inside mainland China who self-identify themselves as mom fans.

Sharing this anti-essentializing and anti-normativizing attempt with the Sinophone is queer theory (Chiang and Wong 2020b; Heinrich 2014). These Sinophone mom fans assume a motherly role rooted in a heteropatriarchal family imagination while paradoxically queering it. This imagination in the Sinophone context is largely a Confucian one that sees family relationships as primarily hierarchical with respect to sex, age, and generation (Lai 2020) that coincide with heterosexisim, cisgenderism, and monogamy. Therefore, in addition to the homoeroticism in BL works, the shifting identificatory positions and queer fantasy manifested by these mom fans in trans-Asian fanning and BL consumption can also be regarded as queer. The queerness transgresses, if not necessarily resists, the stability of these familial hierarchies and thus the normativizing forces of the heteropatriarchy. Putting into question China-centrism and heteropatriarchy, this chapter offers a queer Sinophone reading of Saintsup's mom fandom against the background of the blooming Y-series production in Thailand.

From Y-series to Taifu

Taking after the success of the film *Love of Siam* (dir. Chookiat Sakveerakul, 2007), Thailand has seen a bloom in the male homoerotic youth TV genre, the Y-series,

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