尋找臺灣當代酷兒電影中《梁山伯與祝英台》及「凌波熱」論述之遺緒*

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摘要

本論文從酷兒歷史的角度出發，意圖重新檢驗 1963 年邵氏出品的經典作品《梁山伯與祝英台》以及台灣「凌波熱」現象的文化意義。本文指出，「反串」顛覆了電影裝置的凝視機制，而在與凌波的明星論述形成交互參照後，使凌波成為「女性陰態陽剛」（female feminine masculinity）形象的代表，同時也開啓對其時凌波與粉絲間具有高度情感張力的互動的重新詮釋，從酷兒角度重返歷史，發掘當年論述中藏伏著女性同性愛欲的潛文本。而在台灣當代酷兒電影《我的美麗與哀愁》（陳國富，1995）及《飛躍情海》（王毓雅，2003）中，包括反（反）串、女性唱音，女性欲望之「女性陰態陽剛」等諸多衍身自《梁山伯與祝英台》及「凌波熱」現象的元素，都被吸納、轉化為敘事母題或譬喻，折射出女性同性愛欲再現中《梁山伯與祝英台》與「凌波熱」現象的遺緒。由此，本文嘗試建立起台灣當代酷兒電影與《梁山伯與祝英台》及「凌波熱」現象之間的系譜關係，希望藉此豐富「再現女性同性愛欲」在台灣文化語境的討論。

關鍵字：凌波，女性陰態陽剛，女性同性愛欲，母性想像，《梁山伯與祝英台》、《我的美麗與哀愁》、《飛躍情海》
Eternal Love for *Love Eterne*: The Discourse and Legacy of *Love Eterne* and the Lingbo Frenzy in Contemporary Queer Films in Taiwan

Chun-Chi Wang

In a brief chronological history of the human rights movement of *tongzhi* compiled by the renowned gay activist Kefei, the stupendous popularity of the Shaw Brothers’ *Love Eterne (Liang shanbo yu Zhu yingtai)* 梁山伯與祝英台, dir. Li Han-Xiang, 1963)\(^1\) is listed as the first

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\(^1\) The film is adapted from the famous folk tale of the same name. Since the Tang Dynasty, many books have documented the story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, which has widely been adapted for folk theater. Among many versions of it, the one in an etymology book edited by Zai hao of the Qing dynasty specifically carries an explicit homoerotic flavor. In this version, Liang surprisingly learns of the fact that Zhu is a woman when he visits her two years after her graduation. Instead of feeling thrilled, Liang is described as feeling “disappointed as though he has lost something precious” (「悵然若有所失」). Liang’s disappointment over Zhu’s femaleness strongly intimates that Liang falls in love with Zhu as a male, not as a female. Liang’s homoerotic attachment with Zhu when she is in disguise makes explicit the gay subtext of the *Liangzhu* story—if the intimate bond between Liang and Zhu occurs at school when Zhu is mistaken as a man, Liang’s object of desire can’t be a woman. This entry from Zai’s *Popular Collections* can be regarded as the earliest archetype of *Love Eterne*. See Zai Hao (翟顥), “Liang Shanbo Visiting Friend” (梁山伯訪友), Story Section (故事), *Popular Collections* (通俗編), Vol. XXXVII, Qing Dynasty, rpt. in *Popular Collections*, vol. 4 (Taipei: Guang-Wen, 1969). The author wants to thank one of the reviewers for the information of this reference.
monumental event in the “Literature/Film/Publication/Academia/Artistic Activities” section in the The 2001 Manual for Understanding Tongzhi (2001 Renshi tongzhi shouche/2001 認識同志手冊). Kefei’s commentary then states that the character of Liang Shanbo is deeply adored by lesbian viewers. However, this acknowledgement of the cultural significance of Love Eterne in relation to the lesbian community begs the following questions: What does the film’s popularity back then have to do with the lesbian community today? Who are the lesbian viewers Kefei refers to? What kind of relationship can be established between the film’s popularity in the 1960s and those lesbian viewers? To what extent can a conclusion be drawn that Love Eterne can be included in the category of queer cinema, which, as Chia-Chi Wu aptly puts it, “refers to the textual spaces (in production as well as reception) wherein heteronomativity is debunked, the homo-hetero dichotomy undercut, and gender and sexualities dislodged from essentialist strictures.”

Based upon a reading of the film’s cinematic and fan discourses from a theoretical queer position, this paper argues for *Love Eterne*’s status as a queer film before the concept of queer films became a recognizable label roughly in the 1990s in Taiwan. This argument challenges Confucian epistemology, which refuses to acknowledge the radicalism of cross-dressing performance in gender and sexual terms, and, while legitimizing Lingbo’s performativity of masculinity, relegates the star-fan interaction to an asexual romantic friendship, if not heterosexualizing the star-fan interaction by reading Lingbo as a surrogate male. Psychoanalysis is deployed here as an available discourse to identify erotic and sexual desire between women in Western terms, to counteract the reactionary forces that impute homosexuality as a wicked foreign import or as inauthentically local or national in Asian contexts.3 Textual analysis will be prominent in this paper as I delineate the constructed image of feminine masculinity

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performed by the cross-dressing star Lingbo (aka Ivy Ling Po).\(^4\) The same methodology will be employed in analyzing two contemporary films with female homoerotic themes, *The Peony Pavilion* (*Wo de meili yu aichou*/我的美麗與哀愁, dir. Chen Kuo-Fu, 1995) and *Love Me, If You Can* (*Feiyue Qinghai*/飛躍情海, dir. Alice Wang, 2003), both of which poach *Love Eterne*’s unintended queer subtext. Since Taiwan-based fan magazines concerning Lingbo were not widely circulated, my study of the Lingbo fan discourse is based upon news coverage from two major Taiwan daily newspapers, *The Central Daily News* (*Zhongyang ribao*/中央日報) and *The United Daily News* (*Lianhe bao*/聯合報), and two trade magazines issued by Shaw Brothers and circulated in Taiwan during the 1960s, *Hong Kong Movie News* (*Xianggang yinghua*/香港影畫) and *Southern Screen* (*Nanguo dianying*/南國電影).

Adopted from the folk theater of *huangmeidiao* (黃梅調), the romantic heterosexual couple in *Love Eterne* is played by two women, one of whom is a male cross-dresser played by Lingbo. Along with the film’s unprecedented box office success, Lingbo achieved meteoric stardom and subsequently attained widespread adoration predominately

\(^4\) Ivy Ling Po is the official English name commonly used in the trade magazines published by the Shaw Brothers. She is also known as Lingbo, her stage name in Chinese; Jun Haitang (君海棠) is her real name.
from female viewers. The cinematic translation of this cross-dressing performance yielded a space for female spectators to desire a genderly queer character that denormalizes the common trope of feminine style in traditional Chinese operas in which the cross-dresser is forthrightly accepted as a man as Ang Lee explains in an interview for the *New York Times*. Given that the object of desire—the blending of the impersonator’s manufactured on-screen image, star persona, and private self—remains genderly equivocal, the emotionally charged star-fan interaction can be argued to exceed the normative codes of female homosociality. Furthermore, as Sara Ahmed argues that emotions shape and are shaped by the object with which we have contact, Lingbo’s complete withdrawal from cross-dressing performances and “becoming straight” out of fear of and disgust at the unstable sexual undertones that cross-dressing signifies vicariously comments on her prodigious popularity. And vice versa, the desirous female fans contoured Lingbo’s queerness by highlighting her peculiar “female feminine masculinity.”


The idea of women’s embodiment of feminine masculinity as an inexorable gravitation to women is undertaken by contemporary queer films to describe a romantic bond between women.

In the construction of homoeroticism in two contemporary queer films, *The Peony Pavilion* and *Love Me, If You Can, Love Eterne* is recognized as a source of cultural inspiration for expressing female homoeroticism within the film’s narrative world and in queer film history. Both films narratively reify the cultural legacy of the homoerotically charged star-fan discourse surrounding *Love Eterne* by reenacting a woman’s emotional and libidinal investment in fantasizing about an unattainable woman with what I call “female feminine masculinity,” which in return destabilizes the desired woman’s heterosexuality, as if in homage to Lingbo’s female fans. This gives *Love Eterne* the status of a queer film, because the film was a foundational text for contemporary films in Taiwan that negotiate their own representations of same-sex desire between women under heteronormative codes.

For any discussion of the gender-sexuality spectrum in *Love Eterne*, the cross-dressing element is of primary concern. Some argue that cross-dressing demonstrates “performative transexualization” that “enables (cross-) sexual transcendency” in which a cross-dressing performer has to be aware of the limitations of her/his biological sex to
go beyond it to be the other sex by manipulating gender roles. However, others have reminded us that cross-dressing might not be as radical as we would like to think, especially when it is a prevalent and ordinary form of traditional theatrical practice. If cross-dressers, as Chia-Chi Wu argues, intend to “become or be the very sex they impersonate,” trafficking at the borders of gender poses no challenge to existing gender norms. Nevertheless, when a cross-dressing performance is transferred onto celluloid as in the case of Love Eterne, the sensual experience is altered in the cinematic context of reception. Cross-dressing on film rarifies the gender structuring of the gaze economy that caters to the female spectators’ visual pleasure. This gender-role transcendence complicates the sexual dynamics of the star-fan relationship with a tint of homoerotic sensibility highly resonant with female queer sensitivities that are discursively identifiable in today’s cultural and social contexts. How the cross-dressing in Love Eterne complicates a male-centered gaze economy will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

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The cinematically rendered concoction of the male protagonist Liang Shanbo in *Love Eterne* and Lingbo suggests a mutual resonance between her on-screen image as a male character and her off-screen image as a female star, and generates “feminine masculinity” in her, a form of gentle and soft masculinity that equivocally straddles traditional forms of masculinity and femininity. Revising Judith Halberstam’s famous term “female masculinity” to account for various masculinities beyond white, middle-class, and male bodies, Claudia Breger uses the term “feminine masculinity” to refer to “configurations of gender identification and performance that are constituted through the combination of elements commonly associated with masculinity and elements commonly associated with femininity,” thus broadening Halberstam’s narrow focus on “the difference between sex and gender or body and performance.” The concept of “feminine masculinity” characterizes the non-hegemonic forms of masculinity performed by all genders, and identifying Lingbo’s gender temperament as “female feminine masculinity,” a combination of Halberstam and Berger’s terminologies, has a dual implication. First, this term indicates how Lingbo’s presentation of masculinity breaks down the arbitrary but naturalized connection between biological maleness and masculinity; second, a nuance is added to specify that Lingbo’s image, to correspond

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to her real-life star image as a woman, while apparently more masculine than the average woman, is not even close to “manly” masculinity.

The plasticity of Lingbo’s gender representation significantly contributed to a homoeroticism that permeated the star-fan interaction without being sanctioned. Female viewers’ libidinal investment in Liang cannot be simplified as adulation for a fictional male character, nor can their embrace of Lingbo be considered merely as identification with a female star. Fran Martin points out the liminal space between the two models for conceptualizing female same-sex love in the modern Chinese cultural context—one based on same-sex romance and the other on secondary gender (commonly perceived to be associated with lesbianism).\(^1\) The cultural tradition of cross-dressing legitimized Lingbo’s performativity of masculinity and allowed the emotionally entrenched interaction between a female star and female fans to be accepted as a kind of romantic but asexual friendship. However, her “incomplete” embodiment of the secondary gender, generally believed to be an identifiable mark of a homosexual, constantly makes the star-fan relationship susceptible to being defined as female homosexuality.

This emphasis on a discourse of equivocacy associated with the emotional and erotic attachment between women partially construes a particular mode of the culturally specific historiography of popular representations of female homoeroticism. Corresponding to Fran Martin’s observation of contemporary lesbian-themed cultural productions, the popular representation permits and positively foregrounds the pleasures of feminine women who are attracted to women, but the desired object falls on the gender spectrum somewhere different from tomboys. This pattern carries a different cultural meaning and significance in the struggle over representations of non-heteronormative gender and sexuality. The woman subject, as someone who desires instead of being desired, is given a force to maintain the susceptible accordance between female feminine masculinity and homosexuality that compulsory heteronormativity painstakingly sabotages.

Reexamining the interpretive context of the Lingbo frenzy (凌波热) from the perspective of a queer-positioned reader helps to establish a relationship with contemporary queer cultural products. Drawing upon cultural studies’ consideration of reception practices and uses of texts, the engagement in cultural history in a different time and under different circumstances can “account for the existence and expression of a wide range of positions within culture [my emphasis] 

12 Martin, Backward Glances, p. 132.
that are queer or non-, anti-, or contra-straight.”

Keeping this in mind, this paper looks at *Love Eterne* beyond a costume epic, like others produced by Shaw Brothers, which set out to capitalize on “Chinese flavor” and to invoke “the consciousness of a cultural China” by imbuing characters with “values and desires closely paralleled with an idealized morality supposedly existent in traditional China.”

In Taiwan, as I argue, *Love Eterne*’s status as a proto-queer text has outweighed the film’s status as a text that symbolizes the nostalgia for a lost China. To explore the cultural meaning of the star-fan relationship for the contemporary queer community, newspapers and trade magazines will be treated as a form of representation and psychoanalysis as an available discourse that enables a specific kind of cultural explanation of these materials to counter the asexual assumption within the dominant framework of Confucianism and, from a queer-positioned readership, to detect a sense of possible homoeroticism embedded subtextually in the star-fan interaction.

We are reminded by scholars working on Chinese lesbianism that during the 1920s and 1930s the systematically imported, translated, and, most importantly, indigenized European sexological theory had begun to transform the conceptualizations of same-sex sexuality in modern

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Chinese cultural discourses, not to mention further transculturation from the United States and Japan. Theoretical insights from work on female subjectivity and desire in Euro-American contexts help to elucidate how female fans’ devotion to *Love Eterne* and to Lingbo was invested with homoerotic innuendo. Contemporary queer films that portray homoerotic and homosexual feelings reify the cultural legacy of *Love Eterne* and of the surrounding fan discourse by thematicizing female feminine masculinity desired by feminine subjects and by making the female singing voice an auditory motif. The establishment of a genealogical relationship between the discourse of *Love Eterne* and contemporary queer films is proposed as a supplement to enrich scholarship that conceptualizes lesbian representation in modern Chinese cultural contexts.

**A Feminine Style, a Feminine Pleasure**

Born in 1939, Lingbo was the most popular male impersonator of *huangmeidiao* film, a musical costume genre produced in great

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numbers by Hong Kong’s Shaw Brothers beginning in the early 1950s and continuing throughout the 1960s. Lingbo began her performing career at the age of fourteen with small parts in Amoy-dialect films. She was noticed by Li Han-Xiang after Lingbo’s successful work dubbing the male lead character’s lines in Dream of the Red Chamber (Hongloumen/紅樓夢, dir. Yuan Qiou-Feng, 1962). She shot to stardom after playing the leading male role of Liang Shanbo in the blockbuster Love Eterne and subsequently impersonated numerous male roles in huangmeidiao films. Her cross-dressing performance in Love Eterne earned her the Best Performer award at the Golden Horse Film Festival in 1963 since her performance did not fit either the Best Actor or the Best Actress categories. For the same reason, she was awarded the Most Versatile Talent prize at the twelfth Asian Film Festival in Tokyo in 1965 for her performance in another huangmeidiao film The Mermaid (Yumeiren/魚美人, dir. Kao Li, 1965). It was the first time that the Asian Film Festival had presented this award. In a sense, both special awards suggested that the public recognized the link between cross-dressing and gender play.

Hunt and Wing-Fai Leung (London: Tauris, 2008), pp. 41-56; Chun Bong Ng (Ho Ng), Period Drama, Huang Mei Opera (Guzhuang, Xiayi, Huangmeidiao/古裝，俠義，黃梅調) (Hong Kong: Joint, 2004), 268 p.
Predominantly a consequence of gender segregation, cross-dressing has been a common performing practice and played an important role in the history of Chinese theatrical performance, including *huangmeixi* from which *huangmeidiao* film was adapted. Given the long tradition of this practice, it is plausible that the public attention to Lingbo’s performance went beyond the cross-dressing element. Her unprecedented popularity with women viewers in particular aroused some to wonder regarding the magnetism of her bi-gender quality. This speculation reflects an act of “reading” the performance that, according to Peggy Phelan, differs from “seeing” it. She argues that reading, in addition to seeing, generates a narrative of meaning, and people’s effort to “read” often proceeds with “a judgment through a normative lens.” Public opinion at the time tended to attribute Lingbo’s success to her capacity to traverse gender parameters, as noted by the screenwriter Zhong Lei (aka Di Jun-Shi) during a 1963 panel that discussed *Love Eterne*: “She made a man look feminine while seeming to women even more masculine” (「她能使男人看起來

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This oxymoronic statement fortifies the binary of gender by emphasizing the residual traces of Lingbo’s femininity in her impersonation in order to uphold men’s exclusive privileges to masculinity. Meanwhile, a heterosexual dynamic is averred, as Zhong concludes that women were drawn to Lingbo’s masculine temperament, even to the point of taking her as a man. Zhong’s claim mirrors a disavowal of homoerotic desire by predicking sexuality solely on sexual difference.

The public reasoning was agitated by the fact that the film’s theme of gender confusion, along with Lingbo’s cross-dressing, calls into question the heterosexual matrix. In addition to Lingbo's impersonation, the story itself involves impersonation as the female protagonist, Zhu Yingtaï, disguises herself as a man to pursue an education, which was typically reserved exclusively for men. After being successfully admitted to school, she and her schoolmate Liang Shanbo soon establish their relationship based on a close fraternal tie. Before Zhu has to return home for a family emergency, she decides to implicitly reveal the truth of her female identity to Liang. Unfortunately, Liang realizes the fact only too late. Upon learning of Zhu’s forced marriage, Liang dies of desperation. On her wedding day, Zhu passes

by Liang’s grave on purpose, and kills herself on the site. The film ends with a mythological tone with the couple reincarnated as flying butterflies to signify their eternal love.

With the casting of Lingbo, multilayered gender implications persist that ironically trouble the heterosexual imperative of this classic romance and the gaze economy in cinema. This popular film provides an explicit example of homoeroticism, albeit in a reversal of performativity. At the level of the plot and the casting, *Love Eterne* is unable to provide heterosexual closure. On the diegetic level, the first half of the relationship between Liang and Zhu, masquerading as a man to attend school, is compellingly suggestive of two men falling in love with each other (Fig. 1). It is not until the second half of the film that their relationship is “straightened” in the diegetic world, and yet Lingbo’s impersonation imbibes the affectionate interplay between Liang and Zhu with a sense of women loving each other.
Fig. 1

Convoluted gender play in *Love Eterne* fractures the trilateral relationship among the camera, the male protagonist, and the male spectator in Laura Mulvey’s model of the gaze economy to which women are subordinated as the “to-be-looked-at-ness.” 20 Mulvey’s analysis of the visual pleasure offered by classical Hollywood cinema presupposes a heterosexual mechanism of desire and privileges a male spectator. The processes of objectification and identification in *Love Eterne*, on account of its cross-dressing, no longer conform to a

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naturalized principle of sexual difference and thus deprivilege the heterosexual male spectatorship of visual pleasure. For the heterosexual male spectator, recognizing Liang Shanbo as his alter ego is a thorny position in that the act of impersonation disrupts the essentialized connection between masculinity and maleness. To alleviate this anxiety, this male spectator presumably would make both female actresses the erotic object of his gaze, but as both women in this film are made to look like men, the process of objectification also appears untenable. The women’s appropriation of masculinity dissolves the proper distance between the “erotic identity of the [male] subject from the [female] object on the screen” and could further imply male homoeroticism.21 That said, if desire is based on difference, obviously what lies between these two characters, who for a considerable amount of screen time “are” both male, cannot be circumscribed by sexual difference, especially in the case of Liang who embraces Zhu as a man before learning the truth. The exclusion of masculine heterosexual desire on the textual level can aptly explain why Ang Lee ascribed “feminine” to a female-to-male cross-dressing performance in the abovementioned New York Times interview.

21 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” The Sexual Subject, p. 26. Of course, this argument is based on the position of the male heterosexual spectator. Male homosexuality is not this paper’s concern.
As a consequence of the film’s refusal to guarantee the male heterosexual spectator a privileged viewing position, a feminine object of desire to be desired by a woman subject is intimated; in addition, both women are simultaneously the object and the subject. Drawing on Freud’s theory of femininity, Mulvey in “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’” revises her theorization of a monolithic cinematic apparatus structured around male viewing subjects to argue for a mobile position for a female spectator. Identifying passivity alongside the female character is not the only option for her; when aligning with the active point of view offered by masculine pleasure, she can discover the lost aspect of her never-fully-repressed masculinity.22 In Love Eterne, Zhu, who literally “borrow[s] transvestite clothes,”23 evokes a female spectator’s residual masculine self that allows her to actively desire (Fig. 2). Interestingly enough, as a female spectator identifies with Zhu to desire Liang, her object of desire is gendered equivocally in that Liang is very much a man who

23 Mulvey, “Afterthoughts,” Feminist Film Theory, p. 125. In her readings of Duel in the Sun, Mulvey notes that although the memory of the “masculine” phase before passive femininity settles can defer the power of patriarchy, the masculine identification is ultimately in conflict with the patriarchal need for representing femininity. The plot of Love Eterne suggests a disapproval of Zhu’s masculine pleasure as she is forced into an arranged marriage, but the metonymic ending that apotheosizes their love provides an alternative resolution to their unacceptable union.
significantly detours from the dominant form of masculinity as he encompasses some elements of femininity and illustrates feminine masculinity. In a lengthy discussion of the original *Liang-Zhu* text, Siu Leung Li notes that Liang fails to meet the criteria of masculinity in imperial China: “Liang falls short of the ideal scholar, one ideal type of masculinity in imperial China, for he has shown no concern or ambition to strive for maximum masculine power through distinguishing himself at the imperial civil examinations, not to mention gaining top graduate status.”

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Typical of literary pundits in the “beauty-scholar” romance literary genre who often resemble women in their effeminate look and sometimes ways of thinking,25 Liang takes no interest in measuring up to patriarchal expectations and fails to win recognition from male authority figures. Most of the male protagonists Lingbo impersonated share the personality traits of being sensitive and infirm. Both Chen Boqing in *The Mirror and the Lichee* (*Xin chensan wuniang* 新陳三五娘, dir. Kao Li, 1967) and Zhang Junrui in *The West Chamber* (*Xi xiang ji* 西廂記, dir. Yue Feng, 1965) are sickened by despair when the family of the female protagonist objects to the couple’s union. Appearance-wise, Lingbo’s impersonated characters look much daintier and less stout than other vulgar, imbecilic, and relatively brawny male characters. The shoulders on Lingbo’s female body look narrow and sloping; sometimes, the chest line is slightly visible in profile. He is often the same height as the female protagonist, or even shorter. The symbolic male body is tinged with effeminacy thanks to the corporeality of a female body and her coquettishly charming performance. Although the frail, scholarly type epitomizes the traditional Confucian ideal of a feminized form of masculinity before the modernization of sexuality in the early twentieth century, this type

of masculinity was predominately regarded as outdated. As early as in 1953, film critics already addressed the changing ideal type of *xiao-sheng* (小生), junior male role, in Chinese film history from the antique one with “feminine handsomness” (「女性美」) to the modern charm of “masculine handsomeness” (「男性美」). 26 Congresswoman Xiang-Xin Mao, also a known devoted fan of Lingbo, wrote in a newspaper column, trying to make sense of Lingbo’s popularity, that “modern women are no longer interested in effeminate *xiao-sheng* as they were in ancient times. Women nowadays only fantasize about masculine male stars . . . what both male and female audiences have appreciated is simply Lingbo’s performance.” 27

Film critics have commented that male impersonators could aptly represent male characters only in chaste beauty-scholar stories because the essence of their characters involves naiveté and vulnerability, “the ‘perverted beauty’ of women” (「女性的病態美」). 28 They “lack the strength to truss up a chicken” (「無縛雞之力」), meaning that

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they are physically frail. Lingbo’s enactment of masculinity is permissible because the fictional character’s physical and mental decrepitude often results in exclusion from or marginality in the patriarchal order. Moreover, she represents a form of feminine masculinity that does not undermine the legitimate form of masculinity, which, as argued by Judith Halberstam, is “naturally” wed to maleness and to power and domination. Despite its popularity, Lingbo’s appropriation of masculinity was deemed subordinate to the dominant mode of masculinity possessed by biological men and thus was nonthreatening. From this perspective, the narrative desire of this film can also be regarded as being elicited by the romantic interplay between different modes of femininity alongside male homoeroticism. The heterosexuality promised by the classical tale remains at a literal level, proscribing spectators from being cognizant of their pleasure in participating in the non-heterosexual fantasy that the film’s subtext implies.

This desire for feminine masculinity manifests itself not only on the profilmic level but also the extra-cinematic level where the information of Lingbo as a star and the on-screen persona of Liang Shanbo entwine and inflect each other. In an issue of Hong Kong Movie

29 Guan Ho, “Passé Film Criticism” (Guoqi yinhua/過氣影話), Hong Kong Movie News (Xianggang yinghu/香港影畫) 16 (1967): 50.
News in which another historical epic *The Perfumed Arrow*, (*Nüxiucai* 女秀才, dir. Kao Li, 1966) was promoted, a series of Lingbo’s photos on a single page illuminated her gender fluidity. On the bottom left of the page, Lingbo is captured successfully lifting weights while wearing the costume of a male character, and the caption reads: “. . . Ivy is strong and here is the proof.”

Occupying the upper one-third of the same page is Lingbo wearing a female costume, annotated by the caption as being a woman wondering who her Prince Charming is. Lingbo’s look as a feminine woman counterbalances her masculine characteristics suggested by the weight lifting and flaunts the constructedness of her signature male look. The promotional star discourse thus keeps reminding audiences of Lingbo’s bi-gender persona. The discourses of devotion by Lingbo’s female fans across different age groups further vitiate the heterosexual desire originally prevailing in the story.

Female fans’ adoration of Lingbo/Liang underlies a love of an inimitable body that simultaneously projects gender sameness and difference. Although the casting of Lingbo is meant to correspond to the narrative construction of Liang as a feminine male, Lingbo’s female status in real life constantly troubles the designated gender of the Liang Shanbo character. However, Lingbo is inseparably integrated with the

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on-screen Liang Shanbo, as is evident in her commonly known epithet Brother Liang (梁兄哥). Lingbo’s star persona in real life is female but not feminine, masculine but not male. A close reading of the reflections of Xi Xi, who later became a prominent female novelist, illustrates that Lingbo’s off-screen persona deviated from traditional femininity to masculine femininity, indeed the flipside of the feminine masculinity of her on-screen image. Xi Xi’s doting remark is worth quoting at length to capture her sensitivity toward Lingbo’s different femininity as the novelist meticulously describes Lingbo from head to foot:

Did I ever tell you that Lingbo did not wear any makeup today? I must reiterate how pretty she was today. There was absolutely no excessiveness on her face, no powder, no eye shadow, not even eyebrow definer! I never knew she was born with such gorgeous features. . . .

I still want to tell you, that she got a new haircut today. She had no updo, no dressy suit, and no excessive makeup. She had the crisp shorthair with a touch of French style: straight, but soft. I adore her new hairstyle. I also love her hair itself. It’s black and shiny, the qualities that define good hair. . . .

She wore a pair of nylon trousers that every American lady is in love with. The combination of the black trousers in contrast with the subtle red sweater and the black nearly
Charley-Jordan styled flats, topped with the faint lipstick precisely brought out her elegance. I like this side of her . . . I still remembered how elegant Lingbo’s hands are, white and delicate. Her nail polish is white, no disturbing color, very exquisite. . . .

In her devoted worship, Xi Xi repeatedly declares that she saw Lingbo in real life. Nevertheless, as Xi Xi idealizes Lingbo’s look, Lingbo still appears astonishing and almost unattainable. Her gender-neutral qualities, inflected by her on-screen image, are especially emphasized by the signs of her minimal makeup and feminine accessories, short and straight haircut, black trousers, and pair of flats. This sentiment, highly conscious of and captivated by different femininities, introduces an element of homoeroticism beyond a simple mode of desexualized identification that reproduces “sameness, fixity, and the conformation of existing identities” and that excludes potential homoerotic pleasure between the self and the ideal. Jackie Stacey argues that when spectators articulate their devotion “within the language of love,

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32 Xi Xi, “The Impression of Lingbo” (Yinxiang Lingbo/印象凌波), Hong Kong Movie News 1 (1965): 22.

33 On another visit to Ling a year later, Xi Xi reiterated this point, paying extra attention to Ling’s androgynous look, including her short hairstyle and black shirt and pants. Xi Xi, “Revisit Lingbo” (Zhongfang Lingbo/重訪凌波), Hong Kong Movie News 5 (1966): 28.

adoration, and worship . . . the identity of the spectator remains absent from the equation.”  

Stacey’s claim posits a politically progressive possibility that desire can transcend the limits of identification. If the femininities of glamorous female stars and female audiences are different and that difference cannot be bridged, some forms of desire can be detected in the mode of cinematic identification. Xi Xi’s remark articulates a degree of homoeroticism, for she shows no sign of aspiring to become like Lingbo, and the boundaries between self and ideal, marked by the idiosyncratic features that she saliently pinpoints, are kept intact. Desire is founded upon difference, and sexual difference is not the sole signifier of desire. Lingbo’s androgynous look, treated by Xi Xi as an ideal, evinces a desire concerning different modes of femininity, and this can further inspire a reappraisal of the fervid star-fan relationship beyond the heteronormative matrix.

The Lingbo Frenzy

As I have argued, the desired object of female fans should be regarded as an amalgamation of the real-life Lingbo and the on-screen Liang Shanbo, and her equivocal bi-gender qualities add homoerotic innuendo to the emotionally entrenched star-fan interaction. Interestingly, as Lingbo’s female feminine masculinity solicited fans,

35 Stacey, Star Gazing, p. 143.
constant public commentaries in newspapers in Taiwan fastidiously vindicated Lingbo’s attractiveness according to her heterosexual appeal. Set against the journalist accounts of male fans as being modest and polite, women have been framed as hysterical, obsessive, and unwieldy, as well as having lost their minds. The journalistic account of Lingbo’s visit details how women became dangerous lunatics, flocking to the streets, smashing cars and doors, and injuring people. For instance, when Lingbo visited Taiwan in 1967, female fans “pushed over the guarding police and smashed glass doors, which injured Officer Liao. Despite blood gushing from Liao’s arm, the frantic fans showed no sign of stopping. They besieged Lingbo in the hope to be closer to her.”

This vilification of female fans’ libidinal impulse on the one hand illustrates how a patriarchal society penalized women who were too ambitious for the meek role that society expected them to play. The disparaging portrayals of women framed by the newspaper coverage, while associating emotions with the feminine, also depict women as the desiring subject. Within the confinement of compulsory heterosexuality, on the other hand, the portrayals function to mollify the hazards of transgression fueled by Lingbo’s unprecedented popularity. This is especially so given that female fans were set against male fans who were depicted as being modest and polite and whose appreciation for

Lingbo lay in her successful delivery of a positive image of a courtly scholar like themselves.\(^{37}\)

Because women at different ages are expected to live up to different moral standards of conduct, the means of expressing desire for Lingbo varied according to generation. Adolescence has traditionally been associated with “emotional turbulence, mental imbalance and accelerated physical growth,”\(^ {38}\) and social commentaries at the time generally believed that intense affection for the opposite sex was the most manifest aspect of puberty. These commentaries also agree that the traditional gender segregation in Taiwanese society often prohibited young women from engaging in a heterosexual relationship, and their feelings of affection were displaced onto people of the same sex with whom they had frequent interaction. Nonetheless, it was situational and impermanent.\(^ {39}\) Ironically, the public’s tolerance for young women’s same-sex affection gave license to the immodest utterance of their passions for Lingbo. During the same visit to Taiwan in September 1967, for example, Lingbo attended a meeting held by a philanthropic

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\(^{38}\) Frank Dikötter, Sex, Culture and Modernity in China (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1995), p. 174.

organization run by her fans, and at the meeting, “a group of female students jostled toward her as if they lost their minds; they caressed her hands and even tried to press their faces onto hers.”

Compared to adolescent women who had more leverage to candidly exhibit their desire for Lingbo in a corporeally intimate way, married women, who bore different moral expectations, acquired a more inscrutable form of expression. A considerable number of elderly married female fans sublimated their desire for Lingbo into a mother-daughter scenario. This invocation of “mother” as a threshold of desire was, indeed, something initiated by Lingbo through her public quest for her own lost mother. Born to a destitute family in Fujian Province in China, Lingbo was traded to her foster parents at the age of five. In Zhen Zhang’s analysis of Lingbo’s popularity particularly in Taiwan, Zhang noted the phenomenon in which many old women labeled themselves Lingbo’s godmothers, and several even claimed to be her biological mother. Zhang’s reading connects her immense popularity among elderly women to Lingbo’s parentless childhood. With Lingbo’s transregional and transethnic appeal, the national history of abandonment and/or separation incites empathy in viewers who are members of Chinese diasporas in Taiwan to the point of adopting her as

40 “Lingbo is Like a Tornado” (Lingbo! xiang yizheng xuanfeng/凌波！像一阵旋风), Central Daily News (29 Sep. 1967): 4.
their own. 42 Zhang’s insight under the framework of cultural nationalism downplays the erotic energy embedded in the intensified star-fan interaction that can be understood in light of the maternal attachment specific to lesbian experience. A psychoanalytic reading of the representation of the interaction is not to substantiate the sexual identity of certain historical figures but to find subversive positions to open up the possibilities of reappropriating cultural history to make it a queer one. Patricia White, in resonance with scholars of star studies such as Richard Dyer and others, points out that “the complex ideological work performed by a particular star image frequently provides ways for marginalized groups to negotiate a pleasurable response to dominant cultural productions that would seem to exclude them.”43

This melodramatic revelation of Lingbo’s personal history was frequently reiterated in newspapers to solicit sympathy and to sell her persona, and during the early phase of her stardom, her search for Mother rather than for Mr. Right characterized her private life. This promotional strategy evoked a pre-Oedipal narrative that hinges on a


daughter’s homoerotically charged affection for her mother. In Freud’s account of human sexuality, the change of the love object from the mother to the father affects women’s subject formation. A woman’s attachment to her mother precedes attachment to her father, and both are equally intense and passionate. Psychoanalytic feminists have generally cast doubt on women’s complete transposition of sexual desires to the father, and some argue that the strong maternal attachment that remains for some women is the seed of the “homosexual factor in all feminine sexuality.”

Lingbo’s craving for her unknown birth mother registered the strong maternal attachment. In one interview, initiated by Lingbo herself about her search for her birth mother, Lingbo expressed her feelings this way:

Lingbo desperately needs someone to rely on. She dreadfully misses her birth mother and could no longer live her life with such a void. She longs for her mother, from whom she could get comfort, to whom she could cry and act like a spoiled child.

This introductory paragraph puts emphasis on how Lingbo’s literal separation from her mother under particular social circumstances

reinforced her enduring love for her mother. Her emotional account parallels to a “homosexual maternal fantasy” in which the mother is placed at the center of Lingbo’s need and desire as an object of her libidinal investment.

This interview appeared at a specific moment when the public’s emotional excess concerning a daughter searching for a mother and vice versa culminated in the case of an old lady, Mrs. Ye Li Yuan-Xian, who aggressively asserted—and somehow succeeded in persuading the public—her identity as Lingbo’s birth mother. The public condemned Lingbo’s selfish denial of this woman as a way to retain her popularity. In the same interview quoted above, Lingbo articulated her agony over the confused match with Mrs. Ye:

. . . Mrs. Ye worries that I can’t admit the bloodline relationship out of concern for my fans…so what if an actress does have a mother? Do people love me merely because I don’t have a mother? Does that mean I will be less popular when I do have a mother? . . . Mrs. Ye has given me a lot of warmth, but I’ve only brought her apprehension while keeping her waiting. I heard that she’s been ill because of me. Whenever she crossed my mind, I felt horribly sad for her. I
am here all by myself and she is missing me to death out there.  

Lingbo’s defensive retort implies the high degree to which her popularity hinged upon keeping a mother position available for elderly married female fans to fantasize about her. When a star’s personal life is withheld from public knowledge, the star’s status as a publicly available erotic object choice can be sustained. Lingbo’s refusal to recognize Mrs. Ye or any other women as her birth mother *rhetorically* makes the maternal absence the propelling drive for desiring female comfort.

The narrative of Lingbo’s personal life, though carefully contrived to craft a particular public image of a filial daughter, resonates significantly with the ways in which the absent mother is conceived in lesbian rather than heterosexual (female) fantasy. A heterosexual woman’s intensified desire for a reunion with her mother, interrupted by an encounter with sexual difference, is substituted through the act of becoming a mother herself. For lesbians, however, the maternal loss remains unrecoverable and irretrievable through identifying *with* maternal desire. The narrative of Lingbo’s recurring evocations of maternal attachment constitutes a desire to desire, which

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sustains and extends the justifiable homoeroticism in the mother-daughter riddle. Lingbo’s narrative account resembles a lesbian subject’s maternal imaginary, as the mismatches provide an opportunity to imagine that Lingbo’s forever deferred fulfillment represents a desire to desire the mother.

Looking at it from another perspective, the aggressive elderly women\(^\text{47}\) fashion a mother figure, in representational terms, whose heterosexuality is surpassed by her positive response to the erotic evocation of the daughter. In an examination of the psychoanalytic theory of female oedipal complex, Dianne Elise makes a convincing claim that the mother’s heterosexuality in desiring the penis—the father and the body—puts an end to the girl’s erotic possibilities with the mother even on the level of fantasy.\(^\text{48}\) In contrast to a heterosexual woman who is not recognized in a mother’s heterosexual desire for her genitalia, her sex, and is redirected to her father, a lesbian is more likely to recognize and uphold this desire. For lesbians, the heterosexual elderly female fans of Lingbo uncommonly stand for a mother whose

\(^{47}\) For example, a middle-aged married woman visited the Ming-Hua Film Production Company claiming that she was Lingbo’s birth mother and asked for an arranged meeting with Lingbo. To avoid further troubles, the film company responded to the public that this woman actually was a lunatic fan of Lingbo. See Feng-Pan Yao, “Obsessed with Lingbo; Jealous of Ivy Lingbo” (Mi lingbo, gi lingbol 逆凌波，嫉凌波), United Daily News (27 Oct. 1963): 3.

strong desire for a daughter “enthusiastically relates to the lesbian aspect of her psychic bisexuality,” especially in a Confucian society wherein sons are more preferable than daughters.

Performing Straightness

The frantic adulation from female fans seemed to eventually overwhelm Lingbo, who suddenly stigmatized her own cross-dressing performances as “not normal” and “perverse.” Lingbo’s self-negation of her performance, together with the focus of reportage shifting from Lingbo’s mother search to her heterosexual romances, could be a veiled repudiation of the outpourings of female same-sex love her performances occasioned in fans. Lingbo’s decision to align her career and personal life with heterosexuality suggests an attempt to redirect the powerful flow of homoerotic energy associated with her impersonation. After completing numerous productions as a male impersonator, Lingbo grew conscious of her “perverse” pathway to success and wished to return to “her true female self”:

After *Liangzhu*, I played quite a few male roles, which seems to suggest that I am on the track of becoming a “pervert.” For me, this is definitely something to worry about. Frankly speaking, no matter how great the script that has an impersonating male role is, I still wish I could follow my real identity as a woman and play a female character. I’m very reluctant to continue my on-stage cross-dressing performance. This is not a sort of performance that is normal. I even began to wonder whether I am a bit “perverted” after playing that kind of character for so long.\(^{50}\)

The transition came in stages as she began to play female characters who, in the diegesis, needed to be in male disguise.\(^{51}\) Abetted by heterosexual ideologies, Lingbo seemed to believe that female fans’ failure to distinguish the real her from her male characters precipitated their same-sex affections, and for the sake of setting the record straight, her future performance had to “follow her real identity” (this is in many ways a fallacy since her femaleness was never forgotten, as I argued earlier). Her angst about the incoherence and blurring between the (on-screen) performed gender and her “real” gender indicates that her

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\(^{51}\) The last time Lingbo played a male role was in 1969 in *The Three Smiles* (*Sanxiaol*三笑), directed by Yue Feng.
gender identity had been inflected by the maleness that she was supposed to perform, not identify with. This is at least implied by her choice of the word “pervert” in her autobiographical account. As Judith Butler famously argues, the construction of gender pivots upon a naturalized false alignment among anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. Lingbo’s self-declaration ironically lays bare the arbitrary and yet forceful coincidence among the three as her gender identity could align with her anatomical sex or her gender performance. This flux in gender is itself a result of her negotiation with the male gender that she performs on-screen. To reduce the gender perplexity, Lingbo decided to cogently stigmatize her performances as “not normal,” even though unfavorable public comments were actually rare given cross-dressing’s legitimacy in the Chinese theater tradition.

In addition to reducing and eventually refusing cross-dressing roles, Lingbo underwent rhinoplasty and, probably, eyelid surgery to reckon with her anxiety by making certain corporeal signs more feminine. The film production of Journey to the West (Xiyoujī/西遊記), for which Lingbo was contracted to impersonate the character of

Sanzang, was supposedly aborted due to the new look of her face. The decision to cancel the project indicates a disruption the presumably naturalized integrity between the gender core and its outer appearance. Lingbo’s facial configuration also activated a series of changes in her gender performance in real life. After her plastic surgery, several pictures in which Lingbo posed femininely for a report in *Southern Screen*, and the written text of this report, focused on Lingbo’s new feminine appearance, as the reporter wondered if perhaps “her high nose gives her more feminine charm”.  

54 Reshaping her facial configuration and restyling her body were apparently a way to placate Lingbo’s anxiety and to rectify the public’s “misperception” of her gender. This (re)construction of gender, in the words of Teresa de Lauretis, “is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation.”  

55 By dint of feminine acts and gestures, the new look yielded a more comfortable and confident posing of femininity that bridged the daunting split between Lingbo’s gender identity and her screen image, and her gender was thus reformatted.

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While feminine gender attributes were accentuated to revamp Lingbo as an authentic woman without the problem of gender inversion, her affairs with male stars and heterosexual marriage were also deployed strategically to further substantiate her heterosexual orientation and to correct female fans’ mistaken admiration for her. The press probed her various relationships with men, including her previous marriage to a Chinese-Filipino businessman before she rose to fame. Detailing Lingbo’s rumored affair with Mr. Leonard Ho Koon Cheung, one reporter from the *United Daily News* emphatically remarks that “Lingbo has impersonated a man in many of her films, but off the movie screen, she is a genuine woman. Every woman wants a life companion . . . Lingbo is no exception.”

56 Similar discourses continued as Lingbo complied with the social roles assigned to women under the grid of hetero-patriarchy—those of wife and mother—in order to represent herself and to be represented as being traditional, which is synonymous with being “normal.” Regardless of objections to her marriage from female fans, Lingbo’s declaration of her intention to lead a “normal” life was volitional and persistent. Her marriage to Chin Han completed her gender “rectification” and forged her new persona as a “dutiful wife and a loving mother” (賢妻良母).

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This new image emerged at the expense of “the disappearance of Liang Shanbo’s dashing and romantic disposition,” as described in the caption of a newspaper picture of Lingbo and her baby boy in *United Daily News*.\(^57\) Xi Xi’s reports on her visit to Lingbo after she married also subtly reflected this shift in interest from her individuality to her family life. Direct remarks about Lingbo’s distinctive look and clothing were notably fewer. Instead, Xi Xi focuses on the interior design and decoration of Lingbo’s house, as well as the couple’s playful interaction with each other. However, Lingbo’s wish to stop the adoration of female fans through her acts of gender transformation did not seem to go as planned. Her intentional performance of heterosexual female identity could hardly reach the anticipated result because, as Richard Dyer points out, film stars are mediated identities that involve extra-cinematic social discourse, and Lingbo was not simply the star-as-person but the star-as-image.\(^58\) One of Xi Xi’s interviews with Lingbo after her marriage opens with a description of how Lingbo’s husband Chin Han reacted defensively after mistaking the journalist for a female fan who had stalked Lingbo outside their home.\(^59\) This gambit connoted that Lingbo’s newly sanitized heterosexual persona failed to create a

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critical distance, which is thought to exist naturally between persons of same sex, between her female fans and herself as object. It also invalidates the heterosexual interpretation that female spectators illusorily conflated Lingbo with Liang Shanbo and indiscriminately projected their desire for an ideal man onto a cross-dressing performer. Female fans’ desire for Lingbo as a woman who exuded a masculine charm—regardless that this desire’s source was her natural proclivity or internalization of the male role she played—extended Lingbo’s popularity even after her shift of persona.60

Lingbo’s heightened attention to keeping femininity palpable in her performance ensured her status as a woman, yet ironically the male characters she impersonated further digressed from the legitimate form of Chinese masculinity. This form of “feminine masculinity” as being “illegitimate,” “incomplete,” or “crippled” compared to the hegemonic one led to the inexorable gravitation to Lingbo on the part of female audiences and is itself a minor form of socially defined gender roles. Lingbo’s fluctuation between being feminine and masculine on- and off-screen not only produces an effect of denaturalizing gender norms but also represents a way of appropriating masculinity and negotiating femininity that aroused homoerotic feelings.

60 It is noteworthy that the fan activities similar to those discussed in the section of “The Lingbo Frenzy” that demonstrate the female fan’s overwhelming affection for Lingbo also happened after she gave birth to her son.
The Legacy of *Love Eterne* in Contemporary Queer Films

The same-sex desire revolving around the interactions between Lingbo and her fans illuminates that her cross-dressing performance transgresses its cultural framework as a Chinese theatrical convention. Robert Clark and Claire Sponsler argue in their analysis of cross-dressing in a different social and cultural context that “cross-dressing, it would seem, is transgressive through its uses, not in and of itself.”

The transgressive nature of Lingbo lies in the way in which the mutual inflection between Lingbo’s on- and off-screen images adds another gender identification of feminine masculinity to Liang, as opposed to Zhu, who deliberately masquerades to receive an education. Engendered and propelled by the rendition of Liang’s feminine masculinity, the homoerotic dynamics in *Love Eterne* reconfigures it to be about a representation of women’s same-sex affections. This subtextual perception renders *Love Eterne* a cultural reference point from which the representations of female homoeroticism in the cultural context of Taiwan draw upon and expand. In and through their cross-textual reference to *Love Eterne*, a genealogical relationship between *Love Eterne* and contemporary queer cinema can then be established

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and ascertains *Love Eterne*’s significance in the historiography of filmic representations of female homoeroticism in the context of Taiwan.

*The Peony Pavilion* and *Love Me, If You Can*, in their respective depiction of female homoeroticism, refer to the female heteroerotic undertone, instead of the heterosexual denotation, of *Love Eterne*. This is achieved through “the memory narrative,” identified by Fran Martin as the dominant trope in the popular representations of female homoerotic imaginary in the Chinese cultural context across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. In both films, the previous incarnation’s life in which *Love Eterne* and cross-dressing is symbolically summoned composes the content of the memory and renders female homoeroticism perpetually haunting experiences for the heroine(s). Moreover, the use of a woman’s singing voice in *The Peony Pavilion* and *Love Me* symbolizes the lingering homoerotic feelings and mediates between the previous life and the present life. The emphatic use of a woman’s singing voice as a token of promise, a trigger of memory, and a medium of love registers the meaning of Lingbo’s voice within the diegesis and for her fans. Through particular characterization, Lingbo’s female feminine masculinity is embodied by one of the heroines and desired by a socially feminine subject. Strategically rather than coincidentally, the representation of female homoeroticism in *The Peony Pavilion* and *Love Me* is saturated with the cultural memory of

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the homoerotic subtext in the discourse surrounding Love Eterne and Lingbo.

The female signing voice appears as an utterance of desire in the very first shot of The Peony Pavilion before the opening credits. The heroine Du Lily is sitting on the floor in a trancelike state. This shot is accompanied by a female voice singing in the traditional rhythm of the Chinese opera qun chu (崑曲). Lily, a student at a girls’ high school, is the reincarnation of Du Li-Niang, the fictional female protagonist in Tang Xian-Zu’s qun chu play The Peony Pavilion from the Ming Dynasty. The story revolves around how she is haunted by her unfinished affection for her male lover in a previous life, the fictional male protagonist Liu Meng-Mei in Tang’s The Peony Pavilion, who is now reincarnated as female singer Liu Yu-Mei (Fig. 3). The asynchronous female singing voice in the opening shot carries out a double role of being Lily’s interior monologue as Du Li-Niang, and the feeble look of Lily resonates with the image of Li-Niang who dies of lovesickness for Liu Meng-Mei as she has dreamed but not yet encountered Liu until her afterlife. The female singing voice stands as more than an expression of desire; the voice also signals the explicit homoerotic turn of the narrative occurs when the specter of Lily finally
encounters female singer Liu Yu-Mei, Liu Meng-Mei’s present incarnation, in Lily’s derelict apartment.  

Fig. 3

Since a voice has to be anchored to a given body, the female singing voice could be regarded as a substitute form of the body to be desired and possessed. Yu-Mei’s first encounter with Lily’s specter in the mirror causes a mysterious loss of Yu-Mei’s recorded singing voice in the sound recording studio. Appalled by the evanescence of the recorded singing voice of Yu-Mei, the producer, also Yu-Mei’s boyfriend, claims to see a flickering shadowy figure next to Yu-Mei. Lily’s “stealing” of Yu-Mei’s voice induces resistance against the male

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63 This is similar to the plotline of the original story where Liu Meng-Mei inhabits the same place that used to be Du Li-Niang’s home. The garden of the residence is where Du falls in love with Liu in her fatal dream.
producer/boyfriend’s control over Yu-Mei’s voice by making it inaccessible to him. The severance of the female voice from a given female body in the auditory register of the film works together with the haunted apartment to expel Yu-Mei’s heterosexuality and to make her respond to Lily’s ardent calling. Haunted by Lily’s indomitable spirit, the mysterious apartment visually articulates and represents femininity and is permeated with Lily’s homoerotic desire to the point where heterosexuality is expelled (Fig. 4). As soon as Yu-Mei steps into the apartment, her heterosexual life starts to deteriorate. This is most clear when Yu-Mei halts her boyfriend’s sexual advances as she feels scrutinized by a mysterious force in the room. Mimi, a man chaser, also feels chagrined in the apartment despite being Lily’s best high school friend.


On the surface, *The Peony Pavilion* is making a cross-textual link to the original *qunchu* play of *The Peony Pavilion*. However, a fleeting snapshot of a stage photo from *Love Eterne* in *The Peony Pavilion* signals the source of inspiration for this film’s portrayal of female homoeroticism and provides a narrative cue to explain the protagonist Lily’s hidden homosexual proclivity by suggesting her fascination with the film (Fig. 5). In this three-second transitional panning shot, the stage photo of *Love Eterne* appears on the door to Lily’s room subsequent to the scene in which Lily personally confesses to Yu-mei about her enduring devotion. The photo that captures the school scene in which both actresses are dressing as men intimates Lily’s desire for female feminine masculinity and illuminates why she is carried away by Meng-Mei in her dream. The mysterious charm of Meng-Mei’s female feminine masculinity in cross-dressing that Lily experiences in
her dream explicates why her feelings for a boy are misplaced. *The Peony Pavilion* makes an intertextual referentiality to *Love Eterne* in the use of cross-dressing to historicize the homoerotic connotation of the cinematic adaptation of cross-dressing that foregrounds female feminine masculinity. By using cross-dressing to merge the narrative thread of Meng-Mei and Yu-Mei, Yu-Mei’s relationship with Lily exceeds a reading of a romantic sisterhood. Lily’s possession of the stage photo of *Love Eterne* aligns her with devoted female fans of Lingbo who were enthralled by her disposition of female feminine masculinity. The mirroring effect between the impersonated Liang and Meng-Mei as an object of desire represents *Love Eterne* as a surviving cultural remnant in the dominant heteronormative culture that shelters alternative sexual desire and helps audiences come to terms with their identity.
Love Me, If You Can is another contemporary film that finds inspiration in Love Éterne in its depiction of female homoeroticism (Fig. 6 and 7). At first glance, the folk story of Liangzhu seems to be adapted to frame the prophetically tragic relationship between two female protagonists, Ying and San, whose names resemble the given names Zhu and Liang. Nevertheless, the soundscape of Love Me makes a generic association with Love Éterne’s version of Liangzhu. Similar to The Peony Pavilion, an arresting female voice sings the first and probably the most remembered aria of Love Éterne in the opening sequence that outweighs a regular establishing shot in a fishing village where Ying’s cousin San resides. In the rest of the film, Ying often sings huangmeidiao arias from Love Éterne to vent her frustrations and to attract San’s attention. The singing voice functions to express homoerotic affections and to recall the memory. Through the singing voice, Ying reminds the viewers of Zhu in Love Éterne in particular; likewise, the disagreement between San’s gender identification and her biological sex evokes the character Liang impersonated by Lingbo, whose cross-dressing is perceived by viewers in a similar vein.
The intertextual affiliation between *Love Me* and *Love Eterne* sheds some light on the specific characterization of San, who does not signify congenital lesbianism. Even though her relatively masculine appearance and personality attract women, San is drawn to her male

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friend A-Bin (Fig. 85). San’s female feminine masculinity concurs with the screen image of Liang (San’s inferred previous incarnation), and Ying’s pursuit of San represents the experience of women’s homoerotic desire for female feminine masculinity. Yet Love Me does not end with Ying’s mournful death when she sacrifices herself to rescue Sang. In the final scene, the arrival of a woman in San’s village who claims she is Zhu Yingtai and is searching for someone indicates a continuity of “Zhu’s tenacious, transhistorical love” 67 for Liang and her female feminine masculinity in particular (Fig. 9). The meaning of Zhu’s love goes beyond the diegetic level to stand for the social experience of women’s desire for female feminine masculinity, which was first widely and publicly perceived in the interaction between Lingbo and her female fans.

Fig. 8

67 Martin, Backward Glances, p. 3.
Conclusion

This sort of female feminine masculinity continues to enchant women in the terms initially established by *Love Eterne*. Recently, the record label Gold Typhoon directly referred to Lingbo’s enormous popularity to elucidate the charm of three of its contracted female singers who possess a sense of female feminine masculinity: “they are embraced just as how Liang Shanbo/Lingbo attracted viewers of her generation.”68 This paper complicates the seemingly naturalized appeal of Lingbo, which largely has evolved from her impersonation of Liang


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Shanbo, with a focus on women as desiring subjects. Taking notice of the social consternation at the time, this paper corrects the predominant hetero-centric account of Lingbo’s cross-dressing performance to attend to female homoeroticism in its cinematic representation and reception context. This film constructs an imaginary threshold that invites women to actively desire another woman, just as heterosexual identification is simultaneously thwarted.

Nevertheless, the film’s cultural meaning as a media representation of female homoeroticism has to be ascribed to the erotic response of female viewers to the character Liang, impersonated by Lingbo. The popularity of Love Eterne and Lingbo because of their ambiguous messages regarding gender and sexuality helps to sustain and cultivate women’s deviant infatuation for female feminine sexuality in the public realm. The incorporation of Love Eterne in The Peony Pavilion and Love Me, If You Can not only attests to the viable reading of the female homoerotic overtone associated with Love Eterne, Lingbo, and the fan discourses but also helps to give Love Eterne the status of being a filmically and culturally queer text. Only when we excavate the hidden deviance underneath Love Eterne and Lingbo’s outward heterosexuality are we able to understand how the film’s legacy helps to establish female homoeroticism as an alternative form of desire in a heterosexual-dominant culture.
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Eternal Love for *Love Eterne*: The Discourse and Legacy of *Love Eterne* and the Lingbo Frenzy in Contemporary Queer Films in Taiwan

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This paper examines the cultural meaning of *Love Eterne* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai*, dir. Li Han-Xiang, 1963) from the perspective of queer history. I argue that the cross-influence of the cinematic representation of cross-dressing and extra-cinematic star discourse about the famous performer Lingbo (Ivy Ling Po) render her the epitome of female feminine masculinity, and her popularity among female fans, thus, can be read beyond a hetero-centric interpretation. Moreover, engaging with Taiwan’s cultural history from the perspective of a queer-positioned reader provides a different understanding of the journalistic accounts of the highly emotional and affective star-fan interaction as a form of representation, illuminating a homoerotic subtext. Through the narrative tropes and motifs of cross-dressing, female singing, and most importantly, female feminine masculinity as an object of women’s desire, two contemporary queer films—*The

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Peony Pavilion (Wo de meili yu aichou, dir. Chen Kuo-Fu, 1995) and Love Me, If You Can (Feiyue qinghai, dir. Alice Wang, 2003)—exemplify the legacy of Love Eterne and the Lingbo frenzy in the representation of female homoeroticism. This establishment of a genealogical relationship between the discourse of Love Eterne and contemporary queer films is proposed as a supplement to enrich the scholarship that conceptualizes the representations of female homoeroticism in the Taiwanese cultural context.

Keywords: Love Eterne, Lingbo, Lingbo frenzy, female feminine masculinity, female homoeroticism, maternal imaginary, The Peony Pavilion, Love Me, If You Can