

Queer Sinophonicities in (South) East Asia: The Short Films of Desmond Bing-Yen Ti

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Introduction

1. Bing-Yen Ti, also known by the name Desmond, is an emerging filmmaker from Malaysia who has studied film production and directed short films in his home country and China. To date almost half of his repertoire focuses on young same-sex attracted individuals and these filmic offerings have been distributed through YouTube and local Chinese (queer) social media. While mainly set in Malaysia, his films have been welcomed by Chinese audiences, to an extent that exceeded Ti's own anticipation. His short film debut *Tongchuang Yimeng/Exchange 2012*, for example, achieved over one million views combined on several major Chinese video-sharing websites and generated many more comments from these viewers than from their Malaysian counterparts on YouTube.^[1]
2. In this paper I investigate and explore transnational intersections of queer screen cultures between Malaysia and China through a case study of Ti's film production, online distribution, and reception. My analysis begins with a critique of 'queer Sinophonicities' as a promising and problematic methodology. Further to a brief introduction to historical Malaysian cinemas, I then situate and scrutinise Ti's films in the context of (queer) Sinophone Malaysia and explore how to make sense of nationhood and Sinophonicities through queer filmmaking. In the following sections I critically discuss Ti's engagement with online (queer) social media and video-sharing services through the lens of Sinophonic conjunctions and disjunctions and include a textual analysis of Ti's *Exchange 2012* to further explore queer Malaysian Sinophonicities. Putting Ti and his films at the intersections of queer studies and Sinophone studies, I conclude with a call for new theories and methods in researching visual culture and sexuality.

Queering Asia and queer Sinophonicities

3. I employ queer theory as a view that draws attention to the social construction of gender and sexuality, and questions dualist, naturalist, and essentialist accounts of identity. I use queer theory to highlight the diversity and complexity of marginalised sexualities and cultures-as demonstrated by Ti's example-vis-à-vis heteronormativity. Under the 'queer' mantle, I also acknowledge material(-bodily) and psycho(-sexual) differences among individuals, communities, societies and cultures. However, queer theory arguably 'remains rooted in western, primarily Anglo-American discourse,'^[2] and researchers still hold divergent views about 'the salience and appropriateness of "queer" as a descriptive term and analytical category' in an Asian context.^[3] As Ara Wilson beautifully summarises

the term queer appears to represent a loose domain of disparate non-normative genders and sexualities, although it does not solve any problems of English-language hegemony or ethnocentric categorisations of sexuality. It is not a gloss for Asian vernaculars, nor is it necessarily a term of choice for Asian actors.^[4]

4. Megan Sinnott further notes that the problematic use of queer theory in Asia 'may not resonate with local meaning systems regarding sexuality and gender.'^[5] Such tensions between 'western' queer theory and 'local' Asian sexualities have long been an intellectual battlefield in queer Asian studies.

5. Wilson traces two major approaches that have been adopted by researchers: the first is to recuperate the significance of the local, vis-à-vis the US/West-dominated global, and the second is a post-colonial critique of queer western-centrism.^[6] The former has often been criticised for nativism and its essentialist view of culture, while the latter for its curtailed ability to provincialise the West. Wilson's conceptual reframing is 'critical queer regionalism' or 'queering Asia,' an alternative frame of reference that understands Asia as both the recipient of western understandings of sexualities and a geo-political entity with its own sex-related traditions and values, while emphasising the 'complex modernities and transnational flows in a global context shaped by political economic asymmetries.'^[7] This standpoint echoes other researchers' discussions about the fluid and unstable, diverse and heterogeneous, multiple and dynamic, and vibrant and complex characteristics of sexualities in East and Southeast Asia,^[8] that queer theory as an analytical tool has demonstrated great capacity to penetrate.
6. I intend to further Wilson's argument. My own positioning lies beyond the idea of local/global, East/West, and Asia/America as purely imagined categories (which is somewhat romantic/innocent and implies a borderless universe where queer theory circulates without resistance) and beyond the attempt to install these notions based solely on their geo-locations (which is often too rigid and static). My understanding is that binaries such as queer Asia/queer America and local queer/global queer are established upon, but not bound up with, the geo-positions and geo-proximities of Asia and America, and East and West. These locations are shaped by their own histories and cultures, as well as by the intermingled local(ising) and global(ising) forces of modernity and sexuality that are typically more complicated than the local/global dualism could adequately capture.^[9] Through this lens, I recur to the notion of Sinophone (discussed below) to reframe the territorial and conceptual locations and dislocations of various Asian societies (for example, China and Malaysia) that queer regionalism has been striving and struggling to address.
7. The notion of Sinophone, or Chinese/Sinitic-language, delineates a linguistic-based cultural, historical, and political stance that aims to bring the peripheral and diasporic Sinitic communities—those outside China—into a single framework.^[10] It prioritises localised and heterogenised Sinitic-language cultures of Chinese migrants who have settled long enough—sometimes for several generations or centuries—at their new home to become more eligible as 'local' and less eligible as 'Chinese diaspora.' Sinophone is a paradigm-shift from diaspora studies (with its strong nostalgic attachment to and monological view of the ancestral homeland of origin) to a linguistic-historical understanding of cultures and people (that is sensitive and subject to geo-localational flows and the temporal localisation of Sinitic-speaking migrants). Sinophone seeks to rationalise and reinstall 'minor' and 'inferior' immigrant communities overshadowed by the ancestral China, like the Chinese community in Malaysia, as equally authentic and significant Sinitic cultures that have long been articulating their own voices through film, literature and other cultural outputs.
8. Facing China's rise on the global stage, the Sinophone framework is a conscious and timely breakaway from the hegemonic China-centrism that often looks up to the continental Mainland China as the superior Sinitic society and the single standard of Sinitic cultural productions, and often neglects different constructions and articulations of Chinese-ness in other Sinitic-language locations. In this Sinophone concerto, China and other marginalised Chinese communities do not share an umbilical relationship as the Motherland and her diasporic children; rather, China is rendered from the ancestral 'mother' to Other. This otherness has generated much debate around Sinophone. As Sheldon Lu argues and Emilie Yeh summarises, Sinophone is epistemologically limiting in the sense that it creates a dichotomy between China and the rest of Sinitic communities.^[11] Furthermore, although Sinophone appropriates and appreciates localised Sinitic cultures, positioning such cultures into a single conceptual framework risks building an 'imagined community' where people speak a common language called Sinitic-language (more on this later)

and share the common linguistic, historical, cultural and emotional expressions despite differences, tensions, and non-conformities among and within each and every Sinitic society.

9. Such risk has emerged at two levels. At the global level, as Arjun Appadurai comments in a different context, the sense of nationhood, or that of common belonging, is increasingly transcending state boundaries, as the scattered and stretched identities of a transnational diaspora have been activated to imagine a community and a commonality.^[12] That is to say, while Sinophone insightfully breaks away from the monolithic view of Chineseness and empowers the often marginalised Sinitic cultures beyond state boundaries, its overarching coverage of the scattered and stretched Sinitic cultures around the globe may construct an imagined 'Sinophone sphere' and an imagined sense of common belonging. What has emerged through Sinophone is thus a double dualism: a rupture between Mainland China and the rest of Sinitic cultures, and a binary between the imagined Sinophone sphere and the rest of the world. The idea of imagined community is initially developed as a critique of nationalism that Sinophone also has great potential to transcend; however, Sinophone shares with nationalism in designating diversified cultures in a socially and epistemologically constructed frame—be it a nation, be it a 'phone' sphere.
10. At the level of any given Sinitic society, furthermore, a Sinophone community is not a monolithic and essentialist existence, but multiple articulations of various identities and sexualities, tensions and contradictions, and heterogeneous emotions and expressions. Sinophone Malaysia, for example, consists of different generations of immigrants and various religions, languages, artistic articulations and non-normative sexualities. If we consider Malaysia an imagined community—in Benedict Anderson's sense^[13]—then Sinophone Malaysia is an equally imagined community and a constructed notion based on its linguistic-historical relations with China and other Sinitic cultures, and on its past and present interactions and negotiations with other ethnic groups and cultures in Malaysia. Every Sinophone community, through this line of thought, is a Sinophone imaginary.
11. On the one hand, such a double-layered imaginary (Sinophone sphere and Sinophone communities) offers a promising framework to examine the intra- and trans-Sinitic flows of visual content, such as Ti's films, and makes possible a less rigid approach compared to geo-political nationalism and regionalism. However, it risks obscuring the non-conformities among and within different Sinitic languages, communities and cinemas. After her coinage of Sinophone, Shu-mei Shih gradually makes clear that Sinophone studies is about Sinitic cultures and communities 'on the margins of China and Chineseness'^[14] and 'on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions,'^[15] such as trans-Sinitic queer cultures vis-à-vis heteronationalist state propaganda. Sinophone studies is hence read by Ari Heinrich as 'an inherently queer project' that, not unlike queer theory, prioritises the marginalised and questions essentialism.^[16]
12. The conceptual connections between Sinophone studies and queer studies enable a new framework described by Howard Chiang and Andrea Bachner as 'queer Sinophonicity.'^[17] First, both 'queer' and 'Sinophone' draw our attention to the fluidity, diversity and complexity of sexualities and cultures that are not confined by essentialist views of sexuality and culture. I agree with Bachner that queer theory and Sinophone studies both have conceptual flexibility to scrutinise unstable and ever-changing sexual cultures as 'processes of becoming' rather than 'states of being.'^[18] Second, queer Sinophonicity is a more nuanced negotiation of the territorial-conceptual locations and dislocations of queer Asia and queer regionalism, inasmuch as it is based on linguistic-historical (rather than geo-positional and geo-political) understandings of cultures and sexualities. Third, the imbrication of queer studies with Sinophone studies appropriate both marginalised sexualities and marginalised cultures facing the heteronormative productions of China-centrism—hence a 'minor-to-minor alliance,' to borrow Shih's words.^[19]
13. However, queer Sinophonicity requires refinement because the position of China in queer

Sinophonicity is still under debate. Acknowledging the increasingly tightened relationship between China and other Sinitic societies, for example, Chiang still treats China as an antithesis to Sinophone.^[20] But Sheldon Lu^[21] and Audrey Yue^[22] both suggest synthesising China into the Sinophone framework to better analyse the trans-Sinitic flows of visual contents and screen cultures. So long as marginality is at issue, I propose to include China's marginalised subcultures (such as queer screen cultures) into the Sinophone sphere, since Sinophonicity lies on the margins of the hegemonic production of the official nation-state culture. In addition, China is also the beneficiary of (queer) cultures from other Sinitic societies,^[23] as discussed below in relation to Ti's film. More important, there is little point debating China's position in the Sinophone atlas if we simply treat China as a monolithic entity, since in so doing we are trapped in the essentialism and geo-political nationalism that Sinophone aims to transcend in the first place.^[24]

14. Sinophonicity might be better termed as plural: Sinophonicities. The singular form connotes a single point of arrival for various Sinitic languages and societies, both at the global level and inside any given Sinitic location. Such epistemological empowerment, romantic as it is, may blur and flatten the linguistic, cultural and sexual complexities and non-conformities between and within each and every Sinitic area. Queer Sinophonicities can better address the ever-changing and intersectional landscapes of queer (visual) practices, further embrace the instabilities and contradictions embedded in queer theories and Sinophone studies and offer more conceptual flexibility through which to scrutinise Sinitic cultures and societies on their marginalised common ground as well as in their different dislocations and displacements of Chinese-ness.
15. Finally, queer Sinophonicities are deeply intertwined with colonialism—both the colonised histories of Sinitic societies (China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, etc.) and Sinophone's post-colonial connections with other 'phone' spheres such as Francophone.^[25] In addition, when Shih sees queer Sinophonicity as 'a different genealogy that challenges Chinese studies (with its China-centrism) and queer studies (with its Western-centrism)',^[26] such marginalised methodological positioning itself demonstrates the often uneven flows of queer cultures and scholarships between the origin of queer theory and Sinitic-language areas, and between Mainland China and other Sinitic communities. A minor-to-minor alliance of queer studies and Sinophone studies does not necessarily guarantee a stronger methodology, although such conjunctive method has demonstrated great potential in researching marginalised cultures. In what follows, I read Ti's film production, distribution, and reception in China and Malaysia through the lens of queer Sinophonicities, while further problematising this concept and discussing its theoretical shortcomings.

Malaysian cinemas: A very brief history

16. To better understand Ti's visual offerings in a Sinophone Malaysian context, I would like to map a brief history of Malaysian cinemas. Mainstream cinema first emerged in 1930s' colonial British Malaya—consisting of today's Malaysia and Singapore. Through to the 1980s, Malaysian cinema remained a form of popular entertainment, while the key players in the film industry were often Chinese, Indian, Philippine and European.^[27] The New Wave arrived at the dawn of the 1980s which foreshadowed the turn of Malaysian cinema towards more realistic styles with a foci on political, religious and other serious social issues.^[28] The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed the emergence of a new cinematic movement in Malaysia termed by Hassan Abd Muthalib as Second Wave Alternative Film, characterised by digital filmmaking and the films' reflection of—for the first time in the local film history—the ethnic and cultural diversities of the country. These new films are categorised by Yuen-Beng Lee as Malaysian Digital Indies (MDI).^[29] MDI films are often independently produced and distributed to bypass government regulations and conventions—and criticise those polices—and self-funded and/or transnationally-funded because of a lack of local

(state) funding.^[30] This context is acknowledged in the following analysis of Ti's film and queer Malaysian Sinophonicities.

Making film/making sense of nationhood in the Sinophone Malaysia^[31]

17. Born in Kuala Lumpur, Ti has a degree from a journalism and communication college in Malaysia, and has recently completed his study of film production in China. The work that has brought him to attention is *Exchange 2012*, a two-part short drama film that blends the director's autobiography of a young gay man falling in love with his straight friend and the fantasy of heterosexuals becoming minorities on the alleged Mayan eschatological day. *Exchange 2012* won a short film award at an international art festival, and inaugurated Ti's queer film voyage in Malaysia and China. He has since directed more than a dozen short drama films and music videos, short documentaries, docudramas, and advertisements, many of which are queer-related. Most of these were produced in Malaysia and a few in China (Figure 1).

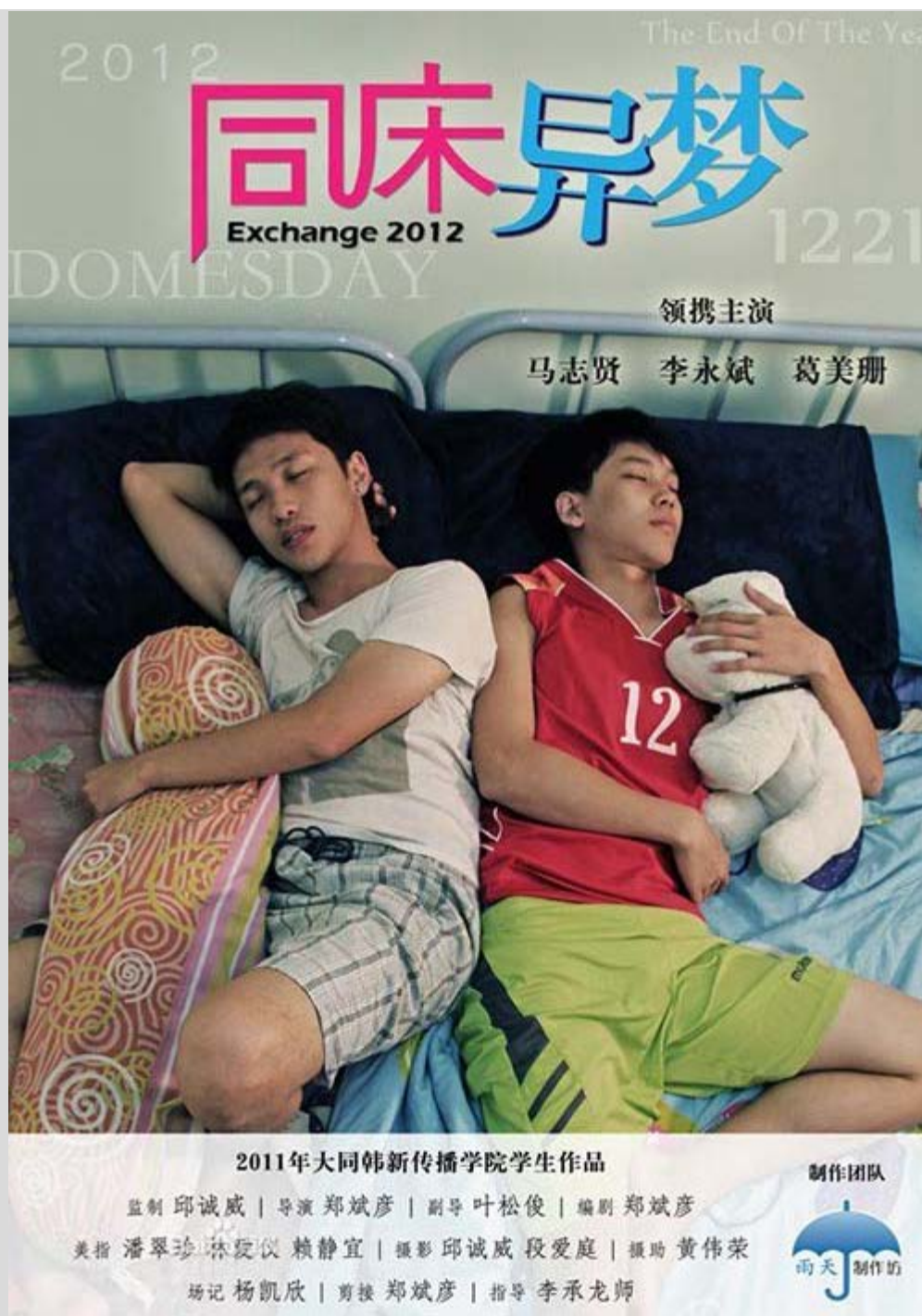


Figure 1. *Exchange 2012*. Courtesy of the filmmaker

18. Though a Chinese descendant, Ti first and foremost self-identifies as a Malaysian filmmaker. His autobiographical introduction on Feizan begins with 'I am Bing-Yen Ti, Malaysian.'^[32] And when I approached him for an interview through WeChat (Weixin), a mobile Instant Message (IM) smartphone application, his personal profile concisely and conspicuously states 'Malaysian' alongside his name. This practice avoids potential confusion about his nationality due to his Chinese name and Mandarin-proficiency. A strong sense of national belonging also runs through his works. By this I mean not only are most of his drama films set in Malaysia and stage local (queer) people but also some of his works require local knowledge to understand.
19. *Pray for Beng Hock*, for instance, is based on the tragic and suspicious 'suicide' of Malaysian journalist and councilman-aide Teoh Beng Hock/Zhao Mingfu.^[33] With the release of the film on YouTube, Ti calls for further investigation into the incident. Ti's 2014 short film *Young Man* is

produced in memory of the late Malay film and advert director Yasmin Ahmad.[34] These productions are not explicitly queer-themed, but strongly echo Ti's firm stand as a Malaysian filmmaker who is willing to tell the stories of Malaysia. Ti's educational background, choice of film themes, and clear sense of nationhood remind me of Lee's observation that recent MDI filmmakers are often urban-born, well-educated from overseas, digi- and cine-literate, and unafraid of spotlighting minorities and the marginalised, expressing their discontent about the lack of social and sexual equity, and criticising dominant political and heteronormative discourses.[35] Ti apparently shares with other non-Malay digital-generation filmmakers the same longing for the nation to claim their positions as genuine and socially responsible Malaysians, as they have often been pushed to the margins by state policies and Islamic policy in Malaysia.[36]

20. Since independence in 1957 and the establishment of the state religion Islam in 1963, Malaysia has witnessed a gradual revival of Islamic doctrine, ethics and sex-related values.[37] Non-normative genders and sexualities have been socially, legally, and religiously oppressed, alienated, and silenced by an increasingly heightened Islamisation.[38] The religious situation in Sinophone Malaysia is more complicated. The latest census in Malaysia has confirmed the popularity of Buddhism and Taoism, in lieu of Islam, among its Chinese population.[39] But even though most Chinese-Malaysians are not bound by Islamic law, they are still subject to a secular law that punishes homosexual conducts.[40] Although the non-Islamic Sinophone cultures in Malaysia have carved a relatively less restricted area for visual explorations of sexualities, as seen in Ti's case, queer film is still confined by Malaysia's religious, legal and political constraints.
21. In addition, the state's economic, cultural and religious polices established since the Sino-Malay sectarian strife in 1969 have been marginalising ethnic minorities and prioritising *bumiputera*—literally 'sons of the soil,' a political term that privileges Malays and other 'indigenous' Malaysians over ethnic minorities such as Chinese- and Indian-Malaysians.[41] A former British colony where 30 per cent of the current population is ethnically Chinese and Indian,[42] Malaysia's hybrid ontology marks its plight in defining a monolithic Malaysian national identity. Ti's self-reflexive portrayal of and strong sense of nationhood is an identification with Chinese-Malaysian or a multi-cultural Malaysian identity, characterised at least by immigrant Chinese and modern Malaysian enculturation, multi-linguistic affiliations, and Islamic and non-Islamic religious influences. For over a century Chinese migrants and descendants in Malaysia have been struggling against the double pressure, or the 'dual domination,'[43] of Malaysia's state racism and Chinese cultural essentialism, and of the local nation's refusal and the increased pressure from China's rise regionally and globally.[44] Queer Chinese-Malaysian people, in addition, are further marginalised by heteronationalist gender and sexual hierarchies, stigmatised by the state religion, and alienated by both Chinese and Malaysian heteronormative social and familial values.
22. This is why we need queer Sinophonicities to address such Sinitic cultures and sexualities born on the margins of the hegemonic state productions of heteronormative and heteronationalist cultures. As a non-Malay Malaysian filmmaker and a non-Chinese Chinese-descendant, Ti speaks through his Sinitic-language queer films against both sides of the dual domination: the *bumiputera* heteronormativity in Malaysia, and the China-centrism that neglects Sinitic cinemas outside China. The enthusiastic reception of Ti's film in China further demonstrates that a young filmmaker from a peripheral and marginal overseas Sinophone community is fully capable of making his voice heard in the Mainland against China's heteronationalist cultural essentialism. Such queer Sinophonicities challenge the imagined monolithic identitarian nationhoods as well as the seemingly stable and standardised heterosexual ideal (in China and Malaysia alike), and free Ti and his films from the MDI framework that questions the *bumiputera* privilege but is still obsessed with a monological Malaysian nationalism.

Film and social media: Queer Sinophonic conjunctions and disjunctions

23. The articulation of queer Sinophonicities includes the unique linguistic attributes found in Ti's example. Sinophone Malaysians often have trilingual literacy in Malaysian (the official language), English (a post-colonial residue), and Chinese (a post-diasporic legacy). But here 'Chinese' as a lingual category encompasses a large number of different dialects spoken by Sinitic populations across the globe. In Ti's case, he speaks fluent Mandarin along with basic Cantonese and Hokkien, two major Sinitic dialects popular in the (imagined) Sinophone sphere.^[45] The romanisation of his surname ('Ti') is actually based on the Hokkien pronunciation,^[46] while in China his surname is spelled and pronounced in Mandarin as 'Zheng'. People in China's queer film circle have thus only heard about Binyan Zheng, but not the Hokkien name Bing-yen Ti, which shows the first clue to a Sinophonic/linguistic disjuncture in the border-crossing migration and queer cultural flows.
24. The de facto language used in most of Ti's films, however, is actually Malaysian-Mandarin which is characterised by its unique accent and lexicon that are moderately different from Standard Mandarin (Putonghua), the official language spoken in today's China. Thus film viewers in China, myself included, sometimes need subtitles to fully understand the dialogue in Ti's work. But in most cases Sinitic-linguistic commonality serves well as a lingua franca between speakers of differently accented Mandarins, and enables audiences in Sinophone Malaysia, China, Taiwan and potentially other Sinitic societies to enjoy his films. Ti's multilingual proficiency and the wide circulation of his film in Sinitic-language areas have demonstrated that the imagined Sinophone sphere itself is full of linguistic contradictions and displacements, both at the global (trans-Sinitic) level and the local Sinophone Malaysian (intra-Sinitic) level, although the common linguistic root is often able to bridge different Sinophone cultures—a point to which I will return shortly.
25. If we take a closer look at the distribution and circulation of Ti's films, he stands out as the fresh YouTube-generation and social-media-generation when compared to the MDI cinematic veterans discussed in Yuen-Beng Lee's research. Ti's films are distributed on YouTube and promoted through Facebook, the most popular social media in Malaysia. Since both YouTube and Facebook are blocked in China, he has switched to alternative distribution channels, and uploaded some of his works to Chinese mainstream video-sharing websites and promoted these films on Feizan, the aforementioned queer Chinese social-networking service. It is quite interesting in this case to think about the role of social media in the circulation of queer Sinophone screen cultures. On the one hand, even when I was temporarily staying in China, broadband Internet connection and queer social media still enabled me to get access to Sinitic-Malaysian short films online. On the other, the utopian 'free' Internet is fragmented by the increasingly intensified censorship in such countries as China and Malaysia.
26. In China, blocking YouTube and Facebook offers an opportunity for local online social media to grow, but inevitably creates self-confined and isolated cyber islands in the global and trans-Sinitic flows of information. If Ti did not upload his films to video-sharing websites in China and promote his work via Chinese queer social media, I might not have had the chance to watch his films and learn about his story—of course people with more advanced tech-knowledge could digitally bypass Internet censorship and geo-blocking, but in such case the connection speed is not guaranteed and online video-streaming could be unbearably slow. In Malaysia, on the other hand, Ti has to rely on Facebook and YouTube to share his works in his hometown where these online platforms are censored but accessible; to his knowledge and to mine, queer social media like Feizan is still nowhere to be found in today's Malaysia.
27. Ti's work, through this line of thought, offers an invaluable opportunity to further examine queer Sinophonicities through the trans-Sinitic circulation and reception of queer visual content. The linguistic-based Sinophone concept, to begin with, is further complicated by the reception of Ti's

queer films in different Sinitic societies. On YouTube, his films have received comments written in simplified-Chinese (used in today's China, Singapore and Malaysia), traditional-Chinese (used in Hong Kong and Taiwan and popular in overseas Sinophone communities), and English. The websites in China, however, appear to attract only local users commenting in simplified-Chinese characters. Moreover, on Feizan and the prestigious mass-review website Douban,[47] lots of comments from local film audiences focus on the characters' Malaysian-Mandarin accent, while such an attribute has seldom been mentioned by the viewers on YouTube.

28. In other words, Chinese film viewers (including me) are usually unfamiliar with other accented Sinitic-languages. This linguistic version of China-centrism appears to be worsened by the cyber-isolationism forced by the Chinese authorities, and serves as a strong contrast to YouTube viewers' diverse linguistic background and Ti's own multilingual proficiency. This reminds us why we need the Sinophone framework in order to challenge monolingual hegemony, when Sinitic cultures and cinemas outside China have often been doubly marginalised by their own states and by China's self-centred cultural essentialism. On the other hand, the trans-Sinitic circulation of Ti's work and the different reception on YouTube and in Chinese cyberspace further problematises the very idea of Sinophone. While Francophone refers to French-speakers and Anglophone to English, to which Chinese languages does the 'Sino' in Sinophone refer:[48] 'standard' and accented Mandarins, Hokkien, Cantonese or other Chinese dialects?
29. An interview I conducted with Ti completed in English and Mandarin presented further issues. The translation and understanding (as well as plausible mistranslation and misunderstanding) between Ti and I reveal an even more deep-rooted linguistic dilemma in a research like this—regardless of which languages Ti has adopted for his films and I have chosen for my interview. Every finding of this study and every piece of information under scrutiny have to be presented in English if I am to publish this research in 'international academia.' The very concept of Sinophone was first coined and developed in English, not in any Sinitic-language that Sinophone as a category potentially encompasses; Sinophonicities, in addition, are hitherto mainly discussed through the medium of English, which does not solve any problems of 'English-language hegemony', to once again borrow Wilson's words.

Filming/framing queer Malaysia sinophonicities

30. Ti's films have great potential in raising the social visibility of queer people in Malaysia, and, in some cases, changing people's attitudes toward homosexuality. The bittersweet *Exchange 2012* has made some of Ti's friends in Malaysia realise that same-sex attraction exists in their daily social circles, although gay people are often closeted. When he began to make this film, which later became his most widely-circulated work, his producer was reluctant to cooperate due to its homosexual theme. However, the production of *Exchange 2012* changed his producer's attitude and together they made this production into a two-part series.[49] The plotline of *Exchange 2012* also sparks a few interesting points around the theme of exchange: on the alleged Mayan eschatological day (that is 21 December 2012), heterosexuals mysteriously become attracted to the same-sex, while homosexuals become heterosexuals. This is not only an exchange of sexual preference, but also a swap of dominance in the sexual hierarchy when the mass population turn into gay and the former queers become straight. The tricky part is people are unaware that such an exchange has happened and take for granted the newly established sexual order without any suspicion.
31. As the writer-director of the film, Ti has also added another twist to the storyline: people who were born on 21 December will not be changed. The two male protagonists thus retain their respective homo and heterosexuality. Then the drama begins—the heterosexual man who was previously 'normal' has suddenly become a sexual deviant in the new sexual order, while his best friend and

long-time secret lover has finally become part of the sexual majority. The deep-buried private feeling between the two then unravels and reaches the climax during a fight between them in an open-air basketball court. This scene is mainly shot with hand-held camera, through which we can feel the tensions and confrontations. Only when one character begins to confide his deep-buried homosexuality does the camerawork return to steady—the self-revelation and articulation of one's sexuality seems to be a huge relief and the camera cools down to visually find its 'inner peace' and to give audiences a few moments to breathe steadily.

32. This is, however, not simply a standard coming-out scene. When the sexual hierarchy between homo and heterosexuals has been reversed, who is coming out in this scene—the gay man or the straight man? Who is the minority, and who is the marginalised? They have both been left over by the exchange when other people have unknowingly changed their sexual preferences. What has been exchanged in this scene between the two characters is their previously and currently marginalised and alienated sexualities under the dominant normalising sexual hierarchies—no matter whether it is heteronormativity or homonormativity—when they are both left out by the new sexual order. This intense scene of confrontation intercuts between the characters, the cloudy and thundering sky, and the flashbacks of their memories before the exchange, where the boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual, the normal and the abnormal, the confrontational and the non-confrontational, the past and the present, and the real and the fictional have been frequently transgressed (Figure 2).

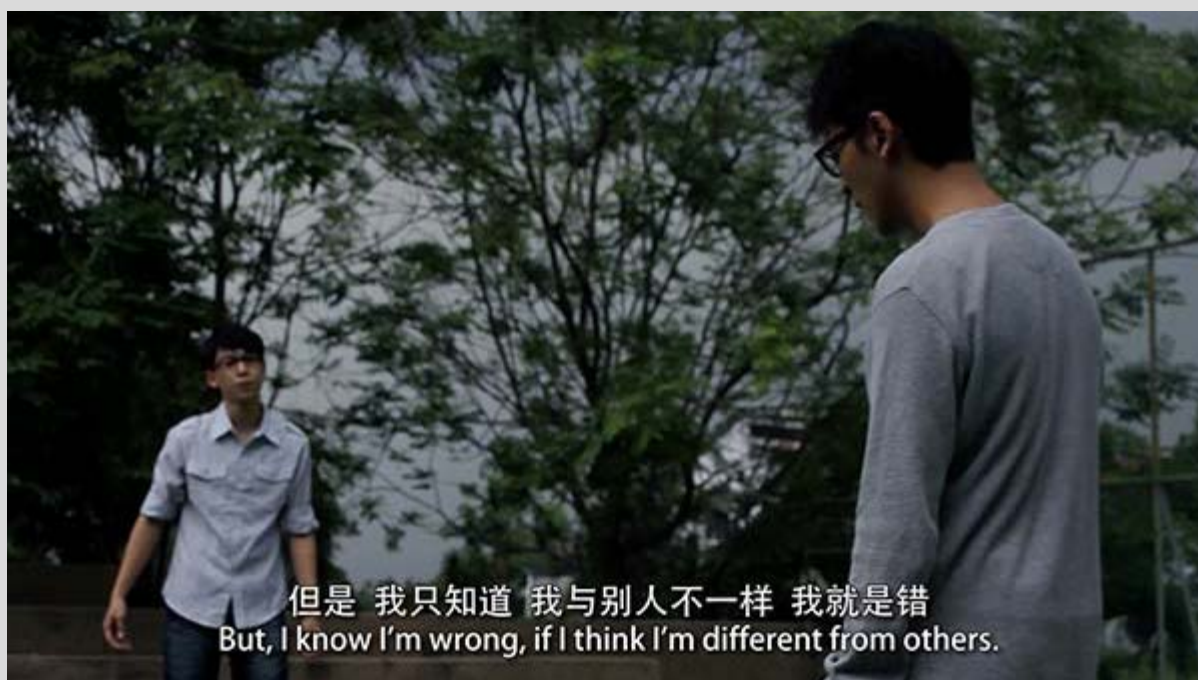


Figure 2. The mutual revelation in *Exchange* 2012. Courtesy of the filmmaker

33. Such blurred boundaries between queer and non-queer, and heteronormative and non-heteronormative also run through Ti's subsequent films. *Same Love*, shot in China, depicts a woman catching her husband cheating on her with a man, only to reveal that she is a closeted lesbian. *Valentine's Package*, made in Malaysia, is a comedy about the misunderstandings of people's sexual orientation, where heterosexual couples turn out to be queer and a gay couple turns out to be straight. The unstable borders between different sexualities remind us about the equally unstable and fluid queer Sinophonicities when queer studies and Sinophone studies both depart from fixity and essentialism. Ti's films, across real and imagined linguistic, geographical and sexual borders, have become a site of queer Sinophone negotiation between Chinese-ness and

the influence of 'western' constructs of gayness.

34. More specifically, Ti's films highlight the tensions and contradictions between queer Malaysian Sinophonicities and the global gayness/queerness disseminated into Sinitic areas in the name of sexual modernities. [50] While as a researcher and a queer theorist I describe his work as 'queer film,' Ti clearly identifies himself more with the Sinitic same-sex identity of *tongzhi*—literally 'comrade,' a Chinese slang for same-sex attraction popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and other Sinitic societies since the 1990s. [51] Ti uses 'gay film' more often in Malaysia for film promotion, but has switched to '*tongzhi* film' in China. During my interview, *tongzhi* was also the term that he adopted in response to my questions:

Tongzhi in Malaysia are quite inferior and humble, and usually dare not reveal their true sexual orientation to others and to the public. Because I am a tongzhi, I know how hard it can be. And hence I think making tongzhi short film is significant; these films could help tongzhi walk through the darkness ... I believe I have the obligation and responsibility to make tongzhi short film, not only to satisfy the need of tongzhi, but to speak for those who dare not come out of the closet, and to make people understand who we are, what we think, and what kind of difficulties we face [my translation]. [52]

35. But the term most frequently appears in his films is actually *tongxinglian*, a direct Chinese translation of homosexual, [53] as seen in *Same Love* and *Valentine's Package*, while in *Exchange 2012* *gay/tongzhi/homosexual* are used interchangeably. Same-sex sexual identity is a many-headed hydra, and the global flows of queer sexualities and images have further disseminated western-style sexual politics such as 'gayness' and 'coming out' into the (imagined) Sinophone sphere, which has in turn provoked the local awareness to reproduce non-western identity categories such as *tongzhi*. In this context, on the one hand, Ti has the cultural sensitivity to apply different terms to different contexts, and his self-reflexive *tongzhi* identity also demonstrates his Sinitic cultural affiliation alongside his sense of national belonging with Malaysia. On the other, the interchanged use of *gay*, *tongzhi*, *homosexual*, and *tongxinglian* has itself testified against the effectiveness of sexual identity categories in queer Sinophone cultures, in the sense that none of these labels could singlehandedly voice the unique socio-cultural, ethnic, historical, political, familial, religious and sexual issues facing Chinese-Malaysian same-sex attracted people, or adequately catch the diversity and fluidity of sexualities and queer Sinophonicities.

Final remarks: Toward more fluid queer theories and practices

36. When borders of local and non-local, local and regional, and regional and global have been crossed and transgressed, and senses of ethnic and national belongings, cultural and linguistic affiliations, and sexual identifications intertwine and intersect, what we need now—when queer theory goes through its third decade—is an even more fluid and flexible way to think and rethink intersectional queer subjects and subjectivities, theories and practices, and visual and screen cultures. What awaits future queer theorists and practitioners should and would be a transformative queer understanding beyond the real and imagined boundaries of geo-location, nation-state, ethnicity, language, religion, gender and sexuality. Such queer understanding will build on but eventually transcend the local/non-local, regional/global, East/West, and national/transnational frameworks that pinpoint diversified sexualities and modernities in dyadic ways. And this is perhaps what queer theory may add to its intellectual arsenal when we would more often than not encounter such practices as Ti's 'border-crossing' filmmaking in the ever-changing landscape of everyday queer (Sinophone) experience and queer film production, circulation and consumption.
37. Ti's filmic voyage itself is an interesting and thought-provoking case, especially when we muse about how his visual practices shed light upon current queer cultures and Sinophone cultures. Concluding my analysis, I would like to give the stage back to Ti: after winning an award in an art festival, he made a docudrama based on the real-life story of the making and public-screening of

his short film *Exchange 2012*.^[54] In this docudrama he plays a minor role (a journalist), whereas the character based on him is played by another actor. In addition, he is the director of both this docudrama and the film *mise-en-abîme*. The borders between fictional/non-fictional and narrator/narrated have been further blurred, through which a queer-ness emerges—not unlike today's border-crossing queer Sinophonicities, if such borders ever exist.

Notes

[1] [Bingyen Ti](#), 'Singing out my inner self: The theme song of *Exchange 2012*—Way to Love' (《同床异梦》主题曲—相爱方式 唱出我的心声), online: <http://www.feizan.com/space-182513-do-blog-id-86013.html> (accessed 8 March 2013).

[2] [James Welker and Lucetta Kam](#), 'Introduction of queer import(s): Sexualities, genders and rights in Asia,' *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* no. 14 (2006), online: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/introduction.htm> (accessed 15 October 2014).

[3] Evelyn Blackwood and Mark Johnson, 'Queer Asian subjects: Transgressive sexualities and heteronormative meanings,' *Asian Studies Review* vol. 36, no. 4 (2012): 441–51, p. 442.

[4] [Ara Wilson](#), 'Queering Asia,' *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* no. 14 (2006): para. 2, online: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html> (accessed 9 March 2013).

[5] Megan Sinnott, 'Borders, diaspora, and regional connections: Trends in Asian "Queer" Studies,' *The Journal of Asian Studies* no. 69 (2010): 17–31, p. 20.

[6] Wilson, 'Queering Asia,' paragraphs 6–7.

[7] Wilson, 'Queering Asia,' paragraphs 6–7.

[8] See Blackwood and Johnson, 'Queer Asian subjects'; Howard Chiang, '(De)Provincializing China: Queer historicism and Sinophone postcolonial critique,' in *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, ed. Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich, London and New York: Routledge, 2014: pp. 19–51; Helen Hok-Sze Leung, 'Archiving queer feelings in Hong Kong,' *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* vol. 8, no. 4 (2007): 559–71; Petrus Liu and Lisa Rofel, 'Beyond the strai(gh)ts: Transnationalism and queer Chinese politics,' *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* vol. 18, no. 2 (2010): 283–88; Fran Martin, 'Getting over it: Thinking beyond the hetero(genizing)/homo(genizing) divide in transnational Sexuality Studies,' *English Language Notes* vol. 49, no. 1 (2011): 117–24; Michael G. Peletz, 'Gender, sexuality, and the state in Southeast Asia,' *The Journal of Asian Studies* no. 71 (2012): 895–917; Lisa Rofel, 'Queer positions, queering Asian Studies,' *Positions: Asia Critique* vol. 20, no. 1 (2012): 183–93; Sinnott, 'Borders, diaspora, and regional connections.'

[9] These forces are 'mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another' and thereby proclaim 'the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular.' See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 43.

[10] See Shu-mei Shih for her coinage and development of this notion: 'Global literature and the technologies of recognition,' *PMLA* vol. 119, no. 1 (2004): 16–30; *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007; 'Against diaspora: The Sinophone as places of cultural production,' in *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang, Leiden: Brill Press, 2010, pp. 29–48; 'Theory, Asia and the Sinophone,' *Postcolonial Studies* vol. 13 no. 4 (2010): 465–84; 'The concept of the Sinophone,' *PMLA* vol. 126, no. 3 (2011): 709–18; 'On the conjunctive method,' in *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, ed. Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich, London and New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 223–25.

[11] [Sheldon H. Lu](#), 'Review of *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) by Shu-mei Shih,' in *MCLC Resource Center Publication*, 2008, online: <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/visuality-and-identity/> (accessed 28 August 2015); Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, 'Wenyi and the branding of early Chinese film,' *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* vol. 6, no. 4 (2012): 65–94.

[12] Appadurai, *Modernity At Large*, p. 40.

- [13] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (revised edition), New York, Verso, [1983] 2006, pp. 6–7. See also Michael Walsh, 'National cinema, national imaginary,' *Film History* vol. 8, no. 1 (1996): 5–17, p. 6.
- [14] Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, p. 4; 'Against diaspora,' p. 29.
- [15] Shih, 'The concept of the Sinophone,' p. 710.
- [16] Ari Larissa Heinrich, "'A volatile alliance": Queer Sinophone synergies across literature, film, and culture,' in *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, ed. Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich, London and New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 3–16.
- [17] Chiang, '(De)Provincializing China,' pp. 19–24; Andrea Bachner, 'Queer affiliations: Mak Yan Yan's *Butterfly* as Sinophone romance,' in *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, ed. Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich, London & New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 201–20.
- [18] Bachner, 'Queer affiliations,' p. 202.
- [19] Shih, 'On the conjunctive method,' p. 223.
- [20] Chiang, '(De)Provincializing China,' p. 37.
- [21] [Sheldon H. Lu](#), 'Dialect and modernity in 21st-century Sinophone cinema,' *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 49, 2007, online: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/Lu/> (accessed 15 August 2015); Review of *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific*; 'Notes on four major paradigms in Chinese-language film studies,' *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* vol. 6, no. 4 (2012): 15–25.
- [22] Audrey Yue, 'Mobile intimacies in the Queer Sinophone films of Cui Zi'en,' *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* vol. 6, no.1 (2012): 95–108, p. 105.
- [23] Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, 'From diasporic cinemas to Sinophone cinemas: An introduction,' in *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol. 6, no.1 (2012): 9–13.
- [24] For more discussions on China's (dis)placement in the Sinophone sphere, see John Wei, 'Beyond gayness and Chineseness: Queer Sinophone screen cultures in the early twenty-first century,' unpublished manuscript.
- [25] Lu, 'Notes on four major paradigms,' pp. 15–25; Yeh, '*Wenyi* and the branding of early Chinese film,' p. 77. In this case, China is also deemed as a coloniser over other Chinese migrant societies.
- [26] Shih, 'On the conjunctive method,' p. 223.
- [27] [Hassan Abd Muthalib](#), 'The little cinema of Malaysia: Out with the old, In with the new,' *KINEMA: A Journal of Film and Audiovisual Media*, Spring (2007), online: <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=31> (accessed 13 March 2013); Yuen-Beng Lee, 'The Malaysian digital Indies: New forms, aesthetics, and genres in post-2000 Malaysian cinema,' Ph.D. thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2012.
- [28] Muthalib, 'The little cinema of Malaysia'; Lee, 'Malaysian digital Indies.'
- [29] Lee, 'Malaysian digital Indies.'
- [30] Lee, 'Malaysian digital Indies.'
- [31] After our initial encounter on Feizan and brief correspondence on this Chinese queer social-networking platform in early 2013, Bing-Yen Ti agreed to be interviewed when I approached him again in mid-year. The actual interview was carried out in late 2013 after the ethics clearance was granted. Additional correspondence continued into early 2014 with a few follow-up questions. All his accounts are treated as contested materials highly contingent on the socio-cultural, geo-political, post-colonial, religious, ethnic, linguistic, economic and technological contexts which this paper addresses later in greater detail. Some of Ti's accounts discussed below (e.g. his empirical observation of religions in Malaysian) have also been cross-checked against other sources for validity.

[32] [Bingyen Ti](#), 'Director's notes on the Malaysian *Tongzhi* micro film *Exchange 2012*' (马来西亚同志微电影《同床异梦》导演手记), online: <http://www.feizan.com/space-182513-do-blog-id-85422.html> (accessed 4 March 2013).

[33] [Bing-Yen Ti](#), *Pray for Beng Hock*, online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FI9Xl14rnjA> (accessed 5 March 2013).

[34] [Bing-Yen Ti](#), *Young Man*, online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZC-Qp41bNxo> (accessed 5 March 2013). Yasmin Ahmad's own films and her alleged transgender/transsexual/intersex past have been read by researchers through the lens of queer Malaysian Sinophonicities against the *bumiputera* privilege, and against the imagined (heteronormative) racial harmony. See Wai Siam Hee and Ari Larissa Heinrich, 'Desire against the Grain: Transgender consciousness and Sinophonicity in the films of Yasmin Ahmad,' in *Queer Sinophone Cultures*, ed. Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich, London and New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 179–200.

[35] See Lee, 'Malaysian digital Indies.'

[36] See Lee, 'Malaysian digital Indies.'

[37] Yik Koon Teh, 'Politics and Islam: Factors determining identity and the status of male-to-female transsexuals in Malaysia,' in *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities*, ed. Fran Martin, Peter Jackson, Mark McLelland, and Audrey Yue, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008, pp. 85–98.

[38] Baden Offord, 'Queer activist intersections in Southeast Asia: Human rights and cultural studies,' *Asian Studies Review* vol. 37, no. 3 (2013): 335–49. See also Audrey Yue, 'Queer Asian mobility and homonational modernity: Marriage equality, Indian students in Australia and Malaysian transgender refugees in the media,' *Global Media and Communication* vol. 8, no. 3 (2012): 269–87; Julian C.H. Lee, *Policing Sexuality: Sex, Society and the State*, London: Zed Books, 2007, pp. 97–108; Ismail Baba, 'Gay and lesbian couples in Malaysia,' in *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, ed. Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 143–63; Walter Williams, 'Strategies for challenging homophobia in Islamic Malaysia and secular China,' *Nebula*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2009): 1–20.

[39] See Department of Statistics Malaysia, *Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics*, 2011, online: <http://www.statistics.gov.my/> (accessed 28 June 2011).

[40] See Williams, 'Strategies for challenging homophobia,' pp. 6–7.

[41] For more discussion on *bumiputera* and the dominance of Malays in the social hierarchy in relation to film and sexuality, see Lee, 'Malaysian digital Indies'; Gaik Cheng Khoo, 'Recuperating Malay custom/*Adat* in female sexuality in Malaysian films,' in *Asian Media Studies: Politics of Subjectivities*, ed. John Nguyet Erni and Siew Keng Chua, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 207–24; Gaik Cheng Khoo, *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*, Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2006. For the marginalised situation facing queer Chinese-Malaysians, see Olivia Khoo, 'Sexing the city: Malaysia's new cyberlaws and cyberjaya's queer success,' in *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, ed. Chris Berry, Fran Martin and Audrey Yue, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 222–44.

[42] According to the latest census conducted in 2010 Malaysia, Malays account for 60.3% of the total population with 22.9% Chinese and 7.1% Indians—at its peak Chinese used to make up 45% of the population in the late 1950s, but while they have multiplied in absolute numbers, the ratio they account for has been dropped significantly during the second half of the twentieth century. See Zarinah Mahari, 'Demographic transition in Malaysia,' paper presented at the 15th Conference of Commonwealth Statisticians, New Delhi, India, 7–0 February 2011.

[43] Ling-chi Wang, 'The structure of dual domination: Toward a paradigm for the study of the Chinese diaspora in the United States,' in *The Chinese Overseas*, ed. Hong Liu, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 279–96.

[44] See Shih, 'The concept of Sinophone,' p. 714; 'Against diaspora,' p. 48.

[45] See Daniel Kane, *The Chinese Language: Its History and Current Usage*, North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2006, pp. 94–98.

[46] This analysis was confirmed by Bing-Yen Ti in the follow-up interview.

[47] [Feizan contributors](#), 'Comments on Director's notes on the Malaysian *Tongzhi* micro film *Exchange 2012*,' online:

<http://www.feizan.com/space-182513-do-blog-id-85422.html>; [Douban contributors](#), 'Comments on Exchange 2012,' online: <http://movie.douban.com/subject/20266556/comments> (both accessed 5 March 2013).

[48] Chua Beng Huat, *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, p. 35.

[49] [Exchange 2012 \(Part I\)](#), online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OcGF8xNNRo; [Exchange 2012 \(Part II\)](#), online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LY615JjLBMs> (both accessed 5 March 2013).

[50] For the theoretical framing of 'global gayness,' see Dennis Altman, 'Rupture or continuity? The Internationalization of gay identities,' *Social Text* vol. 48 (1996): 77–91; 'Global gaze/global gays,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* vol. 3 (1997): 417–36; *Global Sex*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

[51] For a comprehensive discussion of the socio-cultural politics of *tongzhi*, see Chou Wah-shan, *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies*, New York: Haworth Press, 2000. For the criticism of Chou's argument, see for example Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei, 'Reticent poetics, queer politics,' in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2005): 30–55. For a more recent recount of *tongzhi* and other queer identities in relation to Sinophone film cultures, see John Wei, 'East palace west closet: Representing the Chinese same-sex tradition and same-sex identities in contemporary Chinese-language cinema,' M.A. Dissertation, University of Auckland, 2012; 'Beyond gayness and Chineseness.'

[52] Interview with Desmond Bing-Yen Ti.

[53] *Tongxinglian* literally means 'same-sex love.' It is a direct translation of 'homosexual' when western sexology and sex-related social norms were imported into China in the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century; this word shares the same pathological connotation as 'homosexual' in a Chinese context. See Wei, 'East palace, west closet,' and 'Beyond gayness and Chineseness' for more discussions.

[54] [Exchange 2012: Behind the Screen](#), (docudrama), online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oS1VaxQhorw&src> (accessed 15 October 2014).

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