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Chapter 8 Gay Men in/and *Kangsi* Coming

Oscar Tianyang Zhou

Introduction

In September 2015, I interviewed Tiger-Girl, a 32-year-old Chinese gay man in Beijing, who was a video game designer.¹ Like many other Beijing drifters, he came from an industrial city in the northeast of Hebei province, China, and moved to the city to seek a better life. Tiger-Girl was a loyal fan of TV entertainment. When asked about memorable images of gay men in the Chinese-language media, he cited two male entertainers, Mix Xiao (肖骁, a gender-nonconforming Chinese TV celebrity) and Edison Fan (樊野, a hunky Chinese influencer and gay model) from the popular Chinese online talk show *U Can U Bibi* (奇葩说; iQIYI, 2014–2021), to exemplify the two most common ways gay men have been constructed by Chinese-language media and popular culture, as either “sissy” or “outstanding” (which refers to the “macho” men).² Tiger-Girl explained that being gay means “two men love each other in a manly way.” Therefore, by lacking masculinity, effeminate gay men like Mix Xiao “have a negative impact on the Chinese gay community, who only reinforce the stereotypes of gay men as ‘sissies’ (娘娘腔).” By contrast, Tiger-Girl highly commended Edison Fan for his masculine images and viewed him as a positive role model for Chinese gay men. Tiger-Girl’s story led me to wonder what the social meanings of the new “gay” images on entertainment media screens, such as Mix Xiao and Edison Fan, are, and how these representations can create new meanings of Chinese gay sexualities. How and why do these new gay representations differ from their precursors in the Chinese-language media?

The representation of gender and sexual minorities matters, for as Richard Dyer has written, “how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in

¹ This interview stems from my recent research project that examines the cultural politics of gay men’s everyday media practices in China, which included semi-structured ethnographic interviews with self-identified Chinese gay men in Beijing between 2015 and 2016.

² *U Can U Bibi* is one of China’s most popular online talk shows, aired on iQIYI since 2014, which features a debate competition joint by both influential celebrities and newcomers of entertainment industry to discuss contemporary socio-cultural issues in China.

life” (2002, 1). “How we are seen,” he expands, “determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation” (Dyer 2002, 1). Representation is vitally important for queers, particularly when they lack the support of queer communities. Lianrui Jia and Tianyang Zhou (2015) argue that severe restrictions have been imposed on the spread of content relating to homosexuality in the mainland Chinese media. This is a result of longstanding discrimination against gay men and lesbians in the local society, which views homosexuality as socio-culturally abnormal and perverted. The visibility of LGBTQ communities within popular culture has increased in recent years, however, thanks to the digitization of media and changing social conditions in a globalized China (Bao 2018; Wang 2015; Wei 2010; Zhao 2020a; T. Zhou 2018, 2020).

Whereas academic discussions of male homosexuality in Chinese media and popular culture frequently attends to cinematic representations (see, for example, Berry 1998; Bian 2007; Lim 2006; Robinson 2013; Zhou 2014), this chapter focuses on entertainment TV, particularly talk shows. I take two of the most influential Chinese-language talk shows—*Kangsi Coming* (康熙来了; CTi Variety, Taiwan, 2004–2016) and its successor, *U Can U Bibi*—as case studies to investigate how gay men are (mis)represented in Chinese-language media and popular culture, looking at the (non-)normative sexual identities that are associated with these new (mis)representations. This chapter is different from previous studies on “queering” Chinese mainstream TV (for example, Yang and Bao 2012; Zhou 2017), which focus on queer fans’ negotiation and resistance. Instead, I use a contextual approach to look at how the representations of gayness in the two talk shows can be used to help us understand what it is like being gay in mainland China and Taiwan today.

I begin by outlining the rise and fall of *Kangsi Coming* in the context of Chinese-language TV in transition. Despite remaining under certain regulation and censorship, TV has become increasingly dynamic, digitized, heterogeneous, and transcultural in the Chinese-speaking world. In this context, I explore the discussion of “gay typification” in popular media, which is, as Dyer argues, “a near necessity for the representation of gayness, the product of social, political, practical and textual determinations” (2002, 20). I examine two dominant gay types represented in *Kangsi Coming* and *U Can U Bibi*: the “sissy” and the “macho,” which each signifies both a gay subject and object of desire. The new gay representations analyzed in this chapter show how popular culture both creates and constrains gay identities. Nevertheless, they do not exhaust the range of gay types in Chinese-language media. In conclusion, I argue that it is impossible to treat the issue of gay visibility and representation in isolation from the actual consumers of queer media cultures. Hence, I call for a reflexive ethnographic approach that is able to unpack the incompatible expectations and outcomes at stake in the increasing queer visibility enabled by digital media technologies.

The Rise and Fall of *Kangsi Coming*

I became aware of the Mandarin variety-comedy talk show named *Kangsi Coming* while studying for my bachelor's degree in mainland China during 2007. Watching the show quickly became one of my most cherished queer experiences, and I have seen every single episode released online. Inaugurated in Taiwan in 2004 and continuing until 2016, it became the longest-running and most successful variety talk show in the Chinese-speaking world. Recorded in a small studio, the show is fast-moving, uncontrived, and humorous. It centered around conversations on a range of different (and often controversial) topics that two hosts, Kevin Tsai (蔡康永) and Dee Hsu (徐熙娣), conducted with entertainers, celebrities, and politicians from Taiwan, mainland China, Hong Kong, and elsewhere.

In 2005, Chinese Entertainment TV (CETV) became the first TV channel to introduce *Kangsi Coming* to audiences in mainland China. As a non-mainland broadcaster, however, CETV was subject to mainland Chinese broadcasting regulations, which restricted its operations to cities in southern China. Demand from mainland audiences led to widespread informal circulation. As a result, it became available on the black market, along with other Taiwanese and Hong Kong TV programs (E. Zhao 2016). It was not until 2011 that Tudou.com, a leading Chinese online video network, was awarded the exclusive rights to broadcast the show in the Mainland. These were then sold to iQIYI, another popular Chinese online video platform, in 2013. This ensured that the show was available on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Featuring a range of novelties and unrestrained discussions of the personal lives of guest celebrities and its two hosts, *Kangsi Coming* was unprecedented when compared with coetaneous variety shows on the mainland TV, which strictly adhered to state guidelines. This brought the show even greater success (in terms of Internet ratings) in mainland China than it had enjoyed in Taiwan. In addition, the show has also engaged with mainland Chinese fans by means of the *Kangsi Gala Concert* (康熙盛典). As it toured major mainland cities between 2008 and 2010, it showcased celebrities from both mainland China and Taiwan. Thus, *Kangsi Coming* became not only a competitive stage on which Taiwanese celebrities could enter the mainland entertainment market, but also the most effective platform for local celebrities to promote their films, dramas, and music to audiences in other parts of the Chinese-speaking world.

Kevin Tsai and Dee Hsu are at the heart of the show. In fact, the show's title is a combination of their names. As its producer Wei-Chung Wang stated, "*Kangsi* only belongs to Kevin Tsai and Dee Hsu" (*NetEase Entertainment* 2015). Their personal chemistry appears natural, and the show relies on their almost symbiotic relationship. Paris Shih (2015) observes that *Kangsi Coming* is secretly loved by gay men because of their connection to Dee Hsu, who is known as "Little S" (小S) because of her hourglass figure. Having risen to fame in the 1990s as a singer in the duo S.O.S., Little S is one of the

best-known female comedians and hosts in the Chinese-speaking world. She joined *Kangsi Coming* in 2004, rapidly becoming a top comedian owing to her fast wit and caustic humor. Importantly, Little S consistently supported same-sex marriage at a time when this was rare among celebrities, thus winning her the devotion of legions of gay fans.

Arguably, gay subjectivities on Chinese-speaking TV (and among its audiences) and Little S's stardom have mutually constructed one another. Her performances on TV are seen as camp practices, containing strong elements of theatricality and reflexive parody. Her stardom has arguably supported the notions of "being as if playing a role" and "life as theatre," presenting a comic version of the world (Sontag 2018). More importantly, her exaggerated and pretentious performances on TV have been appropriated and imitated by many gay men to express their queer effeminacies and challenge "the local gay male agenda inscribed by moralistic, assimilationist and sissy-phobic tendencies" (Lin 2006, 284). For example, in 2002, Little S created the character of "Teacher Hsu" (徐老师), who was inspired by the 1980s American fitness guru Jane Fonda. Teacher Hsu rapidly became one of the most well-known characters in local gay cultural history. Shih (2015) defines her as a site of a politics of the body, which simultaneously advocates for and mocks fitness and bodily management, and their inevitable failure. Little S's extravagant televised impersonations subvert the boundaries between beauty and ugliness, good and evil, and desirable and undesirable. In so doing, she has opened up a cultural space between "coming out" and "staying in the closet," in which gay men can express themselves, communicate with each other, and build communities. Little S's gay fans become "gay" by imitating her. She welcomes this and (re)impersonates their sissiness on TV in turn. Gay men and Little S, in other words, are intimately interconnected, with each becoming the other (Shih 2015).

Little S's co-host, Tsai, is one of the best-known TV hosts and writers in the Chinese-speaking world. Between 2003 and 2008, he was nominated for the Best Host in a Variety Program award at the Golden Bell Awards no less than six times. He and Little S eventually won this influential annual Taiwanese TV production award in 2005. Tsai is also one of the few openly gay celebrities in the Chinese-speaking world, becoming a prominent LGBTQ role model after acknowledging his sexual orientation on a talk show in 2002. Because of this, the "gay" agenda of *Kangsi Coming* is very clear. The entertainment industry has praised Tsai, who graduated with a master's degree in TV production from the University of California, Los Angeles, for being "an intellectual within the entertainment circles" (娱乐圈里的读书人). He first appeared in mainland Chinese variety shows in 2014, as a host of the popular talent talk show *U Can U Bibi*. Like many in Taiwan's entertainment industry, he thereby transferred his focus from Taiwan to mainland China in pursuit of a larger market. In 2015, the second season of *U Can U Bibi* featured an episode discussing whether gay men and lesbians should come out to their parents. Tsai's own emotional description of his experience of being an openly gay celebrity,

in which he tearfully insisted that “we are not monsters,” subsequently went viral online.

Tsai’s success in *U Can U Bibi* indicates how the Taiwanese and mainland entertainment industries are interrelated. Indeed, as Elaine Jing Zhao has written, “collaborations between Taiwanese and mainland creative workers . . . have a better chance of tailoring to the local culture and audience taste than direct import of Taiwanese content” (2016, 59). In addition, Tsai’s decision to pursue his career in mainland China served as a catalyst for Taiwanese entertainment professionals to move from Taiwan’s declining local entertainment industry (Huang 2015). Against this backdrop, *Kangsi Coming* was closed down in 2015, marking the end of the golden age of Taiwanese variety shows. By then, however, both Little S and Tsai were actively engaged in mainland Chinese online video platforms. Little S started her own food talk show *S-style Show* (姐姐好饿; 2016–2017) and celebrity reality show *I Fiori Delle Sorelle* (小姐姐的花店; 2018–2019) on iQIYI, an online video platform based in Beijing, while Tsai continued to host *U Can U Bibi*. Since 2018, they have co-hosted a lifestyle talk show titled *The Truth of the Prismatic Universe* (真相吧!花花万物; 2018–2020)—the mainland version of *Kangsi Coming*—on Youku, a top Chinese online video and streaming service platform. It is in this context that this chapter uses *Kangsi Coming* and its successor *U Can U Bibi* as case studies to investigate how gay men are (mis)represented in Chinese-language media and popular culture.

Sissy “Gay” Men

Kangsi Coming’s defining theme has always been gay sensibilities, its particular strength being how it humorously plays with signs of gayness. The most popular representations of gayness in the show tend to be the trope of the sissy gay pretender. This illustrates the importance of gender in gay representations in media and popular culture, particularly in relation to comedy (Raymond 2003; Wei 2010; T. Zhou 2020). In *Kangsi Coming*, a notable example of the “sissy gay” trope appears in a 2009 episode titled “*Kangsi Tender Men Dance Contest*” (康熙温柔汉舞蹈大赛), in which five male entertainers (whose sexualities are never revealed) are invited to compete. The key to winning is to embrace and display one’s inner male effeminacy, which serves as the comedic device. The most overtly effeminate entertainer is the news reporter Kelvin Hsu (许建国), who becomes the episode’s focus. The two hosts introduce a short farcical sketch, in which Hsu is matched with Ryan Kuo (郭晋东), a tall and muscular entertainer. As Kuo embraces Hsu slowly from behind and calls him “baby,” streaming loving-heart bubbles render the screen cloudy pink. The farce is clearly homoerotic, with Hsu and Kuo presented as a gay couple to comedic effect.

The gendered humor continues focusing on Hsu, not least by having him engage in a “sexy” jazz dance with two young male dancers while wearing heavy eye makeup and black leggings. Hsu’s embarrassed and reluctant movements contrast with the professional dancers’ fluid and confident

performances. This invites further caustic interjections from Little S and reduces Tsai to tears of laughter. Tsai calls Hsu “an old, dispirited madam” (心灰意冷的老妈妈桑), thus attributing his embarrassment to a self-rejection of his own inner sissiness. Pretending to help him overcome this, the two hosts implore him to shout “I am a sissy” (我就是娘们儿) loudly and dance again. As one would expect, Hsu continues to move awkwardly, seemingly reluctant to embrace his feminine inner self. Little S mocks him for performing not like “a seductive bitch” (小贱货) but “an exhausted housewife” (被事务压垮的家庭主妇).

One possible reading of this scene suggests that such performances subvert the essentialist way in which the boundary between heterosexual and homosexual identities is often imagined. They may serve to empower effeminate gay men to disrupt gender and sexual norms and fight against effeminophobia (Lin 2013). As such, these performances can be seen to echo a queer agenda, according to which it is “either that we’re all queer or that there’s a little queer in each of us” (Raymond 2003, 107). The “queer” performances in *Kangsi Coming* are tightly intertwined with local LGBTQ rights movements in Taiwan (Lin 2006; Shih 2015). The show was launched one year after the first Taiwan Pride—the largest LGBTQ pride parade in Asia—that was held in Taipei in 2003. More than three decades of the LGBTQ social movement has led to a shift towards greater social acceptance of gender and sexual minorities in Taiwan (Lee 2017). As a result, in general, the Taiwanese entertainment industry is much more queer-friendly than its mainland Chinese counterpart.

Kangsi Coming teaches its viewers that there is a little sissiness in each of us, which should be embraced rather than suppressed and denigrated. It could also be argued, however, that the gendered humor that arises from performances such as the “*Kangsi Tender Men Dance Contest*” is made possible by the audience’s knowledge that the heterosexuality of these male entertainers is never in doubt. The viewers tend to have “an epistemological advantage,” providing them “not only with a certain degree of distance but also with reinscribed boundaries between the gay and the straight” (Raymond 2003, 108). This advantage and certainty allow the male entertainers that feature in the program to play with the effeminate and sissy stereotypes of gay men without worrying that their performances will be read as homophobic. The result is a comedy of misreading.

Kangsi Coming exploits the trope of the sissy gay pretender purposefully to position male entertainers as “gay.” This is demonstrated by the above-mentioned Taiwanese celebrity Kuo, who is well-known for having a fictional gay relationship with his male model roommate. On the show, he often talks about their everyday life in a homoerotic way, although it is almost certain that *Kangsi Coming* has scripted his “gay” performances (Taiwan’s social tolerance toward LGBTQ people greatly encouraged local entertainment TV, especially talk shows, to explore and commercialize issues of

gender and sexuality). Through these performances, the show explicitly plays with sexuality, allowing the audience to access male entertainers' eroticism. Arguably, *Kangsi Coming* creates a fantasy world in which gay men, far from being victims of legal discrimination and social exclusion, are more powerful than their heterosexual counterparts. These inverted performances, to a large extent, echo the fact that Taiwan has the most progressive gay rights climate in Asia, generating a lot of humor. They might, however, "mask the ways that power operates" and "make the mechanisms of power even more covert" (Raymond 2003, 108). These comedic gay performances exist amid the reproduction of an unequal social system: whereas the viewers of Chinese-language entertainment TV are able to tune in or out of specific programs, this remains impossible when it comes to broader structural social inequalities. In addition, it is also important to consider the power of the "sexual hierarchy" of media representations (Lin 2013), which privileges gay pretenders' sissy comedies and some gay men's non-confrontational storytelling, while further marginalizing and stigmatizing queer people's more flamboyant and radical performances.

Moreover, these representations of gayness should not be understood solely in relation to media practices; they also closely related to the broader gay social movement. Indeed, the gendered gay performances in *Kangsi Coming* (along with their associated sissiness humor) have caused controversy, which has crystallized into a public debate in Taiwan about the televisual appropriation of (gay) male effeminacy as a comedic device. This recalls the furor surrounding one of the most successful mainland Chinese commercial filmmakers, Xiaogang Feng, who was criticized by Chinese gay activists for his stereotypical depiction of gay men as "sissy" in the 2008 Chinese romantic comedy film *If You Are the One* (非诚勿扰; Wei 2010). The controversy surrounding gay sissiness humor led to criticism of *Kangsi Coming* in general and Tsai in particular. Critics have argued that, as a gay public figure, Tsai should not mock male effeminacy to increase ratings, because it could reinforce the "sissy" stereotype of gay men. His supporters, however, have argued that he was simply doing his job and did not intend the offensive humor to be personal.

In response to this criticism, Tsai wrote an article on his blog titled "When I am calling a guy 'sissy'" (当我说一个男生“娘”的时候):

Are we mocking and condemning him when we call a guy effeminate? Many people will say "yes, of course." But I don't think so. For me, it is definitely okay for a guy to be effeminate, and to shout loudly about being sissy if that makes them more self-confident and interesting. In my dictionary, "effeminate" is not a negative term, what's wrong with guys being effeminate? . . . Presuming guys should not be effeminate is a heterosexist bias. Presuming

guys should not be called “sissies” is being strung along by this heterosexist bias . . . Therefore, when I call a guy effeminate . . . I wish the audience to feel the uniqueness of him, rather than judging him. (Tsai 2009, translated by the author)

Tsai views male effeminacy as nothing to be ashamed of, criticizing those who cast it in a negative light. Negative interpretations of comedic sissy performances along the lines of the hetero/homo dichotomy, he argues, fail to acknowledge the diversity within gay communities. Tsai defends himself and the show by attributing these interpretations to a heterosexual bias. To win the audience over to his side, he employs the rhetoric of intentionality, according to which “meaning resides with the speaker” (Pérez and Greene 2016, 269). In asserting that his intention is to challenge negative understandings of sissiness, he puts himself above criticism.

Tsai’s article, however, provoked criticism from Taiwanese gender education scholars, including the feminist activist Jau-Jiun Hsiao (2009), who points out that Tsai’s defense prioritizes his intention over viewers’ personal experiences. She argued that Tsai failed to acknowledge that different people may have unequal access to societal resources, which means that not everyone can overcome bullying based on gender non-conformity and make something positive of their experiences. In addition, the show romanticizes the terms “effeminate” and “sissy,” neglecting how historically they have been used to verbally abuse and bully effeminate schoolboys. Tsai strongly disagreed with this criticism, referencing Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* series to illustrate his interpretation of sissiness: “if we don’t dare to call him Voldemort, instead calling him ‘He Who Must Not Be Named’, will he make a concession? [No], he will only become more aggressive” (Tsai 2010). Yet, this can also be seen as a defense for his own elite gayness that embodies an emerging *gaymi* (meaning women’s gay male friends) masculinity with “gentility and impeccable tastes” (Wang, Tan, and Wei 2019, 911).³

Humor can mediate and reinforce the meanings imposed by hegemonic gender relations as well as forms of resistance to them (Weaver, Mora, and Morgan 2016). The controversy over gay sissiness humor demonstrates the identity work and politics performed by those who were concerned to defend or condemn *Kangsi Coming*. What is more, it brings the rhetorical and political nature of sissy jokes into focus. Tsai sees his deliberate sissiness banter as equivalent to heroes courageously violating the taboo against pronouncing Voldemort’s real name, which suggests a rebellion against

³ *Gaymi* is “discursively constructed as a genteel and fashionable gay man who accommodates women’s emotional needs” in China, which “indexes progressive social change”; at the same time, it also indicates stereotypes about gay men (Wang, Tan, and Wei 2019, 911).

heteronormativity and conformity. He thus presents sissy humor as close to what we might call “rebellious humor”—a momentary escape from restrictive social norms. Unlike conservative humor, which mocks rule-breakers, rebellious humor targets power (in Tsai’s case, this would be heteronormativity). This humor sees to it that “authority is challenged and the guardians of rules are mocked” (Billig 2005, 208). Some scholars have highlighted the rebellious potential of *Kangsi Coming’s* gay sissiness humor. For example, Dennis C. Lin (2013) provides a “queer” reading of gender performances in *Kangsi Coming*, foregrounding the ways in which campness figures a means of combating assimilationist tendencies in gay culture and social movements. Similarly, Po-Han Lien (2015) defends the show by highlighting its emancipatory power, which cuts against the excessive rhetoric of victimization and the reservedness that is enforced by political correctness.

Such readings, however, run the risk of engaging in “a fetishism of resistance . . . a tendency in cultural studies to celebrate resistance *per se* without distinguishing between types and forms of resistance” (Kellner 1995, 38). Arguably, work in this mold can

lose sight of the manipulative and conservative effects of certain types of media culture, and thus serve the interests of the culture industries as they are presently constituted and those groups who use the culture industries to promote their own interests and agendas. (Kellner 1995, 38–39)

In the context of late capitalism, commercial entertainment media has come to value liberating and rebellious humor highly. Comedic sissy performances in *Kangsi Coming* may have made gay pretenders famous, but they have also contributed to the emergence of a new “sissy media business.” For example, as a result of his popular “gay” role on the show, Ryan Kuo (in partnership with his male roommate) has launched a variety talk show, *Sissies Coming* (娘娘驾到) in Taiwan, created by the *Kangsi Coming* production team. This venture further exploits the trope of the gay pretender and explicitly advertises “gay” sissiness as its distinct selling point. Although this new talk show was cancelled after just seven months, it was popular especially among local female audiences.

U Can U Bibi, one of the most popular online talk shows in mainland China, presents a similar scenario. In the show, a popular entertainer, Mix Xiao, has won over legions of young fans (in particular, post-90s Chinese viewers) with his sissy performances. On account of his hyper-feminine tone and V-shaped facial contours, some viewers see him as “*shejing nan*” (蛇精男; meaning the male version of a seductive and dangerous snake fairy) whose sissy performances “confound conventional and established binary gender categories of male vs. female” in China (J. Li 2016, 78). However, the

representations of sissy “gay” men in *U Can U Bibi* are best understood in terms of what Qian Wang (2015, 163) calls “a ‘one stone, two birds’ strategy for the government and the creative industries . . . allowing a politically neutralised cult of queerness benefits China’s economy without generating ‘real’ social change.” *U Can U Bibi* deliberately hints at how Mix Xiao’s effeminate and exaggerated performances position him as gay, successfully monetizing his “sissy” label. At the same time, however, it explicitly informs the audience that offscreen he behaves in a more traditionally masculine manner (a message that is reinforced by his female associates). Mix Xiao (2017) once explained that “there is a real man (纯爷们儿) alive in my soul.” In this way, he prioritized an essentialized masculine interior over his performative effeminate behaviors. Moreover, the show also emphasizes his cleverness as if it were an exceptional quality for a sissy performer, as well as his individualistic, anti-mainstream attitude.

Equating enjoying sissy humor/performance on TV with the radical politics of rebellion, then, can be problematic. Indeed, Michael Billig (2005, 209) observes that:

These [entertainment] products do not encourage their audiences to become rebels in an absolute sense, for their rebelliousness conforms to the standards of the times. At the flick of a switch (and after the proper payment by credit card), we can enjoy regular programmes of fun and mockery. Dutiful consumption encourages us to mock apparent authority, enabling us to enjoy the feeling of constant rebelliousness in economic conditions that demand continual dissatisfaction with yesterday’s products. (Billig 2005, 209)

In her critical analysis of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a popular American makeover reality show that features a team of gay professionals performing a makeover, usually on a straight man, Katherine Sender (2006, 133) argues that the show “entices heterosexual men into a gay-inflected contemporary sphere of intimate consumption.” While acknowledging its queerness, Sender points out that “the show suggests that the appropriate place to negotiate gender and sexual politics is the commercial realm, leaving its progressive message vulnerable to the vagaries of audience ratings and marketers’ patronage” (2006, 138). Difference is capable of being monetized both on and offscreen. Presenting sissy “gay” performances in the media as opposing heteronormativity, without fully evaluating their impact, can simply contribute to promoting new “queer” styles and artifacts. It can reinforce a form of identity politics that tends to overlook the structural forces of oppression such as capitalism.

As Wei Wei (2010) argues, a heteronormative commercial media tends to undermine the queer potentials of Chinese popular culture. Although there has been a dramatic increase in the number of queer images on Chinese entertainment media screens since 2005, these new queer performances do not legitimize homosexuality in Chinese public culture (Zhao 2020a). Instead, they feature, in Jamie J. Zhao's (2018b, 483) words, "an extremely ambivalent queer potential by emphasizing nonnormative culture's performative and playful, yet also sometimes manipulative and pejorative nature." It is therefore vital to acknowledge the disciplinary functions of seemingly rebellious sissiness humor/performance in Chinese media and popular culture. Undoubtedly, audiences can engage with their favorite talk shows in a reflexive way. However, this reflexivity, as Sender (2012, 25) argues, "does not afford audiences unlimited agency or freedom to self-define, but can also be considered a new type of habitus that comes with demands and expectations."

The "Ideal Man"

Reflecting on the role of camp in Western gay cultural history, Andy Medhurst (1997) puts forward the following observation:

in gay men's myth of our past we like to think it was some screaming queen. Thus an emblematic camp individual became an enshrined community figurehead, but this queen's starring role was simultaneously her farewell performance—all she did, in the long run, was to usher in the hyper-masculine gay culture of the 1970s, where effeminacy was stigmatized. (Medhurst 1997, 278)

Indeed, camp has been used as a survival mechanism not only in the West but also in the Chinese-speaking world. Many gay men in Taiwan see gender performances in *Kangsi Coming* as camp practices with emancipatory power (Lien 2015; Lin 2013; Shih 2015). While acknowledging the significance of televised camp practices for local gay community, we should also nevertheless recognize that what they have ushered in, as Medhurst (1997) suggests, is an emergent hyper-masculine gay culture. This development has crystallized into a new gay type onscreen—namely, the "macho." This transformation is best understood in the broader context of the global proliferation of male bodies as desired and objectified commodities (Forrest 1994; Gill, Henwood, and McLean 2005; Song and Hird 2013). David Forrest (1994, 104) points out that "we may be witnessing the proliferation of certain identities based on sexual practices, fashion, life-styles or certain fetishes, but these revolve around the athletic male body."

The way in which *Kangsi Coming* presents the “macho” gay type is exemplified by an episode from 2014 titled “A Survey of Male Celebrities’ Popularity among Gay Men” (男明星同志好感度大调查). This episode included a competition among ten male celebrities, whose attractiveness was assessed by gay audiences. The competition demonstrated “both what it is like to be gay and what it is gay people find attractive” (Dyer 2002, 28). 150 local gay men from outside the entertainment industry were invited to give their opinions on which celebrity they considered to be the most desirable—indeed, the “ideal man” (同志天菜). The show also featured two guest judges: (1) the well-known gay illustrator Sunny Face, who represented an authoritative gay insider, and (2) the popular female TV anchor Patty Wu, a straight female ally. This episode ignited a heated online discussion and the entertainment industry came to value the contest’s winner highly, as part of the pink economy.

As the episode begins, Little S and Tsai attempt to predict which of the celebrities will be voted the top five most attractive among gay men. They choose five male entertainers with muscular and athletic bodies, expressing confidence that their prediction will be reflected in the voting. They then focus on the low end of the ranking, and in particular on Hao-Ping Huang (黄豪平), a young, petite Taiwanese comedian whom they consider the least masculine of the group and therefore least attractive to gay men. Although Huang does not acknowledge his sexuality, everyone in the studio takes his effeminate attributes (such as his physique, voice, and behavior) as incontestable evidence of his gayness. He is depicted as a gay man, betrayed by his sissiness while being unwilling to come out. This is also reflected in the interviews that the show conducts with gay audiences. They disparagingly label him a “sissy sister” and “lesbian,” reflecting enduring sissyphobia in Chinese-speaking gay communities (Lin 2006, 2013; Zheng 2015; T. Zhou 2020, 2021). One effeminate gay voter dislikes him intensely on the grounds that “similar poles repel each other” (同性相斥), suggesting that an ideal gay relationship should conform to dominant heteronormative gender norms, with one partner being masculine and the other feminine.

The body is the principal site at which masculinities are reified. Forrest argues that “whatever its contradictions or changing characteristics, ‘male masculinity’ is tied to a masculine body” and that “this body is hard, muscular and athletic; a symbol (if not a guarantee) of power within a hierarchically gendered society” (1994, 104). Similarly, Zhiqiu Benson Zhou (2020, 576–77) points out that masculine built bodies in the Chinese gay world “represent movement toward the ‘right’ advancement to the superior [Western] modernity,” which “symbolize certain people’s economic capital to reshape their bodies.” The desirability of masculine bodies is confirmed by the male celebrities whom *Kangsi Coming*’s gay audience voted the top three most desirable of those presented to them. Each has a muscular, lean, and athletic body, the signs of eroticism. More importantly, the show assembles an extensive gay “wish list,” producing a cartoon character named the “ideal man.” Designed by the guest

judge, Sunny Face, the “ideal man” is comprised of short hair; bushy eyebrows; a clipped beard; a big chest; thick arms; toned abs; firm buttocks; a “big package”; and plump legs. This “ideal man” is reminiscent of the “clones” found in gay America during the 1970s:

The clone was, in many ways, the manliest of men. He had a gym-defined body; after hours of rigorous body building, his physique rippled with bulging muscles, looking more like competitive body builders than hairdressers or florists . . . He kept his hair short and had a thick moustache or closely cropped beard. (Levine 1998, 7)

This “ideal man” represents the most desirable masculine body, which only a small number of gay winners could attain. As Sunny Face suggests, the “ideal man” differentiates himself from “snowy little egrets”—a gay slang term referring to those with a developed upper-body build and very slender legs. Striving to achieve the ideal masculine body can be detrimental. As Daryl Higgins (2006, 91) points out, “the body becomes the site for competition, and for the losers in the race the object of shame and self-loathing.” This can result in gay men focusing on dieting and muscle-building rather than “the primal need for connection and intimacy with others” (Higgins 2006, 91). Indeed, in Taiwan, hitting the gym and building muscles has become an integral part of gay subculture, leading to many gay men facing massive anxiety over their body image; moreover, this anxiety is further fueled by taking and sharing smartphone gym selfies among local gay communities (Jhuo 2020).

The “ideal man” visualizes various expressions of masculinity to which gay men may be attracted. It may encourage *Kangsi Coming's* gay viewers to sculpt their bodies so as to dilute their femininity. Through this masculinization, is the “macho” gay type that is emerging in media and popular culture simply reinforcing the very stereotypes and gender norms that are the origin of so much prejudice and oppression? Shaun Cole (2000, 128) argues that “the macho-man is a reaction against effeminacy, and this means that the masculine/feminine binary structure has not gone away, but only been redistributed.” Within Chinese gay communities, hypermasculine built bodies may serve to “prioritize heteromascularity, while marginalizing other types of masculinities that deviate from this normative masculinity” (Z. Zhou 2020, 566). On the other hand, however, Raewyn Connell (1992) argues that the gendered eroticism that gay men direct toward stereotypical masculinity can challenge the gendered social system. In this vein, gay masculinity can be seen simultaneously as “both subversive (in that it challenges orthodox masculinity) and reactionary (in that it reinforces gender stereotypes—a crucial factor in the oppression of gay sexuality)” (Forrest 1994, 105).

The “ideal man” does not simply embrace traditional, stereotypical heterosexual masculinity. It can also be seen as signifying the “macho” man who is marked off from the simply straight man by both a gay sensibility and “an excess of masculinity” (Dyer 2002, 38). As the guest judge Sunny Face argued, whereas a straight man might leave his facial hair scruffy and scraggly, the “ideal man” always keeps his hair short, eyebrows trimmed, and beard clipped. Arguably, this brings “a gay sensibility to a gendered attire” (Levine 1998, 60). The “ideal man” proves his masculinity by building an exaggeratedly manly body: whereas a straight man might work out to get leaner and fitter, the “ideal man” aims to be shredded, chiseling his serratus muscles in addition to his V-cut abs. Like the queer satire put forward in *Kangsi Coming*, the “ideal man” arguably indicates what Martin P. Levine (1998, 59) has termed “the doubleness of clone style,” which contains both “self-conscious, almost parodying references to stereotypically traditional masculinity” and a “self-conscious embracing of that very stereotype at the same time.”

The mainland gay Internet celebrity and model Edison Fan, with his exaggerated masculinity, can be seen as a real-life representation of the cartoon “ideal man.” In 2015, Edison Fan shared his coming out story on *U Can U Bibi*. His personal appearance differed considerably from heterosexual entertainers’. His hair was slick and his moustache trimmed, his clothing perfectly matched and designed to accentuate his athletic physique. More importantly, he deployed macho fashion in a sexual way so as to express “hotness.” In a departure from the conventional suits of his heterosexual counterparts, Edison Fan often dresses in string vests to call viewers’ attention to his well-built chest and biceps. Even when he wears a suit, Edison Fan deliberately highlights his musculature by unbuttoning his shirt. His sense of fashion serves to perform not only gender but class, in that it emphasizes good taste, consumerism, and elitism. This echoes Geng Song and Derek Hird’s (2013, 74) observation that “Chinese hypermasculine sexuality is constructed as a privilege of the rich, just like other forms of consumption.” At the same time, Edison Fan’s rough masculine identity also has something of the working class to it. Indeed, in one selfie, which has circulated widely across Chinese social media platforms, he resembles a skillful construction worker. Here, his macho stylization recalls hypermasculine “clone” fashion, which embraces a “rougher, coarser masculinity of the common laborer” (Levine 1998, 60).

In emphasizing exaggerated masculine images and physiques, the “ideal man” and his living counterpart Edison Fan are both a parody and emulation of heterosexual masculinity, with a camp sensibility. They echo Cole’s (2000, 129) description of the “tightrope” that some gay men walk “between straight imitation and an interpretation that could identify them not only as real men but as real *gay* men.” Seen in this light, macho looks may serve “a dual purpose, in that whilst attracting other gay men it also acted as a form of self-protection.” This is particularly important in mainland Chinese

society, which goes on stigmatizing and discriminating against homosexuality. In its liberating aspect, the “macho” man is closer to camp, which “constantly draws attention to the artifices attendant on the construction of images of what is natural” rather than “expressing a sense of what is natural” (Dyer 2002, 40). The new macho gay type in *Kangsi Coming* (and elsewhere) can arguably be seen as self-conscious performances of the signs of masculinity and gender. This is important, for “it is in the play and exaggeration that an alternative sexuality is implied—a sexuality, that is, that recognizes itself as in a problematic relationship to the conventional conflation of sexuality and gender” (Dyer 2002, 40). This is not to suggest that the “macho” man presented in media and popular culture is the foremost way in which gay men in Taiwan and mainland China present themselves. These representations are context-specific, which need to be understood as tightly intertwined with indigenous political regulation, media industry, and pink economy. Gay men in the Chinese-speaking world have exhibited diverse ways of doing masculinities. Accordingly, more empirical research is needed to capture the differences—including those concerning race, class, gender, and age—that challenge attempts to construct a unitary identity for Chinese gay men.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the issues of gay visibility in the media, illuminating the ways that media and popular culture create and constrain gay identities. The images and discourses of homosexuality flow from and through Chinese-speaking media, particularly TV entertainment genres, shaping how gay men understand themselves and the world around them. I have examined some representative cases of gayness in *Kangsi Coming* and *U Can U Bibi*, highlighting the heterogeneity and transculturality of Chinese-language TV. While acknowledging the trans-regional circulation of queer TV in mainland China and Taiwan, it is important to note that the televised cultural representations in question are specific to the local context, including media and political regulations, pink economy, social movements, and changing social attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Together, they shape the production, consumption, and circulation of gay images in the two major Chinese-speaking societies. The evolving queer mediascapes in the Chinese-language world, especially the rise of gay social networking services (Wang 2020; Li and Lu 2020; Zhou 2021), promise to enhance the visibility of gay men. That said, it has never been simply visibility that is at stake here, but rather only a specific kind of visibility. Thus, the new gay cultural representations that emerge through digitization may “cultivate a narrow but widely accepted definition of gay identity as a marketing tool and help to integrate gay people as gay people into a new marketing niche” (Hennessy 2000, 137). Although the market is not necessarily the unpardonable enemy of queers, when gay visibility and cultural practices become a good business prospect in a digital age, the question we need to ask is “Who is profiting from these new markets?”

With the “queer turn” in Chinese-language media studies (Zhao and Wong 2020), a growing body of scholarship seeks to examine the new representations of nonnormative sexualities in China, contributing to the de-Westernization of queer theory and LGBTQ activism in the transnational context. Interpreting these texts critically may be a necessary part of the project of queering Chinese media studies, but it should not be its ultimate goal. This highlights the need for a reflexive ethnographic approach if we are to be able to unpack the incompatible expectations and outcomes that surround the increase in queer visibility brought on by digital technologies. This need is particularly pressing in the light of scholars’ difficulties with connecting with the queer communities about whom “we” write. Gay (in)visibility in Chinese popular culture is paradoxical. Although it commences “from assertions accepted as true about a positive good—progress, financial means, acceptance, and digital prowess,” the value of these goods “turns out to be at least partly negative, contrary to expectation” (Barnhurst 2007, 2). Therefore, I close this chapter by inviting further critical reflection on the diverse cultural politics that shape (and are shaped by) gay men’s everyday media practices in China.

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