

‘Shanghai is Burning’:

Extravaganza, Transgender Representation and Transnational Cinema

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9 pm, 8 July 2017, the Pearl Theatre, Shanghai. A four-hour drag performance named *Extravaganza* lifted its curtain.¹ The one-night show gathered twelve of the city’s drag performers, ‘the fiercest kings and queens in town’ (Baren, 2018a, p. 2), who gave brilliant performances to an audience of 350 people. It was the first drag performance of its scale in Shanghai in recent years and was hailed as a ‘milestone’ for Shanghai, which ‘set a new standard for what drag in Shanghai could mean’ (Baren, 2018a, p. 3). British filmmaker Matthew Baren, a resident of Shanghai at the time, made a 45-minute documentary film called *Extravaganza* to document the event. The film was edited from nine hours of video footage covering the pre-performance preparation, the show itself and the post-performance celebration. The film is a record of the evening.

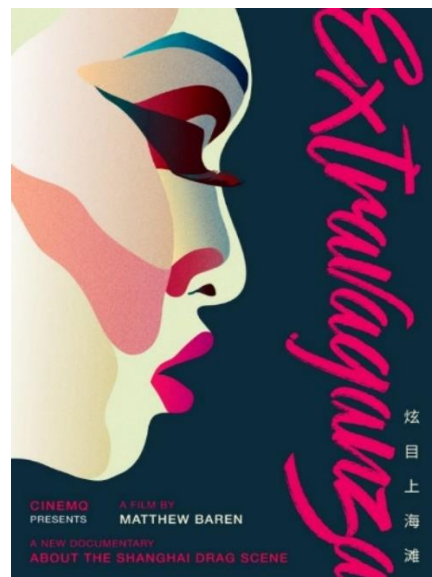
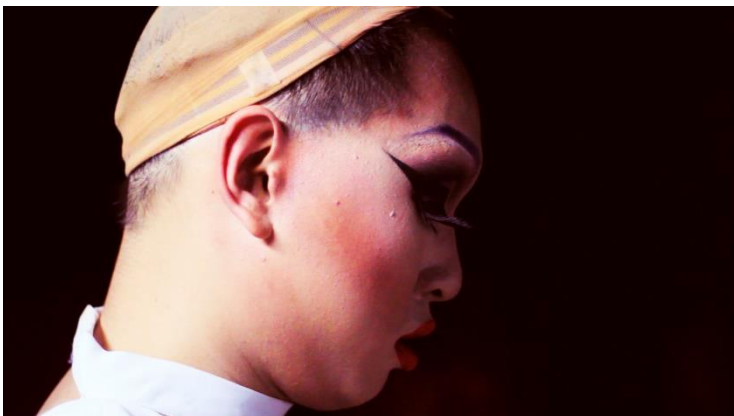


Fig. 1 *Extravaganza* film still: Miss Jade (image credit: Matthew Baren and Will Dai)

Fig. 2 *Extravaganza* film poster (image credit: Matthew Baren and Will Dai)

This article brings together critical perspectives in queer theory and film studies to examine *Extravaganza*, an independent documentary about Shanghai’s drag scene made by a British director who lived in Shanghai at the time. Bringing together a critical analysis of the film and interviews with the filmmaker and the performers, I discuss the politics of queer representation and new modes of filmmaking in a globalised world. The article asks the following questions: what is the national identity of the film? What are the political economies, power relations and affects that shape such a representation? And most important

of all, how can a queer perspective help us better understand new types of cinema and innovative modes of filmmaking in a transnational context? By interrogating the meanings of the prefix ‘trans’ shared by transgender and transnational cinema, I identify ways of ‘becoming trans’ in an inter-connected world of queer identities, bodies, affects and filmmaking.

In this article, I start my discussion with an introduction of the queer film culture and the drag scene in Shanghai to contextualise the film *Extravaganza*. I then analyse the representation of the drag scene in Shanghai in the film by focusing on the politics of ‘backstage’, affect and modes of ‘becoming’. Using the film as a case study, I engage with the academic debate about Chinese cinema and transnational cinema in the field of Chinese film studies. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of ‘becoming’ and Song Hwee Lim’s discussion of ‘trans’, I discern new modes of filmmaking under capitalist globalisation and ‘minor transnationalism’ that can be called transnational cinema. By bringing together transgender studies and transnational film studies, I highlight the critical potential of thinking about national and gender identities and emergent modes of film cultures with the critical concept of ‘becoming trans’.²

Queer Film Culture in a Global City

Shanghai has changed tremendously in the past decade, so has Shanghai’s film culture. As the birthplace of Chinese cinema, Shanghai has had a vibrant film culture since the Republican era (Lee, 1999). The Shanghai Film Studio, founded in 1949 and now part of the Shanghai Film Group Corporation, is one of the largest film studios in China. Launched in 1993, the Shanghai International Film Festival has become one of the biggest and most important film festivals in Asia. The Expo 2010 marked an important moment for Shanghai to imagine itself as a global city. Creative and cultural industries have been identified as a key area of development for the city (Rong and O’Connor, 2018). Shanghai has become an international and cosmopolitan city that rivals Hong Kong.

Queer culture, although still semi-underground due to the ambiguous legal status of sexual minorities in China, has re-emerged in the city during China’s economic reform since 1978 (Bao 2012). It has also shaped Shanghai’s film culture in significant ways. At the moment, the city hosts two queer film festivals, ShanghaiPRIDE film festival and Shanghai queer film festival, which articulate different types of film aesthetics and sexual politics (Bao 2018b). Meanwhile, there are dozens of multiplex cinemas and independent film clubs all over the city; the latter includes CINEMQ, a queer film collective dedicated to regular film screenings. CINEMQ also publishes an online zine on social media.

In an interview, the director of the film *Extravaganza* Matthew Baren describes the queer film culture in Shanghai in the following way:

Shanghai is one of the best cities in China for LGBTQ people, but there’s very little queer cinema coming out of here right now. I think it’s important for people to see what Shanghai is made of and to hear about the people who have built our community. Being queer isn’t just an identity you wear on the weekend—it’s something you live every

day. I hope people see this and are proud to be part of a city where people like the kings and queens featured in *Extravaganza*, live their truth and art to the fullest. (Baren in Thede, 2018)

For Baren, a booming queer culture is in line with the image of Shanghai as a global city. He seems to identify more with Shanghai as a city than with China as a country. He uses the word 'our' to suggest a sense of collectivity and solidarity, as well as to claim a sense of belonging to the city. As a relatively recent new-comer to the city and a foreign expatriate, he certainly identifies with the queer communities in the city in the way that local queers do. National identity becomes less relevant here; it is a shared sense of identity and community that gives him and other queer people in the city a shared 'sexual citizenship' (Weeks, 1998).

Baren also remarks on the Shanghai government's relative hands-off approach to queer events such as the Shanghai Pride and the Shanghai Queer Film Festival:

Government policy is always so grey and strange, but Shanghai does seem to exist in like a weird bubble. It's not easy to organise queer events in Shanghai but we don't encounter the particular problems that Beijing does or a lot of other places around the country do. I don't really know why, I'm happy that we haven't, but I don't know; we'll see how that changes. (Baren, 2018b)

The relative liberal attitude of Shanghai in relation to queer events forms a sharp contrast with the government intervention of queer community organising in other Chinese cities. This should not be seen as a defence of *laissez-faire* capitalism, but rather be read as a call for the Chinese government's more active and consistent support for queer people. As the city brings a sense of freedom and even cosmopolitan exceptionalism, it also carries with it a sense of precarity and uncertainty. This reveals the feeling of uncertainty in a global city under neoliberal capitalism. At the end of the interview in *Extravaganza*, Miss Jade has the following to say about Shanghai:

People come and go; that's what I hate about Shanghai. Every time there is a queen leaving, we thought: oh, this is the end; we are falling apart, and everything is gone. But look at the Shanghai drag scene: it's not going down for anybody's absence. It's still going up because Shanghai is full of talented people; we just need to discover them. (Miss Jade in Baren, 2018b)

Miss Jade is talking about the rapid changes of the drag scene; she is commenting on the fast transformations of a global city as well.³ In such a city, talented people from different parts of the world gather, find each other and work together. Their talents make the city's creative and cultural industries prosper, and this further creates favourable conditions for the city to become a global city and an attractive place for more people. A global city is constantly changing, and it necessarily has to do so in order to facilitate the fast accumulation of capital. Because of the fast changes, there are always welcomes and farewells, happiness and regrets, as well as uncertainties and precariousness. A global city leaves little time and space for personal sentiments. Emotional resilience on the part of each individual and an understanding that no one is irreplaceable are key to survival in such a city. Miss Jade's words thus best summarise her ambivalent attitudes towards Shanghai as a global city, situated in the constant flows of capital, people, media and popular culture.

Both cinema and queer identity converge in a global city. They combine easily together as ‘queer film culture’ which affords ‘flexible citizenship’ (Ong, 1999) that people can acquire and assemble at their own will. After all, flexible forms of citizenship constitute the ‘cultural logics’ of transnationalism in neoliberal capitalism. In such a context, queer and cinema are attributes, or ‘capitals’ (Bourdieu, 2010), that serve specifically a young, urban, middle class, transnational and cosmopolitan group of people living and thriving in a global city. Eventually, they facilitate the flow of capital across national borders.

‘Shanghai is Burning’

China has a long history of crossdressing performance on stage, represented by the *dan* character, or male-to-female crossdressing performers, in Peking Opera (Li, 2003), and the female-to-male cross-dressing characters in Yue opera popular in and around the Shanghai area (Jiang, 2009). This tradition was largely disrupted during the Maoist era (1949-76) and was never fully revived in the post-Mao era (1977 to present). Today’s commercial drag scene in Shanghai mostly takes the form of a Western type of stage performance, with a strong emphasis on glamour, individualism and character building. The RuPaul type of drag also finds its popularity in China through live streaming websites such as bilibili.⁴ Some foreign expatriates living in Shanghai, represented by two drag king performers Ennis F. W and Dorian T. Fisk, were among the waves of people who introduced the Western style of drag to Shanghai’s nightlife (Short, 2018). Together with a Chinese drag queen named Fantasia Valentina, Fisk also co-founded DKNSTRKT (read ‘deconstruct’), a genderfluid collective aimed at creating a safe space for people to experiment with drag as a way of self-expression and to learn different skills relating to the art of drag such as makeup and movement (Fisk, 2018). Miss Jade, a Chinese drag queen living in Shanghai at the time, brought together eleven drag performers to put on the first edition of the *Extravaganza* show in July 2017. In June 2018, Fisk organised the second edition of *Extravaganza*. The 2018 show was advertised as one of ‘the biggest and baddest [sic] drag shows the city has ever seen’ (Martin, 2018). *Extravaganza II* featured a more balanced number of kings and queens and showcased a wider variety of drag styles; it also introduced a few new drag artists who made their debut on the night (interview with Fisk, 1 July 2018).

One cannot help notice how quickly the Western style of drag culture has emerged and developed in Shanghai: In a few years’ time, Shanghai’s drag scene grew from being underground and unknown to starting to capture a great deal of media attention. It is also noteworthy how international and cosmopolitan this scene is. There were twelve performers at the 2017 *Extravaganza* show: Miss Jade, Fantasia Valentina, Erica Balenciaga, Wu Wu Yan, Ennis F. W., Dorian T. Fisk, Mo Meaux, Miss Uni Verse, Mandala, Ariana Grindr and the Flyer sisters. In the group, there were four Chinese, two Americans, two Brazilian, one British, one Indonesian, one Korean and one Russian. The group’s working language was English, and they sang or mimed English-language songs at bars, nightclubs and cabarets where international expatriates and tourists as well as young Chinese urbanites frequented in Shanghai. In the film, Miss Jade describes jokingly Miss Uni Vers as being ‘kicked out’ of Russia because of her sexuality. As an international metropolis and a harbour city, Shanghai has been a safe haven for gender and sexual minorities from different parts of the world, in

the same way that it provided shelter for many stateless people during the war times (Willens, 2013). Shanghai as a global city is certainly a perfect space to develop a transnational form of drag culture.

It is tempting to see the drag scenes in Shanghai as a replica of the drag scenes in other parts of the world, especially those in the West. After all, drag is not simply a form of performance; it is also a flexible form of identity produced in the context of global capitalism and against the backdrop of Shanghai's booming creative and cultural economies. Such an environment has created a 'global gay' identity (Altman, 1997), a type of 'modern' sexual and gender identity originated in the West and spread to different parts of the world. Like the 'global gay' identity, this type of drag can be called a 'global drag' identity. The 'global drag' is often found at commercial venues frequented by an international clientele. Their practitioners and consumers are usually young, urban, and English-speaking Chinese nationals and foreign expatriates. The 'global drag' identity sometimes threatens to replace, marginalise and overshadow homegrown or indigenous forms of queer identities, including crossdressing performers on Chinese theatrical stages and the low-income transgender sex workers who wander around Shanghai's city streets and cheap nightclubs.⁵

However, one does not have to be rich or middle-class in order to do drag in China.⁶ With a passion and some do-it-yourself advice acquired online and from friends, one can buy the costumes and cosmetics needed for drag performances on *taobao*, a Chinese-language online shopping platform, at a relatively affordable price. China's position as a developing country and as a 'world factory' (Ngai 2005), with its labour intensive manufacturing industries and its cheap delivery cost, makes drag a less class-distinctive practice. As a young independent filmmaker doing freelance work, Baren was almost broke when he went to Shanghai to take up a job as an English teacher at a local high school (Baren 2018b). Fisk arrived in Shanghai for a teaching job but shortly afterwards worked in hospitality, and for a while in the charity sector (interview with Fisk, 1 July 2018). Most drag performers in the group have regular day jobs—some are teachers and others work in small local firms—and they are not on big salaries, and usually have to squeeze their time after work to attend rehearsals. Fisk and Valentina's DKNSTRKT group is open to participants for free. When the drag performers get a chance to perform on stage at commercial venues, they are usually paid a few hundred *yuan* for a show, which hardly covers the cost of their make-up, costumes, food and transport (personal communication with Baren, 17 June 2018). In the film *Extravaganza*, there is a sense of bohemian and even anarchistic fun in these non-commercial drag communities.

Whether in terms of its subject matter or its cinematic style, *Extravaganza* invites the audience to associate itself with Jennie Livingston's 1990 film *Paris is Burning*, an American documentary about the ball culture of New York City, attended by people from different ethnic, gender and sexual minority communities. Queer theorist Judith Butler (1993) uses the film to develop her theory of gender performativity. The *Extravaganza* trailer uses the tagline 'Shanghai is Burning' to parody *Paris is Burning*. Baren explains the differences between the two films as:

Paris is Burning is a much longer timeline—I think that's the major difference—and draws in voice from a number of subjects, whereas the *Extravaganza* is more compact. Also, I think that the experiences of the cast are different. For example, people in *Paris is Burning* drew inspiration and developed their art from 'straight' culture, whereas

Extravaganza cast (and myself as a filmmaker) draw from an existing queer vernacular, with influences like *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Paris Is Burning*. (personal communication, 28 May 2018)

In the same way that the drag queens in Livingston's *Paris is Burning* could only afford to look good by hustling and stealing from the Clinique counter, the drag queens and kings in *Extravaganza* took inspirations from the Western drag culture, appropriated the style, used cheap goods from online shops, and invented their queer pleasure. They are essentially 'queering' the 'global drag' identity originating from the West and dominated by consumer capitalism by giving drag different meanings.

The Unflinching Queer Gaze from the Backstage

Baren is a young British filmmaker who has been making films since 2011. He has made about ten titles so far and most of his films are shorts and have a slightly dark tone, represented by *Exquisite Corpse* (2012), a 72-minute fiction film about death. He lived in Shanghai from 2014 to early 2018. As a young filmmaker, Shanghai offered him ample opportunities and challenges. Baren worked in Shanghai as a high school English teacher and as a commercial film professional working on projects for clients. But his passions are independent filmmaking and being a film festival programmer. From 2015 to 2016, he directed and programmed the ShanghaiPRIDE Film Festival. In 2015, he founded CINEMQ, a queer film collective that organises monthly film screenings and publishes a zine on social media. He was also involved in Shanghai's drag scene, often hung out with 'the fierce and the fabulous, the kings and queens of Shanghai's genderfluid and genderfuck drag glitterati'. He has adopted a drag persona 'Mx Qu'eera Genda' and describes her as 'trashy' (Baren, 2018a). As an insider of the genderfluid communities in Shanghai, he was well positioned to make a documentary about the drag scene in Shanghai.

In an interview I conducted with Baren, the filmmaker explains the origin of the film as resulting from a casual conversation with his two drag friends:

We were talking to the main organiser Miss Jade. She said she was often approached by photographers who wanted to do photos of her. They wanted to do a series on drag in China. They often said, we want one photo of you half-in and half-out of drag. There would be a shadow on you. She said that she felt like their message was always like: since you're a drag queen in China, you must live on the fringes of society; nobody likes you; your lives must be bad and depressed. Bullshit, she said, it's not what it's like: we are backstage; we are laughing; there's joy and sisterhood, and we are always throwing shade on each other. So we said cool and we came backstage and filmed it and made this documentary. (Baren, 2018b)

Baren points to a common issue in representing gender and sexual minorities: Western media often cast an orientalist gaze on queer life in China. Queer life in China is often treated as a 'national allegory' in 'Third World' texts (Jameson, 1986; Bao, 2018b, p. 85), and queer people are often portrayed as poor victims living under the communist dictatorship and struggling for freedom and survival. This type of Western gaze is intrinsically orientalisating

and objectifying. Drag performers in China are aware of the problem. Instead of catering to the Western gaze, they decided to look back, and to make their own representations to reveal to the world what they think their life is about. This type of act reverses the objectifying and orientalisng gaze; it becomes a kind of ‘unflinching gaze’ (BRAG, 2017) that challenges the global order of image and knowledge production permeated by unequal power relations. Such an unflinching gaze is best demonstrated by the fact that the drag performers gaze straight at and speak directly to the camera in the film.

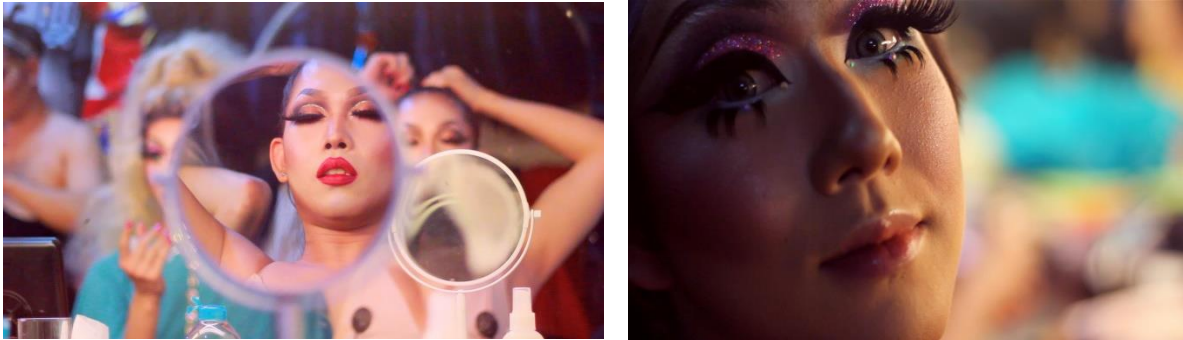


Fig. 3 *Extravaganza* film still: Fantasia Valentina (image credit: Matthew Baren and Will Dai)

Fig. 4 *Extravaganza* film still: Erica Balenciaga (image credit: Matthew Baren and Will Dai)

Rather than focusing on the four-hour show, the film focuses on the backstage. The 45-minute documentary primarily focuses on the preparation for the show backstage in a crowded dressing room, where the performers dress themselves up for their stage appearance. There is a great deal of fun, friendship and camaraderie in the process. Baren explains the reason for focusing on the backstage as:

The film focuses just on the backstage. We don't really see much of what's going on front-of-house. Well, that's because everything she was talking about was the backstage: the way they speak with each other; the way they get ready; it's all about their interactions so that's what we wanted to see. We spoke with people; we interviewed people; we were just like a fly on the wall, observing what was going on. It was really fun and it was a real pleasure. (Baren, 2018b)

While Baren uses the ‘fly on the wall’ metaphor to describe the widely believed objectivity of a documentary filmmaker in documenting an event, and the assumed detachment of the filmmaker from the filmed subjects, he is not obsessed with ‘objectivity’. Although Baren’s physical body is not present in the film, the audience can hear his voice and can easily detect his presence. They make casual conversations and even play jokes on each other. The performers sometimes speak to the camera in a chatty and humorous way, well aware that they were talking to someone with whom they are very familiar. This often reminds the film

viewers of the presence of the filmmaker and the mediated nature of the show. The drag performers seem comfortable enough with the filmmaker's presence and they even teased each other during filming. The camera does not seem intrusive or voyeuristic, as was the case in some of the earlier independent Chinese documentaries about drags made by heterosexual identified filmmakers (Chao, 2010a, 2010b; Robinson, 2015). Baren describes the filming process in another interview as:

There were two of us—myself and producer Will Dai—on camera the night of the show. The dressing room backstage at the Pearl is tiny and we had twelve performers, plus a bunch of other people squeezed in there—and a lot of costume changes. It was nine hours of half-naked, sweaty queens throwing shade at each other in a box room. Filming around that was fucking insane but a lot of fun. (Baren in Thede, 2018)

Miss Jade explains her reason for having an interview with Baren and having the show documented:

What people can see is just the frontstage under the spotlight. But there are more interesting stimulating factors behind the scene. I want people to know that that's the root of everything. That's basically why I agreed to do this interview. (Miss Jade in Baren, 2018b)

The 'front stage' and 'backstage' metaphors remind us of Erving Goffman's (1990) dramaturgy. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman compares people's management of identities in their everyday life to acts of theatrical performance: 'frontstage' is where a coherent sense of self is presented to the public according to the needs and requirements of specific social contexts; whereas 'backstage' is where the self is constructed, managed and negotiated. While the 'frontstage' is important for the public knowledge, the 'backstage' often offers a deeper insight into the complexity of the self. 'Backstage' is a useful metaphor to understand queer life in China. On international media, people often see the 'frontstage' aspect of queer life in China: the glamorous and frustrating moments. Media events such as the Shanghai Pride and China's social media ban of LGBT issues dominate the international news agenda and global imaginaries about queer life in China. Whilst this 'frontstage' information is indispensable, it is often easy to forget the backstage: that is, how ordinary queer people live their everyday lives. Through this documentary, drag performers reveal the complexity of the 'backstage'; that is, what's going on in the everyday for queer people living in China. They are doing this self-consciously: by selecting the filmmaking they trust and by setting their own agenda, they 'look back' at the dominant discourses in mainstream international media in the hope to challenge and change the stereotypes.

Although the film *Extravaganza* primarily captures the backstage scenes at the Pearl Theatre, the setting of the show in a global city is unmistakable. It is only in a global city such as Shanghai that one can find such a transnational group of performers and audience; it is also in such a global city that such gendered embodiments and transformations are celebrated with relatively few political constraints. In Beijing, for instance, the Beijing Queer Film Festival has been fighting 'guerrilla warfare' against authorities that have tried to shut down the

festival for years. Queer film festivals in Shanghai, on the contrary, have adopted a more relaxed and apolitical approach to fun and entertainment to build identities and communities. This is in line with the city's reputation of being 'bourgeois' and pragmatic. Queer cultures in Shanghai thrive amidst booming creative and cultural industries and pink economies, sometimes beyond the city's strategic planning. Although this raises concerns about homonormativity and pink economies in the local queer communities, it offers a way for Chinese queers to imagine a future that is based on lifestyle, consumption and entertainment on the lines of identities and communities but without evoking rights.

Queer Affect, Kinship and Gender Performativity

It was the fun backstage that Baren tries to capture in his documentary. This sense of playfulness, fun and pleasure counters the dominant narrative of queers living in the shadow and in sadness often portrayed on international media. It also disrupts the distance between the filmmaker and the filmed subjects, as the filmmaker and the drag performers were clearly interacting with each other during filming. This type of happy and collective queer representation differs vastly from the early representations of queer people as 'lonely' and 'sad' young men who have no homes or families to belong to in East Asian queer cinema (Berry, 2000). The politics of pleasure also undermines the reification of identities alongside the lines and categories such as nation and gender. As David Halperin discusses Foucault's distinction between pleasure and desire:

Unlike desire, which expresses the subject's individuality, history, and identity as a subject, pleasure is desubjectivating, impersonal: it shatters identity, subjectivity, and dissolves the subject, however fleetingly, into the sensorium continuum of the body, into the unconscious dreaming of the mind. (Halperin, 1995, p. 95)

For Foucault, pleasure embodies a desubjectivating potential that challenges fixed identities and stable relationships. At the backstage, through chatting, teasing, feeling and touching, drag performers were engaging in affective communication. In the process, national identities and cultural differences started to dissolve; gender and sexual categories became blurred and insignificant. The queer affect of pleasure becomes a transformative force that creates queer modes of friendship, family and kinship (Foucault, 1997; Halperin, 1995; Young and Weiner, 2011).

'Family' is usually understood in heteronormative terms in contemporary China and personal 'happiness' is often defined in relation to heterosexual notions of family, marriage and kinship (Wielander and Hird, 2018). The strong emphasis on Confucian family values in official and popular discourses has alienated many single men and women (Fincher, 2014). Meanwhile, as the international discourse of same-sex marriage enters China, the one-on-one relationship and same-sex marriage has dominated the imaginary of the queer communities in China. Contrarily to the homo- and heteronormative imaginations of family, Miss Jade paints a picture of a queer family, made up of twelve drag kings and queens. This queer family crosses gender and sexual boundaries as well as national and cultural differences; it also

challenges heteronormative and homonormative modes of intimate relations. It is a queer family full of pleasure and vitality, and supported through friendship, camaraderie, mutual help and support.



Fig. 5 Dorian T. Fisk (photo credit: S-Ma) Fig. 6 Dorian T. Fisk (photo credit: S-Ma)

In the group, each performer has their own drag personalities and performance styles. For example, drag king Fisk usually puts on a persona of a cowboy, a truck driver or a rock band performer. In the words of Ennis, Fisk's masculinity can be deceptive to outsiders:

He is so freaking masculine. To the extent that people misgender him all the time at our shows. Especially when he first started appearing, people would be like: who was the dude working in the show? ... He is just muscular, and he has a very angular face. Despite the fact that he performs drag with his natural hair, which is hilarious, his natural waist length hair. Yeah, he reads as male, which is kind of cool.

Fisk described how he developed his personality in my interview:

Dorian is a concentrated dose of hypermasculinity wrapped up in different packaging. I realised early on that I have way too much hair to pile under a wig, so Dorian is essentially a mishmash of long-haired guys in rock bands I liked in the 80s with a smattering of the vampires in the *Lost Boys* and Johnny Depp. He has also evolved since I started performing about two years ago. I have taken him on a journey of self-discovery and sexual awakening through the performances over time. (Interview with Fisk, 1 July 2018)

Fisk confesses in the film that he is not allowed to wear the artificial nipples that look like a man's real nipples 'because they looked too realistic'. He has to wear glitter nipples instead

to remind the audience of the fact that he is simply a drag performer and is merely there to perform a show. Fisk's story reminds us of the discussion of drag in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Butler uses the example of drag to illustrate the performativity of gender. The practice of drag challenges the notion of an original or authentic gender identity. A drag king such as Fisk can be as masculine as a man. '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.*' (Butler, 1990, p. 187, original emphasis) In other words, Fisk's masculinity reveals the constructed nature of being a man and being masculine: anyone can be a man, and anyone can act like a man; it was simply social norms that assign masculinity to men and femininity to women. The nipple story also reveals the society's cultural anxiety towards gender: drag performers must 'perform' gender in an exaggerated manner, so that the traces of imitation can be detected easily by the audience. If such a performance or 'imitation' appears too realistic, the society then feels obliged to police such a 'performance' to make it appear 'unreal'. Drag performers constantly must negotiate with the notion of authenticity in relation to gender. In making such negotiations, they reveal the fictional and arbitrary nature of gender norms and open up imaginations for the resignification of gender. The example of drag, therefore, becomes a good illustration for the social construction of gender through performativity of gendered embodiments.



Fig. 7 Ennis F. W. (photo credit: Tiffany Star-Ware)



Fig. 8 Ennis F. W. (photo credit: Hot Pink)

Drag king Ennis is someone who refuses to conform to gender binaries and thus truly crosses gender binaries. Miss Jade comments on Ennis' gendered embodiments:

Ennis is a pioneer. She is the only one who blurs the boundary between genders. I will never define this person Ennis F. W. as male or female. I constantly call Ennis 'her' because she is a very feminine guy.

Despite knowing Ennis is in drag, Miss Jade still refers to Ennis as 'her' to suggest the Ennis' embodiment of both masculinity and femininity. This can be read as a slip of the tongue or a recognition that femininity can also be possessed by a man, and masculinity can be possessed by a woman (Halberstam, 1998). But I want to venture a more radical reading of Ennis' gender identity. Ennis' gender identity should be seen as neither male nor female, or both

male and female; in fact, it should not be defined in restrictive binary terms. By performing drag, Ennis becomes other gender that does not conform to conventional gender norms; Ennis subverts gender norms.

Warning against a reductive reading of seeing drag as intrinsically subversive, Butler glosses possible subversive potentials of drag practices in *Gender Trouble*:

The perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggest an openness to resignification and recontextualisation; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities.

Although the gendered meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nonetheless denaturalised and mobilised through their parodic recontextualization. (Butler, 1990, p. 188)

Butler was talking about the seemingly obvious resubscription to gender norms often seen in drag culture. Fisk is a good example of recontextualising masculinity in his drag performance, as he performs and presents perfect masculinity. However, in the case of Ennis, such a decontextualisation becomes more radical, as Ennis refuses to conform to traditional gender norms of being either a man or a woman. Ennis, in this context, is neither a man or a woman; Ennis becomes something other than a man or a woman; Ennis is becoming trans. This understanding of 'becoming trans' will also inform my following discussions of transnational cinema.

Chinese Cinema as Transnational Cinema

How do we understand the transnationalism represented by the drag scene and the *Extravaganza* in Shanghai? How 'Chinese' (Zhang, 2004), 'transnational Chinese' (Lu 1997) or 'Sinophone' (Shih, 2007) is the film *Extravaganza*? How do we understand films made in a global city such as Shanghai? Obviously, many films are made in Chinese or other Sinophone languages and dialects and are marketed to a global audience, and they can be captured by terms such as Chinese cinemas or Sinophone cinemas, depending on how one understands these terms. But there are also films such as *Extravaganza* that are not made in Chinese languages and dialects, and they are not specifically marketed to a transnational Chinese audience.

When I asked Baren what kind of film the film *Extravaganza* can be labelled as in term of national identities, and whether *Extravaganza* is a British film or a Chinese film. Baren has the following to say:

Oh, interesting question, I hadn't really considered that. I'd probably have said it was a Chinese production, since it was produced in China by a China-based team, but this may not be accurate. (personal communication, 28 May 2018)

Indeed, this is a difficult question to answer. Although the film was produced in China by a crew based in Shanghai, both the production crew and the cast are undeniably international. The film is identified as a CINEMQ production; that is, it is produced by an independent

queer film collective based in Shanghai. The producer of the film, Will Dai, is Chinese and the director Baren is British. Among the twelve members of the cast, only four are Chinese nationals. The film dialogue is in English, with only scant Chinese dialogues. The film is subtitled in English and Chinese and is obviously made for an international audience. The film has been shown at international events in Shanghai (such as at the DKSTRKT group launch or a CINEMQ screening event) and at various film festivals (including the Guangzhou International LGBT Film Festival 2018, KINQ, Moscow 2018, Shanghai Queer Film Festival 2018, Gender Reel Film Festival 2018, Ljubljana LGBT Film Festival 2018, Beijing Queer Film Festival 2018 and Scottish Queer international Film Festival 2018). Few audience members, and even film critics, would confidently identify *Extravaganza* as a ‘Chinese film’. Labelling this film as a British film based solely on the director’s nationality or seeing the film as a China-UK coproduction, is equally problematic; Baren himself would not entertain the possibility as this does not give due credit to the Shanghai-based production and cast team, the people with whom he worked closely on the film. The independent production that derived from a collective enterprise defies the capitalist logic of individualism, private property and fixed identity categories. This section engages with the discussions of the national and the transnational in the context of Chinese cinema and Chinese film studies in order to gain a better understanding of the ‘identity’ of the film.

At this point, it is useful to visit some academic debates regarding Chinese cinema in the past few decades. In an article titled ‘Genealogies of Four Critical Paradigms in Chinese-Language Film Studies’, Sheldon H. Lu (2014), building on Lim (2006), offers a succinct summary of the ‘milestones’ in the field of Chinese film studies (primarily in English scholarship). He reviews four ways of conceptualising Chinese cinema: national cinema, or cinema and the national (Zhang, 2004, 2010; Berry and Farquhar, 2006), transnational cinema (Lu, 1997; Marchetti, 2006; Taylor, 2011), Chinese-language cinema (Lu and Yeh, 2005), and Sinophone cinema (Shih, 2007; Yue and Khoo, 2014). Recently there has emerged a new term, the ‘Huallywood’ (Fu, Indelicato and Qiu, 2016). With a strong industry focus, the term ‘Huallywood’ speaks to the contemporary condition of China’s film industries in its ambition to ‘go global’ and as a form of the state’s ‘soft power’ (Voci and Luo, 2018). However, ‘Huallywood’ has so far not addressed issues of gender and sexuality. To become a critical paradigm, more attention needs to be paid to gendered and sexed intersections with film culture that is both national and transnational, and queer studies can prove useful in this respect.

In recent decades, some scholars have brought sexuality and queer theory into critical dialogue with the study of transnational Chinese cinemas. Researchers have demonstrated complex relationships between national identities, gender and sexual identities, and the queer sense of belonging (Bao, 2010a, 2010b, 2015, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Berry, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004; Chao, 2010a, 2010b; Fan, 2016; Leung, 2004, 2008, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Lim, 2006; Martin, 2000; Pecic, 2016; Robinson, 2015; Shaw and Zhang, 2017; Tan, 2016; Yue, 2012). For gender and sexual minorities, and especially those who live in the diaspora, national identification is never straightforward, and it often requires complex negotiations with the personal, the political, and various other intersectional identities (Bao, 2013). Writing about

queer and China intersections, Petrus Liu (2010, p. 316) remarks that what is 'queer' is constantly expanded, supplemented and revised by what is 'Chinese' and that 'our critical task in the coming years is to transform the signifier of "China" into a useful set of queer tools'.

These paradigms in film studies and queer studies reflect the continuing self-reflexivity of the academic fields towards their own identities and objects of study. They also challenge the underlying PRC-centrism and Mandarin-mono-lingualism embedded in the popular understanding of 'China' and 'Chinese cinema'. Despite this, the national and linguistic signifiers such as 'China', 'Chinese' and 'Sinophone' are still omnipresent, although understandings of these terms vary. Following Alison M. Groppe's (2014) provocative question 'can the Sinophone speak Singlish?', I ask: can Chinese/Sinophone cinemas speak English? Can they be made by Western filmmakers in English involving a predominantly Western cast and production crew? To answer these questions and to understand transnational productions such as *Extravaganza*, I suggest that we re-examine the term 'transnational cinema'.

In the inaugural issue of *Transnational Cinemas*, Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim (2010) noted the 'transnational' turn in film studies and proposed a model of 'critical transnationalism'. Higbee and Lim (2010, p. 15) suggest looking at transnational alliances 'configured in relation to identity formations that disregard or challenge traditional constructs of the nation'. One of such transnational alliances is undoubtedly queer cinema, as Lim's (2006) study of the representation of male homosexuality in Chinese cinemas powerfully demonstrates. This article takes Higbee and Lim's call seriously to look at the films produced as a result of such transnational alliances of gender and sexual minorities. Perhaps films such as *Extravaganza* can be better understood as a 'transnational cinema', without national and ethnic signifiers. This probably does not speak to the situation of every film; and in fact, it probably does not describe many films specifically made in a national language and for a national audience. However, it does describe certain modes of transnational and deterritorialised productions. Seen in this light, *Extravaganza* is a transnational film made by, for and about a transnational group of people, queer and non-queer alike. Its transnational nature overrides its national aesthetics and politics. It is shaped by the urban queer cultures of a global city and in turn also shapes the development of such cultures.

For transnational productions, while it is important to recognise the material conditions of 'transnational order of globalisation' (Berry, 2010), a conventional notion of globalisation based on the framework of the nation state is insufficient. The production of *Extravaganza* has been facilitated by the global flow of capital, people, technology, images and ideas to create its conditions of existence. But after its emergence, its relationship with capital is not always visible. As a low-budget independent production coming out of the filmmaker's and his queer friends' interest, the film was financed primarily by the filmmaker himself and completed in his spare time while he had a full-time job. The production process relies on the friendship, generosity, free and affective labour of the people in the communities. The film

has so far only been sent to film festivals and community screenings, with no intention to generate a box office income. In other words, the film is made with fun and for fun. How do we understand this type of transnationalism without being pessimistic about the all-powerful dominance of global capitalism?

It is important to note that not all forms of transnationalism are hegemonic and not all are dominated by the nation state or supranational entities. There are always people-to-people communications and collaborations between individuals and grassroots organisations, which function as a form of ‘minor transnationalism’. For Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (2005), the field of transnational studies often focuses on analysing vertical relations between minority culture and mainstream society and thus ignores horizontal relations and lateral networks between these minority cultures. As a result, minority groups often form their identities ‘in opposition to a dominant discourse rather than vis-à-vis each other and other minority groups’ (p. 2), thus losing important opportunities for mutual support, collaboration, and forming synergies to fight for shared goals. Lionnet and Shi suggest that we shift our attention to horizontal relationships among diverse minority groups and encourage collaborations and foster solidarities. In short, minor transnationalism opens up an alternative vision in which the transnational can be conceived as ‘a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the centre’ (p. 5). Seen in this light, the transnationalism animated by transnational queer connections should be seen as a form of ‘minor transnationalism’ that does not necessarily rely on the manipulation of the nation states or entirely dominated by global capital. This type of ‘trans’ is not hegemonic; instead, it is characterised by sociality, relationality and affectivity. This type of transnationalism would need to be informed by ‘trans’ in transgender studies to unravel a more radical political imaginary.

Becoming Trans

The notion of ‘trans’ has been well studied and debated in the field of transgender studies (Aizura, 2006; Aizura et al, 2014; Burns, 2018; Chiang, 2012; Halberstam, 2005, 2018; Martin and Ho, 2006; Stryker, 2017; Stryker and Aizura, 2013; Stryker, Currah and Moore, 2008; Stryker and Whittle, 2006). It might seem odd, and even contentious, to refer to drag performers as trans in this article, but there are also good reasons for doing so. Following Jack Halberstam (2018), I use the term ‘trans’ in a broad and generic sense to refer to a wide range of gendered embodiments including what are often variably referred to as transgender, transsexual, crossdressing and drag. In other words, trans is used less as an identity category or a form of personal and collective identification than as a critical concept to unsettle fixed gendered identities, identifications and embodiments. In his recent book *Trans**, Halberstam uses ‘trans*’ to open discussions about the multiplicity and undecidability of trans representations. ‘It’s not a matter of whose gender is variable and whose is fixed’, Halberstam explains, ‘the term “trans*” puts pressure on all modes of gendered embodiment and refuses to choose between the identitarian and the contingent forms of trans identity’ (2018, p. xiii). This type of understanding is also echoed by other scholars in the discussion of trans issues in Asian contexts (Aizura, 2006; Aizura et al, 2014; Chiang, 2012; Jackson,

2010; Leung, 2012a; Martin and Ho, 2006; Stryker, 2012). Noting a critical tendency in theoretical discourse to go beyond the nominal understanding of transgender as an identity and as the naming of a specific group of people, Leung suggest seeing the study of transgender representation in Chinese language cinema as ‘an exercise in locating moving targets’ (Leung, 2012a: 185). I follow these scholars in understanding trans as a verb and a critical method, applied in critical analysis to interrogate how gendered embodiments are assembled, disassembled and reassembled under certain power configurations and with intersections of other determinants. I am aware of the potential problems of collapsing different forms of gendered identities and identifications, but I hope that by problematising gendered identities, we can open up discussions about the multiplicity and fluidity of gendered embodiments rather than foreclosing it for the sake of identity politics.

In an article titled ‘Is the Trans- in Transnational the Trans- in Transgender?’, Lim (2007) considers the convergence between transnational cinema and transgender.⁷ Lim’s use of the term ‘trans’ goes beyond identity categorisation of gendered embodiments; it points to forms of transitioning, changing and becoming, and to the notion of passing. In Lim’s article, mainland Chinese actresses Zhang Ziyi, Gong Li and Michelle Yeoh’s ‘ethnic passing’ as a Japanese geisha in a Hollywood produced film *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), is an example of such a ‘becoming’ that defies a fixed concept of national identities: ‘they are neither Chinese or Japanese but in and in-between space embodying both and neither ethnicities. They are *in the process of passing* from Chinese to Japanese, or they are literalising the process of a Chinese performing as a Japanese’ (p. 49, original emphasis). Such a notion of passing be ‘becoming’, controversial as it may seem, has the potential to unsettle the myth of origin and authenticity in the study of cinema in relation to the national.⁸

Lim’s discussion of trans brings nicely together transnationalism and transgender. Indeed, if we see trans as ‘processes of passing’ or ‘modes of becoming’, then we may depart from the conventional type of identarian thinking that structures many discussions in terms of gender, sexuality and cinema. ‘Becoming’, for Deleuze and Guattari (1983), is a process of change, flight or movement within an assemblage, or any number of things gathered into a single context. ‘Becoming’ is a constant and dynamic process that cannot be contained by any fixed categories. It produces new and unexpected effects rather than reproducing old paradigms; it also challenges ideas of imitation, analogy and fixed identities and generates new assemblages.

Seen in this insight, in performing genders at *Extravaganza*, trans performers are ‘becoming’ something that departs from where they started. Fisk is ‘becoming male’ and Ennis is becoming both male and female, or neither male nor female. In fact, Ennis is becoming something else; Ennis becomes Ennis. ‘Trans’ should not be seen as becoming things that are already there; it should be seen as creating new, unexpected and unpredictable social relations, affects and intensities. After all, trans is transfer, transition, translation and transformation at the same time; it refuses to be pinned down to single entities and fixed categories.

Similarly, *Extravaganza* should be seen as neither a Chinese film nor a British film. It is a transnational film on its own merit. It is in the process of ‘becoming transnational’; and in this process, it challenges fixed geographic and cultural boundaries of national identity. It is true that the condition of such transnationalism is created by capitalist globalisation. However, after such a condition is fulfilled, the types of activities that occur may not be entirely dictated by neoliberal capitalism. There can emerge anti-capitalist impulses, sentiments, friendship and connections. It is a form of ‘minor transnationalism’, a transnationalism neither grand-scale nor hegemonic, but nonetheless significant for people and communities involved. In this sense, *Extravaganza* is becoming trans.

Conclusion

In this article, I have offered a critical analysis of the film *Extravaganza*. By focusing on the drag characters represented in this film, in tandem with an analysis of the social and industry contexts of the film, as well as my interviews with the filmmaker and performers, I problematise the gender identity of the performers and the national identity of the film. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of ‘becoming’ and Song Hwee Lim’s discussion of ‘trans’, I propose to think about certain modes of transnational production with the critical concept of ‘becoming trans’. ‘Becoming trans’ offers a productive way to conceptualise new modes of ‘minor’ transnational cinematic connections in a globalised world without having to resort to identity politics.

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Filmography

- Exquisite Corpse* (dir. Matthew Baren, UK, 2012)
- Extravaganza* (dir. Matthew Baren, China, 2018)
- Lost in Shanghai Lan* (dir. Wang Leijun, China, 2009)
- Memoirs of a Geisha* (dir. Rob Marshall, USA, 2005)
- Paris Is Burning* (dir. Jennie Livingston, USA, 1990)

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² I thank a reviewer of this article for pointing out that, strictly speaking, Deleuze's notion of 'becoming', drawing on Bergson's *Elan Vital* and Spinoza's *conatus*, points not only to the changing process of something, but also the changing process of the intensiveness of the constellation of singularities within a system. I agree with the reviewer's comment. This article does not wish to enter into the philosophical debate of what constitutes 'becoming' and I therefore use the notion of 'becoming' in a broad sense to refer to the changing process of things.

³ This article follows the convention in the local drag community to use the gender pronouns of the performers' drag personalities. It is a common practice in local drag communities to refer to a drag king as 'he' and a drag queen as 'she', regardless of their assigned biological sex. Neither Fisk nor Ennis identifies with being they/them/theirs.

⁴ RuPaul (full name RuPaul Andre Charles) is an American drag queen and TV celebrity, known for being the producer and host of the reality competition series *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Fisk commented that the RuPaul show 'focuses on a very narrow slice of drag culture and does not include drag kings' (personal communication, 18 November 2018). Baren points out that drag existed long before RuPaul, and whilst the RuPaul show has an important influence, it is not the only or defining influence on drag cultures in Shanghai (personal communication, 18 November 2018).

⁵ For an account of the life of transgender sex workers in Shanghai, see Wang Leijun (Yutian)'s 2009 documentary *Lost in Shanghai (Shanghai Shanghai lan)*.

⁶ I thank Matthew Baren for pointing out the bohemian nature of Shanghai's drag scene, which does not always map nicely onto a fixed 'class' structure of a society.

⁷ I agree with a reviewer of this article that prefix 'trans' in transgender and transnational carries different meanings. While it is important to recognise their differences, this article places emphasis on their similarities, i.e. how they all point to an anti-identarian mode of thinking and how they can be used to think about and beyond identity categories. Also, as two modes of identities or ways of being, transnational and transgender are not just paralleled but also intersected in complex ways.

⁸ I am aware of the possible controversy regarding the dismissal of identity politics for racial, ethnic, gender and sexual minorities. My anti-identarian politics is a universal one; instead, it is situated in specific historical and social contexts: in this case, the intersections of gender/sexual and racial/ethnic identities may produce specific configurations and unexpected effects. For an example of this intersectionality, see Bao (2013).