

Gender Role Reconstruction: LGBTQ+ Optimism in Mainland China Via Transgender Representation – Investigating Online Comments on Queer Films

Yunzhe Shao^{1,*} and Junyu Sheng²

¹ Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology, Taipa, Macau (China SAR)

² School of English, Jilin International Studies University, Changchun, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 1210032612@student.must.edu.mo

Abstract. The LGBTQ community is becoming more active as Mainland China's society starts to reflect a trend toward more diverse growth. People in Mainland China have also paid more attention to the transgender population from a queer cultural standpoint. Under the framework of Dramaturgy, as the mismatch between transgender people's psychological sex and physiological sex is not consistent with the expectations of gender roles under the usual concepts, it has initially caused the collapse and disappointment of the roles of other groups in the Chinese society, and thus a lot of unfriendly voices have appeared in the society. However, with the increase in the number of mainland images featuring transgender people, there has been an increase in the amount of images of transgender people that people have come across. By examining the public's comments on these images, it is possible to find out how attitudes towards the transgender community have changed and developed in Mainland China in recent years. This paper will focus on the LGBTQ+ group, especially the less focused community of transgender, from the perspective of Gender Roles and Dramaturgy. Through the research method of online ethnography, this study analysed the reviews of queer movies from different periods, and explore whether the queer community and the transgender community, which receives less attention among them, will have more room for survival in the future society of Mainland China. The author hopes that this article will serve as a reference for future transgender studies in Mainland China.

Keywords: Transgender community; gender role; dramaturgy; queer movies.

1. Introduction

Cultural openness, diversity and inclusiveness are symbols of the progress of civilisation in modern society. With the development of the film and television industry, queer movies are gradually entering the horizons of Mainland China's moviegoers. Transgender people, a subset of the concept of "LGBTQ+", have also increased in frequency in the public eye. Due to the cultural and political reasons in Mainland China, the public initially had a very shallow understanding of this community. Thus, transgender persons first came to the public's attention as a source of curiosity. However, with the development of society, the level of people's awareness of this community has increased significantly and people began to attempt to redefine the social roles of transgender people and fight for more rights for them. This article will analyse several representative online comments on transgender images from the early 21st century to the present day. It also demonstrates how the gender and social roles of the transgender community have been reconstructed in the public eye, and thus concludes that the transgender community will have a more positive social environment in Mainland China in the future.

The concept of gender is commonly used to distinguish physiological differences between men and women, and gender roles are similar to social roles, referring to different behavioural norms caused by different roles in daily life. Academia believes that gender can be distinguished by sex and gender, with the former emphasising physiological differences between genders and the latter emphasising differences in behavioural norms caused by physiological differences [1].

The definition of Transgender was proposed by scholars in the 1970s, but to date, there is still no exact definition in academia. However, the widely accepted definition of "transgender" as a collective term involves not only individuals who have undergone gender reassignment but also the full range of gender-reversal components [2, 3].

For the most part, the discussion of gender roles tends to be confined under the framework of the two genders, male and female, ignoring the marginalised community within gender, the transgender community. The gender role attributes of this community cannot be solely based on the behaviour norms of male and female roles. Due to the special situation caused by the difference between physiological and psychological genders, the role portraits of this community go against the traditional theory of gender roles and therefore cause ambiguity in the community's understanding of their social roles.

Dramaturgy views society as a stage where people in society will play their roles according to the expectations of society and conform their behaviour to the role [4]. Role-playing has two dimensions: impression management and self-presentation, which means presenting oneself to others in such a way that they perceive the role-playing in terms of their own internal expectations and expect to receive a response from the other person that meets their psychological expectations. Transgender community plays different roles at the gender level, and this identity leads them to expect the same treatment and equal rights as other gender roles in society. The positive response and attitude towards the transgender community in society will strongly confirm that this community will have more room for survival and development, as well as a reasonable voice.

Based on a search of the literature of previous studies, this study found that most of the studies were conducted under the macro perspective of the "queer theory". Queer encompasses homosexuals, bisexuals, transgender, transvestite, sadomasochistic, and heterosexuals who subscribe to and practice the queer theory [5]. While most of the discussion in these studies has centred on the group of "homosexuals", the literature on transgender, which is also a subset of the "queer community", is much less accessible.

The literature on in-depth investigation and research of queer community represented by the transgender community in Mainland China is very scarce. This article believes that a representative paper is "The present Chinese youth queer culture studies". The authors of this paper conducted a documentary study of the survival status of the Chinese queer community from the perspective of cultural research, through the method of interview and survey [6]. The author of this article believes that queer culture not only involves human rights issues of sexual minorities but is also a symptom of a subcultural phenomenon.

Since the research direction of this paper is from the perspective of "queer movies", this study also collects some literature on related movies in Mainland China. The paper "Cabinet Image: The Discourse Dilemma and Development Trend of Queer Cinema in Mainland China" analyses queer movies in Mainland China [7]. It explains why such movies are in a deep dilemma in terms of development in Mainland China and the dilemma of discussion space. It also reflects the plight of transgender and other queer communities in Mainland China. The paper "Research on Transgender Culture in Films" analyses the transgender culture in the images and believes that transgender is becoming a social trend, a behaviour seeking value and community identity [2]. Yet at the same time, this ideology will inevitably undergo distortion under the constraints of traditional social concepts.

2. Evolution of Role Construction - Changes in Comment Attitudes

As a medium, the movies have the function of expressing culture. Whether it is documentaries about transgender community or drama movies with related themes, it cannot be denied that movies with this theme have made certain contributions to the self-expression of the transgender community. As a form of visual art, the movies are more intuitive and visually appealing in expressing the themes of the transgender community. The creation and dissemination of transgender movies have a significant impact on the culture dominated by heterosexual hegemony.

Setting aside the creation of the movie texts themselves, the research will focus on the audience who watch transgender movies. Their feedback and comments on the images can also reflect how people in Mainland China perceive the transgender community, as well as explore the public opinion space of the transgender community in Mainland China. Collecting a series of comments from the audience about images of the transgender community on the internet can get a rough emotional profile of the audience. At the same time, analyse the audience's attitudes and perceptions towards gender roles of the transgender community.

This article collects several representative queer movies produced and released in Mainland China at different times from 2007 to 2023. Using the methodology of online ethnography, online reviews of related movies (not for the films themselves, but mainly for the expression of viewing attitudes) were collected and screened on Douban, a mainstream film fan-sharing platform in Mainland China. This article attempts to summarise the development of attitudes towards this group in Mainland China over the last decade, the change in other communities' expectations for this community's role, and how to help rebuild the confidence in gender roles of the transgender community.

3. The Collapse and Disappointment of the Roles

As the maiden work of contemporary female director Li Yu, *Fish and Elephant* is known as "the first lesbian film in Mainland China". Although the movie was not about the transgender community, it was about lesbians in the queer community. As the first Chinese lesbian movie in the eyes of the public, the audience's comments on it are still very meaningful.

Table 1. Comments on *Fish and Elephant* [7]

Movie	Comment Time	Reviewer	Content	Source
<i>Fish and Elephant</i>	2007-02-17	A	The picture is rough. However, for Mainland movies, it is a subversion.	Douban
<i>Fish and Elephant</i>	2007-12-14	B	I do not like the les in this, but maybe it is everywhere in real life just we do not know it.	Douban
<i>Fish and Elephant</i>	2007-01-18	C	Mum said: "Then I really do not get it."	Douban

The movie was released in 2001, and early reviews that can be found about the movie were mainly posted in the winter of 2007. The three comments in Table 1 are considered representative comments selected by this study, and most of the comments during this period contain emotions that are approximately the same as the three above. Many people think that the appearance of this kind of theme in the audience's view in Mainland China is a subversion, which can reflect that the topic of Queer was deliberately suppressed by society at that time. Artistic works on this theme and the exploration of related communities are greatly limited, and the public knows very little about it. There were also a large number of people who expressed incomprehension, indicating that the emergence of such a community has broken through some viewers' perceptions of traditional gender roles. The gender role construction of the queer community has not been formed, so many people's comments reflect negative comments on the role cognition of this group, such as being seen for the first time, rare, abnormal, etc. This provides a more powerful argument for the lack of knowledge about the relevant communities among people in that era, as well as a certain degree of disappointment with the role-playing by this community. This study also found a significant portion of rational thought about same-sex relationships, but the number of comments was completely unable to compete with the negative comments during the same period.

Similar comments can be found in other Queer movies of the same period in Table 2.

Table 2. Comments on *Men and Women* and *The Box* [8, 9]

Movie	Comment Time	Reviewer	Content	Source
<i>Men and Women</i>	2009-08-26	D	There are gays and lesbians. It's rare to see it taken in mainland China.	Douban
<i>The Box</i>	2008-03-28	F	My first exposure to homosexual movies.	Douban

Summarising from the times as well as the emotional overtones in the comments, it is reasonable to believe that in Mainland China at the beginning of the 21st century, people's acceptance of homosexual communities under the concept of queer community presents a generally low level. The social roles of queer people make people feel disappointed.

4. The Reconstruction of the Roles

However, when moving back less than a decade, this phenomenon has undergone a significant transformation. In 2016, *Gender in Bias Out*, which was released in Mainland China, is a short documentary about the current situation of the transgender community through interviews. Through the comments on this documentary, different attitudes can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Comments on *Gender in Bias Out* [10]

Movie	Comment Time	Reviewer	Content	Source
<i>Gender in Bias Out</i>	2009-08-26	E	The film directly allows transgender people to be the interviewers, empathetic, convincing and closer to the interviewees. I hope more and more documentaries like this will come out, what we lack is understanding.	Douban
<i>Gender in Bias Out</i>	2008-03-28	F	Unable to empathise, but at the very least, we should not use malicious language.	Douban
<i>Gender in Bias Out</i>	2017-08-28	G	I actually think this kind of person is quite pitiful. The female soul enters a male body and cannot gain self-identity.	Douban
<i>Gender in Bias Out</i>	2017-09-02	H	As a transsexual, this kind of exposure really warms the heart... Every day, I spend my fear in rumours, especially when my parents do not understand anything. Parents dare not tell outsiders, whether it's relatives or colleagues. I hope that in the future, there will be a more tolerant attitude towards Female-to-Male, Male-to-Female, and the gay community.	Douban
<i>Gender in Bias Out</i>	2017-09-22	I	I won't discriminate, but if you are talking about prejudice, there must be some bias. Because we normal people just do not get it! I am quite open-minded, but if there are people like this around me, I will definitely have some discussions or take a few more glances! I hope there is more of this kind of promotion, after all, it exists for a reason.	Douban

Through these representative comments, it can be found that can find that in less than 10 years, people seem to have less unfamiliarity and exclusion towards movies on this subject and the

emergence of the transgender community. People have begun to explore such movies and topics more boldly in the online space of public discussion. The public's curiosity and drive to learn more about these groups can be sensed. A number of viewers belonging to the transgender community participated in the public discussion below the movie. Therefore, it can be inferred that the public's acceptance of it is becoming increasingly positive. However, there is also a certain emotional attitude that pervades them: "not discriminating against this group" and "feeling pitiful", these arguments reveal the public's perception of the transgender community as a vulnerable community. Using gender role theory to construct transgender gender group portraits during this period, a marginalised community under the construct of non-dominant gender. The transgender community is mixed in with traditional values of male and female, and gender roles are still ambiguous. This is reflected in the movie's reviews: many people are beginning to be concerned about the careers that the transgender community engage in society, and whether this particular perception of gender will have a different impact on their careers. At the same time, these phenomena also bring some positive signals: both the rest of the public and the transgender community itself are beginning to think about and construct the social role of transgender people in the social stage- even if that role is vulnerable, marginalised and deserving of pity. The identity of this role is in the process of being constructed, and the transgender community has a relatively normal definition of their roles, which reduces the level of public disappointment with their roles. Transgender individuals have their own identities, people are beginning to try to shed a traditional gender perspective to view this community, and society's tolerance for this community greatly increasing.

5. Confidence in the Roles

This positive concept for queer community represented by the transgender community has been continuously advancing and developing in recent years. This study found more positive social signals in some comments of transgender movies between 2020 and 2023 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Positive Comments on Transgender Movies [10-13]

Movie	Comment time	Reviewer	Content	Source
<i>Out of Place: Transgender Stories from Asia</i>	2020-10-29	J	I may not be a qualified supporter of the LGBT community but seeing them constantly striving to become themselves makes my eyes wet. There is such a group living in the darkness, I wish one day you could all walk in the sunshine with a smile.	Douban
<i>Gender in Bias Out</i>	2021-05-27	K	Although I am not transgender, I would definitely choose to speak up for them if given the opportunity,	Douban
<i>Gender in Bias Out</i>	2023-07-21	L	Brave, beautiful, and worthy of respect.	Douban
<i>A Day of Trans</i>	2022-01-04	M	But I still wish there were still more domestic LGBT films...	Douban
<i>A Day of Trans</i>	2022-01-04	N	There's queer, non-binary and agender content! Very happy to see such a perspective.	Douban
<i>The Two Lives of Li Ermao</i>	2022-05-10	O	As a documentary audience, I am no different from the people on stage in the movie, and I also want to cheer him on.	Douban

This article selects three representative transgender movies and identifies the audience's comments on these films in the past three years. It can be concluded from this that the overall emotional attitude

of the reviews is more positive. People began to expect more images on the subject and attempt to resonate with the transgender groups in the film. Moreover, these comments show that more and more other communities want to speak up for the transgender community, and their tolerance and understanding of transgender groups have greatly developed. They have begun to seek more attention and equal rights to help the transgender community. On a certain level, the social role of the transgender community is beginning to be understood – a third sex that is independent of the male and female genders and is not bound by the social stereotypes of the two sexes. This means that the transgender community has found its own social role. Images are created from cultural representations, and movies and documentaries on transgender and other queer communities are created. The fundamental reason for this is the hope that society will pay more attention to this community. This is in line with the social expectations of transgender and other queer communities to fulfil their social roles and present themselves to the society. Transgender individuals are becoming increasingly clear and confident in their role-playing and have the opportunity to achieve better living space and development in the future.

6. Conclusion

Unlike both cisgender males and females, the LGBTQ+ community, represented by transgender people, as a marginalised group in the concept of gender does not conform to society's expectations of gender roles, and as a result, society's overall early attitudes towards this community are not friendly. Seeking social recognition and equal rights with other gender roles, they actively present and introduce themselves to the outside world in the hope of gender role and social role reconstruction. As people become more open-minded and tolerant, some images revealing the lives of transgender have shown the public their living conditions from the perspective of this community, prompting other groups to start thinking about their rights and demands and to reflect and reconstruct their roles from a social perspective. In recent years, it can be learnt from the reflection of Mainland China audience groups on transgender movies that the cognitive changes of the general gender community are positive for the transgender community. The transgender community's active self-role reconstruction and the audience's generally clearer positive perception of the transgender community's role will lead to a more positive social hope for the transgender community in Mainland China.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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