Implications of Recent Chinese-language LGBT+ Films for Gender Equality Education

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Abstract. As a solution to gender discrimination that remains a serious problem today, gender equality education is receiving increasing attention around the globe. How to teach gender equality more effectively, in this context, becomes a pressing issue. The study takes eight Chinese-language LGBT+ films released in the past five years, including Tracey (2018), Dear Ex (2018), The Two Lives of Li Ermao (2019), All in My Family (2019), Twilight's Kiss (2019), Your Name Engraved Herein (2020), Dear Tenant (2020), Secrets of 1979 (2021), as the analysis texts, aiming to find the educational implications of the films for gender equality and thus discuss the feasibility of applying them to classroom teaching. The study finds that Chinese-language LGBT+ films generally succeed in reflecting the difficulties faced by LGBT+ groups in corresponding regions. Although they are still not free from gender stereotypes, the negative impact of such can be dissipated through methods such as class discussions. Therefore, the study argues that Chinese-language LGBT+ films are generally meaningful and educational from the perspective of gender equality and can be used as teaching tools as long as they are carefully and critically examined. In this way, they can help eliminate gender discrimination and build respect for diverse sexualities.

Keywords: Gender equality education; Chinese-language LGBT+ films; Films as teaching tools.

1. Introduction

As an emerging subject, gender equality education is now needing innovation in teaching methods. Films, as an important part of popular culture, reflect and discuss social reality from different perspectives, and are therefore often used as a teaching aid for various subjects. As LGBT+ contents continue to appear in Chinese-language films and gradually steps from the niche market toward the center of the stage, using LGBT+ films in teaching gender equality becomes an idea worth discussing.

Most of the previous studies analyzed LGBT+ films from artistic and sociological perspectives, such as the characteristics and evolution of such films, and the image-building of LGBT+ characters. In terms of education, even if there were links between film/television materials and gender equality, such as television commercials and cartoons concerning gender stereotypes, they were mostly focused on equality between two sexes rather than diverse genders and sexualities. Therefore, this study is intended to fill the research gap and provide new ideas for teaching practice by introducing LGBT+ films from the perspective of gender equality education.

Based on the aforementioned background, the study takes eight films, including Tracey (2018) [1], Dear Ex (2018) [2], The Two Lives of Li Ermao (2019) [3], All in My Family (2019) [4], Twilight's Kiss (2019) [5], Your Name Engraved Herein (2020) [6], Dear Tenant (2020) [7], Secrets of 1979 (2021) [8], as the research objects. The aim is to analyze the features of gender profiles presented in recent Chinese-language LGBT+ films, reveal their educational values, and discuss the feasibility of applying such films to classroom teaching of gender equality education. In light of the above research objectives, this study seeks to address the following three specific questions:

1) What kind of gender profile is presented in recent Chinese-language LGBT+ films?
2) What are the implications of these films for gender equality education?
3) Is it feasible to apply these films to gender equality classroom teaching?

2. Gender Profile Presented in Recent Chinese-language LGBT+ Films

2.1 Replication of Inherent Gender Stereotypes

As a kind of mass media, films naturally reflect social realities, either consciously or unconsciously. At the same time, because there is a pressing need for films, especially commercial films, to appeal to audiences, they may actively follow the stereotypes that society has always held about different groups to cater to the preferences of the mainstream. In today's society, where sexism is a reality and stereotypes are widely embedded in people's minds, films about LGBT+, whether intentionally or unintentionally, often have identical gender stereotypes as in heterosexual films.

Conventionally, masculinity, robustness, extroversion, and bravery are often positively valued in men, while women are, by contrast, feminine, slim, introverted, and modest. If there are traits in a person that do not match his or her gender, it is considered a "misplacement" and can lead to implicit discrimination or bullying. Examples can be found in Your Name Engraved Herein, in which a schoolboy is beaten for his homosexuality and femininity [6], and in Secrets of 1979, one of the heroines of which is a "manly woman" and therefore mocked by classmates [8]. At the same time, the reverence for a masculine, robust male body extends from the heterosexual community to gay men. The logic is that since gay men are also men, they should look and act like real men [9]. This tendency to make a single image the "normal" and "standard" can easily slip into the tyranny of buffness, i.e., the excessive obsession with the fit body to the exclusion of other "non-mainstream" bodies. The above can explain why in many gay and lesbian films, the active party in the relationship is always strong and tough, while the passive party thin and fragile. They simply follow the common stereotypes of the two sexes in heterosexual films, which is a pitiful compromise for LGBT+ films that are, in the first place, supposed to be breaking with conventions.

It is acknowledged that the gender stereotypes in a film do not necessarily represent the director's or writer's personal views and may be used for the sake of artistic expression, but from the perspective of gender equality education, it is necessary to have the awareness and ability to identify them.

2.2 Confusion of Self-identity and Denial From Others

Traditional Chinese societies reject homosexual and transgender groups. Growing up in such an environment into adolescence, LGBT+ people are highly susceptible to a self-identity crisis. On the one hand, education at home, school, and society do not offer the option of being "non-straight"; on the other hand, LGBT+ adolescents at the stage of sexual initiation can feel their difference but fail to explain it by themselves. In the Two Lives of Li Ermao, Ermao, a transgender woman, felt vaguely she "always liked boys" during her adolescence, but "didn't understand" this feeling, and still tried to date girls before finally confessing her desire of "being a woman" [8]. It is evident that such a self-identity crisis not only affects oneself but also may inadvertently hurt others.

Once LGBT+ people have established their self-identity, the lack of understanding from family is another barrier to be crossed. Like the majority of the Chinese community, there is a high probability that their family members have not been educated about gender equality and are unaware of, or even prejudiced against, the LGBT+ community. To defend old values and maintain the stability of the family structure, they often ignore the coming out of LGBT+ relatives and deny their self-identity. In Tracey, when Tai-hung appears in front of her wife in female clothing and confesses her transgender identity, her wife's reaction is to ask her to see the doctor and beg her to pretend nothing has happened [6]. It shows resistance to reality due to the fear of drastic changes. In Secrets of 1979, after learning the girl he adores is lesbian, Siang says he knows girls tend to form "little circles" at this stage, and it is all temporary [8]. It is out of the arrogance and indifference of the dominant central group to the disadvantaged marginalized groups in the patriarchal society.

The confusion of self-identity and the negativity from others form a contrast, highlighting the weakness of LGBT+ individuals themselves and the great pressure from the outside world, and the superposition of the two leads to more obstacles for LGBT+ in Chinese society.

2.3 Resistance in Society and Compromise in the Family

Another interesting contrast is that while Chinese LGBT+ groups are becoming more active in social movements and speaking out for their rights, they still tend to conceal their identity within their families or make subtle unspoken compromises with other family members. The former is due to the development of the worldwide LGBT+ movements and the efficient exchange of information in the Internet age, while the latter is largely due to the Chinese tradition of valuing family and ethical relationships and the Confucian principle of "cherishing harmony".

Scenes reflecting the LGBT+ groups' resistance in society include both LGBT+ campaigns such as the protest of Chi Chia-Wei, one of first Taiwan's LGBT+ rights activists, recreated in Your Name Engraved Herein [6], but also political movements in the broad sense of pursuing freedom, democracy, and human rights, for example, the Formosa Incident mentioned in Secrets of 1979 [8]. Although the latter is not directly related to LGBT+, it can be considered as a metaphor for LGBT+ groups' struggle for social acceptance because its spirit of fighting against the system and fighting for their rights coincides with the demands of the LGBT+ community.

In contrast, within the family, Chinese LGBT+ individuals have shown exceptional forbearance. In Dear Ex, Song Zhengyuan kept the secret of his being gay during years of heterosexual marriage [2]. It is more dramatically demonstrated in All in My Family. The Chinese-born director who married his husband and had surrogate children in the U.S. describes his situation: "After having lived openly and proudly in America for over 20 years, I find it frustrating to have to go back into the closet whenever I see grandpa in Chengdu. [4]" Such inconsistency of identity between the inside and the outside is the root of the dilemma faced by Chinese LGBT+ people.

3. Implications of Chinese-language LGBT+ Films for Gender Equality Education

3.1 Letting the Community be Seen

Increasing the visibility of the LGBT+ community and social discussions of related issues is an important value of these films. In the real life of Chinese society, most people do not have many opportunities to meet LGBT+ people in person--or they will not realize when they do, let alone to communicate. Traditionally, public toilets, public baths, and parks at night are common places where gay men gather in Chinese communities [10]. These spaces are dark, damp, and narrow, and gay men who are forced to marry and have children due to secular pressures and traditional beliefs can only go to such unseen places to escape from families and relieve loneliness. For the sake of self-protection, the social circles of the LGBT+ are relatively fixed, bringing them two-way barriers with outsiders.

Films, however, provide the public with a glimpse of the community. People are seeing more of them on the screen and are thus having a better knowledge of them. From the early homosexual films in the last century which focused on young gays and lesbians to nowadays, transgender, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and other more marginalized groups, as well as gays and lesbians of all ages, are appearing on the screen. In addition to Twilight's Kiss and Tracey, which focus on elder gay men and elder transgender groups respectively as mentioned above [1, 5], there are also All About Love (2010) and Papa & Daddy (2021), which discuss the diverse family formation of lesbian and gay couples respectively, and Hijra: In Between (2018), which tells a story of an intersex person.

The three-dimensional portrayal of the LGBT+ can also be seen through the way of presentation. For example, the story of Dear Ex is told in a witty and humorous tone, with hand-drawn animation to assist the narrative [2], which makes it more acceptable to the general audience and breaks away from the binary moral criticism, so that people can easily understand the situation of the characters and truly think about the LGBT+ issues in reality.

3.2 Allowing Understanding of the Domestic Dilemma

As demonstrated in 2.3, LGBT+ people in Chinese society are often forced to hide their gender identity due to cultural and practical considerations. Thus, the coming out of a Chinese person is not simply a personal choice, but also cannot be separated from family relationships. This mixed and contradictory nature makes the confession of one family member a great potential challenge for the whole family [11]. In All in My Family, the director's mother admitted that it took at least two or three years from her son's coming out to her eventual acceptance of this reality, and even now that she has accepted it, she still dares not confess to the director's grandfather because of his old values and desire of having the family's offsprings [4].

It reveals the profound influence of traditional family values on Chinese people. As the only son in the family, not only does one have to meet the social expectation of being successful in a career, which is already a lot of pressure, but he also has to take on the ethical responsibility of passing on the family name to the next generation. Under such circumstances, if he has to deal with homophobic parents, which is, in fact, very likely to be the case in current Chinese society, he may have to reconsider the decision of coming out. On the other hand, parents who suddenly learn of their children's "abnormal" sexualities, are faced with a situation in which their values, authority, and social connections are all challenged at the same time, especially in the case of elder people, and full acceptance is never an easy goal to achieve. For LGBT+ children, the struggle between the desire to be accepted by their beloved ones and the fear of rejection often becomes a heavy mental burden.

In addition, because people's values do not necessarily become more progressive with the change of generations, middle-aged and elder LGBT+ people not only face pressure from parents and peers but are also likely to suffer from the lack of understanding of their children. People tend to have higher expectations of those who are more intimate with them. Although some people claim to be LGBT-friendly, they fail to treat their families the same as friends and strangers, because the sexualities of outsiders have little impact on them, while the sudden "change" of someone inside the family can hugely affect their current life. The son of transgender Tai-hung in Tracey breaks down in anger after accidentally seeing his father on street in women's clothing, however, he has always claimed himself a supporter of gender equality and has shown the rainbow avatar on social media. His girlfriend mocked him: "Turns out everyone can be a gay, trans, crossdresser, whatever they want, as long as it never comes to your own family. [1]"

In the relationship between Tai-hung and his son, there is the selfishness of the son, his fear and self-defense in the face of the unknown; at the same time, there is also the father's unconditional love for his child and his guilt in letting down his wife and son. The seemingly simple "coming out" of a person involves complex ethical and emotional entanglements, the rights and wrongs of which cannot be easily told. The extraordinarily complicated situation of the Chinese LGBT+ indicates the great influence of "family" as a core concept in Chinese culture.

3.3 Inspiring Rethinking of Gender Power Relations

Since LGBT+ films bring to the public a narrative that is different from the mainstream heterosexual perspective, it becomes possible that current gender power relations are rethought and changed. This challenge to gender power implies not only the rebellion of women against patriarchy, such as the rebellion of Lan, a Chinese Malaysian student, against the family-mandated marriage in Secret of 1979 [8], but also the rebellion of femininity against masculinity, or, a broader level, the rebellion of minorities against the hegemony of the majority.

In Your Name Engraved Herein, the bullied boy is beaten for his fair and weak appearance, but after being treated violently by his classmates, he resolutely says he has always liked boys and will never change in the future in the face of Jia-Han's sympathy and "advice" [6]. The contrast between such inner bravery and the outer lack of masculinity proves that there is no necessary connection between a person's appearance and personality, holding the power to break the gender dichotomy.

Lin in Dear Tenant, also a "weak-looking" man, questions the rationality of current gender power relations when interrogated by the police: "If I were a woman, my husband passed away and I

continued to take care of his parent and child, would you have asked me the same question? [7]" It reveals the absurdity of the exclusion of the LGBT+ from the functioning family system. Inheritance and custody rights, which have nothing to do with gender or sexuality, are disqualified from the LGBT+ due to the monopoly of heterosexuality on the right to speak in the patriarchal society. It is probable for viewers to question the system and have a chance to think about the causes of the problem.

In any case, the subversion of gender power relations is not intended to establish a new gender hegemony, but to provoke social discussion and reflection. Even if there is controversy or even a heated clash of opinions, it is better than having the whole society's opinion monopolized by one voice. It is controversies that are often the norm in the history of civil society [12], and when citizens are willing and able to engage in controversy, it can be the beginning of mutual understanding.

4. Feasibility of Using Chinese-language LGBT+ Films for Gender Equality Teaching

4.1 Multimedia Technology as an Aid to Film Teaching

Using multimedia in classroom teaching is a teaching method that has become increasingly popular and valued in recent decades. The use of multimedia in the classroom not only makes the teaching material more visible, audible, and relatable, but also enhances students' participation, stimulates their enthusiasm for learning, and brings them a better learning experience. The spread of mass media has made it possible for various audio-visual materials, which may be far from the class in terms of time and space, to come to the classroom instantly for efficient teaching and learning.

Films as teaching materials have been used globally in different subjects. As Loretta F. Kasper said, "Films can clarify comprehension, consolidate concept and reinforce learning. [13]" As early as 1971, U.S. research on teaching English as a second language showed that students improved in listening, speaking, reading, and writing after documentaries were used in class [14]. Since then, more types of films have been used in the teaching of more subjects, such as feature films as teaching tools in psychology and social work education, and commercial films for teaching health sciences.

In recent years, there has been a lot of research and practice on using films in classroom teaching in China. Related studies and achievements of the U.S., a pioneer in this field, have naturally received special attention from Chinese academics. An in-depth analysis of using Hollywood films in American secondary history teaching suggests that this is a change brought about by the new technologies, reflecting the great influence of a highly developed media, and at the same time helping to enhance students' interest in history learning, consolidate what they have learned, and improve critical thinking skills [15]. In terms of teaching practice, Chinese schools at different levels have also gone from using films mainly in liberal arts classes in the past to applying them to all subjects; from using mainly official and semi-official propaganda films in the past to commercial and imported films also being widely used nowadays. For example, mathematics, science fiction, and English language films are used for teaching middle school mathematics, physics, and English language respectively. Gradually, diverse genres of films are more seen in classes of various subjects.

In light of this, a similar approach could be taken in teaching gender equality by bringing LGBT+ films into the class. As for the genre of films to be chosen, previous researchers and teachers usually preferred either documentaries or feature films. This study argues that each has its strengths--documentaries are more realistic about society and its problems, less whitewashed or biased because of less interference of commercial interests; feature films have a stronger appeal to students, and their dramatic conflicts make the focused problem very obvious. Therefore, with sufficient class time, it is advised that both are taken into account to provide students with more diverse perspectives.

4.2 Advantages of LGBT+ Films for Teaching Gender Equality

As part of gender equality education, LGBT+ film teaching is expected to allow students to recognize gender diversity, to critically think about gender issues, to see the collision of values, and to develop empathy and respect for the LGBT+ community by providing different narratives.

Any ideological progress of the whole society is a long and difficult process. Gender inequality remains a serious problem worldwide. In 2020 alone, a total of 1,207 crimes against the LGBT+ were reported in 36 countries, including 352 threats, 117 attacks against property, and 739 violent attacks against people [16]. Taiwan, the most tolerant of the LGBT+ of all Chinese-speaking countries, and one of such of all Asian countries, has anti-LGBT+ campaigns launched by political and religious groups even after the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2019 [17]. Gender discrimination and prejudice have never disappeared.

In confronting this problem, films can play a unique role and have the advantage of imperceptible influence. While LGBT+ films may not necessarily be the most radical push for change, they are also far from being merely artistic expression and entertainment. This is because, in addition to their gender-friendly socio-educational implications, LGBT+ films also have the potential to assist teachers in educating about gender equality in the public schooling system. Whether in or out of school, on formal or informal occasions, understanding the LGBT+ community through LGBT+ films and thus discussing gender issues rationally is an effective way to learn about gender equality. These films are not only different in subject matter, but more importantly, they provide a different narrative from the heterosexual "usual", allowing viewers to see the lifestyles and plight of the LGBT+. Therefore, film teaching expects students to be exposed to and engage in dialogue about gender issues while and after watching LGBT+ films, and thus to empathize with people of different sexualities.

4.3 Suggestions for Film Teaching Using LGBT+ Films

The role of films is to help teaching and learning, so teachers should arrange film teaching according to the curriculum and teaching objectives. To foster gender equality and diversity awareness and to achieve desired results, the following advice on operational details is worth noting.

First, the film's content must be aligned with the course. If not all of the film is relevant, only the relevant parts may be shown. To ensure this, the teacher must have watched the film in advance, be fully aware of the content to be shown in class, and have assessed the relevance of the content. Before the screening, teachers should provide students with necessary introductions and warnings, such as the context in which the film was made, difficult terms, and scenes that certain groups of people may find uncomfortable. During the screening, the teacher should be present from start to finish and pay attention to students' reactions. Once the screening has begun, avoid interruptions or disruptions; if additional clarification is needed, pause until the clarification finishes, but remember to limit the length and number of pauses to not distract students or affect the coherence of their understanding. If there is a need for extra emphasis, consider replaying a clip if the circumstances allow. Finally, discussion, commenting, and questioning should be arranged, preferably immediately, after watching, when students have the clearest impression.

Extra attention is needed that post-watching discussions are an indispensable part of film teaching, because, unlike textbooks, some of the content in films, especially commercial films, may deviate from, or even contradict, the values that the course is intended to guide. Teachers may not avoid the issue, but rather give students ample space to think and discuss, and take the opportunity to exercise their critical thinking skills to achieve more desired pedagogical goals.

5. Conclusion

The study analyzes the implications of gender equality education in recent Chinese-language LGBT+ films and has the following findings.

Firstly, Chinese-language LGBT+ films reflect the dilemmas faced by the LGBT+ in Chinese society. They are subjected to gender stereotypes and need to deal with the confusion and anxiety

brought about by self-identity crises. External pressure comes from both society and family, and because of traditional Chinese culture's emphasis on the concept of family, the LGBT+ are often less bold or powerful in the struggle against family pressure than they are in that against social pressure.

Secondly, these films have positive implications for gender equality education. The diverse narratives bring the possibility of breaking gender bias and stereotypes. From the basic understanding of LGBT+, students are likely to gradually learn about the situation, especially the difficulties of the community, and then rethink the irrationality of the current gender power relations.

Finally, these films can be used for teaching gender equality. With the spread of multimedia, films as teaching tools are accepted in classes of various subjects worldwide. If teachers are well-prepared beforehand, operate properly during the screening, and allow sufficient discussion afterward, teaching objectives of making students recognize gender diversity, think about gender issues, and respect and empathize with LGBT+ are likely to be achieved.

The study is expected to promote the thinking about and practice of using LGBT+ films for teaching gender equality. Due to time and other constraints, only eight Chinese-language LGBT+ films were selected as analysis texts, of which four were produced in Taiwan, two in Hong Kong, one in mainland China, and one in the U.S. and China. The films were selected considering both reputation and influence, so they were mostly feature films; however, there was a lack of such films in China and independent documentaries were selected instead. Given the huge population in China, it is clear that only one and a half independent documentaries are far from enough to fully reflect the current situation and culture of the LGBT+ community in the region.

The study uses textual analysis, which has methodological limitations, so it is expected that the following studies can be conducted using different methods such as interviews and teaching experiments. In addition, there have been high-quality LGBT+ films worldwide. Future studies can extend their attention to non-Chinese-speaking regions and find the feasibility of using foreign-language LGBT+ films for teaching gender equality, leading to cross-border discussions, such as the impact of racial and cultural differences on gender equality, for enrichment.

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