

# THE QUEER EAST FILM FESTIVAL

**MARGINALISED VOICES ARE  
ON FULL DISPLAY AT THE  
QUEER EAST FILM FESTIVAL**







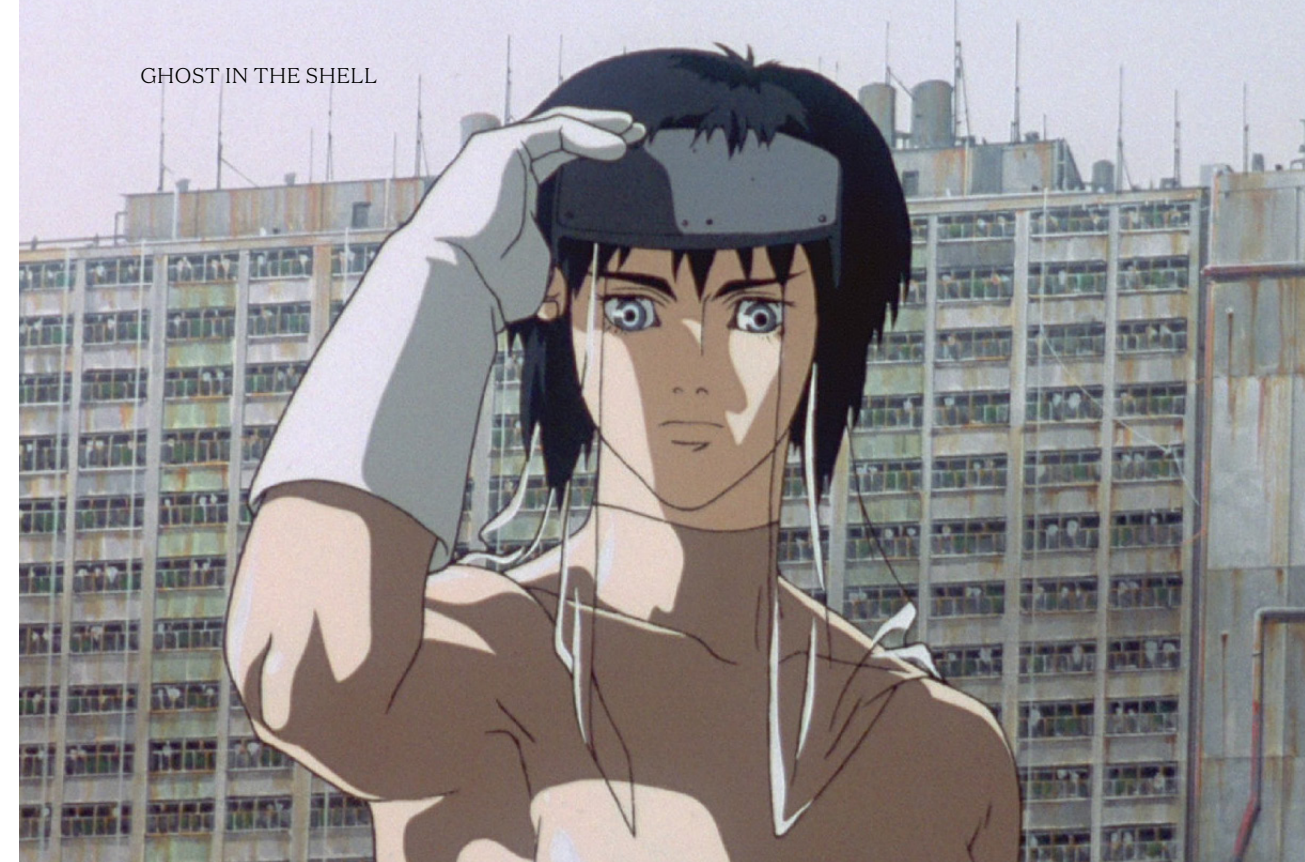
LAN YU CH



NUMBER 1



LEGIT MOMS, ILLEGITIMATE KID



GHOST IN THE SHELL

IT IS SAID (ACCORDING TO CHRIS BERRY'S ARTICLE, *SEXUAL DISORIENTATIONS: HOMOSEXUAL RIGHTS, EAST ASIAN FILMS, AND POSTMODERN POSTNATIONALISM*) THAT AT THE 1993 BERLIN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, ANG LEE'S *THE WEDDING BANQUET* PROVOKED A PECULIAR DISCUSSION AMONG THE CRITICS, SPECIFICALLY FROM AN ELDERLY GENTLEMEN FROM CHINA, WHO PROTESTED THAT THE FILM SHOULD NOT BE GIVEN A PRIZE, BECAUSE THE UNPRECEDENTED AND POWERFUL PORTRAYAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY BETWEEN A TAIWANESE AND AMERICAN MAN COULD NOT POSSIBLY BE TRUE. HE EXCLAIMED, "DIDN'T EVERYONE KNOW THERE WAS NO HOMOSEXUALITY IN CHINESE CULTURE?", MAINTAINING THAT THE FILM REPRESENTED WESTERN DECADENCE CORRUPTING 'TRADITIONAL' CHINESE VALUES.



However this attitude is not an outlier, but an all too common one, held by many in Asia more broadly, both socially and systemically within the legislature in many nations. Taiwan (Lee’s home country) is the most progressive when it comes to LGBTQ+ rights. For example there has never been a law against same-sexual activities, and there is a constitutional ban on all anti-gay discrimination. However in the likes of Brunei and Indonesia, there are laws that prohibit forms of gender expression and same-sex activity. But of course, how queer people are perceived by the law, and whether they are criminalised or not, does not reflect the social stigma they face, with many facing tremendous amounts even to this day.

“Advancing LGBTQ+ rights requires a collective approach” says Yi Wang, the organiser of The Queer East Film Festival, a week-long event taking place throughout London that showcases rarely-seen queer cinema from East and Southeast Asia, seeking to amplify the voices of Asian communities in the UK. “It is important that Queer East plays a part in this, as a joint force together with many other allies. Together, we can work on tackling inequalities both outside and within LGBTQ+ communities, and to ensure the full diversity of the queer community is well reflected through the power of film”.

The festival features a diverse collection of both modern UK premieres, examples of classic Queer Asian cinema, experimental art pieces and short films. For example, the previously mentioned *The Wedding Banquet* by Ang Lee is on the programme, as well as a 20th anniversary screening of the landmark Lan Yu from Hong Kong-based, Stanley Kwan. The film was produced without filming permissions in Beijing, and was based on an anonymous novel, posted to the internet in 1998, detailing the tragic love story of two men. Other screenings include a queer revisiting of the 1995 animation *Ghost in the Shell* by Mamoru Oshii and the 20th anniversary screening of Ryosuke Hashiguchi’s *Hush!* Also of note is South Korea’s award-winning drama *Moonlit Winter* by Daehyung Lim; and drag comedy *Number 1* from Singapore-based Kuo-Sin Ong.

*(Tending) (to) (Ta)* is a narrative-led speculative fiction film grounding itself in ‘tā’, the monosyllabic sound which in Mandarin Chinese encompasses all third person pronouns. The film follows an exchange of internal letters between two protagonists who imagine one another across parallel dimensions, exploring issues affecting those who identify as non-binary through a “reciprocal reach for the unknown, a world that bears an uncanny resemblance to our contemporary reality – colonised by Western capitalist constructs of race, gender and class”. The film’s director, April Lin , tells me that “*(Tending) (to) (Ta)* sprung from my ponderings on relationships [...] I had, and continue still, to reflect on what a relationship constitutes between its minimum of two parties”.

Interestingly, the key to understanding the narrative of *(Tending) (to) (Ta)* is through the language of Mandarin, and how queer activists have adopted the sound, ‘tā’, as a gender neutral pronoun. “I liked that this sound is used to refer to many kinds of others: ‘male’, ‘female’ and ‘more-than-human’, and so when writing this film I broadened that notion to see what it might look and feel like if ‘tā’ were to encompass all unknowns.

So why cinema? What does the medium of film provide for the activism efforts that perhaps literature (or any other cultural product) does not? “I believe that film is one of the most direct and accessible mediums, able to shine a light on issues and situations that people just weren’t aware of before”, says Yi. For director April Lin, it’s less that film is easily accessible, but more that “film contains an audiovisual and temporal container of images, and images are complex, they contain many layers of meaning – in how they are produced, received, remembered”.

Daniel Luther, co-founder of Queer Asia, and Teaching Fellow of Gender, Film and Media at the London School of Economics and Political Science, argues that “irrespective of location, there is an importance that cinema facilitates dialogue, conversation and understanding, building solidarity across all groups of people, including religion, gender, sexuality, nationality etc”. In relation to queer cinema, they state that “queer cinema has the radical potential to bring around transformation in the world”, and goes on to argue that it is important to guide that potential and enable those conversations, facilitating a way of learning that enables embracing difference as a way of life, paraphrasing the celebrated cultural theorist, Stuart Hall.

However, in their article, *Queer Curatorial Praxis: Learning from Failure at the “Queer” Asia Film Festival*, they deliberate - what actually is the meaning of queer cinema? “Is it simply enough to have LGBTQ+ people represented on screen, or is there something more to it, something different and reactive, that is not diversity tokenism, or full of tropes in which queer people feature.” In the article, they argue that it is “in the process of watching and interacting with these films that we find the radical potential of films to be queer”.

Furthermore, there is discussion around ‘queer curatorial praxis’ (a term coined by Daniel), in which they ask - “when we are running a film festival, or any other LGBTQ+ festival, what am I hoping comes out of it and what should we want the audience to take away?” For Daniel, they conclude that the helpful ‘queer curatorial praxis’, “lies in thinking about how we negotiate and navigate in such a way that we build solidarity, rather than being in a position of consuming images of queer people in ways that are uncritical”. Daniel concludes that, although they are not inherently damaging, “cultural events in general can run the risk of becoming complicit in the marketisation of queer people”.

Yi Wang, the Queer East Film Festival organiser, recognises this, and details that “when I programme for Queer East, I pay strong attention to the storytelling and topics of the films, and whether they represent a community and its culture in an authentic way. All too often, we see stereotypical portrayals of queer Asian characters, as a group of victims trapped within the restrictions of society. Of course, frustration, anger and oppression are a part of queer life; however, joy, happiness and celebration are also present, and I want these to be shown in our programming. I select films covering a wide range of topics, groups, genres and historical periods of East and Southeast Asian queer filmmaking, and create a programme that I feel offers a more three-dimensional perspective on the current queer landscape across Asia.”



QUEER JAPAN



GOHATTO



DAUGHTERS





DEAR TENANT



MY DEAR FRIEND



CLOSE KNIT



HISH!



MADAME X



MISS ANDY





NUMBER 1



MERRY CHRISTMAS MR LAWRENCE



DEAR TENANT



THE AIM OF THE FESTIVAL IS TO AMPLIFY VOICES OF THOSE IN THE UK ASIAN DIASPORA, WITH YI STATING THAT “THERE IS A NOTICEABLE LACK OF EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN QUEER FILMS AVAILABLE IN CINEMAS FOR THE PUBLIC [IN THE UK]”. THIS REFLECTION IS BAFFLING, CONSIDERING THAT “ASIANS ARE ONE OF THE FASTEST RISING ‘ETHNIC GROUPINGS’ IN THE UK’ AND “SOUTH EAST ASIANS HAVE DOUBLED IN SIZE SINCE 2001” ACCORDING TO GOV.UK. HOWEVER WITH EVENTS SUCH AS QUEER EAST, UK AUDIENCES CAN GAIN AN IMMEASURABLE, AND UNRELENTING PORTRAIT IOF THE LIVES AND TRUTHS OF LGBTQ+ INDIVIDUALS IN EAST AND SOUTH EAST ASIA, PROMPTING A REAL UNDERSTANDING OF, AND EMPATHY WITH THE LIVES OF THOSE PORTRAYED.